

The bullshit, it was endless. I hadn't had a very good night and was in no mood to watch it get worse. I didn't move right away—assholes twitched, assholes always thought it was harder to hit a moving target and they thrashed around constantly. I knew better. I wasn't the oldest person in the room for nothing. With his heavy hand on my shoulder, gripping tightly, trying to be intimidating, I took a few seconds to take in my surroundings.

I saw it all — every face, every position, every table, chair, or pile of rubble they were sitting on. I saw the twitchy augmented security—illegal muscles with its own alien IQ layered all over their bodies—making sure no one got crazy. I saw the red-eyed beggars eager to drain the dregs from an abandoned cup. I saw it all and fixed it in my mind, even the Monks. The Monks with their creepy plastic faces and mirrored glasses were always in these places. They were supposed to be immortal—humans who'd signed up to have their brains placed in advanced cyborg bodies, in order to pray for eternity or some such shit, and by the looks of them they believed it. Three of them were working the tables, scanning faces and talking to people about death and sin and forever.

I dismissed them; I'd heard of people messing with the Tin Men and finding out they were dangerous, vague stories of a guy who knew a guy who'd tried to rob a Monk in a dark alley and lost his arm for his trouble, or stories of people going to sleep after a bender and waking up Monked against their will the next morning—there was so much bullshit, you didn't know what to believe, and I didn't have time to figure it out now. I didn't know whether to believe their spiel about “salvation through eternity” either. I figured it was best to just give them a wide berth and hope they never scanned *my* face.

I had the layout fixed in a moment: thirteen tables, approximately three hundred people crowded into the space, one narrow, inconvenient exit guarded by security. Probably a hidden escape-hole for the proprietors, too. The security guys weren't much better than the customers, skillwise. One on one I wouldn't have much trouble with them, but with a crowd and narrow doorways, they'd be trouble enough. This was why I was still alive. Most people in my line of business, they just blazed away—all muscle and ammo. No research. No patience—they lived and died by their reflexes. Especially if their reflexes were augmented with black-market gene splices.

Me, I was *tired*. I was old school. I liked to use my brain a little.

I shifted to the left just a tick, brought the cup up, and splashed gin into the big guy's eyes, and knew I'd hit the mark from the sudden squeak of surprise. I spun left and his knife flashed into the empty space in front of him. I slapped out my hand and took him by the wrist, firmly, and stood up, rolling his arm behind him as I moved, something popping loudly in his shoulder as he dropped the blade with a clatter onto the floor. I kicked at it and it disappeared, most likely plucked cleanly off the floor as it skidded by some enterprising criminal. From the look of his expensive clothes, my admirer either was rich, worked for someone rich, or was a System Security Force officer. But System Pigs didn't need to hire guys to arrange murders; they just showed up, pinched you, and shot you in the head in some deserted alleyway, usually after emptying your pockets. This guy, from what I remembered when he'd hired me a few days before, didn't talk rich. He was just a middleman who'd come up in the world.

Now I had leverage, and I used it to slam him face-first onto the table. No one else sitting around me had moved. I leaned down, smothering him, and chanced a look up. Security was just starting for me, a little slow. Fuckheads. You couldn't find good help these days. I thought, *I could kill this bastard six times before you made it to me, assholes*. Keeping my eyes on security, I put my mouth into his ear. "You owe me fifteen thousand yen, motherfucker."