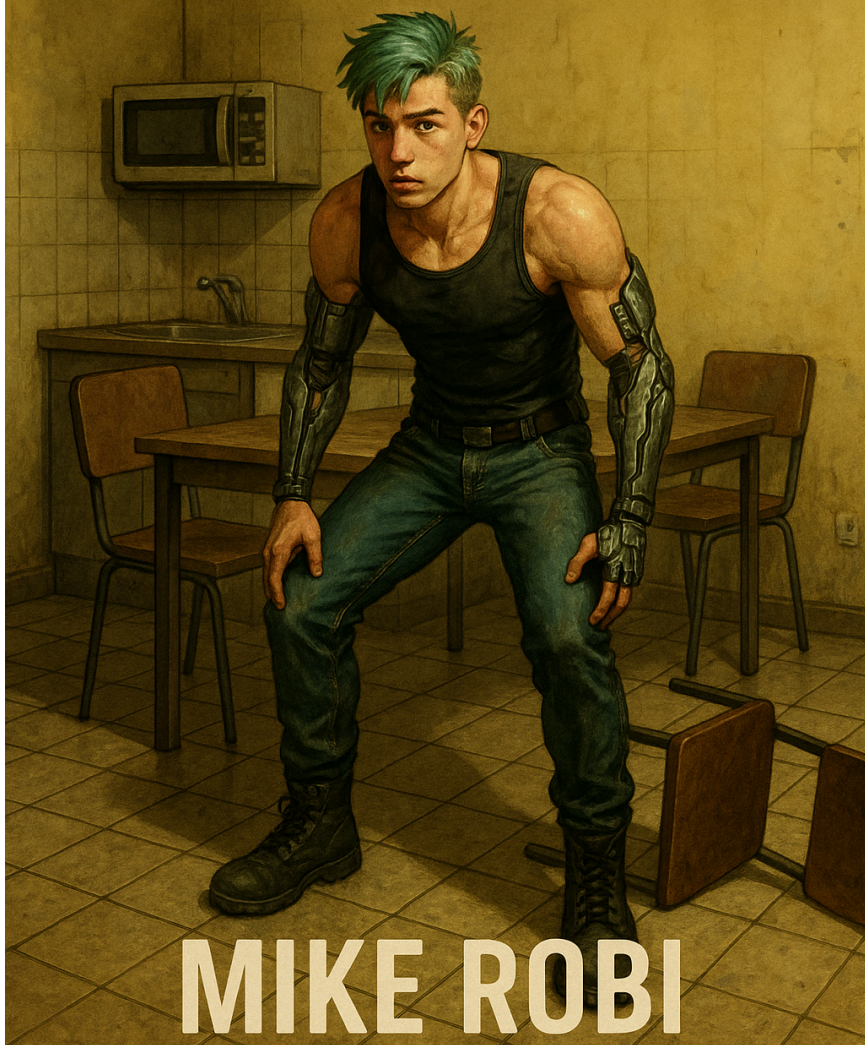


# FAMILY TIES

A SHORT STORY FROM THE CYBERPUNK GUS UNIVERSE



Kam burst through the front door of the multibox apartment, his smile wide, proud. Inside, his younger brothers sat cross-legged on the floor, eyes locked to their holopads, the glow reflecting off their tired faces. Their mother sat at the table, hunched over a lesson plan, scrawling diagrams for her next day at the c-school where she taught bioengineering focused on germinating syntactically created seeds.

“Mom! Check it out!” Kam called, patting the table with both hands like an excited kid. She looked up.

Kam struck a pose, flexing. His arms were wrapped in fresh bandages and plated chrome. His frame is broader and stronger. The muscle augmentation showed even through the bandage seams.

Her eyes went wide. “Kam! What did you do?”

The pride on his face faded just a little. “We got our senior placement paths today. I’m assigned to the loading docks on floor twenty-nine.” He grinned again. “So... I auged my arms and spine. Figured I should be able to carry more. Smart, right?”

She didn’t answer at first. Sweat had gathered on her brow. She stared at him, then slowly closed her notebook, her fingers trembling slightly.

“Does your father know yet?” she asked, barely above a whisper.

Kam blinked. “No... I came straight home.”

She nodded once and stood. “Boys,” she called gently, “go lock yourselves in the bedroom. Now.”

They didn't argue. Just paused their games, stood, and shuffled toward the back room with practiced silence. No questions, no protests, just the quiet sadness of children who'd learned what silence can prevent.

Kam watched them go, his stomach sinking. The joy he brought home now felt like a loaded weapon.

Their mother checked the time. His father's shift ended at six. If he wasn't home by eight... That meant he was drinking again. That meant they were running out of time.

Kam's mother looked him over, a soft smile forming beneath the worry. "You know I'm proud of you no matter what, sweetie. Your new arms look amazing. I like that you kept part of yourself; the mix works."

She stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him. He sank into the hug. "I just don't want you to get your hopes up about your father liking it, baby."

Kam nodded, the wind knocked from his sails. "Thanks, Mom."

That's when they heard it. The door handle jiggled, keys fumbled, muffled cursing, and then the slow creak as the front door swung open. The silhouette filled the entryway, broad and looming.

"Penny, what's for dinner?" the man barked.

She patted her son's shoulder and whispered, "There are leftovers in the fridge."

Rick didn't even glance at Kam as he walked past them and yanked the coldbox open. He pulled out a covered metal dish, peeled it back, and dipped his bare hand into the contents, mushy and gray, and stuffed it in his mouth like an animal.

He chewed as he turned to Kam. "The fuck did you do to your arms, boy?"

Kam straightened, voice firm but not aggressive. “I got assigned to work the warehouses. Floor twenty-nine. I augmented my arms and spine so I could lift more without getting tired.”

Rick’s chewing slowed. Without a word, he shoved the half-eaten mush back into the container, then flung it across the kitchen. It exploded against the wall in a wet splatter.

“The warehouses?! What level?!”

Kam swallowed hard. “Twenty-nine...”

“Nine levels down?” Rick’s voice dropped, colder now. “Your mother and I worked our asses off to get up here, and you get placed nine levels down?”

He slammed his fist against the coldbox with a metallic *THUD*. “You’re a fucking disgrace.”

Kam clenched his fists. He wanted to yell, but before he could move, his mother stepped between them. She reached out, gently placing her hand on Kam’s shoulder. A silent plea: *Don’t*.

She turned to Rick, tried to defuse him. “Rick, please. Your blood pressure—”

He yanked his arm away from her. “Oh, it’s always gonna be okay, huh? It’s always just okay with him! He doesn’t study, he won’t learn mechanics, he’s a lazy, good-for-nothing little shit.” He brushed past her and stepped toward Kam.

Kam flinched before the strike even came. Rick’s anger ignited at the sight of fear. “Coward,” he spat under his breath.

The punch came fast. Kam dropped, collapsing to the floor, his cheek already swelling, blood leaking from a split lip.

Rick towered over him. “I gave you everything. And you turned out to be *nothing*.” He turned and stomped back into the kitchen, digging through the coldbox for another beer.

Kam’s mother stared in horror at her son on the floor. Her hands trembled, but this time, she didn’t go quiet. Something in her snapped.

She stormed in after Rick, voice shaking but loud. “Apologize to him now! He’s doing his best!”

Kam looked up from the floor, stunned. She rarely raised her voice to Rick. And when she did, she always paid for it.

Rick didn’t even look back. “We outta beer,” he grumbled, slouching halfway into the fridge.

“You drank it all last week!” Penny shouted, hands trembling as she reached for his shoulder. “You have to stop this!”

Rick stood up fast and spun, grabbing her by the throat and slamming her into the coldbox. The door slammed shut with her body.

“Who the fuck do you think you are? I work all week. I pay for this shit! You don’t get to talk to me like that! You don’t touch me!”

Kam started to rise, every instinct screaming at him to protect her. She saw him move, and she shook her head. *No*. He stopped.

She turned back to Rick, her voice barely audible, eyes locked to his. “I work just as hard as you...”

Rick growled. His hand slid along the counter, grabbing a kitchen knife. He pressed it to her throat.

“You think I won’t? I’m the reason we got here! I built this life! You forget who’s in charge?”

Her throat bobbed, but she didn't speak. She couldn't. The wrong word, a wrong breath, it might push into the blade.

Kam watched it all unfold. He couldn't take it anymore. And neither could she.

The moment Rick's attention broke, his head turned toward Kam, and Penny struck. She grabbed his wrist and pushed. The momentum, the alcohol, and his unstable stance, he stumbled.

And the knife went in. Right under his ribcage, just left of center.

Rick staggered back, coughing, blood already foaming at his lips. The gurgling that followed was his last word.

Kam stood frozen. Penny slid down the coldbox, both hands over her mouth, screaming into herself.

"Kam... I... I didn't..." She couldn't finish.

Kam looked down at the body. At the man who had terrorized their family for years. He knew what would come next. The corpo security wouldn't care. His mother would be blamed, labeled unstable. The boys sent to labor camps or the slums below. He had no choice.

Kam walked over, crouched beside the body, and pulled the knife free. His mother stared at him, confused, until she saw his face. His expression wasn't angry. It was resolved.

"You have to watch, Mom," he said quietly.

She didn't understand until he stabbed the body four more times.

Blood soaked his hands, splattered his shirt. He stood up and turned to her, voice steady. "When security asks... You won't be lying. There was a struggle. He got stabbed. I finished the job."

He reached into Rick's pocket, pulled out the wallet, and counted. 115 shivs.

"Give me a two-hour head start before you call it in," he said, voice soft. "Please."

He walked to her, bent down, and kissed her forehead. "I love you. I love my brothers. This had to happen."

Penny couldn't speak. But her eyes said it. *I love you too.*

Kam turned and walked out the front door, making sure to let every hallway camera get a good look at the blood, the blade. No hiding, no doubt.

He called the elevator and rode it down, all the way to the ground floor of MotoRogue Plaza, one of the wealthiest towers in the Stack.

But down here, the base level was still the slums.

Outside, BizStreet buzzed with vendors and neon haze. Kam weaved through them until he found a small clothing stall. "I need new clothes," he told the vendor.

The man sized him up. "Got jeans, boots, red tee. Close enough to your build. Twenty shivs or seventeen clics."

Kam paid in shivs and took the bundle. He walked away, changing in the open as he moved, leaving the blood-stained shirt behind like a shed skin.

He checked his HUD. South. He walked.

Near the end of the strip, a metalworking stall caught his eye. It was carved into the alley, homemade and buzzing with tools.

Kam approached the counter and dropped the bloody knife. "I need this turned into something I can protect myself with."

The vendor looked at the blade, then at Kam. He nodded once. "Fifty shivs. That buys you no questions." Kam paid by sliding the shivs across the counter..

Forty-five minutes later, the vendor handed him a long, narrow blade, reshaped from the kitchen knife. "Stiletto. Fast and accurate," he said, sliding it into a leather sheath. "The cover's tight. Give it time, it'll fit like a glove." Kam belted it to his back.

The clock was ticking. Less than an hour before the corpo dogs came sniffing.

He shut his eyes. Took a breath. And walked south. Disappearing into the stack. Into the myth.