Altered Carbon

Richard Morgan

‘His mastery of the SF thriller has brought a well deserved new kudos to the genre’ Peter F Hamilton
Sample Chapters from

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RICHARD MORGAN

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Two hours before dawn I sat in the peeling kitchen and smoked one of Sarah’s cigarettes, listening to the maelstrom and waiting. Millsport had long since put itself to bed, but out in the Reach currents were still snagging on the shoals, and the sound came ashore to prowl the empty streets. There was a fine mist drifting in from the whirlpool, falling on the city like sheets of muslin and fogging the kitchen windows.

Chemically alert, I inventoried the hardware on the scarred wooden table for the fiftieth time that night. Sarah’s Heckler & Koch shard pistol glinted dully at me in the low light, the butt gaping open for its clip. It was an assassin’s weapon, compact and utterly silent. The magazines lay next to it. She had wrapped insulating tape around each one to distinguish the ammunition; green for sleep, black for the spider venom load. Most of the clips were black-wrapped. Sarah had used up a lot of green on the security guards at Gemini Biosys the previous night.

My own contributions were less subtle. The big silver Smith & Wesson, and the four remaining hallucinogen grenades. The thin crimson line around each canister seemed to sparkle slightly, as if it were about to detach itself from the metal casing and float up to join the curlicues of smoke ribboning off my cigarette. Shift and slide of altered significants, the side effect of the tetrameth I’d scored that afternoon down at the wharf. I don’t usually smoke when I’m straight, but for some reason the tet always triggers the urge.

Against the distant roar of the maelstrom I heard it. The hurrying strop of rotorblades on the fabric of the night.

I stubbed out the cigarette, mildly unimpressed with myself, and went through to the bedroom. Sarah was sleeping, an assembly of low-frequency sine curves beneath the single sheet. A raven sweep of hair covered her face and one long-fingered hand trailed over the side of the bed. As I stood looking at her the night outside split. One of Harlan’s World’s orbital guardians test-firing into the Reach. Thunder from the concussed sky rolled in to rattle the windows. The woman in the bed stirred and swept the hair out of her eyes. The liquid crystal gaze found me and locked on.

‘What’re you looking at?’ Voice husky with the residue of sleep.

I smiled a little.

‘Don’t give me that shit. Tell me what you’re looking at.’

‘Just looking. It’s time to go.’

She lifted her head and picked up the sound of the helicopter. The sleep slid away from her face and she sat up in bed.

‘Where’s the ’ware?’

It was a Corps joke. I smiled, the way you do when you see an old friend, and pointed to the case in the corner of the room.

‘Get my gun for me.’

‘Yes ma’am. Black or green?’

‘Black. I trust these scumbags about as far as a clingfilm condom.’

In the kitchen, I loaded up the shard pistol, cast a glance at my own weapon and left it lying there. Instead, I scooped up one of the H grenades and took it back in my other hand. I paused in the doorway to the bedroom and weighed the two pieces of hardware in each palm as if I was trying to decide which was the heavier.

‘A little something with your phallic substitute, ma’am?’
Sarah looked up from beneath the hanging sickle of black hair over her forehead. She was in the midst of pulling a pair of long woollen socks up over the sheen of her thighs.

‘Yours is the one with the long barrel, Tak.’
‘Size isn’t—’

We both heard it at the same time. A metallic double clack from the corridor outside. Our eyes met across the room and for a quarter second I saw my own shock mirrored there. Then I was tossing the loaded shard gun to her. She put up one hand and took it out of the air just as the whole of the bedroom wall caved in in thunder. The blast knocked me back into a corner and onto the floor.

They must have located us in the apartment with body-heat sensors, then mined the whole wall with limpets. Taking no chances this time. The commando that came through the ruined wall was stocky and insect-eyed in full gas attack rig, hefting a snub-barrelled Kalashnikov in gloved hands.

Ears ringing, still on the floor, I flung the H grenade up at him. It was unfused, useless in any case against the gas mask, but he didn’t have time to identify the device as it spun at him. He batted it off the breech of his Kalashnikov and stumbled back, eyes wide behind the glass panels of the mask.

‘Fire in the hole.’

Sarah was down on the floor beside the bed, arms wrapped around her head and sheltered from the blast. She heard the shout and in the seconds the bluff had bought us she popped up again, shard gun outflung. Beyond the wall I could see figures huddled against the expected grenade blast. I heard the mosquito whine of monomolecular splinters across the room as she put three shots into the lead commando. They shredded invisibly through the attack suit and into the flesh beneath. He made a noise like someone straining to lift something heavy as the spider venom sank its claws into his nervous system. I grinned and started to get up.

Sarah was turning her aim on the figures beyond the wall when the second commando of the night appeared braced in the kitchen doorway and hosed her away with his assault rifle.

Still on my knees, I watched her die with chemical clarity. It all went so slowly it was like a video playback on frame advance. The commando kept his aim low, holding the Kalashnikov down against the hyper-rapid-fire recoil it was famous for. The bed went first, erupting into gouts of white goosedown and ripped cloth, then Sarah, caught in the storm as she turned. I saw one leg turned to pulp below the knee, and then the body hits, bloody fistfuls of tissue torn out of her pale flanks as she fell through the curtain of fire.

I reeled to my feet as the assault rifle stammered to a halt. Sarah had rolled over on her face, as if to hide the damage the shells had done to her, but I saw it all through veils of red anyway. I came out of the corner without conscious thought, and the commando was too late to bring the Kalashnikov around. I slammed into him at waist height, blocked the gun and knocked him back into the kitchen. The barrel of the rifle caught on the door jamb and he lost his grip. I heard the weapon clatter to the ground behind me as we hit the kitchen floor. With the speed and strength of the tetrameth I scrambled astride him, batted aside one flailing arm and seized his head in both hands. Then I smashed it against the tiles like a coconut.

Under the mask, his eyes went suddenly unfocused. I lifted the head again and smashed it down again, feeling the skull give soggily with the impact. I ground down against the crunch, lifted and smashed again. There was a roaring in my ears like the maelstrom and somewhere I could hear my own voice screaming obscenities. I was
going for a fourth or fifth blow when something kicked me between the shoulder blades and splinters jumped magically out of the table leg in front of me. I felt the sting as two of them found homes in my face.

For some reason the rage puddled abruptly out of me. I let go of the commando’s head almost gently and was lifting one puzzled hand to the pain of the splinters in my cheek when I realised I had been shot, and that the bullet must have torn all the way through my chest and into the table leg. I looked down, dumbfounded, and saw the dark red stain inking its way out over my shirt. No doubt about it. An exit hole big enough to take a golf ball.

With the realisation came the pain. It felt as if someone had run a steel-wool pipe-cleaner briskly through my chest cavity. Almost thoughtfully, I reached up, found the hole and plugged it with my two middle fingers. The finger tips scraped over the roughness of torn bone in the wound, and I felt something membranous throb against one of them. The bullet had missed my heart. I grunted and attempted to rise, but the grunt turned into a cough and I tasted blood on my tongue.

‘Don’t you move, motherfucker.’

The yell came out of a young throat, badly distorted with shock. I hunched forward over my wound and looked back over my shoulder. Behind me in the doorway, a young man in a police uniform had both hands clasped around the pistol he had just shot me with. He was trembling visibly. I coughed again and turned back to the table.

The Smith & Wesson was at eye level, gleaming silver, still where I had left it less than two minutes before. Perhaps it was that, the scant shavings of time that had been planed off since Sarah was alive and all was well, that drove me. Less than two minutes ago I could have picked up the gun, I’d even thought about it, so why not now. I gritted my teeth, pressed my fingers harder into the hole in my chest and staggered upright. Blood spattered warmly against the back of my throat. I braced myself on the edge of the table with my free hand and looked back at the cop. I could feel my lips peeling back from the clenched teeth in something that was more a grin than a grimace.

‘Don’t make me do it, Kovacs.’

I got myself a step closer to the table and leaned against it with my thighs, breath whistling through my teeth and bubbling in my throat. The Smith & Wesson gleamed like fool’s gold on the scarred wood. Out in the Reach power lashed down from an orbital and lit the kitchen in tones of blue. I could hear the maelstrom calling.

‘I said don’t—’

I closed my eyes and clawed the gun off the table.
PART ONE: ARRIVAL

(Needlecast Download)
CHAPTER ONE

Coming back from the dead can be rough.

In the Envoy Corps they teach you to let go before storage. Stick it in neutral and float. It’s the first lesson and the trainers drill it into you from day one. Hard-eyed Virginia Vidaura, dancer’s body poised inside the shapeless Corps coveralls as she paced in front of us in the induction room. Don’t worry about anything, she said, and you’ll be ready for it. A decade later, I met her again, in a holding pen at the New Kanagawa justice facility. She was going down for eighty to a century; excessively armed robbery and organic damage. The last thing she said to me when they walked her out of the cell was: ‘Don’t worry kid, they’ll store it.’ Then she bent her head to light a cigarette, drew the smoke hard into lungs she no longer gave a damn about and set off down the corridor as if to a tedious briefing. From the narrow angle of vision afforded me by the cell gate, I watched the pride in that walk and I whispered the words to myself like a mantra.

Don’t worry, they’ll store it. It was a superbly double-edged piece of street wisdom. Bleak faith in the efficiency of the penal system, and a clue to the elusive state of mind required to steer you past the rocks of psychosis. Whatever you feel, whatever you’re thinking, whatever you are when they store you, that’s what you’ll be when you come out. With states of high anxiety, that can be a problem. So you let go. Stick it in neutral. Disengage and float.

If you have time.

I came thrashing up out of the tank, one hand plastered across my chest searching for the wounds, the other clutching at a non-existent weapon. The weight hit me like a hammer and I collapsed back into the floatation gel. I flailed with my arms, caught one elbow painfully on the side of the tank and gasped. Gobbets of gel poured into my mouth and down my throat. I snapped my mouth shut and got a hold on the hatch coaming, but the stuff was everywhere. In my eyes, burning my nose and throat, and slippery under my fingers. The weight was forcing my grip on the hatch loose, sitting on my chest like a high-g manoeuvre, pressing me down into the gel. My body heaved violently in the confines of the tank. Floatation gel? I was drowning.

Abruptly, there was a strong grip on my arm and I was hauled coughing into an upright position. At about the same time I was working out there were no wounds in my chest, someone wiped a towel roughly across my face and I could see. I decided to save that pleasure for later and concentrated on getting the contents of the tank out of my nose and throat. For about half a minute I stayed sitting, head down, coughing out the gel and trying to work out why everything weighed so much.

‘So much for training.’ It was a hard, male voice, the sort that habitually hangs around justice facilities. ‘What did they teach you in the Envoy anyway, Kovacs?’

That was when I had it. On Harlan’s World, Kovacs is quite a common name. Everyone knows how to pronounce it. This guy didn’t. He was speaking a stretched form of the Amanglic they use on the World, but even allowing for that he was mangling the name badly, and the ending came out with a hard ‘k’ instead of the slavic ‘ch’.

And everything was too heavy.

The realisation came through my fogged perceptions like a brick through frosted plate glass.

Offworld.
Somewhere along the line, they’d taken Takeshi Kovacs (d.h.), and they’d freighted him. And since Harlan’s World was the only habitable biosphere in the Glimmer system, that meant a stellar range needlecast to—

Where?

I looked up. Harsh neon tubes set in a concrete roof. I was sitting in the opened hatch of a dull metal cylinder, looking for all the world like an ancient aviator who’d forgotten to dress before climbing aboard his biplane. The cylinder was one of a row of about twenty backed up against the wall, opposite a heavy steel door which was closed. The air was chilly and the walls unpainted. Give them their due, on Harlan’s World at least the re-sleeving rooms are decked out in pastel colours and the attendants are pretty. After all, you’re supposed to have paid your debt to society. The least they can do is give you a sunny start to your new life.

Sunny wasn’t in the vocabulary of the figure before me. About two metres tall, he looked as if he’d made his living wrestling swamp panthers before the present career opportunity presented itself. Musculature bulged on his chest and arms like body armour and the head above it was cropped close to the skull, revealing a long scar like a lightning strike down to the left ear. He was dressed in a loose black garment with epaulettes and a diskette logo on the breast. His eyes matched the garment and watched me with hardened calm. Having helped me sit up, he had stepped back out of arm’s reach, as per the manual. He’d been doing this a long time.

I pressed one nostril closed and snorted tank gel out of the other.

‘Want to tell me where I am? Itemise my rights, something like that?’

‘Kovacs, right now you don’t have any rights.’

I looked up and saw that a grim smile had stitched itself across his face. I shrugged and snorted the other nostril clean.

‘Want to tell me where I am?’

He hesitated a moment, glanced up at the neon-barred roof as if to ascertain the information for himself before he passed it on, and then mirrored my shrug.

‘Sure. Why not? You’re in Bay City, pal. Bay City, Earth.’ The grimace of a smile came back. ‘Home of the Human Race. Please enjoy your stay on this most ancient of civilised worlds. Ta-dada-DAH.’

‘Don’t give up the day job,’ I told him soberly.

The doctor led me down a long white corridor whose floor bore the scuff marks of rubber-wheeled gurneys. She was moving at quite a pace and I was hard pressed to keep up, wrapped as I was in nothing but a plain grey towel and still dripping tank gel. Her manner was superficially bedside, but there was a harried undercurrent to it. She had a sheaf of curling hardcopy documentation under her arm and other places to be. I wondered how many sleevings she got through in a day.

‘You should get as much rest as you can in the next day or so,’ she recited. ‘There may be minor aches and pains, but this is normal. Sleep will solve the problem. If you have any recurring comp—’

‘I know. I’ve done this before.’

I wasn’t feeling much like human interaction. I’d just remembered Sarah.

We stopped at a side door with the word shower stencilled on frosted glass. The doctor steered me inside and stood looking at me for a moment.

‘I’ve used showers before as well,’ I assured her.

She nodded. ‘When you’re finished, there’s an elevator at the end of the corridor. Discharge is on the next floor. The, ah, the police are waiting to talk to you.’
The manual says you’re supposed to avoid strong adrenal shocks to the newly sleeved, but then she’d probably read my file and didn’t consider meeting the police much of an event in my lifestyle. I tried to feel the same.

‘What do they want?’

‘They didn’t choose to share that with me.’ The words showed an edge of frustration that she shouldn’t have been letting me see. ‘Perhaps your reputation precedes you.’

‘Perhaps it does.’ On an impulse, I flexed my new face into a smile. ‘Doctor, I’ve never been here before. To Earth, I mean. I’ve never dealt with your police before. Should I be worried?’

She looked at me, and I saw it welling up in her eyes; the mingled fear and wonder and contempt of the failed human reformer.

‘With a man like you,’ she managed finally, ‘I would have thought they would be the worried ones.’

‘Yeah, right,’ I said quietly.

She hesitated, then gestured. ‘There is a mirror in the changing room,’ she said, and left. I glanced towards the room she had indicated, not sure I was ready for the mirror yet.

In the shower I whistled away my disquiet tunelessly and ran soap and hands over the new body. My sleeve was in his early forties, Protectorate standard, with a swimmer’s build and what felt like some military custom carved onto his nervous system. Neurochemical upgrade, most likely. I’d had it myself, once. There was a tightness in the lungs that suggested a nicotine habit and some gorgeous scarring on the forearm, but apart from that I couldn’t find anything worth complaining about. The little twinges and snags catch up with you later on and if you’re wise, you just live with them. Every sleeve has a history. If that kind of thing bothers you, you line up over at Syntheta’s or Fabrikon. I’ve worn my fair share of synthetic sleeves; they use them for parole hearings quite often. Cheap, but it’s too much like living alone in a draughty house, and they never seem to get the flavour circuits right. Everything you eat ends up tasting like curried sawdust.

In the changing cubicle I found a neatly folded summer suit on the bench, and the mirror set in the wall. On top of the pile of clothes was a simple steel watch, and weighted beneath the watch was a plain white envelope with my name written neatly across it. I took a deep breath and went to face the mirror.

This is always the toughest part. Nearly two decades I’ve been doing this, and it still jars me to look into the glass and see a total stranger staring back. It’s like pulling an image out of the depths of an autostereogram. For the first couple of moments all you can see is someone else looking at you through a window frame. Then, like a shift in focus, you feel yourself float rapidly up behind the mask and adhere to its inside with a shock that’s almost tactile. It’s as if someone’s cut an umbilical cord, only instead of separating the two of you, it’s the otherness that has been severed and now you’re just looking at your reflection in a mirror.

I stood there and towelled myself dry, getting used to the face. It was basically Caucasian, which was a change for me, and the overwhelming impression I got was that if there was a line of least resistance in life, this face had never been along it. Even with the characteristic pallor of a long stay in the tank, the features in the mirror managed to look weather-beaten. There were lines everywhere. The thick cropped hair was black shot through with grey. The eyes were a speculative shade of blue, and there was a faint jagged scar under the left one. I raised my left forearm and looked at the story written there, wondering if the two were connected.

Well, you’re on Earth now. Most ancient of civilised worlds. I shrugged and scanned the letter, then got dressed and folded it away in the jacket of my new suit. With a final glance in the mirror, I strapped on the new watch and went out to meet the police.

It was four-fifteen, local time.

The doctor was waiting for me, seated behind a long curve of reception counter and filling out forms on a monitor. A thin, severe-looking man suited in black stood at her shoulder. There was no one else in the room.

I glanced around, then back at the suit.
‘You the police?’
‘Outside.’ He gestured at the door. ‘This isn’t their jurisdiction. They need a special brief to get in here. We have our own security.’
‘And you are?’
He looked at me with the same mixture of emotions the doctor had hit me with downstairs. ‘Warden Sullivan, chief executive for Bay City Central, the facility you are now leaving.’
‘You don’t sound delighted to be losing me.’
Sullivan pinned me with a stare. ‘You’re a recidivist, Kovacs. I never saw the case for wasting good flesh and blood on people like you.’
I touched the letter in my breast pocket. ‘Lucky for me Mr Bancroft disagrees with you. He’s supposed to be sending a limousine for me. Is that outside as well?’
‘I haven’t looked.’
Somewhere on the counter, a protocol chime sounded. The doctor had finished her inputting. She tore the curling edge of the hardcopy free, initialled it in a couple of places and passed it to Sullivan. The warden bent over the paper, scanning it with narrowed eyes before he scribbled his own signature and handed the copy to me.
‘Takeshi Lev Kovacs,’ he said, mispronouncing my name with the same skill as his minion in the tank room. ‘By the powers vested in me by the UN Justice Accord, I discharge you on lease to Laurens J. Bancroft, for a period not to exceed six weeks, at the end of which time your parole status will be reconsidered. Please sign here.’
I took the pen and wrote my name in someone else’s handwriting next to the warden’s finger. Sullivan separated the top and bottom copies, and handed me the pink one. The doctor held up a second sheet and Sullivan took it.
‘This is a doctor’s statement certifying that Takeshi Kovacs (d.h.) was received intact from the Harlan’s World Justice Administration, and subsequently sleeved in this body. Witnessed by myself, and closed circuit monitor. A disc copy of the transmission details and tank data are enclosed. Please sign the declaration.’
I glanced up and searched in vain for any sign of the cameras. Not worth fighting about. I scribbled my new signature a second time.
‘This is a copy of the leasing agreement by which you are bound. Please read it carefully. Failure to comply with any of its articles may result in you being returned to storage immediately to complete the full term of your sentence either here, or at another facility of the Administration’s choice. Do you understand these terms and agree to be bound by them?’
I took the paperwork and scanned rapidly through it. It was standard stuff. A modified version of the parole agreement I’d signed half a dozen times before on
Harlan’s World. The language was a bit stiffer, but the content was the same. Bullshit by any other name. I signed it without a blink.

‘Well then.’ Sullivan seemed to have lost a bit of his iron. ‘You’re a lucky man, Kovacs. Don’t waste the opportunity.’

Don’t they ever get tired of saying it?

I folded up my bits of paper without speaking and stuffed them into my pocket next to the letter. I was turning to leave when the doctor stood up and held out a small white card to me.

‘Mr Kovacs.’

I paused.

‘There shouldn’t be any major problems with adjusting,’ she said. ‘This is a healthy body, and you are used to this. If there is anything major. Call this number.’

I put out an arm and lifted the little rectangle of card with a machined precision that I hadn’t noticed before. The neurachem was kicking in. My hand delivered the card to the same pocket as the rest of the paperwork and I was gone, crossing the reception and pushing open the door without a word. Ungracious maybe, but I didn’t think anyone in that building had earned my gratitude yet.

You’re a lucky man, Kovacs. Sure. A hundred and eighty light years from home, wearing another man’s body on a six-week rental agreement. Freighted in to do a job that the local police wouldn’t touch with a riot prod. Fail and go back into storage. I felt so lucky I could have burst into song as I walked out the door.
CHAPTER TWO

The hall outside was huge, and all but deserted. It looked like nothing so much as the Millsport rail terminal back home. Beneath a tilted roof of long transparent panels, the fused glass paving of the floor shone amber in the afternoon sun. A couple of children were playing with the automatic doors at the exit, and there was a solitary cleaning robot sniffing along in the shade at one wall. Nothing else moved. Marooned in the glow on benches of old wood, a scattering of humanity waited in silence for friends or family to ride in from their altered carbon exiles.

Download Central.

These people wouldn’t recognise their loved ones in their new sleeves; recognition would be left to the homecomers, and for those who awaited them the anticipation of reunion would be tempered with a cool dread at what face and body they might have to learn to love. Or maybe they were a couple of generations down the line, waiting for relatives who were no more to them now than a vague childhood memory or a family legend. I knew one guy in the Corps, Murakami, who was waiting on the release of a great-grandfather put away over a century back. Was going up to Newpest with a litre of whisky and a pool cue for homecoming gifts. He’d been brought up on stories of his great-grandfather in the Kanagawa pool halls. The guy had been put away before Murakami was even born.

I spotted my reception committee as I went down the steps into the body of the hall. Three tall silhouettes were gathered around one of the benches, shifting restlessly in the slanting rays of sunlight and creating eddies in the dust motes that floated there. A fourth figure sat on the bench, arms folded and legs stretched out. All four of them were wearing reflective sunglasses that at a distance turned their faces into identical masks.

Already on course for the door, I made no attempt to detour in their direction and this must have occurred to them only when I was halfway across the hall. Two of them drifted over to intercept me with the easy calm of big cats that had been fed recently. Bulky and tough-looking with neatly groomed crimson mohicans, they arrived in my path a couple of metres ahead, forcing me either to stop in turn or cut an abrupt circle around them. I stopped. Newly arrived and newly sleeved is the wrong state to be in if you plan to piss off the local militia. I tried on my second smile of the day.

‘Something I can do for you?’

The older of the two waved a badge negligently in my direction, then put it away as if it might tarnish in the open air.

‘Bay City police. The lieutenant wants to talk to you.’ The sentence sounded bitten off, as if he was resisting the urge to add some epithet to the end of it. I made an attempt to look as if I was seriously considering whether or not to go along with them, but they had me and they knew it. An hour out of the tank, you don’t know enough about your new body to be getting into brawls with it. I shut down my images of Sarah’s death and let myself be shepherded back to the seated cop.

The lieutenant was a woman in her thirties. Under the golden discs of her shades, she wore cheekbones from some Amerindian ancestor and a wide slash of a mouth that was currently set in a sardonic line. The sunglasses were jammed on a nose you could have opened cans on. Short, untidy hair framed the whole face, stuck up in spikes at the front. She had wrapped herself in an outsize combat jacket but the long, black-encased legs that protruded from its lower edge were a clear hint of the lithe
body within. She looked up at me with her arms folded on her chest for nearly a minute before anyone spoke.

‘It’s Kovacs, right?’

‘Yes.’

‘Takeshi Kovacs?’ Her pronunciation was perfect. ‘Out of Harlan’s World? Millsport via the Kanagawa storage facility?’

‘Tell you what, I’ll just stop you when you get one wrong.’

There was a long, mirror-lensed pause. The lieutenant unfolded fractionally and examined the blade of one hand.

‘You got a licence for that sense of humour, Kovacs?’

‘Sorry. Left it at home.’

‘And what brings you to Earth?’

I gestured impatiently. ‘You know all this already, otherwise you wouldn’t be here. Have you got something to say to me, or did you just bring these kids along for educational purposes?’

I felt a hand fasten on my upper arm and tensed. The lieutenant made a barely perceptible motion with her head and the cop behind me let go again.

‘Cool down, Kovacs. I’m just making conversation here. Yeah, I know Laurens Bancroft sprung you. Matter of fact, I’m here to offer you a lift up to the Bancroft residence.’ She sat forward suddenly, and stood up. On her feet she was almost as tall as my new sleeve. ‘I’m Kristin Ortega, Organic Damage Division. Bancroft was my case.’

‘Was?’

She nodded. ‘Case is closed, Kovacs.’

‘Is that a warning?’

‘No, it’s just the facts. Open-and-shut suicide.’

‘Bancroft doesn’t seem to think so. He claims he was murdered.’

‘Yeah, so I hear.’ Ortega shrugged. ‘Well, that’s his prerogative. I guess it might be difficult for a man like that to believe he’d blow his own head clean off.’

‘A man like what?’

‘Oh come—’ She stopped herself and gave me a small smile. ‘Sorry, I keep forgetting.’

‘Forgetting what?’

Another pause, but this time Kristin Ortega seemed to be off balance for the first time in our brief acquaintance. There was hesitancy blurring her tone when she spoke again. ‘You’re not from here.’

‘So?’

‘So anyone from here would know what kind of man Laurens Bancroft is. That’s all.’

Fascinated at why someone would lie so ineptly to a total stranger, I tried to put her back at her ease. ‘A rich man,’ I hazarded. ‘A powerful man.’

She smiled thinly. ‘You’ll see. Now do you want this lift or not?’

The letter in my pocket said a chauffeur would be outside the terminal to pick me up. Bancroft had made no mention of the police. I shrugged.

‘I’ve never turned down a free ride yet.’

‘Good. Then shall we go?’

They flanked me to the door and stepped out ahead like body-guards, heads tilted back and lensed eyes scanning. Ortega and I stepped through the gap together and the warmth of the sunlight hit me in the face. I screwed up my new eyes against the glare and made out angular buildings behind real wire fences on the other side of a badly-
kept landing lot. Sterile, and off-white, quite possibly original pre-millennial structures. Between the oddly monochrome walls, I could see sections of a grey iron bridge that came vaulting in to land somewhere hidden from view. A similarly drab collection of sky and ground cruisers sat about in not particularly neat lines. The wind gusted abruptly and I caught the faint odour of some flowering weed growing along the cracks in the landing lot. In the distance was the familiar hum of traffic, but everything else felt like a period drama set piece.

‘... and I tell you there is only one judge! Do not believe the men of science when they tell you...’

The squawk of the poorly operated ampbox hit us as we went down the steps from the exit. I glanced across the landing area and saw a crowd assembled around a black-clad man on a packing crate. Holographic placards wove erratically in the air above the heads of the listeners. NO TO RESOLUTION 653!! ONLY GOD CAN RESURRECT!! D.H.F. = D.E.A.T.H. Cheers drowned out the speaker.

‘What’s this?’

‘Catholics,’ said Ortega, lip curling. ‘Old-time religious sect.’

‘Yeah? Never heard of them.’

‘No. You wouldn’t have. They don’t believe you can digitise a human being without losing the soul.’

‘Not a widespread faith then.’

‘Just on Earth,’ she said sourly. ‘I think the Vatican - that’s their central church - financed a couple of cryoships to Starfall and Latimer—’

‘I’ve been to Latimer. I never ran into anything like this.’

‘The ships only left at the turn of the century, Kovacs. They won’t get there for a couple more decades yet.’

We skirted the gathering, and a young woman with her hair pulled severely back thrust a leaflet at me. The gesture was so abrupt that it tripped my sleeve’s unsettled reflexes and I made a blocking motion before I got it under control. Hard-eyed, the woman stood with the leaflet out and I took it with a placating smile.

‘They have no right,’ the woman said.

‘Oh, I agree...’

‘Only the Lord our God can save your soul.’

‘I—’ But by this time Kristin Ortega was steering me firmly away, one hand on my arm, in a manner that suggested a lot of practice. I shook her off politely but equally firmly.

‘Are we in some kind of hurry?’

‘I think we both have better things to do, yes,’ she said, tight lipped, looking back to where her colleagues were engaged in fending off leaflets of their own.

‘I might have wanted to talk to her.’

‘Yeah? Looked to me like you wanted to throat-chop her.’

‘That’s just the sleeve. I think it had some neurachem conditioning way back when, and she tripped it. You know, most people lie down for a few hours after downloading. I’m a little on edge.’

I stared at the leaflet in my hands. CAN A MACHINE SAVE YOUR SOUL? it demanded of me rhetorically. The word ‘machine’ had been printed in script designed to resemble an archaic computer display. ‘Soul’ was in flowing stereographic letters that danced all over the page. I turned over for the answer.

NO!!!!

‘So cryogenic suspension is okay, but digitised human freight isn’t. Interesting.’ I looked back at the glowing placards, musing. ‘What’s Resolution 653?’
‘It’s a test case going through the UN Court,’ said Ortega shortly. ‘Bay City public prosecutor’s office want to subpoena a Catholic who’s in storage. Pivotal witness. The Vatican say she’s already dead and in the hands of God. They’re calling it blasphemy.’

‘I see. So your loyalties are pretty undivided here.’

She stopped and turned to face me.

‘Kovacs, I hate these goddamn freaks. They’ve been grinding us down for the best part of two and a half thousand years. They’ve been responsible for more misery than any other organisation in history. You know they won’t even let their adherents practise birth control, for Christ’s sake, and they’ve stood against every significant medical advance of the last five centuries. Practically the only thing you can say in their favour is that this d.h.f. thing has stopped them from spreading with the rest of humanity.’

My lift turned out to be a battered but undeniably rakish-looking Lockheed-Mitoma transport decked out in what were presumably police colours. I’d flown Lock-Mits on Sharya, but they’d been a dull radar-reflective black all over. The red and white stripes on this one looked garish by comparison. A pilot in sunglasses to match the rest of Ortega’s little gang sat motionless in the cockpit. The hatch into the belly of the cruiser was already hinged up. Ortega banged on the hatch coaming as we climbed aboard and the turbines awoke with a whispery sound.

I helped one of the mohicans manhandle the hatch down, steadied myself against the lift of the cruiser and found my way to a window seat. As we spiralled up, I craned my neck to keep the crowd below in sight. The transport straightened out about a hundred metres up and dropped its nose slightly. I sank back into the arms of the automould and found Ortega watching me.

‘Still curious huh?’ she said.

‘I feel like a tourist. Answer me a question?’

‘If I can.’

‘Well, if these guys don’t practise birth control, there’s got to be an awful lot of them, right. And Earth isn’t exactly a hive of activity these days, so . . . Why aren’t they running things?’

Ortega and her men swapped a set of unpleasant smiles. ‘Storage,’ said the mohican on my left.

I slapped myself on the back of the neck, and then wondered if the gesture was in use here. It’s the standard site for a cortical stack, after all, but then cultural quirks don’t always work like that.

‘Storage. Of course.’ I looked around at their faces. ‘There’s no special exemption for them?’

‘Nope.’ For some reason, this little exchange seemed to have made us all buddies. They were relaxing. The same mohican went on to elaborate. ‘Ten years or three months, it’s all the same to them. A death sentence every time. They never come off stack. It’s cute, huh?’

I nodded. ‘Very tidy. What happens to the bodies?’

The man opposite me made a throwaway gesture. ‘Sold off, broken down for transplants. Depends on the family.’

I turned away and stared out of the window.

‘Something the matter, Kovacs?’

I faced Ortega with a fresh smile gripping my face. It felt as if I was getting quite good at them.

‘No, no. I was just thinking. It’s like a different planet.’
That cracked them up.

Suntouch House

October 2nd

Takeshi-san,

When you receive this letter, you will doubtless be somewhat disoriented. I offer my sincere apologies for this, but I have been assured that the training you underwent with the Envoy Corps should enable you to deal with the situation. Similarly, I assure you that I would not have subjected you to any of this had my own situation not been desperate.

My name is Laurens Bancroft. Coming as you do from the colonies, this may not mean anything to you. Suffice it to say that I am a rich and powerful man here on Earth, and have made many enemies as a result. Six weeks ago I was murdered, an act which the police, for reasons of their own, have chosen to regard as suicide. Since the murderers ultimately failed I can only assume that they will try again and, in view of the police attitude, they may well succeed.

Clearly you will wonder what all this has to do with you and why you have been dragged a hundred and eighty-six light years out of storage to deal with such a local matter. I have been advised by my lawyers to retain a private investigator, but owing to my prominence in the global community, I am unable to trust anyone I could engage locally. I was given your name by Reileen Kawahara, for whom I understand you did some work on New Beijing eight years ago. The Envoy Corps were able to locate you in Kanagawa within two days of my requesting your whereabouts, though in view of your discharge and subsequent activities they were unable to offer any kind of operational guarantees or pledges. It is my understanding that you are your own man.

The terms under which you have been released are as follows: You are contracted to work for me for a period of six weeks with an option for me to renew at the end of that time should further work be necessary. During this time I shall be responsible for all reasonable expenses incurred by your investigation. In addition, I shall cover the cost of sleeve rental for this period. In the event that you conclude the investigation successfully, the remainder of your storage sentence at Kanagawa - one hundred and seventeen years and four months - will be annulled and you will be refreighted to Harlan’s World for immediate release in a sleeve of your own choosing. Alternatively, I undertake to pay off the balance of the mortgage on your current sleeve here on Earth and you may become a naturalised UN citizen. In either case the sum of one hundred thousand UN dollars, or equivalent, will be credited to you.

I believe these terms to be generous but I should add that I am not a man to be trifled with. In the event that your investigation fails and I am killed, or that you attempt to in any way escape or evade the terms of your contract, the sleeve lease will be terminated immediately and you will be returned to storage to complete your sentence here on Earth. Any further legal penalties that you incur may be added to that sentence. Should you choose not to accept my contract from the outset, you will also be returned to storage immediately, though I cannot undertake to refreight you to Harlan’s World in this case.

I am hopeful that you will see this arrangement as an opportunity, and agree to work for me. In anticipation of this, I am sending a driver to collect you from the
storage facility. His name is Curtis and he is one of my most trusted employees. He will be waiting for you in the release hall.
I look forward to meeting you at Suntouch House.
Yours sincerely,

Laurens J. Bancroft.
CHAPTER THREE

Suntouch House was aptly named. From Bay City we flew south down the coast for about half an hour before the change in engine pitch warned me that we were approaching our destination. By that time the light through the right side windows was turning warm gold with the sun’s decline towards the sea. I peered out as we started to descend and saw how the waves below were molten copper and the air above pure amber. It was like landing in a jar of honey.

The transport sideslipped and banked, giving me a view of the Bancroft estate. It edged in from the sea in neatly manicured tones of green and gravel around a sprawling tile-roofed mansion big enough to house a small army. The walls were white, the roofing coral and the army, if it existed, was out of sight. Any security systems Bancroft had installed were very low-key. As we came lower I made out the discreet haze of a power fence along one border of the grounds. Barely enough to distort the view from the house. Nice.

Less than a dozen metres up over one of the immaculate lawns the pilot kicked in the landing brake with what seemed like unnecessary violence. The transport shuddered from end to end and we came down hard amidst flying clods of turf.

I shot Ortega a reproachful look which she ignored. She threw open the hatch and climbed out. After a moment I joined her on the damaged lawn. Prodding at the torn grass with the toe of one shoe, I shouted over the sound of the turbines. ‘What was that all about? You guys pissed off with Bancroft just because he doesn’t buy his own suicide?’

‘No.’ Ortega surveyed the house in front of us as if she was thinking of moving in. ‘No, that’s not why we’re pissed off with Mr Bancroft.’

‘Care to tell me why?’

‘You’re the detective.’

A young woman appeared from the side of the house, tennis racket in hand, and came across the lawn towards us. When she was about twenty metres away, she stopped, tucked the racket under her arm and cupped her hands to her mouth. ‘Are you Kovacs?’

She was beautiful in a sun, sea and sand sort of way and the sports shorts and leotard she was wearing displayed the fact to maximal effect. Golden hair brushed her shoulders as she moved and the shout gave away a glimpse of milk white teeth. She wore sweat bands at forehead and wrists and from the dew on her brow they were not for show. There was finely toned muscle in her legs and a substantial bicep stood out when she lifted her arms. Exuberant breasts strained the fabric of the leotard. I wondered if the body was hers.

‘Yes,’ I called back. ‘Takeshi Kovacs. I was discharged this afternoon.’

‘You were supposed to be met at the storage facility.’ It was like an accusation. I spread my hands.

‘Well, I was.’

‘Not by the police.’ She stalked forward, eyes mostly on Ortega. ‘You. I know you.’

‘Lieutenant Ortega,’ said Ortega, as if she was at a garden party. ‘Bay City, Organic Damage Division.’

‘Yes. I remember now.’ The tone was distinctly hostile. ‘I assume it was you who arranged for our chauffeur to be pulled over on some trumped-up emissions charge.’
‘No, that would be Traffic Control, ma’am,’ said the detective politely. ‘I have no jurisdiction in that division.’

The woman in front of us sneered.
‘Oh, I’m sure you haven’t, lieutenant. And I’m sure none of your friends work there either.’ The voice turned patronising. ‘We’ll have him released before the sun goes down, you know.’

I glanced sideways to see Ortega’s reaction, but there was none. The hawk profile remained impassive. Most of me was preoccupied with the other woman’s sneer. It was an ugly expression, and one that belonged on an altogether older face.

Back up by the house there were two large men with automatic weapons slung over their shoulders. They had been standing under the eaves watching since we arrived, but now they ambled out of the shade and began to make their way in our direction. From the slight widening of the young woman’s eyes I guessed that she had summoned them on an internal mike. Slick. On Harlan’s World people are still a bit averse to sticking racks of hardware into themselves, but it looked as if Earth was going to be a different proposition.

‘You are not welcome here, lieutenant,’ said the young woman in a freezing voice.
‘Just leaving, ma’am,’ said Ortega heavily. She clapped me unexpectedly on the shoulder and headed back to the transport at an easy pace. Halfway there she suddenly stopped and turned back.
‘Here, Kovacs. Almost forgot. You’ll need these.’

She dug in her breast pocket and tossed me a small packet. I caught it reflexively and looked down. Cigarettes.
‘Be seeing you.’

She swung herself aboard the transport and slammed the hatch. Through the glass I saw her looking at me. The transport lifted on full repulse, pulverising the ground beneath and ripping a furrow across the lawn as it swung west towards the ocean. We watched it out of sight.

‘Charming,’ said the woman beside me, largely to herself.
‘Mrs Bancroft?’

She swung around. From the look on her face, I wasn’t much more welcome here than Ortega had been. She had seen the lieutenant’s gesture of camaraderie and her lips twitched with disapproval.

‘My husband sent a car for you, Mr Kovacs. Why didn’t you wait for it?’

I took out Bancroft’s letter. ‘It says here the car would be waiting for me. It wasn’t.’

She tried to take the letter from me and I lifted it out of her reach. She stood facing me, flushed, breasts rising and falling distractingly. When they stick a body in the tank, it goes on producing hormones pretty much the way it would if you were asleep. I became abruptly aware that I was swinging a hard-on like a filled fire hose.
‘You should have waited.’

Harlan’s World, I remembered from somewhere, has gravity at about 0.8g. I suddenly felt unreasonably heavy again. I pushed out a compressed breath.

‘Mrs Bancroft, if I’d waited, I’d still be there now. Can we go inside?’

Her eyes widened a little, and I suddenly saw in them how old she really was. Then she lowered her gaze and summoned composure. When she spoke again, her voice had softened.

‘I’m sorry, Mr Kovacs. I’ve forgotten my manners. The police, as you see, have not been sympathetic. It’s been very upsetting, and we all still feel a little on edge. If you can imagine—’
‘There’s no need to explain.’
‘But I am very sorry. I’m not usually like this. None of us are.’ She gestured around as if to say that the two armed guards behind her would ordinarily have been bearing garlands of flowers. ‘Please accept my apologies.’
‘Of course.’
‘My husband’s waiting for you in the seaward lounge. I’ll take you to him immediately.’

The inside of the house was light and airy. A maid met us at the veranda door and took Mrs Bancroft’s tennis racket for her without a word. We went down a marbled hallway hung with art that, to my untutored eye, looked old. Sketches of Gagarin and Armstrong, Empathist renderings of Konrad Harlan and Angin Chandra. At the end of this gallery, set on a plinth, was something like a narrow tree made out of crumbling red stone. I paused in front of it and Mrs Bancroft had to backtrack from the left turn she was making.
‘Do you like it?’ she asked.
‘Very much. This is from Mars, isn’t it.’
Her face underwent a change that I caught out of the corner of my eye. She was reassessing. I turned for a closer look at her face.
‘I’m impressed,’ she said.
‘People often are. Sometimes I do handsprings too.’
She looked at me narrowly. ‘Do you really know what this is?’
‘Frankly, no. I used to be interested in structural art. I recognise the stone from pictures, but . . .’
‘It’s a Songspire.’ She reached past me and let her fingers trail down one of the upright branches. A faint sighing awoke from the thing and a perfume like cherries and mustard wafted into the air.
‘Is it alive?’
‘No one knows.’ There was a sudden enthusiasm in her tone that I liked her better for. ‘On Mars they grow to be a hundred metres tall, sometimes as wide as this house at the root. You can hear them singing for kilometres. The perfume carries as well. From the erosion patterns, we think that most of them are at least ten thousand years old. This one might only have been around since the founding of the Roman empire.’
‘Must have been expensive. To bring it back to Earth, I mean.’
‘Money wasn’t an object, Mr Kovacs.’ The mask was back in place. Time to move on.

We made double time down the left-hand corridor, perhaps to make up for our unscheduled stop. With each step Mrs Bancroft’s breasts jiggled under the thin material of the leotard and I took a morose interest in the art on the other side of the corridor. More Empathist work, Angin Chandra with her slender hand resting on a thrusting phallus of a rocket. Not much help.

The seaward lounge was built on the end of the house’s west wing. Mrs Bancroft took me into it through an unobtrusive wooden door and the sun hit us in the eyes as soon as we entered.
‘Laurens. This is Mr Kovacs.’
I lifted a hand to shade my eyes and saw that the seaward lounge had an upper level with sliding glass doors that accessed a balcony. Leaning on the balcony was a man. He must have heard us come in; come to that, he must have heard the police cruiser arrive and known what it signified, but still he stayed where he was, staring out to sea.
Coming back from the dead sometimes makes you feel that way. Or maybe it was just arrogance. Mrs Bancroft nodded me forward and we went up a set of stairs made from the same wood as the door. For the first time I noticed that the walls of the room were shelved from top to bottom with books. The sun was laying an even coat of orange light along their spines.

As we came out onto the balcony, Bancroft turned to face us. There was a book in his hand, folded closed over his fingers.

‘Mr Kovacs.’ He transferred the book so that he could shake my hand. ‘It’s a pleasure to meet you at last. How do you find the new sleeve?’

‘It’s fine. Comfortable.’

‘Yes, I didn’t involve myself too much in the details, but I instructed my lawyers to find something . . . suitable.’ He glanced back, as if looking for Ortega’s cruiser on the horizon. ‘I hope the police weren’t too officious.’

‘Not so far.’

Bancroft looked like a Man Who Read. There’s a favourite experia star on Harlan’s World called Alain Marriott, best known for his portrayal of a virile young Quellist philosopher who cuts a swathe through the brutal tyranny of the early Settlement years. It’s questionable how accurate this portrayal of the Quellists is, but it’s a good flic. I’ve seen it twice. Bancroft looked a lot like an older version of Marriott in that role. He was slim and elegant with a full head of iron grey hair which he wore back in a ponytail, and hard black eyes. The book in his hand and the shelves around him were like an utterly natural extension of the powerhouse of a mind that looked out from those eyes.

Bancroft touched his wife on the shoulder with a dismissive casualness that in my present state made me want to weep.

‘It was that woman, again,’ said Mrs Bancroft. ‘The lieutenant.’

Bancroft nodded. ‘Don’t worry about it, Miriam. They’re just sniffing around. I warned them I was going to do this, and they ignored me. Well, now Mr Kovacs is here, and they’re finally taking me seriously.’

He turned to me. ‘The police have not been very helpful to me over this matter.’

‘Yeah. That’s why I’m here, apparently.’

We looked at each other while I tried to decide if I was angry with this man or not. He’d dragged me halfway across the settled universe, dumped me into a new body and offered me a deal that was weighted so I couldn’t refuse. Rich people do this. They have the power and they see no reason not to use it. Men and women are just merchandise, like everything else. Store them, freight them, decant them. Sign at the bottom please.

On the other hand, no one at Suntouch House had mispronounced my name yet, and I didn’t really have a choice. And then there was the money. A hundred thousand UN was about six or seven times what Sarah and I had expected to make on the Millsport wetware haul. UN dollars, the hardest currency there was, negotiable on any world in the Protectorate.

That had to be worth keeping your temper for.

Bancroft gave his wife another casual touch, this time on her waist, pushing her away.

‘Miriam, could you leave us alone for a while. I’m sure Mr Kovacs has endless questions, and it’s likely to be boring for you.’

‘Actually, I’m likely to have some questions for Mrs Bancroft as well.’
She was already on her way back inside, and my comment stopped her in mid-stride. She cocked her head at an angle, and looked from me to Bancroft and back. Beside me, her husband stirred. This wasn’t what he wanted.

‘Maybe I could speak to you later,’ I amended. ‘Separately.’

‘Yes, of course.’ Her eyes met mine, then danced aside. ‘I’ll be in the chart room, Laurens. Send Mr Kovacs along when you’ve finished.’

We both watched her leave, and when the door closed behind her Bancroft gestured me to one of the lounge chairs on the balcony. Behind them, an antique astronomical telescope stood levelled at the horizon, gathering dust. Looking down at the boards under my feet, I saw they were worn with use. The impression of age settled over me like a cloak, and I lowered myself into my chair with a tiny frisson of unease.

‘Please don’t think of me as a chauvinist, Mr Kovacs. After nearly two hundred and fifty years of marriage, my relationship with Miriam is more politeness than anything. It really would be better if you spoke to her alone.’

‘I understand.’ That was shaving the truth a bit, but it would do.

‘Would you care for a drink? Something alcoholic?’

‘No thank you. Just some fruit juice, if you have it.’ The shakiness associated with downloading was beginning to assert itself, and in addition there was an unwelcome scratchiness in my feet and fingers which I assumed was nicotine dependency. Apart from the odd cigarette bummed from Sarah, I’d been quit for the last two sleeves and I didn’t want to have to break the habit all over again. Alcohol on top of everything would finish me.

Bancroft folded his hands in his lap. ‘Of course. I’ll have some brought up. Now, where would you like to begin?’

‘Maybe we should start with your expectations. I don’t know what Reileen Kawahara told you, or what kind of profile the Envoy Corps has here on Earth, but don’t expect miracles from me. I’m not a sorcerer.’

‘I’m aware of that. I have read the Corps literature carefully. And all Reileen Kawahara told me was that you were reliable, if a trifle fastidious.’

I remembered Kawahara’s methods, and my reactions to them. Fastidious. Right. I gave him the standard spiel anyway. It felt funny, pitching for a client who was already in. Felt funny to play down what I could do, as well. The criminal community isn’t long on modesty, and what you do to get serious backing is inflate whatever reputation you may already have. This was more like being back in the Corps. Long polished conference tables and Virginia Vidaura ticking off the capabilities of her team.

‘Envoy training was developed for the UN colonial commando units. That doesn’t mean . . .’

Doesn’t mean every Envoy is a commando. No, not exactly, but then what is a soldier anyway? How much of special forces training is engraved on the physical body and how much in the mind? And what happens when the two are separated?

Space, to use a cliché, is big. The closest of the Settled Worlds is fifty light years out from Earth. The most far-flung four times that distance, and some of the Colony transports are still going. If some maniac starts rattling tactical nukes, or some other biosphere-threatening toys, what are you going to do? You can transmit the information, via hyperspatial needlecast, so close to instantaneously that scientists are still arguing about the terminology but that, to quote Quellcrist Falconer, deploys no bloody divisions. Even if you launched a troop carrier the moment the shit hit the fan, the marines would be arriving just in time to quiz the grandchildren of whoever won.

That’s no way to run a Protectorate.
OK, you can digitise and freight the minds of a crack combat team. It’s been a long time since weight of numbers counted for much in a war, and most of the military victories of the last half millennium have been won by small, mobile guerrilla forces. You can even decant your crack d.h.f. soldiers directly into sleeves with combat conditioning, jacked-up nervous systems and steroid built bodies. Then what do you do?

They’re in bodies they don’t know, on a world they don’t know, fighting for one bunch of total strangers against another bunch of total strangers over causes they’ve probably never even heard of and certainly don’t understand. The climate is different, the language and culture is different, the wildlife and vegetation is different, the atmosphere is different. Shit, even the gravity is different. They know nothing, and even if you download them with implanted local knowledge, it’s a massive amount of information to assimilate at a time when they’re likely to be fighting for their lives within hours of sleeving.

That’s where you get the Envoy Corps.

Neurachem conditioning, cyborg interfaces, augmentation - all this stuff is physical. Most of it doesn’t even touch the pure mind, and it’s the pure mind that gets freighted. That’s where the Corps started. They took psychospiritual techniques that oriental cultures on Earth had known about for millennia and distilled them into a training system so complete that on most worlds graduates of it were instantly forbidden by law to hold any political or military office.

Not soldiers, no. Not exactly.

‘I work by absorption,’ I finished. ‘Whatever I come into contact with, I soak up, and I use that to get by.’

Bancroft shifted in his seat. He wasn’t used to being lectured. It was time to start.

‘Who found your body?’

‘My daughter, Naomi.’

He broke off as someone opened the door in the room below. A moment later, the maid who had attended Miriam Bancroft earlier came up the steps to the balcony bearing a tray with a visibly chilled decanter and tall glasses. Bancroft was wired with internal tannoy, like everyone else at Suntouch House it seemed.

The maid set down her tray, poured in machine-like silence and then withdrew on a short nod from Bancroft. He stared after her blankly for a while.

Back from the dead. It’s no joke.

‘Naomi,’ I prompted him gently. ‘She barged in here, wanting something. Probably the keys to one of the limos. I’m an indulgent father, I suppose, and Naomi is my youngest.’

‘How young?’

‘Twenty-three.’

‘Do you have many children?’

‘Yes, I do. Very many.’ Bancroft smiled faintly. ‘When you have leisure and wealth, bringing children into the world is a pure joy. I have twenty-seven sons and thirty-four daughters.’

‘Do they live with you?’

‘Naomi does, most of the time. The others come and go. Most have families of their own now.’

‘How is Naomi?’ I stepped my tone down a little. Finding your father without his head isn’t the best way to start the day.

‘She’s in psychosurgery,’ said Bancroft shortly. ‘But she’ll pull through. Do you need to talk to her?’
‘Not at the moment.’ I got up from the chair and went to the balcony door. ‘You say she barged in here. This is where it happened?’

‘Yes.’ Bancroft joined me at the door. ‘Someone got in here and took my head off with a particle blaster. You can see the blast mark on the wall down there. Over by the desk.’

I went inside and down the stairs. The desk was a heavy mirrorwood item - they must have freighted the gene code from Harlan’s World and cultured the tree here. That struck me as almost as extravagant as the Songspire in the hall, and in slightly more questionable taste. On the World mirrorwood grows in forests on three continents, and practically every canal dive in Millsport has a bar top carved out of the stuff. I moved past it to inspect the stucco wall. The white surface was furrowed and seared black with the unmistakable signature of a beam weapon. The burn started at head height and followed a short arc downwards.

Bancroft had remained on the balcony. I looked up at his silhouetted face. ‘This is the only sign of gunfire in the room?’

‘Yes.’

‘Nothing else was damaged, broken or disturbed in any way?’

‘No. Nothing.’ It was clear that he wanted to say more, but he was keeping quiet until I’d finished.

‘And the police found the weapon beside you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you own a weapon that would do this?’

‘Yes. It was mine. I keep it in a safe under the desk. Handprint coded. They found the safe open, nothing else removed. Do you want to see inside it?’

‘Not at the moment, thank you.’ I knew from experience how difficult mirrorwood furniture is to shift. I turned up one corner of the woven rug under the desk. There was an almost invisible seam in the floor beneath. ‘Whose prints will open this?’

‘Miriam’s and my own.’

There was a significant pause. Bancroft sighed, loud enough to carry across the room. ‘Go on, Kovacs. Say it. Everyone else has. Either I committed suicide or my wife murdered me. There’s just no other reasonable explanation. I’ve been hearing it since they pulled me out of the tank at Alcatraz.’

I looked elaborately round the room before I met his eyes. ‘Well, you'll admit it makes for easier police work,’ I said. ‘It’s nice and neat.’

He snorted, but there was a laugh in it. I found myself beginning to like this man despite myself. I went back up, stepped out onto the balcony and leaned on the rail. Outside a black-clad figure prowled back and forth across the lawn below, weapon slung at port. In the distance the power fence shimmered. I stared in that direction for a while.

‘It’s asking a lot to believe that someone got in here, past all the security, broke into a safe only you and your wife had access to and murdered you, without causing any disturbance. You’re an intelligent man, you must have some reason for believing it.’

‘Oh, I do. Several.’

‘Reasons the police chose to ignore.’

‘Yes.’

I turned to face him. ‘All right. Let’s hear it.’

‘You’re looking at it, Mr Kovacs.’ He stood there in front of me. ‘I’m here. I’m back. You can’t kill me just by wiping out my cortical stack.’

‘You’ve got remote storage. Obviously, or you wouldn’t be here. How regular is the update?’
Bancroft smiled. ‘Every forty-eight hours.’ He tapped the back of his neck. ‘Direct needlecast from here into a shielded stack over at the PsychaSec installation at Alcatraz. I don’t even have to think about it.’

‘And they keep your clones on ice there as well.’

‘Yes. Multiple units.’

Guaranteed immortality. I sat there thinking about that for a while, wondering how I’d like it. Wondering if I’d like it.

‘Must be expensive,’ I said at last.

‘Not really. I own PsychaSec.’

‘Oh.’

‘So you see, Kovacs, neither I nor my wife could have pulled that trigger. We both knew it wouldn’t be enough to kill me. No matter how unlikely it seems, it had to be a stranger. Someone who didn’t know about the remote.’

I nodded. ‘All right, who else did know about it? Let’s narrow the field.’

‘Apart from my family?’ Bancroft shrugged. ‘My lawyer, Oumou Prescott. A couple of her legal aides. The director at PsychaSec. That’s about it.’

‘Of course,’ I said, ‘suicide is rarely a rational act.’

‘Yes, that’s what the police said. They used it to explain all the other minor inconveniences in their theory as well.’

‘Which were?’

This was what Bancroft had wanted to reveal earlier. It came out in a rush. ‘Which were that I should choose to walk the last two kilometres home, and let myself into the grounds on foot, then apparently readjust my internal clock before I killed myself.’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘The police found traces of a cruiser landing in a field two kilometres from the perimeter of Suntouch House, which conveniently enough is just outside the pick-up range of the house security surveillance. Equally conveniently, there was apparently no satellite cover overhead at that precise time.’

‘Did they check taxi datastacks?’

Bancroft nodded. ‘For what it’s worth, they did, yes. West Coast law does not require taxi companies to keep records of their fleets’ whereabouts at any given time. Some of the more reputable firms do, of course, but there are others that don’t. Some even make a selling point of it. Client confidentiality, that sort of thing.’ A momentary hunted look crossed Bancroft’s face. ‘For some clients, in some cases, that would be a distinct advantage.’

‘Have you used these firms in the past?’

‘On occasion, yes.’

The logical next question hung in the air between us. I left it unasked, and waited. If Bancroft wasn’t going to share his reasons for wanting confidential transport, I wasn’t going to press him until I had a few other landmarks locked down.

Bancroft cleared his throat. ‘There is, in any case, some evidence to suggest that the vehicle in question might not have been a taxi. Field effect distribution, the police say. A pattern more in keeping with a larger vehicle.’

‘That depends on how hard it landed.’

‘I know. In any case, my tracks lead from the landing site, and apparently the condition of my shoes was in keeping with a two-kilometre trek across country. And then, finally, there was a call placed from this room shortly after three a.m. the night I was killed. A time check. There’s no voice on the line, only the sound of someone breathing.’
‘And the police know this too?’
‘Of course they do.’
‘How did they explain it?’
Bancroft smiled thinly. ‘They didn’t. They thought the solitary walk through the rain was very much in keeping with the act of suicide, and apparently they couldn’t see any inconsistency in a man wanting to check his internal chronochip before he blows his own head off. As you say, suicide is not a rational act. They have case histories of this sort of thing. Apparently, the world is full of incompetents who kill themselves and wake up in a new sleeve the next day. I’ve had it explained to me. They forget they’re wearing a stack, or it doesn’t seem important at the moment of the act. Our beloved medical welfare system brings them right back, suicide notes and requests notwithstanding. Curious abuse of rights, that. Is it the same system on Harlan’s World?’
I shrugged. ‘More or less. If the request is legally witnessed, then they have to let them go. Otherwise, failure to revive is a storage offence.’
‘I suppose that’s a wise precaution.’
‘Yes. It stops murderers passing their work off as suicide.’ Bancroft leaned forward on the rail and locked gazes with me. ‘Mr Kovacs, I am three hundred and fifty-seven years old. I have lived through a corporate war, the subsequent collapse of my industrial and trading interests, the real deaths of two of my children, at least three major economic crises, and I am still here. I am not the kind of man to take my own life, and even if I were, I would not have bungled it in this fashion. If it had been my intention to die, you would not be talking to me now. Is that clear?’
I looked back at him, back at those hard dark eyes. ‘Yes. Very clear.’
‘That’s good.’ He unpinned his stare. ‘Shall we continue?’
‘Yes. The police. They don’t like you very much, do they?’
Bancroft smiled without much humour. ‘The police and I have a perspective problem.’
‘Perspective?’
‘That’s right.’ He moved along the balcony. ‘Come here, I’ll show you what I mean.’
I followed him along the rail, catching the telescope with my arm as I did and knocking the barrel upright. The download shakes were beginning to demand their dues. The telescope’s positional motor whined crabily and returned the instrument to its original shallow angle. Elevation and range focus ticked over on the ancient digital memory display. I paused to watch the thing realign itself. The fingermarks on the keypad were smudged in years of dust.
Bancroft had either not noticed my ineptitude or was being polite about it.
‘Yours?’ I asked him, jerking a thumb at the instrument. He glanced at it absently.
‘Once. It was an enthusiasm I had. Back when the stars were still something to stare at. You wouldn’t remember how that felt.’ It was said without conscious pretension or arrogance, almost inconsequentially. His voice lost some of its focus, like a transmission fading out. ‘Last time I looked through that lens was nearly two centuries ago. A lot of the Colony ships were still in flight then. We were still waiting to find out if they’d make it. Waiting for the needlebeams to come back to us. Like lighthouse beacons.’
He was losing me. I brought him back to reality. ‘Perspective?’ I reminded him gently.
‘Perspective.’ He nodded and swung an arm out over his property. ‘You see that tree. Just beyond the tennis courts.’
I could hardly miss it. A gnarled old monster taller than the house, casting shade over an area the size of a tennis court in itself. I nodded.

'That tree is over seven hundred years old. When I bought this property, I hired a design engineer and he wanted to chop it down. He was planning to build the house further up the rise and the tree was spoiling the sea view. I sacked him.'

Bancroft turned to make sure his point was getting across.

'You see, Mr Kovacs, that engineer was a man in his thirties, and to him the tree was just an inconvenience. It was in his way. The fact it had been part of the world for over twenty times the length of his own life didn’t seem to bother him. He had no respect.'

'So you’re the tree.'

'Just so,' said Bancroft equably. ‘I am the tree. The police would like to chop me down, just like that engineer. I am inconvenient to them, and they have no respect.’

I went back to my seat to chew this over. Kristin Ortega’s attitude was beginning to make some sense at last. If Bancroft thought he was outside the normal requirements of good citizenship, he wasn’t likely to make many friends in uniform. There would have been little point trying to explain to him that for Ortega there was another tree called the Law and that in her eyes he was banging a few profane nails into it himself. I’ve seen this kind of thing from both sides, and there just isn’t any solution except to do what my own ancestors had done. When you don’t like the laws, you go somewhere they can’t touch you.

And then you make up some of your own.

Bancroft stayed at the rail. Perhaps he was communing with the tree. I decided to shelve this line of inquiry for a while.

‘What’s the last thing you remember?’

‘Tuesday 14th August,’ he said promptly. ‘Going to bed at about midnight.’

‘That was the last remote update.’

‘Yes, the needlecast would have gone through about four in the morning, but obviously I was asleep by then.’

‘So almost a full forty-eight hours before your death.’

‘I’m afraid so.’

Optimally bad. In forty-eight hours, almost anything can happen. Bancroft could have been to the moon and back in that time. I rubbed at the scar under my eye again, wondering absently how it had got there.

‘And there’s nothing before that time that could suggest to you why someone might want to kill you.’

Bancroft was still leaning on the rail, looking out, but I saw how he smiled.

‘Did I say something amusing?’

He had the grace to come back to his seat.

‘No, Mr Kovacs. There is nothing amusing about this situation. Someone out there wants me dead, and that’s not a comfortable feeling. But you must understand that for a man in my position enmity and even death threats are part and parcel of everyday existence. People envy me, people hate me. It is the price of success.’

This was news to me. People hate me on a dozen different worlds and I’ve never considered myself a successful man.

‘Had any interesting ones recently? Death threats, I mean.’

He shrugged. ‘Perhaps. I don’t make a habit of screening them. Ms Prescott handles that for me.’

‘You don’t consider death threats worth your attention?’
‘Mr Kovacs, I am an entrepreneur. Opportunities arise, crises present themselves, and I deal with them. Life goes on. I hire managers to deal with that.’

‘Very convenient for you. But in view of the circumstances, I find it hard to believe neither you nor the police have consulted Ms Prescott’s files.’

Bancroft waved a hand. ‘Of course, the police conducted their own cursory inquiry. Oumou Prescott told them exactly what she had already told me. That nothing out of the ordinary had been received in the last six months. I have enough faith in her not to need to check beyond that. You’ll probably want to look at the files yourself, though.’

The thought of scrolling through hundreds of metres of incoherent vitriol from the lost and losers of this antique world was quite sufficient to uncap my weariness again. A profound lack of interest in Bancroft’s problems washed through me. I mastered it with an effort worthy of Virginia Vidaura’s approval.

‘Well, I’ll certainly need to talk to Oumou Prescott, anyway.’

‘I’ll make the appointment immediately.’ Bancroft’s eyes took on the inward glaze of someone consulting internal hardware. What time would suit you?’

I held up a hand. ‘Probably better if I do that myself. Just let her know I’ll be in touch. And I’ll need to see the re-sleeving facility at PsychaSec.’

‘Certainly. In fact, I’ll get Prescott to take you there. She knows the director. Anything else?’

‘A line of credit.’

‘Of course. My bank have already allocated a DNA-coded account to you. I understand they have the same system on Harlan’s World.’

I licked my thumb and held it upqueryingly. Bancroft nodded. ‘Just the same here. You will find there are areas of Bay City where cash is still the only negotiable currency. Hopefully you won’t have to spend much time in those parts, but if you do you can draw actual currency against your account at any bank outlet. Will you require a weapon?’

‘Not at the moment, no.’ One of Virginia Vidaura’s cardinal rules had always been find out the nature of your task before you choose your tools. That single sweep of charred stucco on Bancroft’s wall looked too elegant for this to be a shoot ‘em up carnival.

‘Well.’ Bancroft seemed almost perplexed by my response. He had been on the point of reaching into his shirt pocket, and now he completed the action, awkwardly. He held out an inscribed card to me. ‘This is my gunmaker. I’ve told them to expect you.’

I took the card and looked at it. The ornate script read Larkin & Green - Armourers since 2203. Quaint. Below was a single string of numbers. I pocketed the card.

‘This might be useful later on,’ I admitted. ‘But for the moment I want to make a soft landing. Sit back and wait for the dust to settle. I think you can appreciate the need for that.’

‘Yes, of course. Whatever you think best. I trust your judgement.’ Bancroft caught my gaze and held it. ‘You’ll bear in mind the terms of our agreement, though. I am paying for a service. I don’t react well to abuse of trust, Mr Kovacs.’

‘No, I don’t suppose you do,’ I said tiredly. I remembered the way Reileen Kawahara had dealt with two unfaithful minions. The animal sounds they had made came back to me in dreams for a long time afterwards. Reileen’s argument, framed as she peeled an apple against the backdrop of those screams, was that since no one really dies any more, punishment can only come through suffering. I felt my new face twitch, even now, with the memory. ‘For what it’s worth, the line the Corps fed you about me is so much shit on a prick. My word’s as good as it ever was.’
I stood up.

‘Can you recommend a place to stay back in the city. Somewhere quiet, mid range.’

‘Yes, there are places like that on Mission Street. I’ll have someone ferry you back there. Curtis, if he’s out of arrest by then.’ Bancroft climbed to his feet as well. ‘I take it you intend to interview Miriam now. She really knows more about those last forty-eight hours than I do, so you’ll want to speak to her quite closely.’

I thought about those ancient eyes in that pneumatic teenager’s body and the idea of carrying on a conversation with Miriam Bancroft was suddenly repellent. At the same time a cold hand strummed taut chords in the pit of my stomach and the head of my penis swelled abruptly with blood. Classy.

‘Oh, yes,’ I said unenthusiastically. ‘I’d like to do that.’