



(AI image generated by Michael Lopez, *Military Review*)

Assassination 2057

Neil Espie

Anna stood watching the approaching snowstorm from her station office overlooking the World Trade Center Transportation Hub in New York. The three layers of floor-to-ceiling, graphene-layered armored glass completely silenced the buffeting wind. No laser listening device or sniper

bullet could penetrate the window, so what chance did nature have of announcing its presence?

As the last rays of sun faded beneath the skyline, she rolled her shoulders and expelled a deep sigh only to suddenly notice her reflection in the inner layer of glass. She did not recognize the person staring back at

her. This woman looked old and worn out, with a hint of gray in her hair.

Hard to believe I made it to 42, she thought. Just my luck not to come to a sticky end by now. More fool me to have seen, and know, more than any mere mortal ever should. God certainly has a way of answering our prayers, just not in the way we expect.

A quiet knock came at the door. Anna turned as her assistant silently padded across the deeply piled carpet to deposit a pile of folders on her desk. Her assistant nodded quickly in Anna's direction and waved a data pad at Anna before placing it on the front of her desk. Anna nodded in return. Her assistant pivoted and traversed that expansive carpet once again, deftly closing the enormous double doors to her office on the way out.

Anna turned back to watch the approaching storm, the quiet of the room dispelling the interruption.

So many things must come together for this to work, she thought. Damn, I hate uncertainty. She laughed out loud, realizing the absurdity of that statement. *That's what I get for thinking I know everything. And soooo, the fate of the free world comes down to me, planning, execution, and a lot of luck.*

Crazy hey! came a voice in her head; it was her constant companion from when she joined up as a fresh-faced know-it-all.

That was soon knocked out of me, she thought. Were you listening to my thoughts, Rowan? She asked her AI.

AI was how Rowan had been described to her when the program was inserted just above the base of her skull that fateful day so long ago. But this AI had grown to be very special compared to standard military issue.

Because he had been her constant companion over the years, she hadn't realized just how much Rowan's abilities had grown as his learning algorithms evolved. Unfortunately, he also took up more and more space with time as his hardware updates became larger. This resulted in a noticeable golf ball sized bump on the back of Anna's head. She didn't mind, as it was hidden by her hair and anyway—she had to stay up to date in her position.

AI agents like Rowan had become standard issue in the armed services since the 2040s after the first very crude and virtually dumb predecessors were touted as



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embedded assistants for the disabled by an industrialist back in the early '20s.

Rowan's older military relatives were built to connect to available closed wireless networks to seamlessly supply coordination and information to their hosts, much like early century smart phones. The big difference was that they and their host communicated via subvocalisation and small subduction transducers embedded near the ears.

Later and current models, with thanks to improvements in AI, nanobiotechnology, and surgical procedures involving the speech and auditory centers of the brain, one could have a two-way conversation. It required considerable effort and training initially to learn personal "triggers" that enabled two-way communication between host and embedded AI. It was not quite the same as a conversation with another person, but after a month or so, it became second

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nature. While Rowan wasn't particularly intelligent, he could appear to be due to his constant connection with other much larger AI information systems in the outside world. Coupled with his natural language and emotional bias processor, Rowan was, for all intents and purposes, a constant companion to Anna, albeit a fact-driven know it all!

Ha, as if I'd want to be in on your everyday thoughts; that wetware of yours is sooo primitive, answered Rowan.

Hey! Just remember, without me and my monkey brain, you wouldn't exist! she quipped back.

Just then another flash of sheet lightning lit the sky

"Thanks, Kate. I'll get to—" she started to say before she was cut off by an enormous explosion and shattering of glass and cracking carbon fiber-reinforced (CFR) concrete right in front of her. Then there was another explosion and another, rocking the whole building. The armored glass in front of Anna was down to its last inner pane, which was cracking and spidering outward from Anna's reflection.

She felt Rowan take over her body and jerkily throw her off to the side just as the final pane exploded inward. Her desk disappeared in a rain of splinters and ceiling tiles.



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almost from one side of the horizon to the other. Wow! she thought.

Oh, pa-lease. A bit of static electricity and you're amazed! thought Rowan. If he had had his own eyes, he would have rolled them. Damn monkey!

Another knock came to her office door. It opened just a crack. "May I come in, director?" asked a familiar voice.

"Yes, Kate!" Anna replied as she half turned to confirm who it was.

"I just want to give you a travel form to sign for the upcoming defense exhibition in London. I'll leave it on your desk."

She felt herself hit the floor on her right side and then there was nothing; darkness enveloped her.

As the blackness slowly lifted, she could hear through her ringing ears a far-off voice calling what sounded like her name. She tried to move but couldn't.

What? What's going on? she tried to say out loud, but nothing came out.

Anna, stay very still. DO NOT MOVE, said Rowan. *We have a situation. There are two Redbacks in the room. They must have been deployed in that last sniper shell. I'm slowing your breathing and heart rate so they will have a harder time locating you, just DON'T MOVE! Trust me ...*

That was a stupid thing to say, Anna said to her head companion. One, I can't move, I've tried, and two, if I die, you die, so why wouldn't I trust you?

A pile of broken ceiling tiles half covered Anna, pinning her down while broken furniture burned brightly in the far corner. Dust floated in the air everywhere, reducing visibility to almost zero.

Anna scanned the room as best she could without moving. She could just make out two small spider-like machines toward the center of her office. Each was the size of a child's hand with their legs fully extended. They were sitting motionless on the top of one of her overturned office sofas.

Rowan was right. They were Redbacks (RBs), but they were the smaller versions that, as far as she could see through the dust, were each carrying the standard "shaped" high explosive package. This package was much like a tiny grenade but, optionally, instead of sending shrapnel evenly in all directions, these machines could reconfigure on the fly and focus their blast into a guaranteed narrow cone of death in the direction they were facing.

They were small and extremely fast. Their AI was programmed to get within at least ten feet of a target and then explode radially or, if within five feet, use the more deadly shaped-charge configuration. Their infrared and visible light optics, along with auditory and tactile systems, were programmed to seek, identify, and destroy. Their only tactical downside was that they only had enough battery charge for five minutes, but in that time, they could cover a heck of a lot of terrain to find their target.

Why am I not dead? she asked Rowan. *I should be dead. Those things should see my heat signature and hear me.*

I don't know. Insufficient data. I have limited my networking in case they can sense me. DON'T MOVE!



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A sudden stifled gasp coming from the back of her office caught Anna's attention. She instinctively tried to glance in the direction of the sound, but she couldn't move. She tried to move her finger. Nothing.

Damn AI. How are you doing that? You shouldn't have that much control.

No answer.

Anna filed that question away for a future conversation with Rowan and her tech specialists.

In this case it probably was good she didn't respond. Anna moved her eyes around toward the sound as best she could, spotting Kate's dust covered, wide-eyed face peering above an overturned filing cabinet. Her aide-de-camp was staring at the Redbacks, her panic evident on her face.

Don't move, Kate, don't move, please! thought Anna.

Unlikely, answered Rowan. *Building control says she is exhibiting a fight or flight response.*

Release me, Rowan. DO IT NOW. RELEASE ME!

No, Anna, I can't do that. You would be sacrificing yourself for zero outcome. You would both be killed.

Rowan, please ...



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As if to illustrate Rowan's rebuttal, right at that moment one of the Redbacks jumped a few inches into the air, swinging around to face Kate as it landed. Its spidery legs twitched as its body moved around to zero in on the source of the sound.

Like a gunshot, it was away. Its scrambling legs were a blur of metal and deadliness. It moved blindingly fast over the overturned, splintered furniture and debris.

Anna cried out to Kate, "RUN!"

Her voice worked. The shout heard.

Kate glanced over in Anna's direction and suddenly bolted over the upturned filing cabinet that she had landed behind and made for the shattered door like a runner exploding from the starting blocks.

Go. Go. Go! yelled Anna in her mind. Rowan had managed to control her vocalisation and silenced her again.

In its haste to take out Kate, the Redback smashed into the side of a filing cabinet then accelerated toward the doorway without even a momentary pause.

Just before reaching the door, the Redback tripped over some rubble and careened into what was left of one of the door jams. A piece of ceiling fell on top of the

machine, trapping it, but only for a few seconds. But it was enough for Kate to at least get a small head start on the deadly pursuer.

Anna watched in horror as Kate disappeared out the doorway and listened to her frantic footsteps as she raced away down the corridor.

The Redback skidded through the doorway so fast that it couldn't get a grip on the hallway tiles. Its legs pumped furiously as it squirmed to point its body in the direction of Kate's retreat, only to smack into the far hallway wall. It deftly flipped over so that its legs were oriented in anticipation of the vertical wall, then used its momentum to scramble along the bottom half of the wall and back down onto the hallway floor after Kate.

It was breathtaking to watch but soon came the inevitable bang of the explosion that Anna hoped she wouldn't hear. Dust billowed down

the hallway past her office; the sound of debris falling to the floor. The patter of running feet was no more.

Oh God! Anna gasped in thought when suddenly she remembered the other Redback in the room. It hadn't moved from its spot but was now looking straight at her.

Uh, oh, Jongo! Rowan said silently. *I don't know how you managed to yell out. I thought I had you shut down.*

Anna, we are in deep shi—

What the hell! Anna responded. *Since when did you swear? I expected more of you.*

Ahh. Anna, now is not the time to discuss linguistics.

Well, I can't see why not as I don't hear any better suggestions from you about how we get out of this one.

Why wasn't the Redback moving much? It was just doing its weird slo-mo dance as if trying to decide on a course of action, thought Anna without including Rowan.

Just then something crackled and popped behind Anna along with a burst of yellowish light that half lit the room.

What the? thought Anna.

The Redback jumped but settled in the same spot, still looking in Anna's direction, but now more agitated.



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Bingo! came back her AI. It's the fireplace behind us. In the explosion you ended up in front of the hearth. The Redback mustn't be able to discern you from the heated surroundings using its thermal imaging. The dust and debris over you must also be obscuring your outline while there is still haze in the room. I predict a 71 percent chance you will survive for the next two minutes until the dust haze settles.

Grreaattt! replied Anna. Any helpful suggestions?

No! Immobility is our best chance of survival. I cannot see a way out of this as I only have minimal comms with building control, but it does say that Rozoff's SRT is responding.

I'm not lying here waiting only to die before they get here, Anna thought. I'm making a dash for that overturned weapons cabinet before the dust settles. It looks to be open. Maybe I can get into it before the RB blows us to smithereens.

Your chance of success is 0.125 percent, Anna. I cannot recommend this action.

Well, unless you have another option, in another thirty seconds we are shooting for 1/8th percentage success! Get ready to release me when I say, and then amp up my responses as best you can. You can do that, right?

Yes, Anna.

Anna started to count down to making her move. She could have had Rowan do it but at least this way she felt as if she had some control over her destiny.

Meanwhile the Redback in front of her had moved a few feet toward her very slowly, all the while waving from side to side. A funeral dance of sorts, Anna thought. 15-14-13-12, she counted down until her dash for safety.

Bang! Kurumpf! came a blinding light and skin stinging sound that assailed Anna's senses and all but knocked her unconscious.

Dazed, she tried to shake her head, but nothing happened thanks to Rowan. She couldn't even blink.



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Through the now refreshed dust haze in the room she could see a dog in the middle of the room. Squat, heavily built, like a bulldog. It was strangely still but made a funny whirring sound. The RB was nowhere to be seen.

A heavily helmeted head suddenly peered around the hanging door frame to the office, then another and another.

The lead helmet with amplified voice yelled, “Move!” and the two other armored men, weapons drawn, quickly entered while covering the back and front of the room.

“Director, are you OK?” came the amplified voice.

“Yes!” yelled Anna. Rowan had released her from her immobility, “Here!”

The armored leader with glowing double bars on his chest came over quickly to Anna. “I’m Lt. Rozoff, building SRT. Stay still until my men say otherwise. We need to make sure there are no other Redbacks hiding dormant here.” The lieutenant raised his heavy Redback Killer (RBK) pistol and scanned the room as if to emphasize his statement.

Anna nodded.

“How are we going?” comm’d the lieutenant.

“Clear!” “Clear!” came his sergeant’s and corporal’s responses.

“Cat, you go down the hall and stay with the first RB’s target until forensics gets there, then meet Bird at Lab One. Bird, I want you to take Bully down to Lab One and get a rush on his RB lunch. Manufacturer, origin, etc. I assume that Bully has come up empty with an ID?”

“Yeah, he has none, L-T. Clean as a baby’s bum,” came the reply from Sgt. Bird.

Bully was the nickname everyone in SR used to describe their robotic Redback hunter. It got that name because from a distance, it did look like a very fat bulldog. It was a heavy, squat, four-legged mechanical marvel that could chase down RBs. It would normally spring on top of an RB, lowering its dish-like squat body over it and attempt to interrogate and disable the RB. Usually that didn’t work, and the RB would explode, hoping to cause collateral damage, but the upturned dish-like body of Bully could contain the explosion and save the remains for later forensics.

Both marines started to move about their business. Lt. Rozoff turned back to the director. “Your AI tells me you have a nasty broken femur and a punctured ear drum, director,” he said.

What’s he talking about, Rowan? Anna quizzed.

Sorry Anna. You don’t feel pain at the moment because I have amped up your natural adrenaline and at the same time, I am attempting to manipulate your shock response for safety. Your leg was broken when you cartwheeled over here from the explosion. I thought you had enough to worry about given the situation.

“Director, building control AI has asked me to put your leg in traction and stabilize it. Please stay still,” said Rozoff.

“Go ahead, L-T,” she replied.

Just as the lieutenant bent down to use a med pack that Cat had thrown over to him, a horrendous explosion happened behind him. The room seemed to implode. The previously broken CFR concrete wall, and what was left of the window, seemed to turn to dust and sand. The entire outside eastern facing wall of the office just disappeared. In the center of the room appeared a blurred ghost of steel blades and whipping razored cables.

Bird, who was standing over Bully and leaning down to pick him up, disappeared in a spray of flesh and separated body armor. He didn’t even know what hit him. Bully didn’t fare much better.

"Cat! An SL! Get out!" yelled the lieutenant as he thrust one armored arm around Anna's chest and under her arms while simultaneously throwing himself as hard as his exoskeleton would allow toward the back of the room. As he flew, he spun Anna off behind a downed filing cabinet while trying to land himself behind the tipped over weapons safe.

"Damn it, Cat. Get 'im!" Rozoff shouted as he desperately unholstered both his RBK pistols and rolled up into a half stance to fire on the machine from behind the cabinet. *Max D auto on my line*, he thought.

His AI obeyed instantly and automatically linked with both pistols as soon as they cleared their holsters so that he could choose ammunition type, fire mode, and sighting method.

Before he had even focused on the machine, his AI sighted through his HUD to the only target in his vision, the SL, or Slasher Lite. It then instructed both pistols to load with maximum charges equivalent to minigrenades and switched them to fully automatic firing. These settings limited the range of the projectiles and made targeting a bit of a hit and miss affair, but in close-quarter firefights, that could be an advantage.

He pulled both triggers before he finished lining up his guns on the Slasher. Sixty explosive bullets were on their way in under two seconds, thirty from each weapon. His armored suit reacted to improve aim and soften the blows to his upper torso as they "brrrrrrrred" away in a continuous stream.

His AI took over the short flight of each bullet to ensure they hit the target type as effectively as possible; in this case, they aimed for each of the joints in the Slasher. Of course, the Slasher was also designed to account for such an attack and began to move its spinning arms, blades, and razored cables to intersect, deflect, or detonate the bullets in response.

Slashers came in two variants: lite and heavy. The lite version looked like a simple upright tube on six legs. The upright tube of a body had horizontally rotating sections to which were attached multiple short arms which ended, and were in themselves, slashing tungsten and titanium blades and razored cables.

This variant was intended for use in confined spaces and built-up areas. Their only task was to find and eliminate personnel. A big part of it was to strike fear into those unfortunate enough to witness their macabre handiwork and lose the will to fight.

It was equally effective in this scenario of cleaning up a botched assassination if you didn't mind collateral damage. They were normally programmed to be indiscriminate in their targeting of personnel to heighten fear.

The aim of this game for the special reaction team was to overwhelm the Slasher. Unless Cat opened up along with Rozoff very soon, there was a good chance the "meat bags" in this room wouldn't be walking out.

At nearly three long seconds for auto-reload to occur from his armored exoskeleton, Rozoff really needed Cat's input fast! And he wasn't disappointed. Cat was just past the broken doorway into the hall when Rozoff's alert came. Instinctively, Cat spun around while dropping to her right knee, bringing the tip of her hypersonic rifle up from its slung position across her lower waist. She instructed her AI to action the rifle to its 2D, *on my line*, setting.

She felt her armor go rigid immediately. It automatically started to swing her around to support the butt of the rifle against her right hip. She knew her AI had the target when she suddenly felt like she was being run over by a truck. Her AI had instructed her suit to compress her body to protect her vital organs from the impending recoil of the rifle.

The hypersonic, or HS, rifle had a maximum of thirty rounds of intelligent sabots. It could be set to one of thirty controlled high explosive firing charges ranging from thirty, which means thirty slower shots could be fired, down to one, where one round had the highest possible velocity with maximum destructive power. After a maximum of thirty weaker shots, the rifle had to be returned to the armorer for a new barrel and recalibration. This meant that Cat's command for a "2" setting would mean she could theoretically fire two rounds from the rifle at near maximum velocity before it was useless; not that any one person could fire two rounds at that setting. This was going to hurt!

The "D" part of the "2D" setting was to instruct the sabot to fragment into a fine mist of destruction just before striking the target. The idea was to limit its overall distance of travel, and effectively increase its volume so that it vaporised a large area of the target.

At least that's how the theory goes, thought Cat as she depressed the trigger of the rifle. She'd never used it before in such close quarters, with a Slasher, and in a confined space to boot.

The rifle sounded like field artillery being fired up close, accompanied by an ear-piercing rumble of rolling thunder from the bow shockwave of the sabot travelling at nearly 6,000 feet per second.

It found the Slasher, exploding into its programmed fine mist shrapnel almost as soon as it had left the rifle muzzle as the target was so close. When the mist struck, the Slasher's body and its robotic scythes instantly melted, further expanding outward as the deadly mist drove forward. The whole mess exploded into a molten ball of fury and superheated gas and atmosphere that barrelled into what was left of Anna's already smashed outer office wall. It blew straight through the furthest reaches of the wall, sending half molten steel framing, CFR concrete, and glass onto the evening street traffic below.

The explosion and shockwave shattered windows for hundreds of yards in all directions. It spent itself as a giant fireball against the high-rise building on the opposite side of the street.

Cat, in her protective armored exoskeleton, was flung backwards like a rag doll, hitting the far wall of the fifteen-foot-wide hallway with an almighty smack. Her armored suit rippled from the kickback of the rifle as it tried to dissipate the shockwave around Cat's body and vital organs. She crashed down to the floor unconscious.

Meanwhile, Rozoff was blown into the back of the room along with all the remaining sticks of office furniture. He speared headfirst into the wall and was buried in a pile of kindled furniture. After a few moments to realize what had just happened, he tried to move but found his head literally stuck in the wall. He reached out and up to push against the wall to pull his head out but got nowhere.

Now this is embarrassing, he thought. Not a good look. AI, how is the director doing?

The director appears to be unconscious and her AI isn't responding to my comms. Hold ... it said.



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Not getting any more info from his AI, Rozoff decided to have another go at extricating himself. He applied maximum strength to his suit arms and instantly regretted it. He blew out from behind the smouldering wood pile and ended up on his backside near the center of the office where the Slasher had been standing. The area was a burning molten mess after the Slasher exploded. Before his suit overloaded from the heat, he jumped to his feet and moved forward, hoping to find Anna where he had tossed her.

"Cat, are you OK?" he comm'd. No answer. "Cat?" Still no answer. *To be expected, he thought. That idiot used way too high a setting. She'll be out for quite a while.*

L-T, I have basic binary contact with the director. It says she has numerous serious injuries and needs attention ASAP. I do not know why her AI is not fully functional, his AI reported.

Just then his HUD started flashing red and a softly lilting feminine voice said, "Halogen gas fire extinguishers will flood the room in twenty seconds. Please evacuate the room immediately. Evacuate the room immediately."

Begger me, talk about rain on my parade, he thought. Now, where the hell are you, director?

He had to retrieve Anna and get out of the room before the fire system operated or she was a goner. He'd be fine in his sealed light armor suit, but Anna had no such protection.

He stumbled along in the dust- and debris-filled room waiting for his AI to pick her up with its sensors. After what seemed like an eternity, he found her in the back corner of the room, two filing cabinets on top of her. He didn't need to be told that she was in a bad way.

"You have ten seconds to evacuate the room. Please evacuate the room immediately," came the automated voice.

"Sorry, but I have to do this, director," he said as he bent down and hauled her over his shoulder in a fireman's lift and sprinted toward the crumpled doorway.

Halfway there, he tripped over a large block of concrete and lost his grip on Anna. He'd been careful to minimize his hold on her so as not to increase her risk of injury. Luckily, his AI instantaneously changed grip and caught her before she slid off his shoulder.

"Three seconds until release!" came the fire warning.

He redoubled his efforts to get out of the room.

Boom, boom, boom ... strategically placed ceiling panels flew to the floor, halogen gas roaring out to suffocate the flames. The dust in the room was quickly joined by a blinding mist as the cold gas expanded into the room.

Rozoff hit the doorway at full pelt and slid across the hallway, narrowly missing the far wall. As he then moved off down the hallway at a less frantic pace, he

saw Cat propped up against the hallway wall. He veered over to her and grasped for her shoulder with his free hand while still at speed. His AI anticipated what he was about to do and instructed Cat's AI to pop her shoulder handle up. Rozoff grabbed it and kept on running with Cat dragging beside him in her now rigid suit along with Anna over his shoulder; a feat not possible without his armor's enhancing strength.

"Medical, do you copy?" he comm'd.

"Yes, lieutenant. How can we assist?"

"Send a retrieval team for two to the director's office. Western end of hallway, fire exit!"

"On their way, lieutenant."

"One is a TO suffering HS 2D kickback. The other is the director, multiple critical injuries. Sending vitals now," Rozoff comm'd back.

By the time he reached the end of the hallway, the overpressure ceiling fans had spun up to full speed, ensuring that any halogen gas would be forced out and away from their location.

Rozoff just stood where he stopped at the western exit, holding both his unconscious packages. He was still on a high from the confrontation. He slowly started to wind down as the evac team arrived and gently took his charges away with them.

"L-T?" came a familiar commanding voice over secure comms. "I've sent a team to retrieve Bird and also forensics. Clean up and report for debriefing in thirty minutes. Briefing Room 4. Building control reports no more activity. Good job, L-T! And don't mention you are really SOF! It'll be hard enough explaining away Cat's little show without any extra complications." ■