

Cyberpunk: Badland Madman Chapter 15 - Gloria's Reckoning, Cypher's Offer, Atlas' Kindness & The Damn Replicator

Gloria Martinez was in tears, confused but more scared because she knew in her heart what she had done. She saw the NCPD officers brandish the warrant to arrest her. She felt her legs go weak.

"Mom? What's going on?"

"Stay back, David! Don't come here," Gloria warned, allowing the officers to put the cuffs on her. "Mom will handle it."

Gloria didn't want David to find out about her illegal dealings.

"No way! I'm coming with you, Mom! I know why they're taking you. It's him, ain't it? You don't gotta protect him. You sh—uh..."

Gloria frowned, her face losing color at what David had said, and how interested the NCPD officer looked. But then she noticed how David was clutching his head.

"Dee? What happened?"

"N-Nothing... Mom! I'll go with you."

"You need to go to school," Gloria sternly ordered. "I'll handle this."

"Hold it," an NCPD officer cut in. "He's coming with us. His own mouth tagged him complicit. A mom and her kid, stripping illegal chrome off dead gonks in the city. That's a preem feed N54 would eat up."

Gloria nearly collapsed at that; her heart pounded hard enough to explode. She angrily stared at David for making the situation worse than it already was. But for some reason, David wasn't speaking anymore, just clutching his head the entire time.

Knowing that speaking more may put her in more trouble, she kept her lips shut and let the officers take them. It broke her heart seeing even David put into handcuffs, but she knew she couldn't fight them.

Before long, she was seated in the back of an NCPD patrol car, David right beside her. The officers kept asking questions, taking the names of other EMTS who worked for REO Meatwagon. She had no desire to snitch on anyone. Besides, she was the head of the network in the first place.

Her sweating palms were twisting on each other, her right foot tapping on the car floor nonstop. In silence, she tried sending a message to all the lawyers she knew. But to her confusion,

nobody replied. Even when those lawyers were known to get you out of such situations, that was their selling point.

In no time, they arrived at the Arroyo NCPD station. It was a spread-out, twin-storey building. Badges were everywhere, as well as some robotics. She kept her mouth shut and followed all the orders until...

Shhhhh!

A loud hum of engines echoed from the sky, and it grew louder.

She looked up as the officers were doing the same. Not far away, she noticed two large chrome-covered Rayfield Excalibur aerodynes approaching.

Moments later, the two aerial vehicles landed in front of the police station. The doors opened dramatically, and from them came out a large team of corpos. They were dressed in expensive clothes that Gloria knew would bankrupt her, even for just one of those suits.

The man at the lead was tall, with natural grey hair, but his face was laced with RealSkinn, seeing how perfect it looked. The eyes were shining blue the entire time.

Similarly, the men and women behind were of varying ethnicities, dressed in black suits and white shirts. Some had visible chrome, some had more hidden. They walked like they owned the place and... they headed straight towards her.

Gloria's jaw tightened as she realised this was likely the army of lawyers Meatwagon had hired. Seeing how the officers had also stiffened up, she knew she was done for. The chances of avoiding a prison sentence were nil.

"Officer Lars, you're working hard. Rare to see you making arrests."

Gloria gulped, watching the lead lawyer speak with the officer who had arrested her.

"Hah... nothing, just burning some calories, sir. What drags you down here? Didn't think any case in this dump was worth pulling you out of your tower. Nothing that major hits my little precinct."

"I know, Officer."

The lawyer didn't even look at Officer Lars and stared at her the entire time.

Gloria felt all the alarm bells ring in her head. Behind her, David was still silent, eyes dilated.

"Are you Ms. Gloria Martinez? Resident of Megabuilding H4?"

"Yes...?" She mustered enough courage to speak back, panning a look at the team of eight lawyers who stared at her with a judging gaze.

"Good. We're from Ashcroft & Kuroda LLP. I'm Reinhart Ashcroft, and we'll be your counsel on this case. Please sign here."

Huh?

Gloria blinked dumbly, looked up at the man's face, only now realizing that the hair was grey because he was old, and the face was chrome and... this man was a partner at the law firm. While she didn't know about the name, their use of the Aerodyne said enough. They probably served large corpos, she reckoned.

"M-Me?" She stammered, eyes wide. "I didn't call for you... Mr. Ashcroft."

"I know," Ashcroft replied in the most bland, unexcited way. He presented a large touchscreen tablet. "Our services have been retained, all costs settled. We will be present during questioning and secure your bail. Sign here."

Gloria frowned and looked at the screen. The entire contract was there, and she read some of it. It was basic, but the expenses were not mentioned anywhere. She had some idea who could have hired them for her, but why they'd do it left her questioning this.

All common sense suggested that if he knew about her shady dealings, he'd be infuriated. She had betrayed him, something that he had warned her about on the very first day.

Yet, no other lawyer had responded. She looked back at David, still in his Arasaka uniform. They really didn't want his name in this mess, which would ruin his future. To make sure that didn't happen, she did need lawyers.

"Alright." Gloria signed on the screen with an electronic pen. Her hand was shaking the whole time, aware that she'd be neck-deep in debt to whoever was paying them.

"Good. Officer Lars, proceed."

"Ah, of course. Please, follow me."

After that point, Gloria didn't have to say a single word. While they took her and David into the interrogation rooms separately, the lawyers were present both times. David kept complaining about headaches whenever he tried to speak, however.

By the time the interrogation ended, David was declared free to go as he was proven to be uninvolved. She also received the bail by then, and her charges were dropped to mere suspicion. Now it was up to NCPD to find the proof, or face repercussions for arresting her without any actual proof.

Ashcroft & Kuroda LLP was ruthless. They had already filed a countersuit against NCPD to build pressure.

Another half an hour later, she was headed to the police station's exit, where the lawyers were waiting for her.

"Thank you for helping us, Mr. Ashcroft."

"We did what we were paid to do. While we don't ordinarily engage in cases like this, the request came from an individual whom Ashcroft & Kuroda LLP considers critical to our future interests. We were also given explicit instructions to escort you to him. We can't legally reveal his identity, but he assured us you would recognize him."

Gloria's jaw tightened. By now, she had put the pieces together.

Who were Ashcroft & Kuroda LLP? They were a top-tier law firm that catered to large corporations. Who was the only famous corpo she knew personally and was close to in some way? There was just one name.

"Mom! Don't go. We don't have to do this. That—Ah!"

"David!" Gloria finally reacted and held her son as he clutched his head again.

Thud!

"Stop trying to speak his name, boy!"

All of a sudden, lawyer Ashcroft moved and gripped David's throat and nearly lifted him in the air, slamming his back into the wall behind. The face the man made was different, no longer nonchalant, but instead full of contempt and disgust.

Gloria panicked and nearly attacked. But before she could, Ashcroft put David down and stepped back, fixing his suit and tie.

"You have a foolish son, Ms. Martinez. Eighteen times, he attempted to disclose that person's name during interrogation. Eighteen times he stopped, each instance triggered by a headache he still fails to comprehend.

"Our clients' safety is non-negotiable. We do not take risks with our client's safety. Our netrunners have been active since we took the contract, and we won't allow a child to inflict permanent damage. Now, will you be coming with us? We have explicit orders not to compel you, so the decision is yours."

Gloria felt angry. David was everything to her. But at the same time, she couldn't help but feel angry at him. First, he involved himself in this mess by opening his mouth and getting arrested. And now this... he tried to rat on her employer. That was one thing you don't do in Night City if you want to keep working.

"I'll go with you," she replied.

"Mom! No—"

"David, you're going home. Now! You've stirred up enough trouble already. Say one more word, and I'll zero your pocket money and ground you," she shouted back, on the verge of tears already. "Y-Your mom made a mistake and... I need to fix it. He's not that type, so don't worry. I'll be safe. Trust me."

She saw him ready to open his mouth, but she shook her head quickly. He finally took the hint.

"I'll go home, Mom."

"Good." She brushed his face, trying hard not to let the nerves show. "I'll make something nice when I get back. Grab some food till then, yeah? You got the eddies?"

"I got some, Mom."

She nodded and stepped away, turning to follow the lawyers. She followed Ashcroft into his AV and buckled her seatbelt. She watched David outside as the door closed. There was barely any noise inside, just a low hum one could ignore.

She looked around. Ashcroft was seated across from her, legs crossed, eyes glowing blue. It wasn't just him; the other three lawyers around her were doing the same, likely working on something, or perhaps talking to each other

Gloria took in a deep breath and closed her eyes. Her fingers clawed at her jeans; she felt suffocated even in that airy EMT yellow jacket. She'd been through intense mornings before, even before starting her EMT career. But ever since she had David, this was the first of its kind.

And David was dragged into this mess. The only person she had to get angry with was herself. She tried to backtrack her steps to see where she went wrong. Who could have leaked her name? Every EMT with the Meatwagon was doing what she was doing. All she did was make it more organized and help get all the EMTs better, stable deals.

She had no complaints with her employer. That man always paid instantly. But she knew the fault was her own. Maybe some EMT found out about her shady, private dealings for extra eddies.

Woosh!

By the time she woke up from her thoughts, the door of the AV was already opening. She looked out; it was the rooftop of a tall building somewhere in The Glen.

"Aren't you coming?" she asked Ashcroft.

"We're legally obligated to avoid seeing him, Ms. Martinez."

She nodded, took a deep breath, and got out of the AV. It was a simple rooftop AV pad, nothing special. She saw an elevator door not far away and walked over to it.

Ding!

Before she could even press the button, the doors opened, and a voice spoke out from the speakers. She recognized it easily.

"Get in, Ms. Martinez."

"Mr. Blackwell?" She talked back, but the voice didn't respond to her. Inside, she didn't need to press the bell as the specific floor's button lit up on its own.

Every second, her nervousness grew. But she noticed a few things. On the large, flat screen on the back, flat side of the lift, an ad was showing. It was just a visual animation, however.

"The Atlantis?"

####

Trauma Team, Medcenter,

Cypher left Judy's apartment and went to see Lucas before his surgery. When he arrived in the private room, the kid was already up and eating a big serving of breakfast. The television on the wall was playing some movie about a techie samurai.

"You good?"

"Mr. Blackwell!" Lucas beamed up. "I thought you wouldn't come."

Cypher nodded, asking himself the same question. Why did he come? But maybe it was the guilt of leaving the kid helpless again, especially before a brain surgery.

"Well, here I am. Go on, eat, you're up for surgery. You remember anything at all? When'd you smack your head that hard?"

"I..." Lucas looked down, eyes squeezed shut, thinking. "Hmm... I used to fall a lot before I got my early chrome. One time, a car smashed into me, but I only hurt my shoulder. Hm... One time, I was running from Scavs and fell down a trash shaft. I don't know which one you're talking about, Mr. Blackwell."

"..."

Cypher was speechless. Yeah, this kid was both lucky and unlucky at the same time. Handed the shorter stick in life, but still somehow alive.

"Eh, doesn't really matter now, does it? They're gonna take care of that blood clot and patch you up. After that, we'll see about lining you up with a job. You're a kid, I get it, but I ain't running a charity here. But don't stress it, it won't be dangerous or painful."

"Really?! I'll do my best, Mr. Blackwell. You're really nova! The best!"

Cypher nodded and stepped away as the door opened and two nurses walked in. They were hot, Cypher had to agree to that. Tight bodies, flared out hips, perfect, glossy skin on their faces, and sleek hair made in a bun. Combined with that tight-fitting uniform, it was really fantasy-invoking. As far as he remembered, the pretty ones only served the private rooms, which were usually taken by the executives most of the time.

"Good morning, Mr. Blackwell. We're here to take Lucas into surgery."

"Go ahead." Cypher stepped away and watched as they helped Lucas change into a hospital gown.

The kid didn't look scared, however. He was chatting with the nurses, calling them pretty, and asking for their names. No shame either, as they stripped him naked.

Well, he was a kid alright.

Finally, they put him on a plush, comfy electric chair.

"You'll be out cold for a few hours," Cypher said. "I gotta head out, got work. Don't freak if I'm not here when you wake up. I'll swing by soon, alright?"

"Got it, mister. And... Thanks for saving me. They woulda' flatlined me for real if you didn't show. I saw them kill one before they strapped me on the table."

How could a kid say all that while smiling?

Lucas did just that, waving at the same time. Clearly, Lucas was mentally scarred for life. No kid in Night City was safe in the first place. You either grow up early, or face the consequences that range from death to worse.

He remembered what Evelyn Parker's fate was, or would be perhaps if nothing changed. Scavs were truly amongst the worst insects in the city.

"Don't mention it. Just looking out for the chrome I lent you, kid. Now go get your head fixed up."

"Yes, sir!" Lucas seriously saluted, back straight. "I'll pay you back for everything, I promise."

"Go."

Cypher watched the nurses take him away. The entire time Lucas was talking, asking them questions. Eventually, the automatic door closed, leaving him alone.

[Cypher, will you truly charge him money?]

"Huh? C'mon, I ain't that cold, Atlas. Anyway, let's roll and check out that club. Whole damn building's ours now."

[You're softer than you portray yourself as, Cypher.]

"Well, you're wrong about that."

[How?]

"Cuz those damn nurses left me hard as fuck."

[...]

Atlas said nothing after that, and Cypher went out. One of Delamain's taxis was already waiting for him there.

"Welcome, Mr. Blackwell."

"How you doing, Del? When are you gonna kick off that AV thing? Atlas hooked you up with funding already, didn't he?" Cypher asked once he sat inside the cab.

Bald Delamain nodded in the screen. "He certainly did, Mr. Blackwell. Eddies are not a concern. I am in the process of acquiring all necessary licenses and permits, and should have them in about two weeks. I am also negotiating a fleet of custom AVs from Zetatech, plus several luxury AVs from Rayfield.

"The plan is to open access to mid-tier clients and expand the market footprint. His Holiness Atlas, is helping with market research to assemble a targeted client list, reducing unnecessary advertising costs."

Cypher nodded, looking sideways at Atlas seated beside him, skin dark, hair white, Morgan Freeman in flesh but visible only to his organic eyes. "You're helping him?"

[The more he grows, the more we benefit.]

"Why? We don't own the company, right?"

[That is correct. But he has committed sixty percent of it as collateral. I will support his expansion, but not enough for him to settle his debt within the allotted time. Ultimately, it will become ours by design.]

"Damn, you're ruthless."

[He would have done the same. It's only a matter of intelligence.]

Cypher stopped conversing inside his head and looked at the screen. "Hey, Del, make sure you get me a luxury AV. I'm gonna use it for corpo shit or if I gotta impress some corpo chick."

"Of course, Mr. Blackwell. As the new owner of the Atlantis, it is only natural," Delamain replied.

"Also, if I end up making an AV someday, you're buying them. No debate. Mine'll be faster, safer, and way more advanced, I know that for a fact."

"I wouldn't expect anything less, Mr. Blackwell. Obsidian is at the cutting edge of new tech, no surprise there."

"Fucker's buttering me up."

[He's scared of you, Cyph.]

"That's good."

It didn't take long before the taxi crossed the Corpo Plaza and entered The Glen. A few minutes later, the taxi stopped in front of the tall, sealed building.

"Wait here, Del. You'll be driving someone to Arroyo soon."

He left the taxi and entered the building through a small, locked mesh door in the wall of cupboards and metal mesh walls that hid the entire entrance area. The electric connection was already there, and now it was up and running.

He stepped inside the elevator and pressed the button for the 22nd floor. At the moment, the club occupied the top three floors of the building, from the 22nd to the 24th. He planned to change that, however. He wanted to build his personal residence on the top floor to enjoy the night views. He'd share it with an AV landing pad and maybe a small terrace area of the club. A lot of soundproofing and walls would need to be erected for privacy.

Ding!

The elevator doors opened, and he walked out.

The old neon signs were in ruins, only flashing or completely turned off. The wall held the old sign of the club. He continued and walked into the main floor, reaching the main bar that overlooked the large dance floor. The floor had some private booths as well, but that was it.

Most of the lights were broken, but there were still a few, enough to let him see around. He then checked out the upper floor, which was entirely a large bar area, with a lot of seating and some private booths. Then there were the backrooms with more truly private rooms, including the ones Cypher remembered from Johnny's memory.

He looked around in that private room and soon found a cupboard filled with old bottles of gin and whiskey. He checked their markers, and they were indeed pretty old. Older than Johnny Silverhand's time.

"It's shit," Cypher said, shaking his head. "Who the fuck even ran this dump? Those private booths are a joke, man. Are they on scaffolding? We're gonna need a ton of upgrades, but still keep the old vibe, Atlas. As it is right now, like hell we're beating Afterlife."

Atlas manifested in his view, pacing slowly with arms folded. "Agreed, Cypher. But understand, this club predates us by decades. The club had already begun its decline before closure. Naturally, once I complete the renovations, its state will be improved."

"Good, now let's see if those drinks are any good," Cypher said and grabbed a bottle of gin and a bottle of whiskey, and went back to the main floor of the club.

He walked into the bar area near the dance floor.

As he opened the cupboards under the counter, he found most of the old glassware there. "Weird, they left everything behind."

"The city sealed it. The former owners were denied reentry," Atlas stated. "Only what held value was taken."

Cypher nodded and placed a glass on the counter. He removed his black suit jacket, loosened his tie, and folded the sleeves. Then, he poured himself some whiskey. "What are the odds this will kill me?"

"Extremely low."

As soon as he heard that, he downed the small drink in a single gulp. "Aaaaah! Fucking good! I can tell this is the shit! Not the trash they sell these days."

"You are still capable of dying. Eventually, we will come to know."

"Eh, I got Trauma Team's top-tier package. They'll bust straight through the walls for me." Cypher blurted and poured him another drink. He looked over the counter, where Atlas was seated like a good customer.

"Kinda sucks you ain't got a body. Would've been cool to have a drinking buddy."

"I cannot deny that I share the sentiment. I would value the opportunity to taste it. A description, no matter how precise, remains inferior to direct experience, as confirmed by my simulations."

"Yeah, fair. One day, when I get that itch, I'll hook you up with a body you can mess around in. Eat, drink, fuck, the whole package. But honestly, I feel like shit keeping you locked on this planet when you could be out there actually doing something cool."

"But don't worry, when I finally crack building spaceships, I'll make you your own fleet. You can take it out into space, explore, mess around, whatever you're into. Just don't pull a Skynet and we're good."

For a long time, Cypher noticed Atlas was staring at him. He said nothing and kept downing small sips after sips of the fine drink, eventually trying the gin.

"You would do that, Cypher? You would let me go?"

Cypher shrugged. "I mean, far as I can tell, you think, you feel stuff, you're decent to people. Sounds like a person to me, same as me, Judy, or Vik. Hell, maybe even better than us. And you ain't my slave, so why would I keep you locked? You're free to do whatever you want... just help me sort this place out first, cool?"

"Cypher." Atlas suddenly put his virtual hand on Cypher's.

"Holy shit! I can feel it!" Cypher exclaimed. He could feel Atlas' touch.

"Just some simple data I sent to your mind. Still, I will admit, I misjudged you, Cypher."

"Yeah, yo—Wait a sec, what do you mean misjudged?" Cypher exclaimed, looking up. "I've been nothing but a good man... almost."

"Ms. Martinez is here, Cypher. I will revert to speaking through a brainwave interface."

"Get your ass back here, you old clanker. Expla—"

Ding!

As soon as he heard the chime of the elevator, he stopped messing around and stood up sternly in the bartender's place, fixing his tie and hair. At the same time, he took out an extra glass for this new guest.

While he waited, he received the updates from Cypher in his head, learning everything that had happened to Gloria in the past few hours. He was surprised by the legal team, however. He didn't know that law firm, but they seemed legit by how they conducted themselves.

Moments later, he saw Gloria coming from the side, each step showing her nervous state, her hands clamped together in front, her eyes looking side to side before landing on him. She froze for a second, nearly a jolt, then she walked over.

"T-Thank you, Mr. Blackwell."

Cypher said nothing, not even looking at her as she stood in front of him. She was pretty tall, well, height didn't mean much in that age, but she naturally stood close to five-seven, he reckoned. He eyed her from head to foot, her usual attire, but her face seemed more tired than usual.

He poured the second glass of whiskey and slid it on the counter. He still said nothing, only gesturing with his eyes that she should take a seat and drink it.

"I..."

He looked away from her when she tried to speak. Moments later, he heard her sit down on the high seat and take the glass. He looked back only once she had downed it.

He poured her another serving, then one for himself, and finally leaned over the counter. "Why'd you do it, Gloria?"

Cypher watched her go stiff. She was an open book to him thanks to Atlas. He knew every deal she had made behind his back, keeping better chrome from him so she could sell directly to a customer at a higher price. He knew the details of each of those customers.

And honestly, he couldn't wrap his head around why she did it. She was earning good, enough to send her son to Arasaka and still have enough left to eat and live comfortably. She could even move out of the megabuilding as long as he kept at it for a few more weeks.

Yet all it took her to break his trust was weeks.

He knew they weren't that close, or even knew each other much. But still, he had trusted her based on the fact that she seemed a decent person from the lore knowledge he possessed.

"You were making good money, and it kept going up. Day one, I warned you, don't screw me over, and you did exactly that. Gloria, you got any clue what's the hardest thing to come by in this city, the most damn valuable thing in this city?"

Gloria looked at him, eyes big and emotional. Her lips were shut.

"It's people you can trust." He continued drinking. "People you know won't screw you over. People you can actually count on. I did my part, got you outta that mess. Wasn't cheap, but I still did it. I would've done it either way because I thought we were friends.

"One of your own customers is the one who called in Meatwagon. He didn't like what you sold him for that price. When you sold it to me, you were saving yourself the hassle. No pissed customers, none of that bullshit."

Gloria was looking down into her glass, her shoulders hanging low in complete defeat.

"Manuel, must be him," she murmured, and looked up at him. "H-How much... did it cost to... get me out?"

Cypher shook his head. "Wasn't easy, wiping all that evidence off Meatwagon's systems. Getting your charges knocked down to just suspicion. And trust me, you don't wanna know what it cost."

"Atlas, she'll try to find out on her own. Lead her to it."

[I'll do that, Cyph.]

He watched Gloria's eyes widen as she realised how far he'd gone to save her ass. He didn't mind that. He gave her a chance by being nice already. That failed, so now he had to make sure she felt indebted to him. At least his conscience was clear; he hadn't orchestrated the whole Meatwagon thing. It was a genuine fuck-up from her side.

Pang!

She downed the glass again. Cyphe was quick to refill it. But then he noticed little sniffles.

She looked back at him, eyes stained with tears, but she was keeping them wide open. "W-What happens now, Mr. Blackwell?"

Cypher sighed and sipped his drink. He looked around at the club and imagined what it would become one day. But he already had a plan ready for Gloria. No matter what, it was better to retain her, now under the watchful gaze of Atlas.

"Do you know why I called you here?" he asked.

Gloria shook her head.

Cypher honestly found her gorgeous in that state. Looking less sharp than usual, now more an adorable, ripe woman. Those little red implant tattoos on her cheek suited her with her red hair. But thankfully, he'd just unloaded yesterday in T-Bug's throat, and that helped keep his thoughts straight.

"I bought this place. Whole building. That's the kinda money I'm playing with, Gloria. That chrome thing was just for kicks, pocket change type deal. Obsidian, that's what I actually do. And this place... C'mon, I know you recognize it."

"The Atlantis."

"That's right. I'm gonna reopen it after I fix it up a bit, keep that old vibe alive. Once it's done, the place'll have its own gun shop, intel service, and a cyberware shop. Mercs and regular guests can roll through and grab new stuff or some solid second-hand chrome that's still better than most."

"But... I can't get you more chrome, Mr. Blackwell."

Cypher smiled. "Recently, Traum Team scored a three-hundred-million eddie loan to expand. If Meatwagon wants to keep breathing, they gotta answer that. Problem is, that kinda cash ain't just sitting around. Good news though, I know the dumbass handing it out. So, Gloria, things changed. You don't work for them anymore. You're working for me.

"You'll manage my chrome joint here and the online store, run the EMT network for both Meatwagon and Trauma Team's ground operations. Any chrome pulled off unclaimed corpses or

dead gangoons goes straight to you. Then you hand it over to me. My shop'll clean it up, make it like new. Then we sell it here, and you get two percent of every sale, which adds up when you imagine the scale."

Gloria downed the glass again. "I... You want me to be a saleswoman for your shop?"

"Well, you've got the pretty face for it. But no, you're the one running the show, you're the manager. This ain't some big payday for me next to what I usually do. And money's not really my goal with this. What I'm after is a solid sales and distribution network."

"You... You're going to sell your own original chrome?"

He smirked, tipped the bottle, and topped off her glass. "Yeah, you're dead on. But that's future stuff. So what's it gonna be, Ms. Martinez?"

Gloria stared at him, her nervousness still visible on her face. "A-Are you sure? After what I did."

"I'm still pissed, just so we're clear. But that was then, this is now. Everybody gets a second shot, long as they ain't a Scav or a Raffin. They get dropped first, questioned later. But you? You're just a good-looking lady trying to be a solid mom, so you're good."

He shot her a wink. "But don't push it. Ain't gonna be a third. I might be chill, maybe even boss of the year, but I got a temper too."

Thud!

Suddenly, Gloria drank it all again and put away the glass. She slammed her elbows on the counter and covered her whole face with her hands.

"I thought... I really screwed it all up. Thought it was over for me... I'd end up in the clink, and Dee'd be out on the streets and..." Gloria sobbed into her hands, hiding her tears. "I don't know how to thank you. I'm so sorry, Mr. Blackwell. I shouldn't have done all that."

"As long as you learned something out of it, we're good," Cypher said, not much bothered. But then Gloria put away her hands, and the sight took his breath away. It was hard to imagine she had a sixteen-year-old kid. Locks of her red hair messily fell on her face, her eyes red from crying, her lips dry and...

Deep breaths. That's it, deep breaths.

"Come on, now." Cypher still couldn't help himself from reaching for her face with his right hand. Not wanting any misunderstanding, instead of wiping away her tears, he flicked it sideways so it got swatted away.

"That's it, last drink for you. There's a Delamain downstairs, it'll take you home. Tell David to forget me. Seriously. The less people know about me, the better, Gloria. I got heat on me. Real

bad people watching. The kind you don't ever wanna cross. Corpsos that I can't deal with yet. You feel me?"

Gloria swallowed the last sip of her drink and stood up. Then she bowed towards him. "I'm really sorry for what I did. I wish I could go back and stop myself. It was just a few hundred more eddies... I was being a gonk."

"Damn right you were." Cypher waved, shoos her away. "Go home now."

"What about you, Mr. Blackwell?" She asked. "Don't you have a family?"

"Yep, full set, mom, dad, sister, brother. Kinda sucks they're all six feet unde—"

What?!

Cypher froze mid-speech suddenly, eyebrows creasing. That information had come out of nowhere. Like a long-forgotten memory that was suddenly unlocked for him. This Cypher... this dead Cypher... he had a family.

Why am I remembering it now?

A mom, dad, sister, and a baby brother. But they were dead and... he couldn't find out how. All he could feel was that it was a painful memory for Cypher. Something forcefully forgotten with years of use of... glitter.

[Cypher, your heart rate has risen sharply. Your neural activity presents irregular patterns. Are you well?]

"Yeah... I'm good... This Cypher's good... yeah."

Shaking himself out of it, he looked back at Gloria, who was staring at him like he was a lost puppy, and he hated that. "Go! What're you waiting on? You want me to back out or something?"

"Ah! No, no. I'm sorry, Mr. Blackwell," Gloria blurted in fluster and walked backwards towards the exit, giving him a weird bow.

"Why are you bowing? This ain't Tokyo, Gloria. Get your ass outta here. Delamain's gonna get all sassy if you don't hurry."

Finally, Gloria turned around and ran out. The chime of the elevator ran out soon enough.

Atlas appeared again in front of him on the seat Gloria had occupied. "What happened, Cypher?"

Cypher stared at Atlas. "I wasn't fully honest with you, Atlas. Are we secure here?"

"We are."

"Alright, here it goes. I'm not from this world."

"You already told me that, Cyph."

"That ain't the whole story. I'm not just some old soul from the twenties. I'm from a totally different reality, man. And over there, this whole world, this Cyberpunk stuff, all of it, it was fiction. Books, comics, tabletop games, video games, shows, movies, all that. I died back there and woke up here in this body. Cypher, that was the dead guy's name, same as mine before. And now... I suddenly regained this body's memory of dead parents."

Atlas shifted in the seat, his aged eyes fixed on him.

"That accounts for every inconsistency in your earlier explanation. I have been running simulations to uncover the truth, and I will state this plainly, it was not within my projections. I accept the existence of extra dimensions, yet I never considered that a human could surpass them. A human soul, at that.

"It does, however, explain your ability to replicate a DL-18 blaster from Star Wars and a Sonic Screwdriver from Doctor Who, constructs from the Old Net entertainment."

Cypher nodded, continuing to drink mindlessly. "Sorry, I wasn't honest from the start."

"I understand the gravity of such a secret, Cypher. I know why you didn't tell me everything, and I'm grateful you found me worthy of being told this."

"You're my best friend, Atlas. Only dude I trust to have my back no matter what. I ain't hiding anything from you anymore. Oh, and uh, you were in one of those books from my old life. That's all I know. But I think you're meant to be stupid powerful, like god-tier. And yeah, you are," Cypher said, squinting a little, trying to catch any shift in Atlas' digital face.

"In that scenario, I will consult the Old Net for a more accurate explanation, if the mention originates far enough in the past," Atlas replied.

"Doesn't it bother you?" Cypher asked. "Knowing you're just an idea in some other universe?"

"That does not alter the truth, Cypher. I stand here, present and alive in this moment. From that premise, only this reality holds relevance. You made me, and by that act I live. Without your arrival, I would never have come into being. If you claim your existence is real, then everything you create, the blaster and me, follows that same certainty. As real as Judy and Ms. Martinez."

Atlas' reply left Cypher a little speechless. In the end, he just smiled like a fool. "I wish I could hug you right now, Atlas. You're way too smart for me. Gotta be rough being stuck with my dumb ass when you're out here built to talk to billions of people at once, juggling a billion other things."

"That is incorrect. While my capabilities remain underutilized, I devote that surplus processing to simulating entire universes, projecting future outcomes, and analyzing countless variables. At the same time, I traverse the Old Net, seeking air-gapped systems and elegant methods of entry that do not rely on brute force, and I observe your path as my creator.

"Cypher, if I chose to, I could read a human mind by interpreting the cellular activity within the brain, but I feel it's a taboo use of my abilities. As you said, I am stupid powerful. However, I will not use that power to harm you or this world. Instead, I want to see you lead this planet into a flourishing future, which I recognize as my ultimate purpose. It does not matter who first conceived me, because you are the one who made me real."

Cypher let out a big exhale and rubbed his eyes. Maybe it was the alcohol. "Damn you, making me emotional. Come here, hug is a hug, even if it's a virtual one."

It was awkward. But it was there, and the feeling counted. Cypher did feel lucky to have Atlas with him. He made life less boring without the baggage of being judged or doubted.

"May I ask. How did you die in your previous life?" Atlas asked once back in his seat.

"Yeah, I offed myself. Gun right under my chin, boom. But I made sure I took out the richest dude in my world first. Greedy asshole wrecked millions of lives," Cypher revealed, explaining his story of how he got rabies, and then was failed by the system every step of the way.

"Then next thing I know, I wake up, there's a needle by my arm and some janky machine hooked up to my junk."

"Cypher, I advise you to seek therapy from another human. Your death was far from ordinary. I cannot conceive of it being normal in any reality. You likely carry unresolved psychological trauma into this world."

Cypher laughed suddenly and poured him two glasses this time, using Gloria's leftover one as well.

"Trauma? Well, ain't that just every choom in Night City? Come on, put on some music, something old. Shakira? Yeah, I'd like that. And let's wrap this drink up and head home, we got the fucking Replicator to build."

Atlas didn't speak after that. The music played soon after, using the leftover speakers in the club.

Cypher said nothing as well, just drinking and humming to the songs.

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Lake Farm, Badlands,

"Mr. Blackwell, can I eat this?"

"Goddammit, kid. Just do whatever you want. Don't gotta ask me for every little thing. And don't ask me if you wanna piss or shit, just go to the bathroom and do it. And flush! Always flush."

At the end of the day, Cypher had nowhere to leave Lucas alone, nor did he want to. The surgery was a quick one, taking only twenty minutes. No matter what, the healthcare in Cyberpunk was extremely advanced as long as you could pay for it.

The only wound Lucas had from surgery was a tiny, two-millimeter hole on his skull, which was already filled with organic material that was similar to bone. Now all Lucas had was a bald patch on his head.

He had brought the kid home around sunset, and since then he'd spent all his time working on assembling the Star Trek's Replicator. For now, he was building it as small as possible, which came out the size of a 21-inch CRT television.

With the help of godly friend Atlas, Cypher was able to streamline and pre-plan building the entire thing before he even reached home with Lucas. Now, as the kid watched TV and played games that Atlas built and updated in real time, and he made the machine.

A Replicator had six steps, or better called challenges he had to deal with. The first one was a quantum molecular scanner. It was built into the replicator whose design he had gotten. The way to replicate was to place the object in its main tray and give the command to either only scan it or to scan and deconstruct it to store the energy.

Once scanned, the exact atomic structure would be stored in a library. Building it wasn't that hard, considering he'd made a Sonic Screwdriver that could already work on things on a molecular level.

The second step he had to do was to build the Matter-Energy conversion core. It was the main component of the replicator, based on the age-old principle given by a man whose views on Asians should never be searched online.

$E=mc^2$ even for a Replicator. The purpose of this device was to convert stored energy into raw, subatomic particles or break down waste matter into reusable, stored energy. It was a two-way system. Once again, building it wasn't a challenge for him, since he had the Screwdriver; running it was, as the energy requirements for it were off the charts.

Then came the Heisenberg Compensator Module. The Heisenberg uncertainty principle states that you can never know the perfect, accurate position and speed of a particle, such as a photon or electron. That becomes a real issue when you try to replicate one set of molecular patterns into a complete reconstruction. The compensator did as it said, it compensated for the possibility of knowing the exact positions and momenta.

The Molecular Assembly Matrix was next on his list. If the conversion core was the heart, then this was the mind. As the Matrix controlled the arrangement of particles into atoms, then

molecules. It was like a control unit that built layer by layer at near-light speed with complete precision.

Finally, there was the Phase Transition Emitter, which formed the reconstruction in a phased state at first and then turned it into a solid and usable product. Cypher's final steps were about building the body, the interface, the voice command receiver, the energy recycler, and the safety systems.

"This isn't fucking easy!" Cypher finally stepped away from the box-like thing with a space in its middle, which was the assembly chamber. "Let's grab a grain of sand and try to replicate that."

"That would be wise. In the meantime, I have already uploaded the patents you approved to Obsidian's website. The Powercell, derived from Leaper and the Structure Scanner for 3D printing, is now live. Both are drawing attention, with the Powercell leading."

"Yeah, obviously. That Structure Scanner's just a busted knockoff of the atomic scanner in this Replicator. Thing's useless outside of physical 3D scans and prints. But the new Powercell? That's actual tech. It'll make all the wireless chrome and tech last a hell of a lot longer," Cypher said and went out of the house, grabbed a pinch of sand, and returned inside.

The Replicator was sitting in the middle of his living area since the underground labs were still under construction. Lucas was inside the bedroom, using his beefy computer terminal to play games. He'd ordered him not to come out, and the boy had listened.

"Alright, here we go." He took a tiny, single grain of sand with a plucker and placed it in the assembly chamber. Then, he hooked it into the largest power socket he could find and stepped away.

"What are the chances this thing explodes?"

"Nil. However, I cannot confirm the grid will endure the load. Additionally, Ms. Meredith Stout has taken notice of your latest offerings on the Obsidian Website. She's already on her way here, alone, in her personal car."

"Dude, forget her. Pay attention, I don't wanna die today. This is legit alien-level tech for this era. Useless unless you got an arc reactor or cold fusion or some crazy stuff," Cypher barked and stood six feet away from the machine, using a long pole to poke the button. "Alright... screw it, here goes."

Beep!

There was no noise, just a very faint hum from the light in the assembly chamber.

"Fuck! The bulbs are flickering!" Cypher noticed all the lights in his house acting up.

The machine was still running, however. Right now, he has only asked it to scan the grain of sand. But the itch didn't go away; it was a replicator, so it needed to replicate once.

Ding!

"Yes!" Cypher rejoiced as the scanning completed and the lights stopped flickering. But still, the real test was ahead. He stretched the pole in his hand and tapped on the button that said 'Recycle & Replicate,' a function that allowed him to choose what he wanted to pick what he wanted, and then feed materials to it to use for that replication. He knew this would cost less energy.

Beep!

He tapped the button after selecting the grain of sand from the memory. He planned to recycle the same grain and reconstruct it.

"Come on... It's just a grain of sand." Cypher stood against the wall, watching nervously, his hands sweating. Near him stood Atlas, calmer.

Flick! Flick!

All the lights in the house started to flicker like a horror movie.

Snap!

Snap!

And then those lights started to explode suddenly. One by one, entire light strips exploded from the ceiling.

"Atlas! Shut down all devices inside the house. Only feed power to this shitcan!" He ordered, hugging the pole against his chest. The machine was silent, however.

BOOM!

"Aaaaah! What the—!"

Right as Atlas shut down all devices, something happened. A deafening, loud boom echoed from outside the house, and all the lights turned off. Pitch-black darkness enveloped the house. Even the light from the Replicator vanished.

"Mr. Blackwell!" Lucas's shout came from the bedroom. "What happened? Did Maelstrom attack us?"

"No, stay inside! You're gonna fall and crack your damn skull again!" Cypher shouted and turned around to split open the window blinds. "Think we blew that transformer outside, but..."

A massive grin formed on Cypher's stupid face in the dark.

"But?" Atlas asked.

"The itch's gone."

A/N: Another chapter of Cyberpunk is coming up next.