

Intermission 180.5 - Stories

PoV: Mikey “Deadwire”

Mikey had been picking at the same loose wire on the side of his baby for the last five minutes.

It didn't need picking at. The wire was fine.

It had been fine the last fifteen times he'd checked it and it was fine now, the connection solid, the insulation only slightly more chewed-up than it had been when he'd first salvaged the thing from the pile three years back.

His fingers just needed somewhere to go, and the wire was there, and the alternative was sitting completely still in a waiting room chair that was, frankly, nicer than anything he'd ever personally owned, and thinking about what was waiting for him on the other side of the door at the end of the hall...

He was sweating through the back of his jacket.

He could feel it running down his spine.

This was utter bullshit, was the thing.

This was complete and total, unambiguous blank-type bullshit, and if there was any justice anywhere within the fourth layer of Neo Avalis—which there wasn't, he knew that, he'd always known that, but hypothetically if there *was*—he would not be the one sitting in this chair right now.

Crenn had been the blank to get them all into this mess. Been there from the damn jump.

Crenn's group had been the ones to make the initial intercept, had been the ones to ram the Operators' car and set up the blockade in the first place.

If anyone was sitting in this chair, it should've been Crenn.

Or Vasht—Vasht had brought in the second wave, had been coordinating on the street the whole time Deadwire was still three fucking blocks away getting the call that they had found them!

'But nooo...! Of course neither of them!'

Somehow—*somehow*—it was Mikey in the chair.

Mikey with the sweaty back and the wire he couldn't stop picking at and the very imminent appointment with—

The speaker on the wall beside the door crackled, peaked sharply, and Deadwire's heart exited his chest via his throat before the sound had fully resolved into anything recognizable.

"Woops—so sorry about that." The voice that followed was warm and unhurried, the kind of voice that belonged to someone who had never once in their life been in a waiting room they didn't own. "Deadwire? Big Darcy will see you now."

Deadwire put his baby back in its holster with hands that were doing their best not to let it drop despite the shaking, stood up, and went to the only door he hadn't entered from...

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The hallway beyond the waiting room was nicer than the waiting room, which Deadwire had already thought was nicer than it had any business being.

The floor was actual *tile*—not cracked or water-stained or the kind of tile that had given up on being tile and was mostly just memory at this point.

The walls were clean, too.

The lighting overhead didn't just look warm, it literally was. Not to mention it being even and coming from fixtures that matched each other, which was the kind of detail that Deadwire had never consciously noticed in any building before and was noticing now with a specific, uncomfortable acuity.

The second hallway was somehow even nicer than the first.

He didn't know how that was possible and didn't examine it further, because his eyes were fixed towards the far-end of the hallway.

The office door at the end was open.

Deadwire had been in a few corporate offices in his life—run jobs through them, mostly, the kind that ended with him leaving faster than he'd arrived.

He knew the general shape of them.

The window-wall, the desk that cost more than a vehicle, the particular quality of furniture that communicated money by looking like it was trying very hard not to.

This room had all of that—and more—the bones of it recognizable under everything that had been added on top—the racks of salvaged plating mounted to the walls like trophies, each piece tagged and labelled in a hand Deadwire didn't recognize.

The workbench along the left side running the full length of the wall, covered in components and half-assembled gadgetry in various stages of becoming something new. The makeshift weapons displayed above the window with the careful placement of things that were valued, not merely functional—each one visibly hand-built, each one visibly *good* at what it was designed to do.

And behind the desk, Big Darcy himself.

He was looking out the window when Deadwire entered, hands clasped loosely behind his back, a broad silhouette against the neon wash of the city below.

He was a big man—not in the exaggerated, augmented way of someone who'd paid for it, but in the foundational way of someone who'd simply been built that way and had spent several decades making use of it.

'Not that he isn't augmented out the ass, of course. That, too...'

The chair behind his desk looked like it had been built specifically to accommodate him, which it almost certainly had been.

'Most things around Big Darcy probably have been,' Mikey suspected.

The massive man turned when he heard footsteps, and his face opened into a smile that reached his eyes entirely and without reservation.

"Deadwire! Or... Do you prefer Mikey?" His voice was the warm one from the speaker, larger now but no less comfortable. "Come in, come in—close that behind you, would you?"

Mikey closed the door behind him. His palms were *very* wet.

"E—either is fine."

"Sit, please." Big Darcy was already moving toward his own chair, gesturing at the one across the desk with the easy hospitality of a man who genuinely meant it. "You want something to drink? I've got decent *tea*, if you can believe it. Real stuff, not the synthetic."

"I'm—no, I'm alright. Thank you, Sir."

"You sure? You look like you've had a bit of a day." The observation was delivered without edge, just a simple, accurate read of the man across the desk from him. Big Darcy settled into his chair and leaned back slightly, giving Deadwire the full, unhurried weight of his attention. "How are you holding up? You weren't hurt out there, were you? I can call for a Ripper if you need...?"

"N—no," Deadwire said. Then, because it felt like the question deserved more than one word to not be disrespectful: "No, I—I came in late. Wasn't in the building when it—when it happened."

"Good." And the man meant it, was the thing. Mikey could hear it. "That's genuinely good to hear, Mikey. *Truly*."

Big Darcy folded his hands on the desk, unhurried. "Take a breath. Then tell me what you saw."

Deadwire took the breath.

It didn't help as much as advertised, but it was something to do, at least.

"Crenn's group made the intercept, Sir," he started, finding the beginning of it and holding on. "T—The Operators—there were five of them, we think. S—Small crew, came out of the Kuller Street safehouse after clearing it out... Crenn had eyes on the building, got the alert when things went sideways inside, had people in position by the time they hit the street."

He paused, trying to steady himself. "C—Crenn's the one who rammed their car, Sir. Ran them into the blockade, one of our vehicles on its side already—Vasht's crew had it positioned. M—Molotov took care of their transport."

Big Darcy nodded slowly, listening attentively.

"T—They got into a nearby building. Residential, one of the blocks on the corner of Kuller and Ninth. Barricaded themselves in the ground floor foyer." Deadwire's fingers found the wire again, reflexively, and he made himself stop. "They were already hurt—Crenn said they were carrying at least two of their own going in. One of them looked *bad*."

"But yet they held the foyer?" Big Darcy interjected, genuinely sounding simultaneously surprised and impressed.

"Y—Yes, sir. T—They held it." He confirmed a bit reluctantly. "First wave went in when the barricade gave—four, five of ours, I think? Then another six behind them. I—I wasn't—I had just arrived by then, really. Just heard of it from others before then, Sir. M—My group was outside, we were staged to go in as the next wave, but the door's narrow and you can only push so many people through at once, so we were—"

He gestured vaguely. "We were waiting. W—Watching the door for an opening, Sir."

Big Darcy said nothing, simply nodding along in complete and utter silence.

"There was a lot of gunfire from inside. L—like a lot, a lot of it. And then—" Mikey stopped, his words failing him.

"Take your time," Big Darcy said, the same tone he'd used to offer tea.

"I—I don't—I don't really know how to describe what happened next, Sir..." The admission came out rough. "I—I've been trying to think, Sir. I—in my head, since it happened, and I keep—" He pressed his knuckles briefly against the side of his jaw. "It doesn't come out sounding right."

"Then simply describe what you saw. Just what you actually saw and heard. Don't try to make it make sense yet, leave to Big Darcy, yes?"

Deadwire nodded rapidly. Breathed shakily.

"F—First thing was the sound, Sir," he said. "T—there was this—this high-pitched sound...? Like air *screaming*. Like pressure, building up, getting louder and louder until it—" He shook his head. "I thought my implants had finally gone. I—I've been having trouble with the left one, the calibration's been drifting, and I just—I thought that's what it was. I actually sat down to check them. I—I was sitting on the ground, pulling at the casing trying to get it to cut out—"

He stopped again, closing his eyes, seeing the moment unfold behind his eyelids once again.

"And then," he said, and his voice had dropped without him choosing, "t—the building just—the whole front section, the entire face of the foyer, there was just suddenly—like a gash. This perfectly straight *line*, straight across the whole thing. B—Both walls, left and right. Either side, really, Sir. Didn't matter. It was straight through, like someone had just—I don't know what had done it. I—I don't even know what *could* have done it, Sir. It went through the metal doorframe, the rockcrete of the building, the concrete reinforcements—everything. L—Like it wasn't even really there."

Big Darcy's expression hadn't changed. He was still listening with the same open, receptive attention he'd offered from the moment Deadwire sat down, nodding along and visibly enraptured by the retelling, eyes sparkling with interest.

"And then it—something *pulled*. I—I don't—it was like the air went the wrong way, all at once, everything just went *toward* the door, toward the building. T—the noise, the dust, *our people* who were staged closest to the door—"

His jaw tightened.

"H—half of Crenn's remaining group. Most of what was left of Vasht's. J—Just—pulled in. Into the debris. The whole front side of the foyer came down and it just—took them with it."

He exhaled, long and shaky, covering his mouth with one of his hands and breathing through the fingers. "T—the ones who'd been inside when it happened, the ones who'd gone through in the first waves—we couldn't even—"

He stopped. Didn't finish it. "T—There *wasn't anything* to recover, Sir."

The office was very quiet.

Big Darcy sat forward slowly, elbows coming to rest on the desk, and looked at Deadwire with an expression that was still warm, still open, and now also very, *very* focused.

It sent a shiver down Mikey's spine.

"One of the Operators did this," he said. It wasn't a question.

"H—had to have been, Sir." Deadwire's voice came out smaller than he intended. "It—it was just a normal residential building. We checked. It—it was just people living there. N—Nothing strange in the least."

Big Darcy thoughtfully nodded once and for a long moment said nothing at all.

"Thank you, Mikey," he said finally, with the same genuine warmth he'd used to ask about the tea. "You did right, coming to me directly like this. I know that wasn't easy."

He reached across the desk and poured himself a cup of something that steamed faintly, utterly unhurried. "We'll get you and your group sorted out. Don't worry about that. You've done the Scrapwrights a great service today, Mikey. I will not forget it."

Deadwire nodded, swallowing heavily, and tried very hard to feel reassured, and mostly just felt the sweat cooling slowly on the back of his jacket...

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PoV: Detective Harlan Nass

Harlan had not been planning on leaving his apartment today.

That *had* been the plan, anyway.

The plan had involved the specific chair by the window, the one with the view of the mid-rise sprawl that was ugly enough to be honest about itself, and a pot of something that was technically coffee in the same way that second layer residential buildings were *technically* considered housing.

The plan had involved not talking to anyone, not going anywhere, and not doing the thing he had spent thirty-one years doing professionally and had spent the last eight months of retirement attempting to stop doing for free out of sheer compulsive habit.

Then Lena Marsh had called.

He'd known it was her before he picked up, because it was always her when the number was blocked and the hour was inconvenient, and because Lena had a specific philosophy about retirement that could be summarized as: Not his damn call to make.

They'd worked the same floor for sixteen years before he'd finally handed in the badge, and she'd spent most of those sixteen years being right about things in the quietly devastating way of someone who didn't need to announce it.

'Pertains to your personal interests,' she'd said—knowing exactly how to dangle the damn carrot in front of his nose to make him jump.

She'd said nothing else.

Just that, and an address in the fourth layer, and the particular silence afterward that meant she wasn't going to elaborate and he was going to show up anyway.

She'd been right, as it turned out.

She usually was...

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Harlan pulled the car up to the holographic cordon tape and sat with the engine idling for a moment, taking the scene in through the windshield before he committed to getting out of the vehicle and making it official.

The street read clearly enough at a glance, for someone who'd been reading streets for three decades.

The tiremarks first—two separate sets of heavy acceleration leading into the intersection, one of them with the specific lateral drift of a vehicle that had been moving fast and turned harder than it wanted to.

Impact point obvious from the scoring on the asphalt and the spread of debris outward from the corner, the physics of it pointing back to a collision that had been deliberate rather than accidental.

One vehicle had hit another and pushed it.

The pushed vehicle had ended up against the building face—you could still see the scrape marks in the facade where it had made contact before coming to rest.

The burned-out shell sitting twenty meters back from the building was undoubtedly the Operators' transport, or rather, *had been*.

'Too expensive for Scavs in this layer...'

The fire damage was thorough and old enough to be fully cold by now, the frame sitting low on melted synth-rubber, the surrounding asphalt stained in the wide, irregular pattern of liquid accelerant rather than mechanical fire.

Someone had thrown something at it.

The throw hadn't been good, but there had been more than enough accelerant, at least.

'Standard enough, so far... Ambush, pursuit, vehicle neutralized. Operators in over their heads fucking with the wrong gang of Scavs—Scrapwrights, probably, given this layer.'

He'd seen variations of this particular story more times than he could put a number to.

But then his eyes found the building, and stayed there.

Harlan had a bit of a habit—developed over three decades of scenes that didn't add up until they suddenly did—of letting his gaze settle on the thing that was *wrong* before he went looking for an explanation for it.

The brain knew before the conscious mind caught up, most of the time.

You just had to give it space to work.

The thing that was wrong in this particular scene was the *cuts*.

Two of them, running horizontally through the rockcrete on either side of what had been the building's entrance foyer—one on the left wall, one on the right, both at the same height, both with the same orientation, both with the kind of edge geometry that rockcrete did *not* produce when it failed under normal load or impact conditions.

Rockcrete failed in chunks.

It failed in cracks that propagated outward from a stress point in irregular lines, following the path of least resistance through the aggregate. It did not fail in clean, continuous horizontal lines that ran the full width of a structural wall and looked, from thirty meters away through a dirty windshield, like someone had simply decided where the cut should be and the material had agreed.

'Huh...?'

The thought that followed arrived fully formed and brought a familiar, specific weight with it.

*'Looks like she's been right once again. This **does** pertain to my personal interests...'*

Harlan turned the engine off and got out of the car to take a closer look...

The cordon had been set up with the standard NAPD efficiency, which meant it was functional and slightly wider than it needed to be and staffed by two uniforms who were doing their best impressions of people who had somewhere better to be.

The low-end Corpo workers the department had contracted and brought for the physical labour were already inside the perimeter, a small crew of them moving debris and shovelling out the foyer's *remains* with the focused, expressionless energy of people paid by the hour to not have opinions about what exactly it was that they were shovelling.

The mixture they were shifting was the colour and consistency of something Harlan had seen before in rooms that had contained a lot of people and then very suddenly contained *significantly* less of them in any coherent, comprehensive sense of the word.

He ducked under the tape without acknowledging either uniform, pulled his coat straight, and started walking—neither of them bothered him.

'Smart.'

The first major point of interest—a large pool of dried blood—caught his attention twenty feet inside the cordon.

A large splodge on the floor of the foyer's surviving section, close to the left wall—the spread pattern of it consistent with a wound that had been leaking steadily over several minutes rather than all at once. A significant bleed, sustained.

'Someone has been here for a while, applying pressure or having pressure applied... Maybe a previous wound opening up from the crash...?'

Not immediately fatal or the person wouldn't have been upright long enough to produce that particular distribution, but serious enough that whoever it belonged to had needed to stop moving and *stay* stopped.

He photographed it with the cybernetic eye, tagged it in the running file his cerebral link was building automatically, and moved further in.

The second pool was deeper into what remained of the foyer, and it told a different story entirely.

First off, it was larger. *Much* larger.

The dark, almost black quality of dried arterial blood in quantity, spread outward from a central origin in the specific pattern of a catastrophic, rapid pressure release.

Gunshot, probably—something that had found a major vessel and opened it *fast*.

He crouched beside it, studying the edges.

"Officer," he directed this at the nearest uniform without looking up. "Anyone pulled a round from the structural material in this section?"

"Two recovered," the uniform said, coming over with the slightly wary energy of someone uncertain of the protocol for a civilian in a coat asking competent questions inside a crime cordon. "Standard-issue, nine millimeter, both of them. One from the wall, one from the floor."

"Entered from the doorway direction or from inside?"

A pause while the uniform consulted something. "Just outside. Both trajectory assessments put the origin point somewhere just in front of the foyer."

'So the arterial bleed is from one of the Operators that had been holed up inside, hit by fire from the outside...'

Harlan stood up, turned the geometry over in his head, and moved on.

He talked to three more officers before he'd made a full circuit of the surviving foyer section.

The picture they assembled between them, fragment by fragment, was of a crew of Operators—five, the current best estimate—who had taken casualties during or before the vehicle ambush, barricaded themselves in the building's ground floor, and held the position against a sustained breach attempt by a Scrapwright response force that had arrived in numbers significantly larger than the Operators' own.

"How many Scrapwrights?" he asked the last officer, a young woman with the look of someone on one of her earlier scenes.

"Best count from what's been recovered so far—" She checked the pad. "Fourteen confirmed. Possibly more. The debris field is still being cleared."

Fourteen.

Against five Operators, at least two of whom had been carrying serious injuries going into the barricade.

Harlan looked at the debris field around him.

What remained of the foyer's front section occupied a dense, compressed area centered on the building's entrance—or what had once been the entrance, before whatever had happened to it had reclassified it as an art installation at best.

The material had somehow moved inward and forward simultaneously, the collapse pattern inconsistent with any standard failure mode he recognized.

'Walls don't fall like this, no matter how you apply force to it...'

They didn't move toward each other, nor toward the door, not with this distribution or kind of violence.

Load-bearing failure went down. Blast damage went outward. Implosions went inward.

This had just gone—*wrong*.

The geometry of it was wrong in a way that his thirty-one years of pattern recognition was flagging *loudly* and his current understanding of available technology was struggling to account for.

He spent a long time staring at the cuts.

Both walls, examined up close, produced the same result: Edges so clean they looked finished. Not broken, fractured or sheared by impact, heat or any process that left the characteristic surface texture of forced material failure.

'Cut...'

It was the word his brain kept producing and that he kept testing against alternatives and kept returning to, because the alternatives didn't fit and this *did*.

'Cut, cleanly, in a single pass, through a material that has a compressive strength rating that makes the very premise seem entirely unreasonable...'

The depth of the cut was consistent across its entire length.

The height was consistent.

The angle was consistent.

He photographed everything. Tagged everything.

Said nothing more to anyone.

The Scrapwright remains that had been recovered and laid out for assessment at the far edge of the perimeter were the last stop before the conclusion he'd been building toward since the windshield.

He looked at them with the specific detachment of someone who had looked at a great many things they would not have *chosen* to look at and had learned to treat the looking as a technical exercise.

The cuts on the recovered pieces were the *same* cuts as the walls.

Same edge quality. Same angle. Same single-pass consistency, present on biological material with the same indifference they'd been present on rockcrete.

Whatever had made them had not distinguished between the two in any way that had seemed to matter.

Harlan stood up from the last examination, put his hands in his coat pockets, and turned back toward the foyer.

'The origin point is the blood pool...'

The large one—the slow, big bleed.

The person who'd been down and staying down at the center of the surviving floor space.

He walked to it and stood in it and turned to face the door, and let the cybernetic eyes shift to the reconstruction overlay his cerebral link had been building quietly in the background the whole time, assembling trajectory data, cut geometry and spatial relationships into the visual approximation of what the room had looked like when it had still been a room with people in it.

The silhouette his mind produced was standing approximately where he was standing.

Blade in hand.

Single-handed grip, or close to it, by the angle of the cuts relative to shoulder height.

The sweep had been horizontal, committed, covering the full width of the space in one motion—both walls, everything between them, the material inside the room and the material outside the door all caught in the same arc.

A reach that no standard blade produced.

A cut quality that no standard blade produced.

The shape of the silhouette in his mind's reconstruction resolved, degree by degree, into something more specific.

'Katana...'

The blade-angle, height and movement said katana in his mind.

The geometry of the cuts, the height of them, the rotation arc required to produce both wall cuts from a single origin point—definitely a katana, held in a downward grip, swept horizontal at approximately chest height from the wielder's perspective.

Harlan stood in the blood pool of an unconscious man that someone had been trying very hard to keep alive, in a destroyed foyer in the fourth layer of Neo Avalis, and felt the smile arrive before he'd consciously decided to let it.

It spread across his face in the unhurried way of something that had been waiting a *long* time for the right provocation...

He reached into his coat pocket, produced a deathstick, and lit it.

The uniform nearest to him made a sound of objection that he registered and did not respond to, his eyes still running the reconstruction overlay, still looking at the shape of the silhouette with the blade and the impossible reach and the cut quality that rockcrete and human beings had both found equally non-negotiable.

'The fourth layer,' he thought, the smoke settling comfortably into his lungs. *'Why in the hell is he in the fourth layer?'*

The Shrieking Blade.

Twenty-three years since the last confirmed sighting.

Twenty-three years since the last scene that had produced cuts like this, in a city that had spent most of that time assuming he was either dead or gone, preferably both and forever.

Twenty-three years of Harlan keeping a file that his former colleagues had considered a quirk at best and a fixation at worst, updating it with the patience of someone who *believed*, on a foundational level, that patterns didn't stop just because you stopped seeing them.

He took a long drag of the deathstick and let the smoke out slowly.

The uniform was still looking at him with the particular expression of someone uncertain whether to escalate the no-smoking complaint.

Harlan didn't look at him.

He was still looking at the silhouette inside his own mind.

"Log the cut samples for independent material analysis," he said to no one in particular, knowing someone would write it down. "Full geometric documentation on both walls—I want exact measurements, not just photographs. And find me whoever owns this building. I want the tenant records for every floor over the last thirty years."

He took another drag.

'Twenty-three years, old man...'

The manic quality of the grin wasn't something he was going to be able to do much about, so he didn't try.

The Shrieking Blade was back in Neo Avalis.

And Harlan Nass had absolutely nowhere better to be than right fucking here...