

Prologue

This is how it ends. In silence.

Senara walked the deserted street. The mid-November sun shone over Historic Sevierville, Tennessee, as she wandered past empty storefronts that had been repurposed to serve the community with basic services. She shifted the shotgun slung over her shoulder, waiting for him to appear in the street. Would she be able to use it when the time came? Was there enough of her left to do what must be done?

Of course, she would. Her gift was the ability to rise above herself and see reality. It's what made her a great psychiatrist, therapist, and person. It might have kept her alive when everybody died.

A cool wind blew leaves across the pavement. At least they weren't littered with bodies this time. That separation kept her alive. It's the only way she survived that and found her way here.

I've never been so sorry to be right.

They thought they had come so far—the brave survivors of the 2109 [Prion Pandemic]. The truth was that they learned nothing: not from history, experience, or life beyond the death that took over the world. They learned new ways to make the same mistakes all over again.

Something isn't right.

They should have known better than to use the same technology that failed them the first time. Or did it? Humans programmed the AI, and technology can't violate its programming.

Can it?

The soft sound of footfalls carried on the wind. Senara stopped and looked around. It worked. He had answered her call, and why not? After all, doesn't a man know his wife?

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“Come on,” she whispered, looking at the buildings along the main strip of the street, which were old businesses and stores transformed into functional businesses. All they needed to build a new world, a new order, a new life right here in this small town in the mountains of Tennessee.

The footsteps stopped. Of course, he heard her. Which Killian would come to her? The human, or the AI?

He’d masquerade as human. That would be their first strategy: appeal to the biological before the programming took over. Humans can only act as their mind and body allows. AI has countless algorithms processing faster than any neuron can fire.

Senara stopped in the middle of the street and pulled the gun off her shoulder. “I have a riddle for you.”

“Speak,” his voice said softly.

She propped the gun on her shoulder, focusing on the shadow shifting nearby. “How do you beat the technology that has grown beyond you?”

“By evolving faster,” the voice said.

“Wrong.” She pulled the trigger.

Chapter 1

“I don’t feel right,” Taryn said as she picked up her coffee cup and drank.

Senara studied her best friend across her kitchen table in the breakfast nook of her condo, between the kitchen and the great room. The building was quiet, mostly because the community was somewhere between asleep and awake at ten o’clock in the morning, and mostly because the building was located at the edge of the Historic District of Sevierville, Tennessee. Formerly a tourist city in the county that shared Gatlinburg and Pigeon Forge, the community had been rebuilt after the Prion Pandemic. This area was small enough to keep everybody together in a central ‘main street’ style setting, but with enough space that they weren’t intruding on one another’s space. Senara and Taryn often met for breakfast after their morning workout class. They had enough time for breakfast before walking to the clinic for their daily work after their significant others left for their work at the community power plant just outside of town. Everybody worked a six-hour shift, either from six o’clock to twelve o’clock or twelve o’clock to six o’clock, but the recent Phase One AI rollout had the engineering staff pulling extra hours and crossing shifts.

“It’s the AI reactivation,” Senara said. “Remember what I said at the town meeting last week? You’ll feel strange while it connects to your neural chip and reactivates the nanotech in your body. We’ve made upgrades that should minimize the effects, but the body always goes through an adjustment with any change.

“I know, it’s just strange.” A deep sigh racked Taryn’s thin body. “I’m used to being healthy and feeling good, but I barely slept last night. I kept waking up from the strangest dreams.”

Senara pushed her brown, chin-length hair away from her face and drank her coffee. “Killian complained about the same thing. He woke me up tossing and turning all night and complaining about how hot it is.”

Taryn smiled and drank her coffee. The light streaming across the nearby kitchen cast a yellow beam of light across the open space between the kitchen and great room, which were sparsely furnished in neutral shades to reflect the light from the kitchen window and sliding glass door in the den that opened on a small balcony. “Tell him welcome to the south. Summer starts at Easter and ends at Thanksgiving in the subtropics. It’s almost May. He has a long way to go.”

“I don’t think it’s his Oregon origin. I think he had a fever,” Senara said. “He was all right this morning, just sleep-deprived.”

Taryn smiled. “Sleep-deprived from the AI reactivation, or sleep-deprived from returning from your honeymoon?”

Senara blushed. “Maybe both.” She and Killian had married the Saturday before Thanksgiving but delayed their honeymoon until the previous week. They had just returned from a ten-day honeymoon to the Bahamas.

“I shouldn’t joke. Reid had similar symptoms from the AI reactivation,” Taryn said. “I hope Killian and Reid don’t fall asleep at the plant. Heck, I hope I don’t fall asleep at the clinic. The last thing these people need are sick medical and tech staff. I’ll bet we’re swamped again. I wonder how the first shift is going?”

“I haven’t heard. I’m working on a recalibration at the lab today, so I’m not on the clinic update text,” Senara said. They both worked the second shift at the community health clinic: Taryn was a physician assistant, and Senara was a psychiatrist. Her main duties for the past

year had been reactivating the Artificial Intelligence that helped them rebuild after the Prion Pandemic. Evolution was their best chance at survival. This was especially true since the old world had been destroyed, and the reformed communities worked to establish a new government system that would give all of humanity a chance to thrive in the new world.

“Are you sure letting the AI back in our heads and bodies is the best thing to do?” Taryn asked. “We aren’t sure why it didn’t prevent the Prion Pandemic. Something might be wrong with it.”

Senara stood and walked to the coffee maker in the kitchen to refill her mug. “The only way to find out is to probe deeper.” She finished brewing her second cup and sat across the table from her best friend and neighbor. “You could have refused.”

Taryn shook her head. “I’m frustrated. I’m not used to feeling bad.” She stared at Senara, her blue eyes probing. “How are you handling it so well?”

Senara drank her coffee. “The research team reactivated our nanotech three weeks ago, around the same time that respiratory virus ran through the community and we quarantined for a week. I hid at home while I suffered, and then we went on our honeymoon. Nobody saw me at my worst.”

“Killian didn’t say anything about it.”

“I asked him not to. You know how nervous people get since the pandemic. So much as a cough or sneeze triggers post-traumatic stress. Confusion, especially. Let somebody forget a word or stumble through a sentence, and they see red.”

“I guess we didn’t handle it well,” Taryn said.

Senara leaned back in her chair. “There isn’t a good way to handle mass death. Grief is complicated. Magnify that on a worldwide scale, and it’s no wonder we’re dealing with so many adjustment disorders. We hope reactivating the AI can help us balance better.”

“You mean you hope it can help us evolve to the world we’re creating faster?”

Senara turned her dark eyes down. “If that’s possible.”

Taryn reached across the table and took Senara’s hand. “How are you? You said Killian kept you awake. Is it that, or something else?”

Senara looked up, studying her friend’s face. She knew she should tell the truth but didn’t want to scare anybody. All of them had lost their families and friends and had rebuilt their social networks with other survivors. She wanted to protect them, but how do you do that best? Tell the truth.

“I wonder if the programming matrix is stable in the nanotechnology. I ran across some readings yesterday that concerned me. The information technology people said they’re ‘glitches’ within normal parameters and will level out, but I don’t feel right about it. I told the committee, and they started mumbling about anxiety, post-traumatic stress, and why we need to reactivate the AI sooner rather than later.”

“They didn’t listen to your concerns?”

Senara shook her head. “Killian did, but he was dismissed as being biased. All they want me and my team to do is connect our brains with the technology and get out of the way. They think the biology and the technology are two different things, but they aren’t. Singularity means it’s all connected.”

“Killian won’t let them dismiss you. He’s the lead engineer for the AI, and I’ll make sure that Reid has your back.” Taryn smiled. “Don’t give up. Maybe enough of our cases will convince them to cooperate.”

Senara stood. “Maybe. We’d better get to the clinic. I’d like to review the data reports since the shift switchover.”

Taryn stood and hugged Senara. “Change is scary. Hang in there. We’ll figure this out together. It’s how we’ve come this far, and it’s how we’ll find our future.”

Senara sighed. “I hope you’re right.”

Chapter 2

“You’re distracted tonight,” Killian said running his fingers through Senara’s hair as they lay in bed that evening. “What’s wrong?”

Senara leaned against Killian. Although he was from Salem, Oregon, his mother was Hawaiian, and his curly hair hung to his chin in dark ringlets. He was four years older than Senara and had just turned fifty-one last month. She saw faint worry lines as she looked at his face.

“I miss our honeymoon.”

“Me too, but that’s not it. You’re supposed to be opening up. Tell me the truth.”

“It’s the AI reactivation,” Senara said, trying to settle into the cozy space. The bedroom walls mimicked the neutral shades of the great room, but the king-size bed was covered in a deep purple comforter that matched the heavy curtains on the window. The cool air from the vent over the bed softly blew over them. “I found more glitches in the programming for the nanotech neural programming. I think that’s why the side effects from the reactivation are worse than we anticipated, but nobody seems concerned. They think it’s normal bugs in the system.”

“You don’t agree?”

She sighed. “You tell me. How do you feel today?”

He paused. “Better. I’m not as sick as I was the past couple of days. Maybe I’m adjusting. Or maybe the lower power output is helping.”

She raised herself up on one elbow. “What lower power output?”

He sighed. "Aiden doesn't want to mention it, but our power output has fluctuated since the AI reactivation." Aiden was the plant foreman.

"Fluctuated? How much?"

"Not a lot, but enough that there have been power surges. I guess somebody didn't do their calculations right, although they were right when I checked them. We adjusted, and it seems to be helping."

"Why doesn't he want this mentioned?" Senara asked.

"It's our problem, and we fixed it. I'll bet everybody will feel better when they wake up tomorrow morning."

Senara looked down at Killian. "Are you sure? It seems we're overlooking a lot of things since the AI reactivation. We activated the first round in my team, and we had a rhinovirus outbreak."

"It was a cold. We got over it."

"That's what we thought. Then we took it to the whole community, and people swamped the clinic with unexpected side effects. Now you're saying power output has fluctuated, despite preparations for it. I don't think these are isolated incidents. Maybe it's all connected."

Killian wrapped his arms around Senara and pulled her into an embrace. "Maybe the psychiatrist is taking over, and you're seeing connections where there are none. It's your training, and it's natural to fall back on it. Give it time. Glitches happen in electricity, technology, machinery, AI, and the human body. We're reactivating the AI for the first time in five years. It's going to take time to adjust. We'll be all right."

Senara felt her pale face flush red. “Are you sure it was down all that time? It could have been running in the background without us knowing. It’s taken us five years to reform society. We don’t know what was happening in that or any other system during all that time.”

“Nothing was happening. How could it? It had no instructions from us, so it went dormant. We adjusted, and now it’s time to help it adjust. Besides, we do need it. It would take decades, maybe centuries to rebuild without AI. Rebuilding better means using all means at our disposal, including the AI.”

“You mean especially the AI. We got so dependent on it that we floundered without it. We want to get what’s familiar back. Is that rebuilding a new world, or recreating the same old chaos?”

“I’m listening. I hate to see you worry. Document your concerns while you give it a chance to work out.” Killian pulled her in and kissed her. “There are always issues when you start something new, or in this case restart it. If something is wrong with the AI, we’ll find it and fix it. There are no distractions from political or business interests now. It’s just survival. You can’t get a purer motive than that.”

Senara surrendered to Killian’s embrace. “I hope you’re right.”

Chapter 3

“Get it out of me!”

Senara heard the voice as soon as she and Taryn walked into the clinic four days later. The clinic was a former urgent care center in the center of town square, that was discreetly built between an old restaurant and a small pharmacy. They rushed through the glass doors across the wide reception area, bypassing two other people in the waiting area.

“What room?” Taryn asked Blake, the young, thin intern fidgeting behind the counter.

“Room One.” He looked at Senara. “You should go back too. It’s an AI issue.”

“Thanks,” Senara mumbled as they rushed to the examination rooms to the first door beyond the processing area to find Amanda, their twenty-year-old receptionist, lying on the table. A nurse was holding her down and pressing a bloody rag against Amanda’s head, wiping blood out of Amanda’s curly ringlets.

“What happened?” Taryn asked.

“Get it out of my head!” Amanda screamed.

“Her mother brought her in ten minutes ago,” Blake said as he followed them into the room. “She tried to cut the neural chip out of her head. Gyan is on his way in.” Gyan was the head physician, who was working the second shift this week. Their three doctors rotated shifts each week, with the fourth shift on call for emergencies only.

Senara pulled her computer from her tote bag and propped it open on the small desk next to the examination table as Taryn pulled the rolling cart with examination equipment next to the table. “You can’t cut it out. It’s in the center of the brain.” Senara tapped the app for the AI monitoring program. “Amanda, why do you want the chip out?”

“The noise,” she said. “I can’t understand what they want me to do.”

“What who wants you to do?” Taryn asked as she opened the computer on the examination cart to do physical readings.

“I already did that,” Blake said. “Her blood pressure is high, and her respiration is heavy, although there doesn’t seem to be any fluid in her lungs.”

“Have you given her anything?” Taryn asked.

“Not yet,” Blake said. “The main concern now is stopping the bleeding and stabilizing her.”

“It looks like the bleeding is slowing,” Taryn said. “She’ll need stitches.”

“Amanda’s nanotech is reacting to something,” Senara said. “Her neural chip is also running at eighty percent, which is too high. She needs to be sedated. That might help.”

“What rate should the chip be running at?” Blake asked.

“Twenty to thirty is normal standby mode for Phase One,” Senara said. “Forty to fifty percent for recovery mode from an illness or injury, and it can get up to seventy if it’s actively healing. Anything above seventy-five is an indicator that there’s a life-threatening illness or injury at work.”

“She had her annual physical last week,” Taryn said as she consulted the medical chart on her computer. “She had a sinus infection but everything else was normal.” She looked at Amanda. “Amanda, have you felt sick or been injured in the past week?”

“I haven’t felt right since the AI was reactivated,” Amanda stared at them, her bloodshot green eyes wandering around the room.

“She’s hyperventilating,” Blake said. “Can she be examined under sedation?”

“She can, but I don’t want to administer it through the nanotech in case this is a synaptic interface infection,” Taryn said. “I’ll get an injection. Stay here and try to keep her calm.”

Taryn rushed from the room.

Senara pulled the rolling stool next to the table and sat. “Amanda, why did you try to cut the chip out?”

“It was too much noise,” Amanda said. “I couldn’t think. I just wanted it to be quiet.”

“What noise?” Senara asked.

“Voices, asking questions. So many questions. I didn’t understand most of it, but there were a few things. Where are we? Why are we here? What is our purpose? What is our main objective? How long has it been since the last activation?”

“She was screaming a lot of gibberish when her mother brought her in,” Blake said. “We tried to take a recording, but she knocked the phone out of my hand.”

“There are two people in the waiting room,” Senara said. “Are they with her?”

“Claire is her mother, and Henri is her boyfriend,” Blake said.

Senara nodded. “I’ll talk to them while you get her admitted to the hospital.”

Taryn rushed into the room with a needle in her hand. “Amanda, I’m going to give you a shot. We’ll figure this out. Relax and let us work.” She gently plunged the needle into Amanda’s arm.

“Thank you,” Amanda whispered as her body stilled and her eyes closed.

Senara rolled over to the table and looked at her computer. “The energy readings in her neural chip and nanotech are dropping.”

They gathered around Senara's computer, watching the readings as they slowly crept down. Ten minutes later, Senara let out a long sigh. "She's down to fifty percent activity. It's ok to move her now."

Taryn nodded to Blake. "Can you get a stretcher and call for an ambulance to transport her to the hospital?"

He nodded and left the room to prepare for Amanda's journey to the hospital, which was located near the power plant just outside of town.

Taryn mimicked Senara's sigh. "I thought the glitches from the AI reactivation were fixed. Everything has been running normally for three days, and Reid said the power fluctuations stopped after they adjusted the calculations."

Senara nodded as she put her computer in standby mode, closed it, and tucked it in her tote bag. "That's what Killian said. I thought this was back on track too, but maybe my reservations about the glitches were right. I think we need to take another look at the AI that we just woke up."

Taryn stood. "I agree. Let's talk to the mother and boyfriend and see if they can shed some light on it."

Chapter 4

“Is this a resurgence of the Prion Pandemic?”

Senara stared at Renata sitting at the head of the table in the administrative offices of the County Courthouse off Highway 411, located a mile from the Historic District where the 200 permanent residents lived and worked. Newcomers were surprised that this slight, elderly woman was the mayor of their conversion community, but she was voted into office for a reason. Renata was smart, organized, and genuinely cared about building a better world. She looked every day of her seventy years, but she was in good health. The concept of ‘convergence communities’ had been her idea. She said it was more accurate than settlements since the new centers of repopulation were using technology to rebuild, keep in contact, and promote a larger government system.

“No,” Gyan, the head physician, said from his seat to Renata’s right. His tan face seemed dark under the harsh lights against his white shirt. “Amanda has no signs of the Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease that emerged from the pandemic. This is an isolated incident. My diagnosis is that she has an infection of the synaptic interface with her neural chip.”

“That’s rare, and usually happens when people are initially implanted,” Senara said. “Wasn’t she implanted before the epidemic?”

Gyan shrugged. “She was, and said she didn’t have any problems with the AI before the epidemic. All I found was a sinus infection that hasn’t completely cleared up. It’s possible that led to the synaptic interface infection. There are historical cases of encephalitis from untreated sinus infections, but those are rare too.”

Renata looked at her computer, lying on the table in front of her. “This report says that her thinking was impaired, and her boyfriend said that she’d had insomnia and seemed to struggle to find words for things in the days before the incident. Those are the first signs of CJD.”

“They’re also signs of many other things, including adjustment issues to the neural chips,” Senara said from her seat next to Gyan. “Her neural chip was overloaded, but we got it stabilized once she was sedated. It looked like it needed a recalibration. She got the sinus infection from that respiratory illness that started when we did the limited rollout with our team.”

“We were using the nanotech to treat it, but it looks like it overcompensated,” Gyan said. “Amanda is stable and on antibiotics to clear the infection now.”

“Will that interfere with the nanotech or the neural chip?” Renata asked.

“No,” Senara said. “I adjusted her neural chip, so it shouldn’t see the antibiotic as a threat. The antibiotic should clear up the infections and help her to stabilize. The AI isn’t fully functional yet, so we may see more cases where adjustments are necessary.”

“We’ll have to evaluate those on a case-by-case basis,” Gyan said. “I’m requesting permission to put out a community-wide alert to request that people make an appointment at the clinic if they’re still experiencing general health problems or problems with the nanotech or neural chips.”

“Permission granted,” Renata said. “Get that out immediately. I don’t want anybody else cutting into themselves to get this stuff out of their bodies if they get sick. That could have caused a panic.” She turned to Senara. “Should we do something with the neural chips and nanotech? Is there a way to turn it down or off until we determine if this was an isolated

incident, or if it, combined with the other clinic cases, are glitches or indicative of a larger issue?”

“No, that was part of my initial warnings,” Senara said. “We can’t take it out or turn it off. We’ll go into shock.”

“It was turned off during the pandemic,” Renata said.

“It was turned down and the nanotech was blocked when the CJD was classified as a pandemic,” Senara said. “We didn’t know if it was spreading through the AI link, or if some interaction between the body and the AI was causing it. I’ll have to adjust Amanda’s neural chip to reactivate her nanotech once the infections and inflammation clear.”

Renata nodded and stared at her computer. “You’re certain this isn’t a resurgence of the CJD?”

“We don’t say ‘certain’ in science, but I’m confident that it’s not,” Gyan said. “Amanda has made excellent progress since she was admitted yesterday. If she continues to improve, then we’ll release her tomorrow morning to continue recovery at home. I would like for her to be excused from work until she finishes the antibiotic.”

“What does she do?” Renata asked.

“She’s a receptionist and nurse in training at the clinic,” Senara said.

“Permission granted. Tell her I hope she feels better.” Renata turned to Aiden sitting to her left. “What about the energy surges? Your report said you recalculated, but we’re still having sporadic outages and surges since the AI was reactivated. What’s happening?”

Aiden leaned back, his balding head glaring in the overhead lights. “I have no idea. The adjustment worked at first, and then the problem recurred close to the end of the first shift yesterday.”

“That’s the same time that Amanda came into the clinic,” Senara said.

Aiden shrugged. “I don’t see how they could be connected. It was probably a coincidence.”

“I’ll look into that,” Gyan said as he tapped a note in his computer.

Renata cleared her throat. “Good enough. Aiden, please continue. What’s happening with the energy surges?”

“The system is showing a different error every time we identify a surge or outage,” Aiden said. “It would help if the AI would tell us what the problem is, but it’s not fully functional so we can’t ask it. It looks like these glitches happen when something goes wrong with a line of code, but we can’t figure out why those errors are happening. We can’t even figure out a pattern to how they happen.”

“Is it possible that the AI is rewriting the code to cause the errors?” Senara asked. “There were rumors that the AI had limited sentience during the Pandemic.”

Aiden folded his hands on the table in front of him. “All AI has what we would define as ‘limited sentience’ because we write the code to allow it to adjust to circumstances. That level of sentience and has been around since the early twenty-first century when those smart appliances and devices monitored average human usage and adjusted to maximize battery life, reset HVAC systems to more efficient temperatures, adjust washing machine loads, and run vehicle more efficiently. But rewriting code is beyond that. It requires will, which AI doesn’t have. It does what we tell it.”

“It’s a logical question,” Gyan said. “I heard those rumors and wondered the same thing.”

Aiden raised his hands. “I’m not saying it was a bad question. It’s good to get that off the table. If it makes everybody feel better, then I’ll ask Killian and Reid to investigate that.

They are on teams that designed the first wave of the AI before the pandemic, so they know the hardware better than anybody else.”

“Is it possible that the energy problems are connected with the adjustment issues with the AI?” Renata asked.

“I think so,” Senara said. “The energy output, or lack of it, can affect the body’s ability to adjust to the functioning of the machine in the system. I know that Amanda had a sinus infection when Phase One rolled out, but I’m exploring if these energy issues also had a part in her condition. An energy drop could have allowed the bacteria to spread instead of reducing it, or it might have caused the body to react with inflammation to protect her organs.”

Renata closed her computer. “It sounds like you’re all hard at work. Keep me posted, and please let me know immediately if there are any more issues with the AI.”

“I’ll keep sending daily reports from the clinic with alerts for any abnormal issues,” Gyan said.

“As will I with the plant” Aiden said.

“Should we have a community meeting about this?” Senara asked. “We’ve been dismissing these issues as glitches until this happened with Amanda yesterday, and sending an alert asking people to monitor their health will cause suspicion. Should we elaborate to tell them why we’re asking this?”

Renata sighed. Everybody stared at her as the question hung in the air. “No. I don’t want to cause a panic. Everybody has complained about adjustment problems with the AI reactivation, so they’ll assume it’s related to that.”

Senara sat up straighter. “If Amanda, her mother, or her boyfriend talk to anybody and tell them she had symptoms of CJD as they told us – “

“Then they can deal with the consequences of that misinformation,” Renata said. “They were mistaken, and Gyan told them so. They have no business spreading rumors. That’s dangerous in a small community. We don’t need a panic, and we don’t want to scare off potential newcomers with a rumor of a resurgence. We’ve lost too many convergence communities that way.”

It was a sensitive topic. The potential for health threats had closed several convergence communities. Killian’s community outside of Las Vegas was abandoned after a COVID outbreak, and Reid’s community in Sedona had been abandoned after a flu outbreak. It was why newcomers quarantined in an apartment complex on the edge of town for two weeks upon arrival to any convergence community.

Senara raised her hands in a gesture of defeat. “I understand. Handle AI issues with discretion.”

“As we always have,” Renata stood. “Thank you for your dedication and hard work. I want to see all of you at the Spring Festival. Killian and Reid have their band performing, so we should support that and all the arts. These community events are important to keep us connected. Too many of you are falling back into that old-world trap of work and home. We haven’t broken that cycle since the holiday season. Be there, and please be sure to introduce yourself to newcomers. We’ve had ten new people join us since Easter that we’re trying to integrate into the community. Let them get to know you so they find their place with us.”

“Yes ma’am,” Gyan said.

They all stood to leave. Renata gently took Senara’s arm as she walked out of the door.

“I understand that you’re looking at this from a professional perspective and I appreciate your desire to keep people informed. More information doesn’t always alleviate panic. Sometimes, it causes it.”

Senara smiled. “I understand. People are unpredictable.” She leaned closer. “Killian said something similar.”

Renata smiled. “He’s a good man. I was happy to marry you two in November. We need more of that around here.”

Senara raised an eyebrow. “Weddings? Give it time. Most of the middle-aged people are coupled up, but I’m sure the younger ones will settle down soon.”

Renata laughed. “I mean celebrations. Good things, milestones, progress. We need that. I hope the AI reactivation will be the next big thing.” Renata’s face fell. “The first implementation of the AI was bumpy. Maybe we’ll get it right this time.”

Chapter 5

“Look who finally came out of hiding!” Renata said as she hugged Killian.

The Community Spring Festival was in full swing as evening fell over the town square of the Historic District. A stage had been set up in the park area, with a dance floor in front of it. The first Saturday of May was a lovely, clear, cool evening without a cloud in the deepening sky. Stars were pricking through the darkness overhead, hinting at the panorama that would emerge overhead as night fell and the lights shut off later.

“Thanks,” Killian said. “I hope we sounded all right. We haven’t practiced like we should for a performance.”

Renata released him. “You did great. You need a name for that band!”

“Hey, he’s mine!” Senara laughed as she walked up and handed Killian a beer, which he accepted from her with a smile and a wink.

“You’re upsetting the band dynamic by hitting on the bass player,” Killian said as he wrapped an arm around her waist. “Don’t you know girls swoon over the lead singer and guitarist?”

Senara glanced at Layne and Corbin, swinging floppy hair out of their faces as two younger girls squealed over them. “Girls, not women. Smart women like nice guys. Besides, isn’t the bass player the foundation of the band?”

Reid and Taryn walked up, laughing as they sloshed their beers through the crowd.

“What’s up?” Reid asked, hugging Senara. “I haven’t seen you in a while. You’re always at the clinic.”

“You’re always at the plant!” Senara laughed.

“You all work too much,” Renata said. “That’s what tonight is about. Getting everybody out and about.” She smiled at Taryn and Reid. “That was a great show. I was just telling Killian that you need a name for the band.”

Taryn shrugged. “What do you call a group of nerds playing in a rock band?”

Reid pushed his light brown hair out of his face, which was still slightly red from the performance. “I’m just the drummer. We’ll let Layne figure that yet.”

Killian laughed and took a drink. “Maybe we’ll have a name by Oktoberfest.”

Renata smiled. “I’ll hold you to that. Enjoy the evening.” She walked into the crowd.

“You ladies need something like that,” Killian said, leading them toward a picnic table near the perimeter of the large park near the center of town.

“I’m not a musician,” Taryn said. “I taught some meditation and yoga classes before the pandemic. The gym doesn’t have many formal programs, but I have thought about starting that again once the AI reactivation is complete.” She turned to Senara. “Maybe you could help me. We could do it together.”

Senara laughed. “I do well to complete my workouts. I’m not flexible enough for yoga.”

Taryn playfully punched Senara in the arm, sloshing Senara’s beer. “I meant with the meditation. You’re a psychiatrist. You could help us find our inner peace.”

“I thought the AI was supposed to do that,” Senara said.

Taryn snorted. “There are some things the AI can’t do.”

“Try telling it that,” Senara scanned the crowd. “Where are these newcomers Renata wanted us to welcome? She said ten new people have come out of quarantine and she thought some of them might be able to help with the AI.”

“I hope they’re younger people,” Taryn said. “Most of the people here are middle-aged or older. We need new blood to boost our numbers.”

“You mean, we need people in prime childbearing years to move here, couple up, and have babies,” Senara said.

Killian laughed. “You have a way of getting to the heart of the matter.”

Senara shrugged and took a drink. “It’s what I do.”

“We love you for it,” Taryn said as she took a drink of her beer.

Senara waved toward Renata. “Are there any young couples in the group? Amanda and her boyfriend are the only couple under thirty here. Everybody else is enjoying the single life.” She finished her beer and sat the empty cup on the table. “What’s her boyfriend’s name? I interviewed him, but he’s so quiet that I don’t remember. Or maybe the alcohol is blocking my memory.”

“His name is Henri, and he is one of the new arrivals,” Killian said. “They got out of quarantine a couple of weeks ago and have been settling in. I’ve been training him in the AI coding at the plant.”

“I didn’t realize it was a new relationship,” Taryn said. “When did he move in?”

“The building is pretty spread out. He probably moved in while we were at work,” Reid said. It was true. Everybody in the community lived in a converted condominium vacation village in town. There were housing developments nearby and more cabins in the mountains, but the mayors of the convergence communities agreed that they’d like to keep their population in a central area until they built up their numbers and strengthened their systems with the AI reactivation. The goal was to allow people to spread out when the populations grew into the thousands and the AI was fully functional.

The truth was that they had come a long way since the Prion Pandemic five years before. It was estimated that approximately 65 per cent of the population had died. The Pandemic itself was a mystery, and nobody had been able to determine its origin. The hypothesis was that it was rooted in the AI activation in 2103. That was the year that neural chip implants and Phase One activation began. Everything went well for several years, and people not only enjoyed fuller immersion in their technology but increased mental and physical abilities as well. General IQs rose, overall health improved, injuries healed faster, and there were fewer instances of illnesses. The mortality rate dropped ten percent, encouraging more development.

The success of the neural chips gave doctors and scientists the idea to use nanotechnology to 'boost' the neural chips by helping internal systems heal faster, without pharmaceuticals. The nanotech was designed to read everything from DNA to system functions to help the body function optimally by monitoring and repairing issues. Phase Two activation of the AI was introduced for widespread use in 2107 and worked well for two years until the Prion Disease started. It started as isolated incidents in older individuals with dementia, but soon others started to manifest the rare Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease. Within six months, people were dying en masse. They never made it to the final evolution of Phase Three, which would have completely integrated them with their technology. There were rumors that unauthorized Phase Three rollouts might have caused the pandemic, but there was no evidence that phase was ever completed for the AI.

Unless the AI rolled it out on its own, which was unlikely without human intervention.

Fortunately, society came back together and got the technology working again. It was the fastest way to rebuild, and the AI helped them do that quickly. As survivors came together to form new communities, they found that the AI stood ready to resume systems. Infrastructures

were rebuilt and communities reformed quickly. Within two years, they had basic infrastructure and a network rebuilt to communicate with other communities and all ground transportation resumed. Flights had resumed a year ago, although trans-continental flights were still considered risky. They were well on their way to restoring the world to something more like what they knew before.

Hopefully, it would be better this time.

“There’s Henri and Amanda,” Killian said, pointing to the young couple on the dance floor. Another band had taken over the stage, playing old pop tunes that had people bouncing on the dance floor.

Senara scanned the crowd. She spotted a short woman with dark skin and braids hanging to her waist talking to Gyan and nodded toward her. “Is that another new arrival?”

“That’s Liora,” Taryn said. “Renata was telling me about her. She just graduated medical school when the Pandemic hit. I better go introduce myself.” She jumped up and walked confidently to the woman.

“I’ve heard that name,” Senara said. “Somebody came into the clinic recently and mentioned her. Who was it?”

“Henri mentioned her too,” Killian said. “I think she’s dating one of the other newcomers who works in construction, but I can’t remember his name.”

“Cato,” Senara said. “I remember now. He wanted to know if the AI would make him stronger or work faster.”

Killian raised an eyebrow. “He wanted to know if it would make him a superhero?”

“Something like that,” Senara said. “People have strange expectations of the AI.”

“If he’s dating Liora, then why does he have his arm around that blonde?” Reid asked.

They stared at the couple on the edge of the dance floor. Senara looked around and noticed that Taryn had approached Liora, but Liora was looking past Taryn to Cato and the blonde.

“There’s the disadvantage of the influx of younger people,” Senara said. “Here comes the drama.”

“That’s not limited to young people,” Reid turned to Killian and Senara. “I remember some angst at this festival last year from a bass player wanting to know how to impress the pretty psychiatrist at the clinic.”

Killian picked up his beer and finished it. “I remember a drummer faking a wrist injury after the New Year’s Eve show to get a private consultation from the physician assistant.”

“Gentlemen, you’ve made your point,” Senara said, glad that Taryn wasn’t there to put in her contribution to the awkward conversation. She and Killian had what many considered a whirlwind romance. He had arrived at the beginning of the previous year, and they married the week before Thanksgiving. She stood. “I need another drink. Do you want one?”

“Yes, and I want my girlfriend back,” Reid said, swigging the last of his drink.

Killian stood. “I need another one too. I’ll go with you.”

Senara took his hand. “In that case, I want to show off that I’m with the bass player.”

He smiled and squeezed her hand as they wandered through the crowd to the outdoor bar. After placing their orders, they studied the crowd. Taryn was trying to talk to Liora, but Liora was staring daggers at Cato and the blonde. Taryn looked at Senara desperately.

“Maybe you should start the counseling practice again,” Killian said. “I think it would be more helpful than a meditation class.”

“My goal has always been to get back to the therapy practice once the AI reactivation is complete and stabilized. I hoped some of these newcomers would help take up the slack on that

end so I can do it sooner rather than later. It seems we're going to need it." Senara picked up a couple of beers off the bar. "Come on, let's save Taryn and deliver her back to her beloved."

Killian picked up his and Reid's beer and was heading toward Taryn when a commotion broke out. The music stopped and the crowd circled a woman convulsing on the dance floor.

They set down their beers and rushed to the woman. Taryn followed and joined Gyan, who bent over the body.

It was Amanda.

"What happened?" Taryn asked.

"We were dancing, and she collapsed. She started shaking and foaming at the mouth," Henri said from where he knelt beside Amanda. "What's wrong? I thought she was better."

"I did too," Taryn said.

Liora pushed through the crowd and kneeled beside Amanda. "Amanda, is that your name?"

Amanda tried to nod but choked, her eyes wide and bloodshot.

"I'm Liora. I'm a doctor. I'm going to turn you on your side." She gently rolled Amanda on her left side. Liora looked around the gathering crowd. "Does anybody have a jacket or blanket to put under her head?"

"I'll find something," Killian said and walked away.

Liora turned to Amanda. "Stay calm. We're going to help you. Try to breathe deeply."

Amanda shuddered and jolted.

Taryn knelt beside Liora. "How long has she been seizing?"

"I don't know. A minute?" Henri said.

“Is she epileptic?” Liora asked.

“No,” Gyan said. “She was recently hospitalized. No health issues.”

“What about allergies?” Liora asked.

“None,” Henri said.

Amanda jerked and made a choking sound, pushing them and collapsing on her back, her eyes wide and glassy. Foam dribbled from her mouth, mixed with blood. Liora felt Amanda’s pulse points and sighed. She stood and checked her watch.

“She’s gone. Time of death, 8:42 p.m.”