RICHARD MORGAN

BROKEN ANGELS

The diamond hard new novel from the author of Altered Carbon
Sample Chapters from

Broken Angels

RICHARD MORGAN

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PART ONE

Injured Parties

War is like any other bad relationship. Of course you want out, but at what price? And perhaps more importantly, once you get out, will you be any better off?

Quellcrist Falconer Campaign Diaries
CHAPTER ONE

I first met Jan Schneider in a Protectorate orbital hospital, three hundred kilometres above the ragged clouds of Sanction IV and in a lot of pain. Technically there wasn’t supposed to be a Protectorate presence anywhere in the Sanction system - what was left of planetary government was insisting loudly from its bunkers that this was an internal matter, and local corporate interests had tacitly agreed to sign along that particular dotted line for the time being.

Accordingly, the Protectorate vessels that had been hanging around the system since Joshua Kemp raised his revolutionary standard in Indigo City had had their recognition codes altered, in effect being bought out on long-term lease by various of the corporations involved, and then reloaned to the embattled government as part of the - tax deductible - local development fund. Those that were not pulled out of the sky by Kemp’s unexpectedly efficient second-hand marauder bombs would be sold back to the Protectorate, lease unexpired, and any net losses once again written off to tax. Clean hands all round. In the meantime, any senior personnel injured fighting against Kemp’s forces got shuttled out of harm’s way, and this had been my major consideration when choosing sides. It had the look of a messy war.

The shuttle offloaded us directly onto the hospital’s hangar deck, using a device not unlike a massive ammunition feed belt to dump the dozens of capsule stretchers with what felt like unceremonious haste. I could hear the shrill whine of the ship’s engines still dying away as we rattled and clanked our way out over the wing and down onto the deck, and when they cracked open my capsule the air in the hangar burnt my lungs with the chill of recently evacuated hard space. An instant layer of ice crystals formed on everything, including my face.

‘You!’ It was a woman’s voice, harsh with stress. ‘Are you in pain?’

I blinked some of the ice out of my eyes and looked down at my blood-caked battledress.

‘Take a wild guess,’ I croaked.

‘Medic! Endorphin boost and GP anti-viral here.’ She bent over me again and I felt gloved fingers touch my head at the same time as the cold stab of the hypospray into my neck. The pain ebbed drastically. ‘Are you from the Evenfall front?’

‘No,’ I managed weakly. ‘Northern Rim assault. Why, what happened at Evenfall?’

‘Some fucking terminal buttonhead just called in a tactical nuclear strike.’ There was a cold rage chained in the doctor’s voice. Her hands moved down my body, assessing damage. ‘No radiation trauma, then. What about chemicals?’

I tilted my head fractionally at my lapel. ‘Exposure meter. Should tell you. That.’

‘It’s gone,’ she snapped. ‘Along with most of that shoulder.’

‘Oh.’ I mustered words. ‘Think I’m clean. Can’t you do a cell scan?’

‘Not here, no. The cellular level scanners are built into the ward decks. Maybe when we can clear some space for you all up there, we’ll get round to it.’ The hands left me. ‘Where’s your bar code?’

‘Left temple.’

Someone wiped blood away from the designated area and I vaguely felt the sweep of the laser scan across my face. A machine chirped approval, and I was left alone. Processed.

For a while I just lay there, content to let the endorphin booster relieve me of both pain and consciousness, all with the suave alacrity of a butler taking a hat and coat. A small part of me was wondering whether the body I was wearing was going to be
salvageable, or if I’d have to be re-sleeved. I knew that Carrera’s Wedge maintained a handful of small clone banks for its so-called indispensable staff, and as one of only five ex-Envoy soldiers for Carrera, I definitely numbered among that particular elite. Unfortunately, indispensability is a double-edged sword. On the one hand it gets you elite medical treatment, up to and including total body replacement. On the downside, the only purpose of said treatment is to throw you back into the fray at the earliest possible opportunity. A plankton-standard grunt whose body was damaged beyond repair would just get his cortical stack excised from its snug little housing at the top of the spinal column then slung into a storage canister, where it would probably stay until the whole war was over. Not an ideal exit, and despite the Wedge’s reputation for looking after their own there was no actual guarantee of re-sleeving, but at times in the screaming chaos of the last few months that step into stored oblivion had seemed almost infinitely desirable.

‘Colonel. Hey, colonel.’

I wasn’t sure if the Envoy conditioning was keeping me awake, or if the voice at my side had nagged me back to consciousness again. I rolled my head sluggishly to see who was speaking.

It seemed we were still in the hangar. Lying on the stretcher beside me was a muscular-looking young man with a shock of wiry black hair and a shrewd intelligence in his features that even the dazed expression of the endorphin hit could not mask. He was wearing a Wedge battledress like mine, but it didn’t fit him very well and the holes in it didn’t seem to correspond with the holes in him. At his left temple, where the bar code should have been, there was a convenient blaster burn.

‘You talking to me?’

‘Yes sir.’ He propped himself up on one elbow. They must have dosed him with a lot less than me. ‘Looks like we’ve really got Kemp on the run down there, doesn’t it?’

‘That’s an interesting point of view.’ Visions of 391 platoon being cut to shreds around me cascaded briefly through my head. ‘Where do you think he’s going to run to? Bearing in mind this is his planet, I mean.’

‘Uh, I thought—’

‘I wouldn’t advise that, soldier. Didn’t you read your terms of enlistment? Now shut up and save your breath. You’re going to need it.’

‘Uh, yes sir.’ He was gaping a little, and from the sound of heads turned on nearby stretchers he wasn’t the only one surprised to hear a Carrera’s Wedge officer talking this way. Sanction IV, in common with most wars, had stirred up some heavy-duty feelings.

‘And another thing.’

‘Colonel?’

‘This is a lieutenant’s uniform. And Wedge command has no rank of colonel. Try to remember that.’

Then a freak wave of pain swept in from some mutilated part of my body, dodged through the grasp of the endorphin bouncers posted at the door of my brain and started hysterically shrilling its damage report to anyone who’d listen. The smile I had pinned to my face melted away the way the cityscape must have done at Evenfall, and I abruptly lost interest in anything except screaming.

Water was lapping gently somewhere just below me when I next woke up, and gentle sunlight warmed my face and arms. Someone must have removed the shrapnel-shredded remains of my combat jacket and left me with the sleeveless Wedge T-shirt.
I moved one hand and my fingertips brushed aged-smoothened wooden boards, also warm. The sunlight made dancing patterns on the insides of my eyelids.

There was no pain.

I sat up, feeling better than I had in months. I was stretched out on a small, simply-made jetty that extended a dozen metres or so out into what appeared to be a fjord or sea loch. Low, rounded mountains bounded the water on either side and fluffy white clouds scudded unconcernedly overhead. Further out in the loch a family of seals poked their heads above the water and regarded me gravely.

My body was the same Afro-Caribbean combat sleeve I’d been wearing on the Northern rim assault, undamaged and unscarred.

So.

Footsteps scraped on the boards behind me. I jerked my head sideways, hands lifting reflexively into an embryonic guard. Way behind the reflex came the confirming thought that in the real world no one could have got that close without my sleeve’s proximity sense kicking in.

‘Takeshi Kovacs,’ said the uniformed woman standing over me, getting the soft slavic ‘ch’ at the end of the name correct. ‘Welcome to the recuperation stack.’

‘Very nice,’ I climbed to my feet, ignoring the offered hand. ‘Am I still aboard the hospital?’

The woman shook her head and pushed long, riotous copper-coloured hair back from her angular face. ‘Your sleeve is still in intensive care, but your current consciousness has been digitally freighted to Wedge One Storage until you are ready to be physically revived.’

I looked around and turned my face upward to the sun again. It rains a lot on the Northern Rim. ‘And where is Wedge One Storage? Or is that classified?’

‘I’m afraid it is.’

‘How did I guess?’

‘Your dealings with the Protectorate have doubtless acquainted you with—’

‘Skip it. I was being rhetorical.’ I already had a pretty good idea where the virtual format was located. Standard practice in a planetary war situation is to fling a handful of low-albedo sneak stations into crazy elliptical orbits way out and hope none of the local military traffic stumbles on them. The odds are pretty good in favour of no one ever finding you. Space, as textbooks are given to saying, is big.

‘What ratio are you running all this on?’

‘Real time equivalence,’ said the woman promptly. ‘Though I can speed it up if you prefer.’

The thought of having my no doubt short-lived convalescence stretched out here by a factor of anything up to about three hundred was tempting, but if I was going to be dragged back to the fighting some time soon in real time, it was probably better not to lose the edge. Added to which, I wasn’t sure that Wedge Command would let me do too much stretching. A couple of months pottering around, hermit-like, in this much natural beauty was bound to have a detrimental effect on one’s enthusiasm for wholesale slaughter.

‘There is accommodation,’ said the woman, pointing, ‘for your use. Please request modifications if you would like them.’

I followed the line of her arm to where a glass and wood two-storey structure stood beneath gull-winged eaves on the edge of the long shingle beach.

‘Looks fine.’ Vague tendrils of sexual interest squirmed around in me. ‘Are you supposed to be my interpersonal ideal?’
The woman shook her head again. ‘I am an intra-format service construct for Wedge One Systems Overview, based physically on Lieutenant Colonel Lucia Mataran of Protectorate High Command.’

‘With that hair? You’re kidding me.’

‘I have latitudes of discretion. Do you wish me to generate an interpersonal ideal for you?’

Like the offer of a high-ratio format, it was tempting. But after six weeks in the company of the Wedge’s boisterous do-or-die commandos, what I wanted more than anything was to be alone for a while.

‘I’ll think about it. Is there anything else?’

‘You have a recorded briefing from Isaac Carrera. Do you wish it stored at the house?’

‘No. Play it here. I’ll call you if I need anything else.’

‘As you wish.’ The construct inclined her head, and snapped out of existence. In her place, a male figure in the Wedge’s black dress uniform shaded in. Close-cropped black hair seasoned with grey, a lined patrician face whose dark eyes and weathered features were somehow both hard and understanding, and beneath the uniform the body of an officer whose seniority had not removed him from the battlefield. Isaac Carrera, decorated ex-Vacuum Command captain and subsequently founder of the most feared mercenary force in the Protectorate. An exemplary soldier, commander, and tactician. Occasionally, when he had no other choice, a competent politician.

‘Hello, Lieutenant Kovacs. Sorry this is only a recording, but Evenfall has left us in a bad situation and there wasn’t time to set up a link. The medical report says your sleeve can be repaired in about ten days, so we’re not going to go for a clone-bank option here. I want you back on the Northern Rim as soon as possible, but the truth is, we’ve been fought to a standstill there for the moment and they can live without you for a couple of weeks. There’s a status update appended to this recording, including the losses sustained in the last assault. I’d like you to look it over while you’re in virtual, set that famous Envoy intuition of yours to work. God knows, we need some fresh ideas up there. In a general context, acquisition of the Rim territories will provide one of the nine major objectives necessary to bring this conflict . . .’

I was already in motion, walking the length of the jetty and then up the sloping shore towards the nearest hills. The sky beyond was tumbled cloud but not dark enough for there to be a storm in the offing. It looked as if there would be a great view of the whole loch if I climbed high enough.

Behind me, Carrera’s voice faded on the wind as I left the projection on the jetty, mouthing its words to the empty air and maybe the seals, always assuming they had nothing better to do than listen to it.
CHAPTER TWO

In the end, they kept me under for a week.

I didn't miss much. Below me, the clouds roiled and tore across the face of Sanction IV’s northern hemisphere, pouring rain on the men and women killing each other beneath. The construct visited the house regularly and kept me abreast of the more interesting details. Kemp’s offworld allies tried and failed to break the Protectorate blockade, at the cost of a brace of IP transports. A flight of smarter-than-average marauder bombs got through from somewhere unspecified and vaporised a Protectorate dreadnought. Government forces in the tropics held their positions while in the north-east the Wedge and other mercenary units lost ground to Kemp’s elite presidential guard. Evenfall continued to smoulder.

Like I said, I didn't miss much.

When I awoke in the re-sleeving chamber, I was suffused in a head-to-foot glow of well-being. Mostly, that was chemical; military hospitals shoot their convalescent sleeves full of feelgood stuff just before download. It’s their equivalent of a welcome-home party, and it makes you feel like you could win this motherfucking war singlehanded if they'd only let you up and at the bad guys. Useful effect, obviously. But what I also had, swimming alongside this patriot’s cocktail, was the simple pleasure of being intact and installed with a full set of functioning limbs and organs.

Until I talked to the doctor, that is.

‘We pulled you out early,’ she told me, the rage she'd exhibited on the shuttle deck tamped a little further down in her voice now. ‘On orders from Wedge command. It seems there isn’t time for you to recover from your wounds fully.’

‘I feel fine.’

‘Of course you do. You’re dosed to the eyes with endorphins. When you come down, you’re going to find that your left shoulder only has about two-thirds functionality. Oh, and your lungs are still damaged. Scarring from the Guerlain Twenty.’

I blinked. ‘I didn’t know they were spraying that stuff.’

‘No. Apparently nobody did. A triumph of covert assault, they tell me.’ She gave up, the attempted grimace half formed. Too, too tired. ‘We cleaned most of it out, ran regrowth bioware through the most obvious areas, and killed the secondary infections. Given a few months of rest, you’d probably make a full recovery. As it is . . .’ She shrugged. ‘Try not to smoke. Get some light exercise. Oh, for fuck’s sake.’

I tried the light exercise. I walked the hospital’s axial deck. Forced air into my scorched lungs. Flexed my shoulder. The whole deck was packed five abreast with injured men and women doing similar things. Some of them, I knew.

‘Hey, lieutenant!’

Tony Loemanako, face mostly a mask of shredded flesh pocked with the green tags where the rapid regrowth bios were embedded. Still grinning, but far too much of far too many teeth visible on the left side.

‘You made it out, lieutenant! Way to go!’

He turned about in the crowd.

‘Hey, Eddie. Kwok. The lieutenant made it.’

Kwok Yuen Yee, both eye sockets packed tight with bright orange tissue incubator jelly. An externally-mounted microcam welded to her skull provided videoscan for
the interim. Her hands were being regrown on skeletal black carbon fibre. The new tissue looked wet and raw.

‘Lieutenant. We thought—’

‘Lieutenant Kovacs!’

Eddie Munharto, propped up in a mobility suit while the bios regrew his right arm and both legs from the ragged shreds that the smart shrapnel had left.

‘Good to see you, lieutenant! See, we’re all on the mend. The 391 platoon be back up to kick some Kempist ass in a couple of months, no worries.’

Carrera’s Wedge combat sleeves are currently supplied by Khumalo Biosystems. State-of-the-art Khumalo combat biotech runs some charming custom extras, notable among them a serotonin shutout system that improves your capacity for mindless violence and minute scrapings of wolf gene that give you added speed and savagery together with an enhanced tendency to pack loyalty that hurts like upwelling tears. Looking at the mangled survivors of the platoon around me, I felt my throat start to ache.

‘Man, we tanked them, didn’t we?’ said Munharto, gesturing flipper-like with his one remaining limb. ‘Seen the milflash yesterday.’

Kwok’s microcam swivelled, making minute hydraulic sounds.

‘You taking the new 391, sir?’

‘I don’t—’

‘Hey, Naki. Where are you, man? It’s the lieutenant.’

I stayed off the axial deck after that.

Schneider found me the next day, sitting in the officers’ convalescent ward, smoking a cigarette and staring out of the viewport. Stupid, but like the doctor said for fuck’s sake. Not much point in looking after yourself, if that same self is liable at any moment to have the flesh ripped off its bones by flying steel or corroded beyond repair by chemical fallout.

‘Ah, Lieutenant Kovacs.’

It took me a moment to place him. People’s faces look a lot different under the strain of injury, and besides we’d both been covered in blood. I looked at him over my cigarette, wondering bleakly if this was someone else I’d got shot up wanting to commend me on a battle well fought. Then something in his manner tripped a switch and I remembered the loading bay. Slightly surprised he was still aboard, even more surprised he’d been able to bluff his way in here, I gestured him to sit down.

‘Thank you. I’m, ah, Jan Schneider.’ He offered a hand that I nodded at, then helped himself to my cigarettes from the table. ‘I really appreciate you not ah, not—’

‘Forget it. I had.’

‘Injury, ah, injury can do things to your mind, to your memory.’ - I stirred impatiently - ‘Made me mix up the ranks and all, ah—’

‘Look, Schneider, I don’t really care.’ I drew an ill-advisedly deep lungful of smoke and coughed. ‘All I care about is surviving this war long enough to find a way out of it. Now if you repeat that, I’ll have you shot, but otherwise you can do what the fuck you like. Got it?’

He nodded, but his poise had undergone a subtle change. His nervousness had damped down to a subdued gnawing at his thumbnail and he was watching me, vulture-like. When I stopped speaking, he took his thumb out of his mouth, grinned, then replaced it with the cigarette. Almost airily, he blew smoke at the viewport and the planet it showed.

‘Exactly,’ he said.
‘Exactly what?’

Schneider glanced around conspiratorially, but the few other occupants of the ward were all congregated at the other end of the chamber, watching Latimer holoporn. He grinned again and leaned closer.

‘Exactly what I’ve been looking for. Someone with some common sense. Lieutenant Kovacs, I’d like to make you a proposition. Something that will involve you getting out of this war, not only alive but rich, richer than you can possibly imagine.’

‘I can imagine quite a lot, Schneider.’

He shrugged. ‘Whatever. A lot of money, then. Are you interested?’

I thought about it, trying to see the angle behind. ‘Not if it involves changing sides, no. I have nothing against Joshua Kemp personally, but I think he’s going to lose and—’

‘Politics.’ Schneider waved a hand dismissively. ‘This has nothing to do with politics. Nothing to do with the war, either, except as a circumstance. I’m talking about something solid. A product. Something any of the corporates would pay a single figure percentage of their annual profits to own.’

I doubted very much whether there was any such thing on a backwater world like Sanction IV, and I doubted even more that someone like Schneider would have ready access to it. But then, he’d scammed his way aboard what was in effect a Protectorate warship and got medical attention that - at a pro-government estimate - half a million men on the surface were screaming for in vain. He might have something, and right now anything that might get me off this mudball before it ripped itself apart was worth listening to.

I nodded and stubbed out my cigarette.

‘Alright.’

‘You’re in?’

‘I’m listening,’ I said mildly. ‘Whether or not I’m in depends on what I hear.’

Schneider sucked in his cheeks. ‘I’m not sure we can proceed on that basis, lieutenant. I need—’

‘You need me. That’s obvious, or we wouldn’t be having this conversation. Now shall we proceed on that basis, or shall I call Wedge security and let them kick it out of you?’

There was a taut silence, into which Schneider’s grin leaked like blood.

‘Well,’ he said at last. ‘I see I’ve misjudged you. The records don’t cover this, ah, aspect of your character.’

‘Any records you’ve been able to access about me won’t give you the half of it. For your information, Schneider, my last official military posting was the Envoy Corps.’

I watched it sink in, wondering if he’d scare. The Envoys have almost mythological status throughout the Protectorate, and they’re not famous for their charitable natures. What I’d been wasn’t a secret on Sanction IV, but I tended not to mention it unless pressed. It was the sort of reputation that led to at best a nervous silence every time I walked into a mess room and at worst to insane challenges from young first-sleevers with more neurachem and muscle grafting than sense. Carrera had carpeted me after the third (stack retrievable) death. Commanding officers generally take a dim view of murder within the ranks. You’re supposed to reserve that kind of enthusiasm for the enemy. It was agreed that all references to my Envoy past would be buried deep in the Wedge datacore, and superficial records would label me a career mercenary via the Protectorate marines. It was a common enough pattern.
But if my Envoy past was scaring Schneider, it didn’t show. He hunched forward again, shrewd face intense with thought.

‘The Es, huh? When did you serve?’

‘A while ago. Why?’

‘You at Innenin?’

His cigarette end glowed at me. For a single moment it was as if I was falling into it. The red light smeared into traceries of laser fire, etching ruined walls and the mud underfoot as Jimmy de Soto wrestled against my grip and died screaming from his wounds, and the Innenin beachhead fell apart around us.

I closed my eyes briefly.

‘Yeah, I was at Innenin. You want to tell me about this corporate wealth deal or not?’

Schneider was almost falling over himself to tell someone. He helped himself to another of my cigarettes and sat back in his chair.

‘Did you know that the Northern Rim coastline, up beyond Sauberville, has some of the oldest Martian settlement sites known to human archaeology?’

Oh well. I sighed and slid my gaze past his face and back out to the view of Sanction IV. I should have expected something like this, but somehow I was disappointed in Jan Schneider. In the short minutes of our acquaintance, I thought I’d picked up on a gritty core that seemed too tightly wired for this kind of lost civilisation and buried techno-treasure bullshit.

It’s the best part of five hundred years since we stumbled on the mausoleum of Martian civilisation, and people still haven’t worked out that the artefacts our extinct planetary neighbours left lying around are largely either way out of our reach or wrecked. (Or very likely both, but how would we know?) About the only truly useful things we’ve been able to salvage are the astrogation charts whose vaguely understood notation enabled us to send our own colony ships to guaranteed terrestroid destinations.

This success, plus the scattered ruins and artefacts we’ve found on the worlds the maps gave us, have given rise to a widely varied crop of theories, ideas and cult beliefs. In the time I’ve spent shuttling back and forth across the Protectorate, I’ve heard most of them. In some places you’ve got the gibbering paranoia that says the whole thing is a cover-up, designed by the UN to hide the fact that the astrogation maps were really provided by time travellers from our own future. Then there’s a carefully articulated religious faith that believes we’re the lost descendants of the Martians, waiting to be reunited with the spirits of our ancestors when we’ve attained sufficient karmic enlightenment. A few scientists entertain vaguely hopeful theories that say Mars was in fact only a remote outpost, a colony cut off from the mother culture, and that the hub of the civilisation is still out there somewhere. My own personal favourite is that the Martians moved to Earth and became dolphins in order to shrug off the strictures of technological civilisation.

In the end it comes down to the same thing. They’re gone, and we’re just picking up the pieces.

Schneider grinned. ‘You think I’m nuts, don’t you? Living something out of a kid’s holo?’

‘Something like that.’

‘Yeah, well just hear me out.’ He was smoking in short, fast drags that let the smoke dribble out of his mouth as he talked. ‘See, what everyone assumes is that the Martians were like us, not like us physically, I mean we assume their civilisation had the same cultural bases as ours.’
Cultural bases? This didn’t sound like Schneider talking. This was something he’d been told. My interest sharpened fractionally.

‘That means, we map out a world like this one, everyone creams themselves when we find centres of habitation. Cities, they figure. We’re nearly two light years out from the main Latimer system, that’s two habitable biospheres and three that need a bit of work, all of them with at least a handful of ruins, but as soon as the probes get here and register what look like cities, everyone drops what they’re doing and comes rushing across.’

‘I’d say rushing was an exaggeration.’

At sub-light speeds, it would have taken even the most souped-up colony barge the best part of three years to cross the gap from Latimer’s binary suns to this unimaginatively named baby brother of a star. Nothing happens fast in interstellar space.

‘Yeah? You know how long it took? From receiving the probe data via hypercast to inaugurating the Sanction government?’

I nodded. As a local military adviser it was my duty to know such facts. The interested corporates had pushed the Protectorate Charter paperwork through in a matter of weeks. But that was nearly a century ago, and didn’t appear to have much bearing on what Schneider had to tell me now. I gestured at him to get on with it.

‘So then,’ he said, leaning forward and holding up his hands as if to conduct music, ‘you get the archaeologues. Same deal as anywhere else; claims staked on a first come, first served basis with the government acting as broker between the finders and the corporate buyers.’

‘For a percentage.’

‘Yeah, for a percentage. Plus the right to expropriate quote under suitable compensation any findings judged to be of vital importance to Protectorate interests etcetera etcetera, unquote. The point is, any decent archaeologue who wants to make a killing is going to head for the centres of habitation, and that’s what they all did.’

‘How do you know all this, Schneider? You’re not an archaeologist.’

He held out his left hand and pulled back his sleeve to let me see the coils of a winged serpent, tattooed in illuminum paint under the skin. The snake’s scales glinted and shone with a light of their own and the wings moved fractionally up and down so that you almost seemed to hear the dry flapping and scraping that they would make. Entwined in the serpent’s teeth was the inscription Sanction IP Pilot’s Guild and the whole design was wreathed with the words The Ground is for Dead People. It looked almost new.

I shrugged. ‘Nice work. And?’

‘I ran haulage for a group of archaeologues working the Dangrek coast north-west of Sauberville. They were mostly Scratchers, but—’

‘Scratchers?’

Schneider blinked. ‘Yeah. What about it?’

‘This isn’t my planet,’ I said patiently, ‘I’m just fighting a war here. What are Scratchers?’

‘Oh. You know, kids.’ He gestured, perplexed. ‘Fresh out of the Academy, first dig. Scratchers.’

‘Scratchers. Got it. So who wasn’t?’

‘What?’ he blinked again.

‘Who wasn’t a Scratcher? You said they were mostly Scratchers, but. But who?’ Schneider looked resentful. He didn’t like me breaking up his flow.
‘They got a few old hands, too. Scratchers have to take what they can find in any
dig, but you always get some vets who don’t buy the conventional wisdom.’
‘Or turn up too late to get a better stake.’
‘Yeah.’ For some reason he didn’t like that crack either. ‘Sometimes. Point is we,
they, found something.’
‘Found what?’
‘A Martian starship.’ Schneider stubbed out his cigarette. ‘Intact.’
‘Crap.’
‘Yes, we did.’
I sighed again. ‘You’re asking me to believe you dug up an entire spaceship, no
sorry, starship, and the news about this somehow hasn’t got round? No one saw it. No
one noticed it lying there. What did you do, blow a bubblefab over it?’
Schneider licked his lips and grinned. Suddenly he was enjoying himself again.
‘I didn’t say we dug it up, I said we found it. Kovacs, it’s the size of a fucking
asteroid and it’s out there on the edges of the Sanction system in parking orbit. What
we dug up was a gate that leads to it. A mooring system.’
‘A gate?’ Very faintly, I felt a chill coast down my spine as I asked the question.
‘You talking about a hypercaster? You sure they read the technoglyphs right?’
‘Kovacs, it’s a gate.’ Schneider spoke as if to a small child. ‘We opened it. You can
see right through to the other side. It’s like a cheap experia special effect. Starscape
that positively identifies as local. All we had to do was walk through.’
‘Into the ship?’ Against my will, I was fascinated. The Envoy Corps teaches you
about lying, lying under polygraph, lying under extreme stress, lying in whatever
circumstances demand it and with total conviction. Envoys lie better than any other
human being in the Protectorate, natural or augmented, and looking at Schneider now
I knew he was not lying. Whatever had happened to him, he believed absolutely in
what he was saying.
‘No.’ He shook his head. ‘Not into the ship, no. The gate’s focused on a point about
two kilometres out from the hull. It rotates every four and a half hours, near enough.
You need a spacesuit.’
‘Or a shuttle.’ I nodded at the tattoo on his arm. ‘What were you flying?’
He grimaced. ‘Piece of shit Mowai suborbital. Size of a fucking house. It wouldn’t
fit through the portal space.’
‘What?’ I coughed up an unexpected laugh that hurt my chest. ‘Woudln’t fit?’
‘Yeah, you go ahead and laugh,’ said Schneider morosely. ‘Wasn’t for that
particular little logistic, I wouldn’t be in this fucking war now. I’d be wearing out a
custom-built sleeve in Latimer City. Clones on ice, remote storage, fucking immortal,
man. The whole programme.’
‘No one had a spacesuit?’
‘What for?’ Schneider spread his hands. ‘It was a suborbital. No one was expecting
to go offworld. Fact, no one was allowed offworld ’cept via the IP ports at Landfall.
Everything you found on site had to be checked through Export Quarantine. And that
was something else no one was real keen to do. Remember that expropriation clause?’
‘Yeah. Any findings judged to be of vital importance to Protectorate interests. You
didn’t fancy the suitable compensation? Or you didn’t figure it’d be suitable?’
‘Come on, Kovacs. What’s suitable compensation for finding something like this?’
I shrugged. ‘Depends. In the private sector it depends very much on who you talk
to. A bullet through the stack, maybe.’
Schneider skinned me a tight grin. ‘You don’t think we could have handled selling
to the corporates?’
‘I think you would have handled it very badly. Whether you lived or not would have depended on who you were dealing with.’

‘So who would you have gone to?’

I shook out a fresh cigarette, letting the question hang a little before I said anything. ‘That’s not under discussion here, Schneider. My rates as a consultant are a little out of your reach. As a partner, on the other hand, well.’ I offered him a small smile of my own. ‘I’m still listening. What happened next?’

Schneider’s laugh was a bitter explosion, loud enough to hook even the holoporn audience momentarily away from the lurid airbrushed bodies that twisted in full-scale 3-D reproduction at the other end of the ward.

‘What happened?’ He brought his voice down again, and waited until the flesh fans’ gazes were snagged back to the performance. ‘What happened? This war is what fucking happened.’
CHAPTER THREE

Somewhere, a baby was crying.

For a long moment I hung by my hands from the hatch coaming and let the equatorial climate come aboard. I’d been discharged from the hospital as fit for duty, but my lungs still weren’t functioning as well as I would have liked, and the soggy air made for hard breathing.

‘Hot here.’

Schneider had shut down the shuttle’s drive and was crowding my shoulder. I dropped from the hatch to let him out and shaded my eyes against the glare of the sun. From the air, the internment camp had looked as innocuous as most scheme-built housing, but close up the uniform tidiness went down under assault from reality. The hastily-blown bubblefabs were cracking in the heat and liquid refuse ran in the alleys between them. A stench of burning polymer wafted to me on the scant breeze; the shuttle’s landing field had blown sheets of waste paper and plastic up against the nearest stretch of perimeter fence, and now the power was frying them to fragments. Beyond the fence, robot sentry systems grew from the baked earth like iron weeds. The drowsy hum of capacitors formed a constant backdrop to the human noises of the internees.

A small squad of local militia slouched up behind a sergeant who reminded me vaguely of my father on one of his better days. They saw the Wedge uniforms and pulled up short. The sergeant gave me a grudging salute.

‘Lieutenant Takeshi Kovacs, Carrera’s Wedge,’ I said briskly. ‘This is Corporal Schneider. We’re here to appropriate Tanya Wardani, one of your internees, for interrogation.’

The sergeant frowned. ‘I wasn’t informed of this.’

‘I’m informing you now, sergeant.’

In situations like this, the uniform was usually enough. It was widely known on Sanction IV that the Wedge were the Protectorate’s unofficial hard men, and generally they got what they wanted. Even the other mercenary units tended to back down when it came to tussles over requisitioning. But something seemed to be sticking in this sergeant’s throat. Some dimly remembered worship of regulations, instilled on parade grounds back when it all meant something, back before the war cut loose. That, or maybe just the sight of his own countrymen and women starving in their bubblefabs.

‘I’ll have to see some authorisation.’

I snapped my fingers at Schneider and held out a hand for the hardcopy. It hadn’t been difficult to obtain. In a planet-wide conflict like this, Carrera gave his junior officers latitudes of initiative that a Protectorate divisional commander would kill for. No one had even asked me what I wanted Wardani for. No one cared. So far the toughest thing had been the shuttle; they had a use for that and IP transport was in short supply. In the end I’d had to take it at gunpoint from the regular-forces colonel in charge of a field hospital someone had told us about south-east of Suchinda. There was going to be some trouble about that eventually, but then, as Carrera himself was fond of saying, this was a war, not a popularity contest.

‘Will that be sufficient, sergeant?’

He pored over the printout, as if he was hoping the authorisation flashes would prove to be peel-off fakes. I shifted with an impatience which was not entirely
feigned. The atmosphere of the camp was oppressive, and the baby’s crying ran on incessantly somewhere out of view. I wanted to be out of here.

The sergeant looked up and handed me the hardcopy. ‘You’ll have to see the commandant,’ he said woodenly. ‘These people are all under government supervision.’

I shot glances past him left and right, then looked back into his face.

‘Right.’ I let the sneer hang for a moment, and his eyes dropped away from mine. ‘Let’s go talk to the commandant then. Corporal Schneider, stay here. This won’t take long.’

The commandant’s office was in a double-storey ‘fab cordoned off from the rest of the camp by more power fencing. Smaller sentry units squatted on top of the capacitor posts like early millennium gargoyles and uniformed recruits not yet out of their teens stood at the gate clutching oversize plasma rifles. Their young faces looked scraped and raw beneath the gadgetry-studded combat helmets. Why they were there at all was beyond me. Either the robot units were fake, or the camp was suffering from severe overmanning. We passed through without a word, went up a light alloy staircase that someone had epoxied carelessly to the side of the ‘fab and the sergeant buzzed the door. A securicam set over the lintel dilated briefly and the door cracked open. I stepped inside, breathing the conditioning-chilled air with relief.

Most of the light in the office came from a bank of security monitors on the far wall. Adjacent to them was a moulded plastic desk dominated on one side by a cheap datastack holo and a keyboard. The rest of the surface was scattered with curling sheets of hardcopy, marker pens and other administrative debris. Abandoned coffee cups rose out of the mess like cooling towers in an industrial wasteland, and in one place light-duty cabling snaked across the desktop and down to the arm of the sideways slumped figure behind the desk.

‘Commandant?’

The view on a couple of the security monitors shifted, and in the flickering light I saw the gleam of steel along the arm.

‘What is it, sergeant?’

The voice was slurred and dull, disinterested. I advanced into the cool gloom and the man behind the desk lifted his head slightly. I made out one blue photoreceptor eye and the patchwork of prosthetic alloy running down one side of the face and neck to a bulky left shoulder that looked like spacesuit armour but wasn’t. Most of the left side was gone, replaced with articulated servo units from hip to armpit. The arm was made of lean steel hydraulic systems that ended in a black claw. The wrist and forearm section was set with a half dozen shiny silver sockets, into one of which the cabling from the table was jacked. Next to the jacked socket, a small red light pulsed languorously on and off. Current flowing.

I stood in front of the desk and saluted.

‘Lieutenant Takeshi Kovacs, Carrera’s Wedge,’ I said softly.

‘Well.’ The commandant struggled upright in his chair. ‘Perhaps you’d like more light in here, lieutenant. I like the dark, but then,’ he chuckled behind closed lips. ‘I have an eye for it. You, perhaps, have not.’

He groped across the keyboard and after a couple of attempts the main lights came up in the corners of the room. The photoreceptor seemed to dim, while beside it a bleary human eye focused on me. What remained of the face was fine featured and would have been handsome, but long exposure to the wire had robbed the small muscles of coherent electrical input and rendered the expression slack and stupid.
‘Is that better?’ The face attempted something that was more leer than smile. ‘I imagine it is; you come after all from the Outside World.’ The capitals echoed ironically. He gestured across the room at the monitor screens. ‘A world beyond these tiny eyes and anything their mean little minds can dream of. Tell me, lieutenant, are we still at war for the raped, I mean raked, archaeologically rich and raked soil of our beloved planet?’

My eyes fell to the jack and the pulsing ruby light, then went back to his face. ‘I’d like to have your full attention, commandant.’ For a long moment, he stared at me, then his head twisted down like something wholly mechanical, to look at the jacked-in cable. ‘Oh,’ he whispered. ‘This.’ Abruptly, he lurched round to face the sergeant, who was hovering just inside the door with two of the militia. ‘Get out.’

The sergeant did so with an alacrity that suggested he hadn’t much wanted to be there in the first place. The uniformed extras followed, one of them gently pulling the door shut behind him. As the door latched, the commandant slumped back in his chair and his right hand went to the cable interface. A sound escaped his lips that might have been either sigh or cough, or maybe laughter. I waited until he looked up. ‘Down to a trickle, I assure you,’ he said, gesturing at the still winking light. ‘Probably couldn’t survive an outright disconnection at this stage in the proceedings. If I lay down, I’d probably never get up again, so I stay in this. Chair. The discomfort wakes me. Periodically.’ He made an obvious effort. ‘So what, may I ask, do Carrera’s Wedge want with me? We’ve nothing here of value, you know. Medical supplies were all exhausted months ago and even the food they send us barely makes full rations. For my men, of course; I’m referring to the fine corps of soldiers I command here. Our residents receive even less.’ Another gesture, this time turned outwards to the bank of monitors. ‘The machines, of course, do not need to eat. They are self-contained, undemanding, and have no inconvenient empathy for what they are guarding. Fine soldiers, every one. As you see, I’ve tried to turn myself into one, but the process isn’t very far along yet—’

‘I haven’t come for your supplies, commandant.’

‘Ah, then it’s a reckoning, is it? Have I overstepped some recently drawn mark in the Cartel’s scheme of things? Proved an embarrassment to the war effort, perhaps?’ The idea seemed to amuse him. ‘Are you an assassin? A Wedge enforcer?’ I shook my head. ‘I’m here for one of your internees. Tanya Wardani.’

‘Ah yes, the archaeologue.’

A slight sharpening stole through me. I said nothing, only put the hardcopy authorisation on the table in front of the commandant and waited. He picked it up clumsily and tipped his head to one side at an exaggerated angle, holding the paper aloft as if it were some kind of holotoy that needed to be viewed from below. He seemed to be muttering something under his breath. ‘Some problem, commandant?’ I asked quietly.

He lowered the arm and leant on his elbow, wagging the authorisation to and fro at me. Over the movements of the paper, his human eye looked suddenly clearer. ‘What do you want her for?’ he asked, equally softly. ‘Little Tanya the Scratcher. What’s she to the Wedge?’

I wondered, with a sudden iciness, if I was going to have to kill this man. It wouldn’t be difficult to do, I’d probably only be cheating the wire by a few months,
but there was the sergeant outside the door and the militia. Bare-handed, those were long odds, and I still didn’t know what the programming parameters of the robot sentries were. I poured the ice into my voice.

‘That, commandant, has even less to do with you than it does with me. I have my orders to carry out, and now you have yours. Do you have Wardani in custody, or not?’

But he didn’t look away the way the sergeant had. Maybe it was something from the depths of the addiction that was pushing him, some clenched bitterness he had discovered whilst wired into decaying orbit around the core of himself. Or maybe it was a surviving fragment of granite from who he had been before. He wasn’t going to give.

Behind my back, preparatory, my right hand flexed and loosened.

Abruptly, his upright forearm collapsed across the desk like a dynamited tower and the hardcopy gusted free of his fingers. My hand whiplashed out and pinned the paper on the edge of the desk before it could fall. The commandant made a small dry noise in his throat.

For a moment we both looked at the hand holding the paper in silence, then the commandant sagged back in his seat.

‘Sergeant,’ he bellowed hoarsely.

The door opened.

‘Sergeant, get Wardani out of ’fab eighteen and take her to the lieutenant’s shuttle.’

The sergeant saluted and left, relief at the decision being taken out of his hands washing over his face like the effect of a drug.

‘Thank you, commandant.’ I added my own salute, collected the authorisation hardcopy from the desk and turned to leave. I was almost at the door when he spoke again.

‘Popular woman,’ he said.
I looked back. ‘What?’

‘Wardani.’ He was watching me with a glitter in his eye. ‘You’re not the first.’

‘Not the first what?’

‘Less than three months ago.’ As he spoke, he was turning up the current in his left arm and his face twitched spasmodically. ‘We had a little raid. Kempists. They beat the perimeter machines and got inside, very high tech considering the state they’re in, in these parts.’ His head tipped languidly back over the top of the seat and a long sigh eased out of him. ‘Very high tech. Considering. They came for. Her.’

I waited for him to continue, but his head only rolled sideways slightly. I hesitated. Down below in the compound, two of the militia looked curiously up at me. I crossed back to the commandant’s desk and cradled his face in both hands. The human eye showed white, pupil floating up against the upper lid like a balloon bumping the roof of a room where the party has long since burnt itself out.

‘Lieutenant?’

The call came from the stairway outside. I stared down at the drowned face a moment longer. He was breathing slackly through half-open lips, and there seemed to be the crease of a smile in the corner of his mouth. On the periphery of my vision, the ruby light winked on and off.

‘Lieutenant?’

‘Coming.’ I let the head roll free and walked out into the heat, closing the door gently behind me.
Schneider was seated on one of the forward landing pods when I got back, amusing a crowd of ragged children with conjuring tricks. A couple of uniforms watched him at a distance from the shade of the nearest bubblefab. He glanced up as I approached.

‘Problem?’

‘No. Get rid of these kids.’

Schneider raised an eyebrow at me, and finished his trick with no great hurry. As a finale, he plucked small plastic memory form toys from behind each child’s ear. They looked on in disbelieving silence while Schneider demonstrated how the little figures worked. Crush them flat and then whistle sharply and watch them work their way, amoeba-like, back to their original shape. Some corporate gene lab ought to come up with soldiers like that. The children watched open-mouthed. It was another trick in itself. Personally, something that indestructible would have given me nightmares as a child, but then, grim though my own childhood had been, it was a three-day arcade outing compared with this place.

‘You’re not doing them any favours, making them think men in uniform aren’t all bad,’ I said quietly.

Schneider cut me a curious glance and clapped his hands loudly. ‘That’s it, guys. Get out of here. Come on, show’s over.’

The children sloped off, reluctant to leave their little oasis of fun and free gifts. Schneider folded his arms and watched them go, face unreadable.

‘Where’d you get those things?’

‘Found them in the hold. Couple of aid packages for refugees. I guess the hospital we lifted this boat from didn’t have much use for them.’

‘No, they’ve already shot all the refugees down there.’ I nodded at the departing children, now chattering excitedly over their new acquisitions. ‘The camp militia’ll probably confiscate the lot once we’re gone.’

Schneider shrugged. ‘I know. But I’d already given out the chocolate and painkillers. What are you going to do?’

It was a reasonable question, with a whole host of unreasonable answers. Staring out the nearest of the camp militia, I brooded on some of the bloodier options.

‘Here she comes,’ said Schneider, pointing. I followed the gesture and saw the sergeant, two more uniforms and between them a slim figure with hands locked together before her. I narrowed my eyes against the sun and racked up the magnification on my neurachem-aided vision.

Tanya Wardani must have looked a lot better in her days as an archaeologist. The long-limbed frame would have carried more flesh, and she would have done something with her dark hair, maybe just washed it and worn it up. It was unlikely she would have had the fading bruises under her eyes either, and she might even have smiled faintly when she saw us, just a twist of the long, crooked mouth in acknowledgement.

She swayed, stumbled and had to be held up by one of her escorts. At my side, Schneider twitched forward, then stopped himself.

‘Tanya Wardani,’ said the sergeant stiffly, producing a length of white plastic tape printed end to end with bar code strips and a scanner. ‘I’ll need your ID for the release.’

I cocked a finger at the coding on my temple and waited impassively while the red light scan swept down over my face. The sergeant found the particular strip on the plastic tape that represented Wardani and turned the scanner on it. Schneider came forward and took the woman by the arm, pulling her aboard the shuttle with every appearance of brusque detachment. Wardani herself played it without a flicker of
expression on her pallid face. As I was turning to follow the two of them, the sergeant called after me in a voice whose stiffness had turned suddenly brittle.

‘Lieutenant.’

‘Yes, what is it?’ Injecting a rising impatience into my tone.

‘Will she be coming back?’

I turned back in the hatchway, raising my eyebrow in the same elaborate arch that Schneider had used on me a few minutes earlier. He was way out of line, and he knew it.

‘No, sergeant,’ I said, as if to a small child. ‘She won’t be coming back. She’s being taken for interrogation. Just forget about her.’

I closed the hatch.

But as Schneider spun the shuttle upward, I peered out of the viewport and saw him still standing there, buffeted by the storm of our departure.

He didn’t even bother to shield his face from the dust.