



The Brainrush Series

Brainrush is a story about second chances, and embracing every day of your life as though it's your last. Called "a terrifically entertaining thriller" by Publishers Weekly, Book-1 of the series was named *The Wall Street Journal* #1 Bestselling Action/Adventure in their *Guide to Self-Published Big Sellers*, while Book-2 was on the Top-10 Amazon Mystery/Thriller Top Rated list for 53-straight weeks. This set the stage for the blockbuster release of the third book in the series, which was heralded by *Suspense Magazine* as "part science fiction, part thriller, part suspense,

part love story, and part mystery. It's got it all and that's what makes this novel one of the best." The characters live on in the final three books of the series. Books 4 & 5 were released in 2014, and were met with rave reviews. Book-5 was named "one of the best books of the year" by IndieReader.com. *No Refuge*, the final book of the series, is scheduled for release in 2017.

Back Cover Text

Beyond Judgment

(Brainrush 3)

After waking up with amnesia from a six-year coma, Jake Bronson's past is lost to him. But that doesn't mean the past hasn't been looking for him—or that it will let him live when it finally catches up.

Jake's placid, anonymous life in Italy is shattered by the arrival of an assassination squad hell-bent on eliminating him—and he has no idea why he's in their crosshairs. He's saved only when an American scientist intervenes, wielding strange technology that briefly reactivates Jake's dormant memories and deadly skills. As unknown enemies continue to hound Jake's every step, the scientist helps him reconnect with lost friends and loved ones who believed him long dead. Any happy reunion is forfeit, though, as Jake's murky history and mysterious talents conceal a terrible secret that—should it fall into the wrong hands—could trigger the extinction of the human race. Averting this apocalypse means Jake must risk everything to reawaken his true self and stop an ancient order from unleashing humanity's ultimate judgment.

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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Dedication

For my wife, whose unconditional support frees my time and fuels my imagination.

Beyond Judgment

Brainrush 3

Richard Bard

Part I

*Humanity is in “final exam” as to whether or not it qualifies for
continuance in the universe.*

—R. Buckminster Fuller

Chapter 1

Le Focette, Marina di Pietrasanta, Italy

HE HAD NO PAST. But the future held promise.

The woman seated across from him was in her late twenties. An American tourist who'd blushed when they'd met. Her Italian was broken. Her alluring curves and inviting smile had inspired him. A sip from her cappuccino left a thin line of foam on her upper lip. It disappeared behind a slow lick of her tongue. Her eyes never left his.

He wore an open linen shirt, casual slacks, and three-day stubble. His skin was tan. They sat at an outdoor café and *ristorante* in Le Focette, a quiet Tuscan enclave situated a block from the beach resorts of the Mediterranean Sea. It was a warm and sunny afternoon. A salty breeze stirred the thick canopy of trees overhead, dislodging a pine nut that bounced off a nearby Cinzano umbrella and skittered to the ground. He leaned over and picked it up.

"They used to serve these at the outdoor cinema down the street," he said in Italian. Her expression told him she hadn't understood, so he brushed off the nut and popped it in his mouth. "Mmmm...*buono!*" he said.

Her eyes widened. He winked. She smiled.

"*Bella,*" he said. His hand patted the air as a signal to hold the pose. The pastel stick in his other hand moved swiftly across the canvas. She blushed and it was his turn to smile.

He wondered if she would be the one.

The café was filling up for lunch. A group of local teens crowded around their customary tables not far from his corner. Two of the boys strummed guitars while the rest chatted with an infectious effervescence. A middle-aged couple sat nearby. German, he thought, judging from their stiff demeanor. That would change after they'd been in the area a few more days. The magic would set in: the easy pace, the food, the friendly smiles—impossible to resist.

He switched sticks, working a blend of colors into her luminescent eyes. There was eagerness in her stare that stirred him. His movements were automatic. His brain orchestrated a talent that he'd discovered when he'd awakened four months ago. When he had asked how long he had

been in a coma, no one had any answers. The doctor who cared for him told him his name was Lorenzo Ferrari. Everyone called him Renzo.

His mind wandered, but his strokes didn't falter. The closer the portrait was to completion, the faster the pastel stick moved—as if it had a life of its own. The doctor had told him what little he knew. Renzo had been wheeled in by an anxious young American man. Renzo had been unconscious. His skin hung loose on his 180-centimeter frame. His muscles had atrophied. Money had changed hands, a room in a local *pensione* had been leased, and the doctor had accepted the assignment of restoring the patient's health. The American had left in a rush, leaving final instructions for Renzo in a sealed envelope.

The hiss of the latte steamer brought his attention back to the sketch. When he took in the final image, his shoulders slumped. The portrait was perfect in every detail—except for the eyes. They belonged to someone else. Instead of sky blue like those of the girl seated across from him, they were liquid chocolate, filigreed with rings of gold dust. They were penetrating.

The girl sat forward. “Is it ready?” she asked in broken Italian.

“No,” he said, flipping closed his art tablet.

She frowned.

“I must apologize,” he said. “I'm having an off day.” He pushed back his chair as if to leave.

“Wait,” she said softly. Her hands reached out and cupped one of his. Her touch was tender. Her gaze was an invitation. “I go with you?”

Renzo faltered. How long had it been? Longer than he could remember—like everything else. She was beautiful. And his *pensione* was only a block away. All he had to do was ignore the feelings of guilt. His free hand absently patted the pocket of his slacks. The wrinkled envelope from the American was there—his only link to the past. The hastily scrolled message had been brief:

Trust no one. Lives hinge on your ability to remain anonymous.

Surely, this young woman posed no risk, he thought. He was torn.

The decision was made for him when he noticed two men stop short on the opposite side of the street. One of them stared his way. The other had a hand to his ear. He seemed to be speaking to himself. They were dressed in casual clothes, but Renzo's artist's gaze narrowed at the incongruence of the matching pair of rubber-soled shoes and dark glasses. The hand dropped from the man's ear, and a whisper was exchanged. They started toward him.

A buried instinct set off alarms in Renzo's head. He rose. His chair toppled, the girl yelled, and the tablet fell from his lap. The pages fanned on the way down, and a corner of his mind saw the same pair of brown eyes staring back at him from each portrait.

They all shouted the same command in his mind:

Run!

He shouldered through the woody hedge beside the table. Brambles caught on his shirt. He pushed through, shredding his skin. Angry shouts behind him. A girl's scream. Rapid footfalls. He raced down the tree-studded lane, thankful for the snug fit of his running shoes. He headed inland. Past villas, the old church, and the rows of stone counters that had supported the fish market for a hundred years. The *pineta* was four blocks ahead. They'd never track him through the myriad paths in the forty-acre forest. He filled his lungs with the pine-scented air and dashed toward it. He knew the men behind him wouldn't be able to keep up. He'd yet to meet anyone who could. Sure, Renzo had memory issues, but his physical rehabilitation had revealed that he had remarkable endurance—thanks to a heart that the doctor had proclaimed a miracle of science. According to him, it had been formerly owned by a seventeen-year-old female athlete.

He wondered at his instinctual decision to flee the café. He didn't doubt the validity of the command his subconscious had generated. But he wished he could pull up the memories that prompted it. Perhaps it was the assuredness of the movements from the two men. He'd sensed the spark of recognition in their expressions even behind their dark glasses.

Lives hinge on your ability to remain anonymous.

He hungered for answers, but only questions were served: Who were they? What did they want with him? Did they know where he lived?

Renzo was a block from the *pineta* when a car careened from a side street to block his path. Doors opened. Three men exited. They had the same feel as the two behind him. They held silenced weapons. The flush of adrenaline triggered a doubling of his heart rate, fueling his muscles. He jinked to the right between two villas. Bullets hammered into the limestone walls behind him—and the question of what they wanted was answered.

Chips pelted his trousers. A ricocheted round spun past his ear with a hornet's buzz. Terror filled his gut. He leaped a stone wall and wound a serpentine trail through gates and yards and streets. The solitude of the woodland was no longer an option. But maybe the anonymity of a crowd would provide an escape. The beach was dead ahead.

He twisted through traffic across the four-lane coastal road. Cars skidded, scooters dodged, and motorists shouted. Renzo ignored them. He sped across a gravel parking lot, through a busy

open-air trattoria, past a row of private cabanas and showers, and onto the sand. There was no sign of his pursuers.

Each section of white-sand beach was privately owned, passed down one generation to the next, demarked by the color and style of the umbrellas and lounge chairs that extended in neat rows to the water. It was packed with tourists, in large part because of the influx of college students visiting during spring break. Renzo kicked off his shoes, removed his torn shirt, and plopped himself in their midst. He was shaken. He dug his hands and feet into the warm sand, searching in vain for the familiar calm that the act usually brought. Two bikini-clad girls offered an approving stare. He was accustomed to the attention, more for his tan physique than for his crooked smile. He forced a wink. They giggled. He blew out a breath and sank deeper into the sand. He needed time to think.

“Ciao, Renzo!” a man shouted.

He recognized the voice before he turned around. It was the *bagnino*, Paolo, responsible for this stretch of beach. The fifty-year-old, potbellied lifeguard was a bronze fixture who always had a kind word. Unfortunately, he also loved to hear the sound of his own voice. Once he started talking, it was impossible to get him to stop. He waved as he approached.

“Another run today?” the man asked in his booming voice.

Tourists turned their way. Paolo appreciated an audience.

“It’s a wonderful day!” the lifeguard proclaimed, his arms outstretched as if to soak in the sun.

So much for blending in, Renzo thought. He rose and glanced nervously about. A man with dark glasses and familiar rubber-soled shoes stared back at him from the trattoria. His hand was to an ear. His lips moved urgently.

Renzo took off. The *bagnino* shouted behind him, “Renzo, you forgot your shoes, your shirt!”

He hit the wet sand that was his daily running track and poured on speed. One familiar resort after another passed in a blur. His plan was simple. He wouldn’t stop running until he came abreast of the police station in Forte dei Marmi. Renzo needed help. After four months in hiding, remaining anonymous was no longer an option.

He was nearly there when he saw the girl from the café. She blocked his path. So did the two men who gripped each of her arms. The girl tried to act natural, but her fear was palpable. She was a hostage, not an accomplice. The men’s deportment left no doubt of the deadly consequences of noncooperation. A big part of him screamed to keep running, to put behind him

the two men and the girl whom he had only just met. But he could not. Amnesia or not, a man's character doesn't change. He stopped.

The men were all business. They had crew cuts and chiseled features. The taller one removed his glasses. He had angry dark eyes and a boxer's crooked nose. Through tight lips he said, "You for the girl." The words were English. Renzo didn't understand.

"*Cosa?*" he said.

The man's eyes narrowed. He seemed surprised. He switched to Italian. "We trade you for the girl," he said. His Italian was good, but Renzo caught the trace of a German accent.

The girl's expression pleaded.

"Let her go first," Renzo said.

The man stiffened, as if unaccustomed to conditional surrenders. Renzo figured he was in charge. He scanned his surroundings with military precision. "We make the exchange in the parking lot."

Where it will be easy to stuff us into a car and kill us later with no fanfare, Renzo thought. No thanks. He considered his options, grateful that the physical trainer hired by the doctor had included martial arts in his regimen. The movements had seemed natural to him. He remembered wondering if his muscles held memories that his brain could not.

Renzo pointed to a Ping-Pong table by the showers. It was still in view of the crowded beach but only a step or two from the walkway leading to the parking area. "We walk together to that point," he said. "Then she goes free."

The second man nodded to the first, and they escorted the girl up the beach. Renzo followed, recalling the key weakness that his trainer had identified in his fighting skills. *No killer instinct*, he'd said. *Stick to running*.

That was his plan.

The walkway between the beach and the parking lot was lined on either side by rows of cabanas. The men turned to face him, stopping beside a bathroom stall. Their grip tightened on the girl's arms. She winced. The leader inched up the hem of his polo shirt to reveal the pistol tucked at his waist. "Any tricks and she dies," he said.

The girl's breathing quickened. Renzo nodded. He readied himself. The leader motioned to his subordinate.

The man shoved the girl into the stall. "Not a sound," he growled as he closed the door behind her. Her soft whimper was filled with relief. Renzo could imagine her huddled in a ball

beside the toilet, watching their shadows through the slats in the door. Both men turned to face him.

“Let’s go,” the leader said.

The girl was safe for the moment, Renzo thought. The sooner he and the two men turned the corner into the parking lot, the sooner she could slip away. He allowed himself to be taken. Each man grabbed an arm.

They stopped when they reached the graveled lot. The leader’s gaze panned the area. The black BMW that had blocked Renzo’s path earlier was parked by the entrance. Its motor idled. The driver nodded. His hand went to the dash, and the sedan’s trunk popped open.

My coffin, Renzo realized with a start. There was no one else around. They would kill him here and dump him later. The men tightened their grip and walked him forward. But instead of responding with tension, Renzo relaxed his muscles—as he’d been taught. The subconscious reaction of the men holding him was instinctual. They relaxed as well.

He sagged, allowing his dead weight to pull at the men’s grip. They held on with angry grunts and yanked upward. In the same instant, Renzo combined his force with theirs by springing into a backflip. Grips gave way. Renzo turned to run. But instead of freedom, he found himself staring down the barrel of a silenced weapon. It was wielded by a third man, who had followed them down the walkway. A wisp of smoke leaked from the muzzle—and Renzo knew that the girl was dead.

“*Bastardo*,” he gasped. The other two spun him around.

“You’re fast,” the leader said. He pressed his own pistol against Renzo’s chest. “But experience trumps speed every t—”

He cut off when the horn sounded from the waiting sedan. A van filled with bobbing heads drove into the lot. It was followed by a man on a scooter. Guns disappeared. A door slid open on the van, and a family of six piled out. Two of the youngest children jumped up and down with enthusiasm. The leader patted Renzo on the back as if they were old pals. He whispered, “They will die unless you get in the car.” Renzo could barely breathe past the rage he felt over the death of the girl. But he didn’t doubt the truth of the man’s words. He allowed himself to be ushered toward the sedan.

The scooter idled under the shadows of a tree. The rider wore an oversize helmet that looked odd above the shorts and baggy shirt that revealed thin arms and bony knees. The tinted helmet visor hid his face. His head tilted to one side as if he were taking in the scene. Renzo willed him to leave for his own safety. The man didn’t budge.

The two thugs walked on either side of Renzo. The one who had killed the girl moved ahead of them. He opened the rear passenger door, motioning for Renzo to get in. But Renzo's attention was still on the scooter driver. It appeared as though the man stared directly at him from behind his visor. His helmeted head shook slowly from side to side as if he were warning Renzo not to enter the car. But a firm hand on Renzo's lower back reminded him that he had little choice. He glanced over his shoulder. The family had gathered their beach bags. They were walking toward the sand. The kids ran ahead.

The sudden whine of the scooter sent a shock of tension through the men surrounding him. The bike raced toward them. The rider had flipped up his visor. His teeth were bared, his eyes narrowed, and he held a dark object in an outstretched hand. The Germans reached for their guns.

Renzo cried out, "Nooo!" The young rescuer didn't stand a chance. Renzo stomped the instep of the man to his left. The German folded to one knee with a surprised grunt. Ducking to avoid the leader's fist, Renzo countered with an uppercut that smashed his nose. Cartilage cracked. Blood flowed. He turned to face the third man, when out of the corner of his eye he saw his would-be rescuer fling the object. In the same instant, there were muffled gunshots from within the car and the helmeted scooter rider was thrown backward onto the gravel. But the object he'd hurled continued its arc toward Renzo in a wobbling spiral.

It looked like a small pyramid.

Renzo felt a tingling sensation in his forehead.

Chapter 2

Le Focette, Marina di Pietrasanta, Italy

SOUND MUTED. The world around Renzo slowed as the miniature pyramid tumbled through its arc. The closer it got, the stronger the tingling in his head and limbs. Gulls hung as if suspended midflight. The driverless scooter skidded on its side in frame-by-frame motion, furrowing a bow wave of gravel before it. The silenced barrel of a pistol rose toward Renzo's face. His gut tightened. Fear fueled his supercharged reflexes.

His hand chopped at the nerve bundle in the man's forearm. The move must have appeared impossibly fast to his assailant. Fingers numbed, grip loosened, and the weapon dropped to the ground. Doors unlocked in Renzo's brain, and he recognized the gun as the tactical version of a Sphinx AT380, with 9mm slugs, a sixteen-round magazine, and manufacturing tolerances that rivaled that of a Swiss watchmaker. Details of the weapon flashed through his mind like he was reading a Wikipedia page.

The pistol settled in the gravel. The black pyramid dropped beside it, and an explosion of memories expanded in his mind. The force of it nearly knocked him off his feet. But instinct held him steady. Arms grappled from behind. His body responded in a blur of action. He grabbed a wrist, spun, and flipped the leader onto his back. A heel to the temple and he was out cold. A stiff-fingered gouge to the throat of another. A vicious side kick to the chest of the third man. The BMW driver moved around the front of the car, a compact assault rifle pressed to one shoulder. Renzo somersaulted toward him. In a single fluid motion, he grabbed the Sphinx and double-tapped the trigger. Twin holes blossomed in the driver's chest, lifting him from his feet. A shuffle at Renzo's back set off alarms. He tumbled to one side as spits from a silenced weapon left a trail of slugs puckering the gravel beside his head. He rolled to his back, extended his pistol, and squeezed the trigger three times. The killer's body jerked with the impact of each slug. He folded to the ground and lay still.

Time settled.

Renzo felt the throb of his heart at his temples. The high-speed effort had taken a toll. He staggered to his feet. The scene shocked him. He fought a sudden urge to vomit. The scooter

driver was surely dead, as were two of the gunmen. A third gasped a final, rasping breath through a crushed larynx. The fourth—their leader—lay unconscious. There was a seesaw of sirens in the distance. The family must have called the authorities, Renzo thought. He needed to leave. He gathered the weapons, tossed them into the sedan's trunk, and slammed the lid.

On his way around the car, he retrieved the miniature pyramid. It was the size of an apple. When his fingers closed around its smooth surface, his body seized. His mind reeled with a rush of images. Like flipping channels on a TV, each scene was replaced by another before his consciousness could cling to its details. Faces, bodies, and explosions swirled amidst a tornado of emotions that brought forth an overwhelming sense of hopelessness. Each image kindled a memory more painful than the last. Rather than embracing them, he pushed them away, corralling them into a closet deep in his brain. His body shook with the effort.

It was the groan of the man from the scooter that broke the spell. Renzo's wits returned. He rushed forward and knelt beside the fallen man, setting the miniature pyramid on the gravel.

The man still wore his helmet. His eyes fluttered open. Renzo pushed aside a sense of familiarity as he dealt with locating any injuries. His movements were swift and sure, drawing on knowledge that he hadn't known he possessed. The man bled from a shoulder wound. An exam confirmed that the bullet had been a deep graze. It bled freely, but it was noncritical.

"M-my fault," he said. His words were slurred. Shock was setting in.

"Quiet," Renzo said, ripping off the man's rolled-up sleeve.

"They followed m—" He grimaced as Renzo wadded up the sleeve and pressed it against the wound.

"Keep pressure on this," Renzo said. The kid gripped the bandage with his good hand. Bleeding slowed to a trickle. Renzo unhooked the chin strap and removed the man's helmet. He was in his twenties, with scruffy dark hair, pale skin, and a number of tiny holes on his brow and ears—evidence of previous piercings. Renzo gasped when he recognized him. Memories dropped into place: an underground bunker, assassins, death, an alien pyramid...

"Timmy?" Renzo said.

The kid's eyes widened. "You recognize me!"

Renzo retrieved the mini. It felt warm in his grasp. Images clarified. "Yeah," Renzo said, pushing through the cobwebs. "Area 52. There was you, and Doc, and—"

"Right on! Six years ago..." Timmy said. He hesitated a moment before continuing. "Hey, wait a minute. You're speaking English!"

Renzo shook his head. *Six years?* It couldn't be. He tried to superimpose a timeline onto the jumble of memories, searching for the code that would unlock the encryption in his brain. But before the last tumbler clicked into place, the kid's gaze snapped to a point beyond Renzo's shoulder. His eyes widened.

The leader tackled Renzo from behind. The air was blown from his lungs, and the mini flew from his grasp. It skittered into a drainage culvert.

So did his past.

They rolled past Timmy. The German assassin ended up on top. He straddled Renzo, fists pummeling. Blood from the man's broken nose drooled onto Renzo's face. He defended the first three blows, but the fourth hammered into his jaw. The fifth impacted his temple, stunning him. Thick hands wrapped around his throat. Fingers dug. Renzo arched his back and flailed at the bigger man. But the vise grip around his neck tightened. Renzo clawed and came away with a torn shirtsleeve, exposing rippling muscles and a stylized tattoo of the phrase *Cæli Regere*. Renzo's throat burned and his vision blurred. He reached desperately for the man's face, groping for eyes. But the experienced fighter twisted from his reach. He continued to squeeze.

A shadow passed behind the German. There was a hollow thunk as something cracked against his skull. The man groaned; his eyes lost focus, his grip released, and he toppled to one side. He lay still. Renzo sucked air through his tortured windpipe, wriggling from beneath the man's bulk.

Timmy stood above him, wobbling back and forth like a drunk. The motorcycle helmet dangled from the chin strap he gripped in his good hand. He'd used it as a mace. Suddenly, the kid's eyes rolled and the color drained from his face. He had a dull grin as he collapsed into Renzo's arms.

"Bravo," Renzo rasped, lowering him to the ground. The sirens were a few blocks away. The kid was woozy, but still conscious. Renzo would stay with him until help arrived. He owed his life to...

He'd forgotten the kid's name. He'd known it just a moment ago. "*Come sì chiama?*" Renzo asked.

The kid's eyes narrowed. "In English?"

Renzo shook his head. "*Non parlo inglese,*" he said. He'd never had a knack for languages.

"But you were just speaking Eng-wisssh!" the kid slurred.

There was a blare of horns. Renzo turned from the meaningless words. Cars were backed up at a traffic light. Another black BMW jerked and twisted as it attempted to nose past the cars

ahead of it. Angry fists and more horns, and Renzo realized that the rest of the hit squad had found him. The sirens coming from the other direction wouldn't be here in time. He moved even before the decision had fully formed in his mind.

The kid yelped as Renzo dropped him to the ground and ran toward the parked sedan.

“Wait...*Alto!*” the kid shouted.

But Renzo couldn't stop. Seconds counted if he was to draw the threat away. He jumped in the car and floored it. The vehicle fishtailed in the gravel, and Renzo had to slow to avoid hitting his new friend. As he drove past, the kid yelled, “Piazza San Marco, *domani, mezzogiorno, Danielle!*”

Renzo didn't have time to wonder at the kid's words. He skidded onto the road and sped toward the sirens. The other BMW broke through traffic and shot after him. A man leaned out the passenger window. There were muzzle flashes, and the rear window exploded. Renzo jerked the wheel from side to side to throw off the man's aim. Hammer blows impacted the rear trunk. He jinked too hard, and the passenger side—starting with the fender—swiped a traffic pole. A gut-wrenching screech of metal against metal. Sparks flew and the side mirror went airborne. He centered the steering wheel, stomped on the accelerator, and let out a long growl through his burning throat.

A string of flashing emergency lights appeared ahead. Two police vehicles wound through the oncoming traffic. The car in the rearview mirror suddenly slowed. It turned east and disappeared toward the hills.

Chapter 3

Swiss Alps

JAKE BRONSON WAS ALIVE AFTER ALL, Victor Brun thought. He'd suspected as much. The American had been reported dead four months ago—his comatose body consumed in a fire. But Victor's assassin who'd sparked the blaze at the secret US facility that housed the American had never seen the body. That wouldn't be the case in this instance. The team in Italy should report soon with confirmation.

He propped his feet on the ottoman and allowed himself a rare opportunity to enjoy the comfort of the castle's great room. A white Persian cat jumped up and curled on his lap. He stroked its fur. The pet was his constant companion.

The crackle of burning logs from the grand fireplace, the plush furnishings and ancient tapestries, the dim lighting, and even the dampness that spilled from the stone walls combined to embrace him in a cocoon of harsh memories that would chill the bones of most men. He drew strength from them.

Château Brun had been built in the tenth century. But it was relatively new compared with the ancient maze of tunnels and caverns that burrowed beneath the mountain that supported it. The mansion was hidden among the alpine peaks of Switzerland. Thanks to its obscure location and crenellated battlements, it had never been breached.

Feathers of snow drifted across the French panes of the picture window across the room. Another late-season storm grayed the sky, obscuring the view of Mont Blanc. Victor swirled cognac in a snifter. His other hand stroked the cat. The pet purred under the attention. His gaze drifted to the tall man standing across from him. "Two more days, Hans," Victor said in English. His Swiss-German accent was refined. He spoke seven languages. But of late he'd preferred to practice English. It would become the language of choice.

"*Jawohl, Mein Herr,*" his confidant said with a slight nod. Hans had a military bearing—solidly built with a protruding jaw, a blond flattop, and an ice-blue stare. The knots and calluses of his hands testified to his daily training regimen. "All is ready."

A hammering from a nearby room quieted, and a pair of white-gloved workers entered the room. They offered a deferential bow to the lord of the château.

Victor acknowledged them with a smile. By all public accounts, he was a gentle man. Like his father before him, he was renowned for his generosity and old-world charm, garnering standing invitations to the elite circles of European upper-crust society. His Swiss heritage shone through his broad forehead, high cheekbones, and slanted green eyes. Though he'd never married, his warm smile and attentive manner provided him with ample companionship. His sharp, analytical mind made him a trusted advisor to corporations and governments alike—where he exhibited a unique ability to guide opposing factions to a common view. While he preferred to avoid the direct spotlight, he would be center stage at the upcoming summit in Geneva. The public had been told that the unprecedented event was to be the first of a series of conferences to discuss the issue of world hunger. Leaders of every major nation would attend.

Carefully, the two workers removed a painting from the far wall. They exited the room. The priceless piece of art would be crated along with the others, Victor thought, bound for humanity's new birthplace. Soon the castle walls would be bare, save for his favorite piece. He glanced up at the fresco that stretched above the mantel. It filled most of the thirty-foot-high plastered wall that had been the artist's canvas. The ornate swirls and colors depicted a family tree that reached back a thousand years. He'd memorized every branch, leaf, and curl. The names, dates, and images would be forever ingrained in his mind. He regretted that he had to leave it behind.

He would also abandon the strategically placed mirrors throughout the mansion. Soon, they would no longer be necessary.

It was hard to believe that the end was finally here, he thought. Centuries of planning coming to a head during his reign as head of the Order: nurturing allies, positioning spies, preparing for the final conflagration—all while guarding the greatest secret the world had ever known. It was appropriate that it should happen during his reign. It had been predicted by his grandfather at his christening sixty years ago. His father's eyes had glazed each time he recounted the event to young Victor. *The age of technology is upon us*, his grandfather had said as the priest anointed Victor. *With this child our line will reign over a new world order, an order of peace, prosperity, and freedom from the risk of violence.*

Victor tapped a computer tablet resting on the end table beside his chair. The blank screen lit up. He stared at the live images of the twin pyramids orbiting above the planet. "*Cæli Regere*," he said softly, reciting the Order's Latin credo.

Hans raised a hand to one ear. The team was reporting in. “*Ja?*” Hans said. His voice was transmitted through a miniature jawbone implant. A beat later, the former soldier stiffened. His face reddened. “Bronson escaped,” he reported to Victor. “Three of our men were killed. One was arrested.”

Victor removed his hand from the cat’s dense fur. The purring stopped. He studied his reflection in the decorative mirror on the coffee table, running his fingers through his wavy coiffure of silvered hair. His expression remained casual. There was no hint of the sudden anger that boiled within.

“He will not be easily found now that he’s been alerted,” Victor considered aloud. His voice was pleasant. “What of the young American scientist?”

After a quick interchange with the man in the field, Hans said, “Wounded, but alive. He’s in the hospital.”

Victor nodded. His mind catalogued options. “Put a man on the scientist,” he said. “But focus the teams on Mr. Bronson’s friends and family. Now that he’s broken cover, he’ll undoubtedly seek them out.”

“*Jawohl, Mein Herr,*” Hans said. He turned sharply and left the room.

Victor steadied himself. Jake Bronson was the lone obstacle to their mission’s success. He could not be allowed to live. The table mirror beckoned, and he noticed a brief microexpression around his eyes. It was a tell. It revealed anxiety. He felt a jolt of disgust at the weakness. It opened cold closets in his mind.

Letting out a slow breath, he lifted the cat to his chest, rose, and left the room.

He needed a moment alone.

His brain required another lesson.

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