
CUTTY'S
WAR

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1 – THE DIRT

Sweat on the ribs, stomach like a drum. Throat angry with the thick, morbid air, the lingering scent of decay that violates every inch of me.

Grim down here, on street level, bathed within this unreality of nanotech fog and heavy filth. Dilapidated structures at every corner, concrete tombs, forgotten crypts that house their dead or dying inhabitants.

Got a tipoff at the Split Pill, an old-haunt dive bar of only minor significance, just the way I like them. The walls drip, filthy beats, pop-skull whiskey, and the occasional dreg of a human slides you a whisper for a favour in return. Turn your eye onto something, or away, depending on their inclinations. Whatever. The information and favours flow as quick and dark as the drinks.

Fast Eddie fired a wink my way. "Got something for you, Cutty. Might make a tale out of this one. Some real juice."

Caught my attention, said there's going to be a meet at a derelict labour-line warehouse, and if that poor fucker is even half right, I might catch me a serious bag.

Could be bullshit, but I chew on the scraps I'm thrown. Not much going about as it is, and Fast Eddie's been good for a whisper in the past.

I hold my breath, look up, jaw clenched, taking a moment in the middle of it all. The screams populate the air down here, calling cards of the wretched and hurt. If you're in bad enough shape to be this close to the ground, there's little hope left.

The crumbling concrete, infrastructure that hangs, thick pipes as wide as a waist to carry whatever power and bandwidth they can between the hulking buildings. My IZPD AI flickers an attempt at life, a chance effort to connect with the surveillance networks that are as old as the Incident Zone itself.

My AI, *Hymn,* they're good when they work, hooked into the Department Core, and when that bandwidth's turned up, they can dance the dance. Right now, there's a digital cough in my peripheral vision and they retreat into the great algorithm.

So, I'm back to that scrap of analogue Fast Eddie spilt to me in return for one of my better favours somewhere down the line.

A meet, a gang coming in from outside the IZ to do a deal with the Widows, and that's rare. Rare enough for me to chase my way through these ruins to an old labour-line, anyway.

I figure if it works out, I might bag myself a Widow gangbanger, beat the shit out of them, pull up some dirt on someone else higher up. If they don't talk? Well, then they get the blade, and there's one less Widow out there to prey on the poor bastards down here. I get the call wrong, it's a setup or I run into some heavies? Well, I've taken my licks before, and I don't mind taking them again. If I don't make it back alive? That's just a bonus.

More screams, gunshots that rattle off the broken windows in the colossal blocks that rise into the clouded sky. That smell, the decay and filth, the humidity, the nanotech, and the low light that mixes with it all. A Tyrian purple fog that falls over everyone and everything, lining the world with its ethereal glow.

The signature look of any Incident Zone.

And what? Stand and fight, try to help them? Chase those screams, dig myself into one of those crypts and rescue some radiation drenched bag of flesh? Maybe once. Not now.

Here, in Incident Zone Number Five, I play the game. One of seven zones across the Federated Union of North America and one of four within the vast swathe that is Major Prime, where the Corporate and Federal Cores sit.

Here I chew those scraps I'm thrown, try to get at something that'll cause a rift, maybe do some good, and that means the screams fall on deaf ears.

Outside, in the Federated Union, where us poor fuckers in the IZ hope salvation lies, maybe they listen to the screams there. Maybe some AI in the great algorithm picks up something when there's split skin or broken bone. Rescues come, and *the man* saves lives. There they have the blue sky, here we've only got these dark hues, held thick by the clouds of nanotech that keep the radiation from poisoning us to death.

Heard this once; courage isn't carrying on when you know there's a chance you can win. Courage is carrying on when you know you've already lost, and we lost this fight a long time ago. Every one of us that didn't get out in time after whoever the fuck it was that hacked the power plants. Those who didn't escape when the quarantine came down, followed by the Big Splash. Everyone that couldn't run before Content-Hotaru, in all their wisdom and backed by the Federated Union, soaked us in that first-gen nanotech that poisoned the sky, then the air, then us.

Millions of us, tens of millions across all seven zones.

We all lost.

Lost our souls to this place, lost our humanity to the Corporation, lost our freedom to the Federated Union Intelligence Agency. Any semblance of life we scrape together now, locked down and mandated by the two combined. Not a single fuck given.

Then there's this threat, the one that's staring at me from the shadows, right now, as I move through the pain and filth of these lower levels. This thing that's been rising, the thump of a beat that pushes and pushes until it's pounding in your head, driving your eyes out of your skull.

They who are not as others.

The things that crawl in the neon haze and have claimed the Underworld for their own.

The Cosmic Widows.

A gang, a cult, a tribe, a fucking mutant horde, whatever you want to call them. Things that creep in the dark with that power of theirs that coats us all with a new layer of fear.

That's who's got a track on me now, eyes in the recesses, three shadows deep down here, layers of dark you don't even want to know.

They're keeping tabs on me. An IZPD cop on foot and in this place? Not a normal look and it provokes their lizard eyes out of the dark, through the thick purple fog. They're watching, always, and right now they're eyeing me up for some juice. I know it from the twitch in my eye, that knot in my gut.

Half surprised I've got this far; they'll be tracking what they can with whatever tech the heavies that live deep down in the underworld have given them. Put a scan on my AI for a way to get to me. There's always a good bounty on IZPD police. Bring down the cop and maybe crack their AI, get a way into some heavy Core, suck on the thick data.

Well, no such luck, motherfuckers. I am armed TO-THE-TEETH.

Black-market upgrades courtesy of the Golden Hinde. It's the only way. Keeps me out of the Widow's reach and in line to stand up to my reputation in dealing with these fuckers.

Mr Hinde caught himself some trouble from the Widow herself a few years back, the chief, the witch, the boss, whatever, she who commands those who walk the night. Yeah, Hinde caught some bad funk before she dropped away into the Underworld to let her army take care of things.

Well, too bad for her because you don't fuck with the Golden Hinde. Got himself pieced back together, that full nanotech bath, ice cold but hot with tech. Once I made a reputation for myself well, naturally he took a liking to my work and that's when he slipped me the blade.

"You go do what you need to," he said, and I have done exactly that ever since.

There's a whistle and a shout, *"Hey, poh-lice!"* A figure skulks out from the shadows. Some shithead, low ranking Widow wannabe with a bad limp and a worse cough.

Calling him a sack of rotten meat might be a compliment, but something's still holding him together. Black-market nanotech supplied by the Widows, and if that's right, he's what they call an Acolyte. Means he's got something to prove to the gang, and that means he's dangerous.

"Smell the sweet air." I say, throw him a scowl and stop my march.

There's nothing to him, *it*. An emaciated frame, gaunt, all bone with rags of half melted skin wrapped around them. He's had a bad dose, and more.

We all got it bad, the attacks, the meltdowns, the quarantine, the Big Splash and all that airborne nanotech that spilled into us with the idea it was there to save us. Most people it gives a semblance of life, if you work the labour-lines to get your dose from the government mandated and Contrent-Hotaru owned dispensaries.

About a third of the population, the nanotech mixed with their DNA and the radiation and made some real nasty shit, bad mutations, fucking nightmare fuel. In about a third of them poor fuckers, something different happened. Something even worse.

So now we have the Cosmic Widow, the Cosmic Widows plural. A mutant gang that runs the underworld and they work some dark deeds. *Real* dark.

This asshole in front of me has got something to prove. He's not a Widow, he got a mutation, a bad one, but not bad in the way the Widows want it. Bad in how he's got to work twice as hard at the labour-lines to get what he needs to stay alive. Catch-22, right? The worse the mutation you get, the sicker you are, the harder you work to keep yourself alive. Poor man remains poor, always been the way.

So, fuck it, what other choice does he have? Melt into a pool of weird biological mess, sink into the drains of the underworld? No, he pulls shit for the Widows to get black-market nanotech that'll keep him alive, on the edge. If he pulls a good gig, maybe he'll get a shot at being taken into their ranks proper. And right now, I reckon he's got an eye on doing a cop.

"Smell the sweet air," he says, wheezing breath, a bad twitch in his hands, deep lines in the skin of his face. He's wrapped in the retro-gear these acolyte types think makes them look tough. Chains, leather, spikes, all that old-school bullshit.

I huff a laugh, keep one eye on him, the other on those that still creep in the dark, behind the shadows, deep in that purple neon fog as my AI twitches. Another digital cough and a few lines of scan intel roll down my peripheral vision.

He's had some sort of flush, no sign of Contrent-Hotaru nanotech, means he's off-grid now. Also means he's deserved another chance at life in the eyes of the Widows.

Tendons jump under loose skin, eyebrows raise. "Bloody Cutty, in the flesh," he pulls an upside down smile out of his ragged teeth and drops me a wink.

Little shit knows who I am. Might be tricky, and he might pack one of a million tools or weapons that my fucked AI has missed.

How good's his scan on me? Could know who I am from my reputable past. Fancies he can bag a cop, move one step closer to the ranks of the Widows. Could be bait for some harder types that got wind I'm down here, on my way to this meet. Either way, he's got my attention now, and that's one thing this little fucker does-not-want.

"Move," I say.

"Yeah, big bad Bloody Cutty, chop up any Widows lately?"

"MOVE."

"*Yeah-yeah-yeah*, thought so," he pauses, laughs, looks me up and down. "Don't seem so bad to me? What about that blade? Still sharp, huh?" He points at my hand and flashes a set of half broken and fully blackened teeth.

Pursed lips and a shake of my head. If he knows about the blade, this is going to get dark, and fast. "Want to try her out?" I say.

He laughs again, more like a cough this time. Something comes out of him, jaw slush, black foam that froths over his lips, followed by more groaning, doubled over.

I make to move past him as he comes back up straight, steps in close and nods. "Yeah, you ain't so bad."

"*Move*," I say. "No third time lucky with me, prick."

He licks those teeth, shifts his weight and nods.

"You want to see her?" I say, the blade, the upgrade from the Golden Hinde, already shape-shifting my right hand. Military grade nanotech that he'd bagged somewhere down the line. Best thing about this piece, it doesn't need Core access or bandwidth, works alone with the subdermal neural link between my fucked-up brain and the nanotech that's swimming through my bloodstream right now. Surprising how far a melee weapon will get you these days.

It turns my hand into rudimentary objects as fast as I can think, and right now, as reputation would have it, it's turning into the blade.

"Listen," he backs off, hands raised in front of him, palms out towards me, a frayed voice with tired distress. "Calm is what's called for here," he tries another wink. "Didn't mean any disrespect, Cutty, only we don't get a lot of cops down this way, you know?"

"How you know who I am?"

"Word gets around," he says.

"What word?"

"You're this good-bad-guy, right? The anti-hero or some shit, going after the Widows when no one else will. Got that blade of yours, yeah, big bad Jack *Bloody* Cutty. You do that shit and you get a reputation, right? So, something's brought you down here, not like you're out for some midnight stroll…so…" he trails off, attention gone, moved elsewhere, a signal coming in.

The neon haze settles across his face and makes me twitch. I blink and the hand morphs; the blade shoots out in a flicker, chrome come to life. I put a foot back, shift my weight onto it and swing around in one fluid motion.

There's a murmur. His eyes go wide. No scream, and it's over before it ever begins. A blink, a slice, and the soft thud of his right arm hitting the ground.

Blood sprays from the stump, vital fluid coating me in its signature nightmare-red.

I swing again with the same speed, hold the blade to the wound for a fraction of a second while it cauterises the flesh and I step back.

He's wide eyed, breath no quicker than it was five seconds ago, mouth dropped, the smell of burnt flesh in the humid air of the dark, neon night.

I give him a quick look as I move past him, the corner of his mouth twitching, eyes wide as the nanotech retreats and my hand reforms. Reckon I can hear him attempt a word, hard to tell over the sound of him pissing his pants and the crunch of my boot on the severed limb.

I stop, turn back to him, "The Widows, they might kill you now. See, you'll cost them more nanotech than you're worth to keep you alive. Still, they might not," I say and look around, into those shadows, through the tyrian fog. "But all the little fuckers like you who're out here and think they'd like a piece, now they know what it costs."

He falls to his knees as I turn and settle back into my walk. The lizard-eyes in the deep shadows twitch before receding into the dark. Some dark recalculation on what moves might work, an attempt to figure just how serious I am. Might give me enough time to get where I'm going, might bring down a tornado. Offence is the best form of defence, right? Right.

I push through it, into it, the black, the decay. The towering blocks of human misery that taunt me, *'We hold secrets you will never know,'* they whisper to me. *'We torture people you will never save.'*

I know the horror they hold. I've been there, I am there, here, in this world, as much a part of it as any of them. So, what, I'm a cop, IZPD, and I'm here to save the fucking day?

Some bullshit police issued AI with no bandwidth and a gun with a handful of bullets. Save them to save myself? All the same.

It collects and builds and burns. A coal in the pit of my stomach.

Anger, sorrow, hate, fear, whatever.

Funny thing about that coal, it might not be the most efficient fuel, but it's steady enough, and it pollutes you. All this and the memory of what happened, what the mutants took from me. It

burns, smoulders in the deepest part of my psyche, the pit of my stomach, that releases flaming embers that catch onto my soul, enough fuel to keep the old engine ticking over.

Dreams have a long life, nightmares even longer. That ether that flows through you, into you, it crystallises around a memory, and then there's nothing else, only you and that moment. Reality shifts, consciousness flares inside. A million-million neurons fire off and you're wherever it was, whatever took place, whoever smiled, whoever died, you're there with them. It runs over you, through you, and licks the soul you thought you never had. So, you either laugh or cry, because there's never any in-between.

That night, the terror, the mutants, my parents murdered, a child that hid and wept for days until someone showed up. Darkness and cold. Alone. What is it those fuckers over the pond say? The more things change, the more they stay the same.

Mine's one story of a million stories that Incident Zone Number Five holds, and millions more across the IZs, and despite it, and them all, the really fucked up thing? Somehow, we still hold on to some hope. Hope in a hopeless place. And to rub salt in these cancer ridden sores that line our radiation-soaked bodies, we all have it, hope. Every single one of us in the IZ clings to it, despite knowing no one will ever come to save us. All this will ever change. Stuck here, indentured to the Corporation, sucking down bad nanotech to keep the radiation from sucking the life out of us, and that is that.

A plague of nanotech comes in around me, the swarm, the fog that hangs. It's alive. Alive with these little fuckers, alive with the AI that takes care of it, them, whatever. A quick scan and it breezes past. There are ways around it. Ways to go undetected by it. Get a flush like that fucker back there, or some hack from the Hinde that'll cost you, but I've used up my one golden ticket and a cop's salary doesn't quite cut it for anything else.

Here to keep us alive, that's what it's supposed to be doing. Might be the case about 10% of the time. The other 90%? Plenty of theories about that.

I take a quick look back over my shoulder as I find a hole in a rusted metal wall that reaches up into the sky, evaporating from my vision and into the neon clouds.

It's a colossal discharge pipe from the labour-line warehouse where I've been told this drop is. Wide enough for me to walk into at six-and-a-bit feet of rough bones and that limp flesh.

I find my footing and move along it as the smell of decay, the death that rises from the ground in the IZ intensifies. My IZPD issued overcoat flickers into life, a low a glow just strong enough to let me see a few feet ahead of me.

A bulkhead door, the sort you'd see on a ship or submarine reveals itself to my right as I come to the end of the tunnel wide pipe covered with a thick metal grate that's caught all the built-up shit flushed down here over the years.

I brace against door's wheel. It gives without too much pressure and the thick steel swings back as I gag one last time and step into the dark recesses of the labour-line warehouse.

CHAPTER 2 – THE HORSE

The labour-lines. Contrent-Hotaru ran and owned with IZ inhabitants that work for clean air and that nanotech that'll keep them alive. A sniff of hope to stave off that foul radiation that keeps our skin sagged and bones weak.

There're thousands of these places all over the IZs. Sometimes there'll be a fuck-up that even the Corporation wants to forget about, move on, bury that shit. So, they abandon it, take over another residential area, put in another line. The great circle of life. A few thousand dead IZ workers? No one gives a fuck, especially those bastards in Major Prime.

Inside now, moving up a set of corrugated steel stairs into the warehouse proper. The place abandoned, broken machinery, more rot and decay, thick layers of rust and that smell of old oil, burnt out electronics. Moving through a few backrooms littered with old papers, broken terminals and other equipment. Some decent enough catastrophe must have happened here to have had them clear out this quick.

I shift through, quiet, keeping myself as hidden as I can before I make it round to where the warehouse floor opens to the mainline. The big manufacturing floor for whatever it was they made here. Half cleared now, the biggest pieces of machinery stripped and left, skeletal masses of rusted steel and old wires.

Voices in the air, light chatter, can't figure where it's coming from as I creep in, low, quiet, the nanotech of the blade a twitch across my hand. I crouch behind some big, rusted piece of

equipment and spy a quick look. There's a group of them stood in a cleared-out area toward the middle of the warehouse's colossal space.

White light from spotlights on top of tripods positioned all around casts long shadows from all the abandoned and broken gear. I eye a better spot, shuffle across behind some heavy-duty kit, and get a good look.

A group of them, four from what I can see, one in the middle with three others surrounding him in an arc, a protective formation. They're all in black tactical gear. Hard faces, visible implants, submachine guns pointed at the ground. All the usual trappings of a high-level gang from the Federated Union. Might even be mercenaries.

I fix on the leader. Short, red beard, mean eyes, hands tight around his gun that's pointed down to the concrete floor. Solid stance with enough confidence to show he's had training.

He looks down and shakes his head as I follow his line of sight and spot the body there. I bite down hard on my bottom lip hard, growling out, *'fuuuuuck.'*

A kid, a child's corpse, ragged clothes, short legs that poke out of ripped shorts. One shoe gone, little toes there in the sharp glow of the spotlights.

My eyes dart as the other three shuffle behind the leader, alert, clenched jaws, all broad set, and solid muscle. None of that sagged skin and decayed horror that you get from us IZ types. They're farm fed and hard as fuck.

"Their nanotech signatures show they are from outside the IZ. Pinpointing their origin in the Federated Union is beyond my bandwidth allowance at this moment," my AI nudges to me in its gender-neutral voice.

The sound appears in my grey matter, the ether, working with the IZPD nanotech to talk to me through osmosis. I don't fucking know. It's an internal monologue that trickles up my spine and floats into my mind. *"Looks like they are gang affiliated."*

"No shit, you work that one out by yourself, Hymn?" I whisper back to them as they stream what little information they have on the surroundings into my peripheral vision. Some intel on the gangbanger's guns, armour, implants, nanotech, AI. Surface level stuff. Nothing that might get me an advantage.

"I would suggest nudge-comms only given our proximity to the target."

"Yeah, right," I say in my head, think more than say. I nudge it to them with a little thought. Either way, Hymn knows what I'm getting at.

"Sorry for my reduced capabilities. Department Core access remains severely restricted across all AI support." The sick fucker, same as the rest of us. Run down, beat up, drained by what the IZ is, what it does to you, the grip of the Corporation.

Hymn is solid back-up when they have access to that bandwidth we were all promised. Now, they're an ultra-high-end piece of tech you can't quite reach. Floating in and out of my consciousness via the Department Core, able to dig deep into whatever police infrastructure we still have left. Half the time they're dormant, chained down in the core databanks, taking whatever scraps they can from the great algorithm. Sat there like an idol mid meditation, waiting to do what we programmed them to do, maybe make a difference in this world.

"Restrictions on my run-time and LIVE-WIRE capacity are in place, however, emergency protocols can circumnavigate this if initiated. Current bandwidth at around 8%. It would seem I am in time for the party."

"You got that right," I whisper. *"What can you get me if you juice it?"*

"Cutty—"

"—What can you get me?"

"Perhaps 25%," they nudge.

"That'll do it," I say.

"Heads up. New arrivals."

I hunker down in my spot, make a line of sight through all the piled-up equipment in the massive warehouse, broken old machinery, storage containers, toxic waste barrels, you name it. The leader with the red beard stands in the middle, tenses the grip on his gun, moves his finger over the trigger, watches as something big come towards him.

"And what in the *LIVING FUCK* is this, Monroe?" an enormous voice rumbles out from the shadows. Its deep tone coming from behind the short, curving glow of the spotlights, followed by the sound of high heels on the concrete floor.

Monroe tenses. The men behind him position themselves as a gigantic figure moves into the white light, towering above the gangbangers.

It's draped in chains and latex and rubber, all spikes and barbed wire wrapped around the moist, grey skin that releases its own weird sheen in the bright, white light. Thick muscle that bulges under and between the garments, deep veins running along the heavy brawn, pumping whatever mutant blood and nanotech it's got in its enormous body.

It comes up to Monroe, stops, and licks its monstrous lips with a tongue as thick as my wrist. It points down to the dead body at Monroe's feet, next to its own massive stripper heals.

Monroe coughs, raises his jaw in the shadow of the vast mutant, "Look," he says, a hold on the quiver in his voice. "Not our problem. Your team delayed delivery." He lights a cigarette with a steady hand as he drops the submachine gun to his side.

"Ballsy fucker this one," I nudge to no response.

"Unacceptable, Monroe," the gigantic thing says in its heavy voice, shaking the words through the dense air as it stares down at the man. "What the *FUCK* do you think we can do with a shipping container full of dead children?"

"What did that thing say?" my eyes dart. *"Hymn, scan the area for bodies. Anything you can pull up. Whatever you can find!"*

"On it." They nudge and data runs down my peripheral vision.

"What the—"

"I've gained access to an old labour-line sensor in an overhang that's still on the network. The container behind the men, dissipating heat signature, correlates with 20-30 dead bodies, small. Strong chance it is children."

A line draws itself out from my nose, out and across the room via my heads-up-display, flows around the container behind the men. It outlines the box with a yellow pulse as I switch my glance back to Monroe.

His guard's up, gun raised, the cigarette hanging out the side of his mouth as the men behind him crouch into tactical positions. "Horse, now listen," he says, forgetting to blink.

"—*NO!* You listen, you little fuck." Horse steps forward and points with a heavy finger down at Monroe. "We had a deal for twenty *live* children from outside the IZ. It didn't matter where they came from. We weren't asking for Major Prime's finest. They didn't need to be perfect specimens by any means, but we needed them *A-FUCKING-LIVE."* It pauses, takes in a vast breath before letting it out with a slow rumble, steepling its fingers in front of its big, grizzled face. "Now, we paid you good money, did we not? We expect to get what we paid for, Monroe."

"Since when the fuck did the Widows traffic humans from outside the IZ? Children, for Christ's sake? What's happening here?"

"No intel available," Hymn nudges. *"No records showing any previous investigations into, or reports of, human trafficking from the Widows. Considerable amounts of what you would assume: weapons, drugs, tech. No humans."*

Monroe holds strong, cold sweat on his forehead, mean eyes. This isn't his first barbeque, and he's ready for a fight. "Weapons, Horse," he says, real slow. "Not a fucking problem. Live children? A little more difficult when—"

"—Ah, my boy!" Horse steps up to Monroe as he cups his head in a massive, grey-skinned hand. "Is this not Major Prime? Even out there, outside the horrors of the IZ, I thought you said little street rats crawled high and low all over the vast and broken conurbation you call home?"

It takes a few steps back, heels cracking on the concrete floor, its skin a grey leather that gives off the same sheen as the latex in the white light. A skull, a vast ball of ivory, jaw pulsing, lips pursed around stallion teeth.

Monroe shakes it off, "You delayed the drop, Horse. They were alive 24 hours ago, less even. You think I've got time to run fucking kindergarten here?" His eyes fixed on the mutant, a gun barrel stare, not letting up. "We don't need this to get messy."

"Oh fuck," I nudge, turning to sit back against the old machinery.

Horse's laugher fills the warehouse, a titanic sound from the gut that rises through me. "You think you know messy?" it says before pulling the laughter back. "Come, Sweet Jane, come to see these men. Come smell their fear."

I turn, look back up, staring into Monroe's eyes that dart to the shadows. His tactical gear flashes with some sort of nanotech as the men behind him ready themselves for a fight, but that's not the mutant's style.

Horse steps to the side as it comes crawling out of the dark beyond the reach of the spotlights. A skinny little thing on all fours. Skin that pale grey the same as Horse, wrapped in similar gear, chains, spiked wire, pierced and dripping with their off-colour blood. It holds the same sheen in the bright light, lizardous eyes, a head shaven down to the bone. She crawls, real slow, on fingers and toes across the concrete floor, sniffing at the air.

"Yes, fear," she says and then pauses, her head with some weird twitch before her eyes dart toward me.

"What is it, Sweet Jane?" Horse says.

"Fuck-fuck-fuck-fuck."

"Cutty, evasive action required. Evacuate now, find the route you came in by—"

"—There's someone here. Someone watches us," Sweet Jane says, still on her knees, rolling her tongue, her lizard-eyes looking right at me.

"Give me that 25%," I nudge as the blade shoots out of my hand. *"LIVE-WIRE protocol, gimme it all. Turn the dials up, right-fucking-now, Hymn!"*

"But—"

"DO IT! They're trafficking children into the IZ. I think that permits emergency protocols. Give me LIVE-WIRE!"

I keep my eyes fixed on Sweet Jane, staring her down, pushing through whatever horror I can from my head and into hers. I rise from behind the old machinery as Hymn pulls whatever they can from the Department Core.

This nanotech, it isn't much by itself, but when an AI like Hymn has Core access, it's a different ballgame. When they pull on those vast banks of data through the fat Core bandwidth, they can make these little nanofuckers in my blood really dance, and right now, I need them to do the fandango at double speed.

"And, who the *FUCK* are you?!" Monroe shouts across the warehouse, gun up, eye on me through the sights, the spotlights giving them all this ethereal glow.

Hymn draws it out in my HUD, lines its weapons up for me as the surge of bandwidth builds in me, pumps through the little nanofuckers housed in my body.

"Smell the sweet air," I say as I step out and around and through the machinery, arms held up, palms out to them, blade held back.

"Yes," Horse says, their voice a rumble in my guts. "Who is this delicious little man?"

Sweet Jane crawls up to its side as it places a giant hand on her shaven head. She purrs, twitching, feels the air with that power the Widows have.

"IZPD," I shout back as I move toward them, lowering my arms behind me as my overcoat slides off. "You fancy telling me what you've got in that container there?" I point as the coat hits the floor and the first bullets scream through the air.

Duck, roll, the broken concrete floor covered in glass and shrapnel tears into my elbows and knees. I grab some cover as bullets ricochet off the rusted machinery, and it gives me a flicker of a second, a moment for the nanotech to draw on what it needs to.

It's here, now, that rush, that surge of power in me, through me, deep into every part of me. Muscle, sinew, balls and bones, all flexed hard, dialled up to eleven. Brain and heart ready, jaw locked, eyed wide to absorb the world at a rate beyond any rational comprehension.

I'm synced, human and tech, neural pathways electrified by a billion-billion nanobots that swim through me. All powered by an AI sunk deep into the Department Core with access to data that covers every human action recorded ever since Major Prime's Cores came online. And everything that big fucker could get its machine mind on from human history total. The great algorithm is always hungry.

Monroe's team shoots out the spotlights and the place goes dark other than a few small windows across the ceiling high up that let in the preternatural purple glow from the IZ.

A moment of quiet settles over us as we assess the next move. Brief sounds of glass and debris that crunch under heavy boots, deep breaths trying to hide themselves. The thump of my heart, blood in my ears, throat dry, hands dripping with sweat.

"What've we got?" I nudge.

"Four heat signatures remain. Looks like the Horse and their concubine have run. Monroe here thinks he might have a shot at a cop."

"Good."

I rise and pull out my sidearm as Hymn draws outlines around Monroe and his grunts. I bolt, darting between the machinery, speed and rhythm. One flashes a head out from behind a container and I pop a bullet into it.

The precision and pace spooks the other two as they rise and run, bullets through their heads drop them as quick as I'm over and through the rest of the warehouse, on top of them in seconds.

Gun dropped, blade out, through their necks and heads roll.

No chances taken here. Decapitation *is* the only way.

They might have nanotech that'll heal a bullet wound within a few minutes.

They will not grow a new head.

I spin and catch Monroe coming down at me from an elevated position, knife out and looking for my throat. I hold him by the hand and neck, but he's fast. His other hand comes from the side with another knife that pushes itself about a centimetre into my ribs before I snap his other arm and slam him down onto the concrete.

I knock the wind out of him and muffled groans echo through the warehouse. My hand still wrapped around his neck, the heat signature of his body throbs in my enhanced vision for a moment before it all goes dark again.

"I'll patch your puncture wound up, no critical damage. I think you can handle the situation from here on your own," Hymn nudges as I take a breath and nod.

I stamp down hard on Monroe's broken forearm, slice the other hand off with the blade. His secondary set of screams rattle off to no answer in the dark warehouse as I cauterise the wound and step back.

Deep breaths release the clench in my heart, my muscles, my jaw, as I slow the beats pulsing through my brain and blood. I arch my head back, mouth open, huff the stale air of the labour-line. It's been a long time since I went LIVE-WIRE, had almost forgotten how good it is.

Monroe's screams pull me back into the moment. I turn to him as Hymn pulls my pupils wide open so I can make out his figure in the low purple light.

"You going to talk?" I say as I lean over to him as I take a cigarette from a pocket in the front of his tactical gear and light it with the heat of the blade.

"Don't count on it," he spits.

"Thought as much." I drag half the thing in one go, flick it away and bring my knee into his neck, hard.

He chokes as I push a finger into each nostril, his panting breath on the back of my right hand, the blade licking the inside of his nose from the tips of my fingers.

"Want to be like them?" I say, and nod to the decapitated heads across from us.

"Fuck you, pig," he says as I push his head back into the concrete.

"Yeah," I say as I rise, turn and walk to the shipping container where the bodies are.

"Cutty, don't," Hymn nudges.

"Got to," I say as my hand turns into a solid ball and I punch off the big padlock, release the deadbolt, and pull the heavy door open.

A wall of death hits me.

The smell, unholy, foul beyond anything that's ever polluted me before.

I gag, turn and retch, bile pouring out of my mouth as my stomach kicks and body convulses. With each heave I suck more of the foul air in. With each gulp, I choke and vomit.

Stumbling, I hold myself against some piece of equipment to catch my breath and hold the bile and vomit back.

"You," I manage, pointing at Monroe as I wipe the filth away from my mouth. "What the fuck have you done?"

"Fuck you," he says, a pulse in his jaw, sat up against a piece of machinery now, severed hand cradled in his lap with the other broken one.

I pull myself straight, step over to him, "You talk, or you die for this. Right here, right now."

"You aren't going to kill me, cop. The Widows, sure, but you? No. Emergency protocols, remember? You've caught me! Look, I'm fucking unarmed!" he raises the stump of his severed arm and laughs. "Dumb pig, that AI in your head records everything you do, and streams it back to your PD. So, stop fucking around, take me in. I'll take my chances with the Agency."

"Funny understanding of IZ cops you've got there." I tilt my head. "Thought you for more of an experienced type? Shit, Monroe, I had you down as a bad man, too."

He huffs another laugh. "You IZPD assholes, you're even more of a shit show than the joke cops we have in the Union. Take me in, do what you assholes do, and take your orders from the Agency so I can get out of this shit-hole."

I rub the stubble on my chin, turn back to the container, the door open, the silhouette outline of the piled bodies visible in the low light. Twenty, thirty dead children, the sight carving its morbid tale into my mind, a rotten smell that penetrates me to the core.

"Fuck the Agency," I turn back to Monroe, my fist balled, nanotech hardened.

"Wait!" he screams, but I don't give a fuck as I hammer my fist into his jaw, taking it clean off, a streak of blood whipping itself across the concrete.

Garbled screams spurt out of him as I pound his head into the machinery behind it, the figure mashing into a mound of sinew and flesh.

I stand and wipe the paste of his head off my hand against my leg.

"You record that?" I nudge to Hymn.

"Seems there was a glitch in my department core sync soon after you opened the container."

"Right…" I say, lowering my head.

"What's next?"

"Call it in, clean-up crew," I say as I take another cigarette out of the blood-soaked packet.

"On their way. What about us?"

"What about us, Hymn? Seems to me like we need some answers."

"I'll be here when you need me."

"I know it," I say as the digital presence flickers away, leaving me with the cold of the warehouse and the bodies. The low tyrian light falls from the windows in the roof, laying its morbid tint over the steel coffin.

CHAPTER 3 – THE BEAST

The IZ Police Department Core casts a long shadow, long enough for it to settle and cover the entire Incident Zone. I look up. This colossal structure, with all its weight and meaning that towers over me and pushes me down as I take a step and lean into the pressure.

The beast growls its low growl from a thousand half collapsed air filtration vents. All big huffs and low rumbles. A building with its own distinct voice, and with each bellow, it judges me, the same as everyone else in this world.

My teeth grind, fists ball, I stop to look up at the silhouetted brute drawn out against the purple sky. Its immense presence vibrates through the neon haze. A dying monster that wheezes its drawn-out final breaths among the bustle and noise of all of us little people outside. Each one prey that waits and watches for it to draw its final breath so they can pick it apart, skin from bone, concrete from rebar, to add to their own dying nests.

Four blocks wide and twenty-five stories high. It's dwarfed by the hulking skyscrapers that surround, but it's stout, broad across the chest, dense, ready to take a beating.

Concrete overhangs curl down into the violet night. Monstrous teeth, battered and chipped by failed drone landings, riots from civilians and gangs, breakout attempts, bomb attempts. You name it, we've had it.

One patch they've stitched up with concrete and re-bar and packed in ten feet thick is half a block wide and five stories tall. A healed scar of this beast, showing where the Widows fired off

half a dozen RPGs trying to get out one of their top members. She died in the attempt, same as everyone else that's ever tried.

It holds its massive weight, firm, impenetrable, unescapable, but it crumbles more with each day. A metaphor for the IZ itself, the beast that holds us in its dying bosom. But it still stands, like me, right here, right now. Same as I have for the six years I've been pulling my shifts here.

We're fucked, and on our knees, but that idea of hope runs through our veins the same as the botched nanotech and the radiation-soaked cells.

I break the trance and move towards it, forcing myself into the deep shadow to spy a look at the other cops and miscreants that hang around outside. Hard to tell one from the other. Contrent-Hotaru pays off the force, everyone takes that Corporation dollar and does what they're told. Step out of line? Then you've got the Federated Union Intelligence Agency on your back. They'll knife you and twist it in real good. Find dirt on you and hold your family against you or whatever. Slide the blade in and keep it there until you do what you're told and then let the wound heal. Only now there's a thick, pink stripe of scarred flesh there to remind you never to step out of line again.

I've got plenty of scars, a nice collection that says I walk my path, the same as a few others that do some good and call this place home, but it's not easy.

"Cutty, Jack, Lieutenant First Class," I say again to the microphone, waiting for the security system in front of the reinforced steel door to come to life. The thing set into the perimeter wall that's about 20 feet high and 3 feet thick, more of that concrete and rebar.

Sweat runs down my spine as the camera turns to look at me and I can see it almost twitch with disgust. Guess I'm looking extra pretty today.

The two scanners either side of me search my body for my nanotech-ID-signature. Those miscreants mix with the cops and pass me by on the street alongside the norms that make their way to the labour-lines. Horror and fear on their faces melted from all that radiation. The people I'm supposed to protect, to make a life for, the purple atmosphere glowing around us all. That poisoned sky that adds its neon sheen over us all and makes all the dying eyes stand out that little more to show us the horror we hold.

"Come on!" I shout as I look up at the camera and give them the finger.

"Cutty? That you?" a voice crackles out of a speaker.

"Open the door."

A warning amp screams for three seconds. Two yellow siren lights spin a few times, and two shotgun barrels fold out of the concrete wall in case anyone gets the idea they can follow me in. Neither have any shells in them.

The steel door grinds, pulls itself back about an inch and slides across.

I step into a bullet and bomb-proofed glass box that's inside a rebar Faraday cage.

The purple glow from the sky disappears as the door slides shut behind me. My eyes adjust to the green-grey sheen from the strip lights overhead as I shake it off. Two police decked out, armour and tactical gear, riot masks, shotguns and shields, shuffle outside the glass box, but within the rebar cage, guns aimed at me.

I get a small nod, taut eyes that look through mask visors as the quarantine jets blow from under me, ten seconds to clear all the shit off me from out there. Ten days might do it, not that there's been working filters for years now, anyway.

The fans whirl down, my overcoat drapes itself back over me, and a door in front of me in the glass box slides open. I step into the rebar cage with the two armoured cops and look them up and down.

Everyone's corrupt here, but the Department Core is *our* house. We all know that, and we all take that with an air of seriousness I've never seen around anything else. We have our own wars with each other, the good versus the bad, the corrupt against the non-corrupt. All the usual shit, but we're all police, and when the shit hits the fan, that's all that counts. At least you hope so.

If you're not police, or if there's even a whiff, you're compromised, nano or AI hack? You are mincemeat. Target practice for these two goons with shotguns who'll take the utmost pleasure in filling you full of holes.

"Smell the sweet air, Cutty," one says in muffled tones through their riot mask.

"Smell the sweet air," I say and walk past them, up to the rebar door, wait for another scan and turn and give them a nod.

Deadbolts shift, motors spin into action. The door swings open.

Data streams down in my peripheral vision as I move out of the dead-zone of the rebar cage, onto a set of stairs that lead to the main level booking and processing area.

Now we're within the walls of the Department Core, Hymn comes back online. Sucking on the local bandwidth as they fire fresh data and information down my peripheral vision.

"You pick up on anything?" I nudge as I climb the stairs. Whitewashed walls with scrapes from nails and gun barrels and everything else squeeze me.

"Nothing that relates to what we found. Two Widows brought in on weapons smuggling. Looks like they'll be out soon, though. They've posted bail. Two dozen curfew arrests. Labour-

line infringements. Black market traders. Sex workers and low-end drug-protocol dealers, all the usual," they nudge back.

"As expected."

"Correct."

"Keep your ear close to the ground. Whatever bandwidth you can beg, borrow or steal. There's going to be a lot of action out there if the Widows are putting money into human trafficking operations, and children, too. Keep tabs on the tip-off I got."

"They're already dead. Body found shortly after we resolved our situation."

"Fuck, they got Fast Eddie?" I nudge and shake my head.

"They pieced together his ID from what was left."

"Poor bastard," I say out loud as I make my way up the stairs.

"I've cast my net wide. Tracking modules across the network are now initiated. I will utilise what Core bandwidth I can gain access to."

I'm at the top of the long and narrow staircase and the buzz of the strip lighting overhead gnaws at me. It dulls the sound from the Core's main entrance on the other side of the last security check.

I put my hand in the hole in the wall on my right and the prick of the jet-injector on my wrist comes with a sting. Two billion new nanobots feed their way into my bloodstream, ready to override and eat away the old batch from a few hours ago when I was last here. Standard protocol, forever updating, doing their best to keep me alive in this pit. Keep me reliant on the Corporation's handouts.

They pulse through me, and I go rigid for a second before the big door clicks. It shifts back an inch and slides open to reveal the core's primary processing hub.

I push my way into the melee. Cops grappling with everyone from acolytes to low-ranking Widows and the norms that were unlucky enough to get picked up for whatever random low-level shit they got themselves into. Regulars working the labour-lines and trying to make some life for themselves. People brought in on some Corporation sanctioned infringement.

Could be anything. Breaking curfew, an attempt to get medicine on the black market to keep their kid alive. Drug-protocols for the nanotech to take the edge off the foul neon world outside. T>O<X dealing. Weapons to protect their family.

That's the saddest part. Most of the people we've got locked away in here, left to rot in the cells rather than to rot out there, are the ones just trying at some semblance of a life.

I get nods from the few of cops in here that do their job. Furrowed brows from the others that know what I stand for as I move in and out.

They know the Corporation dollar doesn't line my pockets, and it scares the shit out of them. They watch as the Agency slips their knife between my ribs and I take the scar and keep fighting. They understand I'll keep hounding the Widows, tearing into them everywhere I can. If that means I get eaten up by some big mutant fucker with a penchant for radiation-soaked meat, then fuck it.

I step through it, in-between the brawls and beatings and into the main booking room, tall functional ceilings held up by thick concrete walls. Smoke in the air, more of those strip lights, the smell of every bodily fluid you can imagine that mixes and penetrates me the same as all the rest. People bent over broken desks, batons that come down and crack against backs and skulls. Two big mutant types stood about two feet over the cops that have brought them in, looking down at them with those eyes, lizardous and deep.

Those are the fuckers I try to bring in. I don't go after the low hanging fruit to get my Corporation bonus. I don't book people if they miss a curfew or skip a day on the labour-lines. Those are the people we're supposed to protect. It's the Widows that need bringing in here, caging up like the animals they are. Get them and get the weapons off the streets. Get the drug-protocols wiped out. Try to make this bleak world a little brighter for those that deserve it. Do something for everyone that got stuck here with no other choice than to take the nanotech and sink into their position on the labour-lines to work themselves to death so those on the outside can have the latest fucking AI headset bullshit piece of tech.

I come to another door; it scans me and shifts open, and I move through to the locker room. Cops in and out of the showers, a solid mix that moves and talks in the one place we let our guard down, whichever side of the fence you're on.

"How sweet's the air, Cutty?" I hear from behind as I get to my locker to open it up and look at my battered face in the little cracked mirror on the inside of the door.

"Shit," I say, turning to Manrose. She's stood there, about a foot taller than me, thin and dark, a sheen to her skin but not the same as the grey slime the mutants have. Black as the night that we all once knew before the Big Splash and the nanotech fucked us all.

She smiles. How the fuck she keeps her teeth that white I'll never know. It sure as shit never fails to give me a twitch of hope that there's still at least something half decent in this world. Cheeks rise over high bones, eyes narrow. She reaches out one of her long thin arms and puts it on my shoulder as she tilts her head just a touch.

"You're onto something, aren't you?" she says.

"Can't tell you." I raise my eyebrows and feign a smile. She's a good cop, brings in the Widows the same as me, only with twice the style and half the dead bodies.

I trust her and trust is a hard thing to find in this place, but the info I've got, what happened, I've known good cops go bad over less.

She leans back and laughs. "Cutty, you fucking kill me."

I furrow my brow as two other shitheads shuffle past us in the narrow walkway between the lockers. Our eyes meet, faces held at best grimace, lines on our foreheads ridged.

I wait till they're out of sight, then face her straight on. "Look, I get a little deeper in on this and I'll need someone I can trust. Give me some space. I'll see what I dig up. Don't want to bring you down with me before I get started."

"That bad, huh?"

"Yeah, something like that." I turn and watch her in the reflection of the cracked mirror.

"I got you, Cutty. You give me the nod, you know?"

"Yeah, I know. You into anything yourself?" I say as I take my gun from underneath my arm and put it into the security holster inside the locker.

"Nothing too deep. Widows making some strange moves out there. There are rumours, informants going quiet or disappearing altogether. Fuck, you hear about Fast Eddie? Some nasty shit is going down, and you just know it's going to get buried as quick as it rises."

"There are moves being made," I say, turning back to her, those keen eyes looking me up and down, that smooth face, nothing else like it in the IZ far as I've seen. Could have been up at the top of one of those skyscrapers with the Corporation lackeys that got unlucky enough to land a position within the IZ. All the clean air she wanted. Good food, good nanotech, a chance at life.

Instead, she's here staring at this fuckhead with delusions of grandeur and a severe case of perennial hostility.

"You smell that sweet air, Cutty. Give me that nod when you're close to the action." She flashes those teeth again, zips up her jacket, ribbed with tech and armour. Tightens the fingerless gloves on her hands, shifts past me with those legs that go on all night and gives me a wink.

"Police Chief Garcia has requested your presence," Hymn nudges me.

"Shit," I say, slamming my locker door and making my way to the elevator.