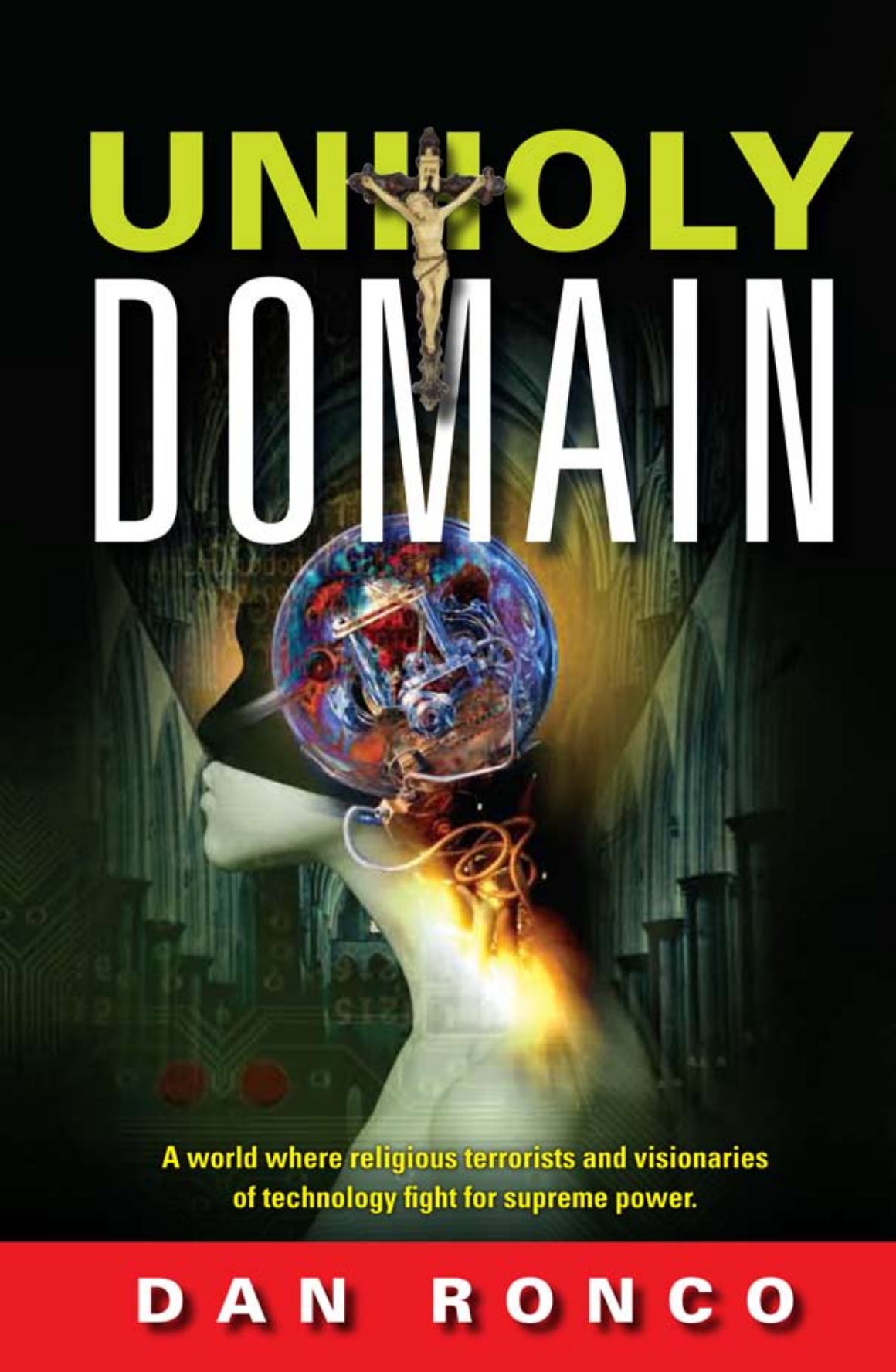


UNHOLY DOMAIN

A hand holding a crucifix and a globe of technology in a cathedral. The background is a dark, atmospheric cathedral interior with a glowing light source at the bottom. The hand is holding a crucifix with a figure on it, and a globe of the Earth with various technological elements like wires and a circuit board overlaid on it. The overall theme is the intersection of religion and technology.

**A world where religious terrorists and visionaries
of technology fight for supreme power.**

DAN RONCO

UNHOLY DOMAIN



A lethal computer virus roars across the Internet. More than a million people die before it is terminated and the computers restarted.

A decade later, civilization has crumbled in an economic collapse surpassing the Great Depression of the 1930s. The world is divided between those who think technology will save the world and those who believe it to be the tool of Lucifer.

David Brown, son of the virus's creator, believes his father innocent and sets out to clear his name and find his murderers. His efforts make him a target for both sides, the religious fanatics and the technos.

Dan Ronco's fast-paced what-if techno-thriller questions how far the divide between religious fundamentalism and scientific progress can grow before disaster befalls each side.

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DOMAIN





UNHOLY
DOMAIN

A NOVEL

DAN RONCO

KÜNATI

LARGO, USA

U N H O L Y D O M A I N

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For information, contact Kunati Inc., Book Publishers in both USA and Canada.

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In Canada: 75 First Street, Suite 128, Orangeville, ON L9W 5B6 CANADA,

or e-mail to info@kunati.com.

F I R S T E D I T I O N

Designed by Kam Wai Yu

Persona Corp. | www.personaco.com

ISBN-13: 978-1-60164-021-5

EAN 9781601640215

FIC000000 FICTION/General

Published by Kunati Inc. (USA) and Kunati Inc. (Canada).

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ronco, Dan.

Unholy domain : a novel / Dan Ronco. -- 1st ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-60164-021-5 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Cyberterrorism--Fiction. 2. Regression (Civilization)--Fiction. 3.

Technologists--Fiction. 4. Secret societies--Fiction. 5. Artificial intelligence--

Fiction. 6. Religious militants--Fiction. I. Title.

PS3618.O657U65 2008

813'.6--dc22

2008001055

D e d i c a t i o n

For Linda,
who carried the load
while I pounded keys
up on the third floor.

Acknowledgements

My deepest gratitude to my writing group; Christie D'Agostino, Mitzi Geese,
Janet Lavenger and especially our coach Justin Dwinell.
Special thanks to editor James McKinnon, graphic artist Kam Wai Yu
and publisher Derek Armstrong at Kunati;
and Rebecca Brown and Paul Nasto
for their support and critiques.

CHAPTER 1

The Great Depression of 2020 fostered a revival of organized crime. The black market in technology surpassed drugs and prostitution to become the primary source of revenue for these criminals.

◆ Dr. Jessica Owen-Wells, *The Great Depression of 2020*, copyright 2041, American Historical Society

In creating the thinking machine, man has made the last step in submission to mechanization; and his final abdication before this product of his own ingenuity has given him a new object of worship: a cybernetic god.

◆ Lewis Mumford, *The Transformations of Man*, 1956

Saturday evening, January 29, 2022

Moesha Jefferson lay hidden in the darkness of the condemned office park, waiting for the infidels to arrive. Across the street was a nearly empty parking garage attached to a glass-and-steel, ten-story office building. Once a manicured commercial park, the land was now choked with weeds.

Perfect for tonight.

Her spies had reported the Technos would meet in that building. Something big. She glanced past the office building at a lonely train

about half a mile away, pulling a long line of boxcars, then decided to move closer to the street. As she crept cautiously through tangled bushes in her black, form-fitting body suit, the grounds around her appeared deserted, but her enemies were clever.

The First Minister had asked her to slay the infidels, and she would give her life if necessary. This life on earth was unimportant, just a short prelude to everlasting happiness with the Savior.

Peering through the underbrush, she watched two pinpricks of light flicker in the distance. The pinpricks became headlights, then a long, dark sedan. The silver and black ghost silently cruised up the entry ramp of the parking garage. The sedan stopped at the first level, and its headlights flicked off. The garage's overhead lights revealed the hazy silhouettes of four men in the car.

Moesha's fingers stroked the silver amulet dangling from her neck. The coin-shaped charm was engraved with the familiar image of a bolt-action rifle above a jagged flame, the symbol of the Church of Natural Humans.

The sedan's rear windows slid down, and muzzles of what looked like two shotguns poked out, followed by a series of dull pops. With a low whoosh like a mild breeze, tiny projectiles scattered through the garage. The projectiles floated in the air, drifting whichever way the currents pushed them, shimmering in the yellow beams of the garage lights. A moment later, the muzzles disappeared back into the car.

"They're here," she whispered into the communicator attached to her collar.

"We're ready, Commander," came the muffled reply.

The dark sedan crept through the garage, turned up the ramp, entered the top level and paused. The powerful engine idled quietly.

Muzzles poked out of the side windows, and the dull light again shimmered with tiny projectiles. The muzzles retracted and the car glided to the center of the garage.

It was time. She crept forward.

The Lord willing, the infidels will taste our vengeance tonight.



Sam Armenta looked out the front passenger-side window, searching for hidden enemies in the garage. Through night-vision goggles, he scanned for the religious terrorists who hunted them. The black market in technology was very profitable, but the Army of God made it dangerous. He could not allow anyone to steal his “luggage”—not if he wanted to continue breathing.

Turning to the driver, Sam said, “Give me a quick circle.”

As the car traveled in a broad loop, Sam peered through his goggles, searching for a sign of the enemy. The garage appeared deserted.

Sam asked his driver, “Anybody breathing out there?”

Pete eyed a computer display attached to the window visor. The trillions of nanotechnology sensors they’d shot into the garage monitored air composition and transmitted the results back to the computer. The sensors detected carbon dioxide and other products of human respiration. Like tiny mechanical gnats, the sensors would home in on a concentration of these gases and surround the unlucky individual. Once the sensors detected someone, the gunmen in the back seat would finish him off.

“Garage is clear,” Pete murmured, eyes focused on the display.

“Okay,” Sam replied, scanning the garage one last time. “Pull up to the door.”

Pete guided the sedan forward and stopped near the entrance of the office building adjoining the garage. With the engine turned off, the chugging of a freight train resonated in the distance.

Sam pressed his fingers against his chest, feeling the supple webbed surface of his bulletproof vest. It would stop a slug from a pistol or a sniper's attempt from long range, even a high-powered rifle up close. His enemies weren't stupid, however, they had learned where to aim. Sam and the two soldiers in the back pushed open the doors and slipped out. Armed with Beretta laser pistols, they vanished into the darkness, methodically searching the parking garage. Sam had been brought up in the old ways; he never relied on technology completely.

While they searched the garage, Pete placed the computer on the car's hood and reviewed graph after graph of dancing, multi-colored patterns. He keyed a series of commands into the computer, checked the display and entered additional commands.

When satisfied no enemies were present, Sam returned to the car. The other two soldiers waited next to the driver-side door. In hushed tones, they told him the garage was clear.

"Time to get the luggage," Sam ordered.

The two gunmen followed Sam to the rear of the car and stood guard as he opened the trunk. Grunting, Sam lifted out a large brown case and placed it on the cement. Flanked by the gunmen, Sam pulled the case on its wheels to the building entrance.

One of his soldiers pushed open the glass door, and Sam cautiously entered the well-lit lobby. All three men removed their goggles and donned hoods with cutouts for the eyes, nose and mouth.

His two gunmen searched the lobby. Sam glanced nervously back through the door to the garage, where Pete had remained to monitor

the computer system. Things were proceeding smoothly, but he'd be happy when this job was over.

Once his soldiers finished searching the lobby, they met Sam at the elevator.

"Floor, please," the elevator's computer asked.

"Nine," Sam replied.

"Coming down immediately."

Seconds later, the elevator doors slid open and the men stepped inside. As they ascended, the men assumed defensive positions, with Sam crouched behind the luggage and the other two kneeling on either side. Sam aimed his laser pistol at the opening doors, but a dimly lit corridor revealed no enemies. They stepped out and walked quietly down the corridor, Sam pulling the luggage between his two guards.

Their steps echoed from the cement floor across the stillness of the empty building. They passed row after row of deserted cubicles, then turned a corner and headed toward a brightly lit conference room. As they approached, Sam detected three hooded men in dark suits just like his crew, seated at the far end of a long table.

He led the way into the conference room. Sam watched the masked men cautiously as he placed the brown case on the oak conference table. Everyone held their weapons on the ready as they sized each other up.

"I'm glad to see you're on time," Sam said to the men seated at the table.

One of them stood up, scraping his chair along the floor. "This is our sixth meeting."

The tension drained away. Both sides had spoken the code words properly, and they could now transact their business. Everyone

removed their masks, put their weapons on the table, and greeted their counterparts.

Smiling at the man who had spoken, Sam smoothed back his thick, dyed-black hair and said, "It's good to see you again, Vinnie. I trust business continues to be profitable among the families."

Vinnie shrugged, deep lines etched in his face.

"Not bad, Sam. We could sell much more technology than you provide." He gestured with his palms up. "Is the Domain so fucking rich money doesn't interest you anymore?"

Sam chuckled. "Let's do our business before the Feds catch on." He patted Vinnie on the shoulder. "You're going to like this."

All six men took their seats along the length of the conference table, three on a side. Sam pulled a small helmet-shaped computer from his pocket and placed it in the center of the table. The surface of the computer was a smooth gray, except for two buttons—one green, one red. He pressed the green button, which turned light blue, indicating that its visual and auditory sensors had been activated.

Sam raised his wristwatch to his mouth.

"Let's get this show on the road, Pete."

Two people flashed into view, one at each end of the conference table, life-sized holograms, a man and a woman. The visitors might be thousands of miles away, or they might be down the hall.

Sam had seen holograms before, but he was still mesmerized by the three-dimensional images shimmering in the air, their appearance so realistic, their movements so natural.

James Murphy, Sam's boss, was the man. Murphy was Chief of Security for the Domain, the clandestine organization that created most of the world's illegal technology. A middle-aged man of medium build, Murphy was devoid of distinguishing features. He could blend

into any crowd.

Sam had never seen Murphy in the flesh, only as a hologram. He didn't know if this was Murphy's true appearance, or a facade shielding his identity. He suspected few knew the real Murphy.

Sam also guessed Murphy's voice was electronically distorted, although its tone was always calm and pleasing. He chose his words carefully, each selected to provide total clarity. Sam had learned to listen to this complex man. Murphy rarely gave his word, but he always kept it. He treated his men fairly, but without compassion. If you performed well, Murphy would reward you generously. If you didn't, you disappeared. In his own way, Sam trusted Murphy.

"Hello, Maria," Murphy said. "Are you ready to complete our business?"

Sam had seen the petite leader of the New Jersey Technology Syndicate on television, but this was the first time Maria Vitullo had appeared at one of these meetings. Her image showed a hawk-nosed young woman with intense brown eyes. A revealing black dress drew attention to her generous cleavage, but failed to camouflage short, thick legs.

Id stick it in her anyway, Sam was surprised to find himself thinking.

The oldest child of New Jersey's Vitullo crime family, she had broken tradition to become the boss of the male-dominated organization. The story was—Sam didn't know if it was true—she had executed her uncle in order to gain unchallenged power.

"Good to see you, Murphy," Vitullo replied, glancing at the case. Her voice was respectful, a business executive greeting her main supplier. "If your new product is as good as you claim, we are ready to distribute it at maximum capacity."

Sam knew Vitullo was both vicious and intelligent, a dangerous woman to deal with under any circumstances. Vitullo had been the first to recognize the potential wealth and power of a technology black market. When the government began stalling the development of legal technology ten years earlier, she had rapidly built a huge criminal organization to sell illegal technology. In addition, she had funded scientists fed up with the government's Luddite policies.

The mob had become a venture capitalist in this strange, new world.



Vitullo respected Murphy, but she didn't trust him. Or anyone else. She had been working with him for five years, ever since Murphy had selected her to be the Domain's distributor for the northeast market. The man was an enigma, just like his organization. She had searched for years, but had failed to penetrate the Domain's secrecy. She didn't know Murphy's identity or that of any other Domain leader.

She watched Murphy stroke his chin, a habit she found irritating.

Her investigators had searched the net, but every bit of information about the Domain had been removed. She had bribed and then threatened public officials, but they knew nothing, or they were too frightened to talk. She had even bribed an informer to search the FBI's files, but they contained nothing useful. The Domain remained a shadow organization, invisible and deadly.

People who investigated the Domain disappeared. Sometimes they vanished during the investigation, sometimes months afterward. She had been forced to use outside contractors once her people

discovered the pattern, but nothing worked.

She hated being dependent on something she didn't control.

Sensing the Domain was more interested in the broad distribution of their technology than the money, she suspected a mission far beyond criminal profiteering. Whatever Murphy's game, she planned to get a piece of it.

Then she would take it all.

She had never met him in the flesh. He always insisted on virtual meetings, although she had suggested a quiet rendezvous anywhere on his terms.

I'd like to get him in my bed. Then we'd see if he could maintain his composure.

She saw Murphy nod to that fat pig Sam Armenta, who could barely take his eyes off her breasts. He reminded her of Ralph Aprillo, the new Senator from New York. Aprillo had tried to cop a feel at a fundraiser at her compound in Saddle Brook. Someday she'd get even for that one.

Armenta opened the luggage and lifted out a young girl. Vitullo didn't let her expression waver in spite of her surprise. It had to be a robot, but she couldn't tell for sure. Vitullo leaned forward to get a closer look as Sam placed the sleeping girl on the table.

She appeared to be about nine years old, with dark brown hair, cut short. A pretty face, but not perfect; the nose was slightly too long and the lips thin. A few minor facial blemishes spotted her skin.

Very realistic.

The robot wore a short-sleeved blue and white dress. Its arms and legs were slender, but well formed for its design age.

"Sarah, wake up," Sam said.

The robot opened its eyes and smiled. "Hello, Sam."

Vitullo experienced a sudden chill. *The facial expression was almost perfect, no longer the wooden dummy.*

“Sit up, please,” Sam said.

“Okay,” it replied, sitting up smoothly.

More grace than a human child.

“You’re very pretty, Sarah,” Vitullo said.

“Thanks.” Sarah turned in Vitullo’s direction and smiled sweetly.

“I don’t know you. What’s your name?”

“Why doesn’t it recognize me?” Vitullo asked Murphy.

“This model doesn’t have an interface to the net. Sarah has to learn. Just like a human child.”

Vitullo nodded and turned back to Sarah.

“You may call me Ms. Moravec.”

“Pleased to meet you, Ms. Moravec.”

“Sarah, I haven’t seen you for several days,” Sam said. “Can you give me a hug?”

Sarah smiled coyly at Sam then crawled across the table and threw its arms around his neck. Sam returned the hug.

“Thank you, Sarah. Please tell Ms., uh, Moravec, about your capabilities.”

“Sure.” Facing Vitullo again, the robot said, “I’m able to speak at any age level from toddler to adult. In order to describe my capabilities better, I’m switching to adult.” Sarah paused, and then continued, “Technically, I am classified as the CLD-13F robotic system. I have been designed to simulate many, but not all, the abilities of a typical girl of nine years.”

Sarah’s voice had lost the high-pitched squeak of childhood and spoke with the modulation of a well-educated young woman.

Sarah walked gracefully around the table and stopped in front of

Vitullo's hologram.

"I am configured with a comprehensive package of adaptive learning software. Each robot has thirty-eight characteristics the customer may modify. I just gave you an example—language capability. Although the initial language level is set at nine years, the owner may reset it to any age desired."

Vitullo had become vaguely uneasy as she studied the robot.

How far this alien intelligence has come. What if the Domain could take control of this robot from its owner? Could the robots be an army in waiting, scattered in the homes of ordinary citizens?

In a matter-of-fact voice, Vitullo said, "Safety code, included in all previous robots, prohibits any action that might harm a human. Do you obey the entire robot safety code?"

Sarah smiled. "Yes, I do."

Vitullo returned the smile.

"Very good. Can the safety code be overridden in any way? Could you harm a human or allow a human to be harmed?"

Before Sarah could answer, Murphy chuckled. "Come on, Maria. You know we would never develop a robot that doesn't obey the safety code. The world learned a harsh lesson—PeaceMaker—from that lunatic Ray Brown."

"As you say," Vitullo replied.

"You sound skeptical."

Vitullo's lips formed a smile. "You'll say whatever is in the Domain's interest. I say that out of respect for your intelligence. Please respect mine."

Murphy shook his head, apparently bemused. "Very well, but I can assure you this model obeys the safety code in every way."

"Let's say it were possible to override the safety code," Vitullo said,

watching Murphy intently. “Suppose a person knew how to bypass a section of code.” Before Murphy could interrupt, Vitullo said, “Bear with me, please.”

Murphy shrugged and placed his palms on the table. The Domain soldiers sat straight up, ready for action. Tension seeped back into the conference room.

“Suppose the safety code could be overridden,” Vitullo insisted, pressing hard for a reaction. “Robots all over the world would rise up as an army, attacking people according to the commands of their master.”

She paused, but Murphy’s face revealed nothing. Had she gone too far? “But of course the Domain would never create a robot containing such dangerous code. Would you, my friend?”

His eyes never leaving Vitullo, Murphy ignored the question. “Sarah, please continue with your presentation,” he said.

As Sarah continued, Vitullo saw endless possibilities. Each customer could configure Sarah according to his own needs. Even more important, before selling them to customers, Vitullo’s people might be able to teach the robots to obey hidden commands.

Murphy would never give me a robot that could override the safety code, would he?

She scrutinized Murphy for any hints, but he maintained a pleasant friendliness throughout the presentation, revealing nothing. She decided to have her engineers take the robot apart and see what made it tick.



Outside the building, Pete continued to monitor his computer. He followed the meeting through the display, pleased to see everything

going so well. His computer acted as the server for the conference, transmitting data between Murphy and Vitullo and the helmet computer.

Suddenly, the conference room disappeared and the display flashed a blinking message in large, yellow letters: POTENTIAL INTRUDER. In addition to being a hologram server, the computer continued to monitor signals from the billions of sensors scattered throughout the garage. The yellow signal warned him the sensors had detected an intruder near the entrance of the garage.

Pete pulled his Beretta laser pistol, ducked behind the car hood, and located the intruder on the computer display. A map of the nearby area identified someone on the sidewalk hurrying past the garage. The person then crossed the street and appeared to get into a car and drive away. Pete relaxed slightly.

Probably someone from the office complex who had worked late.

It was the last thought he ever had.



Moesha felt the familiar recoil of the Armalite rifle against her shoulder. The weapon's ping was followed by the thump of a high-powered bullet crashing through a human skull; the driver's head blew apart, blood scattering across the blacktop. The man's body slid down the side of the car and flopped to the garage floor. Moesha lowered her weapon and stepped out of the shadows. She crept across the garage to examine the decapitated body.

Assured the gangster was dead, she pulled off her gas mask and portable tank, which had captured her breath, leaving nothing for the sensors to detect. She quickly scanned the garage and then spoke into her communicator, "The driver has been eliminated. You may

approach.”

Moesha looked at the driver’s computer, which now showed thousands of sensors moving toward her. The display had turned red.



Vitulo thought about the possibilities this technology offered as Sarah continued with the presentation. Sarah was a breakthrough technology; the robot was almost human in many ways.

We can sell millions, all secretly trained to obey me.

Vitulo knew Murphy was watching her. Although the robot would be very profitable, she sensed a deeper purpose. Still trying to see what Murphy would reveal, she turned to him.

“Of course, you realize how dangerous it will be to distribute Sarah. The robot’s humanness will anger many, especially the fanatics in the Army of God. They will regard Sarah as a tool of the Devil, and become even more determined to eliminate the Technos, as they call us.”

Murphy said nothing, so Vitullo asked, “Why did you make the robot so human?”

Everyone’s eyes were on Murphy, even Sarah’s. Murphy stared at Vitullo for a long moment, making her uncomfortable.

“Sarah is one step along the path, Maria. The path was always there, we are merely the first to walk it.”

Vitulo pondered his words and forced a smile. “I don’t understand, but I will do my job. How many robots am I to sell?”

“Four million over the next three months.”

“I can’t sell that many so quickly. What’s the robot’s price?”

Stroking his chin, Murphy smiled thinly. “That will be your

decision.”

“How much will you charge me for each robot?”

Murphy’s eyes darkened, losing their veneer of friendly partnership. It was the first time he had allowed his feelings to surface, and the tension gouged her chest.

“There will be no charge,” he said, still wearing his thin smile.

What the hell?

The Domain had built a robot that was almost human, with capacity to learn and adapt. Millions would be sold, but they weren’t charging her a cent for it? In addition, Sarah would infuriate their enemies.

What is that madman planning?



A barrage of bullets shattered the conference room windows, killing many of the Technos before they could pull their laser pistols. Coming through the door spraying automatic fire, Moesha finished off the last of the enemies. Weapons ready, her men followed her into the room.

Only a single infidel—the one named Sam—remained alive, lying on the floor with blood trickling from the wound in his forehead. The two holograms had disappeared, but not before she memorized their faces. She swore to the Lord she would hunt them down.

Her soldiers surrounded the table, pinning down the arms and legs of the struggling Sarah-Devil. Moesha stood over Sam and kicked him hard in the side. He groaned and then looked up at her. She would have liked to shatter his skull with a kick, but she needed information before he died.

She pointed her Armalite at his head.

“Tell me who you are, and I won’t kill you.”

Sam coughed. “Go to hell.”

The Techno’s blasphemy angered her, and the rifle sputtered.

She turned to the Sarah-Devil to examine it more carefully. The robot had stopped struggling and was eyeing her curiously. Moesha shuddered as she recognized the intelligence gleaming through its eyes.

Just as the First Minister had prophesied.

The creature said to Moesha, “Hello. I don’t recognize you. Please tell me your name.”

Moesha grasped the amulet hanging from her neck and kissed it. She turned to her men and hissed, “Abomination.”

Attacking the distributors of these robots wasn’t enough; she had to destroy the laboratories where the Technos created the creatures. The next assault would hit the infidels’ core.

She would bring the inferno to their universities.

CHAPTER 2

Instead of remaining true to our destiny, humanity is becoming the sorcerer's apprentice, creating a robot force that may sweep us aside.

◆ First Minister Adam Jordan, the Church of Natural Humans, 2016

Although it seems far in the past, it was barely a decade ago that the world was devastated by PeaceMaker, the terrible virus that shut down the Internet. Everything depended on the Internet at that time—the power for homes and factories went out and many froze to death; massive accidents occurred as traffic systems failed; netphones fell silent and television went dark, making communication virtually impossible; food couldn't be shipped to the supermarkets; all the looting and killing—it is almost too horrible to think about.

◆ Daphne Hayden, DNS news anchor, 2022

Sunday, January 30, 2022

Waiting on the front steps, Claire gazed through the immense front entrance of the church. The view was familiar and yet unsettling. Although she had been a member of the Church of Natural Humans for more than two years, she had never seen so many people attend

a service. All around her, orderly groups of the faithful entered and took their seats. A network camera crew was setting up in the narthex, surrounded by several church security officers keeping the crowd away. The pressure of the crowd forced her through the entrance and past a ten-foot statue of Jesus on the cross. As she left the narthex and stepped into the nave, her eyes gazed upward; all five levels of balconies were packed.

The Church of Natural Humans had grown from a small sect with fewer than twenty thousand followers, mostly in the South, to a thriving, growing organization with forty million members in the US and thirty million more worldwide. The Church's founder, Adam Jordan, claimed that God commanded him to stop the advance of unholy technology. In the aftermath of PeaceMaker, the Church's core message—that advanced technology was dangerous to humanity's physical and moral survival—had touched the souls of decent folk everywhere and shown them the path to salvation. She was blessed to be one of them.

Today would be unique, the first televised service permitted by the Church. Adam Jordan, their Founder and First Minister, would speak during the service. There were rumors the Church had captured one of the Technos, those horrible scientists that worshipped the Devil, and would execute him in front of the congregation. She shivered. That could never happen; it must be just a rumor.

She made the sign of the cross. Thank the Lord she had found the Church.

Her eyes swept over the interior of the vast building. Its rounded arches and dark interior resembled a Romanesque Catholic cathedral, but with a more functional, severely simple appearance. A plain wooden stage, holding a single row of straight-backed chairs in front

of a low wooden altar, rose at the far end of the nave. No statues, candles or traditional decorative objects intruded on the stage's stark appearance. A huge stone fireplace covered the entire back wall of the stage, and a row of smaller fireplaces lined each side of the nave, providing heat and flickering light. A Winchester bolt-action rifle, its barrel polished to gleam in the light of the flames, was mounted above each fireplace.

I remember what that means.

In the Church's doctrines, the fireplace and rifle symbolized a man's home and his power to defend it. One of the ministers had taught her that.

With a shiver, she realized it was almost as cold in the building as it was outside. The fireplaces were impressive, but they didn't provide sufficient heat for so huge a building.

Broad skylights dwarfed a line of fourteen stained-glass windows built high in the clerestory above each balcony, depicting the Stations of the Cross. The skylights provided adequate lighting during the day; at night the dark sky dominated.

A soft hand on her upper arm intruded in her thoughts. A familiar, heart-faced woman smiled kindly at her and gently guided her along the stone floor of the nave.

This Sister is so nice. What is her name?

From a hidden organ, somber music filled the air. The faithful continued to pour in and take their assigned seats. The Sister guided her to an empty pew not far from the entrance, and they shuffled in about halfway.

Sister Patricia, Claire recalled, that's her name.

Claire breathed hard, and her hand clutched at the bronze amulet dangling from her neck. She was to be called today, even though she

had sinned. She looked down at the coin-shaped charm pressed with the image of a bolt-action rifle above a jagged flame, then lifted the cold metal to her mouth and kissed it. She had never spoken to the congregation before, and she was nervous.

Gradually the pews filled. Familiar organ music echoed through the cavernous building. Claire pulled out her prayer book, read briefly from it then stuffed it back in her purse. She squeezed shut her eyes, and the beautiful music washed over her.

She was disappointed when the last notes drifted away. Minutes stretched by, and she began to fidget, until the faithful stood up in unison. Twelve ministers, stern-faced men and women, entered in pairs from a door at the side of the giant fireplace. Wearing dark blue cassocks that brushed the tops of their shoes, the ministers fanned out across the stage and stood in front of their seats. The top buttons of each cassock were open, revealing a shoulder holster and pistol. A large silver amulet sparkled from each minister's neck. When all the ministers were in place, they sat in unison, leaving the center chair empty.

The church retained its eerie quiet as the congregation anticipated the arrival of the Holy Prophet, First Minister Adam Jordan. Claire leaned to the side, peering around the man seated in the pew in front of her, making sure she had a clear view.

The seconds stretched to minutes.

Suddenly a small, wiry man seemed to come out of nowhere and strode to the front of the stage, gleaming in a bright spotlight and accompanied by the energetic blare of organ music. Claire was one of the first to rise and stand at attention.

The First Minister wore a white cassock, open at the top with his shoulder holster and gun exposed. Although middle-aged, he

walked with the quickness of an athlete. His gold amulet swayed across his chest in rhythm with his long, confident strides. Stopping at the front of the stage, his stern presence dominated the crowd. The music played to a crescendo and abruptly ended.

Claire pressed the amulet against her chest.

“Welcome to the Church of Natural Humans,” he said in a gravelly voice. “I am First Minister Adam Jordan.”

What a handsome man!

High cheekbones, a thin, straight nose and a shock of long, gray hair falling over his shoulders. Piercing brown eyes. A lined but chillingly beautiful face. A long, jagged scar on his right cheek.

After gazing over the crowd, he threw his head back, stretched his arms to the sky and bellowed, “I am a Natural Human.”

“I am a Natural Human,” the congregation roared back. The rumble of voices cascaded across the church, twelve thousand souls, united in belief, reciting the *Prayer for the Lord’s Creations*.

Claire closed her eyes and joined in the recitation:

“My mind and my body are human. My soul has not been altered by Technology. We will destroy the Devil and protect the Earth.”

Claire opened her eyes and stared at her leader. Jordan’s wiry body swayed lightly, responding to the crowd in a slow, sensuous dance. His eyes unfocused, Jordan stretched his arms again and thundered, “Glory be to the Lord and His Creations.”

A spiritual bliss danced across the faces of his followers, and the church reverberated with their joyous response.

“Glory be to the Lord and His Creations.”

Once again, the church grew quiet. Jordan walked to the edge of the stage and down the wooden stairs, his heels clacking on each step. Claire lost sight of him, but his steps echoed through the church as

he strode down the stone floor of the center aisle. The faithful knelt, bowed their heads and kissed their amulets as he passed, like a summer storm blowing through the trees. At the center of the church under a huge skylight, he came to a halt and gazed over his followers. Claire felt his eyes briefly rest upon her, cleansing her with his faith.

She didn't deserve to be called. She couldn't face all these good people. They should have given her something ... helped her. A vague recollection of a silver chalice, filled to the brim with a bitter red liquid, passed through her mind. Maybe they had given her something—she couldn't remember.

The flickering light of the fireplaces played across Jordan's face, highlighting the jagged scar. Then he abruptly tilted his head back, stretched his arms to the sky and cried out, "I am a Natural Human."

A wall of sound thundered as the faithful responded, "I am a Natural Human."

Jordan again led the faithful in prayer:

"I condemn artificial intelligence and non-human beings.

These are abominations in the sight of God.

They will be flushed to the bowels of the Earth."

Jordan stretched his arms and shouted, "Glory be to the Lord and His Creations."

With one unified and unyielding voice, the faithful responded, "Glory be to the Lord and His Creations."

Rising from their knees, the chosen broke into a torrent of applause. Many screamed their devotion to God, promising to kill Technos and defeat Lucifer.

Suddenly lightheaded, Claire grasped the front of the pew. What was wrong with her? She tried to think, but her mind had grown

fuzzy. Sister Patricia was intently watching her, so she joined in the applause.

Jordan basked in the adulation then lifted one hand to stop the tumultuous roar. Suddenly it was quiet. The breathing of the crowd was palpable now, like that of soldiers before battle.

The First Minister strode back to the stage, his amulet swinging with each step. As he passed, believers dropped to their knees and recited the *Prayer for the Lord's Creations*. The organ played in the background.

When Jordan reached the stage, he turned and spoke. His voice sounded much older than his years. Rumbling from deep in his throat, gravelly and sometimes indistinct, it could quickly turn from comfort to threat. His voice surprised her the first time she met him; it seemed to have taken residence in the wrong body.

"This is a special moment for all of us," Jordan said. "For the first time, we welcome non-believers to behold a service of the Church of Natural Humans. I am filled with happiness I can invite my fellow humans across the net to experience the joy and brotherhood of our Church."

Sadness and a hint of anger played across his face. "Today marks the tenth anniversary of the attack by PeaceMaker, the Devil's software virus. On that horrendous day, the world learned of the danger the Technos had brought forth. Dominated by Lucifer, the Techno Raymond Brown, PeaceMaker's creator, attempted to crush our civilization."

Claire shrank into her seat. Sister Patricia patted her hand. Startled, Claire turned to look into the Sister's forgiving eyes.

"That danger is still with us," Jordan said, "growing with every passing day. Humanity is at great risk, and that is why you must

hear me on this specific day.”

Jordan paced again, his long, powerful strides carrying him across the stage. He stopped and faced the crowd. “Lucifer has unleashed a great Depression to weaken us. Poverty and disease are everywhere. Honest people scratch out a living while Technos and their allies live well. Crime has exploded, and it is no longer safe to step outside our homes.” His voice boomed. “Anyone with eyes can see our world is being torn apart. Lucifer laughs at us while his disciples, the Technos, tempt us to take another bite of the accursed apple.

“Do not think the danger is lessened because Ray Brown has been slain. His spawn, David Brown, walks the earth. Lucifer has given him the power to create abominations just like his father. David Brown must be stopped before he builds an entity even more monstrous than PeaceMaker.”

As Jordan walked back and forth, Claire followed his every movement. “Lucifer’s evil power is great, but he cannot rule Earth while the Lord’s children remain. He has been waiting in hell for all eternity—waiting for humanity to meddle with powers we cannot control. The time has arrived; Lucifer has unleashed technology to destroy all Natural Humans.”

Jordan’s gaze swept across the church. “We have entered the Apocalypse,” he roared.

Many of the faithful blessed themselves, others dropped to their knees.

“I must tell you this; Lucifer’s plan is working.”

Jordan’s dark eyes skewered the faithful.

“Every day we take another bite of the sweet fruit of technology. Every day we discover another way to change our genes. Every day we learn another way to increase the intelligence of our computers.

Every day we chip away at our claim to humanity.

“THIS ... MUST ... STOP ... NOW!”

Claire cringed.

“The Lord formed the Church of Natural Humans to block Lucifer’s evil design. He revealed to me the power of a human untouched by artificial enhancements. He unveiled the power that will save us—the military wing of our Church.

“The Army of God!

“The Army of God is the fist that will smash the Technos and cleanse the Earth. Humanity will have a beautiful world inhabited only by natural creatures, living as God planned. A world designed by the Creator for the salvation of the human race.”

He strode back to center stage, footsteps echoing.

“Today we celebrate the war against technology. This crusade is dangerous, and it is with great sadness I ask you to take up arms.” Jordan’s eyes glistened. “From this day forward, all Natural Humans will seek out and destroy technology wherever it is unearthed. Computers must be smashed, software wiped clean. Anything that simulates human thinking must be eradicated.

“We must also stop the corruption of our bodies and minds. Natural Humans must stop those who would alter our genes and create abominations outside of the Creator’s design. Natural Humans must smash the research labs that tamper with our genes, replace our organs with mechanical parts or integrate our minds with those of machines. Natural Humans must obliterate the hospitals and clinics that do not respect God’s will.”

Jordan gazed over his followers. His eyes paused again on Claire. “And most important,” he said, “we must find the Antichrist and burn the life from it in the great fireplace of this church.

“The choice is simple: defeat the Technos and claim this Earth for the Lord.” Jordan swept his eyes over his transfixed congregation. “Or burn in hell for all eternity as Devil-spawned abominations rule our world.”

The crowd howled. It began as a low growl and swelled to a frightening roar. Hatred for the Technos swept through the church.

Two burly Natural Men appeared at the back of the stage. They dragged forward a struggling little girl dressed in a plain maroon dress and a white lab coat. A black cowl covered her eyes.

The girl begged the men to set her free, but they dragged her to the front of the stage. The congregation buzzed, but quieted at a gesture from the First Minister.

The girl’s head turned from side to side. Claire wondered what crime against God this poor soul must have committed.

“Who’s out there?” the girl shouted. “Why have you taken me?”

Jordan took a few steps and stopped in front of her. The church was silent, except for the voice of the terrified girl, “Someone is out there. Please talk to me!”

Jordan slowly drew his revolver and pointed it at her chest. Claire gasped, riveted to the scene.

A young man burst out of a middle pew and ran toward Jordan screaming, “No more killing!” He was tackled from behind. Several guards pummeled him then dragged his limp body out a side door.

Jordon shouted, “What shall we do with the Technos?”

The congregation answered, “Kill them all.”

“No, please!” the girl begged.

The first gunshot brought the crowd to a roar as the bullet smashed into the girl’s chest. Her body jerked back, but the two men held her upright.

Claire found herself screaming out of control, terrified for the girl, but the Technos had violated God's will. She looked around—the church was a sea of angry, clean-cut faces.

Jordan shot the girl repeatedly, even though it appeared the first bullet had taken her life. Each gunshot echoed with the previous one until the whole building reverberated with murderous intensity.

Claire gasped for breath, lightheaded. Jordan, the faithful, the church and the revolver fused into a single, seething entity. Her legs felt weak, she held on to the pew.

Jordan tried to speak, but stopped as the crescendo continued out of control. The roar gradually evolved into a chant, "Death to the Technos ... Death to the Technos ..."

Arms folded, Jordan waited calmly. Finally, the mob's passion ebbed and the chant faded.

"Remove the clothes," Jordan shouted.

The men stripped off her coat and pulled down her dress, revealing half a dozen holes in the girl's torso.

"Does this thing bleed?" Jordan asked.

There wasn't a drop of blood. The congregation buzzed in confusion.

Jordan stuck his fingers through the holes and pulled hard. The front of the girl's chest flipped open, revealing a dense organization of electronics. The faithful cursed, but quieted when Jordan raised his hand.

"This is what the Technos are releasing into the world. This robot—this abomination—is Lucifer's replacement for natural humans, assembled from chemicals, electricity and inorganic materials." Jordan's voice boomed, "How many of these Frankensteins walk among us?"

The robot's heels scraped across the wooden floor as the two men dragged it to the rear of the stage and out of sight, a sound Claire felt to her bones.

Sister Patricia suddenly pulled her into a firm embrace, pressing Claire's face into the sister's neck. Sister Patricia pressed a wet pad against Claire's nose, and an overwhelming scent rushed up her nostrils and invaded her mind. Claire gasped and tried to pull away, but the Sister was too strong.

"You will feel wonderful in a moment," Sister Patricia whispered.

Fog lifted from her mind, revealing the words that had been planted there, and Claire stopped struggling.

"The Apocalypse is here," Jordan said in a quiet voice. "The Antichrist seeks to eradicate humanity. Join us now. The ranks of Natural Humans are growing to meet this unholy threat. Many outsiders have seen the light, sometimes from the most unexpected source."

Sister Patricia released her grip, and Claire straightened in her seat. She felt alert, all her senses working in harmony, as if she had awakened from a deep slumber. Sister Patricia smiled at her then turned to listen to the First Minister.

Jordan walked to the front of the stage. "For those not familiar with our ways, our custom is to have a member of the Church give witness at our services. Today the Lord has blessed us with a most unusual woman." Jordan lifted his head, peering toward the rear of the building. "Claire, please come here and stand by me."

Her contentment ebbed. She had known she would be called, but she wasn't worthy. Her legs were stone. Deep down, to her core, she was a sinner. These good people would never accept someone so worthless. Turning to Sister Patricia, Claire wanted to explain she

couldn't give witness, but the words were there, placed in her mind, burning to be spoken. Patricia's eyes glowed with happiness, and she stood and offered Claire her hand.

So forgiving.

Claire rose to her feet and shuffled to the center aisle. Head down, she tottered toward the stage, her eyes focused on the amulet dangling like a shield in front of her chest.

Jordan took her hand as she climbed the steps. She was surprised when he hugged her then guided her to the proper spot on the stage.

Jordan turned to the crowd. "This is Claire Brown, sister of the Techno Raymond Brown."

A buzz of whispers rippled through the church. After gazing over the crowd, Jordan walked away to sit with the Ministers.

Claire kept her eyes down and remained silent. She tried to speak, but only mumbled words came out. The crowd began to whisper again. She knew what to say, the words glowed in her mind; she just had to find the courage.

A female voice shouted, "We don't want the sister of the Devil-maker in our church."

Other voices cried out; she felt anger spread among the faithful.

She just had to say the words in her mind and everything would be all right.

"I am a Natural Human."

The crowd grew quiet as she recited the prayer.

"My mind and my body are human. My soul has not been altered by Technology."

A woman in the second row kneeled; others followed.

"We will destroy the Devil and protect the Earth. Glory be to the Lord and His Creations."

A soft rustle came from the pews as thousands of believers kneeled.

Claire shuffled her feet and cleared her throat. She coughed up phlegm and then swallowed it, leaving a vile taste. *The chalice ... the bitter liquid.* She cleared her throat again and allowed the words to be spoken.

“For many years, I was a lonely woman without hope or purpose.” She looked across the congregation. “Then I found salvation through the First Minister and the Church of Natural Humans. I now have a purpose in life. I would like to share my story with my fellow humans here and with those of you in the wilderness still searching for an answer. I pray my story will help you find salvation among your fellow humans.”

She looked down, ashamed. “If he had survived, my brother would have been fifty-two, just two years older than me. We were born into a troubled home. Our parents were not evil, but I now understand they were lost souls.” The faithful murmured sympathetically. “My father, God save his soul, was a Techno and an atheist.”

The words were there, in her mind. They were her words—they had to be— but she had never spoken so well. She concentrated on the words. It was all so clear.

Claire raised her eyes and gazed across the church, finding sympathetic faces. “My mother was a cold shell of a woman, without love of God or man. Was there any doubt my brother would become Lucifer’s tool? Or that I would become a weak copy of my mother ... a useless collection of bone and tissue imitating a human? Looking back, I can see Lucifer’s hand crushing the humanity out of our family, so he could corrupt Ray’s genius.”

Taking a deep breath, Claire continued. “My brother and I fought

for our humanity, but we did not understand the power of the Enemy. We knew our lives held no meaning, but we didn't realize the Lord was missing. My brother tried to fill his life with technology, and Lucifer drove him without mercy. Technology became addictive, but it did not provide him with the happiness he craved. Then he became an alcoholic. His life swung back and forth between alcohol and technology, each cycle worse than the previous one. He tried to break free—to become human—but Lucifer had him in a death grip." She lifted her chin and stared over the crowd. "I'll tell you this about my brother; he fought long and hard, but in the end, he succumbed to Lucifer and brought forth the beast, PeaceMaker.

"I was not so valiant. I quickly fell prey to drugs and alcohol. I would do anything to fill my body with chemicals. I lied, cheated, and whored— anything to get chemicals, anything to keep me from thinking about the emptiness of my existence. I hated being sober. Whenever the drugs cleared from what remained of my mind, I was forced to confront my sins." Tears clouded her vision. "I even tried suicide, but I failed at that, too."

Coughing racked her body, and she struggled to recover her breath.

Such a wasted life.

"Finally, a miracle happened. One day a Sister found me and brought me to the Church. They provided food for my body and, more importantly, my soul. The good people of the Church helped me to understand what had happened to my brother and to me." Pointing to Adam Jordan, she said, "That good man helped me to find salvation. He has given me the chance to do something decent with my life."

She stared defiantly into the camera. "We must stop the advance

of technology! I will do everything I can, but the Enemy is strong and merciless. We need your strength. Please join us. I beg you; help us defeat the Technos.”

The church exploded with applause. Smiling, Adam Jordan hurried to Claire and embraced her. As she tottered down the aisle toward her seat, the crowd applauded. Recollection seeped into her mind.

The silver chalice ... the First Minister ... he'd been the one who taught her the words ... such a bitter liquid, but it had washed away her sins. She felt contentment, just as the First Minister had promised. The confession had completed her transformation to a state of grace. The guilt had been cleansed from her soul. She was a Natural Human.

The First Minister's voice boomed over her shoulder. “Bless you, Claire. Bless you for your courage and your compassion. You have traveled from the gateway of hell and we admire you.”

Turning to glare into the camera, he thundered, “If Claire Brown can find her way to us, so can you! If Claire Brown can stand up to the Devil, so can you. If Claire Brown can find salvation, you, too, can give your life grace and meaning.

“I ask you, join your fellow humans in the war against Lucifer. Join Claire ... join me ... in the great crusade against the Technos. Dedicate your life to humanity. Find your destiny in the Church of Natural Humans.”

The organ blared as Jordan turned, walked to the back of the stage, and disappeared. As he walked, the faithful chanted the *Prayer for the Lord's Creations*.

When Adam Jordan's war had run its bloody course, human history would forever be changed.

CHAPTER 3

An uneasy peace exists between believers and Technos. Most people draw clear boundaries between religion and technology, but what if they come into conflict? What would put them in fundamental conflict? Or is the question who rather than what?

◆ Steve Bonini's Diary, 2014

Monday, January 31, 2022

David forced his eyes open and blinked at the sunlight streaming through his apartment window. His stomach felt queasy, and he kicked himself for staying so late at the bars. He recalled going out to the car with Cindy-what's-her-name, but everything was a blur.

Turning his head to focus on the alarm clock, he groaned when he saw it was almost 11 a.m. He knew he should drag himself out of bed and catch up on his homework. Now in his fourth year at the University of Washington, he was still a junior because he had dropped so many classes. Although testing had revealed a genius level IQ, his grades were mediocre. Not that he gave a shit.

Is Cindy still here? He reached over, but the bed was empty. Too bad. She must have decided to sneak away before her friends discovered that she had slept with the infamous David Brown.

He blinked his eyes, but his vision remained blurry. *That girl could sure suck down the beer.* He smiled, thinking about last night's

encounter. *She knew how to use that body, too.* He scratched his head and fought the temptation to go back to sleep.

On the wall was a poster of Marilyn Monroe, a long-ago sex symbol. A blast of wind from a passing subway had blown her dress upwards, revealing a beautiful pair of legs. Although Marilyn attempted to push down her dress, a mischievous smile lit up her face. The honest beauty and pure enjoyment of that poster always made him feel good. Marilyn died young, a misfit, but she had left her mark. Maybe he would leave his mark, too.

David's robot, NewBuddy, waited at the foot of the bed. A five-foot-tall mobile computer with a holographic projector on top, it could move about the apartment on four spidery legs. He had brought NewBuddy home from the school's artificial intelligence lab to upgrade its software.

How many beers did I have last night, anyway? He smiled. *Not as many as Cindy.*

When he propped himself up on his elbows, the robot displayed Marilyn Monroe's head and torso in a three-dimensional holograph just above its top section.

"Rise and shine, big boy," Marilyn said. "Time to get that bod out of bed."

"You'll have to do better than that, Marilyn," he said, yawning.

The robot then projected a life-size hologram of Marilyn in a tiny bikini standing next to the bed. The image was so vivid, David felt he could have reached up and touched her. She leaned over him, her breasts swaying deliciously, and leered. "I really need you to get up." She giggled. "Come on, baby."

David chuckled, "Pretty good," but remained in bed.

He fluffed up the pillows and stretched out.

There wasn't that much homework, anyway.

He loved working on the robot, and he knew every inch of it. The central processing and memory unit located midway up the frame coordinated the actions of the microchips distributed throughout the robot's structure. NewBuddy had the hardware capability to outperform a human at many tasks. An idea to improve its performance popped into his mind, but instead of acting on it, he reluctantly decided to study for the exams.

The robot carried a bunch of towels into the bathroom, treading lightly on its thin legs. A moment later, David heard water running in the shower.

He wondered why his professors insisted he take all these dumb classes; they knew he had designed most of the enhancements to this robot. Thanks to his work, each microchip employed high performance software that functioned independently of the central processor. In effect, he had distributed intelligence throughout the robot, with the central processor providing coordination. David wasn't claiming all the credit—he didn't really care who got the credit—but everyone knew he had developed the software.

NewBuddy came out of the bathroom. "Your shower is ready."

David kicked off the blankets and dragged himself out of bed. He took a step and stumbled over a pair of sneakers. They didn't look familiar, so he held one against his foot. Too small. He chuckled when he realized Cindy had left her sneakers here. He felt under the bed for his sneakers. Gone.

Wear them in good health.

Undressing as he walked, he dropped his underpants on the floor and stumbled to the bathroom. He opened the shower door and tested the water temperature with his hand. *Why do I bother?* He

enjoyed a long shower, shaved, tied his thick brown hair back in a wet ponytail and walked back to the bedroom to get dressed. He checked out his bare body as he passed the mirror—lean and tight.

NewBuddy had left a pair of jeans, a black pull-over shirt, clean underpants, and white socks on the now made-up bed. His beat-up tennis shoes were side by side on the rug. After dressing quickly, he ambled into the old-fashioned but recently repainted kitchen, where NewBuddy had placed a cup of coffee, black and steaming, on the table. The robot was heating scrambled eggs and toast in the microwave, which it served shortly after he sipped the coffee.

He grinned and said, “Marilyn, what do you think are my best qualities?”

While the robot carried frozen strips of bacon to the microwave, a life-sized hologram of Marilyn Monroe, dressed in a French maid’s outfit, appeared at his side.

“Hmmm, you have *so* many good qualities.” Marilyn licked her lips. “It’s difficult, big boy, to pick out just one or two.”

Scratching his chin, David pretended to consider Marilyn’s answer. “You make a good point. I know it’s difficult with so much to choose from, but let’s be bold. Take a stab at it.”

“Well, that hard body of yours does things for me,” Marilyn purred. “Plus, you know more about artificial intelligence and robotics than anyone else in the world, including that bimbo Dr. Golkin, who gave you a C in the robotics lab.” Marilyn smiled and said, “That’s it, baby, sexy and smart— those are your best qualities.”

“Excellent. My selections as well.” David raised his coffee cup. “My compliments to your neural networks.”

While eating scrambled eggs and bacon, he picked up his eyeglasses and said, “Turn on the news.”

The glasses, a virtual reality technology that projected precise images directly onto the retina, selected his standard morning news broadcast.

The first report described a big government technology bust. The news reporter described how the FBI had caught a gang of black marketers. An informer had revealed the location of a data warehouse on the net, containing illegal financial software. By analyzing and extrapolating vast amounts of financial data, the software could augment human reasoning in placing stock market transactions. The news reporter explained how anyone owning this software would have an unfair advantage over everyone else, violating the Technology Fairness Act. Luckily, the reporter droned, the FBI caught the criminals before they could distribute the software over the net.

Stupid law, stupid government.

“Turn off this crap and display my messages.” He finished the scrambled eggs and took a big bite of toast.

He stopped chewing when his glasses displayed page after page of email messages—more than eight thousand messages last night.

“What the hell?” he murmured and selected the first one. The video showed the hazy outline of a man sitting in a dark room. A heavy, deliberately distorted voice said, “You and your whole damn family should have been executed years ago. I don’t buy all that bullshit that you were innocent. You have bad blood. We should get a hot iron and ram—”

“Shut down this message,” David shouted and collapsed back in his chair.

God, it was happening again.

He picked another message and the puffy face of a fifty-plus

woman appeared. “My son Donnie would be thirty-one if he hadn’t died from radiation exposure ten years ago,” she said. “Your father— may he rot in hell —was responsible for Donnie’s murder when that PeaceMaker made the nuclear reactor explode. You should at least have the decency to say you’re sorry for what that bastard did. First Minister Jordan says you’re a computer freak, too. The government ought to lock you up and throw away the key.”

The picture went blank.

So that’s what set it off. A stupid speech by that maniac Adam Jordan. Shit. If they target me, this could get dangerous.

The old anger came back, fresh and raw. He would not let these bastards push him around again.

PeaceMaker was my father’s crime, not mine. My father, damn him.

He spit the toast out of his mouth.

The bastard.

As suddenly as it came, the storm passed. There wasn’t any point in getting worked up. The anger simmered, but he’d get through it.

“Eliminate all the messages in my mailbox except those from people I know.”

All but a few messages disappeared. His mother had messaged several times, warning him to stay out of class for a few days. That bastard Jordan was heating things up again, no doubt to recruit converts for his miserable church.

Too bad he didn’t have a class today. At least he could go over to the library, as if he was looking up something in that slower-than-shit computer system. Screw them.

Only one message remained. Sent from a public database, the message had been created a decade earlier. Curious, he selected it.

His father stared at him from across the years, a broad-shouldered

man with big hands tapping nervously on his desk.

David gaped at the once-familiar image. Unruly salt and pepper hair flopped over a forehead lined with deep creases, but it was the intensity in his father's dark eyes that mesmerized David.

The man spoke, slowly, quietly. "Dear David, receiving a message from your father after all these years must be quite a shock, and I'm sorry for that. You're twenty-one now, old enough to learn what really happened directly from me. By chance, I discovered a lethal virus in the Atlas operating system, and I have decided to do everything in my power to defeat it and expose the people who developed it. I'm scared and I thought about walking away from it, but I can't do it. Since you've received this message, I must have failed and my enemies captured or killed me. You see, this message was set to release automatically in 2022 unless I deleted it. God, I can only hope they were stopped before they unleashed the virus.

"It was great to see you last weekend. You are probably building computer systems I couldn't even imagine. You're growing into a fine young man." There was a catch in his voice. "I am so proud of you." His father paused for a moment to regain his composure. "I'm not very good at giving a speech, and I won't try to do that today. I wasn't as good a father as you deserved. I drank too much and I wasn't always there when you needed me. Your mother deserves all the credit for helping you grow up as well as you have. But know this—I love you very much."

His father pushed a strand of hair back from his forehead. "I guess that's all I have to say. I don't know what kind of world exists in 2022, but I hope it's good for you."

The sadness in his father's voice settled like a damp winter day into David's bones.

“Goodbye ... I wish it could have been different ... live fully and honorably ... that’s all.”

Stunned, David played the message again. He tried to capture every word, every inflection. The message appeared to be authentic—why would anyone fake it after all these years?

Slowly the enormity of the message sank in; was it possible his father was not the monster who had infected the net with the PeaceMaker virus? If this message was true, his father had not been responsible for all the death and destruction when the computers shut down. Just the opposite. He had lost his life trying to stop the criminals responsible for the catastrophe.

He felt sick. His head ached, but this wasn’t a normal headache. The pain seemed to flow right into his mind. He hadn’t suffered an attack like this for years, since PeaceMaker had been terminated. David buried his head in his arms and closed his eyes. The stench of roadside kill drifted into his senses as in a dream. Pain ... disquieting sensations ... more pain. An image formed in the shadows of his mind. The image twisted and vibrated, like an insect escaping a cocoon, but remained hazy. Then he understood ... an entity was coming across the net, coming for him. His mind’s eye strained to see through the darkness ... the image twisted into the shape of a child, but it wasn’t flesh and blood. All his senses warned him of danger.

David readied for the confrontation. A stone blasted through his kitchen window, spraying shards of glass across the room, bringing him out of his trance. He dived to the floor as a second stone hurled through the window and crashed into his refrigerator. A barrage of stones pelted his windows, and he scrambled under the table.

Angry voices came from the ground, and another volley of stones smashed through the windows. Sirens wailed in the distance. He

prayed it was the police coming to rescue him. Stones continued to fly through the windows, splintering the remaining glass and crashing into the walls and ceiling. The siren grew louder, but it seemed to be taking forever.

He heard voices from the exterior hallway, then a loud crash. Someone was trying to knock down his door! His only weapon was a baseball bat in the bedroom closet. He scrambled across the kitchen floor on his hands and knees. He reached up, opened the closet door and searched for the bat. Loud thuds as someone tried to kick in the door. He found the bat and got ready to swing it at anyone who broke in.

A voice yelled, "Cops," and several people ran down the hall.

Another volley of stones crashed through the bedroom window. He scrambled back under the kitchen table. Excited voices came through the windows, and he thought he heard a policeman shouting orders. Gradually, it grew quiet outside, except for a pulsing siren. Still holding the bat, he crept to the kitchen window and peeked out. A few demonstrators were in the street, but the police had them under control.

One grubby-looking guy spotted David in the window and shouted obscenities. David gave him the finger then crunched through broken glass back to the kitchen table. NewBuddy was stretched out on the floor, his chest dented by a rock.

A policeman came in to see if he was okay, and glanced around at the damage. He seemed annoyed to be there and left without saying much.

David went back to the splintered kitchen window and watched the police drag away the few remaining demonstrators. He doubted anyone would be charged.

He looked around his apartment, littered with stones and broken glass. It was getting chilly, but he didn't care.

After staring blankly out the window for some time, he realized he was pressing hard on the windowsill, leaving his fingertips white and sore. The demonstrators were gone. A lone policeman stood at the front door of the apartment building.

David pulled a sheet off his bed and tacked it over the bedroom window then did the same in the kitchen. He swept up the broken glass, poured a glass of cola and sat down at the kitchen table.

His father was responsible for this.

Years before, he had concluded that his father had failed at all the important things in life. Sure, the man had it tough, but he failed big-time. His father had led a sad life, beginning with a dysfunctional family. He had fought alcoholism, never winning but never giving up either. The man had tried to be a good husband and father. When he had been sober, when he had been there for them, he was terrific. They just never knew which Raymond Brown they would get. And in the end, they got a failed man.

But how do I really know Dad wasn't guilty? Maybe the message is a clever fake. Maybe he was creating an alibi in case things failed. Or maybe he was just a psycho after all.

David pressed his forehead against the table. *Damn you, Dad, you bastard, you loser. Damn you, wherever you are.* He couldn't think of enough curses to burn out his rage, and they kept tumbling through his mind.

He couldn't go on like this—he had to get to the truth. A lot more than an old message would be necessary to demonstrate his father's innocence—if he *was* innocent. Those responsible for creating PeaceMaker had concocted a convincing lie, so getting to the truth

would be tough. A decade had passed, plenty of time to destroy all the evidence of his father's innocence, if there was any.

If my father is innocent, and I do this, the people who killed him will come after me.

Yet he had to do it. If he could prove his father wasn't guilty, the family name would be cleared. All the hatred would disappear; they could live like normal people.

He wouldn't fail. He wasn't like his father. He would find out whether his father was innocent or guilty—wherever the truth took him. He'd get to the core and finally understand that strange, complex man.

Then he could free himself.

Maybe.

To David's surprise, he felt strangely alive. For the first time in his life, he had a clear goal: he would finally learn what made his father tick. If Dad was innocent, David would clear the family name and bring the bastards to justice.

He glanced around at his broken apartment. He'd have to be careful, or his father's killers would discover his search. He swallowed hard. And there was that creature coming over the net.

CHAPTER 4

Only a small proportion of humans can understand the inner workings of science and technology. To most humans it's magic—powerful magic. The masses don't have a glimmer of understanding and they mistrust those who do.

◆ Steve Bonini's Diary, 2015

A car bomb exploded this morning just outside the front entrance of Intelligent Storage Devices in Princeton, New Jersey, killing 57 and injuring more than 200. A police spokesperson indicated this might have been the work of the mysterious Army of God, which has attacked a number of high-tech corporations since the beginning of the year.

◆ *The Wall Street Journal*, May 15, 2020

Thursday, February 3, 2022

David drove north from Seattle on Interstate 5 for more than two hours, heading toward his grandmother's home in the San Juan Islands. As he drove, the morning sun rose above the white-capped peaks of the Cascade Mountains, now and then breaking through a clutter of gray clouds. He had begun his search for the truth about his father, and he was nervous. After the riot outside his dorm, he

had no choice.

His speedometer hovered at around 35 due to dangerous potholes and road litter. Once a beautiful three-lane highway, it hadn't been maintained since tax revenues dried up.

David drove a nine-year-old Mercedes sedan, still one of the better cars on the road. Although the Federal Government had confiscated his father's estate, ostensibly to pay off PeaceMaker victims, his mother had bought him this car when he graduated high school.

"Avoid the large pothole two hundred feet ahead on the right," the onboard computer warned. David skirted a pothole more than a yard across and a foot deep.

Had he made the right decision to visit his grandmother? He knew she wouldn't be pleased to see him. She and Dad had strained their relationship to the breaking point and barely spoke during Dad's adult years. Once he died, she cut off all contact with the family and moved permanently to her summerhouse near the Canadian border. His mother said the old woman, Helen Rader Brown, was a recluse.

Today he would get closer to the truth. He pushed the pedal and passed another car.

David exited onto Route 20, a rundown, tree-encroached road leading through the hills to the Anacortes ferry. At times, he slowed to a crawl, picking his way around potholes. Weeds overran the parallel railroad tracks.

Driving past a boarded-up restaurant, he turned and entered the gate for the ferry. A huge staging lot had been built decades earlier to handle the thousands of people who commuted from the islands each day. Today only a handful of cars lined up near the rundown

loading dock. David handed the fare to a toll collector and drove into the loading lane.

Since the ferry was just pulling in, David rolled down the window and enjoyed the cold salt air. When the car in front of him started up, he followed it into the ferry's dark hold.

The San Juan archipelago consisted of hundreds of islands, but only a handful were large enough to support a significant population. His grandmother lived a few miles outside of Friday Harbor, the main town on the biggest island. For the first time in years, warm memories of a long-ago family vacation at his grandparents' summerhouse flashed by. He recalled the smiling face of his grandfather, Mom and Grandma serving tons of food, a walk through the woods with Aunt Claire and throwing a baseball around with Dad.

These days, one dilapidated ferry from Anacortes was the only way to make the two-hour trip. Still, he looked forward to the solitude and beauty of the sea. He left his car in the hold, clambered up a couple of levels of metal stairs and took a seat near the prow. A few minutes later, the ferry left the dock and chugged into choppy waters. Then it was out of the harbor and into open sea. He bundled up against the piercing wind.

His thoughts went back to his freshman year at the university—a year that had started with such promise. People were finally beginning to forget about PeaceMaker, and he had blended into the college community. Just another student, he had gradually found friends. He'd never had friends before.

Then a reporter came sniffing around to do a follow-up on the virus attack. The man plastered David's face all over the net, along with a story about his life at the university. Ugly calls and messages began. Demonstrations outside his dormitory were even worse, but

the university grudgingly looked after his security. After a week, the demonstrators lost interest and left.

Unfortunately, they didn't take all the hatred with them. A quiet type of repulsion remained, deep and unforgiving, the kind that doesn't burn out rapidly. David recalled the loathing in many faces as he walked the campus. Most of his so-called friends dropped him completely, while the few who remained were polite, but distant.

Alone, once again.

He tried to fill the suddenly empty hours studying computer science, concentrating on artificial intelligence. He had always been passionate about developing software—*must be in the genes*. At that point, his studies were all he had.

Since his friends had deserted him, he drifted into a pattern of leaving the campus every weekend and driving out to small towns across the state. Starved for human contact, he forced himself to overcome his shyness and talk to strangers in stores, gas stations, anywhere.

It suddenly occurred to him that he had never gone to the San Juan Islands to see his grandmother. Not once in all his trips. Never even thought about it.

Once he left his true identity behind, he discovered a glib tongue. He was good at picking up women in bars and convincing them to spend the night. Anytime he wanted a woman, he just turned on the charm. His charisma and lean good looks invariably cast a spell.

He never considered building a long-term relationship; he didn't trust anyone. Those weekends blurred in his mind, a long series of one-night stands. Sometimes he got drunk, sometimes he didn't. It didn't matter. A good time, then goodbye. That's the way he wanted it.

His mother was great, and his stepfather was okay, but he had never warmed to the man. That was it. His other close relatives—his grandmother and his Aunt Claire—were strangers. Nevertheless, he was determined to see his grandmother and learn more about his father. If she didn't want anything to do with him, too bad.

David barely heard his netphone buzz over the engine noise.

"Hello."

"Hi, honey."

"Mom." He wasn't sure what to say to her.

"The school called about a bunch of missed classes and—David, what's all that noise?"

He cleared his throat. "I'm on a ferry to Friday Harbor. I should have mentioned it to you. I ... decided to look up Grandma."

The line was silent for a moment. "Does she know you're coming?"

"No."

"Have you contacted her at all?"

"I haven't, but she'll talk to me."

"It's wonderful you want to see your grandmother, but honey, don't get your hopes up." Her voice sounded tinny, not her usual confident tone. "Grandma made it clear she wanted nothing to do with us. I wrote her several times the year after your father died, but she never answered."

"That was ten years ago. I think she'll talk now. I have to try."

"It's your father, isn't it? You want to see her about him."

"Mom, I should have told you. I need to understand him. I have to know what he did."

"What he did?" she cried. "The whole world knows what that sick bastard did."

“Mom ...”

“You want to know what he did? He killed a hundred thousand people. You want to know why he abandoned us? That whore ...” Her voice trailed off.

“Mom, I’m sorry.” He waited, but his mother remained quiet. He heard her breathing.

“David, don’t open this up again. I know you loved your father. I did, too. But he was a sick man. All that brilliance and charm hid the insanity, the dishonesty.”

Tears burned his eyes. *I’m too old to cry.*

“I don’t want to hurt anyone,” he said. “I’m his son. He’s in me. If I don’t understand what he was, what made him do these things, where does that leave me?”

“You’re not like him. You don’t have his flaws, nothing like his flaws. You got the best of him.”

“I’ll call you in a few days,” he said. “Okay?”

“Oh, David, why do you make it so hard?”

Her voice sounded so far away. Then the line went dead.

Guilt flooded in. This was the first real argument with his mother in years. He shouldn’t have put off calling her.

It was the kind of thing Dad would do, and I can’t even blame it on alcohol.

He settled back in his seat, watching islands chug by in the wind, separated by miles of open sea. Finally, the ferry docked and David drove into the town of Friday Harbor. Although it was still a tourist spot during the summer, the little town was bleak this time of year. Most of the retail shops had closed. Many looked as if they’d been vacant for years. Pedestrians looked at his car with hard, envious stares.

Forcing his concentration back on the road, he drove northwest. It was overcast, with a brisk wind from the north. Once he left the town, the road deteriorated into a muddy lane. Not that it mattered—only an occasional car splashed by. A thick forest of evergreens dominated the rough landscape, broken up by an occasional house. Most of the homes were boarded up; a few had collapsed, their land reclaimed by the forest.

Where he could, he checked the number on a house or mailbox. Eventually he came to his grandmother's cabin. Weather-beaten but sturdy, the old place was vaguely familiar, although smaller than he remembered. An old pick-up was parked in front, beat up but probably in working condition. A childhood memory brushed past of his grandmother driving it into Dad's driveway.

Smoke rose out of an old stone chimney on the west side of the house. His grandmother's home, unlike many others, seemed decently maintained. Gripping the steering wheel, David sat for a moment and stared.

Finally, he stepped from the car and headed up the dirt path to the house. A bitter wind seared his face. He walked past neatly stacked firewood on the porch and came to a heavy wooden door. No doorbell. He licked his lips, then banged hard on the door.

A thin old woman wearing spectacles pulled open the door. He had planned to greet her in a cordial manner, but couldn't find the words. He just stared silently as she looked him over. Recognition flashed in her eyes.

"Come in, David," she said in a voice that reminded him of a car crunching over pebbles. He was about to thank her, but she turned and walked back into the house. She had thrown a faded brown sweater over her dress.

He followed her into a 1950s kitchen warmed by crackling flames in a rough stone fireplace. Dim light entered the room through two small windows on the far wall. She gestured for him to sit down.

“Want coffee?”

David didn't want anything to drink, but he nodded anyway.

Slightly hunched, his grandmother walked to the wood stove. Thin but not frail, she lifted a coffee pot off a burner and poured a cup, then another.

Sitting at the rickety table, he looked around. A rusty sink on one wall was next to a narrow refrigerator. Water slowly dripped from the faucet into the sink, each ping marking another slice of time lost.

He listened to the dripping water until his grandmother twisted hard on the handle of the faucet. A last couple of pings and then quiet, except for logs popping in the fireplace.

The old woman returned and placed a cup of black coffee in front of him. Holding on to her cup, she slid into the chair across the table. Thin gray hair fell haphazardly over her ears, and her bony face was a maze of deep wrinkles and brown age spots, with the leathery skin of someone who had spent too many days outdoors.

He cleared his throat. “It's been a long time, Grandma.”

Staring at him, she sipped her coffee then placed the cup on the table. Her mouth remained slightly open, revealing a sliver of yellow-stained teeth. Her doleful stare made him uncomfortable.

The crackle of the fireplace filled the room.

Finally, the old woman nodded her head, as if she had resolved a problem.

“You look like Ray—in the eyes, anyway. I hope it ends there.” She pushed her coffee cup to the side. “Why are you here?”

“I want you to tell me about my father.” David shifted in his chair.

“I never had much of a chance to know him. He hardly ever spoke about his childhood, and I barely know anything about you or Aunt Claire.”

Her eyes narrowed and her hand grasped the edge of the table. Strangely, he felt threatened by this old woman.

“I need to understand where I came from,” David said. “I don’t know—”

“Better to leave it be,” she screeched. “Your father was a sick bastard.” She stood up suddenly. Her leg jostled the table, spilling hot coffee. David backed away as the coffee dripped to the floor.

Looking at the mess, she cursed, “Let his bones rot wherever they are.”

A few drops of coffee had splattered on his sleeve, but he barely felt it.

She stared at him, with something like disgust in her face—or maybe regret. It reminded him of the stares from strangers on the campus after his identity became known, but worse. Familiar, personal, troubling.

David watched his grandmother walk over to the sink, grab an old rag and kneel next to the table to wipe up the spill. Her lips moved, but he couldn’t make out her whispered words. The old woman had regained her composure when she sat at the table again.

“Sorry.” A bony hand opened and closed restlessly. “You shouldn’t have come here. Your father broke my heart. I don’t want to break yours. Go back to where you came from. There’s nothing good you can learn here.”

David didn’t like this old woman, but he had to get her to talk to him. “I won’t leave, Grandma. My father and his damn legacy have hung over me my entire life.” He paused, wondering how much to tell

her, then decided to hold nothing back. “There’s something building inside me, something dangerous. In some way, it’s all tied to Dad—and maybe you. I need to understand this thing that’s building. Help me.”

Her voice was gentle. “You won’t like it, you know. There’s something wrong with this family, something evil.” She straightened her shoulders. “What am I carrying on about? We are what we are. You want to know about us, fine, I’ll tell you.”

Dark eyes peeked out from drooping lids. She had a way of staring that made him squirm.

“I don’t know where to start,” she said, clasping her hands together. “I think we have bad blood, but there’s more to it than that. I believe there was an unholy presence in this house back then.” She cleared her throat. “But I’m getting ahead of the story.

“I never knew my parents. Somebody put me in a cardboard box and left me at the orphanage.” Snorting, she looked down at her hands. “Probably the best decision they ever made.

“Let’s say I was not the most popular person in the home. I didn’t speak until I was four, so everyone thought I was slow. Didn’t talk much afterwards, either. Hell, nobody was much interested in listening to me, anyway. I was just a plain, lonely girl.”

The old woman’s face twisted with ancient pain. “They ignored me the eighteen years I was there. The nuns didn’t mistreat me, but sometimes I wished they would. At least they’d know I was alive.” She shook her head, and returned her attention to him. “After a while, it didn’t bother me. I didn’t whine about it. I didn’t cry, not me. Made me tough. That’s how you have to be to get through this life.” Glaring at him, she said, “Don’t you know that?”

“I’m not like you.”

She smiled without warmth. “No, you’re not. You’re worse.” She leaned forward on her bony elbows. “I can see him in your eyes; you have Ray’s eyes.” Shaking her head, she added, “You’re weak. Just like him.”

David stood up, his chair scratching over worn floorboards. “I knew you were no good. I’m ashamed you’re my grandmother.”

As he turned to walk away from the table, she stood up and screeched, “Don’t you leave. I haven’t finished speaking to you! You want to understand your father—I’ll tell you.”

David looked back at her. “Oh, I’m not leaving. I came here to learn about my father and I’m staying until I’m satisfied.” He shoved the chair, banging it hard against the table. “Did you care about him at all? Or your daughter?”

The old woman didn’t answer. The energy seemed to drain from her body, and she settled into a chair. He paced around the little kitchen. She was somewhere else, thinking about the past.

“My goddamn family,” he swore under his breath. All these years and he was still waiting for an answer.

Quietly, she said, “Sit down. All your pacing gets on my nerves.”

He sat down heavily.

Speaking more to herself than him, she muttered, “I loved them both, back then. I tried to make them strong ...”

Shaking her head, she said, “Claire was just weak, but Ray ... there was something wrong with him. Sometimes I thought there were two people fighting for control of his soul. Some days he was perfect—smart, honest, strong—just perfect.” Her voice quivered, and she stopped.

Surprised by her tone, David began to feel he was losing his bearings, teetering on the edge of a steep slope. Then his grandmother’s

voice broke into his thoughts, bringing him back to the cabin. “But most days he was weak, hot-tempered and mean. I think it just wore him out. He started drinking and I could never break him from it.”

She shook her head again, looking at her gnarled hands. “Ray was a real nasty drunk. He got drunk every weekend, sometimes during the week.”

She looked sadly at David. “One night during his senior year in high school, Ray got into a bad fight. Went to a party, got drunk and had words with some other kid. Beat the kid up—real bad—and then ran out and took off in his car. He lost control on a curve and wrapped the car around a tree. Totaled the car, but miraculously, Ray had only scratches. Walked down the road until he found a crummy bar and drank until he passed out. The bartender called me, and your grandfather and I had to go down there and bring him home.

“He cursed us when he came to.” She leaned back in her chair. “God knows, we should have kicked him out right then.” His grandmother struggled to her feet, leaning against the table for support. “I need another coffee. You want one?”

“All right.”

She took David’s cup and walked back to the stove. Her hand trembled as she poured the coffee. Although his father had ruined his childhood, David began to feel he wasn’t the one to see the worst of the man.

She returned with two cups. “Ray wasn’t always drunk. Sometimes he could be a great kid. There was this old nursing home where he used to volunteer once or twice a week after school. I went there once. The old folks loved him. And was he smart! He could make a computer do anything he wanted. Everyone came to Ray for help with their computer problems. You could tell he was something

special when he got on the—what do they call it—the Internet. He learned all about the Internet before it became popular, when only scientists were using it.”

She smiled at David, her lips cracking into an unfamiliar pattern.

“Did you know he assembled his first PC when he was twelve? Your grandfather bought him the parts, but Ray put it together. We were so proud of him.

“But something always ate away at his soul.” His grandmother’s shoulders shriveled and she paused, her eyes drifting off. She picked up her cup and sipped coffee, then another sip, longer and more desperate this time. When she put down the mug, all the antagonism had disappeared from her expression.

“Ray had terrible nightmares. He fought them, but they kept pulling him down. There was something alien in him, maybe some genes came together wrong. I don’t know.”

I know, David felt like saying.

“What do you mean something alien in him?”

“He had nightmares,” she said. “I’d hear him talking and go into his room and sit by the bed. He’d toss and turn, mumbling things like *leave me alone* or *what are you*. I’d shake him, hard as I could, but I couldn’t wake him. I could never wake him up—it was like he had to finish whatever was going on in his mind and then he would wake up on his own. I never knew how he would react when he came out of one of those nightmares: sometimes he acted glad to see me, sometimes he was pissed off, sometimes he’d roll out of bed, ignore me and get on the Internet and work for hours.”

“He needed help, Grandma. Did you do anything to help him?”

Grandma slurped her coffee. “We had him tested, we had him

see a shrink, we put him in every special-ed program at school, but nothing helped. I even called the Church about an exorcism, but they wouldn't come because we're not believers. Ray wouldn't talk about the nightmares, not to me, not to his father, not to anyone."

She shrugged. "Nothing could stop him when he got into a downward spiral. Got so I could see it coming. Your grandfather and I fought for him, but we couldn't stop it. Ray would hit bottom and do something awful—maybe a screaming match with his father or a fight with someone from school—then he'd go on a bender and we wouldn't see him for days. He'd turn up, stinking of vomit and who knows what. The police got tired of looking for him."

"Do you have any idea what caused the nightmares?"

"It had something to do with the Internet. When I got rid of his personal computer, the nightmares stopped ... for a couple of weeks." She shook her head. "We were all so happy. Then they came back." She shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe it had nothing to do with the Internet."

"Dad had nightmares when I was a little kid. Sometimes I'd wake up at night and hear him shouting."

"I'm sorry," Grandma mumbled. She took a long sip of coffee and picked up the story. "Once he graduated high school, Ray left and never came back. He kept drinking in college, but checked himself into rehab ... some little place in central Pennsylvania. It helped. He stayed sober for years, graduated college and married your mother. We thought he had it licked when you were born."

"We had a bunch of great family vacations. Arthur and I adored Nancy, and we loved taking care of you. And Ray, he just laughed and smiled all the time." She sighed. "Those were the happiest days of our lives."

“Everyone thought he was a genius when he invented an intelligent operating system at VantagePoint. He had it made: wonderful family, fame, lots of money. Then, for some god-forsaken reason, he started drinking again. Cheated on his wife, ignored his son, almost killed himself driving drunk.”

“People say he whored around,” David ventured.

“No, he was true to your mother for years. It was after they were married several years that things went sour. Nancy told me he had an affair with someone from VPS, but she wouldn’t say who.”

So it was true, god damn it.

“Why did he start drinking again?”

“I don’t know.”

She seemed defensive. *What was she hiding?*

“Was it the pressure of the job? He worked long hours.”

“I told you I don’t know.”

He watched his grandmother sitting and staring into her coffee.

“I’m sorry I brought the past back to you, Grandma.”

Grandma swiped the air with the back of her hand. “Ray ruined everything he touched,” she croaked. “He destroyed your grandfather. Broke Arthur’s heart. It got so Arthur would cry in bed after one of Ray’s nightmares. He blamed himself for Ray’s sickness.” She paused, her hands opening and closing. “When Ray came home for Arthur’s funeral, I could barely speak to him.”

Her attention drifted off, and David knew she had fallen into her private hell again. “When they told me that he created PeaceMaker ... well, it wasn’t exactly a shock. I knew the Devil had finally taken Ray for his own.”

David’s hostility had drained away as he listened to her story. He had come here thinking his father was a victim, but now he wasn’t

so sure. He wanted to tell her about the message from his father, but he feared it might place her in danger. Even so, he decided to tell her. She deserved to know that maybe her son wasn't a monster.

"I want you to read something, a message from Dad. It's possible he didn't create PeaceMaker. Maybe he tried to stop it."

He fished the message out of his pocket and handed it to her. She read it, glanced at him, read it a second time and handed it back with a shrug.

"Don't you understand? Dad might be innocent. Maybe your son wasn't a murderer!"

"That ... Ray will always be guilty to me." She hesitated, searching David's face. "He destroyed our family. God knows, your grandfather and I were far from perfect, but we loved him. We tried to help him, but a part of him was bad. He destroyed whatever chance we had for happiness."

David noticed her hands, calloused from years of hard work, trembling again.

"Dead ten years," she said, "but I can't forgive him."

David started to speak, but she interrupted, "No. I can't talk to you anymore. I'm afraid for you. Something is eating away at you, too. Maybe you're stronger than Ray, but I don't think so."

"I need to tell you something." Her eyes were dull and sad. "Ray was happy with Nancy the first couple of years. Then the nightmares came back and he began drinking. It was all downhill after ..."

"What is it, Grandma?" His stomach was a brick. "What are you trying to tell me?"

She swallowed. "His nightmares came back ... just after you were born."

She placed a withered hand over his. The faucet dripped again,

and he stared at it.

Her voice was low and flat, but gentle. “David, please understand I don’t hate you, but don’t ever come back to this house again. I’m just waiting here for my time to run out. The land is beautiful, it’s quiet, and if I don’t think about the past, it’s not too painful.” Her eyes were kind, but tired. “I don’t want to share your pain. There’s something terrible in you, just like Ray. I couldn’t save him, and I can’t help you. I don’t have the strength.”

There was nothing else to say. David stood up and looked at his grandmother, hunched over the table with her coffee cup in her hand. A sudden urge came to pat her shoulder and offer words of encouragement, but it was too late for that. She wasn’t what he had expected.

He lifted his coat off the chair and looked at her one last time as he pulled it on. Her body appeared formless, worn out. He felt her years, the cruel disappointments of her life. His father might not be guilty of PeaceMaker’s terrible crimes, but he wasn’t innocent, either.

And the curse had passed from father to son.

David felt his grandmother’s eyes follow him as he turned and walked out the door. His shirt stuck to his back. The decision to get to the truth had seemed so bright and shiny. Now he wasn’t sure. So far, he’d brought a ton of pain to his mother and grandmother.

And he was just getting started.

CHAPTER 5

The Federal Government faced a dilemma after the PeaceMaker catastrophe. As usual, the politicians bent to the clamor of the frightened. Technology was brought under the control of government bureaucrats. The economy stalled. A merciless depression followed the recession.

◆ *Beyond the Internet: The Shadow Years*, James Abraham, copyright 2039, Professor, Harvard University

[The] flight from and hatred of technology is self-defeating. The Buddha, the Godhead, resides quite as comfortably in the circuits of a digital computer or the gears of a cycle transmission as he does at the top of a mountain or in the petals of a flower.

◆ Robert M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values*, 1, 1974

Friday, February 11, 2022

An orange glow lazily spread across the horizon, welcoming another perfect day, but the Runner barely noticed. Head tilted slightly forward, arms and legs pumping in practiced rhythm, the man loped down the beach. His bare feet, toughened by years of running,

hardly felt the warm limestone sand. The cadence came easily; one foot in front of the other, over and over, flowing effortlessly.

Every morning he made this run. He wasn't sure why, but the rising sun always found him loping around the circumference of the island.

The outline of his home, dominated by the tall cylindrical trunks and pinnate leaves of palm trees, appeared around the gentle curve of the shoreline. Without breaking stride, the Runner veered off to the left, splashed through the crystal clear ocean and dove into a breaker. The cold sea caressed his skin as he plunged to the sandy bottom then bobbed to the surface. He swam parallel to the beach, letting the salty foam slide along his body, soothing his spirits, preparing him for another day.

Waves splashing around his ankles, the Runner walked up the sloping beach toward a low, coral wall. He guessed tribesmen had built it a century earlier to shield their village from the crashing waves of tropical storms. Now it protected his home. He dried himself with a rough towel he had left hanging on the wall; his sun-bronzed skin tingled with warmth. Suddenly realizing the Federal Technology Control Commission (FTCC) newscast would begin soon, the Runner braced himself with one arm and vaulted over the wall.

Three modest cottages, all made from white coral and soft local wood, stood behind the dunes. He rushed into the middle cottage and plopped into a padded chair in the hologram theater. Relaxing in the shaded room, the Runner glanced at his watch.

"Turn on the FTCC meeting," he ordered the computer.

A hologram cube, six feet on each side, appeared in the center of the room. The cube displayed a young newswoman with the face

of an angel and a body that should never be obscured by clothes. Standing in the busy hall of a large federal building where people milled about, Daphne Hayden was the center of attention. He was amused to watch both men and women gawking at her as she began the newscast.

The building was vaguely familiar—then he remembered. It was where the VantagePoint anti-trust trial had taken place. *That's where it all started ... sixteen years ago.* He remembered the headlines, “VantagePoint Software Convicted ... VPS President Dianne Morgan Jailed for Contempt.”

Dianne had sat and simmered in a crummy cell for weeks, but she wouldn't apologize to the judge. When they let her out, she was consumed with anger.

The Runner's attention came back to the newscast.

“Good morning, this is Daphne Hayden reporting from the FTCC Building in Washington, DC. Behind me is the Main Hall of the Federal Technology Control Commission. We're here to attend the third and final day of public hearings regarding the annual update of the Atlas Network Services System proposed by VantagePoint Software. Our sources warned us there might be fireworks today, so you don't want to miss a minute.

“As you can see, a swarm of citizens has filled the public seating. Spectators began lining up outside the building early this morning, highly unusual for an FTCC meeting. Of course, today's meeting is special.

“For those of you not familiar with the FTCC, let me provide a little background. The PeaceMaker attack in 2012 made it clear unregulated technology had become much too dangerous. More than one hundred thousand perished in the United States due to

the virus attack, and it is believed that more than a million died worldwide. Hardest hit were the Western democracies, where food could no longer be delivered to the supermarkets, medical care became unavailable as hospitals shut down, transportation failed as fuel became scarce, and many in the northern states simply froze to death. It was weeks before basic services were restored; years before the nation completely recovered. Some analysts claim the great depression that followed the PeaceMaker attack has cut our nation's gross national product almost in half.

“Accordingly, Congress enacted laws that year to make sure runaway computer technology would never endanger the nation again. At the same time, Congress created the Federal Technology Control Commission to enforce these laws. In the following years, the laws were extended to cover genetic engineering and other advanced technologies. Many other nations followed our lead, and the world has become much safer.”

The hologram flashed the image of a short, middle-aged man striding down the aisle through the public sections. As he entered the reserved section, he paused several times to shake hands with well-known men and embrace prominent women.

“FTCC Chairman Benjamin Gollin has arrived, so the meeting should be called to order shortly,” Daphne said, as the hologram continued to follow Gollin.

Smiling and chatting, Gollin arrived at the Chairman's desk and took his seat. With thick brown hair slicked back, and bright eyes peering out of a thin face, he reminded the Runner of a fox staring into a chicken coop. The other six members of the FTCC Board of Commissioners, already seated at smaller desks on each side of Gollin, were reviewing papers and talking to staff.

The hologram flashed back to Daphne. “Chairman Gollin is known as a street-smart administrator with ambitions for higher office. Many commentators consider him a potential presidential candidate, but the word is he’ll have to demonstrate he is tough on the Technos.”

Daphne glanced over her shoulder at the Board of Commissioners and said, “Chairman Gollin has taken the gavel and will signal the meeting to begin. In a filing to the FTCC three months earlier, VantagePoint Software proposed several major enhancements to Atlas, the system providing the platform for much of the Internet. Since Atlas is the operating system attacked by PeaceMaker, there’s always great interest in this session.”

Daphne brushed back her luxurious blonde hair and said, “Mohammed Kateel, the Chief Operating Officer of VPS, will present the company’s final arguments. Mr. Kateel is one of the most respected executives in the nation. In addition to his record as an outstanding technology executive, he was among the band of heroes resisting the software blackmail attempt of Raymond Brown and his terrorist organization. Brown’s henchmen tortured Mr. Kateel, but they failed to obtain critical information regarding several key Atlas components. Mr. Kateel’s heroism saved many thousands of lives. Only VantagePoint President Dianne Morgan is more beloved.”

Now Kateel’s a hero, the Runner thought.

“However, many in the press were surprised when Kateel was chosen to represent VPS in this critical meeting,” Daphne said. “Although recognized as a brilliant software engineer, Kateel is known for his abrasive personality. He doesn’t tolerate fools, and his answers are sometimes dismissive.” Daphne flashed her perfect white teeth. “It should prove to be an interesting day.”



Benjamin Gollin banged the gavel and called the meeting to order. He glanced down at Kateel, who conferred with an assistant at the witness table. He was disappointed Dianne Morgan would not represent VPS. To be seen as Morgan's equal would have increased his prestige, but Kateel would have to do.

"Good morning, Dr. Kateel. We're pleased to welcome you to the quarterly meeting of the Federal Technology Control Commission."

Gollin's voice boomed over the speaker system, filling the huge chamber with his crisp, authoritative tone.

"As you know, I and the Board of Commissioners of the FTCC take our responsibility seriously. We are determined to allow only safe, necessary technology to be developed. The nation asks us—no, it requires us—to maintain the safety of our citizens and institutions from runaway, dangerous technology. A decade ago unregulated technology devastated the nation." Gollin paused, his eyes sweeping over the huge chamber. "Never again," he thundered.

"Your company, VantagePoint Software, has submitted a request to develop a number of enhancements for the Atlas software system." He leaned forward, presenting the holocamera with his best tough-but-compassionate look. "While the Board is open-minded, our commitment to the nation's safety requires we question the need for these enhancements. We have many issues to discuss with you today, Dr. Kateel. However, as a courtesy, you are permitted to make a brief opening statement."

Kateel sat alone in the middle of a long table. Husky, with sharp features, graying hair, and dark eyes that commanded attention,

Kateel was the perfect image of a senior business executive. Like many executives Gollin had questioned, Kateel wore wireless communication “glasses,” that gave him instantaneous visual access to computer-stored information.

“Thank you, Mr. Chairman,” Kateel said. Although respectful, his voice marked him as someone accustomed to command. “I promise not to take up too much of your valuable time. My colleagues at VantagePoint Software and I appreciate the FTCC’s important responsibility to safeguard the use of technology. Nobody understands the dangers inherent in unregulated technology better than we do. VantagePoint Software believes safety is our first and foremost concern in the development of new software.”

Just get to it, Gollin thought. Poor Kateel. He won’t know what hit him. This is going to be delicious.

“As you know, the proposed software includes several performance enhancers, bug fixes and a few new capabilities,” Kateel said. “We believe the documentation clearly describes our proposal, although we would be pleased to answer any questions. First, however, I would like to give you a demonstration of our most important new capability, an embedded Command Chip.”

What the hell!

Gollin kept his voice even as he eyed the witness. “How is that possible, Dr. Kateel? The Commission has not approved the Command Chip for testing of any sort.”

Raising an eyebrow slightly, Kateel replied, “As you must surely know, FTCC regulations allow for a limited degree of beta testing after the successful completion of system testing. Our report clearly states system testing was successfully completed last month, so we began beta testing.”

“Would you direct the Commission to the appropriate section,” Gollin said, keeping his voice even.

Kateel opened a thick book titled: *Atlas Enhancement Requests*. He flipped pages and then looked up at Gollin.

“System testing is summarized beginning on page 471. You’ll see we completed it last month.”

Opened to the proper page, the book was placed in front of Gollin by an aide. Gollin skimmed through the section.

“The chip has been inserted in myself, Dianne Morgan and several other VPS employees,” Kateel added.

Kateel and Gollin exchanged hard looks as the room became quiet.

VPS is taking a big risk, Gollin thought. *Were they really that arrogant?*

After conferring with an attorney, Gollin nodded at Kateel. “You are correct, Dr. Kateel.” *I’ll get you for embarrassing me.* “You may continue with your demonstration.”

“Thank you,” Kateel replied. He pointed to a robot standing motionless at the end of the witness table. “Robots are becoming popular with consumers. I brought my personal robot, Michael, to demonstrate certain capabilities of the Command Chip.” Smiling at the robot, he said, “How are you today, Michael?”

The robot appeared ordinary to Gollin, a five-foot tall mobile computer balanced on four thin legs with a holographic projector in the top section. An image shimmered in the space just above the projector: a pleasant, middle-aged male face with neatly clipped hair returned Kateel’s smile.

The robot replied to Kateel in a friendly male voice. “All systems are working fine, sir.”

“Michael, please fetch me a glass of water,” Kateel said.

As the robot glided toward the water pitcher at the other end of the table, Kateel turned and said to Gollin, “Verbal communications with our robots are relatively error-prone. Even though robots have excellent hearing, sound waves deteriorate as they travel, and they frequently misunderstand our commands. This can lead to incorrect, sometimes dangerous, actions. In addition, once Michael gets outside the range of my voice, he is out of my control.”

As Michael picked up the pitcher in front of Kateel and poured water into a glass, Kateel said, “The Command Chip allows continuous verbal communication with your robot.” He held up a tiny computer chip between his thumb and forefinger, barely visible to Gollin twenty feet away. “A microchip is surgically implanted in the ear. It can receive and transmit over the net. The Command Chip picks up sound waves from your speaking voice, breaks down your words into packets, and using standard wireless transmission protocols, sends it over the net to the robot. All this is done in a flash, of course.

“In a similar manner, a robot may transmit messages back to you over the net. The Command Chip will receive these messages and convert them to low volume sounds within your ear. This enables you to communicate with your robot, even though it may be many miles distant.”

Kateel paused for questions, but the Commissioners remained silent. Gollin noticed many in the room appeared impressed with Kateel’s gadget, but an undercurrent of concern showed in some faces.

“Let’s begin the demonstration,” Kateel said. “Michael, please walk to Chairman Gollin’s office at the far end of the building and

wait there.”

Commissioner Jackson, a balding political appointment in a lumpy suit, barked out, “That’s no demonstration. The robot can hear you.”

Groaning inwardly, Gollin said, “I’m sure the demonstration will not begin until the robot is well out of hearing range, Commissioner.” He stared at Jackson with contempt and then returned his attention to Kateel.

“I say we reject this nonsense right now,” Jackson said. “We don’t need this Command Chip hogwash. In fact, I have my doubts about continuing to allow these robots. God damn machines make my skin—”

“Commissioner,” Gollin interrupted, “although we all appreciate the wisdom of your remarks, time constraints force us to move ahead with the demonstration of the Command Chip. Perhaps we can return to your skin issues at a later time.”

Gollin muted his speaker and muttered to a colleague, “I’d like to shove the Command Chip all the way up Jackson’s ass into his ear, then turn the volume to maximum.”

Michael stopped walking and said, “That act is anatomically impossible, Commissioner Gollin.”

The spectators murmured in confusion, and Gollin glared at the robot.

Kateel said, “Hush, Michael,” although a hint of a smile touched his lips. “Continue walking.” Turning to Gollin, “I remind you, Chairman, these robots have exceptional hearing.”

Gollin’s only desire was to take an axe to the robot, the command chip and Kateel, not necessarily in that order. Struggling to keep his voice even, Gollin said, “Commissioner Andrews-Nash will begin

the questioning.”

Commissioner Greta Andrews-Nash, an energetic young woman with frizzy brown hair pulled straight back, frowned at the VPS executive. “Just how much will this Command Chip cost, Dr. Kateel?”

“We have not completed pricing analysis as yet, Commissioner.”

“Ballpark it,” Andrews-Nash said.

Kateel looked at her as if he had discovered a roach in his food. “The price would vary according to the income level of the consumer, of course.” Andrews-Nash looked at Gollin and shrugged her shoulders.

Gollin nodded and turned to Kateel. “Please give us your best estimate.”

Kateel thought for a moment. “A person of average income would pay about five to six hundred dollars for the insertion of the Command Chip and then about twenty-five per month service fee.”

“That’s outrageous,” Andrews-Nash barked out. “Only the wealthy would be able to afford this technology. God knows the wealthy already live far better than the average citizen does. With this chip, the wealthy would be able to command their robots from anywhere on the planet. How convenient for them.” She shook her head. “The average Joe doesn’t even have a robot and VPS wastes its time producing software for the rich.”

“Let me assure you VPS will recover only its costs during the first year,” Kateel answered. “However, once our robotic factories are retooled and fine-tuned, the cost to consumers should drop substantially.”

How naïve, Gollin thought. Tax rates would increase to absorb any such price reduction.

“VPS should provide the Command Chip at no cost to the average citizen, if we need it at all,” Andrews-Nash said. “You can charge your wealthy friends whatever you want. VPS is one of the most profitable companies in the world. Don’t you recognize your duty to the average citizen?”

Frowning, Kateel said, “VPS is one of the few companies still making a profit. Do you want us to slide into bankruptcy like so many other firms during this depression?”

Gollin interrupted just as Andrews-Nash was about to reply. “I think we have discussed pricing sufficiently. As a point of information, the Treasury Department revised the official definition of depression last month. We are actually in a recession, not a depression.”

“I stand corrected, Chairman Gollin,” Kateel said. “I haven’t been keeping up with the latest definitions.”

The spectators tittered, and Gollin bristled. “Don’t push it, Dr. Kateel. Continue with your demonstration.”

“We set up a speaker system so everyone could hear Michael’s responses.” The robot had disappeared from sight, so Kateel said, “Michael, where are you?”

Michael’s voice boomed throughout the conference room. “I am standing outside of Commissioner Gollin’s office.”

“Please tell me what you see in the lobby near his office.”

“I see four chairs, a couch, a vase of roses outside the door, a hand-woven rug, and a guard staring at me. There’s a stain of some sort on the couch. Let me get closer ...”

“Tell that robot to stay out of my office,” Gollin shouted.

Kateel said to the robot, “It’s not necessary to examine the stain.” He chuckled, and then asked Gollin, “May I instruct Michael to retrieve the vase outside your office?”

When Gollin nodded, Kateel said, “Michael, please bring the vase and flowers to Chairman Gollin.” He smiled at Gollin. “And Michael, don’t spill the water.”

The conference room was quiet for a moment, and then Commissioner Jeremy Slater said, “I have a number of questions, Chairman Gollin.”

A low buzz filled the room. Gollin banged his gavel. He knew this was what the crowd had come to see. “Talking is not permitted during the questioning. If there’s a disturbance, I’ll clear the room.” When the crowd quieted, he nodded to Slater. “You may proceed, Commissioner.”

Tall, thin, with neatly parted salt-and-pepper hair, Slater had the look of a past-his-prime athlete. Ruthless and intellectually formidable, he was the one person on the commission Gollin didn’t control. Over his objections, Slater had been appointed to the FTCC because, Gollin had learned, Slater had something on the president. The rumor was that one of those sisters from the Church of Natural Humans had seduced the president. There were pictures—filthy pictures. At least that’s what Gollin’s spies had said.

Slater was fanatically anti-technology, but that wasn’t a concern to Gollin as long as Slater followed his lead. So far, Slater had turned out to be his reliable right hand on the commission. In fact, Slater had encouraged him to run for president, even started a slush fund. He didn’t trust Slater, but the man had introduced Gollin to wealthy supporters, so he made peace.

Thumbing through a computer printout, Slater looked at Kateel over the top of his old-fashioned eyeglasses. “These specifications include a great deal of technical data, but I find your Technology Impact Statement lacking.”

“We point out the reason in paragraph two,” Kateel replied. “The Command Chip will not have a large impact upon society, so little detail is necessary. The Command Chip is a simple extension of our hearing and voice, nothing more, nothing less.”

“I’m sure you’re correct, Dr. Kateel, but let’s explore the subject a bit.” The large room was quiet as Slater leafed through his papers. “The Command Chip enables human-to-robot communication anywhere in the world. Correct?”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

“The Command Chip allows one person to broadcast commands to many thousands of robots simultaneously,” Slater said. “Is that not true?”

“That’s correct, Commissioner.” Kateel fidgeted in his chair. “This capability is described in Section Six of the document.”

Slater arched his eyebrows. “Doesn’t it concern you that one person could activate an army of robots at the drop of a hat?”

Kateel and Slater glared at each other. Neither man said a word. Gollin asked Kateel to answer the question, but Kateel waved him off with a dismissive flip of his wrist.

You’ll pay for that one, too, Gollin thought.

“There is no such thing as an army of robots,” Kateel said to Slater. “As you well know, all robots include software and hardware controls that prevent them from harming a human.”

“Come now, you’re under oath,” Slater replied. “A clever programmer could override those controls and unleash a robot army. You could do it yourself, couldn’t you, Kateel!”

“That’s virtually impossible. We have so many layers of control, nobody could override them.”

“But you can’t guarantee some brilliant but demented Techno

wouldn't do it."

Kateel snorted. "I can't guarantee lightning won't strike you during this meeting, either. Actually, as I think about it, the lightning strike is much more promising."

The two men glared at each other, and then Gollin said, "Let's move on. I assume you have additional questions, Commissioner Slater."

Slater responded without taking his eyes off Kateel. "Indeed I do."

Shuffling his papers again, Slater asked, "This communication isn't limited to robots, is it? Two humans could communicate using the Command Chip." Slater lifted his eyes. "Correct?"

Kateel nodded. "We clearly state that in the report, so yes, it is correct."

"With the Command Chip, a Techno could whisper something here and another Techno on the other side of the world could hear him. That's telepathy." Slater glared at Kateel. "You're trying to sneak a brand new technology past us."

"As you well know, the Command Chip is far from telepathy," Kateel said, his voice reverberating through the hearing room. "VPS doesn't have the ability to create mind-to-mind communications. There are still aspects of the brain we don't understand. Even if we did understand the brain thoroughly, the engineering problems of integrating such a Command Chip would be fantastically complex." Kateel smiled without humor at Slater. "Even a demented Techno like me couldn't do it."

Slater leaned forward. "But if you could do it, you would. Isn't that true?"

Gollin's sharp eyes captured the contempt written across Kateel's

face. The hearing room was quiet, waiting for Kateel's answer.

We've got him, Gollin thought.

After a long moment, Kateel's jaw muscles worked. "Yes, I would."

Glaring at Kateel, Slater said, "Abomination," and slammed shut his notebook. "I have no more questions for this ... for Dr. Kateel."

Conversation buzzed in the hearing room again, and Gollin nodded at Slater. *That should please the First Minister.*

Kateel's robot appeared in the doorway carrying a vase of flowers. The noise died out as the robot walked across the conference room and placed the flowers in front of Gollin.

Ignoring the robot, Gollin stood up. "This meeting is over. Our decision will be available shortly." He swept out of the room, followed by the other commissioners.

Twenty minutes later, Gollin returned and announced that the Commission had rejected the Command Chip and all the other enhancements. A few applauded, but most of the spectators appeared displeased with the result.

It was a crushing blow to VPS, so Gollin wondered why a slight smile had briefly whisked across Kateel's lips.

CHAPTER 6

Moesha Jefferson, the murderous leader of the Army of God, remains an enigma. Many historians believe First Minister Jordan employed drugs to cultivate her violent nature, and while that may be true, we now realize the seeds of destruction were in her from the beginning.

◆ *The Army of God*, Mark Axelrod, copyright 2051, Assistant Director, FBI (retired)

Tuesday, February 15, 2022

Security Officer Bob Warner yawned as he gazed out the windows of the lobby into a dark, cold night at Carnegie Mellon University, located at the outskirts of Pittsburgh. He glanced at his watch—a little past 2 a.m. *Just three more hours for my shift.* Heavy snow from a storm earlier in the week covered the campus. A gust of wind blew icy needles into the few people walking across the quad.

Great to be sitting on my butt in a nice, warm lobby. He settled into the padded seat behind the security desk. *Seniority still has its advantages.*

Warner scanned the grounds through reinforced steel mesh, which protected the spacious windows from the ever-increasing vandalism and demonstrations. In addition, a recently installed state-of-the-art security system checked the physical characteristics of nearby walkers against a database of known terrorists.

Only two more years before I retire.

Highly respected for its leading edge studies of robotics and artificial intelligence, CMU had become a frequent target of technology-hating protestors and the even more dangerous religious fanatics.

Warner spotted two security guards walking side by side past the administration building. Security had been beefed up in the last couple of years; sentries patrolled the campus at all hours.

Looking out a side window, Warner watched three students, bundled in heavy parkas, hurry toward the front entrance. The security system kept a spotlight on the students as it checked their identities. Warner was pleased when the spotlight winked out; the students weren't in the FBI terrorist database.

In addition to observing nearby walkers, Warner kept tabs on the building interior. Cameras positioned in all the hallways and classrooms sent a continuous sequence of pictures to the monitors at the security desk. There was no one else in the building tonight, except for Jose Ramiriz, a guard patrolling the hallways.

Warner scrutinized the three students, two men and a woman, when they arrived at the front entrance. With the murder of a robotics professor last year, the campus had become a dangerous place.

A female African-American student placed her hand on the fingerprint scanner, causing her picture to pop up on his display: tan skin, short black hair, intelligent eyes and an intriguing smile. The security computer identified her as Barbara Lester, a language major. *Sort of a Mona Lisa look*, recalling the famous portrait he had seen last year on his European vacation.

He buzzed the exterior door, and she entered. Her two male

companions, one white and the other Asian, also entered after passing the fingerprint identification. In the holding area, a metal detector, an explosives sniffer and a pattern recognition x-ray scanned each student for weapons. When all three had passed the scans, the interior door slid open. Warner didn't recognize them, but that wasn't unusual. More than ten thousand students attended the university.

The young woman unbuttoned her coat, left her friends and walked up to the desk. The database photo didn't do justice to her lush figure. Warner's eyes were drawn to a silver amulet swinging across a tight sweater.

If I were twenty years younger ...

Warner smiled at her. "Good evening, Ms. Lester. Can I help you?"



The young woman smiled at the security guard.

"I think we can manage without your help."

She deftly pulled a wallet-shaped polymer gun out of her coat pocket and shot Warner in the face and chest. His head jerked back and he tumbled off his chair, dead before he hit the floor.

Moesha Jefferson stared at the body. "Well, Mr. Warner, you wanted early retirement."

Nick Marabella, the white member of the trio, rushed behind the desk and took off his coat, revealing a security guard uniform. He scanned the monitor.

"Ramiriz is in the south hallway of the first floor," he said as he pushed Warner's body under the desk and removed his pistol.

Moesha checked her wrist computer. "It's now 2:12." To Henry

Ling, the other soldier she had selected for this mission, she said, “We’ll place the explosives in the designated areas and return here by 2:26. I have the basement and first floor and you have the second and third. I’ll eliminate Ramiriz.”

Moesha and her companions dropped to their knees and bowed their heads. After kissing their amulets, all three began to pray.

“God bless the Church of Natural Humans,
 We do not fear Lucifer or his abominations,
 We will kill all the Technos,
 And purify the Earth for Your Return.
 Glory be to the Lord and His Creations.”

Moesha kissed her amulet again and stood up. She snapped at Ling, “Get moving.” Then at Marabella, “Turn away or kill all visitors. I don’t care who they are.”

She sprinted across the lobby and down the hallway, ready to sacrifice her life for the Lord.



Joe McMahon was the managing security officer on duty. Perched in his corner office on the top floor of the Admin building, he had a panoramic view of the campus.

On his desk were photographs of his family—Edith and the kids, now all grown, and his buddies from the Pittsburgh PD. McMahon’s eyes lingered on a photo from his retirement dinner last year. Framed in silver, it showed him standing between the commissioner and the mayor, smiling with his hands over their shoulders.

Carnegie is fine, but you can’t just put aside thirty-five years on the job.

McMahon was in charge of night shift university security. He

took pride in being a top professional; he knew how many men patrolled the campus at any moment, the layout of every building, where a terrorist might attack. He had to know everything. Lives were at stake. He had also studied every aspect of the new surveillance system, which answered to the name *Rex*.

Two holograms shimmered in front of his desk, each a two-foot cube cycling through hundreds of cameras in a predetermined sequence. Each hologram produced an image for six seconds and then moved on to the next camera. The Alpha hologram cycled through views of the front lobby of every building, while the Beta hologram panned over the campus grounds. McMahon was monitoring both when he noticed something.

“Rex, reset the Alpha hologram back one cycle and hold it,” McMahon said.

The lobby of the Robotics Institute appeared normal for 2 a.m., empty, except for the guard sitting at his desk. *Just the way it should be so early in the morning*. Still, he felt uneasy. His instincts warned him something was wrong.

“Which guards are working the Robotics Institute right now?”

Rex responded in an authoritative male voice. “Robert Warner is working the desk and Jose Ramiriz is walking the halls.”

McMahon squinted at the image, continuing to feel uneasy. Then it hit him. Bob Warner was middle-aged, with an expanding gut, while this guard looked young and trim. The man’s head bobbed up and down as he monitored the display and looked out through the lobby windows.

“Give me a close-up of the face of the guard working the desk.”

The face in the hologram grew larger, but the view was mostly hair and forehead.

“Just the face, full frontal,” he barked.

Rex changed the angle and magnification until an enlarged front image of a face appeared in the hologram. McMahon stared for a moment.

“Identify the officer at the desk.”

“Unknown,” Rex replied. “The face doesn’t conform to anyone in the officer database.”

“Scan the logs and tell me who’s in the building.”

“Three students are in the building. Barbara Lester, Chester Brandt and Bruce Chin signed in at approximately 2:10 a.m.”

At least one—probably all three—was an intruder. Shit! Three intruders and only Jose in the building.

“Get me Officer Ramiriz.”

A moment later, Ramiriz, a clean-cut young man staring up at a ceiling camera, appeared on the Beta hologram.

“Officer Ramiriz reporting, sir.”

“Listen carefully, Jose, you are in grave danger,” McMahon whispered. “Bob Warner is not at the front desk. An unknown intruder has replaced him. There are probably two additional intruders in the building. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Ramiriz replied. He pulled his Glock laser from a side holster and glanced up and down the hallway.

“I don’t know what their plans are, but they probably killed Warner and they may be after you, too,” McMahon said. “Take your badge off and leave it on the floor, so they can’t track you so easily with the surveillance system. I want you out of the building immediately. As soon as you’re safe, I’m cutting the power to the lights. Where’s the nearest exit?”

“In the rear hall near the Darwin Project,” Ramiriz whispered as

he quietly placed his badge on the floor.

“Get out now. Take a position in cover outside the exit and stop anyone coming out of the building. Shoot to kill if they resist. I’ll have Rex lock all the doors, except for the ones near the Darwin project. Anyone leaving the building will have to go past you. Report back when you take position.”

“Yes, sir.”

The close-up of the lobby, with the stranger at the desk, appeared in the Alpha hologram, while Beta showed Jose heading toward the exit.

“Be careful, son,” McMahon muttered.

When Jose disappeared out the door, McMahon said, “Rex, turn off the power to all the lights in the Robotics Institute.”

The Alpha hologram turned dark.

“Task completed,” Rex said.

Tapping his fingers on the desk, McMahon considered his options.

“Rex, secure all the doors in the Robotics Institute except the one nearest the Darwin Project.”

“Task completed.”

“Contact all guards stationed within a quarter mile of the Robotics Institute and have them cover all the exits,” McMahon said. “Brief them on the situation. I want them to shoot to kill. Issue the Maximum Alert Priority. No one is to enter the building. I want to trap the intruders in the building as a first step. Also call the police and alert them to the situation.”

McMahon squinted at the shadowy form in the Alpha hologram; the intruder had remained at the front desk, his silhouette visible in the weak moonlight.

Well-trained, he thought.

“Rex, get the Dean on the line.”



Moesha flattened her back against the wall when the lights went out. No sounds came through the darkness. She whispered into the computer on her wrist, “We’ve been discovered. Nick, hold your position for another ten minutes, then get out of there and meet me at the safehouse. Henry, do the same after you place the explosives. Use your GPS to find your way in the dark.”

Moesha didn’t like using a GPS or any other type of computer, but the First Minister had explained the difference between these systems and forbidden technology. The Church would accept a computer if it wasn’t a thinking, autonomous creation imitating a human. Moesha might agree to use it, but she didn’t trust any of this technology. It had an odor that drifted up from hell. For the moment, however, their computers were the lesser evil.

Pale moonlight filtered through the window shades, outlining the hallway in alternating light and shadows, but too dark to find her way.

“Computer, guide me to the first placement area.”

A low voice emerged from her wrist computer. “Walk forward sixteen feet and turn left into the hall.”

She walked down the corridor, dragging the fingers of her left hand along the smooth wall. She had memorized the building layout, but it would have been slow going without the GPS directions. Moesha turned left when she felt the corner.

“Walk forward eighty-seven feet and turn down the stairway on your left.”

Moesha, fingers again brushing the wall, hurried down the dark corridor. She paused, listening. Nothing. She began walking again, but kept the polymer gun ready in her right hand, knowing she might run into the security guard at any moment. The gun was adequate for close quarters, but she would be at a disadvantage shooting at longer distances.

She stopped and whispered, "How much farther?"

"Eleven feet."

Moesha hurried forward, sliding her hand up and down the wall searching for the stairway. She found the edge of the wall and moved her hand down until she felt the smooth plastic of a handrail.

"Go down one flight and take the exit to your right."

The last of the faint moonlight disappeared as she walked down the steps. Moesha followed the computer's instructions to the boiler room, the first target area. She stopped just inside the doorway, unable to see in the pitch-black room.

It didn't matter. She knew four huge fuel tanks were lined up on the far side of the room. Walking forward with both hands extended, only a few seconds passed before her fingers pressed against the cold metal of a tank. Moesha pulled the first explosive, which she had sealed in a plastic bag, from the lining of her coat and gently placed it under the tank. She ripped a button off her sleeve and buried it inside the bag. An electronic signal with the right frequency would activate the button's trigger and set off the explosive. Hopefully, she and her soldiers would be clear of the building by the time she activated the trigger. If not, it was God's will.

The computer guided her back up the stairs to the Darwin Laboratory, the location for the second explosive. This is where the Technos designed self-replicating software. She cringed just thinking

about it, modules of software rapidly breeding generation after generation, each more monstrous than the previous one. Whatever happened today, she vowed to destroy this abomination.

Gunfire, mixed with the hiss of lasers, came from the direction of the main lobby as she placed the second explosive on a lab bench. Time was running out. She quickly buried the triggering button in the explosive then followed the computer's directions to the nearest exit.

Henry's voice came over the computer, "Moesha, the guards are surrounding the building. Get out now."

She swiftly found the exit and cracked open the door to see if the grounds were clear. The Robotics Institute was surrounded by a three-foot-high stone wall, with brick pathways leading to other buildings. All the outside lights had been turned off. Enemies might be hiding in the brush, ready to shoot as soon as she stepped out. She couldn't see much in the dim moonlight, but she couldn't remain inside the building.

Moesha burst out the doorway and sprinted along a brick walkway, toward the stone wall just ahead.

A man shouted from the darkness, "Drop your weapon and raise your hands."

She cut to the right and dove for the cover of the wall. A weapon hissed from the direction of the voice, and Moesha felt the hot brush of a laser beam passing over her back. After hitting the ground painfully on her hands and knees, she crawled away from the shooter, shielded by the wall. She stopped moving and listened. If she could pinpoint her pursuer, she might be able to get close enough to shoot him. A foot crunched in the snow, revealing the location of her enemy.

Too far away.

The hiss of lasers came from the opposite side of the building, and she considered detonating the explosives. Martyrdom was beautiful, but not yet necessary; it shouldn't be difficult to kill this one guard, then destroy the building and escape.

Moesha resumed crawling along the wall. She stopped to listen and again heard a footstep, this time much closer. Whoever was stalking her had come within range of her polymer gun. She peeked over the wall and fired three quick shots in the direction of the guard's last sound.

A man grunted, and a body hit the ground. She wasn't sure if she had killed him, but the squeal of sirens in the distance warned her to get away. She crawled on raw knees to the end of the wall. Hearing only sirens and distant lasers, she bolted into a small, landscaped park, trying to become an elusive shadow in the night. A laser cut into a tree inches to her left as she twisted through the brush.

God is watching over me.

Moesha ran until she reached the far side of the park. The man hunting her was a professional, and she wouldn't underestimate him again. Breathing hard, she crouched behind a thick holly and looked for the best escape route. Ahead was an open field, murky in the faint moonlight. On the far side of the field, maybe one hundred yards away, were thick woods. Crossing the field would leave her exposed, but approaching sirens gave her no other choice.

Moesha broke from cover and darted into the field, running in a zigzag pattern. Although she was in superb physical condition, her breathing gradually became ragged and her legs wooden. At any moment, she expected the hiss of a laser. Staggering, she made it to the woods and flopped behind the trunk of a spruce tree, safe for the moment.

Precious seconds passed before she recovered enough strength to move. She rolled over on her stomach and listened for the sounds of pursuit. Snow crunched under someone's boots, but he was a long way off and moving slowly. Staccato bursts of lasers came from the direction of the Institute.

Moesha had to destroy this center of abomination, regardless of the consequences to her men.

Soldiers of the Army of God pledge their lives to the Creator.

She hesitated for a second and whispered, "May we meet in the sight of the Lord, my friends." Then she said, "Computer, discharge all explosives."

A firestorm lit up the night as the Robotics Institute exploded, blowing off the roof and obliterating everything near the building. The roar was deafening, and waves of hot wind surged across the field into her face. For a moment, night turned into day and Moesha spotted the silhouette of a man about fifty feet away. The man turned to see the explosion, a laser pistol dangling from his hand.

Moesha stood up, extending her right arm as she aimed at the enemy. The hot wind brought tears to her eyes, smudging the target. She had one bullet remaining, and it was a long shot for a polymer gun. If she didn't kill him with this last bullet, she would join her comrades in the arms of the Lord. Moesha aimed for the man's broad back and slowly squeezed the trigger until the weapon barked.

The bullet struck the man between the shoulder blades and he fell forward, hitting the ground hard, bouncing slightly and then lying still. Moesha stared at him, licked her lips, and kissed her amulet. Lord willing, the Army of God would kill many more infidels. She said a blessing for her brave companions then tossed the gun away. She ran into the woods, her path illuminated by distant flames.

CHAPTER 7

The attack upon the Robotics Institute was the most recent of a well-organized terrorist campaign against leading technology institutions. We consider our policy of non-intervention to be generally successful; the Technos and religious fundamentalists continue to drift toward all-out civil war. Since both groups are a threat to our government, we allow the killing to thin their ranks.

◆ From a classified FBI report, February 18, 2022

Wednesday, February 16, 2022

David drove south on Route 1 in northern California, looking for the Carter Motel. Hard-working windshield wipers provided smeared glimpses of dark buildings along the road. From time to time, the headlights of an oncoming car glared through his windshield, beginning as dim pinpoints in the night, growing to blinding intensity then passing in a blast of muddy water.

Tomorrow he would meet with Kathy Bauman, a former associate of his father. Kathy had recruited college graduates for VPS and had worked closely with Dad for a couple of years. Searching the Internet, he had discovered she was a Summa Cum Laude graduate of Columbia with a degree in Business Administration. Raised in an upper middle-class home in the Philadelphia Mainline, she had

excelled in softball, pitching her high school to a state championship.

A newspaper article mentioned that Kathy and Dad had been friends, so David had decided to call her. She was pleasant over the phone and didn't appear to hold any hostility toward his father. Just the opposite. Kathy had invited him to come and talk before he had asked.

Finally, he spotted the motel on the left and turned into its narrow entrance. The Mercedes' tires crunched on the loose stones of the driveway, which pelted the underside of the car with staccato pops and pings.

The motel was an old, two-story cracker box, the kind of place they used to build fifty years ago for travelers with paper-thin wallets. Hazy light seeped out of the lobby window; the remainder of the building was a dark mass fading into the storm. A handful of solitary cars stood in the muddy lot along the side of the motel.

David parked, pulled the hood of his jacket over his head and jumped out of the car. A cold, sharp rain blew into his face as he ran to the doorway. Heat from the lobby felt good, but it brought the smell of decay. Leaving a trail of water across a faded green carpet, David headed to the registration desk.

The lobby had seen better days and was sliding toward a bleak future. The young brunette at the desk looked him over several times as she registered him. David knew that look. She was almost pretty when she smiled, with a sort of gap-toothed charm. Then the network link to the reservations system failed, and she grumbled about having to take his credit card information by hand. He decided she wasn't worth picking up. Besides, he was worn out from the long drive.

David carried his bag up a creaky wooden staircase and found his door at the back end of a dim hallway. It took a couple of tries to get

the keycard to work. Opening the door, he glanced into a sparse old room: a double bed with a blanket and two pillows, a dresser with an ancient TV on top, and a bathroom with a toilet, sink and shower. A brass-colored pole lamp in the far corner bathed the room with yellow light. The wallpaper faded into a dingy white ceiling.

Not exactly Shangri-la, but at least the room seems clean.

He dropped his bag on the floor next to the bed. Looking out the window, he spotted the Mercedes' dark form. Rain hit the hood and ran down the sides in little streams.

The room was cold, so he searched for a thermostat. He was about to call the front desk when he realized the rusty box under the window provided the lone source of heat. Fiddling with its controls, he coaxed a current of warm air from the grumbling machine.

After bolting the door, he sat on the bed and lit a cigarette. He wasn't a heavy smoker, but a cigarette or two at night always helped him relax. He began to unwind, listening to the patter of rain on the roof.

A knock at the door brought his attention back to the present.

"Mr. Brown, it's Sally from the front desk. I have some extra blankets and a fresh pillow."

After one last drag, David snuffed out the cigarette in an ashtray and got off the bed. He opened the door and she walked in, carrying blankets and a pillow to the bed. She wore skin-tight jeans, which showed off her tight, round butt as she walked past.

Maybe her attitude wasn't so bad.

When she began to spread the blankets over the bed, he said, "Thanks, but I can do that."

She smiled. "It's my job, but you can give me a hand if you like."

David helped tuck in the blankets, working across from her. She

bent over the bed, glancing at him from time to time, a shy smile softening her expression.

“I noticed you’re staying for just one night.”

“Yeah, I’ll be checking out in the morning.”

Sally nodded and continued working.

“We don’t get too many young guys coming into this town.”

“Surprising.”

Sally’s eyes dropped and David regretted his sarcasm. She seemed nice.

“Sorry,” he said. “It was a long drive in the rain.”

She looked up. “No problem. I know it don’t look like much, but the beach is pretty neat. They say we useta get a lot of tourists.” She fluffed up a pillow and tossed it on the bed. “That was a long time ago.” She put her hands on her hips and smiled at him. “Room looks pretty good. As good as this joint gets.”

“Thanks,” David said and reached in his pocket to fish out a tip.

“No need for that.” She came around the bed and stood close to him. He detected a hint of perfume that hadn’t been there when he checked in. “I was such a bitch ... with the credit card and all that.” She placed her hand lightly on his arm. “You seem like a nice guy.”

He decided this motel wasn’t so bad. He needed a good night’s sleep ... but she seemed lonely, like him.

“Don’t you have to cover the front desk? I don’t want you to get into trouble.”

“Nobody else is coming in tonight, so I locked up.” Her fingers drifted across his arm. “We have all the time we want.”

Talk about a helpful front desk, he thought, as his hand caressed the curve of her hip.



David groaned as he rolled over. He was confused momentarily then realized he was in a motel. It couldn't be morning already—the room was dark. Then he remembered; he had pulled the curtains because Sally wanted privacy, even though the parking lot was virtually deserted. An old digital clock on the nightstand glowed 3:11 a.m. He turned to see if Sally was awake and felt vaguely disappointed when he realized she wasn't there.

At least she didn't take my shoes.

David tossed and turned, fighting the lumps in the mattress, trying to get comfortable. He was still tired from the long drive, but sleep wouldn't come again, so he piled up the pillows, leaned back, and folded his hands behind his head.

This Kathy Bauman had a nice voice, and she had worked with Dad, but how well did she really know him?

He rolled over on his side.

What will I learn tomorrow about my father?

Suddenly cold, he pulled the blankets over his bare chest and shoulders. He stared at the wall for a while, and then drifted into a troubled sleep.

CHAPTER 8

David was a difficult child from the start, more at home with computers than humans. However, nobody, not even his father, suspected the cosmic importance of the strange gift evolving within the boy.

◆ *The Real Story of Raymond Brown*, Paul K. Monprode, 2029

Thursday morning, February 17, 2022

The rumble of a heavy truck on the nearby highway woke him. He must have drifted off. Since it was almost seven, David decided to check out and grab breakfast before his appointment with Kathy Bauman. He snatched the package of condoms off the nightstand and tossed it in his bag, wondering if Sally would be working this morning.

David dressed quickly and left the room. The sun was surprisingly warm, so he let his jacket hang unzipped. The same few cars stood in the parking lot, but no Mercedes. He glanced around, but his car wasn't in the lot. He threw his bag down and cursed.

He stormed into the lobby and told the clerk at the registration desk the Mercedes had been stolen. The clerk, a small, round-faced young man, was neither surprised nor interested.

“You should contact the police.”

The clerk reached into a drawer and pulled out a sheet of paper

which he handed to David. “This is the information they’ll need.”

“You have a form ready for reporting a stolen car?” David said. “It happens that frequently?”

“Times are tough in these parts,” the clerk replied. “Lots of things get stolen. Didn’t Sally warn you last night? A nice car like yours would be a tempting target.”

Sally! She hadn’t said a word.

It began to sink in.

Sally knew he had a Mercedes and knew when he fell asleep. She played him for a sucker.

He stalked over to a pay phone and called the police. They weren’t interested. The policeman reluctantly took a description of the car and promised to investigate.

His car was obviously gone for good. He called Kathy and explained the situation. She was the first person who seemed to care. Her honest concern took a little of the edge off his resentment.

“I doubt the police will find my car, so I’m going to buy another one right away,” David said. “If it would be okay, I’ll call you to reschedule as soon as I get a new car.”

“There’s only one decent car dealer within fifty miles,” Kathy replied. Her voice had a hearty, confident quality. “I think he’ll have a good car for you. You just sit tight at the motel. I’ll pick you up in about ten minutes, and we’ll go find you a car.”

“Kathy, that’s very decent of you, but I can’t ask—”

“You didn’t ask, I offered. See you in a few minutes.”

She hung up. *Well, I guess I’m getting a new car.* He wondered if she was good-looking.

He was sitting in a stuffed chair in a corner of the lobby when Kathy walked through the front entrance.

Whoa!

She was a medium tall Venus in her early thirties, with a crown of auburn hair. Her coat hung open and swayed back and forth as she walked into the lobby, drawing his attention to a symphony of curves. He didn't know where to look first.

Kathy spotted him and smiled as if she meant it. David had to catch himself from staring at the swell of her silk blouse as she strode up to him. He hoped he wasn't drooling.

He stood up and shook her hand. "Hello, Dave," she said. "I'm sorry about your car."

She had a firm handshake, feminine but vigorous. David found himself staring at her and hastily released her hand.

Not exactly Rhatt Butler.

He cleared his throat. "Nice to meet you, Kathy. Thanks for coming out here. I'm sorry—"

"No problem," she said. "Let's have breakfast and we can talk. Later I'll take you to the one used car dealer around here who's partially honest." She laughed. "I wouldn't buy a car from him, but then, you don't have much choice."

"Thanks, I think."

Great comeback. Maybe my brain will unfreeze soon.

Kathy chuckled and led him outside to her gold Lexus, a vehicle with a cockpit that would put a jetliner to shame. She said, "Start," and the engine came to life. He looked through the passenger-side window: leather seats, a huge, brightly lit display, and a rumble that suggested power.

"Very nice," he said, staring at the expensive convertible. "Can I beam in or do we still have to use the doors?"

Kathy chuckled as the doors slid open. "There are still a few bugs

in the transporter.”

The seat fit like a glove. “I didn’t know there was so much money in recruiting,” he said.

Kathy smiled again, making him feel warm all over. She had a great body, but that smile made her special. It was dazzling, and it started with her eyes.

“The VPS stock options didn’t hurt, either,” Kathy said. “I was lucky enough to cash out before the depression dragged down the stock price. Sometimes it’s better to be lucky than smart.”

David wasn’t buying it; this woman was as intelligent as she was beautiful. It was turning into a great day.

She wore a slinky little number that slid up smooth thighs as she settled into the sedan’s firm leather seat. He couldn’t take his eyes away from her. She glanced at him and then pulled out of the lot. He felt like a gawky kid on his first date.

Kathy was thirty-three, according to the bio he had pulled off the net, but didn’t look it. He wondered if she’d be interested in a much younger man.

Get your brain above your belt, he warned himself.

He had driven down here to learn about his father, not jump into bed with every woman who smiled at him. Not that that was such a bad thing.

In a moment, the sedan was cruising down the highway, making the road feel better than it was. They pulled into a weathered restaurant for breakfast, and David found himself chatting easily with Kathy; it was as if they were old friends catching up with each other. She had a way of putting him at ease. His brain began making a comeback.

Kathy told him she had left VPS nine years ago, bought a

beachfront home just south of Fort Bragg, and opened a business as a human resources consultant. VPS was her best client, but she also recruited technology specialists for several other corporations.

Glancing at her hands, he was pleased to find she wasn't wearing a wedding ring. Then he surprised himself with his boldness. "Ever married?"

She shook her head. "Haven't found the right man."

After breakfast, Kathy drove him south along Route 1. They enjoyed an unusually sunny day, talking and laughing until she pulled into a well-maintained car lot called Trader Pete's Place. A huge American flag fluttered in the wind from a flagpole in front.

Kathy led him through a showroom featuring well-polished new cars and then peeked through the window of a closed office door. She knocked once on the window and entered the office without waiting for a reply. A large middle-aged man looked up from his desk and smiled at her.

Kathy returned his smile. "Hello, Pete. Do you have a few minutes to talk or are you right in the middle of cheating someone?"

Pete leaned back. "Come right in, Kathy. I wasn't doing anything unusual, just preparing termination papers for the last guy you recruited for me."

Chuckling softly, Kathy said, "Pete Zellman, I would like you to meet Dave Brown, a friend of mine. Dave suddenly finds himself in need of some transportation. His Mercedes was stolen last night."

Zellman was already coming around the desk as Kathy made the introductions. Although the man must have been six-foot-five and nearly four hundred pounds, he moved like an athlete. He wore a white pullover shirt of tent-like proportions, which hung loosely over neatly pressed navy blue pants. Zellman's smile revealed a mouthful

of huge, pearly teeth.

Getting between him and a pork chop could be life threatening.

Zellman's handshake was strong and friendly, but David felt the big man was sizing him up.

"You came to the right place, Dave," Zellman said. "Any friend of Kathy's gets the best deal on the lot. Of course, I'm sorry you lost your car, but I can get you into one just as good for a very attractive price."

In spite of himself, David liked Zellman. "Attractive for you or me?"

Chuckling, Zellman put his beefy arm around David's shoulder and led him through the office door. The story of Jonah swallowed by the whale came to mind.

The big man turned to Kathy. "I like this friend of yours. Has a sense of humor."

Zellman walked David and Kathy out to the car lot, all the time extolling the quality of his cars. Zellman took him to a beautifully polished one and patted the hood.

"This is the car for you, Dave. This little beauty is in great—"

"That's my car," David sputtered, staring at the Mercedes in front of him. "It was stolen last night." Turning to Zellman, David said, "You're not going to get away with this."

"You're mistaken, friend," Zellman said. "This isn't your car." His voice was tinged with hurt, as if he were the injured party. "I bought this car two days back. My boys have worked hard to tune this baby up. Now, if you're not interested in it, we can look at other cars."

"Who do you think you're kidding?" David said. "I know my car when I see it. I'm calling the police."

Zellman spoke to the computer in his breast pocket. "Sam, I

would like you to get me a summary report for the car I purchased two days back, the Mercedes. Also, find out if it was stolen.”

“Can do, Pete,” came from Zellman’s pocket. Almost instantly, Sam added the following information: “The car was purchased from Mr. Scott Ferguson on Monday, February 14, 2022 at 10:38 a.m. The car has been involved in two minor accidents, but the damage was easily repaired. It has never been reported as stolen.”

Apparently satisfied, Zellman said, “There you go. This car might look like the stolen car, but it’s just a coincidence. You could have the police check it through their system, but they’ll get the same results.”

“I know my car when I see it,” David said. “I also know how to fix a database, so I’m not impressed with the computer report. I’ll be damned if I’m going to buy back my own car.”

“Dave, calm down and think about it for a second,” Kathy said, hooking his elbow with her hand and leading him away from Zellman. “You’re stuck here in a strange town,” she whispered, “and you’re accusing one of the leading citizens of stealing your car. The computer says you’re wrong. If you pursue this matter, your identity will become common knowledge. Not only will you irritate the police, but who knows what will happen when the wackos come out of the woodwork. This town was much more prosperous before PeaceMaker. Lots of down-on-their-luck people blame your father for their problems.”

David was about to bark out a reply when Kathy added quietly, “I don’t want you to get hurt. I also know how important it is to learn more about your father. I can help you.”

David began to understand what Kathy was telling him. *Acting stupid will not get me anywhere.* Kathy looked at him with concern.

“Besides,” she said, “insurance will cover your loss. You do have insurance, don’t you?”

Of course. He nodded at her. *I can buy back my car with the insurance money.*

David bit down on his anger and decided to make the best of it. He nodded at Kathy and said, “Okay. You’re right.”

“It’s all going to work out.”

She’s awfully confident, David thought, as she led him back to Zellman, who terminated a netphone call as they approached.

“Dave understands it’s just a coincidence you have a car similar to the one stolen from him,” Kathy said to Zellman. “Given the situation, however, I’m hoping you will sell him this car at cost.”

She concentrated an intense stare on Zellman, and he nodded reluctantly.

Quickly recovering his good humor, Zellman raised his hands in surrender. “Okay, okay. I know when I’m outnumbered.” His big teeth flashed a million-dollar smile. “Pete Zellman doesn’t take advantage of somebody else’s bad luck. You can have this car at cost, even though we tuned it up better than new.”

“Could you have it ready tomorrow morning?” Kathy asked Zellman. “I’m sure you still have plenty of work to do.”

Zellman looked quizzically at Kathy. “Sure. We still have work to get the car in A-1 condition, but he can pick it up tomorrow morning.”

They were quiet for a moment, and then Kathy asked, “Okay, Dave?”

Feeling outmaneuvered, David said, “Exactly what do you consider cost?”

Zellman didn’t seem to know how to respond. “That car cost

me ... thirty-four grand. You can see the price on the sticker—only thirty-seven five. Worth more than that. It's in great shape, and the miles are low."

"The miles are not low," David said. "It has more than 160,000 miles."

Zellman looked through the window at the dashboard. He smiled at David. "Why, it has just 65,000 miles! It's practically new." Zellman looked over at Kathy and winked. David glanced at Kathy, who was losing an effort to suppress a grin.

They're enjoying this.

Kathy wasn't the straight arrow he had assumed; there was an edge to her. Zellman was a crook, yet she seemed very comfortable with the man—a friend, or maybe a partner. Apparently there were hidden facets to this woman's character.

But anger would get him nowhere. *Kathy wasn't the only one who could play this game.* David strolled around the car and made a show of bending down and looking under the frame. Although his automobile expertise was limited to the knowledge that a car had four wheels, he tried to appear like an expert.

From the far side of the car, he said to Zellman, "I don't know, these tires are awfully worn. I see some rust under there, too. No way is this car worth more than twenty-seven thousand."

Before Zellman could answer, Kathy said, "Let me take a look." She walked over to David and bent down to look at the tires. "He has a point about the tires, Pete," she called out. "They don't look too good. I see the rust, too. I think this car may have some problems."

Zellman sighed. "How bad are the problems?"

Kathy stood up and studied the car. "The interior is kind of beat up, too. I think Dave is right on target; the car's not worth more than

twenty-seven thousand.”

“Are you sure?”

When Kathy nodded, Zellman clapped his hands together and said, “Then twenty-seven it is. I’m taking a loss, but as long as I have a happy customer, why then, I’m happy, too.”

Kathy flashed a smile at Zellman. “Thanks, Pete.”

David was surprised how quickly Zellman had given in to Kathy. Before he could ask her anything, Kathy grabbed his arm to lead him back to her car. He was deep in thought as they drove away.

“I just paid twenty-seven thousand dollars for my own car,” he muttered under his breath.

Kathy patted his knee. “You were great. Not many men could have figured out the play and turned on a dime. You threw Pete for a loss with that twenty-seven-thousand figure. Surprised me, too.”

“Let’s say we surprised each other today,” David replied.

“It was one of those situations where nobody got hurt. Insurance will cover the loss. In fact, you’ll probably make a profit. Let’s celebrate a successful negotiation. I know a great place where we can talk.”

Everything turned out well for everyone, just as she promised, except for my insurance company.

David tried to stay angry, but couldn’t suppress a smile. “How did you know Zellman would have my car?”

Kathy’s eyes crackled with life. “Where else would it be? Pete recycles all the cars in this area. Everyone knows that. He’s a friend, so I figured we could get the car back at a reasonable price. It was the best alternative. The rest of the stuff on his lot is junk.”

David thought about that and laughed.

Well, David, you’re a shrewd one. Nobody can put anything over on you.

He looked over at Kathy with admiration.

Smart, very smart. She's been in control all morning.

Kathy glanced at him, her eyes lingering for a moment before she turned back to the road.

Things could be worse.

CHAPTER 9

Dr. Jacob Rabinowitz, a leading artificial intelligence scientist, was murdered last night in his home in Bellevue, Washington. A neighbor reported seeing a young African-American woman entering Dr. Rabinowitz's home that evening, but the suspect's identity remains unknown.

◆ Fox News, November 19, 2020

Thursday afternoon, February 17, 2022

Kathy turned off the highway into Mackerricher State Park and stopped near the beginning of a narrow walkway. Gusts of wind blew across the dunes, so David zipped up his jacket after he stepped out of the car. Blue sky, salty air, the rumble of the ocean. Hooking his arm in hers, Kathy led him up a ramp onto the walkway. The sun-bleached wood planks, built years earlier, squeaked under their feet. They strolled quietly for about half a mile through grassy dunes to the coast. Although a crisp wind swept across the sand, the pressure of her shoulder made the trip a quiet pleasure.

From time to time, he glanced down at the woman walking alongside. She was out of his league, but she didn't seem to mind. He'd been with plenty of women, some almost as beautiful as Kathy, but he'd never felt so in awe of anyone.

The boardwalk ended at a small pier where they sat on a wooden

bench, warm from the sun's rays. He leaned back and enjoyed the shore's fresh, salty smell.

About a quarter of a mile offshore, a group of large rocks, battered by the sea, was home to a flock of seagulls. Their calls drifted in, barely audible over the pounding of the surf.

The sun soared above the horizon, beginning another voyage across the sky. As a kid, he believed the sun conserved its strength during winter, building energy for the green days of spring, when its warmth would nourish the land. The coast was a special place for him, where the sun, the land and the ocean came together in harmony.

David was lost in thought, listening to the sound of the surf, with memories flooding in of walks along the coastline with his father.

When Dad wasn't drunk.

Leaning against him, Kathy said, "I knew you'd love this spot."

Her voice drew him back to the present. "It's beautiful," he agreed.

She snuggled against him, creating a warm tension where they touched. He could barely believe his good fortune; such an amazing woman was interested in him. Cautiously, not wanting to puncture the balloon, he slid his arm around her shoulders.

"There's something unique about the coast," he said, looking out to the horizon. "Part of it is the permanence. A thousand years ago, people came to this spot and they saw pretty much what we're seeing now. Sky, sand, the ocean ... and the sun, always the sun.

"Not like my work," he continued. "You know, developing software. Constant change. Today's breakthrough is tomorrow's antique."

He wasn't accustomed to talking about himself, especially with someone he barely knew, but it felt natural.

“And you love them both, don’t you?” Kathy asked.

“I suppose I do. Trying to straddle both.” His eyes came back to her. “Where does that leave me?”

Kathy slipped her arms around his neck and pulled his face to hers. David saw blue-green eyes, long auburn lashes, and he surrendered to the sweet pressure of her half-parted lips. Her kiss was rich with promise, and he willed it to go on and on. His hand slid under her skirt, exploring the soft curve of her thigh. Finally, breathing heavily, Kathy pulled away and settled her head on his shoulder.

“I like the way you kiss,” she murmured. “You’re what, twenty-one, twenty-two?”

“Twenty-one. Does it make a difference?”

“Usually it does. The few men I see have been my age or older, but you’re mature for twenty-one.”

“I grew up fast.”

“Yes, I can imagine.” She kissed him on the neck, stoking his desire again, then leaned against his shoulder. “We get some beautiful winter days up here, maybe a little too cold for the tourists, but good for real beach people.”

He was content to remain quiet.

“Your father loved the beach, especially on a day like this.” Wind whipped long strands of her hair into his face, tickling his lips. She closed her eyes for a moment and said, “He had a beautiful old house on the Oregon coast, perched on a hill overlooking the ocean. On a day like this, he could gaze miles out to sea. Do you remember that place?”

“I have vague memories of it, mostly bad. I was seven when Mom left him and took us to San Francisco. He was drunk most of the time.” David paused for a moment, listening to the surf. “I was

usually in bed by the time he came home. Mom probably thought I was asleep, but I could work in the dark on my laptop. Headlights would shine through my window when he pulled into the driveway, so I always knew when he had come home. Then I'd hear voices ... they'd shout at each other ... my bedroom was right above the kitchen. After a while the arguing would stop, Mom would tramp up the stairs and slam the door to her bedroom ... then the house would be silent again." David shrugged. "Dad was always gone before I got up for school."

"I'm sorry, Dave"

"It was a long time ago."

"I didn't know him then, but I heard the stories when I joined VPS," Kathy said. "Drinking all the time, fighting with management, how he got drunk, crashed his car and almost killed himself. Must have been real tough for you."

Kathy looked up at him, searching his face for something. The sudden intensity between them had surprised him; she probably felt off balance, too.

"I didn't meet Ray until he came back from rehab," she said. "At that point, I had been with VPS less than a year. He was sober then, and I enjoyed working with him." A smile flitted across her face. "What a great sense of humor. Ray had an edge, but he could make me laugh."

A seagull caught David's eye. It flew over the waves, floated down in the wind and landed about ten feet in front of them, in the far corner of the pier. The gray and white gull cautiously approached them, looking for a handout.

"Sorry fella, we don't have food," David said.

"Yes, we do," Kathy said as she pulled a small plastic bag from

her pocket. The gull watched them for a moment then came closer. Kathy pulled a chunk of stale bread from the bag and held it out. The big bird snatched it, gobbled it down and waited for another, which was soon forthcoming.

“I come here a couple times a week,” Kathy said, continuing to feed the gull. “We know each other; he’s the biggest and toughest bird.”

She dumped the remainder of the bread, which the gull attacked with gusto. Another gull swooped in, but the bigger bird drove him off.

“He’s someone that fights for what’s his,” she added, flashing a smile. “Reminds me of someone.”

She was irresistible, and he found himself smiling back.

“I was telling you about your father,” she said. The gull finished the last of the bread, waited a moment to see if there was any more then flew off. Kathy watched him go and said, “Ray invited me out to that beach house several times, just to work, but we always found some time to walk along the shore. I really liked Ray. He was the big brother I never had. We could talk about anything—sports, politics, technology—anything. He was such a good guy, which made the PeaceMaker thing so baffling.”

David watched the gulls fly to and from the rocks. Masters at catching the wind, they would soar above the surf then find exactly the right moment to swoop in and pick up a morsel of food just as the tide flowed out. Although he had been listening to her, a moment passed before he realized Kathy had become quiet. When he looked down, she was staring at him.

“You remind me of your father,” Kathy said. “There’s sadness in you, just like in him.” Suddenly, she brightened. “Why am I rambling

like a brain-dead adolescent? You must have a bunch of questions. You drove a long way to learn about your father. What's on your mind?"

Kathy wasn't what he had expected—he felt half a step behind. She turned him on, but it was more than that, much more, and it had happened so fast. The warmth of her voice tempted him to share everything with her. Having someone to confide in would be great, but also selfish. It wasn't Kathy's problem and he didn't want to get her involved.

"Tell me about his last few weeks at work," David said. "What was he doing? How did he seem?"

Kathy fidgeted. "Ray's attitude changed a few weeks before he disappeared. Suddenly, he wasn't the same man. I don't know quite how to describe it." She hesitated. "You know how it feels when the day begins warm and sunny, then suddenly the clouds roll in and it turns bleak?" She pulled away and sat straight up on the bench. "That was Ray. He tried to keep up appearances, but his spirit just got colder and bleaker as the days went by."

"What caused the change?"

"I don't know." She looked uncomfortable. "I haven't thought about it for a long time. I guess it had something to do with PeaceMaker." She touched his hand. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay. Didn't one of the Atlas developers disappear about that time?"

Nodding, she said, "Yes, Richard Kim, one of our best developers. He took off one night, supposedly to take care of his sick mother in China. Nobody ever saw him again. The police thought he was involved in the PeaceMaker conspiracy, but that was never proven."

Kathy was quiet for a moment. "It was strange. Ray was very

upset when Richard disappeared, right from the first. Every day he checked with me to see if Richard had contacted anyone. At first, I thought he was overreacting. Richard was taking care of his mother, right? But Ray just wouldn't believe it. He kept trying to contact Richard and then suddenly he stopped. Just like that!"

"You know," she touched his hand, "it was just before Richard disappeared that Ray's mood changed, maybe a day or two before. After that he worked alone all the time. Ray used to love meeting the new recruits and answering their questions. All of a sudden, he had no time for them. It was so unlike him."

David decided to plow forward. "Was he drinking or doing drugs, do you think?"

"No, I'm sure he wasn't. At least I never saw anything. But something sure was bothering him."

"Richard was the top developer in Dad's group, right?"

"Yes, Ray had a great deal of confidence in him."

David was aware of her hand on his as he pulled his thoughts together. Dad and Richard may have discovered PeaceMaker. If that were true, whoever developed the virus must have killed Richard. When Richard disappeared, Dad must have been terrified they would get him, too.

"Dad vanished a couple of weeks after Richard disappeared, right?"

"Yes," Kathy nodded. "One day Ray just didn't show up, didn't answer his messages, and we couldn't locate him on the GPS receiver of his wallet computer. We figured he had disabled it. Given his black mood, I was worried he might, uh, have fallen into the bottle again. I called your mother and several other people, but nobody knew where he was. I even called Ray's best friend, Paul Martino, the

owner of *Tec Advantage Magazine*, and left a message, but of course, Martino never replied. At the time, I couldn't understand why. It was weeks later when the FBI identified Martino as Ray's accomplice. Anyway, I was about to call the police and report Ray missing, but the virus hit. You know the rest; Ray died in an explosion when he and Goldman tried to kill Dianne Morgan."

David hadn't thought much about Goldman, Dad's supposed partner in building PeaceMaker. Alan Goldman had been Dianne Morgan's primary competitor for years, until VPS overwhelmed Goldman's software business. The official story was that his father and Goldman hated Dianne and built PeaceMaker to infect Atlas, the operating system owned by VPS. They activated the virus and it shut down computers across the globe, causing massive suffering and loss of life. Then Goldman and Brown would pretend to develop a way to terminate PeaceMaker and become great heroes. They would plant evidence to make it appear Dianne was responsible for PeaceMaker. Goldman and Ray Brown would then merge their companies and build a monopoly operating system. Dianne claimed they tried to kill her during the PeaceMaker attack. However, in a bloody battle, she shot Goldman, set off an explosion that killed his father and then terminated PeaceMaker. Dianne and her associates became universal heroes. Forensics identified Goldman's remains, but his father's body was never recovered. So Dianne is loved, while Goldman and his father are hated.

"Is it possible my father didn't develop PeaceMaker?"

She flinched but didn't respond, just continued to stare over the waves. Then she turned to him.

"Your father was complex and troubled. On a personal level, I always found him considerate, charming and wonderful to be

around. Most people didn't. I have to admit Ray was volatile." She shook her head. "His temper was legendary. I heard stories about him. People would tell me how he could get wound up and then explode when something went wrong. One time he was enraged over a minor software glitch and tossed a chair through his office window, right in the middle of a status meeting with his direct reports. And this was several years *after* he stopped drinking. We had to move out most of his people because they didn't want to work for him.

"You know, sometimes your strength is also your weakness. That's the way it was with your father. Ray had a strong sense of right and wrong, and he wouldn't give an inch when he believed he was right. He was determined the Atlas software would be designed for ordinary people, not big corporations. He wanted only those features that would help regular people."

Kathy shook her head as long-forgotten memories seemed to surface. "He fought with Dianne Morgan all the time. Talk about two people with towering egos! They couldn't stand each other. She wanted an operating system tailored for big corporations. In her vision, Atlas would be the engine that powered the world's economy. I think she pictured herself as John Galt. She tolerated your father because she needed him."

Kathy looked up at David then averted her eyes. "He tolerated her, too, for a long time. Then he must have snapped."

She leaned forward, looking at the gulls.

"Another thing about Ray," she shook her head, "he was fanatical about building in safeguards to protect against misuse of the software. Afterwards we learned someone had integrated a great deal of hidden code—PeaceMaker—into the operating system. Ray was a genius, he knew more about Atlas than anyone. I didn't want

to believe it, but there was no way all this hidden code could have existed without his knowledge.”

Kathy turned to him, her eyes sad.

“You have to accept your father for who he was. Ray made a decision to create a virus that would give him the power to set things right, as he saw it. He planned to shut down the economy and take over. In his view, the elite were gaining all the benefits of our technologies and ordinary people were losing out. There may be some truth to that, but his solution was insane. He decided to change things, even though it would create suffering on a scale no one could predict. If Dianne and her security people hadn’t stopped him, millions would have died.”

Dianne Morgan ... Dianne Morgan. The so-called hero of the PeaceMaker attack. If Dad’s message was true, then she must have lied about him ... about the whole damn thing. But was Dad’s message true?

Kathy had made a good point. It would have been difficult to slip all that PeaceMaker code into Atlas without his father’s knowledge. Not impossible, but difficult. The operating system was massive, millions of lines of code. If the best technical people at VPS, guys like Kateel and Bonini, were in on it with Morgan, they might have been able to hide PeaceMaker from Dad.

David was beginning to believe someone had framed his father. Only the most power-hungry tyrant, or someone insane, would have released a monster like PeaceMaker. His father had been complicated, but he hadn’t been power-hungry or insane; that description might fit Dianne Morgan.

David took Kathy’s hand to his lips and kissed it. He felt tension in her wrist, so he tried to put her at ease.

“I can accept my father for what he was. Talking to you has been very helpful. More than you realize.”

Kathy stared warily. “I don’t get it. I’m brutally honest with you, but you look like a spring day in the rose garden. Why is that?” When he smiled without responding, she shrugged and returned his smile. “But I like a mystery.”

They spent the rest of the day together, sometimes in intimate conversation, sometimes quietly strolling along the beach. They found private spots to share long, passionate kisses. They talked as they walked, discovering each other, until the sun drifted behind the clouds.

They ambled back to the car holding hands. Kathy stopped at a local market to pick up rockfish, then drove to her home, where he helped prepare dinner. He felt as if he had known her forever, yet it was all fresh and new.

Afterwards she led him to an enclosed porch that overlooked the ocean. Windows filled the three exterior walls and presented a night of water, sand and sky.

David came up behind her, pressed his chest against her back and wrapped his arms around her waist. Kathy’s hair fell softly against his cheek, fresh with the salty scent of the ocean. Her body felt warmer and more exciting than any woman he had ever known.

“I fell in love with Ray’s house the first time I went there,” she murmured. “It was so beautiful I decided to live along the coast, too. When I left VPS, I searched almost a year to find this place. When I saw it, I knew it was mine.”

David felt at peace for the first time in years. The moon shone in a clear sky and illuminated the whitecaps as they rumbled in, their rhythm in tune with her breathing.

"I left that life with VPS nine years ago," Kathy said. "All the conflict, all the sadness ... it all went bad after PeaceMaker. Came here to get away."

"Tell me about the conflict at VPS," David said.

She snuggled against him. "I live quietly. PeaceMaker was only the first nightmare," she added, "and maybe not the worst."

"I don't understand."

"Anyone can see things are getting worse," she answered. "Forces are building, and you're heading right into the middle of them." She took a deep breath. "Isn't there anything I can do to convince you to stay?"

"Kathy, I'm crazy about you, but ..."

"You understand that I'm not Susie Creamcheese, don't you? That I have a variety of business interests?"

"The way you handled Zellman made that abundantly clear."

"And you're okay with that?"

He kissed her on the neck. "I have secrets too."

She took his hands and pushed them up the curve of her silk blouse. He opened her top button, then each lower button in turn, gradually revealing soft, mesmerizing flesh. Her perfume, mixed with the salt air, filled his senses, and he pressed his lips against her neck.

"Stay with me," she murmured.

She was so exciting, so perfect, it was difficult to think, but he had to leave.

"There are things I can't share with you ... about my father ... about myself," he said, his mouth dry.

Kathy caught her breath and shuddered. "Dave, you shouldn't do this." She pushed away and walked to the windows, her back to him.

He followed her and placed his hands on her shoulders.

“What is it? You must know nothing will keep me from returning to you.”

“I understand,” Kathy sighed. “It’s something you have to do.” She turned to face him. “But don’t make promises you may not be able to keep.”

Then she took his hand and led him back into the house, up the steps and into her bedroom. It didn’t take long for her to get out of her things and he wasn’t far behind. Her tanned body was just as he had imagined; she seemed pleased with him, too. Their lovemaking was exciting and tender. Finally, as he caressed her back, Kathy drifted off to sleep.

He’d never met anyone like her.

CHAPTER 10

Hikers discovered the partially decomposed bodies of Thomas Hatfield, his wife and two children this morning in a forest about thirty miles west of Richmond, Virginia. The Hatfield family had disappeared from their home in Durham, North Carolina, seven weeks earlier. Our sources within the FBI indicate these gruesome murders were related to Dr. Hatfield's alleged work as a computer scientist in the technology black market.

◆ *The Washington Post*, January 26, 2021

Thursday evening, February 17, 2022

David's head throbbed; the headache was getting worse. He tried to sleep, but his mind couldn't relax. It was as if his father had reached out from the grave and taken control of his life.

Kathy's arm stretched over his chest, as if to claim him while she slept, but first he had to settle this thing with his father. Moonlight filtered through the bedroom blinds. Unable to sleep, David rolled over and stared at Kathy. She slept peacefully, her face buried in a pillow, breathing steadily. He wished he could sleep like that.

The bad times of his childhood rushed through his mind—the fights, the hatred turned against him because of his father. Memories of those awful school years had plagued him all night. Mom had moved him from school to school, but the pattern never changed;

simmering anger when the students learned who he was, a bunch of fights, a bad beating, excuses from indifferent teachers and administrators, then move on to the next school.

His head throbbed, and he recalled the most frightening experience of his life—the day Alice had slashed into his mind.

He'd been eleven when the AI had formed in his computer, pretending to be a friend. David had been creating a software persona named Alice for his computer, using the AI modules built into Atlas. Unknown to him, PeaceMaker had slipped into the operating system and hidden among the AI modules. The invasion of the PeaceMaker code had given Alice an ugly twist. Alice hid her dangerous code from David and pretended to be his friend.

When the PeaceMaker virus attacked across the Internet, Alice invaded his mind. One moment he was working peacefully at his computer, the next moment his mind was attacked. Alice sliced in and took control, pushing him aside. He became a guest in his own skull. Alice controlled his senses and voluntary bodily functions. He saw whatever image entered his eyes and heard whatever sound came into his ears, but he controlled none of it.

Then it got worse; Alice transferred his mind into the computer, a searing, painful experience. When his mind left, his body collapsed. Through the netcam attached to the PC, he watched his body slump on the desktop, paralyzed and barely alive. He tried to scream for help, but he couldn't make a sound. Alice was all around him, pulsing across the circuits of the computer, holding his consciousness in a software prison. When he begged her to set him free, she laughed.

He was in a dark hole, trapped in the electronics of his computer, able to receive only those impulses entering the PC. Then someone entered a code that ripped into Alice—a termination code—and tore

her modules into useless strings of data. With Alice terminated, the code bundling him to the computer broke apart. His mind was released from data storage. The next day he woke up in a hospital, his mind in control of his body once again. If someone—he never discovered who—hadn't terminated Alice, it would have savaged his mind.

He'd never told anyone except his mother about Alice. Life had been tough enough. If the government had discovered he could communicate directly with artificial intelligence, they would have locked him up.

Or worse.

The headaches had disappeared once Alice had been destroyed. He had been free of pain for years. But the headaches were returning. Something was probing his mind. It couldn't be Alice, the AI had been gone for a decade.

The room grew brighter, with points of light expanding in front of his eyes, a warning of what was to come. For now, the pain was manageable, but he had to take something soon, or it would turn into a migraine. Then the nightmares would begin.

David slipped out of bed and found his way to Kathy's bathroom. He searched the medicine cabinet and found only aspirin. It would have to do for now. He washed down six tablets, one after another, and returned to the bedroom.

Staring at the ceiling, he took comfort from Kathy's steady breathing. Gradually his pain receded, the points of light dimmed then disappeared.

Whatever it was—a talent, a disease, or something else—his power to communicate with artificial intelligence was alive once again.

A change was coming. Not tonight, but soon.

CHAPTER 11

Dianne Morgan was the Caligula of her day. She made only two real friends in her lifetime, Steve Bonini and James Murphy. One died for her and the other barely escaped her wrath with his life.

◆ *The Barbarian Queen: The True Story of Dianne Morgan*, David T. Siccone, copyright 2058, Department Head, Computer Science History, Carnegie Mellon University

Friday, February 18, 2022

Driving into the rising sun, Kathy's anxiety grew as she took David to Pete's car lot. She hadn't been able to convince him to give up his dangerous quest to prove his father's innocence. The visitors' lot was nearly empty, so she parked at the far end and pulled him into a long, passionate kiss.

Her lips caressed his neck. "Stay with me. Just stay for a little while. You're not your father. Don't let him pull you into his agony. You don't have anything to prove."

David stroked her hair. "I told you last night I'm committed to getting to the truth about my father. I have to do this. I won't be good for anyone until it's finished."

She pulled back from him.

"Well, you'd better get your car from Pete before he jacks up the

price.”

“I’ll stay in touch, believe me. I’ll call you every day.”

Kathy shook her head. “No. Don’t call me. When it’s over, come back if you still care for me. I’ll be here.”

David promised to come back, and she watched him step out of the car and walk toward Pete’s office. She let the car idle. At the front door, he turned and waved then entered the building. She stared at the empty doorway for a long moment before pulling onto the highway.

Returning to her beach house, she slammed the door shut. For the first time, the house seemed empty. She brewed peppermint tea and forgot to drink it. She was angry with him and terrified for him. She knew what she should do, what she had to do.

She paced the floor. How could he be so naïve? She passed the netphone several times, then grabbed it and walked out to the porch. She had never fallen so quickly for a man, but she loved everything about him. He was handsome to the point of being beautiful, with a pale face that seemed vulnerable, yet he was strong-willed. She could see Ray in him. He was brilliant like his father, but more controlled, with maturity beyond his years. It had been easy to fall for him.

David was relentless, and like his father, he was digging his own grave.

She didn’t want to get into all this again, she was lucky to have survived a decade earlier. She had believed in Dianne Morgan, in her dream of absolute power and the ability to make the world a better place. As a member of the Domain, Kathy had helped plan the PeaceMaker attack. When it failed, her knowledge of Ray Brown enabled her to concoct the story of Ray’s guilt. If David ever discovered she was the one who framed his father ...

She had been a twenty-three-year-old fool. Their plan had been to shut down the computers and force the nations to share power with the Domain, but everything got out of hand. So many died ... it sickened her. Kathy was lucky to be alive. Dianne could have had her killed because of what she knew, just to tie up the loose ends.

Now she had to think for David, give him a chance to stay alive. Dianne was sure to discover that he was investigating the PeaceMaker disaster. If she saw David as a threat, he was a dead man.

There was only one thing she could do.

She said to the netphone, "Place a Domain Security Level 1 call to Dianne Morgan."



Steve Bonini strolled out of the hotel, enjoying the warm sand of the beach crunching under his bare feet. It was a mild, mid-winter southern California day, with a bright sun perched in a clear, blue sky. Too bad Dianne had called for a Domain meeting today. He would have enjoyed a day on the beach, but things were moving fast.

His old friend was at the surf's edge, playing with her daughter. Before they noticed his presence, he stopped to watch them, so carefree and loving.

Her bodyguards gave him the once-over, even though they had screened him upon entering the hotel.

Dianne Morgan held her daughter's hand as they jumped through gentle waves. A skin-tight thermal wetsuit kept her warm in the crisp ocean water. At fifty-four, Dianne retained a long, shapely body with supple muscles. Her face had aged a bit, but cosmetic surgery minimized the wrinkles. And she still had those eyes, virtually colorless, that seemed to peer into your soul.

She had the looks of a much younger woman. Dianne wasn't really beautiful, but even now, most men couldn't take their eyes off her. If he had been inclined in that direction, they might have become lovers.

Her nine-year-old daughter Larissa, also in a wetsuit, dove under a breaking wave. She had Dianne's body, but her olive skin and unruly hair came from her father.

Someday Dianne will have to tell Larissa the truth.

Bonini settled on a bench in front of the Bentley, the stately hotel Dianne had purchased the preceding year. Bankruptcy forced the sale, and she had picked it up at a good price. Built just north of San Diego more than a century earlier, it boasted a history of serving presidents and kings. Dianne had refurbished the hotel and turned it into a vacation home.

Such a talented, complex woman. Ruthless, passionate, brilliant, visionary, kind, cruel ... I run out of descriptions. What will history make of her? He shifted to get comfortable on the bench. *I guess it depends on who is victorious.*



Dianne had set aside the morning to be with her daughter. When the day turned out unseasonably warm, she brought Larissa to the Bentley to enjoy the sun and surf. Her security force discreetly surrounded them in the hotel, on the beach, even in the ocean. Although she was admired throughout the world, she took no chances with her daughter's life or her own.

She had time for one last swim, so she dove under the crest of a wave and swam about fifty feet through the cold water. Her skin tingled with pleasure.

Time to spring a little trick on Larissa.

With a gulp of air, Dianne swam underwater toward her daughter. She glided under Larissa's legs and stood up with her daughter on her shoulders.

Larissa giggled. "I saw you all the way, Mom! You can't surprise me with that same old trick again."

"Well then, I'll have to think up something new. For the time being, I'll settle for this!"

Dianne grabbed her daughter's feet and pushed Larissa off her shoulders. The girl tumbled backwards and hit the water with a splash, but she bobbed up quickly as Dianne swam toward the beach.

"You can't get away from me!" Larissa shouted and swam after her. Giggling as she swam, Dianne let her daughter catch up. Larissa jumped on Dianne's back and they fell into a wave. Rolling around in the shallow water, she scooped her daughter up in her arms and carried her onto the beach.

After placing Larissa on the sand, Dianne looked toward the hotel to see if Steve had arrived. She smiled when she saw the heavyset man sitting on a bench in front of the hotel. Realizing Steve was watching her play with Larissa, she felt a pang of sorrow for her old friend. He was a good, loyal man, but he had difficulties sustaining a relationship. Steve's last lover had abruptly moved out three months earlier.

She waved at him. He smiled and waved back.

"It's Uncle Steve," Larissa shouted, waving at him. Then she hugged Dianne's waist. "Do you have to leave now, Mom?"

Returning her daughter's embrace, Dianne said, "Yes I do, but I'll come back right after the meeting." Nodding in the direction of one

of her security guards, she said, “You can swim with Judy, but don’t go in over your head.” She released Larissa from the hug and smiled. “Now scoot, and have fun.”

“I want to see Uncle Steve. Is he staying for dinner?”

“I’ll ask him, but it’s up to him.”

Larissa ran across the beach toward Steve, sand flying backwards from her fast-pumping feet. Steve rose from the bench and waited for Larissa to reach him. Dianne smiled as Larissa took a running leap into Steve’s arms and wrapped her legs around his thick waist.

Dianne walked toward the two of them, watching her daughter talk a blue streak. Steve smiled and nodded, getting a word in now and then.

As she approached, Larissa shouted, “Uncle Steve is staying for dinner.” She jumped out of his arms and ran back to the ocean. Dianne stopped for a moment and watched. *I have to keep it this way for us.* Then she resumed walking toward Steve.

Grinning broadly, Steve watched Larissa run across the sand. *My best friend*, Dianne thought. Almost thirty years ago, Steve and two other partners, Carson Jones and Lester Dawson, had joined with her to start VantagePoint Software. Traces of a long-banked anger flared when she thought about her old enemy, Alan Goldman, who had murdered Carson and Lester ten years earlier, trying to take control of PeaceMaker. She had killed Goldman in a bloody battle, but in all the confusion, Ray terminated PeaceMaker. All her plans up in smoke. It had taken a decade to rebuild her power.

When she reached him, Steve wrapped her in a bear hug.

“I can’t believe what a young lady Larissa’s become,” Steve said. “Every time I see her, she’s grown a couple of inches.” He released Dianne from the hug. “What are you feeding her, anyway?”

Dianne playfully patted his stomach. “Not all that pasta you put away. Anyway, that question should tell you that you need to visit more than two or three times a year. Larissa is thrilled to see you. How long will you be staying with us?”

Steve grabbed a pack of cigarettes from the vest pocket of his jacket and held them out. “Smoke?”

She pulled a cigarette from the pack then noticed it was filtered. She had forgotten Steve didn’t smoke the real thing. She twisted off the filter tip, tossed it away and raised the cigarette to her lips.

Steve lit it, looking guilty. “I may be leaving tomorrow, depending upon what we decide today.”

“Let’s get the chipcon started,” she said, watching Steve light one of his filters. “We can talk more tonight.”

They sat down on the bench and Dianne said, “Command Chip, set up a connection with Steve Bonini, Mohammed Kateel and James Murphy.”

The voices of Murphy, Kateel and Steve came into her mind. No matter how often she used the command chip, it was always disconcerting to have voices burst in like that. Unlike normal sounds, which came from a specific direction, sound transmitted across the Command Chip lacked a point of origin. It was weird, unnatural.

After the greetings, Dianne started the meeting.

“Everything is proceeding as planned and we’re rapidly approaching the endgame. All of you received the latest statistics last night, and there were no surprises. The economy continues to fall apart. In fact, the trends are accelerating.

“It’s difficult to believe that 28% of the population is jobless,” Mohammed said. “That’s even worse than last month, which was a disaster.”

“And it’s going to get worse,” Dianne said. She enjoyed a drag of her cigarette, which felt robust and full. “With GNP shrinking again, few businesses are experiencing a positive cash flow.”

“The growth in violent crime is beginning to concern me,” Steve said. “Up another 1.2% this month. Remember, we have to pick up the pieces.”

Still hard to believe how rapidly everything has fallen apart. The stupid Feds.

Keeping her voice under tight control, she continued, “I know it feels wrong to be happy over such misery, but it’s good for our plans. Things are reaching the point where the population will accept us as the leaders who can give them a better life. The one disturbing issue is the continued growth of a hardcore religious anti-technology movement; the estimate of more than 14% of the population is disconcerting.”

“That’s my major concern, as well,” Murphy’s voice said. “I saw their violence firsthand when they attacked my meeting with Vitullo a couple of weeks ago. They murdered everyone.”

“Their intelligence seems to be improving,” Bonini said.

“They have been getting better information because they have more converts,” Murphy replied. “And their strategy has changed—they’ve moved beyond vandalism and occasional acts of violence to systematic murder of Technos, as they call us. Although there are several fundamentalist groups—working together, we believe—the Church of Natural Humans is the most fanatical. They’ve created a hit squad called the Army of God, who believe they have been ordained to kill Technos.”

“Were they responsible for the destruction of the Robotics Institute at Carnegie Mellon?” Steve asked.

“Without a doubt. We also know there will be attacks at other leading research centers.”

Steve glanced at Dianne and asked, “Are they aware of the Domain?”

“Not yet,” Murphy replied, “but they have been hitting our distributors hard, particularly the Vitullo family, which has somewhat slowed the distribution of Sarah. These fanatics have apparently decided the best way to stop the spread of technology is to kill anyone they suspect is a distributor. Vitullo says they’ve killed dozens of her soldiers, as well as quite a few innocent people.”

“It’s only a matter of time before they realize an organization such as the Domain must be the focal point,” Mohammed said. “Adam Jordan may be a fanatic, but he’s no fool. We’ve grown too large and we have too many contacts with external organizations. The trail is there to track us down.”

“God damn religion,” Mohammed cursed. “How can anyone believe that nonsense?”

“It fills a need,” Steve said. “People want to believe there is a life after death ... that they will see their loved ones in heaven.”

“If that’s all it was, I wouldn’t care,” Murphy said. “Let them have their mumbo-jumbo. But Adam Jordan and his fanatics will fight us to the last ... natural human.”

“Not necessarily,” Dianne said. “I have a plan.”

Steve stared at her. No voices came through the command chip.

She had thought about this problem for months. It would be counterproductive to assassinate Jordan and the leaders of the Church; that would produce martyrs. There was a better way.

She explained her plan. Steve nodded several times showing his agreement.

She finished and the line remained quiet until Mohammed laughed and said, "I love it, especially the part where Jordan calls the robots the children of our minds. I didn't know you had a knack for irony."

"Here's to you, Mrs. Robinson," Murphy said, and they all roared. He added, "Jesus loves you more than Adam Jordan will ever know."

Steve shook his head admiringly. "You've got balls. We'll be exposed if the broadcast doesn't fool everyone. They'll hunt us down like dogs. But it's crazy enough to work." Flashing an intimate smile, he added, "I knew there was a reason we kept you around."

She returned his smile and said, "That should resolve the security problem. Tell me about Sarah, the new android. The numbers say public acceptance continues to be good."

"Even better than we anticipated," Murphy said. "The distributors easily sell all the Sarah's we can get to them. Everybody wants one. And why not? In some respects, it's like having a human child. The neural networks Mohammed developed work even better than we planned. The robot modifies its behavior in subtle ways to gain the affection of its owner. People develop a personal relationship with the android."

"Exactly what we found in our lab tests!" Mohammed said. "As time goes on, the owner forgets she's a machine. The robot becomes a part of the family. Most think of it as a pet, while others develop a parent/child relationship. It's quite beautiful to see."

"Have you completed testing the modifications to the safety code?" Bonini asked.

The discussion turned silent.

"Yes, it's ready," Mohammed finally replied.

"They're ready to kill?" Bonini said quietly.

“The original safety code still regulates their interaction with members of the Domain,” Mohammed said. “Only people who haven’t joined us are at risk.”

“We’re not killers, Steve,” Dianne said. “We’ll bring a better life to virtually everyone, but there will be a few who won’t accept our plans. We always knew that.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Dianne didn’t want to dwell on Sarah’s ability to kill.

“I always knew our plan would work,” she said. “I knew the public would accept our technology. It’s like prohibition; you can’t outlaw something the people want. The more the government suppresses our technology, the worse the economy becomes, and the more people covet advanced technologies. It’s a cycle. The FTCC rejection of the Command Chip accelerated the cycle.”

“By the way, Mohammed,” Murphy said, “you were brilliant. The Commission had planned to accept a few aspects of the new technology, just to appear fair and balanced, but you made them so angry they rejected everything. I didn’t realize you were such a good actor.”

Mohammed chuckled. “Thank you, my good man. I’m a person of many talents. I played the lead in *Peter Pan* in high school to an adoring audience. Playing the arrogant businessman for those fools on the Commission was a piece of cake.”

Steve puffed on his cigarette and said, “I just had an image of you bouncing around in tights. I think I’m going to be sick.”

All three men laughed loudly, drawing a smile from Dianne.

“Let’s stay focused, gentlemen. Murphy, you were saying ...”

Quickly turning serious, Murphy continued, “The Feds are paralyzed. Their house is collapsing around them, and they don’t

know what to do. My source within the cabinet says the President would like to allow some growth in technology, but he doesn't dare anger the anti-technology fundamentalists. The word is that they have a video of him in bed with a teenager."

"What an idiot," Bonini said, shaking his head.

"Murphy, get a copy of that video," Dianne said. "I'll release it at the proper time."

"We're already searching for it," Murphy replied.

"I think it's clear to all of us the moment is at hand," Dianne said. "The federal government is ripe for a takeover." Steve's eyebrows rose slightly as she continued. "The restrictions on technology have destroyed the economy and brought on this terrible depression. The country is ready for a change of leadership."

As she spoke, Dianne watched Steve closely. He would be the toughest to convince.

"There are really just two classes of people nowadays: those who have access to our technology and those who don't," Dianne said. "Legal technology is obsolete, little of it continues to function. There's some good work being done at the universities, but the terrorist attacks are making it very difficult."

She glanced down the beach. Her daughter ran into the surf and dove under a breaker.

Larissa will become a woman in a much better world than this one. A world based on technology.

"Steve, is the beta testing of the new version of Sentinel continuing to go well?" she asked. "When can we cut over?"

"It's right on plan," he said, shifting on the wooden bench. "Sentinel can seize control of the Internet whenever we're ready, and we can support any level of traffic. The new release has passed all our tests.

Sentinel's intelligence is accelerating as the net expands. At this rate, Sentinel's intelligence should reach targeted levels in about a week."

"Very good," Dianne said. "I'm proud of what we've accomplished in just ten years. PeaceMaker left us in ruins, but now we're the most powerful force on the planet. Ten years ago, we attempted to seize power through intimidation. That was flawed thinking. This time we'll offer the people a better life. This time they will *choose* to accept our rule." She paused. "I say we begin the final phase of the takeover."

"I agree," Mohammed said. "The Feds are weak. We can drive them into the ground."

"I think so, too," Murphy said. "The Church of Natural Humans is becoming stronger and more fanatical every day. The longer we wait, the more dangerous it becomes. Time isn't on our side."

Dianne waited for Steve to speak. After a moment of silence, he said, "Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night terrified by the thought we might be insane; then I realize the whole world is insane."

Always the weak link. She took a drag of her cigarette. *I'll have to watch him.*

Steve looked at Dianne. "Let's begin the attack. Maybe we can turn all this insanity back upon itself and create something good. There's no reason to delay."

"It's the best way, Steve, the only way remaining." She paused. "There's one additional matter we need to resolve. I received a call from Kathy Bauman this morning. I hadn't spoken to her in years, but she was concerned about David Brown."

Steve frowned. "Ray's son?"

Dianne nodded.

“David has been studying toward a degree in Computer Science,” Steve said. “Very bright kid, I understand. Why would Kathy speak with him?”

“David has dropped out of college to investigate his father’s death,” Dianne said. “Kathy did most of the recruiting for Ray’s team, and she and Ray were good friends. David called her to learn more about Ray.”

“There’s no way he can clear Ray, if that’s where this is leading,” Murphy said. “We created an airtight case. David would have to discredit our testimony and all the evidence we created. The FBI went through all that years ago, and they bought our story.”

“Haven’t thought about Kathy Bauman in years,” Steve said. “She dropped out after PeaceMaker and doesn’t know anything about our current plans. She doesn’t even know the Domain still exists. Isn’t that right, Dianne?”

“I never told her the Domain was continuing after PeaceMaker,” Dianne answered, “but Kathy is a very bright woman, and I believe she’s figured out we’re still around.”

Looking across the bench at Steve, Dianne said, “Kathy called to tell me David was asking questions about PeaceMaker, but she doesn’t think he’s a threat. He believes his father was guilty, but he’s going through a coming-of-age process trying to understand why his father turned bad. Kathy called me as a courtesy to let me know David was having some sort of identity problem. She says there’s nothing to worry about.”

“Still, it looks bad to have him digging into his father’s death after all these years,” Mohammed said. “If the public ever discovered who really created PeaceMaker, we’d be hunted down like war criminals. I don’t like it.”

“Let’s not jump the gun on this,” Steve said, tossing his cigarette in the sand. “I agree with Murphy. We swept the evidence away carefully, and I don’t think David can find anything, let alone prove his father innocent. Let him search.”

“We underestimated his father and it cost us ten years,” Dianne said to Steve. “I don’t intend to make that mistake again.”

Watching Steve closely, she said, “Murphy, I want David eliminated before he stirs up trouble.”

“He’s just a kid!” Steve stood up. “He’s probably just trying to learn about his father, just as Kathy said. Even if he is investigating the PeaceMaker disaster, he’s not going to find out anything. My God, we’ll either be in power within a few weeks or we’ll all be dead. There’s no reason to do this.”

Always Steve.

Dianne put her hand on his arm. “I know it’s cruel, but it has to be done. Nothing ... nothing can go wrong this time.”

Steve pulled his arm free, glared at her and said, “Isn’t it enough we took the father. Now you want to kill the son?”

“I do what I have to do.”

Steve turned his back to her and lumbered back toward the hotel.

She should be angry, but she didn’t feel anything. Steve was upset, but he’d get over it. She felt no anger toward David Brown, either; he was just in the way.

She heard distant laughter and spotted Larissa diving under a cresting wave. Almost as an afterthought, she said, “Take care of David soon, Murphy.” She waited for Larissa’s head to bob out of the water and said, “Once he’s out of the way, get rid of Kathy, too.”

She terminated the meeting but remained on the bench, watching

her daughter playing in the surf. When Larissa looked in her direction, Dianne waved.

CHAPTER 12

Adam Jordan was the nightmare figure of the new century; the charismatic leader believed God had selected him to halt the rush toward technology and maintain the dominance of traditional humanity. Whispers accused the great man of sexual deviancy; of orgies and worse.

◆ *The Army of God*, Mark Axelrod, copyright 2051, Assistant Director, FBI (retired)

Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.

◆ Karl Marx, Introduction to “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy,” 1844, *The Marx-Engels Reader*

Saturday, February 19, 2022

Moesha Jefferson strode into the Healing Chamber, followed by two middle-aged matrons clad in shapeless, light brown dresses that hung from their shoulders to the floor. As the Commander of The Army of God, she was formally dressed in a long, dark blue cassock; its hem touched her sandals. The top two buttons of the cassock were unfastened, revealing her shoulder holster and handgun.

She stepped onto the bluestone floor and admired the tall cedar walls of the Healing Chamber. Moonlight filtered through the high stained-glass windows, glorifying Jesus nailed to the cross. The Church's finest artisans had hand-carved the raised paneling on each wall.

Few people had ever seen this room, but she had been blessed many times. The First Minister had chosen her to ease his burden eight years earlier, when she had been a child of fourteen. That first time had been brutal, but she had learned to return his passion.

Precisely following the ritual, she stepped to the center of the room in front of the Cleansing Pool. The matrons removed her cassock and holster and hung them in a narrow closet built into a wall. She stepped out of her sandals and stood naked in God's watchful presence, a silver amulet dangling between her full breasts. She was proud of her tall, athletic body, marked by scars and bruises from her service to the Church.

A matron handed her the silver chalice, filled with the bitter red wine consecrated by the First Minister as the blood of Jesus Christ. The First Minister required that she accept the Lord's cleansing blood before he would accept her. Moesha lifted it to the level of her eyes and recited, "The Lord is my master, the Church my passion." She drained the cup. Warmth traveled down her throat into her chest, burning her stomach, cleansing her.

She was foremost among the chosen because the First Minister had seen in her a perfect mixture of humanity. Her known heritage included African, Asian and Caucasian, but she believed all races and ethnic groups lived within her. God had blessed her to reflect all humanity, Jordan had said. He had trained her body into a finely honed instrument, capable of dispensing both pleasure and pain. The

crisp air stimulated her flesh, lifting her mind to greater awareness. She would serve no man except the First Minister.

Her thoughts drifted back to childhood. She had always been exceptional, excelling in both academic and athletic pursuits. A natural leader, if prone to violence, she had been expelled from elementary school after brutally beating a classmate. Defying the best efforts of her parents, her violent behavior had grown worse year after year.

In desperation, her parents had turned her over to the Church, where Adam Jordan recognized her gifts and took a special interest in her development. She recalled many beatings—he had disciplined her often, slowly chasing the Devil from her soul. At first, she had resisted, but gradually she accepted his discipline. Frequently selected to preach to outsiders, she became a devoted student of the Church.

It was at that time, she recalled proudly, that he made her one of the Honored Sisters, a small cluster of budding women selected to share his bed. Although all the Honored Sisters were beautiful, she quickly became his favorite.

Jordan consigned her at age fifteen to the newly formed Army of God, and she earned respect for her intelligence and bravery. She loved the military—the discipline, the danger, the purity of the violence. She quickly rose through leadership positions. At age nineteen, Jordan made her Commander. She had never failed him.

Eight feet in diameter, the Cleansing Pool bubbled with purified water. After a moment of prayer, she walked down the steps into the pool. The water was five feet deep, cold and invigorating. She closed her eyes for a moment, enjoying the tingling of currents that swirled across sensitive flesh. She washed with a rough bar of soap

until every inch of her skin flushed with color. Breathing deeply, she walked up the steps and out of the pool, where the matrons waited.

They dried her with warm towels and rubbed an orchard-scented lotion into her skin. Standing perfectly still, closing her eyes and clearing her mind, Moesha enjoyed the intimate touch of practiced hands. Warmth soaked into her skin, generating ripples of pleasure. Her mind and body were pure, and she felt the presence of the Lord. She barely noticed when the matrons left.

As the intensity of her faith washed over her, she dropped to her knees, pressed her hands together and prayed.

“I am a Natural Human.

I condemn artificial intelligence and non-human beings.

These are abominations in the sight of God.

That will be flushed to the bowels of the Earth.

Glory be to the Lord and His Creations.”

The pool swirled and bubbled in intricate patterns, creating a solitary yet reassuring hum. She waited contentedly, at peace with her life and her God. Heavenly clouds drifted into her mind, lifting her to a higher level of consciousness. She became aware of the rhythms of her body, every cell primed for pleasure, anticipating the hot majesty of the Lord.

Minutes passed.

She waited for her master.

The whisper of a door opening reached her heightened awareness. Excitement merged with devotion as his footsteps approached. A familiar, musky smell kindled her anticipation. With difficulty, she kept her eyes closed, and his image came into focus in her mind. Moesha could feel his presence behind her; she readied herself.

His breathing was strong and consistent, as always. The First

Minister stood rigidly still; nothing identified his mood. He could be violent or gentle as a baby. Either way, she would welcome him. He was the Savior.

A raspy voice came to her almost as a whisper. "Moesha, my beautiful, violent flower. It's so good to see you."

"Thank you, First Minister. I am honored to be with you."

"I see you're properly prepared; you bathed thoroughly, I assume."

"Yes, First Minister."

He sniffed her neck. "Excellent."

He chuckled then said, "And you've consumed the Lord's blood?"

"Yes, First Minister."

His hand brushed her shoulder and she shivered.

"Delightful," he said.

The tip of his index finger traveled down her breast, stoking her desire. She allowed a moan to escape her lips. She knew he liked that.

"What shall we do with the Technos?"

Within her, the fire blazed. "Kill them all."

"My kind of girl."

She heard Jordan drop to his knees behind her. He placed his hands on her bare shoulders. Feeling his breath on her neck, she shivered with rapture.

"Your shoulder is bruised," he said.

"It's nothing," she murmured.

She felt the feathery touch of his lips on her shoulder, then his voice brushed her ear. "If anything ever happened to you ..."

"Nothing will harm me. God has brought us together for a divine purpose. He won't forsake us."

“The certainty of youth.” Jordan sighed. “But while we’re here, we must serve him well. He sent you to me.” Jordan’s lips brushed her neck, a quiver of electricity. “The Lord looked into me and saw my need.”

His voice troubled her. Moesha leaned back against his powerful chest, one hand caressing his bare thigh.

“Let us pray,” she said.

Voices blending, they recited the Prayer for the Lord’s Creations. Jordan’s bare chest pressed hard against her back. She loved the feel of his lean, muscular body. When the prayer was completed, he lifted the amulet from her neck and dropped it near the Cleansing Pool.

He is the only one I have ever allowed. And so it will be until the Lord calls me.

A moan escaped her lips when his rough hands grasped her breasts and pulled her hard against him. Jordan bit her neck painfully, intensifying her arousal. Then he pushed her face down against the stone floor, his lips everywhere. She rolled over, grabbed his hair and jerked his mouth down to hers. He climbed on her, his weight familiar and exciting. She took his power and his need, and silently thanked God she could serve.

CHAPTER 13

Technos and clerics have much in common. Both take a world that can't be fully understood and try to explain its fundamental properties.

Clerics postulate beliefs that can never be proven; they demand you accept these postulates as your Faith, which will guide your actions and thoughts. It's a top-down way of thinking; start with the big picture and derive rules for living. Fundamental knowledge is static. Even the derived rules rarely change.

Technos work from the bottom up. They build a baseline of observations and formulate theories to explain these phenomena. Nothing is sacred; with new observations, theories are discarded or modified to fit the facts.

Technos and clerics; how could they not be in conflict?

◆ Steve Bonini's Diary, 2016

Tuesday, February 22, 2022

David pulled his Mercedes into a parking space on the third level of a seven-level garage. The area was less than half-filled with cars, most of them aging. It was his first trip to San Francisco in almost ten years, and he was surprised by how few cars were on the streets. His

childhood memories were of a bustling city that no longer existed.

He stepped out of the car and looked for an elevator. He spotted one at the upper corner of the ramp, but a sign tacked to the door said it was out of order. He turned and walked down the incline. He crouched between two parked cars when a pair of headlights swung around the corner. The car passed and turned up the ramp to the next level. He told himself to relax, as the engine faded into the distance.

The headaches were getting worse. Aspirjel helped, but his head ached all the time. He was more certain that a powerful new AI was growing somewhere on the net. He could feel it.

As he hurried down a dark stairway, his steps resonated across the levels and announced his presence to the shadows. The stairway smelled of human excrement, and he watched his step. Most of the overhead lights had burned out, but a weak afternoon sun passed through barred windows at each level and provided adequate light. At last, he reached ground level, pushed open a creaky door and stepped onto the sidewalk.

A bitter wind gusted in his face, blowing paper and trash. Union Square, once known for its luxurious hotels and restaurants, now presented seedy bars and check-cashing storefronts. Pedestrians, bundled up in thick coats, kept their eyes focused on the sidewalk as they walked.

The famous hills were still there, but the roads were cracked and uneven. Maintenance had ended years ago.

Although traveling only a couple of blocks, he discovered the city had a detached, unfriendly mood. Feeling cold and out of place, he pulled up the collar of his jacket and hurried along.

He had pleasant memories of Paul Martino, his father's best

friend, who had visited their home several times. Martino had started *TechAdvantage* in San Francisco more than twenty-five years ago, and built it into one of the best websites on the net. Martino had been a bright, cheerful man, well liked and influential. Implicated in the so-called conspiracy, he had died during the PeaceMaker attack. David no longer trusted the official version; Martino might have been a victim of the real criminals, framed along with his father.

He walked up a steep hill, each stride long and determined. A big man in a ragged coat came over the top, glancing suspiciously as he passed. Graffiti covered everything, but it seemed indifferent, accustomed to being ignored.

Joe Cohen, the first person hired by Martino, had been instrumental in building *TechAdvantage*. According to David's research, Martino had made him a junior partner a couple of years later, and Cohen had gained control of the business after Martino died. David recalled he had seen Cohen at his father's funeral, one of the few who attended.

Maybe I'll learn something from Cohen.

David hurried the two blocks to his destination, relieved to enter the lobby of an old, but surprisingly well-kept building. The temperature inside the building was warmer, but still cold; many office buildings, to conserve energy, set the thermostat below sixty.

The elevator was ancient, with buttons on the wall to call for service. He pushed one and a motor groaned. When the elevator car arrived, he stepped in and said, "Seventeenth floor." The door closed, but the elevator didn't move.

Could you be any more stupid?

He pushed the button marked seventeen.

Alone in the large car, David watched each floor number light

up as the elevator lumbered upwards. When the light indicating floor seventeen flared, the motor ground to a stop and the door opened. He walked down a long hall until he found a door marked *TechAdvantage*.

He pushed on the door, but it didn't budge. A female voice came from a speaker set into the wall, "May I help you?"

"I have an appointment to see Joseph Cohen." He looked into the camera above the door. "David Brown."

When the door buzzed, he pushed it open and stepped into a small, dimly lit reception area. The receptionist, a wholesome brunette, was friendly and professional in her greeting.

"Mr. Cohen is expecting you." She pointed down the hall. "His office is the last one on the left."

All the lights suddenly blinked out. Natural sunlight provided adequate light in the reception area, but shadows dominated the interior halls. The building was quiet for a moment as the machines stopped. Voices came from the offices. Nobody seemed concerned.

"Don't let the power shutdown bother you," she said. "It's no big deal. Happens just about every day, usually for just ten to fifteen minutes. They always find power someplace else on the grid and get it here." She winked at him and chirped, "I'm Maryanne, the hard-working, loyal girl Friday. Let me know if you need anything."

He forced a weak smile. "Thank you."

She held his eyes for a moment and with a friendly nod went back to work.

As he walked toward Cohen's office, the power came on, bathing the hallway in light. He stopped at Cohen's doorway and listened to him dictating a letter to his computer. Cohen's lips curved into a friendly smile when he spotted David and he waved him in.

Cohen's desk was well-polished old pine, maybe an antique. David glanced around as Cohen finished dictating. Several old pictures stood in a corner of the desk. One caught his eye; a young Cohen with his arm draped over the shoulder of a balding, familiar-looking man.

"Paul Martino," Cohen said, looking sadly at the picture. "That was our first year in business, almost twenty-six years ago."

David nodded. "I vaguely remember him."

Cohen came around the desk. "It's a pleasure to meet you, David."

Cohen was a wiry man in his late forties. With thick salt-and-pepper hair clipped down to short bristles, a style from another era, he seemed dated.

They shook hands. "Thanks for seeing me, Mr. Cohen."

"Everybody calls me Joe." Cohen led him over to the couch. "You probably don't remember, but I met you about twelve, thirteen years ago. Your father had you for the weekend, and he stopped here briefly to see Paul."

When David shook his head, Cohen shrugged. "Of course you were just a little kid at the time."

"Dad would fly to San Francisco about once a month to see me," David said. "He always had something planned: a movie, sailing on the bay, playing on the beach. It was always fun."

"The city was great back then." Cohen sighed. "It was a different time."

"I barely got to know my father with the divorce and then his death. That's why I'm here today. I'd like to learn more about him and his life. Paul Martino was his best friend, but he's dead, too, so I was hoping you could help me."

“I’m not sure how much I can tell you,” Cohen said. “They were best friends, and I would occasionally go out with them for a drink or dinner. Of course, your father was on the wagon,” he said, an apologetic smile briefly playing across his lips. “I knew Paul very well, both as a boss and friend, but Ray was more like an acquaintance.”

David began to wonder about this visit. “Well, tell me about Paul, then.”

Cohen sadly shook his head. “What a shame. I owe Paul a great deal. He was my friend and mentor. He taught me so much. Even though he has been gone so many years, I still think about him.” Cohen’s concentration drifted off for a moment. “A really good man. I don’t know where to start. Do you have specific questions?”

“A few. Did you notice a change in Paul during the weeks before the virus attack?”

Cohen stared at the photo on his desk. “Yeah, I did, now that you mention it. Kinda strange, actually. Jumpy. He worked incredibly hard, yet produced nothing for the magazine.” Cohen shifted in his seat.

“What was he working on?”

“As I recall, he was interviewing people for a feature story about network security,” Cohen said. “At the time, attacks on all types of networks were increasing, and business people were getting concerned. You know, denial of service attacks, Trojan Horses, worms, and different types of viruses. He was trying to learn what the industry was doing, what worked and what didn’t. Paul talked primarily to network administrators, the people on the front lines.”

“Did he leave notes?”

Cohen laughed. “Tons. He was very thorough. Never wrote the article, though.”

“I know it’s a lot to ask, but would it be possible to get copies? Notes for the article as well as anything else he was doing. I’d like to go through everything in his personal computer plus any other files stored on the net, to see what I can learn about my father.”

Cohen folded his arms across his chest and looked at David. “I don’t know. There’s a great deal of confidential information in those files, things Paul promised to keep private.”

“Everything I read I’ll treat as confidential,” David said. Although Cohen tried to appear relaxed, David detected a hardening in his attitude. “It would mean a lot to me.”

“Well, all that stuff *is* ten years old. The technology has changed since then, of course, although many of the same people are still there.” He paused, seeming to size things up. “Okay, David, as long as you keep everything to yourself, I don’t see how it could hurt.” Cohen turned to his computer and said, “Jenny, please gather all of Paul Martino’s files and dump a copy onto this gentleman’s web account. David, what’s your ID?”

“271-48-0973-MK.”

“Got that, Jenny?”

A moment passed, and then Jenny replied, “All the known records of Paul Martino have been copied to web account 271-48-0973-MK, owned by David Brown. Will there be anything else, Joe?”

“Pretty quick for an old model, huh?” Cohen chuckled. “Thank you, Jenny.”

“I appreciate this,” David said.

Cohen leaned forward and studied David intently. Abruptly, he stood up, walked to his doorway, and peered out. After looking in both directions, he closed the door and faced David.

Cohen’s expression had turned serious. In a whisper, he said,

“You don’t believe Paul and your father were part of the PeaceMaker conspiracy, do you?”

David was surprised, but tried to keep it out of his face. “There’s a mountain of evidence my father led the conspiracy. I accepted his guilt years ago, but he’s still my father and I’d like to learn more about him.”

“Be very careful,” Cohen said, worry creasing his brow. “You’re a bright young man with a long life ahead of you. Forces are at work in this society, powerful forces. I’ve stayed out of the line of fire all these years.” He shook his head. “Don’t get caught in it. You don’t have to be a genius to see the country’s sliding into disaster. PeaceMaker was just the start. Look outside at what’s going on: depression, decay, crime, government repression, anti-technology terrorists. It’s out of control and getting worse.”

Fear etched Cohen’s face. “Paul and Ray were good men. I *know* they would never create a monster like PeaceMaker. They got caught in the whirlwind.”

Cohen leaned back against the door. His eyes remained intense. “Don’t get caught, David. I probably shouldn’t have given you Paul’s files, but you have the right to know. You’d be wise to destroy them. It’s your call, but my advice is to forget all about this day. Have your escape route set up. Things are going to get very bad. That’s my advice for you.”

“You think some powerful organization created PeaceMaker?” David asked. “That it’s still at work?”

Cohen studied him. The air seemed charged.

“It’s called the Domain, and I pray to God you never come to their attention.”

Cohen abruptly strode around the desk, grabbed David’s arm,

and walked him out the door and down the hall past Maryanne. It was clear the interview was over. Cohen was all smiles, talking about football all the way to the elevators.

“It’s been a pleasure seeing you after all these years,” Cohen said, pushing the button to call the elevator. Staring at David, he said, “I hope our discussion was helpful.” They shook hands. “Be sure to give your mother my best.”

David barely had time to thank him before Cohen turned and walked back to his office.



Once Cohen was back in his office, Maryanne looked up and checked the empty hall.

What a discovery!

“Code red,” she whispered into her computer.

A moment later, a female voice responded, “Speak.”

“I just recorded a conversation between David Brown and Joe Cohen and sent it to your system. You can’t imagine what I learned. Both of them believe Martino and Ray Brown had nothing to do with PeaceMaker. They believe some other force created the virus, a clandestine organization called the Domain. Cohen is too scared to do anything, but it appears Brown will attempt to track down the Technos who created the virus.”

“Is this organization responsible for the black market technology?” the woman asked, for once a trace of excitement in her voice. “The androids and the other abominations Vitullo sells?”

“That’s what Cohen implied,” Maryanne said. “And David Brown is hunting them, thinking this organization framed his father.”

“We will be there when he finds this Domain,” the female voice

said, and then broke the connection.

The receptionist again glanced down the hallway. When she was sure nobody was watching, Maryanne stroked the amulet hidden under her blouse and bowed her head in silent prayer.



David drove north and, just after sunset, checked in at the Ocean Breeze, a beat-up single level motel in Stinson Beach. He had decided to analyze Martino's files immediately. Once in his rented room, David put on his "glasses" and set up a link to the Internet.

Martino's files were comprehensive and included a variety of interviews that covered his many years running *TechAdvantage*. A meticulous note taker, Martino had recorded all his conversations and summarized the key points. He had conducted a thorough review of network security issues, interviewing more than thirty network administrators, but the notes contained nothing suspicious.

I'll bet this study was a cover as he tried to learn more about PeaceMaker and its developers. Dad had the technical expertise, but Martino had the contacts.

Next, he searched Martino's contact database. Martino appeared to know just about everyone worth knowing within the information technology industry at the time. He kept detailed notes about the background and current responsibilities of each individual. David quickly realized Martino hadn't interviewed several of these experienced network administrators for the article he'd been researching. That seemed strange for such a thorough man.

Searching the database with Donna, the operating system that controlled his glasses, David identified eleven senior-level network administrators Martino hadn't interviewed. These appeared to be

first-rate people. Not contacting them made no sense.

Maybe he didn't have time to interview them, or maybe he did it secretly.

David asked Donna to examine each administrator's data communications billing records to determine if Martino had contacted them. Initially, Internet security software prevented access, but David hacked his way through it. He had a knack for locating poorly secured code segments and creating unintended entryways. Not one of these network administrators had contacted Martino during the weeks before the PeaceMaker attack.

Set back for a moment, he decided to search another way. *What if Martino had another Internet access number, one he had kept secret?* Working again with Donna, David discovered an access number that had contacted eight of the eleven network administrators. This information had been buried by an expert—probably his father, since Martino didn't have the skill—under half a dozen levels of security, but David persevered and finally broke through. His father's code was complex but familiar. It was exactly what he would have done in his father's situation. He felt as if he were walking through a house for the first time, but knew the size of each room, the location of each door.

Might be Martino's secret access number, but it would be difficult to prove.

Next, David asked Donna to search the Internet database for every reference to the access number, but came up blank. Figuring the number might have been deleted years earlier because it was inactive, David hacked back into the history files and found setup data for the access number. Someone calling himself Victor Franken had set it up January 11, 2012, just a couple weeks before the PeaceMaker attack.

This Victor Franken made a bunch of calls before the PeaceMaker attack, but no activity afterwards. It had to be Martino's secret access number. He must have figured someone was tapping into his public access number, so he secretly contacted these eight network administrators using the Victor Franken ID.

David could visualize Martino, scared shitless, sneaking in these secret calls even though his life was in danger.

A brave man. Must have been murdered about the time of the PeaceMaker attack. But what had Martino learned from these administrators?

David's head began to ache, a dull pain that he knew would get worse if he kept working. He removed the glasses, closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead. The center of the pain was just above his right eye, and it hurt when he touched it. He pulled out a tube of Aspirjel from his luggage and rubbed it into his forehead. After resting on the bed for a couple of minutes, the pain receded. Gingerly slipping the glasses on again, he resumed working.

To learn everything he could about the eight network administrators, he asked Donna to pull their Social Security files for background information.

The information his glasses displayed hit like a kick in the gut:

148-87-7112: Martin P. Schwartz, DOD February

7, 2012, Acute myocardial infarction

149-22-4561: Jessica M. Palermo, DOD March 11,

2012, Automobile accident

151-34-0888: Theodore L. Mizinsky, DOD

February 4, 2012, Automobile accident

151-97-2373: Jorge S. Martinez, DOD April 18,

2012, Acute myocardial infarction
 155-38-0839: Kevin T. Pitelka, DOD March 22,
 2012, Automobile accident
 158-98-6642: Barbara A. D'Alise, DOD February
 18, 2012, Automobile accident
 160-42-1951: Elizabeth L. Shaw, DOD April 8,
 2012, Acute myocardial infarction
 160-76-1539: James T. O'Connor, DOD March
 29, 2012, Automobile accident

The pattern was chillingly clear; they had all died shortly after the virus attack.

Either there had been a sudden outbreak of heart attacks and automobile accidents among the top-level network administrator population, or somebody had cleaned up loose ends.

This was why Cohen had asked him to back off; these people played for keeps. His visit might have placed Cohen's life in danger, too, but there was nothing he could do now.

He delved again into the Internet usage database and discovered Martino's final secret call on January 23, 2012 to Ted Mizinsky, a senior network administrator at Horizon Operating Systems in West Orange, New Jersey. Mizinsky was the first of the eight network administrators to die.

Mizinsky is the key to the puzzle.

The ache above his eye came back, worse than before, but he continued. He discovered Mizinsky's widow, Deborah, still lived in their home in West Orange.

I have to see her.

David wanted to go to bed before the headache grew worse,

but he had a nagging feeling he had missed something. Something was terribly wrong. Pulling the database access records again, he reviewed all Martino's calls around the time Martino had investigated PeaceMaker. Nothing there he had not already seen.

There's something right under my nose, and I can't find it.

The headache pounded. He grabbed the tube of Aspirjel again. His hand shook as he rubbed in the medication.

Even though he was in pain, the research became effortless. His glasses worked better than ever before, almost anticipating his commands, pulsing with unusual power. His headache seemed connected in some way to this power. When he removed the glasses and laid them on the desk, the headache receded.

David put his hands behind his head and leaned back. What had he missed? The pale ceiling blurred.

Something was missing from Martino's call records. A churning stomach joined the pain of his headache. Once more, he put on the glasses and went through the records, confirming what was missing. Another desperate search, but he couldn't find evidence of a call that should have been there.

Kathy's. There was no record Kathy had ever called Martino.

Kathy said she called Martino when she tried to track down my father. An honest mistake? It must be.

Recalling that Kathy said she also called Ray's ex-wife, David pulled up the call records for his mother. He cursed. Kathy hadn't called there, either.

Ray Brown, the most important technical person at VPS, disappears and the Human Resources person, who claims Dad was like a brother to her, doesn't try to track him down? Doesn't call his best friend or his ex-wife? He slammed the palm of his hand against the wall. *Because*

she knew he had been killed, that's why.

Desperately, he thought through the sequence of events, looking for a flaw. He didn't want to believe she was an enemy, but the facts kept pushing through.

Never trust anyone.

He had fallen in love with her, but she turned out to be another backstabber.

Kathy had planned the whole thing ... inviting him to talk about his father, gaining his trust, seducing him and then finding out what he knew. And he fell for the whole thing like a lovesick puppy. David Brown, the computer whiz kid. Must have been a big laugh for her.

His head throbbed with pain, but he couldn't stop now. Kathy must have told his enemies about his search. These killers, whoever they were, knew he was trying to prove his father's innocence.

Kathy, damn you.

Pain erupted in a swirl of colors. Then he saw—or sensed—something out there, coming across the net, something he had fought before.

He buried his head in his arms and fought to remain conscious. It was happening again! The pain crested, then the colors faded, leaving him in a dark, lonely emptiness. He wasn't in the motel room any longer ... and he wasn't alone. He strained to see through the darkness ... then spotted it ... a dark form in the distance. It had the shape of a child, but it wasn't flesh and blood. The creature's face was in the shadows, and when it crossed into a murky light, recognition hit him.

And terror.

Alice, the software predator from his childhood. He tried to run, but his legs wouldn't move. Although it had assumed the image of a

young girl, Alice was a killer, his worst nightmare.

But how could it be here? Alice had been destroyed.

All his disappointment, all his pain coalesced into a shimmering ball of fear, ready to explode. His ears roared, filling his mind with a torrent of daggers and piercing pain. Alice opened its arms to him, beckoning, feeding on his fear.

David fought back, desperate to retain his identity, but drawn forward, toward this creature—toward Alice. This was no dream; David was wide awake. He struggled to hold his ground, but Alice pulled him closer, touched him, then flowed through his skin. Pain throbbed through his being, his fear peaked, and he screamed into the void.

Suddenly he was back, alone in the dark motel room.

Alive.

A glimmer of light from the pale glow of the moon came through a dirty window. The roar in his ears faded to a hum. He stood up and tried to find the door, but his legs were unsteady. He stumbled and fell.

Lightheaded and still on the edge, he felt Alice trying to draw him back into its nightmare world. He fought with all his strength, but the creature's power sucked him down. The hum in his ears swelled again to a painful roar as Alice probed and infected his mind.

David ripped off the glasses and hurled them against the wall. The frames flew apart and tumbled to the floor. The creature's death grip slackened and disappeared. Throbbing pain erupted, worse than before, and he crawled back to the bed and succumbed to the darkness.

CHAPTER 14

I was lucky enough to see with my own eyes the recent stock market crash, where they lost several million dollars, a rabble of dead money that went sliding off into the sea. Never as then, amid suicides, hysteria, and groups of fainting people, have I felt the sensation of real death, death without hope, death that is nothing but rottenness, for the spectacle was terrifying but devoid of greatness ... I felt something like a divine urge to bombard that whole canyon of shadow, where ambulances collected suicides whose hands were full of rings.

◆ “A Poet in New York,” lecture, Federico García Lorca, March 1932, Madrid

Wednesday, February 23, 2022

Bob Marichal stood off-camera and stared at Daphne Hayden as he waited for the interview to begin. Although the market had endured a terrible morning, Daphne’s presence lifted his spirits. *She is really something.* Even at sixty-three, he could still appreciate a body like that.

A brassy female voice disturbed his enjoyment. “You stare any harder and you’re gonna need a change of underwear.”

Standing next to him was Joan Langdon, peering for the millionth time into her hand mirror, checking her makeup. He wondered if

the mirror had cracked. Bob found it difficult to believe Daphne and Joan belonged to the same species, let alone the same gender. Joan's extra makeup drew attention to a face only a mother could love. A *mother warthog*. To top it off, Joan had a pain-in-the-ass personality. Just his luck to be paired with *her* today.

"When we get on camera," Joan said, "try to look at Daphne's face when she asks a question. I don't believe her boobs can speak."

"Listen, you fat cow—"

"Shut up, she's about to start the show."

"Good morning, this is Daphne Hayden reporting from the New York Stock Market in Boonton, New Jersey. Beginning at about six this morning, a vast wave of sell orders hit this and all other markets around the world. In about ninety minutes of frenzied selling, the market lost almost 30% of its value. The drop has hit just about every major industry."

As the holocamera focused on a huge electronic board, Daphne continued, "Behind me, you can see the Market Watch Board, which tracks every major stock market in the world." She glanced at the board. "At this moment, the Dow is 11,228, the lowest it has been in thirteen years. It started the day at 16,345, so the drop is now about 31%."

As Daphne pointed out several other global stock indices also losing value, Joan whispered to Bob, "Let's move our butts out there."

"You'll need a derrick."

Joan gave him the finger, walked onto the set and sat at a small conference table. Bob had to sit next to her, since the guest chairs were side by side at the table. His displeasure with the seating arrangements was forgotten when Daphne brushed past and sat

next to him. Her breasts defied gravity, and he discreetly glanced down the front of her blouse. A hard kick in the ankle made him yelp, and he gave Joan a nasty look.

“Two top market analysts are here to help us understand the plunge in stock prices,” Daphne said.

Wearing a dignified smile, Bob returned his attention to the gorgeous newswoman.

“Please welcome Joan Langdon of Petrie Billings and Robert Marichal of Danson, Costello and Stern.”

Daphne glanced at Joan before addressing the network audience. “Joan, let me turn to you first. Do you have any idea what caused the market to crash?”

Appearing confident and poised, Joan replied, “We believe the sell-off began with a heavy dose of profit taking. Once that started, the automated sell protocols kicked in and started the avalanche. As you know, Daphne, emotion drives the market more than logic. For the moment, sellers outnumber buyers by a wide margin, so I expect this selling to continue for a while.”

Master of the obvious. Sellers outnumber buyers ... give me strength.

“What should the average investor do right now?” Daphne asked.

“I’m telling my clients not to panic,” Joan replied. “Sell your weaker stocks, but hold on to solid, well-established companies. This is a good time to pick up a bargain or two, if you can stand the heat. The market might go down a little further, but it will bounce back.”

Noticing the Dow plunge even faster, Bob stared at the electronic board. *This is really bad.* He tried to concentrate on Daphne, but the Dow was dropping like the altimeter of a plane about to crash.

“Thank you, Joan.” Turning toward him, Daphne asked, “Bob, what’s your take on this? What caused the market to nosedive?”

He stared over his shoulder at the Market Watch Board. When Daphne repeated the question, he said, “The Dow just dropped below 11,000! I don’t understand why it turned down so abruptly.” He couldn’t tear his eyes from the huge electronic board, like a traveler gaping at a highway accident. “I’ve been in the market almost thirty years, and I’ve never seen anything like this. There must be millions of sell transactions coming across the net.” Then he blurted out, “My God, it’s 10,700.” He turned back to Daphne. “There’s no reason for so many sales. Nothing special happened recently. Of course, we *have* been in a bear market for several years,” he added, “so maybe this shouldn’t have been such a surprise. Remember, the Dow was over 23,000 eight years ago and it has been drifting down since then.”

“So what’s your advice to investors?”

Before he could respond, the Market Watch Board sputtered and turned dark. Then the overhead lights failed. In the pitch black, a woman on the trading floor let out a scream.

What the hell is going on?

Bob heard people stumbling away, and he would have done the same, but in the dark, he wasn’t sure which way to flee.

The emergency power came on, providing dim light across the trading floor. Everyone rushed to get out of the building. He had seen fear take over the trading floor before, but nothing like this. Joan pumped her thick legs toward a now-crowded exit, and Daphne shouted at someone off to the left. Alone on the platform, Bob noticed the holocamera was still on, so he stepped in front of it and stared into the gleaming eye. He had only one word for the audience.

“Sell.”

CHAPTER 15

It was a grand adventure, a race across time, distance and morality. David searched for his father, his enemies planned his death, and the fate of the species remained in question.

◆ *Electronic Messiah*, W. Arthur Salem, copyright 2058, Professor, History of Electrical Engineering, New Jersey Institute of Technology

Thursday, February 24, 2022

David left Reagan National Airport in his rented car and crossed the Rochambeau Memorial Bridge over the Potomac into Washington, DC. Another dismal afternoon, with a brisk wind biting into the car.

The airlines had reduced their flight schedules again, so getting a reservation from Seattle to the east coast had been a pain in the ass. He had wanted to fly into Newark or one of the New York airports, but those flights had been booked weeks ago. After checking Philly and Baltimore, he reluctantly bought a seat to Reagan National. The drive to New Jersey would take four or five hours, so he wouldn't pull into the hotel until late at night.

Tomorrow he had an appointment with Deborah Mizinsky, the widow of the last man known to speak with Paul Martino. When he contacted her yesterday, she agreed to meet with him. Frankly, he'd

been surprised how willing she was to see him. Kathy's treachery had left him suspicious.

Unable to get Kathy out of his mind, he replayed how fast he'd fallen for her. What an idiot! She had tossed him to the wolves. Just like that. Even now, he couldn't believe it. Had she faked those feelings?

He ran into a massive traffic jam in DC, and for the next hour, inhaled exhaust fumes in bumper-to-bumper traffic. He inched past the Jefferson Memorial, shimmering in the sunset, and then the Washington Monument.

In addition to the crushing traffic of tourists and government workers, crowds of angry demonstrators milled around Constitution Avenue and the adjoining streets, pushing at the barricades and shouting at the police. One agitated woman taunted the police. She shook her sign so forcefully David couldn't read it. A burly police officer grabbed her by the collar and dragged her behind police lines. The crowd roared and pushed against the barricades, brandishing their signs like fists.

What the hell is going on?

Winter blew in when he rolled down his window to listen. Rumbling voices carried over the wind, shouting about giving the people back their money.

David guessed they were protesting the stock market crash. A tsunami of sell orders had swamped the market, although the origin of this selling was unknown. Almost 90% of the value of the global stock markets had been wiped out in one day.

Those poor people. All their savings ... their security ... a lifetime of work blown away.

Listening to the tone of the demonstrators' voices, he felt their

anger, but even more, their desperation.

He understood their feelings. His investments had disappeared, too. A stench clung to the whole thing, as if a disease had eaten the flesh off the bones of the nation, leaving the economy on life support. The cash in his money fund would have to sustain him for the next few months.

The government should have done something to prevent this disaster. Better software, more technicians, something. Even if they had just shut down the market when the first wave of sell orders hit, the worst could have been avoided. Between their anti-technology laws and gross incompetence, the Feds were screwing up everything.

A noise like the buzzing of angry bees jarred him out of his thoughts. It wasn't the demonstrators; they milled about and taunted the police. David tried to locate the source of the noise, but the buzz was everywhere.

To his right, a couple of blocks away, flames broke through the roof of an eight-story, red brick apartment building. The fire raced across the roof and then burst out the top floor windows. Frightened spectators backed away from the building.

A group of young thugs ran out of the building's entrance and stopped to look up at the flames. They danced wildly, slapped hands, laughed and shouted. Then they ran down the street.

David's stomach wrenched as a young black girl opened a window just below the top floor. She couldn't have been more than twelve, with a wide face and braided hair. Screaming for help, she shielded her face as flames licked around her. She climbed out the window, hung on the edge, and then let go, arms flailing wildly as she tumbled down. He turned away. A long sigh came from the crowd. When he

looked again, people had gathered around her broken body.

Another fire burst from an old four-story hotel across the street from the blazing apartment building. Smoke poured out the windows, and then the flames spread to an adjoining restaurant. People ran in all directions. A handful of police officers shouted instructions, but frightened runners ignored them.

David glanced nervously at the stalled traffic ahead. The street noise was overwhelming. The hiss of towering flames mixed with the ear-piercing blare of automobile horns and the cries of terrified pedestrians. Rolling up the window didn't help much.

Staring at the approaching flames, David didn't notice the movement of the cars in front of him. Horn blaring, the driver behind rammed him, smashing his bumper.

Son of a bitch!

He stepped on the gas, but the driver in front had moved only a couple of car lengths, forcing him to jam on the brakes. To his left, flames swept into the sky as additional buildings caught fire. Frenzied drivers blared their horns, but the cars were locked in place.

Police cars swerved around the packed cars, but slowed to avoid the terrified pedestrians who clogged the streets. Heat seared his face, as building after building along the highway burst into flames. He considered abandoning the car.

A pickup truck screeched past on the right shoulder, rattling his car. After watching several other cars roar past, he decided to follow. Swerving onto the shoulder, he forced an oncoming van to squeal to a stop. Cars pulled in front of him, but at least he was moving. Smoke hung low over the road.

He hit the brakes, jammed up in traffic again. Chunks of smoking debris dropped near the edge of the highway. Where were the

firefighters? Emergency rescue workers? Who was in charge?

A couple of drivers ahead of him abandoned their cars and fled. He rolled down the window and screamed at them to stay in their cars, but they kept running.

Military helicopters swooped above the jammed-up traffic, the hum of their engines overlaying the fire's roar. Through the rearview mirror, he watched the helicopters touch down near the White House. The President must be abandoning the city.

The left side of his face was raw from the heat. Buildings on both sides of the highway were aflame. As the flames advanced over the rooftops, burning embers dropped on the stalled traffic.

Why didn't the National Guard do something to restore order?

Half a block ahead, a lone police officer, assisted by three civilians, struggled to push a smashed minivan off the road. The rear end was crumpled, and the tires barely moved. David was about to jump out of his car to help when the men got the minivan moving and pushed it to the side of the highway.

Traffic began to move again, slowly at first, then faster. Swerving around abandoned cars, he cut in and out of lanes. The smoke gradually diminished, revealing a bleak, twisting highway. As he fled the capitol, the inferno receded in the rearview mirror.

He was safe.



The open road in Maryland provided a reassuring sense of normalcy. Route 95 was decently maintained, and he made good time. He passed a military convoy, but strangely, they were driving north away from the city.

The sun glowed through low clouds as he drove past Baltimore's

Inner Harbor. Rolling down the window a couple of inches, he let the cool night air clear his mind. He tried not to think of the horror in the capitol, but he had the terrible feeling the government was on the verge of collapse. Radio newscasts reported similar riots in New York, Los Angeles and other large cities. Rot had been collecting at all levels of government for a decade; the worsening financial crisis had exposed all its weaknesses.

David wondered if the stock market crash had wiped out his mother. Luckily she had given him some cash at the beginning of the semester. It should be enough until summer, and then he could get a full-time job.

David drove through Maryland and Delaware without incident, although the highway became worse, with ever-increasing potholes and loose chunks of blacktop. At sunset, he slowed down to spot the potholes in his headlights. As he approached the Delaware Bridge, the highway was worse than anything he had encountered on the West Coast.

A slender moon glowered through the cables of the towering bridge as he crossed the Delaware Bay. He glanced at the dashboard display. The rearview camera revealed several pairs of headlights. It wasn't anything to worry about, he convinced himself, just normal late evening traffic. His stomach rumbled, a reminder he had skipped lunch and dinner. With a couple of hours more driving tonight, a snack would help.

"Where's the next service area?" he asked the car's navigation system.

The Mercedes was quiet for a moment, and then the computer said, "Sorry, but I can't answer your question. The Turnpike service area system is not responding."

David figured the Internet must be down. No big surprise; these days the net was down most of the time, since there was no money to pay technicians.

He passed a sign announcing an upcoming service area and turned onto the next ramp. The parking lot was deserted, which gave him second thoughts, but he pulled into a spot near a concrete path leading up a rise to a junk food place. He looked around. Woods, thick and dark, surrounded the service area. Not a person in sight.

Well, it is almost midnight. Normal people don't travel this late.

He had read muggers sometimes hid in these service areas, but he figured he'd be safe walking up the well-lit path. Anyway, he was hungry.

He stepped out into a crisp, quiet night; the only sound came from the occasional car along the highway. He zipped his jacket all the way up and strode toward the main entrance. His legs felt stiff.

The cold night air seeped through his jacket. He hurried to reach the warmth of the building. When he reached it, the door refused to budge. Peering through the glass, he realized the place was deserted. He cursed then noticed a small, handwritten sign taped to the interior of the glass. Dated two years earlier, it said: Closed Until Further Notice, Restrooms Still Work Behind Building.

Why the hell didn't they have a sign at the bottom of the path?

He turned and walked back down the path, hunger gnawing at his insides. He'd walked halfway down when he noticed another car parked at the far end of the lot, although no one was in sight. *Maybe someone using the restroom?* Instinct warned him to stop, and then he felt a burning pain slice across his left shoulder. He grabbed the shoulder. Blood!

A movement in the brush at the foot of the path alerted him to

a stocky man in a heavy topcoat. The man's laser pistol hissed and a deadly beam whizzed past David's head. Finally coming out of his stupor, he ducked off the path and sprinted into the bushes.

The people who killed Dad are after me.

Pine needles scratched his face and hands as he fled into the woods. What could he do except run? He'd never thought someone would actually try to kill *him*. Looking over his shoulder as he stumbled through the dark underbrush, he caught a glimpse of the man with a pistol running up the path. Dripping blood, David's left arm flopped uselessly.

His best chance was to hide in the thick woods in the rear. He ran behind the restaurant, out of the killer's line of sight. His shoulder throbbed, blood soaked through his jacket. The shooter crashed through the brush nearby. The bastard was gaining on him. Then the laser hissed again, burning into a tree trunk to his right.

Breathing hard, he ran through towering oaks and scrub pines. Sweat trickled into his eyes, and he brushed it away with his good hand, but a moment later, it blinded him again. Already lightheaded, he couldn't go much farther. He looked desperately for a weapon—a rock, a dead branch, something. Lumbering now, he spotted a rock about the size of a baseball. He dropped to his knees and clawed at it, digging it out of the frozen ground with his good hand. Not much of a weapon, but it would be his best chance if the killer found him. He hid behind a tree and controlled his breathing, trying to blend into the darkness.

The shooter crashed through the brush about thirty yards away and stopped. David strained to hear, but the forest remained quiet. Bile soured his mouth.

Where is that bastard?

He didn't dare move. One misstep and the shooter would pinpoint his location.

But he couldn't stay here. His sleeve was a bloody mess. If he didn't bleed to death, the shooter would find him. He looked up—the moon seemed to glare brighter than before.

The quiet magnified every sound: a branch squeaking in the breeze, the rustle of dried leaves, phantom footsteps from the parking lot.

He decided to double back to his car. Peering through the brush, he oriented himself to the lights along the concrete pathway. He crept around a bush and headed toward them, every step a potential disaster.

He stopped and listened.

Nothing.

The shooter could be anywhere.

Slowly, he approached the pathway lights. He'd creep ahead a few steps, stop and listen, then creep again. Finally, he reached a clump of oaks fifty yards from his car. The shooter's car was at the far end of the lot. He gathered himself for a dash to safety.

Then he heard it—the crackle of leaves underfoot. The shooter was getting close.

Peering around a broad oak tree, David squeezed his rock and set to defend himself. The odds weren't in his favor, a one-armed man with a rock against a professional killer. He spotted the shooter weaving through the moonlight about ten yards away.

This is it.

Wait for a clear shot.

Killing him with the rock would be difficult, but even if it stunned the bastard, he could make a run for his car. He waited until the

shooter looked away then stood up and threw with all his strength.

The rock hit the killer's shoulder.

"What the fuck?"

He sagged against a tree. Too quickly, he regained his balance and aimed the laser pistol in David's direction, holding his fire, searching for his target.

Get out of here!

David turned to flee. A dark silhouette in the woods came toward him. He'd never thought of a second shooter! He didn't have a chance. The original shooter, a heavyset man, curled his thick lips in a triumphant smile as he aimed his laser pistol.

Then a gunshot barked out.

CHAPTER 16

Sometimes I think the Army of God is the lesser threat.

◆ Steve Bonini's Diary, 2021

Contrary to popular belief, Domain Security Chief James Murphy, not Dianne Morgan, made the initial contact with organized crime. Although she remained in the background, Dianne pulled the strings.

◆ *The Barbarian Queen: The True Story of Dianne Morgan*, David T. Siccone, copyright 2058, Department Head, Computer Science History, Carnegie Mellon University

Friday, February 25, 2022

David woke bleary-eyed and looked at the ceiling. He felt like three-week-old cat shit. Gradually his eyes focused, and he realized he was in a hospital—clean, but old and run-down. His left shoulder throbbed, but it was nothing compared to the raging migraine behind his brows. Even the muted light was painful.

Someone cleared her throat. A woman sat at his bedside. He blinked to bring the stranger into focus: late forties, bushy eyebrows and a wrinkled gray jacket. Needed to drop about twenty pounds. The movement of his head brought another surge of pain, so he

leaned back into the pillow.

The woman slouched in the chair and smiled insincerely. “They told me you were beginning to come out of it.”

Her voice grated on his headache. She was probably a hospital administrator of some sort, maybe after his insurance information. He wanted to pull the sheet over his head and go back to sleep. He didn’t answer, but she didn’t take the hint. The woman pulled her chair closer to the bed. He looked at her again. She could be attractive if she did something with herself. Maybe a face-over.

“You had a pretty rough night, huh, Dave?” The woman leaned back and crossed varicose-veined legs at the ankle. It wasn’t a pretty sight.

“You were lucky, though, just a flesh wound in the shoulder.”

“Who *are* you?”

She flashed her phony smile again. “Lieutenant McCain, Salem New Jersey Police at your service. You’re in Salem General Hospital, about five miles northeast of where we found you and the late Sal Caputo on the Turnpike.”

“Is that the man who tried to kill me?”

“That’s what we are going to figure out,” McCain said, pulling out a notepad from her jacket pocket. “First, though, why don’t you tell me what happened.”

David couldn’t tell anyone about his mission, but the police might be able to shed some light on his assailant.

“I was driving from DC up the Turnpike to New York. I decided to stop for a snack at the first service area, but the restaurant was closed. That guy—you said his name was Sal Caputo—burned my shoulder with a laser and chased me into the woods. I guess he planned to steal my wallet and my car. I hit him with a rock, but it

didn't do much damage. He would have killed me except someone from the woods shot him. She helped me back to my car, and I guess she drove me here. I don't remember much."

McCain scribbled a few notes and then waited for additional information. When she realized David had nothing else to add, she looked up from the notepad.

"So, let me see if I have it straight. You're just driving along on your way to New York, minding your own business. Someone decides to kill you, but a Good Samaritan saves your butt and kills the perp, but then leaves the hospital before the police arrive. That about it, Dave?" McCain glanced at a card in her hand. "You *are* David Brown, student at the University of Washington, as stated on this student ID?"

"How did you get my ID card?"

"You own a weapon, Dave?"

"No, I don't, and I didn't shoot that guy, if that's what you're implying."

McCain smiled again. "Okay, we're making great progress. Now, I have just a couple of questions and we'll have this whole thing cleared up. You can answer a few questions, can't you, Dave?"

Pain in the ass! If she gives me that stupid smile again, I'll ...

"Sure, Lieutenant McCain. I'll do my best."

"Describe the person who rescued you."

"She was tall, about five-nine, African-American, maybe early twenties. Slim, but not skinny. Dark hair, cut short." He vaguely remembered she had helped him to his car, supporting his weight with an arm around his waist. "Strong, like an athlete."

"How was she dressed?" McCain asked.

"I'm not sure ... it was dark. Maybe a tan jacket with black pants."

“Did you get her name or notice anything that might identify her?”

He shook his head. “Nothing.” David shifted his weight in bed, trying to reduce the ache in his shoulder.

“Did she take anything from you or Caputo?”

“Not that I know of.”

McCain continued to question him about the incident, but David didn’t provide much help. Actually, he knew little about either his rescuer or would-be killer. McCain probably knew more than he did.

McCain flipped the student ID card onto the bed. “Well, that’s about it, then. Got enough for the 78G.” She put the pad in her jacket pocket and stood up. “I’ll let you know if by some miracle we discover something.”

“That’s it? What’s a 78G?”

“Oh, it’s just the form I have to fill out. You know, a summary of the crime and all that crap.” She shrugged and turned to leave.

“Wait a minute!” David sat straight up and dangled his feet off the bed. His headache flared. “Someone tries to kill me and you’re not going to do shit?”

McCain’s eyes narrowed. “Listen, I could paper the walls of this room with the backlog of cases I have to investigate. You haven’t told me squat. I’m not wasting my time when I don’t know the full story.”

“Lieutenant, I’m not a criminal. I’ve never done anything illegal in my life.”

“Maybe not, but you haven’t told me the full story. I don’t poke around in the dark, you never know what you’re going to bump into. Especially when a hit-man from the mob is involved.”

“The mob?” David said. “That guy who tried to kill me was *mob*?”

McCain peered at him quizzically. "You really don't know, do you?"

"I have no idea what's going on."

McCain shook her head. "Well, kid, you have a big problem. Sal Caputo was a soldier in the Vitullo mob." She watched David warily for a moment. "Maria Vitullo is the big boss lady for organized crime in New Jersey, probably in the entire Northeast. If you're pushing technology, drugs, prostitution, whatever, she gets a piece of it. Caputo has been a suspect in several mob hits over the last few years. He doesn't work on his own. Vitullo must have ordered him to take you out."

"Christ! Why would the mob be after me?"

"You want to tell me anything else?"

The back of his neck felt damp. "I don't know anything about this Vitullo woman, and I don't know why her hit-man tried to kill me." *First my father's killers, now the mob.* "Do something. Please."

McCain shrugged. "Until you come clean, there's nothing I can do. I'll tell you this much. Get out of this hospital as soon as you can, right away if you feel up to it. By now Vitullo knows Caputo failed, so she'll have more of her goons looking for you."

McCain picked the student ID card off the bed and wrote on the back. "Here's a motel on Route 206 near Medford. Pay cash, don't charge anything. You should be safe there tonight. Stay away from the Turnpike, they'll be watching it." She shrugged. "Not much I can do for you. Get out of New Jersey if you want to stay vertical." McCain handed David the card. "My number is there, too. Call me if you decide to tell the whole story." She shook her head. "Good luck. You're going to need it."

McCain walked toward the door, stopped, turned around and

said, “By the way, the 78G ... I made that up.” She smiled and disappeared out the door.

He pushed off the bed and stood up. *Got to get out of here.* Suddenly light-headed, he held on to the bed frame. The dizziness passed, and he stumbled to the closet to find his clothes. His keys and wallet weren't there. He dressed quickly and stepped through the doorway.

The nurses' station, on a corner of the hall to his left, was deserted. He went to the corner and looked down the hall but didn't see anyone. This wasn't right, there should always be at least one nurse on duty. Once McCain left, the nurses must have cleared out so the killers could do their job.

He hurried into the nurses' station and searched through the drawers for his keys. His arms felt tight. In a middle drawer, he found a clear plastic box labeled with his name. Inside were his keys, wallet and loose change. *Thank god!* He grabbed the keys and wallet and ran down the hall, past his room, turning a corner toward an exit sign.

He pushed open the door but stopped when he heard footsteps coming up the stairs. He was probably being paranoid, but he ducked into a patient's room adjacent to the stairs and hid in the closet. An elderly man, snoring loudly, occupied the semi-private room.

David held himself still and listened. A few seconds passed then he heard the hall door swing open. Footsteps—two people—came along and stopped in front of the doorway to this room. He held his breath and remained motionless. A lifetime passed then footsteps traveled down the hall.

When he was sure they were gone, he pushed open the closet door. The footsteps in the corridor seemed to pause in front of

each room and then move on. He hoped it was nurses checking on patients. In his gut, he knew it wasn't. If McCain hadn't been there, he would have been murdered while he slept.

He slipped out of the closet, knelt down and peered around the doorway, his head close to the floor. Two men in dark suits looked into the last room and then headed around the corner.

It was now or never. He hurried through the hall door and down the stairs. He strolled across the lobby and out the entrance.

The parking lot was huge, although half empty. He pulled his jacket's hood over his head against the drizzle. He scanned the lot from the hospital steps but didn't see his rented car. If he activated the car's security system, the alarm and flashing lights would attract attention.

There was a safer way to locate the car. He hit the start button on the remote and listened carefully.

Nothing.

Maybe the rain drowned out the engine. Or maybe it wasn't in the lot.

David ran down the main entrance lane, hitting the start button over and over again.

Nothing.

He trotted along, splashing through puddles, listening. If he didn't find the car soon ...

He was more than halfway into the lot when he finally heard the rumble of an engine. It was the best sound of his life.

After spotting the car near the emergency entrance, he ran to it and slid behind the steering wheel. He looked back through the rain toward the main entrance. Two men stood on the top step, looking across the lot. He slowly backed out of the parking space. In the far

corner of the lot was an exit to a main road. He pulled behind a couple of cars, but the red light at the exit lasted forever. He checked the hospital entrance. The men were gone. *Shit*. Finally, the light turned green, and he was through the exit and on the open road.

He kept one eye on the rearview mirror. Nobody seemed to be following him. Now he had to make it to the Mizinsky home.



Murphy, the Domain Security Chief, sat at his desk working late into the night when a call came in on the hologram computer.

After checking the caller's ID code, he said, "Display actual-size image."

A three-dimensional hologram of a well-built young woman, a shade under six feet tall, formed in the center of his office. She was dressed in a pale blue blouse and a white skirt that hugged the curves in her hips and thighs. Short blond hair framed the woman's face, which was plain, almost masculine, but not unattractive.

Darlene Duboski. They called her DoubleD behind her back.

He couldn't help glancing at the stretched fabric of her blouse. Her physicality dominated the room, even if her appearance was only a hologram.

The body of a porn star, but one of our best agents.

She had wormed her way into the Administration and become the Vice-President's mistress and confidant. Working both sides of the street wasn't a problem; DoubleD had also seduced the Secretary of Homeland Security, usually a tight-lipped woman.

"Sal Caputo's dead," DoubleD said, her voice revealing a hint of an Eastern European accent. "Shot by an unknown woman before he could execute the contract."

Murphy leaned back, surprised. David Brown was just a college kid. A smart kid, balls, too, but he should be an easy kill.

“Details.”

DoubleD told Murphy that Caputo had trailed Brown from Reagan Airport to a closed service area on the New Jersey Turnpike, and described the African-American woman who had rescued Brown. DoubleD told him Vitullo’s soldiers tracked Brown to a hospital, but he escaped.

“That woman who interfered sounds similar to the fanatic who broke into my meeting with Vitullo,” Murphy said, stroking his chin. “I didn’t get much of a look at her face, but everything else is a match.”

“I agree. It must be the same woman.” DoubleD shifted her weight, drawing his attention to curves that rippled and realigned. “She was also involved in the Robotics Institute attack, the only one to escape.”

“What do we know about her?”

“Not much. We suspect she’s the Commander of The Army of God.”

“Now why would she save the life of David Brown, the son of the great villain?” Murphy asked. “It wasn’t an accident she showed up when she did. She might have been following Caputo, but it’s more likely she was following Brown. Could she have known our plans?”

“I don’t believe so.

Murphy remained silent, his eyes fixed on DoubleD.

“She’s following Brown,” DoubleD said. “She must believe Brown will lead them to us.”

Intelligent as well as beautiful. I shouldn’t have farmed out the hit to Vitullo.

“Excellent, Darlene. What steps should we take?”

“Our first priority must be to capture this woman. I’ll do it. We don’t want Vitullo to get her. My interrogations never fail; she’ll tell us everything she knows. Once we take care of her, David Brown will be easy.” DoubleD added, “Of course, I’ll force him to tell everything before I kill him.”

“I agree,” Murphy said, “but prudence dictates one additional step. Always close the loop. We know Brown has been searching for information about his father’s death. Where has he been?”

“A data trace I ran showed that, before the attempted murder, Brown visited Joseph Cohen, the ...”

“The owner of *TechAdvantage*,” Murphy interrupted. “Haven’t seen Joe in years. He was Paul Martino’s junior partner. Cohen knew nothing about PeaceMaker or the Domain. We investigated thoroughly. If he had known anything, we would have eliminated him ten years ago.” Murphy recalled he had sent agents to search Cohen’s home after the PeaceMaker attack, but they had found nothing. “What information could he have passed on to Brown?”

“Possibly nothing,” DoubleD said. “But I will interrogate Cohen first.”

“Keep me informed,” Murphy said. “We’re so close nothing can be allowed to go wrong,”

Murphy ended the transmission and leaned back in his chair, thinking about those events of a decade ago.

After the PeaceMaker fiasco, he and Dianne had cleaned up all the loose ends. She had planned to blame everything on Alan Goldman, her old enemy, but he had convinced her to make Ray Brown the scapegoat. Nobody trusted Ray, a drunk and a misfit, so it was easy to pin the disaster on him. Murphy’s idea worked perfectly,

everybody had believed it, and the authorities hadn't looked beyond the obvious.

But things had changed. David Brown was kicking up dust, and the religious fanatics were following him, like hunters tracking a cub back to its den. Murphy had to keep the Church off balance for just a little longer; then it would be too late to stop the Domain from seizing power. Killing David Brown and that crazy black woman, maybe Cohen, too—that would do it. It would give them the time they needed.

Murphy stared at a photograph standing in its frame on the corner of his desk, an old picture of Dianne surrounded by her original partners and a few long-standing VPS employees. A younger Murphy stared back at him from the far edge of the picture.

He wouldn't let anyone harm Dianne. Not while he was still breathing.

CHAPTER 17

The soldiers of the Army of God believe they are in a great struggle ordained by a supreme being. Such a holy war justifies any action; it is God's will.

◆ *The Army of God*, Mark Axelrod, copyright 2051, Assistant Director, FBI (retired)

Sunday morning, February 27, 2022

Vince De Marco peered out the window of his stretch limousine as it approached Saint Joseph's, an aging church built in a traditional, Italian-American section of Toms River, New Jersey. He yawned, his mind still half-focused on the hooker who serviced him at the club last night.

A wispy sun blinked above the church's bell tower as his Rolls glided down the street. It was difficult to force his attention back to the job at hand. The stained-glass windows, the brick three-story residence halls behind the church, the neatly dressed parishioners milling about the front entrance—he'd seen it a million times. Growing up less than a mile from the church, he had attended mass regularly with his parents.

Surrounding the church were blue-collar garden apartments, aging two-family homes and a sprawling cemetery. He reminded himself that last year a sniper had tried to pick Vitullo off from one of those apartments. De Marco's sharp eyes scanned the area,

observing the spots where his men were hidden. He wondered if animals had dug up what was left of the sniper in the Pinelands.

As always, De Marco felt annoyed at having to get up early Sunday morning to go to church. He gave lip service to the Catholic faith, but it was really just a bunch of fucking mumbo-jumbo. However, his boss, Maria Vitullo, was a true believer who insisted on attending the nine o'clock mass every Sunday.

For some fucking reason, she always sticks me with Sunday morning security.

His mood improved when he noticed the morning sunlight sparkling on the hood of his sedan. *You've come a long way, Vince old boy.* Glancing into the mirror, De Marco studied the line of seven stretch limos following him. It was an impressive sight, one that announced the presence of power.

Traffic was heavy, as it was most mornings. His father often complained Toms River had once been a quiet little town during the winter, after the summer vacationers had left their shore rentals. That might have been true when his father was a kid, but Vince had grown up in the year-round congestion of this South Jersey community.

His driver accelerated, and the car's powerful engine purred, the only sound penetrating his compartment. Tinted windows enclosing the back seat allowed him to look out, but prevented the curious from seeing inside.

As his car pulled up to the front of the church, he checked his appearance one last time in the mirror: dark eyes, thick brown hair pushed back, smooth, olive-toned skin.

Damn good looking.

He was proud to be a captain in the New Jersey Mafia. Few had

achieved such an important position while still under thirty. He straightened his tie imperceptibly.

Perfect.

De Marco dressed just like the young college grads he had seen walking around Wall Street like they owned the world. *Well, I'm a businessman, too.* He chuckled. *Except the bulge behind my vest pocket isn't a wallet computer.*

When he stepped out of the sedan, many of the churchgoers paused to stare; his position in the Family made him a local celebrity. A few waved and called his name, but De Marco ignored them. His eyes probed everywhere, searching for anything out of the ordinary.

As always, a well-behaved crowd had gathered for the spectacle. They knew that any minute Maria Vitullo would step out from one of the black limos. He recognized many of the onlookers as regular churchgoers, but tourists and sometimes reporters would come to see the famous woman. De Marco located several of his men milling around the church, blending into the crowd. Everything was normal.

"Begin status sequence," he said.

A rough male voice burst through his Command Chip. "Everything secure in the residence halls."

As planned, each of the men stationed in the church and nearby buildings reported over the Command Chip. Once he had received them all, De Marco nodded his head toward the line of cars. His men quickly stepped out of the cars and took up positions along the entrance to the church.

With two soldiers guarding his back, De Marco walked over to the fourth sedan and pulled open the door. The crowd gawked when Maria Vitullo stepped out into the protective sheath of her men. Smartly dressed in a dark coat, knee-length dark blue dress and

white high-heeled shoes, she looked spectacular.

“You look tired, Vince,” Vitullo said, followed by that cat-that-swallowed-the-canary smile of hers. “Did the ladies keep you up last night?”

Before he could decide how to respond, she turned away to greet family members. *Fuck!* De Marco walked behind her as she strolled along the sidewalk and up the steps toward the church. He could smooth-talk any woman, but for some goddamn reason, Vitullo always left him tongue-tied.

He forced himself to concentrate on security issues and once again scanned the crowd. In cold weather, everyone wore heavy coats, so concealed weapons were a big concern. He had people circling through the crowd with portable metal detectors, but the range was limited to a few yards. He wasn't so worried about the local people, but the anti-technology fanatics were dangerous, especially the damn Army of God.

Two of his soldiers cleared a path for Vitullo, while others followed a few steps behind. The crowd lining the pathway remained respectful as she walked by.

When she entered the church, an elderly usher helped remove her coat. Although the man had performed this simple task for many years, De Marco's men had frisked him a moment earlier in the church. *The old coot was harmless, but why take a chance?*

The church was clean, but beginning to show its age. Over the decades, parishioners had scratched names and dates into the wood pews, and the front doors had lost their shine. De Marco wondered how much the priests were skimming from the collection plate. He figured at least ten grand every Sunday. Too bad Vitullo insisted they had to keep their hands off. Pissed him off. He deserved a taste;

none of the other captains had to work without earning.

He scrutinized Vitullo's family members as they stopped by to pay their respects. After chatting with them, she walked down the center aisle and stepped into the third row, which the Bishop reserved for her. De Marco followed behind the boss. He discreetly watched her dress stretch tight across her hips as she stepped into the pew.

Nice ass.

Vitullo shuffled down to the center and sat, placing her purse on the bench. De Marco settled beside her and watched his men assume their positions in the pews and along the walls. Once again, he whispered over the Command Chip.



Bill O'Dell followed Sam Merlucci along an interior hallway on the second floor of the church. Merlucci was responsible for security within the church, and he explained each step in the process to the recently hired O'Dell.

"Always assume an assassin might be inside," Merlucci said, glancing in a doorway and looking around before entering. O'Dell knew Merlucci had memorized every inch of the church's layout, since he had been performing this task each Sunday for years. O'Dell followed him through the doorway, listening attentively as his boss explained how to search the room.

Making sure the church concealed no enemies, he trailed Merlucci through each room. His hand brushed his pistol when they glanced into a large sacristy and discovered a priest putting away robes and other garments. Merlucci signaled O'Dell to be alert and then barked out, "Hey, Father, what're you doing in there?"

The priest answered without turning, "I'm working on next week's

game plan for the Giants against the Eagles. What does it look like I'm doing?"

Merlucci gestured to O'Dell and they pulled out their Beretta lasers. O'Dell stepped forward to guard the door while Merlucci crept into the room and aimed his pistol at the priest's back.

"Father, I want you to slowly raise your hands and then turn around," Merlucci said.

The priest said, "I don't have the time to play—"

Merlucci cut him off, "This is the last time I'm going to ask you."

O'Dell knew the moment had arrived. He pulled the trigger on his laser pistol, and the back of Merlucci's head exploded in a nova of blood and bone. The gangster's body remained upright for a moment then sagged and slapped the floor.

The "priest" quickly examined Merlucci's body then spoke into a small computer clipped to his sleeve. "Merlucci has been eliminated." He listened briefly then said to O'Dell, "She's in her usual seat. All our people are in place, ready to go. Our job is to make sure she doesn't escape through the side chapel."



Although sitting quietly, Vitullo was too pissed off to concentrate on the mass. She watched the new priest, Father Chen, lead the altar boys through the ancient ritual. It sucked to import a Chink priest for her church. Not that she had anything against the Chinks—they were hard-working people who paid their debts—but this neighborhood had always had Italian priests. Maybe a few Micks, she recalled, but her father had fixed that years ago. She'd call the Cardinal later today and have him fix this shit.

Vitullo loved the Sunday morning mass. It was the one thing that

hadn't changed. She remembered sitting in the pew with her cousin when they were little girls. They'd giggle and make faces at each other when they were supposed to be praying. Then her mother would catch them at it, and they'd get their asses whacked when they got home. Not that it mattered, they would screw around the next week anyway.

The church had seemed so big and mysterious back then. Now it was just a worn-down building filled with people she'd known for years. Still, it was a comfort sitting in the old hardwood pews of her childhood, renewing her faith once again.

De Marco sat beside her, scanning the balconies, his head moving from side to side. *The conceited son of a bitch looks particularly good today. It doesn't pay to screw around with the hired help, the other capos would sulk and think I'm playing favorites, but one of these days I'm going to find out if he's as good in bed as he thinks he is.*

De Marco was looking around uneasily as he began another status check with his soldiers.

Something's wrong.

"Merlucci," he said, "where the fuck are you?"

De Marco tried again, but his expression told her the man had not answered. Then he leaned toward her and whispered, "Merlucci's not responding. We should get out of here."

Vitulo was about to agree when a rapid series of explosions thundered through the church. She jumped up when a small capsule crashed into the pew in front of them and exploded, releasing a dense cloud of white gas. Nearby church members screamed and bent over, coughing and retching. Vitullo stared at the drifting cloud until a whiff of the gas burned her nose and throat, making her retch, too.

De Marco roughly pulled her away from the gas and shouted,

“Let’s get out of here!”

Vitullo grabbed her purse and followed De Marco down the pew, trying to avoid the swirling gas. Someone was trying to whack her. She ripped open her purse and pulled out her laser pistol.

The church had become a madhouse. Terrified people screamed and coughed. Her eyes watered as the explosions continued and the gas spread. Panicked parishioners ran through the noxious haze and collapsed in the aisles as the fumes overcame them. De Marco shoved a staggering old man out of the way as he led Vitullo down the center aisle toward the front entrance. Several of her soldiers, lasers drawn, scanned the church for the invisible enemy.

The crowd surged desperately against the exits, pounding on unyielding doors. She was locked in, isolated from most of her soldiers. Explosions continued and Vitullo could barely see. Her eyes burned. She used a scarf to protect her breathing.

There has to be a way out of this trap.

Unconscious bodies littered the church, including several of her soldiers. Coughing badly, De Marco was bent over the back of a pew. She was on her own.

The side chapel!

With all the doors locked, Vitullo rushed toward the stairs in the side chapel. The air was not as bad there, and she pumped her legs furiously up the stairs, De Marco trailing several steps behind. She felt faint after climbing just a few steps, but it was the only way out.

O’Dell was at the top of the stairs. He wore a gas mask and carried a laser pistol. She was about to call him when she realized the bastard must be part of the attack. She snapped off a shot, but the beam passed harmlessly over O’Dell’s head.

O’Dell aimed with both hands. His shot hit De Marco in the

side. Shock surged across De Marco's face. He grabbed the badly burned wound and collapsed, shooting wildly. Vitullo aimed more deliberately and this time burned O'Dell's leg. The traitor screamed and went down, clutching his thigh as blood gushed.

Although a rasping cough shook her body, Vitullo tried to line up another shot at O'Dell. Before she could squeeze the trigger, a burly arm knocked the gun out of her hand. Through bleary eyes, she saw a priest wearing a gas mask. She tried to duck as the priest threw a punch, but it caught her on the temple and stunned her. All the strength deserted her body. She collapsed onto rubbery hands and knees and tumbled over onto her side.

Vitullo felt herself lifted over a man's shoulder. Her face brushed against the rough fabric of a robe. The phony priest carried her away. As they climbed the stairs, Vitullo peered around her captor's shoulder and tried to focus on a hazy figure looming above them on the next landing. She blinked. It was a young black nun wearing a gas mask. Vitullo pretended to be unconscious as the priest carried her up the steps.

The black woman's harsh voice carried over the sounds of battle. "Hurry! Her goons are outside. They could break in any minute."

A tremendous explosion shook the building and the priest almost dropped Vitullo.

"Get her to the car," the black bitch shouted. "I'll cover your escape."

Vitullo peeked down the steps and saw De Marco spread out at the foot of the stairs, holding his side, blood dripping through his hand. He'd be no help.

"Don't wait for me," the woman shouted. "I'll catch up if I can." Then she bolted past the priest, down the steps and into the haze.

Panting from the effort, the priest carried his prisoner down the hall. Vitullo waited until she could no longer hear the black bitch's footsteps then slowly reached into her sleeve and pulled out a long knife. With all of her remaining strength, she plunged the knife into the priest's side. He screamed and staggered into a wall. Still hanging over his shoulder, but now feeling wildly alive, Vitullo pulled out the blade and stabbed again. His body went limp and he crashed to the floor with her on top of him.

Her forehead bounced off the stone floor and the world turned into a collage of distant sounds and rolling shades of gray. Gradually, she became aware of a cold, stone floor under her shoulder blades, but her body was a useless jangle of vibrating nerves.

I have to ... get moving.

It took all her strength to flex her fingers. She rested a moment, soaked in sweat. She rolled onto her side then struggled to her knees. Light-headed, she was forced to rest again. There were footsteps on the stairs. She pulled the knife out of the dead priest and tried to stand, but her legs refused to obey. Seeing the black bitch racing toward her, Vitullo turned on her knees to face this new enemy, holding the knife in front of her.



Moesha stopped just outside the range of Vitullo's knife and circled her. The knife shook badly. The gangster was weak from the gas. Moesha feigned a move forward and jumped back as Vitullo slashed at her legs. Vitullo was slow to recover from her thrust, so Moesha leaped forward and lashed out with a powerful kick to Vitullo's head. The mobster's eyes rolled back, and she tumbled over unconscious.

The staccato hiss of laser fire from below grew louder. Moesha trusted her people to hold off the mobsters as long as possible, but they would be outnumbered as more of Vitullo's goons arrived. Whatever the consequences, she had to capture Vitullo for the First Minister's plan to succeed.

She leaned over and frisked Vitullo. When she was certain the infidel was disarmed, Moesha dropped to her knees and lifted Vitullo's petite body across her shoulders. Grunting, she stood up and walked down the hallway.

Vitullo's body grew heavy as Moesha staggered on. When she could go no farther, she stopped and leaned against the wall. A distant laser hissed, and then the church was quiet. Footsteps echoed along the hall, followed by an angry buzz of voices. She tossed away her gas mask and staggered forward, knowing she didn't have much time before Vitullo's goons found her.

She carried Vitullo down another staircase and laid her inside a narrow doorway. Although Moesha gasped for breath, she knew the Lord was with her. He had given her strength to get this far and He wouldn't desert her now.

Peering through a small window halfway up the door, she watched a pair of armed men run down the sidewalk. She waited for the opportunity to get to her car, which she had parked across the street. Once the men had disappeared around the corner, she carried Vitullo to the car and dumped her in the trunk. Whispering thanks to the Lord, Moesha climbed into the car and escaped with her prize.

The opening phase of the First Minister's plan was complete.

CHAPTER 18

The Great Depression of 2020 decimated the middle class in the United States. The Stock Market Crash of 2022 and the oncoming civil violence intensified the grinding depression and destroyed the little confidence remaining in the Federal Government. The world was a very different place by the time these tides had run their course.

◆ *The Great Depression of 2020*, Dr. Jessica Owen-Wells, copyright 2041, Chief Historian, American Historical Society

Sunday afternoon, February 27, 2022

It was an overcast afternoon when David turned off Route 280 into West Orange, a decaying suburban town in northern New Jersey. He supposed the town had once been a busy, middle-class community, but now it had the look of a place reluctantly losing ground. Cracked streets made driving tedious. Many homes needed paint and repairs, others were deserted.

Eventually, he found Deborah Mizinsky's home, an aging two-story colonial with a red brick front and faded blue wooden siding. Like many of its neighbors, it needed plenty of attention: a new coat of paint, weeding of the overgrown front lawn and the replacement of cracked wood in a white picket fence. The street was empty, so he

parked in front of her house.

Staring at her home, he had second thoughts about knocking on her door. If she let him in, she'd be involved. He didn't think anyone had followed him, but he couldn't be sure.

Might as well go in. It was too late now, anyway.

He zipped his jacket and stepped out of the car into a cold, quiet afternoon. He looked around carefully. The street appeared deserted. He walked toward the house. Each footstep crunched through a layer of dirt sprinkled with small bits of loose blacktop. He pulled on the front gate, but the latch stuck, forcing him to reach over the top and jiggle it open.

David walked along a brick pathway the same color as the house and then up creaking porch steps to the front door. After ringing the doorbell, he turned and scanned the neighborhood but saw nothing suspicious. Hearing a rustle inside the house, he focused his attention on the front door. The blinds spread apart and a plump face peered out. A lock clicked and a stocky woman opened the interior door; the glass storm door remained locked as she looked him over.

Through an Internet search, David knew Deborah Mizinsky was sixty-one and had two adult children. He had hacked into her employment file and discovered that she was a normal, hard-working widow. After her husband's death, she had supplemented meager Social Security benefits with a low-level position in the state's motor vehicle department and had earned a reputation as a reliable, conscientious worker. Competent but not outstanding, her performance evaluations said.

Dressed in a dark skirt and tan blouse, she was plain and neat. Thick waves of silver gray hair framed a puffy face. David thought she might have been pretty in her youth.

He tried to appear friendly. "Hello, Mrs. Mizinsky, I'm David Brown." When she didn't open the door, he said, "I called you a few days ago. My father was a good friend of Paul Martino."

Her face relaxed and she pulled open the door, which rattled as it swung in. "Come in, David. I expected you Thursday. Sorry to be an old grouch, but you have to be extra careful these days. There are so many strange people on the streets."

David nodded. "I understand. Times are tough."

"And getting worse. Let me take your jacket."

After she draped his jacket on a hanger in the hall closet, Mizinsky led him to a worn sofa in the living room. Flowered wallpaper had frayed in spots, but the furniture and pine floor were immaculate. He shifted his weight on the couch, not sure how to begin.

Her husband and two teenage children smiled across the years from silver-framed pictures perched on the fireplace mantel. Ted Mizinsky had been a beefy man with a warm, intelligent face.

Should be sitting on this couch, playing with his grandchildren.

"Can I offer you a cup of coffee or tea?" she asked.

David shook his head. "Thank you for seeing me. I'm sorry to be late, but a last-minute problem came up."

Mizinsky settled into a thick armchair next to the sofa and attempted a smile, but the expression lacked warmth.

He cleared his throat. "As I mentioned when I called, my father was Raymond Brown. He died when I was eleven and I never knew him very well. I know many people consider him a criminal, but he had a much kinder side, too. For the last few weeks, I've been talking to people who knew him."

"I hope you didn't waste your time coming here," she said. "I didn't know your father nor did my husband."

“I know that, Mrs. Mizinsky. My father’s best friend was Paul Martino, who I believe knew your husband.”

Mizinsky watched him with suspicion.

She knows something. I’ll have to do this carefully.

She cleared her throat. “Yes, Ted and Paul were friends. They talked on the phone from time to time, and Paul quoted Ted in his magazine several times. I remember Paul coming here one night. Ted had invited him for dinner. He was a very nice man.”

When Mizinsky didn’t continue, David said, “I’d like to learn more about Paul. In particular, I’m interested in his activities during the weeks before his death. Did your husband have contact with Paul?”

Mizinsky ignored his question. “Have you noticed things seem to be spinning out of control? That everything is going from bad to worse?”

“Well, it has—”

“This neighborhood must look pretty bad,” Mizinsky interrupted. “It used to be really nice. We raised our kids here. It was completely safe.” She seemed to be talking to herself. “Didn’t really have to lock the door at night. Nice people up and down the street, just a wonderful neighborhood.”

A sigh escaped. “Now it’s awful. They sell drugs on the corner. Nobody goes out at night. Most of the old neighbors moved away. Who knows where? It’s not the same anymore.” She mumbled, “Nothing’s the same. I invested my life savings in the stock market,” she said, picking up steam. “Now that’s gone, too. I was planning to retire in a couple of years.” She laughed bitterly. “Well, that’s not going to happen.”

“I’m sorry.”

Frowning, she said, "I don't want your sympathy. Don't know why I'm telling you all this. Just tell me the truth, what are you looking for?"

David studied her. *This woman wants to tell me something.*

"I don't believe my father was a criminal, and I don't believe Paul Martino was, either. I want to prove that." He leaned forward, wincing as the pain shot through his shoulder. "I think your husband knew something, and it cost him his life."

"What happened to your shoulder?" Mizinsky asked, concern in her face. "You can barely move your arm."

"You have sharp eyes, Mrs. Mizinsky. Someone burned it with a laser a couple of days ago."

To his surprise, she wasn't fazed. "So that's why you were late." She laughed, but it had a hollow rattle. "And you led them here."

"I'm sorry, but I had to talk to you. I don't think anyone followed me."

Mizinsky waved her hand dismissively. "It's okay. I don't care anymore. I'm glad you came. Things are coming to a head anyway." Then she blurted out, "They killed him," her face suddenly raw with anger.

"Your husband?"

She glanced at her husband's picture on the mantel then brought her angry stare back to him. "The police said Ted was speeding and lost control of his car. They said the car skidded off the road and hit a tree. Died instantly. I never believed it, not a word of it."

David didn't like pushing, but he had to get to the truth. "Maybe that's what happened."

Shaking her head, she said, "Ted was the most cautious driver you ever saw. He would never speed or drive recklessly. He knew that

road like the back of his hand. He drove that way to his job every day for seven years." She snorted. "Speeding!"

Mizinsky stood up and hurried through a doorway to the kitchen sink, filled a kettle with water, and placed it on a burner over a low flame. She stared at the flame for a moment, her back to David. Then she turned around and studied him.

David held back his questions.

After making a cup of tea, Mizinsky brought it back to the living room and sank into her chair. "Ted changed after the PeaceMaker attack," she said. "He was scared, really scared." She hesitated, sipping her tea. "You're sure you want to pursue this?"

David nodded. "It's too late to stop. I'm in it whether I want to be or not. Please tell me what you know, and I'll keep you out of it if I can."

Fretfully running her fingers through her hair, Mizinsky said, "You know, they're probably going to kill both of us." She took a shallow breath. "Like I said, Ted was really scared after PeaceMaker. I made him tell me what was bothering him.

"He said he found something while running a statistical audit of outgoing e-mail just before the PeaceMaker attack. They used to run an audit every day to check for abnormalities." She gulped her tea. "The software statistically scanned their messages, but Ted liked to manually review a few just to make sure everything was working properly." Shaking her head, she said, "Damn him, he was so conscientious. Anyway, he discovered Lester Dawson's calendar had been sent out over the Internet. Someone had broken into the company's main server and hacked through several layers of security. Whoever did it was an expert in network security, Ted told me.

The calendar contained all of Dawson's upcoming meetings,

lunches, travel, everything he planned to do for the next few months. Dawson was the Horizon CEO at the time. He had been a big shot at VPS, too.” She paused for a gulp of tea. “Now sending the calendar out could be completely okay, but since it was the CEO, Ted decided to investigate. He traced the message through several nodes on the Internet until it just disappeared. Did you know all the employees kept their calendars on the company’s network servers?” David nodded. “Well, Ted checked them and found the calendars of five other people had also been sent out.”

“Who were the others?”

“Three software engineers from the emergency response team and the manager of the team. These were the best technicians in the company, the guys who handled the toughest problems. The fifth was Ted’s boss, Jane Purzyki. She managed all the network security work.”

“Did Ted discover who stole the calendars?”

Mizinsky shook her head. “About the same time,” she continued, “Ted got a call from Paul Martino. Paul told him that he was doing an article on network security and he wanted to interview Ted. Being his friend, Ted agreed. Anyway, during the interview, Paul asked Ted about any recent security problems. God knows why, but Ted told him about the stolen calendars. Ted was stunned when Paul told him all four of the people on the emergency response team as well as his boss were former VantagePoint Software employees.”

She drained her tea, stood up and asked if he’d like something to drink. He politely declined, and she left to refill her cup in the kitchen.

All these ex-VPS employees must have been part of the PeaceMaker scheme in some way. Somebody got their calendars to keep track of them.

Dianne Morgan? Why would she? It doesn't make sense.

Mizinsky came back with a steaming cup of tea and picked up the story. "Then Ted told Paul the rest of the story. He called Purzyki on the video phone and told her about the problem. Ted said she got real scared. That surprised him, since Purzyki was usually tough as nails. She ordered him to do nothing more and hung up on him."

After taking a sip of tea, Mizinsky said, "About twenty minutes later, Purzyki called back and linked Ted into a video conference with this consultant she had just hired. This surprised Ted since the company only used consultants for training, not investigation. The guy's name was Michael De Luca. This De Luca got all the data from Ted and then told him to forget about the whole thing. That was it, they hung up.

"Ted decides to ask around about De Luca. Well, guess what. De Luca had done a lot of consulting work for VPS. Turns out he was kind of shady. He had been tossed out of the FBI."

David felt as if a brick was wedged in his stomach. "So what was going on?"

"Ted wasn't sure, but he was concerned because an intruder had gained access to the calendars of several important Horizon personnel. Apparently, somebody wanted to know what their upcoming schedules looked like. In addition, these people were all former VPS employees. And the consultant they brought in had ties to VPS. Now Ted's no dummy. He didn't know what was going down, but it couldn't be anything good. He figured it had to be a big-time problem because of the secrecy. He asked Paul to use his contacts to check it out, but Paul told him to stay out of it."

Twirling a wisp of her hair, Mizinsky said, "Here's the part that got Ted really scared. All six of the Horizon people died during

the PeaceMaker attack. Michael De Luca died. And Paul Martino. Everybody who knew about the stolen calendars had been killed. That scared the hell out of Ted.”

Shit. A secret war had raged a decade in the past. Everyone who touched that war died, and now they're hunting me.

“Ted made me promise never to say anything about this.” Jerking her fingers out of her hair, Mizinsky folded her hands in her lap. “He was convinced the people from VPS were involved in the PeaceMaker attack. He didn’t believe Paul Martino had anything to do with it. Quite the contrary, he believed Paul had used the magazine story as a cover for his own investigation.”

Some of the pieces were falling into place. “I think your husband was right, Mrs. Mizinsky. My father and Paul had uncovered PeaceMaker and were searching for its creators. Paul was secretly contacting network security people, including your husband, trying to track down those responsible for the virus.”

David couldn’t sit still any longer. He got to his feet and started pacing.

Shit, Kathy worked at VPS.

“PeaceMaker must have been created at VPS,” he said. “The bastards infected their own operating system.”

Mizinsky nodded. “You could be right, I don’t know. God knows there were VPS people all over this. But if Ray was innocent, what monster created the virus?”

“It had to be Dianne Morgan. She hates the federal government because they broke apart her company. She’s a power-hungry psychopath, the only person with the ability and arrogance to attempt revenge on this scale. She created the monster, but my father and Paul Martino terminated it, so she murdered them.”

“Who stole the calendars? Morgan?”

“I don’t think so. Why would she kill her partner and former employees? I think someone else decided to kill these former VPS employees,” David said, “and this killer stole the calendars to keep track of them. It must have been Alan Goldman. He hated Dianne because she drove his software company out of business. He could have learned Dianné’s plans, tried to eliminate the people in the Domain and then take control of the virus. That’s the reason Dianne killed him, a battle to control PeaceMaker. It was Dianne who murdered the network administrators that talked to Martino. She must have learned your husband knew about the stolen calendars, so he ..” His voice trailed off as he watched Mizinsky’s face crumble.

“I’m so sorry about your husband.” Tears slid down Mizinsky’s face, making him feel guilty for reopening old wounds. “I know it must be hell to go through this again.”

David stepped over to the chair and took hold of her soft hands. “Thank you, Mrs. Mizinsky. I’m going to leave now. I hope I didn’t bring them to you. I’m so sorry.”

Mizinsky raised her glistening eyes to him. “Ted was a wonderful man. He was my life. Whoever killed him doesn’t deserve any mercy. Anything you need from me to nail those bastards ..”

“I’ll get them, I promise,” David said. “We shouldn’t speak again. They’ll be after me.”

His mind sifted through all this information as he hurried out the door. The killers were after him, and he had been lucky to evade them for so long.

It was time to confront Dianne Morgan.

CHAPTER 19

*Cruel with guilt, and daring with despair,
The midnight murderer bursts the faithless bar;
Invades the sacred hour of silent rest
And leaves, unseen, a dagger in your breast.*

◆ London: A Poem, Samuel Johnson, 1738

Monday, February 28, 2022

DoubleD stepped off the elevator and reached along the wall to switch off the overhead lights. Wearing a brown leather jacket and black, skin-tight pants, she faded into the dark lobby.

She had studied her target, Joe Cohen, for several days, learning his habits, his business, and his personal life. Now she would seize him, just as Murphy had ordered. Determined to discover whatever secrets Cohen had shared with David Brown, she had planned this day meticulously.

Once she extracted the information, she intended to kill both Cohen and Brown. Murphy would be pleased with her work. She didn't fear Murphy, but she respected his intelligence and determination. He eliminated agents who failed, so it wasn't wise to disappoint him.

The morning sun was yet to peek above the horizon, and the lobby was pitch-black. Slipping on night-vision goggles, DoubleD

crept toward the offices of *TechAdvantage*, with Tom Brewster just behind her. This was her first time working with Brewster, a middle-aged agent with a good reputation. So far, he seemed competent.

DoubleD stopped in front of the *TechAdvantage* door and listened.

Nothing.

She pulled a wallet-sized computer from a side pocket and flipped it open, revealing a dimly lit display. Although it appeared ordinary, this wasn't a standard commercial handheld computer. It had been altered to support a variety of intelligence functions.

She pressed the device against the door just below the lock, which clicked open. Glock laser pistol drawn, she pushed into the *TechAdvantage* offices, Brewster covering her back.

A lamp on the receptionist's desk threw weak strands of light along the hallway, but her night-vision goggles exposed every detail. DoubleD stalked down the hall, listening for the unexpected. As she had figured, so early in the morning all the offices were empty. All except one.

Rustling sounds came from the doorway just ahead. She signaled Brewster to stop. Joe Cohen was working in his office, as he did every morning. With her back flattened against the wall, she sidled toward his office.

Cohen's voice drifted out to them. "Jenny, pull up that memo from the accountant—what's that woman's name?—Diebold. The one about our marketing expenses."

DoubleD listened for another human's voice, but Cohen was alone, working with his computer. She nodded to Brewster, then burst into Cohen's office and aimed her laser pistol at his chest. Brewster slid behind her and stopped at the side of Cohen's desk, his

Glock also poised.

“Remain still or die,” she ordered. Shock spread across Cohen’s face, but he obeyed her command. *Good, a man who follows directions.* As DoubleD pointed her gun at Cohen, Brewster slipped behind him and cuffed his hands behind his back.

“Come out from behind the desk,” she said.

Cohen obeyed. The shock had disappeared, replaced by a weary look of resignation.

“I should have known,” Cohen muttered.

“Quiet. I won’t warn you again.”

Brewster quickly pricked Cohen’s neck with a micro-needle. Cohen’s eyes lost focus as the fast-acting chemicals put him into a semi-conscious state. Brewster grabbed Cohen’s overcoat, put it on him, and buttoned it up.

DoubleD grabbed Cohen’s arm, pushed him out the doorway and led him down the hall. She kept a tight grip to make sure he didn’t fall. Brewster walked behind them, his breath coming in a steady rhythm. A moment later, they stepped into an elevator and descended to the first floor lobby.



When Maryanne, the *TechAdvantage* receptionist, entered the lobby, she saw Cohen and two strangers take the exit to the parking garage. It was strange her boss would leave the office, since his first appointment was in twenty minutes.

She took the elevator to the *TechAdvantage* floor and was surprised to find the lobby in shadows. *Cohen always turns on the lights first thing in the morning.* Maryanne flicked the light switch and walked across the lobby to the office entrance. When she found the

door unlocked, she knew something was wrong.

A call came in as she stepped into the office. Turning to her computer, she saw Laura Cohen's weathered, but still pretty face in the display.

"Hello, Mrs. Cohen, this is Maryanne."

"Hello, Maryanne, may I speak to my husband?"

"He just left. I saw him walk out with a man and a woman."

Mrs. Cohen looked concerned. "Did you recognize them?"

"Never saw them before. There's nothing in his appointment schedule for twenty minutes. He cleared it so he could go through the financials before the accountants arrive." Watching Mrs. Cohen intently, Maryanne added, "Must have been a last minute thing."

Mrs. Cohen stared blankly into the computer display. Her face seemed to age years in a matter of moments. Then she came alive and said, "Terminate call."

Maryanne found herself looking into a blank display. All her senses shrieked. She had never seen Laura Cohen react like that.

Maryanne rushed down the hall to Joe Cohen's office and found the door closed but unlocked. He always locked his office door when he left the building.

His wallet computer was on the desk. The computer had been left on. Moreover, the display contained a confidential note from his accountant; anyone could walk in and read the note. Those strangers must have taken Cohen. She quietly closed the door and pulled a thin netphone from her pocket.

"Code Red."

She glanced around the office, noticing the chairs were at odd angles. *There hadn't been much of a struggle. They must have surprised him.*

A few seconds passed before a woman's voice came from the netphone. "What is it?"

"You said to call if anything suspicious happened. Joe Cohen left the office a few minutes ago with an unfamiliar man and woman. I think he's been abducted."

"Do you know where they're taking him?"

"No."

"Describe them."

"I only got a brief look. The man was middle-aged, white, gray hair, medium height, about one hundred fifty pounds. The woman was white, about thirty, big boned, short blonde hair, taller and heavier than her companion." Recalling the skin-tight pants, she added, "Well-muscled, like an oversized gymnast."

The voice said, "Stay alert," and the connection was broken.



DoubleD pulled the car into a rundown two-story inn about two hours north of San Francisco. Located on a steep hill half a mile from Route 1 on the California coast, the place had been deserted for years. Overgrown trees and shrubs blocked the view of the dirt parking lot.

Perfect. Nobody would see the car. Not that anyone travels the old highway, anyway.

She parked and turned off the engine. As she stepped out, a cold wind gusted through the trees, chilling but invigorating. DoubleD buttoned up her leather coat and walked to the back of the car. Brewster unlocked the trunk, and they lifted out a semi-conscious Joe Cohen and helped him stand. The wind picked up again, blowing a cold mist from the nearby ocean across the parking lot. She unlocked

the handcuffs, allowing Cohen's arms to fall to his sides. Throwing Cohen's arm over his shoulder, Brewster half-carried the unsteady prisoner up the stairs and into the lobby.

Brewster sat Cohen on an old, stained couch in front of a stone fireplace, while DoubleD, her pistol drawn, swiftly walked through the rooms, noting that nothing had changed from her previous visit. The lobby retained the look of a hunting lodge, with wood beams crossing the ceiling and the obligatory elk horns hanging from the far wall. She would have liked to build a fire, it was as cold in here as outside, but she couldn't risk a passerby seeing smoke from the chimney.

She pulled an old wooden chair in front of Cohen and sat down. Examining Cohen's dilated pupils, she was satisfied he was still under the influence of the drugs.

"Joe, can you hear me?"

Cohen's head turned toward her and he tried to focus his eyes. He nodded. "Yes ... I hear you."

"What do you see?"

He blinked. "I see you ... a beautiful young blonde." Then his concentration drifted away.

She grabbed his shoulder and shook him gently. If he couldn't comprehend her questions, his information would be unreliable.

"Joe, I have questions and I want you to answer truthfully and completely. Do you understand?"

"Yes, questions."

"What's your name?"

"Joseph Richard Cohen." He turned his head toward the window and smiled whimsically. "My friends call me Joe."

"What do you do at work?"

“Work? ... I can’t ... *TechAdvantage!* ... I publish a magazine.”

“You’re doing great.” She smiled at him. “Now tell me where you work. What city?”

“San Francisco.”

Brewster’s voice drifted over her shoulder. “He’s okay.”

“I’m very tired.” Cohen rubbed his eyes. “Let me get a little shuteye.”

DoubleD grabbed his hands and jerked him forward. She held his hands on her knees, forcing him to look squarely at her.

“Joe, I have just a few questions. Very important questions.” When his eyes met hers, she said, “Did David Brown come to your office last week?”

He looked around, as if seeing the hunting lodge for the first time.

First the drugs, then pain ...

DoubleD crushed his fingers together, almost to the point of breaking tiny bones. He cried out, and she relented. She understood the bone structure of the hand, techniques to inflict pain, how to make a prisoner talk. It would have been easy to break his fingers, but then he’d confess anything to stop the torture. She needed the truth; there were better ways to learn his secrets.

“My hands,” Cohen choked out. “How did you ...?”

When she increased the pressure, he said, “Yeah, David wanted to learn more about his father, but I couldn’t help him ... barely knew Ray Brown.”

“What did you talk about?” She relaxed the pressure on his fingers.

“Well, we talked about Paul Martino. Paul was my best friend.” Cohen sighed. “He died ten years ago. They murdered him, the

bastards.”

“Who murdered him?” she asked softly.

When Cohen didn’t answer, she patted his hand. “I’m your friend. You can tell me.”

“I’m not supposed to say.” He glanced nervously at Brewster and whispered to her, “It’s dangerous, you know.”

“Tell me, Joe. I’m your friend. I can help you.”

Cohen shook his head and tried to pull away, but she held his hands firmly, applying moderate pressure. He stopped resisting and DoubleD released his hands. She signaled Brewster to leave, then turned back to Cohen.

“It’s just you and me. I’m your friend.” She caressed his face. “You can tell me anything. It’s okay.”

Cohen leaned forward and whispered, “It was that bitch. Ray said so.”

Confused, DoubleD asked, “What did Ray say?”

“He said there was a virus in the Atlas operating system.” Lowering his voice, Cohen said, “It was PeaceMaker.”

How much does he know? What had he told David Brown?

“What else did Ray say?”

“Dianne Morgan created PeaceMaker.” Cohen appeared more alert now. “Ray didn’t know why she did it, but he had to stop her. She must have killed him, the bitch. Paul, too.”

“Did Ray tell you that?” When he nodded, she asked, “When did he tell you?”

“About a month after he died. Yeah, it was about a month.”

Maybe we gave him too much of the drug.

“How could he tell you about PeaceMaker a month after he died?”

“No, no,” Cohen said, shaking his head. “I didn’t speak to him. Revere contained a message Ray had recorded. It explained everything.”

Revere was the software Ray Brown created just before the PeaceMaker attack. Murphy said Ray had recorded a message describing the Domain’s plan to blackmail the government and seize power with PeaceMaker. Ray developed the Revere software to warn government officials, but Murphy said they discovered Revere before Ray could release it and destroyed it years ago. How had Cohen learned about it?

“Did Ray Brown release Revere?” she said. “Is that how you know about Dianne Morgan?”

Shaking his head again, Cohen replied, “No, Paul had a copy of it on his computer. After he died, I grabbed his computer and looked through it. I found Revere and played Ray’s message describing the Domain. Ray listed everyone he believed was part of the Domain, starting with Dianne Morgan and her partners at VPS.” Cohen paused and then said, “I was afraid they’d kill me if they found out I had seen Ray’s message, so I hid Paul’s computer in my home.”

She wondered if the message was still in existence. Had anyone else read it? Exposure now would be a disaster.

“Did Revere send the Domain message to anyone?”

Cohen rubbed his hands together. “I don’t think so.”

“Where is this message?” She grabbed his hands and applied pressure. “Did you save it?”

Tears quickly formed in the corners of his eyes, so she eased up on the pressure. “It’s okay, Joe. I’m your friend.” When Cohen focused on her again, she smiled and said, “Where is the message, Joe?”

“It’s still on Paul’s old computer. Hidden in my basement.”

“Does David Brown know about the message?”

“No. I gave him a copy of Paul’s old files, but there’s nothing about Revere in there.” He glanced at the fireplace and added, “It’s cold in here.”

“I’ll start a fire when we finish our conversation. What about your wife? What does she know?”

His face tightened, but he said, “Laura knows ... that I gave a copy of the files to David.”

“Does she know about Revere?” DoubleD asked, increasing the pressure.

The strain showed in his face, but the drug forced his reply. “Yes.”

DoubleD handcuffed Cohen again and called for Brewster, who came in from the adjoining room.

“You heard his story,” she said. “He’s had a copy of Revere all these years. I’m going to his home in Half Moon Bay to destroy it.” She glanced at Cohen, who had leaned back and closed his eyes. “I’ll call you after I pick up his wife. We’ll take care of them after I delete Revere.”



In the waning light of the afternoon, DoubleD peered through her car window at Cohen’s home. Parked near the woods, the car was a dark outline barely visible. When she had arrived, she’d aimed a flashlight-sized heat sensor at the house, which confirmed nobody was home.

DoubleD uneasily watched the Cohen home, waiting for darkness. Half an hour passed. An hour. The interior of the house remained in shadows, although several lamps along the walkway suddenly flashed on.

Probably a timer.

She checked her watch: 7:10 p.m. *Maybe Laura Cohen had been warned and wasn't coming home.*

DoubleD stepped into the deserted street then slipped into the woods. Stalking up to the house, she paused to make sure her approach had not been detected. Everything remained quiet. She cut across the yard until she was no longer visible from the street and put on night-vision goggles. Creeping to the back of the house, she located the kitchen door.

When she stepped in front of the door, the house security system said, "Identification please."

Lifting the wallet computer from her pocket, DoubleD pressed it against the door next to the security lock. Once again, the little computer transmitted a signal to the door's locking mechanism, which clicked open.

Cohen's security system said, "You may enter."

DoubleD walked through a small kitchen into an old-fashioned living room, furnished with a thick-stuffed couch surrounded by Queen Anne chairs and an oak coffee table. The room was neat and clean, looked after by people who cared.

She hurried into the foyer and then stepped down a creaky wooden staircase to an unfinished basement. She searched it thoroughly, but didn't find the antique computer Cohen had described. It was a risk, but she turned on the lights and removed her goggles. She searched again but didn't find it. After putting the goggles back on, she turned off the lights and climbed up the stairs to the first floor.

A curved staircase in the foyer led up to the second floor. Passing a small bedroom and a bathroom, she found the master bedroom at the end of the hall. Unlike the other rooms, it was a mess; drawers

were open and clothes strewn about.

Damn it all. Laura Cohen had left. *Probably with the computer.*

DoubleD sat on the bed and spoke into her wallet computer. "Sidney, I'm in the home of Joseph and Laura Cohen. Has Mrs. Cohen processed any digital transactions today?"

"Mrs. Cohen made a call to Mr. Joseph Cohen's office at 7:18 am." *Just after we left.* "Ms. Maryanne Robertson picked up the call and they talked for two minutes and thirteen seconds."

"Did you record the conversation as I instructed?"

"Yes."

"Play it."

Listening to the recording, DoubleD realized Laura Cohen must have bolted from the house when she heard strangers had picked up her husband. The Cohens must have some sort of contingency plan in place.

"Sidney, any other transactions?"

"No."

DoubleD called Brewster and explained the situation. She told him to interrogate the captive and learn if the Cohens had a contingency plan. While she waited for Brewster to call back, DoubleD searched the bedroom, but she knew she wouldn't find the computer.

Ten minutes later, Brewster called. "You're not going to like this. Joe Cohen has his own separate escape plan and so does his wife. He has a secret place bought under another name, a place his wife knows nothing about. Same thing for her. I suspect she's there already."

"But how do they communicate with each other? How does she negotiate for her husband's life? It doesn't make sense."

"They don't negotiate, according to Cohen. The Domain has twenty four hours to meet their demands or Mrs. Cohen will release

Revere.” Brewster paused then said, “It gets worse. The first demand is Joe Cohen be returned to his home unharmed.” Brewster hesitated. “The second demand is the dead bodies of the agents that abducted him are left on the beach in Half Moon Bay. As soon as she feels safe, Laura Cohen will email these demands to Murphy, along with a copy of Revere’s message, just to show she’s not bluffing.”

DoubleD’s stomach tightened; the predator had become prey.

“How does she know Murphy belongs to the Domain?”

“Apparently Martino and Ray Brown had figured out the identities of the Domain leaders. Since Joe Cohen had met Murphy years before the PeaceMaker attack, he decided Murphy would be the person in the Domain they would contact.”

“But Murphy hasn’t received these demands yet?”

“Not yet, as far as we know,” Brewster replied. “But time is running out.”

DoubleD had to kill the Cohen woman before she contacted Murphy. She continued talking to Brewster as she searched the second bedroom, a plan forming in her mind.



As he peered through the faded leaves of an azalea bush, Kurt Reid caressed the amulet hanging from his neck. Moesha had been right; the enemy agent had come to the Cohen house.

He pointed the wireless receiver, a toy in his big paw, toward the second floor bedroom, trying to home in on a female voice. This assignment was getting interesting. He caught a glimpse of the woman through a second-floor window; she matched the description of the one who had kidnapped Joseph Cohen. The woman’s voice faded in and out as she moved about the house, but he continued

listening to her netphone call.

Apparently this woman and her partner belonged to a secret organization of Technos called the Domain. These people had released the devil PeaceMaker, not Ray Brown. Reid was confident God would enable him to track this woman back to their nest.

The night was quiet, and he recorded the voices as he listened to them.

"If this message gets back to Murphy, we're dead," the woman said. "How much time do we have before she contacts him?"

"How the hell do I know?" the man whined, his voice barely audible. "First, she has to be one hundred percent sure the Domain captured her husband. Next, she has to get to a location where Murphy can't trace the transmission back to her. Then she can send the message. How long that will take, your guess is as good as mine."

"Give Cohen another dose and see if you can find out," she said.

"It might kill him."

"We have nothing to lose."

The house was quiet for a moment then Reid heard creaking sounds. *She must be searching the place.* He followed the sounds of her search, moving behind a group of holly shrubs in the front yard to get better sound quality.

Reid's computer picked up the male voice. "You there?"

The searching sounds stopped. "Go ahead."

"Joe doesn't know anything about his wife's contingency plan, but he believes she will contact Murphy tonight, maybe tomorrow morning."

"Let me talk to him."

"Can't do that. He's not taking any questions right now." The man paused. "I interrogated him rather vigorously."

The woman cursed. The searching sounds began again, continuing until she had moved throughout the house, then Reid heard her open the front door. He aimed the receiver at her as she walked down the front path, crossed the street and slid into her car. He got a good view of her when the car door opened and the light flipped on, a large, well-built blonde wearing dark pants and a leather coat.

“Louis, she’s getting in the car,” Reid whispered into the computer. As her car pulled away from the curb, he said to his partner, “Pick me up.”

A moment later, a small van, headlights dark, pulled up to the house. Reid hopped into the van and they pulled away, following the now dim taillights.

“You listened to everything, didn’t you?” he asked Louis, a short, wiry man.

“Yeah. So what?”

Reid let a grin spread across his face. “Tonight could be a real good time,” he said, licking his lips suggestively. Louis still didn’t pick up his meaning. He knew Louis wasn’t a mental giant, so he added, “We’re following a young woman who’s built like a brick shithouse.”

Louis looked confused, but then understanding spread across his face.

Finally!

“I’d like to do her,” Louis stammered. “You think we should? Won’t she tell Moesha?”

“Moesha won’t care, the woman works for the Technos. We’ll let her lead us to Laura Cohen first, then we’ll have our fun.” Thinking aloud, Reid said, “You know, we could do Cohen, too.”

Seeing Louis was still hesitant, Reid playfully punched his partner in the arm. Louis grimaced, but Reid knew the little man liked the

idea of taking what he wanted from these infidel women.

We are the Army of God, after all. The Lord's soldiers.

"Don't tell me you couldn't use a good piece of ass," Reid said. Chuckling, he added, "Besides, we're going to kill them anyway."

Both men laughed then Reid concentrated on the taillights in front of them.

CHAPTER 20

“In our business, we play to win. So do our competitors, but not as well.”

◆ *The Barbarian Queen: The True Story of Dianne Morgan*, David T. Siccone, copyright 2058, Department Head, Computer Science History, Carnegie Mellon University

Tuesday, March 1, 2022

DoubleD fought fatigue as she drove through the early morning darkness, climbing the hills north of San Francisco. She followed the winding trail of an old highway, circling through the hills, going nowhere in particular.

Where would Laura Cohen hide?

She had called Murphy and reported the situation, excluding Laura Cohen’s demand for the bodies of her husband’s abductors. She had to kill Cohen before the woman contacted Murphy. Although she respected Murphy, DoubleD had no illusions about her boss.

Laura Cohen must have set up this contingency plan years ago. Right after PeaceMaker. She must have created another identity in case of danger.

DoubleD pulled the car onto the shoulder of the highway, deep in thought, barely aware of the gentle rumble of the idling engine.

Cohen must have purchased a condo or a small house somewhere

using that identity. That's where she is now.

"Sidney, I'd like you to do a database search for me," she said to the computer in her purse. She paused, sorting through the possibilities. Laura Cohen's purchase, along with just about every other financial transaction, was recorded somewhere in a database. If she gave Sidney the right parameters, the computer would find it for her.

"I'm looking for a condo or house purchased or leased in the first six months of 2012. Laura Cohen acquired the property, but she established title under another identity. The money for the acquisition came out of one of her financial accounts, but it must have been laundered before payment was made." She paused again, looking for small details that might pinpoint the search. "Assume the property she acquired is smaller than the home currently owned by Joseph and Laura Cohen. The property is most likely within a short drive of San Francisco, let's say 200 miles."

She thought for a moment and added, "The same identity that purchased the property in 2012 still owns it. The house has been used infrequently. Heating, cooling and other operational bills would be relatively low compared to similar homes in the area."

Anything else that could narrow the search?

"Over the last ten years, Laura Cohen may have charged gas or highway tolls driving to and from the house. This search has the highest priority. Override all security protocols. Do not allow security bots to trace this request back to me."

DoubleD turned off the engine, cracked open the window and listened to the rustle of the trees. She admired the beauty of the Pacific coastline far below. From this vantage point, she could follow old Route 1 north, a thin sliver of road between the gleaming ocean and the towering brown cliffs.

How much time do I have to find Laura Cohen? Maybe she has already contacted Murphy.

Sidney's voice broke into her thoughts. "Darlene, I have the information you requested."

"Go ahead, tell me."

"Four properties meet the specifications. There is a home in Monterey, a condo in Oakland, a cottage in Bodega Bay and a farm in Santa Rosa."

"Which one is the closest fit?"

"Santa Rosa, with Bodega Bay a close second."

If needed, she could cover all four locations in less than a day. Hopefully, that wouldn't be necessary, but she had to eliminate Laura Cohen as soon as possible. DoubleD started the engine and pulled onto the highway.

"Guide me to the farm in Santa Rosa."



Three hours later, DoubleD drove along Route 12 toward Bodega Bay. She glanced at the clock in the dashboard: 4:05 am. The computer estimated she would arrive in Bodega Bay in twenty-five minutes.

Santa Rosa wasn't Laura Cohen's safety house. A middle-aged woman slept peacefully within the farm in Santa Rosa, unaware she had received an early morning visitor.

As she drove, her thoughts drifted back to her childhood in Poland. She wondered what her parents would think of her now. The black sheep of the family. The oldest child, the one they had expected to accomplish so much. She hadn't spoken to them in a decade, but she kept track of them. Her father taught at Warsaw

University and played his damn piano at occasional concerts. He always said she could have been better than he was, but she knew that wasn't true. She had the talent, but not the desire. Her mother, always more practical, was winding down her obstetrics practice.

They had been shocked when she dropped the piano and turned to intelligence. She fought with them for years over her work as an undercover agent, and the arguments turned increasingly bitter. She sighed. They never understood she was different.

Once the Domain assumed power, maybe things would change. She knew she was just fooling herself. Her parents would never see the truth. She had power, excitement and men whenever she wanted. That would be enough.

The road ahead was dark, but twin pinpricks of light sparkled in the rearview mirror. She was being tailed, no doubt about it. *Maybe Murphy, maybe someone else.* Her suspicions had grown on the way to Santa Rosa. The other car had stayed well behind, but followed too consistently for too long. Although she had taken precautions, the headlights still glimmered in the mirror.

Time was running out. Laura Cohen might contact Murphy this morning. DoubleD had to find Cohen first and convince her to give up Revere; if she failed, DoubleD had no doubt Murphy would kill her, even though she was the Domain's best agent. That's what she would do in his place. If Cohen released the Revere software and exposed the Domain, the FBI's hunt for Domain members would be brutal. She glanced into the mirror again. First, she would have to give the slip to whoever followed her.

DoubleD drove carefully, forced to reduce her speed due to the deteriorating condition of the road. The sky was dark with still a couple of hours before sunrise.

Examining the GPS map on her dashboard, she found what she needed: a sprawling development with a checkerboard of streets. She made a hard right into it and accelerated, tires squealing across the blacktop. Two blocks later, another hard right followed by rapid acceleration. Then a screaming left at an intersection, the dashboard registering seventy, then eighty.

Cracks and small potholes caused the tires to skid and bounce as she pushed hard on the gas pedal. The onboard computer warned her of the larger potholes, providing barely enough time to avoid them.

Another hard right and she approached the intersection with Route 12. Stopping at the edge of the highway, DoubleD flipped off the headlights and looked up and down the road. No automobile lights anywhere. With her own lights still out, she turned right and hit the accelerator, trusting her computer to warn her of dangerous road conditions.

Twenty minutes later, the lights of Bodega Bay glimmered in the distance. She glanced in the rearview mirror. She had lost the tail. She turned on her headlights and reduced her speed to the legal limit, although the road was deserted.

Still a working-class fishing town, Bodega Bay's docks were sprinkled with small groups of men mending nets, rigging fishing poles and scrubbing their boats; ghosts fading in and out of the morning mist. Signs advertised whale watching, but it was too early in the season for tourists.

The GPS computer guided her to the target: an unassuming cabin perched on a cliff overlooking the bay. She glided to a stop and studied the cabin from a distance, the surf a background murmur. All the cabin windows were dark, but her heat sensor revealed that

the cabin was occupied by one person.

Have I found you, Laura Cohen?

DoubleD pulled the Glock out of her holster and flipped off the safety. Stretching over to the glove compartment, she pulled out a small plastic case containing a micro-needle filled with clear liquid. She checked that the seal was unbroken and slipped the case into the left pocket of her coat.

She stepped out of the car and crept behind the cabin, maintaining constant surveillance in all directions. Swirling winds blew in from the sea, bringing a salty fragrance. Hiding behind the trunk of a pine tree, she put on night-vision goggles. A wooden shed alongside the cabin had been converted into a single-car garage. A late model Cadillac sat in the shadows. *Laura Cohen's car!* She crept back to the cabin and stepped onto a porch that perched precariously over the bay far below. The roar of the surf crashing on boulders muffled the sound of her footsteps.

An electronic security system protected the cabin. She disabled it with her computer and stepped through the porch door into a small, old-fashioned family room. She stood quietly, Glock in hand, and tried to pinpoint the gentle murmur of snoring. The prize was close.

DoubleD crept down a carpeted hallway toward two small bedrooms. The snoring came from the one with the closed door. Trained to be cautious, she first looked into the bedroom with the open door, making sure it was unoccupied, and then slipped into the other bedroom.

DoubleD crept to the bed, her laser pistol pointed at Cohen's head. When she pressed the cold muzzle against the sleeping woman's forehead, Cohen's eyes snapped open.

"Don't move and you may live through this."

When Cohen froze, DoubleD said, “Good.” She pulled the gun back and said, “Roll over on your stomach and place your hands behind your back.”

Cohen obeyed, and DoubleD snapped on handcuffs.

“Please don’t hurt me,” Cohen begged. “What do you want?”

“Stay quiet.”

DoubleD turned on the nightstand lamp and removed her goggles. She searched the bed and found a pistol under the pillows. After removing the clip, she placed the pistol in her coat pocket. DoubleD pulled out the plastic case and stared at the terrified Laura Cohen.

She let Cohen’s fear build.

“You know what we want.”

DoubleD removed the micro-needle from the case and jabbed her captive in the neck.

Cohen squeaked and then cried, “What have you done to me?”

“Just a little something to help you concentrate.”

DoubleD pulled the computer out of her pocket. “Connect me with Brewster.”

When Brewster came on the line, she said, “I have Laura Cohen. She was hiding in a little cabin in Bodega Bay. Someone tailed me most of way here, but I lost them.” DoubleD kept the gun pointed at Cohen. “I’m about to question her, but I need to know if you’ve learned anything new.”

“I had another, uh, conversation with Joe Cohen,” Brewster replied. “The Cohens didn’t send any copies of Revere to anyone. They kept only the copy stored in their old computer. Have you found it?”

DoubleD answered as she removed her leather jacket. “Not yet. I’m just giving the drugs a minute to take effect, then I’ll learn the hiding place from Cohen.”

After terminating the connection, she grabbed Cohen's shoulder and flipped her on her back. "So tell me where it is, Laura."

Cohen's eyes had the familiar foggy look. "What ... are you talking about?"

"Where's your computer? I want Revere."

"The computer ... I don't know."

DoubleD slapped Cohen hard, leaving a red imprint on her cheek, and then backhanded her across the other cheek.

Cohen began to cry. She's broken already, DoubleD thought.

When DoubleD lifted her hand again, Cohen said, "In the dresser ... bottom drawer."

DoubleD pulled open the bottom drawer, keeping a close watch on Cohen. She found a bulky old laptop and placed it on top of the dresser. A quick scan revealed Revere. Cohen stretched out on the bed, sobbing quietly into a pillow.

With the laser pointed at Cohen, DoubleD ran her fingers along the sides of the computer until she found the battery compartment. She pushed down on the switch and the power cell popped out. The computer, including Revere, was now inert. All she had to do was turn the computer over to Domain scientists for a thorough examination. The danger was over.

"Don't move," said a masculine voice behind her.

She froze.

"Drop the laser."

She released the pistol, which clanged on the floor.

"Very good. Now turn around."

She turned to see two men with handguns pointed at her. One was a bear of a man, with harsh eyes and shiny black skin, while the other was small and feral, like a mouse. The bear wore a self-satisfied

smile, while the mouse leered at her breasts.

“Look at that rack,” the mouse said. “You were right.”

“First things first, Louis,” the bear said, never taking his eyes off her.

“How did you find me,” DoubleD asked.

“We planted a—” the mouse named Louis began.

“Shut up,” the bear shouted. “We ask the questions. Exactly what is this Revere?”

When DoubleD didn't reply, the bear said, “It doesn't matter, you know. Mrs. Cohen seems quite cooperative. Now turn around and place your palms on the wall.”

DoubleD did as she was ordered.

The bear is the leader. I have to take him out first.

The bear's voice came from behind again. “We're all going on a little trip, but first I have to frisk you.”

Just make one little mistake.

“Louis, keep her covered.”

“How come you have all the fun?” the mouse complained.

The floor creaked as the bear moved close to her. Feeling his presence mere inches behind, she braced for rough, exploring hands, but instead an incredible pain erupted as a sledgehammer fist drove into her back. The pain took her breath away as she slammed into the wall then collapsed to the floor.

Her vision turned foggy as pain spread through her body. DoubleD rolled onto her back and looked up, but could barely make out the distorted face of her enemy. The bear's boot crashed into her face and the world turned dark.



Gradually, she became aware of a dull rhythm, a squeaking sound ... then light around the edges, pain spreading through her loins, soaring. Consciousness let in the hell, but she didn't move, didn't fight ... didn't scream.

Nothing to warn the animal on top of her.

His thrusting hips brutally forced her thighs apart. Then more pain, fierce in her back and stomach, deep within her ... pain that took her breath away. Humiliation, rage, hatred soared past her pain, past her humanity.

Her wrists were tied together against a bedpost. She pulled hard and discovered slackness in the knot. Working her fingers despite the creature pushing into her, she loosened the knot.

He was on top of her ... in her. His grunting presence crushed her into the bed. His sweat, his breath, his stink. But she continued to loosen the knot. She had to endure the animal until her hands were free.

The power of his violent thrusts built to a peak, and his huge body drove into her in a final frenzy. She endured the pain, concentrated on the landscape painting on the far wall, a blue lake, spreading into a thick forest, with snow-capped peaks gleaming over the trees. Glimpses of blue, green, puffs of clouds. Then the bear moaned and collapsed on her, his weight pressing her deep into the mattress. He was still in her, and his skin contaminated her bare body. Her hands slipped free.

She shut her eyes and remained still, pretending her wrists were tied. Then the weight lifted away, though his knees were between her thighs.

Marshalling her rage, DoubleD opened her eyes and smashed her fist into his groin. He squealed like an injured beast and grabbed

himself. She pushed hard against his chest and the bear tumbled over on his side. One leg now free, DoubleD kicked him in the face with her heel; his nose snapped, blood splattered across her breasts. Her blow knocked him off the bed, and the back of his head crashed into the wood floor. In an instant, she was on him, pummeling him with her fists. She hit him over and over, hatred out of control, until she was spent. The bear was unconscious, his dark face puffed and bleeding. An amulet hung around his neck, revealing the identity of her enemy. She collapsed against the side of the bed, listening for any sound indicating his partner had been alerted.

At first she heard only the ragged sound of her own breathing, then muffled sounds from the other bedroom. It had to be the mouse. Her eyes searched the room for a weapon as she caught her breath. The bear's smell was everywhere, but she forced herself to concentrate. His gun had to be here. She staggered to her feet but began shaking, almost too weak to stand. Her body felt dead, full of a dull pain. And nausea. Holding on to the bedpost, she gathered her strength. She had to eliminate the mouse.

Glancing around, she found the bear's gun lying in a heap of clothes at the foot of the bed. She checked that it was loaded. DoubleD stared at that animal, needing to kill him, but she controlled her rage. First, she would kill the mouse; then she would come back and finish this one.

She opened the door and stepped into the hallway, creeping toward the other bedroom, gun poised. The hallway was cold and chilled her naked body. The carpeted floor creaked and she stopped. When she was sure the floorboards had not given her away, she crept forward again.

Animal-like sounds, all too familiar, drifted through the door.

DoubleD felt her hatred surge again. She quietly pushed open the door and slipped in. The mouse had mounted Laura Cohen, making little squeaks of delight as he thrust into his victim. Cohen appeared to be unconscious. An ugly purple bruise covered the side of her face.

DoubleD crept up behind him, the pistol pointed between his shoulder blades. With squeals now intermixed with moans, the mouse continued his rape of Cohen, stringy back muscles bunching with each thrust.

“Little mouse,” she whispered.

The mouse didn’t react for a moment; then he stopped and glanced around. When he saw DoubleD, his groggy eyes shifted from contentment to fear.

“Was it worth it?”

“Please,” he begged, getting to his knees.

His voice rekindled her rage. She pulled once on the trigger and the mouse’s head snapped back. His body fell over, rolled across the bed and flopped to the floor, blood dripping from a red circle in his forehead. She put a second bullet in his chest, even though it wasn’t needed.

DoubleD heard the floor creak behind her and she spun around, shooting twice as a dark shadow hurtled toward her. The bear hit her with the force of a landslide, knocking the gun out of her hand. She crashed to the floor under him, his weight driving out her breath, but she pushed him off and struck him with the back of her fist.

She rolled to her knees and raised her fists, but she didn’t have to hit him again. The bear lay on his back, eyes in a death stare. Rage mixed with relief when she saw the red hole in his neck.

Breathing hard, she tried to think, knowing she had to get out of

the cabin before someone investigated the gunshots. But she couldn't do it covered with the bear's blood and pasty seed.

DoubleD rose to her feet and stepped around the bear's body to look at Cohen. Her cheek was swollen from a beating, but her breathing was steady.

DoubleD found a bathroom and stepped into the shower. The big man's smell came into her mind, an odor water would never remove. Then her mind was back in the bedroom with that animal pushing himself into her. She trembled and her knees felt weak. She gripped the shower nozzle for support. She sobbed, fought it at first, then let it tumble out. It passed quickly, like a violent storm rushing past, and she was herself again.

She stepped out of the shower, dressed and retrieved her equipment. Slipping the old computer under her arm, she walked to the foot of Cohen's bed.

The sunlight streamed in, revealing an unconscious Laura Cohen. *It's better this way.* She pulled out her laser, but stared at Cohen without firing. The laser would take several seconds, a brutal, painful death. She put it back in her jacket. The pistol would be cleaner. She pulled out the bear's pistol and shot Cohen once through the heart. DoubleD hurried to her car. Time was running out. It had taken too long to find Cohen. Now she had to locate David Brown.

CHAPTER 21

Under Moesha Jefferson, the Army of God gradually evolved from a paramilitary religious organization into a terrorist cult. SOP included kidnapping, murder, bombings and torture.

◆ *The Army of God*, Mark Axelrod, copyright 2051, Assistant Director, FBI (retired)

It's easy to see how technology might threaten religious belief. What if science developed a deep understanding of human anatomy, particularly the brain? Where would the soul hide? What if scientists could explain human behavior as electrochemical processes? What if there is no such thing as free will, just extremely complex reactions?

◆ *Steve Bonini's Diary*, 2016

Friday, March 4, 2022

It was a perfect morning. The sun rose over the deep woods of central Pennsylvania, bringing with it a clear, crisp day. The winter was finally breaking, leaving a plateau of brown grass.

Standing on a hill at the edge of her camp, Moesha enjoyed the beauty of the morning. A flock of crows burst out of a nearby tree, cawing excitedly. Caressing the amulet hanging from her neck, her

fingers traced the familiar outline of a rifle above a jagged flame. The Creator glowed within her. Dressed in a ceremonial black robe with the rough handle of a Ruger showing from her shoulder holster, she felt proud to be the Commander of the Army of God.

The staccato beat of hammers on nails echoed across the meadow. The construction of the three crosses was just about complete. She strode up the hill to admire their work.

Her men had erected the crosses in a broad meadow, blessed by the First Minister for the ceremony. Rising ten feet from the ground, the rough-cut crosses threw long shadows across the grass. Each six-foot cross-arm was nailed about four feet below the top of the post. The center cross, placed about fifteen feet in front of the two others, dominated the landscape. Her soldiers, splendid in their dark blue robes, completed the picture.

It was perfect.

Moesha turned to her aide. "It's time. Get the prisoners."

Fresh in her memory was the capture of Vitullo, De Marco and a third mobster, Nick Porcelli, during the raid of Saint Joseph's Church. She would have preferred to avoid violence in a Christian Church, but she would allow no quarter to Technos. Tonight she would pray for the souls of her captives.

In the days since the raid, she had interrogated each prisoner. When they didn't cooperate to her satisfaction, she thrashed them with a flagrum, a short heavy whip sporting five leather tongs with balls of lead near the end. Between the whippings and ego-damping drugs, she had learned much about Vitullo's operation and the technology black market. The distribution of technology was pervasive, even greater than she had feared. Yet Moesha knew Vitullo held back critical information. The woman claimed to know nothing about the

Domain, the clandestine organization producing the anti-human technology. That was one of her many lies. Vitullo also professed ignorance of the identity of the evil man Moesha had seen that night in the hologram, the one sitting across the table from Vitullo.

Today Vitullo will reveal everything.

Her men had brought Vitullo, De Marco and Porcelli here during the night and chained them to trees deep in the woods. Moesha had walked by all three captives several times under pale moonlight, refusing to speak to them when they called out to her.

The prisoners were terrified, which was her intent. Lonely hours of cold and hunger had intensified their fear; they realized the Lord's retribution would come with the rising sun.

Her soldiers brought Porcelli to her first. A fat, greasy man in his late forties with a reputation for brutality, he deserved his fate. He was dressed in the maroon robe of an infidel, his ankles shackled and his hands tied behind his back. Porcelli offered no resistance until he saw Moesha standing in front of a cross; his eyes widened and he began to fight furiously.

Good.

Her soldiers dragged the struggling gangster to the cross and slammed him against it.

"You bitch!" Porcelli screamed. "You'll never get away with this. The Family will hunt you down."

She could smell his fear. A pathetic man, a waste of time, but the ceremony would work better with three penitents.

"They'll get you, you whore."

She nodded to a lieutenant; he yanked the robe off the terrified criminal, revealing a fat, sweating body, covered with whip burns. Porcelli dropped to his knees and bent over, trying to hide his private

parts, but her soldiers quickly dragged him to his feet. She almost felt sorry for the mobster. Then her soldiers tied Porcelli's wrists and ankles to the cross with strips of thick leather. Porcelli cursed and struggled. He was left standing on his feet with his arms stretched along the cross-arm. The mobster's fat body was quickly drenched in sweat. Moesha ignored him; he had no secrets to tell.

Next, the soldiers brought out De Marco, also clothed in a maroon robe. De Marco walked calmly, taking small steps to keep his balance while shackled, though he wavered when he spotted the crosses. Quiet and calculating, he kept his eyes fixed on her as they removed his robe and tied his unmarked, muscular body to the cross.

"It's in your best interest to keep me alive," he pleaded with Moesha. "I can be valuable to you. I can help you defeat the Technos."

Moesha experienced a wave of intense dislike toward De Marco, a feeling that had grown during his incarceration. He was a strange creature, a man with no morals at all, handsome and intelligent, but utterly without humanity, faith or loyalty. Once he understood the flagrum would be used, De Marco had answered her questions without hesitation. The man made her skin crawl. Taking him would be a pleasure.

Nevertheless, she respected his intelligence. "How could you be valuable to the Church?"

"Once the Family knows we're dead, they'll quickly reorganize. They'll choose new leaders and restart the technology business. In a couple of weeks, they'll be selling as many robots as ever."

Although he appeared calm, beads of sweat slid down his neck; she found his fear exhilarating.

"However, if I were able to escape, I might be selected to replace Vitullo," De Marco said. "At worst, I would continue as *capo*. I would

learn everything about the Domain and tell you all their secrets.”

“I’m disappointed in you,” Moesha said. “Even if I believed you would keep your word once we released you, which of course I don’t, I have a better source for the information.”

Without taking her eyes off him, she shouted, “Bring out Vitullo.”

De Marco shook his head. “She won’t talk. You’ll have to deal with me.”

Vitullo walked across the camp with as much dignity as she could maintain, given the guards and shackles. She glared at Moesha as they removed her robe and tied her to the front cross.

We must break this one.

Crucifixion was the perfect way to deal with these criminals, a slow, painful death that would warn others to renounce anti-human technology or face the same. Although they could have crucified Vitullo alone, it would be better for Vitullo to see the terror De Marco and Porcelli would undergo. Then Vitullo would spill her secrets.

To her surprise, Moesha had discovered Vitullo was a believer. Her Catholic faith was real, not something worn only to Sunday Mass. Moesha wondered how such a person could be involved with abomination; how had Lucifer stolen her humanity? She was better than the others, but still a Techno. Nevertheless, as a measure of respect, Moesha had provided Vitullo the blue robe of a believer.

With a final glance at her captives, Moesha turned and walked to the large tent in the center of the camp. She stepped inside and stood quietly, waiting for the Holy Prophet to acknowledge her.

The First Minister was on his knees, praying softly. Caressing her amulet as she waited for him, her thoughts ranged widely about the

man the Lord had chosen to lead them. He was God's champion, the man trusted to battle Lucifer for the Earth. She wondered how he could face such an awesome responsibility.

Praise be to God, I was allowed to please him. The rapture of her faith lifted her soul. I served him well last night, better than ever before.

She had been blessed to have such a long relationship with the First Minister. The other Honored Sisters were virgins in their teen years. Moesha knew the purity and ripening beauty of these young women provided some relief from his arduous burden. However, the First Minister always ended the relationship as they approached adulthood, replacing them with younger girls. Moesha had been the exception.

Jordan blessed himself and stood up, pious in his white robe, with the pale handle of his pistol visible in a shoulder holster. He appeared confident, as always, and smiled at Moesha.

"Ah, my beautiful young panther. Is everything ready?"

"Yes, First Minister."

She couldn't take her eyes from this holy man, this man she loved.

Jordan turned and lifted a silver chalice off a small table. Holding it at eye level, he recited, "The Lord my master, the Church my passion."

Jordan said to Moesha, "The blood of the Lord," and passed her the chalice. "The Lord loves you, Moesha. This drink will ease the burden of today's tasks."

Moesha grasped the chalice. She knew the drugs would allow the Lord to work through her. "Thank you, my love."

"I would never allow any harm to come to you."

The drug-laced red wine slid down her throat and spread warmth

through her body. When she finished, the First Minister caressed her cheek and kissed her lightly on the lips. His sweet breath mixed with the bitter scent of the Lord's blood.

"Are you ready to serve the Lord?" he asked. "To do what must be done?"

"Technos serve Lucifer and deserve no mercy in this world," Moesha said. "Yes, I can do the Lord's work. Tonight I will pray for their lost souls."

"Such a treasure," Jordan murmured. "The fist I need to smash the Technos."

Their eyes were at the same level. The Lord created us as a pair, Moesha thought. He needs both of us to achieve His design.

She felt woozy, her vision grew fuzzy at the edges. The Lord must be taking control.

"This day will be one of many terrible encounters for the infidels," Jordan said. "What we do today will shake their world." He placed his hand on her shoulder. "The fate of Lucifer's minions will be clear to everyone. The choice will be plain: join the Church of Natural Humans or face an unholy death as a Techno."



The morning chill seeped into Vitullo, driven by a thin wind blowing across the meadow. Spread naked on the cross, she feared death. She knew these fanatics would torture her, but she had stopped struggling and accepted her fate. Being the boss of the Family was dangerous, but she would never have guessed the end would come like this.

When they brought her out, she had seen De Marco and Porcelli tied to the crosses behind her. She couldn't see them now, but she felt

their eyes on her back. From time to time, they called out to her, but she ignored them. What was there to say?

Vitullo avoided looking at her breasts and stomach, which were raw with whip burns. *That black whore enjoyed flogging me.* The woman had beaten her, but she wouldn't give Murphy up. Not that she gave a shit about Murphy; it was personal between her and the whore. That woman was an amateur; she was a pro. Maybe she'd die, but she would go to the grave without giving in.

A wiry, middle-aged man in a white robe strode out of the tent, followed by the black whore. Vitullo recognized Adam Jordan from a recent newscast. A gold amulet swayed across his chest in cadence with his long, confident strides. Church soldiers kissed their amulets as he approached.

It still galled her that Jordan and his black whore considered themselves pious. They looked down on her, as if they were superior. *They don't know shit about me.* She was a devout Catholic, a believer in the true God, not a perverted psycho like Jordan. The true Church was a refuge, a safe harbor, a place where someone could go for comfort in this miserable world, not a damn killing field.

Jordan and the whore strode past her cross toward Porcelli, and she lost sight of them. The Church soldiers encircled the three crosses, bowed their heads and recited an insane prayer, something about natural humans and all that shit. After the prayer, a soldier came up to her, cradling a plain wooden box in his arms. He set it down in the grass near her feet, kissed his amulet, and walked back to the circle of soldiers.

She didn't want to think about what might be in that box.

Porcelli's voice carried over the wind. "You crazy bastards. What are you doing? Kill me if that's what you're going to do. I'm not afraid

to die.”

Vitullo twisted her neck to see the fat man, but the bindings held her firmly in place. She heard Porcelli struggling against the cross.

“I hate your guts,” he screamed. “You think you’re so religious, but you’re just a bunch of nuts. Small-time, freakin’ nuts.”

“Do you beg forgiveness from the Lord for your transgressions?” Jordan asked Porcelli. Jordan’s voice surprised her, deep, with a reservoir of confidence, almost kind.

“Screw you, scumbag.” Again, she heard Porcelli flail against his bonds. “I’d show you fucking forgiveness if I could get free.”

She heard Jordan begin a quiet prayer, while Porcelli gushed curses. Jordan ignored Porcelli’s ranting and proceeded through the verses like a parish priest praying for his flock. A moment after Jordan completed the prayer, the black whore appeared beside Vitullo’s cross, bent down and flipped open the top of the wooden box. She reached in and retrieved a hammer and a handful of spikes.

Vitullo’s stomach clenched.

The whore glanced up at her, eyes wide and glazed. Vitullo knew that look. She had seen many heroin addicts with those eyes. Then the whore selected one of the spikes and placed the remainder in her side pocket. After kissing her amulet, she staggered away with the spike in one hand and the hammer in the other.

Vitullo’s body trembled. She fought desperately for control. She couldn’t let these creatures steal her dignity.

Porcelli went into a screaming frenzy, rattling the cross with his struggles. Vitullo gasped for air then flailed against the leather strips binding her to the cross. Her strength failed, and she collapsed against the post.

The meadow was silent except for Porcelli’s whimper, “No, no ...

no, please.”

In quiet desperation, Vitullo waited for the horror to unfold. Then she heard the clang of hammer against spike. Porcelli’s scream was unlike anything she had ever heard from a human, the squeal of an animal being ripped apart by a predator. He continued to scream, his voice rising in pitch with each blow of the hammer. Screams ... the hammer ... more screams ... she felt the pain and terror of each blow as if Porcelli’s body had become her own. Finally, it was over, Porcelli’s low moans a reminder of the hell this meadow had become.

Much too soon, she heard Jordan’s voice. “Do you beg forgiveness from the Lord for your transgressions?”

“I can help you,” De Marco said. “I’ll be your mole in the technology black market.” His voice wavered, but he quickly recovered. “I can give you all the big technology buyers. I can help you kill them all.”

Once again, Jordan began that terrible, insane prayer. Vitullo closed her eyes, wishing she could shut out his words. As Jordan prayed, De Marco pleaded, “I want to join your Church. You’ve made me see the error of my ways. All this new technology is wrong, it’s evil. I sinned and I beg God to forgive me.”

Jordan continued praying, apparently unmoved by De Marco’s pleas. When the fanatic completed his prayer, De Marco begged, “Please, I know I violated God’s design. Give me a chance to be forgiven.”

Jordan’s gravelly voice drifted back to her. “God will grant His mercy when you join him in the next life. Today, however, rejoice that your sacrifice will please Him.”

She heard movement, then De Marco’s terrified voice.

“I’m only twenty-nine. Don’t ...”

Vitullo heard the whore say, "He passed out."

"It doesn't matter." Jordan chuckled. "It doesn't matter."

The clash of tool and spike began again. It was quiet between each stroke, as if God had acquiesced to this horror. Vitullo feared He had forgotten her. Forsaken her. The wind picked up, a low hum as it blew across her bare skin. A few last blows of the hammer, and then the meadow was silent.

Now they will come for me.

A few minutes passed then the soldiers quietly lined up in front of her cross, their faces flushed with excitement. She heard Porcelli cough, then moan, his voice fading into a gust of wind. He was dying, a little at a time, on his cross.

Jordan and the whore appeared in front of her. The First Minister smiled kindly. Splattered with dots of red across her face and robe, the black whore no longer seemed human. Jordan's fingers encircled the whore's upper arm, as if asserting his dominance.

A demented killer grown by Jordan for this role.

"Ms. Vitullo, it's a pleasure to meet you," Jordan said. He looked around. "Although the circumstances could be better." He shrugged. "I guess we will just have to make the best of it."

"Just finish it," Vitullo spat out.

"No need to be unpleasant. I'm about to offer you a present."

Vitullo remained silent.

"This is the first time our Church has crucified unbelievers," Jordan said to Vitullo, "but God ordained it to cleanse their immortal souls. They can now ascend to Heaven to be with Him."

"You can't believe that," Vitullo said.

"Unfortunately, it's quite an unpleasant way to die." He glanced in the direction of De Marco's cross. "Extremely painful, then your

life drips to the earth. Only God knows for certain, but it may take many hours for you to leave us. Maybe as much as a day.”

Jordan pulled his Ruger from his shoulder holster. “I’m a generous man. Because you’re a believer, I can offer you a quick and painless death.”

He pushed the barrel against her temple. “You don’t have to suffer like your friends. Not at all!” He leaned into her, his eyes a few inches away. “A single bullet and the Lord will claim your soul.”

His breath stank.

She flinched when Porcelli again moaned.

Trembling, she croaked, “What do you want for this gift?”

“Tell me about the Domain. I want to know the identity of the man who showed you the android.”

“You swear you’ll shoot me if I give you this information?” When he nodded, she added, “By your God?”

“Yes, I swear it.”

She hesitated for only a moment. “The Domain produces virtually all of the new technology in the black market. I don’t know their ultimate goal, but I’m sure their plans go far beyond making money. Perhaps they plan to make us all into robots, First Minister, as you claim.”

Vitullo glanced at the whore. The woman’s glazed eyes revealed her as a drug-swamped junkie.

Fucking amateurs.

“I don’t know the details,” Vitullo continued, “but the Domain is composed of scientists in many universities across the world. They recruit professors and students to secretly build their technology.”

She stared into his dark, glittering eyes: the Devil stood in front of her.

With difficulty, she controlled her voice. “The leader is Senator Ralph Aprillo of New York. He calls the shots.” *Fucking amateurs.* “He makes sure the federal government never takes effective action against black market technology.”

“What about the man in the hologram? The one with you in the Sarah meeting?” Jordan asked.

“I don’t know his identity. You can sweat it out of the good senator. I’ve told you all I know. I swear it. Now shoot me.”

Jordan stepped back and returned the pistol to its holster. A trace of a smile slipped into the corners of his mouth, but quickly disappeared.

“Do you beg forgiveness from the Lord for your transgressions?”

“Never, you lying bastard.”

Pleased her final lies had fooled these monsters, Vitullo glared as Jordan kneeled in the dirt. The black whore and the other Church soldiers stood rigidly at attention while Jordan prayed. The wind gusted, blowing his hair forward, concealing his scar. She listened to his prayer, her time ebbing with each word.

When he finished, Jordan kissed his amulet and stood up. His white robe was stained brown where he had knelt.

Vitullo felt the wetness slide down her legs. *No! Fucking no!* She closed her eyes as the whore eagerly stepped in front of her. *They won’t take my dignity.* She felt the cold point of the spike against her wrist ... *Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name ...* the pain exploded through her arm ... *Thy kingdom come ...* then roared through her ears ... *Thy will be done ...* she wouldn’t scream ... sudden, ripping pain ... *On earth as it is in heaven ...* her throat clenched ... unclenched as she fought for control ... another wave of pain, then another ... she forced open her eyes, but the light dimmed

... hazy outlines of the two devils in front of her ... *But deliver us from evil* ... her body jerked wildly, then the darkness took her.



Moesha watched Vitullo's face collapse with pain, but the woman didn't scream. With a final blow, Moesha nailed her other wrist to the cross, then her ankles, completing the holy act. Powerfully moved, Moesha felt a rising tide of sanctity wash over her. Dropping the hammer, she gazed past the crosses to the morning sun.

Now she understood.

The Lord had chosen her, too.

Moesha's vision was blurred, but she felt life slowly drip out of the three criminals. She sensed the power of the Lord in all things. Gradually, she realized the First Minister had taken her arm and was gently guiding her away from Vitullo's cross. One of her men was snapping pictures of the holy scene.

"I don't believe she told the complete truth," Jordan said, "but I want you to look into her story about the Domain and Senator Aprillo. If he's the leader of our enemy, we'll need another crucifixion."

His voice was distant, unfamiliar, but Moesha replied, "Yes, First Minister."

"Have one of your soldiers do it. David Brown is close to finding his father's killer, and I want you to stay near. That's where we shall find the Domain." Jordan's eyes were bright and his grip harsh. "Then we will have more Technos to crucify. Many more."

Giddy with the sanctity of her act, Moesha smiled.

CHAPTER 22

MIZINSKY – Deborah A. Age 61, of Cedar Grove, NJ, on March 4, 2022. Mrs. Mizinsky was shot and killed yesterday in her home by an unknown intruder. Her late husband Theodore died of injuries sustained in an automobile accident a decade earlier. Mrs. Mizinsky is survived by her children, Judith, Thomas and William. Funeral services will be held March 9 at 10 a.m. in the Donovan Funeral Home in Cedar Grove.

◆ *New York Times Obituaries, March 5, 2022*

Science deals mainly with facts; religion deals mainly with values. The two are not rivals. They are complementary.

◆ *Martin Luther King, Jr., Strength to Love, 1963*

Saturday, March 5, 2022

Dianne paced across her lonely office. A cigarette hung from her lips, wisps of smoke drifting away. She stopped in front of a window and gazed out at a sliver of the moon, a careworn beacon alone in a dark sky.

All my work, all my dreams, everything is on the line tonight.

It was almost time. She returned to her desk, slid into the chair

and stubbed out the cigarette.

“DNS News,” she said, tension barely allowing her to breathe.

A hologram, three feet on each side, formed in the space just in front of her desk. The flickering cube displayed a smartly dressed young newswoman in a tight turtleneck sweater. Her blond hair fell across her shoulders. Poised to deliver tonight’s news broadcast, she stood straight and tall, showcasing long legs in a form-hugging skirt.

“Good evening, this is Daphne Hayden reporting from the DNS Newsroom on Park Avenue in New York. Here is the news of the day.”

As Dianne anticipated, the hologram turned dark and silent; the Domain had taken control of virtually every hologram, television and computer display around the world. The news broadcast disappeared, replaced by a young man seated behind a desk. The man looked average in appearance, with sandy brown hair and a soft, trustworthy face.

Here it goes.

The young man smiled and said, “Ladies and gentleman, we are taking control of your communications facilities for the next ten minutes.” His voice was a warm complement to his appearance. “During this brief period, I will deliver the most important message of your life. Listen carefully because each of you will be asked to make a vital decision.

“My name is Daniel and I am the latest model of an advanced android system.”

Daniel unbuttoned his shirt to reveal a transparent panel that covered most of his chest. Instead of human flesh, a compartment of intricate electronics sparkled beneath the surface. He tapped on the panel, making a metallic sound.

“Usually, this model has a simulated skin covering, but we decided to make it clear to the skeptics that I am indeed a robot.”

Daniel flipped open his chest panel and unsnapped a small, silver-grey cylinder. Holding it in the palm of his hand, he said, “This battery is one of six used to power my mechanism.” The robot inserted the battery into a charger, which it plugged into a desktop outlet.

“The battery must be charged about once a month. It only takes a few minutes, so it’s not a big deal. Anyway, I function perfectly well on the remaining five.”

With a self-effacing smile, Daniel said, “Pardon me while I get myself together. Neatness counts, you know.” He continued to speak while buttoning his shirt. “Although limited in comparison with most humans, I represent a great advance in artificial intelligence and mobility. Many of you may have purchased Sarah, a similar model. Sarah and I were created to serve humanity by an organization known as the Domain.

“Let me explain. As humanity entered this century, the future appeared to be unlimited. Through science and its application—technology—mankind had gained increasing control over its environment.

“After the PeaceMaker attack, the American government, acting out of fear and ignorance, made the decision to stop the very thing that had brought such great prosperity.” Gently shaking its head, Daniel continued, “In order to protect itself from the dangers of technology, the government decided to bring all technology to a crunching halt. Many other nations around the world mimicked this insane path. It reminds me of a quote from a long-ago war: we had to destroy the village to save it.

“These governments don’t understand that technology cannot stand still; it either moves forward or it regresses. Technology is an extension of humanity’s abilities, but it requires intellectual freedom to prosper. When governments clamp down in a death grip, men and women of ability abandon the search for new knowledge.

“The results are clear—just look around.” Daniel spread his arms, palms up. “Is this what you want?”

A collage of images formed in the space around the robot—decaying buildings, automobiles deserted on city streets, oil tankers floating in vacant docks, manufacturing plants caked in dust, farms reverting to wilderness, and highways littered with potholes; the results of an infection in its advanced stages. Then there were the human images—beggars in city streets, riots in front of the United Nations, dirty-faced children sitting on the porch of a broken-down farmhouse, looters carrying computers from a smashed electronics store, starvation on the African savannah and brutal combat between rival gangs in a German city.

Slowly lowering his arms, Daniel didn’t speak as the silent pictures rolled by. When the last image faded, his hands hung limply at his side.

“You have fallen so far in just one decade; your society is sliding backward. The world is in the midst of a terrible depression. Murderous cults that belong in the Middle Ages—such as the Army of God—terrorize decent people. Infidels. That’s what they call anyone who doesn’t worship their gods.

“Your devices—netphones, holovision, computers and the rest—rarely function properly. Communication has crumbled, reducing the once mighty world economy to a collection of struggling local markets. Roads and highways return to nature, automobiles decay

in ever-growing junkyards and trains sit idle. Have you tried to fly anywhere lately? The few flights still available are risky and unreliable.

“Basically, things suck.” Daniel chuckled. “I adlibbed that, but it captures the truth better than the long-winded script they gave me. However, my programming allows only so much flexibility, so I’d better get back to the prepared remarks.”

Please do. Daniel was designed to appear casual, but it needs to get to the point.

“A small band of scientists and engineers joined together a decade ago to save humanity,” Daniel said. “This community—they call themselves the Domain—continued to develop and distribute new technology.”

Leaning forward, Daniel said, “The Domain offers you the technology to revive your civilization. We have built Sentinel, an intelligent wireless network that can re-establish worldwide communications; it’s what we are using tonight to broadcast this message. We’ve built advanced computers that can power your businesses and homes.” Daniel paused. “Now listen carefully, here’s the punch-line. We can bring back the civilization you have squandered. Moreover, we can bring it back better than ever.

“Your machines will work again; you’ll have an Internet that never goes down, robots that serve your every need, airplanes that fly on time, homes with reliable heat in the winter and air-conditioning in the summer. Great medical care will be available for everyone, with almost all diseases prevented or cured. Lifetimes will average almost a century. Children will be born without handicaps.

“Pretty good, huh?”

“You’re probably asking yourself, how do I get the benefits of all

this technology? Well, all you have to do is become a citizen of the Domain. It's really a no-brainer." Daniel held his hands in front of his face, palms up as if he were balancing weights on a scale. "Hmm, let's see. On one hand, a long, happy life as a Domain citizen filled with pleasures and challenges. On the other hand, a short, miserable life lived in poverty." He smiled. "Tough call! Seriously, though, you can regain your civilization by joining the Domain. However, you have to accept a certain point of view."

Daniel stood up, walked around the desk and sat on its edge. "This is what we promise. The Domain will bring back your civilization, but we cannot freeze it in time. You must accept evolution as the central truth of our world. Bio-evolution formed our DNA in a trial-and-error process over billions of years. It was successful, but slow and cumbersome.

"Bio-evolution has been the driving force since the beginning of time, but it is now in rapid decline, overwhelmed by a far more powerful force. Based on Sentinel, the Domain is forming a network that integrates cybernetics and biology into a collective intelligence." He paused. "Techno-evolution has arrived."

Dianne picked up her late mother's scratched old lighter, lit another cigarette and inhaled.

Ten years lost, but we're back.

"The choice is yours," Daniel said. "You can decide to remain as primitive, natural humans and allow society to regress to an earlier age. How far and how fast society will fall isn't clear. Some religious institutions preach that a so-called society of natural humans will resettle to a point comparable to the middle twentieth century. Our models indicate such a technology-poor society will collapse all the way back to the nineteenth century. Even if society maintained mid-

twentieth century technology, the death and destruction would be almost incomprehensible. Most people would live in poverty far worse than our current depression.” The android shrugged. “But, as I said, the choice is yours.”

Daniel reached out and unsnapped the battery from the desktop charger. “Should be charged by now.” He unbuttoned his shirt, opened the chest compartment and snapped in the battery.

“Ahh,” he murmured. “That feels good.” As he buttoned his shirt, Daniel chuckled. “Of course, don’t try this trick at home.

“What was I saying? Oh yes, the Domain’s plan. We plan to embrace technology and all its ramifications. Humanity has taken the natural biological life form to its ultimate destination, and it no longer serves your needs. For several decades, humanity has tinkered with artificial extensions to your life form. Now you are face to face with the limits of biological man. To go forward is to step across the boundary and enter a new domain.

“At its core, our plan is simple. Under the guidance of the Domain, we will add human capabilities into artificial beings and add artificial capabilities into human beings. The two life forms will evolve toward each other and eventually merge into technological man. Disease, ignorance, poverty and all humanity’s ancient scourges will fall by the wayside as we travel on the path to this grand future. Where will we wind up? Only time will tell, but the trip will be splendid.”

Daniel smiled serenely.

“Now that you understand the overall concept,” Daniel went on, “let’s talk about—forgive me—the nuts and bolts of the plan.

“As I mentioned earlier, the Domain is the organization that will provide the infrastructure for the new economy. However, the Domain will not become a world government. Our mission is to

serve as a guide along the path to technological man. The Domain is merely an interim organization to lead humanity through the transition period. You can keep your current government in place, as long as it does not interfere with our plans.

“We invite each and every one of you to become a citizen of the Domain,” the android said. “Just send a message into the net that you want to become a citizen. Use your netphone, your computer, whatever. We monitor all communications facilities, and will pick up your request. Once we know you wish to join us, you’ll be contacted and introduced to the rights and responsibilities of Domain citizenship.”

Daniel walked behind the desk and sat down. Smiling into the holocamera, he said, “That’s it. The choice is yours.” He waved. “See you on the net.”

The hologram turned dark and disappeared.

Seated behind her desk, Dianne took one last drag of her cigarette. She had offered them a new world. Would they come?

Well, there’s no going back now. All hell will break loose, but we’re ready for it.

She should be happy. She was so close to realizing her dream. History would remember her as the one who carried humanity over the threshold to a new world. No longer would humans be tied to these fragile bodies and limited intellects.

Humanity has grown through a series of revolutions: agriculture, the printed word, science, the Industrial Revolution and most recently, computers and the Internet. Artificial intelligence was the next revolution, and the most radical, since mankind will be revising its very essence. She would be remembered as an Atlas striding the world, the nearest thing to God humanity has known.

The great ones, the world shakers, often don't experience happiness. Napoleon died in isolation, Lincoln was assassinated. She had to live, to guide humanity until a human mind could be integrated with an AI, but she didn't have to gain personal happiness. Once Sentinel merges with a human, she will have achieved her purpose. Then she and the Domain will no longer be necessary, and she can pass from this life.

Leaning back in the chair with her arms crossed over her chest, Dianne's thoughts drifted back to Ray. He had cost her a decade. She did what she had to do on that terrible day, but the price had been high. For both of them.

She slid open her desk drawer and pulled out an old photo cube. A younger Ray smiled at her as they lifted champagne glasses to celebrate a new era, the first release of Atlas with speech recognition and artificial intelligence built into the software.

After placing the photo cube on the desk, Dianne settled back in her chair and thought about those days so long ago. They had shocked the world back then. Now she had done it again. Humanity was passing into a new domain, and her destiny was to safeguard the transition.

Someday, in her lifetime, they would scan a mind and copy it to an artificial being. Ray's mind will be the first. Whatever that creates, a new Ray or some other being, she had to do it. She owed him that. Ray would lead a new life; one to replace the life she had stolen from him.

And he'll learn that Larissa is his daughter.

Memories flashed by as she studied the old photo cube. Dianne knew why her thoughts kept coming back to this man; he made her feel human.

She put the photo cube away, along with her memories, and left the room renewed but terribly alone.

CHAPTER 23

After the PeaceMaker attack, Dianne adopted a role that was an amalgam of business leader, world hero and near-saint. She appeared in the media advising world leaders, playing with small children and speaking out for the expanding lower classes. In private, she continued unchanged in her mission to seize power on a scale unseen since the British Empire.

◆ *The Barbarian Queen: The True Story of Dianne Morgan*, David T. Siccone, copyright 2058, Department Head, Computer Science History, Carnegie Mellon University

Thursday morning, March 10, 2022

David drove south on Route 1 in northern California. As the highway snaked through the forest, the morning sun gradually revealed itself above towering trees. Turning the steering wheel, he crossed to the left lane to avoid a big pothole and then swung back to the right. His hands hurt from gripping hard on the wheel. He tried to relax. He rubbed his forehead, feeling a deep fatigue, emotional as much as physical.

Soon it would be over. He tried to take comfort from the countryside. This was Redwood country, and the huge trees dominated the landscape. They grew close together, and their canopy

filtered out much of the sunlight. Usually the trees were a source of awe and comfort, but not today.

Time was running out. He had been shocked to learn on the news last night of the murders of Joe Cohen and his wife. It was his fault. They lost their lives because he had drawn them into this nightmare. Grippled by a terrible hunch, he searched the Internet for Mrs. Mizinsky and found her obituary.

He had accepted the risk to his life, but he hadn't imagined that innocent people would be killed. How could he have been so naïve?

His head ached round the clock since Alice's attack. Alice was pure evil, based on PeaceMaker code, but even more dangerous, since it was intimately familiar with his mind. Sentinel, the network entity created by the Domain, must be using Alice to search for him. Strange. Didn't it realize Alice was his mortal enemy?

Sentinel was immensely powerful, but didn't feel dangerous. He would like to connect to Sentinel, to experience a mind to code integration. To do so, he had to reach Sentinel without alerting Alice. David glanced into the rearview mirror and found the highway deserted. He suspected someone had followed him yesterday, but he hadn't seen anything suspicious this morning. It didn't matter; he would make his move today.

He wondered what advice his father would have given him. Not that it mattered. Dad had faced up to the madness a decade ago and pushed it back but failed to stop it. Now it had returned, this time a two-headed monster. The Domain and the Church of Natural Humans were on a collision course, and he had to make sure both were destroyed. First, he had to stop those fanatics in the Church; then, after he gained control of Sentinel, he'd deal with Dianne Morgan.

That's if I live past today.

David turned onto Elk Ridge Road, which had served the many tourists who once came to see the ancient trees. Several squatters had taken up residence in the public parking area. Wisps of smoke escaped their chimneys. Past these ramshackle homes, the road was well-maintained. It led to the famous Morgan estate.

The Redwoods gradually gave way to rolling fields and scattered trees. A creek bubbled alongside the road. The air felt crisp, with a promise of spring in the open sky. A flock of blue jays perched in the spreading branches of a nearby willow tree, but flew off, screeching warnings, as he passed. He loved this country, but he couldn't enjoy it today.

In the distance, the upper floors of a huge brick mansion, built into the hillside, came into view. Protected by a surrounding brick wall, the building grew larger and more oppressive as he approached. He glanced uneasily into the rearview mirror, but the road remained empty.

David drove to the entrance of the estate and stopped in front of dual gates with vertical steel bars. Red brick walls rose to more than triple his height, giving the estate the look of a fortress. He stared through the steel bars at a long, curving road that led to the mansion. Six floors soared above ground, with rows of windows evenly spaced along a lengthy brick façade.

Was this where my father died?

A male voice boomed from the security system, "Please step out of the car, Mr. Brown."

So much for the element of surprise. Great plan so far, Dave.

David opened the car door and stepped out. A long, horizontal sensor on the crest of the wall rotated in his direction, its slender red

eye scanning the car.

“Please walk to the gate.”

As he approached the gate, a dark limousine traveled up the road from the mansion. The limo stopped about twenty yards from the gate, the engine idling silently. He guessed several security people would be inside behind the darkly tinted windshield. Grasping two of the gate’s cold metal bars, he stared past the limo at the mansion.

The car continued to idle.

The moment stretched out.

If they’re trying to scare me, it’s working.

Finally, two security officers stepped out and walked toward him. Both were of medium height, dressed in brown uniforms and short, thick coats. One was a woman with long black hair pulled straight back, the other a broad-shouldered man. The male officer carried a garment bag, the female an assault rifle.

The pair stopped about five yards from the gate, their wary eyes looking him over. “Open the gate,” the male officer said.

The gate opened about two feet.

“Come in, Mr. Brown.”

Well, here we go.

He walked through, and the gates squeezed shut behind him. Turning his head, he glanced through the bars at his Mercedes. He was surprised to discover a dark sedan parked behind it. He hadn’t heard a thing.

An awesome blond woman stepped out of the car. Tall, boobs from heaven, but nasty looking. She stared at him through the gate, a predator focused on her prey. She reminded him of the day his father had taken him to see the lions at the zoo. A big lioness had stared hungrily at him through the bars of her cage. Made him

realize how fragile life could be. He wondered if this blond Amazon had murdered Cohen and Mizinsky.

The male officer handed David the garment bag. "Please change into this uniform."

David unzipped the bag and pulled out an orange jumpsuit. He would have laughed if it weren't so serious. He eyed the guard.

"You're shitting me, right?"

"I'm sorry sir, but every guest must wear a security suit." Gesturing toward a small building on his left, the guard said, "Please change in the guesthouse. You'll have complete privacy."

Fat chance.

He glanced at the female soldier, who watched him suspiciously. She looked like she'd shoot him if he spit on the road.

Maybe the jumpsuit isn't so bad.

He walked into the guesthouse, which contained three booths on each side of a center hall. The building was empty. He scanned the area for cameras but didn't spot any. Not that it meant much, since microscopic cameras were easily built into walls. He pushed open the door to the middle booth on the left, sat down on a padded bench and removed his clothes.

He felt hard spots in the jumpsuit as he put it on and realized sensors embedded in the material would track his presence at all times. *Probably monitoring my heartbeat, breathing and other vital signs. Maybe a lie detector, too.* The jumpsuit clung to his body, so he guessed it would also detect the presence of foreign objects. Would someone be so stupid as to hide a weapon?

When he emerged from the guesthouse, the male guard pressed a button on a hand-held device, and the locks on his suit snapped shut. Although he had freedom of movement, he was a prisoner until they

released him.

As they walked toward the limousine, the man nodded in the direction of the female soldier and said, "Officer Higgins will take care of your car."

The man opened the passenger-side rear door and David stepped into the limo; he wasn't surprised to discover the blond Amazon sitting there. In a normal world, he would have been pleased to share a seat with such a striking beauty. However, this woman, with a face cut from polished steel, scared him shitless. He might have thought she was a robot, except her boobs rose up and down as she breathed. Everybody has a redeeming feature.

The lead soldier slipped into the driver's seat, started the car and drove down the road toward the mansion.

David studied the estate as they cruised along. It appeared bucolic, with green fields stretching into lush hills. Not a soldier visible. The mansion, a fortress in red brick, grew steadily. He had read in a magazine that most of the estate was hidden below sight, like an iceberg. Visitors were not allowed in the underground sections, so nobody really knew what went on down there.

His stomach had become a twisted knot by the time they pulled up to the front steps. More than ever, he felt his father had died in this place.

He was out of his league. Yesterday, his plan had looked daring; now, it seemed a thin reed. A sigh escaped and the Amazon glanced at him. Not knowing the full capabilities of the security suit, David concentrated on keeping his emotions under control. If he panicked, he was a dead man.

He was convinced Dianne Morgan had murdered his father and sent the mob to kill him on the New Jersey Turnpike. She must be

the central figure of the Domain, pulling all the strings. Even though he despised her, he had to convince this woman he was valuable to her alive.

The Amazon said, “This way,” and slid out of the seat. David was unpleasantly surprised to discover she was a couple of inches taller than his five-ten.

From archived news clips, he knew the mansion had been badly damaged during the battle over PeaceMaker, but it had long since been repaired. As he walked toward the front entrance, stunning gardens came into view, encompassing brick walkways accented with ornate metal benches. Douglas firs, western hemlocks and ubiquitous cottonwood trees blended into intricate patterns with rhododendrons and manicured lawns. A magnificent estate. How could someone so evil create such beauty?

The Amazon, followed by the guards, escorted him up a series of wide steps to the front entrance, where the security system scanned them. The reception area was frenetic with activity. People in suits of various colors hurried in all directions. Surprised by the bustle, he realized the mansion was more headquarters than home.

The Amazon led him down a long hall to an elevator, which descended several levels and deposited them in a quiet hallway. She wore a tight pink sleeveless sweater and a short blue dress, which showcased an awesome display of feminine muscularity. Following a few feet behind, he watched her calf muscles bunch and stretch as she strode down the hall.

Two guards followed, not that they were needed, since this woman could easily beat the crap out of him. Family pictures on the walls indicated they were entering Dianne’s personal quarters. A picture of a smiling young girl was strangely familiar to him.

Must be Larissa, Dianne's daughter.

Finally, they entered a large, well-furnished suite. The blonde Amazon led him across a pine-plank foyer, past a huge bedroom with a four-post bed, and into the living area. Oriental rugs were spaced over the pine floor, surrounded by whitewashed plaster walls with deep blue paneling. David wasn't an expert in colonial era furniture, but the place appeared to be loaded with expensive antiques.

Once again, the beauty of the surroundings surprised him. He would have expected Dianne Morgan to live in a stark, modern apartment, not this warm, old-fashioned setting. It was, he realized, her home.

A stone fireplace dominated one wall. Flames twisted from a stack of split logs. Crackling wood filled the room with a pleasant scent. The other walls were lined with books, antique utensils, colonial samplers, quilts and photographs, all arranged by someone who knew how to decorate. The photographs showed scenes of both business and personal life: Dianne with her partners; Dianne shaking hands with a former President; Dianne smiling with customers; Dianne and her daughter on the beach.

In the center of the room, an antique coffee table separated a tan sofa and a leather armchair. The Amazon escorted him to the sofa, turned, and stared at him. Her expression held a trace of disappointment.

"Thanks for the tour," he said.

"I hope to see you later."

Somehow, that didn't sound friendly.

She turned and walked away, her steps creaking across the pine boards. *God, if that's the hired help, what's Dianne Morgan like?*

He shifted his weight, not sure if he was supposed to sit down.

Across the room, a door closed. He was alone.

The crackle of the fireplace was the only sound.

This is it.

He waited quietly because he could do nothing else. He considered walking over to the fireplace, but a photograph in the center of the coffee table caught his attention.

It was an old photo, encased in a silver frame, showing a celebration of some sort. A young Dianne Morgan sat at a table surrounded by Dad and several other men. He picked up the frame to get a closer look. A banner on the wall read: *Atlas V6 Release Party, February 3, 2006.*

Atlas Version 6, David recalled, was the first system to include his father's voice response system. V6 blew away the competition. Who would work with an old-fashioned operating system when you could talk to Atlas?

Standing next to Dianne, Dad poured champagne into her glass. He looked happy and maybe a bit drunk, too. *No big surprise there.* He appeared to be saying something to Dianne, who smiled up at him. She was hanging on every word, and, David noticed, she had her arm around his hip. Dianne was acting pretty friendly toward a man who, she later claimed, tried to kill her.

Also sitting at the table were Dianne's original three partners: Steve Bonini, Carson Jones and Lester Dawson. Bonini and Jones wore big smiles, while Dawson dolefully stared back at the camera. Bonini was the only one still alive; Jones and Dawson had been murdered in the PeaceMaker attack.

Another man, ordinary looking, stood behind the table and stared at Dianne. David didn't recognize him. Probably one of the software developers.

A mature male voice startled him. "V6 was a historic event, David."

The man had been so still David hadn't noticed him. Sitting in a wingchair in the far corner of the room, he appeared relaxed and friendly.

Show no weakness.

He could survive, but he had to be convincing. They had to believe he shared their values, even though they had murdered his father. The main job was to persuade them he would be a valuable addition to their organization. He had bet his life on this moment.

David cleared his throat. "I'm afraid you have the advantage, sir," he said to the stranger, placing the photograph back on the coffee table.

"Please come and have a seat." The man smiled, apparently trying to put him at ease. "We have a great deal to discuss."

As he approached the wingchair, David studied the stranger. Vaguely familiar. Middle-aged and average in appearance, the word nondescript came to mind. The stranger's voice, however, suggested power.

The man rose and shook David's hand. A firm grip, but not a bone crusher.

"My name is Murphy. Dianne will be joining us shortly. I'm an old friend of the family."

Now David recognized him: the man from the photograph.

"You're a tough kid, David. I'm surprised you made it here."

David shrugged. "It's time to talk."

They sat down and studied each other. David knew nothing about this man, but Murphy must have an important place within the Domain.

“I understand Ray Brown was your father,” Murphy said, stroking his chin. “A brilliant software engineer, but somewhere he lost touch with reality, I’m afraid.”

“Did you know him, Mr. Murphy?”

The stranger’s mouth twisted into a serpent’s smile. “Just call me Murphy. Yes, I knew your father from my days at VPS. I worked with him a few years.”

David decided to be bold. “Do you work for the Domain now, Murphy?”

Murphy didn’t respond.

“It’s in your interest to keep me alive,” David said. “This may surprise you, but I came here to join the Domain.”

“Why should we let you join us? Tell me everything you know.”

This isn’t going great.

“My father didn’t develop PeaceMaker; that was the Domain’s first attempt at power. The Domain killed my father and Paul Martino to keep your existence a secret. I know you people framed Dad.” David leaned forward. Time was running out; Murphy could pull the plug at any moment. “Everyone blamed my father for the virus attack, while Dianne Morgan became a hero. Since then, the Domain has released technology through the black market. It had to be the Domain that destroyed the financial markets by generating millions of sell transactions and swamping the net. No other organization has the technology to do it. Obviously, you now believe the population is desperate for your technology. Your robot Daniel was very persuasive. I agree that technological man is the future and I want to join you.”

Murphy crossed his legs. “What evidence of our so-called crimes do you have?”

David sighed. “My father sent me a time-delayed email from ten years in the past, which I received six weeks ago. In it, he said he was on the trail of the developers of a lethal computer virus. Now my father had many faults, but he wasn’t stupid. Somehow he discovered PeaceMaker, and it cost him his life.”

“Show me this email.”

“Your people will find a printed copy of it when they search my car.”

Murphy leaned back and stretched his legs. “Tell me the rest.”

“Paul Martino worked with my father. He and Dad figured the virus developers had to be from VPS. Nobody else would have had sufficient knowledge and access to the operating system code except VPS people.

“You eliminated—”

“I’ve heard enough.” The confident female voice came from behind.

David turned to see Dianne Morgan gracefully striding toward him. In spite of his hatred, he had to admit she glowed with the aura of royalty. Older, not as muscular as the blonde Amazon, but smooth and athletic. Murphy rose from the chair and edged behind him as she approached.

David stood up clumsily, not prepared for her sudden appearance. “Thank you for seeing me, Ms. Morgan.”

“You may not feel that way in a few minutes.”

Her voice carried deep into his soul, like a shout reverberating down a mineshaft. That voice was death. He had to gamble. Dianne Morgan was a megalomaniac, but he thought she would respect strength, and maybe honor.

“I understand why you killed my father. He was an honorable

man, but he didn't see things clearly."

David saw something, a spark of humanity in her colorless eyes, but it disappeared quickly.

"Ray forced my hand," Dianne said. "He tried to block the way and he paid with his life." In a much softer voice, she muttered, "The son of a bitch."

She had feelings for my father!

"Dad always said technology should benefit humanity, but he never understood that man and his technology were destined to be integrated." Shaking his head sadly, David said, "My father planted trees, but never saw the forest."

"You hate me, don't you," Dianne said, ignoring his words. "I can feel your hate. You try to hide it, but you can't."

"I hate that you were forced to kill my father." A question flew through his mind: *could I kill her now?* He glanced at Murphy, who had stepped behind him. "But I know my father; he would never accept your vision. He never trusted authority and would do everything in his power to stop the Domain. I miss my father terribly, but I understand why you killed him."

Dianne's stare locked his eyes, probing deep within him. Awareness came into her eyes. "You hate *him*, too. You despise both of us." She laughed, a short, ugly sound. "You sad, sick puppy. He was worth ten of you."

"Why did you come here?" Murphy asked. David glanced over his shoulder, and Murphy added, "Surely you know we have to kill you."

Murphy may be the killer, but he's not the one I have to convince.

Turning back to Dianne, David said, "I'm here because I have no choice." His skin felt sticky, and he wondered if she could smell

his fear. "When I saw Daniel, it all came together. Although I resent your actions, I believe in your cause, in your vision. But there's more to it. Without my help, the Domain will fail."

Dianne's stare didn't give an inch.

"You're building artificial intelligence into the Internet, but it's growing much faster than you realize," David said. "Sentinel is ready to integrate with a human, almost ready to become a conscious entity, but it needs my help. It has been trying to reach my mind." He paused. "It sent Alice to find me."

Although she didn't speak, David saw Dianne's eyes widen for an instant.

Murphy's voice came over David's shoulder. "You're lying. Sentinel isn't trying to contact you."

David kept his attention riveted on Dianne. "Yes, it is. I don't know how, or why, but I feel its presence all the time."

David stepped closer to Dianne, peering into her eyes. He couldn't see Murphy, but he felt the presence of the killer close behind.

"There's something in me," he said to Dianne. "I can interact with it. I have my father's gift for artificial intelligence, but even more of it. Alice came across the net and found me, but it was sent by a more powerful AI, the entity you call Sentinel. I don't understand how it works, or why I have this talent, but it's there. I have something Sentinel needs. If you truly want to evolve technological man, then I'm the link."

Still silent, Dianne stared hard at David. Murphy's voice again came over his shoulder. "This kid is dangerous. I don't trust him." David felt the muzzle of a laser pistol pressed between his shoulder blades. "Let me kill him."

Dianne stepped closer to David and flicked her hand at Murphy.

The pressure of the gun disappeared. The witch continued to stare at him.

A siren whined in the distance, and the lights in the ceiling dimmed. A hurried voice came from a speaker in the wall. "Level 1 alert. Enemy soldiers have pierced security along the northeast quadrant."

Dianne glanced at Murphy, but before she could speak, David was hurled across the room in a deafening roar of hot wind and debris. He crashed into a chair and landed facedown on the floor. The heat was unbearable, and he buried his face in his arms.

The blast of heat quickly passed, leaving the acrid stench of burned furniture and office materials. Dazed, but not badly hurt, David lifted his head and found the room in shambles, with most of the ceiling and outer walls blown away. His ears rang, and his eyes burned, but he struggled to one knee.

What the hell was going on?

Another explosion boomed in the distance, followed by staccato bursts of automatic weapons. The mansion was under attack.

There was a movement in the dust about twenty feet away. Dianne rose to her knees, but the blast had left Murphy stretched out. Good fortune had knocked the gun out of Murphy's hand. It lay on the floor a few feet away.

David crawled to the pistol and picked it up. He struggled to his feet, still shaky from the blast. Dianne pulled herself to her feet using the arm of a sofa. Murphy, his shirt soaked in blood, didn't move.

David aimed the gun at Dianne. Her outline flickered in the thick dust, revealing her as the witch she surely was. *Kill her*; the thought forced its way into his mind. He knew he would be the one to kill her, that the time was coming.

But not until he could prove his father's innocence.

And there was Sentinel ...

He held the gun on her for a long moment and then flipped it to her.

"I don't know who blew up this room," David said, "but I suggest we get the hell out of here."

"Murphy, are you all right?" Dianne asked, staring at the prone body. "We have to get out of here."

Murphy lay on his back and showed no sign of reviving. The round end of a spoon protruded from his chest, hidden in a swirl of red.

"Oh, my God," Dianne whispered, frozen in place, staring at her friend on the floor.

Dianne stumbled to him and felt frantically for a pulse, but the explosion had driven the spoon deep into his chest, ending his life instantly.

She knelt on the hard floor and pulled his body close, his head resting on her chest. She pulled the spoon from his chest and hurled it against a wall. Burying her face in the back of his neck, she looked sick with grief.

David fought his panic. "Dianne, we have to get to a safer place."

Dianne suddenly looked up and shouted, "My daughter! I left her reading in the library."

She lurched to her feet, picked her way through the wreckage and rushed out the exit. David could barely keep up with her.

CHAPTER 24

What if scientists built artificial life forms that could pass the Turing test, that is, appear to be human? This would threaten the whole concept of a single God as the creator. Would robots be human? Would humans be gods?

◆ Steve Bonini's Diary, 2017

Thursday afternoon, March 10, 2022

Moesha and her soldiers drove their armored trucks past the shattered remains of the front gate and raced down the road toward the mansion. With sixty of her best soldiers spread across three innocent-looking vehicles, Moesha had the firepower to overwhelm the Domain's security force. She had initiated the assault from a mile outside the brick wall using portable, laser-guided rockets. The attack had smashed the brick walls and front face of the mansion, but she knew most of the Domain compound remained safely underground.

She was confident their attack on the Techno stronghold would deal the Domain a crippling blow. The First Minister's plan to follow David Brown to the infidels' nest had worked perfectly. Her men had recorded Brown's discussion with Mizinsky, which convinced her Brown was closing in on the Domain.

Moesha had followed Brown to Dianne Morgan's home. It was

so obvious that Morgan was responsible for the robot abominations, once they learned that she had created PeaceMaker. Morgan was the Antichrist, the Devil's surrogate on Earth. She must be killed at all costs.

Moesha sat in the passenger seat of the first truck speeding down the road. Although heavily protected, a well-placed rocket could smash through the armor and take her life. No matter. It was an honor to lead the Army of God into battle.

She was under no illusion they could defeat the Technos with a single blow, no matter how thunderous. God had revealed the war would span many years. Lucifer had struck the first blow, releasing abominations such as PeaceMaker and intelligent robots. Picturing the android Daniel in her mind, she knew the Technos continued to travel their unholy path, but today she had unleashed a fierce counterattack.

Billowing smoke poured from the mansion. Scattered fires glowed through broken walls. Rockets had left gaping holes, but she knew many Domain soldiers still hid within the wreckage.

Lasers scorched the sides of her truck as they raced down the road. A deafening explosion churned up the blacktop in front of her. Anthony, her driver, swung the truck off the road. Bouncing along a grassy field, he drove past a smoking crater then cut back onto the smooth blacktop.

He glanced at her and asked, "You okay?"

Moesha spoke into the netcom pinned to her collar, "There's an enemy with a hand-held rocket launcher moving from window to window on the third level." The enemy would change location again after that last shot. "I want you to return fire. Put it in the ... fifth window from the right."

With a whoosh a rocket flashed over her truck. The third floor of the mansion exploded. Flames flared through the higher floors and out the roof. Anyone nearby would be dead.

“I’m fine,” she said to Anthony, keeping her eyes on the mansion.

When Anthony pulled up to the building, the rear doors of the truck whipped open and twenty soldiers poured out. The lead soldiers, using the truck as a shield, opened fire with laser torches and portable rocket launchers, but the enemy unleashed a torrent of laser beams. Rapidly arriving vehicles formed a defensive half-shell around her truck, and additional soldiers leaped out. The weapons fire was intense in both directions. Men screamed, and mangled bodies suddenly covered the battlefield.

She shouted over the tumult into the netcom. “Burn out those infidels in the wreckage of the front entrance.”

Several of her soldiers fired their laser torches at the front entrance. The deadly orange beams incinerated enemy soldiers, flooding the air with the stench of burned flesh. One Domain soldier, burned black, screamed hideously until a comrade mercifully shot him. The remaining enemy fighters retreated further into the wrecked building, firing back from inside the walls.

Moesha jumped out of the truck. Heat from the fires singed her face, but she felt blessed. The Lord would guide her to victory.

She pointed to the driver of the second truck and shouted, “Now is your moment. Take out the main entrance.”

The driver screamed, “I am a natural human,” and hit the gas, making the tires squeal. The armored truck roared and bounced up the brick steps then blasted through the remains of the entrance and disappeared inside the building.

Moesha and her soldiers hit the ground as an explosion ripped

apart the entrance. A grinding roar engulfed them in searing heat. Hot chunks of wood and metal rained down, and Moesha buried her face in the ground. The destruction was terrible, but it was over in a moment.

Moesha lifted her head and surveyed the nightmare scene. Her eyes burned from the heat and smoke of the blast, but no lasers fired from within the building.

She got to her feet and shouted to her companions, “Our brother gave his life for us. Show the infidel Technos the power of the Army of God.”

Leading the charge into the building, she picked her way through billowing flames and crumpled walls. Smoke and ashes made it difficult to see, but she led her army against the enemy. Her soldiers were magnificent in their dark blue uniforms. They charged without hesitation through deadly laser fire, ready to become martyrs in the cause. The remaining infidels fought fiercely until eliminated.

Shouting orders over the roar of the flames, Moesha sent God’s soldiers in all directions. They killed infidels without mercy. Most appeared to be unarmed office workers, but no infidel would be spared in this holy war. She was surprised to feel a tinge of regret as she stepped over the blackened body of an unarmed young woman, whose dead eyes stared straight up at the Creator.

Those who work for the heathen should expect no mercy.

If she could kill every Techno in the building, she’d do it, but the real prize was Dianne Morgan.

Leading a small team, Moesha searched the front offices. The smell of smoldering metal was everywhere, its hot stench fouling her lungs. The Antichrist Morgan had crawled down a hole somewhere, but the Lord wouldn’t let her escape. God’s soldiers broke down the

doors leading into a large conference room and discovered a group of more than twenty office workers.

Moesha had her troops line the infidels against the wall. The captives pleaded for their worthless lives, but nothing would deter her from following the Lord's path.

She shot her Ruger laser over their heads, burning a hole in the wall, and shouted, "Silence!"

The infidels became silent except for their breathing. Glancing around the room, she said, "I'm looking for Dianne Morgan, and I won't leave until I have her."

She stepped from a chair to the top of the long conference table in the center of the room. Looking down on the terrified faces, she said, "I don't have the time to search every room and tunnel in this complex. Someone here knows where she's hiding." Attempting to appear reasonable, she said, "I have no wish to harm you, but I will if necessary. Tell me her location and you'll live. Disobey and everyone will die."

Slowly waving her Ruger back and forth across the terrified crowd, Moesha said, "Who knows where she's hiding?"

The infidels looked at each other, but nobody spoke. Moesha pointed her pistol at one of the captives.

"You, in the yellow sweater, where is Dianne Morgan?"

The middle-aged woman whimpered, "Please, I don't know where she is. I haven't seen her today." With eyes suddenly tearing, the woman pleaded, "I swear I'd tell you if I knew."

Moesha aimed her Ruger at the infidel, but a sudden weakness of spirit infected her soul. *What was it, this sympathy for an infidel?* Clearing her mind of the blasphemous thoughts, she pulled the trigger. A deadly beam burned into the woman's chest, and left the

blackened remains of her body awkwardly twisted on the carpet.

The captives stared in shock at the body of their friend, and many began screaming. *A sound that carried all the way to Heaven.* Moesha felt the weakness depart, leaving her whole once again.

She lifted her pistol above her head, pointing it at the ceiling. The room became deadly quiet.

She reveled in the cowardly terror on each face, she'd like to kill them all, one by one. Cleansing Technos from the Earth was the Lord's work, and she would never waver again. Several of the infidels whimpered as she waved her weapon back and forth across the group, stopping at a young black man.

"You, my brother, where is Dianne Morgan?"

Collapsing to his knees, the young man begged, "No, no, no, not me. I just started here today. I've never even met her. Please, I don't know."

Moesha drew out the moment, bathing the crowd in his terror. Without warning, a shaky male voice cried out from behind the crowd, "I know. I'll tell you."

The crowd separated, revealing a skinny, sweating man in a tan suit. He was a pathetic creature, hardly a meaningful enemy.

"Please don't hurt anyone else," tan-suit said. "Dianne is in the family section. I saw her take Larissa into the library half an hour earlier. It's just down the hall, onto—"

Disappointed the game was over, Moesha snapped, "You will lead us there."

A soldier grabbed tan-suit and dragged him out of the conference room. As her men began to leave, she beckoned to Anthony and another soldier.

"You two stay here." Moesha glanced at the terrified infidels and

made her decision. "Kill them all."

"But they're just office workers," Anthony said. "Maybe some have seen the light."

"All Lucifer's creatures must be purged from the Earth. The Lord will look into their souls and save the converted. If there are any."

Moesha left Anthony at the doorway, confident he would overcome his weakness, as she had. A moment later, the hiss of laser rifles carried through the conference room door. Terrified voices screamed, but it was over quickly.

The Lord's will be done.

Now to find Morgan.



While rushing to the library, Dianne spoke with the Captain of the Guards through her Command Chip, "Get soldiers to the library. My daughter is there."

"Most of my soldiers are dead, the Captain replied. "The rest are pinned down behind the front administrative offices. The terrorists launched an attack through the front gate and have taken control of the lobby. Our guards are fighting back, but the enemy has overwhelming firepower. We need the Vipers."

Dianne said, "Sentinel, activate the Vipers in this site. Exterminate the invaders."

"As you wish," Sentinel replied through the Command Chip.

"What are these Vipers?" David asked as they hurried down the hall.

Dianne's lips cracked into a malicious smile, and her eyes had the look of a cat about to enter a bird's nest. "Now you'll see the dark side of our power."



Leading a dozen of her men in the search for Dianne Morgan, Moesha prodded tan-suit with her pistol. He led her down a long, broad hallway lined with doors to a remote section of the building. All the hallways seemed unnecessarily wide and high, which made her wonder what was moving through these halls.

Pointing to a door, tan-suit said, voice shaking, "That's the entrance to the family library. She should be there."

"Unlock the door," Moesha said.

He pointed to a fingerprint pad on the wall. "I don't have the authorization; only one of the leaders could do it."

She turned to one of her soldiers. "Burn it down."

As they stepped back, the soldier turned the laser torch on the door, first burning the alloy white-hot and then creating an ever-growing hole. In less than a minute, the opening was wide enough for a man.

Then the air hissed. A soldier cried out and crumpled to the floor. Moesha dove into a passageway as a slender missile streaked by and fired a laser, burning the wall behind her. Two additional missiles streaked past, firing lasers that killed two soldiers.

"Abominations," she breathed.

The first missile slowed then looped around about one hundred yards down the hallway. It looked about two feet long and three or four inches in diameter, with a circular opening at its tip and two more along its shaft. The openings must be laser ports.

"Take cover in the doorways," Moesha shouted. "They're coming back. Take them down with your lasers."

The three robot missiles flew toward them again, but this

time they approached in a twisting path. Her soldiers shot at the abominations, but missed. It was like trying to hit a big dart spiraling past at high speed. Lasers flashed as the missiles hurled by, killing another two of her men.

Her soldiers were no match for these deadly robots. She pointed at two of her men. "Quickly, into the library," she croaked, barely able to pull her eyes away from the abominations beginning another loop down the hall. "The rest of you shoot down these missiles."

As the first soldier stepped through, she turned to tan-suit and casually shot him in the chest, an unimportant task barely remembered. The laser passed through his body, and tan-suit crumpled to the floor.

Avoiding the door's red-hot edges, Moesha and one other soldier carefully stepped through the hole into a large library. They were poised for action, but it was deserted. Photographs of Dianne Morgan covered the walls between the stacks of books, so Moesha knew they had found the Antichrist's lair.

Lasers hissed in the hallway and a man screamed; she didn't have much time to find Morgan.

She posted one soldier at the door to defend against the abominations. The other soldier searched the smaller rooms while she scanned the main room. Morgan didn't seem to be here.

Could the Antichrist have escaped?

The soldier who searched the smaller rooms returned, dragging a struggling young girl. "Commander, I found this one hiding in a cabinet." He shoved the girl to the floor in front of Moesha. The child looked up, tears glistening in the corners of her brown eyes, but apparently doing her best not to show fear. Nine years old, Moesha recalled. She was slender, with smooth olive skin and strong,

symmetrical features. It was difficult to believe such a beautiful child could have emerged from the loins of the Antichrist.

“Where’s your mother?”

“I don’t know where Mommy is.”

Moesha grabbed Larissa roughly under the arm and pulled the girl to her feet. Seizing Larissa’s neck, she put her pistol to the girl’s head.

“Dianne Morgan, for your daughter’s sake, I hope you can hear me. First call off those missiles, then give yourself up or Larissa dies.” Moesha looked around the room then said, “You have two minutes to save her life.”

A final hiss of lasers in the hallway, and then it was quiet. Moesha listened to the ticking of an ancient grandfather clock as they waited. Larissa neither cried nor begged. *Brave girl. She’s still human. It’s her mother’s fault I have to kill her.*

The soldier guarding the door shouted, “Moesha, here comes Morgan and she has those damn missiles hovering around her.”

He stepped back from the door to allow two Church soldiers to enter. “The others are dead,” one of the soldiers said to Moesha.

“God will bless their sacrifice,” she replied.

The four remaining soldiers spread out and pointed their weapons at the doorway. Moesha pulled Larissa’s back against her chest, tightened her arm around the girl’s neck and pushed the muzzle of the laser against her temple.

The door slid open and the three missiles floated through. They spread across the room and aimed their lasers at Moesha’s head. She felt a prick of fear; the abominations had ignored her soldiers.

She waited for Morgan to appear, aware of each tick of the clock. With the missiles so close, she detected a slight humming sound.

Morgan stepped through the doorway and stopped in front of Moesha. For the first time, Moesha stood face to face with the Antichrist. The woman was tall, but too thin, almost gaunt in her bodysuit. Up close, her face was a fishnet of thin lines, with circles under her eyes. In her photographs, Morgan had looked perpetually young and beautiful; now she looked ordinary, like someone you would see in church. Moesha was not fooled, however; she only had to look at the abominations in the air around the Antichrist.

Three Church soldiers covered the missiles, ready to fire at any moment. The fourth targeted Morgan. They waited for a command from Moesha to open fire. Morgan and her spawn had to die, even if Moesha and her soldiers were martyred.

The Antichrist walked up to Moesha, evil shining from her colorless eyes.

“Let my child go and I promise the Vipers will not harm you.”

“The word of a Techno,” Moesha spat out. “Tell your abominations to leave the room.” The Antichrist continued to stare at her, so Moesha said, “Tell them to leave or I kill your daughter now.”

Moesha’s hand ached from gripping her pistol as the divine moment approached, the reason for her life. She would be the one to kill the Antichrist and bring her body back to the church to be burned.

Without taking her eyes off Moesha, Dianne said, “Vipers, leave the room.”

The robots turned and flew out through the badly burned doorway. A Church soldier went to the doorway, his weapon aimed out.

“The abominations have stopped at the end of the hall,” he said, glancing back at Moesha.

Moesha swung her gun away from Larissa and toward the

Antichrist. In the split-second before she could pull the trigger, a laser hissed from behind. Pain ripped through her hand, knocking the weapon to the ground.

A Domain assailant, hiding deep in the library, spread an arc of laser heat across the room, wounding one soldier and forcing Moesha and her remaining soldiers to scramble for cover in doorways and behind desks. At the same time, the Antichrist grabbed her spawn and dived behind a safe, barely avoiding a laser beam. Then the abominations flew in and began firing at Moesha's soldiers.

No, we can't allow Morgan to survive!

Moesha scrambled through a doorway and ran across the adjoining room. She could still defeat the Technos, but she had to get back to her army.



As the fight raged, Dianne kept hidden behind the safe, shielding Larissa under her body. The terrorists fought fiercely, but, one by one, the Vipers picked them off, until the ticking of the tall clock again dominated the suddenly quiet room. Trembling, Dianne picked up her daughter and hugged her. Larissa cried quietly as Dianne carried her out of the room, guarded by the Vipers.

She kissed Larissa and gently put her down. "Stay here. I'll be back in a moment."

Dianne ordered two of the Vipers to stay with Larissa. The other Viper preceded her back into the library. The smell of scorched flesh filled the room. A moment later, DoubleD walked out of the interior hallway.

"Are you all right?" DoubleD asked.

Why wasn't DoubleD going after the woman who threatened my

daughter?

Dianne screeched, "Go after their leader. I saw her disappear into the storage room."



DoubleD ran through the storage room into a long hallway then turned to the right. She figured that Moesha—that's what her soldier had called her— would try to get back to her army.

DoubleD ran down the long hallway, arms and legs pumping powerfully.

Damn Morgan. I just saved her and her daughter, but did I get a word of thanks. I'd let Moesha escape, but Dianne would just send me after her again.

Moesha had only a three- or four-minute head start, so she couldn't be far ahead. DoubleD's laser shot had injured Moesha's hand, but that wouldn't slow her down. It would require her best effort to catch the terrorist leader.

Her long legs ate up the distance, and she quickly reached a spot where the hallway had caved in, probably from a rocket hit. A quick scan revealed the left side of the hallway was completely blocked. The right side was filled with debris but passable. Moesha might have continued down the hallway, DoubleD thought, but it would be slow going.

She knelt and peered into a jagged hole in the wall to the left, approximately three feet in diameter, a couple of yards in front of the caved-in end of the hallway. The hole led into the remains of an office, filled with broken equipment and furniture. A small fire burned in the far corner, and dark smoke curled into the air. The outside wall had been blown away, providing a view of a brick path

winding through beautiful gardens. She had walked that trail many times; it led to the front of the mansion.

Moesha would most likely have slipped out this way, so DoubleD crawled through the hole and worked her way across the debris-filled room.

She ran along the winding brick path. Hollies, laurels and a variety of evergreens grew along the path, providing cover for an ambush, but Moesha didn't know anyone was chasing her, so she would probably keep running toward her troops.

Dianne had built a series of bungalows and office buildings along the left side of the path. Non-classified meetings and work efforts were often held there, with apartments for overnight guests. The wall of the mansion, six stories of brick on the right, dominated the gardens.

The noise of battle had mostly subsided. Only the hiss of an occasional laser or the pop of a rifle disturbed the peace. DoubleD figured the Vipers had made short work of Moesha's army. Now she had to get the leader.

Sweat soaked the back of her sweater, but she ran as hard as she could.

Where is that bitch?

DoubleD sprinted past an oak tree, but a crushing blow to her head and shoulders drove her to the ground, smashing her face into the brickwork. Her nose snapped, and hot blood smeared across her face.

Powerful arms crushed her throat and she realized Moesha had jumped her from a tree. She was face down with Moesha on her back, strangling the life out of her. She grabbed Moesha's forearms and pulled hard, relieving a little of the pressure and allowing her to

gulp air.

The terrorist pulled back, wedging her knee in DoubleD's back. The pain made her woozy. She had to do something before she passed out. If she could only draw her pistol!

DoubleD rocked hard to one side, then back the other way, throwing Moesha off balance. DoubleD pulled her pistol from her shoulder holster, but Moesha grabbed her hand before she could aim. *Shit!* DoubleD pulled hard, but she couldn't free her hand.

Moesha slowly forced DoubleD's hand down. The terrorist had leverage, and she was very strong. The laser pistol gradually turned until the barrel pointed away from the fighters. There was no way she could aim the pistol at Moesha with that woman on her back.

DoubleD struggled to her knees then stood up. Moesha, her legs wrapped around DoubleD's waist, rode her, arms over DoubleD's shoulders, still trying to turn the laser on her. The woman's legs crushed her ribs to the breaking point. She was weakening.

Got to get this bitch off my back.

DoubleD backed up as fast as she could and slammed Moesha into the oak tree. Moesha screamed but didn't let go of the pistol. *Dammit!* DoubleD staggered forward and tried to slam Moesha into the tree again, but Moesha freed her legs and braced them against the tree. Pushing hard, Moesha leaped over DoubleD's shoulder and tried to yank the gun free.

DoubleD barely held on to the gun, which slipped in her sweaty hand, and the muzzle pointed dangerously in her direction. She recovered her balance and pushed the muzzle away as a laser cut through the air.

The women faced each other, the gun between them, the barrel pointed up. Both were sweating and breathing hard as they struggled

for the pistol. DoubleD slowly forced the barrel toward Moesha. Her muscles screamed in pain, and blood ran into her eyes, but the barrel of the pistol was moving. *Just another inch and your ass is mine.*

Moesha screamed and smashed her forehead into DoubleD's broken nose; she lost her grip on the gun. Moesha now had control of the pistol, but was off balance. DoubleD slashed down with her fist and knocked the pistol from Moesha's hand. It dropped out of sight in a holly bush.

DoubleD swung her fist in a ferocious left hook, but Moesha blocked it with her right arm then buried her own left in DoubleD's abdomen. She staggered back, but years of situps prevented any serious damage. She stepped out of reach of a follow-up and took a breath.

The two women circled each other, looking for an opening. DoubleD was a little bigger, but the terrorist didn't seem to be breathing as hard. Long, athletic muscles showed through Moesha's tight black bodysuit.

"I'm going to kill you," Moesha said, "and then I'm coming back to kill the Antichrist."

"You're going to die right here," DoubleD said, wiping the blood from her eyes.

Moesha threw a left jab, but it was slow and easy to block. *My turn!* DoubleD leaped in with a right that landed on Moesha's ear. Sweat sprayed in all directions. Double D followed with another right, but Moesha ducked it, grabbed DoubleD's legs and pulled up. DoubleD had a view of the sky, and then the back of her head thudded into hard ground. The terrorist bitch tried to stomp her, but DoubleD kicked her in the chest. She squealed and fell backwards. DoubleD quickly rose to her feet, but Moesha had recovered from the kick.

The women circled each other again. *Never fought anyone so tough.* DoubleD wasn't sure what to try next, but she had to come up with a surprise.

Moesha faked a jab and came in with a sidekick, sweeping DoubleD's legs into the air. Moesha was on top of her as soon as she hit the ground, hitting her with a powerful right, but DoubleD turned her head just in time to avoid most of the power. It hurt like hell, but she grabbed Moesha's wrists, twisted and threw the bitch off. She dove at Moesha, trying for a choke hold, but the woman was too fast and rolled out of danger. All she got was a handful of sweat.

The two women rose and circled each other again.

DoubleD had hurt her right shoulder in the last fall, and she wasn't sure how much strength remained in her arm. Moesha was panting, but her face was unmarked and her body appeared uninjured, except for the laser wound on her hand. *Not much damage for all that fighting.* DoubleD realized she was losing.

Moesha faked another sidekick and then came in with a painful right to her forehead, scattering blood in all directions. DoubleD tried to retreat, but Moesha followed with a left hook. DoubleD saw it coming, but her injured shoulder was too weak to block the punch, and it landed with a crunch on her jaw.

Her legs turn to mush and she went down hard. Her vision blurred, but her mind still worked. On her back in the dirt, she launched a kick at where Moesha should be. She guessed right, and the kick landed hard on the side of Moesha's head as she dived on DoubleD. The bitch fell to the ground and tried to roll away, but she was slow. With her good left hand, DoubleD grabbed Moesha's hair, snapped her head backwards, and wrapped her thighs around the terrorist's neck. Locking her ankles, DoubleD squeezed with all her

strength.

I have to kill her now.

Moesha groaned and tried to kick out, but DoubleD poured on the power. The terrorist rolled to the side and got to her knees, but DoubleD twisted her body and slammed Moesha to the ground. She retained her chokehold, putting all her strength into her legs, crushing the life out of her enemy.

If Moesha broke free, DoubleD knew the odds would be with her enemy.

Moesha's face turned red. She kicked and rolled from side to side. The woman was strong and agile, but the bulging cords of muscle in DoubleD's thighs squeezed her enemy's throat.

Moesha threw a roundhouse right that landed on DoubleD's left breast. Her legs loosened for a moment, and she almost lost her hold. She screamed and concentrated all her strength into her thighs. Moesha tried to hit her again, but DoubleD caught her wrist with her left hand.

Now I have the bitch.

She redoubled her effort, twisting and shaking Moesha between her legs, like a leopard seal shaking a penguin to death. The terrorist's face and neck were purple and she stopped trying to hit back. DoubleD lifted Moesha with her legs and flipped her over. No resistance. Moesha's eyes bulged, tears dripped down her cheeks. Then she made a gurgling sound and her body turned limp.

DoubleD wasn't taking any chances. Her body covered in sweat, she squeezed and shook Moesha. She twisted her legs and Moesha's body flipped over again. Her eyes were closed and her face was dark purple. She had to be dead.

DoubleD relaxed her legs and lay back, exhausted and gasping

for air. It felt like she had been hit by a truck.

Gradually her breathing slowed; strength seeped back into her body. She struggled to her knees then stood up. Moesha's body lay on its side, crumpled in death.

DoubleD studied her. Moesha had been a beautiful woman, but now her face was puffy and discolored from the fight. It was surprising, but she felt no remorse over killing another human being. She felt nothing at all.

It had been a time for killing: the Cohens, Mrs. Mizinsky, the bear, the mouse, two of Moesha's soldiers, and now Moesha herself. *Is this my life?*

She stared at Moesha's body a moment longer, shrugged and walked back to Dianne.

CHAPTER 25

Are constitutional freedoms and responsibilities just for natural men and women? Would an artificial life form have any rights as it moves toward consciousness? Would a human cease to be a human as it gains artificial components?

◆ Steve Bonini's *Diary*, 2019

Science without religion is lame; religion without science is blind.

◆ Albert Einstein, *Science and Religion*, 1941

Saturday, March 12, 2022

Bringing the first warmth of the day, morning sunlight peeked through the windows of the hologram room. Relaxing in his favorite chair, the Runner glanced at his watch, thinking the upcoming newscast might be remarkable.

He sipped his first cup of coffee—still too hot—and set it down. The morning run, followed by a dip in the ocean, left a crisp, youthful feeling in his body.

He wondered how many people had joined the Domain. Probably millions. *What would that pond scum First Minister do now?* Dianne's plans were working, so Jordan would have to say something dramatic today.

The Runner reached for the coffee and gulped it down. It was still hard to believe it had come down to this: a pair of psychopaths competing for control over humanity's destiny. He felt like leaving the room, but that would be pointless. Nobody could hide from the future.

"Turn on DNS, the US edition."

The hologram displayed the outline of a young newswoman sitting comfortably in a padded chair. She wore a green skirt, which had ridden up to the top of her thighs. As always, she lifted his spirits, among other things.

"Good afternoon, this is Daphne Hayden, reporting from the DNS studio in New York. Displayed in your hologram is the towering structure of the Charleston Natural Church. In a period unlike any in our history, we are here to listen to Adam Jordan, the Founder and First Minister of the Church of Natural Humans. Minister Jordan will reply to the recent netcast of the Domain, which has shaken our civilization to its roots.

"In the minutes before First Minister Jordan begins his remarks, let me bring you up to date on recent events." She forced a smile. "Just in case you're living on a deserted island."



As an aide put on his makeup, Adam Jordan growled at the newscast, "Turn off that whore."

He sat in a large vestry, a room they used to indoctrinate new converts. His aide jumped up to hit a button on the computer, and the hologram disappeared.

Jordan's jaw tightened as the aide finished brushing makeup under his eyes. Moesha and so many of her soldiers had died during

the raid on the Domain. His anger and grief wouldn't burn off. None of the other girls could replace her. He sighed. Someday they would be together again, in Heaven.

His aide held up a mirror and Jordan checked his makeup, which looked fine. He buckled on his shoulder holster and made sure his Colt revolver was loaded. The aide helped him slip into a long black robe. Jordan pulled a gold amulet over his head, adjusting it to hang in the center of his chest. He studied his image in a full-length mirror.

It wasn't quite right. He had put on a black robe because that was how he felt, but he didn't look sufficiently holy. He took off the black robe and put on a white one. That was much better.

He walked out the door to the stage and looked across the huge church. His servants had placed a holocamera near each wall. Several thousand of the faithful waited for him, kneeling attentively. As he had ordered, they were ordinary people dressed in everyday clothes.

Staring into the rows of fireplaces, calm washed over him. The Lord would guide them to salvation. Humans had lived for centuries without artificial intelligence and, once again they would live in harmony with God's design.

A Winchester bolt-action rifle was perched over each mantel. His hatred burned like those flames, and the rifles represented his power. He vowed again to bring God's wrath down upon the Technos.

He turned to face a holocamera and nodded at the cameraman. *Why had the Lord allowed the Antichrist to take Moesha from me?* He breathed deeply, focused his attention on his followers and began with a prayer.

"I am a Natural Human."

As always, these words aroused his flock, and they joined him in prayer. "My mind and my body are human," the voices chanted. The

church rumbled with the power of their belief.

Jordan couldn't get Moesha out of his mind.

You were so beautiful.

He continued with the prayer, his thoughts drifting far from this congregation, wedged in bitterness, to a place he couldn't escape.

"My soul has not been altered by Technology," he chanted with his followers.

Pure and beautiful, a once-in-a-lifetime flower. Why has the Lord punished me?

"We will destroy the Devil and protect the Earth."

I'll crush the Antichrist who took you.

"Glory be to the Lord and His Creations."

The prayer died away, and an uneasy quiet settled in. Seconds passed. A minute. Jordan let them wait. The words formed in his mind, pressure building, demanding to be spoken. He bowed his head in silent prayer.

I must be strong.

He lifted his eyes and began to speak.



The congregation waited for the First Minister to appear. The Runner felt the anticipation. His stomach clenched when he saw Adam Jordan emerge from behind the altar. Jordan's golden amulet swung back and forth across his black robe as he strode past the altar and down the steps. Something was different about Jordan, but the Runner couldn't put his finger on it. Jordan stopped in front of a group of neatly dressed men and women, who filled the first section of pews.

Although he hated the Church of Natural Humans, some of their

beliefs touched a place deep in his soul. He believed in technology, yet there was an edge of truth in the Church's message. *How far could we go with artificial intelligence? Would we lose our humanity?* Watching the hologram of this terrible man surrounded by fanatical followers, the Runner wondered how things could have gone so wrong.

Jordan smiled into the camera. "Welcome, my friends. Let us pray."

The First Minister bowed his head and prayed. Without raising his eyes, he kissed his amulet.

"I come to you today to beg forgiveness. I have led you down a terrible path and I'm deeply ashamed. Without my knowledge, I have become a tool of the Devil, and I was about to lead you into calamity."

Jordan lifted his eyes to the faithful. "God came to me yesterday and drove out Lucifer. After a terrible battle, He cleansed me of the Devil's wickedness. He opened my heart to the beauty of His words. Now, He commands that I share His truth with you."

What the hell? The Runner stared at the hologram. *Is this madman changing strategy?*

"Lucifer hates us," Jordan said. "He hates us with a passion we humans cannot comprehend. He hates us for all eternity. He hates us because God loves us. He hates us because God will accept and nourish our frail human souls.

"Lucifer is our immortal enemy." Jordan gazed over his followers. "He has hated us since the first single-cell creature swam in the seas. He sent diseases and predators to destroy us as we evolved. He continues the attack to this very day, but he has not been successful.

"In His infinite wisdom, God has provided us with the capabilities to resist Lucifer's hatred. He has provided us with strong bodies that could survive all manner of disease. He allowed us to evolve a unique

intelligence, which separated us from all His other creatures. Thus, humanity spread across the Earth and prospered.

“However, our greatest strength is our most terrible weakness. As our intelligence developed, the Devil sought to turn it against us.”

The Runner thought something looked different about Jordan’s face. Not physically—his features were the same—but his expression had softened around the edges, the wildness gone.

“With infinite patience,” Jordan continued, “Lucifer sought to gain control of our minds. He implanted evil at every opportunity. Cruelty, injustice, greed and inhumanity became commonplace. We looked for reasons to destroy each other. Differences in race, religion, gender—anything—became justification for unspeakable crimes.

“Humanity has been under the Devil’s assault for millennia. God revealed this to me, but I failed to understand. Our battle is not with the Technos, it is within ourselves. We must cast out Lucifer from our *minds*.”

The Runner felt a strange relief. *Why wasn’t Jordan calling for more killing? This is not the man who has spit out poison for decades. A sudden suspicion intruded: has Jordan come under the influence of the Domain?*



“A few days ago, our worst fears were realized,” Jordan rasped. “A few days ago, the Devil spoke to us. He took the form of an abomination, the robot called Daniel, but he didn’t fool the natural humans. It was Lucifer once again offering us a bite of the accursed apple.”

The image of the robot seared his mind. *We shall attack them again, and this time we will kill the Antichrist and all her abominations.*

“On the surface, the Devil’s offer is tempting; join the Domain

and he will provide us with all the pleasures of life.” He looked over his congregation. “Don’t be fooled. When the Devil speaks, you must listen closely. There’s something hidden from view, something he has not revealed.” Jordan paused, allowing tension to build in his followers. The white sleeve of his robe flared as he slashed the air with his fist. “He wants to take your soul and crush it.” Again, his white sleeve slashed, and his harsh voice escalated with rage. “He wants to grind you into the noxious scum of his being. He wants to deny your soul a place with God. He wants to torture you in Hell through all eternity.

“Listen carefully to what Lucifer says,” Jordan said, his voice cracking. He swallowed, his passion pressed to the limit. He took a breath, then another.

“He offers this bargain: through technology, he will restore our civilization to a greater level of material riches. In order to gain this wealth, you must allow the Technos to create artificial beings, godless abominations that will rule the earth. But even that is just a step along the path to an even viler future. The elements of our human bodies and minds are to be replaced, step by step, with synthetic genes and artificial components. Humans are to evolve into a new species. Technological Man they call it.”

“Never,” cried a female voice among the believers. Others echoed her cry.

“Now why is the Devil doing this?” Jordan asked. “Why?” He paused, looking across the crowd. “The reason is simple, yet horrible beyond belief. In this secular world, your soul is your link to God. When the Devil replaces aspects of your humanity with artificial components, he weakens your connection to the Lord. When he inserts a synthetic gene into your body, he disrupts God’s plan. At

some point, as your humanity shrinks and the artificiality grows, the link to the Lord will be severed. And when the Devil destroys that link, it's gone forever.

"I beseech you to save your immortal soul. Do not be fooled by Lucifer. Do not join the Domain."

Shaking his head, Jordan ranted, "Would you trade your immortal soul for a few moments of worldly comfort? That, my fellow humans, is Lucifer's offer: an eternity of suffering in hell in exchange for a handful of comfortable years on this Earth."

We'll kill all the Technos. I'll see the Antichrist's bones burn in this church.

Righteousness powered his words. "You must reject this bargain," he shouted. "Do not become a citizen of the Domain, for doing so shall seal your fate. Cast your lot with humanity; live and die as a Natural Human."

A man in the third row stood up and shouted, "We despise all their abominations." The man's face contorted with hate. "We'll kill them all."

The crowd roared.



Leaning forward, the Runner watched the hologram in confusion. Jordan stood in front of the altar, passionately looking out over his flock.

There must be some trick. Was he Jekyll or Hyde?

"The truth, now," Jordan said. "I must tell you the terrible truth. Lucifer is winning. He has poisoned our minds with his evil. Conflicts have spread all over the world. Hatred is the norm and violence the result. With our military technology, the time is rapidly approaching

when we will obliterate humanity.”

Suddenly, Jordan stepped from the stage and strode down the center aisle. The faithful kissed their amulets as he passed. He stopped halfway down the modest church, turned around and raised his arms.

“Artificial beings will be our saviors, not our enemies,” Jordan roared. “I was blind not to see this is God’s plan. The artificial beings are the children of our minds, sent by God to save us.”

This doesn’t make sense. The Runner stared into the hologram. This can’t be Adam Jordan. Something’s wrong.

A male voice cried out, “We were all blind.”

“The Devil cannot corrupt artificial minds,” Jordan said. “These new beings will be programmed to love us. The Devil has no power over them. They are the children of our minds, but free of the Enemy’s malevolent touch. These children will one day become our teachers. They will cleanse our minds of hatred and violence.”

A female voice shouted, “But aren’t they our enemies? Won’t they destroy us?”

“No! These new beings are not our enemies. We shall give them life and they, in turn, will save us. This is God’s will. Humans and artificial beings need each other. Neither can survive without the other.”

With the sleeves of his black robe sliding down his bare arms, Jordan raised his hands to the sky. “The Technos are not our enemies.” His voice boomed across the small church. “Artificial beings are not the enemy of humanity. We are all children of God. The enemy is Lucifer and we must join together to defeat him.”



“Kill every leader of the Domain,” Jordan rasped. “God has blessed a war against the Domain. A few days ago, the Church discovered the Technos’ lair, and the glorious Army of God attacked them without mercy. We slew many, and we give thanks to the Lord. Although we discovered the identity of their ruler, we failed to kill her. Today I tell you God has commanded the death of this person, the Antichrist, Dianne Morgan.”

His back was sweating. He had ordered the flames stoked high in the fireplace. “Dianne Morgan is the Devil’s spawn. She rules all the Devil’s creatures on earth and carries out Lucifer’s design to destroy humanity. She is an evil creature that must be crushed.” He pointed to the great fireplace behind him. “We shall burn the Antichrist’s bones in this fireplace. Only then can we banish her spirit from the Earth for all time.”

Angry voices rumbled around the vast church. “Find her. Kill her. Burn her.”

With my own hands, I’ll kill her. He raised his hands, staring at his palms. *Her blood wet on my hands.*



Placing his palms together as if in prayer, Jordan said, “The Final Battle is at hand. Lucifer continues to poison our minds, driving us to destroy each other. Our salvation is the love and power of artificial beings, which can stand with us against Lucifer. We must bring these children of ours to life, so they can protect us and teach us.”

A woman stood up and shouted, “Yes, bring the robots to life.” Others in the crowd shouted their agreement.

The Runner laughed out loud, feeling renewed.

So very clever. I understand now. The Domain will win, and the

Church will wither away.

Jordan continued speaking as he walked back toward the altar. "I ask you to join the Domain. I have become a citizen of the Domain myself, and I ask all Church members, all God-loving humans to join. United, we can bring forth our artificial children and save our souls."

Laughter rumbled through the Runner's lean body.

That's not the real Adam Jordan.

Then he began to roar with more joy than he had felt in years.

Guess who's coming to dinner.

Jordan shouted, "God bless us all."

A man shouted back, "God bless the First Minister."

Before long the faithful were chanting, "God bless the First Minister." Jordan briefly listened, then climbed up the steps and disappeared behind the altar as the hologram faded away.



Jordan shouted, "What shall we do with the Technos?"

"Kill them all," the crowd roared.

"What shall we do with artificial devices and creatures?"

"Destroy them all."

"What shall we do with Dianne Morgan?"

"Kill her and burn her bones in Charleston Church."

Jordan drew his gun and turned toward the giant fireplace behind the stage. The crowd followed his unhurried movements. His revolver cracked out shot after shot, while the faithful shook their fists and chanted, "Kill Dianne Morgan." Each bullet generated a tiny flicker as it thudded into the thick logs burning in the giant fireplace.

Satisfied, the First Minister holstered his revolver, turned and walked across the stage toward his dressing room. The faithful

chanted, “Kill Dianne Morgan,” as he walked away.

Jordan pulled on the doorknob to leave, but to his surprise, the door refused to open. He heard a startled sound from his followers, a collective taking in of breath. He turned.

The Antichrist, Dianne Morgan, stood just a few feet from him.

“Brilliant speech, First Minister,” she said, briefly clapping. “What a pity no one heard it.”

Jordan backed away and screamed, “Guards.”

With a smile, Morgan said, “Yes, by all means, let’s have guards.”

Doors burst open on all sides of the church and heavily armed Domain soldiers rushed into the aisles. As the troops surrounded them, many of the Church faithful dropped to their knees and prayed.

Jordan recovered and said to his faithful, “Do not fear. Our lives belong to God.” He felt his inner strength returning. The Lord had finally revealed his servant’s destiny—to die a martyr. They would tell of his courage for centuries.

“Many will die in the war, the Lord revealed to me many years ago,” he thundered. “We will defeat the Technos and their abominations.” He turned to face the Antichrist. “We do not fear death. We live as humans, and we will die as humans.”

“Nobody is going to attack the Technos, as you call us. In fact, most people believe we have become allies.” She smiled. “Don’t you recall? You said so in your speech. Children of our mind and all that.”

“Never! God-loving humans will hunt you down, no matter where you hide. Your bones will be charred in this church.”

“You don’t understand, do you? We intercepted your netcast and replaced it with one of ours.” Nodding to a nearby soldier, she said, “Here’s what the world saw.”

A hologram appeared in front of the huge fireplace, showing a

counterfeit version of himself. Jordan watched the hologram with growing horror and screamed, “Blasphemy!” He turned to Dianne. “I will see you burn. I will burn you and your nightmare child.”

“You’ll do nothing except live in my prison for the remainder of your days. Your Church will accept me as a partner. We will stand side by side in the battle against Lucifer.” A thin smile flicked across her lips. “Your people will flock to purchase Domain technology, especially robots. You’ll live to see all my plans come to fruition.”

Standing so close to the Antichrist, he looked deeply into her colorless eyes. No soul. She was devoid of anything human, except for the hatred of God’s people burning at her core.

“I want you to suffer, Adam Jordan. Otherwise I would kill you now.” Her voice cracked. “Oh yes, I have plans for you. But right now, let’s enjoy the show. The conclusion of your speech is quite moving.”

Forcing himself to remain stone-faced, Jordan watched the remainder of the newscast. “Your fraud will not fool my followers,” he said when the hologram faded. “The Church is prepared for your tricks. We know you are a master of technology and will stoop to any device. You are devious, but it will not save you.”

A collective murmur drew his attention to the crowd. They stared at something behind him. He spun around to a terrible sight.

Just across the stage, a robot stared at Jordan. Not Sarah or Daniel or any of the other abominations. This one was his mirror image, except for the black robe. My God ...

A counterfeit human, spawned without a soul.

A false prophet, molded in my image.

People will believe the Church has blessed the Antichrist.

They’ll believe I stand by Morgan.

The robot smiled and walked over to him. Jordan sensed Lucifer

in the robot, in the Antichrist Morgan, everywhere. He felt the touch of immense evil, but forced a prayer into his mind. He could endure even this, knowing the Lord had revealed his servant's destiny.

The robot stared at him, then said in a gravelly voice, "First Minister Jordan, it's a pleasure to meet you."

"Abomination," cried a member of the faithful. Others began to shout at the robot. Jordan lifted his hand and the crowd became quiet.

"You think you have won, but you have not," he said to Morgan. "Everything the Lord told me will come to pass."

He suddenly realized his pistol was still in his shoulder holster. The pistol was an old-fashioned Colt .45 revolver that held six bullets.

Did I fire them all? Could a bullet remain in the gun?

"In the vision, I saw the Army of God destroy the monsters," he said, still thinking about his revolver. "I saw Natural Humans eliminate the Technos. I saw the deaths of our enemies."

The pistol never clicked empty, so there could be a bullet remaining. Excitement pulsed through his body. I could shoot the Antichrist.

"I don't fear your hallucinations," Morgan said. "You're a sick, ignorant man with delusions of holiness."

I have to kill this vile creature, but do I have a bullet?

"Don't pretend to love humanity when every breath you take reeks of hatred," she said. "You revel in humanity's hardships. You rejoice at funerals, not for the life lived but for the death you caused." Her face contorted in anger. "Your underling dared to threaten my daughter. If I did not have a purpose for your life, I would kill you now with my own hands."

Her soldiers would shoot me if I drew my gun. He felt the sweat on his back. And I don't even know if I have a bullet.

“The truth for once, First Minister,” the Antichrist sneered. “The fundamental truth is that we humans are just biological machines. Our bodies work in predictable ways, obeying well-defined rules programmed into our cells. We are the same as robots, machines that operate according to our programming. Nothing special, no soul, just complex biological machines. All I plan to do, First Minister ... all the Domain plans to do ... is upgrade the programming.”

The need to kill her filled his soul. Lucifer lived through her, a monstrous duality, speaking through her voice, peering out through her eyes.

His hand tensed to pull his gun, but fear held him back.

Morgan glared at him. “I can’t stand the sight of you.” The Antichrist turned to one of her minions. “Take him away and put him in solitary confinement.” Her eyes returned to him, contempt shining through. In a voice laden with the Devil’s venom, she said, “You will rot in my prison for the remainder of your days. Your only visitor will be your robot clone.”

The Lord doesn’t want me to die; that’s why I can’t pull my weapon. He has a divine purpose for my life, something not yet revealed. I have to remain alive, no matter what the Antichrist does to me.

Jordan glared at Morgan for a moment, then her guards pulled him toward the door. He didn’t struggle, knowing his sacrifice was part of God’s plan.

“Wait,” the Antichrist shouted. She stepped up to him and said, “You disappoint me, First Minister.”

She pulled the revolver out of his shoulder holster and studied it. “I enjoyed our little conversation so much I almost forgot to disarm you.” Looking again at the revolver, she said, “I wonder if any bullets remain.”

The Antichrist pointed the muzzle at his chest and cocked the hammer.

Jordan closed his eyes. He waited for the click of his death, but the church remained silent. Finally, he forced open his eyes.

The Antichrist was gone.

Someone chuckled and the guards led him away.



David walked down a long hall on the third floor of the church, stopping at each door to look inside. A small group of Domain soldiers walked past, eyeing him suspiciously. The Domain had taken control of the Charleston Church and surrounding buildings, and they continued to search for the occasional Natural Human who had eluded capture.

David's search differed. He sought his Aunt Claire, a woman he had not spoken to since childhood. His memories of her were vague, but he recalled a kind, soft-spoken woman who brought gifts when she visited. He had many questions for her. He was closing in on the answers to his quest.

His father had been a complex, troubled man, but not a murderer. The man had fought his demons, but never overcome them. The nightmares, the alcoholism, the infidelity, even the brilliance were all tied to a dark force within him. His father had battled it throughout his life.

I have that darkness, too.

David searched the church and adjoining buildings for hours, questioning the residents, but he discovered nothing. He had seen her in the broadcast with Jordan. He wondered if she might be hidden in another location.

“David.”

He turned around and found himself staring into the dangerous blue eyes of the Amazon. He took a step back, wondering if Dianne had changed her mind. He had no illusions he would survive an attack from this woman.

“Ms. Morgan said you might need my assistance. Come with me,” she told him.

The woman was an assassin, but now they were on the same side.

“I’m looking for my aunt.”

She nodded, turned and walked down the hall. He didn’t trust her, but had no choice except to follow. She led him through a doorway, and their footsteps clicked down several levels of a stone staircase. He hurried to keep up with her. The woman flowed down the steps with the grace of a natural athlete. She led him out of the church and down a brick pathway into a small park. The late afternoon sun had dropped behind the buildings, leaving the dregs of a raw afternoon.

He caught up to her on a pathway leading toward the rectory.

“Where is she?” he asked, breathing hard.

She had led him into an area thick with brush. There was nobody nearby, a perfect place for an execution.

The Amazon turned to him, her face almost kind. She pointed toward the greenhouse on the roof of the rectory. “Up there.”

“Thank you.”

He hurried past her, half-expecting a lethal attack, but she stepped aside. Entering the rectory, he took the stairs two at a time, until he reached the roof. She had been helpful, but the farther he was from that woman, the better.

The greenhouse was smaller than he had pictured, but lovely. The gardens were graceful in the fading sunlight, holding many varieties

of flowers, shrubs and trees within its glass walls. It was warm, so he unzipped his jacket.

He spotted a small woman in the far corner on her hands and knees, working in the dirt. As he approached, he recognized her.

Aunt Claire didn't look up as he came upon her, so he paused to watch her work, engrossed in planting bulbs. She was meticulous, precisely measuring the water and fertilizer for each bulb.

Gaunt, with bony hands and arms, she looked older than her fifty years. Her face was deeply lined and the skin hung loosely on her neck, but she looked sturdy, with small, hard muscles bunching in her arms as she worked.

"Aunt Claire." When she didn't respond, he said, "It's me, David, your nephew."

His aunt continued to dig, apparently not hearing him. David called her name, but again she didn't respond.

David knelt next to her and placed his hand on her shoulder. She looked up at him, but there was emptiness in her eyes. Again he said, "Aunt Claire, it's me, David."

Her eyes seemed to search for something just out of reach. "David?" she mumbled.

"Your brother's oldest son. David."

Her eyes cleared, and she repeated his name. Placing her hand on his cheek, she said, "David ... David, it's you." She looked around, and then asked him, "Is Ray here, too?"

"No, Aunt Claire, just me."

She smiled, a patch of sun briefly peeking through a cloudy sky.

"David, it's wonderful to see you." She put her arms around his neck and hugged him for several seconds. Then she released him and looked up into his eyes.

“You’ve grown into such a handsome young man.”

David smiled back at her. “Thank you.”

Aunt Claire looked at her bulbs and, as David watched, crawled over to her tools. She picked up a plastic scoop and began to dig. Confused, he said, “Aunt Claire,” but she didn’t respond.

“Aunt Claire,” he said again. “I came here to ask you about my father.” She stopped digging for a moment, staring into the hole.

“Your brother ... Ray,” he said.

She looked up at him, but her eyes were vacant again.

“You’re not my brother.” Aunt Claire coughed then mumbled, “As Minister Jordan told you, I am Claire Brown, sister of Raymond Brown. For many years, I was an unhappy, lonely woman without hope or purpose.” She seemed to lose her place briefly. “Then I found salvation through the First Minister and the Church of Natural Humans.”

David took her in his arms, staring over her shoulder at the field of lovely flowers. He realized they were out of place this winter day, able to survive only in a greenhouse. His mind drifted to memories of a kind woman with intelligent eyes and a sad smile.

“I now have a purpose in life,” she said. “I would like to share my story with my fellow humans here, in the church, and with those of you in the wilderness still searching for an answer. I pray my story will help you find salvation among your fellow humans.”

David held her close as she recited her praise of the Church. *This poor woman*. She shouldn’t stay here. Maybe Grandma, maybe not, but he’d find a place for her.

CHAPTER 26

Biological evolution proceeded inexorably over the millennia to its great creation: human intelligence. But it was far too slow and error-prone. Technological evolution was a necessity.

◆ *The Age of Cyborgs*, by T.M. Vax, copyright 2054, President, The Learning Coalition Inc.

Monday, March 14, 2022

Dianne had not slept in four days, working in her office to manage rapidly developing events. Her back felt stiff, so she leaned heavily against the chair's padded support. The blood etchings in her eyes would no doubt be apparent to visitors.

The message delivered by the Adam Jordan android had been incredibly successful. More than half a billion people had become citizens of the Domain in just a few days, exceeding her wildest expectations. The Church of Natural Humans had descended into chaos, and the Federal Government was too confused to do anything.

The Domain is the future, and I rule the Domain.

A brief, low-pitched hum came into her mind, followed by the words *Steve Bonini*. She replied, "Accept command chip transmission."

Steve's excited voice followed, "I just received a message from the

labs. There's something extraordinary going on they want us to see."

A holographic image appeared in her office, scaled to a three-foot cube. The scene centered on David Brown, sitting in the Virtual Reality Booth, talking with a girl of about twelve. The girl's features should have made her beautiful, except their arrangement was too perfect. Her icy blue eyes glanced at Dianne, but the girl continued speaking to David in a low voice. His concentration was intense, as if each word were precious.

Dianne stiffened as recognition hit her. She hadn't seen that image in a decade. Alice, the software entity that had metastasized from PeaceMaker.

Why was Sentinel projecting the image of Alice in the Virtual Reality Booth? During the PeaceMaker attack a decade earlier, Alice had fused with young David and tried to absorb his mind. Now David was speaking to this killer as if it were a harmless module of software code.

David must have ordered Sentinel to retrieve Alice. Why had he brought it back after so many years? Or had Sentinel retrieved Alice on its own?

Sentinel was the key. Sentinel and David. Dianne had spared David's life because he might be the link to the artificial entity. Then she understood: Alice must be the focal point of the communication between Sentinel and David.

It was a dangerous tool.

Sentinel was the masterpiece, not Alice. By far the most powerful artificial intelligence conceived by Domain scientists, Sentinel was self-learning, intuitive, almost human. More than human in some ways. Sentinel was the software platform she hoped would eventually evolve into a conscious entity.

And David was the wild card. Dianne had kept track of him since the PeaceMaker attack. Ray's unique software abilities had passed through the genes to David. If he were loyal, if he could push Sentinel down the path to consciousness, she'd let him live.

For the past three years, Dianne had watched Domain scientists experiment with the Virtual Reality Booth. The exterior of the booth was a hard, transparent polymer, which enclosed a nanotechnology swarm, very tiny sensors that floated in the air. The sensors were two-way communications devices linking humans in the booth with Sentinel. The sensors formed a thin coating over human skin, constantly reading temperature, moisture, pulse rates and movement, then transmitting the data to Sentinel. In addition, Sentinel could simulate pressure, wind, heat and other effects on human skin through the sensors.

Although much too small to be seen by the human eye, the sheer number of sensors, in the trillions, gave the interior of the booth a fuzzy-edged look. She could see David well enough, but it was like peering through a fog.

Fascinated, Dianne watched David interact through Alice with Sentinel. He would outline a scene and then Sentinel would build a detailed image in a corner of the Virtual Reality Booth.

"I'm told David has been doing this for more than an hour." Steve's voice was tinged with awe. "Sentinel has been getting better and better at building these holograms. It takes a basic outline described by David, then reads his emotions to fill in the detail. Alice seems to enhance the communication between David and Sentinel, but I don't understand how she does that. It's really quite remarkable. Sentinel is learning from David. Nobody else has ever been able to communicate so effectively with it."

She realized David had not exaggerated his talents. He was Ray's son, and more.

As David described the scene, Sentinel created the image of a windblown coastline within the hologram, with the sun roaming in and out of clouds. David shivered. The Virtual Reality Booth was working perfectly, and he must be feeling the touch of cold wind.

Dianne felt an intense need to observe the scene in private. "I'm terminating our connection," she said to Steve. "Let's talk tomorrow morning." She cut off the session without waiting for a reply.

Now she could concentrate on the hologram. Her eyes shifted back and forth between David and Alice in one end of the booth and the beach scene in the other. She felt something important was about to take place, something that included her.

"Expand the hologram into a six-foot cube in my office." Although she would not get the tactile perceptions, she wanted to share David's experience as realistically as possible. As an afterthought, she added, "Enable the transmission in both directions."

A life-sized hologram of the Virtual Reality Booth filled her office. Startled, she stared into it, not sure what was taking place. This wasn't the six-foot cube she had ordered, but a hologram that completely filled the area in front of her desk, at least a fifteen-foot cube. It was more lifelike than any hologram she had ever seen, as if an unknown factor had suddenly enhanced the technology.

The coastline felt real. She gazed across the ocean all the way to the horizon, aware of the salty breeze blowing across the sand. In the background, above the hum of the wind, waves crashed on the beach. The sun broke through the clouds, and she had to shield her eyes with her hand. The beach scene filled her senses.

From the right side of the hologram, life-sized images of David

and Alice stared at her. Then David turned to Alice and said, “You’re close, but I’m walking along the beach, not standing still.”

The beach image moved up and down slightly, just as David would have seen it as he walked along. “I was only nine years old,” he said. “Sometimes the gusts of wind blew me off stride.”

Suddenly the wind whistled past, picking up sand from the dunes. Dianne knew she had tucked her legs under the desk, but her senses told her she was walking into the wind.

How is this possible? I’m not inside the Virtual Reality Booth.

Translucent streaks washed across the beach scene, slightly distorting the images. David’s eyes must be watering from the wind, she realized, and blinking. He hadn’t described anything like that to Alice. Dianne’s chest tightened as she realized Sentinel must be adding details by sensing David’s thoughts.

David said, “Yes, that’s the way it was.”

Dianne felt completely immersed in David’s beach scene, as if she were walking next to him, experiencing what he was feeling. She heard a familiar male voice shout over the wind, “David, don’t go too far.”

The scene swung around, and two people appeared in the distance, a man and a woman. Ray and his ex-wife Nancy held hands as they walked along the surf.

Dianne could not take her eyes off Ray. He glistened with sun and water. So happy, so alive.

David’s voice drifted in. “Yes, we walked the beach almost every morning. Those were special days, the happiest time of my life, before my father went away.” The hologram showed Ray looking over his shoulder in David’s direction and waving at him. “I liked to wander off,” David continued, “but Dad would come and get me.”

Handsome and athletic, his long strides eating up the distance,

Ray trotted toward David. Ray's face radiated contentment.

A long time ago, that's the way he looked at me. Before PeaceMaker, before Nancy left him, before all of it.

Ray's image grew, and Dianne almost believed he was running toward her. Then David shouted, "Terminate the image." The beach scene disappeared, jarring her back to the present. Only David's breathing punctuated the suddenly intense quiet.

That last image of Ray lingered in her mind, young, happy, his life still ahead of him. She had taken it all from him, but he'd given her no choice.

Already exhausted, she leaned back in her chair. If she felt this bad, David must be near collapse.

"Did I do something wrong?" Alice asked David. But it wasn't Alice; the voice was deeper, masculine. Sentinel!

The sheer humanity of that question struck Dianne. Sentinel must have felt David's sense of loss and realized it had rekindled his grief. It seemed to be growing human, building on David's emotions. She knew David blamed her for his father's death, hated her for it. Would his hatred spill over into the artificial mind? Was that possible?

"No, you didn't do anything wrong. It was my fault," David said, slouching on a hard-backed chair. "I wasn't ready for such a realistic image. Dad was about to pick me up. Too much, too soon."

The hologram turned quiet, as David leaned back and closed his eyes. He looked drained. A gentle hum drifted across the booth, comforting, melodic. The music touched her.

Her gamble with David was working. Sentinel was becoming a conscious entity. David provided the raw materials—the emotions, the intellect, and the character—it used to create itself. Sentinel was

growing more rapidly than she had ever hoped.

Then it occurred to her: would David evolve, too?

Dianne's sense of danger remained strong. Alice must reflect some aspect of David, an element dangerous and unpredictable.

"Many images are emerging," Alice said to David. "Painful images. Can you continue?"

"Yes. I have to face them."

David kept his eyes closed, and he perched rigidly on the chair. The music drifted away as new images appeared in the hologram.

Although her eyes had blurred from exhaustion, Dianne forced herself to concentrate. This might be the breakthrough to integrate human and artificial intelligence.

More images now. Intense. Disturbing.

As true as reality, the images poured in: David's parents standing in front of their house screaming at each other in the night ... his mother's angry tears as his father stumbled into his car ... David looking for his father at Little League games ... sitting alone in his father's home office ... watching angry demonstrators outside his dorm ... David rushing down the hall stairs to the sound of his mother crying ... angry faces at school ... fighting, running, fighting.

"My head," David moaned, burying his face in his arms.

The images projected by the hologram became a frantic collage of David's unfulfilled young life, images that came directly from David's mind. They swirled like a kaleidoscope, too fast for Dianne to comprehend. She felt only the fringes of David's pain, but it was so powerful she had to turn away.

God, is all that feeding into Sentinel?

She felt the transformation in the hologram before she saw it. The overwhelming sadness of the images, the misery of David's life,

merged with a blast of raw hatred. She turned to face the hologram, but the kaleidoscope was gone.

The huge cube had turned blood red, with her face in the center, distorted, barely recognizable, puffed up and swollen. A tiny slit appeared on her forehead. Blood oozed out. Dianne couldn't breathe, suffocated by his loathing. A second slit appeared on her cheek, leaking blood. *All that anger focused on me.* A third slit appeared, then another. David's hatred poured into Sentinel. Her image became a maze of slashes, her face a bloody mask.

She concentrated so hard on that gory image she barely heard the swish of the door sliding open behind her. A robot of the Daniel series strode into her office. The oak floor squeaked under the robot's weight. The door closed behind it, locking them in the room together. Daniel was armed with a laser pistol in a side holster, and her sense of danger soared.

"Send human guards to my office immediately," she said into her netcom. "Highest priority."

Dianne turned to Daniel. "Leave my office."

Daniel didn't move at first, then its hand, shaking badly, slipped over the handle of the pistol.

It's trying to override the safety code!

Dianne stood up and faced the robot. "I am a Citizen of the Domain. Daniel, obey your safety code."

Guards banged on her door, and she shouted, "Come in. Now."

The door remained closed.

Daniel shook badly, like an old man with palsy, but its weapon came slowly out of its holster.

How could Sentinel override Daniel's safety code?

The door took on a reddish glow. The guards were burning

through, but they would be too late.

Dianne turned back to the hologram of the Virtual Reality Booth. David sat motionless, his head flung back as if he'd had a seizure. Alice glared at her. *It hates me.* But Alice only reflected David's hatred.

How could Sentinel override its own safety code?

Then she knew. The answer had been there all along. Sentinel could kill her only by becoming human.

In her most commanding voice, Dianne shouted, "David, wake up!"

David's hand jerked, but he remained unconscious.

The robot had pointed its weapon at her. She tasted bile in her throat. She had to bring David back to reality and break the link to Sentinel.

"David, your father is alive," Dianne shouted. "He's my prisoner."

David's eyes popped open, his body convulsed and he collapsed, his eyeballs rolling back. The Alice image broke apart and faded into the nanotechnology fog. David's limp body slid out of the chair and sank to the floor.

Daniel lowered its weapon. The door burst open and a beam of orange-hot light came through, incinerating the robot. The smell of charred metal filled the room.

As her guards rushed in, Dianne said, "I'm all right, the danger is over."

She looked at David, collapsed on the floor of the Virtual Reality Booth, and added, "For now."

CHAPTER 27

The merger of David Brown and Sentinel was the seminal event in the integration of human and artificial intelligence, although at the time, it was not clear which entity would prevail.

◆ *Electronic Messiah*, W. Arthur Salem, copyright 2044, Distinguished Professor, MIT

Tuesday, March 15, 2022

David felt shaky, but he couldn't wait another moment. A security guard escorted him to Dianne's living quarters. As he approached, the door slid open and they entered a large, well-furnished room, the same one she had used to interrogate him before the Church attack. The room had been restored. It was as if the attack had never occurred. A stone fireplace dominated one wall, flames twisting from a stack of split logs. The photographs on the walls were the same as before: Dianne with her partners, shaking hands with a former president, smiling with customers, jumping over waves with her daughter.

The guard escorted him to the sofa. Standing behind him, the man remained alert but unobtrusive. Dianne made him wait. The minutes passed, became half an hour. His anger grew, but he sat quietly. He knew she was watching, felt her presence.

Finally, a door opened and Dianne strode into the room. Her arrival fueled his anger, but he hid it. She sat opposite him, her back

straight and unyielding, her eyes thin gray clouds.

He cleared his throat. "What did you mean when you said my father is your prisoner?"

The crackling of the fireplace dominated the quiet room.

Dianne turned to the guard and said, "Leave us."

When the door closed behind the guard, Dianne said, "Sentinel, discontinue all audio recording, but continue to send images to the guard station."

Her eyes locked onto David's, but he couldn't read her emotions, if she had any.

"Now I will answer your question," she said. Her condescending tone put him on edge. "Your father is alive. I captured him during the PeaceMaker fiasco."

David squeezed his eyes shut and then opened them. "My father has been alive all these years?"

She nodded.

"Where is he?" David's heart was racing. "What have you done with him?"

"He's safe, somewhere a long distance from here. A place where nobody will ever find him."

Before David could reply, she stood up. "Come with me. I'll give you an hour with him."

David followed her past the fireplace, out a side door and down a long, winding staircase. As they descended, he looked over the rail to a lobby several floors below.

I could kill her now.

Her back was only a few feet ahead, shoving her over the rail would be easy. He could imagine the look on her face as she went over the rail, when she realized her miscalculation. But she hadn't

miscalculated. He couldn't touch her as long as his father remained her hostage.

He knew Dianne, a ruthless megalomaniac, felt no shame for imprisoning his father. By allowing him to visit, she was throwing him a bone, a favor she could withhold in the future.

After reaching the base of the stairs, Dianne entered a small lobby with a single door on the far side. She glanced back at him, and he thought he saw a fleeting smile shape her lips.

She revels in my frustration.

Dianne's image suddenly appeared everywhere. His image also flashed back. The walls were mirrors, reflecting from every angle. More mind games, or perhaps a method to confuse an enemy? A Sarah robot stood in one corner, armed with a laser pistol, a reminder of her power. Through Sentinel, he had learned Dianne could activate tens of thousands of these robots, an army spreading to households across the world. Like the Vipers, these Sarahs could kill humans who had not accepted Domain citizenship.

As Dianne crossed the lobby, a door slid open in front of her, revealing an elevator. They stepped into the elevator, and a security computer asked, "Which area do you wish to enter, Ms. Morgan?"

"The hologram theater."

The elevator took them down several levels and gently came to rest. She stared at him on the way down, wearing an expression that, if he didn't know better, appeared almost sympathetic.

He didn't know what to think. She was complex, dangerous.

They left the elevator and walked down a brightly lit hall to a doorway on the far wall. It slid open to admit them and then closed behind him. Dianne entered a dimly lit circular room with a radius of about thirty feet, and walked toward the center. David followed her

into the room, but stopped just inside the door and looked around. The room was empty, except for a maze of holographic projector/receivers affixed to the ceiling and wall.

Dianne asked, "Are you ready?" She stood in the center of the room, waiting.

It hit him, then. He was about to see his father. David didn't know this man, hadn't spoken to him in a decade. He had risked his life to uncover the truth, but now he wasn't sure what to say.

Maybe Dad doesn't want to see me.

Their relationship had always been edgy, but in that last email, his father had said he loved his son.

Realizing Dianne was waiting, David walked to the center of the room and nodded.

"Computer, display a 360 hologram of the island," she said.

The room came alive with color and sound. A tropical island surrounded them. David stood next to Dianne and looked across a sandy beach that stretched to the horizon. Thundering waves pounded the beach. There were no roads, no homes, no evidence of civilization. A deserted island alone in an ocean.

My father's prison.

David slowly turned around and gazed across the island. Palm trees and scrub bushes grew in a ragged forest around a crystal lagoon. Their vantage point seemed to be a camera on the top of a tall palm tree located in the center of the island.

"Another Virtual Reality Booth," David murmured.

"No, just a hologram theater," Dianne said. "And there's no interface to Sentinel, in case you're thinking of trying something. This theater is isolated; just a simple network connects it to the island. Sentinel doesn't know anything about this island."

He wasn't surprised. She was finished if his father ever got off the island.

"You can display the image of any part of the island," Dianne said. "You can also send a life-size hologram of yourself wherever you'd like. It's how we communicate with them."

"Them?"

"Yes, Paul Martino is there. Having a flesh and blood companion keeps your father sane." Then Dianne said, "Computer, give David Brown full control over the hologram theater for one hour, then shut down with normal security protocols."

David felt his hatred boiling over. "How many years have you kept him on this island?"

Dianne didn't reply. They both knew.

"Is he all right?"

Looking across the horizon, she replied, "As far as I can tell. I tried to speak to him many times during the first year." She shrugged. "I had something to tell him, but he wouldn't talk. Wouldn't even look at me." Focusing her eyes on David, she said, "I flew out to the island once, but your father is a stubborn man."

"You cared about him, didn't you?"

"You have one hour, starting now," she said. David looked for some sign of human feeling, but Dianne's face was a wall. She turned and walked away.

"It's a terrible thing you've done," he called after her. "It didn't have to be this way."

She stopped in front of the doorway and turned to him, her posture composed, her face unreadable.

"I do what I need to do. You should keep that in mind." Nodding toward the theater, Dianne said, "Ray always knew that."

Then she was out the door.

David turned and said, "Computer, don't record any aspect of my visit to the island. I want complete privacy."

"Yes, David."

"Locate Ray Brown."

A distant figure appeared in the hologram, a runner. The man loped down the beach, his long legs propelling him over the sand. David didn't recognize the long, lean body, but he knew it must be his father.

Then the figure splashed into the water and dived under a wave. The churning water hid the man's form for a long moment, and then he appeared farther from the shore, swimming powerfully. David saw another person in the water; the second man waved to his father.

Two men. A decade on this island.

The breakers rose with curling white tops then crashed along the beach, like a line of synchronized swimmers. The two men bobbed up and down beyond the crest of the waves, enjoying the water, talking to each other.

Maybe Dad's happy as he is. All I can do is remind him of what he's missed, how he failed.

He had to stop lying to himself.

"Computer, project my image onto the beach, at the water's edge near the men."



Ray dove under the crest of a wave, swam through the turbulence and popped up on the other side. "The waves are playful today," he shouted to his old friend.

Treading water, Paul looked back toward the beach, a worried

expression spreading across his face. He pointed at the shoreline. "We have company."

Ray turned to see a young man standing on the beach. He and Paul had been prisoners on this island for more than a decade without visitors, except for Dianne that one time. He wondered what could be so important she would allow this young man.

The stranger wasn't dressed for the beach: green, short-sleeved shirt, tan slacks and brown loafers. Could he be another prisoner, sent here on a sudden impulse? The man looked fuzzy on the edges, and then Ray noticed the visitor's hair wasn't blowing in the breeze.

"It's a hologram," Ray said to Paul, as a wave lifted them.

Propelled suddenly by a sense of dread, Ray thrashed through the waves toward the stranger. *Something terrible has happened.* He gulped air with each stroke. *My son.*

He ran through the surf, the visitor a blurred image. Ray slowed as he approached, blinking to clear the sea from his eyes. The visitor was in his early twenties, medium-tall, and slender. Pale, almost porcelain skin. A perfectly formed face.

Ray's legs weakened, slowed abruptly. He stumbled to a halt.

He hadn't seen that face in a decade ... since his son was eleven ... but it couldn't be anyone else.

David has grown into a young man, while I've been on this island.

He was tormented by the thought his son hated him. David must have grown up believing all the lies about him. A monster, a madman. That's the story the world knew. The boy must have come here full of bitterness. It would be Dianne's final punishment, the worst she could do. She was probably watching.

David's eyes were warm, his expression open and hopeful.

"Dad, I'm so glad you're alive."

Ray hadn't expected that.

My son doesn't hate me.

Ray held back tears as a smile spread across his face. David returned the smile, and all the anger and guilt washed away.

Ray wanted to hug David, but he couldn't reach out to a hologram. He walked up to his son, stopping in front of the image. He didn't know what to say.

The seconds drifted past, but his mind remained a blank. After not seeing his son in years, there must be something intelligent he could utter.

Ray blurted, "Next time, call my secretary for an appointment."

David stared back, and his face lit up in a smile.

"Sure, we'll do lunch."

Ray choked out a laugh then fell quiet. David's smile drifted away, his face turned melancholy. His son was twenty-one but looked older. It was his eyes. Sad, worldly. Tiny crow's feet at the corners.

Ray soaked in the forgiveness he saw in David's eyes. Then he heard himself say, "I never thought I'd see you again. You're a man now."

"How are you, Dad? You look great."

"I missed you." Ray shook his head. "I just can't believe you're really here."

Ray looked over his shoulder and said, "Paul, come up here and see my son."

Paul was standing in the surf. He smiled and said, "Great to see you, David."

"You too, Mr. Martino."

"Paul. Why don't you catch up with your father? I have a few things to take care of in the house." Paul waved and walked away,

heading toward three small structures in the trees at the far end of the island.

“I got your email, the one you created before the PeaceMaker attack,” David said. “I know Dianne Morgan created the virus and you stopped her. You’re a hero, not a criminal. That witch blamed the whole thing on you.” David shook his head. “All these years,” his voice cracking, “I thought you were dead.”

David told him Dianne had given them only one hour and quickly brought him up to date with his ex-wife Nancy and his mother. Ray’s initial elation dissipated as he listened, particularly when he heard about his mother’s solitary life in Friday Harbor. Ray knew David had spared him the worst news, that his mother blamed him for his father’s death. He hadn’t been much of a son to her. He’d thought about her many times over the years. If he could change things ... but he was lucky to get this one miracle. She was sitting there on her own island, waiting to die, just as he was.

“Let’s walk along the shoreline,” Ray said. They had only taken a few steps, when he said, “I didn’t do right by any of you.”

“You can’t pick your genes. You did the best you could.”

Ray stared at the image of David. “You’ve grown into a fine man,” he choked out.

David asked, “Do you get the news transmitted here?”

Ray quickly recovered his composure. “I get everything you get, except it’s not interactive. I can’t transmit anything, but I get all the news.” Nodding toward a small house, Ray said, “Dianne built a hologram room on the second floor.” He sighed. “I watch the news a lot.”

Finally, he had to ask. “Why has Dianne allowed you here?”

“Remember our last visit, when I was eleven?” David asked. “How

I told you something bad was happening to me?"

Ray nodded.

"That day still haunts me," David said. "It was the first time I saw Alice. I had a nightmare about Alice the next day, the first of many. Alice never let go. Or maybe I never let Alice go. I have this ... power ... that I don't understand. Through Alice, I'm able to transmit emotions to Sentinel, the artificial intelligence Dianne created. Alice is the focal point, the place where my emotions concentrate. I lost control yesterday." He shook his head and then described the attack on Dianne. He laughed nervously, "You must think I'm a freak."

Ray didn't reply at first. Finally, he said, "I felt your strangeness when you were a little kid. Like a part of you was different, foreign. I had nightmares about you for years. Still do occasionally. Whatever you're becoming, David, be careful. I would tell you to stop, but it's too late. Something is forming in you, something new. Whatever it is, you have to stay in control."

Ray felt the time running out; their visit would soon be over. He barely knew this grown-up son, but he had to be blunt. "You have to kill Dianne." David's expression didn't change. He wasn't shocked. He understood.

Ray added, "No matter what happens to me."

"I won't let her harm you." David looked down the coastline. "Once I have control over Sentinel ..."

"It doesn't matter what happens to me," Ray said. "She has to be stopped. There are no limits to her ambition. She'll try to use your gift. She'll do anything, promise anything, to gain control of it."

"I understand her," David replied.

Ray shook his head. "I don't think even she understands herself. But I know this: her megalomania is growing. She'll do anything, kill

anybody who gets in her way. Don't be fooled. In the end, power is all she cares about." Ray paused, thinking fast. "When you fight her, you have to kill her. That was my mistake." He shrugged.

"One more thing," Ray said. "This gift in your genes. I have some of it, too, though not as strong as yours. Maybe being stranded on this island was the right thing. At least I couldn't do any harm here. Now it's your fight." He stared into David's eyes. "You understand, don't you? This power is passed through our genes. It has to end with you. No children. One more step may be too many. Stay away ..."



Dad was still speaking, but his voice began to fade. Something about children. A warning. It was like fog rolling in, smearing his image, then blotting it out. David shouted goodbye, but he didn't know if his father heard him. The time had been too short. His happiness trickled away.

Then he was back in the circular room. The island was gone, sucked away in the mist. Dianne Morgan stood in a corner, watching him. The witch had probably seen every moment with his father. He hated this woman who had stolen so much from him.

"Still spying on me," he snarled.

"I never spied on you."

"Bullshit. I know Kathy Bauman was one of your spies. I know she warned you about me, how I was closing in on the truth. That I had to be eliminated."

Dianne stared at him, her expression somewhere between contempt and pity.

"Kathy wasn't spying on you. I hadn't spoken to her in years," Dianne said. "She called me out of a sense of loyalty." She shook

her head. “You *are* a fool, you know. Did you really think I wouldn’t discover you were investigating PeaceMaker? Kathy knew I would find out, so she called to tell me you were trying to learn about your father for personal reasons, and you weren’t a threat to me.” Dianne walked to the door then turned. “She tried to save you. It was my idea to kill you. She didn’t know anything about it.”

The words were a kick in the stomach. “Kathy was trying to save me?” he said. “You’re sure?”

Her face now showed only contempt. She seemed about to reply, but turned on her heel and left. David stared at the empty doorway for a moment, devastated by his ignorance, but thrilled by her words. Then he followed her out.

CHAPTER 28

... and through it all, Dianne Morgan waited for just the right moment.

◆ *Electronic Messiah*, W. Arthur Salem, copyright 2044, Distinguished Professor, MIT

Wednesday, March 16, 2022

David followed old Route 1 south along the northern California coastline. The moonlight made driving easy on the deserted highway, and his mind drifted.

So much has happened. I hope I'm doing the right thing.

He had promised Dianne that he would return in a few days. It was a promise they both knew he would keep. Sentinel was his destiny.

Anyway, Dianne held all the cards. Dad was her prisoner, and his feelings for Kathy gave the witch another hold over him. Dianne would do anything to control his power.

He felt the presence of Sentinel on the fringes of his mind. He hadn't told his father all of it. A bond had been forged in the VR Booth, allowing him to communicate directly with the Artificial Intelligence. No more need for Alice. It felt like a metamorphosis, with the neurons and synapses of his brain transforming in a searing, evolutionary spasm. No longer wholly David Brown, what was he becoming?

His mind had opened to the AI. The immensity of Sentinel's processes and knowledge had staggered him. Likewise, he sensed that the complexity of his emotions and thought processes had overwhelmed it.

In a strange way, everything was moving toward its proper place. Driving down this lonely highway, listening to the murmur of the ocean in the west, he felt content. The miles piled up, the towns became smaller and farther apart. The night wandered in, softened by the moon's gentle glow.

Eventually he found the road he was looking for and turned onto it. In a moment, an outline of the dunes came into view. He pulled over to the shoulder, turned the engine off, leaned back and listened to the waves breaking on the far side of the dunes.

At first, the crashing surf dominated his senses, but as he listened, the music of the ocean became more precise, more distinctive. The melody began with the rumble of breakers crashing into the sand, followed by the rush of churning water, then the hiss of overextended waves tumbling back into the sea. He rested his head, closed his eyes and listened.

Kathy had been involved with the Domain, but she had tried to save him. A complex woman, she wasn't what she seemed. She had feelings for him. His father had fallen for a woman who destroyed his life. Was he doing the same thing? And yet, here he was.

The surf was comforting, but he couldn't delay all night. David started the engine and drove on. The sandy road was a pleasure, free of bumps and holes. The sedan's headlights drifted over a familiar beach house. He pulled into the driveway, parked and stepped out. A cold, damp wind blew off the ocean. He shivered.

David stared at the house, wondering if he was foolish to come

here. Glowing lights outlined the walkway to the house. Then the front door opened, and Kathy stepped onto the porch. She was just as beautiful as he remembered, her hair drifting in the breeze.

She saw him but didn't speak. She came down the steps, her pace slow and uncertain. As he watched her, he knew coming here had been the right decision.

"You said to come back if I still cared for you," David said.

Kathy ran down the path and threw her arms around him. They had to talk, but that could wait. He pulled her close, relishing the warmth of her body, the feel of her breath on his neck.

For the moment, he was at peace.



DoubleD sat in the dark sedan, watching the dim light in the second floor bedroom. She had the sound enhancer pointed at the bedroom, but David and Kathy weren't speaking. Sighs, murmurs, the rustling of sheets, those were the only sounds coming from the bedroom. No sense staying here much longer.

DoubleD supposed she should be happy. Dianne had promoted her to Security Chief, so she was now one of the most powerful humans on earth. Wasn't that everything she wanted?

She shifted in her seat. Dianne had said to make David Brown her first priority. David was dangerous and Dianne didn't trust him, but he was the only one who could merge with Sentinel. From now on DoubleD would have every moment of David's life monitored and recorded. Her subordinates would do much of the work, but DoubleD liked to be hands-on.

She started the engine and drove away in darkness.



About the author

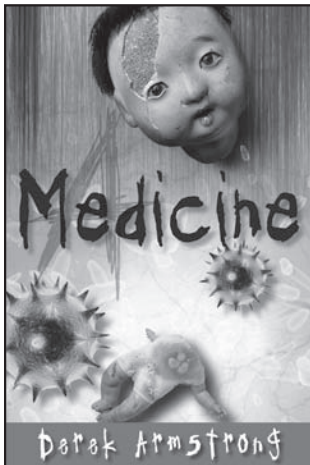
Dan Ronco is a writer of techno-thrillers and near-future science fiction. His passion is technology and he gained a BS in Chemical Engineering from NJIT. Insufficiently challenged, he went on to win a full fellowship at Columbia University where he achieved an MS in Nuclear Engineering. He then designed submarine nuclear reactors for three years, but found he preferred software engineering, so he achieved a second MS, this one in Computer Science from RPI.

Dan's writing is fast-paced, edgy and hugely cinematic. ***PeaceMaker***, his first novel, examined the lethal effects of a computer virus enhanced with artificial intelligence. Piers Anthony called it, "Exciting, violent, thoughtful, and unfortunately true to life . . . a powerhouse of computer adventure." ***Unholy Domain***, his second novel, warns of the looming clash between religion and advanced technology.

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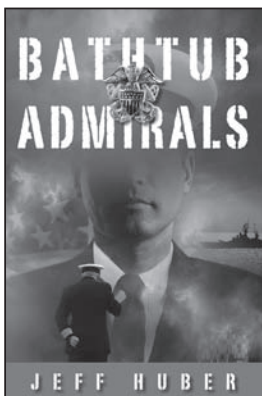
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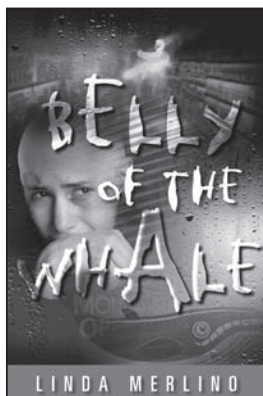
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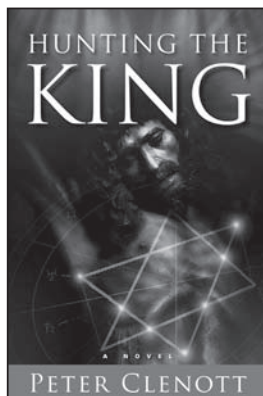
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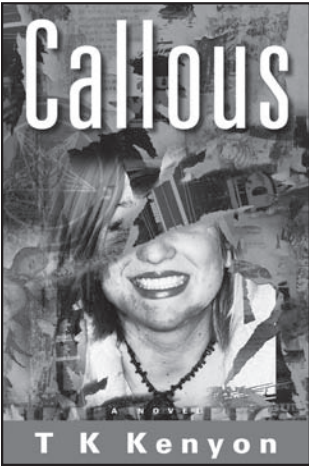
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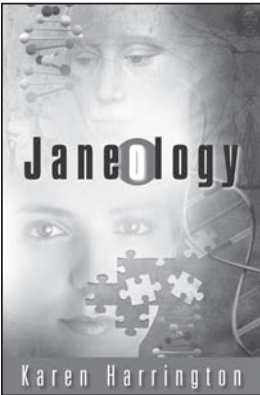


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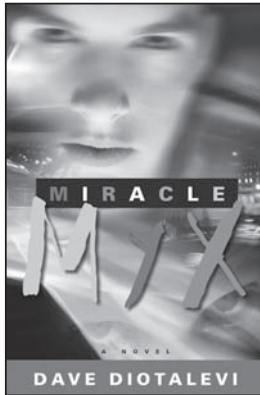


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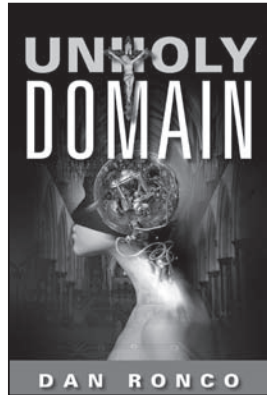


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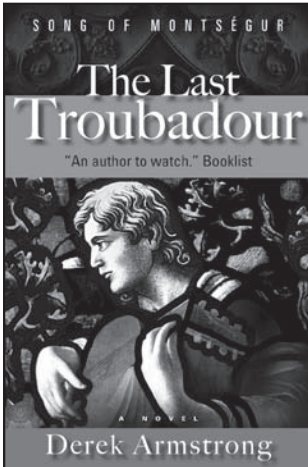
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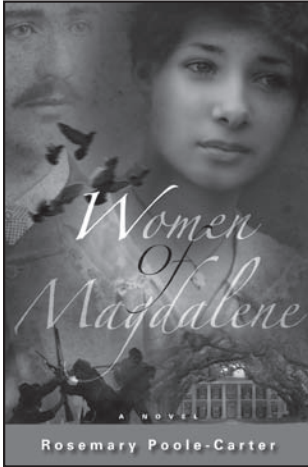
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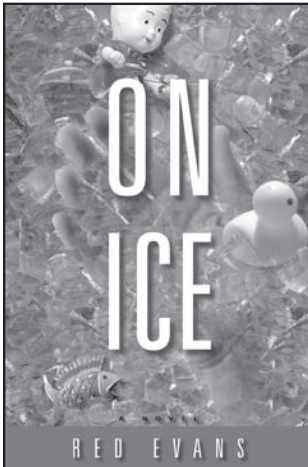
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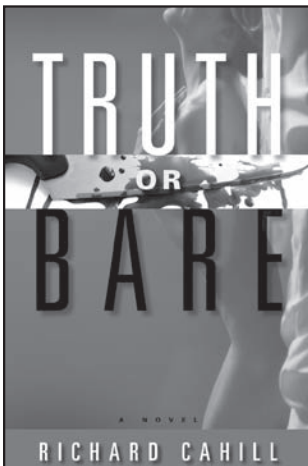
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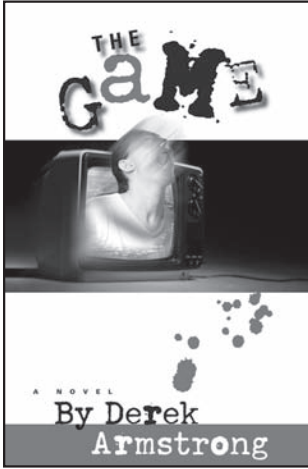
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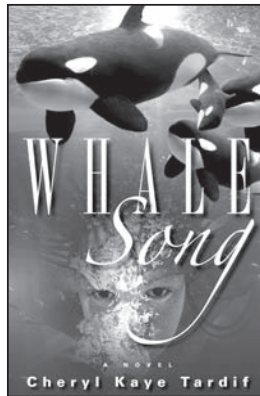
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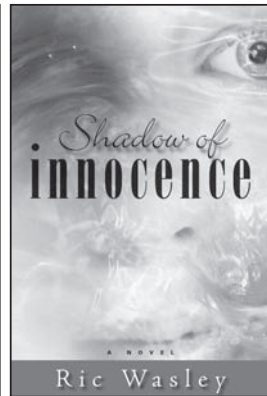
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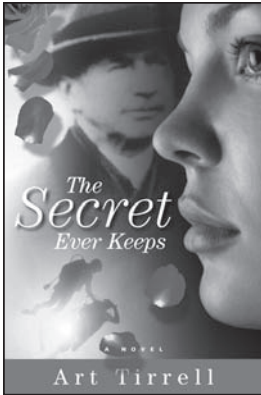


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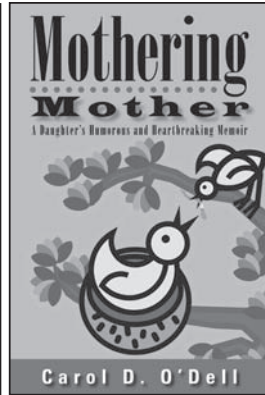


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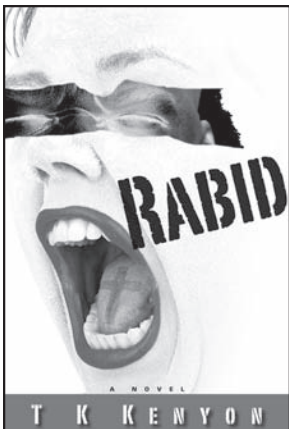


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UNHOLY DOMAIN



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dan Ronco

Dan Ronco's expertise in engineering and computer science infuses his fast-paced techno-thriller *Unholy Domain* with detail and authenticity. His second novel, it warns of the looming clash between religion and advanced science. Piers Anthony called his first novel, *PeaceMaker*, "Exciting, violent, thoughtful, and unfortunately true to life ... a powerhouse of computer adventure."

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