

PROTOST☆RS

ISSUE 1

March 23rd, 2104. Aurora Valley City, formally known as Great Gulf City. The greatest coastal city in the United States of America. A technological marvel of the 22nd century.

It was a windy spring night in the Eastend District. The old port was full of rusted, empty shipping containers scattered across the docks. The only sounds were the occasional hyper-passenger jets flying in and out of the city. In the distance, the Australis Bridge shone bright, connecting AVC to Crystal Island. The hundreds of cars crossing it looked like fireflies gliding over the water. Above, the Auroras wavered slowly in the sky, beginning to outshine the lights of the city.

Suddenly, the ground began to vibrate, followed by a series of screams, hollers, and cheers. A group of half a dozen young adults, mounted on motorcycles and followed by a large pickup truck, rode into the old port. They were second-generation members of the **Sun Wranglers** motorcycle gang, led by 26-year-old Osaka Santana. Somewhere down the hyper-freight train line, a Hoshino Motors warehouse was about to discover they were missing an entire shipment of motorcycle parts.

The crew parked their bikes in a clearing between some shipping containers, right in front of an old slipway for smaller cargo ships. Osaka dismounted her bike and removed her helmet, turning to her younger sister, Valencia.

“Is everyone good?” she asked.

Valencia took off her helmet and replied, “Yeah, all good. Rome just verified we weren’t followed—he should be here soon. We did it, Saka.”

A small, barely noticeable smile formed on Osaka’s face. She hooked her helmet onto her bike and walked toward the truck. The truck’s driver, Mikey, stepped out excitedly.

“Dude, Val’s scrambler fucking WORKED.”

Valencia, standing behind Osaka, replied, “No shit it worked. I told you—keep a straight line, and their scanners only see what I want them to see.”

Osaka nodded in agreement. “The truck stays here overnight. Good job, Mikey.”

Osaka and Valencia turned to the rest of their crew, who were dismounting and preparing a celebratory bonfire. Valencia smirked and walked toward her best friends, Jackson and Luna. Osaka let out a sigh of relief—her first heist as operation leader had been a success.

Behind her, another bike came to a stop. Its rider dismounted, a large, muscular figure who removed his helmet and left it on his seat. Osaka walked over to her younger brother and best enforcer, Rome Santana.

Rome hugged his sister, grinning. "Proud of you, Saka. You killed it out there—I told you it was in the bag."

Osaka hugged him back, smiling. "You have no idea how relieved I am that we didn't have to use Plan B."

Rome laughed. "Never had a doubt. Dally should be here soon, by the way."

Osaka nodded, walking with Rome toward the group. "Good. He's gonna freak when he sees this score."

They sat down in a circle around the fire. Samuel, one of the crew's muscle, was complaining about his bike's suspension when they went off-road. "Man, I felt every bush and pebble out there," he grumbled.

Minutes later, one last bike arrived. The youngest Santana sibling, Dallas, pulled up to the slipway. Rome stood to greet him.

"We fucking did it, Dally," Rome said, walking over, doing a handshake with him.

"Where's the take?" he asked Osaka.

She smiled and stood, with Valencia following her. Rome threw an arm around Dallas' shoulders as they led him to the back of the truck. Osaka opened the doors, revealing dozens of crates stacked on top of each other, all labeled "HOSHINO MOTORS." Dallas' eyes widened, like a kid seeing his first cybernetic installed.

Valencia handed him a tablet with the manifest of the cargo. The list was long: turbos, Neural Interface Control Units (NICUs), fairings, suspension kits, tires, and other cybernetic components. Dallas scanned the list, then handed the tablet back to Valencia.

"Did Nevada tell you what parts we're keeping?" Dallas asked.

Rome closed the truck doors as they walked back to the group. "Nah, he said the NICUs are worth the most, so we made sure we got those. No idea what we're selling, though."

"Solana probably has some buyers lined up," Osaka added. "Don't worry about it right now. It's time to celebrate."

They sat back down, sharing stories late into the night. They talked about future heists, frustrations with the jobs Selina gave them, and their eagerness to tackle bigger operations instead of simple territory management. By 3 a.m., the others had left, leaving only the Santana

siblings behind. They listened to music as they usually did when together, watching the auroras dance over the city.

Osaka started talking about the expectations Eduardo, the Sun Wranglers' leader, had placed on her and how nervous she was to meet them.

"I don't know how he does it," she admitted. "I can barely get Mikey and Jason to fall in line. I feel like they don't take me seriously sometimes."

Valencia reassured her. "You just can't give them the option not to, Saka. You know what's going to happen when we're out there—we rely on you to make it happen. You've just gotta use us however we're needed. Be tough on those guys—they can take it."

Osaka nodded. After a few seconds of silence, Dallas asked, "You guys think Eduardo will let me in on Osaka's next job?"

The question hung in the air, creating a brief awkwardness. Rome was the first to answer.

"I don't know, man. You know Mom doesn't want you out there."

Dallas scoffed. "Why is it even up to her? She doesn't even know half of what I do."

Osaka spoke up. "Your cybernetics aren't safe, Dally. You know that."

Her statement triggered him, as this wasn't their first time having this conversation. Dallas rolled his eyes.

"No, we *don't* know that. You act like it's some written law. For all we know, they could be fully functional, and I've just been sitting around doing nothing, wasting time."

Osaka's voice turned stern. "We're not risking you getting hurt over something we doubt can even work. It's not worth it to us. Accept that."

Dallas gritted his teeth and stood. No one said anything for a moment. Rome began, "We care too mu—"

"No," Dallas interrupted. "It's worth it to me. And I'm going to show you. Accept that."

He locked eyes with Osaka before turning away and walking to his bike. Rome started to get up, but Osaka stopped him with a hand on his shoulder.

"Let him go."

Rome stayed silent as Dallas started his bike and rode off the old port. After a moment, Valencia finally spoke.

"Why is he so desperate to prove himself to us?"

Osaka sighed. "I don't know. I just hope he doesn't do anything stupid."

As Dallas drove off he looked up once more at the Auroras, they seemed restless tonight.

-

Dallas felt like doing something stupid. He rode deeper into the Eastend District, angry and eager to prove to himself that he could handle anything. He knew exactly where he needed to go. But first, he had to make a pit stop. He pulled over into an alleyway between a shoddy optics clinic and a closed corner mart. He got off his bike and immediately got to work.

When his siblings had shown him their take, he had swiped a NICU while they weren't looking, fully intending to install it on his old bike. He'd found out about the street race happening tonight about a week ago. The stakes? A spot in the upcoming Formula 0.5 race in AVC. Dallas thought if he could win this race, there'd be no stopping him. All he needed was the edge that the NICU would give him. He had raced hundreds of times without one, but tonight was different. He needed all the help he could get.

He worked quickly. He had rebuilt his bike twice and modded it dozens of times. A 2084 Nishikawa TC-1000, an antique at this point but he knew what he was doing. His head was full of thoughts—every moment he felt someone had doubted him. His old bike wasn't exactly compatible with a next-gen Hoshino Motors NICU, which didn't help either. After about 20 minutes, Dallas had "installed" the NICU alongside the bike's original ECU. It wasn't pretty, but it looked functional enough. There was no time to test it, and Dallas was riding a high of overconfidence, so he rolled with it.

He turned the bike on and jacked the NICU's rider connector into his left wrist. The cable was jerry-rigged onto his clutch, but it didn't bother him. Besides, his left hand was the only place where he had an open socket for cyberware jacks. As soon as the bike powered up, a flood of warnings and pop-ups appeared, all telling him the NICU was incompatible with his bike. He had expected this, so he had already hardwired it over the original connector. He shut off the warnings, overriding the error codes.

The NICU switched to passive mode, allowing him to see the bike's computer interface through his IOD (internal optics display) instead of his helmet's visor. He wasn't used to it, and the faint buzzing in his head wasn't exactly comfortable, but there was no time to rewire everything. So he took off, heading for the race

-

Dallas arrived at the race in a small neighborhood on the edges of the Eastend district. This was barely Sun Wrangler turf; another smaller gang that Eduardo barely tolerated called **Los**

Solteros rode here. Word on the street was that Los Solteros had somehow bought themselves a slot in the upcoming F.0V race, and the winner of this race got that spot. Naturally, all the racers participating were Solteros. It was an open invite, but no one really had the nerve to challenge them on their turf. Dallas felt he had nothing to lose.

As soon as he pulled up to the starting line, he began to get stares. He stood out on his older, modded bike and even more so wearing Sun Wrangler colors. A pair of Solteros walked over, trying their best to look intimidating—trying and failing.

“Ay Wrangler, you racing that shit rocket?” the one on the right, a shorter guy with mushroom-shaped hair and neon green optics, called out to Dallas.

Dallas wasn't intimidating, but he knew how to talk shit. It got him into more trouble than out of it, but he thought it was fun. “At least my shit rocket isn't riding for me. I heard most of you Soltero guys started running HAREs. All you gotta do is turn the bike on, no?”

The Soltero was visibly offended, but his friend, a taller guy who looked almost exactly like him, stepped in. “We'll see if that thing can keep up with our Blades.” He stared down at Dallas before turning around and heading back to what Dallas assumed were their friends. The shorter one lingered for a moment longer, staring, before following him.

Dallas grinned. He loved being underestimated, at least when it came to racing. He didn't know anyone here, so he waited on his bike as more people gathered, placing bets as racers arrived—mostly Solteros riders. Eventually, 15 bikes were lined up on the starting line. A Soltero walked out in front of everyone on the street. He was pretty big but couldn't have been older than 26. A tattoo climbed up his neck and wrapped around his chin. He wore sparkly baggy jeans and a Solteros leather vest.

Someone from the crowd yelled out, “Fuck yeah, Victor!” and Dallas put the name to the face. He had heard of Victor “Sling” Ramirez, leader of Los Solteros. Dallas didn't know much about him except that he was a cheating asshole who'd make a deal with anyone if it meant getting paid.

Victor smiled at the racers, then saw Dallas and gave him a glare. He addressed the crowd, “How we doing, Eastend?” The crowd cheered. Victor smiled and raised his arms in celebration. “I'm sure we all know what's at stake here—a golden ticket into F.0V.” He grinned while scanning all the racers at the line. “And only one of you lucky devils is getting into the chocolate factory,” he laughed, revealing his chrome teeth implants. “All bets close in 5 minutes. Any bets placed after that, house tax goes up 35%. You know the rules. Solteros turf, Solteros rules.”

He had a sinister look on his face, and Dallas almost felt targeted. He'd raced a couple of times with Los Solteros, and they almost exclusively played dirty. Victor strutted off the street, letting his track girls take his place. Two younger girls, wearing cowboy hats and identical hot pink and neon green hair, stood there, seemingly connected by a wire behind their necks. These were Los Solteros' flag girls, twins, probably around Dallas' age. He swore they were staring directly at him as they yelled to everyone, “Are youuu readdyyyyyy?” in a playful manner. Their eyes

never left Dallas', which kind of freaked him out, but it made him grin like crazy. "Set!" The girls winked and pointed at the sky at the same time. Above them, a cable lined with green LEDs lit up brightly, nearly blinding everyone. "Go!" The twins cheered out, bouncing together in excitement.

Dallas dropped his visor and switched his NICU into active mode. Everyone peeled off the starting line in a split second—except Dallas. His bike stalled. "FUCK!" he cursed out loud. He lingered at the starting line for what felt like an eternity, as the entire Solteros gang laughed at him—rightfully so. He hadn't stalled his bike in years. He started the bike again and released the clutch, but it stalled again. "FUCK!" he cursed even louder. He was left alone at the starting line with the smell of hot asphalt and melting rubber in the air. The Solteros crowd was practically roaring with boos, Dallas caught one of them yelling out "a thousand says the Wrangler DNFs!" followed with a wave of laughter.

The flag girl twins giggled at Dallas. What the hell was going on? Once was a fluke, but twice? It couldn't have been his fault, at least that's what he was telling himself. He quickly thought about what to do while everyone laughed around him. He figured the NICU hack job was messing with his usual manual takeoffs. He killed the ignition, unjacked the NICU, started the bike, flipped up his visor, and revved the RPMs. He let go of the clutch and shot off the line like he was used to. He shook his head in frustration but wasn't ready to count himself out yet. His bike roared with life, the familiar clanking and clicks of his multiple mods. His exhaust growling with anger, ready to catch up, the NICUs faint buzzing in the back of his head.

Everyone else just got a head start—easy, he thought to himself. He loved the odds. Before he reached the first corner, he jacked the NICU back into his left wrist. His bike's data reappeared on his optics display, along with all the warnings and error codes. He quickly swatted them away and let the NICU do its work. He no longer had to manually manage the power his brakes received or set the weight distribution for his rolling chassis. All he had to focus on was speed and keeping his line as best as possible.

Dallas quickly caught up, passing maybe 5 riders. The Solteros' bikes pierced through corners like knives, their automated systems doing most of the work. Dallas gripped his handlebars and fought for every pass with all his strength. He was doing well, all things considered, but the NICU's passive buzzing only got louder, like it was working overtime. A flashing warning sign kept popping up on his display about an incompatible operating system. Dallas assumed it was a glitch—NICUs were compatible with almost every operating system out there, even bootlegs. He kept ignoring the error codes and pushed on, but it only got worse. The buzzing was like a siren in his head, begging him to stop using it. Dallas tried to pull through, but it felt like the NICU or the bike was draining him of energy. He started feeling lightheaded, it was becoming a little too much to bear, but he refused to give up.

He blinked hard and gripped his handlebars. He flipped up his visor, letting the fresh air in and pressed on, reaching the leaders of the race. There was only one lap to go, and he'd managed to avoid any dirty racing. He was in fourth place, closing in on third. The Solteros' Blade bikes had proven to be easy competition. Dallas just had to hold on a little longer. He passed the

shorter guy who mocked his bike before the race. The Soltero rode right up next to Dallas, their sides almost touching. Dallas didn't have the energy or focus to drive defensively, so he tried to outrun him. Sweat dripped from his eyelids, and he felt extremely warm.

He was coming up on the second-place rider, and it was the final stretch. The first-place rider was only a few feet ahead, too focused on the second-place rider. Dallas maxed out his RPMs, turning the throttle all the way, hoping to slingshot around both of them at the last second. His bike shot forward, leaning right to go around. He was redlining. He couldn't feel his hands on the handlebars anymore, but he knew he was holding on. He passed second place, nearing first. It felt like something was trying to escape his head, so he leaned forward, giving it all he had left.

He saw the finish line just before his vision went completely dark. The last thing Dallas saw were the auroras above central AVC.

-

Dallas woke up feeling like his body was on fire. His clothes were in tatters, but there were no flames—just scratches all over him. His body felt like lead, and he couldn't move a muscle. It took almost a full second before he realized people were shouting around him. He looked up to see four totaled bikes near the finish line, including his own. Los Solteros were in complete disarray; some were arguing, others were panicking, and most were trying to reach the other crashed riders.

Dallas had no idea what had happened. His head felt strangely clear, but his body was completely wrecked. What happened? he wondered. The last thing he remembered was nearing the finish line... and then, nothing. He tried to prompt his IOD for any kind of info, but the system was dead—no response.

It wasn't long before Los Solteros spotted him. A group of them started towards him, and they didn't look happy. Dallas tried to get up, but his muscles were numb and refused to move. The Solteros were closing in, and panic started to set in. Victor appeared among them, a pistol in hand. Dallas froze. Victor was only about 15 feet away when he raised the gun and aimed directly at him.

"Stupid fucking Wrangler kid!" Victor growled, clearly not in the mood to talk. The next thing Dallas heard was a sharp pop. In an instant, Dallas found himself behind Victor and the rest of the Solteros, his nerves feeling raw, as if bare and exposed to the air. His senses scrambled, his shoes gone, he looked up at Victor, who still had the gun in his hand, smoke leaving the chamber.

"What the fuck...?" Dallas whispered. The Solteros looked just as shocked, spinning around to locate him. When they saw him behind them, they didn't waste time trying to understand what had happened. They drew their guns and aimed at him.

Dallas didn't think. His body ignited with a sensation he'd never felt before. He could feel the wind tugging on his skin, like ropes trying to tie him down, but his legs churned with raw,

instinctual power, unrelenting. His muscles thrummed, every fiber stretching and contracting with machine-like precision, operating far beyond anything human.

His body surged forward, but his mind struggled to catch up. His vision blurred as the world turned into streaks of light—the cars, the lights, the people, even the ground and sky became fleeting images. His feet barely touched the ground before lifting off again with each step. For a moment, he felt completely out of control—his arms and legs were moving before he could even decide why or where.

His heart raced, not from exertion, but from sheer awe. He tried to make sense of what he was seeing, but the world seemed to drag behind him, as if he were cutting through reality itself. For the first time, Dallas felt truly complete.

-

Dallas woke up the next morning to his older brother, Rome, shaking his entire body furiously. “WAKE UP GOD DAMN IT”. Dallas struggled to open his eyes, he felt exhausted. “It's 5pm dude, wake up.” Rome walked out of Dallas' room and Valencia poked her head in. “Get up and eat your breakfast, you're coming with us today.”

-

TO BE CONTINUED IN ISSUE 2.