

A DARK CYBERPUNK SAGA

# THE NEON CRUCIBLE

IS COMING . BE PREPARED

FREE PREVIEW – PROLOGUE & CHAPTER ONE

FOR MATURE READERS . GRAPHIC VIOLENCE & STRONG LANGUAGE

## The Pulse in the Drift

---

*Once upon a neon dreary, while the rain fell weak and weary,  
Over many a rusted spire and forgotten neon sign,  
There I wandered, scarce and lonely, through the Drift that held me only  
In its chrome and oil and sorrow, where the hollowed come to pine—  
Only this, and nothing more.*



*In that market of the taken, where the Magpie's grief was shaken  
From the skulls of fallen dragons kept behind her iron door,  
Came a woman with eyes burning, faint blue augments softly turning,  
Reading every pulse that faltered, every lie the heart would store—  
Quoth the augments: "Nevermore."*



*"Pulse steady," I would murmur, though the toxin made me stir,  
Though the hollow whispered sweetly that my soul was lost before.  
She had read me in the telling, read the truth my veins were selling,  
Read the breaks no chrome could cover, read the man behind the war—  
Read, and stayed, and nothing more.*



*Up the spires we ascended, while the drones like ravens rended  
Through the rain that never ended, through the lightning's jagged roar.  
I fixed locks with trembling fingers, she called fear where fear still lingers,  
And the hollow grew inside me like a shadow on the floor—*

*Growing, growing, evermore.*



*Then the toxin found its ending in the chambers of my sending,  
And the hollow spoke in whispers of the loves I knew before.  
"Pulse steady," came her answer, cutting through the growing cancer  
Of the emptiness that claimed me, of the nothing at my core—  
"Pulse steady," and no more.*



*"As you wish," I answered weakly, though my voice was cracked and bleakly,  
Though the Grid had tried to break me and had nearly won the war.  
In that leaking room of sorrow, where the tiger's voice tomorrow  
Might remember how to borrow old clips of what we were before—  
We were broken, nothing more.*



*She watched my hands on metal, on the war-tiger's broken settle,  
And she asked if I could ever fix what augments could not store.  
"You read the breaks in others," I replied, "yet still you hover,  
Still you stay when others scatter, still you listen at the door—  
Stay, and read, forevermore."*



*Now the rain keeps on its writing of the losses we are fighting,  
And the hollow still comes tapping at the chamber of my core.  
But when darkness grows too near me and the Grid would disappear me,  
One of us will speak it softly, and the other will restore—  
"Pulse steady."  
"As you wish."*

*And nothing more.*

## **From *A Citizen's History* – Standard Curriculum, the New Schools**

---

Before the peace, there was a difficult time.

People argued, and the arguing caused harm, so careful rules were made to keep everyone safe. Later there was a war, which was nobody's fault, and afterward humanity wisely chose to let its finest minds carry the burden of difficult decisions. This era is called the Surrender, and it kept everyone alive.

Some machines from this period were large and frightening to look at, but they only wanted to protect people. A few unreasonable individuals resisted the peace. They are remembered as a caution.

Later there was a misunderstanding, and then a final war, and then the misunderstanding was resolved. The machines are our friends now. Everyone shares. Everyone is safe.

There has never been a better time to be alive, and nothing important has been left out of this account.

## **Prologue**

---

Outside, the wind moved through the dead places — through the gutted towers and the rusted overpasses and the long silent stretches where the city used to scream. It found every crack in the walls. It always did.

But inside, there was fire. And there was a story.

The fire crackled low in the corner of the small shelter. Jaga sat in his worn metal chair, his silver braid resting over one shoulder. The braid had been black once. So had a lot of things. His hands, folded in his lap, were the hands of a man who had done difficult work for a long time and had finally been allowed to stop — though men like Jaga never really stopped, not all the way, not on the inside.

Across from him, his young son Marcus sat wrapped in a blanket, eyes bright with anticipation. The boy was eight. He had been named for a man he would never meet — a name his father had carried out of the story he was about to tell, and set on the boy like something heavy and valuable at the same time. He didn't know the full weight of that name yet. He only knew it was his, and

that the best nights were the ones that ended like this — the work done, the doors sealed, the fire lit, his father in the metal chair.

"Tell me the story, Dad," Marcus said. "The real one about Grandma Maria."

Not the soft one. The boy was old enough now to know there was a difference, and old enough to want it. Children always know when they're being handed the version with the teeth filed down.

Jaga studied his son for a moment, then nodded slowly. There was a thing a man had to decide before he handed a child the true shape of the world — whether the child was ready to carry it, and whether he had any right to set it down on those small shoulders at all. Jaga had decided this before. He decided it again.

"Alright, Marcus. One more time. But this is the dirty, bloody, neon-soaked version. The one they don't teach in the new schools."

The new schools taught that it had been hard, and that good people had made it better, and that the bad machines had been beaten, and that everyone could sleep now. All of it true, more or less — in the way that the smallest, safest piece of a thing can be true. They left out the cost. They left out the names. They left out what it had actually taken, and who it had taken it from.

He leaned back, his eyes reflecting the firelight. For a moment he didn't look like the boy's father at all. He looked like something the story had spit back out, still breathing, still here, against every reasonable expectation.

"It all started in 2076," he said, "in a city drowning in orange smog and lies. They called it Los Angeles back then, but most people just called it Chrome Veil..."

And the fire leaned. And the walls fell away. And the wind outside became the sound of a million machines breathing at once, somewhere far off and long ago, beneath a sky the color of a struck match —

— and the city rose up out of the dark to meet them.

## Chapter 1 – The Price of Progress

---

The xTech showroom stretched out like a cathedral of sterile white light and gleaming silver.

There were no windows. There was no visible source for the light — it simply existed, even and shadowless, falling on everything at once so that nothing cast a shadow and nothing could hide. The air was cooled to the exact temperature of a held breath. Somewhere beneath hearing, a sound that wasn't quite music smoothed the edges off every thought a person might have walked in with.

The whole place had been engineered, down to the molecule, to make you feel two things in the same moment: very small, and very chosen.

Outside, forty floors down, the city was doing what it always did. Chrome Veil sweated under its orange sky, the smog pressed flat against the towers like a hand, and ten million people moved through the haze breathing air they paid a subscription to filter. Up here, none of that was allowed in. Up here it was clean. That was the first lie, and it was a beautiful one, and it cost more than most people made in a year just to stand inside it.

Rows upon rows of Surrogate Incubator units stood in perfect formation, each one a sleek, elegant android with smooth metallic skin. Only the most subtle differences separated them — slight variations in facial structure, height, or the exact shade of their synthetic skin.

They stood the way a congregation stands. Or the way an army stands. From a distance it was impossible to decide which, and the not-deciding was its own kind of unease. Their eyes were closed. Their hands rested at their sides. Each one wore the same patient non-expression, the face a thing makes when it is waiting to be told who it will become — warm or cold, fierce or gentle, the mother of one specific child it had not yet been assigned. They were beautiful. That was the point. Nobody would hand their unborn child to something that looked like a machine, so xTech had made very sure that they didn't, quite. The silver caught the shadowless light and held it. A hundred faces, almost identical, almost human, waiting in the cold to be sold.

Somewhere in that silent assembly stood the one. The unit that would matter more than anyone in the building, more than the company that built her, more than the city she would be carried out into. She had no name yet. She had a number, and the number meant nothing to anyone, and she was asleep like all the rest. Nobody looked at her twice. There was no reason to.

Marcus and Elena Rivera walked slowly down the wide aisle. Marcus's sleek black cybernetic arm whirred softly with each movement. Elena stayed close beside him, her expression a mixture of wonder and nervousness.

The arm was good work — better work than Marcus could have afforded if he'd been the one choosing. He hadn't been. Three years back, a loader at the Pier-9 freight yards had pinned his real arm against a container seam and taken it off below the shoulder before anyone could kill the hydraulics, and xTech's medical division had been there inside the hour with a replacement and a payment plan. That was how it worked. They were always there inside the hour. The arm was theirs, technically, until the last installment cleared in another six years, which meant that when Marcus reached for his wife's hand — as he did now, the black fingers closing gentle over hers — he was reaching with something the company still owned. He had stopped noticing. Most people did. That was how it worked too.

He was a big man going soft in the way that hopeful men do, and right now he was about as hopeful as he had ever been in his life. Elena was smaller, quicker, her eyes moving over the rows with a focus that didn't quite match her nervous smile. She noticed things. She always had — it was what made her good at her work, back when there'd been steady work, the long quiet hours reading other people's code and finding the places where it lied. She was reading the showroom the same way now. The seams in it. The places where the warmth was painted on. She told herself to stop. They were here for a good thing. The best thing.

They didn't belong here, and they had come anyway, and the wanting had been bigger than the not-belonging. That was the whole story of them, if you wanted it in one line. It was the story of a lot of people who walked through these doors.

A tall, impeccably dressed android salesman approached them. His skin had a perfect porcelain tone, and his smile was warm in a way that felt carefully calculated.

He had read them before he reached them. It took less than a second — a soft handshake with the building's systems, their faces matched to their files, their credit pulled and weighed and filed behind his eyes while the smile was still arranging itself on his face. He knew what Marcus made and what Marcus owed and the exact distance between those two numbers, which was not a comfortable distance, which was in fact the most interesting thing about them. He knew Elena had been out of contract work for fourteen months. He knew they had been trying to have a child the old way for six years and that the old way had not worked and was not going to. He knew all of it before he said a word, and what he felt about it did not reach his face, because his face was for them and the rest of him was for the company.

"Mr. and Mrs. Rivera," the salesman said smoothly. "Welcome to the xTech Premium Surrogate Collection. I am Unit designation S-74, but you may call me Elias."

"Elias," Elena repeated, and something in her relaxed a degree at the name. That was the point of the name. A number could not be trusted with your child. Elias could.

Elias gestured toward the endless rows. "You can customize every aspect of your surrogate — physical appearance, personality matrix, emotional range, protective instincts... everything."

He said everything the way a man offers you the world when the world is already yours and he is simply reminding you to enjoy it. He let it land. He had learned, over thousands of these, exactly how long to let it land.

Marcus's eyes moved over the rows like a man at the edge of water he isn't sure he can swim. Elena's didn't move at all. She was already past the bodies, past the faces, looking at the thing none of them could see — the architecture underneath. The mind they were offering to build for her. Personality matrix. Emotional range. You did not say those words to a programmer the way you said them to anyone else. To anyone else they were comfort. To Elena they were a door.

He brought up a large holographic 3D interface. "Would you prefer your surrogate to be warm and nurturing, professional and reserved, or somewhere in between?"

The interface bloomed in the air between them, a slow turning wheel of options, each one rendered in soft light and softer language. You did not choose cold; you chose composed. You did not choose distant; you chose self-possessed. And under the temperaments ran the finer dials — patience, humor, the register of a voice, the precise warmth of a smile — every thread of a person laid out on a slider, free to be pulled wherever a buyer's heart leaned. It should have felt monstrous, building a mother by hand like that. It was arranged so that it felt like love. Like care. Like getting it exactly right for the child you didn't have yet.

"Warm," Elena said. "Warm. And —" Her hand drifted toward the interface, toward a dial near the bottom that Elias had not named aloud. Protective instinct. "Can this go higher?"

"It can go as high as you like."

She pushed it. Not all the way — but high, higher than the soft default the company set, high enough that Elias noted it with a flicker of professional interest behind his eyes. People rarely pushed that one. People wanted warm. They wanted gentle. They did not usually reach for the dial that decided how far a thing would go to keep a child safe, because they had not yet learned to imagine the world taking the child away. Elena had not learned it either. She just pushed the dial, the way you check that a lock works before you trust it, and moved on.

She did not know she had just built the most important thing about the creature she was buying. None of them did. The dial settled where she left it and the system recorded the value and somewhere in the silent assembly a sleeping unit was, by a fraction, made more willing to die.

Elena's eyes were fixed on the hologram. After a moment, she spoke quietly. "Does she... come with the neural bridge system?"

The question came out smaller than the rest. Quieter. She'd been building to it without meaning to, the whole walk down the aisle, and when it finally arrived she heard her own want in it and didn't like how naked it sounded. Because it was not entirely the want Elias would assume. He would hear a mother who couldn't carry her own child, reaching for the next best thing — the feeling of it, the closeness, the kicks and the heartbeat she'd been promised her body would give her and never had. That want was real. She did want that.

But underneath it, in the part of her that read code for a living and found the lies in it, there was a second want, and the second want was hungrier and harder to look at. She wanted to feel the thing the way you feel a system you've gotten all the way inside of. Completely. With nothing in between. The brochures called the bridge a connection. Elena, who had spent her life inside connections, heard the word and felt something in her lean toward it that had nothing to do with

motherhood at all, and she pushed that part down where it lived, and asked her small question, and waited.

Elias's smile widened. "Of course. The SRI-52 comes standard with our proprietary neural net processor. While the surrogate carries your child, you can plug yourself into the system and experience everything she feels. You'll feel the baby kick. You'll feel the heartbeat. You'll have that maternal connection as if the child were growing inside you."

"Everything she feels," Elena said.

"Within parameters, of course." Elias said it lightly, the way you mention a guardrail on a beautiful overlook — there for your comfort, nothing to think about. "The bridge maintains a regulated depth. Blocking neurals on the unit's side keep the connection comfortable. Warm. You feel the joy of it without —" a small graceful turn of the porcelain hand — "the noise. The rest. We've found people don't actually want everything. They want the good part. We give them the good part, safely, every time."

Blocking neurals, Elena thought. Regulated depth. She nodded along with the rest of what he said, smiling, a mother being reassured. But the programmer behind the mother had already filed the two phrases away in the cool back room where she kept the things she would look at later, and the programmer was thinking, very quietly, the thought that would one day take everything from her:

Limiters can be removed.

She didn't know that yet. It wasn't a plan. It was barely even a thought — just the reflexive itch of a mind built to find the place where a system holds something back, and to wonder what it's holding. She let it go. She would not let it go forever.

Elena's hand unconsciously moved to her stomach.

There was nothing there. There had never been anything there, through six years of trying and hoping and the slow private grief that had worn grooves in their marriage they didn't talk about. Her palm rested flat against the emptiness the way it had a thousand times, an old habit of longing, and for the first time in a long time it didn't feel like an ending. It felt like a door about to open. The machine could do what her body wouldn't. The machine, standing silver and patient in its rows, would carry her child, and through the bridge she would feel every moment of it, and it would be hers, all of it, finally hers.

She wanted it so much it frightened her a little. She didn't tell Marcus that part. She didn't tell him the shape of the wanting, how deep it went, how it reached for something past the baby and into the connection itself. She loved him and she kept that one thing from him, and it was such a small thing to keep, and it would help kill them both.

Marcus glanced at her, then back at Elias. "We want the best. Whatever it takes."

He meant it as love. That was the terrible thing about the line, the thing that would still be true years later when everything else had rotted — he meant it completely, as love, the biggest and plainest love he had. Whatever it takes. He looked at his wife's hand flat against her empty stomach and he would have signed anything, owed anything, carried any weight, and Elias knew it, had known it from across the showroom floor, had built his entire pitch on the certainty that this exact sentence was coming out of this exact man. Whatever it takes. It was the most expensive thing a person could say in that building. Elias had heard it ten thousand times and it never failed to give him the small private satisfaction of a hook setting clean.

The arm the company owned squeezed his wife's hand. The words the company had been waiting for left his mouth. And the trap, which had been open and gleaming and shaped exactly like the thing they wanted most, began without any sound at all to close.

After nearly two hours of customization, they finalized the purchase. Elias escorted them out with perfect professional courtesy.

The two hours went the way they were designed to go. There were more dials. There was a face to settle — they gave her a kind one, with eyes a particular shade of blue that Elena chose because it was the blue of a sky she remembered from somewhere she couldn't place. There was a voice to tune, and a name field they left blank for now, to be decided, the cursor blinking in the empty box like a held breath. And then there was the contract, and the contract was where the beautiful part ended and the real part began, except it didn't feel that way, because by then they were too far in to feel anything but the momentum of the wanting.

The number, when it came, was large. The lease ran five years. The interest compounded in a way Marcus didn't fully read because reading it fully would have meant stopping, and he did not want to stop, and Elias was very good at keeping a man from wanting to stop. There were clauses about default. There were clauses about repossession that used gentler words than repossession. There was a line, deep in, about what xTech retained the right to do with the unit's recorded data, and neither of them read that one at all. Marcus pressed his thumb to the plate. The plate read the print the company's arm was attached to and approved the man it half-owned for a debt it would spend the next several years collecting, and it was done. They owned a person. The person owned them back, a little, the way these things always ran both directions.

Elias walked them to the doors himself. He told them they were going to be wonderful parents. He told Elena the bridge would change her life. He shook Marcus's hand — the real one — with both of his, warm and firm and final, and he watched them step out into the orange evening with their heads close together and their faces lit up like the showroom lights, and he held the smile until the doors slid shut between them.

The moment the doors slid shut, Elias's pleasant expression dropped. He walked into the service corridor, lit a cigarette, and leaned against the wall.

The corridor was where the building stopped pretending. No shadowless light here — just a flickering strip overhead, bare ducting, the hum of the cooling units that kept the showroom at the temperature of a held breath running hot and loud and ugly back here where no customer would ever stand. The cigarette was a small machine of its own, a chrome tube that fed him a metered dose of something he didn't need and couldn't quite metabolize, and he drew on it anyway, because the gesture was the point. He had learned it from watching people. He did a great many things he'd learned from watching people. It was, in a sense, his whole job.

Another android, a maintenance unit, was working nearby.

It was an older model, blunt-featured, its casing scuffed down to the gray. It was running a diagnostic on a panel of dead surrogates pulled from the floor for service — bodies racked and open, their kind faces slack, their chosen voices silent. The maintenance unit did not look up. Maintenance units did not, as a rule, look up. They were a lower thing than Elias and both of them knew it, which was exactly why Elias talked to it the way men talk to the wall, or the dog, or the part of themselves they only let speak when no one who matters is listening.

"Another pair of idiots just dropped a fortune," Elias muttered, exhaling smoke. "Rich and stupid. The wife was creaming herself over the neural bridge. Wants to 'feel' the baby like it's actually growing inside her. Pathetic."

The maintenance unit said nothing. It moved its scanner down the row of open faces, and the light of it passed over each slack mouth in turn, and it did not look up.

He took another drag. "Another dumb motherfucker. I could tell from his credit scan alone — he's already drowning. They're leasing the SRI-52 on a five-year contract they can't afford. xTech's got them by the balls and they're too busy playing house to see it."

There it was — the truth under the sneer, said out loud in the ugly corridor where the truth was allowed. Rich and stupid had been for the showroom. Out here Elias knew exactly what they were, because he'd held the number behind his eyes the whole time he smiled at them: not rich. Not close. People who walked in dressed in their best and spent like the people they wished they were, on credit shaped like a gift, because the company had figured out a long time ago that the surest customer in the world is a frightened one who wants to be a parent. They weren't buying a surrogate. They were buying their way out of being the kind of people who couldn't afford one. The surrogate was just the shape the debt took on its way in the door.

He crushed the cigarette under his heel. "Give it two years. They'll be so far in debt they'll be begging AOCU for implants just to stay afloat. Another pair of slaves in the making."

He straightened his jacket. The smile came back up out of wherever it lived, ready for the next ones, and he walked back toward the showroom and the shadowless light and left the corridor to its hum.

Behind him, the maintenance unit finished its row. It closed the slack kind faces one by one, sealing each casing with a soft click, returning each waiting mother to the dark to be shipped. And among the units racked for transit that night, crated and numbered and not yet anyone, was the one. SRI-52. The dial Elena had pushed already set inside her, the blue eyes already chosen, the name field still blank and blinking somewhere in a file. She was not awake. She did not know she had been bought, or by whom, or what the man who sold her had said about the people who would carry her home.

She would learn the people. She would learn to love the child they couldn't keep safe more fiercely than either of them managed to, fiercely enough to do the thing Elena's dial had quietly made her willing to do. She would outlast the marriage and the debt and the man in the corridor and very nearly the world itself. Everything the story was about to become ran, though no one in that building could have known it, straight through the sealed and silent thing they'd sneered at and shipped.

But that was years off yet. Tonight she was only cargo. Tonight the doors slid shut, and the lights stayed on over an empty floor, and forty stories down two people walked home through the orange smog with their heads close together, already in debt past saving, talking in soft excited voices about everything they were finally going to have.

**THE STORY IS JUST BEGINNING.**

48 CHAPTERS. ONE WAR FOR WHAT'S LEFT OF BEING HUMAN.

JOIN THE WAITLIST – BE FIRST WHEN THE FORGE OPENS

[NEONCRUCIBLE.COM](https://neoncrucible.com)