

## Animals

Rain. It hadn't stopped for days. Barely visible in the foggy skies above, the Sky Train lines shined, neon veins in a body of mist. Ads warning the people about Hyper Rush overdoses could be heard echoing from above the clouds. Sometimes the ads would change, and women would be enticed to have more babies.

*Society is human, not clone!*

The hum of the Sky Trains became less audible at the street level. Here, paths were clogged with humans and clones alike; thousands of dollars were exchanged in these markets every hour. The small Chinese vendor selling traditional food had gotten a loan from U-Corp. A portion of any money he made today would be wired directly to U-Corp's off planet bank. A textile merchant, sick with the Shivers, was getting medicine from S-Corp. Little did he know that the medicine was making him sicker, and that he would need more medicine, again produced by S-Corp.

They laughed all the way to the bank.

Down in the rat maze of people, one stood apart from the rest. His brown jacket was a relic from the Old World. He didn't stop for any vendor and shoved the homeless beggars away from him with stiff arms. Smoke rose from beneath his wide brimmed hat.

"Sir please, clones deserve equal rights! Just a moment sir, that's all I ask!" an oily man said from the side of the road. With his misshapen face and moldy teeth, this man could've passed for a starved rat. The jacketed man shoved him away, and Rat Man cracked his skull on the wall behind him. No one stopped for him, they simply stepped around the blood. The rain would wash it away. It always did.

As he got away from the markets, the jacketed man began scanning the infinite tubes of neon for the Swede. He owned a laundromat, a relic from the Old World. A-Corp had scanned the place... It was a nest for Junkies and Metalheads. Place was a drug store now. The Swede was to be relieved of his position.

The jacketed man took refuge under a dilapidated bus stop, the rusting metal roof only protecting him from some of the downpour. Just across the road, the Swede's blue neon sign welcomed customers to the laundromat. The windows were tinted brown; he couldn't see anything inside. Up above, an airship's horn signaled that it was nearly curfew. Any citizens caught outside would face police action. What that meant for them, was in their hands.

A few doors down stood a Synthetic strip club of sorts. The jacketed man tossed his cigar into a nearby puddle, the reflection of the pink and red neon blurring with the ripples created. Customers flocked into the club, the Synthetic doorkeeper barely operational enough to check their passes.

*Sex bots for sale!* The sign had nearly withered away from the storm. The jacketed man wondered if any of the bots even worked anymore. In this district... He was doubtful.

Deciding to waste no more time, he walked across the empty street, stepping over the head of a Synthetic on his way there. He pushed open the door to the laundromat. A wave of hot smelly air hit him. Smelled like rotten eggs and piss. Nothing surprising there.

"Hello?" a man asked from behind a counter. It was so worn down, the wood and metal bent and warped, the jacketed man barely considered it to be a desk anymore.

"Hello Swede."

The man behind the counter took a deep breath. He moved around the gnarled remains of the reception desk. The lights weren't on. The jacketed man heard movement in the back of the small rectangular room. The Swede moved closer. His glasses were cracked. The man noted a red light shining from The Swede's right eye. His business must've been doing quite well. Synthetic parts weren't cheap. Especially in this district. A few more robotic parts and he could've passed as a Metalhead himself.

"W-who are you?" The Swede asked. His thin body quivered in the shadowy light. The jacketed man gently removed his hat, searched a pocket, retrieved a mask, and put it on. He switched it on, his vision immediately becoming suited for this darkness. Four Junkies stood in the back, all clutching pipes or bricks.

"I think you know who I am," the jacketed man said. The Swede's mouth was moving, but no sounds came out.

"You—it can't be! B-but I've done nothing wrong! I'm j-just a business owner! What are you going to do to me?" he cried, his red eye failing to show any emotion. The jacketed man raised his arm, a shining silver revolver grasped neatly in his hand.

"I'm doing you a favor," he said.

The shot nearly took The Swede's head off. His eye blinked several times before going dark.

"Fuck, it's The Wolf!"

"Did he just kill Swede?"

"Get him!" One Junkie's war cry. One Junkie's mistake.

Four more shots from the revolver. Its kick felt natural in Wolf's hands. He saw the four Junkies drop; they were dead before they hit the floor. Their weapons fell to the ripped-up floor, and another part of the desk fell over with them. Wolf watched it all happen from behind his mask, the tech in it giving him near perfect vision in the darkness. He released the revolver chamber, steam hissing from inside of it, and replaced the bullets. Each bullet carried more than enough speed and power to kill any man, clone, or bot that stood in Wolf's way.

These bullets wouldn't fail him. He'd made them himself.

Wolf walked back through the still open door to the laundromat. The neon sign had already switched off, the tubes still humming faintly over the rain. He turned back, retrieving a stapler and plastic sheet from his jacket. The sheet had the words "FOR SALE! CURTESY OF A-CORP" painted across it. With a grunt, Wolf stapled the notice to the door. He walked into the rain and mist, as an ad played from a building above talking about the importance of keeping yourself and your clothes clean to prevent disease.

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"Ya know, I've always wondered what would happen... Ya know, if one o' us had to kill another." This man had slicked back black hair. It never looked clean, but he claimed this was part of his style. His jacket was green. His mask sat on his hip, the dark eyes making Wolf's skin crawl. His name was Viper.

"S'pose it wouldn't be any different eh?" Viper asked. Wolf took a puff from his cigar.

“Yeah, I guess so. Our job is simple. Shoot first, let A-Corp ask the questions later,” Wolf said. Viper picked at a scab on his chin. He really was an ugly bastard.

“Had to kill a clone yesterday. Bitch was selling black market weapons. Didn’t know they made ‘em that smart,” Viper said. Wolf laughed.

“How long have you lived in this city? Clones are made from the best genes suited for their role. She must’ve gone rogue.”

“I guess. Those cops, some o’ ‘em are clones, yeah? Does that mean they’re genetically better than you or me?” Viper asked. A valid question. Wolf considered it.

“I guess so. They’re bred for one job, and being a strong arm means you need good genes. Doesn’t matter though. I’d have no trouble killing a clone,” Wolf said back. Viper gave him a long look, his eyes squinting from a neon ad playing outside their window.

“Do you think you could kill me Wolf?” he asked. Wolf laughed again.

“With ease.”

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A-Corp had no problem sending in one man for a job. Wolf had heard of one of the first of his unit, a woman named Serval, she had killed nearly two dozen rogue Metalheads in one warehouse before eventually succumbing to her wounds. Wolf sometimes wondered if A-Corp really gave a shit about this unit. He needed Viper’s help today more than ever.

The Junkies had begun rioting. Wolf had hoped he wouldn’t have to go back to *that* district of the city, but he was sent back only a week after killing The Swede. Apparently, his operation had been pretty important to the Junkies, and they were complaining about The

Swede's building being bought by an S-Corp clinic. No more Hyper Rush in the area. That meant no more getting high out of your mind. They'd recently killed several cops and a few civilians in a hostile takeover of a media center. They were holding a clone—Iona 6775—as a hostage. Iona worked at the S-Corp clinic that had bought The Swede's old place.

Wolf had been given the license to kill any and all Junkies in the media center. Rescuing Iona was a secondary objective. If she was killed, Jackson 1985 would take her place.

Wolf put on his mask, the mask that gave him his name.

He readied his revolvers.

Using the loud speaking function on his mask, he said, "This is Wolf speaking. You are ordered to stand down. Drop your weapons and line up against a wall. Failure to comply will result in termination. I am entering the building now!"

Knowing full well that none of the crazy bastards would listen, Wolf went in with his fingers on the triggers. The first shot fired off, resulting in one dead Junkie. The media center was huge; a circular room filled with cubicles. This is where workers played the ads that showed on the sides of buildings. This was a propaganda center.

The walls were lined with different ads from the big three corporations. Pictures depicting dull futures if the ads' instructions weren't followed glared down from every wall. All were well lit. Up above, the stale white lights illuminated the Wolf in his environment.

No ammo in this revolver. Wolf smashed a Junkie's face in with the butt end of the gun instead. He threw another one down a flight of stairs. There was a stinging pain on his left arm. When he glanced over, he saw streaks of blood dripping from a gnarly wound. He lost focus for

one second, allowing the Junkies to gang up on him. Wolf was thrown back, his head smashing through the faux wood wall of a cubicle. His revolvers slid away in the scuffle. Two more Junkies picked them up, brown toothed grins spreading across their ugly faces.

The one who'd thrown Wolf down was a burly woman, strong for her place in society. Most Junkies were thin shivering corpses, waiting to die in a world that had abandoned them. This woman though, she was stronger than any Junkie Wolf had seen. She had long unkempt black hair. If Wolf looked close enough, she almost looked like Viper.

"You've lost your weapons now Wolf! You're dead!" she screamed, her voice deep and violent sounding. The few remaining Junkies laughed. Wolf joined in. They laughed together, maddening—freeing—disturbing.

"Why is this fucker laughing?" one growled behind him. Wolf howled with laughter.

"Don't any of you know who I am? Lost my weapons... *I AM THE WEAPON!*" And with that, Wolf kicked the feet out from under the female Junkie. He rolled to his right, under the wall of a cubicle. He took his stapler out and quickly moved around the cubicles. One Junkie died to a letter opener, something that held no practical use in this day and age. The next was taken down with the stapler, its high-power function coming in handy for Wolf. The last one, the woman, sat whimpering on the floor.

"You... You're not human," she whispered. Wolf picked up his guns, reloading them slowly as he approached her. His arm throbbed. It was only then that he noticed how light headed he'd become.

"What makes you so sure?" Wolf asked, letting the empty shells hit the final Junkie as he reloaded his guns.

“Look around you... Look at this! You were made for killing... Fucking psychopath,” she muttered.

“Just like you were made for shooting up Hyper Rush, or snorting Whiteout,” Wolf replied. He took aim.

“You’re not human, no, no, you’re an *animal*,” the woman hissed.

The revolver asked no questions. It simply kicked. Wolf holstered his weapons. Maybe the Junkie was right. Maybe he had gone too far. The media center was wrecked; it would take weeks to clean this shit up. The black walls and towering propaganda posters had been painted with the blood of the Junkies, and maybe some of Wolf’s own blood. Computers laid in smoking heaps, and several cubicles had been completely destroyed.

*You’re an animal!*

The words echoed in Wolf’s mind as he searched the place for Iona. He removed his mask, the air hitting his face hard. Smelled like metal and smoke.

“Clone 6775, Iona, are you alright?” he called. Movement to his right. Wolf flicked to the moving body of a Junkie. He gripped a revolver in his hand and aimed, but the body was forcibly rolled over. Under it was the slightly bloodied figure of Iona. Wolf had seen photos to identify her by but was struck by how attractive she was. Part of that clone charm... They were perfect. She had dark round eyes, smooth tan skin, and long black hair. There was a streak of blood across her face, and her eyes were wild with shock. Incredible how close they were to humans. They felt emotions unlike the Synthetics... Pain, desire, joy, grief.



“You... You’re with A-Corp?” she whispered. Wolf squatted down next to her. He reached out, but she flinched away.

“I’m here to save you,” Wolf said. Iona’s face blanched even more.

“You?” she asked, clearly frightened by the mess Wolf had just made.

“Me,” he replied, showing her his license.

“I’ve only ever heard rumors about your unit. A-Corp... Likes to keep their secrets,” she said slowly. Wolf reached out again, and Iona cautiously took his hand. She seemed afraid that he might break her arm.

“You’re injured,” Iona said, looking at the gash on Wolf’s arm. He smiled.

“Not as badly as these Junkies.”

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They wouldn’t stop calling. Every hour, 10 seconds into the first minute, the phone would ring. High above the rabble below, Viper surrounded himself with empty bottles. Maybe if he drank himself to death, he wouldn’t have to do it. His high-rise—once a mark of his status—now looked more like the streets hundreds of stories below.

The phone rang.

Drunk and dizzy, Viper reached across his leather couch. The small square device lit up in his hand, the logo of A-Corp flashing across the paper-thin screen. He pressed the receive button, and almost immediately a cold-hearted voice was speaking to him. The curtains in the high-rise closed themselves, an automated function put in by A-Corp. The lights dimmed, the screens on the walls flashing images of Wolf and his clone lover.

“Sector 7, Building A. Level 216, room 925. Make it quick, and try to be discreet,” the voice ordered. They hung up almost immediately, but the walls wouldn’t stop flashing images of Wolf across them. Viper wiped his tired eyes. The address replayed in his head on a loop. The walls shifted through pictures of Wolf faster and faster.

Viper wept before smashing a bottle against the wall. The high-rise went dark.

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Clones. Perfect mirrors made tailored to fit their role. The science teams (all headed by humans) were filled with clones, their genes handpicked by supercomputers programmed by the humans who built this city. What did it say of humanity, to create perfect versions of themselves, and then punish them for their perfection?

Wolf stood on the roof of his building. Up here, above the clouds, one could see the colossal airships in greater detail. Most were shaped like sea turtles; animals only seen in the Old World. All were flashing with ads from the corporations. They were mechanical stars, made to replace the stars hidden long ago by the smoke and smog.

The rain continued tonight. Perhaps harder than before. Wolf waited, one hand in his pocket, the other cradling his mask. A passing airship told him was near midnight. The mech groaned past, sucking air and rain with it. Wolf’s hat flew away in the wind. He smiled. Anytime now.

His jacket was soaked by the time He appeared. Wolf heard the door open behind him, and he turned to face it. Standing in the shadowy mouth of the doorway was a man... A man Wolf considered to be his only friend. A man he had trained, and a man that he loved.

“Viper,” Wolf grunted in the wind and rain.

“Wolf,” Viper said back, his voice shaking. Viper was in a bad way; his hair was unkempt and greasy, and his green jacket had stains all over it. Wolf spotted his revolvers, both loaded and ready.

“Never thought I’d say this, but I can’t say I’m thrilled to see you,” Wolf said, his voice grim. He thumbed his mask, feeling all the curves and bumps in it. The all-seeing eyes, the snout, the faux fur. Much different than Viper’s emerald scaled mask.

“Wolf...”

“Don’t bother. You’re here to kill me. I broke the rules. Fell in love. With a clone, of all things. Come now Viper, let us at least fight as men,” Wolf called. Another airship passed, its engines drowning out any other sound for a few moments. Viper looked up, his eyes red and puffy. Had he been crying? Or was he crying now?

“Wolf, ya know, you and me... We aren’t men. We’re animals,” he called. Wolf grimaced at the word.

*You’re an animal!*

*We’re animals.*

“Why? Are we not doing our jobs in society? A-Corp needs killers just as much as they need surgeons. You and I are simply filling our role,” Wolf called, though even he doubted his own words.

“LOOK AT US!” Viper screamed, “look at this!” He shoved his mask towards Wolf. Wolf backed away.

“Ow’ many, ow’ many have you killed Wolf?” Viper cried. Wolf considered his question. The faces began to blur together when he thought about it. He saw The Swede and his Synthetic eye, white faced moments before death. He saw the Junkies, their bodies piling up in violent gore ridden piles. He saw the Synthetics, their cold metal bodies feeling no emotion as his revolvers tore through them.

“I don’t know,” Wolf replied.

“Wolf, you ever thought... You ever thought that maybe me and you—maybe we aren’t the good guys?” Viper asked.

“I’ve never been a hero. Just a man doing a job,” Wolf said.

“Tell me Wolf, loyalty to Iona, or loyalty to A-Corp? Loving that woman, or loving your *role*?” Viper asked. He was very close to Wolf now, though he showed no signs of aggression.

Before Iona, Wolf hadn’t been anyone but Wolf. No hobbies, no friends other than Viper, no interests in the culture of the city. He waited at his phone in the morning. Waited for his license to kill. Just another cog in the system. He had known his place and embraced it. He’d never questioned his orders. A-Corp had saved him from being a Junkie or a Metalhead.

Wolf was a human being.

*You’re an animal.*

Wolf yanked Viper’s revolver out of his holster and held the barrel to his own head. With his other hand, he forced Viper to grip the gun. He locked eyes with his student, his friend.

“Do it. Kill me, finish the job Viper!” Wolf hissed. Viper shook his head.

“No... I can’t. I’m done, Wolf. Done. I’m done killing. We call ourselves human... But we’ve lost our humanity,” Viper whispered, his voice blending in with the rain. He threw his mask off the roof and backed away, leaving Wolf to hold the gun against himself. Wolf watched Viper step farther back. He watched as his foot hit the siding on the roof. He watched as his friend stepped off the building.

“Viper? Viper!” Wolf sprang forward but was far too late. Viper fell through the mist and the clouds, a smile spread across his face. In seconds, the city had swallowed him. Wolf sat for a moment, not sure what to do... What to feel. He’d been taught how to kill a man in twenty ways, but no one had ever taught him how to cry.

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Down below, Viper’s remains had already been looted. His mask and guns were gone, and the jacket was roughly torn from his barely held together corpse. Flying police vans came in a minute too late, spraying down dozens of innocent people with icy jets of water. A loudspeaker informed them that thieves would be killed on sight.

Rain. It hadn’t stopped for days. Tonight, it poured with vengeful force. Tonight, the rain was Wolf’s fury, sadness, and emptiness. Wolf cried, and the heavens cried with him.