

## CHAPTER 8

Kade watched Oshiro melt into the shadows, vanishing between barricades and service alleys, swallowed by flickering signage and drifting steam. It was only spotting with rain now, and the wind seemed to come rattling through the city canyons. He waited nine more minutes before pushing through a pair of Wild West style swing doors into the blue smoky interior of the club. He paused just inside, letting his eyes adjust. His right hand sat deep in his pocket, fingers brushing the cold curve of the Skorpion through the cut lining of his mac. His other hand hung loose and casual at his side.

He moved further into the club's interior, allowing his gaze to stray for a moment, hoping to catch a look. The sim would stand out marginally more than most of the clientele, but the place was heaving. It was impossible to see beyond the wall of people in his immediate vicinity. To his right was a long mirror-backed bar that spanned the length of the club, lined with customers.

A burst of music shot through the room. The Limiter turned towards its source, away to his left. A raised stage area soaked in cheap blue and red lighting with bare LEDS on strobe. It was from its grey concrete slab that SpeedJazz emanated. Cables snaked from the musicians into chrome ports buried in flesh. Accelerators pumped their systems far beyond safe thresholds. Sweat poured from them in sheets, their skin pale to the point of translucency. They were nearing the limit of their playing time. Any more than half an hour and tissue breakdown would be irreversible,

triggering the growth of hyper-tumours that could swell to the size of a tennis ball in minutes, causing massive haemorrhaging. However, professional players like the combos who appeared at the Jazz-Mine would always work with tissue monitors and relays. Accidents were rare, although he had once witnessed a deliberately induced Speed O.D. when he'd been on R+R in a crawlspace suicide dive out in the Junk Jungle on the edges of the West Mexican Landfills. The tumour had pushed the guy's eyes out onto his cheeks, the pulse of the brain behind it appearing to give it life, black blood pouring from his nose and mouth. It was a scene which had replayed itself whenever nightmares had burrowed through the walls of his sleep. Even so, he liked to listen to good SpeedJazz, but he didn't have the time to stop and listen to these guys.

He started to push through the crush of tables, the music pirouetting about his head, amphetamine arpeggios bouncing off the walls. The heat was stifling, and reefer smoke drifted up past him in thick swirls, narcotic ribbons heading for the ceiling where it hung in a pall of ganga cumulus. In this place even the moths got stoned while flitting round the lightstrips. He reached the bar and quickly checked the time. Ten minutes.

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Oshiro had reached the entrance at the back of the club. He took his hands out of his pockets. His palms were sweaty. He wiped them dry on his coat but within seconds they were wet and slimy again. He pulled his coat tighter round him. Wailing sirens interrupted his thoughts. A police flitter hovered overhead, its undercarriage lights

sweeping the alley in cold, surgical bands. He knew they were zeroing ID cams on him, the city frame pulling his face from its files, okaying him, floating back over the roof. The idea of bluesuits checking him out irked him. He could almost hear them saying *breed*.

He pushed open the rear door. It led to a narrow, black-painted corridor that ran on past the toilets and on to another red door that led into the club. He entered the cramped passageway and let the door shut behind him, leaning against it just long enough to breathe in a few lungfuls of air. Beyond the red door he could make out a muffled bass beat keeping perfect time to his thumping heart. He walked past the wedged-open door of the toilet where a quick glance got him an eyeful of a couple of stoned kids fucking. The guy had his back to Oshiro, trousers in a puddle of piss at his feet, while the girl's head bobbed over his shoulder, legs wrapped round him, her arse perched on the edge of a rickety washbasin. The guy was hooked up to a shiny new portable accelerator and giving it 200 bpm. She was sporting a tiny ampoule of sparkle on her left nostril, dripping slow feed into her system, this month's to-die-for drug accessory. The girl was so high she was hardly aware of speedy's enthusiastic performance, until he stopped abruptly and threw up on her.

*Parents must be proud of them*, Oshiro thought. He checked the cubicles. Only one occupied, stilettos in view. *Jesus, hairy ankles*.

He left the toilet and carried on down the corridor until he reached the red door. He checked the time, half a minute remaining. He waited and counted out the final thirty seconds before opening the door and stepping through into the club's interior.

The music struck him like a solid wall, and the heat was even worse. The air conditioning was shot to shit, and the draw-fog had descended from the ceiling and was settling in his lungs. It felt like he was smoking the world's biggest joint. He was beginning to feel woozy. He pushed through the crowd and saw his partner was already at the bar.

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Kade had drifted toward a small knot of bodies clustered along one edge of the bar. The group was made up of two men and three women, although the definition was moot. The two men had ink crawling up their throats and across their jawlines, intricate dragons and Hanzi tattooed into their pale skin. Triad, or at least something that wanted to be seen that way.

The nearest male was about five nine, dressed in a Maoist-style black uniform, a long, plaited ponytail of black hair hanging from beneath his faux coolie hat. Tucked into a crimson sash was a replica Mauser with laser internals. The woman he stood with had the same style ponytail, and if she was also dressed in a uniform, Kade couldn't tell because she was wearing a huge overcoat with a storm cape big enough to hide a laser cannon beneath it.

Next to her was the second woman, tall and skeletal with bleached hair cut blunt around a narrow skull. Her bodysuit was clear, double-layered. A thermo-spectral fluid sloshed between the membranes. When she saw Kade, it shimmered from amber to a deep arterial red as her temperature crept upward, mapping her emotion in colour.

The third woman was wearing a uni-sleeved half-jacket that progressed no further than a line of useless buttonholes, and denim jeans, the legs of which were completely detached and held up with antique-effect pewter and brass suspenders with a little bit of tanned skin in the gap.

Kade decided to approach the second male of the ensemble. This guy had obviously got his historical references all mixed up. He was dressed in a double-layer silk kimono patterned in archaic motifs. His head was shaved apart from a plume of hair in the centre of his scalp which was tied in a topknot. He had a short katana tucked into his waist sash and a twin-barrel Black Panther on his left hip. A sleek eye patch covered his right eye. A single scar that dissected the skin beneath proved it wasn't just a fashion accessory.

Kade stepped close enough to be heard without raising his voice. "You guys Triad?" he asked.

"Who wants to know?" the Triad asked.

Kade barked a short laugh, head tilting as though genuinely surprised. He glanced around, making a show of it. "Funny," he said. "I could have sworn it said the Jazz-Mine on the sign outside and not Clichéville." He flicked his wrist and activated his ID crystal. A holographic sigil bloomed between them. "He wants to know."

The man's gaze flickered over the projection. "Yeah," he said slowly. "We're Triad. What of it?"

"Triad are generally Chinese," Kade said. "You're dressed like a Japanese samurai."

"It's a fashion choice and not a cultural paradigm," the Triad said.

"Paradigm? You sure you're a Triad and not just an office worker playing dress-up?"

"I would be happy to show you, breed," the Triad said, caressing the handle of his blade and returning Kade's grin with what he imagined was a menacing smile.

"Listen, as much as I'd like to play pretend, I'm here for the sim," Kade said.

"Sim?"

"You know, mean motherfucker, this high, this wide," Kade said, sizing up something unfeasibly large with his hands. "Madder than a wasp in a bottle. I realise you cater for all sorts in here, but this guy should stand out just marginally more than you. You seen anyone who fits this description?"

"You got no jurisdiction here, breed," the Triad said, unfazed.

"My jurisdiction is wherever I am when I decide to start something," Kade said.

The Triad slid the katana free with a soft metallic whisper. He angled it just enough to catch the ceiling lights, letting reflections skate along its surface. "You start something here and I'll finish it."

"Let's hope the blade is sharper than your wit," Kade said.

The Triad's swept the sword up and back to strike. The Limiter took one step back out of the range of the blade's arc, at the same time pulling his pistol from its holster and poking it out from beneath his mac.

“I really wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Kade advised. He twitched the barrel at the sword and the Triad lowered the weapon slowly. Unwilling to relinquish it entirely, he began turning the blade, catching the light. Kade saw something in the other man’s eyes, a sudden distraction quickly masked, a sudden tension. It was enough to draw the Limiter’s curiosity. He studied the patterns of colour moving on the surface of the blade, the treachery of reflection confirming his suspicion.

He waited until the reflection shifted and blurred and then he twisted and dropped to the floor in one swift motion. The sim was almost on him when Kade’s Skorpion coughed in tight controlled bursts. His assailant danced like a bloody puppet as ten rounds shredded its face, twenty more opening up its chest, jerking it backwards, spraying ruby fluids across the bar and the mirrored wall. The sim fired three shots as it fell.

The first bullet snatched the Skorpion from Kade’s hand. He rolled sideways, feeling the wind from the other two slugs pass over him. The woman behind him in the thermal body suit let out a shocked cry and fell, her hands clutching her chest, blood pumping between her clenched fingers. She was hit twice, and her suit was already turning blue.

The cool blue of death.

The SpeedJazz players played on.

As Kade lunged to retrieve his weapon, he looked up and saw the Triad looming over him. The blade was already descending towards Kade’s head. Somewhere across the room he heard the dull pop of a pistol. The Triad’s hand burst apart mid-

swing. Flesh atomized and bone fragments snapped outward in a wet spray that glittered briefly in the light before spattering across the bar. The sword clanged to the floor at Kade's side. A voice cut through the smoke and noise, dry with amusement.

"Didn't your momma teach you not to play with knives?"

Oshiro stepped out of the press of bodies, calm as ever, his pistol still steady, tracking the wounded Triad.

And the band still played on.

Kade tried to catch his breath, gather his thoughts. His nerves were raw and the music wasn't helping him to focus his racing mind. He retrieved the skorpion and took aim at the amps, letting the pistol exhaust its ammo. The stacks burst open in showers of sparks and molten circuitry. Feedback screamed, then died. The smell of burning insulation filled the room, thick and choking.

Just then, several blue uniforms made a big show of bursting in and shooting up the ceiling. Ghan strolled in after them, looking like king shit. The Triad was there, nursing the bloody stump of his hand, blood pulsing between his fingers.

"Book him," Kade said to a blue suit. "Attempted murder of a Limiter."

Oshiro looked at the burnt-out amplifiers on the stage. "I thought you liked SpeedJazz."

"I didn't like the tune they were playing," Kade said. "Thanks for saving my ass. That was some shot through all those people."

“Was it?” Oshiro said wryly. “I was aiming at his head.” He slapped his partner’s open palm. “All yours.” He was passing the IOU back to his friend.

One of the beat cops stooped to the girl in the plastic thermo-suit and touched her neck. “This one’s wearing her own body bag,” he said.

Kade hunkered down beside him. “She caught the stray crossfire from the sim.”

“Like outside in the alley,” the cop said. “Wrong time, wrong place.”

Over by the stage, Oshiro was talking tough to one of the musicians who was complaining about having his amps shot up. Oshiro activated his Limiter ID crystal and said, “City ordinance #1357 states that the playing of musical instruments in the immediate vicinity of a near fatal incident is expressly forbidden.”

Kade couldn’t suppress a smile when he heard the musician say, “You just made that up.”

Oshiro touched a finger to his ear. “I didn’t quite catch that,” he said. “Did you say, I’m sorry, sir, it won’t happen again?”

The musician stared at him and then deflated. “Yeah,” he muttered. “That’s what I said.” He trudged away knowing it was hopeless to argue with a Limiter.

The morgue guys came into the club and bagged up the sim in a clear bag. Black bag, standard kill; clear bag, Limiter kill. Their trademark. Kade felt that brief swell of pride that he always felt seeing a body being zipped into a transparent bag. The crowd outside would see it come out. He could almost hear their whispered horror, the tourists’ eye-cams zooming in on blood-smeared plastic that distorted the already twisted features of a dead face, condensation of a cooling body breathing

mist onto the inside of the bag. It all added to the reputation, the legend of the Limitation Bureau, the breed. The wall of people silently moved aside as the body bag was carried out, as though by touching it they risked some virulent plague.

They were bagging up the girl. Kade stopped them. "What's this?" he challenged. "She's not a bureau kill. Put the amps in a clear bag if you like." He pointed to the stage area.

The two meat-wagon guys looked at him in disbelief. One of them said, "Who's gonna notice? Its extra credit for ya."

"I'll notice," Kade said. "You've got two choices. Black bag her or I'll gladly go out and get two clear bags for your own sorry asses."

Amid much muted grumbling, one of the meat-wagon guys went back for a black bag.

Ghan, lingering nearby, shook his head. "No respect for the sanctity of our profession," he grumbled. "We put our asses on the line for these people."

Kade waited until Ghan drifted out of earshot before leaning closer to Oshiro. "The only line Ghan's ass has ever been close to is the queue at Rosie's peep palace," he said. "He'll die quietly in his bed. No threat of a bullet ending his peaceful existence."

"Cut the guy some slack," Oshiro said. "It happens, you know. We saw it every day in Mexico. You lose your nerve and never get it back. You either keep your head down or lose it."

“Yeah, sure, but did you see the way he strolled in here?” Kade said. “Big brave man issuing orders like he’s in charge. Like he’s afraid of nothing.”

Several news crews shuffled through the crowd, floaters buzzing overhead with the corporation logos in bright relief against the black metalwork.

“Press is here,” Oshiro said. “He’s playing to the cameras.”

“Well, I don’t like the little shit and I don’t trust him,” Kade said. “Any opportunity to defile his character is an opportunity well spent.”

“It’s a good thing you have a worthwhile hobby,” Oshiro said.

One reporter thrust herself ahead of the throng and the floater followed, its phallic mic extended from its belly. It hovered inches from Ghan’s face, humming faintly.

“Excuse me, officer...” she began.

“Limiter Sumedho Ghan,” he snapped, cutting her off.

“Of course, Limiter Ghan,” she said, smile widening for the camera. “We understand a rogue faxsimulant killed several officers and a civilian outside the Jazz-Mine tonight. Can you tell our viewers what happened?”

“The sim took refuge in the club,” Ghan said, each word measured. He angled his face up, squinting into the floater’s lens. “The bureau was directed to engage. We responded immediately and the sim was terminated.”

The reporter seemed a little confused. “We were under the impression the Limiter involved in the termination was Daniel Kade.”

Ghan’s lip curled, almost imperceptibly. “Due to the incompetence of Limiter

Kade, the faxsimulant escaped containment in the first place. He is indirectly responsible for the deaths of those officers.” He gestured back toward the alley.

Before the final words had spilled from Ghan’s mouth, Oshiro had grabbed a handful of Kade’s mac but in the ensuing tug of war between Oshiro’s grip and Kade’s rage, the material lost.

Sensing something was about to happen, the crowd surrounding Ghan parted as Kade marched through. The Mongolian barely had time to register the threat before Kade’s fist crashed into his face. Blood spurted from Ghan’s nose like a geyser. He grunted in pain and fell to the floor.

The crowd surged inward now, drawn by the violence. Oshiro couldn’t see what was happening directly but he could watch the scene unfolding on one of the many screens around the bar, which flickered, then synchronised to the live feed from the hovering floaters. Kade’s face filled them all, multiplied across the room. Oshiro caught that telltale twitch of his partner’s eye, a look he had seen too many times.

“Shit,” he hissed, already pushing forward, forcing bodies aside.

Kade drew his skorpion and aimed it at a terrified Ghan sprawled on the floor.

“Kade, no!” Oshiro screamed as Kade pulled the trigger.

The crowd recoiled in a collective gasp, a wave of panic rolling backward. Someone cried out. The hum of the floaters deepened as they focused, devouring every moment.

The gun clicked impotently, its magazine spent. The scene froze like a cheap holo-drama.

Kade broke the silence. "Next time, Ghan, it'll be loaded."

Oshiro had reached his partner and was pulling him backwards, but it was too late. The floaters had captured the moment, the screens regurgitating the news item from every conceivable angle.

An image of the bloody prostrate Ghan as Kade aimed a pistol at the defenceless Limiter.

A look of terror.

A close-up of a finger as it squeezed the trigger.

Live news as it happens.

"Jesus, Kade. What the hell was that?" Oshiro asked.

"Tell me you wouldn't have done the same."

Oshiro would have liked to take the moral high ground, but in reality, he knew he would have punched Ghan out. Yet, he liked to think he had enough self-control not to draw his pistol on a fellow cop no matter how contemptible the man was.

"Ghan is a fucking asshole, but that stunt with the pistol was over the top," Oshiro said. "Every news station will be running that for the next 24 hours. I think you made your point. You scared him shitless. You scared *me* shitless too. I forgot that the pistol was empty."

Kade was white when he looked at his partner. "Thing is, I'd forgotten it was empty too."