

The sharp throbbing in Francisco Bastion's head synced with the heavy whump of the club's bass. He pushed through the crowd, every motion sending pain lancing along his nerves. Jaw set, he moved through the mass of scantily clad neon-panted ravers towards the back of the club. He slipped between two dancers to reach the velvet rope that separated.

"The jack, you doing Mac?" a lanky kid with green dreads and silver mirror glasses asked.

"Walking," Francisco said. He half turned towards the kid. Giving him a clear view of holster-slung gunslinger on his right leg."

"Crome, crome." The kid said. Francisco put his hand on one of the metal poles holding up the VIP rope, and the bouncer standing by a set of gunmetal stairs leading to the upper level made a point of turning in his direction. The bouncer was a huge man on his own, and that was accentuated by the massive pair of DL-Meca arms that he had replaced his won with. They were meant for industrial exosuits not human cyberware and the oversized arm made him look like a gorilla, an image he was apparently fond of because he wore a tank top emblazoned with a crown over the word "KONG." Francisco vaulted over the rope, and 'Kong' stepped towards him, rolling his shoulders.

"I'm expected," Francisco said in a momentary quiet before a bass drop crashed into his ears like a sledgehammer.

"Token?" 'Kong' said. Francisco reached into his jacket and pulled out a small silver disc and flipped it off his thumb to 'Kong.' His arm snapped up to catch it. Francisco noted they were overclocked. 'Kong' Held up the token between blocky metal fingers. His right eye turned blue, and he said.

"Got a petitioner here, one Davin Mellain." There was a pause. "Head up." 'Kong said. Looming over Francisco. Francisco stepped around 'Kong.' Kong grabbed his arm. "Hold up, gimme your Iron. Francisco slowly pulled his sidearm out of its holster and offered it to Kong, who took it. "Packing anything else?"

"No." 'Kong shoved Francisco back a step. His eyes glowed, dancing between blue and green as they drifted up and down Francisco. His brow furrowed. "Your chrome. What is it?"

"Deactivated and non-functional; I don't have the right parts anymore, that's why it looks jacked on your scan."

'Umhm.'" 'Kong folded his metal arms. "Don't make me come up there, you Ack?"

"Wilco," Francisco said with a mock salute and headed for the stairs. The respite from the constant pain granted by the rush of adrenalin faded quickly. *Almost over. He thought.* He climbed the stairs using the rail. At the top of the stairs was a door, the same black metal as the wall. It moved back and then slid aside as he approached. Francisco squinted against the bright light of the hallway beyond. He stepped inside; the hallway was done in faux Redwood, With the upper half of the walls split into panels adorned with attempts at traditional Japanese art ranging from tacky to bad. When the doorway closed behind him, the sudden relief from the music made him dizzy. He shook his head, and the spikes of pain racing up his neck were clarifying. At the end of the hall was another door painted to look like a traditional Japanese door. Francisco waited for it to open. It slid back, revealing a decent-sized office. It had bay windows overlooking the street, the attempt at rustic Japanese decor clashing with the brutalist neon sea outside. There were six punks standing around the room, each with FA-fleet machine pistols and

katanas. Fransico stepped into the room, focusing on the man behind the desk, which was the focal point of the room.

"Mr." The man looked down at a pad. "Mellen." He looked up, and Fransico nodded. The gangster drummed his fingers on his desk, then pressed his lips together in a frown. "You got my payment?" he waved at Francisco as he leaned back.

"Do you have what I am paying you for?" Fransico asked. The man laughed.

"Of course,"

"There is your answer."

"Oh? You are a mighty tough guy for a junkie. An odd one, too. You got the sweat for it, but you're a might less twitchy."

"I'm here on business. Mr?" Francisco asked.

"You may call me Laohu," he said. The word triggered Francisco's translation suit. Word blinked into existence on his tactical Eye display.

"Probability high--'Laohu'--Chinese/simplified=Tiger[Mispronounced]

"Mr Laohu," Fransico said. "And the next step in our business is for me to test what you got."

"So formal. Fine." he slapped a switch on his desk, and the windows tinted to a smooth black. Laohu reached down and pulled up a large pelican case. He placed it on the desk. Then spun it to face Fransico. He stood as he unlatched it and raised the lid. Inside was a white plastic seal running around the foam on the edge of the case with "Property of the US Government-Secret" Printed on it. Laohu smiled as he peeled the tab around the edge, a soft hiss of pressurized air accompanying it. "One case of whitecell as promised." Fransico stepped forward. Laohu held up his hand. "Ah, Ah, show me the pay first. You test, I count. Fair?" Fransico reached into his jacket. The goons around the room all pointed their weapons at him.

"And here I thought I was the tweaker," Fransico said, slowly drawing a thick leather envelope from his jacket. Laohu's eye twitched. Fransico tossed the pouch on the desk beside the case. Laohu pulled out a large microfiber cloth and spread it on the desk. He unzipped the leather envelope and poured out a cascade of tiny Gems. Fransico took one of the vials of white liquid out of the case and steeled himself. He sent the command to his arm, and the internal structure rearranged itself. The pain was exquisite as a panel on his arm opened, revealing a long, thin slot. He plugged the vial into it. His TED blinked

*Whitecell detected*

*Determining dose*

*Administering.*

A sudden lack of pain radiated from his arm, washing over him. The sudden relief made him shiver involuntarily. Laohu looked up from the gems. "Dosing already, are we? You must be a real fiend."

"You can shoot me if the count's wrong."

"Oh, I will." Laohu returned to running the gems through the scanner. A cascade of text spilled down Fransico's vision as systems long dormant booted to life. "You know whitecell is not your average street drug. It's preem stuff, expensive as dissent, and not much of a rush. Real odd request."

"You have your pay," Fransico said, reaching out to close the case.

"It's not made anymore, only produced by the old Union during the glorious revolution for their enhanced soldier programs.

"Fascinating."

"Used to call it Ketresel White, drew the nickname from some old show. A drug used to keep soldiers in line for a fascist government. Poetic, don't you think?"

"Is there a point to this, or do you have a problem with silence?" Francisco wasn't able to quite keep the venom out of his voice.

"That doesn't sound like someone in harmony with the new regime." Laohu sat back in his chair, resting his elbow on the arm, and tapped his lips with his pointer finger.

"You 're not exactly the spitting image of societal harmony yourself," Francisco said. Laohu smiled.

"A man comes to me looking for a designer drug used by the Union's Hanzers. Tests it not by scanning it, but by slotting it into a custom port and shooting up." He steepled his fingers. "A man who sounds like he has sympathies for that old Union. One might think that he is one of those dreaded Hanzers the new Regime is so keen on finding." Francisco sniffed.

"That is a hell of a conspiracy theory," Francisco said.

"Seems reasonable to me."

"Well, it's missing some key details for starters."

"Enlighten me."

"If such a man existed. He would be packed to the gills with crome, and not the shitty knock offs everyone prances around with today. Poorly reverse-engineered from the work of Doctor Sung Chong-Hui by 'scientists' with Half her brains and none of her vision. It would be generation 0-hand built by her for one purpose." Fransico glared at Laohu, who waited for him to continue.

"That being?" Laohu asked.

"Killing Motherjackers." the humor drained from Laohu's face.

"Was that a threat?" Laohu asked, his men again readying their weapons.

"It was a wild conspiracy theory spun by two businessmen shooting the shit while they wait for gems to get scanned." The room was filled with the staccato thumping of the club's bass. The scanner on Laohu's desk beeped. "Is the count right?" Fransico asked. Laohu looked down.

"Yes."

"Then have a good day, Mr. Laohu." Fransico grabbed the case and turned towards the door.

"Good luck, Mr. Bastion," Laohu said. Fransico froze in the doorway. He then turned back. He pressed the door close button and surreptitiously flipped the lock switch with his pinky.

"My name is Davin Mellain." Laohu's smug mask flickered with fear.

"My mistake, Mr. Mellain," Laohu said. Fransico shook his head. If Laohu knew his real identity. Then Laohu had been prepared. He only made the trade to extort extra cash from Fransico before turning him over. If he left now, Laohu would be on the holo with the Buro of dissident rehabilitation before the door closed behind him, and a death squad would be lying in ambush at his house before he left the club. He glanced at the computer. He wished he had a ghost rider to tell him how much Laohu actually knew, but his days of working with deck jockeys were well behind him.

"Damn it, Laohu," Fransico said as he set the case down.

"Take him. Laohu said. The punks again pointed their weapons at Fransisco.

"Hands on your head, and we won't have to kick the shit out of you." the nearest of the goons said. Fransisco walked towards him. "I mean it." The guy extended his arm with the flechette pistol. Fransisco grabbed it at the back by the power pack and squeezed the shielding buckled and burst, discharging with a high voltage pop causing a chain reaction in the explosive flechette; the whole magazine detonated with a sound like firecrackers shredding the goon's arm. Pain flashed and disappeared as his implants cut the connection to the synthetic skin that the blast had also torn apart. The other goons opened fire; Fransisco grabbed the wounded goon's arm with his bloodied hand, the dermal armor still very much intact, and yanked him between the storm of flechettes fired by the other punks as Fransisco tugged the Katana off of the unfortunate man's belt. His ally's flechettes ripped him apart with hundreds of micro detonations. They blew their magazines, and when the storm of fire stopped, Fransico shoved the body of his first target across the room. He slammed into one of the goons on the far side of the room, and his nearest friend staggered back in surprise, dropping the fresh magazine he was about to insert into his pistol; before the magazine had hit the floor, Fransico had reached the second of the three goons on his side of the room and disemboweled him. The last punk dropped his Flechet pistol with the magazine half inserted and drew his sword. The goon swung the Katana like a baseball bat. Fransico paired, sliding his blade down his opponent while pushing the blade down in a spin that sent the sword spinning out of the goon's hand. Fransico slashed him twice across the chest, one on the upstroke and again as he habitually returned to his guard.

"Kong, get up here!" Laohu screamed. Fransico swung the blade at him, but the gangster threw himself out of his chair, ducking under the sword. The rolling chair crashed into Fransico's legs, and he toppled over it. He made to roll to his feet, but Laohu's foot connected with his ribs and lifted him off the ground. He flew up and back, crashing into the chair, which shattered under his weight. The punk was chipped. Why hadn't he scanned him or any of them? Stupid, sloppy. Laohu ripped a gun out of one of the desk draws. Fransico hurled himself along the desk as the gaster fired. The first shot slammed into the remains of the chair, and the second splintered apart the corner of the desk. Fransisco used the sword to pull the half-loaded Flechet pistol towards him. He grabbed it and swung the sword up as Laohu came around the corner. The gangster jumped back, his shot going wide as he dodged the blade. A resounding clang signaled Kong's arrival at the locked door. Fransico lunged at Laohu as he slammed the magazine of the pistol home on his rising leg. Laohu dodged back again, but his foot caught on the mauled chair and fell back. Fransisco's blade caught Laohu in the solar plexus and drove through his back into the tempered glass, pinning him there. Laohu dropped the pistol and grabbed at the blade with a wet gasp.

"Laohu is Chinese, not Japanese, you ignorant Jack."

"It is..." His head slumped forward. The room was filled with the high-pitched squeal and firecracker pops of flechettes and the savage pounding of Kong at the door. The Flechetes ripped into Fransico's left side, and he raised his arm to protect his head. The cascade of tiny explosions fused the synthetic fibers of his jacket to the bloody remains of the skin on his right arm and side. When the storm subsided, he scoped up Laohu's pistol.

"That was my favorite jacket." Fransico fired three times, and three goons dropped. With a shrieking groan, the door gave way, the sheet of metal tumbling across the room. Fransisco

lunged out of the way, rolling behind the desk. He came back up. Kong had already crossed the room. He backhanded the gun out of Fransisco's hand as Kong's other fist sailed towards his head. Fransico made to dive behind the desk, but Kong snatched his leg and hurled him upwards. He crashed into the ceiling and then was yanked back down, slamming into the desk and reducing it to rubble. Impact light and stress warning icons appeared in his TED. Kon swung him by the leg, so he flew into the wall of the office. Pain shot from various internal systems and

"Concussion warning." Sounded in his ears. Kong's massive metal hand closed around his head. He flipped through the air, slammed into the wall on the far side of the room, and crashed to the floor. Kong panted heavily.

"Told you not to make me come up here," Kong said.

"Yeah, but you were a little late." Fransico pushed himself to his knees.

"I'll be damned. You're still alive? Must have some chrome under the hood.

"The best." Fransico coughed, blood splattered across his chin.

"Not good enough."

"We will see. I'm ready for you this time." Fransico whipped the blood off his chin with the back of his hand.

"So you are." Kong slammed a giant fist into a palm and bowed. Fransico made to mirror the gesture, but pain shot through his chest. He coughed up more blood as he straightened.

*Left lung collapse detected*

*Concussion detected*

*Internal bleeding detected*

Flashed across his TED as Kong walked towards him. He willed the warnings away and shut off all his internal monitoring systems except for pain. Kong's fist lashed out. Fransico juke to the left, throwing both arms up to deflect the right hook from the other side. He lashed out with his right arm, landing a back fist across Kong's Jaw. He staggered back with his guard up and reset. Fransico circled him as he took in wet, ragged breaths. Kong aimed two punches at Fransisco's head. He caught one with an outer block and the other with his hand. Kong Pressed, his servos whirring. His eyebrows shot up.

"Damn good chrome," Fransico responded by squeezing Kong's fist. The metal began to give. Kong's eyes went wide, and he jerked his fist free. Fransico took the window of imbalance to seize his other wrist, pinning it to his shoulder. He dropped his right side, throwing all his weight into an upward punch connected with Kong's hyperextended elbow. There was a hideous shriek of metal as it bowed in the wrong direction. Kong swung his good arm and landed a blow on Fransisco's Kidney. He jammed a snap kick from Kong's left. The giant rebounded and turned it into a roundhouse from the other side. Fransico blocked it with his forearms, but the force of the blow drove Fransisco onto the floor, which groaned in protest. Kong planted his foot on Fransico's chest, aiming a punch at Fransico's head. Fransico drove his fist into the interior of Kong's knee; he buckled and fell forward, sacrificing his punch to catch himself. Kong and

Fransico rool to their feet with their guards up. Kongs right leg shakes in his stance and he shifts his weight to his right. His Left arm moving in robotic jerks. Fransisco spits out a mouthful of blood. He swoons as a wave of vertigo washes over him. Kong lashes out with his good arm aiming again at Fransico's head. He blocks it with both hands and pulls as he falls to his knees. It's just enough to force Kong to shift his weight to his left leg. Fransico punches the

inside of Kong's knee again and it gives out. He goes to catch himself with his right. Just as his weight shifts Fransico drives his elbow into the interior of the joint with all his weight tumbling into a shoulder roll wich wipes out Kong's left leg and the giant faceplants. Fransico comes up and drops to one Knee on Kong's back, more out of dizziness than tactical intent. He grabs Kong's damaged arm, using the thumb as a fulcrum he extends it and then beguins to pound on the damaged joint. Once Twice, Three times. Metal screams and servows give off ticks and pangs. Biomech cables snap as Fransico grabs the arm and pulls for all he is worth. Kong screams as the arm comes apart at the elbow. Fansico fell back on his ass. He made to stand but vertigo draws him down to the floor. He groaned willing himself to roll. He gets on his shoulder waiting for Kong to finish him at any moment. Kong, crawled across the floor going towards Laohu's pistol. Fansico rolls on his stomach and turns his head. He then muls himself forward as his vision swam like he was looking trough a heat haze. He stretched out his arm and grabbed a flechet pistol. He turns twards Kong and aims. Kong already has Laohu's pistol but his oversized loader's finger cant fit in the trigger guard. He raises it and trys to pull off the guard with his teeth.

"Kong, you can die, or you can drop the girl." Kong raises his eyes to Fransico.

"Heh, you got my joke." He laughed which turned into a cough. Kong tossed the pistol away. Francisco enabled all his monitoring system and his TED turned into times square at christmas.

"Well..." Fransico lowered his head to the floor. "Unless you like soulless propaganda, you have to watch the classics."

"Too true."

"What do they call you?"

"You guessed it." Kong said. Fransico tried to laugh but all he got was a jittering weeze he took stock of his injuries which was summed up nicely in the blinking words.

"Organic System damage at 72%

Already his whitecell levels were nearly zero. Drained from constructing the nannite necessary to repair those organic systems. The dizzynys cleared and he hauled himself to his knees. Casting about for the pelican case that was the cause of all his woes.

"At least I am going to get killed by a fellow Cinimafile. Hey, but tell me who the hell are you with, Bochelli's boys? The Irish?"

"I am not with anyone." Fransico said. He pulled himself over to the case and started unlocking it.

"Bullshit, crome like that? You have to be backed by someone. Hell, why else would you wipe out a Yakuza den?"

"Better question would be if I was backed by somebody why would I wipe out a Yakuza den. You guys are the biggest game in the whole damn city. Other than the megacorporations that is. Not one player on the stage who could win a war against you or even want to." Fransico ejected the empty cartridge and inserted a fresh one.

"True, basically recruit anyone these days."

"That how you come by chinese tigers?" Kongh let out a short laugh.

"Noticed that did ya?"

“How did that guy wind