

Woken Furies

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PROLOGUE

The place they woke me in would have been carefully prepared.

The same for the reception chamber where they laid out the deal. The Harlan family don't do anything by halves and, as anyone who's been Received can tell you, they like to make a good impression. Gold-flecked black decor to match the family crests on the walls, ambient subsonics to engender a tear-jerking sense that you're in the presence of nobility. Some Martian artefact in a corner, quietly implying the transition of global custody from our long-vanished unhuman benefactors to the firmly modern hand of the First Families oligarchy. The inevitable holosculpture of old Konrad Harlan himself in triumphal 'planetary discoverer' mode. One hand raised high, the other shading his face against the glare of an alien sun. Stuff like that.

So here comes Takeshi Kovacs, surfacing from a sunken bath full of tank gel, sleeved into who knows what new flesh, spluttering into the soft pastel light and helped upright by demure court attendants in cutaway swimming costumes. Towels of immense fluffiness to clean off the worst of the gel and a robe of similar material for the short walk to the next room. A shower, a mirror – better get used to that face, soldier – a new set of clothes to go with the new sleeve, and then on to the audience chamber for an interview with a member of the Family. A woman, of course. There was no way they'd use a man, knowing what they did about my background. Abandoned by an alcoholic father at age ten, raised alongside two younger sisters, a lifetime of sporadically psychotic reaction when presented with patriarchal authority figures. No, it was a woman. Some urbane executive aunt, a secret-service caretaker for the Harlan family's less public affairs. An understated beauty in a custom-grown clone sleeve, probably in its early forties, standard reckoning.

'Welcome back to Harlan's World, Kovacs-san. Are you comfortable?'

'Yeab. You?'

Smug insolence. Envoy training conditions you to absorb and process environmental detail at speeds normal humans can only dream about. Looking around, the Envoy Takeshi Kovacs knows in split seconds, has known since the sunken bath awakening, that he's in demand.

'I? You may call me Aiura.' The language is Amanglic, not Japanese, but the beautifully constructed misunderstanding of the question, the elegant evasion of offence without resorting to outrage, traces a clean line back to the First Families' cultural roots. The woman gestures, equally elegantly. 'Though who I am isn't very important in this matter. I think it's clear to you who I represent.'

'Yes, it's clear.' Perhaps it's subsonics, perhaps just the woman's sober response to my levity that dampens the arrogance in my tone. Envoys soak up what's around them, and to some extent that's a contaminative process. You often find yourself taking to observed behaviour instinctively, especially if your Envoy intuition grasps that behaviour as advantageous in the current surroundings. 'So I'm on secondment.'

Aiura coughs, delicately.

'In a manner of speaking, yes.'

'Solo deployment?' Not unusual in itself, but not much fun either. Being part of an Envoy team gives you a sense of confidence you can't get from working with ordinary human beings.

'Yes. That is to say, you will be the only Envoy involved. More conventional resources are at your disposal in great number.'

'That sounds good.'

'Let us hope so.'

'So what do you want me to do?'

Another delicate throat-clearing. 'In due course. May I ask, once again, if the sleeve is comfortable?'

'It seems very.' Sudden realisation. Very smooth, response at impressive levels even for someone used to Corps combat custom. A beautiful body, on the inside at least. 'Is this something new from Nakamura?'

'No.' Does the woman's gaze slant upward and left? She's a security exec, she's probably wired with retinal datadisplay. 'Harkany Neurosystems, grown under offworld licence for Khumalo-Cape.'

Envoys aren't supposed to suffer from surprise. Any frowning I did would have to be on the inside. 'Khumalo? Never heard of them.'

'No, you wouldn't have.'

'Excuse me?'

'Suffice it to say we have equipped you with the very best biotech available. I doubt I need to enumerate the sleeve's capacities to someone of your background. Should you wish detail, there is a basic manual accessible through the datadisplay in your left field of vision.' A faint smile, maybe the hint of weariness. 'Harkany were not culturing specifically for Envoy use, and there has not been time to arrange anything customised.'

'You've got a crisis on your hands?'

'Very astute, Kovacs-san. Yes, the situation might fairly be described as critical. We would like you to go to work immediately.'

'Well, that's what they pay me for.'

'Yes.' Would she broach the matter of exactly who was paying at this point? Probably not. 'As you've no doubt already guessed this will be a covert deployment. Very different from Sharya. Though you did have some experience of dealing with terrorists towards the end of that campaign, I believe.'

'Yeah.' After we smashed their IP fleet, jammed their data transmission systems, blew apart their economy and generally killed their capacity for global defiance, there were still a few diehards who didn't get the Protectorate message.

So we hunted them down. Infiltrate, befriend, subvert, betray. Murder in back alleys. *'I did that for a while.'*

'Good. This work is not dissimilar.'

'You've got terrorist problems? Are the Quellists acting up again?'

She makes a dismissive gesture. No one takes Quellism seriously any more. Not for a couple of centuries now. The few genuine Quellists still around on the World have traded in their revolutionary principles for high-yield crime. Same risks, better paid. They're no threat to this woman, or the oligarchy she represents. It's the first hint that things are not as they seem.

'This is more in the nature of a manhunt, Kovacs-san. An individual, not a political issue.'

'And you're calling in Envoy support.' Even through the mask of control, this has to rate a raised eyebrow. My voice has probably gone up a little as well. *'Must be a remarkable individual.'*

'Yes. He is. An ex-Envoy, in fact. Kovacs-san, before we proceed any further, I think something needs to be made clear to you, a matter that—'

'Something certainly needs to be made clear to my commanding officer. Because to me this sounds suspiciously like you're wasting Envoy Corps time. We don't do this kind of work.'

'—may come as something of a shock to you. You, ah, no doubt believe that you have been re-sleeved shortly after the Sharya campaign. Perhaps even only a few days after your needlecass out.'

A shrug. Envoy cool. *'Days or months – it doesn't make much difference to m—'*

'Two centuries.'

'What?'

'As I said. You have been in storage for a little under two hundred years. In real terms—'

Envoy cool goes out the window, rapidly. *'What the fuck happened to—'*

'Please, Kovacs-san. Hear me out.' A sharp note of command. And then, as the conditioning shuts me down again, pared back to listen and learn, more quietly: *'Later I will give you as much detail as you like. For now, let it suffice that you are no longer part of the Envoy Corps as such. You can consider yourself privately retained by the Harlan family.'*

Marooned centuries from the last moments of living experience you recall. Sleeved out of time. A lifetime away from everyone and everything you knew. Like some fucking criminal. Well, Envoy assimilation technique will by now have some of this locked down, but still—

'How did you—'

'Your digitised personality file was acquired for the family some time ago. As I said, I can give you more detail later. You need not concern yourself too much with this. The contract I am here to offer you is lucrative and, we feel, ultimately rewarding. What's important is for you to understand the extent to which your Envoy skills will be put to the test. This is not the Harlan's World you know.'

'I can deal with that.' Impatiently. 'It's what I do.'

'Good. Now, you will of course want to know—'

'Yeah.' Shut down the shock, like a tourniquet on a bleeding limb. Drag up competence and a drawled lack of concern once more. Grab on to the obvious, the salient point in all of this. *'Just who the fuck is this ex-Envoy you so badly want me to catch?'*

Maybe it went something like that.

Then again, maybe not. I'm inferring from suspicion and fragmented knowledge after the event. Building it up from what I can guess, using Envoy intuition to fill in the gaps. But I could be completely wrong.

I wouldn't know.

I wasn't there.

And I never saw his face when they told him where I was. Told him that I was, and what he'd have to do about it.

PART 1 –

THIS IS WHO YOU ARE

'Make it personal . . .'

Quellcrist Falconer

Things I Should Have Learnt By Now Vol II

ONE

Damage.

The wound stung like fuck, but it wasn't as bad as some I'd had. The blaster bolt came in blind across my ribs, already weakened by the door plating it had to chew through to get to me. Priests, up against the slammed door and looking for a quick gut-shot. Fucking amateur night. They'd probably caught almost as much pain themselves from the point-blank blowback off the plating. Behind the door, I was already twisting aside. What was left of the charge ploughed a long, shallow gash across my ribcage and went out, smouldering in the folds of my coat. Sudden ice down that side of my body and the abrupt stench of fried skin-sensor components. That curious bone-splinter fizzing that's almost a taste, where the bolt had ripped through the biolube casing on the floating ribs.

Eighteen minutes later, by the softly glowing display chipped into my upper left field of vision, the same fizzing was still with me as I hurried down the lamp-lit street, trying to ignore the wound. Stealthy seep of fluids beneath my coat. Not much blood. Sleeving synthetic has its advantages.

'Looking for a good time, sam?'

'Already had one,' I told him, veering away from the doorway. He blinked wave-tattooed eyelids in a dismissive flutter that said *your loss* and leaned his tightly-muscled frame languidly back into the gloom. I crossed the street and took the corner, tacking between a couple more whores, one a woman, the other of indeterminate gender. The woman was an augment, forked dragon tongue flickering out around her overly prehensile lips, maybe tasting my wound on the night air. Her eyes danced a similar passage over me, then slid away. On the other side, the cross-gender pro shifted its stance slightly and gave me a quizzical look but said nothing. Neither were interested. The streets were rain-slick and deserted, and they'd had longer to see me coming than the doorway operator. I'd cleaned up since leaving the citadel, but something about me must have telegraphed the lack of business opportunity.

At my back, I heard them talking about me in Stripjap. I heard the word for *broke*.

They could afford to be choosy. In the wake of the Mecsek Initiative, business was booming. Tekitomura was packed that winter, thronging with salvage brokers and the deCom crews that drew them the way a

trawler wake draws ripwings. *Making New Hok safe for a New Century*, the ads went. From the newly built hoverloader dock down at the Kompcho end of town it was less than a thousand kilometres, straight line distance, to the shores of New Hokkaido, and the loaders were running day and night. Outside of an airdrop, there is no faster way to get across the Andrassy Sea. And on Harlan's World, you don't go up in the air if you can possibly avoid it. Any crew toting heavy equipment – and they all were – was going to New Hok on a hoverloader out of Tekitomura. Those that lived would be coming back the same way.

Boom town. Bright new hope and brawling enthusiasm as the Mecsek money poured in. I limped down thoroughfares littered with the detritus of spent human merriment. In my pocket, the freshly excised cortical stacks clicked together like dice.

There was a fight going on at the intersection of Pencheva Street and Muko Prospect. The pipe houses on Muko had just turned out and their synapse-fried patrons had met late-shift dock workers coming up through the decayed quiet of the warehouse quarter. More than enough reason for violence. Now a dozen badly co-ordinated figures stumbled back and forth in the street, flailing and clawing inexpertly at each other while a gathered crowd shouted encouragement. One body already lay inert on the fused-glass paving, and someone else was dragging their body, a limb's length at a time, out of the fray, bleeding. Blue sparks shorted off a set of over-charged power knuckles, elsewhere light glimmered on a blade. But everyone still standing seemed to be having a good time and there were no police as yet.

Yeah, part of me jeered. Probably all too busy up the hill right now.

I skirted the action as best I could, shielding my injured side. Beneath the coat, my hands closed on the smooth curve of the last hallucinogen grenade and the slightly sticky hilt of the Tebbit knife.

Never get into a fight if you can kill quickly and be gone.

Virginia Vidaura – Envoy Corps trainer, later career criminal and sometime political activist. Something of a role model for me, though it was several decades since I'd last seen her. On a dozen different worlds, she crept into my mind unbidden, and I owed that ghost in my head my own life a dozen times over. This time I didn't need her or the knife. I got past the fight without eye contact, made the corner of Pencheva and melted into the shadows that lay across the alley mouths on the seaward side of the street. The timechip in my eye said I was late.

Pick it up, Kovacs. According to my contact in Millsport, Plex wasn't all that reliable at the best of times, and I hadn't paid him enough to wait long.

Five hundred metres down and then left into the tight fractal whorls of Belacotton Kohei Section, named centuries ago for the habitual content and the original owner/operator family whose warehouse frontages walled the curving maze of alleys. With the Unsettlement and the subsequent loss

of New Hokkaido as any kind of market, the local belaeed trade pretty much collapsed and families like Kohei went rapidly bankrupt. Now the grime-filmed upper-level windows of their facades peered sadly across at each other over gape-mouthed loading bay entrances whose shutters were all jammed somewhere uncommitted between open and closed.

There was talk of regeneration of course, of reopening units like these and retooling them as deCom labs, training centres and hardware storage facilities.

Mostly, it was still just talk – the enthusiasm had kindled on the wharf-line units facing the hoverloader ramps further west, but so far it hadn't spread further in any direction than you could trust a wirehead with your phone. This far off the wharf and this far east, the chitter of Mecsek finance was still pretty inaudible.

The joys of trickle-down.

Belacotton Kohei Nine Point Twenty-Six showed a faint glow in one upper window and the long restless tongues of shadows in the light that seeped from under the half cranked loading-bay shutter gave the building the look of a one-eyed, drooling maniac. I slid to the wall and dialled up the synthetic sleeve's auditory circuits for what they were worth, which wasn't much. Voices leaked out into the street, fitful as the shadows at my feet.

‘—telling you, I'm not going to hang around for *that*.’

It was a Millsport accent, the drawling metropolitan twang of Harlan's World Amanglic dragged up to an irritated jag. Plex's voice, muttering below sense-making range, made soft provincial counterpoint. He seemed to be asking a question.

‘How the fuck would I know that? Believe what you want.’ Plex's companion was moving about, handling things. His voice faded back in the echoes of the loading bay. I caught the words *kaikyo*, *matter*, a chopped laugh. Then again, coming closer to the shutter ‘—matters is what the family believes, and they'll believe what the technology tells them. Technology leaves a trail, my friend.’ A sharp coughing and indrawn breath that sounded like recreational chemicals going down. ‘This guy is fucking late.’

I frowned. *Kaikyo* has a lot of meanings, but they all depend on how old you are. Geographically, it's a strait or a channel. That's early Settlement-Years use, or just hyper-educated, kanji-scribbling, First Families pretension. This guy didn't sound First Family, but there was no reason he couldn't have been *around* back when Konrad Harlan and his well-connected pals were turning Glimmer VI into their own personal backyard. Plenty of dh personalities still on stack from that far back, just waiting to be downloaded into a working sleeve. Come to that, you wouldn't need to re-sleeve more than a half dozen times, end to end, to live through the whole of Harlan's World's human history anyway. It's still not much over four centuries, earth standard, since the colony barges made planetfall.

Envoy intuition twisted about in my head. It felt wrong. I'd met men and women with centuries of continuous life behind them and they didn't talk like this guy. This wasn't the wisdom of ages, drawling out into the Tekitomura night over pipe fumes.

On the street, scavenged into the argot of Stripjap a couple of hundred years later, *kaikyo* means a contact who can shift stolen goods. A covert flow manager. In some parts of the Millsport Archipelago, it's still common usage. Elsewhere, the meaning is shifting to describe above-board financial consultants.

Yeab, and further south it means a holy man possessed by spirits, or a sewage outlet. Enough of this detective shit. You heard the man – you're late.

I got the heel of one hand under the edge of the shutter and hauled upward, locking up the tidal rip of pain from my wound as well as the synthetic sleeve's nervous system would let me. The shutter ratcheted noisily to the roof. Light fell out into the street and all over me.

'Evening.'

'Jesus!' The Millsport accent jerked back a full step. He'd only been a couple of metres away from the shutter when it went up.

'Tak.'

'Hello Plex.' My eyes stayed on the newcomer. 'Who's the tan?'

By then I already knew. Pale, tailored good looks straight out of some low-end experia flic, somewhere between Micky Nozawa and Ryu Bartok. Well-proportioned fighter's sleeve, bulk in the shoulders and chest, length in the limbs. Stacked hair, the way they're doing it on the bioware catwalks these days, that upward static-twisted thing that's meant to look like they just pulled the sleeve out of a clone tank. A suit bagged and draped to suggest hidden weaponry, a stance that said he had none he was ready to use. Combat arts crouch that was more bark than readiness to bite. He still had the discharged micro-pipe in one curled palm, and his pupils were spiked wide open. Concession to an ancient tradition put illuminium tattooed curlicues across one corner of his forehead.

Millsport yakuza apprentice. Street thug.

'You don't call me *tani*,' he hissed. 'You are the outsider here, Kovacs. You are the intruder.'

I left him at the periphery of my vision and looked towards Plex, who was over by the workbenches, fiddling with a knot of webbing straps and trying on a smile that didn't want to be on his dissipated aristo face.

'Look, Tak—'

'This was strictly a private party, Plex. I didn't ask you to sub-contract the entertainment.'

The yakuza twitched forward, barely restrained. He made a grating noise deep in his throat. Plex looked panicked.

'Wait, I . . .' He put down the webbing with an obvious effort. 'Tak, he's here about something else.'

'He's here on my time,' I said mildly.

‘Listen, Kovacs. You fucking—’

‘No.’ I looked back at him as I said it, hoping he could read the bright energy in my tone for what it was. ‘You know who I am, you’ll stay out of my way. I’m here to see Plex, not you. Now get out.’

I don’t know what stopped him, Envoy rep, late-breaking news from the citadel – *because they’ll be all over it by now, you made such a fucking mess up there* – or just a cooler head than the cheap-suited punk persona suggested. He stood braced in the door of his own rage for a moment, then stood down and displaced it, all poured into a glance at the nails of his right hand and a grin.

‘Sure. You just go ahead and transact with Plex here. I’ll wait outside. Shouldn’t take long.’

He even took the first step towards the street. I looked back at Plex.

‘What the fuck’s he talking about?’

Plex winced.

‘We, uh, we need to reschedule, Tak. We can’t—’

‘Oh no,’ But looking around the room I could already see the swirled patterns in the dust where someone had been using a grav-lifter. ‘No, no, you told me—’

‘I-I know, Tak, but—’

‘I *paid* you.’

‘I’ll give you the money—’

‘I don’t *want* the fucking money, Plex.’ I stared at him, fighting down the urge to rip his throat out. Without Plex, there was no upload. Without the upload— ‘*I want my fucking body back.*’

‘It’s cool, it’s cool. You’ll get it back. It’s just right now—’

‘It’s just right now, Kovacs, we’re using the facilities.’ The yakuza drifted back into my line of sight, still grinning. ‘Because to tell the truth, they were pretty much ours in the first place. But then Plex here probably didn’t tell you that, did he?’

I shuttled a glance between them. Plex looked embarrassed.

You gotta feel sorry for the guy. Isa, my Millsport contact broker, all of fifteen years old, razored violet hair and brutally obvious archaic datarat plugs, working on world-weary reflective while she laid out the deal and the cost. *Look at history, man. It fucked him over but good.*

History, it was true, didn’t seem to have done Plex any favours. Born three centuries sooner with the name Kohei, he’d have been a spoilt stupid younger son with no particular need to do more than exercise his obvious intelligence in some gentleman’s pursuit like astrophysics or archaeologue science. As it was, the Kohei family had left its post-Unsettlement generations nothing but the keys to ten streets of empty warehouses and a decayed aristo charm that, in Plex’s own self-deprecating words, made it easier than you’d think to get laid when broke. Pipe-blasted, he told me the whole shabby story on less than three days’ acquaintance. He seemed to need to tell someone, and Envoys are good listeners. You listen, you file

under local colour, you soak it up. Later, the recalled detail maybe saves your life.

Driven by the terror of a single lifespan and no re-sleeve, Plex's newly impoverished ancestors learnt to work for a living, but most of them weren't very good at it. Debt piled up, the vultures moved in. By the time Plex came along, his family were in so deep with the yakuza that low-grade criminality was just a fact of life. He'd probably grown up around aggressively slouched suits like this one. Probably learnt that embarrassed, give-up-the-ground smile at his father's knee.

The last thing he wanted to do was upset his patrons.

The last thing I wanted to do was ride a hoverloader back to Millsport in this sleeve.

'Plex, I'm booked out of here on the *Saffron Queen*. That's four hours away. Going to refund me my ticket?'

'We'll flicker it, Tak.' His voice was pleading. 'There's another 'loader out to EmPee tomorrow evening. I've got stuff, I mean Yukio's guys—'

'—use my fucking *name*, man,' yelped the yakuza.

'They can flicker you to the evening ride, no one's ever going to know.' The pleading gaze turned on Yukio. 'Right? You'll do that, right?'

I added a stare of my own. 'Right? Seeing as how you're fucking up my exit plans currently?'

'You already fucked up your exit, Kovacs.' The yakuza was frowning, head-shaking. Playing at *sempai* with mannerisms and a clip-on solemnity he'd probably copied directly from his own *sempai* not too far back in his apprenticeship. 'Do you know how much heat you've got out there looking for you right now? The cops have put in sniffer squads all over uptown, and my guess is they'll be all over the 'loader dock inside an hour. The whole TPD is out to play. Not to mention our bearded stormtrooper friends from the citadel. Fuck, man, you think you could have left a little *more* blood up there.'

'I asked you a question. I didn't ask for a critique. You going to flicker me to the next departure or not?'

'Yeah, yeah.' He waved it away. 'Consider it fucking done. What you don't appreciate, Kovacs, is that some people have got serious business to transact. You come up here and stir up local law enforcement with your mindless violence, they're liable to get all enthusiastic and go busting people we *need*.'

'Need for what?'

'None of your fucking business.' The *sempai* impression skidded off and he was pure Millsport street again. 'You just keep your fucking head down for the next five or six hours and try not to kill anyone else.'

'And then what?'

'And then we'll call you.'

I shook my head. 'You'll have to do better than that.'

‘Better than.’ His voice climbed. ‘Who the *fuck* do you think you’re talking to, Kovacs?’

I measured the distance, the time it would take me to get to him. The pain it would cost. I ladled out the words that would push him. ‘Who am I talking to? I’m talking to a whiff-wired *chimpira*, a fucking street punk up here from Millsport and off the leash from his *sempai*, and it’s getting old, Yukio. Give me your fucking phone – I want to talk to someone with authority.’

The rage detonated. Eyes flaring wide, hand reaching for whatever he had inside the suit jacket. Way too late.

I hit him.

Across the space between us, unfolding attacks from my uninjured side. Sideways into throat and knee. He went down choking. I grabbed an arm, twisted it and laid the Tebbit knife across his palm, held so he could see.

‘That’s a bioware blade,’ I told him tightly. ‘Adoracion Haemorrhagic Fever. I cut you with this and every blood vessel in your body ruptures inside three minutes. *Is that what you want?*’

He heaved against my grip, whooped after breath. I pressed down with the blade, and saw the panic in his eyes.

‘It isn’t a good way to die, Yukio. *Phone.*’

He pawed at his jacket and the phone tipped out, skittered on the evercrete. I leaned close enough to be sure it wasn’t a weapon, then toed it back towards his free hand. He fumbled it up, breath still coming in hoarse jags through his rapidly bruising throat.

‘Good. Now punch up someone who can help, then give it to me.’

He thumbed the display a couple of times and offered the phone to me, face pleading the way Plex’s had a couple of minutes earlier. I fixed him with my eyes for a long moment, trading on the notorious immobility of cheap synth features, then let go of his locked-out arm, took the phone and stepped back out of reach. He rolled over away from me, still clutching his throat. I put the phone to my ear.

‘Who is this?’ asked an urbane male voice in Japanese.

‘My name is Kovacs.’ I followed the language shift automatically. ‘Your *chimpira* Yukio and I are having a conflict of interest that I thought you might like to resolve.’

A frigid silence.

‘That’s some time tonight I’d like you to resolve it,’ I said gently.

There was a hiss of indrawn breath at the other end of the line. ‘Kovacs-san, you are making a mistake.’

‘Really?’

‘It would be unwise to involve us in your affairs.’

‘I’m not the one doing the involving. Currently I’m standing in a warehouse looking at an empty space where some equipment of mine used to be. I have it on pretty good authority the reason it’s gone is that you took it.’

More silence. Conversations with the *yakuza* are invariably punctuated with long pauses, during which you're supposed to reflect and listen carefully to what's not being said.

I wasn't in the mood for it. My wound ached.

'I'm told you'll be finished in about six hours. I can live with that. But I want your word that at the end of that time the equipment will be back here and in working order, ready for me to use. I want your word.'

'Hirayasu Yukio is the person to—'

'Yukio is a *chimp*. Let us deal honestly with each other in this. Yukio's only job here is to make sure I don't slaughter our mutual service provider. Which, incidentally, is something he's not doing well. I was already short on patience when I arrived, and I don't expect to replenish my stock any time soon. I'm not interested in Yukio. I want *your* word.'

'And if I do not give it?'

'Then a couple of your front offices are going to end up looking like the inside of the citadel tonight. You can have *my* word on that.'

Quiet. Then: 'We do not negotiate with terrorists.'

'Oh *please*. What are you, making speeches? I thought I was dealing at executive level. Am I going to have to do some damage here?'

Another kind of silence. The voice on the other end of the line seemed to have thought of something else.

'Is Hirayasu Yukio harmed?'

'Not so's you'd notice.' I looked down coldly at the *yakuza*. He'd mastered breathing again and was beginning to sit up. Beads of sweat gleamed at the borders of his tattoo. 'But all that can change. It's in your hands.'

'Very well.' Barely a handful of seconds before the response. By *yakuza* standards, it was unseemly haste. 'My name is Tanaseda. You have my word, Kovacs-san, that the equipment you require will be in place and available to you at the time you specify. In addition, you will be paid for your trouble.'

'Thank you. That—'

'I have not finished. You further have my word that if you commit any acts of violence against my personnel, I shall issue a global writ for your capture and subsequent execution. I am talking about a very unpleasant real death. Is that understood?'

'It seems fair. But I think you'd better tell the *chimp* to behave himself. He seems to have delusions of competence.'

'Let me speak to him.'

Yukio Hirayasu was sitting by now, hunched over on the evercrete, wheezing breathily. I hissed at him and tossed him the phone. He caught it awkwardly, one-handed, still massaging his throat with the other.

'Your *sempai* wants a word.'

He glared up at me out of tear-smeared, hating eyes, but he put the phone to his ear. Compressed Japanese syllables trickled out of it, like

someone riffing on a ruptured gas cylinder. He stiffened and his head lowered. His answers ran bitten off and monosyllabic. The word *yes* featured a lot. One thing you've got to hand to the yakuza – they do discipline in the ranks like no one else.

The one-sided conversation ended and Yukio held the phone out to me, not meeting my eye. I took it.

'This matter is resolved,' said Tanaseda in my ear. 'Please arrange to be elsewhere for the remainder of the night. You may return six hours from now when the equipment and your compensation will both be waiting for you. We will not speak again. This. Confusion. Has been most regrettable.'

He didn't sound that upset.

'You recommend a good place for breakfast?' I asked.

Silence. A polite static backdrop. I weighed the phone in my palm for a moment, then tossed it back to Yukio.

'So.' I looked from the yakuza to Plex and back. 'Either of *you* recommend a good place for breakfast?'