PACIFIC STATE

THE SUNDOWN SERIES : BOOK TWO

GRANT PRICE



Black Rose Writing | Texas

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PRAISE FOR
THE SUNDOWN SERIES

"A bracing blast of neo-cyberpunk with some smart tweaks to the operating system."
–*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)

"A rip-roaring cyberpunk novel…it's definitely science fiction, but it's frighteningly plausible."
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For Ania, my real-life Mia Warsaw.

PACIFIC
STATE

"The factory which works all night is a sign of the victory
of a ceaseless, uniform and remorseless time.
The factory continues even during the time of dreams."
–John Berger

ONE

A MORAL KIOSK

1

'He took my child from this world,' said the woman. 'Now I ask you to take his world away from him.'

A bulb threw spoiled light onto a grim room. Windows taped, walls nicotine, floor pockmarked with the brittle dried skeletons of insects. In the corners, single-use plastic lay piled like forgotten sculptures. The air was a curtain of dust and cloying sweetness. It was a hopeless space that had been built without ceremony, occupied without ambition, then abandoned and left to rot.

In it, a woman who hadn't had the misfortune to experience such squalor in life.

In it, a woman and a girl for whom squalor was their life.

The woman who didn't belong wore a muted dashan gown whose sleeves pooled on either side of her chair. Designer violet eyes glowed faintly in the semi-dark. She was the oldest in the room, though it would have taken a tissue sample to prove the fact, because her skin had been crisped and stripped at great expense. Even so, she didn't wear her artificial youth as a vain person would. It was part of her, just as her wealth was part of her. Her hands rested in her lap, her eyes on her audience. She had no mind for the decay around her, for she carried enough in her soul.

'I no longer believe in this system we have created,' she said. 'It has been good to me, but now it has taken away the only thing I would never have given up. From an early age my daughter Lulu showed a talent for music. She heard things others could not. She responded to

it with her body and mind. Before the end, she believed she was close to transcending the limits of the time to which we are bound. I don't pretend to understand what she meant, though she tried to explain it to me many times, and even had our consciousnesses share a Haight pool in an attempt to transfer her experience to me. I tell you this only so that you recognise what her music meant to her.

'Her move to Wraptstar wasn't for fame, carbon, comfort or sponsorship. She wanted her channel to provide tranquillity amid the noise. She wished to show that beauty could still exist, even thrive, in a world that had become barren and nihilistic. For a child to think like that? I would call it a miracle of cognition. Perhaps her precociousness reflects on me and how I raised her. Perhaps it doesn't.

'When Lulu played her Cristal Baschet, people stopped to listen. I mean truly listen. Her songs were chromatic paintings dipped in light. When she pressed her fingers to the glass, she continued a conversation that had started a million years ago and which has no end. Her message depended on her mood. It could be beautiful. It could be humorous. It could be melancholy. What the music always did was demonstrate a level of empathy a girl her age had no right to comprehend. And her audience loved her for it.'

For the first time since the woman had arrived in the room, a crack appeared in her façade. The hands that rested in her lap trembled, and the movement sent waves along the delicate sleeves of the dashan gown. An intake of breath, loud and sharp. Then stillness.

'Luc Benz found her through Wraptstar. I had never met him, though I was well aware of his reputation. Few can twist the system as he can, and even those living underground have heard the name of his father. I don't know if Lulu knew much about him. She didn't think like you or I do. She wanted only to touch people, and an intimate audience with a man who has the resources to assist thousands in need would have appealed to her. If she had only told me her intentions. If she had only confided in her mother. You may have heard about what Benz does to young women who are invited to his penthouse. You haven't? Then I will tell you.'

The woman looked to the ceiling, then back at her audience of two.

'Benz is not a surgeon, yet he practises anyway. He refers to it as his 'outlet'. Subcutaneous grafts and osteo-plants are his focus, using parts sourced from black resellers around Berlin so they can't be traced. No new technology. That would be a waste of carbon. He has zero interest in providing the girls he works on with any genuine enhancements. His satisfaction is derived from the act itself. Occasionally, his surgery is successful and his patient survives. That is worse than dying, because it means he can open her up again. When they found Lulu's body under a pile of refuse in leech town, it showed three grafts she hadn't had before, plus a ten-year-old HH-omnipol chip inside her skull. It was the chip that killed her, the coroner said. His notes also stated that the surgery for the three grafts was inferior to the point of torture, and from the marks on Lulu's body he suspected it was performed without anaesthetic.'

The woman stopped again. This time her hands did not tremble. Her designer gaze held firm. 'You have heard my story,' she said. 'So I trust what I say next will not shock you: I am willing to pay you whatever you ask to kill this man.'

***

A silence, drawn out to the point of discomfort.

The other woman in the room stirred. From her black ripstop nylon vest she withdrew a straight-sided parejo that was cut at the bottom and pushed it between her lips. The girl sitting next to her proffered a battered cartridge lighter, and the woman leaned in so the tip of the parejo touched the dirty flame. Through velvet smoke she squinted at the woman who had been Lulu Chao's mother.

'You took a risk coming to this place.'

'I do not care. I've already lost everything that mattered.'

'Then why come at all? Why not swallow a handful of Oblivion pills and be done with it?'

A crease appeared on the woman's artificially youthful skin. 'I heard you could be callous with your words, but suggesting to a grieving mother that she kill herself exceeds all expectations.'

'You think I should welcome you with open arms?'

'Simple courtesy would do.'

'Answer me this: when were you last in a neighbourhood like this one?'

The woman hesitated. 'Longer than I care to admit.'

'Admitting is better than not.'

'Then it is years,' said the woman. 'Does my answer satisfy you? I know what you're thinking: that mine is the problem of a rich person, involving another rich person. That if someone rolls a stone, it will roll back on them. Why should you have anything to do with it? But I am not here for me. I came to speak to you on behalf of Lulu. She never knew hardship because I hid the true nature of existence from her. I did it because I've seen what this world has turned into. I have observed with my own eyes, year after year, how malaise has taken hold like the rot in this room and how morals have eroded to the point that they no longer exist. The infrastructure is swaying and ready to collapse, more so than many at the top are willing to believe.'

She looked into the eyes of her interrogator. 'You should understand that better than anyone, Mia Warsaw.'

The half-smoked parejo fell to the floor, where it lay smouldering. The girl watched it, as if the smoke might give her a clue as to what would happen next between the two women.

Mia Warsaw sat unmoving. Faye Mao had surprised her twice, and knowing her name wasn't one of them. The first was that she had come to the meeting in person. The second was that she had owned up to what she was. A growther. A peddler of polite fiction. A citizen who had likely become rich off the misery of others, albeit one who had now suffered the greatest emotional loss there was. Mia didn't hate the woman, didn't feel much of anything toward her, but she would not make their conversation a pleasant one simply because civility dictated she should.

'You think you know me,' she said.

'I know only of your feats,' said Mao. 'The matter with Minister Bülow. Your stint in the Ziranese Liberation Army. A standoff with Heizer's strikebreakers.'

'That was all a long time ago.'

'How about the demise of Athos? Is that recent enough?'

Mia said nothing.

Next to her, the girl smiled. 'Most gens think she's dead by now.'

'When the broker told me it would be you,' said Mao, 'I was tempted to call it off. I know you despise my kind.'

'Yet you're here anyway. And you're asking me to kill a man. A man with whom I share no connection.'

'I am. Lulu wasn't the first and she won't be the last. Not unless someone does something about it.'

Mia could feel the girl's gaze on her. 'Go to the bulls. That's what they're there for, at least for people like you.'

The flawless skin wrinkled again. 'I took you for aloof, not a fool. The police in my precinct are bankrolled by Habanik Entertainment Corp. Habanik is owned by Benz's father, Eccard. I have asked myself several times why they haven't simply killed me yet and staged it to look like an accident.'

'Is that why you have a Barbarossa junkhead standing sentinel outside?' asked the girl. 'It's pretty, but you know they'll just slag it if they wanna get at you bad enough.'

Mao interlaced her fingers in her lap. 'I realise that. It's there to buy me time. I wish only to live long enough to see Benz dead. Then they can do what they want with me.'

Mia stuck out a booted foot and planted her heel against discoloured plank vinyl. 'You may have lost your daughter, but you still have more than most.'

'I don't see it that way.'

'It makes little difference to me how you see it.'

Now, finally, desperation showed in the woman's violet eyes. 'Won't you help me?'

'Why should I?'

'I will pay you. The broker said it was what you wanted.'

'You think this is about putting carbon into an account? You're wrong.' Mia levered herself out of the chair. She stood over the woman. 'Dead wrong.'

Mao stared, her body rigid, as if any movement would shatter her into a thousand bloodless shards.

'Are you going to kill me?'

Mia smirked. 'Not today. But you should leave now.'

With the utmost dignity, Faye Mao gathered her dashan gown around herself and stood. The raw silk edge of each sleeve left trails in dust as she made for the door. Beyond it lay the single titanium-laminate biped that she trusted to shield her from an entire city's casual violence.

'Chotto matte,' said the girl. 'Wait.'

Mia turned to her. Janeane was a gossamer blonde who had worked a polygon window on the Spree circuit until one night she'd gone to the cheaptainment block people called the Trident to throw herself off its roof. Mia didn't believe in fate, but she'd been up on that roof, too, after losing the last of her neweuro on a pajatso board. Instead of jumping, Janeane had seen her, talked to her, asked her for a job. Mia had said she wasn't the Ministry of Labour, but the kid had insisted that every mercenary could use a good thief. She'd disappeared for five minutes and returned with an unlocked cash slate holding more neweuro than Mia had seen in weeks. That had been six months ago.

Faye Mao paused at the door. Her designer eyes were blank, resigned. 'What is it?'

'I have a question,' said Janeane. 'How old was Lulu when she died?'

'Sixteen.'

The kid glanced at Mia. 'Tensix. Maybe a year younger than me.' She said it simply, like there was nothing to it, but the subtext was clear. Then she stood and drifted to the wall at the back of the room,

leaned against it and hitched a leg up underneath her. The centre was left to the two women. Separated by a few metres, yet worlds apart, watching and waiting for the other to blink first.

'Is this your daughter?' asked Mao.

Mia ignored the question. 'What do you want?'

'I want you to give me justice.'

'That word no longer has any meaning.'

'Then give me my revenge.'

Mia took in the hardness of the other woman's face, saw a mother's pain weaponised and ready to be unleashed on her daughter's executioner. Janeane's words echoed inside her head.

Mao took a step closer. 'You were once a symbol of resistance against econopaths like Luc Benz. When you took the Minister of Transport hostage, you showed that even criminals thought to be untouchable could be held to account. Benz is no different. In many ways he is worse. He should suffer as he has made his victims suffer. My own personal revenge is scant motivation to take a person's life, I grant you that. But proving there is more to this crumbling world than evil alone?'

Violent violet eyes burned into Mia, pinning her to the spot. 'This is your calling, Mia Warsaw. And I beg you to do it.'

Mia blinked.

'Okay,' she said. 'You'll have what you came here for.'

Faye Mao did not speak as a tear grazed her cheek. Her chest rose and fell and the dashan gown shook on her elegant frame.

'Thank you,' she said finally.

'The broker will handle the fee. Until it is done, I recommend you lie low. And invest in several more automatons to protect you.'

Mao nodded. She looked with gratitude to Janeane, who winked, then left behind the grim room and the business she'd transacted there.

As the door closed, Mia dropped into the vacated chair and rubbed her temples and didn't speak for many minutes.

The street was in a bad part of town, home to cold-blooded citizens with hostile intentions. Grit in the air, the stink of oily food and grain alcohol seeping between the cracks of shutter-fronted refugee-run chow joints and dive bars. Any transport on two, four or six wheels was so ramshackle it wasn't worth the effort of stealing. Mia Warsaw saw the looks that the derelicts gave Janeane, and she kept the kid close as they followed a rubberised paving strip to a kingCab depot two blocks up. Under her coat she kept a hand on the hilt of a fully charged Daisy, an electrified anti-riot baton that could drop an anabolic dysmorphic in a heartbeat.

Janeane seemed oblivious to the attention she was receiving. 'Are we gonna do it?'

Mia's gaze flickered to a man who squatted in a doorway, holding an ancient box terminal whose reader was worn shiny with use. There were gouges in his face where his grafts had been forcibly removed. He pointed at his terminal and whispered his spiel in a broken voice as they walked by.

'There's no 'we' in this,' said Mia.

'Says you.'

'Correct.'

'Why'd you take me with you, then?'

'I wanted you to see how that kind of person thinks and acts.' Mia paused. 'But I judged her wrong, at least in part.'

'Far as I could tell, Ms Mao isn't much different to you or me, except for the threads and her personal guard dog to keep the bad guys away.' Janeane's expression hardened. 'Besides, I already know what too much carbon can do to people. Clients showed me that when I was working my window.'

Ahead, a fly stumbled out of an Indo-tech reseller, then froze as he saw the kid approach. Mia gripped the Daisy a little tighter and opened her body more. Even as the fly made to speak, Janeane skipped around him like he didn't exist. He watched her go, then shook his head and shuffled on. He hadn't noticed Mia at all.

They reached the corner and found a depot absent of kingCabs. Two passengers waited at the blast gate, hands deep in the pockets of vinyl jackets. Quick eyes gave Mia Warsaw and Janeane the once-over and labelled them as probable non-threats. A beat-up track sentry patrolled the depot's perimeter, its packed camera head scanning in full revolutions. An overhead display flashed a message in red: ARRIV FIVE MIN.

'Rollerboy's seen better days,' said Janeane, eyeing the sentry. Then she noted the look on Mia's face. 'Shoulder?'

'It's aching a little.'

It would never be right, thought Mia, not unless she paid a whitecoat to open her up and replace flesh with high-density Plastex. But she didn't have the carbon for a procedure like that, didn't have the carbon for anything. She was in debt all over town. To a dermaclinic for the work they'd done on her face. To a second-rate implant artist in Gesundbrunnen to switch out her bio-ID chip. To various vendors for weapons, clothing, accommodation. And most of all to Mantis, the broker who had stepped up when she'd been bleeding out and found a reliable scalpel jockey to sew her back together. After regaining the use of her arm and learning to shoot straight again, she'd hit the streets only to find work scarce. Six hard months of scumjobs and she'd barely been able to settle the vig. Now, though, Mantis had put her onto the revenge fix against Benz. If she managed to pull off the job, she could pay her debts, load up a truck and kiss Berlin goodbye.

It sounded good in theory.

Janeane shuffled her feet. 'When that cannon tagged you, did you think you were gonna die?'

'I told you already.'

'Aw c'mon. I like to hear it.'

'I didn't think about dying. I didn't notice I was hit until I was on the roof of the train.'

'But you got the cannon even after it shot you?'

'Yes.'

'Pure geznet.'

On the forecourt, the track sentry halted at the blast gate and its camera head locked on to the new arrivals and scanned their ID chips. Janeane stuck out her tongue. Rubber treads bit into asphalt and the sentry rolled on.

'That Benz guy—'

Mia clicked her tongue.

'Désolé. You got a plan in mind?'

'Not yet.'

'Wanna talk it over?'

'No.'

'So what you're saying is you're uncomfortable about the job.'

'I'm not a mercenary.'

'The way I understood it, that ain't what Ms Mao was asking you to be. More like an avenging angel.'

Mia looked at the roller sentry, which was exploring a pile of rags on the far side of the depot. When it extended a probe, the pile stirred and a man's face appeared. 'Are all kids your age this perceptive?'

'Maybe. I don't know many kids.'

A breeze made its way over the forecourt and Janeane brushed away white-blonde strands from her eyes. 'When I was doing the polygon thing,' she said, 'there were plenty of clients I wanted to pull a trigger on. You could tell the ones, even before they started coming on fierce. Ugly energy. You knew you'd be in for it once the show got underway. Sometimes I tried to melt into the visuals or get off the stage as soon as I'd pitched a few shapes. Other times I figured it was my turn. Why should the other junos have to handle them and not me? I know now that ain't the right way to think. It puts the burden on me and the girls instead of the client. But maybe it's how this kid Lulu thought. Maybe, like Ms Mao said, Lulu had the idea that her music could calm his ugly energy and protect the others who came after her. Shouldn't have been her cross to bear, but there was no one else to do it. Then there's you. This ain't your mess, but you're doing it anyway. Because it's your turn.'

Janeane raised a leg and tucked her foot against the thigh of her other leg. 'How I see it, anyway.'

Mia squinted at her. 'Is that so?'

'Plus,' said the kid with a smile, 'once we do this job, we're gonna have all the scratch we need.'

'There's that word again.'

'Don't pretend you don't need help.'

They both fell silent as the track sentry passed them again. The overhead display indicated that the transport would arrive in one minute.

'Well?' said Janeane after the automaton was out of earshot.

'Yes, I need help. But we're not stealing credit slates here.' Mia's mind moved fast. 'If daddy finds out who cut his son's thread, we'll be exposed in a big way.'

'You're saying it needs to look natural.'

'Or like an accident.'

'Know anyone who does that kind of work?'

'No. But I know someone who may know someone. If he agrees to talk to me.'

'Why wouldn't he?'

'History.'

A six-wheeled kingCab that looked more like a tank than a taxi pulled up at the blast gate and discharged five people. A chime sounded and the gate opened, and a message spelled out in red crawled across the overhead display: PLS EMBARK.

'So who is this guy?' asked Janeane, waiting as the other two passengers took their seats inside the cramped gun-metal grey transport.

'His name is Ramirez,' said Mia. 'But people call him Lucky.'