



# End Game

In the cluttered heart of Charlie's Beverly Hills office, the air turned sharp as four Glowies pushed through the door of Colony Records, their plain jackets and clipped strides screaming intent. The hum of vinyls spinning in the background and the clack of keyboards from the staff stuttered to a halt, eyes darting to the intruders. Charlie stood behind his desk, arms crossed, his denim jacket creased from a long day, his grin gone, replaced by a hard glint in his eyes. The lead Glowie—#1, broad-shouldered, with a jaw like granite—stepped forward, his voice low, edged with authority.

"Well, Charlie, where's the package and what was in it?" he asked, his gaze boring into Charlie, unblinking, the question a hook meant to snag.

Charlie didn't flinch, his stance rooted, his voice steady but laced with defiance. "Hey, I got a business to run here. Don't have time for your games. No warrant, no info, and I'm pleading the Fifth. You can't just barge in and try to intimidate me—or my staff. Get off my property. Now."

The words landed like a slammed door, the room's tension spiking, the other three Glowies shifting slightly—#2 near the door, lean and watchful, #3 by the vinyl racks, scanning faces, #4 hovering near the reception desk, his hand resting too casually on his belt. The staff froze, a young assistant clutching a stack of contracts, her eyes wide, while the receptionist's fingers hovered over her phone,

unsure whether to call someone or stay still. Outside, Sunset Boulevard buzzed, oblivious, the neon glow of LA's pulse a world away from the standoff inside.

In the back, the tech guy—wiry, glasses slipping down his nose—heard the raised voices, Charlie's sharp rebuke cutting through the walls. His heart jackhammered, the memory of that USB stick—John's ghost, those crypto wallets—flashing like a warning. *Nope, not getting dragged into this.* He bolted from his cluttered desk, monitors still glowing with code, and slipped into his small office, the door clicking shut behind him. He turned the lock, the sound loud in his ears, and sank into his chair, breath shallow, hands trembling as he stared at the door, willing it to hold. *Charlie's got this*, he thought, but the Glowies' presence felt like a noose tightening, and he wasn't about to stick his neck out.

Glowie #1's lips twitched, not quite a smile, more a predator sizing up resistance. "Pleading the Fifth, huh?" he said, stepping closer, his shadow falling across Charlie's desk, strewn with tour schedules and coffee mugs. "That's cute, Charlie, but the Postal Service doesn't miss much. We know a package hit your door—no return address, routed through half the globe. Sound familiar?" His voice stayed calm, but the threat coiled beneath it, his eyes flicking to the staff, daring someone to crack.

Charlie leaned forward, his hands planting on the desk, his voice dropping to a growl. "You're fishing, and I'm not biting. You got nothing but guesses, and I got rights. My staff's got nothing to say either—unless you've got paper from a judge, you're just blowing hot air. Door's that way." He jerked his head toward the exit, his stare locked on Glowie #1, unflinching, the room's silence heavy, every word a gauntlet thrown.

Glowie #2, by the door, shifted, his hand brushing his jacket, eyes scanning Charlie's face for a tell—fear, guilt, anything. "We're not here to play," he said, his tone flatter, colder. "That package ties to a fugitive. You're smart, Charlie. You don't want to be the guy shielding him." His gaze slid to the assistant, still clutching her papers, her knuckles white. "Or maybe someone else knows something?" he added, softer, probing, letting the question hang.

The assistant swallowed, her eyes darting to Charlie, then the floor, her voice barely a whisper. "I—I don't know anything about a package." Her words shook, but she held her ground, Charlie's defiance a shield she leaned into. The receptionist, bolder, crossed her arms, her nails tapping her elbow. "Like he said,

we're busy. You want to talk, bring a warrant. Otherwise, you're scaring my clients." Her chin lifted, a spark of LA grit flashing through her nerves.

Glowie #3, near the vinyls, picked up a record—Lucy's latest promo, her face glowing on the sleeve—and turned it over, casual but deliberate. "Big star you got here," he said, glancing at Charlie. "Wouldn't want her caught up in something messy, would you? Packages, fugitives... bad for business." He set the record down, too gently, his eyes never leaving Charlie's.

Charlie's jaw tightened, Lucy's name a line they'd crossed, but he kept his cool, his voice ice. "You're reaching, and you're wasting my time. Threaten my people again, and I'm calling my lawyer. You know the way out." His finger jabbed toward the door, his heart pounding but his face a mask, Lucy's future—her music, her freedom—a fire he'd guard, no matter how close these suits got.

In the locked office, the tech guy's breath hitched, his ear pressed to the door, catching fragments—*package, fugitive, Lucy*. His fingers twitched toward his phone, then stopped. *Don't move, don't say shit*, he told himself, the USB's secrets burning in his mind—wallets, crypto, John's shadow. He'd checked it, called it clean, but now? Now it felt like a bomb, and he wasn't about to light the fuse. He sank lower in his chair, the glow of his monitors a dim comfort, the commotion outside a storm he prayed would pass.

Glowie #1 lingered, his stare heavy, weighing Charlie's resolve. Then he nodded, slow, like he was filing every detail—Charlie's defiance, the staff's silence, the locked door he'd clocked in the back. "We'll be back," he said, his voice a promise, not a threat, his hand signaling the others. They moved as one, #2 holding the door, #3 giving the room a last sweep, #4's boots heavy on the hardwood as they stepped into the neon haze of Sunset Boulevard, the black SUV waiting at the curb, its engine a low growl.

Charlie exhaled, his shoulders easing just a fraction, but his eyes stayed on the door, the Glowies' shadow lingering like smoke. The assistant slumped against a file cabinet, her breath shaky, while the receptionist muttered, "Assholes," under her breath, already texting her girlfriend about the drama. Charlie's mind raced—Lucy, Theresa, that USB, John's ghost. He'd protect them, no question, but the Glowies were closing in, their net tightening, and he'd need to play this smarter than ever to keep Lucy's star burning free.

In the back, the tech guy stayed locked in, his pulse slowing but his gut twisting. *They'll be back*, he thought, the USB's weight heavier now, its secrets a chain linking him to Charlie, to Lucy, to a fugitive he'd never met. Colony Records hummed back to life, but the air felt different—charged, waiting, the Glowies' footsteps an echo that wouldn't fade.

In the stark fluorescence of a Lower Manhattan courtroom, the air buzzed with the low hum of urgency, case files stacked like small towers on the judge's bench. The Glowies—four of them, led by #1 with his granite jaw—stood rigid, their plain jackets out of place among the wood-paneled walls and the faint echo of gavels past. They'd pushed hard for a warrant, their application a tightly woven net aimed at Charlie's Colony Records, the mysterious package, and the shadow of John's crypto. But the judge, a wiry man with silver hair and eyes sharpened by years of sifting truth from noise, leaned forward, his voice cutting through their carefully rehearsed pitch like a blade.

"Gentlemen, don't waste my time with overreach," he said, his tone dry but firm, glasses glinting under the lights. "I've got enough on my plate—Mangione's mess, Pam Bondi breathing down my neck. This?" He tapped their warrant request, a slim stack dwarfed by others. "Too broad, too vague. Fishing expedition dressed up as probable cause. I'm formally throwing it out. Try again next time—bring something solid." He waved a hand, already turning to the next file, the dismissal a door slammed shut.

Glowie #1's jaw tightened, a flicker of frustration breaking his stoic mask. #2, beside him, shifted, his fingers twitching like he wanted to argue but knew better. #3 and #4 exchanged a glance—sharp, silent, the kind that promised they'd regroup, not quit. The lead agent's voice stayed level, but the edge was there. "Understood, Your Honor," he said, the words clipped, a nod to protocol masking the sting. They filed out, their boots a steady drum on the marble floor, the courthouse's bustle swallowing them as they stepped into Manhattan's gray chill. Outside, #1 muttered to #2, low enough for only them, "He's protecting someone—or he's just tired. Either way, we're not done." The SUV idled at the curb, its black bulk a quiet vow to circle back, their hunt for John undeterred, Lucy's orbit still a beacon they'd chase.

Across the country, in the warm clutter of Charlie's Beverly Hills office, the phone rang, cutting through the soft spin of a demo track on the turntable. Charlie

snatched it up, his denim jacket slung over a chair, his desk a chaos of tour dates and Lucy's promo shots. On the line was Bob, his attorney—a bulldog in a tailored suit, voice gravelly from years of courtroom brawls. "Charlie, good call stonewalling those feds," Bob said, a faint chuckle in his tone. "They're sniffing around the postal scan—pure fishing. Tried for a warrant in Manhattan, but the judge tossed it. Overreach, he called it. We'll get any follow-up dismissed too. They've got nothing solid, so they'll have to look elsewhere. Lucy's covered, don't worry—her name's not even in their crosshairs."

Charlie leaned back, a slow grin breaking through the tension he'd carried since the Glowies' visit. "Thanks, Bob, you're a lifesaver," he said, his voice warm but firm, fingers drumming the desk. "They came in here like they owned the damn place—disrespectful, throwing their weight around. I wasn't having it. And I need them kept away from Lucy, period. She's got enough on her plate—John's ghost, the tour, her heart's still raw. I won't let them spook her. She's too valuable, too special. Expensive client, sure, but it's more than that—she's family now. Keep her safe and sound."

Bob's voice softened, a nod in his tone. "Got it, Charlie. Lucy's insulated—my job's making sure it stays that way. Those feds want to play hardball, they'll hit my wall first. Focus on her music, her gigs. I'll handle the shadows." A pause, then a lighter note. "Heard she's killing it at Wonder Ballroom soon. You're doing right by her."

Charlie's grin widened, pride flaring for his star. "Damn right, Bob. She's a phoenix, rising every night. I'll keep the stage ready—she'll shine, no matter what those suits try." He hung up, the office settling back into its rhythm—staff typing, vinyls humming, Lucy's latest single a faint pulse from a speaker. Outside, Sunset Boulevard glowed, unaware of the victory, small but fierce, that kept Lucy's light untouchable for now.

His mind flicked to her, holed up in the RV with Theresa, wrestling her funk, John's video still a weight. The Glowies were blind, their warrant dead, but Charlie knew they'd claw back—John's shadow was too big, Lucy's star too bright to ignore. He'd guard her, Bob's legal armor at his side, the tour's momentum a shield. Wonder Ballroom loomed, Portland's crowd waiting, and Charlie vowed to keep it hers—her music, her truth, free from feds and ghosts, her voice the fire no one could dim.

The Portland dusk settled over the quiet lot, the Willamette River's faint shimmer a backdrop to the RV parked under a canopy of pines. Inside, the air was still, heavy with the weight of Lucy's funk, the hum of the fridge the only sound breaking the hush. Lucy lay curled on the couch, her pale blue nightshirt barely covering her, no bra or underwear, her body unguarded in the safety of their haven. Her hair spilled across the cushion, tangled from sleep, her eyes half-open, staring at nothing, John's video still a ghost in her chest. Theresa sat nearby in the recliner, her own hair a wild mess, a loose tank top and shorts her only armor, a tablet forgotten in her lap. The RV—John's gift—felt like a cocoon, shielding them from the world, until a sharp knock shattered the calm.

Theresa flinched, her heart lurching—she wasn't expecting anyone. Her eyes darted to Lucy, who stirred but didn't rise, then to the door, her bare feet padding softly across the floor. She peered through the small curtain, cautious, her breath catching until she saw the familiar denim jacket, the easy slouch. "Charlie," she muttered, relief mixing with unease. "I wasn't expecting you." Her voice was low, frayed, as she cracked the door, her messy hair and casual clothes making her feel exposed.

Charlie stood outside, his grin soft but steady, the company car's taillights fading down the lot. "Wanted to see how you were," he said, his tone warm, genuine, eyes flicking past her to the RV's dim interior. "Pay my respects, help any way I can." His hands slipped into his pockets, a gesture of ease, but his gaze held concern, a quiet plea to let him in.

Theresa hesitated, glancing back at Lucy—sprawled, vulnerable, not ready for eyes beyond her own. But Charlie's voice, his intent, carried the weight of family, not just business. She exhaled, stepping aside reluctantly, the door creaking wider. "Come in," she said, her tone soft but guarded, brushing a hand through her hair, wishing she'd had warning to pull herself together.

Charlie stepped inside, his boots light on the RV's floor, the space feeling smaller with his presence. His eyes found Lucy, curled on the couch, her nightshirt riding up slightly, her bare legs tucked tight. He didn't stare, his gaze settling on her face, searching for the spark he knew. "Hey, Luce, how you doing?" he asked, his voice gentle but firm, carrying the warmth of a friend who'd seen her soar and wouldn't let her fall.

Lucy lifted her head, her eyes meeting his, heavy with the fog of her grief but flickering with recognition. A wry smile tugged at her lips, small but real, a crack in her haze. "I'm okay," she said, her voice soft, raw, pushing herself to sit up a bit, the nightshirt shifting but her care for modesty dulled by exhaustion. "I promise, Charlie, I'll be ready for the next gig." The words were a vow, to him, to herself, her fingers clutching the blanket's edge, grounding her against the ache.

Charlie nodded, easing into a chair across from her, his hands resting on his knees, his grin fading to something serious, protective. "I've got my attorney, Bob—he's a bulldog, Luce. He'll keep the feds off your back if they come sniffing. They tried for a warrant, got slapped down in Manhattan. They've got nothing, and Bob'll make sure it stays that way." He leaned forward, his eyes locking with hers, steady, insistent. "But you gotta pull yourself out of this funk, okay? Focus. Your fans out there—they love you, they need you. Take care of yourself, Luce. You're important—to them, to me, to T. You're more than a client, you're..." He paused, searching, then softened. "You're family."

Lucy's smile wavered, her throat tightening, Charlie's words piercing the fog—fans, family, a life beyond John's shadow. She nodded, slow, the promise sinking in, her fingers loosening on the blanket. "Thanks, Charlie," she whispered, her voice catching, not with tears but with a spark of resolve, faint but growing. "I'll try. I will."

Theresa stood by the dinette, arms crossed, her messy hair framing a face etched with gratitude and worry. She caught Charlie's eye, a silent thank you passing between them—he'd come, unasked, to lift Lucy's weight, even if just a fraction. "She'll get there," Theresa said, her voice low, steady, a vow to Charlie, to Lucy, to herself. "We've got Wonder Ballroom soon. She'll shine."

Charlie rose, his grin returning, softer now, his hand brushing Theresa's shoulder as he passed. "I know she will, T. You're both tougher than they come." He glanced at Lucy, still curled but sitting taller, her wry smile a seed of the phoenix he'd seen burn stages down. "Call me if you need anything—day or night. We've got this." He stepped toward the door, the lot outside quiet, the company car long gone, his boots a faint echo as he left them to their haven.

Inside, Lucy sank back, her eyes drifting to the ceiling, Charlie's words—*you're important, family*—a lifeline she clung to, her funk still heavy but cracked, the stage calling, Wonder Ballroom a horizon she'd reach, Theresa's steady presence

her bridge. The RV hummed, John's gift a shelter, the Glowies' shadow held at bay, Lucy's music a fire waiting to blaze again, fueled by love, loss, and a promise to rise.

In the soft glow of the RV's cabin, parked in the quiet Portland lot, Lucy stirred from the couch, her pale blue nightshirt slipping as she reached for the portable keyboard tucked beside her. The weight of Charlie's visit—his words, *you're family*—lingered like a spark, piercing the fog of her funk. She sat up, her bare legs unfolding, her eyes sharpening with a sudden resolve. "T, this has to stop," she said, her voice low but firm, a vow to herself as much as to Theresa. Her fingers found the keys, hesitant at first, then steady, coaxing out chords that filled the small space, raw and aching.

The melody of *All I Need* spilled forth, her voice joining, soft but piercing, each word a brushstroke of longing: "Tell me you love, tell me you need me... I just wanna run back to something that feels like home." The notes trembled, her heart laid bare, the lyrics a tether to a past she couldn't fully release—John's shadow, his love, his absence woven into every chord. She swayed faintly, her nightshirt loose, her body unguarded, pouring herself into the music, the RV a sanctuary where her truth could breathe.

Theresa, standing by the dinette, froze as the words hit, her messy hair framing a face caught off guard. Her breath hitched, her mind flashing to John—his face in that video, his gamble in China, the brother she might never see again. Lucy's voice, singing of home, of need, felt like a mirror to her own ache, his name a silent pulse between them. Her hands gripped the counter, steadying herself, her eyes glistening but holding back the tears threatening to spill.

Lucy paused, her fingers stilling on the keys, her gaze lifting to Theresa, soft but clear. "T, it was moving what Charlie said," she said, her voice quieter now, grounding them both. "We're family." The word hung, heavy with truth, a bond forged through stages, tears, and John's ghost—a promise that held them even as the world shifted.

She returned to the keyboard, the chords flowing again, stronger now, her voice climbing, carrying the ache but laced with defiance: "I just wanna run back..." The music was her anchor, pulling her from the funk's undertow, Charlie's faith and Theresa's steadiness a lifeline she wouldn't let go.

Theresa's tears broke free, silent, trailing down her cheeks as she watched Lucy play, her strength flickering back to life. "I hope John makes it okay," she whispered, her voice cracking, raw with love for her brother, fear for his path, and pride for Lucy's fight. She wiped her face, quick, not wanting to dim the moment, her heart torn but tethered to the woman pouring her soul into the keys.

Lucy stopped again, sitting tall, her shoulders squaring as she fixed her nightshirt, tugging it down with a sudden clarity. She looked at Theresa, her eyes bright, resolute, the fog lifting like dawn breaking. "I need a shower," she said, her voice firm, alive. "Clean clothes. And a spa day, T. I'm done wallowing." The words were a declaration, the phoenix stirring, her music and Charlie's words fuel for the fire she'd stoke again.

Theresa's lips curved, a shaky smile breaking through her tears, pride swelling as she nodded. "Damn right, Luce," she said, her voice steady, wiping her eyes again. "Shower, clothes, spa—let's make you shine." She stepped closer, her hand brushing Lucy's shoulder, a silent vow to walk this with her, John's fate a shadow they'd face together, but not today. Today was for Lucy's rise, the keyboard's echo a promise of Wonder Ballroom, of fans, of family.

Lucy stood, the nightshirt falling loose, her bare feet firm on the RV's floor as she headed for the bathroom, the hum of the shower soon filling the space, steam curling like hope. Theresa sank into the recliner, her tears drying, her heart heavy but warm—John out there, Lucy here, and Charlie's faith binding them. The RV glowed, a haven holding them tight, the river outside whispering of stages yet to come, Lucy's voice already blooming again, ready to burn bright.

The RV's small bathroom filled with steam, the shower's spray a warm cocoon around Lucy as she let the water rinse away the last of her funk. Her voice rose, soft at first, then stronger, weaving a new melody through the hiss of the water: "The song of the angel, silent revere..." The words spilled out, raw and soaring, a quiet hymn of healing, her tone carrying the ache of John's absence but laced with a returning fire. Each note was a step back to herself, her strength blooming in the tight space, the song a phoenix's whisper, defiant and alive.

Outside, Theresa heard it, the sound slipping through the bathroom door, Lucy's voice a current that tugged at her heart. She stood by the dinette, her own grief for John softening under the weight of Lucy's revival. *She's coming back*, Theresa thought, a faint smile breaking through her worry. The strength in Lucy's singing—

clear, unguarded—felt like a tide turning, the RV glowing warmer with every note. Spurred by the sound, Theresa moved, shedding her loose tank and shorts for clothes fit for the world—jeans, a soft sweater, practical but neat. She pulled her tangled hair into a messy bun, brushing it smooth, her reflection in the RV's small mirror showing a woman ready to guide, to step forward with Lucy.

The shower cut off, and Lucy emerged, her skin flushed from the heat, a towel wrapped tight as she padded to her bedroom nook. She rifled through her clothes, bypassing the muted tones for a vibrant sundress—bold coral, flecked with gold, its fabric light but striking. She slipped it on, the hem swirling at her knees, the colors lifting her mood like a banner. She wanted to feel pretty, to wear something that sang with her returning spark, the dress a quiet rebellion against the gray of her funk. Barefoot, she stepped back into the main cabin, her hair damp but free, her eyes brighter, a smile tugging at her lips.

Theresa's gaze snapped to her, catching the shift—the dress, the posture, the light in Lucy's face. "Look at you," she said, her voice warm, a teasing lilt hiding her relief. "That's my Luce." She crossed her arms, leaning against the counter, pride swelling as Lucy stood taller, the coral dress a flame in the RV's soft light.

Lucy met her eyes, her smile growing, a nod to their shared road. "Let's get out of here, T," she said, her voice steady, alive. "Need some air." They stepped outside, the RV door clicking shut, the Portland evening cool against their skin. The lot was quiet, pines casting long shadows, the Willamette River glinting nearby, its surface a mirror for the fading sky. They walked toward it, their steps syncing, the crunch of gravel giving way to grass as they reached the river's edge. The water moved slow, steady, a rhythm Lucy felt in her bones, her dress catching the breeze, vibrant against the dusk.

"Tomorrow," Lucy said, her voice clear, thoughtful, as they strolled along the bank, "is a day to get dolled up. Self-care, T—I've been neglecting it." She glanced at Theresa, her eyes gleaming with intent, the spa day already taking shape in her mind—nails, a massage, maybe a new hairstyle, something to seal this turning point. "I want to feel like me again, you know? Ready for Wonder Ballroom, for the fans." Her words carried Charlie's echo—you're *important*—and her own promise to rise, the stage a beacon she'd chase.

Theresa nodded, her messy bun bobbing, her sweater hugging her against the evening chill. "Damn right," she said, her tone firm but soft, her arm brushing

Lucy's. "Spa day, the works. You deserve it, Luce. We'll make you shine." Her eyes flicked to the river, John's shadow lingering—his gamble, his love—but she pushed it aside, focusing on Lucy's fire, the dress, the voice that had carried through the shower. *He'd want this*, she thought, her heart steady, their walk a quiet vow to keep moving forward.

The river murmured, Portland's lights flickering on, and Lucy felt the weight lift, not gone but lighter, her dress a burst of color against the gray, her steps surer. Theresa walked beside her, their bond a tether, tomorrow's self-care a spark to fuel the stage, the fans, the family they'd built. Wonder Ballroom waited, and Lucy's song—angel's revere, silent no more—would burn bright, the Glowies' shadow far behind, her phoenix rising with every step along the water's edge.

In a sleek, sterile office buried deep in Hong Kong's neon-lit Kowloon maze, John sat across from the lead hacker of Volt Typhoon, a wiry man in his thirties with sharp eyes and a tailored blazer that screamed CCP backing. The room hummed with the faint buzz of servers tucked behind smoked glass panels, screens glowing with streams of code, the air thick with ambition and suspicion. Zsuzsa and Anes waited back in the flat, their trust a quiet fire in John's chest, but here, it was just him and the hacker—Li, he'd called himself—sizing each other up under the cold glare of fluorescent lights.

Li leaned back, his English flawless, a smirk playing on his lips as he spoke, his voice smooth but laced with arrogance. "You've come to train," he said, eyes glinting like he was savoring the moment. "We're the best, John. We've pwned your telecoms, your power grids—America's soft underbelly. We're ready to take down Taiwan, own TSMC. When we do, the West will be at our mercy, scrambling while we call the shots." His words dripped with CCP bravado, a script he'd clearly rehearsed, every syllable a flex of Volt Typhoon's reach, their hunger for control.

John's jaw tightened, his face unreadable, but inside, he wasn't buying it. *Rhetoric*, he thought, *all CCP mouthpiece noise*. Li's boasts were loud, but John had danced in deeper shadows—cracked systems the likes of which Volt Typhoon only dreamed of touching. He'd outrun Glowies, buried crypto fortunes, burned lives to ash to stay free. This guy? Just a cog in Beijing's machine, talented maybe, but not untouchable. John leaned forward, his voice low, cutting through the swagger. "Let's get started," he said, his tone flat, final, a challenge wrapped in calm.

He pulled his laptop closer, fingers flying across the keys, crafting a block of code—dense, elegant, encrypted with a custom cipher he'd forged years ago, layered like a labyrinth. He slid the machine toward Li, eyes locking on his. "Break it," he said, simple, no flourish, the code a gauntlet thrown.

Li's smirk didn't falter as he took the laptop, his own fingers darting with practiced ease, tools spinning up on his screen as he probed the encryption. Minutes ticked by, the room silent save for the soft clack of keys and the hum of cooling fans. John watched, arms crossed, noting every move—Li was good, methodical, peeling back layers with a precision that spoke of real skill, not just CCP hype. The cipher fell, the code unlocking with a faint chime. Li leaned back, his grin sharper now, tossing the laptop back to John. "That was easy," he said, voice smug. "Just a warm-up, right?"

John didn't blink, his expression stone, but a flicker of respect stirred—he'd expected Li to struggle more, but the guy had bite. Still, John wasn't here to play warm-ups. He nodded, slow, then turned back to his screen, his mind already steps ahead. "Fine," he said, his voice a quiet blade. "Let's raise the stakes." His fingers moved again, this time diving into a backdoor he'd long held—a ghost in the machine of a Chinese spy satellite, one of Beijing's eyes in the sky. He'd slipped in months ago, unnoticed, mapping its systems like a thief casing a vault. Now, he embedded a payload—subtle, vicious, a worm that could cripple the satellite's comms if triggered, buried deep in its telemetry protocols.

He pushed the laptop away, no trace of the hack on his screen, and met Li's gaze, his words spare but heavy. "Now, find it."

Li's smirk faltered, just for a heartbeat, the challenge sinking in. John had breached their satellite—*their* system, supposedly ironclad—and planted a digital landmine without breaking a sweat. Li's eyes narrowed, his fingers hesitating before diving back in, pulling up access to the satellite's network, his tools scouring for the payload. John leaned back, his calm a mask, knowing the worm was a needle in a haystack—his work always was. He'd cracked their defenses to plant it, a flex of his own, proof he wasn't just some fugitive to be trained but a force they'd underestimated.

The room grew tense, Li's brow creasing as minutes stretched, his screens flashing with data streams, logs, and diagnostics. John's payload was a ghost, its signature cloaked, and he knew Li would chase it for hours if he didn't get lucky.

*Good,* John thought. Let him sweat, let the CCP see what they'd bargained for—his skills, his edge, a double-edged sword they'd need to respect. Zsuzsa and Anes's faces flickered in his mind, their futures riding on this deal, Lucy's fortune safe but her shadow still a quiet ache. He'd train Volt Typhoon if it meant asylum, but he'd do it his way—on his terms, not Li's boasts or Beijing's leash.

Li muttered something in Mandarin, frustration creeping into his tone, his tools still hunting, the satellite's systems mocking his efforts. John stayed silent, his eyes steady, the Hong Kong skyline a blur beyond the window, its neon pulse a reminder of the stakes—freedom, survival, a life for the women he loved, balanced on the code he wielded like a blade in the dark.

In the sterile glow of the Kowloon office, screens casting cold light across the server racks, John sat back, his calm a deliberate contrast to the faint tension creeping into Li's posture. The satellite payload hunt was still running, Li's tools grinding through data with no hit yet, his earlier smirk long faded. John's voice cut through the hum, low and steady, a teacher testing a student. "A true hacker multi-tasks, Li," he said, his eyes glinting with intent. "Let's play around with some PQC stuff—keep your skills sharp."

He pulled his laptop closer, fingers dancing as he brought up Apple's PQ3 messaging protocol—post-quantum crypto, a fortress of math designed to laugh at even quantum attacks. "Now, my friend," John said, his tone almost playful but edged with a challenge, "let's see if you can break out of the sandbox and crack PQ3." He knew it was a near-impossible ask—PQ3's layers were a beast, unhacked for now, its sandbox tighter than a vault. But he wanted Li to squirm, to feel the gap between Volt Typhoon's boasts and the real game. A bead of sweat on Li's brow would be worth more than a cracked cipher, proof John held the upper hand.

Li's eyes flicked to the screen, his jaw tightening, the satellite hunt still eating his focus. "No," he snapped, his voice sharper than before, a crack in his cool. "That's a trap—PQ3's locked down. Multi-chain exploits would take weeks, and you know it." His fingers hovered, caught between tasks, his protest betraying a flicker of doubt, the CCP's golden boy not used to being cornered.

John leaned forward, his grin slight but razor-edged, his voice a soft taunt. "Aw, tell me you can't do it?" The words hung, a dare that cut deep, probing Li's skill, his pride, his place in this shadow world. A true crack of PQ3—unlikely as it was—

would fetch millions in crypto on the black market, an exploit kings would ransom entire firms for. John didn't expect a win; he wanted Li stretched thin, exposed, his limits laid bare. The satellite payload was John's ace, still hidden, but this? This was a lesson—Volt Typhoon wasn't untouchable, and John wasn't their pawn.

Li scowled, his hands darting back to his keyboard, splitting his screen to poke at PQ3's edges while the satellite scan ran, his multi-tasking strained, frustration seeping through his precision. John watched, silent, his calm a mask over the calculations running in his head—every move Li made was data, a map of his skill, his weaknesses, intel John would hoard for the day he'd need leverage. Hong Kong's skyline pulsed beyond the glass, a reminder of the stakes: asylum, Zsuzsa, Anes, a life carved from code and nerve.

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Across the city, in a modest flat perched above the chaos of Mong Kok, Zsuzsa and Anes moved with quiet purpose, turning a sterile hideout into a home. The air smelled of fresh paint and lemongrass, the markets below spilling noise and life into the narrow streets. Zsuzsa swept the hardwood floor, her dark hair tied back, her movements brisk but thoughtful, a scarf draped over a secondhand couch to add warmth. Anes, humming softly, arranged candles on a low table—jasmine and cedar, their glow softening the room's edges. They'd hit the stalls earlier, haggling for thick blankets, a teapot with a dragon curve, small things to make the space theirs, Hong Kong's pulse a new rhythm they'd learn.

In the tiny kitchen, a pot simmered—congee with ginger and scallion, simple but grounding, its steam curling like a promise. Zsuzsa stirred it, her eyes flicking to Anes, who was pinning a woven mat to the wall, a touch of color against the beige. "Looks good," Zsuzsa said, her voice soft, a smile breaking through her focus. Anes glanced back, her grin quick, bright. "Feels like us now," she said, her hands dusting off, the flat no longer just a bolthole but a haven, their stake in this gamble with John.

They worked in sync, no need for words, their trust in him a steady current beneath the tasks. John was out there, weaving his code, his deals, carving a path for them all. Zsuzsa paused, her hand on the teapot, her mind brushing his face—his quiet strength, his ghosts. Anes caught her look, stepping closer, her voice low. "He'll be back soon," she said, certain, her hand grazing Zsuzsa's arm. "Dinner's waiting when he is."

The flat glowed, cozy against the city's neon snarl, the congee bubbling, candles flickering. Zsuzsa nodded, her smile returning, firm. "Yeah," she said, setting out bowls, the warmth of the room a mirror to their hope. They'd wait, patient, the meal a quiet vow—John would walk through that door, and they'd face whatever came, together, their new home a root in Hong Kong's storm, his fight their anchor, Lucy's shadow a distant song they'd carry too.

In the Kowloon office, the air thick with the hum of servers and unspoken stakes, John leaned back, his eyes steady on Li, whose fingers still hovered over his keyboard, PQ3's sandbox unyielding and the satellite payload still a ghost. The hacker's frustration was palpable, a faint sheen on his brow betraying the cracks in his CCP-polished confidence. John's voice cut through, calm but final, a teacher dismissing a student. "Enough for now," he said, motioning with a hand, his laptop snapping shut. "I'll leave you with some homework—work on these tasks 'til our next time." He slid a USB drive across the table—encrypted, layered with challenges: a deeper dive into the satellite's telemetry, a mock PQC breach, problems to keep Li chasing shadows and sharpen his edge.

Li's eyes flicked to the drive, his nod curt, pride stung but curiosity hooked. "Sure," he said, his voice tight, pocketing the drive with a glance that said he'd tear it apart later, alone, away from John's gaze. John stood, his jacket rustling, his face unreadable but his mind already shifting—away from Li's bravado, Volt Typhoon's leash, the CCP's long shadow, and toward the flat, toward Zsuzsa and Anes, the real anchor in Hong Kong's neon storm.

He left the building, stepping into Kowloon's pulse—vendors shouting, neon signs sizzling, the air thick with salt and spice. His boots hit the pavement, steady, the weight of the day—Li's boasts, the satellite hack, the deal for asylum—settling but not breaking him. The flat wasn't far, a beacon in his mind, its warmth pulling him through the city's snarl, Zsuzsa's quiet strength and Anes's fire the home he'd fight for, Lucy's shadow a faint ache he carried but set aside for now.

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In the flat above Mong Kok, the air was soft, fragrant with congee and jasmine candles, the hardwood gleaming under the glow of strung lights. Zsuzsa and Anes had transformed the space—blankets draped over chairs, a dragon-curved teapot steaming, the woven mat on the wall catching the flicker of flames. The table was set, bowls ready, the congee still warm, its ginger-scallion scent a quiet promise of comfort. They moved lightly, tidying final touches, their laughter low as they

shared a glance—nerves and hope mingling, John's return a heartbeat they both felt.

The door clicked, and their heads snapped up, hearts racing, excitement sparking like a shared current. John stepped through, his frame filling the doorway, his eyes softening as the flat's warmth hit him. Anes moved first, her grin bright, her body a blur as she crossed the room, throwing her arms around him in a warm embrace. "You're back," she murmured, her voice thick with relief, pulling him into a long, lingering kiss, her fire unbridled, her hands tight on his shoulders like she'd anchor him there forever.

Zsuzsa hung back, leaning against the counter, her smile quieter, letting Anes have her moment. Her dark hair framed her face, the candlelight catching her eyes—steady, deep, a reservoir of desire she held until John's gaze found her. He eased from Anes, crossing to Zsuzsa, his voice low, warm. "Hey, beautiful," he said, leaning in, his hand brushing her cheek as he gave her a lingering kiss. Hers deepened, slow and deliberate, a current of want pulsing through, her fingers curling into his jacket, pulling him closer. John felt it—her need, distinct from Anes's constant blaze, a tide that could drown him if he let it.

He pulled back, his grin soft, taking them both in—Anes's spark, Zsuzsa's depth, the flat a haven they'd carved together. "You ladies have been busy," he said, his eyes sweeping the room—the candles, the blankets, the meal waiting. "Made this place cozy, warm. I appreciate you both." His voice held weight, gratitude beyond words, the day's edges smoothed by their effort, their presence.

Anes laughed, her hand still on his arm, her fire undimmed. "Had to make it ours," she said, tugging him toward the table. Zsuzsa followed, her smile widening, pouring tea as they settled, the congee's steam curling between them. John exhaled, the office's cold stakes—Li, Volt Typhoon, the satellite—fading against this warmth, this home. Zsuzsa's foot brushed his under the table, deliberate, her eyes holding his, while Anes's laughter filled the gaps, her stories of the market's chaos a spark to keep them grounded.

They ate, the flat a bubble against Hong Kong's roar, Lucy's fortune safe in John's crypto vaults, her music a distant hum he'd protect from afar. Zsuzsa and Anes were here, now, their love a fire he'd guard, the CCP's game a shadow he'd outplay—one hack, one kiss, one bowl of congee at a time.

The flat above Mong Kok glowed with candlelight, the table a small island of warmth with bowls of congee and steaming tea, the dragon-curved teapot catching flickers of flame. John sat at the heart of it, Zsuzsa and Anes orbiting close, the day's weight—Li's boasts, the satellite hack, Volt Typhoon's shadow—melting into the comfort of their shared haven. The congee's ginger-scallion scent mingled with jasmine, grounding them, but the air shifted as Anes, her fire brighter tonight, slid from her chair with a quiet purpose.

She moved to John, her eyes glinting, and without a word, settled into his lap, curling in like she could fuse herself to him. Her arms looped around his neck, her warmth pressing close, a silent claim after the hours he'd been gone. John's voice dropped, low and warm, a smile tugging at his lips. "Someone wants to be close," he murmured, his hand resting lightly on her back, feeling the steady beat of her heart through her thin sweater.

Zsuzsa, across the table, leaned back, her dark eyes dancing with mischief as she sipped her tea. "Gyerek," she teased in Hungarian, her voice lilting—"You child." The word was soft, playful, but it sparked a reaction, Anes's head lifting, her grin sharp.

"Oh, yes, my warmth and protection," Anes shot back, her tone half-laugh, half-defiance, her arms tightening around John, her body nestling closer, staking her ground. Her fire was a constant—fierce, unyielding, a blaze that burned hottest when she felt him near, and tonight, it flared brighter, Hong Kong's uncertainty fueling her need.

John chuckled, shifting her slightly so he could reach his bowl, his free hand spooning congee with practiced ease, Anes's weight a familiar anchor. "Easy, firecracker," he said, his voice a low rumble, keeping the mood light but feeling her cling, her silent hunger for him after a day apart. He ate steadily, her warmth against his chest a contrast to the cold calculations of Kowloon's office, Li's smug face a fading ghost.

Zsuzsa's smile turned sly, her foot nudging John's under the table as she set her tea down. "Fine," she said, her voice teasing but pointed, "I get first dibs tonight, then." Her eyes locked on Anes, a challenge wrapped in humor, knowing exactly what she was stirring. Anes's head snapped up, a playful snarl curling her lips, her grip on John tightening like she'd fight for her place.

"Not a chance," Anes said, her voice a mock growl, her eyes flashing with that fiery spirit John knew so well. She always burned for first—first in their lovemaking, first to claim him when the world felt too big, her passion a tide that didn't share easily. Zsuzsa laughed, soft but rich, leaning forward, her own desire a quieter current but no less deep, her teasing a way to keep the balance, to remind Anes they were three, not two.

John's grin widened, his hand stroking Anes's back, calming her fire without dimming it, his other reaching across to brush Zsuzsa's fingers, grounding them all. "Plenty of me to go around, ladies," he said, his tone easy, warm, but his eyes held theirs—Anes's blaze, Zsuzsa's depth—promising he'd meet them both where they needed him tonight. He knew Anes's cling was her shield, her way of claiming safety after his dance with Volt Typhoon; Zsuzsa's tease was her own claim, steady but fierce, her patience a fire that burned slower but just as true.

In the quiet of the RV parked by the Willamette River, Portland's night settled soft and still, the pines outside whispering faintly against the hum of the city's distant pulse. Inside, the bedroom was a cocoon of warmth, the air heavy with the scent of lavender from a candle flickering on the nightstand. Theresa had long drifted to sleep in her own bunk, her steady breathing a quiet anchor in the RV's hush, leaving Lucy alone, the space hers to claim.

She lay in the bedroom, the door softly shut, a thick towel spread beneath her on the bed, its texture grounding against her bare skin. The comforter enveloped her, plush and warm, cocooning her nudity in safety, her body free from the weight of clothes, of expectations. The room glowed cozy, the candle's light dancing on the walls, a contrast to the funk she'd shed, Charlie's words—*you're family*—and her river walk with Theresa still a spark in her chest. Tomorrow's spa day waited, but tonight, this moment, was for her—a reclaiming, a fire she'd stoke alone.

Lucy took a deep breath, her chest rising, the air slow and deliberate, centering her. Her hands moved, tentative at first, fingers grazing her skin with a touch light as a whisper, teasing the edges of her body—her collarbone, the curve of her hip. She closed her eyes, her head tilting back against the pillow, her damp hair fanning out, the sensations blooming under her fingertips. She stoked the fire within, deliberate, unhurried, each brush building heat, her breath catching as she explored deeper, her body waking to her own rhythm.

The world fell away—John's ghost, the Glowies, the stage's glare—leaving only her, this bed, this pulse. She savored it, the pleasure a quiet rebellion, a gift to herself after days of carrying too much. Her touch grew bolder, fingers tracing paths only she knew, the fire catching, spreading, her lips parting in a soft sigh. She needed this—more than the spa, more than the crowd's roar—a moment to feel alive, whole, hers.

The comforter shifted, warm against her skin, the towel soft beneath her, and Lucy let herself sink deeper, eyes shut, body arching faintly as the sensations crested. The candle flickered, casting shadows that danced with her, the RV a haven holding her safe. Theresa slept on, unaware, and Lucy's fire burned bright, a private phoenix rising, her breath steady as she lingered in the glow, the night hers, the stage tomorrow's promise, this self-care a root she'd grow from, strong and unashamed.

In the Mong Kok flat, the air was thick with warmth and want, the candlelight casting soft shadows across the hardwood, the dragon-curved teapot cooling on the table. The congee bowls sat empty, the night deepening as John, Zsuzsa, and Anes moved from laughter to something fiercer, the flat their haven against Hong Kong's neon snarl. Tonight, John took control, his presence steady, commanding, the day's dance with Li and Volt Typhoon's shadow fueling a need to claim this space, these women, this life. The bedroom glowed, curtains drawn, the bed a tangle of blankets and intent.

Anes, her fire always the first to flare, pressed close, her earlier clinginess now a spark begging to ignite. John met her hunger, taking her first, his hands strong, deliberate, a rough edge that matched her blaze. He tugged her hair, just enough—firm, playful, a pull that drew a gasp and a grin from her lips. "Yes," she breathed, her voice low, alive, "that's how I like it. That's the side I love to see." Her eyes flashed, her body yielding but defiant, urging him on, her fire meeting his force.

Zsuzsa lounged nearby, her dark hair loose, her smile sly as she watched, her own desire a quieter tide but no less potent. "Kurva!" she teased in Hungarian, her voice rich with laughter—"You slut!" The word was sharp but loving, a jab to keep the heat playful, their bond a dance of edges and trust.

Anes laughed, her head tilting back, her body arching under John's touch. "I'll be a whore tonight," she shot back, her tone half-growl, half-giggle, her words a

challenge, a surrender, her fire burning bright as she gave herself to the moment. John's grin flashed, his voice a low rumble. "Of course, my love," he said, his hands guiding her, his strength a mirror to her want, their rhythm building, raw and unyielding.

Anes moaned, sighs spilling free, her contentment a song in the candlelit room, her body moving with his, open, alive. John's breath hitched, his grunt low as he reached his peak, a release that grounded him, tied him to her, to this. Anes collapsed beside him, giggly, her laughter bubbling up as she curled against his side, her skin warm, her eyes bright with mischief and afterglow. "You're too much," she murmured, her fingers tracing his chest, her fire sated but still smoldering, ready to flare again.

Zsuzsa's chuckle carried from the bed's edge, her gaze on them both, patient but hungry, her turn coming, her tease a promise she'd claim her own fire soon. John caught her eye, his hand reaching for her, pulling her closer, the night stretching long, their love a tangle of rough and soft, laughter and heat. The flat held them, Lucy's shadow a distant hum, the Glowies and Volt Typhoon worlds away, this glow—Anes's giggles, Zsuzsa's depth, John's control—their truth, their home, a fire no one could touch.

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Across the globe, Lucy's own glow burned private in the RV's bedroom, her self-care a quiet phoenix rising, her fingers stoking her fire as the candle flickered. Portland's night cradled her, Hong Kong's pulse cradled John, and though oceans apart, their moments wove a parallel—each claiming their light, their strength, their way forward, the stage and the flat equal altars to love and defiance.

In the Mong Kok flat, the candlelight flickered low, painting the bedroom in warm golds and shifting shadows, the air heavy with the scent of jasmine and the lingering heat of John and Anes's fire. The bed was a tangle of blankets, Anes sprawled to one side, her giggles fading into a sated glow, her body still humming as she watched, her fire never fully banked. John, his breath steadyng, turned to Zsuzsa, her dark eyes waiting, patient but alight with a quieter hunger. He mustered his energy, a soft grin curving his lips—he'd never leave her out, not when her depth called him as fiercely as Anes's blaze.

He reached for Zsuzsa, his touch gentle, deliberate, knowing she craved slow over rough, savoring over rush. His hands traced her arms, soft, grounding, pulling

her close, her skin warm against his. "Hey, you," he murmured, his voice low, warm, a promise just for her. Zsuzsa smiled, her hair falling loose as she moved, straddling him with a grace that felt like a claim, her body settling over his, taking control with a quiet authority that made the room feel smaller, theirs alone.

Anes, lounging beside them, let her fingers wander, exploring herself lazily, her eyes glinting as she watched them move together. Her touch was idle but deliberate, her own pleasure a spark reignited by the sight of Zsuzsa's slow rhythm. Zsuzsa caught her gaze, a laugh bubbling up, her voice teasing but sharp. "Kurva!" she said again in Hungarian—"Slut!"—the word a playful barb, their bond a dance of jest and love, Anes's grin flashing in response, unashamed, her fingers still moving, her fire feeding off their heat.

Zsuzsa leaned down, her lips brushing John's ear, her voice a soft tease, laced with intent. "Anes can take it out of you," she murmured, her hips rolling deliberate, precise, a tempo she set to claim every second. "Not 'til I'm finished." Her words were a vow, her motions controlled, each shift pushing her buttons and his, a slow build she knew by heart. John matched her, his hands on her hips, syncing to her rhythm, his focus absolute—her pleasure, her pace, her climax his only goal now.

She moaned, low at first, then louder, her voice breaking the room's hush. "I've been waiting all day for this," she confessed, her breath catching, her body tightening as the fire she'd held back surged. Her movements grew sharper, still deliberate but urgent, her eyes locked on John's, a current passing between them—trust, desire, a love that burned steady, not fleeting. John moved with her, his touch soft but sure, guiding her higher, her moans filling the flat, a song of release she'd earned.

Anes's breath hitched beside them, her own exploration quickening, her eyes half-lidded but fixed on Zsuzsa's arch, John's focus, their union a spark for her own flame. She didn't interrupt, her pleasure a quiet mirror, her laughter stilled by the intensity of watching Zsuzsa unravel. Zsuzsa's climax came, her moan peaking, her body trembling as she gripped John's shoulders, the wave crashing slow and deep, her glow a tide that pulled them all under.

She collapsed against him, her breath ragged, a smile breaking through as she nestled into his chest, John's arms wrapping her tight, his own heart steadyng. Anes sighed, her fingers slowing, her body curling closer, the three of them

tangled now, a constellation of fire and calm. The flat held them, Hong Kong's roar a world away, Lucy's shadow and Volt Typhoon's stakes distant hums. Zsuzsa's warmth, Anes's spark, John's care—their glow burned bright, a home no code or chase could break.

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Across the ocean, Lucy's own glow lingered in the RV's bedroom, her self-care a private fire still smoldering, her body eased by her touch. Portland's night cradled her as Hong Kong did John, their paths apart but twined—each stoking their light, reclaiming their strength, the stage and the flat altars to their truths, their loves, their fights yet to come.

Morning light filtered through the flat's curtains, soft and gray over Mong Kok's restless hum, the air in the bedroom still warm from the night's shared fire. The bed lay tangled, blankets askew, John, Zsuzsa, and Anes stirring slow, their bodies heavy with sleep and the glow of last night's love. Zsuzsa woke first, her dark hair fanned across the pillow, her eyes blinking open with a quiet resolve. She stretched, her voice soft but clear, cutting through the dawn's hush. "Shower," she said, a smile curling her lips. "Join me."

She reached out, her hands finding John's and Anes's, her touch gentle but insistent, pulling them from the fog of sleep. John groaned, a low chuckle escaping as he rubbed his eyes, his body rousing, the memory of Anes's fire and Zsuzsa's tide still vivid. Anes mumbled something playful, her voice thick with sleep, but her fingers curled into Zsuzsa's, her fire never far from kindling. They rose, sleepy but willing, their steps shuffling across the hardwood, following Zsuzsa to the flat's small bathroom, a trio bound by trust and want.

The bathroom door clicked shut, and Zsuzsa turned the shower on, hot water hissing to life, steam curling fast, fogging the mirror and wrapping the space in warmth. The shower was tight—barely enough for two, let alone three—but they stepped in together, drawn to the closeness, the need to share this too. Their bodies pressed, skin brushing skin, the water cascading over them, slick and searing, a contrast to the cool morning air. John stood at the center, his shoulders broad, grounding them, while Anes and Zsuzsa flanked him, their laughter soft as the steam thickened, the space a cocoon of heat and care.

Anes, her fire waking, took the soap first, her hands lathering John's chest with loving care, her fingers tracing muscle, deliberate, playful, her grin flashing as she

moved to Zsuzsa next, suds trailing over her shoulders, her hips. She saved herself for last, her touch lingering, but Zsuzsa's eyes glinted, her hands claiming the soap to return the favor. "Not so fast," Zsuzsa murmured, her voice teasing, her fingers lathering Anes's back, slow and thorough, suds slipping down her spine, a quiet repayment of last night's jests. Anes leaned into it, her sigh mingling with the water's rush, her body yielding to the care.

The soap made them slick, bodies sliding together, a dance of caresses under the spray—John's hand grazing Zsuzsa's waist, Anes's fingers brushing John's arm, Zsuzsa's touch lingering on Anes's shoulder. It wasn't rushed, not like the night's fire, but a slow savoring, their laughter weaving through the steam, their closeness a balm after John's day with Volt Typhoon, the flat's glow a shield against Hong Kong's storm. They slipped and slid, bodies mingling, water and soap blurring lines, each touch a note in a quiet song—love, trust, togetherness.

They rinsed, the water washing suds away, leaving only warmth, their skin flushed from heat and connection. Zsuzsa's smile was soft, Anes's eyes bright, John's steady gaze tying them together, his hand resting on each briefly, grounding the moment. They stepped out, the steam lingering, towels wrapping them as they dried, their laughter spilling into the flat, the morning new, their bond tighter, a fire that burned gentle now but ready to flare when needed.

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Far off in Portland, Lucy would soon wake, her own glow from the night's self-care carrying her toward her spa day, the RV's quiet holding her as fiercely as the flat held John's trio. Their paths diverged—her stage, their code—but the morning's light touched them all, each reclaiming their strength, their love, their fight, the water's dance in Hong Kong a mirror to Lucy's coming rise, the world waiting for their fires to burn bright.

In the Mong Kok flat, the afternoon light spilled soft and golden, the air rich with the scent of simmering lunch and the quiet hum of trust. John sat on the couch, the USB drives now a bridge between him and his companions, their crypto balances a vow of freedom. He took Anes's hand, his grip firm but warm, his eyes steady on hers, her fire flickering with excitement. "Spend it wisely," he said, his voice low, deliberate. "Invest it—build something you can live off, long-term." His words were a guide, not a chain, trust in her spark but tempered by the life they led—shadows always close.

Zsuzsa, leaning against the counter, translated softly, her Hungarian accent curling around the words, her smile reassuring as she caught Anes's glance. "Don't worry," she said, stepping closer, her hand brushing Anes's arm. "I'll help you." Her calm was an anchor, her promise a tether to keep Anes's fire from burning too wild, their sisterhood a balance John leaned into.

Anes's grin flashed, her eyes lighting up, the drive clutched like a talisman. "Can we go shopping?" she asked, her voice bubbling, already dreaming of Mong Kok's stalls—colors, fabrics, life. The question was half-plea, half-plan, her restlessness itching for a spark beyond the flat.

John chuckled, his thumb grazing her knuckles, but his tone stayed firm, threaded with caution. "You're free to do whatever you want," he said, his gaze holding hers, then Zsuzsa's, pulling them both in. "But don't attract attention. Always—can't get caught up with authorities." His words carried Volt Typhoon's shadow, the Glowies' reach, the deal for asylum a tightrope they walked. Freedom wasn't careless, not yet.

Anes's eyes danced, undimmed, mischief curling her lips. "Promise," she said, her voice teasing but true, her fire banking just enough to heed him. Zsuzsa laughed, her own excitement flickering, her voice warm as she leaned in. "Dresses," she said, her eyes glinting. "Spa days." The words were a vision, a shared indulgence they'd weave carefully, their joy a quiet rebellion against the stakes.

John nodded, his grin softening, pride swelling for them—Anes's spark, Zsuzsa's depth, their hands linked, their futures his to guard. "Go," he said, releasing Anes's hand, his trust a gift. "Make it yours." The flat hummed, lunch cooling, the market waiting, their crypto a seed for dreams they'd grow together, Hong Kong's pulse a beat they'd dance to, unseen.

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Across the ocean in Portland, the Willamette River sparkled under a crisp afternoon sky, the city's buzz a backdrop to Lucy and Theresa's spa day, a balm before the Wonder Ballroom gig loomed at week's end. The spa's air was thick with eucalyptus and calm, their morning spent in robes—massages easing Lucy's tension, manicures painting her nails a bold crimson, Theresa's laughter lifting her higher. Recharged, they'd hit the boutiques, hunting a dress for Lucy's stage, her phoenix ready to blaze.

In a small shop, racks bursting with color, they found it—a blue dress, sapphire and flowing, its cut hugging Lucy's frame without binding, its shimmer catching the light like her voice caught a crowd. She slipped it on in the fitting room, the fabric cool against her skin, no shaper needed, her body free, confident. She twirled, the hem flaring, and Theresa snapped a pic, the mirror reflecting Lucy's glow, her smile wide, unbroken.

Theresa grinned, leaning against the doorframe, her eyes warm. "Luce, you look smashing," she said, her voice rich with pride. "No shaper either—just you." The words were a hug, a nod to Lucy's strength, her rise from the funk, John's shadow a hum she'd sing through, not hide from.

Lucy laughed, her fingers brushing the dress, the blue a promise for the gig—Wonder Ballroom, fans, her fire. "Not posting this yet," she said, tucking the phone away, her profile safe, the Glowies' eyes far off. "Just for us." Theresa nodded, her hand squeezing Lucy's shoulder, their bond a mirror to Zsuzsa and Anes's, sisters in their own right, anchors for the fight ahead.

They bought the dress, bags swinging as they stepped into Portland's chill, the spa's glow lingering in their steps. Lucy felt it—her stage, her song, her family in Theresa and Charlie, the blue dress a spark for the crowd she'd claim. Hong Kong's flat and Portland's streets held parallel fires—John's code, Lucy's voice, Zsuzsa and Anes's market dreams, Theresa's steady love—each a thread in a tapestry of defiance, care, and futures they'd seize, the world's shadows no match for their light.

A week later, the Kowloon lair hummed with the same sterile chill, servers whirring behind smoked glass, Hong Kong's neon pulse a faint throb beyond the walls. John stepped into the office, his boots steady, his mind sharp but braced—Li's silence since their last meet had gnawed at him, a quiet too deliberate for comfort. The USB drive's tasks, the satellite payload, PQ3's taunt—he'd expected Li to counter, but not like this. Li stood waiting, his tailored blazer crisp, his smile not the tired grin of a coder stumped by homework but a predator's smirk, smug and loaded.

"You thought you could outsmart me," Li said, his voice smooth, cutting, his English perfect as he leaned against the desk, arms crossed. "Well, I have something for you." He gestured to a screen, his fingers flicking with theatric flair. The display flared to life—Lucy, in Portland, her blue dress catching the Wonder

Ballroom's backstage lights, her movements fluid as she prepped, her face focused, unaware. John's pulse spiked, but his face stayed stone, his eyes narrowing only a fraction.

Li wasn't done. He turned to a second screen, and there were Zsuzsa and Anes, in the Mong Kok flat, mid-motion—Zsuzsa folding a blanket, Anes wiping down the counter, their laughter faint but clear, the dragon-curved teapot steaming nearby. The feed was live, too close, too intimate, a violation that twisted John's gut. Fear coiled inside—Volt Typhoon's reach, the CCP's eyes, deeper than he'd feared—but he buried it, his expression locked, giving Li nothing. *They're watching*, he thought, his mind racing, mapping exits, contingencies, the nest egg's safety.

He crossed his arms, his stance casual but deliberate, his voice low, edged with defiance. "The moment they sense something, they bolt," he said, his eyes boring into Li's, unflinching. "That's what they were taught." The words were truth—Lucy, Zsuzsa, Anes, each drilled in his rules: trust your gut, vanish clean, no trace. But they were also a bluff, a shield to buy time, to mask the dread clawing at him—*how long have they been watched?*

In his pocket, his thumb moved, subtle, practiced, tapping a signal on his phone—a custom script, preloaded, untraceable. It fired a pulse to emergency burners he'd given Lucy, Zsuzsa, and Anes, a code to check their dead drops: *eyes on you, move now*. The script was his ghost, his way to reach them without Li's net catching it, a lifeline he prayed would land.

Li's smirk didn't waver, his eyes glinting, savoring John's calm like a challenge he'd meet. "Bold words," he said, stepping closer, his voice dropping. "But we're deeper than you think. Your women, your games—they're not as hidden as you'd like." He tapped the desk, the screens looping—Lucy adjusting her mic, Zsuzsa's hand brushing Anes's arm—a taunt, a leash, Volt Typhoon flexing its grip.

John held his ground, his mind splitting—part here, countering Li, part with them, willing the burners to buzz. *Lucy's prepping, exposed; Zsuzsa and Anes, too close to home*. The crypto vaults were safe, untouchable, but their bodies, their freedom—Li's screens screamed leverage. "You're fishing," John said, his tone flat, daring Li to show more. "Show me proof, or it's just noise." He leaned forward, a fraction, his bluff a blade—make Li doubt, make him overplay.

Inside, his fear burned—Lucy's stage, Zsuzsa's calm, Anes's fire, all targets now. The standoff loomed, unspoken but heavy, Volt Typhoon's move a step John

hadn't mapped. He'd taught them to run, but *too late* echoed, a ghost he shoved down. The burners would ping, the women would move—he had to believe it. Hong Kong's lair felt smaller, Li's smirk a wall, but John's signal was out, his code their shield, the fight not over yet.

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In Portland, Lucy's burner lay tucked in her gig bag, silent for now, her blue dress a beacon as she warmed up, Theresa nearby, oblivious to the pulse coming. In Mong Kok, Zsuzsa and Anes's burners sat in a drawer, untouched as they cleaned, their laughter a fragile shield, the signal racing to them, seconds from breaking their calm. The women didn't know—Li's eyes, John's warning, the net tightening—but John's script was live, his love a ghost in the wires, praying it'd reach them before the trap snapped shut.

In Portland, the Wonder Ballroom buzzed with pre-show energy, the crowd's murmur swelling as Lucy stood backstage, her blue dress catching the stage lights, her heart thrumming with the gig's promise. Her crimson nails adjusted her mic, her glow from the spa day and self-care a fire ready to blaze. But in her gig bag, tucked beneath a scarf, her burner phone—John's lifeline—rang, a shrill pulse cutting through the noise. Theresa, nearby, froze, her eyes snapping to the bag, the ring a sound she'd dreaded, a ghost from their drills. "Code red, code red!" she shouted, her voice raw, urgent, slicing through the backstage clatter.

She bolted to Lucy, her hands grabbing her arm, yanking her from the stage's edge before the crowd could claim her. Lucy's head whipped around, the burner's ring echoing in her ears—she knew it, John's warning, the signal to run. Her heart lurched, but her body moved, instinct kicking in, John's rules burned deep: *hear it, bolt, no questions*. Theresa's grip was iron, pulling her through the backstage maze—past confused techs, over cables, out a side door into Portland's chill night, the Willamette's glint a fleeting guide. Lucy's dress flared as they ran, her boots pounding pavement, Theresa's breath sharp beside her, the burner's ring a death knell fading behind. *Glowies? John?* Lucy's mind raced, but she didn't stop—freedom first, answers later.

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In Mong Kok, the flat glowed warm, Zsuzsa and Anes's laughter spilling as they bantered in Hungarian, folding laundry, the dragon-curved teapot steaming. Zsuzsa teased Anes about a mango stain, Anes firing back with a grin, their sisterhood a shield. Then, from the drawer, a sharp ring—their burners, John's

voice in absentia, a sound that stopped their breath. They froze, eyes meeting, the code clear: *danger, move now*. No words needed; they'd drilled this, John's shadow their guide.

Zsuzsa snatched her purse, Anes grabbing hers, keys jangling as they moved, their banter dead, their fire channeled. They knew the spot—a dead drop only they and John shared, a Kowloon alley, untraceable. They rushed, the flat's door slamming, their boots hitting the stairwell, Mong Kok's chaos swallowing them as they ran. Anes's hand brushed Zsuzsa's, a fleeting anchor, their purses bouncing, crypto drives safe inside, their dresses from the market a blur as they wove through crowds, eyes sharp for tails, John's signal a lifeline pulling them to safety.

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In Kowloon's lair, Li's smirk widened, the screens looping Lucy's aborted stage prep, Zsuzsa and Anes's now-empty flat, a trap John hadn't seen coming. John stood rigid, arms crossed, his face a mask of stone, but inside, his fear burned—*they're exposed, all of them*. Li stepped closer, his voice a blade, slicing deeper. "You'll go back to America to hang," he said, his tone gleeful, venomous. "The DoJ knows you're here—I'll tell the CCP to turn you over. But..." He paused, leaning in, the screens flickering behind him. "Hack their satellites—blind them, the world—for us to take Taiwan, and you and your bitches will be safe."

The words landed like a bomb, Li's leverage a noose—Volt Typhoon's endgame, Taiwan's fall, John's skills their key. The DoJ's shadow, the CCP's leash, Lucy, Zsuzsa, Anes—all pawns unless he played. John's jaw tightened, his mind splitting: *Li's deep, deeper than I thought—cameras, feeds, deals with feds?* His signal was out, the burners ringing, but *safe* was a lie—Li's promise reeked of betrayal, a cage dressed as freedom.

He didn't flinch, his voice low, steady, buying time. "Big ask," he said, eyes locked on Li's, his bluff a shield. "Proof you can deliver—safe passage, no strings." His thumb grazed his phone, checking the script's ping—sent, received, he hoped. *Run, all of you*, he willed, his heart with Lucy's flight, Zsuzsa and Anes's rush, their training his only armor now.

Li laughed, sharp, stepping back, the screens his throne. "Proof comes when you deliver, John. Taiwan's ours, or they're all done—your call." The standoff crackled, John's fear buried deep, his code, his women, his fight—balanced on a razor's edge, the lair a trap he'd have to break.

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Lucy and Theresa vanished into Portland's alleys, the blue dress tucked under a jacket Theresa grabbed, their breaths fogging, the burner's echo driving them to a safehouse Charlie kept, its address burned in Lucy's mind. In Hong Kong, Zsuzsa and Anes hit the alley, their dead drop—a locker, a go-bag—waiting, their hands steady, John's lessons their pulse. The women ran, oceans apart, their fires alight, John's signal a thread holding them, the standoff's shadow looming, too late to warn, but not to fight.

In the Kowloon lair, the air crackled with menace, the server hum a cold pulse under Li's venomous words. The screens glowed—Lucy's blue dress frozen mid-stage, Zsuzsa and Anes's empty flat a taunt—Li's trap laid bare. John stood, arms still crossed, his face a granite mask, but inside, rage and fear churned, Li's threat against Zsuzsa, Anes, and Lucy a blade twisting deep. *Strip them, dark room, kill them*—the words burned, Li's cruelty a mirror to Volt Typhoon's ruthlessness, the CCP's leash tight around his throat.

Li leaned closer, his smirk a sickle, his voice dripping with disdain. "If it was up to me, I'd take your bitches, strip them, throw them into a dark room with no heat," he spat, his eyes glinting, savoring John's silence. "Why? You Americans think you're all that. You thought you could play me—I played you instead. Kill the women, John. That'll cut you free. True hackers have no one but themselves." His words were a dare, a dogma, Li's world where bonds were chains, love a weakness to sever.

John's pulse hammered, but his eyes stayed locked on Li's, unflinching, his voice low, cutting. "Prove the DoJ knows," he said, his tone flat, a challenge to shift the ground, to force Li's hand. *Keep him talking, buy time*, he thought, his thumb still grazing his phone, the burner signal out—Lucy, Zsuzsa, Anes, *please, be moving*. Their faces flashed—Lucy's fire, Zsuzsa's depth, Anes's spark—his reason to fight, not Li's to break.

Li's grin sharpened, undeterred, swiveling to another screen with a flick of his wrist. It lit up—a DoJ indictment, stark and damning: *John, multiple counts of cyberstalking, HIPAA violations, conspiracy, obstruction of justice*. The charges scrolled, a net woven tight, each line a year in a cell, a gallows if Li's taunts held truth. "There's your proof," Li said, his voice smug, leaning back. "They know you're here, John. We've got eyes, strings—your feds are hungry."

John scanned the screen, his mind racing—*real or forged?* The seals looked legit, the counts plausible, HIPAA a stretch but clever, conspiracy the catch-all. His years on the run, his hacks, Lucy's crypto—he'd left trails, faint but findable, and Volt Typhoon had dug deep. Still, he didn't crack, his voice steady, pushing back. "That'll take them forever to prosecute," he said, his tone dismissive, a jab to shake Li's confidence. "Paper's one thing—dragging me back's another." He leaned forward, a fraction, his eyes boring into Li's. "You're bluffing extradition. Show me the order, or it's just talk."

Li laughed, sharp, his hand slamming the desk, the screens flickering. "Extradition's easy," he said, his voice a hiss. "We'd hold you here—CCP's guest —'til we kick you back to the US. I'll love the day you hang, John, and your bitches killed." His eyes burned, fanatic, the Taiwan hack his prize, John's life the cost. "Blind their satellites, give us the world, or it's over—for all of them."

John's fear spiked—*they're running, they have to be*—but his face gave nothing, his mind a storm of counters. *Li's deep, but sloppy—too eager, too cruel.* The indictments were real enough, but extradition? A gamble, not a lock, Hong Kong's limbo his edge. His signal was out, the burners alive—he pictured Lucy bolting with Theresa, Zsuzsa and Anes hitting the dead drop, their training his lifeline. "You need me," John said, slow, deliberate, turning Li's leverage. "Kill them, you lose me. No hack, no Taiwan. You're not that stupid."

Li's smirk twitched, a flicker of doubt, but he held firm, the screens looping, a silent threat. The standoff tightened, John's rage a fire he banked—*no one touches them.* His code, his women, his fight hung on seconds—Lucy's stage empty, the flat abandoned, the burners' pulse a hope against Li's noose, the lair a chessboard where John played for their lives, not Li's world.

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In Portland, Lucy and Theresa were shadows now, weaving through alleys, the blue dress hidden, Charlie's safehouse their beacon, the burner's ring a fading echo. In Mong Kok, Zsuzsa and Anes hit the alley, the locker's go-bag heavy in their hands, their steps quick, eyes sharp, John's dead drop their north star. Oceans apart, the women moved, John's signal their pulse, Li's screens blind to their flight, the standoff's weight a storm they'd outrun, their fires burning, unbroken, free.

In the tense hush of Kowloon's lair, John stood firm, his arms crossed, the screens behind Li still looping their venom—Lucy's stage, Zsuzsa and Anes's flat, now empty frames of his worst fear. Li's threats hung heavy—*hang, kill, Taiwan*—but John's focus split, his mind tethered to the women, their burners, his signal. He'd built their escape with care: a Morse code tap, unique to each—Lucy's sharp rhythm, Zsuzsa's steady pulse, Anes's quick flare—sent to his own burner, a lifeline rigged to brick the phones if the code faltered, wiping data clean, leaving no trace. His heart pounded, but he trusted their training, his code, their fire.

Like clockwork, his burner buzzed, silent in his pocket, the vibrations distinct—Lucy first, her taps precise, then Zsuzsa, deliberate, Anes last, her rhythm fierce. All safe. Relief surged, a wave he hid behind his stone mask, Li's smirk blind to the win. *They're out*, John thought, his fear easing, though the standoff's edge remained—Li's leash, Volt Typhoon's game, Taiwan's shadow. He held his ground, eyes locked on Li, waiting for the next move, his women's freedom a spark he'd guard with everything.

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In Portland, Lucy and Theresa crouched in Charlie's safehouse, a nondescript apartment off Burnside, its windows dark, the blue dress folded in a bag, Lucy's stage fire banked but alive. Her burner lay silent now, her Morse code sent, John's signal answered. Theresa's hand rested on her shoulder, her eyes scanning the door, her trust in Charlie absolute. Charlie stood nearby, his denim jacket creased, his voice calm but firm, cutting through Lucy's adrenaline. "Luce, don't worry," he said, his gaze steady. "We'll refund or reschedule Wonder Ballroom—fans'll wait. You've got other things to focus on. I've got a friend, private security, ex-cop—he's coming to stay with you, keep you safe."

Lucy nodded, her breath slowing, gratitude tight in her chest. "Thanks, Charlie," she whispered, her voice raw, the gig a distant hum against John's warning, the Glowies' shadow looming. Theresa met Charlie's eyes, her own fierce with relief. "Thank you so much for your help," she said, her tone heavy, "and your protection." Her hand squeezed Lucy's, their bond a fortress, Charlie's care a shield to weather this storm, the safehouse a pause to plan their next move.

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In Mong Kok, Zsuzsa and Anes reached the dead drop, a grimy Kowloon alley, the locker's go-bag heavy—passports, cash, new burners, John's foresight their armor. Their Morse codes sent, phones still live, they melted into the crowd, hand-

in-hand, their purses light but hearts steady, the flat a memory, their sisterhood unbroken. They headed for a safe spot—a tea house John had marked, its back room theirs—eyes sharp, steps quick, Anes's fire tempered by Zsuzsa's calm, their crypto drives safe, their flight a vow to meet John again, free.

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Back in the lair, the air shifted, a door slamming open as a mid-ranking CCP officer strode in, his suit sharp, his face a storm. Li's smirk vanished, his posture stiffening as the man unleashed a torrent of Mandarin, his voice low but venomous, strict verbiage cutting like a whip. "We need him as an ally, not a foe, you fool," he snapped, his finger jabbing at Li, the words carrying dismissal's edge. "Another slip-up, you're done." The rebuke was public, deliberate, Li's cruelty a misstep the CCP wouldn't forgive twice.

John stepped back, his face neutral, watching the scene unfold—Li's wings clipped, the power shifting. The officer turned to him, his eyes calculating but softer, a diplomat's mask over steel. "He will be dealt with," he said in English, his tone measured, nodding at Li, now silent, chastened. "However, we do want Taiwan, and we want you to help us do it." The offer was blunt, no threats, but the weight clear—satellites, chaos, a world tilted, John's skills the key, asylum the unspoken trade.

John's mind raced, the women safe but the game tighter—*ally, not foe, but for how long?* Li's screens still glowed, indictments real, extradition a shadow, but the officer's pivot gave him room, a crack to exploit. "Taiwan's a big ask," he said, his voice steady, probing. "What's the deal—safe passage, all of us, no strings?" He held the officer's gaze, his burner warm with their codes, Lucy's song, Zsuzsa's depth, Anes's fire his anchor, the standoff's tide turning, his next move a code yet to write.

Li stood frozen, the officer's scolding a chain, while John weighed the play—hack or run, trust or break, the women's signals his north star, Taiwan's fall a price he'd never pay blind. The lair hummed, Hong Kong's pulse waiting, their fires—his, theirs—burning, unbroken, a fight they'd win together, one signal at a time.

In the Kowloon lair, the air was taut, the server hum a low drone under the weight of the standoff. John faced the CCP officer and Li, his arms still crossed, the screens behind them frozen—Lucy's stage empty, the flat abandoned, his women's Morse codes a quiet victory in his pocket. Li's threats—*strip them, kill*

them—and the officer's pivot to Taiwan hung like a noose, but John held his ground, his voice cutting sharp and final. "Table this discussion for now," he said, his eyes flicking from the officer's calculated gaze to Li's chastened scowl. "Li decided to threaten my family, and now I have to clean up his mess."

The words were a blade, dismissing Li's cruelty and the officer's offer in one stroke, his tone leaving no room for debate. He turned his back, deliberate, his boots echoing on the lair's floor, a calculated exit that dared them to stop him. Li's face twitched, silenced by the officer's earlier rebuke, while the officer watched, his silence a pause, not a retreat—Taiwan's shadow would wait, but John had bought time. The door closed behind him, Kowloon's neon chaos swallowing him as he stepped into the night, Hong Kong's pulse a rhythm to steady his rage.

Outside, he pulled his regular phone, his burner safe for now, and texted Zsuzsa, fingers quick, precise: *Stay put, I'll meet you*. The tea house, their alternate spot, was close, its back room a haven only they knew. In the alley, Zsuzsa and Anes waited, the go-bag heavy, their burners quiet after the Morse code. Anes exhaled, a sigh of relief breaking her fire's edge as she read the text, her shoulders easing. Zsuzsa pulled her close, her embrace fierce, sisterly, her dark eyes scanning the crowd, her calm anchoring Anes's spark. "He's coming," Zsuzsa murmured, her voice steady, their hands linked, the crypto drives in their purses a vow of freedom.

Not long after, John slipped into the tea house, his jacket blending with the dim light, his eyes finding them instantly—Zsuzsa's depth, Anes's fire, alive, safe. He crossed the room, his arms opening, pulling them both in, a brief, tight hug that said more than words—*you're here, we're whole*. "You did good," he said, his voice low, pride and relief threading through. "We're not clear yet, but you're safe for now." They nodded, Anes's grin flickering, Zsuzsa's hand lingering on his arm, their trust a fire no lair could dim.

John pulled his phone again, texting Lucy on a secure line, his message spare but heavy: *All I can say for now, I'm safe and glad you are too. Keep your eyes open—not the Glowies, but Volt Typhoon*. He sent it, his heart with her, the blue dress, her stage, her fight, oceans apart but tied by his code, his care.

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In Portland, Lucy and Theresa huddled in Charlie's safehouse, the apartment's dim light casting shadows, the blue dress folded away, Lucy's burner quiet after her

Morse code. Charlie's security friend—a burly ex-cop, silent but watchful—stood by the door, his presence a shield. Lucy's phone buzzed, John's text flashing, her eyes scanning it fast, her breath catching. "All I can say for now, I'm safe..." She read it aloud, her voice steady but edged, then paused, frowning. "Who or what the hell is Volt Typhoon?" she said, turning to Theresa, her crimson nails tapping the table, her stage fire flaring with questions.

Theresa's brow furrowed, her mind racing—*John's world, hackers, shadows.* "No clue," she admitted, her voice low, glancing at the ex-cop, then back to Lucy. "But if John's naming them, they're trouble—worse than feds, maybe." She leaned closer, her hand on Lucy's, their bond tight. "We stay sharp, Luce. Charlie's got us, John's watching. We'll figure it out." Lucy nodded, her jaw set, the spa day's glow now a fighter's edge, Volt Typhoon a ghost she'd face, her song, her family—Theresa, Charlie, John—her armor.

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In Hong Kong, John sat with Zsuzsa and Anes, the tea house's murmur a cover, their go-bag ready, the crypto safe. Li's screens, the indictments, Taiwan's price—they loomed, but the women's signals, their flight, gave him ground to fight. Volt Typhoon had overplayed, Li's cruelty a crack John would pry open, the officer's leash a thread to pull. Lucy's question hung, unanswered, but her fire, like Zsuzsa's and Anes's, burned bright, their paths split but joined—code, song, sisterhood—a defiance no threat could break, the standoff's next move John's to shape, one hack, one step, one signal at a time.

In the tea house's dim back room, John sat with Zsuzsa and Anes, the go-bag at their feet, the weight of the Kowloon lair—Li's threats, the CCP officer's pivot, Volt Typhoon's net—still pressing but dulled by their closeness. Their hands linked, Zsuzsa's steady, Anes's warm, John's voice broke the murmur of the crowd outside. "Let's go somewhere quiet," he said, his eyes meeting theirs, a spark of resolve cutting through his fatigue. "Intimate." The words were a promise, a need to reclaim their space, their fire, after the day's storm.

They moved fast, slipping through Mong Kok's chaos, their steps synced, eyes sharp for tails. John led them to a high-rise hotel in Central, its glass facade gleaming under Hong Kong's neon sky, a fortress of luxury where anonymity could be bought. They checked in under aliases—John as "Michael Chen," Zsuzsa and Anes as sisters, "Lina and Mara Kwan"—paying a week in advance with Monero, the crypto untraceable, their tracks clean. The clerk didn't blink, handing over

keycards to a suite on the 38th floor, large and luxurious, a temporary home to breathe, to plan.

The suite opened to a sprawl of elegance—plush carpets, floor-to-ceiling windows framing Victoria Harbour’s shimmer, a king bed draped in silk, a living area with a bar, and a bathroom gleaming with marble. Zsuzsa and Anes’s eyes lit up as they spotted the garden tub, deep and wide, its jets promising solace. They walked to it hand-in-hand, their laughter soft, a shared spark cutting through the day’s fear. “We’re getting in,” Zsuzsa said, her voice warm, decisive, tugging Anes closer. “Soaking for a while.”

Anes grinned, her fire flaring, already kicking off her shoes. “Hell yes,” she said, glancing at John, her eyes teasing but grateful. John smiled, his voice low, tender. “Enjoy, my loves.” He felt the weight of the day—Li’s screens, the indictments, the women’s flight—crushing him, his body screaming for rest. He crossed to the bed, the silk sheets cool, and crashed, his jacket still on, boots dangling off the edge. Exhaustion claimed him, his mind flickering with their faces—Zsuzsa’s depth, Anes’s spark, Lucy’s song—before sleep pulled him under, deep and dreamless.

Zsuzsa and Anes shed their clothes, the tub filling with steaming water, bubbles rising as they sank in, shoulder to shoulder, the jets humming soft. Their hands stayed linked, their bodies easing, the water a balm for the alley’s rush, Li’s shadow, John’s signal. Zsuzsa’s head leaned back, her sigh long, while Anes hummed faintly, her fire banked but warm, their sisterhood a quiet anchor. “He’s okay,” Anes murmured, her voice low, relief threading through. Zsuzsa nodded, her fingers squeezing Anes’s. “We’re okay,” she said, her accent soft, their soak a reclaiming, a pause to gather strength.

The suite held them, Hong Kong’s skyline a silent witness, the crypto-paid walls a shield. John slept, his breath steady, drained but safe, Zsuzsa and Anes’s laughter faint from the bathroom, a sound to tether him even in sleep. Lucy’s safehouse, Charlie’s guard, Volt Typhoon’s threat—they waited beyond, but here, the tub’s steam, the bed’s embrace, their love burned steady, a week’s refuge to unwind, to plot, to rise. Oceans away, Lucy’s fire smoldered, her blue dress ready, and though Volt Typhoon loomed, their signals—John’s, theirs—wove a net no lair could break, their fight paused but far from done.

In the high-rise suite overlooking Victoria Harbour, the garden tub’s steam still curled in the bathroom, the jets now silent as Zsuzsa and Anes lingered in the

warm water, their bodies relaxed, shoulders touching. The bubbles had faded, but their contentment hummed, sighs escaping as they soaked away the day's terror —Li's screens, the alley run, John's signal. The tub was a haven, their hands linked, their laughter soft, the ordeal weaving their bond tighter than ever, deeper than their university days when they'd been friends, not yet sisters forged by fire.

Zsuzsa's dark eyes met Anes's, a shared understanding passing—*we're here, we're whole*. "Enough," Zsuzsa murmured, her accent warm, a smile tugging her lips. Anes nodded, her fire gentle now, and they rose, water dripping as they stepped out, the marble cool under their feet. They reached for towels, drying each other with care, Zsuzsa's hands gentle on Anes's shoulders, Anes's touch lingering on Zsuzsa's back, a ritual of tenderness born from the day's chaos. Their closeness, once unexpected, now felt inevitable, and as they finished, Zsuzsa pulled Anes into a sudden embrace, their damp skin pressing, a wordless vow—*we've got each other, always*.

They held the hug, hearts steadyng, then parted with a shared grin, their towels loose as they padded to the bedroom, Hong Kong's skyline a quiet glow beyond the windows. John lay sprawled on the king bed, still in his jacket, boots half-off, his face slack with exhaustion, the lair's weight buried in his sleep. Zsuzsa and Anes exchanged a look, their love for him a current, unspoken but fierce. They moved quietly, their hands gentle as they eased his jacket off, tugging his boots free, unbuttoning his shirt with care, not to wake him but to show him—*we're here, we care*. Their touches were soft, deliberate, stripping away the day's armor, leaving him bare, vulnerable, theirs to guard.

Their towels fell away, pooling on the carpet, and they slipped into bed, naked, their skin warm from the bath, their bodies curling against John's. Zsuzsa slid to his left, her arm draping over his chest, her breath soft on his shoulder, her depth a steady anchor. Anes pressed to his right, her leg tangling with his, her fire banked but warm, her fingers tracing his arm, a spark of care. They wanted his warmth, his presence, knowing he'd crave theirs even in sleep—their triad a shield, their love a fire no threat could douse.

John stirred faintly, a low hum in his throat, his body sensing them, easing deeper into rest, their closeness a balm for the indictments, Li's venom, Volt Typhoon's leash. Zsuzsa's eyes met Anes's over his chest, a smile passing, their bond—sisters, lovers, fighters—sealing the moment. The suite held them, the city's pulse

faint, Lucy's safehouse a distant echo, her fire burning parallel. The women nestled closer, their skin against John's, the bed a haven, their love a vow—we're safe, we're together, we'll rise. Tomorrow waited—Taiwan's shadow, the Glowies, the fight—but tonight, their warmth, their care, was enough, a glow to carry them through.

In Portland's safehouse, dawn crept through the blinds, casting faint lines across the sparse apartment, the air quiet save for Lucy's soft strumming. She sat cross-legged on a worn couch, her acoustic guitar cradled, her fingers coaxing out *Love in the Night*, a track from her first album, its chords raw and wistful. Her voice joined, low and haunting, each note a thread of longing, John's face flickering in her mind—his text, *Volt Typhoon*, the burner's weight in her pocket. The song was her confession, a love she'd never speak, only sing, its lyrics a bridge to him across oceans, safe in code, not words.

Her blue dress lay folded, the Wonder Ballroom a paused dream, but her fire burned steady, the guitar a lifeline. Theresa slept in the next room, Charlie's ex-cop guard dozing by the door, their electronics—phones, laptops—off, unplugged, ghosts against trackers. Only the burner stayed live, its silence a vow, John's signal her anchor. *Safe for now*, she thought, her fingers steady, the song's ache weaving her love, her fear, her fight, *Volt Typhoon* a shadow she'd outrun with her voice.

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In Hong Kong, the high-rise suite glowed with morning light, Victoria Harbour sparkling beyond the windows, the king bed a tangle of silk and warmth. John woke slow, his body heavy from the lair's toll—Li's threats, the CCP's leash, Taiwan's price—but eased by the press of Zsuzsa and Anes against him, their skin warm, their breaths soft. He blinked, his eyes tracing them—Zsuzsa's dark hair fanned over his shoulder, Anes's arm slung across his chest, their nudity a trust, a home. A smile broke through his fatigue, and he leaned in, kissing Zsuzsa's forehead, soft, then Anes's, lingering, his voice a low murmur. "Thank you for being here," he said, raw, real, "for staying with me through all of this."

Anes stirred, her thick accent curling warm, her eyes bright despite the hour. "We wouldn't have it any other way," she said, her voice fierce, her hand tightening on his arm, "not ever." Her fire flared, loyal, unyielding, the alley's rush a bond sealed tighter. Zsuzsa chuckled, her tease soft, playful, her Hungarian lilt dancing. "You, baby," she said, her eyes flicking to Anes, a jab wrapped in love.

Anes grinned, her retort quick, her arm pulling John closer. "Yes, I'm his baby now," she said, her tone half-laugh, half-claim, her fire sparking, staking her ground. Zsuzsa laughed, leaning over to kiss John's cheek, her hand brushing Anes's, their triad a balance—depth, spark, strength—a fire no threat could break. John's smile widened, his exhaustion easing, their warmth, their banter, a shield against Volt Typhoon, the indictments, the Glowies' shadow.

The suite hummed, their crypto-paid haven a pause to breathe, to plan. John's burner lay on the nightstand, Lucy's Morse code a quiet win, her safety a thread he held tight. He didn't know her song, *Love in the Night*, but its echo lived in his fight, their burners a lifeline across the divide. Zsuzsa and Anes nestled closer, their teasing fading to quiet, their bodies grounding him, the morning theirs. Lucy's chords, John's code, their loves—sung, unspoken, fierce—wove a net, Volt Typhoon's lair a storm they'd face, together, their fires burning, safe for now, ready to rise.

In Hong Kong's high-rise suite, the morning's warmth—Zsuzsa and Anes curled against John, their banter a soft shield—shattered as Li's revenge broke across the globe. Chastised by the CCP officer, Li hadn't slunk away; instead, he'd struck back, vicious and precise, leaking John's identity to global news outlets, burning every alias—Michael Chen, others buried deep—and exposing Zsuzsa, Anes, and Lucy in a blaze of headlines. Their faces, their lives, splashed across screens, billboards, and feeds, no corner safe. John, still in bed, hadn't seen it yet, his burner quiet, the suite's luxury a false cocoon.

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In Portland, Lucy stood in Charlie's safehouse, her blue dress laid out for the rescheduled Wonder Ballroom gig, her guitar resting nearby, *Love in the Night* still humming in her chest. Theresa adjusted the safehouse's blinds, the ex-cop guard checking his phone, when the TV—left on low, a habit—flashed a news alert. Lucy's eyes snapped to it, then froze, her breath stopping. A billboard feed, live from Times Square, showed her wedding photo—her in white, John's arm around her, smiles bright—plastered huge, digital, undeniable. Below, text screamed: *John Lombardi, Fugitive*. Theresa gasped, her hand flying to her mouth, the room tilting.

The anchor's voice cut through, crisp, relentless: "John Lombardi, on the run from cyberstalking, multiple counts of interstate stalking, conspiracy, obstruction of justice charges. Word has it, he's holed up in China, helping the CCP plan attacks on Taiwan." The screen shifted—John's mugshot, Zsuzsa and Anes's names,

Lucy's face again, her music career now a footnote to *fugitive's wife*. The DoJ's indictment scrolled, Pam Bondi's name tied to the case, her reputation for hardline prosecution a shadow over it all.

Lucy stood stone-still, her crimson nails digging into her palms, her mind rejecting the treason charge. *No way*, she thought, her heart fierce, certain. John, with his security clearance, his years dodging traps—she knew he'd play Volt Typhoon's game to protect them, not betray the US. He'd dangle skills, not secrets, his loyalty to her, Zsuzsa, Anes, a line he'd never cross. But the DoJ, Bondi—they'd see a traitor, not a survivor, their narrative fed by Li's leak, the truth buried in headlines. "He wouldn't," Lucy whispered, her voice raw, eyes locked on the screen, Theresa's hand gripping her shoulder.

Theresa's face hardened, her shock turning to resolve. "Luce, he's being framed—Volt Typhoon, not John," she said, her voice low, urgent. "We stay sharp, stay hidden. Charlie's got us." The guard glanced up, nodding, his phone now off, the safehouse's walls tighter. Lucy's burner lay silent, her Morse code sent, John's text—*Volt Typhoon*—now a prophecy. The gig loomed, but her fire shifted—John's fight was hers, the news a storm they'd weather, not break under.

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In Hong Kong, John woke to Zsuzsa and Anes, his kisses soft, their warmth a fleeting haven. But as he reached for his phone, a news alert pinged—then another, a cascade. His aliases, burned. Zsuzsa's face, Anes's, Lucy's wedding photo, all public, Li's knife twisting deep. *Global*, he thought, his gut dropping, the suite's luxury mocking him. "Li," he muttered, rage flaring, the CCP officer's reprimand a spark Li had turned to fire. Zsuzsa and Anes stirred, their eyes catching his, the morning's tease gone. "What is it?" Anes asked, her fire dimming, Zsuzsa's hand tightening on his.

He showed them the screen—CNN, BBC, Al Jazeera, all screaming *Lombardi, Fugitive, CCP, Taiwan*. The indictments were real, but Taiwan? A lie, Li's spin to trap him, the DoJ's leash a noose Pam Bondi would tighten. John's mind raced—*safehouse for them, new aliases, crypto's still clean*. "We move," he said, his voice steady, his love for them—Lucy too—a fire no leak could douse. "New plan, now."

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Lucy's heart held firm—she knew John, his code, his fight. The DoJ, Bondi, they'd chase the traitor myth, but she'd sing, she'd run, her burner her link to him, her song her truth. Zsuzsa and Anes, in Hong Kong's glare, clung to John, their

sisterhood a vow to fight. Li's leak had exposed them, but their fires—John's hacks, Lucy's chords, Zsuzsa's depth, Anes's spark—burned brighter, a defiance no billboard could snuff, their next move a signal yet to send, the world watching, their love their shield.

In the Hong Kong high-rise suite, the morning's fragile calm shattered as John, Zsuzsa, and Anes scrambled to gather their things, the news alerts—John's aliases burned, Lucy's wedding photo, Zsuzsa and Anes exposed—still blazing on their screens. Li's leak had stripped their shadows, the DoJ's indictments and Pam Bondi's name a tightening noose. The go-bag was half-packed, crypto drives secure, when a sharp knock at the door froze them. John's hand went to his burner, his eyes signaling Zsuzsa and Anes to stay back, their faces tense, hands linked.

He cracked the door, braced for a trap, but it was the CCP officer from the lair, his suit immaculate, his face grim but composed. Two military officers stood behind him, rifles slung, eyes scanning the hall. "We know what Li has done," the officer said, his English clipped, authoritative. "It was all him, not the CCP—a lone wolf, acting alone. He's been eliminated." The word landed heavy—Li, dead, his smirk erased, his leak a rogue move the CCP now scrubbed clean. "Come now," the officer continued, his gaze locking on John. "We'll protect you from prosecution, but at a price."

John's jaw tightened, his mind racing—*eliminated, protection, price*. The officer's offer echoed the lair's Taiwan gambit, but Li's death shifted the board, the CCP distancing itself from his chaos while doubling down on John's skills. He couldn't say no, not with the DoJ circling, Bondi's wrath a trans-Pacific threat, but he'd draw his line. "I'll assist," John said, his voice steady, eyes unyielding. "But no secrets will be passed. I'll offer my skills, as the original agreement stands—my companions and my ex-wife are to be protected." His words were a vow, Zsuzsa, Anes, and Lucy his north star, their safety non-negotiable.

The officer nodded, a flicker of respect in his eyes, no pushback—for now. "Agreed," he said, stepping aside. "You'll be safe, all of you." John turned to Zsuzsa and Anes, their bags clutched, fear and fire in their eyes. He motioned, his voice low, reassuring. "Stay here," he said, his hand brushing Zsuzsa's arm, Anes's hand. "You'll be safe now." He nodded to the officer, who signaled the two soldiers to stand guard outside the door, their presence a shield, not a cage.

Downstairs, the high-rise swarmed with military—PLA soldiers, disciplined, rifles low, securing the lobby, the exits, a perimeter John clocked as he followed the officer. The CCP had carved a bubble, a safe zone to keep him from the DoJ's reach, their investment in his code clear—Taiwan loomed, their price unnamed but heavy. John's burner stayed silent, Lucy's Morse code a faint echo, his trust in her flight, Zsuzsa and Anes's warmth, holding him steady as he stepped into the officer's car, the city's neon a blur, his fight now theirs.

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In Portland, Lucy and Theresa huddled in the safehouse, the TV off, the news—John's face, their wedding, *Taiwan*—a wound still raw. Lucy's guitar lay quiet, her blue dress ready for Wonder Ballroom, but her mind was on John, Volt Typhoon, the burner's weight. Charlie's ex-cop guard stood by the door, his phone buzzing with updates, when a new alert hit—Pam Bondi's voice, sharp, broadcast from a DC presser: "Immediately cancel Theresa and Lucy's passports," she declared, her tone iron. "They're a flight risk. I want them locked down to our borders."

Lucy's breath caught, Theresa's hand tightening on hers, the safehouse walls closing in. *Flight risk, locked down*—Bondi's move was a cage, the DoJ swallowing Li's bait, John's *traitor* label now theirs. Lucy's fire flared, her jaw setting. "They don't know him," she muttered, her voice low, fierce. "He's no traitor." Theresa nodded, her eyes hard, practical. "We stay low, Luce. Charlie's got us, the guard's solid. Burners only." The ex-cop glanced over, his nod firm, already texting Charlie, the safehouse their fortress, the gig a risk they'd weigh.

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In Hong Kong, Zsuzsa and Anes stood in the suite, the soldiers' boots audible outside, their hands still linked, the go-bag untouched. Zsuzsa's calm held Anes's fire, their sisterhood a vow—we *wait, we trust*. John's text—*stay here*—was their anchor, the crypto drives safe, their love for him a fire no leak could douse. Lucy's safehouse, oceans away, held her song, her defiance, Bondi's net a shadow she'd slip. The CCP's bubble, the DoJ's cage—John, Lucy, Zsuzsa, Anes—fought parallel wars, their burners a thread, their skills, their love, a signal to outlast the storm, Taiwan's price a fight John would shape, not bow to.

In the Hong Kong high-rise suite, John sat in the back of the CCP officer's car, the city's neon streaking past, the military perimeter a tense cocoon. Zsuzsa and Anes were safe upstairs, guarded, their crypto drives secure, but Lucy—oceans away, her face on billboards, her passport canceled—burned in his mind. Li's leak,

Bondi's net, the DoJ's traitor label—it had cornered them all. His burner buzzed, a secure line still alive, and he typed fast, his message to Lucy raw, urgent: *No lie, no secret any longer. I'm not a traitor and will die if need be. Go to the Chinese embassy. You'll be arranged transport to Hong Kong. Go, now.*

He sent it, his heart heavy but certain—*Hong Kong, together, the only way*. The CCP's offer, Taiwan's shadow, meant protection at a cost, but he'd carve terms: his skills, not secrets, their safety his line. Lucy's music, her fire, Zsuzsa's depth, Anes's spark—he'd fight for them all, traitor or not, the DoJ's lies a storm he'd outrun.

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In Portland's safehouse, Lucy stared at her burner, John's text a jolt that stopped her breath. *Chinese embassy, Hong Kong, leave forever*. Her blue dress lay folded, Wonder Ballroom's stage a fading dream, her guitar silent. The words sank in—leave the US, her career, her fans, for China, for John. She froze, her crimson nails digging into her palms, her mind reeling. *My music, my life—gone?* John's vow—*not a traitor, will die*—echoed, his love, their past, a pull she couldn't shake. Seeing him again, once impossible, now shimmered real, but at what cost?

Theresa, beside her, read the text over her shoulder, her face steady, practical. "Luce," she said, her voice low, warm, cutting through the panic, "you could learn to sing in Mandarin. Opportunities—a new life, maybe one we can all share with John." Her hand rested on Lucy's, her eyes bright with possibility, not loss. "He's fighting for you, for us. Hong Kong's not the end—it's a start."

Lucy's breath hitched, Theresa's words a lifeline, shifting the weight. *Mandarin, a new stage, John's arms*. Her music wasn't dead—it could evolve, like her. She nodded, slow, her fire flickering back, John's certainty fueling hers. "Okay," she whispered, her voice firming. "Let's go." The ex-cop guard, already briefed by Charlie, stood ready, his eyes sharp. "Embassy's a straight shot," he said, grabbing their bags—burners only, no electronics, the blue dress left behind.

They moved fast, the guard driving, Lucy and Theresa in the back, Portland's streets a blur. The Chinese embassy loomed, its gates guarded by PLA soldiers, their rifles low, eyes scanning. The guard flashed a code—John's work, relayed through Charlie—and the gates opened, the soldiers waving them in, their protection a mirror to Hong Kong's high-rise. Lucy stepped out, Theresa beside

her, their hands brushing, the embassy's walls a portal to John, to safety, to a life uncharted.

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In Hong Kong, John waited, the officer's car now parked at a secure compound, PLA soldiers circling, his burner quiet but alive. Zsuzsa and Anes, upstairs, held the suite, their warmth his anchor. Lucy's move—embassy, transport—meant reunion, a chance to rebuild, but Taiwan's price, Bondi's wrath, loomed. He'd hack, he'd fight, but not betray—his women, his code, his truth, unbreakable.

Lucy, in the embassy, felt the shift—her career, her past, bending, not breaking. Mandarin songs, Hong Kong's stages, John's side—it was possible, Theresa's hope her guide. The soldiers stood guard, her burner clutched, John's signal her star. Oceans apart, their fires converged—Zsuzsa's depth, Anes's spark, Theresa's steadiness, John's fight—Hong Kong their horizon, Volt Typhoon's shadow a storm they'd face, together, their love, their songs, a defiance no border could cage.

In the Portland Chinese embassy, Lucy and Theresa stood tense, their burners silent, the PLA soldiers' presence a stark reminder of the stakes. A gentleman in a crisp suit approached, his demeanor formal but calm. "Ma'am," he said, addressing them both, "we'll arrange transport to Hong Kong with diplomatic status. Please come with us." Lucy's heart thudded—*Hong Kong, John, a new life*—but her resolve held, Theresa's steady hand brushing hers, a silent vow to face this together. They followed, the ex-cop guard staying behind, his nod a final anchor as they stepped into a black SUV, its tinted windows shielding them from Portland's gray dawn.

The drive to a private airfield was swift, the city blurring past, Lucy's mind on her guitar, her music, the career she'd reshape. At the airfield, a sleek private jet waited, its engines humming, PLA officers flanking the stairs. Lucy clutched her guitar case, Theresa her bag, and they boarded, the cabin plush but cold, diplomatic immunity their shield. The flight stretched long—hours over the Pacific, Lucy's fingers tracing the guitar's neck, Theresa's eyes scanning the clouds, both silent, processing the leap from safehouse to embassy, from stage to exile.

They landed in Hong Kong, the city's neon skyline a jolt after the jet's quiet. Another SUV whisked them to the Chinese embassy, its gates heavy, guarded by more PLA soldiers. Inside, a woman in diplomatic attire met them, her expression neutral, her voice clipped. "You'll remain here at the embassy until John

completes his assignments," she said, gesturing to a secure wing, its rooms sparse but safe. Lucy's jaw tightened—*assignments, Taiwan, John's fight*—but she nodded, her fire banked, not broken. Theresa's hand grazed her arm, their bond a steady pulse.

Lucy glanced at her guitar, then the woman. "I'd like a smartphone to use," she said, her voice firm, needing a link to her fans, her world. The woman shook her head, offering a laptop instead, its webcam blinking. "You can use this," she said, leaving them in the room, the door clicking shut, soldiers outside. Lucy sat, her guitar in her lap, the laptop open, and saw her chance—not silenced, not yet. She logged into her social media, accounts still live despite Bondi's net, and hit stream, the webcam framing her face, her guitar, her truth.

"My husband is not a traitor," she said, her voice clear, fierce, eyes locked on the lens, speaking to her fans, the world, the DoJ's lies. "I may not be home, but I'm here now." Her fingers found the strings, strumming the opening chords of *Love in the Night*, a song from her unreleased album, its ache raw, her love for John woven in every note. "To my fans," she continued, her voice steady, "I'll keep making music, but from here." She played, her voice soaring, the embassy's walls fading, the stream live to millions—her defiance, her art, a signal no cage could mute.

Theresa stood nearby, her smile proud, her eyes glistening—that's my Luce. The stream trended, fans flooding comments—*We're with you, Lucy! Keep singing!*—the world hearing her truth, not Li's leaks or Bondi's charges. Her guitar hummed, the song a vow to John, to herself, Mandarin stages a horizon she'd conquer, her fire unbowed.

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In the Hong Kong high-rise, John worked in the CCP's secure compound, his burner quiet, Zsuzsa and Anes safe in the suite, PLA guards their shield. He hadn't seen Lucy's stream yet, but her Morse code, her flight, burned in him—*she's here, close*. The embassy held her, Theresa too, their safety his leverage as he faced the officer, his skills offered, not secrets, Taiwan's shadow a tightrope. *Not a traitor*, he'd vowed, and Lucy's song, streaming live, echoed it, their love a thread across the city, Zsuzsa's depth, Anes's fire, Theresa's steadiness weaving a net—code, chords, defiance—no assignment could break.

The embassy's laptop glowed, Lucy's stream a beacon, her guitar's hum reaching John's heart, though he didn't know it yet. The CCP watched, Bondi's net tightened, but their fires—Lucy's song, John's hacks, their shared fight—burned brighter, Hong Kong their crucible, their love, their art, a signal to outlast the storm.

In a fortified compound deep in Hong Kong, John stood before the assembled hackers—Salt Typhoon, Volt Typhoon, Silk Typhoon—a room crackling with tension, screens glowing with code, the air thick with the weight of their task. PLA soldiers guarded the doors, the CCP officer's presence a shadow in the corner, but John's focus was iron, his resolve forged by Lucy's stream, Zsuzsa and Anes's safety, the DoJ's lies. He stood tall, his voice steady, commanding, cutting through the hum of servers. "I'm here to lead and to task out," he said, his eyes sweeping the room, locking on each hacker—Li's ghost gone, their skills now his to wield. "It's up to you to show what China can do, what combined talent can do."

His words were a rallying cry, not for the CCP's cause but for survival, for leverage—his women's freedom, his own. He'd crafted a plan, intricate, ruthless: multiple diversions to swarm SBIRS (Space-Based Infrared System) and CBERS (China-Brazil Earth Resources Satellite) during a narrow maintenance window, exploiting vulnerabilities he'd mapped in silence. The diversions—false pings, spoofed telemetry—would blind the systems, letting his team slip into Taiwanese networks, gaining a foothold, a beachhead. He tasked Salt for signal jams, Volt for payload embeds, Silk for lateral movement, each move a thread in his web, his skills offered, not secrets, Taiwan's fall a price he'd feint but never pay.

Against all odds, they executed, their breach deep, persistent, a digital fortress carved in Taiwanese servers. They named their new group APT 00—Advanced Persistent Threat, a nod to their unity, their edge. The cyberattack roared, chaos cloaking China's military moves—troops mobilizing, ships edging toward Taiwan's waters, a gambit the CCP had long planned. But the US 7th Fleet, patrolling the Pacific, was watching, destroyers and carriers shifting, satellites realigning, their own hackers sniffing APT 00's tracks. The world teetered, John's diversions a spark in a global powder keg.

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In the Chinese embassy, Lucy sat with her guitar, her live stream of *Love in the Night* still trending, her fans' comments a lifeline—*Not a traitor, Lucy, keep singing!* Theresa stood by, her eyes on the embassy's guarded doors, the PLA soldiers

outside, their diplomatic status a fragile shield. Lucy's burner lay silent, John's last text—*go to the embassy*—her anchor, but the news flickered on a muted TV: *Taiwan tensions rise, cyberattack hits, US fleet moves*. She froze, her fingers pausing on the strings, *Volt Typhoon* echoing in her mind, John's fight now a global storm. "He's in this," she whispered to Theresa, her voice low, certain. "Not for them, for us."

Theresa nodded, her hand on Lucy's shoulder, her voice steady. "He's playing their game, Luce, not selling out. We stay sharp, wait for his signal." The embassy held them, a gilded cage, John's assignments—*Taiwan*—their chain, but Lucy's fire burned, her song a defiance streaming live, her Mandarin dreams a stage she'd build, with or without borders.

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In the Hong Kong suite, Zsuzsa and Anes watched the same news, their crypto drives safe, PLA guards outside, their hands linked as the world shifted. "John's leading," Zsuzsa murmured, her accent thick, pride and fear mingling. Anes's fire flared, her grip tightening. "He'll outsmart them," she said, her voice fierce, "all of them." Their burner lay ready, John's Morse code a vow they trusted, the high-rise their haven, his fight theirs.

In the chaos of the Kowloon compound, John stood amidst the hackers of APT 00, screens blazing with data streams, the air electric with the breach's success. SBIRS and CBERS lay blinded, John's diversions—spoofed signals, embedded payloads—executed flawlessly, a digital fog cloaking China's move. But the screens flickered with a new horror: China had launched ICBMs, their arcs streaking toward Taiwan, undetected until impact. The 7th Fleet, caught flat-footed, scrambled too late, their satellites dark, their destroyers distant as the missiles struck Taiwanese soil—Taipei, Kaohsiung, craters blooming, chaos erupting. Chinese naval ships surged, boots stormed the shores, PLA forces flooding Taiwan's beaches, a blitz John's hacks had unwittingly enabled. *They're in*, he thought, his gut twisting, *and they're not leaving*.

The CCP officer stood at the room's edge, his suit pristine, his smile cold, triumphant. "Thank you, John," he said, his voice smooth, final, as if sealing a contract. "Now it's our job to secure the asset—Taiwan. We'll nationalize TSMC, block all exports globally." The words landed like a guillotine. John's mind raced—TSMC, the world's chip lifeline, choked off overnight. Semiconductors would stall, tech industries—phones, cars, servers—would collapse, economies buckling, the

West scrambling, China's grip iron. He'd offered skills, not secrets, meant to feint, to protect Lucy, Zsuzsa, Anes, but the CCP had played him, his diversions a key to their war, Taiwan's fall his unintended mark.

His face stayed stone, but rage and guilt churned—I *didn't know, didn't plan this*. The lair's screens showed PLA tanks rolling, Taipei burning, TSMC's factories ringed by troops. APT 00's hackers cheered, their triumph blind to the cost, but John saw it: a world tilted, his women's safety now a debt to a regime he'd never trust. *No secrets spilled*, he reminded himself, but the line felt thin, the DoJ's *traitor* label a shadow that fit too well.

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In the Hong Kong embassy, Lucy and Theresa watched the news on the embassy's muted TV, the stream of *Love in the Night* paused, her guitar silent. Taipei's skyline smoked, PLA ships docked, the anchor's voice grim: *China invades Taiwan, TSMC seized, global markets crash*. Lucy's heart stopped, John's text—not a traitor—clashing with the screen's truth. *Volt Typhoon, his hacks*, she thought, her crimson nails gripping the guitar, but she knew him—he *didn't want this*. Theresa's face was pale, her hand tight on Lucy's. "He was trapped," Theresa whispered, her voice fierce. "Not his war, Luce. He's fighting for us."

Lucy nodded, her fire flaring, her stream's echo—not a traitor—a vow she'd amplify. "I need to sing," she said, her voice low, urgent, turning to the laptop, the webcam live again. "For him, for Taiwan, for us." The embassy's walls held her, PLA guards outside, but her music, her truth, would reach beyond.

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In the high-rise suite, Zsuzsa and Anes sat close, the news a knife—Taiwan fallen, TSMC gone, John's name unspoken but heavy. Zsuzsa's eyes were steady, her hand on Anes's, her voice soft. "He didn't betray," she said, her accent thick, certain. Anes's fire burned, her nod sharp. "He's ours, not theirs," she said, her grip fierce, their burner ready for his signal, the crypto drives safe, their love a shield against the war's shadow.

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John faced the officer, his voice low, cutting. "You got your foothold," he said, his eyes locked, no flinch. "My terms stand—my companions, my ex-wife, safe, free, no strings." The officer's smile didn't waver, but his nod was curt, a pause, not a promise. John's mind spun—*TSMC's fall, markets crashing, the 7th Fleet circling, Lucy's song, Zsuzsa's depth, Anes's fire*. He'd led APT 00, blinded systems, but he'd hack again, not for China, but for them, to slip the CCP's leash, to rewrite this

endgame. Taiwan burned, the world reeled, but John's fight—code, love, defiance—stood unbroken, his women's signals, Lucy's chords, a net to outlast the collapse, their fires burning, ready to rise from the ash.

In the Kowloon compound, the screens flickered with Taiwan's fall—smoke rising over Taipei, PLA forces entrenched, TSMC's factories locked down, global markets plummeting. John stood before the CCP officer, his face a mask of resolve, the weight of APT 00's breach—his diversions, his unintended role in China's blitz—burning in his chest. The officer's eyes gleamed, his voice smooth, final. "You kept up your end of the deal," he said, extending a leather folder. "We'll keep ours." Inside were new IDs—clean aliases for John, Zsuzsa, Anes, Lucy, Theresa—passports, visas, diplomatic stamps, and stacks of yen, crisp, untraceable, a starter for their new lives. "Safe passage, as agreed," the officer added, his nod curt, Taiwan's conquest their leverage, John's women his price.

John took the folder, his grip steady, but his mind raced—*safe, but for how long?* The CCP's word was a thin thread, their grip on TSMC, on him, a leash he'd need to slip. He nodded, pocketing the IDs, his burner silent, Lucy's stream, Zsuzsa and Anes's warmth, his anchor. "My companions, my ex-wife—protected, no strings," he said, his voice low, a line drawn. The officer's smile didn't falter, but he waved John out, the PLA soldiers parting, the compound's doors opening to Hong Kong's neon glare.

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At the Chinese embassy, Lucy sat with her guitar, Theresa beside her, the laptop's webcam off, *Love in the Night* still echoing online, her fans' support a pulse against the news—Taiwan gone, TSMC seized, John's name tied to the chaos. The diplomatic woman returned, her attire crisp, her tone neutral. "You're free to go," she said, gesturing to the door. "We can take you to your husband now." Lucy's breath caught, her eyes meeting Theresa's—*John, here, now.* Her guitar case in hand, her fire flared, the embassy's cage lifting, Hong Kong's streets a path to him.

Theresa squeezed her hand, her smile steady. "Let's go, Luce," she said, her bag slung, their burners tucked, the PLA escort waiting. They stepped into an SUV, the city's skyline a blur, the high-rise looming where Zsuzsa and Anes held their ground. Lucy's heart raced—*John, Zsuzsa, Anes, together*—a moment she'd never dreamed, her music, her love, now a bridge to this new life.

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The SUV pulled into the high-rise's secure garage, PLA soldiers clearing the way, their rifles low. Lucy and Theresa were escorted to the suite, the door guarded, the air thick with anticipation. The door opened, and there stood Zsuzsa and Anes, their faces alight, hands linked, the suite's luxury a backdrop to their fire. Lucy froze, Theresa beside her, the three women meeting for the first time—Zsuzsa's depth, Anes's spark, Lucy's song—a collision none had imagined, yet here it was, real, raw.

Zsuzsa stepped forward, her smile warm, her Hungarian accent soft. "Lucy," she said, her hand extended, "you're here." Anes grinned, her fire dancing, pulling Lucy into a quick hug. "Took you long enough," she teased, her eyes flicking to Theresa, welcoming. Theresa nodded, her steadiness grounding them, her voice low. "We're family now," she said, her hand brushing Lucy's arm, the suite a haven, their bond instant, forged by John's fight, their shared defiance.

They stood together, Zsuzsa's calm, Anes's warmth, Lucy's fire, Theresa's resolve, waiting for John. The IDs, the yen, sat untouched, their crypto drives safe, Taiwan's fall a shadow they'd face. Lucy's guitar rested nearby, her stream's echo—not a traitor—a vow they all carried. The suite held them, Hong Kong's pulse faint, the moment theirs—a reunion unthought, unbreakable, all eyes on the door, John's return their next signal, their love, their fight, a fire no war could dim.

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John approached the high-rise, the folder heavy, the CCP's deal a chain he'd break. Lucy, Zsuzsa, Anes, Theresa—together, waiting—his reason, his code. The 7th Fleet circled, markets crashed, Bondi's net snapped, but their fires burned, APT 00's breach a tool he'd turn, not a cage. The door loomed, their reunion a spark to outlast Taiwan's ash, their signals—code, song, love—a net to rise, unbowed, free.

In the Hong Kong high-rise suite, the door clicked open, and John stepped through, the weight of the Kowloon compound—Taiwan's fall, TSMC's seizure, the CCP's yen and IDs—still heavy in his hands. His eyes swept the room, landing on Lucy, her guitar case by her side, her face a mix of fire and fragility, the first time he'd seen her in years. Time stopped, their past—wedding vows, her songs, their fights—flooding back. They teared up instantly, eyes locking, and ran to each other, colliding in a tight embrace, arms wrapping like they'd never let go. Tears flowed freely, Lucy's face buried in his chest, John's lips brushing her hair, their breaths ragged, a reunion carved from chaos.

Theresa, Zsuzsa, and Anes stood back, their eyes soft, hands linked—Zsuzsa's depth, Anes's spark, Theresa's steadiness—a silent circle giving them space. "Let them have this," Theresa whispered, her voice thick, pride and relief mingling. Zsuzsa nodded, her smile warm, Anes's hand squeezing hers, their sisterhood embracing Lucy's return, John's heart laid bare. For now, John didn't think of the new dynamics—Lucy's presence, Zsuzsa and Anes's love, Theresa's role—just the truth pulsing through: *they're safe, all of them, here*. The suite held them, Hong Kong's neon a faint glow, Taiwan's ash and Bondi's net worlds away, this moment theirs, unbroken.

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In the US, Pam Bondi stood in a DC war room, screens flashing Lucy's embassy stream—*Love in the Night, not a traitor*—her jaw tight as she pieced it together. Lucy and Theresa had slipped her net, their passports canceled too late, the Chinese embassy a fortress she couldn't breach. "They'll all remain in exile, forever," she said, her voice cold, final, recognizing the diplomatic shield, Hong Kong's limbo. The DoJ's hunt for John—cyberstalking, conspiracy, now *traitor*—was stalled, China's grip too tight, her wrath a fire with no target.

The Glowies, in their shadowed offices, leaned back, a rare smirk shared. "The rat got the cheese," one said, tossing John's file aside. The hunt for Lombardi was over—Hong Kong, the CCP, Lucy's stream had closed the book. They'd pivot, new targets, new games, John's ghost a lesson, not a prize. Their eyes turned elsewhere, the 7th Fleet circling, TSMC's loss a wound, but John, Lucy, their crew—out of reach, for now.

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In Portland, Charlie worked his phone, his denim jacket creased, his safehouse empty without Lucy and Theresa. Her stream had lit a fire, her fans clamoring—*Sing, Lucy, wherever you are!*—and he saw a path. He reached out to music industry contacts he'd cultivated—producers, promoters, one with ties to Shanghai's scene, another in Hong Kong's underground venues. "Lucy's in China," he told them, his voice steady, pitching her future. "She's ready—Mandarin lessons, new songs, a fresh start. Get her stages, studios, fans." His contacts listened, intrigued—her story, her defiance, a spark to sell. Charlie grinned, knowing Lucy's fire, John's fight, would carry her, Theresa too, into a new life, their music a bridge to rise.

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In the suite, John and Lucy eased apart, their tears drying, hands still clasped. He looked to Zsuzsa, Anes, Theresa, his voice low, raw. "You're all here," he said, gratitude choking him, "safe." Lucy nodded, her fire steady, her guitar a vow—I'll sing, for you, for us. Zsuzsa stepped forward, her hand on Lucy's arm, Anes's grin welcoming, Theresa's nod sealing them—family, forged in exile. The IDs, yen, crypto drives lay ready, Charlie's work a hum they'd soon hear, Hong Kong their crucible. Bondi's exile, the Glowies' pivot, Taiwan's fall—they loomed, but their fires—John's code, Lucy's song, Zsuzsa's depth, Anes's spark, Theresa's heart—burned brighter, a signal, a stage, a love no war could dim, their new life just beginning.

In the Hong Kong high-rise suite, the air was thick with the weight of reunion—John and Lucy's tear-streaked embrace, Zsuzsa, Anes, and Theresa's quiet circle, their shared safety a fragile victory against Taiwan's fall, Bondi's wrath, the Glowies' pivot. The neon glow of Victoria Harbour filtered through the windows, casting soft shadows as Lucy stepped back from John, her eyes still glistening, her fire steady but raw. She reached into her small backpack, her fingers finding a worn, laminated sheet—the original song list John had left her years ago, its edges soft from time, a relic of their love, their dreams, kept close through every storm. She held it like a talisman, her breath catching, then sat on the couch, her guitar settling in her lap, its familiar weight grounding her.

Her crimson nails brushed the strings, her voice soft at first, trembling, as she began to sing *Fix You* by Coldplay, a song from that list, its chords a bridge to their past: "When you feel so tired but you can't sleep, stuck in reverse..." The words spilled, her voice rising, raw, each note a confession—*And the tears come streaming down your face, when you lose something you can't replace*. Her eyes locked on John's, tears tracing her cheeks again, the lyrics a mirror to their years apart, their love strained but never broken. *When you love someone but it goes to waste, could it be worse?*—the question hung, her heart laid bare, the song a vow, a plea, a promise to heal, to hold him now, in this exile, this new life.

John stood frozen, his own eyes wet, the laminated list a ghost he'd forgotten, now alive in her voice. Her emotionalism poured out, unguarded, her fire not just for the stage but for him, their shared history—wedding vows, fights, her music, his code—woven in every chord. Zsuzsa and Anes sat close, their hands linked, feeling Lucy's heart through the music, its ache piercing their own. Zsuzsa's dark eyes softened, a tear slipping free, her depth resonating with Lucy's loss, her love

for John a mirror. Anes's fire quieted, her usual spark stilled, her hand tightening on Zsuzsa's, Lucy's rawness pulling them into her orbit, their sisterhood embracing her pain, her hope.

Theresa stood by the window, her steadiness a pillar, her own heart heavy, watching Lucy sing to John, their past a weight she honored. The suite held them, the guitar's hum filling the space, Lucy's voice soaring—*Lights will guide you home, and ignite your bones, and I will try to fix you*—a pledge to John, to all of them, to mend what Taiwan's fall, Li's leaks, Bondi's net had torn. Her song was defiance, love, a signal stronger than her embassy stream, reaching beyond the suite's walls, echoing Charlie's work to build her Mandarin stages, her fans' cheers online.

John stepped closer, sinking to his knees before her, his hands finding hers on the guitar, his voice a whisper. "Luce," he said, choked, "I'm here." The song faltered, her fingers stilling, their foreheads touching, tears mingling, the list between them a vow renewed. Zsuzsa, Anes, Theresa watched, their breaths held, the moment sacred—family, forged in fire, safe for now, their love a chord no war could break.

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In the US, Bondi's rage simmered, Lucy's stream a taunt, her exile a wall. The Glowies moved on, new targets rising, John's file closed. Charlie's contacts hummed, Shanghai promoters eyeing Lucy's voice, Hong Kong venues waiting, her song list a spark for a new career. The suite glowed, Lucy's *Fix You* fading, John's hand in hers, Zsuzsa's depth, Anes's fire, Theresa's heart—their fires burned, Taiwan's ash a shadow, their signals—code, song, love—a net to rise, to heal, to sing, unbowed, in a world remade.