

ONE

Maison deBeers—Geneva—Switzerland

From the window of the great house it was possible to see the summit of Mont Blanc on a good day, a clear day when the sky was a perfect shade of teal and unhindered by clouds. There still were days like that, once in a while. Those moments that were rare and becoming rarer still, when clouds gray as oil-soaked wool graced Geneva's ornate streets with a moment of weak sunshine; but for the most part, the city remained wintry and wet, as summers became something that were spoken of by parents and grandparents to children with no experience of such things.

The house was fifteenth century, and it stood witness to the turning of the gray clouds above the city, just as it had to the republic of John Calvin, the rise of the Catholics, the fascist riots, and the gathering of nations. Like the blue sky, the house was a relic from an age so far removed from the now, it seemed as if it were something drawn from mythology. It stood undimmed by the acid rain that pitted and wormed into the bones of its fellows. The bricks and mortar of the building resisted the march of time and the polluted atmosphere, protected by a layer of polymerized industrial diamond a few molecules in thickness.

It pleased the man who lived here to toy with the idea that a thousand years from now, this place might still be standing while the rest of the city had come to dust. In his more fanciful moments, he even imagined it might become some sort of monument. The owner of the house did not consider this to be arrogance on his part. He simply thought it right, as he did about so many of the choices he made.

A trim man of solid stock, he resembled a captain of industry, a scion of blue bloods from the old country, a man of mature wealth—and he was all those things. He had a patrician face, fatherly after a fashion, but tainted by something that those who knew him well would call a sense of superiority. He walked the halls of the great house in the same manner he did the halls of the world—as if he owned them.

An assistant—one of a dozen at his beck and call, faceless and interchangeable—fell into step as he crossed the reception hall. Her shoes were beetle black, matching the discreetly flattering cut of her business suit and the cascade of her sharply fashioned hair. He registered her without a word, her footsteps clacking across the mosaic flooring.

“Sir,” she began, “all connections have been secured. The gallery is ready for you.”

He graced her with a nod. He expected no less.

The woman frowned slightly. “In addition...Doctor Roman has confirmed he will be arriving on schedule for your—”

“I know why he’s coming.” The flash of irritation was small, but any such sign from him was so forbidding that it sent his staff into silence.

He resented the small, unctuous physician and the minor indignities the man forced him to suffer each time he visited the house; but age was not a kind companion and the advance of years was taking its toll. If he were to remain at the top of his game—and more important, maintain his leadership of the group—it would be necessary for him to ensure his own fitness, and so these little moments of ignominy were his trade-off. He was no fool; all the others, his protégé in Paris first among them, watched like hawks for signs of weakness. Today would be no different.

As they reached the paneled doors of the gallery, he looked properly at the young woman for the first time and smiled, forgiving her. “Thank you, my dear,” he said, the softened vowels of his native Southern drawl pushing through. “You’re dismissed.”

She nodded as the doors closed on her, and he heard the gentle metallic click of hidden machinery inside the frame as it sealed closed. The gallery was decorated with walls of smoky, dark wood that shone in the half-light through the arched windows. Works in watercolor, oils, some portraits, others still life or landscape, hung in lines that ranged around the room. Deep chairs of rich red leather were positioned about the floor, and he noted that a silver tray with cups and a cafetière of his favorite Saint Helena were waiting for him. He sat and poured a generous measure, savoring the aroma of the coffee as the lamps above seven of the paintings flickered in unison.

Panes of shimmering color formed in front of each of the works, shifting and changing from interference patterns to something approximating human faces. Presently, ghostly busts of five men and two women

gained form and false solidity, projected from concealed holographic emitters hidden in the brass lamps. He saluted them with his cup and they nodded back to him, although he knew that none of them were seeing his real, unvarnished image. The sensor that picked up his face used software to parse the virtual avatar the others saw, advanced suites of pattern-matching programs that did away with tells and flattened vocal stress inflections; in this way he showed them only the aspects of him that they needed to see.

Data tags showed their locations in the corner of each image; Hengsha, Paris, Dubai, Washington, Singapore, Hong Kong, New York. Among them he saw the protégé, the politician, the thinker, and the businessman, the ones he distrusted and the ones he trusted to lie. He enjoyed another purse-lipped sip of the rich Saint Helena and put down the cup. “Ladies and gentlemen, welcome. Let’s begin, shall we?”

As he expected, his protégé spoke first. *“The current project is proceeding as expected. I’m pleased to report that the issue we had with the Hyron materials has now been dealt with.”*

“Good,” he murmured. “What about the deployments of our agent provocateurs for the active phase?”

“I’ve staged the operatives in all the standby locations,” said the politician, hissing as sibilance caught his words through the link from the American capital. *“We’re ahead of schedule.”* The other man cleared his throat. *“In addition, the distribution channels are now all in place.”*

He looked toward the businessman. “The media?”

The man in Hong Kong nodded once. *“Our control there remains firm. We’re already embedding liminal*

triggers in multiple information streams. I won’t bore you with the details.”

He nodded. The demonstrations and confrontations they had gently encouraged were a regular feature on the global news cycle. He turned slightly in the chair and glanced at the feed from Hengsha. “What about production?”

The Asian woman’s face tensed. *“Testing has proven... problematic. I’ve gone as far as I can, but until I have updated schematics for the—”*

Before she could finish, the dry English accent of the scientist issued from the Singaporean link. *“We’ve been through this. Is it necessary for me to explain once again? This is not an exact science. I told you from the start there would be delays. The work is an iterative process. In any event, I am about to acquire some new . . . resources that will speed things along.”*

He held up a hand to silence the woman before she could frame a retort. “We all understand the circumstances. But we also all understand the importance of this project. I’m sure no one wants to be the participant who slows down the hard work of everyone else.” His eyes narrowed and he gave the scientist and the woman a level look. “Solve whatever problems the two of you have and move forward.

We’ve invested too much time and resources in this to lose ground at this late stage.”

“Of course,” said the woman. The scientist said nothing, only nodded.

He felt that something needed to be said, and so he stood. “My friends. My fellow perfectibilists.” He smiled again, amusing himself with the use of the archaic term.

“None of us harbor any illusions about the delicacy of our work. The burden of governance, the stewardship upon us is great, perhaps at this moment in history greater than any of our group have ever had to shoulder. Humanity is becoming malleable, and we see battle lines being drawn across our society...We alone see this where others do not, and the great responsibility, as ever, falls to us. And so we must have a unity of purpose, yes?”

A series of nods followed his words. They all knew what was at stake. The group was on the cusp of the next great iteration, the placement of the next flagstone in the path that stretched from the day of first foundation in old Ingolstadt, to that glittering human tomorrow a thousand years hence. He felt a tingle of rare excitement in his fingertips; so much of what they did was slow, so gentle and subtle that it was like a breath of wind upon the sails of society. It shifted the path of humanity by degrees, an infinitely long game that measured its turns in years, decades, generations.

But once in a while, a point of criticality would approach. A moment of importance that would act as a fulcrum for the future.

The fall of Constantinople. A sunny June morning in Sarajevo. The detonation of the first atomic bomb. The two burning towers. These and all the others. For those with foresight and the will to act for the greater good, the elite who could lead mankind through the darkness, these moments represented the rise of opportunity. The group’s very existence was predicated on times such as these—and if these critical incidents did not occur in the weave of world events by a process of natural evolution, then it was only right that they *create* them.

He nodded to himself. They were the breath of wind on the sails, indeed. But they were also the hand upon the tiller.

He looked across at the face that ghosted before Turner’s *Scarlet Sunset*, the other woman watching carefully from the towers of Dubai. “The . . . impediments,” he began, with a sniff. “I’m sure we don’t need to discuss names and all. Specifics we can leave to you, yes?”

The olive-skinned woman nodded. “*I have it in hand, Lucius,*” she said, showing her rank to the others with her casual use of his first name. “*The last pieces are being placed upon the board as we speak.*” She smiled, and there was no warmth in it. “*The knights are in place to take the bishops and the rooks.*”

None of them spoke for a moment, and he found his gaze drawn away once more to the windows. Shafts of sunshine were making a valiant effort to pierce the dreary veils of gray over Geneva, and perhaps if he had been a pious man, he might have thought it to be some sort of good omen. He was long past the point of musing on what might happen to him, should he one day be called to account by human agencies or spiritual ones for what he had done. In his time he had ordered the death of men, the warring of nations, the ruination and the aggrandizement of individual lives, each in its way a tool toward a greater end. This was simply the method at hand; it was how it had to be done, and today was no different.

They would make history happen according to their design, as they had for more than two and a half centuries.

Logan Circle—Washington, D.C.—United States of America

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It was cool inside the parking levels of the Dornier Apartments, the heat of Washington's midday held back by thick concrete and air-con units that labored day and night. The walls were a uniform stone-white, punctuated every few feet by Doric columns that were more ornamental than practical. The sublevel smelled of machines; rubber, hydrocarbons, and the metal tang of batteries.

Anna Kelso glanced back over her shoulder toward the rectangle of light that was the exit, eyeing the pizeopolymer barrier bollards that had yet to retract back into the floor. The agent standing on the lip of the ramp that led up to Logan Circle gave her a nod, which she returned. He had his arms folded across his waist so his jacket stayed closed, hiding the butt of the Hurricane tactical machine pistol nestled in a fast-draw holster. The jacket was United States Secret Service issue, cut wide to hide the bulges, but those things never seemed to hang right on Anna's spare, whipcord frame. She'd long since decided to spring for the extra cash to get an Emile off-the-rack A-line modded by a tailor out in Rosslyn; still, there were days when she looked in the mirror and felt like a collection of angles cloaked in black hound's-tooth. Her dark hair framed a face that masked doubts with severity.

Anna's own firearm, a compact Mustang Arms automatic, sat high in a paddle holster in the small of her back along with two extra clips. Aside from the gun, the only other thing about her that could be considered standard issue was the discreet flag-and-eagle badge on her right lapel; the arfid chip inside today's identifier pin briefly communed with those on the jackets of the men

standing in front of the elevator bank. If Kelso had been wearing the wrong pin, or if it squawked an out-of-date pass-code string, each of them would feel a tap on the breast from the tiny device to alert them to an intruder.

She gave the same nod to the other agents. The tallest of the group ran a hand through a buzzcut of steely hair and frowned. Agent-in-Charge Matt Ryan had a boxer's craggy face and a perpetually stern, on-the-job expression.

"You're late, Anna," he said, without real heat. "She'll be on her way down any second."

"Then I'm not late, Matt," she replied, and was rewarded with a smirk from one of the other agents. Kelso had a reputation to live up to.

Ryan folded his arms. "In that case, you can finish the recap for me."

"We can just draw it from the comm pool, sir," said Byrne, the youngest agent on the detail. He tapped his temple as he spoke, where a discreet hexagonal implant module emerged from beneath his hairline. "Data's all up there on the shared hub server."

Ryan shook his head. "I like to hear someone say it out loud. I'm old-school that way." He shot a look at Anna. "Go on."

She shrugged. If the senior agent was trying to catch her off guard, he'd have to do better than that. "Standard three-car detail," she began, gesturing toward the dark blue limousine idling at the curbside and the muscular sport-utility vehicle parked behind it. The third vehicle—a nondescript town car—was already out on the street, waiting for the go-code. "Our principal is one Senator Jane Skyler, and today's move is a short run out to a Cooke's

Row restaurant in Georgetown. The senator is going to take a lunch meeting, then back to her offices for a bunch of briefings.” She took a breath. “We’re here because she’s upset some of the wrong people.”

That got a nod from Ryan. “We have a credible threat here, folks. Skyler’s stirred up a hornet’s nest with a bunch of the West Coast triad families, and they’ve made it clear she has a target painted on her back.”

“D.C. is a long way from California,” said the other agent, a dark-skinned guy called Connor. “Do we really think Chinese hoods are going to take potshots at her on the streets of the nation’s capital?”

“Whatever we *think*,” Ryan replied, putting hard emphasis on the word, “we have our jobs and we’ll do them, get me? Just stay focused and this will be a walk in the park.”

“Sir.” Connor nodded and fell silent.

Anna had to agree. The threats to Skyler’s life were real enough, but she knew as well as Ryan did that the detail was there more as a favor for a woman who was a close personal friend of President DeSilvio.

Ryan closed his eyes for a moment and she heard his voice inside her skull. “*Gimme a mode check. All stations report in.*” His mouth didn’t move, but Anna saw the slight motion in the muscles of his throat as he subvocalized; the communications bead bonded to his mastoid bone picked up the silent whisper and relayed it wirelessly to the radio node encrypted to the protection detail’s frequency.

One by one, everyone gave their call-sign code. The last was Agent Laker, who reported he had just entered the elevator and was on the way down. Ryan paused for a

moment, his gaze losing focus, and Anna knew that he was using the wireless link to patch into Laker’s optics, getting a look at the senator through the other agent’s eyes. Then he blinked and it was back to business.

“Saddle up. We’re on the move. Stay on open channel.”

Connor slid smoothly into the driver’s side of the SUV and Byrne clambered into the back. Anna paused, looking to Ryan for her orders as she settled a pair of military-grade sunglasses onto her nose. The elevator arrived with a melodic chime, and he nodded toward the limo. “Ride with Laker. I’ll be right behind you.”

“I really wasn’t late,” she said, suddenly feeling compelled to make the excuse. Anna thought about the careworn brass coin in her pocket and her lips thinned.

“I know.” He said it without looking back.

Anna opened the limo’s door as Senator Skyler emerged with Agent Laker and a man she didn’t recognize at her side. Eyes narrowing, she immediately commed Laker with the sub-voc.

“*Who is this joker?*”

Laker made eye contact. “*Security.*”

“*We are her security. She knows how this goes, no last-moment changes to the detail.*”

“*It’s already been cleared with command. Guess she likes to have a backup.*”

The man got in the car first, and Anna saw what she expected; a corporate assistant-cum-bodyguard, rail-thin, watchful, with a humorless face. Her optics captured a blink-and-miss-it flash of something under his dark, gold-lined jacket—the grip of a hi-tech nonlethal firearm—and a discreet logo pin in the shape of a stylized bull’s skull.

Belltower. As well as getting the American taxpayer to fund her security on the Washington visit, Skyler had also dropped what had to be some serious cash on a personal guard from the largest private military contractor on the planet.

The senator was speaking firmly into a vu-phone as she approached. “I don’t care what Phil Mead wants, Ruthie. I don’t like the man and I don’t like his policies. Tell the governor he can go look for his endorsements somewhere else.” Snapping the device shut, she afforded Anna a wan smile and climbed in.

Kelso was the last after Laker, and as the door thumped shut the limo set off. She didn’t need to look forward to see that the town car was already on point, as the SUV slipped seamlessly into the six o’clock position behind the senator’s vehicle.

Anna gave the interior of the limousine a once-over, and found herself looking Skyler in the eye. The senator reminded her of a history teacher she’d had in junior high, plump but not overweight, with a pinched face and hawkish eyes.

“I don’t often see female agents with the Secret Service,” said Skyler, as the convoy crossed onto Q Street and turned westward.

“There’s a fair few of us,” Anna replied. “It’s not that much of a boys’ club anymore, ma’am.”

“What’s your name?”

“Agent Anna Kelso, Senator.”

Skyler smiled in a way that was ever so slightly patronizing. “Did they put you on my detail because I’m a woman, Agent Kelso?”

“No, ma’am,” Anna replied. “They put me on your

detail because, like my colleagues, I’m very good at what I do.” She could almost hear Ryan wincing in the trailing car.

The Belltower operative, who was in the middle of pouring a glass of water for the senator, shot her a look.

“That’s very reassuring,” said Skyler as she took the glass. “I’m sure you have a lot of people to protect, and I appreciate your hard work today.” She paused for a sip and then leaned forward. “Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?”

The woman’s request wrong-footed Anna, but she covered it. “I guess so.”

Skyler pointed at her face. “Can I see your eyes?”

Laker gave her a quizzical look, but Anna complied, taking off the sunglasses and giving the senator her full attention. It wasn’t as if she really needed to wear them—her cyberoptic implants had full-spectrum UV and solar protection built in—but they were as much a part of the Secret Service “uniform” as the black jacket and pants.

Skyler leaned closer, studying her. “Your eyes . . . Caidin optics, am I right? I understand your agency also requires the implantation of certain communications and enhanced cyberware as well, is that so?”

Anna was uncertain where this conversation was heading. “Yes, ma’am.”

“How do you feel about that?” the senator went on. “I don’t have any implants myself, I don’t ask for them for my staff. How do you feel about your government insisting on such a thing for you to do your job?”

“Not every Secret Service agent is enhanced,” Anna replied. “That would be prejudicial.”

Skyler sat back. “Really? Tell me, how many field agents do you know who are not implantees?”

Anna frowned. “I’m not sure I see your point, Senator.” But she did.

“You know what I’m doing here, don’t you?” said the politician. “The president has asked me to chair a Senate subcommittee with the National Science Board on America’s involvement with the science and industry of human augmentation technology. The very reason I have that job is because of what I’ve done to make myself a target for certain criminal groups.”

The briefing on Skyler had been clear on all that, Anna reflected. Back home in SoCal, Skyler’s hard, pro-science stance on tech smuggling had also led to a crackdown on something the press liked to call “harvester” crimes—the 2020s’ equivalent of the old urban legend about guys waking up in a bath of ice sans a kidney . . . Only this time, victims were unlucky souls killed and stripped for their cybernetic augmentations. In the United States, the high price of many augs put them beyond the range of most regular citizens; trading in so-called recovered cyberware was fast becoming one of the key revenue streams for the triad gangs and their rivals, right after people-trafficking and drugs. Skyler’s home state was the gateway to America for the snakeheads in Beijing, Hengsha, and Hong Kong.

As for understanding all the rest of it . . . well, Anna watched CNN and the Picus WorldView channel just like everyone else. People were always looking for ways to divide themselves, and the line between “augmented” and “natural” was just another take after race, religion, gender . . .

“My job,” Skyler went on, her tone bordering on that of a lecture, “is to determine what kind of stance America should take on augmentation, to find out if this emerging technology can benefit our nation’s economy.”

The car slowed as they approached Buffalo Bridge. “Are you asking for my opinion, ma’am?” said Anna.

That seemed to amuse the senator. “No, Agent Kelso. But the fact is, the man I’m meeting for lunch runs the company that made those striking eyes of yours. Garrett Dansky, chief executive of Caidin Global. Tell me, did he do a good job?”

Anna resisted the urge to put the glasses back on. “I’d say so.”

“And you don’t feel . . . *diminished* by your augmentations?”

Her lips thinned. “I’m not like the panzer girls on *Ultimate Aug Fighters*, if that’s what you mean.” Anna kept her expression neutral; what implants she did have were mostly neural units, small-scale stuff that didn’t disrupt her natural profile. “I’m good at what I do. These make me even better.”

Skyler seemed to accept that and drew back, sipping her water.

“*You okay?*” Ryan’s voice was a gentle pressure on the back of her head. A telltale at the corner of her optic field showed he was speaking to her on a channel isolated from the rest of the team.

“*Fine.*” She knew what he was going to say next, the question he was going to ask, about the phone call the night before; she headed him off. “*Really, Matt. I’m good.*” It was a lie.