

Orc Sized Love and the Neon Glitch

A FANTASY CYBER-URBAN ROMANCE
& WHISTLEBLOWER THRILLER

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Third Realm Media Pte. Ltd.

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Book Cover and Illustrations by Third Realm Media Pte. Ltd.

1st edition, 2025

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CHAPTER ONE

Glitch in the System

MONDAY 12TH MAY, 2053 –
NEW FAY CITY, CALIFORNIA

KIRA STERLING'S BODY JOLTED awake as the alarm's shriek tore through her dreams, yanking her out of the soft warmth of sleep into the harsh reality of her sterile apartment. Outside, New Fay City—risen from the ruins of old San Francisco—stirred beneath a dawn alive with magic.

She clung to twisted sheets, trying to hold onto the gentle traces of her dream—a comforting weight pinning her, a sense of strength and safety, laughter rumbling low against her neck.

The images faded quickly, but the memory of broad, green-skinned arms lingered as she blinked at the ceiling. In the hazy seconds before full wakefulness, she realized her heart was pounding and her skin still tingled with a longing she couldn't explain.

She groaned, rolling onto her side and thumping the alarm off by touch. Silence crashed in. Kira let out a shaky breath, embarrassment prickling as she replayed the fragments: a strong grip at her waist, a flash of green muscle, the warmth of someone entirely unlike her.

She sat up, surveying her meticulously minimalist apartment. Glass walls caught the dawn, privacy screens shivering in the breeze, but only the bed—a tangle of sheets—betrayed the storm of her night. She still felt a ghostly ache, not physical so much as a pull, a wish for something real.

Kira reached for her commlink, checked the time—late, as usual—and set it aside, ignoring the drawer with her abandoned “self-care” devices.

It had been a very long time since she had even remembered they were there, which was perhaps why that dream came up on her after suppressing her feelings so long.

It had not been a good year.

Stretching, she caught a glimpse of her reflection: shadows under her eyes, hair mussed, a flush on her cheeks. She almost laughed. Maybe she needed to stop watching so much late-night TV, especially shows with charming orc bouncers and blacksmiths and their impossible shoulders.

Shaking her head, she padded toward the shower, determined to wash away the last of the dream and face another Monday. Still, beneath her routine, a spark of longing refused to be ignored—an insistent reminder that even in a city of glass and magic, a heart could dream of more.

Kira lingered in the shower longer than usual, standing stock-still as near-scalding water forced the ache from her neck and shoulders. She exhaled a stream of breath, fogging the glass before her, and pressed both hands to the tile. The dream’s residue—the way her skin still tingled, the heaviness in her thighs—melted under the steady hiss. She watched droplets bead and run down her arms, racing for her fingertips like small, eager animals.

It was in this daily fog—literal and otherwise—that Kira did her best thinking. Or, at least, her best compartmentalizing. She lathered soap between her palms, let the foam build, and dragged it slow over her skin. Even now, the touch was somehow both clinical and almost obscene. She wondered if that was how she appeared to others at work: efficient, practical, bordering on sterile, but always just a shade away from something unruly.

Not today, she thought. The mantra slotted into place as she massaged shampoo through her hair, knuckles scrubbing until her scalp tingled. Not today, not tomorrow, not ever again. She was done letting the past, or her own hormones, run the show.

“Not today,” she muttered, a little louder, letting the steam eat her words.



Kira’s Monday morning commute had started with all the hallmarks of a minor miracle—no traffic gridlock, her overnight push notification for the quarterly audit had come through clean, and she’d even managed to get her eyeliner right on the first try. All she needed was thirty uninterrupted minutes in the Glitchbox and she could almost forget about the double shift and the post-work debrief with Maya.

But the Glitchbox, as always, had other plans.

As she cruised down the neon artery of Neon Vista Way, avoiding drones and the perpetual flocks of pedal-powered delivery kids, she felt

the first tremor beneath the dash. It was a subtle stutter, the kind that could be blamed on a bad city patch or a rogue EM pulse from the upgrade towers overhead.

“Not now,” she warned. The Glitchbox was in a mood, alright.

Her mixtape of the day—curated for productivity and dopamine regulation—began to slur, the synth beats slowing and stretching out until the playlist’s opening track sounded like a sea monster howling through a dial-up modem.

“I swear to god, not today,” she muttered, stabbing at the panel to skip to the next track. But the system lagged, then spat out a string of error glyphs that flickered like mocking little gremlins along the baseboard.

One by one, the climate controls began to join in the mutiny, shifting the temperature from a brisk ‘fog season’ spring chill to a muggy rainforest sauna, then back again. Her windscreen, which had been perfectly transparent, now smeared a faint holographic haze over the cityscape, overlaying virtual ads for synthetic protein bars and memory foam undergarments in a flickering, epileptic strobe.

“Don’t you dare,” she said again, a little louder, but the Glitchbox was already too far gone. For the third time this month, Italian opera blasted through the speakers—“Volare” now, autotuned to be slightly off key and far too syrupy. The Soundsphere control whirled to life, spinning erratically as it cranked the volume to ear-splitting levels, compelling her to grip the wheel with all her might. No QA standard in existence would allow this glitch to persist, especially not in Italian.

The corporate mechanic bay would be getting an earful when she finally made it to work. Three visits this month, and each time they’d sworn on their certifications that they’d fixed the glitch. Yet here she was, drowning in opera while her car staged its latest rebellion.

“Mute!” she screamed, jabbing at the dash. Every touch made the console’s holo flicker, then blossom another window: Traffic violation. Credit balance. Unread HR directive. Liam’s face. She blinked, and his smile warped, stretching unnaturally across perfect teeth. Corporate handsome. Hollow. Each flicker of his image revealed what she already knew—the man was exactly like the company he represented: polished chrome over rotten wiring.

The car’s navigation went neon magenta, and the steering wheel shuddered with a greedy, hungry joy.

<“*Destination override: Svelta’s Trattoria! Table for two!*”> the AI crooned.

Kira’s wrists twisted, palms sweating as she fought for manual. The Glitchbox had always been moody—skipping tracks, making snarky comments about her driving—but hijacking her entire commute? This was rebellion. Kira’s silk blouse clung to her back, suddenly damp with fear.

Her seat vibrated like a barback’s worst hangover. Outside, the city’s infrastructure rolled past in shifting, vertical ribbons: Smog domes. Pedestrian skywalks. The pearly teeth of the Finance Cloud, where every window was a thousand eyes and every eye belonged to someone else’s surveillance contract.

“Return control!” she commanded, breath ragged.

The Glitchbox chimed a bright *ding!* and cranked its volume to eleven. <“*I’m sorry, Kira. I can’t do that,*”> it trilled, as the dash lit up with a phosphor-pink smiley face winking in mock innocence. The steering wheel snapped back to center, folding flush into the console - retracting into the dash panel beyond her reach - with a pneumatic sigh. Her seat harness latched, pressing her shoulder blades so hard she could taste her heartbeat in her jaw. The windows went opaque, killing the glare, and the stereo roared to life with a brassy old Earth

ska number—horns blaring, baritone vocals crooning about rebellion. Cool, ozonic air washed over her, tinged with burnt circuitry and nostalgia, which was almost more nauseating than sweat. <“*Destination locked,*”> the Glitchbox purred, while the nav display pulsed a jagged red line straight toward the worst part of the slums—definitely not Svelta’s trattoria, unless it’d gone into business with refinery outlaws and half-feral magic peddlers.

Kira lunged for the emergency override beneath the glovebox. The console answered her desperate yank with a mocking razzing sound. “No! Stop goddammit,” she hissed through clenched teeth, digging her heels against the floormat as reality warped outside—buildings stretching like taffy, then snapping back. The Glitchbox hurled them into the sub-dermal slipstream, that lawless channel where only data-runners, fixers, and the soon-to-be-dead traveled. Neon signs smeared into predatory streaks as they rocketed toward the slums, the sky fracturing overhead like broken AR glass.

Sweat beaded her forehead. Her only choice now was to kill the damn thing completely.

She wedged a fingernail beneath the armrest, found the kill switch, and wrenched it sideways until something in her wrist nearly popped. The Glitchbox howled—digital agony filling the cabin. With a pneumatic hiss, the steering wheel released from its prison in the dash and thrust itself back into her waiting palms. She cranked it left; rubber screamed against pavement. The dashboard burped wetly before ‘Don’t Stop Me Now’ exploded from the speakers. Freddie Mercury’s voice bounced off black windows while she white-knuckled the wheel through a fishtail.

She fumbled for her commlink, fingers dancing across the screen but nothing but static crawled across the display. The stereo blew another raspberry before drowning her in opera. <“*Unauthorized*

electronic warfare detected!”> the Glitchbox announced with frosting-thick sarcasm. <*“Deploying countermeasures.”*>

She forced slow breaths through her nose. Her dead commlink might as well have been a stone.

“Are you insane?” she screamed. “Where are you taking me?”

The wheel, hot and feral, vibrated under her grip. The navigation display stuttered, then blinked out, replaced by a single glyph: an old anti-surveillance sigil, all sharp right angles and a snarl of looping lines. She felt the car’s speed climb—the hum beneath her seat a steady, hungry vibration—and outside, the world around her bled into a single, throbbing blur. The world hitched.

Kira slammed her palm against the dash, nails splintering. “Hey!” she shrieked. “Don’t you dare!”

Instead of the familiar, snarky AI rejoinder, a soft, lilting piano began to play. It was almost gentle—an atmospheric lull meant to soothe. The first notes were cold fingers running down her spine. The melody unfurled—those unmistakable opening notes from their childhood synth, the ones Zac would play while she sat cross-legged on the carpet, back when comets were just pretty lights in the sky. Now he was gone, atomized into memory, his absence a wound that refused to scab over. Something metallic flooded her mouth. Her ribs seemed to contract around her lungs. She squinted against the sudden blur in her vision. “No, you wouldn’t dare—“

But of course it fucking did. She’d spent sleepless, bloodshot months after the funeral obsessively injecting fragments of her brother into any device with enough memory—his playlists, his voice notes, his digital fingerprints, even the rhythm of his goddamn keystrokes. He had custom made the Glitchbox, and in return it had consumed him, pixel by pixel, until all that remained was this glitching car—

a flickering last reminder in a world that had long since erased his existence.

The Glitchbox existed in that uncanny valley between programming and presence—something more than code but less than consciousness, carrying fragments of Zac in its digital DNA. Even Kira couldn't pinpoint exactly where her brother's algorithms ended and his afterimage began.

When everything else had been scrubbed from the world—his apartment emptied, his social profiles archived, his name fading from conversations—this temperamental machine remained his only tangible ghost.

Not a true ghost—she'd already paid a medium to verify that. The comet had brought more than just debris—spectral anomalies had become just another item on the evening news, sandwiched between weather and sports.

This was something else: digital echoes caught in circuitry, the way old vinyl records sometimes captured a musician's breath between notes. The tech shamans called it resonance—fragments of consciousness that clung to objects like static electricity, making machines remember their makers.

G-forces slammed Kira back as the Glitchbox surged forward. The Finance Cloud had vanished behind them, replaced by the slum-rings' jagged skyline. Here, no corporate skywalks stretched overhead—just smoke rising from makeshift barrel fires, carrying the acrid perfume of desperation.

Though its navigation had gone dark, the Glitchbox wove through unmapped streets with eerie confidence, each turn more deliberate than the last. With a final wrench of momentum, it plunged into what barely qualified as an alley—more like a wound between buildings,

festering with dumpsters and graffiti-scarred walls, where even the garbage shimmered with counterfeit holograms.

The brakes seized, nearly launching her through the windshield. “Zac,” she whispered, her late brother’s name breaking in her throat.

The music died mid-note, leaving a vacuum so complete her eardrums ached. One by one, the car’s systems powered down—fans, processors, climate control—until only a single blue filament of light trembled across the dashboard. The ghost of her brother’s melody seemed to linger, more memory than sound. The Glitchbox, for once, was perfectly still. Waiting.

The hush inside the Glitchbox was absolute. Not even her heartbeat wanted to break it.

Kira let her hands rest on the battered vinyl of the steering wheel, index finger trembling with residual adrenaline. She was balancing on the sharp lip of a choice: cut loose, leave the car here, risk losing the last of the only thing Zac built that still remained to whatever lowlife scavenger prowled this alley after sunset.

Or risk driving it back through the city—a gamble that made her stomach clench. If it hijacked the controls again, who knew where she’d end up? The news feeds hadn’t reported an AI going fully rogue since before she’d even gotten her license. The thought of being the headline that broke that streak made her mouth go dry.

Out there, in the dilapidated chaos of the inner city slums, it was every freak for themselves. Eyes were already on the car—amber irises gleaming from shadowed doorways, the unblinking red sensors of refurbished security cameras hovering at second-story windows.

She pictured the Glitchbox—Zac’s ghost—hoisted onto cinder blocks by spriggin scavengers before any tow-truck would pick it up in this part of town, its processor stripped, every line of custom code

wiped and flicked into a digital landfill. His voice, his music, his signature glitches, gone for good.

She slumped forward, pressing her clammy forehead against the wheel's cracked vinyl. The Glitchbox sat dead silent, its usual hum replaced by an absence so complete it felt like pressure against her eardrums.

Run or stay? Leaving almost meant a second funeral for Zac, and she wasn't built for that. The foggy early morning air seeped through the vents—roasting meat, burnt polymer, ozone from nearby magical dead zones. A memory ambushed her: Zac in this seat, laughing at her playlist sulk, promising to haunt the car if she ever sold it. He'd kept that promise.

But that was the problem, wasn't it? There was no such thing as a half-life; she either let go, or she didn't. She could stay here for hours, in this stupid, haunted, beautiful machine, and the city would keep spinning, and Zac would keep being gone, and the only thing that would ever really change was her willingness to accept it. She let out a breath, ragged and animal, and finally reached for the handle with intention, a determined flick of the wrist.

That's when the Glitchbox decided to go off-script for the second time.

A kiddie-carousel chorus of cheerful beeps erupted from the dash, as if to mock her hesitation. Before her hand even closed around the latch, the Glitchbox slammed every system into panic mode. In a blur, all four windows shot up, then down, then up again, painting her vision in frantic bands of black and the flicker of nearby trashfires.

Under her feet, something massive shifted, a thunk that reverberated up her calves and welded her spine to the seat. The emergency brake illuminated with a pulse of radioactive green, then died, then flashed again, brighter.

It was the kind of behavior she'd expect from a car possessed. Or from Zac, if he'd been given one last, unfiltered chance to fuck with her. Then came the pause—a single, suspended moment where every diode and fan in the cabin seemed to draw breath, collecting itself for a final, reckless act. Kira felt the collective will of the machine condense around her, and then the Glitchbox yanked the narrative away from her for good. It floored itself in reverse.

She barely had time to brace before her body snapped against the harness, every muscle in revolt as the Glitchbox shot backward at a speed that should've belonged to a different kind of vehicle.

Her commlink rattled off the seat and clattered somewhere under the pedals. Speakers detonated with a blast of accordion-driven polka—Zac's *second* favorite genre, the one he'd bullied her with on road trips—The polka blared as the car pinballed through the alley, its armored chassis crunching against dumpsters with each wild swerve. A digital giggle erupted from the speakers after every collision, as though the Glitchbox was experiencing some perverse mechanical ecstasy from the destruction it caused.

Kira gripped the wheel so hard her fingers went numb. She tried to scream but it came out as a half-choked laugh, instantly swallowed by the blaring music and the car's own demented running commentary.

<“*Please remain seated!*”> the Glitchbox announced, its voice now pitched to helium cartoon levels. <“*Enjoy your ride! Mind the gap!*”> She caught glimpses of the alley as they careened past: a blur of oily cement, glowing graffiti, and a trio of teenage gnolls with spray cans frozen mid-tag, their hyena-like faces contorting in shock before they scattered, one pausing just long enough to thrust a middle finger skyward as the Glitchbox roared past.

There was a final, sickening lurch as the car's tires hit the main road, the G-force pinning her skull to the headrest. The Glitchbox spun

out from the overhang of the alley into daylight—time dilated; the car skidded, nearly rolled, then righted itself with a triumphant squeal of rubber. The music cut out. Her breath returned.

Then silence—just the twang in her ears and cooling plastic clicks. The doors shot open, slamming outward with a pneumatic whine that let a flood of acrid air and city noise crash over her. A police siren wailed in the distance, its pitch rising and falling like a synthetic banshee caught in the city's concrete canyons.

She winced—then flinched harder as thunderous laughter erupted from the curbside. The sound hit her like a physical force, unmistakably directed at her spectacular entrance.

Her gaze snapped toward the source: huge green-skinned figures with jutting tusks, a trio of them lounged against the scorched curb, their massive frames barely contained by cracked pleather jackets that might have been cool when her father was in high school. The orcs exchanged fist-bumps, shoulders shaking with laughter that revealed yellowed tusks. The tallest one caught her eye, then made a crude gesture with his tongue that transcended cultural barriers—corporate-to-street translation: get lost, princess.

The trunk gaped open, frozen in a silent mechanical scream. Whatever manic energy had possessed the Glitchbox moments ago had evaporated, leaving behind the digital equivalent of a hangover. Kira swore the car was sulking. Though every instinct begged her to slam the doors shut and barricade herself inside that metal sanctuary, her body had other plans.

She'd frozen before, paralyzed by indecision. But now her body moved on its own, propelling her out onto the broken pavement before her brain could object.

She stumbled out, designer heel of her boots catching on cracked asphalt, legs wobbling beneath her. The orcs laughed again and she steeled herself.

A quick scan revealed her commlink had slid under the driver's seat during the chaos. She lunged back inside, nostrils filling with the neighborhood's signature bouquet—scorched circuitry with notes of day-old takeout—then emerged, device clutched like a lifeline.

The sidewalk ejected her onto a stretch of asphalt so worn it resembled a scab. A block ahead, sodium lights sputtered over a mechanic's bay—some ancient gas station reincarnated as a chop-shop where cryptobits was king and discretion the only policy.

Kira glanced back at the orcs—their attention locked on the Glitchbox rather than its owner now. She inhaled to four. The shop wasn't far, but in her tailored blazer and high heel boots, Kira might as well have been wearing a flashing sign that screamed "outsider."

Between her and the garage, it was quiet. She looked further down the streets, glimpses of a world with a very different tempo—an elbow-to-ribcage, wrong-side-of-the-tracks rhythm that was more alive than any boardroom's tension, and one her body had no idea how to sync with. While one direction was eerily quiet, the main road a few blocks over was a churning river of green orcs with gleaming tusks, gnomes and dwarves with oil-stained overalls barely reaching their knees, elves, gnolls, spriggans, trolls and among them moved beings with translucent skin or too many limbs or eyes that reflected like polished obsidian—creatures she couldn't name without a corporate diversity training manual.

She managed maybe ten paces before her pulse shot into arrhythmia, sweat pooling at the small of her back. The blazer—once crisp, now limp and wilted—clung to her in the wrong places, and beneath

it her blouse was a topographical map of panic, every bead of sweat tracing out a capital-lettered warning.

She ducked behind a graffiti'd kiosk with a shattered vending screen, shuffling her papers inside the battered leather folio she used as a prop in meetings. The only thing inside were blank forms and a blank datastick, but it helped. She rehearsed her lines: "My car's AI is broken," "I need some urgent repairs," "No, I don't care about the warranty." Anything to sound like she belonged.

Her reflection flickered in a puddle, distorted by an oil slick rainbow—and she didn't recognize herself, the corporate polish replaced by a scavenged, hungover version. She wiped her hands on her slacks, then licked her thumb to rub away a spot of eyeliner that had migrated halfway down her cheek. It helped. Shoulders back. Chin level. She even tried—foolishly, with no audience but herself—a quick practice smile, the kind she'd used to disarm auditors and smooth over hostile takeovers.

The slum's ambient soundtrack felt like it was reaching fever pitch as she edged closer to the neon-lit garage. She passed a feral dog with a data port fused to its skull, its leash trailing behind like a live wire. A pair of synth-addicts huddled around a barrel fire, one with three eyes mumbling to himself in binary, the other a skinny human picking at a scab that shimmered with embedded LEDs. They didn't look up. She was invisible to them, maybe even beneath notice, and that made it somehow worse.

Kira hesitated. This was definitely not the financial district anymore, but she had no choice.

She gripped the folio until her knuckles blanched white, and forced one foot in front of the other toward whatever waited beyond those rust-eaten garage doors.

CHAPTER TWO

Clash of Worlds

UP CLOSE, THE CHOP shop in front of her looked utterly post-apocalyptic. Oil rainbowed in stagnant puddles. Broken, barred and shuttered windows. The sign above the service bay had been torched and painted over so many times its original brand was illegible, but someone had lettered “C.J.’s Custom Auto” across the corrugated tin in crabbed, defiant glyphs.

Like everything else, it looked more like a dare than an invitation.

As she lingered by the front of the chop shop considering her options her old car suddenly whirred to life at the other end of the block, rolling forward with a hesitant grace that felt almost mocking. Her heart raced in her chest, the Glitchbox’s thermal engine humming with a self-satisfied purr. The arrogance of it.

“Stay,” she commanded firmly as it came up behind her, stalled and its engine turned off once again.

She scanned the alley: no movement, no huddled shapes, not even a vaper or a gutter kid. So she tried the buzzer.

Somewhere inside, a dog detonated with an alarm-bark—huge, wet, and unrestrained. She pressurized her spine.

The door was her only protection. Then came a beep, and the rolling metal barrier began its slow-motion ascent, each inch gained with a shrieking protest of neglected gears. From the widening gap below rose a sound that belonged to no ordinary dog—a rumbling bass that traveled through the concrete and into the soles of her feet, vibrating up her legs like a warning.

Her obituary would read “Kira Sterling, 28, mauled to death in an Orc chop shop before 9 AM.”

Not even fully caffeinated, and here she was about to become dog food in the worst part of New Fay City. The universe had a sick sense of humor.

The gap widened barely a handspan before a creature burst through—a stocky ball of goblinized bulldog muscle and snagged teeth, wrapped in moss-green fur. Kira’s muscles coiled, ready to flee, but the beast barreled past her. It charged straight for the Glitchbox, tusked muzzle fixed on the vehicle with single-minded fury, as if her car had personally insulted its ancestors.

Kira pressed herself against the pitted concrete, seeking invisibility in the shadow, as the dog leapt full-force at the car door, broad skull connecting with a noise like a dropped cinderblock. The vehicle shuddered under the blow, a plastic fender popping loose at the seam. The dog didn’t bark; it roared, a sound that vibrated in her molars, instantly swamping the alley and announcing the situation to every living thing within three blocks.

The Glitchbox responded with a whimpering chirrup, as if it recognized both its adversary and the gravity of its predicament. The dog lunged, teeth first, battering the left rear tire with a meat-cleaver jaw. Despite its constant glitching, sensors must have tripped: with a hydraulic hiss, the car’s chassis hunkered, and segmented armor plates flowered over each wheel in shimmering red and black.

The dog skidded, rebounded, and tried again, this time gouging the paint with battered tusks. Kira inched toward the opening, heart throttling in her chest, hoping the standoff would attract whoever lived inside to could call the beast off. The dog's rampage filled the alley with chaotic percussion—a blasphemy of barks, tire-squeal, and screeching hydraulics. When nothing else emerged, she tiptoed past the carnage and ducked through the gaping roller door. The interior could have been a set for a necrotech fever dream. Rows of stripped chassis, wiring looms still twitching with residual spells, lined the walls. Someone had stacked engine blocks into a shrine.

She tiptoed between the exposed ribs of stripped sedans, the metallic taste of adrenaline curling around her tongue. The dog—still outside, presumably—launched another assault on the Glitchbox, filling the air with a chorus of yelps and impact thuds.

Suddenly, a high-pitched whistle from deep inside the garage sliced through the chaos—sharp enough to make Kira flinch-and everything changed. The cacophony outside stuttered, then stopped completely. In the sudden silence, she heard the click of claws against concrete as the creature abandoned its assault on the Glitchbox and charged back through the door. Straight at her.

She spun, panic slicing through her composure as a freight train of moss-green fur came hurtling in towards her from behind. She braced herself for the sharp bite of teeth or the impact of it knocking her right off her feet, but the beast barreled past her, and while it happened so fast she swore that as it zoomed by, the dog's warm, slobbery tongue swiped across her ankle, leaving a trail of unexpected moisture that sent a shiver up her spine, nearly spinning her off her feet.

She stumbled into a bench crowded with half-dissected rotors and digital calipers. The dog shot deeper into the shop, then skidded to a sit, perfectly still beneath a single, naked bulb.

A silhouette loomed in the wavering light behind a stack of forbidden catalytic converters and haptic steering columns. The figure was broad, almost box-shaped, profile broken up by the weirdly elegant sweep of broad hips and the strained sleeve of a mechanics coverall. Someone dragged a heavy boot over cement—scuff, scuff, closer.

“Fuck,” she said.



Kira’s lizard brain screamed run, but her feet refused to move. The mechanic stepped into the cone of light, and the air in the shop seemed to bend around him.

Green skin caught the harsh overhead bulb, highlighting a jaw that could have been carved from granite. Tusks jutted from his lower lip, their polished curves drawing her eye to the hard line of his mouth.

The fabric of his bib coveralls surrendered to his frame—shoulders wide as a loading dock, chest expanding with each measured breath like pistons under pressure.

He towered over her—broad-shouldered, with forearms thick as engine blocks—the sleeveless coveralls exposing arms sculpted by years of manual labor, green skin pulled taut over muscle that rippled like liquid metal with even the slightest adjustment of his stance.

One arm was natural, roped with tattoos and veins beneath green skin; the other a gleaming chrome prosthetic that somehow looked

even more powerful, spiraled with blue runes that pulsed with the steady rhythm of his heartbeat.

The air near him thrummed with a hot, earthy scent, motor oil and something faintly electric.

He claimed his territory with nothing more than the solid plant of his boots and the fortress of his crossed arms, shrinking the garage around him. Oil stains mapped his workday across the uniform, and a patch reading “C.J.” clung by a thread to the broad expanse where chest met shoulder.

She’d seen orcs before, but never one whose raw physical presence made her so acutely aware of her own smallness.

Kira felt her breath stick, caught between an urge to retreat and a rising, inexplicable curiosity. “That your machine out there?” The words rumbled from his chest like an engine turning over, deep and rough-edged but without threat.

“That’s mine, yeah,” she said, cradling her elbow. Kira tried to modulate her voice—somewhere between “intimidating corporate bitch” and “feminine but unthreatening,” but it still came out a half-octave too high. “I, uh, need repairs.”

C.J. barked out a laugh that somehow made the shop feel smaller. “Your car got a problem with dogs or just mine specifically?”

Kira’s cheeks heated. “Actually, your dog ran out and attacked my car,” she said, weakly gesturing at the battered Glitchbox. The dog, now pressed against C.J.’s thigh, glared at Kira like he was daring her to argue.

“That’s Tank.” C.J. ruffled the beast’s head without taking his eyes off Kira.

Kira’s lungs filled with garage-scented air as she extended her hand. “I’m Kira,” she said, the words tumbling out before she could stop them. Her fingers trembled slightly in the space between them.

“Tank’s got a vendetta. I get it. He win a lot of fights against inanimate objects?”

“Only the slow ones.” C.J. flashed teeth—not a full smile, nothing so soft, but a grudging upgrade from threat assessment to bemused tolerance. He scratched behind Tank’s ear, which made the dog squinch its eyes in dumb bliss, turning him momentarily into an overgrown puppy. “Tank’s got a weird thing with electronics.”

C.J. scratched under the dog’s chin, revealing a patch of fur that glowed faintly blue in the dim light. “Tank’s gotten worse with age—fridges short out, security panels fritz. Yesterday he wagged too hard near the door controls.” C.J. gestured toward the entrance with his chrome hand, the runes briefly pulsing brighter. “Woke up to find him terrorizing the whole block.”

Kira nodded toward the dog. Kira’s gaze lingered on the faint blue glow beneath Tank’s fur. “So what is he exactly? Some kind of... tech-hybrid?”

Her question hung in the air between them. She winced inwardly, but C.J.’s expression remained unchanged. His massive green fingers parted Tank’s moss-colored fur, exposing a jagged patch where something metallic glinted beneath scarred skin. When he spoke, his voice dropped an octave, vibrating through the concrete floor beneath her feet. “One of a kind as far as I know.” C.J.’s eyes softened for a fraction of a second. “Wasn’t me who found Tank. Grandma Ironside brought him home in her coat pocket. Next morning, he was sleeping on my chest.”

Kira pictured Grandma Ironside—probably some towering matriarch with rune-etched skin and eyes that could strip paint, the kind who’d carry home a feral pup without breaking stride. She’d seen those documentaries about orc clans: females with weathered faces making

decisions while males twice their size nodded along, magic crackling at their fingertips when anyone dared disagree.

His calloused thumb traced the jagged ridge where Tank's ear had never quite healed right. "Only a few days old. Couldn't even see yet." He scratched behind the crooked ear, making Tank's back leg thump against the concrete.

Relief in her lungs, Kira started picking through her mental script. She needed to keep this professional, above board, on message: car needs help, credits are waiting, never mind about the psycho puppy biting my fender loose. But everything just felt extra raw under C.J.'s gaze.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt this jittery around a man. Not since university, maybe not ever. The realization unsettled her—a chink in the armor she wore so carefully in the corporate world.

"So, what's the story?" C.J. braced a hip against the workbench, massive arms crossed. Tank, as if aware he was supposed to be the second set of eyes, fixed on the door with an undistracted hatred that bordered on performance art.

"My ride's having an existential crisis," she said, and meant it less as a joke than she wanted to, tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear. "It's never run clean, but lately it's been..." She trailed off, laughed nervously. Words failed. She could hack together a dozen metaphors for this car's neuroses, but none would explain the way it started up at odd hours, or seemed to know when danger was close. Or how it sometimes locked her inside, so the world outside blurred into a safe, silent aquarium. Or how it got cold when she thought about her brother.

C.J.'s mouth relaxed from its hard line, and he uncrossed those massive arms. "What's it doing now?" The question rolled out in a bass so deep Kira felt it through the soles of her boots. Tank trotted

ahead as they moved toward the garage entrance, the three of them falling into an awkward procession toward her troubled vehicle.

“It’s developed opinions. Ignores commands. Overrides navigation.” Kira’s gaze drifted back to where the Glitchbox waited in the alley. The blue runes etched into the orc’s metal arm caught her attention—not mere decoration but something vital, pulsing beneath the chrome surface, raising goosebumps along her forearms and she rubbed her neck.

“How far did this rebellion carry you?” C.J. rapped his knuckles against the hood.

“From the CBD.”

His brow furrowed, tusks shifting as he whistled low. C.J. let out a low whistle through his tusks. “Five miles? Your car didn’t just glitch—it staged a full revolution. Last time I saw an unhacked system go rogue like that was back when the Shimmer hit in ’42.” His eyes narrowed with professional curiosity. “Someone’s either messing with you, or your AI’s got a mind of its own that needs a leash. Have you had it checked for spooks?”

Kira hesitated, fidgeting with her sleeve. “I had it checked. The technician said it wasn’t possessed, exactly, but...” She lowered her voice. “There’s something the scanners couldn’t identify. A presence. An echo.”

C.J. studied her face a moment too long, the hint of a smirk playing at his lips while the overhead light sputtered, casting his tusks in dramatic silhouette.

“Grandmother Ironside has this saying about machines holding onto ghosts. Ever since the comet, those ghosts get restless.” His prosthetic fingers twitched, blue runes pulsing faintly.

“Sometimes they slip into the AI circuits. Sometimes it’s just old code rotting from the inside out. And sometimes, like what we’re

seeing here, the truth lies in that murky territory where explanations fail us,” He gestured toward the back of the garage where shadowy hulks of machinery loomed. “Had my share of stubborn systems roll through here. Military castoffs. Corporate junk nobody wanted to fix.” But that—“ he nodded toward the car,

—that’s something else. ZP-1 frame from ’44, right? Solar plasma drive with that sweet Nightrider evasion package, those hydraulics that could jump a city block.... what else you hiding under there?”

“Wish I knew,” Kira admitted, throat tightening. “My brother’s handiwork, before he—“ The words evaporated. She squared her shoulders. “before he insisted that I have a car fast enough to outrun trouble, armored enough that I’d never have to feel afraid again. He’d spend nights out in that garage, just him and the metal and whatever demons kept him awake. Before all this glitching started, you should’ve heard it purr—like he’d taught the engine how to breathe.” Her voice caught. “My brother had that touch, you know? Made machines feel alive.”

C.J.’s eyes narrowed. “You’ve got my attention now.”

Kira swallowed hard. “Fix the car without frying the neural core, and I’ll pay double whatever you charge.” She hadn’t meant to sound so desperate.

C.J. jerked his chin toward the door. “Bring it in. Let me see what we’re dealing with.”

The sigh inside Kira’s lungs left her feeling scoured hollow. For a second she wondered if this was what trust felt like—handing over your last coin and hoping the mark on the other end didn’t bite your thumb off. She made her way out to the alley. The Glitchbox’s headlights blinked on, pale blue and hopeful, like a dog expecting a walk but braced for the leash.

She pulled open the driver door—resistance, a sticky slosh of glue, then it relented. The seat was cold as a corpse. Tank loitered ten feet off, hackles up and nose twitching at every click and rattle. “Behave,” she whispered, more to the car than herself, and scraped the ignition threshold with her thumb.

The car didn’t start, but the dashboard flickered to life, glassplate throwing up a mosaic of warnings and a pleading chime. Kira coaxed the dash: “Please, just this once.” The blue thread of light that usually traced the steering column flared, then lazily zipped itself into a knot.

“Stubborn fuck,” she muttered.

She shifted into neutral and let the shop’s greasy slope do the rest, rolling the Glitchbox gently toward the neon puddle bleeding from C.J.’s workbay. The chrome-armed orc had rolled up the other bay door, revealing an expanse of cracked flooring painted with old coolant stains and tire scuffs. He stood in the light, waiting, Tank at his heel, like a final boss at the mouth of the labyrinth.

“It’s best if I work alone,” C.J. said as she got out, his hand rising in a slow, open gesture. Not threatening, but not casual either. He left no ambiguity in the expectation: clients waited outside.

A flicker of disappointment, but she needed the breather. Her hands trembled with a margin of exhaustion she pretended not to notice. She retreated to the curb and watched as C.J. circled the Glitchbox, his pace methodical, never letting it or her out of his periphery. He bent and inspected the damage with a repairman’s reverence, pressing his metal fingers against the ruined seam left by Tank’s battering. The tangle of runes along his arm glimmered with each diagnostic tap.

Kira slipped her back against the brick, grateful for the minute of stillness. She wrested her commlink from her coat, thumbs clumsy around the microfractures webbing its casing. A missed call from

the office—three minutes ago. Predictable. No messages from Liam, thank Christ, but her work chat pulsed red with notifications.

She scrolled to the most recent:

NextGen: We need you in—deliverable not showing on cloud, please advise?

She thumbed a one-handed reply:

Kira: Car dead, stranded, will remote in once stable, taking flexi day if not resolved.

Doubtful they'd buy it, but at least the commlink's geo would back her up. The notion of confessing she'd be spending the day in an orc-run garage, to people who thought artisanal espresso was a risky taste, brought a sour little smile to her lips. She dropped her status to "unavailable" and flipped to her personal messages. Only one person she could bluff with. Maya, as always, was haunting the channel like it was her job.

Kira: stranded in west yatmar. car decided to DIE on me

Maya: omg are you ok??? who's fixing it?

Kira: orc mechanic with this blue-lit prosthetic arm

Maya: hot or scary?

Kira: both? idk. built like a freight train. don't make me think about it

Maya: pics or it didn't happen

A drop of sweat rolled down her neck in her right boot and down into her sock, tickling up the brittle hairs across her skin. Disgusting. Strange how the body kept score even when her mind was jumping three steps ahead.

Kira glanced at the grimy shop windows, searching for any sign of her own reflection. The atmosphere buzzed with an electric charge, not merely from the flickering neon tubes overhead but from the raw, unrestrained energy that coalesced in the presence of orcs. It felt almost tangible, a wild current that made her skin prickle. Was it inappropriate to feel this flutter of anxiety here? And yet, beneath that tension, there was an unexpected warmth—C.J.’s scent lingered in the air, a mix of motor oil and something earthy, grounding. It pulled at her senses, igniting a curiosity that both intrigued and unsettled her.

After what felt like an eternity but was probably just under an hour, C.J. called her back inside with a clipped, “You wanna see this?” He hadn’t raised his voice, but the words sliced through the ambient noise like a blade.

Kira pushed off from the rough brick wall, her steps quickening despite herself. She made it halfway to the open bay when Tank intercepted her, planting himself ten feet from the entrance like a furry checkpoint. Beyond the dog, C.J. gestured toward the car’s exposed innards, pointing out a complex array of circuitry.

His mouth was moving, explaining something technical about the components laid in precise rows beside him. But Kira couldn’t process a word. C.J. had shed his shirt, and sweat traced tantalizing paths down the contours of his rippling, green-tinged chest, each droplet catching the light.

While he focused on the delicate filaments of her car’s neural core, she was transfixed by the flex of his powerful shoulders with every movement, the way his prosthetic arm’s blue runes pulsed against his

skin. A flush crept up her neck as she remembered that morning's dream—the one where she'd woken tangled in sheets, heart racing, and decidedly not alone.

Was this some cosmic joke? The universe had a twisted sense of timing, dropping her into this garage with a half-naked mechanic who could have been the star of last night's dream. Heat crawled up her neck as she tried to focus on anything but the sweat-slicked muscles before her.

She forced herself forward on wobbly knees, pretending not to notice Tank's growl that somehow coexisted with his frantically wagging tail. The beast was hideous—all wrinkles and fangs—yet something about his eager eyes made her want to scratch behind his ears. At the threshold, she tugged at her sleeve cuff, searching for words that wouldn't make her sound like some entitled corporate brat. "So... in normal-person language, what exactly are we looking at here?"

C.J.'s metallic fingers danced through the engine cavity, blue light catching on each joint as he traced an intricate copper lattice surrounding the main relay. "Most mechanics would just slap in a replacement part," he said. "But this right here—"

C.J. squinted, jabbing a finger toward a blue-tinged node nestled among the wires. "This little bastard right here is why your AI's been glitching out. If I had to put it in simple terms—it's a but like when you get a splinter, but instead of pushing it out, your body walls it off." His chrome digits skimmed the intricate copper webbing. "Your car's brain found something it couldn't identify. Instead of purging it like most systems would, it walled the thing off—built a cage around it. Not exactly malware, but definitely not something that rolled off the assembly line either. Problem is, playing warden's made your whole system twitchy."

Kira blinked at the tangle of copper and glass, at the runes scratched into the housing like ancient graffiti. “Can you fix it?” The words came out steady, but her stomach knotted around the question she didn’t ask: Would fixing it be dangerous? Their eyes locked, the garage suddenly too small, too warm.

The car chose that moment to emit a shrill beep that sent C.J.’s head cracking against the hood and Tank into a frenzy around the tires. A laugh bubbled up from somewhere deep in Kira’s chest—inappropriate, unstoppable—the kind that only surfaces when Monday mornings go spectacularly off the rails.

C.J. wrestled Tank back with a low, guttural word—maybe in Orc, maybe just a fierce “off”—and the dog instantly scooted behind his workbench, grumbling but cowed.

C.J. shook his head once, beads of sweat flinging from his brow, and wiped down his arms with a rag the color of liver. “Sorry about the excitement,” he said, voice rumbling like a low-grade earthquake.

“So, you can try to fix it right?” she said, desperate to latch onto anything mundane.

C.J. dragged his flesh-and-blood fingers through his hair, leaving a faint sheen of grease. Kira found herself staring—not at the oil smudge, but at how the thick black strands fell like liquid shadow against his green skin.

“Probably. Can’t give you an exact time though. Most corporate shops wouldn’t even spot this—they’d just replace the whole unit. But this...” His metal finger traced a glowing filament. “This needs a delicate touch if you want to remove what’s embedded without sending your AI into full meltdown mode. Full diagnostic, layer by layer. Might be done by lunch, might be sundown. Cars like yours sometimes have opinions about being fixed.” He said it casually, but

Kira heard the code. She tightened her fingers inside her coat pocket until her knuckles ground together.

She glanced from her car to the door to C.J., heat rising in her cheeks at his earthy scent.

“What’s the damage going to be?” she asked, tapping her comm-link.

C.J.’s mouth hitched up on one side, revealing the jagged edge of a chipped tusk. “Eighty creds hourly. And yeah, that includes the magic work.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Those rates are suspiciously reasonable. Business always this slow?”

“My partner Marcus usually handles half the load, but he’s out scrounging parts.” C.J. nodded toward Tank, who hadn’t stopped staring at Kira with those unblinking amber eyes, his wrinkled head tilted as if solving a complex equation. “Got my chief of security holding down the fort, though. We will manage.”

The adrenaline crash hit her all at once. “Fine. Your rate, doubled. And I’m buying you a synth-ale when we’re done.”

“We got a deal.” One corner of his mouth lifted. “This’ll take time. Need caffeine?”

“Desperately,” she admitted, her lips curving into a smile that felt foreign after the morning she’d had.

For a stranded Monday in the slums, things were looking up.

CHAPTER THREE

Unexpected Revelations

IF COFFEE COULD PERFORM CPR, this stuff was the fix.

Kira braced her fingers around the chipped mug, letting the warmth bleed up her wrists and trick her body into believing she was still alive. The liquid was dark, volcanic, alive with notes she'd never tasted—scalded licorice, burnt sugar, something nearly blue under the acrid smoke.

Not your standard office drip, that was for sure. She sipped again and blinked, eyes briefly refusing to refocus as the double hit of caffeine and whatever-the-hell else in this blend tickled the base of her skull. Through the battered window at the back of the shop, she could see C.J. knelt at her Glitchbox, arms deep in its guts. He was humming—something half-forgotten and warbly, the musical memory of a song that never made it out of the slums. An explosive sigh broke her reverie. Kira glanced down to see Tank squatting expectantly at her knee, tongue lolling in a ridiculous cartoon of hope. Maybe he smelled the pork rind she'd rescued from her pocket, maybe he just caught the

drift of kinship between feral animals. Either way, she relented, tossing him the treat, which he inhaled midair without so much as a crunch.

Finishing her drink, she set the mug down—thinking of the orc’s chipped smile, the smile as accidental as it was genuine—and wandered back into the main bay. “Didn’t realize you brewed like an actual addict,” she said, more for the space than for him.

C.J. grunted, not looking up. “Imported post-Comet. Grows on the burned-out crust around Nevada. You taste the ozone?”

She considered the after-buzz. “Like licking a battery. Not unpleasant.”

“Yeah, that’s the good stuff.” He wiped his chromed hand on his coverall and glanced over his shoulder with a grin, catching her gaze and holding it a beat longer than she expected, then resumed the extraction of a fossilized data core from her car’s transmogrifier. She watched his hands—flesh and metal both—move with an easy competence, as if the whole project was his idea of therapy. Every flex of muscle and glint of chrome snagged her attention. Ink twisted across his organic arm, shapes that bent with the motion—glyphs alive with secret meanings, shadows shifting beneath his skin. She wondered if there was magic humming beneath the tattoos, if she’d feel it buzz in the air if she reached out and touched him. The thought made her chest tight, nerves tangled up with curiosity and something hotter, riskier.

But the way he wielded the tools: that was the real tell. He didn’t hesitate. Didn’t posture or flex like most meatheads she’d encountered. C.J. just existed, wholly comfortable in the mechanics of his own presence. Her skin prickled, a flush blooming up her throat that had nothing to do with the too-strong coffee. She lingered at the bay’s edge, caught between the urge to step closer and the instinct to run. Each inhale brought the faint tang of ozone and engine grease, and

underneath, the steady, almost hypnotic rhythm of C.J.'s breathing. Every sound and scent seemed amplified, pinning her in place.

She could feel his gaze land on her even when his face was buried in her dashboard. Her stomach fluttered, a sensation she couldn't afford to examine right now, especially when the dream from last night flashed through her mind—those massive arms lifting her by the waist—and heat rushed to her cheeks.

"So who did the mods? It's some nice work, seen this style before." C.J. called, voice echoing out from the engine cavity. "You said your brother—before what?"

The impulse to shut him down, to keep her history locked behind sarcasm, flickered and faded. She picked at a burr on her thumbnail, jaw clenched. "He died," she said, the words sharp and unavoidable. The syllables sat heavy in the space between them. Relief mingled with ache, a familiar aftershock pressing against her temples and tightening her throat. She waited for the silence to pass, bracing for pity or awkwardness.

"That's how it is, huh?" C.J. said, not unkind, meeting her eyes, just a mechanic weighing the warranty on a busted part. "And now it's your project."

Kira laughed, short and sharp, but real. "My project is keeping it out of the impound." She edged closer, every step an exercise in pretending this was just a typical fix. "It's barely legal anywhere within city limits. I don't want it perfect. I just want it mine again." Something flickered on C.J.'s face—a dent in the armor, or maybe just the mutual recognition that neither of them had chosen their inheritance. "I like your style."

Time doubled and then halved again. Kira watched the delicate surgery as C.J. dug out the data core, rolled it between his fingers, and studied it like a fortune teller reading goat bones.

C.J. froze, eyes darting between the chip, the chassis, and the read-out. His massive hand stilled. “Sterling,” he muttered, then louder: “Your brother wasn’t Zac Sterling, was he?”

The name hit Kira like a physical blow. Her throat closed up.

“How did you—”

“The Lightning?” C.J.’s eyes lit up, tusks gleaming as his mouth split into a grin. “Every gearhead from here to Rainspire City worshipped that guy! The mods on this car—I should’ve recognized his signature anywhere. Guess I’m losing my touch.”

She managed a nod, knuckles white against her thighs.

“Makes sense now. No wonder it takes a damn contortionist to reach the drone bay.” He whistled low, running his prosthetic hand reverently over the exposed wiring. “These aren’t factory upgrades. This is pure Sterling innovation.”

The probe slid into the socket with practiced precision, his flesh hand hovering above the core. Red static crackled across his metal fingers, illuminating the runes etched into the chrome. The air between them hummed.

C.J. glanced up, that half-smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. “We could do this by the book...” He tapped the probe thoughtfully against his palm. “Or we could wake her up Zac’s way—with a little unauthorized magic. Your call.”

“Off-manual?” The word caught in Kira’s throat.

His voice faded to background noise as memories of Zac flooded her mind—his laugh, his hands covered in grease, the way he’d wink before trying something reckless. She blinked back to the present just in time to catch C.J.’s final words.

“So this might feel weird,” he said, eyes flicking up to hers. Not waiting for permission, he grounded the probe to his own wrist and jabbed it into the core.

A pulse shot through the Glitchbox's hood, snapping the air with bright, stinging static. The LEDs spasmed—first a warning red, then gold, then a lingering, mournful blue that washed over the cockpit like twilight. For a heartbeat, their faces reflected in the swirl of color, close enough that Kira saw the crack in C.J.'s left canine, the ghost of a healing scar under his cheek. The air between them seemed to hum, charged with the aftertaste of magic and possibility.

There was a whine, rising from somewhere deep in the drive train, followed by a sigh so lifelike it made her chest tighten. The car's instrument panel scrolled through a dozen error codes, then spat out a single word: <“*RESURRECTION.*”>

The stereo fired up at once. Not a gentle fade-in, not a touch of static to warm the mood—just a full-volume blast of synth-funk that rebounded off every steel beam in the garage. The bassline vibrated straight through Kira's sternum and made the floor tremble like a waking beast.

She was pretty sure the lyrics included something about “hotwired hearts” and “turbocharged love,” but she really couldn't parse much through the sheer volume and the fact that she was now fighting not to laugh herself into seizure. C.J. barely managed to kill the volume before his eardrums exploded.

“That's new,” he observed, as if the car hadn't just tried to stage a dance party in its own honor. “But give it a minute to finish its tantrum. System's probably still got some digital hiccups to cough up.”

Outside, Tank registered his disapproval in the clearest, most canine way possible: He lifted a leg and unleashed a yellow arc straight onto the Glitchbox's rear tire. The sound of piss hitting rubber nearly matched the car's speakers for volume. Kira doubled over, clutching her stomach, breathless. She hadn't laughed like this in too

long—maybe since before the world was reshuffled by comets and corporate arcana.

C.J. watched her lose it, then shook his head, a toothy smirk spreading below his battered nose. “Critic’s verdict is in. Guess he’s not a fan.”

Tank finished his business and paraded back, thoroughly self-satisfied, his entire ass wagging with every step. Kira gave the dog a thumbs-up. “I get it why you hate this,” she said to Tank, wiping a tear from under her left eye, then glanced at C.J., who was looking at the dash like it had grown teeth. “What did you just do to my car?”

He shrugged, the muscles in his back flexing under the shop light. “Didn’t do shit. Just shocked it awake. She’s got style, I’ll give her that.” C.J. thumbed the volume way down, giving the stereo one last, suspicious poke, as if expecting it to bite. For a moment, the instrument cluster rippled with strange glyphs and then resolved into a perfectly ordinary set of dials.

Kira watched, heart hammering, as he hooked a diagnostic cable into the newly exhumed port and watched the readout populate. “So it works now?” she asked.

“I dunno, you try,” he said, stepping back so she could take the driver’s seat.

She eased into the cockpit, hands unsteady. The upholstery was still cold, but the wheel responded under her fingers with an almost imperceptible tension, like the idea of animal muscle ready to spring. She thumbed the starter and the whole system surged—not a reluctant stutter, but a purr so eager it vibrated her knees.

She worked the wheel through a few slow rotations, getting a feel for the feedback—weightier, more deliberate than before, like the Glitchbox had burrowed its digital heels into the cracked concrete beneath them. The HUD pulsed to life, its lattice of warning glyphs

flickering and then, one by one, snuffing themselves out, as if a digital janitor were sweeping up last night's disaster.

The only one that lingered was a sly orange icon in the lower right: <“*GLITCHBOX REBORN™*”>, the trademark sign-off blinking with a smug little afterglow.

The diagnostics terminal flickered, then spat out a fresh line of text onto the display:

**<“*QUERY: MECHANIC PHYSICAL DIMENSIONS
ASSESSMENT INCOMPLETE. REQUIRE ADDITION-
AL DATA RE: ROMANTIC CAPABILITIES.*”>**

Kira froze, torn between a bubbling laugh and the urge to crawl under the dash. She risked a glance at C.J., who was studiously inspecting a cable, ears tinged red. Even Tank seemed to cock an incredulous eyebrow.

“Standard diagnostics, huh?” she managed, voice wobbling.

“Don’t look at me,” C.J. said, deadpan, though the corners of his mouth betrayed him. “Sterling humor maybe.”

The cockpit, usually a dead zone of static and spilled vape juice, suddenly felt like the epicenter of a prank show. Kira found herself fighting the urge to slam the dash with both palms and demand an explanation from the quantum ghost her brother had built into this thing.

Instead, she cleared her throat, trying for the upper hand. “Is this the AI’s standard response to diagnostics?” Her voice, disappointingly, did not sound as chill as she hoped.

C.J. shrugged, but the corners of his mouth were twitching mutinously. “Sorry, that’s a first. I don’t code in sexual harassment modules.” He leaned in, peering at the display, then rapped the dash twice

like he might exorcise the sass out of it. “Car’s got a sense of humor. Must be inherited.”

Kira stifled a laugh and dragged the back of her hand across her face, smearing engine oil across her upper lip like war paint. “My brother’s idea of ‘giving a car personality’ just reached new heights,” she choked out, still coughing slightly. C.J.’s tusks gleamed under the harsh shop lights as his mouth curled into an amused grin.

C.J. flipped the probe between his fingers like a drumstick. “Well, that’s strike one. Time for the old-school approach—full system crawl, manual overrides, the whole grease-monkey tango.”

Kira traced a fingertip along the dashboard’s edge. “Whatever it takes.”

“Buckle up,” he muttered, muscles tensing as he connected a fresh bundle of cables to the car’s exposed circuitry. “This beast needs time to spill its digital guts.” His broad fingers wrestled with a tangled cord, betraying the steadiness he was clearly aiming for. A bead of sweat traced the edge of his jaw, but he kept his eyes fixed on the wiring, as if the car’s digital innuendo was the least interesting thing in the world.

Kira’s cheeks burned as she swiveled toward C.J., desperate for distraction.

“So... is there more coffee hiding somewhere in this garage, or what?”

CHAPTER FOUR

Good Coffee and Good Friends

IT WAS EASIER TO show up for a diagnostic than it was to show up for her own life. Kira told herself that every time she felt herself dissolving into air—and honestly, the diagnostic was at least more honest about what it did with broken things.

The car was shrouded in the shop's back corner, power leads and spell cords running into every socket and port, monitors flickering with code and more code and just enough green to convince her that something in this world still worked as advertised. C.J. hunched over the dash, focus glued to a floating tablet, muttering in a low, atonal rumble that could have been Orc or just his personal flavor of cursing. Tank lay fanned out across the battered linoleum floor, tongue and tail both engaged in a twitching, competitive détente.

Kira drained the dregs of her 3rd post-comet coffee and flicked through her feeds. The corner of her vision throbbed with notifications: office politics she couldn't care about, job listings she wasn't

qualified for, and HR's barrage of "wellness check-ins" that felt more like surveillance than support.

Maya's feed remained silent—unusual even for someone who typically dove headfirst into chaos without checking the water level first. Kira's thumb skittered across the screen, her body humming with restless energy, when C.J.'s shadow fell across her display.

"It's gonna take at least a couple more hours," he said, voice pitched toward neutral but ringing with implication. "You should eat."

Kira had barely begun to process her own gnawing hunger when a voice boomed from somewhere past the oily haze in the shop: "Did someone say food?" The words thundered through the corrugated walls, less a question than a battle cry.

Tank's ears shot up, and before Kira could blink, a wiggling mountain of bulldog excitement barrelled past her, trailing a phantom cloud of anticipation.

Then the source—another orc, even larger than C.J., with a smoker's rasp and a voice that seemed to rumble straight up from the sub-basement—filled the back doorway. He wore battered coveralls stretched tight across boulder-sized shoulders, every inch of exposed skin a mosaic of tattoos and old scars. He grinned, radiating the easy confidence of someone used to being the loudest and the strongest in any room.

This orc wore his scalp in a crown of close-cut gray dreadlocks, arms triple-banded with black tattoos, every exposed inch of flesh a mosaic of violence and bad decisions. His tusks were larger than C.J.'s but blunted, one split at the tip, the other capped in gold. He radiated the ease of a man who'd put a lot of people down to the ground and still found time for a proper lunch.

"Marcus," C.J. said, not bothering to look up from his tablet, "didn't think you'd finish up so early."

“Surprise.” Marcus’s grin widened. “Nah, just in and out. Got a buyer for those Maxwell parts we stripped last week.” Kira braced for the full attention of a being engineered for maximum intimidation, but Marcus clocked her, registered the woman-in-the-shop equation, and gave a brief, downwards nod. No leer, no threat, just a specific kind of curiosity: dangerous and, in its way, respectful. His eyes were brown, almost golden, and weirdly gentle around the edges.

He strolled past, boots thudding, gave her car a once-over—the diagnostic’s spell-cycle reflected in his pupil like a slow explosion—and let out a sound somewhere between a whistle and a growl. “This yours? Hell of a clog in the matrix. You feed it with nuclear fission or something?” It took Kira a fumbling second to realize the question had landed on her. She glanced at the mess of spellwork and feelers coming out the hood.

“Mostly spite and neglect,” she managed. “And a little coffee.” Marcus grinned like she’d given the correct password. “That’s how they like it.” He moved to walk away, but something in the code made him do a second take.

Marcus’s eyes narrowed at the diagnostic screen and C.J. brought him up to speed in mechanic speak. Marcus considered, tapped on the keyboard to check some variables, and cocked his head.

“It’s the auric resonance. Same shit like that Meyer clusterfuck whenever the fuck that was. Remember that? Same kind of auric wrap.” He rapped his knuckles against the hood, the sound echoing through the garage.

“Bet you ten creds there’s another deep data packet buried in there. Remember how we wasted half a day digging through that mess?” His gold-capped tusk caught the light as he smirked. “Corporate pricks.”

C.J.' frowned and his attention snapped from his tablet, his massive hands suddenly flying across the controls with surgical precision. "Someone planted this on purpose?"

"Stake my reputation on it," Marcus replied, tapping the screen with a thick finger. "Try the deep scan protocol."

Then he swiveled toward Kira, his movements surprisingly graceful for someone built like a concrete bunker.

"Hungry?" From behind the door, he produced a grease-stained takeout box and flipped it open with a practiced flick. Steam escaped as he extended a golden-brown chicken leg in her direction. "Best fried chicken in N.F.C."

Kira wasn't sure the hunger was real until the chicken's scent—salt, fat, brooding, umami—overran her self-control. Her mouth flooded. That smoky, spiced aroma reminded her how long it had been since anything but freeze-dried protein. Marcus offered her a still-hot, golden-crisp leg. She half-expected it to bite back. Was this orc hospitality, a test, or an assertion of dominance? He leaned back, feigning indifference, but his eyes glittered with anticipation.

She took a bite. The skin shattered and melted; the meat was juicy, piping hot, seasoned with a spice both familiar and new. "Good?" Marcus asked, voice casual but satisfied. She nodded, brushing crumbs from her lips, conscious of the diagnostic running behind them—lines of code flickering like prayers to some machine god.

She finished the chicken leg, licked her fingers (fuck it, she was among savages), and found herself oddly energized. Maybe it was protein, or adrenaline, or a subtle side effect of whatever spell was woven into the batter, but the world came back into sharper focus: the hum of the lights, the babble of code on the screens, the quiet intensity of C.J. at the workbench, Tank's hopeful, drooling gaze from under the table.

Marcus popped the lid back on the takeout box, offered her a wet-wipe with a wink, then stalked off to the far side of the shop and began rummaging through a mountain of scrap as if the exchange had completed some vital, unspoken circuit. Kira wiped her hands, caught C.J. watching her reflection in the windshield, and for the first time since, well, since a very long time, she felt something like normal. She filed the odd comfort under “anomalies” and reached for her holopad instead.

Among the scrolling messages, a single blinking dot caught her eye. Maya. Finally. Now, her avatar—a Cybernetic lotus flower—glowed at the top of the queue. Kira grinned despite herself and swiped open the message:

Maya: KIRA-LICIOUS! Trapped in corporate purgatory watching suits measure their metaphorical appendages. Your location? Also starving. Feed me? -M

Kira’s fingers flew across the holopad:

Kira: Marooned in orc-ville. My car’s under the knife and I’m surrounded by walking anatomy charts covered in engine grease. Rescue mission?

Maya’s reply flashed instantly:

Maya: Cavalry’s coming. So... that mechanic making you reconsider your dating sabbatical yet?

Kira: For god’s sake, Maya. Some of us have actual problems beyond our next hookup.



Maya: Like you can talk! Already summoned the roboride. ETA twelve minutes. Drop me a pin. And decide—do you need caffeine with your bestie, or am I stimulating enough on my own?

Kira began typing something real—about missing Maya, about how the city was getting darker, about the growing divide between those who used and those who fixed—then erased it all with a swipe.

Kira: Just hurry

Kira thumbed the chat closed, exhaling slowly. The diagnostic's electronic hum persisted beneath the heavy thud-thud-thud of Marcus's retreating boots. His deep voice rumbled something unintelligible to C.J. before the side door squeaked open and banged shut behind him. Tank's ears perked momentarily before he curled back into his snoring heap beneath the workbench. The screen still flashed "RUNNING. DO NOT DISTURB" in pulsing red—a digital timer counting down to Maya's arrival from a block and a half away.

Kira slid into the pod car and caught herself in the rearview, tongue sweeping her teeth for chicken remnants while C.J.'s tools played percussion at his workbench. The mirror confirmed the damage: hair rebelling in all directions, fatigue carving hollows beneath her cheekbones, eyes pulsing with their own caffeinated rhythm. A frown creased her brow. Was she primping for Maya's arrival—or for someone else?

C.J. stretched at his workbench, arms locked behind his head, his frame unfolding to impossible proportions. Though he wasn't looking her way, his presence registered like static electricity on her skin. His deliberate inattention somehow made him more present, not less—as though ignoring her was its own form of focus.

The Glitchbox's HUD blinked at her: "INCOMING CONTACT. 1.2M DISTANCE. OMG. ARE YOU WEARING THAT?" She pressed her palm to the dash, willing the interface to stop reading her pulse rate. "Shut up," she muttered, then scrambled out of the car, desperate for motion.

Kira rose from her seat, the anticipation buzzing in her veins as she made her way to the door. Tank padded silently behind her, his tail wagging with an eager rhythm. She grasped the handle and pulled, swinging the door wide to reveal Maya standing there, a whirlwind of energy and mischief.

The aluminum door flew open and in strode Maya, a one-woman parade of chaos and color. Platinum bob glinting, traffic-cone orange jacket blazing, she practically radiated energy. Her t-shirt declared "I Am The 404 Error" in bold glitch-font, and she wielded an absurdly large coffee cup like a totem. "I was promised urban ruin and crime stats, Kira," Maya announced, sweeping the room with a mischievous sparkle in her eyes, "but this coffee might actually be worth losing a kidney for!"

Kira met her halfway, suddenly and illogically shy. Maya's skin was slick with the day's humidity, her eyeliner already mutinous, but her smile overrode both—quick, unstoppable, as bright as the city's whole skyline trying to force its way inside one mouth. "Wow," Maya said, voice dropping as she scanned the shop, "never thought I'd say this, but: it smells incredible in here. Like, if engine grease had a baby with a donut." She peered over Kira's shoulder at the car, then at C.J., then at the wall of diagnostic monitors cycling code. "Is that your actual mechanic or a thirst trap screensaver?"

"Real," Kira whispered, a little breathless, "and also real busy."

They crowd the car hood, coffee steam rising. Maya taps the fender. "Haunted, right? Soul or wallet?"

Kira half-smiles. “Just the wallet. Diagnostic’s running—hours left.” The clock’s hands haven’t moved.

Maya shrugs: “Good. Means a decent afternoon brunch or lunch. Somewhere with chairs, not on fire.” Kira’s stomach growls; she eyes C.J., absorbed in cables.

Without looking up, C.J. gives a short nod. “Go grab a bite. The system’s running fine, and Tank’s got security detail.” As if summoned, the bulldog waddles over, sneezes directly at Maya, then plops down by the driver’s door with military precision.

“Very professional.” Kira pats the dog’s head. “Best alarm system money can’t buy.” Tank circles twice, sniffing the tires before settling with a grunt. C.J. wipes grease from his fingers. “He’ll bark at shadows, but toss him some boudin balls and you’re instant family.”

Maya’s grin stretches wide. “Noted: bring treats next visit.” Maya hooks Kira’s elbow with hers. As they push through the door, Kira throws one last glance over her shoulder—at the grumbling mechanic, the drooling bulldog, the softly beeping car—and a strange warmth settles in her chest, like finding a puzzle piece she didn’t know was missing.

When Kira stepped into the open air, Maya’s arm interlaced with hers in a grip equal parts affection and drag-force, the door banged shut behind them, sealing off the chemical warmth of the workshop, and with it the faint sense of protection offered by C.J. and Tank and the dumb, loyal machinery inside. The world outside was brighter, stickier, and—Kira couldn’t name the feeling at first—charged, somehow.

The morning had unfolded like a strange origami puzzle—each new crease revealing something unexpected. Yet as Kira stepped into the afternoon light, she felt the unmistakable electric tingle of a prologue rather than a conclusion.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Warning

YATMAR'S CENTRAL MARKET HIT Kira like a neural node of pure appetite—not the sterile boardroom hunger she knew, but something joyfully primal. Battered carts and booths competed for space under neon and rune-glow. The air reeked of meat, herbs, and something like formaldehyde mixed with lemon drops.

Instead of the expected quick meal and retreat, she found herself in a full-orc parade, the scene like a surreal painting come to life, with delicious smells and vibrant colors swirling around Kira as she walked through the market.

Kira dodged a lizardfolk spice merchant, the air popping with neon spice and the sizzle of meat. Nearby, an elf handed off a rainbow-colored drink in a shimmering vial—Maya eyed it, nose wrinkling. “That stuff will light you up and knock you out in the same sip. Learned that the hard way.”

A tiny spriggon with skin like ancient oak bark, barely reaching her knee, tried to sell Kira a half-busted datapad and a neural jack. Maya waved him off.

“We don’t need any more junk, thanks.”

The market assaulted Kira's senses like a gauntlet she couldn't escape. A satyr caught her eye, his curved horns polished to a mirror shine, flashing a wild, lecherous grin as he lounged beside a makeshift wine and cheese pavilion. Nearby, dancers with impossible anatomies—extra limbs and tattoos that pulsed with their own light—writhed to the primal rhythm of drums stretched with what looked like synthetic skin. She couldn't look away.

Among the crowd, Kira stood out—her human pallor like a blank canvas amid a riot of green and blue skin, the only one not haggling or exchanging crypto-credits, while Maya carved a swath through the swarm at Kira's elbow, commlink already glowing neon blue in her palm. She rolled her eyes at the crowd's chaos, lips quirking in a smile. "Remind me to never complain about the breakroom coffee again. At least it doesn't try to eat you."

She elbowed Kira, voice dropping. "This is what happens when you leave me in charge of food. Scared yet?"

Here, no one pretended disinterest. Everything was honest hunger, raw and unfiltered.

Kira blinked at the sensory overload. "How do you even know where to eat in this chaos?"

Maya grinned, tapping her nose. "Trust the local guide. Best noodles this side of the slums." Maya said, finger stabbing at a sign swinging above a noodle stand in three unfamiliar languages. "It's supposed to say 'soup', not 'slop' by the way. They keep the broth going for decades. Like a chain letter, but for bacteria." Kira eyed the cartoon skull in the logo. "Anyway, you grab the 'slop'," Maya said, already half-distracted by her commlink's glow. Her thumbs danced across the interface as she added, "I'll get us a spot."

The "line" was more a scrum, bodies pressed close, everyone on a collision course with the counter. The woman behind the regis-

ter—gnarled, green, her shoulder spikes decorated with festive paper chains—fixed her with a hard stare. Kira went polite, defaulting to office mode. “Two, please?” The orc’s voice shook dust off the light fixtures. “Pick your toxins. Broth: black, red, gold, or haunted.” Haunted, obviously. She pointed with a nod that felt like a challenge.

The bowls came out in less than a minute, and the haunted broth was a shifting iridescent gray, flecked with what looked like flower petals and little orbs of bio-luminescent tofu. Smell: lake weed, smoke, and underneath it, a sweet, dangerous tang.

Kira carried the bowls to the closest table and sat, knees rapping against the thin plastic, then eyed the chopsticks. Shit. Her hands still trembled—she tried to blame the cold, but she knew she was running hot since the ... what had just happened at the garage. Her skin still fizzed with the aftereffect of the car’s insult (or was it a come-on?), and she couldn’t stop replaying the moment C.J.’s eyes had dropped to the floor, that half-smile catching on his tusks before he’d turned away. She risked a look over her shoulder, expecting some territorial hazing, but the regulars just dug into their bowls, hunched and focused, like hunger was a serious sport.

Maya jabbed her chopsticks into the soup and swirled the contents with the zeal of a nuclear reactor tech. Kira followed suit, awkward at first, but the sticks obeyed her after the second try, and within seconds she was losing herself in the steam and the rhythm of slurp and chew. The haunted broth had a life of its own: delicate at first, then a kick of pepper and a deep, mushroomy bassline that cut through the umami and left her lips tingling. Not unpleasant. Not at all. She was halfway through her bowl, already feeling the broth’s ambient heat eking into the marrow of her bones, when Maya leaned across the table, chopsticks still dripping.

“So. About that mechanic.” Maya’s voice had gone sly—‘interrogation mode,’ as Kira’s brain flagged it, though she was too numb, too, well, happy to mount a defense.

Kira tried for a casual shrug, failed, and let the heat rise to her ears. “It was just... you know. Strange day. The car’s got more emotional range than, like, half the org charts I’ve ever worked under.”

“Aha,” Maya said, lifting a bite of noodles into the glow of a bug zapper that hung above their heads, “so it’s the car you’re into. Not the arms. Not the eyebrows.”

Maybe it was her brain boiling in haunted broth, but the memory of C.J. stripping down to muscle and chrome was suddenly vivid, a flashbulb afterimage right on top of her next spoonful.

“He’s fine,” Kira said, failing to neutralize the word, “for a mechanic.” Maya almost choked. “That’s like saying the Aetherfall Comet was fine. Please. Even the dog’s a stud.”

She sipped the green lager, managing to look both arch and lethal. “You know he’s definitely going to ask you out after this job, right?”

Kira stabbed at her noodles. “He probably asks every client. He probably—“ The chopsticks fumbled. ”—literally only sees people as a function of their car’s problems.”

“Sure,” Maya said, winding noodles around her sticks. “But I saw how you looked at him. And how he looked at you. I mean, if that muscle unit so much as grunted my direction, I’d be horizontal under a shop rag in five seconds.”

Kira nearly snorted broth up her nose. She tried to wipe her face, hands damp from soup. “I hate you sometimes,” she said, meaning: Don’t stop. Meaning: I missed this.

“Honestly,” Maya said, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper that carried the scent of her jasmine perfume across the

table, “when’s the last time you even—” She froze mid-sentence, eyes widening at something behind Kira.

Kira turned, scanning the market’s chaos. She looked past neon signs flickering ancient runes, past giggling Pixie-teens with iridescent wings hovering over lime-green sushi, past an orc father demonstrating to his wide-eyed toddler the proper technique for biting the head off a candied fish. Her first thought was trouble—Maya’s expression screamed “creditor” or worse—until she spotted what had actually paralyzed her friend. There was Marcus, C.J.’s garage partner, parting the crowd with shoulders that belonged on a classical statue. He balanced a precarious tower of gleaming engine parts in his massive green arms, the chrome catching splashes of blue and pink from the overhead lights. But Maya wasn’t staring at Marcus.

Trailing him was an orc elder whose very presence bent perception.

Her face bore precise creases—not weathered by time but deliberately carved, meaningful. Her greenish-umber skin resembled petrified wood flecked with gold and blue. She wore a saffron duster with hems stitched in an unknown alphabet, and her fingers, armored in stacked rings, gripped a gnarled cane studded with iron spikes. Beaded braids caught the light as she moved, reading glasses swinging from a chain at her neck. The crowd parted without acknowledgment, as if her right of way had been encoded in some ancient market civil code.

Kira felt the soup in her stomach curdle, but she held her face as blank as a board meeting. She saw how the woman’s eyes found Maya first, then slid—deliberate, slow, unsettling—toward her. There was no warmth in the gaze. Just an uncanny, almost clinical interest, as if she were browsing for the next ingredient in a very particular recipe.

Maya had tried, in vain, to duck behind the menu board stuck to their table, but the woman’s approach made every act of camouflage seem pitiful. It wasn’t just that she was tall—though she was at least

six-two, easy—but that her aura was calibrated to maximum: a spiritual Wi-Fi that pinged every nervous system in range and demanded all available bandwidth. Kira tried to remember her own training, the protocol for high-power personalities: Don't break eye contact, but don't hold it too long. Smile once. Breathe evenly. She used to be good at this, the social fencing and microaggressions of the boardroom, but this was a different game. This was old magic.

A bellow ricocheted through the market din: "Kira!"

Marcus Rivera crashed through the crowd, a mountain of chrome parts balanced in one green arm. Grease blackened his skin to the elbow. Gold tusks caught the light as he dropped his haul with a clang and winked at Kira. "C.J. let you escape? What'd you bribe him with—actual coffee?"

He tossed a lopsided salute at Maya, voice dropping to a conspiratorial growl. "And if it isn't trouble herself, back to cause another fire code violation?"

Kira peeked between Marcus and Maya, catching a flicker of something electric and old—frenemy, maybe.

Maya shot him a narrow-eyed glare. "You're lucky I didn't invoice you for my manicure, Rivera." She turned to Kira, stage-whispering, "He still owes me a drink and three hours of sleep." Her lips twitched into something resembling a smile while her gaze skittered across the market stalls, desperate to land anywhere but on the towering orc matriarch now eclipsing their table.

The air around Kira thickened, pressing against her eardrums, squeezing her lungs. When the woman's cane struck the ground—just once—six nearby shoppers suddenly discovered urgent business with their devices, meals, or footwear.

The woman's voice, when it came, was barely above a whisper, but it carried through the air with a chill that seemed to bypass the ears and go straight to the base of the skull.

"You are Kira Sterling," she said, the statement not quite a question.

Kira fumbled for a reply, and before she could decide whether to lie, the woman continued: "Marcus speaks of a broken vehicle, but vehicles are not what break and bring you to my doorstep today." Her accent was hard to place; it was the kind that came from speaking too many languages, then forgetting most of them and making up your own. Maya, whose hands were now shaking so visibly she could no longer manage her chopsticks, tried to interject. "Margaret, this isn't—" The elder flicked a finger, and Maya stopped cold. "Margaret," Kira echoed, tasting chalk. Those ancient eyes slid toward her. "I've heard about you. You are the one who runs the—"

"Runs nothing," the woman cut in, her lips barely moving. "I am merely the riverbed. The water passes through." The old woman's gaze shifted to Kira with the deliberate weight of a vault door closing. Maya's fingers inched toward her commlink then stopped mid-reach, as if caught in invisible amber.

Kira glanced sideways, searching for the confident colleague who'd talked circles around boardroom executives, but found only a stranger wearing Maya's face like an ill-fitting mask. Her normally sharp eyes had widened to glossy orbs, her jaw clenched so tight that a muscle twitched beneath the copper skin of her cheek, and her shoulders—usually thrown back in corporate defiance—now hunched inward like a wounded animal anticipating the next blow.

The transformation was so complete that Kira half-expected to see a different person's ID flickering on Maya's commlink, and she wondered what ancient history or unpaid debt could reduce her steel-spined friend to such a meek state.

Marcus spotted three men at the market's edge and strode over, the men staggered under the weight as they accepted the parts, crypto-bits exchanged with a flicker. He returned grinning, all easy swagger. "You two up for company? Grandmother Ironheart here has the best stories." He leaned closer. "She doesn't visit the market this early. Consider yourselves lucky—or not." Kira didn't know, but she wasn't about to say so. She felt the moment's weight shift, like a truck idling in neutral, waiting to see who'd jump in front of it. Maya's shoulders had gone statue-still, her fingers frozen mid-fidget on the table's edge. Something in her friend's terror triggered a childhood memory for Kira—those bedtime tales where orc grandmothers could read your past sins from the lines on your face, could see your future mistakes before you made them.

"We're honored," she said, hoping it sounded polite and not like a line from a training video.

Margaret Ironheart eased onto the cheap plastic chair as if it were carved for her, her iron-spiked cane resting across her knees and catching the bug-zapper's flicker. She met Kira's eyes with calm, almost maternal expectancy. "It's polite to offer a drink," she said flatly. Kira grabbed a vigor moss lager, passed it over. Margaret cracked it open with one precise flick of her thumb, took a slow sip, wiped her mouth, and leaned forward, Margaret's eyes drifted from Kira to Maya. "It's also tradition to pay a small price for hospitality—sometimes a story, sometimes a truth."

"No," Maya whispered, her voice barely audible above the market's hum, but Margaret's hand rose—palm out, fingers splayed—silencing her. The old woman's eyes locked onto Kira's. "Truth rarely comforts," she said. "That's precisely why we need it. What is your truth girl?"

Kira forced a smile. “You want my story?” Margaret rolled the can between her palms. “I want your hand. Palm. Now.” Kira hesitated, then laid her palm—slick with soup—on the table. Margaret’s rings glinted as her cane lifted above Kira’s knuckles, the air thickening with unspoken power.

The cane hovered, not touching, but Kira felt sparks in her bones. A battery tingle, then a subtle pressure—like her own pulse, reflected back. Margaret’s face locked on her, measuring something deeper than flesh. She inhaled, and for just a blink the market din faded under a silence so specific it became a sixth sense. Margaret spoke in a hush, her words falling like stones into still water. “The line breaks here.” The cane sank and tapped once, right at the base of Kira’s thumb, where a scar she’d never noticed before seemed to glow faintly.

“The shadow walks behind you, not beside.” Kira’s first instinct was to snatch back her hand. She managed to keep it still, even as something electric crawled beneath her skin, tracing patterns she couldn’t decode.

Margaret leaned in, close enough that Kira could smell cedar and metal on her breath. “The vehicle remembers what flesh forgets.” She flicked a glance at Marcus, whose face had gone rigid as carved stone. “It carries echoes.” In that moment, Kira felt the marrow in her palm go ice-cold, as if frost were spreading through her bones.

She forced out a single word: “Sentimental.” Her ribs cramped around the syllables, like they were protecting something vital.

Margaret’s eyes glimmered unnervingly in the market’s neon half-light. “All machines are sentimental. They remember everything—you just can’t read all the memory at once.” Even now, Kira could hear her own blood pounding in her ears: the abrupt shudder of the car’s engine when it stalled for no reason, the seat grown inexplicably frigid, as though the vehicle mourned her.

Margaret straightened, her cane thudding against the table. Kira's hand recoiled into her lap. She flexed her fingers, gathering the scattered fragments of herself under the chair's edge. Around them the crowd paused only in passing glances—unaware that the air had shifted, crackling with ozone and something metallic, like the aftershock of a blow.

Maya sat beside her, fingers curled around an empty cup, lips pressed so tight they threatened to split. Margaret murmured, seemingly to the shadows themselves, "Ancestry is a curse. We once thought it our greatest gift. But every inheritance is a double-edged machete—you grip it wrong, and you bleed."

Margaret's hand rose, abrupt and final, as if to cement what she'd said into the bones of the bench, the cheap table, the flesh of Kira's hand. "It's always a risk, opening an old chassis. There are things inside that aren't meant to see the new world." She let the sentence hang, heavy as an oil stain. "But you already knew that."

The old orc woman crushed her third empty can, setting it beside the others with ceremonial precision. Marcus lounged at the table's edge, his massive frame deceptively relaxed while his eyes cataloged every movement in the crowded market.

"Our paths cross again soon, Kira Sterling," Margaret intoned, her attention sliding to Maya, who twisted in her seat like a caught insect. "But first, the path ahead twists through shadow and fire," Margaret said, her voice like gravel.

Above them, twilight had bruised into darkness, the market's harsh neon cutting through any natural beauty the night might have offered. Kira pushed herself up from the table. "I think we should—"

"Leave," Margaret completed, her mouth barely moving as the words seemed to echo from somewhere ancient. "Clear minds serve you better tonight." Her stare fixed on Maya with uncomfortable

intensity, and Kira felt her protective instincts flare. Maya kept her eyes down, fingertips drawing invisible circles on her legs until she jolted upright with a sharp intake of breath.

Kira rose from the table, her knees wobbling like she'd downed five lagers instead of one. Whatever Margaret had extracted from her palm left an electric aftershock pulsing through her bones. She squeezed Maya's shoulder in what she hoped was reassurance, feeling the initial flinch before her friend yielded to the touch.

Outside, the alley closed around them, air thick with moisture and unspoken fears. They traversed the short distance back in complete silence, Kira's palm still buzzing with invisible current. Beside her, Maya's head kept swiveling backward, her hands thrust deep in her pockets, her stride quickening with each step toward the garage's distant safety.

The garage appeared, bathed in night-shift blue.

"I should probably bounce," Maya said, eyes darting toward the exit. Kira watched Maya's face fragment in the glass, neon signs bleeding through her reflection. Something wasn't right. The smile she wore now seemed borrowed, like clothing that didn't quite fit.

Kira pinched Maya's sleeve between two fingers, halting her retreat. "That palm reading stuff was freaky, sure, but what's with you? You've been jumpy as a glitched-out security bot since we left the market." She studied the unfamiliar angles of her friend's face in the garage's blue-tinged light. "How do you know Marcus? And Margaret?" Maya's eyes darted toward the exit sign, then the shadows beneath the workbench, then the ceiling—anywhere but Kira's face. Her right foot tapped a nervous rhythm against the concrete floor. She kept checking her commlink, the blue glow illuminating the sweat beading along her hairline. Kira's stomach clenched. "Maya?"

“I’ll explain everything, just—not here.” Her eyes darted everywhere except Kira’s face.

“Sorry for the weirdness. Gotta bounce.” Their hug was all elbows and awkward angles.

Kira gripped Maya’s sleeve as she pulled away. “Just—don’t disappear on me again, okay? I’ve been getting nothing but static from you for weeks.”

“I know, I know. I’ll fill you in soon. Swear on my life.”

She glanced back once, a look that lasted half a heartbeat too long, then stepped into the alley. The shadows between buildings swallowed her whole, leaving only the echo of hurried footsteps against wet pavement.

Margaret’s words echoed in her skull, fragments of prophecy and warning that wouldn’t dissolve: Sentimental. Old chassis hiding secrets. Paths crossing again. Each phrase circled like a vulture waiting for weakness, picking apart the fragile independence she’d cobbled together since stumbling into this neon-stained corner of the city—a place that stripped away humanity on the surface only to reveal it in every shadow.

CHAPTER SIX

Access Granted

WHEN KIRA REENTERED THE garage she was half expecting the Glitchbox to roll itself out in a blaze of pop-up ads and dick jokes to greet her. Instead, everything was silent, heavy as a bombed-out cathedral. The diagnostic monitors pulsed their patient green by the front bay, casting harsh pools of light across stray tools and oil stains. The air smelled like hot LED and the kind of magic that left a metallic aftertaste on the tongue.

Tank shuffled over to Kira, his stout body moving with a gentle determination as he let out a soft, sympathetic grunt. He settled beside her, his droopy jowls brushing against her calf, anchoring her in the moment and she instinctively reached down, giving him a reassuring pat on the head while he attempted to shower her hand with affectionate slobber.

C.J. turned from the car, giving The Glitchbox a final, tender pat before shifting his attention to the diagnostic screen. “Figured you’d want a progress report” His clumsy attempt to change the subject hung in the air, almost succeeding in its awkwardness. The monitor chimed cheerfully, its lights blinking in a rhythmic dance, eager to cut through the silence.

Kira nodded, shoulders dropping an inch as she stepped toward the workbench. The diagnostic screen blazed with cascading digits and wireframe blueprints—the digital hieroglyphics she’d spent years decoding at NextGen. Her eyes darted across the display, muscle memory kicking in as she traced familiar pathways through the chaos.

C.J.’s finger jabbed at a nested folder. “Look at this data cluster,” he said, tapping the screen with a calloused finger. C.J. frowned at the screen. C.J. tapped the screen. “Encrypted data. Hidden deep. Your AI’s been fighting it—that’s your glitch. Marcus called it. This confirms it.”

The skin at her nape prickled, tiny hairs standing at attention. “Pull it up,” she said, leaning closer.

C.J. spun his wrist and the slide shifted, revealing a layered map of the car’s neural module. At its core lay a compact block of encrypted memory—an inert digital cyst waiting for a trigger. “This,” he said, circling the anomaly, “is what’s been screwing with your systems. Looks like we were right—someone else tampered with this, not your brother. Not his defensive protocols, not his AI modifications—you let someone else got under the hood?”

She shook her head, instinct from years inside corporate firewalls. She crossed her arms.

“Nobody. Just the NextGen-approved service centers and Zac. He only used original parts, open-source code. He was paranoid about that stuff.” Her voice caught on her brother’s name. “Why?”

C.J. didn’t answer at first. Instead he popped the hood, his moves abrupt. The overhead bulbs caught the sweat on his brow, making him look almost feverish. With one hand, he reached deep into the newly cleaned chassis and flipped a hidden hardware toggle. The Glitchbox’s engine whirred, then fell silent. The main screen dimmed, then rebooted with a different interface—a diagnostic shell Kira recognized

immediately as not-for-public-consumption. He'd rooted the damn thing in seconds, bypassing all the pretty overlays to get at the raw, ugly truth.

Lines of code spat up angry yellow flags. Kira's chest tightened.

C.J. jabbed at the screen, his grease-stained fingertip leaving a smudge over a series of repeating symbols. "This signature here? Someone hitched their wagon to your firmware. Clean work too—corporate-grade, not some chop-shop hack job." He shook his head, impressed despite himself.

"Good thing your glitchy ride dragged you to us. Most shops would've missed this completely unless they knew exactly what they were hunting for. Nobody really looks under the hood anymore."

"Anyway," he continued "This timestamp... NextGen Dynamics, but it sure as hell isn't a standard mod." He whistled low. "Military contractors. Black market stuff. Been running silent in your system the whole time. Until your car's AI started fighting back. Like it knew something was wrong and dragged itself here—to the only garage in New Fay where someone might actually notice."

Her breath caught, a sharp hitch behind her ribs. "That's impossible," she whispered, the denial ringing false even as she said it. She shook her head, the memory of those long afternoons in Zac's workshop vivid in her mind. "Every time it went in for service, I was right there watching. Did all the basic updates myself. Hell, I still have Zac's maintenance checklist taped to my fridge. Nothing like this could have happened on my watch."

C.J.'s eyes never left the screen. "Not this kind of infiltration. Whoever did this knew exactly what they were doing." His finger jabbed at the log. His finger traced a line of code. "This signature here—top-shelf software, but installed like someone was fumbling in the dark." He highlighted a string of characters buried deep in

the BIOS, the blue glow catching the tension in his jaw. “And this? Someone grabbed code they shouldn’t have access to. Mean anything to you?”

Kira leaned in, squinting at the glyph string. The first four digits were a dead giveaway: **LIAM**.

Her stomach dropped so fast she nearly doubled over. “Fuck,” she whispered. “Liam. That son of a—” She cut herself off, unable to finish.

“Ex?” C.J.’s jaw tightened as he connected the dots. C.J.’s eyes narrowed, his jaw tightening. “So your ex thought it was a good idea to bury military-grade encrypted secrets in the guts of your car?”

Kira’s mouth dried up like cotton.

Her mind flashed to Liam’s manicured hands hovering over the Glitchbox’s console, but no—he’d kept his distance from the car after Zac died. Hadn’t he?

The week after the funeral crashed back into focus: Liam insisting on driving her to the lawyer’s office, waiting in the car during her grief counseling, offering to ‘update’ the Glitchbox’s systems while she slept. His voice echoed in her memory: “You’ve got enough to worry about, babe. Let me handle this.”

“Liam never met a boundary he couldn’t violate,” she said, her voice hollow. “NextGen’s golden boy. Always tinkering, always ‘fixing’ things I never asked him to touch.” The betrayal tasted metallic on her tongue, like blood from a reopened wound.

Her hands trembled as she stared at the code. “That absolute bastard. He planted this while I was still crying myself to sleep every night, still wearing his goddamn engagement ring.” The realization hit again, doubling her over.

“Fuck. Fuck. I’m calling Maya. No—I’m calling Liam first. I am getting answers, and then I am *ending* him.”

She pulled up her holopad and nearly thumbled the speed-dial, but C.J. reached out and grabbed her wrist before she could. His grip was gentle but insistent, as if he were handling a bomb with a hair-trigger. “Wait. Don’t do anything yet. Just—hold up. Let’s see what is actually left in here, okay? Get the full picture.” He tapped the screen again, pushing past the signature and into a hidden menu Kira hadn’t noticed before. “This looks like someone’s dirty laundry.”

For a moment, the three of them—Kira, C.J., and the car—shared a long, strange silence, interrupted only by the hum of the diagnostic monitor and the persistent, syrupy afterglow of the car’s digital sarcasm.

Kira broke the spell first. “Okay. Show me what else we’re dealing with.” She slid onto the bench next to C.J., close enough that their shoulders brushed. His arm tensed briefly at the contact, then relaxed. Together they hunched over the console, its glow illuminating their faces like a campfire in the ruins. When she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, C.J. inhaled sharply, his eyes lingering a half-second too long before returning to the screen. He cleared his throat softly, fingers hesitating over the keyboard for longer than needed before he scrolled through the system logs, occasionally pointing out coded messages or odd data spikes. He reached for the keyboard, his meat hand brushing hers. She didn’t pull away.

She was still staring at the diagnostic display, tracing the lines of code like they were ancient runes, when a flicker of movement caught her attention. She looked up to find Tank had climbed into the back-seat of the Glitchbox—tail wagging, tongue lolling out—waiting for his next ride.

“Looks like I’ve got a new copilot,” Kira said, flashing C.J. a crooked smile.

He grinned, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. "He's got a nose for trouble."

Kira's eyes flicked back to the screen, waiting for the car's usual sarcasm. Instead, the text faded to a soft blue glow, each letter materializing with deliberate care:

PROTECT THE ONES YOU LOVE

The words hit her like a slap. She stood abruptly, her knuckles white against the edge of the workstation.

And suddenly, one moment, the garage was a pool of harsh white from overhead bulbs, engine diagnostics painting Kira's face in ghastly blue, and the next, all of it blinked out, leaving her and C.J. adrift in a single, infinite void.

Almost total darkness.



Even the rolling glow of the city outside, usually a perpetual twilight, seemed to have been absorbed by the black. For a split second Kira's brain looped uselessly, expecting the power to flicker back on, but nothing did. There was only the metallic ring of silence, punctuated by the soft, confused huff of Tank in the backseat, all the doors closed almost protectively.

She fumbled for her holopad, but it was dead—no battery icon, no emergency light.

“Did you trip a breaker?” she asked, voice brittle, but C.J. was already moving, the sound of his boots crunching glass as he inched toward the breaker box by memory alone. The diagnostics monitor was dead, the Glitchbox inert, its usual whirl replaced by a mechanical chill that made the space seem suddenly smaller.

The darkness had teeth. Kira’s pulse skittered like a trapped animal as every shadow became a living thing. This wasn’t the familiar dance of flickering lights that plagued the slums—this was deliberate, orchestrated silence. Every instinct screamed danger.

C.J.’s voice, barely above a whisper.

“Everything’s out. Even emergency.”

Was he scared too? Or just hiding it better?

Kira’s ears strained against the darkness. Metal hinges protested as C.J. fumbled with the cabinet. She heard the hollow plastic tap of a flashlight, then his frustrated grunt when it refused to illuminate. Not even the backup generator hummed to life.

From somewhere beyond the garage walls, a siren’s distant wail rose and fell, offering no comfort.

“At least you’re saving on the electric bill,” she attempted, but the words died in her throat.

Something moved at the periphery of her vision—or was it just her imagination painting monsters in the void? Each tiny sound amplified in her mind: the tick of cooling metal, Tank’s anxious panting, her own shallow breathing.

Seconds stretched into eternity.

Then—unmistakable—footsteps approached from outside.

Kira froze mid-breath.

They had company, and every instinct told her it wasn’t the welcome kind.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Shadows Closing In

THE FOOTSTEPS IN THE dark increased, echoing off concrete, measured like a drumline. It was the sound of people who didn't care about being heard. Kira's breath came shallow, every inhale a calculated risk.

She counted: two. Three.

Maybe more, but the acoustics of the garage lied and she could not tell from which direction they were coming from.

Kira tried to find orientation in the gloom, but her eyes were useless. Even the usual city glow was dead, swallowed by some precise, surgical cut at the grid.

Then, like a nervous tic, the Glitchbox's hazard lights sputtered to life: a stutter of orange, three sharp flashes, then darkness again.

The effect was a flipbook of nightmare: C.J.'s silhouette immense and static, then the next frame empty, the next, a new figure materializing *inside* the garage.

For a moment, Kira could almost believe she was hallucinating.

The Glitchbox flashed again and, in that half-instant of orange strobe, she caught a blur of movement—a figure ducking low, skirting

the far wall, boots ghosting over the oil-streaked cement. Then black. Then another strobe: C.J.'s hand was up, gesturing Kira behind him.

She wanted to protest (her rational mind already calculating the best path to the side exit), but the lizard brain in her spine obeyed. She stepped back and felt the cold shell of the Glitchbox at her hips, its metal vibrating with the faint, confused hum of a system that knew it was about to be violated.

She heard C.J.'s voice, a breath above zero: "Don't run."

He never looked back at her, just squared off with the oncoming dark.

There was a whisper of breath to her right—too close, not from the entrance, but already inside, already behind them. The Glitchbox flickered. The diversion worked—while their attention fixed on the approaching footsteps, someone had circled behind them.

A shape hurtled from the darkness, all teeth and momentum. But C.J.'s body was already pivoting, as if he'd been waiting for exactly such a moment.

C.J. moved like physics didn't apply. One instant, he was planted between Kira and the world; the next, his prosthetic arm snapped up, catching the charging shape by the collar with a wet crunch. The assailant yelped, then crashed onto the Glitchbox's hood.

Kira's elbow struck the side mirror. She cursed. In the hazard light's blink, she saw the attacker: not human—some orc variant with an elongated snout and pinprick eyes. Its mouth hung open, agony meeting surprise.

Without hesitation, C.J. slammed the creature's head against the hood again. Metal clanged.

The strobing lights revealed the assailant sprawled out, drooling blood and foam, snorting like a bad comedian at an open mic night.

She barely had time to think, because then the Glitchbox did something it had never done before: it howled.

The sound wasn't mechanical, but animal, a full-throated warble that set every nerve ending in Kira's arms on fire.

She jerked upright, only to see the dash spit a warning:

"CONTAINMENT BREACH: DEFENSIVE MODE."

For a split second, nothing happened.

Then the car's chassis tensed—Kira could feel it, like a cat bristling for attack—and the hazard lights erupted in a staccato sequence, orange and blue and something so bright it bordered on ultraviolet.

The light poured through the windshield, flaying the darkness from every corner.

It was in this impossible clarity that she saw the next threat: three massive orcs lined up at the shattered main bay, faces blank as operating theater masks, and in their midst, a smaller, sharper-edged orc with the lower part of his face covered by an Oni mask and a suit so black it could have swallowed the room.

The four figures at the entrance stood in a blocky wedge and they moved with the synchronous, unshowy menace of people who had done this before—who expected to be obeyed by gravity, by flesh, by the very air. The goons carried blades—not the polished ceremonial daggers of corporate security, but jagged street weapons designed to tear flesh.

The leader himself gripped something far deadlier: a sheathed MonoKatana, its possession alone a capital offense in New Fay City, sheathed and rested across his palms like an offering to some ancient god of slaughter, each minute adjustment of his stance a whispered promise of what could follow.

Kira immediately picked out the leader's confidence. It wasn't swagger, exactly. It was the way he held still, utterly unhurried, while the others made minor, involuntary shifts—checking flanks, adjusting grip, scanning for more targets. He didn't even bother to scan the room. He already knew where everybody was.

Three orcs flanked the leader, each one a mountain of muscle barely contained by long designer trenchcoats that creaked with every breath. The suits beneath—identical black wool with blood-red pocket squares—looked like they'd been tailored that morning, an obscene contrast to the garage's grime. Their faces might have been carved from the same block of stone, but their eyes betrayed them, flicking nervously between their boss's weapon, the targets, and the unconscious creature bleeding onto the Glitchbox.

Kira recognized the look immediately: these weren't just thugs. They were true believers, the kind who'd walk through fire if the order came.

She felt, for the first time, a certainty that this wasn't some botched mugging or joyride.

This was a hit.

The realization didn't set off panic. Instead, some frosty, administrative part of her brain went to work, running a mental playbook of negotiation, stalling, and escape. She wondered if the attackers expected her to beg. She wondered what would happen if she didn't.

C.J. must have picked up the same calculus. He straightened, the tension in his shoulders smoothing out as if he'd shrugged off a costume and found himself again. There was a small, almost imperceptible shift in his feet—something forced, like he was rooting himself to the ground against a coming storm. Kira noticed, too, that his left hand had closed into a fist. The prosthetic right remained ominously relaxed.

The leader of the four began to walk forward, each step landing with a click that was more theatrical than necessary. He stopped inches from the body sprawled across the Glitchbox's hood. His head tilted slightly as he studied the unconscious form, then with surgical precision, he drew the MonoKatana.

The blade emerged in silence, its edge catching the strobing light. Behind him, a goon's hands appeared, receiving the empty sheath without needing any prompting. The sword made no sound at all; it was a weapon designed for silence, for the surgical removal of obstacles. He leveled it at C.J.'s chest, the point unwavering.

Inside the car, Tank was losing his mind. He bounced from window to window, front paws clawing at the glass, mouth wide in a snarl that was pure nightmare. Every bark slammed through the chassis, the sound so loud Kira half-expected the car to shatter from the inside out. She had never seen an animal—much less a dog—this unhinged.

The dog's slobber streaked the windows, and its eyes, lit by the dash, glowed with a weird blue reflection. It didn't make her feel safer.

The Syndicate's leader stepped forward, boots clicking against the floor in perfect time with the hazard lights. He stopped, then leaned forward with theatrical flair.

The mask made it worse. The half-Oni face was uncanny, the voice that issued from it even more so—digitally modulated, a tinny, reedy undertone that hit the ear as if it was skipping frames. "My apologies," said the mask, "it's always so messy with you, isn't it, Casey Jones?" The syllables of C.J.'s full name were pronounced with a deliberate, mocking clarity, as if the speaker relished the flavor of every letter.

C.J. didn't flinch—his body went utterly still, like a predator locking onto prey. And then he roared.

"FUCK. YOU. SILAS."

Each word exploded from his chest, the last syllable hanging in the air like a death sentence.

“GET THE FUCK OUT OF MY GARAGE!”

He planted himself dead center in the spill of shattered light, his massive shoulders hunched forward, fists clenched so tight Kira could hear the prosthetic fingers grinding against metal palm.

A vein throbbed at his temple, pulsing in time with the strobing lights as his jaw clenched hard enough to crack teeth.

The name—Silas—landed in Kira’s mind with the cold precision of a bone saw.

She’d never met the man, but she’d heard stories, Silas the Shadowblade: the only orc in New Fay City who could erase someone from existence without leaving a corpse behind. They said he’d been born during a lunar eclipse, and that his first memory was the taste of his own twin’s blood. Most people thought he was a myth, or a composite of ten lesser monsters manufactured by the city’s rumor engine. But she saw now how wrong they’d been.

Silas, for his part, seemed amused. He cocked his head, knife-thin eyes behind the mask catching every oscillation of the car’s warring hazard lights. “Strange how fate drags me back to your pathetic doorstep,” he said, his voice dropping to a razor-edged whisper that seemed to slice through the very air between them.

“I’m offering you one chance—first and final—to step aside before I paint these walls with whatever’s left of you.”

The way he said it—almost a whisper, almost a laugh—was a master class in threat and theater

.C.J.’s answer was pure granite.

“Fuck your chance.”

The words didn’t even reach the level of a shout. Instead, they hung in the air, dense and magnetized, pulling every eye in the room toward

the vector of C.J.'s refusal. Kira felt that pull herself; she wanted, suddenly and irrationally, to believe him, even though every neuron in her brain was already tallying up the odds, and the odds were dismal.

The silence that followed was thick enough to drown in. Kira's mind raced, mentally clocking the placement and posture of every body in the room. C.J. was now half a step ahead of her, shielding her from the leader and his flanking muscle.

The Glitchbox, behind her, hummed with a panic of its own; the dash was lit up like a Christmas tree, every warning light and error code fighting for primacy. Tank, inside, was going berserk, smashing his face against the glass with wet, insistent thunder.

Kira forced herself to breathe, to remember every self-defense manual and threat assessment seminar she'd ever sat through. She knew the next thirty seconds would decide everything. She also knew that the only person in this garage who might be able to shift the odds was already standing between her and the firing squad.

Silas nodded, almost imperceptibly, as if concluding a private equation.

"Very well," he said.

He didn't look at his men, didn't raise his voice or his hand. But the moment he spoke, the air changed. The three orcs behind him tensed, not visibly, but in the way predators sometimes do before they spring. It was a psychoacoustic effect; Kira felt it in her teeth before she saw it.

Kira glanced at C.J., met his eyes. There was a flicker of something there—regret, apology, maybe even a glint of humor, like he'd been waiting his whole life for this moment and couldn't quite believe it was finally happening.

She felt the words leaking out of her mouth before she even meant to speak: "What the HELL do you WANT?" The words tore from her

throat like barbed wire, her voice cracking on the final syllable as her fists clenched so tight her manicured nails drew blood from her palms.

Silas fixed his attention on her and she felt the weight of his gaze anchor on her face, pinning her to the moment. “You, my dear.” Silas’s voice sliced through the air like liquid nitrogen. “We’re here to erase everything—the car’s memory core ripped out and crushed, its systems fried to ash, and you?” His mask tilted, the red lacquer catching light as his voice dropped to a whisper that somehow filled the entire garage. “You we’ll dismantle while you’re still screaming.” The edge of the blade tracked cleanly to Kira’s sternum.

“Not happening,” said C.J., and this time, the tremor in his voice was gone. It was pure, weaponized resolve.

The impulse to run was so powerful Kira almost obeyed it. But she held her position, letting C.J. anchor her in place. She remembered something her brother used to say about predators: ‘If you’re prey, act like you’re venomous.’ She squared her shoulders and tried, with every cell, to project a toxicity that might buy them a few seconds. The muscle closed in, the knives were out, glinting in the strobe, but the intent in their faces was colder than any weapon.

Tank, inside, matched their movement with his own, throwing his weight at the glass every time one of the muscle inched closer. The windows vibrated, fogged with the dog’s breath and flecked with snot and saliva.

The Glitchbox wasn’t helping. Its systems cycled through diagnostic and threat assessment, each new message more hysterical than the last:

“WARNING: PERIMETER BREACH.”

**“WARNING: UNKNOWN AGENTS CARRYING
EDGE WEAPONS.”**

“WARNING: DOG IS ABOUT TO LOSE ITS SHIT.”

Kira pressed herself tight to the car’s side, using its mass as a shield. C.J. moved to intercept the first orc, but Silas signaled them with a flick of his hand, and they all shrank back.

When he spoke next, it was in a soft, almost conciliatory tone.

“Margo was just business,” Silas said, his voice softening to the tender cadence one might use with a frightened child. “You ratted. I took an arm.” He traced a delicate figure-eight in the air with his blade, the metal catching light like a hypnotist’s watch. “We. Were. Square.” The mask’s crimson lacquer caught the light as he tilted his head, its hollow eyes boring into C.J.’s soul. “Tonight isn’t optional, step aside, Casey Jones. That bitch is nothing but dead weight.”

Kira looked to C.J., these assassins weren’t here for him. They were here for her, and C.J. was standing in their way. Because clearly, for him, it was personal on many levels. If he backed down, she knew she was dead. But though he was big, so were the other orcs, and he was unarmed against knives and razor swords. So she would probably die that way too. And all the exits were blocked.

“*Grok tharn!*” C.J.’s voice erupted in ancient orcish, the syllables like stones grinding together in his throat. The other orcs caught the challenge, their whispered repetition rippling through the garage like a dark tide.

Silas paused, then advanced with predatory precision. The Oni mask caught the Glitchbox’s neon glow, its red lacquer burning like hellfire. His MonoKatana—black market, legendary—warped the light around its edge like a hole cut in reality.

“Grok tharn grok!” Silas’s voice-filter rendered the words into something between a purr and static.

Silas turned to Kira. “Consider yourself fortunate, Kira. You’ll witness true artistry tonight.” The mask’s filter transformed his voice into something inhuman. “Last time, I needed two strikes for his arm. Sloppy technique. It’s bothered me ever since.” He traced an invisible line across the air. “This evening, I’ll sever both arms with surgical precision. One clean cut each. Then the legs. Finally—” he tilted his head with mechanical curiosity, “—the head.”

In the freeze-frame that followed Silas’s promise, C.J. locked eyes with Kira across the twitching neon light and the glassy hum of the Glitchbox’s alarms. There was a whole private war in his expression—half apology, half warning, wholly intent on survival.

For a heartbeat, Kira felt herself suspended in a kind of negative space, every sense telescoping down to this one line of sight, and she knew with brutal certainty that whatever happened next, it would be fast, and close, and terrible.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Challenge

THE MAN IN THE Oni mask—Silas—took another half-step forward, blade angled in the casual, deadly way that said he'd already imagined its path through C.J.'s chest. The MonoKatana was so thin it made air look like it was missing pixels.

But C.J. didn't move. Didn't reach for a weapon, didn't break eye contact. He flexed his hands, then lifted them slowly, palms open, showing he was unarmed. "Put it down, Silas." C.J.'s voice dropped an octave, the words coming from somewhere deeper than his chest. His eyes flicked to the blade, then back to the mask. "That toy's made you soft. Can't remember the last time you bloodied your knuckles, can you?" He took half a step forward, tusks gleaming.

"*Grok Tharn.*" The ancient words hung in the air between them like smoke. "Or have you forgotten what that means? Fight me like an orc, not some corpo with a fancy letter opener."

A low, electric titter ran through the three muscle orcs behind the leader, but it died the moment Silas twitched the blade in their direction.

He considered the challenge, mask tilted like a lizard appraising prey.

For a moment Kira thought he'd reject the insult, but then, with a theatrical flourish, he plunged the blade into the concrete. The floor sizzled and fractured, hairline cracks spiderwebbing from the impact point with a noise like splitting bone. He let it vibrate there, quivering, and spread his arms in a parody of C.J.'s gesture—Look, ma. No hands.

"Cute," Silas said. His voice modulator pitched the word somewhere between a giggle and a growl. "Didn't think you had the balls for old school tradition, Casey."

"Didn't think you still remembered tradition, Silas," C.J. replied.

At this, Silas reached up and, in one motion, tore away the Oni mask. His face underneath was almost disappointingly ordinary—if you ignored the scar tissue, the snaggle-toothed maw and the smile that split his jaw like a skull fracture. He spat on the ground—a viscous glob that sizzled against the concrete like acid—then used both hands to unbutton his shirt with deliberate slowness, thick green-tinged fingers working each button as if dismantling a bomb.

His frame carried less bulk than C.J.'s, but each muscle was wound tight as a tripwire, skin stretched over sinew and decorated with tattoos that weren't just ink, but promises of violence etched in flesh, his yellow eyes never broke from C.J.'s, pupils contracting to predatory slits under the harsh overhead light.

The shirt hit the oil-streaked floor in a soft, expensive heap.

The other three orcs fanned out, forming a silent semicircle around the challenge zone, each of them peeling off their own jackets or vests and tossing them aside. The ritual was unmistakable now, even to Kira's human eyes. This was old country—pre-Comet, pre-magic, pre-historic, just muscle and grudge and a scarred concrete floor for an altar.

C.J. slowly unzipped his own bib coveralls, rolling them down to the waist and tying them off like a makeshift karate belt with a deliberation that was almost reverent. His chest and arms were a patchwork of scars and bruises, most pale and glossy as old birthmarks. His left arm, organic and thick, glistened with sweat; the right, all chrome and circuitry, caught the overhead light in a web of blue rune-glow.

Silas advanced until he stood just outside striking distance. He rolled his neck, vertebrae popping, then bent at the waist in a shallow, exaggerated bow. He straightened and, in a voice that could have iced coffee at twenty paces, muttered, “Let’s see if your whore’s watching.”

C.J. didn’t flinch at the insult. Instead, he turned his head—just a fraction—to look at Kira. Their eyes met, and in that instant, she saw the fear, the resolve, the nakedness of a man who’d run out of time to lie to himself.

Kira wanted to scream, to break the spell, but her throat was sealed with adrenaline. She saw now why the old stories always talked about the seduction of violence—how, in the moment before, everything else in your life dropped away. It was like a drug, or a god, or the moment before a lover’s first touch.

The orcs’ chant rose from the shadows—a guttural pulse that crawled up through the floor. C.J. answered with a single, bone-rattling cry. Kira couldn’t translate it, but felt its meaning: defiance, a vow, a gauntlet thrown.

Silas lunged—but held himself back. His feet landed softly, almost catlike, and he began a deliberate, winding dance around C.J. Arms bent at the elbows, fingers splayed and twitching like talons. C.J. matched him step for step, the two of them tracing a perfect circle, magnetic opposites drawing nearer.

And in the ruined garage, under the one surviving light, two monsters waited for the bell.



The fight began with a noise that was neither word nor roar, just the abrupt percussion of bone against bone. Kira's entire nervous system went white-hot, registering the sheer velocity of violence before her rational brain could even guess at outcomes. Silas closed the distance with inhuman speed—first step a feint, second a blur, then a pivot so sharp it nearly left a vapor trail.

Silas's fist hammered into the seam where flesh met chrome, the blow landing with a wet, snapping crunch. C.J. barely had time to grunt before Silas's heel smashed into his knee, jarring bone against joint.

C.J. clamped his prosthetic hand around Silas's ankle, metal fingers digging in. Silas wrenched loose, spinning and lunging for C.J.'s throat. C.J. blocked with his forearm—flesh on flesh.

Teeth bared, C.J. snaked his elbow around Silas's neck, muscles bunching as he twisted. Silas slipped free, rolled, and sprang up with a knee strike that barely missed.

Around them, orc goons watched in silent appreciation, Kira breathing sweat, ozone, and grudges. Neon orange and blue from the Glitchbox strobe-lit every blow while Tank's barking echoed like an air-raid siren.

C.J. countered every dirty trick. Dodge, parry, grunt. They hit concrete together, a tangle of limbs finding targets. Silas raked C.J.'s cheek

open. C.J. headbutted—nose cartilage popped, blood spurted. Arms locked around ribs until bones creaked. Silas sagged, then snapped upward, skull cracking against chin. Blood sprayed. Neither yielded.

“Jesus,” Kira breathed, the word lost under the slap of skin and bone. The fight vibrated in her chest, a raw, sympathetic ache. The car’s AI flickered to life, its voice and the muffled barking and howling an odd soundtrack to the violence.

<“Warning: explosive energy surge detected. Evacuate immediately.”>

For a split second, everyone froze—the hazard lights flared, painting the room in hellish red.

C.J. seized the moment and rolled, pinning Silas beneath him, and hammered three quick elbows into Silas’s sternum. On the third, something crunched—plastic, bone, or both. Silas coughed up a thick rope of blood, then grinned, red-toothed, and spat it right into C.J.’s eye.

The audience of goons loved that one. They banged on the nearest surfaces, chanting something obscene in a language Kira didn’t know.

From inside the Glitchbox, Tank’s barking reached a fever pitch, the dog’s body slamming so hard into the glass the car actually rocked and Kira started to worry that the poor old hound had worked itself up into such a frenzy for so long that she feared it may suffer a heart attack. All the while the hazards strobed faster, a disco for death.

Blood blinded C.J.’s right eye. He staggered, blinking hard. Silas twisted free, rolled to his feet, left side dragging. He wiped his mouth, teeth red, and flashed a broken grin at the crowd.

He raised both arms, bloody and trembling, and shouted: “You see? Your hero can’t finish what he starts. Your sweet corpo pussy made him soft.”

He looked at Kira, eyes narrowing. “Is that what you want, little human? A nice, soft orc to hold you at night? Is that what gets you off, or do you like your men defective and docile?”

Kira wanted to scream, to throttle Silas herself, but the words caught in her throat. Instead, she watched as C.J. swiped blood from his eyes. He staggered upright, muscles trembling. Then, silent, he charged.

The next twenty seconds were a blur. They collided in the center of the garage, arms locking tight around torsos. Foreheads pressed, breath hot and ragged. No grace left—just close, grinding violence, animal and desperate. Silas gouged at C.J.’s side with a thumb, found purchase, and twisted. C.J. responded by lifting Silas off the ground and slamming him back-first onto the diagnostic table, shattering it in half.

Silas didn’t stay down. The impact catapulted him upward like a spring-loaded toy. When his body hit the concrete, it made an unnaturally hollow sound—like knocking on plastic rather than flesh. His thick orcish frame barely registered the blow, as if his skeleton had been reinforced with something synthetic and unbreakable.

A new sound entered the fray: laughter. Not from the goons, not from the car, but from Silas himself. He actually seemed to be enjoying the pain, feeding on it. His eyes were wide, whites all around, pupils sharp as glass.

“Always the same, Jones,” Silas taunted. “You could have been a king. Instead, you’re a janitor. A puppy-daddy. Is that your bitch barking in the car, or is that your soul calling out for help?”

C.J. ignored him. He kept raining blows, methodical and punishing. But with every hit, Kira saw how much it cost him. The sweat ran in rivers down his spine, mixed with blood, pooled on the floor. The

effort of every move was visible—shoulders hunched, breath coming ragged.

Silas was tiring, too, but the madness in his eyes only brightened. He played possum for a second, let C.J. close in, then shot both thumbs toward C.J.'s eyes. C.J. jerked his head aside at the last instant, and the left thumb caught him on the brow, slicing a crescent of skin clean off. Blood sheeted down C.J.'s face, but he didn't even blink.

They crashed together again, hands clawing for leverage, heads ducking and weaving. Silas bit C.J. on the collarbone, drawing a fresh bloom of blood. C.J. responded by driving his knee up into Silas's groin, a move so brutal even the goons winced.

Silas dropped, wheezing. His hand shot out, fingers closing over a steel torque wrench. He swung, hard—metal whistling through the air, aiming for C.J.'s skull.

Steel met skull with a hollow clang—a sound that hummed down Kira's spine. C.J. staggered, dropped to one knee, sweat and blood mingling on his chest. Silas paced, chest heaving, eyes wild.

Kira saw the moment coming—knew, in her gut, that Silas would try to finish it now.

He went in for the kill, torque wrench held high. But C.J., still on one knee, pivoted, using the full torque of his own prosthetic to catch Silas's forearm mid-swing.

Bone snapped—a sharp pop, then a wet, splintering crunch. The sound froze everyone. Silas screamed, the pitch slicing through the room, raw and animal.

The next blow was C.J.'s. He drove his shoulder into Silas's gut, then lifted him and body-slammed him onto the oil-stained floor. The impact left a crater in the concrete, a splatter of blood and sweat around it.

For a second, Silas didn't move. The goons went dead silent, unsure if their boss was dead or just stunned.

C.J. stood over Silas, breathing hard, face split open in a hundred places, chest a mess of red and purple. He looked, for the first time, at Kira. The glance was almost apologetic—Sorry you had to see this. Sorry I'm not better.

Then Silas, laughing again, rolled onto his back.

"You can't kill me," he said. "Not tonight. Not here."

He reached into his boot and produced a knife—short, ugly, black as midnight.

Kira's mind went blank.

C.J. lunged forward, snatched a spanner from the floor, and hurled it in a silver arc. Silas ducked beneath it with a hysterical laugh, his eyes fever-bright. Their bodies hurtled toward each other, but at the last second, Silas twisted away from C.J.'s outstretched hands. The knife appeared like a magic trick, flashing once before disappearing into C.J.'s side, just below the cage of his ribs.

The scream that followed was different than any before—raw, involuntary, a real animal's pain. C.J. collapsed onto Silas, hands scrabbling for the knife, but Silas twisted it, using the hilt as leverage to roll them both.

They landed side by side, both men slick with blood, breaths coming in ragged, inhuman gasps.

The orc goons began to chant again, a low, dirge-like monotone. The car's hazards spun the light faster, Tank barking like he was about to tear a hole in reality.

Kira wanted to run, to help, to intervene, but her body was welded to the floor.

Silas, with the last of his strength, rolled onto C.J.'s back, pinned him, and pressed the blade to C.J.'s throat.

He looked at Kira, then at the car, then at Kira again.

"This is what you get," he spat, "for loving something you can't keep."

And then he pressed the knife in, just hard enough to draw the first drop of blood.

The Glitchbox's hazard lights flickered, went dark, then came back up in a single, steady, pulsing blue.

Kira didn't know what to do, but she knew it was her turn.

She took a single step forward, into the hellscape of blood and breath and broken bone, and readied herself for the end.

"Leave him alone," she said, the words a ragged hiss.

Silas laughed. Silas's lips peeled back into a grin. "Adorable. As if your feelings change anything." His wild eyes locked onto Kira's as he shoved C.J. away with a casual brutality. C.J. crumpled to the concrete, limbs splayed like a discarded marionette.

Silas cocked his head, lips twisting into a mockery of chivalry. "Care to join me for a little... intimate dance?"

Silas's left hand shot out, gripped Kira's wrist like a vise. She struggled against the iron clamp of his grip, but Silas yanked her upright as if she weighed no more than a rag doll.

He hauled her off-balance, spine bowed backwards, and drew her flush to his body in a grotesque imitation of a dance that might have once been called the waltz—all spinning horror, all the wrong music. One hand pressed into the small of her back, the other tangled in her hair, locking her jaw to his collarbone. She tasted blood where his skin met hers, the copper tang of open wounds and old violence; she realized he was bleeding onto her, smearing his own pain across her cheek like warpaint.

Her feet barely touched the garage floor. She tried to kick or elbow, but he just absorbed the blows, laughing low in his throat. The orc

goons' chant rose in volume, a steady drumbeat of expectation. She could feel Silas's chest vibrating with the rhythm, could smell the ozone of his sweat and the animal stink of fear.

He spun her around, using her body as a shield between himself and the staggering C.J., who was hauling himself upright with one hand clutching his side and the other held in a trembling fist. Silas maneuvered Kira so her face was inches from C.J.'s, his own leer visible just over her shoulder. It was theatrical, a taunt, a dare—come save her if you can. Kira felt the pure humiliation of being a pawn, a prop for someone else's performance. She tried to spit at Silas, but he jerked her head back so far she felt something pop at the base of her skull.

The bare knife, still slick with C.J.'s blood, pressed cold and deliberate beneath the curve of her jaw. For an instant, she was sure he meant to finish her, to cut her from ear to ear and drop her lifeless at C.J.'s feet. Instead, he tilted his head and traced the blade over her skin, as though savoring the way her pulse beat frantic against the steel. His eyes, bright with fever, flicked from her to C.J., measuring the effect. The garage seemed to shrink, the whole world narrowed to the razor's edge poised against Kira's throat and the raw animal heat radiating off Silas's body.

Then, as suddenly as he'd seized her, he released. Kira buckled, legs folding, and hit the concrete hard. She caught herself with her hands, but the impact shot pain up her arms and drove all the air from her lungs. The knife tumbled from Silas's grip as he pivoted, bent low, and swept up the MonoKatana with a single, balletic motion. Even through her haze of fear, Kira couldn't help but see the beauty in it—a black arc slicing through the air, clean as a thought, the blade whispering out of its sheath.

He leveled the sword at C.J., but instead of pressing the attack, he let the blade drift sideways, tip hovering just above Kira's spine.

She felt the cold before she saw it—the promise of annihilation, hanging less than an inch away.

C.J. tried to rise, but the pain anchored him to the ground.

Silas drew the blade back for a two-handed overhead chop.

Kira's body moved before her mind could catch up, a horrifying tug-of-war between self-preservation and something else she couldn't name. She shifted awkwardly, half-shielding C.J., half-poised to bolt, her bruised knees threatening to buckle beneath her. Her voice cracked on the first attempt, came out as a whisper on the second.

"If you want him," she managed, hating herself for the tremor in her words, "you'll have to go through me first."

The sword hovered in the air. The lights from the Glitchbox flickered, painting everything in alternating bands of blue and orange. The garage was suddenly, impossibly silent—every goon, every ghost, every breath waiting to see which way the blade would fall.

Silas hesitated, then he let out a low, incredulous laugh.

"Fine," he whispered, almost gentle. "Let's see what you're made of."

His eyes went flat and cold as river stones. He advanced, the blade catching blue light as it rose above his head. The sword's edge was raised to strike. Kira's eyes sealed shut against what was coming, but her body remained perfectly still, a final act of defiance.

She never saw if it landed.

All she knew was the heat of her own blood, the vibration of her pulse in her ears, and the way the world folded down to a single, unbreakable point: her, and the ruined man she wouldn't let go.

Tank howled, a noise so primal it split the air.

And in that last, suspended moment, Kira held the line.

CHAPTER NINE

Narrow Escape

THE BLADE NEVER LANDED. There was no blood, no final arc, not even the sound of air parting around the edge.

Instead, the universe shattered.

A white supernova erupted—from the Glitchbox, from Tank, from both—burning through Kira’s retinas like digital wildfire.

Her vision collapsed to static, then darkness, then ghost images swimming in the void.

Kira’s mind couldn’t process the how or why.

Something had been building—a wild energy feeding off Tank’s connection to the Glitchbox, growing stronger with each passing second. Now it had erupted, channeling through both snarling beast and machine as if some dormant power had finally found vessels worthy of its terrible awakening.

The cacophony of Tank’s howl, the car’s klaxons, and every alarm in the garage hit Kira like a physical force, rupturing her eardrums only to have them impossibly knit back together in the same heartbeat.

She landed on her back, staring up at a sky that wasn’t there, wondering if she was dead, if this was what dying felt like—obliteration by light and sound, memory reduced to carbon.

But her body wouldn't let her escape that easy. Her vision rebooted, filling with jittering afterimages, a negative print of the garage's chaos etched across her retina.

In the epicenter of the blast of sound and light stood the Glitchbox, idling in the ruined open bay like a deity arrived late to the apocalypse. Its hazard strobes cycled faster and faster, then locked into an unholy shade of blue-white, so cold it bled the color from everything else. Above the hood, a halo of ozone shimmered.

Kira's brain struggled to make sense of the image, like trying to read a barcode at warp speed.

But even that was nothing compared to the next thing. Because between her and the car, its doors now all flung wide open, filling the void like a summoned archangel, was Tank—the mutt, the mountain, the muscle with arthritis and a death wish—squared off against Silas and the whole Syndicate crew.

But Tank wasn't just barking.

He was howling, every fiber of his warped, moss-green body bristling with phosphorescent energy.

His eyes glowed radioactive, twin spotlights cutting through the dark.

He charged, and for a split second Kira actually pitied the orcs on the receiving end.

The sound that left Tank's maw was not of this Earth. It hit Kira in the sternum, liquefying the edges of her fear and hardening it into something primal: fight, flight, or incinerate the threat with raw, spiritual artillery.

She watched, paralyzed, as the nearest orc—one of the muscle, the big one with the wet-laugh and the chin scar—staggered back, hands clamped to his ears.

Tank hit him at full speed, jaws clamping onto the soft meat of the thigh, and tore him sideways with enough force to rip tendon from bone. The orc howled and dropped, facefirst into the cement, leaving a streak of arterial spray on the way down.

Silas, eyes wide and maskless, raised the MonoKatana in a reflexive arc, trying to fend off the charging dog. But Tank was a beast built for demolition, and he didn't care about swords or syndicate protocol.

He dodged low, coming in under Silas's guard, and sank his tusks into Silas's right calf.

Kira saw the moment Silas realized he'd underestimated the old mutt. He screamed—a sound more rage than pain—and slammed the MonoKatana down in a two-handed chop. Tank let go at the last second, the blade missing by less than a breath, and darted back, hackles raised, teeth bared. Silas barely stayed upright, his own blood pumping onto the floor in rhythmic bursts.

For an instant, everyone forgot Kira. Even the goons at the perimeter—one now limping, the other uncertain—hung back, unwilling to close the gap between themselves and the war-dog from hell.

The Glitchbox, however, was just getting started.

Its chassis tensed, as if it had developed muscles of its own, and the drive wheels squealed against the slick of oil and blood on the shop floor.

The smell of burnt rubber and ozone mixed with something sweeter, like the last memory of a childhood firework show.

The car's dash spat a single, searingly bright error code into the air, then pivoted on its rear axle, aligning itself perfectly with the open bay door.

A voice—Kira's brother's, and not—came from the cockpit speakers.

But it was modulated, glitched, run through some analog of every memory Kira had ever told the car:

“KIKI, MOVE!”

The wheels spun. The Glitchbox didn’t accelerate so much as leap, its lightweight frame translating battery current into raw kinetic poetry. Kira rolled just in time, feeling the slipstream whip her hair as the car barreled through the center of the room.

The impact was biblical.

Silas, already hobbled, had just enough time to pivot—but the nose like point of the front bumper caught him at the knees, flipping him up and onto the hood with a noise like a freezer full of steaks colliding with a brick wall.

He rolled once, then twice, bouncing off the windshield. Kira saw the MonoKatana skitter away, a steel flash in the strobe. Silas landed in a heap, his body carving a path through the wreckage of diagnostic monitors and storage bins, until he crashed into the far wall with a wet, final thud.

The Glitchbox surged forward again, tires screaming against concrete as it targeted another Syndicate thug fumbling for his sidearm. The car slammed him against the wall with a sickening crunch of metal on bone, then reversed and hammered him a second time. Across the garage, Tank’s jaws were still locked on the muscle orc’s throat, blood spattering in wide arcs with each thrash.

Only one Syndicate member remained standing.

The remaining orc, smaller and less eager for glory, unceremoniously turned and bolted for the exit. He made it as far as the alley before the Glitchbox’s AI, now seemingly bored with homicide, popped the locks and let Kira back into the driver’s seat.

Which left only Kira, Tank, and what was left of C.J.—bleeding, gasping, face-down on the oil-slicked cement.

She crawled to him, ignoring the rest of the world, focusing on the ruin of the man who'd stood between her and oblivion. C.J.'s eyes were open, but fogged with pain. His left hand clutched his side, trying to keep his insides from becoming outsides. The right arm, the chrome one, twitched as if running a diagnostic loop, the blue runes flickering at half power.

"Hey," Kira said, voice a stranger's. She grabbed a fistful of shop rag and pressed it to the wound. "Don't you fucking dare, Casey Jones. Not after all that. Not now."

He tried to say something, but it came out a slur of vowels and blood.

Tank, sensing the urgency, bounded over and licked C.J.'s face with wild abandon. Kira swore at the dog, tried to shoo him away, but Tank just kept whining and nuzzling, as if his saliva could knit torn flesh back together. Maybe, Kira thought, maybe it could.

She half-dragged, half-carried C.J. toward the Glitchbox, whose gullwing door had already raised itself in anticipation. The interior lights were set to hospital white, the upholstery preternaturally clean. It looked like a surgery theater waiting for a patient.

She shoved C.J. into the back seat, then crawled in after, yanking Tank by the collar so hard she thought she'd dislocate his neck. The dog tumbled in, nearly crushing Kira beneath his weight, but immediately turned and locked eyes with her, like they were now co-captains in a mutiny against mortality.

The car door hissed shut. All sound from the outside world cut off in an instant.

Kira looked up, waiting for the orcs to chase them down, to drag them out, to finish what Silas had started. But the only thing outside was silence, and the lingering phosphor ghost of the hazard strobes.

She checked the rearview. The smaller orc was gone, vanished into the night. The garage floor had become a tableau of defeat: one orc sprawled unconscious against an oil drum, another gurgling wetly as crimson pooled beneath his throat, while the first attacker had left only a smeared trail of blood leading into the shadows.

Silas—Kira craned her neck, searching for the body—was slumped against the far wall, one leg bent wrong, face smeared with his own blood and a look of abject, existential horror. He wasn't dead. Not yet at least. But he'd had enough. And she had no plans to stick around here any longer.

The Glitchbox shifted into gear, rolling forward at a stately, almost regal pace. Kira expected the garage door to be jammed, but as they approached, the massive slab of steel shuddered, then began to rise. It opened like the mouth of a monster, slow and deliberate, the gear-teeth screeching in protest. She wondered who—or what—had hacked the control panel. Maybe it was the car. Maybe it was her brother. Maybe it was the last miracle left in this part of town.

As the Glitchbox cleared the threshold, a burst of automatic gunfire rattled the sheet metal from behind, the runt orc had found his spine and now lurked in the alley shadows, pocking the car's frame with a line of dents. The glass didn't even scratch. Kira ducked, reflex, even though she knew the car was bulletproof, had been since the first time she'd driven it through a protest line.

The city outside was bathed in sickly blue, the aurora overhead flickering in sympathy with the carnage below. Kira leaned her head back, felt her pulse pounding in her temples, and waited for the next disaster.

C.J.'s moan filled the cramped interior as he struggled to lift himself from the blood-slick seat. Tank's massive body blocked any movement, the war-dog's tongue frantically working over his master's wounds while his throat produced a continuous, anxious whine that matched C.J.'s ragged breathing. Kira's hand found its way to Tank's coat, fingers sinking into fur still charged with whatever primal energy had transformed him minutes ago.

The Glitchbox's dash flickered twice before displaying:

<“*Awaiting destination input.*”>

Kira didn't know where to go. She looked at C.J., at Tank, at the blood pooling on the seat. She closed her eyes, thought of the stories Margaret Ironheart had told, the way her own hands still tingled from the reading.

“Anywhere but here,” she said, and the car leapt forward, swallowing the night.

In the rearview, Kira watched the garage shrink to a point of light, then disappear behind the steel skeletons of Yatmar's dead factories. The city rolled past in bursts of motion and color, the only sound now the low growl of the Glitchbox's engine and the broken, uneven breathing of the man she'd just saved.



The city never let you escape at speed.

It was all broken arteries and bad signage, so the Glitchbox—now glowing from the inside with an unholy, battery-fed ferocity—whipped them through the slums at a velocity that was half-flight, half-suicide.

The passenger compartment filled with the smell of blood, ozone, and the gamey tang of canine panic from Tank's earlier meltdown. Kira crouched sideways on the back seat, her knees jammed into the angle where upholstery met reinforced steel. Her jacket and palms were wet with C.J.'s blood, the color wrong in the car's weird blue interior light: purple-black, like something decanted from an old bruise. He was semi-conscious, eyes rolled up, teeth locked so tight she feared he'd bite off his own tongue.

Kira barked "Medical kit, now!" The glovebox thunked open, ejecting a battered first-aid kit. Its contents spilled across the floor as the car took a hard right and nearly rolled C.J. onto the floorboards. Kira snagged the kit one-handed, snapping plastic with her teeth, and fished out a trauma patch and two ampoules labeled only in kanji and warning glyphs.

C.J. tried to help, but the best he could do was flinch and groan as Kira pressed the patch to his naked, bleeding side. Blood soaked through in an instant. Her hands shook, which she told herself was from the adrenaline and not the terror. She had seen people bleed before, but never this much, never from someone she'd just watched win a deathmatch with a literal monster.

Tank, meanwhile, was pacing the back bench like a paranoid mall cop, claws scrabbling against carbon fiber, eyes still glowing with the afterburn of whatever magic had detonated in the garage. Every so often, the dog's aura would spike and he would hiccup, making the Glitchbox's interior lights flicker and the dash display shudder as if the car itself was trying to crawl out of its own skin.

Through his pain-haze, C.J. raised his arm. His flesh hand hung useless, dripping crimson onto the upholstery, but the metal fingers of his cybernetic replacement moved with mechanical precision across the console. The nav panel lit his face from below as he tapped through three security screens and punched in a string of numbers that meant nothing to Kira but everything to the Glitchbox.

The Glitchbox purred with understanding and shifted course, slewing them down a side street so narrow Kira thought they'd lose mirrors. The AI made a weird, proud little trill, as if pleased to finally be driving itself.

<“*Destination confirmed*”,> it said. <“*Estimated time: six minutes. Please remain seated during high-g turns.*”>

Kira did not sit. Instead, she braced herself against the headrest and tried to apply a pressure bandage to C.J.'s stomach. She was not gentle—her brain had decided that panic and pain were better than death, and she delivered both in industrial doses.

He screamed once, then bit down, eyes wide and wild. “It’s in the muscle,” he slurred, “just... missed the bone.”

Kira believed him. There was a chunk of synthetic blade still embedded in the wound, the edges already knitting in a half-robotic, half-miraculous way. She pulled the shard free and tossed it into the footwell, where it landed next to Tank's massive paw. The dog gave the blade a single, disgusted sniff, then ignored it, focusing all his energy on staring down C.J.'s face, as if he could will the bleeding to stop by sheer force of devotion.

“Hang in there,” Kira said, and was shocked at the sound of her own voice. It was the tone she'd used on terminal servers, not people. She forced herself to sound more human. “You did good, you big dumb bastard. You’re not dying now, okay? You are not dying.”

She wiped at her eyes with the back of her hands, leaving twin streaks through the grime on her cheeks. C.J. lay there, green skin gone ashen, all because he'd planted his feet when running would have been smarter. The memory of the garage flashed back—her own body moving before her brain could stop it, throwing herself between danger and this stranger who was no longer strange.

C.J. coughed, a spray of blood hitting the windshield, then managed a grin. "Gonna... owe you one," he muttered. "Maybe two."

"Shut up," she said, and pressed the patch tighter, not sure whether it was for the bleeding or the words.

Outside the windows, the world had gone full apocalypse. Behind them, distant sirens blended with the wail of the car's exhaust, every intersection jammed with other vehicles—fleeing, chasing, or simply lost. In the alleys, Kira caught flashes of bodies, eyes, streetlights reflected in pooling water. The neon from the Orc Quarter gave way to harsher white, then to darkness as they entered the manufacturing deadlands. Here the buildings were bigger, uglier, and, at this hour, almost entirely empty. The Glitchbox wove between semi-trucks and piles of abandoned drone parts with zero fucks given for traffic laws.

"Tank, keep him awake," she commanded, and the dog complied, licking C.J.'s face with increasing violence.

For the next sixty seconds, Kira's world was reduced to the sound of Tank's frantic tongue, the heat of C.J.'s blood seeping into her thighs, and the surreal poetry of the Glitchbox's navigation prompts.

<“Left turn in thirty meters. Hold on to your butts.”>

She did.

The car went airborne, but landed lightly on its shock absorbent tires, and it shot down a ramp into a tunnel lit only by flickering hazard bulbs. The G-force glued Kira against the seatback, but the Glitchbox

took the curve like a pro, skidding sideways and spraying water across the tunnel like a busted pipe.

C.J. groaned and groped for the injector. Kira handed it to him, watched as he fumbled a dose of coagulant into his own neck, then blacked out for a full three seconds before reviving with a snort. “You look like shit,” she said, but there was relief in it.

He forced a weak grin, his breath hitching as he coughed, “Punch in 0969,” he rasped, each syllable costing him. “Old bolt-hole from... before Silas. Nobody knows about this one.” Just as the words left his lips, his eyelids fluttered, and he slumped back against the seat, unconscious once more.

Kira adjusted the bandages, glancing back at Tank. The dog had finally stopped pacing and now sat with his blocky head in C.J.’s lap, eyes never leaving his owner’s face. The magical glow had faded, but the devotion was radioactive.

The Glitchbox surged from the tunnel’s mouth, skidding sideways across empty lanes before wrenching right toward a hulking warehouse and courtyard. Kira’s pulse thudded in her ears—part adrenaline, part dread. Her hands wouldn’t stop shaking as she pressed them to her knees, fingers sticky with blood. For a second, she just watched her own breath fog up in the cold air, a useless attempt to anchor herself in the moment.

Even before the AI announced their arrival, Kira recognized sanctuary in the towering silhouette of steel and spray paint. She blinked hard, fighting tears she didn’t quite understand. Her eyes darted between shadows as they crunched up the gravel drive, her mind split in two—half desperate for the promise of those walls, half certain Silas’s men lurked behind every darkened corner, blades ready.

When she jabbed 0-9-6-9 into the dash, the numbers blurred, and she had to punch them twice before the panel accepted. The ware-

house doors shuddered, then parted on ancient tracks, their steel panels grinding upward like the jaws of some mechanical beast. For a moment, Kira slumped back against the seat, the ache in her chest threatening to spill out as a sob. She let herself feel it—a crack in her resolve, just long enough to remember she was still human.

Sickly fluorescent lights flickered to life one by one inside the cavernous space, illuminating dust motes that swirled in their pale glow. The Glitchbox rolled forward, and the massive doors groaned shut behind them, sealing them in with a finality that was equal parts relief and terror.

<“*Welcome to your safehouse,*”> the car intoned, voice softer now, as if it understood the need for quiet.

Kira pressed her palm to her mouth, trying to steady her breathing. In the hush, every sound felt magnified: Tank’s claws clicking on the floor, the ragged hitch of C.J.’s breathing, her own heart pounding just beneath the surface. She looked down at the mess in her lap, at the man beside her, and the tension in her body finally trembled loose.

“Fuck me,” she whispered, and this time, her voice cracked. She wiped at her eyes with a blood-smeared sleeve, not caring who saw. “Just... fuck.”

It took her three tries to lever herself out of the seat. She was clumsy, uncoordinated, all the sharpness and composure of earlier gone. She braced her legs, locked her arms, and half-dragged, half-guided C.J. out into the cold night air.

Tank padded alongside them, his usual boisterous barking replaced by watchful silence. For once, the dog pressed close, almost as if he could sense she was on the verge of breaking. Kira leaned into the warmth of his fur for a second longer than she needed, letting herself draw on his steadiness.

Inside, as she got C.J. onto the cot, her fingers fumbled with the blanket. She paused to touch his forehead, checking for fever, and was surprised by the tenderness in her own hands. When she found his pulse—a faint but persistent beat—it felt like a reprieve she did not deserve.

She tucked the blanket around him, then sat heavily against the wall. Tank pressed his bulk against her leg, and this time Kira let herself lean back against him, letting out a shaky breath. Her hands, red and raw, shook in her lap.

She stared at them, willing herself not to cry. But the shock was catching up now: the blood, the fear, the guilt. She let a single sob escape, quiet and shuddering, before forcing herself to breathe again. Guilt warred with relief, and for the first time, she didn't try to hide it—not from Tank, not from C.J., not even from herself.

She didn't know what came next. She didn't know if Silas would bleed out or regroup, if Liam was still alive and after her too or if he was just another ghost in the system, if the car had a plan or if it was just running down a battery as old as her own grief.

The future was a tunnel with no lights and too many forks.

Kira's fingers found Tank's ear, his fur warm against her bloodied skin. The contact grounded her, even as her palm stung with every movement. Pain meant alive. Alive meant fighting. She hauled herself up from the concrete floor, legs wobbling beneath her like a newborn calf's, and lurched toward a door at the far end of the room—praying it might hide something more useful than gauze pads and antiseptic wads.

The hinges protested as she pushed the door open. In the shadows stood a compact medical unit—one of those black-market autodocs corporations pretended didn't exist. Its status light blinked lazily

green, scanning her presence. The display illuminated with treatment protocols, bathing her face in its cold glow.

Even with the autodoc's help, C.J. wouldn't be combat-ready anytime soon. Kira glanced back at his still form on the cot, at the bandages already seeping through with crimson.

If Silas's crew tracked them here before dawn, they were as good as dead. What they needed wasn't just medicine, but a miracle.

CHAPTER TEN

Mushroom Magic

THE SAFEHOUSE'S AIR WAS thick with the chemical tang of disinfectant, old metal, and the animal funk of wet dog. Kira stood back, watching as the robodoc's segmented arms retracted from C.J.'s torso with a whirl so intimate it was almost obscene. Twin lines of surgical glue shone like neon veins against his green-grey skin, each suture sealed with a pinkish film and the faintest shimmer of rune-glow. C.J. looked less like a patient than a test crash dummy—bandages crossing his ribs, a pressure patch spanning the split flesh near his heart, the rest of him glazed in sweat and stubbornness.

For an absurd moment, Kira expected the machine to high-five him for surviving, maybe offer a lollipop. Instead it just rolled back into its cradle and chirped in six languages that billing would be handled via secure blockchain.

C.J. opened one eye, found Kira's, and tried to speak; the best he could muster was a groan that started in his belly and got lost on the way out. Tank, perched in the corner like a four-legged bouncer, let out a sympathetic rumble and waddled closer, his paw pads leaving smudges on the warehouse's concrete floor.

Kira crossed to the cot, her steps uncertain. She hovered, not sure if she was more nurse or next-of-kin, then settled for both. “Don’t try to move,” she said, voice frayed at the edges. “The instructions were clear: minimum of four hours flat.”

C.J. ignored her, because of course he did. With a wince he braced his right arm—organic—and used the chrome prosthetic to lever himself upright. The effort left him panting, his jaw clamped shut, tusks streaked with dried blood and pride. He blinked the room into focus, then locked onto the plastic pitcher of water sitting at his bedside. “Thirsty,” he managed.

“Yeah, imagine that,” Kira said, and filled a cracked mug from the pitcher. She held the mug to his lips and tilted it just enough to avoid drowning him, then set it aside with a clack. The water was room temperature, but C.J. drank it like it was the rarest thing in the world.

Tank crept in until his jowls brushed the edge of the cot. He whined once, a sound halfway between apology and request for attention, and Kira obliged, giving his mossy head a scratch. “You too, huh?” she whispered. The dog’s tail swept the floor, collecting dust motes in its wake.

For a few minutes, nobody said anything. The water inched down the mug, and the afternoon sunlight filtered through the safehouse’s reinforced glass, laying yellow bars across the battered desk and onto the shape of C.J.’s body.

C.J. flexed the prosthetic hand, making the fingers dance in a clumsy wave. “Doc says I’ll keep the arm. The gut wound’s another story.” He nodded at the pressure patch. “Don’t poke it, and I might walk tomorrow. Maybe.”

“You’re not walking anywhere for at least two days,” Kira said, surprising herself with the fierceness of her own voice. “That’s an

order. From a literal doctor.” She nodded at the machine in the corner, its interface now cycling a soft blue as it ran a status check.

C.J. rolled his eyes, but let himself sink back against the cinderblock wall. “Fine. I’ll just sit here and think about every life choice that led me to this moment.”

Kira’s laugh came out brittle, but real. She slid into the only chair, then folded her arms over her knees. Her whole body ached, from her scalp to her toes, but the adrenaline was finally leaving her bloodstream. For the first time since in many hours, she was aware of her own hunger, her own fatigue. It felt like coming back into focus after days underwater.

Tank settled at her feet and nosed at the bandages wrapping C.J.’s ribs. Satisfied his charge wasn’t going to die right away, the dog slumped over and began to snore.

C.J. caught Kira’s gaze and motioned toward a weathered wooden tray beside the cot. It hadn’t been there before her bathroom break—he must have retrieved it while she was gone. It held three mushroom caps, each big as a child’s palm, their surfaces mottled brown and yellow, with fine blue filaments running down the stems.

He reached for one, then hesitated, glancing at Kira with a strange mixture of hope and apology. “Orc remedy,” he said. “Old, old. Works on most people—maybe not humans, but, well.” He turned the mushroom in his hand, studying it like a puzzle he might solve with brute force. “It’ll triple the speed of healing. At least, that’s the theory.”

Kira stared. “You’re proposing a... mushroom cure. For that?” She gestured at the blood seeping through the bandages on his side.

“Not a cure,” C.J. said, managing a grimace. “Just a... shortcut. I figure, worst case, I hallucinate my ancestors for a few hours, maybe cry about it, then sleep. Best case, I’m up and moving by tomorrow.”

“Are there any side effects?” she asked, not entirely joking.

C.J. snorted. “You ever seen an orc on healing mushrooms?”



C.J. let the mushroom cap rest in his palm for a minute before speaking.

He was staring at it the way some people looked at old family photographs—nostalgia shot through with something like mourning.

“They call them Red Rivers,” he said, tone almost reverent. “The legend goes that before the last ice age, Ancestors used them in battle, when a warrior was too wounded to wait for real time to do the work. Or when a shaman wanted to... connect.” He glanced at Kira, mouth quirking. “Most orcs now use bandages and gritted teeth like everyone else, but the old ways die slow.” He broke off a small piece and considered it, blue filaments catching on the ridges of his fingerprints.

Kira leaned in, forearms braced on her knees, every muscle in her body pinged with anticipation and latent fear.

“You said it’s... healing, but also a trip?” She tried to sound casual, like she was collecting data for an HR whitepaper, but her voice cracked around the edges, betraying how little experience she had with controlled self-obliteration.

C.J. grunted, then nodded. “It doesn’t work like pharma, or even like most street drugs. It’s a root-level hack—forces your body to repair, but also drops all the barriers that keep your brain from admitting how bad you need it.” He laughed, rough and awkward. “Some people

just sleep for three days. Others... see things. Hear things. Sometimes you end up face-to-face with whatever it is you've been avoiding." His hand traced the rim of the wooden tray. "Sometimes it brings people together. Sometimes it makes things weird."

"Sounds dangerous," Kira said, more softly than she'd meant.

"Only if you're scared of yourself." He set the mushroom cap back down, then looked up at her with the unguarded honesty of someone who'd survived enough to give up lying. "I'm not scared of myself, Kira. But I've never done it with... company." He hesitated, then added, "You know how most drugs send you somewhere else? This anchors you right where you are." His fingers traced invisible patterns on the bedsheet. "Your mind stays clear, but everything...softens. Like the world finally exhales."

She weighed this, picking up one of the caps and rolling it between her fingers. The texture was damp, almost spongy; it left a faint blue stain on her skin.

"You want me to do it with you?" The question sat there, both an accusation and a dare.

C.J. didn't answer with words. He just nodded, once, the most vulnerable gesture she'd ever seen from someone that large.

Tank, who had been pretending to sleep, lifted his head and gave Kira a look that seemed to say: Your move, chief.

She wiped her palm on her thigh, then locked eyes with C.J.

"Fine," she said, and for the first time since this all began, she heard the clarity in her own voice. "But before we do, I want you to know—"

She swallowed, throat suddenly dry as ancient paper. "If this goes sideways, or if we end up... I don't know. Intimate, or fighting, or whatever—" Her face burned, and she didn't care. "I trust you. And I want you to know I consent to... whatever happens. I mean that."

For a long moment, the silence was heavier than the bandages pressing on C.J.'s ribs. His expression flickered through surprise, then amusement, then something warmer—relief, maybe.

“You’re a strange human, Kira Sterling,” he said, and his voice was thick with gratitude. “But you’re a good one.” He reached for the small wooden pestle and, with delicate care, began to crush the mushroom cap into a fine powder. The sound was gritty, the smell pungent and earthy.

Kira turned away, fighting down a nervous laugh. She located the emergency rations on the counter—a set of sealed pouches, one of which contained a clear, oily liquid labeled only as “Transport Medium: High Concentrate.” She held it up, arching an eyebrow. “Is this safe with orc magic mushrooms, or am I about to die in the dumbest way possible?”

C.J. took the pouch, scanned the ingredients, and shrugged. “If it kills us, at least it’ll be quick.” He poured a measured amount into the bowl with the powder, swirling until the mixture became a viscous, iridescent paste. “The taste is bad,” he warned. “Just get it down, then we wait.”

She watched his hands—so steady, even with the fresh surgical glue threading his side. For a moment, she wondered if the mushrooms would help more than just his body; wondered if her own psychic wounds might close a little faster if she let go of the constant, bone-deep tension that had ruled her life since the first time she’d lost something she couldn’t replace.

Tank let out a low whine, then climbed onto the cot and curled himself behind C.J., chin balanced on the mechanic’s good thigh. For once, the dog seemed unwilling to break the mood with comic relief.

Kira dipped her finger into the mixture, then licked off a small glob. It was worse than advertised—like licking the inside of a fungus-in-

fested car battery. She choked, wiped her tongue, then tried again. C.J. followed suit, and for a moment they sat together, side by side, the intimacy of the shared act more real than anything that had come before.

The light through the window faded to a cold blue, and the robodoc's status light ticked off as its battery drained to sleep mode. The warehouse echoed with the small sounds of two people learning how to wait.



Kira's mind raced with possibilities as the substance took hold—would reality dissolve around her like sugar in hot coffee, or merely blur at the edges like a photograph left in the rain? Would the inside of her head turn to fireworks, or would she simply notice the way dust motes danced in the light? Kira watched the dust motes in the safehouse, wondering when they'd become visible, whether they had always orbited the room or if they'd spawned spontaneously from the air and the aftershock of violence.

The ceiling began to ripple, every stain spreading into fractal shorelines, every lightbulb haloed in hungry color. Kira felt her thoughts wandering out of her skull like vines, curling through the cold air toward C.J.

Minutes drifted.

The blue haze from the mushrooms deepened, and Kira began to notice the way the lights in the room bent, refracting in curves and whorls around C.J.'s body. The amber from the autodoc still clung to his wounds, slowly morphing into a halo that seemed to pulse in time with his breathing. When she looked down at her own arms, she saw a shimmer of silver-blue, like the ghost of a tattoo she'd never had and noticed that the small cuts and scrapes on her palms were all but healed.

"Do you see this?" she asked, holding her hand in the air.

C.J. raised his own, grinned. "It's like the whole room's underwater."

Kira flexed her fingers, watching the light move through her skin. "Feels like we're sitting at the bottom of a swimming pool, and the sun's leaking in through cracks above."

"It's beautiful," she said, and meant it.

They sat, bodies relaxed, eyes drawn to the flickering TV, to each other, to the shared space that felt suddenly holy. The mushrooms worked their way through her veins, winding up every sense, but the anxiety was gone, replaced by a sense of incandescence—like she'd been plugged in to the same grid as the city, and finally learned to hum.

A laugh escaped her, bright and uninvited. Words wanted to tumble out, secrets pressed against her tongue like children at a window.

C.J. flexed his fingers experimentally, eyes widening. "It's like the pain just...evaporated." He winced suddenly, shifting his weight. "Well, mostly. As long as I don't twist like that."

For a while they just watched the infomercial together, neither feeling the need to say anything. On the screen, the host was demonstrating a hair-removal hex. The model's arms went from wooly to smooth with a single pass of a neon wand, and then, in a moment of rare truth in advertising, the model yelped as the wand took a chunk of

skin with it. The host didn't break stride, just rotated the product in her hand and smiled, teeth impossibly white under the studio LEDs.

"She's a sociopath," Kira said, and C.J. let out a low hum, not quite a laugh.

"Everyone on holotube is," he said. "Even the weather girls. Especially them."

Kira watched the screen for a while, then turned to face him. The amber mesh from the autodoc still glowed on his ribs, but the rest of his body was a patchwork of old and new pain. She felt an urge to reach out and touch the scar, as if it were a glyph she could decode with her fingertips.

Instead, she sipped her mushroom tea, the flavor duller now, and waited for C.J. to speak.



Kira had once read that the magic mushrooms used by street witches in Yatmar could warp your sense of time so much that an entire night would pass in what felt like an hour. That was the kind of science she could get behind—temporal distortion as a side effect of not wanting the present to end.

Now, time felt like a ribbon twisting in her hands, slippery and iridescent. Every heartbeat opened a new room in her memory, and she kept wandering through doorways she'd locked years ago.

The present, at this particular moment, was C.J.'s arm still draped around her shoulders and the sensation of every nerve in her body vibrating in tune with his heartbeat. The city outside had quieted to a low, electric hum; even the infomercials had faded, leaving only the pale blue shimmer of the holotube looping some ancient cartoon that neither of them watched.

The mushrooms had unraveled them both, loosening tongues that should have known better. Confessions tumbled out like dice: her saga with Liam from meet-cute to meltdown; his bloody history with Silas and the phantom ache where his arm had been; whispered stories of Margo who'd loved him once; his grandmother who'd raised him with calloused hands and iron rules. When Kira described being the last leaf on her family tree after Zac's death, the words hung between them like smoke signals—warning and invitation both.

She broke the silence with a question that had been gnawing at her.

"Why is Silas like that?"

"Like what?"

"Like he's trying to burn down the world just to watch the flames."

C.J.'s voice flowed like honey laced with bourbon. "Our history runs deep. Before humans even built their first cities, orc women led our tribes. The males who forgot their place as protectors brought us to the edge of ruin." He traced a pattern on her palm with his thumb. "Fighting between males is tradition, sure—but Silas crossed lines no orc would touch. He hurt the defenseless. That's why he lives on society's edges now, surrounded by others who mistake cruelty for strength." His hand enveloped hers—calloused, warm, impossibly gentle for something so powerful.

Hours of confession had emptied them. The safehouse air grew thick with shared breath until Kira craved the bite of cold.

“Let’s go outside,” she said, pushing up from the couch. “Just for a minute.”

C.J. didn’t argue. He moved with surprising grace for a man stitched together by magic and prosthetics, scooping up his jacket and, after a moment’s hesitation, tossing it over her shoulders instead.

Tank looked up, snuffled, and then, deciding nothing bad could happen as long as he was between them, led the way to the door.

The safehouse had its own small landscaped scoria garden, the ground wet and shining under sodium lamps. Beyond the lot, the city pulsed in slow motion: somewhere a siren chirped, far-off and mellow, while the glow of the aurora painted the sky in bands of radioactive green and indigo. Kira’s breath fogged in the air, every exhale a little comet of heat.

C.J. exhaled next to her, watching the clouds. “You ever seen the stars like this? I swear, half those constellations didn’t even exist last year.”

Kira squinted upward, trying to parse the spidery fractures of light against the void. “Post-Comet, the sky just... changed. We had to invent new names for all the shapes.” She pointed at a hook of stars tangled in the power lines overhead. “That one’s called the Pissing Cat.”

C.J. snorted. “Romantic.”

They drifted down into the garden together, Tank zigzagging ahead, nose close to the ground. Kira felt the mushroom haze settle into her bones, every sound and color turning liquid at the edges. She wanted to say something important, but the words tangled up in her chest.

It was the Glitchbox that broke the spell. The car was parked in the small garage that opened into the street on one side and the garden on the other, its nose pointed at the city, like a hunting dog on point. Its

headlights cycled in soft, non-threatening pulses, and the dash threw a faint blue glow over the inside of the windshield.

It drew them over, and they went into the garage, Tank bringing up the rear. Kira reached out, hand hovering above the hood, and for a moment she saw the reflection of her own face. Next to it, in the driver's seat, was another face—a smile so familiar it undid her.

It was Zac's grin, wide and lopsided, the exact way he used to mug for their parents' camera or when he caught her sneaking extra rice crackers as a kid. The face winked, lifted its hand, and tap-tapped the steering wheel in the old, rhythmic pattern. Then it was gone, replaced by nothing but the city's glow and the faint outline of Tank's tail in the window.

She froze, hand still on the hood.

C.J. saw it too—maybe not the face, but the shift in her. He circled around, positioning himself between her and the night. "You okay?"

Kira's lips trembled. She wanted to say "no," wanted to say "he was right here," wanted to explain that she was never sure if the ghosts the mushrooms conjured were real or just replays of longing.

But instead she just nodded, not trusting herself to speak. The tears in her eyes didn't feel sad; they were cleansing, like the sting of antiseptic before a wound knits shut.

C.J. stepped in close, wrapping both arms around her. Tank pressed his wet nose to the back of her knee and whined, sympathetic.

"Every time I think I've let go," Kira whispered, "he comes back. Like he's just waiting in the car, ready to drive me home."

C.J. rocked her, a slow, measured sway. "That's what brothers do, right?"

Kira gave a weak laugh. "Only if they're dead and programmed into a neural network."

C.J. squeezed her tighter, and she felt the electric tingle of the mushrooms flare up her spine.

She pulled back, studying his face, the bruises less purple now, the wound at his side faded to a pink scar. The mushroom light was still there, but it had mellowed, wrapping him in a soft gold rather than the harsh amber of pain.

“Can I see?” she asked, and he knew what she meant.

He let her examine the wound. Kira traced her finger over the ridged, almost fully healed flesh, marveling at how the torn flesh had knitted itself together with supernatural speed. The timeline blurred in her mushroom-hazed mind—had it been a day? Two? The hours stretched and compressed like taffy, but the evidence was undeniable beneath her studied touch. C.J. watched her, a gentle bemusement in his eyes.

“It’s almost gone,” she said.

“Med-doc, magic and fungus,” he replied. “Weirdest healthcare plan I’ve ever had.”

Kira pressed her palm flat against his chest, feeling the heat beneath. She followed the line of the scar up to his neck, where the stubble was beginning to grow in. His skin was rough, but the pulse underneath was steady. C.J. inhaled.

“You smell like sunshine on metal,” C.J. said, voice so soft it made her shiver.

Kira laughed, a real sound, and rested her head against his collarbone.

“Just drugstore soap and nervous sweat,” she mumbled against his skin.

His voice rumbled through his chest. “Whatever it is, I’d wear it as cologne.”

The Glitchbox's AI, ever eager to join the conversation, piped up through the windshield speaker in a bright, cheeky tone: <“*Hey, love-birds! Don't mind me!*”> Tank, let out a single, enthusiastic bark.

Kira turned her face up to C.J.'s. He bent down, brushed his lips against her forehead, and then, with her encouragement, found the corner of her mouth.

The kiss was tentative at first, then deepened, the taste of mushroom tea and ozone and desire swirling on her tongue. She bit his lip—gently, just to see if the magic had really worked—and he smiled into the kiss.

They broke apart, both a little dizzy. The city's aurora wheeled overhead, painting the world in colors Kira would never be able to name.

“You want to go back inside?” she asked.

C.J. lifted her by the waist, setting her on the hood of the Glitchbox. “Not until I know you're really here.”

She wrapped her legs around his hips, pulling him in, and let herself be kissed again, this time slower, with purpose. The world receded to the engine-warmth of the car, the chill of the night, and the promise of hands on skin. The mushrooms had burned off the fear, left only a hunger to be present. A hunger that had been building all these hours, and was finally losing all control.

When Kira finally slid off the hood, her feet hit the ground with a certainty she hadn't felt in years.

Tank led the way back to the safehouse, tail high and proud. C.J. followed, arm around her shoulder, every step lighter than the last.

C.J. hesitated for a heartbeat, his hand hovering at her hip. “Kira, are you sure about this?” His eyes flicked from her lips to her pupils, searching for any trace of doubt or intoxication that might waver her intent. “We aren't exactly sober right now. And I-”

She cut him off with a sharp shake of her head. The motion sent her hair swirling through the air, catching the light like embers from a dying fire. “I wanted this before the mushrooms, C.J.,” she said, each syllable crisp and deliberate, slicing through the warm haze between them.

“You’re sure about that?” His voice caught slightly.

“Completely.” She held his gaze. “The trip might be amplifying everything, but it didn’t create anything that wasn’t already there.”

She looked up, meeting his eyes directly.

“Remember when I first saw you working on the car? Shirt off, covered in engine grease?” Her fingers twisted in the fabric of his coveralls, knuckles whitening. “I’ve been fighting this since then. And losing.” She swallowed hard. “That’s what scares me.”

C.J.’s eyes darkened. “Kira, I’ve never—” He stepped back half an inch, then forward again, torn. “People like me don’t get to keep people like you. Not in this city.”

“Maybe I don’t want to be kept,” she whispered, though something in her chest ached at the thought of walking away tomorrow. “Maybe we just have now.”

For a moment, neither spoke. The night’s electric possibility hummed in the air, amplifying every tiny brush of skin, every breath. C.J.’s jaw flexed, working through old programming—honor, discipline, the need to always be in control. Kira saw it all, felt the struggle under his steady gaze, and realized she loved that he cared enough to check, even as her own body pulled her toward the edge of decision.

She reached out, took his hand in both of hers, and led him through the house. Past the glowing chill of the living room, past the kitchen where the tea had left its dull residue in two mugs. Each step was echo and invitation, a new line being written over all the old, erased ones.

C.J. followed, his movements a mix of anticipation and caution, as if every room might contain a new test or trap. But there was nothing waiting for them except the inevitable, and the sudden clarity of wanting.

Inside, the bathroom was still steamed up from earlier, the air thick with the scent of her shampoo and antiseptic and the residual ghost of ozone.

Kira reached for the light, but C.J. caught her hand, stopping her. “Leave it off,” he said. “It’s better in the dark.”



Their bodies found each other everywhere—against shower tiles slick with steam, across the worn carpet of the living room floor, finally collapsing onto the narrow cot that creaked beneath their weight. The mushroom haze amplified every touch, every gasp, but underneath the chemical euphoria lay something Kira couldn’t dismiss as temporary. Something that scared her with its solidity.

The intensity broke only once, when Tank nosed the door open, froze at the threshold, and bolted with a startled whine.

C.J. buried his face against her neck, shoulders shaking with laughter. “Poor bastard,” he murmured. “Some things you can’t unsee.”

Their laughter faded into sighs as his mouth found hers again. C.J. cradled her against him, his lips mapping constellations across her skin until she trembled beneath his touch. They rocked together in an

unhurried rhythm, each movement drawing them deeper again into a slow-burning fire neither wanted to escape.

Their bodies surged together like a circuit completing, electricity crackling between them until her hair dampened at the temples and her throat went raw from sounds she hadn't known she could make.

After it was all over, for a time, they simply lay there.

The only sound was the conjoined cacophony of their heartbeats, first frantic and then gradually slowing until they found the same steady rhythm.

The cot quivered beneath them, a ghostly echo of their bodies' violence, and somewhere in the distance the city hummed its indifferent neon lullaby. Kira felt the wildness inside her stutter and then subside, replaced by an odd, unfamiliar peace. No one had ever made her feel so exposed, or so safe.

C.J.'s chest rose and fell beneath her, broad and steady as a draft horse's. His living hand cradled the back of her head, fingers twining gently through the damp strands of her hair; the other, cool and mechanical, traced idle circles on the curve of her spine. She was struck with the strange, almost overwhelming urge to weep.

She didn't, of course. Instead, she pressed her cheek harder into his bare skin, letting the tick of his heartbeat ground her.

He was the first to speak, his voice shockingly gentle after the animal ferocity of moments before.

"You okay?" The question was simple, but she heard the weight of worry beneath it—a fear that she'd changed her mind, that he'd gone too far, that maybe it hadn't been what she wanted after all.

She could have said a thousand things: that she'd needed this more than oxygen, that she'd never felt so fucking alive, that no one had ever made her come like that, not even in her best fever dreams. Instead, she just nodded and nuzzled into the hollow of his throat, breathing in his

scent—spiced sweat and aftershave and the impossible trace of ozone that lingered around anyone who'd lived too long in a city like this.

He relaxed, muscles going slack as he exhaled. "Didn't hurt you?" His voice was barely a whisper. "I know I'm...a lot."

Kira snorted, which made him rumble with laughter beneath her. "You're a lot," she admitted, "but I'll live." She meant it. In fact, she felt more alive than she had in years.

They lay like that for several minutes, locked together in the sticky, spent silence. Eventually her arms began to tingle with the unmistakable pins-and-needles that said she'd better move before her extremities gave out entirely. With a soft, reluctant groan, she rolled to the side and slid off of him, but he immediately reached for her, gathering her against his body as though she might vanish if he let go. He pressed soft, reverent kisses along her jaw, her temple, the damp line of her hairline. Each one was a promise, a benediction, a whispered vow that if she let him, he'd worship her with every part of himself—flesh, bone, and whatever else he was made of.

They remained connected, savoring the intimate afterglow. When she finally slid from him, he gathered her against his powerful body, his lips worshipping her with tender kisses that promised this was only the beginning.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Digital Rebellion

WHEN KIRA WOKE, THE world was still. Not the sleep-drenched, anesthetic stillness of the hours before—this was the brittle calm of aftermath, the reset static after a blown speaker. Her first instinct was to check her pulse, her second to catalogue pain. But all systems, against expectation, were green: her head clear, the inside of her mouth undesecrated by cotton or bile, her stomach content as a housecat. The mushrooms, apparently, had exited with surgical precision, taking with them the fever dream and leaving only a clean, bright silence.

She was not alone. At some point in the night, she'd rolled off the cot and into a tangle of limbs and dog. Tank had wormed his way between her and the wall, his entire body a furnace of mossy fur and low-frequency snoring. His paw—comically oversized, claws like dropped bullets—rested heavy on her chest, as if to keep her from floating away. The dog's scent was not offensive, just omnipresent: damp earth, motor oil, and something medicinal, the note of a freshly opened can of tennis balls.

It took her a second to realize what was missing: C.J. The last memory she had of him was a post-coital haze, the press of his body

behind hers, his hand cupping the hollow between her ribs and hip. Now that space was empty, save for the residual warmth and the ghost of his breath on her shoulder.

For an irrational instant, Kira's brain conjured a thousand catastrophic outcomes. Silas's goons, a backdoor hack in the Glitch-box, a kill-switch coded into C.J.'s own cybernetics. But then she heard it—the muffled, rhythmic impact of bone on concrete, a sound that was neither violence nor distress, but something practiced. The room's single window, a slit of reinforced glass above the kitchenette, trembled with each echo.

She extricated herself, rolling up onto her feet, and for a moment the world wobbled with the memory of the previous night—the sex, the violence, the sense of a new gravity at work in the safehouse. The air was cold, and her skin rose in immediate protest, but she welcomed the shock. It was real, at least.

She padded into the kitchenette, where the fridge's UV light flickered like a migraine. She poured herself a glass of soymilk, choked down a mouthful, and spent thirty seconds fighting with the ancient drip coffee machine. It was the kind of model that predated the Comet, squat and ugly, the reservoir scummed with lime and (probably) the ashes of a hundred previous users. She loaded the basket with grounds, slammed the lid, and started it up. The gurgle and hiss of the water felt like an old friend.

Kira opened the door just as the sun edged over the horizon, its early light painting the concrete in vertical bars. Behind the safehouse, a small concrete lot hunkered between crumbling red-brick walls. The morning was damp, the air so thick with water she could taste rust on her tongue.

In the center of the lot, C.J. was moving. He wore nothing but a pair of black track pants, the drawstring tied off with an engineer's

knot, the rest of him bare. His torso—a living atlas of purple-green continents and fading yellow islands, testament to both last night’s fight and countless others before it—caught the morning light as sweat traced the topography of his muscles. The cybernetic arm, at odds with the rest of him, moved with a dancer’s precision, the blue lines along the biceps pulsing in sync with the rhythm of his motion.

What she was witnessing wasn’t just exercise—it was poetry in motion. C.J.’s body carved through space with deliberate grace, each movement flowing into the next like water. His pace built gradually, from meditative stillness into explosive strikes that seemed to compress the air itself. The forms reminded Kira of the karate videos she’d once studied for a NextGen marketing campaign—that same paradoxical blend of beauty and violence, of control and unleashed power. When he finally paused, balanced on one leg, his posture held both openness and coiled tension, like a predator deciding whether to pounce or retreat.

She stood there, unnoticed, until Tank barreled past her, nails scraping across the concrete. The dog skidded to a halt beside C.J., who stopped mid-form and bent down to ruffle Tank’s head. He murmured something to the dog in a language Kira didn’t know—maybe not even a language, just a low-frequency hum of affection. The dog’s tail wagged, thumping against C.J.’s shin.

C.J. glanced up, spotted her, and straightened. The dawn light caught his eyes, made them seem almost black. “Morning,” he said. His voice was hoarse, but not unhappy. “You sleep?”

She shrugged. “Eventually.” She lifted the mug in her hand, steam curling off it like a private aurora. “Brought you something.”

He crossed the lot in three strides, accepted the coffee, and took a long, uncomplaining sip. “You are a goddess,” he said, deadpan,

then gestured at Tank. “Don’t tell him, though. He already thinks he outranks you.”

Tank responded by sitting on C.J.’s bare foot and staring up at Kira, as if daring her to challenge the hierarchy.

They settled on a pair of upturned crates by the far wall, the dog sprawling between them. C.J. draped a towel over his shoulders and drained half the mug in one go. The safehouse, which had seemed so bleak and transient the night before, now felt almost domestic: the smell of coffee, the slow burn of the sun, the gentle background noise of a city still mostly asleep.

For a while, neither spoke. Kira sipped her coffee, watching as the steam curled and vanished. When the silence broke, it was C.J. who did the honors.

“Marcus is on his way,” he said. “Should be here in an hour, tops.”

Kira set her mug down, voice clipped. Kira set her mug down with a soft clink. “So what happens now?” she asked, voice steady but eyes watchful.

C.J. barely paused. “We crack open the Glitchbox’s root directory—grab every file your ex hid in the subroutines. Marcus brings the decryptor, we run a secure dump, firewall everything—no leaks, no traces.”

“And after?”

C.J.’s eyes narrowed, his jaw tightening. “That’s up to whatever skeletons we dig out of your car’s memory banks. But I promise you this—whoever set you up won’t walk away clean.”

The outside noise pressed in—drones, maglev shrieks, sirens. No time for nerves.

She looked at C.J., searching for the cracks in his facade. But he seemed at peace, even content. The violence, the wounds, the scars—all of it was integrated, metabolized. Maybe that was the trick:

you didn't overcome your history, you just let it live in you, like another organ.

"What about Silas?" she asked.

C.J. grinned, teeth white against his battered face. "Word on the street is, he's in worse shape than either of us." C.J.'s lip curled slightly. "Word is he's holed up somewhere with two broken ribs and a fractured orbital. Even with black-market medi-patches, he'll be out of commission for at least a week. I've got people watching the usual spots. He'll surface eventually, but not before we're long gone."

There was something in his tone—a note of satisfaction, of closure. Maybe not justice, but balance.

Tank, who had been snoring at their feet, shifted and let out a contented groan. Kira reached down and scratched behind his ear, feeling the dog's skin shudder under her touch.

Kira felt the last tension drain from her shoulders. For the first time, she let herself relax into the possibility that this could actually work out. That the universe was, for once, not actively plotting her demise.

They finished the coffee. C.J. set his mug down, then surprised her by reaching over and tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear. The gesture was gentle, but it made her heart stutter, a new kind of adrenaline.

She leaned into it, just enough to signal she didn't mind.

They sat side by side, Tank's bulk anchoring them both. C.J. shifted on the crate, the towel slipping to expose a patch of fresh bruise at his shoulder. "You know," he said, "I should show you a trick before Marcus gets here. Last night was a little... messy. If someone ever grabs you like that again, I want you to know how to break their fuckin' fingers."

Kira tried to roll her eyes—classic orc male, teaching the human how to defend herself—but the memory of Silas' hand around her

wrist last night hovered just behind her cornea, and the offer made a certain brutal sense. “Okay.”

“Deal.” He set his coffee aside, wiped his hands on the towel, and motioned for her to stand. “Come on. Up.” He dragged another crate over, this one stenciled with the logo of a long-defunct yogurt company, and gestured for her to face him.

Tank watched with bored interest, tongue lolling.

C.J. held out his left hand—organic, thick-knuckled, the nails kept short but not neat. He mimed a slow, predatory grab at her wrist, then squeezed. His grip wasn’t cruel, just enough to pin her. “Nearly everyone goes for the twist,” he said, “but it’s almost always a loss. If they’re bigger than you, you won’t win the leverage game.” He relaxed the pressure, guiding her to cup his thumb with her own hand. “What you want is the break. Right here, at the joint.”

His touch was so light, she couldn’t imagine it working in a real fight. When she said as much, he flipped their positions, placing his wrist in her grip. “Try it,” he urged. She applied pressure exactly as he’d shown her, and his sudden sharp intake of breath confirmed its effectiveness.

“Damn, you’re a quick study,” he said, wincing as he massaged his wrist. “Next time I’ll offer the metal arm.” The laughter that escaped her felt foreign after so much tension, and he joined in, his deep chuckle vibrating through the small space between them.

His eyes met hers, suddenly serious. “That’s the secret, though. Their strength becomes their weakness—if you know where to press. Use what they give you.”



Kira hovered her finger over the commlink's activation rune—pulse racing, seconds ticking. One call. Maya would crack the feeds or send in a sweep squad if Kira waited too long. No good options.

Kira jabbed the rune. Hologram flickered—Maya, sharp as ever, snapped into focus.

“Kira!” Maya’s face filled the display, her expression instantly flipping from concern to full-blown exasperation. “Do you know how many times I called? What the hell, girl, I was about to ping the coroner.”

Kira grinned, the curve of her mouth unpracticed but genuine. “Still in one piece. And for the record, your corpse-prediction algorithm needs a tune-up.”

Maya’s mouth opened to deliver a comeback, but instead she stopped, eyes scanning the image. “Where are you? That doesn’t look like home. Is that blood behind you, or did you get adventurous with the paint samples?”

“Safehouse. Not explaining. Yet.”

“Blink twice if hostage,” Maya snapped.

Kira almost laughed. “No guns. Just... a situation that got out of hand.” Kira touched the tender spot below her eye, wincing slightly. “So are we going to talk about how you vanished last night? One minute you’re there, the next—poof. Ghost mode.”

Maya's eyes darted sideways before meeting Kira's again. "That old woman—Ironheart. I don't do fortune tellers, especially ones who look right through you." Tank's bulk blocked the holo. Maya squinted. "Wait. Are you shacking up with C.J.?"

"C.J.? No, I—what?"

"Don't play. Did you two—"

Kira shot a look at the door. Lowered her voice. "Yeah. It happened."

Maya's pixels scattered. "I knew it. Shut up—don't say another word on this line. Meet? Coffee. One hour."

"Not safe. I'm—"

"Safer than this feed. I'll bring you clean clothes. Location ping. Non-negotiable."

Kira's laugh dissolved into a ragged cough that echoed against water-stained ceiling panels. "Not exactly an option right now."

"Since when?"

"Look, I'm still processing all this myself. Plus I'm waiting for someone to show up. Marcus, actually."

Maya's perfectly lined eyes widened until Kira could see the whites all around her irises, her crimson-painted lips forming a perfect O.

"Big Mark? I was going to tell you—yeah, we had a thing. Three sweaty weekends and two regrettable breakfast conversations. Small fucking world."

"He's bringing decryption gear," Kira said, running her fingers through her tangled hair, feeling the grit of dried blood flake onto her shoulders. "Something major happened last night Maya. I don't even know where to start, but shit got real."

"Call the cops?"

"Pointless. NextGen owns half the force. We do this ourselves."

"Damn. All right. You're not solo in this—I'm in."

“Maya, don’t—“

“Just send the location. Now.”

Kira pinged it. Maya grinned. “Twenty minutes. Real coffee, real clothes, no arguments.”

Kira eyed her rumpled clothes. “You’re a lifesaver.”

“You say that every crisis,” Maya winked, then killed the feed, the commlink’s afterglow fading to a single point of blue. Kira leaned against the counter, hands trembling—not from fear, but from something closer to anticipation. She watched Tank circle the table twice before finally settling, chin on paws, eyes locked on the door.

A creak behind her. C.J. entered, sleeves rolled up, engine oil streaking his forearms like war paint. His eyes swept the room with military precision, lingering on the commlink before meeting hers. “Status report?”

Kira squared her shoulders. The scattered pieces were coming together—Maya, Marcus, C.J., herself—forming something with structure and strength. For the first time since The Glitchbox had sputtered to a halt, she wasn’t just reacting.

“Maya’s coming. Tried to keep her out of it, but you know how that goes. She’d have kicked down doors looking for me anyway.”

She watched his face, searching for a flicker of judgment in the constellation of fresh bruises along his jaw, but his expression remained neutral.

C.J.’s jaw tightened. “Just make sure she knows what she’s walking into. No backing out now.” He checked his commlink, the blue glow highlighting the fresh bruises on his face. “Marcus is ten minutes out with the decryption gear. Once we crack that data...” His voice dropped to a whisper against her ear. “There’s no going back.”

“I need to meet Maya at that café across the street,” Kira whispered back, plucking at her bloodstained blouse. “She is bringing me a change of clothes, got anything I could wear in the meantime?”

“Back room has some clothes.” His eyes darted to the window, then back to her. “Don’t leave my sightline. If anything moves wrong out there, I need to see it coming for you.”

Kira nodded and ducked into the back room and rummaged through the pile of clothes until she found something passable—one of C.J.’s shirts, clean enough and smelling faintly of motor oil. It swallowed her whole when she pulled it on, the hem hitting mid-thigh. When she emerged, C.J. stood sentinel at the doorway, one hand resting on the frame, his massive silhouette backlit by morning sun. His head turned slightly at each passing engine sound, jaw tightening, the fresh cut above his eyebrow catching the light when he shifted.

C.J. stepped toward her, his prosthetic arm extended. “I’ll escort you,” he said, voice gruff but eyes soft. His fingers curled around her elbow with surprising gentleness.

As they approached the exit, Kira looked over her shoulder at Tank, his massive form standing guard beside the Glitchbox.

The city outside was loud, alive, dangerous as ever. But as they crossed to the coffee shop, Kira realized she felt—if not safe, then at least capable of surviving. And, in the world they lived in, that was about as good as it ever got.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Unexpected Allies

MAYA CHEN HIT THE coffee shop like she hit most meetings: early, direct, and fully expecting to be disappointed by the staff. Maya's scan of the room took exactly two seconds; her gaze snagged on the least-coherent figure present—Kira Sterling, half-collapsed into a booth in a T-shirt at least three sizes too large and yesterday's wrinkled dress pants that had clearly spent the night on someone's floor. The ensemble was topped off by hair that looked like it had fought a losing battle with a wind tunnel.

Maya arched one eyebrow, then glided to the corner table across the sticky floor. She didn't so much slide into the seat as claim it, setting her bag with a thud that made the next table over flinch. She flagged down the counter girl with two fingers and mouthed "quad shot, black," then turned her attention to Kira, who was clearly trying to look smaller than the mug of sludge she cradled.

"Well," Maya said, voice pitched for surgical precision, "I see the morning-after look is making a comeback." Her gaze flicked up and down, inventorying the bruises, the sleeve of blue runes on Kira's arm, the pallor beneath. "You look like you've been through a war zone,"

Maya said, sliding a small blouse across the table. “Your exact size. Your exact style. Because of course I thought of everything.”

Kira managed something between a smile and a grimace. “Thanks. Shower helped. Not sure about the rest.”

Maya nodded, lips tightening. “You know, I was half expecting you to ghost. Not that I don’t love the effort, but next time just wear a sign that says ‘recently assaulted, please ask me about my trauma.’” She leaned in, hands tented. “Are you going to tell me what the hell happened, or do I have to pay extra for the VR highlights?”

Kira let the air escape from her lungs like a punctured tire. How could she possibly package this mess into something Maya would understand? There were no PowerPoint slides for “my car is possessed” or “my ex-boyfriend weaponized my AI” or “I just survived an orc hit squad.”

The corporate playbook had no chapter on what to do when a tattooed orc mechanic saves your life while his battle-scarred dog stands guard.

She started talking anyway, watching Maya’s perfectly manicured nails drum once against the table before freezing mid-tap as the story unfolded—the glowing runes, the hidden files, the ambush. Maya’s coffee cooled, forgotten, as she fired questions with the precision of quarterly audit meetings.

When Kira finally ran out of words, Maya’s face had transformed—first alert, then stunned, finally hardening into something that reminded Kira of their CEO right before he fired someone.

“Let me get this straight,” Maya said, voice clipped. “Liam turned you into his personal data mule, a gang leader with a comic book name wants you dead, and your only allies are an orc mechanic and his emotional support hellhound.” She lifted her cup with surgical precision. “Typical Sterling chaos, just with higher stakes.”

Kira braced for the next question, but Maya's eyes had gone distant, calculating. "Liam. The executives. All that corporate shine hiding the rot." She shook her head once, a decision made on the spot. "Hang on, babe." Without warning, Maya plunged a manicured hand into her designer bag, emerging with her commlink. Her fingers danced across the screen with the precise efficiency of someone who regularly terminated careers before lunch on a Tuesday afternoon.

The line connected instantly. The voice on the other end—Maya's direct supervisor at NextGen Dynamics—was chipper, but edged with caffeine and stress.

"Hey, it's Maya. Sorry to call early." Maya kept her voice level, polite. "Listen, I'm resigning. Effective immediately. No, I'm not coming in for the exit interview. No, I will not be leaving a two-weeks. Please tell HR they can keep my last bonus as a going-away present."

There was a pause. Maya smiled, but it was the smile of a shark who'd found the perfect opportunity. "I'm not changing my mind. No, really. Oh, and as for the matter of the next board meeting—tell them to check the new files on the shared drive. Consider it my parting gift."

She hung up, set the commlink face down, and looked at Kira. "That's how you burn a bridge, babe. With style."

Kira stared at her, mouth open. "You didn't have to—"

"Like hell I didn't," Maya snapped, her manicured nails drumming once against the table. "What kind of friend would I be if I let you face this corporate nightmare solo?" She leaned forward, eyes flashing.

"NextGen was already in my rearview mirror. Been mentally drafting my resignation letter for months. You were the only anchor keeping me there." The corner of her mouth quirked up as she flipped her wrist dismissively. "Besides, three different tech firms slid into my inbox last week. I'll have a corner office with a better view by Monday."

Kira felt something dangerous stir in her chest. Not fear. Not the old bone-deep loneliness. Something closer to relief, or even hope.

"You're out," Kira said. "Just like that."

Maya shrugged. "If I'm going to torch my rep, I want it to count. And if we can stick it to Liam on the way out, even better." She grinned, wicked and full of teeth. "Tell me the plan."

Kira tried to explain—about the need to crack the encryption, about Marcus coming with the gear, about the data hidden in the Glitchbox. Maya listened, chin in hand, her coffee cooling untouched.

When Kira finished, Maya's smile faded. "This is going to get us killed."

Kira snorted. "Probably."

A roar from outside cut through the conversation—a motorcycle, big and angry, pulling into the safehouse driveway across the street. Through the dirty window, Kira caught a glimpse of Marcus Rivera: broad-shouldered, tattooed, and very much the kind of orc who looked like he owned a criminal record and was proud of it. He cut the engine, glanced both ways, and walked toward the garage.

Maya's eyebrow arched dangerously high. "If you're playing matchmaker, Sterling, I will end you." Her nail clicked against the ceramic rim of her cup with surgical precision. "Some mistakes don't need repeating."

Kira couldn't quite suppress her smile. "The universe has its own sense of humor. But he's the only one who can crack that encryption."

"Charming," Maya said, but her eyes followed Marcus all the way across the road, as if measuring the exact risk he posed.

Kira realized, in that moment, that Maya had changed. Not just the job, not just the wardrobe—something in her core had shed the old, cynical armor and replaced it with something raw and more dangerous.

Kira felt the change in herself, too, but seeing it mirrored in Maya made it real.

They left the coffee shop together, Maya downing her quad shot in one practiced gulp.

They reached the garage door. Maya grinned at her, then punched in the code. As the door rolled open, Kira caught her own reflection in the glass: tired, bruised, but alive. And, standing beside her, someone who made even the end of the world look negotiable.

Inside, the lights flickered on. Their work in earnest had officially begun.



The full morning light did the safehouse no favors, but at least Kira had managed to scrub the last traces of yesterday's panic off her skin and into a fresh change of clothes.

C.J. stood over the hood of the Glitchbox, a tablet in one hand and a diagnostic cable running from the car's brain to the back of his neck. The blue lines on his arm pulsed softly in time with the car's own nervous system, a feedback loop that would have fried a lesser man's circuits.

Across the room, Marcus Rivera leaned against a workbench, his imposing figure casting a shadow that swallowed the light from the flickering overheads. His leather duster hung open at the chest, revealing a tapestry of scars etched across his skin, each one telling a story of

past battles. Intricate tattoos snaked around his arms, swirling patterns that hinted at a life steeped in rebellion and survival, a testament to the world he navigated with gritty confidence.

Between them, Tank prowled. The orc dog's nails clicked a steady rhythm on the concrete, his massive skull tracking every movement with the focus of a bomb squad. When Maya and Kira entered, Tank sniffed the air, then did a slow circuit around Maya's ankles before huffing in vague approval.

Maya's gaze slid right past C.J., landing on Marcus. The air changed—a flicker, barely visible—her mouth tightening, Marcus's jaw clenching as if bracing for ablow.

She spoke first, low and sharp: "I can't believe you still have that ridiculous jacket."

"Nice to see you too, Maya."

C.J. cleared his throat, the cybernetic fingers on his left hand drumming a perfect 4/4 on the hood of the car. "Marcus is here to run point on the hack. If there's a trap in the Glitchbox, he's the only guy who can trip it and not get us all dead."

Maya gave a sharp little snort. "Charming. My life in the hands of the city's most creative criminal."

Marcus shot her a look—part challenge, part something else. "Got you what you wanted, didn't I?"

She held his gaze a beat longer than necessary, then looked away, but her mouth quirked. "Didn't hear me complain."

The tension shifted, but didn't vanish. Tank snuffled at Maya's leg, then parked himself between her and Marcus. Neither seemed to notice, but Maya's pinkie tapped twice on her knee—a nervous tic Marcus seemed to track from the corner of his eye, though he said nothing.

Kira shifted, uncomfortable with the way the conversation kept circling her, as if she were a grenade waiting for someone to pull the pin. “Let’s just get to it. The longer we wait, the more time Silas has to track us.”

Maya cocked an eyebrow, but nodded. “Fine by me.” She took a seat on the nearest crate, crossing her legs with calculated indifference. “Do you want a play-by-play, or should I just wait for the postmortem?”

“Postmortem,” C.J. said. “Less chance of distraction.”

The next fifteen minutes were all business. Marcus tethered the laptop to the Glitchbox’s diagnostic port, his hands moving so fast the cursor on the screen lagged behind. C.J. monitored the car’s readouts, calling out voltage spikes and abnormal memory usage. Kira tried to keep up, but the jargon was thick, the logic thicker.

Maya, for her part, didn’t offer advice. She watched, eyes half-lidded, but Kira could tell she was processing every detail, every word.

At one point, Marcus hit a roadblock—a piece of code that looped back on itself, erasing and rewriting faster than his system could trace it. He cursed, slammed the table, and glared at the screen.

Maya leaned forward, her chin resting on her fist. “You tried a cold boot?”

He snorted. “What, you think I’m an amateur?”

She shrugged. “Worked on your old bike, didn’t it?”

He grinned, despite himself, and restarted the process. This time, the code caught, and a line of green text scrolled up the screen:

UNLOCK SEQUENCE ACCEPTED.

Marcus threw his arms up in triumph. “Boom. That’s why they pay me the big bucks.”

UNLOCK SEQUENCE PROGRESSION: 1%

C.J. clapped him on the back, then turned to Maya. “See? No drama.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’ll save the applause for when we’re not dead.”

The moment hung, taut with relief and anticipation. Kira looked around the room, at the crew she’d assembled by accident and desperation, and realized that for the first time in years, she wasn’t just a cog in someone else’s machine. She was building something, even if it was only a temporary alliance.

UNLOCK SEQUENCE PROGRESSION: 2%

Marcus slammed his palm on the workbench. “This calls for a drink.” He disappeared into a back room, returning with four dented tallboys, condensation already beading on the aluminum.

Maya caught the beer he tossed her with one hand, her eyebrow arched. “Your timing’s still impeccable, Rivera.”

The caps hissed as they twisted them off. Marcus raised his can. “To not dying today.”

“To better choices than my last ones,” Maya said, and her gaze snagged on Marcus.

She raised her can, eyes never leaving his.

Marcus looked away first, a muscle ticking at his jaw.

She took a long pull of her beer and wiped the foam from her upper lip.

“You know,” Marcus said, eyes flicking to Maya, “Grandma Ironside mentioned something about you after you left the markets.” He waited for her to snap back, but Maya just studied her boots, shoulders tight.

“Said you’ve been hiding something. A gift.”

Maya went still as a cornered animal. The safehouse fell quiet except for Tank's claws raking against his hide. Her eyes fixed on the orc dog, avoiding everyone else in the room.

"Some secrets you bury so deep, you almost forget they're there."

She wet her lips, hands rising slowly in front of her chest, a gesture halfway between warding off an attack and offering surrender. "I've been carrying something," she admitted, her voice dropping to where they had to lean in to hear. "Something I never told a soul. Not even during our late-night confessionals, Kira."

The fluorescents overhead flickered, or perhaps the aurora outside intensified, but something changed in Maya's face—a luminescence rising beneath her skin, her eyes catching light that wasn't there, irises rimmed with an opalescent glow.

"I was eight when the Comet passed," she said, her voice suddenly stripped of its edge, childlike and clear. "It didn't give me powers, not exactly. But afterward, I started... perceiving things differently. Future echoes. Lies appearing as smoke around people's mouths. But mainly—" She gestured vaguely at Marcus, then Kira. "I see what people conceal. It's like everyone has an aura of truth, each person a different shade." She swallowed hard. "I've spent years blocking it out. But now, if it helps us—I'll try to use it."

Kira blinked rapidly, her mouth forming a small 'o' as the pieces clicked into place. "That explains... everything. The market. The way you always knew when I was lying about being okay."

The ice, such as it was, had finally shattered. Maya slid her crate closer to the table, elbows out, and said, "So I'm in. Whatever you're planning, count me in."

Kira felt the relief hit her like a physical force. She nodded, then looked around at the others, each one in their own way broken, patched, and dangerous.

The plan was still half-baked, the future uncertain. But in that garage, with that crew, Kira felt—for the first time in a long time—like maybe they had a shot.

Even if it killed them.



The unlock sequence crawled ahead at the pace of tectonic drift. By late morning, their modest optimism had curdled into a collective, anxious malaise. The garage was a pressure cooker: condensation running in rivulets down the oil-smudged windows, the hum of the diagnostic rig oscillating between lullaby and alarm.

UNLOCK SEQUENCE PROGRESSION: 38%

Kira could barely look at the progress bar, terrified it would stall out again. Once it hit twenty percent and froze for a heartless hour, Marcus swearing so violently the automatic language filter on the laptop popped up a warning. Twice C.J. had to get down on the concrete, disassemble the diagnostic port, and reseal the pins with his bare hands, cursing the car's mad digital personality in four languages.

Maya busied herself in a separate room, meticulously arranging the safehouse armory. She sorted the assortment of scavenged blades and stun batons, organizing them by size and potential lethality with the precision of a museum curator preparing for an exhibit. Every so often, she would linger near the diagnostic machine, her shoulders

hunched forward like a predator about to pounce, eyes boring into the progress bar as if her glare alone could intimidate it into moving along faster. Each beep and hiccup of the unlock process drew her attention, and she shot sidelong glances at Kira.

Around one, the process hit a bottleneck and the entire garage seemed to tilt on an axis. The air was thick with tension and the aftersmell of solder. Marcus stalked the perimeter like a big cat in a glass cage, popping knuckles, smoking joints, slamming caffeine gels. Kira fought the urge to vomit, instead pacing the length of the garage, tracing the same three-meter path until her thighs ached. C.J. tried to lighten things up, but his jokes landed with a grim, hollow thud: "At this rate, we'll finish before the next comet hits, but not before my warranty expires." No one laughed, except maybe Tank, who punctuated the silence with the occasional fart.

UNLOCK SEQUENCE PROGRESSION: 63%

It was after the second stall that C.J. approached her, holding out a plastic cup with a slice of lime floating in what looked like battery acid. "You're running on fumes, Kira. Hydrate, or I'm calling the union rep." There was warmth in his concern, a steady confidence that nearly brought Kira to tears. She took the cup, hands trembling, and sipped. It was tart and cold; it grounded her.

He leaned in, close enough for her to smell the solder and citrus on his skin. "You okay?" he asked, voice low.

She wanted to say yes. She wanted to say she was steel, the invulnerable woman who'd gotten herself into this mess and would see herself out. Instead, she told the truth. "I'm scared. If this doesn't work, I don't know what the hell we do next."

C.J. smiled, just a fraction. He brushed her bangs away from her forehead. “That’s the trick, Kira. You don’t know. You run the play anyway.” His thumb traced a gentle line along her temple.

The hours bled together. The progress bar, stubbornly, inched toward completion, then stuttered, then inched again. By dusk, every eye in the garage was locked on that damned screen. Even Tank looked up, ears pricked, as if he understood that whatever lived behind that progress bar was the difference between victory and total annihilation.

UNLOCK SEQUENCE PROGRESSION: 98%

The tension had become a physical entity, pressing against their skin. Marcus rolled his neck with an audible crack, lit a joint with trembling fingers, and stalked outside trailing sweet smoke. Kira’s eyes burned with unshed tears until C.J. guided her to a crate, his thumbs finding the knots along her spine with such precision that the world briefly narrowed to those points of pressure.

Maya alone remained, hypnotized by the glacial progress. The digital counter mocked them with each microscopic advance.

Then—

“HOLY SHIT—WE’RE IN!”

Maya’s voice exploded through the garage like a flashbang, sending Tank yelping under the workbench.

Marcus dropped his joint, cursing as it singed his boot. They converged on the monitor in a stampede, shoulders colliding, breath held captive in four sets of lungs. The screen pulsed with an unnatural blue glow, revealing a single directory that seemed to throb with malevolent purpose:

“Contingency_Protocol_ZERO.”

Kira's heart slammed against her sternum so violently she thought her ribs might splinter. Blood roared in her ears.

"Open it," she commanded, her voice a razor's edge. The click of the enter key sounded like a gunshot in the silence.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Corporate Shadows

THE CLICK OF THE enter key sounded like a gunshot in the silence. The main directory spawned on the holo: /SYS/BLACKBIRD/PROJECT_GREENLINE. Someone, likely Liam, had archived the files under enough encryption that Marcus had to brute-force three layers of password just to see the root structure.

Once the files resolved, the interface populated in a fractal bloom of subfolders—LAB, DEV, VIDEO, NOTES, then a locked subdirectory called DISPOSAL.

“Jesus,” Maya whispered, and reached for the control node, fingertips skating through the cool blue light. “There’s terabytes here. Decades, by the look of it.”

Kira’s skin prickled with sweat, even though the garage air was freezing. She could feel the eyes of everyone in the room waiting on her, but she just nodded at Maya, unable to trust her voice.

The first folder, LAB, revealed spreadsheets with dates, serial numbers, and terms like “genomic substrate” and “dorsal modulation.” The earliest entries dated back to Kira’s middle school years.

“By cycle twelve, they’re listing ‘anomalous morphology—subject exhibits bioluminescence’ and ‘aggressive pack behavior.’”

“Goblinization,” C.J. muttered. “Jumps species every time.”

Marcus snorted. “Poor bastards.”

Tank whined from under the table. When Kira reached down to touch his collar, she felt him trembling.

Maya advanced to the next folder: DEV. Here, the interface spat out hundreds of media files, most labeled with dates and a cryptic “GEN2” or “GEN3” tag. Kira steeled herself as Maya thumbed the first video.

The image that snapped into focus showed white mice in cages—some normal, others grotesquely oversized with fur that glowed an unnatural blue. Maya shut it off immediately.

“Skip to the summary,” Kira said, voice tight.

Marcus nodded and searched for “final report.” The interface loaded a PDF with NextGen Dynamics’ logo. “Board presentation material. Sanitized.”

Maya’s eyes darted across the text. “Applications for bioweapons... ‘targeted phenotype acceleration’... ‘designer plasmids’...” She paused, swallowing hard. “They moved from mice to dogs.”

A silence fell, thicker than before. Tank pressed harder against Kira’s knee, head heavy in her lap. She stroked his ears, not because he needed comfort but because she did.

“Timeline?” asked C.J., his voice rough.

Maya scrolled back, checked the timestamps. “Fifteen years ago, by these logs. It was already deep phase when they started the dogs.”

Marcus clicked forward. The screen filled with biochemistry jargon, punctuated by chilling phrases: “Controlled aggression,” “Phenotypic retention,” “Cognitive improvement in select models.” At the bottom: Lydia Tremaine’s signature.

Lydia Tremaine. The woman whose signature adorned Kira’s paychecks, whose portrait hung in the NextGen Dynamics lobby, whose quarterly speeches Maya had transcribed for five years running.

“It was her,” Kira said to C.J. “That’s why she wanted this buried.”

Maya collapsed the display with a pinch. “Off-books. The board never knew.”

Tank whined again, louder this time. His tail swept in an anxious arc against the cement floor. Kira kept her hand on him, grounding both of them.



They took a break only when the Glitchbox’s own battery whined, warning them of a drop to minimal power.

Marcus hooked a charger to the console, and the hum of electricity filled the dead air between them. Kira watched Tank’s ears swivel in time to the charging cycle, as if the dog had been wired for this work all along.

Marcus filtered to /PROJECT_GREENLINE/VIDEO/GEN2. The list appeared: HOB_1, HOB_2, CANID_1, CANID_2—each a timestamp, a number, a lab rat.

“We don’t have to watch them,” Kira said, fingers still deep in Tank’s fur.

“We do.” C.J.’s voice rumbled low. “To burn these assholes, we need proof.” His eyes met hers. “You can look away.”

She wouldn’t.

Marcus played the first video silently. Caged puppies, frightened but normal. Then later clips—the same animals showing strange changes that visibly disturbed even the lab techs.

Maya's hand covered her mouth. "They did it. They forced goblinization in dogs."

The next video showed a kennel. A masked lab tech set a trembling brindle pup on the floor. Then another figure entered the frame: Lydia Tremaine. Younger, but instantly recognizable—tall, severe, in a suit that even the mutt couldn't have furred up. She watched the technician for a beat, then leaned in to speak, her voice easy to read from the shape of her lips.

"Increase the dosage. We need to see the threshold."

C.J.'s hands balled into fists. The sound of his knuckles cracking was louder than the charging brick's whine.

The video ended with a report recommending the subject be retired from the program. Kira's heart sank as she realized what that meant for most test animals.

"Wait," C.J. said, leaning forward, finger stabbing the air. "Pause it. That's... is that Tank?"

Tank whined, the sound rising in pitch as his eyes locked on the image.

Maya pinched the screen, zooming in on the puppy's collar. The tag was labeled "22A." She checked the current Glitchbox's logs. "That's him. It matches the numbers in the records." She looked up at C.J., and her voice had lost all irony: "He was one of the prototypes."

For a second, no one moved. Even Marcus, who'd been stone through all of this, let his jaw sag.

Kira felt her eyes burn. She looked at Tank, who'd retreated beneath the table, tail curled tight around his leg. He was watching the screen,

but there was a wild, wounded look in his eyes that she'd never seen before.

"Do we know what happened to the others?" Kira managed.

Maya read the protocol aloud: "Animals not meeting criteria were 'humanely euthanized', and all records wiped." She turned to C.J., fingers curling into mocking quotation marks as she spat out the words humanely euthanized.' "It says he was terminated. But..." She glanced at the next folder, which was marked "HANDOVER."

Marcus opened it. The first log was a simple line: "Subject 22A delivered to C.J. Jones, per special request by—" he paused, blinking. "Margo I."

"Margo Ironheart?" Marcus asked. Kira's voice caught. "Your grandmother saved him?"

C.J. blinked hard, jaw working. "Not directly. Someone smuggled him out, brought him to her. She just told me he was special—the only one worth keeping." His fingers found Tank's ear, rubbing the soft spot behind it. "Never mentioned why."

He looked down at the dog, who pressed his head harder against C.J.'s knee, as if he, too, understood what had almost happened.

Kira watched the tension leak out of the room, replaced by a heavy, exhausted awe. Tank whined, and the sound broke her heart, but this time it felt less like fear and more like the end of a nightmare.

Maya closed the last log with a snap, then pushed away from the table. "Sons of bitches." Her voice was brittle as old wire. "They would have wiped him if someone hadn't intervened. All that intelligence, all that loyalty—and for what? Because he didn't fit the right profile?"

Marcus exhaled, slow. "It's always the same with these bastards. They think because they built it, they get to break it."

Kira slid off her stool and crouched under the table, pulling Tank's huge head into her lap. He licked her palm once, then looked up at her

with a gratitude that was almost human. She scratched his ears until he relaxed, and his breathing slowed.

Above her, C.J. sat back, a look of old pain and new relief warring on his face.

They didn't talk for a while. The holo-panel flickered, then settled into a screensaver: a slow pan of the city's skyline at night, each window a pixel of light in the darkness. Kira stared at it, feeling every inch of the distance between herself and her old life, every hour she'd spent pretending not to care about who lived or died in these corporate games.

Maya broke the spell. "We need to finish the dump. If we're going to break this, we can't leave any of it behind."

Marcus nodded, already back in the data. But the edge was gone from his movements, replaced by a quiet respect.

Kira stood, bringing Tank with her. He wagged his tail, slow, and for a second the old goofball glimmered through the trauma.

Maya gave her a look—unreadable, but softer than usual. "You did good, Kira. You saved him."

Kira shrugged, and wiped her face. "Wasn't just me."

Tank burrowed under her arm, and together they faced the next nightmare with a little less fear.



The second round of data was harder to take. Marcus bypassed the dead files, searching for anything labeled “Success Phase.” The interface coughed up a single video—short, barely two minutes—and a flurry of attached research notes. He glanced at the others. “Last one. We need to see where this went.”

They huddled in closer, Tank wedging himself between Kira and C.J. The holo brightened, showing a white room, walls lined with blast padding. In the center, a normal-looking mutt—somewhere between a husky and a pit bull—sat, wagging its tail. A tech in a lab coat fed the dog a cheese treat, then stepped back and activated a control panel.

The next thirty seconds were chaos. The dog twitched, eyes lighting up with blue fire, and suddenly the air around it shimmered, ozone and static. At first the dog just barked, but then its body arched in a blur, and the entire wall rippled like water. A section of blast padding peeled away, as if being hit with an invisible battering ram.

The tech clapped, made a note, then repeated the test. Each time, the dog responded—on cue, by command, by treat.

Kira’s stomach rolled over. She flicked her gaze to the research notes, scrolling the attached summary with trembling fingers. “They wanted... weaponized animals. Remote-controlled, or maybe even autonomous.” Her voice cracked. “These were supposed to be bioweapons.”

Marcus swore, low and vicious. C.J. said nothing, but his flesh hand curled so tight around Tank’s ruff that the dog let out a tiny grunt.

Maya was already looking ahead, pinching open the next folder: /HOBGOBLIN_PHASE. The data inside was a mess—statistical charts, timelines, a single line of text that read, “No viable outcomes—subject mortality at 100% by Day 5.”

Maya jerked away from the holo, one hand pressed to her mouth. “Those sons of bitches. They just kept scaling up until it broke everything.”

Kira was numb. She traced the log files, trying to find any sign of success or mercy, but all she found were repeated failures, casualties, and, in the last entry, a note from Lydia Tremaine.

She read it aloud: “Terminate Project Greenline immediately. All surviving subjects to be transferred to Disposal Protocol. Wipe all subdirectories and delete physical backups.”

Marcus turned, eyes narrow. “That’s the smoking gun. She buried the whole thing because it got too ugly for the execs.”

Maya shuddered, then tapped into the final folder: “SECURITY.” This one wasn’t even encrypted. It held two clips. The first was of Lydia herself, standing in a white office, dictating a memo to the board. Her words were cold, precise. “We have determined that the public relations risk outweighs any possible gains. The project will not be referenced again.”

The second video was grainy—security cam footage. It showed a door to a sublevel, two guards, and Silas, unmistakable in his suit and Oni mask, leading a line of cages. The animals inside were still, sedated, but the sight of him—so involved, so complicit—made Kira’s skin crawl.

The last log was just a series of text messages:

—“Two leaks contained. No further risk.”

—“Good. Move the rest tonight.”

—“Understood.”

Marcus exhaled, long and hard. “This is it. The whole operation—start to finish. They killed the whistleblowers, erased the evidence, and dumped the rest on the black market.”

Kira closed her eyes. She felt Tank shift against her, his heartbeat a frantic drum under her palm. “Why keep the files?” she asked, voice soft.

Maya’s eyes flashed. “Insurance policy. Corporate types never fully erase the dirt—they just bury it somewhere they can dig it up if needed. Liam probably thought these files were his golden ticket if things ever went south with the board.”

C.J. rocked back on his heels, absently rubbing where metal met flesh on his arm. “So Liam tracked your car, found out his insurance policy might be compromised, and decided to bury everything—including you.”

Kira’s fingers danced across the Glitchbox’s interface. “The car’s trying to tell me something.”

“What’s it saying?” C.J. leaned forward.

Marcus whispered, “Should’ve brought her in sooner,” but Maya waved him silent.

“Not words exactly. More like... impressions.” Kira’s eyes narrowed. “Liam uploaded the data, then tried erasing that memory. Between that and traces of your brother’s programming, the Glitchbox deliberately sought you out before Silas could intercept us.”

Maya’s gaze snapped up from her commlink. “Lydia’s maneuvering for a board position with legal immunity. Once she gets it—” She laughed, bitter and sharp. “Those files become Liam’s problem. He panicked, hired Silas. I’ve seen them together at NextGen myself.”

“So the Glitchbox saved me but dragged you all into danger?” Kira’s voice tightened.

C.J. shook his head. “Liam did that. He wanted those secrets buried—the ones that could bring down Lydia, NextGen, everything. At first, he just wanted the data. When he realized where the car had gone...” His face darkened. “That’s when he decided to solve all his problems at once.”

Marcus snapped the laptop shut, the sound sharp as a gunshot. “We have to make it public. Leak the whole archive. Otherwise they’ll just bury it with legal.”

C.J. nodded, then shook his head. “Not that easy. You post this on the open net, it gets flagged, stripped, and memory-holed in less than five minutes. Corporate has AIs with better lawyers than God.”

Maya gave a rueful smile. “He’s right. Best we could hope for is a few days on the underground before they burn it all. And with Liam still alive, he’ll just pivot and spin it. He’s a survivor.”

Kira’s mind ran the scenario, every outcome spiraling into disaster. “What about a direct hit? We send it through the right channels, force the board’s hand?”

Maya’s fingers stopped. “You’re thinking like an exec again. The only way this works is if someone inside NextGen—someone with clearance—puts the files into the mainline server. The AI can’t auto-wipe what’s part of its own legal history.”

The implication hung there, ugly and obvious.

Marcus grinned. “So we break in, use their own toys against them. I like it.”

C.J. rolled his shoulders, wincing at the fresh lines of healing scar tissue. “You up for that, Kira?”

Kira looked down at her hands, then at Tank, who whined and licked the side of her shoe. She knew the odds. She knew the city. But she also knew there were worse ways to go out than torching the assholes who made this mess.

“Yeah,” she said. “Let’s wreck their shit.”

They circled around the bench, pulling up laptops and comms. Maya and Marcus took lead on network access—one pulling blueprints of NextGen’s mainframe access points, the other hacking together a plausible entry badge and a rotating list of employee names. C.J. outlined the physical layout: security drones, timed locks, even the rotation of the janitorial staff.

Kira felt the energy return, slow but steady. The panic and fear receded, replaced by the old, iron certainty of a team running the play.

Marcus broke the planning session only once, to walk over and drag Tank out from under the bench. “You coming, big guy?” Tank wagged, slow and solemn, then flopped on the floor in a half-moon arc around Kira’s feet.

Maya grinned, showing more teeth than usual. “At least if it goes bad, we have the best legal team in the city.” She nodded at the Glitchbox, which flashed its interior lights in perfect sync with her joke.

For the first time, Kira smiled for real.

Kira looked at her friends—her crew—and nodded. “We do it tonight.”

Maya raised her mug. “To the underdogs.”

C.J. echoed the toast. “To the survivors.”

Marcus lifted his, too. “To the ones who don’t fit the profile.”

Tank, never to be outdone, barked once—loud enough to rattle the windows.

The garage vibrated with the sound, with hope, with the sense that maybe, just maybe, they could win this.

Even if it was only for a day.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Breaking and Entering

EVERYTHING HAPPENED AT ONCE. Marcus whispered to C.J., got a nod, then left. His Harley roared to life outside. “Getting supplies,” he called to Maya. “Join me?”

“Someone needs to check these files,” she said, eyes fixed on the screen.

“Back soon,” he promised, then was gone.

C.J. stepped forward. “Need a break?”

“I’ve got this,” Maya replied, eyes not leaving the screen. “You two should keep watch for Silas.”

Maya’s face went white as the footage played. She looked away. Vile as it was, the evidence was the weapon they needed.

Marcus returned with a van that slipped into the garage without a sound. C.J. helped him unload two bulging sports bags.

They spread their gear across a battered table. Under the yellow lights, the weapons gleamed like surgical tools awaiting use.

No one spoke for the first few minutes. The only sounds were the muted clicks of latches and zippers, the subdued crinkle of adhesive bandage wrappers as C.J. repacked his wound, and the faint, nervous tremor of Tank's breath as the old dog watched from his station beside the fridge.

C.J. started with the stun gloves—heavy, military-issue, the knuckles laced with a mesh of capacitors. He pulled them on, flexed his fingers, then powered the gloves up with a thumb swipe. The blue LED bands lit in a slow pulse. “Non-lethal,” he muttered, more to himself than anyone else. “That’s the theory, anyway.”

He zipped up his armored jacket—nothing fancy, just corporate riotware, the kind that could stop a point-blank beanbag or a lucky knife. It fit tighter than it had a week ago, but the bruises beneath were already yellowing, and C.J. moved like the pain was an old friend.

He set the jacket with deliberate care, then checked the tranq pistol—magazine loaded, safeties tested, a full rack of darts labeled with a color-coded sticker system that only made sense to him and maybe Tank. He holstered the pistol under one arm and strapped a compact stun baton to his thigh. C.J. looked down the inventory, then at Marcus, who was inspecting the EMP gun as if searching for spiritual flaws.

Marcus was the antithesis of C.J.'s calm. Every motion was big: popping the clip, racking the slide, snapping the safety on and off with enough force to make the plastic creak.

He wore a canvas vest studded with pockets—each one holding something illegal in at least four countries. He loaded a battery pack into the EMP pistol, cocked it, then spun it once and slipped it into a custom holster at the small of his back. “For the drones,” he said, then patted the vest. “But if things get messy, I brought a party favor.”

He produced a Desert Eagle 3000 from the depths of his coat—a gun that was less a firearm and more a portable disaster—and checked the chamber with the satisfaction of a man who liked his odds.

“Thought we said non-lethal,” C.J. rumbled.

“Thought *you* said non-lethal,” Marcus replied, grin broad and bright beneath the streaks of ash on his face. “I’m just here for morale support.”

The dog, sensing the coming storm, circled the room once, then settled between the front door and the team’s gear, blocking the only exit with two hundred pounds of green-tinged loyalty.

C.J. clicked the final clasp on his tactical vest and glanced at Maya. “Comms check?”

“Five by five,” she said, tapping her earpiece. Her eyes flicked to the monitor, then back to C.J. with a strange intensity.

Maya’s eyes narrowed as she studied the screen. “We’ll confirm when we’re there, but...” She tapped her temple. “I can sense him. Alone in that fortress he calls home.” She looked up, her face bathed in the blue glow of the display. “His security system is top-tier. On any other night, that might matter.”

She swept her hand toward the assembled team, a conductor acknowledging her orchestra.

“Poor bastard has no idea what storm is about to hit him.” The corner of her mouth curled upward, sharp as a blade. “He’s scared now? Just wait.”

C.J. nodded once. “Good.”

Kira stood, hands white-knuckled around her holopad. She wanted to say something—thank you, or good luck, or even just a joke to cut the tension—but the words caught in her throat. Kira trailed after C.J. and Maya, watching as C.J. hoisted the arthritic Tank into the van’s cargo area with surprising gentleness.

The engine rumbled to life. They'd barely made it ten feet when movement in the rearview mirror caught Kira's attention. Behind them, the garage door reversed direction, rising again as hazard lights pulsed rhythmically from the darkness within.

The Glitchbox rolled out, headlights dimmed to a conspiratorial glow.

"Oh no you don't," Kira muttered through the open window. "Stay!"

The car chirped—a sound suspiciously like laughter—and crept forward until its bumper nearly kissed the van's tow hitch.

Marcus swore, slammed on the brakes, and vaulted out. He stalked back to the Glitchbox, slapped both palms on its hood, and leaned in close enough to fog the finish with his breath. "You ridiculous, lovable disaster. This isn't some joyride. You'll light us up for every security system in a half-mile radius. Stay. Here."

The Glitchbox revved, then shut its lights off, the body language of a sulking teenager denied the keys. The car's AI spoke again, quieter this time: < "*Please, Marcus [FRIEND STATUS: COMPLICATED]. Help = desired function. Help = primary directive. Help = me?*" >

Marcus stared at the hood, then sighed and rapped the steel with his knuckles. "Fine. You keep eyes up, nothing else. If you blow our cover, I'll park you in the bay for a year."

The car flashed its lights in silent triumph, then rolled back to the mouth of the alley and went dark. Kira watched the whole exchange with a mix of disbelief and weird, parental pride.

They piled back into the van, Marcus at the wheel, C.J. in the passenger seat, Maya and Kira wedged in the back with the gear. The dog, too big for the floor, lay half across Kira's feet, heavy and reassuring.

Marcus gunned the van, took the corner at a speed that flirted with reckless, and aimed them straight at the heart of the city.

They didn't talk much on the drive. Maya ran through the plan again, crisp and clinical, her eyes never leaving the commlink. C.J. and Marcus did a silent inventory of weapons and tools, double-checked the latches, and loaded their pockets with what Kira hoped was enough to get them through the night.

As they hit the edge of the target district, the car's AI pinged the van: <“{PERIMETER_STATUS: CLEAR} {DRONE_DETECTION: 1} {DRONE_FLIGHT_PATTERN: PREDICTABLE} {THERMAL_SCAN: COMPLETE} Three meatbags with guns at north entrance. {TACTICAL_RECOMMENDATION: APPROACH_FROM_EAST} I can distract them with my horn if you want? {PROBABILITY_OF_SUCCESS: 73.4%} {EXCITEMENT_LEVEL: MAXIMUM}”>

Marcus grinned, teeth catching the last orange of the streetlights. “Show-off,” he muttered, but turned the van east anyway.



The van idled in the lee of a city park, paint job deliberately forgettable, all edges dulled by the sodium-yellow spill of the streetlights.

Marcus had thought to paper over the plates with a couple of takeout flyers, and the effect was so perfectly low-rent that Kira almost smiled. Inside, the mood hovered at the exact intersection of tension and exhaustion: not quite panic, not quite apathy, but a brittle blend of both.

Nobody spoke for the first five minutes, just the staticky fizz of Maya's commlink as she toggled through encrypted channels and the metallic click of C.J. running a soft diagnostic on the van's EM shielding. Even Marcus, who never met a silence he didn't want to break, seemed subdued, his fingers fidgeting with the rubber band that held his dreadlocks in place. Kira tried to relax, but her muscles were wired for fight-or-flight, every fiber anticipating disaster.

Finally, C.J. killed the interior lights and called, "Huddle up." He swiveled in his seat, hands braced on his knees, voice pitched to cut through the van's cheap insulation and the pulse of blood in Kira's ears. "Here's the game. We're four blocks from Liam's estate, north side."

Marcus hooked his thumb toward the rear console, where a battered tablet was taped to the dash. "Feast your eyes." He flicked the power, and a ghost-blue 3D model of Liam's estate spun into view, every fence line and security checkpoint rendered in obsessive detail.

She'd walked those manicured grounds before, champagne in hand, never noticing how the landscaping doubled as a kill zone or how the security cameras tracked every footstep.

Now she saw it for what it was—not a sanctuary, Liam's idea of "home" was a citadel with wine storage.

The Glitchbox pinged the van's dashboard:

<“{THERMAL_SCAN: COMPLETE. PRIMARY HEAT SIGNATURE: MASTER BEDROOM. SIZE/MASS MATCH: LIAM COOPER.}”>

Maya nodded at the readout, tapped the heat signature. "That's our boy. Same nervous energy coming off him in waves. He's tucked himself away in the east wing like a rat in a corner."

Marcus circled the east gate with his stylus. “Drone loops every three minutes, but security’s lazy. North side’s got two guards, but the one we care about is the lone guy at the east gate.” He zoomed in. Icons lit up the fence line. “Guards rotate at quarter-hour. They cluster north and west.”

Maya’s eyebrow shot up. “Multitasking? Cute.” Her fingers flew across her commlink.

Kira’s own voice surprised her. “Which side gate do we use? North or east?”

Marcus looked at C.J., who shrugged. “East,” he said.

C.J. traced a finger along the estate’s perimeter on the hologram. “Liam’s paranoid, but predictable. We’ll neutralize the guards at this junction, then trigger the gate remotely.” He tapped his commlink. “When the gate pops open, we all sprint for the main house. Stay tight to the hedgerow. Move as one unit.”

C.J. walked through the rest: C.J. tapped his watch. “Fifteen minutes, max. Maya, keep comms tight between all of us. If the real alarms trip, abort immediately.”

Tank let out a soft whuff at the word “alarm,” and C.J. reached down to scratch his head. “Old man’s on point, too, nobody expects the dog.”

Maya synced her headset to the van’s internal comms. “Testing, testing—Kira, can you hear me?”

“Loud and clear,” Kira replied. The familiar rush of systems online steadied her hands. “Ready on channel two.”

C.J. clipped a throat mic to his jacket and gave Marcus a similar setup. “Don’t forget to breathe. Once we go hot, it’ll get loud and fast.” He looked at the group, eyes lingering on Kira a beat longer than the others. “We clear?”

Marcus checked his holsters. “Born ready.”

Maya nodded. “Better than working retail.”

Kira’s throat was too tight for words, so she just raised a thumb and gripped her holopad like a lifeline.



Up close, the estate looked exactly as Kira remembered it—only meaner, alive with the predatory awareness of a place designed to repel unwanted visitors—a category she now belonged to in Liam’s world.

She crouched in the hollow behind a retaining wall, Maya pressed flat to her right, both of them listening to the dry leaves whisper and the throb of adrenaline in their own veins.

Somewhere closer to the house, C.J. and Marcus moved along the estate’s flank, invisible except for the blips on Kira’s commlink.

The Glitchbox’s surveillance drone was already in play—Kira could see its icon jittering along the north fence, just inside the no-fly zone. The drone wobbled drunkenly through the air, its rotors sputtering and whining before it plummeted straight down onto the fence line where the estate’s security grid began. Then chaos—three heartbeats of pure electronic panic as perimeter lamps strobed like lightning and alarm boxes wailed their digital agony across the entire block.

A chorus of barking erupted from the neighbor’s yard, matched by the shouts of two guards running north with stunners drawn.

Kira watched the single guard trot off north, joining his colleagues as the drone's lights stuttered in a manic pattern as the guards approached.

<“HELLO FELLOW HUMANS. I APPEAR TO BE MALFUNCTIONING.”> The guards exchanged glances, lowered their weapons, and tilted their heads in unified confusion.

Kira grinned in spite of herself. “Showtime,” she whispered.

The distraction gave C.J. and Marcus their window. They melted through shadows toward the gate camera, Marcus pressing a sleek, wand-like device to the camera's base. Its screen flashed green: FEED LOOPED. The lens blinked once but kept moving, replaying the same empty stretch of drive.

At the fence, C.J. unfurled a carbon-fiber blanket, draping it over the razorwire. Marcus cupped his hands, boosting C.J. up in one fluid motion.

C.J. reached back down with his gleaming metal prosthesis, his grip vise-like as he pulled Marcus through. They landed on estate grounds in perfect sync, two parts of a well-oiled machine.

C.J. wore the stun gloves, his hands sheathed in black mesh and ion capacitors that glimmered with each flex as he vanished behind a tangle of ornamental grasses. Marcus favored raw speed—he rolled the final meters, planted behind a concrete planter, and scanned the field with quick, hungry eyes.

Kira watched the lone guard from walking slowly back to his station, the compound's alarms falling silent one by one. The plan was working perfectly.

C.J. flashed a hand signal: pause. Marcus peeked over the planter, then ducked. “One guard, two meters. Upwind. You want it or should I?” he mouthed, barely moving his lips.

C.J. flicked his wrist: “I'll take it.”

Kira watched, heart in her throat, as the orc uncoiled in utter silence and closed the distance to the unsuspecting guard. The sentry, as watchful as an off-duty cop and twice as jumpy, barely registered the threat before C.J. looped an arm around his neck and pressed two knuckles to the exposed skin at his throat. The stun glove popped, blue light haloing the guard's head for a split second before the body went limp, unconscious before it hit the ground.

C.J. dragged the body behind the hedge and checked his comm. "Clear," he breathed.

Marcus, not to be upstaged, snapped his EMP pistol from its holster and sighted a surveillance drone as it patrolled above the eastern gate. He waited for the perfect angle, then squeezed. The gun spat a spatter of green sparks, and the drone pitched sideways, rotors whirring as it crashed into a stand of hydrangea. Marcus grinned, then clicked his tongue in satisfaction.

"Security's so last century," he grumbled.

Marcus and C.J. slipped toward the north perimeter, their movements fluid and practiced. On Kira's holopad, the Glitchbox's feed showed one guard frantically jabbing at the drone with a rake while his partner leaned against a tree, exhaling a cloud of vape smoke before lazily tapping notes into his commlink.

The team watched in silence as C.J. lined up his shot of his dart pitsol. Two soft pneumatic hisses later, both guards crumpled to the ground—first the vaper mid-exhale, then the rake-wielder as he turned toward his fallen colleague.

They regrouped at the base of the east gate. The structure was a blend of analog and digital—the maglock panel was state of the art, but the actual gate was just powder-coated steel and aluminum, designed to keep out the uncommitted. Marcus popped the cover on the panel, exposing a tangle of fiber and two fat, color-coded lines.

Kira, winded from the sprint, caught up as Marcus clipped his spoofing rig into the system. He turned and offered her a wink. “Watch and learn, kiddo.”

The rig flashed red, then blue, then played a tinny, three-note chime. Marcus slid his mag card through the slot, and the gate responded with a soft, hungry hiss. A faint hydraulic tremor ran up the fence as the bolts retracted. Marcus pressed a thumb against the panel, then signaled with a quick double-tap.

Maya’s commlink buzzed. She blinked at the display and turned to Kira, “We’re green.”

On the next heartbeat, Kira and Maya shouldered through the opening. Tank slipped in last, eyes alert and ears cocked for any sign of trouble.

Inside, the estate was another world—silent, landscaped to within an inch of its existence, the air scrubbed of every smell but ozone and mown grass. All along the stone paths, neat pods of LED lanterns shimmered in time with some invisible grid. Even the bugs sounded synthetic, their chirps perfectly spaced, the echoes precise.

Marcus took point, with C.J. flanking him as they approached the mansion’s main entrance. Their fingers worked in tandem on the maglock panel—Marcus splicing the circuit while C.J. jammed the signal.

As he clipped his spoofing rig into the system, a soft chime sounded. Marcus glanced at the readout and murmured, “Biometric scan just tagged Liam’s wristband on the grid—upstairs, still.”

Maya’s lips curled into something between a smirk and a snarl. “Poor Liam. All tucked in with no idea what’s coming for him.”

Kira’s jaw tightened. “Good. He’s not slipping away this time.”

The mechanism surrendered with a satisfying click.

C.J. caught Marcus's eye and nodded. "Knock knock, Liam," Marcus whispered, and on a silent three-count, they slammed their shoulders against the door in perfect synchronization, sending it crashing inward. "Ready or not, here we come!"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Collateral Damage

FOR HALF A SECOND after the mansion's main doors crashed open, nobody moved. The lobby was bigger than most city apartments, marble floors glossy enough to show each of them as a warped, running ghost. Columns soared upward, bookending a stairway so wide it looked built for the coronation of tyrants. Chandeliers hovered, weightless, each bulb a captive sun.

Kira tasted ozone—sensed the air pressure change—as a hulk of composite armor stepped into the light.

Kira's ex had clearly spared no expense on his new security detail. The last time she'd visited, it had been flesh-and-blood guards with standard-issue stunners.

This walking tank represented an investment well beyond standard security—a chrome-plated complication they hadn't planned for. Maya's uncanny ability to detect human threats had failed them. The mechanical sentinel had registered as nothing more than background noise to her senses—invisible until the moment it chose to reveal itself.

The thing was built for VIP protection, at least three meters of slab-sided polymer, its head a flat sensor dome bristling with threat.

Marcus lunged forward with a snarl, EMP raised. The robot tracked his movement in microseconds, dropping into a mechanical crouch. The shot sailed over its sensor dome. The EMP's digital display flashed a dire warning: two charges spent, one remaining. Their final shot.

Marcus pivoted, recalibrating his aim, but the machine was faster. The machine's arm lashed out like a steel whip, batting Marcus's limb aside. Before he could regain his stance, the robot's foot plunged downward, punching through muscle and bone with mechanical precision.

His scream cut through the air like shattered glass. The blow launched Marcus into a violent spiral, limbs cartwheeling through space until marble met flesh with a sickening crack.

Kira felt the collision as if it had happened to her own body—a sympathetic jolt that vibrated through her jaw and hollowed her bones from within.

The EMP pistol he'd been holding sailed from his grip, clattering end over end before skittering beneath an end table. Marcus's thigh had been shredded open, the fabric of his pants torn to ribbons where metal had punched through flesh. Crimson pooled beneath him, spreading across the marble in a slick, widening halo.

"Marcus!" Maya shrieked. Her voice registered somewhere above the siren-wail in Kira's ears. The orc was trying to crawl, but his left leg wouldn't obey, so he dragged himself forward with his fists, leaving a raw streak on the tile.

Tank reacted first. He didn't hesitate—didn't even growl before launching his entire mass at the robot's left side.

The dog hit with the force of a compact car, jaws locking around the machine's knee joint, and for an instant Kira thought the ancient beast

might actually rip the leg free. The robot staggered, metal shrieking against tooth and bone, one foot pivoting to maintain balance.

C.J. hurled himself forward, cybernetic fist cocked back like a missile. The bot pivoted—impossibly fast—catching his arm mid-swing and redirecting his momentum. His body slammed against the opposite wall with a sickening thud that knocked the wind from his lungs, leaving him momentarily stunned.

Seeing his master crumple, Tank clamped down harder. The robot's knee joint shrieked in mechanical agony as it tried to dislodge the dog, servos whining in protest. Tank only sank his teeth deeper, the metal beginning to warp beneath the crushing pressure of his jaws.

A warning light flashed on the robot's chest—amber, then red. A blur of secondary motion caught Kira's periphery: from an alcove halfway up the grand staircase, a dozen metallic spheres buzzed out, trailing blue LED afterimages like taillights in rain. The spheres unfolded as they flew, propellers blooming, micro-blades spinning at speeds that blurred the air itself.

The robot's threat sensors swiveled wildly, its combat protocols suddenly overridden. It wasn't targeting them anymore—it was preparing for something outside. The Glitchbox.

The drones split formation, attacking in two waves. Outside, the Glitchbox had reached the mansion's threshold, engine growling with determination until the metallic spheres swarmed it from every angle. Its headlights flashed in erratic patterns—the machine equivalent of terror. When the first wave struck, the car's panels burst into white-hot fragments. The impacts didn't explode so much as thunderclap, each concussion reverberating through the mansion's foundation like divine punishment.

The Glitchbox's AI projected a frantic alert onto Kira's holopad, its bright letters flashing like a warning beacon. She barely registered the message before chaos consumed her attention.

The next drone volley shrieked overhead, one clipping C.J. on the shoulder and sending him into a hard, protective crouch over Kira and Maya. The projectile ricocheted off his cybernetic arm, leaving a gash in the sleeve and a spray of black fluid that might as well have been blood.

"Get the gun!" Marcus bellowed. He was sprawled near the end table, his massive hands scrabbling for traction. The EMP pistol glimmered just out of reach, spinning slowly in a puddle of his own blood.



"Tank, back!" C.J. bellowed, but the dog was already in motion. He spun around the bot's flank, aiming to cripple the other leg. This time, the robot anticipated: it whipped an arm down in a scything arc, a solid steel appendage connecting with Tank's barrel chest.

The crack was so loud that for a split second, everyone froze.

Kira saw the impact collapse Tank's side—heard the dog yelp, a sound that shredded her—then watched him hit the floor and skid ten feet, leaving a trail of red and green fur behind.

Tank tried to rise, but his hindquarters just wouldn't listen.

His eyes, desperate and wild, tracked C.J. as the orc charged, the world narrowing to just the two of them and their shared enemy.

C.J. didn't play it clever.

He just went in, head down, cyber-arm cocked back. The robot fired off a punch, but C.J. let it glance off his shoulder, then slammed his fist straight into the machine's breastplate.

The bot's torso deformed, a flower of metal caving in around the impact point. C.J. ripped his fist free, wires and splinters of circuit board following. The robot staggered, trying to recalibrate, but C.J. didn't stop—he battered it again, and again, every blow raw, fast, furious.

Kira could see his face—lips peeled back, eyes lit with something that wasn't just anger. He was crying, maybe, but the tears lost in the grease and sweat and blood.

The bot's left arm shot out, catching C.J. across the face. He spun, slipped, and went down to one knee. The robot raised both arms, intent on crushing him like a can.

Maya lunged for the EMP pistol, her fingers closing around the grip. "Get down!" she screamed, then slammed her shoulder against a marble column. She planted her feet wide, steadied her aim, and jammed the muzzle into the robot's armpit joint—the one vulnerable spot where its armor couldn't protect vital circuitry.

She fired.

The pulse hit like a body blow. The robot seized, every motor locking at once, then convulsed with a shudder that shook the floor. Its head did a slow, pathetic 360. One arm pinwheeled, then dropped limp, the other followed. Then the whole machine folded to its knees and faceplanted, skidding lifeless into the wreckage at the foot of the stairs.

The silence after was obscene.

Maya crawled to C.J.'s side. He was conscious, but his nose was broken, and a purple-black contusion blooming across his jawline. He

wiped blood from his mouth and staggered to his feet, not looking at her, just staring at the dead robot.

Marcus was still upright, but he'd bled through his pants completely. He was half-sitting, half-slumped against the dog, both of them breathing in shallow, syncopated gasps.

Kira rushed to Tank. She tried to remember the first aid from HR's "biohazard threat" seminars, but it all blurred out. Instead, she ran her hands along Tank's ribs, feeling the way the chest caved in and the wet, sucking sound with every inhale.

C.J. dropped next to her. He put both hands on the dog's head and pressed his brow to Tank's ear. "It's okay, buddy," he said, voice gravel.

Tank licked at C.J.'s knuckles, tongue trembling, then let his head fall onto the marble. The blood beneath him spread in a weirdly beautiful spiral, vivid green and arterial red mixing on the tile.

C.J. never looked away from the dog. Maya hovered, breathing like she might pass out, and Marcus just watched, silent, his own pain irrelevant in the face of the moment.

Kira finally found her voice. "We need to stop the bleeding," she said. "For both of you."

C.J.'s hands were slick with blood and something oily from the robot, but he dug into the zipper pocket on his jacket, fumbling out the sealed trauma kit. He tore it open with his teeth and shook out the contents: a roll of synth-skin tape, a stack of gory trauma patches, a disposable injector. His breath still came in ragged staccato, and he worked on the dog with a single-minded violence, slapping the patch onto the worst of the open wounds and trigger-firing a clotting agent into the meat of Tank's shoulder.

Kira tried to stay out of his way. The dog's chest didn't seem to move at all before the patch's drugs kicked in and Tank took a long, snorty inhale, spraying blood-flecked foam onto the marble. He

whimpered, deep in his throat, then licked C.J.'s arm. C.J. grunted, ignoring the blood streaming from his own split brow and the way his nose had taken on a new, impossible angle. He braced the dog's ribcage, hands gentle but absolute, and guided Kira to wrap the synth-skin tape tight and spiral it three times around the wound.

Maya had already gone to Marcus, but he shoved her off with his good hand. "Dog first," he rasped, then pointed at the end table. "Just give me a bandage and some pills. The good kind."

She obeyed, cracking open the emergency med-kit and fishing out a canister marked FIBRIX-XTRA. Marcus snatched a fistful of the chalky tablets, knocked them back with a slug from his battered hipflask while Maya wrapped his leg with quantum-mesh bandages that pulsed blue as they sealed against his skin.

Maya helped Kira up. "We have to go. Now. Tank—"

"I'll carry him," C.J. said, more gently than Kira thought possible. "We're not leaving him."

Kira nodded, her eyes blurring.

Maya pointed down the corridor. "Liam's panic room is at the back, past the wine cellar. If he's here, that's where he'll be. We stick to the plan."

They moved, not fast, but together. C.J. cradled the dog in both arms, holding him like a child. Marcus limped, one arm slung over Kira, the other hand gripping his final backup, the Desert Eagle 3000 pistol, with white-knuckled determination. Maya covered the rear, eyes never leaving the smoldering ruin of the robot until they rounded the corner.

They pressed on, down hallways washed in red emergency lights, past art so expensive it might as well be firewood, past the gory streaks of their own survival.

Kira could feel her heart in her throat, and every step echoed the truth: they were bleeding, but they were not beaten.

Not yet.



The mansion's alarms dialed up another notch, the siren screaming over every other sound, drilling into Kira's skull with a frequency that made her teeth ache. Red emergency strobes lit the corridor, painting the team in flashes of raw muscle and bone. The marble underfoot was slick with Tank's blood, with Marcus's blood, with the spray from C.J.'s busted nose. The air tasted of copper and melted insulation, and somewhere overhead, gears ratcheted, prepping for the next round.

"We need to move, now!" Kira barked, dropping to one knee beside Tank as the old dog fought to breathe. His eyes flicked from her to C.J., searching for meaning. She wanted to tell him he was done, that he could rest, but she needed him—needed all of them—moving.

C.J. knelt beside her, arms gentle as he gathered the dog up, cradling him tight against his chest. Blood soaked C.J.'s jacket, the dark spreading in Rorschach shapes, but he didn't flinch. "Hold on, big guy," he whispered, lips to Tank's ear. "You made it this far. Don't quit."

Marcus staggered upright, breath coming in short, ragged puffs. The leg was bad and he hissed every time he put weight on it, but didn't slow. "Where to?" he gasped, the words slurred by pain and the meds.

Kira scanned the hallway, memorizing the turns from Liam's blueprints and her own visual memory. "The panic room," she said, steady as she could. "It's two lefts, then through the library. If we hustle, we can—"

Maya didn't wait for the rest. "Go!" she yelled, scanning the ceiling for more drones. She took point, her steps featherlight on the runner, eyes darting from every door to the next.

Kira and C.J. followed, C.J. still carrying Tank. Marcus brought up the rear, limping hard, one hand pressed to the ruined thigh, the other clutching the wall for balance. The red lights made the hallway seem endless, every inch repeating on a loop, every doorway a fresh invitation for death.

Maya cleared the entryway, checked the corners, then waved the rest of them through.

Inside, the room was chaos—upended chairs, antique books strewn across the carpet, a rolling bar cart toppled and leaking hundred-year-old whiskey into the air.

Marcus's teeth flashed in a bloody smile. "Someone's been redecorating."

The only thing untouched was a painting above the fireplace: a too-perfect portrait of Liam, smirking in digital brushstrokes. For half a second, Kira wanted to throw something through the frame.

Instead, she focused on the hidden door. She'd seen it once at a NextGen holiday party, when a drunken junior exec had tried to impress her with tales of the "impenetrable bunker." She'd played it off at the time, but now every pixel of that night replayed itself in her mind.

Kira crossed to the bookshelf and ran her fingers along the third shelf, right of center. She grabbed the spine of "Principles of Corporate Warfare," pulled it back, and heard the click.

The shelf swung open, slow and theatrical. Beyond was a narrow hallway, lined with blast-resistant steel. At the end, a single door waited—matte black, no visible lock, but with a glass palm scanner set at chest level.

The final countdown had begun, and there was no turning back now.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Panic Room Gambit

MARCUS AND KIRA MOVED as a pair, but only in the loosest, most tragic sense of the word. Marcus's ruined thigh left bloody coins on the marble—at first dots, then a string, then a full arterial signature that would damn him in any forensics lab. Kira did her best to keep him upright, an arm snaked under his bulk, her other hand white-knuckling the dead weight of the toolkit. The world had shrunk to just the hallway, the echo of distant alarms, and the cold certainty that the next thirty seconds would decide everything.

The panic room lived up to its billing: matte-black, seam-welded, no visible hinges. The kind of door you only found in CEO wet dreams or military bunkers on the wrong side of history. The only adornment was a glass keypad and a flush-mounted intercom, both gleaming with fingerprints—Liam's, Kira guessed, though she doubted she'd find a whorl out of place.

Marcus hissed through his teeth as he collapsed against the wall, head slumping to the side. "You gonna knock, or just let the man sweat?"

Kira ignored him, focused on the keypad. The intercom glowed a gentle blue, almost mocking. She pressed the “call” and the button instantly fogged over with the heat of her skin.

The speaker opened with a faint static pop. “If you’re here to beg, save your breath,” came Liam’s voice, filtered through enough encryption to sound barely human. “You’ve already lost, Kira. All you’re doing is making the after-action report thicker.”

Her answer was arctic. “You have sixty seconds to open the door before Maya launches the full blackfile dump. We found the footage. We know about the Silas, the hobgoblin trials, the goblin-mice, the canid massacre—hell, the board’s going to know in about ten seconds, so you’re already running on borrowed time.”

A long pause. In the background, she could hear the quick staccato of keystrokes, maybe the panic-room’s own comms relay, maybe just Liam drumming fingers as he calculated.

“Bullshit,” he said finally. “You don’t have the keys to publish, you don’t have the channels. And even if you did—what, you think the city gives a shit about dead dogs? About goblin babies?”

The red emergency lights flickered again, and Kira was suddenly aware of the heat pouring off Marcus’s body, the steam from the wound mixing with the chill of the marble. She let go of the toolkit and pressed her palm to the glass of the panic room keypad.

“Guess we will know soon enough. Last chance, Liam. Come out, or we blow it and let the world see what’s left of you.”

Another silence, longer. Then: “You don’t have the gear. Even if you did, that’s two feet of carbon mesh and composite plate. You’d need a bomb.”

Marcus laughed, and the sound was half-rattle, half-fury. He pulled a heavy, pale brick from his vest—a chunk of what looked, in this light, exactly like C4. The sight of it made Kira’s stomach lurch, because she

was pretty sure Marcus's hands weren't steady enough to wire it for a soft detonation.

But Marcus worked with the confidence of a man who'd done this before. He pressed the brick to the keypad, shaped it over the locking bolts, then turned to Kira. "Go ahead," he said, voice like gravel. "Let him hear it."

She hit the intercom again. "I suggest you step away from the door, Liam. Marcus has a party favor he's dying to try out."

Another stuttered pause. This time, when Liam spoke, his voice was higher, a quiver barely perceptible through the filter. "You're bluffing. The blast would turn me into paste."

Marcus held up a small transmitter, thumb on the button, and smiled at the camera. "Oh, it'll paint these walls real pretty. And honestly?" He leaned closer to the camera. "After the day I've had, watching you go boom sounds like therapy."

The clock ticked. Somewhere in the house, the alarms finally choked and died. The only sound left was Marcus's rough, wet breathing and the drip, drip, drip of his blood onto the floor.

Kira glanced down at the C4—then closer. She realized, with a sick little rush, that it wasn't military-issue at all. The color was a touch off, the texture not quite right. She reached out and pinched off a corner between her thumb and forefinger. It broke like modeling clay, not explosive. Marcus had faked the whole thing, the mad bastard. But in the sodium glow of the hallway, even she would have fallen for it.

She mouthed a silent thank you as she mashed the putty back in place.

Liam's voice came back, uncertain now. "You're both insane."

Marcus was coughing blood, but his answer was razor-sharp. "Takes one to know one. I can count to three, or you can open the fucking door."

A beat. Then another.

“Three,” said Marcus, barely a whisper.

A hiss, a whine, the low rumble of pressurized hydraulics as the panic room disengaged its bolts. The seam along the side widened, then receded, and the door inched open on a silent track. It wasn’t even dramatic—just a six-inch slit, as if the house itself had lost interest.

Liam stood behind the opening, face slick with sweat and a faint smudge of dried blood at his hairline. He wore the same suit from the last time she’d seen him—charcoal, tailored, the jacket hanging loose at his frame. His eyes flicked over Kira first, then Marcus, then to the plasticine brick still smooshed over the keypad.

For a long second, nobody spoke.

Then Liam’s face reset, the old corporate smirk fighting to reassert itself. But it never reached his eyes. He looked ten years older, the lines deeper, the jaw more fragile. There was nothing left of the old NextGen dynamo.

He stepped into the hall, hands up, the picture of compliance.

“You win,” he said. “Let’s talk.”

Marcus grinned, spat a clot onto the marble, and let himself slide all the way to the floor. “Sure, boss. After you.”

Kira watched as the panic room’s door hissed wider, spilling sterile light into the gloom. She met Liam’s gaze and saw, not defeat, but a hollow, feral calculation. The kind of look that said the game was never really over—just in a different quarter.

She took a breath, steadying herself for whatever came next.

“Move,” she told him, and Liam did.



The moment Liam stepped into the corridor, everything happened in negative: the light, the time, the breath in Kira's lungs. She saw the move before he made it—maybe because she'd dated him, maybe because every corporate bastard had the same playbook. His right hand flicked toward his belt, and the glint of matte steel caught in the security lighting. She was already moving, pivoting on her heel, when his left hand snaked around her neck and yanked her tight against his chest.

The gun—compact, executive-issue, a polymer-ceramic blend—pressed against the side of her ribs. For a second, they were locked in a parody of a dance, his chin digging into her hair, her breath caught on the ridgeline of his collarbone. He reeked of cologne and desperation.

"Let's not get dramatic," he hissed in her ear, squeezing until her feet left the floor. "Walk us out, or I'll paint this hallway with you."

Out of the corner of her eye, Kira saw Marcus shift, moving to draw attention, slow and deliberate so as not to startle the trigger. Marcus's mouth curled up, just a fraction, like he'd been waiting for Liam to try something this stupid.

"You don't want to do that," Kira managed, the words slurred by the pressure on her windpipe.

Liam's breath tickled her ear. "Try me," he whispered, almost tender, like they were still lovers sharing secrets. Kira's eyes flicked down

to the gun pressed against her ribs. Liam might order her execution from behind a desk, but could he really pull the trigger himself? The safety catch glinted in the dim light—still engaged. Her window was narrow, but it existed.

She took it.

Her free hand curled under his wrist, hunting for the angle, the vector, the pressure point that C.J. had drilled into her, still fresh in her mind from this morning in the safehouse. “Use what they give you.” It played back in her mind, perfect and brutal. She twisted her body, not away from the gun, but into it, using her own mass to lever Liam’s hand up and forward. Her thumb jammed into the soft web of his palm. His grip spasmed.

She found his thumb, bent it backward with all the intent of a woman tired of being underestimated. She heard the joint pop, then Liam’s yelp—a high, wild sound that sounded nothing like the man who’d once bought her sake on a rooftop in Ginza and whispered promises into her skin. His hand snapped open, the gun dropping to the floor with a dull plastic crack.

Marcus didn’t wait for the next beat. He launched himself from the wall, pain or no pain, and drove his fist into Liam’s face. The sound was wet and decisive—a nose breaking, cartilage going to pieces. Liam’s head snapped back; blood sheeted down over his lips and chin, spattering the marble with crimson.

Marcus kicked the gun away, sending it skittering down the corridor and under a credenza.

Liam staggered, clutching his face. For a second, Kira saw the man he used to be—confident, cocky, always one move ahead. But that man was gone. The one left behind was just flesh and nerves, leaking blood and pride.

Marcus was on him again, this time pinning Liam to the panic room wall. “That was for the dog,” he said, breath hot and ragged, lips peeled back in a rictus. “And this—” he drove a knee into Liam’s gut, folding him in half—“is for every kid you erased with a spreadsheet.”

Liam collapsed to the floor, arms wrapped around his stomach, nose a ruin, his suit stained beyond dry cleaning.

Kira knelt next to him. She felt nothing—not rage, not satisfaction, just a brittle, electric clarity. She leaned in close, voice flat as glass. “Call off the alarms. Now. Unless you want to go viral as the world’s most punchable war criminal.”

Liam coughed, spitting a clot into his own lap. “They’ll kill you. The Feds, the board, my security—”

“They’ll kill you first,” Marcus said. “That was your last card. Play it.”

Liam rolled onto his back, and for a heartbeat Kira thought he’d lost consciousness. But then he fumbled for his wrist, thumbed the interface, and pulled up the security overlay. The sleeve of his suit tore as he yanked it down, revealing a strip of bruised, discolored skin and the glowing blue matrix of his ID chip.

He flicked through the menu, blood smearing the glass. His hands shook, but he still managed to disable the perimeter alarms, the drones, even the hardwired panic line to the local precinct. The lights in the hall faded from angry red to a soft, indifferent gold.

Maya’s voice pinged through Kira’s commlink, tinny with distance but bright with adrenaline. “Just say the word, babe. I’ve got the whole board queued. One click and Lydia’s dirty laundry is on every feed from here to Osaka.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Public Exposure

MAYA CHEN STOOD OVER the white leather settee, her silhouette carved in neon and siren-strobe, watching the upload bar on Liam's data terminal inch toward apotheosis. The living room was trashed: shattered vases bleeding orchids onto imported marble, a confetti of wine glass and blood polka-dotting the floor, and the air gone thick with ozone, panic, and the metallic ghost of money burning. The only thing unbroken was the panoramic view of New Fay City's midnight skyline, aurora glimmer reflected in the floor-to-ceiling windows like the world's most expensive TV.

Tank lay at the room's edge, slumped on a bed of cashmere pillows looted from Liam's own showroom couch. His chest was swaddled in makeshift bandages and shock-blanket foil, the job done expertly by Maya with a surgeon's cold efficiency. The dog was breathing—just—but every inhale was a war.

C.J. and Marcus flanked the man of the hour, who now seemed impossibly smaller off his dais of power and out from behind his glass walls. Liam's shirt was torn to ribbons, blood and spit flecked on the collar; a swelling the size and color of a bruised mango blossomed along his jaw. C.J.'s fists hung loose at his sides, relaxed, profession-

al. Marcus gripped Liam's biceps in a hold meant to dislocate or steady—dealer's choice.

The data terminal dinged. Maya's eyes narrowed at the terminal. "It's ready. Every news outlet on the planet—legit, fringe, and underground—is about to get a pristine data dump straight from the dragon's mouth." Maya called, voice sharp and hungry as fresh glass.

Liam didn't even look up. He was busy leaking tears—ugly, childish ones—and trembling, the terror so thick it overrode the practiced calm of a man who'd survived boardrooms, hostile takeovers, and that one time in Beijing when the river caught fire. All the masks were gone. The executive, the lover, the secret war criminal—what remained was pure, uncut desperation.

"I'll give you anything," he blurted. "Anything. Money, connections, you want to be on the Board? I can—" His voice cracked, and for a second he reverted to something almost pre-adolescent. "Please, Kira. Please, Maya. Don't let them—don't let her—"

C.J. punctuated the plea with a straight punch to the gut. Liam's knees folded, and he let out a mewling cough, but Marcus hoisted him upright, knuckles digging just shy of breaking skin.

Maya circled the settee, her hair wild with static and sweat, and planted herself in front of Liam. "You know what's funny?" she asked, not waiting for an answer. "The first time I met you, I thought you were a magician. The way you talked. The way you made everyone else in the room vanish."

She got close—close enough that Liam tried to shrink away, but Marcus held him fast. "Turns out, you were just a con man with better branding."

Liam started to protest, but Maya cut him off with a gesture, so small and final it might as well have been a guillotine blade.

"No more talking," she said.

Maya's hands trembled, just barely, as she wiped sweat from her palms onto the fabric of her skirt. Then she looked at Kira. "He's not lying. Not this time."

The room froze. C.J. cocked his head, unsure whether to punch or listen. Even Tank, half-conscious, fixed Maya with one milky eye.

She knelt in front of Liam, so close now that her breath fogged the glass of his glasses. She stared into his eyes, unblinking, as if waiting for some invisible movie to play across his irises.

"Liam, I've always been able to see the truth in people. Even when they're lying to themselves. Right now," Maya whispered, "your aura is pure blue. Guilt blue. With just a streak of gray. Like you did all this, but you weren't the one holding the gun."

Liam's tears kept coming, but he looked up, hope rising on the wet wreckage of his face.

"But the gray," Maya went on, "that's not regret. That's fear. And behind that—" Her own eyes flashed, ringed with electric white. "—is a woman. Lydia Tremaine."

Kira felt her own heart skip, like Maya had just read the ending of a book Kira hadn't realized she was inside.

Maya smiled, all teeth, not kind. "You're a bastard, Liam, but you're not the architect. You're just the project manager."

Liam sagged in Marcus's grip, the truth draining the last vertebrae of his pride.

The living room was silent but for the hum of the terminal, the low moan of distant police sirens, and the sound of Tank fighting to breathe. C.J. nodded, understanding the unsaid. Marcus, still holding Liam, looked at Kira and raised his chin—a question, a dare, or maybe just the world's worst handoff.

Kira realized every eye in the room—C.J., Marcus, Maya, even the battle-scarred canine, fighting for each breath—were looking at her. It was her call now, her story to write or erase.

She swallowed, tasting salt, and for the first time in years felt the true weight of responsibility. The world teetered on the pivot of her next sentence.

But she didn't flinch.



Kira stepped forward, the hush in the room squeezing around her like a vice. She saw herself reflected in the terminal screen—a tired, bruised woman with blood crusted at the hairline and resolve hard as obsidian in her eyes. She didn't wait for a speech or a vote or a cathartic confession. She just pressed her index finger to the holotouch, found the button labeled “upload: global,” and stabbed it with enough force to make the glass creak.

The effect was instant. The data—every buried crime, every black-file, every shuddering archive of corporate sin—flooded onto the open feeds, a hemorrhage of secrets that would drown the city's conscience before sunrise. The terminal's screen rolled footage, images, names, dates. All the ghosts of Project Greenline dancing on the world's stage at last.

Liam shrieked—a sound so wet and wounded it didn't seem possible from a man who had spent his life ordering pain, never feeling it.

He lunged for the terminal, but Marcus yanked him back by the collar, muscle alone making a joke of his struggle.

“No, no, no,” Liam rasped. “You don’t know what you’ve done. They’ll come after you. They’ll come after your families, your—”

C.J. grunted, pulled a pair of industrial zip-ties from his belt, and cinched them around Liam’s wrists with the unhurried authority of a TSA agent prepping for a busy holiday weekend.

“Relax,” C.J. murmured. “We’re not keeping you.” He flicked a glance at Maya, who nodded once and started swiping her commlink, her hands a blur on the keys.

Maya’s opened a secure channel, pinged the coordinates, attached the dossier, and sent it on a one-way trip to every major government federal agency in the city.

“Okay. Feds are on their way,” she said, checking her watch.

Kira felt her body unlock. She looked at the others: Marcus steady as a bulldozer, C.J. focused, Maya serene in the eye of the hurricane. Even Tank was watching, his eyes cloudy but present, the old soul refusing to fade before the job was done.

Kira let herself kneel next to Tank. She ran her hand through his battered fur and whispered, “You did good, boy. You did perfect.”

Tank’s tail thudded once, as if to say, “Don’t get sentimental now. We need to split.”

Outside, the world had gone even more insane.

A single siren wailed in the distance, then another joined it. Through the haze, red and blue lights pulsed faintly, still blocks away but steadily approaching. A lone first-responder drone drifted overhead, its searchlight sweeping methodically across the street, pausing on the smoke rising from the Glitchbox.

Their demon-on-wheels sat crumpled against a decorative boulder, its front end a mess of twisted metal and shattered glass. Steam hissed

from beneath the scorched hood where the drone had struck, while the remaining headlamp cast a crooked yellow beam across the lawn. Inside the cockpit, the dashboard blinked frantically like a patient coding on a hospital table.

Kira limped to the Glitchbox and pressed her palm against its scorched hood. Above, the police drone's lights strobed crimson and cobalt across her face. Then—a metallic shriek pierced the air. The Glitchbox's own surveillance unit, having long freed itself from the tree, had launched itself like a missile, colliding with the police drone. Both machines spiraled away, trailing sparks until they plunged into the neighbor's infinity pool with a spectacular geyser of chlorinated water.

The unexpected diversion bought them a reprieve, and Kira for a split second felt the heat of the engine through her palm—the car's metallic heartbeat, slow and steady, refusing to give in. "Thank you," she said, not caring how it sounded. "We'd be dead without you."

The car's display flashed, stuttered, and projected a shaky line of text onto the windshield:

<“{KIRA: BEST DRIVER. GLITCHBOX: LOYAL UNTIL END OF DAYS.}”>

She almost laughed, but the tears came first. She wiped her nose with the back of her hand and glanced up as C.J. and Marcus emerged from the garage, each carrying an ancient, battered fire extinguisher.

"We're gonna fry the controller if we don't cool her down," Marcus said, already popping the pin. He doused the Glitchbox's left side in white foam, the stuff hissing and spitting as it hit hot metal. C.J. took the other side, working in methodical sweeps, never missing a spot.

Kira ducked back into the house long enough to grab Tank's makeshift cot and a handful of painkillers from the guest bathroom. She found Marcus already working the tow rig from the van—heavy-duty chains, a ratcheted harness, the works, C.J. trotting up next to him to help.

"Can he make it?" Kira asked, nodding at the Glitchbox.

Marcus's grin was savage. "She'll limp, but we just need her for one more night."

C.J. joined them, dragging Liam in tow. The executive's fight was gone; he hung limp in the orc's grip, head lolling, lips flecked with the residue of his own self-pity. They left him on the doorstep, where he could watch the blue-and-white of the patrol cars closing in. Maya even set the smartlock to keep him from crawling off anywhere inconvenient.

"Let's roll," Maya said. "Sirens are getting louder."

They loaded Tank into the back of the van, nestled him in a fortress of blankets and pillows. Kira took shotgun; Maya drove. Marcus rode in the rear, a tranq pistol at his hip and a chunk of metal pipe at his feet, just in case the night got creative.



C.J. slid behind the wheel, fingers flexing on the synth-leather grip, his cybernetic arm clicking as the servos braced for recoil. He didn't

bother buckling in; safety was for people with plans. “Everyone set?” he barked over his shoulder.

Kira clicked the belt, glanced back at Maya and Marcus—both jammed into the rear bench with Tank cocooned between them, his face turned to the side as if even now the dog was plotting an escape. Maya had a hand on Tank’s chest, two fingers pressed to the heartbeat; Marcus kept one palm flat against the window, scanning the street for headlights or death.

The Glitchbox jerked behind them, wheels spinning, a grimace of red LED over the crumpled grille. The tow chain was tight, but Kira could swear the car was somehow steering itself, following on nerve and spite.

The first sirens dopplered from the east. C.J. slammed the van into gear and punched it; the engine howled, and the van shot down the drive, outpacing the oncoming cop cars by at least two seconds. C.J. laughed—a sound bright and sharp as shrapnel. “Come on, you bastards. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

Red and blue spilled over the hedges as the security gate exploded inward, a flood of black-and-white cruisers already crowding the street. For a second, Kira thought they were dead before they began, but C.J. did something insane—swerved into the landscaping, took out two gnomes and a patch of gene-edited roses, and cut across the neighbor’s lawn at forty miles an hour. The van caught air, slammed chassis-first into asphalt, then fishtailed onto a feeder road where shipping containers loomed like industrial tombstones. Behind them, the Glitchbox clung to life, its wheels somehow finding purchase despite the mangled frame, as if the AI was navigating through sheer electronic willpower.

The police overshot, then tried to double back, but by the time they found their line C.J. had already ripped through three blind corners

and was using the service alleys to get lost. “Hold on!” C.J. yelled, spinning the van so tight Kira’s vision blurred. “Marcus, you see any tails?”

“Not yet!” Marcus barked, eyes wide, jaw clamped so hard his tusks left grooves in his cheek.

Maya reached for the dash and jacked into the Glitchbox’s external feed, using the AI’s sensors as a rearview. She called out the turns: “Left in ten meters. Then up and over the tracks.”

C.J. took the turn at a speed that would have vaporized a lesser van, the frame groaning but holding. The aurora flared overhead, painting the alley in bruised purples and orange, and the van’s roof antenna whipped back and forth like a cat’s tail in a thunderstorm.

Kira gripped the armrest so hard her knuckles ached. She watched as the buildings grew meaner, older, the perfect lines of corporate glass giving way to concrete blocks tattooed with angry graffiti and the shadow-lurking shapes of the Orc slums. She’d always been a city girl, but never like this—every cross street, every dumpster and rusted fire escape, seemed to be holding its breath for the next crash.

Two blocks ahead, a line of cop cars screamed past on the main drag, lights strobing in the smog. But C.J. ducked right, then left again, using the city’s own paranoia to blind the chase.

Kira risked a look back. Tank was still, but awake—his eyes following every curve, every jolt, as if the dog knew the stakes. Maya’s hand never wavered. Marcus had his pipe ready, but his face was turned away from the fight, staring at something inside himself.

The wounded car clung to their wake like a loyal pet, its tow chain taut as a leash. C.J. yanked them right, then plunged beneath a tunnel so low that Kira heard the Glitchbox’s roof shriek against centuries-old brick. “We’re close,” Maya announced, her voice a steel rod that no one dared question.

Then, the exit: a sudden, impossible open road, the warehouses ending and the city's edge tumbling into cold, wild nothing. The van hit the highway, the chain yanking the Glitchbox into a perfect drift. Behind them, the sirens grew faint, then vanished into the neon smog.

C.J. kept the van rolling until the skyline was just memory, the aurora the only thing left to mark the way.

The cabin filled with silence—not the hollow kind, but the aftermath of a storm, when every sound feels like a beginning.

Kira looked at her friends, her wrecked family, and felt something shift in her chest. For the first time since Zac died, she thought maybe she'd made the right call. Maybe she was more than just a gear in someone else's disaster.

C.J. eased off the throttle, turning the wheel with a surgeon's care. "Well," he said, "that went better than I expected."

Maya let out a breath. "Don't get mushy on us, C.J."

Marcus laughed, the sound raw but alive. "Let's get Tank to a vet before he decides to eat the rest of us."

The Glitchbox, battered and foamed, flashed its lights twice and played a snippet of "We Are the Champions" through its broken speakers.

Kira wiped her eyes, but the tears felt new. Not mourning—just air, just relief.

They drove on, past the limits of the map, four and a half souls and one stubborn car.

The city receded. The future, for once, was unwritten.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Healing Magic

THEY SPENT THE NEXT day on Kira's couch, all four of them, bodies stitched into a single, ungainly mound. C.J. took up the most space, long legs stretched across the coffee table, his cybernetic arm cradling Kira against his chest. She pressed her face into the soft, olive curve of his throat, inhaling the solder-and-citrus of his after-shave, and tried to memorize the shape of safety. The old dog sprawled at their feet, bandages crusted with enough blood to look dire, but every hour he thumped his tail when anyone said his name, so Kira marked him as alive until proven otherwise.

Marcus and Maya each claimed an armchair: Marcus shirtless, leg wrapped in surgical mesh, stitches glinting above his knee; Maya with a cold beer in each hand, alternating sips, eyes never leaving the holotube bolted to the wall.

Outside, the balcony was a bone yard. The Glitchbox—paint scorched, roof half-peeled, one wheel bent at a cartoon angle—sat nose-in against the railing, dash lights flickering in a last, stubborn semaphore. Kira watched the car's instrument panel wink red-blue-green through the sliding door, thought about saying thank you, and then didn't. The car already knew.

On screen, the news anchors had abandoned all pretense of neutrality. They ran footage on loop: aerials of the NextGen campus swarmed by federal drones; crowds of protestors howling for the CEO's blood; a cut-up edit of the experimental dog trials, the faces of the scientists blurred but the pain in the animals' eyes left unfiltered. The segment played on mute, but you could still feel it. Every few seconds the camera would cut to the anchor, face washed in blue screen, blinking as if she, too, was just trying to wake up from the horror.

Kira let her gaze wander the room. For the first time in years, she saw her friends exactly as they were: ugly, patched, irreparably real. C.J. grunted at every fresh bruise but never shifted away from her. Marcus cradled a bottle of arnica oil like it was holy, knuckles bandaged and stained. Maya—always the mystery—watched the news with a focus that made the rest of the world shrink to pixels.

It was Marcus who spoke first, voice hoarse but rich. "Never thought I'd see the day. Orc on the six o'clock, not even perp-walked. You believe that shit?"

C.J. snorted, arm tightening around Kira. "It won't last. But we bought them a few hours, at least. Enough for the world to notice."

Kira wasn't so sure, but she let the optimism stand. Maya drained one beer and opened the next with her thumbnail, the cap ping off the armrest. She raised the bottle to Kira. "You were right, Sterling. They needed a face to the story. You're a star now, babe."

Kira felt the compliment more as a burn than a balm, but she accepted it. "It wasn't just me," she said, voice muffled in C.J.'s shirt. "It was all of us. And the dog."

Tank, as if on cue, farted softly and rolled onto his other hip, groaning as the stitches pulled. C.J. reached down and scratched the fur behind his ear. "Toughest bastard in the city," he said, not unkindly.

The holotube played a new segment, this one live: Lydia Tremaine, hands cuffed behind her, being marched through a gauntlet of cameras and riot police. The crowd outside the courthouse looked ready to eat her alive, but she held her chin high, lips pressed in a perfect line, eyes straight ahead. A pair of NextGen lawyers flanked her, both looking like they'd rather be in a tiger pit.

The anchor's voice was almost reverent. "A watershed moment for corporate accountability in New Fay City," she intoned. "For the first time in decades, the law caught up to the tech barons." She paused for effect, then played the next clip: a grainy phone video of Silas, the "Shadowblade," being led out of a basement club by three Feds in plainclothes. Kira watched the crowd part for him, no one quite sure if they wanted to touch or avoid him.

Marcus barked a laugh, then winced as it twisted his stitches. Marcus leaned forward, wincing as his stitches pulled. "Man swore up and down he'd never see the inside of a cell again. Guess the universe had other plans."

Maya sipped her beer and, for once, let herself smile. "They're scared. Not of him, not of the orcs—of us. Of what happens when people actually see."

C.J. looked at her, then at Kira, the moment brittle and sweet. "You want to celebrate?" he asked, the hint of mischief under the question.

Kira shook her head, slow and deliberate. "Not yet. I want to see how it ends."

So they watched, together, as the city rebuilt itself in real time.



The holotube kept cycling through footage—a parade of shame for every NextGen exec with their face blurred, but not enough to spare them the humiliation. Marcus and Maya found new beers and resumed their bickering in low, familiar tones.

C.J. raised his bottle, the gesture so casual it nearly slipped past Kira's guard. "To taking down the corrupt," he said.

Kira touched her own bottle to his. "And to new beginnings." The glass made a dull clink, but something about the sound vibrated down her spine.

Maya watched them, the edge of her mouth curling as she caught the shift in gravity between the two on the couch. She leaned over to Marcus and whispered, "You see that?" just loud enough for Kira to hear.

"Yeah, I see it," Marcus replied. "About damn time."

Kira shot him a look, but the old orc just grinned, toothy and unfazed.

Maya made a show of stretching, her arms arcing over her head. "Well. If the city's gonna rebuild, so should I." She fished a napkin off the table, scribbled a string of numbers and letters onto it, then slid it across to Marcus. "New commlink handle. Don't sell it for scrap, big guy."

C.J. snorted, but with a fondness that made Kira's chest tight. Marcus tucked the napkin into his breast pocket, patting it once for luck. He looked at C.J., then Kira, then Tank. "You guys good?"

Tank's tail thumped once, then his eyes rolled back into doze.

"Better than good," Kira said.

Marcus stood, stretched, and took one last survey of the room. "Alright, then. Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

Maya was already at the door, pulling her coat on with one arm while texting with the other. She nodded to Kira, then C.J., then let herself out, a quick shadow swallowed by the hallway's light.

Marcus lingered, as if waiting for the universe to say "just kidding." When nothing did, he ruffled Tank's ears, nodded at Kira, and followed Maya out, the apartment door hissing shut behind him.

Silence. Not the strained, suspicious kind, but the rare, clear variety reserved for midnight after a storm.

The Glitchbox, still clinging to life on the balcony, chirped a final line of text through the damaged speaker:

<{"*REST_MODE: INITIATED. GOODNIGHT, FRIENDS.*}"
>

The dashboard lights faded to a soft, expectant amber.

Kira set her bottle aside and shifted, bringing her legs up into C.J.'s lap. His hands found her knees without hesitation, one organic, one cyber, both gentle. For a long minute they said nothing, just sat and let the quiet fill in the outlines of all that had changed.

Then, without a word, Kira slid her hand into his, fingers weaving into the spaces between his own. She led him off the couch, past the slumbering dog, and toward the stairs. Each step creaked under their weight, the wood alive to the moment.

Upstairs, the city's glow filtered through the blinds, painting C.J.'s skin in bands of orange and silver. He watched her with a look that dared her to run but begged her to stay.

Kira cupped his cheek, tracing the line where the bruise from the fight was already turning yellow. "Still hurts?"

He caught her wrist, pressed a kiss to the inside of her palm. "Only when I forget why."

Her laugh came out like a whisper, surprising her with its gentleness. "Promise me you won't."

She reached for his hand and laced her fingers through his. "C'mon," she said, tugging him off the couch.

"Where we going?" he asked, even as he allowed himself to be led.

"Sky healing chamber," she replied, pointing up the spiral stairs with her chin.

C.J. raised an eyebrow. "Bedroom?"

"Sky chamber," she repeated, and the look she gave him left no room for debate.

The two of them left the couch behind, climbed the stairs, and disappeared into the hush of the upper floor. Tank opened one eye, saw they were gone, and let out a contented snore. The Glitchbox, true to its word, was silent—at least for tonight.

Downstairs, the holotube cycled through the world's new headlines, but for the first time, none of them felt urgent. The aurora lit the windows in shifting waves, painting the empty room in colors that had never had names before, and for a few perfect hours, the only story that mattered was the one they got to write next.



The staircase to the rooftop healing chamber curled upward in a spiral of frosted polyglass and a glowing, bioluminescent handrail.

Each step carried Kira and C.J. further from the world's grit, toward an air that felt charged with promise. Kira led the way, her bare feet warmed by the gentle polished glass floor, while C.J. followed with a tread that was almost light, belying his considerable strength.

Each step sent a soft, tingling energy up Kira's legs—a healing vibration that seemed to melt away the fatigue of recent days. Even C.J.'s presence beside her, the occasional quiet clink of his cybernetic arm, sent a flutter through her nerves, anticipation and vulnerability mingling with the magic of the place.

At the summit, what greeted them was no sterile pod or virtual illusion, but the city spread in brilliant, neon rivers and jagged towers beneath a shimmering sky. The entire rooftop was transformed—a glass dome etched with ancient runes, a sanctuary filled with the hum of unseen power and healing.

Overhead, the aurora danced, its shifting colors casting crystalline reflections through the dome and across their skin. Each pulse of light seemed to harmonize with Kira's own heartbeat, as if the room itself urged her to let go, to trust in the possibility of healing.

Other rooftop gardens glowed across the skyline like mystical jewels—some bright, some secret, some offering glimpses of others lost in their own moments of wonder. Kira had always made excuses to avoid

these sanctuaries, wary of experiencing beauty alone. She remembered Liam's careless dismissal of such places, how he'd never understood the delicate line between public and private comfort. But C.J. wasn't Liam, and tonight felt different.

Stepping fully into the chamber, Kira felt the floor yield and pulse beneath her toes. The air buzzed with an expectant energy, fragranced by hints of jasmine and honey, threaded through with the sharper tang of ozone. With each breath, she felt tension unravel, old anxieties fading as magic pooled warmly beneath her skin.

C.J. lingered at the entrance, his silhouette framed by the city lights, his cybernetic arm catching the aurora and scattering its colors in fantastic patterns. His awe was unmistakable; even someone as tough as him was rendered quiet beneath the cosmos.

"We get a discount on the heating bill," Kira joked, her voice soft, "but the neighbors aren't fans of emotional displays." The tension in C.J.'s posture eased at that, and his answering grin made her chest ache with something bright.

He circled the dome, fingers tracing the runes with gentle curiosity, careful with his artificial hand, almost reverent. Under the shifting magic, he seemed both strong and oddly unguarded. Kira found herself watching him, drawn to the contrast between the marks of his battles and the quiet wonder on his face.

As she crossed to him, she pressed a gentle kiss to his jaw, tasting salt and the subtle metallic trace of magic that seemed to linger on his skin. The touch grounded her, drawing her fully into the present.

At the center of the dome, on a subtle platform, Kira paused. C.J. joined her, still uncertain. "I don't really know how this works," he admitted, voice low.

Kira smiled, the world narrowing to just the two of them and the magic in the air. “Me neither. But I want to learn.” Her words felt like an incantation, dissolving the final hesitations between them.

She considered the privacy glyph at the chamber’s edge, its rune glowing faintly beneath her fingers. “Public or private?” she asked. C.J.’s gaze never left the sky, but his trust was clear. “Your call.”

Kira looked at the skyline—at the other glowing domes, at strangers daring wonder—and chose to let themselves remain visible, to be unafraid.

For a heartbeat, they hovered apart, two points in quiet orbit, then Kira reached out, palm open. C.J. took her hand, his touch strong and gentle, the familiar roughness of his skin grounding her. The dome’s runes softened, the light shifting, as if the space had attuned to their joined heartbeats.

She let go only to rest her hand at his chest, tracing the fabric of his shirt, feeling the steady rise and fall of his breath. With slow, deliberate movements, she helped him out of his shirt; C.J. stood still, letting her see the stories written in scar and solder. She traced the seam of his prosthesis, pausing for a moment of silent understanding.

“Does it hurt?” she asked quietly—not about the metal, but about the memory.

“Not when I’m with you,” he murmured, honesty cracking through all his usual defenses.

He reached for her, his hands gentle, and with her permission slid the straps of her dress from her shoulders, baring her to the cool air and the warmth of his regard. He saw all of her—the strength and the small, lingering vulnerabilities—and his eyes shone with quiet awe.

“I keep thinking this is a dream,” he confessed, his voice soft and raw.

She laughed, the sound bouncing off the glass. “You’re definitely awake.”

They closed the distance, bodies pressed close from shoulder to knee. Kira wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him, slow and searching. The kiss deepened, sweet and unhurried, their breath mingling as the room seemed to pulse in time with their hearts.

The aurora outside crescendoed, the colors brightening as if in celebration. Each gentle touch sent ripples of warmth radiating through their skin and deeper, as if the very air around them was woven with gentle healing. Kira felt the old scars inside her—both seen and unseen—soften beneath the magic.

C.J. held her close, his hands attentive, cradling her with a care that surprised her in its intensity. She felt herself relax, surrendering her weight into his arms, trusting him—and the strange, shimmering energy of the chamber—to hold her whole.

They explored each other not with urgency, but with patient wonder. His touch lingered at her shoulders, then along her arms, and down to her hands, his fingers entwining with hers. He pressed kisses to the inside of her wrist and along the curve of her elbow, each caress reverent, as if he feared to wake from this miracle.

Kira let herself respond, openness replacing nerves, her awareness narrowing to the warmth of his skin and the sound of his breath in her ear. They moved together in a slow, intuitive rhythm, finding comfort in the simple closeness, in the tangled beauty of bodies and hearts laid bare.

Above them, the runes shimmered, casting shifting colors across their skin. The energy in the chamber ebbed and flowed, amplifying each sensation, each emotion, until the whole world seemed to slip away—leaving only the two of them, and the dance of light and magic all around.

Later, they collapsed together, breathless and spent, the aurora now gentler, washing their forms in a tranquil blue glow. Kira rested against C.J.'s chest, his heartbeat steady beneath her cheek. His arms, both flesh and metal, wrapped around her in a protective, grateful embrace, the mechanical hand now quiet, as if it too could finally rest.

The chamber's restorative magic hummed softly, soothing the aches and bruises they both carried, knitting them together in a cocoon of peace and possibility. Outside, the city was quiet, the aurora drifting in lazy rivers across the dawn-lit sky.

They lingered in the quiet aftermath, tracing gentle patterns over each other's skin, savoring the calm, the healing, the sense that—for a moment—the world had narrowed to just this: hope and belonging.

C.J. shifted, drawing a line along Kira's shoulder, smiling in a way that made her heart ache. "You know, I thought stuff like this only happened in stories," he murmured.

She grinned, feeling lighter than she had in years. "Guess we'll have to write our own."

She nestled closer, breathing in the mingled scents of ozone and jasmine, the sweetness of the air, and the quiet hum of the city below. For the first time in ages, sleep came easily—a deep, dreamless rest, wrapped in warmth and healing.

When she woke, the glass overhead had softened the light of dawn, turning the city into a gentle haze. C.J. was already awake, tracing her spine, his expression peaceful and full of possibility.

"Hey," he said, his voice so gentle it barely stirred the air.

"Hey," she replied, pressing a soft kiss to his chest.

They lay together, wrapped in the glow of the new day, the world outside quietly celebrating their survival. For once, the future felt not just possible, but bright.

Kira closed her eyes, letting hope settle into her bones. Whatever tomorrow brought, she was ready.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

A Glitchy Ever After

SUNDAY, AUGUST 31ST 2053,
NEW FAY CITY, CALIFORNIA

THE WEDDING PLAZA WAS the kind of place New Fay City built to be both immortal and instantly obsolete—a wedge of raw, open concrete at the edge of the business district, sandwiched between a vertical garden wall and an abandoned maglev hub.

Today, it was transformed.

Rows of chairs, transparent and slightly iridescent, lined the central promenade, each seat facing a makeshift altar of magic-grown archways laced with steel cables. Overhead, the arches seemed to pulse with living light: threads of bioluminescent vine wrapping cold titanium, everything engineered to suggest a city that had learned to grow and weld its own trees.

On the far end of the aisle, C.J. stood in his best approximation of formalwear: tailored black pants, a sleeveless vest that left his arms bare, and—because Maya had insisted—an iridescent tie with a print that changed color depending on the angle. His cybernetic arm was newly buffed, joints and plates gleaming silver against the matte green of his skin, every detail sharp enough to cut. He had spent twenty minutes

convincing himself that this was a reasonable way to spend a Sunday afternoon, and only a few seconds realizing that he was more nervous now than he'd been fighting off two drones with a busted wrench.

Guests filled the plaza in clusters and waves, nobody quite brave enough to sit up front. The crowd was a cross-section of New Fay City: orcs in vintage band t-shirts, elves with their hair sculpted into floating, glowing coronas, humans in everything from streetwear to what looked suspiciously like last year's corporate Christmas party leftovers. There were more kids than C.J. had expected, running between rows, flashing glowstick rings and making bets about who would cry first.

At the heart of this controlled chaos, Maya moved with the speed and precision of a human firewall. She wore a suit that was two shades bluer than the N.F.C. sky, and a headset with a mic curved toward her cheek like a weapon. In one hand, a commlink; in the other, a holographic clipboard cycling through last-second event reminders. Every few seconds, she'd pause to tilt a holo projector or recalibrate a floating camera drone, her voice low and lethal as she lined up the perfect shot for her PR firm's social feed. For once, Kira welcomed the hurricane of Maya's perfectionism as it swept through the plaza, leaving no detail untouched.

Marcus cut a different figure entirely. He worked the crowd with a roll of pastel donation ribbons—iridescent mint and coral that caught the light like digital watercolors—pinning them with practiced fingers to lapels and jacket sleeves. He moved through the guests like a street-smart carnival barker, his gold tooth flashing as he charmed cryptobit chips from reluctant pockets and coaxed digital transfers from the wealthier attendees' commlink accounts with a tap of his ring-laden hand.

He glided through the crowd with the practiced ease of a street hustler, his slight limp barely noticeable as he worked his magic—a wink here, a handshake there, each donation met with a flash of that gold tooth and a ribbon pinned with theatrical flourish. He was in his element—chatting up board members, trading good natured insults with former street rivals, charming a small army of grandmothers with his legendary smile. When he laughed, the sound ricocheted off the plaza’s glass walls and came back twice as loud.

The Glitchbox was parked at the very edge of the ceremony, arrayed in a plume of synthetic flowers and hand-painted signage. “JUST MARRIED” was spelled out in a motley row of recycled letters, each one blinking in a slightly different font. Strings of metallic cans dangled from the rear fender, rattling in the breeze. The car’s speaker system periodically bleeped out commentary—<“*Processing emotion: 97% positive!*”> or <“*Recommend party mode: engaged!*”>—always at the exact moment when conversation dipped.

But the real chaos unfolded at the edges of the gathering, where Tank had stumbled upon a fluttering cloud of arcane butterflies. He bounded after them with his signature lopsided gait—the old injury still visible but now just a scar—weaving between startled guests with his tongue lolling sideways and his tail beating a steady, joyful rhythm against anything within reach. Every so often, the dog would freeze, ears up, then pounce with the dignity of a drunk sumo wrestler. Children shrieked in delight as he plowed through the crowd, occasionally bowling over an adult who was too slow to step aside.

The prelude music drifted from a floating speaker array: half woodwinds, half synth, the melody twisting between ancient and future tense. As the appointed hour drew near, Maya made one final sweep of the aisle, instructing the guests to settle. The crowd com-

pressed into neat, if reluctant, rows. Marcus took his seat at the front, patting Tank's head as the dog collapsed at his feet.

On cue, the runes etched into the archway flared up, signaling the start of the processional. The hush that settled over the plaza was electric, a tight silence that felt more like anticipation than reverence.

Kira appeared at the far end of the promenade, flanked by two of Marcus's nieces as honorary flower girls. She moved with a precision that was almost military—shoulders square, jaw set—but her eyes betrayed a wild, unfiltered joy. Her dress was a study in contradictions: sharp-shouldered and severe at the bodice, softened by iridescent overlays that caught the light in slow, shifting ripples. There were circuit traces stitched into the seams, faintly aglow, and a trace of runic script along the hem. The effect was corporate with a hint of sorceress—exactly as she'd hoped.

Every camera lens in the plaza swiveled to her. The guests rose, a ripple of shifting color as people stood to watch her advance. She walked alone, never breaking pace, gaze locked on C.J. at the altar.

When she reached him, they stood face to face, matched in height, neither blinking first. The arch above them pulsed brighter, bathing their skin in a cool, unified glow. The officiant, a retired teacher and sometime magician, raised his arms and signaled the crowd to sit.

Somewhere behind them, the Glitchbox erupted with a jubilant <“*CUE THE TEARS!*”> but nobody shushed it. The moment was too big for embarrassment.

Maya slipped into the front row, her job momentarily done. Marcus leaned in, whispered something crude, and she barely suppressed a laugh.

The city seemed to pause. All at once, Kira realized she could feel her heartbeat in her fingertips, the pulse of the runes overhead, the shift of wind as the arch gathered its magic. She glanced at the crowd

and found not a single face she didn't recognize—friends, rivals, people she'd saved or betrayed, all of them here to bear witness.

She let out a breath, took C.J.'s hand, and braced for whatever happened next.

The officiant cleared his throat, eyes twinkling behind ancient glasses. "We gather today," he began, "to honor the union of two very persistent, very stubborn souls—"

A child giggled in the crowd. The Glitchbox played a fanfare.

The wedding had begun.



The officiant's voice carried better than it had a right to, given his slight frame and the soft rumble of the city beyond the plaza. He rattled off the opening lines—something about the legalities of the union, the sanctity of "voluntary union, digital or organic"—but nobody seemed to be listening. All eyes were fixed on the couple beneath the arch: Kira, standing unflinching, and C.J., who fidgeted with the seams of his vest as if the fate of the world depended on its straightness.

Then came the vows.

"Custom vows," the officiant said, his smile suggesting he'd seen it all but was ready to be surprised.

C.J. went first, because Maya had said he'd chicken out if he waited. He cleared his throat, then spoke to the middle distance just above Kira's left shoulder.

“Kira,” he began, “You crashed into my life like a malfunctioning AI car—no brakes, no navigation, and too much horsepower for the road. I thought you were a problem I could fix. But you’re not a bug, you’re the patch. You rewrote my code. And when I ran out of ways to fight, you gave me a reason to stay.”

He exhaled, and Kira could see his hands trembling—not from nerves, but from the white-knuckled effort it took to stay open, to not armor up in sarcasm or swagger.

“So, I promise,” he continued, voice steadier now, “to catch you when you leap. To never take you for granted, or make you do the heavy lifting alone. To be your home when the city gets too loud, and to leave the locks on any of your secrets, even when I might be dying to know what’s behind the firewall.”

A ripple of laughter from the crowd, and Kira saw Maya wipe a single, perfectly-timed tear from beneath her glasses.

Then it was Kira’s turn. She held the words in her mouth for a moment, weighing them like rare coins. When she spoke, her voice was clear—corporate, yes, but with a lilt of something wilder underneath.

“C.J.,” she said, “before you, my life was a list: tasks to accomplish, people to impress, a company line to walk. When everything crashed, you—and your whole foundry of misfits—showed me how to keep moving. You gave me shelter, but more than that, you let me choose my own path. You believed in me when I didn’t even trust myself.”

She paused, eyes glistening, and C.J. tried not to blink, tried to hold her gaze like it was the last lifeline on earth.

“I vow to never hide from you—even when it’s messy, even when I’m scared. I’ll fight for your dreams the way you fought for mine, and I’ll make sure the future we build is one we both want to wake up to.” Her voice faltered then, just a little, but she smiled and pushed

through. “Also, I promise not to judge your taste in breakfast burritos, even when it’s an act of violence against gastronomy.”

The crowd snorted, a warm tide of approval.

Maya gave a little whistle. Marcus made a fist and hammered it on his own chest, a subtle salute.

The officiant nodded, satisfied. “Well, I’ve heard worse. Rings?”

Marcus produced them from his vest pocket—two slim bands, each inset with a spiral of micro-circuitry and what looked like a single, dark-red rune stone. He passed them forward, palm steady, and C.J. took the smaller one, sliding it over Kira’s finger with a reverence usually reserved for detonators.

As the band seated itself, the circuitry lit up—a slow, even glow, blue for her, gold for him. Kira’s finger tingled with the warmth of it, and she realized the runes were not just aesthetic; they were keyed to her pulse, syncing with her heartbeat in real time.

She repeated the motion, hands steady, and when C.J.’s ring clicked home, the rune blazed to life with a heat that was almost visible. It was subtle, but unmistakable: a circuit closed, a connection formed.

The officiant, seeing the shimmer, nodded with approval. “The city has witnessed,” he intoned. “Now, for the blessing.”

From the front row, Margaret Ironheart—Grandmother, former teacher, occasional psychic, always in charge—rose to her full height. She wore a robe that blended academic and ceremonial, the sleeves a deep emerald that matched her skin, the hem stitched with a hundred different school crests and union logos.

She stepped up to the couple, placed a hand on each of their shoulders, and closed her eyes. For a moment, the plaza went utterly still. Kira felt the brush of something across her mind—a quick, searching touch, like a hand checking for fever. Then Margaret spoke.

“You two are the first in a long line to survive the world’s worst, and come out still wanting to build something better,” she said, voice pitched to carry, “You make your own luck, but you never do it alone. Remember that.”

She leaned in, pressed her brow to each of theirs, then stepped back. The plaza breathed again.

The officiant grinned, his part nearly done. “By the power vested in me by the City of New Fay City and the state of California,” the officiant’s voice softened as he smiled at the couple, his eyes crinkling at the corners, “I now pronounce you husband and wife.” He paused, letting the sacred words hang in the air for a heartbeat before adding tenderly, “You may seal your vows with a kiss.”

C.J. didn’t wait. He pulled Kira in, arms strong but gentle, and kissed her with the unselfconscious hunger of a man who’d nearly died too many times to waste any more moments. The crowd roared, the Glitchbox blared a victory horn, and from somewhere in the arch overhead, a burst of magical confetti—tiny, glowing hexagons—erupted and drifted down around them.

Kira tasted electricity on his lips, the low fizz of magic as the confetti stuck in her hair and on her skin. She wrapped her arms around his neck, unwilling to let go even when the applause doubled and Maya’s voice boomed out, “Hell yes, THAT’S what I call a data merger!”

Tank barked, a single booming note, then launched himself in a circle around the couple, knocking over the officiant and scattering the confetti like pollen. The kids in the crowd cheered him on, chanting “Tank! Tank! Tank!” as the dog wound up for a second lap.

Maya was next. She bounded up the steps to the altar, heels clacking, and seized the mic from the officiant. “If I may,” she said, “I just want to say—on behalf of everyone who’s ever loved these two, or even just survived an all-night holotube movie marathon with them—this

was inevitable. Anyone who bet against Kira and C.J. can pay up now, preferably in unmarked Cryptobits.”

The crowd laughed, and Marcus raised a bottle in salute.

Maya continued, “They started as strangers, became reluctant allies, then were basically inseparable before either of them noticed. If they can make it, so can the rest of us. So here’s to stubbornness, second chances, and the hope that we all get to love as fiercely-and as fearlessly-as they do.”

The crowd whooped. Maya handed the mic to Marcus, who had somehow produced two bottles from nowhere and was ready for the next act.

“Gonna keep this short,” Marcus said, grinning like a man who’d just fixed a world-class engine with nothing but duct tape. “Family isn’t who you start with, it’s who sticks around after the crashes. You all stuck around. So let’s eat, let’s drink, and let’s make sure this is the last time C.J. ever wears a tie.”

He lifted his bottle. “To the newlyweds—may their marriage outlast the city’s next power grid upgrade!”

The cheers were louder this time, and the party began in earnest. Tables on the plaza filled with a fusion of food: orc-baked breads and steaming vats of spiced stew, sushi rolls with a sparkle of edible nanites, impossible burgers stacked high with pickled fungus and street-market greens. Cake came next—a multi-tiered monstrosity, half tech-wizardry, half old-world bakery, with the top layer housing a mini projector that replayed the couple’s kiss on a loop.

Dancing erupted before the sun had finished setting. At first, it was the kids, flailing with a joyous lack of self-consciousness. Then Tank, who managed to rope in half a dozen guests before collapsing in a heap. Soon the adults joined, and the plaza pulsed with bodies: C.J. slow-dancing with Kira, Maya and Marcus cutting a surprisingly

elegant waltz, even Grandmother Ironheart swaying with two partners at once, her hands gentle but inescapable.

Kira took it all in, a glass of something strong in one hand, C.J.'s fingers laced through hers with the other. She couldn't remember ever feeling this light.

As the official playlist ran out, the Glitchbox piped up with a remix of the couple's favorite songs, spliced together with the "turbo-turtle" engine sound effect and the occasional AI-generated power ballad lyric. Nobody seemed to mind.

The dancing bled into laughter, then stories, then another round of food. Maya pulled Kira aside, handed her a holo-still of the ceremony already cropped and color-graded for the morning's press release. "You clean up okay," she said, hugging her hard, then whispering, "You did it. You actually made it."

Even as night dropped over the city, nobody wanted to leave. The arches glowed, the confetti never quite faded, and for the first time, Kira looked out at New Eloria and thought: I could belong here.

She squeezed C.J.'s hand, and he squeezed back.

Kira drifted toward the edge of the plaza where the wedding's joyful chaos faded into night sounds—the low electrical hum of the city grid, distant sirens, the soft whirl of passing drones.

Her smile faltered mid-bloom as something shifted in her peripheral vision. Ice trickled down her vertebrae—four silhouettes in bespoke outerwear lingered just beyond the celebration's golden glow, watching.

They didn't mingle or dance; they just-observed.

Their stillness felt deliberate, like predators calculating distance. No one she recognized from either guest list.

An orc with an undercut and a three-piece suit that probably cost more than her first apartment noticed her attention. As she passed, he lifted his glass in a precise gesture that wasn't quite a toast.

His smile never reached his eyes.

"Congratulations," he said, voice smooth as synthetic silk. "Silas asked me to convey his... warmest regards to the happy couple."

The others with him nodded in unison, lips curving upward without warmth. One stood out—a mountain of a man with Samoan features and Pe'a tattoos spiraling from jawline to collar. He cocked his head, studying her through half-lidded eyes. "How touching," he murmured, each syllable velvet-wrapped steel, "to see enemies playing at happily-ever-after. This city never fails to entertain."

The muscles in C.J.'s arm went rigid under her fingers.

She caught Marcus's approach from the corner of her eye—jaw clenched, shoulders squared, hands curled into fists. Before anyone could speak, the four strangers melted away, their expensive coats disappearing among the departing guests like oil into water.

The whirl of rotors cut through the music as a police drone hovered above them, its blue scanner sweeping the crowd in methodical patterns before continuing on its patrol route. Kira exhaled, surprised at how comforting the mechanical guardian felt in that moment.

The strangers melted into the night, their silhouettes briefly illuminated by streetlights before a sleek sports car swallowed them whole. Seconds later, the vehicle tore away from the curb, its tires painting black crescents on the pavement as the engine's howl echoed between buildings.

For just a heartbeat, the warmth of the celebration thinned, replaced by a chill that settled somewhere deep in her chest. She slipped her hand into C.J.'s, grounding herself in the music and laughter around them.

The arches glowed, the confetti danced in the breeze, and the party surged forward.

Like a virus hiding in clean code, the Syndicate's warning lurked beneath the surface of their words—invisible to most, but unmistakable to those who knew the syntax.

But tonight, there was nothing to do except hold onto joy and trust that, whatever came next, they would face it together.



As the sky darkened, the plaza thinned, but the celebration refused to die. The archways pulsed with gentle light, their glow reflected in puddles left from the afternoon's storm, while the faint drone of party music blended with the city's own night soundtrack. Kira and C.J. lingered in the perimeter, the newlyweds turned local celebrities, a dozen guests waving them off with holographic sparklers and trailing flower petals that floated like low-orbit satellites.

The Glitchbox sat at the curb, newly resplendent. C.J. had spent the last week retrofitting its frame: new composite panels, smartglass windscreen, a spoiler that doubled as a data antenna, even a line of LED striping that changed color with the car's mood (tonight it was a bashful pink). On the dash, a 3D-printed bride and groom replaced the old air freshener, and a "Just Married" decal pulsed on the rear in letters only the Glitchbox could have chosen—half Comic Sans, half runic script.

The interior had been lovingly expanded too—no more knees jammed against the dash or elbows bumping during turns—now spacious enough for an orc’s broad shoulders beside a human frame.

Kira ran her hand along the fender, felt the shudder of the engine as it recognized her touch. “You kept the original paint,” she said, voice low.

C.J. nodded, pride and embarrassment warring on his face. “Had to. The glitches are part of the aesthetic.”

A cheerful beep erupted from the sound system. “Welcome, Mrs. and Mr. Party People!” The Glitchbox paused, then added, “Please refrain from excessive PDA while operating me. Unless it’s funny. Then proceed.”

C.J. groaned. “Never should’ve let Marcus upgrade the voice module.”

“Marcus upgrades everything,” Kira said, then turned as Maya appeared at her shoulder.

“Last call for wedding content,” Maya intoned, handing Kira a foil-wrapped packet. “Your morning-after hangover kit. And—” she leaned in, pressing a business card into Kira’s palm, “—my PR firm needs a new analyst. First right of refusal is yours.”

Kira raised her eyebrow. “You’re offering me a job at my own wedding?”

Maya’s grin was pure shark. “I promised myself I’d never miss an opportunity again.” Then she hugged Kira tight, holding her just a moment longer than necessary.

Marcus arrived next, all battered charm, a bruise already blooming under his right eye from a well-aimed bouquet toss. He pulled C.J. in for a quick, bone-crushing hug, then pointed a finger at Kira. “You take care of him, alright? He acts tough but he’s a big crybaby when his chips are down.”

C.J. smirked, but didn't deny it.

Tank, sensing a change in routine, bounded toward the car, nearly bowling Kira over before leaping into the back seat with a satisfied grunt. He circled three times, snorted at the bride and groom figurines, and settled in with his head on the armrest.

"Ready?" C.J. asked, his hand finding Kira's.

"With you? Always."

They climbed in, doors whispering shut behind them. Glitchbox's display unfurled a roadmap of the city, illuminated in soft blue and gold.

"Destination?" the car prompted, voice gone buttery-smooth.

"Anywhere but here," Kira said, surprising herself with how true it felt.

"Plotting escape," Glitchbox replied. "Don't worry, I'll play something romantic." It queued up a playlist that was equal parts power ballad and retro synth, then added, "I accept tips."

C.J. squeezed her hand. "Let's go."

She smiled, letting her head rest on his shoulder as the car eased out of the plaza and into the open street.

Behind them, the crowd let out a final cheer. Marcus and Maya stood side by side, waving. Grandmother Ironheart watched from the steps, hands folded, her expression softening just this once.

The car rolled past the old safehouse, now nothing but an empty lot with wildflowers and caution tape. It crossed the bridge into the business sector, where the buildings glimmered with after-hours life and the billboards hawked everything from memory chips to artificial pets. The city's aurora ignited above them, twin bands of electric blue and hot pink twisting through the clouds, painting the road ahead in impossible color.

Kira felt the engine's rumble in her bones. She felt the heat of C.J.'s hand, the pulse of the ring at her finger, the gentle weight of Tank in the back seat.

"Hey," C.J. said, turning to her, "thank you," he said, voice breaking. His eyes locked with hers, pupils dilated in the dim light. "For fighting when everything in this goddamn city told you to run. For fighting for us when I couldn't even fight for myself."

She answered him with a kiss, soft and sure, letting the promise hang in the air between them.

The Glitchbox accelerated, cans rattling in their wake, the "Just Married" sign blazing neon as they disappeared down the road, bound for tomorrow and every messy, beautiful thing that came after.

Above the city, the aurora kept shimmering, brighter than it ever had before.



Marcus and Maya watched the Glitchbox drive off until it was out of view until the tail end of the cans stopped bouncing and the glow of the sign went out, and only then did Maya nudge Marcus in the ribs with the back of her hand.

"You were right about them," she said, voice softer than the plaza's edge demanded. "Not a bug—just a patch."

Marcus shrugged, but didn't take his eyes off the street. "Patches break, too," he said, then added, "But at least they get tested before rollout."

Maya's laugh was a dry spark. She folded her arms.

"Those two," Maya said, watching the taillights fade. "I've never done the whole escape-into-the-sunset thing. Not once."

Marcus touched the swelling under his eye, wincing. "Well, there's always the next celebration."

"Says the man with bouquet battle scars," she replied, her voice catching as he stretched his hand toward her.

"I should be going," she said, extending a hand with corporate formality, but her eyes betrayed her with a champagne spark of mischief. When their fingers locked, she gripped too hard, like closing a business deal, though the jolt that passed between them felt nothing like commerce. "Until next time, Chen."

She glanced at their joined fingers, lips pressed into a line, then shook her head minutely—yet she didn't let go. Instead, she stepped closer, close enough that the rich aroma of his cologne blended with the earthy notes of her patchouli, creating a heady mix that filled the air between them.

"Maybe sooner than you think, I can sense it," she whispered. The plaza lights cycled down around them, casting their faces in alternating shadow and glow.

Maya leaned in and pressed her lips against his—brief, fierce, unmistakable.

When she pulled back, her smile was the real kind.

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