

Jackie and I sat at the bar for about ten minutes, just chatting and waiting for his friend. Eventually, I prodded him enough to explain who we were waiting for.

"Carlos was a friend from my time in the Valentinos," He explained. "We ran in the same circles and did the same kind of work, but we weren't all that tight. Always seemed to be working different gigs."

"He gets out too?" I asked, taking a small sip of my beer.

"Yeah, he did. Then he fucking vanished," Jackie said, shaking his head. "Nobody knows where he went. We all assumed he got jumped by scavs or something. Then Padre reached out and said he was back in town looking to meet up."

"Huh... And Padre didn't say what he was looking for?"

"Hinted at a job but explained it was up to Carlos to explain," Jackie responded with a shrug. "Your guess is as good as mine, choomba."

We quietly sat there for a while longer, polishing off a bowl of bar snacks that Pepe put down in front of us. After another five minutes, our guest finally arrived, nearly falling through the front door.

The first thing that I immediately noticed was how high-strung he was, glancing this way and that, looking nervously looking for someone. His left arm was cyberware of decent quality, though it had seen better times. The organic bits of him looked worse, with his face a mottled wash of healing bruises and a partially healed split lip. He walked with a limp, but only a minor one. When he spotted Jackie, he immediately made a beeline for us.

Jackie spotted him just about the same time I did and stood up quickly, helping the man into his chair.

"¡No mames! Carlos, what the hell happened to you?" Jackie asked, waving down Pepe. "You look like you got into a fight with a moving vehicle!"

"Jackie, it's good to see you," He said, sitting down heavily. "Thank you for showing up. Padre said you could help, but I wasn't sure you would agree to."

"I'll do my best, chico," He assured him before nodding to me. "This is Jackson. He is a good friend and works on the team as a frontliner and a techie. Jay, this is Carlos."

When Jackie introduced us, I reached out and shook the man's hand, noticing him wincing as he reached over. He nodded, his expression one of gratitude and just a smidge of hopefulness.

"Choom, I gotta admit, before you contacted me, we thought you were dead," Jackie admitted after continuing. "What the hell happened?"

"Sorry, Jackie, but that was on purpose," He admitted with a wince, his voice filled with regret. "Things were... complicated when I left, I couldn't hang around Night City anymore, and it was better if people thought I was in a ditch somewhere."

Jackie didn't seem to like that, but Carlos seemed genuinely sad about what he had done, so I threw him a bone to see what he had to say for himself.

"Why don't you start from the beginning, Carlos," I suggested.

"Yeah, okay. Good idea. A year before I left, I met a girl, Akiko. Jackie, I tell you it was like... dammit, it was like something from an old vid," He admitted, shaking his head, his lost and anxious expression pulling back as he recalled what was clearly a treasured memory. "She was beautiful, and we clicked, man. We met in a club and by the end of the next day we knew it was love. But... She was Tyger Claw, back when we were clashing heavy."

Jackie cursed and shook his head, passing the man a beer, which he drank heavily from before continuing.

"We knew the only chance we had to be together was to leave. Akiko had always wanted to get out, she hated the Claws, but it killed me asking Padre to help me cut ties," He said, clearly wanting Jackie to know how hard it was to leave the gang behind. "We both knew we would never have a real chance together here. We needed to leave the city."

He took another long drink, during which Jackie gave me a look, hand still on Carlos's shoulder. The ex-gang member took a moment once he was done, recollecting himself. When he continued, he was a bit more calm.

"We started saving, pooling our resources, and eventually, we got enough to buy a new life somewhere else," He explained. "I paid my debts and got permission to leave the gang, but she had to fake her death. It cost a lot, but we left Night City behind. We got married... we even have a kid!"

Carlos pulled out a picture, a recorded video on one of those flexible screens, handing it to Jackie. I could see it was an image of a young girl, only one or two years old.

"Everything was going great until the Claws somehow found out that Akiko wasn't dead. They sent a bunch of psycho bastards and grabbed her from her job! She... never liked to talk about it, but she was someone's daughter, someone important enough that they could drag her back... I don't know what I'm going to do, Jackie! I just want my wife back, and my daughter needs her momma!"

"And you want us to help get her back," Jackie finished, the distraught man nodding, leaning heavily on the bar, rubbing his hands along his face.

"I asked Padre, and he said you guys are just about the only ones he has on tap who can do it," He explained. "Technically, you'd be running the gig through him. I'm not crazy enough to ask you to do this freelance."

"So your wife is the daughter of someone important enough to order a hit squad to go out and grab her. She is probably surrounded by their top goons because they are expecting her to try and escape or for you to come to rescue her," I confirmed, the man nodding. "Could I ask what exactly you're offering in exchange?"

Jackie gave me a look, and I gave him one right back. Taking on a job that pitted us directly against higher-up Tyger Claws would bring on a lot of heat. Even with Padre working to keep us as "neutral" hires, it needed to be worth it.

"Eighty-five thousand eddies, it's what Padre said the mission was worth," he stated, shocking both Jackie and me. "I had to sell my dad's classic wheels. Look, Jackie, I know what I'm asking you to do, but I don't got anyone else to go to. Padre said you were my best bet, so I'm putting it all on you."

I looked at Jackie again, and he was already looking at me, his eyes wide in shock. Before, his look was saying he was all set to confirm we would do the gig, but that amount of money on the table was *scary*. The fact that it's what Padre said the mission was worth meant that we were looking at a big challenge, a make-or-break mission. I had faith in my people... but I needed to know more.

"This seems like a lot, Carlos," I admitted. "We need to discuss it with the rest of our team, and we need to find out more."

He nodded, rubbing his face to wipe away the tears that had started to drip. He seemed to understand our dilemma and, after discussing the job a bit more, left the bar with the same limp as before. He gave us a number to contact him with, assuring us he was living in a safe house provided for him by Padre.

"You need to contact Padre," I said with a sigh, rubbing my face once Carlos was gone. "If the job is going through him, he needs to provide as much intel as he can. Anything he can offer will make deciding if we are going to take this job much easier."

"He'll have something, Choom," Jackie assured me. "This... this is too much to try without knowing details."

I reached over and patted his back, finishing my beer and standing with a stretch.

"Get what you can and stop by tomorrow morning," I said. "No reason to push it for tonight. This is the kind of job we take our time on because rushing is going to get us killed."

Jackie nodded in agreement, and I said goodbye. I made my way through and out of the bar, eventually arriving at my truck, climbing in and driving it all the way back to the Ridge. By this point, it was already starting to get late, so I made another round through the town,

checking in with everyone and letting them know we would have a briefing of sorts the next morning before finally heading off to sleep.

The following day, while waiting for Jackie to arrive, I continued to work on my new canine companion. Robin had delivered the fur Realskinn, and considering the material was generally used for [exotics](#), I understood the weird look that she gave me when she did. Part of me wanted to show her the plans for my canine companion, just so I could prove what I was making, but it really wasn't worth it. Besides, they would probably see it around eventually if they kept delivering to us.

I spent the rest of the early morning assembling the canine frame and installing the control core. This was basically just an AI core that would contain all of the memories and core programming of the canine.

This version was not an AI, both because it was supposed to protect me, even to the detriment of its survival, and because creating a purposely stunted AI because I wanted a dog was wrong on so many levels. Despite that, however, I wanted to leave plenty of room for improvement and potential uplifting. I had no idea what tech tree I might get access to, nor did I know what they might contain. It was perfectly possible that I might run into a new type of AI that was humanely at the level of a canine.

I was mostly finished with the construction of the android canine when Jackie finally arrived, the telltale sound of his motorcycle announcing his presence. He arrived at the garage at about the same time as Riggs did, with Kaytlyn trailing not far behind. Once everyone who had gone on missions was there, Jackie started to explain what the potential gig was. He passed me a shard before sharing the data directly with Kaytlyn. The more I read, the more I realized that this was going to be a big deal.

According to the information that Padre had gathered, Carlos's wife was being kept in one of the top apartments in one of the Claw's higher-end locations. It was far from true corpo luxury, but it was high quality enough that several lieutenants and high members of the Claws lived there.

"Jackie... Just how important is this woman to the Tyger Claws?" Kaytlyn asked. "That's a lot of bastards on guard to keep her from running."

"According to Padre, the area is just normally that dense," Jackie corrected. "It's in the heart of Tyger Claws territory, where some higher members live. According to what Carlos knows, Akiko is the daughter of an important lieutenant."

"Which is why we need to be sure we are ready to do this. This is a big job, and while I think we can handle it..." I said, shaking my head. "This is not going to be easy, Jackie. There are going to be multiple borgs, a lot of firepower, and potentially some heavy reinforcements. From just these basic images, I can see at least twenty men on patrol, just around the outside. It's more like a compound than an apartment building."

"So are you saying we shouldn't take the job?" Jackie asked with a frown.

"I'm saying... I'm saying that we need to be prepared," I responded. "This is *not* a casual smash and grab, and these are not homeless scavengers scraping together a profit from murder. These are Tyger Claws. Well-funded, decently trained bastards who will *fuck us up if we fuck up.*"

"According to Padre, she is safe for now, so we can take our time," Jackie responded. "We can plan and prepare as much as you want."

"Well... then a good start is getting a better look at the area. Jackie, you should message Padre to see if he can't provide us with a layout of the surrounding buildings," I pointed out, Jackie nodding in understanding. "Kaytlyn, do you think you could do a walk around? Casually investigate what's going on?"

"I can try to fill in whatever blanks Padre might have in his data," She confirmed. "It will mean I won't be around here for a day or two, though."

"With the additions to the sensor network, we can manage," I said. "Might have Murtaugh increase the patrols anyway. Jackie, anything else?"

The larger man chewed his lip for a moment, contemplating something for a long pause before finally nodding.

"I'm going to be getting the Sandy chipped in, and you should finally get your muscle lace done," He pointed out. "Then we can wait a week. That way, your lace will be set, and I'll have time to practice with the Sandy. Even better, you'll have some time to do your own thing and build some stuff to make the job easier."

"That... sounds like a solid plan," I agree with a nod. "Anyone else have anything to add?"

"Who is going to be around the woman?" Riggs asked. "If we show up and flatline everyone, is she going to be pissed we killed her father or brother?"

"Fuck, that's a good point, Choom," Jackie said, paling slightly. "I'll reach out to Carlos to see if he knows what's up with her family."

We discussed some basic ideas for attacking the hotel and did a basic analysis of the compound. Our images weren't complete, so there was no use getting too in-depth, but with any luck, we would soon have some better intelligence.

Once we had gone over everything we had at the moment, Jackie and I both made appointments with Vik for the next day. Technically, I could have squeezed my muscle lace in that day, but Vik would need at least three hours to install the Sandevistan on Jackie, and the big lug wouldn't be coherent enough to drive himself around for at least an hour after that. I would be his babysitter until he had recovered enough to handle himself. Thankfully the muscle lace was the easiest to deal with out of all three, and with my nanohive regeneration, I would be fully enhanced in just five or six days.

Once Jackie, Riggs, and Kaytlyn left, heading to the BD shack to make their calls and clear out of my workspace, I got back to work on my canine companion. Samwise had been working in the background as we discussed the new gig, so when we were done, all that was left was to put everything together, including the Realskinn fur. Luckily, with the completion of the android animals from Become Human, I now knew a whole lot of information about how to exactly mimic a dog, even if the medium was different.

About an hour and a half later, my canine companion, [Duke](#), was complete. His design was based heavily on a Great Dane, but mechanically, he was a coiled beast of Titanfall artificial muscles, an Alien Alloy frame, and structured armor plating, with advanced sensors and a large Elirium node to power it all. At the moment, his chest cavity was filled with a weighted block to keep his body balanced, but eventually, I would probably end up filling it with either some sort of emergency go bag or a modular system that would let me slot in different things depending on what was going on.

With one last check to make sure everything was in place and properly connected, I finally activated the canine. For a moment, nothing happened. Then, a pale green glow flicked on deep inside the internals, blinking twice before going out again. Suddenly, the various motors and strands of artificial muscles twitched and activated, and the robot finally came online.

With a loud bark, Duke announced his presence, jumping off the crates we had been using to raise him up. He sniffed the air and spun around in excitement before running to me, hopping up and putting his front paws on my chest. Between his large size and predominantly metal construction, he immediately put me on my ass.

"Woah, Duke, take it easy!" I said with a chuckle, rubbing the back of his head. "You need to get used to your size, bud. You're not some small puppy."

He whined and hopped off of me, sitting patiently as I stood back up. I patted his head again before nodding out of the door. He did an excited bounce before running out the garage door, spinning around to wait for me.

"Okay, Duke. Before I go show you off, show me hellhound mode," I said, watching the four-legged robot's reaction.

Immediately, the android canine's stance shifted, going from happy and excited to dangerous and angry. His head dropped low as all of his armor-plating pulled in tight, his muscles audibly coiling tighter as he prepared for danger. Like this, he was a killing machine, his armor plating as thick as Riggs', with no gaps in between. In this mode, he was completely focused on protecting me, and as I watched, he immediately started looking for threats.

I could also just barely hear the faint whine and shift as his jaw opened wider, and his teeth were replaced with Alien Alloy blades as big as my finger. His normal jaw strength could chew through steel, but with the superior sharp blades, he would make quick work of just about everything he chomped on.

After watching him growl and look for the threat, I deactivated hellhound mode. Then I immediately reactivated it, turning it on and off using the several programmed hand motions and sounds, testing to make sure Duke could follow my orders no matter what. When I was done, he laid down and put his paws over his snout, whining at being activated and deactivated so quickly.

"Sorry about that, buddy. I needed to make sure everything was working," I explained, leaning down to scratch his ear. "C'mon, let's go introduce you to everyone and get something to eat for me."

We made our way over to the BD shack, pushing the doors open and stepping into the cool interior. Duke rushed ahead, sniffing and running around the place, even heading upstairs. His program recognized this as a friendly area, so while it looked like he was just excited and running around, he was actually clearing it for anything unfriendly before returning to me. If this had been somewhere dangerous or unknown, he would have stuck by me while doing more passive scans.

"!Ay Guey! En la madre, Genio!" Jackie said as he stumbled back when Duke tried to jump up on him. "He's like a real freakin' dog! Like from old movies!"

"Just about," I responded with a smirk, watching Duke run from Jackie to Kaytlyn, who was shocked and speechless. "It's a complicated bit of programming, but that might as well be my bread and butter at this point."

"This... holy hell, Jackson, this blows other robotic companions out of the water, at least the ones I've seen," Kaytlyn admitted. "He moves so fluidly..."

"That's thanks to the artificial muscle I and the three gyroscopes I used," I explained. "I built him tough and strong since he is meant to protect me."

"He is gonna stick out like a sore thumb," Jackie pointed out. "You realize that, right?"

"I did, which is why..."

I whistled a command, and Duke's demeanor immediately changed. The fluid and agile motions vanished almost mid-stride, replaced by much more precise, robotic movements. A lot of his armor-plating seamlessly pulled up slightly to cover more of his artificial muscles, disguising how much he was using. In just about half a second, he went from a creation several decades ahead of most robotics in this world to the awkward and robotic movements that most people were familiar with. As he walked mechanically around the table on his way to me, I sat down in one of the chairs.

"Fuck me, that's uncanny," Kaytlyn said, watching as Duke approached me and robotically sat down, his head scanning the area for threats. "Yeah, that's more typical of what I would have expected... just how advanced is he, Jackson?"

I eyed Kaytlyn before signaling Duke that he could leave his disguised mode. He barked once before laying down fully, partially curled up as he waited.

"Pretty advanced," I explained vaguely, holding up a hand when she rolled her eyes and opened her mouth to complain. "He is more advanced than basically anything similar on the market, and most likely anything in development or will be developed for quite a while."

"How... Look, I get that you didn't trust me, but with Sable potentially working with us and us teaming up for gigs... I think I've earned a little," She pointed out with a frown. "I've seen a lot of crazy crap over the last few weeks... could I get some sort of explanation? Even if it's just basic? This shit is not normal..."

I was silent for a long moment before looking over at Jackie. As he caught my eye, he nodded, signaling he at least trusted her. I let out a sigh before leaning back in my chair.

"To be clear, I don't actually trust Sable," I explained. "She might be useful, she might even eventually be loyal to the group if she doesn't fuck it up, but I don't trust her for a second now. So don't think she skipped the line or anything."

The pout that Kaytlyn gave me, plus the refusal to meet my eyes, told me that I had pretty much hit the nail on the head. After a moment, I continued, recapturing her attention in the process.

"I... my brain isn't exactly normal," I explained with a frown. "I don't really know the whys or hows, but every few weeks... I get bursts of inspiration. Sometimes it's small things, sometimes big things, sometimes I'll spend two weeks barely leaving my shop, and sometimes I'll be done within two days. I'm accumulating knowledge that is either strange and out there or about esoteric energies or materials that open up doorways into concepts that were previously impossible."

"That's... where does it come from?" She asked, her eyes filled with doubt. "I mean, I would just flat-out call you crazy if I hadn't seen you create so much... bullshit."

"It's... hard to describe," I admitted. "But it clearly works. And what's even bigger is that I am picking up speed. Three weeks ago, it would have taken me days to build Duke, probably close to four. Now, it only took me several hours, and most of that was because I kept getting distracted."

"Jesus... No wonder you're so confident about changing things," She said, shaking her head. "How long until the corporations just can't keep up?"

"Not nearly as long as I would like," I admitted with a frown. "I'm progressing much faster than I'm ready for, which is why the Sable and the garage addition is so important. Between the safety net she described and my production ramping up even more, I can finally start making some crazy moves. Of course, that all depends on my inspiration being useful."

"It's not always useful?" She asked, looking confused.



"Yeah, this week was more or less a dud, at least when it comes to making progress to being safe or making a difference," I responded with a shrug. "It might be useful eventually, but who knows."

"So strange... Well, I guess that's it then," She said. "All or nothing, taking a chance to change the world... Count me in."

I looked up at the blue-haired woman, my eyes wide. So far, the only reason she had been hanging around was that she was being paid, in cash from our gigs and in tech, for being a bodyguard and working security. I did not expect her to just want to join in the cause.

"Hey, don't look at me like that," She said, rolling her eyes. "Just cause I know how important being paid is doesn't mean I don't want to be a part of something bigger. As little as I trust her, Sable was right about that whole golden goose, iceberg thing."

I chuckle and nod, not denying that the two descriptions fit pretty well.

"I'm glad to have you on board, then," I said with a smile. "Things are only going to get crazier from here."

For a while, the three of them had lunch together, and Riggs and Murtaugh eventually joined us. We spent about an hour just chatting, mostly about each other, about what we wanted in the future, and what exactly the group would be doing next.

"I would like to build this town back up," I admitted, leaning back in my chair. "I would love nothing more than to turn this monument to corporate greed into a damn utopia. I mean grass, trees, flowers, real food for everyone, and no constant threat of gangs or corporations breathing down your neck."

"They won't make that easy," Jackie pointed out. "No one will. Night City just ain't built like that, amigo. Everyone is going to want a slice."

"I never said it would be easy," I responded with a shrug. "This world is already on fire, Jackie. If the cost of saving it is to throw some more kindling on in the meantime? I can live with that because every step forward is better than where we are now."

"...Fuck, and I just wanted a couple of cars and my own full-sized house. Though, now that I see Duke, you'll be making me a cat, too," Kaytlyn said with a smirk. "But you're thinking big, huh? Guess it makes sense for what you're capable of."

"I just want to have a drink at the Afterlife," Jackie said, chuckling and nodding in agreement. "Not overthrow the world order."

"What can I say? It's hard not to aim for the moon when you know you have a shot of hitting it," I responded with a shrug. "I got a chance to do it, so I have to at least try."

Kaytlyn and Murtaugh nodded in understanding while Riggs and Jackie just shrugged. The both of them had similar mentalities, though Jackie's obsession with making a big name for himself, even if it killed him, was something I didn't think Riggs shared.

Jackie was the first to leave our impromptu long lunch, as Padre and Carlos had both agreed to meet u. I assured him I would be at his house the next morning to pick him up, and then he left. Kaytlyn was next, stopping by the door to point at me.

"I was serious, by the way," She said, giving me a rather intense look. "I expect a cat sooner rather than later. Consider it my next payment or whatever."

She left without another word, and I couldn't help but chuckle and shake my head.