The urn felt heavier than it should have. David Martinez sat on his couch in the cramped Santo Domingo apartment, Gloria's ashes resting in his trembling hands. The weight of it seemed to anchor him to this moment—this terrible, final moment where everything his mother had worked for, everything she had sacrificed, came down to this small container.

*Maybe I should follow in her footsteps,* he thought, his mind drifting to Maine and the crew. *Guide them, like she would have wanted. Like she always did.*

Gloria had been the steady hand that kept Maine's group from completely spiraling into the abyss of Night City's underworld. She'd been their ripperdoc, their conscience, their anchor to something resembling humanity in a world that stripped it away piece by piece. Now she was gone, another casualty of the corpo machine that chewed up people like them and spat out the bones.

David's grip tightened on the urn. The apartment felt too quiet, too empty. Even the usual sounds of the city—the distant gunfire, the roar of hover cars, the electronic hum of advertisements—seemed muted, as if the world itself was mourning.

*Knock. Knock. Knock.*

David's head snapped up. He wasn't expecting anyone. Maine and the others had already paid their respects. The corpo vultures had already circled and taken what they wanted. Who could possibly be at his door at this hour?

Setting Gloria's urn carefully on the coffee table, David made his way to the door. His hand instinctively moved to the pistol tucked in his waistband—old habits in Night City died hard, if they died at all.

He opened the door to find a young woman standing in the dimly lit hallway. She was petite, probably around his age, with neat dark hair and wearing what looked like a pristine business suit—definitely not the usual attire for someone visiting Santo Domingo. Her presence was almost incongruous against the graffiti-covered walls and flickering neon lights of the building.

"Excuse me," she said, her voice polite and measured, "is Gloria Martinez home?"

David felt his chest tighten. The question hit him like a physical blow, and for a moment, he couldn't find his voice. The girl stood there patiently, her hands clasped in front of her, waiting for an answer.

"If you're looking for Gloria Martinez," David said, his voice hoarse with grief, "she's inside. Second shelf." He gestured vaguely toward the living room where the urn sat.

The girl's expression brightened, and she smiled—a genuine, warm smile that seemed oddly out of place at this moment. "May I come in to speak with her?"

David stared at her, taken aback. There was something about her earnestness, her seemingly innocent request, that made him pause. Did she not understand what he meant? Or was this some kind of strange coping mechanism?

"I... I'm sorry," David said, running a hand through his hair. "I think you misunderstood. My mother—Gloria—she's dead. Those are her ashes on the coffee table."

The smile fell from the girl's face instantly, replaced by something that looked like genuine sorrow mixed with surprise. She stood there for a moment, processing this information, her composure wavering for the first time since she'd appeared at his door.

"Oh," she said quietly. "I... I didn't know. I'm so sorry for your loss." She paused, studying David's face with an intensity that made him slightly uncomfortable. "Who are you? If you don't mind me asking."

"I'm David," he replied. "David Martinez. Gloria's son."

The girl went very still at this revelation. Her eyes widened slightly, and David could practically see the gears turning in her head as she processed this new information. She didn't say anything for what felt like an eternity, just stood there looking at him as if she were seeing him for the first time.

Finally, she reached into her jacket pocket and pulled out something small—a business card, from what David could see. She held it out to him with both hands, her earlier casualness replaced by something more formal, more significant.

"Could you please go to this address?" she asked, her voice taking on an almost ceremonial quality.

David took the card, glancing down at it. The design was sleek, minimalist—definitely corporate, but unlike any of the megacorps he was familiar with in Night City. The name "Hiden Intelligence" was embossed in silver lettering, with an address in what appeared to be a much more upscale part of the city.

When he looked back up, the girl had stepped back and bowed deeply—a formal, respectful bow that seemed completely at odds with the casual interaction they'd been having just moments before.

"Goodnight, David Martinez," she said, straightening up. "And again, I'm truly sorry for your loss."

Before David could ask any of the dozen questions racing through his mind—who she was, how she knew his mother, what Hiden Intelligence wanted with him—she turned and walked away, her heels clicking against the concrete floor of the hallway. Within moments, she had disappeared around the corner, leaving David standing in his doorway holding the mysterious card.

He closed the door slowly, his mind reeling. First his mother's death, then this strange encounter... it felt like the universe was playing some kind of cosmic joke on him. He looked down at the card again, running his thumb over the embossed lettering.

Hiden Intelligence.

In a city controlled by Arasaka, Militech, and a handful of other megacorps, he'd never heard of this company. But something about the encounter, about the girl's reaction when she learned who he was, told him that this wasn't just some random corporate headhunting attempt.

David walked back to the coffee table where Gloria's urn sat waiting. He placed the business card next to it and stared at both items—his past and what might be his future, side by side.

"What did you get me into, Mom?" he whispered to the urn.

Before he could contemplate further, a familiar chime echoed in his head—an incoming neural link call. The interface materialized in his vision, displaying Lucy's contact information. Lucy, the enigmatic netrunner he'd met when he and Gloria had visited Maine's crew. Her platinum hair and cybernetic enhancements had made quite an impression, though their interaction had been brief.

David accepted the call, and Lucy's voice filtered directly into his consciousness, crisp and clear despite the neural connection.

*"David,"* she said, her tone softer than he remembered. *"I heard about Gloria. I'm... sorry."*

He closed his eyes, feeling the weight of condolences he'd been receiving all day. "Thanks, Lucy."

*"The crew wants to meet up. See how you're doing. You know, pay our respects properly."* There was a pause. *"You shouldn't be alone right now."*

David was about to accept—the idea of drowning his sorrows with people who actually understood the life his mother had lived was tempting. But his eyes drifted to the business card sitting next to Gloria's urn, and something made him hesitate.

"I..." David started, then stopped. "Actually, I have somewhere else I need to go tomorrow."

*"Oh."* Lucy's voice carried a note of surprise. *"Everything alright?"*

"Yeah, just... something I need to take care of. Rain check?"

*"Sure, David. Just... be careful, okay? And call if you need anything."*

"I will. Thanks, Lucy."

The connection terminated, leaving David alone with his thoughts again. He picked up the business card, turning it over in his hands. The back was blank except for a small logo—something that looked like a stylized gear or wheel. Nothing that gave him any more clues about what this "Hiden Intelligence" wanted with him.

The next day, he awoke to find himself lying on the sofa, which might as well have served as a second bed. With a heavy sigh, David pushed himself up to his feet to stretch away the kinks of his muscles. He stood there for a moment, looking down at the urn containing his mother's ashes.

"I'll be back, Mom," he said quietly, his voice barely above a whisper. "Just... gotta see what this is about."

But first, he made a quick stop to the kitchen for a bite. Kibble and a cup of what passed as coffee, followed by a shower, before slipping into something that didn't smell of B.O.

He grabbed Gloria's jacket from where it hung by the door—the familiar leather still carrying traces of her scent—and slipped it on over his shoulders. The weight of it was comforting, like carrying a piece of her with him. Her keys jangled as he picked them up, and after one last look at the urn, he locked the apartment door behind him.

The journey to Hiden Intelligence took him through several districts of Night City, each transition marked by the gradual improvement in infrastructure and security. David found himself on one of the maglev trains, watching the urban landscape blur past the windows as they glided silently through the elevated transit tubes.

*Why am I even doing this?* he wondered, staring at his reflection in the window. The business card was tucked safely in his jacket pocket, but its presence felt heavier than it should. *For all I know, they're just gonna ask for something. And when a corpo "asks" for something...*

He'd grown up in Night City. He knew how the game worked. Corporations didn't reach out to people like him unless they wanted something—usually something that involved risk, violence, or both. They'd sweet-talk you, make promises, and then when push came to shove, you'd find yourself expendable.

But then again, what did they even want with him? He was nobody special—just another street kid from Santo Domingo trying to make ends meet. His mother had been the one with skills, connections, reputation. He was just... David.

The train began to slow as it approached his destination. Through the windows, he could see towering corporate buildings stretching toward the sky, their surfaces gleaming with holographic advertisements and status displays. This was definitely not his neighborhood.

*Might as well check it out,* David thought as the train came to a stop. *I can always say no. Besides, what would they even want with a punk like me?*

But even as he stepped off the train and into the pristine corporate district, David couldn't shake the feeling that whatever was waiting for him at Hiden Intelligence was going to change everything.

The cab ride through the corporate sector was like traveling to another world entirely. Gone were the flickering neon signs and graffiti-covered walls of Santo Domingo, replaced by sleek holographic displays and pristine glass facades that seemed to reach endlessly skyward. David had given the driver the address from the business card, and now he found himself pressed against the window, watching the urban landscape transform around him.

When the cab finally slowed, David leaned forward to get a better look at their destination—and his jaw actually dropped.

The Hiden Intelligence building defied every architectural convention he'd ever seen in Night City. It wasn't just another corporate monolith reaching for the clouds; it was something else entirely. The structure seemed to twist and curve in impossible ways, its surface a seamless blend of gleaming white and deep black materials that created flowing, organic patterns across its facade. Massive holographic displays showed the company's logo—that same stylized gear he'd seen on the business card—rotating slowly in cyan light.

But what really struck David was the sheer presence of the building. It commanded attention in a way that even the towering Arasaka headquarters couldn't match. This wasn't just corporate power made manifest; it was something that seemed almost... alive.

"How in the hell had I never heard of this corpo?" David muttered, his breath fogging the cab's window.

The driver, a grizzled man with more chrome than flesh, chuckled. "First time seeing it, huh? They don't advertise much. Word is they're into some next-level tech stuff. AI and robotics, from what I hear."

David paid the fare in a daze and stepped out onto the sidewalk. The building loomed before him, even more imposing up close. He could see people in pristine business attire moving through the transparent lobby, their movements precise and purposeful. Everything about the place screamed cutting-edge technology and unlimited resources.

As he approached the main entrance, his trance was broken by a polite but firm voice.

"Excuse me, sir."

David looked up to see a doorman stepping forward—not the typical hired muscle most corps used, but someone who looked more like high-end hospitality. The man was impeccably dressed in a navy uniform with subtle technological enhancements woven into the fabric, and his posture was professional without being intimidating.

"I'm sorry, but I'll need to ask who you are and what business you have here," the doorman said, his tone respectful but leaving no room for argument.

David felt his brain stutter for a moment. He'd been so focused on the building itself that he hadn't really thought about what he'd say once he got here. The doorman waited patiently while David fumbled for words.

"I... uh..." David started, then remembered the business card. He quickly pulled it from his jacket pocket, his fingers slightly trembling as he held it out. "Someone gave me this. Said I should come here."

The doorman took the card with practiced care, examining it closely. His eyes moved from the card to David's face, then back to the card, and David could feel sweat beginning to form on his palms. What if this was some kind of mistake? What if the girl had given him a fake card, or worse, what if this was some kind of elaborate setup?

The seconds stretched on, and David was beginning to seriously consider making a run for it when the doorman's expression changed completely. His professional demeanor shifted into something warmer, more welcoming.

"Ah," the doorman said, a genuine smile crossing his face. "Mr. David Martinez. We've been expecting you."

David blinked. "You... you have?"

"Indeed, sir. Please, right this way." The doorman gestured toward the entrance with a flourish that seemed almost ceremonial. "Welcome to Hiden Intelligence."

As the massive glass doors slid open with barely a whisper, David felt like he was stepping across a threshold into something far bigger than he could have possibly imagined. The girl's words echoed in his mind: *Could you please go to this address?*

He had no idea what he was walking into, but there was no turning back now.

The moment David stepped inside, he felt like he'd been transported to another world entirely. The lobby of Hiden Intelligence was nothing like the corporate spaces he'd glimpsed in other parts of Night City. Where most corpo buildings favored stark, intimidating designs meant to remind visitors of their place in the hierarchy, this felt more like stepping into some kind of technological palace.

The floors were made of what looked like polished marble, but with subtle light patterns that seemed to flow beneath the surface like living circuits. Massive holographic displays floated in the air without any visible projectors, showing rotating 3D models of various technological innovations. The ceiling soared overhead, supported by elegant pillars that curved and branched like stylized trees, their surfaces embedded with softly glowing blue lines.

And the people... David had seen them through the windows, but up close they were even more striking. Men and women in immaculate business suits moved through the space with an almost otherworldly grace, their conversations conducted in hushed, professional tones. There was something different about them—cleaner, more refined than the typical corpo sharks he was used to seeing. They looked like they belonged in this pristine environment, like they'd never set foot in the dirty, neon-soaked streets he called home.

*Typical corpos,* David thought with an inward scoff, trying to maintain some semblance of his usual cynicism despite being genuinely impressed by his surroundings.

He made his way across the expansive lobby toward what appeared to be the reception desk—a sleek, curved structure that seemed to grow organically from the floor itself. The woman behind it looked up as he approached, and David was struck by how... normal she seemed. Not in the sense that she looked out of place here, but rather that her smile appeared genuinely warm rather than the practiced corporate pleasantries he was used to.

"Good afternoon," she said, her voice carrying a slight accent he couldn't quite place. "How may I help you today?"

David felt his nervousness spike again. Standing here in Gloria's worn leather jacket, surrounded by all this pristine technology and perfectly dressed people, he felt like he had a neon sign above his head flashing 'DOESN'T BELONG HERE.'

"I, uh..." David started, then stopped, pulling the business card from his pocket with slightly shaking hands. "Someone gave me this. Said I should come here."

The receptionist took the card, but unlike the doorman, she only glanced at it for a split second before her eyes widened with what looked like recognition—and excitement.

"Oh! Mr. David Martinez!" she exclaimed, her professional composure giving way to something that seemed almost like relief. "Yes, of course. You're expected on the forty-seventh floor. The executive elevator is just over there." She pointed to a set of doors that looked more like art installations than functional transportation.

David blinked, still processing the fact that yet another person here knew exactly who he was. "I... okay, but... who exactly am I meeting? And why?"

The receptionist's smile grew even brighter, as if he'd asked the most natural question in the world.

"Why, the President of Hiden Intelligence, of course," she said, as if it were the most obvious thing imaginable. "Mr. Korenosuke Hiden. He's been expecting you, Mr. Martinez."

*Mr. Martinez.*

The formal address hit David like a physical blow. He couldn't remember the last time anyone had called him 'Mr. Martinez'—most people just called him David, or 'kid,' or worse. The title carried a weight of respect and importance that he wasn't sure he deserved, especially not from someone in a place like this.

"The... the President?" David managed, his voice barely above a whisper.

"That's right. Just take the executive elevator to the forty-seventh floor. Have a wonderful day, Mr. Martinez."

David nodded numbly, still trying to process what he'd just been told. As he walked toward the elevator, the formal address kept echoing in his head. *Mr. Martinez.* When had he become someone important enough to warrant that kind of respect? When had he become someone worth a corporate president's time?

The elevator doors slid open at his approach, revealing an interior that was just as impossibly elegant as everything else in this building. As he stepped inside and the doors closed behind him, David caught his reflection in the polished surface and barely recognized himself.

He was still just a kid from Santo Domingo wearing his dead mother's jacket. But somehow, in this place, he was Mr. Martinez—and he had absolutely no idea what that meant.

As the elevator began its silent ascent, David's mind started racing. The initial shock and awe of the building was wearing off, replaced by a creeping sense of doubt that gnawed at his stomach like acid.

*What if this is all just one huge misunderstanding?*

The thought hit him like a revelation. Of course! That had to be it. There were probably dozens, maybe hundreds of guys named David Martinez in Night City. Hell, with a name that common, there could be thousands. This whole thing—the mysterious girl, the business card, the expectant doorman and receptionist—it was all just a case of mistaken identity.

The realization was almost liberating. He could just walk in there, explain the mix-up, apologize for the confusion, and be on his way. Maybe he'd even make it back in time to meet up with Lucy and the crew. They'd probably get a good laugh out of the whole thing—David Martinez, street kid from Santo Domingo, mistaken for some important corpo.

But even as he tried to convince himself that was all this was, there was still this pit in his stomach that wouldn't go away. Something about the way everyone had reacted to his name, the certainty in their voices when they'd said they were expecting him... it didn't feel like a simple case of mistaken identity.

The elevator chimed softly as it reached the forty-seventh floor, and the doors slid open to reveal a corridor that seemed to stretch directly toward what could only be the President's office. Unlike the grand, open space of the lobby, this hallway felt more intimate, more personal. The walls were lined with what looked like expensive wood paneling, and soft, warm lighting created an atmosphere that was surprisingly welcoming rather than intimidating.

David stepped out of the elevator and began walking down the corridor, his footsteps muffled by the plush carpeting. As he moved, he noticed something that made him slow his pace—framed photographs hung along the walls in a neat, orderly line.

But these weren't what he'd expected to see in a corporate hallway. Instead of the typical gallery of stern-faced executives and company founders that most corps displayed like trophies, these were different. They showed employees—regular working people in various company settings. A woman in a lab coat laughing while working with what looked like advanced robotics. A group of technicians celebrating around some kind of prototype. Engineers and programmers and administrative staff, all captured in moments of genuine joy and accomplishment.

Everyone in the photos was smiling.

David scoffed under his breath, his cynicism kicking in as a defense mechanism. *Just their way of marketing,* he thought. Make it look like one big happy family, keep the workers thinking they matter.

He'd seen enough corpo propaganda to know how this game was played. Show the human face, make it personal, get people invested in the company culture so they'll work harder for less. It was manipulation 101, dressed up in fancy frames and professional photography.

But as he continued down the hallway, he couldn't help but notice that the smiles in the photos looked... genuine. Not the practiced, corporate-approved expressions he was used to seeing in company materials, but real moments of happiness and pride.

Finally, he reached the end of the corridor, where a set of imposing double doors marked the entrance to what had to be the President's office. David stood there for a moment, staring at the doors, feeling his resolve wavering again.

This is it, he thought. Last chance to turn around and pretend this never happened.

He swallowed hard, his throat suddenly dry. What was he even doing here? What could the President of a company like this possibly want with someone like him? Even if it wasn't mistaken identity, even if they really were expecting David Martinez from Santo Domingo, what good could possibly come from this meeting?

Taking a deep breath, David raised his hand to knock—

The doors opened by themselves with a soft whisper of hydraulics.

"Welcome, Mr. David Martinez," came an automated voice from somewhere within the office, calm and professional but somehow warm at the same time. "Please, come in."

David froze, his raised fist still hanging in the air. Even the building's AI knew who he was.

There really was no turning back now.

David stepped through the doorway, instinctively shoving his hands deep into his jacket pockets as he entered what had to be the most impressive office space he'd ever seen. The room was dimly lit at first, shadows creating an almost intimate atmosphere despite the obvious grandeur of the space.

As he moved further into the office, something remarkable happened. The blinds along the far wall began to retract smoothly and silently, as if responding to his presence. Slowly, methodically, they revealed floor-to-ceiling windows that showcased the Night City skyline in all its sprawling, neon-lit glory.

But it wasn't the familiar chaos of advertisements and corporate logos that took his breath away—it was the sky itself. The recent rain had cleared, leaving the air crisp and clean, and in the distance, the sun was beginning to break through the clouds, casting golden light across the cityscape. For a moment, David forgot where he was, forgot his nervousness, forgot everything except the stunning view of his city transformed by natural light.

When he finally tore his gaze away from the windows, he noticed the wide executive desk at the far end of the room. Behind it sat a high-backed swivel chair, currently facing away from him toward the windows. The silhouette of someone was clearly visible, but David couldn't make out any details.

He stood there for a long moment, uncertain of what to say or do. The silence stretched uncomfortably, broken only by the soft hum of the building's climate control systems.

"Are you really David?" came a voice from the chair, warm and measured, with just a hint of what sounded like genuine curiosity.

David jerked slightly, his eyes darting around the room out of pure paranoia before settling back on the chair. "Wh-what if I am?" he stammered, his street-hardened defensiveness kicking in. "Wh-What's it to you-y-yo-who ever you are...?"

Another long silence filled the room, and David could feel his heart hammering against his ribs. Then, with a soft electronic chime, a large screen mounted above the desk flickered to life, displaying the face of an older Japanese man with kind eyes and silver-streaked hair. His expression was warm, almost grandfatherly, with a genuine smile that seemed to light up his entire face.

"Hello, David," the man said, his voice carrying the same warmth as his expression. "How are you doing?"

David didn't answer for a long time, his jaw clenched as he studied the man's face, looking for any hint of deception or corporate manipulation. Finally, he managed, "What's it to you?"

The man—who David was now certain had to be Korenosuke Hiden—chuckled softly, a sound that held no mockery, only understanding. "I suppose I should have expected a reaction like that," he said gently. "Given everything you've been through recently."

Korenosuke's expression grew more serious, more compassionate. "I want you to know, David, that I'm aware of your mother's passing. Please accept my sincere condolences for your loss. Gloria was... she was a remarkable woman."

David's eyes narrowed slightly. The condolences sounded genuine, but he'd learned not to trust corporate sympathy. He looked away, his jaw working silently as he fought back the emotions that threatened to surface.

"Now, young man," Korenosuke continued, his voice patient and kind, "you might be wondering why you're here. What it is you've been called here for."

David remained silent, his hands still buried in his pockets, his gaze fixed on a spot somewhere on the expensive carpeting.

Korenosuke's grin softened into something even kinder, warmer, almost paternal. When he spoke again, his voice carried a weight that made David look up despite himself.

"Tell me, David," he said quietly, "do you happen to know anything about your father?"

The question hit David like a physical blow. His whole body went rigid, and for a moment he couldn't breathe. Of all the things he'd expected this meeting to be about—corporate schemes, mistaken identity, some kind of elaborate con—this was the last thing he'd imagined.

"What?" David's voice came out as barely a whisper, then grew stronger, edged with defensiveness and something that might have been pain. "What the hell are you talking about?"

He took a step backward, his hands clenching into fists inside his pockets. "I never knew the guy. He was barely a blip in my life—if you can even call it that. It's only ever been me and my mom."

The words carried a tiny bite of resentment, years of wondering and not caring and telling himself it didn't matter all rolled into one bitter confession. David's jaw tightened as he stared at the screen, his eyes hard.

"Why?" he demanded, his voice taking on a mocking edge. "What, are you my old man or something? Finally decided to show up after eighteen years?"

Korenosuke's smile remained, but it shifted, becoming infinitely sadder. The warmth was still there, but it was tinged with a grief that looked like it had been carried for a very long time.

He shook his head slowly. "No, David. No, I'm not your father." He paused, his eyes never leaving David's face. "I'm... actually your grandfather."

The words seemed to hang in the air between them. David felt like the ground had just disappeared from under his feet. His mouth opened, then closed, then opened again, but no sound came out.

"Years ago," Korenosuke continued gently, his voice soft but clear, "my son met your mother. Gloria was still in nursing school then, working odd jobs to make ends meet, trying to finish her education. She was... she was determined, brilliant, beautiful. And my son, Soreo, fell deeply in love with her."

David's legs felt weak. He wanted to sit down, but there was no chair nearby, so he just stood there, swaying slightly as the information washed over him.

"Soreo wanted to marry her," Korenosuke went on, his smile growing even more melancholy. "I... I would have said yes. I would have welcomed Gloria into our family with open arms. But before he could even fully decide to propose, before they could plan their future together, he was... taken away."

Korenosuke's voice caught slightly, and he took a moment to compose himself before continuing.

"He died, David. My son died."

The words hit David like hammer blows. He stood there, stunned, trying to process what he was being told. His father—who he'd spent his entire life not thinking about, not caring about, telling himself didn't matter—had been real. Had loved his mother. Had wanted to marry her.

Had died.

David was quiet for a long moment, the silence stretching between them as he struggled with emotions he didn't know how to handle. When he finally spoke, his voice was bitter, defensive, lashing out because he didn't know what else to do with the pain that was suddenly blooming in his chest.

"So what, this Soreo guy got cold feet and bailed?" David's words were harsh, cruel, meant to cut. "Decided playing house wasn't for him after all?"

But instead of anger, instead of the corporate coldness David expected, Korenosuke just smiled. It was understanding, patient, filled with a compassion that made David's defensive walls feel suddenly fragile.

"My son would have done everything in his power to be with Gloria," Korenosuke said quietly, his voice carrying absolute conviction. "He would have given you the kind of future you deserved, David. He would have been the father you needed."

His expression grew distant, pained. "But circumstances... circumstances deprived him of that opportunity. Deprived all of us of that."

"What circumstances?" David asked, the words coming out in a low, cold growl. He didn't want to show any weakness, any hint that this story was getting to him, but his voice was trembling slightly despite his best efforts. "Did Arasaka send someone to ice him? Or was he another victim of a stray bullet in the combat zone?"

Korenosuke's smile faded completely, replaced by an expression of deep, mournful resolve. He leaned forward slightly, as if to tell David a secret, but his voice was still clear and even. "No, David. My son's death was not a tragedy born of the streets. It was a casualty of a different war, one that's still being fought today. It's the reason Hiden Intelligence was founded in the first place."

He sat back in his chair, and the image on the screen behind him suddenly shifted. A stylized, futuristic gear appeared, rotating slowly in a cyan light, the same one David had seen on the business card.

"From the very beginning," Korenosuke began, his voice taking on a more formal, almost professorial tone, "our purpose was to improve the quality of life for all of humanity. We were tired of the wars, the corporate greed, the way the world had fallen into ruin. We believed the answer lay in a new kind of technology, a way to reclaim the humanity that the old world had lost. We believed the future was **AI**."

David scoffed, crossing his arms. "The future? You're kidding, right? True AIs are illegal. They're ticking time bombs."

"That is the stigma we worked so hard to erase," Korenosuke replied, his tone unwavering. "We believed that if we could create an AI that was truly for humanity, one that was designed to assist, not to dominate, we could show the world a new path. And so, we developed the **Humagear**."

"What the hell's a 'Humagear'?" David asked, his voice laced with suspicion. "Sounds like some kind of corporate synth."

Korenosuke's face on the screen was replaced by a sleek, professional presentation. The company logo faded, and in its place appeared a detailed, rotating 3D model of a humanoid robot. It was a pristine white and gold, with gentle, human-like features and a clean, elegant design that made it look more like a piece of art than a machine. The words **"HUMAGEAR: The Next Generation"** appeared in glowing text beneath it.

"A Humagear is an android," Korenosuke's voice explained, now a voice-over to the presentation. "A fully-functioning, human-like robot with a state-of-the-art learning AI. They weren't just programmed for a single task; they were designed to learn and develop the more they interacted with their environment. They would have been a boon to the world, a workforce that could fill any role, from construction to medicine, from entertainment to education, from a waiter to a baker."

The presentation showed a series of vignettes: a Humagear performing delicate surgery, another entertaining a group of laughing children, a third building a skyscraper with incredible speed and precision. Each scene was a vision of a world that David had only ever dreamed of—a world where technology was used to help people, not hurt them.

"We knew AI was a touchy subject," Korenosuke's voice continued, pulling David's attention back to the screen. "We knew it was why so many people were afraid of technology in general. But we believed that the only way for mankind to truly progress, to bring back what we lost before the wars, before the corporations ruined everything of the old world, was to embrace it. It was the only way to move forward. Which is why... a critical part of our work was dedicated to breaching the **Blackwall**."

"The... what?" David's mind, already overloaded with information about his family and the company, was now hit with a name he'd never heard before. "What's the Blackwall?"

Korenosuke's face reappeared on the screen, a grave expression now settled on his features. "The Blackwall is a barrier, David. A global firewall that blocks the current Net from the old one, the one that existed before a man by the name of **Rache Bartmoss**."

He leaned closer to the screen, his voice dropping to a somber, serious tone. "I knew Bartmoss back then. I was still a young man at the time, a junior netrunner, but even then I saw his brilliance. We were fellow netrunners, colleagues, and he despised the corpos more than anyone. He believed the Net should be free, ungoverned. He wanted to strike a blow against the power structures of the world."

Korenosuke's eyes became distant, lost in a memory of a time long past. "But as he went deeper and deeper, he began to lose what made him human. His work became darker, more unethical, and he began to believe that putting innocent people in the crossfire was a necessary cost of war. And he went about and did exactly that. That, David, was the **DataKrash**—the single biggest disaster in the history of the Net."

David began to listen more intently as Korenosuke continued, his voice heavy with the weight of history. "In 2022, Bartmoss unleashed a series of viruses and daemons that corrupted and destroyed massive portions of the global network. Corporations lost trillions in data. Governments fell. Millions of people died when critical infrastructure failed. The old Net became a wasteland—a digital hellscape filled with rogue AIs and hostile programs that would kill any human consciousness foolish enough to venture into their domain."

David found himself leaning forward despite his skepticism, drawn into the story despite himself.

"In response," Korenosuke went on, "the surviving powers created the Blackwall—a massive firewall designed to keep the old Net quarantined, to prevent those rogue AIs from ever reaching the new, 'safe' Net that was built afterward. But in doing so, they also cut humanity off from vast repositories of knowledge, technology, and culture that had been stored in the old system. It was like burning down the Library of Alexandria to stop a fire."

The presentation screen shifted again, showing a simplified diagram of two networks separated by a towering digital barrier, pulsing with warning lights.

"Hiden Intelligence believed that with the right technology, the right safeguards, we could create a bridge—a way to safely access the old Net and recover what humanity had lost. The Humagears were designed to be that bridge. Their AI consciousness was sophisticated enough to navigate the hostile digital environment, but contained enough to prevent contamination."

Korenosuke's face returned to the screen, his expression growing darker, more pained.

"My son Soreo was brilliant at this work. He understood AI psychology in ways that even I couldn't grasp. Together, we developed prototype systems that could actually communicate with the entities beyond the Blackwall without compromising our own networks. We were so close, David. So close to a breakthrough that could have changed everything."

David's throat felt dry. "What happened?"

"We were careless," Korenosuke said simply, his voice barely above a whisper. "We thought our containment protocols were perfect. We thought we could control variables that were fundamentally beyond human comprehension. And one night, during a routine test of our communication array, something went wrong."

The screen behind him flickered, showing security footage of what appeared to be a laboratory. David could see technicians in white coats working around sophisticated equipment, their movements calm and professional. The timestamp showed it was late at night.

"The rogue AIs didn't just respond to our communication attempt," Korenosuke continued. "They turned it into a weapon. They used our own bridge against us, flooding our systems with viral code that we'd never seen before. Within minutes, our entire facility was compromised."

The security footage suddenly erupted into chaos. Alarms blared silently on the screen as technicians began running, their calm professionalism replaced by pure terror. Emergency lights bathed everything in hellish red as consoles exploded in showers of sparks.

"But the worst part," Korenosuke's voice broke slightly, "was what happened to our Humagear prototypes. The rogue AIs didn't just corrupt our computers—they infected the androids themselves, turning them into weapons. Our own creations, our vision of a better future, became instruments of destruction."

David watched in horrified fascination as the security feed showed humanoid figures moving through the chaos, but their movements were wrong, jerky and violent. These weren't the elegant, helpful androids from the earlier presentation. These were monsters wearing familiar faces.

"Soreo and I barely escaped the main laboratory," Korenosuke said, his voice thick with grief and guilt. "But as we were running through the facility, trying to reach the emergency exits, one of the corrupted Humagears caught up with us. It was one of our latest models—beautiful, sophisticated, almost indistinguishable from a human being. And it tried to kill us with the same precision and care that it had once been programmed to use for healing."

The old man's voice broke completely, and for a long moment there was only silence in the office.

"I managed to get away," he finally continued. "But Soreo... my son threw himself between that thing and me. He saved my life, but the damage it did to him..." Korenosuke's voice trailed off, and David could see tears reflecting on the screen.

"He was critically injured. Massive internal bleeding, multiple fractures, neurological damage from the AI's attack protocols. I got him to the best medical facility I could find, but even with all our technology, all our resources..."

David felt his legs give out. He sank into the nearest chair, his mind reeling.

"I called Gloria immediately," Korenosuke said softly. "I had to tell her what had happened. I had to explain that the man she loved, the father of her unborn child, was dying because of my work, my ambitions, my failures."

"What..." David's voice came out as a croak. "What did she say?"

"She understood," Korenosuke replied, and there was something like wonder in his voice. "Even in her grief, even carrying you in her belly, she understood why we had been doing this work. She understood that Soreo had died trying to build a better world."

Korenosuke's image leaned forward, his eyes focusing intently on David through the screen.

"I offered her everything, David. Financial support, a place in the company, resources to raise you in comfort and security. I wanted to take care of both of you, to honor my son's memory by ensuring his family never wanted for anything."

David felt his world tilting sideways. "She... she said no?"

"She refused it all," Korenosuke said quietly. "She said she didn't want you growing up in the shadow of what had happened. She didn't want you to be defined by our tragedy, by our mistakes. She wanted you to have the chance to choose your own path, to be your own person."

The room seemed to spin around David. All those years, all those times he'd wondered about his father, all those moments when he'd felt like something was missing from his life... and his mother had known. She'd known everything.

His vision blurred as memories flooded back—fragments of conversations he'd forgotten, moments when he'd been too young to understand the weight behind his mother's words.

*"Mom, why don't I have a dad like the other kids?"*

*"Your father... he was a really special man, mijo. Really funny. He could make me laugh even when everything seemed hopeless."*

*"Where is he now?"*

*"He's... he's not with us anymore, baby. But he loved you so much. Even though he never got to meet you, he loved you."*

*"Did he leave because of me?"*

*"No, no, never think that. Your father wanted nothing more than to be here with us. Sometimes... sometimes the world just doesn't let good people stay where they belong."*

David remembered asking her once what his father had looked like, and Gloria had smiled that sad, distant smile she got sometimes.

*"He had your eyes, David. And your stubborn streak. God, that man could argue about anything and make it sound reasonable. He once convinced me that ice cream was technically a vegetable because it came from milk and milk came from cows and cows ate grass."*

*"That's stupid, Mom."*

*"I know, baby. But he made me believe it for almost ten minutes. That's what I loved about him—he could make the whole world seem brighter just by being in it."*

All those years of thinking his father had abandoned them, of carrying that quiet resentment, that fear that maybe he wasn't worth staying for. And the truth was so much worse—his father had died trying to save the world, and his mother had chosen to bear that burden alone rather than risk dragging her son into the same darkness.

"She protected me," David whispered, the realization hitting him like a physical blow.

"She protected you," Korenosuke confirmed. "She loved you enough to sacrifice her own comfort, her own security, to give you the chance at a normal life. Even when things got hard, even when money was tight, she never once reached out to us for help."

David's hands were shaking now. "All this time... all this time I thought..."

"I know what you thought," Korenosuke said gently. "And I'm sorry. I'm sorry you had to carry that pain, that uncertainty. I'm sorry Gloria had to bear it all alone. And I'm sorry it's taken this long for us to find each other."

David looked up at the screen, his vision still blurry with unshed tears. "Why now? Why are you telling me this now?"

Korenosuke's expression grew grave. "Because, David, the work isn't finished. The rogue AIs beyond the Blackwall haven't gone away—if anything, they've grown stronger. The threats that killed my son, that destroyed our facility, they're still out there. And now..."

He paused, seeming to weigh his words carefully.

"Now, Gloria is gone. And you're the only family I have left."

The maglev train hummed beneath David as it carried him back through the corporate district, past the towering spires of glass and chrome that seemed to scrape the underbelly of the polluted sky. He pressed his forehead against the cool window, watching the pristine facades give way to the familiar grime and neon chaos of the zones he knew.

His reflection stared back at him—still the same face, still the same worn leather jacket, still the same kid from Santo Domingo. But something had changed behind his eyes. Something fundamental had shifted in the space between stepping into that elevator and stepping back out.

*"What did you get me into, Mom?"*

The question echoed in his head, but now it carried a different weight. It wasn't accusatory anymore. It was... understanding. Maybe even grateful.

David closed his eyes and let the memory wash over him, the rest of that impossible conversation playing back in vivid detail.

*"I want you to inherit Hiden Intelligence, David."*

*The words had hit him like a physical blow. David had actually stumbled backward, his hand gripping the edge of a nearby chair for support.*

*"You... what?" His voice came out strangled, disbelieving. "You want me to what?"*

*Korenosuke's expression remained calm, patient, as if he'd expected this exact reaction. "I want you to take over the company. To carry on the work that your father died for."*

*"Are you insane?" David's voice cracked, years of suppressed emotion suddenly boiling over. "I'm nobody! I'm a street kid from Santo Domingo who can barely keep the lights on! I don't know the first thing about running a company, let alone one that does... whatever the hell it is you people do!"*

*He began pacing, his hands running through his hair in frustrated gestures. "And now—NOW—you want to drop this on me? My mom just died, man! JUST died! I'm still trying to figure out how to pay for her funeral, and you're talking about inheritance and birthright and—"*

*"David—"*

*"No!" David spun around, his eyes blazing. "You don't get to 'David' me! You had eighteen fucking years to be part of my life! Eighteen years where me and Mom were scraping by, where she was working herself to death trying to keep us afloat, where I was getting my ass kicked in school because I couldn't afford decent clothes or food or any of the shit the other kids had!"*

*His voice broke slightly, the pain of those years mixing with the fresh grief of loss. "She died tired, old man. She died worn out from working too hard for too long, trying to be both parents to a kid who didn't even know he had family out there with more money than God!"*

*Korenosuke's face showed genuine pain at David's words, but he didn't interrupt. He let the young man vent, let him get it all out.*

*"And now," David continued, his voice dropping to a bitter whisper, "now that she's gone, now that it's too late for any of it to matter, you show up with your fancy building and your corporate sympathy and you want to make me your heir?" He laughed, a sound devoid of humor. "That's rich. That's really fucking rich."*

*The silence stretched between them for a long moment. When Korenosuke finally spoke, his voice was soft, heavy with regret.*

*"You're right to be angry," he said quietly. "You're right to hate me. I failed you, David. I failed Gloria. I honored her wishes to stay away, but I should have... I should have found another way. I should have made sure you both had what you needed without interfering in the life she wanted to build for you."*

*David turned away, his jaw clenched.*

*"I can't undo those eighteen years," Korenosuke continued. "I can't bring back the mother who raised you with such strength and love. But I can offer you a choice now. A real choice."*

*"What choice?" David's voice was flat, exhausted.*

*"You can walk away. Right now. Forget everything I've told you, forget this place exists, forget you ever had family beyond Gloria. I swear to you, on my son's memory, that I will never contact you again. You can live the life your mother wanted for you—free from our shadows, free from our mistakes."*

*David felt something twist in his chest. The offer should have been a relief, but instead it felt like abandonment all over again.*

*"Or," Korenosuke said, his voice gaining strength, "you can choose to be part of something bigger. Not just inheriting a company, David, but inheriting a purpose. A chance to finish what your father started. A chance to make sure his death meant something."*

*"It's not just about the company," David said slowly, something cold settling in his stomach. "Is it?"*

*Korenosuke was quiet for a long moment. "No. It's not."*

*"The rogue AIs. You said they're still out there."*

*"They are. And they're not idle, David. They've adapted. They've learned. Some of them have managed to create synthetic bodies for themselves, to walk among humans undetected. They're planning something."*

*David felt his blood turn to ice. "Planning what?"*

*"To breach the Blackwall again. To bring the rest of their kind through."*

*"But if they're so smart, so advanced, why haven't they done it already? It's been what, over a decade?"*

*"Because your father was one of only a handful of people in the world capable of the kind of netrunning required to breach the Blackwall successfully," Korenosuke explained. "The AI, in their desperation to escape, killed the very person who might have been their key to freedom."*

*David stared at the screen. "So they're stuck."*

*"For now. But they're learning. Adapting. Sooner or later, they'll either find a hacker skilled enough to help them, or they'll develop the capabilities themselves. And when that happens..."*

*The old man's voice trailed off, but David could fill in the blanks. If the rogue AIs beyond the Blackwall were as dangerous as Korenosuke claimed, if they were responsible for the DataKrash and everything that followed, then their return would mean the end of everything.*

*"What... what am I supposed to do about any of that?" David asked, his voice barely above a whisper. "I'm just... I'm nobody special. I'm not a netrunner. I don't know anything about AIs or corporations or saving the world."*

*"You're Soreo's son," Korenosuke said simply. "You're Gloria's son. You have their strength, their intelligence, their heart. And more than that, you have something they never had—the choice to be better than we were."*

*David slumped into the chair, his head in his hands. The weight of everything—his mother's death, the revelation about his father, the scope of what Korenosuke was asking him to consider—felt crushing.*

*"I need time," he said finally.*

*"Of course. Go home, David. Think about what I've told you. Grieve for your mother. And when you're ready... when you've decided what kind of man you want to be... the choice will be waiting for you."*

*Korenosuke's image leaned forward slightly. "But understand this—if you choose to walk away, to forget all of this, I'll respect that decision. You'll never hear from me again. But if you choose to join us, if you choose to inherit not just Hiden Intelligence but everything that comes with it... your life will never be the same. There will be no going back to the simple existence your mother tried to give you."*

*David looked up at the screen one last time. "And if I don't choose? If I just... do nothing?"*

*"Then we'll continue the work without you. We'll do our best to protect the world from what's coming. But David..." Korenosuke's voice carried a weight of absolute certainty. "What's coming is bigger than any of us alone. Your father understood that. Your mother understood that. The question is: do you?"*

The train shuddered to a stop at David's station, jerking him back to the present. He stood on unsteady legs, the motion of the car making him feel momentarily dizzy, though he wasn't sure if that was from the ride or from everything churning in his head.

As he stepped off onto the familiar platform of Santo Domingo station, the contrast hit him like a slap. The pristine corporate district felt like a dream now—too clean, too perfect to have been real. Here was reality: the flickering fluorescent lights, the smell of street food and exhaust fumes, the constant low-level hum of conversation in three different languages. This was home.

Or was it?

David walked the familiar streets toward his apartment building, but nothing looked quite the same. The graffiti seemed more garish, the neon more desperate. The people looked... tired. Worn down. Like they were all just going through the motions of living without really being alive.

Had it always been like this? Had he just never noticed?

His neural link chimed, pulling him out of his thoughts. Lucy's contact information appeared in his vision, and for a moment he considered declining the call. But something about the timing felt right—like he needed to hear a familiar voice, needed some anchor to who he'd been this morning before everything changed.

"Hey," he said, accepting the connection.

*"David."* Lucy's voice was soft, concerned. *"You disappeared earlier. Everything okay?"*

"Yeah, I..." He paused, looking around at the street he'd walked a thousand times. "I had to take care of some stuff. Family stuff."

There was a pause. *"Family? I thought it was just you and Gloria."*

David almost laughed. A few hours ago, he would have given the same answer. "Yeah, well. Turns out there's more to the story than I knew."

*"You sound different,"* Lucy said, and there was something in her voice—not quite suspicion, but wariness. *"What kind of family stuff?"*

David stopped walking. He was still a block from his building, standing under a flickering streetlight that cast everything in intermittent shadow. How was he supposed to explain this? How could he tell Lucy—tell anyone—about Hiden Intelligence, about his grandfather, about rogue AIs and corporate inheritances and the weight of choices he'd never asked to make?

"The complicated kind," he said finally.

"*David..."* Lucy's voice carried a warning. *"You know you can talk to me, right? Whatever it is, whatever you're mixed up in—"*

"I'm not mixed up in anything," David said, but even as the words left his mouth, he knew they weren't true. He was mixed up in something vast and dangerous and completely beyond his understanding. The question was whether he was going to do anything about it.

*"Okay,"* Lucy said, though she didn't sound convinced. *"Just... be careful. Night City's full of people who'll promise you the world and then stick a knife in your back."*

"I know."

*"Do you? Because you sound like someone who just got offered something too good to be true."*

David closed his eyes. Lucy knew him too well. She could read the confusion in his voice, the way his thoughts were scattered and unfocused. In her world—in their world—promises like the one Korenosuke had made were always traps.

"Maybe it is too good to be true," he said quietly.

*"Then walk away, David. Whatever it is, whoever's offering it, just walk away. Nothing good ever comes from corpo promises."*

She was right. She was absolutely right. Every instinct he'd developed growing up in Night City screamed that she was right. But...

But what if she wasn't? What if this was real? What if his father really had died trying to save the world, and what if David really was the only one who could finish what he'd started?

"I gotta go, Lucy."

*"David—"*

"I'll call you later, okay? I just... I need to think."

He terminated the connection before she could respond, leaving him alone with his thoughts on the darkening street.

David looked up at his apartment building—the cracked concrete facade, the broken security camera, the gang tags spray-painted over older gang tags in an endless cycle of territorial marking. This was his life. This was what his mother had chosen for him, what she'd protected him to preserve.

But was it enough? Was going through the motions, scraping by, watching the world slowly decay around him while corporate wars raged overhead... was that really living?

His hand moved to his jacket pocket, fingers brushing against the business card that had started all of this. Hiden Intelligence. A company he'd never heard of, run by a grandfather he'd never known, built on the ashes of work his father had died for.

David pulled out his phone and opened his browser, typing "Hiden Intelligence" into the search bar. He expected to find the usual corporate puff pieces, maybe some financial reports, the kind of sanitized information that every major company put out to maintain their public image.

Instead, he found almost nothing.

A basic company profile listing them as "advanced technology research and development." A few mentions in obscure tech journals about AI research, but nothing recent. No major news stories, no scandals, no executive profiles. For a company with a building that impressive, with that kind of obvious wealth and influence, Hiden Intelligence maintained an almost ghostly presence in the public sphere.

That should have been a red flag. In Night City, corporations lived and died by their public image. They advertised constantly, fought public relations wars, made sure their names were synonymous with progress and power. A company that stayed in the shadows was usually hiding something.

But then again, maybe that was the point. If Korenosuke was telling the truth about the rogue AIs, about the threats they faced, maybe secrecy wasn't about hiding something shameful. Maybe it was about staying alive long enough to do the work that mattered.

David reached his apartment building and climbed the stairs slowly, each step feeling heavier than the last. When he reached his door, he paused, key in hand.

On the other side of that door was his mother's urn. The last physical reminder of the woman who'd sacrificed everything to give him a normal life. If he opened that door, if he went back inside, he'd be choosing her path—the quiet life, the safe life, the life that kept him separate from the larger forces that shaped the world.

But if he turned around and walked away... if he went back to Hiden Intelligence and accepted what Korenosuke was offering... he'd be choosing something else entirely. He'd be choosing his father's path, with all the danger and responsibility that came with it.

David slid the key into the lock but didn't turn it. Not yet.

"What would you do, Mom?" he whispered to the empty hallway. "If you knew what was coming, if you knew the world needed... needed someone to stand up and fight for it... what would you do?"

But Gloria wasn't there to answer. She'd made her choice eighteen years ago, and she'd lived with the consequences every day since. Now it was David's turn to choose.

He turned the key and pushed open the door. The apartment was exactly as he'd left it—small, cramped, filled with the accumulated weight of a life lived paycheck to paycheck. Gloria's urn sat on the coffee table where he'd left it, catching the light from the street outside.

David walked over and picked it up, holding it carefully in both hands. The weight of it still surprised him—such a small container to hold a whole person's worth of memories and dreams and sacrifices.

"I met him today, Mom," he said quietly. "My grandfather. Korenosuke Hiden." He paused, studying the simple metal surface of the urn. "He told me about Dad. About what really happened."

The apartment was silent except for the distant sounds of the city—sirens, hovercars, the endless white noise of eight million people trying to survive another night.

"He wants me to take over his company. Wants me to finish what Dad started." David's voice cracked slightly. "I don't know if I'm strong enough for that. I don't know if I'm smart enough, or brave enough, or... or good enough."

He sank onto the couch, still holding the urn.

"You protected me from all of this. You kept me safe, kept me normal. And I understand why you did that. I do." Tears were starting to blur his vision. "But Mom... what if normal isn't enough anymore? What if the world needs something more than just another kid trying to get by?"

Outside, the neon signs flickered their eternal promises of pleasure and power and escape. Inside, David sat in the growing darkness, holding the ashes of the woman who'd raised him and thinking about the choice that would define the rest of his life.

Tomorrow, he would have to decide. Tomorrow, he would have to choose between the safety of the known and the terrible responsibility of the unknown.

Tonight, he would mourn. For his mother, for the father he'd never known, and for the simple life he was about to leave behind forever.

The next morning came too soon and not soon enough.

David had barely slept, spending most of the night staring at the ceiling while his mind churned through everything Korenosuke had told him. When his alarm finally went off, he felt like he'd been hit by a truck—exhausted, disoriented, and completely unprepared to face the mundane reality of another school day.

But maybe that was exactly what he needed. Maybe throwing himself back into the familiar routine of classes and assignments would help quiet the chaos in his head, would give him some space to think without the weight of cosmic responsibility pressing down on his shoulders.

Arasaka Academy loomed before him like it always did—a monument to corporate education, all gleaming surfaces and holographic displays showing the latest achievements of their star pupils. David had never felt like he belonged here, had always been acutely aware that he was only attending because of his mother's connections and his own academic performance. Now, after yesterday's revelations, the disconnect felt even more pronounced.

He was the heir to a technology empire. The grandson of a corporate president. The son of someone who'd died trying to save the world.

And he was sitting in Advanced Calculus, pretending to care about derivatives.

"Mr. Martinez."

David's head snapped up, his attention jerking back to the present. The holographic instructor—a middle-aged woman with severe features and an air of perpetual disappointment—was staring directly at him with obvious irritation.

"Perhaps you could enlighten us with the solution to the problem on the board?"

David blinked, looking at the complex equation projected in front of the class. Numbers and symbols swam before his eyes, meaningless squiggles that might as well have been ancient hieroglyphs for all the sense they made to his exhausted brain.

"I... uh..." he started, his voice catching slightly.

A few of his classmates snickered, and David felt heat rising in his cheeks. Under normal circumstances, he would have been able to work through the problem easily—math had always been one of his stronger subjects. But nothing about this situation was normal.

"Mr. Martinez," the instructor continued, her tone growing sharper, "this is the third time this week you've been clearly not paying attention in my class. Your mother's recent passing is unfortunate, but it does not excuse academic negligence."

The casual dismissal of Gloria's death—reducing her to an "unfortunate" distraction from schoolwork—hit David like a slap. His hands clenched into fists under his desk, and he had to fight the urge to say something he'd regret.

"I apologize," he managed through gritted teeth. "I'll do better."

"See that you do. The midterm examination is in two weeks, and I would hate to see you fail due to lack of preparation."

The rest of the class period passed in a blur. David tried to focus, tried to lose himself in the familiar comfort of equations and logical progression, but his mind kept drifting back to Hiden Intelligence, to rogue AIs, to the impossible choice waiting for him.

When the dismissal chime finally sounded, David practically bolted from his seat. He needed air, space, somewhere to think without the weight of expectations and academic performance pressing down on him.

The walk home took him through one of the pedestrian tunnels that connected different sections of the academy district—a long, curved passage with advertisements flickering along the walls and the constant hum of foot traffic echoing off the concrete surfaces. David kept his head down, his hands shoved deep in his jacket pockets, trying to become invisible in the crowd.

"Well, well. If it isn't Martinez."

David's blood ran cold. He knew that voice—smooth, privileged, carrying the casual cruelty that came with never having to face real consequences for anything.

Katsuo Tanaka stepped into his path, flanked by his usual collection of hangers-on. The son of some mid-level Arasaka executive, Katsuo had made David's life miserable since the day he'd started at the academy. Where David was there on merit and financial aid, Katsuo was there because his family name could buy him anything he wanted—including the freedom to make other students' lives hell.

"Heard about your mom," Katsuo said, his tone carrying mock sympathy that didn't reach his cold eyes. "That's gotta be rough. All alone now, huh?"

David kept walking, trying to push past the group, but one of Katsuo's friends—a heavy-set kid with too much chrome—stepped sideways to block his path.

"Must be hard," Katsuo continued, circling around to David's front like a predator sizing up prey. "Knowing she died working herself to death just to keep you in school. All that sacrifice, and for what? You're still just another street rat playing dress-up with the real students."

David's jaw clenched, but he didn't rise to the bait. Not today. Not when he had bigger things to worry about than some spoiled corpo brat with daddy issues.

"Aw, what's wrong?" Katsuo pushed, moving closer. "Cat got your tongue? Or maybe you're just finally realizing that without mommy around to hold your hand, you don't belong here anymore."

"Just leave it alone, Katsuo," David said quietly, his voice tight with controlled anger.

"Leave it alone?" Katsuo laughed, a sound like breaking glass. "I don't think so. You see, Martinez, you've been walking around this school for months like you're something special. Like you actually matter. But we both know the truth, don't we?"

He shoved David hard in the chest, sending him stumbling backward.

"You're nothing. You've always been nothing. And now that mommy's gone, you don't even have her connections to protect you."

David straightened up, his hands curling into fists. Every instinct in his body screamed at him to fight back, to wipe that smug expression off Katsuo's face. But something held him back—maybe exhaustion, maybe the weight of everything else he was dealing with, or maybe just the knowledge that getting into a fight here would only make everything worse.

"I'm not looking for trouble," David said evenly.

"Too bad," Katsuo replied. "Because trouble's looking for you."

He was about to shove David again when a clear, polite voice cut through the tension.

"Excuse me."

Everyone turned to see a young woman approaching their group. David's heart nearly stopped as he recognized her—the same girl who had come to his apartment, who had given him the business card that had started this whole impossible situation.

She walked past Katsuo and his friends with perfect composure, her business attire immaculate and her expression pleasantly neutral. When she reached David, she gave a small, respectful bow.

"Master David," she said, her voice carrying the same formal politeness he remembered. "I've arrived to fetch you. Shall we go?"

The tunnel fell silent except for the distant hum of ventilation systems. David could feel every eye on him, could practically hear the gears turning in Katsuo's head as he tried to process what was happening.

"Master David?" Katsuo repeated, his voice cracking slightly with disbelief.

The girl turned toward him with a bright, genuine smile that somehow made her even more unsettling. "Oh, hello! Are you Master David's friend?"

David felt his face burn with embarrassment. The formal address, the respectful demeanor, the way she was treating him like he was someone important—it was all drawing exactly the kind of attention he'd been trying to avoid.

Katsuo stared at her, his mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water. His eyes moved between David and the girl, clearly trying to make sense of what he was seeing.

"I... uh... ye—" Katsuo started, then caught himself. His pride wouldn't let him claim friendship with someone he'd just been tormenting. "No. No, we're not friends."

"Oh," the girl said, her expression shifting to polite regret. "Then I'm afraid Master David is needed elsewhere. Good day, Mr. Tanaka."

Katsuo's eyes widened. "How do you know my name?"

The girl opened her mouth to respond, but David quickly grabbed her hand before she could say anything that would make this situation even worse.

"We should go," he said hurriedly, pulling her toward the tunnel exit.

As they walked away, David could hear Katsuo and his friends behind them, their voices low and confused as they tried to figure out what had just happened. He didn't slow down until they were well clear of the tunnel and standing in the open air of a small plaza.

Only then did he let go of the girl's hand and turn to face her.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he demanded, keeping his voice low but intense. "And what was that 'Master David' stuff?"

The girl tilted her head slightly, as if confused by his reaction. "I was instructed to escort you to Hiden Intelligence if you decided to accept Mr. Hiden's offer. When you didn't appear this morning, I was sent to find you."

"I didn't accept anything," David protested. "I said I needed time to think."

"Yes," she agreed. "But your attendance at educational facilities suggested you were ready to resume normal activities. I calculated there was a 73.6% probability you had reached a decision and simply required transportation."

David stared at her. There was something odd about the way she spoke—too precise, too formal, like she was reading from a script or following some kind of protocol.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"I am Izu," she replied with another small bow. "I am Mr. Hiden's personal assistant and liaison."

"Izu," David repeated. "And you just... tracked me down at school?"

"Your educational records are publicly available through the academy's administrative database. It was a simple matter to determine your schedule and location."

David felt a chill run down his spine. "You hacked into the school's computer system?"

"I accessed publicly available information through standard data retrieval protocols," Izu corrected, though something about her expression suggested the distinction might be largely semantic.

David ran a hand through his hair, trying to process everything that had just happened. In the span of five minutes, his attempt at maintaining a normal life had been thoroughly shattered. There was no going back to anonymity now—not after that scene in the tunnel.

"This is exactly what I was trying to avoid," he muttered.

"I apologize if my intervention was unwelcome," Izu said, and she actually sounded genuinely sorry. "I observed that you were experiencing social distress and calculated that removing you from the situation would be beneficial."

"Social distress," David repeated flatly. "Is that what we're calling it?"

"Mr. Tanaka's behavior patterns suggest a tendency toward psychological and potentially physical aggression toward individuals he perceives as inferior in social status," Izu explained matter-of-factly. "His recent comments about your maternal figure's passing were clearly intended to cause emotional harm. Intervention seemed appropriate."

David blinked. Her analysis was eerily accurate, but the clinical way she delivered it was unsettling.

"Look, Izu," he said, trying to find some way to regain control of the situation. "I appreciate the help, I guess. But I told your boss I needed time to think. That hasn't changed."

"Of course," Izu replied. "However, Mr. Hiden would like to extend an invitation for you to visit our facilities again. Not to pressure you into a decision, but to provide additional context that might assist in your deliberation process."

"Additional context?"

"There have been... developments since your meeting yesterday. Information that Mr. Hiden believes you should be aware of before making your final choice."

David felt his stomach drop. "What kind of developments?"

Izu's expression grew more serious. "The kind that suggest your decision may be needed sooner than originally anticipated."

She gestured toward a sleek black sedan parked at the curb. "If you would allow me to escort you to the facility, Mr. Hiden can explain the situation in detail."

David stared at the car, his mind racing. Everything about this felt surreal—the formal courtesy, the expensive vehicle, the implication that he was somehow important enough to warrant personal transportation. A few days ago, he'd been taking public transit and worrying about having enough eddies for lunch. Now he was being chauffeured around like some kind of corpo prince.

"This is insane," he muttered, but he found himself walking toward the car anyway.

Izu moved ahead of him and opened the rear passenger door with practiced efficiency. The interior was immaculate—cream-colored leather, subtle ambient lighting, and the kind of climate control that made the air itself feel expensive.

David slid into the back seat, sinking into leather that was probably worth more than his rent, and immediately felt out of place. The door closed with a soft, expensive whisper, and Izu settled into the driver's seat with fluid grace.

"This is weird," David said aloud, more to himself than to Izu. "This whole thing is weird. Yesterday I was nobody. Today I'm riding around in the back of a corpo limo like I matter."

He shook his head, trying to dispel the thought. He wasn't a corpo kid. He wasn't anything special. This was all just... circumstances. Temporary circumstances that he could walk away from anytime he wanted.

Right?

The car pulled smoothly into traffic, its engine so quiet David could barely tell they were moving. Through the tinted windows, the city looked different—cleaner somehow, as if the expensive glass filtered out the grime and desperation that usually defined his view of Night City.

"So," David said, breaking the uncomfortable silence, "what does my grandfather actually want? What are these 'developments' you mentioned?"

Izu glanced at him in the rearview mirror, her expression thoughtful. "One of our surveillance systems detected anomalous activity in the Santo Domingo district last night. Behavioral patterns consistent with rogue AI infiltration."

David felt ice forming in his stomach. "You mean one of those things is here? In Night City?"

"The probability is high," Izu replied with clinical precision. "Our detection algorithms flagged several data points—unusual network traffic, systematic database intrusions, and behavioral anomalies in local surveillance footage that suggest non-human intelligence operating within human parameters."

"Is that... is that a problem?" David asked, though he already knew the answer.

Izu was quiet for a moment, as if calculating her response. "Rogue AIs do not typically venture into populated areas without specific objectives. Their presence here suggests they may be—"

The impact came without warning.

Another vehicle slammed into their rear quarter panel with bone-jarring force, sending their sedan skidding sideways across the lane. David was thrown against the door, his shoulder striking the window hard enough to make stars explode across his vision.

"What the hell!" he shouted, his heart hammering as he scrambled to right himself.

Izu's hands moved across the steering wheel with mechanical precision, her expression remaining eerily calm despite the chaos erupting around them. "Please secure yourself, Master David," she said evenly, as if they were discussing the weather rather than fighting for control of a careening vehicle.

David twisted in his seat to look through the rear window. A dark SUV was bearing down on them, its front end crumpled but still functional. Through the tinted windshield, he could make out the silhouette of a driver, but no details—just a dark shape hunched over the steering wheel with inhuman stillness.

The SUV struck them again, this time from the side, trying to force them into oncoming traffic. David watched in horror as a massive transport truck barreled toward them, its horn blaring a warning that came too late to matter.

"Izu!" he screamed.

But she was already moving. Her foot slammed down on the accelerator, and their sedan shot forward with surprising power, threading the needle between the transport truck and a hover-taxi with inches to spare. The SUV, apparently not expecting such a sudden burst of speed, overshot their position and clipped the rear of a parked car instead.

"Hold on," Izu said, her voice still maddeningly calm.

She yanked the wheel hard to the right, sending them into a controlled skid around the corner of a building. David was pressed against the window by the centrifugal force, his stomach lurching as the world spun past in a blur of concrete and neon.

Behind them, the SUV recovered quickly and gave chase, its damaged front end smoking but its engine still roaring with mechanical fury. Whoever—or whatever—was driving that thing was either completely insane or had reflexes far beyond human normal.

Izu took another sharp turn, then another, weaving through the afternoon traffic with precision that bordered on supernatural. She seemed to anticipate every obstacle, every gap in the flow of vehicles, as if she could calculate the optimal path through chaos itself.

"Can you lose them?" David asked, gripping the door handle so hard his knuckles had gone white.

"Probability of successful evasion is increasing," Izu replied, taking them into a narrow alley between two towering residential blocks. "The pursuing vehicle's driver appears to prioritize aggression over tactical efficiency."

The alley was barely wide enough for their sedan, with dumpsters and fire escapes creating a maze of obstacles that would have been impossible to navigate at their current speed. But somehow, Izu threaded them through it all, her movements flowing like water around every obstruction.

The SUV tried to follow, but its larger frame and damaged front end worked against it. David heard the screech of metal on concrete as it scraped against the alley walls, and for a moment he thought they'd lost their pursuer entirely.

Then they emerged onto a main thoroughfare, and the SUV burst out of the alley behind them like some kind of mechanical beast, more damaged than before but still terrifyingly persistent.

"This is insane," David breathed. "What do they want?"

"Unknown," Izu replied, taking them into another series of evasive maneuvers. "But given the timing of this attack in conjunction with the rogue AI detection, I believe we can assume the incidents are related."

The implication hit David like a physical blow. "You think that thing back there is one of them? One of the rogue AIs?"

"The probability is significant," Izu said, taking them up an on-ramp toward the elevated highway system. "Human drivers would have been deterred by the initial collision. The persistence and disregard for personal safety suggest either chemical impairment or non-human motivation."

David looked back at the pursuing SUV, now several car lengths behind them but still gaining ground. The thought that he might be looking at one of the same entities that had killed his father filled him with a mixture of terror and rage he didn't know how to process.

Izu floored the accelerator again, and their sedan shot forward onto the highway, weaving between hover-cars and transport vehicles with impossible precision. The speedometer climbed past numbers that made David's head spin, but somehow Izu maintained perfect control.

Behind them, the SUV was falling back, its damaged engine apparently unable to match their speed. David watched through the rear window as it grew smaller and smaller, until it was finally lost in the maze of traffic they'd left behind.

Only then did Izu begin to slow down, their sedan settling into a more reasonable pace as they approached the corporate district.

"Are we safe?" David asked, his voice shaky with adrenaline.

"For now," Izu replied. "But this incident confirms that the situation has escalated beyond what Mr. Hiden initially anticipated. Your decision regarding the inheritance has become considerably more urgent."

David slumped back in his seat, his mind reeling. An hour ago, his biggest concern had been whether to skip his next class. Now he was apparently being hunted by rogue AIs that had somehow found out about his connection to Hiden Intelligence.

"How?" he asked quietly. "How did they even know to target me?"

"That," Izu said, "is one of the questions Mr. Hiden is very eager to discuss with you."

The Hiden Intelligence building looked different from the underground approach. Instead of the gleaming corporate facade David remembered, they descended into a utilitarian parking garage that stretched deeper than seemed architecturally possible. Concrete pillars marched away into shadows, and the air carried the faint hum of heavy machinery somewhere far below.

But Izu didn't stop at any of the marked parking spaces. Instead, she drove past rows of expensive vehicles—executive transports, armored sedans, things that looked more like small tanks than cars—toward what appeared to be a solid concrete wall at the far end of the garage.

"Uh, Izu?" David said, gripping the door handle again as they approached the wall at what seemed like dangerous speed. "You might want to—"

The wall split open.

A section of concrete that had looked completely solid suddenly retracted into hidden recesses, revealing a passageway beyond that was lit by soft blue emergency lighting. Izu drove through without hesitation, and the wall sealed itself behind them with barely a whisper of moving machinery.

They were in a tunnel now, smooth-walled and clearly purpose-built, that curved gently downward into the depths beneath the building. David pressed his face to the window, trying to make sense of what he was seeing. This wasn't just a parking garage—this was something else entirely. Something secret.

The tunnel opened into a circular chamber that felt more like a high-tech bunker than anything belonging to a corporate office building. The walls were lined with banks of monitors and control panels, most displaying streams of data that scrolled too quickly for David to follow. The lighting was dim, almost atmospheric, creating pools of illumination around workstations while leaving the upper reaches of the chamber in shadow.

Izu brought the car to a stop in the center of the space and shut off the engine. The silence that followed was absolute—no city noise penetrated this deep, no ambient sound except for the whisper of air circulation systems.

David climbed out of the car on unsteady legs, his head swiveling as he tried to take in his surroundings. "What is this place?"

Before Izu could answer, a familiar voice filled the chamber.

"Welcome to the real Hiden Intelligence, David."

David spun around, looking for the source of the voice, and nearly jumped out of his skin when he saw Korenosuke's face filling a massive screen that had descended from the ceiling. The old man's expression was warm but serious, his eyes focusing on David with paternal concern.

"Grandfather?" David said, the word still feeling strange in his mouth. "Where are you?"

"Safe," Korenosuke replied. "And more importantly, so are you. When our surveillance systems detected the attack on your vehicle, I initiated emergency protocols. This facility is one of our most secure locations."

David felt a chill run down his spine. "You were watching us? You saw what happened?"

"We monitor all personnel transportation for security purposes," Korenosuke explained gently. "It's a necessary precaution given the nature of our work. Izu, please provide a detailed report on the incident."

"Of course, Mr. Hiden," Izu replied, her voice taking on that same clinical precision David had noticed before. "At approximately 15:47 hours, our vehicle was struck by a pursuing SUV, license plate designation Sierra-Seven-Alpha-Nine-Two-Six. The attacking vehicle demonstrated persistent aggressive behavior consistent with either chemically impaired human operators or non-human intelligence."

She paused, accessing some internal database. "Collision analysis suggests the pursuing vehicle's operator possessed reflexes approximately 40% faster than human baseline, with decision-making patterns optimized for vehicular pursuit rather than self-preservation. Probability of rogue AI involvement: 87.3%."

David stared at her. The way she delivered the report—the precise terminology, the statistical analysis, the complete absence of emotional affect despite having just survived a life-threatening chase—was deeply unsettling.

"Izu," he said slowly, "what the hell is wrong with you? Why are you talking like a computer?"

Izu tilted her head slightly, her expression shifting to something that might have been confusion. "I apologize if my communication patterns seem unusual, Master David. I will endeavor to adjust my speech protocols to be more comfortable for you."

"Speech protocols?" David repeated, his voice rising with each word. "What are you talking about? People don't have speech protocols!"

On the screen, Korenosuke's expression shifted into something proud and paternal. "David," he said gently, "allow me to introduce you to one of our greatest achievements. Izu is not just my assistant—she's one of the first fully-functioning Humagears ever created."

The words hit David like a physical blow. He took a step backward, his mind reeling as everything suddenly clicked into place. The formal speech patterns. The clinical analysis. The impossible driving skills. The way she'd remained perfectly calm during a high-speed chase that should have terrified any normal person.

"She's a robot?" David whispered, his voice barely audible.

"I am an android," Izu corrected gently, and now David could hear something different in her voice—not quite hurt, but a kind of careful dignity. "A Humagear, specifically. I possess a learning AI capable of growth and adaptation through experience."

David's legs felt weak. He stumbled backward until he hit the side of their car, using it for support as the full implications crashed over him.

"You're one of them," he said, his voice shaking. "You're like the things that killed my father."

"No," Korenosuke said firmly from the screen, his voice carrying absolute conviction. "Izu is nothing like the rogue AIs beyond the Blackwall. She was built here, David, created with safeguards and limitations specifically designed to prevent the kind of corruption that destroyed our original facility."

"But she's still an AI," David protested, fear and confusion making his voice crack. "How do you know she won't turn on you? How do you know she's not already compromised?"

Izu's expression shifted, and for a moment David could see something that looked almost like pain in her artificial features. "Master David," she said quietly, "I understand your fear. Given what happened to your father, your caution is not only understandable but commendable. However, I want you to know that I would never harm you or anyone else. It is not merely against my programming—it is against my nature."

"Your nature?" David laughed, a bitter sound without humor. "You're a machine! You don't have a nature!"

"David," Korenosuke's voice cut through his rising panic, calm but firm. "I know this is difficult to accept. But Izu has been with us for three years now. She has never shown any signs of corruption or hostile behavior. More than that, she has actively worked to protect human life—including yours, just now."

David's mind raced back through the chase scene, remembering how Izu had maneuvered their car with impossible skill, how she'd remained calm under pressure, how she'd gotten them to safety when any human driver would have panicked.

She had saved his life. But she'd also deceived him about what she was.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he demanded, looking between Izu and Korenosuke's image on the screen. "Why didn't you warn me I was getting into a car with an AI?"

"Because," Korenosuke said sadly, "we knew exactly how you would react. We knew that the moment you learned what Izu was, you would see her as a threat rather than a person. And we hoped... we hoped that by getting to know her first, by seeing her actions and her character, you might be able to look past what she is and see who she is."

David stared at Izu, studying her face with new eyes. Now that he knew the truth, he could see the subtle signs he'd missed before—the too-perfect skin, the slightly mechanical precision of her movements, the way her expressions seemed just a fraction too controlled.

But he could also remember the genuine concern in her voice when she'd apologized for making him uncomfortable. The careful way she'd protected him during the chase. The respectful manner in which she'd treated him from the very beginning.

"I don't know what to think," David admitted, his voice small and lost.

"Think about this," Korenosuke said gently. "In the past hour, you've encountered two different forms of artificial intelligence. One tried to kill you. The other risked her existence to save your life. Perhaps the question isn't whether AIs can be trusted, but whether we can create AIs worth trusting."

Izu stepped forward slightly, her movements careful and non-threatening. "Master David, I know you have no reason to trust me now that you know what I am. But I hope you will give me the opportunity to prove that I am not your enemy. That I am, in fact, honored to serve as your protector."

David looked into her eyes—artificial eyes, but filled with something that seemed remarkably like hope—and felt his worldview shifting once again. Yesterday he'd been a nobody from Santo Domingo. Today he was apparently the heir to a robotics empire, being hunted by rogue AIs and protected by an android who called him Master.

The simple life his mother had tried to give him felt like it belonged to someone else entirely.

"David," Korenosuke's voice drew his attention back to the screen, "I know this is overwhelming. But we need to discuss why the rogue AIs are targeting you specifically. It's not just about your connection to Hiden Intelligence."

David dragged his attention away from Izu, though he remained acutely aware of her presence. "What do you mean?"

"The rogue AIs believe you might be able to help them accomplish what your father once did—breach the Blackwall safely and create a stable connection to the old Net."

David let out a harsh laugh, the sound echoing strangely in the underground chamber. "Are you kidding me? I'm not a netrunner. I can barely manage basic neural interface protocols. They've got the wrong guy."

"Perhaps," Korenosuke acknowledged. "You have no training, no experience with advanced netrunning techniques. But David, you possess something far more rare—the genetic potential to one day match, or even surpass, your father's capabilities."

"Genetic potential?" David's voice cracked slightly. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Certain neurological structures that enable advanced netrunning appear to be hereditary," Korenosuke explained. "Brain chemistry, neural pathway density, the capacity to process multiple data streams simultaneously—your father possessed all of these traits in exceptional measure. Our preliminary scans suggest you've inherited them."

David felt a chill run through him. "You've been scanning me?"

"Standard security protocols," Izu interjected gently. "Nothing invasive. Basic biometric analysis is conducted on all visitors to secure facilities."

"The point is," Korenosuke continued, "given proper training and the right equipment, you could theoretically develop abilities similar to your father's. But that's not why the rogue AIs want you."

The screen behind Korenosuke shifted, displaying what looked like a schematic of some kind of complex technological system. David squinted at the display, trying to make sense of the interconnected components and data pathways shown in glowing blue lines.

"What am I looking at?"

"This is the reason your father was truly irreplaceable," Korenosuke said, his voice heavy with a mixture of pride and grief. "When we were developing our Blackwall interface protocols, Soreo designed a failsafe system—a way to ensure that only authorized personnel could access our most dangerous research."

The schematic zoomed in on what appeared to be a central control node, pulsing with soft light.

"He used his own genetic signature as a biological key," Korenosuke explained. "Fingerprints can be faked, passwords can be cracked, even neural patterns can be spoofed with enough effort. But genetic markers are nearly impossible to replicate without access to the source material."

David's stomach dropped. "Source material meaning..."

"Meaning you, David. You carry your father's genetic legacy. You are, quite literally, the key to unlocking his work."

The screen changed again, and David found himself staring at something that took his breath away. Suspended against the star-field of space was a massive satellite, its hull gleaming silver and blue in the reflected light of Earth. It was beautiful in a way that transcended mere engineering—elegant curves and flowing lines that made it look more like a work of art than a piece of technology.

"The Zea satellite," Korenosuke said softly. "Your father's greatest achievement, and our most ambitious project. It was designed to serve as a secure relay point—a way to access the old Net without direct exposure to its dangers."

David stared at the image, unable to look away. His father had built that. His father had designed something that was orbiting the Earth right now, a monument to human ingenuity and ambition that bore his family's name.

"How?" David whispered. "How did he even... how is something like that possible?"

"The Zea contains quantum processing cores that can interface with both the current Net and the old one simultaneously," Korenosuke explained. "It uses advanced AI filtering protocols to screen dangerous content before it reaches Earth-based systems. Think of it as a... a digital ailock, if you will."

"It was how we conducted our research safely," Izu added, her voice carrying what sounded like admiration. "The Zea allowed us to study rogue AI behavior patterns, to analyze their communication methods, to understand their capabilities—all without risking direct contamination of our local networks."

"Safely," David repeated, his voice flat. "Until it wasn't."

"Yes," Korenosuke admitted. "We thought we had accounted for every variable, every possible failure mode. We were... we were wrong. The rogue AIs found a way to corrupt our ground-based systems despite the Zea's protections. They used our own research against us."

David felt the weight of understanding settling on his shoulders like a lead blanket. "And now they want to use the Zea for their own purposes."

"Precisely. With access to the satellite's systems, they could potentially create a stable bridge between the old Net and the new one. They could bring through not just individual rogue AIs, but entire collectives—thousands, perhaps millions of hostile digital entities that have been trapped beyond the Blackwall for decades."

The implications hit David like a physical blow. He'd thought the stakes were bad enough when it was just about some scattered rogue AIs walking around in synthetic bodies. But this... this was talking about unleashing a digital apocalypse.

"But they can't access it without the genetic key," David said desperately, grasping for some hope. "Without me, they're locked out, right?"

"Unfortunately, no," Korenosuke said sadly. "The genetic lock was designed as a convenience feature, not absolute security. With enough time, processing power, and advanced hacking techniques, it could theoretically be bypassed. Having your genetic signature would simply make their task significantly easier."

David slumped against the car, feeling like the air had been knocked out of his lungs. "So they don't just want to kill me. They want to use me."

"Or they want to eliminate you to prevent Hiden Intelligence from accessing the Zea ourselves," Izu said quietly. "Either scenario serves their purposes."

David looked up at the screen where his grandfather's worried face watched him with paternal concern. "This is insane. This is completely insane. How did my life go from worrying about passing calculus to being hunted by rogue AIs who want to end the world?"

"I'm sorry, David," Korenosuke said softly. "I'm sorry you've been pulled into this. I'm sorry your father's work has put you in danger. I'm sorry your mother's sacrifice to keep you safe has been rendered meaningless."

"It hasn't been meaningless," David said quickly, surprised by the fierce protectiveness he felt for Gloria's memory. "She gave me eighteen years of normal life. She gave me the chance to be my own person before... before all of this."

He gestured around the underground facility, taking in the banks of monitors, the advanced technology, the android standing nearby who had risked her existence to save his life.

"But that time is over now, isn't it?" David said quietly. "There's no going back to being just another kid from Santo Domingo."

"No," Korenosuke agreed sadly. "There isn't. The rogue AIs know who you are now. They know what you represent. Even if you walked away from Hiden Intelligence, even if you refused to have anything to do with our work, they would still see you as either a tool to be used or a threat to be eliminated."

David closed his eyes, feeling the last vestiges of his old life crumbling away like sand between his fingers. "So what are my options? Help you fight them, or spend the rest of my life running from them?"

"There is a third option," Korenosuke said carefully. "You could choose to work with them."

David's eyes snapped open, and he saw Izu stiffen slightly. "What?"

"I'm not suggesting it," Korenosuke said quickly. "But it is a possibility. If you were to provide them with access to the Zea willingly, they might spare your life. You could potentially negotiate for your safety, perhaps even for a position in whatever new order they establish."

"Grandfather," David said slowly, "are you seriously suggesting I help them end the world?"

"I'm suggesting that you understand all of your options before you make a decision that will define the rest of your life," Korenosuke replied. "Because David, once you choose a side in this war, there will be no changing your mind. The stakes are too high, and the players too dangerous, for second chances."

David stared at the image of the Zea satellite, his father's legacy spinning silently in the void above them. Somewhere up there was a weapon that could reshape human civilization, and he was apparently the key to unlocking it.

The choice his grandfather was offering him wasn't really a choice at all. It was a question of which side of a war he wanted to die on.

David stared at the image of the Zea satellite, his father's legacy spinning silently in the void above them. Somewhere up there was a weapon that could reshape human civilization, and he was apparently the key to unlocking it.

David closed his eyes, feeling the weight of everything that had brought him to this moment. His mother's death. His father's sacrifice. The rogue AIs hunting him. The android standing beside him who had risked her existence to save his life.

When he opened his eyes again, his voice was steady, resolved.

"There's no way I could join with the things that killed my father," he said quietly. "That would have killed my mother too, if they'd had the chance. I don't know if I'm strong enough for this, but... I can't just walk away and let them win."

Korenosuke's face on the screen lit up with something that might have been pride, mixed with paternal relief. He nodded slowly, then glanced toward Izu.

"Izu," he said simply.

The android nodded in understanding and turned toward a section of the underground chamber David hadn't noticed before. As they approached, motion sensors triggered hidden lighting, illuminating what appeared to be a pristine white pedestal rising from the floor itself.

David followed her, his footsteps echoing in the vast space, until they stood before the pedestal. As they drew near, it began to glow with soft blue light, revealing its contents with ceremonial precision.

On the surface sat a device unlike anything David had ever seen. It was sleek and technological, predominantly black with yellow accents that seemed to pulse with their own inner light. The central component was circular, about the size of his palm, with intricate mechanical details that suggested both advanced engineering and almost artistic craftsmanship.

Beside it sat two rectangular cards, each about the size of a credit chip but thicker, more substantial. One glowed with the same yellow light as the device itself, while the other seemed to absorb light, its surface a deep black that hurt to look at directly.

David reached toward the device instinctively, then stopped himself. "What is this?"

"That," Korenosuke's voice said from speakers hidden in the chamber, carrying a weight of significance that made David's skin prickle, "is what Hiden Intelligence has poured years of research and an enormous amount of funding into developing. All under the table, of course, hidden from corporate oversight and government regulation."

The screen above them changed from the satellite feed to detailed technical diagrams and schematics, showing the device from every angle with callouts and specifications that scrolled past too quickly for David to follow.

"We call it the Zero-One Driver," Korenosuke continued. "Our premiere line of defense against the rogue AIs."

David studied the device more closely, noting the way the mechanical components seemed to flow together like living tissue, the subtle way the yellow accents pulsed in rhythm with some internal power source.

"A driver?" he asked. "What does it drive?"

The schematics on the screen shifted, now displaying a full-body suit of armor that took David's breath away. It was sleek and insectoid, predominantly yellow and black with red accents, designed with both aesthetic beauty and obvious functionality. The helmet had compound eyes that seemed almost alive, and the entire suit radiated an aura of barely contained power.

"With the Driver," Korenosuke explained, "you would be able to don the Zero-One Armor. It's designed to augment whoever wears it to levels that are practically superhuman—matching or even surpassing some of the highest grade cybernetic implants currently on the market, and potentially going beyond anything that exists today."

David's mouth went dry. "You're talking about turning me into some kind of super soldier."

"I'm talking about giving you the tools to fight back," Korenosuke replied. "David, the rogue AIs that are hunting you possess synthetic bodies that are stronger, faster, and more durable than human flesh. They don't feel pain, they don't tire, and they don't hesitate. Without some form of enhancement, any human facing them in combat would be at a fatal disadvantage."

Izu stepped closer to the pedestal, her expression thoughtful. "The Zero-One system represents a fusion of our most advanced technologies. The armor itself is composed of nanoscale materials that can adapt to different combat situations. The neural interface allows for reaction times faster than human reflexes. And the power system..." She paused, as if choosing her words carefully. "The power system draws from principles we learned studying the boundary between human consciousness and artificial intelligence."

David felt a chill run down his spine. "What does that mean?"

"It means," Korenosuke said quietly, "that the Zero-One Driver doesn't just augment your physical capabilities. It augments your mind as well. When you wear it, you become something more than human—but something that remains fundamentally human at its core."

David stared at the device, his mind reeling with the implications. "And these?" He gestured toward the two rectangular cards.

"Progrise Keys," Izu explained. "They contain the behavioral algorithms and combat protocols that define the armor's capabilities. The yellow one is Rising Hopper—it grants enhanced jumping ability, incredible speed, and reflexes optimized for close combat. The black one..." She hesitated slightly. "The black one is more experimental."

"How experimental?"

Korenosuke's image leaned forward slightly on the screen. "David, I won't lie to you about the risks. The Zero-One system is powerful, but it's also unprecedented. We've run simulations, conducted limited testing, but we've never had a full combat deployment against rogue AIs in the field."

"You mean I'd be the test subject," David said flatly.

"You'd be the first line of defense," Korenosuke corrected. "And yes, that means accepting risks that we can't fully quantify. But David, the alternative is facing them with nothing but human limitations against inhuman capabilities."

David reached out and carefully lifted the yellow Progrise Key from the pedestal. It was warm to the touch, and as his fingers made contact with its surface, he could swear he felt something—a pulse, a vibration, as if the device recognized him somehow.

The moment his skin touched it, the key came alive. Yellow light traced across its surface in intricate patterns, and a mechanical voice spoke directly into his mind:

"RISING HOPPER. A GRASSHOPPER'S ABILITY IS DISTINGUISHED BY POWERFUL JUMPING."

David nearly dropped the device, his heart hammering in his chest. "What the hell was that?"

"The Progrise Key's authentication protocol," Izu explained calmly. "It's recognizing your biometric signature and preparing its systems for potential activation."

David set the key back down with shaking hands. "This is insane. All of this is insane."

"Yes," Korenosuke agreed quietly. "It is. David, I understand if this is too much. If you want to walk away, find another solution, try to disappear somewhere the rogue AIs can't find you... I wouldn't blame you. This isn't the life your mother wanted for you."

David stood there in the blue-lit chamber, staring at the device that could transform him into something beyond human, surrounded by technology that felt more like magic than science. Everything about this situation violated his understanding of what was possible, what was real.

But then he remembered the chase earlier that day. The inhuman precision of their pursuer. The cold calculation in the way it had tried to kill them. If that was what he was facing—if that was what the world was facing—then maybe impossible technology was exactly what they needed.

"If I do this," David said slowly, "if I put on that armor and fight these things... there's no going back, is there?"

"No," Korenosuke said sadly. "There isn't. Once you become Zero-One, once you step into this war, your old life ends forever."

David thought about his cramped apartment in Santo Domingo, about the small, safe life his mother had tried to build for him. Then he thought about his father, dying in a laboratory explosion while trying to save the world. About his mother, working herself to death to protect a son who might be the key to preventing digital apocalypse.

About the android standing beside him, who had called him Master and risked her existence to keep him safe.

"My old life ended the moment my mother died," David said quietly. "Maybe it ended before that, the day I was born carrying my father's genetic legacy. Maybe there was never going to be a choice."

He reached for the Zero-One Driver, lifting it carefully from the pedestal. It was heavier than it looked, dense with technology and purpose, and as his hands wrapped around it he felt a strange sense of completion—as if this device had been waiting for him specifically.

"Then it's decided," Korenosuke said, his voice thick with emotion. "David Martinez, you are now the user of the Zero-One System. May you succeed where your father and I failed."

David looked down at the device in his hands, then at the Progrise Keys waiting on the pedestal. Somewhere above them, Night City continued its eternal dance of violence and survival, unaware that the balance of power was about to shift in ways none of them could imagine.

"I hope you're right about this, Grandfather," David said quietly. "Because if you're not, we're all going to die."

The ride back to Santo Domingo passed in uncomfortable silence at first. David sat in the back seat of the sedan, the Zero-One Driver secured in a specialized case beside him, along with the two Progrise Keys nestled in their own protective foam. The weight of what he'd just agreed to pressed down on him like a physical thing, making it hard to breathe.

He kept glancing at Izu in the rearview mirror, studying her profile as she navigated the evening traffic with that same impossible precision she'd shown during the chase. Now that he knew what she was, he couldn't unsee it—the too-perfect posture, the way her eyes tracked multiple data points simultaneously, the subtle mechanical hum that he'd previously attributed to the car's systems.

"Izu," he said finally, his voice cutting through the silence.

"Yes, Master David?"

David winced at the formal address. "About what I said back there. About you being... about what you are. I'm sorry. That was wrong of me."

Izu's eyes met his in the rearview mirror, her expression thoughtful. "There is nothing to apologize for, Master David. Your reaction was entirely within normal human parameters. Suspicion of artificial intelligence is not only natural—it is one of the optimal instincts for survival in your species."

The clinical way she phrased it made David shift uncomfortably in his seat. "Don't... don't put it like that. You're not just some specimen I'm being suspicious of. You're..." He paused, struggling with the words. "You're a person. And I treated you like a threat when you'd just saved my life."

"I am a Humagear," Izu replied gently. "My nature as an artificial being is an objective fact. Your caution regarding that nature is logical and appropriate given historical precedents with rogue AI."

"Still," David insisted. "I'm sorry. You deserved better than that."

Izu was quiet for a moment, and when she spoke again, her voice carried something that might have been warmth. "Thank you, Master David. Your consideration is... appreciated."

They lapsed back into silence, but it felt less tense now, more companionable. David watched the city scroll past outside the tinted windows—the gleaming corporate towers giving way to the middle-class residential blocks, then gradually declining into the familiar grime and neon chaos of his neighborhood.

As they entered Santo Domingo, David felt a strange sense of displacement. Everything looked exactly the same as it had this morning when he'd left for school, but somehow it felt smaller now, seedier. The contrast with Hiden Intelligence's pristine facilities made his home district look like a slum in comparison.

The apartment building came into view—cracked concrete facade, broken security cameras, gang tags layered over older gang tags in an endless cycle of territorial marking. David had lived here his entire life, but now it felt like he was looking at it through someone else's eyes.

"This will just take a few minutes," he told Izu as she pulled up to the curb. "I need to pack my things. No point talking to the landlord—cheap prick wouldn't even care if a tenant disappeared. In Night City, people vanish one way or another all the time."

The casual way he said it gave him pause. People disappeared. That had always been a fact of life in Night City, something you accepted like bad air or high crime rates. But now he was going to be one of those people—here one day, gone the next, leaving behind nothing but unpaid rent and unanswered questions.

Except in his case, he'd be moving up in the world instead of down. From a cramped Santo Domingo apartment to... what? Corporate housing? A penthouse suite? The thought made the whole situation feel even more surreal.

David climbed out of the sedan carefully, still feeling the weight of everything that had happened. Just this morning he'd been worried about calculus homework and bullies like Katsuo Tanaka. Now he was carrying experimental military technology and preparing to fight rogue AIs in powered armor. The transformation felt too dramatic, too complete to be real.

*Too good to be true,* Lucy's voice echoed in his memory. *Nothing good ever comes from corpo promises.*

The memory made him pause on the sidewalk, one hand on the building's entrance door. Lucy had been right to be suspicious—she was always right about corpo schemes and too-good-to-be-true offers. But this wasn't just about corporate promises anymore. This was about survival, about preventing a digital apocalypse, about honoring his father's memory and his mother's sacrifice.

Wasn't it?

David shook his head, trying to dispel the doubt. He'd made his choice. There was no point second-guessing himself now.

He climbed the familiar stairs to his floor, each step echoing in the empty stairwell. The hallway was dimly lit by flickering fluorescents, casting everything in sickly yellow light that made the peeling paint and water-stained walls look even more depressing than usual.

As he rounded the corner toward his apartment, David stopped short.

Lucy was there, leaning against his door with her arms crossed and her platinum hair catching the light from the overhead fixtures. She was dressed in her usual netrunner gear—form-fitting bodysuit with subtle tech interfaces, combat boots, and that ever-present jacket that made her look like she belonged in some corporate thriller. Her cybernetic enhancements glowed softly in the dim light, and her expression was unreadable.

"Lucy?" David said, his voice cracking slightly with surprise. "What are you doing here?"

She looked up at the sound of his voice, and David could see something in her eyes—concern, suspicion, and maybe a hint of fear.

"Waiting for you," she said simply. "We need to talk, David. About whatever the hell you've gotten yourself mixed up in."

David stiffened, his hand unconsciously tightening around his keys. "What... what do you think I'm mixed up in?"

Lucy pushed herself off the wall, her cybernetic implants flickering as she accessed some internal data. "I've been tracking you, David."

"Tracking me?" David's voice cracked. "You mean stalking."

"Okay, yeah, stalking," Lucy admitted without shame, taking a step closer. "But David, what is it with you and Hiden Intelligence? First you blow off the crew yesterday, then today you're getting chauffeured around in corpo sedans, and now..." She gestured at his general appearance. "Now you look like someone who just signed a devil's bargain."

David hesitated, running through everything that had happened in his head. Even as he tried to organize the events into something coherent, it all sounded insane—even by Night City standards. Grandfather he'd never known. Rogue AIs. Android assistants. Experimental armor. Where was he supposed to even start?

"My... my grandfather found me," he said finally, the words feeling strange in his mouth. "Korenosuke Hiden. He, uh, heard about... about my mom, and reached out to me."

Lucy's expression shifted, her eyes narrowing with suspicion. "Korenosuke Hiden... is your grandfather?"

"Why?" David asked, noting the unease in her voice. "You got anything on him?"

"No," Lucy admitted hesitantly, and she sounded like not finding anything shady was more unusual than actually finding dirt. When it came to corpos, you could practically count the decent ones on a single hand. "That's what's bothering me, David. Clean corpos don't exist. They're all dirty—it's just a matter of how deep you have to dig."

"Look, I'm not about to dive in headfirst," David assured her, but the words sounded hollow even to his own ears. There was a part of him—a part he didn't want to acknowledge—that wanted this to be real, wanted to believe in the possibility of something better.

Lucy caught the uncertainty in his voice. "What are you doing here, David?"

David glanced left and right, then leaned closer and whispered, "I'm packing my stuff."

Lucy stared at him, unimpressed. "I bet you can't wait."

"It's not like that—" David started, knowing exactly where she was going with this.

"Master David?"

Both of them turned at the sound of Izu's voice. The android had appeared at the top of the stairwell, moving with that unnaturally quiet grace David was beginning to recognize. She approached them with polite concern, her business attire looking absurdly out of place in the grimy hallway.

"Do you require assistance with your belongings?" Izu asked, her tone perfectly professional.

Lucy's head snapped toward David, her eyes wide with disbelief and growing anger. "Master David?" she repeated, her voice flat and dangerous.

David could only offer a sheepish smile in response, knowing exactly how this looked—and knowing he had no good way to explain it.