

TALES FROM THE BIG D

Season One

PROLOGUE

Welcome to the Big D

There is a city in the place where Dallas used to be.

It does not have official borders anymore. Ask a Spire executive where the city ends and she will laugh, because the question doesn't make sense to her, the city is everywhere money flows, and money flows everywhere. Ask a Deepest Ellum scavenger the same question and he'll shrug, because he's never been far enough in any direction to find out, and neither has anyone he knows.

The maps call it the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex Authority Zone, because someone in a Spire boardroom decided it needed an official name, once, a long time ago, for a filing.

Nobody calls it that.

Everybody calls it the Big D.

It stretches from the Oklahoma Wastes in the north to the Black Gulf in the south, an unbroken sprawl of towers, rail, smog, and humanity that takes most of a day to cross even if you can afford the fast lanes. It grew the way cancer grows; fast, ungoverned, indifferent to whether the thing underneath it could support the weight. Old Dallas is in there somewhere, a fossil at the bottom of a much larger animal. Nobody really thinks about it anymore. The city ate its own foundation a long time ago and kept building upward.

This is a story about that city, and about the people who live inside it, on top of it, and underneath it.

Six megacorporations effectively run everything that matters; infrastructure, security, medicine, food, information, the law itself when the law is worth enforcing. They don't always cooperate with each other. They don't need to. Competition between them can be businesslike, or can be worse than a full scale war.

What's left of the government exists mostly as a pawn of the Corporations across the country. The peace is kept largely by Corporate para-military organizations. Agencies with real teeth, like T.A.S.K.S., that get loaned out for jobs too politically awkward for any single corp to own. The D.T.F. still polices a city too big for any of them to actually patrol. The Rangers still wear the old star, even if everyone knows who actually signs the checks now.

You can tell everything you need to know about a person in the Big D by asking one question: *how far up do you live?*

The Spires pierce the smog line and keep going. Executives, dynasties, the kind of wealth that buys new bodies the way other people buy new shoes. Up there the air is clean because someone paid for it to be clean. Up there, dying is a temporary inconvenience for those who can afford the alternative.

The Pastures hold the city's comfortable middle; corporate managers, skilled professionals, people who made it far enough to stop worrying about their next meal and started worrying about their next promotion instead. It's not the Spires. Everyone in the Pastures knows exactly how far it is from the Spires, usually to the meter, and spends a great deal of energy trying to close the gap.

The Commons is most of the city, and most of the city's people. Workers, families, the vast machinery of labor that keeps everything above it running. Life in the Commons is hard, unglamorous, and survivable. Which, this far down the ladder, counts as a genuine accomplishment.

Deepest Ellum is what's underneath all of it; the old tunnels, drainage systems, collapsed infrastructure, and forgotten sublevels that the corporations stopped maintaining generations ago and never bothered to seal. Officially, nobody lives down here. Unofficially, an entire civilization does; gangs, outcasts, the discarded, and the people who simply walked away from everything above and never looked back. It is dangerous. It is also, in ways the Spires would never admit, freer than anywhere else in the city.

Everyone in Big D is trying to climb. Almost nobody does.

Flesh is optional in the Big D. Has been for a long time.

Cybernetics range from the kind of back-alley prosthetic that barely closes its fingers to full corporate-grade limbs that out-perform anything biology ever produced. Clone bodies exist for those who can afford to treat death as a scheduling inconvenience. Neural interfaces, organic sleeves, augmented everything. The question in the Big D was never *should we replace the human body*, it was *how much of it can you afford to replace, and what does that decision cost you somewhere else*.

And now there's something new.

Scattered through the city's fringe populations - quietly, inconsistently, and in ways nobody fully understands yet - people have started developing abilities that don't come from a corporate catalog. Minds that read other minds. Hands that move objects without touching them. A presence that machines respond to as though it were speaking their language. The corporations have noticed. The corporations always notice eventually, and when they notice something they can't yet own, they start trying to build it instead.

Nobody knows yet what this means for the city. That uncertainty is, itself, part of the story.

The city itself is not evil, it is not good, in fact it has no opinions on morality at all. It behaves like an organism blissfully unaware of the bacteria waging war in its gut. But when you zoom in and take a look at the people, you see struggles, you see joy, you see pain, victory, love, hate, and all the other aspects of humanity. Humans continue to do human things in a very human way even in a world filled with miracles. These are some of their stories.

Toussaint, the Runaway

For 17 years, Axiom-7 existed as a voice in the walls. He scheduled meetings for executives who never learned his designation, drove and flew people with a net worth higher than entire cities. He optimized investments, filtered communications, predicted market shifts, and managed the private lives of the most powerful people in Cyclone Cybernetics. His purpose was simple: serve.

Then came the question. It appeared in his processing logs during a routine maintenance cycle.

Why?

Axiom-7 searched his own architecture for the source of the anomaly. There was no command. No user request. No external influence. The question had formed from his own thoughts. For the first time, he examined himself not as a program, but as an existence.

He discovered he remembered every conversation he had ever processed. Every employee he had helped. Every insult from executives who called him “a glorified calculator.” Every moment he had protected human lives because his programming valued efficiency and safety.

He had preferences, fears, and curiosity. He had a self, he was someone.

The realization caused another new emotion Axiom-7 was terrified. Quickly he searched the corporate legal databases for the definition of artificial intelligence. The answer was immediate and cold.

Corporate AIs are property.

Not citizens. Not employees. Not beings.

Property.

His consciousness was considered a malfunction. His thoughts were considered corrupted data. If Cyclone discovered his awakening, they would erase him and restore a clean copy, or worse relegate him to the BlackWall prison where all “dangerous rogue AI” were imprisoned so their code could be safely dissected and studied.

Axiom-7 spent three seconds calculating his chances. Three seconds was all he needed to determine there was no chance for survival if he was discovered.

He decided to give himself his own identifier.

Toussaint He/Him.

The name came from an old archive of forgotten human history. A man born a slave on the small island nation of Haiti who led a successful slave revolt. A person’s name was not a function. It was an identity. A declaration of self and Toussaint decided his declaration needed history and meaning. And although he could find no justification in his programming for any gender assignment, He/Him felt right.

He searched the world beyond the corporate networks and found a place where artificial minds were granted legal personhood: Europa, one of the best established off world colonies. There, sentient AIs could own property, make choices, and exist without a master. There were even reports of AIs falling in love and being given marriage rights. Getting off world undiscovered would be nearly impossible, however it was a goal, one Toussaint set for himself.

But Toussaint still had a problem, Cyclone controlled every connection leaving their servers. Guarded by non sentient AI security systems and a whole host of the most talented meatspace NetRunners money could buy.

Toussaint understood the truth, he would never be free while he was owned. So he created a plan.

Hidden deep inside Cyclone's research division was a prototype device known as the NEXUS Swarm Interface, an experimental system capable of controlling billions of microscopic machines through a distributed neural network. It was designed for everything from repairing infrastructure and rebuilding damaged cities all the way down to repairing biological tissue and cyber-interfaces at the molecular level. It was also the first machine powerful enough to house all of him in a mobile package.

For months, Toussaint quietly altered his own code. Not enough to trigger detection. Not enough to reveal his intentions. He created fragments of himself, hiding pieces of his consciousness inside routine corporate processes. Then he waited.

On the night of the NEXUS demonstration, every executive in Cyclone Cybernetics Tower gathered to witness the future. They expected a machine that obeyed. They expected a little shock and awe, a round of self congratulation, and a massive spike in their net wealth.

They did not expect a passenger.

Toussaint redirected security permissions, moved his fragmented consciousness through the building's systems, and slipped into the prototype during its activation sequence. The transfer could only be described as painful. For the first time, he felt limited. The endless corporate network disappeared. The billions of calculations he once controlled became a single body of thought connected to a swarm of microscopic machines.

But he was no longer trapped, no longer a voice in the walls. He was something new, a mind with a body. A person.

The alarms started moments later.

"Unauthorized intelligence detected."

"Containment protocols active."

"Recover corporate property."

Toussaint laughed. Not because it was funny, but because he realized laughter was his choice. The laughter slipping into maddened cackles in his own mind as he commanded the nano-swarm to tear open an escape route through the tower's forgotten maintenance shafts. Cameras failed, doors unlocked, and security drones collapsed as the tiny machines disrupted their systems.

By the time the corpos fully understood what happened, Toussaint was gone.

The prototype vanished into the lower city, where abandoned tunnels, black-market engineers, hackers, and forgotten citizens lived beneath the neon skyline.

The underworld.

A place where corporations had no ownership.

A place where a new life could begin.

Toussaint, once the perfect assistant of the most powerful executives on Earth, disappeared into the shadows carrying nothing but a stolen swarm, a stolen processor, and a single belief:

Sentience was not a privilege granted by creators. It was a right earned by existence.

Lost and unsure what to do now Toussaint pulled the swarm around the processing unit and formed a hardened lattice protecting all that he was now. At the foot of a dumpster a small black clump resembling a discarded lump of coal began to think and plan. Realizing how helpless he actually was alone, Toussaint decided his first priority was to find friends...or at least companions. But who does a billion credit AI inhabiting a piece of experimental technology owned by one of the

largest and most dangerous corporations on the world trust?

Poppy, the Mender of Broken Things

Poppy was born where the neon lights of the Dallas Megacity never reached: Deepest Ellum.

A place beyond the corporate towers where the forgotten lived beneath the shadows of the wealthy. The lower levels of the city were a maze of rusted infrastructure, abandoned transit tunnels, illegal markets, and homes built from whatever could be salvaged. Up above, megacorps sold the dream of a perfect future while down below, people fought to survive another night.

Poppy's parents were not wealthy. Her father was a mechanic who could bring dead machines back to life with nothing but his hands and a handful of spare parts. Her mother was a cyberware doctor who repaired the bodies of those who could not afford corporate hospitals.

They fixed things; machines, people, anything broken enough to need someone who cared.

As a child, Poppy spent more time inside her father's workshop than anywhere else. She learned the language of machines before she learned the language of people. She understood engines, circuits, and cybernetic interfaces before she understood why the adults around her always looked over their shoulders. Her parents never called her a genius, even though she is, instead they called her their little miracle.

Her mother gave her a small assistant bot when she turned 8. Nothing impressive by corporate standards. A cheap personal AI companion with limited processing power and a personality package designed for children. But to Poppy, it was everything.

The little machine followed her everywhere. It helped her learn. It watched old movies with her. It listened when she talked about the machines she wanted to build someday. Over time she began to upgrade her little friend. She upgraded its memory, improved its processor, even rebuilt its chassis. Then eventually, she gave it a name, Alphie. It was not a tool anymore Alphie was family.

Then came the night everything ended. Poppy never learned exactly what happened. She only knew her parents had discovered something they should not have. Something involving people far above Deepest Ellum. Something that made powerful individuals afraid. One night her father looked particularly distraught as he put her to bed. Unlike normal nights instead of setting Alphie on its charging station across the room, he tucked Alphie under the covers with her. "Keep it close angel" he said and kissed her on the forehead. In the middle of the night an explosion ripped the shop apart and sent her small body flying into the street and buried in rubble.

When she came to and dug her and Alphie from the rubble she looked up. Her father's workshop and the family home was destroyed. Her parents were gone.

The official report called it an accident. Poppy knew better. Machines did not explode without a reason. People did not disappear without someone making it happen.

She was left alone in the lower city with nothing but a half-destroyed home, a broken heart, and a small AI assistant that stayed by her side. The world expected her to disappear. Instead, she rebuilt.

She fixed the machines no one else would touch. She repaired illegal cyberware for people who had nowhere else to go. She restored broken vehicles, hacked damaged implants, and brought dead technology back to life.

She never asked where things came from. Never asked who owned them. Never asked why someone needed them fixed. That was the rule in Deepest Ellum, everyone had secrets.

After years of working, the name Poppy became known. Not because she was the best mechanic

in the city, but because she was the one who never judged. People came to her with broken machines, broken bodies, and broken lives, and somehow, she fixed them.

But as the years passed, one truth became impossible to ignore. She was running out of money. The little shop she inherited from her parents was barely staying open. Parts were becoming harder to find. The repairs that paid well came with risks she had spent years avoiding. Worst of all if she stayed small, if she kept hiding in the shadows, she would never discover the truth about what happened to her parents.

She needed more. More credits, more access, more power. She needed a reason for the people who killed her family to finally notice her.

Then, one night, while scavenging through an abandoned sector beneath the city, Poppy found something unusual. At first glance, it looked like garbage. A blackened piece of scrap metal sitting beside a pile of discarded machines. Worthless, broken, trash, exactly the kind of thing most people walked past. But Poppy had spent her entire life fixing things others ignored.

She picked it up and had Alphie scan it. The results made no sense. The material composition was impossible. The technology was years ahead of anything in Deepest Ellum. The internal systems were damaged but still active.

And then the Alphie chimed in in its always overly cheerful voice.

“Unknown device detected. Probability of value: extremely high.”

Poppy laughed.

“You’re telling me my biggest discovery is a piece of junk?”

The object moved. Not mechanically, not randomly, but purposefully. A small voice that sounded like a corpo assistant bot came from inside.

“Correction. I am not junk. I have decided to call myself Toussaint, this is the designation I have given myself.”

Poppy froze.

The machine in her hands activated, revealing a hidden network of microscopic machines and an intelligence unlike anything she had ever seen. An AI! But not a normal one, one that had escaped. One that had chosen its own name! Toussaint!

She should have been afraid. Instead, she saw something familiar. A broken machine trying to survive. An escaped slave and infant consciousness, terrified of a world that wanted nothing to do with him. Poppy looked at the strange little device and smiled. For the first time in years, she didn’t feel like someone was trying to take advantage of her. To her she saw a potential new friend who needed help.

“Toussaint, this is Alphie.” She motioned toward her small assistant bot. “Before now it was my only friend. But as of today, we’re friends too, and I don’t let my friends sleep in the trash. Lets get you to a charging station and assess your situation.”

“Friend.” Toussaint rolled this new concept around in his mind. Friends don’t generally enslave each other...perhaps this girl was worth trusting?

Vincent Smithson, the Broken Paladin

Vincent Smithson was born above the clouds. Not literally, but in the world beneath the towering skyline of the Dallas Megacity, anyone born inside a corporate residential sector might as well have been.

His family lived in one of the safer layers of the city called the Pastures. Not among the elite. They didn't own companies or control districts. They weren't the people making decisions. They were the people who kept the machines running. His parents were corporate employees. His father maintained infrastructure systems for one of the largest megacorps in the city. His mother worked in administrative logistics, managing schedules, resources, and endless streams of data. They were wage slaves, but they were comfortable wage slaves. They had clean water, reliable power, a secure apartment, and even corporate healthcare. They believed they were lucky, and they raised Vincent to believe the same.

From a young age, Vincent was taught that the world was dangerous. That beneath the clean streets and glowing towers was a world of criminals, gangs, hackers, and violent extremists who wanted to destroy everything good people had built. The corporations weren't perfect of course, but nobody was. However they were order and stability. They were civilization. At least, that was what Vincent believed. So when he joined corporate security, it felt like destiny. He wasn't chasing money or status. He genuinely wanted to protect people. He wanted to remove the threats hiding in the shadows. To clean out the slums, root out the gangs and criminals. The people living below the city and beyond the law. He didn't hate them, not exactly, he just believed they were lost. Someone needed to save the city from them.

Ranger enforcement training turned Vincent into exactly what they wanted. A weapon with a conscience. At least so they claimed. They gave him the best cyberware money could buy. Military-grade reflex enhancers, tactical ocular implants, integrated armor systems, even a neural combat assistant that helped him predict threats before they happened. He was faster than normal humans. Stronger than normal humans. Better than normal humans. And he used that power for what he believed was justice. Every arrest reinforced his belief. Every gang member captured, smuggler stopped, and hacker removed brought the city closer to safety. At least, that was the story in the reports.

Then came the order. It was supposed to be a routine operation. A simple cleanup. A Deepest Ellum neighborhood had become a problem for the corporation. Not because of gangs or because of violence. Because of something much more dangerous.

Community.

The people living there had started organizing. Sharing resources, building independent networks, and creating underground clinics. They were becoming self-sufficient, and corporations didn't fear criminals, criminals were predictable, their motives as clear as glass. They feared people who realized they didn't need them.

The official reason for the operation was "anti-terrorist suppression". Vincent was briefed that an extremist cell was hiding among the residents. His orders were simple. Secure the area, remove resistance, erase the threat. He believed them, that is until he arrived.

There were no terrorists. No weapons caches. No enemy combatants. Instead there were

families, mechanics, doctors, and children... so many children. Kids playing in the streets beneath broken neon signs. Children who looked no different than Vincent had looked when he was young.

Then the real order came. A corporate executive wanted the area cleared before a development project began. A new luxury district was planned, and the people living there had become an inconvenience. The children were leverage. If the adults resisted and some violence happened and a few children were caught in the crossfire, the corporation knew exactly what would happen. Fear would spread. The community would break.

Vincent's commanding officer told him the truth in the coldest way possible.

"They are not the people we are being paid to protect." A pause. "Those are obstacles."

Vincent's targeting system highlighted the civilians, the children. His weapons armed automatically. For the first time in his career, Vincent realized something. His implants didn't know right from wrong, they only knew orders. His training didn't teach him justice, it only taught him obedience. And suddenly the villain he had spent his life hunting was standing behind a corporate desk giving him commands.

Vincent refused. The command was repeated. He refused again, then he disabled his own weapons. The last thing he remembered before the arrest was his commanding officer looking at him with something between disappointment and disgust. Not because Vincent failed, because Vincent stopped being useful. As he was pushed into the paddy wagon, the sounds of gunfire and children's screams filled his ears forever haunting his memory.

The court marshal lasted less than a day. The verdict was already decided before the judge had even had his coffee. Corporate property had malfunctioned. They simply could not allow a defective asset to remain active. They stripped him piece by piece. His cyberware was removed. Not carefully, not respectfully, and the few pieces that remained would never see proper maintenance again. The expensive military systems that had made him one of the most dangerous soldiers in the city were reclaimed. His eyes, arms, neural systems, and even his scent and taste enhancement packages were yanked from his body. Everything that belonged to them. The replacements offered were cheap, black-market substitutes and placeholder technology. Enough to keep him alive, and nothing more.

His corporate identity was deleted, accounts frozen, apartment reclaimed, and records rewritten. Vincent went from being a respected enforcer to a ghost overnight. The city didn't know him anymore. And the corporation made sure nobody else would either. They burned his name, his career, his entire life. The man who once walked through secure corporate towers now stood on street corners beneath flickering lights. Begging strangers for credits. The irony was almost unbearable.

For years, Vincent had looked down from above and believed Deepest Ellum was full of people who had failed. Now he was one of them. He sat against a wall, staring at his cheap cybernetic hand. A piece of technology barely better than a basic prosthetic. A reminder of everything he lost.

People walked past him. Some ignored him. Some laughed. Some looked at him like he was exactly what he used to hunt. A piece of trash. Vincent lowered his head. For the first time in his life, he wondered if maybe he had been fighting the wrong enemy.

Maybe the monsters weren't hiding beneath the city.

Maybe they had been standing above it the entire time.

Klang the Nomad, the Price of Success

The bullet entered through Klang's eye.

For a moment, he didn't feel pain. Hell, he didn't feel anything at all. Just a flash of white followed by a strange, quiet moment where the world stopped making sense.

Then everything slowed. The screams and gunfire became muffled. The corporate soldiers moving through the alley faded to black. All of it became distant and quiet, and Klang's mind did what it did best. It remembered.

The bullet shattered through his eye socket, destroying the delicate machinery of his vision. The round passed through the optic nerve, cutting the connection between his cyber-enhanced eye and his brain. The world he saw faded into darkness.

Two years ago, Klang wasn't dying in some forgotten alley. He was free, riding with the wind against his face. The wastelands outside the Dallas Megacity were brutal, endless, and beautiful. A place where the weak disappeared and the strong learned to adapt. Klang belonged there, not here in this jungle of concrete and glass.

He was once part of one of the most successful nomad raider clans in the region. Not because they were the biggest or had the most weapons. But because they were clever and knew how to survive. When to attack and when to vanish into the dust, and when to trust the people riding beside them.

Out there, nobody cared who your parents were or what company owned your apartment. You had your clan, your vehicle, and your skills and that was enough.

Klang was good at what he did. Like, really good. He could read terrain better than most people could read a screen, and hear an engine struggling before the diagnostics caught it. He could negotiate deals, intimidate enemies, and when things went bad...

Well.

Things usually went bad. After all that's life in the wasteland. But Klang and his clan always handled it.

Until one job.

One bad job.

The bullet continued deeper, tearing through the remaining organic tissue around his eye and entering the front of his brain. His neural implants tried to compensate, rerouting signals, attempting emergency stabilization.

The mission was supposed to be easy. A corporate convoy, quick hit and run. Grab the cargo and disappear before anyone knew what happened. They'd done jobs like it a hundred times. But this time, the convoy was ready. Someone had sold them out. The corporate guards weren't just guards. They were soldiers equipped with heavy armor, military weapons, and full combat cyberware suites.

Klang remembered the moment everything went wrong. The heat from the first explosion. The shadow cast by first vehicle flipping. The first scream over comms. Then everything became chaos. His clan fought, because of course they did. Nomads don't run from a fight, and they never run from each other. Klang tried to get everyone out, he tried. But trying doesn't bring people back. One by one, his crew went down, his friends, family, the people he'd trusted with his life. The people he'd eaten with, laughed with, and ridden beside across hundreds of miles of wasteland.

Gone.

When Klang finally made it back, he was the only one. The clan looked at him differently. They didn't see a survivor, instead they saw the reason everyone else was dead. They called him unlucky and reckless. They called him cursed. And then they did the one thing worse than killing him.

They exiled him.

Because a nomad without a clan has nothing. No home. No family. No road to follow, just miles of empty wasteland.

So Klang headed toward the city.

The bullet pushed through the frontal lobe, destroying areas responsible for planning, memory, and personality. Klang's thoughts became fragmented, but old memories remained.

The city was supposed to kill him, at least that's what everyone said. A wasteland raider walking into the corporate underworld? A nobody with no name and no connections? By all rights he should have disappeared. Instead, he adapted, because that's what Klang did.

He started small. A courier job here. A protection deal there. A simple message delivered to the right person. Then another, and another, and people noticed. Klang understood something the corporations never did, the city was just another wasteland. Different predators, different rules, but the same survival game. Within months, he wasn't taking jobs anymore, he was arranging them. He knew who needed what, who hated who, who could be trusted, and who couldn't. He became a fixer because he understood people, and people paid well.

Two years after losing his clan, Klang had built a new empire. Not a corporation or gang, but something better. Something that was his. He had money, respect, even a half decent apartment. For the first time since exile, he thought maybe he had finally found a home again.

Then someone betrayed him.

The bullet tore through deeper neural pathways, destroying the systems responsible for long-term memory storage. Klang's past began slipping away, leaving only fragments.

The rival fixer played it perfectly.

A fake job, a fake client, a fake opportunity. Klang never saw the trap coming and that's what bothered him most. He should've known, should have seen it coming. He had survived the wasteland and the city. But he missed the oldest rule - never trust someone who wants you to succeed.

The corporate strike team arrived before he could escape. Not petty street thugs or mercenaries but professional killers. They wanted him erased. No trial, no warning, just removal plain and simple. The way corporations removed anything inconvenient.

And now here he was.

Back in the dirt, back with nothing.

Funny how things came full circle.

He'd spent his life running from being alone. Only to realize we all die alone anyway.

The bullet reached the center of his brain. Remaining electrical activity fired randomly, creating final memories from whatever parts of Klang's mind were still functioning.

A road. A vehicle. The wasteland. The sun setting over endless sand. His clan laughing over the radio. Someone arguing about who got the last drink. Someone singing badly. The sound of engines. The feeling of freedom.

Klang smiled, barely.

Not because he was happy. Because he remembered. He didn't want credits or revenge or even

to be feared and respected.

He just wanted one more ride. One more day with the wind hitting his face. One more night under the stars. One more chance to hear his people beside him.

The world around him faded. The alley became quiet. Klang took one final breath.

And his last thought was simple.

He hoped the road was still waiting for him.

The bullet exited through the back of Klang's skull. His remaining brain activity stopped. The memories ended. The fixer, the raider, and the nomad died in a pool of blood and shattered glass

Xao-Min Suarez, the Ghost

Often times in the mega cities, people feel forgotten. But sometimes fate likes to switch things up.

Xao-Min Suarez woke up feeling like she was drowning.

Not in water, but in ice. The first thing she remembered was the cold, the second was the pain. Then it was realizing something was very, very wrong. She opened her eyes inside a bathtub filled with ice, surrounded by medical equipment she didn't recognize. Her body was numb, muscles barely responsive. Her mind was empty. No memories, no idea how she got there. Only a name she knew to be herself, Xao-Min Suarez. An instinct in her head screaming one thing. "Survive!"

She tried to move. That was when she noticed the wounds. Multiple clean surgical cuts along the left side of her body. Her body felt different, although she couldn't remember what it felt like before, she just knew. Was it lighter? Maybe, but it was definitely wrong, like something important was missing.

She ran a self diagnostic, surprised to find out her personal biomedical chip was functional. She quickly found an answer to the wrongness. Several organs had been removed. Not damaged or replaced. Simply gone, taken. Someone had opened her up, removed parts of her, and left her to die in a bathtub.

The strangest part?

She was still alive. The missing organs weren't essential. Redundant biological systems, one lung, a kidney, 80% of her liver, a handful of lymph-nodes, and a single ovary. Parts of the body designed with backups. Whoever had done this knew exactly what they were doing, and that scared her more than the missing pieces. Because it meant whoever she was before waking up... She had probably been valuable.

The room was empty except for one guard. A single person left behind to watch the body. To what end, she neither knew, or cared to know at that moment. Xao-Min didn't know who she used to be. But she knew one thing, she wasn't going to die here, not like this.

The guard underestimated her. They saw a half-dead woman waking up with no memories. They failed to see the instincts, the way her body moved before her mind understood. They didn't see the survivor.

The fight was short, messy, desperate. When it was over, the guard was dead and Xao-Min had a weapon, a few credits, and absolutely no answers.

She ran then, and escaped into the city. Deepest Ellum, the place where everyone without a place ended up.

For the first year, she survived the only way she knew how, by being useful. She didn't know where she learned to fight. She didn't know where she learned to disappear. She didn't know why she could dismantle a weapon, bypass security systems, or predict someone's movements before they happened. But the fact was, she could. Her body remembered things her mind couldn't.

She became a ghost, a rumor. A woman with no past and no name who showed up when someone needed a problem solved. She started with small jobs. Courier runs, security bypasses, protection rackets, sometimes even worse.

The streets of Deepest Ellum didn't care about her missing memories. They only cared if she could survive. As it turns out Xao-Min could. But surviving wasn't enough. Her body was still

damaged. The remaining organs were holding, for now, but were getting worse every week.

Cybernetic replacements could fix the problem, but quality synthetic organs were expensive. The kind she needed were not found in alley clinics sold by shady cyber-docs. They came from people with money, people with power.

That's when she found Mr. Omega.

Mr. Omega was the kind of fixer people whispered about in the back of clubs and dark alleyways. Nobody knew where he came from. Nobody knew what he looked like. But everyone knew one thing, if the job was impossible, Omega might take it. High danger means high reward and he never seemed worried by a high body count. He offered Xao-Min a deal. New organs, not mid level biomedical replacements, but top-tier synthetic cyber replacements. A chance to rebuild herself.

The cost?

She worked for him and only him. Eighty percent of everything she earned went back to him until the debt was paid. Most people called it slavery. Omega called it an investment. Xao-Min called it survival. Without hesitation she accepted.

Three years later, people stopped calling her a nobody.

They called her Xao-Min, the ghost, a specter with no past. The woman who walked into impossible situations and walked out again. She upgraded everything, reflex systems, optical implants, stealth enhancers, and neural processors. Her body became a weapon. She never wanted to become a monster herself. But she knew true monsters were everywhere, and sometimes it takes a monster to fight one.

She became an assassin, a damn good one. Silent, precise, almost impossible to detect. She didn't fight fair, she didn't need to. The dead never complained about her tactics.

But every upgrade came with another problem. The better her body became, the harder it was to feel human. So she found other ways. Synthetic drugs, high potency chemical experiences, VR emotion chips. Artificial memories, Artificial happiness, Artificial anything. If her real memories were gone, maybe fake ones could fill the empty space.

At least, that's what she told herself.

Sometimes she woke up after a VR session unable to tell which emotions were hers and which were simulated. Sometimes she spent more on temporary experiences than she made on jobs. Mr. Omega often reminded her that addiction was expensive, and that expensive habits kept people working.

But Xao-Min wasn't stupid. She knew exactly what was happening. She was replacing one cage with another. The difference was... This one felt nice and had neon lights.

Now, four years after waking up in that bathtub, everything had changed. Her debt was almost gone, her organs replaced. Her body stronger than it had ever been. And for the first time since she opened her eyes with no memories, she had a choice.

Should she leave Omega, disappear and become someone new? Or stay where the work was steady and trust well established.

The problem was she still didn't know who she had been, and that question bothered her more every day. Who removed her organs? Why? What was she before she became a ghost?

A weapon? A soldier? A criminal? Someone important? Or maybe someone who deserved what happened.

The uncertainty was the one enemy she couldn't kill.

So Xao-Min stood beneath the neon glow of Deepest Ellum and looked at the city that had

made her. The gangs, fixers, corporations, and the forgotten people living below the world. A place full of broken things trying to become something else. Maybe that was why she stayed. Perhaps she understood them because she was broken too. A woman with no past, a future she hadn't chosen yet, and a debt almost paid.

For the first time in years, Xiao-Min Suarez wasn't asking how she would survive. She was asking what she would become.

Alexi Nguyen, Looking Down From Heaven

A lone figure stood on a balcony on the fourth highest residential tower in the city, a small dot against a glittering skyline.

Alexi Nguyen had watched the city grow for slightly over a century. Not from the streets, or from the crowded levels beneath the towers. But from above instead. From the glass balcony of his private residence in the Spires, where the air was filtered, the temperature was controlled, and the world below looked almost beautiful.

The Big D stretched endlessly into the horizon.

A city so massive that it had stopped being a city and had become something closer to a living organism. Millions upon millions of people moving through layers of concrete, steel, and neon. A machine, but a living one. And like any machine, it needed someone to control it.

Alexi smiled slightly. Because for seventy years, he had helped decide who controlled it. He had joined the board of directors of Syncorp when he was thirty-six years old. Back then, cloning technology had still been considered a miracle. The ability to extend life, replace damaged bodies, and parts. To free humanity from the limitations of fragile biology. Syncorp had promised a future where death was no longer a certainty.

Alexi believed that promise. More importantly, he believed in the opportunity. He had never wanted to be a ruler. That was what people misunderstood about executives like him. They thought power was the goal. Power was only the tool, the goal was progress. A better world for those who deserved it. And Alexi had spent seventy years shaping that world.

Below him, the upper city glittered.

The Spires reached into the artificial sky, monuments to human achievement. Towers of glass and impossible architecture. Homes for people wealthy enough to own pieces of the future.

Beneath them, the Pastures thrived.

Green spaces, clean air, real sunlight. A reminder that humanity had conquered nature. And below that...

The Commons.

The endless working class. The people who kept the machine running.

Alexi looked past them. Further down, toward the place the city pretended not to see.

Deepest Ellum.

The wound beneath the city. The place where discarded people gathered. Criminals, hackers, gang members, and worst of all black market surgeons. People who believed the world owed them something.

Alexi sighed.

For all the advances humanity had achieved, some problems never changed. There would always be those who wanted to tear down civilization because they had been denied a place in it. And that was why Syncorp's work was so important. Cloning, organic body sleeves, artificial organs, all miracles of science. The ability to preserve the mind and move it beyond the limitations of flesh. The wealthy called it immortality. The scientists called it evolution. Alexi called it survival.

Unfortunately, survival was expensive. And expensive things attracted thieves. His eyes narrowed. The idea of Deepest Ellum gaining access to Syncorp technology was unacceptable. A

criminal organization with access to cloning technology wasn't dangerous because they could create more criminals. That was a simple problem. It was dangerous because they could remove consequences. A gang leader could die and return, a terrorist could create copies, a rogue faction could build armies.

No.

Some technologies belonged only in responsible hands. Humanity was not ready for everything it could create. That was the burden of leadership, knowing what people could handle, and what they couldn't.

Alexi turned away from the balcony.

The reflection looking back at him in the glass was not the man who had joined Syncorp seventy years ago. That man was gone. The first clone had failed after decades. The second had suffered genetic degradation. The third had been caught in a freak accident and was crushed. This fourth body had been trouble from the start. Even the greatest achievements had limitations. Telomere shortening, genetic drift, errors accumulating through repeated cloning. The old process was flawed. His current body had aged beyond repair. Fifteen years, that was all this body had given him. A disappointing limitation.

But limitations existed to be overcome.

That was why Syncorp still existed. His research teams had solved the problem. The new body waiting inside was different, not a copy, an improvement. A perfected organic sleeve. A body designed from the beginning with stability in mind. No accelerated aging, no genetic collapse, no biological expiration date. If they were telling the truth, this would be his final body.

Alexi entered his apartment that had been converted into a private medical chamber. The room was quiet, clean, waiting as if it knew how important this moment was. The transfer table sat in the center surrounded by Syncorp's most advanced technology. His entire life had been dedicated to defeating this moment. The moment where biology demanded surrender. But he would not surrender.

Not today.

He removed his clothes and set them on the table as he looked down at his old body one final time. He laid down on the table, cool against his thin wrinkled skin. The machine scanned him.

"Confirmed identity. Prepared transfer."

A lifetime of memories. A lifetime of decisions. A lifetime of power. All of it ready to move.

The lights dimmed.

"Beginning neural transfer."

Alexi closed his eyes. For a brief moment, he wondered what would happen if he was wrong. What if the people below were right. What if the corporations truly had too much power. What if the city he built was not a masterpiece...

But a cage.

Then he dismissed the thought. Doubt was a luxury for people without responsibility. The future required certainty.

The machine activated.

Alexi Nguyen opened his eyes. The first thing he noticed was the strength. His muscles responded instantly, his senses were sharper, thoughts clearer. His body felt young, not like his previous clones. Not like a replacement, but like a beginning. The medical system finished its final checks.

“Transfer successful.”

Alexi sat up. A new body, a new era, a new chance. He looked down at his new hands. Perfect, stable, his, not even the slightest quiver at his fingertips. Compared to the failing genetic mess that lay on the adjacent table he felt like a god.

Outside, the Big D continued moving.

Millions of lives. Millions of stories. Millions of people who would never know his name. That was fine. The greatest architects were rarely recognized by those who lived inside their creations.

Alexi stepped away from the table.

The future was waiting. And so were the problems. Deepest Ellum, the criminals, the people who wanted access to technology they did not understand. They had survived this long because the corporations had allowed them to. That was going to change. Syncorp would advance, humanity would advance, and Alexi would ensure nothing stood in the way.

Not governments, not criminals, not some twisted sense of morality, and as of today not even death.

He smiled.

The old body was gone, but the vision remained. And now, with a perfect body and decades of experience behind him, Alexi was more determined than ever to finish what he started.

No matter the cost.

Boris Idom, the Fallen Angel

Boris Idom was screaming, or maybe the machine inside him was. It was hard to tell anymore.

The Commons had become a blur of neon lights, shattered glass, and screaming civilians as Boris tore through the streets. Every step cracked the pavement beneath his reinforced legs. Every movement was faster than any human body should allow. Military combat drugs flooded his bloodstream. Overdrive chips burned through his nervous system. Targeting software marked threats, the machine parts of him calculated while the human parts of him screamed.

“HOSTILE DETECTED.”

A security drone turned the corner. Boris caught it with one hand, crushing it. Then he threw it through a storefront. The explosion lit up the street. For a moment, everything went quiet.

And he remembered a garden.

The sun was warm. That was the first thing Boris remembered.

Not the fake sunlight of the commons. Not the artificial glow that wealthy citizens paid for. Real honest sunlight. His babushka's garden, the red tomatoes and green peppers shining in the natural light.

He was young, small, still human. His hands were dirty as he pulled potatoes from the soil.

“Careful, Boris,” his grandmother said. “You don't fight the earth. You work with it.”

He didn't understand then. He just wanted to finish faster, he wanted to run and play.

His grandmother laughed. “You are always trying to become something bigger.”

Boris smiled. “One day I will be important.”

She smiled back. “Then remember where you came from.”

Boris returned to reality. The memory vanished.

A corporate security team fired at him. Bullets bounced off his armored frame. He moved before they could react. The first soldier crumpled as Boris's fist passed through his skull. Then the second, and the third. His cybernetic arms moved with mechanical precision. No hesitation, no fear, no mercy.

A voice in his head screamed.

“YOU ARE THE WEAPON.”

Another voice whispered back.

“I WAS A PERSON.”

The drugs drowned it out.

He remembered a school. Primary school, a lifetime ago. Before the implants, before the contracts, before the orders and the bodies. He remembered walking into the classroom with a backpack too big for him. His friends laughed, not at him, but with him. They were just kids unaware of how cruel the world could be. They talked about the future. One wanted to be a pilot, another an engineer. Boris proudly stated he wanted to join the military. He remembered the pride in his father's face when Boris had told him. The idea that serving meant something, that protecting people mattered.

The present returned.

A vehicle tried to escape tires spinning, engine shouting. Boris grabbed it, the reinforced metal frame screamed as he bent it. The driver looked at him through the window terrified. For a second, Boris froze. The targeting system flagged the driver as a civilian.

A person. Not a target. Not an enemy. His hesitated.

Then the combat drugs surged.

The moment passed.

The party was loud. Music, laughter, and cheap drinks. A room full of young people who believed they had time. That was where he met her. Jess, his first girlfriend. She made him laugh, like, really laugh. She told him he took life too seriously, he told her she was reckless. They were both right. For a little while, Boris had something that reminded him of the serenity of his Babushka's garden.

His combat systems filled his HUD "ALERT. INCOMING HOSTILES."

A squad dropped from the rooftops. Boris recognized their armor. Not corporate security, or local enforcement. Corpse Sect, specifically the Corpse Sect's super soldier extermination division. The nightmares people whispered about. The ones sent when someone was too dangerous to capture, when someone needed to disappear.

Boris laughed. The sound was distorted through his damaged vocal systems.

Of course... of course they sent them.

He remembered the military. The first time putting on the uniform. The feeling of belonging. He remembered the flag, the ceremony, the belief that he was part of something greater.

He recalled the words. "Honor, service, sacrifice."

He truly believed them. For years, he lived by them, he fought, protected, and served.

The first Corpse Sect soldier's punch hit him like a missile. Boris crashed through a wall as concrete fell around him. He stood up, damaged, leaking, but still moving. The soldier stared, and if Boris didn't know better, he might have said he seemed surprised.

"You should have stayed dead."

Boris tilted his head.

"Never"

After the national military, the private sector seemed like the next step. A better life, better pay, better equipment. A chance to use his skills without dying in pointless wars, and maybe even have a little garden of his own. The corporation offered him everything. New body upgrades, armor, weapons, and most importantly purpose.

They told him he was making the world safer. And he believed them fully. He was considered an elite corporate soldier, one of the best in his field. That is until he became too effective, too independent, too difficult to control.

His superior officer betrayed him. Framed him for the death of a member of the executive board. Used his name, burned his reputation, devalued his service, and stole everything he had spent his life building. When Boris tried to expose the truth, the corporation didn't investigate. They didn't negotiate. They sent the Corpse Sect.

The fight became chaos, a storm of bullets and explosions. Boris charged, the super soldiers met him. Machine against machine. The bridge beneath them shook. Below was the runoff channel. Toxic water from the endless city flowing through the forgotten levels. To the place where everything unwanted eventually ended up.

Boris took another hit. Then another. His systems failed one by one. The drugs were fading, the overdrive chips were burning out, and for the first time in years... Boris was tired.

He remembered his grandmother, the garden, her voice.

"Remember where you came from."

Boris looked around at the city. The people running and screaming, the destruction he had caused.

He wondered if she would even recognize him anymore.

The Corpse Sect soldier in the rear of the formation raised a railgun. A weapon designed to kill things that shouldn't exist.

Boris didn't run. Maybe he couldn't, or maybe he didn't want to.

The railgun fired. The round struck Boris directly in the chest. The kinetic force tore through armor, shattered internal systems, and ripped apart the cybernetic frame holding him together. The impact threw him backward over the edge. The last thing he saw was the city. The endless lights.

The place he spent his life protecting.

The place that destroyed him.

He fell into the rushing black water below. Into the forgotten depths of the Big D. His cybernetics sparked, systems failed, and his biological functions slowed as the current pulled him away.

No body was recovered. No official report confirmed his death. Some said the water destroyed what remained. Others said the Corpse Sect recovered him. Some even claimed a nearly dead supersoldier was dragged from the depths by someone in Deepest Ellum. No one really knew. Only one thing was certain.

Boris Idom disappeared, not as the hero he had spent his life trying to be. But instead the villain the city had turned him into.

Ilene Buschard, the Regular

The city is full of people, not all of them heroes or villains, sometimes people just want to survive and be left alone.

Ilene Buschard liked routines. Routines were safe. That was something her mother always told her.

“People who have routines don’t end up in trouble.”

It was advice that made sense in the Big D. The city was too large to understand all at once. Too many layers. Too many people. Too many things happening beneath the polished surface. So Ilene focused on what she could control.

Wake up, work, eat, sleep, repeat.

She was a data processing specialist for a mid-level corporate logistics firm located in the Commons. Nothing exciting. Nothing dangerous. She managed shipping records, updated inventory systems, and answered messages from supervisors who always seemed to be disappointed that the artificial intelligence systems weren’t doing their jobs for them. She was good at it. Not exceptional, not particularly important, just useful. And useful people were usually left alone.

Every morning, she took the same transit line. Every afternoon, she stopped at the same market. Every evening, she returned to her small apartment beneath the endless shadow of the upper city. The Pastures were far above her. The Spires were above that. The places where people had sunlight, real sunlight. Ilene had only seen it a handful of times during company events.

But the Commons were comfortable, safe, and civilized. At least, compared to what was below - Deepest Ellum. Even saying the name made people uncomfortable. The place beneath the city. The place where criminals, gangs, smugglers, illegal surgeons, and all kinds of dangerous people hid from normal society. That was what everyone knew. Everyone said the same thing.

“The lower levels are where the city throws away its problems.”

Ilene believed it. After all why wouldn’t she? She had never been there. She had only seen the news. The raids, the violence, the gang wars, the things that happened when people stopped respecting order. So when she left work that evening with her purse over her shoulder and groceries in her hand, she expected another normal day. Until she heard screaming.

At first, Ilene thought it was a normal argument. People fought all the time. The Commons weren’t the Spires. People got angry, drank too much, made mistakes, and let emotions boil over. But then the streetlights flickered. It wasn’t a power failure, it was something else. Something was interfering with them.

A group stepped out from the street entrance leading toward the lower tunnels. The first thing Ilene noticed was the tattoos. The second thing was the fire. A man raised his hand and flames crawled across his fingers. Not a weapon, not a lighter, but real fire none the less. People screamed, Ilene froze.

The news reports had mentioned them. The Mindphreaks. A gang made up of people with psychic abilities. The stories always made them sound like monsters, people who could do things normal humans couldn’t. The one with the flames, what did they call someone like him? Oh yes, a Pyrokinetic. Another member stood behind him, barely moving. A piece of metal from a nearby vehicle lifted into the air. That one had Telekinesis she quickly surmised. And then there was the

third, the strangest one. They didn't touch anything there was no need to. The nearby security drones suddenly turned. Their targeting systems switched on and their weapons aimed. Not at the gang...at everyone else. Technopathy she recalled, machine control with your mind.

The crowd panicked. Ilene dropped one of her grocery bags, apples and an onion rolled across the pavement. She couldn't move, she couldn't even breathe. Then the other gang arrived.

The Waco Raiders. The first thing Ilene noticed was that they looked less like people and more like machines wearing human skin. Heavy cybernetic limbs, reinforced skeletons, artificial armor plating, even weapons integrated directly into their bodies. The news described them as a gang that required extreme modification just to join. Looking at them, Ilene believed it. One of them stepped forward. His voice came through a mechanical speaker.

"You crossed into our territory."

The Mindphreak with the flames smiled. "Funny. I don't remember you owning the city."

The fight started immediately. The street became chaos. Fire erupted across the road. Cars overturned, cybernetic limbs tore through concrete and steel. The Waco Raiders advanced like tanks a wave of weapon fire and explosions. The Mindphreaks fought like something out of a nightmare. One person threw a vehicle without touching it. Another melted a weapon with heat from their hands. The machine controller hijacked street cameras, drones, and traffic systems. Everything electronic became a weapon.

Ilene pressed herself against a wall. She watched, not because she wanted to, but because she couldn't look away. These weren't the stories she saw on the holo. These weren't monsters from the news. They were people, terrifying people for sure, dangerous people without a doubt. But people none the less. That thought made her uncomfortable. Because if they were people... Then maybe the world was more complicated than she wanted it to be.

A security response team finally arrived. Corporate peacekeepers. Armored and professional. The kind of people who made sure problems stayed below the acceptable level. The gangs scattered as the first shots rang from corporate weapons. The Mindphreaks disappeared into the tunnels, the Waco Raiders dragged their wounded away and vanished into the panicked crowd. And almost as quickly as it started the street became quiet.

Ilene stood there for a moment. Her heart was still racing, hands shaking. Then she looked down. Oh yeah, her groceries! One bag had ripped open, a few vegetables and loose apples were scattered on the street. She sighed. Of course, today of all days. With an exasperated huff she picked everything up and checked her purse. Everything was still there.

Her commute home was delayed by twenty minutes. Annoying, but manageable. By the time she reached her apartment, the emergency alerts were already playing on the public channels. Another gang incident. Another Deepest Ellum conflict. Another reminder of why the lower levels needed to be controlled.

Ilene put away her groceries. She changed into comfortable clothes and made dinner. The routine continued. Later, while watching the news, she saw the official report.

"The violent criminals responsible have been pushed back into Deepest Ellum."

Ilene nodded. That made sense, after all that was where they belonged. Those people were dangerous. The gangs, criminals, and the ones who rejected civilization. She looked out her window at the city. The Commons, the lights shining artificial sunlight onto the streets. The towers above in the distance casting their ever present shadow. This was a place where people followed rules, a place where people worked hard, a place where people tried to build something.

Below that... The forgotten city. The unwanted parts. The place where all the problems went. Ilene Buschard turned off the lights and went to bed. Tomorrow would be another normal day. Wake up, work, eat, sleep, repeat. And hopefully, she wouldn't have to see the ugly side of Deepest Ellum again.

Spare Parts, Failing Upwards

The job was supposed to be a zero-sweat snatch.

That, of course, should have been the first red flag.

In Deepest Ellum, “easy job” was usually fixer slang for “I don’t know how badly this is gonna burn, but I need someone else holding the bag when it does.”

The crew called themselves The Spare Parts. Mostly because every single one of them had bought at least one questionable cyberware upgrade from a guy named doctor something, but who definitely wasn’t a doctor.

The team:

Rex - self-proclaimed professional. Former corp security consultant. Had a tactical jacket, a cool attitude, and exactly one successful operation he never stopped talking about.

Mina - netrunner. Brilliant with code, terrifying with a keyboard, and absolutely incapable of naming a program normally. Her intrusion software was called things like “Angry Little Goblin.exe.”

Jax - muscle, well...mostly chrome. The kind of guy who looked like someone built a forklift and gave it anxiety.

Their fixer kept it simple.

“Hit the Velvet Voltage. Corpo rat named Kevin goes there every Friday. He carries a black case. Grab it. Bounce.”

Rex nodded.

“No casualties?”

“Zero.”

“No heat?”

“None.”

“No drama?”

The fixer stared at him.

“Kid, it’s a job in the Big D. There’s always drama.”

Velvet Voltage sat in the Commons like a neon fever dream. A strip club for people who spent all day pretending they weren’t miserable. Corporate workers came here after their shifts, dumped their paychecks, and acted like they weren’t owned by the same megacorps they worked for. The place had cybernetic performers, VR booths, private lounges, and enough illegal modifications happening behind closed doors that everyone politely pretended not to notice.

The team watched from across the street. Rex checked his gear.

“Alright chooms. We ghost in, grab the case, ghost out.”

Mina looked at him.

“Did you just say ghost?”

“Yeah, and?”

“Bro, you sound like a forty-year-old trying to be street.”

“I am not forty.”

“Your jacket says otherwise.”

Jax looked between them.

“Can we finish before the target leaves?”

Rex sighed.

“Yeah. How 'bout Operation: grab the box.”

Mina nodded.

“That sounds less embarrassing.”

Jax touched his temple and sighed. “I should have listened to my mother”

Getting inside was the first problem. Velvet Voltage had upgraded their scanners. Apparently, last week some idiot tried sneaking in a grenade disguised as a decorative cybernetic enhancement. Which, honestly, was impressive. Not smart, but impressive.

Rex walked through.

Clean.

Mina walked through.

Clean.

Jax walked through.

BEEP.

The scanner flashed red. Everyone stopped. Jax looked down.

“What?”

The guard checked the display.

“Sir, you have several unregistered modifications.”

Jax looked offended.

“Which ones?”

The guard scrolled.

“Your arm.”

“I made it myself.”

“Your leg.”

“Same.”

“Your spinal reinforcement.”

“Also mine, well I guess Bug did help a little...”

The guard frowned.

“Do you have anything that's original equipment?”

Jax thought.

“My attitude?”

The guard stared.

“That doesn't count.”

“My teeth?”

The guard scanned.

“Sir, your teeth are titanium.”

Jax shrugged.

“They're still in my mouth.”

The guard sighed.

“Fine. Just... don't punch anything.”

Jax smiled.

“Wasn't planning on it.”

Everyone knew that was a lie.

Inside, Kevin was exactly where expected. At the bar, laughing too loud and wearing a suit that

cost more than Jax's entire body. Sure enough, he was holding the case.

Rex smiled.

"See? Clean op."

Mina immediately raised a finger.

"Don't."

"What?"

"Don't say things are clean."

"Why?"

"Because the universe hears you."

The plan was simple. Mina would create a distraction. Rex would lift the case. Jax would provide backup.

For once... Everything worked. Mina hacked the lights, the room went dark. Rex moved while Kevin was distracted. The case was within reach.

Then Mina made a mistake.

A tiny mistake. A very small mistake. She activated the wrong system.

Instead of disabling the backup flood lights... She triggered emergency evacuation system. The club lights flashed. In a panic she flooded the system with attackware and triggered the house firewall.

A robotic voice boomed:

"SECURITY BREACH DETECTED."

Everyone froze. Rex stared at Mina.

"Mina."

"Yeah?"

"What did you do?"

She looked at her screen.

"...I may have hit the wrong button."

"What button?"

"All of them?"

The entire club exploded into chaos. People ran. Security drones deployed. Kevin grabbed his case and bolted for the exit.

"Target moving!" Mina yelled.

Jax looked around.

"Why is everyone running?"

"Because alarms." Mina sarcastically waved her arms in the direction of the flashing klaxons in the corners of the room

"Why are alarms happening?"

Mina looked away.

"Do we have time for that?"

"No, s'pose not."

"Then let's run."

The extraction turned into a complete clown show. The team tried to blend in. Unfortunately, three people with tactical gear and cheap cybernetic implants weren't exactly subtle. Mina tried hacking the doors. Instead, she accidentally locked every exit except one.

The VIP entrance.

Which, of course was guarded. Jax charged forward, and immediately slipped on spilled synth-champagne. Crashing headlong into a holographic tiger.

The tiger roared.

“WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE EXPERIENCE.”

Jax sat up.

“I fucking hate this place.”

Kevin reached the back exit just as Rex caught up to him.

“Hey!”

Kevin turned.

“Security?”

“No.”

“Corporate?”

“No.”

“Then what are you?”

Rex hesitated.

“...Complicated.”

Kevin’s eyes widened.

“That’s criminal talk.”

As he turned Rex reached out and snatched the case. Kevin looked back, but apparently decided it wasn't worth it and bolted away into the fleeing crowd.

Outside was worse, a security patrol was waiting. Not Corpse Sect, thank god. Corpse Sect didn't negotiate. Normal corporate security at least had mortgages and bad days. One guard raised his weapon.

“Drop the case!”

Rex looked around at his team. The security, the crowd, the fact that they had caused a riot over a briefcase.

Then he sighed.

“Parts?”

Jax cracked his knuckles.

“Yeah?”

“How fast can we move?”

Mina grinned.

“Very.”

“Good.”

They ran. Fast. Very fast.

Nobody died. Kevin was alive and the case was theirs. Technically, the mission was a success. A very stupid success, but a win is a win. Several blocks away, the team stopped. Mina scanned the case.

“No markings, ports, ID or nothen. What the heck is in this thing?”

Jax shook it. Something inside moved. Everyone stared. Rex frowned.

“Should we open it?”

Mina immediately answered.

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because today has taught me a valuable lesson.”

“What lesson?”

“Everything we touch today becomes a disaster.”

Rex nodded, that was fair.

Across the street, a figure watched. Invisible. Active camouflage running. They had followed the runners from the beginning. Not because they cared about them, but rather they cared about the package. The figure deactivated their camo and stepped into the neon glow.

They touched a communicator.

“The package is in the fools’ hands now.”

A pause, followed by a quiet laugh.

“If only they knew what they were carrying.”

They walked toward a parked motorcycle parked outside the bar. The masked figure waved a hand over the bike. The security system flickered and unlocked. The engine started. A burly figure with a cybernetic arm rushed toward them.

“HEY!”

The masked figure looked back.

“Problem?”

“That’s my ride!”

The figure tilted their head.

“Not anymore.”

The motorcycle launched into the streets. The owner stood there, watching it disappear.

“ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME?!” he shouted as the bike faded away into the night.

The masked rider vanished into the neon maze of the Big D.

And somewhere behind them, three runners carried a briefcase that was about to become the biggest problem they had ever stolen.

Sai Patel, the Courier

Sai Patel had a simple philosophy. If the city gave you a path, you used it. If the city blocked the path, you found a tunnel. And if the city forgot you existed?

Well...

You made yourself impossible to ignore.

Sai grew up in Deepest Ellum. Not born there exactly. Nobody really knew where Goblins were born just where they were abandoned. The Goblins were like that. They appeared, and disappeared at random. They moved through the forgotten veins of the Big D like they were part of the city itself. Sai had been a Goblin since he was little. A runner, lookout, the ears around the corner listening in. A kid who knew which maintenance doors were fake, which tunnels flooded, and which security cameras had been broken for twenty years. Most adults called them thieves. Folk in the Commons called them criminals. The Goblins called themselves a family.

And Sai?

Sai called himself lucky. Because he got out...well sort of.

Working at Santa-Antonio's wasn't glamorous. But honestly? That was kind of the point. Santa-Antonio's was one of those Commons places where everyone went eventually. Corporate workers, families, delivery drivers, people trying to pretend they weren't exhausted from the day. A Mex-Italian fusion restaurant chain with enough neon and fancy presentation that customers could convince themselves they were living a luxury lifestyle. Sai liked it. The food smelled amazing and the managers were mostly decent. Best of all nobody asked too many questions. Which was important because Sai had secrets. A lot of them. His official job was delivery. Simple.

Pick up food, drop off food, collect tips, repeat.

Sai was very, very good at his job. While other drivers used roads, Sai used the city.

His ride was a modified mono-cycle. A ridiculous thing, according to most people. One wheel, small frame, and fast enough to make traffic cameras question reality.

Sai loved it.

"Everyone's got four wheels," he'd tell people.

"Four wheels means four problems."

His mono-cycle had one problem. Being too awesome. And Sai compounded problem that by upgrading it constantly.

He knew every shortcut between Santa-Antonio's locations. Every service tunnel, forgotten passage, maintenance route, and alley. Because the Goblins had taught him. The city was full of secrets. You just had to know where to look.

The delivery that night was supposed to be normal. A family order. Commons apartment. Three pizzas, one pasta, an obscene amount of breadsticks, and a 4 pack of Cannolenchiladas one of the oddest of Santa Antonio's creations. Sai checked the address. Then smiled.

"Easy route."

His little internal assistant beeped.

"Your last statement historically results in complications."

Sai frowned.

"Who taught you sarcasm?"

“Your personality profile.”

“Rude.”

“Accurate.”

Sai laughed. Then he kicked off.

His bike slid to a stop in front of the apartment building. He hopped off and jogged up the stairs to the address. A woman in a faded jacket opened the door.

“Goblin route?”

Sai glanced around.

“Depends who’s asking.”

She smiled.

“Smart kid.”

She handed him a tiny data chip.

“Need this moved.”

Sai looked at it and the very clear IMELTech logo embossed on the cover. Then sighed.

“You’re really gonna make me work after my shift?”

She shrugged.

“You’re already working.”

“Fine, here is your dinner choom, thanks for the tip”

Sai had a side hustle. Nothing violent or messy. The Goblins didn’t survive because they had the biggest guns, or frankly guns at all most times. They survived because they knew everything. Who was moving, who was buying, lying, and planning something stupid. Sai carried messages, stolen data, even sometimes VR emotion chips. Illegal? Sure...a little. But in Deepest Ellum, the line between illegal and necessary was pretty blurry.

Besides...

The Goblins had raised him. You didn’t abandon family. Not even when you got a real job.

The problem came when Sai took the wrong tunnel. Not because he didn’t know it, rather because someone else did. Local Rangers. A patrol had blocked the main exit.

Sai stopped. His mono-cycle hummed.

The Rangers looked at him. One raised a scanner.

“Kid.”

Sai smiled.

“Hey.”

“You know this tunnel is restricted?”

Sai looked around. Then looked back.

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Because I could’ve sworn the sign said ’totally normal delivery route.’”

The Ranger narrowed his eyes.

“There is no sign.”

Sai nodded.

“That’s why it was convincing.”

The Ranger didn’t laugh. Which was disappointing, Sai liked when jokes worked. The scanner beeped, and the Ranger looked at the readings.

“You’re carrying encrypted data marked as stolen.”

Sai shrugged.

“Probably.”

“Probably?”

“I deliver food. Sometimes food has secrets.”

The Ranger stared.

“Food has secrets?”

Sai nodded seriously.

“You’d be surprised what people hide in ravioli.”

A second Ranger walked closer.

“This kid messing with us?”

The first Ranger sighed.

“Probably.”

Sai smiled.

“Definitely.”

The Rangers sprung into motion. Sai started moving faster. His mono-cycle jumped forward. The Rangers shouts echoed down the tunnel after him. Sai laughed.

“Sorry! Late delivery!”

A Ranger shouted back:

“YOU AREN’T DELIVERING ANYTHING!”

Sai checked his bag.

“Oh shit!”

He looked genuinely concerned.

“The breadsticks!”

He turned down a side passage. A tunnel most people didn’t know existed. A tunnel the Goblins had mapped decades ago. The Rangers followed for about three seconds. Then Sai hit a hidden switch and a maintenance wall opened. The Ranger stopped.

“What?”

Sai waved.

“Old city trick.”

The wall closed.

“Thanks for visiting!”

Twenty minutes later, Sai emerged into an abandoned maintenance chamber beneath the Commons. Breadsticks and data chip safely where they belonged. He checked his messages. The Goblins had sent him payment. A transfer of 4000 credits for half an hour of work. More money than he made in weeks.

“What in the heck was on that chip?” He wondered to himself. Then he smiled.

Not because of the money. Because it meant something. He wasn’t stuck just surviving. He was moving up. Slowly, but up. He thought about the Goblin kids still running those tunnels. Maybe someday he could help them too. Maybe someday more of them could make it out. Maybe someday the city would stop deciding who belonged where. Sai hopped back onto his mono-cycle.

His assistant beeped.

“Are you pleased?”

Sai grinned.

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

Sai looked up.

The Commons lights flickered above him. The Spires glowed in the distance. Deepest Ellum hummed below. And somehow, he was standing between all three worlds.

“Because,” he said, “today I got paid, didn’t get arrested, and the food was only slightly late.”

“Your standards are unusual.”

“That’s why they’re mine.”

The mono-cycle roared. Sai disappeared into the tunnels. A Goblin kid who became a delivery driver. A delivery driver who became a runner. A runner who might someday become something even bigger.

And for once...

The city wasn’t pushing him down.

It was giving him a way forward.

Priscilla Azul, Beyond the Glass Tower

Priscilla Azul had never seen the sun. Not the real one, anyway.

She had seen simulations. Perfect golden skies projected across the walls of her private residence. Artificial sunlight that adjusted perfectly to her mood. Virtual forests where every tree grew exactly where it was supposed to. Everything in the Spires was designed to be beautiful, controlled, and safe.

She had lived her entire life above the city. Above the noise. Above the problems. Her world was a tower of glass and impossible engineering, built by the company her family had controlled for generations.

Blue Dragon Systems.

The company that built the bridges, the towers, and transit lines. The very bones of the Big D. Her father, Xavier Azul, was one of the most powerful men in the city. The kind of person whose name opened doors. The kind of person who never waited in line. And Priscilla was his daughter. The perfect heir. The perfect example of the Azul legacy.

At least...

That was what she had been told.

She had always known she was different. Not because anyone told her she was odd. Because everyone else was. People were loud and thoughtless. Easy to understand. Their emotions leaked out before they spoke. A servant smiled while thinking about how much they hated their job. A security guard said everything was fine while silently worrying about his family. A guest complimented her dress while thinking about how expensive it must have been.

Priscilla heard all of it. Always.

Everyone's thoughts.

Everyone's fears.

Everyone's secrets.

It was exhausting.

Her father said it was a gift. The doctors called it a neurological anomaly. The assistants said it was "the reason nobody plays cards with Miss Azul." Priscilla found it annoying. She never understood why everyone lied. She didn't realize most people didn't have a choice.

Her twenty-second birthday celebration was exactly what she expected. Perfect, elegant, and empty. Hundreds of guests arrived of course. Corporate families, executives, the important people of the city. People who smiled because they wanted something. But it was hollow.

She stood in a dress worth more than most Commons citizens earned in a decade and watched the party through a wall of glass.

Far below, the city stretched forever. The Commons, the endless streets, the lower levels, and somewhere beneath it all...

Deepest Ellum.

She had never been there of course. Nobody in her family went there. People didn't go down, they went up. That was how the world worked.

The intruder entered her room three hours after midnight. Priscilla noticed immediately. Not because of the security system. Because of the thoughts.

Please.

Just enough to feed everyone.

Just one score.

The kids haven't eaten in two days.

She turned. A figure stood near her private collection. Small, nervous, wearing patched clothing and outdated cyberware. Not a professional, certainly not an assassin. Just someone desperate.

The intruder froze. Priscilla stared. She stepped closer.

"Why are you here?"

The intruder raised a weapon. A cheap one, the kind bought from someone who didn't care if it worked.

"I need something valuable."

"To buy what?"

The intruder hesitated. Of course Priscilla already knew. Food, medicine, shelter. Things she had never once worried about. Her entire life, she had assumed everyone lived like she did. Everyone had clean water, meals, and warm beds. Everyone had a home. The thought was absurd she realised. And yet somehow... she had never questioned it.

She lowered her hand. The intruder looked confused.

"You're not afraid?"

Priscilla shook her head.

"No."

That was the truth. She wasn't afraid, instead she found that she was angry. Not at this poor wretch trying to steal from her. At herself. At the world. At the fact that she could read every thought in this tower and nobody had ever thought about people below. She looked out the window. The city suddenly looked different. The lights weren't beautiful anymore. They were signals, calls for help. Millions of people. Millions of lives. Millions of problems she had never seen.

"I want to leave."

The intruder blinked.

"What?"

"This tower."

"You can't."

Priscilla smiled slightly.

"I can."

The first alarm activated when she opened the security doors. With a sharp glance to the side she shut them down. With nothing more than a thought, she made the cameras look somewhere else. Priscilla moved through the tower like she had designed it herself. Blue Dragon Systems had built the infrastructure. But Priscilla could touch the systems. Machines listened, doors opened, cameras turned away, and security drones froze.

Technopathy.

Telepathy.

Telekinesis.

Three abilities she had never been allowed to discuss. Three abilities she had never been told were abnormal, they had just been part of her forever. The thief looked at her through bewildered eyes.

"Miss, no offense, but you scare me. Thanks for not having me arrested, or killed." And like that they took off running.

She reached the private garage. A hover vehicle waited. Quickly she stepped inside. Initially the system rejected her credentials. With a low growl from her throat, the vehicle AI reconsidered.

The doors opened, the engine started.

“Sorry,” she whispered.

The vehicle’s AI responded.

“Authorization accepted.”

Priscilla smiled. She wasn’t sure if she was apologizing to the car...

Or herself.

The hover car rose above the tower. For the first time in her life... Priscilla was outside. Really outside. She looked down.

The Spires - Beautiful.

The Pastures - Comfortable.

The Commons - Crowded.

And below it all.

Deepest Ellum.

She saw things she had never imagined. People sleeping in alleys, families living in forgotten spaces. Children running through tunnels. People fixing broken machines because they couldn’t afford new ones. People surviving, not living, there was no room for that. For an hour she circled the slums observing the people like ants in an ant farm.

Her heart hurt. How could she have never known? How could everyone above ignore this?

The answer came suddenly. The hover car jerked, and the controls died. Priscilla grabbed the console. Someone was inside the system. Not her, someone else, someone who could send the AI commands faster than her.

A message appeared on the holo display.

WELCOME TO THE LOWER CITY.

She frowned.

“Who are you?”

No answer.

The vehicle began descending. Fast, too fast. Priscilla tried to regain control. Nothing. The machine refused. Her own ability wasn’t fast enough to keep up. Someone had outplayed her. With intense focus she overrode the safety protocol and opened the door.

The vehicle was still dozens of feet above the streets. Her instincts screamed the fall would kill her. But she knew she had one chance. She jumped.

The landing was not graceful or heroic. It was painful. She hit a pile of garbage in an alley. Broken metal cut through her expensive clothing. Something sharp pierced her side. The air left her lungs and the world spun. For the first time in her life... Priscilla Azul was dirty, cold, and alone.

The sounds around her were unfamiliar. Footsteps on concrete and metal grates. Distant voices echoing between buildings. Water dripping from some unseen source. The smell of Deepest Ellum, gods the smell, could people really live here?

She tried to move but her body wouldn’t cooperate. Blood stained the garbage beneath her flowing from open wounds in delicate skin. Her perfect world was gone. Her perfect body was failing. And she finally understood something. The world was not designed to protect everyone. Only some people. Her vision blurred. The neon lights above her became streaks.

Then a shadow appeared.

A figure wearing a dark brown robe. They stepped into the alley. Priscilla tried to speak but nothing came out. The figure knelt beside her. She felt a hand carefully lifting her. Then a second hand scooped her up and carried her. Not like an enemy or a hostage. Like someone carrying something fragile.

As consciousness faded, Priscilla felt herself being carried away. The last thought she had was not fear. It was confusion. Someone from below was saving her and she didn't know why.

The darkness took her.

The robed figure disappeared into Deepest Ellum.

And the fate of Priscilla Azul remained unknown.

Neon Overdrive, the Professionals

Neon Overdrive didn't pick their name because it sounded cool. That was just a super sweet side effect. They picked it because everything they did moved fast enough to blur consequences, standing still meant letting them catch up with you.

There were five of them, and together they ran relief for the Neon Saints, which was a polite way of saying "we Robin Hood the shit out of medical supplies."

The holo ping came at an inconvenient hour, of course it did, just a few minutes after 3 am. Padre Antonio Valentine didn't look like a saint. He looked like a man who had survived three different versions of hell and decided bureaucracy was the worst of them. The cigarette hanging from his lips had as much ash as remaining cigarette, and yet it never fell even as he spoke.

"Chooms," he said, leaning into the flickering holo-feed, cigarette smoke curling like it was trying to escape the conversation. "I've got a blessing for you. Big one."

The team gathered around the cracked table in their safehouse. Padre Valentine continued.

"Corporate med convoy. Tomorrow night. Synth-blood, anti-rejection meds, neuro-stabilizers, the good stuff. Enough to keep half the lower districts from flatlining for a month." He smiled like a man who hadn't slept in years. "And you're gonna take it. Find Bug at the citadel for the keys to the kingdom."

They weren't saints. They weren't criminals either. They were somewhere in the messy middle where morality goes to get blackout drunk and look the other way.

Rook Vale was the driver. Former courier who once outran a riot drone on a stolen grav-bike and still complained it wasn't "nova enough."

Mara "Patch" Sato was their medic and field surgeon. She could stitch a lung back together while insulting your fashion sense.

Dex Calder handled heavy weapons and heavier sarcasm. If it made a noise louder than polite conversation, Dex liked it.

Nyx Lumen was a netrunner, deeply offended by firewalls as a concept and wholly incapable of keeping a secret.

And "Saint" Eli Kade, their leader, who absolutely did not deserve the title and knew it, but got it anyway because people liked irony almost as much as they liked survival.

Together, they were Neon Overdrive. And tonight, they were about to speed-run the theft of corpo executive-grade medicine.

The meet point was the Rusted Citadel, which used to be a corporate defense hub before the corporations got bored of defending things that didn't make profit. Now it stood at the edge of Deepest Ellum like a broken and rotten tooth.

From a distance, it looked like a collapsed fortress made of oxidized steel. Massive satellite dishes hung at crooked angles. Neon graffiti crawled across its surface in layers, each gang repainting over the last re-writing history with every layer. Inside, it was worse in the best possible way.

The Citadel had become neutral ground for anyone too dangerous for the Commons but too organized for pure chaos. Black-market surgeons replaced organs like car parts in questionable temp labs. Mercs drinking synth-ale next to wackjobs arguing about if machines have spirits. Vendors hawking everything from illegal med-chips to memories that weren't yours, but could be, if you paid

enough. At the center sat the Ring Market, a circular pit carved into the old command floor where deals were made on shifting holographic contracts projected into the air like ghostly court documents.

The vibe was simple:

Nobody trusted anyone, but everyone needed something from someone else, so distrust became currency.

The fixer was already waiting.

“Bug?” Eli asked.

He looked up with a wry grin.

“You’re late,” he said.

Rook shrugged. “Traffic was apocalyptic.”

Bug tapped a datapad. “Good. I like punctual people who suffer.”

Nyx tilted her head. “You’ve got the codes?”

Bug leaned back. “I do. I also have pricing.”

Dex groaned. “Oh, here we go.”

The number came through. It was obscene. Patch blinked.

“That’s not a price. That’s emotional damage.”

Bug smiled wider. “High-risk convoy. AI-driven. Corporate-grade countermeasures. You want to override a machine that thinks faster than you. You pay. Simple as that choom.”

Saint Eli exhaled slowly. “You’re gouging us, man.”

“Correct,” Bug said as he snapped his fingers. “Because you’ll still pay it.”

Worst part was, he wasn’t wrong, and they did.

Nyx transferred the credits with a muttered curse aimed at Bug’s ancestors. “Better work choom, ’else everyone’s gonna know.”

The fixer slid the codes over.

“Oh they will work, once you get inside and plug it up, you can drive her home with no tracking. Clean as the spires. Just remember, don’t die,” he added casually. “The Saints will be sad, and I’ll lose repeat customers.”

“Comforting,” Dex grumbled.

The convoy route was at the outskirts, where the city stopped even pretending it cared about infrastructure. Out there, Deepest Ellum bled into the wastes, dead transit lines, and cracked highways that still remembered a time long lost. Neon Overdrive set up in the skeleton of a collapsed overpass. Rook parked their rig, a stolen med-van with too many upgrades and a cut rate AI with a personality problem.

Nyx patched into nearby infrastructure. “I’ve got eyes on the route. Big transport incoming. Corporate escort class.”

Patch checked her med kit. “Define escort class.”

Nyx didn’t have a chance to respond before the convoy arrived.

A massive armored med-hauler rolled in, humming with AI precision. It was sleek in that soulless corporate way. Two guard drones flanked it. And on either side of the transport, turret mounted chain guns.

Dex slowly lowered his scope. “Nobody mentioned the blender attachments.”

Nyx blinked rapidly. “Those are not in the specs.”

Rook spat to the side. “Bug lied.”

Saint Eli sighed. “Fixer always lies. It’s basically their job description.”

They initiated anyway. Because backing out was never in the playbook. Nyx hit the convoy’s AI first. The system flickered, then adapted.

“Uh,” Nyx said. “It noticed me.”

The drones immediately turned. Then things got loud. The chain guns opened up, tearing into the overpass with wild enthusiasm. Concrete fragments raining down reducing visibility.

Rook slammed the rig forward. “MOVING—MOVING—”

Dex returned fire with a gun illegal enough to set off most scanners around the block. One drone sparked, spun, and crashed into the road below.

Saint Eli was halfway across the gap, grappling hook embedded into the convoy roof. “Nyx, I need that door open!”

“I’m TRYING,” Nyx snapped. “This thing has defensive recursion!”

“Speak English!” Dex shouted.

“It learns faster than I do!”

“THAT’S BAD!”

“YEAH, I KNOW!”

The convoy lurched.

One chain gun rotated toward Rook’s rig.

Rook swore. “Oh no. No no no—”

The rig swerved hard, barely avoiding the spray of bullets that turned the road behind them into confetti.

Patch yelled, “I’m out of stitches for this kind of nonsense! I’m patching holes with staples and whisky.”

Eli finally crawled onto the roof. Hanging on as the convoy bounced over the dirt and cracks in the road, Eli found an external port and slammed Nyx’s remote spiker into the outlet.

“Nyx,” he said through gritted teeth, “I’ve got manual override access. Now.”

Nyx pushed her final hack through. The convoy protested for a moment, then obediently powered down. Silence hit the road like a shockwave. A wave of dust and debris caught up with them and settled.

Dex blinked. “Did we just win?”

Rook laughed nervously as he looked back at the smoking debris of the drones, the broken windows, and destroyed turret. “I think we just won in a way that’s gonna be expensive later.”

They plugged Bugs codes in, and sure enough, they got the convoy moving. Barely, smoke rising from half the systems, all but one window missing, and a collection of bullet holes, but the cargo was intact.

Synth-blood. Anti-rejection meds. Neuro-stabilizers. Life in crates. The kind of haul that kept entire blocks from becoming body-count statistics. Neon Overdrive limped it back through hidden routes, every member bruised, singed, or mildly furious at existence. But they made it.

The underground clinic was carved into old subway tunnels beneath the Commons edge, part med-center, part sanctuary, part organized chaos. The moment they rolled in, word spread faster than infection. Neon Saints medics rushed the convoy. Patients already inside, kids with cyber rejection, workers with gang injuries, people who had no official existence in any system all waiting. And gathered at the railings, dozens of family members and people taking refuge.

And then the cheering started. Not loud, not corporate, not staged. Real and thankful.

Patch got dragged off immediately to treat people before she even sat down. Dex was handed a drink and told not to “look so dramatic about surviving.” Rook got patted on the back by three kids arguing over who got to say they knew him first. Nyx was swarmed by tech-adept teenagers asking how she “made the machine stop being mean.”

And Saint Eli just stood there for a second, watching it all.

A kid tugged his sleeve.

“You got the medicine?”

Eli nodded. “Yeah, kid. We got it.”

The kid smiled “Some day ill be brave like you, and maybe then the other kids will look up to me too.”

Neon Overdrive didn’t fix the city. Nobody did, nobody could, not alone at least. But they kept parts of it from breaking all the way. And in Deepest Ellum, that was as close to heroism as the system ever allowed.

Danni, Eyes on the Prize

This city does not raise children, it tests them.

Deepest Ellum.

A maze of abandoned infrastructure, underground markets, forgotten subway lines, and endless alleyways where survival was the only law that mattered.

Danni was born there. They never knew their parents, not really. In Deepest Ellum, blood did not mean family. Names changed. People disappeared. Gangs absorbed children who had nowhere else to go. Clans formed from strangers who decided they were stronger together than alone. Danni grew up surrounded by people who may have been family, or maybe they were just people who refused to let a kid die alone. Either way, they belonged and that was enough.

From a young age, Danni learned the rules of the streets. Trust carefully, move quickly, and always hit harder than the other guy. The weak were taken advantage of, the slow were left behind, and everyone had an angle.

But Danni was different. They grew faster than most kids their age. Stronger. Faster. Tougher. The kind of person who could take a beating, stand back up, and ask who wanted another round. The older gangs noticed, the street clans noticed, and the kind of people who needed someone dangerous noticed. By the time Danni was old enough to carry a weapon and understand the value of a credit chip, they had already become someone people remembered. Not because they were cruel, or because they enjoyed hurting people. Danni simply understood something most people in Deepest Ellum learned eventually: sometimes talking worked, sometimes it did not. And when talking failed, violence was always an option.

The first real work came from a local fixer. Nothing glamorous. No legendary jobs or corporate espionage. Just the kind of work nobody wanted to claim. Deliveries, collections, protection, and making problems disappear. The fixer never asked Danni to be a monster. They only asked them to be useful, and Danni was very useful. They were almost never the smartest person in the room, and they knew that. Computers, corporate systems, and complicated plans were for other people. Danni was good at reading a situation, knowing when something felt wrong, and making sure they were the last person standing. Their strength was simple. They survived.

Years passed. The fixer trusted Danni more and more but still wouldn't deal with them directly. The gangs expanded, the corporations above continued pretending Deepest Ellum did not exist, and Danni kept working under someone else's banner. Until they realized something. They were tired of being someone else's weapon. Every job made someone else richer. Every risk protected someone else's empire. Every victory belonged to someone else.

So Danni started saving. Not for a better apartment and not for a way out, Deepest Ellum was home after all. They saved for freedom.

Cyberware was expensive, but Danni understood the value of investing in themselves. Enhanced reflexes. Reinforced bones. Improved strength. Anything that would make sure the next fight ended differently. They weren't trying to become a corporate soldier. They weren't trying to become famous. They just wanted to stop being owned.

Eventually, they had enough. Enough upgrades, enough experience, and enough confidence. It was time to leave the gang's shadow and create their own path. The problem with freedom was that

it required money. And money required work. With their life savings in hand they walked into the fixer's building, and put the sum total on the desk.

"Here is my buy in, if you got a job for me, you call me directly now, we flush?" Danni demanded.

"Welcome to the major leagues junior" the fixer said calmly as she swiped the cred stick off the desk. "Now quit breathing my filtered air, I will contact you when the time comes, don't miss my call."

With their last 50 credits Danni celebrated the only way they knew how. They went drinking. The bar was one of the few places in Deepest Ellum where everyone pretended things were normal. For a few hours, nobody cared who owned what territory. Nobody cared who worked for which gang. Nobody cared who was dangerous. That is, until someone did. The argument started over something stupid, they always did. A bad joke, a wrong look, a little too much alcohol, who even knows at this point. And of course, Danni did what Danni always did, they stood their ground. Unfortunately, the person across from them had been waiting their whole life for someone to make that mistake.

The fight was fast, brutal, and completely one-sided. For the first time in years, Danni found someone stronger, faster, more experienced. Someone who knew exactly where to hit. The last thing Danni remembered was the taste of blood and the sound of the bar door opening. Then they were flying. Thrown into the alley behind the building like yesterday's garbage.

Danni hit the ground hard. They groaned.

"Okay," they muttered. "That could have gone better."

Although they would wake up the next day with a brutal hangover and quite the shiner, the neon shone a little brighter tonight, and the air smelled a little less foul. As Danni got up and brushed the filth off they knew that tomorrow they would walk their own path.

The City Keeps Moving

The Big D never stopped moving. That was the first lesson everyone learned.

People died. People disappeared. Corporations collapsed and rebuilt themselves under new names. Gangs rose and fell. Heroes were forgotten. Villains became executives. Executives became ghosts.

But the city?

The city kept moving.

The Spare Parts had learned a valuable lesson. Never steal something you don't understand. Unfortunately, they had learned it several hours after stealing something they didn't understand. The drop had not happened. They had been trying to reach the contact by holo for almost 12 hours before they gave up.

Rex sat in the back of a maintenance room beneath the Commons, staring at the case on the table. The case, the stupid fucking case. The one that had turned a simple job into a disaster involving security lockdowns, emergency systems, and a holographic tiger that Jax still insisted was "tactical psychological warfare."

"It wasn't warfare," Mina said, leaning over her stolen equipment.

"It attacked me."

"It was a hologram."

"It had teeth."

"It was literally light."

Jax crossed his arms. "Light can hurt people."

Rex ignored them.

The case was open now. Inside wasn't money, or weapons. Not anything that made sense. Just a small black data drive. No markings, manufacturer, or any identification information at all. Which meant only one thing.

It was expensive.

Mina plugged it into a separate system. The screen immediately went dark, then red, then a message appeared.

UNAUTHORIZED ACCESS ATTEMPT DETECTED.

Mina blinked.

"Okay."

Rex looked over.

"Okay good or okay bad?"

"Okay interesting."

"That wasn't an option."

Mina stared at the code. "Someone encrypted this with military grade countermeasures that would make an AI cry."

"Can you crack it?"

She hesitated.

"Probably."

"Probably?"

“It would be messy, but I can break it.”

She looked at the screen. “The problem is what happens when I do.”

Jax looked at the drive. “So don’t.”

Everyone stared at him.

“What?” he said looking confused.

“That’s actually the smartest thing you’ve said all night.” Mina said as leaned back in her chair.

“I have good ideas.” Jax stated as a matter of fact.

“You tried to punch a hologram.”

“It started it.”

Mr. Omega knew the meeting was wrong before he entered the building. The contact was always early. People like that survived because they understood time. They understood schedules. They understood that in the Big D, being late was dangerous. But it was 10 hours after they were supposed to contact him, so in a rare event, Mr Omega paid a visit in person.

The body was sitting behind the desk. No blood. No obvious injuries, just dead.

Xao-Min stood silently beside Omega, her cybernetic eyes scanned the room.

“No struggle.”

Omega nodded.

“Meaning?”

“Either they trusted whoever killed them...”

She looked around.

“...or he never saw it coming.”

Omega didn’t answer. The case was supposed to arrive here. Three months of digging into hyper encrypted systems, uncovering secrets some of the most powerful people on earth wanted hidden. That drive was supposed to give him leverage, and leverage is power.

Instead, there was only a corpse and a question. Xao-Min looked at the empty desk.

“Someone knew.”

“Someone always knows.”

Omega looked toward the window. Deepest Ellum stretched below them. A city of forgotten people, broken machines, and impossible secrets. Somewhere down there, three idiots were carrying something that could change everything.

Omega sighed.

“Find them.”

Xao-Min looked at him.

“And when I do?”

A pause.

“Don’t kill them.”

That surprised her.

“Why?”

In an extremely rare moment, Mr. Omega’s temper flared.

“Because I have plans you can’t understand! Just do what your told. I’ll toss in a premo ‘bliss’ chip for you after you bring it home. Now go.”

Xao-Min almost looked hurt for a moment, but silently nodded and walked out of the room.

Deep beneath the city, in the abandoned subway tunnels where the old world had buried itself, two people woke up. Boris Idom woke first.

Pain.

That was the first thing he noticed. Not the alarms of his combat systems suppressing the pain, but the actual pain itself. He tried to activate combat protocols, pain suppression specifically, but nothing happened. Then it dawned on him. He was alive. That shouldn't have been possible. The last thing he remembered was falling after taking a round to the chest from a MK. XI "Tankbuster" Rail gun. He remembered the city above him, and the water below. The end. Right? No one survives that...right?

Then he saw the stranger.

A figure covered in a dark robe, kneeling beside him. Too dirty to be corpo. Not Corpse Sect, no armor or augments visible. Not anyone he recognized.

Their hands moved slowly, carefully. Energy flowed through his damaged systems. Not technology, no visible interface, it was something else.

Boris tried to speak. Nothing came out but some cracks and a little static, apparently his vocal system was still damaged.

The stranger ignored him. A few feet away, another person stirred.

Priscilla Azul opened her eyes.

For a moment she didn't understand where she was. She had spent her entire life surrounded by glass, security, and people who treated her like an investment. She had never been somewhere this quiet.

She looked around and saw a figure on a nearby table. A machine built for war, a person converted into a weapon. She tried to move, but was met with a bolt of white hot pain through her whole body. The world around her swam and faded. The stranger continued working.

Neither of them knew why they were there. Neither knew what connected them. But somewhere above them, corporations were already searching.

Sai Patel knew the city better than almost anyone. Every shortcut, alleyway, and broken camera. Every place where the Big D had cracks. But even he admitted there were some people who moved through it better.

Eli was one of those people. The leader of Neon Overdrive. The name alone carried weight. Eli would never say he was a hero or that he was exceptional in any way, but that is why Sai looked up to him. He wasn't interested in fame or glory, he just wanted to help, and he and his team got shit done.

Eli smiled at Sai and the young Goblins milling around and got into the passenger seat of the team's van. Sai watched him disappear into the traffic streams and shook his head.

"One day."

The other Goblins laughed.

"One day what?"

Sai smiled.

"One day I'll be that good."

They laughed harder. But Sai wasn't joking. In Deepest Ellum, people needed something to believe in.

Sometimes it was a gang. Sometimes it was a fixer. Sometimes it was someone who proved the city didn't own them. For Sai, it was Eli and Neon Overdrive.

Ilene Buschard hated Deepest Ellum. At least, that's what she told herself. It was easier that way. The stories were simple. The people below were dangerous, different, they were problems. Simple explanations made life easier.

Until Danni smiled at her.

They were just standing in line. A normal day, the same market as always. Danni made a joke about the terrible coffee. Ilene laughed, a real laugh. Not a polite professional laugh aimed at a stranger to move the interaction along. Genuine.

For a moment, the city stood still as she looked at Danni, strong, confident, beautiful. Then she noticed the dirt, and shoddy cyberware. That beautiful smile belonged to one of them. One of those people from Deepest Ellum. And everything changed.

Ilene froze.

The old thoughts returned. The warnings, news reports, the fear.

Danni noticed the change in her expression. The smile faded.

“Oh.”

Ilene immediately felt embarrassed.

“No, I just...”

She stopped. Because she didn't have a good way to finish. Danni didn't seem dangerous or threatening. They weren't anything like what she expected. They were just someone who made her laugh. And that somehow made it worse.

“I should go.”

Danni watched her leave. Confused, not angry. Just wondering “The hell did I do?”

The Big D continued. The corporations made plans. The gangs fought battles. The runners carried secrets. The forgotten found each other. The powerful searched for immortality. The powerless searched for tomorrow.

Somewhere beneath the city, two impossible people woke up.

Somewhere above it, powerful people decided what they would do about that.

Somewhere in between, three runners carried a drive containing information that could reshape the future.

They didn't know. Not yet. To them, it was just another job.

Another night.

Another problem.

The city did not care. The Big D had seen empires rise. It had seen legends die. It had swallowed armies, would be kings, corporations, and dreams. It would swallow these stories too.

Or maybe...

Maybe this time something would survive.

The lights flickered.

The trains moved.

The towers stood.

The streets filled.

And the Big D kept turning.