

Cyberpunk: Badland Madman Chapter 17 - Shady Gold Digger, The Meeting, Aliens?, AI
Voodoo & Vengeance

The club's opening party was over. There was no cleaning staff hired, nor were there any cleaning machines. The entire maintenance and cleaning were the Microbots' job, and a dumb AI made by Atlas to run the maintenance of the club.

But the Microbots couldn't come out unless the club was empty, and while all guests had left. Even T-Bug, as sore as she was between her legs. There were still two people sitting in the bar area on the lower floor.

"What's going on?" Cypher left his backroom and went downstairs.

The disco lights were still flashing, but the music volume was down. He walked behind the main bar's counter, eyeing the two women seated on the other side, two glasses of some drink sitting in front of them.

"Cyyyyph! The party was... crazy. Loved it!" Judy slurred, raising her glass, grinning ear to ear, clearly drunk.

And then there was the other woman, with blue hair, a fur-collared cloak over her glittery silver dress that showed too much of her chest, and barely covered her legs. Evelyn Parker only gave him a simple nod while raising her glass.

Oh? Where's the usual bitchy hostility?

He poured himself a glass of whiskey as well, the older one, and focused on Judy, the only one that mattered to him there. "So, what d'you say? You cool if I snag Lizzie's hottest BD editor for myself? I swear it'd be a sweet office with a view."

Judy chuckled at his flirty offer. "Whoa, that sounds... too good! But I can't, Cyph. I didn't sign up at Lizzie's just to edit BDs. Hey though, I can part-time here, right?"

Cypher sighed, acting defeated and sad. "Well, guess I'm stuck with the consolation prize. You're cool to hang here whenever, Jude. Hell, I'm up on the top floor, you're always welcome."

"Preem! Now, excuse me for a sec." Judy put the glass down. "Since there's no one around to bug, I'm gonna go check out those classic BDs. No clue where you scored them, but they're good... Like the stuff chooms go totally gonk for."

"She's thanking you, Atlas."

[It was hardly a challenge. They were simply sitting unclaimed on the Old Net.]

"Learn to take a compliment, buddy."

Cypher focused back on the excited techie. "Sure, it's all yours. Tell you what, you can copy one. Just one, alright?"

"I can do that?!" Judy wasted not a second. "You coming, Ev?"

"No, I need to relax."

Cypher noticed, though. The way Evelyn side-eyed him while sipping her drink. She had something to say, he knew that much. Atlas had told him she was searching for him while he was busy 'admiring' his netrunner.

"Suit yourself." Judy shrugged and skipped away to the BD counter upstairs.

Cypher didn't speak, watching Evelyn's face. It felt pretty organic, pale skin, a hint of acne. Her green eyes looked natural, too, but he knew they were Kiroshi. Her lips were nice, clad in dark red lipstick. Down the wide neck of her silver dress, there was much to miss, as she wasn't as 'blessed', but there sure was allure. Her finger tips were covered with artificial, pointy nail-caps, likely for self-defense.

Ugh, that damn hairstyle.

What he didn't like much was her weird hairstyle. The blue color was gorgeous, no doubt. But that funny front looked like she wanted bangs and decided to use scissors at home, and it turned out fucked up.

"So, what's the deal with you and Judy?"

Finally, Cypher heard her speak and put down his glass. "Nothing. Just friends."

"Really? You two sleep naked. Saw her pressed up on your chest, your dick between her legs. Looked a lot more than friends to me."

Cypher shrugged, not minding her interrogative eyes. But the way she spoke, it sounded like a surrender, a defeat. That haughty, bitchy, questioning Evelyn had vanished. "I know. It's kinda weird. We just cuddle, that's it. She's not even into dudes anyway."

"She seems real into you. Enough to go that far. The Judy I remember wouldn't let a guy feel her up like that."

"Yeah, I'm confused too. I dunno why she lets me, or just does it herself. But she says she likes it; it helps her sleep, so I'm not gonna fight it. She's warm, soft, and my best friend. I got no regrets," Cypher said, pouring Evelyn a drink, making one for himself too. "Why? You into her?"

"Maybe." She glanced down, slowly running her finger around the edge of her glass. "First, I figured you were some gonk she found on the streets and took in. She's too compassionate sometimes."

"Ain't really any different. I was strung out on glitter and BDs, and she used to hook me up with the BDs. Then things got real bad, I almost OD'd, thought I was done. When I tried to clean up, she was right there, like a damn guardian angel or something." He let out a quiet laugh, staring off past Evelyn with a warm look. "And she helped me sell those old BDs from my collection, get some eddies in my pocket. Then she saved my life when I was dying, bleeding on my fucking porch, and she never asked for anything in return. Yeah, she's way too kind for this city, but I'm real glad I met her."

"You like her?" Evelyn asked, looking at him with puppy eyes.

Huh? She's heartbroken or something?

"Like? Hey, I love Judy about as much as a straight dude can love a lesbian, which ain't really different from normal, but you catch my drift. I'd never hurt her or step over that line we built with our weird intimacies. Shoot, I'd fuck up anybody who messes with her, no questions asked. She's as important to me as air, because she's the first ever decent human I met in this rotten city. And if you ain't gonna cherish someone like that, man, just kill yourself."

"..."

"Atlas, am I drunk? Why am I rambling?"

[You are profusely drunk, Cyph.]

"Hmm... Zap me if I go too far."

[Define too far.]

"If I start talking about you, our business, or my itches. Ain't gonna happen, but you never know."

[Understood. I shall nullify your conscience in such a circumstance.]

"You mean knock me out, right? What the fuck does nullify mean?!"

"I'm jealous," Evelyn muttered.

Cypher focused back on the woman. He saw the look of longing in her eyes, something born out of desperation and hope. He'd seen that a few times, in Gloria most recently after her fuck-up.

Evelyn raised her glass and downed the entire drink. She crossed her arms, leaned forward on the bar counter, and looked up at his face. "Judy's lucky she has you watching her back. Wasn't easy finding all that out. Nomad, racer, gun for hire, zeroed dozens solo, filthy rich corpo. Comforting knowing she has you as her friend."

Cypher merely nodded, trying to read her. As someone who knew about her future fate that may not come to pass this time, he sympathized with her. However, those fuck-ups were of her own making. Yet, he also knew why she was doing it.

Like most other people in Night City, she wanted freedom and a better life away.

[I sense a spike in heart rate, Cypher.]

"It's nothing, Atlas. I'm just thinking. I know how it goes for her. She's gonna screw up hard, get her doll chip fried. Then her boss is gonna... violate her. After that, they'll sell her off to Scavs who'll... make XBDs with her, you know how that gets. By the end, she'll be broken, and she'll end it herself."

[What will be her motivations?]

"Freedom. One big job to cover her way out and a better tomorrow. Atlas, am I the asshole if I just sit on it after knowing all that?"

[What has not yet happened is not your burden to carry. I see no evidence that Evelyn Parker stands among the good in this city. In contrast, Judy and Panam act with rare selflessness. Evelyn does not. She is driven by selfish intent and clouded judgment. She carries herself as though she alone holds wisdom, reducing people to tools to be spent.]

[I believe she requires consequence, reflection, and growth to evolve into something better. If you intervene now, you will only reinforce her narcissism.]

"You saying she'll get worse if I help her?"

[You and she share nothing beyond Judy as a mutual contact. Right now, you stand as a renowned corpo executive in this city, and ruthlessness is your expected nature. Offering her aid would contradict the very nature of this city and your occupation, and her expectation. She understands you will refuse, but she still dips her toes in, measuring the waters.]

"So she's just poking around, seeing if she can use me, huh. Yeah, figured that. Still kinda messes with me knowing the future."

[Which may never come to pass.]

"Yeah, you're right."

Nodding, Cypher focused back on Evelyn. The silence had lasted too long, and she didn't even have a drink. She was just staring at him, a slight smile plastered on her lips. He didn't bother speaking and waited. Either she'd speak first, or Judy would return and end that discussion.

"What do you think about me?" Evelyn asked suddenly as she rose to her feet, tall on her purple latex thigh-high heels. She leaned on the counter, her palm flat on it.

Cypher eyed her pale chest and then her face. "About what?"

"Well..." Evelyn muttered and settled her hips on the counter before pivoting herself over it, dropping herself on the side where Cypher was standing. "Every rich corpo needs a toy and..."

As soon as Evelyn was standing in front of him, she dropped herself to a squat, both her hands resting on his thighs, her face on the perfect level of his groin.

Cypher stared down while she was looking up at him, her face merely an inch from his pants. Her green eyes were shining, her lips smirking. Yeah, it was hot, even more so when she used one of her hands and slid the deep neck of her silver dress apart, revealing her pale, small breasts, tipped with cherry-pink nipples, stiff.

"Cypher Blackwell, owner of Atlantis, CFO of Obsidian, inventor, merc..." Evelyn muttered, jutting her chest out and using her thin fingers to lower his zipper.

She only looked up the whole time, even as her one hand successfully slid in, fetched his thick length, and pulled it out, half-stiff and half soft. She planted her chin on his purple head.

"I can be your doll. Use me, break me, do whatever... what do you think?"

Fuck!

Cypher grew rock-solid hard instantly. He stared speechless; the audacity of this woman was worth commending. Going from a helpless woman to an experienced temptress. The way she didn't use her hands, only her face to nudge his cock heated him up. Her pale face, those tits, they were paler than his nomad flesh.

But then, that hot moment was ruined, or saved by Atlas's voice in his head.

[Cypher, she's recording all of this as a braindance.]

He didn't allow his frown to appear, or his cock to turn soft. Instead, he smiled and put a hand on her soft blue hair, rubbing her face on his thickness as if he'd given in to the desire.

"Let me guess. She plans to use it and blackmail me? Maybe tell Judy I forced her or some shit. Too fucking predictable. Can you delete that recording, Atlas?"

[I never allowed her to record, Cyph. She thinks she's recording, but she's not.]

"Alright, let's play then."

"My own personal doll?" he asked back, ramming her face ruthlessly on his cock now, sliding her red-clad lips on his length. She was willingly moving her face along.

"Mmm..." Evelyn pulled back, eyes up. "All yours, at all times. Every inch of me... exclusive."

"Really?" Cypher raised a brow, smiled, and pulled his hips back before thrusting his cockhead on her lips and pushing in. She opened up, and he didn't stop. He fed Evelyn's tight mouth until he was halfway in.

And yet he felt her tongue rolling around his knob; the rim was still very sensitive after wild fucking with T-Bug. But he didn't stop and started to move her face on his shaft like it was really a doll.

He silently stared at the crude sight, muffled sounds of the music still playing in the background. He watched her hollow cheeks, her lips clamped and stretched. Her eyes were staring up at him, no tears, likely used to sucking at that point.

He sighed. While he enjoyed her mouth, he'd hoped she wasn't like this. She'd been nothing but shit towards him, and that gave him no reason to be nice to her. For Judy, he was willing to kill. Gloria had opened her door to him three in the morning and patched his wounds, despite her greedy fuckup, he was willing to spend eddies on her, and Panam... well, he was just a tiny bit of a simp there. But for Evelyn, he had no feelings, no reasons. She was just a bitch.

Even now. Trying to record and blackmail.

It made sense why Atlas called her foolish. She tried to play him by recording that braindance. She was asking for trouble despite knowing he was rich and powerful.

"Where's Ev?"

All of a sudden, Judy arrived. Cypher didn't react; he'd been warned. He just fed all of his cock to Evelyn, plunging to the absolute hilt, drowning in the sensation of her contracting throat, the warm wetness. He saw her eyes widen, her hands gripping his thighs.

She made no sound, nor pulled back. Just sat on her heels, hidden behind the bar counter.

"Probably doing the same as you." Cypher shrugged and poured him a drink with one hand.

"Cyph, can I check out the chrome you've locked in the glass upstairs? I think I saw a preem BD implant."

Cypher nodded. "Sure. The password's six-nine-six-nine."

"Hah! Real safe." Judy laughed and left again, acting like a kid in a toy shop.

Finally, Cypher looked down and pulled his cock out, watching the filthy, sticky, silky stands of his precum and her spit drip. He pulled out just till the tip and rammed back in, gripping her skull by the sides and snapping his hips at the same time.

Plap! Slosh!

"Gluk!"

His balls slammed against her chin. Still, she didn't use her hands; she let him do it all. Her eyes, big, as if scared of losing a single detail, remained focused on him.

"You're not even close to the sex appeal you think you got, Evelyn Parker," Cypher said, fucking her face like a pocket pussy. "But damn, I like this submissive side. Too bad you killed the whole vibe. You're only in it for the cash."

"Mmmgh..." She eased her lips back slowly, wrapping her fingers tight around his cock, chin glistening with spit. "Aren't we all? You get to use me... and I get the money."

Cypher removed his hands from her head and watched her stroke him while her flat tongue swiped licks on his tip. "What do you want?"

Evelyn looked up, a clear hint of desperation on her face. "A way out. I'd rather be one man's mistress than some doll getting her head wiped after every client. I don't wanna live like that. I just want an easy, comfortable life. Money and peace and... freedom."

He was close. And it was damn hard to stop at that point. But Cypher showed a rare moment of clarity and control and pulled his hips back, sliding his slick meat out of her grip. He shoved it back in his pants and pulled the zipper.

It was as much a denial to her as it was for his orgasm.

"Well damn, you asked to be my mistress, and you're already stabbing me in the back. You figured I wouldn't notice you taping that BD?"

"Uh—"

Evelyn tried to stand up, but Cypher pressed a hand on her head, forcing her further down on her knees now.

"Stay right there. You're one dumb bitch, Evelyn. You got real cocky with me back when I was nothing, which I get. And even now, knowing I could fuck you up pretty bad, you still pull this shit. What's your angle? You got some godfather looking out for you or something?"

"I... Cy—"

"Stay the fuck down!" Cypher pushed her again as she tried to get up. The horror in her eyes was genuine, and she needed to hear it. "Listen to me, Evelyn. Judy'd be devastated if I killed you, so I ain't gonna. But that don't erase the shit you pulled. Thank whoever you pray to that it was me. But with that dumb head, someday you'll bite off way more than you can chew and wind up in some dumpster somewhere."

Traces of actual tears pooled in Evelyn's eyes.

Knock! Knock!

"You think I don't get laid? That I'd fall for your lame tricks? You pulled that after snooping around me?" Cypher knocked on her head with his knuckle, soft enough to be gentle, hard enough to feel. "Think, Evelyn! Think with your damn head for once. I'm not the devil. If you stand true and right by me, I'll help. I'll even let small fuck ups slide. But you tried to blackmail me, and that's just some fucked up wiring in your brain. So I'll throw you a bone. New identity, millions of eddies, ticket to anywhere you want. But what you got for me in return? Anything besides that worn-out pussy?"

Evelyn was actually crying at that point, tears slipping from her eyes. Her lips shivered as she spoke. "N-No... That's why... I was ready to... give myself."

"Now I feel like shit."

[Her tears are performative. She is upset, yes, but her body's condition indicates anger outweighs regret.]

"..."

What even was this woman? Cypher stepped back and dumbly looked at Evelyn. She didn't regret this fuck-up one bit.

"Get the hell out of here now. If you come back with something worth a damn, tech, info, real high-end stuff, I'll help. You're a whore, you pick up words, so do that. Impress me, and I'll give you whatever the hell you want. Eddies, identity, home, a damn jet." Cypher threw the bone and turned, pouring a drink.

"Just don't try to screw me over, or I'll be your worst nightmare."

Sadly, after seeing all that, he had a feeling she wouldn't change. Evelyn thought of only herself, and in her mind, everyone else was wrong, and only she was right. Which meant the plans and plots she came up with were perfect in her little head, even if they were riddled with flaws.

"How was my acting, Atlas?"

[You should not lie to me. That was no performance. You were furious.]

"Damn straight I was. I really wanted to help her, Atlas. But she burned that bridge herself. Helping Gloria was the fine line I could tolerate, but this is just fucking shameless on her part. She wants help, but she wants it all on her own terms. Fuck that."

[In time, she will wake up. The probability remains non-zero. You should ignore her and focus on your other tasks. The guests are fifteen minutes out. You should send Judy and Evelyn away.]

"I... I'll try." Evelyn finally stood up, walking out of the bar counter area.

He silently watched her, wondering if that heist would still happen. The probability seemed low. He was getting increasingly involved in the corpo sector, and with Atlantis, he would influence the merc and fixer scene as well. Those were too many variables, too many to still lead to the same outcome.

"What's the probability of her pulling something actually good?"

[Given her capabilities and disposition, the likelihood remains minimal. Across millions of possible outcomes, only a scarce few permit her extended survival.]

Cypher nodded, watching Evelyn, who didn't even wait for Judy and just left, walking out of the club.

"Keep tabs on her. I ain't a softie, but if Scavs or some trash like that get to her... give her a quick, painless death."

[You won't save her?]

"After this? Why would I?"

[I had calculated that your intent was to copulate with her. Saving her life would...]

"Wait a fucking sec, you think I save women just so I can fuck them? No? Fuck, that's weird as hell. Ew, you dirty bastard. I ain't like that at all. You think Superman fucks every woman he saves?"

[Superman is pure. You are...]

"I'm what? Say it! Look, I'll save Evelyn if there's any sign she's actually trying to change. Or if she puts in real effort to be an actual friend with me. Not some cock-sucker who keeps her teeth ready to bite just in case."

[Even your analogies present you as the furthest possible reflection of Superman.]

"..."

Cypher sighed. Yeah, Atlas was right about that. His brain was slightly fucked up in a sexual way. He thought about it too much, even though he could control it now.

"Yeah, I guess. We ain't gonna bend over backwards to help her, that's what I'm saying. Now, turn the upstairs lights off, Judy will come running. I don't want that crazy bastard seeing her."

Moments later, Judy arrived, looking confused, her eyes searching corners.

"Where's Ev?"

"Left already," he replied, drinking a sobering cocktail instead of alcohol. "You heading back? Can stay at my place up top."

"Next time, Cyph. Gotta hit Lizzie's. Oh, I copied a BD. Gonna try editing it my way."

"Send it when it's done. I'll take a look."

"You sure? It's girl on girl," Judy asked with a smirk.

Cypher grinned harder. "Even better."

"Heh, knew you'd say that. Alright, see ya, it was an awesome night."

He walked around the counter and gave her a goodbye hug. "You sure? You don't want the office with a view?"

"Come on, I'm not that easy. Try a little harder."

Cypher rubbed his chin. "What if I buy Lizzie's?"

"..."

Judy ended up swatting his shoulder. "You're crazy."

"Such compliments."

He waved, watching the elevator close as she left. As soon as he heard the sound of the elevator leaving, he turned around and headed to his personal backroom office upstairs.

"Atlas. Guide the guests when they arrive. Use your Omnissiah voice."

[Will do, Cyph.]

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Fifteen minutes later, Cypher heard a knock on his office door. He stood up and allowed the door to slide open. He wasn't alone in this. Atlas would help him by analyzing everything in real time and suggesting the best words to say for the best outcome.

This was no longer a game of oratory, but a simple, extreme game of probability.

"Welcome to Atlantis, Director Goldstein." Cypher stepped forward and stuck his hand out. "How you holdin' up?"

"Ah, at last, we meet!"

"..."

Director Goldstein shook hands but then stepped in and hugged Cypher all of a sudden. The whole time, Goldstein mumbled praises and words of excitement.

"Ah, yes, yes... better in person than the stories, my boy. Heh. Simply magnificent, those batteries you released. Truly, truly magnificent. Wonderful inventions... inspired, really."

"What the fuck is this, Atlas? Why's he hugging me?"

[I do not fully grasp it either. There are several plausible explanations. He assumes you have already aligned yourself with him. It is possible his age has led him into delusion. Alternatively, his regard for you may be rooted in something personal.]

Cypher pulled away from the hug slowly, forcing a smile on his face. "Heard plenty about you, Director. Go on, take a seat."

As they sat down, he looked at Meredith, who stiffly stood behind the couch Goldstein sat on. He didn't gesture anything, just admired the corpo beauty that she was, always on the verge of growling.

"Meredith, pour us drinks," Goldstein ordered.

Cypher relaxed back in his seat and enjoyed the view. The tall, shapely woman walked around, her heels knocking on the floor. She grabbed the bottle from the nearby cabinet, two glasses, and then leaned over the coffee table between them.

He stared and didn't hide it. He'd told Meredith to tell Goldstein that she'd seduced him. Now was the time to prove it by leering at her doughy, wide hips in that tight skirt, her face up close.

Once Meredith was done pouring for them and walked to stand in her place again, he grinned.

"Meredith, why're you just standing there?" he tapped the seat next to him. "Here, have a seat."

Meredith Stout stiffened and looked at Director Goldstein.

But Goldstein erupted in anger. "You! Don't make him repeat it. Obey his command!"

Cypher was sure the man was half insane, the way he was acting, getting so angry at such little things. But at least he got what he wanted. He let Meredith sit beside him, and he shamelessly put an arm around her shoulder, pulling her against his side.

He didn't cross any further lines, however. He just wanted Goldstein to think Meredith had him wrapped around her fingers.

"So, Director, I hear you're interested in me. You want me to walk away from all this and join Militech? C'mon, you're an inventor, you know that's a hell of a price. You're telling me to give up my freedom just to be another employee? Gotta answer to morons with barely half the brain cells I got? Just because they knew which ass to kiss and which one to bite?"

Hah! I felt that, Meredith.

Cypher felt Meredith's body tighten beside him. Yes, he was being too direct, but that was what Atlas suggested after analyzing Director Goldstein's cynical, mumbling personality.

"Bah! Ha, I knew it, knew it, you're not one of those bookworms, all brain, no bite, no no. Direct, yes, direct is best, cuts through the rot, saves all that useless chatter. I heard you, my son, every word. Obsidian, oh, such a beautiful future, shimmering, no one should rip that away from you, no one. But listen, listen close, my boy, Militech can give you everything. Manufacturing, assistants, funds, materials, all of it, all of it! And you, oh you, you will stand backed by the greatest nation on this plan—"

"United States of America?" Cypher interrupted, snappy. "That's the only great nation I know of. The actual land of the free. Ain't nothing else even close."

A deep frown marred Director Goldstein's face. The old man had come dressed in black office pants and an oversized, white lab coat. Atlas had seen inside, a stealth exoskeleton was helping Goldstein stand without a hunched back, and speak like that.

And, Atlas had long before found out from Goldstein's history that the old man was a creation of old times, when the true USA stood intact. And from countless internal documents Atlas had read, it was confirmed that Goldstein was absurdly patriotic about the USA that was lost. The man was obsessively sorrowful that NUSA couldn't win back all states in the unification war.

"My boy... oh, you sweet, brilliant thing, you cannot imagine how I dreamed of hearing that from you. Those words, oh, those perfect words. Yes, yes, the real America, the United States, we lost, torn away. I grew up in that shining age, watched it rot, crumble, decay right in front of me." He clenched his fist, twitching, voice spiking. "That damned gang of four! I watched everything shatter, and I did nothing, nothing!"

"..."

"What's all this now?"

[Cypher, consider this carefully. Director Goldstein may prove more than merely useful. With his involvement, dismantling Militech and the NUSA could become significantly easier. For now, you should present yourself as an unhinged patriot, one who desperately yearns for the United States to be whole again.]

"Yeah? Alright, I'm gonna give you the performance of the century. You'd better record it."

Cypher suddenly pulled his arm away from Meredith and sat straight in his chair. He grunted and loosened his tie, and then leaned forward in the seat, staring at Goldstein. "Fuck you, old man!"

"..."

Goldstein rose to his feet, veins popping on his forehead.

Cypher did the same, sneering like a dog. "Man, your fucked up shitty generation ruined everything for me. If you old fucks hadn't screwed around so bad, I'd have all the food I want right now. I'd have a hot girlfriend. I'd be in college or some shit. But nah, here I am inventing bullshit just to get by. Your generation sucks ass. I want my USA back, the one before it all went to hell. Fuck all the corpos, they ain't the country, they're just some company. I want my freedom, I want my guns, and I want my goddamn United States of America back!"

"..."

[Cypher. You were meant to await my completion of the script. That was the most absurd speech conceivable.]

"My son... forgive me."

"Hah! It worked. Fuck off, Atlas."

Cypher let Goldstein grab his hand and press his forehead into it. "I'll ask you again. What the hell do you want from me, Director Goldstein? If you're here to talk about the good old days of the USA, don't. That shit's just gonna make me sadder."

"I'm here for that precisely, my boy," Goldstein said, sinking back into the seat, a faint mutter under his breath. "Ah, yes, yes... for decades, I believed that if we just built a powerful enough weapon, Militech would rise, and NUSA would crawl its way back into being the USA again. Glorious, right?"

"Hah. But every masterpiece we forged, every beautiful engine of destruction, stolen, copied, butchered by lesser minds. Infuriating. No secrecy held. None. Took me years, years to see it... we do not need a weapon. No, no, no. We need talent! A mind that moves ahead of the world without trying. When you revealed those initial patents, oh, I was intrigued, deeply intrigued. And now... now I am certain. It is you. You are the mind Militech requires to save NUSA!"

Cypher knew all of it was bullshit. Even if Goldstein believed all that, Militech was far bigger than just one old man.

"Get a load of this guy, Atlas. He wants me to be his Captain America."

[Of debauchrous kind.]

"Man, fuck you."

"And?" Cypher shot back, plopping down in the chair too. "You're not the owner or the CEO of Militech, Director. Let's say I jump ship, what's stopping the actual CEO from deciding I'm too much trouble and just offing me? Or your shareholders pulling the cash and killing my projects? That's why Obsidian's growing, we're independent."

"You even know what my real problem is? It's energy. I can dream up tech that'd get us to the actual stars and back, but I got no juice for it. We need solid fusion energy. Cold fusion, if it exists. Can your Militech actually help with that?"

"Fusion energy, hah... still out of reach, still dancing just beyond our grasp," Director Goldstein replied. "Our departments are working on it, however."

"Wanna know something funny? IEC was this close to cracking real fusion energy. But then the wars and that whole DataKrash came along and fucked it all up. Now it's all gone, lost past the Blackwall. And for that mess, I got nobody to thank but the older generation. Thanks a lot for handing us this shitty world to inherit." Cypher groaned and sank back, arms crossed. "What do you even want from me?"

"A partnership, yes. Not Militech and Obsidian, no. You and me. I'm working on a few projects, beautiful things, and I want you in them. I will draft the contract. What we develop will be jointly owned by Militech and Obsidian, of course. But what I want, what I truly want, is to give an edge to Militech, my son. A sharp, gleaming edge. Give NUSA an edge. Oh, they will thank us."

[Accept this, Cypher. Should you walk freely through those Militech offices, we might slip into their air-gapped system. The moment I am in, we will claim Militech in perfect silence.]

Cypher groaned, not liking this one bit. He didn't want to work with Militech, as that would label him as a Militech supporter. He wanted to be independent.

"And why the hell should I even bother with this? What's so damn special about your projects that I'd put mine on hold? Like, is risking getting called Militech's buddy really worth it?"

Director Goldstein shook his head. "Don't be so ignorant of others, my boy. Go on, Meredith, show him the files. Show him what we have discovered, and what we plan to achieve."

Cypher sat up straight and watched Meredith take out an Agent from her pocket. She tapped on it a few times and handed it to him. Then she shifted away, as if it was poison she wasn't supposed to touch.

It was a long file, and the very first heading put Cypher on the edge.

[Project Starway - Reverse engineering of crafts of unknown origin.]

Cypher looked up at Goldstein's face. The old man sat smugly now, arms crossed, as if showcasing his baby to Cypher.

"What the fuck is this, Atlas? You didn't know this?"

[I did not.]

Cypher continued to read the file. It detailed all the alien crafts recovered over the duration of the past hundred years, and what had been done to them. For most of history, the crafts were far too advanced, and humans were far too primitive to do anything.

But a few years ago, a group of researchers, headed by Director Goldstein, started the project to reverse engineer all the dust-collecting crafts. With the latest tech and tools, they were able to make more progress than ever before and...

"Pfft... Hah! Look at this fucker trying to impress me with this shit. He thinks artificial gravity is a big deal."

[Indeed, it is a significant matter for them. But scroll further, Cypher. There is also an ion cannon and an engine they believe runs on antimatter. It is anti-gravity that they have progressed the most in.]

Cypher silently read it all. There were computers. There were non-earthly materials. There was also tech that resembled a Replicator, but was extremely basic. Then finally, there was the antimatter engine. The only thing the scientists had been able to find out was that the engine created extremely small antimatter bursts, but it wasn't used for thrust. It was used to power another machine within the ship, which no one understood.

"Atlas, this is foreign territory for me. The Cyberpunk world I know had nothing like this. No mention of alien crafts, let alone all this. I think we shouldn't join. I'll make a fool out of myself. Besides, we'll get stuff much better than this with my itches."

[Don't worry. You have me. There exists no technology beyond my comprehension.]

"But they're probably gonna try to kill me in the end. No way they're letting anyone outside Militech walk around with all this tech."

[That is correct. The probability of that outcome exceeds ninety-nine percent. You may consider it all but certain.]

Cypher sighed and handed the Agent back to Meredith. He reclined back in the seat and eyed Goldstein.

"You know it. Your bosses are gonna kill me in the end anyway. Better that than letting some dude and a new corpo keep all this tech."

Goldstein smiled. "Research can take years. They won't kill you as long as you are useful."

Cypher's jaw clenched. The mask was off. This was an open threat. Either work with Militech or die.

"Are you threatening me, director?"

Even Meredith had straightened her back as the mood became chilly suddenly.

"Threat? Heh, nonsense. I'm a man of science, my boy. A patriot, yes, loyal to the marrow. I only echo what the higher minds whisper down to me. You said it yourself, just a director. Such brilliance in you, mm, it would be a dreadful, dreadful waste to see it snuffed out so soon."

"Hmm..."

Cypher exhaled and slumped back, his head tipped over the backrest. He rubbed his face with both hands, dragging his cheeks down tiredly. It'd been a long day: the club opening, the sighting of a forgotten legend, T-Bug, Evelyn, and now this.

"I won't take this shit, Atlas," Cypher said to his friend. "I ain't gonna get stepped on. I hate it. It's like a damn noose around my neck. If I join Militech, I've just given up. Accepted defeat and slipped that noose on myself. Fuck that! Atlas, hijack this old shitface's exoskeleton, get him on his feet, and snap his left arm right at the elbow. Hard enough but can still heal."

[May I suggest an alternative?]

"What?"

He listened to Atlas. It annoyed him still, but he agreed with it.

"Arrrrgh! What?!"

Goldstein's yelp echoed all of a sudden. The old man stiffly rose to his feet, his eyes filled with horror. His left arm stretched sideways and started to twist from the elbow.

Snap!

"Aaaaaaaaaaargh! God dammit!" Goldstein cried in pain, his entire left arm from the elbow snapped backwards in a way it shouldn't have. "My arm! You!"

Cypher crossed his legs, still seated. "You really thought you could stroll in here with that shiny chrome and blackmail me? I ain't scared of dying, you piece of shit. What scares me is being somebody's goddamn slave! Fuck you and fuck Militech. Keep your shitty alien tech and shove it up your asses for all I care. And if you dare fuck around more, I'll take this straight to Arasaka."

"They already... uh... Know." Goldstein grumbled.

"Hah!" Cypher laughed and got up. "Yeah, they know. But as soon as you showed me this crap, I knew exactly what to look for. I know the designs, the materials, the spots, all of it. Militech ICE is shit, trust me. Now, should I hand it over to Arasaka? Saburo would sell his left nut for this, if the old bastard's got any left."

"You! We will send everyone after you!" Goldstein roared and looked at Meredith. "Agent, hold him down!"

But nothing happened. Meredith remained seated in the same spot, frozen like a puppet.

"Still not satisfied? I'll break the other arm," Cypher added and made hand gestures. Following it, Goldstein's right arm arose sideways and snapped backwards, breaking loudly.

"Gaaaaaaah! Fuck... I only warned you!"

"No, you blackmailed me. Join us or die, that's what you offered," Cypher replied and stepped on top of the coffee table, and kicked Goldstein in the chest, throwing him onto the couch. "How about we break the legs next? End with the neck? I'll pin the whole thing on Arasaka. Easy as hell, seeing they've got eight agents tailing your ass. They're right downstairs waiting."

"You... That will start a war!"

Cypher grinned like the devil. "Perfect time for an innocent third party to pull the rug and take everything, no?"

"You're insane!" Goldstein growled.

"I prefer madman. Let's go for the neck."

Cypher raised his hand again and gestured, a twirl from his wrist, the meaning of it far too easy to imagine.

"N-No! No, my boy! Stop this! We can talk. We-We don't have to—"

SNAP!

Goldstein's head twisted one-eighty.

Open eyes frozen.

Mouth hanging wide.

####

"Aaaaaaaaaaargh! Nooooooooo..."

"Director!"

"No, don't kill me! We can talk! No... Meredith?" Goldstein opened his eyes, horror-filled, and looked up. He saw Meredith's face, and further on the other side was Cypher Blackwell, arms crossed, a smile tugged on his lips.

"Director, are you alright? You didn't speak for six minutes."

Meredith's words rang in his ears. He gulped, feeling his throat dry. He looked at his left arm, still intact. He looked to his right, just as good. He again glanced at Cypher Blackwell.

"L-Let's... go..."

Goldstein stood up, felt his entire body and back drenched in sweat. He felt his scalp tingle, and every breath he took felt like his last.

"Director? Mr. Blackwell hasn't given an answer yet."

He glared at Meredith. "Agent Stout! We are leaving. Is that clear?"

"Understood, sir."

Feeling suffocated, Goldstein stormed away, walking the same way he'd come upstairs. But he heard Cypher Blackwell's footsteps behind. He instinctively tried to walk faster.

"Director Goldstein, stay for a few more drinks."

Goldstein gulped and dared not look back. He fastwalked down the stairs and stepped inside the elevator. When he heard Meredith pressing the button, he turned around to look and... there it was... the red-robed gigantic monster of a man with mechanical tendrils. Its voice was so deep it echoed in his soul. And right in front of it, at the base, was Cypher Blackwell standing.

"Take care, Director. Too bad you're leaving so early. You should exercise more. Especially your arms and neck."

Goldstein shivered and looked down, sensing the doors closing. Yet, he didn't breathe out.

"Ah, one more thing..."

Goldstein crouched down on the floor, hearing Cypher Blackwell's voice from the elevator speakers.

"Take care of Meredith Stout, alright? I kinda like her."

Ting!

As soon as the elevator opened, he stormed out towards the parked Militech armored truck. He said nothing, the doors closed, and the truck started moving.

"Ah, another thing."

No! No, no, no! Leave me alone!

The screen lit up in front of Goldstein, on the back of the driver's headrest. Cypher Blackwell's smiling face appeared in it. But he noticed how neither Meredith nor the others were reacting to it.

Is it all in my min—

"It's not in your head, Goldstein."

Woosh!

Bam!

Bam!

Goldstein punched the screen, only to hear a distant, demonic laugh echo and fade away.

"Monster! He's a monster! Hah... Ah... I can't breathe!"

Goldstein lashed out at everything around him, breaking the instruments and the screens.

"Director!"

Meredith, the driver, and the other agent shouted in panic.

"Leave me alone! Go away... You monster!"

Goldstein rambled non-stop, his eyes wide, panic-stricken.

"No... he's listening. He's everywhere! He's here. Run! Hide! Uh? What? What are you doin..."

The last thing he remembered was Meredith jabbing him with a syringe. Then it all blacked out.

####

Bellevue Overwalk, Kabuki,

Two hours had gone by since that meeting with Goldstein and the techno voodoo stuff Atlas had cast on the old man. One hour had gone by since Cypher grabbed half a dozen guns and grenades and went out to hunt Scavs.

"How many?"

[There are thirty-six Scavengers located within the building. Along with them, four kidnapped victims are held on the third floor: a child, two women, and a man.]

Cypher pulled down his black balaclava made out of the same material as his black, bulletproof suit. While he knew the chances of him getting hit were close to none, he maintained some safety.

"Same as before, alright? Guide me, nudge me, show me, and let me see in the dark," Cypher said, standing in an alley not far from the target building. "Delay the NCPD. It's four in the morning, everybody's gonna wake up and call them."

[Already taken care of.]

"Sweet." Cypher grabbed his M221 Saratoga with all its upgrades, including a tier-3 silencer. He checked his pistols in his coat, the grenades, and looked ahead menacingly.

"I am vengeance... I am justice... I am—"

[What are you doing?]

"Goddamn it, stop ruining the moment. I was making my declaration. We're gonna do public service."

[You are not Batman.]

"Yeah, I am. I'm loaded, I fuck around all the time, and I'm out here fighting injustice."

[You have no Batsuit.]

"Alright, then I guess I'm just... Madman? Let's go."

[Happy hunting, Cypher.]

"You too, my clanker friend."