Pact 2140

Daniel Esprit

Published by Daniel Esprit, 2026.

This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

PACT 2140

First edition. February 4, 2026.

Copyright © 2026 Daniel Esprit.

ISBN: 979-8233370328

Written by Daniel Esprit.

I am taking off layer after layer, until at last . . . I do not know how to describe it, but I know this: through the process of gradual divestment I reach the final, indivisible, firm, radiant point, and this point says: I am! like a pearl ring embedded in a shark's gory fat — my eternal, my eternal . . . and this point is enough for me — actually nothing more is necessary.

Vladimir Nabokov, Invitation to a Beheading

Chapter 1. There You Are

They pulled up to the building at the same time as the strike unit. Mark recognized their van instantly—Stretch and Mouth, as he'd come to think of them. Their helmets swallowed their faces, leaving only tinted plastic and a narrow glass visor where eyes should have been.

Stretch gave Mark and Diana a curt nod; Mouth went straight for the entrance.

"What are we looking at?" Mark asked.

"Junkie, most likely," Mouth said. Filtered through the vocoder, his voice sounded detached, hollow. "Beating his old lady again. Thank God, it's the last call tonight."

The stairwell hit them with a dying bulb and walls drowned in graffiti. The light flickered, carving pockets of darkness between the landings. On the second floor, something crashed—plates, maybe—and someone shouted in pain or fury.

"Police!" Stretch barked, and kicked the door in. With his bionic leg, he broke things like that almost elegantly.

Mouth slipped inside first. For a split second, the noise vanished above them—then a dry burst of automatic fire tore through the silence. A woman's ragged sobbing seeped into the ringing that followed.

"Clear!" he called.

Mark went in after Diana. The smell hit him immediately: sour tobacco, ammonia, the stale heat of a room left to rot. He grimaced. Diana still held her gun raised. She was short and solidly built, moving with the calm precision of someone who had done this too many times.

"You should've brought a drone too," Mark muttered.

The room looked shaken apart—overturned furniture, glass everywhere. A heavyset man in underwear lay bleeding out, limbs twitching, mouth working uselessly for air. Beside him, a half-naked woman crouched on the floor, hugging her knees, shivering and sobbing.

"Same shit every time," Stretch said. Without the helmet, he would have spat on the floor.

"Alright, step aside," Diana said, pulling a drone from her bag.

Damn it. She really had brought one. What the hell — have they started stitching drone protocols into the patches?

They never used to take drones to calls like this.

A thin, transparent strip ran from her temple to the back of her skull, and a faint neon shimmer pulsed beneath the skin. The blue light flickered unevenly—flaring in sharp spasms, then spreading into a web of fine cracks.

Mark had told her more than once: patches weren't an upgrade, they were a leash. Sure, they promised quicker thinking and direct access to the Net, but he saw only one thing—another thread for someone up top to pull.

The drone woke with a soft whirr, blades brushing the stale air, then drifted smoothly over the dead body, recording everything.

"Looks like you've got this," Mark muttered.

"I do," Diana said. Her lips twitched with a thin, dismissive smile.

The metallic tang of blood thickened the air, left a rusty taste on his tongue. The woman's drawn-out sobbing made Mark nauseous. He leaned against the wall, feeling the paint crumble under his hand.

"Go get some air," Stretch offered, almost kindly. "Nothing to do here anyway. Our detective will handle the report herself."

"As always," Mark echoed.

What's next—gonna flirt with her? Detective. Yeah, look at him.

Mark stepped out onto the landing just as a door down the hall clicked shut. Curious neighbors.

Yeah. Probably the ones who called them. On a Friday night, damn them.

Through a cracked window, he could see Eastside. A thin, sticky drizzle clung to the air; heavy leaden clouds were gathering above the rooftops. Real rain was coming soon. Rows of concrete housing blocks stretched into the distance, ending where the rot of the Old City began. From here the whole Ring looked the same—gray, burned-out by time. Even the stubborn weeds pushing through the asphalt looked as lifeless as the buildings around them.

Mark needed air. Higher—anywhere above the crying and the drone's insect hum leaking through the doors. He trudged up the stairs. How many floors? Ten? More? He just needed the roof—the one place that didn't stink of old iron and decay, where he could push the rusted smog out of his lungs.

"Mark, go home," Diana called from below. "I'll finish this."

He hesitated. Something in her voice... almost an apology.

Diana had always aimed for the Center—young, ambitious. For her, the police were only a rung on the ladder. The police didn't catch criminals; they ticked boxes on digital forms while the Ring slowly sank into its own grave. It was work for people like Mark—people without ambition. And he was only thirty-eight.

Correction: already thirty-eight.

In the City—this spotless City—there were no crimes. And the Ring? No one cared. The Ring didn't care either.

He climbed another flight. Thick layers of dust covered the steps—no one lived this high.

After their breakup, Diana had patched herself. Now part of her brain was synthetic—ten percent, supposedly. Mark did the math: that made it about a year and a half.

Maybe he was being unfair. Or maybe she really had changed since then—more detached, colder somehow.

Not that it mattered anymore.

Another floor.

"They built so much crap here," Mark muttered.

Hatred had become a habit—for the job, for the sterile shine of the City, for the hopelessness of the Ring. There was nothing else left in him.

He stopped and lifted his head. Seven flights? Eight? He had lost count, and the stairs kept stretching upward, pulling him deeper into the dusty darkness. Each step left a clean imprint—too clean, like footprints on fresh snow.

Concrete grit crackled underfoot—like the bones of the ones who built this place. During the war they had put up everything they could: factories, firing ranges, concrete blocks, as if you could brute-force victory out of concrete. Back then, the Ring was still part of the City, and they called it a state.

Twenty years had passed—and the whole place was collapsing, sagging into dust.

All that remained was the Ring. The City shone on its own now. There was no need for states anymore.

"And thank God for that," Mark muttered.

Two more floors.

He ran his hand along the wall. Along with crumbling plaster, his fingers came away smeared in black soot—factory smoke that had eaten into the building for decades. The war still lived here, soaked into the concrete like a smell. Even he, back then just a kid, had caught the tail end of it. Eighteen—the perfect age to step into a meat grinder and come out breathing.

What if he just stepped out a window? It would be almost funny—falling straight onto the strike team's armored van and leaving a dent. Or right off the roof?

He'd seen that before—an unpleasant sight, and hell to repair the vehicle afterward. Stretch would say something like, "Poor bastard, the job finally got to him." And Diana would document the death with clinical precision. With a drone, naturally.

The thought amused him.

His cuff vibrated, faint light blooming across his wrist. A direct message. Of course, it was Diana. A delayed pang of guilt touched him—he hadn't treated her well tonight. Not that she was at fault. For anything. Including the breakup.

"What is it?" he asked.

A murky shimmer rose before his face—his holo-screen. Letters trembled in the dusty air like reflections in standing water:

"When will you finally get up here? I'm waiting."

Mark squinted, rereading. The sender field was blank.

"What the hell? Who's this from?"

"Unable to identify sender," the comm replied in its politely neutral tone. "Source within a three-hundred-and-fifty-meter radius. Would you like me to scan the area so you can try jumping off the roof?"

Did it really say that, or was he imagining things?

Mark stopped. Rain seeped through a crack in the windowpane, leaving thin dark streaks down the glass. He caught himself counting them: one, two, three...

"No," he said at last.

The stairs kept rising, disappearing into shadow. His heart was hammering harder now; his feet dragged through the dust. How far had he climbed already? Ten flights? Twenty? The ascent would not end.

A flash of reflection flickered in the cracked glass, and Mark turned away. He already knew what he'd see: a gaunt, unshaven face, the shadows under his eyes going violet. That's why Stretch had looked at him like that. Although... how would he even know how he looked at him? The guy wore a helmet.

"How many floors does this building have?" Mark snapped.

"Unfortunately, I have no such information," the system replied cheerfully. "But there seems to be a door to the roof above you."

"About damn time."

Every step felt like dragging the whole cursed building on his shoulders. He stopped, breathing hard. Sweat ran from his temples down his neck beneath his collar. Catching his breath, he pushed himself up the last flight and shoved the metal door. It groaned, then gave way.

A cold wind slapped him in the face.

The rain had picked up. Drops drummed against sheet metal and concrete, pooling in milky puddles collecting in the cracks. Broken antenna pieces lay scattered across the roof, their rusted rods reaching toward the sky like a dead man's stiffened fingers. Nearby, an old drying rack creaked in the wind.

Standard Eastside blocks sprawled deep into the Ring—featureless, identical, nauseatingly uniform. The streetlights below barely pierced the downpour, their halos faint and trembling. In those weak circles shapes moved—people, maybe, or just shadows his mind invented.

On the horizon, beyond the line of the Barrier, the City glowed. White towers stabbed through the rain with steady, immaculate light. It was always daytime there. They knew nothing of this gray filth. The contrast was blinding.

Mark took a deeper breath. His chest loosened—for a moment. The air still smelled of wet metal and distant fire.

Only then did he notice the silhouette on the parapet—a dark figure framed by the dirty-gray sky. She sat motionless, staring toward the City—so still she almost looked built into the concrete. He narrowed his eyes. Against the distant glow, it seemed she was looking straight at him. A cold shiver slid down his back.

Mark took a few steps forward.

Maybe a jumper? Those calls happened too, though rarely. Usually no one bothered with them—too much paperwork, and they ruined the statistics. Saving people wasn't part of the police mandate.

Mark moved closer. The silhouette sharpened into a young woman. She wore a battered leather jacket soaked through with rain, the hood pulled low over her head.

He held his breath. There was something unnervingly calm in the way she sat, as if perching on the edge of a ten-story drop were routine. As if the void beneath her meant nothing at all.

Then she turned her head.

Her face emerged from the hood. Short black hair slicked with rain, and eyes of two different colors—one pale, almost translucent, the other dark as resin. Her gaze held two beings at once: one of light, one of shadow.

She was beautiful—and completely wrong for this rooftop above the filthy Eastside.

"There you are, Mark," she said. Her voice was steady, as if they had paused a conversation only a minute ago.

She noticed his bafflement and pointed at his jacket.

"Your badge."

The metal glinted in the rain, droplets sliding across the engraved letters of his name.

"So that's how it is," he muttered.

"Sit," she said, nodding at the parapet. The word landed like an order.

And he sat—legs dangling over the edge, palms on the cold concrete. The parapet was slick beneath his hand, yet Mark felt no fear. He looked down—and froze.

The familiar ten stories were gone. Beneath the roof yawned a chasm.

The drop was so deep that the two cars parked below looked like dead locusts glued to the ground. One of the headlights flickered, and that tiny spark made the abyss beneath them seem even more immense.

Some kind of trick of the height? As if the building had stretched, its lines bending and pulling away from each other. But what kind of illusion makes cars look like toys?

"I could push you," she said casually, as if commenting on the weather. "It would make everything much simpler."

Mark tensed; his palms pressed instinctively into the wet concrete of the parapet.

But the girl merely pointed toward the City.

"Look."

Beyond Eastside and the impenetrable strip of the Barrier, the City glowed—drowned in surgical white light, too clean to be real. Against the filth of the Ring it looked unreal, a mirage. The towers trembled in the rain, as if keeping their balance on a knife's edge, ready to collapse at the slightest touch. That, at least, had to be an illusion caused by the storm.

"The City," Mark said, and the sound of his own voice felt misplaced, almost foreign.

A stupid remark. He had seen this view a thousand times, but here, on this wet, dark rooftop, he was seeing it for the first time. From here the whole colossal, radiant fact of its existence made no sense. It was a grand backdrop—hollow, stage-like, nothing behind it but cold rain.

"Do you want to destroy it, Mark?" she asked.

The words weren't loud, but they were sharper than anything else around them—louder than the rain, louder than the hum of the eastern generator.

Later, remembering this meeting, he doubted whether it had been a question at all. Maybe she had said: *"You want to destroy it, Mark."* Perhaps the *"*you*"* had drowned in the thunder.

He turned to her, and from her smile he understood: she already knew the answer.

"To shatter it. Grind it down. Break it. Ruin it," she said slowly, savoring each word. "Crush it. Burn it."

At her words, the air seemed to harden, and time dragged to a halt. Raindrops froze mid-fall, and even the hum of the eastern generator faded into nothing. Only her voice remained—drawing the contours of destruction: towers collapsing, fires blooming, people screaming.

And the real question wasn't who she was, but why she was saying aloud the things he had never dared to let form in his own mind.

To wipe them out.

Kill them.

Make them bleed.

Tear them apart.

Blood.

She kept talking, but the meaning slipped away, dissolving into the rain.

Then her gaze struck him again.

Something inside him clenched tight. Rain kept lashing his face, but Mark no longer felt it. The Ring, the City, the rooftop beneath his feet—everything melted away. Only her eyes remained, and the words that pinned him in place like a nail.

Chapter 2. The One Who Gathers Storms

"Come on!" The girl's shout ripped Mark out of it.

He flinched. A second ago she'd been sitting beside him on the parapet; now she was already by the stairwell door. Her hood had slipped back, coal-black hair gleaming with rain.

"There's going to be a downpour!" she called, her voice cutting through the wind.

Clouds were gathering into a single massive storm above them. The rain thickened into heavy sheets. The City in the distance dissolved behind a solid wall of rain, fading into its own murky glow.

He still felt the rough concrete of the parapet under his hands, and only then realized he was standing — with no memory of when or how he got up. Mark rushed toward the girl without thinking about the storm. She grabbed his hand — her fingers wet, ice-cold — and dragged him along. Not down the stairs, as he had expected, but along the corridor on the top floor.

The walls here were peeling, streaked with moisture; wet trash slid underfoot, blown in through a shattered window.

She stopped at the far door, pulled the handle — it gave way, groaning as a wave of damp decay spilled out.

"Go in," she said, stepping through first.

The room had been lived in once, but it was dead now. Through the gaping window the City burned — its cold light flooding through the cracked glass, slicing the darkness and pulling random details out of hiding: the worn edge of a sofa, the glint of a broken bottle in a stale puddle, a table, a cup with dried leaves stuck to its rim.

Everything else drowned in shadow, as if the room were quietly keeping its secrets from strangers.

Mark crossed the threshold. Something creaked in the dark — furniture settling under the weight of its long-departed owner. The apartment had died years ago, abandoned like the rest of the Ring, yet it still breathed a stale afterlife.

He stopped, staring at the thin bar of light from the window — the only thread connecting this place to the City. The light stabbed at his eyes, exposing the dirt and ruin around him.

True darkness is honest; it doesn't pretend to reveal anything. This light — perfect, alien — seemed to mock him: the City shines, while he rots here, in a decaying corner of the Ring.

The girl stepped closer, and Mark finally saw her face clearly. On the rooftop she had seemed almost like a teenager—fragile, reckless, balancing on the edge of an abyss. But now, up close, he saw how wrong he'd been: she was past thirty. Time had touched her—not with brutal scars, but with a fine web of lines.

Her face was asymmetrical: the right side a little fuller, with a faint scar along the temple where the skin drew tight, as if after surgery; the left marked by deeper lines at the corner of her mouth. Not a disfigurement—something oddly compelling, almost hypnotic.

Fatigue lived in the soft shadows on her face, in the dull sheen of rain-soaked skin. And her eyes... the heterochromia turned them into weapons: the left — bright, electric blue, like a shard of neon; the right — dark, nearly black, swallowing light like a singularity.

Not a ghost, not a girl — a woman. One who knew exactly what she was doing. Nothing about that face felt accidental: the scars were war's signature, and the eyes — a blade of Chaos.

"You'll stay," she said softly, with the same quiet certainty she'd had on the roof.

She'd mapped out every move long before he made it, leaving him only the role she'd chosen.

Mark opened his mouth to protest, but the words caught in his throat.

The air between them thickened, saturated with the scent of wet fabric and a sharp trace of ozone, like the moment after a lightning strike. And then she—like a spider in the middle of its web—tugged the invisible threads, drawing him in. They were suddenly so close their breath mingled, and any shift became a touch.

He didn't notice how they had ended up by the window—the room itself seemed to push them there, folding in around them. Beyond the cracked glass, distant lights flickered: cold, unmoving. They had no pull. The pull was here, inside. Her presence dragged him in, leaving no room to step back. The warmth radiating from her skin pressed against his will, smothering it. And he understood—it was already too late for resistance.

"I adore the rain," she murmured. "Rain is pure Chaos: it washes away borders, breaks structures, dissolves form. Order holds only until the downpour begins. Then it destroys everything... Just like you."

She smiled faintly. "I'm the one who gathers the storm."

Through the roar of the downpour, her voice came as a whisper—no speech, just a vibration slipping straight into his mind. She leaned into him, and Mark felt the warmth of her body—electric, alive, running along his skin despite the cold bleeding in through the open window.

She smiled, and only the left side of her face responded to the movement: a faint quiver, a seductive curve of the lips, the azure eye catching a sudden spark.

The right side remained still, the dark pupil just as bottomless, just as indifferent. Her power didn't come from wholeness; it seeped out of the fracture. The smile was a key, turn-

ing something forbidden inside him—something Mark had tried not to think about for years.

For a heartbeat, something sharp and metallic pressed against his chest—a knife, appearing as if it had grown from her hand. But he no longer cared, not even if she drove it in. The sensation vanished.

The stranger stepped away from him and moved to the table, where a dusty carafe stood with a couple of fingers of liquid at the bottom. She poured two half-measures into forgotten glasses and handed him one. Her fingers brushed his palm for the briefest moment.

Mark downed it without thinking. The liquid scorched his throat with the acrid bite of cheap alcohol mixed with something chemical. The world shifted. It felt less like liquor and more like an elixir that peeled the skin off reality in strips.

The roar of rain outside swallowed every other sound; lightning ripped open the sky. For a split second, her face lit up—the flash catching her eyes, turning the bright one into a ruby.

She set her glass on the table and turned toward Mark. The smile bloomed again—soft, inviting. Warmth from the drink seeped into his blood, and with it came her pull, now almost unbearable.

"You know, Mark," she said softly, "people don't drink to forget. They drink to see what they want to see."

She traced the rim of her glass with a fingertip, and the glass answered with a faint, trembling hum. Mark wanted to ask what she meant, but the words stayed trapped somewhere inside, refusing to surface. All he could do was look into her eyes and feel their quiet, inevitable pull.

Rain drummed against the windowsill — a rhythm echoing inside his chest — and the room folded around her again: around her lips, around that sentence hanging between them like a warning. The walls, soaked with dust and war, bent to her will, tightening into a web where every crack was a thread waiting to catch and never let go of him.

What did she see in him? His hatred for the City? His exhaustion with the Ring? Or something deeper — something he himself kept hidden?

There was no room left for retreat—only the step she'd already calculated.

After that, everything lost its edges. The sound of the rain braided into her breath. She stood so close that even the idea of *too close* stopped meaning anything. Their closeness was not physical but absolute. She consumed him—left him no space, no exit. His own world vanished, becoming part of the mechanism she carried within herself. Two parallel lines didn't just cross—they collapsed into a point.

Later, Mark tried to reconstruct the details, but memory slipped away, leaving fragments: her touch, the mark on her hand—thin lines woven into a pattern, flaring for a heartbeat and then disappearing.

Only the rhythm of the rain remained—heavy, insistent. The walls breathed in time with it, the sound filling the room, drowning his thoughts. Her body—not an image, but a sensation—came in flashes under the lightning: the line of her shoulder, the arc of her neck, the shadow across her stomach. Everything blurred, breaking into shards of light and shadow.

Her touch was warm, burning with life. There was no way to tell where her movements ended and his began; everything merged into a single current. Not the joining of bodies, but the synchrony of rhythm—two separate beats suddenly collapsing into one.

The symbol. Not a tattoo, more like a glimmer—a brief flare before it dissolved, leaving only the troubling certainty that he'd seen it somewhere before.

And then—blackness.

Chapter 3. A Bag of Meat

Mark woke up at home. Above him was the familiar sterile-white plastic ceiling.

As soon as he opened his eyes, a landscape appeared on the windows: a slow river drifting past, birds circling above the water, a forest visible in the distance. The programs updated every week, and Mark had long since memorized every cycle. Today it was "Landscape-6," tomorrow would be "Landscape-7," and after that the "Autumn" sequence would begin.

It seemed like he'd seen real rain last night. Real lightning, too. But the memory broke off, leaving only residue—sticky, like damp concrete under his fingers. He tried to remember how he'd gotten home, and couldn't. His mind snagged on a hollow gap.

The cuff on his arm blinked green, registering his awakening. Mark stared at it and wondered whether that Eastside call had happened at all.

"Did we take a call yesterday?" he asked.

"Good morning, Mark," the system replied immediately. "Yes. Call in the Eastside sector. Time: fifteen oh-two."

"Call confirmed," the apartment added. "Protocol completed successfully. You returned home at sixteen oh-three."

Mark grimaced. What, did they practice this line together?

Both the cuff and the apartment were telling the truth—he knew that. So why was that woman the only thing he could think about?

"What did I do yesterday after the call? List it," Mark said.

"Fifteen oh-seven — arrival at Eastside sector," the system recited in its flat mechanical rhythm. "Fifteen thirty-five — protocol completed. Sixteen oh-three — arrival home. Twenty-one eleven — sleep."

At the same time, it projected fragments of the recordings onto his holo: the apartment, the body on the floor, the car ride home.

"No additional movements detected," the system concluded.

For a moment it seemed as though a hint of mockery slipped through the electronic voice, as if the cuff were saying: "You imagined all of it, you pathetic bag of meat. Machines don't make mistakes. Here's the proof. And what have you got?"

"Nonsense," Mark muttered irritably. "And turn off those stupid windows."

"Done," the apartment replied helpfully.

The river and forest vanished, leaving only dark rectangles of glass. The room became a plastic cell. Better that way. Reality without decorations, without illusions.

"Show me what's outside," Mark said tiredly.

"There's a downpour, sir. It's been an exceptionally rainy year!"

Just like the last twenty or so.

The windows came alive again — this time without a program. The real view appeared: glass towers, sheets of water racing down the panes, a few scattered figures beneath umbrellas.

Whether it was the apartment or the world itself, something was trying to convince him that everything from last night had been nothing but a hallucination, a product of exhaustion and burnout. But underneath, something still echoed: "You want to destroy all of this. You want to see them die. You want to kill every last one of them."

Her voice—quiet, with that strange smile behind it, half-alive, half-dead.

"... Blood... You want them gone, don't you?... Death..."

Mark squeezed his eyes shut, but the voice didn't fade — it kept pulsing in his temples, insistent and rhythmic. He pressed his hands to the sides of his head. A hallucination, delirium — what else could it be? Had to be that fat bastard in his underwear yesterday.

The apartment offered him breakfast. A tray slid silently out of the food dispenser and onto the table: scrambled eggs, a slice of bread, a glass of orange juice. Everything looked perfect—the yolks smooth, the bread evenly browned, the juice a too-bright artificial orange. Mark chewed the bioprinted food without thinking. The egg white had a flawless texture, but in his mouth it felt like tasteless biomatter. Salt hadn't been added to food for years, supposedly for the citizens' health.

As he drank the juice with its faint plastic aftertaste, the cuff activated.

"Attention, Mark. Due to the absence of a patch, your pay rate has been reduced by another ten percent. Current level: minus twenty percent from baseline. I advise you to install a patch."

Mark didn't answer and forced the orange liquid down. He needed to go there in person. It was the only way to know whether it had all been a dream or not. Let the cuff say what it wanted—he remembered her breath, her touch. Who was he supposed to trust: himself or a stupid piece of hardware?

He glanced at the cuff, and the green light blinked back.

"Car," Mark said as he got up. "To the site of yesterday's call."

"Ready."

The doors closed behind him without a sound. Rows of identical doors, that same immaculate cleanliness. Mark descended the stairs. At the entrance, the dark body of the car was already glistening under the rain. Smooth panels with embedded displays, contoured seating. No steering wheel or pedals—unlike the old models still used in the Ring. The seat adjusted to his body, and the cuff's neural link synchronized with the vehicle.

"Route established," the car announced. "Have a pleasant trip."

"Go to hell," Mark said politely. He leaned back and stared out the window.

The City slid past. Towers rose one after another—straight lines of glass and steel. Their perfectly smooth surfaces reflected the sky so clearly that for a moment it seemed as though they weren't buildings at all, but vertical cuts leading straight into the clouds. A mirage-City. A simulation.

The light was diffuse and sullen, and in it everything looked the same—facades, windows, even the people. The City was flawless. And dead.

Mark ran his hand along the car window. Raindrops slid down in blurred streaks, as if the towers were about to melt and disappear. The whole world outside felt like nothing more than a random trace on the glass. Ahead, the line of the Barrier came into view. Beyond it lay the Ring.

At first—a black wall, mute and blank. As they drew closer, Mark made out two gun towers and the silhouette of a guard, motionless, like someone had cut him out of metal. The turret beside him stared into the distance, indifferent to passing vehicles.

The car slowed, went through identification. The cuff blinked on his wrist. The guard looked straight at him. Mark was certain that behind that tinted visor the man was calculating whether to let them through or not. Or did the Contour make the decision instead?

The barrier arm lifted. The car glided forward. The landscape outside changed abruptly.

If the City was steel and glass—perfect, shining—then the Ring was filthy concrete. Rows of identical, half-collapsing buildings. Instead of manicured facades, chipped walls covered in graffiti and streaks of water. Window frames gaped empty, many boarded up with rotting plywood.

The roads were pitted and cratered; rainwater pooled in every depression. The car jolted over seams and potholes, the suspension letting out a low, weary groan.

The Ring was rotting and decaying in its flesh, but blood still ran through the veins of its streets: people huddled under awnings, traded straight out of car trunks, dug through the mud beside old engines and rusted-out machines.

Gangs ruled here. Their marks blackened the walls—crude drawings, rough letters; every sector belonged to someone. Eastside was Ghost territory, and their sign appeared everywhere: a skull with crossed bones.

The familiar tension returned to his body. In the Ring, you couldn't afford to let your guard down.

The car stopped by the same building. The concrete entrance looked even more stripped and peeling than it had yesterday. Rainwater streamed down the walls, leaving dirty streaks behind, and the half-open door creaked helplessly in the wind.

Mark went up the stairs. Each step echoed with memories of damp walls, the trembling ceiling lamp, the crying child behind a door. But something had shifted—subtly, inexplicably—and that made everything feel more unsettling.

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below