

Chapter 1: UMI Headquarters

The UMI building stood like a tall, black sentinel watching over the city of Centurium, a giant reaching head and shoulders above the sprawling mass of skyscrapers. Deep within, an empty service elevator slowed as it neared basement level two, finally juddering to an abrupt halt.

A young man, dressed in dark street clothes, waited for the echoing footsteps of a patrolling security guard to fade, before dropping down into the lift from a maintenance hatch above. He ducked between the closing doors; the contracting shaft of light silhouetted him briefly, and he smiled to himself. He was in.

Akira brushed several strands of hair from his pale blue eyes and stole into the shadows, where he stopped to survey his surroundings. Moulded utilitarian walls enclosed what appeared to be an underground warehouse punctuated by large, square support pillars at regular intervals. Everything was formed from the same drab concrete: the walls, the low ceilings, the pillars—a lifeless mausoleum, claustrophobic and depressing.

His gaze fell upon a large consignment of metal storage crates stacked in rows, the maze of narrow walkways between providing excellent cover. Flattening himself against these crates, he made his way towards the main exit, logging the camera position, until he reached the far edge of the metal labyrinth. Here he paused, dropping to a crouch and withdrew a small card-shaped object from his pocket. The clear, plastic cover laminated a fine network of wires that ran along its surface like veins. A thin cable dangled from one end, and he plugged this into a socket just behind his left ear.

Akira watched from the shadows as the camera began the sweep, then moved forwards and inserted the card into the electronic lock.

“Okay, we’ve got about thirty seconds before we’re the stars of ‘Celebrity Break-in.’” His voice echoed in his head, relaying the information to Spook.

“You always say that, and it’s still not funny,” the distorted version of his own voice replied.

“Twenty-five seconds.”

Spook ran the calculation, logging the time as twenty-eight point three seconds and began to run a series of mini Raider programs on the lock, causing a bank of lights to flash quickly along the length of the card device. Akira looked at the camera, which was beginning to arc its way back towards the door.

“Hurry.”

Spook didn’t reply. The lights still flickered brightly.

“Damn.” Akira grabbed the card, ripping it from the lock, ready to dodge back out of sight, just as the mechanism clicked and the door opened. He rolled through to the other side, and the door closed again before the camera registered the movement. “Cutting that a bit fine, don’t you think?” he scolded.

Spook snorted in reply, and he just smiled as he scanned his surroundings for danger.

Akira looked around the narrow corridor, at the walls lined with cool, blue metal, an aesthetic relief from the subfusc concrete outside. There were no more cameras and no sign of the facility’s vast workforce. This was a low-security section, and he didn’t anticipate a problem here. Narrow bands of fine circuitry ran along the centre of the walls and floor. These filaments were encased in an organic jelly, behind a transparent facia that fitted flush with the surround. The jelly was a healing nutrient, promoting the automatic growth of pathways to bypass any damaged areas. This was the neural plexus that extended from the core mainframe; it controlled all the systems within the building. Above him, a network of steel and chrome pipes followed the corridor along the ceiling, twisting and snaking their way through the basement. Dim lights, inset between the pipes, cast soft pools of light that reflected back from the metal floor, throwing everything into soft focus.

Akira started to make his way forwards, ever alert, the rubber soles of his boots making scarcely a whisper on the metallic floor plates. To either side, the sleek profile of the conduit was broken up by tall doorways. Ignoring these, he continued along the corridor until he could see a junction up ahead.

“Spook. Map,” he whispered. A display of the basement blueprints flickered into view, superimposed at the edge of his vision as Spook relayed the image to his optic nerve. His eyes flicked backwards and forwards involuntarily as he checked the route on the schematic in his head. Zooming in on the nearby maintenance section, he located the low-security terminal that would make a perfect access point.

Running footsteps shattered his concentration; they were heading his way. He cursed under his breath and glanced over his shoulder for a possible hiding place. Twenty feet back down the corridor was a metal door, which after a cursory scan of the map, he could see, checked out as a closet. Sprinting back, he grabbed at the handle, hoping that it wasn't locked and was relieved when the door swung open. He threw himself inside, closing it behind him to a mere crack as two men and a young woman appeared at the junction. The door clicked shut plunging the small room into darkness, and he listened as the trio carried on past, their muffled shouts fading once more to silence.

The tension slowly drained from his body as Spook quickly adjusted his vision enabling him to see in the low light, bringing the room into view. All was silent outside. He felt a buzz in his pocket; it was his cell. He pulled out the phone to cancel the call and sighed as he read the name on the screen; it was Rebus. He answered keeping his voice low.

“Now is not the best time.”

“Where are you?” asked an old, cracked voice.

“Still in the main storage section, I'm off to find the terminal now.”

There was a brief pause then Akira's mobile beeped and a blue light started blinking on the main keypad. He pressed a button acknowledging the data transfer and a loading bar appeared on the small LCD screen.

“I'm sending a new route to your phone,” Rebus informed him, “you'll have to change your plans, go north through the lab section.”

“What? You crazy? It'll be crawling with techs.”

“It's not perfect I'll grant you—”

“Not perfect? It's suicide. I already chose the easiest and safest route, and I'm sticking with it. I'm not a bloody amateur; I've done this before.”

“It's not that...” the old man hesitated. “Look, who's paying for this job? It has to be done right.”

“Done right? Of course, how stupid of me. It's a wonder I haven't been arrested or shot. I should look on this as a learning opportunity as you're such an expert. I'll bring you the key when I have it.” He snapped the cell phone cover shut, interrupting the download. “What's his problem?” he growled.

“You're going to ignore him aren't you?” Spook's soft voice asked.

“Of course.” Akira frowned running his hand through his messy, black hair. “Bastard wants to control everything. Why didn't he do the damn job himself if he thinks he can do better than me?”

“Taking advice is not one of your strong points.”

“That's crap. The way I see it, he's paying me to do this job because he can't. I know what I'm doing, and I'm not taking unnecessary risks by changing my route now.”

“He must have his reasons,” Spook pleaded.

“Who's side are you on?”

Spook didn't reply.

“And don't sulk,” Akira added.

“I'm only a digital extension of your personality. If I'm sulking, then you're sulking, and

I find the fact that you're sulking after arguing with yourself faintly disturbing."

Akira ignored him and listened at the door again.

"And now you're ignoring yourself."

"Shut up," muttered Akira.

Carefully, he drew open the door and peered through into the corridor outside; it was deserted. Satisfied, he left the relative safety of the cloakroom and resumed his journey to the junction. Once there, he hesitated slightly, regarding the left corridor as he reconsidered Rebus's words. Then making a decision, he turned the other way, following his original route, paying no attention to Spooks grumble of disapproval.

"Okay," he whispered, coming to a halt a short way down the passage. "This is the tricky bit."

Up ahead he could see that the hallway opened into a small refectory, equipped with a bank of food and drink dispensers along one wall. But it was unoccupied. Relieved, Akira moved on to the offices beyond. He'd been sure that some poor sap would be draining his coffee here, topping up for another all-nighter. These white coat jerks didn't usually have homes to go to anyway, so it was odd that the place was so deserted, apart from the runners he'd just narrowly avoided.

He continued, moving cautiously until he reached a large, open plan office where a wall of glass separated the room from the corridor. Each pane reflected his image as he peered between the slats of the half closed blinds. The area beyond was brightly illuminated in harsh white light, an austere landscape of regimented workstations like an abandoned exhibit of corporate oppression preserved behind glass.

"What is this, a public holiday? There's no one here," Akira complained. "After what the old man said, I expected some sort of security convention, I'm almost disappointed."

"Be careful for what you wish."

Akira was about to reply when their prescient exchange was interrupted by a sudden commotion from up ahead. Through the office windows, he could see the distorted image of two security guards sprinting along an adjoining corridor, heading his way. Akira cursed and looked around for a place to hide, feeling exposed in this transparent tunnel. But they weren't looking at him.

Behind them, the corridor exploded with machine gun fire, and he saw one of the men fall forwards from an impact that sprayed the wall with blood. The other continued to flee, screaming for assistance, but was cut down by a second hail of bullets.

"What the fuck?" Akira hissed sharply.

Dropping to the floor, he skittered along the ground and threw himself through a nearby doorway into the offices, scrambling behind one of the desks as another guard ran past. Spook started to say something, but Akira cut him short.

"Don't you dare tell me I should have listened to the old man. If we get out of here, I want to know how the hell he knew this was going down."

The desk was pretty flimsy, and he glanced about for better cover. The only solid object he could see was the server hub, a large metal pillar in the centre of the room, but he'd never reach it unnoticed.

Another team of security guards arrived. These were armed with heavy machine guns, masked, and clad in black Kevlar. Their boots thundered along the hall and stopped abruptly as they took up positions just outside. Akira could hear their voices but couldn't make out what they were saying.

"I've tapped into the short range radio of the security team outside," Spook reported. "It seems one of their Sentinel security droids has malfunctioned catastrophically. It is no longer responding to commands and—oh dear, it appears to have opened fire on the maintenance team. At least two of them are dead. It seems to be the latest in a series of recent system errors."

"I knew this job was going to be bad news. I just had a feeling."

“Actually, you said it’d be a piece of cake, easy money.”

Akira risked a glance over the cover of his desk and saw yet another team arrive. They joined the others, setting up a cordon around the junction. Several men lay prone, squad support machine guns resting on tripods before them, trained on the hallway beyond. Akira realised that there was no escape except through the cordon itself; he’d have to sit this out.

The soldiers launched an attack, and a volley of shots rang out, answered by a hail of return fire so fierce that it cut into the metal walls as if they were plaster. Fragments of hot metal showered the corridor, and one of the soldiers screamed, shredded by the deadly shrapnel.

The gunfire ceased, leaving an eerie silence broken only by the sound of Akira’s racing heartbeat pounding in his ears. Both the soldiers and the security droid seemed to be waiting for each other to make a move. He peered over the top of his shelter once more to see what would happen next. He heard the groan of an injured soldier out in the hallway, but none of the armed militia moved to the man’s aid. They were staring fixedly at the large, metal monster advancing on their position and Akira followed their gaze along the line of windows.

Staring back at him through the blinds was a multitude of dark optics resembling spiders’ eyes, the lenses zooming in and out as they changed focus. He immediately ducked back behind the desk, hoping that it hadn’t registered his movement, holding his breath as he waited for the sound of gunfire.

There was nothing.

The tension was unbearable; he needed to see what was going on. Carefully he changed his position to see around the edge of the desk while remaining hidden from the droid. The machine had stopped, its cylindrical form bobbing up and down floating at least two feet from the ground. It seemed to be searching. Akira watched as the two rotary machine guns, mounted either side of its body, swivelled around, independently hunting for targets, their barrels smoking in angry swirls.

A movement to his right caught his attention, and he turned to see the guards behind the cordon shuffling back in a low crouch. The droid saw it too, and Akira had just enough time to see both gun mounts swivel onto their position before they erupted into life.

It fired diagonally through the office, and the glass windows shattered inwards, fine fragments showering the room like rain. Akira swore and pulled himself under the desk, curling up into a ball as the lethal shards fell around him. He heard the security guards return fire, and someone shouted that the droid’s magnetic shielding was damaged. One of the soldiers took a chance and skimmed a small metal disc into the corridor. There was a loud crash as the Sentinel turned and threw itself through what was left of the office glazing, pulling down the blind that clattered to the floor as it headed straight for the hub. A blue spark arced between the droid’s casing and the metal pillar as they made contact. Both gun pods retracted into its body, and it hovered expectantly as if awaiting further instruction.

Akira had no time to ponder this strange behaviour, as a split second later the silver disc started to emit a low hum. The Sentinel fell to the ground, a dead weight that buckled the metal floor plating, and a searing pain coursed through Akira’s temples. The room went dark as the lights failed and all the computer monitors went blank. Flashlights snapped on and the guards approached the droid, their boots crunching on the broken glass, their weapons ready. But in the silvery light of the halogen beams, it was obvious that the grenade had deactivated the metal beast, and they moved in to surround it.

Under the desk, Akira grabbed his head with his hands, the map display had disappeared along with Spook. The electronic disruption would only last a short time and the men in the office scrambled desperately to shut off the Sentinel’s power supply before it recovered.

Akira cursed; Spook was as dead as the droid thanks to the grenade’s effect, which although temporary, left Akira running blind.

He peeked out from the desk and saw that his way back along the corridor to the labs was still cut off by a line of soldiers waiting for the all clear. It was only a matter of time before

he was seen. He needed to escape before the main lighting returned while he still had some cover in the semi-darkness.

He heard approaching footsteps and quickly ducked back, feeling the desk move slightly as someone leaned against it. He looked down as a booted foot brushed against his hand and he instinctively tried to draw it away only to find that the boot was securely pinning his glove to the floor. He paused for a moment, cursing silently, waiting to see if the guard had noticed. His only consolation was that Spook wasn't online to witness this. He attempted to work his hand free, but the soldier shifted his weight slightly, pressing down harder against his fingers, pinching the skin. It was painful, and Akira was held more securely than ever. He felt sure the man must be able to feel that he was treading on something, but again there was no reaction.

After a few moments of panic, Akira was thankful that his hand was going numb. Then one of the maintenance team reported that the droid had been made safe and, to Akira's immense relief, the soldier walked slowly away from the desk.

He snatched his hand back, rubbing it furiously and risked a cautious peek out, searching for an escape.

The room was a mess of broken glass and foam, which the maintenance team had started pumping in around the ruined machinery. Two large, ragged holes in the glazing led out into the corridor, where he could see a bustle of activity around the survivors. He could hear the tormented groans of the injured as a call went out for a medical team. He couldn't go that way.

His anxious gaze flicked towards the back of the room, and he caught sight of a door, virtually hidden in the shadows. He had no idea where it might lead, but it was a way out. Moving tentatively, but quickly, he crawled on his hands and knees between the rows of desks, trying to ignore the splinters of glass piercing his clothing. A quick glance into the room assured him that no one was looking his way; the men were busy dismantling the rogue droid like vultures on a carcass. Akira dashed to the next line of desks and stopped to listen, to make sure he hadn't been seen. His heart thudded in his chest so hard that he was sure someone would hear it, but he forced himself to move on, keeping low.

Finally, he reached the exit, pausing briefly to make sure that he was unobserved, then slowly he turned the handle. With one eye still on the drama behind him, Akira slipped into the darkness beyond, letting the door swing to silently.

He felt some of the tension leave his body and sagged against the wooden portal, finding himself in a small room separated from the main office by a shuttered glass wall. Dim light fell across him in bands, a soft glow emanating from the emergency lighting that had snapped on further along the corridor, out of range from the grenade's effect. Dark stains of blood blossomed on his clothes, and he began to register pain from the many small cuts on his knees. As his eyes gradually adjusted to the gloom, he searched the small office, plucking glass splinters from his wounds. Shit, there were no other exits.

Shouts from outside reminded him that he couldn't stay here forever; he had to do something. He looked up, and his gaze fell upon a large air conditioning fan in the centre of the ceiling, which had been silenced by the blackout. Yes. He was back in the game. He removed the unit and levered himself into the narrow air shaft that lay beyond, barely big enough to take his bulk. Inside, the channel was cramped, the air cold and he found it hard going dragging himself along the smooth metal on his belly; but slowly he managed to inch his way forwards. The scant illumination from the fan grille had all but disappeared and without Spook to enhance his vision, he found the ensuing darkness disorienting and claustrophobic. Edging forwards blindly, he felt the conduit branch, he'd reached a T-junction. He was lost and had no idea which way to turn. Echoing voices drifted in through the ducting, and he paused trying to get a fix on the source. He felt a buzz of static in his head, and the map flickered back into focus over his vision, like a beacon in the darkness. "Welcome back," he whispered with some relief, as Spook's systems returned to life. He studied the schematic and soon found his position in the ventilation system.

"Good to see we're still alive," Spook said dryly.

Akira pressed on with more confidence, following the map until he reached a dead end. Dots of light poured in through a mesh-covered hatch, and he inched forwards looking into an empty concrete chamber beyond. The room was full of pipes and machinery; it looked like he'd made it through to the maintenance section.

He opened the grille and dropped down to the ground. The air in here was stuffy and much warmer. It smelled of hot grease, and he could feel the heat coming off the pipes and knew he must be near to the backup generator room. Sliding down the wall to a sitting position, he tried to relax a little, letting his heart rate slow, taking deep breaths.

"See," Akira whispered, "Much easier than going through the labs."

Spook replied with something rather like a snort.

"No faith, that's your problem."

Hauling himself back to his feet, he made for the door and stepped out into a dimly lit maintenance corridor. He was back on track and moved swiftly down the passage, past the generator housing and along to a small room that was barely more than a cupboard and contained a single desk terminal. He made sure it was empty and slipped inside. Here, according to his plan, he should be able to make his dive unhindered.

Akira shut the door and pulled a small black box from his pocket. Attaching it to the handle, he booted up the device and watched as the two green lights on the front panel started to blink. No point in taking any risks, he thought. If anyone came within a ten-foot radius of the door handle, it would alert him and bring him out of the dive. Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes and prepared himself.