

CHAPTER 7

“What happened to your stakeout?” Ghan asked.

“The stakees were better prepared than we expected,” Kade said. “We got all of them, but one.”

“But the one you lost just happens to be built like a motherfucker and mean to boot,” Ghan summarised as he looked across at Kade.

Kade met Ghan’s eye and smiled. “Wounded, cornered and insane,” he said. “Just how I like my sims.”

Another line of sarcasm was already chambered ready to shoot at the Mongolian when Oshiro flicked him a look so small most people would have missed it. Kade did not. He and Oshiro had spent too many years in kill-zones together. They had held whole conversations with nothing more than eye contact. Trench telepathy.

“Let’s get to it shall we?” Oshiro said.

The three Limiters pushed through a gaggle of wealthy ex-worlders, many of them sporting clip-on i-cams, red activation lights blinking. Kade couldn’t help but wonder what kind of mentality it was that saved holiday flix of bagged corpses to show the friends back home.

A shock stick crackled against his sternum and the fat bluey behind it said, “You wanna step back there?” The tone was flat and cold.

Kade made a move to activate his ID crystal. The cop's hand jumped to his gun. Kade made a take-it-easy gesture with his hand and thumbed the crystal with two fingers.

"Please don't shoot, officer," Kade said sarcastically, as the three-dimensional sig rotated in the wet air, throwing thin prisms across the cop's face, revealing official seals and Limitation Bureau rank markers.

The cop blanched. Some of the swagger drained out of him at once, but not all of it. "The Limiters," he muttered. "They been expectin' you."

"The Limiters?" Kade repeated, lowering his eyes as if the phrase itself offended him on a technical level. "There's just no respect for rank anymore." He stepped close enough to smell stale stim gum. The cop's top lip shone under the ad-light. Kade patted the officer's paunch once, almost friendly. "I've got this great diet for cops like you," he said. "I call it the Badge and Gun Diet. We take both away and the pounds just fall off."

The cop swallowed hard. "Yes, sir. Just these ex-worlders, y'know," he said, flicking his eyes toward the crowd, desperate to deflect the attention. "They keep crowdin' the line."

Kade gave him a few more moments in which to stew, the cop desperate now to get the Limiter off his back.

"I think they're waitin' for you, sir," the cop added, trying to recover some trace of professionalism.

The Limiters moved on, splitting the onlookers like Moses parting the Red Sea. The crowd folded in neatly behind them in a beautifully synchronised whisper.

The uniform's attitude was still prickling Kade. "Did you notice speedy back there?" he said, motioning his head in the direction they had come. "So slow on the draw I could have undressed his wife before he even got a hand on his gun."

"And you'd be finished with her before it even cleared leather," Oshiro said.

He couldn't resist a sideways glance at his partner to register the look that no doubt greeted his latest slight. He was not disappointed when Kade responded to the remark with the age-old witticism. He gave Oshiro the finger.

As the men continued on through the crowd, their progress was accompanied by the sinister mutterings of the spectators as they closed ranks behind them, the awe-struck chorus of one breathed word.

Breed.

The street slang for the Limitation Bureau.

A blue-suit Sergeant stood at the mouth of a side alley, barking orders at two night police while the flattened discs of surveillance floaters hovered above him, their lamp arrays cutting narrow cones through the gloom.

"What we got here, Sergeant?" Kade asked, looking over the scene.

There were bodies in the gutter, null-grav mag lamps illuminating the pale sheen of their skin. Kade counted four in all, three uniforms and one street. The street kill was just cheap skin, one arm flung under her, one heel caught in the drain mesh. Cheap dermal shimmer glittered at her throat but stopped at her face which was

now just a black cavity. The yellow fabric of her dress had darkened to orange, then rust, where blood soaked through it and pooled underneath.

A little farther in were two uniforms, caught in the same arc of fire, 9mm probably, pumped into them even after they were down, judging by the pockmarked flagstones.

One floater drifted lower, and its light beams slid across the third dead cop. The geometry was wrong. A trick of the light, perhaps. More of the lamps flashed on one by one and the true horror of the scene became sickeningly apparent.

His back was broken. The upper half of his torso had been twisted around almost one hundred and eighty degrees, his uniform rucked and torn, arms and legs bent at impossible angles. He looked like a rag doll ripped at the seams.

"Only the enhanced physiology of a sim could do something like this," Oshiro said.

"Hell of a way to die," Kade said. "Staring at your own butt."

"Fuck's sake, Kade," Oshiro exclaimed softly. He caught his partner by the sleeve and drew him two steps aside, out of the Sergeant's hearing. "A little respect," he said. "These are some of our own."

"Sorry, trench humour."

"This isn't the trenches anymore."

Kade looked back at the bodies, at the blood spreading black under white light. "You could have fooled me," he said.

“Listen, another thing, before that mouth of yours runs away with itself,” Oshiro said, flicking a quick glance at Ghan who was talking to the Sergeant. “I think that scar of Ghan’s was done by a sim.”

Kade looked over at Ghan. Light from the floater caught the ruined edge of the older man’s face, silvering the scar tissue and turning it into something almost metallic.

“He tell you that?” Kade asked.

Oshiro shook his head. “It was his reaction when he heard this was a rogue sim. It rattled him. Probably before he joined the bureau. It’s not the sort of information he’s going to willingly volunteer.”

“That’s just fucking perfect,” Kade said.

The clean-up crew had arrived on the scene. Plastic body bags snapped in the wind as uniforms worked around the dead.

Kade composed himself and turned back to the blue-suit. “Better give us what you got, Sergeant.”

The Sergeant gave. “We got the alert about that rogue sim you been chasing. We were tracking it and ran it right into *them*.” The Sergeant flicked his head back to the bodies. “End of shift for these guys. ‘S’when you’re just easing down, right, you never think it’s gonna happen end of shift, do you?” he said, shaking his head.

Kade regarded him blankly. “End of shift? I feel like I’ve been working the same fucking shift since 93.” He shook his head. “End of shift syndrome.” He pointed at the bodies. “That’s what you get, end of the *big* fucking shift.”

The blue-suit just shrugged. "Wrong time, wrong place. One of the guys managed to get a shot off but it didn't slow the sim down much."

"Where to from here?" Oshiro asked.

"In there," the Sergeant said, jerking a thumb towards the Jazz-Mine club.

"Still?" Kade asked in disbelief.

"We've locked the perimeter and got the place covered," the Sergeant said. He shrugged again as the excuse followed. "It's a big place, like a maze in there."

Oshiro considered the entrance, trying to establish the most likely escape route. He turned back to the Sergeant. "You send any of your blue boys in?"

"No point," the Sergeant responded. "Figured we'd leave it for..."

"Anyone else but you," Kade said.

The Sergeant offered a thin smile. "Hey, bureau's mess. Bureau gets to clean it up. We got crowd control."

"Well, you be careful with that crowd, Sergeant," Oshiro said. "Some of those tourists look mean. I know how that verbal abuse can hurt a man's feelings."

Kade turned away disgusted. "Aren't we supposed to be all one big happy family?"

"Dysfunctional," Oshiro said.

Procedure and paperwork, bribes and blind eyes, the beat cop's litany. Kade despised them almost as much as the criminals. He watched as the zipper caught in the matted hair of the girl in the yellow dress. He turned to his partner and said, "Let's go and justify our existence."

Oshiro checked his own weapon and replied, "I'm an existentialist these days."

"Way I see it," Kade began loud enough for Ghan to hear. "One in the front, one in the back, and one stays outside to direct the bluesuits in case the sim gets past us."

"Sounds reasonable," Oshiro said.

Ghan nodded but remained stoically silent. He had his weapon held a little too tightly and a vein jumped in his neck. Even though Kade disliked him, he realised the Mongolian would go in there if asked.

"I've been here before and know the layout of the place," Kade said. "Makes sense I go in the front. Equally, I've got a lot of time in with Oshiro as back up, so it also makes sense that he covers me on this and goes in the back way. No offence, Ghan, but you get the short straw this time."

Ghan's mouth protested but his eyes begged Kade to talk him down.

"Listen, Ghan, this is my case," Kade said, "I don't want to pull rank, but I will if I have to."

Ghan nodded and took a step back from the entrance.

"Eau de Kade," Oshiro said. "Masculine yet sensitive."

"I'm not doing it for him," Kade said. "I don't want him jumping at the first shadow and putting one in my back by mistake."

Oshiro patted Kade's back and whispered in his ear. "Whatever, it was nicely done, partner."

“Yeah? Remind me of that when they’re carrying *our* broken bodies out on a gurney.”

The Limiters moved to the entrance of the club. Kade turned to Oshiro. “Ready?”

Oshiro nodded. “Give me ten to get around back before you go in, okay?”

“Ten,” Kade agreed, noting the time. He loaded a new belt feed into his Skorpion and checked its easy release from the holster high on his right hip.