

# City of Rain

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2013

To Patt

## Chapter One: “Hot date, Cameron?”

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...to question whether this mutation is in fact new. In this chapter, I will present evidence that First Nations cultures recognised individuals with abilities that closely resemble those of the sensates who have been studied in this century. Such abilities were highly prized: the sensate was a warrior, a hunter and a protector of the tribe. In modern times, those who possess the sensate mutation have been shown to possess, in addition to the enhanced physical abilities, a number of psychological traits that...

*The Sensate Mutation* by Dr B Dawson, 2199

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The black asphalt was shiny with rain and slick with spilled oil. Steam rose from vents in the sidewalk. Garbage lined the gutters, the acrid stink of rot and decay filling the air. A pair of hookers huddled under the only working streetlight. They had been there long enough for the endless rain to ruin their overdone cosmetics. In the gap between two dumpsters, a vagrant huddled under layers of discarded newspaper and cardboard, muttering to himself. In the distance, a siren wailed.

This was the Rainier underworld, the grimy depths of the city beneath the city. This land belonged to the gangs and the drug dealers, to the bums and the addicts. No one else ventured here, these streets of hopelessness and death.

With cold rain seeping under his raised collar, Michael Cameron drew his scarf across his mouth and nose in a futile attempt to stifle the stench. As he turned into the narrow alley his footsteps echoed and he was glad for the weight of the gun at his side. He knew he looked out of place; his good clothing and sturdy shoes marked him as an outsider as much as his military buzz cut. It was almost midnight; he was late.

A crumpled food carton skittered down the alley ahead of him, blown by the wind. He followed it with his eyes and it led him to the foul-smelling dumpster. Mike detected a strange scent beneath the decay. Sighing, he walked over to the dumpster and raised the lid. The body of a man at least three days dead was partially buried in garbage. Though it was almost too dark to see, Mike observed the gleam of metal beneath the greying flesh. There were blackish purple veins in a spider-web pattern across the corpse's

face. A mech addict, most likely killed by his own illegal mods. Those cheap fuel cells could be lethal. Mike let the dumpster lid fall and walked on.

The image of the dead man stayed with him. It felt like a warning, but it was not a warning Mike could heed. He had no choices left.

Finally, he reached the end of the alley. In a dark recess he found a door. Once painted green, the door was rusted and daubed with graffiti. Some of it was obscene: a crudely drawn penis, a disembodied mouth open to receive it. Some was colourful, almost artistic. Near the top of the door was a stylised head of a wolf with pointed ears and teeth.

Mike saw the square of an intercom beside the door. He pushed the button and heard the buzz sound somewhere within the building. After a moment, the intercom crackled and he heard a peremptory order.

“Show your ID to the camera.”

The lens of a camera glinted just above the intercom. Mike extracted an IDent® card and raised it before the lens. The card identified him as Michael Ellsworth, a former army captain now running a small business in the Rainier docklands. The IDent® was good: Michael Ellsworth had a birth certificate, school and army service records, bank accounts and a business license. He existed on the social matrices, too: as fully realised an identity as any other person. He just didn't exist in the flesh. Or, rather, he existed as a cipher: a ready-made alias for men like Mike to step into and out of, as needed.

Mike waited almost ten seconds before the voice said:

“Enter.”

The lock clicked. Mike raised a hand and pushed the door open. The corridor within was well lit and he blinked while his eyes adjusted. He let the door swing closed behind him and heard it lock itself once more.

“Are you armed?” the voice said from a speaker on the wall.

Mike hesitated, but he had come too far to be thrown out for a lie now. He had gone from hood to drug addict, from dealer to mech head and finally found a bouncer in an underground night club who agreed – for a significant price – to make arrangements for Mike to come here. Mike pulled back his leather coat, exposing the gun.

“Yes,” he answered.

“There's a row of lockers on your left. Leave your weapons there.”

Mike examined the lockers. There were six: metal, fairly sturdy, each with a combination lock of the type that allowed the user to set a new combination each time the lock was used. Mike nodded to himself. He was sure the locks could be broken but it was a reasonable effort to make him

feel secure. He took the gun from his holster, slid the clip out and placed it in the third locker. He kept the clip and its bullets, unwilling to leave behind a weapon that could be used against him. He studied the lock for a moment then, satisfied, he set a combination and locked it.

The walls were painted pale grey, the paint peeling in places. The floor was charcoal grey linoleum. As far as Mike could tell both walls and floor were clean; a welcome change from the alley outside. He walked down the corridor. At the far end was another door, standing slightly open. Mike rapped on it with his knuckles.

“Come in.” It was the voice from the intercom, but softer this time.

Mike entered the room. He found a room with a once-white curtain pulled across it, concealing the size of the room. On his side of the curtain there was an old-fashioned wooden desk with a man seated behind it. On the desk sat a computer holo-projector and several medical instruments.

The doctor behind the desk was a surprise. When he made this appointment Mike ran a search on the doctor’s name. It was a simple precaution. Doctor Paul Guevarra was a US citizen, but listed as born in the Texas Union. That had unpleasant associations for Mike but the doctor’s qualifications interested him more and they were good. Double undergrad major – cybernetics and pre-med – medical doctorate and post-doc work at Rainier University with a surgical residency at Sky City Surgical Hospital. It was an impressive resumé that didn’t explain why Guevarra was now working in the illegal market.

Guevarra was younger than his resumé suggested. The first thing Mike noticed about the man was his hair: long and glossy black curls tied back in a futile attempt to tame them. Then the man looked up and Mike saw his warm brown eyes and friendly smile. He was younger than Mike had expected. His skin had the golden hue of a South American genetic heritage, somewhat dulled by lack of sunlight. Despite that he was perhaps the most beautiful young man Mike had seen for a long time. Mike felt an immediate attraction but he ruthlessly suppressed it. That was not his purpose here and his goal was too important to let his dick do the thinking.

The young man gestured to the chair on the other side of the desk. “Please, have a seat.”

Mike sat down warily.

“Before we begin, I have to ask. Are you a cop?”

It was a sensible precaution. If a police officer came here and denied what he was, any evidence he gathered would be inadmissible: entrapment. But Mike wasn’t worried about that.

“I’m not a cop,” he answered. Him, a cop in Rainier? Mike could trace his family back to the twentieth century and he knew that there were lawyers

and police in his family history, but no Cameron had such a mundane job in Rainier today. The very idea was ridiculous.

The man nodded. "I am Doctor Guevara. Why don't you tell me what I can do for you?" He turned his head slightly as he spoke, and Mike spotted the tattoo on his neck: the same stylised wolf's head that was on the door.

Mike stiffened. He knew he was in Wolfpack territory; he had not known this doctor belonged to them. It made Mike uneasy. On the plus side, it told him that this doctor was competent, in spite of his youthful appearance. But the downside was bigger. Mike couldn't trust that his visit would remain confidential and he did not want to give the Wolfpack something to hold over him. He didn't want *anyone* to know. That was his whole reason for coming here instead of getting more conventional medical assistance.

Doctor Guevara waited patiently while the silence spun out. Finally, with a barely audible sigh, he leaned back in his chair. "You made an appointment, so I know you haven't come for emergency treatment. I can tell by looking at you that you're not in withdrawal, so it's not narcotics. Your IDent® says you're registered at a Docklands medical practice, so if you were sick, you'd go to them. That means your reason for coming to me is, well, illegitimate. So it's either mods or steroids."

This was a mistake. Mike stood. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have come," he muttered and turned toward the door.

"I'm gonna guess it's steroids," the doctor added, as if Mike hadn't spoken.

Mike turned back to him, surprised. He had a strong and athletic body which he kept in top condition, but he was no cheat. He got the body he had through hard work. Why would this young pup assume he wanted steroids?

"You're wrong," Mike answered.

Doctor Guevara nodded gravely. "You're looking for mods?"

"I...yes. I mean, I was. But..."

"Sit down, for goodness' sake." Doctor Guevara flashed a reassuring smile. "You've got nothing to lose by telling me what you want."

"I do," Mike said. "Have something to lose, that is," he clarified when he saw Guevara's frown. But he didn't explain. If he revealed that secrecy was important to him, he was opening himself up for blackmail.

"You've taken the biggest step already. You're here. Why not talk to me?" Guevara gestured to the chair again.

Reluctantly, Mike sat.

"Do you have any mods already?" Guevara asked him.

It was a reasonable question. Mike shook his head. “No. The usual comm chips, but nothing more. I was offered basic enhancements when I was in the army, but I didn’t need them.”

“Okay. Are you looking for something, uh,” Guevara hesitated for a moment, and then finished, “something visible?”

Visible cybernetics were usually ostentatiously visible. Those mods ranged from simple skeletal enhancements that had originated as treatments for injuries to full-on mecha. Mike knew it was the fashion among certain people, but the thought of doing that to himself made him feel nauseous. Nothing like that would help Mike.

“No,” he said firmly. “It’s no good to me unless I can hide it.”

Guevara nodded again. “So, what effect is it you want?”

Mike hesitated again.

“Come on,” Guevara urged, impatience creeping into his voice. “You’ve trusted me this far.”

Actually, he hadn’t. Mike wouldn’t have said even this much if he’d been using his real IDent® and they were getting into dangerous territory. He had rehearsed this conversation a hundred times in his head. He knew he had to be honest, fully honest, for the mods he wanted to work. But still he hesitated. Trust didn’t come naturally to him.

But what other choice did he have? Finally, Mike answered. “Sensory. I’ve read about the new IK-47 units for the eyesight...”

“Ah,” Guevara interrupted him. “I can certainly install an IK-47 for you, but as you say, it’s very new. That means it’s costly. In a few months the price will come down, but at the moment...”

“How much?” Mike asked bluntly.

Guevara named a figure and Mike almost smiled. It was a hefty sum, but not unexpected and not out of Mike’s reach. “That’s acceptable,” he said carefully, “if it works.”

“Search. Elijah CyberNet, IK-47. Download spec,” Guevara instructed his matrix. He knew the name of the manufacturer without having to check, Mike noticed. It increased his confidence in the doctor: the man knew his stuff and kept up with the latest tech.

The matrix’s holo came on and a cartoonish clock appeared in the air above the desk.

“Why the 47 in particular?” Guevara asked Mike.

Again Mike hesitated, unwilling to disclose his secret. “Control,” he answered. It was an honest answer, just not a complete one. “I read it works like a biological eye, giving the user a fine control over the, uh...”

Guevara reached for his matrix projector and turned the holo a little so Mike could see the display more clearly. After a moment, the specs for the eyesight mod Mike had researched appeared in the holo. Guevara touched the image and rotated it.

“The IK-47 is a new class of mod,” he explained as the technical diagram rotated. “Undetectable by the standard scans because it reads more like a neurally integrated link than a mod. That doesn’t mean it’s entirely undetectable or that the best scanners won’t recognise it. The IK-47 uses nanotechnology to integrate with your nervous system, which is what gives you that control. That part is true. But it also means you can’t just get it implanted and walk out of here with super vision. It takes time to integrate and even more time for you to learn the system. To get the fine control they’re advertising, you have to adjust to the mod. It’s similar to learning to walk again after a badly broken bone.”

“How much time?”

“It would vary. I’ve only got the data from the company, but based on this...maybe four weeks. Probably six months before you learn enough to use it to its full potential.”

Mike’s stomach felt hollow. He hadn’t anticipated it would take so long. His research told him most mods took a week or so to settle. But six months! He couldn’t disappear for that long. He couldn’t *wait* that long.

“That level of integration takes time,” Guevara said, evidently reading Mike’s worry. “I’ve got sight mods I could fit for you tonight and you’d have it working by morning. But they wouldn’t be undetectable.”

Mike nodded to say he understood, but his mind was racing. He wanted something that wouldn’t be visible, but he wasn’t worried about passing scans. Getting a mod this way was illegal, sure, but there were ways around that. It was secrecy he needed, and a long recovery would make that impossible.

“Guess I wasted your time,” Mike said glumly. He shifted his weight in the chair, about to get up.

“Wait,” Guevara said sharply. He dimmed the holo-display. “Look, I know you’ve done your research, Ellsworth, but I know a lot more about this than you can pick up online. So why don’t you explain to me what you want from a mod, and I’ll figure out if there’s something out there that will fit?”

It was a sensible suggestion, but Mike was fairly sure he’d covered all the bases himself. To explain fully to this doctor required trust. And Mike couldn’t trust an underground doctor who was owned by the Wolfpack. He sighed. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but I’m not desperate enough to lay out my business for the Wolves.”

Guevara stiffened. "I'm a doctor. This is confidential."

"I can't trust that." Mike looked pointedly at the tattoo on Guevara's neck.

"Hey, that's not fair. Sure, I have an arrangement with the Wolfpack, but they don't own me. I don't betray my patients."

"That's not the way I hear it works," Mike answered levelly. Everyone knew there was no compromise with the Wolfpack. You were either one of them, or you weren't. The tattoo said it all, whatever kind of "arrangement" this doctor thought he had.

Guevara stood and walked around the desk. "I get it, man. I see a lot of people here, and most of them are addicts of one kind or another. You're different. I can tell you need help. You're not desperate yet, but you wouldn't be here if you had anywhere else to go. I can help you, if you trust me."

He was persuasive. And it was true. It had taken Mike forever to find this one doctor. He had nowhere else to go.

"I have..." he began, hoping he could keep at least some of his business to himself, "...problems with my eyesight. I need control of it."

Guevara nodded. "Well, you don't need something as expensive as the IK-47 to improve your vision. There's -"

"No, Doc," Mike interrupted. "You don't understand. I don't need improved vision. I need the opposite."

For the first time, surprise registered on Guevara's face. "Why would you want...?" he began, frowning a little. Then his eyes widened, his expression registered something like fear. His eyes flickered to his right: a swift, involuntary movement which told Mike their conversation was not as private as Guevara claimed.

Guevara recovered quickly. Leaning across the desk, he cleared his throat a little before going on. "I'm sorry, your reasons are none of my business."

Suddenly the holo flickered and vanished. A burst of static and high-pitched feedback came from the computer and Mike clapped his hands over his ears. That hurt!

"Sorry!" the doctor said. He did something to the computer and some of the sound faded. It was less painful, but Mike still heard a lot of static. What the hell was wrong with the computer?

Guevara was looking at him, an odd, intense look. He spoke almost inaudibly. "Are you a mutant?"

Mike flinched at the word and instantly knew he'd answered the question. He knew something else, too. That computer glitch was no accident. Guevara triggered it somehow, and Mike could think of only one reason to have pre-programmed something like that: to knock out surveillance. So much for confidentiality.

“And you need control?” the doctor said, apparently oblivious to Mike's growing anger. “I can help, but not here.” He tapped the computer again and the static finally cut out. More loudly, Guevara said, “Man, I'm sorry about that. This equipment is temperamental sometimes.”

Mike began to stand. Coming here was a serious mistake. He should have walked out the instant he saw the Wolfpack was involved here.

The door burst open and a woman strode in. Mike spun to face her, automatically reaching for his absent gun. He tried not to stare, but it was a struggle. She was the most striking woman he had ever seen.

She was tall, close to Mike's height, with an hourglass figure and long, black hair woven into tight cornrows: she had been beautiful, once. Now the mecha overwhelmed her beauty. Silver covered the right side of her face: smooth and shiny around her eye, pitted metal across the cheek and a glitter of silver dots around her mouth, vivid against her dark skin. Her right eye looked biological, but the iris was full of circuitry and Mike caught a flash from her pupil that was definitely mecha. Above the eye, a stylised wolf head was etched into the metal, proclaiming her allegiance. Along her jawline on both sides were crystal chips of many colours – on their own they would have looked like jewellery. She was dressed head to foot in skin-tight black and Mike saw the ripples of other mods beneath the cloth: wires across her chest and a coil like a solenoid around her collar bone. Her hands, too, had a glint of metal and she wore a power pack outside her clothing, on her belt beside a large gun. Mike suspected she had more mods than was healthy, but he saw no sign of the tell-tale dark veins of an addict.

The woman's eyes locked onto Mike for an instant then she focussed her dark gaze on Guevara. “Need you. Parker's coming in bloody.”

Guevara straightened instantly. “How long?” he asked.

“Soon!” She whirled, revealing a bulge of mecha on her spine, too. Ignoring Mike altogether, she strode out of the room. The door slammed behind her.

Doctor Guevara stood. “I apologise,” he said awkwardly. He looked genuinely chagrined. “Look, I'll research the mod you want and find out for sure about the integration time. Here...” He took a contact card from his pocket, wrote on it and offered it to Mike. “Call me. We'll set up a new appointment.”

*And give you another chance to screw me?* Mike thought. *I don't think so.* He did stretch out a hand to take the card.

The doctor held onto it a moment too long. "I mean it, man. I can help. Call me."

Mike nodded curtly and pocketed the card.