

Survival Instinct – Excerpt 1

Talk. Some say Underhivers do nothing but talk, that they chatter like reprieved convicts coming out of solitary. Fact is, to them, talking is all about survival: where the lashworms have taken root, where the waste spills are toxic, who's top dog, where to find trade or scav, who's new in town. It's an unwritten law that nothing is taboo down here. A refusal to answer just about any question is a tacit invitation for a fight, not that it's uncommon to see it used as such.

So it is that the drinking holes and slop shops are always filled with a hubbub of gossip that hangs in heavy clouds like the twisting obscure smoke and the greasy fumes of tallow candles. So it was that when she walked into Hagen's place everyone, and I mean everyone, already knew that Mad Donna was in the settlement of Glory Hole.

It wasn't like in the pict-shows; the music didn't stop, everyone didn't shut up and stop what they were doing to stare. But there was a discernable dip in the noise, and a dozen subtle shifts in body posture betrayed curiosity or fear or bravado or guardedness in the crowd. She gazed brazenly at the inhabitants of the shadowy bar with her brilliant blue eye, zapping them with a billion volts of bad attitude. You get a tough crowd in Hagen's place but few were brave enough to meet her gaze and no one was about to challenge her right to be there.

Outlaw. Psycho bitch. Renegade noble. With an easy multiple choice of reasons like that it was easy to hate or fear Mad Donna. Her gory reputation had spread through Badzones like a twenty kay rad-cloud in the five cycles she had been below. She was easy on the eye with dancers' long legs and a set of bewitching curves more flaunted than obscured by her body-casque. Her face would have been beautiful if it wasn't etched by hard lines of cruelty and despair. Legend had it that she'd torn her own eye out years before when a barkeep had told her she was pretty, and now one socket was covered by a glittering, unwinking bionic. Truly there was more softness and compassion in that metal eye than the remaining real one. She carried well-worn weapons on her curving hips, two pistols and a slender chainsword she called 'Seventy-one' for the number of fingers and toes it had chopped off in its time. A dozen pairs of eyes quickly found other places to be.