

CHAPTER 2

The moment seemed frozen in time until the low hum of an ion engine broke the spell. A police flitter powered up from stealth mode and floated out from behind the five-story building at the north face of the quad. The leaking residuals of a null-grav generator made their bones tingle, the ephemeral jolt of vertigo. A photon-dense spotlight snapped on, cutting through the darkness and lighting up the quad.

“This is the police,” an amplified, synthetic voice rasped. “Lie face down on the ground, arms and legs spread. Any resistance will be met with a deadly response.”

Chameleon fields phased out in stuttering overlaps, figures shimmered into existence, resolving into heavily armoured silhouettes. The click and hum of assault rifle power-packs reinforced the threat.

“Fuck,” Nick hissed, taking a step back.

He should have trusted his instincts, his sixth sense; the way the alley’s sounds had seemed wrong, the almost subliminal flicker in his peripheral vision. He had ignored it all and now he was in the middle of what would shortly turn into a total shit storm. He felt the almost unconscious urge to drop to the floor. He knew that five against this show of strength was no contest, faxesimulants notwithstanding. The cops would cut them down with no more thought than a harvester would wield his scythe against the crop.

The first shot shattered the stalemate. One of the hired muscle snapped his weapon up and fired without warning. Beams lanced across the quad, followed

instantly by the concussive crack of superheated air. Lines of coherent light stitched the darkness while tracer rounds burned glowing arcs between opposing positions. A crimson ray flashed out from the shadows and vaporised the head of the muscle standing next to Nick. The gang youth smelt the ozone, felt the fine spray of steam-heated blood almost hot enough to scald. He could taste its ferric tang. Ignoring the bone shrapnel that lacerated his coat, he dived behind the prone body of the dead smouldering man. The corpse was still radiating heat, muscles twitching in death spasms.

Stone chipped and spat around him. An energy beam scored the ground inches from his leg, leaving molten lines that smoked in the cold air. Nick expected to look up and see the others similarly cut down. But as the hiss of laser tracts continued to sear the skin of night, he realised that the others were not falling beneath the onslaught but edging back towards the flitter, using it for cover, keeping up a constant crossfire.

Some tech had kicked in just after the first man had died, whether it was a refractive field interfering with the cops' laser targeting, or a device far more sophisticated than even Nick could imagine, let alone understand.

Three cops, no doubt frustrated by their inability to bring down the targets and buoyed up by that age-old feeling of invulnerability, edged out from cover to get a better shot. The female sim caught one cop in the chest, the body armour momentarily saving his life, until the gravity slug released its inertia and buckled the

thin plating with a sickening crunch, as if it were made of foil. The man's body followed it, spine compressing until it ruptured through his back like an alien spawn.

The second cop pivoted toward the female sim, bringing his weapon up, but a heavy-calibre round reached him first. The uranium-weighted .48 picked up most of his brains on its split-second journey and took them on a brief but deadly detour through the back of his head. A dark fountain of blood emerged from his helmet, a viscous plume suddenly turning black as it sprayed the wall.

The third cop might later think himself lucky to get hit by an incendiary, but he was too busy getting back to cover so that he could rip off his armour before the burning bullet broke through and boiled his insides.

The big stocky man dropped to one knee and took out the spotlight with a carefully aimed shot. As quick as the first light died, a second kicked in, but the short delay gave Nick's Eastern Bloc contact the time he needed to pull three small metal spheres from his pocket and send them rolling into the quad. They glided, tiny gyros whispering as they corrected their paths and spread out in a loose triangle.

The first sphere detonated, sending out a short burst EM pulse, which effectively shut down all the electrical systems in the immediate vicinity. The sudden darkness was absolute, the last solitary neon 100 metres away guttering and dying as the cavernous dark swallowed it. Only the light from the moon illuminated the scene now, enough to reveal the sickening sight of the hovering police flitter plummeting as its null-grav generator was shut down by the pulse, and gravity, weak but greedy, reclaiming it from the sky.

Beneath its crippled, inelegant trajectory, cops dived for cover as the flitter glanced off the corner of a building before crashing into the ground, emitting an agonising groan of crumpled metal. Its explosion was brutal and swift. Heat rolled across the ground. Debris tore through the air in blind, lethal trajectories. Shards of alloy and composite smashed into walls and flesh alike, embedding, ricocheting and killing.

The other two spheres triggered. The first emitted a mag flash, a light so intense it pierced closed eyelids, searing afterimages into the retinas. At the same instant, a sonic pulse slammed into the air, a concussive wave that hammered the eardrums and vibrated through the chest cavity. These were meant to blind and deafen everyone in the area but these cops were professionals, the best the city had to offer. They had been fighting a ground war for years and had paid an expensive price with their own blood but that sacrifice had bought them knowledge and wisdom. The cops' helmets incorporated heads-up tacticals, audio repressors and polarised visors. While the mag flash had blinded them, its effects were merely temporary.

Nick had to resort to cruder means of protection by burying his face in the ground and covering his head and ears with his arms. The intensity of the flash still found him, pulsing white through his flesh.

Realising the futility of the situation, the Asian abandoned the sims to their fate and lunged for the open door of the flitter. The vehicle lifted almost immediately. Nick felt the lurch in his stomach from the unshielded null-grav residuals disturbing his inner ear. He raised his head in time to see the blurry image of the black flitter

rising swiftly between the towers. A brief flare from its ions lit up the silhouettes of the three he had abandoned. The afterburner glowed white, a perfect target for the heat-seeking ground-to-air missile fired by one of the cops. He watched with some satisfaction as the projectile's white ribbon of vapour weaved and danced against the backdrop of night, inexorably hunting its quarry. Pinning the tail to the donkey, the cops called it. For a brief moment before impact, the flitter looked like an elaborate Chinese kite with a beautiful gossamer tail. Then the flitter burst apart silently in a shower of debris and sparks, the sound of the explosion arriving seconds after the light from the fan of fire. Nick flinched as debris rattled somewhere above him, pinging off metal and stone.

The remaining adversaries, still partially blinded by the mag flare, were backing away, firing wildly, shots striking high and punching holes in the walls. It served only to rain shards of stone and dust down on the advancing troops.

Taking advantage of the flare's blinding effects, a single cop stepped out from his cover. He wore no armour, just a shabby black mac already slick with rain. He angled his body side-on, presenting the smallest possible profile and moved at a steady crab-like gait, his weapon arm extended.

He took out the big stocky man with three shots grouped in his forehead, no bigger than a poker chip. His pistol was an old thing, solid and dependable. The targeting refraction tech didn't affect him as his weapon had no laser sight, and no more aid than three compensator slots cut into the barrel.

The female sim tried to focus her blurred vision and continued firing at the shadowy figure approaching her. One slug plucked at the material on the cop's shoulder pad, but he didn't flinch, just kept coming. A second shot cratered the ground near his boot, concrete bursting upward in a gritty plume.

The female sim's new emotions struggled for dominance as her fight-or-flight response kicked in. Flight won out over the combat conditioning, as she dropped her empty weapon and ran. The cop didn't break stride as he fired one short burst into the back of each of her knees. He needed her alive for interrogation.

She screamed but kept moving, momentum carrying her forward. She stumbled as the muscles in her legs drove splinters of bone into and out of her knees and thighs. The pain had become excruciating, crushing the edges of her vision. She fell and began to drag herself over the rubble of the quad, compelled by an urge which, ironically, was the vestige of what human scientists had been unable to remove from her core brain stem. As the effects of the EM pulse faded, lights and signs began to flicker back to life. The sim saw them in swathes of colour which dripped and flowed like melting neon.

The rain began to fall heavily now as the black-coated cop came to her and hefted her over with the toe of his boot. On her back, she looked up at him, seeing his sharp cheekbones and heavy stubble, his cold green eyes showing no compassion. She reached to her waist and pulled a knife from its scabbard. Before the cop could react, she spun it in her palm, and thrust it cleanly into her own chest, twisting it to snap it at the haft.

The cop watched as death reverberated in her throat, and a fine mist of blood issued from her lips. Carefully, the cop reached down and put the barrel of his gun to her eyeball. He turned to the gang youth cowering nearby, and said, "You can never be fucking sure with these things."

The sim suddenly arched her back and her jaws clamped on the barrel of the gun. The cop pulled the trigger, the sudden recoil wrenching the weapon free from her shattered teeth. Smoke spiralled lazily out of the charred cavity.

"See what I mean?" the cop said. "Like wasps, these things. Just don't know when they're dead. How about you, Nicky?"

"I ain't dead," Nick said, scrambling to his feet.

The cop nodded as if confirming something he had long suspected and said, "You're hard to kill too, huh? Are you a sim?"

"I ain't no vat trash," Nick said, bristling at the implication. "I had a mother. She was a drug taking, whoring bitch, but she was real flesh."

The cop stood over the headless body Nick had been using as cover. Rain hissed and spat as it struck the exposed bone and liquefied flesh. He tilted his head, studying the ruin with clinical detachment.

"This is not a good look for him, is it?" he said, almost conversationally. He tapped the crystal pinned to his chest. It flared with pale blue light. A three dimensional hologram of his own face unfolded in the air beside him, rotating slowly. Bands of official script circled it like satellites, serial codes flickering.

"I am Limiter Daniel Kade," he said, finally.

"Nick 5.1, Starfire clan," the youth announced, proudly.

Kade's eyes stayed on the body for another moment, then slid to Nick with a measured, assessing look. "I know who you are, Nicky," he said. "The bureau maintain a file on you."

Nick grinned smugly. The Limitation Bureau had a file on him. That was deep street rep.

"When I say file," Kade amended. "It's half a page. Today's little debacle may just stretch it out to a page."

Nick felt a little lip service was in order, false flattery to ingratiate himself. "You were smooth out there, man," he said. "Yeah, real smooth and cool, just striding up like that." He mimed pulling the trigger of an imaginary pistol. "All hell rattling around your head and you just took 'em out."

"Smooth?" Kade grunted. "This whole thing was about as smooth as a Martian whore's legs. This is a grade-A fuck-up. What in that drug-addled brain of yours makes you think anything about this is good?"

Nick opened his mouth, then shut it. He knew better than to argue with a Limiter. A state-sanctioned mercenary in all but name.

An armour-suited cop approached Kade and stared down at the female sim.

"I thought you wanted one alive for questioning," he said. His voice came through a filtered speaker in his helmet, flattened and metallic.

"She obviously had a self-destruct compulsion loop," Kade said. "Somebody didn't want us talking to these sims. Did we get the last one?"

“He got away.”

“Jesus and his stamp collection,” Kade groaned. “How can something that big get away from so many cops? There’s nowhere to go.”

The cop pointed to a jagged hole where a reinforced window had been. A twisted mesh grille dangled loose, its anchoring bolts torn free. The sim had ripped the grill from the wall, broken a window and crawled through. The building’s alarm was screeching at the breach of its security.

“Call it in,” Kade told the cop. “Full perimeter alert. Floater nets, thermal sweeps, everything.”

The cop walked away already relaying the instructions through his helmet com system.

Kade reholstered his pistol and turned his attention back to the gang youth. “My boss will not be happy, Nicky,” he said. “My one consolation is that I still have hold of *your* balls.” He gestured to another cop and said, “Take him back to HQ and stick him in the holding tank.” As the cop led Nick away, Kade shouted after him. “Talk soon, Nicky.”

For the first time that evening Nick felt sick with fear. His employer was not a man who took failure lightly. He was alone with no gang to back him up, only the dark shadows of death flickering in the light from the burning cop flitter. The adult, the gang member, the killer in him, lifted his chin in defiance but the child in him, locked away since the age of six, when his mother had died in the Harvest Lottery,

began to weep silently. The solitary tear trail from his good eye was like quicksilver against the moonlight.