

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, Kovacssan. Are you comfortable?'

'Yeah. You?'