



## CHAPTER 1: Multibox Blues

The cold bites at his extremities as he lays on the stoop of the massive multibox, one of many in this hood. Huge towers packed full of apartments, everyday normal people who make up this slum of the city.

After the governments fell and the corporations took over, natural resources were burned through faster than the planet could keep up. It was our fault, and now we reap the consequences of our hunger for more. Small towns became legend. Now, cities span states, countries.

He shivers. The cherry glow of his cigarette is the only warmth he has. The neon lights that litter the ground level do nothing for the freezing masses on the street. They don't offer safety, they don't offer hope, all they do now is keep the desperate from sleeping.

He exhales smoke and hears the all-too-familiar hum above, low engines droning in the clouds. The corporations are watering the plants again. RainPlanes, passing overhead, dumping water to clean corporate windows and hydrate the rooftop flora that only the rich can afford. The rest of the city just gets wet. That's life in The Stack...getting pissed on by those high enough to do the pissing.

The cigarette's already-short life is cut shorter by the downpour, smoke curling into the air as it dies. He tosses the wet escape aside and digs into his pocket, pulling out the crumpled soft pack. Empty. He crushes it in his hand. Time to move, he hadn't eaten in a few days. The last of his shivs spent on cigarettes that felt more important than food.

Jade Rhade is a boy who calls himself a man. Seventeen. Born in The Stack. A lanky dark haired mess of a 'man,' with nothing but a tattered hoodie, cargo pants and shoes to his name. He never had a real home, but The Stack is his home. He's walked every street and squeezed through every alley

in this part of the city. It was always just him and his little sister, Gulie Rhade, now just him.

Jade looks at his wrist. His OcuLens Mk1 flickers in the corner of his vision, telling him what he already knows: skin temperature critical. No shit. It's freezing. And raining. At night. The OcuLens is standard trash tech the lowest-end HUD you can get implanted. More than half the lower city has one. The deeper down you go, the more jank the tech becomes. His barely works, but it's enough to know he's alive. And cold.

He glances up, rain pelting the hood of his jacket as his emerald eyes were assaulted by the neon lights of the buildings. Then he steps off the stoop and into the dirty street. The water's cold. The night is colder. His hoodie's thin. The pain keeps him moving, the hunger gives purpose.

The BizStreetz were alive in that dead kind of way like a rotting animal still twitching. It stretched for blocks, half open-air flea market, half failing mall, buried between concrete spires and blast-shielded towers. Tarps flapped in acid-drizzled wind. Makeshift stalls spilled into the walkway, selling old tech guts, protein gunk on skewers, bootleg stim packs, and FeelBear guts scraped for resale.

Jade kept his hood low, shoulders hunched.

Junkies lined the edges, huddled near rusted heat vents. Most were smeared in old tattoos and glowing IV scars. One was jabbing a needle full of pink haze straight into his synth-arm. Another stared at a FeelBear head, whispering to it like it could talk back, the kind of mania too much EmoStim causes.

Cyberfreaks strutted past in jagged chrome, too much augmentation, not enough sanity. One guy had no lower jaw, just a voicebox mod wired to his throat that coughed out auto-tuned laughs. These people were engineering mad scientists, clashing mods together or building them from scrap. Each one, brilliantly insane.

Tankos bounced through in flocks, shaved heads, neon tongues, AR rave goggles blasting private sets, everything from classical music like Aphex

Twin and Flashbulb to new joints like Gritch and Saint Motherboard. They pulsed with kinetic mods, always dancing to music no one else could hear. Their jackets buzzed with shifting patterns: QR graffiti, animated porn loops, janky lofi idols.

Pressers crawled on benches and between stalls, glazed eyes glowing from full-web addiction. Their faces were covered in cheap holo-masks made of stolen anime girls, glitching VTuber overlays, or corrupted cat filters. One was live-streaming a mukbang with an empty bowl.

Gangers posted at corners, static as statues wrapped in colors, totems, circuit-painted vests. They didn't speak unless they had to. Just watched. One tagged a wall with an electric stencil as Jade passed. Another scratched tally marks into their own arm with a mono-blade.

Above it all, the rich glided past, clean and untouchable.

While Jade shoved through crowds of body heat, piss steam, and vendor smoke, the corpos cruised in glass-skinned rail cars strung between towers like veins. They connected the upper floors of mega-structures, no need to ever touch the street.

Hovercars blinked past overhead, their engines whispering like ghosts, never stopping in the hood. Why would they? The ground was where you earned poverty, where the city spit its leftovers.

“Sky ain’t free,” Jade muttered to himself, watching another hovercar vanish into the fog. “Those Corpzes built their heaven right on top of our rot.”

He kept moving, stomach tight, scanning for any stall that might be looking for a runner. Then something caught his eye, a sealed bag lying in the gutter.

Too clean. Plastic unstained by the street. Inside was a plush bear with wide, glassy eyes, red Yamani Co. logo embedded in its chest.

A young kid in tattered clothes darted out from behind a heat vent, snatched it, and disappeared.

Jade froze. For a second, the cold rain was gone, replaced by a slow burn in his chest. He pulled his hood lower and kept walking. Not his problem. Not today. But the image stuck, stubborn and unwelcome, riding with him toward wherever his feet were taking him.

Down here, public buses wheezed and groaned, packed with workers crammed into stained seats, half the passengers still plugged into feedscans or crying kids. The buses didn't hover. They crawled on crumbling mag-rails barely maintained by whoever hadn't quit yet.

Jade had walked today. Not out of pride. He just didn't have enough clicks left on his wristchip for fare. Still, he walked like he had purpose.

He stopped at a stall for a second, half-curious, where a seller hawked "Emotion Packs" sealed in vials. Each labeled: *Courage*, *Bliss*, *Closure*. Jade picked up one labeled "Home" and turned it in his hand. The seller smiled with too many teeth. His hand tightened around it for a second.

The vendor grinned, teeth too sharp, too white. "Missing something?"

Jade stared. "Just remembering I never had it."

He set the vial down and walked on with the kind of walk that keeps people from asking more.

The market buzzed behind him. Neon. Noise. Grime. People. Systems. All of it chewing itself. His stomach grumbling, tank's on empty just fumes left.

He makes his way through the junk labyrinth, not looking to buy, he never has the cash. The scent of burned oil, wet tarp, and frying garbage clings to the air.

He passes a familiar sounding vendor mid-argument with a customer. A grin sneaks across Jade's face as he slows down, eavesdropping. "Look, ikker, this finger mod is at least fifteen shivs," the vendor snaps. "Look, fatso, I don't have time for this. I only got clicks," the customer fires back.

Shivs, physical coin, greasy and real. The kind old-timers cling to like it means something. Clicks, digital credit, transmitted by a handshake.

The vendor shakes his head. "I'm no Ikker. I'm all human. I don't take clicks so I guess you ain't gettin' fingered today." The customer flips him off and jabs his middle finger right in the vendor's face. "How's that for fingered, you hoom?" he growls, storming off in a fit of rage. Jade chuckles. He turns to see the vendor's back turned, gently placing the lock-picking finger mod back in its cracked plastic case. "Hey Hoom, got any spare clicks?" The vendor spins around, ready to explode. "Look here, ikker, I will beat your fu—" Then he sees who it is. "Call me a hoom again, Jade, and I will break my foot off in your ass," he says with a grin. Jade walks up and rests his arms on the table, eyeing the dusty display of black market implants, the whole stall looking like it's held together by chewing gum and hope.

In the sprawl, nobody cares about skin color, gender, or flags anymore those old-world battles were buried under megablocks and corporate doctrine. Now, there's only one real split left: Hooms and Ikkers.

Hooms are the purists. Unaugmented. Raw. Flesh-only humans. They don't just avoid tech, they *refuse* it. Living artifacts of the analog age. Some call them the new Amish, but they call themselves "Trueborn." No mods, no implants, no interference. Just blood, bone, and belief. Ikkers, the slur came from the Hooms, are the opposite. The ones who chose to evolve. Or degrade, depending on who you ask. Augmented.

The line isn't clean. Some grounders walk both worlds, hiding jacks behind scars or using only minor mods to survive. But the culture war is real. And down here, nobody forgets what side you're on.

"What's the news, Tolie? Got any work this week?" Tolie, proud 'upstanding' dealer of fine, questionably-functioning cybernetic parts, shakes his head. "Sorry, kid. Ain't got anything this week, 'fraid."

He sits back on a stool, rubbing his knee. Jade watches a twitch of age and pain under the man's skin, gray hair hanging low over tired eyes. "You know, Tolie... I never got it. You need a new knee," Jade points to the cybernetic augment on the table, "You have a new knee. It's got a damn strobe light built in for high-vis running. You sell implants... but you won't use them on yourself. Doesn't make sense, old man." Tolie lets out a gravelly chuckle,

nodding slowly. "You kids wouldn't understand. Back in my day, we could see the sky. Smell flowers. Climb trees. There's something about staying pure to our nature that is... well, it's natural."

Jade's stomach rumbled, he held it for a brief moment before looking up to Tolie. The disappointment of no work from one of the few that kept their end and paid. Jade gave a single nod to Tolie, "Well, thanks anyway old man. I gotta hit up the rest of the regulars to see if I can run something. If I don't get something in me soon I might not be able to run anything."

Tolie shakes his head, thinking to himself, *'Softie, can't save all these kids...'* He reaches under the counter and pulls out a small black box, sliding it toward Jade. "Look, kid. I know you gotta eat. So how about this, run this down the street to that school. Find that cracked-out teacher, Jimmy Holmes. He owes me thirty shivs for it. You can keep the shivs. Save my old ass the walk." He smirks. "Hell, he prepaid ninety for it, and I found the damn thing in a dumpster two weeks ago."

Jade laughs. "You really are an asshole, old man... Overcharging for literal trash." He picks up the box and gives a sarcastic curtsy. "Till we meet again, Lord Hoom." Tolie flips him off without looking up.

Jade turns and vanishes into the drizzle, making his way toward the public school, a black box in hand and thirty shivs waiting at the other end.

Stepping out of BizStreet, Jade dug into his jacket pocket for a cigarette, only to remember he'd smoked the last one and tossed the softpack. He let out a bitter sigh. A drag would've hit just right.

"At least I've got some Shivs coming. Could score a few packs and a solid meal..." he muttered.

Right then, a loud, erratic whirring cut through the air. A janky, slapped-together drone dropped from above like a steel vulture. Jade hit the ground on instinct, limbs going slack as the thing buzzed past his face with inches to spare.

The impact knocked the wind out of him and the box from his grip.

Before he could curse, three Cyberfreaks burst from a side alley like scavengers. The leader snatched the box without slowing down and disappeared into another alley, the others close behind.

Jade blinked. One breath. Two. Rage already boiling over.

Getting jumped was one thing. But letting punks jack his delivery? Unforgivable. If word got out he let himself get mugged without a fight, no one would ever trust him to run jobs again.

Jade sprang to his feet without bothering to brush off the grime. No time for that. He broke into a sprint, legs tight, burning with effort.

He squeezed his right eye shut, *click*. The HUD flared to life in the dark behind his eyelid, green glyphs dancing in the void. He zeroed in on the Runner High protocol, a cheap, sketchy booster Tolie sold him last year to help push longer runs and rack up more Shivs as a transporter.

Questionable code, barely patched, borderline illegal. Probably unstable.

His eye snapped open. The world sharpened. Speed surged through him.

Down the alley, he spotted the freaks just as they veered left toward the old warehouse district.

Jade's breathing evened out, deep and efficient, every inhale optimized. The nanomachines from the 'runner's high' protocol kicked in, redistributing oxygen more efficiently through his system. His legs pulsed, newfound strength working muscles into overdrive.

They had a head start. But he was gaining.

He chased them down the block, weaving through alleys slick with rain and shadow. But his edge was short-lived, they were faster, their bodies laced with high-grade augments. Better nanotech than his bargain-bin booster.

If there was an opposite of a Hoom, it was a Cyberfreak.



Jade slowed as he watched them slip into a crumbling, abandoned warehouse. From inside came flickers of bright light, welding arcs, the clatter of metal on metal echoing loudly.

He crept up to the barn-style doors and peered through a crack. Cyberfreak nest.

The space pulsed with raw energy, a junk cathedral of wire, rust, and madness. At its center stood a towering totem of scrap: limbs, eyes, exosockets, cables stitched together like a tribute to chaos. Around it, scattered workstations buzzed with activity. Cyberfreaks hunched over warped tables, soldering, sawing, muttering, crafting new abominations from spare parts and fried tech.

And there, by a rusted scaffold, stood the three freaks who jacked his box. Laughing. Tossing it between them like a toy.

That box was food. Smokes.

Jade's fists clenched. No way he was walking away empty.

Jade crouched low and crept into the warehouse, staying in the shadows as he circled around the towering deus-ex altar of welded tech and mutilated machines. So far, so good.

Until a strange beeping cut through the air. He froze.

From behind a pile of rusted junk, a small mech-dog shuffled into view. It skittered forward on uneven legs, its chassis stitched together with scraps of metal and frayed cables. A glowing visor flickered red where eyes should be. It barked a distorted screech, like a dial-up modem being tortured.

Jade winced. He moved fast, stomping down hard. The robo-mutt let out a warped whine, static fizzing from its mouth before it shorted out with a crackle. Then silence.

He looked up expecting every head to turn, alarms to blare. But nothing. Not a single Cyberfreak reacted.

They were locked in, lost in their work, muttering to themselves, trying to coax life into their Frankenstein augments. Sparks flew. Screws dropped. Flesh merged with steel.

The three freaks with his box had finally stopped playing catch. The biggest one held it to his one remaining human ear and gave it a shake, listening like a kid with a mystery gift.

Screw stealth. Jade bolted forward, weaving between crates and tech-altars, closing the distance with reckless speed. Stealth was dead. This was war.

As he ran, he reached out and snatched a rusted pipe from one of the countless junk heaps gripping it tightly.

His shoes squeaked against the filthy cement. The pipe felt heavy and righteous in his grip and he was ready to go down swinging.

Not for the creds. Not for his next meal. Not even for his rep as a transporter.

But because... why the hell not? When you've got nothing to live for, risk isn't a cost, it's currency.

He raised his voice, a growl cutting through the din of welding and humming aug-rigs:

“Look here, you wire-for-brains freak-os. I'm delivering that box to my client. And if I gotta bash in every ugly face in this dump to do it? That's just a bonus.”

The largest Cyberfreak, the one holding the box, turned with a whirl of servo-motors, his voice glitching through a throat-mounted speaker:

“We saw... *static*... you take this from the old... *beep*... Hoom who sells the augs... Let’s see what we... *beep*... got here.”

A metal finger twitched, then unfolded into a thin blade extending from beneath the synthetic nail with a crisp *shink*. He ran it along the box’s seal, slicing it clean, then popped the lid and upended the contents.

All eyes locked onto the prize as it tumbled to the ground. A FeelBear. Fresh. Unbagged. Wide-eyed. But wrong.

No Yamani Corp logo stamped on its belly. No serial ID burn. Just smooth, clean fur and a dead-eyed stare that seemed to look right through them.

The Cyberfreaks leaned in, joy flickered into confusion and disappointment.

Even they knew: this wasn’t standard issue but it sure as hell wasn’t an augment that they could tinker with.

Jade gripped the pipe tight and then hurled it. It spun through the air and cracked the biggest Cyberfreak square in the face with a satisfying clang, cutting off his confusion with a metallic groan.

While the freaks reeled, Jade dove in.

He slid between them, snatching the FeelBear off the floor in one fluid motion. The pivot was instinct. Years of tight corners and bad deals. His shoes scraped against the concrete as he turned and booked it for the exit.

Behind him, the Cyberfreak who’d taken the box let out a garbled cry, half pain, half rage. But Jade was already gone.

He hit the doors, burst through them, and didn’t stop, not until the flicker of neon signs swallowed him back into the city haze.

He tossed a middle finger over his shoulder, shouting with that crooked grin of his:

“Catch ya later! Maybe next time get steel balls installed before taking me on!”

The street swallowed the sound of their howls as he vanished into the sprawl. Cargo secured. Pride intact. For once, he didn’t lose.

Once Jade had put enough distance between himself and the warehouse he didn’t hear the clank of steel feet trailing behind, he slowed to a jog, then finally to a walk. His Runner High had burned out long ago. Great for short bursts. Useless for the long haul.

As he caught his breath, he passed rows of the forgotten: people huddled in broken old-world cars, buried in the filth of the streets. Others curled inside makeshift tents stitched from billboard vinyl, ripped canvas tarp and scavenged plastic.

This? This was familiar.

## CHAPTER 2: Schoolhouse Lost

Jade never stayed in one place too long. Street kids learned quick: if someone can find you, they can hurt you. So these scattered camps, these temporary corners, they weren’t just part of the scenery. They were home.

The adrenaline from his warehouse stunt finally faded, leaving him clear-headed and aware.

He needed an upgrade. More metal in the skin. More edge in the fight.

But augments cost. First, he’d need a real gig. Then maybe he could afford some of Tolie’s discount mods. And if he was lucky, Tolie might even hook

him up with a decent fleshwelder who wouldn't leave a servo sticking out the side of his damn arm.

Jade looked around, getting his bearings after the whole ordeal.

A cracked speaker mounted on a light pole screamed an ad for "FeelBear: Because You Deserve to Be Held" before skipping and rewinding on loop.

Jade looked up, those drug riddled toys. LovDust is a mild neuromodulator, engineered to subtly reshape emotional pathways, bonding a child's affection to their FeelBear complete with Yamani's glowing logo stitched proudly into its chest. The drug was dusted onto the fur and packed into the stuffing, and each bear came with a tiny speaker that emitted a soothing white noise at a frequency only children could hear.

It was marketed as harmless and approved, of course, by Yamani's own regulatory board. But the real intent was clear: make children loyal. Hook them early. Addicted kids grow into addicted adults, and addicted adults don't ask questions, especially not about why the only real light they ever see is what slips through the cracks between megablocks.

He looked up hearing a buzzing noise that overtook the advertisement speaker.

A trio of MotoRogue Corp drones zipped overhead, their cargo pods dangling beneath them like steel fruit. Destination: nowhere Jade cared about.

Then came the Yamani Corp flyers. And right on cue, buzz battle.

The sky lit up with bursts of low-caliber fire as both fleets locked into a territorial skirmish. One of the cargo pods took a hit, cracked mid-air, and spilled its contents with a crash into the street.

The sleeping stirred. The awake ones sprinted. A crowd of desperate hands scrambled for the crate, tearing it open and clawing through whatever was

inside. Could be food, meds, cheap tech or just shredded promo merch. Didn't matter. It was *something*.

Jade didn't bother. Not worth getting trampled.

He kept walking, the sound of gunfire and humming rotors fading behind him as four Yamani drones tangled with three MotoRogues in the air above.

Eventually, he reached it: The school. A squat, three-story block wedged between two multiboxes like a tumor.

He stopped and stared.

Memories crept in, ghosts of childhood, the scraps of "education" he'd gotten. There were no math classes. No history. No art. School now was just prep for factory work or petri-labs. How to grow *MillMeat*. How to harvest *LactoJam*. How to tighten servo clamps and debug production bots.

If you were smart, really smart, they might funnel you into a c-school. You'd learn how to train AIs, manipulate workers, maybe even run ops from one of the upper floors. Jade wasn't that lucky.

He sighed, shook his shoulders, and started up the stairs. Near the top, Jade paused a moment and glanced back at the street. Quiet.

No Biz. No gangers. No patrols. Just silence.

It was rare. Peaceful, even.

He relaxed on the stoop, leaning his head back against the wall.

"Might as well get some zeros and ones... no one's gonna be here till morning," he muttered trying to ignore the cramping in his gut.

He pulled his hood up, zipped his hoodie tight with the FeelBear tucked safely inside, and let sleep take him.

The sound of laughter and stomping feet stirred him.

Jade cracked one eye open as a swarm of kids moved past him, barely noticing him, just another street waster taking up space. He stretched, rubbing the rested stiffness from his neck.

The sky overhead hadn't changed still just dim shades of gray. The megastructures towering around the school kept sunlight out of reach.

He stood and watched puddles as children splashed through them, chasing each other into the building playfully. Cynical as he was, even Jade couldn't help but admire the beauty of ignorance.

He turned towards the door.

Inside, the atrium was buzzing with students hurried off into different halls. He kept his hood up, eyes scanning for AI patrols or robotic guards. None visible yet. Not that he was worried, at seventeen, his frame passed for a student easily enough.

At the center of the atrium, four datapad terminals stood arranged in a square. He stepped up to one, booted it with a thumb tap, and began typing:

JIMMY HOLMES

A blue loading ring spun on the cracked screen before flickering into a readout:

Jimmy Holmes  
Corporate Ideology 101  
Room 291, Floor 1  
Class: NOT IN SESSION

A few seconds later, the screen blinked to standby mode.

Jade shook his head.

“Corporate Ideology, huh... sounds like the kinda douche who’d drop 120 Shivs on a FeelBear.”

He scanned the halls and spotted the markings above one corridor:

HALL C: Rooms 200–400.

Bingo.

He merged with the flow of students and started walking. The lights above buzzed, and the hum of machinery echoed faintly through the walls. Room numbers grew one after another. 265, 274, 281...

Finally, after what felt like an unnecessarily long walk, he found it:

Room 291, he pushed the door open and stepped inside.

Jade glanced around the room, eyes flicking over a patchwork of corporate posters lining the walls each one repping a sponsor of the school, each one selling something toxic in a prettier box.

Yamani was plastered front and center, pushing their FeelBears and that glossy pharma line called EmoPacks, a laundry list of vein-invading mood drugs with cutesy names and nasty side effects. Glojo had ads for mass-market firearms and their “domestic peacekeeper” bots, all grinning chrome and red optics. Hawkline pushed hovercars, flashy promos of their sky rail lines, and even some retro-look wheelers for the poor still stuck on pavement.

Plenty more corps had their claws in other blocks, other cities, but these three were the heavy hitters in The Stack.

On the board, a map of what used to be Alaska, now just another city-sized monolith. The Stack took up the whole damn state, creeping well into what was once called Canada. Where forests used to breathe, concrete now choked the land.



Then Jade's eyes landed on the man behind the desk.

Jimmy Holmes, Junkie. Teacher in name only. Hunched over, eyes twitching, skin slick with sweat. Probably riding a chemical high straight into orbit.

Jimmy looked up and blinked at him. "Naw, kiddo. This my off period. You go on to your assigned class now. I gotta eat my... lunch. Yeah, lunch. Who sent you in here? You here to take my lunch?!"

Jade spotted a full EmoPack on the desk, label blurred. But one empty blister pack was easy to read: *Paranoia*. Figures. Jimmy looked halfway through his midday meal already.

Jade smirked. "Hell of a lunch you got there, waster."

Jimmy growled, pupils flexing. "How *dare* you speak to me that way, you little shit. You're gonna be in so much trouble."

Jade shrugged. "Naw. I'm not your student, Jim-bo. Tolie sent me, here to collect those shivs."

Jimmy froze. Then his eyes lit up. "Tolie? That old hoom who can find anything in the city? Shit yeah! I prepaid for that, gimme it! Hurry, before someone sees."

Jade reached into his jacket, hand closing on the plush. "Sure. But you owe me thirty for delivery. And with this drop, your debt with Tolie's cleared."

He pulled the FeelBear free and tossed it onto the desk. It landed with a soft thunk next to the twitching EmoPack blister.

Jade sighed. Dealing with a 'Noia-addled moron was always a *blast*.

Jimmy's joy vanished in a blink. He stared at the bear...Then snapped.

"The *fuck* is this?! I said sealed! This ain't sealed! You trying to screw me? You *kennew* what I was gonna sell it for!"

Jade stepped back, arms raised. “Whoa, whoa, my guy. Ain’t like that. I got jumped, you’re lucky I got the damn bear out at all and kept my augs.”

Jimmy’s jaw clenched. “Your *augs*? You should’ve *died* to keep this sealed! This was my *ticket*! I had a buyer lined up with MotoRogue for a sealed, experimental line FeelBear. *Sealed! Sealed! SEALED!*”

He grabbed the bear and hurled it to the floor, stomping on it like a toddler mid-tantrum.

“They were gonna pay enough to get me outta The Stack, a real corp box apartment, smack in the middle of New Mexi-fornia. You—”

Jimmy turned on Jade, eyes twitching harder now, stepping forward. “You knew it all along...”

Jade shoved him back. “Back *off*, waster. You took too much ‘Noia and now you’re makin’ shit up. Sure, I didn’t keep it sealed, but I still got it to you. I deserve at least half the payout.”

Jimmy stumbled, catching himself on his desk. His hand grabbed a holotablet and launched it.

The throw was wild, overshooting Jade completely and smashing through the door’s glass panel. The tablet shattered on the tile outside with a metallic crack. A beep and single warning siren blasted down the hall.

Jimmy grinned. “You ain’t getting *shit* but a one-way ticket outta here, you street rat.”

Jade didn’t even have time to curse. Heavy footfalls slammed down the hall, metal on tile.

The door hissed open, and in stepped two RoboGuards, bronze and silver armored frames, green scanning lasers flickering over his body.

“ERROR: No student record found.

DIRECTIVE: REMOVE UNWANTED INDIVIDUAL.”

“Shit.”

Jade lunged toward Jimmy. “Give me my shivs, man! I fought hard for that! I *need* that shit!”

But the guards moved fast. Thick, servo-powered arms clamped down on his shoulders with brutal precision. He thrashed, tried to twist free, but the machines didn’t feel pain, didn’t hesitate, didn’t care.

They dragged him backward through the hallway as he kicked and yelled, voice rising to a garbled mix of threats and fury.

“YOU OWE ME, JIMMY! I’M GONNA RIP YOUR GODDAMN HEAD OFF AND TAKE WHAT’S MINE!” Jade yelled knowing he couldn’t keep running jobs on an empty tank or the escape of a smoke.

By the time they hit the school’s front doors, Jade was still flailing, until the guards *hurled* him.

He sailed through the air and crashed onto the sidewalk with a loud, wet *thud*, pain shooting through his ribs as he gasped for breath.

“WARNING: Do not enter corporate buildings without proper authorization. Have a good day, citizen.”

The doors slid shut behind them with a hiss as the guards turned and walked back inside.

Jade writhed in pain, rolling onto his side with a groan. He turned his back to the school, ribs screaming with every breath. His vision swam, blurred at the edges then sharpened, slowly pulling the world back into focus.

The street stretched out before him the cracked walkways, tents of tattered synthfabric clinging to the edges like tumors. Homeless camps curled

around rusting skeletons of old-world cars, retired railcars left to rot on concrete beds. The usual ruins.

But something caught his eye.

A rare sight, a working black box van sat parked nearby, glossy and silent. On the side: the red circle and thick Y of the Yamani Corporation. No mistaking that mark, it was stamped on everything from painkillers to playthings.

Jade scoffed. Probably dropping off “school books” which were really just corporate pamphlets dressed up like education, full of smiling kids and product placement.

He pushed himself up, knees trembling as he staggered upright. Everything hurt, ribs, back, pride. Worse, he was still hungry. And thanks to Jimmy's freakout, he was still broke.

The van's rear door clanged open.

Five figures stepped out, clad in black tactical gear, each one marked with the Yamani logo. Not delivery drivers. Definitely not teachers.

Jade narrowed his eyes. This wasn't a book drop.

One of them, the one with a single red stripe running down his back, barked orders, “Get this setup, we gotta get rid of this bullshit stock”. The rest pulled a folding table from the van and set it up curbside. A printed sign unfurled and clipped to the front:

“FREE TO THE GOOD BOYS AND GIRLS OF OUR SCHOOL.”

Jade blinked, then scoffed.

*Nothing* was free in The Stack. Not a single goddamn thing. And if something *was* free, it sure as hell wouldn't come from a corporation.

He watched as they pulled out clear plastic bags, dozens of them, each one stuffed with freshly sealed FeelBears. The air almost glittered with the chemical haze still clinging to the plastic. He saw how carefully the workers handled each one, the careful care of the bears but not of the children's lives.

LovDust. That's what they were preserving, the slow-burn cocktail baked into the fur of the bear, meant to mellow a kid into compliance. Jade had seen it too many times. Smile a little wider. Cry a little softer. Learn to say *thank you, Yamani*.

But something was wrong.

Jade's eyes narrowed as he stepped a little closer. The seals.

Each bag had a thick black line running across the top, faint, almost an afterthought. But Jade knew exactly what that line meant.

His stomach dropped. Blacklines.

Not just any FeelBears..*those* FeelBears. The ones from the experimental run. The ones they claimed had been "recalled." The ones that killed his sister.

Yamani had introduced an experimental neural stabilizer 'Slothinall' into the LovDust formula. Side effect? Death.

Children began dropping days after the newest models hit the streets. The drug seeped into the brainstem, overloading their undeveloped neural networks. The heart kept beating, but the mind was gone.

His breath caught in his throat. The noise of the city fell away.

All he could see were those bears, lined up in neat little rows. Innocent. Soft. Deadly.

And just like that, memory surged up and swallowed him whole and dragging him back to one of the worst days of his life. Back to the arcade.

It wasn't much. Just a half-lit bunker crammed with flickering machines and stale air, but for a kid with only a few cliks to his name and a sister to protect, it was paradise. He'd scrounged enough for food, barely, and what little he had left, he spent here, for her.

She lit up the second they walked in. The neon glow of the screens reflected in her eyes, casting joy across a face far too used to disappointment. She was nine. Jade was fifteen. Both old enough to be broken, young enough to still pretend they weren't.

He remembered her voice small, excited, and pleading: *"Can I get a FeelBear? Just one? Please?"*

He'd known better.

He knew what LovDust was. What it *did*. But in that moment, all he saw was a kid who deserved to feel something good. To be normal, just for a few minutes.

So he nodded. And he was the one who placed his hand on the prize machine. He was the one who fed it the cliks. He was the one who paid for her death.

The bear dropped into the slot with a cheery jingle. Neither of them noticed the faint black stripe on the seal. Why would they? It was just a toy.

She hugged it tight, burying her face in its synthetic fur as the drug dispersed. The squeeze triggered the internal speaker, a high-frequency tone only she could hear. She let out a happy sigh and took his hand.

They walked home like everything was okay.

Home was a gutted-out railcar on the roadside, rusted and left to rot. Jade had reinforced it with scrap, painted the inside, turned it into something

resembling shelter. That night, he cooked what little food he could, told her to study for school like any tired parent trying to hold a crumbling world together.

The next day, Gulie seemed... off.

Sluggish. Distant. Eyes dull.

He chalked it up to bad sleep. Who wouldn't toss and turn in a busted railcar during a Stack night? He didn't think much of it. Didn't want to.

But she got worse.

Each day chipped away a little more. She forgot where she was. Who she was. Who *he* was.

Her laugh vanished. Her eyes went glassy. Her words started to slur, then disappear entirely.

He begged for help, what little pride he had, gone. A few adults he barely trusted, old contacts who maybe owed him something, they shrugged or looked away. He had no creds for a doctor. No favors left to pull. And nobody gave away meds unless there was a camera and a PR team watching.

So he stayed. Watched.

Watched his little sister unravel. Watched the light leave her, day by day, as her mind slipped beyond reach.

And then, on the fifth night... she just never woke up.

She breathed. Her heart still beat. But she was gone, trapped in her body like a ghost behind glass.

He tried everything. Dripped water into her mouth. Cleaned her, held her, whispered her name like maybe it would reach her wherever she was. But her body was burning through what little was left. Starving. Shaking. Dying.

And he couldn't stop it.

She was in pain, not screaming, just suffering, silent and still. A husk of the bright girl who once danced in the glow of arcade lights.

Jade stood over her at the end, shaking, helpless, broken.

Tears streamed down his cheeks, falling on her tiny, wasted frame. He'd done everything he could. And it hadn't been enough.

It would never be enough.

Now, in the present, his head jerked back like he'd been punched. He sucked in a breath and snapped out of it. Eyes tearing up.

The street was still there. So were the FeelBears. Neatly sealed. Lined up like candy.

His fists clenched. Those bears, *those* FeelBears, had killed his sister.

And Yamani was giving them out for free. Jade clenched his fists.

He couldn't. He just couldn't let them get away with this.

His whole body trembled, not from rage alone, but from fear. He knew this was a fight he couldn't win. The odds were stacked higher than the damn city. But that didn't matter. Winning wasn't the point. It was about making them *hurt*. Making them remember him. Making Guile count.

He forced himself forward, knees wobbling, nerves fried. His voice cracked as he shouted across the pavement, raw and defiant:

*"Those are Blacklines! What the fuck do you think you're doing?! You know what those things do to kids! They were recalled!"*

The men paused mid-movement, glancing up with the disinterest of people being interrupted by a passing gnat.



Jade stood tall, or tried to, fists clenched at his sides, eyes glassy with tears he refused to let fall. Every instinct told him to run. But he held his ground. Even if it killed him.

The leader, the one with the red stripe, turned toward him and sighed. Told the others to keep working. Then walked over slowly, like he had all the time in the world.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, kid,” he said, voice thick with contempt. “It’s just the bags. We’re reusing them. These are clean stock. A reward for all the hard work this school’s done. Be grateful.”

His tone was dripping with condescension, the voice of someone who saw Jade as filth. Just another broken part of the city to step over.

Jade’s breath hitched and then instinct took over.

He shoved past the man, stormed to the table, and kicked it hard.

The display toppled, sealed bags scattering across the pavement like spilled candy. For a second, there was silence.

Then the crack. A sudden, brutal snap of metal against flesh.

The baton hit behind his knee, fast and precise, and Jade buckled instantly. The pain surged through his leg like fire. He hadn’t even seen the leader move.

Was that an aug? *Had* to be. No one was that fast.

He hit the ground hard, clutching his leg as he tried not to scream. Behind him, the man grinned.

“Joe, fix that mess. The rest of you...” A pause.

“Let’s show this little shit why he should be in school instead of fucking with us.”

The other four closed in. Jade tried to stand. Tried to backpedal. But there was no point.

Metal-toed boots slammed into his ribs, his back, his legs. Over and over. Precision mixed with cruelty. He curled into himself, arms wrapped tight around his gut, trying to protect something, anything.

But the pain just kept coming. A crack to the spine. A boot to the face. Blood in his mouth. He couldn't breathe.

Then the silence. A hand raised in the air. The leader again.

"Next time, kid... keep your mouth shut and keep walking. Be smart."

And then the final blow. A boot across the face. White light. Then nothing.