

CHAPTER 5

The first sightings of the escaped sim started filtering down to Kade shortly after the initial skirmish. Each report pulled him west, deeper into Lambeth's contested zones. By the time he crossed the invisible boundary into gang territory, the rain had thickened into a cold, needling downpour. It ran in oily streams along the broken streets, and carried with it the sour stink of rot and human waste.

With each step, he could feel the exhaustion of a long shift seeping into his legs. He pushed on until he arrived at the outskirts of Brixton. The area was bathed in the orange hues of trashcan fires, the hunched figures of the street Greys watching him pass.

Amongst the broken-down tenements, he noticed small groups of bare-foot Grey clan children playing in the street puddles. It was an image analogous to the pitiful lives of a people born to the gutter, spending their lives there, and so very often dying there, buried beneath the weight of a world that did not acknowledge them.

Like some cynical segue life often throws up, Kade noticed another example of false bravado being played out before him, not unlike Nick 5.1 in the quadrangle. As he approached, the children reacted. Most scattered at once, vanishing into alleys and doorways with feral instinct. Fear of the Limiter ran deep.

Only one remained, a proud and defiant boy. He was slight, no older than ten, his ribs visible beneath stretched skin. Rain streamed down his face, but he did not

wipe it away. His eyes locked onto Kade with something that was somewhere between courage and despair.

Kade smiled sadly at him and pulled a solitary metal from his pocket. He flicked it toward the gutter. It struck the wet pavement with a sharp, ringing note before settling in the stream of filthy water. He stood for a long moment watching the child. In the Limiter's world, a single metal was nothing to him but riches to them.

The Scape had rewritten the rules of life two and a half centuries earlier. Medical miracles had extended life far beyond its natural span without the ensuing decrepitude of advancing years. Flesh no longer failed as it once had. However, that enhanced life span came at the price of crippling overpopulation with all its incumbent social and economic problems. After every method of control had failed, a desperate Earth government had decided to appeal to the one human characteristic inherent in everyone. If they couldn't appeal to common sense, they *would* appeal to greed.

By the middle of the twenty-first century, every newborn was fitted with a neural implant which served as their ticket to the health care that would grant them this extended longevity. They were allowed fifty years of life with which, from the age of sixteen, they were at liberty to do exactly as they pleased. There were no restrictions. Every implant was linked to the ubiquitous solar system spanning Artificial Intelligence known as the Scape. Millions of medical nanomeks maintained the body in perfect medical health, and when someone's time ran out, the Scape sent out a single pulse which instructed those same benevolent nanomeks to

painlessly terminate life. To the majority, the rewards of the system negated people's initial trepidation at such an intrusion on their lives. The miracle of nanotechnology and rejuvenation therapies kept Scape members younger, fitter, and healthier. They would enjoy five decades of quality life, retaining the health and vitality of a twenty-five-year-old, with the potential to earn extra lifetime.

In Kade's world, time was money, quite literally. The innocuous twentieth century business phrase had taken on a whole new sinister meaning in the centuries that followed. Essentially everyone was born rich, with a lifetime of capital to do with as they wished. Time could be converted into money. Money could buy back time. The motto: work hard, live long, was daubed in glowing neon across the city.

Time could be extended.

Time could be squandered.

Human nature tended towards the latter.

Kade, ever the cynic, knew that the self-destructive nature of humanity given wealth before the attainment of wisdom was the best population control ever. He understood the necessity. It was the politics of survival, a delicate balance between flesh and resources.

The system had worked with the exception of the Grey clan, the descendants of those who had originally refused the implant. They were not recognised by the state, their files erased from the records. They were trapped by the sins of their ancestors, because once outside the Scape it was almost impossible to get back in. Precious few ever did. They were considered society's pariahs, legally denied access to even the

most basic human rights. Ironically, without the benefits of the rejuvenation therapy and the protection of the law, their lives were far shorter and poorer than the minimum fifty years offered by Scape membership.

The logic was inescapable. A human who wasn't in the Scape didn't exist; a human who didn't exist, neither required nor received the protection of the law. The murder of a Grey was considered nothing more than background noise.

Justice was a dirty word to a Grey. There were millions of them scattered throughout the world cities, but like rats they went unnoticed, hiding underground or in the shadows, while the Scape members, or Angels as they were better known by the Greys, lived in the gleaming towers.

A low-level cop flitter shook Kade from his thoughts. Its siren lights were flashing as it skimmed over his head, the downdraft slapping at his coat. He looked back at the Grey clanchild. The coin still lay where it had fallen, half-submerged in the gutter water. As if to mock him, the single grey metal glimmered, catching the light from the fires, and taking on the hue of gold. Kade felt suddenly very cheap, aware of the small fortune weighing heavily in his pocket and even heavier on his conscience. He plunged his hand back into the deep pocket. It came up for air full of metal. In his hand he held what amounted to about half a minute of his life and yet could mean the difference between life and death to them. A small price to pay. He cast them into the gutter. The child stared at the metal and then up at the Limiter, fear radiating from his young eyes, shadows from the firelight dancing on his sad little face.

Fuck's sake, the kid wonders what he's got to do to earn it, Kade thought.

“No trade, kid. Take the metal,” the Limiter said. “It’s charity.”

Kid didn’t know what charity was. The concept had never made it this far into the third millennium, and what little there was never applied to the Grey clan. Kade had to walk away from the coins at his feet before the child would take them. The Limiter watched as he snatched them up and ran back to his family sheltering in a cluster of collapsed structures where dim figures huddled. He could hear the kid telling them he’d received this treasure from an Angel. Kade didn’t feel very angelic as he stood for a moment longer, watching the trashcan fires cavorting with the wind, the flames hissing at stray raindrops that interrupted their fervour.

The adhesive cochlear pad behind Kade’s ear crackled and a voice buzzed in his head. “Kade! Where the fuck are you?”

Kade lifted a hand and pressed it against the pad, shielding it from the ambient roar. “Brixton,” he said, recognising the voice of the duty Sergeant, Denny.

“We’ve had a report of that sim you’re after,” Denny said. “Damn thing’s running riot out there.”

“Where is it now, Denny?” Kade asked.

“Last ping puts it real close to you,” Denny said, “A low-life place called the Jazz-Mine. Know it?”

Kade let out a short, humourless laugh as a memory resurfaced. Neon haze, good SpeedJazz, cheap gut rot booze and bodies packed too tight. “I used to be a regular.”

"Figures," Denny said. "A fire's been reported at that location. Several people down. Get there as quick as possible."

"On my way," Kade said.

"We need that sim contained, Kade," Denny said. "Or put down. We don't care which. Just stop it before this turns into a media circus."

"Get hold of Oshiro," Kade said. "Tell him to meet me there."

"Be careful," Denny said.

Kade almost smiled. "Didn't know you cared."

"I don't," Denny said. "Paperwork'll be a bitch."

The connection was broken and Kade was off running, his boots pounding against the slick ground, splashing through shallow puddles.