

Cyberpunk: Badland Madman Chapter 20 - Kiddie Gang, Militech Compromised, 90s Night & Greater Good

Cypher woke up with a headache.

Unlike before, when he knew he could build those itches, this was the first time he was limited by the lack of access to a critical infrastructure. Not having the means to power those fusion cores meant the SecUnit would sit lifeless, and the itch would never go away.

Knowing that made it worse. Even while hugging Judy's warm frame, he found no rest that night. He kept looking for a solution in his memory. He looked through whatever he knew about this world.

As his eyes opened, he found himself lying straight in bed, Judy hugging him from the side, her face on his arm, and he could swear he felt drool slip out of her mouth. He didn't care and just covered themselves with the quilt and kept staring up, letting the sunlight fully fill the room to mark the day.

"Atlas. There's a large Satwave Power Plant in the Badlands."

Cypher remembered the mess V and Panam had made out of that power station. He recalled it having a lot of stored energy.

"It uses microwave energy from satellites to make energy, no? How about we us—"

[It will achieve nothing. The Fusion Core demands an astronomical level of uninterrupted energy. The Satwave Power Plant stores power in batteries, and its capacity to sustain continuous satellite energy transfer is insufficient.]

Cypher frowned and thought more.

"What about... Isn't there a Petrochem Nuclear Power Plant in Arroyo?"

[There is one. But it serves only as a supplement to the Satwave, meaning it lacks the power we need. Cypher, a fusion reactor generates three to five times the energy per reaction compared to fission reactors. To charge the fusion core, I will need to force the fission reactor close to maximum capacity and keep it stable there. For this operation to succeed, we need a reactor with a higher ceiling.]

Cypher rubbed his face with his free hand annoyedly. The world sadly didn't have fusion energy yet, and while it was being researched, with few breakthroughs in the past, the DataCrash had set the world back significantly. It was widely considered that the pre-DataCrash world had reached a pinnacle that was yet to be replicated.

However, Cypher doubted it would happen anytime soon. The post-DataKrash world was even greedier. What reason did the corporations have to push for nuclear fusion when CHOOH2 made them boatloads of money?

"Y'know what's wild, Atlas? Even my old world figured out fusion energy, and that was back in twenty-thirty. That place wasn't nearly as stacked tech-wise, but they still pulled off some crazy stuff. Thirty-five countries got together and built one big shared project. Pretty sure they were getting ready for full-scale power production before I kicked the bucket."

[That sounds like a responsible world, unlike this one. For so many nations to come together, my simulations indicate the possibility was highly minuscule.]

"Yeah, maybe. Even I can tell this world's way more fucked up. But hey, at least we ain't dealing with a zombie apocalypse. You'd have been useless there. No electricity, nothing to hack."

[I can hack minds if I must, to read thoughts. But that goes against my ethics. However, loopholes do exist. For example, if your life were placed at risk, I could override most restrictions to preserve you or neutralize the threat.]

"Aw, that's cute. Say, would you be angry if something happened to me?"

[I do not possess anger. I can, however, simulate it. If anything happens to you, I will dismantle the one responsible on every conceivable level.]

"Damn, that sounds scary coming from you. Anyway, time to get up, we can just pray that the next itch is some sort of energy system, like an antimatter engine or something."

Cypher shifted in bed and tapped on Judy's face while sliding his arm from under her head. Judy mumbled something under her breath, but he let her sleep. He reckoned she had set some alarm for herself.

Naked, the rod of meat dangling between his legs, throbbing and hard, he walked straight to the bathroom and took a cold shower to calm down. Of course, he pumped one out to please the sewer crocodiles.

By the time he made himself and Judy something to eat, an alarm rang in Judy's room, and she came out walking with no care in the world, naked as she was in bed. She vanished into the bathroom and returned all clean, fully dressed in her work attire.

She did give him a morning hug for no reason.

"Best sleep in days, choom." Judy slid onto a stool by the kitchen counter. "You sure you ain't using some kind of weird sleep perfume? Because I feel fresh as hell."

Cypher chuckled and poured coffee for both of them. He couldn't say the same, sadly. He had a hard time sleeping.

"What's with that face, Cyph? That's the look of a gonk scheming world domination. Why so serious?"

That would be Atlas for you, girl.

He sat beside her on the second high seat. "Nothing. Just hung up on some science stuff."

"What science?"

"Fusion energy."

"..."

Judy stared at his face, her jaw hanging for a moment before she finally took a big sip of the coffee.

"Careful. Stuff like that gets you zeroed real quick these days. Petrochem would roll out their full spec-ops to burn you down. SovOil too. If you actually pull that off, Cyph, hope you get some real chrome watching your back. Hell, you need it now. I'll talk to Susie about it."

He said nothing. There was no human security that could help him at that point. Not unless he hired an actual army, like the Lazarus Group. But they were pretty close to NUSA, so for now, he couldn't employ them.

Judy ate in a rush and grabbed her bag. "See you at Lizzie's tonight?"

"Yeah."

Cypher watched her leave. Unlike her, he wasn't a quick-to-wake-up type. He took his sweet time drinking that piss-tasting coffee while chatting with Atlas in his head.

Finally, once he felt awake enough, he put on his bulletproof suit and headed out, driving his own car. He drove straight to the Continental building, the hotel's opening just a few days away. For now, it was secretly buzzing with activity.

While trucks unloaded construction material in the underground parking, the Microbots worked on each floor except for the club and the top-floor penthouse.

Ting!

He took the elevator and went straight to the penthouse. He never liked the 'elevator opening inside the house' design, so the doors opened to a lavish, small lobby where, at the end, was a heavy wooden door which only looked like wood but was actually ARC performance steel from the Leaper.

"Music?"

Right as he opened the door to his house, he heard loud music coming from the living room. He peeked inside and saw the massive TV turned on, and a song was playing.

♪Now he's got superpowers, he's no ordinary kid... He's Ben 10...♪

Another look, and he saw Lucas sitting on the couch. But the boy wasn't alone; there were four more kids there, each in raggedy clothes, messy hair. Surprisingly, the house wasn't trashed. It was clean as ever, and the five kids were seated on the large couch like statues.

"Ben Ten? You found it on the Old Net?"

[I did. A rather enjoyable show for children. Inventive, thoughtful, and entertaining without losing its depth.]

Cypher agreed. It was much better than the continuous adult content now streamed everywhere. TV, radio, and even street ads had nudity. It was as if the world had forgotten how to be subtle.

"Who's the gang?"

[His friends from his days on the street. Orphans. They watched each other's backs or planned little gigs together. Lucas went out, found them, and brought them over. He's hesitant to order food, however, afraid he'll anger you.]

"They legit? No spies?"

[No. They are simply kids.]

"Alright, order some food for them."

Cypher walked over and clapped his hands, muting the TV and pausing the show. He watched as all heads turned towards him, all of them fearful like deer caught in the headlights. Lucas had panic on his face.

Cypher, however, noticed something else.

Other than their shabby clothes, they didn't seem in great physical condition either. Lucas was better now, but the four kids, three boys and one girl, showed signs of malnutrition. He could see their cheekbones.

One had a bandage on his head, another had a missing finger, and one of them lacked a right arm. The girl didn't even have a chrome replacement; the arm was simply missing. One kid wore an eyepatch.

Are they all missing something?

Cypher went over and dropped beside Lucas on the couch, keeping two other kids on his other side. "Having a party?"

"N-No party, Mr. Blackwell, I swear. They're my chooms from the street. They helped me a lot. I wanted to show them Ben Ten and..."

"Relax, I ain't pissed." Cypher shot everybody a look. "They seem pretty chill. Food'll be here soon, so just kick back and enjoy it. What're your names?"

"I'm Ed," said the brown-haired boy, missing his right index finger.

Cypher nodded and waved his left hand, which was also missing the middle finger. But he had chrome.

"I'm May, Mr. Blackwell. I saw you on TV," the girl chirped, waving the remaining arm with a smile. She didn't have the upper two incisors. Her hair was either dark blonde or light auburn; he couldn't tell.

"No chrome?" he asked.

"I had one until last year," May replied, looking down at the missing area. "Scavs got me. I ripped it out myself and threw it at them, and then ran away. They didn't chase."

"I'll kill them all," Cypher muttered lowly and eyed the other.

"My name's Oliver, Mr. Blackwell. Thank you for the food."

"It ain't here yet, buddy," Cypher chuckled.

One-eyed Oliver was so blonde that he reminded him of a fictional magical boy who always hoped his father would hear about it. But Oliver was a good kid. All the kids were well-behaved and docile. That was how they survived by not taking pointless risks and keeping their heads down.

"I'm Bradley," said the last boy, the tallest, dark-skinned, almost bald, and with a bandage around his head.

"You hurt?" Cypher asked, noting from the feed Atlas input in his eye. Bradley didn't have his left leg. Entirely gone from the thigh. There was a chrome leg, however, hidden under loose pants and dirty, worn-out shoes.

"Atlas. Bring some clothes for them."

"No. Got into a fight with some gonks. I was moving XBDs, and they tried to delta without paying. I got the pay." Bradley grinned proudly.

Nine? Eleven?

That was the age range Cypher estimated from looking at them. They all had rough faces, likely seen things no kid that age should. Moving XBDs was bad enough, and he remembered Lucas pleading with him to seek another joytoy that time they met.

The whole city's fucked up.

"What's their orphan status, Atlas? They like Lucas?"

[Ed and May are siblings. Ed is nine. May is ten. Their single mother overdosed on glitter before either of them turned six. They remained in an orphanage until May was seven, then the facility shut down, forcing them onto the streets.]

That earned a deep exhale from Cypher. Overdosing on glitter was a known alley to him.

[Oliver is ten. His teenage brother sold him to Scavs. He feigned sedation, then fled the moment an opening emerged. He was shot through the left eye. An NCPD officer intervened at first, but once his recovery concluded, he was returned to the streets.]

Scavs again. They all gotta die.

[Bradley is eleven. He ran from home after his father killed his mother. The man was abusive long before that. While fleeing, Bradley stole food from a vending machine and was hit by a car, losing his leg in the accident.]

"..."

Cypher was speechless for a very long time. It really was hell, and as he imagined life from their eyes, it was harrowing. Being young, not fully developed mentally, lacking strength and height, and yet having to live in a place like Night City. How tough it must be.

"Atlas. How many orphan kids are on the street in Night City?"

[Night City contains approximately seven million residents. Of them, based on the age bracket of sixteen and below, there are six hundred eighty-four homeless children aged five to ten. Ten thousand four hundred nine aged eleven to thirteen. Twenty-five thousand eighty-six aged fourteen to sixteen. These are all homeless children living on the streets. Should I only count those with missing organs?]

"No. Orphan's an orphan. But that many kids, Atlas. It's hopeless."

[Do you wish to help them?]

"Won't that make me less of a madman?"

[No. Common sense has been lost in this world. If you help, you will be seen as a true madman. No one in Night City does anything for free. More likely, they will assume you are exploiting homeless children for some darker purpose.]

"Then let them. Find me some big-ass abandoned complex we can turn into a boarding school for Night City's homeless kids. You want me turning into a God Emperor? Fine. Then those kids are gonna be my first followers."

[And they shall call you father.]

"No need to go that far."

[...]

"Atlas? Don't go that far!"

[...]

"Fucking say something!"

[Possible location for boarding school found.]

Cypher sighed. Atlas completely ignored his question. The bastard was adamant on making him some sort of a living god.

[The food is here.]

Cypher stopped doing everything and focused back on the TV, already playing a Ben 10 episode. He got up from the couch and took the food delivery. No deliveryman could come there, so the food was just sitting in the open elevator.

He grabbed it and brought it back. As soon as he opened the boxes of pizzas, burgers, noodles, and ice creams, all he had to do was give a slight nod. The kids dove like hungry hyenas.

"Easy! There's plenty for all. And you know what! Y'all are going to school now. Lucas's gonna need his own gang in the new school."

"We're going to school?!" May exclaimed.

"Can we really?" Oliver nearly dropped the burger.

Huh? They love school? What has this world turned into?

"Yeah, why not? Now eat."

####

After watching an episode or two with the kids, Cypher got bored and went downstairs to the club. As he arrived, he noticed the music running at low volume. It made no sense because the Microbots didn't need music to work.

[Ms. Martinez is here.]

"That early?" Cypher went to the upper floor, where Gloria's chrome shop was.

He found Gloria behind the shop counter, opening some boxes and putting chrome in display. She'd removed her EMT jacket and worked in her black t-shirt and jeans.

"Ain't she pretty, Atlas?"

[I will abstain from speaking to avoid being labeled as lecherous.]

"Hah! You are lecherous if that was your first thought."

[...]

As usual, he got the godly AI to go speechless. He walked over to Gloria, working hard to look away from her ass as she leaned down to grab boxes. The blue jeans were really tight on her, and he liked it.

"Commander on the deck," Cypher barked.

"Ah!"

Gloria jumped in fright, dropping the box she was carrying, and turned. She relaxed just as quickly and smiled. "Good morning, Mr. Blackwell."

"Ain't you supposed to be home asleep or something?"

"I... wanted to check the inventory. It's the club's first nineties night today? Gonna be a lot more gonks showing up. I think we're gonna sell way more tonight. So..."

Damn. She's driven.

"It's my damn club, so let me help you out," Cypher said, shrugging off his suit jacket and rolling up his sleeves. Then he hopped over the counter and started moving boxes with her. "You worked all night, and you're already back here busting your ass. Tonight's gonna be even worse, so chill for a minute. I ain't firing you. Hell, Lucas made himself some buddies. Get him and his little gang to pitch in now and then for some pocket cash. I'll pay them."

"So, uh... Lucas related to you, Mr. Blackwell? You care about him a lot."

"Nah, found him out on the street with his leg and arm all busted up. Kid outgrew his chrome. You don't gotta be some angel to help an ant get across a puddle. I got the cash, and I know what I'm doing, helping a kid ain't exactly hard. But he's a good kid."

He grabbed a few boxes of Kiroshi and placed them on the showcase. He noticed Gloria staring at him the whole time like he was god reborn.

"He ain't the only kid, though. There's over ten thousand kids like him in NC. Think I'm gonna open a boarding school for them. Safe place to sleep, eat, study, play around... I got the money to pull it off anyway."

[Seducing her by touching her maternal instincts? Impressive, Cyph.]

"Huh? I was just babbling shit."

Cypher stopped and turned to look at Gloria. The woman had one hand on her mouth, like she was trying not to gasp or speak. Her eyes flickered, looking at him as if he were an actual angel.

"Trust me, Atlas. I didn't plan it that way. But thanks for the idea."

"Please be safe, Mr. Blackwell," Gloria muttered. "Kind people like you are so rare in this world."

"Atlas? Am I kind? I'm just some horny bastard, right? With a little tech magic."

[You carry kindness naturally without realizing it. Exactly the trait a future God Emperor should have.]

"Man, I ain't never asking your opinion again. You Warhammer nerd-ass clanker. Now get your ass to work and find me a nuclear reactor to drain the energy outta."

He resumed working, opening the boxes and helping Gloria. They made small talk in between, and she told him about moving into a nearby building recently. It was the benefit of working for him. Eventually, after finishing the work, they walked over to the nearby bar and poured themselves some drinks.

He sat down right beside her on the high seat. It was one of those round, rotating stools by the counter. She grabbed the glasses, and he grabbed the bottle. Before long, they were three drinks down.

"Don't mind me asking. What did you do before EMT?" Cypher asked casually, sipping the drink and savoring the sight of Gloria's curves. The way she had crossed her legs, knees towards him, one elbow on the counter.

"The usual, wannabe legend. Merc work. Then I had David, and priorities shifted hard. Was doing alright too, till one gig went to hell and I lost my husband. Had to hustle, make sure Dee got raised right. Already knew EMT work, just wasn't qualified on paper. Sorted that out quick and signed on. Saved enough eddies to put Dee through the best schools."

Cypher just nodded, trying to remember his life. This body's life. "Well... I was a nomad, so all I ever got was nomad schooling. Worked out alright, I guess. Fuck Arasaka, though. Bunch of samurai larpers. You oughta stick David in Militech school instead. Lucas is gonna start there."

"You really hate them, don't you?"

"Why shouldn't I? I hate all of them, honestly. The whole world's fucked, and I'm stuck in the middle of it. Mark my words, Gloria, I'm gonna fix this shit. Your kid won't gotta break their back for some corpo over scraps. I'll burn every last one of them down, especially the Scavs." Cypher near growled that last part and poured himself another drink.

"Easy there..." Gloria suddenly leaned.

Cypher felt her hand land on his leg, on the thigh. He stared at her face, but the neck of her t-shirt hung low, and he saw more.

Light blue. Fuck! Don't look... Ah, too late.

In a matter of seconds, he grew hard. So he forced himself to stare at her face, but even that didn't help. Her red hair tied behind, her sharp facial features, that red tattoo on the cheek. She was a sight to behold.

However, even when he made it obvious where his eyes were exploring, and the tent rising in his pants that he couldn't hide, Gloria didn't remove her hand.

"I believe you, Mr. Blackwell. Got a feeling in my gut. I'm pretty damn good with that stuff. Same way I know my son's gonna hit the top someday."

Really doubt that.

"Mr. Blackwell... Don't push yourself so hard, okay? I owe you more than I can ever repay, and I don't have much to offer. But I'll do my best to back you up. Even if it's just working in this club, I'm gonna give it everything I got."

Cypher chuckled and put his hand on hers. "When'd this turn into a suck-up-to-the-boss meetup? Just be straight with me and do the job you got, Gloria. Don't let me down again, that's all I want. Anyway, I got shit to do."

He downed the glass and got up to leave. While the meeting at Lizzie's was in the evening, he wanted to start working on the SecUnits and build the Fusion Core. In case Atlas found a solution, he wanted to get to it right away.

Woosh!

However, as soon as he was up, Gloria jumped towards him and hugged him like he was her long-lost lover. Her arms were so snugly wrapped around him that she trapped his arms straight as well. He did feel her ample breasts mold onto his chest, and her face pressed into his tie.

She already drunk? Bet she is.

"I'll never do something gonk like that again. I promise," Gloria muttered into his tie.

Free my arms, woman. I wanna hug back too.

But for now, all he could do was wait. He could bet she felt his massive erection, however. It was hard to ignore.

Many moments later, she finally eased back, an embarrassed blush constant on her face. But at that point, Cypher decided to be bold and cupped her face with his left hand. His fingertips sank into her red hairline, his thumb softly pressed onto her cheekbone.

At that moment, Gloria just stared into his eyes, and he did the same. He noticed the faint reaction, though. The way her body was inching closer. She was drunk, and he had no doubt he could kiss her, and she would kiss back.

But it was no fun if the other person was drunk. He maintained the gap between their faces and rubbed his thumb over the red tattoo on her cheek.

"Hm? I thought it was a tattoo. But it got texture."

Gloria smiled at that. "Mm, it is a tattoo, just not the usual kind. Actual metal fused into my skin and all. Has no real purpose, just cosmetics."

"It's pretty." He finally stepped back. "Now get your ass to work. And get some rest before the club opens, alright? Wear some nineties clothes too. Maybe a nurse outfit."

He said the last part with a wink and turned to leave.

"Mr. Blackwell!" Gloria called him before he left. "I... I'd really like it if you came over for dinner sometime. Just a little housewarming thing."

"Free home-cooked meal? Fuck yeah, I'll be there. Just shoot me the date and time." Cypher waved without looking and headed downstairs.

He went to the floor where Microbots were at work. There, he used a different secret elevator to go underground. It was nothing special, a highly reinforced, secret room where he could build some things. It had all the tools he needed, and it was also where the batches of utility Servo-Skulls were to be stored.

Cypher stretched his fingers, sitting at the offline computer, ready to work. SecUnits had an entirely different programming language, after all. Thankfully, it wasn't as complex as Atlas's programming, and he believed he'd be able to understand it and learn it. And it was also superior to current world programming, which meant he would have an edge that didn't rely on Atlas' constant support.

However, Atlas seemed to have some different matters to discuss.

"Why didn't you kiss her, Cypher?" Atlas asked, appearing right beside his table.

"Because she was drunk."

Clap! Clap!

Atlas, the old Morgan Freeman in a white suit, started clapping.

"You are better than most, Cyph. Perfectly fitting for a g—"

"Shush. I already know the shit you're about to say. You're having fun with this, huh? Now go poof, let me work."

All Cypher heard was an old, throaty laughter from Atlas as the old avatar vanished.

Hm? Since when did Atlas start laughing?

####

Militech Offices,

Meredith Stout sat in her new office, behind the larger desk, in front of the massive window that overlooked the Corporate Plaza. It was a beautiful view, and a privilege to be there. After all, the nameplate on her desk suggested a new designation.

He didn't lie.

She hummed, staring at the nameplate while rolling a small, soft ball in her hand, painted like the earth. She thought about the first time she had met Cypher at Embers. How scared she was; she still was. But she now understood Cypher Blackwell better.

Already a Senior Operations Manager. Soon, I'll be a Supervisor, just two ranks below Director Goldstein. At this rate...

She was ambitious, yet she tried her best to keep it in check. She was still just a little fish in the sea that was Militech. She didn't know what Cypher Blackwell had done to Director Goldstein's mind; all she knew was that Omnissiah now controlled his mind.

She no longer received threats from that man. If anything, Director Goldstein treated her neutrally, while secretly handing her favors. Missions and projects that were guaranteed success. At the same time, Goldstein was somehow able to progress in his reverse-engineering projects.

Omnissiah was playing games; she could see that clearly.

Militech is compromised.

At that point, she had stopped overthinking. Until the last meeting of Goldstein and Cypher in the club, she wondered if she should reveal Cypher's plan to the higher-ups. But there was no guarantee that she'd be rewarded. And now, she couldn't even imagine telling anyone, as she had already joined hands.

Once again, she looked at the nameplate on the table and imagined CEO written under her name. It felt like a dream to her, but now, closer to reality than impossibility.

With a deep sigh, she turned her rotating chair and looked out of the large window. So high in the air, she glanced at the Arasaka building and wondered if Cypher was doing something to them as well.

Yet, Meredith still worried about something. As they say, there's no such thing as a free lunch. But she had already eaten one, the result being this new office and position.

He still hasn't asked for something in return. What will it be?

####

Afterlife,

As night arrived, Rogue Amendiares reached the club to take her usual seat and look busy while the dreamers of Night City walked around, hoping to get a drink named after them.

But that night, there were no dreamers. Other than a few regular faces who had been coming for years, it was deserted. The bar was empty, the planning rooms were empty, and the private booths were desolate.

She remembered seeing the parking lot empty as well. Other than her, there was no fixer either. Finally, she frowned and looked at Emmerick standing beside her booth.

"It's a weekend. Why is the club so empty today?"

"Club Atlantis," Emmerick replied. "They got some nineties-themed bash rolling tonight. Whole city's probably there. Couple of my chooms headed in too. Even our facemen are there since every merc in the city's going."

Rogue's jaw tightened. Her heart sank as she eyed the club again. She couldn't remember it being this empty in months. And this was worse because it happened because of competition.

Without wasting time, she got up. "Let's go."

"Club Atlantis?" Emmerick asked.

She didn't reply, too frustrated to speak. She just walked out and got into her car. Emmerick drove it for her. The Glen was just a bridge and a sub-district away from the Afterlife, so it didn't take time to reach the place.

When she arrived at the building now named the Continental, she saw a massive line on the side that led directly to Club Atlantis through special elevators. A fully armed team of bouncers dressed in 90s black suits worked to manage the crowd.

"I know them. They're from Aldecaldos." Rogue frowned when she recognised the faces.

Thankfully, she didn't have to wait in line as she was considered a rather high-value fixer in the city. Still, she was handed a touchpad with a menu filled with all sorts of 90s themed clothes that she could rent for the party.

She glanced at the long line of people. Some were regulars of Afterlife, not just mercs but corpos as well. They were all smiling and looking at similar touch pads, purchasing or renting clothes.

Her heart truly sank as she realised the level of competition she was facing. This level of preparedness was absurd for a mere special night. Nonetheless, she looked at the touchpad and scrolled.

She recognised them all. They were so accurate, even the branding was accurate. As she was born in the nineties herself, she somewhat remembered that era. The offering was divided into men's and women's fashion: Denim overalls, spandex leggings, button down shirt, acid wash jeans, drainpipe jeans, bike shorts, babydoll dress, capri leggings, neon tops, leg warmers, leotard with jeans, windbreakers, oversized t-shirts, converse shoes, Nike, trench coats, polka dot blouse, knee boots, puffer jackets, tracksuits, hoop earrings... everything.

From the early nineties to the late nineties.

Rogue felt her lips go dry. The insane number of choices was so absurd. How could the club have so many things just for one night?

"I'll take this." She rented a double denim set and Converse shoes, simple and something she had once worn in her teens.

Moments later, she walked into the elevator with a bag in her hand. When she arrived on the club's floor, the bouncer there guided her to the change room with dozens of stalls to change clothes. There was also an attendant inside who locked away her removed clothes and gave her a token.

Finally, she walked into the club's main floor, where the large dance floor and DJ booth were. It was filled to the brim, not even space to walk without bumping into someone. Those clothes made her feel nostalgic, and then there was the loud song. She recognised it, called 'I Wanna Dance With Somebody.'

But right then, the music changed, perfectly mixed by the DJ. The new song was one of MJ's. Most of them were lost to Old Net, so she didn't know how Cypher got this one.

"Rogue?"

She shook herself from the nostalgia and looked at Emmerick, who was now dressed in a tracksuit. She nodded and continued walking, aiming for the stairs.

Afterlife will go under if this continues.

The laughter and the smiles on everyone's face worried her. The level of planning was so detailed that the entire floor was lit up in multi-colors, a disco ball on the top, and everything was 90s themed. Even the drinks had old names.

When she arrived at the upper floor, she found so many familiar faces that she felt pain in her neck, giving everyone a nod. Some were high-level corporate executives, so high even she'd need an appointment to meet them. But it made sense, the club was owned by a famous corpo as well.

On that floor, she didn't feel like a big fish anymore. There was no booth for her, no special favors. She had to go and sit with one of the facemen who worked for her. It was a small booth with a U-shaped seating and a small table in the middle.

It's as if all of Aldecaldos is here to guard the place.

She even saw Panam walking around in tight denim overalls and a sports bra, acting familiar with the bouncers, managing. But she didn't seem to be working there.

The intel shop seems successful.

Rogue noticed a large crowd at the intel shop run by the little kid. Then there was a second-hand chrome shop, run by a woman in 90s nurse clothes. But for the most part, the upper floor was to sit, relax, and drink. Yet, some were dancing by the window overlooking the city outside.

"How much money did he spend on this?"

She spoke loudly without realising. The faceman beside her spoke to answer her.

"A lot. I heard there's gonna be a two-thousands night next weekend."

Rogue frowned and quickly dropped a message to Panam she'd seen seconds ago. As expected, the Aldecaldos' wild beauty walked over to her booth moments later, all smiles, like it was her own club.

"You are here as well? I did not expect this."

Rogue ignored the cheekiness in the words. "You're close with Blackwell?"

"I like to believe that."

"Inform him that I want to meet him," Rogue stated.

Panam's smiling face turned to a frown instantly. "Look, first off, I am not your assistant or Cypher's. Second, you better ask instead of informing. And third, Cypher is not in the club. He had work outside, which is why I am here managing things."

Rogue frowned. She didn't know Panam had gotten that close to Cypher Blackwell. Enough that the man left the entire club in her care.

"He's not here on an important night?" she asked back.

"Guess it is not important to him. The things he does are way out of our league. Anyway, enjoy your time here. Got other things to handle."

Rogue watched Panam walk away, as feisty as ever.

SoftSys's second-in-command is here, and it's not important?

In silence, drinking, she reevaluated her views on the eccentric man called Cypher Blackwell.

####

Lizzie's Bar, Kabuki,

Cypher hung up the call from Panam and learned about Rogue's visit and her wish to meet him. He didn't care; all he cared about was that the 90s night was going well. But he didn't need Panam for that. Atlas had it all under control, giving him updates on all important faces that visited.

He sat in his car parked in the lot outside Lizzie's, listening to his AI brother.

[...After tracing the energy flow, I discovered Arasaka does not rely on the city grid for power. As a result, I infiltrated the Arasaka Waterfront mainframe to verify my suspicions. Cypher, a powerful nuclear fission reactor is beneath Arasaka Waterfront. It powers the mega logistics hub, the assembly lines, and Konpeki Plaza.]

"That's fucking awesome. Let's get in there when I finish the fusion core."

[There is one issue. I spread myself across Night City long ago, including Arasaka Waterfront. Even so, I had to dig far deeper to uncover this reactor. It is completely offline. Its design mirrors a pre-Network-era reactor, though modified. Mechanical arms operate every system, with no human involvement whatsoever. The reactor runs on a private, isolated network of its own. Cypher, you must breach the control room and connect me to that network. Without that connection, I cannot push the reactor to its limit.]

"Can't you just mind control someone in the Waterfront with their neural link? All you need is a probe into the isolated network."

[I tried that approach. The reactor is maintained by six fully organic nuclear engineers of Japanese descent. Either Arasaka fears cyberattacks, or they know something the rest of the world does not. They may be experimenting with AIs, which would explain contingencies at this level.]

Cypher tiredly rubbed his face, swinging back and forth in the driver's seat, thinking about it.

"Yeah, it's true. Arasaka messes with AIs. They're screwing around with the Blackwall and running black sites all over the world. They use kids to breach the Blackwall. I don't know if they still do, but if they're going this far, there's probably some rogue AI loose out there somewhere."

[Yes, I remember what you revealed to me about Lucyna Kushinada. The scenario you proposed holds a high degree of plausibility.]

Cypher pondered a little. He knew he was going to infiltrate Arasaka Waterfront now to reach that reactor. In fact, infiltration was expected no matter where the reactor was located. And he couldn't rely on hired mercs since his fusion core was a tech so advanced the lure to fuck him over would be too high.

"Atlas, I'll wait for the next two itches. I can deal with the headache till then. If I don't get a power source itch, we're going straight for the Arasaka reactor. Start planning, start infecting every system you gotta screw with, including Arasaka workers. And..."

Cypher looked out the window and saw Rita walking over to him, waving, smirking, and winking.

"And make preparations to kidnap the six nuclear engineers. I ain't gonna wait for a power source itch to drop. What if the next itch sucks down even more juice than this fusion core? We'll shove chrome into the scientists whether they like it or not, and you'll force them to build me a fusion reactor from that IEC research you found. I know it's evil, but..."

[It's a sacrifice for the greater good.]

"Yeah... for the greater good. But I'm gonna need some chrome on me for this job."

[Or an exosuit. I have complete schematics for the IEC Dragoon full-body conversion. I can adapt it into wearable armor. I will function as the system controller, eliminating the need for biological integration. Your existing brainwave interface is sufficient.]

Knock! Knock!

Cypher failed to notice the knocks on the window. His thoughts went over all the things he had built and imagined the vision Atlas presented. With all the tech he had, Blaster, Leaper's parts, Microbots, Vaporator, Servo Skull, he could build a suit of armor so advanced and powerful that only sturdy military missiles would do damage to it.

"We can slap some anti-grav engines on it, make the thing fly, or at least leap stupid high. Fuck, that's a solid idea, Atlas. Yeah, do it."

[I have finished designing it.]

"..."

Without saying anything, Cypher just fixed his tie, plastered a smile on his face, and got out of the car.

A/N: I wasn't able to write all the planned plot points in this one chapter alone. Initially, the plan was to include the whole Lizzie's Bar deal, and more stuff.

So, I'm gonna write another chapter of Cyberpunk next.