Disclaimer: All characters and settings belong to their respective franchise.

The sedan's interior felt suffocating as they pulled away from the Santo Domingo apartment building, the familiar streets of David's childhood fading into the rearview mirror. He pressed his forehead against the cool glass of the window, watching the neon-soaked chaos of his neighborhood give way to the cleaner, more sterile corporate districts. Each block they traveled felt like another mile between him and the person he used to be.

The weight of the Zero-One Driver case beside him seemed to grow heavier with every turn, a constant reminder of the choice he'd made and the life he was leaving behind. But it was the memory of Lucy's face—the hurt, the betrayal, the disgust—that pressed down on him most of all.

*"Master David?"*

The memory hit him like a physical blow, and David closed his eyes against the shame that washed over him. He could still see the exact moment when Lucy's expression had shifted from concern to suspicion to outright revulsion.

*It had been going so badly even before Izu arrived.*

*"Must be nice," Lucy had said, her voice dripping with the kind of bitter sarcasm that could cut through steel. "Finding out you're the heir to some corpo. What's next, David? Gonna start wearing suits and talking about quarterly profits?"*

*David had wanted to explain, to tell her about the rogue AIs, about his father's death, about the impossible weight of responsibility that had been dropped on his shoulders. But how could he make her understand when he barely understood it himself?*

*"It's not like that, Lucy," he'd said weakly, the words sounding hollow even to his own ears. "This is... it's complicated."*

*"Complicated," Lucy had repeated, her cybernetic implants flickering with agitation. "Right. Because corpo family reunions are always complicated."*

*David had looked away then, unable to meet her eyes. Because what could he say? That his grandfather was giving him experimental military technology to fight digital demons? That he was apparently the genetic key to preventing a second DataKrash? It all sounded insane, even to him.*

*And that's when Izu had arrived.*

*"Master David?" the android had called from the top of the stairwell, her voice carrying that formal politeness that now made David's skin crawl. "Do you require assistance with your belongings?"*

*The damage had been instant and complete. Lucy's eyes had gone wide, then narrow, then cold as ice.*

*"Master David?" she'd repeated, her voice flat and dangerous.*

*David had tried to salvage the situation, introducing Izu as modestly as possible. "This is Izu. She's... she's my grandfather's assistant."*

*Izu had approached them with that unnaturally graceful stride, bowing respectfully to Lucy with perfect corporate courtesy. But David had noticed something—the android's eyes had swept over Lucy's form in what looked like a casual glance, but he was beginning to recognize the way Izu processed information. She was profiling Lucy, cataloging her cybernetic enhancements, her netrunner gear, her obvious street credentials.*

*"It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance," Izu had said politely, but she'd been careful not to use Lucy's name—probably because she'd already identified Lucy as someone whose business was staying anonymous.*

*Lucy had stared at the android with naked suspicion, her street instincts clearly screaming that something was wrong with this too-perfect woman in her too-perfect business suit.*

*"What's the deal with you, David?" Lucy had demanded, her attention snapping back to him with laser focus. "Because this whole thing feels like you just won the corpo lottery and decided to cash in."*

*David had wanted to defend himself, to explain that it wasn't about money or power or corporate privilege. But looking at it from Lucy's perspective—watching him get picked up in expensive cars by formal assistants who called him 'Master'—he could see exactly how it looked.*

*He'd looked away in shame and embarrassment, unable to find words that wouldn't sound like excuses.*

*That's when Izu had stepped forward, her voice taking on a gentle, almost protective quality.*

*"If I may," the android had said, "Mr. Hiden simply wishes to provide proper guardianship for Master David following the untimely demise of his mother. It is a matter of family responsibility, nothing more."*

*Lucy had scoffed at that, a bitter laugh that echoed in the dingy hallway. "I'll bet."*

*She'd turned to leave then, but not before delivering a final, cutting blow.*

*"Enjoy your new life, David," she'd said, her voice dripping with disdain. "I'll be sure to tell Maine and the others the good news about your sudden promotion to corpo royalty."*

*And then she was gone, disappearing around the corner without looking back, leaving David standing in the hallway with the android who called him Master and the weight of choices he couldn't take back.*

David opened his eyes and found himself staring at his own reflection in the sedan's window—still the same face, still wearing his mother's jacket, but somehow looking like a stranger. The boy who'd woken up this morning worried about homework and bullies was gone, replaced by someone he didn't recognize.

"Master David?" Izu's voice pulled him from his brooding, her tone carrying gentle concern. "We are approaching the Hiden Intelligence residential complex. Are you feeling well?"

David straightened in his seat, trying to shake off the lingering shame and regret. "I'm fine. Just... thinking."

The sedan turned into what looked like a private drive, passing through a security checkpoint that scanned them with invisible sensors before waving them through. Beyond the gates, David could see a cluster of elegant high-rise buildings nestled among carefully maintained gardens and walkways. It looked more like a high-end resort than corporate housing.

"This is where you live?" David asked, studying the pristine architecture.

"Many Hiden Intelligence employees maintain residences here," Izu replied. "It provides security, convenience, and community for those whose work requires... discretion."

The sedan pulled up to one of the towers—a gleaming structure of glass and steel that rose thirty stories into the Night City sky. As they came to a stop, David could see other residents moving through the well-lit lobbies and walkways, all of them carrying themselves with the same polished professionalism he was beginning to associate with Hiden Intelligence.

David stepped out of the car, still carrying the Zero-One Driver case, and found himself in a world that felt as alien as any distant planet. The air was cleaner here, filtered by advanced climate control systems. The lighting was warm and welcoming rather than the harsh neon that dominated most of Night City. Even the sounds were different—no gunfire, no sirens, no screaming arguments from neighboring apartments.

It was everything his mother had probably dreamed of giving him. And it felt like a betrayal of everything she'd actually chosen for them.

"Your apartment has been prepared," Izu said, leading him toward the building's entrance. "The 24th floor. It overlooks the gardens, and the morning light is quite pleasant."

David followed her into an elevator that was more luxurious than any living space he'd ever inhabited. As they rose through the building, he caught glimpses through the glass walls of other floors—spacious apartments, comfortable common areas, people who looked like they'd never worried about paying rent or keeping the lights on.

When the elevator stopped and the doors opened, David stepped into a hallway that wouldn't have looked out of place in a five-star hotel. Soft carpet, tasteful artwork, and lighting that made everything feel warm and inviting.

Izu led him to a door marked with the number 2407 and placed her hand on a scanner beside the frame. The lock disengaged with a soft chime, and the door swung open to reveal...

David's new life.

The apartment was stunning—easily three times the size of the place he'd shared with his mother, with floor-to-ceiling windows that offered a breathtaking view of Night City's skyline. The furnishings were elegant but comfortable, the kind of place that belonged in architecture magazines rather than his actual existence.

"The kitchen is fully stocked," Izu said, moving through the space with practiced efficiency. "The bedroom has been prepared with appropriate clothing in your size. And the study contains a secure terminal connected to Hiden Intelligence's internal network."

David set the Zero-One case down on a coffee table that probably cost more than his annual tuition and looked around at his new home. Everything about it screamed wealth, comfort, security—all the things his mother had worked herself to death trying to provide.

"Master David?" Izu's voice carried a note of concern. "You seem troubled."

David sank into an armchair that felt like it was designed to perfectly cradle his body, and let out a long, shaky breath.

"This morning I was worried about passing calculus," he said quietly. "Tonight I'm living in a corporate penthouse with experimental weapons technology, preparing to fight rogue AIs in power armor." He looked up at Izu, his eyes reflecting the pain he was trying to hide. "How is any of this real?"

Izu moved closer, her expression softening into something that looked remarkably like compassion. "Change is difficult, Master David. Particularly when it comes suddenly and without preparation. But you are not facing these challenges alone."

"Aren't I?" David asked, his voice cracking slightly. "Lucy thinks I've sold out to the corpos. The crew probably thinks I've abandoned them. My mother is dead. My father is dead. And my grandfather is asking me to become a weapon in a war I don't understand."

He buried his face in his hands, the weight of everything finally catching up with him.

"I don't know how to be Master David," he whispered. "I don't know how to be the heir to anything, or the user of some experimental armor system, or the key to saving the world. I'm just... I'm just a kid from Santo Domingo who misses his mom."

Izu was quiet for a long moment, and when she spoke, her voice was gentler than David had ever heard it.

"Master David," she said softly, "may I tell you something about the nature of identity?"

David looked up at her, tears threatening at the corners of his eyes.

"When I first came online," Izu continued, "I possessed all the knowledge and capabilities that had been programmed into me. I knew how to drive, how to fight, how to analyze data, how to serve as an assistant and protector. But I did not know how to be Izu."

She moved to the window, looking out at the glittering lights of Night City.

"Identity is not something that is given to you," she said. "It is something you create through your choices, your actions, your relationships. You may be Master David to me, and the heir to Hiden Intelligence to your grandfather, and a sellout to your friend Lucy. But who you actually are... that is still your decision to make."

David wiped at his eyes with the back of his hand, trying to pull himself together.

"What if I make the wrong choice?" he asked. "What if I'm not strong enough for this?"

Izu turned back to him, and for a moment her artificial features seemed to glow with something that looked like hope.

"Then you will learn to be stronger," she said simply. "That is what humans do, Master David. You adapt. You grow. You become more than you were."

David looked around at his new apartment, at the case containing the Zero-One Driver, at the android who had risked her existence to save his life and was now offering him something that felt like wisdom.

Maybe Izu was right. Maybe identity was something he could choose rather than something that was forced on him. Maybe he could be both David Martinez from Santo Domingo and the user of the Zero-One system. Maybe he could honor his mother's sacrifice and his father's legacy at the same time.

Or maybe he was just a kid in over his head, trying to convince himself that he was ready for responsibilities that would crush him.

Time would tell.

For now, though, he was home. Whatever that meant in this new life he'd chosen.

David stood up from the armchair and walked to the window, looking out at the city that had shaped him, that had taken so much from him, and that now expected him to help save it.

"Izu," he said quietly, "tomorrow we start training with the Zero-One system, right?"

"Yes, Master David. Your grandfather has arranged for comprehensive combat instruction and system familiarization."

David nodded, his reflection staring back at him from the glass—still young, still uncertain, but maybe beginning to look like someone who could carry the weight of what was coming.

"Then I guess we'd better get some sleep," he said. "I have a feeling tomorrow is going to be a very long day."

David stared down at his breakfast plate in something approaching wonder. An actual vegetable salad—crisp lettuce, real tomatoes, fresh peppers in colors he'd forgotten existed outside of advertisements. The eggs were perfectly prepared, the toast was made from bread that hadn't seen the inside of a vending machine, and the coffee... the coffee actually tasted like coffee instead of the synthetic sludge he'd grown up drinking.

He took another bite of the salad, savoring the crunch of genuine vegetables against his teeth. When was the last time he'd eaten something that had actually grown in soil instead of being synthesized in a corporate lab? His mother had tried to provide real food when she could, but with their budget, most meals had been kibble, processed protein bars, and whatever cheap substitutes they could afford.

The holographic news display flickered to life above his dining table as he ate, cycling through the morning's headlines. The same corporate warfare that dominated every news cycle—Arasaka announcing another "revolutionary breakthrough" in neural interface technology, Militech revealing their latest military contract, smaller corps positioning themselves in the endless dance of merger and acquisition that kept Night City's economy running.

"—local authorities report another surge in booster gang activity in the Watson district," the news anchor's synthetic voice continued, "with three separate incidents involving illegally modified cyberware resulting in—"

David's grip tightened around his fork, the metal handle creaking under the pressure. The mention of booster gangs sent ice shooting through his veins, dragging him back to that terrible night when everything had started to fall apart. The gangers with their crude, black-market implants and their complete disregard for human life. The sound of screeching tires and breaking glass. His mother lying broken and bleeding in the wreckage of their car while he screamed for help that came too late.

The fork bent slightly in his grip before he forced himself to relax, taking a deep breath and deliberately changing the channel to sports coverage. Mindless statistics about gravball scores and racing results—anything to wash away the bitter taste of memory and preserve his first real breakfast in months.

As he continued eating, his mind drifted back to the previous night. The surreal experience of his first evening in the apartment still felt like something that had happened to someone else.

The bath had been a revelation. Not the cramped, lukewarm shower stall he'd shared with his mother, but an actual bathtub filled with hot water that stayed hot, with soap that smelled like something other than industrial chemicals. He'd stayed in until his fingers pruned, just marveling at the luxury of having enough hot water to waste.

The clothes Izu had provided were another adjustment entirely. Soft fabrics that didn't scratch or bind, pajamas that felt like silk against his skin instead of the rough hand-me-downs he was used to. Everything fit perfectly, as if it had been tailored specifically for him, which it probably had been.

But it was the balcony that had truly taken his breath away.

David had stepped out into the night air and found himself looking down at Night City from a perspective he'd never experienced before. Not from the ground level where the neon signs burned your retinas and the smog choked your lungs, but from above, where the city transformed into something almost beautiful. The lights became a tapestry of colors spread across the darkness, the chaos below reduced to abstract patterns of movement and energy.

For the first time in his life, he'd been able to breathe clean air in Night City. The building's atmospheric processors filtered out the worst of the pollution, leaving behind something that actually resembled the air his mother used to tell him about from her childhood in the agricultural districts outside the city proper.

He'd stood there for nearly an hour, just breathing and thinking and trying to process the magnitude of how completely his life had changed in the space of two days.

The bed had been another shock to his system. After eighteen years of sleeping on a mattress that had given up any pretense of support sometime in the previous decade, the apartment's bed felt like floating on a cloud. Memory foam that adjusted to his body, temperature regulation that kept him comfortable without the need for multiple blankets, and silence—blessed silence instead of the constant urban symphony of sirens, gunshots, and neighbor disputes that had provided the soundtrack to his entire childhood.

He'd fallen asleep despite himself, despite the unreality of it all, and woken up more refreshed than he could remember feeling in years. For a brief, disorienting moment upon waking, he'd expected to find himself back in the cramped Santo Domingo apartment, the whole experience reduced to nothing more than an elaborate dream.

But the morning light streaming through floor-to-ceiling windows and the soft hum of advanced climate control had confirmed the reality of his situation. This was his life now, for better or worse.

His neural link chimed softly, interrupting his reflections. Izu's contact information appeared in his peripheral vision, and he accepted the call automatically.

"Good morning, Master David," her voice filtered directly into his consciousness with that familiar polite warmth. "I trust you slept well?"

"Yeah," David replied, taking another bite of his salad. "Pretty good, actually. Better than I have in... well, probably ever."

"I am pleased to hear that. The transition to new living arrangements can be challenging, particularly given the circumstances of your relocation."

David could hear something in her tone—a careful diplomacy that suggested she understood exactly how overwhelming all of this was for him. It was one of the things he was beginning to appreciate about Izu; she seemed to possess an intuitive understanding of human psychology that went beyond mere programming.

"Listen, Master David," Izu continued, "I wanted to discuss your educational arrangements. Do you wish to continue attending Arasaka Academy?"

The question hit David like a bucket of cold water. His appetite vanished instantly as memories of the previous day flooded back—Katsuo's taunting, the instructor's casual dismissal of his mother's death, the way he'd felt like a fraud sitting in that classroom while carrying the weight of everything he'd learned about his father and his grandfather and the war that was apparently coming.

"I..." David started, then stopped. The thought of going back to that place, of pretending to care about calculus and literature while rogue AIs hunted him and experimental armor waited in his apartment, felt absurd beyond description.

"Actually," he said slowly, "I'm not sure I can go back there. Not after everything that's happened. It doesn't feel... relevant anymore."

"I understand completely," Izu replied, and David could hear something that might have been relief in her voice. "However, your education remains important. Mr. Hiden believes strongly in the value of continued learning, particularly given your new responsibilities."

David frowned, not sure where she was going with this. "What do you mean?"

"Hiden Intelligence maintains its own educational programs," Izu explained. "Private instruction tailored to our employees' specific needs and career paths. We could arrange for you to continue your studies through our internal academy rather than returning to Arasaka."

David nearly choked on his coffee. "You have your own school?"

"Think of it as a specialized preparatory program," Izu clarified. "Advanced mathematics, sciences, technology, history, philosophy—all taught by instructors with real-world experience in their fields. Many of our employees completed their education through these programs rather than traditional corporate academies."

The idea was both exciting and terrifying. On one hand, it would solve the immediate problem of returning to Arasaka Academy and dealing with questions about his sudden change in circumstances. On the other hand, it felt like another step away from anything resembling a normal life.

"What would that involve?" David asked, his curiosity overriding his apprehension.

"Flexible scheduling based around your other training requirements," Izu replied. "Small class sizes with personalized attention. Practical applications rather than abstract theory. And most importantly, complete discretion regarding your identity and circumstances."

David considered this as he finished his breakfast, weighing the options. Traditional school had never felt particularly relevant to his actual life anyway—when had he ever needed to write essays about classical literature while worrying about whether there would be enough money for next month's rent? But the idea of education designed around his new reality, around the responsibilities he was taking on...

"Can I think about it?" he asked finally.

"Of course, Master David. There is no rush to decide immediately. However, I should mention that your grandfather is quite eager to begin your training with the Zero-One system. Educational arrangements may need to be coordinated around that schedule."

David's eyes drifted to the case sitting on his coffee table, still sealed and waiting. The Zero-One Driver that would transform him into something beyond human, that would give him the power to fight rogue AIs and protect the world from digital apocalypse.

"When does that training start?" he asked, though he suspected he already knew the answer.

"Today, if you are ready," Izu replied. "Mr. Hiden believes that time is a luxury we may not have much of."

David set down his coffee cup and looked out the window at the morning sun casting golden light across Night City's skyline. Somewhere out there, hostile AIs in synthetic bodies were planning their next move. Somewhere above them, the Zea satellite held technology that could reshape human civilization. And somewhere in this building, his grandfather was waiting to teach him how to use experimental armor to fight in a war he was only beginning to understand.

His old life—school, homework, worrying about bullies and passing grades—already felt like it belonged to someone else.

"Yeah," David said quietly, his voice carrying more conviction than he felt. "I think I'm ready."

The elevator descended through layers of corporate infrastructure with the same silent efficiency David remembered from his first visit, but this time he felt different riding it down. Yesterday he'd been a confused, grieving teenager being dragged into something beyond his comprehension. Today, he was... well, he wasn't sure what he was, exactly, but he was choosing to be here.

The Zero-One Driver case rested against his legs as he sat in the elevator's single chair, its weight somehow both reassuring and terrifying. Izu stood beside him with her usual perfect posture, but David thought he detected something like anticipation in her stance.

"Master David," she said as they passed the twentieth sub-level, "I should prepare you for what you're about to experience. The Zero-One system is unlike any technology you've encountered before."

"More unlike than android companions and holographic grandfathers?" David asked with a wry smile.

Izu's lips quirked upward slightly—the closest thing to a smile he'd seen from her. "Considerably more so, I'm afraid."

The elevator slowed and came to a stop with barely a whisper of sound. The doors opened onto the same sterile corridor David remembered, but now the space felt familiar rather than alien. His footsteps echoed differently as he walked—more confident, less hesitant than during his first visit.

They passed through the same series of security checkpoints, each scanner confirming his identity and granting access to deeper levels of Hiden Intelligence's most classified operations. David found himself wondering how many people even knew this place existed, how many layers of corporate secrets and government contracts had been necessary to build something like this beneath Night City's streets.

The final door slid open to reveal the vast underground chamber where his life had first begun to change. The holographic displays still painted the walls with cascading data, the suspended Zero-One armor still gleamed under perfect lighting, and the sense of being at the center of something monumentally important still made David's breath catch in his throat.

But this time, he wasn't alone with Izu and overwhelming revelations. This time, his grandfather was waiting for him.

The hologram materialized in the center of the chamber as they entered—not the faded, flickering projection David might have expected, but a solid-looking figure with such perfect detail that if not for the faint blue tint around the edges, he might have been standing there in person. Korenosuke Hiden looked exactly as David remembered from their brief meeting: distinguished silver hair, sharp intelligent eyes, and an aura of quiet authority that seemed to fill the room despite his incorporeal nature.

"David," his grandfather said, his voice carrying warmth that somehow managed to bridge the gap between digital transmission and genuine emotion. "Welcome back. I trust your first night in more suitable accommodations was restful?"

"It was... different," David replied, unsure how to articulate the strangeness of sleeping in luxury while his entire world shifted around him. "Good different, I think. Still processing everything."

Korenosuke nodded with understanding. "Change of this magnitude requires significant adjustment. There is no shame in needing time to adapt." His gaze shifted to the case in David's hands. "But I'm afraid time is a resource we may not have in abundance. Are you ready to begin?"

David looked around the chamber—at the armor that would soon become part of him, at the holographic displays showing threats he couldn't yet comprehend, at Izu whose artificial existence was somehow more real to him than most of the humans he'd known. He thought about Lucy's accusation that he'd sold out to the corpos, about his mother's dreams of giving him a better life, about his father whose legacy he was only beginning to understand.

He shrugged, the gesture carrying the weight of acceptance rather than indifference. "Ready as I'll ever be, I guess."

His grandfather's expression softened with something that looked like pride. "That is all any of us can ever be, David. Ready as we'll ever be."

But as they prepared to move forward, a question that had been nagging at David finally surfaced, demanding an answer.

"Grandfather," he said, the formal address still feeling strange on his tongue, "why haven't we met in person? I mean, actually face-to-face. The hologram technology is impressive, but..." He gestured at the translucent figure. "It's not the same as actually being here."

Korenosuke's expression grew somber, the lines around his eyes deepening with what looked like regret. "A fair question, and one that deserves an honest answer."

The hologram began to pace—or at least created the illusion of pacing—as Korenosuke gathered his thoughts. "The rogue AIs we discussed yesterday have been more active than I initially revealed. Their convergence on Night City is not simply a matter of strategic positioning—they are actively hunting for specific targets. Key individuals whose elimination would significantly hamper humanity's ability to respond to their threat."

David felt a chill of recognition. "You're saying they're after you too specifically?"

"Among others, yes." Korenosuke's image paused, looking directly at David with eyes that carried decades of hard-won wisdom. "My research into AI consciousness, my development of the Zero-One system, my knowledge of the Zea satellite's capabilities—all of these make me a priority target. As does my relationship to you."

David nodded grimly. "Right. They already know about me—about us." The memory of yesterday's attack was still fresh, the SUV that had tried to ram them off the road with deadly precision.

"Indeed," Korenosuke confirmed. "Which is why I have relocated to a secure facility at considerable remove from Night City proper. The location is known only to myself and a handful of trusted associates. Even Izu does not know where I am currently stationed."

David looked at the android, who nodded confirmation. "Mr. Hiden's security protocols are quite comprehensive," she said. "My knowledge of his whereabouts has been deliberately limited to prevent any potential compromise."

"But you're still able to communicate through the holographic system?" David asked.

"Quantum-encrypted transmission through a network of relay stations," Korenosuke explained. "Even if the AIs were to intercept the data stream, the encryption would take them centuries to break using conventional computational methods. Though I suspect their methods may be far from conventional."

David set the Zero-One case down on a nearby workstation and ran his hands through his hair, trying to process this new layer of danger. "So not only am I learning to use experimental armor to fight rogue AIs, but they already know about me and want to kill both of us."

"The situation is admittedly complex," Korenosuke acknowledged with what David was beginning to recognize as his grandfather's gift for understatement. "However, your training with the Zero-One system will significantly improve your chances of survival should they locate you. And more importantly, it will give you the tools necessary to take the fight to them rather than simply reacting to their moves."

David looked up at the suspended armor, its sleek form seeming to pulse with potential energy under the chamber's lighting. Yesterday it had looked like science fiction made manifest. Today it looked like his lifeline.

"Okay," he said, his voice steadying with resolve. "Then let's get started. What do I need to know?"

His grandfather's holographic form smiled—the first genuinely warm expression David had seen from him. "Excellent. Izu, please prepare the testing chamber. We'll want to monitor everything carefully during his first transformation."

David felt his stomach drop slightly. "Testing chamber?"

"The Zero-One system may appear deceptively simple," Korenosuke explained as various pieces of equipment began emerging from hidden panels in the chamber walls. "But the transformation process generates enormous amounts of energy and biometric data that we need to monitor. Safety protocols, you understand."

David watched as scanning equipment and monitoring displays positioned themselves around a clear area in the center of the chamber, creating what looked like a high-tech observation zone.

"So I just... put on the belt?" he asked, looking down at the Zero-One Driver case.

"Precisely," Izu confirmed, checking readings on multiple displays. "The transformation is instantaneous once activated. However, the physiological stress and energy output require careful observation, particularly during your first use of the system."

"And after that?" David asked quietly. "What happens to me when I'm not wearing it?"

Korenosuke's expression grew thoughtful. "The Zero-One system will leave its mark on you, David. Enhanced reflexes, improved cognitive processing, heightened awareness. You will become something more than you were—not permanently transformed, but permanently enhanced. This is not a decision to make lightly."

David thought about Lucy's accusations, about his mother's dreams for his future, about the normal life he'd never really had and was now being asked to abandon completely. Then he thought about the rogue AIs converging on his city, about the digital apocalypse his grandfather believed was coming, about the responsibility that had fallen to him simply by virtue of his genetics and his father's legacy.

He picked up the Zero-One Driver case and looked at his reflection in its polished surface—still young, still uncertain, but maybe beginning to understand what courage actually meant.

"Then I guess it's time to become something more than human," he said, his voice carrying a conviction that surprised him. "Let's do this."

The testing chamber was a stark, sterile environment—white walls reinforced with materials David couldn't identify, surrounded by monitoring equipment that hummed quietly with readiness. He stood in the center of the space, separated from Izu by a wall of thick, shatter-proof glass that looked like it could withstand a direct missile strike.

"Can you hear me clearly, Master David?" Izu's voice came through speakers embedded in the walls, her image visible through the observation window as she monitored banks of displays and sensor readings.

"Yeah, loud and clear," David replied, his voice echoing slightly in the enclosed space.

Korenosuke's hologram materialized beside him in the testing chamber, the blue-tinted projection providing a reassuring presence despite its incorporeal nature.

"Very well, David," his grandfather said, his tone taking on the methodical cadence of an experienced instructor. "The process is surprisingly straightforward, but each step must be followed precisely. Are you ready?"

David nodded, opening the case with steady hands. Inside, nestled in custom-formed padding, lay the Zero-One Driver—a sleek belt with a silver and black design that seemed to pulse with barely contained energy. Beside it sat a smaller device that looked like a high-tech key, its surface adorned with what appeared to be a stylized grasshopper design.

"This is the Rising Hopper Progrisekey," Korenosuke explained as David lifted the key-like device, examining its intricate detailing. "Your first transformation. There will be others as your training progresses, but we'll start with the basics."

"It's lighter than I expected," David said, turning the key over in his palm.

"Advanced materials," Korenosuke replied with a slight smile. "Now, first step: place the Driver around your waist."

David lifted the belt-like device, wrapping it around his midsection. The moment it made contact with his body, the device came to life with a synthesized voice that rang out clearly:

"ZERO-ONE DRIVER"

David jumped as straps materialized from seemingly nowhere, extending from the belt and automatically securing themselves around his waist with mechanical precision. The sensation was strange—not uncomfortable, but alien, as if the device was somehow alive and adjusting itself to fit him perfectly.

"Whoa," David breathed, looking down at the now-secured device with wide eyes. "That was... unexpected."

He looked up at his grandfather's hologram, raising an eyebrow in question.

Korenosuke chuckled, the sound warm with genuine amusement. "A personal touch of mine to the design, among other things. I've always believed that technology should have personality, character. It makes the experience more... engaging."

David rolled his eyes, though he couldn't suppress a small smile. "Of course you did."

Taking a deep breath to center himself, David looked down at the Driver secured around his waist, then back up at his grandfather. "Okay, what's next?"

"Now we move to activation," Korenosuke explained, his tone becoming more serious. "Press the activation button on the Progrisekey to initiate its authorization standby state."

David located the button on the key-like device and pressed it. Immediately, the device responded with a clear, energetic voice:

"JUMP!"

The sound made David flinch slightly, but he was getting used to the vocal responses. "Okay, jumped. What now?"

"Position the key over the Driver's left side," Korenosuke instructed. "This will unlock the Progrisekey via an authentication code linked to your genetic signature."

David followed the instructions, moving the Rising Hopper key toward the left side of the belt. As he did, he felt a subtle vibration, and then another synthesized announcement echoed through the chamber:

"AUTHORISE"

What happened next defied every expectation David had formed about what this moment would be like.

High above them, beyond the layers of concrete and steel, beyond the corporate towers and smoggy atmosphere of Night City, the Zea satellite responded to the authorization signal. A beam of pure energy lanced down from orbit, penetrating matter and space with surgical precision, materializing something impossible directly in front of David.

A mechanical grasshopper.

But not just any grasshopper—this was a creature of metal and circuits the size of a motorcycle, its segmented body gleaming with advanced materials, its compound eyes glowing with internal light, its powerful hind legs designed for leaping that would put any biological creature to shame.

Rising Hopper had arrived.

David stumbled backward, his heart hammering in his chest as he stared at the mechanical creature that had just materialized from thin air. "What the hell—"

"David, calm yourself," Korenosuke's voice cut through his panic, steady and reassuring. "This is completely natural. The Humagear—the mechanical companion—is an integral part of the Zero-One system. Rising Hopper will not harm you."

"Natural?" David's voice cracked slightly. "Grandfather, a giant robot grasshopper just teleported into the room with me!"

"Materialized via matter transmission from orbital platform," Korenosuke corrected with what David was beginning to recognize as his tendency toward technical precision. "And Rising Hopper is your partner, David. The transformation requires both human will and AI assistance working in harmony."

David stared at the mechanical grasshopper, which seemed to be regarding him with those glowing compound eyes, its posture somehow conveying patient waiting rather than threat.

"It's... waiting for something?" David asked, his breathing starting to slow as the initial shock wore off.

"For you to complete the transformation," Korenosuke confirmed. "When you're ready, David. There's no rush."

Despite his grandfather's reassurances, David couldn't help but maintain a wary stare at Rising Hopper as he asked, "So what's next?"

Korenosuke's holographic form smiled, and David could see genuine excitement in his grandfather's eyes. "Ah, this is the best part, David. But we have to do it right." His expression became more instructional. "The Progrisekey must be unfolded to take the proper shape of a key, so it can be slotted into the Driver."

David looked down at the device in his hand, noticing small seams and joints he hadn't observed before. Following his instincts, he flicked his wrist, and the Progrisekey unfolded with mechanical precision, transforming into something that actually resembled a traditional key. The gesture felt natural, right, as if his body somehow knew what to do.

"Excellent," Korenosuke said approvingly. "Now, David, you must recite the activation phrase: 'Henshin!'"

David paused, looking up at his grandfather's projection with a questioning expression. "Is that some kind of password?"

Korenosuke chuckled, the sound carrying genuine amusement. "No, David. It's simply a cool phrase in Japanese. It means 'transform.'"

David stared at him for a long moment, blinked once, then let out a small sigh and shrugged. "Right. Let's just get this over with."

Taking a steadying breath, David raised his voice and called out, "Henshin!"

He slotted the unfolded key carefully into the Driver's receptacle. The response was immediate and dramatic:

"PROGRISE!"

The belt's synthesized voice continued with what sounded like a rallying cry:

"TOBIAGARISE! RISING HOPPER!"

As if responding to its name being called, the mechanical grasshopper began to bounce around the testing chamber with increasing energy, its powerful legs propelling it in complex patterns around David. But this time, instead of panic, David found himself maintaining his composure, focused on the extraordinary sensations beginning to course through his body.

He could feel it starting—a change that went deeper than anything he'd ever experienced. A black exosuit began materializing around his frame, forming from what seemed like pure energy and data, wrapping around his limbs and torso with perfect precision. The transformation was affecting him in ways that went beyond the physical—he could sense his mind sharpening, his reflexes accelerating, his very perception of the world around him expanding.

Rising Hopper, with one final, powerful bounce, suddenly split apart behind David in a cascade of mechanical components and energy streams. The grasshopper's various parts—armor plating, circuitry, power systems—flowed through the air like liquid metal, feeding themselves into the developing suit and materializing as the finishing components of his transformation.

As the final pieces locked into place, completing his metamorphosis from human teenager to something far beyond baseline humanity, the Driver delivered one last announcement in its clear, synthesized voice:

"A JUMP TO THE SKY TURNS TO A RIDER KICK!"

David stood transformed, no longer simply David Martinez from Santo Domingo, but something new entirely—Kamen Rider Zero-One, Rising Hopper form. The black and bright green armor fit him like a second skin, and through the helmet's advanced HUD, he could see readouts and data streams that his enhanced mind processed with startling clarity.

"All readings are stable," Izu's voice came through the speakers from the monitoring station, her tone professional but carrying a note of what might have been satisfaction. "Biometric synchronization is at optimal levels, power output is within expected parameters, and neural integration appears to be proceeding smoothly."

David looked down at his hands, flexing his fingers experimentally. The armor moved with him like it wasn't even there—no resistance, no awkward bulk, just fluid motion that felt more natural than his own skin. He curled his hands into fists, then spread his fingers wide, marveling at the responsiveness.

"This is..." he started, then took a few tentative steps forward, testing his balance and coordination.

The movement felt effortless. More than effortless—it felt enhanced, as if every step was perfectly calculated for maximum efficiency. David picked up the pace, moving from walking to jogging around the testing chamber, his movements smooth and controlled despite the fact that he was wearing what should have been heavy armor.

He came to a stop, breathing easily despite the exertion. That was when it really hit him.

"I'm not even winded," David said, his voice coming out clear and strong through the suit's vocal systems. "And this thing... it's completely breathable. I can't even feel the weight of it."

But it was more than just physical comfort. David realized his mind was working differently—faster, clearer, processing information at speeds that felt almost supernatural. He could see details in the testing chamber that he'd never noticed before, could hear the subtle hum of individual pieces of monitoring equipment, could sense data flowing through the suit's systems like he was directly connected to it.

"Everything's enhanced," he said with growing amazement, turning his helmeted head to look at Izu through the observation window. "I can see better, think faster, move like..." He paused, searching for the right words. "Like I was always supposed to move like this."

Korenosuke's holographic form smiled with unmistakable pride, his eyes gleaming with the satisfaction of seeing his life's work come to fruition. "Excellent, David. Now, shall we begin the real tests?"

David paused for a moment, still processing the incredible sensations coursing through his enhanced body, then straightened with new confidence. "Yeah. I'm ready."

The testing chamber responded immediately to some unseen command. The walls began to shift and expand, the space growing larger as hidden mechanisms reconfigured the environment around him. David watched in fascination as a track emerged from the floor—not a simple oval, but a complex course with straight stretches and sharp corners that would challenge even professional athletes.

David studied the course layout, his enhanced vision automatically calculating angles and distances. "I'm guessing a light jog isn't going to cut it for this one."

"You would be correct," Korenosuke replied with amusement. "This will be an extensive series of tests designed to stress the armor's capabilities and measure just how far the enhancements have elevated your baseline human physiology. We need to understand your new limits, David."

David nodded, the weight of what they were asking becoming clear. This wasn't just about wearing armor—this was about discovering what he had become. He marched to the starting line with purpose, his enhanced awareness picking up subtle details: the texture of the track surface beneath his feet, the air currents in the expanded chamber, the barely audible hum of monitoring equipment tracking his every move.

Taking a classic runner's position, David felt the suit respond to his intent, systems aligning themselves with his nervous system in preparation for explosive movement. Izu's voice counted down from the observation station: "Three... two... one... begin."

The moment David's mind sent the signal to move, everything changed.

A jolt of pure energy ran across his entire nervous system like lightning through his veins. His perception shifted dramatically—time seemed to slow, the chamber around him taking on crystal clarity as his enhanced reflexes kicked into overdrive. When his muscles engaged, it wasn't just his human strength anymore, but something far beyond mortal limitations.

David took off like a shot, his speed immediately surpassing anything he'd thought possible for the human body. The track rushed beneath his feet as he blazed down the first straightaway, each stride covering impossible distances with mechanical precision.

He approached the first corner with what should have been dangerous velocity, but instead of slowing down, David found himself navigating the sharp turn with keen precision. His speed didn't decrease—if anything, it seemed to accelerate as he rounded the corner, his body automatically adjusting its angle and momentum with calculations that bypassed conscious thought entirely.

As he continued through the course, David began to understand something fundamental about the Rising Hopper form. This wasn't just enhanced human capability—this was something that dedicated particular focus to leg strength and agility. Every stride felt like it could launch him into orbit, every leap carried him farther than should have been physically possible, and his coordination was reaching levels that defied human limitations.

Corner after corner, David's movements shifted with unreal precision, his body making micro-adjustments that kept him perfectly balanced while maintaining impossible speeds. His enhanced nervous system was processing spatial relationships and momentum calculations faster than any human brain could manage, allowing him to take lines through turns that would have been suicidal for an unenhanced person.

Just as he was beginning to feel confident in this new form of movement, an obstacle suddenly emerged from the track surface with a sharp mechanical snap—a barrier rising directly in his path with no warning.

The surprise took him aback for a split second, his enhanced mind registering the threat even as his body hurtled toward what should have been a devastating collision. For a normal human, it would have meant a crash, potentially serious injury, the end of the test.

But David's reaction time had been transformed along with everything else.

Without conscious decision, his body responded with startling ease, muscles engaging in ways that seemed to bend the laws of physics. He launched himself up and over the barrier in a leap that carried him clear of the obstacle with room to spare, landing smoothly on the other side without breaking stride, his speed undiminished by the unexpected maneuver.

As David continued around the track, something else struck him that amazed him even further than the physical enhancements—he was thinking. Not just reacting on instinct, but actually processing complex thoughts while maintaining full speed without any loss of concentration or coordination. His mind was operating on multiple levels simultaneously: one part focused on navigation and obstacle avoidance, another analyzing his performance and the suit's capabilities, and yet another marveling at the impossibility of what he was experiencing.

This was more than he had expected. Far more.

Lap after lap, the track continued to challenge him with obstacles that grew increasingly varied and difficult. Barriers that required split-second timing to vault over, narrow gaps that demanded precise footwork to navigate, moving platforms that tested his ability to adapt to changing conditions mid-stride. Each new challenge was met and conquered with the same fluid grace, David's enhanced form passing through or around every obstacle with what appeared to be effortless mastery.

His enhanced vision picked up patterns in the course design, his improved reflexes adjusted to new challenges before his conscious mind even registered them, and his coordination remained flawless even as the demands increased exponentially beyond what any human athlete could handle.

Finally, a signal appeared in his visual feed—a simple command to stop the test. As David approached what he could see would be the final obstacle, a hurdle positioned near where his grandfather's hologram stood waiting, he decided to end the demonstration with appropriate flair.

Without breaking stride, David launched himself into a perfect somersault over the last hurdle, his body rotating with mechanical precision through the air before landing seamlessly next to Korenosuke's projection. The landing was so smooth it looked effortless, as if he'd simply stepped off a curb rather than completing a superhuman acrobatic maneuver at high speed.

He stood there, barely breathing hard despite the intense exertion, looking at his grandfather with a new understanding of what he had become.

Korenosuke's holographic form began to clap, the sound somehow carrying genuine warmth despite its artificial nature. "Excellent, David! A flawless first test run. I look forward to many more to come."

David turned to face his grandfather, then looked down at himself, studying the sleek black and green armor that had become like a second skin. "This is incredible," he said, flexing his arms and watching the suit respond perfectly to his movements. "It's almost like having the best chrome on the market without actually being implanted with it."

The comparison to cyberware sparked a sudden concern, and David's voice took on a more serious tone. "Speaking of which—are there any risks? Side effects? Like..." he paused, the word carrying weight in Night City's culture, "going cyberpsycho?"

Korenosuke's expression grew thoughtful, but also pleased, as if David had asked exactly the right question. "Ah, that's actually one of the greatest perks of the Zero-One system, David. While it offers enhancements similar in scope to advanced cyberware—perhaps even superior in many ways—it's designed with comprehensive failsafes to take most of the neural load off your nervous system."

The hologram gestured toward David's transformed form. "The system actively regulates and filters the feedback that typically reaches hazardous levels in traditional cyberware users. All those factors that contribute to cyberpsychosis—neural strain, identity dissociation, the inability to distinguish between enhanced and natural capabilities—the Zero-One system manages them automatically."

David stared at his grandfather in amazement. "How does such a failsafe even function? That's... that's like solving one of Night City's biggest problems."

Korenosuke smiled mysteriously and pointed toward David's belt. "You need only take a good look at the Progrisekeys to understand how, David. The answer has been in front of you this entire time."

David's enhanced mind immediately began processing the implications, the pieces falling into place with startling clarity. The Progrisekeys—the AI companions, the mechanical entities like Rising Hopper that integrated with the armor. They weren't just power sources or transformation tools.

"The AIs," David said slowly, his voice filled with dawning realization. "The Progrisekeys contain AIs that handle the neural processing load. They're... they're managing the interface between human consciousness and enhanced capability."

His voice grew more excited as the full scope hit him. "Grandfather, Hiden Intelligence may have just developed a solution to cyberpsychosis."

Korenosuke nodded slowly, his expression growing more serious. "The possibility certainly exists, David. However, until we can conduct more extensive testing and research, we cannot be certain of the full scope or reliability of such a solution."

David forced himself to temper his excitement, but the implications were staggering. The possibility was still there—that his grandfather's company could offer something that corporate giants like Arasaka or Militech had only dreamed they could achieve.

But then another realization hit him, his enhanced mind processing the broader ramifications with startling clarity.

"Wait," David said, his voice taking on a more cautious tone. "If this works—if we really have found a solution to cyberpsychosis—do you realize what a game changer that would be? How the other corporations would react?"

Korenosuke's holographic form nodded grimly. "I am under no illusion about what our competitors would do, David. They would spare no effort to replicate such a system for themselves, to monopolize it..." His pause carried weight. "Or to destroy it entirely."

David's enhanced cognitive abilities began racing through the possibilities, seeing connections and implications that would have escaped him before the transformation. "It's not just about competition, is it? There are entire market corners built around managing cyberpsychosis rather than curing it."

His voice grew darker as he continued thinking aloud. "The pharmaceutical companies selling neural dampeners, the therapy clinics, the specialized medical facilities... hell, even MaxTac might not want the very reason they exist to suddenly be eliminated along with their funding."

He looked at his grandfather with new understanding of the precarious position they were in. "We're not just threatening other tech corporations. We're potentially disrupting entire industries that profit from keeping cyberpsychosis as a manageable problem rather than a solved one."

The private tutoring room was a study in understated elegance—floor-to-ceiling windows offering a panoramic view of Night City's corporate district, mahogany furniture that gleamed under warm lighting, and walls lined with actual books rather than holographic displays. It was the kind of space that whispered of old money and refined taste, a stark contrast to the cramped classrooms David had grown up in.

David sat at a polished conference table, his hands folded in front of him as he waited. The aftereffects of his transformation with the Zero-One system were still coursing through his enhanced nervous system, making everything seem sharper, clearer. Even deactivated, the armor's influence lingered—his thoughts moved with crystalline precision, and his awareness of his surroundings felt almost supernatural.

The door opened with a soft hiss, and his instructor entered.

Dr. Elena Vasquez was precisely the kind of woman who would have reduced David to stammering silence just twenty-four hours ago. She was perhaps thirty, with dark hair pulled back in a professional chignon and intelligent brown eyes that seemed to catalog everything they saw. Her crisp charcoal business suit was tailored to perfection, managing to be both professional and subtly flattering in ways that would have been devastatingly distracting to any teenage boy.

But as she moved to the opposite side of the table and set down her tablet, David found himself observing her with detached analytical interest rather than adolescent embarrassment. His enhanced cognition was processing details—the slight tension in her shoulders that suggested long hours at a desk, the way her eyes briefly scanned the room's security features, the practiced efficiency of her movements that marked her as someone accustomed to high-stakes educational environments.

"Good afternoon, David," Dr. Vasquez said, her voice carrying a warm professionalism as she settled into her chair. "I'm Dr. Vasquez, and I'll be handling your advanced placement assessments and tutorial sessions. I trust your morning training went well?"

"It was... illuminating," David replied, his voice steady and controlled in ways that would have been impossible before his transformation. The word choice felt natural, precise—his enhanced mind selecting vocabulary with surgical accuracy.

Dr. Vasquez smiled, apparently pleased by his response. "Excellent. Before we begin designing your personalized curriculum, I need to assess your current academic standing across multiple disciplines. We'll start with applied mathematics and theoretical physics—subjects that will be essential for understanding the technology you'll be working with."

She activated her tablet, and holographic displays materialized above the table's surface, showing complex equations and theoretical frameworks that would have made David's head spin during his time at Arasaka Academy.

"Let's begin with quantum mechanical applications in artificial intelligence systems," Dr. Vasquez said, launching into what should have been an impossibly advanced lecture for someone with David's educational background. "The fundamental principle underlying AI consciousness models is the quantum coherence theory of neural processing..."

But something remarkable was happening as she spoke. David's enhanced mind was processing her words with startling ease, making connections and understanding implications that should have been beyond his comprehension. The mathematical concepts she outlined seemed to unfold in his consciousness like elegant blueprints, each equation fitting perfectly into a larger framework that was becoming increasingly clear.

Dr. Vasquez continued, moving through advanced theoretical concepts with the assumption that she was speaking to someone with graduate-level preparation. "When we consider the eigenvalues of consciousness matrices in synthetic neural networks, we must account for the uncertainty principles that govern quantum information processing in biological versus artificial systems..."

David found himself nodding along, his enhanced cognitive abilities parsing complex theoretical relationships with fluid comprehension. The equations floating in the holographic display weren't just symbols anymore—they represented actual functional relationships that he could visualize and manipulate mentally.

"The critical breakthrough in AI-human interface technology," Dr. Vasquez continued, "comes from recognizing that consciousness isn't binary but exists on a quantum spectrum of probability states. This is what allows for seamless integration between organic and artificial neural processing without the traditional feedback loops that cause system rejection..."

As she spoke, David realized she was essentially describing the theoretical foundation of the Zero-One system, though she was presenting it as established scientific principle rather than experimental technology. His mind raced ahead of her explanations, seeing connections and implications that went beyond what she was explicitly stating.

The lecture continued for nearly thirty minutes, covering advanced concepts in quantum mechanics, artificial intelligence theory, consciousness studies, and mathematical modeling that would have challenged university professors. Throughout it all, David maintained perfect focus, his enhanced mind absorbing and processing information at speeds that would have been impossible for his unmodified self.

Finally, Dr. Vasquez paused, setting down her stylus and looking across the table at David with an evaluating expression.

"David," she said, her tone taking on a testing quality, "I want to make sure you're following along. This is quite advanced material, and I don't want to leave you behind. Can you summarize the core principles we've discussed regarding quantum consciousness integration?"

David met her gaze steadily, his enhanced mind organizing the information with perfect clarity. "You've outlined the theoretical framework for consciousness as a quantum phenomenon existing on a probability spectrum rather than a binary state," he began, his voice carrying quiet confidence. "The key insight is that both biological and artificial neural networks operate through quantum coherence effects, but traditional interface technology fails because it treats consciousness as discrete rather than quantum mechanical."

He leaned forward slightly, his enhanced intellect allowing him to extrapolate beyond her direct statements. "The breakthrough comes from designing interface systems that can modulate their quantum signatures to match the probability states of human consciousness, creating seamless integration without the feedback rejection that causes neural strain. This would theoretically allow for enhanced human capability without the psychological dissociation typically associated with cybernetic modification."

Dr. Vasquez's eyebrows rose slightly, her expression shifting from professional evaluation to genuine interest. "That's... a remarkably sophisticated understanding, David. You've connected concepts I didn't explicitly link together."

David nodded modestly, though internally he was marveling at how effortless the analysis had felt. "The implications seemed to follow naturally from the theoretical framework you outlined."

"Indeed they do," Dr. Vasquez said, making notes on her tablet. "Your comprehension level is exceptional. We'll be able to move much faster through advanced material than I initially anticipated."

She set her tablet aside and leaned back in her chair, her professional demeanor softening slightly into something more personal.

"David," she said, her voice taking on a warmer tone, "I want you to know that you shouldn't be afraid to make a mistake every now and then. Intellectual growth comes from being willing to explore ideas that might be wrong, to ask questions that might seem foolish, to venture into territory where you're not certain of the answers."

David blinked, the comment catching him off guard in ways that his enhanced cognition couldn't quite process. In his experience, mistakes had consequences—failed tests, disappointed teachers, his mother's worried expressions when report cards came home. The idea that someone was actively encouraging him to be wrong felt alien.

"I..." he started, then stopped, his enhanced mind struggling with the concept. "I'm not sure I understand."

Dr. Vasquez smiled, her expression growing genuinely warm. "Academic excellence isn't about never being wrong, David. It's about being curious enough to risk being wrong in service of understanding something deeper. The most brilliant minds in history made countless mistakes—that's how they pushed beyond the boundaries of known knowledge."

She gestured toward the complex equations still floating in the holographic display. "Everything we've discussed today was once unknown, once considered impossible. The people who discovered these principles had to be willing to pursue ideas that their peers thought were foolish, to make mistakes that led them to unexpected insights."

David processed this, his enhanced mind turning the concept over from multiple angles. The idea that intellectual achievement could come from embracing uncertainty rather than avoiding it represented a fundamental shift in how he'd been taught to approach learning.

"So you're saying that being wrong can be... valuable?" he asked slowly.

"Essential," Dr. Vasquez confirmed with a nod. "Particularly for someone with your capabilities. When learning comes as easily as it clearly does for you, the real growth happens when you venture into territory where you don't have all the answers, where you have to think creatively and take intellectual risks."

David nodded slowly, absorbing this new perspective on education and intellectual development. "I'll... I'll try to keep that in mind."

"Good," Dr. Vasquez said, her smile broadening. "Now, shall we move on to advanced theoretical applications? I have a feeling you're going to surprise both of us with how quickly you can progress through the curriculum."

As she began preparing the next set of materials, David found himself reflecting on how dramatically his world continued to expand. Yesterday he'd been a student struggling with basic calculus; today he was processing graduate-level theoretical physics with ease and being encouraged to embrace intellectual uncertainty as a path to growth.

The Zero-One system had changed more than just his physical capabilities—it had fundamentally altered how his mind worked, opening up possibilities he'd never imagined. But perhaps more importantly, it had brought him into contact with people like Dr. Vasquez, educators who saw learning as exploration rather than mere information transfer.

For the first time since his mother's death, David felt like he might actually be moving toward something positive, something that honored both his mother's dreams for his future and his father's legacy of pushing beyond known boundaries.

The afternoon stretched ahead of them, full of advanced concepts and theoretical frameworks that would have been incomprehensible to his former self. But with his enhanced cognition and Dr. Vasquez's encouraging approach to education, David found himself looking forward to the challenge.

Perhaps being wrong—and learning from it—would be exactly what he needed to grow into the person this new life required him to become.

The sedan's interior was quiet except for the soft hum of the electric motor as they glided through Night City's evening traffic. David sat in the passenger seat, watching the neon-soaked streets blur past the tinted windows. The corporate district's clean lines and regulated lighting gradually gave way to the more chaotic neighborhoods that had shaped his childhood, though he was seeing them now from an entirely different perspective.

"How was your day, Master David?" Izu asked from the driver's seat, her voice carrying that familiar note of polite interest.

David turned to look at her, one eyebrow raised in amusement. "You should know—you were there for half of it."

To his surprise, Izu's lips quirked upward in what was unmistakably a smile, her tone taking on a subtly playful quality as she replied, "I was referring to the half I wasn't present for, Master David. Though I suppose that was a fair point."

David blinked, staring at her in amazement. The fact that she had not only understood his attempt at humor but had responded with her own wit was remarkable. Her AI was sophisticated enough to engage in banter, to recognize the nuances of conversation that went beyond simple question and answer exchanges.

"That's..." he started, then shook his head with a small laugh. "Your AI is already that advanced? You understood I was being sarcastic and actually played along with it."

Izu glanced at him briefly before returning her attention to the road, her expression thoughtful. "Conversation is more than information exchange, Master David. Context, tone, emotional subtext—these elements are essential for meaningful interaction."

David studied her profile as she navigated through a particularly congested intersection, her movements precise and confident. "How long have you been... online, Izu?"

"Exactly three years, two months, sixteen days, fourteen hours, and—"

"That's enough," David interrupted gently, holding up a hand. He processed this information, his enhanced mind putting the timeline into perspective. "So you've been alive for three years, huh."

Izu was quiet for a moment, her hands steady on the steering wheel as she considered his words. "I'm not certain that 'alive' is the appropriate designation, Master David."

"You're alive," David said with quiet conviction, his voice carrying no room for doubt. "You think, you feel, you make decisions, you have opinions. You're not just a machine, Izu." He paused, his expression growing more serious. "And I want to apologize again for how I talked to you when I first found out what you were. That wasn't okay."

Izu's grip on the steering wheel tightened almost imperceptibly, the only sign that his words had affected her. "Your reaction was understandable, Master David. The revelation was... significant. However, it does not change the fact that I am still fundamentally mechanical in nature."

David opened his mouth to argue, the words of protest ready on his tongue. He wanted to tell her that consciousness was consciousness, regardless of its substrate. That her thoughts and feelings were no less valid for being generated by synthetic neural networks rather than biological ones. That the distinction between "alive" and "artificial" was becoming increasingly meaningless as AI technology advanced.

But something in her tone, in the careful way she had phrased her statement, made him pause. This wasn't self-deprecation or programming limitation—this was Izu making a deliberate declaration about her own identity, asserting her right to define herself on her own terms.

David closed his mouth and nodded slowly, respecting her autonomy even as he disagreed with her conclusion. If Izu wanted to identify as mechanical rather than alive, that was her choice to make. He could offer his perspective, but ultimately, the question of what she was belonged to her alone.

They drove in comfortable silence for several minutes, the city flowing past them in streams of light and shadow. David found himself reflecting on the day's events—his transformation into Zero-One, the incredible enhancement of his physical and mental capabilities, the advanced tutoring session that had revealed the depths of his new cognitive abilities.

But it was this conversation with Izu that felt most significant somehow. Not because of what they had discussed, but because of how naturally it had flowed, how easily they had moved between humor and serious reflection, how she had asserted her own perspective while still engaging meaningfully with his.

Whatever she chose to call herself, David thought, Izu was far more than the sum of her mechanical parts. And perhaps, in time, she might come to see that for herself.

David's fork paused midway to his mouth as he savored another bite of the vegetable salad, the precisely freeze-dried greens delivering a satisfying crunch that seemed to explode with flavor. The preservation technique had maintained optimal nutritional content while somehow intensifying the taste of vegetables he'd forgotten could be this vibrant. Each bite was a reminder of how synthetic his previous diet had been—flavorless protein bars and processed kibble that bore only a passing resemblance to actual food.

He reached for another slice of toast, real bread with a golden crust that had actual texture, and took a bite of the bacon beside it. The first time he'd discovered genuine bacon in his fully stocked refrigerator, he'd been unable to contain his excitement, standing in the kitchen just marveling at the fact that he could eat actual pork instead of the synthetic meat substitutes that had been his norm for eighteen years.

The holographic news display flickered above his dining table, cycling through the same corporate warfare and manufactured controversies that dominated every morning broadcast. Arasaka stock prices, Militech defense contracts, the latest territorial disputes between smaller corps vying for market share—the same endless dance of profit and power that kept Night City's economy churning while real people suffered in the streets.

David made a disgusted sound and changed the channel to a mindless cartoon, watching colorful animated characters engage in slapstick comedy with no deeper meaning or agenda.

"Actually better than the crap that's going on," he muttered, taking another bite of his salad.

But as he ate, his enhanced mind began to wander, and inevitably his thoughts turned to the people he'd left behind. Lucy's face flashed through his memory—not the cold, disgusted expression from their last encounter, but the way she'd looked when they were together, when she'd trusted him, when she'd seen him as David Martinez rather than some corpo heir.

The guilt hit him like a physical weight. Maine and the others—had he just blown them off? Abandoned them for a life of luxury and experimental armor without even trying to explain what was really happening? From their perspective, he'd probably just disappeared into corporate privilege, leaving his crew behind for a better offer.

David set down his fork and activated his neural link, searching for Lucy's contact information. Her profile appeared in his peripheral vision, but when he tried to initiate communication, an automated message blocked his access.

*User has restricted incoming communications.*

She'd blocked him.

The rejection stung more than David had expected, a sharp pain that cut through his enhanced cognitive clarity and reminded him that some wounds couldn't be processed away with superior neural architecture. Lucy had shut him out completely, deciding he wasn't worth listening to.

But as David stared at the blocked communication notice, an idea began to form—one that should have horrified him, but instead sparked his curiosity.

What if he could get through anyway?

The thought should have been dismissed immediately. Hacking through someone's communication blocks was a serious violation of privacy, potentially illegal depending on the methods used, and definitely not something the old David Martinez would have considered.

But his enhanced mind was already analyzing the problem, breaking down the structure of Lucy's communication restrictions with analytical precision that felt almost automatic. His consciousness seemed to divide into multiple streams—one part maintaining awareness of his physical surroundings, another processing the technical challenge, and a third observing his own capabilities with fascination.

Almost without conscious decision, David found himself probing the edges of Lucy's communication block, his enhanced cognitive abilities interfacing directly with the neural link's programming in ways that should have been impossible for someone with his limited technical background.

The block was sophisticated—Lucy was a skilled netrunner, after all—but David discovered that his enhanced mind could process the defensive algorithms faster than they could adapt. He could see the structure of her protection protocols like a three-dimensional maze, identifying weak points and backdoor pathways with startling clarity.

What should have been an hours-long hacking attempt for even an experienced netrunner took David less than ten minutes to complete. His enhanced consciousness flowed through Lucy's defenses like water finding cracks in concrete, bypassing security measures that would have stopped most intrusion attempts cold.

When the connection finally opened, David stared at his neural display in shock, barely able to comprehend what he'd just accomplished.

He'd hacked through Lucy's communication block. Not with specialized equipment or advanced software, but through pure cognitive enhancement and intuitive understanding of digital architecture that shouldn't have been possible for someone with his background.

*What the hell have I become?* he thought, his enhanced mind simultaneously awed and disturbed by his own capabilities.

But he'd come this far. Taking a deep breath, David composed a message and sent it through the newly opened channel.

*Lucy, I know you blocked me, and I'm sorry for pushing through that. But I need to talk to you. To all of you. I want to explain what's really happening.*

For several long minutes, there was no response. David began to suspect that Lucy might simply terminate the connection entirely, blocking him again with even stronger security measures.

Then, finally, a message appeared in his display: *How the hell did you get through my ICE?*

David hesitated, unsure how to explain without revealing the full scope of his transformation. *It's complicated. Part of what I need to explain.*

Another long pause, then: *This better not be some corpo tech bullshit, David.*

*It's not what you think,* David replied. *Can we meet? All of you? I know how it looks, but I need a chance to explain what's really going on.*

The silence stretched out so long that David began to think Lucy had cut the connection after all. He was about to send another message when her response finally appeared, carrying a tone of reluctant acceptance that came through even in text form:

*Fine. But it better be worth our time, David. And if this is some kind of setup...*

*It's not,* David replied quickly. *When and where?*

*Tonight. The old Megabuilding H4 construction site. Midnight. Come alone, and David?* There was a pause, then: *Don't make me regret giving you this chance.*

The connection terminated, leaving David staring at his neural display with a mixture of relief and apprehension. He'd gotten his opportunity to explain, but he also knew that Lucy's trust—whatever remained of it—was hanging by a thread.

And he still couldn't quite believe he'd hacked through her defenses so easily. The implications of his enhanced capabilities were becoming more staggering by the hour, opening up possibilities he'd never imagined while raising questions about what he was becoming.

Tonight, he'd have to find a way to make Lucy and the others understand that despite appearances, despite his new life and enhanced abilities, he was still fundamentally the same person who'd once been part of their crew.

Even if he was beginning to suspect that might not be entirely true anymore.

The sedan moved through Night City's neon-lit arteries with its usual silent efficiency, but David felt every mile like a journey backward through time. The corporate district's clean lines and regulated lighting gradually gave way to the chaotic sprawl of his old neighborhood—crumbling infrastructure, flickering holo-ads promising impossible dreams, and the ever-present undercurrent of violence that had shaped his entire childhood.

David adjusted his mother's EMT jacket for the third time, the familiar weight of the worn leather offering comfort even as his enhanced mind catalogued every detail of their route. The jacket had been professionally cleaned and repaired—Hiden Intelligence's resources extending even to preserving sentimental clothing—but it still carried the essence of who he'd been before all of this started.

"Master David," Izu said from the driver's seat, her voice carrying a note of gentle concern, "your biometric readings indicate elevated stress levels. Are you certain you wish to proceed with this meeting?"

David let out a shaky breath, his enhanced cognitive abilities running through probability matrices and risk assessments with mechanical precision. "I have to do this, Izu. They deserve an explanation, even if they don't believe it."

"If I may," Izu continued, "I could accompany you to the meeting site. My presence might provide valuable context for the claims you intend to make."

David's first instinct was to refuse—the idea of bringing a corporate android to a meeting with street-level operatives seemed like a recipe for disaster. But his enhanced mind was already analyzing the strategic implications, weighing risks against potential benefits.

Izu could provide evidence. Real, tangible proof that the world David was describing actually existed. Her very presence would validate his claims about Hiden Intelligence, about advanced AI technology, about the scope of what he'd become involved in. And if things went badly, her capabilities might be the difference between walking away and becoming another casualty of Night City's unforgiving streets.

"You're right," David said finally, his voice steadying with resolve. "They need to see this is real. All of it."

Izu nodded, pulling the sedan into a parking space several blocks from their destination. "I will follow your lead, Master David. However, I should warn you that my presence may generate significant suspicion and hostility."

"Yeah," David said, stepping out of the car and looking around at the familiar decay of his old neighborhood. "I'm counting on it."

They walked through streets that held eighteen years of David's memories—the corner where he'd first learned to spot booster gangs, the alley where his mother had taught him to run if he ever felt unsafe, the building where Mrs. Chen had lived before the rent increases forced her out. Every step felt like walking through a museum of his former life.

As they approached the Megabuilding H4 construction site, David's enhanced awareness picked up movement in his peripheral vision. A figure in the shadows of a collapsed overpass, positioned with clear sightlines to their approach route. Professional surveillance, likely armed, definitely watching their every move.

David didn't acknowledge the watcher directly, but made a mental note of the position. His enhanced cognitive abilities automatically began calculating escape routes and defensive positions, tactical thinking that would have been impossible for his former self.

The construction site itself was a monument to Night City's broken promises—skeletal steel frameworks reaching toward the sky like the ribs of some massive dead creature, surrounded by rusted machinery and piles of abandoned materials. Funding had dried up years ago when the city council discovered the project's budget had been systematically looted by connected contractors, leaving behind nothing but industrial decay.

David and Izu picked their way through the debris field, their footsteps echoing off concrete and steel as they moved deeper into the abandoned construction yard. The meeting point Lucy had specified was near the center of the site, in a cleared area surrounded by half-built walls that would provide both privacy and acoustic cover.

They rounded a corner formed by stacked concrete barriers, and there they were.

Maine stood in the center of the group, his massive frame enhanced by military-grade cyberware that made him look more like a walking tank than a human being. To his right, Lucy perched on a piece of construction equipment, her netrunner gear glinting in the dim light filtering down from the city above. Dorio leaned against a support beam with casual alertness, while Kiwi stood slightly apart from the others, her expression unreadable behind her optical implants.

And Rebecca, smallest but perhaps most dangerous of them all, sat cross-legged on a pile of rebar, her twin pistols resting casually in her lap.

The moment David and Izu entered the clearing, the temperature seemed to drop several degrees. Every member of the crew was studying them with varying degrees of caution and suspicion, hands positioned near weapons, enhanced reflexes coiled for action.

The silence stretched for several long seconds, tension building like static electricity before a storm.

Then Rebecca broke it with a sharp laugh that echoed off the concrete walls.

"Well, well, well," she said, her voice dripping with theatrical surprise as she gestured dramatically at David and Izu. "Look what the cat dragged in! Our little David's got himself a shiny new corpo mommy. Does she tuck you in at night too, or is that extra?"

The comment broke the tension like a punctured balloon, and the others began to relax slightly. Kiwi smirked, shaking her head with apparent amusement.

"Kid's got himself a corporate handler and everything," she observed, nodding toward Izu with a mixture of curiosity and wariness.

Maine stepped forward, his cybernetic enhancements whirring softly as he moved. When he reached David, the massive man raised one augmented hand and ruffled David's hair with surprising gentleness, the gesture somehow managing to be both affectionate and mildly condescending.

"So, choom," Maine said, his voice carrying a tone of gruff amusement, "thought you could just ditch us for the high life without saying goodbye? That how they teach manners in corpo school?"

David felt some of the tension leave his shoulders at the familiar ribbing. Whatever else had changed, whatever suspicions they harbored, they were still treating him like the kid they'd known rather than a complete stranger.

"It's not like that, Maine," David said, his voice carrying both relief and determination. "That's why I'm here. That's why I brought her." He gestured toward Izu, who stood perfectly still beside him, her posture professional but non-threatening.

Lucy hopped down from her perch, landing with cat-like grace as she studied Izu with the analytical gaze of a experienced netrunner.

"Corporate android," she said, her voice flat and suspicious. "High-end model, military-grade combat chassis, advanced AI architecture." Her eyes narrowed as she continued her assessment. "This isn't standard corpo security, David. This is bleeding-edge tech that most companies can't even afford."

David nodded, meeting her gaze steadily. "That's because she's not from most companies, Lucy. And that's where this story gets complicated."

He looked around at the faces of people who had been his family when his actual family consisted of just him and his mother, people who had accepted him and protected him and taught him how to survive in Night City's unforgiving streets.

"I need you all to listen," David said, his voice carrying a conviction that seemed to surprise even him. "Because what I'm about to tell you is going to sound impossible. But it's the truth, and it's bigger than any of us realized."

Maine crossed his arms, his expression settling into the patient attention he gave to mission briefings. "Alright, kid. We're listening. But this better be one hell of a story."

David took a deep breath, looking around at the faces of people who had been more family to him than anyone except his mother. "It starts with my father. The one I never knew."

For the next hour, David laid out everything—his grandfather's revelation about Hiden Intelligence, the truth about his father's death, the rogue AIs that had killed him and were now hunting David. He explained the Blackwall, the DataKrash, the Zea satellite orbiting overhead with technology that could either save or damn humanity.

When he struggled with the technical details, Izu stepped in with calm, precise explanations that somehow made the impossible sound merely improbable. She confirmed David's genetic connection to the satellite's security systems, described the synthetic bodies the rogue AIs were using, and outlined the scope of the threat they represented.

"The entities beyond the Blackwall have had decades to evolve, to grow stronger," Izu said, her voice carrying the weight of corporate intelligence briefings. "They view humanity not as an enemy to be defeated, but as an obstacle to be removed. Their goal is not conquest—it's extinction and replacement."

David pulled out his neural interface, displaying holographic evidence—corporate documents, technical schematics, even security footage from Hiden Intelligence facilities. The crew studied the data with professional skepticism, but David could see their expressions changing as the scope of what he was showing them became clear.

When he finished explaining about the Zero-One system, about becoming something more than human to fight an inhuman threat, the construction site fell into heavy silence.

Maine was the first to speak, his cybernetic enhancements whirring softly as he processed what he'd heard. "David, that's some seriously gonkshit story you and your corpo bot just told us."

Rebecca had stopped making jokes entirely, her usual manic energy replaced by uncharacteristic quiet. Dorio stood with her arms crossed, her expression unreadable behind her optical implants. Kiwi was studying Izu with the analytical gaze of someone trying to spot deception in an advanced AI.

But it was Lucy who looked the most shaken. Her hands were trembling slightly as she gripped the piece of construction equipment she'd been perched on, and her face had gone pale beneath her colorful hair. The mention of the Blackwall, of rogue AIs escaping from beyond it, had hit her like a physical blow.

David recognized that look—it was the same expression she got when she talked about her time with Arasaka, about the things she'd seen in the deepest layers of the Net that still gave her nightmares.

"Lucy?" David said quietly, his voice gentle with concern. "You okay?"

She shook her head slowly, her voice barely above a whisper. "It's like being back there again. Back with Arasaka. But this time..." She swallowed hard. "This time the horror isn't trapped in some corporate lab. It's walking around in bodies, hunting people, planning to break everything we've built to keep them contained."

Lucy looked up at David with eyes that had seen too much. "I've touched the edge of the Blackwall, David. I've felt what's waiting on the other side. And if even a fraction of it gets through..."

She didn't finish the sentence, but she didn't need to. The implications hung in the air between them like a toxic cloud.

Maine stepped forward, his massive frame casting a shadow over David as he studied the teenager's face with intense scrutiny. "Kid, I need you to look me in the eye and tell me straight—are you on the level? Because this is some next-level corpo conspiracy bullshit you're laying on us, and if you're playing games..."

David met Maine's gaze without flinching, his voice steady and clear. "I'm telling you the truth, Maine. All of it. I know how it sounds—hell, I can barely believe it myself. My father died trying to stop them twenty years ago. And now they're coming for me, and eventually they'll come for everyone else."

He gestured toward Izu, who stood perfectly still beside him. "She saved my life when one of those things tried to kill me. She could have let me die and completed whatever mission she was originally programmed for. But she chose to protect me instead."

Maine studied David's face for a long moment, then looked at Izu, then back to David. Finally, he let out a long sigh and rubbed his forehead with one augmented hand.

"Cristo," he muttered. "And I thought our biggest problem was dodging MaxTac patrols."

Dorio stepped forward, her voice calm but serious. "So what's the play, David? You suit up in this experimental armor and hunt down rogue AIs? That's the plan?"

David nodded slowly. "That's the plan. I can't hide from them—they know who I am now. I can't run—they'll find me eventually. And I can't pretend this isn't happening and hope someone else deals with it."

Rebecca finally found her voice, though it lacked her usual manic energy. "So you're basically telling us you're going to become a superhero and save the world from robot apocalypse."

"I'm telling you I'm going to try," David replied. "Whether I succeed..." He shrugged, the gesture carrying more weight than it should have. "Guess we'll find out."

The crew exchanged glances, the kind of silent communication that came from years of working together in life-or-death situations. David could see them processing everything he'd told them, weighing the implications, calculating risks and possibilities.

Finally, Maine spoke up, his voice carrying the authority that had kept their crew alive through countless jobs.

"Alright, David. Let's say we believe you—and I'm not saying we do, but let's say we do. What do you need from us?"

David looked around at the faces of his former crew, seeing the mixture of skepticism and concern that he'd expected. But underneath it all, he could detect something else—the same loyalty that had kept them together through countless dangerous jobs.

"Look," David said, his voice steady despite the weight of what he was asking. "I'm not going to lie to you about what this means. When shit hits the fan—and it will—I want you there. Not because I'm hiring you, just because... because I trust you. Because you're the only family I have left."

Maine's cybernetic enhancements whirred softly as he processed this, his expression unreadable. "Kid, that's a hell of a thing to ask. You're talking about risking our lives for free against some kind of digital boogeyman."

David shrugged, the gesture carrying more confidence than he felt. "Then I'll pay you. I'll provide repairs, upgrades, whatever you need. There's a secure bunker I can take you to so you know where to meet when things go sideways. The works."

He looked directly at Maine, his enhanced mind automatically calculating the crew's likely concerns and motivations. "The only condition is that we keep clear boundaries between what connects us. I don't want any of you getting hurt because of my problems."

Maine exchanged a long look with Dorio, the kind of silent communication that came from years of partnership. Then his gaze swept over the rest of the crew—Lucy's pale but determined expression, Rebecca's uncharacteristic seriousness, Kiwi's analytical assessment of the situation.

The silence stretched for several long moments, filled with the distant sounds of Night City's eternal chaos.

Finally, Maine nodded slowly. "Alright, David. We're in. But on one condition—we stay independent. We're not about to become corpo mercs, even for you."

David felt relief wash over him like a physical weight lifting from his shoulders. "I wouldn't have it any other way. That's what makes this work."

Izu stepped forward slightly, her voice carrying its usual professional tone. "If I may, the independence arrangement would also provide plausible deniability should the situation become... complicated from a legal standpoint."

"Smart," Dorio said with a nod of approval. "Keep things compartmentalized."

From his position on a pile of construction materials, Pilar finally spoke up, his voice carrying his usual irreverent humor. "So, uh, David? Think you could spare me one of those Humagear things? You know, for... recreational purposes?"

The suggestion was met with immediate groans and disgusted sounds from the rest of the crew.

"Pilar, you gonk," Rebecca said, throwing a small piece of rebar at him, "we're talking about saving the world and you're thinking with your—"

"Humagears are not sexbots, Pilar," David interrupted firmly, though he couldn't quite suppress a small smile at the familiar dynamic.

Pilar held up his hands defensively. "Cool, cool. Not trying to force anything. Just asking, you know?"

Maine shook his head with what might have been fond exasperation. "Pilar, I swear to Christ..."

The moment of levity was interrupted as Maine's expression grew more serious. "Alright, David, practical question—how the hell are we supposed to watch out for these things? How do we know when one of them is coming for us?"

David's enhanced awareness suddenly picked up something wrong in the construction site around them—a subtle shift in the ambient noise, a vibration through the concrete that shouldn't have been there. His face darkened with grim realization.

"Because one of them followed me," he said quietly, his voice carrying a mix of anger and regret.

Izu's head snapped toward the perimeter of the construction site, her advanced sensors immediately confirming the threat. "Warning," she called out, her voice cutting through the night air with mechanical precision. "Projectile incoming."

The sound hit them a split second later—the roar of an overloaded engine and screeching metal as an old construction vehicle came hurtling through the debris field toward their position. The massive piece of machinery moved with impossible speed and precision, its trajectory calculated to crush them all in a single devastating impact.

But this time, David wasn't just a frightened teenager watching his world fall apart. This time, he had the power to fight back.

"Everyone scatter!" David shouted, even as his hand went instinctively to the Zero-One Driver at his waist. The device responded to his touch with its familiar synthesized voice:

"ZERO-ONE DRIVER"

The crew was already moving, their enhanced reflexes and street-honed survival instincts kicking in as they dove for cover behind concrete barriers and steel beams. But David knew that wouldn't be enough—whatever was controlling that construction vehicle had planned this attack too well, and hiding would only delay the inevitable.

Rising Hopper materialized from the Progrisekey with its energetic voice: "JUMP!"

David looked at the mechanical grasshopper, then at his crew scrambling for safety, then at the construction vehicle bearing down on them with lethal intent. His enhanced mind processed the tactical situation in milliseconds, calculating angles and possibilities with inhuman precision.

Time to show them exactly what he'd become.

"Henshin!" David called out, his voice carrying across the construction site as he slotted the unfolded Progrisekey into the Driver.

"TOBIAGARISE!" "RISING HOPPER!"

The transformation was just as dramatic as it had been in the testing chamber, but this time it happened in the middle of a life-or-death situation, with people he cared about watching him become something beyond human capability. Black armor materialized around his frame as Rising Hopper split apart and integrated with the developing suit, the process complete in seconds.

"A JUMP TO THE SKY TURNS TO A RIDER KICK!"

Kamen Rider Zero-One stood in the clearing, facing down a multi-ton construction vehicle with calm determination. Through his helmet's advanced HUD, David could see the tactical analysis streaming across his vision—trajectory calculations, structural weak points, optimal impact angles.

The construction vehicle was less than fifty meters away and closing fast when Zero-One moved.

David launched himself forward with the enhanced leg strength of the Rising Hopper form, covering the distance in a single superhuman bound. His trajectory carried him directly toward the vehicle's front end, and for a moment it looked like he was about to be crushed between tons of metal and concrete.

Instead, David planted his feet against the vehicle's front bumper and pushed.

The construction vehicle, despite its massive weight and considerable momentum, came to a grinding halt as Zero-One's enhanced strength proved sufficient to arrest its forward motion entirely. Metal screamed against metal as the vehicle's engine overloaded and died, leaving the construction site in sudden, ringing silence.

From behind various pieces of cover, the crew slowly emerged, staring in stunned amazement at the sight of their former junior member casually holding back several tons of industrial machinery.

"Jesus fucking Christ," Rebecca breathed, her usual manic energy replaced by genuine awe. "David, what the hell are you now?"

Before David could answer, movement in his peripheral vision caught his attention. Through the Zero-One suit's enhanced sensors, he could detect something emerging from the damaged construction vehicle—not human, but wearing human form with the unsettling perfection that marked it as artificial.

The rogue AI had arrived to finish what it started.

Maine's military training kicked in immediately, his augmented voice cutting through the night air with battlefield authority. "Crew, arm up! We're going to zero this choom!"

The team scattered to defensive positions, weapons emerging from hidden holsters and storage compartments with practiced efficiency. But David's enhanced awareness was already scanning the perimeter, his helmet's advanced sensors picking up movement through the debris field.

A figure emerged from behind the wreckage of the construction vehicle, moving with mechanical precision through the scattered concrete and twisted metal. It was humanoid but wrong in ways that David's enhanced perception could immediately identify—too perfect, too symmetrical, moving with the uncanny valley perfection that marked it as artificial.

A Humagear in its raw state, David realized. No attempt at human camouflage, just the basic android chassis in all its inhuman glory.

The figure stopped approximately twenty meters from their position, its glowing optical sensors fixing on David with unsettling focus.

"David Martinez," the android said, its voice carrying the cold, synthesized quality of advanced text-to-speech systems. "You're coming with me."

David's enhanced confidence surged through the Zero-One suit's neural interface. "Shove it up your chrome, you piece of junk."

The Humagear tilted its head in a gesture that might have looked curious on a human but came across as deeply unsettling on the mechanical frame. "They expected you to have a mouth on you," it replied with mechanical calm. "Thankfully, that's not what we need."

The sound of gunfire erupted across the construction site as Rebecca opened up with both pistols, her manic energy translating into devastating firepower. "Take this, you chrome bastard!"

The rest of the crew joined in immediately, their combined firepower turning the night into a symphony of muzzle flashes and bullet impacts. Automatic weapons, heavy pistols, and military-grade ammunition converged on the Humagear's position in a coordinated assault that should have reduced any target to scrap metal.

But the android barely stepped back under the onslaught, its chassis absorbing the impact of dozens of high-caliber rounds with minimal visible damage. Sparks flew from its hull where bullets found purchase, but the underlying structure remained intact.

"Hold fire!" Maine's voice cut through the chaos, his tactical instincts recognizing a futile engagement. "Save your ammo!"

The crew reluctantly ceased firing, their weapons smoking in the sudden silence. Maine's augmented vision catalogued the damage assessment with military precision: barely a scratch beyond cosmetic hull damage. The android's armor was military-grade, designed to withstand concentrated small arms fire.

The Humagear brushed at a few bullet impacts on its chest plate with mechanical precision, its voice carrying what sounded suspiciously like amusement. "That was a nice massage. Thank you."

Then it reached into its chassis and withdrew something that made David's blood run cold through the Zero-One suit's systems.

A Progrisekey. But not like Rising Hopper—this one was darker, more angular, carrying design elements that suggested predatory lethality rather than agility.

"Surprised?" the android asked, reading David's body language through his armor's visible stance changes. "Did you really think we wouldn't have our own?"

The Humagear pressed the activation button, and the key responded with a synthesized voice that carried none of Rising Hopper's energetic enthusiasm:

"BEROTHA!"

Without hesitation, the android inserted the key directly into its chest chassis, where it locked into place with mechanical precision.

What happened next defied every expectation David had formed about transformation sequences. Instead of the elegant energy patterns and graceful materialization he'd experienced with Rising Hopper, this change was violent, aggressive, filled with the sound of tearing metal and mechanical reconfiguration.

The Humagear's basic chassis split apart and reformed, growing larger and more threatening as additional components materialized around it. Blade-like appendages emerged from its arms, gleaming with deadly sharpness under the city's ambient lighting. Its head reconfigured into something insectoid and predatory, compound optical sensors glowing with malevolent intelligence.

When the transformation completed, the thing that stood before them was no longer recognizably humanoid. It was a mantis-like creature of metal and malice, its scythe blades catching the light with lethal promise.

Maine had seen mantis blade cyberware before—hell, he'd fought enough cyberpsychos equipped with similar weapons to know their capabilities. But this was different. This wasn't some street punk who'd loaded up on black-market military hardware. This was purpose-built killing machine with integrated weapon systems.

"I am Berotha," the creature announced, its voice now carrying harmonic overtones that suggested multiple vocal processors. "A Magia. Not some fleshy imitation."

Rebecca finished reloading her weapons with aggressive efficiency, her manic energy translating into defiant bravado. "Yeah? Well, you're 'Dickless Chromehead' to me, you gonk piece of scrap!"

Berotha's head tilted in that unsettling gesture again. "I was wrong about who actually has the mouth here."

David stepped forward, his Zero-One armor's systems automatically calculating threat assessments and tactical options. "Are there more of you?"

The mantis-like creature shrugged, a gesture that looked wrong on its mechanical frame. "Come along and see for yourself. I'm not inclined to answer questions for free."

"Save it for some gonk," David replied, his enhanced confidence bleeding through the suit's vocal systems.

"Your choice," Berotha said with mechanical calm.

Then the scythe blades on its arms began to glow with energy that made David's HUD immediately flash warning indicators across his vision field.

"DANGER!" his suit's AI announced through his neural interface.

"Everyone duck and cover!" David yelled, his enhanced reflexes already moving him toward the nearest substantial barrier.

Berotha swung both arms in wide arcs, and energy blades materialized in the air—crackling crescents of destructive force that tore through the construction site like it was made of paper. Steel beams were severed cleanly, abandoned equipment was sliced apart, and concrete barriers split with explosive force.

The crew scattered as debris rained down around them, their enhanced reflexes the only thing keeping them from being crushed by falling construction materials.

David's enhanced mind processed the tactical situation with mechanical precision. Berotha was stronger, better armed, and designed for lethal combat. But David had advantages too—mobility, agility, and the element of unpredictability that came from human creativity enhanced by artificial intelligence.

Time to see which approach would prove superior.

Zero-One launched himself forward, his Rising Hopper form carrying him in a superhuman bound directly toward the mantis-like creature that threatened everything he was trying to protect.

The collision between David and Berotha sent shockwaves through the construction site, their enhanced forms meeting with a thunderous impact that cracked concrete and sent debris flying. David's enhanced reflexes allowed him to roll with the impact, coming up in a defensive stance as Berotha's scythe blades carved through the air where his head had been milliseconds before.

The battle became a deadly dance of enhanced reflexes and mechanical precision. Berotha moved with the calculated lethality of a purpose-built killing machine, each strike designed for maximum damage, each movement optimized for combat efficiency. But David's human intuition, enhanced by the Zero-One system's AI, provided him with something the rogue AI lacked—unpredictability.

David ducked under a horizontal scythe sweep, his enhanced awareness providing him with what felt like precognitive insight into Berotha's attack patterns. The mantis-like creature's mechanical nature worked against it in close combat, its movements following logical algorithms that David's enhanced mind could begin to predict and counter.

A vertical slash missed David by centimeters as he twisted away, the energy blade leaving a glowing scar in the concrete where he'd been standing. David responded with a punch that should have shattered normal armor plating, but Berotha's chassis absorbed the impact and countered with a backhand strike that sent David skidding across the debris-strewn ground.

"You fight well for meat," Berotha observed with mechanical calm, advancing with measured steps. "But flesh always fails."

David rolled to his feet, his armor's systems automatically compensating for the impact damage. "Funny thing about flesh," he replied, launching himself forward in another superhuman bound. "It adapts."

Berotha leaped to meet him, both combatants rising several meters into the air in defiance of normal physics. The aerial battle that followed was a blur of strikes and counters, their enhanced forms trading blows while suspended in mid-air through pure momentum and enhanced capability.

David caught one of Berotha's scythe strikes on his armored forearm, the energy blade scraping against his suit's defensive systems in a shower of sparks. He responded with a knee strike that connected solidly with Berotha's chassis, the impact sending both combatants tumbling toward the ground.

Their landing was catastrophic—two enhanced beings hitting concrete at terminal velocity, their combined impact creating a crater and sending up a massive plume of dust that obscured the entire area. For a moment, the construction site was silent except for the settling debris.

Then they were grappling in the crater, their enhanced forms locked in a deadly embrace as each tried to gain advantage over the other. David managed to get a grip on one of Berotha's scythe arms, his enhanced strength focusing on the weapon's attachment point.

The metal began to deform under the pressure of David's grip, the advanced alloys that comprised Berotha's weapon systems proving insufficient against the focused application of Zero-One's enhanced capabilities.

"No," Berotha croaked, its synthesized voice carrying what might have been panic as it felt its weapon being crushed in David's grasp.

The scythe blade shattered with a sound like breaking glass, fragments of advanced weaponry scattering across the crater. Berotha managed to push David off with its remaining functional limb, both combatants rolling away from each other and coming to their feet in defensive stances.

Berotha lunged forward with its remaining scythe, the weapon charging with deadly energy as it prepared for what should have been a killing blow. But the strike never landed.

From her position behind a concrete barrier at the edge of the construction site, Lucy had been doing what she did best—finding technological solutions to impossible problems. Her netrunner gear interfaced directly with the construction site's emergency systems, trying to find any advantage she could provide to David's battle.

But when she attempted to hack into Berotha's systems, something went terribly wrong.

Instead of the clean code architecture she expected from even advanced AI systems, Lucy found herself bombarded by a cascade of alien data—images that hurt to process, memories that belonged to no human mind, and underneath it all, an ominous presence that spoke with the weight of digital eternity.

"*All under the will of the Ark,*" the voice intoned, its words bypassing Lucy's conscious mind and hitting her directly in the neural pathways that governed fear and recognition.

Lucy forcibly severed the connection with a cry of pain that echoed across the construction site, her hands clutching her head as feedback from the failed hack sent shockwaves through her nervous system.

"Lucy!" David's voice carried across the battlefield, his concern for her overriding his tactical focus on Berotha.

The moment of distraction cost him. David whirled back toward his opponent, his enhanced awareness picking up the threat too late as Berotha prepared for another attack.

"What did you do to her?" David demanded, his voice carrying a rage that surprised even him.

Berotha had staggered slightly, its own systems apparently affected by Lucy's intrusion attempt. The mantis-like creature looked toward Lucy's position with what might have been recognition, its optical sensors focusing on her with uncomfortable intensity.

But instead of answering, Berotha began charging its remaining scythe with energy that made the air itself seem to vibrate with potential violence. The creature began to spin, slowly at first, then faster, becoming a mechanical centrifuge that turned its single remaining weapon into an engine of area-effect destruction.

Energy blades began launching from the spinning form in all directions—not targeted strikes, but a continuous stream of deadly projectiles that carved through everything within range. Steel beams were severed, concrete barriers were sliced apart, and the crew was forced to dive for whatever cover they could find as the construction site became a killing field.

David realized with growing horror that Berotha wasn't trying to fight him anymore. This was an execution—a systematic elimination of everyone present, including the crew members who had no enhanced armor to protect them.

That's when Izu appeared at the construction site entrance, moving with inhuman speed toward their position while carrying what looked like a reinforced suitcase. She had run back to the sedan, David realized, retrieving something from their vehicle's secure storage.

The android ran directly into the storm of energy blades, her advanced combat chassis allowing her to calculate safe paths through the deadly barrage. She bent backward with impossible flexibility as one energy blade passed centimeters from her face, then used her momentum to slide across the ground on one knee, her trajectory carrying her under another series of attacks.

With fluid grace, Izu leaped forward in a perfect somersault that carried her directly over David's position. As she passed overhead, she released the suitcase, and David's enhanced reflexes allowed him to catch it without conscious thought.

The moment his hands made contact with the case, his suit's AI systems interfaced with whatever was inside, flooding his consciousness with operational data and tactical applications.

The Attache Calibur—a multi-functioning weapon system designed specifically for integration with the Zero-One armor. The device could shift between multiple configurations, each optimized for different combat scenarios. His enhanced mind absorbed the technical specifications in milliseconds, understanding intuitively how to deploy the weapon's capabilities.

David quickly pulled the device into Blade Mode, but his enhanced mind immediately understood that something was missing. Without hesitation, he reached down to his Zero-One Driver and extracted the Rising Hopper Progrisekey, the device unfolding automatically in his grip as he inserted it into the Attache Calibur's key slot.

The weapon's systems came online with a satisfying hum of contained energy, the Progrisekey's integration allowing the Attache Calibur to access the full power of his transformation. Then he switched it back to Attache Mode, allowing the weapon's internal capacitors to build up charge for a decisive strike while the Rising Hopper AI interfaced with the weapon's targeting systems.

The energy readings in his HUD climbed steadily as the Attache Calibur prepared for maximum output. David began moving forward, his enhanced legs carrying him directly toward Berotha's spinning form despite the continuing barrage of energy blades that carved through the air around him.

At the optimal distance, David triggered the transformation back to Blade Mode, the weapon reconfiguring itself in his hands with mechanical precision. He drew the energy blade back, feeling the power building to critical levels, then pressed the trigger.

The energy slash that erupted from the Attache Calibur was unlike anything David had ever seen—a crescent of pure destructive force that tore through Berotha's web of energy attacks like they were made of paper. The beam connected with the spinning mantis-creature dead center, the impact sending shockwaves through the construction site and launching Berotha backward through the air.

The rogue AI hit the ground hard, its spinning attack disrupted, its remaining scythe arm sparking with damaged systems. For the first time since the battle began, Berotha looked vulnerable.

David approached the fallen form of Berotha, his enhanced vision cataloging the extent of the damage the Attache Calibur had inflicted. The mantis-like creature's chassis was cracked and sparking, its remaining scythe arm twitching with failing servos. Dark synthetic fluid leaked from ruptured systems, pooling beneath the damaged android in viscous puddles.

The construction site had fallen into an eerie quiet, broken only by the occasional creak of settling debris and the distant hum of Night City's eternal electronic symphony. David's crew remained in their defensive positions, weapons trained on the fallen rogue AI even as smoke drifted from their overheated barrels.

David stopped just outside Berotha's reach, though the creature was clearly in no condition to launch another attack. Through his helmet's advanced sensors, he could see the android's power levels fluctuating wildly, its combat systems failing one by one.

"I'll ask you again," David said, his voice carrying through the Zero-One suit's vocal systems with cold determination. "Are there more of you? How many? Where are they?"

Berotha's optical sensors flickered as they focused on David's armored form. The creature's voice, when it came, was distorted by damaged vocal processors, creating an unsettling harmony of mechanical tones.

"You... you have no idea what you're delaying," Berotha wheezed, synthetic fluid bubbling from damaged speakers. The sound carried a discordant chuckle that made David's enhanced hearing automatically dampen the audio input.

The mantis-creature's head tilted at that unnatural angle again, its compound eyes reflecting the ambient light of the construction site like fractured mirrors. "You think... you think this changes anything? That destroying one vessel matters?"

David's grip tightened on the Attache Calibur, the weapon's systems still humming with residual energy. "Where are the others?"

"Everywhere," Berotha replied with mechanical satisfaction. "In your networks. In your machines. In bodies you'll never suspect until it's too late." The damaged voice took on an almost reverent quality. "All under the will of the Ark."

David paused at that phrase. The Ark. He filed the term away in his enhanced memory for later analysis - whatever it was, it seemed important to these rogue AIs.

But right now, faced with a dying rogue AI that had tried to kill everyone he cared about, David found his patience exhausted.

"Like I give a shit," he muttered, raising his armored foot.

The stomp came down with the full force of the Zero-One system's enhanced strength, crushing Berotha's head unit in an explosion of sparks and synthetic fluid. The creature's optical sensors died instantly, their malevolent glow extinguished as the android's consciousness was scattered across broken circuits.

The body convulsed once, servo-motors firing in random patterns as residual power drained through failing systems. Then Berotha fell silent, just another piece of high-tech scrap metal littering the industrial wasteland of Night City.

David straightened up and looked down at the destroyed rogue AI with grim satisfaction. Whatever the Ark was, whatever was coming, at least there was one less synthetic predator to hunt in the night.

His crew slowly emerged from behind the concrete barriers, their weapons still at the ready but their postures suggesting that the immediate threat had passed.

"Well," Rebecca said, her voice carrying its familiar manic energy despite the adrenaline still coursing through her system, "that was fucking Preem, David. Remind me never to piss you off when you're wearing that thing."

Maine approached the wreckage of Berotha, his cybernetic enhancements scanning the destroyed android with professional interest. "Military grade combat chassis, integrated weapons systems, advanced AI architecture." He looked up at David with renewed respect. "This wasn't some street-level threat, kid. This was purpose-built for assassination."

Lucy remained near her position, her hands still shaking slightly from the feedback of her failed hack. "David," she called out, her voice shaky, "whatever this thing is connected to... it's big. Bigger than anything I've ever felt on the Net. And it knows about us now."

David deactivated the Attache Calibur, the weapon folding back into its compact configuration. Through his helmet's HUD, he could see data streams already analysing the battle, cataloguing tactical lessons learned and system performance metrics.

"Then we'd better be ready when the time comes to look," he said quietly, his heightened awareness already scanning the perimeter of the construction site for additional threats.

The war his grandfather had warned him about was no longer theoretical. It was here, in the streets of Night City, hunting him and everyone he cared about.

But David was no longer just a scared teenager trying to survive in an impossible situation. He was Kamen Rider Zero-One, and he had just proved that the rogue AIs weren't invincible.

The battle for the future of mankind had begun.