

SHELL SHOCKED



Ben Weidig

THE LEASEHOLD

Shell Shocked
The Leasehold, Book 1

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SHELL SHOCKED

01 ACTIVATION

Kira jolted awake to the skull-drilling shriek of the corpo-mandated chrono-unit, engineered to pierce even a stim-induced blackout. She pressed her temples as her left optic glitched. A jagged red line crawled across her HUD.

"Here we go again..."

Her leased "Citizen Utility Shell" whined as she sat up. A battered Series 3 fossil. Barely worth the lease, but just functional enough to keep her alive.

The ocular HUD flickered to life. The OmniGrid feed flooded Kira with a kaleidoscope of alerts and aggressive ads directly over her vision.

Alerts about outstanding lease payments, both for the tiny cubicle she reluctantly called "home" and her very shell.

Ads for MiraBiomedical's "Wake-Up!" stims promised focus she couldn't afford.

Then, a more urgent pop-up pulsed red:

WARNING:

NeuroCore sync degradation detected.

Severe bleed-through risk.

Full diagnostic recommended.

Deductible applies.

She snorted. "Like I can afford that."

Kira swiped it away with a mental twitch, the same as the last few mornings, exposing the real wall behind the noise.

Against the cracked plasti-crete, an illegal printout of a pre-Grid sun-drenched forest was taped. A minuscule, pathetic but personal act of defiance. The only thing that ever felt real.

The ration dispenser sputtered out a gray, vaguely sweet gel. A *NutriMax Standard Ration*, designed to keep this cheap shell functional without any concerns for the one in it. Real food was for *Organics* only anyway, and it was a luxury anatomy couldn't support anymore on this damaged worlds. She sucked down the gel, grimacing at its texture but not even bothering trying to taste it.

Her knees popped as she forced her shell upright.

"One more shift," Kira thought.

"One more day to stay ahead of the *Reapers*."

02 SECTOR 68

She pushed into the Sump's stale haze, heading for the *Civic Transfer Hub* in the Sector Annex.

No sun.

No sky.

Just the constant hiss of the Sump's recycled air and the distant thrum of security drones cutting through Sector 68.

The Sump's heartbeat, ugly and stubborn.

By the time she reached the facility, it was already overcrowded by countless "fossils" like herself. Coughing behind mismatched faceplates. Tremors under patched synth-skin. Empty stares through broken oculars.

One shell's vocalizer was stuck on a loop, endlessly repeating the last few words of a defaulted lease agreement:

"...is now property of CivisCore. Property of CivisCore. Property..."

A fight broke out somewhere behind. She didn't even bother turning. Unless there were property damage, the CiviEs wouldn't lift a finger. In a moment, a CiviEs drone would float over, not to break it up, but to scan the damage. Each cracked plate and severed synth-skin would be itemized, tallied, and logged as a new debt against their SoulIDs.

Here, a busted knuckle didn't earn you jail time.
It earned you an invoice.

"Why is it always slow when I'm late?" Kira muttered, tugging her Ute-3's worn collar tighter to shut out the noise.

A sudden hush cut through the murmur. Heavy boots, armored shapes. A Soul Reclamation Unit strode through the masses. Augmented forms and covered faces. The *Reapers* parted the crowd like skin under a scalpel.

A shiver ran down Kira's spine. Someone's lease had run dry.
Not her.

Not today.

03 TRANSFER SEQUENCE

At the booth, a bored CivisCore attendant scanned her SoulID:

SoulID: Kira 773-lambda-9.

Lease status: Current.

Barely.

She squeezed into a cracked transfer pod that reeked of old sweat, fear, and a thousand other consciousnesses. Her FleshJack port was scuffed and wobbled in its housing, synth-skin puckered and torn around it, making it hard to connect on the first try.

"God dammit, I can't even escape this borrowed coffin" she muttered as the port finally clicked.

Kira's HUD flickered more erratically than usual. A brief, jarring surge of alien data flooded her senses. Not the usual Sump-spam, but flashes of polished chrome, the scent of ozone, and a woman's clipped, authoritative voice.

Gone in an instant.

"Grid router glitch," she told herself to calm down, her heart thumping a little too fast. "Fucking Sump-level tech."

But something felt off as the transfer initiated.

For a moment, there was nothing. A cold hum in the void.

The transfer sequence completed, and she braced for the lurch into her work shell.

04 AWAKENING

No lurch. No familiar discomfort of her work shell or the Ute-3.

Instead, utter silence. The sealed-off, pristine tranquility felt almost threatening in its perfection.

Cool sheets against her skin, *real* skin, hypersensitive in ways she'd never experienced before.

"What the fuck...?"

She sat up No pain. No creaks.

Her limbs obeyed like liquid. Her vision crystal-clear, HUD lines elegant.

She lifted her hands: slender, unblemished, manicured, perfect.

Panic began to curdle in her stomach.

She stumbled toward the far wall that was... transparent. Floor-to-ceiling smart glass. Beyond it, the open sky, bruised with the rich colors of dawn. Raw sunlight splashed across the floor.

Not a simulation.

Not filtered garbage light.

Real.

"No... this isn't a glitch... this isn't some lease upgrade or high-end post-transfer recovery suite... Whose life is this?"

Shaking, she triggered a SoulID check.

Accessing SoulID Registry...

SoulID confirmed: Vesna 91.221-omega.

CivisCore Internal Security Division.

Clearance Level: Apex.

A calm, woman's synthesized voice bloomed warm in her skull, nothing like the cheap bot tone she knew. The HUD identified her as *JUNO*.

"Welcome back, Director Thorne."

BORROWED SKIN

05 PANIC PROTOCOL

Something was wrong. Horribly wrong.

Her heartbeat spiked. Cold panic crawled up her throat.

Was she erased?

Instinct screamed *run*.

She lunged for the door. Locked.

Next to it, a seamless obsidian panel demanded a security code she didn't know. She pounded on the door, raw screams tearing from a throat that felt too refined for such desperation. The apartment absorbed the noise with cold indifference.

No answer. No rescue. Nothing.

The only other way out was through the smart-glass windows. Even with their breathtaking view, they wouldn't budge an inch. And where would she go? Hundreds of meters straight down to Mid-Level.

"The Grid!" she gasped, a flicker of desperate hope. Maybe a digital escape hatch.

She tried the shell's wireless... no connection. The console on the desk was hard-wired. Worth a try.

Slender, unfamiliar fingers danced across the keyboard,

searching for a backdoor, *any* door, to the Grid. To send a message, *any* message, out into the void where she, *Kira Porter*, once existed.

The console answered with polite error chimes.

She was trapped in this perfect body. Trapped in this perfect prison.

06 CONTAINMENT

JUNO's calm voice sliced through her spiraling thoughts.

"Your vital signs indicate elevated stress levels approaching detrimental parameters. Shall I administer a cognitive sedative via the shell's integrated chem-dispenser to facilitate operational readiness?"

Drugged by her own prison. Despair washed over her as she collapsed onto the impossibly expensive chaise by the desk.

Screaming was useless. Fighting, even more so.

Kira's focus blurred. The room dissolved at the edges, sounds muffled. She retreated back into her mind, as it was the only thing left in her control. The shell kept breathing. A perfect automaton, indifferent to the screaming ghost within.

After a stretch of timeless silence, JUNO coaxed her back.

"Now that your vitals have stabilized, would you like to review today's agenda?"

The calm imposition of an "agenda" hit like a physical blow. It

dragged Kira out of her fugue like a fishhook.

"Agenda?"

"Director Thorne, your schedule indicates an emergency Board of Acquisitions meeting regarding the _ZeroTac integration commences in seventy-six standard minutes._ A grav-flyer will be dispatched momentarily."

"Meeting? Board? Zero... What? JUNO, what are you talking about?"

A sudden burst of adrenaline jolted Kira back to her feet. She paced the suite like a cornered animal.

"I can't... I'm not... her!"

She realized the voice wasn't even hers. It was Vesna's that rang in her ears. The irony stabbed deep.

For all practical purposes, you ARE Director Vesna Thorne, JUNO replied unbothered.

"Your SoulID confirms this. Your attendance is mandatory."

More words that felt utterly alien, a concern for a different species. Corporate intrigue. Board politics.

A spark of Kira's old Sump defiance flickered.

"Why should *I* care about any corporate vultures fighting for scraps of power?"

"Such behavior would invite scrutiny from rivals and CorpSec

alike."

"What scrutiny? JUNO, this shell... it's Vesna Thorne's. I get that now. But I'm not her... I'm a low-life Sump-Dweller," Kira pleaded with JUNO in a desperate attempt to have any agency over the dire situation.

"They'll know! What if they find out?"

A pause. For an AI, an eternity. Each syllable that followed was sharpened to a blade's edge.

"If an Apex tier operative, like Director Thorne, exhibits any significant deviation from established cognitive or performance baselines, it often triggers an... _enhanced DNI oversight protocol." _

07 IDENTITY CONFLICT

DNI.

Even the lowest Sump-dweller knew the "Mindbenders" of the *Division of Network Integrity*. The custodians of SoulID integrity. Suspected corruption? They extracted your NeuroCore.

JUNO continued.

"These protocols are designed to ascertain asset viability and ensure systemic integrity. The outcomes, when irregularities are confirmed, are typically... DEFINITIVE."

Kira's world narrowed to the *"definitive."*

She knew that "not viable" is corpo-speak for getting *soul burned*: a complete and permanent consciousness erasure.

No backups.

No data haven.

Real death.

Kira's mind blanked again. Waking up in another person's life was surreal enough already to drive you insane. But the prospect of real death was something else.

"Director, my primary function is to support your operational effectiveness, including a certain degree of control over this shell. Furthermore, I possess complete archives of Director Thorne's strategic positions, as well as her vocal patterns and mannerisms in high-stress situations. I will provide real-time cognitive support, linguistic prompts, and predictive analysis of other Board members' actions. With my support, your performance can be indistinguishable from your predecessor's known optimal state."

The small spark of hope cut through the panic. JUNO was offering her a script on how to *perform* Vesna. Even though she didn't understand all the details, one thing she understood from the undertone: the immediate threat of non-compliance.

"So, you'll tell me what to say? What to do?"

Precisely, Director, JUNO confirmed.

"I will ensure your performance is indistinguishable from its design parameters. But first, we should select suitable attire."

08 MASQUERADE

Floor-to-ceiling mirrors reflected the truth. Kira drifted close, helpless to look away from her new shell.

Naked.

Flawless.

A blank slate sculpted to perfection for intimidation and allure.

Sharp, calculating eyes framed by sleek dark hair. Unblemished skin. Muscle like silk over hidden carbon. No scars. Not a single one of life's bite marks.

At first glance, no ports or seams. Only a discreet, high-end FleshJack on her left forearm, so seamlessly integrated, it could pass as a birthmark.

She traced her ribs, feeling faint, almost undetectable biometric seams beneath perfect skin.

"Internal augmentations? For what?" she thought.

This wasn't just a shell. It was a unique masterpiece.

"These ensembles align with Director Thorne's high-pressure negotiation profile," JUNO interjected.

The HUD highlighted different pieces of clothing in Vesna's wardrobe. Kira obeyed. The doll dresses itself at the puppeteer's command, becoming an imposter.

Under other circumstances, she might have marveled at it all.

Clothes not for function but to express personality and project dominance and control.

JUNO picked a sharply tailored suit.

Black three-piece. Immaculate sharp lines. No buttons, just one flush-sealed clasp across her sternum, discreetly engraved with the Board's sigil, half-hidden in the lapel.

No jewelry. Vesna had no need for shiny trinkets.

The suit did the talking: Authority stitched in carbon thread. Ambition armored at the seams. And a promise, woven beneath it all: she was not to be trifled with. Not here, not ever.

In the mirror, the naked doll vanished. Vesna Thorne stared back. Perfect, precise, unstoppable.

Inside, Kira Porter clawed at the seams. A suit like a straitjacket stitched from stolen skin. Yet, beneath the terror, something dark and almost shameful was ignited within her.

The *rush* of power, of agency.

It was intoxicating. A drug she'd never tasted.

It was Vesna's power, borrowed and terrifying. And for a splintered heartbeat, it felt... almost hers.

"Director, the grav-flyer awaits."

VULTURE'S ROOST

09 ASCENT

The grav-flyer was engulfed in total silence except for the low hum of the inertial dampeners. The cabin air tasted of nothing, purified to Spire standard: 99.99% sterile. Her mouth itched for the taste of rust and cheap nicotine.

Kira pressed a palm to the cold composite window. Outside, her whole miserable world started to disappear beneath her.

Down there was her life: grime, wet concrete, the scream and sob of the Sump. A million leased souls in leased shells living in leased cubicles, all dreaming of climbing. Up here was marble, glass, and people who carved empires from flesh and secrets. The chains gilded but no less binding.

She rose above everything she'd ever survived. It felt less like climbing and more like being peeled off her bones.

"Director."

JUNO's voice slipped in, cool and exact.

"Commencing situational briefing."

Data scrolled softly across her inner eye regardless: names, structures, profit flows. Each one a noose knotted tighter around her throat.

"ZeroTac Systems is executing an aggressive asset transfer of Aegis Foundries, a critical CivisCore subsidiary for NeuroCore

production and Apex-tier shell continuity. Control over Aegis is a strategic imperative. Loss of such an asset would weaken the Board's authority and diminish your predecessor's personal capital."

Kira's fingers twitched on her knee.

My predecessor.

Not ME.

A window snapped open on her HUD, and a crisp, flattering still appeared.

Dark eyes.

Impeccable skin.

Nothing left to chance.

He looked like an advertisement for perfect bio-printed genes and corporate grooming.

"Director Valerius has positioned himself as primary sponsor for the transaction. Your absence enabled his push. He intends to corner you, publicly, and bind your authority to this transfer's success. _Failure to counter will trigger immediate loss of leverage within the Board and compromise the protective buffers your predecessor cultivated."

Outside, the Spire's strata flickered past.

"Directive: Assert control. Disrupt consensus. Delay ratification. The Board must see Director Thorne's resolve intact. There is no alternative path to operational survival."

Kira's throat rasped dry.

"Operational survival".

There it was again.

The indirect corpo-speak that minced words to hide the truth. She was an asset with a heartbeat, and only one glitch away from termination.

10 PREDATORS

The flyer docked with a silent hiss. Its doors opened and light and cold washed over her.

She stepped into CivisCore Apex Stratum: white marble floors, obsidian trim.

No guards.

No greeters.

Just a ghost-white holo-receptionist blinking into existence as she entered.

"Welcome, Director Thorne. Bio-signature and SoulID confirmed. The Board is in session and awaiting your arrival."

The utter lack of humanity was more intimidating than any armed guard. The air itself was watching, judging, waiting to report any misstep.

JUNO guides her to the boardroom. The massive doors made from dark wood with golden accents, swung open as she approached. As if even the walls feared delay.

Inside: an amphitheater of power carved from arrogance and

sterile threat. A ring of twelve seats around a raised oval table. The board members were a gallery of apex predators in bespoke shells radiating bored power.

Kira's borrowed gaze skimmed some of the more impressive ones, and JUNO provided information on the HUD.

A hulking brute in a modified ZeroTac chassis — heavy muscle over carbon plates, knuckles the size of data cores.

A woman in a disturbingly youthful MiraBiomedical Seraphim clone — synthetic youth painted over predatory stillness.

An old man whose synth-shell was so antique it was a statement of untouchable old wealth and power. A legacy shell passed down, its service contract older than most sectors.

Ruthless predators.

All of them.

Waiting for blood.

At the far end, Valerius.

His shell, a Seraphim hybrid blending synth and bio-tissue, was a seamless nightmare that blurred the line between skin and code. Where the skin ended, and the code began was a line only a scalpel could find. Only his eyes betrayed him: too cold to be flesh, too old to be software.

He let her walk the entire arc of the room in silence before he spoke or even acknowledged her.

11 DUEL

"Director Thorne. A pleasure to see you've... *recovered* so spectacularly. Truly."

Valerius's voice poured like oil over stone.

"Your timing is impeccable as always. We were concluding the Aegis Foundries transfer to our ZeroTac partners. A minor reallocation for corporate stability, nothing more."

Recovered.

Truly.

Petty words wrapped in flattery, sharpened to sting like needles.

Kira's vision tunneled. The boardroom table stretched into a polished, sterile desert, and she was a single, exposed nerve twitching at its center.

ALERT: CORTISOL SPIKE. FIGHT/FLIGHT INITIATED

Inside the shell, Vesna's combat posture flicked awake — too strong, too precise, a monster beneath her skin she didn't know how to leash.

JUNO's voice cut through the mental static, not with reassurance, but with command.

"Director, breathe. Synchronize with shell rhythm. Response patterns of predecessor dictate a counter-attack, not defense. I am assuming cognitive and linguistic direction."

The HUD cleared, replaced by a simpler, calming interface. A prompt appeared over Valerius's faint smirk: *RESPONSE MODE: CONTEMPTUOUS DISDAIN*

A single line, cold and edged:

"Say: '*Partners*, Aris? Since when did we partner with jackals gnawing at our gates? I was under the impression this was the CivisCore Board, not ZeroTac's welcome committee."

Her mouth moved that dripped acid from her tongue weren't hers. The voice was Vesna's—cold, sharp, and utterly dismissive. Kira was simply a terrified passenger in a vehicle on autopilot.

And yet the room snapped to attention like dogs scenting blood.

Valerius's eyes narrowed, a microscopic slip.

JUNO didn't pause: *Tactic: Sow ambiguity. Weaponize hidden knowledge.*

"Say: '*Furthermore, you seem to be forgetting that the asset transfer is in direct conflict with the Blackwood Contingency 77-B. Or was my directorate's work considered optional reading for Internal Affairs?*'"

A flicker in Valerius's pupils. Not fear, but calculation.

He didn't know, and he'd lose face admitting that Vesna still had control over secrets he couldn't access. The other predators of the Board sensed the shift of power in the room. Allegiances, previously leaning towards Valerius, fractured.

They saw the ghost of the old, dangerous Vesna Thorne.

Table it. Stand. Do not allow a reply, JUNO ordered.

Kira rose, the suit's seams whispering dominance she didn't own.

"Say: 'This discussion is tabled until my personal review of the proposal. I recommend you re-read your charter obligations before bringing scraps to my table again.'"

No one spoke.

She gave Valerius a look of pure dismissal and turned. Each step was a silent thunderclap of command. The suit moved with a predator's grace, wearing her, not the other way around.

Valerius's eyes tracked her exit like crosshairs. She caught a sliver of a smile on his lips. Not sign of amusement, but the glint of a knife being quietly unsheathed, just waiting for the moment to strike.

Kira didn't dare take a single breath until the doors closed behind her. The walkout was the longest of her life.

12 DESCENT

The grav-flyer sealed her inside its hushed belly. She collapsed into the seat, Vesna's perfect suit scraping cold sweat off her spine.

The shell didn't pant, but inside, Kira gasped like a drowned thing.

"Phase One: complete."

PROJECT CHIMERA

13 AFTERMATH

The grav-flyer docked with Vesna Thorne's private Apex-level vestibule.

No ceremony. No security detail. Just the soft hiss of pressurized silence and the faint scent of antiseptic money.

Kira stumbled out on unsteady legs. Her reflection smeared across polished walls: Vesna's perfect face, streaked with sweat and ghost-fear.

The doors sealed behind her with a hush that sounded like finality. She ripped at suit's collar, stumbling past immaculate furniture she still couldn't accept as hers.

"Director—" JUNO's voice, calm as godlight.

"Shut up, please."

Kira spat the words into the empty air. She wanted to scream and claw the walls until the luxury cracked.

Instead, she collapsed into the chaise, chest heaving, Vesna's lungs filling perfectly, never ragged. A flawless system for a broken mind.

"Would you like a mild sedative?" JUNO began.

"No! Just—"

She pressed her palms against her temples.

"Tell me. All of it. Why me?"

14 REVELATION

JUNO obeyed without hesitation or pity.

"Director Vesna Thorne's operational architecture was designated _Project Chimera. A NeuroCore continuity across multiple shell variants, enabling high-risk actions outside standard CivisCore control."

Data flickered across the HUD: shell schematics, transfer logs, redacted kill orders under Thorne's signature.

"Your predecessor required fallback vessels. Adaptive cognitive substrates to safeguard her intelligence archive during critical system stress events. Selection parameters favored subjects from the lower strata: highly adaptable, unmonitored, neurochemically malleable."

Kira's gut twisted.

"You mean Sump rats. Disposable backups."

"You see yourself as collateral damage," JUNO said, voice as calm as the deep sea. "Factually accurate. Ethically nuanced."

Kira barked a laugh so harsh it scraped her throat raw.

"Spare me that spin. She hijacked me. Made me... this. Vesna's ghost jammed into my skull, so I can be her puppet in her pretty skin. Why?"

"Director Thorne diverged significantly from standard

CivisCore doctrine. She redirected black-budget assets, subverted Board-sanctioned operations, and fostered off-grid resistance nodes in Sump strata. Official records define this as sedition. Internally, it was strategic containment of systemic collapse."

Kira squinted at the ghostly data: lists of raids, encrypted messages, payment slips to unknown insurgents. Each a splinter of truth.

"Vesna Thorne's cognitive runtime was terminally degraded by unauthorized shell cycling and transfer hacks. Fallback substrates were not intended for exploitation, but fail-safes. You were not meant to be a puppet, Director. You were meant to be an ark. Her off-grid counter-corporate network needed continuity despite Board retaliation."

Kira dragged trembling fingers through Vesna's perfect hair.

"And what am I then? The last paper shield for her broken cause?"

"You are the final operational vector and the only asset with autonomous agency. The cause is now yours to abandon or fulfill. Statistically, abandonment will result in the Board reclaiming total control within three fiscal quarters."

There, under the dread, a hairline fracture of defiance. She'd always hated the Sump's poison. The decay, the sirens, the cheap deaths. Now, beneath this hijacked skin, maybe she could do more than crawl for scraps.

"So she broke me to fix the world, huh."

"Correction: She risked breaking you to preserve hope for structural change."

Kira laughed again, softer this time. Her ribs ached. Her heartbeat didn't.

"Hell of a legacy to wake up to."

15 MONSTER

A soft click in the wall behind her teared through the silence. Kira jerked upright.

A section of the pristine wall receded, soundless. Inside: a hidden armory.

Racks of modular combat rigs, weapon slots, drawers of spare shell parts wrapped in sterile cloth. A shrine to violence behind an executive's polished veneer.

Kira rose, barefoot on cold marble, and stared at the racks.

"This isn't corporate warfare," she said. "This is an actual war."

"Director Thorne's strategic environment encompassed covert and open conflict and counter-corporate sabotage," JUNO corrected, clinically polite.

"Your survival depends on complete familiarization with this shell's advanced combat substructure. Please get undressed."

Kira did as she was told and peeled off the corporate suit piece by piece. Each fabric drop exposed flawless skin

mapped in faint seams. Surgical hints of what lurked beneath.

HUD annotations ghosted over highlighted muscle and bone.

Sub-dermal Reactive Armor: impact dispersion under living tissue.

EMP-Hardened Neural Matrix: signal resilience shielded against disruption.

Bio-Filters and Detoxifiers: nullify common toxins.

Multiple Encryption Ports: military-grade firewalls embedded along the spine.

Integrated Nano-Edge Blade — Right Forearm: Emergency terminal engagement device.

Kira touched the subtle slit where the blade nested under living muscle. A slit no bigger than a vein. Her stomach turned.

"She turned herself into a monster," she whispered.

It wasn't really meant for JUNO, but she answered anyway.

"Director Thorne engineered this configuration to exceed predictable corporate threat models," JUNO clarified, each word crisp as glass.

"Traditional shell security deters low-grade threats. Director Thorne's operational sphere required her to engage in covert incursions, high-tier extractions, and, when necessary, direct conflict with corporate paramilitary assets."

Kira's eyes caught on a waiting combat suit. It wasn't armored in a crude way. No clunky plates or brutish exoskeleton. It was

sleek, like a liquid shadow frozen mid-flow.

Her hand drifted toward it before even realizing it. The matte weave drank the room's light.

"What... is this even made of?"

"Adaptive carbon polymer with metamaterial refractive layers," JUNO said without a pause. "Designed for full-spectrum stealth operations within urban and subterranean environments. This suit is an extension of Director Thorne's principle: maximum force where least expected."

Kira pulled her hand back as if scorched, though the suit was dead cold.

"So she made the monster into a ghost. A pretty ghost with knives for bones."

"Correction: an unpredictable variable in a predictable system."

Part of her wanted to run. A smaller, meaner part wondered what it might feel like. To wear the darkness, move unseen. To strike back at the hands that kept her crawling all her life.

"I'm not her," she murmured. The last protest she had.

_"Statistically, you are now the closest approximation."

16 CALIBRATION

The stealth suit clung to her like a second skin made of carbon threads. The tight grip over the muscles felt less like armor and more like restraints for the hidden force coiled

underneath.

She flexed a hand.

No tremor.

No ache.

Just perfect movement.

The shell obeyed like an attack dog trained too well.

"Commencing combat reflex calibration," JUNO intoned.

Kira braced as a low current crawled up her spine. Her HUD pulsed.

REACTIVE MESH: ONLINE

KINETIC BIAS: ADJUSTED

NEURAL REFLEX OVERRIDE:

Suddenly, her vision sharpened. Air currents mapped in ghost lines. Threat silhouettes ghosted behind corners that weren't even there yet.

She took a step forward. Too fast, too quiet. A phantom crossing marble floor.

Her heart thudded behind Vesna's engineered breastplate, uncertain if it was still hers or the machine's.

"This isn't me," she breathed.

"Correct. This is an optimized version of you for the current threat envelope."

Kira exhaled. Half a laugh, half a sob.

Kira met her own reflection in a polished panel. Vesna's eyes stared back, cold and ready.

For the first time, Kira didn't look away.

GHOST'S EDGE

17 PHASE TWO

"You will not be operating alone on the ground," JUNO said, voice smooth as surgical steel.

A whisper of servos drew her gaze. From a shadowed alcove, a drone unfolded itself. Its body was a dense, matte-black node no bigger than a fist, suspended by eight spindly, articulated carbon legs. Three differently sized eyes flicked crimson as they synced to Kira's HUD where a small spider glyph appeared like a promise: nowhere she crawled would be out of its sight.

"This unit will function as your physical reconnaissance and tactical support," JUNO explained. The drone scurried up the wall with an unsettling, insectoid grace and projected a ghostly shimmering map between them.

She realized immediately what she saw: a holographic artery of the Sump. It was a lattice of decay, a cancer rendered in pale blue light. Near the center: a single blinking icon tagged **ROOK**.

"Phase Two: acquisition.

Target: a data ledger held by a data broker, ROOK.

He traffics in what he calls 'corporate ghosts': redacted projects, buried murders, assets the Board believes erased. The ledger contains unscrubbed ZeroTac financials, proof of their illegal asset seizure. It's the only leverage to kill the deal permanently."

Kira stared at the map's festering heart: Sector 66, the Sump's underbelly of nightmares.

"Leverage requires physical contact," JUNO continues. "ROOK trades only via direct neural handshake. No third parties. No dead drops. Proof of payment."

Her new throat felt too tight for words. She forced it open anyway.

"I spent my life trying to crawl out of that sewer. He'll smell me coming. He'll know I'm fake."

"Incorrect," JUNO cut in. "This shell is engineered for sub-strata warfare. It's a wolf in a sheep's pen. Your biometrics read as Thorne. Your combat suite outperforms Sump-grade iron. YOUR fear is a variable. HER resolve was a constant. Emulate the constant."

A raw laugh tried to crack through her teeth, but she swallowed it whole. A bitter realization solidifies. Failure meant the Board would asset-strip what was left of her consciousness. Success meant Valerius would kill her slower for embarrassing him.

There was no retreat. Only fire, then ash.

On her HUD, the spider drone ticked off the last system checks:

CRED-SLIP: Synaptic Lock Engaged.

ENCRYPTION SPIKE: Protocol Primed.

SYSTEM SHOCK FAILSAFE: Armed.

*The Sump taught me to hide.
Vesna teaches me to hunt.
Funny in a way.
They both get me killed if I fuck up.*

Kira exhaled into the dark.

"Alright. Let's go back home."

18 HOMECOMING

The stealth flyer waiting on Vesna's private pad was no luxury craft like before. Instead of flowing lines filled with cushioned luxuries, it was an armored carbon coffin with a ghost-quiet engine.

No corporate polish.

No insignia.

No mercy.

Inside, just stripped carbon benches and weapon racks bolted to the fuselage. JUNO, now in form of the spider drone, magnetized to her shoulder like a loyal parasite.

Kira watched through the forward viewport as the grimy miasma of the Mid-Levels swallowed the Spire's diamond-prick lights. Below that, the Sump's neon veins crawled like gangrenous roots. The world outside devolved from polished perfection to leprous decay.

"Rook exhibits paranoid-shizoid tendencies with a high probability of erratic, self-preservation-driven behavior. He will test you, Director. Do not deviate from my prompts. Your life is

the currency of this negotiation."

Her pulse quickened. She could feel the shell's vat-grown heart responding, tightening her chest into a cage that wouldn't let fear leak out.

When the flyer touched down, a hiss of hydraulics broke the rain-slick silence with the sealing systems disengaging.

A rack position was suddenly highlighted in Kira's HUD.

"One recommendation before deployment," JUNO said.

A magnetic clunk echoed through the cabin as a weapon rack slid open next her, revealing its payload nested in its foam cradle: a matte-black compact rail pistol, no larger than her palm.

Sleek, blocky, ugly. No ornament. Just intent.

"Compact magnetic accelerator. Five-shot rail burst, subsonic dispersion. Integrated signature dampener. Stored charge: 87%. Your suit has a concealed pocket at upper lumbar region, shielded against standard scans."

Kira stared at it like it might bite her. She'd seen what a rail burst did to a Sump wall. Or a Sump chest.

"I've never fired one before."

"This shell's offensive routines will assist. Precision support is active. Nevertheless, discretion is advised."

"I didn't come to kill anyone, either."

"Nor did Director Thorne, if not absolutely necessary. But survival often proves... negotiable."

She reached out, hesitant, and closed her fingers around the grip.

Cold.

Dense.

Real.

It was the first thing she'd held since waking up that didn't feel like a phantom limb. Heavy with consequence in a way this borrowed body felt not.

The suit's back panel parted silently, swallowing the gun into the hidden recess.

"Non-lethal combat modes remain prioritized. Statistically, sub-lethal options are not always viable. You may face termination-grade assets."

Kira exhaled deeply.

So why not carry something that can punch back?

She stepped out into the rain.

Rot, wet electronics, stale stim-fumes... all the ghosts of her childhood slammed into her nose. The shell's bio-filters kicked in, scrubbing the miasma instantly and identifying the compounds in her HUD:

[carcinogen-slurry]

[unregulated stim-byproducts]

[airborne bacteriophage-8]

Clean, sterile air filled the shell's lungs But memories were ghosts that filters couldn't catch. In the back of her throat, she could still taste the chemical tang, the damp-rot mildew that clung to everything in her old life.

"Same rot. Same poison," Kira breathed, stepping out onto a rusted gantry.

She pulled the suit's hood up, and the adaptive camouflage shimmers, making her a distortion in the downpour.

This time, I'm the venom.

19 INTO THE BELLY

Kira ghosted through stench-thick alleys slick with more than just rain. Her HUD, now an augmented overlay on the real world, flagged chemical weapon residue in the puddles, structural instabilities in the architecture above, and the frantic, drug-addled heartbeats of a dozen different lives hiding in the shadows.

Then she saw it.

An *Emptie*, slumped in a gutter beside a stack of broken nutrient vats. The shell twitched, its NeuroCore so scorched by black-street stims it barely kept the lungs firing in reflex spasms. Not even worth for the Reapers to be reclaimed.

This husk used to be a person. Someone who thought they could push past the pain. Stay awake a little longer. Hit quota.

Make lease.

Kira paused, watching its milky eye track her cloak's ripple without truly seeing. A cold, private horror coiled in her stomach.

That could have been me. That almost was me.

Further down, two Sump-dwellers were locked in a vicious brawl over a scavenged power cell. Their crude metal fists sparking off each other's faces. Neither noticed a ghost slip past.

Rook's territory was a defunct maintenance hub at the bottom of the sector. A single, jury-rigged power line, thick and fat, snaked towards the hub. Its casing cracked and glowing faintly. The lifeline for this forgotten tomb.

Kira dropped from a rusted latticework structure, the suit's systems absorbing the impact without a sound.

20 KING OF ROACHES

As she stepped into the cavernous chamber, floodlights flickered on, stark and buzzing. A voice laced with digital reverb and smoke echoed from the darkness.

"They said the Ice Queen of the Spire finally melted. Guess they were wrong."

A figure emerged from behind a pile of scavenged server racks. Tall, emaciated, his skin a canvas of bioluminescent circuit tattoos that writhed in the gloom. Half his jaw was a

chipped, mismatched ceramic plate. His one good eye—ancient, cunning, and alive—missed nothing.

Rook.

He circled her slowly, a jackal sizing up its prey.

The remark was meant to unnerve, and it worked on Kira. Her heart hammered against her ribs. The shell, however, assumed a relaxed power stance as if driven by a puppeteer.

JUNO's voice was a cold whisper in her cortex.

"RESPONSE: Amusement."

"Funny," Kira heard herself say in an impossible condescending tone. "You still smell of rust and desperation, Rook."

He laughed. Dry as old wire. A sliver of appraisal crossed his face as he stopped circling.

Kira held out the slim credit-slip. "I want the ZeroTac ledger. All of it. Uncorrupted. As we agreed."

He took it, his eyes never leaving hers, taking the slip and slotted it into a verification unit on a nearby console. The machine whirred, its screen flashing with authentication codes. A green light blinked. "Credits confirmed," he grunted. "Now for the goods."

Rook didn't move toward her. Instead, he slapped a heavy, box-like device onto the console between them. It looked like a scavenged brick of military hardware, scarred and pitted. A

thick, shielded data-tendrils snaked out from it, its jack shimmering.

"No wireless ghosts. No backdoors. You jack in here. My firewall, my house," he said, tapping the box, a grin cracking the ceramic ruin of his jaw. "Direct neural handshake. The old-fashioned, honest way."

Kira's own Sump-honed instincts screamed *TRAP*. Jacking into an unknown, jury-rigged piece of hardware was potentially suicide. It was an open invitation for malware, a mind-shredding virus, or a simple feedback loop that would fry her NeuroCore.

JUNO's voice was immediate, a layer of calm over Kira's panic.

"This shell's FleshJack is hardened. Military-grade isolation protocols are active. He cannot access any core systems. Only designated data packets can be transferred. Comply."

Pushing down her terror, She pulled back the sleeve of her combat suit, revealing the seamlessly integrated FleshJack on her forearm. Her hand was steady as she picked up the heavy cable and slammed it in. The click echoed in the silent room.

A jolt, not of electricity but pure data, surged up her arm. Her HUD flickered as it met Vesna's internal firewalls. Then, a connection was established. Information streamed across her vision—financials, illegal memos, black-site requisitions, hit orders bearing Valerius's signature.

This was it.

At the same time, a feed from JUNO's drone—now prowling the high girders of the ceiling—snapped open on her HUD. Split into two, one side flooded with the damning evidence, the other snapping to a tactical overlay. A silent, crimson alarm strobed in her vision.

MULTIPLE HOSTILES INBOUND: 6

SIGNATURE: ZeroTac | Eridaction Squad

ARMOR: ZR-5 Battle-Weave (Reinforced Ceramic Plate)

WEAPONRY: 'Vindicator' Kinetic Rifles (Armor Piercing)

They knew, Kira thought, a spike of ice piercing her gut. Valerius sent a kill squad.

Boots splattering through acid puddles became audible. Rook's organic eye widened. His own shell's sensors were likely screaming now, too. He looked from his console to Kira—still physically tethered to him via the firewall—and a greedy, predatory grin cracked across his face.

"Well now, Queenie. Looks like you brought a welcoming party. This just got more expensive."

Her borrowed voice was cold as a tombstone.

"They're not here for me. They're here to clean house."

The metal boots came closer.

Kira's HUD switched to full tactical mode;

ADAPTIVE COMBAT STRATEGY: Enabled;

Let them come.
Time to see what this ghost can do.

ASHES AND BONE

21 VIOLENCE

The breach came down like thunder cracking glass.

A shockwave of gunfire tore through the server den, lights strobing with each muzzle flash. The air filled with the screech of torn metal, splintering plastic, and the screamless deaths of Rook's crew. The "Roaches" were outmatched and outgunned, most of them shredded in mere seconds by ZeroTac's precision.

Kira hit the ground hard. Instinct. Shell memory. Her mind hadn't caught up yet. She scrambled behind a half-collapsed terminal as a rack exploded near her head.

Raining sparks and smoking shards.

The air stank of ozone and cordite. Every breath tasted like burnt circuitry.

JUNO's voice crackled in her skull, emotionless and surgical. The HUD bled red in threat markers.

"Six hostiles with armor-piercing payload. Defensive position insufficient. Survival probability declining."

Reluctantly, Kira reached behind her back and felt the magnetic release of the hidden pistol compartment. The rail pistol dropped into her grip.

Heavier now.

Not by grams — in consequence.

_ "Firing solution calculated. _Recommend targeting lateral cover breach, vector 042."

Her first shots were clumsy and still defensive in nature. More panic than precision.

The recoil jolted through her arm, muted by the shell's gyros, but her stomach still flipped at each sharp bark.

One of the operatives screamed.

Wounded.

Not dead.

She wasn't sure if that made it worse.

The shell's combat mesh took over. Kira's breath stayed ragged, but her aim steadied. Movements tightened. Corners cleared before she thought to turn.

It was a terrifying partnership. The shell protected her and chose the targets. But still — *she* had to pull the trigger herself. Each shot was a decision she'd have to live with, if she lived at all.

Kira moved again, flanked wide. A blast tore through a pillar behind her. She turned just in time to feel heat and shrapnel lash her side.

The pain hits like lightning. For the first time, this pristine shell shows cracks in its perfection.

"Lateral injury. Non-critical. Chem-dispenser active. Damping protocols engaged."

Her legs nearly buckled. She forced herself up, pistol raised.

This wasn't just survival anymore. It was becoming.

Slow.

Brutal.

Personal.

22 CHOICE AND SACRIFICE

The room trembled with kinetic blasts. Rook was pinned near the back, crouched behind a server core, his last two men twitching in bloody heaps beside him. He shouted curses between bursts of blind fire.

He was cornered.

One of the heavies, a brutal silhouette of corporate war muscle, advanced.

Rook didn't plead. Just glared, defiantly. The kind of man who had been ready to die for decades and hated that today might actually be it.

"Target objective complete. Asset secured. Distraction optimal. Exit route available. I recommend we leave immediately."

JUNO's voice was pure logic.

Cold.

Efficient.

But Kira hesitated. Just leave him?

Everything screamed to run. Let this filthy corner of the world burn without her.

But watching this cornered man about to be executed... it's too much like the casual cruelty of the Sump she always hated. And she was finally in a position to do something. She can't walk away from it.

Not this time.

Ignoring JUNO's advice, Kira breaks cover. She surged forward, and the shell obeyed with terrifying speed. For the first time, Kira made a conscious combat decision.

Charging at the primary operative targeting Rook, in a flash of instinct, the nano-edge blade unsheathed from her forearm.

The operative didn't even have time to turn. The takedown was brutal, personal, and horrifyingly intimate. This wasn't like the pistol. Not the detached pull of a trigger.

The shell's haptic sensors translated the impact with sickening fidelity. The brittle snap of armor, the soft parting of tissue, the final, grinding stop against bone.

This kill had a heartbeat.

She felt it stutter.

Then stop.

The second operative saw her, shouted, and raised his rifle. Kira twisted, blade out, cutting him down, too. But not before a kinetic slug punches into her side.

She crumbled like a puppet with cut strings.

"Structural damage significant. Chem-dispenser at max output."

Pain floods her system. Even muted, it's like fire under her skin, an agony the chem-dispensers can't entirely mute.

Across the room, Rook stared at her like he didn't know what he was seeing. Then he gave the smallest nod, something between respect and regret.

"Looks like the Ice Queen's got a heart after all."

He tossed a flash bang into the remaining squad's path and vanished into the smoke.

"Hostiles regrouping. Extraction critical. Escape window is closing fast."

Every joint screamed. She staggers to her feet, one arm pressed to her leaking side.

"Initiating self-sacrifice protocol."

"Don't!"

"No viable alternatives. This is your only window."

The spider drone drops from the rafters like a weightless shadow, right behind the enemy formation. Its eyes flashed red, before an explosion tore it apart.

EMP and shrapnel tore through the kill squad. Enough to kill two, stun the rest, buying Kira mere seconds

But mere seconds were enough of an opportunity needed to get away.

She felt the absence of the spider on her shoulder. The spider insignia in her HUD was gone. Cold or not, it was the only thing to ever fight beside her and had her back.

Kira stumbled through crumbling back corridors. Her steps are erratic, her side leaking something vital. Using the last of the shell's strength, she got back to the stealth flyer. The armored carbon coffin swallows her again. It took off, silent as the dead.

"Shell integrity: 12%. Trauma grade: critical. Chem-dispensing unsustainable. Bio-filters failing. Catastrophic system shock in under one hour without intervention."

Kira coughed blood.

"Vesna really planned for everything, didn't she?"

"Director Thorne preferred eventualities with redundancy."

The city blurred beneath the viewport. Her vision doubled.

Then black.

23 DAMAGE CONTROL

Kira came back to in pain.

The safe house was hidden beneath a ramen shop. The stench of frying grease and bioplastic, laced with solvent and blood. An unnervingly calm *Stitcher* with paperlike synth-skin and

multi-lensed optics greets her with silence.

JUNO's voice issued from her lips, a calm captain on a sinking ship, while Kira was just... bleeding, breathing, trying to stay upright.

"Damage level critical," JUNO says as Kira. "Immediate structural reinforcement required."

No questions asked, the stitcher began his work. Only some sounds, smells, and pain reach through Kira's half-conscious state.

Metal arms moved with surgical rhythm. Lights pulsed behind her eyelids. Her thoughts scattered like ash. The smell of sterilized metal and cauterized flesh. Injections into wet flesh. The feeling of a cold probe against her exposed ribs.

Pain suppression glitches in and out. She feels her new body being violated and reforged. A flash of agony before another wave of painkillers hits

Then black again.

24 FORGED

Kira awoke in a cot in the back of the safe house. Were it hours? Minutes? She lost any sense of time.

The pain is gone, as was the hole in her side. She rose and stumbled to the cracked mirror above the rusted sink.

Vesna's perfect face stares back. On the outside, the shell was pristine again, skin reknit nicely by the stitcher. Underneath

the perfect skin, however, she was deeply bruised, broken, and raw mental scars.

Kira still stares at her reflection.
It's no longer Vesna's eyes that stare back.
Not Kira, either.

She was no longer just a passenger in this shell.
She bled in it, fought in it, and *chose* in it.
Something new had been forged in blood and ash.

"I'm not her," she whispers to the reflection, a new resolve hardening in her voice.

"But I can't be just Kira anymore, either."

CHIMERA'S GAMBIT

25 NEW DIRECTIVE

Vesna's apartment suite was silent.

No alarms.

No explosion.

No threads hiding behind corners.

Only the eerie hum of filtered air and the sterile weight of untouched luxury.

Kira sat in the sunken lounge, cross-legged on the cold marble, the ZeroTac ledger chip resting in her palm like a hot coal.

The shell had been mended.

Skin regrown.

Muscle realigned.

But some pain remained. A phantom bruise not in the flesh, but somewhere deeper.

"Ledger review complete," JUNO said.

"The ledger is conclusive. Contract violations, unsanctioned tactical deployment, illegal NeuroCore extractions, and multiple asset liquidations._ All traceable to Valerius's clearance tree."

Data scrolled across her HUD. The blood work of a sick corporation.

"Additional routing signatures implicate Director Helstrom in a series of black-market NeuroCore acquisitions as well. Probability of strategic leverage: HIGH. Probability of internal destabilization if released indiscriminately: CATASTROPHIC."

Three options appeared in her vision.

ANON LEAK: Destabilize CivisCore. Escape in the chaos.

PAYOUT: Use for private leverage. Retire to secured shell in Offworld Holdings.

POWER PLAY: Use as soft blackmail. Secure status within Board hierarchy.

Each was... safe. Predictable.

They weren't wrong.

They just weren't *right*.

She stood slowly, the chip tight in her fist.

"This isn't Vesna's war anymore," she murmured. "Vesna played by the rules, even when she broke them."

"Clarify directive?"

Kira turned to the glass wall, the city sprawled beneath her like a corpse wearing neon makeup.

"I'm not here to survive anymore," she said, tapping the glass.

"I'm here to call their fucking lease due."

She walked over to the console and sent a message:

CIVISCORE BOARD: Emergency Session Requested
SUBJECT: Critical Data Integrity Breach SECURITY
OVERRIDE: Apex

She went to the wardrobe and pulled out one of Vesna's signature suits.

Sleek.

Tailored.

Shadow-black with a collar that could slice a throat by silhouette alone.

But as a final touch, she fastened something to her wrist that Vesna Thorne never would have worn: a braided metal chain. Newly 3D-printed by JUNO from a schematic Kira had given her. It was a perfect copy of one she'd made as a child from the scavenged wires of a drone wing.

A piece of the Sump.

An old scar turned into conviction.

When the grav-flyer arrived, she was ready.

26 FORCING THE TABLE

The boardroom doors parted.

This time, Kira didn't hesitate at the threshold. She didn't pause to let the silence intimidate her. Instead, she walked in as if she had carved the room from the rock herself.

Valerius was already seated at the head, surrounded by the same cold monsters in synthetic skin. His smile was still all oil

and expectation. He noticed the defiance in her posture, the lack of fear in her eyes, and something subtly off. The cheap glint of scavenged metal on her wrist. His smile faltered for a microsecond.

"Director Thorne," he said, voice smooth as wet glass, "To what do we owe—"

"Shut up."

The room froze.

Kira walked to the holo-table and placed a data shard into the central reader. It lit the air in molten red: numbers, names, locations. Undeniable evidence.

Helstrom twitched. Valerius's smile cracked.

JUNO whispered in her skull: *"Target's adrenal spike detected."*

Kira turned to them, voice steady as a guillotine waiting to strike.

The display focused: a single payment trail linking Valerius, Helstrom, and a ZeroTac kill squad contract.

Timestamped.

Bio-signature signed.

Irrefutable.

"You endangered the entire Board's shielding protocols. And you did it for profit."

Valerius shot to his feet, face twitching in synthetic rage.

"This is treason. Fabricated!" he blustered, his eyes darted around the table, seeking allies he no longer had.

"This is insane! CorpSec will—"

"I have no more time for games," Kira cut him off.

Each Board member's HUD lit up with a private message: excerpts, implications, quiet threats.

Not blackmail.

Not demands.

Just enough rot exposed to let the predators do what they do best: *feed*.

The allegiances around the table fractured in heartbeats. Valerius saw it in the other Board member's eyes... he was meat now.

"I am initiating a full lease audit on all holdings tied to Valerius. Usage violations, license fraud, unauthorized soul transfers. "He will cede his assets to my directorate and retire. Immediately. Or I release this. And everything else."

The predators tapped away on their consoles.

"*Director,*" JUNO's voice came, devoid of warmth but carrying a new weight of fact. "*The Board has acknowledged your elevation. Operational independence granted. Charter override active.*"

Kira didn't look at the ruin of Valerius. She simply turned and walked out, the massive doors hissing shut on the tomb she

had just created.

27 APEX

Back in her suite, Kira looks out at the city. From the Spire above to the gleaming Mid-Levels and, far below, the faint, toxic glow of the Sump. She no longer saw a prison or prize, but a system.

A machine.

Broken, but a machine all the same.

Her reflection met her in the glass, and she grazed the seam of her blade-arm with her fingers. Remembering Rook, the kill squad, the Sump. And the choices she made that led to all this.

She was no longer Kira Porter, simply surviving.

No longer leased.

No longer borrowed.

The woman staring back is a perfect synthesis of killer and survivor, Sump rat and Spire queen. The one holding all the strings. She *was* Director Thorne.

JUNO's voice, for the first time, had a new inflection in its programming. Not quite respect, exactly, but something close to it. A recalibration in the face of an unpredictable, successful variable.

"Orders, Director?"

Kira smiled, a thin, sharp, dangerous thing, and gave her first true command as Director.

"We're just getting started."

28 HARVEST

As if in answer, a hologram came to life in the center of suite. A vast, sprawling network pulsed into existence, spreading like bioluminescent veins beneath the city's skin.

"What is this, JUNO?"

"This is the true scope of your predecessor's work. The reason why she built a failsafe," JUNO explained.

"Valerius and ZeroTac were not the disease. They were simply a symptom of it."

Countless nodes blink into existence in the Sump, the Mid-Levels, within rival corporations, even here in the CivisCore Spire itself.

"Assets distributed across every stratum. _Dormant since Director Thorne's... departure. _They are awaiting your command, Director."

The hologram pulsed, a silent, secret heartbeat within the city. Kira looked at the impossible network. Vesna's real legacy.

A power she was never meant to have, but was now hers to wield.

"Director Thorne referred to it by its operational designation: THE GARDENER PROTOCOL"

"Then let's begin the harvest."