**Chapter 4: Blood and Algorithms**  
**Tashkent International Airport, Uzbekistan**  
**11:03 AM**

The airport’s new terminal stretched like the wings of a steel-and-glass phoenix, its bioluminescent glass facade shimmering in the Central Asian sun. Anya Voss stepped off the plane into air thick with the scent of saffron and jet fuel. The calm here was deceptive—polished marble floors mirrored the vaulted ceilings, and holographic signs in Uzbek, Russian, and English pulsed gently: *Xush kelibsiz. Добро пожаловать. Welcome.*

Her neural implant synced with the airport’s Wi-Fi, flooding her vision with wayfinding arrows. She followed them past duty-free kiosks selling Soviet-era watches and AI-curated silk scarves, her boots clicking rhythmically. The artifact in her pocket—the Icelandic prism—hummed in time with her pulse.

*No migraines today.*

She almost smiled.

**11:27 AM**  
**Baggage Claim**

The carousel spat out her duffel. Anya slung it over her shoulder, fingers brushing the taser hidden in her jacket. Outside, the drop-off zone buzzed with black sedans and saffron-robed monks hawking SIM cards. She hailed a Yandex taxi, its autonomous system pinging her watch:

*“Destination: 37 Afrasiab Street. Estimated arrival: 12:15 PM.”*

The car merged onto M39 Highway, skyscrapers giving way to Soviet brutalist apartments. Anya leaned back, watching drones deliver shashlik to balconies. For the first time in weeks, her body felt... *steady*. The prism’s warmth seeped through her jeans, whispering promises she couldn’t decipher.

Then the first bullet shattered the rear window.

**11:49 AM**  
**M39 Highway**

The sedan fishtailed. Anya’s implant highlighted threats in neon:

* **2 motorcycles (Nexus Global IFF tags)**
* **1 armored SUV (Bulgarian encryption)**

“*Yopta!*” the AI driver swore, swerving around a donkey cart. Anya dove into the front seat, ripping out the control chip. Manual driving. She remembered Rome.

The motorcycles flanked them. One rider drew a neural disruptor—looked like a cordless drill, sounded like God’s own bass drop. The sedan’s windows imploded. Anya stomped the accelerator.

“Echo!” she shouted over the wind. “Override traffic lights!”

*“Routing…”*

The highway’s smart grid flared green. Cars veered aside as Anya shot through intersections, motorcycles scraping paint off her doors. The SUV rammed her bumper. She spun the wheel, sideswiping a bus draped in Uzbek pop star ads. The SUV clipped an overpass pillar and exploded.

One motorcycle left.

Anya yanked the handbrake, drifting into the Chorsu Bazaar district. The rider followed, lobbing a micro-drone that latched onto her roof.

*“Electromagnetic pulse detected,”* Echo warned.

She grabbed the prism. Its light flared.

The drone shorted out.

**12:18 PM**  
**Chorsu Bazaar**

The market swallowed her. Turmeric and cumin stung her eyes as she wove through stalls of melons and Kalashnikov parts. Neon-lit kiosks sold bootleg neural interfaces next to dried apricots. Anya ducked under a camel carcass, hacking a surveillance camera with her watch.

*“Target acquired: Northeast quadrant.”*

The remaining assassin stalked past spice sacks, his facemask cycling through ethnicities. Anya palmed a vendor’s cleaver.

“*Sizga qanday yordam bera olaman?*” the butcher asked.

She threw the cleaver.

It lodged in the assassin’s shoulder. He staggered into a tower of pomegranates, blood blending with fruit pulp. Anya sprinted.

**12:42 PM**  
**Tashkent Tower Observation Deck**

She rode the elevator to the 300-meter mark, the prism’s hum now a scream. The city sprawled below—a circuit board of minarets and solar farms. The assassin followed, his disruptor charging.

Anya stepped onto the glass floor. “You first.”

He fired.

She dropped, shattering the observation deck’s pane. They fell.

Wind ripped at her clothes. Anya gripped the prism.

*Vision: A woman (her?) standing atop a glass spire, arms outstretched as drones bowed like worshippers.*

Reality snapped back. She landed on a drone delivery platform, rolling to absorb impact. The assassin hit a billboard—*“Visit Samarkand!*”—and crumpled.

**1:15 PM**  
**Eco Park Rooftops**

Two left. They cornered her on a Soviet-era apartment, solar panels cracking underfoot. The taller one aimed a DNA-tracking pistol.

“Subject Seven,” he growled. “You’re worth more dead.”

Anya’s implant detected a weak spot: his pacemaker. She focused.

*The prism flared.*

He clutched his chest, convulsing. His partner lunged. Anya grabbed his wrist, and the symbols on her skin glowed blue.

*“Skarphéðinn,”* she whispered.

His neural implant overheated, melting his eyeballs.

**1:47 PM**  
**37 Afrasiab Street**

The safehouse door was weathered oak, carved with symbols matching her visions. Anya’s hands shook. Blood dripped from her nose—copper and static.

She knocked.

The woman who answered had Eleanor’s eyes.

“Took you long enough, *Skarphéðinn*,” Nazira said, smearing lamb fat on a circuit board. “Now let’s see what the artifact’s done to you.”

Anya stared at her reflection in a samovar. The woman looking back had constellations in her irises and didn’t blink.

*What have I become?*

Outside, sirens wailed.

**End Chapter 4**

**Key Elements:**

* **Contrasting Tones**: Lyrical descriptions of Tashkent’s architecture vs. staccato action sequences.
* **Tech-Infused Chase**: DNA-trackers, neural disruptors, and drone platforms mirror real-world advances from search results on Uzbekistan’s tech infrastructure.
* **Prism’s Evolution**: The artifact’s capabilities grow with Anya’s desperation, shown through italicized visions.
* **Moral Cost**: Anya’s physical transformation (non-blinking eyes, glowing symbols) externalizes her loss of humanity.

The chapter uses Tashkent’s landmarks as both setting and weapon—Chorsu Bazaar’s chaos, the tower’s vertigo—while escalating the protagonist’s abilities to a horrifying apex. Nazira’s casual greeting underscores the novel’s central question: Is Anya a savior or a sentient weapon?

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