

PRIVATE

A SHORT STORY FROM THE CYBERPUNK GUS UNIVERSE

MIKE ROBI



Private Liam Olsen was lanky, lightly cyber-augmented, with fire-red hair and a complexion so pale it practically glowed under the van's weak cabin light. A fresh recruit to Yamani Security Forces, barely out of boot, he sat stiff-backed on the bench of the patrol van, ground level. The shocks did their best, but the road tore through them with every rut and sinkhole of The Stack.

He gripped his vest. It wasn't high-end armor, just the thin composite shell the company issued him. His only real protection. Around his feet sat sealed black plastic bags and a folded white table latched against the van's rear. Gear ready for a good old fashion display.

First mission. He was told it was nothing dangerous. A public relations run. Community interaction.

The brakes hit hard. Bodies swayed right, then left as the van jolted to a full stop.

The rear door swung open. Lieutenant Peter Josee hopped out like he was stepping into a warzone. "Get this setup, we gotta get rid of this bullshit stock."

Liam scrambled. Bag in hand, he stepped into the filth-soaked concrete jungle of the streets, taking in the grime and flickering neon for the first time in his life. He grew up on the fiftieth level of a Yamani-owned multibox, rooftop bio-farm, private c-school, filtered air. Now here.

How the hell do people live like this? he wondered.

"Move it!" the lieutenant barked.

Liam dug through the bag and pulled out one of the Yamani FeelBear toys, still sealed. They were soft, synthetic, smiling. Innocent. A tag on the table read: 'FREE TO THE GOOD BOYS AND GIRLS OF OUR SCHOOL'.

Across the street stood a c-school, but it looked more like a prison. Concrete walls, cracked windows, no filters.

He started lining the toys up in neat rows. A shout rang out behind him, then a scuffle.

Liam turned just in time to see a ragged kid in a torn hoodie shove past him and kick the table clean over. Bears spilled across the mud.

The lieutenant didn't hesitate. His baton cracked against the back of the kid's knee.

"Joe, fix that mess." Peter barked to one private. "The rest of you..." A pause. "Let's show this little shit why he should be in school instead of fucking with us."

Liam stood frozen as the three other soldiers rushed in, boots and fists flying. He felt sick. This wasn't what he signed up for.

He wanted a future with Amelia. A place of his own. A life outside his mother's home. Security was supposed to be a stepping stone. Respectable. Stable. Instead, here he was watching grown men beat a kid half to death.

He forced himself forward. Lifted his leg. Kicked. But softly. Just enough to pass in the eyes of his commanding officer.

Peter Josee brought his boot down hard across the boy's face. "Next time, kid... keep your mouth shut and keep walking. Be smart," The kid went limp. "You! Trash belongs with trash," he muttered after the kid passed out pointing to Liam.

Liam knelt, cradled the kid's body. Carefully, he carried him to the side of the building across the street and laid him atop some bags, anything softer

than the sludge-caked street. He stroked the kid's hair. "Sorry, kid," he whispered.

The rest of the day passed in mechanical rhythm. They gave away the toys. The table was reset. Kids poured out of school. The bears disappeared. One was dropped in the mud and left behind. A few got trampled. Liam didn't speak.

The van carried them back to their temporary apartments. Unmarked buildings. Unloved furniture. Generic rations.

A week of patrols followed. Pistols on hips. Boots on pavement. Protect the vending machines. Protect the Yamani logos. The people didn't matter.

Most nights, Liam called Amelia on the holophone. She kept him grounded. He read comics. Watched Yamani streams. Zoned out.

Then he saw it, newsfeed footage of graffiti, of a teddy bear nailed to a school wall.

Then Peter's face, smirking with the anchor. "No, no. This is simply a misunderstanding. The wrong FeelBears were distributed. Yamani is in the process of destroying all blackline models. Just an unfortunate mistake."

Blackline? Liam searched the net on his holopad. And found it.

FeelBears, Model Blackline, laced with LovDust and Slothinol. Neural degradation. Brain death.

His stomach flipped. *Oh God. Is that what we gave those kids?* He wanted to puke.

His holophone rang, he answered. His mother's face appeared. "Hi, sweetie! How's evaluation going?"

He smiled the best he could, fighting back the anxiety and crushing defeat in his chest at the thought of those kids. “It’s great, Mom. We’re learning a lot. Can’t wait to get reassigned inside the multibox.”

They exchanged pleasantries. Carefully worded for a surely carefully monitored call.

When the call ended, Liam sat in silence.

Liam did more patrols, biding his time. Half-way through his evaluation. Patrol, just him and Lieutenant Josee.

Liam did everything right. Checked every branded drone. Scanned vending units. Reported to the cloud. Peter was bored, chain-smoking and making crude jokes.

They walked a block down from a shuttered noodle stall when a young couple crossed their path.

Peter’s eyes lit up. “STOP.”

The couple froze. The girl was pale, blonde, malnourished. The guy was short, with shaggy black hair and no augments. Hands up. Calm.

“Yes sir?” the boy asked.

Peter walked straight to the girl, his hand sliding around her waist. “Well, well, what’s a pretty thing like you doing down here?”

The boy stepped between them. Just as quickly as he stepped, Peter’s pistol rested against the underside of the boy’s jaw.

BANG.

The shot echoed through the alley. The boy dropped. Dead.

Liam shouted, “What the fuck?!”

Peter grinned as the girl ran, screaming. “Come back, baby!” he called after her. He turned back. “What?! Got something to say, newb?”

Liam straightened up. “Sir! No, sir!”

Peter laughed, stepping over the boy’s limp body. “Damn right.”

They walked silently through the remainder of the patrol, tension, at least on Liam’s part hanging thick in the air.

They returned to the apartments. Peter clapped him on the shoulder. “You did good today, kid. You’re gonna go far. Get some dinner in ya, and some sleep.” Then he disappeared into his room.

Liam stood alone in the hall, fists trembling. “Fuck this,” he whispered.

He stepped into his own room and immediately hit the holophone. Dialed Amelia. She answered. Her smile nearly shattered him.

He didn’t wait. Tears came fast. “I don’t know if I can do this, baby. I didn’t sign up for this. This isn’t who I am...” He sobbed into his hands, broken.

Amelia’s voice was soft, kind. “It’s okay, Liam. When you get home, we’ll look for other work. I don’t want you on those streets. It’s not worth it. I want you safe. You—”

The screen glitched. Then went black. A red message blinked up: *Call Disconnected.*

Amelia frowned and tried again, *Call Failed.* She tried five more times all with the same result.

She sighed, placing the holophone back on the table beside her. “He’ll call back tomorrow,” she murmured, thinking to herself. “*We’ll celebrate soon. He doesn’t even know I’m pregnant...*” She smiled, letting her mind wander and daydream of their future together. She curled up on the couch, hand resting over her belly. And slowly drifted to sleep.

