



"A CYBERPUNK
DREAM COME
TRUE..."

—H.S. KALLINGER,
AUTHOR OF
THE LOST HUMANITY
SERIES

THE HERMES PROTOCOL

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THE
HERMES
P R O T O C O L

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PRAISE FOR *THE HERMES PROTOCOL*

“*The Hermes Protocol* grabbed my attention from the get go. I found myself in a believable future world that left me torn between wanting to destroy the establishment and accepting my corporate branding in order to enjoy the enticing benefits available. Chris Arnone weaves a tale of intrigue wrapped around characters I found myself rooting for. As Elise revealed each layer of story and world, I lived the shock, anxiety, and everything else with her. Quynn and Bastion were a cyberpunk dream come true. If you're looking for a relatable adventure of cyberpunk mystery rather than misery, then this is the story you've been waiting for.”

—H.S. Kallinger, *Author of the Lost Humanity Series*

Chapter One

This had to be one of my least favorite ways to spend a Saturday night: clinging to the bottom of a flying limousine, watching the skyscrapers of Jayu City blur by below me. The view was nice, don't get me wrong. Towering ads lit up the buildings below in artificial light.

LeGrand Corto modeling the newest Coach handbags, flying a high-end Mercedes past Corto's central business district, and laughing with some friends over a meal prepared by Swyla's Kitchen. Brands from two planets, Earth and Little Sekhmet Settlement, my home, mingled together. Not every ad featured LeGrand's sweeping smile or overwrought curves. A pair of twins, one male and one female, modeled Corto Cybernetics' CX199 hand upgrades, "for the surgeon, engineer, or micro-detailist in your life."

"How's it looking?" Quynn Corto-Nano said. Corto Corporation was the company we both worked for, though they worked in the Nano division. Hence Corto-Nano. Their voice was clear in my communications implant while their torso hovered in front of me, disappearing into

the bottom of the limo. They weren't actually there, of course, just an augmented-reality projection on my display. And I was one on their comms, though Quynn couldn't see what was around me, only me in this hunkered position.

"Clear and breezy," I said, barely in a whisper and barely opening my mouth. My communications implant wasn't some off-the-shelf number like Quynn's. If it had been, even screaming wouldn't have been heard over the rush of wind around me, even with the helmet. High on the list of reasons to become an intelligence operative for Corto Corporation: I got the good tech. Like the implant that picked up on my vocal vibrations through the bones in my skull and translated accordingly. It was almost telepathy at that point. Almost.

"And you'll be home by 24:00?"

"That's the plan."

Quynn started to say, "We need to leave by--"

"24:30. I know."

"This is important. We only have a few hours to make the rounds before midnight."

"Yes, 28:00. I know that, too," I said, though I still didn't understand why this gala had a hard stop time. "Stop being so nervous. You're going to be great tonight."

Quynn sighed. They got this way before every big company event. I'd learned not to take it personally.

"Be safe," they said.

"What's the fun in that?"

"That's never going to be funny."

"It will be," I said. "One day when you least expect it."

"Do I even want to know what you're doing right now?" Quynn asked. "Or where?"

I glanced at the altimeter on my display. About 2500 meters up. Current speed was 185 kilometers per hour. Thankfully, my cybernetic arms and legs couldn't feel the cold wind and didn't get fatigued from hanging onto the bottom of the limo. My abs could have felt fatigued, but I was chemically suppressing those feelings from transmitting to my brain. Feeling Quynn's cheek under my fingertips or the silk of our sheets at home was a good thing, this 185 km per hour wind wasn't. My black helmet--deployed from a plate magnetically attached to the back of my neck--was deflecting the wind and cold from my face, and the bodysuit covered the rest of my living flesh, though I could feel a slight cooling around my collarbone. I'd have to get that seal looked at. The limo was over the cliffside district of the Corto Corporation borough, a sparkling, expensive area perched along the southern cliffs that overlooked the vast ocean. I was quickly approaching a similar district in the borough for Nexus Neuronics, the next company over. The sun had almost set, but I could still see the waves crashing against the cliffs to my right, the shadows of the skyscrapers so long, they threw the whole of the city into darkness prematurely.

"No," I finally said. "You really don't want to know what I'm doing right now."

"If you get into trouble--"

"Hey, you know me. I'm a safecracker. And a burglar. And an escape artist. I leave the fighting to you."

"I only fight in the conference room," Quynn said.

"Still more than me."

They sighed again. "Okay. See you at 24:00."

"You got it," I said. "I love you."

"Love you."

CALL WITH QUYNN CORTO-NANO DISCONNECTED flashed in the corner of my display for a few seconds. It was soon replaced with ENTERING NEXUS NEURONICS BOROUGH.

I didn't really need the heads-up on crossing into the Nexus Neuronics to know it. The buildings were just as crowded with towering ads as the Corto Corporation borough, but gone was LeGrand Corto. The same ad for Mercedes towered on an apartment building, but the car was flown by a muscular figure with a trim goatee and silver-blond hair. Gone was any advertisement for Corto Corporation, replaced with ads for Nexus Neuronics' latest neural interface, the NX15987. "Make latency a distant memory."

After only a couple of blocks, the limo started to descend and shed speed, drawing closer to a landing pad on the 200th floor of Cliffside 2, a 310-floor apartment building with clear views of the cliffs and ocean. Not near so tall as the buildings in the business centers of the boroughs, but plenty tall. The landing platform came into view, a circular construction of metal and glass jutting out of the corner of the building, hanging more than a kilometer above the intersection below. Another car was taking off from the platform as the limo I was clinging to lined up its approach. The thrusters slowly rotated from flight to landing positions, and the landing gear deploy above my shoulders and to either side of my calves. They extended down 20 centimeters, making a very tight space for me, so I turned my head sideways.

The limo glided into a hovering position above the landing pad, the winds from the thrusters buffeting me from all directions, but my carbon-fiber limbs didn't waiver, clinging to the undercarriage like I was glued there.

Why ride the bottom of the limo instead of just renting it out? First, I didn't want a record of me having ever been here. Second, there was a camera aimed at the landing pad all 28 hours

of Little Sekhmet Settlement's Day. I wasn't here to visit a friend or shop for real estate. I was here to steal something. That was my job. And I loved it. But I didn't want anyone in Nexus Neuronics to know I was ever here.

The instant all four landing gear were down on the platform, I detached from the limo, my hands and feet spinning and catching me in the breath before my body hit the ground. Then staying as flat as possible, I scuttled like an Earth crab out from under the limo, keeping the vehicle between me and the camera. In a few seconds, I was over the edge of the landing platform, shimmying my way along the bottom, working the support structure of the platform like a set of monkey bars until I was gripping the side of the building using the same tech that had kept me plastered to the bottom of the limo: a gel that became unbreakably bonded when a small current ran through it. Wall-walking made easy.

Half the success of a good burglary--maybe more than half--lay in research. Every job came with a mark and a timetable. That told me how much time I had to research my mark, to learn everything about their ins and outs, idiosyncrasies, loved ones, habits, everything. You wanted to steal something from someone, then you needed to know them better than they knew themselves. It wasn't just the mark, but everything surrounding the job.

Like in this case, I didn't want to climb 30 floors on the outside of the building. In a city of flying cars, that was a great way to get noticed. So I needed an entry point close to a landing pad. Hessod Corto-Intel, my Intel Analyst, discovered 19820 was owned by Ortega and Randy Nexus-Nano. They were both directors in the nanotechnology division of Nexus Neuronics, so they made plenty of credits. They also worked almost constantly. Their apartment at Cliffside 2, therefore, was an oh-so-rarely used vacation home. Completely vacant 270 out of the 290 days it took for the Little Sekhmet Settlement to orbit its star. Today was one of those 270 days.

I padded along the outside of the building, careful not to walk across any windows of apartments that were occupied, and I found my destination. I had to say, Ortega and Randy had a great view, and a swimming pool on their balcony that was bigger than my entire apartment. Mental note: big swimming pool when Quynn makes director. The lights were out in the apartment, as expected.

Oh, this was just sad. If you're going to have a massive balcony in a city with flying cars, at least put a decent lock on the door to the balcony. Don't be like Ortega and Randy. It was a simple keypad lock connected to the house network, and it even had an external data port. I pulled my data cable from my right elbow and plugged in. A Nexus Maxlock 187. Child's play. It was open in a few seconds. I slid the door open as silently as I could because you never knew until you knew. I'd learned that the hard way. I closed and locked it behind me. Should have been simple. Across the living room, past the kitchen, there was the front door. But leading from the front door to another door on my right was a trail of discarded clothes. Recently discarded. Randy and Ortega hadn't been here in four months. A cleaning service was here yesterday, so there shouldn't have been anyone here. I retracted my helmet and dialed up the sensitivity on my ear implants, aiming them at the closed door.

Heavy breathing. Deep grunts. Feathering moaning. Rhythmic wetness.

Sex sounds.

Yeah. Definitely a couple of low voices grunting and moaning in tandem. Randy and Ortega. They shouldn't have been there, and neither should I. I turned away from the carnal cacophony, intent on making a line straight for the front door and pretending I hadn't just heard what I'd heard when my foot caught in someone's discarded pants, which then caught on a barstool parked in front of the kitchen. Software, hardware, and my instincts kicked in. My arm

shot out, catching the stool before it crashed to the floor. I slowly shook out a breath and righted the stool while the sounds in the next room continued without pause.

I kept creeping along, nearly to the end of the kitchen island, only a couple meters from the front door, when a voice erupted from far too close to my left ear.

“Skip the lines and order now!”

I spun to see mirrored closet doors, an image of Nexus Neuronics’ best-selling home audio system hovering next to my reflection. A pair of white speakers and a little display unit wiggled to a tinny techno beat. The very system I’d been considering for Quynn’s birthday.

“Sparks!” I whispered. I brought up my keyboard and jumped into my system settings. Of course, a recent software update changed how my ad blocker worked, and so I wasn’t turned on like it was supposed to be when I was on a job.

The sex noises had stopped. I needed to hide.

Kitchen cabinets. Too small and probably full.

I could have clung to the ceiling like an insect. But the ceiling was white. Even if they didn’t look up, my black-clad body and black limbs would attract attention.

Two couches. Three chairs. All too low or small to fit under.

Coat closet with those mirrored doors. That would have to do. I opened it and stepped inside in a blink. I shouldn’t have been surprised at how empty it was. This was a vacation home, after all. A couple of windbreakers. A robotic vacuum on the floor with a blue light gently undulating. Repelling and parachuting equipment, all folded up and put away neatly. I guessed Ortega and Randy had more fun with the cliffs than I’d imagined. I was eyeing space above the shelf that ran along the top. Tall ceilings. I clambered up, my limbs twisting and bending in ways that biological limbs couldn’t. I shut the door behind me, and then stuck to the wall directly

above the closet doors, squeezing as flat as I could.

“What was that?” a voice said, tenor and smooth like syrup. Ortega, according to my notes.

“What was what?” Randy echoed, their voice deep and gruff.

“I heard something,” Ortega said. I heard the door to the bedroom unlatch. I imagined it slowly and silently opening fully.

Randy started to say, “You heard me--”

“Not that! Out in the living room.”

The not-knowing was driving me crazy, so I deployed a fiberoptic camera from my left pinky. I snaked it down and over the top of the closet door. The camera was only half a centimeter in diameter. Hard to notice in full sun, let alone the shadows of the apartment.

Randy and Ortega wandered the apartment naked, and I could see they were both males. Randy had the gruff voice and looked like they powerlifted apartment buildings, and Ortega was modified to be well over two meters tall. Definitely not a pair I wanted discovering me.

Ortega stepped cleanly over one of the living room chairs and turned on the lights, looking out at the balcony. “I don’t see anything,” they whispered.

“Just the mess we left out here.” Randy poked at a pair of underwear with his toe.

Ortega moved out of my line of sight, then said, “Door is still locked.”

“Sorry,” Ortega said as they reached out and grabbed Randy by, well, they were still naked.

Randy grunted and kissed Ortega on the cheek. “Let’s make sure we’re really alone.”

Ortega practically whined as Randy walked away from him, past the closet, stepped into the kitchen, and looked around there. “There’s nothing to see.”

“I’m not making this up,” Randy said as they moved to the front door and checked the locks. “I heard something.”

Then Randy was in front of the closet. As they reached a hand for the door, I retracted my camera in utter silence and then held my breath. Meager light spilled in as Randy yanked the doors open like they thought they were about to surprise someone. I watched their head poke in, the top sparse with brown hair and sweat. The stench of sex and body odor wafted straight up at me. My stomach did a little churn in reply. Randy looked left and right, glanced at the empty shelf above, and then closed the doors.

“Must have been a neighbor,” Randy said.

“A neighbor with terrible aural implants and no ad blocker,” Ortega said.

I let out the breath I’d been holding.

“Now then,” Randy said, followed by a slapping sound of flesh on flesh, and Ortega yelped. “Get that ass back in bed.”

There were some wet sounds that I pretended were kissing. I knew they weren’t, but for the life of me, I’d never understood why anyone wanted to do more than that with anyone else. The wet sound dissipated as their fumbling footfalls moved away. I waited to hear the bedroom door close again. A minute went by. Then another. Instead of the clicking door, there was a grunt from Ortega and then moans from both, much louder than before. I slinked down from the wall, silently descending to the floor of the closet, and I checked things out with my camera.

The door to the bedroom was still open, but I couldn’t see them from my angle. I extended the camera as far as it would go, a full meter beyond the closet door, but I still didn’t see them. So I pulled the camera back and gently opened the door, stepped out, and kept my eyes on the opening to the bedroom. I stayed low to the ground, doing my best impersonation of ooze

sliding across the carpet. I finally got to the front door and rose up until I could see over the corner of the kitchen counter. There they were, Randy standing behind Ortega, the two men having a full-throated good time now. The briefest glance was enough for me, too much really. I ducked back down instantly. I had to believe it was good for them, though the whole business turned my stomach. Good for them, not for me.

The moans and grunts were getting louder. Sex wasn't my thing, but I knew what was about to happen, and it could be my chance.

I sank to a crouch. After a few more minutes, both men were practically screaming, and then fell into panting. I rose again and only saw their legs side-by-side on the bed. Good for them, and it was time for me to go. I was out the door and in the hall in seconds.

As usual, I was glad I didn't have my biological eyes anymore. They would probably have taken several seconds to adjust to the brighter light of the hallway, but my enhanced eyes had no such issues. I needed to move. People in the hallway wouldn't be anything unusual for the security guards to see on their camera feeds, but my bare, high-end, carbon-polymer limbs sticking out of my black bodysuit weren't exactly everyday wear. I walked quickly, though not running, to the bank of elevators six doors down, ducking underneath the camera mounted directly across from them.

There was one bit I couldn't completely prepare for: the elevators. I knew there would be six here and that they all ran on electromagnetic rails. I also knew there were cameras in every single elevator in the building. I couldn't predict where they would be at this very moment. It looked like I'd caught a little luck finally. One of the elevators was only three floors below me.

I reached my right hand up and snapped my fingers, triggering a mini-EMP, or electromagnetic pulse. Guaranteed to knock out any unshielded electronics like the little camera

watching the elevators, though not for long. I grabbed the doors to the elevator that was only three floors away and yanked them open by main force. Trust me, it wasn't that impressive, not with cybernetic arms. Even ones designed for stealth and maneuvering like mine were several times stronger than biological arms.

The electromagnetic rails were on the sides, so I leaped over to one, gripped it with my feet, and used my arms to close the elevator doors behind me. No, the rails weren't electromagnetic. The car below me used electromagnets to hover off these rails and propel itself. The rails were just highly magnetic metal, easy enough to slide down and land almost noiselessly on the car below. Through the grate on the top, I could see that it was blessedly empty. My plan was to hack into the elevator's systems, though hacking certainly wasn't one of my strengths. I had a small database of algorithms for getting past common elevators, safes, locks, you get the idea. And I could download the less-common ones if I found them in my research. Well, Hessod would download them for me if he found them. Whatever. I didn't know how to actively hack anything. This elevator was definitely in my database, though it was a slow process to let the algorithm work its magic. Still better than being seen riding an elevator up 60 floors. Then I saw a better option: the camera.

It was mounted in the upper corner of the elevator, only a few inches from me, and all its wiring was exposed to the elevator shaft. I deployed my own camera, snaking it through the grate, skimming along the ceiling of the elevator, and positioned it right next to the security camera. As I started to record, a double ding sounded right by my ear, and the doors to the elevator slid open, voices spilling in from the hallway.

Silent circuits, I was having the worst luck tonight.