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Beneath the Glass City

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Introduction

In the heart of what was once old Europe, a new city rises: New Vienna, a glittering testament to human resilience and ambition. Crowned by skyscrapers of living glass and bathed in the ceaseless pulse of digital light, the city floats above the ruins of a world undone by economic collapse. Here, the air shimmers with possibility and peril; fortunes are made in seconds, and lives are lost in whispers. Hover-trams slice through boulevards aglow with holographic displays, while unseen eyes watch from a thousand security grids, hungry for any sign of subversion. Yet beneath the opulent surface, shadows gather—poverty, unrest, and old secrets festering in the city's iron bones.

To the privileged few, New Vienna is a paradise of technological wonder, a place where innovation manifests overnight and the future feels within reach. But every paradise has its price, and in these shining streets, the cost is steep. The city is split—above, the elite sip imported nectar in their aerogardens; below, the desperate trade in secrets and labor, surviving on the margins of society's barcode. Surveillance drones hover at every corner, while the ever-present hum of data traffic gives rhythm to an uneasy peace.

Among the invisible, in the crumbling tiers of the old city, live those who ferry the most sought-after currency in New Vienna: information. Data couriers—smugglers of encrypted memories, stolen code, and digital confessions—are both reviled and needed, a breed shaped by necessity and tempered by danger. Their world is one of hidden passageways, quick deals, and betrayal waiting behind every transaction. For those like Mila Hartmann, every day is a test of loyalty—and survival.

Once, Mila dreamed of something better. Born to these streets, she learned to rely on her instincts and never to trust a promise. After years running memory-chips through the city's arteries, Mila sees a way out: one final job before she goes legit, cashing in her old contacts and dangerous skills for a fresh start. But in New Vienna, the past is never far behind—and neither is the surveillance state. She finds herself cornered by a ruthless blackmailer, drawn into a game where common criminals and corporate titans all gamble for control of the future.

Mila's quest for redemption sets her crashing through the city's shimmering facade and into its darkest chambers. Friends and foes blur as she becomes entangled in a conspiracy that reaches to the highest echelons of power. Caught between survival and sacrifice, Mila must decide who she can trust—and what she's willing to risk—to expose the truth beneath the glass city.

New Vienna is a place where fortunes turn on a secret, and the most dangerous weapon isn't a gun, but a few well-chosen bits of code. This is a tale of loyalty, justice, and the cost of freedom, told on the razor's edge between hope and despair. Welcome to New Vienna—where everyone has something to hide and little time to lose.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Skyline Divide

Mila Hartmann moved through the pulsing arteries of New Vienna like a ghost in the machine, her old combat boots a muted counterpoint to the city's electric hum. Above her, the towers of the corporate district, collectively known as the 'Crown Jewels,' pierced a sky painted in shades of artificial dawn. They shimmered with a dynamic outer skin of luminescent glass, displaying ever-changing corporate logos and public service announcements in a dizzying ballet of light. Below, in the 'Undercroft,' where she now walked, the light was harsher, the air thick with the smell of recycled synth-fuel and damp concrete.

This was her world, or at least, the part of it she was trying to leave behind. For years, Mila had navigated the labyrinthine routes of the Undercroft, a data courier with a reputation for speed, discretion, and a knack for disappearing when the heat came down. Her face, framed by practical, dark hair, rarely betrayed emotion. She'd learned that early on: in New Vienna, sentiment was a weakness, and information, the true currency. Every flicker of an eye, every tightening of a jaw, could give away a secret.

Her current destination was 'The Coil,' a notorious black-market data exchange tucked away in the forgotten underbelly of Sector 7. It was a place where anything digital could be bought, sold, or stolen, and where the line between legal and illegal blurred into a hazy, dangerous gray. Mila was there for a meet, a final delivery for a client she'd never seen, only known through encrypted comms. This was it, she told herself, the last one. No more desperate runs through rain-slicked alleyways, no more paranoid glances over her shoulder.

She pulled the collar of her worn synth-leather jacket tighter as a gust of wind, smelling of ozone and recycled air, swept through the narrow passage. The Undercroft was a living organism, a sprawling slum built on the bones of the old city, powered by scavenged tech and fueled by desperation. Makeshift stalls lined the grimy thoroughfares, hawking everything from cloned protein strips to illicit neuro-stimulants. Holographic projections, mostly advertisements for the luxuries of the upper city, flickered erratically, their broken images adding to the pervasive sense of decay.

Mila navigated the throng with practiced ease, her eyes scanning for familiar faces, or more importantly, unfamiliar ones. Data couriers were a necessary evil in New Vienna. The official channels of information were tightly controlled by the ruling corporations and the Governor's office, making independent, untraceable data transfer a lucrative, albeit highly dangerous, enterprise. They were the underground arteries of the city, carrying the lifeblood of secrets that kept the gears of New Vienna turning, or

sometimes, grinding to a halt.

Her own past was a tangled knot of bad choices and survival instincts. Growing up an orphan in the Undercroft, she'd learned early that trust was a luxury she couldn't afford. Data running had been her ticket out of outright destitution, a brutal education in the city's true power dynamics. She'd seen what happened to couriers who got sloppy, who trusted the wrong people, or who, worse, looked too closely at their payloads. Most ended up as anonymous data-ghosts, wiped from existence without a trace.

Mila pushed through a heavy, rust-stained door, the scent of stale synth-ale and synthetic tobacco hitting her first. The Coil was a maze of dimly lit booths and private alcoves, the air thrumming with the low murmur of hushed negotiations and the rhythmic click of data-pads. She spotted her contact, a wiry man known only as 'Ghost,' hunched over a data-terminal in a secluded corner. He was a broker, a middleman who facilitated deals, and he rarely met anyone face-to-face. That alone put Mila on edge.

Ghost looked up, his eyes, perpetually bloodshot from too many late nights staring at screens, narrowed slightly. He didn't smile, no one did in The Coil, but there was an unusual tension in his hunched shoulders. "Mila," he rasped, his voice a gravelly whisper. "Punctual as ever. Got something special for you tonight."

Mila didn't reply immediately. She slid into the seat opposite him, her gaze sweeping the small alcove. No overt signs of trouble, but her gut, a reliable instrument honed by years of close calls, was tightening. "Special isn't usually good when it comes from you, Ghost," she said, her voice low and even. "I thought this was the last drop for the old account."

Ghost pushed a small, unmarked data-chip across the table. It was thicker than a standard memory stick, indicating a significant storage capacity, and its surface felt unusually cool against her gloved finger. "It is the last drop, in a way," he said, avoiding her gaze. "But this ain't for the old account. This is... an opportunity. A final, highly lucrative opportunity."

Mila's jaw tensed. She hated surprises, especially when they involved 'opportunities' presented in places like The Coil. "What kind of opportunity?" she asked, her voice laced with suspicion. "And why are you here in person? You usually send a drone for these things."

Ghost finally met her eyes, and Mila saw a flicker of genuine fear in their depths. "Because this isn't a simple package, Mila. It's... sensitive. The client insisted on direct contact, and they insisted on you. Said you were the only one reliable enough to handle it." He leaned in, his voice dropping even lower. "They know about your plans

to go legit. They know about your clean slate initiative."

Mila's breath hitched. That information was supposed to be completely secure, hidden deep in the underbelly of her encrypted network. Only a handful of people, her closest associates, knew of her intentions to leave the life. And none of them would ever betray her. This wasn't just a job; it was a threat. Someone was watching her, intimately.

"Who are they?" she demanded, her hand instinctively hovering near the vibro-knife she kept strapped to her forearm.

Ghost shook his head, his face a mask of genuine apprehension. "Can't say. All I know is, they have a lot of pull. Enough to make sure your 'clean slate' becomes a very dirty record if you refuse." He gestured to the chip. "This package needs to go to Sector Zero, to a private vault beneath the Governor's Residence. Tonight."

Mila's blood ran cold. Sector Zero was the most heavily guarded, meticulously surveilled district in New Vienna, home to the city's elite, its government, and its most sensitive data. Getting in was next to impossible, getting out with a package like this, even more so. It reeked of a trap.

"No," Mila said, pushing the chip back towards him. "I'm out. I told you, Ghost, I'm done. Find someone else."

Ghost didn't touch the chip. Instead, he pulled out a small, sleek data-slate and activated it. A holographic image flickered to life above the table. It was a recent surveillance feed, a grainy shot of a small, nondescript apartment in the Undercroft. Mila recognized it instantly. It was her sister's place.

"They also know about your sister, Lena," Ghost said, his voice flat, devoid of the usual opportunistic greed. It was a warning, pure and simple. "About her medical treatments, her precarious health. A shame if something were to... disrupt her continued access to vital care."

Mila felt a cold rage blossom in her chest. Lena was her only family, her anchor in a world that constantly threatened to drag her under. Her sister suffered from a rare neurological disorder, a consequence of the polluted Undercroft environment, and her survival depended on expensive, high-tech treatments provided by a private clinic. Treatments Mila paid for, meticulously, through her illicit earnings.

"You son of a bitch," she hissed, her eyes blazing. "You knew this was coming, didn't you?"

Ghost flinched, but held her gaze. "I'm just the messenger, Mila. Believe me, I wouldn't

be here if I had a choice. They don't give you one, not when they're this powerful. You take the chip, you deliver it, and your sister stays safe. You refuse... well, I'd rather not think about the alternatives."

Mila stared at the chip, then at the flickering image of her sister's apartment. The city, which she had always seen as a collection of challenges to overcome, now felt like a cage, its glittering facade a cruel mockery. Her dream of a clean slate, of a normal life, shattered into a thousand reflective shards. She was trapped, blackmailed into a job that promised nothing but escalating danger.

"What's in it?" Mila asked, her voice barely a whisper, the rage giving way to a cold, hard resolve. "What's so important it's worth threatening a civilian?"

Ghost shook his head again. "Not a clue. Encrypted to the core. All I know is it's valuable enough to cause a lot of trouble for a lot of important people if it gets out. And even more trouble for you if it doesn't get where it's going." He glanced around The Coil, a flicker of paranoia in his eyes. "They're watching, Mila. Already. If you try anything clever, they'll know."

Mila picked up the chip. It felt heavy in her palm, not just with data, but with the weight of her compromised future. This wasn't just 'one last run'; it was a dive headfirst into the abyss she'd been trying to escape. Her sister's life depended on it.

"Details," Mila said, her voice now flat and devoid of emotion. "Give me the coordinates, the drop-point, the access codes. Everything."

Ghost exhaled slowly, a visible release of tension. He quickly uploaded the necessary information to her personal data-pad, his fingers flying over the holographic keyboard. "The drop is set for 0200 hours. Go through the old sewer access under District 5. It'll get you close to Sector Zero without tripping the main grid. Just follow the marked route on your pad." He pushed a small, disposable comm-link towards her. "Use this once you're inside. It'll connect you directly to the client. No names, no questions, just follow instructions."

Mila nodded, pocketing the comm-link and the data-chip. Her mind was already racing, analyzing routes, potential pitfalls, escape vectors. This wasn't going to be a simple delivery. This was a forced infiltration into the heart of New Vienna's power structure, and she had a feeling she wasn't just carrying data, but a ticking bomb.

"Don't screw this up, Mila," Ghost said, his voice unusually earnest. "For your sake. For Lena's."

Mila stood up, her gaze hardening. "You just made sure I won't, Ghost," she replied, her voice dangerously quiet. "But if anything happens to her, I swear, I'll dismantle

your operations brick by brick, and then I'll come for you."

She turned and walked out of The Coil, leaving the shadowy broker to his fears. The Undercroft seemed to press in on her, its familiar grime now feeling like a shroud. The glittering skyline of the Crown Jewels, once a distant, unattainable dream, now loomed like a prison wall. Her path to legitimacy was gone, replaced by a desperate, high-stakes gamble. Mila Hartmann, the street-smart data courier, was back in the game, whether she wanted to be or not. And this time, the stakes were higher than she could have ever imagined.

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