

I

DAY ONE: I KNEW THE MECHANICS OF DEATH BETTER THAN ANYONE



I was going to have to kill a whole lot of people.

“Keep walking, Avery.”

I didn't like how he kept calling me *Avery* in that distorted voice, like he knew me. It made me nervous. It was one thing to be sold out by someone in your own organization and sent into a fucking ambush; chances were, when you got sold on a bounty, you were just entering a startling gauntlet of upsells. Eventually you discovered the original bounty had been laid out by some Chinese gangster halfway around the fucking world. And I was big money these days: Avery Cates, cop killer.

This is what happened when you were successful in the System: you wore a target.

It was cold, a strong wind pushing a metallic smell up my nose with prejudice. I estimated ten or twelve people around me, though only two had spoken so far. Both sounded like

they were using a digital morpher to mask their voices, which made me wonder if I knew the pieces of shit who'd sold me out. Anger, green and corrosive, bubbled inside me. I didn't work with anyone I didn't know, so a friend had sold me out, and it made me *angry*. If I'd been psionic—even a tiny, microscopic little bit—I would have been able to burn off the blindfold with my thoughts. As it was I was listening, trying to pick up clues. For when I came back and killed every last one of them.

That *Avery* stuck in my head.

I didn't know how long I'd been unconscious—one second I'd been on Hudson Street, pale sun fighting its way through the scummy clouds, yellowed acidic snow crunching beneath my feet, and then an explosion behind my eyes, red and yellow and orange. When I came to, I was on a hover, blindfolded, my hands bound in rubber bracelets. I knew the buyers were heavy hitters because of the hover—a ride like that took money and plenty of it. That made me feel better; if I was going to be fucking sold like cargo, I at least wanted it to be serious people. People I wouldn't feel bad about killing later.

I tried to walk steadily, but the ground was uneven and I kept tripping. The world was an endless howling wind that pressed against me, making me lean into it, panting with effort, and the icy ground beneath me crunching like tiny bird bones as I walked. I had no idea where we were; there were buildings, judging from the echoes, but no people. The suburbs of Manhattan didn't lack for Ghost Cities, so that didn't really narrow it down. Go an hour or so in any direction and you would find empty towns filled with collapsing buildings and riot damage. Gangs of Wilders sometimes took them over and tried to start permanent settlements, but the cops were pretty good about stamping that shit out, and so every year the countryside got bigger and those monuments to pre-Unification got smaller.

THE DIGITAL PLAGUE

In case anyone was watching, I kept a smirk on my face. You had to keep up appearances. If my file hadn't been cleared by Dick Marin, Director of SSF Internal Affairs and pretty much the biggest ballkicker in the System these days, I probably would have been number two on the System Security Force's Most Wanted List, right behind the legendary—and probably dead—Cainnic Orel. You couldn't be the SSF's number two and get scared every time you found yourself blindfolded—it looked bad. Besides, I knew it was only a matter of time before my people found me; a transmitter chip under the skin of my right hand would lead them here. The only question was, would my people get here before I was sold off to the next outfit?

My people were mainly Belling—older than he'd been when he'd helped me on the Squalor job, but still the best Gunner I'd ever seen—and Gleason, who was just a kid but who'd proven herself to me a dozen times already. She did things the way I wanted them done, because she'd learned everything from me. They'd grab up some muscle, of course, but I didn't care about the muscle. Belling and Gleason were pretty much my people in total.

"Stop, Avery."

I stopped and beamed my invisible smile around. I started to say something, but my throat filled with phlegm and I had to hack up a warm mass of it onto the ground. "Stop talking to me like you know me," I finally managed.

"We are old friends, Avery," the voice responded. I was trying to catch the rhythms, the beats and pauses he used, see if it tugged at a memory. "Kneel, please."

I turned slowly until I thought I was facing the voice. "Give me a hint."

There was a scrape and the dry sound of fabric, and I flinched a second too late as something resembling a cannon-

ball in heft and weight slammed into my stomach. I went down on my knees as requested, overbalanced, and landed face-first in sharp, iced-over snow. I lay there trying to breathe but just sort of twitching like a dying fish.

“Thank you, Avery,” the voice continued, calm and electronically blurry. “Pull him up.”

Someone was moving toward me, and then there was a fist in the fabric of my coat—a good coat, expensive—that hauled me upright. I hung there, limp, struggling to get my burning lungs back into motion.

“A hint? Avery Cates, the king of fucking New York, right? How many people have you killed?”

Fifty-four, I thought. Personally.

“I know you keep count, Avery. But how many have you simply destroyed, leaving them shattered, ruined? So many, right, Avery? More than you even admit to. More than you even *know* about, since some of us were simply never noticed. You couldn’t pick me out of the multitude.”

Slowly, I was able to pull a thin thread of cold air into my lungs. My head pounded with a fuzzy, painful pulse, as if an artery had burst and my brain was filling up with blood. I’d bitten my tongue when I’d gone down, and the salty rust taste of blood was making me nauseous. And then I went still and cold, because the frozen muzzle of a gun had been placed against my forehead. Revenge shriveled up inside me and faded away. I could hear birds in the air, a multitude of calls. I’d never heard so many birds in my life.

“For all these things, Avery, you deserve to die.”

Everything had changed. These weren’t swaggering assholes trying to throw a scare into me, this wasn’t just shipping a fat payday out to some bigger fish. I was used to the threat of instant, unforeseen death—every day of my life. Having it

THE DIGITAL PLAGUE

brought right up under my nose so I could smell it was shocking, though, and I froze up.

Behind my blindfold I closed my eyes. *There are better ways to die*, I thought, my heart pounding. I'd lived longer than I'd ever imagined, and I felt like I'd been tired for most of it, always scrubbing along on no sleep, scrabbling. I found a part of me, small but distinct, was suddenly happy. The wind leaned against me, making a hollow noise. The snow on my face burned slightly, and I'd be red there for a few days. The gun pressed into my skin and hurt, and I found myself leaning into it, pressing against it, like digging at a scab.

I guessed my people weren't going to be in time.

"This is not an execution, Avery," the voice continued. "This is an assassination. Not yours. But an assassination none the fucking less."