

Cutty's War

Revelation

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DIRT

Chapter 1 – DEAL

“2147. Nineteen years after nuclear power plant meltdowns left seven Incident Zones across the Federated Union of North America under a plague of nanotech fog. There to help us, or so we thought. Inside IZ-5 we survive, or we mutate. Some do both.”—Jack Cutty, Lieutenant First Class

I hold my breath. The clock *is* ticking. There in my peripheral vision at twenty-odd minutes and counting, telling me this is no time to fuck around.

Sweat on the ribs, stomach like a drum—grim down here on street level, bathed in this world’s unreality of purple nanotech fog and heavy filth.

Dilapidated housing blocks tower at every corner, their silhouettes nodding in the haze. Known sources of desolation. Concrete tombs that house their dead or dying inhabitants.

I shoot the eyes lingering in the shadows a hard look and march on. Into and through it all.

Got a tip-off at the Split Pill a few hours back. An old haunt, cop-run dive bar of minor significance. Just the way I like them. Sweat-soaked walls and filthy beats. Pop-skull whiskey gets poured and a 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 sat there propping up the bar. Old informant. He hammered back his shot, fired a wink my way, called me over and pulled me in close. “Got something for you, Cutty. Might make a tale out of this one. Some real juice.”

Caught my attention, and if what he spilled is even half right, maybe I'll spot myself a serious bag. Could be bullshit, but I chew the scraps I'm thrown, and Fast Eddie's been good for a whisper in the past.

Crumbled concrete rides high above me, infrastructure that hangs. Pipes as wide as a waist carry whatever power and bandwidth they can to those contained within. Screams populate the air. Calling cards of hurt. And if you're in bad enough shape to be holed up in one of these colossal habitations, there's little hope left.

My IZPD AI blinks an attempt at life. A chance effort to connect with surveillance networks as old as the Incident Zone itself. Push's ID flickers, fuzzes out in my peripheral next to that ticking clock with a 'BANDWIDTH ZERO' indicator. They're decent 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 before they retreat into the great algorithm.

"A deal," Fast Eddie explained after I bought him another shot of something oily and black. "Mercs coming in from outside the IZ. Major Prime specials. Some trade with the Widows, and that's rare, Cutty." He raised his eyebrows, fired back the shot, coughed hard, and fixed his eyes back on me. "Rare enough for you to do some chasing, I'd say."

Figured if it works out, maybe I grab myself a Widow gangbanger. Beat the shit out of them and pull up some dirt on someone else higher up. If they don't talk? Well, I take them in. They put up a fight? Then they get the blade, and there's one less Widow out there to prey on the poor bastards down here. If I get the call wrong? It's a setup and I run into heavies? Well, I've taken my licks before, and I don't mind taking them again. I don't make it back alive? That's just a bonus.

More screams, gunshots rattle off broken windows in the blocks that rise into the clouded sky. The dense fog that falls over everyone and everything. These purple-coloured hues the signature look of any Incident Zone.

The cries build as I pass through. And what, help them? Track those screams? Dig myself into one of those crypts and rescue a civilian, half dead with radiation poisoning?

I ignore it. Them. Swallow the guilt. Same as always.

Here in Incident Zone Number Five, I play the game, and right now that's fucking up this deal for whoever's got the balls to do it under my nose.

“Smell the sweet air, Eddie.” I threw down my own shot of the oily black liquor, looked at him, into those old bloodshot eyes and gave him a wink. “There are moments when we must chase something that’ll do some good.”

He gave me a small nod of affirmation. “Smell the sweet air.”

Yeah, the air. That's what we've got here. Outside, in Major Prime and beyond, where those like me in the IZ hope salvation lies? There it's different. There they have the blue sky. Here we've only got these dark hues held thick by the nanotech that keeps the radiation fallout from poisoning us to death.

“Heard this once,” Fast Eddie again, another shot ordered with a click of his greasy fingers. Figured I'd give him a minute, for what it's worth. He is *Fast Eddie* after all, right? Right. “Courage isn't fighting when you might win; it's fighting after you've already lost, and we lost this fight a long time ago. So, if you've got it? That courage to still stand up and do some good? You take it.”

Courage. The fight. Whatever's left in every one of us that didn't get out in time after whoever it was hacked the power plants. Those who couldn't escape this hell I march through now.

This place *they* created. What Contrent-Hotaru brought down on us when the meltdowns happened, and the quarantine came online, followed by the Big Splash. Where we all scrape an existence together. Where everyone who couldn't run before Contrent-Hotaru, in all their infinite wisdom and backed by the Federated Union government, got soaked in that first-gen nanotech that poisoned the sky, then the air, then us.

We lost our souls to this place. The Corporation never blinked.

“I know it.” Another nod to Fast Eddie before I pointed down at his shot glass for a refill, turned off the low barstool, and headed out into the streets to where I now march.

To chase after this deal. One Fast Eddie says is going down between some Major Prime specials and this other threat. The one that stares at me from the shadows as I move. This other source of desolation catalysed by those who are not as others.

The Widows.

An organised crime gang, a cult, a tribe, a fucking mutant horde. Whatever you want to call them. Things that creep in the dark with telepathic power that coats us all with a new layer of fear. Mutants that snake through the neon haze and have claimed the Underworld for their own. Variant nanotech they hacked or spliced that gives them this edge everyone wants. Some of the low-level types, empath sex workers or souped-up enforcers? They'll give you a moment of peace or brutality for a few bucks. The higher up the chain you go in that descent into the Underworld proper, that's where it gets real dark. Telepathic powers that even Contrent-Hotaru wants to get their hands on.

It's the low-level types that have their eyes on me now. Those in the recesses here on street-level. Three shadows deep and keeping tabs on me. An IZPD cop on foot and in this place? Not a normal look, and it provokes their foreign mutant eyes out of the dark. They're watching, always, and right now they're eyeing me up for some of that juice. I know it from the sweat clinging to my ribs. This stomach that's as tight as a drum.

Half surprised I got this far. No doubt tracking me with whatever Widow variant nanotech the heavies that control the Underworld have given them. Put a hack intercept on my AI for a way to get at me. Good bounty on IZPD police. Bring down a cop and maybe crack my security protocols, get a way into some heavy Department Core bandwidth, suck on the intel to give them a hand in whatever machinations they have. The great algorithm is always hungry.

Well, no such luck, motherfuckers. I am armed and set. 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 them.

The Hinde caught himself some trouble from the Widow herself back at the beginning of all this. The boss, the witch, whatever. She who commands those who walk the night. Yeah, the Hinde caught some bad funk before she dropped away into the deepest recesses of the Underworld to let her soldiers take care of things up top.

Well, too bad for her because you don't mess with the Golden Hinde. Got himself pieced back together. That full nano-bath. Ice cold but white hot with tech. Once I made a reputation for myself, naturally he took a liking to my work. That's when he called me in and chipped me the blade.

“Hey, poh-lice,” a shout and a whistle as a figure creeps from the shadows. Some shithead, low-ranking Widow wannabe with a bad limp and a worse cough.

Calling him a sack of rotten meat would be generous. Held together by that Widow variant nanotech by the looks of things, and if that's right, he's what they call an Acolyte. Means he's about in with them proper, got something to prove to the gang up here, 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 radiation poisoned skin wrapped around him.

“Sounds about right,” he stops.

“Got yourself a bad dose, little man?” I say.

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

About a third of the population, the nanotech mixed with their DNA and the radiation. Made some real nasty shit beyond the cancers. Bad mutations. Fucking nightmare fuel. And in about a third of those? Something different happened. Something worse.

So now we have the Widow, the Widows plural. These mutants that manifest as an organised crime gang up top and run the Underworld down low in the Incident Zones. Held tight and out of reach by the deep-level telepaths we only half know exist. And they work some dark deeds. *Real* dark.

“Bad enough,” he spits, looks at me, full grimace, might be ready to dance this one. See, this asshole's not a Widow, yet. The tell is in the skin. None of that grey sheen they play host to. Looks like he got the cancers, nasty shit, and not in the way the Widows want it. None of that telepathy they keep so well hidden. Nasty in how he's got to work twice as hard on the labour-lines to get what he needs to stay alive. Catch-22, right? The worse you're messed up, the sicker you are, the harder you need to work to keep yourself alive. Poor man stays poor. Always been the way.

“Yeah.” I look down at the blade, only a faint nanotech twitch across my right hand's fingers for the moment. “You going to make a scene?”

“Just out to see the sights.”

Yeah, see the sights. What he does is pull shit for the Widows to get their variant nanotech. Keep himself on the edge of life. He pulls a good gig? Maybe he'll get a shot at being taken into their ranks proper. Given a solid batch, full upgrade, serious enforcer meat that'll wreak some bloody havoc on the civilians up top.

"Give me a break, kid," I say, the clock ticking down in my peripheral, thirteen minutes to go and cutting it too tight for this shit.

He stares, wheezing breath, a bad twitch in his hands that hints at T>O<X addiction. 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. Fuckers behind the shadows. Telling him what to do. My AI twitches another digital cough, and a few lines of scan intel roll down my peripheral next to that ticking clock.

Twelve minutes and counting.

This guy'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.

"A break?" he says. "You think I'll get one from *Blood Cutty*, in-the-flesh?"

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

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

"Doesn't have to go this way."

"Yeah?" he pauses, laughs, and looks me up and down.

"Care to try me?"

"The blade, huh? That thing still sharp?" He points at my right hand.

My lips purse as I shake my head. This is going to get dark, fast.

He laughs, more like a cough. Something comes out of him, jaw slush. Black foam that froths over his lips, followed by more groaning as he doubles over.

I make a move to pass him as he comes up straight and close. "Yeah, you ain't so bad."

"*DON'T, ASSHOLE.*"

He licks his teeth, moves his weight and nods as the blade starts shape-shifting my right hand. Best thing about this piece? Doesn't need Core access or bandwidth. Works alone with the subdermal neural link between my fucked-up brain and the IZPD nanotech that swims through my bloodstream. Surprising how far a solid melee weapon will get you these days.

"Listen," he says, voice beginning to fray. He backs off, hands raised in front of him.

Palms out towards me. "Calm is what's called for here. Didn't mean any disrespect, Cutty. Don't get a lot of cops down this way, you know?"

"How you know who I am?"

"Word gets around."

"What word?"

"You're this good-bad guy, right? The *epitome*," he lets the word push itself through his half-broken clenched teeth.

"And what the fuck does that mean?" I say. Not got time for this.

He sniffs, spits. "Oh yeah, the anti-hero, right? You go 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 from whoever's got him on the collar. *He* doesn't know I'm on my way to this deal, but that doesn't mean *those fuckers* aren't a threat.

The neon haze settles across his face and makes me twitch.

He reaches for something on the inside of his metal-spiked leather jacket.

I blink, and my hand morphs. The blade's out in a flash. 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 even begins. A blink, a slice, and the soft thud of his right arm from the elbow down hitting the floor.

Blood sprays from the stump as he brings it up, wide eyes, mouth a perfect O, and his vital fluid coats me in its nightmare red.

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

He's open-eyed, breath no quicker than it was five seconds ago, gaping mouth collecting the smoke of burnt flesh in the night's humid air.

I wipe the blood from my face, give him a quick look as I move past him. The corner of his mouth twitches, unblinking eyes look at the remains.

The nanotech retreats, and my hand reforms. Reckon I can hear him attempt a word. Hard to tell over the sound of him pissing himself and the stomp of my boot on the severed limb.

I stop, turning to him over my shoulder. "The Widows, they might kill you now. See, you'll cost them more variant nanotech than you're worth to keep you alive. Fix that stump proper. Still, they might not," I say and look around. "But all the little shitheads 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. Eyes in the deep shadows twitch before receding. Some heavy recalculations on what tactics could work. Might give me enough time to get where I'm going. Might bring down a storm. Offence is the best form of defence, right? Right.

I look up at the towering blocks of human misery that mock me. 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 day?

Some bullshit police issued AI with no bandwidth, the blade, and a gun with a handful of bullets. Yeah, right. Save the fucking day. The good-bad guy. Parents murdered by GEN-A mutants not long after the Big Splash. A kid who ran into the new purple-laden night sky. Collected up by Jones, some semblance of a life given, held together however she could. Revenge in my heart, wrapped in fear and hatred...

Dreamt I could make a difference once. They have a long life, dreams. The nightmares have longer ones. But somehow, a few of us still have it. Hope in a hopeless place. The thought this will all change. That one day we'll see that blue sky again.

Well, not today, Cutty.

This deal's set to go down, and I am just twitching to take a few more limbs. A nanotech plague comes in around me. The swarm. The fog that hangs. It's alive with these little shits. Alive with the AI that takes care of it. Them. Whatever. A quick scan as it checks my IZPD credentials, and it breezes past. There are ways around it. To go undetected by it. Get a flush like that prick back there, or some hack from someone like the Hinde that'll cost you. Most people? The civilians who work the labour-lines? They look into it, breathe it in, soak it up and keep on trying to stay alive. That's what it's supposed to do. Keep us alive. Might be the case about ten percent of the time. The other ninety? Plenty of theories about that. Contrent-Hotaru has its own machinations too.

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

It's a gigantic discharge pipe feeding out from the derelict labour-line where the deal's set to happen any minute now. Wide enough for me to walk into at six-and-a-bit feet of rough bones and limp flesh.

I find my footing and move in.

The smell of decay from the ground rises. My IZPD-issued overcoat flickers to life, and a glow strong enough to let me see a few feet ahead reaches out over the settled filth.

A bulkhead door comes into view as I march forward. The sort you'd see on a ship. It reveals itself on my right as I come to the end of the tunnel wide pipe. There's a thick metal grate at the end that's caught all the built-up shit flushed down here over the years.

“Smell the sweet air,” I say as I take a few breaths, stand up straight and brace against the door's wheel with what weight I still have.

It gives, and I pull at it as the thick, rusted steel swings open, and I step aside. I look back, watch the nanotech fog at the tunnel's far end, and gag as I step into the dark recesses of the abandoned labour-line.

The digital timer in my peripheral vision hits zero.

Distant voices echo through the stairwell ahead of me.

Fast Eddie was right. This deal is about to go down.

Time to ruin somebody's day.

Chapter 2 – HORSE

The labour-lines. Contrent-Hotaru owned. Thousands across all seven IZs. Where the indentured civilians work for their nanotech rations to keep themselves on the edge of life.

This one's derelict. Some sort of screw-up. The Corporation moves on and buries that shit. Takes over another residential area. A few hundred dead IZ workers? No fucks given.

I make my way inside, the heavy stench of the tunnel behind me falling away. Slow steps up corrugated steel stairs to the manufacturing floor as I pass through abandoned managerial rooms. The rot and dust illuminated by the low glow of my overcoat. One kick at another door and it opens out onto the edge of the old production facility proper. Gutted to the studs other than a few colossal pieces of rusted machinery left looming.

I hold a second to see if my AI will cough any intel at me. Nothing.

With a quick twitch, my coat goes dark as voices creep through the heavy air. I move, low and quiet, over to a big piece of equipment and crouch. Back to the thick steel before I take a quick look past the edge. A group stands in a cleared-out area towards the middle of the facility's vast space. Piercing white spotlights positioned all around cast long shadows from their bodies.

A group of them. Four, all men. One in the middle with three others around him in an arc. Protective formation. They're in black tactical gear. Hard faces, visible implants, submachine guns strapped across their chests pointed at the ground. The usual trappings of hard types from Major Prime. Mercs, like Fast Eddie said.

I fix in on the leader. Short red beard, mean eyes, hands tight around the gun at his chest. Got a solid stance on him. One 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 lying there.

“*Fuuuuuck,*” the word comes out of me as a low growl as I spot it. A kid’s dead body. Ragged clothes, little legs poking out of ripped shorts. One shoe missing, only a dirty white sock to cover the tiny foot.

Been shifting through the dirt of the IZ all my adult life. Seen a lot. Too much. Took a long time to learn how to lock it down. Keep a clear head. Stay focused. But a kid? That’ll open the cracks. Let the pain come through. The hate. The anger. That thought of revenge. What happened to me? The murders. Left helpless and chased. Right now, it’s pushing through hard.

The other three shuffle behind the leader. Alert, clenched jaws, all broad set and solid muscle. Farm-fed and tough as fuck.

“*Nanotech signatures indicate they are from outside the IZ borders. Though pinpointing any origin or affiliation in Major Prime is beyond my bandwidth allocation at this moment,*” my AI nudges to me in their gender-neutral voice.

The sound appears in my grey matter, the ether, working with the nanotech to talk to me through osmosis. Whatever. I don’t know. It’s an internal monologue that trickles up my spine and floats into my mind.

“*Glad you’re here, Push,*” I nudge back.

“*Proximity to a crime has provided additional bandwidth allocation.*”

“*Good. Anything else?*”

“*High probability of mercenary background or gang affiliation.*”

“No shit. You work that one out by yourself?” I whisper to them as they stream what little information they have on the surroundings into my peripheral vision. Some intel on the guns, armour, implants. Surface level stuff. Nothing that might get me an advantage when it comes to it.

“*I would suggest nudge-comms only. Based on our proximity.*”

“Yeah, right.”

“Apologies for my reduced capacity. I remain behind severely restricted Department Core bandwidth limiters. Restrictions on my analysis and LIVE-WIRE capability are in place. However, emergency protocols can bypass this if initiated. Current bandwidth is at three percent. It would seem I am, however, in time for the party.”

“You got that right,” I nudge. “What can you get me if you juice it?”

“Cutty—”

“What can you get me?”

“Perhaps twenty percent.”

“That’ll do it,” I whisper.

“Heads up. New arrivals.”

I shuffle a little further, hunker down in my spot and make better a line of sight through the old, broken machinery, storage containers, toxic waste barrels. The leader with the red beard stands in the clearing, tenses the grip on his gun. Keeps his eyes fixed on the dead kid until he moves his finger over the trigger, raises his head and watches something big come from the shadows.

“And what in the *LIVING FUCK* is this, Monroe?” an enormous voice rumbles from the dark recesses. The sound of high heels clacking hard on the concrete floor follows the heavy question.

Monroe tenses, gun raised. The men behind him position themselves as the gigantic figure moves into the white light and towers above the mercs.

Big Widow. Must be from deep down. High-ranking. Draped in chains, wrapped in black latex and rubber. Spikes and barbed wire bound around the moist, grey skin, releasing its own weird sheen in the bright light. Vascular lines run along the heavy brawn, pumping mutant blood and variant nanotech through their enormous body.

They come up to Monroe, stop, lick their lips with their tongue as thick as my wrist and nod. I follow the movement of their vast arm, pointing down to the kid's body at Monroe's feet.

Monroe coughs, raises his line of sight in the shadow of the vast mutant. "Look, Horse," he says. "Not our problem. Your team delayed delivery." He drops the submachine gun to his side, lights a cigarette with a steady hand.

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

"Unacceptable, Monroe," Horse says. "What the *FUCK* do you think we can do with a shipping container full of dead children?"

"*What did that thing say?*" I freeze. "*Push, scan the area for bodies. Anything you can pull up. Whatever you can find. Draw at that bandwidth, NOW.*"

"*On it,*" they nudge as intel runs down my peripheral vision.

"*What the—*"

"*Three labour-line sensors still on network. Container behind the mercs. Dissipating heat signature. Correlates with multiple dead bodies. Small. High probability of children.*"

"Fuck," the word rolls out in a low whisper as I fix my stare back on Monroe. His guard's up. Gun raised. The cigarette hangs out the side of his mouth as the men behind him crouch into tactical positions.

"Horse, now listen," he says and forgets to blink.

"*NO!* You listen, you little prick." Horse steps forward and points with a massive finger. "We had a deal for *live* children. 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.*"

Monroe blinks.

Horse pauses, takes a vast breath and lets it out in a slow rumble. They steeple their fingers in front of their big, grizzled face. “Now, our money is good, correct? We expect to get what we paid for.”

“Since when did the Widows traffic in humans from beyond the IZ? Major Prime? Children, for Christ’s sake?”

“No intel available,” Push nudges. “Records show no previous investigations into or reports of human trafficking from the Widows. Considerable amounts of what you would assume: weapons, drugs, tech. No people.”

Monroe’s strong. He faces Horse with a cold stare. Sweat beads on his forehead, mean eyes. This isn’t his first barbecue, and he’s about ready for lunch.

“Weapons, Horse,” he says, real slow. “Not a problem. Live children? A little more difficult when—”

“Ah, my boy!” Horse steps up to Monroe, cupping his chin in a massive, grey-skinned hand. “Is this not Major Prime? Even out there. Outside the horrors of the IZ borders, you said little street rats crawl high and low all over the vast conurbation that surrounds us, and you call home.”

Horse lets go of Monroe’s head with a push and takes a few steps back. That grey leather skin giving off the same sheen as the latex in the white light, their head housing an enormous smiling skull.

Monroe shakes it off, renewing his focus. “You delayed the drop, Horse. They were alive twelve hours ago. You think I run a kindergarten here?” Eyes fixed on the mutant, gun barrel stare not letting up. “We don’t need this to get messy.”

“*Oh...shit,*” I nudge, turning to sit back against the old machinery.

Horse’s laughter fills the space.

“You think you know messy?” they say. “Come, Sweet Jane, come see to these men.”

I turn, look back around the machinery, 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 the Widows have other tricks to use before they pull out guns.

Horse steps to the side as something crawls out of the dark and into the light of the spots. A bony little thing on all fours. Skin that same pale grey as Horse, wrapped in similar gear. Chains and spiked wire. She's pierced all over and dripping with off-colour mutant blood. Holding the same sheen in the bright light, a head shaven down to the bone. She crawls, slow, on fingers and toes across the concrete floor as she sniffs at the air. Telepath, got to be. Bad fucking news.

“Fear,” she says and then pauses as her head rises, eyes twitching towards me.

“What is it, Sweet Jane?” Horse says.

“*Shit-shit-shit-shit*,” my mind lights up.

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

“There’s someone here. Someone watches us,” Sweet Jane says on her knees, rolling her tongue, looking right at me.

“*Give me that twenty percent*,” I nudge as the blade twitches in my right hand. “*LIVE-WIRE. Everything you’ve got. Turn the dials up, right-fucking-now.*”

“*Cutty—*”

“*Do it! Evidence of human trafficking. I think that permits emergency protocols. Give me the LIVE-WIRE.*”

I keep my eyes fixed on Sweet Jane. Stare her down. Force whatever fear I can from my head and into hers, knowing what that telepath power is looking for. Make her think I’m shit scared enough not to be a threat.

I rise from behind the old machinery as Push pulls whatever they can from the Department Core and the seconds tick over.

This nanotech, my IZPD-mandated ration. Not much by itself. Keeps me alive, fights back the cancers well enough. But when an AI like Push has Core access? Different ballgame. If they can pull on those vast banks of data through fat Core bandwidth, they can make these little nanofuckers in my blood dance. And right now, I need them to do the flamenco.

“And *WHO* the fuck are you?” Monroe shouts across the labour-line floor, gun up, eyeing me through the sights.

Push draws them all out on my HUD, lines their weapons up for me as the surge of bandwidth fired nanotech builds through my body.

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

“Yes...” Horse says. “Who are *you*? ”

Sweet Jane crawls up to Horse’s side, and they place a giant hand on her shaven head. She purrs, twitches, feels the air with that telepathic power the true Widows from deep down have.

“IZPD,” I shout back as I walk towards them, lower my arms behind me and let my overcoat slide 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 ground covered in glass and shrapnel tears into my elbows and knees. I grab some cover as bullets ricochet off rusted metal, and it gives me a sliver. A moment for the nanotech to draw on what it needs to.

It’s here. Now. The rush. The surge. It powers through. Deep into every part of me. Muscle, sinew. Balls and bones. Everything flexed hard. Dials up to eleven.

I’m synced, human and tech, neural pathways electrified by a billion-billion nanobots swimming through me. All powered by an AI sunk deep into the Department Core with access to data covering every human action recorded since Major Prime’s Cores came online.

And everything that big prick could get its machine mind on from human history total. The great algorithm is always hungry.

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

A moment of quiet settles as we all assess the next move.

Brief sounds of glass and rubble crunch under heavy boots. Deep breaths. The thump of my heart. Blood screams in my ears, throat dry, hands drip with sweat.

“What’ve we got?” I nudge.

“Four heat signatures remain. Looks like Horse and Sweet Jane have fled. Monroe here left to tidy up.”

“Good.”

I rise, pulling my sidearm from behind my back as Push draws outlines around Monroe and his squad on my HUD. I bolt and dart between the equipment. Speed and rhythm. One merc flashes a head out from behind a container and I pop a bullet into it.

The precision and pace spook the other two as they rise and run. Bullets through their backs drop them as quick as the last. I’m over and through the rest of the facility, on top of them in seconds. Gun dropped, blade out and through necks.

Taking no chances here. Decapitation *is* the only way.

They might have nanotech that’ll heal a bullet to the back within a few minutes.

They won’t grow a new fucking head.

I spin and catch Monroe as he comes down at me from on top of a piece of machinery. Knife out and looking for my throat. I hold him by the hand and neck. 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, spin over and slam him down onto the concrete.

I knock the wind out of him with a quick knee. Groans echo as he drops the knives. My fingers tense hard around his neck, squeezing the life out of him. The LIVE-WIRE strength in my hand clenches solid before it dissipates, drawn back.

“I’ll patch your puncture wound up. No critical damage. Bandwidth limiters reactivated.”

Push nudges as I take a breath, and the rush retreats.

I hammer another knee into Monroe’s ribs while I’m on top of him. He gasps as I release the grip on his neck, rise, and stamp down hard on his broken forearm. The blade fires out, and I slice his other hand off at the wrist in a quick motion. His screams rattle out to no answer in the dark factory as I cauterise the wound, step back and spot the dead child lying on the cold ground in the corner of my vision.

I swallow it back. Deep breaths to release the clench in my heart. I slow the thundering beats pulsing through my brain and blood, and I arch my head back. My mouth’s open, and I breathe the stale air. Been a long time since I went LIVE-WIRE, even at twenty percent. Had almost forgotten how good it was.

Monroe’s screams pull me back into the moment. I turn to him as my pupils widen and I make out his writhing figure in the low purple light.

“You going to talk?” I say as I lean over to him and grab the cigarette packet from the webbing on his chest. I take one out, light it with the heat off a nanotech-fired finger as I watch his eyes come back into focus.

“Don’t count on it,” he spits.

“Thought as much.” I draw a deep drag, flick the thing away, crouch, and bring my knee into his neck. Hard.

He chokes as I push a finger into each nostril and his panting breath licks the back of my hand.

“Want to be like them?” I say and point at the heads on the floor across the space.

“Fuck you, pig,” he says as I pull my fingers out and push his head back into the concrete. “Yeah.” I rise and turn. “Don’t get any ideas,” I say as I walk to the container a few metres across the manufacturing floor.

“*Cutty, don’t,*” Push nudges. “*We need to call this in.*”

“Got to,” I say, my hand turning into a solid ball as I punch off a big padlock that holds the deadlock tight.

I 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. With each heave I suck more of the air in, and with each gulp, I choke and vomit. Stumbling, I hold myself against a piece of equipment as I catch my breath.

“You,” I manage. “What have you done?”

“Fuck you,” he spits again, sitting up against a piece of machinery now. He cradles his severed wrist in his lap as he reaches across the floor for the cigarette packet with his broken hand.

I pull myself up straight, step over to him. “You talk, or you die for this. Full decap, no nanotech bath for you.”

“You aren’t going to kill me, cop. The Widows, sure, but you? No. IZPD protocols, remember? You’ve caught me! Look, I’m unarmed!” He raises the cauterised stump of his severed wrist and laughs. “God-damned pig. The AI in your head records everything you do, remember? Streams it back to your IZPD Core. So, quit your charade and pull me in. I’ll take my chances with the Agency.”

“Funny understanding of IZ cops you’ve got there.” I tilt my head. “Shit, Monroe, I had you down as a bad man, too.”

He huffs another laugh. “You IZPD assholes are even more of a shitshow than the joke cops we have in Major Prime,” he says as he tries to nudge a cigarette out of the packet he’s got to his chest. “Fuck it,” he looks back up at me. “Take me in. Do what you assholes do. Get your orders from the Agency so I can get out of this shithole.”

I rub the stubble on my chin and turn back to the container. The door is open, the silhouette outline of the piled bodies visible. Twenty, thirty dead children. The sight carves its morbid tale into my mind as the smell penetrates me to the core. It flickers, that memory, the thought. The day *I* was that kid *they* came for, and in the flash of a moment, my parents were murdered before I escaped, out into the world unknown, to become the man I am now.

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

“*Wait!*” he wails as I hammer sideways across his jaw, taking it clean off.

Garbled screams spurt out of him as I pound his head into the machinery, the shape mashing into a stump of sinew and flesh.

I stand and wipe the paste off on my leg.

“*You record any of that?*” I nudge.

“*Seems there was a glitch in my Department Core sync after you opened the container.*”

“Right...” I say. “Now you can call it in.”

“*Done. What’s next?*”

“Someone’s going to answer for this.”

“*I’ll be here when you need me.*”

“I know it,” I say as the digital presence retreats into the great algorithm, the cold and the smell of the container wrapping themselves around me in the low purple light.

Chapter 3 – BEAST

The Police Department Core casts a long shadow. Collars taken, lives saved...or not. This place isn't power—it's punishment. The same as the rest of the IZ.

I look up at the immense structure with all its weight and meaning. It leans over me and pushes down as I take a step into that long shadow. A dying monster that wheezes its drawn-out breaths among the bustle and noise of all the little people outside. Each one watching for it to draw its final breath so they can pick it apart. Skin from bone. Concrete from rebar.

Four blocks wide and twenty-five stories high. It's dwarfed by the housing blocks that surround it, but it's stout, broad across the chest.

Concrete overhangs curl down into the eternal violet night. Monstrous teeth, battered and chipped by failed drone landings. Civilian and gang riots. Breakout attempts. Bombings. You name it, we've had it. But it still stands, like me, right here, right now.

I break the trance, move deeper into the shadows and shoot a quick glance at the other cops and miscreants hanging around outside. Zero reactions. Hard to tell one from the other. Contrent-Hotaru's paid off the force for years. Most of them take that Corporation dollar and do 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 good. Find dirt on you, hold your more nefarious activities against you. Whatever. They slide the knife 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 mark of scarred flesh there to remind you never to step out of line again.

Got plenty of those metaphorical scars myself. A nice collection that says I walk my own path. The same as a few others that do some good and call this place home.

No one ever said it was going to be easy. But maybe not this hard.

“Jack Cutty, Lieutenant First Class,” I say as I come up to the perimeter walls and wait for the security system in front of a reinforced steel door to come to life. It’s set into the border wall that’s about twenty feet high and two feet thick, more of that concrete and rebar to chew down on.

Sweat runs down my spine as a camera focuses in to look at me. The thing almost twitches with disgust. Guess I’m looking extra pretty today.

Two scanners on either side of me search my body for my IZPD nanotech-ID-signature as the miscreants mix with the cops and pass me by on the street alongside the civilians making their way to the labour-lines. The horror and fear written on all their faces.

“Come on.” I look up at the camera and give it the finger.

“Cutty? That you?” a voice crackles.

“Open the door, assholes.”

A warning amp screams for three seconds. Yellow siren lights spin a few times as two shotgun barrels fold out of the concrete wall in case anyone gets the idea they want to follow me in. Neither has any shells in them.

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

Another few steps and I’m out of the IZ’s purple night and into a bullet and bomb-proofed nanoglass box that’s set inside a rebar Faraday cage.

The glow from the sky disappears as the door slides shut behind me. My eyes adjust to the green-grey lustre from the strip lighting overhead, and I shake it off. Two police shuffle outside the box. They’re decked out. Armour and tactical gear, riot masks, shotguns and shields. All the usual. They train their guns on me, and I know for a fact those will have shells in them.

I get a small nod, tense eyes looking through mask visors as the quarantine jets blow from under me. Ten seconds to clear all the shit off me. Ten days might do it. Not that there's been working filters on them for years now.

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

Most everyone's corrupt in here, but the Department Core is *our* house. We all know that, and we take it seriously. We have our own wars with each other, the good versus the bad, the corrupt against the non-corrupt. All the usual, but we're police, and when the shit hits the fan, that's what 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? Then you're target practice for these two goons with shotguns. And bet your ass they'll take the utmost pleasure in filling you with 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 my peripheral vision as I move out of the dead zone of the cage, and Push comes back to life within the confines of the Department Core. I look at the set of stairs that leads to the main level booking and processing area and give a low grunt.

Push continues to emerge from the great algorithm and pulls in fresh data and intel for me. Sucking on the local bandwidth now we're here.

“*Pick up anything?*” I nudge, climbing the stairs. Whitewashed walls with scrapes from nails and gun barrels and everything else squeeze me with all their memories.

“Nothing that relates to what we found. Two Widow enforcers brought in on weapons smuggling. A dozen curfew arrests. Labour-line infringements. Black-market traders. Sex workers and low-end drug dealers. Nothing out of the ordinary,” they nudge back.

“As expected.”

“Correct.”

“Keep your ear close to the ground. Whatever bandwidth you can beg, borrow, steal. There’s going to be a lot of action if the Widows are putting money into human trafficking operations, and children, too. Keep tabs on my informant. Any tracking you can pull.”

“He’s dead. The report came in shortly after we resolved our situation.”

“Fuck, they got Fast Eddie?” I shake my head as I trudge up the stairs.

“They pieced together his ID from what was left outside the Split Pill.”

“Poor bastard.”

“I have cast my net wide. Tracking modules across the network are now initiated. I will utilise what Core bandwidth I have access to.”

A few more steps and I’m at the top of the narrow staircase. The buzz of strip lighting gnaws at me and 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. All there to override and eat away the old batch from 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. Obedience is the word. Fuck them.

A pulse runs through me, and I go rigid for a second before the big door clicks. It shifts back and slides open to reveal the corridor to Core’s primary hub.

I push my way into the melee. Cops grapple with everyone from Acolytes to low-ranking Widows and the civilians that were unlucky enough to get picked up for whatever random shit they pulled.

Could be anything. Breaking curfew after some bullshit labour-line infraction. Black-market medicine deals to keep their kid alive. T>O<X to take the edge off the foul world outside. Weapons to protect their family.

That's the saddest part. Most of the people we've got rotting in the cells in here rather than rotting on the streets out there are the ones attempting some semblance of a life.

I get nods from the few cops in here who try at their job. Furrowed brows from the others who know what I stand for. They know that the Corporation dollar doesn't line my pockets, and that makes me an enemy more than most of the scum out on the streets. They see how the Agency slips that knife between my ribs, and I take the scar. Keep fighting. They know I'll hound and tear into the Widows until my breath gives up.

And if that means I get a bullet in the back one day from one of them on the Corp dollar? Well then, that's all she wrote.

I step through, in-between the brawls and beatings and into the main booking room. Tall ceilings held up by thick concrete walls surround me. Smoke in the air. More of that strip lighting. The smell of every bodily fluid you can imagine. People bend over broken desks with scowls that reach across the room. Batons come down and crack against backs. Two big Widow enforcer types stand about a foot over the cops that have brought them in with mean looks on their warped faces.

Those are the scum I bring in. Booking people who miss their curfew or skip a day on the labour-lines? Those are the people I'm supposed to protect.

It's the Widows that need to be in here. Caged up like the animals they are. Get them off the streets. Get the T>O<X epidemic under control. Try to make this bleak world a little brighter for those that need it.

Doesn't mean I don't use what the Widows can do on occasion. That empath power the sex workers have. Not deep telepath, but enough to take away a hint of the pain. I'm a hypocrite, so what? I don't take that Corp dollar, and I crack the right skulls when it comes to it.

I reach another door—it scans me, opens, and I move through to the locker room. Cops moving in and out of the showers. That mix and chatter in the one place we think we can 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. I open it up and look at my withered face in the little cracked mirror on the inside of the door.

“*Shit,*” I say, turning to Manrose.

She's stood there, a fraction 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 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 place. She reaches out a long, thin arm and puts a hand on my shoulder as she tilts her head with a touch of curiosity.

“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 she's got twice the style and half the body count.

There's an element of mutual trust between us, and trust is a hard thing to find in this place. The intel I've got? What happened? I've known good cops to go bad over less.

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

I furrow my brow as two shitheads shuffle past us in the narrow walkway between the lockers. Our eyes meet as we hold our faces at best grimace. I wait until they're out of sight, then face her straight on.

"Look, I get a little deeper into this, and I'll need someone I know I can trust. Give me some space. I'll see what I can dig up. Don't want to bring you down with me before I get started."

"That bad, huh?"

"Yeah, something like that." I turn back to the locker, watching her in the reflection of the cracked mirror.

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

"Yeah, I know it. You into anything?" I say, not taking my eyes off her face in the mirror.

"Nothing too deep. Widows making some strange moves out there. Hearing rumours. Informants going quiet or disappearing altogether. Christ, you hear about Fast Eddie?"

"Yeah, I heard," I say and let out a long sigh. What was it he said about courage?

"There's some nasty shit coming up here, and you know it's going to get buried as quick as it rises."

"Moves are being made," I say as I turn back to her, those keen eyes housed in that smooth face looking me up and down. Nothing else like it in the IZ far as I've seen. Could have been up at the top of one of those tidy Corp residential areas with the 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. Sure, you work hospitality, and they've made that term pretty broad, but so what? This is the IZ. People do a lot worse for a lot less. Instead, she's here staring at this fuckhead with delusions of grandeur and a severe case of perennial hostility.

“You smell the 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,*” Push nudges.

“Shit,” I say as I slam my locker door. “Any ideas?”

“*Immediate debrief required.*”

“Christ,” I say as and make my way over to the elevator. “This one’s going to hurt.”