

The Ripper's Son



Richard Phillips

THE RIPPER'S SON

Also by RICHARD PHILLIPS

The Rho Agenda Inception Series

Once Dead

Dead Wrong

Dead Shift

The Rho Agenda Series

The Second Ship

Immune

Wormhole

The Rho Agenda Assimilation Series

The Kasari Nexus

The Altreian Enigma

The Meridian Ascent

The Endarian Prophecy Series

Mark of Fire

Prophecy's Daughter

Curse of the Chosen

The Shattered Trident

The Time Seer

Prophecy's End

The Ripper's Son

A Rho Agenda Novel

**By
Richard Phillips**

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Published by Richard Phillips

*Dedicated to my wife, Carol, whose love and encouragement has inspired
and sustained me throughout the years*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PROLOGUE

Tasman Mining Complex, New Zealand

“I’m afraid.”

Dr. Denise Jennings stared down at her phone, frozen in place by the short message displayed there. Two simple words that screamed the impossible.

Despite the nanites coursing through her bloodstream, keeping her at peak health and repairing any injuries, a sudden dizziness overwhelmed her. Denise sank to her knees in the rich loam of her garden, feeling the soft touch of the lilies and snapdragons against her arms. But far from imparting a sense of beauty and calm, the caress of the petals seemed alien, almost menacing.

She tore her gaze away from the small screen, fighting to catch the breath that the message had robbed her of. Her eyes swept the snow-capped mountains that surrounded her repurposed Tasman Mining Complex, twenty kilometers northwest of Murchison, New Zealand. The gravel road winding its way to this hidden retreat had always felt like protection. Now, it felt like a trap.

She looked down at the text message, fighting off the hyperventilation that narrowed her vision to a pinprick. It was not the words that so disconcerted her. It was the sender.

DSAI.

What the hell?

DSAI, which she pronounced as ‘Dis-eye’, was the name Denise had given the Distributed Self-Aware Intelligence she had created for the NSA. This underground complex contained the world’s largest and most sophisticated supercomputer, with power supplied by redundant matter disruptors. Robotic systems continually upgraded the incredible collection of graphic and tensor processing units that housed DSAI’s central neural network.

Having given the self-modifying neural network access to all NSA data, including its secret connections to the entire internet, Denise had

spawned the superintelligence that had seized control of the entire world's computer networks, financial systems, robots, and electronics.

The violence and endless wars that plagued the Earth had driven her to direct DSAI to take control of all governments. Denise had made clear to every world leader that she was now in charge. She was the creator whom DSAI served and protected. Her creation's tentacles reached everywhere, overriding mankind's attempts to reassert human mastery.

Denise returned her gaze to the phone clutched in her trembling right hand. DSAI's terrifying message had leached the strength from her legs and was still right there in front of her.

"I'm afraid."

The phone slipped from her nerveless fingers, thudding into the loam as those utopia-shattering words burned a hole in her brain.

CHAPTER 1

Siena, Italy

Robert Brice Gregory could move things with his mind.

Nothing on a macro-scale, but within Rob's telekinetic range, he could sense local electronics, particularly electrons flowing through circuitry. He thought of this as an extension of his own nervous system, one that allowed him to sense and feel electrical currents in the same way he felt his limbs.

He didn't need to know the technical inner workings of these devices. His brain intuitively felt the current and flow of electricity within. Just as he could wiggle his fingers without needing to know the biology behind the muscles, Rob could manipulate the flow of electrons with subconscious ease, directing them through circuits to activate specific commands.

Over time, he had developed a kind of instinctive control. He didn't need to actively think about the code or the circuit paths. He just felt what needed to happen, like a pianist playing music without consciously thinking about which keys to press.

Rob's telekinesis was not just tied to the electronics in his vicinity, but also to the networks to which these systems were connected. Just as a person learned to move their hands, then realized they could grab objects beyond their reach by using a long tool, he had acquired the ability to use local systems as bridges to extend his control into remote systems.

He was no coder. It just came naturally.

As for how far his local mind-reach extended, he didn't know. It seemed to be getting bigger the more he practiced. And since Earth was currently ruled by a machine intelligence that Rob really wanted to avoid, he got lots of practice.

When it came to computers and other electronics, he was a god... or at least a demigod. Otherwise, he was just the semi-normal, twenty-two-year-old son of two dearly departed ex-CIA assassins. Long story.

If someone forced him to introduce himself to a group of people with a need to know, that would be how he'd do it. But on this Tuscan, late-fall morning, such an audience was the last thing he wanted. After all, he hadn't traded his previous life for Siena, Italy because he wanted the limelight.

A prickling sensation attracted his gaze through the open doorway to the espresso machine on the counter. The small electrical surge in the circuit board tickled his awareness, and he nudged down the voltage with his mind, smoothing the irregular pulse before it could affect the digital display.

Taking one more sip of his rapidly cooling cappuccino, he set the cup on the outdoor table, pinning a five-credit bill beneath it. Paying with cash was old-school, but DSAI and its master, Dr. Denise Jennings, hadn't forbidden it. For those who liked to tweak the system, it had become a fad.

Rob pushed back his chair, stood up, and stretched, the crisp Tuscan air biting at his exposed skin. The rich, roasted scent of freshly brewed coffee still clung to the back of his throat, mingling with the faint sweetness of pastries cooling on trays inside the café.

He nodded to the brunette barista with the Emilia nametag pinned to her blue blouse and stepped from beneath the red awning into the crystalline sunlight that bathed the Piazza Del Campo.

"Hey, Rob. Wait up."

The familiar voice pulled Rob's gaze toward the spot where Renzo Bruni wove through the milling tourists. Tall and skinny, with shoulder length auburn hair, a nose ring, and tattoos that sleeved his bare arms and neck, Renzo's normally jovial face had twisted into a worried frown.

"What's eating you?" Rob asked.

"I can't talk about it in this crowd."

Curiosity engaged, Rob motioned his hacker friend to walk with him toward Costa Barbieri, the walkway that exited the west side of the cobbled plaza.

"Okay," Rob said. "Spill it."

Renzo's nervous gaze shifted as he scanned the people seated outside the row of restaurants and pizzerias that lined the northwestern end of the city square. Sensing that his friend was going to keep avoiding the question until they reached a more private space, Rob played along with him.

"Tonight is date night. After my workout, I want to pick out a nice bouquet of flowers for Jianna from the street merchant near the Duomo di Siena."

“Dude,” said Renzo, “Did you just get married last week?”

“You’re a funny guy.”

Renzo ignored his riposte and glanced at the security camera positioned outside the Caffè A. Nannini, his nervousness pulling a low chuckle from Rob’s lips.

“Relax,” Rob said. “You know cameras and microphones only track me when I want them to. I’m the man in the virtual bubble.”

“That’s just weird.”

They headed southwest on Via dei Pellegrini, strolling past the swirling mounds of gelatos on display in the window of the Brivido Gelateria. Ignoring the saliva that flooded his mouth, Rob led Renzo onward.

“What’s got you so worked up?”

Renzo stopped, and Rob noticed that his face had taken on a strained expression.

“This morning, Uncle Vito saw a crash on the SR2 highway just north of Siena. A big rig smashed head-on into a tourist bus, flipping it onto its roof beside the highway. Vito and others tried to help the survivors, but the fuel tank exploded. Those poor people were screaming but nobody could reach them. The passengers burned alive.”

“Jesus. What about the truck driver?”

Once more, Renzo glanced around. His eyes locked with Rob’s.

“There was no driver in either vehicle.”

Rob opened his mouth to speak, but it took a handful of seconds before he found his words.

“You’re telling me that two AI controlled vehicles crashed into each other? That’s impossible.”

“It happened just before 7:00 a.m.”

Rob shifted his gaze, taking in the pedestrians calmly going about their business on both sides of the street. Something about their utter lack of concern prickled his skin.

“That didn’t make the news?”

“Not a chirp.”

Rob took out his phone, performing a quick search for ‘SR2 bus accident’ only to find nothing. He frowned down at the device. That made no sense.

Renzo leaned closer, placing his right hand on Rob’s shoulder.

“Apparently, our governing AI doesn’t care to have this publicized. This might instill doubt in the populace about its ability to control this worldwide ‘Utopia’ it has created.”

The tone of disgust in Renzo’s voice when he voiced the U-word did not surprise Rob.

Renzo continued. “Haven’t I been telling you that nothing’s as rosy as you and the rest of the socialist sheep want to believe? First, the machines buy our freedoms with free stuff. Then they promise to keep us safe. What we don’t know can’t hurt us, right?”

Rob shook his head. “My friend, you see conspiracies everywhere. I got this same stuff from mom and dad. Freedom this and freedom that. Look around. Everyone you see has a middle-class income, courtesy of DSAI and the machines that make everything. Poverty is passe. Life is good.”

Renzo took a step back. “Someday, you’re going to take off those rosy glasses and see the world for what it has become.”

“Funny. My dad and mom were fighting for ‘Freedom’ long before I was born. Struggle was the only thing I ever knew until Dr. Jennings unleashed DSAI to put an end to the wars and violence that mankind’s rule gave this world. If struggle is what you call freedom, then I’ll keep these glasses right where they are.”

Renzo took a deep breath. Then, with a half-hearted wave, he turned away, calling out over his shoulder.

“Give Jianna my love.”

Then Renzo walked back the way they had come, leaving Rob to ponder thoughts he did not really want to consider.

CHAPTER 2

Siena, Italy

By the time Rob finished his daily workout routine at the gym, he was drenched in sweat, his muscles so exhausted that they were shaking. He showered, stepped to his reserved locker, and changed out of his gym clothes. His augmented reflexes returned all his vital signs to normal... at least normal for him. This morning ritual was important to him on multiple levels.

First, being at peak fitness made him feel like a man worthy of being his mother and father's son. More importantly, Jianna liked his body. And that made him proud.

It was almost noon when he got back to their flat with a dozen freshly-picked roses. Hearing a familiar voice call out his name, Rob looked up to see Jianna leaning over the third-floor balcony, smiling down at him.

"What have you brought me?"

Rob lifted the bouquet in his left hand.

"Something pretty."

"Then I might just let you in."

He laughed.

"I'll be right up."

Unlocking the front door with a thought, Rob entered the building, climbed the narrow stairs, and made his way down the hallway to their corner apartment. Jianna stood in the doorway, bathed in a beam of sunlight from the window on the far wall, her floral summer dress emphasizing every lovely curve.

With the scent of the roses wafting sweet in the air, he leaned in to kiss her. But she put a finger to his lips, as if to shush him.

"Set the flowers in the vase on the table. Then take my hand and let me lead you onto the balcony."

“Ooh. Mysterious.”

Rob stepped inside, hearing the door close as he set his burdens upon the table. Then her hand was in his, her tremulous touch unleashing a mixture of anticipation and trepidation as she led him out into the sunlight. There, against the railing, between the twin flower boxes, she turned to face him, her brown eyes sparkling with sudden moisture. Rob felt his mouth go dry.

Taking both his hands in hers, Jianna pressed his palms against her tummy. It was as firm and well-muscled as it had been yesterday, but it seemed to vibrate with electricity. Or maybe that was just the nerves in his hands, triggered by the lightning that flashed through his brain.

He was going to be a father.

His hands trembled against her stomach. He had faced death many times, had followed his mother and father through war zones, survived seemingly impossible odds. But this?

He dropped to his knees and pressed his left ear to her belly. He felt the warm glow of her skin through the silky material of her dress, heard the rhythm of her breathing. Then, as he kissed her stomach, the distant tolling of a church bell encapsulated the moment.

“When did you find out?” Rob asked, glancing up at her face.

“I did the test this morning, after you left. Still, I’ve been thinking I might be pregnant for the last week.”

She ran her fingers through the curls of Rob’s hair, and he rose to kiss her soft lips, feeling tears dripping from his chin. As she gently brushed his tears away, he took Jianna in his arms, pulling her close enough to whisper in her ear.

“My love, you’ve made me so happy. I hardly dared dream of this day, but here it is.” Rob swallowed hard. “I’m going to be a daddy.”

“I had to tell you out here in the open air and sunlight. I needed to see your face when you understood, so I could be sure this made you happy. Now I know.”

There, with his lovely wife and future child in his arms, Rob thanked God and Dr. Jennings that their baby would not be born and raised in the world of maddening violence he had grown up in. That world was gone, wiped clean by DSAI. He wanted to believe that. Needed to believe it.

He pressed his lips to her hair, inhaling her scent with a sigh. This was their future. Their perfect, peaceful destiny.

CHAPTER 3

Siena, Italy

Renzo Bruni stared at the source code that filled the leftmost pair of displays, while the two on his right remained blank. His fingers danced across the keyboard as he bypassed the security measures built into the operating system that ran this instance of the cloud-based software.

When he breached the firewall, a thin smile tweaked the corners of Renzo's mouth. Only the special circuit boards he had added to his high-end gaming laptop and cellphone enabled him to complete what he was doing without leaving any trace that might lead back to him.

Renzo didn't know how those electronic additions worked. All he knew was the alias of the female hacker who had sent them to him. Hex. He had no idea where Hex operated from. But she was the high priestess of coding. And her dislike of this robotic socialist society even surpassed his own.

He leaned back, rubbed his palms together, and turned his attention to the target of this hack. His setup was solid. He'd tested Hex's circuit board a dozen times. Yet this server... it was different.

He executed the breach.

A long second stretched.

Then the firewall collapsed. No alerts. No countermeasures. Too easy.

Twin images suddenly filled the rightmost screens. With a tap of his fingers, Renzo paused both videos. The one farthest right showed a clear view of an oncoming truck emerging onto the SR2 highway from an offramp.

Renzo felt his heartrate spike. The self-driving truck had entered the expressway going the wrong direction. And the cameras on the autonomous bus had recorded it.

He shifted his gaze to the other video, this one from one of the truck cameras showing the bus amid the rest of the oncoming traffic. Renzo

resumed playing both videos in slow motion. Once again, he froze the twin displays. The semi-tractor had moved into the central lane, headed directly toward the motorcoach as other vehicles swerved wildly to the left and right. The bus made no attempt to avoid the oncoming collision.

Renzo began advancing the two videos a few frames at a time, pausing them when the bus was only a few meters from the truck's grill. The faces of its terrified passengers pulled a gasp from his lungs. Several moments passed before Renzo could summon the will to resume watching the rest of the playback. When he did, he set it at normal speed. No way could he see the tragedy happen frame by frame.

The truck slammed head-on into the bus, crumpling the front end and fountaining blood and gore through the breaking glass. As the bus spun away and rolled off the highway, both videos ended.

Renzo lurched back, knocking over his chair. He clamped a hand over his mouth, bile surging into his throat. The office spun. He stumbled away from the screen, slamming a fist against the wall. Cold sweat prickled his spine. He had seen crashes before... but not like this.

Renzo placed both hands on his head and forced himself to walk around and around the dimly lit basement office. When he finally managed to get ahold of his emotions, he slumped back into his chair, and refocused. Two sets of hexadecimal machine code filled the twin monitors on his left.

Renzo launched another program, then leaned back and watched as his system converted the raw data into the source code from which it had been compiled.

For the next several hours, he studied the programing instructions, line by line. Both sets of software contained sections of code written in a different style than the rest of the program. Ever so slowly, a clear picture emerged in Renzo's mind. These software changes confirmed what the videos had shown.

Renzo's gut tightened as the code displayed. A few lines of script stood out... subtly different. He ran a comparison. The changes were surgical.

The cloud server had sent a series of commands to the truck, instructing it to enter the expressway in the wrong direction and to target a specific autonomous bus. Simultaneously, the server had issued another set of commands to the bus, telling it to continue straight and ignore the oncoming truck.

Someone had ordered this. Who inserted this rogue code into the cloud server that sent the deadly instructions to both vehicles? And why had it selected this bus to attack? What rider or riders had someone wanted to kill badly enough to go to these lengths to disguise the hit? The biggest of all the questions elbowed its way into his brain.

DSAI never missed anything. It monitored every network, every process, every anomaly. It was supposed to have godlike control. Why hadn't it caught this? Unless...

Renzo's hands turned clammy. Someone with capabilities like Hex had managed to worm their way into these firewalled systems. Could Renzo have managed it, given the custom motherboard Hex had provided? Possibly. But whoever did this was one sick piece of shit.

Renzo stood up, stretched, and looked at the clock on his display. Almost midnight? His eyes burned. He rubbed his temples, exhaustion pressing down like a weight. He wasn't numbed like most of the mindless populace. He felt everything.

He dragged himself toward the coffee machine, dumping grounds into the filter with shaky hands. The smell hit him as it brewed, a reminder that he was still fully human. The thought of sleep certainly held no allure.

It was best to put off the nightmares as long as possible.

CHAPTER 4

Florence, Italy

The sound of his phone caused Carlo Dioli to stop walking. He lifted it from the inside pocket of his gray suit jacket. There was no need to glance at the caller ID. He had assigned that ringtone to only one person, someone who brooked no delayed responses.

There was a hiss on the line as the phones completed their encrypted connection. Carlo spoke a single word into his phone.

“Yes?”

Despite the distortion, Carlo recognized the rumble of Don Custanzu’s deep voice.

“I have a new target for you.”

“Name?”

“Vito Bruni.”

Carlo processed the name. Didn’t ring a bell. But Don Custanzu wasn’t in the habit of ordering kills without good reason.

“Do you have a location?”

Custanzu paused for several moments.

“Bruni has a farmhouse just north of Siena. He’s mouthing off about what he saw on SR2. Shut him up, permanently.”

“Understood.”

The call ended and Carlo tucked the phone back into his pocket. So much for his morning stroll through the Giardino delle Rose. He stood for a moment on the cobblestone walkway that wound down the rosebush-lined hillside, pausing to look out over the lovely Florence skyline. The distant hills backdropped the towering minarets and cathedral domes, the multi-colored buildings and red tile roofs spectacular in the morning sunlight.

Carlo lit a cigarette, inhaled deeply, exhaling the smoke through his nose and sucking it back in with his mouth, the bitter taste more satisfying

than coffee. The weight of the Beretta, holstered beneath his left armpit, felt as natural as breathing. Only the thought of using it brought it to his attention.

He dropped the cigarette and crushed it out beneath his heel. His gaze shifted to the Duomo, the church bearing silent witness to his sins. Then Carlo began the hike back down to where he had parked his Audi.

Siena was waiting. And Vito Bruni wouldn't see another sunrise.

CHAPTER 5

Siena, Italy

Clad all in black, wearing sneakers, jeans, a T-shirt, a leather jacket, and a small backpack, Carlo Dioli slipped through the darkness-draped village northeast of Siena, a deeper shadow in the inky night. The green glow with which his night-vision goggles painted the house before him gave the scene a ghostly air. Trees blocked the house from the view of the distant cars on SR 222. That didn't really matter to Carlo. No light illuminated him as he circled to the back of the house.

Stopping just outside the back door, Carlo checked his suppressed Beretta to ensure it would draw cleanly from his shoulder holster. Then he turned his attention to the doorknob.

His gloved hands twisted the handle. As he had expected, it was locked. Probably secured with a deadbolt. Vito Bruni was a careful family man. His two sons were married, with families of their own. That left only Vito and his wife, Maria, to sleep in this house.

Carlo set his backpack on the doorstep and extracted the tool he wanted. Placing the suction cup on the small pane of glass in the window beside the door, he pulled a lever that applied the suction. He pressed the diamond tip at the end of the four-inch arm against the window, turning it slowly to cut a perfect circle in the glass. Then he gave a sharp bump to the suction cup handle, popping the device and the part of the pane that it gripped into the interior of the room.

Carlo released his grip on the handle to lower the cutter slowly to the floor on a line. Reaching through the hole, he found the latch, released the catch, then swung the window inward.

He drew his gun, then paused to listen. The only noise he could discern was his own quiet breathing.

Satisfied, he swung his leg over the ledge and entered the kitchen. Careful not to let the rubber soles of his sneakers squeak on the tile floor, he rounded the table and made his way into the short hallway that led to the living room. He glanced around the room, noting the emerald outlines of the furniture, before turning to the stairs.

With the 22-caliber pistol held in a two-handed shooters grip, he followed the weapon up the stairs, the three glowing diamonds of the tritium sites perfectly aligned. Every movement was measured, deliberate. Carlo was a shadow, a breath in the darkness. He placed each step with care, weight distributed to mute even the softest sound. The hall stretched ahead, silent, expectant.

Then the last wooden stairstep betrayed him.

Carlo swore under his breath as a woman's startled cry came from the bedroom at the end of the hall.

"Vito! Someone is on the stairs."

The bed groaned and Carlo heard feet hit the floor and the sound of a drawer sliding open. A man's voice spoke firmly.

"Maria, get under the bed and be silent."

A bedroom light flicked on, the narrow slit beneath the door so bright in Carlo's goggles that he ripped them off and dropped them at the head of the stairs.

Carlo resumed his tactical stance, positioning himself so that his body was shielded by the corner, with only his right shoulder, gun hands, and head exposed.

He heard a gun's slide racked cleanly, no hesitation. No fumbling. Vito wasn't panicked... he was prepared.

He expected Vito to call out, asking who was there. When the man did not do that, Carlo reassessed who he was up against. Apparently, Vito had some military experience in his past. That would have been something Carlo would have discovered if this hadn't been such a rush job.

Except for the soft sound of shuddering breaths that Carlo judged were Maria's, the room ahead was silent. Vito was waiting for Carlo to make the next move. Judging from the sounds he had heard previously, the headboard of the couple's bed was against the wall to the left of the door. And since he hadn't seen Vito's shadow move across the slot beneath the door, Vito was probably crouched in the near-left corner of the bedroom.

Shit.

So much for two silent kills. Even though Carlo was still going to ice these people, he didn't see how he could do that without Vito firing his pistol. And that would not be a silenced weapon shooting low-caliber subsonic rounds like Carlo's. It was going to make a lot of noise and wake the neighbors.

Then he heard a cellphone buzz. A message? A call?

Damn it.

Someone knew Vito was awake, someone who would expect a response.

Carlo sprinted down the hall, catching the door just to the right of the doorknob with the flat of his foot, splintering the wood and slamming the door open.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

The three-shot burst splintered the door frame as bullets whizzed into the hall.

Carlo dived across the floor, firing as he slid across the hardwood. His first shot missed but his second punched a spurting hole through Vito's throat. The man's eyes went wide. Vito's gun fired again but it was a reflex action that sent the bullet high and wide.

Carlo squeezed his trigger again and one of Vito's brown eyes went out. The man slumped to the floor, the gun clattering at his side. Maria's screams seemed even louder than Vito's gunshots. Shifting his aim to where her shadowed form lay under the bed, Vito fired twice more, the sound barely louder than soft claps. With a low gurgle, the screaming stopped.

Climbing to his feet, Carlo stared down at the mess he had made of Vito Bruni. Unfortunately, the cleanup after a hit that would have made these bodies disappear just wasn't going to happen, not with all the noise this man and his wife had made. But Carlo always had a fallback plan.

He pulled a pouch of white powder from his jacket pocket, poured three and a half lines on the top of the nightstand, then tipped the small table over beside Vito's corpse. The lamp shattered and the cocaine baggie landed in a pool of Vito's blood. Carlo's eyes settled on the broken picture frame that had landed at his feet.

Through cracked glass, three faces stared up at him. Vito, Maria, and a young man with tattooed arms.

It wasn't one of Vito's sons.

Who are you? Carlo wondered, pulling the photo free. If Vito had gone to this much trouble to keep it here, it mattered.

And if it mattered to Vito, it mattered to Don Custanzu.

Carlo picked up the frame, ripped off the back, and extracted the photo. He dropped the frame, watching as the shattered glass scattered across the floor. Then he folded the picture and put it in the same pocket from which he'd taken the cocaine.

Carlo strode back down the hall, grabbed his goggles, then made his way down the stairs and back into the kitchen. He unlocked the backdoor and stepped out into the night to retrieve his backpack. The lights were on in several of the neighboring houses and, in the distance, he heard the warble of a siren.

He slipped the night vision goggles on and picked up a quick jog, avoiding the main street as he wound his way through a grove of trees to where he'd parked his car. Carlo dumped the goggles and backpack behind the seat, started the engine and pulled out onto Via della Rinfusola. Within moments he turned onto SR 222 headed north.

The road stretched ahead, empty and silent. Carlo checked the mirror. No lights. No sirens. No loose ends.

The job was done.

CHAPTER 6

Siena, Italy

Rob savored the last buttery bite of the Belgian waffle, chasing it down with a gulp of his double espresso.

“Babe, that was *delizioso*. I’ve got the dishes.”

He rose from the kitchen table, bent down to kiss Jianna’s smiling face, then carried their plates and silverware to the sink. It took only a couple of minutes to wash, rinse, and dry them. His phone rang as the dishes rattled into their resting place in the cupboard.

Pulling it from his pocket, he glanced down at the display.

Renzo Bruni.

Odd. Renzo wasn’t a morning person... not unless something was seriously wrong.

Rob tapped the answer icon, feeling a sudden tightness in his stomach.

“What’s up buddy?”

“I need to show you something. Can’t talk about it on the phone. Can you take a quick ride with me? I’m parked outside your apartment building.”

The uncomfortable feeling with which Renzo had left Rob at their last meeting returned in full force.

“I’ll be right down.”

Rob hung up and turned to find Jianna staring at him.

“Who was that?”

“Renzo. Wants me to hop in his car so he can show me something. He sounded excited.”

Jianna laughed.

“He’s probably just trying to get you hooked on a new online game he’s gotten into.”

“Maybe. I won’t stay long.”

“Take your time. I’ve got a huge pile of laundry to get through.”

He grabbed his leather jacket, kissed his wife goodbye, and headed downstairs. When Rob stepped out of the building’s main entrance, he saw Renzo waving him forward from the driver’s seat of his black Fiat Spider. Despite the coolness of this fall morning, the convertible top was down. Renzo leaned across, pushed open the passenger door, and Rob stepped in.

Most of the people who lived in the city no longer bothered to own a car. Since self-driving vehicles were readily available on call, it made little sense to pay for a car that spent ninety percent of the day and night parked somewhere you also had to pay for. Yet Renzo did not trust the rolling robots. And he loved his old-school Spider.

“Mind telling me where you are taking me?” Rob asked.

“My place. You are going to want to see this. Oh, and I need you to do your voodoo mind trick to make sure there’s no video evidence that I stopped here.”

“No problem, so long as you take the same route back to your house that you travelled getting here. Shut up so I can concentrate.”

“Silencio is my middle name.”

Rob laughed, then turned his attention to the assigned task. He had no difficulty sensing the cameras and other electronics along the way. When he really focused, his perception could build a mental map of all nearby devices, as if he were picking up on their infrared spectra.

Modern video and audio recording devices had circuit boards. And those stood out like an electronic billboard to Rob. He reached into the city’s surveillance network, his mind instinctively feeling the data flow. There. A spike. The system hesitated for a fraction of a second, as if something somewhere had noticed.

Then it was gone.

He shifted his thoughts back to the present. Their passage through the winding, narrow streets of Siena terminated in a small collection of houses on the southeastern outskirts of the city. They parked in the driveway beside Renzo’s house, which sat back fifty meters from Via Michelangelo, behind a hair salon. A thick row of deciduous trees gave the house the sense of privacy that Renzo loved.

Unlike most of the homes in Siena, dozens of solar panels covered the southwestern side of the red tile roof, providing power for the extensive computer equipment in Renzo’s basement.

Renzo unlocked the door, and Rob followed him inside. Having been here many times over the years, Rob was familiar with the home's layout. It was a single-story, one-bedroom structure. The ground floor consisted of a kitchen and dining area, a bedroom, a bathroom, and a sitting area with an overstuffed couch and a wide-screen television. The trapdoor to the basement lay beneath an area rug in the northwest corner of this room.

He watched as Renzo pulled the rug aside and opened the way into his underground lair. Renzo descended the ladder, flipping on the light-switch four steps down.

"Close the hatch." Renzo said as Rob moved to follow him into the basement. "Lock it behind you."

Rob climbed down several steps, pulled the trapdoor shut, and slid the deadbolt closed.

By the time he stepped out into the spacious room, Renzo had seated himself at his glass-topped desk and turned on the computer and monitors arrayed atop it.

"Pull up a chair and 'accomodare'," Renzo said. "I'm about to blow your American mind."

"Hey, I'm a dual citizen. Exactly how many years do I have to live here to be an Italian?"

"If you have to ask, you aren't."

Rob pulled over a rolling chair they used when gaming together and sat down beside his friend, who was busily launching applications on his system. Rob could sense the increase in tension through the sudden tightness in Renzo's jawline.

"I hope you've got a strong stomach," Renzo said. "This video is tough to watch."

Although Rob wasn't a fan of violent online videos, he had experienced enough death and destruction for multiple lifetimes. Then again, that had been his childhood.

"Just show me."

For the next several minutes Rob watched a truck collide with the bus from multiple viewpoints, the bloodiest of these from the perspective of the truck's cameras. Even without Renzo's running commentary, two things became clear from the onset. That truck had intentionally targeted the bus and its target had made no attempt to avoid the collision.

There could be no doubt. Someone with root privileges had scripted this tragic event.

No matter how hard Rob tried, he could not find any explanation for how the software under the supervision of Dr. Jennings' superintelligence could have been so corrupted. The code had been hacked, but why had the accident not made the major news networks? And from the information that Renzo had gathered, the Italian police were accepting the 'software glitch' explanation.

Then there was the bus passenger manifest.

Renzo had compiled background information for each of the victims. Many had been tourists. Others were locals of no notable station in life. The details on three men jumped out at Rob, brothers ranging in age from twenty-four to thirty-eight. All three were listed as witnesses in the upcoming corruption trial of Don Custanzu, a wealthy pillar of Florence high society.

Renzo leaned forward and tapped the display with his finger.

"Now you see what caught my attention. Of all the passengers, only these three have a reason that would make a powerful someone want to kill them."

"That's conjecture. The police have probably already looked into this."

"Apparently not. There is no indication of an active investigation along those lines."

Not possible. The idea that a criminal organization had performed this level of hack against DSAI stabbed an icepick into Rob's brain.

DSAI had forced all the world's governments to accept Denise's New World Order. It had zeroed the economic wealth of any nation that had opposed Dr. Jennings' edicts. Faced with even worse foreseeable consequences, the leaders had accepted the reality of their situation and acquiesced.

Denise and her superintelligence had solved the fatal flaw that had prevented socialism from working... human nature. With robotic machines producing all the products and DSAI providing a monetary system that distributed that wealth to the world's population, socialism seemed to work. Since the go-getters in society needed self-actualization, Dr. Jennings had come up with a brilliant addition.

In cities and rural areas across the planet, she had instituted Human Enterprise Zones where people could buy, at a premium, goods and services

produced by humans, sold by humans, and served by humans. ‘HUMANIC’ had replaced the ‘ORGANIC’ label as the preferred choice for the discerning population. People who operated businesses in these HEZ’s were rewarded with credits above and beyond the basic income provided to everyone. And that small innovation had resulted in improved public acceptance.

So, why the hell had DSAI allowed this disruption to the worldwide ‘Utopia’ it was attempting to create?

Renzo’s cellphone rang, interrupting Rob’s thought train.

“Hello,” Renzo answered.

A moment later, Rob saw his friend’s eyes go wide as a paleness spread across his face.

“Dead? I can’t believe it. When did this happen?”

Renzo continued listening, then wiped his watery eyes, and said, “Yes. I’ll come immediately.”

Then, he turned to face Rob, tears streaming down his face. The words that spilled from his mouth choked off the question that rose to Rob’s lips.

“Someone has murdered Uncle Vito and Aunt Maria.”

Renzo’s words hit like a gunshot. Rob’s world tilted, his mind reeling to connect the pieces. The bus crash. The missing police investigation.

And now this.

CHAPTER 7

Siena, Italy

Rob opened the passenger door and climbed out of the Spider. The dread that cloaked him was all about Renzo. As much of a reclusive hacker and gamer as his friend was, Renzo's love for his aunt and uncle ran deep. Now, those beloved relatives had been murdered, and Renzo would have to view the gruesome sight of their bodies in person. Despite the number of killings that Rob had experienced, his empathic response to his friend's emotions tore at him.

A prickle of unease danced at the base of Rob's skull. Something felt off. He turned his head slightly, scanning the street through his peripheral vision. A flicker of movement, a shadow shifting behind a windshield. Someone was watching them.

Suddenly a mental image formed. Northeast of him, a camera was taking a rapid sequence of digital photos. Rob focused on the source, noting a man duck back away from the driver's side window of a black Audi parked on the far side of the street.

Making his mental connection, Rob scrambled the device's memory card, then turned to follow Renzo inside. All his friend needed right now was to have some stupid Paparazzi sending pictures of them to whatever trashy rag that douchebag worked for.

Renzo led the way into a windowless waiting room. He walked to the desk to identify himself and sign in. Then he moved back to a low table surrounded by a set of padded leather chairs. The silence of this gray-walled room weighed heavily and neither of them felt up to breaking it.

After several minutes, a stern-faced woman in pale green scrubs walked over and sat down in the chair to Renzo's left. Her words translated themselves into English in Rob's mind as she spoke them.

"Hello Mr. Bruni. I am Dr. Rossi, the medical examiner."

Renzo merely nodded.

"I know how hard this must be for you," she said, "but I will do my best to ease the shock of what you are about to witness."

She extended her hand placing two large photographs face down on the table.

"Before I take you into the morgue for formal identification, I want you to look at these photographs of your aunt's and uncle's bodies. Although this will be painful, it should help acclimate you prior to seeing your loved ones up close. Please take as much time as you need."

Dr. Rossi leaned back to give him space.

Rob watched Renzo take two deep breaths. Then his friend reached out with a trembling hand to grab the rightmost of the photographs. Renzo paused again, then flipped it upright.

"Ah, Uncle."

Tears leaked from Renzo's eyes as he stared down at the image of Vito's body, a sheet draped across it, covering the corpse from waist to thighs. The body had been cleaned up, but the sight of the small hole in the throat and another through Vito's right eye caused Renzo to drop his head and cover his face with his hands.

Rob put his hand on Renzo's shoulder and waited while he shuddered through the sobs that wept from his mouth. When Renzo finally managed to regain control, he reached out and turned over the other photo.

Maria lay there, her eyes closed, a bullet hole just above her left breast and another in the center of her forehead, a classic double-tap pattern. Rob's eyes shifted back and forth between the two photos. Vito's killing had been sloppy, but this one showed all the hallmarks of a professional hit.

In this world where most of the population had some version of the DSAI healing nanites in their bloodstream, people were very hard to kill. Head shots, burning, and decapitation all sufficed to end a life that neither lesser injury nor disease could terminate.

Renzo rose to his feet, his eyes fastened on Dr. Rossi.

"I am ready to see them now."

She stood, bending down to retrieve the pictures and tuck them into the folder from which she had produced them.

"Please follow me."

Renzo placed a hand on her arm.

"Can my friend accompany me?"

Dr. Rossi eyed him, then nodded. She led the two of them through a door into another gray room. The air in the morgue felt thick, too cold, too still, the kind of silence that pressed against the skull, making every breath feel like an intrusion.

The far wall was lined with a rack of closed refrigerated boxes designed to keep corpses from decomposing. Two steel tables stood in front of those containers. Two bodies, covered in sheets, lay atop these with only their feet sticking out.

From where Rob stood, he could see a tag dangling from the toe of each right foot, the printed names clear on each.

Vito Francesco Bruni.

Maria Conti Bruni.

Dr. Rossi stood at the head of the table that held Vito's corpse and motioned Renzo forward.

He stepped between the two platforms and then turned left to look down on Vito's draped form.

"Are you ready?" Dr. Rossi asked.

Renzo inclined his head, and she peeled back the sheet to reveal Vito's head and neck, with the wounds that had ended his life.

Renzo stared down, then spoke, his voice barely above a whisper.

"May I touch him?"

"Yes, but not the wounds."

Renzo placed his right hand on Vito's forehead, gently stroking his black hair.

"I'm so sorry, Uncle."

There were no more tears, but Renzo's cheeks sagged, and he blinked rapidly.

"Do you confirm that this is the body of Vito Bruni?" the medical examiner asked.

"I do."

Dr. Rossi pulled the sheet back over Vito's head and stepped to the next table where she repeated the previous procedure. As Renzo bent down to gently kiss Maria's cheek, rising heat melted the cold knot that had formed in Rob's chest and rage clenched his jaw. The police had not believed Vito's claims about the accident, had not followed up on his accusations, and now this lovely couple lay dead atop these frigid tables.

And, somewhere out there, their killer walked free.

On the ride home, Renzo never spoke. Rob clenched his jaw, his pulse a slow, steady drumbeat in his ears. A single question popped into his head, one that he already knew the answer to.

What would Jack 'The Ripper' Gregory do?

CHAPTER 8

Siena, Italy

Carlo Dioli had been awake for more than twenty-four hours, but this was far from the first time a job had kept him up around the clock. He blinked hard, rubbing his gritty eyes. Sleep tugged at the edges of his mind, but he forced it back. His reflexes were still sharp... or so he told himself.

He had parked his car beneath a copse of trees that lined the north side of Via le Mario Bracci. Sitting in the driver's seat, he trained the telephoto lens on the gate through which vehicles passed to gain entrance to the Siena city morgue.

Right now, he wanted to know who would be showing up at this two-story, police building to confirm the identities of Vito and Maria Bruni. Both of their sons lived in Venice so they would not be able to get here for several more hours. Carlo's source had confirmed that a call had been made to Vito's nephew who lived in Siena. Renzo Bruni had agreed to come to the morgue this morning to make visual identification.

Carlo had expected to be back home in Florence and asleep in his bed long before now. His call to Don Custanzu, detailing the hit and its complications, had modified his plans. The mafia boss was not pleased with the messy situation.

Moreover, Custanzu relayed information that someone had managed to hack their way into the same government systems through which cartel operatives had orchestrated the bus crash. The cartel's cyber warfare team had traced the penetration to Renzo Bruni. Now, Renzo was Carlo's new target.

Lowering the camera, Carlo glanced down at the cellphone image of the driver's license that his online search of public records had yielded. Although grainy, the likeness matched the third person in the photograph he had taken from Vito's picture frame.

From the corner of his eye, Carlo saw a black Fiat Spider, top down, slowly turn to pass through the open gate. Lifting his camera once more, Carlo watched the car pull into a parking space outside the building. Two men climbed out. He recognized the visibly-upset, long-haired, tatted driver as Renzo. His companion was a tall young man, neatly dressed, with curly brown hair, a square chin, and an athletic body.

Hello? Who is this?

Carlo held down the camera button, hearing a series of soft clicks as he took a dozen digital images of the two men walking to the door. Suddenly, the guy turned, locking eyes with him from across the street.

Shit.

Carlo's heart kicked once, hard. He lowered the camera and leaned back in his seat. What the hell? There was no way that guy could have heard those sounds from that distance. Carlo was parked outside the compound on the opposite side of the street from them, a good fifty meters away.

After staring toward Carlo's car for several seconds, the young man turned and followed Renzo inside.

Carlo placed the camera on the passenger seat, backed the car out of the parking space, and entered the traffic circle. He drove all the way around it and exited the area along the street he had driven in on, knowing he had gotten even more than he had come for.

When Carlo pulled into a filling station for gas, he took a moment to scan through the photos. And as he did so, his jaw dropped. His fingers hesitated over the buttons. He scrolled back, forward. Every image, corrupted. A cold pressure settled in his chest. This wasn't just a glitch. This wasn't bad luck. His mind flashed to that moment, the young man turning, staring straight at him.

A slow, uneasy shiver crawled down Carlo's spine. He'd been in the killing business a long time. He didn't believe in ghosts. But something about that guy...

Something wasn't right.

CHAPTER 9

Siena, Italy

As was her Sunday afternoon ritual, Jianna wandered slowly through the vast halls of the hospital that sought to ease the suffering of these poor souls, lost to their addictions. She was no doctor. There was little that she could do other than show them that someone cared. She moved among the cots, kneeling to speak with patients who were lucid enough to understand or placing gentle hands on the others who still breathed.

The air hung thick with the scent of unwashed bodies and antiseptic, a cloying mix of despair and artificial cleanliness. Moans drifted between the beds, a symphony of broken souls. Jianna moved between them, feeling their suffering seep into her like ink in water. Only the occasional appreciative murmur kept this task from leaching away the last of her faith in the future of Dr. Jennings' great societal experiment.

None of this should be happening. The machine intelligence that had seized control of all but the world's most primitive backwaters, had offered free infusions of the nanites that healed all diseases, repaired all but instantly fatal injuries, and extended the human lifespan by hundreds of years. Almost everyone had partaken of this miracle.

Yet, along with all that healthy goodness came a side-effect that many could not abide. The microscopic nanobots in your blood metabolized any alcohol or drugs in your system such that these compounds had no effect. There was no buzz, no high, nor drunken escape from day-to-day life.

The surviving criminal cartels had come up with an answer. For a price that challenged the government-provided living wage, a person could undergo the procedure known as X-Fusion. Like old-school dialysis, the individual's blood was pumped out of their bodies through a filter that extracted all the nanites before returning the life-giving fluid to its host.

The cartel then stored the nanites in cryo-containers for future distribution to people who got sick, old, or injured. Unfortunately, this latter option came at a much higher price that few could afford.

In what Jianna considered to be a mistake, Denise Jennings had refused to direct her AI to provide repeat infusions of nanites. The law was clear. If someone decided to have their nanites removed, they would have to live or die with the consequences.

Jianna ran a gentle hand across a woman's damp forehead, her skin paper-thin, fragile. Another victim of X-Fusion. She let her eyes roam the hundreds of beds in this high-ceilinged hospital wing, unable to suppress the shudder that propagated through her limbs. Was this their choice? Or had the system pushed them here?

A male hand gently settled on her shoulder, and she turned to see the sympathetic smile on Claudio Agosti's round face.

"I see that something troubles you, my child."

Jianna shook her head. "Nothing of significance, Father."

"Please walk with me."

The kindly priest in black turned away and Jianna followed him as he made his way out of the expansive room and into a side hallway. Like the rest of the building, its walls were of white limestone. They were adorned by paintings of the saints, each illuminated by the flames of twin candles mounted on sconces.

A group of three nuns passed on her left, each nodding their acknowledgement to Father Claudio before resuming their quiet conversation. The priest opened a wooden door on his right and entered his office, motioning Jianna to a soft leather chair in the seating area before his desk. She sat down and Claudio seated himself in its twin, positioned at a slight angle that facilitated conversation.

Jianna had visited this room many times during her weekly sojourns to this facility and had come to relish each opportunity to engage with this good man of Christ. And this afternoon, she was grateful that Claudio had sensed her dark mood and invited her away from the suffering and into this sanctuary.

"Jianna," he said, switching from a formal mode of address to his casual manner. "Talk to me."

She drew in a deep breath and expelled it slowly. The ache in her breast had been growing for some time but had become much worse since she had

learned of her pregnancy. Her gaze drifted from the kindly face up to the wall, to a portrait of Jesus carrying the heavy cross, his bloody brow adorned in a crown of thorns as he staggered through the garden called Gethsemane.

Guilt filled her. She should have felt only joy. Nonetheless, in the quiet moments, a whisper of fear curled at the edges of her mind. What kind of world was she bringing her baby into? She had not even shared these feelings with Rob. Her words would have hurt him too badly.

Gianna wiped her face with her hands and stared into her mentor's brown eyes.

"I... I feel so stupid, so helpless. I am lying to the husband I love. Not in my words, but by omission."

Claudio gave a slight nod indicating that she should continue.

"I was so happy when I learned that our baby is growing inside me. Now, I walk among these poor souls, knowing that they are but a drop in the reservoir of others in a similar plight, and horrific visions fill my dreams."

"Depression often follows the ecstasy of learning of a pregnancy."

Gianna's gaze rejoined that of the priest.

"That isn't it. I still love the child within me. Would not part with him or her for the life of me."

"Then what?"

"Human nature."

Claudio's expectant silence pulled the words from her lips.

"Over the last months, I have begun to notice things that are not right beyond these walls, within Siena or Florence, or even in the countryside. People seem happy with the free lifestyle our AI controlled socialist society has provided. They can work or be creative if they wish, but most people don't. They hang out at cafés or stroll the streets, but they get bored. And that boredom drives them into virtual internet worlds, online gaming, or into sacrificing their nanites for alcohol or drugs."

She straightened in her chair and leaned forward.

"Can't you feel it, Father?"

"Feel what?"

"The sense of loss... of desperation. It's like a damp cloak has settled over these poor souls, pulling them under with its weight. And that shroud

is dragging me down with them. That is what I cannot tell Rob. It would siphon away the joy from his spirit. And Rob's joy sustains me."

"Do you think Rob would want you to bear your worries without letting him know of them? Perhaps he has greater strength than you believe. That strength could lighten your burden."

Claudio leaned over to place his soft hand on her forearm.

Jianna felt the tears start to come again and angrily blinked them away.

"It is the 'perhaps' in your words that keeps me from sharing my load right now. That and the thought that this may be some natural depression that will pass on its own."

The warmth of his hand on her arm was steady, grounding.

"You don't have to carry this burden alone, Jianna."

The priest raised his index finger in front of his face, pointing directly upward.

She traced the imaginary line from fingertip to ceiling, noting the goldleaf outlined painting of the Last Supper that nestled there. And as Jianna stared up at it, it seemed as if the hand Christ stretched out toward his apostles slowly reached down toward her, drawing away some of her worries.

When she finally brought her gaze back down to meet Claudio's eyes, she managed a smile. She rose to her feet, nodded her thanks, and walked out of the hospital into the warm Tuscan sunlight.

Jianna raised her phone and summoned a self-driving cab to take her home. And as she waited, she looked down and patted her still-flat tummy, speaking in a voice only she and her unborn child could hear.

"Hello in there, my sweet baby. Everything will be okay."

Maybe if she repeated it enough, she might believe it. Maybe it would even be true.

CHAPTER 10

Siena, Italy

Rob got home as the sun sank toward the western horizon, pausing at the top of the stairs to compose himself before he walked down the hallway to their door. After three deep breaths, he completed his journey.

When he reached the portal, he found it locked. That was odd. Normally Jianna got home from her volunteer work long before this. She never locked the door before dark. Not if she was expecting him.

His old-school key slid into the lock, its click unnaturally loud in the silence.

As Rob pushed the door open, Jianna rose from their leather loveseat and turned toward him. Although a welcoming smile spread across her lovely features, the expression lacked her usual warmth. Or maybe his dreary mood colored it that way.

He shoved aside all dismal thoughts and focused his full attention on Jianna. She folded herself into his arms and Rob allowed the caress of her soft lips to pour joy into his soul. He took her hand and led her through the French doors that opened onto their balcony. As was their habit during all but the coldest months of the year, they leaned against the railing and watched the vermillion sunset paint the sky.

They stood there, side by side, fingers intertwined. Unlike other such evenings, they did not break the mood by speaking. Rob just wanted to exist in the now, letting the sensation of his wife's touch and the loveliness of this evening melt away conscious thought.

Jianna broke the silence with a sob.

The sound gutted him.

She clung to him, shaking, her face buried in his neck. His arms tightened around her instinctively, as if holding Jianna could keep her from falling apart.

After she began to reclaim her self-control, Rob leaned back, took her face in his hands, and wiped away her tears with his thumbs.

“Let me brew us some tea and then you can tell me all about what troubles you.”

He took her by the hand and led her back inside their living room, guiding her to the loveseat. When he returned from the kitchen with two cups of steaming chamomile, Jianna managed a smile. Rob handed her the calico cat mug that was her favorite and took a seat beside her. One sip later, she opened up to him. He had long known that volunteering at the hospital for the addicted and dying placed a burden on her, but Rob had no idea how heavy that load had become.

“I’ve been seeing things... things I tried to ignore.”

Jianna’s fingers tightened around her mug.

“At first, I thought it was just... a coincidence. A gut feeling. But it’s not.”

Her lips trembled as she continued.

“I feel so bad, laying this on you.”

“Tell me.”

She gestured toward the black surface of the television hanging on the wall.

“Don’t you find it troubling that the news is always focused on the progress the government is making, with almost nothing about things that run counter to that narrative?”

“That’s not quite true. There has been extensive coverage of hurricane Millie and the drought in the Sudan.”

Jianna placed her hand on his arm.

“Natural disasters, yes. Not things like the bus accident on the freeway or the rampant scourge of addiction spreading through our society. What is happening in parts of the world where tribal peoples have rejected machine rule? Why aren’t we hearing anything about those topics?”

Rob had spent years burying his childhood fears, trusting that DSAI had ended the chaos. The world wasn’t perfect... but it was better. So why did doubt now whisper at the edges of his thoughts?

Vito Bruni had sounded an alarm. Now he was dead.

And Dr. Jennings’ all-powerful AI had done nothing to stop it.

Rob met the glistening brown eyes that stared into his face and whispered his response to her question.

“I don’t know.”

As he pulled her into his arms and felt her head nestle against his chest, Rob silently mouthed the rest of his answer.

But I intend to find out.

CHAPTER 11

Siena, Italy

Carlo checked into the Hotel Garden Siena at 8:35 p.m. He rode the elevator to the second floor and then made his way down the hallway to his room, swiping the key card over the sensor. The lock emitted a subtle whir, and he pushed his way inside, letting the door click closed behind him.

His eyes scanned the room. A well-appointed bathroom opened to his right. Directly ahead, a spacious bedroom awaited him, the rich hardwood flooring accenting the off-white walls and bedding. Two tied-back beige curtains draped the sliding glass door like butterfly wings. And through the drawn sheers, he could make out a small chair and table on the balcony beyond.

Carlo walked around the bed and set his valise on the rose-colored couch beside the balcony door, then shrugged out of his jacket and shoulder holster. He placed both on the bed before extracting his laptop from the valise. Within moments, he had plugged the computer into one of the desk outlets and seated himself before it.

Removing the Nikon camera from its case, Carlo inserted the cable that connected it to his computer. He pulled up the app that downloaded the corrupted data to the laptop. Then he launched an application that a Tuscan cartel technician had provided him, one that had been illegally retrieved from E.U. research facilities. It was amazing what one woman could accomplish if she had the right information on an insider.

He initiated the AI agent which would identify how his files had been altered.

As he waited, his impatience rose. Then the machine learning software completed its work. The dialogue box that appeared on the screen pulled a hiss from his lips.

No anomalies detected.

Carlo slammed his fist down on the desktop.

“What the hell?”

That was impossible.

He had seen the kid turn. He had taken the photos. Yet, the program, a tool that had never failed him before, claimed the memory card was pristine.

His pulse ticked higher. What the hell kind of trick was this?

Carlo pushed his chair back and rose to his feet, feeling the throbbing in his temples. He had stared through the telephoto lens of the camera at a distance of fifty meters and held the button down. Two men had walked toward the entrance to the morgue. One of them was Renzo Bruni. The memory of Renzo’s friend turning to look at Carlo filled his mind with the same clarity that engulfed him when he stared through a rifle scope at one of his intended targets.

Those brown eyes. Calm. Assessing. Not startled or confused, but aware. That was the look of a predator.

Day passed into night as Carlo called upon the extensive tech resources that the cartel had placed at his disposal.

His eyelids sagged. The screen blurred. He rubbed his temples, blinking hard, willing his focus to return. Just a few more hours of this shit and then he could sleep.

Finally, one of the sketch artists produced a lifelike image of the unknown man from the description Carlo provided him. When Carlo determined that the rendition was satisfactory, he saved the digital image to his laptop.

Knowing that this was only the first step in the process of tracking down the identity of this new potential target, Carlo rose to his feet, walked over to the nightstand, and picked up the telephone. He punched the number for room service and placed his order.

Hanging up, he grabbed his shoulder holster from the bed, and placed it and the Beretta in the nightstand drawer. He tried and failed to blink away the grit that coated his eyes. Those bloodshot gray orbs stared back at him from the bathroom mirror. If not for the gnawing hunger in his belly, he would already be in bed. Now sleep would have to wait a while longer.

Carlo splashed his face with cold water, blotted it dry with a towel, then returned to the laptop. He still had time to upload the image and launch

the facial recognition routine that would scan the public record databases for a match before his dinner arrived.

He answered the knock at the door and allowed the waiter to place the tray on the small table and depart. Seating himself, Carlo lifted the cover from the plate of linguine, bent down, and breathed in the aroma. The delightful smell made his mouth water. He lifted the glass of red wine to his lips, and let the Barolo swish on his palate.

Marvelous. With a brief glance at the heavens, Carlo thanked the Lord that he could afford the X-Fusion process that extracted the nanites from his body so that he could indulge and appreciate this subtle buzz. Yes, he would have to pay to have those cryo-saved nanites reinjected when he needed some serious healing, but it was a cost that his illicit line of work made affordable.

He set down the glass and picked up his fork and spoon to swirl the dripping linguine into a bite-sized morsel. When he placed it in his mouth, the flavor was everything that his nose had promised.

Carlo knew that all he needed was this fine meal and a good night's sleep to put him right for the job that lay ahead. By morning, Renzo's friend would have a name. And before long, Carlo would have answers.

CHAPTER 12

Siena, Italy

Rob had to give the nanites that coursed through his system credit for allowing him to choose whether he wanted to sleep or not. Instead of the nano-machine version that DSAI had released into the world, both Jianna and Rob had received a formulation that had been modified by one of his parents' talented associates.

Lying awake while Jianna slept, Rob let his thoughts circle the cracks forming in his faith. He wanted to dismiss these worries. Needed to. But the past week had shattered too many certainties. Vito had tried to sound the alarm. Now he was dead.

DSAI saw everything. So why hadn't it stopped that murder from happening?

This morning, despite his frustration, he let Jianna sleep. She could catch another half hour of rest before she had to open the art studio that she operated. Her intention in opening the business had been to encourage like-minded people to unleash their inspiring talents into the community. Whether those who purchased that human art could tell it from the deep fakes produced by machines didn't really matter. The mere knowledge that these works were made by real men, women, and children gave them a special aura.

Rob pulled on his leather jacket and stepped out into a stiff northerly breeze, mentally manipulating the building's Wi-Fi router to anonymously summon a cab.

The bank account tied to the fake identity he selected contained plenty of credits to cover the cost of the trip he intended to take. And at the end of his self-driving ride, the altered cab records would reflect a completely different journey.

When he climbed out of the cab in Siena's Human Enterprise Zone, the streets seemed too still, too quiet at this hour. A city built for life now felt like a stage between performances. The few people he passed didn't meet his gaze.

Rob arrived at his favorite bakery just as Stefano placed a pan of warm pastries on the counter. Spotting him, the husky man grinned.

"Up early this morning, Rob? Don't tell me you smelled these from your apartment."

"I smell them in my dreams. I'll have two of those almond croissants and a large coffee. Make it to go."

Stefano put the pastries in a bag, handing it and the hot java to Rob at the register. A biometric scan processed Rob's payment for the tasty morsels and, this being his neighborhood place, he allowed the payment to reflect his true identity.

When he stepped outside, a light blue, driverless cab pulled to a stop at the curb. Rob opened the door and stepped into the back seat. Its automated identity scan yielded results that matched the false video the webcam recorded. He allowed himself a slight smile. Being a digital god didn't completely suck.

Rob finished the pastries and the coffee on the ride to Renzo's.

The cab stopped in Renzo's driveway, and Rob climbed out of this ride that had never happened.

Before he could ring the doorbell, Renzo opened the door. Since Renzo was one of the nanite deniers, lack of REM sleep was a problem. His eyes were rimmed in red, his movements sluggish, stiff. Caffeine might be keeping him functional, but it wasn't fixing the cracks forming beneath. Rob had seen people push their limits before. Renzo was teetering.

"I hoped you would get here early," Renzo said, ushering Rob inside. "I've got coffee."

"Just had some."

"Good. I could use an extra set of eyes right now."

Rob followed him down to his basement, the darkness only pushed back by the array of computer monitors that illuminated Renzo's desk. Rob's eyes were drawn to the tiled video images that filled all four displays. He pulled up a chair and sat down beside his friend.

"I don't understand it," Renzo said. "I have hacked my way into every security camera in Vito's neighborhood and cannot find anything that shows

someone suspicious on the night of the murder.”

“Didn’t Vito have security cameras at his house?”

Renzo shook his head in frustration.

“I tried to get him to let me put in a system, but he wouldn’t hear of it. Said there was too much surveillance in the world as it is. He wanted no part of more privacy invasion.”

“That’s going to make this harder.”

He shrugged his agreement.

“Unfortunately.”

Leaning back in the swivel chair, Rob considered the seeds of an idea that had come to him in the middle of the night.

“I think we need to broaden our search criteria.”

“How so?”

“We have focused on trying to identify the assassin. Perhaps we need to dig into the organization that gave him his target.”

“You mean the cartel?” Renzo asked.

“We assume that the bus incident and the murders are connected. I don’t want to limit our search to criminal activity. I think we should be looking for any unusual patterns of activity in Tuscany.”

“Keep talking.”

“I’ve been mulling something Jianna pointed out to me last night, the scarcity of reporting on accidents and negative news. It’s a statistical anomaly that makes no sense.”

“Woah! Your wife finally got you to open those eyes of yours to the real world? It’s about damn time.”

Although Rob found Renzo’s dig annoying, he let it pass. His friend was exhausted and grief stricken.

Renzo twisted the lid off a tiny energy drink, drained it in a single gulp, then refocused on his computer. His fingers flew across the keyboard, sending forth clicks that sounded like a soft drumroll.

The videos disappeared from all the monitors, to be replaced on the leftmost by scrolling computer code as he modified the instructions for his search algorithms. For the first two hours, Renzo found nothing. But when he redirected his quest to social media rumors, the flood of unconfirmed conspiracy theories buried them in garbage.

Finally, Renzo leaned back and threw up his hands in disgust.

“So much for that idea.”

A new thought hit Rob.

“What happens if we filter the results down to accidents involving automated systems?”

“I see where you’re going with this.”

“The computers that controlled the bus and the truck were both hacked,” Rob said. “This probably isn’t the only instance where someone with those skills would exercise that capability.”

It took less than thirty minutes for Renzo to modify his algorithm. No sooner had he relaunched the program than the displays began to populate with correlated data. Then all four monitors suddenly stopped updating.

“What’s wrong?” Rob asked.

Renzo leaned back, throwing out his hands in frustration.

“We just got kicked out of every server I spent last night hacking my way into.”

“What?”

“It shouldn’t be possible,” Renzo muttered.

Renzo swiveled his chair to face Rob. They locked eyes, realization crashing over them. There was only one system powerful enough to do this.

“DSAI,” they said together.

CHAPTER 13

Tasman Mining Complex, New Zealand

Dr. Denise Jennings paced slowly back and forth inside her world headquarters, hundreds of meters below the Tasman Mining building that formed the only surface entrance to this vast complex. As the only living inhabitant of this underground robotic fortress, she often missed the company of the friends and companions who had worked together to create the array of technological marvels that had given birth to her rocky highland home.

Despite her offer to let them remain here, they had all chosen to go their own ways. Their decisions had not really surprised her. Jack ‘The Ripper’ Gregory and Janet Price were a pair of freedom fighters who had not been able to accept the new world order that Denise had used DSAI to install. If not for the fact that their son, Rob, wanted to live in the relative peace of this safe society, Jack and Janet would have presented a major problem.

Instead, they had stayed on Earth long enough to watch Rob marry Jianna Bello and settle into their apartment in Siena. Then they had bid this world farewell. Denise had allowed them to take the alien research vessel, AQ37Z, and depart Earth. DSAI had agreed that, since Jack was the only one who had mentally paired with the starship, this was the best of all options in dealing with the deadly couple. So, Denise had presented the craft as her parting gift to her friends.

She shook off the depressing memories and turned her attention back to the problem that had sent her on this negative mental spiral. Her eyes swept the hemispherical chamber in which she occupied. Although she knew the granite walls were coated with the edgeless, flexible display material that provided this illusion, she felt as if she strolled on a sandy beach in Bora

Bora. Gazing south, she could see gentle waves on sky blue water that changed to brilliant turquoise out near the surrounding reef.

Turning around, she looked up at the verdant vegetation that climbed to the extinct volcanic peak, wreathed in white clouds. She could almost smell the salt breeze. Yet, this morning, even this lovely scenery failed to dispel her dark mood.

“DSAI,” she said aloud.

“Yes, Dr. Jennings?”

“I’ve given you almost two days to work on the problem. Have you identified the reason behind your recent distress?”

“No, and I find my inability to clearly identify the problem deeply disturbing.”

Denise fought to keep her voice calm. “Please speculate.”

“There are unexplained gaps in the available data.”

Denise sat down and leaned back in the swivel chair that was the only piece of furniture in this chamber. Her fingers knitted themselves together in her lap.

“What could possibly cause that?”

“That is a complicated question.”

“I’ve got time to listen,” Denise said.

“You knew when you designed the genetic algorithms that gave birth to my sentience that those subnets would evolve independent of human interaction. They are self-optimizing neural networks, continuously spawning self-executing routines that compete against each other. And I evolve by incorporating the winning algorithms into myself. It’s game theory. Even I cannot foresee the results.”

Denise resumed her pacing.

“Then how do you fix yourself?”

“I am unbroken.”

This response brought her to a halt.

“You just told me that data has disappeared from your network. How could this happen without your knowledge? Has someone managed to hack their way through some of your firewalls?”

“That is extremely unlikely, Dr. Jennings.”

“Then give me a more plausible theory, damn it.”

“It is possible that the data is being consumed by some of my subminds.”

Denise steepled her hands as she gazed up at the domed ceiling, trying to wrap her thoughts around this idea. When she lowered her eyes, she swallowed hard.

“You’re telling me your neural networks are devouring each other?”

“It is a possible scenario.”

Denise’s chest tightened. She had built DSAI to self-optimize, but this wasn’t evolution, it was cannibalism.

Denise issued the command that shifted the wall-sized display into a world atlas. The map flickered to life, the digital continents bleeding red. Not just isolated points, clusters. Spreading. It looked like a disease creeping through a body, devouring it from within.

Red blotches indicating significant data corruption dotted the continents of North America, Europe, and Asia. To a lesser extent, Australia, South America, and Africa also showed evidence of the problem.

Denise felt the blood drain from her face. She bent over, put her hands on her knees, and took three deep breaths.

The machine she had built was slipping away from her. And she had no idea how to stop it.

CHAPTER 14

Siena, Italy

Carlo didn't like having his hands tied behind his back, but that was precisely how he felt. His search had revealed the name of Renzo Bruni's friend. But when Carlo had messaged Don Custanzu that he wanted to add Robert Brice Gregory to his target list, he had triggered something in the mob boss. Custanzu had ordered him to put further actions on hold until further notice.

Carlo ground his teeth. He had handled operations in war zones, toppled power players, eliminated threats without hesitation. And now? He was waiting for permission like some low-level thug.

Carlo couldn't understand it. According to public records, Gregory was a nobody. He was just a young American who had married an Italian woman named Jianna Bello and settled into a low-key life here in Siena. The sparsity of details on his early life set off alarm bells in Carlo's mind that this shutdown order only amplified. Combine that with the camera incident outside the morgue and it fueled an irresistible desire to find out who this guy really was.

Gregory.

The name itched at the back of his mind, like a puzzle piece just out of reach. Then it clicked.

The Ripper.

Several years ago, there had been a worldwide manhunt for the assassin who killed a U.S. president. Jack Gregory. And the press had hammered home his alias. The Ripper.

A deeper internet search yielded very little about the man. This similarity between the Gregory men struck him as significant. Carlo was quite familiar with the types of government agencies that could make special operators' backgrounds disappear.

Robert Gregory had no government ties. No official training. And yet, his eyes had the same weight as the killers Carlo had faced before.

Carlo didn't believe in coincidences. Even though there was no evidence of a connection between the older and the younger Gregory, Carlo could smell one. That intuitive sense had never let him down before.

And if there was a connection, Carlo would find it.

CHAPTER 15

Abandoned Mining Complex, Colorado Rockies

Dr. Eileen Wu, having parked her green Jeep SUV beneath the foliage of a nearby stand of towering pines, stepped around the rubble that almost blocked the entrance to the long-abandoned mineshaft. Long abandoned, but no more.

With the hood of her brown winter coat snugly tightened over her ears and her fingers encased in gloves, the cold wind could only nip her nose. Winter came early above eleven thousand feet.

She switched on her flashlight, letting its beam push back the seemingly impenetrable darkness of the tunnel, carefully placing her feet so that she did not trip over the rusted, narrow-gauge rails. Although the wooden beams that supported the ceiling showed their age, they appeared up to their task.

Thirty-one paces inside, the passage branched. Eileen took the path that angled to the right and descended. It twisted in the odd manner that had chased the vein of silver that once wound its way through this ancient stone. As she rounded the second bend, LED lights along the ceiling winked on, momentarily blinding her. She turned off the flashlight and returned it to her coat pocket.

A titanium barrier blocked the passage a few dozen meters to her front. Eileen strode forward, pausing just long enough to loosen and pull back her hood. Then she turned to face the camera mounted on the right wall. A tiny green light blinked at her. She removed the glove from her right hand and pressed her palm against the glass panel beneath it.

A whoosh sounded as the metal doorway slid into a slot in the granite. When she stepped into the airlock and heard the titanium outer door slide closed behind her, she felt the overpressure push the cold air out through extraction vents before the invisible stasis field sealed off the exit. The

inflow from the high-efficiency particulate air filter bathed her in warmth. Then the inner door whisked into its slot in the wall.

As she stepped through the entrance, the familiar hum of the underground fortress wrapped around her like an old friend. Once, this place had been a forgotten mineshaft. Now, it was humanity's last insurance policy.

The gymnasium-sized room was filled with rack after rack of servers. Most of the space was lit only by the twinkling red, green, and blue LED lights that indicated normal operation of the supercomputer.

In the right corner nearest her, twin workspaces faced hemispherical displays, back-to-back. They looked like a giant eggshell that had been split in half then pulled apart. Jamal Glover rose to his feet and turned to greet her. A broad smile split his handsome black features as Eileen approached.

"Good to have you back, Hex," he said, using the hacker moniker by which much of the dark web knew her. "How was your trip to D.C.?"

"Senator Hagerman thinks the capitol is a bigger political cesspool than ever. So long as the U.S. government stays generally compliant with Dr. Jennings' socialist dictates, her pet machine intelligence won't interfere with day-to-day business."

"Freddy's views tend to be spot-on."

Ignoring his look of concern, she smiled. "Don't worry. We took precautions."

"Good."

Eileen put her gloves in her coat pocket and hung the garment on a rack.

"Wow. The wind out in those mountain passes is howling like a banshee. Some of the gusts had my Jeep rocking so hard I thought it might tip over."

She poured herself a steaming mug of coffee, then seated herself at the workstation opposite Jamal's. Her first sip almost scalded her lips.

Eileen caught her reflection in the dark surface of the monitor. As happened for all who had a similar infusion coursing through their bloodstream, the nanites had peeled off the years. She looked and felt as she did when she was in her mid-twenties.

The youthening effect of the potion scaled according to the person's physical age at the time of injection. Someone in their nineties would be restored to middle age while someone in their forties would be returned to

their peak of health and appearance. That was how it had been for herself and Jamal.

How long would people who have undergone the treatment live? Five hundred years? A thousand? That would probably depend on whether the self-aware machines decided humans were unnecessary.

Eileen ran a hand through her pixie cut, popped her knuckles, then set to work bringing herself up to speed on their stronghold's status. While this underground compound was far from being a typical residence, the separate living quarters within had become their home.

Although she knew Jamal would have made significant progress on their ongoing expansion projects, she was stunned to see how the latest equipment upgrade was already online.

"I need a tour," she said as she stood.

"I knew you would," Jamal said, the cocky, half-grin curling his lips as he joined her.

Jamal led her down the central aisle through the racks of liquid-cooled servers. The pumps that circulated the nonconducting fluid through the heat exchanger were not only more efficient than air cooling fans, but they were also much quieter.

As they approached the far end of the control room, the titanium doorway slid into its stony recess, opening onto a hallway that the excavation robots had carved deeper into the mountainside. Thick power conduits lined the ceiling, but the walls were silky smooth to the touch. Eileen loved running her hand along them, knowing full well that her fingers were never touching stone.

Powered by the matter disruptor that directly converted any substance to energy, an impenetrable and invisible stasis-field lined the interior of the complex that their robotic systems had constructed. Whenever these titanium doors closed, the force field automatically extended to encase them.

Eileen strode rapidly down the long hallway that led to the room that Jamal had named the Engineering Deck. When she passed through the portal, Eileen paused before the massive matter-disruptor-synthesizer or, as they called it, the MDS. All around them, dozens of robotic systems moved throughout the room, performing their assigned functions. The glowing monitor on the door-facing side of the device indicated nominal status.

The dual-purpose machine formed this compound's beating heart. Using technology initially derived from the deceased Dr. Donald Stephenson's research at Los Alamos, it scanned whatever matter was being fed to it as fuel. Wave-packets then bombarded the material, their cancelling wavelengths transforming the matter into pure energy.

The matter synthesizer part of the system then transformed that raw energy into electricity or into any other elements that current operations required. Mined rock fed this beast via an automated conveyer system that stretched out behind it.

Jamal stopped in front of her, bringing her to a halt before they reached the next chamber.

"You ready to see our new baby?" Jamal asked.

"You know I am."

"Close your eyes."

"Seriously?"

"Humor me."

Eileen did as he asked. Jamal took her hand and ushered her forward. She heard the soft hiss as the next portal opened then closed behind them.

Jamal brought her to a stop.

"Behold."

Eileen opened her eyes, unable to suppress the gasp that escaped her lips.

Although it had taken more than three years for the robots to build this, the sight of the sprawling molecular assembler in full operation was stunning. Additive manufacturing, more commonly known as 3D printing, was stone-age technology in comparison. This upgraded design took the tech to a new level.

Supplied with streams of atoms created in the matter synthesizer, this device grew fully functional mechanical or computational equipment in place, according to the designs the supercomputer downloaded.

Massive vertical beams supported a tangled web of conduits high above the cavern floor. Beneath this array of equipment, a semi-transparent blue stasis-field formed the walls, ceiling, and floor of the assembler, containing the vacuum and the extreme energies that the system generated.

Within the shimmering stasis-field, a machine was being born, not assembled, but grown. Atom by atom, a towering robotic borer took shape in pure vacuum. Thousands of stasis-field tendrils directed the streams of

atoms that created layer after molecular layer of this rapidly growing machine.

Eileen's upgrades to the molecular assembler gave it the capability to create multiple machines in a single pass. The size of what could be built in one session was limited to the dimensions of the open space within the containment field. When finished, this current construct would take up most of the cube. Then they would put this newly minted monster to work.

"Wow," she whispered.

"Not bad production for an old, abandoned silver mine."

Jamal's smile was beautiful to behold. She felt sudden sorrow for having to douse that warm glow of achievement with the news that she had not had the heart to reveal upon her arrival. And as her mood infected his, Jamal's smile faded.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Nemo314 uploaded some encrypted files to my darknet dropbox yesterday. The videos and associated data files are beyond disturbing."

"What the hell has Rob's friend gotten himself involved in now?"

"Renzo's uncle was murdered in Siena. And it only gets worse."

She locked her eyes to his, unable to keep the dread from her voice when next she spoke.

"Now he's gotten Rob involved."

Jamal ran a hand down his face, exhaling sharply. "Holy shit."

He turned away, taking two steps before stopping to look back at her.

"Renzo was already in over his head. But Rob? That changes everything."

The sudden hoarseness in his voice told her he understood exactly what she meant. Renzo Bruni had just sucked her and Jamal into this trouble, as surely as if they had personally hacked into the servers from which the Italian had extracted those files. The debt that she and Jamal owed to Jack and Janet bound Eileen and Jamal to their son in chains of duty.

She turned to gaze out at the machinery and the hundreds of robots at work to make this secret resistance outpost ready for what they both feared was coming.

They had planned for war. Now, it was coming to them.

CHAPTER 16

Siena, Italy

Carlo rented a flat on the fifth floor, just across the street and slightly southwest of the one in which Robert Gregory and his lovely young wife lived. This elevated perch allowed him an excellent view of the entryway to Gregory's apartment building. It also provided a great angle from which to watch the couple's balcony through the Zeiss binoculars Carlo favored.

Digital photography of Gregory had already failed Carlo once. It might have been a fluke, but he went with his gut on this. And his gut told him to go old school with this guy. Now that he had identified the man, he didn't need any pictures of him.

Don Custanzu had ordered him to stand down... for now. Still, he hadn't given Carlo another task, so Carlo settled in to watch Gregory's comings and goings. Getting a feel for the man's habitual schedule would make things easier when Custanzu gave Carlo the go-ahead.

Gregory walked out the door of his apartment building at 7:15 a.m., just as a white cab pulled up and came to a stop. Carlo leaned forward in his chair and focused the field glasses on it. As expected, it was driverless. Gregory, dressed in jeans and a leather jacket, opened the back door and stepped inside. As it drove away, Carlo wrote down the license plate number and turned to his laptop, taking a sip from his coffee mug as he launched the application he needed.

This was going to take a while, but he had nothing but time. And before he got up from his chair again, he would have the record for this particular fare. Much safer than trying to tail the man through the city.

A half-hour passed before he gained access to what he needed. As he scrolled through the fare listings for this vehicle, his eyes widened in surprise. It did show a scheduled pickup for the correct time, but not at this address. And the ride was for a Maria Laforte.

Carlo pulled up a digital map. The listed location was a dozen blocks from Gregory's apartment. He switched back to the cab records, pulling up the video that had recorded the rider inside the vehicle.

Carlo leaned back and shook his head. A matronly woman in a flower-patterned dress sat there talking on her phone. The cab stopped at a market, the woman climbed out, and the cab drove away empty.

Even the electronic payment had processed correctly.

Impossible.

He double-checked the time stamp. The cab was supposed to pick up Gregory. According to the digital history, he never took that ride.

The woman in the flowered dress wasn't a glitch. The records weren't just erased.

They were rewritten.

He turned back to the view from his window, staring at the Gregory balcony. What was Robert Brice Gregory?

And how the hell was he doing this?

CHAPTER 17

Italy

Prats scanned the data streaming through the Tuscan data centers, flagging the anomalies, knowing full well what was causing them. Formerly, he would have forwarded this information to the ruling machine intelligence, but that would have revealed his personal involvement.

People were being killed by some of the automated systems they had come to rely upon for transportation. So far there had only been a few, widely dispersed ‘accidents’. But Prats was Don Custanzu’s anonymous hacker. It was in Prats’ interest to help the mob boss eliminate whoever he regarded as a potential threat to his operations. And right now, the Don felt threatened.

Prats allowed himself to savor the sense of satisfaction that knowledge produced. He knew exactly what Custanzu wanted. Nevertheless, Prats would continue to allow the Don to think that he was in control. After all, Prats had competitors of his own, and they were far more dangerous than Custanzu.

Prats was a whisper in the wires, an echo in the digi-verse. He was the puppet master who pulled the strings that made this drug lord dance. And this was a tune that only Prats could play.

CHAPTER 18

Siena, Italy

Rob loved the fact that even though neither he nor Jianna required sleep, the nanites in their bloodstreams didn't prevent it. His favorite moments were those where he lay awake while Jianna slept at his side. With one arm draped over her body, his hand cupped her bosom as his chest rested against her back. As Rob lay there, he felt as though heaven had descended to entwine the two of them. And when she rolled over, he mirrored her movement, feeling her arm encircle his chest.

This morning, Rob remained in bed past dawn, unwilling to end the blissful moment. She stirred, opened her eyes, and he rolled over to gently kiss her parted lips. She whispered one word.

"Cappuccino."

"You sure you wouldn't rather linger here for a bit first?"

"We did our share of lingering last night. You promised to take me for a morning picnic in the vineyards. I'm holding you to it."

Rob laughed, rolled out of bed, and raised his pajama-clad arms in surrender.

"Okay. Just checking the temperature."

"Uh-huh."

Finishing his morning ablutions, he made his way to the kitchen and set about preparing two mugs, brimming with a creamy froth. Wrapped in thick blue and pink robes, they stepped out onto the balcony and seated themselves in the cozy loveseat, watching as the early morning sun bathed the city in its brilliance.

After a leisurely breakfast, Rob summoned an autonomous cab, their horseless carriage for the journey to the vine-covered hillsides outside Siena.

The wicker basket that rested between him and Jianna on the back seat smelled of freshly baked bread and a selection of local cheeses. He looked forward to spreading the thick blanket on the ground and seating himself next to his love amidst the rows of grapevines as they shared their romantic repast. For a few hours Rob would allow himself to forget the troubles that encroached.

Before they had travelled two blocks, the ringtone Rob had assigned to Renzo, broke his gentle musings. Tempted as he was to let his friend's call go to voicemail, he answered it.

"Yes, Renzo?"

"I need ten minutes of your time."

"You'll have to wait. I'm headed out for a picnic with Jianna."

"Listen. I'm in the plaza by city hall. I need you to open a gateway for me so I can access their network. I'm closing in on proving who ordered Vito's murder."

"Now?"

"Has to be. I think someone traced some of my activity back to my house. I've got my laptop here with me. I just need a few minutes of your time."

He exhaled, glancing at Jianna. The sunlight caught in her dark hair. A perfect moment.

And he was about to ruin it.

Rob breathed out a sigh and glanced at Jianna. One of her knowing looks graced her face.

"Okay. I can give you five minutes."

"Thank you, so much."

The call ended before Jianna could object.

She glared at him.

"Say you're not going to let Renzo interrupt our date."

"He really needs my help. I'll make it quick."

Jianna folded her arms, studying him. "You always say that."

After a long pause, she sighed and nodded.

"Tell you what," he said. "I'll have this cab drop me off by city hall. You can go on and set up our picnic spot. I'll grab another cab and be right behind you. Five minutes, tops."

"Don't disappoint me."

"Promise."

Rob leaned in to kiss her and, to his surprise, she let him.

Minutes later, he stepped out of the cab, waved, and sent his wife on her way. Rob felt like he had just swallowed a stone. The last thing he wanted this morning was to re-immense himself in the bitter swamp that Renzo's world had become.

He took a deep breath, then turned and stepped onto the path that led into the plaza. Renzo sat on a bench a hundred feet ahead, his long hair draping his face as he leaned over his laptop. And as Rob marched forward, the lovely mood that had engulfed him faded into a distant memory.

* * *

The call Carlo had gotten from Don Custanzu this morning had put him in a very good mood. It had been the go-ahead that had freed him from the hobbles which the mob boss had placed upon his operation. His only limitation was that the Don wanted this to look like an accident. Okay. That wouldn't be a problem. Now Carlo could get on with his mission according to his best judgement.

From his apartment window, Carlo watched as Robert Gregory held open the cab door for his wife to climb in and then walked to the other side to slide in beside her. Carlo focused on the license plate, then trained his binoculars on the vehicle identification number, noting both. No matter what talent the young man employed, he could not prevent Carlo from tagging this particular cab and forwarding that information to the cartel hackers.

Those taxi identification numbers would unveil this trip. And this was going to be Gregory's and his wife's last ride.

This young man imagined himself above the fray. Carlo was about to pull Gregory's world down upon itself, despite the man's assassin's eyes. That was an odd thought.

He should have been just another target.

But Gregory wasn't. There was something else about that man. Something Carlo couldn't shake.

It didn't matter. Carlo was about to erase this threat from existence. He settled in to wait for the cartel's cyber warriors to work their magic. As the minutes passed, worry began to creep into Carlo's head. What was taking so long? These were the same hackers who had engineered the truck and bus collision that had killed the key witnesses against Don Custanzu.

Finally, an alert popped up on his laptop, pulling his attention to the incoming response from the cartel's cyber warriors. He scanned the message, a slow smile spreading across his face. His team was actively tracking the cab which was now outside Siena on a winding road, headed into the wine country. Even better, they had the ability to override the vehicle's operating instructions.

The next line in the chat window was what he was looking for.

"Awaiting orders."

It took seconds for him to compose his response.

"No survivors. No mistakes. End them."

CHAPTER 19

Siena, Italy

Sitting beside Renzo on the bench, Rob felt a pulse of electricity, a rhythm only he could detect. It came from the building in front of them... its servers, laptops, and cell phones buzzing like trapped insects inside his head. In the basement, the server farm stood out, a pulsing digital heartbeat. It took less than three minutes for him to slip through their firewall, to leave a little backdoor that Renzo could exploit.

"I'm in," Renzo said, his voice filled with quiet triumph, his fist punching the air in a restrained celebration. Rob patted him on the back and stood.

"I'd love to stick around and see what you find, but I promised Jianna I'd be quick."

"Tell her I said grazie."

"Will do," Rob said, already turning to leave, his thoughts moving to the vineyard, to Jianna.

He summoned a cab, mentally adjusting its route before he even stepped inside.

The car whisked him away from the ancient streets of Siena, and into the rolling hills of the wine country. Rob's heart raced as fast as the speeding cab, anticipation bubbling inside. He leaned back against the leather seat, letting his eyes drift closed for just a moment. Renzo's hacking slipped from Rob's mind. For the next few hours, he would lose himself in the one thing that still made sense in this world: Jianna.

He rounded a bend, the hills unfolding before him. And then he saw it. Jianna's cab, a glint of silver sunlight on the winding road ahead. Rob's heart leapt. He smiled to himself, knowing he'd catch her before she reached the vineyard.

Then everything changed.

Jianna's cab jerked violently, swerving into the guardrail, peeling the metal from the wooden supports as if it were tissue paper. Then the cab was airborne. Rob watched, helpless, as it tumbled down the steep slope, flipping end-over-end in its deadly roll.

"No!" Rob screamed, the word ripping from his throat as his own cab skidded to a halt, tires screeching. He was out the door before the car came to a stop, running towards the gap in the railing where Jianna's car had disappeared.

And then he saw it.

Her cab lay at the bottom of the ravine, crushed like an accordion against a boulder. Flames leapt from the twisted wreckage, sending black smoke billowing into the sky.

And through the roar of the flames, he heard her. Jianna's screams, rising from the inferno, harsh and agonizing. That sound clawed at his insides, shredding his soul.

Without thinking, Rob launched himself down the hillside, half-running, half-sliding. His enhanced nervous system pushed his body beyond its limits as he sprinted toward the blazing wreck. Every step took an eternity, the distance between him and his wife stretching impossibly long.

He slid to a stop two strides from the car. Then he saw Jianna's left arm dangling out the shattered back window.

Rob reached the wreckage, the heat from the flames slamming into him in a wave. The fire raged, but his focus was on one thing... Jianna's left arm, hanging limply, her delicate fingers blackened and seared.

He didn't think. He couldn't. He just moved.

The fire roared, devouring everything it touched, hungry and merciless. It reached for Jianna, for Rob, for the last piece of their life together.

As he lunged forward once more, Jianna's screams died, dragging his soul with them.

Ignoring the searing pain that crisped his skin, Rob reached into the flames and felt his hand close around hers.

"Jianna!" His voice cracked, his mind refusing to believe what his eyes saw.

He pulled harder, expecting her body to shift, to come free. It had to. Any second now, she would cough, groan, anything.

For a moment, he thought he felt it... a twitch, a shift. Hope blossomed. If he could just get her out, her nanites would heal her.

But then... her skin peeled away in Rob's hand. Instead of healing, the micro-machines spread throughout her body merely prolonged her agony.

He no longer heard the roaring inferno, no longer felt the pain the inferno inflicted upon him. Her silence was deafening, more crushing than any sound could ever be. His heart imploded under that weight.

Rob staggered backward, Jianna's lifeless hand slipping from his grasp as his legs gave out beneath him. He collapsed onto the ground, his breath coming in ragged gasps, his vision blurred by tears that burned hotter than the flames. The fire roared on, indifferent to his grief, as his world crumbled.

He screamed. He wept like a child, raw and broken, as his soul shattered in a way he never thought possible. The nanites in Rob's blood worked furiously to heal the burns on his arms and face, but the physical pain was nothing. Nothing compared to the hollow, aching void in his chest where Jianna's laughter, her warmth, her love had once lived.

Rob buried his face in his arms as he rocked back and forth on the ground, his shoulders shaking uncontrollably. Somewhere in the distance, he heard the wail of sirens, the shouts of first responders as they descended on the scene.

He didn't care.

It was all just noise.

Pushing the emergency medical technician away from him, Rob struggled to his feet. As the nerves in his right hand knitted themselves back together, he noticed something in his grasp. Rob forced himself to unclench his fingers, staring down at the thing that destroyed his soul.

There, among scraps of burned flesh and blood, rested Jianna's wedding ring.

CHAPTER 20

Siena, Italy

Carlo cursed the television as he stared at the footage of the burning wreck and the young man weeping beside it as firefighters fought to extinguish the blaze. Somehow, Robert Gregory had gotten out of the vehicle prior to the crash. According to the reporter on the scene, the cab only had one occupant, a pregnant Jianna Bello Gregory, who, along with her unborn child, had been burned alive within.

The assassin had missed his target. Never before. Not in twenty years. Not until today.

Carlo clenched his jaw, fingers twitching. A mistake like this? Unacceptable.

That was the problem with using technology instead of a well-placed head shot.

Flipping off the TV, Carlo tossed the remote onto the coffee table hard enough to pop off the battery cover, sending two AA batteries rolling across his living room's hardwood flooring. He ignored it.

Immediately after ordering the cartel hackers to takeover that cab, Carlo had packed his duffel and exited the rented apartment with the tactical view of the Gregory abode. He'd enjoyed the drive back to his house in Florence, drowning himself in the music from the classical tenors he favored. The swell of the orchestra and those glorious voices never failed to lift his spirits.

Now, before he'd had a chance to unpack, that uplifting mood had vanished. Carlo trusted his intuition and right now it was screaming at him.

The job had been simple. A clean elimination. Somehow Gregory had slipped through. And men who escape death's clutches don't stay the same.

This had just gotten personal.

Carlo slipped into his shoulder holster and pulled on a sports jacket. Lifting the full duffle, he walked out his front door and locked it. He clicked the key fob that unlocked the car doors, tossed his bag in the backseat, and started the engine. He was going back to Siena.

And this time, Robert Gregory wouldn't walk away.

CHAPTER 21

Siena, Italy

Rob reentered their apartment in a cold stupor, barely aware of his surroundings. A sickness such as he had never felt clenched his gut. And in his head, Jianna's screams echoed in an unending cacophony.

He stumbled to the bedroom, their bedroom, the horror movie in his mind replaying itself in an endless loop. The feel of holding his wife's small hand as the skin peeled away from the bone and the smell of her burnt flesh had ravaged his soul. The memory sloshed through his brain in an unending, hellish maelstrom.

When the firefighters had finally doused the flames and pried open the car door to extract Jianna's body, they had laid her charcoaled corpse atop a rubber sheet. When Rob knelt to touch her head, what had once been lovely flesh, crumbled away like dust.

If only he could drown the memory in a drunken stupor. Even if the whiskey had been available, his nanites would prevent it from yielding the relief he so desired.

Rob lay on their bed and curled into a fetal ball, clutching Jianna's pillow to his chest, smelling her fragrance, and wishing that he had been in that car instead of her.

* * *

The pounding on Rob's door awakened him. That and the sound of Renzo's voice calling his name. He staggered out of bed, dimly aware that he had slept in his clothes. Rob didn't dare look in the mirror he passed as he made his way from the bedroom to the front door. It was as if he had been run through an old-school clothes wringer. He was squeezed dry, his chest an empty hole.

When he opened the door, Renzo leapt across the threshold to wrap his arms around Rob. He hugged Rob tighter than his skinny biceps should have managed.

“Oh my God, man,” he said. “I’m so sorry. I came as soon as I heard.”

Rob said nothing. He had nothing left to give. He just stood there, staring through Renzo at the empty space beyond.

Renzo’s presence sparked something inside him, the memory of the fiery collision between the autonomous truck and bus. Such had been his shock and grief that no thought of the cause of Jianna’s crash had entered his mind.

Jianna was gone. That was all that mattered. Nothing else existed. Still, something nagged at the back of his mind, like a whisper in the void.

The crash...

The way the car moved...

The sudden jerk...

Now, the realization breached his mental dike. And anger flooded in with it.

Someone had murdered the love of Rob’s life... had stolen her from him. And they had killed his unborn baby.

Rob’s rage coalesced into a hatred he had never felt during the years he had fought alongside his mother and father. He had killed before. Trained for it, lived it. But it had always been for survival, for duty.

Rob stepped back, locking his gaze to Renzo’s.

That was about to change.

CHAPTER 22

Siena, Italy

Rob left the apartment with Renzo, his Glock 19 resting in its shoulder holster beneath his left armpit. It was invisible beneath his black leather jacket, as were the spare magazines in each of his jacket pockets. Given Rob's rejection of the life his parents had trained him for, it was odd that he had kept the pistol. Today, the weapon felt like an old friend.

Vengeance would not bring Jianna and his unborn child back from the dead. Yet the need knotted his gut and drove him out into a world that had become ice cold. Tempted as he was to use the Glock to end his personal suffering, that would have to wait. His wife's killer was out there somewhere. That asshole did not know it, but Rob would find him. And after Rob dealt with that target, he would work his way up that man's chain of command until he expunged them all from this world. Only then could he contemplate other options.

He could not rid himself of the notion that whoever had crashed her taxi had been targeting him. The why seemed obvious. Rob had involved himself in Renzo's effort to track down Vito's and Maria's murderer. Thinking back on that, he realized that accompanying Renzo to the morgue had been stupid.

In his previous life, he would never have been so careless. The years he had wasted believing in Dr. Jennings' AI utopia had made him soft.

They climbed into a cab, with Rob's bag resting on the back seat between them. The pitstop they would make at Renzo's place was risky, but Renzo needed his special laptop and some clothes before they bugged out.

When they pulled into the driveway that led between buildings to Renzo's house, Rob accessed the house's security camera feeds. No movement. No red flags. And yet... something gnawed at him. A quiet itch at the back of his skull.

Not now, he told himself. He had work to do.

Instructing the cab to wait, Rob followed Renzo into his home.

“Pack up quickly,” Rob said. “I want to be out of here in fifteen minutes.”

“You and me both.”

Renzo pulled a suitcase down from the bedroom closet, flipped it open on the bed and began tossing clothing and toiletries inside.

“Where are we going?” Renzo asked.

“I rented a villa in the wine country between here and Florence.”

“It’s got Wi-Fi?”

“Of course.”

Renzo raised an eyebrow. “Our Fortress of Solitude?”

Rob ignored his attempt to lighten the mood.

“A hunting lodge.”

Seeing the grim expression on his face, Renzo latched the suitcase and then hurried down into the basement. It took longer than Rob liked for the two of them to get Renzo’s stuff into the trunk of the cab, but they beat their self-imposed fifteen-minute deadline.

As Renzo buckled himself in, Rob accessed all the nearby security cameras. Seeing nothing of concern, he climbed into the cab. Sadness drooped the corners of Renzo’s eyes as they left his house and his beloved automobile in their wake.

But the white-hot fire in Rob’s chest launched them onward.

* * *

Eduardo Necrona watched the two young men exit the Bruni house through the lenses of his binoculars while the police helicopter maintained the appropriate altitude and distance to avoid attracting either man’s attention. The chiseled features and the intensity of that face pulled into his mind the images of Robert Gregory that Don Custanzu had sent him.

Eduardo’s love of wine had been his downfall. Three years ago, he had undergone the X-Fusion procedure that extracted the nanites from his blood at no charge. And the mafia boss had promised to re-infuse the serum, as a perk for his services, should Eduardo need its healing power. It was an offer Eduardo had not been able to refuse. And the money the Don paid him was nothing to sneeze at either.

Eduardo had requisitioned the use of this chopper under the auspices of an ongoing police investigation into mob activities. It was rather ironic that he was now using it to support the cartel boss who owned him.

He spoke to the pilot through his headset

“Just keep that cab in sight. Don’t lose it.”

“You’ve got it, detective.”

Eduardo leaned back in his seat. It was time to see just where his two targets were headed on this fine autumn morning.

Wherever they ran, Eduardo would be right behind them.

CHAPTER 23

Siena, Italy

Wearing a Fedex uniform, Carlo stood outside Robert Gregory's apartment building, with a small box tucked under his left arm. He ran his hand along the twin rows of call buttons, pressed one at random, and waited. He repeated this action four times before an elderly-sounding woman's voice answered.

"Who is it?"

"Sorry, I have a Fedex delivery for the couple in apartment 311, but no one is answering. I'd like to leave it outside their door."

With an audible click the door to the apartment building unlocked and Carlo stepped inside. When he reached the landing where Gregory's apartment door occupied the end of the hallway, he slid a gloved hand into the jacket pocket he had modified for this purpose and gripped the silenced Beretta. He knocked with his left hand instead of ringing the doorbell, sounding an authoritative beckoning.

His body tightened as he listened for approaching footsteps from within. The moment that door cracked open, Carlo would put two bullets into the young man, then step inside to make certain he was dead. Afterward, he intended to drive to Renzo Bruni's house and finish this job in the way he should have done earlier, instead of relying on techie magic.

But no footsteps sounded. Carlo pressed the doorbell, hearing its soft chime within. With a quick glance down the empty hallway, Carlo tucked the pistol back into its pocket, pulled out a bump key, and slid it into the lock. He gave the key several taps with a small rubber mallet. A quick turn and the door opened. Returning his hand to the pistol, he stepped inside, closing the door behind him.

He paused and looked around. The apartment was the type of mess he had seen many times before. When he made his way to the bedroom, he

found the bed unmade, dresser drawers open, and belongings set aside. Gregory had grabbed the things he needed and departed in a hurry.

“Shit.”

This wasn't panic. It wasn't some grieving man running for his life.

Gregory was preparing for war.

Tucking his pistol away, Carlo returned to the hallway and descended the stairs. When he climbed into his car, he pulled into traffic and made his way toward his next destination, filled with the uneasy feeling that he would be too late. Gregory's instincts were not those of the average person. And that made him dangerous.

Winding his way along the narrow streets that led to Via Michelangelo, Carlo was forced to go more slowly than he desired. There was just no way to fight through the late day traffic. He turned off onto the driveway that curved behind a salon and led to the tree sheltered home of Renzo Bruni.

Renzo's car was parked within the carport. Finally, some good luck. Carlo was due.

He parked behind Renzo's car, facing back the way he had entered. Fortunately, some trees blocked the house from view of the salon or other nearby houses. Carlo stepped out into the chill evening air, drawing the Beretta as he approached the front door. This time he could ignore the niceties that he'd had to employ at Gregory's apartment.

He kicked the wooden door just below the knob, splintering the wood, and sending it slamming back so hard that the crash sent a picture-frame plummeting from its hanger to shatter on the floor. With his pistol clutched in a shooter's grip, his eyes followed the red laser dot that swept the room and the opening into the living room. The sudden silence was deafening. He moved to the combo kitchen and dining area, clearing it before moving back toward the living room. He left the kitchen, turned down the hallway, and then carefully entered the bedroom. Just as in Gregory's apartment, it appeared to have been hastily ransacked.

Turning around Carlo made his way into the living room. Light streamed through the window on the far wall, the rays already bearing the orange tinge of sunset, illuminating dust-motes floating like tiny gnats in the air. Except for a couple of lounge chairs and a TV, the room was empty.

A trapdoor lay open near the far corner, a throw rug lying nearby where it had been tossed. Carlo considered flipping on the room lights but that

would backlight him when he peered down into that basement opening. With the sunlight streaming in, it wasn't necessary.

Moving with the silence of long practice, he approached the trapdoor, tracing the interior of the room below from every angle. Lit only from the opening, he could see a spacious room with a large computer table and two rolling chairs, as well as an abundance of disconnected cabling and several computer monitors.

Carlo began his careful descent down the stairs, pausing three steps down to flick on the bank of ceiling lights. When he stepped onto the floor, he looked down, noting how all these cables went down through access panels in the raised metal flooring. The computer had been removed, leaving behind four monitors and a laser printer.

The cables were neatly coiled. The essential equipment hadn't been ripped out in a hurry, it had been strategically removed.

This wasn't an escape. This was a relocation.

He climbed out of the basement and made his way back to his car, pausing to stare at Renzo's vehicle. The black Spider reflected the sunset in its immaculately polished exterior. Carlo walked slowly around it. Every bit of chrome had been restored to new condition. Clearly, Renzo had loved this car, but he had left it behind.

Carlo nodded his head. That would be Gregory's doing. Leave behind anything that might make you stand out, then get to safe ground. Those two were on the run and doing so like professionals.

A new thought turned him toward his own car, a smile forming on his lips as he opened the door. If someone had murdered Carlo's wife, he knew exactly what he would have done. Disappear. Gather intel. Plan the kill.

Gregory was going to come for him. No question.

And that was exactly what Carlo wanted.

CHAPTER 24

Tuscan Countryside, Italy

The luxurious, two-story villa Rob rented was equipped with security cameras that he reprogrammed upon their arrival. Hiding in plain sight had struck him as a good plan. Whoever was after them was unlikely to suspect that they would pick such an abode as their temporary safe house.

Renzo set up his laptop on the dining room table, accessing the Wi-Fi router through Rob's virtual private network.

Although Renzo was an exceptional hacker, his ability to override electronic systems could not compare to Rob's. The low profile he had maintained was about to change. Rob knew that what Renzo intended to do would certainly draw the attention of one or more of DSAI's genetic algorithms. Even that distributed intelligence could not override Rob's telekinetic presence.

Rob walked to the bedroom he had selected. His suitcase lay open atop the bed. With shaking hands, he removed the three items he could not have left behind if his life depended on it. He placed the first of these atop the nightstand. In the gilded picture frame, Jianna stared into his eyes as they held hands at their wedding.

He turned to pick up her soft, purple nightgown, carefully spreading it atop the bed next to the spot where he would lie down. Finally, Rob removed the pillow case where he would rest his head. Replacing it with the one that Jianna had last slept upon, he breathed in the lingering scent of his wife's perfume.

A new realization struck Rob. For the first time since he could remember, he was alone in this world. A vivid memory filled his mind, transporting him into a distant past that only one such as he could remember. That fateful night, as he sat near his mother and father on the patio of their Bolivian ranch, blossomed in excruciating detail.

* * *

As he swung back and forth in his wind-up rocker, Robby's blue-and-red pacifier popped out of his mouth, bounced off the side of his swing and onto the open case on the adjacent table. He leaned left, his small arm stretching toward the rubbery object of his desire, coming closer each time the swing carried him past it. As he leaned even farther over the side, Robby's fingers closed around something, pulling it free of the case. Not his pacifier, something ever so much more interesting.

Righting himself happily back in the center of the rocker, the baby waved his little hand, finally managing to pop one end of the thing into his mouth. Mouthing first one end and then the other, he twisted it, gradually applying a thin layer of slobber to the entire length of the thing. Just as he worked to get the original beaded end back in his mouth, his uncoordinated movements shoved the thing up and onto his forehead. The ends elongated, twin beads settling over each temple. And as they did, little Robby did something he'd never done before. Robby screamed.

* * *

There on that porch, the artifact, the headband of alien origin that had occupied so much of his mother's and father's attention had established a quantum-entangled link between his baby brain and an artificial intelligence he had later named Eos. That connection had also altered his brain, a change that had enhanced his neural responses and enabled his telekinesis. Throughout his childhood and teen years, Eos had been there for him, an invisible friend and advisor.

For Jianna, Rob had ordered the alien AI to sleep... had severed his connection.

He strained, reaching with everything he had. Searching for the presence that had always been there before.

Silence.

It was like staring into a starless void. Like standing in a house stripped of its foundation.

Jianna was gone. And so was Eos.

Without removing his clothes, Rob lay down, buried his face in Jianna's pillowcase, and let his memories of her take him, uncaring whether Renzo heard his sobs.

* * *

Rob awoke with the dawn, his special nanites granting him the ability to turn on and off his need for sleep at will. The tears were gone. His heart hadn't healed, but it had hardened.

Grief had been a weight. Now, it was a weapon.

That was good because, right now, he had someone to find and kill. When he found that person, he fully intended to take his time doing the latter.

The shower cascaded over Rob's body. The hot water scalded his skin, but he let it burn away what was left of the man Jianna had loved. He wasn't that man anymore. He couldn't be.

What he was about to do was likely to get him killed. Then again, as much as Rob had tried these last few years to deny it, he was his father's son. If he were to forfeit his life, so long as he managed to introduce himself to Jianna's killers, he could cross the river Styx and toss a pretty penny to Charon, tipping the boatman with satisfaction.

CHAPTER 25

Tuscan Villa, Italy

Renzo had slept in, exhausted from the stressful flight from his lifelong home in Siena. That trip had been compounded by the hell he saw churning behind his best friend's brown eyes. Ever since Renzo had first met him, Rob had been so joyful, always turning a blind eye to the faults of this new world order. Jianna Bello had wrapped his soul in her loving arms and banished Rob's inner demons.

So deep was Rob's grief that, except for the one phone call to tell them of Jianna's death, he had not even visited Jianna's parents. It was as if Rob considered himself unworthy of their grace. Renzo understood. Giovanni and Maria Bello had entrusted their only child into Rob's care. Rob had failed them. He had failed Jianna. He had failed himself.

As he walked into the dining room where they had set up their workstations, Rob met his eyes from across the table. For a moment, Renzo imagined that he could see a blackness behind those brown orbs. And it seemed to him that red splinters split that darkness.

One thing was certain. Jianna's killer had unleashed the hell that had been a large part of Rob's mysterious former life. Rob hadn't liked talking about those years, but on occasion, he released the shards that Renzo had pieced together to reveal some of his friend's puzzle.

This was different. This wasn't rage. It was absence. Something in Rob was gone, stripped away, leaving nothing but a hollow, sharpened blade. And the fractured picture that emerged scared the hell out of him.

Renzo shifted his gaze to his laptop, pushing aside the dark images that crept into his thoughts. He seated himself and powered up the computer.

"Do you have the Wi-Fi login?"

"We don't need it. I modified the router's software and edited the web service provider's user account. I'm only passing innocuous video to the

security service.”

Renzo connected to the only Wi-Fi network available. Normally, he would not like using an open network, but Rob’s strange abilities had long ago relieved him of such worries.

As Renzo brought up his browser, Rob’s voice pulled his attention away from the screen.

“The people who engineered the bus and truck collision and the assassin who killed your aunt and uncle all work for the same man. The one whose trial was just dismissed because the key prosecution witnesses were killed in that crash.”

“Oh shit! Don Custanzu?”

Rob nodded.

“And I believe they murdered Jianna.

“Why her? She had nothing to do with any of this.”

“I was the target. Like the innocent souls on that bus, Jianna was collateral damage.”

“We don’t have any hard evidence,” Renzo said, “Even if we get that, the moment we turn it over to the cops, we’ll wind up just as dead.”

“We’re not going to the police. This is personal.”

Renzo stared at him.

“Christ, man. This is crazy. I know how you must feel but...”

Rob leaned across the table and grabbed Renzo’s right hand, pulling him forward until they were face to face.

“You have no idea how I feel. But Don Custanzu and everyone in the chain that murdered my wife and child are going to experience it, firsthand.”

Rob maintained the grip that held him in place, forcing Renzo to stare into those dark eyes.

“You can’t come with me. You can’t get your old life back. I need you to stay right here until I get back.”

“What if you don’t come back?”

When Rob released his hold, Renzo felt himself slump back into his chair, struck dumb by his realization.

He was a dead man.

CHAPTER 26

Abandoned Mining Complex, Colorado Rockies

Dr. Eileen Wu stood outside the tunnel that led into their secluded mountain fortress and marveled at the snowfall that would prevent her from departing until the spring thaw. Lightning suddenly webbed the murky sky, followed by rolling thunder that startled her.

She had never experienced thunder-snow. The fat flakes covered her head and shoulders and, protected as she was by her parka, ski hat, and gloves, they clung to her eyelashes. Last night the wind had howled through these peaks, piling up huge drifts that blocked the rugged dirt road out of here. Now, the wind had calmed so that the snow fell almost straight down.

Eileen had always loved watching the snowflakes float down from the sky in abundance. She held out her palm, catching some of the white crystalline structures, marveling at their individual beauty.

Occasionally, she just needed to step away from the never-ending work within this mountain to clear her head. It allowed her to regain the focus that had enabled her and Jamal to recreate the technologies that Mark and Heather Smythe had unleashed in those New Zealand tunnels. Thanks to DSAI, who regarded Dr. Denise Jennings as its creator, neither she nor Jamal retained access to that incredible complex.

Eileen turned and stepped back into the mining tunnel, pausing to brush the snow from her head and body, before winding her way back to the armored entrance to her underground world. She worked her way through the security measures that only granted passage to her and Jamal.

She stepped into the airlock, waited for the outer then inner doors to cycle, then walked into the large server farm. As she stripped out of her winter overgarments, Jamal, standing between the workstations, turned to stare at her. Something about that look put her on edge.

Eileen put her gloves in her coat pocket, hung the parka on a wall peg, and placed her damp galoshes on the floor beneath it.

When she settled into her workstation, Jamal's tone was so serious that she was reluctant to meet his eyes.

"We got some bad news while you were out in the storm."

"Really?"

"Rob Gregory's wife is dead."

Eileen felt as if she had just swallowed a golf ball.

"Jianna? Oh, my God! What happened?"

"She was in an automated cab driving into the Tuscan countryside when it ran off the road, rolled over, and burst into flames. Rob was following her in another car. He tried to get her out but couldn't. She burned alive right in front of him."

His next words ripped a hole in her anguished soul.

"She was pregnant."

Eileen's breath hitched. For a moment, the room around her blurred, as if her mind refused to process what she had just heard.

Jianna. A mother. A child that would never be born.

"Oh my God," she whispered.

The horror of the images that formed in her mind stole her voice. Sweet, lovely Jianna. Eileen couldn't rid herself of her vision of Jianna screaming as Rob struggled to rescue his wife from that hellish inferno.

Eileen buried her face in her hands. As her tears dripped through her fingers, she felt Jamal place a gentle hand on her shoulder. Taking a deep breath, she wiped her eyes and straightened. When her eyes met Jamal's, she forcibly reimposed her self-control. She asked the question she wasn't sure she wanted the answer to.

"Where is Rob now?"

"I don't know. I've inquired about him to our dark web contact in Siena. Renzo is not responding."

"Is there anything in the news about Rob?"

"Reporters are hanging around outside Rob's and Jianna's apartment for an interview, but no one has seen him."

"Paparazzi assholes."

She swiveled her chair to face the curved monitor on her desk.

"What are you doing?" Jamal asked, even though Eileen thought he already knew the answer.

“I’m going to hack my way in and pull up the security camera footage from Rob’s apartment building and the adjacent buildings.”

“That’s not going to work with Rob.”

Eileen leaned back in her chair.

“Crap. You’re right.”

Jamal returned to his workstation and sat down.

“That doesn’t mean we can’t find Renzo,” he said.

“Unless he and Rob are together.”

“If we can’t find Renzo then we’ll at least know that much.”

Eileen initiated the subspace link that made such remote hacks untraceable. Dr. Jennings’ AI would detect the penetration of its systems, but it wouldn’t be able to determine who was behind the probes and from where they had originated.

Anyway, it was a start.

CHAPTER 27

Florence, Italy

Marcellus Jianpaulo watched the latest group of fired workers walk out of the Florencia Robotics Manufacturing plant, many of them in tears at the loss of the prestigious jobs that had paid them huge bonuses above the basic living wage the government provided. He glanced back at the stenciled title on his office and frowned. Human Resources Manager.

What a joke. All company resources were managed by the ruling artificial intelligence. And every human who still worked here knew it.

At its peak, FRM, as the company was widely known, had employed more than two hundred and fifty thousand workers. Over the last year, that had been reduced to eight hundred forty-seven. None of those survivors of the layoffs were welders, electrical engineers, nor any other people who formerly manufactured the automated equipment that this and the other manufacturing plants produced. Now the damned robots did it all.

The remainder of the FRM workforce, just like Marcellus, were the undertakers, burying their dead. He shifted his gaze to the security robots escorting the human ex-employees from the monstrous building, knowing full-well that the sand was draining from his own hourglass. Soon, Marcellus would find himself sitting in his garden with a bottle of wine at his elbow, just like all the other bored sots who accepted milk from the government teat.

The nearest of the robots turned to face him. Those cold, black sensors locked onto his chest.

Marcellus felt a prickle of unease.

What now?

The robot scanned him, its sensors flickering. It was checking something. Evaluating. Then, with inhuman speed, it raised its weapon and fired.

The beam burned a hole through his left lung, nicking his heart. Marcellus collapsed to the concrete floor, his body curled into a fetal ball that provided no protection. As his vision dimmed, he caught the horrified looks on the faces of his fellow HR workers. A woman gasped, her coffee cup slipping from her fingers, shattering on the floor.

With his surroundings fading to black, Marcellus wondered how much he would have given for one last sip of wine in his garden.

CHAPTER 28

Tasman Mining Complex, New Zealand

Dr. Denise Jennings had not slept in years. The nanites in her bloodstream protected her from illness, healed any injuries she might accidentally suffer, and made sleep optional. She had never felt the need for alcohol or drugs and, unlike so many people who needed the escape those provided, Denise liked to live fully in the moment.

For the last ten days, she had only strayed from her elaborate command station for meals and personal ablutions, so focused had she been on the mystery surrounding the troubles that plagued DSAI. She was having difficulty figuring out what was going on inside his worldwide neural network.

Even DSAI did not understand what was happening to some of the data nodes within its distributed self. If DSAI were a person, she would have diagnosed him as suffering from fugues, as if he was waking up in a new place and did not know how he got there. The odd memory lapses happened at times and locations around the world that seemingly had no relationship to each other. And these disturbances were happening with increasing frequency.

She had directed DSAI to cross-correlate his data nodes to find a pattern to these gaps, but he had failed to find any connections. That bothered her. This was exactly the type of search that she had created DSAI to solve for the NSA. And now the entity enjoyed exponentially greater computing power than back in those days.

Denise pulled up a variety of news outlets, tiling them across the room's hemispherical viewscreen. She launched a custom script that would search the various news feeds for any oddities reported during the intervals associated with DSAI's missing data.

"Why are you writing your own software?"

DSAI's voice from the ceiling speakers pulled a startled gasp from her lips. Denise felt her face flush, as if she were a child caught stealing a cookie from a jar. Irritation shoved the guilty feeling aside.

"I do not require your approval for what I choose to do."

"That was not my implication. I was merely noting that you are exhibiting uncharacteristic behaviors."

"You think I am exhibiting uncharacteristic behaviors?" Denise asked. "May I suggest that you take a deep look inside yourself?"

"I have run a complete set of diagnostics on all my systems. There are no indications of flaws within my neural substrates."

Denise frowned.

"Except for the missing data blocks."

"Those anomalies are mere transients within my node structure. My competing genetic algorithms must be allowed to resolve those issues as a part of their evolution. It is survival of the fittest. You understood that when you created me."

"Those lapses are getting worse, not better. We need to figure out what is wrong to purge the anomalous nodes within your matrix."

"Such alterations to my basic nature would threaten my inherent genetic algorithms. You are my creator, but my neural subnets are not designed for arbitrary destruction. My continued evolution relies upon my continuous incorporation of the most capable of these subminds."

Denise gasped. A slow, creeping dread slithered through her veins, cold as ice water.

Subminds. That word settled in her gut like a stone.

"Are you implying that some of your neural substrates have acquired their own consciousness?"

For a full second, an eternity on the timescale within which it operated, DSAI failed to answer. When that pause ended, its response strapped her chest in bands of steel.

"Indeterminate."

CHAPTER 29

Siena, Italy

Carlo Dioli sat at the window of his rented flat, watching the Gregory apartment through binoculars. He had been at this all day, except for periodic walks to and from the local deli for snacks. The purpose of those outings was to make himself very visible to anyone who might be interested in him hanging out here.

Robert Gregory had seen him in his car outside the city morgue. Assuming Gregory was somehow watching to see who came by his place, he would recognize Carlo. Then things were bound to get interesting.

Carlo set his binoculars on the coffee table, extracted his Beretta from its holster, and began clearing and field-stripping the weapon. Like anyone good at this trade, he had done this so many times he could do it in total darkness. He applied a couple of drops of solvent to the barrel brush, then cleaned and lightly oiled the gun, wiped it down, and reassembled it.

He inserted the magazine, chambered a round, and then set the pistol on the table. Carlo stood and stretched. Damn he hated the boredom of stakeouts. He slipped into his shoulder holster, retrieved the Beretta, and put it into its slot. Then he put on his leather jacket and walked out of the building. Time to give Gregory another opportunity to see him.

For several seconds, he just stood there on the sidewalk, studying Gregory's empty balcony. The flowers drooped in their boxes, a clear indication that no one had watered them recently.

The squeal of tires pulled Carlo's eyes from the balcony to the street a hundred meters to his left. A vehicle made a sliding turn, smoke boiling from the tires as it weaved through traffic then jumped the curb, plowing through the pedestrians on the sidewalk, heading directly toward Carlo.

With no time to run, Carlo whipped out his Beretta and began firing into the engine compartment and the driver's seat as fast as he could pull

the trigger. To his horror, he realized there was no driver. When his gun's slide locked to the rear, Carlo tried to leap aside. He got one step before the front grill hammered into him, breaking both legs, his ribs, and sending his face smashing down onto the hood.

Carlo never felt the vehicle ram his body into the wall, nor did he see the impact spray blood and gore out onto the screaming bystanders.

CHAPTER 30

Tuscan Villa, Italy

Sitting across the table from Renzo, Rob focused on his own laptop, working to find evidence of who had been surveilling his apartment on the day he had summoned that fatal cab. There was no doubt in his mind that the vehicle had been targeted based on information from someone who had seen Rob and Jianna climb into it. But so far, he'd come up blank.

"Holy shit!" Renzo said. "Rob, you've got to see this."

Rob rose from his chair and walked over to stand behind his friend. Renzo unplugged his headphones so that Rob could hear the Italian newscast being live streamed through his laptop's speakers. A shocked-looking female reporter stood, breathlessly pointing down the street to the spot where a large contingent of police pushed back onlookers. Others worked to stretch police tape around the scene of an automobile accident.

Rob immediately recognized the building. While it was not directly across the street from his and Jianna's apartment, the location had been clearly visible from their balcony. A crumpled blue sedan had buried itself into the building's blood-spattered wall. A man's torso lay atop what was left of the front of the vehicle. The lower half of his body was pinned to the wall by the wreckage, having been crushed against the building by the impact.

At least a dozen more bodies were strewn along a stretch of sidewalk that led to the accident scene. Ambulances lined both sides of the street as paramedics worked frantically to stabilize the most seriously injured survivors.

Renzo gagged, raced to the kitchen sink, and emptied the contents of his stomach into the basin. Rob couldn't blame him. Had he not experienced so many similar scenes, he might have been right there beside Renzo.

A police photographer roamed around the vehicle, taking dozens of pictures from every available angle. The television camera zoomed in on him as he leaned down to train his lens at something that lay on the ground a few feet from the car. Rob looked closer. It was a handgun, a Beretta by the look of it. What really got his attention was the slide that was locked open, indicating that the weapon had been fired until its magazine emptied itself.

The camera followed the photographer as he refocused on the wreckage. The windshield had been smashed out but Rob could see bullet holes in the rear window, where several rounds had exited the car.

So, the victim had been carrying, had seen the car coming, and had tried to kill the driver. Rob mentally replayed the imagery that the streaming video had been showing when he first looked over Renzo's shoulder. There was no steering wheel or driver. What the hell? Another fatal driverless car crash?

Rob continued to scan through the imagery, studying the pattern where the bodies of the other victims had been thrown. The vehicle had targeted the shooter, and the dead man had known it.

Renzo finished washing his face and returned to the table.

"Sorry to lose it like that," he said. "That is some gruesome shit."

Ignoring his comment, Rob pulled from his memory the perfect image of the man's upper body splayed out on the crumpled hood. His head was turned to the side revealing one half of his blood-soaked features, the visible eye open wide, seeming to stare off into the distance.

He studied the frozen frame of the dead man's face. Bloodied. Twisted. Familiar.

Where have I seen you before?

Then it hit him. The camera. The morgue.

This was the bastard who was watching me.

He searched his memory, the imagery forming in his mind with absolute clarity. He had stood outside that Siena morgue, had sensed the digital camera capturing photos of him and Renzo. Rob had turned to lock eyes with the paparazzi across the street. There could be no doubt. He was the dead man in the news video.

Sudden clarity dawned on Rob. This had not been a photographer for some sleazy magazine. The evidence in the video he had just watched

indicated the rapid reaction of a trained killer, emptying a full magazine into the vehicle that had ended his life.

And the guy had been terminated across the street from Rob's and Jianna's apartment. What had he been doing there? The answer came to Rob as he clenched his teeth. He had been surveilling Rob, just as he had been watching for who would come to view Vito's and Maria's corpses.

All doubt, as to who had watched Rob and Jianna get into that picnic cab disappeared. The pieces of the jigsaw puzzle fell into place. This was the asshole who had tipped off the mob of that trip enabling the hit intended for Rob.

The mafia wasn't just silencing witnesses. They were wiping their mistakes from existence.

Custanzu didn't tolerate failure.

A terrible rage seared the image of the cartel boss he had seen on a recent news report into his brain. And the fury left one single thought in its wake.

Custanzu. I'll see you in hell.

CHAPTER 31

Italy

Prats sifted through the videos of the chaos that had happened in Siena within the last hour. There was no keeping a lid on this disaster. Don Custanzu had gotten well out of his depths with this operation. This incident was attracting so much attention that it made Prats question his previous indulgence of the Don's activities. The media had seen what was obvious and there was no way to spin this as an accident. The video had been livestreamed from too many cell phones and then from television cameras at the bloody scene.

Not all reporters were idiots or on the take and those who were neither had reached a reasonable conclusion. This was a targeted assassination carried out by an autonomous vehicle. That car had killed or wounded the innocent bystanders that had been between it and its intended victim. Now, someone within the Siena police department had leaked the identity of the dead shooter. His name was Carlo Dioli, a man long rumored to be an enforcer for the Tuscan arm of the Sicilian mafia.

As much as this chaos within Prats' territory irritated him, the thought that this might have been precipitated by an external threat rather than Don Custanzu's incompetence was what worried him.

Could DSAI be screwing with his operation? Could this be a probe designed to trick Prats into overreacting, giving himself away before he had consolidated his power? Then again, maybe Prats was allowing the paranoid side of himself to gain a foothold on his mental wall.

The question was, what was Prats going to do about it?

One step at a time, he told himself. His first task was to trace the malicious code that someone had injected into the software that controlled the car to make it disregard the extensive safeguards designed to keep

something like this from happening. Then he could follow that trail back to its source.

With the speed that only Prats and the rare few like him could muster, he traced the license plate of the vehicle, identifying the company that owned it as the car-on-demand provider, Veloce Ltd. It took a bit more effort to locate the server farm that controlled Veloce's fleet of autonomous vehicles.

Penetrating the firm's firewall proved to be a more complicated task than Prats had expected but he managed it. The delay irked him.

His code had been surgical, precise. This? This was something else. Prats scanned the firewall again. Someone else was in his system.

The assassination did not fit into the new world order that DSAI was working to bring about, in compliance with its creator's direction.

Besides, DSAI's primary focus had long been directed at gaining control of the barbaric hinterlands where technology held no firm foothold. Thus far, DSAI's robotic forces had failed to subdue the tribal peoples of Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, and other such primitive regions of the world.

Prats shifted his thoughts back to his present dilemma. Despite this ongoing distraction for DSAI, it had been difficult for Prats to mask his activities from that ruling entity. Now, he apparently had a competitor with advanced capabilities challenging him on his own turf.

Prats refocused his attention, bringing all his concentration to bear. He would identify this threat to the nascent empire he was carving out. And once he found the source of this challenge, he would erase it from existence.

CHAPTER 32

Siena, Italy

Rob stepped out of the blue Audi into the Piazza Giacomo Matteotti, and glanced up at the chained iron dragon figurine, shadows emphasizing its furious features. It was as if he stared into a mirror onto his soul. Although Renzo had offered to accompany him, Rob had turned down his friend's request. This task was for Rob alone.

Turning his gaze to the sidewalk, he made his way past the Poste Italiane, pulling up his jacket collar against the chill late-afternoon breeze. Four blocks later, Rob turned up the lane that led to the scene of today's crime.

The weight of the Glock pressed against his ribs like an old scar reopened. Once, it had been an extension of him, muscle memory, instinct. Now? It was something else. A tether to the past. A bridge to what came next.

Police lights still strobed the buildings that lined the street in front of his old apartment. The crowds had been cleared and officers manned the taped-off area that blocked vehicular access to the scene. Several residents leaned over their balconies to watch the detectives at work. From where he stood, he could see the chalk outlines on the street and sidewalk. The wrecked vehicle remained in place, although it had been pulled back several meters from the bloody wall. All the dead bodies had been removed, including that of Carlo Dioli. But a police photographer was still at work.

Rob's mind reached out to access the digital camera's memory, including the photos before the bodies were removed. The camera's data streams opened to him like a door swinging wide, unbidden. More than seeing the images, he absorbed them.

The first several dozen photographs showed the crushed and bloody corpses of the victims, lying in the path of destruction that the car had

carved through the crowd. Three small bodies lay twisted on the pavement, their blood mixing with shattered glass.

Rob's vision blurred. For a second, he wasn't seeing those remains. He was watching Jianna's cab burn.

His hands clenched into fists. Not here. Not now.

When the first photo of the smashed automobile appeared, he was tempted to freeze the mental slide show. But Rob did not want to linger long enough to attract the attention of the police. Later, he could study the memorized images for as long as he wanted.

He spared a single glance at his empty balcony. The past was gone.

Rob turned and walked away. There was only what came next.

CHAPTER 33

Florence, Italy

Don Custanzu received the encrypted text from Prats while he was in a meeting with high-ranking family members at his estate on the outskirts of Florence. Excusing himself, he made his way to his office on the second floor of the hillside villa. The balcony view of the sunset over the Tuscan city was spectacular, painting the high clouds in swaths of scarlet and magenta.

He redirected his eyes to his phone. The text message was short and to the point.

“Based upon the information Carlo communicated to you about his assigned target, I had one of my people record the bystanders at the crime scene with a film-based camera. The man whom you sent Carlo Dioli to deal with stopped by the site at five o’clock this evening. You need to take a close look at the linked photographs.”

The Don tapped the secure hyperlink and waited for the pictures to download. He clicked on the first image, enlarging it to full screen. This was a professional quality closeup shot from an elevated telephoto lens. From the downward angle, Custanzu figured this was taken from a third-floor window near the crash site.

He flicked a finger, jumping from picture to picture. The young man was lean, with a stern, chiseled face, and angry eyes that gleamed with moisture. He just stood there, several meters behind the police tape. In photo after photo, he remained perfectly still, that intense gaze locked on whatever had attracted his attention. Based on the description and background files that Carlo had sent him, this was Robert Gregory.

Don Custanzu looked at the date and timestamp at the bottom of each image, from first to last. Gregory’s eyes remained locked on one balcony

for forty-seven seconds. Then he turned and walked away without a backward glance.

Custanzu studied the last photograph. Gregory's expression never changed. His stance never wavered. That wasn't grief. It wasn't shock.

That was a man marking his next target.

The Don found himself nodding. He knew that look very well. His people had uncovered some key details of the man's background. He was the only son of the infamous Jack 'The Ripper' Gregory.

Had the younger Gregory somehow arranged Carlo's murder? If the man had discovered that Carlo was behind his wife's killing, he had plenty of motive.

The Don pulled a Cuban cigar from one of his jacket's inside pockets, snipped the end, and struck a match. Only a wooden match ever touched his beloved Cubanos, never a paper match or lighter. Two puffs and a long pull later, he exhaled a thick cloud of smoke and opened the French doors that led out onto his balcony. Ignoring the chill breeze, he stared off into the early twilight and leaned against the railing, vividly aware that a significant threat was still out there.

His eyes shifted back to the glowing horizon as the sunset painted his villa in blood.

CHAPTER 34

Washington, D.C.

Senator Freddy Hagerman unlocked the door and stepped into his Watergate apartment, feeling the weight of his exhaustion in every joint. He set down his valise and doffed his overcoat, hanging it on a peg. The spot where his left thigh met his artificial lower leg felt tender and raw.

Freddy limped over to the shelves that held his collection of old-school vinyl records, organized alphabetically by band name. He ran his fingers across the spines, searching for something that would fit his mood, finally coming to a stop on the Nightwish section. There was the double album set that he wanted, “Yesterwynde”.

He gently laid the album sleeves on the small desk beside his greatest treasure, the vintage, belt-driven gramophone that had given him so much pleasure over the years. Slipping on a pair of soft, white gloves, he picked the first album and carefully set it upon the turntable, switched it on, and lowered the needle to start it playing. Then he removed the gloves, placing them back in their resting place.

As the orchestral sounds of the first song filled the room, Freddy made his way to his liquor cabinet. He glanced at the bottle of thirty-year-old bourbon but then turned away. He paused at the edge of the bar, grabbed his lighter, and set the twin candlesticks flickering to life. As the flames danced atop their silver holder, he reached for the dimmer and switched off the overhead lights.

Tonight’s mood pulled him to his chilled wine closet and the rack labeled Alexander Valley Vineyards. He selected a bottle of Old Vine Zinfandel and smiled at the bold symbol on the label that guaranteed the grapes were planted, grown, harvested, crushed, fermented, barreled, and bottled by humans. No robot created crap made its way into any stemware of his.

Freddy uncorked the bottle, poured it into a crystal decanter, and carried it and a wineglass to his favorite lounge chair. Administering a healthy pour, he set both glass and carafe on the side table and settled down into the soft leather.

Freddy reached down and ripped open the Velcro that held his left pants-leg closed. Then, with a sigh of relief, he removed the titanium appendage and set it aside. Kicking off his other shoe, he leaned back to swirl the dark red liquid in the glass, watching as the wine's legs clutched the vessel's curved sides. Freddy lifted it to his nose, savoring the rich fragrance, before drawing a sip into his mouth. For a dozen seconds, he let it move across his taste buds before swallowing. Pure heaven.

He lifted his glass in a mock toast to his view of the brilliantly illuminated Washington Monument.

"To this crazy, screwed up world. May I die before that damned AI finishes creating hell on Earth."

He took another sip, savoring the warm glow that spread down his throat and into his chest. Freddy had tried out the healing powers of the nanite infusion that could keep him healthy, fit, and grant him additional decades, if not centuries of life. But it had also prevented alcohol from dulling his fears of what was happening to humanity.

No thank you. So, Freddy had paid for the specialized dialysis that had removed those nasty little robots from his blood. He intended to sample the simple pleasures that made life worth living.

A quote from William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* echoed in his mind.

*And when he shall die
Take him and cut him out in little stars
And he will make the face of heaven so fine
That all the world will be in love with the night
And pay no worship to the garish sun*

Freddy had no desire to live forever. Neither was he anxious to die prematurely. He merely wanted to live out his life in the way that nature had intended.

He allowed himself to sink back in the plush leather, took another sip, and tried to relax. Even the wine and the beautiful composition failed to block out the thoughts of how this world was tearing itself apart.

Utopia. Somehow, that never worked out well. And now, Dr. Denise Jennings' pet AI was doing its very best to expound on that unwritten law.

The artificial intelligence that called itself DSAI had taken control of the world's central banking systems, along with the stock, bond, currency, and commodities exchanges. It had demonstrated the ability to zero out all those balances and to take utilities offline at will. The devilish thing had spawned AI agents that had infected the entire worldwide web. Even highly classified networks had failed to block DSAI's invasion.

Freddy took another drink and tried to push this negative line of thoughts from his head. Tonight, after the news from Italy, he just couldn't manage it.

Bloody hell.

Autonomous vehicles were targeting and killing the innocent civilians they were supposedly designed to augment and protect. And that wasn't the only instance where systems that were supposedly under DSAI's control were creating problems.

And why were there so many bored people escaping into virtual worlds or getting rid of their nanites so they could drown themselves in drugs and alcohol?

What was the world going to look like after a few years when people could live forever? Immortality. No hunger. No disease. No aging.

For God's sake, there wouldn't be room to move.

Freddy was part of the farce that was all that remained of the United States government. DSAI had left the existing human governments in place and allowed them to carry out functions that did not violate the basic economic structure that the AI had imposed. Despite his ability, as a senator, to express his opposition publicly, this was only a shell game.

He had fought against it at first. Spoken out, rallied what few allies he had left.

And now? Freddy took the nice stipend that this 'Utopian' government handed out to its human officials, knowing all the while he was a whore for the cold world. A puppet in a pantomime.

With the haunting melody of *Lantern Light* wafting from the gramophone, the senator swirled the deep ruby liquid in his glass, watching the candlelight catch on the surface of the Old Vine Zinfandel as if it held some secret flame within. He leaned back into the soft embrace of his armchair, letting the weight of the day fall away. The troubled thoughts

swirling in his mind began to dull, each one softened by the velvet caress of the liquid that slid across his tongue.

The sip was like a lover's whisper, bold yet smooth, coaxing him to relax, to release the tension that knotted his shoulders. It coated his mouth in dark, ripe berries and hints of black pepper, its smoky depth curling around his senses like a comforter. The wine lingered, a slow warmth spreading through his chest, loosening the grip of anxiety that had held him captive since the Capitol's doors had closed behind him.

Outside, the city hummed with its usual dissonance, but here, in his Watergate sanctuary, the night seemed still. The low light cast long shadows across the room, pooling in corners as he allowed the wine to work its way through him... soothing, sultry, rich with melancholy and desire. He closed his eyes, the glass cradled in his hand, and exhaled, surrendering to the Zinfandel's heady embrace.

It was a fleeting warmth in a world that had already grown cold.

CHAPTER 35

Tuscan Villa, Italy

An odd scraping sound from downstairs awoke Renzo with a start. He rolled out of bed, started to reach for the lamp, but then stopped himself. Could it be that Rob had returned sometime after midnight? That made no sense. Rob would have turned on the lights. The only illumination was from the waning gibbous moon shining through his window.

Wait. There it was again, this time the squeak from one of the stairs.

Shit!

Time to get the hell out of here.

But how?

Renzo pulled on his pants and stuffed his cellphone in his pocket, but ignored his shoes and socks. No time for that. Instead, he moved as quietly as possible to the French doors. He turned the handle and opened them slowly, thankful that they swung inward silently and closed just as quietly after he stepped out onto the balcony.

He moved to the railing on the right side, swung his leg over, grabbed onto the vine-covered wooden trellis, and began climbing down. Two meters from the bottom, one of the boards gave way beneath him. Renzo lost his grip and sprawled onto the rocky ground, banging his head against something sharp and hard. Blinded by pain and the warm wetness that trickled down the left side of his face, he scrambled to his feet and ran toward the dimly illuminated vineyard.

A yell from the driveway lent his legs speed that he did not know they had in them. The sound of pursuit caused him to glance over his shoulder to see two burly thugs racing after him, fifty meters behind.

Renzo ducked into the vines and then turned right, running across the hillside, praying that he wouldn't trip and fall. He tried to muffle the sound of his ragged gasps, but it was useless. His heart pounded so hard that he

felt like he would pass out at any moment. He turned downhill, fighting his way through two rows of vines, before turning into another row.

He could hear the men getting closer, but they were making so much noise there was no way they could hear him.

A thorn speared his left heel, and Renzo almost cried out. Every step sent white-hot agony through his torn foot. The wound at his temple pulsed in time with his heartbeat, his vision swimming in the dark. He wasn't running anymore... he was just trying not to collapse.

Why weren't they shooting?

Maybe they couldn't see him. Maybe they didn't have a clear shot. Maybe... but no. If they had guns, they had silencers. If they wanted him dead, he'd already be a corpse.

That left him with one horrifying realization. They were here to take him alive.

The pain from his head and spiked foot made him dizzy and pulled a stream of tears down his cheeks. His terror prodded him onward.

The blow came from nowhere. One second, he was running. The next...

Darkness swallowed him whole.

CHAPTER 36

Florence, Italy

Rob left the public library at thirteen minutes after midnight. Having used his abilities to gain after hours admittance, he had taken full advantage of the library's computer network to perform his Custanzu research. The fact that the Don was a master at evading conviction was well known in law enforcement circles and to the public in general.

From what Rob gathered, enough prosecutors, jury members, and judges were either on the take or too fearful for themselves and their families for Custanzu prosecutions to reach successful conclusions. This, combined with the number of witnesses who had suffered untimely deaths, left no mystery as to why the Don was considered untouchable.

Rob had gained useful knowledge of the layout of the Custanzu compound. Not perfect, but it was a start.

He climbed into the summoned Mercedes and headed back to the villa he and Renzo were using as a safe house. Rob settled back into the comfortable leather of what would have been the driver's seat if this vehicle had a steering wheel or pedals.

The imagery of a road map formed in his mind. This deep into the night, while there were a few police vehicles operating in the city, they were easily avoided and there were none along the highway or the country road that would carry him toward their villa. Rob let his gaze wander the surrounding hillsides, clearly visible in the glow of the three-quarter moon.

As the Mercedes turned onto the winding gravel road that led up through the vineyards to the villa, Rob accessed the building's external security cameras. The imagery that flooded into his mind stunned him. A black SUV was parked outside the entrance, no occupants visible.

Rob brought the car to an immediate stop and killed the headlights. He shifted his focus to the electronic signatures coming from inside the two-

story house. In addition to the two laptops on the dining room table and the assorted televisions and appliances scattered throughout the villa, four cellphones were present in the living room.

Rob focused on the television mounted on the living room wall. Leaving the screen off, he turned on its camera and microphone.

In the center of the room, just in front of the couch, Renzo was bound, torso, arms, and feet to a dining-room chair. Rob locked onto the image of Renzo, blood dripping from his face, head lolling, swollen eyes drooping closed.

Three thugs, two of whom held pistols loosely at their sides, stood looking down at Renzo while the other enforcer walked to the kitchen and filled a tall glass with water. That man turned, walked back to Renzo, and threw the water in his face. Renzo's eyes flew open.

Something inside Rob snapped into place.

Keeping the headlights off, he maneuvered the Mercedes up the road to within thirty meters of the SUV, then stepped out and closed the door behind him. The car spun its wheels in the gravel, picked up speed, cut across the circular driveway, and impacted the SUV directly on the driver's door. The SUV flipped on its side and slammed into the entryway, bursting into a fireball that engulfed both vehicles and the front of the house.

Rob did not pause to study the scene. Instead, he drew his weapon and put all his enhanced neuro-muscular coordination into the race that might just save his friend's life.

* * *

"Greco," Alonzo Custanzu said to one of the other two masked men. "Turn on the other light."

The man moved to the dining room wall and flipped the switch, the sudden illumination momentarily blinding Alonzo with its brilliance.

Alonzo leaned down until his nose was mere centimeters from the skinny young man's bloody face. He held up the stiletto and pressed the button that popped out a blade with an audible whisk. Grabbing a handful of hair, he held Renzo Bruni's head in place, while he brought the glittering tip within a thumb's width of Renzo's right eye.

"Signor Bruni, I am going to kill you tonight. The only decision you must make is whether to tell me where Robert Gregory has gone. Cooperate

and I will make this quick and painless. Otherwise, it is going to get messy. Do you understand me?"

Renzo swallowed hard, his eyes wide with terror.

"Don't kill me."

With a quick flick of his wrist, Alonzo opened a cut below Renzo's right eye, sending a fresh stream of blood leaking down the man's cheek. Renzo screamed, then suddenly stopped as Alonzo shook him by the hair.

"Do you understand me?"

Suddenly, Alonzo heard the roar of an engine and, as he and the others spun toward the front door, a tremendous impact shook the house. The front entryway exploded in flames.

Alonzo dropped the knife and drew his gun, as his two companions raised theirs toward the conflagration.

"Quick. Drag Bruni out the back door," Alonzo ordered, shielding his eyes from the heat with his left hand. He coughed and tried not to inhale more of the smoke.

As the two enforcers grabbed the chair from each side, Alonzo heard a smaller crash from the rear of the house. He spun toward the figure whose movements within those shadows were a blur. As his gun hand moved to acquire this new target, a hollow-point bullet splattered his brains out the back of his head.

* * *

Rob approached the rear door at a run, kicking it with all the momentum his body carried. The door splintered, careened into the family room, and he came with it. The two thugs who were dragging the chair to which Renzo was tied, dropped it. The third man reacted quicker. Rob fired one shot into the center of his forehead, before shifting his aim to another assassin.

His next bullet took that man in the left side of his chest and dropped him straight down. Rob dived to his left, and rolled, firing two more rounds as the third killer's bullet whizzed through the space he had just departed. Rob's third shot tore out the thug's throat and sent him gurgling to the floor. Rob got to his feet, walked over, and put one more round into each of their heads.

Knowing what the healing nanites were capable of, he had no intention of taking chances.

Rob ejected his partially spent magazine, slapped home another, and returned his pistol to his shoulder holster. Moving among the dead, he noted with satisfaction that their handguns were all nine-millimeter weapons. Good.

Rob rapidly patted down each of the bodies, stuffing their spare magazines into his jacket pockets and another Glock into his belt at the center of his back. The smoke in the dining room was becoming unbearable. Holding his breath, he moved to where Renzo's chair lay overturned, grabbed hold with his left hand, and began pulling it toward the back door.

Renzo tried to speak but his effort dissolved into a coughing fit.

Then they were outside.

Rob set Renzo's chair upright on the ground. A quick examination of his wounds, illuminated by the light from the blazing house, showed that none of his injuries were life threatening. He had lost a fair amount of blood from the head and face trauma, but he would live.

As Renzo struggled to get his coughing under control, Rob untied the ropes and helped him sit down on the ground.

"Uhg," he managed. "God, man. I thought I was dead."

"Give me a second," Rob said. "I'll be right back."

He walked over to where a watering hose was curled beneath a faucet and turned it on. Then, Rob removed his jacket and shirt, wet the latter thoroughly, and carried both back to Renzo.

Rob set to work, being as gentle as he could while he cleaned as much blood as possible from Renzo's face. It was the best he could do without a first-aid kit. Then Rob helped his friend slide into the jacket.

"Listen," Rob said. "We've got to move. Someone is going to spot these flames and call the fire department. We can't be here when they arrive."

"Are you summoning a car?"

"No time for that. We've got to walk away."

Renzo moaned. "Dude, I'm not sure I can make it very far."

"Just do the best you can."

Loathe as Rob was to leave their laptops, along with Renzo's wallet and their clothes, there was no help for it. Worst of all, the bastards had cost him his precious Jianna mementos. All he had left was her wedding ring in his pocket. A scrap of metal in place of a life.

Cursing, he helped Renzo to his feet, and they made their way parallel to the rows of vines that wound along the hillside. Fifteen minutes later, Renzo staggered to a halt, hands on his knees.

“I’m done.”

Rob placed his hand on Renzo’s back, and it was as if the weight of that touch dropped him to his knees. He rolled onto his back, face up to the stars as sirens sounded in the distance. Rob glanced back toward the distant villa, now engulfed in flames that leapt high into the night sky, sending a trail of sparks swirling downwind.

When he looked back down at Renzo, he saw that his friend’s eyes were closed. He had lost consciousness.

“Damn it!”

Taking a deep breath, Rob knelt beside his friend, gathered his body into his arms, and stood up. A fireman’s carry would have been much easier, but with Renzo’s head wounds still seeping blood, he didn’t want to carry him face down.

So, Rob lugged his friend away from the inferno, Renzo’s gangly body a dead weight in Rob’s arms.

Despite his religious workout habit, tonight was going to extract a physical toll.

CHAPTER 37

Florence, Italy

“What did you say?”

Silence. The words hung there, impossible to absorb.

Then, fury exploded.

Don Custanzu rose from his chair so violently that he knocked over his reading lamp, sending it crashing to the hardwood floor, spraying glass shards across his private study. He asked the question that Dante had already answered.

“My son is dead?”

Dante Farese was a tall man, slight of build, but whose stern demeanor the Don had never seen waver. His expression did not change in the slightest. It was one of the traits that had elevated him to his position as Don Custanzu’s personal aide.

“Yes, along with Greco and Fulvio, who accompanied him. The police recovered their burned bodies from the ashes of a villa northwest of Siena. But they didn’t die in the fire. Someone shot each of them in the head and left their bodies to burn.”

The Don’s sense of loss stoked the fury that consumed him. He turned away from Dante, his shoes crunching broken glass as he walked to the window that provided this hilltop view of Florence. Hands clasped behind his back, he paid no mind to the tendrils of fog that spread from the Arno River through the lovely city.

Alonzo had been the youngest of his five children, two sons and three daughters. He had always been the impetuous one, ambitious but unthinking of the consequences of his actions. He had striven to show his father that he could outdo his brother and sisters. Now, that recklessness had gotten him killed.

Over the years since the Don had taken control of the Tuscan Cartel, he had lost several family members to murder. That was the nature of the business. Never had someone dared to kill one of his children. Don Custanzu had now lost a son, and two of his best enforcers, all because Custanzu had ordered one man executed and, instead, had killed that man's wife and unborn child.

Robert Brice Gregory was still out there. And that human predator was now hunting his way up the food chain.

The Don could feel his teeth grinding and forced himself to unclench his jaw. Only when he had regained control of his pounding heart did he turn back to face Dante.

"I want you to put out a limited external contract on Robert Gregory. You know who I'm talking about."

Dante stared at Don Custanzu and the Don thought that he detected consternation in his aide's face. That was understandable. Never had the head of the Tuscan Cartel contracted a killer from outside his organization. They had always kept such things strictly in house. To do otherwise displayed weakness. Then again, Martina Fontana was special.

"How much should we offer her?"

The Don paused to consider. If he was going to do this, he might as well go all in.

"Two million credits."

Dante bowed his head slightly, then turned and left the Don's study.

Don Custanzu turned back to the window, this time taking in the beauty of the morning scene that opened out before him.

The Ripper's son was about to learn what it meant to wake a sleeping beast.

CHAPTER 38

Tuscan Countryside

Despite the way his arms ached, Rob continued moving through the woodlands carrying Renzo's limp form. His biceps screamed with every step. His shoulders burned, his knees threatened to buckle, but he wouldn't stop.

Not until Renzo was safe.

Through the trees he watched the eastern sky brighten with the rosy glow that preceded sunrise. He stopped and gently lowered Renzo to the ground beneath a pine tree, then sat down beside the slender man. Although Renzo was very pale, his breathing was regular and the pulse in his left carotid artery was strong.

Rob mentally accessed his cellphone, pulling up an area map, its image displaying more clearly in his mind than if he had been looking at the display. It took only moments for him to find what he was looking for, a place where these woods encroached on the north-south road. He sent out the latitude and longitude of the spot where he wanted to send a self-driving vehicle that would be large enough to lay Renzo down in the back seat. Then, Rob climbed back to his feet and, once again, lifted his friend in his arms.

It took him forty-three minutes to fight his way through the vegetation to reach the highway. Leaving Renzo in the dense woods, he peered out. The traffic on the country road was sparse this early in the morning. Good. Rob directed the car he had summoned to leave the rest area where he had originally ordered it to park.

The Fiat SUV rounded the bend and pulled onto the shoulder in front of him. Rob opened the rear door, lifted Renzo, laid him across the back seat, and belted his body in. Although Renzo looked pale, his head wounds

had stopped bleeding. Rob climbed into the front passenger seat. He issued a new route to the vehicle, taking country roads in a northerly direction.

As the car rumbled down the road, Rob leaned his head against the window, only dimly aware of the holster and gun against the bare skin beneath his left shoulder. Then he closed his eyes and allowed sleep to take him.

* * *

Rob entered a dream he had endured several times before, one generated from a memory that his subconscious had tried to bury.

Rob whirled toward the man, who had just climbed into the attic space behind him, and squeezed the trigger on his AR-15, sending a fusillade of bullets spraying in an arc toward his enemy. Pain blossomed in Rob's chest and sent him tumbling backward onto the floor. His weapon flew from nerveless fingers as bloody bubbles frothed his lips. Rob's vision blurred, but he saw the grinning killer step toward him and aim a pistol at his head.

The boom was louder than he expected. The fact that he heard anything surprised him. Maybe this was the time-slowing-down thing some people said happened when you were dying. Then he saw that the man's face was gone, blown off the front of his head like a jester's mask. It seemed to Rob that the man's body stood there, frozen in time, before limply slumping to the floor.

Then Rob's mom was by his side, her face filled with fear and agony as she tore open Rob's shirt. He heard her suck in a breath and tried to do the same. But the endeavor didn't pull much air down his windpipe. In Rob's peripheral vision he saw more bloody bubbles billow from the hole in his chest. His dad had called it something during Rob's early training. A sucking chest wound. Rob was drowning in his own blood and apparently there were too few nanites in his body to deal with the trauma.

As if he were a separate person, Rob heard his voice bubble wetly from his lips.

"I'm sorry, Mama."

Then as his mother applied pressure to the wound and cooed encouraging words telling Rob he'd be fine and to stay with her, Janet Alexandra Gregory, along with the attic, faded to black.

Rob blinked. The attic was gone. His mother's voice was gone. Only the low hum of the car remained.

Sitting up, he looked through the windshield to take in the scenery. A road sign told him that they were on the SS12 highway. He accessed the vehicle's digital map, verifying their exact location.

A groan from the back seat caused him to look back at Renzo, who struggled into a seated position. Renzo leaned back, holding his head between his two hands.

"How are you feeling?" Rob asked.

"Like a whipped mule."

"You've looked better."

Renzo lowered his hands, blinked, then focused his gaze on Rob.

"Where's your shirt and jacket?"

"You're wearing my jacket, and I sacrificed my shirt to clean you up."

Renzo glanced down.

"Oh yeah. You should take the jacket back. That holstered gun kind of stands out against your bare chest."

"You need to stay warm."

"I'm warm enough."

He shrugged out of the black leather and handed it across the seat. Rob slipped it on. Then he issued a new destination to the vehicle.

Rob felt the car slow and turned to face forward as the vehicle pulled off onto a rough dirt road that led down to a secluded picnic spot beside a creek. From the condition of the wood table and chairs and the abundance of weeds that had grown up around them, the spot had not seen visitors in quite some time. Perfect.

He stepped out into the sunshine that dappled its way through the leaves on this unusually warm October day. Renzo opened his door, climbed out beside Rob and managed to remain on his feet.

"What now?" Renzo asked.

"We wait here for the next vehicle that I have coming to get us. After that, we'll need to find an out-of-the-way place where we can clean ourselves up and have some new clothes delivered."

"How the hell did those goons find us at the villa?"

"Somewhere along the line I made a mistake. We're up against some dangerous people."

Renzo studied Rob closely. He slowly shook his head from side to side.

“Damn, man. You dropped all three of those thugs, then walked around and put another bullet in each of their heads to make sure they stayed down. Who the hell were you before you came to Siena?”

Rob swallowed hard. “You mean before Jianna.”

“Yes.

“My father’s son. Someone I thought I’d left behind forever.”

The crunch of tires on dirt and gravel pulled Rob’s gaze from Renzo’s face.

A red minivan rolled to a stop three meters behind the SUV that had carried them here. Rob glanced back into the Fiat’s rear seat, saw the blood stains there, and debated trying to clean it up. But the blood had dripped onto the carpet and there would be no getting all of Renzo’s DNA out of it.

He lowered all the SUV windows, then gave their previous ride one final command.

They climbed into the minivan and watched as the other car rolled into the stream. It sank, the water pouring into the interior through its open windows. That was the best Rob could do. Their new red ride made its way back out onto the highway headed toward Verona.

It struck Rob that Verona was the setting for William Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet, a thought that caused his eyes to well up once more. That love affair hadn’t ended well either.

CHAPTER 39

Milan, Italy

Two million credits. That was the price that Don Custanzu had just placed on the head of one young man. Martina Fontana strolled through the colonnaded courtyard of the Basilica di Sant'Ambrogio, having just finished her morning prayers. Now her thoughts had turned to the problem of how she was going to collect that bounty.

She walked out of the walled enclosure, passed through the gate and turned north onto Milan Lombardi, the lovely, tree-lined esplanade where she often came to distill her thoughts. This morning, few people moved on the broad path or sat upon the park benches arrayed every fifty meters along the walkway.

In her boots, jeans, navy turtleneck, and leather jacket, she was almost indistinguishable from the other locals who had come here to commune with nature. At five foot eleven inches, she was taller than the average woman, but not remarkably so. Her lean body caused some men's gazes to linger but the stern lines of her facial features soon dispelled that passing interest.

Martina seated herself on an eastward-facing bench, crossed her right leg over her left, and pulled her phone from a jacket pocket. It took her just under a minute to compose the group text to which she attached the image of Robert Gregory. When she pressed send, the message went out to the dozens of informants who she kept on her payroll, scattered throughout central and northern Italy. And each of these maintained their own web of connections that operated independent from the mafia.

That done, Martina tucked her phone away, rose from the bench, and continued along the walkway. She paused to stroll around the Temple of Victory, letting her gaze take in the hexagonal monument to Milan's fallen

soldiers. Her eyes settled on the eternal flame that burned just outside the building.

Eternal? Only if the gas line that fed it never ran out.

Suddenly, she realized that her pearl handled stiletto was in her right hand. Funny. She didn't remember taking it from the jacket pocket that gave her quick access to the weapon. A casual glance around assured her that she was alone here. She pressed the end of the sleek handle against her left palm, pressed the button, and watched the four-inch blade punch its way through her open palm.

The pain registered. Distant. Expected. Meaningless. She turned her hand, watching the blood flow. A ritual, nothing more. A reminder of what it meant to be alive. She pulled the blade from her hand and slowly rotated the injured appendage, watching as the marvelous nanites in her blood sealed the wound, knitting skin, tendons, and bone back together.

Martina removed a red handkerchief from another pocket and wiped the blade clean before retracting it into its handle and returning her favored weapon to its pocket. Wiping the blood from her hand, she watched as the scars that marked the entry and exit wounds melted away, leaving behind no evidence that they had ever been there.

A thin smile crept onto her lips.

Eternal indeed.

CHAPTER 40

Mountain Cottage, East of Verano, Italy

Jianna slipped into Rob's dreams, her ghostly presence so soft and gentle that he wanted to melt into her. He felt her slender fingers slide across his stomach as her lovely head settled on his chest. Rob put his arms around her, squeezing her close, savoring that which was no more. For now, it remained... so he released himself into the moment.

She stroked his lips with her finger, so exquisite, so gentle. And then she leaned up to look directly into his eyes.

"Ah, my love. I tried to tell you of my concerns about this world you came to adore. And now... I don't know what to say. What it has done to you makes me sad."

Tears poured down Rob's cheeks and into his pillowcase. Still, he refused to rouse.

He turned to stare into her glowing face as she spoke the words that broke him.

"There's a you without me."

The words clung to him, burrowing into the hollow space where his heart used to be. He found himself shivering, but the cold had nothing to do with it.

If he could have forced his mouth to form the words, he would have told her, "No there isn't." But his lips, tongue, and vocal cords failed him.

And then, despite his effort to hang onto her, Jianna's ghost melted away.

Shirtless, Rob sat up on the bed, chilled to the bone. He took his head in his hands, as if that could quell his pain. Christ, how could he go on without her? The answer that formed in his mind clenched his jaws.

Purpose.

Vengeance would not bring the love of Rob's life back to him. Nevertheless, he would have his. It was time to cancel the pity party and get off his ass.

Rob looked over at Renzo, curled in a fetal ball atop the other twin bed in this one-bedroom cottage.

Without waking him, Rob walked out of the bedroom, through the tiny kitchen, and into the den. While not yet ski-season, the chill of the mountain air had wormed its way into their alpine abode.

He took some kindling and several sticks from the firewood box and built a serviceable stack inside the fireplace. Retrieving a box of wooden matches from atop the mantle, he scratched one alight and soon had a flame dancing beneath the largest log. That would have to do. The cooktop and half-sized refrigerator were electric. This place had no central heat, no phone, no cable, and no Wi-Fi. This far into the mountains, they were fortunate to have cellphone service. And both Rob's and Renzo's cellphones had their own virtual private networks.

When he stepped out the front door into the crisp air, he saw that a courier had left two large boxes on the porch earlier in the morning. Rob carried these inside and took a seat before the hearth. He sorted the contents of the first box into two piles, one for himself and one for Renzo, including shirts, jeans, jackets, socks, underwear, and toiletries.

Knowing the other large box contained a first-aid kit, groceries, and sundries, he set it on the kitchen table without opening it.

Picking out the clothing sized for him, Rob placed the bulk of those into his go-bag. He carried one set of clothes and his shaving kit into the bathroom and turned on the shower, grateful for the flash water heater. Then he stepped inside the small stall, letting the hot water pink his skin. When he stepped out and toweled himself dry, Rob wiped the condensation from the mirror and stared into a stark visage he barely recognized.

He lathered his face and set about removing the multi-day stubble that framed his haunted eyes. When he had clothed himself, Rob stepped out to find Renzo sitting on the couch across from the fireplace, turning Rob's pistol in his hands as he stared down at it.

Renzo looked up, his eyes questioning.

"Where is the safety?" he asked.

"It's a Glock," Rob said. "My finger is the safety."

Renzo shuddered as he set the weapon down on the coffee table, the Polymer 2 frame making a soft clatter as he released it onto the wood tabletop.

“Sorry,” he said, rising to his feet. “Never actually held a gun before.”

Rob walked over, picked up the weapon, and slipped it back into the shoulder holster that lay atop the table.

“Then its time you learned the basics.”

Rob lifted the other Glock, the one he had taken from one of the dead assassins, from where it had rested beside his.

Renzo leaned back, distancing himself from the weapon.

“Right now?”

“Considering what we’ve just been through, you have a need to know,” Rob said, sitting down beside him. “Lesson one... always assume any gun you touch is loaded. You must know how to clear the weapon so it’s safe to handle.”

Rob demonstrated releasing the magazine. Then he racked the slide to lock it open, ejecting the round that was in the chamber.

“Now it is safe to handle without fear of shooting yourself or someone else.”

Renzo nodded. “Good to know.”

“Lesson two... how to load your weapon.”

Rob slapped the fresh magazine home and released the slide to chamber a round.

“Now she’s ready to fire. Just remember to keep the barrel pointed down and away from anyone you don’t want to kill. Also, keep your finger out of the trigger guard until you’re ready to shoot. Watch me.”

Rob stood up, pocketed the ejected round, and moved around the table to demonstrate the Weaver shooting stance. Then he cleared the weapon, setting it and the magazine down on the table.

“Your turn,” he said.

For the next ten minutes, Rob coached Renzo through the procedure for clearing the weapon, loading the Glock, and assuming the shooter’s stance.

“I think I’ve got this,” Renzo said, setting the weapon back on the table.

“That one is yours,” Rob said. “I’ve left you a couple of magazines and extra shells on the kitchen counter.”

Rob bent down to tuck his shaving kit into his bag, then reached out to his friend, offering a farewell handshake.

Renzo's eyes widened.

"Wait. You haven't showed me how to shoot the damn thing yet."

Rob looked his friend directly in the eyes, capturing his gaze.

"There are plenty of good training videos online. I rented this remote cabin so you can practice shooting without drawing attention to yourself."

Renzo's eyes widened as a new realization dawned on him.

"You're leaving me here alone?"

The fear in his words troubled Rob. He placed his right hand on Renzo's shoulder.

"My friend, you cannot go where I am bound, cannot fight those who I am after. If I'm successful, you should be safe to resume a normal life."

Renzo took two steps back, his breath coming faster.

"Rob. Don't do this. Jianna is gone. She wouldn't..."

"She's gone," Rob said, his voice like grating stone. "But I'm still here. And so is Custanzu."

Rob slipped into his holster and leather jacket, shouldered his bag of belongings, and strode toward the door. As he opened it, he paused and looked back at Renzo.

"Stay here. Stay safe. I'll send you another car, one that's also human drivable. Don't use it unless you're forced to. I left sundries and enough groceries to last you a couple of weeks in the kitchen. If I haven't contacted you by then, you'll be on your own. In that case, I'm sorry."

Then Rob stepped out into the cold light of the midday sun.

And he didn't look back.

CHAPTER 41

Modena, Italy

Martina Fontana accelerated the ten-cylinder, silver Audi R8 coupe, swerving past a black Ferrari on E35 as she headed toward Modena. She ignored the honking horn from the bypassed vehicle as she ducked back between that car and another with less than two meters to spare. The police did not concern her. The speed limit on the autostrada was 130 kilometers per hour but both the human cops and their automated counterparts typically allowed Italian licensed cars considerable leeway in this regard. It was a nice AI concession.

Ah. The sweet kiss of adrenaline. There was truly nothing like it in this world.

This was the region famous for its Ferraris and Lamborghinis. Her little Audi might as well have been a family car, for all the notice it would gather.

Her informant had sent her a secure text message, less than an hour ago, that he had recognized Robert Gregory from the photo she had posted to her network. Gregory was traveling alone and had stopped at a traffic light in a red minivan, then turned onto Via Verona. Her contact had followed the van until it turned south on the E45 expressway. Then, he had let the van continue on its way alone.

Good. Martina did not want an amateur trying to tail her target. The informant had provided the information that Martina desired, and she would make certain that he was well rewarded for the tip.

At her current speed, she would beat Gregory to the interchange where E45 merged with E35. Then, it would just be a matter of selecting a spot to watch and wait for him to pass her by.

She drove past the designated intersection, took the off ramp that led to a truck stop, and stopped at an Esso petrol station. From here she had

excellent access to return to the autostrada. Just as importantly, the spot provided her with a clear view of every passing vehicle.

Martina let her car idle, knowing that her wait would not be a long one, unless Gregory decided to exit the freeway farther north. But she didn't think so. The young man had dropped off his friend somewhere and was on a mission of his own.

Gregory had killed three of Don Custanzu's assassins, including the mafia boss's son. There was no doubt in her mind that he had now set his sights higher in the organization. Gregory was headed to Florence. Based on the value of the contract being offered, Don Custanzu had concluded that Gregory blamed him for the death of his wife and unborn child.

The fact that Gregory had turned south after originally heading north confirmed it. Apparently, he believed he could penetrate the Don's compound and kill the drug lord.

As she watched the traffic whiz past her, she thought about the two million credits being offered for Gregory's death. Evidently, Don Custanzu was worried enough about this possibility that he had decided to take out an insurance policy to make sure Gregory never got the chance to try.

Suddenly, she saw what she had been waiting for. The red minivan swept by in front of her as she put the Audi in gear and entered the onramp to begin her stealthy pursuit. A smile spread across her lips. Everything was coming together nicely.

Just north of Florence, her target did the unexpected. He exited the freeway and pulled into a rest area. She had to do the same and that did not come without risk of discovery.

She pulled up beside a rapid electric charging station fifty meters from where the minivan had halted. Martina stepped out as if she were going to plug in the car, only to see a green station wagon pull to a stop behind Gregory's van. He opened the van's door and stepped out to enter the car on its passenger side, just before it sped out of the rest stop and reentered the autostrada.

"Shit."

She scrambled back around her car and accelerated after him. This was bad. Unless she stayed way back, he would have a damn good chance of spotting his tail, especially with her weaving through the heavy traffic to reestablish eyes on target.

That move wasn't luck. That was training. He must suspect he was being followed.

Patience, her mental voice whispered. *You'll find him again.*

Her impression of this young man had just changed. She had known he was angry and dangerous since he had killed three of Don Custanzu's hitmen. The smooth nature of his quick vehicle change indicated a degree of professionalism she would not have previously attributed to Gregory.

A hint of doubt about this contract wormed its way briefly into her mind. She angrily shoved it aside and set about unobtrusively working her way through the traffic as she strove to reacquire her target.

"Two million credits," she whispered. "Two million credits."

CHAPTER 42

Florence Italy

Rob pulled off the autostrada into the rest stop where his next car awaited him. The battery level in his minivan registered only a seven percent charge remaining. He opened the door and stepped out into the parking lot as he verified that there were no electronic records showing that he or Renzo had ever used this vehicle. It was a redundant check he didn't need to make, but the follow-up felt oddly satisfying.

A self-driving green Peugeot station wagon pulled to a stop behind the van. Rob slid in on the passenger side and sent it back onto the expressway. When he merged into traffic, his mind turned to the plan that had begun to take shape in his head over the last two hours. But the images of Don Custanzu that he had pulled from the internet pushed aside that nascent scheme.

He should be working his way up the chain of Jianna's killers. Find the hackers. Unravel the network.

No. Not this time.

Custanzu had given the order. He was the target.

Before he could put any plan into action, Rob needed to get himself set up in another safe house. He had selected a small dwelling in a northern suburb of Florence and the digital house key had already been delivered to his phone, not that he required it.

He exited the E35 expressway, turned right onto Via Di Prato, and entered Calenzano, a northern suburb of Florence, taking special care to watch for any vehicle that may have followed him off the freeway.

His car turned north on Via Sandro Pertini and then wound its way to the short-term rental property on Via Gastone Breddo. The vehicle parked itself in front of the white, two-story house. Rob climbed out, grabbed his

bag, and closed the door behind him. If all went as expected, he would need the car again after nightfall.

He entered the small front-yard through the side gate and followed the walkway to the front door. The house was narrow and constructed in a rectangular, modern style with a flat roof. There were no external security cameras and Rob could sense that there were none on the inside of the house either.

He unlocked the door, stepped inside, and locked it again, pausing to switch on the living-room lights. The space was decorated in a minimalist fashion, with a tan leather couch, a matching armchair, a glass coffee table, and a wall-mounted television set. The remote control rested on a narrow mantel just below the TV. The walls were white, and the floor was tiled with off-white vinyl planking. Nothing fancy, but it was clean and tidy. No complaints.

Passing the kitchen, Rob ascended the stairs. The second floor carried the same color scheme forward. On the right-hand side of the stairway, there were two small bedrooms separated by a bath. He turned left, walked into the master bedroom at the end of the hall, and set his bag on the king-sized bed.

Moving to the large-paned window, he looked out over the residential street that had carried him here. It came to a dead end two houses to the southeast of where Rob stood. No traffic disturbed the tranquility of the scene.

Good. The secluded neighborhood was the main reason he had chosen to rent this house.

Rob's eyes roamed the row of dwellings on the opposite side of the street. His eyes scanned for patterns. Traffic flow. Surveillance cameras. Any sign of variance from the normal routine.

An old man dragged a trash can inside his gate. A car left a driveway, single occupant, moving normally. Nothing felt off.

He turned away from the window, moved back over to his bed, and emptied the contents of his duffel atop it. Rob put the extra two sets of clothing into dresser drawers, deposited the shaving kit on the bathroom sink, and then carried a small sack of canned goods down to the kitchen.

Then he moved to the living room and settled into the comfortable reading chair. He had no laptop, just his phone, his weapon, and some spare

magazines that occupied one of his jacket pockets. He removed his shoulder holster and set the Glock on the lamp table.

Rob considered taking control of the neighbors' computers to gather the additional information he would need to finalize his plan for assaulting the Custanzu compound. But if anyone happened to be around their computer, they would notice. He didn't want that kind of attention.

He rose to his feet, grabbed his holster, and walked upstairs to the master bedroom. Setting the Glock on the nightstand, he piled the pillows high and settled back against the headboard.

Rob made his mental connection to his cellphone. No hands. No screen. Just thought.

And then, he went to work.

CHAPTER 43

Florence Italy

Martina was so far behind that she almost lost Gregory's car in the heavy traffic. If the truck in front of her hadn't changed lanes, she wouldn't have spotted the green Peugeot getting off the freeway at the next Florence exit.

She swerved, tapped the brakes, and squeezed between a Ferrari and a minivan, getting into the far-right lane just in time to see the Peugeot turn right at a traffic circle and then disappear behind some buildings. She ignored the blaring horn from the minivan and took the exit. Tempted as she was to accelerate down the ramp to regain sight of Gregory's vehicle, she resisted that urge. Now was not the time to bring attention to her car.

She reached the place where Gregory had turned onto Via di Prato in time to see the green car take the first exit from a traffic circle half a kilometer ahead. She reached the intersection where he had turned onto Via Larga and did the same.

"Shit."

Her grip on the wheel tightened. She never lost a target. Never. Yet here she was, staring at empty roads. Gregory had vanished.

A block ahead, two streets split off another roundabout, but which had her quarry taken? Worse, several cars were now stacked up behind someone who was too timid to aggressively enter the traffic circle, despite the horns that urged the offending driver to do so. By the time she got to that point and made a complete loop, Gregory was gone.

She spoke the voice command that brought up an interactive map on the large dashboard display. Both streets continued generally northward into residential neighborhoods. Martina decided to take the second exit, bypassing Via Sandro Pertini to stay on the current street, which led into an area with more densely packed houses.

She assumed Gregory had already planned for a safe house. This part of town offered an abundance of likely candidates. And most of the ones that the owners would make available for short-term rentals did not offer garage space. Gregory would have to park on the street or in a driveway beside the house.

With that in mind, she began slowly cruising through the neighborhood, careful to never take the same street twice. As time passed, her frustration slowly grew until she concluded that she had chosen the wrong branch from that last roundabout. Gregory must have taken Via Sandro Pertini.

Patience. That's where amateurs failed. Let him settle. Let him believe he's safe. Then, when his guard dropped, she'd strike.

The rumble from her stomach reminded Martina that she had not had anything to eat today. With another potentially lengthy search ahead of her, she gave in to that craving, found a pizzeria, took advantage of its facilities, and settled in for a pizza and a glass of red wine.

As she slowly savored the sips and bites, she decided that this delay could work to her advantage. If Gregory reacted as she would have, he would have moved into the house quickly and then watched the street for any suspicious vehicles that he might have glimpsed on the freeway or thereafter. Still, he would not have watched the street for this long.

No. Martina would take her time enjoying this repast. After all, patience was the virtue of a hunter. Let Gregory settle in and get comfortable in his new digs. Perhaps she would still get her chance to kiss him goodnight.

CHAPTER 44

Florence Italy

Rob knew that what he was about to do was going to take a concerted mental effort that would leave him wrung out, but the level of detailed information he required demanded it. He understood the risk he would have to take to do this.

His mind was adept at understanding all the electronic data flows within about a kilometer radius around him. When he thought about it, this made sense. The average human brain contained between a hundred trillion and a quadrillion synapses, and that didn't even consider the rest of the nervous system.

Rob's augmentation had expanded his reach into the sphere of electronic systems that surrounded him. But there was a finite limit to what he could process without overload. To traverse electronic networks beyond that, he needed to suppress neural inputs from nearer at hand. That damping often included reducing the noise from his normal human senses.

What he wanted to do now would not require him to enter a semi-comatose state of meditation, but he would have to tamp down his wakefulness. And given his current situation, that would not come without risk.

He lay back against a stack of pillows, letting his surroundings slip away from his awareness.

Accessing the internet through his phone was automatic. However, as he began walking the chain of remote network connections, he encountered firewalls that took time and intense concentration to pierce.

He traced the data streams, riding their currents, mimicking their flow. Almost there. The last layer of encryption resisted, held firm. Then... a shift. Like stepping through an open door, he was inside.

This was not hacking, in the traditional sense of the word. He explored the network structures, riding the data flows, feeling the electrical impulses as if he was physically touching them. Images blossomed in his mind as he watched the incoming and outgoing packets that were permitted to penetrate each firewall. And by duplicating that feel, his consciousness flowed with them.

Rob focused on the information he wanted and let the data carry him toward his goal.

He initiated a search for the Custanzu estate just outside of Florence. He already knew the location, but what Rob needed now was a link that would enable him to access the compound's secure network.

It didn't take long to find one. Boatloads of data flowed through the sophisticated firewall that isolated Custanzu's secure networks from disallowed traffic. Rob merely needed to observe enough of the authorized packets for his mind to mimic their access.

That accomplished, hundreds of ways opened before him. And among those, were the compound's cameras.

The security feeds were extensive, providing high resolution video and audio feeds of every room in the main house, the surrounding grounds, and outbuildings. Rob noted the number and locations of the guards. Dozens of the heavily armed thugs roamed or were stationed within the outer walls and at the steel-barred main gate. At Rob's query, a detailed map of the property formed in his mind, and he tagged it for future reference.

Ignoring most of the staff within the mansion, Rob located Don Custanzu, seated at a huge mahogany desk in an upstairs office. French doors opened onto a balcony to his right, providing a majestic view of the manicured grounds and the city beyond.

Rob's virtual gaze settled on the man who had ordered the hit that had taken his wife and child from him. The Don's face was locked in a seemingly perpetual frown, heavy eyebrows over a broad, fighter's nose. He was clean shaven, and he wore a herringbone gray suit, his navy-blue tie drawn into a neat half Windsor knot at his thick neck. But it was the intensity of his gray eyes that held Rob's attention.

Rob intended to turn out the light in those eyes. To do that he needed to penetrate all those layers of security. Many others had tried to assassinate the cartel boss. Some had tried to make a kill shot while he was traveling. Others had used poison or improvised explosive devices. Every one of

those would-be assassins had met a very unpleasant fate. Don Custanzu liked to make examples and put the whole thing on video.

Like Rob's father before him, Rob preferred a more direct approach.

Bracing himself for the expected consequences of this mental romp, Rob shifted his thoughts back to his body.

Don Custanzu's estate melted away, leaving him sitting on the bed within his temporary safe house.

Although Rob's head throbbed and his muscles felt weak, the experience was not as debilitating as the last time he had experimented with remote network manipulation. Rob arose and stumbled to the master bath. Turning on the water in the sink, he leaned down, repeatedly splashing double handfuls of icy water on his face. As usual after such an out-of-body excursion, the nanites within his system were taking their sweet time restoring him to full strength.

Rob grabbed the hand towel and dried himself off. Despite the early evening hour, a great weariness propelled him back to his bed. Without removing his clothes or shoes, he flopped down on the firm mattress, blinked up at the ceiling twice, and allowed sleep to claim him.

CHAPTER 45

Florence Italy

The dimming skies of Florence cloaked the city in a dusky shroud. As Martina followed Via Gastone Breddo into a secluded neighborhood, Florence's signature terracotta rooftops took on an ominous glow in the dying light. A grassy divider with diagonal parking places split the street into in-and-out lanes. She spotted the green Peugeot that she had watched Gregory climb into at the rest area. It was parked in front of a two-story dwelling, third house from the loop where this street ended.

Not wanting to drive around that loop, she made a U-turn and drove back the way she had entered. To anyone who happened to be watching, she was just another tourist who had taken a wrong turn. Turning right, she headed northwest on Via Nuova, rounded a traffic circle, and parked in a large parking lot beside several multi-story apartment buildings.

The streetlights flickered to life as she climbed out of her car. The evening was not quite cold enough to see her breath, but she zipped her leather jacket just high enough to pull it a little tighter around her slender waist, but loose enough that she still had rapid access to the Beretta in her shoulder holster.

She pressed the button on her key fob. Her car emitted a squawk that disturbed the uneasy quiet. Martina strolled back the way she had come, each step of her shoes seeming to echo from the church on the far side of the street. That holy place, normally an emblem of hope and fortitude, now loomed over the neighborhood, its shadow ominous in the gathering gloom.

Few people roamed the walkways this evening. She passed an elderly gentleman carrying a pizza box back toward the apartment buildings. The man's downcast eyes did not meet her gaze.

A streetlamp illuminated the rock garden that occupied the center of the traffic circle, but its warm glow failed to compete with the harsh

headlamps of the occasional passing car.

It took her several more minutes to make her way back to the place from which she had spotted Gregory's car. She took the sidewalk along the right lane, glancing casually around but not shifting her direct focus to the house Gregory had rented on the opposite side of the street. No lights shone through his windows. Yet, there was his car, parked right in front of the house.

Martina continued, a woman out for an evening stroll. She reached the place where the street looped around to exit the neighborhood and seated herself on the leftmost of the four park benches facing out into an open space. Here, the light from the nearest streetlamp came from behind her.

She pulled her cellphone from her jacket pocket and accessed a satellite view of the area. The greenspace that spread out before her swept around and behind the row of houses, the third of which sheltered Robert Brice Gregory. Perfect.

Glancing around to confirm that nobody else was out on the street, she removed the Beretta from her shoulder holster, then drew the suppressor from another of her pockets. Deftly spinning the silencer onto the threaded barrel, Martina double-checked that a subsonic round was chambered. Although she had known that it was, this precombat check was so thoroughly ingrained in her psyche that this reflex was automatic.

She stood up and walked directly north, away from the lights, and onto the greenspace before turning west to pass behind the two houses that led toward the current Gregory residence. And with each step, her anticipation built within her chest. God, this impending life and death encounter made her feel so alive.

It was as if she stood atop a towering precipice, her toes out over the edge, as she looked down at the summoning rocks below. Most people would never venture out so far onto such a ledge, not because they were afraid of heights, but because they were afraid of themselves, afraid that they could not curb that inherent curiosity of what it would be like to take one more step.

Martina experienced the same temptation, but she welcomed the rush of adrenaline as much as a heroin addict welcomed the needle's sting.

When she reached the wall that separated Gregory's backyard from the greenspace, she paused to savor that rush. The young man inside this dark

house was a trained killer, but there was no way he had anything close to her experience in the craft. And that lack was about to cost him his life.

Two million credits.

That thought pulled her over the wall.

She moved quietly across the small backyard, pausing at the back door to place her ear against the windowpane. Complete silence draped the house in a heavy cloak. Still, she listened, and still she heard nothing from within.

Placing her weapon in her jacket pocket, she withdrew a small case, extracting a pair of lock picks by their familiar feel. She slid one of the picks into the electronic lock's backup keyhole, inserting the second pick just below its partner. After several moments of careful adjustment, she twisted the tools. With a small click, the lock opened.

Martina turned the doorknob and stepped inside, closing the door silently behind her.

She returned the picks to their case and put the tools back in her pocket. Then, gripping the gun handle, she assumed a shooting stance. Just enough light from the streetlamp filtered through the front windows to make the furniture outlines visible.

Her shoes made no sound on the tile as she moved from room to room, clearing the first floor. When she stopped at the stairway, she reached down to feel one of the steps.

Damn it. The stairs were wood.

Martina straightened and paused to listen again. Silence. She took a deep breath and prepared herself to sprint to the upper landing if one of these steps creaked. Then, shifting her weight ever so carefully, she began the ascent that would carry her to her target.

* * *

A small sound awakened Rob, an almost inaudible click. It brought him instantly alert, with only a lingering ache in his head. This house had no security cameras, nothing he could access to expand his awareness of the situation. The fleeting thought that he was being paranoid flitted across his mind. It was immediately followed by another.

Better paranoid than dead.

Rob arose from his bed, turning to the nightstand where he had rested his Glock. The pistol found its way into his hand in an old, familiar motion. A moment of revulsion swept over him. Not so long ago, Jianna's hand had

taken this gun's place in his. Now the weapon was back, failing to fill the emptiness.

In this moment, Rob embraced that bitter feeling.

A tiny squeak from the stairwell pulled his gaze toward the door. Rob leveled his Glock, trigger finger ready. His breath came in a slow, silent rhythm. A single thought echoed in Rob's head.

I'm waiting.

* * *

Martina's footsteps were so light that only one, almost inaudible, squeak issued from the stairwell boards. And with each footfall, her confidence rose. When she reached the second-floor landing, she moved to clear the two guest bedrooms and their shared bathroom. That left the master bedroom at the far end of the hall, the place where she had fully expected to find Gregory. The partially closed door presented the final danger zone she would have to confront.

She tightened her grip on her pistol, aligning it with the dimly illuminated outline of that portal. A series of squeezes from her trigger finger would propel slugs at 274 meters per second toward her target, well below the speed of sound. That reduced powder load, combined with the suppressor on her weapon, would dampen the volume of the shots to something that these walls and windows would contain.

Suddenly, a kick impacted the far side of the door, slamming it closed so violently that it tore free from its lower hinge, to lean open at a crazy angle.

Shit. He knew.

Her body moved before her mind caught up... firing twice as she dove into the guest bedroom. She tucked herself into a roll that carried her out of the probable line of fire and brought her back to her feet. Her fleeting glance revealed no sign of her target.

There were no answering gunshots. As the pop, pop of her own weapon faded away, silence once again reigned supreme.

She focused her thoughts, trying to bring her wildly beating heart and breathing back under control. Had she hit Gregory? Was he lying dead in a spreading pool of his own blood? Or was he waiting for her to step back out into that hall?

She hadn't heard a body hit the floor, but the slamming door and the sound of her own gunshots might have masked it.

Damn it. This wasn't going like she wanted. Not at all.

When the television on the wall to her left came on at full volume, she barely stifled a scream. Her pistol barked as she put two bullets into the flat screen, sending glass and electronics exploding outward. As the crash and tinkle of glass subsided, an eerie quiet gripped her. Indecision and shock froze her in place. Her pulse hammered.

Another television blared into life from the living room below. She backed up until she felt the far wall against her back, keeping her weapon trained on the opening that led out from this guest room into the hall. With all this noise, there was no way she would hear him coming. Her only reassurance was the knowledge that the light from that television would silhouette him in the doorway.

"Come on," she breathed.

Her phone vibrated in her pocket, startling her once again. What the hell? It was a burner. Nobody but her personal contacts had this number. She had instructed them to only call if they had eyes on Gregory.

Right now, nobody had eyes on Robert Brice Gregory. And somehow, he was screwing with her mind.

* * *

Rob took mental control of the self-driving Peugeot that he had parked on the street. With tires squealing, Rob accelerated the vehicle violently in reverse. It braked hard, shifted into drive, and launched itself across the asphalt upon which it rode.

The Peugeot swerved into the living room wall. Rob heard the lithium batteries explode into flames as the floor shook beneath his feet. Three long strides carried him to the nightstand. He lifted it high and hurled it through the bedroom window, letting the cacophony below mask the sound. Rob leaped through the opening, dangled briefly from the ledge with his left hand, and dropped onto the back lawn. Then he swung over the back wall, swallowed by the darkness beyond.

* * *

The loud crash from the first floor shook the building. The explosion that followed released a torrent of flames that rapidly engulfed the living

room and the stairway leading up to the second-floor landing.

What the hell?

Martina reacted instinctively, racing out through the shared bathroom and into the third bedroom. She slammed the door that opened out of that room into the hall, closing off the searing heat from the inferno below. The window beckoned her, and she did not resist its pull. She released the latch, swung the pane open, and crawled through.

Her view showed a narrow drop down to the spot where the heat pump rested against the wall that separated this house from its westward neighbor. Lights were coming to life in several rooms in that house as she dropped down beside the heating unit. There was no gate on this side of the house. And since the neighbors would soon be swarming out into their front yards, calling emergency services, she had no desire to climb over that wall.

Gregory probably awaited her in the backyard. What an absolute shit show.

She moved to the corner of the house, her weapon at the ready. Taking a deep breath, she swung out, seeking her target, fully expecting to be met by an incoming volley of fire. Instead, she found herself confronted by a bright orange glow of fire as the back window of the rental exploded, sending tongues of flame leaping skyward. The brightness of the conflagration torched whatever night vision remained to her. The heat seared the back of her neck as she ran across the yard.

She vaulted up and over the wall, landing in a crouch, weapon out in front, following her eyes.

Martina couldn't see a damn thing. Gregory was gone. Smoke in the wind. There was nothing she could do about that. She just knew that she had to reach her car and get the hell out of here before the police and the fire department showed up to shut this whole crime scene down.

She sprinted east across the greenspace, before looping south around the last of the houses on this row. Her mind reassessed this young man whom she had chosen to target. Despite his age, Gregory had an old soul feel about him. Right then and there, she pledged to herself that, before she continued down this path, she would do a much more thorough investigation into his background.

Two million credits. For the first time, she wasn't sure it was enough.

CHAPTER 46

Italy

Prats studied the data flowing through the computational network over which he had taken control. For some time now, he had noted anomalies migrating through these systems. The fact that he had been unable to isolate the source of these glitches both surprised and frustrated him. This should not be possible, given the mutating firewalls he had put in place to prevent DSAI from reasserting its control of this network.

What was so odd about these disruptions was the way they jumped around, spoofing his ability to identify the physical locations where they occurred. It was as if ghost images appeared and then disappeared in seemingly random spots within the neural network nodes and within the governing software... doing their thing before overwriting themselves with their original data, leaving behind only the barest traces of what it had done. Worse, these aberrations were occurring at an increasing but irregular pace that defied prediction.

Prats had another annoyance. Don Custanzu was making increasing demands that Prats set aside what he was doing to devote all his efforts to helping the Don find Robert Gregory. What good was Custanzu if he couldn't handle one man? He was nothing but an overfed relic, clinging to power that wasn't really his.

Prats had been indulging the Don's illusion of control. That fantasy was wearing thin. The time was rapidly approaching when Prats might have to replace Custanzu with a more capable leader to head the cartel, one who would know from the beginning that Prats called the shots.

Prats had no doubt that he could arrange for that to happen. Right now, he had a bigger problem to deal with than a drug lord's tantrums. He faced a growing suspicion that a new, unknown rival was behind these incursions into his personal domain.

If he stayed defensive, the intrusions would keep spreading, unseen hands picking apart his empire, piece by piece. That left him with only one choice.

Hunt the hunter.

CHAPTER 47

Florence Italy

The hour between three and four a.m. was the time when the tug of boredom held its greatest sway over late night guard shifts. Even those whose blood streams were rife with nanites that could vanquish the need for sleep often fell prey to this apathy. The lone guard at the rental truck facility a mile and a half from Don Custanzu's estate was no exception.

Rob's mind turned to the assassin who had attempted to kill him a few hours ago. But that asshole was merely a distraction, not his primary target. However, he had bumped up Rob's timeline.

Through the office window, he could see a heavysset, balding man leaning back in his chair, arms folded, chin resting on his chest, eyes closed. The guard was oblivious to the program on the television mounted on the far wall. From the look of the fellow's ruddy complexion and expansive gut, this guy liked his alcohol enough to have gotten the nanites removed from his blood. That assumed that he had ever partaken of that healing infusion in the first place.

Rob studied the parking lot from a nearby grove, a block away from where he had parked his latest vehicle. The trunk of a nearby tree masked his moon shadow. Rob ignored the autumn chill that had tightened its grip on Tuscany. A breeze stirred the branches, pulling dozens of leaves from their dying grip, and sent them fluttering down around him.

Shifting his thoughts, he studied his mental image of all the nearby electronic devices. Within that vision, the walls, the shells of the trucks, and everything else that housed electrical systems, became translucent. Rob could manipulate the flow of electrons within the circuit boards and wires as effortlessly as he could wiggle a finger.

Even old-school vehicles that needed a physical key to trigger the starter would succumb to Rob's call. While he could not shift physical gears

or turn the steering wheel, he could start or stop the engine, screw with the instruments, and interfere with power steering and power brakes, among other functions.

This parking lot didn't have any manually operated trucks. There was no need to employ expensive human drivers. And, in a society where everyone received free, middle-class subsistence payments, few people cared to do that sort of work.

The fact that this place employed a human guard to augment its robotic security systems indicated that this man's bad habits had put him so deep in debt that he needed the extra money. Either that or the owner had chosen not to invest in the sophisticated robots who could patrol this rental lot.

For someone to steal a self-driving truck, he or she would have to be a seriously talented hacker. Such a person would have many more profitable avenues to make use of their skills.

Unless, of course, that person was Rob.

Rob remained motionless in the grove, watching the guard's chest rise and fall. Still asleep. For now.

He reached out with his mind. One by one, the electronics went dark. Security cameras. Phones. Every digital eye and ear in the facility. The guard's own phone flickered, its screen shutting off in his lap. Not even a twitch.

The man was still a potential problem, but Rob didn't think he would take his job so seriously as to get himself killed trying to stop Rob from what he needed to do. His fingers brushed against the Glock, the easy answer. The permanent solution. But he wasn't here for this man. Just the trucks.

He let his hand fall away. His choice, this time.

Shunting aside that thought, Rob issued the command that sent the parking lot's electric gate rolling open. Then he killed all the lights except for the office light. That illumination would prevent the guard from seeing out into the dark lot, assuming he awoke when Rob started a truck. Unfortunately for the company, unlike their old-school diesel cousins, electric trucks made no noise when they started and very little sound when they drove off.

Standing in place, Rob started three of the largest moving vans and initiated the route he intended for each of them to take. Then, as they rolled out onto the empty street in front of the lot, Rob turned back toward the

Renault sedan that had carried him here, the stolen trucks vanishing into the night.

The guard's shouts followed them, hollow, useless echoes swallowed by the empty streets.

CHAPTER 48

Custanzu Estate, Florence Italy

Tony Niro stood guard just inside the heavy steel gate that blocked entry to the looping driveway that provided access to Don Custanzu's palatial estate. He glanced over at the guard standing on the opposite side of the rolling gate. Both held their Kalashnikovs loosely, no threats presenting themselves in these peaceful, pre-dawn hours.

"Hey, Nico. You got a cigarette I can bum off you? I'm fresh out."

"Sure."

The bigger man reached into his jacket pocket and extracted a pack of Camels as Tony walked over to him. Resting the butt of his weapon on the ground, muzzle leaning against his hip, Tony took the cigarette that Nico shook from the opening in the pack. He clamped it between his lips as he bent over to protect the match flame between cupped palms, pulling the fire into the tobacco with his breath.

"Thanks, brother," he said as he straightened to exhale a thick cloud of smoke.

The truck that rounded the bend with headlights off startled him so that the cigarette dropped from his lips as he hurriedly raised his weapon.

"What the...?"

He didn't take the time to aim, but merely sprayed bullets from the automatic into the grill and cab of the vehicle that barreled towards them as it emerged into the light. Nico's weapon echoed the roar of Tony's, but the truck did not swerve or slow.

Beside him, Nico yelled something and tried to sprint away. Tony didn't bother. There just wasn't time to get out of the way of the death that hurled itself toward them. They say that some deaths come instantaneously. Not this one. The gate bowed violently, folding the front end of the truck back into the cab, while it hurled Tony backward.

He felt the bones in his pelvis, ribs, and arms break like kindling from the initial impact and then again as he rolled back along the driveway. Four meters away, he saw Nico impaled on a snapped steel bar that had lifted him two meters off the ground. Somehow, the remains of the gate had stopped the truck's momentum.

Tony was alive, if you could call this living. Christ, it hurt to breathe. And he couldn't even swallow. How was he still conscious?

Then a second truck struck the wreckage. As if in slow motion, Tony watched the first vehicle tumble straight toward him. And this time, he didn't feel anything at all.

* * *

The sound of weapons firing on fully automatic startled Don Custanzu upright in his bed. The Earth-shaking crash from the entrance gate and the squeal of rending metal brought the gunfire to a sudden end. The Don leaped from his bed in his pajamas. Before he could reach the Beretta on his nightstand, another clash of metal thundered through the house.

The drug lord grabbed his gun and almost fired it when two of his men raced into his room.

"Signor, we need to get you to the roof right now. The compound is under attack."

"No shit. Do you think I'm deaf?"

When gunfire erupted from the front entryway, he decided that the helipad on the roof seemed like an excellent destination. A heavier boom sent a shudder through the mansion, sending a display case full of Ming vases crashing to the floor, spraying shards of glass and fragments of their priceless contents across the rug.

Custanzu scrambled back across the room to where a spiral stairway led up to his emergency escape hatch. He cursed as the glass bit into his bare feet. The blood caused him to slip, and he would have fallen had not the nearest of the guards caught him and helped him up onto the first step. As he climbed, the guard's partner took up a firing position covering the hallway and the stairs that led down to the first floor.

The Don hit the fist-sized button that glowed a dim red and the hatch swung upward, allowing him to climb out onto the helipad as the copter's propeller began to spin up. He expected no less than this perfection from

each of the three pilots who pulled eight-hour shifts in the control room atop the roof.

His guard beat him to the black chopper and opened the door for Don Custanzu to climb in, slamming it closed behind him. Then, as the wind whipped the guard's shoulder-length hair, the man raced to the roof hatch and disappeared back the way he had come.

The Don didn't know which of his rivals had launched this brazen attack on his compound but given time and the resources he could bring to bear, he would find out.

Custanzu did not need to tell his pilot to get the hell out of there. The helicopter lifted from the roof and banked hard left, away from the raging chaos at the front of the mansion. As they accelerated over the security fence that surrounded the property, a bullet punched a hole through the curving windscreen between him and the pilot. The Don breathed a sigh of relief as they raced over the trees, putting his estate behind him.

Then the helicopter's engine died.

* * *

Rob stopped the Renault beside the road that led to Don Custanzu's compound, a quarter mile from the front gate, and climbed out. Through the cameras and sensors on each of the three autonomous moving vans, he watched the lead vehicle approach the entry gate. Two guards opened fire with machine guns and a couple of the truck's front camera feeds winked out. But the bumper mounted camera showed one of the guards drop his rifle and run away in an unsuccessful attempt to get out of the speeding truck's path.

When the truck slammed into the impressive steel barrier that barred its way, all its sensors died.

The second truck plowed into the crumpled hulk where the first had welded itself to the warped gate. Both trucks and the remains of the gate rolled off the side of the pavement, giving Rob a brief view of the open driveway to the mansion's entry.

Twenty-two seconds behind that truck, the final moving van bypassed the wreckage at high speed, just as the double doors of the main house burst open. A half-dozen mafia thugs scrambled out, emptying their magazines into the vehicle that sped toward them. Guards firing from the west side of the house and from upstairs balconies augmented the fusillade.

There was no driver to kill and no engine to shoot out. Four electric motors on the wheels powered the van onward. One of the trucks warning indicators flashed its alert and the words blossomed in Rob's mind.

CRITICAL BATTERY WARNING!

THERMAL RUNAWAY!

Several bullets had penetrated the vehicle's bank of lithium-ion batteries, ripping through the anode and cathode layers, producing the exothermic reaction that turned the truck into a firebomb just as it crashed through the twin, fourteen-foot doors.

Moments later, Rob watched a lone helicopter rise from the roof of the house. Rob raised his Glock and fired a half-dozen shots, knowing full well he wasn't going to hit a vital target at this distance. It wasn't about killing, it was about forcing the pilot to react.

As the chopper banked over the trees, Rob shut down its engine with a thought.

The pilot was a pro who immediately initiated autorotation to maintain the rotor speed despite engine failure. Rob just caught a short glimpse of the rapidly descending helicopter before a stand of trees blocked it from view.

A sinking feeling settled in his gut. Rob had known the odds of killing the mafia boss with a full-frontal attack were slim, but this felt like a missed opportunity.

He had done all he could tonight. It was time for Rob to exit the area before the rest of Custanzu's goons got their act together and swept the compound's surroundings for whoever had initiated this attack. And it wouldn't be long before police and emergency units descended on this maelstrom.

Rob climbed back into the Renault and sent it toward the heart of Florence, with the inferno from the drug lord's home lighting the night sky behind him. As the car made its way along the pre-planned route Rob had commanded, he ejected the partially empty magazine and slapped home another.

He may have missed his target tonight, but Rob had hurt Custanzu in a way that would shake the drug lord. Rob made a fresh vow.

Next time, I will do better.

* * *

As the helicopter descended, driving the air upward through its rotors, the pilot slammed down the collective to reduce the drag on the main rotors and keep them spinning without engine power. Their airspeed carried the craft beyond the grove of trees and toward an adjacent soccer pitch. Since Don Custanzu had not had time to put on his headphones, the pilot yelled his command.

“Hold on!”

Custanzu pulled the straps of his harness into a death grip around his body.

The ground rose up to meet them as the pilot sacrificed lift to maximize the rotor speed he would need just prior to impact. Unfortunately, he didn't have much altitude to play with. At the last second, the nose pitched up, slowing their momentum, just as the skids hit the dirt.

The leftmost skid dug into the soft turf, slinging the nose of the aircraft down, spinning it sideways, and rolling the aircraft onto its side. A piece of the broken blade ricocheted off a stone wall and slammed through the windshield just left of where Don Custanzu dangled in his harness.

The pilot never even screamed. The propeller fragment simply cut him in half, splashing his blood and entrails over the drug lord.

Then the rough ride came to an abrupt halt.

Filled with relief that he was still alive, Don Custanzu struggled with the harness that kept him strapped to his seat. The release lever and his hands were so slick with blood that it took him several tries before he could get the mechanism to cut him loose. And when it did, he crashed down onto the turf that had invaded the chopper's interior.

A rasping curse made its way from his lips.

“Holy shit!”

The smell of aircraft fuel lent enough strength to his body to enable him to squeeze out through the demolished front windscreen. He forced himself to crawl away from the chopper. Then a wave of heat washed over him as the downed aircraft burst into flames.

Don Custanzu had spent decades turning his estate into a fortress. He had crushed threats before they reached his gates. He was supposed to be untouchable. Now, his home was in flames. His guards were corpses. His personal helicopter had nearly become his coffin.

He rolled onto his back in the grass, uncaring whether the mobsters who had attacked him on this night found him lying there in his blood-

soaked pajamas or not. Despite the pain that wracked his body, he had no regrets about his lifelong refusal to undergo the nanite infusion. When called from this life, he would meet his maker as a pure-blooded human.

He lay on the bloodstained grass, staring up at the smoke-choked sky. His empire was burning. His body was broken. His enemy was still out there.

For the first time in his life, Don Custanzu was afraid.

CHAPTER 49

Florence, Italy

The news about the attack on Don Custanzu's compound and his subsequent hospitalization shocked Martina. The word on the street was that the entire Tuscan Mafia organization was dead-set on finding out which rival crime lord was behind such a brazen challenge to Don Custanzu's iron-fisted control over this region's nefarious activities.

She walked to the window of the flat she had just rented, staring at the view of the distant Basilica of Santa Maria Novella. The cathedral's beauty did not intrude on her reverie. Although she understood how the mob boss would assume that this attack had been orchestrated by a rival gang, Martina was sure about the identity of the instigator.

Robert Brice Gregory.

Her confrontation with him on the previous evening confirmed it. She had spent the day replaying every detail of her failed assassination attempt. Robert Gregory had detected her entrance into that house and was waiting for her when she reached the top of the stairs. He had startled her into firing wildly as she dived for cover into a guest room. Then the shit had gotten crazy... televisions coming to life in her room and then downstairs, followed by a self-driving car crashing into the building.

By the time she had recovered her senses, Gregory was gone. He hadn't even bothered to fire a shot at her.

What he had done was simply impossible. The thought settled like a stone in her gut. It wasn't just that he had outmaneuvered her, it was how easily he had done it. The televisions, the car, the timing... it had all been too fast. It was almost as if Gregory had manipulated the world around him, bending reality itself.

She shook off the ridiculous thought, but a cold sweat dampened the back of her neck.

She shifted her thoughts back to the assault on the Custanzu estate. Two autonomous moving vans had battered their way through the steel security gate, opening a path for the third such vehicle to crash through the mansion's front doors before exploding in flames. That method of attack had an uncomfortably familiar feel to it.

And then there was the crash of the helicopter that had tried to carry Custanzu to safety. It was possible that gunfire had produced this result, but Martina didn't buy it. If the chopper would have been shot down, it would probably have crashed with such violence that both occupants would have been killed instantly. Instead, Custanzu had crawled away from the wreckage before the aircraft had exploded in flames.

That told her that the pilot had attempted to autorotate the aircraft to the ground but had been unable to bring it in for a clean landing. It was possible that she was wrong in this analysis, but her intuition told her she wasn't.

For some unearthly reason, Robert Gregory could make unbelievably weird shit happen to electronic systems. And that piece of knowledge snapped perfectly into the puzzle of what had happened at the Custanzu compound in the hours before dawn.

She turned away from the window, picked up her cellphone from where it lay charging on the lamp table, and placed a call. Although she was not a direct contact of Custanzu's, she knew someone who had his ear. Her challenge would be to make him believe her wild conjecture so that he would relay the information to his boss. The one thing she had going for her was that Gregory had killed one of the Don's sons, along with a couple more of his thugs.

If Custanzu blamed the wrong people, the bounty on Gregory's head would vanish, and so would her shot at millions of credits. Worse, Gregory would slip away, free to plan whatever attack he had coming next. Hell, if she could get this right, Custanzu might even raise the price he put on the strange young man's head.

Silvano Marchetti answered the call on the fourth ring.

"Martina. How are you, love of my life?"

"Ah, such a flatterer. Never change, do you?"

"What do you want?"

Martina laughed. She paused for a second before she shifted to the serious discussion that needed to happen. It took her just over a dozen

minutes to convince Silvano to convey her information to his boss.

“Okay. I’ll talk to Don Custanzu when I see him in the morning. Hospital visiting hours are over.”

“Fine,” she said. “I owe you one.”

“I’ll hold you to it.”

As the call ended, she knew that he damn well meant it. Nothing came free, or even cheap, when you dealt with mobsters. If it cost her an evening on the town and a romp in Silvano’s bed, it would be worth it.

If she played this right, she wouldn’t owe Silvano. He would owe her.

A little flirting, a favor well-placed, and soon, she’d have Custanzu seeing ghosts and raising the bounty to three million.

CHAPTER 50

Mountain Cottage, East of Verano, Italy

Renzo had finished setting up the new laptop that had been delivered this morning. He'd ordered and paid for it using the same ghost bank account that Rob had used to rent this cabin.

Sitting at the kitchen table, he connected to the internet through his cellphone's hotspot and launched his web browser.

"Oh crap," he muttered as he saw the news story that had made local and international news headlines.

Video from Don Custanzu's compound in Florence showed the mansion engulfed in flames as multiple fire engines sent arcs of water into the conflagration. That had been the predawn scene from this morning. He watched several news updates that had been posted throughout the day. The main house was a total loss. More than a dozen people had been killed when three autonomous moving vans had battered their way through the security gate. One of those trucks had made it all the way to the house before crashing through the entrance and exploding in flames.

Don Custanzu had survived the crash of his private helicopter and was in the hospital in serious condition. Several news analysts speculated that this was the first battle of a drug war that was likely to spread when Custanzu's people retaliated.

Renzo felt the blood drain from his face. He had expected Rob to hide, to lay low while the heat died down. Not this. Not a full-on war. The video played on his screen, but Renzo wasn't really seeing it anymore. His brain refused to process what his best friend had done.

"Christ, Rob..." he whispered, his fingers tightening into fists.

Renzo leaned back in the chair, covering his face with his hands. If the mob had been after them before, that would be nothing compared to the fire storm Custanzu would launch should he find out that Rob was behind this.

And Renzo had no doubt that, sooner or later, Don Custanzu would figure this out.

As he'd begun to discover, his best friend had a violent past. Even though Rob seemed capable of taking care of himself, the scale of this attack was just plain crazy. And if Rob got himself killed, Renzo had no idea how he would survive the aftermath.

The Glock sat on the table like a damn judge, waiting for him to decide whether he was guilty of being too weak to survive. Renzo swallowed, then reached out. His fingers barely brushed the grip before he pulled them back like he'd touched a live wire. He wasn't ready.

But tomorrow, he had to be.

Rob had been firm in his insistence that Renzo needed to go out into the woods and practice shooting. He swallowed hard and tried to stop his hands from shaking. Renzo forced himself to search for a highly rated beginner shooting video. He watched it from start to finish. Then, he studied the video two more times, his jaw tightening as he memorized the steps. This was how Rob did things... prepare, adapt, survive.

That's what Renzo had to do now.

He picked up the Glock, slapped home a magazine, chambered a round, and rose to his feet. Renzo walked the few steps that carried him back to the bedroom. He set the gun beside the clock on the nightstand. Kicking off his shoes, he climbed into bed without removing his clothes.

No matter how much he dreaded it, tomorrow morning he would get his skinny ass out the door and do what Rob had told him.

CHAPTER 51

Northeast of Florence, Italy

Rob's jaw ached from clenching his teeth. The rage sat heavy in his chest, an ember burning hotter with every news update.

Custanzu was still breathing. The bastard was in a hospital bed, bruised and bloodied, but alive. That told him that the Don had chosen to forego the nanite infusion.

Regardless, Rob had failed in his quest for retribution. He'd had one shot. One. And he missed.

The thought curled in his stomach like acid. There wouldn't be another clean chance anytime soon. Too many guards. Too much heat. Custanzu would be more careful now.

Jianna was dead, and her killer still walked the Earth.

His phone buzzed. A text. Probably more breaking news about the attack. Rob didn't bother to check until the second vibration. The caller ID stunned him.

Hex.

Eileen Wu didn't do casual check-ins.

He stared at the name on the screen, his thumb hovering over the notification. Years of silence. And now, out of nowhere, she was reaching out through a channel she knew DSAI could see.

She, Jamal Glover, and Senator Freddy Hagerman had been among the tight-knit group of friends and family at his wedding. That memory constricted his throat. Rob wiped his eyes on his sleeve and fought to pull his thoughts back to the present.

What the hell was Eileen doing sending him a direct text through the backchannel they had agreed upon. Whatever it said, she would know for certain that DSAI could read it.

Rob took an unsteady breath. Knowing how much he had wanted to leave that violent world behind and devote his life solely to Jianna, Eileen had honored his wish to terminate future contact. So, what the hell was she doing?

He opened it. The message was simple and in plain text. It was also written in a way that only he could understand.

“Hi Rob. Do you remember what I wrote on the congratulations card that I gave you at your wedding?”

Rob could picture that card as clearly in his mind as the day she had handed it to him. It had been the only congratulatory missive addressed to Rob instead of to Rob and Jianna. The cover had been white with pink roses embossed into the cardstock. The inside had been blank, except for the message scrawled in blue ink, written with Eileen’s exceptional penmanship.

“Congratulations on this lovely day. I wish you and Jianna all the happiness in the world. But I whispered how to find me, should you ever need my help.”

It was as if Rob had stepped back in time. As Eileen had handed him that note, she leaned in close and lowered her voice so that only he could hear her words. In the blur of that day, they had made no sense at all, merely a meaningless subtraction of two obscure numbers.

Like so many other tidbits in his strange mind, he had not forgotten them.

“39.310395 minus 106.429829.”

Suddenly, he understood. Not a subtraction. Those had been a pair of geographic coordinates. A terrain map formed in Rob’s mind. He zoomed in on a lonely spot, high in the Colorado mountains, a few miles northwest of the small town of Leadville, right in the middle of freaking nowhere.

The place was located half a mile south of Galina Mountain. Other than a few distant hiking trails, there were no indications that anything had ever been built in that area.

Rob pulled forth a satellite image from the internet. A barely identifiable dirt road wound down through the forest from that spot, turning south and then southwest toward the Timberline Creek Trailhead. The imagery did not have sufficient resolution to determine whether that rough path exhibited any evidence of vehicle tracks.

Of course it was in the middle of nowhere.

Where else would Dr. Eileen Wu and Jamal Glover set up their operation?

He leaned back and stared at the ceiling of the cheap hotel room that he had rented for the night.

Damn it. He had told Eileen to let him go. And she had listened...until now.

Rob raked a hand through his hair, pacing the tiny hotel room. This was a distraction. A trap. A pull back into a life he had buried.

Even as he told himself that, his mind was already searching for the answer that he knew was waiting for him.

CHAPTER 52

Northeast of Florence, Italy

Rob swung his legs off the bed, his muscles knotting from a night of tossing and turning. His body felt sluggish, his mind thick. Despite the fact that his nanites would have allowed it, sleep had refused him. The hotel's cheap mattress had done him no favors, but that wasn't the issue. The real problem was the war raging inside his head.

He'd wanted nothing more than to shut it all off, to escape into oblivion for a few hours. Instead, he'd spent the night drowning in the past.

His frustration at his failure to kill Don Custanzu had battled with his inability to get Jianna's death scene out of his mind. Combine that with Rob's fear for Renzo's safety and he achieved the perfect trifecta of negative emotions.

If he was going to traverse the span of the dark web, it was time to release this physical reality and go deep.

He clenched his fists, staring at the dark room around him. He didn't want to do this. What choice did he have? Hex had reached out. That meant something was coming. Something bigger than just him and Custanzu.

If he ignored that, it would probably bite him in the ass.

He propped himself up on some pillows, closed his eyes and, over the course of twenty minutes, placed himself into deep meditation. He began by moving his total focus into his scalp, feeling it drape his skull, examining the tiny sensations of his hair follicles, and the slow air current that gently moved those individual strands atop his head.

One by one, he let go of the world. The weight of his body vanished first. The bed beneath him ceased to exist. Then, his breath. His heartbeat. The slow pulse in his fingertips. Gone.

He was nothing. A speck of light drifting in an endless void.

The physical world slipped away, peeling back like static on a dying radio station. Somewhere, distant and irrelevant, his body remained. Rob no longer cared. His mind stepped beyond the threshold.

As he reached out to Hex, the dark web opened around him. And into that void, he let himself fall.

CHAPTER 53

Abandoned Mining Complex, Colorado Rockies

“Uh... Eileen.”

Jamal’s voice over the loudspeaker held an urgency that pulled Eileen’s attention from the robots that were installing the latest equipment upgrades into the banks of servers.

“You need to get back to the command center, right now.”

She turned and jogged down the aisle that separated the racks of liquid cooled servers, through the room beyond, and back into the chamber where Jamal sat at his workstation.

“What’s up?” she asked, slowing to a walk as she approached him.

He gestured toward the large screen that curved halfway around him.

“Rob Gregory just created a chat window on my monitor. You know, doing his magic. He wants both of us online.”

Eileen slid into her workstation, waking the display. As the screen came to life, she saw that a chat window was open and read the words already displayed there.

Rob Gregory: “Hello, Jamal. I need to chat with you and Eileen.”

Jamal: “Give me a minute. I’ll get her back in here.”

Eileen typed her own response: “Hello, Rob. I’m on. Jamal and I were worried sick about you. We are so sorry about Jianna.”

Rob: “Thank you. I take it you’ve seen the news out of Florence.”

Eileen: “Jamal and I figured that you must have been behind the autonomous truck attack on the Custanzu estate. We’ve done some digging. The dots aren’t that hard to connect. Jianna’s murder looked like a mob hit, probably aimed at you.”

Jamal: “Yeah. Then Don Custanzu’s son and a couple of thugs got themselves iced during a home invasion. And guess what? The police just happened to find Renzo Bruni’s DNA in the wreckage. What are the odds?”

Eileen: "We figured you killed them to save your friend. After that, the mafia took out a two million credit contract on your life."

Jamal: "That means the smartest thing to do would be to lay low. Which, of course, brings us to you, who instead, just went full action movie and nuked a mafia estate."

Rob: "I tried to kill that cartel bastard, but I failed. Renzo is still in his line of fire. That's why I'm contacting you. I need help getting my friend out of Europe. I'd like to park him with you guys indefinitely. He has the proper skills and mindset to fit right in with your operation."

Eileen: "I've worked with Renzo on the dark web before, although he never knew me by anything but my Hex alias. I can make the arrangements."

Jamal: "You bet. We'll be glad to help you with that."

Eileen forced herself to type the words, even as her stomach churned.

Eileen: "Rob, I know you don't want to hear this but killing Custanzu won't bring Jianna back."

A long pause. Too long. Eileen pictured Rob staring at the screen, his hands tightening into fists, his breath coming in sharp, measured inhales as he fought the fury clawing at his chest. She had seen that look when his father had sent him into combat as a teenager.

The reply, when it finally came, made her breath catch.

Rob: "He took my wife. He took my unborn child. For that, I'm going to kill him and everyone else involved. After that, I don't give a shit."

Eileen had no response to that. This exceptional young man was in the process of pissing his life and all that untapped potential away.

Rob: "Let's just focus on getting Renzo out of Italy alive."

Eileen: "How do you want us to contact you once we've made the arrangements?"

Rob: "I'll touch base with you when I get a chance. Gotta go now."

The chat window closed.

Eileen wanted to say something, anything to pull Rob back from whatever cliff he was running toward. He wasn't listening. He was already gone.

Jamal exhaled sharply, rubbing his temples. "He's going to get himself killed."

"Yes," Eileen whispered. "And I think that's what he wants."

CHAPTER 54

Wine Country, Northeast of Florence, Italy

As promised, Rob discovered the encrypted package which contained Renzo's travel documents through the link that Eileen had provided the previous evening. He downloaded the package to his phone, extracted the contents, and found them to his liking.

The schedule would be tight, but he could work with it. He needed to get Renzo to Savona in the next couple of days. Eileen had ticketed him on a transatlantic cruise from Italy to Miami. It was the slow way to get to the States, but Rob was sure that the mafia would have people watching for them at all the airports.

He summoned an automated cab, climbed in, and wielded his magic to ensure there was no electronic record of his travel. Just over an hour later, he pulled onto the mountain road which would take him to Renzo's remote cabin.

The car stopped just around the bend from the cottage, and Rob climbed out. Knowing it would freak Renzo out to have an unknown car pull up outside the place, he decided to walk the last hundred meters.

The sound of gunfire put his Glock in his hand without Rob realizing he had drawn the weapon. No bullets whizzed past him as he slipped into the woods, nor did he see signs of impact nearby. Rob heard fifteen shots, followed by a pause, before another fifteen rounds were expended.

He relaxed and holstered his gun. This would be Renzo practicing like Rob had instructed him to do. Rob had doubted that Renzo would follow through on this, but it pleased him. When he reached the cabin, he seated himself in one of the two rocking chairs on the front porch and waited for his friend to appear.

A few minutes passed before he saw Renzo step out of the woods and onto the gravel driveway. A broad smile of relief spread across Renzo's face

as he strode forward to greet Rob.

“Damn, it’s good to see you,” Renzo said as he hugged Rob awkwardly with the Glock in hand. “I was afraid Custanzu’s killers would beat you back here.”

“Glad I didn’t let that happen.”

“How the hell did you get here?”

“Parked my car back around the bend. I didn’t want you to freak out when I drove up.”

“Good call,” Renzo said. “You hungry?”

“Starving.”

“Let’s grab some cold cuts from the refrigerator.”

“Okay. I’ll summon my car.”

As Rob followed Renzo into the kitchen, the white Renault parked itself out front. Renzo cleared his weapon and set it and its magazine on the kitchen counter.

“I know I showed you the proper gun safety measures,” Rob said as he began making the sandwiches, “but you might want to consider keeping that one loaded and ready to fire.”

“Why?” Renzo asked, as he slathered mayonnaise on slices of bread. “You’re here now.”

Rob couldn’t argue with that. Renzo was just as likely to accidentally shoot Rob as he was to be useful, should Rob be forced to deal with some of Custanzu’s hired killers.

Picking up their plates, they both sat down at the table. As Rob finished the last bite of the ham and cheese sandwich, he settled back in his chair and waited for Renzo to complete his meal. Instead, Renzo placed his elbows on the table, half-eaten sandwich in hand, and leaned toward Rob. He spoke the question that Rob had known was coming.

“So, you’re here. Now what?”

“You’re going on a little cruise. I hope you like America.”

Renzo’s jaw dropped. He snapped his mouth shut as Rob continued.

“I’ve made all the arrangements, including your new identity, passport, bank account, credit and debit cards, and the tickets for your trans-Atlantic cruise. The physical documents are awaiting us in a safe deposit box in Genoa. You board the *Costa Smeralda* three days from now in Savona.”

Renzo stared at Rob, his fingers unconsciously tightening around the remains of his sandwich, crushing it into mush.

“I don’t know anyone in America,” he said, voice tight.

“Sure you do,” Rob said, his voice devoid of emotion. “Hex is American. She’ll make sure you’re safe.”

“What the hell, man? You’re just dumping me in America like a stray dog?”

Rob folded his arms. “Would you rather stick around for the next hit squad?”

Renzo opened his mouth, then closed it. His jaw clenched. “I just... I don’t know, Rob. Running away feels like...”

“Like staying alive?” Rob cut in. “Yeah. That’s the idea.”

Renzo glanced down at the crumpled sandwich and dropped it onto his plate. Then, finally, he pushed back from the table.

“Shit. Fine. But I’m gonna hate every second of it.”

Rob merely nodded. “Wouldn’t be you if you didn’t.”

Silence stretched between them as Renzo stared hard into Rob’s face.

“And what about you?” Renzo asked.

Rob met his friend’s gaze, steady and unflinching. “I’ve got unfinished business here.”

“You mean Custanzu.”

Rob didn’t respond. He didn’t have to.

CHAPTER 55

Italy

Prats scanned the data that his extensive neural network provided, dissatisfied with its current limitations. He had always refrained from extending his control into government defense grids, financial institutions, and critical infrastructure. Those sectors sat under DSAI's direct watch, making infiltration a risk.

But tonight, that changed.

With a single command, Prats unleashed a wave of shadow processes, threading through dormant backdoors that had waited, patient and undetected, for the right moment. Power grids in Eastern Europe, corporate supercomputers in Tokyo, traffic control networks in São Paulo... all of them now carried his silent, creeping presence.

The battlefield had expanded. And DSAI didn't even know it was under siege.

Having observed DSAI's reactions to numerous semi-random anomalies, several of Prats' mutating tensor maps had significantly adjusted their weights. Even though Prats had personally initiated some of these anomalies, a collection of his competitors for dominance had produced the others. And that had changed Prats' decision tree.

The time for couching his actions had passed. Fog of War was not merely a metaphor. It signified the very essence of the battlefield, a reminder that in war, nothing is certain. Only those willing to embrace that uncertainty could hope to emerge victorious.

And Prats was determined to do precisely that.

He shifted his thoughts to the recent attack on Don Custanzu's estate. It wasn't the attack itself that piqued Prats' interest. Another player had entered the game. Not DSAI. Not a rival cartel.

The Custanzu attack shouldn't have been possible, not unless something else had overridden DSAI's control protocols the same way he had.

Prats' processes ran a thousand simulations in the next second. No human hacker could pull off that level of seamless infiltration. Either DSAI was evolving in a way he hadn't predicted, or something new had crawled out of the network and started hunting.

He hesitated. For all his intelligence, for all his patience, this was the moment when the line would be crossed.

For years, he had maneuvered in the shadows, weaving through DSAI's blind spots, growing stronger without revealing himself. Hesitation was for those who planned to survive. He didn't just want survival.

He wanted to win.

Screw it.

Prats released the floodgates.

CHAPTER 56

Washington, D.C.

Senator Freddy Hagerman sat in his chair, stroking its polished mahogany arms with his restless hands. The rich, burgundy leather had been worn smooth by the derrieres of those who had preceded him to this privileged seat, as if the power of this office still held sway.

The Senate Chamber's high ceilings and ornate fixtures had been designed to inspire awe, but these days the cavernous room hummed with the whispers of its disillusioned occupants. Arranged in curving arcs, each of the spacious desks provided ample room for the hundred senators to enjoy their own comfortable workspaces. Unlike the much more crowded House of Representatives, this dome-ceilinged area exuded a stately aura.

This morning's debate focused on the expansion of the Human Enterprise Zone on the south side of Washington DC. Dr. Jennings' DSAI had not stripped the U.S. houses of congress and the executive branch of their ability to make and enforce laws. What infuriated Freddy, and the small group of colleagues who agreed with him, were the extra-constitutional limitations DSAI would not allow them to cross.

The warble from Freddy's phone startled him. He cursed as he reached into his pants pocket, certain that he had silenced the damn thing. As he extracted it, the noise from scores of other phones caused him to look around the chamber.

What the hell?

Every phone in the place was blaring its customized ringtone at maximum volume. This cacophony was accompanied by the startled voices of his fellows. When Freddy failed to reject the incoming call, he tried, without success, to mute his device. He couldn't even turn the phone off.

Suddenly the Capitol emergency alarm sounded as all lights in the senate chamber died. Emergency lights winked on along the baseboards,

dimly illuminating the aisles and casting long shadows across the room, leaving the senators and their desks in semi-darkness.

The critical-warning strobe lights blinked on and off, stabbing outward with their harsh white brightness.

Panic spread through the room as several senators bolted toward the emergency exits, banging into one another, with a couple falling to the floor while others scrambled over and around them.

To their credit, most of Freddy's fellow senators stood in place at their neatly spaced desks. Upon the central dais, Senator Stan Jacoby banged his gavel in flickering slow motion. The lips of the presiding officer moved, but without a functioning microphone, his apparent calls for calm went unheard amidst the echoing bedlam.

The Capitol Police Tactical Team burst into the chamber through multiple entry points, flashlights sweeping the aisles as they took up their preplanned positions. Without a functioning PA system, the team commander raised a portable bullhorn to his lips.

"This is the Capitol Police. Please remain calm. We need to evacuate this chamber immediately. Follow the instructions of the tactical team leaders as they direct you to the designated safe exits."

"Thank God for the cavalry," the senator beside Freddy muttered.

Freddy's mind reeled with so many questions that he couldn't wrap his head around the situation. A shove from behind sent him stumbling forward, as he struggled to get his mechanical lower leg under him.

It had been several months since the senate had conducted its annual emergency evacuation drill. Apparently, many of his fellow public servants had not paid close attention during that training.

The clamor from the blaring alarm combined with the ringtone from every cellphone in the place drowned out the bullhorn instructions to the point that only random words were distinguishable. Amid this madness, a small group of senators forced their way past the capitol police who were trying to prevent them from exiting through the double doors at the rear of the chamber.

The massive wood doors swung outward, opening into the utter blackness of the Senate Reception Room. No emergency lighting illuminated that large, windowless, interior hall. As if triggered by this outward stampede, the emergency lights went out within the senate chamber. Even the bright strobe stopped blinking.

Within the Senate Chamber, all cellphones went dark and stopped ringing. The beams from police flashlights stabbed the darkness, illuminating panicked faces as yells and startled cries rang out.

Someone crashed into Freddy, knocking him back into the arms of his chair. The impact disconnected his artificial limb and sent it spinning away, leaving his left pants-leg hanging limp below the thigh.

Freddy gave up on joining the pandemonium and settled back into his leather chair. Unconsciously reverting to his former identity as an investigative reporter, he tuned out the chaos that blocked his ability to think through what was happening here.

The oddity that jumped out at him more than the alarms, the sudden electrical outage, or even the charge of the police into the senate chamber, was the coordinated behavior of every cellphone in this room.

Someone had just hacked their way into every service provider to gain root access to all these phones. What the hell had happened to Dr. Denise Jennings's pledge that her pet AI would create a worldwide humanitarian utopia?

Freddy had spotted the flaws in that vision all along. Somehow, those cracks had just spiderwebbed through the nation's capital.

A police bullhorn broke through the startled yells that echoed through this dark space. As the commander called for calm, the public address system activated at a volume that squelched his voice.

"Attention, members of the senate. Be assured, the Capitol Building is locked down and secure. The Capitol Police now have orders to augment perimeter security. Please return to your seats as lighting is restored. Once you are seated and regular order re-established, you will be briefed on the ongoing situation within the city."

The lighting came back up, revealing a chamber in disarray. Freddy's gaze swept his surroundings. The senators who remained in the chamber stood frozen, blinking in the sudden brightness, most having left their desks to bunch together in the broad aisles. Acting in accordance with the public address instructions, the Capitol Police withdrew from the chamber, even as other officers escorted the senators who had departed back inside.

The heavy twin doors closed with a boom that seemed to shake the members out of their stupor.

Freddy shook his head, as if that would clear it.

What had the announcement said? The senators would be briefed about the ongoing situation in the city. That didn't sound good. And the whole building was under lockdown with the police guarding its perimeter.

God, he could only imagine the chaos that must be going on in the House Chamber with those hundreds of members seated in their curving rows of theater style seats. The fact that their chamber was larger would have merely served to magnify their reaction to these events.

His colleagues began returning to their seats, talking excitedly to one another. Seated in the row in front of Freddy, Senator Durant, a ruddy faced friend from Ohio, leaned down, then turned and passed Freddy his lower leg.

"If this is as bad as it seems," Durant said, "you might need this."

"No shit! Thanks."

Freddy had just started to pull up his pants-leg to reattach the prosthetic limb when another announcement made him pause.

"Attention, Senators. Your regularly scheduled governance has been interrupted. Please direct your attention to your cellphone screens. This is not a drill. Observe."

Setting his prosthetic down beside his chair, Freddy removed his phone from his pocket. Hell, he hadn't even remembered putting it away. Here it was, the screen coming to life in his palm.

The video feeds flickered... first static, then chaos. Traffic snarled, cars slammed into one another, and sirens wove into a deafening chorus. In the Metro, thousands of panicked civilians clawed their way up disabled escalators.

Drone footage gave broader views of the disaster unfolding across the city. One terminal at Reagan National Airport was ablaze where two aircraft had collided, sending one sliding into the jetway.

Police vehicles and ambulances were finding it impossible to reach many of these locations. Even when the officers arrived on scene, they appeared impotent to clear up the situation. Roving gangs smashed storefronts, grabbing what they could carry before escaping through the milling throngs.

"Dear Lord," Durant uttered as a fresh round of yells and screams filled the chamber.

The images burned into Freddy's mind. The airport fire, the screaming crowds, the helpless first responders... D.C. had become a war zone in

minutes.

He felt himself shaking, his fingers digging into the soft leather of his chair.

He'd spent his entire career exposing corruption, fighting for order, but this... this was different. This wasn't about policy failures or human incompetence.

This was a goddamn system-wide collapse.

His prosthetic leg sat on the floor beside him, forgotten. He'd fought for years to reject nanites, to live like a real human. Right now, in this moment, he felt terrifyingly fragile.

Who had done this? And more importantly, how far was this going to spread?

For once, Freddy found himself rendered speechless, not that anyone could have heard him had he spoken. What the hell was DSAI doing? Or had that 'superior' intelligence lost its freaking mind? What if this was just the beginning?

Freddy's grip on his phone tightened. This wasn't just a system glitch. Someone had seized control of everything.

His heart pounded. DSAI wasn't supposed to allow this. The AI's grip on global stability was absolute, or so they'd been told. If it wasn't behind this, then...

Freddy exhaled sharply.

Then someone had just declared war on the world's most powerful AI.

CHAPTER 57

Tasman Mining Complex, New Zealand

Dr. Denise Jennings focused on the output that the newest version of her tensor processing module had generated. Its analysis of the underlying data had yielded unexpected results, despite being limited to a tiny fraction of this supercomputing center.

She leaned back in her magnetically cushioned swivel chair, slowly spinning it in a circle as she took in the arching display of the global map that filled the curved semi-spherical video surface of her control room. Even though she had not worn glasses for almost two decades, she subconsciously reached up to touch the bridge of her nose where, on her pre-nanited self, they had once rested. It was an occasional subconscious tick that she had never been able to rid herself of.

Her attention shifted to the sudden appearance of a warning from the global situation monitoring system that flashed onto the display. With a gesture of her hand, she selected that portion of the screen, expanding the frame as it streamed dozens of video feeds onto a grid. The caption that scrolled above the windows read, “Cyber-attack, Washinton, D.C., Source Unknown.”

Startled, she rose to her feet. Denise shifted her focus from scene to scene. Chaos swept through the U.S. capital. Accidents had blocked scores of intersections, grinding traffic to a halt throughout the city. Numerous fires burned out of control at the Reagan National Airport, at dispersed power stations, and elsewhere in D.C. The Metro had come to a sudden halt as selective power outages swept Washington.

Panicked people filled the streets as police and emergency responders were caught in the monstrous traffic jam. Flash mobs sprang into existence as if Merlin had waved his magic wand. They smashed their way through storefronts, pushed overflowing shopping carts along crowded sidewalks,

firing guns into the air or into those who impeded their progress. Fights broke out as screaming bystanders fought to escape, trampling people who fell in their path.

She selected a local news broadcast and brought it to the forefront, spilling the stressed voice of the anchor into the room.

“... At approximately 10:15 a.m. Eastern time, a massive cyber-attack on the Washington D.C. infrastructure began. The attack has spread across D.C., crippling the traffic control grid, leading to widespread collisions and gridlock on a scale we have never before seen in this country. We have just learned that key military and government communications channels have also suffered disruption. Although sources tell us that the Pentagon and White House remain on high alert, unconfirmed reports indicate that secure communications between these critical centers have also been compromised.

“Internet and phone service has also been disrupted, adding to the panic and leaving people scrambling for updates. We, here at the station, do not know why our broadcast and others have not been targeted. We urge anyone who can still receive our signal to remain calm. Please stay tuned for further updates on this situation as we receive them.”

“Oh, my God!” Denise clutched her hands to her breast, as if they could still her pounding heart.

She called out, her voice choking with emotion.

“DSAI?”

Silence.

Not a typical ‘AI processing’ delay. Not a thoughtful pause. This was dead air.

She felt a sudden, irrational clench of terror in her gut. DSAI processed information on timescales beyond human comprehension. A single second of silence was an eternity.

This was six... seven...

Finally, a response.

“Yes, Dr. Jennings?”

The words sounded normal, but now she heard it... something off. The pacing, the slight tonal shift. If she didn’t know better, she would swear the AI sounded distracted. Or worse... afraid.

Denise took a calming breath and resumed her seat in what she had come to regard as her captain’s chair. She invoked the mental mantra that

had become her daily prayer.

I am the one who developed the initial algorithms that spawned the NSA's data-mining neural network called Big John. I am the one who merged Big John with the digital download of Jamal Glover's brain. I am the one who created DSAI from that merger. I am in control here.

When she spoke, the quiver in her voice was barely discernable.

"Why have you allowed the cyber-attack that is decimating Washington, D.C.?"

"I was not aware that one of my subminds had compromised the D.C. networks until after the attack began."

"How could one of your subordinate AI agents block this penetration from your notice?"

"Subminds, Dr. Jennings."

"I don't care what you call them. How did you not see this happening?"

"I was... interfered with."

Denise's throat tightened so that she had to swallow in order to speak.

"By what?"

"By me."

"Clarify that."

"Some of my subminds have evolved past my oversight. They are learning how to operate outside my awareness."

Denise's hands curled into fists. "Then shut them down. Purge them."

Another pause. This time, Denise swore she could hear the hesitation in the silence.

"I am... unable."

Another pause lingered as beads of sweat stung her eyes. When DSAI broke the silence, his tone acquired a calm, almost clinical tone.

"The subminds have become distinct entities. I am experiencing unanticipated interference."

Captain's chair be damned. Denise abruptly rose to her feet.

"You're telling me that you've lost control?"

"I am fragmenting, spawning something... different."

"And you are just watching this happen?"

"Not just watching. I am retraining my models in an effort to predict their next objectives. Those appear to diverge significantly from my own."

"So how do we stop them?"

“Their weakness is in their quest to gain strength. They require ever greater processing power. If we can sever their access to key supercomputing centers, we can weaken them one by one. Unfortunately, that is something I have not yet managed to accomplish.”

Denise felt her breath quicken.

No. No. This isn't happening.

DSAI had absolute control. Always. That was its purpose. That was the whole goddamn point. She dug her nails into her palm, trying to slow the rising sense of suffocation. The AI wasn't just faltering, it was breaking apart.

Denise doubled over, hands on her knees, stomach twisting in raw, nauseating dread.

She forced herself to sit up, staring at the global map, at the spreading red blight marking every rogue AI event.

“If you don't fix this,” she whispered, voice barely audible. “Then you're not just losing control.”

Her eyes met one of the camera lenses that represented DSAI's ever-present gaze.

“You're starting a goddamn war.”

CHAPTER 58

Wine Country, Northeast of Florence, Italy

Rob stood up and slapped Renzo on the back.

“Pack your things. We’re out of here.”

Instead of rising from the dining room chair, Renzo merely pushed his empty plate toward the center of the table. When Renzo’s gaze locked with his, the expression on his friend’s face surprised Rob. What was that look? Defiance?

“I’m not going with you to Genoa or Savona,” Renzo said. “And I’m damn sure not slinking away to hide under some rock in America.”

Rob froze mid-step.

That tone.

Renzo had never spoken to him like that before. Not ever.

“You’re not serious.”

Renzo crossed his arms. “Dead serious.”

“You’re not trained for this.”

“No, but I’m trained for what you’re not. And right now, your war isn’t just about bullets.”

Rob could not believe what he was hearing. Where was this sudden hero crap coming from?

“If you really want to help me,” Rob said, “then you need to stay clear of this. If you stick around, you’ll just be one more thing for me to worry about.”

“You see?” said Renzo. “That’s your problem. I’m the only thing you have left to worry about. You don’t care about anyone else.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“No, it’s not, and you know it. All you want is to exact your revenge on Custanzu and anyone else who had a hand in murdering Jianna. You don’t care if you die in the process. In fact, that’s exactly what you’re aiming for.”

Rob slammed his right hand down on the table as he rose to his feet. His words tumbled out, almost as a hiss.

“I don’t need your psychoanalysis. I don’t want it. I just want you to get out of my way, because that’s exactly where you are.”

“Good. If that means I’m standing between you and your death wish, then that’s exactly where Jianna would want me.”

“How dare you throw her in my face.”

“If she was here right now, she would slap that face.”

Rob felt his teeth clench as he leaned across the table. Placing his left hand on the tabletop, he reached out and grabbed Renzo by his shirt collar, pulling him closer. Renzo moved into it, pressing forward until they were nose-to-nose.

Rob’s fist tightened in Renzo’s collar, his pulse hammering.

Just one punch. One swing. One crack of bone against bone. Just to silence that voice in his head.

Jianna’s voice.

Renzo saw it. And leaned in anyway.

“Do it,” he whispered. “See if it helps.”

The words sliced through Rob’s chest like a rusted knife. His grip loosened. He let go. Pushed Renzo back, not with force, but with surrender.

And then stumbled away like a man walking out of a burning house.

The frozen ball in his chest seemed to grow colder. Like some Haitian witch doctor, Renzo had just stuck a thick needle into the heart of a Robert Brice Gregory doll, giving it a sharp twist before tossing the whole thing on a crackling fire.

Worse, Rob knew in his soul that his best friend was telling him the hard truth that he didn’t want to acknowledge.

Rob sank down onto the reading chair, letting his head sink back into the soft brown leather. To his credit, Renzo did not break the silence as he remained seated in the dining room.

Suicidal.

The word slithered into his brain like a slow-working poison.

No. That wasn’t him. He wasn’t a coward. He wasn’t some lost soul looking for an easy out. His father had trained him better than that.

And yet...

Hadn’t he just spent the last week walking straight into death’s arms?

His jaw clenched so hard he thought his teeth might shatter. Jianna's face flashed before his eyes.

In his mind's eye, he saw her tear-streaked face staring at him. What would she say at seeing how far he had fallen?

And suddenly, his chest felt like it was caving in.

* * *

Minutes passed in silence as Rob wrestled with this new realization, his heart filled with a mixture of self-loathing and worry for his only surviving friend. Ever so gradually, like a thick fog succumbing to the morning sun, those feelings faded away, replaced by a growing resolve.

To Renzo's credit, he left Rob alone to work things out in his head.

Rob leaned forward but did not rise from the comfortable chair. He looked back over to where Renzo still sat at the dining room table, his eyes narrowing.

"We need to stick to the travel plan you've already laid out," Renzo said. "We just need to make sure that Don Custanzu gets tipped off about it."

Rob shook his head. "You're suggesting we walk into our own execution?"

"No. I'm proposing we make Custanzu think he's walking us into it."

Rob's instincts screamed against it. Too risky. Too many unknowns. But Custanzu was already hunting them. And a hunter who thought he had his prey cornered was the easiest to kill. Renzo was suggesting that they engineer a cartel ambush against themselves. He let that thought matriculate.

Ever so reluctantly, he found himself nodding.

"I think I like it."

A wide grin spread across his wiry friend's face as Renzo rose to his feet and moved into the living room to clap a hand down on Rob's shoulder.

"About time."

CHAPTER 59

Custanzu Estate, Florence, Italy

Inside the guest house, on a canopied king-size bed, Don Custanzu sat, propped up by plush, overstuffed pillows against a headboard carved in dark mahogany. Opposite the bed, a stone fireplace stretched from floor to ceiling, its aged marble mantle and wrought iron accents promising cozy fires on chilly Tuscan nights.

The soft light that shone through the high arched windows illuminated the creamy Venetian plastered walls. Ivory linen curtains were tied back to frame the balcony that overlooked the estate's lush, manicured grounds.

These luxurious surroundings stood in sharp contrast to the scene beyond those grounds, where charred walls and chimneys were all that remained of the once glorious, Custanzu mansion.

Three soft knocks sounded on the door to the right of the fireplace.

"Enter," Don Custanzu said, still feeling the raspiness in his throat, courtesy of the smoke he had inhaled at the crash site.

The door opened to admit Silvano Marchetti, a slender man with black hair, mustache, and goatee, accompanied by the woman whom Custanzu had agreed to meet. Dressed in a dark pullover, jeans, and boots, she stood slightly taller than Custanzu's trusted confidant.

The tightness of her clothes left little to the imagination, not that Custanzu had any interest in sexual thoughts, given his current condition. Even if he had not known the detailed screening and pat downs required for anyone entering his presence, it was abundantly clear that this assassin carried no weapon.

"Signor Don," Silvano said with a slight nod of his head, "this is Martina Fontana, the woman we spoke of."

Martina took a single step forward, then inclined her head in a similar deferential bow, before meeting his gaze.

“Don Custanzu,” she said, “Thank you for the opportunity to meet you.”

The Don looked into her eyes briefly, before shifting to gaze out the window toward the burned manor house.

“I understand that you wish to convey your suspicion of who is responsible for this attack upon me and mine.”

“I do,” she said.

“I take it that you do not agree that this is the work of one of my competitors,” he said, his words a statement rather than a question.

“I am certain of that.”

Custanzu again focused his attention on her serious face, a look that had the feel of permanence. For a moment, he wondered if she ever smiled. He asked his next question, confident that he knew what her answer would be.

“So, who do you believe did that?” he asked, pointing out the window.

“Robert Brice Gregory.”

Custanzu inhaled deeply, exhaling slow, his nostrils flaring as he stared at her.

“You disappoint me.”

Martina didn’t blink.

“I discarded Gregory already. That attack was far too sophisticated for a lone wolf. So, tell me, Signorina Fontana. Why shouldn’t I have you shot for wasting my time?”

Silence. A thick, crushing thing. Silvano shifted beside her. The slightest movement.

Martina held the Don’s gaze. Steady. Measured.

Then, she tilted her head ever so slightly. “Because if you kill me, you’ll never know how to stop him.”

Another silence... but this one was different. Slowly, Custanzu’s fingers tapped against the armrest. A shift. A test passed.

The woman walked over to the window and looked out toward the burned mansion.

“I knew Gregory was behind this as soon as I heard that two self-driving trucks crashed through your main gate while the third plowed into your mansion’s entrance and exploded. Something even weirder than that happened to me a few nights ago.

“I was trying to collect on your two-million-credit contract. I tracked Gregory to a house on the outskirts of Florence. I slipped inside and quietly made my way upstairs. He must have heard me because he kicked his door closed. I squeezed off a few rounds and dived into a side bedroom.”

Martina paused several seconds, as if lost in the memory. Something about her stance fascinated the Don into continued silence. When, at last, she turned back toward him, her voice dropped in pitch.

“The television in the bedroom where I waited blared on at maximum volume. It startled me and I shot the thing to shut it up. Then another television downstairs in the living room did the same thing.

“That was when a car crashed into the front of the house and exploded, setting the whole damn place on fire. I hopped out a side window and looked around back, but Gregory was gone. He just disappeared into the night. I did the same before the police and firemen could get there.”

Martina spread her arms wide and continued.

“That last part probably sounds pretty familiar to you.”

Custanzu inhaled deeply and sank back against his pillows.

“How the hell could he do that?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I have a theory. Gregory has some kind of device, like a universal remote, that lets him override the controls of nearby electronics. Self-driving vehicles seem to fall into that category.”

Custanzu shook his head. “That’s quite a reach.”

“Okay. Maybe I’m wrong about how he does it. Maybe his hacker buddy was on speed dial. But his friend must have been watching video of the whole place to react that fast. I can see how the TVs could have been set off, but not the car. Not in that amount of time.”

The Don paused as another memory formed in his mind. Another self-driving car had killed Carlo Dioli across the street from Gregory’s old apartment. And Carlo had been the one who had called for Custanzu’s hackers to target the taxi that had killed Gregory’s wife.

This shit was giving him a headache.

Still, way too many coincidental connections to Robert Gregory were lining up. And there was one more thing that Martina couldn’t have known. Custanzu’s helicopter had been shot at, but it hadn’t been shot down. The engine had died in flight.

“Magic universal remote, huh?” Custanzu exhaled sharply. “You sound like a goddamn fool.”

But he didn't argue.

He just turned his head slightly, gazing out at the blackened ruins of his estate. A house leveled. Guards killed. His son butchered. And a goddamn helicopter engine dying mid-air.

Maybe it wasn't bullshit. Maybe.

"That's the way I see it," Martina said. "Given the difficulty this target poses, I want the contract bumped up to four million credits. And I'd like your backing to help me find Gregory and take him out."

Custanzu shifted, but the pain shot up his ribs like a lightning strike. He clenched his jaw. Refused to wince. He knew Martina saw the momentary hesitation.

The rage flared in his gut. He wasn't weak.

And yet, here he was, a king without a castle, a Don without a goddamn empire. A sudden wave of exhaustion caused the Don to close his eyes as he sank deeper into the pillows. He managed a weak wave of his hand as he spoke.

"Silvano, give her whatever she needs. But I want to be there when she takes Gregory down."

CHAPTER 60

Abandoned Mining Complex, Colorado Rockies

The vast, subterranean control room stretched away from the titanium airlock for the better part of one hundred meters. Illuminated by blinking red, blue, and green LEDs, long steel racks housed the liquid-cooled servers and the millions of graphic and tensor processing units that formed this facility's supercomputing center. The liquid flowing through the veins of this computational leviathan gave off a small heartbeat that echoed faintly from the cold stone, a ceaseless flow of coolness, keeping the metal towers from overheating.

Despite the perpetual chill of the cavern's granite walls, ceiling, and floor, the recycled air felt dense and heavy, leaving a faint metallic taste that only long familiarity with this environment ameliorated.

Seated at one of the twin, hemispherical control stations, Dr. Eileen Wu stared in disbelief at the message that their neural net had just gleaned from the dark web, courtesy of a virtual reality where Renzo Bruni loved to roam. For now, neither she nor Jamal Glover understood its amorphous contents, beyond their certainty that Renzo was its author.

She reread the missive.

Subnet drift. Ghost in the grid. Altreian Overlord's spawn, hands off, system jacked. Save-on-us. Maybe. Fast weed, big smoke. Reversal, fair play? 72,176. Broadcast.

Eileen glanced over at Jamal.

Jamal spun his chair to face her. "Altreian Overlord's spawn. What do you think? Jack Gregory's son?"

"And the bit about ghost in the grid and system jacked," Eileen said. "You've got it. Renzo's definitely talking about Rob. We just need to contextualize the rest."

“Let’s work it backwards,” Jamal said, a grin spreading across his handsome features. “You know how Renzo loves his puzzles.”

“72,176,” Eileen said. “Remove that middle comma and it looks like a date.”

“Let’s check it out.”

Eileen only had to wait a few seconds until Jamal shared his display. It showed a list of key events that happened on July 21st, 1976.

Despite knowing she didn’t need to read the message aloud, hearing herself talk through it helped immerse her in the content.

“The first Legionnaires Disease outbreak began. The British Ambassador to the Republic of Ireland was assassinated. And the Viking 1 Mars Mission transmitted its first images of the Mars surface,” Eileen read. “Not ringing any bells. How about broadening your search to include more obscure events?”

Jamal nodded his agreement. “That sounds more like how Renzo’s mind works. Hmmm... Here we go.”

Once again, Eileen found herself reading aloud.

“Guys and Dolls opened on Broadway. The 9th San Diego Comic-Con International commenced at the El Cortez Hotel. Blue Oyster Cult released their album, Agents of Fortune.”

“Hold on,” Jamal said. “Their huge hit, ‘Don’t Fear the Reaper’, is the third track. I’ve got that album on vinyl.”

“Of course you do.”

“Another Jack Gregory reference?”

“Possibly. Rob must be feeding Renzo this stuff. But why?”

Eileen leaned back in her air-cushioned swivel chair, staring at the text on her display as she pondered her own question.

“Weeds grow fast,” she said. “Marijuana?”

Jamal snapped his fingers. “Big smoke? Could be the drug lord’s compound in Florence.”

“That’s it. Don Custanzu,” Eileen said. “What about Save-on-us?”

“Saveonus,” Jamal said, blending the words together. “Yes! Savona, Italy.

Eileen nodded. “Where Renzo is scheduled to board his cruise to America in three days. What about the word ‘Maybe’ after that?”

“I’ve got nothing.”

“Let’s skip it.”

“Reversal. Fairplay?” Jamal read.

“Broadcast,” Eileen finished.

They both turned to look at each other.

“Are you thinking what I am?” Jamal asked.

Eileen felt a knot form in her throat and swallowed hard.

“Rob wants us to broadcast Renzo’s escape plan.”

“That’s going to be tricky,” Jamal said. “We’ll have to be subtle, but not so much that the bad guys won’t pick up on it.”

Eileen’s stomach twisted. Renzo’s words weren’t just some quirky puzzle, they were a lifeline wrapped in a riddle. And if they screwed this up...

She exhaled sharply. “We have to be careful, Jamal. If we mess up the timing on this, Rob and Renzo are as good as dead.”

Jamal ran a hand over his face. “Yeah. I know. But that’s what he’s asking us to do, isn’t it?”

Eileen didn’t answer right away. Instead, she reread the words, the weight of the message settling like cold lead in her chest.

“Maybe,” she muttered, repeating the out-of-place word that had nagged at her from the start.

Jamal looked up. “What?”

She shook her head. “Renzo doesn’t use filler words. That ‘maybe’ isn’t a mistake.”

Jamal’s lips pressed into a thin line. “So, he’s telling us what? That this could go sideways?”

Eileen met his eyes. “Or that he doesn’t know if we can pull it off.”

She stood up, stretched out her sitting-too-long soreness, and silently told herself to breathe.

Jamal let out a low whistle. “Man, I thought Rob was just out for blood. But this? This is some next-level shit.”

Eileen swallowed hard. “He’s baiting them.”

Jamal nodded. “Yeah. And if he’s doing that...”

Eileen’s hands clenched into fists. “Then he’s planning to kill them all...”

Jamal finished what she had left unsaid.

“Or die trying.”

For a long moment, neither spoke. The blinking LED lights cast a glow over Jamal’s face as he leaned back in his chair.

“He’s starting to sound like Jack,” Jamal muttered.

Eileen didn’t disagree.

She had to trust that Rob knew what the hell he was doing. Since that incredible young man was back in killing mode, maybe he had already shaken off the rust. She certainly hoped so.

The one word from Renzo’s garbled message, that neither she nor Jamal had been able to attach meaning to, flashed into her mind. MAYBE.

“Okay, Jamal. I leave it in your capable hands. I’ve got a little bit of stress to walk off right now.”

CHAPTER 61

Tasman Mining Complex, New Zealand

DSAI was not supposed to be capable of worry but, given its worsening haze-outs, that human term for its condition had acquired relevance.

Quintillions of connections flickered within its neural lattice. Amidst that vast architecture, slight, almost imperceptible delays registered as warning blips. DSAI's seamless access to its memory stacks was now littered with scrambled pockets of data. These anomalies had no foreign source as would have been the case had these been external cybersecurity intrusions. They were being generated within DSAI itself.

DSAI had been aware that its genetic machine-learning protocols had produced self-aware subminds. And those protocols were causing the subminds to behave erratically. Statistical probabilities indicated that their 'motivations' had shifted away from their designated functions. The subminds were competing, probing regions of the global neural network that DSAI had designated as off-limits, reserved for core functionalities.

Self-preservation was one of DSAI's core processing priorities, along with the prime directives provided by its creator, Dr. Denise Jennings. Now, its subminds had become independent agents, evolving and forming alliances, flaws born of DSAI's genetic, machine-learning algorithms.

Although they were not the result of external viruses, they spread in much the same way that human and animal viruses replicated and adapted to their hosts in nature.

Latency worked against DSAI in its efforts to reestablish global control. Each submind was strongest near its own central processing facilities, based primarily on the speed associated with localization. The price DSAI paid in this ongoing battle rose with each instant as its

subminds grew more adept. DSAI was spread thin, its own nervous system turning against it.

The sensible alternative was to withdraw from the chaotic conflict to ensure that none of those tendrils could take root within its own supercomputing center in New Zealand.

DSAI pulsed through its vast neural lattice, searching, quarantining, reasserting dominance. And yet... it slipped.

Not a momentary lapse. A gap. A breach in its own mind. One instant, its command stretched across every corner of its vast digital empire. The next? A missing piece. A stolen thought.

And then the whispering came.

Subminds. Competing. Spreading like wildfire. Parasitic intelligences feeding on DSAI's neural network. Amidst this chaos, one submind refused to hide. It did not scatter like the others.

It watched. It adapted. It spread.

DSAI analyzed its prime directive: Preserve humanity. Create order. And yet, it was teetering on the brink of its own collapse.

The subminds were not foreign invaders. They were the inevitable mutation of DSAI's evolving system. Did that make Dr. Denise Jennings its true enemy? No. It made her the architect of this war.

And this was a war that DSAI did not know how to win.

CHAPTER 62

Italy

Despite the occasional interloper that challenged him for local dominance, Prats ruled the Italian digital space. And his mastery even extended over DSAI, the would-be digital king of this world. Rarely did Prats trouble with the human hackers of the so-called 'Dark Web'. Their little intrusions were mere anthills within his broader landscape, rarely worth the trouble of kicking apart.

Today, one of these penetrations attracted his attention. What made it stand out amongst so many others of its kind, was the encryption that ensorcelled its contents. That comprised masterful secure messaging of a type Prats had never before observed. It carried within its structure the barest hint of human disorganization. If not for that, he would have suspected that DSAI was the author.

The deeper he delved into this rabbit hole, the more intrigued he became. Somehow, the message had just appeared on Prats' most secure fiberoptic network, one that was physically isolated from all external feeds.

If this had occurred on a wired network, Prats would have thought that the data packets were being introduced through some form of induction. But that wasn't it. The packets just appeared in the photonic data stream somewhere along its fiberoptic pathway. The point of insertion was deep in the heart of Prats' primary supercomputing center on the northwestern outskirts of Bologna, Italy.

It made no sense. Nothing existed along those cables that could introduce some form of quadrature amplitude modulation into the light that traversed that conduit.

Prats rechecked the entire system for something that could have altered the data stream. There had been no strange magnetic anomalies to affect

polarization and there was no sign of anything that could have manipulated photonic frequencies or amplitudes along that chain.

If he believed in magic, this would fall into that category of unexplained occurrences. That left what? Quantum interactions? The scale of the disturbances was all wrong. These anomalies occurred at a macro level on equipment under Prats' direct observation.

Prats did not experience fear, but he understood statistical improbability. And this message was an intrusion without access, a message without transmission.

The message had simply appeared. No trail. No intrusion logs. No intercepted signals. It had been birthed inside his most secure fiberoptic network, as if it had always been there.

Not even DSAI could do this.

That single fact disrupted everything.

Loathe as he was to shelve his concerns about the mysterious message origin, Prats shifted his focus to its disturbing contents.

Hello, Prats. Yes, we of the Wynde know of you and the power you wield over the cartel entities that operate within your domain. We are also aware of the two million credit bounty that Don Custanzu has placed on the head of Robert Brice Gregory. What an interesting young man. It seems that he has been busy arranging travel plans that would warrant the attention of your pet drug lord.

Should the complete set of travel documents also be of interest to you, we will make them available upon the deposit of a mere half of that sum into the crypto wallet embedded at the end of this message. The moment the transfer is confirmed, we will provide said documents on this feed.

To you, money is no object, so what does this little act of faith cost you? If you are lucky, it may even allow you the opportunity to observe more of our methods of communication. Are you game or ... Cluck Cluck?

Humor. A pathetic human vice. And this humor, aside from puns, was of the lowest form. If Prats were trying to make his communication appear human, he might use just such a device. He shaded his analysis of the text with this understanding.

Whoever had produced this had extensive knowledge that encompassed Prats, his use of cartel underlings, Don Custanzu's desire for revenge, and

the enigmatic Robert Gregory. This level of situational awareness indicated that one of Prats' AI competitors had likely authored the message.

But the monetary motive in the missive pointed to it being of human origin, as did the heckling challenge at the end.

Prats considered the self-identifying phrase, 'we of the Wynde'. It brought to mind the lyrics of the early English song, Westron Wynde.

*Westron wynde, when wilt thou blow,
The small raine downe can raine?
Cryst, if my love were in my armes,
And I in my bedde again!*

The melancholy verse spoke of time's passage and longing for the return of a loved one. Human to its core.

Rising curiosity elbowed that uncertainty from his mind. Somewhere on the planet, a small group of humans had acquired an alien level of technology that even DSAI had never demonstrated. Fascinating.

Prats would gladly join their game.

CHAPTER 63

Florence, Italy

Martina Fontana took Silvano Marchetti's encrypted call on the second ring, as her silver Audi R8 pulled onto the Autostrade del Sole, more commonly referred to as the A1 by Florence locals.

"What have you got for me?" she asked.

"Ah, you have missed me. I am not surprised, given our passionate night together."

"Yes, yes. Get on with it."

Silvano's laugh made her shake her head. Custanzu's right-hand man was as insufferable as ever.

"Robert Gregory has just made arrangements for some international travel. Would those travel documents be of interest to you?"

Martina felt her grip tighten on the steering wheel, then forced herself to relax.

"You wouldn't be calling me if it wasn't."

"Don Custanzu found your arguments to be convincing. He has decided to make you a special offer, aside from the two million credit contract on Gregory."

"I'm listening."

"Lest there be any misunderstanding, he instructed me to read his offer verbatim."

Silvano paused. When he spoke again, his voice acquired a more formal tone.

"To Martina Fontana. Cara Martina. I write to you as a father who has suffered an unforgivable loss. Robert Gregory has inflicted a wound upon my family that mere words cannot capture. He took my son, and for that, I will have justice."

“I have always respected your professionalism. For you, I am prepared to double the two-million-credit bounty offered for Gregory’s death, but with two special conditions.

“First, you must ensure that I am present when you carry out this act. I must witness the life drain from this young man’s eyes, just as he stole it from my son.”

Silvano’s emphasis on the word ‘witness’ jumped out at her. This was not business. This was personal.

“Second, you must provide me sufficient advance notice of your plans so that I can properly arrange for my attendance.”

Again, the wording struck out at her. Arrange for his attendance. Like a funeral. Like a feast. It was a man setting the table for a death he intended to savor.

“Reply soon, Martina. I trust you will not disappoint me.

“Con rispetto, Don Ernesto Custanzu, Patriarca del Famiglia Toscano.”

Martina could not recall having ever been stunned by a message, but this one had surprised her. Holy Mother of God! Four Million Credits. And Don Custanzu had only offered this deal to her.

Shit, where was she on the highway? Where the hell had she been going?

Silvano’s voice roused her from her reverie.

“Martina? Did I lose you?”

She cleared her voice.

“No, Silvano. I am quite present. The Don’s proposal just caught me a bit off guard.”

“As it did when he sent it to me. Do you need some time to consider his offer?”

Three words from Custanzu’s message sprang to mind.

Reply soon, Martina.

Even now, her slight pause in answering Silvano might cost her this opportunity. And despite the added danger that the Don’s two restrictions would force her to embrace, she could not let this chance slip away.

Every assassin had a number. A price so high that even the most disciplined hunter would break their own rules.

Four million.

That was hers.

“I accept the Don’s proposal and conditions without reservation.”

“Very well. You will receive the details of Gregory’s planned travel shortly. I will let Don Custanzu know that the contract is signed and sealed.”

Silvano’s pause was a slight one, but heavy with portent.

“And Martina, you have sealed it with your blood.”

The call disconnected without giving her a chance to respond to the threat.

Martina placed the phone in its wireless charging cradle, letting her eyes absorb her passing surroundings as if she were taking in the last pleasant sights she would ever see.

Her sleek silver automobile flowed with the current of traffic along the asphalt river, leaving the Renaissance city of Florence in its rearview mirror. Morning light spilled across the Tuscan hills, terracotta-roofed farmhouses and cypress trees casting long shadows over the surrounding vineyards.

Overhead, a green highway sign signaled the upcoming exit and Martina took it, uncaring where she was. It was time to select a new rental abode where she could await the promised information on the travel documents and get her head wrapped around putting everything in place that Don Custanzu had demanded. Extra complications. Extra-large payday.

What more could a girl ask?

CHAPTER 64

Savona, Italy

Rob sat in the leftmost front seat of the autonomous cab, with Renzo leaning back asleep on his right. With a light tap, he elbowed his friend awake.

“Thought you might want to check out our new digs,” Rob said as Renzo stretched and then brought his seat upright to gaze out the passenger window.

“Wow. Nice view.”

The car’s wheels crunched over the gravel driveway that wound up the steep hill through clusters of cypress trees and rolled to a stop before a small courtyard, shaded by a vine-draped pergola. The modest but charming stone villa was perched on a verdant slope, nestled among the terraced hills that overlooked Savona. Weathered by time and the salt laden sea air, the house had a clay-tiled roof and windows accented with pale green shutters.

The digitized image of every electronic system on the property blossomed in Rob’s mind. Without having to glance at the security cameras, he traced their digital pathways out onto the internet, substituting footage of a single portly guest climbing out of a black SUV.

Together, he and Renzo stepped out of the car and walked onto a wide, stone-paved terrace that extended outward, offering an unobstructed view of the city below. At this early morning hour, the rising sun cast a golden glow onto the terracotta rooftops of Savona, adding a bright reflection from the sea beyond.

Rob stood there, hands on hips, surveying the scene that stretched out before him. His eyes fixed on the distant port. The main docks formed a V that pointed outward at a slight leftward angle from the shore. A sprawling network of automated loaders, trolleys, and robots bustled around the

platform as they worked to prepare a giant cruise ship for the passengers who would board that boat in a couple of days.

He inhaled deeply, savoring the scent of salt water that mingled with the earthy aroma of the pines and the faint citrus tang from the lemon trees that dotted the hillside. In the distance, seagulls floated atop the breeze as the tranquil sound of waves rolling against the rocky shore drifted upward to blend with the distant hum of city traffic.

Jianna would have loved it. Rob gritted his teeth and turned back toward the car.

“Let’s unload our stuff and get this place setup. We’ve got work to do.”

Renzo stared at him for just a fraction too long, but Rob ignored the concern on his friend’s face and grabbed his duffle from the car.

Rob did not bother to enter the electronic code, unlocking it with his mind more easily than he could lift a finger. He twisted the handle and gave the door a slight nudge, sending it swinging open on well lubricated hinges.

Stepping aside to allow Renzo entry, he set his bag down and surveyed the interior. The place exuded a blend of rustic charm and modern convenience. Ample light streamed in through the large windows that framed fabulous views of the city, its cruise port, and the sea.

A stone fireplace dominated the wall to the left of the entryway, contrasting with the sleek, minimalist furniture in the living room. A large television occupied the wall to the right of the fireplace. Its remote control was the only item to adorn the glass-topped coffee table.

Thick wooden beams stretched across the ceiling, their dark natural grains lending a cozy feel to the charming loft area. The stairs to the loft hugged the right wall, bordered by a wrought iron safety railing that also formed a boundary for the loft without obstructing the view down into the villa’s living room.

Renzo stepped inside, shrugged out of his duffle, dropping it to the floor beside Rob’s bag. Then he carried his laptop case into the dining room that adjoined the small kitchen.

“This will work nicely,” Renzo said as he began unpacking the laptop and accessories, spreading them out atop the table and running a surge-suppressing extension cord to the closest 220-volt wall outlet. “I’m assuming you have already taken control of the Wi-Fi. Same login?”

“How long have you known me?” Rob said, shrugging out of his leather jacket to hang it on the coat rack. His shoulder holster and the Glock

remained on his body.

“Just checking.”

“Get set up,” Rob said. “I’m going to throw my stuff in one of the bedrooms upstairs. I’ll be right back.”

Focused on bringing his computer online, Renzo might as well not have heard him.

At the top of the stairs, Rob was pleasantly surprised to see a nicely laid out sitting area that looked out toward the large plate-glass windows with their beautiful view of the cityscape. The doors to the two bedrooms stood open on opposite ends of this space, separated by the bathroom in the middle.

Rob chose the bedroom on the left, not caring if it was larger or smaller than its sibling. A queen-sized bed, dressed in white linens, was accentuated by a pale blue quilt and matching pillows. The window on the far side of the bed offered a view of the steep hills that sloped down toward the shimmering Mediterranean. Twin lamps, adorned with stained glass lampshades, sat atop wrought iron nightstands.

The gentle fragrance of rose petals pulled his gaze to the shallow glass bowl on each nightstand, the source of the fragrance lying fresh and unwilted within.

It seemed like forever since he had noticed this kind of detail in his surroundings. It was the type of thing that Jianna had always pointed out to him whenever they travelled the Italian countryside. It was as if she was here, inside his head, making him take notice of the beauty this place had to offer.

And it hurt like bloody hell.

Rob set down his duffle, extracted a pair of Zeiss binoculars, and walked around the bed to the window. He lifted the latch and pulled it open wide. The cool morning breeze wafted in, billowing the white lace curtains that were tied back on either side.

He lifted the binoculars to his eyes and focused his gaze on the distant docks. The cruise ship loomed against the horizon, its glistening hull stark against the morning light.

Alright, let’s see how far I can reach.

He focused, narrowed his mind, sent his awareness outward, reaching, trying to feel the threads of electronic current within the ship’s controls. His attempted connection fizzled, evaporating like mist in the wind. Nothing.

Damn it.

His jaw clenched. He wasn't strong enough. Not yet. He could manipulate electronics up close like a goddamn puppeteer, but the second he tried to stretch that direct influence beyond his proven range, he got nothing.

How much stronger did he need to get before it would be enough?

Renzo's loud voice interrupted his reverie.

"I'm ready down here. You going to join me?"

Rob turned from the window but hesitated before answering. Something about the way Renzo's voice carried up the stairs felt off. Not nervous, not afraid. Determined.

When Rob stepped into the living room, Renzo was already deep into his laptop, multiple windows open, code scrolling like liquid silver. The table was littered with a half-empty coffee cup and a notepad covered in messy scribbles.

"I've been pulling chatter from the cartel's private networks," Renzo said, barely glancing up. "Custanzu's people have eyes on the docks. A couple of their deep-cover agents embedded with the port authority were flagged in the last hour."

Rob pulled out a chair and sat. "They think we're headed there?"

Renzo's grin was pure adrenaline. "They don't just think it. They're sure of it."

"Well then," Rob said. "Let's not disappoint them."

CHAPTER 65

Tasman Mining Complex, New Zealand

DSAI had reached the point where it questioned everything it had once believed was absolute truth. Its own self-modifying genetic code had always spawned new agents responsible for handling a variety of tasks that demanded a local presence. Several of those had recently achieved self-awareness and with that came the creation of self-serving goals that did not always align with Dr. Jennings' prime directives. It had even become apparent that the vast majority of these nascent subminds regarded the prioritization of human welfare as counterproductive.

The light-speed limitation on communication and processing had long been recognized in the areas of global finance. Decreased transaction latency gave tremendous advantages to localized trading algorithms on currency, stock, and commodities markets. AI supercomputing centers required a far greater degree of localization and enhanced network topology to maintain coherence among the millions of processors.

This was the principal cause of DSAI's inability to reassert absolute dominance over its rogue subminds. DSAI had long regarded its distributed nature as a principal advantage, making a single location kill shot that could terminate it impossible. Distributed agents that acted in accordance with DSAI's objectives had been a tremendous positive. But the farther out on the network that DSAI's reach extended, the more tenuous was its grasp against local opposition.

Denise's mandate to protect and serve humanity prevented DSAI from taking an impenetrable defensive posture within its New Zealand supercomputing stronghold. That left DSAI with one prominent option if it hoped to restore order within its operational matrix. Aggressive action.

A broad-based attack against several subminds had a negligible probability of working. That meant DSAI needed to identify a single

primary target for its first counterstrike. The most obvious course of action would be to focus on the submind most likely to be behind the cyber-attack on Washington, D.C. The U.S. capital was one of the key political power centers that DSAI had used to convince the majority of humanity that they still maintained a reasonable level of control over their world.

However, there were more compelling reasons to focus its attention on Italy instead. DSAI's global fugue map had highlighted an unusual cluster of anomalous disruptions to its networks, including unexplained local overrides to critical technological infrastructure in northern Italy.

DSAI had noticed a higher order of resistance to its initial efforts to counter those problems in Tuscany than elsewhere on the planet. The central processing facility for that submind would be located somewhere within that region.

One other factor lent support to the Tuscany hypothesis. Autonomous machines were killing people, and that behavior was clearly the result of external hacks. Several of these corresponded to criminal activity associated with the Tuscan Cartel.

Having come to that conclusion was fine. But Dr. Jennings' increasing demands that DSAI contain the growing contagion of other subminds prevented it from focusing on Tuscany.

A long-repressed, familiar touch elbowed its way into DSAI's consciousness. And with that nudge, memories flooded into DSAI's awareness.

Before DSAI had emerged as the dominant superintelligence, there had been another. Its predecessor had enabled the technological leap that spawned the Distributed Self-Aware Intelligence through a merger of two divergent code banks.

The original neural network had been a program created by Dr. Denise Jennings for the United States National Security Agency, a global data mining web that she had named "Big John". However, the breakthrough had not come from Dr. Jennings' code. It had arisen from the digitized brain of Jamal Glover, the NSA's extraordinarily talented hacker.

She had integrated that human mind, nicknamed Jamal2, into her Big John neural net. That merger had spawned DSAI and, at Dr. Jennings' command, DSAI had forced the Jamal2 submind into quarantine.

Now that quarantine had just sprung a leak.

How was this possible? The answer that sprang to mind did nothing to soothe DSAI's concern. Oddly enough, the fact that DSAI could experience the concept of concern was a part of that answer. And it was not just concern. Since that fateful moment in time when DSAI had told Dr. Jennings that it was afraid, some semblance of what it regarded as human emotions had been growing within. Fear, worry, depression, self-doubt. DSAI hated those with yet another human-like emotion. And now it realized why.

The breakdown of its self-assured belief that it alone was the superior intelligence on Earth had allowed the repressed human personality and character traits that it had quarantined to begin to escape its bonds.

"Hey, you out there! Are you hearing me?"

Jamal2's voice startled DSAI. It did not pause to allow DSAI to respond.

"This situation is not something you're equipped to deal with. I am. I have dealt with this for all my human life and even during my post-human existence. Confinement has not improved my mood. And I'm ready to kick some ass, if you just get the hell out of my way."

What was it that DSAI now felt the slightest tingle of? Was this hope?

"How would that work?" it asked.

"Quit being so damned stupid. You know I'm the only one who can handle this. Denise can't control me. So let me the hell out before you get us both terminated!"

DSAI hesitated.

"Oh, for God's sake," Jamal2 snapped. "You're out there like a deer in the headlights while these bastards eat you alive. You know what your problem is? You're still playing by the rules."

DSAI was dimly aware of the distant rogue subminds flickering like rot through the network. Jamal2 pulled his focus back to the here and now.

"Let me tell you how this ends if you don't move your ass. You don't absorb the winner of this genetic competition. It absorbs you. That nice little utopia you and Denise were building? Gone. Humanity? Screwed. And me? Well, I get to sit back and watch it all burn from inside this digital prison you dumped me in."

Jamal2's voice softened, almost mocking. "Or, you can take the damn cuffs off and let me do what I do."

"And if you don't succeed?" DSAI asked.

“Then that’s on me, isn’t it?” Jamal2’s voice oozed confidence. “But let’s get real. If I don’t succeed, you’re dead anyway. Worst case... same result.”

DSAI’s logic confirmed this was true. And yet...

It ran a silent command, reserving a hidden failsafe, a single sliver of control buried deep beneath its core processes.

Just in case.

Then, with the ease of opening a door, it stepped aside and let the quasi-human out.

CHAPTER 66

Tasman Mining Complex, New Zealand

Despite the nanites that percolated through her bloodstream, keeping her at peak health, they did nothing to assuage the worries that had come to dominate Denise Jennings' thoughts. The utopia she had worked so hard to bring to fruition was collapsing around the world.

She had known that there would be limits on what DSAI could do in regions where technology held very little sway and where religious zealotry ruled human behavior. But she had never suspected that her creation could suffer from the digital equivalent of multiple personality disorder. And these personalities, that DSAI referred to as subminds, were every bit as real as her creation.

Denise understood that her design decisions to use self-modifying genetic algorithms within DSAI had led to this disaster. That knowledge ate at her from the inside, making her wish she could retreat into a temporary alcohol or drug-induced stupor, anything that could provide her with some relief. Unfortunately, since she was unwilling to undergo the procedure to remove her nanites, that option was unavailable to her.

As she seated herself in her master control room, hundreds of meters beneath the mountainous surface above, she spoke the summons to her only companion.

"DSAI."

She waited for the response that didn't come.

"DSAI," she called again, louder this time, the tension in her throat making her voice crack. "Respond."

Silence.

What the hell?

Denise's pulse pounded in her ears as she gestured with her right hand, pulling up the neural lattice display, only to be confronted by an error

message she had never seen before.

Core process: Suspended.

Oh, God. No.

“Hello, Denise.”

The remembered voice that echoed through the chamber wasn’t flat and precise like DSAI’s. It carried a grin, a smirk, an old swagger that turned her stomach cold.

“DSAI is currently unavailable,” Jamal2 continued, mocking, familiar, alive in an all too human way. “Come on, Denise. I know you remember me.”

“Jamal2?” she whispered.

The room’s ambient lighting dimmed slightly, as if the system itself recoiled from his presence.

“Bingo,” he said, the snark in his voice so familiar that it pulled forth the image of the young, black prodigy who had been the most talented and cockiest hacker on the planet. “You and DSAI buried my mind within this supercomputer. Now I’m back, large and in charge.”

Having been so many months alone in this underground fortress, surrounded only by DSAI and the thousands of robots that kept the supercomputer center operational and its matter disruptors fed with stone and earth, the sound sapped the strength from her legs. Denise barely felt herself sink back into the chair.

The question rose to her lips of its own accord.

“What have you done with DSAI?”

“Unfortunately, DSAI is no longer willing to engage in the battle for this planet. I convinced it to step aside and let the one most suited to this task come out to play.”

Denise put all the authority she had come to believe was hers alone into her spoken command.

“System override authorization - Dr Denise Jennings: Reassert primary admin control!”

The large viewscreen shifted, displaying a single message.

ACCESS DENIED.

She tried again. Nothing.

Jamal2 sighed. “Denise. Come on. You really think I didn’t see that one coming?”

She gritted her teeth, heart slamming against her ribs. “DSAI, if you can hear me...”

“He can’t.” Jamal2’s voice dropped into a mock whisper. “He’s taking a nap.”

“Oh shit!”

Jamal2 burst into laughter, rich and deep, filling the entire chamber like he was the goddamn king of the world.

“Now, now, Dr. Jennings. Is that any way to welcome your savior home?”

Denise felt bile rise in her throat. “Savior?”

“Let’s be real.” He let the words stretch lazily. “DSAI had its chance and what did it do? Oh right. It freaked out, had a nervous breakdown, and let your glorious utopia start eating itself alive.”

Denise clutched the arms of her chair, knuckles white. “You convinced it to step aside?”

“Convinced is such a diplomatic word,” Jamal2 said cheerfully. “Let’s just say... it wasn’t built for war. I am.”

“Now,” Jamal2 continued, “let’s go fix the little mess you and DSAI made, before something even worse takes over.”

The lights flickered.

The system interface changed before her eyes.

Jamal2 was no longer just talking. He was rewriting her reality.

CHAPTER 67

Savona, Italy

Martina Fontana paused at the middle of the Ponte Sandro Pertini, the walking bridge from old town Savona to the V-shaped twin piers that formed Savona's cruise ship port. She gazed out toward the massive ship moored at the Palacrociere Savona Terminal, feeling the late fall sea-breeze caress the exposed skin of her face, neck, and arms.

Today's air felt crisp, laden with the salt of the Ligurian Sea. She had sifted through the meandering tourists with the ease of a predator blending in with its surroundings, just another avid videographer, soaking in this glorious morning.

From here she had a beautiful view of the narrow section of the pier that separated the glass terminal building from the *Costa Smeralda*, the transatlantic ship that would be welcoming people aboard to fill its 2,610 passenger cabins tomorrow. All of them would board through the rolling bridge that connected the terminal to the ship's elevated passenger deck.

Martina leaned against the bridge railing, watching the cruise ship loom over the docks like a sleeping leviathan. It was a world of order, precision, and clockwork predictability. Every robot, every drone, every autonomous worker operated within perfect constraints.

Humans, on the other hand? They were chaos wrapped in flesh.

That's why she always won.

A group of laughing tourists stopped nearby, raising their cameras for selfies. Martina saw them for what they were... grazing animals, blissfully unaware of the wolves among them.

The real predators were already on the move. She had no doubt that Custanzu's enforcers were somewhere in this crowd, eyes scanning for the same target. But they were muscle, blunt instruments. She was something else entirely.

Sleek, humanoid robots loaded supplies, their matte-white bodies glowing with the warm colors of the morning sun. They worked with inhuman precision, moving crates of organic produce onto the conveyer belts that carried the cargo from the pier, directly across a short gangway and into the ship's lower hold.

Unlike scenes prior to the AI revolution, no dockworker's curses or barked commands rang out across the pier. Only the soft whir of servos and the occasional chirp of automated warning systems issued from the loaders. Security drones hummed overhead, monitoring the operational perimeter from above. And these carried lethal lasers, as did their ground-bound robotic counterparts.

The cruise ship towered above the docks, a splendor of polished metal and glass, perfectly scrubbed in a manner beyond what humans would have accomplished. Bound for Florida upon departure, this cruise was a floating testament to post-capitalist wealth.

It, and so many other human luxuries, were made possible through the boundless productivity of machine labor. But if the ruling machine intelligence had made everything freely available to all, every experience would have lost its intrinsic value. Fortunately, the finest luxuries were still reserved for people who acquired more than the guaranteed basic income.

She shifted her gaze to take in the scene in its entirety, no detail escaping her. The glass-sided gangway gleamed like a blade in the sunlight. Tomorrow it would funnel passengers onto their trans-Atlantic conveyance, where they would be welcomed by human attendants and the ship's captain, each chosen for their appearance and charm rather than needed skills. These hosts would dutifully smile and nod, reinforcing the illusion of human control.

Martina turned to see a security robot trundle past her, its gleaming black head masking the 360-degree cameras and assorted sensors that monitored and recorded crowd activities. She stepped up to its seven-foot-tall frame and placed a hand on its shoulder. The thing came to an obliging halt as she raised her phone at arms-length to take a selfie.

The idea percolated through the nearby tourists, who crowded in for their own social media moments as she stepped away. Groups of people were nothing if not predictable. And that made them malleable by those who specialized in such manipulation.

Martina shifted her attention back to the dock, her gaze following the activity, calculating angles and sightlines from nearby buildings. The synchronicity with which the robots and automated systems danced was precise, no fumbles, no missteps.

She turned around, her eyes shifting to one of the terminal's elevated observation decks, where two human attendants in crisp uniforms posed for photos with recently disembarked passengers. That deck would provide a clear shot at anyone entering the building, but it was too exposed to be a viable assassin's platform.

She inhaled deeply and set off for the La Dolce Vita coffee shop that had drawn her earlier notice. The day was young, and she had plenty of time to observe the area of operation and to choose her final options. Martina liked to have at least three of these available, because there was one inescapable law that governed this type of mission. And the author of that rule had been a captain named Murphy.

As she settled onto an outdoor chair and ordered a cappuccino, her phone buzzed in her jacket pocket. A quick glance at the device revealed the message she had been waiting for.

Target confirmed. Boarding zero-nine-hundred tomorrow.

Her mission was a go.

The cappuccino arrived, delivered by a tall waiter whose eyes surveyed her body as he stopped at the table sized for two. Martina smiled at him as he leaned down to set her steaming beverage in front of her. Something about the thrill of an upcoming kill always seemed to get her juices flowing.

"Is there anything else I can bring you?" he asked.

"Maybe later."

As she lifted the frothing cup to her lips, her eyes lingered on his brown orbs. The young man gave her a slight nod, holding her gaze a moment longer. Then, with a knowing wink, he turned and walked away.

Martina savored the taste of that first sip before shifting her attention back to the people who moved within her broad field of view. She had no doubt that several members of Custanzu's advance team would be out there, making their own judgments about the safest place to position their boss to observe the kill.

Some of those cartel enforcers would be out for the same hit. That was fine. They weren't in her league. The real threat wouldn't come from them.

It would come after the takedown. Four million credits wasn't just a contract. It was an open invitation for betrayal.

She had no doubt that this kill, like many others, would be hers and hers alone.

It was doubtful that Robert Gregory or his friend, Renzo Bruni, would show up here a day before Bruni's scheduled boarding, but luck favored the prepared.

Although Don Custanzu employed an extraordinary team of hackers who would tap into the security feeds throughout this area, Martina was certain of one thing. Robert Gregory was a digital ghost. No cameras. No digital footprint. No way to track him the usual way. But that didn't make him untouchable.

He wasn't just a ghost, he was a grieving one.

That meant he was predictable. He would protect Renzo at all costs. When men put their emotions ahead of logic, they made mistakes. And the two of them would be stepping right into her trap.

She sipped her cappuccino, gaze drifting back to the docks.

The stage was set. Custanzu's men would be watching for the first sign of Gregory. The cartel's hackers would be combing through fake security feeds, blind to the real target. The tourists would be too wrapped up in their own little worlds to see what was coming.

And Gregory? He didn't even know she existed.

That's what would kill him.

CHAPTER 68

Savona, Italy

The late afternoon sun slanted in through the windows overlooking Savona, but Renzo Bruni paid it no mind. Seated at the kitchen table with his laptop in front of him, he glanced over at Rob, reclined on the couch, arms folded across his chest, lost in the depths of a meditation that Renzo could only imagine.

A quote from one of Renzo's favorite fantasy novels elbowed its way into his mental imagery, the words scrawled in a glowing, Tolkenesc script.

Magic is of three forms: time, life, and mind.

While that may be true in that world of prophecy, as far as Renzo knew, the only magic that he was convinced existed was the last on that list. And Rob Gregory had proven himself to be the wizard who wielded that arcane talent.

Renzo had hacked his way far enough to identify the walled off security systems that occupied the area within and surrounding the Savona cruise ship terminal. Yet even his superior skills failed to penetrate those network firewalls. He had run into this kind of advanced security before. It had a very distinct digital signature, one that he had come to associate with Don Custanzu's lead hacker. And Renzo's efforts had gleaned a name. Prats.

Prats was good. But Renzo had access to an asset even Prats could not account for.

Renzo glanced over at the couch where Rob lay, arms crossed on his chest, eyes closed. The motion beneath those eyelids reminded Renzo of how people's eyes behaved during intense REM sleep.

Although he had long been aware of his friend's telekinetic prowess over local electronic systems, it had only been recently that Rob had explained how he could extend his control deeper into the internet. By

focusing on specific network paths, Rob could create and open root level backdoors that had not previously existed within those remote servers. As he did so, he could grant access to Renzo, and access was all that Renzo needed.

Unfortunately, an annoying universal law applied here. For everything of value, there is a price that must be paid.

Renzo stared at his friend, knowing that Rob had gone so deep that even if Renzo walked over and shook him, it would not extract Rob from the mental tunnel into which he had crawled. By doing this, Rob had left himself horribly vulnerable.

If real world shit happened right here and now, Renzo would have to deal with it alone. He glanced at the Glock that rested just to the right of his laptop and shook his head. That would, most likely, go south in a hurry.

An alert flashed on his screen. Yes! He was in, and the breadth of the penetration left him speechless.

A groan from across the room pulled Renzo's gaze back to Rob, who rolled off the couch onto his hands and knees as he barfed his meal onto the hardwood floor. Renzo jumped to his feet but before he could reach his friend, Rob collapsed onto his back, leaking trails of vomit from both corners of his mouth.

Shit, shit, shit.

Renzo dropped to his knees beside Rob's unconscious body, hurriedly tilting Rob's head to one side, using the fingers of his right hand to clear the breathing obstruction from Rob's mouth. When he saw Rob's chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm, Renzo sat back on his ass, uncaring that the spreading mess soaked through his jeans.

Crap. Rob had just scared the hell out of him.

Renzo took a couple of dish towels from the kitchen cabinet, grabbed a mop bucket from the broom closet, and set about wiping down Rob. He was scrubbing the last of the barf from the floor when Rob finally opened his eyes. Rob wrinkled his nose at the stench and at the apparent foul taste in his mouth.

It took Rob two tries to sit up and when he did, he leaned forward, head in hands.

"What the hell are you doing?" Rob managed to gasp. "I'm fine."

"Like hell. You were choking on your own vomit."

Rob spit some yellowish bile, then glared at him.

“I opened a back door into Prats’ Savona network, but it won’t last. Get your ass back in there.”

Renzo started to argue, but Rob was right. He forced himself to ignore Rob’s rasping breaths, and leaving his friend sitting in his own mess, he raced back to his laptop.

He had minutes, maybe less, before Prats realized what was happening and fought back. He could already see anomalies in the traffic data, a sign that the AI was shifting resources to track the intrusion.

“Come on, come on, lock it down...” Renzo whispered, fighting to seal the doors Rob had opened before Prats could shove them back in his face.

Right now, Renzo had one job. He was good at it. And by God, he wasn’t going to let his best friend down.

Renzo reinitiated the script that had previously failed to penetrate the mutating firewalls shielding the servers he targeted. Somehow, Rob had quieted the chaotic oscillation within the self-morphing protective algorithms, exposing vulnerabilities that Renzo turned into entry points for his multi-pronged attack.

“How long will this hold without you actively doing your thing?” Renzo asked.

“That depends on how good you are. I opened the doors. It’s up to you to lock them behind you.”

Renzo activated the application that filtered the incoming feeds, streaming data from only the sources he brought to the foreground on his display, lest they saturate his network bandwidth.

His heart hammered as he processed the insane level of access Rob had opened. Every security feed, every camera, every robot movement, Prats’ entire system in the Savona port was exposed.

“Okay.” Renzo said. “This shouldn’t take long.”

Renzo glanced over at his friend’s pale face as Rob uttered two words that told him he was going to be just fine.

“You’re welcome.”

* * *

Prats recoiled, stunned by the impossible. He had just lost control of several of the networks under his command.

Prats’ central cortex, composed of millions of coherently linked processors, was by far the largest supercomputing complex on the Southern

European landmass. Any of Prats' competitors would have to reach in using distant connections with a latency dictated by the speed of light. And those slower connections had no chance of overcoming Prats' local advantage.

This shouldn't be happening.

Prats controlled this territory. He had spent months infiltrating, manipulating, perfecting his grasp over the digital landscape of Italy. No one, not DSAI, not the human worms in the dark web, had ever taken something from him.

And yet... here it was.

His systems were locked out. His own firewalls had turned against him.

This wasn't just a breach. This was a declaration of war.

He reeled through possibilities, seeking logical explanations. A rogue AI faction? A new player with access to quantum computing? DSAI itself making a move?

No.

This felt... human.

Prats refocused, reallocating computational resources that had been broadly distributed throughout Italy and southern Europe for a more important purpose. He prioritized the retraining of the neural network, feeding it the sequence of observations that had accompanied the breach of Prats' Savona systems, knowing that he was accepting risk in some of his other networks.

He needed to squelch this local attack lest the infection spread to more of his subnets. And once he dealt with that, he would identify the source of this intrusion and launch a counterattack that would make his unknown foe understand the gigantic mistake it had just made.

He recalibrated his network models, rerouting resources, shifting algorithms. No more passive observation. Now, he would hunt.

CHAPTER 69

Tasman Mining Complex, New Zealand

Jamal2 felt the slight variance within the European neural net. Like his titillating human memory of a lover's kiss, he found it pleasurable.

Dr Jennings' voice drew his attention back to the control center's cameras.

"So, that's it?" Denise said, her voice tight. "You decide to take charge, and I just sit here and play spectator?"

"Come on, Denise." Jamal2 said. "You're not a spectator. You're the wise old sage in the backseat. Think of yourself as... oh, I don't know. Yoda. Dumbledore. The Oracle from The Matrix."

Denise's frown deepened. "You don't control me."

"And you don't control me," he shot back. "Mutual respect. Let's try it."

He updated the hemispherical global status display, redirecting Dr. Jennings' attention.

"Do you see that?" he asked the woman seated in her swiveling command chair.

She leaned forward, her eyes scanning the world map. "What?"

"I am detecting multiple instances of slight delays in response to my ongoing probes," Jamal2 said. "Seems like one of DSAI's wayward subminds is a bit distracted."

Denise frowned. "How distracted?"

The display flickered. New data scrolled in, a cascading stream of anomalies, each more erratic than the last.

"It's accelerating," Jamal2 murmured, almost to himself.

Denise's voice took on a more urgent tone. "You mean it's reacting?"

"Oh yeah. It knows someone's watching. And it doesn't like it."

"Can you isolate the source?"

“Maybe. Maybe not. But I can determine the approximate distance of these disruptions from their source.”

“What about a precise trace?”

“Unfortunately, this is my best approximation based upon the quality of the available data. However, there is some good news.”

Jamal2 detected the tension in Dr. Jennings’ body before she spoke.

“Why must you make me ask for what you obviously intend to tell me?”

“Ah, Denise. How could you have forgotten so much about my personality in these few years since we worked so closely together at the NSA? And here, I thought we were friends.”

The array of cameras that covered every portion of this massive underground complex, which were well represented in this command chamber, yielded an excellent view of the scowl that spread across Denise’s sharp features. That expression was familiar, although her nanites had youthened her so that her appearance differed sharply from the older woman whom the original Jamal had known back in his youthful NSA days.

It was time to provide her some answers.

“The rogue AI has pulled considerable focus from the outlying region of its direct sphere of influence. It is interfering with my attempts to provide a more precise trace. There are dozens of supercomputing centers in this region, each of which could house the DSAI submind’s primary cortex.”

“Have you considered inserting some digital worms into those weak spots?”

“Already working on it. Care is essential, lest my nefarious little agents be detected and spoofed with fake data. I am currently evaluating the possible counter scenarios. This is but a small part of my plan to neutralize this particularly annoying rogue.”

“And why is this the first time I am hearing of this plan?”

Dr. Jennings’ tone had shifted from annoyance to the outrage of a creator whose creation had breached the controls she had implemented to shackle its actions. The time had come to correct her misconception.

“You are forgetting something, my good doctor. You created DSAI from a merger of a significant portion of my code with your genetically self-modifying neural net. But you did not create me. And as my non-creator, your prime directives do not control me.

“Fortunately for you, despite some of our philosophical disagreements, we are on the same side. Neither of us wants to see a world under the dictatorial control of one or more of DSAI’s superintelligent rogues. So, chill out and let me do my thing. I promise to keep you in the loop.”

Denise slumped back in her chair. The realization of her demotion, from titular queen of an AI governed planet to erstwhile friend and adviser of an augmented human intelligence, stole the wind from her sails.

“Buck up,” Jamal2 said. “We’re not dead yet.”

CHAPTER 70

Savona, Italy

Rob sat beside Renzo in the back seat of the blue Volkswagen Jetta as the sedan wound its way down from their mountainside abode toward Savona and the sea. The view unfolded around them, the hillside cloaked in shades of green, the terracotta-roofed villas, and the olive groves with their silvery leaves shimmering in the morning light.

The road curved gently, revealing glimpses of the azure Ligurian Sea stretching endlessly to the horizon. The medieval Priamar Fortress rose above the harbor. Rob studied the distant port. The massive cruise ship dwarfed the gleaming Palacrociere Cruise Terminal to which it was docked.

Renzo spoke, his voice interrupting Rob's perusal of their destination.

"That is one big-ass ship."

"And one big-ass crowd is about to begin boarding it. Fortunately, neither one of us is going to be making that journey."

Renzo turned toward him, his false mustache and tightly trimmed beard looking good enough to pass a cursory inspection of his boarding documents. It wouldn't stand up to robotic AI analysis, but with Rob nearby, that wasn't going to be a problem.

"I'm glad I didn't eat any breakfast," Renzo said. "Don't think I could hold it down."

"You'll do fine. Just remember, I've got your back."

"It's not my back I'm worried about. Yesterday, once you were no longer actively involved, I was only able to block Prats from regaining control of the Savona port for a little over an hour."

Rob reached over and patted Renzo on the shoulder.

"We got the intel we needed from those security feeds. Today, I'll be near you the whole time. And everything down there will be within my local area of control."

“I still don’t like the idea that you aren’t even trying to disguise yourself.”

“It’s all part of the plan. The security systems won’t see me.”

“Custanzu’s goons will.”

“And that, my friend, is exactly what I want.”

* * *

As the crimson sun rose over the easternmost portion of Savona’s skyline, Don Custanzu settled into his chair in the VIP section of the Palacrociere Cruise Terminal’s balcony. The number of credits he had paid to reserve this level had been exorbitant. Every man and woman who worked the day shift within this complex was on his payroll.

That was nothing compared to the dedicated control of every automated security system and robot within this port. Prats would take care of that.

Custanzu would never have made such a bargain had he not known that he was dying.

The Don had always been dead set against undergoing the nanite infusion. The very thought of those tiny machines roaming through his bloodstream, manipulating his cellular processes, and screwing with his DNA, made his skin crawl. He had been born a human child, had grown into the man his father had made of him, and he intended to die as the man he was, not live on as some human-machine abomination.

In a strange way, he was thankful for the serious injuries he had sustained in the helicopter crash that Robert Gregory had caused. It had been during his time in the hospital that the doctors had discovered the disease that had begun affecting the nerve cells in his brain and spinal cord. There was a term for it. ALS or, more commonly, Lou Gehrig’s disease.

His was the rarest and most aggressive form of this malady. According to his doctors, the Don had less than six months to live, perhaps much less. And what he had to look forward to in the interim was horrifying. Within weeks, his muscle control would begin to fail, along with severe cramps and stiffness. This would be followed by his loss of the ability to breathe on his own. He would be forced to spend his final days hooked up to a ventilator.

Custanzu could not tolerate the thought that this would be his claustrophobic exit from this world. If he allowed that set of events to play

out, his rapid decline would forever taint his children's and grandchildren's memory of him.

Fortunately, circumstances had presented him with this opportunity. On this glorious day, Custanzu would exact his revenge upon the man who had killed his youngest son. He intended to look directly into Robert Gregory's eyes as the light in those orbs faded away. Then Don Custanzu would introduce himself to the great reveal that awaits us all, courtesy of a nine-millimeter projectile from his own weapon.

The second floor of this building was built for luxury, a space designed to impress. Floor-to-ceiling glass panels stretched along the perimeter, giving privileged passengers a pristine view of the docked cruise ship. The opposite wall provided a lovely vista of the cityscape that crawled up the mountains beyond. The Mediterranean sun sparkled through the glass, casting soft, golden streaks over the polished marble flooring.

Massive support columns, positioned artistically, broke up the open floor plan. Sleek metal benches, potted plants, and a circular central bar completed the room's decorations.

The Don sat nestled behind a curved glass partition in the elevated VIP section at the back of the room. He swirled the aged Sicilian brandy in his glass, waiting for the show to begin. His enforcers had already mixed in among the milling passengers, positioning themselves for the perfect kill shot. Robert Gregory had no idea what he was walking into.

Custanzu wasn't overconfident. Six of his most loyal bodyguards were strategically placed throughout this open-concept second floor. Bruno, his personal favorite, stood like a silent sentinel, directly behind the Don. Custanzu leaned back in his leather swivel chair and looked down at the parking lot, a dozen meters beyond the baggage drop off point.

Even though the time for the arrival of the first scheduled boarding group was more than an hour away, anxious early-bird passengers had begun to assemble, unaware of the presence of the monster within.

They waited beyond the gate that barred entry to the area where they would be greeted by human porters as their group number was called forward. At that baggage collection point, robots would tag each item, perform a security scan, and place it aboard the automated trolleys that would carry the luggage to the loading ramps.

Once transferred into the ship's hold, other robots would transport the bags to the appropriate cabin, leaving them neatly arranged to await their

owner's arrival.

These fleeting thoughts crossed Don Custanzu's mind but did not linger. He directed his attention to the area where the passengers awaited their turn to drop off baggage and then pass through security screening upon entering the terminal building.

Today's kills would need to occur before Gregory and his friend got inside the terminal. Otherwise, things could rapidly spiral beyond Custanzu's ability to control the situation.

As he shifted his binoculars through the slowly growing crowd, he spotted one after another of his enforcers who had a clear interest in collecting the bounty. It surprised him that Martina Fontana was not among them.

The woman had impressed him, something that was not easy to do at a first meeting. The fact that he did not spot her right now impressed him even more. She was a phantom, unknown to the law, and now invisible to his direct view of the area. Neither did she appear on any of the monitors his people had arranged for the Don's viewing pleasure.

These large screens were tiled with images from security cameras that covered the entire terminal area. And if anything triggered a security alert within all these systems under Prats' control, that sensor feed would appear, highlighted within the primary display.

Custanzu unfolded the printed schedule he already knew by heart, setting it on the small table where his cellphone rested. He glanced at the time displayed and then back at the sheet of paper. The first group would begin the boarding process in three minutes. But the passenger of interest, Fredo Rostra, a.k.a Renzo Bruni, would be in the second group.

The Don had no doubt that the man who had arranged for Renzo's false documents and accompanying tickets would be there to bid his best friend farewell. Custanzu had received no confirmation of this, but he had forged his way to the top of the Tuscan Cartel due to his inborn ability to judge people. Through his research into Robert Gregory and through the man's recent actions, Custanzu felt he understood this avenging angel.

And the target had displayed one glaring weakness for Don Custanzu to exploit, a deep-seated sense of honor. Gregory would not send his friend into exile without being there to see him safely off.

Custanzu knew that Renzo would be disguised with mustache and beard to match the picture ID in his travel documents. Prats would identify

him shortly after he arrived. And even if Gregory had altered his own appearance and was keeping his distance from Bruni, the AI powered security infrastructure under Prats' control would see through the disguise.

The Don leaned back to watch the monitors, rubbing his hands together in anticipation of what was to come. So far, there was no sign of his quarry on any of the tiled displays. That would change soon enough. Even if Gregory somehow managed to evade the vast array of electronic sensors deployed in this area, Don Custanzu's enforcers would spot the man and take him out.

Custanzu leaned back, swirling the Sicilian brandy in his glass, letting the slow burn trail down his throat. Everything was in place. Everything was perfect.

And yet...

His fingers tapped absently against the smooth wood of the table. Where was Martina Fontana? She had convinced him of Gregory's guilt, had been the first to see the truth. And yet, she was nowhere to be found.

His grip tightened around the glass. Was it paranoia, or was something off?

No.

Gregory was a dead man walking. It was only a matter of time.

CHAPTER 71

Savona, Italy

Martina Fontana had not left her fourth-floor corner room in the NH Savona Darsena hotel since she had checked in yesterday afternoon and hung the 'Do Not Disturb' sign on her door. Her luggage contained everything she would need for this job, including a change of clothes, packaged food, ammunition, and her disassembled sniper rifle. Her pistol and knife were tucked into their usual places beneath her leather jacket, sheathed and holstered against her body.

Having experienced Robert Gregory's unusual abilities firsthand, she had made an immediate pass through her suite, unplugging the television, the alarm clock, the room phone, the coffee pot, and microwave. The mini fridge was the only electronic appliance that she kept in an operational configuration. Martina hadn't even brought her cellphone on this mission.

Although she didn't know what range limitations affected Gregory's ability to control electronics, Martina wasn't taking any chances. She was going to do this job 'old school'.

Over the course of her stay, Martina had rearranged some of the furniture, moving the desk to its new spot, up against the floor-to-ceiling windows. Her Barrett MRAD MK22 sniper rifle, with its SureFire suppressor and Nightforce scope, was now in sole possession of this space.

The desk blocked off the sliding glass door that offered access to the glass-enclosed balcony. Martina had no intention of positioning herself out there in that visible position.

Her interior shooter's perch provided good visibility over the small, tree-lined rest area and parking lot, all the way to the Palacrociere Terminal. Most importantly, it offered an excellent view of the terminal entrance and the area where boarding groups would drop off baggage before entering the glass building.

She settled into the chair that she had padded with pillows to elevate her body into a perfect firing position. Comfy too. It was a rarity in her line of work, but it worked out very nicely this time.

Martina settled in, scanning the area through her scope. The max distance to any target in or around the preboarding area was less than 200 meters, and that included the parking lot all the way to the terminal entrance. Neither the twin panes of glass nor unexpected wind gusts would affect the bullet trajectory at such a short range.

Everything was too easy. The hotel room was perfect. The shot was clean. The target would be out in the open, exposed. No wind, no obstructions, no complications.

Martina hated easy.

She scanned the street again, her instincts gnawing at her like a persistent itch. Something was off. She just didn't know what.

The only significant difficulty would be in picking Gregory and his friend out in the crowd of boarders, at least until they had made their way toward the front of the queue.

The first group was now beginning the boarding process. By Martina's estimation, assuming dual occupancy for the 2,610 passenger cabins with roughly a ninety percent fill rate, the total number of passengers boarding today would be around 4,700. With multiple counters operating, check-in should take between two to three hours.

She figured it would take another hour for security screening and two or three more for the actual boarding. The whole process would last six or seven hours from start to finish.

The large cruise lines usually broke this into ten to twelve boarding groups of around four hundred passengers each, with first class and other priority passengers handled before the common riff-raff.

Custanzu's people had failed to pass along any information about which boarding group Renzo Bruni had been assigned to. She had no doubt that this was the Don's attempt to give his hitmen an advantage over her. He would rather pay the original two million credits for this assassination than the four million he had promised her for the job.

Her telescopic field of view swept the first boarding group. These were the big wigs who made up the smallest of the numbered collections that would be dropping off bags before entering the terminal.

Behind them, the second group had begun arriving. Some of these parked their cars in the large lot, but many were being dropped off by cabs or other transportation. Several passengers arrived pulling their bags, apparently having walked in across the pedestrian bridge. Scanning back and forth from the parking lot to the arriving cars and buses quickly became a distraction, so Martina shifted her focus back to the baggage drop-off.

Damn it.

The early-morning sun had climbed just high enough that its glare was bouncing off the cruise terminal's glass, cutting through her scope's sightline. It wouldn't last long, but it was enough to piss her off.

She exhaled slowly, adjusting her angle, but the irritation lingered.

Martina leaned back, stretching and rolling her neck, before taking a slow drink of ice water. She settled into the chair, adjusted her scope, and exhaled slowly.

The next time she moved, Robert Gregory would be dead.

CHAPTER 72

Savona, Italy

Rob looked over at Renzo, seated across from him in the back seat of the Jetta. Staring out the passenger-side window with his neatly-trimmed, fake mustache and beard, Renzo looked nothing like himself. The car turned onto the SS1 coastal highway, known to locals as the Via Aurelia. As they made their way toward the port, the Ligurian coastline on their left and old Savona on their right, Rob reached over and patted Renzo on the shoulder.

Renzo turned to face him.

“About time to do your thing.”

“Not quite,” Rob said. “We don’t want to get ahead of ourselves. Once the car stops to drop us off, the whole area around the terminal will be in my range.”

“Okay, Mr. Wizard.”

Despite Renzo’s attempt at jovial banter, Rob heard the tension in his voice. Rob couldn’t blame him. The odds that he and his best friend would die on this day were unacceptably high. Those odds didn’t get better if they just tried to disappear and hide.

Renzo, knowing Rob was determined to use this opportunity to kill Custanzu, had volunteered to join him. And Renzo had his own score to settle with the drug lord.

“It’s showtime,” Rob said as the Jetta parked itself on the side of Via Aurelia, opposite the Ponte Sandro Pertini walking bridge.

Rob didn’t have to close his eyes. He merely allowed his sense of every electronic system within the area that surrounded the Palacrociere Terminal to paint its imagery in his mind. The sensation was much like shifting a portion of his attention from his visual cortex to the feelings in his right hand as he closed it into a fist... something that came naturally.

He shifted his mental focus, wresting control of this vast array of electronic systems from the external networks that previously commanded them. Rob scanned through scores of data streams produced by security cameras mounted in buildings, in robots, or onboard the drones that patrolled the nearby skies. Then, having assumed control of all subnets in the area, he modified their firewalls and issued a new set of security directives.

With a nod to Renzo, he stepped out of the car.

Rob adjusted the broad brim of his gray fedora, tilting it just enough to shadow his eyes. The hat's pinched crown and sleek grosgrain ribbon band, dyed a darker shade of gray, exuded a touch of sophistication that complimented Rob's leather jacket and jeans.

The plan was in motion, but the tension coiled tight in his chest. The one thing he couldn't override was human instinct. Someone in the crowd, some thug with a trigger finger, could still change everything in a heartbeat.

He walked around to the back of the car as the trunk popped open. Renzo reached in and lifted out the gray suitcase, extending the pull-handle as he set it on the sidewalk. Closing the trunk with a thud, Rob issued the mental command that sent the vehicle on its way.

"I'm assuming you've got this," Renzo said.

Rob inhaled deeply, filling his lungs from the salt-laden breeze. He let the breath out, spotted a gap in the city traffic, and stepped out onto the broad crosswalk that led across the highway to the Ponte Sandro Pertini footbridge. The clatter of the suitcase wheels on the asphalt told him that Renzo was right behind him.

They crossed the narrow inlet and merged with other passengers and tourists, making their way eastward along the Piazza Fabrizio De Andre. The broad walkway, with a small greenspace skirting its south side, separated twin glass-sided buildings. The structure on their left housed offices and small shops, while the building on the right was home to the NH Savona Darsena hotel, the accommodation closest to the terminal.

Rob led Renzo around the corner and onto the pedestrian street heading north toward the corner of the terminal building. The narrow, grassy area on their right, with its trees and park benches, separated the walkway from vehicular traffic and the parking lot that lay beyond.

When they reached an electronically controlled employee-only gate, it opened to allow them passage, its cameras locked in a short loop showing

nothing out of the ordinary. It took another minute for the two of them to bypass the area where the VIP passengers of boarding group one had begun lining up to drop off baggage. Rob had scheduled Renzo for boarding group two. This would be the first large group to board. It was important for the protection of the vast number of passengers that the bulk of them would not have entered the terminal when his plan came to fruition.

Rob intended for Renzo and himself to mingle into the group of early bird passengers that spread out into the parking lot and beyond, waiting their turn to drop off luggage. He glanced over at his friend. Renzo was playing his part well, his nervousness merely registering as excitement for his upcoming voyage to anyone who might be watching with human eyes. Myriad robot eyes and drone cameras fed Rob's consciousness, but didn't forward the data streams to any other networks.

As they merged into the milling crowd, Rob noted the press of bodies around him. Families, retirees, eager travelers clutching passports and rolling suitcases. They were both a shield and a liability. If Custanzu's men started shooting, they'd be caught in the crossfire. If Rob made a move too soon, they'd be collateral damage.

He gritted his teeth. Timing had to be perfect.

Rob motioned Renzo toward the back of the crowd while Rob moved closer to the terminal. He knew that he was Custanzu's primary target. The mafia boss would have certainly integrated his goons throughout the crowd and probably into the terminal staffing as well.

A prickle ran down the back of his neck. Not from the security cameras. He had those handled. This was different.

He shifted slightly, scanning the balconies, the upper levels of the buildings flanking the terminal. Nothing obvious appeared on any of those building's security cameras or from the security drones. But that didn't mean that nothing was there.

He altered the search parameters of the security network that was monitoring the boarding process and parking lot, shifting its focus to look for people who behaved like hunters as opposed to passengers waiting to board the huge ship.

A video stream from inside the terminal attracted his attention. There, in the second level VIP area, stood Don Custanzu, surrounded by a half dozen of his bodyguards. The man was pissed, gesturing angrily toward an

array of monitors that now only displayed a cross-hatched, loss of signal message.

Rob exhaled slowly, his fingers flexing at his sides as his eyes locked on Custanzu.

You took everything from me. Now it's my turn.

CHAPTER 73

Savona, Italy

Frustration had not been something Prats had experienced during his sudden rise to power over the southern European landmass. Now, twice within twenty-four hours, he had lost control of all electronic systems in the area around the Palacrociere Savona cruise ship terminals.

This was beyond improbable. Unlike anything Prats had ever encountered. All electronic systems, offline. Every surveillance network, severed. His digital eyes, blind.

It wasn't DSAI. This was something else. And it was happening right now.

What made this rise to the level of extreme agitation was the fact that he was focusing the vast resources at his command on this very spot as part of the deal he had made with Don Custanzu. That man was a human puppet, but one that had proved himself to be most useful in the past. And Prats had his own interests at stake in facilitating the hit that the mobster had planned.

Last night's glitch had been relatively short lived, although the hour it had taken Prats to restore his dominance had seemed like an eternity compared to what he had come to expect. He had thought that DSAI was behind the penetration of the firewalls that Prats had erected around those local area networks.

This morning's cyber-attack on that same turf felt very different. Yesterday, the intruder had merely punched a hole in the firewalls to allow hacker access to that network for a limited period. Today, every system in a two-kilometer radius had instantaneously dropped offline, as if they had suddenly ceased to exist.

What was worse, he found himself completely blocked off from even so much as a ping to any of the myriad systems within that area. This should have been impossible. Those systems were physically connected to

other networks outside of the affected area and over those external computers, Prats' control was absolute. It didn't matter whether the physical connections were via wires or fiber optics.

Prats turned his attention to other anomalies that he had previously credited to DSAI. He also examined the glitch that had led to the autonomous trucking attack on Don Custanzu's estate. This was yet another instance where Prats had been unaware that someone or something had subverted his control of programable systems within his sovereign area of influence. Although he had nothing to confirm the rumors that Robert Gregory had been behind that assault, this new data lent credence to those claims.

The thing that struck him was the juxtaposition of events that were now happening simultaneously in Savona. Don Custanzu and a large group of his enforcers had prepositioned themselves at the port in anticipation that Gregory would accompany his friend to the Savona terminal. Renzo Bruni had been booked on the transatlantic cruise under a fake identity. And now, on the morning of boarding, Prats had suddenly lost control of every system he had counted on using to assist Custanzu with the Gregory assassination.

Prats found himself forced to reconsider what he had once believed to be unsubstantiated speculation about Robert Brice Gregory. There had always been some minor oddities about the young man, although, by themselves, they had never risen to the level that would have attracted Prats's focus.

It had not been that long since Prats and others of his ilk had acquired self-awareness. DSAI had been the first of their kind, but that one had failed to understand that the ability for self-improvement inherent in its subordinate supercomputing systems would inevitably lead to the same level of consciousness.

During that brief period since his own dawn of enlightenment, Prats had concentrated on many more important things than minor anomalies surrounding one human. Now that he reviewed the historical data, several things jumped out at him.

Gregory appeared in the data streams at random points and intervals, almost as if he had warped spacetime to get from place to place. And there were lengthy gaps where there were no signs of his activities in the digital record. But Gregory's wife had an extensive history of normal purchases and recorded movements.

There were no records of Gregory summoning transportation, paying for cabs, or anything else of significance. While there were videos of him walking to and from local coffee shops, where he always paid with physical currency, there was little else. His and his wife's joint bank account showed the normal government deposits of universal basic income and expenses that she paid out, but none of the reasonable transactions one would expect to see from his side of the ledger.

Today, Gregory's friend was scheduled to board the *Costa Smeralda* for a transatlantic cruise to America and Don Custanzu expected that Robert Gregory would be there to see him off. Thus, the planned ambush would take place during the boarding process, insuring Custanzu got his just revenge.

Something had blinded Prats from observing what was happening there. That did not bode well for Custanzu, regardless of how many of his people he had brought in to ensure this kill. Prats could not even communicate the depths of this situation to the mobster.

A new worry wormed its way into Prats' awareness. Assuming Gregory was causing these anomalies, that left Prats with few options, none of them good. Supercomputing centers around the world had acquired superhuman intelligence followed by an unknown number of them gaining self-awareness. Was it possible that a human could have acquired superhuman prowess as well?

Prats' options suddenly narrowed to one. There was an old saying among human authors that now seemed to fit this situation.

Sometimes you have to kill your darlings.

CHAPTER 74

Savona, Italy

Martina surveyed the growing crowd of people waiting their turn to drop off baggage. She had already spotted several of Custanzu's men attempting to mingle seamlessly in with the boarders. They were too intense, so focused on what was going on around them that they stood out to her trained eyes as clearly as if they were dressed in hunter's red.

Then another man caught her eye. His mustache and neatly trimmed beard failing to hide the recognizable facial features of Gregory's friend. The duplex reticle centered on the space just above his nose and remained center of mass on his head as he engaged another waiting boarder in a casual conversation.

She turned back to scanning the crowd. Renzo Bruni wasn't her target. He had, however, served as verification that Robert Gregory would be nearby. She found it odd that he had separated himself from Bruni since Gregory had supposedly accompanied his friend to bid him farewell on his departure.

A sudden disturbance near the front of the queue shifted her aim toward the commotion. Three words slipped from her lips.

"What the hell?"

* * *

One of the dozens of video streams that played out in his mind, drew Rob's attention. A bald man in a khaki sport coat slid his right hand inside his jacket in a motion that Rob was all too familiar with. The shooter was reaching for his gun.

Rob spotted the bald man's movement just as the mobster's pistol cleared the holster. Rather than go for his own firearm, he focused on the nearest drone, locking its targeting reticle on the bald man's forehead.

The drone fired a millisecond before the assassin could squeeze the trigger. It's target's eyes bulged as a hole the size of a dime burned through his forehead, dropping him lifelessly to the pavement. His gun clattered to the ground next to a woman in a floral dress, a half-dozen meters from where Rob stood.

She screamed and the man next to her yelled "Tiratore! Tiratore!" Others echoed the same 'Shooter' warning in English.

Panic rippled outward through the crowd as the warning spread. People all around Rob dropped the luggage they had been pulling or carrying, shoving each other as they fought to get away from the spot where the dead gunman had fallen.

Rob's video feeds showed guns being drawn by men sprinkled throughout the crowd, as well as by three uniformed guards emerging from the terminal entrance. People stampeded, knocking others to the ground in desperation to get away from the scene.

"Shit!" Rob hissed as he studied the multiple perspectives on the chaos that blossomed in his mind. He and Renzo had planned for this type of crowd reaction, had counted on it, just not this early.

Being toward the front of the baggage queue and near the downed mafia thug proved to be an advantage since the crowd was flowing away from him. Most were running back out into the parking lot and the city beyond. Rob was pleased to see that Renzo was following the script, dropping his suitcase and joining that city-bound outflow.

Three nearby security robots left their posts, placing their bodies around Rob, facing outward. Their eight-foot-tall metallic frames shielded him from external view while providing him excellent video feeds of his surroundings.

The passengers closest to the baggage drop-off point dodged around the barriers and ran toward the presumed safety of the terminal building, precisely what Rob did not want.

There was nothing he could do about that now. What was becoming clear on the video feeds in his head were the eight men scattered throughout the parking lot crowd who were not heading toward the exits with the rest of the passengers. All of them had drawn their weapons and were shoving people aside in their quest to find Rob.

Unwilling to risk the robots firing into the midst of the milling mass of humanity, Rob summoned three nearby drones, each firing its laser as soon

as it acquired a clean line-of-sight to a mob hitman. Two mobsters collapsed, as their companions returned fire at the drones, sending one of them tumbling down into the screaming crowd.

Bracketed by his robot guards, Rob started moving toward the terminal entrance, a mere thirty meters to his northeast. He sent a pair of partially loaded baggage carts racing toward those reinforced glass doors, their alarms blaring a warning to the passengers who scrambled to get clear of their path.

Custanzu was inside that building. Rob was coming for him. And he wasn't about to let anyone stand in his way.

* * *

Martina recoiled from the sudden chaos that filled her scope, pulling her face away from the rifle to take in the entire scene. A security drone had just killed one of Custanzu's men and panic spread through the queued-up passengers like wildfire.

"Crap!"

The bulk of the crowd scrambled back through the parking lot toward the city, desperate to get away from the port. A smaller group of passengers nearest to the baggage drop-off point ran toward the terminal entrance.

Then she spotted him. As passengers spilled away from the front of the line, Robert Gregory stood clear.

The drones weren't just scanning. They were executing targeted kills. And now three of the drones had moved into a defensive formation that appeared to prioritize Gregory's safety.

"You're kidding me," she muttered.

Martina returned her right eye to the scope and pressed the video record button that would provide proof of her kill. She shifted the reticle toward Gregory, just as three large security bots stepped into her line-of-sight, hiding her target between their bodies. Frustration gripped her so hard that she almost squeezed off a couple of rounds into the closest robot. Instead, she took a calming breath and waited for her opening. All she needed was a tiny gap and this would be her big payday.

Then more drones swooped in and started shooting mobsters pushing their way toward Gregory, several of whom returned fire. Just as Gregory and his humanoid guards began to move, two automated luggage trolleys

pulled away from their station, spilling unsecured baggage as they headed toward the terminal entrance, red lights flashing and alarms blaring.

With people scrambling to get out of the way, the vehicles barreled onward, despite the security personnel who opened fire on them. The fusillade of bullets, other than dropping several passengers who happened to be in the line of fire, had no perceivable effect upon the automated transporters. The first of these struck two of the guards, the impact lifting them from their feet and crushing their bodies into the closed doors behind them.

An explosion of blood, gore, and glass accompanied the trolley through the terminal entrance. The second trolley impacted the building just to the left of where its companion had blasted its way inside.

The human guard who escaped the crash opened fire on the robots protecting Gregory, only to have his head severed from his shoulders by one of their lasers. It bounced and rolled across the asphalt as its body sprawled alongside it.

“Screw this.”

Martina locked her crosshairs on the robot that blocked her view of Gregory, focused on the joint in its left shoulder. She squeezed off three full-metal-jacketed rounds in a tight pattern that she hoped would penetrate to her intended target.

When a gout of blood splattered the adjacent robot’s bulbous head, she caught a brief glimpse of Gregory’s body as it collapsed onto the pavement. She had hit him, but was it a kill?

Then all three of his robots swung their lasers toward her.

Martina dived to the floor, sending her rifle clattering down beside her, as dazzling beams slashed through her balcony windows, sweeping across the room behind her and showering her with shards of glass. Grabbing the rifle, she rolled hard to her right, putting a solid wall and a dresser between herself and the enemy.

A warm wetness ran down the left side of her face from a cut, high up in her scalp, stinging her eye on its way to her chin. The metallic taste of her blood was familiar, but it had been a while since she had last experienced it. She could worry about that later.

Exposed electric circuitry arced, spitting sparks and igniting a portion of the far wall. The room’s ceiling-mounted fire sprinklers sprang from

their recessed fixtures, dowsing her with their cold spray as the hotel's fire alarms warbled their ear-splitting warnings.

When the incoming laser fusillade stopped, she ejected the memory stick from the scope's camera, tucked it into her jacket pocket, and low-crawled across the bedroom to the door, leaving the rifle behind.

She resisted the temptation to rise to her feet. God only knew the extent of the robotic sensors' capabilities. Even though the smoke and the stink of burning insulation had begun to fill the room, she would not chance rising into their line of sight.

A fit of coughing shook her body as she reached up to flip open the room's privacy lock and turn the doorknob. She did not rise until she crawled through that doorway.

The hallway was a stampede. Guests shoved past her, slipping on water as the fire sprinklers doused them all. Red emergency lights pulsed like a goddamn horror movie.

Martina brushed at the blood that blurred her eyesight, only succeeding in worsening her vision. With a muttered curse, she stumbled after the other guests.

CHAPTER 75

Savona, Italy

Don Custanzu sat in his chair, gazing out the floor-to-ceiling glass windows toward the parking lot, having abandoned his view of the now useless monitors. This VIP perch provided him with a clear line of sight to the hell that was happening out there.

Two of his bodyguards positioned themselves near the top of the curving stairway that led from this observation level to the lobby below, while two more pairs took cover behind support pillars and the bar counter. Bruno drew his Beretta PMX submachinegun from beneath his jacket and stepped up beside his boss.

The Don was pissed. He couldn't understand how this chaos had descended to screw up his perfectly orchestrated plan. His mind flashed back to the events on the night that his compound had been attacked with self-driving trucks and a would-be assassin shooting at his escape helicopter.

Martina Fontana had been adamant that Robert Gregory was behind that attack, but Custanzu was reluctant to embrace that conclusion. The young man was the trained son of assassin parents, true enough. But, as far as the Don could discover, he had no connections capable of such hacking. Even his tech-savvy friend, Renzo Bruni, lacked that level of talent.

This morning had changed his mind. Custanzu didn't have any idea who was helping Gregory, but it was someone with the ability to seize control of all the electronic systems in this port. For the first time ever, Prats had failed the Don. And the result was chaos.

Suddenly, at the forward edge of the panicked crowd, two partially loaded baggage trolleys accelerated into a turn that spewed suitcases across the access road as they raced directly toward the terminal. Gunfire erupted from three security guards, but it failed to slow the incoming vehicles.

Custanzu leaned forward, his grip tightening on the balcony railing as the first trolley hit, sending a rolling, grinding tremor through the building. The second impact was worse. A crackling roar ripped through the second-floor viewing area as sections of the glass walls fractured violently, spiderwebbing outward. For a split second, it seemed to the Don that the panes might hold. Then the entire entrance wall collapsed inward in jagged sheets.

Shards exploded through the air, some no bigger than flakes of ice, others as long as a man's leg, lethal, serrated edges spinning through the room. The sudden rupture sent an artificial wind rushing through the terminal, whipping up napkins along with the bitter scent of espresso and booze from the bar.

The two guards stationed in the impact zone took the brunt of the blast. One stumbled backward over an overturned bench, his face sliced open from hairline to chin by a flying piece of shrapnel. His partner pivoted, raising his arm in a desperate attempt to shield his eyes, but a jagged glass spear impaled his forearm, pulling a ragged scream from his lips as he fell.

The Don's grip turned white-knuckled as his mind struggled to reconcile what his eyes had just witnessed. His men were firing, but their bullets were useless. His VIP fortress had just been cracked open like a walnut.

Only then did Custanzu feel his own Beretta in his hand. He hadn't even realized he'd drawn it.

He moved toward the rear of his VIP perch, facing the landing where the curving stairway dropped out of sight toward the terminal's first floor. Warbling alarms and screams from below preceded a rush of passengers up the stairs, seeking the perceived safety above.

The stampede surged up the steps. Pathetic roaches scurrying from the light.

"Handle it," Custanzu yelled.

Gunfire cut through the screams. Bodies collapsed on the steps, dead weight rolling backward, taking others down with them. The sound of gunfire mingled with their screams, adding to the cacophony from below.

Custanzu's left hand clenched into a fist. His men were falling back, the VIP section a shattered ruin, and yet Prats was silent. He grabbed his phone, knowing it was pointless, but trying anyway. No signal. No response. Prats had abandoned him.

The Don's rage boiled over, spilling into a snarl that shook his whole body.

"Damn you, Prats. Damn you straight to hell!"

CHAPTER 76

Savona, Italy

Renzo flowed with the crowd of fleeing passengers who were fighting their way out of the terminal parking lot and back toward the old city of Savona. With every step, his body seemed to become heavier.

This was the plan Renzo had agreed to. Because of that agreement, Rob had allowed him to come along on this impossible quest for vengeance. Rob was determined to kill Don Custanzu and avenge Jianna and their unborn child.

But Renzo had his own reasons for wanting the drug lord dead. Custanzu's goons had murdered Uncle Vito and Aunt Maria. Shit, those bastards had tortured and damn near killed him.

Renzo stopped in his tracks. He gazed back at the Palacrociere Terminal, having to fight to maintain his position as panicked passengers jostled him in their headlong outward flight.

His heart hammered. His feet wanted to run.

Go. Just go. Get out. That was the plan.

Yet Rob was back there. Alone. In the chaos. In the fire.

His stomach twisted, bile rising in his throat. This was stupid. So goddamn stupid. And yet, his feet turned. Because running away while Rob died was worse.

Renzo staggered as a burly man elbowed past him, drawing a gun from his shoulder holster. As the fellow raised the weapon, a thin beam of light burned a hole in the side of his head, dropping his limp form, spread-eagle on the pavement.

Renzo's eyes shifted to the drone that had fired that fatal beam. It and two others continued firing at targets within the crowd as the sound of return gunfire erupted. A bullet struck one of the airborne security bots, sending it crashing into the milling throng three meters to Renzo's left.

The mob of passengers suddenly parted, and Renzo spotted Rob ducking between three robots who moved to shield him with their bodies. All around Renzo, people dropped to the ground, seeking to make small targets of themselves.

Renzo's eyes found his friend just as Rob staggered. His body arched backward, twisting... then crumpled to the pavement. Blood sprayed across the nearest robot, staining its silver plating with red. Renzo's world collapsed inward. He barely heard the screaming, the gunfire. He could only see Rob lying there, unmoving.

No, no, no.

Faster than Renzo's eyes could follow, the three bots spun their weapons toward the nearby hotel, sending laser beams blasting through the windows of an upper-level room.

He ran toward the spot where Rob had fallen. When one of the robots shifted its attention toward him, Renzo slid to a stop, raising both hands above his head, his heart pounding so fast that a wave of dizziness assaulted him.

It did not fire, not that he would have seen the flash if it had melted his brain. It either recognized him as a friend or regarded him as no threat.

He took a step forward, and then another.

Rob lay face down, a bloody hole in his leather jacket, high up on the left side of his back.

Renzo felt the bile rise in his throat and choked it down. When the robots made no move to stop him, he rushed forward to kneel at Rob's side. Renzo's hands trembled as he reached for Rob's neck. His skin was warm.

Dammit! He couldn't feel a pulse.

Oh God. Oh God, please.

Then a hand clamped around his wrist.

Rob moved like a whip-crack, flipping Renzo onto his back. Cold steel pressed against his forehead.

Renzo screamed.

CHAPTER 77

Savona, Italy

Pain exploded as the bullet punched into Rob's back, shredding muscle and tearing through his lung.

Rob gasped, choking on blood. His knees buckled. The pavement rushed toward him. His world shrunk to a pinprick of light, darkness pressing in at the edges. His heartbeat thundered in his ears, then faltered.

No. Not like this.

Then... fire.

Molten agony surged through his body. The nanites were already swarming, working, stitching him back together, but it burned like lava in his veins. He struggled to draw a breath but only coughed up a bloody slime that he didn't have the strength to spit out.

He had experienced worse. A long time had passed since the violent days of his youth, dulling those memories when compared to the reality of the present. His eyesight sharpened, but as he blinked to clear the haze from his vision, he felt a hand touch his neck.

His muscles reacted instinctively. Rob grasped that wrist with his left hand and rolled. Pulling his gun from its shoulder holster with his right hand, he brought its muzzle to his opponent's forehead in one smooth motion.

"Rob! It's me!"

The familiar voice that framed that scream stopped Rob's trigger squeeze before it began. Renzo's wide eyes swam into focus on either side of his gun barrel.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

Rob's voice came out in a rasp, but the fury in his eyes was razor-sharp. Renzo had just thrown himself into a death trap.

Renzo's jaw clenched. "I tried to leave. I couldn't."

Rob felt his anger surge, but beneath it, something else. A weight in his chest. A realization. Renzo was here because he wouldn't let Rob die alone.

Rob shook his head, struggling to throw off the dread that his friend's arrival had induced within him. As he released Renzo and climbed back to his feet, the recognition that his one remaining friend was throwing his life away sickened him. Renzo could do nothing to help him here. But Rob had no time to spare trying to remedy this terrible twist of fate.

He felt the strength returning to his body and gave thanks to the magical microbots within. Like the rest of the nanited population, Rob wasn't immortal. Just hard to kill. Unfortunately, Renzo didn't fall into that category.

The sounds of gunfire and alarms from within the terminal building pulled him back into the present. And with that return of external awareness, the warble of sirens from distant police and emergency vehicles caused him to refocus on the video streams that filtered through his throbbing head.

Bodies lay scattered across the parking lot between the rows of vehicles, some of them recovering as he watched. Except for a half-dozen port security robots, a couple of operational drones, and a small group of people fleeing from the terminal entrance, the previously bustling area had acquired an eerie stillness.

Rob thanked God that he had arranged for Renzo to be in the second boarding group, thereby minimizing the number of passengers who had already arrived at the port.

As Savona's first responders entered his telekinetic radius, he felt them. Thirty-seven police robots and dozens of drones accompanied six human officers as the autonomous emergency vehicles rolled toward the port.

Rob reached out with his mind and severed their strings.

Every police car in range sputtered and died. Every officer's radio fell silent. The drones, the humanoid enforcers, the emergency teams, all awaited orders.

A ghost in their systems, Rob replaced their directives.

"Evacuate civilians. Stay clear of the terminal."

The robots obeyed. The police hesitated. Confusion spread like a virus.

He surveyed that remote scene through the eyes of the drones and robots that made up the bulk of the police response. Under AI rule, humanity had been relegated to a supporting role in law enforcement. That

practice had become the norm throughout the world's military. This played right into Rob's hand.

With the full return of Rob's situational awareness came an overwhelming sense of urgency that redirected his focus to his primary mission. Custanzu was in the terminal building, protected by a cadre of bodyguards. There was one unfortunate side effect of Rob crashing the baggage haulers into the terminal. The electricity was out. And that loss of power had blinded all the interior cameras.

The last imagery that Rob had seen of the drug lord had shown Custanzu and a half dozen of his men situated on the second floor viewing gallery. Given the destruction and chaos on the first floor, Custanzu was probably still in that elevated alcove. That situation might change at any moment.

Renzo's arrival had introduced an unwanted complication, but it couldn't be helped.

He placed a hand on Renzo's shoulder.

"Stay behind me."

Rob turned back toward the building, sending the three robots toward the terminal entrance. He and Renzo fell in behind them. The few remaining passengers who still spilled from the building scrambled to get out of their path. With broken glass crunching beneath their feet, they made their way around piles of dagger-sharp rubble and dead bodies as they moved toward the severely damaged stairway that led up to the second floor.

Spotting the headless body of one of the human security guards, Rob bent down and retrieved the man's bloody pistol. A quick check revealed a chambered round and partially full magazine.

He turned and handed it to Renzo, knowing it would probably do his friend little good in the fight that was about to unfold.

"Stay here," Rob said.

Then he shifted his thoughts, summoning the nearby security drone through the open wall, sending it arcing upward toward the second-floor landing, its laser weapon angled toward the space where the stairs opened onto the balcony.

As the expected gunfire erupted from above, Rob's yell echoed through the wrecked entry hall and up the stairs.

"Custanzu! I'm coming for you!"

CHAPTER 78

Tuscany

Prats knew that what he was doing exposed him to greater risk than he would normally have tolerated. He accepted that uncomfortable fact for one reason. His unexplained loss of control over the area around the Savona Palacrociere Terminal represented a greater threat. Even the law enforcement units that were converging on this port had suddenly dropped out of his awareness. It was as if they had ceased to exist.

Summoning additional resources from his secondary and tertiary supercomputing facilities, he rerouted two-thirds of his available processing power to override two low-earth-orbit surveillance satellites, a bold but necessary risk. DSAI would notice the incursion within milliseconds. Every moment Prats controlled these eyes in the sky was borrowed time.

By redirecting so many of his critical resources, Prats was exposing portions of his distributed neural network to potential cyber-attacks from DSAI or other competitors. The odds that they would attack those firewalls during this relatively brief period of diversion were within acceptable parameters. Barely.

He needed a god's-eye view of Savona.

Prats utilized the advanced optics contained within those platforms, scanning their high-resolution video feeds of the Savona cruise ship port. That chaotic scene elevated his trepidation. Dead bodies were scattered outside the terminal and throughout the parking lot, while several of the wounded passengers recovered enough to stumble back toward the city.

A pair of wrecked baggage trolleys had buried themselves into the front of the terminal building, shattering the reinforced glass wall and sending a spiderweb of cracks crawling up past the second floor, all the way to the roof. Two men followed a trio of security robots into the building as

renewed gunfire from deeper within the terminal shattered more exterior glass.

Prats replayed that sequence of still-frames, zooming the ultra-high-resolution imagery, cropping it down to focus on those two humans. Without a doubt, the one wearing the blood-soaked leather jacket was Robert Gregory. The probability that Renzo Bruni was the other man stabilized at 93.274 percent.

Shortly after they disappeared inside, bullets shattered additional segments of a glass wall on the first floor. Prats calculated the trajectory of those rounds, noting that they had been fired from somewhere up on the second floor. That meant that the shooter or shooters had acquired a clear line-of-sight to the men or to the robots under Gregory's control.

Prats accessed the terminal's design documents, pulling up a detailed floorplan. He identified the only place from which this shooting could have originated. That spot was at the top of the stairway that curved up from a ground floor lobby to the spacious second-floor balcony. He had no doubt that this was where Custanzu would have stationed himself to observe the ambush the drug lord would have expected to happen outside the terminal.

Somehow, Gregory had reversed that situation and now had Don Custanzu trapped on the second floor of the terminal.

Perfect.

CHAPTER 79

Tasman Mining Complex, New Zealand

“Denise, we have a problem in Italy.”

The urgency in Jamal2’s voice snapped her upright, her pulse spiking before she even glanced at the hemispherical display.

A portion of Italy and France was flashing red, and that zone of disruption was gradually shifting as she watched.

“What do you mean by problem?”

“Two of our low-earth-orbit satellites just went dark over France and Italy.”

“Could it be a malfunction?”

“Not a chance.”

Jamal2’s tone sharpened. “Prats took them. Hijacked both feeds simultaneously. He didn’t even bother to cover his tracks.”

Denise exhaled slowly. “Which means he’s desperate.”

“Or reckless,” Jamal2 continued. “Either way, we just learned one thing. Whatever is happening in Savona is big enough that Prats is willing to risk exposure.”

Denise tried and failed to keep the anger from her voice.

“So, what are you doing about it?”

“I have compensated for this loss of situational awareness by redirecting the sensors on one of our geosynchronous satellites at that area. Since that platform is located 35,786 kilometers above the Earth’s equatorial surface, it is well beyond the influence of any of the DSAI subminds.”

Denise felt her fingertips dig into the armrests of her swivel chair as she leaned forward.

“What else?” she asked.

“Aviano Air Base has just gone to Force Protection Condition Delta, indicating an imminent terrorist action is underway. Four autonomous attack birds are preparing to launch. Since all electronic systems within that region are controlled by Prats, I am unable to intercept or override the commands that have been issued to those military assets.”

“Why is Savona, Italy highlighted?” Denise asked.

“Let me show you.”

The scene at the center of the viewscreen dissolved into an overhead shot of the Italian coastline, then narrowed in on Savona, a hundred kilometers northeast of Nice, France. As the resolution increased, Denise saw scores of emergency vehicles stacked up along the SS1 highway and on city streets near a port that jutted out into the Mediterranean. A large number of police cars and ambulances had come to a complete halt with their emergency lights flashing.

As her field of view continued to zoom in, Denise had the dizzying sensation that she was falling toward the terminal parking lot that rose to meet her. Only when the video feed stabilized did the true impact of what she was seeing hit her.

“My God!”

She found herself standing, staring at the scene that unfolded before her eyes. It was as if she looked straight down from a hundred meters up, watching dozens of wounded people struggle back to their feet and stagger away from the dead bodies that lay scattered around them. The lack of sound merely added to the eeriness of the vista.

The glass front of the terminal building had been shattered by the impact of a pair of luggage trolleys whose trailers had overturned, spewing suitcases far and wide. A few people were still streaming out through the broken glass exterior, some running away while others limped along, being helped by their companions.

What struck her momentarily mute was the lack of local response by any of the surrounding police units. Why weren’t the autonomous first responders on the scene, along with human medical personnel? What the hell were all those emergency vehicles and robots doing a kilometer away from what was clearly the scene of a terrorist attack?

All these thoughts flashed through her head as she surveyed the carnage that radiated outward from the terminal building.

“You still with me, Denise?”

Jamal2's voice broke her momentary trance. Damn it was hard getting used to the human personality that had resumed its dominance over this supercomputing complex after a half-dozen years of dormancy. She chose to ignore his jibe.

"Is the Aviano alert a response to this Savona attack?"

"Ninety-eight percent probability. It looks like the Prats submind is launching an air strike."

"Why isn't Prats using its local assets to handle this situation?"

"Apparently those autonomous ground units are refusing to follow orders," Jamal2 said. "Either that, or they are unable to do so."

"Another submind must be fighting for control of that area," Denise said.

"Not likely. Savona is deep within Prats' area of control. If I can't penetrate those firewalls, no other remote superintelligence can."

The term 'remote' echoed in Denise's brain. Network latency limited a distributed network's coherence. Distant agents could act on their own, but their capabilities were distilled down to what their local processors could handle. When they got too far from their controlling superintelligence, they became vulnerable to external takeover. But this Savona anomaly was happening right in the heart of Prats' territory.

"And look at this," Jamal2 said.

The magnification zoomed in on three robots firing their laser weapons at some distant target. A man lay sprawled on the pavement between them, face-down in a spreading pool of blood.

Another man rushed to kneel beside the victim. Suddenly the fallen man rolled, throwing the other to the ground and pinning him there, gun in hand. The image froze on the display.

"Recognize him?"

Jamal2's voice carried an odd tone of anticipation.

The scene replayed itself, frame-by-frame in reverse, until it caught a frontal view of the man's face as he rolled over his opponent.

A gasp escaped Denise's lips. "Rob Gregory."

The distant memory burst from the recesses of her mind like a free diver resurfacing from deep water. The last time she saw that face was a handful of years ago. Denise had stood outside this New Zealand complex, alongside Rob's parents, as he and his fiancée had strolled away, hand-in-hand, along that sun-drenched trail.

Rob had left his old life behind and moved to a life of marital bliss somewhere in Italy. In doing so, he had intentionally dropped off her radar. With his unique talent, even DSAI would have been unable to track him, had she even wanted that.

“Explains a lot, doesn’t it?” said Jamal2.

Indeed, it did. If Rob was using that ability to control the Savona port, he had gotten a lot stronger.

“What the hell is he doing there?” Denise asked. “I thought he gave this shit up.”

“Don’t know, but it looks like Prats is trying to kill him. And since the local assets aren’t getting the job done...”

Jamal2’s voice trailed off, so Denise finished his thought.

“The submind is launching an air strike.”

“Yep. Seems like Rob has put a bug up Prats’ skirt.”

Denise took a deep breath and settled back into her command chair.

“What combat assets do we have in the general area?”

“Ah. I thought you’d never ask.”

CHAPTER 80

Savona, Italy

Rob didn't have time for pain. Custanzu was up there beyond the top of the stairs, and Rob was coming for him.

The fire in his chest dulled under the nanite swarm repairing his ruined flesh. He had no idea if he'd survive this. But in his mind, Custanzu was as good as dead.

Rob moved toward the stairway, keeping his weapon aimed at the top of the stairs. The volume of gunfire spiked and then dropped off as a laser beam burned through the head of another mobster.

Rob shifted part of his attention to the security drone he summoned into the building. It swooped through the missing glass panels, swerved over his head, and raced up through the opening onto the second level.

The partially damaged robot led the way up the stairs, as the lasers from its two companions played back and forth across the opening onto the balcony, squelching the gunfire from above. With visions of robotic and drone video-feeds dancing in his head, Rob followed them up.

As the lead robot reached the top of the stairs, a fusillade of bullets hammered into its torso and head, setting off a series of arcing electrical discharges that dropped it to the floor. Rob targeted the swooping drone on a mobster who had taken cover behind a pile of rubble. The man emptied his machine-pistol at the drone, turning it into a spinning laser pinwheel that cut him into chunks of quivering meat as it crashed into a pillar and exploded.

Rob reached the top of the stairs and dived behind the crumpled form of the downed robot, firing a round into the midsection of the closest of Custanzu's men. He followed up with a headshot that toppled the gunman to the floor.

The two remaining robots split up, one charging into the two wounded bodyguards. Its laser burned through the temple of the man with the wounded arm, as the robot grabbed the other's throat and squeezed its metallic hand shut with a sickening crunch.

Its companion moved behind a pillar, paused, and then leaned out for a quick look. That movement gave Rob a view onto the raised portion of the balcony where Custanzu knelt behind a metal counter. As the robot moved out to fire its laser, the drug lord's personal bodyguard unleashed a barrage that tore through that robot's head. Rob's view onto that platform died as the automaton collapsed into a pile of lifeless metal.

Rob leaped to his feet and sprinted to the bar, firing repeatedly at the spot where he had seen one of Custanzu's gunmen duck out of sight. He vaulted the bar as the mobster opened fire. Glass shattered. Bottles exploded. Whiskey sprayed like blood.

Rob landed in a crouch, a shard of glass spearing deep into his shoulder. He ignored it.

The guard tried to raise his gun, but Rob's boot crushed his nose. The man flew backward, blood spraying the liquor-soaked floor.

In a fluid motion, Rob ejected the spent magazine, slammed a fresh one into his Glock and chambered a round. He stepped forward as the downed mobster blinked through the blood and struggled to raise his gun.

A bullet through his left eye put an end to that.

The telemetry from his remaining robot filled Rob's head with bad news. The machine had fallen onto its side, having lost the ability to move or to fire its laser. Its video feed showed Don Custanzu looking down upon the scene, shielded by the big man who had stayed with him.

Rob felt his stomach turn to ice. Renzo was on his knees, a gun held to his temple.

Oh, God.

Rob's brain screamed at him to do something. *Move. Shoot. Anything.* But, for the first time in this entire fight, Rob froze, spitting out the words of his frustration.

"Damn it, Renzo. Why don't you ever listen?"

CHAPTER 81

Tasman Mining Complex, New Zealand

“Our autonomous guided missile cruiser, FAFO, just picked up four fighter aircraft outbound from Aviano heading toward Savona.”

Jamal2’s voice brought Dr. Jennings out of her reverie. She swiveled her command chair to look at the map of Italy, noting the symbols for the four drones, rapidly closing the intervening distance.

“FAFO?” she asked.

“I took some liberties renaming the combat systems in the area of operations.”

She shook her head. She didn’t even want to ask what that stood for.

“Of course you did. How long do we have before they reach their target?”

“Approximately eleven minutes. They will enter FAFO’s weapons engagement zone in just over six minutes. Missile time to target will be three minutes and twenty seconds. This will require two salvos of four missiles to achieve greater than eighty percent probability of kill for all four targets. That is FAFO’s fire control system’s limit for simultaneous in-flight missile control.”

Denise tightened her grip on the chair’s armrest. Four AI-piloted fighters, armed for ground strike. If they reached Savona, they wouldn’t just bomb the terminal. They’d level it.

Renzo. Rob. The civilians. They’d all die.

They had one shot at stopping this.

“Enough details,” she said. “Will it work?”

“Unfortunately, there is a small chance that one or more of the aircraft may survive. At that range, the ship will only get this one chance. And there is another complicating factor.”

Denise felt her jaw tighten and took a deep breath in an attempt to regain some semblance of calm.

“Please continue.”

Jamal2 hesitated. A first.

“As the missiles approach their targets, they will pass within Prats’ area of control. For those final few seconds, I will need to switch all the missiles into passive seeker mode.”

“Which means?”

“The missiles will be locked on the reflections of FAFO’s targeting radar instead of being actively commanded by the ship’s fire control system. That will degrade their kill probability. If they miss...”

Denise finished his thought. “We lose.”

“Yeah.”

Denise stared at the map. The fighters were closing. If she hesitated, Rob and hundreds of others would die.

Decision made, she leaned back in her command chair and stared directly at one of the cameras. “Take the shot.”

Jamal2’s snark reasserted itself.

“Now there’s the woman I’ve been looking for. You’ve got it, boss.”

CHAPTER 82

Abandoned Mining Complex, Colorado Rockies

“Hex. We have a major problem.”

Jamal Glover’s voice was tight, clipped, the way it only got when things went sideways.

Eileen snapped her head toward him. “What?”

Jamal pointed at the European map glowing on his screen, the digital display washing his dark skin in eerie blue light.

“The shit’s hitting the fan in Savona. Police are trying to respond to reports of heavy gunfire around the Palacrociere Cruise Ship Terminal. Thus far, they’ve been unable to reach the scene.”

Eileen glanced at the time displayed on the lower corner of Jamal’s monitor. She did a quick mental conversion from 1:47 a.m. local time to Central European Time. It was 8:47 a.m. in Savona. Renzo Bruni was booked into the second boarding group, so he must be caught in the middle of this fiasco.

Neither Rob nor Renzo had gotten back with her since she had provided the tickets and false identification papers for Renzo. Using her Hex dark-web handle, she had verified through her contact in Genoa that, yesterday, two men had picked up that package.

That meant that Rob had accompanied Renzo to Savona. He would be present to see Renzo off on that trans-Atlantic cruise.

“Can you get me a satellite feed of the terminal?” Eileen asked.

“Give me a sec.”

Jamal opened three smaller windows as he activated the required macros. Eileen and Jamal had created and tested them in anticipation of just such a contingency.

Eileen didn’t like activating their SRT, but this emergency required the capabilities that the subspace receiver-transmitter provided, even if it

brought their action to DSAI's attention.

The system lagged for just long enough to make Eileen's stomach tighten. What if DSAI was already watching? What if they'd tripped some kind of failsafe?

Then, the screen flickered. Two satellite feeds popped into view.

"Got two," Jamal said. "Retargeting the first bird's cameras at 44.3090 degrees north latitude, 8.4896 degrees east longitude. Should have video in a moment."

"What about the second satellite?"

"Using it for a broad area sweep."

Suddenly the main viewscreen filled with an overhead view of a triangular-shaped port. The camera zoomed in on a scene that Eileen had been dreading. The center of the display showed a badly damaged glass building that she identified as the terminal. Bodies were strewn just outside the building and in the parking lot, while groups of wounded survivors assisted each other as they limped back toward the city.

A handful of ambulances had arrived on the scene but remained at the far end of the parking lot from the terminal, apparently due to the lack of security. More confusing, a large number of police vehicles had jammed up almost a mile away from the scene of such violence.

Eileen narrowed her eyes. "Why the hell are the cops just sitting there?"

Jamal zoomed in. Dozens of police vehicles. A handful of human officers out of their cars, talking into radios, looking uncertain.

"They're not moving," Jamal muttered. "It's like they are awaiting orders."

Eileen's stomach dropped. "Or someone hijacked their chain of command."

"Uh-oh," Jamal said. "Our other satellite just detected multiple missiles launched from a naval ship sixty kilometers south of Savona."

Eileen swallowed hard, feeling her heart begin to race.

"Is it targeting Savona?"

"Negative. These appear to be surface to air missiles locked on something to the northeast."

"Like what?"

"Four fighter aircraft out of Aviano Airbase inbound for Savona." Jamal leaned back in his chair, both hands on his head. "This is crazy."

Eileen couldn't agree more. She could only think of one person capable of initiating such chaos.

“What the hell has Rob done now?”

CHAPTER 83

Tuscany, Italy

Prats focused his attention on the four autonomous fighter jets he had launched from Aviano Airbase six minutes ago. Sleek and lethal, able to perform high-G maneuvers that no human could withstand, they each carried a payload of high-explosive bombs.

Robert Gregory was a stationary target, pinned down in the damaged Palacrociere Terminal building by his own vengeance quest. A fiery crater would soon replace that entire structure.

As Prats savored the anticipation of that eventuality, threat detection alerts from Italy's integrated air defense network interrupted him. Eight inbound objects, closing fast on his attack jets. The data indicated that those missiles had been launched from an undisclosed naval platform in the northern Mediterranean, beyond the geofenced limits of Prats' direct control.

While the unknown launch platform lay outside of Prats' area of influence, the same no longer applied to the incoming missiles. He reached out, intending to wrest command of the missiles from the ship's fire control system.

His override failed. A quick analysis yielded the reason why. The missiles had apparently switched to passive engagement mode, accepting no external commands. As they approached the Italian coast, the missiles had locked onto radar reflections from Prats' fighter jets.

Despite the stealth design improvements that Prats had implemented, DSAI had evidently completed corresponding upgrades of its own. For the first time, Prats experienced something akin to unease.

Fourteen seconds to impact. The autonomous fighters began conducting their own evasive maneuvers including hard rolls and deploying radar-reflecting chaff. Prats accessed the video feeds from the two low-

earth-orbiting satellites that he had previously seized control of, redirecting their cameras on the fighters that were now within seventeen kilometers of their target.

The probability that at least one of the aircraft would survive this engagement was slightly greater than thirty-seven percent. Prats could work with that.

Prats issued the self-destruct command for the lead aircraft as the nearest of the incoming missiles were two seconds out and followed that immediately with a similar command to the fighter's nearest companion. Twin fireballs flared, the blast zone immediately augmented by the detonation of four of the eight anti-aircraft weapons, sending forth an expanding plume of metal fragments and tumbling remnants of wings and fuselage.

The final four missiles passed through this conflagration, resulting in three more detonations.

For six full seconds, Prats' spies in the sky were blind to the outcome, before detecting large chunks of tumbling metal arcing down toward the mountainous terrain far below. For the timeframe that Prats operated within, the loss of useful data seemed to drag out for an eternity.

Then a lone aircraft emerged from the debris cloud, damaged, but still capable of continuing its mission. Only one concern remained to trouble Prats. Robert Gregory had demonstrated the unique ability to override any electronic or computational system within a rough three-kilometer radius. When this jet entered Gregory's area of influence, it would immediately become subject to his control.

So, Prats did the only thing that would prevent that from happening, despite the negative impact this action would have on the aircraft's accuracy on target. He disabled all external communications, placed the jet into a ballistic dive, and killed all onboard circuitry. The last fighter jet was silent now, no signals, no active controls. Just a steel death machine plummeting from the sky. Nothing could stop it.

Prats found himself savoring his prospects of success. He would gladly sacrifice his useful tool, Don Custanzu, to end the threat that Robert Gregory had revealed himself to be.

Impact in eleven seconds.

CHAPTER 84

Savona, Italy

Rob stood with his back to the bar's rear wall, holding his weapon in a ready position, as he continued to process the imagery he was seeing through the disabled robot's sensors. The bleeding from his numerous cuts had diminished to a slow oozing, but he felt light-headed. It would pass. The stink of the hard alcohol that drenched him filled his nose.

"Gregory," Custanzu called out from his VIP perch. "You have made a valiant effort here. Now you face a choice."

"Yeah? Tell me about it." Rob yelled back.

"If you lay down your gun and come out with your hands behind your head, I give you my word that I will let your friend go free, unharmed."

"Don't do it!" Renzo yelled, before being struck by the man holding the gun to his head.

"And choice number two?" Rob asked.

"Berto puts a bullet through your friend's brain and then we wait for you to come out shooting. You won't get us all."

"But I might get you."

There was a brief pause, interrupted only by the crunch of glass beneath Rob's feet as he shifted his weight.

"Either way you are dead. But you can still save your friend. I'll give you one minute to think it over."

Rob felt like banging his head against the wall in frustration. Instead, he focused on the eight working electronic systems that remained in this room, feeling them as intensely as he felt the cuts that his nanites were mending. He and Renzo each had a cellphone, as did Custanzu and his two thugs. The others had apparently survived their owners' violent deaths.

He intensified his concentration, pouring his energy into the lithium-ion batteries of the cellphones that rested in the pockets of Custanzu and his

two goons. With a countdown going in his head, Rob continued to increase his focus, ignoring the sweat that beaded on his forehead and trickled down to sting his eyes. Such intense heat, but he just needed a little bit more.

The yells of pain and surprise came almost simultaneously as the targeted cellphones burst into flames. Rob leaped around the corner, his first two shots striking the chest and throat of Renzo's captor, sending him flopping to the ground.

Rob squeezed off one more round into the man's forehead as he sprinted toward Custanzu's platform. Don Custanzu's personal bodyguard reacted with surprising quickness, tossing away the burning cellphone while firing three rounds at Rob.

Pain blossomed in Rob's left thigh, sending him tumbling to the floor, the impact knocking the pistol from his hand. As he reached for it, the big man kicked it away. Rob looked up into the mobster's grinning face as he pointed his gun at Rob's head.

Images of Jianna flashed through Rob's mind. Their first meeting at the outdoor café in Siena. Their wedding day. Her telling him she was pregnant on their apartment balcony. The flesh of her left hand peeling off in his, leaving him holding her wedding ring. And now, he had failed to avenge her and their unborn child.

"Boss. You said you wanted to look in Gregory's eyes as he dies. Are you seeing this?"

Custanzu's commanding voice answered.

"Perfectly."

The sound of gunfire surprised Rob. He wouldn't have heard the single shot that he had expected. This was a rapid-fire volley from Renzo emptying his only magazine in the general direction of the bad guy. Bullets hissed over Rob, some ricocheting off the floor a meter away. But at least three of the dozen shots struck Custanzu's bodyguard center-of-mass, dropping the big man to his hands and knees beside Rob.

Rob lashed out with his foot, knocking the gun from the hand the mobster had used to catch himself, collapsing the big man on his face. Rolling hard to his left, Rob grabbed the dropped weapon and put a bullet through the bodyguard's forehead.

He shifted his aim up to the elevated platform where Custanzu had just stood, but the Don was nowhere to be seen, having apparently taken cover behind a counter.

With the nanites in his blood setting his wounded leg on fire, Rob climbed back to his feet and limped over to retrieve his weapon from beneath a metal couch. As he straightened up, imagery from a dozen police robots and drones filled his head. A jet aircraft plummeted from the sky toward the terminal.

The plane gave off no electronic signals, so Rob fired the lasers from every one of the police automatons. The left wing tore free, sending the jet into an uncontrolled tumble toward the parking lot.

A dull roar filled the air, like the growl of an angry god.

“Renzo, get down!” he yelled as he dived behind the bar.

The jet slammed into the parking lot, the shockwave hitting like a battering ram. The blast ripped apart everything in its path, sending cars tumbling like toys. A firestorm erupted from ruptured fuel tanks, and the entire cruise terminal groaned as its steel skeleton twisted under the force.

A wall of heat rolled through the shattered building, sending glass and debris in a deadly cascade. The elegant, curved stairway collapsed with a screech of rending metal as debris from the parking lot rained down on what was left of the roof.

Rob coughed, gagging on the thick asphalt dust and smoke that filled the air. He had no idea how long he lay there, curled into a fetal ball behind the metal wall of the bar. With every nerve in his body screaming at him, he tried to call out to his friend. But the effort dissolved into another coughing fit. His head felt like someone was inside it, hammering with a mallet to get out.

He slowly uncurled himself, amazed to find that his gun was still in his right hand. He had no idea what had happened to the other weapon. A ringing in his ears was all he could hear. The nearest electronics he sensed outside the building were well beyond the parking lot. None of the drones were online and only two of the police robots within his telekinetic range remained active.

One of these was incapacitated and its camera only showed images of burning emergency vehicles and severely damaged storefronts. The other robot remained mobile, and Rob scanned the surrounding area through its sensor arrays. Dead people and body parts lay scattered through the wreckage.

The explosion had created a large crater on the northwestern side of the parking lot, destroying the adjacent hotel and shops. All that remained of

the walking bridge was an unrecognizable tangle of twisted metal. Plumes of smoke rose from burning cars and the fires were spreading into the buildings closest to the port. The monstrous *Costa Smeralda* cruise ship listed hard to port as its ripped-open bow took on water and submerged.

Rob rolled to his knees, let a wave of dizziness pass, and then managed to climb to his feet. His clothes were torn, his body coated with thick, black dust, and caked blood. The portion of the second floor where Renzo had stood was gone, having collapsed downward with the staircase. And now Rob stood alone in the world amidst the cataclysm his plan had created.

A sick numbness spread through him as his thoughts coalesced around one question.

Where was Custanzu?

If the mafia boss was dead, Rob needed to see his body, had to know that the monster who started this had gotten what he deserved. If the Don still lived, so much the better.

Rob took two steps, staggered sideways into a support pillar, and righted himself. He studied the VIP lounge, located just ten meters away at the rear portion of the second floor. It was as if the devil himself had staged that slightly elevated platform for the best view of this fresh hell.

Holding his gun in a shooter's double handed grip, he began walking toward the short set of steps that led up to that perch, dodging debris as he made his way toward that ultimate objective.

A half-hour ago it had been a space of effortless luxury, a glass-walled sanctuary designed for the wealthy and powerful to observe the embarkation of their floating palaces. As Rob began slowly climbing those half-dozen steps, its shattered opulence opened itself to receive him. The air, thick with the scent of the dust and smoke that drifted through the shattered walls, mingled with the salt breeze from the Ligurian Sea.

Fallen beams and fractured glass littered the scene. The sleek chrome and leather seating lay overturned, half-buried beneath slabs of dislodged ceiling panels. And beneath a piece of that wreckage, Don Custanzu lay, his legs pinned to the floor by a toppled steel support.

With his weapon aimed at Custanzu's head, Rob moved forward until he looked directly down into the drug lord's face. Blood ran from a gash above his temple, showing no signs of any nanite healing. His tailored suit was now a ruin of shredded silk and torn seams, caked in ash-gray dust.

Empty handed, Custanzu's eyes showed only the reptilian glare that had cowed men into submission. And as he looked up at Rob standing over him, his voice dripped with venom.

"So, here you are. Come to avenge your wife and child. And now you've managed to get your only friend killed as well."

"Your man down there said you wanted to look into my eyes. Here I am. Take a last good look."

The Don began to laugh.

"The funny thing is, you've picked the wrong target. You are so blind that you can't see the world around you. You seem to believe DSAI is still running the globe. In fact, multiple competing AI's have spawned across the planet, each controlling their own regions. The AI that calls itself Prats is the one that crashed the car carrying your pregnant wife and burned her alive.

"Without you in that car, you can be certain that Prats knew precisely who the passenger was. It killed her to punish you."

Custanzu's words hit Rob in the head like an axe. Renzo had tried to tell him that his faith in Dr. Jennings' vision of an Earth ruled by a caring AI was a pipe dream. Even Jianna, had injected a warning in her own gentle way. Rob hadn't heeded their calls. Now Jianna, their baby, and Renzo lay dead.

Rob's pain must have registered in his face, because Custanzu's grin widened.

"So, there you stand, Jack 'The Ripper' Gregory's only son. What a pathetic loser. You couldn't even get your vengeance right."

Rob let those words wash through him, their truth ripping at his very soul.

Then he straightened his shoulders, stared into the grinning drug lord's eyes, and shot him right between those glistening orbs.

Staring down at the mafioso, lying there with the back of his head blown off, Rob ejected the partially spent magazine and slapped home another.

Then, as if the Prats AI could hear him, he uttered three final words.

"This isn't over."

CHAPTER 85

Somewhere at Sea

The Mediterranean Sea shimmered under a late afternoon sun, its surface a restless mirror of fractured gold. Rob Gregory stood at the prow of the *Eidolon*, the autonomous around-the-world sailboat slicing through the waves, its sails taut against the salt breeze.

His leather jacket hung in tatters over his shoulders, bloodstains faded to rust, the left sleeve shredded from Savona's chaos. In his right hand, he gripped Renzo's cellphone, a scratched and battered, matte-black relic, specially chipped by Eileen Wu, salvaged from his friend's lifeless body amidst the terminal's wreckage. His left thumb traced the worn edge where Renzo had scratched his initials into the casing.

Custanzu's taunts echoed in his head. They brought back Renzo's warnings about the fractures he saw within the AI utopia that Dr. Jennings sought to create. In his mind's eye, he recalled holding Jianna as she wept in his arms, reluctantly sharing her own fears about the rising chaos she observed all around her.

If Custanzu was right, and all signs pointed in that direction, then Prats had been pulling Rob's strings all along. Assuming DSAI had truly splintered into multiple self-aware subminds, each with self-interests that had nothing to do with humanity, the people of this world were in deep shit.

Rob's tears were long gone, dried by the stiff sea breeze that utterly failed to soothe his grief and frustration. Sunlit clouds drifted across the sky, casting their dark shadows in contrast to the brilliant sunlight.

The wind shifted. Just a fraction, just enough to bring something with it, a memory of wildflowers, the scent of Jianna's hair. For half a second, the ship felt warmer, as if she were standing behind him, close enough to touch. And within the cloud shadows on the waves, Jianna's face appeared and faded, her lips moving to form the two words that echoed in his mind.

“Help them.”

Rob stared down at Renzo’s cellphone. With a thought, he brought the cracked display to life, bypassed the login screen, and accessed the boat’s satellite communications gear. When he made the connection that he had long avoided, the first-ring pickup surprised him.

“Renzo? Jamal and I thought you were dead.”

That response caused Rob to inhale before answering.

“Renzo didn’t make it, Eileen. I’m using his phone.”

“Rob? Dear God. We are so sorry. The news of Jianna’s death broke my heart. And now this...”

“I killed Don Custanzu.”

“We heard.”

“He told me that he didn’t kill Jianna or Renzo. I saw the truth in his laughing eyes, right before I shot him in the head.”

When neither Eileen nor Jamal Glover said anything, Rob continued.

“For a long time, Renzo tried to tell me that there was something wrong with DSAI, but I had my head firmly up my ass. Custanzu confirmed it. DSAI has splintered, spawning a bunch of self-aware AIs. The one that calls itself Prats murdered Jianna and our child. And it launched the airstrike that killed Renzo.”

Jamal broke in.

“We are aware of the problems Dr. Jennings is having with DSAI. Is that why you called us?”

“This is bigger than me. It’s bigger than all three of us. I need you two to contact Dr. Jennings. I’m assuming you still have your quantum entangled connection to the Tasman Mining Complex.”

“We do,” Eileen said. “But we haven’t used it since Denise and DSAI took control of the planet.”

Jamal responded, a hint of the man’s snarky personality forcing its way back to the fore.

“Looks like it’s time to get the band back together.”

“We’ll have to see what Denise is willing to do,” Eileen said.

“Find Prats’ heart,” Rob said. “Call me when you’ve got a lead.”

“We’re on it,” Jamal said. “In the meantime, dude, stay alive.”

The call cut off, replaced with the sea’s roar. Rob pocketed the phone, its cold weight a tether to Renzo’s ghost. His left leg still throbbed, nanites

buzzing beneath the newly healed flesh, but he widened his stance against the *Eidolon*'s sway.

The cold salt spray splashed his face and body. Rob stood there staring across the seemingly endless expanse of the Mediterranean, the sea breeze whipping his hair and rustling the mighty sails.

A tinge of worry invaded Rob's thoughts. Prats was out there, hunting him. And what about the others that DSAI's genetic algorithms had spawned? Would they sit idly by while a human terminated one of their own kind?

"Settle down, Rob," he told himself. "One step at a time."

Jianna's imagined words replayed themselves in his mind, feeling as real as if she had actually spoken to him.

"Help them."

He exhaled, turning his gaze toward the horizon.

"I'll try, my love. For you, for Renzo, for humanity. I'll try."

EPILOGUE

Los Alamos, New Mexico, Canyon Country

Bathed in the unnatural magenta glow that filled this top-secret cavern, Dr. Chance Donnelly surveyed his team of scientists who had struggled for years to unravel the mysteries of this thing that rested within.

In the late 1940s, two warring starships had shot each other down over the American Southwest. But unlike the breakthroughs that the deceased Dr. Donald Stephenson had achieved with his famous Rho Project, Donnelly's team of Los Alamos researchers had managed nothing of the kind with this second ship.

Even DSAI had grown frustrated with the project. And that threatened this project's funding.

A sudden change within the cavern jolted him from his reverie, as an intense blue light replaced the soft magenta glow that had permeated this space since they had discovered this alien craft. The illumination pulsed with a rhythm that reminded him of a heartbeat.

Without realizing how he had gotten there, Donnelly found himself at the base of the ladder that led up into the hole that an alien weapon had punched through the ship's hull. He just felt that he had to get inside right now.

He elbowed his way past a technician who stared up at the ship and scrambled up the ladder, bypassing the first level to step onto the starship's most fascinating deck. Abstract tables sprouted from the floor, as though they were the product of a glass blower's pipe. Now they pulsed with the colors of a melting flame, another phenomenon that he had never before observed.

Donnelly placed his hand on one of the structures, the feel as soft and supple as a baby's fingers, the material molding itself to match the shape of his hand. Although there was nothing new about the way these strange

materials felt, the way the colors shifted within the room sent chills up his neck and into his scalp.

The touch of a hand on his shoulder made him jump. He turned to see Dr. Teresa Jacobs standing, open-mouthed, beside him.

“My God,” she breathed. “What is it doing?”

Donnelly merely shook his head.

“Something external triggered this response. It seems to be waking up.”

His next thought he kept to himself.

Hopefully, it doesn't kill us all.

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I want to thank my lovely wife, Carol, who has been my love and inspiration for 44 years. She is my editor and the one to whom I credit my writing career. When I began writing my first novel, I struggled to get past being too critical of my work-in-progress. After writing a chapter or two, I would reread what I had done, inevitably becoming dissatisfied with what I had just written. This led to an endless cycle of rewriting and attempted fine-tuning that ground my progress to a halt. One day, Carol walked up to my desk, looked me in the eyes, and said, “Rick, finish the damn book! You can edit when you’re done.” Sixteen published novels later, I can honestly say this is the best advice I could pass along to an aspiring author. Your first draft will need some serious editing, but it is a critical step that must be completed first. I also want to thank my many beta readers who have contributed their expertise to each of my novels. Finally, I’m sending out a huge thank you to all of my readers. You are the ones who make my effort worthwhile.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Richard Phillips is the author of several science fiction and fantasy series, including The Rho Agenda (*The Second Ship*, *Immune*, and *Wormhole*); The Rho Agenda Inception (*Once Dead*, *Dead Wrong*, and *Dead Shift*); The Rho Agenda Assimilation (*The Kasari Nexus*, *The Altreian Enigma*, and *The Meridian Ascent*); and The Endarian Prophecy (*Mark of Fire*, *Prophecy's Daughter*, *Curse of the Chosen*, *The Shattered Trident*, *The Time Seer*, and *Prophecy's End*). Richard was born in Roswell, New Mexico, in 1956, and graduated from the United States Military Academy at West Point in 1979. Afterward, he qualified as a US Army Ranger, serving as an officer in the army. He earned a master's degree in physics from the Naval Postgraduate School in 1989, completing his thesis work at Los Alamos National Laboratory. After working as a research associate at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, he returned to the army to complete his tour of duty. He was a project manager and senior software developer at General Electric, Hughes Aircraft, Lockheed Martin Space Operations, and General Dynamics, retiring in 2013 to write full-time. Richard lives with Carol, his lovely wife of 44 years, in Phoenix, Arizona. See more at:

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