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opening extract from

Virtual Kombat

written by

Chris Bradford

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Bread

My eyes are glued to the fight.

Thunderbolt has just knocked his opponent's front teeth out. Reeling from the blow, Destroid spits blood. Then, like a bull, the US heavyweight boxer charges at Thunderbolt. An anvil-sized fist lands squarely in the Thai kickboxer's gut. Thunderbolt crumples. Next, an upper hook catches him on the chin. His whole body flips high into the air, before landing in a dazed pile in the centre of the Battle-rena.

The crowd jeer and shout.

I hold my breath. Thunderbolt was favourite to win this match.

Destroid, raising both his fists, slams them together like two massive sledgehammers. It's all over. No one survives Destroid's trademark Killing Strike – the Skullcrusher.

The 3D Streetscreen switches to a red-and-black logo in armoured lettering:



A deep-throated voice growls, 'VIRTUAL KOMBAT. SO REAL IT HURTS.'

An advert comes on. 'SYNAPSE DRINKS SPONSORS VK –' I switch off. It'll only make me want what I can't have.

The fight over, the street kids disperse.

Drifting into the side alleys with the rest of the windblown rubbish that pollutes this city. Unwanted. Ignored. Forgotten.

And I'm one of them.

I lost my parents in the pandemic of 2030. A killer virus. It wiped out millions. Didn't seem to affect kids, though. At one point, scientists thought *we* were the carriers. Some parents even dumped their *own* children. No one wanted us. Now there are thousands of us orphans on the streets.

The whole world went to pot. Then the army took over and martial law brought order to the place. After that, people rarely ventured out. Even though the virus had run its course, the adults were still scared they might catch something. Most escaped life online. That's when VK came on the scene. People needed

an outlet – something to funnel all their anger and despair into.

VIRTUAL KOMBAT THE MOST REALISTIC FIGHTING GAME EVER!

That's what the ad says anyway. It's *the* Number 1 entertainment show. Everyone either watches or plays.

A *Zing* energy bar hangs in 3D over my head. I turn away. It's torture.

But the massive neon Streetscreens are everywhere in this city. Like sickly suns that never set.

The VK theme – a blast of horns and pounding drums – signals the commercial break over. The logo returns. The voice is

back too: 'THE ULTIMATE FIGHTING EXPERIENCE. WHERE EVERY ENEMY HAS A MIND OF ITS OWN.'

Two image-enhanced presenters appear on the screen, flashing their crystal-white teeth. Highlight Time – today's Killing Strikes all analysed in glorious ten-storey-high detail. Heads decapitated, limbs crushed, kombatants killed.

The leaderboard flashes up. Destroid's jumped one place. Thunderbolt's name is eliminated.

VIRTUAL KOMBAT. SO REAL IT HURTS.

The only thing hurting me at the moment is my stomach. I haven't eaten in days. VK's a

distraction from the hunger. When the show's on, you don't think about it so much. But afterwards, the clenching emptiness grips once more.

I can't face the reruns and head up a narrow backstreet. There are dumpbins down here, behind the restaurants of the rich and mighty. They still go out. That's if you count sealed MPVs, air-conditioned walkways and dome-malls as outside.

If I'm lucky, I might find a few scraps thrown out by the chefs.

'Hand it over!'

In the darkness up ahead, I see two lads standing over a little girl and boy.

The girl shakes her blonde head, clutching a brown paper bag closer to her chest. The taller of the two lads slaps her hard across

the face and snatches the bag from her grasp.

She doesn't cry. The streets are tough. But even from here I can see the red welt of a handprint on her cheek.

'Leave me sis alone,' says the boy, boldly stepping between them. 'Give that back. It's *ours*!'

'Finders keepers, losers weepers,' taunts the other lad. A stocky teen with dark-red hair. He shoves the boy to the ground, laughing as the kid cracks his head on the kerb.

'You won't believe this, Juice,' says the taller lad, his eyes lighting up with pleasure. 'They got bread.'