

CORPORATIONS

Under the sprawling regulatory body known as the Protectorate, corporate enterprise rapidly became focused on a few very powerful multi-planetary business entities. While many smaller businesses and services still exist, they do not dominate the most important purchases and services, including basics like food. The wealthiest corporations are either partially or entirely under contract by the UN, adding upwards of nine figures to a corporation's balance sheet, even for the simplest contracts. Corporations enjoy the tremendous windfall of money provided by these contracts, but the Protectorate's regulatory involvement in matters, such as the costly and difficult venture of planet colonization and terraforming, causes unusual tension.

CRIMINALITY

Crime is rampant and seen as a strangely acceptable alternative to the omnipresent corporations and Protectorate influences. The oppressive presence of both these organizations gives criminal enterprises a wide potential pool of downtrodden and disenfranchised recruits who maintain a spark of enterprise amidst the doldrums of society. Criminal enterprises are not the "good guys," but often grant a means of advancement that is far less opaque in possibilities and demands, especially to the bottommost rung of society. Besides the obvious problem of illegality, to ascend to the highest echelons of a criminal enterprise, a person must be willing to be truly monstrous, but staying in the middle offers no guarantee of stability or safety. It is common for a Protectorate citizen to be very tacitly involved with a criminal organization in the form of a shell company or an anonymous small

contract job from time to time. This provides criminal organizations the labor they need. Contractors who are caught can easily avoid legal consequences by pleading ignorance. With the criminal justice system being impacted by a multitude of more serious crimes, casual associations with criminal organizations are fairly common. They are logged when known but rarely pursued for prosecution under most circumstances. This information is more likely to be used as leverage to pursue higher ranked criminals, or as a threat to manufacture complicity. However, criminals of that rank are extremely cagey and have layers of protection against such tactics, often having literal lifetimes of practice in this delicate social and legal art.

Some lose the will to live because they cannot handle the extreme passage of time. Worse still, some can handle endless existence; those from the wealthy class called "Meths" (named for Methuselah) are so aloof from the human experience that many lose touch with their humanity entirely, becoming true sociopaths relatable only to their ancient comrades. It is this reality where *Altered Carbon* takes place. The promise of immortality has lured people into accepting a world where they are practically subjects to a caste of immortal plutocrats and a totalitarian government whose influence can be felt in every aspect of life. The cruel truth is that lines of code are the baseline for legal personhood. Those who run afoul of the Protectorate's law can have their bodies confiscated with little chance of reclaiming them at the end of their sentencing without paying exorbitant "sleeve mortgages." Even payment doesn't guarantee the safety of a sleeve with powerful enough enemies.

// LORE NOTE

The distinction between public and private sectors within the Protectorate are not always clear. Roles normally filled by civil servants presently can be done by freelancers and mercenaries under contract with the Protectorate. Even organizations like the police make use of contractors and often determine payroll substantially by the wealth confiscated from the criminals they apprehend.

For example, the expensive and luxurious houseboat that Kristin Ortega makes use of in *Altered Carbon* was the result of Elias Ryker collaring a major crime lord working out of Sydney. The boat was his payment for his substantial role. This is not allowed by the Bay City Police, but each police precinct makes their own rules in regards to mercenaries. Nonetheless, this sort of mercenary organization is one of many of which characters can be a part.

TECHNOLOGY

DIGITAL HUMAN FREIGHT (DHF)

In *Altered Carbon*, a person is not the body they inhabit, but rather the mind that inhabits a body. The body is considered nothing more than property. Using advanced technology, a person's consciousness is digitized into data called Digital Human Freight and transferred from body to body, or "sleeves," within their unique cortical stack. Being reduced to data, DHF can also be transmitted by encrypted signals using a vast broadcast network of satellites. Known as "needlecasting," DHF data is tightly packed, allowing people to safely transmit their consciousness across space into Sleeves waiting in other countries, even other worlds light-years away. The integrity of this data is paramount, as its damage or corruption can lead to Real Death. Thankfully, accidental destruction of the cortical stack is rare. Most Real Death is caused by the deliberate targeting of the cortical stack (known as "slagging"), and it is one of the harshest punishable crimes in the Protectorate.

// LORE NOTE

DHF technology predates the use of Cortical Stacks by centuries. It was originally developed for long-range colony ships.

CORTICAL STACKS

While the technology for cortical stacks is not new, its adaptation as a means for DHF transfer is a relatively recent development. The programmer and explorer, Nadia Makita, first pioneered the transfer protocols using a new type of cortical stack made from raw materials derived from Elder artifacts. This allowed the cortical stack to do two things it previously could not: act as a reusable medium for DHF transfers and override the higher functions of a host brain with the DHF of a cortical stack.

Previously, DHF and cortical stack technology were used to transfer DHFs stored in the memory banks of colony barges to clone sleeves shortly after arrival on a new planet. Artifacts of an advanced alien civilization are now melted down into an alloy to create these cortical stacks that can condense data enough for storage and transfer to other cortical stacks. The new process takes mere seconds rather than spending days or weeks transferring DHF to the waiting sleeve from data vaults.

Physical cortical stack extraction is usually only performed when a sleeve suffers extreme Organic Damage or has no chance of making it to a proper transfer facility. This kind of extraction renders the sleeve useless for future transfers, and even the sleeves of the severely injured, old, or infirm carry significant value to the Protectorate for its various re-sleeving programs. Transfer facilities are relatively common, and portable units for this purpose do

exist, but both require the proper license from the Protectorate to operate. All transfers are logged, but rarely actively monitored.

// LORE NOTE

Whales retained genetic memory from when they met the Elders. It is surmised that their wings could have given early humans a template to form the artistic rendition of angels. While the first connection with whales is verified, there is no actual evidence of humans ever having come into contact with a living Elder at any time during human history.

REAL DEATH

Murder as we know it is viewed differently in the world of *Altered Carbon*. It has become an extreme form of property damage called Organic Damage. Being the victim of Organic Damage comes with many protections, including Protectorate fail-safes that grant the ability to get “re-sleeved” or “spun up” into a new body. The majority of Protectorate citizens will receive whichever sleeves are available, which typically include a rogues’ gallery from the recently incarcerated who carry with them all sorts of neurological and social baggage from their previous DHF occupant. The need for re-sleeving is not nearly as common as it would be if there weren’t radical interventions that can rebuild bone tissue with carbon fiber and regrow soft tissue and nerves with Rapid Regrowth Bios. All but instantaneous death is routinely survivable for a sleeve.

BACKUPS AND COPIES

In special cases, the cortical stack can back up a DHF by transmitting a copy of it to a secure third-party facility under Protectorate jurisdiction in a process known as “needlecasting.” DHF copies may also be placed into storage when someone is planning to needlecast from one location to another under less than ideal conditions. The most effective (and ludicrously expensive) method is Full Spectrum Digital Backup, a passive system employed by the Bancrofts, and a few others who can afford it, that automatically creates a DHF backup every 48 hours via encrypted needlecasts to privately-owned satellites and storage facilities. With similar technology, a DHF can be extracted from a sleeve via remote broadcast, allowing an escape to Virtual from a trapped sleeve.

There are other methods to make DHF backups, but most are illicit and require bribery or a very loyal network of people willing to turn a blind eye. Making full copies of a cortical stack is highly illegal when done outside of the Protectorate’s strict protocols. It is possible for someone well-connected enough to know people who can work the system, or who are willing to run the risk and pay the price. However, it is not legal for a person to possess any duplicate of a cortical stack or backup systems data. If an individual is caught with a DHF copy of themselves or another person, they are subject to the highest punishment of Protectorate law, often resulting in “deletion.”

// LORE NOTE

The Protectorate only directly monitors DHF transfers to and from off-world colonies. Local transfers are typically logged but are not immediately disclosed to the Protectorate unless the DHF is flagged or a Protectorate agency makes a search query for a specific person. Transfers are possible outside of dedicated facilities and can even be done remotely with the right hardware, but it can be dangerous and may require favors to pull off if done clandestinely.



SLEEVES

The body a DHF inhabits is called a “sleeve” and it can take a variety of forms. It can be gestated and grown naturally as humanity always has done (a “natal” sleeve) or it can be an artificial construct (a synthetic sleeve or “synth”) that is little more than a machine with a human mind as its pilot. It can also be a product of genetic science, lab-grown or cloned at tremendous expense. While synthetic sleeves are a popular way to handle the growing ratio of DHF to available sleeves, most synthetics are cheap and contend with a variety of design flaws and operational issues.

Some synthetic sleeves have vastly superior operational effectiveness than that of even a clone (which, to put a finer point on it, is more or less built for luxury). The top-of-the-line synthetic sleeves

are often only part mechanical but have a variety of biological components or take advantage of genetics and neurochemical advancements, often incorporating animal traits of pack bonding, memory, perception, endurance, and a whole host of other features. The manufacturers that do this have become a household name to military contractors and Protectorate officials, as such sleeve models are notorious for their combat effectiveness. Even older models of such combat sleeves maintain tremendous favor and will find their way into the hands of poorer military contractors, collectors, or will be used by criminal organizations when they cannot afford the highest quality synthetic sleeves.

// LORE NOTE

A “birth sleeve” is the original body in which a person is born. A “natal sleeve” is a naturally conceived human body, but the DHF in the cortical stack may not be the original occupant. A synthetic sleeve is a genetically engineered sleeve with no natural human origins. These sleeves may all seem similar, but the main difference is whether they were naturally born versus engineered.

ELDER CIVILIZATION

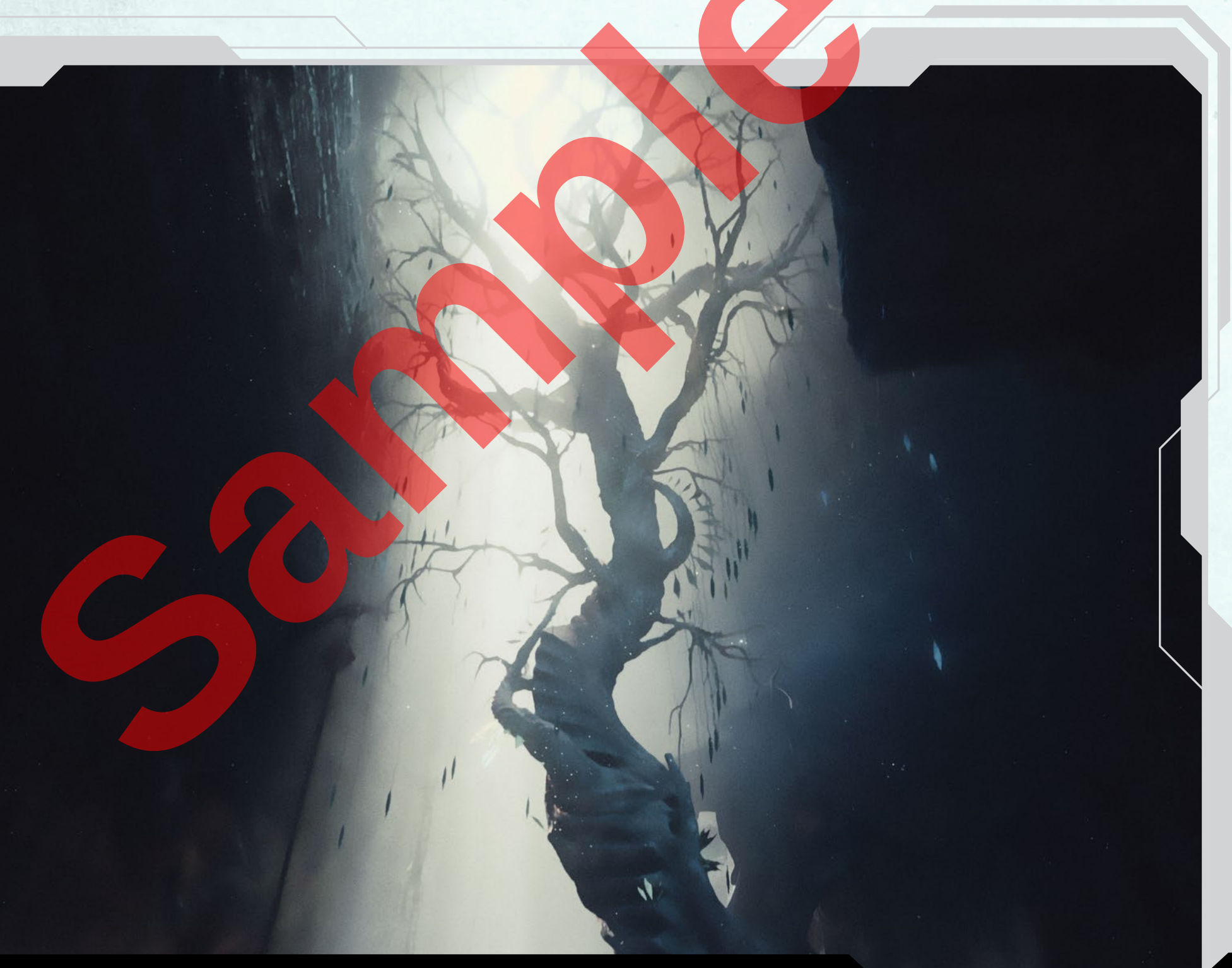
Colloquially known as “Martians” due to the discovery of their ruins on Mars, it is unknown where the numerous colonized worlds of the Elders originated. Their civilization collapsed for reasons not fully understood despite more than five centuries of study across the ruins located in more than forty colonized worlds. Their civilization has been extinct long enough to have an actual fossil record. Based on the remains found, the Elders were avian in appearance with wings and beaked faces. Each star chart found on a colony world made it appear as if that world was the center of their civilization, indicating that they had a raptor-like, solitary mindset. The Elders were unbelievably technologically advanced and were known to possess faster-than-light travel. Their weapons also incorporated this same technology with the ability to rend the fabric of reality. The Elders also had the technology to transport personnel and equipment via a stable wormhole gate variant of the theoretical Einstein-Rosen bridge. This made transport between terrestrial environments and space

possible, without fear of imploding the atmosphere of a planet with the terrestrial gate. The discovery of this technology means that the scope of the Elder civilization’s empire will likely never be overstated in its vastness. There is a remote chance that some extant Elder populations remain isolated in the far reaches of space, regardless, whatever empire they had as a species has long since vanished. However, conspiracies abound that early colonists encountered living elders, but killed them in order to prevent The Protectorate from disputing the colonists claim.

The unfossilized remains of the Elders, when found, crumble without much difficulty, and their volatile body chemistry produces alkali dust that reacts violently with exposed skin. The remaining soft tissues give evidence that they had neck glands, not unlike wattles on a turkey, and are distinguished in sex by the bony skull crest of the female. According to the limited evidence available, female Elders seem to have been the overwhelming majority, if not the sole members, of the “warrior caste.”

Most vexing of all, but not surprising, is the evidence of other species in the universe beyond the Elders and humans who had a hostile relationship with the Elders. The Wardani, an Elder dreadnought class battleship, was discovered on the other side of a gate on Sanction IV, still in an unending battle with another starship of an unknown race. The battleship has held this position so long that the legendarily slow-growing Songspire trees onboard have ruptured through the floors of the ship from the decks below in various places. These Songspires behave differently and are far more sensitive than ones grown on the surfaces of planets. They respond to mere air pressure fluctuations, as opposed to physical touch, to produce their haunting songs. These Songspires

seem to carry the resonance of the crew's death throes. Their tortured alien minds cause tremendous psychic trauma to any humans caught in one of the Songspire's choral dirges. The Wardani, with its Elder crew long dead, fights and repairs on autopilot against the aggressing ship. The unknown alien ship is presumably a drone ship or also on autopilot with its crew suffering the same fate as the Elders over the millennia-long stalemate. This is possibly one battle of many in a system-sized engagement with an unknown number of warships. The Wardani and its clash with the other ship in an eternal danse macabre is the closest thing to a living record that has been found of the Elder civilization in action.



WAR

War in the transhuman era has changed drastically. Soldiers have become more durable due to the ability to retrieve a DHF, paired with the ability to re-sleeve that DHF into various custom combat-ready synthetic sleeves. Even less regard is given to collateral damage or civilian casualties. Soldiers are often mercenaries rather than standing armies and may be either direct or de-facto corporate employees. While a soldier's cortical stack can be retrieved and spun up into new combat sleeves, the mental state of even a trained soldier degrades as the violent trauma of their sleeve's demise no longer carries the eternal peace of death. They are brought back to fight again and again until either their contract is fulfilled, their ego corrodes to the point of mewling madness, or they experience Real Death with the permanent destruction of the cortical stack housing their DHF. Apocalyptic atomics and other weapons once kept as deterrents, are now used wantonly in the wars of the Protectorate. These military actions lay waste to entire cities and populations. Conventional weaponry is also far deadlier with rail, beam, and particle weapons making frequent appearances, as well as wholly unique threats such as explosives with smart shrapnel and evolving nanoweapons.

SOUL MARKETS

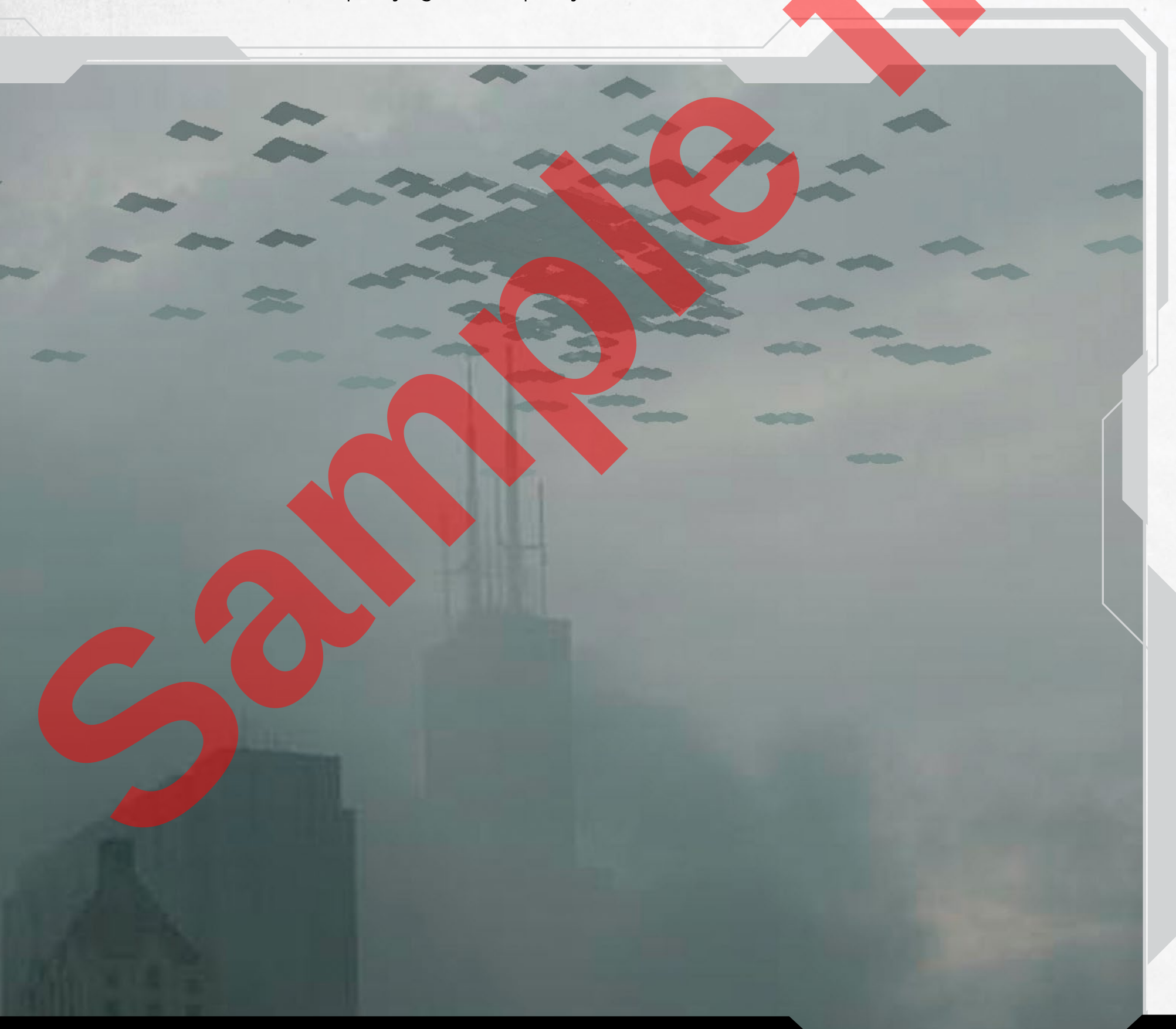
Among the most unscrupulous of all war-time profiteers are those who descend upon old battlefields and extract the cortical stacks from the corpses of soldiers and civilians alike. These extractions are undertaken with such callous, inhuman regard that bits of flesh, cartilage, and bone still cling to the iridescent silver stacks. They are collected in such great quantities that heavy machinery is needed to move and dump them with a sound similar to a rainstorm hitting a tin roof.

Some criminal organizations specialize in this market, most notably the Carrefour Brotherhood whose vendors often adopt a voodoo persona and may even sincerely practice the religion as "Hougans" for men, or "Mambo" for women, but it is just as likely for the theatrics. These cortical stacks are purchased by the bin and offered for sale to a variety of customers.

The volume of cortical stacks and comparative lack of sleeves has led to the further processing of surplus stacks. They are often rendered into dermal patches that distill the life experience of a DHF into a sort of drug. As horrifying as this is, the fact remains that the number of victims war produces gives a nearly endless supply of DHF to sell (and abuse). At this magnitude of victims, it can be almost impossible to feel sorry for any single person whose DHF is sold or snuffed out for a momentary high, or left to waste away in a pile with millions of others who shared the same fate for sometimes decades, even centuries.

The activities of Soul Markets are technically not legal in the Protectorate, but their pervasiveness indicates a lack of concern by authorities. This lack of policing may be due to the deficit of available sleeves for citizens who have suffered an untimely death as promised by Protectorate law. Any attention given to the inability to make good on this promise weakens the Protectorate's influence as a moral actor on behalf of their citizens in need of justice. Even without the deficit of available sleeves, UN bureaucracy is too slow-moving and ill-equipped to handle the massive numbers qualifying for their policy

of re-sleeving every soldier that is psychologically fit or every civilian that is killed as collateral damage. Soul Markets tend to pop up in the open near war zones where cortical stacks can be harvested and where they are unlikely to be bothered by the authorities. The Hougans provide a service to citizens seeking fallen loved ones, and the Protectorate allows this, turning a blind eye to their less savory profit ventures. In areas away from war zones, Soul Markets are distinctly black market operations that operate far more clandestinely, as they are still, in essence, human traffickers.



RELIGIOUS CODING

Not everyone is on board with the wholesale adoption of cortical stacks for virtual immortality. Some holdouts believe the act of using cortical stacks and re-sleeving into different bodies to be abhorrent and a gross violation of the natural order. While their reasoning has often been couched in religious terms, the predictions of orthodox religions about the societal impacts of cortical stack technology have proved to be prescient. The accurate predictions regarding treating death as a curable disease rather than a vital part of the natural order are what give the perspective of religious coding adopters substantial credibility, even when their claims are dismissed as retrograde. Reducing the legal personhood of humans to mere DHF has allowed a super-class of society, monolithic corporations, and an omnipresent government to lord over humanity with hitherto unthinkable power: the power of life and death itself.

While cortical stack technology and re-sleeving carry obvious advantages and the means to correct what were once cosmic injustices, especially regarding accidental death and murder, this is not accomplished without a social price. People are now bought and sold, and it is possible to make copies of a DHF, utterly obliterating the uniqueness of a human being. The promises of immortality become increasingly hollow as each generation lurches on. People don't even own their bodies. If a cortical stack is removed to be stored or incarcerated, that person's sleeve can be bought or leased to others. Even after a fair trial and imprisonment, the newly freed may never see or obtain their original sleeve again (even

their natal sleeve). Sleeves can be absorbed by the redistribution system or purchased by a wealthy individual whose eye was caught by its desirable physical traits. Digitizing the human mind has also invited waking horrors, such as the ability to torture someone to death over and over with amplified intensity in Virtual. This reality would not be possible with the normal release death provides.

The Protectorate allows a religious exemption ("religious coding") for some individuals to prevent re-sleeving upon the death of their current sleeve, for reasons of conscience or to protect their DHF from abuse after death. Whether it's the Neo-Catholics, who believe Hell awaits those who re-sleeve, or Buddhists, who believe re-sleeving renders reincarnation morally meaningless, it is possible to substantiate religious coding from many different perspectives. All these disparate perspectives share one commonality: the belief that death is not just perfectly acceptable, it is necessary to the natural order of things.

It is important to note that there is a decal on a person's DHF that declares a person's religious coding, indicating "Reasons of Conscience." Not only does this indicate the person's wishes, but it is designed to prevent re-sleeving from occurring at all by locking out all attempts to access the DHF, even in simulspace. Unlike those who simply wish to be stored, this is a permanent form of rejecting re-sleeving.

However, religious coding is not without its own controversy.

PROPOSITION 653

UN Proposition 653 would alter the baseline coding of cortical stacks and DHF to override religious coding and require those murdered with religious coding to be re-sleeved to identify or testify against their alleged murderer. This proposition was seen as a threat to Meths, like Reileen Kawahara, who benefited from falsifying religious coding to give the opportunity to Real Death (RD) and thrill kill for a price. To those who sincerely adopted religious coding, Proposition 653 was seen as a backdoor giving the Protectorate the ability to invent increasingly trivial reasons for required re-sleeving until the coding was diminished to no practical protection at all. This programming backdoor was also a security risk for DHF that would otherwise be protected from abuse in simulspace after sleeve death and would remove the one remaining protection from re-sleeving without consent. Regardless of the eventual broader impact, Proposition 653 passed after the events described in *Altered Carbon* and has since become law.

// LORE NOTE

Declaring exemption from involuntary re-sleeving is not a simple process by design. Successfully jumping through the necessary bureaucratic hoops is meant to be in and of itself a test of sincerity.

A person can be born into it, but applying for religious coding requires a sworn affidavit on disc, a full Vow of Abstention filed with the Vatican and multiple signatures from witnesses. There are also other organizations that the Protectorate recognizes as legitimate institutions of conscience besides the Vatican. Each one must fulfill the minimum criteria determined by the Protectorate but are not prevented from adding conditions of their own to file with one sanctioned organization or another.

Since most of the organizations the Protectorate recognizes in this manner are religious in nature, the most common additional qualifier is that applicants filed with them are sincere believers. However, it is not unheard of for some organizations, religious or otherwise, to set no additional conditions whatsoever outside of standard psych screenings. It is seen, from their perspective, as a form of charity to give a soul peace in death, to be ultimately free from Protectorate coercion and control.



THE METHS

The upper strata of transhuman society consists of the Meths, so named after Methuselah, as recorded in the book of Genesis, who is said to have lived nine hundred sixty-nine years. Meths are wealthy and far-removed enough from the human experience to have their DHF re-sleeved with far greater frequency and far less ill effects over time. To the extent that this status is a matter of money, Meths can afford higher quality sleeves that better emulate the experience of their natal sleeve, often maintaining a stable of natal clones. To a Meth, re-sleeving seems as natural as waking up in the morning. The rest of society risks being spun up into a cheap synthetic sleeve with flawed sensory apparatus that can degrade the ability of the DHF to interact with the world in a familiar manner. Meths view themselves as a more advanced form of human, possessing Nietzschean willpower to extend their lives far beyond what the human mind has any business experiencing. In this respect, it is a personality type, as much as it is a social class.

For all the talk of being superior, and as much as they consider themselves beyond normal humans, Meths have a human streak in that they still possess human desires and weaknesses. Over time, all humans, Meth or otherwise, will have diminishing returns on what they consider pleasurable. They will eventually need to seek greater thrills in order to obtain the same sensations if they are not disciplined enough to moderate their desires. Meths must go to ludicrous extremes and depraved excesses in order to acquire the same pleasurable rush that was satisfied with something fairly simple and normal decades before. A Meth will eventually nurture a set of pastimes that seem utterly deranged to the average human. To fellow Meths, these pastimes may seem distasteful at

worst, but generally understandable. This cloistered society nurtures an elitist mentality and is perfectly willing to turn a blind eye and close ranks to protect their own, lest their distasteful secrets become known. While they do not need the approval of non-Meths, Meths will often require the admiration or compliance of the greater population, especially if they are celebrities or maintain consumer business interests.

GENERATIONAL METHS

The very few relatable Meths are those who have worked their way into Meth society, achieving their wealth and status through a legitimate business, and deft social maneuvering. They have a high opinion of themselves but are often deserving of it to some extent. These Meths maintain a certain chivalric code or streak of humility either due to an awareness of their more humble beginnings or because they are old enough to consider what they stand to lose in the passage of lifetimes, casting their gaze back to what brought them to their current status for proper perspective. They will often discover or maintain a rule, or two, from the social code of non-Meths, or have a pastoral hobby of some kind that has been adapted to their new social station in some fashion.

The offspring of Meths, however, suffer an identity crisis and are generally the most dangerous and duplicitous of the Meths. Having not worked for what they have, they feel both entitled to their lifestyle and insecure knowing subconsciously that they are only living in such privileged luxury due to the accident of their birth. Since they are so dependent on their ancient parents and grandparents, they will often have the emotional maturity of a child despite sometimes being upwards of 80 to 100 years old. The long lifespan of Meths will occasionally mean that a generational Meth is one among dozens of brothers

and sisters and even hundreds of grandchildren, whose similar ambitions for the attention and approval of both Meth society and their parents causing them to see each other as rivals as much as they see each other as kin.

The resources at their disposal and the insecurity of their positions pushes generational Meths towards orchestrating schemes against one another. They may even have entire proxy turf wars fought by mercenaries or other criminal elements with whom they become involved as they dig deeper into the scum of Grounder society for recruits to further their schemes. Born into Meth society, they will never fully understand human society and can not comprehend, let alone nurture, a basic moral code in which Grounders have intrinsic worth. More likely, such Meths will see Grounders as disgusting, disposable peons whose sole purpose in life is to serve their grand designs, who can be outright abused, and who should be grateful for the opportunity presented to them. Possibly worse still, generational Meths can

see Grounders as those in need of their intervention as a savior. Such Meths will pose as some tormenting, moral busybody who believes that their often deranged, amorphous concept of the greater good is being served on behalf of the Grounders they abuse.

// LORE NOTE

First-generation Meths who achieved their position through advancing in a criminal organization, such as Reileen Kawahara, are still the most dangerous and conniving of all Meth society. They happen to be among the rarest Meth variety and many of them carry scandals wherever they go. However aloof the Meths may be, they are still extremely wary of social stigma and public scandal, going to almost any means to avoid them. Being wedded to a criminal element already indicates a degree of sociopathy that manifests fully in horrendous schemes involving the utter disposability of human life, along with their complete willingness to inflict any cruelty onto others in pursuit of their agendas.





SETTING

BAY CITY

The majority of the events of *Altered Carbon* take place in what was formerly known as San Francisco. Bay City is now one of the many megalopolises that have consumed all surrounding towns and suburbs into identical vast urban sprawls. Among a few ancient landmarks left standing, the Golden Gate and Bay Bridges still distinguish the San Francisco skyline from any other. Though, they have become host to sprawling hab-blocks as their needs as bridges became obsolete with the introduction of aircars and other related technology.

THE CITIZENS OF BAY CITY

The presence of megacorporations and the Protectorate work hand in hand in making Bay City aesthetically and functionally oppressive.

Tall buildings erupt from the ground and reach hundreds of stories into the air. Only the shining scar of the bay abruptly interrupts the sprawl that reaches its very shoreline. The monolithic buildings blot out the sun for most of the day, casting the city streets into a near-perpetual twilight of neon lights. The citizens are largely insular, isolated, and atomized despite the enormous population.

: LINK ESTABLISHED :

ADDITIONAL CONTENT

This chapter explores the basic concepts of game-play and setting. There will be frequent updates, additional material, and rules support for familiar settings available from the Hunters Entertainment and Renegade websites.

THE AERIUM

The network of skyscrapers called “The Aerium” is the exclusive domain of the Meths. Their towers pierce the sky with heights several times that of a normal Bay City skyscraper. Each tower has the luxury of supporting a multitude of sprawling estates, all far above the need to see the rabble below, the unseen underclasses toiling under permanent cloud cover. Only specifically registered air vehicles and police aircars are permitted to fly anywhere near it. The much-vaunted Suntouch House is part of this complex.

THE TWILIGHT

A razor-thin middle class serves as administration, managers, and highly skilled service technicians for the various technological marvels of society and its expansive bureaucracies. These individuals are said to inhabit The Twilight, somewhere between the darkness of grounder society and the dazzling brightness of the high life of meth aristocracy. Most aren't far removed from some criminal element by choice, a close relation, or the occasional contractor through one of their shell corporations. You'll scarcely find a programmer who hasn't moonlighted as a “Dipper” at some point. Most dabble with decadence or crime (often the white-collar variety) if only to search for some form of existential meaning. The extra money doesn't hurt either.



SOCIETY

GROUNDERS

The underclass, known as “Grounders” due to their inability to inhabit the skyscrapers as residents or personnel, continues to soar in numbers. Grounders are satiated with automated dispensed foodstuffs, public housing, and a neon-soaked parade of carnal pleasures. On paper, these features of the city seem almost Utopian, but the majority serve only as cheap labor for corporations and the vast bureaucracies of the Protectorate, as well as the Meths whose lives are glittering paradises in comparison to the empty, endless grind of the greater population.

YOU LIVE THAT LONG, THINGS START HAPPENING TO YOU. YOU GET TOO IMPRESSED WITH YOURSELF. ENDS UP, YOU THINK YOU'RE GOD. SUDDENLY THE LITTLE PEOPLE, THIRTY, MAYBE FORTY YEARS OLD, WELL THEY DON'T REALLY MATTER ANY MORE. YOU'VE SEEN WHOLE SOCIETIES RISE AND FALL, AND YOU START TO FEEL YOU'RE STANDING OUTSIDE IT ALL, AND NONE OF IT REALLY MATTERS TO YOU. AND MAYBE YOU'LL START SNUFFING THOSE LITTLE PEOPLE, JUST LIKE PICKING DAISIES, IF THEY GET UNDER YOUR FEET.

KRISTIN ORTEGA

METHS

The Meths that live in Bay City do not live in Bay City proper; the majority of their numbers reside in the Aerium. Their cloistered lives are unimaginably opulent, whiling away their prolonged existence with endless hedonistic pursuits and pithy politicking and jockeying for social standing. This conflict will occasionally bleed into the city below, the ripples through society generally going unnoticed by those that reside in the Aerium.

It is important to note that this extremely lopsided society is relatively unique to Earth and Bay City in particular. While a Meth social class exists in every colonized world in the Protectorate's influence, only on Earth is the gulf so extremely wide between the Meths and everyone else. It is as if the strange social stagnation that results from this huge disparity in status has ossified the classes at both polar ends so that both Grounders and Meths alike see their existence as isolated and unchanging. Meths are content with indulging their ridiculously lavish lifestyle. The rest of Earth's society is either living a hand-to-mouth existence or is so cowed by carnal and chemical pursuits that they have lost the will or vocabulary to marshal the type of uprising that occasionally occurs on the colony worlds.

Even in places like Harlan's World, this attitude is not shared. Harlan descendants are frequent patrons of local entertainment venues and participating in society at large. While their raucous behavior is notorious among the Harlanites, being a general public nuisance in such a way is a far cry from living in a literal city in the clouds who rarely, if ever, need to mingle among the lower class.