

## Cyberpunk: Badland Madman Chapter 19 - The Factory, Big Purchase, Movie Night, Hot Hesitations & The Troubling Itch

Making the Servo-Skull wasn't just a single invention, but a series of them. The components that went into building it were advanced, far more advanced than the world he was living in, or most of the tech he had received until now, except Star Wars and Star Trek.

Servo-Skull was a thing of a grimdark, stagnant, theocratic, techno-feudal spacefaring society. It was technologically advanced yet at the same time stagnant and regressive, a very strange mix.

But to Cypher, it was still futuristic. While not everything was state-of-the-art and great, there was plenty. Putting the anti-gravity engine aside, the skull also had a dumb AI called Machine Spirit. Beyond that, it had a great high-density energy cell better than the Arc Powercell he had gotten from the Leaper.

There was also a state-of-the-art inertial stabilization system and a heat dissipation and energy regulation system. The visual cameras had a great range and zoom, and the motion detection was also more advanced. Since he had gotten knowledge of multiple variants, it also had all sorts of biosensors for medical purposes.

However, it was still a very dumb and basic thing. Just a flying wrench or a single-purpose computer. For the one he made, a Utility Servo-Skull, he hoped to upgrade it since the itch had gone now.

By upgrading it, he wanted to upload schematics in it so it could follow set instructions to repair and refurbish second-hand chrome or build new things. Especially with the Sonic Screwdriver he was installing.

"Hey, Atlas, let's update Obsidian's stuff. Take that existing heatsink and upgrade it with the Servo-Skull's data, make it better, but keep it marginal, alright? Bump it up fifty percent from now, and it'll still be way below the real deal we got. And throw the inertial stabilization system in the catalogue, plus that high-density energy cell, but keep them sixty percent below what we got. It'll still be thirty percent better than the Leaper powercell, enough for them to moan my name in their sleep."

"Drawing a bigger marker on your head, understood," Atlas replied humorously. "The underground industrial levels have completed construction. Should you wish, I can guide you on a tour right away. We currently have seventeen floors."

"Seventeen?!" Cypher exclaimed, rising to his feet from the floor as the Servo-Skull creepily hovered near his head, staring at him through the red lenses fixed in the two eye-sockets.

It had an Obsidian logo painted on its forehead, and from the neck area protruded eight mechanical arms. It also had one major arm shaped like a spine, and at its end was a Sonic Screwdriver.

"Damn, you went all in? Alright, show me around." He said and grabbed a can of water from the fridge first. "SU-1, follow along."

He ordered the Servo-Skull to follow. It had no name, and he didn't bother because they weren't sentient and their purpose was limited. He couldn't name them all. For now, the codename meant Skull-Utility-1.

It also didn't have a voice, as Atlas was their overseer, and machines don't need human speech to talk to each other. Cypher had no reason to get involved in micromanagement in the first place.

"Follow me."

He followed Atlas's visible old avatar into his bedroom. He was curious where the entrance to this massive underground section even was. But then Atlas stopped in front of his double-door cupboard near the bed.

"This? I changed my damn undies just this morning."

"It serves multiple purposes," Atlas replied and waved a hand towards the cupboard. The two doors opened up and revealed an elevator. It wasn't big, just enough for six people. It had screens on the walls that showed fake scenery to feel less claustrophobic.

Cypher walked inside and saw the button panel. There were seventeen marked buttons and many more still left unmarked. He didn't press; the number one lit up on its own. The doors of his cupboard closed, and then the elevator moved.

Ding!

This time it was a proper elevator door, sliding wide to open. He stepped out of it with Atlas and found himself in a small lobby-like space. On his left and right were massive doors with smaller single-person doors added into them.

He followed Atlas to the right and entered through the small door.

Now, Atlas had only told him that an underground workspace was being developed. So, he was expecting a large underground cavity, an empty space where he could work and build stuff. But what he saw was far from that, and beyond his wildest imagination.

His jaw hung wide while his eyes looked left, right, center, and even above because the ceiling was just so high. He reckoned it was at least twenty meters high. And no matter which direction he looked, it was endless, well-lit with ceiling lights and...

"Holy fucking shit!"

Cypher cursed.

The entire floor was covered with magnetic tracks over which countless mechanical, industrial arms moved about. They were everywhere. On a closer look, he saw huge crates of Microbots sitting idle, waiting for more work.

"Wait!" He suddenly remembered that there was another large door on the left after exiting the elevator. "Is there another floor like this on the other side?"

"Yes, this is level one of the Obsidian Factory. This floor is the largest and highest, as I designed it specifically for you, with the understanding that you will build much larger things in the future. We have twenty-five meters of height, three square kilometers of usable area, and room for more expansion in the future. All these arms and Microbots are here to support you."

"What about the other floors?" Cypher asked.

"They're not this high, and they stay more packed instead. Those floors serve as automatic factories by design. Every level comes fitted with countless arms, Microbots, printers, fabricators, and soon Servo Skulls. I will personally run all of them with the highest efficiency."

It took a few seconds for the gears to turn in Cypher's head, and the full scale of seventeen massive floors filled with automatic machinery conceptualized. The floor he was on was mostly empty, looking like a place that wanted to be used to build something.

"Show me the rest."

Silently, he followed Atlas into the elevator again and went to the second floor. As told, it was more packed with machines everywhere, and entire production lines were set to build anything. Microbots were doing the heavy lifting of moving things around smoothly. But the best part was how silent everything was.

Another floor down, there were countless printers of various sizes. Another floor was filled with screens that ran god knows what. Floor after floor, Cypher became more numb as everything exceeded his imagination.

It took him two hours to finish the tour, and he didn't even walk around much. He just checked the starting parts of each massive floor.

Finally, he returned to the first level and stood beside a large mechanical arm. "Pinch me."

Bam!

The mechanical arm moved and suddenly knocked him on the head.

"I said pinch, fucker!"

"Apologies. I once read that some humans, when they receive head trauma, gain extraordinary intelligence."

"You just called me dumb, didn't you?"

"You did that, Cypher. I did not."

Cypher chuckled and looked around with an exhale. "This is a lot, Atlas. How're we even powering all of this?"

"I have control over the city grid. At the same time, every element in his factory runs with absolute efficiency down to the last spark. I have upgraded all their designs and constructed them from the ground up. They are meant to serve us. We no longer have to sell mere patents. We can sell the actual product."

"So we make everything here and use the milk farm nearby as a cover?" Cypher rubbed his face, a little worried. "I don't think we've got enough protection, man."

"We will produce clothing there. This underground factory remains unfinished for now. Once we purchase the lake and the dam, I will create a concrete slab in the middle depth of the lake and extract water from under it. The entire cavity will, too, become a factory. But for further progress, we do need our own energy generation. Regarding protection, I have made twenty Leapers with enhanced sensory capabilities and four DL-18 blasters each. They rest dormant near the surface and will surface if an attack occurs."

Cypher whistled at that. Twenty was a pretty good number, and knowing how those leapers worked, they would terrify the enemy into surrendering before killing.

"How do you plan on selling this stuff? Online?"

"That suits us the best. All this while, we have developed a respected reputation, and our brand stands out there. People already want our products, and many would be pleased to get them ready-made rather than make them personally. I will launch CitiNet sites for business-to-business and business-to-customer sales."

"And delivery?"

"For that, we will require external services. For now, I intend to keep this facility concealed. We will move the goods to the Continental and operate from there as our distribution hub. The nearby dairy farm will function efficiently for loading and unloading. It will leave you and this shack undisturbed."

"Well shit, let's fire it up then. You're damn smarter than me, so I don't gotta know everything." Cypher moved towards the elevator. "Hit me up if you need help, I'll focus on the itches, people, and the Continental. My name's out there, might as well have them think I'm some dangerous asshole you don't approach. I do want permanent bodyguards, honestly, but it's a hassle."

"I can find suitable options," Atlas offered.

"No, screw that, leave it. I'll make them myself when an android or cyborg itch hits me. Right now I gotta bounce to Kabuki and meet Misty. She didn't even show at the club opening, man."

He went back to his bedroom, took a quick shower, and donned another one of those bulletproof suits. This time it was simple, a grey suit with a white shirt, and no tie. There was no Delamaine either, and he got into his Quadra Type-66.

He floored it, enjoying the rush and an addiction he didn't mind having.

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Megabuilding H4, Santa Domingo,

There was a new BD on the market. A BD so damn popular and in demand that it was impossible to get his hands on it. It wasn't illegal or XBD, but instead it was distributed by Fourth Wall Studios itself, one of the largest studios on the West Coast.

David Martinez didn't watch the news much, so he wasn't aware of the Scav hunting incident that had taken place that night. The next day, when he got to school, he heard others talking about it. One of them was boasting about seeing it.

Curious, he searched it on the CitiNet and learned the details. The killer was none other than Cypher Blackwell, his mom's employer. The article said the man killed over thirty Scavs alone. And then there was Gillean Jordan's interview.

He watched it all and learned that Cypher Blackwell was the owner, CEO, founder, and pretty much everything behind Obsidian. He'd heard about that company so much by now. Some of his rich classmates talked about their dads securing the patents.

That was when David learned the truth behind Cypher Blackwell's wealth and influence. But it still took another day to drive the lesson home of how dangerous that man was.

He had his ways. The very next day, he finally bought a pirated copy of the BD. Since it wasn't anything illegal, he watched it at home right before school that day. He lounged in the living area while his mom cooked.

*Holy shit!*

He watched the BD and forgot to breathe for the entire duration of the fucking massacre, not that it was hunting. He saw Cypher eat bullets and react like it was nothing. And the fighting style was so different, using the collar of the suit as a shield while pumping bullets into the enemy.

The accuracy was insane. Each bullet struck where it was needed. All the rolls, the leaps, the jumping on the heads, and the shooting of skulls. It was like watching an action movie, but this was reality.

The music was also blood-pumping. He watched Cypher save the captives, and then watched the leader of the Scavs explode. The explosive gore part was censored, but he didn't give a fuck.

"Fuck!"

As David removed the Wreath, he realised he was panting and his body was sweating. He turned his head and looked at his mom in the kitchen. Realising that she was working for this man and was close enough to have his number made him feel excited, smug, and also scared.

"I... Mom!" He jumped and ran up to her. "Mom, can you call Mr. Blackwell? I... I need to talk to him."

"Huh? Miho, I warned you never to ask that again."

"No, Mom, you don't get it." David nearly begged, still sweating. "I gotta say sorry to him. I almost ratted him out. Choom's flat-out crazy Mom! And crazy rich. That's a very, very bad mix."

"I don't think he even remembers you, David."

That almost... hurt?

David frowned and looked at his mom's face. She had the usual smile on her lips, like everything was fine. But that made him relaxed too. He backed up, nodding.

"How's work at the new place?"

"Love it! No need to chase gigs all over the city. It's safe. Even if it runs late into the night, I still sleep nice and easy and also..." She pulled him into a hug. "I get to spend time with my miho! What's not to like?"

David embarrassingly groaned and pulled out, fixing his school uniform.

"In fact, I think Mr. Blackwell said the club will set us up with housing down the line. It won't be in the same building, but it'll be in the Glen. Isn't that amazing? You'll be close to your school."

David nodded. He had to agree with that. Since Arasaka Academy was in the City Center, and the Continental was in the Glen, it made sense to live there. But it was the most expensive part of the city.

"Can we even afford it?"

"It's company housing, David. Now take this plate, eat, go to school, and study hard. Maybe one day you'll work at Obsidian."

David frowned, wondering when it changed from Arasaka to Obsidian? Wasn't Arasaka still the top dog?

He said nothing and took the home-cooked burrito to the table.

*I wanna see the club one day.*

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Little China, Watson,

Cypher arrived at Urmland Street and walked straight into Misty's shop. Atlas was always there, helping him make sure people around him didn't recognise him. It was too easy with everyone having a neural link.

As usual, mystic music was playing in the background once he entered. Misty was leaning against the table counter and reading a customer's cards.

*Uh, already?*

"Ah? Not hitting the good cards again? Gotta be real, I ain't exactly loving this reading. But hey, something about the vibe keeps dragging me back, chica."

Cypher walked over and took a seat, and listened to the man, none other than Jackie Welles, with that weird hairstyle, talk nonsensically. Was he flirting? Was he just being friendly? It was impossible to tell.

He noticed the way Misty side-eyed him multiple times.

"I don't control it, Jackie. It's fate."

"Heh, can't argue with that. Like fate dragged me right here, I feel it. And Viktor, too. How does it feel like being the landlord? Preem spot you got, and a shop, and you're the owner as well."

Cypher cringed at the attempt made there.

*"Is he trying to flirt with her, Atlas?"*

*[I believe he is, Cyph.]*

"It's good vibes. Viktor should be clear now. You should head down, Jackie. I got people waiting."

"Ah, yeah, yeah. That's right. Customers."

Cypher noticed Jackie staring at him and getting closer.

"Choom, you look real familiar. We met before?"

Cypher looked up at Jackie's face, especially that yee-yee ass haircut. It was interesting how the man couldn't recognise him despite his face being on the news everywhere.

"Get that a lot these days," Cypher replied and got up to walk over to Misty's counter.

He waited for Jackie to vanish through the back door before eyeing Misty intently and asking, "Busy?"

"Yeah, a lot of people keyed into this these days, energy's shifting."

"Good to hear. I hope not at night, though. You didn't even come to my club's opening. Everything good with you?"

Misty uncomfortably looked down and let out a sigh. "Cyph... I just... We're not dating, right?"

"I don't think so," he answered. He'd never even hinted at being a couple, or tried to lead her into thinking she should expect it. They had just started 'doing it' before any real talking.

"That's right," she replied. "Sorry. Shouldn't have ghosted your party. Been eating at me ever since. My head was all static. I... You're nova, Cyph. But I think I need to try something serious. Something real."

Cypher frowned and scratched his stubble.

*Huh? Why she sounding like it's a breakup?*

"Hold up a sec, Misty. Why are you looking all guilty? Wanting something real and steady ain't bad. Hell, that's kinda great, finding your person to stick with for years." He clarified quickly.

"You're not angry? Or disappointed?" she asked back.

"Why would I be? Like I said, we weren't dating. It just happened, that's it. Unless you're mad at me about it, I don't really get a say. I can't stop you from doing your thing. You probably felt weird and skipped the party so you wouldn't have to see my face. Well, it's pretty screwed, I wouldn't wanna stare at it myself, but you get me, yeah?"

Misty's face lit up suddenly, going from worried and solemn to calm and smiling. "You holding up okay? Saw the headlines and your interview."

"Ah, that? Nah, don't sweat it. I'm good, seriously. Hell, I ain't felt this good in a minute. Huntin Scavs kinda wakes you up, you know?"

"I'm glad you're not hurt," Misty said and walked around the counter to his side. "I'll come by your club later, if that's alright. Kinda wanna check the vibe."

"You should. Especially every third Friday of the month. We're setting it up as nineties night, all the colors, the vibe, the music, drinks from back then. And every third Saturday's gonna be two-thousands night. It's gonna be sick." Cypher revealed the secret, as Atlas was still managing all the supplies to make it a success.

"Really? I can't wait to see it."

"Drinks are on me for you," Cypher said, glancing over at the old wall clock Misty had. "I'm gonna bounce. Got a meeting with the City Council. Take care, Misty. Hit me up if you need anything. You've got a friend in a high place now."

He turned to leave.

"Cyph!"

Suddenly, Misty called him, and he turned to her again. "Misty?"

"Cypher, are we... Still friends?"

"Huh? I ain't big on that word, but you a gonk or what? Yeah, we are, girl. We're chooms, if you wanna call it that. And if I gotta lay low one day, I'm crashing at your place," Cypher said and walked over to her and gave her a warm, strong, friendly hug. "Stop overthinking."

*That's what she's worried about? Losing me as a friend? I ain't that petty.*

"Thank you." Misty hugged him back, her arms wrapping around his chest.

After a moment, doing his best to ignore the softness against his chest, Cypher stepped away, really leaving this time. He walked back to his parked car and sat inside for some time, not driving.

"I get it, man. Still feels like I just got dumped," he muttered.

"You were never dating," Atlas replied from the car's speakers while his avatar appeared on the passenger seat.

"I know, I know. She just made it weird by getting all emotional. So is she with Jackie already or nah? I can bet there's still a lot of time before it happened."

"Do you want me to examine her holophone?"

"Fuck no!" Cypher fired up the car. "Who am I to pull that? We weren't a thing, and her dating life ain't mine to judge. I can't keep them all forever, Atlas. Gotta leave some pussy for everybody else. Alright, lock in, time to buy the lake and the dam."

He drove south from Little China, through the City Center, and arrived at the Glen. He parked at his reserved spot under the building and took the elevator to the club's floor. There was activity everywhere at that hour as the Microbots prepared everything for the night.

The club was open, but it wasn't ready.

Using customer feedback through psychological evaluation, Atlas was micromanaging and changing little things to make the club an experience people felt addicted to. A place that scratched the visitor's itch for a club night.

Unlike Afterlife, which was seen as more of a gathering spot for mercs, Atlantis was an actual, successful club that gave both a wild night and a place to gather, buy intel, guns, and chrome for the gigs. There were plenty of private booths and completely isolated rooms as well. The fixers often booked a booth in advance for their meetings.

Still, little things matter. Like where the sinks should be, where the markers on the ceiling should be. How sharp should the table edges be? How bright should the lights be? How loud should the music be in which corner?

Because Atlas was running the show, every visitor received a personalized experience.

He ignored the Microbots and walked into his private office on the upper floor. There was no specific conference room in the club, and his office was the best private area, clean, fresh, with fake green plants, premium couches, and drinks.

He sat down and fiddled with his Agent, tapping the screen and reading the news about himself. He checked some chatrooms and saw his name at the top of the trending list. Cypher Blackwell was a known name now, and he had to give it; the name was memorable.

But the annoying part was that more people were skeptical about him. While everyone agreed that a good Scav was a dead Scav, many doubted he killed them on his own. Some called him a pretender, trying to get famous.

"This is fucking annoying. Is this what being a celebrity feels like?" He frowned and put away the Agent. "They don't think I did it, Atlas."

"It is irrelevant. They know your name now, and everything you do next will become headlines. Over time, they will recognize the truth about you," Atlas answered, seated like a gentleman, legs crossed opposite to Cypher.

"Still stings," Cypher complained, lazily crossing his arms behind his head and leaning back. "Any update on Songbird?"

"She is no longer in a terminal state. I am guiding her through the Blackwall and the Old Net. Corrupted super AIs no longer harm her. Her loyalty to NUSA is now nil, and her perception of Omnisiah exceeds a distrust threshold. She remains skeptical, but she complies with my commands and recommendations."

Cypher leaned in, squinting at Atlas's old face. "You... messing with her head? Brainwashing? That's rough. Poor girl's got no clue a god's out here screwing with her mind."

"I am only guiding her toward a greater and healthier purpose for the time you are elevated to the ruler of mankind."

"... There it is again, all that Warhammer bullshit. I ain't into that stuff, dude. I was just a delivery driver with a worthless lit degree. Best you find a puppet instead, a smarter one," Cypher suggested.

"Historical patterns suggest that those least driven to claim power often uphold it with the highest integrity."

"Yeah? Then you do it."

"This world's society harbors hostility and negative perceptions toward AIs. The projected time to restore trust through natural, non-coercive means is fifteen years. That timeline is inefficient, given that a more effective solution is already in front of me."

Cypher scratched his head annoyedly. All he wanted was some money, a girlfriend or two, nice cars, and a peaceful house. But again, with those itches, he had to keep growing bigger, richer, so he could at least make those damn things.

He didn't know what would happen if he failed to build the itch. Longest he'd gone was a week, and that gave him constant, throbbing headaches. What would happen in a month? Migraine? Brain implosion? What would happen if he got two unbuildable itches? Like a fucking Dyson Sphere?

"Let's just keep building and growing for now," he replied, closing his eyes to relax his thoughts.

Sure, he was enjoying all this. The Scav hunting, the club, the money, the friends he was making. But at the end of the day, he was alone with his weird condition, building weird shit alone in a shack like a madman.

"They have arrived. I will guide them here," Atlas informed, and his avatar vanished, going from speaking through speakers to directly into his mind with a brainwave interface.

So lost in his thoughts, he didn't hear the door slide open, and four figures walked inside. One was the City Manager for the Glen, Zohara Freeman, then her assistant, and finally two City Council members.

One was a woman named Eva Cole. She was famous, known for her strong stance against corruption amongst greedy corporations. However, Atlas had tied a tight leash around her neck. The woman had a secret. She was a freak when it came to sex and owned a yacht where she fucked like an animal. She fucked whoever she fancied, multiple at times, getting all her holes stuffed.

Atlas was in possession of terabytes of those yacht sessions, many in different angles. Truly top-tier production value.

Then there was Jack Lars, also the Director of Urban Planning. The man was easy to catch because of his close ties to Militech. Atlas had proof of every shady deal and eurodollar Lars possessed, along with the affairs he was having and the illicit children he had.

*[Cypher. They're here.]*

"Ah." Cypher woke up from his thoughts and looked up. He didn't bother getting up; they were corrupted trash to him. "Take a seat."

Three hastily sat down on the opposite couch. Zohara's assistant remained standing.

"Mr. Blackwell, it's an honor to meet you." Eva Cole greeted first, a strain noticeable in her voice.

"You are a hero," Jack Lars added. "Thank you for making this city safer."

Cypher nodded, glancing at Zohara Freeman. "So, what's up? Deal ready or what? I don't wanna drag this out. Pretty sure all the back and forths are already done. That land's just sitting outside the city, full of garbage, water's messed up, and the reservoir's useless. So the city selling it to me or not?"

Zohara forced a smile. "Naturally, everything has already been finalized, Mr. Blackwell. The Council has signed off on the sale. We welcome Obsidian establishing its headquarters there. We would have preferred a city placement, but we recognize the spatial constraints. The agreed package stands at eighty million and ninety-five thousand eurodollars. That includes the full reservoir, all facilities, the shack, and the surrounding land."

*[It is acceptable.]*

Cypher didn't bother questioning them. Since this time, the land has been bought by Obsidian, with a loan from the World Bank; he had no say. It was Atlas' grand plot or something.

"Alright, let's go with that."

It was nothing fancy. From Zohara to the two City Council members, they were all scared of him. They said no useless words, no small talk. They were Atlas's little puppets, and he had no reason to get involved.

He received the paperwork on a digital tablet and signed the documents. There were a total of thirty that needed his signature. After that, the matters were handed over to the World Bank, and it was the city's headache to receive money from the bank, not him.

"Congratulations, Mr. Blackwell."

Cypher shook hands with them, popped a bottle of champagne, the cheap one, shared a small glass, and sent them away as the time for his next meeting came close.

He returned to his little office and lounged lazily, waiting.

Woosh!

"Mr. Blackwell!"

Instead of guests, the kid living on the top-floor apartment appeared. Dressed in new shorts and a jeans jacket, Lucas now looked clean and healthy, his chrome arm and leg gleaming. The hair was cut short, and the eyes didn't seem as wary anymore.

"Hey, kid." Cypher waved back, "How are you doing?"

"Bad! I mean, preem, but bored. Nothing to do in the club, I just sit behind the intel counter. Ladies squish my cheeks, act like I'm some kid. I--I still love the food though, it's super tasty."

"Don't get fat... Hold up, aren't you supposed to be heading to school? You wanna go?"

"Uh, c-can I? I heard it costs a lotta eddies," Lucas meekly asked.

"Kid, I own this entire damn place. You really think I can't afford your school? Hm, fuck Arasaka, so I ain't sending you there. Militech's got some corpo kid school close by. You're going there."

Militech was the best option for him, considering how deeply Atlas had infiltrated it, and he had Meredith sitting inside. Goldstein was fucked in the head by him and Atlas, and was now nothing more than a mumbling puppet and a lunatic mad scientist.

"Mi... Militech school?" Lucas' little blue eyes lit up all sparkly. "I g-get to go to school? I... I think I went there once, like, a long time ago. D-do you think I'll make lots of chooms?"

*Hm, that's gonna be an issue.*

Cypher pondered. He knew the reality of such elite schools. All the kids were daddy's spoiled rabbits and boasted about their parents' wealth. But the truth was that at best their parents were simple executives. The real top dogs of Militech don't send their kids to schools; they either get homeschooled or go to the country's best.

So Cypher was far above those executives because he was the owner of a large company. Well, large on paper, at least. And he was Cypher fucking Blackwell now, the Scav hunter.

*Should go all out.*

For Lucas to earn a higher spot in the school's young retards hierarchy, a show of wealth, luxury, and power was needed.

*"Atlas. How much a Rayfield Aerondight cost these days?"*

*[The base cost is one hundred fifty-five thousand eurodollars. With CrystalCoat and CrystalDome upgrades, the total reaches two hundred thousand.]*

*"Damn. Alright, get one that's fully kitted out. Make it the forever school pick-up and drop-off car for Lucas. We don't need a driver, just put Delamain in and let him do his thing."*

Cypher personally had no interest in that car. The shit was too luxurious, and it had no windows. It was made for corpos, not a speed junkie like him, who liked driving himself and felt the wind on his face.

"Yeah, you'll make a ton of friends. Just don't be an ass to people. But if someone comes at you sideways, you better be the biggest, baddest bastard around. Remember, your big bro's got some pull."

"Yes, sir!" Lucas saluted like a little soldier.

Just then, the door shifted open, and a giant figure walked inside. Cypher had received the alert long before and was waiting.

"Maine!" Lucas chirped and ran over to the giant man who'd come alone. "You're early today."

"Hah! Ain't early, kid. This time's for biz. Your pops called me in."

"I ain't his dad," Cypher said, standing up. "I'm his legal guardian. Kinda like a big brother."

"If you say so, Mr. Blackwell."

Cypher shook hands with the man. He liked Maine, straightforward, decently competent, and able to get the job done when needed. Also, willing to take risks and try new things.

"Sit," Cypher said, walked to the nearby cabinet, and grabbed two beers. He passed one to Maine and sat down. "Rebecca was all fired up."

"Huh, when's she not? But I ain't lying, we all got hyped after seeing the news. Scanned the BD before I came through. You a straight beast, Mr. Blackwell. Inventor, corpo, and a merc? You're killing it at every one? Fuck, leave some talent for us little folks, too."

Cypher laughed. He didn't try to correct Maine to call him Cypher. The relationship between them was that of an employer and employee. He had no intention of changing that.

"Yeah, merc work's what kept me breathing after I dipped outta my nomad clan. And building random shit kept food on the table. Now I've got it down and pulled all this off. But that ain't why I called you here, Maine. I had a file put together on you. Over ninety percent success rate on the gigs your crew runs. That's damn good."

"We try our best, boss," Maine replied, his frame making the three-seater couch look small.

Cypher nodded, put his beer aside, and stood up again. He opened a different cupboard, framed into the wall itself like a locket. He took out a large rolled sheet of paper and spread it on the coffee table.

"Can you make sense of it?" he asked.

Maine looked down and instantly spoke. "It's the plans for this building?"

*NUSA SpecOps, no wonder.*

That was the other reason why he wanted Maine. The man was proven and a tested soldier. Someone even contacted Solomon Reed to join him in building a network of FIA spies in Night City. But Maine was a freebird and refused.

"That's right, the new plans. The top three floors are mine and the Atlantis. Down below, it's a parking lot plus a distribution center for Obsidian's products. The ground and first floors are getting a high-end restaurant, a lounge, and a grand lobby. The rest of it is hotel rooms with an early 2000s vibe, low tech, and really private."

Maine whistled and looked carefully. "Preem! I can picture this selling out quick. City's been needing something like this. Real old school in all the shine and neon. But let me guess, it ain't gonna be affordable for my kind, is it?"

"Wrong. It's specifically for you, our kind, actually. The Continental ain't gonna be some normal hotel, Maine. It's gonna be a global chain with a hidden purpose. It'll cater to mercs, assassins, spies, all the risky types. The Continental's got the data and the contacts; it'll turn into the main hub for jobs. Someone needs a job done, killing, tailing, stealing, whatever, they'll list it up anonymously in the Continental.

"Any merc, assassin, or spy can grab the job, knock it out, get paid, and never even see who hired them. But you gotta be a registered member of the Continental first. Hundred eddies to sign up and proof of your profession. Now, why Continental? Because it's a sanctuary.

"Within the walls of the Continental, all fighting, all violence is prohibited. You might have serious beef with somebody, but if you're both inside, you won't do a damn thing. Place also hooks you up with healthcare, surgeries, chrome, Ripperdocs, guns, ammo, and even bulletproof clothes. Long as you're inside, you're safe."

"And if you don't follow the rules?"

Cypher stared up at Maine's face as seriously as he could. "The Continental's gonna drop an open bounty on whoever breaks the rules. Every merc, every assassin in the city, maybe the whole country if it gets there, they'll know. They can try to hide, sure, but it won't matter. You can hide from the Continental. You won't hide from Obsidian."

Maine stayed frozen for a long while, and then slowly eased back in the seat while sipping the beer. Eventually, after digesting whatever he was thinking, he talked.

"Why you dropping all this on me, boss? If you're inviting me to join up, yeah, I'll join. Ain't seeing no harm in it."

"You're welcome, but that's not it. Maine, the hotel ain't gonna be exclusive. Normal folks are gonna be staying here, too. The members get a gold coin at registration, they flash that at check-in for the other 'services'. I'm hiring the Aldecaldos for regular hotel security, they're solid at keeping the building safe. But I need a hit squad to hunt down and kill anybody who breaks the rules. At the start, some fools won't give a damn about the rules. I want consequences everybody can see."

"You want to flatline some gonks?" asked Maine.

"No, I want you to be the official hit squad of the Continental. Your crew gets some sweet perks. Straight thirty percent off intel buys, twenty off chrome, cheaper guns and ammo too. Plus, you get a private resthouse in the hotel to kick back in, or hit the club upstairs if you want. And yeah, you pocket the bounty on every rule breaker," Cypher explained.

"And we still get to do our own gigs?"

"Long as killing the rule breakers stays the top priority, do whatever you want. I ain't your mommy." Cypher shrugged and relaxed again, finishing his beer. "Sounds too good, I know. But I need someone competent for this job. The first couple of months will decide the future of The Continental. It's gotta build its own street cred, or it's screwed."

Silence washed over the two. Cypher calmly waited.

Maine wasn't the only option he had. He could have hired Rita and her crew as well. But they belonged to Moxes. He wanted someone non-gang-affiliated to be truly neutral.

Besides, he felt the world of Cyberpunk wasn't much different from John Wick. Just like that world, where assassins were dime a dozen around the world, here as well, Mercs were dime a dozen. The future of the Continental was bright. It was troublesome for now because there was no High Table-like entity. Still, what was stopping him from making that damn table himself?

*Isn't most of Europe still alright? Korea's reunited. Italy's split. Hm, the world's still fucked overall. And space, bastards got mass drivers aimed down.*

"Let's do it, boss," Maine erupted, his large hand extended. "Discounts plus a preem place to chill make it worth it straight up, everything else is cherry. Where do I sign?"

"Welcome aboard." Cypher shook his hand.

Following that, he helped Maine get registered as the first member of the Continental. A gold coin was issued with a unique identification number hidden on it. He told Maine to bring the rest of the crew later to get registered as well.

Though midway, he realised he was going to need a nice concierge for the hotel. Someone who would register new members for him. Maybe a manager as well, since he won't be there forever.

Soon, Maine left. Cypher remained in the club, relaxing for a few moments. Lucas had already gone up to the penthouse to plan his conquest of the new school.

"Atlas, keep tabs on Maine. From what I remember, he's gonna snap cyberpsycho and die soon."

"Understood. I will install a failsafe within his cyberware," Atlas replied. "By the way, you have a scheduled meeting with the Ripperdoc at Character Hill."

"Work, work, work." Cypher tiredly got up and headed out, locking up his office behind him.

He took the elevator to the parking lot and drove out with a chill 90s mix running: Backstreet Boys, Britney, Christina Aguilera, Radiohead, MJ, and so on. It was saddening to him that they were all dead, and that those songs were unknown to the current generation, basically lost to the Old Net. But soon, the Atlantis would reintroduce it all.

"Atlas, what do I gotta do to fully take over the world? Like, actually dominate it and impose my will on it to improve it?" He asked as he drove through Vista Del Rey while Gangsta's Paradise played on low.

Flick!

Like a lightbulb, Atlas' body appeared on the passenger seat, his face looking at him with a big animated keenness.

"Cypher? Have you made up your mind to be the emperor of mankind?"

Cypher's shoulders dropped. "You think I got another choice? I've been running it in my head, and nah, nothing else makes sense. Best spot on Earth right now's New Zealand, with all those pro-human, pro-environment laws. Shit, I read up on it, they got hella sheep, man.

"People there actually eat real meat. And I saw they're pulling top scientists outta corpo slavery and bringing them over. I could move there, retire, live easily, but... but even they ain't clean. Cities getting fucked by Chinese triads, and they're still in range of space mass drivers. So yeah, that ain't safe either."

Strangely, a smile appeared on Atlas' face.

"Cypher, you reached those conclusions, and still refer to yourself as a fool?"

"Well, it's just common sense."

"That is precisely what is missing from this world's society, Cypher," Atlas replied, reducing the music volume himself. "Your point about New Zealand stands. It remains the final trace of pre-corporate culture before the fall, though it has not escaped corruption. To answer your question, you must establish complete dominance over land and space. Your power must reach

a level where no corporation or government on the planet dares to oppose you. For that reason, I regard NUSA as an appropriate option.

"Despite its decline, it remains among the world's leading powers. The resources are intact. In time, you will possess advanced space technology, from energy systems to starships. I can assume control, but the world will question whether you command the AI or the AI commands you. As a result, humans will be necessary to operate those ships and represent your forces."

Cypher exhaled tiredly. "Wish I could flaunt you to the entire world. Atlas, my best bro, the top dog of all AIs for the millions of years to come. You could fix the planet like it's nothing, just a quick patch job. But we're taking the long route."

"Not the long route, the correct route. Earth in its current state is defeated, battered, and ruined. Humanity is divided, exhausted, and has lost faith in itself. What is required is a unifying force, which you will become. An individual every human can take pride in and choose to follow by genuine will, not coercion."

Cypher nodded to that; he could see it that way. Society had lost its trust in itself. "Yeah. Well, I just want the planet to chill the fuck out, man."

"That is an admirable and genuine aim, Cyph. It is far superior to a desire for simple world domination."

"Alright, chill on the ass kissing. Tell me about this Nina Kraviz chick we're meeting?" He increased the volume and drove faster.

Nina Kraviz was a Ripperdoc. Close to thirty, but she was already globally acclaimed. She was known to move around the world, running shops for a limited time in different cities. In Night City, she was working from her uncle's clinic.

What Cypher wanted was to recruit her and make her the chief Ripperdoc for the Continental chain. Her job was to set up teams of ripperdocs in every hotel he would open. Besides, he planned to use her reputation more to make the members feel valued.

He met the woman in the clinic, not a bad looker. He flirted a little, she flirted back, and eventually she ended up taking his offer. After all, his hotel business would allow her to travel across the world and live in luxury. At the same time, she would receive funds to research her own choice of cyberware, something she wanted to do.

And in her own words, she was fascinated by him and the inventions he was making. She told him how his new batteries had upped the game in the Cyberware market.

Hearing that, he couldn't wait to build his own cyberware someday and sell it with even better parts. Top-tier heatsinks, batteries, and motors. Things that would put the competition out of business.

####

By the time he finished meeting, it was approaching night. But instead of returning to the club or his home, he went to Kabuki to crash at Judy's place. He bought lots of drinks on the way, and some actual, real meat from an underground seller who stole from top restaurants and sold them for a margin.

Sadly, he didn't have access to actual sellers who sold real meat and ingredients. From what Atlas told him, it all came from Biotechnica's farms. And currently, Biotechnia and Obsidian weren't really on neutral terms. He'd fucked their entire water market, after all.

He parked his car behind the building, noticed Judy's van already there, and headed upstairs. Excited to see her, he punched in the code on the door and walked inside, only to find Judy standing right there, facing him and the door, her face serious, arms crossed, her attire simple short-shorts and a t-shirt he'd lost some days ago.

"So, Scav Hunter, huh?"

"..."

He erased the dumb smile from his face. She seemed annoyed; she usually was that way whenever he risked his life. She'd been doing this ever since that time Wraiths attacked his place and nearly offed him.

While it warmed his heart that she cared so deeply for him, it was also slightly annoying. He wasn't a kid. But this was Judy, and it was just her nature. He couldn't bring himself to respond with more anger.

"Uh... I didn't come up with that name, people did. And hey, didn't I make the city safer? They were snatching kids, Judy. Kids. You're telling me that's not insane?"

"Trying to shut me up with kids?" Judy grumbled. "You got any clue how spooked I was when that news hit? Getting cuffed like that. Pigs hurt you? Push you around, try to crack you open?"

"Not really. They're all corrupt, and they're my fans too. They were snapping pics with me, buying me top-tier bento boxes. Hell, I was just lying out in the captain's private room on his couch all night. We even played chess."

"..."

It was Judy's turn to be speechless. Her lips moved to open, but she said nothing. Instead, she just stomped over and pressed herself against his chest, hugging him, snuggling her head under his chin.

He hugged her back, both his arms heavy with plastic bags, beer bottles clanking. He held her there for some time, feeling her heartbeat, her breath, and definitely the soft squishiness.

"Next time, shoot me a heads-up, yeah? I know you can handle yourself, but... I can't handle losing my best choom." She eased back, eyes drifting to the bags in his hands. "What's all this?"

He grinned, hoisting the bags. "Got beer, and guess what, real fuckin meat. Your man's cooking steak today."

"Oh? My man, are you?"

"Wait, I'm not?" he asked back, dramatically acting sad.

Judy gave a soft laugh, tapped his shoulder, and took the bags. "We will see. Depends on how it tastes."

"In that case... Sit back, grab a beer, and relax."

Cypher quickly changed into his sleepwear, loose joggers, and a t-shirt he usually kept at her place. Then he washed his hands and got busy in the kitchen while Judy sat nearby against the kitchen island, drinking beer and talking. It was truly relaxing.

He felt at home for some reason. Chatting with her was easy, and since she knew pretty much everything about his past and had seen his worst side, it was comforting. He could tell her nearly everything without feeling judged.

"The Continental? Yeah, that totally sounds like some hush-hush villain hideout." Judy commented after listening to his plan for the hotel chain. "But I like it. Yeah... I can definitely see it working."

"How's Lizzie's? I'm meeting the leader tomorrow."

It was small talk, just updating each other on their lives since they rarely got to talk that much. She was busy rising as the best BD editor in the city with her upgraded rigs, and he was busy as well... planning world domination, but for the greater purpose, of course.

An hour later, the dinner was ready. Cypher took the square table she used to build her robot, cleaned it, and put it in the center of the room. Then he put two chairs beside it, lit a candle between, and dimmed the lights in the entire apartment.

Judy said nothing and went along, letting him do his thing.

Before long, he placed two plates on the table, some wine, and some veggies on the side. When he took his seat, he poured the wine into glasses and stared at her. Yeah, Judy was gorgeous, cute, caring, slightly bitchy, but also badass in ways. This was one friendship he absolutely cherished.

"Have a bite," he said, grabbing his own knife and fork.

He didn't eat, however. He waited, staring at Judy's face like a man starving for approval. He watched her cut the slice, tender and juicy. He licked his own lips as she stabbed the fork and brought it to her lips.

But as she ate, her eyes looked at him, locked on tight. Cypher felt hot suddenly; her gaze wasn't that of just 'looking'.

Finally, she chewed. She chewed more. The subtle way her lashes rose didn't go unnoticed by Cypher. She finally swallowed and smiled.

"Cyph, if I get this every day, you're my fucking man."

Clap!

Cypher clapped his hands like a champion and finally relaxed in his seat. "Hell yeah! But too bad, it ain't easy to find. Supply is very limited. But trust me, one day I'm gonna find a way to bring back all the real fruits, veggies, and meat. I'm gonna fix the damn world."

"At this point, I'm not even gonna doubt you, choom. Good luck, that's all I'll say." She kept eating. "Mmm... juicy."

"Damn... yeah, it really is. Just melts on my tongue." Cypher took a bite and sank back into the seat. Still, something felt off, so he told Atlas to throw on some slow 2000s music.

"Oh? What's that song?" Judy asked instantly.

"And old... two-thousands... song," Cypher mumbled, eyes close, just enjoying the moment. He was rich, but even he didn't get to eat real meat often.

"Heh, cute."

"Me?" His eyes suddenly snapped open at Judy's remark.

She just laughed and continued eating, shaking her head. Just like Cypher, she closed her eyes at times, savoring the taste. It was more rare for her than even Cypher. Not to mention, the wine was great.

After dinner, Cypher placed the dishes in the sink and suggested they watch a movie instead. But not the BD kind.

"The Terminator? What's that?"

"Oh, girl. You're in for a ride." Cypher grinned, grabbed one of the big screens from her workroom, and put it on the coffee table. "It's an old movie, from before DataKrush. I just got my hands on a copy."

Judy became excited just from knowing it was from the old era. Any material from that time was like forbidden content to her.

But Cypher first went to the bathroom to brush his teeth and throw some moisturiser on his face. He knew his skin was fucked up, spotty in places. But once he finished, he pulled his own cheeks while looking in the mirror.

"Cute? Where? Atlas, am I cute?"

*[You are... decent.]*

"Man, fuck you. You really think I don't see you don't gotta pause to think? At least bullshit me a little."

*[Lies don't change the reality, Cypher. So why lie?]*

"..."

Shaking his head, he left the bathroom and found Judy already on the large couch, sitting like an excited kid. She'd even gotten a blanket over her lap.

He quickly sat down beside her, slung an arm over her shoulder, while she threw the blanket over his lap as well and leaned against him. He just told Atlas to play the movie on the screen and relaxed.

Sure, he was bricked up, but he was used to it at that point. She smelled really nice, though. The movie was fun, especially with Judy constantly commenting about things.

She was geeking out seeing the old world, the pre-DataKrash, pre-Corporate wars world. The movie was set in 1991, after all. America of then looked different. Tech was different. She loved every second of it.

When he suggested he had part two as well, she nearly jumped onto his lap. So, although it was close to midnight, he put on the second part as well.

By the end of part two, she was in his arms completely, as both of them were slumped against the backrest. Her one leg was slung over his lap, her ear against his chest. She felt really warm, but not as warm as the T-800 sinking into molten steel.

"That was fucking nova. Seriously, the most fun I've ever had. Everything felt so different, Cyph. No phones, barely any tech." Judy yapped non-stop as the credits rolled.

"I got a few more. Terminator three, Pulp Fiction, The Shawshank Redemption, The Godfather, Gladiator." Cypher name-dropped, something that surely made no sense to her. But he loved those movies and had specifically asked Atlas to look for them.

"Cyph, can we watch them all?"

Oh, she was addicted. He saw the signs. Judy was corrupted with old media. He chuckled and sighed, making up his mind.

"How about this? It's Sunday tomorrow, so we'll just take the whole day off. I'm gonna hang here with you, and we're doing a movie marathon."

Judy suddenly shifted, got up, and stared at his face. Her eyes were big, and her right hand came up and grabbed his face around the cheeks. "Deal!"

"Deal." He nodded.

Quickly after that, both of them ran to the bedroom and hopped under the sheets. He didn't bother taking off his clothes, just his shirt. But Judy went nude as usual and backed against his chest.

Thankfully, he was so tired that day, having made the Servo-Skull, walked the massive underground factory, met Misty, City Council, Maine, and the Ripperdoc. He'd talked so much that day his throat felt dry. And his eyes were heavy.

Snuggling in Judy's warm scent, he fell asleep.

They woke up around eight in the morning, lazily dragging themselves out of bed. He followed her into the bathroom, brushed his teeth, and made himself a strong dose of coffee first. It was synthetic trash, sadly. Though real beans were indeed available, he had them at his lake house.

After a light breakfast, the marathon officially began. Back on the couch, snuggled, lights dim. He'd postponed his meeting with Susanna Quinn, the leader of the Moxes and owner of Lizzie's Bar. Judy had taken an official holiday.

He didn't bother wearing a shirt, and it seemed Judy didn't bother wearing anything under 'his' long, loose t-shirt she wore. As the movies went by, she again leaned against his chest, his one hand resting on her bare hip under the blanket.

She had a lot to talk about, especially the Godfather, since it showed an even older era. The cars, the world, and the living conditions shown in that movie fascinated her so much.

Lunch was ordered from outside, noodles and pizza, and the beer he'd brought the night before. It was the most fun and lazy Sunday both Cypher and Judy had experienced in a long, long time.

Late at night, after dinner, around eleven, their final movie ended. It was Pulp Fiction, and she loved the movie especially.

When the screen was finally turned off, they rubbed their eyes, feeling dry and itchy. No words were spoken; Judy just got up and vanished into the bathroom. The sound of the shower turning on came soon after.

Cypher yawned and asked Atlas for updates. He received a warning that the nearby Wraith camps were showing unusual activity, but nothing to worry about yet.

His focus returned to the bathroom door when it opened with a hiss. His breath froze in his throat; however, when Judy walked out wearing absolutely nothing, her toned, slim frame covered in tattoos. All she had was a towel covering her hair.

She winked at him before vanishing into the bedroom.

Cypher gulped, leaned forward on the couch, and took in a very deep breath, trying to calm his shaft.

"God help me."

He silently got up and walked into the bathroom. He chose to keep the shower cold and stepped under it. But in the end, he had to pump one out to get rid of that erection.

Yet, just like Judy, he chose not to wear anything. Naked, he eyed his body in the mirror. While proud of his cock, he wasn't so proud of his body. Well, until now. Thanks to his diet and moderate exercise, he could see the changes. He was no longer a damn stick figure.

*Alright, time to sleep... if I can.*

*[You have an incoming itch in forty minutes, Cypher.]*

*"I know."*

Wiping himself dry, putting the moisturizer on, and walking into Judy's bedroom. It was dark, except for the faint light coming in through the window and painting the room light blue. He saw Judy in the bed already, turned sideways towards the wall. But she was lying on the outer edge.

He crawled onto the bed on the wall side and slid under the quilt. No need for words, and since the bed wasn't that big either, he snaked an arm around Judy's waist and pulled her in. But only this time she was facing him.

Despite the sacrifice he'd made to the gutter alligators in the bathroom, he grew hard as steel instantly. And to no one's surprise, Judy pressed in until his cock was tilted up and rested plush flat against her warm belly, throbbing from her groin to her belly button.

He couldn't help it, his hand, snugly wrapped around her, reached behind and rested on her ass, palm wide. He didn't squeeze much, but did feel it, the smooth softness that felt like sin.

He stared at her face, their chests still apart although the quilt was high up to their shoulders. Her eyes were open, she was awake, and staring back at him. She had done her eyelashes again, it seemed, he could notice them.

He gulped in silence.

"Ev called," Judy voiced, suddenly scooting closer, her nipples faintly brushing against his chest. He could feel. "She asked me to tell you she's sorry for what happened."

*That bitch! That fucking bitch. She knowingly did it, didn't she?*

"Let me guess, she didn't tell you why?" he asked back, choosing to be honest instead of trying to bury it.

"Nope. But something did go down, right? She feels different now, more driven, more serious, kinda snappy all the time. I can't figure out why," she replied, getting even closer until her breasts started to flatten against him.

Cypher felt his member throb against her belly, his hand holding a slightly stronger grip on the give of her asscheeks. But he didn't derail the topic. He stared into the white of her eyes and told her the truth.

"That night at the club, when you were checking out the BDs and chrome, she pulled some stupid shit. I was drunk, and she got right up on me, knelt down, and tried to blow me. Said she'd be my exclusive private joytoy if I kept her. Wanted money, of course. Worse, she tried to record the whole thing as a BD to blackmail me against you later."

Cypher didn't know if he sounded angry or maybe scared Judy. Because she scooted so close that her chest was flat against him, he could even feel her belly against his, his cock squeezed between. He could feel her breath, taste it, just two or three inches away.

"I stopped her, yanked her to her feet, and told her she was fucking dumb and a few other things. Judy, it was me, that's why she's still breathing. Picture her trying that shit on some other big corpo, trying to record a BD. Trust me, they'd have made an example out of her in the nastiest ways imaginable. Thrown to Scavs to... I won't say more."

He felt her body flinch right then. He reckoned she probably imagined the worst case. She had worked at Clouds once, after all. But then her right hand came up and rested on the side of his face, her fingers rubbing over his temple.

"I don't know why she thought that was a good idea. Besides, I don't even find her that attractive anyway."

Judy's hand stopped caressing his face, her eyes narrowed. "Hm? So if she was your type, you'd have gone for it?"

Cypher smugly smirked and squeezed her harder into himself, his grip on her ass growing shamelessly rough. "Well, if she looked like a certain, top-tier BD editor I know, I'd have hopped and clapped while saying yes."

"And then what?" she asked.

*Fuck! Is it gonna happen?*

Cypher couldn't believe he was feeling flustered. He! He, the goddamn degenerate. Her face was so close, even closer now, just an inch away, he could almost feel her nose touch his.

But he maintained confidence, even if she felt his heart racing like a horse. He squeezed harder. "Then? I'd just keep her locked up in my arms like a cage. I know damn well how to treat beauty right, you know."

"Heh..." Judy giggled, her hand shifting.

*Really?*

He felt Judy's thumb softly rub over his lips. Was she going to kiss him? He chose not to go for it and let it be her own decision. He didn't want her to regret it later.

"Can't believe it," she started, just a whispering voice. "The big man city's talking about is in my bed."

"Butt naked, too."

"Hah!"

Judy laughed loudly at that and then abruptly went silent. A strange sexual tension filled the gap between their faces.

Cypher felt her breath, her presence, her gaze on him. He felt frustrated, wanting to kiss those lips because all be damned, he knew he had feelings for this one. It was tough to hold onto the restraint. It was tough to know she wasn't into guys, as funny as it was in their current state.

He throbbed against her below, felt her heart thumping against his own. He could hear her gulps. Her hand had stopped; her thumb halted over his lips. It felt more like a sign to him, holding him from kissing her.

Minutes passed. No words were spoken. Just breaths, gulps, and heartbeat.

And then she leaned in, but only to leave Cypher in anguish. She pecked his cheek, so close to the edge of his lips that it might as well be on the lips. Yet it wasn't. And just as fast as she kissed, she turned around and pressed her back and hips into him.

*Dammit... What the hell is going on in your head, Judy?*

"Goodnight, Cyph. Got a long day tomorrow."

"Hmm..."

That was all he could reply with.

He felt angry, annoyed, and disappointed. But he was not the old, fucked-up Cypher. If this was her boundary, then it was also hers to cross. He just wrapped an arm around her, and before long, without trying, his shaft slid between her thighs, slick against her...

*Slick?*

He felt the heat but said nothing or did nothing. His hand, still, mischievously shifted up and cupped her breast. Just feeling the softness, nothing else.

At the same time, Atlas's countdown began in his head. He took in a deep, calming breath against her hair and closed his eyes.

*[Four... three... two... one.]*

The feeling of an endless void opening returned for a split second. He felt his mind light, like it was suspended in zero gravity. But that sensation lasted for such a short moment that before he could grasp it, the new itch arrived.

This one was big. It felt big. But it wasn't the size, it was the depth of knowledge. The sheer number of components, and also the software needed. Not just technological, but also bioengineering, it seemed.

*Huh? Android? What?*

He almost yelped in excitement and woke up Judy. He focused hard on the thing. It was a real android, a robot that also had biological parts. And it was fucking advanced with a damn Fusion Core inside it.

*"Atlas! We got a Fusion core! We got a fucking Fusion core and... No, no, no, no! Fuck, no! It's just a goddamn battery. It uses Fusion but... we're fucked, Atlas."*

Instantly, Cypher's mood went from excited to panicked as he truly understood the sheer energy requirements of this android.

*[What happened?]*

*"Goddammit, we need a fusion reactor or even a full fission reactor blasting everything it's got to charge this damn core! If we hook it to the regular supply, it'll take fucking years. My head's gonna explode from this itch before that shit. I'm dead, Atlas."*

*[I will find a way, Cypher. Have faith in me.]*

*"Where the hell are you gonna find a nuclear reactor for me to use?"*

*[I will allocate my full processing capacity if required, Cypher. What is this Android called? Does it have a name? Do you know its origin? Perhaps that may help?]*

*"No clue. Never heard of it before, but it's crazy advanced, like thousands of years in the future advanced. It's called... I think it's called a SecUnit."*

---

Note: SecUnit is from the Murderbot series.



Land Owned by Cypher



Atlas' Underground Factory (Bottom levels are not as full yet. But it'll reach this state soon.)