

Cyberpunk: Badland Madman Chapter 21 - Sweet Offer, Cyborg, Betting, Panam's Trouble & The Invasion

"Looking good. Working out?"

Cypher ignored the little smack Rita gave his ass and walked beside her while talking about random things. She was mostly interested in his Scav hunting, singing him praises non-stop.

They walked into the club through the main entrance, but instead of going to the main floor, they took the single sliding door on the left and headed downstairs, where Judy's BD workshop was. However, instead of taking the left in the server room toward Judy's place, they walked to the opposite side, to a single door.

Cypher knew about it, but he'd never been inside. Rita led him in as the door slid open. It was one of the most private rooms in the club with a long L-shaped couch, a round table in the middle, some large screens on the wall, and an attached bathroom. The sound of the music from upstairs was muffled there.

Damn, talk about a crowd.

There were more people in the room than Cypher had been expecting. Other than the expected ones like Susanna Quinn, the leader, and Judy, there were a few more faces that he didn't recognise. He recognized Anna Fox, one of the minor leaders and manager of the Mox warehouse.

"Atlas. How much of Susanna Quinn is chrome?"

Cypher couldn't help but stare at the leader of the Moxes and the owner of the club. The dark-skinned woman had a strange thing going on with her body. While he found her attractive, her body was built and curvy, with really noticeable thick thighs as she was wearing just a latex leotard and a green jacket above. Her chocolate skin was all on display.

Fake?

But he doubted it was her real skin. It looked so smooth, but also real. Her legs below the knee were clearly chrome, and both her arms were the same as Rita's. And then there was her face, her forehead, and around her eyes was a lighter color than the rest of her face. And her jaw and neck had chrome. He reckoned it was some freak injury that made her do it.

[Arms, legs, voice organs, eyes, and all of her skin are synthetic. The rest of her body is still organic, her internal organs, other than the heart, are real, including the reproductive organs.]

"Why'd you specifically call out her pussy?"

[Because I know you well, Cypher.]

Cypher awkwardly smiled and received Susanna Quinn's handshake.

"Nice meeting you again, Mr. Blackwell," Susanna said. "Never thought you'd grow this big when I first saw you. But I'm glad you're a friend, not an enemy."

"I'm everybody's buddy, minus Scavs and Wraiths. Those freaks are kill on sight," Cypher replied, sizing the others up.

Susanna resumed by introducing the others. "This is Dollie Radcliff, she manages the girls and boys who worked directly for the Moxes. James Morran is one of the main muscles and handles branches of Moxes outside our core territory. This is Anna Nox—"

"I know her." Cypher shook hands with the pretty woman, her eyes covered with a metallic strip.

"This is Ash. She's a radio DJ and host of Growl FM."

Cypher measured Ash, someone new to him. She had chrome on her neck, something likely related to voice. Other than that, she looked normal, pretty face, brown hair, baggy clothes.

"And you know Judy and Rita already."

Cypher winked at both women and turned back to Susanna. "Well, I'm Cypher Blackwell in case some of you are into asceticism. I own the Obsidian, the Continental, and the Atlantis Club. Was moving BDs outta here not too long ago, though."

Honestly, Cypher didn't hate the situation. Being surrounded by beautiful women in an isolated room of the club was... dreamy. But eventually sat down near the curve of the L-shaped couch. On his right sat Susanna, Dollie, and James. On his left were Judy, Rita, Anna, and Ash.

"At least they're taking this seriously. For a gang, that is."

[They would be foolish to underestimate you now. In every respect, you are a powerful corpo, even without a visible military force. You have wealth, and the Scav hunting has raised both your name and your street cred.]

"Cred? What's my number?"

[There is no numerical metric for street credibility. It is a reputation framework built on public perception and word-of-mouth recognition. Based on that perception, people either respect or dismiss you. Higher cred means more jobs and favorable deals to stay on your good side. But of course, you are not a merc, so the system has no relevance to you.]

Halting his chat with Atlas, he focused on Susanna right beside him. "Before we get into business, I gotta know some numbers. How many sex workers does Lizzie's directly employ, and how many are tied to or registered with the Moxes?"

"And why do you need to know that?" Susanna asked.

"Because it's tied to this business idea I've got going in my head. It's gonna be a win-win for all of us," Cypher replied and waited for her to speak. In truth, he already knew the number, but he wanted to hear it from her.

"Only a hundred thirty work the club directly. Over five thousand run with the Moxes one way or another. Now, what's this business idea of yours, Mr. Blackwell?"

Cypher liked this elegant woman. She was a gang boss and still talked to him professionally, never barking nonsense or trying to disrespect him for being a corpo.

Clap!

Cypher clapped his hands suddenly and pointed to the four screens on the wall nearby. "Take a look at the data. CitiNet's traffic is almost fifty percent porn. And BD sales are mostly porn. The problem is, it's trash. Those BDs got no story, no realism, no kick to them. Same recycled shit over and over. That's why I'm breaking into the adult BD market."

"You'll make porn?" Judy exclaimed from the same.

"Not me personally, but the company will. The plan's to turn Lizzie's girls into BD actresses. I'm thinking we set up a studio, like a joint venture kinda thing. I'll invest hard cash in Lizzie's Bar and take part ownership. Studio comes next, we just name it Lizzie's since the brand's solid. The talents get an upfront payment plus 2% of the sales. Lizzie's Bar gets 3% as the studio partner."

Susanna Quinn frowned and folded her arms. "Sounds more like we're the ones getting played here. Yeah, we need eddies, but what you're offering is scraps. You get our talent, our name, and we walk away with five percent?"

Cypher grinned at that. "That's because I'm the guy handling distribution and the spice that'll make our stuff stand out. I recently found this huge stash of pre-Datakrash adult content. Like, top-shelf fantasy shit, every category you can think of. We're gonna use them as the base and reshoot everything with new BD actresses. If that stuff killed back then, it'll kill now. We'll sell limited editions too, with a copy of the original video, just not as a BD. In plain terms, we're giving folks a new experience, that taste of the forgotten past."

"Come on, boss. It's Cypher; he's never fucked anyone over. It's a great deal." Rita chimed in all of a sudden.

Susanna blankly stared at the purple-haired woman. "Rita, just cause you are fucking him doesn't make him a saint."

"Well..." Rita looked at him, biting her lip smugly. "He does fuck pretty preem."

"Yeah, we know. Heard all your moaning back then... Now, Mr. Blackwell." Susanna focused back on him. "Why us? Why not build your own studio? You got the money. Could grab the best-looking talent out there and lock them into contracts if that's what you want."

Cypher shrugged, glanced at Judy and Rita. "First of all, I'm deep in tech stuff, and Obsidian eats most of my days, so this business ain't really clicking with it. It's just a hobby for me. Still, I kinda like what the Moxes were about at the start. They've gotten diluted though, for real reasons. You guys say you're out there shielding the working girls and guys, but you're charging heavy fees, too. This new income would balance that out, let you handle the protection side for a fraction of the cost, and push the gang into the rest of Night City.

"Lizzie's being a BD club can open its own branches. The BDs our studio makes'll run in-house for clients, and the BD girls'll be there for entertainment after. Say one BD turns into a massive hit, and suddenly the actress is the hottest thing around. How she handles customers after that, what her rates are, how much the bar skims, that's your problem."

"Real guts calling us out like that," Susanna blurted, eyeing him intensely.

Cypher relaxed back, one hand on Judy's knee beside him. "I don't like bullshitting around. It's a waste of time. You know it better than I do. Tyger Claws and Scavs keep fucking with your people. You gotta sharpen your fangs, and that takes some serious eddies."

"So let me get this straight." Ash, the DJ, spoke up.

"Huh? I think I recognise her from somewhere. Looks like... Sasha Grey. What do you say, Atlas?"

[The appearance is uncanny indeed.]

"Look at you, horny bastard. Watching porn in the daytime."

[...]

Cypher eyed the DJ with a hidden giggle of triumph over Atlas.

"So, Mr. Blackwell, you wanna invest in Lizzie's Bar, grab a stake in it. You wanna set up a studio with the same name that you own outright. BD profits split two percent for talent, three percent for the club, and the rest straight to you while you handle distribution and kick in those old-school template videos?"

Damn, that sounds like a bad fucking deal now. Am I being too greedy?

"That's a deal too good to be true. What's the catch?" Ash asked.

"Huh? Atlas, I thought it was a bad deal."

[It is. But in this world of low-trust, where all deals are bad deals, what you offer is quite generous.]

Frowning at that, he sighed and got up, walking over to stand in front of the large screens so he could look at them all. He regretted that decision as the women looked a bit too hot for his own good. Especially with their legs crossed.

"There would've been a catch if I were some other corpo bastard. But you're talking to the guy who hooked the world up with free water. You're talking to the guy who'd one day hook the world up with free energy. The deal I offered already favors me, lines up my profits, and you get some, too. I ain't here to fuck you guys over. I'm here as a friend and a fellow degenerate."

"We're not degenerates, choom," Rita barked.

Cypher stared at the woman intently and took out a pen from his pocket. "You sure about that? Want another tattoo?"

Rita grinned and relaxed back. Everyone there already knew she had a thing for body writing during sex.

"What's your offer?" Susanna asked. "How much do you plan to invest in the club?"

Cypher thought about it for some time. "Hmm... I say, twenty-million eddies for twenty percent of the Lizzie's Bar."

"..."

It was an extremely generous offer as it put Lizzie's evaluation at a hundred million eurodollars. In comparison, Cypher had recently purchased the dam, the reservoir, and the lands around it in Badlands for eighty million.

"Are you sure?" Anna Nox asked.

"Damn sure. I'm gonna earn back the cost in a few months, I bet," he replied confidently.

"How? The Night City's BD market is not that big," Susanna asked back.

Cypher suddenly frowned, realising the mistake he'd made in explaining the deal to them.

"What do you mean 'Night City'? Ms. Quinn, my deal ain't about pushing BD in one damn city. It's about the entire fucking world. The BDs we put out are gonna be sold everywhere, every city, every street on the planet. There's gonna be a porn site too, and Obsidian's planning to release a new BD Wreath that lets people browse those sites and download BDs straight into the wreath instead of buying cartridges. We'll be selling this stuff online and offline. Horny bastards from all over the world are gonna come to Night City to see their favorite BD star in person."

"And they'll stay in the Continental to spend a quality night with their favorite star. Fuck, I'm a genius, aren't I, Atlas?"

[Cyph, if the itches belonged to pornography and not tech, I truly believe you would have conquered the world already.]

"Hah! Maybe. But look at their dumb faces."

"..."

Susanna and everyone else had fallen into cold silence.

Cypher's offer was actually exploitative when the entire planet was taken into consideration. Of course, he'd have never done it without Atlas. But with Atlas, running a global business wasn't an issue as long as it was information-based. Moreover, his investment in Lizzie's was a long-term plan.

That twenty percent would mean he'd get a twenty percent cut from the bar and all its future branches' business. It was going to be a long-term money-printing passive-income business for him.

After a long time, Susanna spoke again. "That's a damn lucrative offer. If you're planning to go global, I can already see the club's cut pulling serious eddies, even at three percent. And if you're handling distribution too, that makes things clean on our end. Still, I'd like some time to think it over. I've got to think about the interests of our core members and talent."

Cypher waved his hands and walked over. "Take your time. I gotta be somewhere anyway. Hit me up once you've made up your mind."

"Will do, Mr. Blackwell." Susanna got up and shook his hand again.

He did the same and finally left the room. Nobody came to escort him out; he reckoned they wanted to discuss his offers. Good thing for him, he was listening to it while he made his way out, all thanks to Atlas.

"Judy, you know him best. What do you think about this?" Susanna asked.

Quickly, Judy's answer came. "Think he's gonna do it one way or another. Even if we refuse, he can just buy some BD studio and roll from there. Only reason he's here is because, as mad as he is upstairs, he's still one of the few decent gonks in this city. His studio'll disrupt our BD biz and slash our income, and this is his way of avoiding that."

That's my girl.

Cypher listened to it all and nodded strongly. What Judy said was absolutely right. Once he entered the market, he'd dominate it because Atlas had all the data, and they knew which

customers wanted what. His BD sales were going to be off the charts simply because of personalized recommendations and dynamic pricing.

"You don't think it's his plan to take over Lizzie's?" Ash asked.

"Come on, you all," Rita blurted. "He's got Club Atlantis. It's a weekend, and we ain't got much crowd today. Why? That nineties night is pulling them in there. My chooms are firing photos my way. The place is packed. You think he wants Lizzie's?"

Damn right, Rita. You've got a good head. I'm gonna write absolute filth on you next time.

Cypher walked to his car and sat inside, listening to the meeting continue. In the end, it was Susanna's decision to make, so they stopped after some time, and Susanna went away to her personal office to sit and think.

By then, Cypher was already driving like a cyberpsycho on the streets of Night City. Instead of going to his club to enjoy the nineties night, he drove to his Lake Farm house. He had a lot of work to do, from making the SecUnits to making his exo-suit for the Arasaka nuclear heist.

Besides, the club was running well. Atlas oversaw everything. T-Bug was acting as the netrunner, Panam was handling the Aldecaldos, and even Maine's crew was there just in case a major fight broke out.

"What trash should I eat tonight?"

####

Lake Farm,

Cypher returned home. He changed into a comfy tracksuit and went down into the underground factory's top level, which was designed for his personal projects. There, he set up two workstations.

One was for the SecUnit, and the other was for his exo-suit. He decided to build the SecUnit first since it had so many advanced technologies that when included in the designs of IEC Dragoon's altered version, it would improve significantly.

"Man, the more I sit with it, the more SecUnit seems like a cyborg to me. It's got way too many organic parts, shit needs cloned human brain tissue. We shouldn't make more than this one, Atlas. This one's gonna be sentient, but the rest I'll build as real robots with no brain just for you to control."

Atlas's old form appeared right beside him, staring at the large screen with the schematics of SecUnit. "Fascinating. They engineered it this way so it could think beyond the limits of lower-tier AI. The organic brain tissue, nervous system, and blood exist to optimize data flow. Conventional circuitry alone could never reach this degree of complexity."

Cypher nodded. That was the reason why SecUnits were so popular. They were almost like humans, but better in many ways. "Well, I don't know shit about SecUnits, but I can totally see us wrecking the fuck outta RealSkinn pretty soon. We got crazy good tech now for cloned human brain tissue, nervous systems, boosted muscles, human-looking skin, and upgraded lungs. Shit, we even got organic eyes with digital overlays. Ain't super high-end stuff like Kiroshi, but there's definitely people out there who wanna look ganic and still keep the tech."

"Indeed. These designs allow us to enter the medtech and organ-based cyberware market," Atlas replied. "My calculations confirm they exceed current market-grade goods by no less than twenty percent."

"Huh? Just twenty? I thought it'd be more."

"Surprising indeed, Cyph. For all the flaws in this world, cyberware is impossibly advanced. Sandevistan itself borders on miraculous engineering. I would even advise equipping future SecUnits under my control with some of this world's cyberware. Even so, in muscle and skin development, we would bankrupt Gen-Tek RealSkinn."

"That's what I'm talking about. Let's get to work." Cypher put on his work gloves while Atlas, beside him, prepared the countless mechanical arms and gave a thousand Microbots of varying sizes.

The best thing about the itches was that it always told him how to make each part and not just, 'here, take this blueprint and fuck your brain up to replicate it'. No, the itch gave him point-by-point instructions right inside his brain on how to make each part. From the tiniest screw to a whole mechanical heart.

That was how he made Star Wars' blaster, Vaporator, and everything else. However, SecUnit was different in some ways. Since it was a mass-produced item, its parts weren't created by hand individually.

Unlike the DL-18 blaster, which just needed some metal shaped in a certain way, or the Vaporator, which also just needed some components, the SecUnit had too many varieties. So, to build those parts, he had to build machines for them first.

That was true for all the organic parts. Then, a special operating table-like bench was to be made where the SecUnit would be assembled.

Metal bones, organs, and also the veins that would circulate the blood, synthetic sealants, and blue fluids for cooling lines and hydraulics. It was an insanely complicated cyborg to make.

But he had Atlas, who was billions of times more intelligent than him. Cypher only had to start the basics, and the rest would be worked on by Atlas's controlled mechanical arms and Microbots. But places where too much fine detail was needed, he'd have to act and use his little biological fingers.

"Once we get a couple of no-brain SecUnits under you, you can build way crazier stuff," Cypher muttered, working with the human brain tissue cloning machine. "Hold up. What if we put SecUnits in charge of the boarding school? They gotta teach the kids, keep them in line, and get them ready for the new world we're gonna build."

"An efficient idea. We can give each teacher different faces, body shapes, and personalities."

Chatting, Cypher ticked checklists one after another. He was mostly needed for the organic human parts, as Microbots were too big to work on them. But once the machine was made, the Microbots would only have to run them.

That night, he finished working on a brain tissue cloner and muscle synthesizer. Meanwhile, Atlas finished writing the lifestyle, combat, and tactical software with the new programming language. As well as a metal endoskeleton printer.

Of course, Atlas was going to continue working through the night while Cypher returned to his bedroom and dropped onto the bed. He tucked himself in and asked.

"Atlas, can you look into that brain tissue cloner and see if cloning a whole human body's actually doable? This SecUnit's wild as hell. The brain's got organic tissue, machine parts, and a ton of code mashed together. So why can't we just build Songbird a new body and transfer her consciousness?"

Atlas was silent only for a moment before appearing beside his bed, sitting on the computer chair. "Cloning a body is achievable. Biotechnica has mastered that already. The matter in question is transferring consciousness."

"What about using an engram? Then just rewriting a clone's body with it, since the clone's basically an empty shell anyway?" Cypher asked, remembering one of the fates of future V, where Saburo was able to take over his son's body. That clearly meant perfect cloning was possible.

Once again, Atlas was silent for a long time. "There appears to be an information gap within the Arasaka servers. I can only access fragmented data."

"Yeah, it's called Mikoshi. Basically a data fortress with servers sitting up in orbital stations around Earth. Every access point's air-gapped, so somebody's gotta get in there manually. They store digitized personalities, called engrams, of people who joined that Secure Your Soul program, trying to live forever. Arasaka's got a chip in development called Relic, and it can overwrite a real human body with an engram. Could be a clone or just some random poor bastard." Cypher closed his eyes.

"Maybe when we're strong, we can just say fuck Arasaka, walk straight in through the front door, and smash our way into Mikoshi. Then you can take over all of Arasaka's core data. Or maybe some dumbass'll show up soon and do the whole thing for us."

Atlas stared at him for a very long time. "You seem to be withholding information from me."

"And I ain't spoiling the fun. Good night, my friend."

"Good night, Cyph."

####

The next morning, Cypher went out in his car. But his destination wasn't that far away. It was an underground boxing ring somewhere in Pacifica. With him was T-Bug, whom he'd already given the good morning shag right in his car as he drove and she rode him.

Atlas taught her netrunning on some days, acting like it was him instead. T-Bug was happy about that, and of course, he was happy as well. She was gorgeous, and she never kept him waiting.

"You sure about this?" T-Bug asked.

"Hell yeah, I am," Cypher said, dropping into his seat up in the good section of the arena. He yanked T-Bug sideways onto his lap, savoring the doughiness of her bottom even in that skin-tight netrunner suit. "Told Rhino I'd sponsor her boxing career, and she straight-up asked me for it. I'm not backing out now. Shit, I already threw a hundred grand in eddies on this fight."

"Oh?" T-Bug stared at his face wide-eyed.

"Why the surprise? Ain't she your bestie?"

"She is but... She's still kinda green. And now she's about to throw down with one of the Animals," T-Bug replied.

"And I say she's gonna win. Wanna make a bet? If I win, I get to mess around with you a little." Cypher flashed her a grin, his hand roaming over her ass.

"Mm, didn't we just get handsy in the car half an hour ago?"

"Oh..." Cypher slid his hand to the middle of her ass and tucked his palm underneath, letting his fingers press on her covered, puckered entrance. "I was thinking maybe it's time to explore some new territory."

T-Bug smirked, "Hate to do this to Rhino but... What if I win?"

"Got something in mind?"

"If I win, I want to go on a netrunning raid with you. I wanna see you in action, like that time." She jiggled her bottom harder on his palm.

Cypher groped her harsher. "You got a deal, Tee."

But right then, a figure approached them. Cypher looked up, a woman in tight pants, normal shoes, pretty slim waist. She was wearing a tight tank top that showed her sideboobs and belly button, and a golden shoulder jacket. She was rather pretty with that hat on and big hoop earrings.

"Mr. Blackwell?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm Angelica Whelan, pack-leader of the Animals. You the one who dropped a hundred big on the match?" Angelica asked.

Cypher first eyed her from head to toe. He could swear he saw the edge of her areola in that top. "Ain't you too hot to be in the Animals?"

"Appreciate the compliment. I get the job done, that's what matters, doesn't it? Fast, efficient, you know that better than I do. Scav Hunter, damn preem name, real noble. But I'm here about the bet. How about bumpin' it up?"

Cypher stared at her face, the monkey brain doing claps. But he wasn't dumb enough to go blind into this.

"Atlas. They fucking around? Fixing the match or something?"

[No sign of such activity.]

"Alright, keep an eye on Rhino."

He flashed Angelica a smile. "Alright, let's do that, Angie. I can call you that, right? Let's kick it up to half a mil."

"Think you just became my favorite man in the whole city. Five hundred big, let's make it happen. See you around, Scav Hunter."

Cypher watched her walk away. Well, he was staring at her ass. She was fine for an Animal, real fine. As for her background, he was already listening to it from Atlas while groping T-Bug on his lap.

I look like some crime kingpin sitting like this. Pretty woman on lap, betting big. Bricked up as fuck.

"Ah! It's starting!" T-Bug exclaimed and jumped to stand up and watch.

Cypher didn't get up. He watched from his seat as his sponsored fighter walked in.

Rhino looked bigger than before, and she was. His sponsorship had gotten Rhino the best steroids imaginable. Clean stuff, clinically tested, mostly used by soldiers. Atlas found it, and he

bought it through a small-time merc acting as a middleman, never learning that he had hired him.

As T-Bug stood right in front of him, he smirked at the view of her ass.

Gonna enjoy that soon. Uh, maybe not today.

Ding!

The bell rang, and the match began. It was proper boxing, though the crowd couldn't be trusted. And it was still an underground boxing match. He was safe there because he had Atlas, his reputation, and a team of mercs sitting in the crowds acting like regular folks.

Thud!

Two minutes into the round, Rhino channeled her inner Ippo and knocked out the Animals' fighter with a liver punch followed by an upper cut. The countdown was shouted, but the result was just as Cypher expected.

"How did you know?"

Cypher grinned at T-Bug's surprised face. "Get that ass ready."

"Now?"

"Uh... I gotta head home. Working on something. Maybe next time, but never forget it's due." He got up and pressed himself on her back, his erection probed her soft hips. "Need a ride?"

"Gonna go check with Rhino, Cypher," T-Bug cooed, thrusting her hips into him. "I'll be waiting."

"Yeah, gonna be a fun lesson for my pretty student." He gave a slap on her ass and stepped away, walking towards the exit. But he was very alert.

[They tried to tamper with Rhino's gloves before she wore them. The substance seems to be a powdered agent that causes burning on contact. It reacts with sweat and leaves no detectable trace afterward. I made the saboteur see a false vision where he believed the sabotage succeeded.]

"What else can you expect from some underground fight club and a bunch of roided-up freaks? Where's this Angelica chick at now?"

[On the opposite side of the arena.]

"Alright, we better deal with this now, or they'll come after me. She lost a whole lot."

Cypher walked straight through the arena to the other side. A bunch of giant Animals members were guarding the place, arms folded, hulking beasts in human flesh. But they stepped aside as soon as he approached.

He stopped in front of the chair Angelica was sitting on. The annoyance was visible on her face, but she was masking it with a neutral smile.

"Next time, send somebody better to slip that powder in the gloves," Cypher said nonchalantly, looking around. "And let's bet on a real game next time. Don't expect me to hand the money back, I won it fair and square. If anybody's still pissed, say it now. I don't deal with pointless complicated bullshit."

"No... You won it fairly," Angelica replied.

Cypher already expected that. While he didn't remember her much from memory, what Atlas had told him said enough. She was one of those with more brains than brawn and used negotiations to get things done. And fighting the owner of a rich company, and also Scav Hunter by night, wasn't a wise thing to do.

"Glad we have that understanding. Have a nice day." Cypher turned to leave. The Animals didn't stop him.

"Wait!"

"You serious?" He glanced back, finally catching Angelica's furrowed brows. "Alright, since you want it, let's go on a date, Angie. But I'm booked up for the next two days."

"No, I mean... what? Uh... I mean, I wanted to ask about Club Atlantis. We good there? It's smack in the middle of Valentinos turf, and I'm curious about that intel shop you've got tucked inside. Heard a hell of a lot about it."

Cypher frowned genuinely. "You need permission? Says who? Fuck that, I'm sending you my contact. If anyone gives you shit about coming to my club, hit me up. The whole building is neutral territory for gangs, corpos, and mercs. Nobody's allowed to start shit once they're inside. Anyone dumb enough to break that rule gets flatlined. Hope that clears it up. Catch you around."

"..."

He turned from the stunned Angelica again and left for good this time. That SecUnit wasn't going to make itself.

####

Cypher stayed home the entire day and night and worked on the SecUnit. He finished the final assembly of the operating table and started working on the blood and other biological parts. At

that point, it was messy, dirty, and vomit-inducing, as he felt like he was working on a human body.

Atlas, meanwhile, was busy with too many damn things. Not just building the armor plating, internal weapons systems, sensors, cameras, and all the hardware, Atlas was also updating the Obsidian website.

Finally, the website had a store now where all the things the company had to offer could be directly purchased. But there was another new section called Obsidian Fashion. Clicking on it took visitors to a completely new page with bulletproof, stylish clothing options. The design went from the 80s to the latest fashion.

The advertisement campaign was also launched right away, with digital hoardings across the city displaying AI-created realistic images and animations. Moreover, targeted advertisements were sent to people most likely to buy the stuff. Mercs, corpos, and all those nerdy about old-school fashion.

In simple words, the nearby factory had started to function fully. A compound wall had been raised around it, but no living person worked there. It was fully automated. Even the trucks used to carry the clothes into the Continental building for distribution were automated.

Cypher didn't know much about that. He was busy as another morning came. He was excited since another itch was going to arrive at midnight. At the same time, he was nearly finished with the Fusion Core of the SecUnit.

"Man, I feel lonely," he muttered, seated in his living room, eating breakfast. Fake cereal with fake milk. It was probably going to kill him if he kept consuming it for a few more years.

"You have me, Cyph," Atlas said from right beside him.

"Yeah, but you ain't got no pussy, man."

"..."

There was a brief period of silence between them.

Bzzzzz!

But then Cypher's Agent phone rang up. He grabbed it and grinned ear to ear while picking up the call. "Panam! I was just thinking about you. Thanks for holding down the club that night. I owe you one."

He listened to her talk at length about how awesome the party was. How much she hoped he was there. How many people were there, even famous ones. How she was thankful to him for hiring so many Aldecaldos for the building's protection.

But then she got to the point, and he frowned.

“Seriously? He’s what, retarded? I just handed jobs to a ton of people, and pretty soon my stuff’s gonna be shipping all over America. Your family’s gonna be stuck making long-ass trips till I figure out cheap cargo flights. Honestly, just kick him out, and you be the boss. Turn it from the Bright family into the Palmer family... aight, I’ll quit yapping.”

He resumed munching on his shitty cereal while listening to Panam curse Saul Bright’s ten generations. The fucker was still trying to get in bed with Biotechnica while he existed. But Cypher knew it was somewhat rational from Saul’s point of view.

Obsidian was new and unproven. And what Saul wanted from Biotechnica was reverse transpiration xerophytes. It was equipment to help grow crops in the Badlands. And Saul wanted more permanent jobs for his family.

“Pan, I gave the world the Moisture Vaporator. I basically fixed drinking water for damn near everyone. Saul staying with Biotechnica just means he already signed some deal and now he can’t bail.”

By the time Panam finished telling him about her worries and the track record of Biotechnica, Cypher had already finished eating.

“Alright, what about tomorrow? I’ll swing by your camp. I got some dirt on Biotechnica, and if that ain’t enough to make Saul forget about them, then he’s either in bed with them, or they got him by the balls.”

Finally, Cypher hung up and turned to look at Atlas, still seated on the couch, drinking fake digital tea just for the sake of looking classy.

“You said you’re inside Biotechnica? You mind checking if Saul signed some shit?” he asked.

“He hasn’t,” Atlas instantly replied. “And it is not only Saul Bright, Cyph. Most of the Aldecaldos do not trust you. Only the people at the club are on your side. And it was Panam who convinced them.”

Cypher sighed, deflating against the kitchen counter. “I know. My nomad past’s the only reason Panam don’t look at me like I’m some evil corpo asshole. But the rest of them ain’t like her. Most’d rather starve to death or jump ship to another nomad clan than end up corporate slaves.

“But that ain’t us, Atlas. Aldecaldos is one of the biggest nomad nations out there, and if we get them on our side, it helps your whole grand plan. We start with the Bright family, then they help us pull in the other families around Night City. Once we got all of them, then we go for the whole damn group.”

Atlas gave a slight nod. “They’re one of the more respectable factions. Having their people for manpower would help significantly. But earning their trust won’t come easy. If they discover why your nomad clan cast you out...”

"Eh... I don't think it's really that big a deal. Everyone already knows I'm a horndog and... it was just a threesome."

"With the clan leader's wife and daughter, Cypher."

Cypher awkwardly scratched his head and started to walk away.

"They became pregnant. Both of them." Atlas added.

"Alright, alright! Fuck, man. Get off my back. I didn't have control over my dick back then." He called the elevator to go down.

"You have it now?"

Cypher sighed deeply and changed the topic. "Wait, they were pregnant? That means I got kids?"

"They both aborted. I found them north of Night City, south of Santa Cruz, in the Badlands. The clan is still alive, but they're not doing well. Your moisture vaporator helped them, however."

Cypher just shrugged and walked out of the elevator into the underground workplace.

"Let them disappear, I say. Time to finish the Fusion core now."

####

11:50 AM, Near Laguna Bend, Badlands,

"The shack's just around the corner. Slow down at the turn," Bruce Ward ordered through his holophone on an open group channel.

It was a dark night, and less than half of the moon was visible in the sky. The water of the reservoir was still shining with flickers that night, mainly from the headlights and taillights of the cars in his group. He had twenty cars full of Wraiths following him; a total of fifty men had joined this harmless mission.

Bruce Ward had a job that night. As a high-ranking member of the Wraiths, it was his job to subdue this new corpo daring to live on their lands. Using their marked factory. And now, they had heard that the man had bought it all, from the dam to the factory.

It was unacceptable. Millions were due in the form of protection money and perhaps a few more favors. He'd heard about the club in the city. If the Wraiths could get their hands on it, he could imagine his boss rewarding him handsomely.

"Slow down and spread out. Don't leave a gap. Fucker drives and shoots real good."

His car was at the front, and he could finally see the shack by the lake. The lights were still on, and both the car and the bike were parked outside. It meant the man was still in there.

"Only shoot the roof! We don't want him dead."

At his orders, all Wraiths leaned their bodies out of the windows and aimed their guns.

Woosh!

"Huh?"

Bruce Ward expected to hear gunshots, but instead of that, he heard a loud mechanical noise. It was so loud and dreadful, and then.

Boom!

It appeared. The thing, four-legged, made of metal with a big red ring in the middle. It looked angry at the way it was standing in front of his stopped car. He could feel it; the thing was staring at him.

"What the fuck is this?! Aliens?" He cursed and looked around. He wasn't alone; all the cars had stopped. The spider-like machine monsters numbered just as many as the cars in his group. They all had red circles and looked angry. Some had dust on them, hinting at where they came out from.

"Grrrrrr!"

He heard a very low noise and then...

Zap! Zap!

"What the—"

Bruce jumped out of his car as a continuous barrage of red bolts of burning bullets hit his car. He fell on the ground and watched the carnage. The endless stream of those bullets engulfed his car. The man driving had a hole in his face. The car soon caught fire and exploded.

"No, no... What are you?!"

He took out his gun and started firing. However, the monster only became aware of his presence and started moving closer.

"Fuck!" Bruce jumped to his feet and started running, noticing how all the cars were burning, and most of his men were dead, many missing their heads or parts of their bodies. The remaining ones were running, while some got hit with that red beam of fire coming out of the red circles on the creatures.

He just ran without looking back, dread filling him up. He ran without thinking. He tried to call for help, but he was unable to use the holophone. It just didn't show up in his vision or connect to anyone.

Woooooosh!

Bruce heard a loud sound from behind. It sounded like jet propulsion. He was scared, but he gave a quick glance and saw the metal beast already high in the air, coming closer to him like a meteor.

"I-It can fucking fly?!"

####

Underground Factory, Lake House,

"What was that?" Cypher felt a very faint thud above.

"A few Wraiths attacked us. No concern, the Leapers have already neutralized them. I am keeping their leader alive."

Cypher frowned, but said nothing. Only a few seconds were left for twelve in the morning, and the new itch was about to arrive. Instead of his bed, he was in the workshop, sitting by a table, elbows above, and hands clasped.

He closed his eyes and prayed.

"Sweet Jesus and whatever the hell keeps dumping all these damn itches on me. Please just give me some kind of energy system. I don't care what it is, big or small. Fuck, even a starship engine would do..."

He was shamelessly begging.

Atlas began the countdown. "Five... four... three... two... one."

There was absolute silence. Just Cypher's gentle breathing. His body was calm and frozen in place, unmoving, while some veins on his temples throbbed.

Creak!

He suddenly stood up, pushing his chair back. Then his hands moved, grabbed the keyboard and...

Bam!

"Fuck this shit!" Cypher smashed the computer screen. "Fucking trash! A goddamn hoverboard from Back to the fucking Future. Shit can't even move on water! Useless!"

Bam!

Bam!

He smashed the keyboard into bits and pieces and turned, eyes red, huffing in anger.

"Take me to the Wraith leader. I need a punching bag."