Prologue

Excerpt from an interview transcript:

<8Bit>: "Look, if Synthware has something their competition wants that badly, they'll find Runners who can get to it."

<MIRIAM>: "You give Runners a lot of credit. In your opinion, what makes them different from any other criminal with cyberware?"

<8Bit>: "You ever heard of a lady called Grace Mary Hopper?"

<MIRIAM>: "Famous Runner?"

<8Bit>: "Nah, she lived back before megacorps were a thing. Invented the first language compiler."

<MIRIAM>: "I really don't know much about computers, sorry."

<8Bit>: "It's fine. Hopper's the one that recorded the first official computer bug. The system went down, and she went looking and found a moth stuck between the relays in the main frame. She taped the thing in the logbook with the comment, 'First actual case of bug being found.' Snarky lady. Wish I'd been around to buy her a drink."

<MIRIAM>: "I don't think I see your point."

<8Bit>: "Runners are moths. Doesn't matter how perfect a machine you build. There's a weakness there, and Runners will find a way to exploit it. They're resourceful in a way that wage slaves aren't. Any organization is susceptible to them."

<MIRIAM>: "Well, not any organization."

<8Bit>: "Any organization. Doesn't matter how much cred you throw at the problem. There's always a bug in the system. There's always a glitch."

Chapter 1

The chopper blades thrummed like an overclocked hard drive through the void of the dead sky over Neosakka. Inside, Glitch clutched at the grimy, pleather armrests of her seat. Her stomach's desire to empty itself onto the riveted floor was at odds with her head's desire to *Be a Professional, Dammit*. Glitch abstained from the debate, and instead focused miserably on the overrated nature of biology in general. Each hammer of her heart beat brought them closer to first contact with their mark. That conversation would either put them back on terra firma, or get herself and the rest of the crew blown out of the sky back into the proverbial dust from whence they'd come. Either way, circumstances were only about to improve.

Glitch pressed her head back into the raised hood of her jacket until her long, black ponytail was crushed against the headrest. The end of her jack-in cable dug into her neck. Even though her model spooled the cable into a compartment at the base of her skull, she could never get the end of it to lie flat.The rim of her hood conveniently blocked her view of the window, the skyscrapers, and the nauseating drop beyond it into the glowing sea of neon light below. The pitch of the chopper ranged from irritating to deafening but she left the noise-canceling headset she'd been handed slung around her neck. It was better than having to interface with the rest of her team just now.

By contrast, N4n0bytes, to her left, was making full use of his rig, chattering non-stop into the mic. Glitch wondered if the rest of the crew had muted him by now. It had been years since her first run but surely, surely she hadn't been this obnoxious about it.

The two of them were both considered techs on this job, but the similarity ended there. He was obsessed with the latest and greatest in hardware upgrades and hacking bots. She wrote most of her programs herself. His synthetic-cotton hoodie sported a SOUNDZ music label, and had been washed enough times to resemble pink more than red. Her jacket – while also considered a hoodie from a technical standpoint – was sleek, black leather, and reinforced to stop a taser or, if she was lucky, a low-caliber bullet. She carried a gun holstered under her hoodie - a small baretta she'd picked up off a body. N4n0bytes, as far as she could tell, went unarmed. He'd already mentioned twice that they should grab a drink together afterwards. All she wanted to do was go home and disappear into the Matrix. Added to that were a myriad of details: he was white, she was copper-skinned; he watched trad-sports, she played esports – it was hard to believe they inhabited the same check box on a Fixer's crew list somewhere. But here they were, a four-person team crammed together in a civilian Rent-a-Chopper: pilot, muscle, and two netrunners.

Their craft pitched downward. Glitch's fingernails sank deeper into the pleather. N4n0bytes yelped and Jones, sitting in the co-pilot's seat ahead of her, barked something loud enough to cut him off through the headset. Beside Jones, Wingz howled his elation over the roar of the keening engines.

Skyscrapers hundreds of stories tall rose up all around them. Reflections of names and logos in vivid red, green, blue, and yellow bent and slid across the chopper's plexi-glass windows. Other air-transports shrieked around them. The gap between superstructures was no-man's sky. It was cheaper and more efficient to hire pilots and build computers that avoided collision than it was to police airspace. In a city like Neosakka, governed by the bottom line, cheaper and more efficient were law to anyone below a VP's pay grade.

In the pilot's seat ahead of her, Wingz' hands leapt between levers and buttons. He was copper-skinned, like her, with short-cropped, dark hair and a smooth jawline. His quick smile had an interesting way of twisting the skull and eagle-feather tattoo grafted across his face. She'd heard him tell a cute waitress they were all-but-lost markers of his Aztec heritage, but Glitch was privately sure she'd seen their likeness in a video game somewhere. If he spent any less time recounting his accomplishments as a pilot, she'd be tempted to buy him a drink sometime.

Wingz' lean build was encased entirely in a jumpsuit that was as much glinting, flickering, pulsating LCD lights as it was chrome and webbing. The cable that ran from the back of his skull directly into the flickering, flashing console in front of him gave him the edge over more traditional piloting. The tech involved there impressed her. When she jacked into cyberspace, she was effectively gone from biospace, or as her profession derisively dubbed it, "meatspace". Pilots of cyber-vehicles – planes, ships, cars – juggled the Matrix and bio-space simultaneously. Steel, chrome, pistons, rubber, and engines were all tactile to them. If this job went well, she might buy Wingz a whiskey or whatever he drank, just to ask about it.

Their destination appeared ahead of them through the jungle of buildings and sky-traffic. Eyes in the Sky was a golden, glowing monolith whose roof peaked in a stepped pyramid. A glowing, neon Eye of Horus sign peered haughtily at the city of Neosakka from each side of the structure. The chopper circled warily, eyeing its mark. Glitch swallowed the bile rising in her throat long enough to slip her headset back into place. If they were about to be shot out of the sky, she wanted to know about it.

"Clearance code: 53A6TFF91," she heard Wingz tell the wage slave on the other side of his headset.

"Code confirmed," a bored, static voice replied. "You're clear to land on Pad 3."

Wingz turned his head to give Jones the thumbs up. Jones ignored him. Jones ignored most things that weren't cred or gunfire. The big man kept his eyes fixed ahead and his hands on the modified, military-grade shotgun across his knees. He'd told her the name once, but she could only remember that it had enough letters and numbers to make for a pretty secure password. Most of the rest of his arsenal she recognized from video games: a pair of Glocks in different sizes, a stun gun, a bowie knife, a backup knife, and something in a case strapped to his leg Glitch hadn't been able to identify.

Glitch planned on sticking close to him: when things inevitably went wrong, he'd have options. Jones had showed more restraint than Wingz with the tattooist's needle: the only visible sigil inked into his person was a word or a name emblazoned on his beefy forearm. It was distorted beyond easy legibility by a scar that was too neat to have been accidental. She'd worked a job with him once before – a recon run – and he'd said as little about himself on that gig as he had on this one.

"Told you the codes would work," N4n0bytes crowed over the comm. "Not bad for a wirehead, huh, Wingz? Or what was it you called me? A shut-in teenybopper whose first girlfriend took three hours to compile?"

Glitch cringed. JACKass was the slur of choice to describe netrunners whose time in cyberspace had cost them their social skills. N4n0bytes may as well have stitched the word into his hoodie.

"You want a medal or something?" Wingz retorted. They'd been going at it since their Fixer, [Handle], had introduced them. "Congratulations. You told a computer what you wanted and it gave it to you. I do the same thing with my coffee maker every morning."

"Eyes front, people," Jones voice silenced them before the fight could get any momentum behind it. Glitch suspected he was at least as tired of their fighting as she was.

The helicopter dropped towards the golden lights of Eyes in the Sky. Their ride touched down, and Glitch's hammering pulse spun down in time with the rotors. She looked out the window. A gaunt, leather-skinned man headed towards them across the rooftop. The Eyes in the Sky uniform he wore was an off-white, collared jumpsuit with an embroidered Eye of Horus on the front left breast. It was at least a size too big, and the sagging seams only highlighted his lanky build. He gave the data pad in one, knobby hand a disinterested glance. The chopper door slid open. Jones leaned out of it, balancing with one hand against the doorframe.

"Welcome to Eyes in the Sky," the uniformed man mumbled. "Says here you have a data delivery?"

Jones jerked a thumb over his shoulder at N4n0bytes. "He's got an implant. Data's on a partition inside his head."

The uniformed man grunted acknowledgement and turned away.

"Right this way," he said without looking back at them.

Jones landed on the tarmac with a grunt. Glitch looked down. For all her eagerness to be free of the chopper, she spent a few moments intentionally fumbling with the straps of her seat. Jones was good at his job, which meant he didn't like to leave loose ends. Take, for example, a man in a jumpsuit who'd seen their faces. Firefights were one thing, but looking at a stranger she knew was about to die - well, she'd rather just not look.

"You coming?" N4n0bytes asked her.

Glitch waited until she heard the muffled cry before she looked up. N4n0bytes was half-in, half-out of the chopper. He had this expectant look on his face like a puppy waiting to see if she would come play. Was he really old enough to be doing this? Glitch looked past him. Over his shoulder, she could see Jones dragging the limp body of the uniformed man out of sight. The dead man's head lolled away from her at an impossible angle. She popped the latches on her harness.

"Come on, Glitch!" N4n0bytes bounced up and down, reinforcing her puppy analogy. "*Vámonos*!" He grinned at her, trying to get her to return the smile.

Glitch rolled her eyes. "I don't speak Spanish, kid," she told him. In the hushed aftermath of the chopper's whine, her voice sounded strange in her ears.

"Oh." N4n0bytes made a face at her. " I thought, 'cause you're Mexican..."

Glitch shook her head, hoping to just get on with the job, but Wingz had already spotted the opening.

"You got it wrong, gringo," he said. He leaned around the pilot's seat to smirk at both of them. "She's as white as you are."

So much for that drink. Glitch pulled her hood up again and adjusted her holstered gun underneath. She didn't look back at Wingz.

"I'm a Runner," she told N4n0bytes flatly.

Glitch shouldered past him. She went to seek refuge beside Jones, who was a proper Runner, and didn't care about her one way or another beyond her ability to get the job done.

Chapter 2

Wind stirred up smells of exhaust and whatever chemical cocktail they used to scour the oil from the landing pad. Glitch fell in step with Jones. N4n0bytes hovered at her elbow uncertainly, trying to guess if she was mad at him or not. Glitch scanned the shadows until she found the maintenance panel she needed. She tapped N4n0bytes on the arm with the back of her hand and pointed.

Glitch crossed the roof, feeling her steps sync up to the rhythm of the job. Unyielding ground sent little shocks of force through her rubber soles into her heels. The breeze stung her eyes and stole the heat from every inch of exposed skin. The acrid smell of the city was worse here in the corners where the rain hadn't washed the synthetic cleaner into the gutters or the walkways below. All were details of meat-space she savored only when she was about to leave them behind. Even the tightness of her shoulders and stomach – what was that? Anxiety? Apprehension? – were interesting sensations.

Glitch put her back to the maintenance panel and slid down into a crouch. The metal casing was cool to the touch but the poured cement still remembered the heat of the day. From the back of her neck she unspooled her jack-in cable – a slender bridge between biospace and cyberspace thinner than her little finger.

To her left, N4n0bytes mirrored her. His cable wasn't built in – he fished one out of his pocket and pulled back his hood to plug it into the metal plate on the side of his skull. Jones came to stand watch over their bodies while their minds were away, gun in hand. Wingz joined him, twirling a pistol like some kind of a gunslinger out of a videogame. N4n0bytes gave Glitch a confident nod.

"I'll handle security," he said, "you get the climate control system. If… so like, if you run into any trouble just like give me a call, ok? I'll come bail you out."

Glitch stared at him for a beat. She had dozens of runs to her name and he was giving her instruction. Offering to come to her rescue. Implying that she'd need it.

Unacceptable.

She knew her own skill, and that she could handle both systems on her own, without his help. But that competence didn't matter until she jacked-in. Out here in biospace though, *perceived* competence was everything. It was a teammate's trust. It was the chance they'd call her for the next job. It was the reputation Fixers staked on her whenever they recommended her. And those jobs were the off-the-books pay that let her keep surviving free from the chains of a wage-slave. He was posturing, trying to appear strong, playing into his image of himself as the hero of his story, and it was costing her.

Unacceptable.

She pushed back her hood so he could better see her scorn in the darkness.

"Nano, if I ever need you to come bail me out of anything, the situation is already so far fucked you will need an army of hackers to come find me," she told him. "Get a grip on your savior complex. Just do your job." She turned to Jones, stolidly watching the interplay. "I'll be done inside three minutes," she told him. "If I'm not back in five, pull the plug."

Beside Jones, Wingz frowned.

"Doesn't that hurt like a bitch?" he asked.

Dump shock felt roughly equivalent to waking from a deep sleep by slamming into the ceiling and free falling back down. Not the worst thing in the world, sure, but it took a while for your brain and the rest of your biology to sync up again, so you spent a while feeling the input of your hands through your feet, or smelling your tongue.

Glitch gave Wingz a flat look. "Less than a piece of ICE burning through my brain, one neuron at a time."

ICE - Intrusion Countermeasures Electronics - were nasty little programs, capable in some cases of doing lasting damage to a hacker's mind, while the dump shock just left you stupid for a little while… usually.

Wingz didn't reply, but his lip-shrug was assent enough.

Glitch closed her eyes and pressed the cable into the access panel.

For the briefest moment, she felt her body go limp as her mind dropped away from it. Then all bio-space sensation cut out, and she was inside the Matrix of the building. The wind, the roof, the chemicals, all of it dropped away. Even fear – that's what that feeling had been, fear – faded away without her biology's sweating palms, stiff muscles, and pounding heart to reinforce it. A little black house-cat avatar with purple eyes in a constant state of pixelated glitch sprang into existence.

People didn't often ask what it was like to be jacked in. Computers might run the world, but a shocking few cared how they worked. When Glitch tried to describe the feeling for the first time, she said it was like standing firmly on the ground without having any weight. It was the absence of biological noise cluttering her mind with wants and feelings. It was seeing what needed to be done and doing it without the nuisance of waiting for your body to carry out the command. A perfect marriage of intent and action. It was like editing a piece of code and seeing the resulting change as it happened instead of waiting for the program to compile and run. Her audience hadn't much cared and she'd never repeated the sentiment. People had long since lost their appeal anyway.

N4n0bytes' avatar popped in alongside her. It materialized as a grown, muscular man in sleek, shiny body armor with a full, well-groomed beard and sunglasses. In another context, she could have mistaken it for the brooding protagonist of a first-person shooter. Glitch checked its signature and smirked: he'd bought it from someone named "Pixelator". She didn't wait for him to finish resolving. The less time spent together the better, and N4n0bytes already made time spent around him feel like an eternity without dilation's help. With it - best to move on.

In front of them stood a barred, iron gate set into a wall that stretched for miles in both directions. To a user on the outside, in biospace, it was just a login screen, though some systems might attempt to render the gate in 3D. Inside the cyberspace of the Matrix, the wall appeared to be made of old sandstone and every inch was covered in scrolling, neon hieroglyphics.

Her avatar pawed at the heavy lock on the portal, sending a little tremor through what her brain thought was her hand. Code – rendered into 3D images for ease of handling – was a tangible thing to her when she was jacked in. The simpler it was to process, the lighter it felt; the easier it was to bypass, the softer; and the more straightforward it was for her to manipulate, the warmer. The wall felt heavy, hard and cold, but the lock came away in her hands and became a pyramid-shaped Rubix cube covered in symbols instead of colors.

The cat's tail twitched, sending pixels flying through the air while she toyed with the puzzle. Glitch bounced the cube up and down once or twice, getting a feel for it. It was light, almost weightless, and the hardness of a soda can. It felt warm though, like a hot box of Chinese take-out on a cold day. Glitch's fingers flew as she spun and twisted the pieces this way and that. She got it close enough to completion and then cheated by swapping two runes with one another. The gate swung open and the cat avatar bounded in, leaving N4n0bytes behind playing with his own login. No root permissions meant they had to log in separately; one of them couldn't just open the door for the other without a lot of extra work.

The architects who had constructed this Matrix either hadn't known or didn't care about the historic and geographic difference between Babylon and Egypt. The world behind the wall resembled an approximation of the Hanging Gardens with a giant pyramid rising up out of its center. At its peak, a hovering Eye of Horus glowing neon-yellow spun slowly, like a weight on the end of a string. Walls and stairs patrolled by wandering sphinxes with glowing LCD eyes partitioned off the different subsystems into unique gardens. She needn't challenge them for now – the maintenance panel had let her into the exact garden she needed. Cisterns of impossibly blue water, branching grapevines with golden leaves, and chrome aqueducts that represented the building's climate control spread out before her. If she peered closely enough at the surface of any of them, she could see tiny lines of code running across the surface. The garden's protector – a piece of ICE displaying as a white leopard with neon-green spots – ignored her, convinced that she was part of the normal facilities staff. Overhead hung a blank, mirroring the one she had left behind in biospace.

There was no rush. Her cyberware kept track of real-time for her, and she'd only spent a minute and seventeen seconds of her three minute benchmark. Whatever wage-slaves had built this Matrix had poured what was left of their hearts and souls into it. The sandstone was textured and the leaves detailed on a level a biospace user would never be able to appreciate. Her cat avatar, ignoring the preferences of its kind, splashed through the canal-ways as she admired the water droplets spraying up and even rendering the light reflection of the neon around them. She walked until she found the stone tablet with glowing hieroglyphics that put the air conditioning system on standby for maintenance. Sluice gates slammed shut and the flow of water stopped. She copied an image of the physical blueprints to her deck as an afterthought. Glitch's avatar sprang free of the water and shook itself like a dog, spraying pixels everywhere that hung awkwardly in the air for a moment before dropping to the ground. The system's physics engine didn't know what to do with her avatar's conflicting signals, poor thing. She bounded back out the gate. A little timer set to twenty-five minutes inside her head started counting down. The cat vanished as it cleared the gate.

Back in meatspace, Glitch opened her eyes. Roughly two and a half minutes had elapsed since her departure. Her eyes were level with Wingz' wrist, and she noticed for the first time that he was wearing a holowatch, capable of projecting small doses of information, or pictures on a flat surface. Odd, she hadn't pictured him as the sort of guy to have keepsakes or schedules on him. Glitch unplugged and her jack-in cable started auto-spooling back through her ponytail. Her counterpart twitched and N4nobytes returned to consciousness as well.

"You!" he sputtered as soon as he'd reclaimed his body. "I've seen you!"

Glitch frowned at him. "You got dump-shock or something?" she asked. She reached for her jack-in cable again to go pacify whatever ICE he'd upset.

"No, I saw your avatar in there!" N4n0bytes voice peaked. "You played for Infocalypse. You're Glitch!"

Wingz stared at him like he'd taken serious brain damage. Jones turned around long enough to give him a warning growl. Glitch's stomach did a summersault and she cursed biospace mentally. She could have sworn he said he watched trad-sports, not esports. Maybe she hadn't been listening closely enough. Shit.

"Yeah, we exchanged handles two weeks ago, kid," she said, getting up. "If you're that slow, you should go wait in the chopper while the adults handle this."

"That's so hyped! My brother used to watch you!" N4n0bytes went on, not taking the hint and shutting up. "I thought you were just a fan!" Now he was on his feet, crowding into her space. "You know, cause you're a girl, and stuff."

Glitch tried to shrug him off. "I am just a fan. Names and avatars are easy to come by."

Wait, if she were actually a fan impersonating herself, should she admit to it? Should she be claiming to be herself right now? Was it too late to act otherwise? Drek, she hated dealing with people.

"No, I recognize the cat-glitch," N4n0bytes enthused, getting even closer. "At first I thought-"

Glitch put a hand on his chest and shoved him hard enough to make him stumble back a few steps. Before he could regain his balance, she closed the distance, getting up in his face, near enough that she could tell when he stopped breathing. Her hand found her baretta and she pushed the barrel against the soft fabric across his stomach. She had no intention of using it - the safety wasn't even off - but she was counting on him not thinking of that in the moment.

"You thought wrong," she said in a low voice. "So shut up and focus."

She took a big step back, putting space between them.

"You handle security ok?" she asked more loudly, holstering her gun. Both Wingz and Jones were staring at them.

"Yeah, yeah," N4n0bytes struggled to pull himself back together. "We, uh, we got lucky actually."

Glitch pressed her lips together to keep from cursing him out. She was done wrangling the new kid; it was someone else's turn now. "Lucky" was a word newbies and tenderfoots used right before they fucked up bad enough that people started dying in messy ways. This kid was going to get them all killed.

"Lucky?" Jones echoed gruffly.

"Meat-side of security got called in to deal with some sort of an irregular delivery down in the lobby," N4n0bytes reported. "I set cameras to loop empty feed on the roof and our target – no one knows we're here."

The three veteran runners exchanged glances.

Luck was a lie, but sometimes a bug in someone else's system was leverage for their own. Jones looked at Glitch.

"We good?" he asked.

Glitch nodded. "Vent fans are down till the end of the cycle. System resets in twenty-three minutes and forty-three seconds."

She wasn't sure if that was the question he'd been asking, but sure as betas had bugs, it was the one she was answering.

"You heard her, let's move," Jones ordered. "Absolute silence once we're inside. That floor is supposed to be deserted."

Glitch tried not to look relieved. She saw Wingz eyeing her sideways, favoring her with the look he usually reserved for N4n0bytes. She'd need to get clear of this team as soon as the job was done, maybe lie low for a bit. Or take a job without any JACKasses on it.

Focus.

Focus on today's job, not tomorrow.

Hold it together until she could get back to the Matrix, where the sick feeling in her stomach wouldn't matter anymore.

They found the building's air intake and N4n0bytes produced a small tool kit. A few moments later, the vent cover was pried off and set to one side. Glitch flexed her fingers, rolled her shoulders and then climbed in after Jones, feet first. Time for the tricky part.

Jones led them through a metallic maze of crawl spaces, ladders, and the occasional, heart-stopping drop through stretches of darkness and stale, recycled air. No one noticed the temperature change, so they dropped out of the wall onto worn carpeting next to the elevator instead of being ground up by an industrial strength fan and being cleaned up by the janitor in the morning. Their choice to come by way of the roof was rewarded: the servers and the bounty of data they contained were a hundred and eighty-nine floors up, but only eleven floors down.

A maze of cubicles stretched before them, like the labyrinths that guarded the Pharaohs of old. The dividers between desks bore an art deco Egyptian-style print instead of the normal gray-brown cloth covering. It looked like the result of a committee's attempt to make the space feel less "corporate", whatever that meant. Glowing posters on the wall advertised Eyes-In-the-Sky slogans:

"Watching Out for You"

"Intel from Above"

"In the Know"

They were paired with stylized falcons, the Eye of Horus, pyramids, and vast stretches of golden, glowing sand. The posters cast weird colored light across the workspace and pressed shadows under the desks and rolling office chairs. The servers they sought were entombed at the center of all this behind thick, plexi-glass walls.

At a gesture from Jones, they all moved forward. The big man tapped Glitch on the shoulder as they approached the server room. He pointed at the unblinking eye of a camera overhead, then at one of the cubicle computers. Glitch nodded. At least one of her crew still trusted her to do her job.

She split off from the rest of the crew and slipped into the nearest cubicle block. Inside its pseudo-walls, she pushed aside the chair and crawled under desk. It took a few moments in the darkness to find the right cords to unplug so she could jack straight into the network. Her cable was already in hand when the bark of a gun violated the silence.

Glitch froze. A second gunshot followed on the heels of the first. Glitch scrambled out from underneath the desk, drawing her gun as she went. From her knees, she peered out across the sea of cubicles as best she could. Another burst came from the direction of the elevator, followed by a return shot from Jones' louder, heavier gun. Glitch pointed her baretta in the general direction of the elevator and squeezed the trigger, to draw security's, or whoever it was', fire. Make them have to watch their flanks.

Nothing happened.

Glitch dropped to the carpeting inside the cubicle again. She turned the gun over in her hands. The safety was still on. An amateur's mistake. Fuck.

She flicked the switch and popped up again just in time to see something about the size of her fist arc through the air. The light of the posters reflected across its shiny, rounded surface. The thought flashed across Glitch's mind that she'd never seen a real grenade before. A heartbeat later, it exploded.

The shock wave slammed through every fiber of her body, as though she'd been smashed into a wall. The sound eradicated everything but itself from her mind. Glitch realized a moment later she was on the floor, hands over her head in a useless, instinctive act. For an instant, she thought a wall had come down somewhere, and then realized it was just the cheap, cubicle siding collapsed on top of her. She pushed it off without noticing the weight. Glitch wasn't strong, but adrenaline was a wonderful drug.

Someone was yelling nearby, but she could only catch the odd word through the ringing in her ears.

"~~~the fuck~~~a grenade?!"

"~~destroy ~~~ anyway."

"~~~~AFTER we~~~"

Neither voice sounded familiar. Glitch raked the hair out of her eyes. She peered through the settling smoke in the direction of the blast. She couldn't see much through the mess of overturned office space, but someone should have been screaming from injury. Jones should have been shouting orders. Or returning fire. Or… anything. But the ringing in her ears died away to silence. The smoke cleared and she saw something dripping from the ceiling. Drek, that was a lot of blood. Her heart sank. Numbness enveloped her.

She was alone.

"Stop whining," a faint male voice said somewhere across the wreckage. "We didn't get shot. They all got dead. It's fine."

"Yes, transforming the server room into a scrap yard is an absolute turn-on," a silky, feminine voice replied. "Well fucking done."

Not completely alone.

Not alone enough.

Glitch dropped into a low crouch against the worn carpet. Using her hands to balance herself as best she could, she hustled away. The voices were between her and the elevator, so she fled deeper into the cover of still-standing cubicles.

"I'll set up some surprises for security when they get here," the male voice said. "Check the server room - see if anything can be salvaged."

"I really think we've had enough surprises for one outing, don't you?"

Once Glitch had put a few rows of corporate drudgery between herself and the voices, she broke into a run. The vent shafts were in the ceiling over here, out of reach, and even if they hadn't been, the fans were all back on by now. She was hoping for a bug in the building's design – a fire escape or a side door that didn't make sense.

The building made perfect sense.

Fuck.

A moment later she left the last wall of cubicles and halted in front of floor-to-ceiling windows. They provided a panoramic view of the skyscraper opposite them and the several hundred feet of empty air between the glass and the ground. Pretty, yes, but not exactly a view worth dying for.

Glitch looked left, right, and then back into the darkness.

She was trapped.

Chapter 3

Think, dammit, think.

Glitch hunkered down under a desk, out of sight. Her muscles shaking now that she wasn't moving. Biospace was a bitch that way. It was possible the other team wouldn't sweep the floor and find her, but that sounded suspiciously like luck. Even if they didn't, there were a hundred and eighty-nine floors between her and freedom.

Fuck. Damn. Drek.

None of her favorite colorful expressions seemed to paint the disaster of the situation adequately. She could sneak down the stairs (low probability) find a change of clothes (even lower probability) and then slip out through the ranks of wage-slaves (virtually impossible, given her people skills). She didn't know any pilots, and even if she did, getting one to agree to come pick her up would be like trying to coax a cat into oncoming traffic.

Glitch pulled out her phone and started scrolling through her coded contact list. Time to see if the favors she'd accrued over the last two years were any good when it mattered. She stopped at an entry listed as "[_]" and hit call. It rang twice, and then Handle picked up.

"Glitch? Hey, how are you?" said a cheerful man on the other end. She heard bedsprings creak and remembered belatedly that it was the dead of night. In the background, a woman's voice made an inquiring sound. Glitch cringed. She probably owed him just for picking up the phone.

"I'm kinda in the middle of something right now," Handle went on, "Can I call you back?"

She took a breath to steady her voice. "I'm on a run on the hundred-and-eighty-ninth floor of an intel building called 'Eyes in the Sky'," she said as quickly as possible without stumbling over the words. "It's gone bad. There's another team of Runners in the building. Got the drop on us with a frag. My crew's dead."

"Fuck. Are you ok?"

She heard bedsprings complain loudly and covers slide to the floor.

Glitch swallowed. "…I'm next."

"Fuck."

Glitch hunkered down a little further under the desk of the cubicle she was hiding out in. She could feel shock setting in, making it hard to focus. It was like watching herself through a thick pane of glass. She tried to keep her mind in the game, but kept being distracted by the idea that she really ought to be feeling something right now.

"Look," she kept trying to find a pitch for her voice that was low and professional, "I know it's a long shot, but you owe me for the -."

"I know," Handle cut her off. She could hear him typing furiously on a keyboard. "Stay hidden. I'll see what I can do."

Glitch closed her eyes.

"…K."

She ended the call and pressed the screen of the phone against her chest so the light wouldn't give her away. With her other hand, she rested her beretta against her knees and ran a thumb along the smooth handle. She studied the glint of black metal in the gloom and considered her options afresh. Calling Handle was a long shot, his many connections as a Fixer

for Runners notwithstanding. Then again, so was getting in a shootout with, minimum, two other Runners. Guns were Jones' specialty. And Jones was dead. Fuck.

Her mind skipped away in search of another angle. Where was security? They had offices every ten floors, so it seemed impossible they hadn't heard the blast. But N4n0bytes had said something about them being called away, probably on account of the Runners that had just taken out her crew. And if N4n0bytes' camera loops were holding, then even if someone had heard the disturbance, they would have to search each floor one at a time. N4n0bytes ended up covering for her after all. N4n0bytes was dead. Fuck.

Something inside her was cracking. Or boiling. Or –

Focus. *Focus*.

There were almost two-hundred stories between herself and the ground. Only eleven floors back to the roof, but what to do once she got there? She couldn't fly the chopper. That was Wingz' job, and Wingz was-

Glitch grit her teeth. She pressed both hands to her head against the static hum building there. Her phone vibrated against her chest. Glitch started, then swore at herself. She took the call and pressed the phone to her ear.

"Ok," said Handle's voice. "I've got something."

Glitch released a breath she didn't know she'd been holding.

"I know someone on the other crew. Another Fixer. Her name's Syntechie. I've arranged for her to get you out. Just stick with her, and you'll be fine."

The glass wall inside her – the shock, or whatever it was – shattered as suddenly as if Handle had put a bullet through it.

"What?!" the word fired from between Glitch's lips. "That team just fragging turned my crew into hamburger!"

"I'm not telling you to fuck any of them," Handle replied coolly. "And your crew's not in a position to hold it against you."

"Is this a joke to you?" Glitch snarled. She slammed one, clenched fist into the underside of the desk. Her anger flooded up and spilled out of her. It felt good. Better than being afraid.

"Do you hear me laughing?" Handle replied dispassionately. "Do me a favor and let Syntechie know the deal is off before her team kills you, k? It'll save me a phone call."

"Handle," Glitch snapped. She breathed in. Tried to ride the anger instead of letting it drive her. Exhaled. Focused on pronouncing each word carefully and clearly. "You're not listening. They. Killed. My. Crew. You can't-"

"No, you listen," Handle overrode her. "This isn't your gaming team anymore. Your crew are not your friends. You gave up that kind of luxury when you hung up the keyboard and headphones. No one cares about you, and you don't get to care about them. You're a Runner. Act like it."

He let that sink in for a moment, and then continued. "Here's the facts: your crew is dead. You're not. You called me and I gave you an option. As far as I'm concerned, we're even now."

Glitch closed her eyes. Swallowed her anger. Tried to disconnect again. Recreate the glass wall.

Focus.

She successfully overcame the impulse to hang up on him.

"…I...understand," she managed. "I'll make it work."

"You'd better," Handle growled. "I've got better things to do with my time then edit my contact list. Shoot me a message in the next day or two so I know I won't have to go to the trouble."

That might have been a subtle way of him saying he was still willing to call her for jobs, but she wasn't sure. It could even be what passed for concern. Either way, it left her feeling cold, and empty. She wanted the anger back.

"I'll be in touch," she said.

"Good. And in case you're shell-shocked enough that it's still a question: ditch the job. Tell the client it didn't work out. Shit just happens sometimes."

Glitch tried hard not to picture the dwindling numbers in her cred account. "Take care, Handle."

"Good luck, kid," said Handle.

He hung up.

Chapter 4

"Well, that was touching," a voice purred from somewhere nearby.

Glitch jumped and hit her head on the desk above her.

"Drek," she swore softly to herself.

She crawled out from under the desk and pushed back her hood to see who had spoken, heart hammering furiously. She kept the barretta in hand, but trained the barrel on the carpet. In the darkness, she barely made out the silhouette of the woman Handle had called Syntechie.

There was a sound like the crack of a glow stick. The woman's bodysuit lit up like a rave. Little neon-blue lines traced the exact shape of Syntechie's breasts, thighs, and most of her long legs. Little synth wires woven into her hair shimmered with changing neon colors. The outfit was sleeveless, but some sort of moving, glowing, henna tattoos imbedded into what Glitch could only imagine was artificial skin wove and twisted in a slow, mesmerizing dance. There were two dead spots in the light-show: one shaped like a diamond at the base of her neck, and the other was a heart shape centered a good three inches south of Syntechie's midriff.

"My eyes are up here, pet," Syntechie purred.

Glitch jerked – she hadn't realized she was staring. She felt heat rising in her cheeks and hated herself and Syntechie for it.

How unprofessional.

"Sorry for the mix up," Syntechie continued casually, as though referring to a dinner reservation, not the deaths of three Runners. "You know how it is with boys." Her lips – electric blue and glowing like the rest of her – shaped themselves delicately into a pout. "They get their hands on a new toy, and they just can't wait to try it out."

Glitch bit back a "fuck you" to avoid the double entendre. She looked Syntechie square in the eyes and got a second, unpleasant shock. Syntechie had no irises or pupils to speak of. The eyes were simply a smooth, reflective veneer that shone like black glass, reflecting the light of the motivational posters around them. Cyber eyes. Very, very expensive. They might be equipped with any number of things: heat vision, cameras, telescoping, microscoping, or even all of the above. It was a safe bet that a little computer in Syntechie's head was pulling together a dossier on Glitch at this exact second – height, weight, pupil dilation, the works – and feeding the woman its best, algorithmic bets on what Glitch might say or do at any given moment. The longer they talked, the more data it would have. Drek.

Syntechie arched slender eyebrows at Glitch in a perfect, upside down "V".

"Handle said you were mostly harmless. He didn't mention shy," she said. She gave Glitch a coy smile. "I promise not to bite unless you ask very, very nicely."

Glitch didn't rise to the bait. If Syntechie wanted input for her cyber eyes to play with, she was going to have to work harder than that. Glitch readjusted her grip on her gun, kept the barrel pointed down, and remained silent. Syntechie's hips swayed as she took a graceful step forward, closing the distance between them. She eyed Glitch speculatively.

"Or do you just get tongue-tied when you're talking to pretty women?" Syntechie wheedled. She pressed her lower lip between her perfect teeth.

Glitch treated the question rhetorically.

"Nice cyber eyes," she said. It was a non-sequitur, but also a nice, neutral statement for the microcomputer to process. Hopefully it would tell Syntechie Glitch wasn't a threat, and to get this job done, so they could get out of here.

Syntechie's glowing lips parted into a slow, suggestive smile.

"Aw, you're sweet," she cooed, bringing her face down close to Glitch. "Play your cards right tonight and I'll show you what other parts of me got upgraded."

Her perfume, or whatever it was she was wearing, made Glitch think of spices. There was something strange about the smell - her head swam and her pulse picked up. Glitch made herself focus on the cold fact of the cyber eyes. At this distance, she could see little spots of light hovering and disappearing just below the glassy black surface - little menus or informational displays the cyberware was showing Syntechie. It was too small for Glitch to be able to read any of it, but the UI layout looked familiar.

"Th-they're a Nanotech model?" she guessed the name of the largest cyberware distributor in Neosakka. "What year?"

Syntechie's luminous smile shrank into a disapproving purse of her lips. "Don't you know it's rude to ask a woman her age?"

She tapped Glitch playfully on the nose with a well-manicured finger.

Glitch's hand flew up to push the offending digit away. Syntechie's other hand darted out. The taller woman caught hold of the barrel of Glitch's gun. She twisted it away in a swift, clean motion. Glitch lost control of the beretta, but caught hold of Syntechie's wrist. The cyber eyes must still be calibrating - Glitch had never planned on using the gun in the first place.

"You don't touch me," Glitch warned in a low voice. So much for not giving the computer any data.

"You sure?" Syntechie simpered. "I'm very good." She reached forward with her free hand and ran her fingers down the front of Glitch's hoodie. The fine hairs on Glitch's arms and back stood up like hackles.

For the second time in almost as many seconds, Glitch fell for the misdirect. Her body bunched to shove Syntechie away. Syntechie dropped the gun. She twisted, catching Glitch by the sleeve with her captive hand. Syntechie yanked hard, stepping back with her whole weight at the same time. The gesture caught Glitch by surprise. She stumbled forward. Syntechie pivoted, using Glitch's captive arm as a lever. In a clean motion, Syntechie flipped Glitch off her feet.

Glitch landed on her back with a grunt. Syntechie scooped up the firearm again. She pressed the muzzle of the gun against Glitch's throat, where the hoodie gave way to bare skin. Her cyber eyes glinted in the darkness. Glitch stayed put, feeling the cold metal in the soft spot above her collarbone. She fought down the urge to bat the gun away, consequences be damned. She wasn't sure exactly what her first impression of Syntechie had been, but whatever it was, it needed reevaluating.

"How about we set up up a safe word, before we go any further, hmm?" Syntechie teased. She leaned closer and brushed some strands of hair that had come loose out of Glitch's face. "I'd be mortified if I found out we did something you weren't comfortable with."

"Syn, stop playing with your food," a voice said. "We're on the clock."

Syntechie straightened up and turned, the gun still on Glitch.

"Please, Nine," she purred. "You know I would never." She nibbled her thumbnail suggestively. "I'm a lady."

No. "Purred" was wrong. Soothed? Warned? Something seemed off about Syntechie's tone, but Glitch couldn't pin it down. She turned to see the newest arrival.

Nine looked Japanese by descent, with longer, dark hair that could've once been a business cut, and a slighter, compact build. The way he squared his shoulders and the confidence of his stance gave the impression that he would have to make an active choice to slouch at any given moment. Glitch guessed that whatever he was now, he'd come from money, enough money to think cred didn't matter. She looked him up and down for the cyberware she knew he had to be fitted with, to be a Runner worth anything. Whatever it was, it was subtle enough that she couldn't pick it out on the fly. In stark contrast to Syntechie, he wore street clothes: jeans, beat up converse shoes, a t-shirt with a stylized, black-and-white Oni mask on it, and a canvas jacket covered in pockets. Apart from the gun on his belt, he looked like a guy running late for work at a netcafe, not running corporate espionage. A short, Japanese sword she recognized from video games as a wakizashi swung from his right hip - he was left handed then.

Nine cocked his head to look at Glitch.

"Oh," he said idly. "Guess I missed one."

He reached for his wakizashi in a smooth, controlled motion that belied the casualness of his voice. Glitch saw he had a kanji character tattooed on the back of his hand - one she didn't recognize.

"Nine, wait," the words tumbled out of Syntechie just in time to stop the full draw. "I'd take it as an extra special favor to me if you didn't do that. I need this one alive and walking, if it's not too much trouble."

Nine's eyebrows rose fractionally. "Not like you to get attached."

"Favor to an old friend," Syntechie said with a flip of her hair. She treated Nine to a blue-lipped smile. "You understand."

Nine looked from Glitch to the gun. "You're going to have your hands full," he pointed out.

"Oh, I think we understand each other now," Syntechie replied. She tucked Glitch's gun in the deeply-dipping back of her outfit and stepped back to let Glitch stand. She offered Glitch a hand up. "Don't you think?"

Glitch ignored the proffered hand and stood. She pulled up her hood, acutely aware of Nine's scrutiny.

"Specialty?" he asked.

"Hacker," Glitch replied and then, because she needed an ally right now, added, "I'm Glitch."

Nine inclined his head at her, a polite gesture that took her by surprise.

"What do you do?" Glitch pressed when he didn't return the introduction.

Nine hooked a thumb at his wakizashi.

"I hack things too," he said. Nine looked at Syntechie and opened his mouth, but whatever he was about to say was interrupted by a dull booming sound somewhere below them.

Syntechie made a small hissing sound between her teeth while the memory of the grenade set Glitch's ears ringing again. Nine's eyes lit up.

"Jackpot," he said and his lips spread into a smile.

"It's thrilling," Syntechie said through clenched teeth. The throatiness in her voice was gone. "Makes me want to take you right here on this hideous excuse for carpeting. How many floors down was that?"

"Three or four, depending on which charge they set off," Nine replied. There was something eager in his voice like a dog on the end of a leash. "How long do I have?"

"A good ten minutes until the bot finishes with the server. Then we're leaving," Syntechie said tightly. "Maybe next time, to speed things along, we don't play with live grenades twenty feet from delicate computer equipment, hmm?"

Nine shrugged. His head turned towards the stairs, and adjusted his sleeves. "Calm down. Plans change."

He nodded once to each of them and strode off through the cubicles. "I'm reinforcing the stairway. Get the data we need and Nero up here by the time I get back."

Syntechie cursed his back under her breath. She pulled out her phone and dialed with her free hand.

"Nero, my hero," she purred into the phone, "if that chopper's not in position inside of five minutes, I'm going to think you don't love me anymore."

Syntechie cocked her head away from the phone for a moment to avoid being deafened by the tirade erupting from the other end. She waited a few moments, and then returned it to her ear.

"But you do the impossible all the time," she crooned. "Surely a man with your talents can find their way past an itty bitty anti-air emplacement?"

Another stream of complaints erupted from the earpiece.

"Mmm hmm, yes, that's wonderful, I'll see you soon," Syntechie said through the noise. She hung up with Nero - whoever he was - on the other end still complaining loudly.

"Come on," she said to Glitch in a high, cheerful voice, the one people used to address children and animals. "Let's go check on the servers."

Glitch shoved both hands in her hoodie pocket and fell into step with the taller woman. Syntechie gestured for her to lead the way - apparently the cyber eyes still hadn't written off Glitch as a threat. Not enough to let their user turn her back on Glitch, anyway.

"I can't believe you're using a code-jimmy," Glitch grumbled as they walked. "Those things take ten times longer, and they only get exactly what you sent them in there for. No judgement calls."

Ten times was an exaggeration, but she had her professional pride to consider.

"To err is human," Syntechie said cooly.

A statement, Glitch reflected, descriptive of how they'd come to the current situation.

The air conditioning turned off. Glitch stopped dead. Syntechie nearly ran into her.

"Such thin skin too?" Syntechie baited, misreading the reason for the halt. "Is this your virgin run, darling, or-."

Glitch shushed her impatiently. She pulled back her hood and strained her ears, listening. To her surprise, Syntechie obeyed and fell silent. Small mercies.

A faint whirring sound reached her ears, like the hum of a microwave. Glitch's chin tipped upwards and she studied the ceiling vents.

"Drone," she said. "Run."

Chapter 5

Glitch and Syntechie fled through the maze of cubicles in silence. Gitch heard a faint hiss, like the release of gas, and Syntechie's outfit went dark. There was a metallic clattering behind them - the vent cover hitting the ground. Glitch risked a look back over her shoulder. The body of the chrome-plated drone was small - maybe the diameter of a microwave dish - and perfectly spherical, with embedded cameras shaped like the Eye of Horus on its cardinal points. Four propellers extended from its top, and a pair of metallic prongs like tuning forks extended from its base. It disappeared into the cubicles with a low, whirring hum.

The pair reached the huge, glass windows at the far end of the office. Glitch slowed as they approached, unwilling to go near them. She looked around for the nearest computer to jack into.

"If you can distract them, I can shut them down from the Matrix," she told Syntechie.

Syntechie smirked at her in the darkness, neon lights from outside washing over her like body paint. "This run has been a disaster for you. I'm not putting my life in your hands."

Glitch's chin came up and she shook stray hair out of her eyes. "What are you going to do?" she asked sarcastically. "Be sexy at the drones? For a woman who's half cyborg, you've got a really poor grasp of computers."

Syntechie peered out the window at the forest of skyscrapers, neon, and darkness, searching the sky for something.

"Hush, pet" she murmured. "I'm working." She smiled suddenly and pointed. "There. I love a man who doesn't keep me waiting."

A chopper like the rental Glitch had come in on veered around the building across the street and headed towards them. Syntechie's shoulders relaxed. She fluffed her hair with her free hand, like a holovid celebrity about to deliver a speech.

A streak of light screamed down from the roof. The chopper dipped sideways, but it wasn't fast enough to avoid the rocket completely. Syntechie went still as it hit. Both women stared at the cloud of smoke. It cleared, and against all odds, the chopper was still in the air, lolling dangerously from side to side. Smoke or steam poured from its underbelly. The chopper retreated. A second rocket shot down from on high, but the helicopter was out of range now.

Syntechie released a slow, measured breath. Glitch gave her a sidelong glance.

"What's the expression about plans and first contact with the enemy again?" Glitch asked innocently.

Syntechie started walking briskly away down the cubicle corridor.

"Keep moving," she said over her shoulder, and flipped out her phone.

Glitch looked around. She could hear the microwave hum getting louder, but couldn't see its source. The drone suddenly popped up over the pseduo-wall Syntechie had her back to. The metallic prongs at its base started glowing. Glitch sprang forward. Syntechie, already on the phone, recoiled as Glitch sprinted towards her. Syntechie reached for the berretta. Glitch pulled up her hood in the three strides that lay between them. The barrel of the gun came up, aimed at Glitch's chest. Glitch hoped in that split second that the Kevlar of her hoodie was tough enough to eat the blast. There wasn't time to position properly. Glitch grabbed Syntechie by the shoulder and forced her down. She flung up a defensive right arm as the drone finished charging and struck. It nailed her in the arm, instead of between Syntechie's shoulder blades.

The charge was intended to stun its victim - Glitch had seen its like before - with the added benefit of tripping the surge protector in cheaper cyberware and shutting it down. The leather casing of her hoodie ate the worst of the shock, but every hair on Glitch's arm stood up. Her skin went tingly. The drone pulled back, out of reach, and started charging again. Glitch shook her arm out, tried to position for when it came in for its second sweep. Syntechie slid out of the way, giving Glitch more room to move her feet.

The drone dove again. It had some kind of learning protocol installed - when Glitch raised her arm a second time, it dropped and hit her in the chest instead. This charge was stronger - it made a sharp cracking sound as it discharged - but her armor was thicker there too. Glitch's torso arched involuntarily but she kept her feet. Behind her, Syntechie squeezed off a round. It pinged harmlessly off the chrome casing and bounced into the array of cubicles. The smell of ozone and gunpowder filled the office space. The drone pulled back, charging again.

"Behind!" Syntechie hissed. Glitch turned, left arm going up instinctively. A second drone nailed her forearm. Glitch's entire arm went numb. Damn, the drones were talking to each other, compensating according to what their counterparts had learned.

"Run!" she snapped through clenched teeth at Syntechie.

Syntechie didn't reply, but she did obey the order. Lips pressed together tightly, she disappeared down the corridor of cubicles at a run, phone still in hand.

The first drone caught Glitch square in the back. It felt like she'd been punched by Jones. Glitch stumbled forward, dropped to her knees. The second drone swung into her field of vision. Her limbs didn't react fast enough to her command - fragging biology - and her right shoulder ended up taking the hit. The drones traded off, back and forth, keeping up a steady stream of jolts. The world turned glassy. Her whole body went numb, like a mild case of dumpshock.

Nine rounded the corner of the cubicle corridor. His canvas jacket flapped around him as he ran towards her - no way that thing was going to withstand the force of a shock. One of the drones zipped towards him. Nine reached for his wakizashi. The kanji tattooed to the back of his hand glowed hot white as the blade cleared its sheath. The entire length of steel lit and crackled with electricity. Nine carried the momentum of the draw into a swing. It connected squarely with the drone's body in a smooth, clean motion, like the slide of a well-oiled gun. Light - blue, red, and orange - flashed and flared. The drone's circuitry overloaded. It dropped to the floor in a sparking, smoking mess of scrap.

The second drone closed immediately behind its counterpart, diving into the opening left by the swing. Nine dropped to one knee. The drone shot past over his shoulder. Nine whirled. His blade cut a crackling crescent through the air and caught the drone from behind. Another display of electric fireworks and it also hit the floor.

Nine stood in a fluid, controlled motion. He turned in a slow, tight circle, searching for more enemies. The office space was still. The glow on the back of his hand faded away. With it, the electricity died out and he was left holding a more conventional blade of its kind. He sheathed his weapon. The steel made a soft hissing sound in the silence.

Gingerly, Glitch tried to get up. She made it to her elbows and knees - the rest was a bit more challenging. Nine pulled a phone out of his jacket, hit speed dial, and held it to his ear.

"Drones are down, Syn," he reported. He looked down at Glitch. "I've got your netrunner. Get the data. Security's going to be breathing down our necks before much longer."

There was a pause.

"Understood. I'll have the hacker shut it down," he said.

Another pause. Nine frowned, though Glitch couldn't tell if it was at her, or the person on the other end of the conversation.

"I can't hack a rocket emplacement," he said. "I'd have to dismantle it physically." His eyes narrowed on Glitch like a targeting reticule. "We have her, we should use her."

A third pause, and Nine let out a controlled breath.

"Fine. Hurry," he said tersely, and hung up.

Nine slipped his phone back into one of his canvas jacket's many pockets.

"You okay?" he asked Glitch.

"F-fine," Glitch replied. Her tongue was numb and her speech came out slurred and stuttering. "Just sh-shock wea-wearing off."

"It's Glitch, right?" Nine said, pronouncing her name carefully. "Syntechie told me you covered for her." He gave her a measured nod, "Quick thinking for a netrunner working in biospace."

Glitch returned the nod. "Th-thanks for h-handling the drones," she replied.

Nine nodded at her. "Welcome to the crew," he said. He shifted his feet in a restless motion, as though trying to bleed off excess energy. "We need to keep moving."

Glitch made another attempt at standing. She got to her feet, but her knees didn't quite hold.

"Can I give you a hand?" Nine asked. The question was delivered in a perfectly polite, neutral tone.

Glitch hesitated, then nodded. Normally no, but they were on the clock, and she wasn't going to be the one to fuck up this job any worse. Nine wrapped a hand around her forearm and lifted her bodily to her feet. For a man built along the lines of a knife, he was surprisingly strong. Maybe that was part of his cyberware. Up close, she could practically feel the energy coming off of him, like the buzzing electrical charge of a powerline.

"I think you spooked Syn, jumping in to help her like that," he said conversationally as he guided her back through the maze of cubicles.

"Or her c-cyber eyes," Glitch returned. She tried to pitch the statement like a joke, but he didn't laugh. With her muscles moving, the numbness started to wear off.

Another explosion sounded from somewhere below them. This one was close enough that Glitch felt the vibrations through the floor. Nine quickened his step, pulling her along with him.

They rounded a corner just as the last of the numbness wore off, which was just as well, because the carpeting here was slick with blood. Glitch snapped her teeth together to bite off the end of an involuntary gasp. They'd arrived upon the wreckage of the server room.

"Oh, there you are, my pets."

Syntechie leaned over a datapad hooked into one of the servers. Her neon outfit had reignited, casting cold blue light across the ghastly scene.

A grizzly mess of human parts, mixed with cubicle debris, littered the perimeter of the blast site, like human sacrifices to a corporate god. Blood still trickled down the wall in places and spread from the corpses in pools on the carpet. Glitch picked out the shape of Jones' gun - now a twisted, useless length of metal - lying to one side, and Wingz' body, mostly intact, but missing a huge chunk of his head.

Her biology took the hit from the horror that rolled through her. Glitch had seen corpses before - she'd made two of them in her time as a Runner - but nothing like this. Stomach bile rose up into the back of her throat. Her heart battered her rib cage and her throat closed up to hold down the scream building up inside her.

Glitch closed her eyes. Forced herself to exhale. When she opened her eyes again, she kept them focused on the far corner of the server room, instead of letting herself stare at the broken bodies of her team. Their deaths didn't make sense to her and she didn't want them to. She didn't want to be here. She didn't want to feel this.

Glitch looked around for a jack-in port to escape into, but Nine was still holding on to her arm. Was it her imagination, or had he tightened his grip? She realized her hands were knotted into white knuckle fists.

Glitch shook Nine off. To her relief, he released her without comment and took a sudden, intense interest in the collapsed cubicle wall to his right. A small kindness.

Someone was saying something. Glitch's head came up. Syntechie had closed the gap between them. She had an expectant look on her face, like she was waiting for Glitch's reply.

"What?" Glitch asked. The sound of her own voice brought her back to the present. Pride refused to let her crumble in front of Syntechie and she clung to it stubbornly.

Syntechie's forehead creased.

"Thanks for jumping in with the drones," Syntechie said, instead of repeating whatever it was she'd just asked. Her glowing lips parted in a smug smile. "And welcome to the ever-growing club of people who enjoy watching my back while I work. I'm told I have quite a following."

"Don't mention it," Glitch mumbled, and then added, "Ever."

"Aw, don't be shy," Syntechie teased. She tipped her head down deeply to one side so she could peer past the lip of Glitch's hood. "We're on the same team now."

"Then you should keep your distance," Glitch said. She backed up a half-step, turning to put a hunched shoulder between herself and Syntechie. The blood-soaked carpet made a soft, wet, squelching sound under her feet. "Being on my team hasn't worked out so well lately."

Glitch started to turn away, but Syntechie caught her by the forearm. Glitch's head whipped back around. The muscles in her arm bunched to strike.

"Hey," the directness in Syntechie's voice surprised Glitch enough to make her pause. "It's not your fault they're gone," Syntechie said. "Everyone had jobs to do. We did ours better. That's all."

Glitch wished cyber eyes on herself. Her eyes darted all over Syntechie's face, trying to divine a hidden game, or a setup.

"Here," Syntechie pressed something into Glitch's hand. She released Glitch's and took a step back. "It stings now, but believe me, someday, you'll wish you'd kept something to remember them by."

Glitch looked down and opened her hand. It was Wingz' watch. Blood, mixed with grit, stuck to her hands. She rubbed her fingertips together, and it came off in little rolls. Glitch turned the watch over one more time in her hands, and then dropped it in her hoodie pocket. If the cyber eyes were still looking for data, they were getting it - she could feel her heart hammering double time inside her chest.

Glitch checked Nine's reaction. He didn't turn away quite quickly enough to hide the smirk on his lips. Glitch stiffened.

"Are you feeling alright?" Syntechie asked. Her lips shaped into a sympathetic little pout.

Glitch's head swung back around. She looked directly into Syntechie's gaze and saw little readouts flashing across the interface. Syntechie's eyes darted across Glitch's face, gathering data. A particularly large readout opened up across both eyes a split second later. Syntechie's head recoiled.

"Tell your cyber eyes they can go fuck themselves," Glitch replied.

Syntechie's slender fingers curled against the datapad.

"Did I seduce a boyfriend of yours that I'm forgetting about?" Syntechie demanded. "In the first place, you really can't blame him, and in the second-."

"You killed my crew." Glitch's voice came out in a low snarl.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Nine turn to look at them.

"Ooh," Syntechie made a little cooing noise of sympathy. "I *killed* your boyfriend. Literally. Well, lesson learned, you really shouldn't mix business and pleasure."

"Boyfrie…" Glitch felt the heat of anger rising up inside her again. She welcomed its return. "This may shock and offend your delicate sensibilities, but I wasn't sleeping with any of them. Drek, most of us had barely met before this job."

Syntechie's elegant eyebrows arched gracefully across her forehead. "I was joking before, but… is this your maiden run?"

"My eleventh," Glitch growled. Technically true, though she'd mostly been a digital lookout on the first three. If you could survive upwards of four runs and come out on top in at least one of them you were considered a veteran.

Syntechie uttered a short, high laugh. In a less confident woman, it might have sounded like the prologue to a nervous breakdown. "How have you survived this long?"

"Probably my charming personality," Glitch muttered.

"Data," Nine interrupted the exchange.

He snapped his fingers twice at Syntechie. Glitch wasn't sure if the interruption was on her behalf, or if Nine was just restless, but she welcomed intrusion. Syntechie drummed her glossy nails along the top of the server.

"Another two minutes, handsome," she said tightly.

Nine spun on his heels and walked away with a clipped, deliberate gait.

Syntechie straightened sharply. "Where are you going?"

"Anti-air emplacement," he said without looking back.

He drew his wakizashi and trailed it beside him, letting the tip slice through the fabric covering of the cubicle walls as he passed them.

Syntechie took a step forward, as though she were going to call him back, and then seemed to think better of it. She hesitated in the hallway. One hand rose absently and started

twirling the ends of her hair. It seemed an oddly vulnerable gesture to Glitch. The glint of neon against metal caught her eye - her gun was still tucked in the back of Syntechie's outfit.

Another explosion broke the silence - it sounded like it was only a floor below them now. Syntechie's head whipped around, and in that moment, Glitch struck. She lunged forward for the berretta. Syntechie whipped around, drawing the weapon as she turned. Glitch brought her arm down hard on Syntechie's gun hand, knocking it out line of with her body. Syntechie fired. The bullet bit into the wall of the server room. Glitch brought her knee up into Syntechie's stomach. Lights flared across Syntechie's outfit. She doubled over, clutching her stomach. Glitch seized the gun by the muzzle and tore it out of the other woman's hand. She backed up, fumbled the gun, almost dropped it. Syntechie leapt forward and Glitch scrambled out of reach. She finally got the beretta pointed in the right direction and brought it up into Syntechie's face.

"Stop," Glitch snarled.

Like magic, Syntechie froze. That was the power of a gun. The world bowed before it, and it felt good.

They stood in silence for a moment, struggling for air, watching each other. Glitch imagined the millions of scenarios the cyber eyes had to be running through at that moment.

"What's the matter, pet?" Syntechie purred. "Are you scared? Always had someone there to pull the trigger for you?"

"Listen to me," she said between unsteady breaths. "Stop playing around and fucking listen to me. I don't kill Runners. Not if I can help it. If I planned to kill you, I'd do it right now. All I want is to get out of here."

She paused. Gave the cyber eyes time to assess her biosignatures. "Check your readouts. Do your eyes think I'm lying?"

Syntechie's lips pressed together in a thin line. She smiled tightly.

"You're a Hacker," she said. "You know better than most that technology is imperfect."

Glitch took a deep breath and willed every strained nerve in her body to be patient. "Meat-side security will be here soon," she said in as calm a voice as she could muster. "I'm going to go find a jack-in point and shut security down. All I need is time. Buy me some."

She reached forward and took Syntechie's wrist. The muscles in Syntechie's arm twitched. Glitch pressed the gun into Syntechie's palm, with the barrel facing outwards, towards Glitch's chest. She looked up into Syntechie's face, wishing she could see the readouts playing across the cyber eyes.

"You don't have to trust me. Just trust that I'll do my job. Then we all walk out of here alive," Glitch said quietly.

She let go of Syntechie's wrist. Syntechie didn't fire. Glitch flipped back her hood, shook out her ponytail. Her jack-in cable came willingly to her fingers. Glitch walked away deliberately until she found a cubicle untouched by the explosion and the debris .

Glitch breathed out. Dropped to her knees in front of the jack. Paid attention. Her hammering heart. The rustle of her leather hoodie. The worn carpet. The stale air of an office building.

Then she jacked in.

Chapter 6

The great hieroglyphic walls of the Hanging Gardens rose before her. The sensory noise of bio-space dropped away, and with it, her hammering heart. Fear became an afterthought, and she forgot about it. Glitch's cat-avatar hurled herself at the barred gates. At the last possible second, it fragmented into a blurry mess of pixels and slipped through the bars. All over the garden, sphinxes' heads rose and turned in her direction. The garden's warden, a jackal with an impossibly long, snaking neck, lunged at her. Glitch twisted, tumbling end over end through cyberspace, and evaded the snapping jaws by inches.

Then she ran.

The housecat hurled itself between grapevines and wide, leafy ferns. She scaled a warm palm tree on the edge of the garden and then leapt for the wall. The jackal's teeth flashed again, and she didn't glitch out in time. Cold pixels from her right rear leg flew through the air like blood droplets. The thing had started a trace on her. She hit the sandstone beyond the garden hard.

Glitch looked around. A scant leap away stood a half-man, half-falcon with a scroll of papyrus rolled up in his hands. He was tinkering with the neon-hieroglyphics chiseled into the sandstone of one of the nearby gardens. It figured that a corporation would style its avatars after gods. He was a user like herself, but one who belonged here, a native of the system. Probably a tech doing system maintenance.

He turned towards her. The falcon-head cocked to one side. To Glitch's digital eyes, he was moving in slow motion. Unlike the ICE of the Eyes in this sky Matrix, avatars that weren't directly jacked in were limited to biospace speeds. The user was at a desk somewhere, hammering out queries from the distance of a keyboard. Glitch darted away, sprinting at the speed of thought around the corner, but it was too late. He'd seen her.

Glowing red hieroglyphics spread across the system from around the corner. The native-avatar must have decided to raise the alarm without going through the full diagnostic procedure.A sphinx barreled around the corner a moment later, its eyes glowing scarlet. Glitch dove to one side, narrowly avoiding collision, and slammed into a wall. It was soft and warm to her touch. Glitch pressed into it, shuffling through the code it was made of, and finally fell through, leaving the sphinx behind.

This garden had a guardian as well, but it hadn't noticed her arrival yet. The walls were flashing red, but one of the grapevines was also pulsing gold at intervals. Glitch weighed it in her hand: light enough that it wouldn't slow her processor down, soft enough that it wouldn't trip her up, and most importantly, hot to the touch – she could hack it easily.

Glitch's avatar sank its teeth into the vine and tore a section off. Data flooded her system. It was a chat channel, exclusively used by the company's techs. It spanned the entire system without spilling into the local project channels. Glitch didn't waste time with anything fancy – she turned it into a personal projection so she could keep tabs on it. A chat log populated across the sky.

<Horus>: Hacker maybe?
Unknown user in sec 2 DB for 1 sec

<Anubis>: Noted

Sighting logged
Avatar?

<Horus>: Hard 2 tell
glitchy
maybe a cat??
Logged in as GUEST

<Anubis>: Noted
Logged

<Thoth>: Hey guys I think I got an unknown user over here in the sales database?
Are there supposed to be any guest users in the system?

Glitch looked around. Sure enough, this garden she'd hidden in to avoid that last piece of ICE had another avatar in it. This one was mostly human, but had the head of a bird with a long, narrow, curving beak. Glitch dove between two plants and made a break for the far wall. She hit it full-force, her processor chewing through the code as fast as she could edit it.

<Thoth>: Nevermind, it's gone.
Must have just been a glitch.

<Horus>: ITS NEVER JUST A GLITCH
H4CKZ0R !!!! !!1!

<Anubis>: Agreed.
Get everyone on Net.
If they're traveling that fast, they're probably a JACK.
Contain it before it knows we know it's here.

<Horus>: GAME ON

<Thoth>: Calm down, dude.
If it is a local JACK, meat-side security will get the credit for bagging it anyway.

<Horus>: NOT IF WE CATCH IT FIRST
LETS DOOOOO THIIIIIIIIIS

Glitch broke cover. She bolted flat out for her goal: the heart of the pyramid at the center of the garden – ROOT. Immediately, ICE descended on her. Sphinxes hemmed her in on all sides. Glitch leapt and dodged from side to side. Several of them got their claws into her before she slipped away and she left a trail of pixel blood in her wake – that trace was getting a lot

stronger. It wouldn't be long before the system was able to pinpoint her, and throw her forcibly out. Then she'd have dumpshock to add to her list of problems.

Horus, the falcon-man avatar she'd first encountered, suddenly appeared in front of her, blocking her path. He sent her a direct message.

<Horus > GUEST>: Here, kitty, kitty, kitty
Let's see how many lives you really have.

Glitch smirked. They thought she was fast now…. She loaded up one of the prebuilt programs she carried with her in her cyberdeck. Glitch sent him a reply and hit "Run".

<GUEST > Horus>: yes lets

Her cat avatar split into nine different copies of itself, and each of them bounded away in different directions.

<Anubis>: Sighting in sector 3 database

<Horus>: Got em pinned down in maintenance

<Thoth>: I think I just saw it in both sectors seven and five?
It's fragging fast.

<Horus>: H4CKS

<Anubis>: I have it trapped.
Converge on the receiving database.

Glitch flinched as two of her avatars died untimely, pixel-ed deaths elsewhere in the Matrix. The physical feedback wouldn't do any lasting damage to her biology, but it stung. She darted around Horus as he snagged another of her clones and headed for the pyramid again.

Another piece of ICE, a leopard with glowing spots, raced towards her from between the arches of an aqueduct. It was following her trail of pixel-blood - the trace had just caught up with her. She had a split second of cyberspace time before it was on her. Glitch grabbed as many vines and plant-stuff as her system could handle. The leopard pounced. It flipped her onto her back and swallowed her whole.

The leopard-ICE was built for containment, not destruction. The walls of its stomach were icy-cold and hard as marble. Glitch force-quit every other program she was running and focused all of her processor's power on dragging the vines along with her. Huge chunks of foliage tore up out of the ground and disappeared down the leopard's gullet. It gagged. Glitch redoubled her efforts, pouring every bit of power she had into moving whatever code she could find into the ICE's storage bank before its jaws closed, sealing her away from the rest of the Matrix and blocking her from jacking out. The leopard convulsed. Somewhere in biospace, a

server was about to catch fire. The linings of the leopard's stomach glitched. Glitch sank her teeth into the momentary gap and started forcibly reconstructing the code she found there. If ICE could speak, this one would have been screaming. Suddenly, the convulsions ceased. The leopard's eyes closed. When they opened again, they were a deep purple, the color of her avatar's eyes. All over the garden, guardians relaxed and went back to their patrols. The Glitch-leopard bounded away towards the pyramids.

       <Thoth>: It just disappeared.
           I think it jacked out?

       <Anubis>: No user logout detected.

       <Horus>: Mybe some1 dumped them from the system meat-side?

       <Anubis>: Perhaps bio-security is actually doing their job for a change.
           Pity.
           It was an enjoyable exercise.

       <Thoth>: Dead?

       <Anubis>: Only dumpshocked, I would hope.
           CERD only pays bounties on live runners.

       <Horus>: I wanna get a look at that cyberware before they ship out.

       <Anubis>: Best find them quickly then.
           You won't get near them after CERD is notified.

    The Glitch-leopard hit the steps of the pyramid and started climbing them, five a time. Her claws sent sparks flying every time she hit the sandstone, sending up a spray of neon rainbow colors.

       <Sobek>: I received your message @Anubis.
       We got a hacker?
       Running scans now.

       <Thoth>: *Had* a hacker

       <Horus>: Wait.
       Meat-side security says they're still running sweeps
       On 188 & 189.
       They haven't found anyone yet.

<Thoth>: Does that mean

<Horus>: fuck

<Thoth>: they're still in here?

<Sobek>: Shouldn't that ICE be on standby?
        Why is it showing active?

<Horus>: FUCK

<Anubis>: Shut it down
SHUT IT ALL DOWN

The final door between her and ROOT was light, easy to process, but hard and cool to the touch. Glitch shut everything else out of her mind but the task in front of her. She called up a plain text version of the code and scanned it manually, looking for any poorly phrased command she could exploit. All around her, the hieroglyphs flashed neon red.

The answer came to her in a flash. She extended the alarm around her into the ROOT. A moment later, the door popped open to admit her ICE-leopard to deal with the threat inside. She was in.

The paradox of cyberspace was evident here: the room she entered was at least as large as the pyramid itself. Every inch of the walls, floor, and ceiling were covered with golden, glowing Eyes of Horus which blinked, stared, or rolled about in turn. Glitch abandoned the leopard just inside the door. The program crashed as she left it and the leopard crumbled to pixels. Her black-cat avatar emerged back into the digital world with a leap. The moment its paws touched the floor, the room's eyes began flickering wildly. Purple light spread across them, engulfing them in its glow. Glitch's cat-avatar stretched. It reared back on its back-paws, becoming bipedal and vaguely humanoid in form. Her username changed from <GUEST> to <Bastet>.

<Horus>: @Bastet Drek ur good
        I think I'm in love

Glitch locked the door to the pyramid, and then, after a second thought, relocated it entirely to the opposite side of the room.

<Bastet>: @Horus sorry
        i don't date wage slaves

She moved the steps to the pyramid a moment later, filing the log-in gate in a garden marked "catering".

<Horus>: @Bastet HARSH

<Bastet>: @Horus this building is mine now
            bye bye

From the heart of the matrix, Glitch pulled up a list of every other user with admin privileges. Then she flung them all from the world. She revoked their godhood and exiled them beyond the wall of the garden. Gates slammed shut, passwords failed, and she became the uncontested deity of the pyramid.

Now.

Time to look at options again.

Glitch called up security cameras from everywhere in the building. The eyes all around her opened wide and became windows into meat-space. It took her several long, frantic minutes to find her body in the mess. There she was, half concealed under the desk.

Syntechie was gone.

Glitch flicked through the cameras and found the woman unconscious, near the stairs, with a drone hovering over her, and a security guard with a stun gun trained on her unnecessarily. There was a dark patch on the carpeting. Syntechie was bleeding from somewhere, but Glitch couldn't identify the source from the distance of the cameras.

Syntechie must have lured them away from Glitch's unconscious body and then paid for it. Glitch felt a grudging respect. The feeling faded a moment later in the transience of the matrix. Glitch checked the readouts. There were several other drones on the floor as well, searching systematically for any more of Nine's explosive surprises, or other runners.

Inside the Matrix, Glitch ran her hand along the walls, flipping through menus, until she found the directory she was looking for. There was no hacking necessary now, just a simple set of commands given to a system eager to please . Every door on the floor slammed shut and locked. Cries went up from the security team as their drones suddenly turned on them. Glitch shut down the elevators and, remembering her own arrival, turned up the fans in the vent shafts, sending icy-cold air out across the floor. The guards fell silent, stunned out of consciousness. With a few more commands, Glitch sent drones to patrol the stairs against reinforcements. For the moment, at least, they were safe.

Chapter 7

Glitch considered her position. Neither the drones nor the elevator would hold indefinitely. The elevator shaft was still accessible, and depending on how the drones were designed, a well-placed EMP grenade could make short work of her robotic watchdogs. Glitch flipped through the other security cameras on surrounding floors. There was a second team of CorpSec on standby that hadn't realized their counterparts were down for the count yet. She checked the comm-logs. Eyes in the Sky wasn't scared yet – no one had placed a call to the outside for backup. Glitch severed outgoing lines, re-directing any calls to other extensions within the building. Thus fortified, she went to look for Nine.

She found the Runner holed up in the stairway of the 192nd floor. He was at a standoff with meat-side security - one guard was already down with a gunshot wound to the thigh, and the others were stacked up behind a door. Nine had his wakizashi drawn in his left hand, and a handgun in his off-hand. Glitch called up a collection of drones from their charging pods on 190 and sent them whizzing up the stairwell. Nine dropped into a low crouch as they approached, then turned his head in surprise as they hurtled past. The guards didn't realize they were in trouble until it was too late - they crumpled like cheap paper cups from a drive-thru.

She sent the drones flying back to Nine. Glitch flipped through control options until she found the drones' speaker systems.

"I can shut down the anti-air from here," she told him, executing the necessary commands as she spoke. "Call your guy in the chopper and tell him to come land."

Nine straightened warily. "Hacker?" he asked.

"It's Glitch."

Inside the Matrix, her cat tail twitched restlessly while she waited out the time delay.

"Syntechie better be alive," Nine replied. He didn't sheath his sword.

"Alive, but unconscious," Glitch confirmed. "She's bleeding, but if I leave the system to help her, it's just a matter of time until we're overrun by drones again. Hurry, please."

Nine took off at a sprint, pulling his phone out as he ran.

Glitch checked on Syntechie again. No sign of Nine yet. Why was biospace so slow? An alert triggered. The rent-a-chopper was inbound towards the roof's landing pad.

Glitch checked Nine's progress in the stairwell. He wasn't there. She checked the elevators. He wasn't there either. She checked the roof, just to be sure, and then started combing through every floor of camera feeds from the roof downward. At last, she found Nine on the hundred and ninety-fifth floor.

In stark contrast to the cubical labyrinth of the hundred and eighty-ninth floor, this floor resembled a cross between a high-end hotel and a museum. Luxurious, thick carpets marked quieter walkways across polished marble floors. Pedestals displaying antiquities - gleaming pottery, primitive weaponry, small statuettes - lined the walls. A set of readouts told her that more than a dozen of them were merely high-end holograms. The overhead lights were off - the glow of the displays lit the room. Faux Egyptian columns stretched from floor to ceiling. A large desk was the only piece of furniture. It sat imperiously a short distance from the full-length windows, contemptuously considering the neon glow of the city below. Waterwalls filled the air with the soothing sound of trickling water. Also, someone was screaming.

Nine was not the source of the screams, but he was up to his elbows in the efficient cause. Blood dripped from his sleeves and dyed the jaws of the oni mask on his t-shirt a deep red. A security guard lay disemboweled at his feet in a rapidly widening pool of blood and bile. Her hand, still clutching a gun, lay a few feet away, neatly severed at the wrist.

A middle-aged man who looked like he was grateful to be born in an era that prized elevators sat behind the desk. His thick, short fingers pressed flat against the top of the desk in the arrested gesture of a man about to stand. His eyebrows, which didn't quite match the color of his hair, stretched high and wide across his forehead. His teeth were all uniformly white - the cameras were even able to get a clear view of the back molars. He was the source of the screaming.

"...after I missed our last two appointments," Nine was saying. Whatever the first half the sentence was, she hadn't been able to hear over the wage slave's yelling. "And now look at me. I'm getting paid to have someone else sneak me in here and lock down security so you and I can chat in private."

Glitch looked around the digital version of the room, trying to find devices she could use. There was an oversized, wall-mounted monitor concealed behind a set of panels. She started its boot up sequence and then checked every floor's camera feed again while it took its time powering on. The second biospace security team was making slow progress. Nine heard the panels slide open and looked warily behind him at the monitor.

"the fuck are you doing?" Glitch typed out across the screen in big, black letters, "get down here"

"In a minute," Nine replied. He flicked the wakizashi casually at the wage-slave, sending droplets of blood arcing through air. "I have work to do. If Syn can't hold out for a few more minutes, she's dead anyway."

Glitch dug through the system for other options. She found a dead spot in the blueprints with a power cable stretching to it: panic room or a secret server room. She checked the air ducts. There wasn't any climate control headed into that space. Panic room then. Its entrance would have to be concealed behind a false wall on the left side of the office. The cameras picked out a seam between two faux marble panels.

Glitch pulled a copy of the blueprints, the power grid and, as an added bonus, the invoice for the security cameras' purchase into her deck for later reference. There had to be someone out there who would be interested enough in that little snippet to pay for it.

"I wouldn't expect you to understand," Nine went on, swinging his blade nonchalantly from side to side. He turned back from the screen and approached the desk. "But there are some things in this world more important than money and survival."

"GET READY TO RUN" Glitch typed in all bold across the screen behind Nine's head.

The man at the desk's eyes went wide as he read the words. Nine saw the expression and turned. Glitch killed the lights in the room. There was an almighty scramble of noise across the camera mics and then the night vision kicked in. She saw the man throw himself low behind the desk, and then race towards the panic room. Nine swung at where the man had been an instant ago and hit the chair instead. He cursed loudly in Japanese. He backed up, swinging his blade in a wide arc, assuming the wage slave was making a break for the door.

The exec palmed a hidden scanner on the wall. The light in the panic room came on as the door opened. Nine roared and flung himself across the distance. He was too late. The panic room door slammed shut. A litany of curses in four different languages erupted from Nine's lips. The sigil on his hand flared to life, and with it, the length of his wakizashi. Nine swung wildly at the marble face. Sparks flew up, lighting the darkened office with each strike.

A new set of camera feeds sprang to life. Glitch glanced over at them. Nine's would-be victim slumped against the wall of the panic room, breathing heavily. Thick, shaky fingers clawed the tie loose from around his neck. He looked up at the cameras. Glitch pulled up his HR file curiously. Gordon Abasi had worked for Eyes in the Sky for the past 33 years, 2 months, 19 days. He had pretty good health insurance, no spouse or dependents, and was due for a bonus at the end of this quarter.

Outside, Nine's futile assault on the door ended. He turned, shaking with rage, to look up at the nearest camera.

"Open the door, Glitch," he snarled.

"couldn't if i wanted to," Glitch typed across the screen. "it's an independent system"

She let him think about that for a moment and then added, "get your ass down here and help Syntechie"

A message pinged in the corner of her field of vision. The wage slave in the panic room had a simple data slate that connected to the rest of the building's network.

<SF_RM195>: Hello? Who is this?

Glitch ignored the message. She poked around, seeing if there was anything else she could access through the data slate. It was a dead end. He may as well have been shouting at her through the door, for all that she could get to him.

<SF_RM195>: Why did you help me, Runner?

<Bastet>: it's not about you, wage slave

She glanced back at Nine. He stood outside the panic room, feet spread at shoulder-width, hands shaking with rage.

<SF_RM195>: Nevertheless, I owe you. You want a job? Name your price.

Even in the serenity of cyberspace, the implication rankled her.

<Bastet>: i'm not for sale

She checked on Nine again. Reluctantly, like a feral animal being driven from its kill, Nine backed off towards the stairwell. His eyes glinted in the darkness, and he turned the wakizashi restlessly in his hands.

<SF_RM195>: Come now, we both know that's not true. Runners work for the highest bidder. Is the hazard pay really worth it?

<Bastet>: it's not about the cred
i run to make the corps bleed
it's that simple

<SF_RM195>: Ah, a righteous vendetta. Very good. Whatever helps you sleep at night. I prefer a glass of wine and a massage myself.

The speed of the Matrix notwithstanding, Glitch decided she didn't have time for this. Someone was trying to regain administrative permissions. She went off to go deal with it.

<SF_RM195>: I am curious though… if you intend to make this company bleed, why stop your co-worker from killing me?

<Bastet>: i might be idealistic
but you're naive
you think you matter enough to the corps
that your death would make a difference?
please
they would have you replaced in 24 hours or less
i bet you even know by who
people get paid to organize those kinds of promotions
i'm not doing their work for free

<SF_RM195>: Do you know who you're working with? Why your co-worker tried to kill me?

<Bastet>: don't know
don't much care either

<SF_RM195>: He's a fanatic. He and his drinking buddies fondly imagine they're fighting for the preservation of humanity when they're actually just standing in its way. They all go by numbers.

<Bastet>: that's nice

<SF_RM195>: You won't believe me, but here's my advice to you. Watch your back. Their policy is to burn through anyone or anything that gets in their way. You just made yourself an obstacle to them. Sure you still don't want to talk about that job offer?

Glitch felt brief, bitter amusement, and then the emotion passed and was lost to the binary void.

<Bastet>: if my crewmate wants me dead
he can get in line
he wouldn't be the first person with a score to settle

She started hammering out a series of commands into the drones.

<Bastet>: if i'm going to lose my life in a cubicle
i'd rather it not take the next 40 years

She tabbed away to see what Nine was up to. He was on the stairway, headed down. Time to go.

Glitch powered down the non-essential systems. All around her, the lights of the pyramid started going out, one by one. She set the rest of the system to shut down in five hundred and forty seconds, and then, reluctantly, ceded her divinity and jacked out.

Glitch opened her eyes.

She was back in meatspace, and here, she was only human.

Chapter 8

Biospace information assaulted her senses. Glitch staggered to her feet. Her cheeks were wet, and her body ached as though she'd been straining to lift the building itself. A moment later, her stomach won the argument it had lost in the chopper and she vomited its contents all over the floor.

Drek, she was tired.

Glitch looked around. The floor was dark, thanks to her blackout, except for the computer monitors. They all glowed with the word "standby" written across the screen.

No sign of Nine yet.

She spat a few times and wiped her mouth with the back of her sleeve. Syntechie still had her gun. Glitch made her biology suck it up and run. As she neared the stairway, her steps slowed. Glitch hesitated. Nine should have already made it dow-.

A figure detached from the shadows, moving in a low predator's sprint. Nine slammed into her full force. Her thinner, lighter body flew backwards into the Egyptian-print of the cubicle walls. The breath went out of her in a strangled cry as she hit the carpet. Nine advanced on her slowly, his blade sheathed at his side. The bloodied oni mask on his t-shirt leered at her.

"I need to get through that door, Glitch," Nine said in a low, cold voice. "And you're gonna open it for me."

"Fuck you," Glitch spat from the floor.

Angry felt better than afraid.

Glitch got to her feet. Adrenaline roared through her veins, numbing the pain in her muscles. Nine blocked the entrance to the cubicle, but there was a computer on the desk behind her. . Glitch's hand felt for the keyboard. Nine saw the movement and lunged. He caught the front of her hoodie with his biological right hand and slammed his cyberware left into the computer tower. Glitch's fingertips scraped across the keyboard and hit the enter key before he lifted her bodily away. The word "standby" flickered, vanished. The kanji on the back of Nine's hand flared. Every monitor on the office floor went dead. By the light of his glowing cyber arm, Glitch saw Nine frown. He looked at his hand, and then around at the other, dead computers. The hum of a dozen microwaves filled the air.

"Sorry," Glitch said. She leaned away from him as much as his grip on her hoodie would allow. "I'm getting Syntechie out. I'll come back for you before security finds you."

Comprehension flashed across Nine's face. He dropped her and swung around, drawing his sword as he turned. Buzzing, chrome spheres flung themselves through the air at him. They dropped out of the air vents and hummed over cubicles. Forked metal flashed and sparked, an angry reply to Nine's humming blade.

Nine didn't say a word. His weight centered. His limbs pulled in and the smooth control returned as he took up the ready stance. The first drone of the wave was cut down in a clean arc of steel and blue light. Sparks lit the office space and the smell of ozone filled the air. A second drone struck as the first fell. Nine caught the force of stunner on his arm. The kanji flared brightly, then died down. Nine dropped his wakizashi into his off-hand. His sword hand, he slammed full-force into the nearest, oncoming drone. The cyberware shrugged the held discharge straight into the drone's camera. Its surge protectors blew and the drone went spinning off into a cubicle wall, trailing smoke and sparks.

Glitch tore her eyes away as the wakizashi made contact with the third bot. Nine still blocked the entrance to the cubicle, so she used the desk as a step to go over the pseudo-wall. Drones dodged and whizzed around her, locked into their only target. Glitch tucked her head as tightly as she could between her hunched shoulders. She leaned down, bent almost double so she couldn't been seen over the cubicle walls, and ran.

She found Syntechie still crumpled in a heap by the elevator. An unconscious guard lay nearby, stun gun dropped from his outstretched arm. Glitch flipped him over with a grunt. Her baretta was tucked in his waistband. Glitch retrieved it. She looked up. The floor fell silent again.

Shit.

Glitch shook Syntechie by the shoulder.

"Come on, get up. We gotta go," she hissed.

Syntechie stirred a little, but didn't reply. A familiar sound crackled behind Glitch. She straightened and brought her gun up level with Nine's head. .

He stalked towards her down the cubicle corridor. The light of his blade washed his face in shifting shadows. His off-hand kept his gun steady on her.

"Put it down, Hacker," Nine ordered quietly. There were scorch marks on his jacket, but he looked unharmed.

Glitch backed away, but kept the gun trained on him.

Nine shook his head. "'I'll come back for you before security finds you'?' Really? You're either a liar, or a terrible Runner. Between the two, I'm betting you don't play poker."

Glitch eyed him. "I don't do the corps' work for them."

"And I respect that," Nine replied. The dead calm in his voice ate away at her bravado. "Really. Under different circumstances, I bet we'd get along."

Glitch's back came up against the wall. She'd run out of room to retreat. Her jaw clenched and her shoulders locked tight under her hoodie. The barrel of her baretta wobbled. Fear - that's what that sensation rising up out of her stomach and closing up her throat up was. Fear.

She hated that feeling.

"Normally I'd start by cutting off a finger so you'd understand what you're losing, but we're short on time," Nine went on in a quiet voice. "I will take your arm, Glitch. You're right handed - it will not be fun to start learning left, I promise."

Glitch's arm twitched involuntarily.

"It's not worth it," Nine said. He stepped over Syntechie's fallen form to close the gap between them. "That wage slave shitting himself upstairs is nothing to you." His voice turned gentle. "Come on, Glitch. Don't make me be the bad guy."

Glitch lifted her chin. Her breath was loud in her ears. She met Nine's gaze definitely from within the shadow of her hood.

"I'm getting my team out of here," she told him. "Don't come any closer or I swear I'll shoot you."

Nine's mouth spread into a grin that turned her blood to ice water. He stepped forward.

A loud cracking sound made Glitch jump. Nine's back arched. He pitched over to one side. Behind him, Syntechie knelt by the fallen guard, the stun gun in her hands.

Syntechie let out a slow breath.

"Boys," she murmured to herself. She arched an eyebrow at Glitch.

Glitch stared. "Thanks," she said.

Syntechie collapsed.

Glitch used most of the curse words she knew. She relieved Nine of his wakizashi and gun, then scooped up the stunner from the floor where it had fallen from Syntechie's hands. The leads were still embedded deep in Nine's back. She left them there, and examined the stunner more closely. It was a higher-end model than most of the equivalents she'd seen on the street - this one administered a small dose of some drug along with the shock. She checked the gun's vitals: power was at 83 percent, and there were still four drug doses waiting to be deployed. Keeping the stunner in one hand, Glitch bent over Syntechie. The lights on the Fixer's dress were darker on one side below the waist. Glitch leaned closer and, using the light from her phone, realized there was blood coating the material. Syntechie had caught a stray bullet at some point while Glitch was in the Matrix. Glitch didn't have any medical training, but she was pretty sure people could survive leg injuries, provided they didn't lose too much blood.

About that.

Glitch fingered the edge of Syntechie's outfit but it was all synthetic material – nothing absorbent enough. She looked at Nine. His jacket had too many pockets for her to cut it down easily into bandages, and she was fragging sure she wasn't brave enough to strip him of his shirt or pants.

Glitch swore some more and peeled off her hoodie. The t-shirt underneath sported a picture of a game controller and the FightStreet12 logo from a gaming tournament three years ago. Mercifully, it was not one of her favorites. Glitch stripped herself of it, ignoring the chill of the office, and used Nine's wakizashi to slice it into strips. Whatever cyberware interfaces it had, it functioned just fine as an oversized pair of shears. Nine twitched part-way through the process, and she pulled the trigger on the stun gun again for good measure. She'd almost finished bandaging Syntechie's leg when the woman's phone lit up and started ringing. The caller ID read "Nero" with a little picture of a silver car under it.

Glitch picked up the call. She tucked it between her shoulder and her ear so she could keep working.

"Where are you?" a man's voice hollered at her from the other side. She could hear the whine of the helicopter in the background. "You wouldn't believe the night I've had!"

"I'm coming, I'm coming," Glitch grumbled into the receiver.

There was a pause.

"I love hearing those words from a woman, trust me, but who the fuck is this?" said the voice on the other side.

"The hacker catching a ride out with you and your team," Glitch returned.

"Yeah?" the voice on the other end sounded skeptical. "Syntechie didn't mention she was bringing friends. Where is she?"

Glitch finished tying off her improvised bandage.

"Mostly unconscious," she replied.

"Uh huh, and the other one?"

Glitch glanced over at Nine.

"About the same," she replied.

There was a pause from the other end. Nine might have moved slightly in the darkness. She eyed the stunner.

"What's that noise?" Nero asked.

"Just some electrical equipment," she said, releasing the trigger again. "Get your ass down here and help me move them. I can't drag them both at the same time."

"Yeah, I don't think this chopper's gonna fit down the stairwell," Nero said. "What floor you on?"

"One-eighty-nine," Glitch said. "And you're gonna have to leave your bird alone for a little while, or else pick which one you want to save. I can't move them both on my own."

"I heard you the first time, lady," Nero answered. "I'm fucking exhausted, not deaf. I'll meet you by the windows."

"What do you-," Glitch started to ask, but he cut her off.

"Just shut up and do it," Nero interrupted. "I'll handle the rest."

"Great, wonderful. I'm com-." Glitch swore mentally and then rephrased the statement. "I'm on my way."

Ugh. Pilots.

She hung up on him.

Glitch struggled back into her hoodie, slung the sheathed wakizashi over her back, and stowed the other weapons in her pockets and waistbands. Nine was still out cold. She grabbed him under both arms and started dragging him backward. Without adrenaline for a painkiller, her body protested every fragging step of the way. She heard glass shatter two-thirds of the way there, but she was too focused on putting one foot behind the the other, instead of collapsing into a chair, to pay it much attention. She kept moving towards the windows until she felt cold air on her back and heard wind. Glitch froze.

Wind? Fuck.

She turned.

Hovering outside the shattered window was an industrial-level transport chopper with its passenger door open and a man half-leaning out of it. He looked to be in his mid-twenties, and sported an oversized pompadour. A digital faceplate covered the upper half of his face. He wore a thick, bright, synthetic, red jacket, black t-shirt, heavy jeans, and a pair of teal, high-top converse with glowing white soles. A jack-in cable ran from the back of his head and disappeared deeper into the chopper. Glitch swallowed. More heights. Oh, and he had a shotgun pointed at her face. That was scary too. Drek, she was exhausted.

She forced herself to focus on the pilot, instead of on the gap between the chopper and the building.

"I don't know what the spread is on that thing," she yelled over the noise of the chopper, "But I'm pretty sure you fire and it's gonna hit me and your crewmate!"

Nero studied her for a moment longer. He let go of the shotgun and it swung down to his side on a shoulder strap. Nero reached back into the chopper. He came up with a harness secured to a safety cable. He hefted it once, testing the weight, and then hurtled it across the space between them.

"Catch!" he yelled.

An awkwardly-shaped brown glove - sports equipment of some kind - flashed across his faceplate in digital neon. Glitch set Nine down just in time to grab the harness before it slid away. She more or less shoved Nine into the harness, did up as many of the buckles as she could find, and then gave Nero a thumbs up.

"Syntechie?" Nero hollered. He kicked something behind him and a winch somewhere inside the chopper ate up the cable's slack.

Glitch gave him a tired nod. She turned back, once more, to the cubicles. Glitch took a deep breath and forced her body to sprint. It turned into a jog after only a few strides. Glitch mentally cursed biospace with every aching footfall that sent pain running up her back.

Syntechie lay where Glitch had left her. She roused as Glitch swung the woman's arm over her shoulder.

"Aw, you came back for me?" Syntechie murmured weakly. "I knew there was something between us."

Glitch ignored the comment.

"Come on, I'm gonna need you to try and walk at least a little," she told the woman, "Or neither of us is gonna make it out of here."

Syntechie leaned heavily on Glitch, but managed to support at least some of her weight on her good leg.

"Why?" she asked as they hobbled back towards the chopper.

"Because I spend most of my free time in cyberspace and you're fucking heavy," Glitch growled.

"You cared about your crew," Syntechie clarified. She took a deep breath, rallying her energy. "Why help?"

"You're my ride out," Glitch said. She tried to shrug but it was a bit too much effort with Syntechie's weight bearing down on her.

"My eyes say you're lying," Syntechie replied.

"Your eyes can go fry themselves on a powerline," Glitch grunted.

They were getting close to the window. There was a high keening sound and a flash of light from the far side of the office floor. Glitch swore – she'd heard an EMP go off before. That meant the drones she'd left on guard duty were probably out of commission and they were going to have company real soon.

"So why?" Syntechie pressed.

Glitch kept her eyes fixed on the chopper ahead of them. "Imagine a world where someone gave a damn about other people. Wouldn't you rather live there?"

A shaky laugh spilled from between Syntechie's lips. "I'm hallucinating from blood loss, aren't I?" she breathed when she could speak again.

"Sure," said Glitch. She lowered Syntechie to the floor and gestured for Nero to throw her the harness again. "Why not. Just stay calm and when you wake up in a hospital this will all have been a bad dream."

"Were you really going to shoot him?" Syntechie asked. Her voice was getting weaker.

Glitch hesitated.

"What do your cybereyes think?" she said, instead of answering the question. Nero tossed her the harness and she caught it.

Syntechie was silent for a moment and Glitch thought the woman might pass out again.

"I think you can make anyone to do anything, if you find the right pressure points," Syntechie said. "And you've had a long day."

Glitch didn't reply.

"Last question," Syntechie said. She cocked her head at the improvised bandage on her leg. "How many t-shirts do you usually wear on a run?"

The cyber eyes betrayed nothing, but the corners of Syntechie's mouth twitched.

Glitch sighed. "Make sure you get all the buckles," she said.

Getting a partially-conscious Syntechie into the harness was easier than it had been with an entirely unconscious Nine. Glitch signaled Nero, and then made the mistake of looking down. Glowing rivers of traffic flowed back and forth far, far below, tinted by luminous, neon billboards and blazing marquees. Her head spun at the sight of the drop. The floor felt like it was shifting under her feet. Her already strained nerves failed her. Glitch stumbled backwards until she ran into cubicle siding.

Nero pulled Syntechie into the helicopter and started pulling her out of the harness.

"Come on, jump!" he yelled. A little analog clock with a ticking second hand displayed on his faceplate.

"I think I'll take the stairs!" Glitch tried to joke, but the words got trapped in her throat.

When she didn't move, Nero finished wrestling Syntechie out of the harness and threw it back to her. Glitch fumbled with straps. She slipped into it, snapped the main buckle into place, and started tightening straps. She knew, in the back of her mind, that she would never convince herself to make the jump across that space, but every second she spent securing the harness was one where she didn't have to admit she would rather die in this building, at the hands of the corps, then make a four foot leap to relative safety. Fuck biospace.

"Freeze!" someone yelled.

Glitch turned. A squad of security officers ran towards her down the cubicle aisle. They had weapons - stun guns, sidearms, even a shotgun – drawn.

Glitch dove out of the way behind the nearest cubicle. She ran out of slack on the harness and it yanked her off her feet. She looked up. The security guard wielding the shotgun leveled it in her face.

A force akin to the grenade blast slammed into Glitch's body, carrying her backwards. She had the impression that her skeleton had tried to quit her body without consulting the surrounding flesh and muscle. She glimpsed, for a moment, the startled expression of the security guard. A split second later, she realized the safety line attached to the back of her harness had gone taut. The chopper hauled her backwards, out the window, like an eager, two-ton dog on the end of a leash. If there'd been any breath left in her lungs, she'd have wasted it screaming.

Chapter 9

Glitch spun through open air on the end of the tether. The colors of the city swirled together. Wind howled past her ears, drowning out any sound. The cold made her eyes blur. She saw the darkened forms of other vehicles in flight pass below her as the helicopter climbed higher and higher into the dead sky. Every fiber of her being screamed for the moment to end. Her back collided with the hard metal siding of the helicopter, sending a fresh wave of pain through her already taxed senses. The whine of the blades was now infinitely louder. The harness hauled her up into the chopper. The winch that had been reeling her in uttered a shrieking complaint and then powered down.

"Close the door and strap in!" Nero yelled from somewhere nearby.

Both those things seemed like reasonable ideas, but Glitch's body wasn't cooperating. She tried once, twice, to stand, and then gave up.

"Geez, I gotta do everything around here," Nero complained.

He got up, still trailing his jack-in cable, and came around to punch a button by the door. It slammed shut and the noise outside reduced to a low roar. Glitch looked around. The chopper was similar to the one she'd come in on, maybe even rented out of the same place. Syntechie and Nine were both strapped in. The only place left for her was the co-pilot's seat, the one Jones had occupied on the way in.

Best not think about it too much. She wasn't sure she had the energy to get to it anyway. Too hard to reach it anyway. Just stay on the floor.

"Hang on!" Nero yelled. His faceplate displayed a pixilated little monkey dangling from a tree branch.

The chopper banked sharply. Glitch grabbed onto the nearest seat and clung to the armrest. When they leveled out again, she stayed on the floor, curled up into as tight a ball as she could manage, holding her head in her hands. Everything - *everything* - hurt. So much for being a professional on this job. When this was over, she was never coming out of the Matrix again.

A hand settled on her shoulder.

"You okay?" Nero asked.

"Don't touch me!" Glitch snarled.

She lashed out at where she thought his head might be. She misjudged the distance and it only clipped the surprised pilot across the jaw. The chopper pitched violently to one side. Glitch was flung back against the far wall. Nero caught himself and kept his feet.

"Hey, I'm driving here!" he yelled at her over the noise. His faceplate flashed the "fasten seat belt" sign. "Geez, when did we skip to the violence and the screaming? It's like we already dated!"

Right. Maybe taking a swing at the guy wired into the chopper was a bad idea.

Glitch found that she was shaking too hard to stand. She stared at her hands and willed them, futility, to stop jittering like an addict between doses.

"Just get us on the fucking ground!" she yelled back.

Nero smirked at her, rubbing his jaw with one hand.

"Not a fan of heights, huh?" he gloated. "You need someone to hold your hand, princess?"

Glitch put her arms up on her knees and rested her head between her hands.

"Fuck off," she muttered, though it was doubtful he could hear her.

"Yeah, well, you're gonna wanna get strapped in," Nero said over his shoulder as he returned to his seat.

It took her a few moments to get her biology up and moving again. The turbulence did nothing to help. Glitch got to the co-pilot's seat, sat down, buckled in. Nero handed her a headset without comment.

"You got a name?" he asked after Eyes in the Sky was out of sight. "Cause I was thinking of calling you Lil' Miss Sunshine, but it just didn't quite fit, you know?"

Glitch gave him a sidelong look. "I'm Glitch, and I swear if you make a joke about it…"

"Nice to meet ya, Glitch," he replied. His faceplate displayed a pair of hands shaking.

Glitch folded her arms and didn't return the greeting.

"You punch like a girl," he added after a moment. The faceplate changed to a little "Kapow!" image.

"You fly like a drunk DDS9000," she retorted, naming a delivery drone notorious for its buggy software.

Nero laughed. "That so? If I were a nerd, and knew what that meant, I'm sure I'd be crushed right now."
"It means you're a pilot that interfaces poorly with your ride," Glitch replied. She glared at her knees so she wouldn't accidentally look out the window at the drop below.

"Actually, I'm not a pilot," Nero replied easily.

Glitch's body twitched involuntarily.

"You're *what*?" she demanded. Her voice peaked against her will.

Nero stretched and leaned back a little further in his chair. "Cyberware's amazing, ain't it?" he said cheerfully.

Glitch gripped the armrests of her chair. "Not that amazing. The cyber interface is supposed to be interchangeable between all different vehicle modes in theory, but in practice its suboptimal at best since the UI in cyber-vehicle implants is native to the user, not the machine. And on top of that-."

Nero ran his fingers through his pompadour and looked at her. "Anyone ever mention you talk a lot when you're nervous?" he asked.

Glitch snapped her mouth shut with a little click of her teeth.

"How long till we land?" she asked. "And where are we going?"

"You didn't think to check before you booked your flight?" Nero grinned at her. "We're gonna ditch this bird and then get Syntechie to a hospital. Nine can walk it off."

Speaking of.

Glitch wrestled the wakizashi off her back.

Nero glanced at her. "You know, Nine's not gonna like you messing with his gear," he commented. "The guy's touchy about his stuff. Also psychotic."

"Yeah, I know," Glitch muttered into the headset. She set the wakizashi down on the floor, and then put his gun next to it. "Make sure he gets these when he wakes up, will you? I don't want him thinking I owe him something."

Little balloons played across Nero's faceplate. "You're not sticking around for the afterparty?"

Glitch looked out the window. Neon signs bathed her face in red, green, blue, and yellow. She shoved both hands in her hoodie pockets. Her fingers came up against Wingz' watch. She turned it over in her fingers, feeling the grit of dried blood.

"No," she said. "I'm not really much of a people person."

Nero didn't reply. The chopper banked between two skyscrapers and disappeared into the void of the dead sky above Neosakka.