

JUNE 2041
BACK ROADS TO THE
NAVAL AMPHIBIOUS BASE,
CORONADO, CALIFORNIA

WILLIAM AUSTIN CURSED as the car hit a particularly deep pothole. He pressed a hand against its roof to stop himself from bouncing. Beside him, Lieutenant Brock Christensen, the chief of his security team, showed no reaction. The other members of the six-man team were divided into the two vehicles that sandwiched Austin's SUV. The cars had been spaced with about fifteen feet between them, unlike in a city where they'd have been clustered together. Even this level of protection wasn't necessary since they were so close to the naval base. However, admirals were supposed to have some measure of style. Austin couldn't disagree with that.

Brock was built like a linebacker; he was almost impossible to move. But Austin had seen what happened when the man *chose* to move during the Chicago incident. His response was a key reason why Austin had picked him to lead his security team.

“Hey,” Austin said to the driver, Ricky. “Are you trying to hit every pothole on the damn road?” He noticed a pained grimace on the driver’s face. “Just take it slow, all right? There’s no rush.”

“You have a meeting in two hours, sir,” Brock said softly. The man’s voice matched his size; it sounded like pieces of crushed gravel grinding together.

“Yes,” Austin agreed, leaning back. “And we’re an hour away from the base. And it’s just a debriefing from one of the rear admirals.” It would do the man some good to wait. Nevertheless, Austin didn’t intend to be late. He wasn’t the only four-star admiral who would be attending the meeting. It’d be unprofessional to make his colleagues wait on him.

Besides, Austin was actually interested in this debriefing. That was why he’d decided to attend in person instead of via video. The meeting was supposed to cover everything the government knew about the AI that had apparently caused Mayday. Most of the old crocks had been debating shutting her down, but Austin couldn’t get over how much of a waste that’d be—even if she had gone rogue.

“Holy fuck!” Ricky breathed out. The man’s eyes were wide, and Austin tried to follow his gaze, but the car skidded as Ricky braked. Austin braced himself, cursing. His vision was blocked by Brock, who had moved to protect him.

But what the fuck is he protecting me from?

The car tilted on its side. Austin pushed Brock away, balancing the vehicle enough that it landed upright. He cranked down the window, stuck out his head, and cursed anew.

“Skinner, report!” Brock grunted into his wrist comm. “What’s happening out there? Are there hostiles?”

The vehicle in front had tipped on its side. The three men who had been in it were all outside, their guns drawn. Even at this distance, Austin could see their tension. They were obviously spooked, but over what? Austin had handpicked most of his team. All of them had seen combat at some point. Yet they looked nervous.

Austin could hear one of them yelling something into comm, but only static came out on Brock’s end.

“Sir,” Brock murmured, “you should stay inside while the boys figure out what’s wrong. The bastards might have a sniper.”

Austin nodded and turned to see the other half of the security team out of their vehicles. They all had their guns out and were looking around in confusion.

“What I want to know,” Austin finally said, pulling his head back inside, “is why we didn’t see whoever it is coming. It’s flat ground for miles. How could they have snuck up on us?”

Brock’s expression didn’t change, but his confusion was clear.

“Fuck this,” Austin said, stepping out of the car. *I’m a goddamn admiral, for Christ’s sake.*

He made his way to the flipped vehicle. When he was a few feet away, he could make out a faint whirring sound. He hesitated, slowing. Brock caught up to him a second later, his gun out.

“Can you hear that?” Austin asked. “What is that?”

Brock grunted, then spoke into his comm. A few feet away, Austin could see one of the men respond, but only static came out their end. The man’s words were carried away by the wind and the whirring. It was louder now; Austin didn’t have to strain to hear it.

When he started to take a step forward, Brock placed a hand on his chest. “Sir, it’s best if you stay behind while we locate the threat.” The whirring made it difficult to communicate. Austin’s face hardened but he nodded. There was no point in making the man’s job harder than it needed to be.

Brock nodded, then yelled into the comm. One of the men in front jogged back to his position. “Skinner, what’s happening over there?”

“I’m not sure,” Skinner replied. He had blond hair and, like the rest of the security team, wore a black suit. “There’s a drone headed our way. The new guy—Dave—noticed it while he was driving. He said it came out of nowhere. It spooked him enough that he braked so hard the car tipped over.”

“A drone? At least that explains the damned noise.” Austin frowned and looked up. “Where the hell is it?”

Skinner shook his head. He looked as if he wanted to salute, but the look on Austin’s face warned him off. “That’s the thing, sir,” he explained. “It’s keeping low to the ground and approaching. But we think it just started doing that. We’re on open ground. If it had been flying low this whole time, Dave would have spotted

it a mile off. It must have been flying above the clouds and only dropped once it locked on our position.”

Austin’s frown deepened.

Brock grunted. “If a drone’s here, then it’s obviously hostile. Why haven’t you opened fire on it?”

“For one thing, sir, it’s not yet within range.”

Brock grunted. “Skinner, get your team, grab your shit from your car, and get back to the control. I’ll contact Higgins to do the same. The admiral and I will start setting up.”

Skinner nodded and jogged off while Austin and Brock headed back to the car—the control. Brock was yelling something into his comm, but the whirring was loud enough that Austin had to concentrate to make out the words.

It’s like air being pumped, Austin thought. He didn’t know of any drone that made such a sound. It further convinced him the drone wasn’t one of theirs.

Suddenly, a startled cry came from in front of him. Gunshots pierced the air. Bullets pinged off metal. A few feet away, in front of their vehicle, the rear-end security team had opened fire on something hovering in the air. Austin couldn’t make out the exact shape, but it was small—about double the size of a head. But the air distorted where it moved, almost like it was being pushed. The drone flashed in front of the team. A silver-gray cloud puffed out from somewhere within it, enveloping all three men. Immediately, they stopped firing and stood motionless.

Some kind of neuroparalytic drug? Austin wondered. If so, he’d never heard of anything like it.

Brock already had his weapon out, and Austin followed suit. It felt strange in his hands; he hadn’t had to use it for combat in years. But Austin had used guns for decades longer than he’d been an admiral, and he quickly acclimated himself with the weapon. Brock gave a barely discernible grunt, and they stalked closer to the team.

When they got within ten feet, Austin could make out the machine. He’d underestimated it before. It was a sphere about twice the size of a basketball. Amber-gold light spilled from the cracks in its spherical body. A steady beam of red

light blinked from a hole at its center. The light turned and shone directly on Austin.

The admiral opened fire immediately. He managed to get off one shot before a small explosion from behind distracted him. Against his better judgment, Austin turned to look. The front-end security car exploded and burst into flames. The shockwave from the blast flung the security team about like rag dolls. Austin didn't see where they landed—or even if they were in one piece. His sight landed on a machine combing through the wreckage.

“What the fuck is that?” he muttered. But he already knew what it was. The whirring sound peaked as the drone raced toward them. It was similar to what was harassing the other security team. Both drones were round and moved by forcefully pumping out air. This drone was half the size of the other and had a small tube fixed under it. The barrel of the tube was still smoking from whatever it had shot to cause the explosion. A red light blinked from a hole in its center. It focused on Austin as the drone raced toward him.

“They're here for you!” Brock shouted as he positioned himself in front of the admiral. “Get to the car!”

Austin's face stretched into a frown, but he nodded. A primal part of him wanted to fight, but only an idiot stood in front of drones without a good team behind him and a clear plan.

When he'd nearly reached his car, he tore his eyes away from the weaponized drone, turned, and almost slammed into its friend. Somehow, the second drone had crossed the distance between them while Austin was distracted. He raised his gun but knew it would be futile. The thing's body was already riddled with dents from the bullets his men had shot. Anything short of armor-piercing rounds would be useless.

The drone hovered less than a foot away from the admiral. There was still that strange distortion, but the whirring sound it produced was far fainter than the other drone's, despite this one being larger. That explained why Austin hadn't registered its approach. The drone was designed to be quiet.

Is that why it doesn't have any weapons? Austin wondered. *And what's with the gray cloud?* The admiral got his answer a moment later when a compartment on the front of the drone opened.

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With a yell, Brock—whom Austin had forgotten was beside him—tried to tackle the thing. However, it flitted past him. Austin used the distraction to dive out of the way. But the drone was waiting for him where he landed. The compartment opened wider, and Austin was enveloped in a silvery-gray cloud. The training that had been drilled into him decades before made him hold his breath. Nevertheless, the cloud found its way up his nostrils. The rest landed on the skin of his face and neck, absorbed through his pores.

A minute later, his world went dark except for a blinking red light.