

CHAPTER 6

Ryn Oshiro slouched in the pilot seat of a black cop flitter, watching the rain coming down hard on Parliament Square. The downpour sent the nightlife dashing for cover under the many glowing Reichflek canopies, which flared and hummed as they caught the deluge, their invisible grids bending the rain sideways in rippling arcs that spat and hissed as it was funnelled into gutter channels. Oshiro's own flux field was struggling to repel the torrent, and in the end he gave up and switched off the device. He was content to listen to the heavy drumming of rain against the bodywork, an oddly apt accompaniment to the throb of infrasonic rock music seeping through the walls of the Houses of Parliament.

The government had evacuated the old building a century before. Now it crouched across the square, its gothic bones wrapped in exo-scaffolding and cable trunking, its windows blacked out except where pulses of internal light throbbed in time with the music. Infrasound stacks hidden in its ribs drove frequencies low enough to make teeth ache.

In the passenger seat, Sumedho Ghan grunted his annoyance at the intrusion of the steady thumping rhythm of rain and rock. He switched on the null-audio shell and reactivated the Reichflek field, and the sounds faded away to silence.

"Oxygen Thieves are playing tonight," Oshiro said, his voice sounding too loud in the enforced silence. "Would have liked tickets." He tilted his head, studying Ghan's profile reflected in the dark glass. "You ever been to an infrasonic gig, Ghan?"

"Once, when I was working security," Ghan said.

"You like it?"

Ghan's lip curled a fraction at an unpleasant memory. "It made my ass bleed."

Oshiro laughed. "That's quite some fucking tagline." He used his fingers and thumbs to outline an imaginary guerrilla poster. "*Oxygen Thieves, making your ass bleed.*"

"You think it's funny, my ass bleeding?" Ghan asked indignantly.

"Funny? It's fucking poetic," Oshiro said.

Ghan exhaled through his nose. "You lack refinement."

"And you lack a soul," Oshiro fired back, stretching until his spine cracked softly.

"Come on. There's got to be some music you like."

"I like the delicate melodies of silence."

"You know, Sammy," Oshiro began, knowing that Ghan hated to be called Sammy. "I never figured out why Kade dislikes you so much, but after a night in this flitter with you I'm beginning to see why."

"Daniel Kade is an uncultured heathen with all the social grace of a gutter rat and the sooner he is tossed out of the bureau the better."

Ghan was a small bulky man who could lay claim to true Mongolian heritage undiluted by the blood of any other race, a rare occurrence in the twenty-third century and one he went to great lengths to point out.

Oshiro's lineage was mostly a Japanese genealogy along with a bit of Irish, German, Egyptian and Sioux. He was a true child of a shrinking world. Despite being

a global distillate, his features were a hybrid of Native American and Japanese which, in the Limiter's experience, most women agreed went very well together. His hair was long, black, and punctuated with plaited braids, which framed a face dominated by a slim nose, high cheekbones, and large eyes with long black lashes. The beauty of this combination was marred only by a three-inch scar that ran in a vicious melted arc from the right corner of his mouth across his jawline.

The only commonality Oshiro shared with Ghan was a scar. The Mongolian's scar snaked across his face from his left eye to his left ear. Oshiro had received his injury fighting as a mercenary in the Mexican Civil War. Ghan was yet to reveal the source of his. Kade, in a moment of annoyance with the Mongolian, had claimed his razor had slipped while shaving.

Outside, the rain softened to a steady hiss, the storm losing its edge. The streetlights sharpened, puddles resolving into slick mirrors of the neon skyline. Nightlife resumed in fragments, vendor drones reactivating, covers pulled back on food stalls and booze booths. People began to emerge cautiously from beneath the canopies, wary glances darting toward the flutter. They gave it a wide berth. The flutter's polarized windscreen did not add to the anonymity of those inside. Unmarked it might be, but it was marked enough. Its occupants were members of the infamous Limitation Bureau.

Oshiro watched the square coming back to life, tracking movement out of habit. He caught details others missed. A hand lingering too long in a coat pocket. A

cybernetic eye flicking toward the flitter and away too fast. The subtle choreography of a city that knew it was being watched.

A tall, beautiful girl broke from the flow, her coat translucent and lit from within by soft shifting colours. She jogged past the flitter, then at the last second pivoted and bumped her hip against the hull. The field discharged with a sharp snap. She laughed at the sensation as blue sparks skittered across her skin.

Oshiro couldn't help himself. He gave a low whistle, appreciating both the audacity and the figure. He checked the time and was about to open his pre-end-of-shift bottle of Blue Monkey just as a small segment in the centre of the flitter windscreen flickered. A heads-up display appeared on the darkened glass, above which hovered a fat red face that belonged to the desk Sergeant back at Limiter HQ.

"Hey, Denny," Oshiro said, tipping the bottle slightly in greeting. "S'up?"

"Don't crack that beer yet, Oshiro," Denny said. "We have a code blue one."

Oshiro paused, fingers tightening around the bottle. Something in Denny's tone cut through the idle banter. He recognised the code instantly. Blue One. Men down. Dead cops.

"Location," Oshiro asked.

"Jazz-Mine club, Ninth District, Xaanji Province, Brixton. Kade's already on the scene." A beat. "There's more. It's a rogue sim. Possibly wounded."

Oshiro knew that possibly wounded, meant unpredictable and dangerous. "Understood," he said, but the Sergeant had already terminated the conversation and the display blinked out.

The Mongolian had gone white beneath his weathered skin. Not fear exactly. Recollection perhaps. Oshiro's eyes flicked to the long scar cutting across Ghan's cheek, pale against darker flesh. He realised where his passenger might have acquired the wound. He filed it away for future reference.

Oshiro gunned the ions and lifted the flitter into the air with a violent surge. The banshee wail of its siren cleared a path for the rapidly ascending vehicle as it reached one fifty in three seconds, pulling gees. The cockpit vibrated through his spine as acceleration jolted him in the harness. The city dropped away beneath them in a blur of wet neon.

They flew over Kodo province. Cops called it Hell's Trenches, and it had been written off as a no-go area. With the exception of the occasional foray by the two heavy armour squads, Fastrike and Tactical Justice. The only other police force to venture into Kodo was the Limitation Bureau.

The proximity alarm chimed softly from the central console and Oshiro took the flitter down hard into the ruby speckled trashtown of Brixton, landing out of range of the police cordon.

As they stepped out of the flitter, noise hit them first. A layered roar of voices, music, distant sirens, advertisement floaters buzzing somewhere overhead. They headed for the crowd that had flocked like carrion on the edges of the cordon, with bodies packed tight, drawn by the spectacle of death. The multicoloured nightlife was fractured in places by uniform blue and one familiar shard of black which Oshiro recognised as his friend and long-time partner.

"Well, if it isn't the Bureau's finest," Ghan said, voice dripping with contempt.

"Well, if it isn't the Bureau's sorriest excuse," Kade countered.

"Present company?" Oshiro asked.

Kade smiled at his old friend. "Maybe I was talking about you."

"I'm hurt," Oshiro said, placing a hand over his chest in mock pain.

"Don't be," Kade replied, flicking a glance at Ghan. "Sammy Ganja here would have to show considerable improvement to be the sorriest excuse. I guess it's possible that some of his shitmess is rubbing off on you."

Oshiro made a point of sniffing his clothes. "Nah, it still smells of you. One shift with Ghan ain't going to out stench fifteen years with you."

"Eau de Kade," Kade said, trying to sound like a cheap holovision ad. "Masculine and yet sensitive."

"Give me a break," Oshiro said. He nodded toward the club, its façade pulsing with erratic light, bass vibrations leaking into the street like a heartbeat. "You know this place?"

Kade grinned at his partner. "Old regular haunt of mine. Owned by the Triad." He realised that Oshiro needed a little more information. "The booze is rough. Some good-looking women and good SpeedJazz combos are its only pluses."

"I don't like SpeedJazz," Oshiro said.

"And you prefer your women ugly," Kade said.

"At least I actually have a woman."

"Hey, I've had a few dates recently."

“Yeah? I think I read your ad in the personals,” Oshiro said. “Full consciousness optional.”

Ghan let out a short, sharp laugh despite himself.

Oshiro licked a finger and scored himself yet another point in the never-ending tirade that passed between them. Outsiders listening to their frequent exchanges would wince at the severity of the vilification. Yet to these two men it was both familiar and comforting.

They had met fifteen years earlier in Africa as mercenaries while Kade was saving Oshiro’s life. The metaphorical IOU had changed hands a number of times since then and was getting distinctly grubby and tattered. Neither man was sure whose was the outstanding debt. Outsiders would say they loved each other like brothers. It was the clichéd view, and it was not true. The truth was they respected and trusted each other like soldiers. In their line of work the trust of a soldier was worth far more than the love of a brother.