

FATAL VIRTUAL REALITY

A DANGEROUS GAME

THE RISE OF VIRTUAL REALITY
AND THE RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH ITS USE

Certified Human Pyroduct

*These texts have been written by a human being alone,
and **NOT** by Artificial Intelligence!*

PART 1

Dark Fantasies

The truth is as plain as day about all that A.I

OBSCURE OBJECTS

They come in two varieties, both of which are equally fascinating and terrifying in their own right.

Obscure Objects.

One type is hidden.

Hidden from our view. We cannot see them. They seem not to exist, yet they are there all the same.

Invisible danger.

The other type is sinister. Dark in nature and intent. Malevolent and malicious.

Diabolical.

They both have something in common. You really never want to cross paths with them.

Neither by chance nor by design. Otherwise, things will end badly for you.

It's practically a foregone conclusion!

Nevertheless, everyone keeps searching for it.

You're determined to find precisely that which everyone says is untraceable.

You also want to be able to discover, through your own experience and observations, that something obscure can also be diabolical.

Nobody believes rumours; everyone wants to see pure, irrefutable proof of it.

Curiosity Killed the Cat.

Many overlook precisely that aspect during their Quest.

Most have not lived to tell the tale of that mistake. Yet this, too, is their story...

PRIMORDIAL WORLDS

Do those Primeval Worlds still exist?
Places on Earth untouched by humans.

Have we – Homo sapiens – already been everywhere?
Are our footprints already on every spot on Earth? Or...
Are there still pockets of unspoilt and pristine nature? If anyone
knows, please speak up.

So it's my turn now.

Yes.
There are places that humans have not yet visited.
Not a single Homo erectus has ever seen them.

They are the obscure elements close to home.
Not in remote corners of the cosmos.
No. Close by.
Yet unreachable. Invisible. Untouched.

We are going in
search of them.
Together.
To those undiscovered worlds beyond our grasp.

Do make sure you bring an airbag.
*You're in for a **bumpy ride!!***

INTRODUCTION

Over the course of three books – and thus well over a thousand pages – Roland had believed that HE was invincible, in the guise of a powerful cyborg who would protect humanity and save the world.

That turned out to be an illusion!

His grandson Yaj had ‘locked him away’ inside a virtual reality adventure game that he’d given his grandad as a birthday present.

Oop had once again pressed the wrong button whilst installing the VR-AI console, causing Roland to be sucked into a world of fantasy and betrayal without even realising it. Inside, Roland felt like a hero.

After a whole host of intense virtual adventures, Roland found himself back in reality some time later. At that moment, he didn’t even realise that he was ‘back’.

Roland had performed well during his missions within the Game.

Unfortunately, the results of all his efforts – and those of his team – proved to be short-lived:

- no peace in Ukraine
- no change of power in North Korea and China
- no Strumpf who had finally come to his senses
- no special powers such as those of a Seer
- no divine body of a cyborg
- No young offspring of ‘his’ witches
- but an old bloke with backache in the morning
- but a forgetful old bloke who made up silly stories and wrote them down
- but dogs that kept wanting to snap and run, and two metal-eating worms ...

Normal life suddenly seemed a bit of a slog. Roland did get used to it again, though.

Until Yaj brought up that console again: “*Plug it in at home in Assen*” and “*I’ll help you with that*”

This book – number four and also the final instalment in the series – builds on the previous three books.

It is highly recommended that you read those three books as well.

A summary of each previous book can be found at the very end of this volume. By reading those first, you’ll get to know the characters.

However, it is not essential to do so in order to fully understand this volume, which can stand almost entirely on its own.

Disclaimer

This is purely a work of fiction with no connection to any real-life people, places or things.

Any suggestion that a connection does exist is entirely the responsibility of the Reader themselves.

PRESS THE START BUTTON

“Hey, Yaj, how do you actually switch that thing on?” Roland was momentarily at a loss.

‘Come on, Oop, surely you still know that? You’re not that old, are you?’

The future belongs to the young.

Roland himself had always thought it was the cyborgs who would lead humanity onto the right path, from a violent past to a peaceful future.

‘Just put those grey cells to work, Oop. Come on!’

Young people these days have a completely different view of the world to those middle-aged to elderly grandads.

To them, cyborgs are nothing more than pure fantasy.

AI and VR are the new reality, despite their virtual nature.

Roland couldn’t see the difference between them, but his grandson Yaj explained the distinction – once again – in great detail to him...

‘Your cyborgs are a *figment of the imagination*; AI and VR are the drivers behind them. Do you get it now?’

Roland nodded ‘yes’ whilst still not understanding a thing. A generation gap of over fifty years didn’t exactly help in achieving a good and balanced mutual understanding.

This young man had grown up with social concepts that were completely different from those of the Old Boss. The Cloud and Bitcoins, for example, were not Roland’s cup of tea, whilst Yaj was absolutely raving about them.

‘Make loads of money fast, Oop, that’s what you can do with them...!’ he exclaimed enthusiastically.

Meanwhile, the large screen right in front of both their heads was still completely black. No signal, probably. The device didn't even indicate this. It might just as well have been that he'd forgotten to plug it into the mains. That's how 'dead' the screen looked.

The dazed look in Roland's eyes spurred Yaj into action. The lad realised that today wasn't exactly the sharpest day in his grandfather's life.

'You can look all this up on YouTube, you know. But I'll show you how to do it yet again, Oop. Look, this is how you start the thing up...'

BACK

Roland was suddenly back in the world he'd once known so well, that of the Cyborgs. It felt like coming home after a long, exhausting and nerve-wracking journey abroad.

A warm feeling. Lovely!

The discussion with his grandson was slowly fading from his mind, but the gist of it had certainly stuck. Technology had improved considerably since before. The upgrades had all already been installed. Particularly in terms of visuals.

You no longer needed to wear a helmet for a realistic experience. Even that 'silly suit' – at least according to his grandson – no longer needed to be worn. No longer a Man of Steel, or a robot, but simply a normal human being who still possessed the extraordinary powers of both a cyborg and a Seer. Roland was Roland. But.

Possibly stronger than before. Above all, better, Yaj thought.

'You'll need that, Oop ...' was what Roland had heard at the very last moment.

The visual simulations were now injected directly into the Player's eyes via a low-powered laser. The brain then processed these images as a new reality, a reality in which action and effort were required – no, demanded.

Hallucinations and dreams were now a thing of the past.

Virtual Reality had taken over, powered by the very latest versions of the most advanced Artificial Intelligence modules the world would ever know.

The Game was Real – in the sense of REAL – to the Player's experience within it. Trapped in a web of simulations that could behave as erratically as a

scorched witch on a floating, smoking broomstick...

Real or Unreal simply no longer existed. Such old-fashioned terminology was incapable of accurately describing exactly what process was taking place during the simulations generated by AI and visually presented by VR.

Existence or Non-Existence had become irrelevant in this context.

‘To Be or Not To Be’ went in the bin. Shakespeare’s words were of no value whatsoever to the new generations.

Everything was suddenly Real, unless the contrary could be proven.

People – the new generations – accepted it as a normal law of nature: everything IS real unless it isn’t... Who exactly was to pass judgement on this, and on the basis of what criteria, was left entirely open. Opponents of this doctrine had no leg to stand on.

All this meant that a Fantasy could and was allowed to be exactly the same as Reality.

Thus was the World formed into which Roland was placed by his grandson simply by pressing a button on the VR-AI Console, which both of them had just connected to the gigantic 200-inch superLED television in Roland’s living room, in order to experience the world of sound and image within the context of exotic pleasure and the ease and comfort of their own home, as if it were all an accurate representation of Reality.

Roland, Roland!

He should have known better.

That’s just how things are these days, isn’t it??!!

You made your bed,
now lie in it...

THE TEAM

In a corner of the room, Roland saw a tiny light flickering. This sort of anomaly had always bothered him, and this time in particular. Lights were supposed to be either 'off' or 'on' in 'red' or 'green' or 'blue', but never flickering continuously. A normal person would surely go mad from flickering lights; but what was really 'normal' these days anyway? That complex thought behind his irritation only served to heighten his aversion to this flashing light even further.

What on earth was this?

He walked over to the corner. There was a screen set up there, much smaller than his LED TV. The thing looked more like an 'old-style' computer monitor, the sort he'd once despised, if not actually hated.

That flashing always made him a bit nervous; it was like a 'request for input' and thus a signal, a 'call to action'. What did 'they' want from him now, and why?

Why HIM??

Roland accidentally pressed a key. The screen lit up. A message appeared. Although it wasn't explicitly addressed to him, Roland felt it was meant for him:

CHOOSE YOUR TEAM!

SURPRISE

He saw no selection menu on the screen. He had expected one, given the nature of the question that had appeared on the screen.

What now?

‘Have I really become too old for this sort of thing?’ Roland wondered aloud.

He tapped the screen, hoping to activate the touchscreen function. He’d guessed right. There was a response – in the form of a list.

A list of names.

‘Who are all these people?’

The first names were completely unfamiliar to him.

‘How am I supposed to choose? Who should I choose? What should I choose for?’

He said the last part out loud, driven by his doubt and frustration.

A voice rang out. This time, it was one he’d heard before.

The BALL!

That sound of that voice had echoed inside the Ball, the remnant of the Martian moon Deimos, which they had all stripped of its potato-like shell as a team using their weapons. The Ball was all that remained of Deimos’s core. Roland had then gone to investigate and had entered the Ball.

That was when that voice had sounded ...

“Make your choice easier by first selecting a Mission, Commander Roland!”

This familiar voice echoed far less this time than it had inside that hollow and empty Sphere. The voice clearly conveyed a natural authority through the use of

deep and steady tones whilst speaking the words.
A General, perhaps? Military, that's for sure!

'Which Missions can I choose from?'

"Given your track record, you may indicate a preference yourself this time. Go ahead..."

'Er, er, catching, apprehending, imprisoning and punishing criminals. Is that an option?'

"As you wish. You'll receive specific instructions later. Now choose your team!!"

'OK. I'll do my best. You're taking me a bit by surprise here. All right then...'

Not long after, Roland's list was ready, divided into three categories: *Prime* – *Support* – *Back-up*.

He'd weighed things up carefully.

His 'Old' and former A-team certainly belonged to the *Prime* group, albeit with a few adjustments due to personal circumstances.

Jake – definitely

Balthazár –

absolutely Lydia –
definitely

Lisbet – undeniably

Roland felt that L and HJ, as well as HJ-2, should be spared. They would have their hands full bringing up the kids. Agaath, Johan and Vrida were also very busy with their own real lives. Roland therefore classified them all in the *Back Up* group, available on call whenever absolutely necessary.

Nupintski and AnneMary were still on the far side of the Moon, which was a perfect spot for them. They were having a lovely time there together and could

be of use, but only when exceptional circumstances required it; consequently, they were also placed in '*Back Up*' status.

Yaj and Nelly had proved extremely useful in recent periods. Roland added them to the *Prime* group. Both possessed skills that the team could put to good use. Moreover, they were keen to take an active part in the upcoming operations; they did enjoy a bit of a thrill within their already energetic lives.

Maersk, Strumpf, Kim Yo Jong and Yevgeny Petrovski formed the *Support* group. Their knowledge, influence and contacts would certainly come in very handy. Moreover, from their positions, they could also call upon and direct additional reinforcements, should this be necessary during the course of the team's forthcoming activities.

All in all, an impressive list of names. The new A-team consists of the following people:

Roland, Lydia, Lisbet, Nelly, Yaj, Jake and Balthazár.

Three former Cyborgs, a formidable ex-Marine, two multi-talented schemers and one very clever girl.

Now for the action!

EXTRA

‘Aren’t you forgetting something?’

The young voice rang out loud and clear in his head. Roland was startled. Contact with his grandson Yaj had come so unexpectedly.

Roland looked around, but there was no sign of Yaj anywhere.

‘What then?’ To an outsider, it looked as if Roland was talking to himself out loud.

‘Oh, come on. WHAT THEN?? Duh ... Just think for a moment!’

His grandson at his best.

‘Well? You tell me, smart Alec. You do know, don’t you? So come on, then!’

Roland sounded a bit grumpy as he spoke, because at his age his forgetfulness was often used, whether appropriate or not, as a possible sign of incipient senility by this younger generation.

Yaj still had plenty to learn in life, being a mere 17 years old. That’s how Roland saw it.

This lad clearly thought otherwise, backed up by his ever-present ‘mate’ A.I., who, via his mobile, was constantly offering Yaj general words of wisdom, because that phone was glued to the lad like a pair of wet underpants.

‘Those WORMS!!! Oops. Do you remember? They’re in on it TOO, aren’t they!’

‘Oh, shoot. That’s right. Those worms were there too. A little gift from Space. Brought along from a previous Dream, Fantasy, Hallucination, or whatever it had been ...’

‘VR Simulation!! You really don’t know anything about it, do you.’

Yaj let him know.

Roland didn’t hesitate for a moment and added the Worms – four in total – to the list.

‘Which category, actually?’

‘PRIME!’ was Yaj’s reply.

‘OK. So they’ll be our EXTRA reinforcements. Small, neat, but powerful. Top-notch stuff!’

The list was complete. Yaj faded from his mind; the lad went back to sit behind the console in the living room, opposite that massive TV. He could control everything remotely via a VR simulation. YES, YES. This was going to be proper fun...

NAPLES

The inhabitants of the Italian city of Naples had recently narrowly escaped an all-out disaster in which it was not Mount Vesuvius but the Campi Flegrei that had erupted – albeit on a limited scale.

The Neapolitans had never realised what had really been hanging over their heads.

Most were well aware that the Campi Flegrei were a dangerous area. But they nonchalantly shrugged off the fact that the ground beneath their very feet was just as risky. So what?

People in Naples were used to a lot.

On the one hand, they had the best team in the Italian football league – in their opinion – whilst on the other, there was the Camorra, the low point of daily life in and around this metropolis of some 6 million souls. Highs and lows alternated here like a merry-go-round; weekly, if not daily. You learnt to cope with it. That was the mindset of the average Neapolitan.

Life goes on ... Until it stops ...

Many had no direct connection with the Camorra. Others, on the other hand, had no connection with that Napoli football team.

Life went on with clockwork regularity, in the grind of everyday existence. For some, danger was actually a welcome change from a dull or uncomfortable life...

The volcano did nothing to change that. The plume of smoke that regularly rose from its crater did, however, indicate that something was still brewing and bubbling away, there in the depths of Hell within the lower reaches of that mountain.

The gods would surely protect them! That was the Neapolitan's conviction.

Lightning never strikes twice in exactly the same spot, so those who had no faith in God told themselves, although that was by no means a valid argument in the situation of this town in such a location...

Poverty was the greatest concern in this region. Hot, dry, barren, far removed from the prosperous Italian North, with poor personal morals and too many people crammed into one place with no prospect of a decent life.

The Bay of Naples was absolutely stunning. A real tourist attraction. But a magnificent view did not put enough bread on the table for everyone.

Crime was therefore ever-present; a much easier way to become 'rich' was by robbing others and taking what one believed was rightfully theirs.

The law of the jungle prevailed.

Working as a team made it even worse.

The Camorra was a way out. A sort of 'shadow economy'.

Anyone who couldn't make it 'above ground' could always go 'underground'.

There were plenty of vacancies with those crooks....

The average tourist was largely unaffected by the Camorra, as long as they avoided certain areas within the city. There were certain neighbourhoods in Naples where, as a stranger, you simply shouldn't venture. If you did, you were asking for trouble!

Roland had resolved to pay a personal visit to a number of such neighbourhoods to assess the local issues he had set himself the task of studying, cataloguing, tackling and resolving.

He was really looking forward to it!
So was the rest of the team. Let's
do this!!
That's definitely how it was going to turn out, no doubt about
it...

The Cyborg strike force was absolutely raring to go.
Yaj had already sorted out the right spot.
Action!

MULTIPLICATION

Balthazár had been in consultation with the Worms. They were his friends; they could just as easily have been female friends, as he had absolutely no idea how to tell the difference between one gender and the other.

The Worms were happy. On the farm where they were staying, there was enough scrap metal scattered across the grounds to provide them with ample food. Metal was their source of energy, and light metal was an extra treat on top of that. They had therefore already cleared away a number of scooter parts. Not without some reluctance on Yaj's part, as the carburettors in particular were in high demand amongst the Worms, yet supplies of them were limited.

Balthazár still had the Worm Dictionary at the ready in his memory module. The chatter could begin.

'Hi there, everyone, how are you all? Did you enjoy your meal? What was on the menu this time?' said Balthazár cheerfully.

"Hello, Dark Man. Everything's fine, actually. There were still a few aluminium profile strips lying about somewhere. We've cleared them away for you. As a dessert. The main course was a chunk of that rusty cooker on that pile of rubble in the garden. Looks like that'll keep us going for a week. Tasty stuff. But tell me. What do you want to discuss with us?"

'You're now part of our team too. The A-team, so to speak. The important people. We're going to carry out a project. You're welcome to join in. Are you up for it?'

"What sort of project will it be?"

'We're going to take on some Crooks together. I reckon it'll be in Italy. That doesn't mean anything to you, of course. It's not exactly round the corner. We'll have to set off. We'll sort out the transport. No worries.'

“What are ‘Boeven’?”

‘Bad people who hurt and cause harm to others. We want to put a stop to that.’

“Great idea! How can we help with that?”

‘Well, you eat metal. That’ll come in handy for this project, with scooters and fast cars and guns. You can devour them as soon as you get the chance and the order to do so. Can you still multiply? Split things up. Something like that?’

“I can work on that. But only with the approval of, and in collaboration with, the others. I’ll suggest it to them. In principle, it’s possible, yes.”

‘Oh, good to hear. Will that take long?’

“Er, er. That’s very private, isn’t it! I’ll let you know. Within a few days. Expanding the family is a sensitive issue for us worms. I’ll have to broach the subject carefully... By the way, do you have any more of those aluminium profiles? They were lovely! It gives me a bit more persuasive power, you know...”

‘I’ll ask Roland or Yaj. I’m sure there’s bound to be some aluminium lying about somewhere. In the meantime, do your best too. The more, the merrier. So, go on then, get stuck in...’

It turned out that Yaj had left those aluminium profiles lying about in the yard. His father had bought them especially for their own house, but due to a lack of space there, Agaath’s farm had been considered as temporary storage...

“My dad won’t be too pleased. They were expensive profiles...” Yaj remarked dryly.

WORMS

Not everyone is familiar with those little worms. So here's a brief explanation, for those who haven't read Books 1, 2 and 3 ("do make sure you catch up on them, eh").

There are three types of worms:

Earthworms, which are found in the soil. Every Dutch garden is full of them.

The Great Martian Worms, which are found on Mars and which you definitely do not want to encounter. Mars is full of them. They dig long, wide tunnels. They are temperamental.

The Small Worms, which are also found on Mars (the Cyborgs had discovered them in the ground there) but actually originate from another galaxy. They have landed on Mars as scouts, searching for a new settlement for their colony, which is still drifting through open space.

Under stress, they can transform into metal. Their diet consists of metal particles or solid steel. Their circular row of teeth can bite or drill perfectly round holes in any metal, except mercury. They have developed a language consisting of subtle sounds with which they communicate amongst themselves.

The Cyborgs have deciphered this code and compiled a Worms' Dictionary from it, largely thanks to the intensive work of Balthazár, who now regards the worms almost as his own family.

An earlier Mars mission by the Cyborgs once ended in disaster. This was mainly due to the presence on Mars of the Great Worms, which could be quite aggressive. The Cyborgs' escape back to the Mothership in space was only just successful.

However, it turned out there was a stowaway on board: one Small Worm. As a result, the Cyborg team had to go into temporary quarantine in Greenland before being able to re-enter the rest of the world a little later.

In the meantime, that single worm had already multiplied into FOUR, through 'splitting'.

After lengthy discussions back and forth, these worms decided to form an alliance with the Cyborgs. One day, they still hope to find a home for their own people, who, in the form of metallic asteroids, are still wandering through the Universe – though outside Earth...

A small worm is a few centimetres long. In their metallic form, they are virtually invulnerable, except to mercury. In their normal form, they resemble earthworms, but are equipped with double rows of razor-sharp, radially arranged teeth that can cut through metal like a conical saw.

Metal is their food.

Light metal is a veritable delicacy for them...

Oh yes. In their metallic state, the worms can also make themselves magnetic, allowing them to clump together into a small, compact and invulnerable steel ball. In this way, they can quickly be 'picked up' again by the cyborgs, who themselves are essentially made largely of metal...

In action, Cyborgs and Worms form a coherent Collective, whilst simultaneously sharing all the necessary vital information regarding strategic planning and execution. Their mutual trust is total and complete.

CHOICE

‘Have you made a choice yet, Commander Roland?’

“Certainly. The Camorra of Naples.”

‘Would you care to elaborate on that choice?’

“Yes. We saved Naples from ruin back then. Yet chaos still reigns in that city. As a team, we want to bring about change there. Improvement.”

‘What is your specific objective?’

“To break up the Camorra organisation by dismantling its power, resources and influence over young people.”

‘You have our approval. Go ahead! Good luck, Commander Roland.’

“Thank you. We’ll do our best!”

CAMORRA

They always saw themselves as the ‘lubricant’ of society. A sort of intermediary between bureaucracy and poverty. ‘You scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours’ was their principle.

The Camorra was an organisation – insofar as one could call it that – which had become deeply intertwined with society for almost centuries, from the bottom up to the very top.

The lower echelons had the streets in their grip, whilst the middle and upper echelons were involved in infiltrating the bureaucracy, the city council and even law enforcement.

The structure was almost like loose sand, because every neighbourhood had its own Camorra clan that operated virtually independently of the other clans from the remaining neighbourhoods. Yet they all shared one common element: they were the ones calling the shots on the ground...

As long as no one’s territory overlapped with another’s, things went reasonably well, with little to no infighting.

Roland had already done his research. Via Wikipedia, amongst other sources. He stored the information seamlessly; he had more than enough memory available. As a cyborg, that was certainly a perk, rather than being like a grandad who was slowly erasing his own memory...

‘Yeah, Oop. See, you’re finally admitting it yourself...’

Yaj just had to get that off his chest...

It was a complicated story. That Camorra.

How could you remove a cancerous tumour from an aorta when the tumour had completely wrapped itself around it and become intertwined with it?

Many attempts had been made in the past to tackle the Camorra. Successes had been achieved. Quite a few, actually, if you looked at it on paper.

Yet the Camorra remained standing. Sometimes they emerged even stronger.

Setbacks meant that the Camorra had to adapt once again to a changed situation. They would then seek out ventures in which they could reassert their influence. Drugs, money laundering, extortion, political intimidation, illegal waste disposal, project management, construction projects, and so on.

Wherever there was a lot of money changing hands, you could find the Camorra in one way or another. Their tentacles reached far and wide, into every corner of society.

After Roland had read and processed the information – in the space of just a few seconds – he wondered whether their project had been outlined a little too ambitiously. So many different Camorra clans in all those various places, in Naples but also beyond.

There didn't seem to be a central nervous system within the Camorra. No head that you could simply cut off and be done with it. Each of the tentacles had its own autonomy.

Cutting off one part meant that another part actually gained extra scope for expansion. One man's death is another man's bread...

The Camorra had no single, unified body; it was a complex system.

Roland was increasingly coming to realise that this project was going to be unique, even by their standards.

A different approach was needed from the one they were normally accustomed to.

The Camorra used violence and intimidation as means of coercion; as cyborgs, they were, in fact, just the same.

So what was the difference between Good and Evil?

The method? The goal? What exactly ...??

They were the Good guys; that much was certain. You had to start from somewhere, after all.

The Camorra were the Bad guys; in other words, Evil.

If the methods used by each side were more or less the same – force, power and violence – then the distinction between them must stem from the HOW and WHY.

In what *way* did each of them pursue which *aim*?

Cyborgs served Humanity. The

Camorra served Itself.

Cyborgs, for the most part, abided by the Law.

The Camorra flagrantly flouted the law; they made their own laws.

Cyborgs never caused individual people to suffer – unnecessarily. The Camorra, on the other hand, exploited people's suffering as a means of pressure.

So it was actually quite simple: they were evil and we were good. Good fought against Evil. Always and everywhere. Now all that remained was to find the right method.

Yaj briefly interrupted Roland's dreamy musings, which he had been indulging in to himself.

'Oh, you lot need to give young people more opportunities for a GOOD future!'

Indeed! Yaj was right.

In the Camorra environment, young people were completely cut off.

Either they worked for THEM, or they had absolutely no chance of a 'normal', violence-free future out there on the streets.

The spiral of violence in their immediate surroundings formed an almost insurmountable barrier to the healthy personal development of young people.

Young people, in particular, therefore needed to be given more social opportunities, to be cut off from suffocating illegal power structures, and to be shown the good example:

**THIS IS HOW IT CAN BE DONE TOO... ..THIS IS HOW IT
CAN **BE DONE EVEN MUCH BETTER!!****

The Camorra had to be tackled at the SOURCE: by
transforming the youth!
Sometimes you could fight fire with fire.
Violence with violence.
Rarely did that yield a sustainable solution.

The best way to tackle fire is to cut off its fuel supply. With
firebreaks!
Wide swathes of land where all the trees and bushes had already
been cleared. No wood, no fire.

If you removed the young people from a war zone,
then a child army could no longer be formed there. Simple.
Effective.

Where there's a will, there's a
way... Always and everywhere.

Even in Naples!

BRILLIANT

At the first A-team meeting, Roland put forward his initial ideas.

Jake wasn't there this time; Strumpf needed him for a trip to China.

He would be briefed later on the topics discussed. The rest listened attentively and did not interrupt Roland whilst he was speaking.

When he had finished, Roland asked the team for their comments.

Balthazár was the first to speak. He'd been waiting in the wings. Yaj was second.

B felt that the basic idea of offering young people better prospects for the future was a very good plan and a noble aim, but also something that would take a great deal of time.

Meanwhile, the Camorra could simply carry on enriching itself, usually at the expense of many others...

'Let's hack their accounts! Thwart their transactions! Throw a spanner in the works. That way, you'll annoy them, weaken their position, and fund the plans for those young people.'

There was a moment's silence. No one spoke. Then Yaj stood up and began to clap.

"YES!! Two birds with one stone. Brilliant idea, B. I'M IN!!!

We'll bleed them dry – well, you lot, anyway – and still have enough money left over to invest in education, housing, employment and healthcare.

TOP! "

Roland asked Balthazar to flesh out these plans a bit more. To provide a strategy and structure for the rest of them. He knew full well that B must have been mulling it over for some time; that was just the sort of person he was, his son.

‘For the cyborgs that we are – Roland, Lydia and I – it’s not all that difficult to break into the digital vaults of the Government, banks, the police, companies, Interpol, the CIA, MI6, or wherever ...

From these, we gather data on suspicious transactions, individuals, organisations and shipments. With this, we construct a statistical pattern. On matters such as Who does What, When, Where, How and, above all, Why.

By breaking all the data down into categories such as OK, So-so, Dubious, Suspicious and Incorrect, we immediately gain a better insight and overview.

If we combine all that data with geo-tagging, we can determine for every category – no, even for every single action or transaction – whether there’s a possibility that the Camorra is involved. Naples is fairly well known, isn’t it, and Italy even more so...

So we’re carrying out a sort of pre-screening.

On EVERYTHING. ‘

‘That’s ILLEGAL, isn’t it, Balthazár? You know that better than anyone else here.’ Roland mentioned this merely for the sake of formality, not to correct B.

“We can call on Jake for that. If HE can sort out approval from Strumpf for us, then we’re ‘in the clear’, so to speak.”

Yaj had watched enough crime series to know that POTUS didn’t take international legislation all that seriously either; for the CIA, this was even par for the course.

‘If all this were actually possible – let’s assume that for the moment – then I suppose the CIA would have done something like this themselves long ago, or am I perhaps overlooking something here?’ Nelly had been paying close attention...

‘We’re talking about billions and billions of transactions on an international scale.

Per day! It is precisely the shady elements amongst them that will be heavily encrypted.

For the CIA, processing all that is just a bit too much to ask, particularly as they also need to be able to show concrete results on a daily basis – to the top brass – to justify the continuation of these activities.

We don't have those restrictions. We're our own bosses. This is OUR project! We don't need to rush; on the contrary, we must work carefully to spot the trends we're looking for...

Our computing power is enormous, especially when linked together. Three Cyborgs together, simultaneously, as a Collective. ‘

“Oops. You’re forgetting something again!”

Yaj suggested this as if he were chuckling to himself.

‘What exactly, Yaj?’ asked Roland, somewhat amused by the Teenager.

“Who have we all forgotten? Well... the WORMS !!”

‘Yaj’s right. We’ve completely overlooked the capabilities of our Worms. They’re very intelligent, aren’t they? We’ve known that for ages.

Why haven’t we involved them yet? Who knows, perhaps in a linked Unit with them – that Collective – we could achieve MUCH MORE than we currently suspect. I think pattern recognition is particularly well developed in them. The speed with which they can convert into metal is astonishing!’ said B.

‘Where are they now?’ asked Roland.

‘Er, er. Busy with some private matters... I’d asked them something...’

‘?’ Roland asked B.

‘Multiplication! I thought we could do with a few more worms,’ I reckoned. ‘

“Lads, come and have a look. You won’t believe this...”
said an excited Yaj.

The rusty stove had completely vanished. Consumed.
In its entirety.
A week’s worth of food,
gone in a matter of hours this time!

About thirty little worms were now crawling around on the floor.

Their little mouths, with their radial teeth, were being licked by a
tiny pink tongue.
BLISS!!!

HJ

Hèndirk Jan was a bit fed up that he hadn't been selected for the Prime Team.

As Cyborg, he was surely entitled to it. Or wasn't he?

Which of them all had the most experience of that rotten city, Naples?

Well, who else!

HIM!!!

He'd lived there for a long time, in a shabby little flat above a bar.

After he'd fallen into that volcano, when the helicopter he was in had crashed, and he'd subsequently been fished out by the rescue services.

He'd been lying in the wreckage. Badly, too. It hurt. But he'd survived.

He'd subsequently been provided with accommodation by the Government, for services rendered in installing monitoring equipment on the crater walls... or so they thought at the time.

He was well acquainted with daily life in that particular neighbourhood of Naples. After all, he was right in the thick of it, albeit often in a hazy state due to excessive drinking.

The daily customs of the Neapolitans were also in his blood. He rather liked that carefree and dissolute behaviour, in the spirit of 'Everything for ME and God for us all'.

The Neapolitan was interested in nothing other than his own well-being and comfort. Drink and women were simply part of the package.

A little treat for HJ's little mouth...!!

He should have left the women alone back then, given the state his body and ego were in at the time.

Alcohol eased the pain. It erased his awareness of a daily sense of guilt.

It had been HE himself, after all, who'd wanted to rouse the volcano into action. A daft plan.

Roland and Lydia had managed to avert a potential disaster. Smarter and better than him, that's what they'd been. 'Outsmarting' was what it was called.

He knew a number of the local clans from the Camorra. Those blokes were not to be trifled with.

Teenagers on scooters raced through the streets, searching for the targets that had been designated for them from above. Those lads were armed with knives and automatic firearms. The weapons they carried were actually put to use.

Just like that, in broad daylight, they killed their targets, often with a great deal of bloodshed and commotion. Everyone on the street saw it happen. No one intervened. None of the bystanders seemed surprised, shocked or afraid. Everything was fine, as long as you weren't on the Camorra's hit list...

Shopkeepers were beaten up if they failed to meet their 'payment obligations' on time. Children were abducted for ransom. Some people simply 'disappeared'; no one knew exactly what they had done wrong, but they did know that their actions had not been in line with the Camorra's orders. There was no mercy.

Those who submitted to the laws of the Camorra were left in peace, as long as they continued to behave as obedient followers.

Politicians were liquidated and police officers were also killed. Right there on the street, outside the theatre, the cinema or on an outdoor terrace. Anyone who *did not* listen or cooperate had to pay the price.

The Law of the Jungle.

That was the essence of the city of Naples: an organised jungle. Some survived in it, others met their end. Tough luck!

HJ had witnessed such violence at close quarters. In the Gigolo bar, his local, right below his temporary living quarters. One afternoon, two lads wearing black helmets walked into the bar.

They were in absolutely no hurry. But they had a purpose.

With their helmets still on – you couldn’t see their faces properly through the dark visors – they stood right in front of Giuseppe, the barman.

‘Where’s the Boss?’ they asked in a thick Neapolitan accent.

“*At home!*” was the only thing Giuseppe bravely replied.

‘When’s he coming back?’

“*He didn’t say.*”

At that, one of the helmets kicked him in the foot.

‘Again. When’s he coming back?!’

“*I REALLY don’t know...*” said Giuseppe, his voice distorted by pain.

‘OK,’ the other man in the helmet reached for his pistol to...

“STOP!!”

Hèndirk Jan had never been a hero. Quite the opposite.

But he couldn’t stand to watch this. The needless torment of his friend behind the bar.

Giuseppe had already treated him to many a free drink of his own accord. Lately.

Alcohol stopped negative thoughts; it eased HJ’s inner turmoil.

This business with those black helmets had gone far too far. HJ stood up, without walking forward.

“I’m the boss!” HJ continued. **“What do you want from me?”**

LAUORO SCALPIONI

‘YOU?’ one of the helmeted men had said to him. ‘You’re the boss here?’

“YES!”

‘I don’t know you at all!’ came the reply from Helmet 1.

“I don’t know YOU either! Certainly not with that helmet on.” HJ remained calm.

There was no sound. No voice, no creaking, no jukebox, nothing. Helmet 1 looked at HJ.

He walked towards the table where HJ was standing, his drink still on the table.

Suddenly, they were face to face. Directly opposite each other.

Helmet 1 made a swiping motion with his helmet towards HJ’s head.

Helm 1 just missed HJ...

HJ, however, hadn’t flinched. Not at all. Not even a reflexive movement.

In hindsight, HJ himself thought this was because he was already almost drunk by then...

Helm 1 was taken aback by this. He suddenly took off his helmet. From beneath it emerged a dark-haired young man. A full head of hair. Dark, intense eyes. Light brown skin, typically Neapolitan. Quite a handsome chap, HJ thought to himself. A thin, dark moustache was trying to look serious beneath his rather fine, not-too-large nose. Still a teenager, without any spots.

‘I’m Lauoro, but they all call me Lauro. That extra “O” makes me special. My mates know that, but they don’t really get it. They’re all idiots. Not me!’ He stopped talking; now came the intimidation.

Lauoro pressed his slightly sweaty forehead against HJ's. They were almost the same height, and HJ wasn't short. He applied pressure with his head. HJ pushed back. No problem. The cock-and-bull game had begun...

'Nobody goes against me. At least, none of those who are still alive. I am the son of my father, Luigi Francisco 'Pecco' Scalpioni. He's the Big Boss in this part of town. You should know that ...'

"Never heard of it. Not from him, nor from you..."

The calmness in HJ's voice was icy cold.

"What are you doing here, with that gun? Together with that other spaghetti-eater of yours over there." The standoff was now getting out of hand.

'Are you tired of life? Because that's what it looks like. You're drunk! I can smell it. People like you are worthless! You've certainly got nothing left to live for, have you?'

"I've got a wife. No, an ex-wife, now that I think of it. She bears your name. Laura. What a bitch! She's completely bled me dry.

Everything I still own is here, what you see around you. Nothing else!

Are you just like her too? FUCKING TEENAGER!!' HJ went completely berserk.

Lauoro looked at Helm 2. Fire shot from his eyes. He raised his hand towards his mate. 'Don't do anything, I'll sort this out myself!'

Helm 1, without his helmet, first shook his shoulders loose. To release the tension. Then he craned his neck from side to side. To shake off the stress. Next it was his head's turn; he cupped it in one hand and moved it very gently from side to side. Clear your head!

Suddenly, Lauoro moved forward and pressed his forehead against HJ's once more. There was now more sweat to be felt than before. Cold sweat.

‘Do you know HOW this is going to end? You nameless drunkard.’

“Am I a clairvoyant, then? Am I looking forward to that? Would I have been standing here then? At this very moment?”

If I’d been a proper clairvoyant, I’d have blown your heads off the moment you walked into my bar. Right?”

HJ played along. He was familiar with the bluff and intimidation. He had nothing to lose. Why not enjoy himself a little more, just before the End?

‘HOW?’ repeated Lauoro, now white-hot with rage.

“YOU’RE GOING TO DIE!” followed in a chilling voice.

The teenager spun round on his heel.

After a full turn, his forehead was once again pressed against HJ’s.

The gun, however, was too.

The barrel pressed against his scalp. With force. HJ could feel it. Without panic.

‘Just ONE more time. HOW???’

“YOU’RE GONNA DIE!!”

The gun went off. HJ collapsed to the floor.

Without a drop of blood.

Everything went black in his head...

NOW

HJ felt his forehead.

Yes, the dent was still there. A scar from THEN.

A sensitive spot; it had been painful, but not fatal.

Witches can only die in FIRE.

Young Paulo hadn't known that; he'd never even met a witch before.

They'd quickly made off on their speedy, noisy scooters.

Helmets on, and off they went!

They hadn't bothered about Giuseppe any more. He'd keep quiet, that was for sure. It saved his life ...

Those lads were never seen near the Gigolo bar again.

Perhaps they were afraid of repercussions. Perhaps out of respect. Who knows?

The Boss had found HJ lying on the ground later that day when he visited the bar.

Giuseppe had taken off, convinced that HJ was dead.

Surely no one could survive a shot to the head like that! The police weren't called.

After all, the Carabinieri couldn't be trusted ...

The Camorra had its feelers and tentacles everywhere. Even within the police force.

Those names were still on the tip of his tongue.

The Scalpioni clan. Lauoro and Pecco, plus a host of other scoundrels.

He was going to pay them a visit. At a moment they wouldn't be expecting.

As Cyborg!

That would certainly wipe those sadistic grins off their spoilt faces... Oh yes!!

Back then, HJ was just a witch.

A simple male witch. A rarity, mind you; most were women.

He was invulnerable, in the sense of 'immortal' – except to flames. That didn't mean he felt no pain; if only that had been the case back then...

Now, as a cyborg, HJ was almost invincible. Just like his kind.

Strong, powerful, super-smart, fast and huge! Those

Neapolitans wouldn't stand a chance against him. Oh

no.

HJ rubbed his hands together as he thought about it. That future encounter with Them.

A reunion. A reliving of violence and pain. This time for them, and not for him...

OH YES!

There was still plenty of motivation left within him to truly live for ...

Scalpioni ... his revenge would be sweet ...

SATELLITE ARRAYS

'Can I reach the satellites yet, Yaj?' asked Balthazár.

Yaj was – despite being a teenager – their Manager of Logistics, Arms & Coms.

Operating all the consoles was child's play for him. He enjoyed it too.

“Five on standby! Ready to be deployed whenever you wish, Balthazár.”

Yaj had brought all the arrays back into Earth's orbit. Including the one that had previously been stationed near the Moon during the former asteroid crisis.

All their firepower was now available and ready for deployment by the cyborgs on Earth.

Yaj had neatly distributed the five arrays around the globe. After all, you never knew where trouble might break out on Earth and how the satellites might be needed at short notice.

Be that as it may. They were operational. Ready for use.

Balthazár was reassured ... His 'Love Babies' were still functioning. For the time being, they wouldn't need to be deployed. Still, it was a comforting thought. To have such a mechanical backup available in space. Just in case...

Quick activation and an immediate strike, with instant results.

Totally his sort of thing!