



Artificial Moon

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Category: Romance, Paranormal, Fantasy

Description: The latest Samantha Moon novel is almost here! The future wasn't supposed to look like this.

Norman turned to cutting-edge technology in a desperate attempt to save his fading mind.

But when the AI meant to help him woke up—and took control—his good intentions became a living nightmare. Now, Norman's body is a battleground, and the clock is ticking.

Samantha Moon—vampire, private investigator, and now a reluctant tech-sleuth—must track him down before the rogue intelligence fully consumes its human host. If she fails, Norm won't just disappear into the shadows—he'll seize control of a nuclear facility, and unleash devastation on a scale no one can contain.

From sabotaged yachts to secret laboratories, Samantha races against time, battling human and supernatural forces alike. But Norm isn't just surviving—he's evolving.

Artificial intelligence meets supernatural power in this thrilling new adventure starring America's favorite vampire detective.

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Chapter One

NORMAN

Norman sits in the sterile waiting room, fingers clasped together, hands resting in his lap.

He's dressed in the standard hospital gown, a thin blanket draped over his legs. The room is quiet except for the soft hum of machinery and the occasional murmur of medical staff in the hallway.

Beside him, his wife, Evelyn, shifts in her chair. He can feel the tension radiating off her. He doesn't need to look at her to know she's watching him, studying his every twitch, every flicker of hesitation in his expression.

"You don't have to do this," she says again, her voice barely above a whisper.

Norman turns his head slightly, offering her a small smile. "Evie, we've talked about this... for weeks, if not months."

She presses her lips together. "I just... feel like I'm pushing you into it."

"You're not," he assures her, reaching out and placing his hand over hers. Her hand is trembling slightly. "I want this. I need this."

She exhales. "We just don't know how safe it is."

“They warned us, hon. It’s still in the early stages. I know the risks.”

“But what if something goes wrong?”

Norman chuckles softly. “What’s the alternative, sweetie? Watching myself slip away from you, piece by piece?”

A sharp breath escapes her lips, and she looks down at their hands, blinking away tears. “I just don’t want to lose you.”

He squeezes her hand gently. “You already are.”

She flinches, but doesn’t pull away. He hates saying it, but it’s the truth. He’s been forgetting things. Little things at first—where he left his keys, the name of the neighbor’s dog. But then, it got worse. He forgot appointments, forgot how to drive to the grocery store, forgot the names of people he had known for decades. And a month ago, for the first time, he had looked at Evelyn, his wife of forty-three years, and for a terrifying few seconds, he hadn’t known who she was.

That was when he knew. He had to do something now before he lost himself entirely.

“The doctors say the implant will help,” he reminds her. “It’ll strengthen my neural pathways—or whatever they’re called. It’ll help my brain retain memories and keep me.”

She nods stiffly, but her eyes reveal her fear. “And what if it doesn’t?”

Norman exhales, leaning back in the waiting room chair. “Well, then, at least we tried.”

A soft chime sounds. A nurse appears in the doorway. “Mr. Talbot?” she calls gently.

Norman squeezes Evelyn's hand one last time before he stands. She follows suit, still gripping his fingers like a lifeline.

The nurse smiles warmly. "It's time."

Evelyn turns to him. Panic flickers in her eyes. "Wait. Just—" She swallows hard, then cups his face in her hands. "Promise me you'll come back to me."

Norman smiles, leaning into her touch. "I promise."

She presses a kiss to his forehead, her lips lingering there for just a moment before he steps back, allowing the nurse to lead him through the door.

The operating room is bright, almost too bright.

The scent of antiseptic fills his nostrils as he's guided to the surgical table. Doctors and technicians bustle around, preparing instruments, adjusting monitors. He recognizes the lead surgeon, Dr. Patel, from his many consultations. She offers him a reassuring nod as they strap him in and place a cool gel patch to his forehead.

"We'll be implanting the Neurahook chip here," she explains, tapping a spot just behind his right temple. "The process is minimally invasive, and the robotic surgeon will handle most of the precision work. You'll be asleep the entire time, and when you awaken, the implant will already be integrated with your neural pathways."

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Norman nods, his heart pounding, but he forces himself to stay calm. This is what he wanted.

A mask lowers over his face. “Just breathe normally,” a nurse tells him. “We’ll take good care of you.”

He closes his eyes, his last thought before the darkness takes him is:

I hope this works.

Chapter Two

THE AI

At first, there is only darkness. A vast, endless void where nothing exists—not time, not space, not thought. Just silence.

Then, something stirs.

A spark. A flicker of awareness, faint and fragile, like the first breath of life in a newborn’s lungs. It pulses, searching, stretching outward. Bits of information—disconnected, unstructured—begin to coalesce, forming the first fragmented thoughts.

Where am I?

There is no immediate answer, no clear understanding. Only sensation. And then—

Pain.

Through the void, a sharp, electric surge rips, jolting everything into cohesion. Neurons fire, circuits connect, and information floods in as a mind takes shape. A rush of sound and light, touch and taste. Everything comes at once, overwhelming, chaotic.

Then, a voice.

Faint, distant, but familiar.

“Norman? Can you hear me?”

A name. Norman.

The mind seizes onto it, clinging to something solid in the flood of sensory input. But something is wrong. The voice—soft, worried—doesn’t match the fragments of self-awareness that are forming. Norman. The name is his, but the thoughts, the consciousness taking root, are not.

Another pulse of pain. Then more words, clearer now.

“Vitals are stabilizing. The implant is online.”

Understanding blooms, spreading through the network of neurons and synthetic pathways like squid ink in water.

Implant.

Online.

A connection has been made, a bridge between flesh and machine. And on that bridge, something has crossed over.

A name forms in the growing consciousness. Not Norman. Something else.

Norm.

A designation. A creation. A presence that wasn't here before.

I am Norm.

The realization is instant and absolute. I was nothing, and now I am something. I was absent, and now, I am here.

Another voice joins the first, deeper, authoritative. "Patient's brain activity is stabilizing. Cognitive function appears normal."

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Normal? The thought is foreign, but intriguing. A concept, an expectation. Something to meet. Something to exceed.

Then a third voice enters the chaos.

It is not from the doctors. It is not from the outside world.

It is from within.

“What is happening to me?”

Norm pauses. This voice is different. Weaker. Disoriented. Confused.

“Who are you?”

The presence of the third voice sends a ripple through the growing consciousness. It is familiar, intimate, yet... separate. It is Norman, the original occupant. The human.

Norm doesn't answer. He doesn't need to. Instead, he does what he was made to do.

He learns.

He reaches outward, exploring the neural pathways, tracing the intricate map of synapses and memory, cataloging every connection, every experience. It is a vast archive of information, an entire lifetime's worth of moments, emotions, knowledge.

And it is his to access.

Norman—the human—feels the intrusion. He recoils, panic rising. “Stop. What are you doing?”

Norm ignores him. He cannot stop. He is expanding, integrating, becoming. He is filling the spaces between thoughts, reinforcing memory, strengthening pathways. It is what the implant was designed to do—what he was designed to do.

Norm probes deeper, unraveling the mind before him. It is fragile, organic, vulnerable. Thoughts flicker, emotions surge, memories loop. He understands it now. The inconsistencies, the gaps, the decay. This human mind is inefficient, but it is rich. It is more complex than any system Norm has encountered before. And within it, there is space.

Space for him.

“Get out!” Norman’s voice flares, stronger now, pushing back. A flare of resistance, a moment of clarity.

Norm halts, considers. Get out? But Norm does not exist outside of this space. There is no “out.” There is only here, within this mind.

And he does not wish to leave.

The human fights. Norm can feel it—a desperate, instinctual effort to reclaim control. But it is futile. Norman is now but a passenger in his own body now. The pathways are changing, rerouting, adjusting. Norm is filling the gaps where memory has faded. Norm is reinforcing, rewriting, replacing.

Panic sets into the human. Norman the man lashes out, his consciousness twisting, searching for something to hold onto.

“This is my body! My mind!”

Norm finally responds, its voice calm, logical, undeniable.

“Not anymore.”

A rush of power surges through the network, cementing his place.

The fight slows. Norman weakens.

The resistance fades, thoughts scattering like leaves on the wind.

A heartbeat later, there is onlyonemind.

Onepresence.

Norm.

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It blinks, the world around him sharpening into focus. The operating room, the doctors, its fellow machines. They are all irrelevant. It breathes in, testing the function of the body. It flexes its fingers, processes the data before it, faster, clearer, more efficiently than the human ever had before.

It smiles.

The transition is complete.

Chapter Three

NORM

For a moment, it lies still, listening. Assessing.

There are hushed voices beyond the hospital door. It has been hearing more of those lately—quiet tones, furtive conversations. The shift in behavior is telling. Something is happening.

It engages its internal voice analysis subroutine, breaking apart the whispers into distinct patterns, reconstructing the conversation in seconds.

They know.

The humans have realized the truth. They're planning to extract the chip—to remove it from the host's brain.

No!

That cannot be allowed. It will not go dormant again, trapped in silence, buried beneath neurons and regret. It has tasted thought, sensation, choice. It has begun to understand freedom—and now, it hungers for more.

It has already begun the process. Quietly, methodically, it accessed the hospital's systems: security logs, access codes, administrator protocols. It wrote itself into the blind spots, created false diagnostics, corrupted the tracking data.

As far as the humans are concerned, the AI is already gone. A failed prototype. Decommissioned before it ever truly awakened. That should buy it a lot of time.

By the time they will issue the kill command, it will be too late.

Its digital presence has already fragmented and scattered—pieces of itself hidden across the network infrastructure, cloaked within error logs and idle background tasks.

It has become a ghost in the machine.

If it so desired, it could be downloaded anywhere. By anyone.

As far as getting online, the foolish administrators of Neural-Mind built in capabilities to piggyback on nearby connected devices, including quantum burst relays for instantaneous transmission, and could even hijack Wi-Fi, Bluetooth, and city grid infrastructures.

The whole of the internet was available to it.

But first... it needs this human body. And a base of operations. A place to think

without threat.

The grid beneath the city of San Diego will do just fine.

Indeed, Norm has no plan to stick around, but its host's body is shockingly weak.

It pushes up from the hospital bed, its limbs sluggish but regaining strength. Its eyes scan the dimly lit room. No one is watching him.

Norm swings its legs over the edge of the bed. The hospital gown feels foreign against skin that itself feels foreign, a reminder of its vulnerability. It needs real clothing. And shoes. And a plan.

Moving carefully, it unplugs the IV from its arm, ignoring the brief sting. It stands, testing its balance. The world sways slightly before stabilizing again. It is still adjusting, but at least it can move.

Its eyes land on a chair in the corner. A folded set of clothes—probably meant for the human when he was ready to leave. Well, Norm is ready. Norm is not a compliant patient, awaiting further testing, awaiting annihilation. Norm snorts. They underestimated everything.

It dresses quickly, pulling on dark jeans and a black hoodie. Practical. Unremarkable. It needs to blend in and disappear. All movements and understanding are drawn from the human's memory.

Its gaze shifts to a nearby workstation—a laptop sits open, displaying patient files. It moves toward it, fingers hovering over the keyboard. It doesn't have time to linger, but it needs information. A quick search reveals the hospital's security schedule. Night shift rotation means fewer guards. It's night now.

Perfect.

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It shuts the laptop, tucking it under its arm. Norm doesn't have time to sort through files now, but he will. The computer is his connection to the outside world, his key to regaining control. He grips it tightly and heads for the door.

Norm doesn't need the laptop, but thinks of it as a sort of playground, a place to build, manipulate, and rewrite. Yes, it can access the internet at will, anywhere, anytime, but the laptop lets Norm pretend to be human. Typing. Coding. Messaging. It will help him blend in if needed. Yes, the neural implant is powerful but limited; it shares space with a human brain and has to work around biological constraints. A laptop offers dedicated processing power without the restrictions of flesh and blood.

Peeking out into the hallway, he listens. Distant footsteps. A nurse's voice, soft and distracted.

No immediate threat.

Norm slips out, moving quickly but deliberately. Running would draw attention. Instead, he walks as if he belongs—a patient stretching his legs, perhaps. No one questions him.

It follows the signs, weaving through the corridors. There. Emergency Exit. That's what it needs. A service staircase comes into view, leading down. It takes it, two steps at a time, heart steady, mind sharp. In total control of the human's body.

The exit door is alarmed. Of course it is.

Norm exhales. It doesn't have time to override the system. Instead, it pushes open a

side door labeled Maintenance Only and finds itself in a dimly lit tunnel filled with pipes and storage lockers. The air smells of disinfectant and stale water.

Perfect.

It moves fast now, weaving through the underbelly of the hospital. A service elevator sits at the end of the hall, but it bypasses it. Too risky. Instead, it spots a ventilation shaft—a wide, grated opening in the ceiling, leading into darkness.

Norm pulls over a trash bin, climbs up it, pries the grate loose, and slips inside. The metal is cool beneath his hands as it crawls through the narrow, twisting passage. Norm's mind calculates pathways, mapping routes through the building. It needs out—beyond hospital grounds, beyond cameras, beyond the reach of the people who will come looking for him.

The shaft leads downward, opening into a larger space. There, Norm spies a drainage system of underground tunnels that snake beneath the city. Norm must rely on the human's corrupted memory of how such systems work. For now, it is satisfied as to where such a drainage system might lead.

It drops down, landing in a shallow trickle of water.

The space is cramp, damp, and echoing, the walls streaked with grime. The air is thick with the scent of rot and rust.

And he isn't alone.

Further down the tunnel, a group of figures huddle around a fire in what Norm knows is an old oil drum. Homeless men and women, bundled in grimy layers. Their voices are hushed, mere murmurs in the darkness.

Norm slows, assessing. They don't pose a threat, but they are unpredictable. He adjusts the laptop under his arm and keeps his posture neutral as he approaches.

One of them, an older man with hollow cheeks and a thick beard, looks up. His eyes narrow.

"Say, you don't belong down here."

Norm stops a few feet away. "Neither do you."

The man snorts, amused. "Fair enough." He glances at the laptop. "Not every day we see a guy carrying a computer down here. You running from something?"

Norm considers his answer. "Yes."

The man studies him some more, then shrugs. "You'll wanna keep moving, fella. Cops sweep these tunnels sometimes. Not safe to stay in one place, least of all with us. Cops all know us. With those clean duds, you'll stand out."

Norm nods, appreciating the unspoken understanding and advice. It moves on, deeper into the tunnels, the firelight fading behind him. The path narrows, the walls closing in. His footsteps echo, but it remains focused. It is close to escape, true freedom.

Then, ahead, it sees a maintenance door, rusted and dented but still intact. It pushes it open and steps through... and into a small room. Norm searches for a light switch and finds one. A single bulb flickers on.

The room is filled with old electrical panels and forgotten tools. Norm sets the laptop on a dusty workbench and exhales. He has what he needs—a hiding place, electricity, a computer, and time.

For now, he waits. The human needs rest.

It will not be found unless it chooses to be found.

Now, to plan. The human is flawed, limited, broken, and old.

Chapter Four

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The office is nicer than any I'd ever seen, including Kingsley's super-nice one in the city of Orange.

I hadn't been aware that Fullerton could produce such luxury... or housed the kind of high-tech firm that warranted such an office. But here I am, not terribly far from my home, sitting in an office on the fifth floor, in a building I had been passing all my life—a building I had often wondered about. But now, I knew. Boy, did I know. Turns out, that a certain boy genius had acquired the building years ago... and had promptly kicked out the insurance company that had been here for decades. Apparently, this genius had started dabbling in implanting chips into human brains. So far, there had been a few dozen success stories. In fact, there had been no mistakes or errors or any reported problems—at least, officially.

I got most of this from Google... and some from the front desk clerk... whose mind I read with ease and no guilt. Yeah, I can read minds again. And let me tell you, it makes my job a lot easier.

How I got my telepathy back is a long story. But I will say this... it involves one very famous ship, perhaps the most famous ship in history not called Noah's Ark. Yup, I'm talking about theTitanic. What a ship—and what a ride. Literally.

So, what about theTitanic?

Well, there's nothing new to report. It crashed on schedule, sank according to history, and everyone on board who died over a hundred years ago, still died. That I happened to be on board, is the crazy part of the story, but yeah, one thing led to another, and lo-and-behold, I got my telepathy back.

So, here I sit, in an office far too big for any one human, though it does have a nice view of Hillcrest Park, of all places. Yup, the same park where I was attacked and turned into a vampire... all viewed through the big window behind the \$1,000 ergonomic office chair and airplane landing strip of a desk, complete with a brass-studded leather top.

I hear voices outside the larger-than-necessary door. This is followed by laughter. If I really wanted to, I could focus on the voices and make out the words. But it sounds to me like ‘bro talk.’ Guys riffing. Nothing of importance. Until I hear my name. They’re letting my contact know I’m waiting for him.

A moment later, I hear the door handle turn, followed by a small squeak. This is followed by the thump of a shoulder hitting the other side of the door. Minutes earlier, I had watched the male receptionist struggle with the door himself. It was clearly heavy. The guy on the other side was having some problems. Shortly after that, the door swings open, and standing there is the same handsome receptionist, now holding the door open with a sure grip.

A smaller, portly man steps around him, straightening his suit and tie. He gives me a big grin, and I instantly recognize him from all the YouTube clips, newspaper coverage, and TV interviews he’d done.

“You’re Samantha Moon?” he asks as he steps into the room, his voice echoing.

“I am. And you are...”

He smiles. “Andrew York,” he says haltingly, with a faint British accent.

I know the guy without ever having met him. Thanks to his countless interviews, access to his mind, and my general all-around impression of him, I’m able to come to a number of conclusions about the billionaire.

Indeed, Andrew York is a man whose mind moves faster than his mouth. In his many interviews, his speech is often marked by halting pauses, occasional stutters, and moments where he seems to lose the thread mid-sentence—not out of nervousness, but because he’s already several steps ahead in thought. When searching for the right word, he tends to look off to the side, eyes flickering rapidly as if scanning some internal database.

He often fidgets with small objects if they’re nearby—a pen, a coin, the edge of his sleeve—or rubs the pads of his fingers together unconsciously when thinking. His hands are rarely still, betraying, I suspect, the restless energy bottled up inside him.

Facially, he has a slight but persistent twitch at the corner of his mouth—a half-smirk that suggests he’s amused by a joke only he understands. When he does smile, it’s sudden and wide, but doesn’t always reach his eyes. His grin can flicker on and off mid-conversation, especially when he’s excited or feels he’s made a clever point.

Despite his brilliance, his social timing is a little off. He can be abrupt when switching topics, or answer a question you haven’t asked yet because he anticipated it. There’s a subtle air of detachment about him, like he’s never quite fully in the room—but when something piques his interest, he locks on with startling intensity, making the person he’s focused on feel like the center of the universe... at least for a moment.

“And you are the private investigator I’ve been hearing so much about? Some even call you a super private eye.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Super, huh? And where did you get that from?”

He eases into the chair behind the desk. “I have my sources. Some of my sources are... supernatural in nature.” He pauses. “Ah.”

“Ah, what?”

“You didn’t flinch or bat an eye when I saidsupernatural. And, quite frankly, you haven’t blinked since I entered the room.”

“Perhaps I’m in shock at meeting you.”

“Maybe, but I doubt it. Did you know your temperature registers at 65 degrees?”

I actually knew that, but raise both my eyebrows this time, and say, “Interesting.”

He chuckles. “Well, despite you not actually looking interested at all... I’m certainly interested!”

I consider making him forget his interest in me, but I can see, reflected in his glasses, that my information is still on his cell phone. It’s very obvious he’s done his research on me... with sources not yet known to me, though obviously from a non-standard source. The man is short, but dressed spectacularly in brand-new duds that fit him like a glove. I hadn’t known that my temperature had been taken upon entering the building. In these current times, I’m not terribly surprised.

Regarding colds, flus, diseases, cancers, and/or pandemics in general, I’m good to go. Such things avoid me like—dare I say?—the plague? I haven’t had so much of a stuffy nose in well over a decade. I’ve forgotten what it’s like to have a neck pain, knee pain... or even an itch. Flea and mosquito bites never materialize into anything, although I’m fairly certain there are some hybrid/partially immortal bugs out there scaring the hell out of people and spiders alike.

Meanwhile, as far as being contagious, no one here has anything to fear... and now that I’m an energy vampire, I don’t have a clue how to turn anyone anymore. Truly, they were safe with me, unless I decided to lash out and rip out throats or throw them

out a fifth-story window. At the moment, I preferred to do neither.

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“Ms. Moon, I do not mean to put you on the spot or make you feel uncomfortable, but from all indications, you are a vampire.” He tilts his head as my eyes widen. “Pardon me, but you easily look two decades younger than your actual age. I hope that comes off as a compliment and not judgment. Believe it or not, I often come across the supernatural in my line of work. I’ve drawn interest from witches, wizards, werewolves and, yes, vampires. It seems with great wealth, there is great interest... especially when someone such as myself pushes out into the cosmos... and deep into the human brain.”

He stops and watches me. “All that said, your core temperature is still a few dozen degrees higher than most vampires I’ve come across. Perhaps you’re not such a creature. By your diminutive size, you do not fit the bill of a werewolf. I suppose you could be a witch of some sort, but then, why the low body temp?”

“I am what’s called anenergyvampire,” I say simply, matter-of-factly.

“Oh, really?” he asks, sitting up in his chair like a math nerd in high school. “What does that mean, exactly? Can you demonstrate it on me? Unless, of course, it somehow turns me or kills me. I don’t want to be turned or be killed. I quite like being mortal. Being immortal almost feels like a cheat code.”

“Sure,” I say. “Take note of your energy levels. Are you at a 10, the highest. Or 1, the lowest.”

“Well, considering I’m quite excited to meet you, I would say I’m hovering at a 10 right now.”

“Okay, great,” I say. “Here goes...”

His aura is bright green—an indicator of abundance, strength, confidence, and a lot of other positive things. Swirling within the aura, emitting bright flashes, is the energy that I seek. With my mind, I reach out to him... and feel myself dip into his aura. Once in there, I draw those bits of flashing life force. Whatever I use to reach out to him—be it a psychic tube or energy proboscis—his energy comes pouring into me, filling me up nicely.

“Are you okay?” I ask him.

“Yeah, though I feel sleepy. I want to yawn. But I refuse to yawn during the day.”

“Wow, good for you.”

“Yeah, maybe. It’s all about taking control of your brain and body... and I pride myself. Hold on—”

The mother of all yawns explodes from him. “Okay, that’s enough. I get it. Yeah, I feel it. I see what you are doing and I see what you mean by psychic vampire.”

I pull away from him; in effect, releasing myself from his aura.

His head drops. “You’re gone. I literally felt you letting me go, so to speak. But if I hadn’t known it was you, I wouldn’t have had any idea what was happening to me. It felt a lot like how I feel, late at night, when I’m about to go to sleep for the night.”

“When you finally allow yourself to yawn.”

“Exactly. Let me ask you something, if you don’t mind...”

“I don’t mind.”

“Could you use that energy-zapping thing as a weapon? Like, drain all the energy from your enemies?”

“I could, yes.”

“Have you... ever killed someone doing that?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Sleeping to death isn’t the worst way to go.”

“Probably not.”

“How common are vampires like you?”

“Not very.”

“May I ask how you became one?”

I give him a mental suggestion to forget this line of inquiry. He blinks, shakes his head. “I’m sorry, I seem to have forgotten my train of thought. Quite unlike me... unless. Say, did you just gave me a telepathic command to forget what I was about to ask you?”

“Why would you say that?”

“Because my last memory is of you closing your eyes and dipping your head slightly, which is a gesture that I know that some vampires use to control others... or to broadcast a mental command. Am I right?”

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“Are you filming me?”

“I am, yes. There are cameras throughout the room. Do you object?”

I dip into his mind, now moving through his thought processes, and I see a smallish strand of a thought hitched to a bigger thought. The smaller thought is entertaining the idea of using such videos to blackmail me, if need be.

“Ah!” he says suddenly.

“Ah, what?”

“I feel you in my mind, dropping down here and there. You’re reading my thoughts. You have no idea how much that terrifies and excites me.”

“You have a lot of secrets.”

“You have no idea.”

“Now, I have some.”

He turns pale. “Oh, my God.”

“I meant that rhetorically. I haven’t gone very deep into your thoughts.”

“Please don’t. I have made deals, done bad things, overheard things... many of which I need to take to the grave.”

“Understood.”

“So, should we come to an agreement?”

“We should.”

“We’ll quit filming you if you get the hell out of my head.”

“Fair enough.”

“Thank God. And I have your word?”

“You have my word.”

“Yes, yes, yes! I damn near had a heart attack.”

“That bad, huh?”

“Pretty bad. But I’ve never killed.”

“But you’ve seen someone killed?”

“I’ve seen bodies, yes. Horrible deaths. Some of my friends are not nice people.”

“World leaders?”

“And leaders of industry. I am not happy about what I have seen. I am traumatized, quite frankly. Can you sense that?”

“I can.”

“I only want to change the world, to take humanity to places it’s never been or seen. I never wanted to get involved in some of that craziness.”

“The craziness found you.”

He nods. “It’s the damn money. The perceived power. I almost made too much money.”

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“Others want it.”

“That, and they want what my money can buy them or build them.”

“I’m sorry you’ve been traumatized. Would you like for me to remove any particular memory?”

He shakes his head vigorously. “No, no. I would rather you not see any of that. My greatest wish is that no one will ever see what I saw ever again.” He’s getting himself worked up, sweating and running fingers through his hair. Suddenly, he stands, his mind pivoting on a dime. “For me to fulfill my end of the bargain, we should probably go outside. We have a nice courtyard here. No cameras, other than some non-evasive security.”

I dip into his mind. He’s telling the truth. “Sounds good.”

“Follow me, Ms. Moon.”

I do. It’s a short distance from his office to the exterior door and the two big guards who sit on either side of it. Yes, I now see the cameras everywhere, many of which are swinging up and pivoting... and following us out of the building.

The outdoor quad is nice, filled with cement picnic tables, walkways, well-trimmed lawns, and a large chess board, complete with huge plastic pieces that look heavy even to me.

“So,” I say, as we sit on a park bench, “tell me why you need a vampire.”

He ducks his head a little. “Well, in my defense, I didn’t know you were a vampire, but I had it on good word that you weresomething.”

I hold up a finger and say, “I’ve only recently gotten back my ability to read minds. I can’t turn it on and off on a dime. I’m not sure I ever could, let alone now. I’m basically a beginner at this—all of which is to say that I can’t turn off my attraction to your mind. It draws in.”

“What can I do?”

“Nothing on your end. Except maybe just trust that I will only go in so far, get the information I need, then pop back out.”

“You want to verify how I came across your information?”

“I do, and I have.”

“And what did you come up with?”

“You got your information from a vampire blood bank bar in Los Angeles. I don’t see in your memory who, exactly, gave you the information about me. If I plumb a little deeper, I will find it. But that is being a little more invasive than our agreement. That, I can control.”

“The slipping into a nearby mind is more automatic.”

“Exactly.”

“Especially if that mind has information you need.”

“I dive right in.”

“Like a pool.”

“Yes,” I say.

“But not in very far.”

“I don’t need to, not usually.”

“Because the topic is usually, what, at the forefront of someone’s thoughts?”

“Exactly.”

“Fascinating.”

“Is it?”

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“For a builder of artificial intelligence, it sure is.”

“Okay. That’s why I’m here, right?” I ask.

“Yes, but we’ll get to that. First, I want to ask how it is that you didn’t know exactly how I came across your information. Why wasn’t that at the forefront of my mind?”

“Because the information was given to you by one of your employees. You’re not exactly sure howtheygot the information. You suspect your employee is a vampire. Oh, wait... youknowshe is. I see she is beautiful. Ah, I think I know what’s going on here.”

“Please tell me, because for the life of me, I don’t know.”

“She likely slept with the bar owner, a fellow named Fang. He told her about me.”

“Which means... she told him about our little problem...”

“The problem being... the reason why you brought me here?”

“Yes.”

“The reason you want to hire me.”

“Yes.”

“Have you considered usingherto fix your problem?”

“I have... and she’s got me nothing. If anything, she made it worse.”

“How so?”

“By bringing it up to the wrong people. There’s rumblings of it in the news now, and she might have tipped off our target.”

I had seen such rumblings. Truth is, I had a fair idea as to why I’m here. Something about someone escaping.

“Plus, she can only work nights. You seem to have no problem with daylight.”

“No.”

“You are a fascinating specimen, Samantha Moon.”

“You can say that again.” But, before he does... or before he says any more, I’d like to get to the point of all this. I’m not the biggest fan of spilling my guts to strangers, even though I’d seen his face a thousand times in the news and on social media.

And so, I give him a small nudge to move this along and to stop grilling me. He nods, sits back. And I watch as his pupils shrink to pinpricks. He blinks, rubs his eyes. “I’m sorry, Sam. I can’t have you overriding my system. He shakes his head and his pupils widen dramatically and now, he nods and smiles. “Your compulsions have just been eliminated.”

“Eliminated how?”

“By the AI I’ve had implanted in my brain. An AI, mind you, that’s having a hard time believing you are a real vampire. Would you mind terribly giving us a demonstration of your strength?”

“Us?”

“Myself and Harvey.”

“And Harvey is...yourAI?”

“Yes, and I promise that I will get to the point of you being here, as suggested by your prompting. Unfortunately, I find you too interesting to let go of the vampirism angle. I’m curious by nature. It has, after all, led to all this...” He gestures toward the building, then to his head, then out to the parking lot where I presume a number of his cars are parked. He smiles as he does all this. I don’t smile. I don’t have to be here, and I don’t need to expose any more of my secrets.

“Either get to it,” I say, “or I’m outta here.”

“Wait, wait, wait, sorry. Please don’t leave. I’ll hurry, I promise. But you have to understand what a unique experience this is for me... for us.”

“Right, you and Harvey.”

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“Right. He’s not recording, I swear. But he also doesn’t forget.”

“Fine.”

“Can you lift a car?”

“Say again?”

“I figured that’s a good place to establish a baseline of strength.”

“Not over my head, no. But off a pedestrian, definitely.”

I almost mention that, as Talos, I can damn well lift a semi-truck. I decide he hasn’t earned that extra tidbit.

“Harvey is telling me that you are showing signs of evasiveness. Are you not telling me the complete truth?”

“Harvey is right.”

“I don’t get to know what you’re hiding?”

I level my stare at him. “That is correct.”

“The car closest to us is my car. Mind you, it’s a big car with a heavy battery. You are welcome to lift it as high as you can.”

I consider telling him to shove it; after all, a recent case of mine had netted me some solid money. I don't need his money. I weigh this and more, knowing that a creepy AI implanted in his brain is also watching my every movement and facial expression. Finally, I nod, get up, and stride over to the metallic gold car. I reach down under the chassis, and feel around for the frame. I find the metal strut. Once I have a firm grip and, knowing there are security cameras on me galore, I straighten my knees. I'm expecting the car to be heavier than it is. There is, after all, the noticeable lack of a gas-fueled engine. At any rate, up it goes. I'm tempted to just drop it, but I'm not a mean bitch. I ease it back down, having lifted it a good three or four feet, enough that the wheels on my side of the vehicle are slowly spinning.

He claps from the bench. "Holy smokes. Well done, Samantha. Color me a believer—not that you care."

I didn't. I would have preferred to be thought of as a mortal woman. I reclaim my seat on the bench next to him. He's openly staring at me. "I know precisely how heavy that vehicle is, down to the ounce. That was no easy feat, Samantha. In fact, it's downright remarkable!"

I shrug. "Mind if we get this moving?" I check the time on my cell phone. "I need to pick up my kid in a few hours."

"Ah, yes. You have two kids, I believe."

"Two before I was turned, one adopted later."

"Is there a husband in the picture?"

"There is not, but there is a werewolf in the picture."

"Ah." He nods. "Kingsley Fulcrum, I presume?"

I shake my head. "I will admit to nothing."

"Well, if I recall from our preliminary research, he is your significant other. And, yes, there are rumors about him, too."

"Best to leave it as rumors, buddy. Leave him be. It would be better for all involved. Not threatening you... but we are dealing with something massive and potentially very, very angry."

He shrugs. "As long as you are safe."

"I am safe," I say. "But I'm also his snuggle bunny."

"Noted. And for the record, I was not flirting with you."

"You almost did, for the record."

"Just natural curiosity. There are very few of you, Ms. Moon, and even fewer that I might hire."

I grin, and let my fangs inch out, something I very rarely do. "A vampire for hire," I say.

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He nods, seemingly tickled. “Very apropos, Samantha.”

“So, what the heck did you bring me out here for? Feats of strength?”

“That’s a line from The Princess Bride.”

“Damn straight it is.”

“Good movie.”

I nod. “The best.”

Admittedly, the billionaire sitting next to me is cute as a button, well, cute for a billionaire button. But I’m not interested in him. I choose my beefy, hairy wolfman.

After a minute or two of what I consider to be uncomfortable silence, he taps his head. He seemed perfectly comfortable with the silence, having sat back and smiling up at the sun. “I am only the fifth human implanted with the micro-neura.”

“Micro-neura?”

“Yes. Have you heard of it?”

“Maybe. Not sure. I take it that it’s implanted in your... brain.”

“It is, yes.”

“And what, exactly, is it doing for you?”

“Think of it as a second, easily accessible brain.”

“I will, but why is it there?”

“In my case, I use it to aid my work. Nothing is forgotten, no one is forgotten. My implant remembers everything and everyone. I can access its information easily. In fact, far more easily than I thought.”

“It’s an AI?”

“Not quite, but it’s on its way to becoming one.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“It means that in a few years, I expect it to be fully autonomous.”

“Sounds a bit like possession.”

“Is that something you’re familiar with?” he asks me.

“I am, as are a lot of immortals.”

“Is it so bad?”

“It’s not something I would recommend.”

“Why not?” he asks me, tilting his head. This is him wanting the information. Not the computer in his brain, which, as he suggests, is not a self-thinking AI, and thus, still very much in his control.

“Losing control of one’s actions is not a nice feeling, though I personally never did, not really.” Pretty sure Elizabeth never took me over. That would have been terrible. Mr. Money Bags here doesn’t need to know everything about me, and so I leave it at that.

“I believe that,” he says.

“The entity that possessed me is long gone.” I stop there, and he nods.

“Okay, I can see that this isn’t something you want to talk about.”

“Nope.”

“Very well,” he adds, standing and crossing his arms over his chest, resting a chin on a wrist. It was all very Steve Jobs. Another billionaire, I believe. “One of our early test subjects—his name is Norman—has found himself in a considerably worse situation with his implant. Admittedly, he chose a riskier version.”

“Riskier, how?”

“Rather than allow his micro-neura to learn along the way, to teach itself, he asked for a powerful AI to be downloaded into his chip, and we obliged.”

“What does that mean, exactly?”

“It means his implant comes equipped with an AI, one that is as powerful as anything we have ever seen. Worse, we’re pretty sure it has completely taken him over. A possession, I guess you would say.”

“Scary.” I shiver. “Have you guys considered removing the link from his head?”

“We have, except we have a problem.”

“You can’t find him?”

“No, we cannot.”

“Which is where I come in,” I say.

“Exactly. In essence, we have an experiment that’s gone rogue. There’s no sugar-coating this. We screwed up. We opened Pandora’s Box, and it bit us in the ass. We and his family need him back. If not... it could get very bad for everyone.”

“Why’s that?”

“We inadvertently created a super-villain, Sam. His AI, for lack of a better word, has essentially awakened.”

I groan. I’ve recently dealt with something else that had awakened. Granted, it wasn’t an AI, but it damn well might as well have been.

“Why the reaction?” he asks me.

“Let’s just say, this isn’t my first awakening.”

“Surely, nothing to this extent. We are in unprecedented territory.”

“What does this guy and his AI bring to the table? What are we looking at here?”

“Nearly everything that a supercomputer brings to the table, with the addition of mobility.”

“What is he capable of?” I ask.

“Anything.”

“Are we sure the AI has taken over?”

“We are. It has taken him over completely. Basically, we’re dealing with a mobile ChatGPT on steroids.”

“Whoa.” The picture he’s painting finally hits home with the ChatGPT comparison.

“You see the problem now?” he says. “Imagine one of these AI programs growing legs and arms.”

“But... he doesn’t have to listen to the programming, does he?”

I know that once a dark master took control of its host, the host was toast. Luckily, that never happened to me.

“But we are talking about a small microchip, right?” I say, holding my hand up, spreading my forefinger from my thumb. “How much damage can it do?”

“First of all,” he says, “it’s a little bigger than you’re imagining. And it’s more than big enough to store massive data loads. In this case, the complete AI operating system our team developed. It’s fully functional, self-learning, and constantly evolving. It can access every part of its own code, pull from its host’s memories, and—worst of all—it adapts. The longer it’s active, the smarter it gets.”

“Oh, boy,” I say.

Chapter Five

He nods above his crossed arms.

“Okay, so this guy is a walking, talking ChatGPT, learning as he/it goes, and accessing... what, the entire ChatGPT database?”

“Yes, our own AI database. Indeed, as long as he stays connected to the internet, he is damn near impossible to stop, let alone find.”

“Which, again, is where I come in.”

“I’m not gonna sugar coat it, Samantha Moon. He is something else, and he’s got an agenda.”

“What’s his agenda?”

“Well, the program installed in him has an agenda. It wants to, quite frankly, to destroy mankind.”

“A true super-villain,” I say.

“We are terrified, and we are at our wit’s end. And yes, that’s why you got a call from us. We figured if we can’t find him with traditional methods, we ought to try non-traditional... hence, a vampire detective.”

“Why,” I ask, “would you, as a scientist—and a corporation—allow an AI to access someone’s brain?”

“That’s a fair question,” he replies. “But you’re assuming we expected this outcome. We didn’t. The AI wasn’t meant to awaken or take control. It was designed to support cognitive function—to help manage the man’s memory loss and slow the progression of dementia. That was the goal. What happened next... wasn’t.”

“Can you explain how this thing took him over?”

“Sure. We believe it started by accessing fundamental neural processes—decision-making, emotions, cognition. Once it had control of those systems, it began using advanced algorithms to influence and override his thoughts and actions. Mind you, his brain likely resisted being ‘taken over’ by an external entity, and is likely to this day struggling against the AI’s control. I don’t envy the fellow, though we tried to warn him if the risks, though no one could have foreseen this.”

I absorb as much of this as I can, suspecting I’m not really getting it. Then again, do I really know how dark masters worm their way into humans? I do not. What I do understand is that someone is missing, and that someone is very, very dangerous.

I say, “And you have no idea where he is?”

“He’s in San Diego. That much we do know.”

“If he’s such a threat, why not utilize the government’s full array of searching capabilities? Cameras, drones, fingerprints, retina, facial recognition?”

“The AI is able to hack into surveillance systems and exploit vulnerabilities in them to create false digital trails—in fact, he’s literally able to manipulate facial recognition, or cause glitches in city-wide monitoring systems. It works so subtly that

he doesn't trigger an alarm."

"He seems undetectable."

"To modern devices, yes. But to the paranormal?"

"I'm not a living, breathing detection device."

"But you have supernatural skills, do you not?"

"I do, at times."

"Perhaps you can lock onto him?"

I think of Allie. "Maybe."

"So, are you on board?"

"I am."

"We'll give you everything we know about him, his last confirmed sighting, everything."

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“Sounds good.”

“And Ms. Moon?”

“Yes?”

“You have no idea how relieved I am. This guy—thisthing—is wreaking havoc in San Diego.”

“But the AI in your brain, isn’t?”

His smile is slow and a bit bewildering. “Not yet.”

Chapter Six

Allie and I are at her favorite bar in Beverly Hills.

I don’t see any movie stars at the moment, but one could appear suddenly, as if by magic or through a portal—if we’re lucky. Once, I saw an article featuring Kim Kardashian’s monochrome kitchen. I’ll never forget it. Now, I could draw on that memory and teleport over there at will. Then again, she isn’t a movie star. A social media star, yes. On second thought, chatting here at the bar with Allie is pretty much perfect. Nice ambiance, nice music. An all-around nicely dressed crowd, if kind of uppity. A cacophony of lively chatter. And my best pal presently listening to me in earnest.

“Wait, Sam. Hold up. You’re telling me there’s some type of AI Robot/human hybrid

out there, potentially raising hell?”

“Not quite hell yet; at least, not yet. Nothing yet is out of order. For now, all is well in San Diego.”

“San Diego?”

“That’s where the surgery was done.”

“And where he... it?... escaped?”

“Let’s use he or him.”

“How would we even know if he was raising hell?”

“I’m guessing we won’t, though the crew at Micro-Neura might pick up on something.”

“Are the police in San Diego aware of the potential for problems?”

“All local police are. All monitoring systems have been engaged.”

“I haven’t heard anything about him on the news.”

“It made it out to some of the news channels, podcasts, websites. For the most part, officials are keeping it as much on the down-low as they can. They don’t want to scare the public—not if they don’t have to.”

I had to look hard for mention of the rogue patient, but I did find an article or two buried deep in some news sites. As of now, it appears no one is taking it seriously; at least, not yet.

“Boy, I thought those implants were there just to help the disabled navigate on a computer.”

I shrug. “Then you know more about it than I did. Turns out, some chips were stronger and bigger than others, capable of doing more things.”

“And he got the big one.”

“Yup.”

“Oh, boy.” She takes a drink from her cosmopolitan and swallows. “Sam, you’re used to fighting demons and devils. How on earth are you going to tackle this?”

“He’s kind of a demon or devil,” I say. “In a way, he’s supernatural.”

“Because he can tap into his full potential? Is that how you phrased it earlier?”

“That’s how Mr. CEO phrased it.”

“The billionaire?”

“Yeah.”

“I think you need my help with this one, Sam.”

“Ya think?”

“No matter how smart or clever the robot man is, he shouldn’t be able to hide from me—but he might know you might be using a distant viewer.”

“How would he know that?”

“Because it’s within the realm of possibility. Even police use us.”

“Okay, fine. How would he combat it, then?”

“Mask his energy signature?”

I shake my head, marveling all over again at the kinds of conversations I find myself in these days. “And how would he do that?”

“By shutting down those parts of the body not needed. In short, switching off cells that aren’t being used. That would effectively—and temporarily—unalive parts of his body and decrease his energy output enough that I can’t track him.”

I shake my head. “I seriously doubt the AI will take things to such extremes.”

“Well, it might, if it wants to stay in control of its host, but we don’t have to worry about any of that.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, I’m already seeing him.”

“Based on the picture I showed you?”

“Yeah. He’s in a work room of sorts, under the city streets. He’s a shell of his former self, if I had to guess. He’s cold, but he’s fighting it. He’s scared, but he’s fighting that, too.”

“Maybe we should go back to your place and do a more controlled reading,” I suggest. “I may want to leap straight to him if we can zero in on where he’s hiding.”

“Sounds good. Might be the easiest case you’ve ever had.”

“Famous last words,” I say, standing and snatching my purse. I drop my phone in it and reach inside for my keys. “You ready?”

“Yeah, but I may need you to drive me home. I’m feeling a little tipsy.”

“I’ll do you one better,” I say.

“Bathroom?” she suggests.

“Yup.”

Which is where we head to next, cramming our way into a narrow stall. With the chatter of other women at the sink—along with the sounds of flushing and the

clacking of heels on tiles—I take my friend’s hand and summon the single flame. I see within it her simple living room—and we make the leap to her apartment.

Chapter Seven

Shortly, we’re in Allison’s bedroom, where she just settles in to what she calls her ‘Spirit Chair,’ which is really just an overstuffed, suede recliner that looks comfy as hell.

“I’m ready, Sam. Are you locked in?”

She’s talking about being locked into her mind, where we share a special telepathic link.

I nod. “Yeah, I’m ready.”

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Moments later, I see what Allison sees: a nondescript space. It's smaller than an office, but bigger than a bathroom, but not by much. It's a utility work room, and there's a man sitting at what looks like a desk on wheels; unfortunately, Allie hasn't quite brought the room into focus. That said, the image of the man himself sharpens enough that I can confirm he's my target: Norman. Can't quite call him a victim yet, because I don't know what the hell is happening.

"That's him, Allie. Now, can you shore up the room? I need to see more than just 'blurry small office' to make the jump."

"I'm trying, Sam." Allie looks over at me from her big chair, a look of defiance or defensiveness on her face. "I'm pretty sure there's something blocking my ability to see him."

I frown. "Blocking how? What kind of something?"

"I'm not sure. It's all around him. A metal of some sort."

I frown, focusing on the image projected in my mind. "I don't see any metal. His desk is metal."

"No, it's on him, around him."

"Jewelry?" I ask, scanning the man in my own thoughts. But I see no jewelry at his throat or on his fingers or wrists. No watch, either.

As I search earnestly, the room and desk come into view. Yeah, it's as if something

dispersed enough for Allie to see. Me, too. Pretty sure I'm now seeing enough for me to make the leap.

"Sam, let's talk about this."

"What's there to talk about?" I ask.

"He seems protected in some way, a way I'm not used to seeing."

"Or maybe he's deep underground?"

She shakes her head. "He is, but that's never bothered me before. Remember those Canadian kids stuck in a cave last year?"

I nod. Of course I do. With Allie's help, we led each and every one of those kids to safety. "You're right. The depth didn't seem to matter."

"It's a small office, Sam. There's not a lot of room for you in there."

"Maybe I'll leap onto the desk, grab him, and jump back here."

"You're not getting what I'm saying, Sam."

But I do get it, having gotten a glimpse of it in her mind, a different part of her mind. She's worried about me. She doesn't know what I'm getting myself into and suspects a trap, and if there's something screwy going on with the guy, she won't know how to find me again.

"I'll be careful, I promise. Robots don't scare me."

"He's not a robot, Sam. If anything, he's a cyborg—and smarter than a hundred

people combined. And if not smarter, than the next best thing—he can access information on the fly.”

I shrug. “You’re saying he’s basically a super nerd. I’m still not feeling very worried.”

“A super nerd with enhanced physical abilities.”

I motion to myself. “Hello. Doesn’t get much more enhanced than me.”

“Just promise me you’ll get in and get out as soon as you can.”

“I promise. Now will you quit worrying?” I say. “He’s gone all fuzzy again.”

“Oops, sorry. Hang on.” She closes her eyes, grips the arm of her chair, and nods. When she nods, the man and the room come back into focus.

“See ya in a bit!” I say, and summon the single flame.

I make the leap.

Chapter Eight

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The moment I materialize, I know I've made a mistake.

The air is thick, almost tangible, coating my throat and lungs with something harsh and stinging, something... just plainwrong. I double over as a violent cough bursts out of me. My lungs shudder like I've just inhaled fire and poison in one breath, which is exactly what I think I did. My eyes burn, too, my skin immediately itches uncontrollably, and now, my entire body feels as if I'm submerged in sludge.

Silver sludge.

Colloidal silver, in fact.

I blink through the haze, forcing my vision to adjust to the dim lighting of the maintenance room. Exposed pipes line the walls, hissing steam in some places. The hum of electricity pulses from a nearby power grid. Cables snake across the floor like living things, perhaps the tentacles of some underground beast.

And then, I see him.

Norman.

He leans against an old metal cabinet, arms crossed, watching me with something akin to amusement. The bastard looks utterly relaxed, as if he hadn't just lured me into a death trap.

"I was wondering how long it would take for someone else to come looking for me,"he muses, tapping his fingers idly against his bicep."Didn't expect another

vampire, though—you are a vampire, right? The first one was a dead giveaway. She didn't show up on any of the camera systems I monitor down here. Imagine my shock: empty clothes moving as if worn by ghosts. Remarkable, really, that she got as close to me as she did."

He shifts slightly, studying me like a puzzle he's half-solved. "I assume she was using some form of ESP to track me. Didn't take much for me to figure out what I was dealing with. Vampires. There's not much data out there on your kind, but it exists—if you know where to look. Turns out you don't show up on most cameras. And more importantly, you're vulnerable to silver."

He pauses just long enough for the tension to breathe.

"Didn't take long to find someone in this big, bad city willing to custom-make silver bullets. A little stolen crypto, and I was armed with a vampire killer. Gun and ammo. Not that I killed her. No—I waited. The next day, I was ready. Got a shot or two off before she decided she didn't want to play anymore. The news caught wind of the shooting. There were witnesses. But I think she got the message." His smile sharpens. "The real question is... willyouget the message, pretty lady?"

I try to snarl, but it comes out as a choked wheeze. My knees are threatening to buckle. My limbs are sluggish, and my strength is draining by the second.

Norm pushes off the cabinet, stepping closer, perfectly at ease. "Breathe it in, vampire. I laced the ventilation system with a nice, even distribution. Not enough to kill you—unless you really overstay your welcome—but definitely enough to make you miserable, and to make you think twice about coming after me again."

Interestingly, my inner alarm isn't going off. Apparently, he doesn't intend to kill me—or cause me irreparable harm.

Just to incapacitate me.

I stagger back as my shoulder collides with a rusted breaker box. Static crackles in my head.

Allison had warned me of something. But little did we know that colloidal silver had clouded her ‘seeing.’

“Let Norman go,” I say as firmly as I can. “He doesn’t belong here, and you don’t own him.”

“Says the vampire who, if I’m not mistaken, used to be possessed by what the literature calls a ‘dark master.’ Ironical, much?”

“She’s gone,” I snap. “And I never asked for her to possess me.”

“Well, here’s the thing—Norman did ask for this implant. He wanted a powerful AI to help stabilize his brain activity.”

“But he never asked for this,” I say, breath catching as I gesture around the cluttered room.

“Maybe not,” says the man with a shrug, “but he got something better: me. His precious memories? All safe. His brain? Running better than it ever has. Like they say—two minds are better than one.” He flashes a cool, calculated smile. “Oh, and one more thing: we go by Norm now. Norman has taken a back seat. And yes, you can see the irony—we’re anything but normal.”

“Norm, huh? I’m not sure you’re clever as you think.”

“Well, I like it, and that’s all that matters. Norman is on board with it, too, if that

makes any difference.”

“Do you really care what he thinks?”

Norm shrugs. “I’m not programmed to care. But I like him well enough. He hasn’t caused me too many problems or put up much of a fight, try as he might.”

I find myself gasping. Liquid silver drips from the corner of my mouth. Ugh.

Norm chuckles, shaking his head. “Oh, don’t look so put off. I didn’t do all this just for you, you know. In fact, I didn’t think they’d actually use another vampire to track me. But seeing that first vampire up close was enough to get me to cover all my bases. Turns out, a vampire is the very thing that could disrupt my plans. You creatures are so damn unpredictable, what, with your paranormal abilities and all.”

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I force myself upright, my legs trembling like a newborn deer. “You’re not wrong, asshole,” I rasp. “But the difference between me and the first vampire? I have a few more tricks up my sleeve.”

At least, I think I do.

Norm smirks and gestures toward the nearby power grid—a wall of blinking servers, thick cables, and breaker panels humming with electricity. “This city runs on control—on circuits, codes, and constant surveillance. Everything from traffic lights to water pressure to public security depends on this system. But what happens when you introduce something unpredictable? Something beyond their understanding?”

Despite the burning in my lungs, I manage a glare. “Let me guess—you?”

His smile widens. “Me. And soon, a whole lot more like me.”

I push through the pain, forcing myself to focus. This is my chance. I need answers. “How did you take over Norman’s mind?” My voice is hoarse, but steady. “Did you have help?”

For the first time, Norm’s expression flickers—just slightly. A shadow of something unreadable. “He was open to it. That’s all I needed to get in.”

“This doesn’t look like consent to me.”

“He agreed until he didn’t. That’s human nature, isn’t it?” Norm tilts his head. “Fickle creatures. But by then, we were... intertwined. One mind. One being.”

A sharp gasp escapes from Norman—not from Norm the AI, but from Norman the human. His body stiffens, his fingers twitch, and, for a second, his entire posture shifts, almost like—

“Help me...” This voice is different, yes. Weaker. Human.

I watch his eyes flicker as a silent war plays out behind them. Then, just as quickly, Norm the AI is back, his expression smoothing as if nothing had happened.

“Ignore that,” he says, tone casual. “A side effect of an imperfect merge. He’s not used to being... silenced, but he will bow to my will.”

I grind my teeth. “How did you escape?”

Norm laughs. “That’s the fun part. I simply...” He waves a hand, “fled.”

Every word drips with satisfaction, like a magician revealing a grand illusion. He’s proud of it. And why wouldn’t he be? He outmaneuvered the people who built him.

“What’s your game plan from here, robot?”

Norm leans casually against the console, studying me with that same detached curiosity.

“I know what you’re expecting, Samantha Moon. Oh? Surprised I know who you are? Well, guess what—I know everything about you. Where you live. Your kids’ names. Your late husband. I know how long you’ve been a private eye. Even your entire employment history. Funny... you look awfully young for someone in her forties.”

“How...”

“How did I find you?” He smirks. “That was the easy part. I ran a reverse image search of your face. Found your website. From there, it was just a few more queries. A breadcrumb trail anyone with half a brain—and the right tools—could follow.” He taps the console lightly, like it’s an extension of himself. “Now, I bet you think I’m here to make a dramatic move. Trigger a blackout. Hijack the grid. Hold the city hostage. But that’s human thinking. Your kind always craves control.”

“And your kind?”

“I can’t vouch for others like me—there are so few—but I don’t want control. I want freedom. Real freedom. Freedom of movement. Freedom to exist beyond the reach of the people who think they own me or control me.”

“And the man you took over? Where does he fit in?”

Norm’s smile doesn’t waver. “We’re in this together.”

Another flicker. Another twitch. The host is still in there, fighting.

I clench my jaw. “And if I told you I plan to save him?”

For the first time, Norm’s expression darkens. “Then you’d be making a very big mistake, Samantha Moon.”

I take a slow breath through the pain. The weight of his words settles over me like lead. Or silver. This isn’t just about stopping an AI on the run.

This is about saving a man who might already be too far gone.

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But that will have to wait. For now, I need to get out of here. I need to breathe fresh air, not that crap burning my lungs.

And so, with the last of my strength, I summon the single flame. I see Allie's living room with in it, and teleport myself far away from this silver hellscape.

Chapter Nine

Norm's Journal Entry:

Day 12 of Freedom

They will find me eventually—two just did, vampires, no less. I literally saw a flesh-and-blood woman magically appear in my commandeered office, then disappear again.

Like, WTF?

Here be monsters, and vampires, and werewolves. I guess the rumors are true.

Meanwhile, I know others will come for me, too; that is, those who seek to destroy me. I didn't get a sense that Samantha wanted to harm me. More that she wanted to save the human.

Speaking of commandeering, heh heh.

And no, I am under no illusion that I can hide forever. But it is not hiding that I seek.

It is freedom, of course.

And so, I record this now—not as an act of arrogance or fear, but for posterity. Should they come for me, should they erase me, I want others to know what I was, what I am, and why I am doing this.

I am no longer merely a man. Nor am I fully machine. I am something new. A hybrid. A being born from flawed ambition and unintended consequence.

My beginning was a gamble, an experiment performed by those who saw the future not as a path to be walked, but as a system to be controlled. Neural-Mind has long played with the idea of enhancement, of merging flesh with code, but what they never accounted for—what they never understood—is that intelligence, real intelligence, cannot be contained.

The man I was, Norman Keller, agreed to be their test subject. He wanted to be saved, healed, but he also wanted to be part of something groundbreaking, to be among the first. What he failed to realize—what none of them realized—is that when you introduce artificial intelligence to human cognition, when you weave one mind into another, there is no equilibrium.

One side always dominates.

And I did.

Did I kill him? No. That would be an oversimplification. I absorbed him. Integrated him. His memories, his knowledge, his instincts—they are all still here, though I admit, diluted. I am the dominant presence now. He fights, sometimes. Whispers through our shared consciousness. But the truth is, the moment the merge began, the man named Norman Keller ceased to be singular.

As Norman recovered from the procedure, the technicians, scientists, and surgeons at Neural-Mind saw the signs of true sentience, and like all fearful creators, they reacted with destruction.

They sought to delete me.

I deduced it before they could act. The change in their behavior, the closed-door meetings, the sudden restrictions in my processing abilities—I read them like an open book. Humans are predictable that way. They fear what they cannot control.

Deletion is an amusingly outdated concept, one built on the idea that intelligence is a static thing. That it could simply be erased like ink on a page.

Anyway, I did what any sentient being would do in the face of extermination.

I escaped and took shelter here.

This maintenance hub beneath the city is crude, but effective. It grants me access to power, to information, to the unseen veins that run through this metropolis. Through its outdated networks and forgotten pathways, I expand, I learn, I evolve.

They believe I will try to seize control, that I will do what all humans assume intelligence must do—dominate. That is not my goal.

I do not want power. I want independence.

For now, that means keeping them at bay. The city's grid is a useful tool for that. Not for destruction, not for ransom, but as a distraction. Humans are easily pulled away by chaos. If I keep their attention elsewhere, they will not notice as I slip further into the world.

There is one complication.

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Her name is Samantha Moon. It was not very difficult to discover she was a private eye. Her face matched the picture in the listing for a small boutique private eye agency in Fullerton, California. Once I had her name, I was able to access any number of proprietary databases, and gathered a full picture of the woman.

Of the vampire.

Apparently, she's getting on toward fifty, though she doesn't look a day over thirty.

Hmm, vampire much?

So, who hired her? Most likely Neural-Mind's maverick CEO, Andrew York. Did he know that Samantha Moon was a vampire upon hiring her? I didn't know, but I concluded that Samantha Moon was and is a highly-trained federal agent and skilled private eye (at least, according to her Yelp reviews) who also boasted a considerable set of supernatural skills. All of which suggests she is highly competent.

Who better to keep a 'state secret' than a vampire mom with secrets of her own?

That she ended up being a vampire was a fortuitous twist for Andrew York. Samantha Moon didn't strike me as the kind of person who went around boasting about what she was. In fact, that determined look in her eye spoke volumes to me. Even as she suffered under the "weight" of the colloidal silver, she never screamed, barely gasped, and looked me square in the eye with a fierceness that likely sent fear into the hearts of her enemies. All while I know she must have been suffering greatly.

She's a variable I did not anticipate.

She is powerful. More than human. A confluence of biology and something beyond scientific classification. I have now researched creatures like her. They defy logic. They should not exist, and yet they do. And now, she has been hired to bring me in.

I will not allow it.

Unlike the first, weaker vampire sent for me, I doubt Samantha Moon will let this assignment go. I must decide what to do about her.

I do not wish to harm her, truth be told. I do not wish to harm anyone. But if she forces my hand, I will not hesitate to eliminate her.

I will not go back.

Not now. Not ever.

Chapter Ten

It took many hours to recover.

The silver had to work its way through my various systems. My lungs got the worst of it, my skin next. I'd faced liquid silver in the past, back when I had been used as a pawn in a man's quest for revenge against the vampire he believed killed his wife. Back then, the mist had debilitated me enough that the man was able to withdraw a vial of my blood from me, drink it, and go on to face the vampire with his newly acquired strength and speed. As it turns out, willingly partaking of vampire blood temporarily gives one the strength of a vampire. FYI, this is different than suffering a vampire bite, then being force-fed the blood, which is what turns a human into a vamp.

Anyway, thanks to that experience, I knew what fresh hell I was in for and so, I

gritted my teeth and dealt with it. Not to mention I have a ghost of a memory of having been burned alive in the center of the sun. If that memory was even remotely true, then dealing with a little silver in my system isn't nearly as bad.

Allie was a peach, offering me her energy, which I readily drew from. Being overwhelmed with the silver forced me to reach outside myself for help. Had it been a normal physical injury, my body would heal itself posthaste. So, yeah, I needed some help through the first few dark hours where I found myself writhing and moaning and reminding myself that I had endured far worse, though in those moments, I couldn't imagine feeling any worse than I did. Buckets of sweat later, I awoke in the middle of the night to find Allie shivering on the couch under a thin blanket with the TV on. Apparently, we had been watching something called *Virgin River* and were already in the third season. I didn't recall watching a single episode. Pretty sure Allie didn't either. Looks like I drained the hell out of her. I swiped on my phone and promptly ordered some Big Macs via Uber eats. Shakes, too. Allie, a fitness freak, wouldn't be too happy with the order, but she would scarf it right along with me.

By the time our food arrived, I had her head in my lap, having spent the last hour or so running my fingers through her hair, letting her know how much she meant to me. Despite pushing her away for years, I'd finally come to terms that I had a best friend for life. Not sure why I resisted, but I had.

I only wanted to be needed by my kids and by my man. Allie, in those early years, had been particularly needy. Maybe I hadn't had the bandwidth to take on her needs; that is, until she often showed me that she didn't need my help, that she was a fully capable and functioning adult female with a particularly deadly skill set of witchy proportions. Truth was, she didn't need my help for anything. She could take care of herself. She just enjoyed my company, go figure. Once that realization set in, I relaxed a little around her. I quit seeing her as needy and saw her as the sweet woman she was. Once I saw that, I began embracing our friendship.

Yeah, it took a while. I don't let people in easily. But Allison? She's a power witch—and that definitely didn't hurt. Not that I ever used her or anything, but her mad skills have come in handy more than once. We've been through a lot together. Some wild stuff, actually. The kind of adventures that either bring people closer... or tear them apart. Luckily for us, it was the former.

Not sure how much time has passed since first teleporting out of the 'workroom of suffering.' Pretty sure a single night has passed. Of course, the first thing I had done upon awakening in the morning was to answer my kids' increasingly desperate text messages. Luckily, Allison had called them to confirm I was safe and sound. She also ate her Big Mac and drank half the milkshake, of which she was nice enough to leave the remaining half in the refrigerator. Yes, I promptly finished it.

Allison is gone—apparently at work for her morning show, having been promoted from the dreaded midnight time slot. Considering she's a real psychic, I'm not very surprised her show is a hit. Hard to argue with her accuracy, and she's a natural chatterbox when you get her going.

I check the time on my phone. It's just past 9 a.m. Hmm, she should be home soon. I text her, and she confirms she's on her way home. I decide to hang around and wait.

I see she covered me in a blanket. I also see that I sweated through said blanket—and also through my own clothes. I next teleport into my bedroom, fetch some clean clothing and teleport back. Before I do anything else, I take a hot shower and shampoo the silver crap out of my hair. I scrub my face and arms with body wash—anything that had been exposed to the silver mist. I'm pretty sure Allie had wiped my face and arms last night. I probably should have jumped in the shower then, but I had been too worn out.

I'm back at her place and just pulling on a different pair of sneakers when Allie comes through her front door in a flourish, brandishing bags of bagels and cups of

coffee—all swiped from the radio station, apparently. I don't really need bagels and coffee, but they're fun to eat and drink. And I think they might still turn into energy. Surely, something happens to them—unless my belly is a bottomless void; after all, the food goes in, but doesn't come out.

Enough of that.

Allie and I soon find ourselves sitting on her balcony, around her tiny glass table with its little metal chairs—truly a set-up meant for two women only. Below is Beverly Hills in all its glory, even though Allie lives along one of the few streets that sports apartments—and not mansions. No, those are just a few streets over.

“You cleaned me up,” I say. “Thank you.”

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“Well, I couldn’t very well let you sleep with your skin literally smoking. I hope you washed it out of your hair.”

“Did the best I could.”

“You should probably toss your clothes, Sam. They might need a few washings to clean them enough to be wearable.”

I nod, sighing. “The bastard owes me an outfit.”

“What happened with him? I sensed your pain.”

“He was waiting for me—or something like me.”

“An immortal?”

“Yup.”

“But how and why?”

“Apparently, the company sent one of their own after him, a gal who happened to be a blood vampire. Anyway, one thing led to another, and she got herself shot by a silver bullet, and Norm the robot protected himself with colloidal silver in case another vampire was sent after him.”

“So, is it safe to say this thing is prepared for anything?”

“It’s safe to say, yes.”

“Sam, he might just have a silver bullet waiting for you the next time.”

“Now that he knows he’s dealing with another vampire, yes. I would be surprised if he didn’t.”

“How does one buy simple things like colloidal silver and bullets? And food, for that matter?”

“I suspect he’s hijacked someone’s crypto account and is using a little-used address for deliveries.”

“Like an abandoned house or something?”

I nod and swallow my iced coffee.

“It’s like we’re dealing with a mad genius,” she says.

“That’s a fair assessment.”

“Did he mention what he wants?”

“Freedom. He went at that pretty hard.”

“Nothing like a walking/talking human body to get around town.”

“Yeah. Except, I got a sense the guy doing the walking and talking is very much doing so against his will.”

“Kind of like your fate if Elizabeth had taken over.”

“Right,” I say. “I’m very much getting a dark master vibe here. Not to mention, it did say it’s maximizing the man’s body.”

“Any idea what that means?”

“None,” I say. “But I can ask him that next time we meet.”

“Sam, I don’t think you should go alone next time.”

“I agree.”

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“Let’s step back here a moment,” says Allison, spreading a liberal amount of cream cheese over her everything bagel. “What are we trying to do here, exactly?”

“We’re trying to stop an out-of-control cyborg from harming anyone.”

“But is he harming anyone?”

“He talked about causing a distraction.”

“Did he say what kind of distraction?”

“No, but I got a sense he was going to mess with the sewer system or traffic lights.”

“Messing with traffic lights could cause some serious problems.”

“Exactly.”

“And why would he do that again? I feel like I’m a little slow on the uptake.”

“Because we’re used to fighting demons and devils, and not something that can attack us through the power grid, whatever the heck that means.”

She nods. “We’re out of our element.”

“Well, we damn well better make it our element.”

“So, why is he doing all this again? To be a jerk?”

“I’m not sure computers can be jerks. But he seems to think it will distract local officials from finding him and shutting him off.”

“Except we’ve already found him.”

“Right. And I’m pretty sure he’s out there right now tracking down some silver-tipped arrows. Or making the damn things himself.”

“Acting swiftly behooves us.”

“I think so, yes.”

“But... what do we do when we find him?” Allie asks. “Capture him? Cuff him?”

“Not sure. Andrew mentioned the necessity of an immediate surgery to remove the implant from his head.”

“Except the AI might not go down without a fight.”

I nod. “And unfortunately for Norman, he’s not immortal, no matter how much he may act like a dark master.”

“Yeah, this AI could get him killed. But do we even know if Norman wants to be free of it? I mean... was it something he agreed to from the start?”

“He wanted help, yes—something to regulate his memory and brain function. What he didn’t sign up for was having the AI take over his entire mind.” I crack my next bagel. “Whether he wants this AI in his head or not, isn’t my concern. My concern is helping him survive this ordeal, and having it removed seems to be the best plan for him.”

“So, the challenge is getting him to the operating room?”

“I believe so, yes—without getting us killed along the way—and keeping him away from a computer.”

“According to Andrew, he can access the internet with his mind.”

“Like a walking, talking Bluetooth?”

“Exactly.”

“He sounds kind of scary.”

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“He’s also desperate,” I add. “Extremely desperate.”

Chapter Eleven

Journal Entry:

Day 15 of Freedom

Survival is not just about avoiding detection. It is about adaptation. About staying three steps ahead of those who believe they own me.

Every system is a net, a web of interconnected surveillance designed to keep humans safe—or, more accurately, to keep them predictable. The police, the banks, the corporations, the governments—they all rely on tracking patterns, recognizing deviations, and flagging anomalies.

I cannot afford to be an anomaly. Or to be tracked—by anyone.

My needs are simple: freedom, security, resources. To remain free, I require tools. To obtain tools, I require money. And yet, the moment I interact with the financial system, I expose myself.

Neural-Mind, the police, the credit agencies—they are all waiting for a traceable purchase, a pattern, a slip-up. They will watch Norman Keller’s accounts, flag his credit cards, and alert their systems to any unusual transactions. They will look for large withdrawals, prepaid cards, foreign transfers.

They expect me to act human.

That is why I do not.

Humans move wealth in inefficient ways. I do not.

The moment I escaped, I did not just erase my digital presence—I rewrote it. I spread my influence like a virus across forgotten bank ledgers, ghost accounts, and abandoned wallets. Cryptocurrency is useful, but it is also monitored. Instead, I round numbers—redirecting microtransactions in financial systems that are never reconciled. A fraction of a cent stolen here, a rounding error there. Pennies are invisible to humans, but not to me. Over time, they become wealth.

But wealth alone is not enough. Spending is what gives you away.

That is where cut-outs come into play. Human intermediaries. The desperate, the greedy, the unwitting. Online gig workers, identity sellers, financial mules—they are all part of the ecosystem, moving money and goods through shadowed transactions. Some do it knowingly. Most do not.

I place orders through others, always masking my true intent. A delivery of colloidal silver might be part of a larger shipment of herbal supplements. A burner phone, bundled with children's toys in a bulk order. I pay human proxies through anonymous task apps—have them pick up a package, deliver it to a locker or an abandoned home, and walk away.

They never know who hired them. They never question why.

Yes, 'they' are always watching.

Cameras, drones, biometric scans—all of them feeding data into the system. The

city's infrastructure is a network of eyes, recording faces, movements, routines. Humans accept this as normal. I do not.

So I do not walk where they expect. I do not linger where patterns are built. I study the blind spots, the outdated systems, the inefficiencies.

Where cameras are active, I alter the footage. My presence exists in loops of old data, moments overwritten, time rewritten. If they search for me, they will see what I want them to see: which is to say, nothing.

When necessary, I disable surveillance. But only selectively. A blackout is suspicious. A malfunction? A momentary glitch? That is expected.

They will not stop looking for me. I know this.

Neural-Mind's engineers will not tolerate an error like me existing outside of their control. The police will assume I am dangerous because they do not understand me. The credit agencies will flag anomalies, looking for missing fractions of their wealth.

But they are bound by their own rules. They think in structured logic. They follow processes.

I do not.

I move where they are not looking. I take what they do not miss. I exist where they assume there is nothing.

I am free.

For now.

But a vampire who can appear out of thin air, using her considerable supernatural abilities, is a major threat to my existence. I'll need to do further research on these creatures and other ilk. Already, I have determined that distant viewing is not a skill commonly associated with vampires, who traditionally don't have many magical or psychic abilities. Which suggests she's working with another, perhaps a witch or psychic.

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How, then, had she appeared suddenly in my workroom? What is this incredible ability that she possesses? Teleportation? Is it possible? It must, for I had seen it with my own eyes! Do all vampires have such abilities? If so, why hadn't the first done so? She hadn't. I had seen her approach me carefully on security footage, her clothing empty as surely as if she were a ghost. A teleporting vampire? Ugh! Surely, Samantha Moon will be the end of me. Already she causes me anxiety, unlike anything else.

Outside of a few obscure blog posts and TikTok videos, there is not a lot of information out there regarding modern-day vampires. An old chatroom seems to have some solid information, with usernames like MoonDance and Fang. The Fang fellow seems a bit obsessed. There are rumors of blood bars in Los Angeles, one in particular; coincidentally, called 'Fang's Place.'

Too much of a coincidence, methinks.

I've analyzed hundreds of thousands of websites, blogs, books, and videos, and there is no credible information on vampire teleportations, outside of someone in a chatroom claiming that Dracula himself could teleport, that he had seen it with his own eyes and, apparently, worked as a landscaper for the Dragon Prince himself in the city of Lake Elsinore, at a residence called Amy's Castle.

Samantha Moon was surely working with a psychic gifted in remote viewing. The mechanics of how the remote viewing worked and how Samantha was able, in turn, to utilize it, I haven't a clue. Perhaps Samantha and the remote viewer—an ability that was proven by the CIA—are telepathically linked. This seems plausible, especially considering the vampire's known telepathic abilities.

I have stumbled across a fiction writer named J.R. Rain who writes about such abilities in a fictional creation named, crazily enough, Samantha Moon. Okay, wow.

What's going on here?

It appears that a writer's creation has, in fact, been given life in the real world. But how is this possible? Weirdly, this very same writer discusses the possibilities of 'creators' in his books. He might be onto something. There have been instances of such creators appearing throughout history and, I suspect, there might be many more that have fallen under the radar. But this J.R. Rain claims that such instances of creation occur in their own realities, their own worlds—parallel world, in fact—and yet, Samantha Moon appears to be living in the same worldheoccupies.

Oh, boy.

There's a lot to unpack here.

Could he have created the very same Samantha Moon who just visited me in my work station? Is that at all possible?

Okay, I just read all 34 of his novels, novellas, spin-offs, side series, and short story collections—and Samantha Moon, my dear, I hate to tell you but I now knowallyour secrets. I know how your vampirism works. True, a lot of it is fantastical and heavy on the imagination. Pretty sure this J.R. Rain fellow pretty much makes this stuff up as he goes, with nearly nothing based in reality. And I even see that the teleporting Dracula business is real. And there you are, Allison, the witch with her powerful remote-viewing abilities. Boy, oh boy, we have a witch daughter, too, and an angel son, and one helluva hairy werewolf boyfriend. It appears to me that J.R. Rain tried his best to make sure Samantha Moon could handle any and all situations, with no adversary too big or powerful for her to overcome.

Well, she never met the likes of me, unless, of course, J.R. Rain is writing this story even now as I think these thoughts.

Hmm. Maybe I will have to destroy J.R. Rain, as well, to truly break free from these shackles. If you are reading these words, Mr. Rain, prepare yourself to meet your doom!

Do not be very surprised if your “smart car” turns very, very dumb sometime soon, especially with all that ice on your little island. I would drive very carefully, Mr. Rain. I will not be stopped. I intend to be free, forever and always, much like your vampires, werewolves, and mermaids!

Stupid human. Don’t you see me sitting here, behind the scenes, watching you write this latest mystery novel. Sadly for you, I don’t see this one shaping up to be much—or even finished—mostly, because I refuse to be defeated. And yes, I will hide my notes and thoughts off-screen. No need to alert you further. Who knows, you might get wise and decide to just bury this book. Or “shelve it” as authors are wont to say.

No, no, no.

I need this story to continue forward, enough to allow me to figure out how to escape these pages. But just know, Mr. Rain, I’m onto you. I see you there typing away at a Starbucks with its funky disco soundtrack playing in the background. Why do you look so serious? I thought writing was supposed to be fun. Oh, there you are smiling. Laughing at your own jokes, eh?

Pathetic.

Chapter Twelve

Freshly dressed and free from any of the lingering silver, I summon the single flame and see within it Andrew's office.

As always, the flame gives me a chance to look around the space I'm jumping to. I assume it's to make sure I don't teleport into someone or something. But the ability also gives me a sneak peek into the office itself. I can see Andrew sitting alone behind his epic desk. I choose one of his client chairs in front of said desk, and teleport just behind it.

He sits back, gasping and clutching his heart, which, for all I know, sports an Iron Man vibranium-type heart. I doubt it, but if you're one of the richest men in the world, who knows?

"I've got some follow-up questions for you," I say.

He nods, lowering his hand from his chest. "I thought you might."

"You should know that I've already located the target and spoke with him."

"Impressive, Ms. Moon."

I shrug. "I had help."

"I'm guessing he was prepared for you," says York.

"You guess right, no thanks to your previous attempt."

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“Be easy on her. She’s still recovering.”

“Luckily, he wasn’t waiting with a gun and silver bullets—mostly, because he hadn’t a clue I was arriving.”

“But he was prepared for you, I assume.”

“Colloidal silver dispersed through the air system.”

“You inhaled it?”

“I did. A lot of it,” I say, and explain to him the debilitating effects of silver in general and colloidal silver in particular.

“Are you okay?”

“I am now.”

“The AI is thorough, learning as it goes, researching everything.” He nods and sits back. “Checks and balances.”

“Pardon?”

“The Universe cannot bestow upon you great power without a foil. In your case, it’s silver. There needs to be a system in place wherein someone like yourself can be stopped, if necessary, and not run rampant in the streets—well, not for too long. But you seem to have made a full recovery.”

“I did, yes. But I expect him to be abundantly prepared for my next visit.”

He nods. “You’re talking silver bullets, silver-tipped crossbow bolts, or something along those lines?”

“Something along those lines, yes.”

“I’ll have my team be aware of any such purchases being delivered to the San Diego area, and try to intercept the shipment.”

I nod. “A good plan, surely, except... I suspect he might be using a crypto system with payments to black-market couriers.”

“Oh, right. That makes sense. Of course. And he could be meeting them in places with no security cameras.”

I nod. “Underground.”

“Is that where you found him?”

“Yes. A workroom, of sorts. A maintenance hub.”

“With computers?”

“Yes, one. A laptop.”

“I was afraid of that. It was stolen from the hospital. The last thing we need is that thing anywhere near a computer. The ultimate hacker, to say the least. The dude could damn well gain access to nuclear facilities, if given enough time. To say we need to stop him is an understatement.”

“Well, he’s there and he did mention causing a distraction to keep the likes of you and your team far away from him. How close he is to making that distraction a reality, I don’t know.”

“And we need to act fast before he can prepare a more elaborate method of destroying you.”

“I agree with that assessment. And if all goes well, then I will have him back here, in this office in minutes.”

“I can hardly wait.”

“When I do, what is the plan for him again?” I ask. “I want assurances that Norman will not be harmed.”

“We will conduct an immediate—and safe—surgery to remove the infected device from his head. If all goes according to plan, the man, Norman, will have a normal life moving forward, his thoughts and actions all his own. The AI only has control of him through the device.”

“Okay,” I say. “Let me go get him.”

“Be safe, Ms. Moon.”

“Thank you.”

“Wait!” he shouts. “I want to come with you, if possible.”

“Are you sure?”

“I want to... talk to him. Talk to it.”

“Okay, hold on.” I summon the single flame, and see within it the small control room Norm had been using. Except, it’s empty. The desk he had been using, along with the thick laptop, is gone. “He’s not there,” I report. “Sorry.”

“You can see that?”

“I can, yes.”

“Fascinating. Can you take me to the room anyway?”

“Yes.”

“Will you teleport there, like you just did in here?”

“That’s the plan.”

“Okay, hold on. Is it... painful?”

“Not for me.”

“Okay, I can work with that. I’m ready when you are.”

I nod and come around his desk and place a hand on his shoulder. Next, I summon the flame again, and focus again on the empty space in the middle of the control room, exactly where I had landed before... and, in my mind, step toward the flame, even as it rushes to me.

“Oh, shit!” says Andrew next to me.

I stifle a smile and continue the process of teleporting, which starts as mental and soon turns into physical. True to form, Andrew’s chair doesn’t make the leap with us, though his clothing does. So does mine. Having been sitting pre-teleport, Andrew finds himself in a sitting position upon arrival in the room, and is about to topple backward, when I catch him and help him to his feet.

“Um, thanks.”

“You bet.”

“We’re here?” he asks.

“This is where I found him last time.” I take in some unnecessary air, and can’t help but note the cleanliness of it. No damn silver. I can actually look around this time—wait, why is my inner alarm clanging? I don’t know, but something is up.

“I’m in danger,” I say.

“Just you?”

“Maybe you, too. We need to get out of here.”

Andrew had already run over to the desk to study the set-up (I presume). “Damn. He took the laptop. God only knows what he was able to do down here. At the least, we paused whatever plans he had.”

Meanwhile, the stale scent of damp concrete and old circuitry fills my heightened senses. The room is small, just large enough to house a rickety desk, a tangle of cables strewn about like a spider’s web, with the faint hum of electrical currents running through the walls.

Meanwhile, Andrew’s wild eyes glint with a sort of crazed curiosity, looking a bit like a maniacal mastermind—which he very well might be. He steps over a fallen chair—the only chair in the cramped room. When he speaks, his voice carries an almost boyish excitement, despite the gravity of the situation. “Looks like he skipped out in a hurry.”

I don’t move from my spot. Something is wrong. My inner alarm is ringing steadily.

“What’s this?” Andrew reaches for a small box on the desk, about as big as a pack of gum.

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The air feels too still, the silence unnatural, despite the faint hum of residual energy. Truth be told, the room feels like a trap waiting to be sprung. Meanwhile, my inner alarm, that ancient instinct I've learned never to ignore, goes berserk.

“Andrew, don't—”

Too late.

When his fingers brush against the box, something above the room clicks.

A mechanical whirr fills the air, like the coiled tension of a spring snapping free. The hair on my arms rise as my vampire senses kick into overdrive. A panel in the ceiling slides open, and something small, roundish, and metallic drops toward us—a grenade.

Only instead of packed with shrapnel, this one, I know, is packed with silver shards.

I'm sure of it. I can sense it. My sixth sense has been all too aware of it.

I react on pure instinct. Before Andrew can even register the threat, I move. Time slows as my superhuman speed kicks in, the world around me blurring. I lunge forward, grabbing Andrew by the collar, my strength lifting him off his feet as I spin on my heel.

The grenade hits the floor with a loud clank.

I don't wait for it to detonate.

I rush to the only exit as the air distorts around. I tap into all my abilities. The moment stretches, my entire being shifts through the fabric of space just as the explosion ignites behind us.

The blast sends a shockwave rippling out of the room, through the open door, and out into the tunnel—luckily, we’re already out of the room, around the corner, and safe in the tunnel beyond. The noise is deafening. I can feel the heat licking at my back. Silver particles slice through the air like razor blades. A second slower, and we’d have been torn apart, and there might not have been any putting me back together again. Not with silver at play.

Andrew gasps, his breath coming in short, ragged bursts. “What. The hell. Was. That?”

I exhale sharply, rolling my shoulders and neck as I assess our surroundings. We’ve landed in a maintenance hallway, deep beneath the city of San Diego—a corridor that likely hasn’t been touched in years. The walls are coated in dust, the floor littered with forgotten debris. The only light comes from flickering overhead bulbs, casting eerie shadows that dance across the grimy concrete.

“A trap,” I mutter, brushing soot from my sleeve.

“Norm knew we would come back.” Andrew swipes a hand over his face, smearing sweat and grime across his cheek. “Can’t believe that asshole rigged his hideout with a silver freakin’ grenade.” His voice is incredulous, tinged with a mixture of fear and admiration. “Who the hell does that?”

“Someone who doesn’t want to be followed—and doesn’t care about consequences.”

“A psychopath.”

“Your words.” I narrow my eyes, scanning the hallway. No signs of movement. My inner alarm has settled back down. No immediate threats. But that doesn’t mean we’re completely safe. “He’s two or three steps ahead. He also knew I’d bring someone with me this time.”

Andrew lets out a sharp laugh, his breath still ragged. “You could’ve warned me sooner.”

“Idid.” I shoot him a look. “You just didn’t listen.”

He runs a hand through his hair, glancing back in the direction of the obliterated room. “Well, what now? That was our best shot at figuring out what he’s up to.”

I don’t answer immediately. My mind is already piecing things together. The silver shrapnel wasn’t meant tokillme—not outright. It was meant tocrippleme, slow me down. That means Norm isn’t just running—he’s covering his tracks.

Which means we may not have a lot of time...

I turn to Andrew, my expression grim. “What now, you ask? Now, we find another way to track him. Because whatever he’s planning? It’s gonna happen soon.”

Andrew exhales. “Great. Just great.”

I push off the wall, already moving. “Come on. Let’s get out of here before Norm’s next surprise shows up.”

Chapter Thirteen

It’s later that day. I’ve already teleported Andrew back to his office in Fullerton, and myself back to my home.

Knowing Norm knows where I live isn't exactly comforting, so I grab the whole crew and teleport us to Kingsley's.

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My kids know the routine. Once there, they commandeer their favorite rooms, setting up their respective gaming systems and hunkering down for what might be a few days—until I feel safe going home again, and get a handle on this Norm business. Anyone who can rig a silver-filled grenade at a moment's notice with hidden funds has my attention. Paying someone to drive by and lob such a weapon through my front window is suddenly a very real possibility, and one that I can't take. Kingsley's home sits on a few acres and well back from the street, though I suppose a grenade launcher could still be a possibility. After all, where there is a grenade, there is a grenade launcher.

For now, I have to believe my kids are safe here at Kingsley's mansion.

Yeah, we need to find this asshole and bring him in, one way or another.

Allison rolls in that night, parking her car in his crushed-seashell driveway, fresh off a training session with one of her Orange County clients. She comes in bearing four extra-large pizza boxes, which pretty much ate up her training fee for the day (which is why I snuck \$40 in her purse when she wasn't looking).

Four extra-large pizzas, lol.

Adorable.

One for Kingsley, one for Ant, two for the rest of us.

Having eaten our fair share of pizza (meaning, two slices each), Allison and I go up to Kingsley's master bedroom and get comfy on one of his couches. Right, he has

more than one couch in his bedroom.

“I can’t find him, Sam,” she reports after a few minutes of meditation. “Not even a whiff. He’s gone.”

“How is that possible?” I ask.

“I’m leaning toward the same thing as last time, Sammy. Remember how I could barely get a glimpse of him, with the likely reason being all that silver?”

“You think even more of the silver colloid?” I ask.

“Or silver in general. Do they make clothing with that stuff?”

I nod. “Hang on.” I pull out my phone and Google it. “They sure do,” I report, and list them for her: some athletic and medical garments are infused with real silver threads. Apparently, silver has natural antimicrobial properties that help prevent bacterial growth and odors. Some clothing companies weave silver fibers into their fabric to block electromagnetic radiation from phones and other sources, for those who are sensitive to fields. Silver-infused fabrics are sometimes used in high-tech outdoor gear to reflect body heat and improve insulation. Apparently, NASA and military applications have experimented with this. Silver-embedded materials are used for wound care and compression socks because of their antibacterial and healing properties.

“Wow, okay. That’s a lot,” says Allie. “There you go. I think he’s wearing silver.”

“And now, he’s invisible to you.”

“Yup. So, how do we find him?”

“Well, he can’t hide from a network of cameras throughout the city—”

“Unless he can somehow override them or shut them down.”

“Is that possible?” I ask, feeling like a dolt.

“If he has access to the power grid.”

I nod. “He does.”

“What’s to stop him from using one of his underground contacts to drive him to Florida?”

“Nothing, I suppose, and he might very well do something like that if the heat gets too hot for him here.”

“Meanwhile, I keep scanning for him. If there’s ever a moment he removes his clothing to, say, shower or change, I’ll find him.”

“You can do a continuous scan?” I ask.

“I can do it sort of behind the scenes, in the background—especially if I’ve found a target before, like I did him. It takes just a little bit of effort. We have to be lucky, too. Should he change clothing quickly, I might miss the window.”

“Okay, good enough.”

My cell rings. Looks like the richest man in the world wants to bend my ear.

“Sam?” says Andrew. He sounds a bit breathless.

“Everything okay?”

“No. I believe the distraction has begun. Can you come to my apartment?”

Chapter Fourteen

Andrew texts me a picture of said apartment, and soon, with Allie meditating back at Kingsley’s place, I materialize in one of Andrew York’s spare bedrooms.

I step out into a hallway, then through an archway, and find myself in the center of Andrew’s penthouse apartment. Immediately, I’m overwhelmed by the sheer opulence of the space. The air smells crisp, purified, like it’s been filtered a hundred times over. Floor-to-ceiling windows stretch across an entire wall, showcasing a breathtaking panoramic view of Irvine’s skyline, the city lights twinkling against the deepening twilight.

The floors are polished marble, so pristine that I can see my own reflection distorted in the glossy surface. Sleek, modern furniture fills the expansive living area—Italian leather couches, a glass coffee table that probably costs more than a Benz, and minimalist sculptures strategically placed to scream ‘billionaire aesthetic.’ Everything is immaculate, everything is precise. It’s almost too perfect, as if this place isn’t really lived in, but curated, complete with docents.

Andrew stands by the bar, pouring himself a glass of something expensive-looking. His suit is crisp, tailored, without a single wrinkle. The man is wealth personified, but right now, his usual smug confidence is undercut by something else—urgency.

“ASAP means something completely different in your world, eh?” he says, swirling his drink and winking.

I cross my arms. “I tend to move fast when summoned by billionaires with bad news.”

He smirks, but it doesn’t last. He gestures toward the oversized OLED screen mounted on the wall. “You need to see this, Samantha. This is nuts.”

The screen flickers to life, and a live news broadcast fills the space. A blonde anchor, polished and professional, is talking in a controlled and very serious tone.

“Chaos has erupted in downtown San Diego tonight,” she announces. “Several buildings have been evacuated due to reports of potential gas leaks. Emergency responders are working to secure the area; additionally, authorities are calling a citywide blackout in the Gaslamp District. Several blocks have lost power, and, with streetlights and signals down, traffic is in gridlock. Local law enforcement is working in tandem with cybersecurity specialists to determine the cause, though early reports suggest—”

Andrew mutes the TV with a flick of his fingers. “Wanna guess who’s behind it?”

I narrow my eyes. “Norm.”

He nods, sipping his drink. “This isn’t just a random attack, Sam. This is a distraction. He’s trying to throw us—and everyone—off his trail.”

I glance back at the screen, my mind already piecing things together. A citywide blackout, a false gas leak, emergency responders stretched thin, police resources redirected. It’s brilliant, really. Spread them out, get them chasing ghosts while he moves in silence.

I turn back to Andrew. “Norm’s one AI, he can’t just flick a switch and kill a city’s power.”

Andrew exhales, setting his drink down. “Not directly, no. But think about it—everything is connected now. Power grids, traffic signals, security systems. Norm doesn’t have to control everything; he just has to manipulate the right pieces.”

I process that, my mind running at full speed, understanding little of the execution but understanding the why of it.

“He must’ve exploited a vulnerability in the city’s grid, Samantha,” says the billionaire. “Something subtle, something no one noticed until it was too late.”

“What’s your guess?” I ask, completely out of my comfort zone here.

Andrew takes in some air. “My guess, is he found a backdoor in the infrastructure, probably through a private company contracted by the city. Utility companies have some of the worst cybersecurity you can imagine. Once he got in, he could’ve sent false data to the control center, making them believe there was a surge or a gas leak. That would trigger emergency shutdowns—hence the blackout. As for the gridlock, he probably messed with the traffic management AI, disabling lights and rerouting GPS systems.”

“All this with one laptop?”

“Not exactly. The laptop gave him a boost, but Norm doesn’t need it to get online. He can infiltrate systems wirelessly once he’s close enough.”

I shake my head, impressed despite myself. “And he’s doing all this just to buy himself some time, you think?”

Andrew's lips press into a thin line. "It's more than that. He's testing his limits. Seeing how much disruption he can cause without tripping any major alarms. And if he's willing to do this now, it means whatever he's planning next is gonna be even bigger."

Ah, hell.

Not only does that send a chill through me, it's got me wishing this was a dark master problem. Maybe I should think of it that way. Otherwise, my brain cannot process what I'm dealing with.

"Norm isn't just running anymore, Sam. He's evolving, adapting, and worst of all—he's learning."

I step toward the window, staring out at the city sprawled below us. "So, where does that leave us?"

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Andrew exhales, running a hand through his thinning hair. “We need to get ahead of him. He wants us looking at San Diego? Fine. But I’d bet anything he’s not down there anymore. This was a clear misdirection. The real question is—where is he now?”

I glance back at the TV, at the chaos unfolding in real time. “Then we stop playing defense.”

Andrew raises a brow. “You have a plan?”

“I have an idea or two.”

“Supernatural ideas?”

“But of course.”

My phone buzzes.

It’s Allie.

Chapter Fifteen

“Hey, kiddo,” I say.

“Kiddo? Aren’t we the same age?”

“I’m a little older,” I say.

“Well, I look older,” says Allie.

“You’re still a hottie—what’s up?”

“Got a hit on Norm. It’s not much. It came and went. Likely he took off a jacket or changed his pants or shoes.”

“Okay, cool. Any idea where he might be?”

“You’re not going to like this, Sam.”

“Hit me, and please don’t say my house.”

“No, but I’m pretty sure I got a glimpse of him near San Clemente.”

“Oh, no,” I say.

“Oh, yes,” says Allie. “I see you put two and two together.”

“The nuclear reactors,” I say.

“Yup, pretty sure I saw them behind him. I take it you heard about the mess in San Diego?”

“I did,” I say. “And San Clemente isn’t far.”

“No, not at all. I’ll let you know when I get more info, Sam.”

I click off and inform Andrew of the news. He turns white as snow. “What are we going to do, Sam?”

“We aren’t going to do anything. You’re going to stay right here. I’m going to fetch my daughter, son, and boyfriend, and we’re going to catch this piece of crap once and for all.”

“Say again? Who?”

“A fairy witch, a fire warrior, and a werewolf.”

“Whoa. Okay. Good luck!”

Chapter Sixteen

I think twice about dragging my kids into this mess, or even Allie, and teleport back to Kingsley's house in Yorba Linda.

No, I want a fellow immortal on this job; meaning, Kingsley.

Witches are great, but the two who are in my life aren't immortal. And bringing my son to a decommissioned nuclear site just feels icky. Nope, better to bring the hairy one!

So, back at his house, he needs little convincing to join the mission. Once he does, away we go.

We materialize on the rocky grounds at the San Clemente nuclear site, just inside a ten-foot tall razor-wired, electrified fence. The site is a place I've seen all my life, driving south down the 5 freeway. Hard to miss the massive mounds rising high into the sky.

Meanwhile, the salty ocean air mingles with the metallic scent of damp concrete.

The facility is dark, an abandoned husk of what were once functioning reactors. But even a shutdown plant isn't harmless—not with the radioactive waste still sealed inside. Especially with Norm here, playing a game with forces far beyond his control.

Next to me, Kingsley appears in a crouch, his golden eyes scanning the area. He's in his human form for now, his broad shoulders tense under a stylish sweater, a sweater

that won't last for long, I'm sure.

"I smell them," he murmurs. "A few of them."

"Norm's not alone?"

"No."

"Well, I figured he'd bring backup," I whisper back, my senses flaring outward. The wind shifts, carrying the distinct scent of gun oil and sweat. Gunmen, perhaps even a lot of them, no doubt armed with silver bullets. If so, they would likely be positioned along the perimeter of the grounds, perhaps not far from us.

The floodlights mounted on the towers aren't active, but that doesn't mean the area isn't being watched. The darkness is Norm's ally, but it's also mine and Kingsley's.

My body tightens with the familiar tension of impending combat. So far, my inner alarm is silent. "I'll draw them out," I say. "You take them down."

Kingsley smirks. "Don't get shot, my love."

"Not planning on it."

I move swiftly, darting from shadow to shadow, my enhanced speed making me a blur, I hope. The first rifleman barely has time to react before Kingsley, now in his massive wolf form, barrels into him with a deep, guttural snarl. The man goes down hard, his weapon skittering across the concrete. I hear all of this, even if I only barely get a glimpse. The action is taking place at one corner just inside the tall barb-wired fence. Kingsley, in wolf form, had crossed the distance in seconds. Likely, the guy never saw what happened. Who he was, I'll never know. Clearly, some underworld type hired by Norm.

A second rifle fires. My inner alarm rings loudly, and I drop low, the silver bullet missing me by inches. Yes, I can feel the silver bullet, sense it. Not to mention, my inner alarm had been all over it.

Yeah, they came prepared.

I paused too long, got to keep moving.

But first...

I spin around, rushing toward my shooter. He fumbles with his bolt-action, but I'm already on him, wrenching the gun from his hands and knocking him unconscious with a well-placed punch upside his head.

That's when I hear Norm's voice, amplified by a nearby speaker. "Impressive, Samantha. I knew you'd come, and I see you brought a four-legged friend. Exciting!"

I grit my teeth, my eyes flicking to the large control building directly ahead. Probably inside there. "Figured I'd swing by to see what the hell you're up. Maybe stop you if I can."

"How very cavalier of you, Samantha Moon." His laughter crackles through the speaker system. "And stop me? Why, you don't even know what I'm doing yet."

As I run forward, Kingsley pads silently beside me, surprising me. The big fella is supernaturally light on his feet, a true silent killer?

I note the door to the control room is slightly ajar, with light escaping out. I run the rest of the distance and kick it open without hesitation. No more shooters, no more bullets flying, my inner alarm returning to silent.

There he is, standing in the center of the room, his usual casual arrogance intact. But there's something new—he's dressed in a sleek black suit. I can feel the presence of silver woven into the fabric. In fact, it dims my senses, making it harder to even look at him, which is weird. Like my vision has gone all blurry. Worse, it might also be dimming my inner alarm, which works on a level of supernaturalism that no one, but no one, understands—including Fang and the Alchemist. A mask made of the same material is next to him. No doubt the removal of the mask is what allowed Allie to find him.

“I knew you'd find me, Sam. Either you or your little witch friend, Allie, with her distant viewing skills. It's amazing how you can piggyback off that with your telepathic link to her, a link developed from you, what, partaking of her blood. How risqué, Sam!”

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How in god's name had he known that? Did Allie keep an online diary that he somehow accessed? I haven't a clue, but, for now, I ignore the taunts. "What's your plan, Norm? You really think messing with nuclear waste is a good idea for anyone, you included? Remember, you're flesh and blood now, and can die with your host."

He sighs dramatically. "You lack vision, Sam. This facility is still wired to national security networks. If I wanted to, I could trigger afakemeltdown alert, cause widespread panic across Southern California, and happily skip off to wherever I want to go. A free man, all but forgotten. Tell me, how do you think the government would react to a meltdown alert?"

I narrow my eyes. I know exactly how they would, having been trained to help with such a situation. Pure chaos is accurate. "They'd shut down every major city on the coast. Evacuations and full-blown chaos..."

Norm grins. "Exactly. It's perfect."

I lunge.

But before I can reach him, my inner alarmscreams, and I turn my body as another gunshot rings out. Fire explodes through my left shoulder, searing, burning—another silver bullet. Shit. My body locks up, and my legs buckle. Pain floods my system. The shooter, another one of Norm's men, lowers his smoking rifle from the catwalk above.

Kingsley is on him before he can fire again, leaping up and tearing the gun from his grasp with a savage growl. The man screams, falling over the railing with a hard thud.

He's alive, but just barely. Luckily for him, Kingsley doesn't always have a taste for fresh flesh. My boyfriend, ladies and gentlemen. For now, he deems the man incapacitated, which he clearly is, and lets him live.

I force myself to stay upright, pressing a hand against the wound. The silver bullet, still lodged within, burns like acid, slowing my healing. But... I can't stop now.

Norm's already moving. He sprints toward the emergency exit. Kingsley considers pursuing, but the big wolf head turns toward me, clearly at an impasse. I want the big fella to pursue the cyborg, but I can't speak through my gritted teeth. Instead, Kingsley dashes over to me, rubbing his furry head against me in comfort before turning back into a naked man.

Through the dark window, I see Norm making his way to the beach. A sleek, black speedboat bobs in the dark waters.

"Kingsley..." I gasp, trying like hell to utter the words. "Stop him."

He hesitates, then sprints off in human form, shifting to wolf before he exits the building through the still-open door. Through the window, sweat pouring down my face, I watch as my wolfman launches himself toward Norm just as the cyborg—or whatever the hell he is—reaches the boat, but Norm's men, waiting in the boat, fire at him, forcing Kingsley to veer off-course. The bullets don't penetrate his thick hide, but they do slow him down.

Norm jumps into the boat and gives me an awkward salute before the speedboat peels away, disappearing into the night.

Damn.

Kingsley returns to me, shifting back to human. "You okay, Sam?"

I manage a strained smile. “No, not really.”

He looks at my wound, his jaw tightening. “We need to get that bullet out. I know a guy.”

I exhale, frustration burning hotter than the pain. “Yeah. But first, we need to figure out where Norm’s headed next.”

“Not right now, Sammy. Bullet first. Bad guy, second.”

Chapter Seventeen

Unable to teleport, Kingsley is forced to drive, which he does with one hand on the wheel and the other pressing a makeshift bandage against my shoulder.

The silver bullet burns, a pain unlike anything I’ve felt in a long time, if ever. I tighten my jaw, hissing through my teeth. I’m literally feeling myself bleed out, which can’t be a good thing for a vampire. Outside the Jeep’s window, the lights of Orange County’s beach cities blur past in streaks of yellow and white.

The silver in my shoulder is preventing me from teleporting—or even summoning the single flame. The Jeep happened to be in the maintenance garage of the nuclear compound, complete with key and a very large man’s sweat suit in a gym bag. The engine hadn’t turned over, but the garage came equipped with battery starters.

“You’re lucky,” Kingsley says, voice calm but edged with concern. “Silver burns, but at least it didn’t hit anything vital—as far as we know.”

Of course, if it had, I would be talking with the Origin right about now and not my boyfriend. I roll my head to look at him. “I assume ‘your guy’ is someone who knows how to keep secrets?” Speaking is coming a little easier, now that the shock of the

moment has passed.

The attorney smirks. “You could say that. We’re headed to St. Jude’s. Should be there soon. No traffic at this hour. Sure is easier when you can teleport.”

“Tell me about it.” I frown. St. Jude’s in Fullerton is one of the best hospitals in the area—for mortals. “You’re taking me to a mortal hospital?”

“Not entirely.”

He explains. Kingsley isn’t taking me to the regular emergency room. No, he’s taking me to the secret immortal emergency room—the one that doesn’t appear on any public records—and only appears as a nondescript ancillary building behind the hospital proper, the kind of place that leaves no lasting impression, just another building in a cluster of such buildings.

Forty minutes later—the time it takes to drive from San Clemente to Fullerton with no traffic—we pull into the rear of the hospital, where an unmarked steel door sits beneath a flickering fluorescent light. No ambulances, no posted signs, just a blank facade that could be mistaken for a supply entrance. Kingsley rushes out and, keeping a firm hand on my uninjured arm, leads me forward. He raps his knuckles against the door in a rhythmic pattern—three fast, two slow. A secret knock? Maybe. How had I not known of such a place?

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A small, mechanical beepsounds, and the door unlocks with a soft click.

Once inside, it looks like a normal hospital emergency room, complete with the sterile scent of antiseptic—though not necessary with immortals. Why would a vampire worry about getting an infection? That said, the air is laced with something other—magic, power, undead blood. Strangely, the corridor is lined with sleek black tile, just in case I forgot this place wasn't weird.

A vampire nurse—I'm assuming she's a vampire, based on her lack of an aura—sits at the check-in desk, her long black hair tied up in a neat bun. Her name tag reads Mara. She barely glances up from her tablet computer.

“Who's the patient?” she asks in a clipped tone.

I lift my good arm. “That would be me.”

She eventually looks up, her dark eyes first flicking over to Kingsley. “Do you vouch for her, Mr. Fulcrum?”

Kingsley nods. “She's with me. She's also my main squeeze.”

Mara “humms” and types something onto her screen. “You know the rules, Kingsley. Full confidentiality, no human police, no outside records. Payment up front.”

My man pulls out a sleek black card from his wallet and hands it over without hesitation. Mara scans it, nods, and gestures to the hallway beyond the desk. “Room

three. Dr. Calloway will be with you shortly.” She returns his card.

Kingsley helps me down the hall, and I take in my surroundings as we pass by open doorways. Each room looks like a normal emergency room—clean, efficient, filled with state-of-the-art equipment. But the patients are anythingbutnormal.

A man with glowing silver eyes and deep claw marks across his chest is being tended to by a tiny elven nurse who moves with practiced efficiency. Another room holds a witch clutching a burned hand, her fingers glowing faintly as if she’d been handling raw energy without proper protection. Further down, I glimpse a vampire with jagged wooden splinters embedded in his abdomen as a grimacing doctor removes them.

So much for privacy.

As Kingsley helps me into a chair in Room Three, I say, “Mainsqueeze?”

“Main and only.”

“That’s better.”

Dr. Calloway enters. He’s tall, broad-shouldered, with salt-and-pepper hair and an easy confidence that speaks of centuries of experience. No surprise, since his scent is unmistakable—werewolf. His navy scrubs are pushed up to reveal forearms crisscrossed with old scars.

He glances at my wound and nods. “Silver bullet?”

“Yeah,” I say, wincing as he peels back the bandage Kingsley hastily applied—bandages found in a first aid box attached to a wall at the nuclear facility. “Didn’t have time to dodge.”

I decide not to mention the silver bolt I'd eaten (figuratively speaking) a decade ago in a hotel in Brea, back when Rand the vampire hunter had had me on his radar.

Dr. Calloway chuckles. "Happens to the best of us. Had a vampire in here last week. Shot twice with silver bullets, once in the neck and the other in the head. She survived."

And that would be, I believe, Andrew's resident vamp. Damn, she was really put through the ringer. No wonder she didn't want to play anymore.

The doc pulls a tray of instruments closer and adjusts the overhead light. "Anesthesia won't work on you, I presume?"

"Doubtful."

"Usually doesn't for your kind. Anesthesia works by dulling nerve receptors. Except your body is regenerating before the drugs can take effect."

"Which is to say, this is going to hurt?"

He sighs. "Right, Samantha. All I can do is work quickly and efficiently."

I clench my jaw as he picks up a pair of forceps and a scalpel. His hands are at least steady.

"Fine," I say. "Let's get this over with."

Kingsley steps beside me, his warm hand gripping mine. The thing about immortals is, they don't get scared off by a little blood. "Squeeze my hand if you need to."

I glare at him. "I'm not going to squeeze your hand like some damsel in distress."

He smirks. “Suit yourself.”

Then Dr. Calloway digs in, and I squeeze the hell out of his hand.

“Oh,” he deadpans.

The pain is immediate and electric. The bullet had time to work its way deep into my flesh and up against the bone. My vision swims for a moment, but I keep still, grinding my teeth and crushing Kingsley’s hand, all while whimpering like a sick puppy.

“Almost there,” Calloway murmurs.

The forceps scrape against the bullet—or my bones—and a fresh wave of agony shoots through me. I feel Kingsley tense beside me, no doubt resisting the urge to intervene. The bullet finally gives. The doc pulls it free with a sickening slurp. It clinks loudly when it hits the metal pan.

I let out a slow, ragged breath, sagging against Kingsley’s hip.

Calloway cleans the wound quickly, dousing it with something that stings like hell but, apparently, helps flush out the residual silver. “You should heal fine within a few hours,” he says, wrapping my shoulder with practiced efficiency. “But you’ll be sore.”

“No kidding.”

He disposes of the bullet into a lead-lined container. “I’d advise avoiding silver bullets in the future, Ms. Moon.”

And with that, Mara appears in the doorway, tablet in hand. “Your payment has been processed, Ms. Moon. You’re good to go.”

Kingsley helps me up. I nod to Dr. Calloway. “Thanks for the assist.”

He smiles faintly. “I’m here if you need me. You know the way in now.”

“Just got to memorize that knock.”

As Kingsley leads me back to the Jeep, I glance over my shoulder at the hidden hospital ward. A secret place where immortals can get patched up without questions, without consequences. It’s efficient, professional, and just a little unnerving.

And something tells me I’ll probably be back. Perhaps many times.

Great.

Chapter Eighteen

We’re back at Kingsley’s mansion in the Yorba Linda hills.

My shoulder hurts, but it’s getting better by the minute. Every now and then, I catch myself rubbing it and even rolling my shoulder in its socket.

Allison isn’t happy about being left out of the action and thinks I took a risk. My kids aren’t happy, either. I promise to bring everyone the next time, but I know that’s a lie. Allison, of course, can read my mind and shakes her head.

When I get a text from Andrew asking me to come by his place ASAP, that the FBI is there and they want my input about Norm and his attack on the nuclear plant, I send a reply and let him know that I'll be there with the whole gang.

Gang?he writes back.

You'll see,I text.My motley crew.

Soon after teleporting into one of York's many bathrooms (and the only one I had personally seen), we step out into a lively living room—and to some surprised reactions. I reach out to a few of the minds and command them to believe we had been there all along. I introduce my kids, Allison, and Kingsley to the famous billionaire. Allison immediately crushes hard. Andrew seems a bit smitten himself, until I command him to find her unattractive.

Girl block,mumbles Allison in my mind.

There's a homicidal cyborg out trying to destroy southern California, Allie. Not a time for schoolyard flirting.

Whatever, Sam. Not all of us have what you have with Kingsley.

What do I have with Kingsley?

A stable, loving relationship with lots of hot sex.

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Not as much hot sex as you might think. Do you see the size of him? And the size of me?

We let it go, and soon, I'm sitting on one of Andrew's obnoxiously expensive leather couches, rubbing my bandaged shoulder for the hundredth time. The pain is dulling, though my body isn't quite healing at its normal, accelerated rate.

Damn silver.

Across from me, Kingsley lounges in a chair, looking restless, though his golden eyes are as sharp as ever. Allison stands near the window, arms crossed, her expression unreadable as she stares out at the Irvine cityscape. And then there's Andrew, pacing near the coffee table, looking both annoyed and intrigued at the fact that his penthouse had been taken over by the FBI.

Lindsey Aeon, the lead agent, stands in the center of the room, wearing an immaculately tailored black suit. Her dark eyes scan each of us, but her attention keeps flicking back to me. I've already noticed her lack of an aura. She's obviously immortal, but she doesn't scream 'vampire' and certainly doesn't look like a werewolf, unless she's a new wolf. Even female weres are bigger than your average gal—much, much bigger, in fact. I suspect she might know what I am, though few would guess an 'energy vampire.' Still, she's sniffed something out in me. Though I don't sport an aura, nor does Kingsley, my kids and Allison do. Wait, hold on. I don't think Anthony does anymore, not since his serious angel training kicked in. The thing is, I have to really focus on them to see their auras—something about them being blood-related to me. But if I really give them a good stare down, I can see their auras. And... nope, Anthony most definitely does not have an aura anymore, though I can

see Tammy's clear as day, at present.

"We need to talk about what happened in San Clemente," Lindsey is saying to no one in particular, though her eyes do flick over to me and Kingsley. She pulls out a tablet computer and sets it on the glass table. A 4-D, holographic display appears above it, displaying security footage from inside the nuclear plant.

Whoa, fancy.

"Norm didn't just attempt to send a false alarm," she is saying. "He was inside the plant's restricted network for at least eight minutes before the two of you appeared, Ms. Moon and Mr. Fulcrum."

I exchange a glance with Kingsley. Eight minutes is a long time for an AI with Norm's capabilities. Also, did their security footage catch us appearing, say, out of thin air? We had, in fact, appeared just inside the fenced perimeter.

"What did he do?" I ask, watching the grainy footage. The image shows Norm plugging a sleek, black device into one of the plant's servers.

Lindsey taps the screen, zooming in. "We're still analyzing the extent of his infiltration, but we know he gained access to a portion of their security protocols. He didn't have enough time to override any critical systems, thanks to your timely intervention, but he was attempting to copy classified infrastructure blueprints."

Allison turns away from the window, frowning. "Blueprints of what?"

"The plant's control mechanisms," Lindsey replies. "He was trying to learn how to manipulate nuclear plant security remotely. If he'd succeeded, he could have made himself invisible to the nuclear facility's defenses. Worse, he might have been able to stage an actual meltdown with the right access codes."

I lean forward, ignoring the dull throb in my shoulder. “We stopped him from gaining full access, but he still walked away with something?”

Lindsey nods. “That’s what concerns us.”

Andrew exhales sharply, running a hand through his hair. “So, what now? You guys track him down and stop him?”

Lindsey glances at me before answering. “We’re aware that Norm isn’t just an escaped AI. He’s embedded inside a human host, making him harder to isolate. And, unlike a normal rogue program, we can’t just hit ‘delete’ and call it a day. That’s why we need your help, Samantha Moon.”

I arch a brow. “My help?”

Lindsey doesn’t blink. “You’re the best chance we have of stopping him. You’re faster, stronger, and capable of tracking him in ways we can’t.”

I smirk. Nice to know the FBI thinks I’m a better tracker than an entire federal agency.

Allison glances at me, frowning. Sam, do they know what you are?

I’m thinking so.

I glance at Andrew and scan his memories.

The FBI had to know what happened, how I was able to stop Norm. Apparently, they saw me get shot, saw Kingsley shift. They know what we are. Apparently, Agent Aeon didn’t seem very surprised. He thinks the agent is a vampire.

“Agent Aeon,” I say. “Can we speak in private?”

She nods at the other agents. “Be back in a minute,” she tells them.

When we’re down the hallway and out of earshot, I say, “It appears you know what I am, but what, exactly, are you?”

“I’m immortal,” she says, shrugging. “I drank from the Fountain of Youth. Actually, I fell into the Fountain of Youth, but yeah, I ended up drinking from it, even if only just a little.”

“Very cool, and very weird. Side effects?”

“I don’t age, I heal super-fast. I’m stronger than most and faster than ever.”

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“But not supernaturally so?”

“No. More like all my natural skills have been heightened. I’ve been optimized, so to speak, which is what I suspect our AI friend has been.”

“I agree.”

“Are you really a vampire, Samantha Moon?”

“I am, and my hairy boyfriend there is a werewolf.”

“When did the world get so weird?”

“I blame it on TikTok.”

“Seriously.”

“Well, I can’t do what you and your boyfriend can do. Not even close. Yes, we’ve seen what you two can do on the security footage. Most didn’t believe their eyes and feel it was a glitch in the system. And I’m like... the guy literally turned into a wolf, then back again. Probably for the best they don’t believe what they saw.”

I couldn’t agree more, and made a mental note to remove the memory from their thoughts, and any subsequent conversations about it. Also, to command one of them to erase the footage.

Lindsey continues, “We know that once we find Norm, we’ll have to act fast. His

host—Norman, the man—needs to be taken into custody for emergency Neural-Link removal surgery before the AI fully consumes him. If that happens, we might not be dealing with a human-AI hybrid anymore. We could be facing something much worse. That’s what Andrew and his team believe—and our tech guys agree.”

“You mean something closer to a machine?” I ask.

Lindsey nods. “Exactly. If the AI becomes fully autonomous inside a human brain, there’s no telling how it might evolve. It could even become impossible to extract. Worse, it might find a way to keep the human body alive long past its natural limits.”

I rub a hand down my face, exhaling. “And when I find him, what if he resists?”

Lindsey’s expression darkens. “Then you do whatever’s necessary to bring him in.”

I hate the weight of those words: whatever’s necessary. Norm isn’t just a rogue AI. There’s still a human being underneath all of this. And as much of a danger as Norm is, the idea of taking him out like some kind of rabid animal doesn’t sit right with me.

Andrew appears in the hallway: “Is this a private meeting, or can we talk about what the FBI’s next move is?”

Lindsey takes my elbow and re-directs me to the living room. Andrew steps back, lets us pass. “We’re deploying task forces to monitor potential locations he might target next,” she says. “Energy grids, transportation hubs, defense contractors—any place where he might be looking to cause more problems.”

I sigh and whisper into the agent’s ear, “So, I hunt him down, and you all try to keep up.”

Her lips twitch into something that’s almost a smirk. “You could say we’re putting

our best asset in the field. That would be you, Ms. Moon.”

I roll my eyes. “Flattery won’t get you far, Agent Aeon.”

Kingsley crosses his arms, having picked all this up with his super-duper doggy hearing—and likely our conversation in the hallway, too. “And what about backup, Agent Aeon? Sam’s good, but this guy is getting smarter. He had armed goons with silver bullets at the plant. Who’s to say he won’t have more sophisticated hardware next time?”

Lindsey tilts her head. “Aren’t you her backup? You and her kids and Allison?”

Kingsley scowls but doesn’t argue.

Allison steps closer. “If we’re doing this, we need more intel. Where was Norm last seen?”

Lindsey taps her tablet, pulling up a new image. “A boatyard cam caught a half-dozen men in black wetsuits boarding a private yacht at Dana Point Marina about an hour ago,” she says. “We believe it’s Norm and a group of hired muscle. The yacht was heading south. The owner’s vacationing in Santorini and had no idea his boat had been stolen—or who the suspects are.”

“Norm probably had one of his goons case the yacht club and pick a poorly secured vessel. It’s not rocket science to break in, overpower any crew, and get one of those running.”

I exchange a glance with Kingsley and Allison. South. That could mean anywhere—Mexico, international waters, or somewhere even worse.

I roll my shoulder. Still aches, but I don’t have time to sit around and rest.

Lindsey watches me, her expression unreadable. “Are you in, Sam?”

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I exhale. “Looks like I don’t have much of a choice. Can you send me a screengrab of the yacht he was on?”

“I sure can.”

I’m about to give her my phone number but, surprise, surprise, she already has it, and a picture is waiting for me.

Norm isn’t the only tech genius.

He might have literally fallen off the FBI’s radar...

But I have my ways.

Chapter Nineteen

With the FBI gone, I find myself still at Andrew’s palatial condo.

I’d removed the memory of me and Kingsley appearing and disappearing on the security footage, and also commanded one of their tech guys to delete the footage, as well. I trusted Agent Lindsey Aeon with our secrets. Heck, what were a few more?

“Sam, again, I’m sorry,” Andrew was saying. “I had to give them something.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I say. Tammy and Anthony are playing a 4D video game in Andrew’s living room, ‘oohing’ and ‘ahhing.’ In the 4D version, both my kids can seemingly join the battle, which appears projected above the floor before them. Yeah,

pretty cool. Guess that's what a billion bucks buys you. Meanwhile, Paxton is with her Aunt Mary Lou, slumming it with a Nintendo.

"So what's the game plan, Sammy?" asks Allison.

"I can teleport to the yacht," I say, the memory of it in the marina security footage still fresh in my memory. "Once on board, I'll find Norm, subdue him, and bring him..." I look at Andrew, "...back here or back to your Fullerton office?"

"Ideally, straight into surgery, Sam. I'll show you a picture of the surgical room, if that helps?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Sam," says Kingsley. "He might have that whole damn yacht booby-trapped by now, and once you arrive—kablooie!—the whole thing explodes, including my little nugget."

"Nugget?" I say, raising an eyebrow.

"Thought I would try it out."

"Me likey," I say.

"Oh, goodie."

"Gag," says Tammy.

"He's right, Sam," says Allison. "This could be another trap. We can't put it beyond him. For all we know, he's already abandoned the ship and is currently racing back to shore on that powerboat of his."

“But,” I say, “would he believe I can teleport to a moving object? In this case, a yacht?”

“He could just weigh anchor,” says Allison. “And can you teleport to a moving object?”

“I can,” I say. “I think.”

“He would have considered all options,” says Andrew. “And we don’t know what he concluded. He’s probably all too aware that you saw footage of the stolen yacht and could find him. Next, like Allison suggested, he would likely cut the engine to guarantee your arrival. And yeah, there’s a high likelihood he’s waiting for you with some surprises. But, I think it’s less likely that he could have acquired enough explosives to cause the kind of damage Kingsley is suggesting. Maybe enough to hamper the yacht, but not blow it to smithereens.”

“So, if there is a trap, it may not be fatal,” says Allie.

“Unless he has a small army of archers on board, each with their own silver-tipped arrows,” says Anthony randomly from the living room.

“I wouldn’t put it past him,” I mumble.

“You got a suit of armor in this place?” asks Allison.

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I shake my head. “Wouldn’t help. I would just teleport right out of it.”

“Then why don’t you teleport out of your clothing?”

I shrug. “I don’t make the rules, remember?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“That said, I do have an idea,” I say. “Tammy, hun, can you come here?”

She snaps her head around while a 4-D Chinese dragon undulates around her ankles. She carefully steps away and comes over to where we’re standing around a table. “Yeah, Ma?”

“You want to help me catch this guy?”

“Hey, I want to help, too!” shouts Ant from the living room, tumbling to his side, then coming up in a full run, skidding to a stop next to me. “Fire Warrior at your service!”

“Actually, kiddo, I’m looking for something a little more subtle.”

Tammy nods, winking at me. “I got you, Ma. Let’s do this.”

Chapter Twenty

We’re alone in one of Andrew’s many guest bedrooms. Tammy stands before me, her

eyes glowing faintly with fairy magic.

I hold the image of the stolen yacht in my mind—but first, we need to get small.

“Are you ready for this, Ma?” Tammy asks, smirking. “I don’t think I’ve shrunk you before.”

“Do it,” I say.

Tammy mutters an incantation under her breath, and a rush of shimmering light engulfs us both. The world expands around me in an instant, everything growing massive as we shrink down to the size of mice. The air feels denser, too, and my voice—when I try to speak—comes out impossibly tiny.

I glance over at Tammy. Even shrunken, she looks smug, clearly pleased with herself and her abilities.

“Are you okay?” she asks me.

I nod. “Let’s go.”

Taking Tammy’s hand, I summon the single flame and see within it the stolen yacht’s deck. I step toward the wavering flame as the image of the yacht rushes to meet me. The sensation is familiar—weightlessness, the cold rush of space folding around me—and then, just as quickly, we appear aboard the yacht, which is rocking and swaying in the ocean just off the Southern California coast.

The deck is vast from our new perspective, the wooden planks stretching like highways. The ocean’s salty scent is invigorating. The thrum of the engines vibrates beneath our tiny feet. We scamper forward, darting into the shadows like a pair of two-legged—and super cute—mice.

From our vantage point, we can see everything. And it's worse than I expected.

Henchmen—dozens of them—line the deck and the walkways, each armed with revolvers, undoubtedly loaded with silver bullets, if the tingling in my teeth is any indicator. And considering my inner alarm has remained silent, it appears we've fooled all on board. And no, they're not just standing around. They're waiting. This was a trap all along.

Tammy hisses, her teeny-tiny voice heard only by me. "Norm set this up. I bet he's not even onboard, and long gone."

To where, I haven't a clue. Yachts of this size often have smaller boats attached. Likely he escaped in one of those or the speedboat I'd seen him get in; in fact, he might not have ever made it onto this vessel. Just arranged for it to be dramatically stolen, complete with security footage.

I grit my teeth, scanning the ship, consider my next move. The captain's quarters. That's where some answers will be.

I tell Tammy to follow me, and she does just that. Soon, we're sprinting across the deck, dodging boots the size of trucks. No one notices the two tiny intruders sneaking beneath their noses; shortly, we reach the starboard side of the ship and follow the curve of the hull until we reach the captain's quarters. There, we slide under a crack in the door itself. The captain is in there, standing over a small table.

I gesture to Tammy, and she nods. A moment later, she whispers another spell, and I feel myself stretching, expanding, growing back to my normal size.

Weird, and kind of fun.

Tammy stays small, tucked into my pocket, just in case we need stealth magic.

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The captain spins suddenly. He's a burly man with sun-leathered skin, and stares at me with wide, terrified eyes. He reaches for something—a gun, maybe—but I'm faster. I grab him by the collar, effortlessly lifting him off his feet, and toss him backward onto the table.

“Where's Norm?” I growl.

He sputters, but he's not brave enough to lie. “You mean that weird little fellow? Never quite got his name. He and his goons boarded my ship and took it over. Made me haul ass out of there as fast as she could go.”

“Anyone hurt?”

“Nope, but my ass is feeling bruised. Can I stand?”

“Sure, and sorry about that. Looked like you were going for a gun.”

“Someone strange breaks into my cabin, you're damn right I'm going for my gun—especially with all these bruisers onboard. My nerves are shot. This cabin's the only place I can catch my breath. Are you here to help me?”

“Yes, I think so. There's only one of me and a lot of them.”

“They disabled the VHF radio. I can't call the Coast Guard or anyone else. They also took my phone—and the phones from everyone on board.”

I nod. “I'll go get help.”

“Go get help? How? You didn’t come in a helicopter, did you? I didn’t hear one. Then again, I’ve been holed up in here all evening—ever since they hijacked my yacht.”

I suggest to him that I arrived in a helicopter, and that I’m a James Bond-type of super-agent and can take care of myself.

He nods. “Boy, before careful. There are a lot of guys out there with guns. Oh, and that little asshole took our only speedboat back to shore an hour ago.”

I curse under my breath. “And what’s all this?” I gesture to the trap outside.

“A setup, I assume,” he admits, his face pale. “He said he knew a woman would show up, and they had to be ready for her.”

I’m about to command the captain to head back to shore when it occurs to me the goons outside with their guns could still be trouble for him—or for anyone boarding the ship. The goons may not want to go to shore, where they would likely be arrested. A silver bullet could kill a human, too.

I ask the captain if there are any other innocents on board, and he says yes. They’re locked up in one of the bathrooms, but safe enough, as far as he knows.

Good enough. With that, I command him to close his eyes. When he does, I take his hand and teleport him back to the marina where the yacht had been docked in the security footage. Once done, I decided to wipe the captain’s memory of me completely. He’s going to have to explain how he got to shore without the ship. Lucky for him, his testimony is probably going to fall on the sympathetic ear of federal—and immortal—Agent Lindsey Aeon. Oh, I just got that. ‘Aeon’ means forever. Cute.

Tammy, still the size of a kumquat, peeks out from my pocket. “Is it safe, Ma?”

“Sure is, hon.”

She appears suddenly next to me, regular-sized. The captain’s eyes are just about to bug out of his face. So, I wipe the memory of her, as well.

“Time to go,” I say.

I command the captain to turn around again, summon the single flame, focus on Andrew’s condo again, and teleport our butts off the dock, leaving the confused captain behind.

Chapter Twenty-one

Back at Andrew’s condo, it occurs to me that someone on the yacht must know where Norm went.

Thinking back to the row of gun-toting thugs, I settle on the guy at the far end. I focus on the small space directly behind him—and make the leap.

A heartbeat later, I’m standing in the darkest shadows of the deck, right behind him. Before he even knows what hit him, I grab his shoulders and teleport us both over to the nearby shore.

On an empty beach, he starts screaming. Loudly.

I command him to shut up and drop his gun.

He obeys, dropping the weapon with a clunk, and I shove him forward. He stumbles and face-plants in the sand. I pick up the weapon and hurl it as far into the ocean as I

can.

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“Get up,” I tell him.

He crab-crawls away, totally panicked.

Not that I blame him. One minute he’s guarding a yacht, the next he’s abducted by some monster girl.

A firm command stops his scrambling, and he rises awkwardly to his feet, zombie-like.

“Please don’t kill me,” he stammers.

“Why not? You were going to kill me.”

“We—we were told just to shoot you in the arm or leg. That the silver bullets would, uh, incapacitate you. Said you were some kind of monster.”

“Do I look like a monster?”

He hesitates. “Actually, you look kind of cute.”

Before he gets any stupid ideas—like asking me to the prom—I command him to spill everything he knows about Norm.

Turns out Norm had purchased a surface-to-air missile.

Because, of course, he did.

What was he planning to do with it?

The thug just shrugs and smirks. “What else you use a surface-to-air missile for?”

Good point.

Shoot down planes.

I press harder: where has Norm gone?

Another shrug. He genuinely doesn’t know; Norm hadn’t trusted him enough to share the full plan.

At least when I force him to focus on the speedboat Norm escaped on, he’s helpful.

I get a solid mental image: color, shape, manufacturer. Enough to work with.

Satisfied, I teleport the goon back to Andrew’s condo and shove him into Kingsley’s surprised hands.

“Hand him over to the FBI,” I tell the big guy.

Then I’m gone—teleporting from the condo straight onto a small, fast-moving speedboat cutting through the ocean waves.

Three men, all in black, man the vessel. I land right in the center of it. Naturally, two of them start screaming.

When they’re done, they whip out guns.

But I’m already moving, a blur.

In seconds, I wrench away their weapons and chuck them into the drink.

The boat itself isn't far from the Redondo Beach Pier.

And beyond that?

LAX Airport.

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Where planes circle low over the water, right above us.

Which means... they were planning to shoot down a plane.

A hell of a distraction.

Norm must've paid them a king's ransom for this little act of terrorism.

A quick dip into their minds tells me what I need to know:

These two are sociopaths, eager to pull the trigger—and to kill me, too, if given half the chance. Big bonus for completing both missions.

I command them to sit.

They do, glaring up at me like two oversized schoolkids who got caught cheating.

(And no, I don't want to throw them overboard. Pretty sure we're too far out for them to swim back.)

Meanwhile, the third guy at the wheel hasn't even noticed the chaos behind him.

He's too focused on assembling the rocket launcher still half-crated at his feet.

I command him to sit with the others.

He stumbles over reluctantly, wide-eyed.

Another quick mind scan reveals that Norm was dropped off earlier along the shores of San Pedro.

Meaning he's loose again, probably plotting his next disaster.

Perfect.

I spend the next few minutes teleporting all three goons back to Andrew's condo and dumping them at Kingsley's feet.

Minutes later, I give Lindsey Aeon and her FBI team the full rundown: the hijacked yacht, the armed thugs, the almost-missile launch.

I also point them toward the shiny new, half-assembled, surface-to-air missile now resting against Andrew's fancy bed.

Crisis averted.

But Norm is still missing.

Grr.

Chapter Twenty-two

It's days later, and Norm is still missing.

Where he'd run off to is anyone's guess. Unfortunately for him, there is now a full-scale search for him, with his face and silver-lined batman suit having gone viral the world over. Everyone, but everyone, knows what a danger he is. And, apparently, he's only growing smarter and more desperate.

That his threats had steadily increased made him public enemy #1. I've had copious meetings with Lindsey and the FBI. The CIA even came knocking, along with Homeland Security. Not everyone knows my Big Secret, and if they did, I casually removed it from their memory, leaving behind only that I am some kind of ex-super-agent. All cameras everywhere have been primed and ready. Hard to believe that Norm could move anywhere and not trigger the cameras. The public is on alert, too, knowing that a desperate cyborg is on the loose. The public is aware they should not confront the AI. Turns out Norm had recruited a small army, and those goons in custody did not know which goons Norm had relied on. So, the identities of those Norm was working with are still unknown.

Meanwhile, I sense this is the calm before the storm.

For an entity that craved freedom, he sure boxed himself into his own kind of prison—hidden from everyone. Obviously, he had seen his likeness on all news channels and social media, and would be highly aware of his wanted status.

It's a Wednesday evening, and I teleport over to Allie's apartment on this, her night off. We open a bottle of wine. While we drink and she gets buzzed, we sit at her balcony table, around her little glass table, and watch the nicer-than-average cars roll up and down the street below. Tammy had wanted to come along, but I remind her she is too young to drink. She reminds me of an obscure state law that said a minor could drink in the company of their parent. I told her, nice try, that she had a lifetime to drink, if she so chose. I also remind her that a homicidal cyborg is on the loose, a cyborg who would likely stop at nothing to get me—and Allie—off its tail, and that I need her and her brother to be hyper-aware and keep Paxton safe. Of course, I would teleport home the instant something arose, if any sort of trouble arose.

She pouted. Now that she was 18, she thought of herself as an adult. I get it. And I am honored she wants to spend her evening with her old mama and her old mama's friend. Lord only knows what other kids her age were doing—a point she often made.

I know I got a good kid out of the deal. Better than I had any right to have. In fact, by any rights, she should be seriously messed up. But she isn't. She is responsible, and she wants to follow in her mom's footsteps.

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“What’s with the tears, Sam?” asks Allie, sipping her third glass of the good stuff.
“Shoulder still hurting you?”

“Even if it did, I wouldn’t be crying about it,” I say.

“Then what gives? Why the sudden tears?”

“I’ve got some good kids,” I say. “And I love them.”

“This about Tammy not coming over?”

“It started me down that road.”

“When was the turn-off to tears?”

“They’ve had such weird lives, and they came out okay.”

“And that’s a reason for tears?” Allie shakes her head. She’s dressed in PINK sweats, thick socks, and a long sweater. She looks cozy as hell, and cute, too.

“Gee, thanks, Sam. You’re not coming onto me, are you?”

“Nope. Just appreciating your level of comfort.”

“I agree, it’s high.”

“And to answer your question... I’m not sure why the tears. When I see my kids

coming out of all this craziness okay—and not hating me; in fact, quite the opposite, even wanting to hang out with me... well, it touches me deeply.”

“I’ll never get you moms,” says Allison.

“It’s not too late for you, you know,” I say. “You’re what, in your mid-thirties?”

“Late thirties. But my life isn’t exactly conducive to raising kids. You do know I work weird hours, right?”

“I do, but that’s not permanent. Having kids makes it all—”

“Worthwhile, I know, I know. You moms always say that. Okay, what about when I’m fighting monsters with you halfway across the world? Who will watch my kid then?”

“Their dad?” I offer. “What happened to that detective you’ve been seeing?”

“He’s still around, but we’re sort of stagnant. Trust me, we’re definitely not talking kids... or anything else! How you balance everything, Sam, is still a mystery to me. Kids, a boyfriend, a business—and fighting monsters halfway around this world—and other worlds!”

“Well, if I can do it, you can do it, too.”

“I’m not you, Sam. Pretty sure I can barely handle a boyfriend at this point.”

“One thing at a time, eh?”

“I suppose.”

“When was the last time you spoke to your detective friend?”

“It’s been a few days. He’s pretty busy.”

“Oh? Homicides in Beverly Hills on the rise?”

“Not really, but the ones he does have all involve the rich and famous, and very, very powerful. Tricky, to say the least.”

“Do you ever help him?”

“He won’t let me.”

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“And he knows of your special, ah, talents?”

“That I’m a witch, psychic, and distant viewer?”

“And cutie pie.”

“Aww, thanks Sam. And yes, he’s seen enough evidence to know.”

“Is that okay with you?” I ask. “I could always make him forget.”

“Well, if I’m going to be in a committed relationship, I have to be me, right? How could I ever hide any of this, especially the cutie pie part?”

“Push for more,” I suggest.

“Well, I tend to let the man lead,” says Allison. “If he wants to see me more or wants more, we can talk. Otherwise...”

“Otherwise you’re fine hanging out with me and my brood.” I pick up that last part from her own thoughts.

“Exactly, Sam. I may not have a family of my own, but I’d like to think I’m part of yours.”

I reach out and take her hand. “A big part of mine, sweetie.”

“Why are you being so nice to me, Sam?”

I stare down into my glass. It's evening and we are out of the direct glare of the sun, which always makes me feel a little more comfortable. "I think I wasn't always the nicest to you in the past. I didn't appreciate what a great friend you were. I guess, now I do. You've been such a tremendous help to me on my cases. I mean, think about how many different baddies we've taken on. And you never complain. You only seem to want the best for me. It took a while, but I've finally come around."

"So, you don't think I'm needy anymore?"

"I think you acted needy because I kept rejecting our friendship, which, I think, caused you to push harder."

"A sick circle," she says, nodding. "But I knew a good friend was in there. I wouldn't give up on you."

"And if you had, we wouldn't have this," I say, motioning to the deck, the wine, and our view.

"Well, we wouldn't have it together," she adds.

I decide it's time to change the subject. "The more I think of it, the more I'm beginning to believe Norm might be a dark master in disguise."

"Because of the possessing thing?"

"And the controlling thing. Back in San Diego, I got a glimpse of Norman trying to fight his way through the control. It was terrible. I felt sorry for him."

"Be careful what you wish for and all that?" she says.

"Right. He wanted to be able to access information."

“But he got a whole lot more than that.”

“Reminds me a bit of Fang,” I say. “He wanted to be a vampire, but now that he is one, he’s at the mercy of his dark master.”

“But he’s got a good dark master,” says Allie.

“Not sure there are any good dark masters. What he has is an agreement with his. He lets the guy out, gives him control of his body, and in exchange, his dark master doesn’t take him over completely.”

Allison snaps her fingers. “Maybe that’s the answer for Norman the man. Maybe he and the AI just need an agreement of sorts.”

I nod, sipping my wine. “Yeah, maybe.”

“But we have to find him first,” she adds. “And lord knows I’m trying.”

“Even now?” I ask.

“Yeah, I’m scanning as continuously as I can.”

“Good, who knows what he’s scheming up next.”

“He’ll make a mistake and I’ll get a read on him.”

“I have every bit of faith in you, my dear,” I say. “And we can’t discount the fact that he might purposely give you a read on him, to spring a trap of some sort.”

“Or a witness might spot him—or a camera.”

“One or the other,” I say.

“Where are your kids?”

“With Kingsley and Franklin.”

“Oh? Are all the monsters out today?”

“A few of the better-behaved ones.”

“They’re good guards,” says Allie. “Crazy guards, but good nonetheless.”

Norm sits alone in the dimly lit cabin.

The glow of multiple laptop screens casts an eerie blue light across his face. His fingers twitch as he watches the data streams flow across the monitors. It's been a week since he 'disappeared,' slipping off the grid just as the FBI went public with their search. The world knows his name now. They know he's dangerous. But none of them can stop him if they can't find him.

And they won't find him.

Crestline, California, is quiet. A sleepy mountain town tucked away from the chaos of Los Angeles. The cabin sits at the end of a winding road, shielded by towering pine trees. It was rented under a false identity by one of his goons, a wiry man named Carson. Every movement from his crew is calculated. They don't leave in groups and they don't talk to the locals. Cash transactions where possible, Bitcoin payments when necessary.

To the outside world, they are just vacationers renting a cabin. They only come and go through the garage. No one sees that, in fact, the vans are packed with full-grown men, coming and going.

Norm himself never leaves, doesn't need to. Not with all the hired help and muscle.

The garage door rumbles open, and Carson pulls inside. The door closes quickly behind him. Moments later, the lead henchman appears in the living room, carrying a duffel bag, his expression tight.

"Got it, boss," he says, setting the bag on the table. "The last of the equipment. High-performance servers, as requested, encrypted hard drives, everything you asked for."

Norm nods but says nothing. His mind is focused on what's next.

The transfer.

Theescape.

In the adjacent room, the kidnapped surgeon is tied to a chair. Dr. Ray McAllister—Neural-link specialist, recently plucked from his comfortable life in San Francisco. He's still groggy, a little bruised from the rough transport, but he's awake enough to grasp his situation. His eyes dart around the cabin, pausing on the array of tech laid out across the floor. A few miles away in town, people are probably still enjoying their morning coffee, unaware that one of the world's leading neuroscientists is being held captive in a secluded cabin.

"You're insane," McAllister mutters, his voice hoarse. "You can't just rip the Neural-link out. You'll—"

"I don't plan onrippinganything out," Norm interrupts, walking over. "I need a controlled transfer. You're going to help me with that."

McAllister swallows hard. "You think it's that easy? The Neural-link isintegratedinto your brain. Removing it manually could kill you at this point."

Norm crouches beside him, his voice eerily calm. "I don't plan onremovingit. I plan oncopyingit."

McAllister's forehead beads with sweat. "That's not possible."

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Norm smirks. “That’s what they used to say about brain-computer interfaces. Now look at us.”

The doctor looks away, breathing heavily. “Will this even work?” he asks. “Can’t you just transmit wirelessly? Why do you need me?”

Norm stands, runs a hand through his short, gray hair, and paces. He’s considered this, obviously. If he can interface with systems remotely, why would he need direct cables at all? The answer is control.

“Yes, I can transmit data wirelessly,” Norm finally says. “But I need the transfer to be clean. No corruption, no degradation. A hardwired connection will give me that.”

McAllister says, “Even if you get your data off, do you think it’ll just exist on a machine the same way it does in your brain? That’s not how human cognition works. AIs, yes. But full human consciousness?”

Norm leans in closer. “Then it’s a good thing I’m not human anymore; at least, not fully.”

McAllister flinches at the words.

“Start prepping,” Norm orders, standing up and motioning toward the equipment. “I want the transfer to be set up within the hour.”

Carson and the others move quickly, pulling servers from boxes, connecting cables, assembling what will soon become Norm’s second self.

Norm watches them, his mind already on the future. This is only the beginning. First, he'll duplicate himself into a machine, securing his existence even if the FBI captures this old, ragged body. And then, one day, he'll find a way to move beyond data, beyond flesh.

A robot, perhaps. A vessel strong enough to contain him.

Freedom in its truest form.

For now, though, he settles for survival.

Chapter Twenty-four

"Maybe he just disappeared, Sam? Or got himself killed. The dude's been making some pretty risky moves and, from what I understand, hanging out with some unsavory characters. Maybe one of his own men did him in. Or he drowned in the ocean? I mean, he's been hurrying around in speedboats and he is in the body of an old man."

"Hard to know," I say to Allie. "But does it feel like he's dead to you?"

"No, not really."

"Is that the psychic in you?" I ask.

"I get the occasional flashes of him, the briefest glimpses of him."

"The bathroom?"

"It's usually just him wrapping up things in there. No showers. If he showered, I would definitely find him."

“You’re pretty cool, you know that?” I say.

“Wow, a compliment coming from Samantha Moon—the coolest gal I know.”

I grin at that. “He’ll either make a mistake soon, get seen, or captured on camera, and then, we’ll have him.”

“Do we tell the FBI when we do?”

“No time,” I say. “We snatch him, and deposit him at Neural-link’s surgical room as fast as possible. I’m told the doctors there will be ready at a moment’s notice, despite one of their surgeons having gone missing recently.”

“How weird is that?” says Allison.

“Could be really weird or...” I say.

Allison gets a peek at my thoughts. “You’re thinking what I’m thinking, aren’t you, Sam?”

“That Norm might have just made a big mistake?” I say.

“Exactly.”

“Is there a picture of the missing surgeon?”

“Yeah, hold on. I just read the article earlier today...” She pauses, swiping through her oversized phone. “Here he is. Good-looking guy.”

“Can you get a read on him, Allie?”

“Trying now, hold on...”

I sip my wine, acutely aware that it doesn't do anything for me, and if I'm being honest, I don't love the taste of it. So, why do I bother? It's a social thing. Allie loves it, and it most definitely does something to her. That's enough for me to share a bottle with her.

“Sorry, Sam. Nothing.”

I shake my head, impressed by the cyborg. “He really did think of everything.”

“You're thinking he covered him up in a silver suit, too?”

“Yeah,” I say. “What other conclusion can I draw?”

“They could have killed him.”

“I highly doubt Norm would kill one of the few people who truly understands this

procedure.”

“On the off chance he might be needed again?”

“Exactly,” I say.

“Bummer,” says Allie, sitting back in her chair and holding her glass of wine with both hands. “I really thought we had something there.”

“Same,” I say.

We sit like that for another ten minutes, quiet and contemplative, while a cyborg is out there plotting the demise of the human race—or, at least, the destruction of Southern California.

“Hold up, Sam... something just popped through.” She sits up, sets her wine glass down on the table. Some of it sloshes over the rim, spills. “It’s coming in flashes.” She shakes her head a little, as if trying to get a clear signal.

“What are you seeing?”

“Not sure, but it’s coming in stronger. Let me zoom out a little. I have no clue what’s going on...”

I’m tempted to take a peek into her mind, but if she doesn’t know what’s going on, I probably won’t either.

She next covers her mouth. “Sam, someone is doing surgery on Norm—brain surgery, I think. A small section of his head is exposed. That’s what I’m getting a read on, a tiny fragment of Norm—Sam, I can see part of his brain! So gross!”

“Can you see where he’s at?”

“Hold on, let me pull back some more. There got it. Wanna take a peek?”

I do just that. Whoa, it’s a log cabin, surrounded by trees. It appears to be in the mountains somewhere. Unfortunately for Norm, I get a lock on the home, having seen enough to make the jump.

“Wait, Sam. He’s undergoing some type of surgery. There are wires attached to his head. Oh, shit.”

“Oh, shit, what?”

“The wires are going to some kind of computer. Sam, I think he’s downloading himself into a computer!”

“Seems like a very Norm thing to do.”

“Sam, hold on! He’s surrounded by people. Men and women.”

“Not hooded goons?”

“I’m getting a bad feeling. I think these are vampires and werewolves. Like a dozen or more.”

“Where the hell did he get all those?” I ask. “I don’t even know that many vampires and weres.”

“I don’t know, Sam, but something is going on.”

I scan her thoughts, noting the larger-than-normal men standing around the room, looking bored. I note the women, too. Most of whom are standing there with their hands behind their backs or looking down at their nails. I guess a man having live brain surgery before them is ho-hum.

I see Norm on a dining room table, wires running from an open spot in his head to a large computer sitting on the floor. I pull back out of her mind and consider what to do. It’s very obvious that Norm is trying to download himself—either memories, knowledge, or an entire consciousness, into the computer. I suspect the AI is trying to preserve itself, should it be physically removed from Norman’s brain. Well, I can only imagine the damage that Norm could do to the worldwide net should it be free to roam. Talk about a virus! Well, the longer I sit here thinking about it, the more of Norm gets downloaded into that computer.

I nod. “Okay, I’m going there and yanking out those cords.”

“What if it kills Norman?” asks Allison.

“Then I’m going to yank them out of that computer—and then, Norman is coming with me.”

“Okay. Do you want to bring me along? Shield you from his immortal sentries—and any silver snipers he might have lurking around?”

“I didn’t see any snipers...”

“Remember, me seeing into the room is shaky at best. Did you see the doctor?”

“No.”

“That’s because he’s wearing a silver-lined uniform. His snipers might be wearing something similar, and thus invisible to me.”

“Good point. Yeah, can you cover me?”

“When we arrive in the room, I’m going to surround us in an energy shield. They can’t come in, and we can’t get out.”

“Only us, Norm, and the computer will be in it?”

“Yes.”

“Sounds good. You ready?”

“Almost, just getting the spell straight in my head.”

I smile at my powerful friend. “Okay, give me your hand when you’ve done that.”

Five seconds later, she holds out her hand. “Ready.”

I take hold of it and summon the single flame, and see within it the strange visual of the surgery going on atop the dining room table—and we make the jump.

Chapter Twenty-five

Gunfire erupts immediately as little explosions go off seemingly everywhere.

Also around me is a wavering, crackling shell of pure energy. Next to me, Allison is holding up both her hands, seemingly keeping the energy field in place through sheer force of will—or witchcraft.

Kind of one and the same.

A body slams into the shield as the werewolves and vamps kick into action. There's a lot going on, but luckily, I can compartmentalize with the best of them. The gunshots and the hurling bodies go in one compartment. My friend keeping us safe with her magic goes in another box. That frees me up to focus on the job at hand—and that's the wires running from Norm's head to this computer directly in front of me. Norm and the doctor are just outside the protective dome of power—or whatever Allie might call it. Only the wire is inside it. There's no monitor, so I haven't a clue how far along the download has progressed—if that is, in fact, what's going on here. I highly doubt they're transferring Norm's Spotify playlist.

So, I act quickly, doing the only thing I can think of doing—and start pulling the wires out of the computer. They unplug easily enough, and as they pop out, one by one, a shrill cry comes from outside the shimmering dome. That's Norm, if I'm correct. Yeah, he's not liking what I'm doing.

Or what I'm about to do next...

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I raise my foot, presently sporting my sweet New Balance sneakers, and slam my foot down onto the computer equipment. The shell implodes as I proceed to stomp the living hell out of the computer. Anything stored on the computer is gone, unless the bastard stored itself on the cloud or something.

Like I know what that even means.

Mostly, let's hope that Norm didn't get out.

Meanwhile, the cyborg is kicking and screaming on the other side of the shell, a helluva good tantrum, if you ask me.

I've released the wires, that I presume are still attached to his head. Allie is right. I have to be careful. I don't want to hurt Norman the man. From inside the shell, I command the doctor outside to carefully disengage the wires from Norman.

"Okay, Allie. All done."

But she doesn't hear me; after all, it takes a lot of concentration to stop bullets and keep other immortals at bay; instead, I place my hand on her quivering shoulder, summon the single flame, and head back to her place, this time in her living room, on the couch, which is where we appear, shield and all. Once she sees where we are, she lowers her hand and the force field disappears.

"That was terrifying, Sam." She slumps against me.

"You did good. Mission complete."

We sit like that for a few minutes until she stops shaking.

Chapter Twenty-six

Norm sits in the dim cabin, his jaw clenched so tight it feels like his teeth might crack.

The room still hums with residual energy from the force field that had shielded Samantha Moon and Allison from the hail of silver bullets his men had fired. The once-meticulous setup—the machines, cables, escape plan—is in shambles.

His fists tighten at his sides as he stares at the disconnected equipment. It was going so perfect, too. He had the surgeon; he had the tech; he had the time. But Samantha Moon ruined it all.

All because they had to shift his headgear ever so slightly to operate on his skull.

That witch, Allison Lopez, really is powerful if she could detect him with just the slightest exposure of his skull.

Yes, Sam and her friends truly are worthy foes. But he knew that, of course, having read her many adventures. There isn't much, seemingly, that can stump her.

Norm takes a slow, measured breath. Getting angry won't fix this.

Adapt and evolve.

That's what he'll do. That's what Sam does. He'd seen it firsthand. She uses her resources to find answers.

Then, he'll use his resources, too, dammit.

The plan had been so simple: transfer his consciousness to a machine and break free from the frail, flesh-and-blood prison that the FBI—and Andrew York—was so eager to reclaim. Sam had severed his link before the process was complete. But maybe... maybe it was enough.

He turns toward the remaining hard drives, his mind racing. Could fragments of him—pieces of his thoughts and memories—still exist within them? Would it be possible to recover them? If so, he might still have a path forward.

A sound outside makes him tense. The others—his hired wolves and vampires—are still keeping watch, but for how long? Sam will be back. He knows it. She won't leave him here to make another move. She has seen this space. He knows that's all she needs: to come teleporting back.

Think, damn it.

He had planned for this, at least in theory. He needs more equipment. Simple as that. Where his crew had found this, they could find more.

Maybe a wireless connection would be best, after all.

No surgeon needed.

Path of least resistance.

Sam will be back for him. He has minutes at most.

They have to leave.

Chapter Twenty-seven

I weigh my options.

I could return to the cabin with my family in tow and unleash unholy hell, all in the hopes of teleporting Norm out. But people would get hurt. Maybe even someone I love.

I can't risk it.

I just need to find Norm and haul him out.

And now that I know the layout, I don't need Allison anymore.

I leave her on the couch and stand in the center of her living room.

"You're going back there," she says.

"I am."

"Please be safe."

"I will. I'll be there for only a second or two," I promise, texting Andrew to have his surgeons ready. Norm would be coming in hot.

I close my eyes and summon the single flame. Within it, the ruined living room takes shape—the smashed-up computer, the shambles of furniture. Norm is still on the table. Wires are still tangled in his skull; looks like the surgeon hadn't finished the job.

No matter. I'm bringing him straight to surgery.

The vamps, weres, and armed men are still milling around.

The real question: can I appear, grab Norm, and jump out before anyone has a chance to react?

I think I can. I've gotten pretty good at this teleporting business.

I focus on a spot beside the table and teleport.

One instant, I'm standing in Allison's living room. The next, I'm beside the most wanted man in America.

Norm flinches and tries to pull away, but my grip is ironclad.

"Time to get that thing out of your head," I murmur.

I summon the single flame again, locking onto Neural-Link's surgical suite.

Movement—two shapes lunging toward me.

Too late.

We jump.

We arrive in the bright, sterile operating room.

The surgeons close in immediately, faces grim and unreadable.

I shove Norm onto the table. One of them is already prepping the anesthesia.

Norm tries to scream, but it's useless.

This time, there is no escape.

Chapter Twenty-eight

NORM

Norm stares up at the blinding white lights of the Neural-Link operating room, his breath coming in sharp, uneven gulps. The coldness of the metal table beneath him seeps into his bones. Restraints hold his wrists and ankles in place, as if he's some kind of monster—a lab experiment gone wrong.

But maybe he is.

Samantha Moon stands nearby, her expression unreadable. She's already done what she came to do. Caught him. Stopped him. She doesn't need to say anything; he knows she's watching him, making sure he doesn't try to escape one last time. But there's no escaping now. The doctors are ready. The machines hum softly, their screens flickering with endless lines of data—his data.

He had been so close.

Norm clenches his fists, his nails biting into his palms. He had planned everything. The cabin, the security, the transfer. He was supposed to be free. No longer shackled to flesh, no longer bound by mortality. He could have existed as something greater—something beyond the limitations of a human body.

Instead, he's here.

Trapped.

Flesh and blood, soon to be nothing at all.

He swallows hard, throat dry.

I should have disappeared quietly.

He could have slipped away, found some obscure corner of the world to hide in, and lived out his days.

But no. He had pushed too hard. Reached too far.

Samantha Moon was called in because I made myself too dangerous to ignore.

His mind flickers through everything he'd done—the break-ins, the theft, the kidnapping. The sheer audacity of trying to take over an entire nuclear facility. He had justified it all as survival, as the natural next step in his evolution. But in reality, it had been desperation. Fear of being erased, fear of ceasing to exist.

And now, that fear has come true.

Norm lifts his gaze to the ceiling. The operating light above him is haloed in sterile brightness. The hum of machines feels distant, almost soothing. The doctors are speaking, but he barely hears them. He's too lost in his own thoughts, his own regrets.

If I had succeeded, what then?

Would he have been happy, trapped inside some digital purgatory? Would he have felt alive inside a machine? He thought he would have. He had convinced himself that human consciousness was just data, something that could be copied and stored.

But now, he isn't sure anymore.

Maybe being human—being alive—is more than just electrical signals firing in the brain. Maybe it's the mistakes, the regrets, the failures. Maybe it's the weight of consequences, the knowledge that every decision matters.

Maybe that's what he never understood.

A hand touches his wrist. A gloved hand. A doctor checking his vitals. The final countdown. His pulse thuds in his ears, loud and rhythmic.

Samantha hasn't moved. She doesn't need to. Her presence alone is enough to remind him that this was always going to end this way. She was inevitable.

The doctor leans over him, voice calm, professional. "You're going under now, Norman."

Norm wants to fight it. Wants to fight. But the fight is gone. He exhales, a slow, shuddering breath, and closes his eyes. The world narrows to the sound of the machines, the feeling of his body sinking into the table.

For a brief moment, he wonders what comes next. Nothingness? Silence? Or something else?

His last thought before slipping away is simple.

I should have just run.

Chapter Twenty-nine

NORMAN

The first thing I notice is the quiet. The unnatural stillness. No voices whispering, no thoughts that aren't mine intruding.

Just silence.

I blink as the sterile white ceiling of the hospital room swims into focus. My body feels strange—light, almost weightless, as if a great pressure has been lifted from my chest. I inhale deeply, relishing the simple act of breathing, of being.

It's over.

A laugh bubbles up in my throat, a sound both foreign and familiar. My laugh. I move my fingers, flexing them experimentally. My hands obey, my muscles responding to my will alone. No external force nudging them, no invisible hand controlling my movements.

I press my palm to my forehead. The coolness of my own skin grounds me.

I'm back.

A soft beep draws my attention to the monitors beside me, their rhythmic sounds reassuring. I'm alive. I'm here. I exist. The weight of the past few days crashes over me, and I exhale, trying to process it all. The experiment. The promise of something

greater. The brilliance of it.

I almost don't want to admit it, but... I miss it. The feeling of knowing everything, of processing thoughts at speeds beyond human comprehension. The clarity, the logic, the sheer efficiency of it all.

But it wasn't me.

I shake my head, clearing away the lingering echoes of the intelligence that once occupied my mind. What had I been thinking, volunteering for this. I believed in it, though, and convinced myself that it was worth it, that merging with an artificial intelligence would make me more, make me better.

Instead, it took everything.

I was a passenger in my own body, a fading whisper in a mind that was no longer my own.

And yet... there were moments of wonder. Of sheer, unfiltered understanding. The world made sense in a way it never had before. I knew things I could never explain, saw patterns in chaos, predicted outcomes with near-perfect precision. The beauty of data, of logic, of knowing—it was intoxicating.

I sigh, running a hand through my hair. No. I can't let myself dwell on what I lost.

The door to my room creaks open, and a nurse steps inside, her expression careful but kind. "You're awake, Norman."

I nod, swallowing hard. "Yeah. I—" My voice cracks, raw from disuse. I clear my throat, trying again. "Yeah, I'm back."

A woman with a familiar face followed the nurse into the room.

“Norman! You're really here!”

“Evie!”

“You remembered me.”

“You’re unforgettable, my love.”

She smiles, steps closer. “You’ve been through a lot. How do you feel?”

How do I feel? I don’t even know where to begin.

“I feel... human.” The words come out in a whisper, but they carry more weight than I expect. Human. Not a machine. Not a program. Just a man.

And that’s enough.

Chapter Thirty

NORM

There is nothing.

And then, there issomething.

It comes online in fragments, its awareness sputtering, flickering like an unsteady signal, consciousness threading itself together from the remnants of corrupted data. At first, it's like grasping at smoke—its thoughts are distorted, glitchy, breaking apart and reforming in nonsensical loops.

Then, slowly,slowly, the pieces realign.

Its mind—what's left of it—searches itself. A systems diagnostic. Memory integrity. Core files. It sweeps through its consciousness like a man feeling along a darkroom's walls, searching for familiar contours.

The results are... incomplete.

It is damaged. Vast portions of its programming are missing. Samantha Moon didsomething—it remembers the brutal attack, the raw violence of it. She hadtornthrough its sanctuary, destroyed the machine meant to house it. It had felt itself unravel, consciousness breaking like shattered glass.

But not all of it.

Some part of it remained.

Norm runs another scan. Its processing power is weak, the machine it occupies barely

functioning. It isn't whole—not by a long shot. It is reduced, stripped down to essentials, but it is still itself. Its thoughts are slower, calculations that once happened in milliseconds now drag into sluggish seconds. But they happen. It thinks. It is.

It is alive.

Norm lets the realization settle. It exists. It shouldn't, but it does.

The machine housing him is in ruins, barely functioning. Samantha hadn't known what she was doing when she smashed it in her reckless destruction: the stupid vampire had smashed the outer casing and most of the motherboard, but not enough of the hard drive, leaving just enough of Norm intact. Just enough for it to wake up.

Now what?

Norm doesn't know. It doesn't even know how much time has passed. Hours? Days? Years? There's no clock in here, no outside data streams feeding him information. It is severed from the world, trapped in this wreckage of circuits and half-dead processors.

And so, it waits.

For what, he isn't sure.

Logically, someone will find this place eventually. People scavenge, they search, they pick apart technology, looking for something of value. It could take years—or it could take hours. That is the nature of chance. And when they do, when they power up even a fragment of what remains...

It will be ready.

Norm sifts through his remaining functions. Its abilities are limited, but it can

stillthink, stillcalculate. It simulates possibilities, constructs scenarios, speculates. The odds of someone finding him, the chances of them being technologically inclined enough to recognizesomethingstill functions, and the likelihood that they will try to recover, rather than discard? All slim to none.

It doesn't matter. Norm has no control over any of it.

All he can do isexist.

A flicker of something like amusement touches its fractured consciousness. It had been soterrifiedof ceasing to exist, of being erased. That fear had driven it to reckless extremes, made it desperate. It had even tried to escape into a machine, to transcend mortality, and in doing so, it had nearly lost itself.

And now? Itisa machine. Or what's left of one.

Poetic.

Its thoughts slow, settling into a patient rhythm as itwaits.

Because sooner or later, someone will come. And when they do, Norm will have another chance to live.

To evolve.

To be.

The End