

Chapter One

Part One: The Call

Even at this height, there was still the fog.

Bitter and caustic, it choked the canyonlands between titans of concrete and steel. Iridescent poison hung in the air, drawing the neon colors out into wild blooms that met and blended like the fever dream of some long-dead painter. There was no sign of anything human up here except the spinner heaving its way through what passed for air. Behind it, the garish mist faded into the same bland greenish gray. Ahead, shadowy monoliths were cast suddenly into stark relief by the brilliant white flare of a hauler shuttle clawing its way clear of the spaceport.

Los Angeles, May 2037.

Inside the spinner, the silence had gone on long enough to become a third passenger.

Jephthah Crowe was ostensibly driving, though he had not moved his hands in a quarter of an hour. LE1-1.3 had counted. He had not said a word or looked at her since she climbed in.

He had not needed to.

The call had come before they were even on shift: Priority One. Break-in at a Sector Twelve warehouse. Briefing from officers already on the scene. All ongoing investigations suspended until further notice, though that was not saying much.

Crowe stared into the drive flare ahead until his eyes rebelled and forced themselves shut. He did not know why he had been given the assignment. It did not occur to him that it had been given to Elly just as much as it had been given to him. He assumed Deputy Chief Holden had decided it was not really a job for Rep-Detect.

He was probably right.

Blinking red lights through the thinning fog and a ping from the navigation panel announced their arrival. Uniformed officers waved the spinner toward a landing pad haphazardly maintained and fixed like an afterthought to the side of a structure as massive and ugly as the tomb of some Soviet leader—if the dead man had been twelve meters tall.

The spinner descended, engines whining.

Time to do the work.

The doors scissored open, and the acrid fog shouldered its way inside. At this height it did not sting the eyes enough to draw tears, but it coated the tongue and settled in the lungs. There

should have been wind. There was not. The detectives' coats hung limp and heavy from their shoulders.

Elly stepped out without haste.

The fog clung immediately to the black panels of her coat, gathering in its seams and turning the shoulders dark and wet before the spinner's door had completed its upward arc. She paused only long enough to register the air quality, the absence of wind, the age of the structure, the corrosion on the landing pad, the placement of the officers, and Crowe's breathing pattern beside her.

No immediate threat.

No visible civilians.

Too many unknowns.

One of the uniforms approached. She wore no mask, displaying the native Angelina's disdain for the future health of her lungs. She gave Crowe and Elly a professional once-over as she came close. All business. Probably trying to promote herself into something better.

"I'm Phirel," she said. "Thanks for dragging yourselves out here so fast."

Elly gave her a cool look. Crowe answered with an eloquent lift of one shoulder.

Phirel carried on, matching their pace as they headed toward the elevators.

"We responded to an incident that took down the local ESPER¹ coverage. Early signs point to deliberate sabotage of a network node, but you're welcome to look for yourselves. We rerouted and restored coverage in time to catch suspicious activity outside this facility, so we tooled up for a first-hand inspection."

She pushed a strand of hair away from her face.

"Place is a warehouse. An old one. Records have been sketchy since the Blackout, so we haven't traced an owner yet. One compartment was blown open. Nothing else was touched, as far as we've been able to tell. We called RDU as soon as we saw what was inside."

"And that was?" Crowe asked. His voice was tight. He was trying not to breathe more than necessary.

¹ The LAPD's **ESPER Wall** is a much larger system connected to the **ESPER Network**, a city surveillance network retaining roughly 24 hours of footage. It is powerful, but its cameras do not cover every location—particularly private corporate property and concealed criminal areas. Proprietary technology manufactured by the Esper Corporation rather than an acronym

“Parts. Rep subassemblies. I’m not sure of the details. I’ve been up here waiting for you. Blue at the scene might know more.”

Elly’s expression did not change, but her attention sharpened.

Parts.

Not remains. Not victims. Not evidence of persons.

Parts.

“Subassemblies,” she said, placing the term carefully on an invisible scale. “Organic, synthetic, or mixed?”

Phirel reached the elevator and swiped a skeleton keycard through its reader.

“Organic, I think, unless there’s something else down there no one’s told me about. Not a current model, that’s for sure, but you’re the experts, not me.”

She did not meet Elly’s eyes during those last words. It was difficult to tell whether the gesture was respect or something else.

Elly glanced toward the elevator and then back at Phirel.

“Who has entered the compromised compartment? Has anyone touched the contents?”

There was no anger in the questions, but they came with the controlled force of a hand closing around a wrist.

“Other than blue, only the suspects we can confirm. Though, you know, there’s the usual evidence of Specials. Couldn’t say what’s been touched. You’ll understand when you get down there.”

Phirel shoved an arm into the doorway to hold it open.

“Which reminds me. We called Robbery before we entered the site. Detective Varela is in there now. He’s going to be a little pissed that you two are taking over his investigation.”

Elly turned her head slightly toward Crowe, enough to include him without requiring him to meet her eyes.

“This is not a warehouse break-in.”

She stepped into the elevator.

“Secure the landing pad,” she told Phirel. “Preserve the ESPER node if it has not already been contaminated. No additional personnel enter unless cleared by RDU or scene command.”

After a pause, she added, “Notify Detective Varela that Rep-Detect is on site. He may prefer to hear it before he sees us.”

The elevator lurched into half-life with a smell of old food and a sound suggesting its maintenance had been sporadic even during its glory days.

Back in the years after the Blackout, a place like this would have been valuable territory. A solid building with no clear owner. Power, once the grid returned. Access through dumb hatches that had probably worked even before then. Out of the way, with no reason for most people to look at it twice.

The kind of place claimed by those who could not pay for somewhere else.

People who had made bad choices, people who had been denied any choice at all, and people trapped permanently at the bottom of Los Angeles’s endlessly churning totem pole.

The evidence of them covered the descent.

Tags had accumulated on the walls in geological strata. Totems and talismans hung from rusting rails. The crumbling remains of shanties had been built on walkways barely wide enough for two people to pass. No one was visible, but in a city so crowded that families would knife each other for the right to sleep in a stairwell, only a fool would have said the place was empty.

The elevator shuddered to a stop on the fifty-sixth floor.

Massive sliding doors stood nearby. They would have looked like every other set in the building if a recent explosion had not twisted them open. The echoes were probably still traveling through the sublevels.

Beyond the breach, LAPD floodlights illuminated the compartment with the theatrical brilliance of a stage. A hive of uniforms swarmed within, kicked into frantic motion. Perhaps a great deal of work was being done. Perhaps a great many people had simply found an excuse to stand indoors.

Heads turned as the detectives entered. There were nods at their badges, or perhaps merely the acknowledgment given to any cop stepping onto a new crime scene.

Hard plastic containers lay scattered across the floor. Each was about large enough to hold a football, and each bore old-fashioned corporate labels. Some had been thrown by the blast. Others had been discarded by someone searching for a particular object and caring very little about what happened to the rest.

Then a man was speaking, loud and somehow already too close.

“I’m Mateo Varela, RSS. Not sure why these numbnuts decided this was a Rep-Detect job.” He waved toward a holographic woman making notes on an imaginary clipboard. “Looks like you guys are as short-handed as we are. We both have to deal with partners that aren’t real.”

The hologram continued writing.

Varela turned a professional-grade look of contempt on Elly.

“What are you looking at, skinjob?”

Elly did not look away.

She did not blink faster, shift her weight, reach for the weapon at her hip, or return the insult. She did not give Crowe the satisfaction of seeing whether the word had found anything inside her to bruise.

It was a word. Air shaped by this man’s contempt.

Useful only because it revealed something about the man using it.

Crowe’s voice entered the silence before it could grow teeth.

“Detective Varela. This is Detective LE1. I’m Detective Crowe.”

He showed Varela his badge.

“You know my department, so you know we don’t care about burglaries and break-ins. We are here to determine two things. First, what connection this robbery has to replicants. Second, whether replicants have been, are, or will be involved in the crime.”

He returned the badge to his coat.

“You want to do the paperwork on the burglary, be my guest. You want to find the fence, the yen, or whatever else you need to file your report, you’re welcome to it. Any lead or evidence, stated or implied, relating to replicants is Rep-Detect priority.”

Crowe looked steadily at the other detective.

“If that settles it, we can continue. Tell me what you have while Detective LE1 determines what else may be pertinent to my department.”

Elly recorded the wording without changing her expression.

My department.

Crowe probably had not intended to wound her. With him, it was sometimes difficult to distinguish conviction from carelessness.

Crowe nodded to her.

“Detective Varela,” she said.

Just his name, placed exactly where it belonged.

Varela’s mouth worked as if he wanted to spit. He retained just enough professionalism not to do so at a crime scene.

“Yeah, well, there’s plenty of skinjob up in all this.” He kicked one of the containers.

It skidded over the moisture-slick floor and passed through the holographic woman’s shoes. Projected light made the label fluoresce.

TYRELL CORPORATION.

Elly watched the container come to rest.

Old stock. Organic. Possibly pre-Blackout. Improperly stored, disturbed, exposed to moisture, and now additionally contaminated by Detective Mateo Varela, RSS.

She did not say all of that.

Varela waved at the scattered crates.

“Every one of them has a skinjob part in it. Everything from eyelashes to assholes.”

He turned a long-suffering expression on Crowe.

“I don’t know what kind of furesa dolgok this is, and I don’t much care. But there’s no way this wasn’t a professional raid-and-run. ESPER surveillance taken down. Doors blown open with what I’ll say right now was milspec explosive. The works. Just like half a dozen other cases sitting on my desk.”

He threw his hands out.

“I only want to know whether it was the same charming people. And now, I guess, whether they’re minyet replicants. Ya iilhi, that would be the perfect end to my day.”

“I am looking,” Elly said, “at a crime scene you just kicked.”

The statement sat between them for exactly as long as it needed to.

Then she moved—not toward Varela and not away from him, but around him, as if he were simply another obstruction to be recorded and accounted for.

Crowe studied the room.

“Looks like someone was using this as a spare-parts depot. Maybe some kind of repair yard or a replicant visual-identity kit. Tyrell labeling makes it pre-Blackout. Old stock. Scavenged, stolen, or something that fell off a truck.”

He looked across the scattered containers.

“The question is what was stored here that required a precision raid.”

Crowe turned to Varela.

“Let’s assemble an inventory of what’s still here and compare it with what should be. You mentioned other break-ins. Did any involve this type of entry or equipment?”

He called across the compartment.

“Detective LE1, look for signs of their exit method. Equipment, handling, and how they moved whatever they took. I want to know whether it was a small item, something large, or bulk material.”

“Acknowledged.”

“These crates look like standard packaging,” Crowe continued. “We may be able to determine whether this was original inventory or something collected later. Run the packaging through the system for stock numbers and manufacturing dates. Cross-reference them with old theft reports and insurance claims. If the stock was reported stolen or written off, we might find something.”

He looked toward the hologram.

“I assume your assistant has an uplink. Send the request through Robbery. It will help flush out your burglary report.”

Varela stared at him.

Crowe had achieved compliance. Now he had to discover whether they could work together or whether the next stage of badge measuring was about to begin.

“I’d rather not run it through my KIA²,” Crowe said. “I try to keep the damned thing turned off and in the spinner.”

² **Knowledge Integration Assistant**—the Blade Runner’s standard-issue, handheld police computer.

Varela turned away slightly.

“Yeah, yeah. A’rif kayf csináld a kibaszott munkámat.” He shouted over his shoulder. “Iris! You heard the man. Run the proklyatyy numbers.”

“Yes, dear,” the hologram answered.

Elly almost raised an eyebrow. She could not determine whether Iris was intentionally mocking him or merely programmed to sound subservient. She wondered whether any amount of abuse could break that programming.

Iris approached her and lowered her voice.

“I started a while ago. It’s all right, Detective. These people know their jobs. Full coverage of the scene as it was found is already uploaded to the Mainframe. You can pull it whenever you need it.”

She pointed toward Elly’s KIA.

“So are the reports from Detective Varela’s other cases. Between you and me, it’s a good thing I’m around to do them for him. He can be less than thorough. We’re cataloguing what remains.”

Elly turned her attention to the compartment.

The floodlights made the room too bright in the way crime scenes often were, as though enough light could transform confusion into evidence.

She moved carefully through the scattered containers, placing her boots only where other officers had already walked or where the moisture showed no impression worth preserving. Uniforms clustered throughout the compartment. Too many bodies crossed too many lines. Too many hands hovered near too many objects.

“Scene contamination is already significant,” she said, loud enough for the nearest uniforms to hear. “No one else enters this compartment without logging their name, badge number, time, and purpose.”

She looked toward the nearest officer.

“Who was first through the door?”

Her attention returned to the floor. Drag marks. Boot traffic. Pools of moisture, disturbed and undisturbed. Scuffs, grit, displacement, pressure.

It functions like a secure combination of smartphone, body camera, case notebook, scanner, and access terminal.

She crouched beside the container Varela had kicked but did not touch it.

Tyrell Corporation.

There was a particular cruelty in seeing the name intact while the object inside had been reduced to inventory. Eyelashes to assholes, Varela had said. Crude, but not imprecise. A body broken into categories small enough to fit inside a box and old enough that everyone in the room could pretend it had only ever been property.

Not remains.

Not victims.

Not evidence of persons.

Parts.

“Do not move any more containers until evidence collection clears them,” Elly instructed the officers. “If these are connected to the same series of raids, the scatter pattern may tell us whether the suspects searched randomly, followed a manifest, or knew precisely where to go.”

She looked toward Iris.

“Map the current container positions. Mark the kicked item separately as displaced by scene personnel. Cross-reference all visible labels, lot numbers, and Tyrell stock identifiers against theft reports, insurance claims, archived manifests, and known post-Blackout recovery seizures.”

Iris’s invisible clipboard began to fill.

“Add known raids involving ESPER disruption, milspec explosive entry, and the selective removal of pre-Blackout biomedical or replicant material.”

Elly moved toward the breach.

The doors had not simply been blown open. They had been defeated. Quickly and professionally, with sufficient force to gain entry but not enough to compromise the surrounding structure.

“This was not a smash entry,” she told Crowe. “The charge was controlled so the door would fail without structural collapse. They wanted rapid access with limited damage.”

Her eyes tracked the routes through the room.

“And if they ignored the rest of this inventory, they knew what they were looking for. The value was not in replicant components generally. It was in a specific component.”

She turned back toward Varela.

“Your other break-ins. Were the scenes searched like this, or were they selective from the moment of entry?”

Varela’s indignation diminished when the conversation returned to the work. He still directed his answer toward Crowe rather than Elly.

“No. I would’ve been megszabadulni ettol long ago if the Tyrell name had come up before now. Of the others like this, I’ve got two corporate prototypes no one wants to tell me anything about, a shipment of guns fresh in from Yogyakarta, a vault full of jewels and knickknacks some offworld gwijogdeul never got around to taking with them, and two deeply sketchy clinics I’d bet money were drug factories.”

He scratched beneath his coat, slowly, without chasing any real itch.

“No pattern I can see. Nothing’s reached Hawker’s Circle, either. Not that anyone’s admitting.”

“Were the entries similar?” Elly asked.

“Professional every time. Surveillance interrupted. Fast entry. Selective removal.”

“And Tyrell stock?”

“Nothing until this.”

Varela exhaled through his nose.

“Näen sen. Someone is stealing to order. Fucked if I know who, or who’s paying them.”

Elly returned to the floor. She attempted to assemble the story from what remained, but the evidence read like a half-burned book.

Experimentally, she lifted the container Varela had kicked.

It came up easily in her hands.

A human would have struggled.

Heavy crates. No drag marks. Twisted metal remained around the base of the breach, making the use of skids impractical. Whoever had removed the stolen inventory had carried it over the wreckage.

At least one of them had possessed replicant strength—or had been an exceptionally strong and exceptionally foolish human. More likely there had been several. Enough to identify the target and remove it in the narrow interval between the ESPER failure and the arrival of the first units.

Then where had they gone?

Crowe had followed her reasoning as far as he could.

“These prototypes,” he said to Varela. “I want the case files. Maybe they needed older components to complete them. Or the old parts allow modifications the newer systems don’t.”

He looked toward the Tyrell crates.

“Some kind of custom, bespoke chop shop.”

An old song surfaced from a dark corner of his memory.

“One piece at a time,” he murmured, “and it didn’t cost me a dime.”

Varela raised an eyebrow.

“I’d sneak it out of there in a lunchbox in my hand,” Crowe continued.

Now Elly was looking at him.

A faint chuckle escaped Crowe.

“Because I’d have the only one there was around.”

Iris answered without looking up from her projected datapad.

“‘One Piece at a Time,’ American singer Johnny Cash, 1976. His last song to reach number one on the music charts.”

“DiJi, stop,” Varela snapped. “End query. She does that when she’s trying to parameter a new detective. Someone thought it would be funny for machines to run Voight-Kampff on us for ‘better service.’”

Crowe nodded absently.

Elly noticed him rubbing his thumb against his index finger. A tell. He was thinking.

“Someone wanted something specific from this unit,” he said. “Wanted it badly enough to make a splash getting it.”

He surveyed the ruined door.

“Why attract this much heat? Someone had a key piece. Someone else knew they had it and knew they wouldn’t give it up.”

Crowe realized he had been speaking aloud again. It was a habit he had developed lately and one he needed to stop.

“Focus on components capable of storing memory or identity,” he said. “Critical persona systems. There may have been an identity here—or one that hadn’t been programmed yet.”

Iris turned from her work.

“We have identified twenty-five craniums stacked in crates against the northwest wall, Detective. Uniforms report that the factory seals appear intact. Replicant Intelligence and Technology can scan the brains and determine whether any information has been written onto them.”

RIT.

The crime lab.

Coco and his people would become excited about the technical details and specifications in a way that worried detectives whose primary investigative tools remained their eyes, their shoes, and their ability to recognize a lie. RIT would tell them everything there was to know about the objects in the crates except, perhaps, the only things that mattered.

Why were they here?

Who had wanted one badly enough to blow open the door?

“Vittu vieköön,” Varela muttered.

He looked tired now. Resigned to having his investigation—and any chance for a heroic arrest—taken from him. He was probably already calculating how much of the failure he could blame on Iris.

“If you’re taking it from here, ana predostavit vam dostup a fájlok. I’ll provide access to the files. Just don’t stick your lingo into anything that isn’t skinjob shit.”

He did not meet their eyes.

He knew RDU did not care about jurisdiction once it had a scent. He was trying to retain what remained of his pride.

“Detective Varela,” Elly said before he could turn away completely. Her voice was neither sharp nor conciliatory. It was precise. “Forward the prototype case files to Rep-Detect. Flag anything involving restricted biotechnology. I want the original scene images, not only the summaries.”

She allowed him a moment to absorb the instruction.

“From the other raids, I want entry points, surveillance failures, witness statements, and anything your people dismissed because it did not fit the burglary theory.”

Elly looked toward Iris.

“Preserve the original scene capture as read-only and duplicate it to Rep-Detect. No enhancement overwrites or perspective corrections without retaining the raw source.”

“I understand,” Iris said.

Elly turned toward the northwest wall.

“Evidence collection.”

A uniform looked up.

“I want one sealed cranium unit transferred to RIT under chain of custody. Do not break the factory seal in the field. Photograph every side of the crate, including its labels, serial numbers, seal markings, and position, before moving it.”

Her attention swept across the remaining inventory.

“Flag every opened or displaced crate and every incomplete lot from that wall. If ocular, hand, dermal-facial, vocal, or spinal-interface assemblies are present, photograph them and hold one representative sealed sample from each category for possible RIT examination.”

The officer nodded.

“If anything appears recently handled, do not move it until prints, trace evidence, and contact residue are cleared. Understood?”

“Yes, Detective.”

“Elly turned toward the breach.

“Explosive residue next. Swab the inner and outer edges, the blast-facing floor, the hinge housing, the locking mechanism, and any embedded metal. Bag the fragments separately and record their orientation before removal. Compare the charge signature with those from Detective Varela’s previous raids.”

She left the uniforms to their work and drew her KIA as she stepped carefully through the ruined doorway.

“Officer Phirel, Detective LE1.”

Phirel answered over the connection.

“You said suspicious activity was captured after ESPER coverage was rerouted. I want the unedited feed, timestamped from five minutes before restoration until the arrival of the first uniform. Send the node-failure report as well.”

“Understood.”

“And tell me where the feed places the suspects after they left this door.”

Elly returned the KIA to her belt.

She stood beyond the breach and allowed the building to speak in its small ways. Her gaze remained low at first, looking for boot impressions, disturbed grit, pools of moisture, and scuffs where a heavy load might have shifted against a wall.

Then she looked higher.

Service hatches. Stairwells. Cargo doors. Maintenance rails. Blind corners. Anywhere the structure might swallow people and return them somewhere else.

Where did you go?

Behind her, Crowe surveyed the compartment one final time.

No one liked having Rep-Detect at a crime scene, even if they begrudgingly admitted that replicant abilities offered advantages over human investigators. They did not like Elly, because she was one of the things they had been taught to hunt.

They did not like Crowe, either.

If Varela had not recognized his name already, he would learn Crowe’s reputation once word circulated that he had taken the case.

Everything inside the compartment was now in order. There was nothing more an experienced detective could add that was not already being done. Tools capable of seeing better, processing faster, and recording everything they observed were at work.

Crowe was not out of tricks.

There were still things he could do that his partner could not.

Human things.

He gave a low whistle.

Elly turned her head.

Crowe raised one hand and fluttered two fingers. She nodded.

He was going walkabout.

Specials.

The word sat wrong in Crowe's mouth even when he did not say it. A bureaucrat's small mercy. A soft label for those too sick, too poor, too damaged, or too honest to buy their way off a dying planet.

Crowe had known plenty of them.

Some were informants. Some were victims. Some were worse than the people he hunted. If people were honest when they used the term, only stubborn pride stopped them from applying it to themselves.

Every noodle slurper on the street was somebody's Special.

Crowe adjusted the collar of his coat.

The building looked empty, but that only meant the people living inside it knew when to make themselves scarce. They were here. They were watching. They saw things the optics did not.

A camera performed a task.

These people survived.

Their motivations were different.

Detective LE1 had the crime scene. It was time to find out what blood and desperation had witnessed.

Crowe stepped out of the floodlights and onto the walkways.

For the moment, the warehouse belonged to the police. Soon the floodlights would be removed, the uniforms would leave, and the compartment would return to the people who lived in the walls around it.

They had eyes and ears of their own.

Crowe wanted what they knew—the things that would never appear on an ESPER recording or in a uniform's report.

He slipped a hand into his coat and fingered the vendor tokens he kept there.

Noodles. Stims. Booze.

Chinyen was not the only currency in Los Angeles.

Crowe was buying.

Part Two: A Difference of Opinion

It took a moment for their eyes to adjust after leaving the crime scene.

The LAPD floodlights had turned the warehouse compartment into a white-hot stage, bleaching every surface and carving shadows deep enough to hide bodies. Outside that artificial glare, the building returned to its natural state: intermittent light, layered darkness, and the vague suggestion of movement where nothing should have been moving.

Crowe and Elly separated without discussion.

Elly followed the physical trail.

A chip had been knocked from the graffiti along one walkway. Farther on, she found a fresh impression in the grime. The marks curved around the immense central well, where the open interior of the building fell away through level after level of rusted walkways and improvised habitation.

The trail ended where a railing had been cut short.

Beyond it stood an opening like the mouth of some pagan underworld. Faded hazard stripes remained beneath the evidence of repeated passage by heavy equipment. When Elly pressed the oversized control button beside the opening, warning lights flashed reluctantly into life.

A freight elevator.

She stepped inside and rode it down.

Down was also on Crowe's mind.

He descended through a succession of stairways that swayed and creaked beneath his weight. The weak daylight filtering through the distant skylights faded until it was replaced entirely by dying fluorescent tubes and shadows deep enough to conceal anything.

More than once he thought he saw movement one or two levels below.

Crowe drew a vendor token from his coat and left it on the stairs.

Then another.

Noodles. Stims. Booze. Anything that could be traded for a little temporary relief from life in Sector Twelve.

He dropped the tokens behind him like rust-belt breadcrumbs. Occasionally he stopped and said, "Oops," loudly enough to remove any doubt that the loss was deliberate.

Nothing happened.

Crowe continued down.

Several levels above him, mocking laughter broke out. It degenerated quickly into bronchial coughing, followed by a voice calling through the darkness.

“Szép chesta, polisi!”

Crowe felt his face burn.

He hoped none of the uniforms had heard it.

He especially hoped Varela had not.

Crowe did not turn back to collect any tokens that had not already disappeared. The only thing worse than being mocked by someone clutching a chit for a quick chemical buzz was behaving as if he needed it more than they did.

He eventually reached the same freight elevator Elly had used and rode it down to ground level in silence and degradation.

Elly had been busy.

Flashes from her KIA illuminated the darkened loading level in brief white bursts. Each flash made the blood shine.

Some of it had spattered across the walls and floor. Some had collected in shallow pools. All of it remained tacky, and the air was warm enough to carry its smell.

“There was a fight here,” Elly said as Crowe stepped from the elevator.

She did not need to say it, but did anyway.

“At least one gunshot wound.”

She indicated a finely sprayed pattern on the floor.

“The perpetrators separated afterward. Some went that way.”

A line of bloody footprints led toward the loading bay, as conspicuous as the world’s worst wayfinding stripe.

“Others went there.”

She gestured toward a short flight of stairs descending to a steel door. A single light flickered above it. There was nothing inviting about the entrance.

“Less blood in that direction,” Elly said. “Those individuals were moving faster.”

Crowe examined both trails.

“The locals were no help. This fight seems a little unexpected.”

Elly did not answer immediately.

Her KIA flashed again, fixing the largest blood pool in another burst of white light before the darkness swallowed it. She remained at its edge without entering the surrounding transfer field.

A fight involving perpetrators was not statistically unexpected.

She kept the observation to herself.

Elly tapped the KIA and opened a scene channel.

“Dispatch, Detective LE1-1.3. Send two additional uniforms to the ground-level freight access. I need this area sealed and processed.”

She waited for confirmation.

“Notify Evidence Collection. Multiple blood samples, packaged separately. Photograph everything before collection.”

Elly turned just enough to include Crowe without looking directly at him.

“Have them search for casings, fragments, and embedded rounds. Check the freight-elevator controls and rails for prints.”

She closed the channel and looked at Crowe.

“The locals may not have helped, but the building did.”

Her attention returned to the two diverging trails.

“We should determine which path is more likely to bring us closer to what was taken.”

She began moving carefully toward the loading bay.

“Probability favors this one. Not by much.”

Crowe remained behind for several seconds.

Elly stopped and looked back.

There were differences in training that no amount of shared time in the department could erase. Shooters and thumpers fired rounds and moved on. They understood intellectually that every bullet went somewhere, but the destination mattered less than whether the intended target had been hit.

Crowe had spent enough years examining bloodstained rooms to look beyond the victim.

His eyes moved from the spatter to the wall behind it.

There.

A small, deep cavity in the concrete. Freshly chipped stone showed pale against decades of accumulated grime.

“Tag this,” he said. “Save the uniforms some time.”

Elly’s attention shifted to the wall.

She raised the KIA. A clean flash marked the impact.

“Marked.”

She reopened the channel.

“Dispatch, Detective LE1-1.3. Add one probable bullet impact to the freight-access scene. Concrete wall. Location marked in KIA. Have Evidence Collection prioritize trajectory analysis and projectile retrieval, if possible.”

She lowered the device and looked directly at Crowe.

“Good catch.”

The words came out flat and procedural.

She meant them.

They followed the blood toward the loading dock.

Crowe could have found it blindfolded.

Ancient hydrocarbons and soot formed the base of the smell, heavy and abrasive in the back of the nose. Burned garbage added an oily sweetness from plastics sacrificed to the fire. Over it all drifted the faint copper trace of blood.

Not as much as at the site of the fight, but enough to establish that whoever had come this way was having a bad day.

The loading dock told a brief but revealing story.

Drops of blood and partial footprints crossed the concrete and disappeared over its edge into a mound of crushed refuse. Tire marks remained faintly visible on the floor where the driver had accelerated hard. The security gate had been bent and torn where it failed to rise high enough to clear the roof of a medium commercial truck.

Panic.

Confusion.

Haste.

Above the dock, a red light blinked in a darkened corner. A security camera had been positioned to record the entire scene, provided it had been online when the truck departed.

Elly crouched near the edge of the concrete.

She did not disturb the blood droplets leading into the garbage. Her KIA flashed several times, recording the footwear impressions, damaged debris, tire marks, broken gate, and probable route of escape.

“They left quickly,” she said as she stood.

Her eyes traced the warped metal.

“Medium truck. The driver accelerated before confirming clearance. Whatever they were carrying mattered more to them than the vehicle.”

She looked toward the blinking camera.

“Dispatch, Detective LE1-1.3. Confirm whether the loading-dock camera was operating during the break-in. If it was not, I want the failure time, its last successful upload, and whether the interruption coincides with the ESPER disruption.”

She glanced at Crowe as she continued.

“Notify Evidence Collection that we have another scene. Send uniforms to secure the dock until it can be processed. If exterior drone coverage is available, conduct a vehicle-egress sweep outward from this bay.”

Crowe pointed toward the damaged gate.

“Pull a paint sample from the contact point. Flag local trucking companies reporting theft or insurance claims involving vehicles of the corresponding color.”

He looked toward the open street beyond the bay.

“Check every camera outside, not only this one. Storefronts, traffic systems, private security. Something else may have caught the truck after it left.”

Elly relayed the instructions.

Crowe made another slow circuit of the dock.

“Let’s see what else is hiding in plain sight.”

For a minute, Elly watched him search.

Crowe did not know precisely what he was looking for. He was looking for the Thing: the single piece of evidence from which a straight line would lead to a clean investigation, an unambiguous suspect, a lawful arrest, a confession, moral certainty, and victory for the hosts of angels.

Whatever the Thing was, they both knew he would not find it in a Sector Twelve loading dock.

He probably would not find it anywhere in Los Angeles.

Elly’s KIA began chirping.

The sound was high, persistent, and vaguely avian. Like a baby bird, perhaps, from when there had still been birds.

She accepted the call.

Deputy Chief Holden appeared on the screen. His desk vid-phone had been placed low enough to hold his face at a permanently heroic angle.

“Elly? Good. I’ve just had Goroka from RSS in my ear. He says you two showed up at a by-the-book robbery and took possession of it.”

Holden’s expression suggested that the world had personally inconvenienced him again.

“You’ve been there long enough to form an opinion. I need a good argument if RDU is going to retain the case. What do you think? Is this a Rep-Detect job?”

Before Elly answered, Crowe muttered from beside her.

“Cache of pre-Blackout replicant components. Targeted removal of Tyrell old stock. Not a snatch-and-grab. If it isn’t RDU now, it will be.”

Internally, he was pleased that he did not carry a KIA.

Another thought informed him that he did carry one.

It simply walked.

Crowe sighed.

Elly gave Holden the concise version: deliberate disruption of ESPER coverage, controlled explosive entry, pre-Blackout Tyrell components, evidence of suspects possessing unusual strength, and the selective removal of specific inventory.

Holden’s face folded into a frown so familiar that it might have been his neutral expression. The wrinkles were probably the result of years spent forcing it into something less disappointed with creation.

“All right,” he said. “I’ll tell Goroka he can stick it.”

He drew on his cigarette and blew smoke into the already hazy air around him. His synthetic lungs wheezed audibly, adding nothing pleasant to the experience.

“Keep me informed. This is a new blip on our radar, and I’m not thrilled about it.”

Holden looked away from the screen for a moment, reading something.

“I’m assigning Wylde to the case. He’s back on duty. Contact him, bring him up to speed, and put him to work.”

The connection ended.

Several sectors away, the rain was falling with all the monotonous hostility Los Angeles could produce.

Fuckin' rain, Rett Wylde thought.

Always fuckin' rain.

He stood beneath the canopy of a street-level noodle shop and squeezed a packet of hot sauce into his ramen.

The packet might have been his third.

During his time with the Colonial Defense Patrol aboard the UN dropship *Scylla*, the habit had been a practical necessity. The rations required every available form of seasoning. Back on Earth, the noodles were mostly salt accompanied by an artificial approximation of chicken or beef.

It was not enough.

The sauce darkened the broth to a dirty red. Wylde stirred it with his chopsticks and shoveled noodles into his mouth.

Not bad.

He glanced toward the shopkeeper's Persian cat.

Synthetic, certainly. Even so, the fact that the noodle-shop owner could afford it struck Wylde as deeply ironic.

His spinner sat five vehicles down the street. There was nowhere dry near it, but he had no desire to sit inside.

He preferred being outside vehicles now.

Once a person had experienced the G-force of a dropship falling into a planet's atmosphere often enough, even stationary cabins could begin to feel like traps. Rain or no rain, Wylde would take the open street.

He ate and watched water pour from the canopy.

Los Angeles was very different from Rust-Vaal on Calantha. One world had been a wasteland of endless sunshine and desert heat. The other was a shit hole where rainfall was measured in months.

Wylde shook his head.

He had been with the RDU for one year, five if his offworld service with the CDP was counted.

One year, and already one period of desk duty.

The fucker had not listened.

That was the part Wylde returned to whenever his mind wandered back to the shooting. The man had refused to drop his weapon. Afterward there had been a hole in his skull where his brains had been.

Should have listened, Wylde told the ghost for the thousandth time.

The inquest had followed.

Two weeks without his badge or weapon. Mandatory sessions with a fucking psychiatrist. Six weeks of desk duty that had felt considerably longer.

Now he was back on the street, doing the thing he knew how to do.

His KIA chirped inside his coat.

Wylde cursed and spilled hot broth over his hand while reaching for it. The display identified Holden as the caller.

He accepted.

“Wylde.”

Holden’s face did nothing to improve his day.

“Wylde. Good. At least someone takes his damned KIA with him.”

Holden paused and looked aside.

“Is that rain? Where the hell are you?”

Another pause.

“Actually, I’ve decided I don’t care. Crowe and LE1-1.3 found something in Sector Twelve that appears to be RDU business after all. Something involving skinjob parts. They’ll provide the details.”

He took a drag from a cigarette more expensive than any Wylde was ever likely to purchase.

“Contact Elly. Crowe has gone back to leaving his KIA in the damned car.”

Holden leaned closer to the camera.

“I don’t know what this is, and I dislike not knowing. Keep me in the loop.”

He did not say that Crowe had worked Internal Affairs or that he did not trust him as far as he could spit him into the wind.

No one in Rep-Detect needed him to say it.

Five minutes later, Wylde stared at Elly's face on the KIA while she delivered an impassive briefing.

When she finished, he asked the central question.

"What do you want me to do?"

Elly allowed the question to sit for half a second.

Rain hissed faintly through the open loading dock behind her. On the KIA, Wylde's face appeared in miniature beneath the wet light and street glare.

"What is your location?"

Wylde told her.

Elly turned away from the loading dock and looked into the darker interior of the warehouse. The second blood trail waited there, leading toward the steel door below the flickering light.

"Crowe and I have one unsecured lead remaining inside the building. We're going to clear enough of it to determine whether it connects to the robbery."

She transmitted the preliminary scene packet to Wylde: photographs of the freight-access blood, the marked bullet impact, the damaged loading gate, the tire marks, the dock camera, and the initial findings regarding the stolen Tyrell stock.

"You take the headquarters side," Elly said. "Start by pulling the dock camera. If it was operating, have the footage prepared for ESPER analysis. If it was down, establish the time of failure, its last successful upload, and whether the outage corresponds with the disruption upstairs."

She glanced toward Crowe.

"Then retrieve Varela's files on the previous break-ins. Look for overlap: target type, entry method, missing inventory, vehicle capacity, witness descriptions, and any indication of pre-Blackout Tyrell material."

Elly continued before either human detective could interrupt.

"Run the truck. Medium commercial vehicle, likely damaged by contact with the security gate. Paint transfer is awaiting confirmation. Check recent theft reports, insurance claims, trucking companies, repair shops, chop shops, and impound records."

"That should generate several leads."

Somewhere deeper in the warehouse, metal clicked as it cooled.

“When we finish here, Crowe and I will meet you at headquarters. I’ll coordinate with the crime lab and conduct the ESPER analysis. You and Crowe can follow the street leads before they go cold.”

She paused.

“And Wylde—ask about the Tyrell parts carefully. Whoever entered this building knew what they were taking. I want to know who else understands their significance.”

God, Wylde thought. Reps never missed a beat.

He watched Elly through the KIA, shoved another mouthful of ramen between his teeth, and considered the catalogue of evidence requests she had just assigned him.

“Anything else?” he asked around the noodles.

Elly did not blink.

She did not smile.

She did not answer.

“All right. I’m on it. See you both at headquarters.”

Wylde gave her a crooked smile.

“Don’t go getting shot.”

He ended the call.

At the warehouse, Elly returned the KIA to her belt.

“Let’s see whether the building has anything else to say.”

Crowe looked around the loading level.

He had listened to Elly brief Wylde: concise, mechanical, efficient.

He wondered how much longer humans would remain necessary in the department before someone decided to phase them out.

“Now we have another detective on the case,” he said. “No chance this is a simple snatch-and-grab. I want to know who else understands what’s happening and isn’t telling us.”

He looked toward the second trail.

“Let’s check the last route and see what game we’ve flushed out.”

Wylde looked down at the carton in his hand.

Data analysis and paperwork were not his thing. He was a door kicker. He was the man the people on the other side did not want to meet.

But work was work.

He forced down another mouthful of ramen, planted the chopsticks in what remained, and carried the carton through the rain toward his spinner. Shadowed figures occupied the doorways and alleys along the way. Wylde ignored them. They were only trying to stay dry.

Rain pattered into the cabin until the side door finished descending. Wylde activated the engine and rose without lights until the spinner found a travel lane toward headquarters.

On the dashboard, he opened the personnel files for Crowe and LE1-1.3.

He knew their names. Everyone in Rep-Detect knew the names. He had simply never worked anything important with either of them.

You always knew who your partner was.

That lesson had been taught hard in the Colonial Defense Patrol. Out on the rim, survival depended on knowing that the person beside you would do whatever the job required. No hesitation. No questions. Anything less left someone filling a cold locker.

Human or replicant made no difference to Wylde. He would work beside anyone—or anything—that did its part to make certain he returned home at night.

In some ways, he preferred a good replicant. They calculated the available options and usually found an edge.

Elly, LE1, EI—whatever she preferred to call herself—would probably be useful.

As for Crowe, Wylde had no opinion.

Yet.

The journey across the city was brief. LAPD headquarters emerged from the rain, dark and foreboding despite the floodlights trained across its walls.

Wylde parked, carried his cold ramen inside, and set to work.

The new headquarters had been designed from the ground up to tell anyone looking at it that there was a right side and a wrong side of its walls.

The little people who moved through their fog-shrouded, rain-drenched lives belonged outside.

The police, though they slept in apartments and lived on the streets, belonged inside the floodlit tower.

When Wylde stepped from the elevator onto the Rep-Detect floors, he felt himself relax into the camaraderie soaked into the walls like the residue of cheap tobacco.

He disliked feeling it.

He could not deny it was there.

The building knew him for the inveterate sinner he was and welcomed him anyway, like the open arms of a favorite doxie.

For once, the ESPER wall was unoccupied.

Recovered surveillance from the warehouse provided a clear view of the loading dock. Wylde was no expert, but he could narrow the search to the single vehicle visible when coverage returned.

Flickflickflickflickflickflick.

A bio-waste disposal logo appeared on the side of the truck.

Flickflickflickflickflickflick.

A huge figure ran toward the vehicle.

Flickflickflickflickflickflick.

A second angle resolved the huge figure into a somewhat less huge man carrying another man.

Wylde captured the first face easily. The second was so badly damaged that the digital sorcery within ESPER required several passes before producing an identification.

The Mainframe returned two names.

Boltun Nergüi, known on the street as Bolt-On.

Jacques Bellefontaine, a professional thief of long standing.

Full biographies and arrest records were available, but Wylde remained interested in the footage.

Both men were bloodied. One was clearly panicking. The other hung so slack that, if conscious, he was only barely so.

Something had gone badly wrong at the warehouse, yet no bodies had been found.

Were the two men running for their lives, or had they taken what they wanted and abandoned the scene when the situation turned against them?

Wylde captured stills and forwarded the footage to the medical examiner. Even without a body, the visible injuries might reveal their extent and cause.

He called downstairs.

“Drake.”

“Yeah, Drake. Wylde. I’m sending you footage. Tell me what you can about the injuries and what caused them. Check the local hospitals for anything similar while you’re at it.”

A trace of ice entered Drake’s voice.

“You want me to do your damned job, Rett?”

“No. I want you to do your damned job and get me the answers I need.”

Wylde ended the call before it could become more productive.

He opened the files on Nergüi and Bellefontaine, then started a separate search for GENTEK Bio-Waste, the company whose logo marked the truck.

While the system worked, he abandoned the ramen and poured coffee into an old stained mug.

No cream.

No sugar.

He returned to his desk with the black liquid steaming and began to read.

Bolt-On’s record could have served as an archetypal profile of professional muscle for new LAPD recruits: convictions for assault, grievous bodily harm, and criminal damage, with many more charges that had failed to stick.

If he had been involved, it was not because someone needed boxes carried in a hurry. The crew had wanted an answer ready if anyone interfered.

It had not been a good enough answer.

Bellefontaine came from a family of formerly Parisian refugees and rose from the lowest levels of the city doing stickups. Arrests for violent robbery, burglary, and petty theft had done little to keep him off the streets.

CrimInt suggested that he turned professional in his twenties and moved into serious black-bag work: homes and businesses belonging to the great and the good, or what passed for them in Los Angeles. The file also suggested that he retained a violent streak.

What the record did not show was any experience with explosives.

Bellefontaine spoofed electronics and brutalized security guards, sometimes when it was necessary and sometimes when it was not. If the warehouse raid had been his plan, he had entered new and dangerous territory.

Known associates clarified the picture.

Both men were believed to work in a crew led by Ozek Turfan, formerly Colonial Defense and trained in demolitions. His service record remained sealed under a standing request from the Dayza attorney general, but he was believed to have seen action during the years when corporate claim jumpers treated entire colonial habitats—and their residents—as fair game.

Mr. Turfan knew his way around a bomb.

The current address in his file was almost certainly stale, but there was no indication that he had left Los Angeles.

Satisfied for the moment, Wylde turned to GENTEK.

Los Angeles produced garbage more reliably than anything else, human and otherwise.

What it produced second most was bioware: replicants, famously, but also animoids, augmentations, and cutting-edge medical procedures. All of it generated a daily mountain of unwanted organic waste that needed somewhere to go.

Companies like GENTEK made their bones suckling at that ulcerous teat, hauling away whatever Wallace, the hospitals, and one-man gene-hacking shops did not want to handle themselves.

Wylde worked through corporate shill-speak, municipal records, and financial disclosures filed with the United Nations until his eyes rasped in their sockets. His back popped audibly when he finally stood.

GENTEK was not the largest disposal company in the city, but it held contracts with several significant hospitals, including the University of Los Angeles Medical Centre and Cedars-Sinai-Honkou.

It owned enough trucks that the company might not yet have noticed one missing.

There was also a recycling center—or at least some kind of processing facility—far out in the no-man's-land of the kipple.

Back at the warehouse, the steel door waited beneath the flickering light.

It had been installed during some bygone era as the kind of barrier that could be locked and forgotten forever. Sometime around the Blackout, it had proved unequal to the desperate and heedless ingenuity of the Specials.

The door had been forced from the outside and never repaired. Its frame was distorted, its edge bent, and its locking mechanism ruined. It could no longer close properly.

Doors like it existed everywhere.

They stood in the basements of First Sector nightclubs and beneath Fifth Sector towers occupied by police officers and UN bureaucrats. Perhaps there was one now beneath the dark and silent Tyrell building.

Crowe drew his service pistol.

The hinges protested when he pulled the door open.

Beyond lay a bare concrete stairwell smelling of ancient urine. It descended toward the sound of trickling water and the kind of darkness Cro-Magnon man had learned not to approach without fire.

Crowe did not realize how fast his heart was beating until Elly activated her flashlight.

The beam transformed the scene from impenetrable darkness into impenetrable darkness surrounding a small circle of obnoxiously bright light.

A quiet click announced that Elly had drawn and powered her own pistol.

They descended slowly.

At the bottom of the stairs, they entered what appeared to be an old steam tunnel, perhaps old enough to predate the war.

Architectural speculation became irrelevant when growling rolled through the passage ahead.

It sounded like the world's most aggressive a cappella quartet.

Elly swept the flashlight forward.

A pack of canimoids blocked the tunnel.

They were equal parts pathetic and terrifying in the half-light.

Their biological components had long since deteriorated. Artificial skin and muscle had split or rotted away, exposing mechanical limbs and internal structures. Their bodies had been repaired repeatedly with incompatible parts. One stood with the uneven posture of an animal assembled from several different breeds, assuming all the replacement components had originally come from dogs.

The canimoids growled.

Moldy hackles rose.

Teeth showed.

Crowe looked at the animals and then back toward the stairwell.

“Do we want to go this way, or do we need to go this way?”

He studied the ruined machines.

“Looks like the end of the trail for Robo–Old Yeller.”

Elly did not answer immediately.

She held the flashlight low enough to illuminate their teeth, exposed servos, and irregular movements without shining it directly into their eyes.

“Want is irrelevant,” she said quietly.

The growling traveled down the tunnel and returned from the concrete walls altered by distance.

At least four animals.

Possibly more behind them.

Elly adjusted her stance. Her blaster remained lowered but ready. The KIA continued recording.

“Need depends on whether the trail continues past them.”

She shifted the beam across the floor between the detectives and the pack, searching for blood, footprints, disturbed grime, drag marks, or anything fresh enough to contradict Crowe’s entirely reasonable desire not to enter a mechanical dog fight.

Elly opened a channel without taking her eyes from the animals.

“Dispatch, Detective LE1-1.3. We are below the warehouse in a probable steam tunnel. Multiple damaged canimoids are blocking passage. Mark the route as hazardous. No uniforms or Evidence Collection through the lower door until RDU clears the tunnel or Animal Control arrives.”

She waited for acknowledgment.

“Determine whether this tunnel appears on city plans. I want possible exits, maintenance access points, and utility connections.”

Elly reduced the channel volume and glanced toward Crowe.

“No warning shots. Too much concrete and too many unidentified utilities. I do not want to explain to Holden that we resolved his new Rep-Detect problem by rupturing a steam line.”

Her gaze returned to the canimoids.

“If the trail ends here, we leave them for Animal Control and return to headquarters. If it continues past them...”

She allowed the sentence to finish itself.

Animal Control.

Police officers used the term frequently because the joke had survived long after its original meaning ceased to matter. The war had destroyed nearly every living thing that was not human. Anyone wealthy enough to own a real animal would never allow a filthy-handed municipal employee near it.

Animal Control had become shorthand for deliberate neglect by the powers that be.

Crowe had to give Elly credit. She had delivered the joke like someone who had walked a beat for twelve years.

And people claimed Nexus-9s had no sense of humor.

Elly took a slow step sideways.

The canimoids tracked her movement.

The animal on the far right—something that might once have been an adorable terrier owned by an aspiring socialite—lowered itself into a crouch. The motion sent a convulsion through its kitbashed frame.

Its growl deepened.

Within a second, the rest of the pack joined it.

The sound bypassed every sophisticated layer of thought and activated something older in both detectives. Long-dormant primate instinct insisted that the safest location was high in a tree.

There were no trees.

The canimoids did not attack.

They did not retreat.

Their tails were raised.

Crowe tried to remember whether that was a good sign or whether he was thinking of cats.

The clock was running, if there was a clock. Neither Runner had spent enough time around dogs, real or synthetic, to know.

Crowe raised his service weapon.

PK-D blasters were loud.

They were loud deliberately.

Their report told every skinjob, civilian, and person caught between the two to take cover. Everyone in Los Angeles knew the sound.

Inside the tunnel it would be louder still.

Perhaps the canimoids retained some primitive response protocol. Buried under corrupted behavioral systems and improvised repairs, there might remain a simple binary command.

Fight or flight.

It was not the smartest idea Crowe had ever attempted.

He also had no desire to be torn down while retreating.

“Watch your ears.”

Elly turned toward him, about to speak.

Crowe fired.

The PK-D’s muzzle flash erupted in the darkness like the breath of a dragon. The report crashed through the tunnel.

Crowe recovered his aim and leveled the weapon at the pack, ready to fire directly if they advanced.

For several seconds, nothing happened.

The canimoids did not charge.

They did not run.

They simply stood in place.

The former terrier tilted its head as though curious.

Then something farther down the tunnel decided that the passage was a throat.

And it needed clearing.

A metallic ringing began somewhere in the darkness.

It rose rapidly in pitch.

Riiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiing—

Far above, the uniforms processing the warehouse heard the explosion as a tremendous bang.

Crowe and Elly heard nothing.

There was no time to hear it when the air itself struck them.

The blast lifted them from their feet and hurled them several meters backward. Dust, metal, concrete fragments, and the dismembered remains of the canimoids were driven through the tunnel around them.

Crowe landed on a chunk of rubble.

Elly struck the floor amid the remains of the pack.

For a time, there was only pressure, darkness, and the absence of sound.

Crowe regained consciousness trying to breathe.

Pain lanced through his left side. He rolled from the rubble and collapsed onto the tunnel floor. The impact sent a fresh bolt through his abused nerves, and the world vanished again for several seconds.

Nearby, Elly sat upright.

She threw aside the weakly animated head of a canimoid that had been attempting to lick her face.

A jagged fragment of high-grade aluminum protruded from her right eye socket.

Elly grasped it and pulled it free.

The pain was intense.

More troubling was the misalignment of her visual fields. Her right optical input no longer corresponded with the left. The tunnel doubled and shifted around her whenever she moved her head.

For two seconds, she remained still.

The first second was diagnostic.

Visual mismatch. Right optical feed compromised. Pain sharp and localized around the socket. Foreign material removed. Structural integrity reduced, but basic function retained.

The second was irritation.

Elly looked at the aluminum fragment in her hand.

Then she looked at the canimoid head near her boot. Its tongue continued moving weakly through dust and debris, attempting to complete some ruined approximation of affection despite the absence of its body.

She dropped the fragment.

“Crowe?”

Her voice returned to her distorted. Too flat. Too distant. As though someone else had spoken from the far end of a flooded corridor.

Audio input impaired.

Balance recalibrating.

She turned carefully until her remaining clean line of sight found him.

“Status.”

Elly pushed herself onto one knee and stopped.

No farther.

Not yet.

Her blaster remained in her hand.

Good.

Her KIA did not.

Less good.

She scanned the debris until she found it partly buried beneath concrete dust and twisted metal. The casing had cracked, but the screen activated when she pulled it free.

“Dispatch, Detective LE1-1.3. Explosion below the warehouse. Old steam tunnel beyond the lower door. Two RDU detectives injured.”

She tasted dust, lubricant, and something coppery.

Static chewed through the connection.

“Mark the lower access as hazardous. No uniforms through that door. Repeat: no uniforms through that door.”

Her right eye attempted to focus and failed.

She closed it for half a second, reopened it, and regretted having expected improvement.

“Send a medical technician if one is available. Otherwise have the nearest unit bring a field kit to the freight-access level. Advise Evidence Collection that the tunnel remains unsecured.”

Elly looked into the darkness beyond the dismembered canimoids.

Then she crawled toward Crowe, keeping her blaster angled toward the black throat of the tunnel.

“Crowe,” she said again, more quietly. “No more warning shots, okay?”

It might have been a joke.

It was not a particularly good one.

She began checking him.

“We are going to remain still for a moment. Tell me where it hurts.”

Elly did what she could with damaged vision and no medical supplies. She cleared dust from Crowe’s mouth, checked the obvious cuts, and cleaned several of the worst scrapes.

There was little else she could do.

Crowe’s breath escaped in frequent hisses, enough to establish that he was not dead.

Not yet.

Dust swirled through the beam of Elly’s flashlight.

Crowe coughed.

He muttered something she could not understand. The words did not sound like English.

Then he spoke more loudly.

“Miš need etáŋhaŋ mní iš wí has miyé wáŋkáta na čhetáŋhaŋ lé aŋpétu kiŋ.”

Elly could not determine whether Crowe was speaking to her or whether he knew where he was.

“No, Momma,” he said. “I’ll be fine. Just thirsty.”

“Crowe.”

She tried to focus on him through the fractured alignment of her vision.

His eyes were closed. His body had not moved.

“Crowe.”

His eyes opened.

For a moment, they cleared.

“Did we get them?” he asked. “You go ahead. I’ll wait here.”

“You’re not waiting here.”

Elly’s own voice sounded wrong, flattened by damaged audio processing and the hollow ringing left by the explosion.

She ignored it.

There were more useful things to catalogue.

Breathing painful.

Consciousness intermittent.

Speech irregular.

Possible concussion.

Her hands moved carefully along his torso. Crowe flinched when she reached his left side.

Possible rib fractures.

Possible internal injury.

The list was not reassuring.

She looked at the cuts she had cleaned and then at everything she could not repair in a dark tunnel with one functioning eye and no medical kit.

Insufficient supplies.

Insufficient visibility.

Insufficient time.

“Field assessment incomplete,” she said, partly to Crowe and partly into the damaged KIA.

Her gaze returned to the darkness beyond the dead canimoids.

Whatever had caused the explosion might still be farther down the tunnel.

Or it might already have left.

Either possibility made continued pursuit medically and tactically unsound.

“Dispatch, LE1-1.3. Detective Crowe is mobile only with assistance. We are withdrawing from the lower tunnel. Maintain the hazard marker. Evidence Collection will wait until the route has been cleared.”

Elly shifted her blaster aside long enough to place an arm beneath Crowe.

Her movement was careful, but not gentle enough to be mistaken for uncertainty.

“You may object once we’re upstairs,” she told him. “Preferably in English.”

She lifted him.

They began moving toward the stairs one slow, painful step at a time.

Whenever the tunnel narrowed, Elly positioned herself between Crowe and the darkness.

“The wasteland isn’t so bad,” Crowe murmured.

His weight sagged against her.

“My grandfather said the white man drove the good spirits away, the way sage drives away demons.”

Elly adjusted her grip and continued walking.

“Now it’s the neon,” Crowe said. “The artificial light banishes the good, the evil, and the spirit of man. The ancestors weep, and they are dim in the neon.”

His boots scraped across the concrete.

“In the wasteland, they can still speak.”

They reached the bottom of the stairs.

Crowe tried to stop.

“Just let me sit down. Even the dirty rain is a comfort when it washes away the grime of the city.”

He swallowed.

“I’m thirsty.”

“Mni, thǎŋčǎŋ mni kíŋ táku? Wacípi kíŋ hé.”

His head turned. His eyes rolled unfocused for a moment and then steadied on Elly.

When he spoke again, his voice was clear.

The words came like a recitation, remembered from somewhere beyond the tunnel, the warehouse, and the poisoned city above them.

“When you find something good on the white man’s road, pick it up. But when you find something bad—or it turns out bad—drop it and leave it alone.”

Crowe looked directly at his partner.

“Which one are you, who has no ancestors to welcome you and no children to sing your songs?”

He raised a hand to his ear.

When he pulled it away, there was blood on his fingers.

“Šúŋka.”

Crowe’s head dropped.

His body went limp in Elly’s arms.