

The Edge of Oblivion

A Cyberpunk 2077 Story

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Chapter 1

AntraTech

The Corpo was tall, silver-haired and dapper, sporting a white lab coat over an Avante suit the cost of which could've bought him a car. Nothing from Rayfield, maybe, but not some piece of shit beater, either. His name was Bannerman and he'd smiled when he'd offered his hand. He wasn't smiling now, had dropped that act as soon as they'd reached his private office and sat down. Now there was only a direct look of consideration. After a moment, he spoke.

"I took this meeting because Miss Palmer's father saved my life once, a very long time ago in a very dark place. When she emailed her request, I didn't feel I could refuse, but when she asked me to meet with someone in need of biotech expertise, I was expecting something ... else."

She could see him eyeing her threads. She'd chosen them carefully. Not *too* corporate; that'd give the wrong impression. But not too Nomad, either, despite her weeks on the road with the Aldecaldos. A little bit of Netrunner flair, just enough to show she knew her way around a cyberdeck. A Jinguji blouse to show she wasn't broke. She'd left her bulletproof vest at home, right next to the smart rifle. And the katana.

Valerie Taylor smiled. Set her hands on her crossed legs. Looked him in the eye. "I appreciate you taking the time. I'm no scientist, but I promise this will be an interesting chat."

Bannerman raised his eyebrows. "What is it you'd like to talk about?"

"I have a proposal." She'd rehearsed this with Judy. "Five jobs of your choice, no fee, no expenses. Plus, I'll give your people the chance to work on the most groundbreaking project they've ever touched. You'll be up to your ears in valuable patents."

The Corpo considered this. She knew he had the juice to make the call. The company might be named after Allen Antra, but the man was pushing a hundred and forty and spent most of his days fishing off the back of his yacht. He showed up for

board meetings four times a year and yawned his way through every one of them. Bannerman was the guy who got shit done.

“Why us?” He asked at last. “Why AntraTech?”

She shrugged. “You’re the best biotech company in the world.”

That wasn’t completely true. There were at least three other companies that could make a legitimate claim to that title, including BioTechnica, but it was close enough. And anyway, a little flattery always greased the wheels. But it wasn’t flattery that Bannerman would really be looking for, and she knew it. A moment later, he confirmed it.

“These ... services. Why would we want them?”

V leaned forward and let the smile become a grin, let a little bloodthirstiness creep in at the edges, let him look into the near-white irises of her cybernetic eyes.

“Because I’m the best fucking merc on the west coast.”

Bannerman was unfazed, and she felt a grudging respect bloom in her for that. The eyes unsettled a lot of people, the blue-white irises contrasting against the thick, jet-black lines that circled them and then ran off along the corneas. He tapped two fingers on his desk. “And you think we need mercenaries ... why?”

V leaned back in her chair again. Spread her hands. Repeated herself. “You’re the best biotech company in the world.”

Again that considering gaze. Again those two taps on the desk. Bannerman said, “References?”

“Oh, choose a fixer in Night City, but I’d start with Rogue Amendiares or Regina Jones. Doesn’t matter who you pick, though. Worked with ‘em all. Made ‘em all very happy.”

“Mmm. And what type of services are you good at, miss ...”

“It’s just V.”

“All right then, V. What do you do?”

“I do what’s needed. I can go quiet or loud, wet or dry. You want the world to know? It’ll be splashed all over every news channel from here to Berlin. You want it kept quiet? It’ll be buried in an icebox for the rest of time.”

“I take it you’ve *gone loud* in the past, then? Anything we’ve heard of up here?” AntraTech was based in Seattle. She and Judy had arrived two weeks ago, making their winding way up through Nevada, into Oregon, and then along the coast.

V gave a quiet laugh. “Guessing the Arasaka news made it way farther than *that*.”

That was the first thing to really get a reaction. Bannerman pulled back in his chair, his brow furrowing. “You really expect me to believe—”

“Panam will corroborate. She was there for the whole thing. Also can provide a secure transfer with deets you absolutely will not find on the news, but should be able to confirm if you go digging.” V knew her own calm was selling this. Mikoshi was destroyed, Arasaka’s stock was still in a crater so deep it might never recover, and the company’s security forces in Night City were decimated. Adam Smasher was a smoking pile of scrap with a bullet lodged in the center of the one ‘ganic bit he’d had left – his brain. She’d done that, with some help. It was a claim so audacious it didn’t even make sense to lie about it.

Bannerman thought this over. His calm, almost icy demeanor returned and he leaned forward again. “Restrictions?”

“No kids, no working girls, no Pols. Prefer gigs that require creative solutions rather than the obvious, ugly one, but we all do what we gotta do to get by.”

“No politicians?”

V sighed. “It never *works*. They all deserve it, or at least almost all, but it brings down a ton of heat and some other asshole just slides right into the same place. The client’s never satisfied with the results. The pay usually sucks. Just not worth it.”

He seemed amused. V supposed he could probably buy the politicians outright. No reason to hire a merc to do something worse. “All right. Anything else?”

She thought for a moment. “I don’t sign contracts. Ever.”

Bannerman gave his own little sharklike grin at this. “A wise policy.”

“Yeah. Puts me in a tough spot sometimes, though.”

“Such as?”

“Such as *how can I be sure the biotech company I’m working for holds up their end of the deal?*”

He nodded, looking almost pleased. “I assume by the end of day you’ll know my home address.”

“Knew it three days ago.” No grins, now. No flippant attitude. No intimidation, either. Just the truth.

“Well done. Five jobs, you said. Option to extend?”

“If the Eddies are there, we can talk.”

“You mentioned a miracle project ... a carrot on a string for us, but, I suspect, the vital piece of all of this for you. Five free jobs and the project. What is it, *exactly*, that you want us to do?”

Here it was. The big ask. The craziest thing she was ever going to say to someone in her life, even if her life extended past the next few months, which didn't seem very likely. V leaned forward again, far enough to put her arms on the desk. She locked eyes with Bannerman again and told him the truth. The crazy, impossible fucking truth.

“I want you to rewrite my DNA.”



“*Calabacitaaaaaa!*” The voice echoed into the foyer from the kitchen. V rolled her eyes. She'd finally gotten around to looking that up and still wasn't sure how exactly a badass major league merc had become Judy's little pumpkin.

Judy Alvarez. Leelou Bean. Girlfriend. That word still tasted strange in V's mouth. Delicious, but strange. She'd left Atlanta thinking she'd never say it again. Planning not to, actually. What a clusterfuck that all had been. She'd been a naïve twenty-year-old gonk who'd thought she'd found forever, only for forever to collapse in on itself in less than a year. She sometimes still dreamed of Chryssa screaming at her. By the end, that's all it had been, just screaming and screaming. She'd slunk back to Night City, tail between her legs, gotten wrapped up with Jackie, and then ...

Well. Then she'd met Judy, all set up editing porno BDs for the Moxes, and been pulled into the events that had changed both their lives forever. Now, here they were, six months into *girlfriend*, and V still couldn't look at the woman for thirty seconds without wanting to wrap her up and cuddle her until she was a big toasty marshmallow, or strip

her clothes off and fuck her until she forgot her own name. Usually V decided on both, starting with the latter.

“Hey, Judy.” V pulled off her boots and set them beside Judy’s by the door, then padded into the apartment in her socks. It was a rental, nothing special, but *nothing special* had turned out to be all they really wanted. Back in Night City, V had rented that fucking luxury pad downtown, only for them to end up spending almost all of their time together in Judy’s little Kabuki shithole instead. It felt *real*, there, sweating in that too-small bed under the wheezing AC unit. When it came to Night City, that apartment was about the only thing V missed. That and her friends.

“How’d it go?” Judy asked as V entered the kitchen, and V had to laugh at the affected, casual tone. *Oh, you big faker, you’ve barely been able to sleep the last three days.* Judy was wearing a pair of slate-grey cargo pants and a stretchy black top with two red stripes running up its back along her shoulder blades. A BD headset dangled from her back pocket, one of about three hundred thousand she seemed to own.

“Break out the La Perle,” V said, slipping into one of the stools at the breakfast bar. *La Perle des Alpes* was Judy’s favorite, a slightly sweet sparkling white wine made in Zurich. Not cheap. Not, really the *good* stuff, either ... but neither she nor V had come up in that kind of luxury. La Perle was plenty.

Judy frowned, three creases appearing on her forehead. V had seen those same lines on a different face when they’d visited Judy’s *abuela* in Oregon, a family heirloom of sorts, and one that showed up often. Now here they were again. Miss grumpy pants. God, she was so fucking *adorable*. “You told me you were going to break that out no matter how it went, cuz it’d either be a celebration or drowning our sorrows. So, *mi amor*, that don’t tell me shit.”

V sighed. “He said it was impossible. Insane. Ridiculous and beyond consideration. That even if the timeline was years and not months, it would be *an undertaking of immense difficulty*. That no self-respecting biotech company in the world would even entertain the idea and that deploying such an untested process on a human being, that fast, was essentially a human rights violation.”

She saw Judy’s shoulders sag. Her eyes going glassy. V waited. Waited. Waited one moment more. Grinned. “Then he said they’d do it.”

Judy sat down on the floor. Just dropped right down, there in the kitchen, some cricket-sausage dish still happily sizzling away on the stove. She dangled her arms over her knees and let out a whoofing exhalation that was at least half sob. Two tears spilled out over her eyelids and ran down her cheeks, but when she looked up, she was smiling. “You. Gigantic. *Asshole!*”

V slid around the counter, moved the pan off the burner, and hunkered down. “Isn’t that what you love about me?”

Judy blew air through puffed out cheeks. “It’s not *not* what I love about you.”

“Ooh, I want to hear that. What’s *not* what you love about me?” V reached out her hand, and after a moment Judy took it and allowed herself to be hauled to her feet.

“You hog the covers.” Judy leaned forward and gave her a long kiss. V put her hands in her girlfriend’s hair, enjoying the contrast between the spikes of Judy’s undercut and the silky long locks on the other side. At last, they pulled apart. “And you stare at Panam’s ass too much. And if you want to hear more, you’d better get me drunk.”

Laughing, V went to get the wine.



When she woke in the night coughing blood, she tried not to wake her girlfriend, failed miserably, and nearly choked to death trying to apologize. Judy whaled on her back and, at last, V hocked a truly horrific-looking wad of something red and black out onto the floor. She took a ragged, gasping breath.

“Oh, baby ...” Judy’s voice was low and soft and very, very scared.

“It’s fine.” V felt like someone had jammed a flamethrower into her throat and pulled the trigger. Sounded like it, too. “I’m fine.”

“No, you aren’t.” Lips against her back, at the hollow between her shoulder blades. V shuddered. “I’ll call Vik tomorrow. See if he has—”

“If we up the dosage any higher he thinks it’s going to give me seizures.” V tried to keep any anger out of her voice. Mostly succeeded. She wasn’t angry at Judy, but she was *furious* at the situation. Also, her throat felt like a fucking barbecue and her back hurt from Judy’s pounding.

“Oh.”

“Not gonna die before they fix me, Leelou, okay? I’m *not*. I refuse.”

It hung unspoken in the air between them that, of course, no one at AntraTech had the slightest idea if they could fix her. Or how long it might take. Or who she might *be* when they were finished digging around in her brain and changing her at a molecular level. How much of her was Silverhand, now? She didn’t know, and just about everyone who’d known her before Johnny’d made his unwanted way into her body and her mind was gone now. Most of them were dead.

Finally, Judy said, “I believe you,” in a tone that really said *I don’t believe you, but I love you and I want so much to believe you that I’m just going to keep saying it right up to the end*, and that was good enough. All V wanted, really. Well, that and to still be alive by the time spring came around.

They’d taken samples before she left AntraTech. Bannerman had ushered her into a little room that smelled like antiseptics, told her he’d call her in a day or two with a job, and left. A tiny Asian woman had entered shortly after, swabbed V’s shoulder, and then lopped a chunk of it off with a scalpel so sharp the cut hadn’t started to hurt until a second or two later.

“We’ll need to get a piece of your brain pretty soon,” she’d said.

“Nova,” had been V’s less than enthusiastic reply.

“I don’t know what Doctor Bannerman is cooking up with you, but he seems excited ...” the woman had left her sentence open, waiting to see if V would answer the unasked question.

“You’ll have to bug him for the deets,” V had told her, and within minutes she’d been standing out under the grey, late-September Seattle sky. The clouds had looked like rain, a constant threat in the Pacific Northwest.

She could hear that rain, now, fat droplets hitting the apartment’s single skylight out in the living room like tiny gunshots. She loved the rain. Always had.

“Come back to sleep?” Judy asked, her voice saying she was already halfway there, and V threw a smile over her shoulder. They’d gotten drunk, had sex, fallen asleep all tangled up. Judy’s hair was tousled. The makeup she hadn’t bothered to take off smeared.

“I’ll get you a glass of water and be right back.”

“Kay.” Judy would be asleep before V returned, but at least the water would be there for her in the morning.

At the sink she filled a glass and wet a towel. The glass went on Judy’s nightstand—the *tink* of it causing a brief halt in the light buzz of Judy’s nighttime breathing that never quite materialized into a full snore—and the towel went to the mess on the floor, which was already beginning to dry and harden. V tried not to look at it, taking it back out to the kitchen where, after a brief glance at the laundry machines, she instead threw it in the trash. She poured herself her own drink and stood, the polymer counter cold against her bare ass, staring out the sliding glass doors that led to the apartment’s balcony. She could see the lights of Bellevue, out across Lake Washington, burning away in the night. It wasn’t much compared to Night City’s neon hell of a skyline, but it was pretty in a more peaceful way.

When she’d finished the entire glass of water, more than she wanted maybe but a bit of a precaution against a morning hangover, she took an experimental deep breath. It hurt, but it didn’t induce another fit of coughing and she couldn’t taste the copper tang of blood anymore. Whatever was hemorrhaging inside of her had apparently had enough for the night. V decided she had, too, and made her way back to bed. Judy was warm under the covers, *which you also hog my dear*, and snuggled up against her as V lay down. She found herself staring at the ceiling, waiting for sleep to come.

Please, this is all I want anymore. I’m not ready for it to end.

To whom was she praying? Not a believer, was V, but she supposed even non-believers prayed. The universe was too big and scary not to ask it for a little help once in a while, and she needed help pretty badly. Wanted it pretty badly. There was so much *life* out there for her still. So much to see and do now that she was free of the shackles she’d inadvertently wrapped around her own wrists when she’d decided she had something to prove to the city in which she’d grown up. It wasn’t fucking fair. She’d

done everything right just to have Alt drop that bombshell on her there at the end. Six months. Maybe a little more. Fuck.

Never give up, Johnny had told her, there in Mikoshi. Was he still out there somewhere, merged with Alt but still somehow *him*, surfing the waves of data beyond the Blackwall? She liked to think he was. That not even complete data merger could subsume that personality entirely.

Never give up. Well, she wasn't fucking going to.

V closed her eyes and slept.

Chapter 2

The Needle

The Fixer's name was Marlow. She was tall, rail-thin, and looked a bit like a stretched-out piece of taffy in her tight clothes under a long black trench coat. She had pale skin, silver hair streaked with red and pulled back in a tight ponytail, and might have been in her forties. Might also have been in her sixties or eighties. It was hard to tell with modern cosmetic enhancements. She was leaning against the railing, all of Seattle spread out below her, and smoking a black cigarette just as thin and long as she was.

Judy reached for one of her own cigarettes, briefly fantasized about throwing the entire pack over the edge and off into the wind, and instead jammed one in her mouth and lit it. She stood before the woman and, after a moment, held out her hand. "Judy Alvarez."

This gained her a patronizing smile, but after a moment Marlow shook. "Nice to meet you. Why here?"

Judy shrugged. Blew smoke. "New to the city. Figured it was a good place to get a view. Surprised you came, really. Most people in your line of work don't do house calls."

It wasn't that it was impossible to meet a Fixer face-to-face, or at least so V had told her, just that usually you had to go to *their* turf. Made them feel safe. Meeting a stranger at a random location was reckless.

"I have four people up here watching," Marlow said with another smile, this one with a bit less of an edge to it. "And besides, you're a hot-shit BD editor, not a merc. My sources tell me you can handle a gun all right, but also that you've got no real taste for it. It's your girlfriend I'd be worried about meeting with anything less than a few turrets at my side."

"How do you know she's not sitting somewhere with a sniper rifle trained on your head right now?" Judy asked, keeping her voice light. She didn't want to imply a threat, but she didn't *not* want to imply it, either.

Marlow gave a short, harsh laugh. "We know where she is. Wouldn't have shown if not. She's at AntraTech, and I'll hear from my people the moment she leaves."

V was at AntraTech. Third time in three days. This time they were cutting a piece out of her brain, which Judy had spent the morning desperately trying not to think about. V had assured her that it would be a very *small* piece, to which Judy had responded (rather sensibly, she thought), “Yeah ... of your *brain*.”

“Shoulda known you’d be keeping tabs.” Judy took another drag on her cigarette. Fucking death sticks. She knew she should stop. Didn’t even really like them, anymore, but they had their hooks in her. She’d quit for a while but first there’d been the whole thing with Ev, and then Clouds, and then falling in love with a woman who had an experimental chip lodged in her head that was killing her. It was a lot of stress, and the nicotine had called to her. She couldn’t even remember exactly when she’d started up again. Hadn’t she bummed one from V at some point? But why had V been smoking? “You’re right. This isn’t my game and I don’t know all the plays.”

Marlow pitched the butt of her own smoke off the side. “Honestly? Was surprised to hear from you and not her. Her, I’ve got work for.”

“You’ll hear from her when she’s ... ready. In the meantime, she doesn’t know I’m here and it would be better if it stayed that way.”

“Intriguing.”

Judy stepped up to the railing and leaned out. The Needle was over one hundred years old, now, and while it wasn’t the best view in the city, it was pretty high up the list. Best of all, unlike the others, you didn’t need to be a C-suite Corpo or a billionaire penthouse owner to get it. Seattle sprawled out before her, snarled and tangled with traffic, steaming as the morning’s rain burned off in a rare burst of sun that might hold for another hour or two. A blimp was flying in slow circles over downtown, its sides emblazoned with animated ads for synthpork. She finished her cigarette. Tossed it. Watched it fall.

“Gonna give me some idea what this meeting’s all about?” Marlow asked, turning to face the same direction as Judy and glancing over at her.

Judy waited a moment before speaking. “I don’t trust AntraTech.”

“Congratulations. Something in common with every single sensible human being out there, and probably quite a few chimpanzees, if there are any left from their last clinical trial.”

“Right, no, I get it. Corporations and *trust* don’t really belong in the same sentence, but it’s ... it just feels too easy. We need this to actually work.”

“The hell are you talking about?”

“V needs something from AntraTech. She cut a deal. Think they’re going to try to fuck her.”

Marlow arched an eyebrow. “And that’s *your* job.”

Judy sighed. Straight people loved to bring it up when two women were having sex, as if that was all that held her to V. As if you couldn’t go rent a doll anywhere you wanted and get whatever it was you pleased. As if there weren’t braidances out there that could fulfill any urge, no matter how kinky. Yes, she and V fucked. What made the fucking *matter* was all the other stuff.

“Do you know what it’s like, being with a merc but not *being* a merc?” She asked.

“Not since I was sixteen,” Marlow said. She’d already lit another cigarette. Judy’s fingers twitched, but she resisted the urge.

“We keep things compartmentalized. I can’t know about her work because it’d put me in danger. Suppose just *being* with her puts me in danger, but whatever. So, sometimes she takes a call and then she says, *late night tonight, don’t wait up*. And then she leaves, and I have an extra glass of wine and maybe roll some canab into my last cigarette for the night, so I can try to sleep. And when she comes home and goes right to the shower to wash the *blood* out of her hair, I never ask her how work was.”

“Don’t want to know?”

“*She* doesn’t want me to know. So, I don’t ask, and I don’t go digging, and she doesn’t talk about it. It’s just this thing that’s always there and we ignore as best we can. Like I said. Compartmentalized. But I live with it every single day, just the same.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

Judy glared over at her. “Cuz you made a gonk joke about fucking and I need you to understand that I could get a call any minute and find out that some asshole painted the wall with her brains. She’s almost died like a dozen times since we got together, and I’m *still* with her, and I wouldn’t change a thing. Not a single fucking thing. But I need leverage on those Corpo *pendejos* at Antra, because they’re going to try to fuck her, and she’s so desperate she might let it happen.”

Marlow sucked smoke. “Rule of thumb in this town is you don’t fuck with Antra.”

“Heard that. Heard you were the woman to talk to about breaking the rules.”

Marlow leaned against the rail. Flicked ashes. Looked out at Seattle. “I don’t get it.”

“Don’t get what?”

“You’re shackled up with superwoman. Think I’d be up here talking to you if I didn’t know who she is? What she’s done? Christ ... you know what I thought? I thought you were gonna tell me she was fucking around behind your back and you needed some proof. Standard gig. I get vid of her buried between someone else’s legs, you cry for a while, I make sympathetic noises, then you pay me.”

Judy gave a little scoffing laugh. “That’s not what this is.”

“I know that *now*. So, what do you need me for? If she wants something from Antra, she can just take it, like she did from ‘Saka. Why make a deal at all?”

“Not going into the details. It’s not something she can take. It’s something they have to give.”

A lengthy pause as Marlow digested this. Then, “She’s sick.”

“No comment.”

“None needed. What do *you* want from Antra?”

“Told you. Leverage. Man at the top’s named Bannerman and if he’s dirty, I want to know about it. Anyone else we can find out about, I want that, too. You have people who can get past their ICE?”

“He’s a corporate CEO. The question is *how* dirty.”

“Asked if you can—”

“AntraTech’s wound up like carbon fiber, but even carbon fiber can be unwoven if with time and patience. Let’s assume my people can do what you’re asking. You have any idea how much this is going to cost you?”

“Not a concern.”

“No? You’re a BD editor. Nice gig, nice living, especially if you can get in at a studio that does more than porno, but it’s not a *money’s no object* job. Top of the line mercs, runners, solos ... they do real preem for a few years. Then they get old and slow and either turn into fixers themselves or get killed. Your girl’s too smart not to be saving, and not to notice if you start skimming without explaining what’s up. Where the Eddies coming from?”

Judy wasn't about to tell this woman about the tech she'd started testing in that lake by the dam, in the black waters at its bottom where her home town had once stood, where she and V had shared a sensory connection unlike anything either woman had experienced before. She wasn't about to discuss the work she'd done perfecting it, the patents she'd quietly filed for, or the meetings on her schedule. "My *abuela* always told me that telling someone how you gonna make money just invites them to figure out how to get a piece of it. The transfer will clear. What else matters?"

Marlow gave a little impressed grimace. "Your grandmother had her shit together."

Judy wanted to correct that to *has* but bit it back. She shouldn't have mentioned the woman at all. Relatives were leverage for the wrong kind of people. She settled for nodding. "Can you do this?"

"Told you I could."

"*Will* you do it?" Judy found she couldn't look at the fixer.

There was a long pause. Then Marlow blew smoke, tossed her second butt over the edge, and turned back toward the entrance to the elevators. "You'll hear from me in three days."

Judy stared out at the city spread out below her. She supposed that would have to be good enough.



V was on the couch at home, a bandage stuck to the side of her head where the hair was short and a bottle of tequila in front of her. She had huge dark circles under both eyes and her skin was pale even for a woman Judy sometimes teased as being so white she glowed in the dark. She gave Judy a wan smile and gestured toward two empty rocks glasses sitting by the bottle. "Want a drink?"

"You start without me?" Judy flopped down onto the couch.

V shook her head. Winced. "Not sure I should."

Judy tilted her head, letting her expression ask the question.

“I don’t think my head’s ever hurt this bad. A hangover on top of that might kill me.” A single tear gathered at the corner of V’s eye and she wiped it away.

Judy’s heart ached. She’d seen this woman come home with bruises, gashes, and once a piece of shrapnel still lodged in her shoulder that Judy had had to dig out with a steak knife. Never had V looked this hurt. This sad. This lost. The headache must’ve been really something. She took V’s hand. “They give you anything for the pain?”

V held out a data shard. “Supposed to help. Basically puts a short-term virus into my system that deadens my pain receptors. Didn’t want to chip it though.”

Judy took the chip and held it between her thumb and forefinger. “Why’s that?”

“Have this thing against shards built to mess with my brain.”

“Mmm.” Judy laughed a little. “Can’t imagine why.”

“Wanted to wait for you. I’m just ... I’m a little ...”

“*Querida*, they cut into your fucking brain and then just sent you off like it was a flu shot. You don’t have to explain anything to me. Come here.” She put her hands on V’s head—gently, so gently—and made her girlfriend tilt her neck, exposing the data port behind her ear. Without hesitation, she slotted the chip in. V leaned her head back, and now the tears came freely, sliding from the sides of her eyes and down her cheeks.

“Fuck,” she said.

“You okay?”

V took a little hitching breath. “That’s so much better. I shouldn’t have waited. I’m just ... I was just ...”

Judy realized V was struggling to say the word, simple as it was. She understood. It wasn’t a word V had much practice saying. “You were scared.”

V didn’t open her eyes, but she scrunched up her face. After a moment, Judy realized she was fighting full-on sobs. She tried to think if she’d ever seen V cry like that and didn’t think she had. She wasn’t sure how she was going to react if V lost the fight, probably would start bawling herself, but eventually her *calabacita* got herself under some semblance of control.

“Come here.” Judy took V’s shoulders this time and guided V’s head down to her lap. Taking care to avoid the bandaged area, she began to stroke V’s hair. “I’m here. It’s okay to be scared. I’m here.”

When V spoke, her voice was little more than a croak. “Times like these, I miss Johnny. He’d tell me to grow a pair and stop wallowing.”

“Johnny Silverhand can go fuck himself with a straight razor.” Judy was not a fan of the man who’d nearly killed her girlfriend. Was still killing her, in a way. She continued to stroke V’s hair.

“That feels nice.” V’s voice was fuzzy.

Judy smiled. “Good.”

In another minute, V was asleep. Judy looked down at her. Blood was seeping through the bandage on her head, forming a little spot in a shape that reminded Judy of a wrench, or a dumbbell. She felt a wave of fury sweep over her. This was what AntraTech did when they were *helping*. How bad was it going to get once they had what they wanted from V and decided they didn’t need her anymore?

Marlow had better figure something out. Yes, she’d better. Because otherwise Judy was going to do it herself.

Careful not to disturb her girlfriend, Judy reached forward with the hand that wasn’t occupied with V’s hair and poured herself a glass of tequila.