



The Human Blend (The Tipping Point Trilogy)

By Alan Dean Foster

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In this first novel of a thrilling new series set in our near future, *New York Times* bestselling author Alan Dean Foster reveals a place where criminals are punished through genetic engineering and body manipulation—and poses profound questions about what it means to be human.

Given his name because radical surgery has reduced him to preternatural thinness, Whispr is a thug. In a dark alley in Savannah, Whispr and his partner in crime, Jiminy Cricket, murder what they take to be a random tourist in order to steal his artificial hand. But the victim is also carrying an unusual silver thread, which Whispr and Jiminy grab as well.

Chance later deposits a wounded Whispr at the clinic of Dr. Ingrid Seastrom. Powerful forces have been searching for Whispr since he acquired the mysterious thread, and Jiminy has vanished. All Whispr wants to do is sell the thread, and when he offers to split the profits with Ingrid, she makes an astonishing discovery. So begins the formidable partnership between the Harvard-educated physician and the street-smart thief—as long as they can elude the enhanced assassins that are tracking them.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Alan Dean Foster has written in a variety of genres, including hard science fiction, fantasy, horror, detective, Western, historical, and contemporary fiction. He is the author of the *New York Times* bestseller *Star Wars: The Approaching Storm* and the popular Pip & Flinx novels, as well as novelizations of several films including *Transformers*, *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen*, *Star Wars*, the first three *Alien* films, and *Alien Nation*. His novel *Cyber Way* won the Southwest Book Award for Fiction in 1990, the first science fiction work ever to do so. Foster and his wife, JoAnn Oxley, live in Prescott, Arizona, in a house built of brick that was salvaged from an early-twentieth-century miners' brothel. He is currently at work on several new novels and media projects.

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"Let's riffle the dead man." Jiminy scowled at the newly won corpse and hopped to it.

Viewed up close, the freshly demised Meld wasn't much of a prize--but then, Jiminy Cricket wasn't much of a thief. Neither was his occasional mudbud Whispr. As Jiminy slipped the still-warm barker back inside his shirt, the two men bent over the motionless middle-aged Meld who'd had the unluck to be singled out as prey. Whispr was relieved the man had finally stopped gasping. In the deceptive calm of the Savannah alley where they had dragged the lumpy body, the dead man's penultimate air suckling had grown progressively more disconcerting. Now it, and he, were stilled.

Jiminy had not been certain the barker would work as intended. With a slapjob barker you never did know. It was supposed to identify anyone, Meld or Natural, who was burdened with a fib, pump, adjunct, pacemaker, flexstent, or just about any other variety of artificial heart or heart accessory--and at the push of a button, stop it. A barker meted out murder most subtle. More important to the wielder, it imposed death quietly. Once the barker's short-range scanner had picked the pedestrian out of a late-evening crowd, Whispr and Jiminy had trailed him until the opportunity to stop his heart from a distance and riffle the resulting corpse had presented itself.

Victim and murderers alike were Melds. Jiminy's legs had been lengthened, modified, and enhanced with nanocarbonic prosthetics that allowed him to cover distances equivalent to obsolete Olympic long jump records in a single bound. Immensely useful for fleeing from pursuers. Awkward if you wanted to buy off-the-rack trousers. Each of his bone-grafted, elongated thighbones was twice the length of those belonging to a Natural of the same height. The high-strength fast-twitch muscle fibers with their bonded protein inserts that wrapped around his leg bones were three times normal thickness while the accompanying tendons had been fashioned from synthetic spider silk.

These melded legs had struck Jiminy with the casually bestowed nickname he had gone ahead and adopted as his own. Ostensibly he was a legitimate messenger, able to leap easily from platform to platform and street to catwalk across the multitude of canals and waterways that now crisscrossed Old Savannah. In actuality, they allowed him to elude all but the most persistent hunter. Evening to early morning was when he practiced his real profession. Was when he made his money resolute. Diurnal messenger boy was his mask, moonlight the chisel that chipped it away.

Unlike his friend who had acceded to a naming by acclimation, Whispr had chosen his own Meld name. His validated moniker was Archibald Kowalski. Everyone in his family had been big--in his family "big" serving as polite synonym for "obese." Growing up an obese kid was bad. Growing up poor and obese was bad squared. So when the appointed legal hour of adolescence arrived when Archie could choose to stay natural or undergo his first legal meld, he chose to become--slim. Not naturally slim which he could perhaps have accomplished with diet or even unpretentious traditional surgery, but unnaturally slim. Meld-slim.

Set beside the grand majority of complex meld surgeries, his was comparatively simple. They removed half his stomach and the majority of his intestines. In their place were inserted a fuel cell-powered post-digestive NEM (nutrient extractor and maximizer) that drew its energy from the fortified liquids he drank. It was complemented by a compact prefood processor. Nothing custom was required--all were straight off-the-line components. They had to be. Even with the first-meld loan he took out to pay for them he couldn't afford anything fancier.

Since then, with the money he and Jiminy had aggrandized through their after-hours activities, Archie had been able to add more personalized bioganic components to the humeld that was himself. A carbo squeezer, muscle assists, and most significantly a full course of bone aeration treatments. The result was that while he stood nearly six feet tall and weighed less than a hundred pounds, he was according to all tests and measures perfectly healthy, from his heart rate to his skin color. A bonus accruing from his chosen meld was that his cholesterol and triglyceride levels were lower than a mudpuppy's pooper. He and his whip-thin silhouette were nothing exceptional. Not when compared to the average Meld--far less when set beside one who was exceedingly customized.

He could slip through spaces between buildings where the police could not follow and enter openings too tight or narrow for more intelligent but less willowy thieves. Due to his everlastingly abridged weight he walked in a permanent hush. This practice of making airfalls instead of footfalls had led to him choosing the Meld name Whispr. But unlike Jiminy he had not had it wholly transliterated to his national ident. The census still knew him as Archibald Kowalski. Only friends and fences were acquainted with him as Whispr.

He and Jiminy had not singled out the unaccompanied pedestrian for the man's heartparts. Heart components were as common as--well, as melds. Perversely, what had drawn their attention was the man's left hand. With the face of its deceased owner smudging the alley's old brick paving, Whispr was able to admire the hand more fully as his partner extracted a compact set of decoupling tools from inside his copious shirt and began the process of amputation. Beyond the scene of the crim out on the one-way street an occasional electric vehicle, little noisier than Whispr himself, hummed along on its predetermined path as its passengers toured the city's historical district.

In a time of rising sea levels the blocks of old buildings, warehouses, and stately homes had turned out to be easier to preserve than the natural vegetation among which they had risen. Unlike much of the native flora that dominated the low-lying east coast of the old United States, standing cypress had no problem coping with the rising water that had inundated much of the old city. But most of the other trees and bushes needed a good deal of tender loving care to ensure their continuing survival. In the historical district entire blocks had been razed repeatedly and entirely. As with similar localities deemed worthy of preservation in Charleston, Port Royal, and all the way down to Jacksonville, they had eventually been placed on hydraulic platforms. So Old Savannah still looked remarkably as it had in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, except that the warm Atlantic shallows now flowed sleepily beneath the power stilts that kept the historical city high and dry.

The old town was always full of tourists. Tourists being always full of credit cards and other instruments of

financial transfer as well as marketable swag and viable body parts, it was where Whispr and Jiminy preferred to hang out after leaving their day jobs--and scan for quarry.

Working swift and efficient with the gear from the tidy tool kit, Whispr's mudbud already had the hand half detached. Though his fingers were natural and unmelded, Jiminy was good with them. While his friend toiled, Whispr occupied himself keeping an eye on the distant street traffic and riffling the dead man's pockets, taking time to look for any hidden antitheft compartments that might have been sewn or welded into the fabric. To his surprise he located the man's wallet lying loose and unsecured in a front pocket. Such casual indifference to personal safekeeping pointed to a criminal neglect of personal protective measures. Or worse, the possibility that the wallet held nothing filchworthy. On the other hand there was the hand, whose construction suggested that its owner was a man of means, or at least had access to substantial resources.

Peering close he could see that the meld component his partner was carefully removing was an exquisite piece of work. Navahopi craftsmanship, perhaps. Or if it was an import, maybe Russian or Israelitnian. When one revelation after another came to light their excitement and expectations increased proportionately. As Jiminy's work progressed, however, Whispr found his early enthusiasm giving way in his half stomach to a slow curdling of his dinner. It was becoming increasingly clear that what the Cricket was ampuscating was no ordinary meld accessory. This fertilized the rising suspicion that the evening's prey might be no ordinary tourist.

Maybe sufficiently unordinary that others might come looking for him.

When the manifold processes of triple-R (Repair, Replace, and Regeneration) had first become cheap and widely available, people had opted for the best exterior matches to their truborn selves. It was only later, when flaunting one's Meldness had become not only socially acceptable but trendy, that such additional cosmetic expense had proven itself unnecessary. The prevailing sentiment became the same as that espoused by purchasers of costly private vehicles or fine jewelry. If you could afford an expensive bodily accessory, why not show it off? What was the difference between a tattoo and a blue you? So the titanium weave and carbonic fibers of the dead man's prosthetic hand glimmered in the dim light that infused the alley unencumbered by the ancestral wistfulness of human skin.

It was work as fine and precise as Whispr had ever seen. The bonding of metal and carbon fiber to wrist bone, tendons, and muscles was seamless. It was impossible to tell where organics ceased and modifications commenced. In addition to permitting basic grasping, each finger had been further customized to perform a different task, from aircscribing to communications. The hand of the dead man had been turned into a veritable five-digitated portable office.

Jiminy was all but cackling to himself as he strove to finish detaching the piece from its owner. "Swart-breath, this is terrific stuff! Must've cost tens of thousands to compile and append. Swallower will give us six months subsist for it." He leaned into his work. A surgically equipped Meld or even a Natural would have been finished by now, but the necessary additional installs would have conflicted with Jiminy's chosen meldself. Anyway, he didn't have the inborn brainjuice to be a medmeld. He was better at running. And killing. As was Whispr.

The difference between them was that Whispr knew it. He'd always been aware of his mental limitations. Maybe that was why he had chosen a meld that rendered him even more inconspicuous than most. Jiminy was an audacious, even impudent hunter. Whispr was shy.

And wary. As Cricket labored to finish the job, his slender companion glanced more and more frequently at

the street. No cops showed themselves, no guides or handlers sought their waylaid subject. For an improv hunt it had gone very well.

The sweat that coursed down Whispr's rapier-thin body did not arise from unease. The Carolina coast was sufficient inspiration for the perspiration. Anymore, it was hot and tropical all the time, no different climatologically from the east coast of central Brazil. In the old days, it was said, fall and winter had been cool, occasionally even chilly. Such weather was gone with the Change. Savannah was as tropical as Salvador.

Maybe, Whispr mused, he would have his sweat glands removed one day. He knew those who'd had it done. But the resultant requisite panting that was required to compensate for the meld was unattractive, and inspired too many inescapable jokes of the canine persuasion.

"I wonder what he did, this guy," he found himself muttering aloud.

Jiminy replied without looking up from his work. "Some kind of scribe, maybe. Or accountant. He sure didn't get by on his physical attributes." He grunted slightly as he struggled to dissolve remaining connective tissue without damaging the linkages to the prosthetic. "Visiting from New York, or London. Hope he had the chance to enjoy some good Southern cooking before we made his acquaintance. There!"

The hand came off cleanly in Jiminy's fingers. There was only a little blood. The Cricket was no surgeon, but he took pride in his work. Whispr made an effort to suppress his natural melancholy. He tried to envision the gleam that would come into Swallower's eyes when he set all four of them--two natural and two melds--on the dismembered body part. For Whispr and the Cricket, he told himself with the slightest of grins, money was at hand.

It was as his companion was stowing their five-fingered prize in his scruffy backpack that Whispr noticed the thread.

It caught his eye only because the indirect light in the alley made it stand out slightly from those surrounding it and because he had been kneeling over the body of the dead man long enough for the cadaverish topography to become familiar. Had he passed the man in the street, had he stopped to converse with him, it never would have drawn Whispr's notice. Time, light, and circumstance conspired to reveal it.

Leaning close over the body's motionless chest, he drew a mag from one of his pockets. Slipped over his right eye, it automatically adjusted to his vision. Gently squeezing or releasing the muscles around the ocular orbit increased or reduced the magnification.

His interest had not been misplaced. Beneath the lens he could just make out the minuscule hinges that held the top and bottom of the thread in place inside the dead man's breast pocket.

"Let me have your tweezers." Without taking his eye off the pocket, he extended a hand toward his partner.

Jiminy gazed edgily toward the busy street as he fumbled for the requested tool. When he was sitting down, the kneecaps of his elongated legs rose higher than his head, making him look more like his arthropodal namesake than ever.

"Here--what'd you find? Concealed credit stick?"

"Naw--I don't know what it is. Sewn inside the pocket. Maybe it's a storage device." As the perfectly miniaturized hinges yielded to the pointed tips of the tweezers the top end of the thread came free.

"Leastwise, one end's got a connector. Tiny, but I can see it."

Leaning toward Whispr as far as his monstrous lower limbs would allow, Jiminy sounded dubious. "Just looks like a piece of thread to me. Don't ident what it's made of, but that doesn't mean anything. Looks like metal, but might be something else. Pretty slick piece of work, whatever it is."

Whispr nodded as he carefully slid the excised thread into an empty storage packet. Lifting his right leg he drew a finger across the side of his shoe. Reading his vitals it unlocked and slid aside to reveal a small waterproof compartment. Carefully inserting the packet into the opening, he then snapped the sole back in place.

"I don't recognize the material either, but small as it is the connector looks standard. All we need is a reader."

Knees aimed forward, Jiminy lurched to his feet. "Probably full of family pictures, maybe an address book: nothing out of the ordinary. No subsist, that's sure."

"Yo so?" Normally Whispr would defer to his more intellectually gifted associate in such matters, but not this time. "If that's all that's on it, then why go to so much trouble and expense to hide it? Why not just keep it in the wallet?"

Jiminy hesitated, then nodded approvingly. "Good point. I'm with you on sticking it in a reader." He glanced down one more time at the dead man. The ampuscated was not bleeding. "We're done here." He slung his pack over his back. "Let's go play money tag with the Swallower."

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