

AGENCY 42

A close-up of a human eye with long, dark eyelashes. The iris is replaced by a complex, glowing blue and white circuit board, resembling a microchip or a futuristic lens. The background is dark and textured, with some blue light reflecting off the eye's surface.

1: TERRANS

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ISBN numérique : 979-10-405-4238-4

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First Part

Chapter 1

Washington, December 7, 2018 BT

It was a cold, cold morning in December. Winter had begun early, before Halloween, and had been particularly harsh. Just like the last few years, come to think of it. Donald Trump stared at the snowdrifts on the side of the road, as his black Lincoln made its way through the capital amidst its usual procession of flashing lights. It was one of the few quiet moments he allowed himself in his new life as President. Seeing the tons of snow piled up on the side of the road, he thought back to the outcry caused last year by his decision to withdraw from the Paris climate agreement. Where were the global warming theorists? No doubt comfortably ensconced in their homes, heated by fuel oil or electricity generated by the American thermal power plants he had defended. He was right to withdraw his country from this masquerade, which would have dragged its economy down.

He had already been at the helm of the country for two years, and he hadn't seen the time pass. Right from the start of his term, he focused on his main objective: to restore the United States to world leadership. His radical, determined style had certainly raised a few eyebrows, and given his opponents, both Democrats and Republicans, plenty of opportunity to push him around. But he had held firm, and was beginning to reap the rewards. Economically, the country was doing better. Unemployment was falling, and this was largely due to his ability to support the private sector in the digital transformation of the economy. He relied on Silicon Valley, of course, and even replicated the model in other states across the country. He had to force the hand of several pillars of the new economy, who were among his staunchest opponents even before he was elected. But he had managed to get them on board with this vast economic rebound project. Today, in fact, he was to give a speech to the heads of the hundred most successful start-ups of the moment, the "Techs 100". These were the companies that now counted in the economy, gradually dethroning the traditional Nasdaq industries. He had passed a number of laws to speed up the transformation, which had not gone down well with some of the country's big

fortunes, whose empires dated back decades. Yet he had not yielded to their pressure, and had no regrets. The results were there, and the grumpy ones couldn't deny it. There comes a time when the old model just doesn't work anymore, and the new one does. Like it or not, an industrial revolution was underway, and it had already transformed a large part of the economy. Those who didn't want to jump on the bandwagon would unfortunately be left by the wayside, and he didn't care. He'd always looked ahead, never behind, and had no intention of starting today.

The line of cars took a final turn onto Constitution Avenue. Traffic was heavy at this time of day, but the motorcade didn't suffer the consequences, of course: one of the perks of the job. Soon, through the bulletproof windows of the limousine, he could see the profile of the White House, one of the most photographed monuments in the world, and which had become his home. He'd lived there ever since he'd beaten Hillary Clinton in the 2016 election, after a fierce campaign that he'd won despite unfavorable polls and an unprecedented mobilization of the American establishment. Today, none of that mattered: he was the forty-fifth President of the United States, and he intended to remain so for another six years. The motorcade entered the ultra-secure compound, and the President was greeted by his staff, who reminded him of his agenda for the day. Few changes for once, and he would even have a short break in the afternoon to call his daughter Ivanka. A luxury. The morning would be devoted mainly to Techs 100. The government wanted to introduce new measures to facilitate the growth of start-ups, both current and future. The primary aim was to bolster the national economy, while the secondary, less avowed objective was to extend American hegemony on the planet. Admittedly, most of these companies did not want their image to be too closely associated with the government, and their positions over the last few years had been very clear. It was important to give them a free hand, not to interfere, and to benefit indirectly from their influence in the world.

A few dozen minutes later, he stepped out onto the frozen White House lawn, for a historic photo with the most powerful leaders of their time, and probably even more so. With their companies, they had transformed the American and world economies, toppled empires, overturned the established order, without any hang-ups. They were all there, the old and the new: Mark Zuckerberg, Elon Musk, Tim Cook, Jeff Bezos, Larry Page, Jack Dorsey, and so many others. It

was strange to see them all together for the first time, side by side despite their economic and personal rivalries. To respect everyone's egos, it was finally decided to place them in alphabetical order, from left to right and top to bottom. Facebook's founder would be in the front row, but for once he wouldn't be in the center. It was a strange idea to take this photo outdoors at this time of year. But if the temperature was around five degrees, it was a beautiful early morning. The photo would be beautiful and wouldn't require any special skills on the part of the White House photo retouchers. Everyone was in place: all that awaited was the President, who took his place in the middle of the front row.

William Mac Cabbet watched from a distance as this glorious assembly of decision-makers took shape. From where he stood, he couldn't make out their faces, but even if he'd been closer, he'd have been unable to put a name to any of them. At forty-two, he hadn't embraced the digital revolution as such. Sure, he owned a smartphone, like everyone else, but otherwise he hadn't really changed his lifestyle. Anaïs, his 13-year-old daughter, tried to show him the advantages of this or that connected bracelet, but it didn't interest him at all. He didn't have a Twitter account, wasn't on Facebook, didn't use WhatsApp, much to his offspring's dismay. He sensed that a revolution was underway, and it was hard to ignore it, but he felt that it could do without him. Technology had nevertheless entered his professional world on a massive scale, but he used the tools without seeking to find out more. As a member of the Secret Service, he was responsible for ensuring the security of the White House, and therefore benefited from the latest gadgets in terms of detection, weaponry and countermeasures. The job hadn't fundamentally changed, but it had to adapt to new forms of threat. The day's program revolved mainly around the Tech 100 meeting, and had not been assigned a high level of risk. So, as usual, he patrolled the western sector, on the lookout for any possible danger. He nodded as he passed one of his colleagues and approached the fence. On the other side of the fence, there were already a large number of onlookers, most of them with their backs to the fence, having their photos taken in front of the world-famous monument, if they weren't taking selfies. Agent Mac Cabbet reflected that for stars who had known the days before cell phones, it must be strange to see only the backs of their fans.

A buzzing sound suddenly drew him from his thoughts. Thinking at first that there was something wrong with his earpiece, he removed it, only to realize that the noise was coming from outside. At first, he imagined insects, but it wasn't

the right time of year. He perceived a movement at the edge of his field of vision and saw what he at first took to be the flight of a bird. Turning his head, he realized that these "birds" were flying in an unusual manner, and that there were a great many of them. For a second, he was paralyzed as he realized what he was looking at. He sounded the alarm into his wrist-microphone:

— Multiple flying objects approaching from the west, evacuate POTUS immediately! All sectors on alert, attack in progress!

At the same time, he grabbed his service weapon and adjusted one of the dozens of drones already crossing the White House fence, at an altitude of less than ten meters and a speed of almost one hundred kilometers an hour. He hit the bull's-eye on the third shot, but soon realized the futility of his gesture. It was like trying to stop a swarm of wasps with a blowpipe. At the same moment, small automatic cannons, hidden around the perimeter, went off. Designed by the French company Skydrone for this type of threat, they were equipped with a five-by-five-meter leaded net, projected by means of a compressed air capsule. They could reach any object flying at an altitude of less than fifty meters, trapping it in a tight mesh and causing it to fall back to the ground by the simple action of gravity. This seemingly rudimentary system was preferred to radio jamming or remote deactivation. It was the fastest and most effective, whatever the drone's guidance technology. For a moment, Agent Mac Cabbet thought it would be a success: the nets covered the entire sky for a few seconds, and all the drones were mowed down in mid-air. They fell heavily to the ground. Some broke apart, while the engines of others continued to make noise, trying in vain to turn their propellers. The secret service agent noticed that they were all of the same type, carrying a small brown cube measuring just a few centimetres on each side. He had no time to think further. He heard a new noise and turned around to realize that the danger was far from over: the drones hit were only the first wave, undoubtedly intended to trigger the cannons. The second wave was already heading for the center of the lawn, where the alarm had been sounded some fifteen seconds earlier.

There was a wave of panic on the scene: the President's bodyguards had formed a protective cordon around him, and were taking him running towards the White House. The Techs 100 began to leave the podium, scattering in all directions. William Mac Cabbet ran in that direction, emptying his magazine into the air like all his colleagues, and praying for a miracle.

This did not happen: once the center of the lawn had been reached, the drones deployed in a circle in a matter of seconds and exploded simultaneously. As in a bombing raid, the earth heaved under the impact with deafening thunder. A cloud of dust covered the entire garden, and trees and bushes were torn up. The blast shattered part of the White House window, injuring many inside. Passers-by were also hit by debris in the surrounding streets.

Forty-three different craters were later counted on the lawn, in which lay the dismembered bodies of ninety-seven guests, thirty-five members of the Secret Service or White House staff, and the forty-fifth President of the United States.

Chapter 2

New York, May 2019 BT

As he had every morning for the past fifteen years, Franck Goodo woke up a minute before his alarm went off, at five fifty-nine. He was bathed in sweat, the sheets twisted around his body. The night had brought its share of nightmares, always the same ones. Come to think of it, since that infamous December 7, 2018, sixty-seven years to the day after Pearl Harbor, he couldn't recall having had a single real night's sleep. Not even high-dose alcohol could give him that respite. That day he'd lost friends, a president, but also the hope that things could change.

After the initial shock, the whole country woke up with a huge hangover: the government had been decapitated, and with it all the major technology companies, deprived of their emblematic leaders. The stock market panicked, investors panicked. Silicon Valley, for some time under imminent threat of a bubble effect similar to that of 2001, had collapsed. The entire US economy followed suit. The country, which had struggled to get back on its feet during Trump's first two years in office, was now plunged into a crisis even more serious than that of 2008, and set to last much longer. As is too often the case, only one market seemed to be doing well: arms. The country had gone to war against the Islamic State, which had claimed responsibility for the attack. The whole world, led by the United States, wanted to see justice done, and quickly. A special task force was set up, headed directly by Mike Pence, now President of the United States. This Task Force relied mainly on the NSA, the FBI and the CIA. While experts searched the rubble for initial analysis, a team focused on the drones.

Witnesses had seen them rise from Theodore Roosevelt Island, a few kilometers from the White House. When questioned, the Washington police had indeed checked on a private company that had deployed some 100 drones on the island on the morning of the attack. The company, called Vidadrone Inc. had presented paperwork that appeared to be in order: on that day, it was rehearsing a show commissioned by the Downtown Holiday Market, to liven up the