

CHAPTER 9

The news teams were already pivoting, lenses and floaters swinging like hunters stalking their prey as they locked onto Kade. Oshiro saw the look in his partner's eyes, the almost crazed feral expression that he recognised from the many battles they had fought together. If what had just happened with Ghan was bad, Oshiro knew that the minute the reporters started buzzing around, it could get a whole lot worse.

He pushed Kade through the swing doors and out into the street, directing him towards the thin buffer of shadow between two holo-boards.

"Listen, Kade, you need to leave before these vultures get their hooks into you," Oshiro said, noticing the advancing press bursting out of the Jazz-Mine in pursuit. "In your current mood you're likely to cause a major fucking incident. There's a bar in the next street. Go get drunk. I'll deal with these idiots."

Kade dragged a hand across his face. "Damage limitation?"

Oshiro looked back through the doors to where Ghan was being attended to by one of the street cops. "The damage is already done, my friend," he said. "My job now is to convince everyone you were just trying to scare him and not ventilate his skull."

Kade gave a short, humourless laugh. "Good luck with that."

Oshiro shook his head. "Occupational hazard working with you." He turned his partner around and pushed him in the direction of the alley. "Go. Get lost."

The Limiter started down the short alley.

Behind him, Oshiro stepped into the flood of media bodies, arms spreading wide, guiding, herding. Questions began to fire immediately, like gunfire.

Kade did not look back.

The alley opened into a small square. Rain cascaded off the edges of transparent canopies that stretched between buildings. Beyond them, the Blue Moon bar glowed, its façade a shimmering gradient of deep cobalt.

Kade stepped into the entrance, warm air caressing his face. A huge hologram of a blue moon floated above the club and shone down through the transparent ceiling. The black skin of night and the neon chaos of the capital made a handsome nebulous backdrop, lending a pink hue to the smoky interior of the club like some cheap stage show effect. Small blue-moon inset lights glowed intimately above individual booths.

Music drifted from a small live ensemble in the corner. A low, steady groove of synth and muted bass, just enough to fill the space between conversations without drowning them.

Kade slouched on the counter of the bar. One of the bartenders approached. It was a construct, of course. Too perfect to be human. Synthetic skin stretched flawlessly over a subdermal mesh that glinted faintly under the club lights.

“Bourbon,” Kade said.

The construct paused at the optic array, illuminated liquor selections scrolling internally, then dispensed the drink with mechanical grace and a pre-programmed

smile. Kade accepted the drink and moved to a stool, trying not to notice himself in the mirrors that backed it. He looked rough. His wet hair was plastered across his forehead, his heavy stubble as dark as the rings beneath his eyes. He sat and stared at the grim mask reflected back from the other side, then lifted his hand in a slow, mocking salute. "Congratulations," he muttered under his breath.

At the gesture, the construct bartender slipped back down the bar and placed a cocktail glass before Kade, full of a blue liquid with assorted fruit and a parasol.

Kade stared at it, then turned slowly toward the bartender. "What the fuck is this?" he demanded.

"A Blue Hawaii, sir. As you ordered," the construct said in a smooth, emotionless voice.

"I didn't order a drink," Kade said. He pointed at his half-empty glass of bourbon. "What do you think this is?"

"Sir, I distinctly registered your signal for a Blue Hawaii."

"Jesus Christ and his fucking stamp collection," Kade groaned, grabbing a handful of the bartender's waistcoat. He pulled it forward and rapped his knuckles on the synthetic forehead. "Hello in there, can you hear me?" he shouted. "I did not order a Blue Hawaii. I do not want a Blue Hawaii. I don't even want to fucking *go* to Hawaii."

"I'm sorry, sir, but I distinctly saw your signal," the barman answered in its bland, impassive tone.

From further down the bar, a man approached Kade.

"I'm the manager," he said. "Is there a problem?"

The Limiter released the construct which smoothed down its waistcoat and went back to wiping the bar and polishing glasses.

"Your construct is malfunctioning," Kade said. "It brought me this ridiculous cocktail which I didn't order."

"We are currently testing a new ordering system based on hand signal recognition," the manager explained. "It appears you may have inadvertently made a gesture which the construct interpreted as an order." He lifted his own hand and performed a fluid, deliberate motion. The bartender responded instantly, gliding away and returning with a fresh measure of bourbon.

"Please," the manager said, placing it in front of Kade. "This one is on the house."

"Could get confusing," Kade said. He raised his middle finger. "So, what does *this* get me?"

"Vodka twist."

"Jesus, can't even insult the bar staff now."

Three hours later, Kade stumbled out of the bar feeling mildly pissed. He activated a hailing beacon and seconds later a flittercab descended out of the wet night and landed next to him.

Kade climbed into the back seat, the interior lighting adjusting automatically to his presence. The upholstery moulded slightly under his weight, adaptive polymers shifting to support him.

“Ballentine Apartments, Hampstead,” Kade said. “You mind if I put some music on?”

The pilot nodded without turning.

Kade activated the entertainment selector and keyed in some SpeedJazz. The music kicked in, too quiet. He liked to feel the music rumble in his gut. A plexiglass partition slipped up, sealing off the rear section, the pilot’s way of saying he didn’t share his passenger’s penchant for SpeedJazz. Kade pushed the volume up. He was amused to see a slightly annoyed slant to the pilot’s head as the bass throbbed against the partition. He knocked it up one more notch, slumped back into the seat and allowed his eyes to close as the battered landscape rolled beneath his feet.

The flitter swept past the shrunken remnants of Regents Park, London’s largest concentration of bars stacked on nightclubs, stacked on pleasure dens, their exteriors wrapped in blinking advertisements. A place that could neither rest nor sleep. Kade had seen places that were more wired. Mexico City was a definite candidate for that.

Mexico.

That particular war held some vivid memories, but for Kade the pain had faded with time. He still dreamt about the death and mutilation but he no longer woke bathed in a cold sweat. It was at these times, passing over the city, that he allowed himself the time for quiet reflection. Sometimes, the blindness of familiarity lifted briefly to reveal the truth. He had that feeling now. In contrast to the neon morass around him, the glimpses of the distant suburbs assumed the purity of an endless

night of twinkling stars. Was it a reflection of his own life, the harshness of the neon, blood red and relentless? The thought depressed him. He allowed the hectic melodies of the SpeedJazz to take him away, out of there, out of the city, out of the time into which he had been born.

The city didn't notice his absence.

The flitter was fast approaching his apartment block, like a sickly fly plummeting into a jewelled web. The pilot activated the landing cycle and the flitter dropped out of the sky into the neon-driven heart of Hampstead. Kade shut off the music and tapped on the partition screen. The plexiglass slipped down into its recess.

"Drop me at the Hertzschel," Kade instructed.

The cab put down on the rooftop flitter park of the one hundred and twenty-story Hertzschel building across the street from his own apartment block. The Hertzschel was one of a few buildings in the area large enough to cater for a rooftop market.

Kade stepped out and headed towards a collection of food vendors and booze booths that sold the roughest gut-rot whisky that metal could buy. He bought a bottle and some beef and noodles. Then he headed for the retro-fitted street elevator on the side of the building. Its bare-bones steel substructure shuddered up to roof level and a group of kids attempted to make it their own.

Kade was in no mood for company. "Out!"

"Room enough, man," one of them whined.

Kade showed them his ID crystal. "Room enough in a cell, too, little boy. And I could introduce you to the sweaty fat man who wants you to be his special friend. Now get the fuck out."

They knew it was an empty threat as much as he did but they got the point and got out. They waited until he'd dropped two floors before shouting some fairly mediocre obscenities.

Hampstead spread below. The place had once been moneyed territory, clean streets and old wealth. Three hundred years had peeled all that away. Now it was just another layer of the city's underbelly. The only thing the province was up-market to was the sewer. It played host to the park's fallout and was cheap and nasty, not unlike most of Kade's old girlfriends.

He ate the food as he rode the elevator to the ground and discarded the carton as he crossed the street towards his own apartment block.

As he walked, he felt a sudden weariness consume him. A persistent ache throbbed through his temples. The world seemed to fragment around him, shifting sideways like the movement of the ground during an earthquake. The huge concrete monoliths around him evaporated, replaced by ethereal, insubstantial towers of pure light. For a brief moment he felt weightless, floating amongst these diaphanous spires. The Scape brushed against him, cold and endless, filled with structures that had no business existing. Impossible geometries shimmered at the edge of his perception. Then, as suddenly as it had come, the world shifted back to the harsh, glaring reality and the Limiter was on his hands and knees throwing up in the gutter.

“Very dignified, Daniel,” he told himself.

He’d suffered from these attacks since childhood, a remnant of an unsupervised excursion into the Scape when he was nine. After three months in a coma, he woke up feeling very different from the person he’d been before. He had experienced some form of brain trauma, they’d told him. He took solace in the fact that there was actually a brain in there to be damaged. Each consequent attack he suffered felt like the Scape was reaching out to him, trying to pull him back into its nightmare landscape, like a jealous, unrequited lover. The professionals said he wasn’t crazy, but they expressed it in a tone of voice suggesting he wasn’t entirely sane either. They nodded knowingly and used words like epilepsy or PTSD. They had tried to sound like they knew what they were talking about but even the nine-year-old Kade could tell they didn’t have a clue. That had been the one and only time in the Limiter’s life he had gone into the Scape.

He splashed water from a rain puddle on his face and stood up, walking unsteadily to the entrance of his apartment block. The internal elevator was smoother than the external one on the Hertzschel building but no less battered and abused and the 3D graffiti was imaginative. He rode it to the top floor.

As he stepped inside his apartment, the neutral tones of the apartment's butler program welcomed him, but George, a name that Kade had inherited from the previous owner, sounded remote and unsympathetic. That lack of sympathy was not just in his imagination. If he wanted a sympathetic welcome at the end of a shift, he'd have to buy it in the form of an empathy chip. Every time he entered that cold,

empty space he laughingly referred to as home he would silently swear to himself that tomorrow he was going to get one. And as night followed day, it would take about five minutes before entropy got the better of him and the thought was abandoned.

The apartment was small and utilitarian like so many in the city. A lounge/kitchenette combination, a bedroom barely big enough for a bed and some storage, and a small toilet with a shower. Space was at a premium, reserved only for the rich. Although Kade wasn't poor, to a man used to living in barracks and the occasional muddy foxhole, he regarded his living space as opulent. There were those that lived in cubicle boxes which were glorified coffins stacked on top of each other in huge complexes.

In sharp contrast to the twenty-third century hi-tech kitchenette, the lounge was an odd mix of three centuries. In one corner was an antique table football game and a jukebox. The jukebox held no records as such. All the music spanning the period from 1950 until 2295 was stored on an internal data crystal no bigger than a fingernail. Kade liked the box's gaudy exterior and flashing lights. Most of the furniture was replica stuff apart from a three-hundred-year-old Ikea table. Occupying one wall of the lounge was an antique 2D wide screen television with a mock DVD player that used crystal storage chips. It required a special converter fitted to change standard 3D holo-pictures to 2D format. There was a strange irony to the fact that it had been very expensive to fit a piece of 300 year old retro technology.

The booze from the Blue Moon had not softened his hard edges enough. He leaned over to where he had discarded the mac on the back of the couch and hooked the bottle he'd just purchased out of the pocket. It was Yukon Gold. The vendor had sold all his good stuff and this cheap shit was all that remained. He contemplated it with a measure of distaste before unscrewing the top and pouring himself a tall glass. He considered diluting it with a mixer but thought better of it. Shit was shit. Diluting it would just make it taste like weaker shit. And if ever there was a time he needed his shit straight and strong, it was now.