

**DRONE LAND**  
**(Drohnenland)**  
**by Tom Hillenbrand**  
Novel

Translated by Steven T. Murray

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[epigraph]

"Reason is often the source of barbarity;  
an excess of reason always is."

Giacomo Leopardi

## Chapter 1

From a distance he is the best-dressed corpse I've ever encountered: custom-made calfskin shoes, a bespoke suit from Milan that cost more than my monthly salary, and an ascot in deliberate disarray – with a matching pocket square.

Everything about him is immaculate, except his face.

What's left of it is scattered in a semicircle on the sandy ground. The rain has already washed some of it away. Like a pink halo the mixture of blood, brain matter, and bits of flesh is strewn around one shoulder.

"Something high-caliber," I say to Paul.

The forensics expert looks at me and shakes his head. The gesture rustles his white Tyvek overalls. "Nope. There's too much of the skull left for that," he counters.

"What's your guess, then?" I ask.

Paul, unshaven, grimaces. My question seems premature to him. Like most forensic technicians, he first wants the hummingbird drones and mollies to do their work examining the entire crime scene. After that he would prefer to poke around in the extracted data for another week before he even reports on the gender of the victim.

I take a piece of licorice from my pocket and absently pop it in

my mouth. Paul has plenty of time to work out a well-informed theory and spout it out. I chew on my licorice and wait – in vain.

"I'm not going to hold you to it later on, Paul. In your lifetime how many faces have you seen shot away?"

"Too many."

"I bet you could be in a video on the Web with your trick," I tell him. "In seconds Paul Leclercq can identify the caliber and manufacturer of the bullet by looking at 360-degree photos of people who've been shot in the face . . ."

"What have I ever done to you, Westerhuizen?" he grumbles.

I stick my hands in the pockets of my overcoat. "You woke me up at four in the morning."

It came as a priority call over the sound system in my apartment, with the volume of an air-raid siren. When I staggered into the basement garage of my building a few minutes later and got into my car, Terry had already sent me the preliminary info: Corpse found near Highway E40 near the Westrem interchange. According to the biometric scans and his personal tag ID the dead man was Vittorio Pazzi, forty-seven years old, a Northern Italian residing in Brussels-Anderlecht.

A corpse in a marsh in Flanders is really no reason to get up that early. Normally I would stop by the crime scene to give the forensic techs some instructions and then go right back to bed. But with Signore Pazzi things are a bit different. I can't just let him lie there in the rain all alone, because he's a member of the European Parliament. Or rather, he was until somebody blew away his political instincts and his perfect face.

Using a gun, though I still don't know the make.

"So?" I say, giving Paul a challenging look.

He decides to parry. "I would guess an unjacketed high-velocity round. Probably a 3.7 millimeter. Not from point-blank range, as I said, or there'd be a hell of a mess."

"Who would use something like that?"

"The boys from the SWAT team. And the military; it's a standard caliber for assault rifles. Otherwise almost nobody; you can only get them with a special permit."

Paul's reply raises unpleasant questions. But it's enough for me to begin with. I thank him and walk over toward the road. From there the surrounding area drops off a bit, so I have a good overview of the crime scene. This must have once been pasture or cropland, judging by the ditches and hedgerows surrounding the sandy field. It's not a pretty place to die, but it's quite peaceful. There's nothing much here, and presumably not a soul would look at this place on any given day. Which does raise the question of why Pazzi was found so soon.

"Display action protocol," I mutter.

Data appears on my computer specs that are covered with raindrops. Apparently Pazzi had an implant that sent in his vital signs. It's an expensive toy, even for a member of the European Parliament. The instant the plastic projectile the size of a lentil began to tear a path through his brain at 1500 meters per second, the transmitter notified the medical emergency service that this particular client might need medical attention. Pazzi must have had very good health insurance, because within twenty minutes a helijet drone was on-site. At about 2:41 a.m. the police in Westrem were notified. When the county sheriffs realized that it was about an MEP, they shit their pants and called us.

From my vantage point I watch the hustle and bustle on the

field. Although I had not given any instructions, apparently someone had the same train of thought as I did, although I had no idea who it may have been. So the crime scene is already buzzing with hummingbird drones, floodlight drones, and other machines flitting about in concentric circles around the dead man, snapping high-resolution photos from every conceivable angle.

"Message for Paul Leclerq," I say. "Text: Don't we have any mollies working?"

A few seconds later the reply appears on my specs: "Molecular scanners won't work in this shitty weather."

A Flemish curse escapes my lips. I order a voice connection. "Paul, I want the mollies anyway. Let Terry and Ava try to figure it out from the data later. And in addition to the crime scene, I want everything scanned inside an area of at least two square kilometers."

"That'll cost an arm and a leg. We'll have to reprogram almost everything from scratch. This one-horse town probably gets a land registry flyover about once every leap year."

"I don't care, Paul." I pause for effect. "Or do you want to explain to Vogel why we're not collecting all the data we can find in the case of a dead MEP?"

The head of forensics utters a grunt, which I interpret as agreement. I cut off the call and let my eyes scan the field. This emptiness – what had Pazzi lost out here? He must have wandered off the road if he hadn't been out hiking all night. I run the video in my specs back a few minutes, to the point where I'm standing right in front of the corpse and looking at his shoes. The still shows me that Pazzi's soles and uppers are muddy, but not as muddy as they'd be if he'd walked a long way in this rain. According to my specs

it's 153.34 meters from the road to the corpse, part of it a gravel path. Apparently Pazzi didn't walk any farther. Which again indicates that he arrived by car, and the car left no tracks.

"Is there anything here at all?" I ask the specs.

"You are 31.37 kilometers west of downtown Brussels, District Européen," I'm told by a perky female voice that sounds much too rested for this time of night. "This fallow plot of agricultural land is in the possession of –"

"Break off," I snap. Why are these computers always so stupid? I wish Ava was awake this early. But I'd rather not wake her, because it's only five in the morning, and my analyst will clearly be more useful to me if she gets enough sleep. Besides, it's going to be a while before the crime-scene techs get everything recorded.

I rephrase my request. "Display the nearest buildings and businesses. List view."

Before my eyes the search results scroll past. There aren't very many. There's a service station on the highway to the west, and a farm and a truck stop, all at least two kilometers from the crime scene. In other words, there was no nearby destination that Pazzi might reasonably have been heading for. I take another look at the scene and the surrounding area. Based on the time of night and the distance from civilization, the presence of any witnesses is improbable. Because of the gnarled poplars lining the north and west sides of the field, no one would have seen a thing.

The rain picks up and there's more wind. I can smell the North Sea, not that far away. I pull my wide-brimmed rain hat farther down on my forehead and decide that there's nothing more for me to do here. Then I go back to my Mercedes, which is parked in an emergency turnout on the highway, and get in.

"Take me to Galgenberg, Gottlieb," I say. The car starts up. I take off the specs and lay them on the passenger seat along with my rain hat. The sky is a dark gray, and it doesn't look as though it will be lightening up anytime soon. As the car accelerates with a hum, fat drops of rain strike the windshield – pruimenregen, as we say in Flemish, plum rain. How I hate the summertime.

I send Ava a text telling her to get over to my office ASAP. According to her work schedule she has something else to take care of this morning, but it'll have to wait. If my boss Jérôme Vogel gets wind of the case, I want to know more than just the name and shoe size of the stiff.

I tell the Mercedes to switch my side of the windshield to opaque and connect to Terry. The media foil integrated into the glass changes to dark blue, and the Europol logo appears in the middle. Communicating with the search computer is actually an analyst's job, but I'm in a hurry. And Terry isn't nearly as dense as the French data specs software.

"Good morning, Chief Inspector Westerhuizen," booms a voice from the car's loudspeaker system. "How may I be of assistance?"

"File on Vittorio Pazzi."

"What scope would you prefer, Chief Inspector?"

"Enough material to keep me busy and awake until we arrive."

"Just a moment, please. Your file has been retrieved."

On the screen appears an official-looking photo of Pazzi. He is sitting behind a massive desk, framed by two flags: on the left the dark-blue European Union banner, on the right that of the Northern Italian League.

"Vittorio Pazzi, age forty-seven, born in Merano, South Tyrol to a well-to-do business family. Studied economics in Milan and

Uppsala. Unmarried, no children. Member of the Liberal Party, has been their representative in the European Parliament, acting party president, chairman of the export committee. Last year chosen by the business journal Il Sole 24 Ore as their Man of the Year for his efforts to improve European competitiveness."

As the search computer intones, the images on the screen change: Pazzi skiing in the Alps, at a prize ceremony in Berlin, at the Christmas Market in Strasbourg. Terry plays a video showing the MEP at some conference delivering a speech: ". . . and only through rigorous bolstering of our trade relations with our Brazilian friends, while simultaneously complying with existing customs regulations, can we make the economic power of the Union . . ."

I feel like I might fall asleep before we reach Brussels. It's the usual political bullshit; like most of those in his party, Pazzi talks about cooperation and free trade, while also attempting to restrict imports from South America. Instead of listening, I scrutinize the man. He does have a certain charisma, especially compared to the average representative. And he is always well dressed. On him even a ski outfit looks tailor-made.

Now Terry is telling me something about Pazzi's contributions to the reform of agricultural policy. I interrupt him. "You said he had no family. Was the guy gay?"

The search computer stops talking and there's a brief pause. If I didn't know better, I'd think that he's embarrassed.

"There are no official statements on Vittorio Pazzi in this regard, Chief Inspector."

"Maybe so. But you could run a congruence analysis, couldn't you?"

"I must remind you that this sort of data concerning MEPs is

protected from official access by the Enhanced Privacy Act.”

“He’s dead, Terry. And this is a homicide investigation.”

Another brief pause. “Access to such data has to be logged and filed in court records. Furthermore, a direct connection to the investigation must exist. I am obligated to make reference to Article 23 of the penal code . . .”

“Calm down.”

“Please reformulate the query.”

“Answer my question about Pazzi’s sexual preference and enter it into court records as you wish.”

On the screen a photo appears showing Pazzi with a group of people. What I can see of the background of the venue looks incredibly ugly, which makes me think that the gathering is in the EU Parliament building. A man in his late thirties is highlighted as he stands a short distance from the deceased. He has straw-colored hair and is rather fat. His cheeks are red, probably from the red wine in the glass he’s holding in his right hand.

“There is no official information on Vittorio Pazzi’s sexual orientation. Analysis of his speech patterns, semantics, musical taste, places frequented, and other data sources, however, does tend to indicate a homosexual inclination.”

“How certain is that?”

“The probability is 95.1 percent. The person highlighted in the photo is Peter Heuberger, parliamentary assistant for the Conservatives. Portions of Pazzi’s email correspondence are sealed because of his status as a representative, and a court order must first be obtained before these files can be released for digital forensics. Available private communications patterns as well as check-ins at airports in Brussels, Berlin, and Lisbon do indicate a

partner relationship between the two men.”

Out the side window I see that we’re passing Saint-Gilles. In a few minutes we’ll be there. I would like to poke around a little in Pazzi’s movements during the past twenty-four hours, but unlike his corpse his digital cadaver is still largely protected, at least until the examining judge unseals the crap, which should happen within the next two hours. That’s when the early shift arrives at the office. I instruct Terry to send off an urgent request for release of all digital traces of Pazzi. Then I turn off the display and look out at the morning rush hour in Brussels.

## Chapter 2

I get out at the Café Amsterdam and tell the car to go park in the basement garage at the Europol Palace. I go into the bar and order a cup of coffee. Tired-looking men are sitting at the bar covered with media foil and reading the news. I take a seat at the corner table where I always sit, open a media window and search for reports on Vittorio Pazzi. There are a couple of recent mentions, and happily the articles are all from when he was still alive. That buys me some time. As soon as Pazzi's death is released to the feeds, the top brass will be breathing down my neck.

I order another cup of coffee. In the news overview they're showing pictures of emaciated Persians or Saudis in some sort of refugee camp. Men in ABC-hazmat suits are checking the new arrivals with Geiger apps. Other refugees are standing in line for food, watched by soldiers with assault rifles. According to the breaking news crawl, the scene is from Calabria.

The guy at the next table leans over and points at my tabletop. "Poor buggers, eh?"

I check him out. He's the type of guy who would need another shave at noon even after a double morning shave at the barber shop. His greasy jacket matches his appearance and is on the verge of falling apart. He smells like Calvados and the French-speaking region of southern Belgium.

"Yeah," I reply, "but at least they're still alive."

"You call that living?" he counters. "To have no homeland?"

The conversation is getting too philosophical for my taste, so I grumble, "Not our border, not our problem." A heartless comment, but it has the desired effect. The guy turns back to his drink

without another word.

A message appears from Ava on my specs: "I'll be there in ten minutes, mirroring sequence ready."

I get up, toss a few hundred-euro coins on the bar, and nod to the bartender. Then I leave the café and walk toward Europol Headquarters. Even after all these years I still get a cold chill down my spine when I approach the immense Palace of Justice. The edifice is a clever attempt to meld a myriad of classic architectural styles together. The result is bigger than St. Peter's Cathedral and immeasurably uglier.

The building is far too big for our purposes. In the past the entire Belgian justice apparatus was housed inside, but now the palace contains only the Union's criminal jurisdiction and us. Since there aren't very many of us, the majority of the space is simply gathering dust. Bureaucratic critics claim that it's not proper to house the Union's justice and criminal investigation departments in the same building, because of the separation of powers.

As a small concession to the criticism, two different entrances were constructed for judges and police officers. Judges use the main portal on Poelaertplein, while we enter the building from the rear across Jacobsplein. In my opinion that maintains the separation of powers. But one result of this arrangement is the rather long walk to my office, which is located in the front part of the building. Another is that the access across Jacobsplein has given my office its nickname: we are popularly called "Jacobins." It's meant as a compliment.

As I pass through the security perimeter, a hummingbird is right on my heels. It buzzes around me several times to compare my

physiognomy and my gait with the data bank. Obviously the result is satisfactory, because the security barrier silently slides open. I say hello to the two gendarmes at the entrance and go inside.

The interior of the palace feels much spookier than the façade. The building consists of flights of stairs that lead nowhere; halls and archways whose purpose only the architect knew, and he took it with him to his grave; and pillars everywhere, some more than twenty meters high. Apparently there are more pillars than officers in the Palace of Justice.

I walk up a winding staircase lined with dusty art nouveau sconces to the Main Hall. It's as big as a football field and is stuffed full of round, rectangular, grooved, and trompe l'oeil pillars, which even on a sparkling spring day don't allow enough light through the tiny windows to drive away the constant gloom. Then I take the stairs to the second floor. When I reach my office Ava is waiting for me. She is leaning over the conference table. That's a view that doesn't bother me in the least.

I clear my throat, and she turns toward me. She's wearing form-fitting Japanese jeans stuck inside high black laced boots, with one of those new-fangled exercise jackets with rain neutralizers in the shoulder pads. Ava Bittman is in her early thirties. She has a body like an ancient Babylonian temple dancer and the brain of a nuclear physicist. She's the best analyst I've ever worked with, and the most beautiful too. Most data forensics experts these days are women. Presumably it has something to do with female intuition; rumor has it that women get along better with Terry. The inspectors, on the other hand, are mostly men. Contrary to the custom in our office, I do not sleep with my analyst.

"Good morning, Ava."

"Hello, Aart. You look tired."

"I'll probably look even tireder before this is all over. We can rule out suicide, right?"

Ava sits down on the edge of my desk and looks at the framed Casablanca poster hanging on the opposite wall. Bogart stares back, mildly interested.

"As you will see at once, the ballistic trajectory rules out suicide. The projectile was fired from a distance of about a hundred meters."

"Paul says that Pazzi was shot with a high-velocity weapon."

Ava pushes a coffee-brown lock back from her face and nods. "That's true. It was this model." She clears her throat and says, "Terry: Show Pazzi murder weapon."

The media foil on the conference table changes color and displays a short-barreled assault rifle made of black plastic. Next to it hover a few bright-yellow patches that look like blister packs of welded-together headache tablets.

"A Jericho 42C. Israeli manufacture."

I reach toward the weapon with my right hand and pull it toward me. With a left-hand gesture I make the weapon rotate on its longitudinal axis. I remember this model.

"I've actually fired one of these once," I say.

"Really? When was that?"

"You're forgetting how old I am, Ava. During the last Morocco crisis I was in the MilPol."

She looks at me, her big jet-black eyes revealing astonishment, perhaps a little repugnance as well. "During the Solar War you used unjacketed high-velocity rounds? Against civilians?"

"Against terrorists," I counter feebly. "But forget about those

old stories. Who's using the 42C nowadays?"

"Only the military and the police are allowed to use them, because the vibrations and the enormous kinetic energy of even a glancing hit will turn the nervous system and the blood vessels of the victim into applesauce. The Cohesion Forces in the South are equipped with them, as well as our special unit."

"Any weapons stolen or disappeared that we know of?"

"Unfortunately, quite a few. In North Africa, by all accounts, some equipment inevitably ends up being diverted. Terry says there are about two hundred stolen Jerichos in the data bank. None with a signature that matches this weapon, but that doesn't mean anything. With this type of weapon ballistics is not an exact science."

I walk around the desk and drop into my easy chair. I fish a piece of licorice out of the tin and then offer Ava one.

She shakes her head. "No thanks. That licorice is way too salty."

"That's how it should be. Why is it so hard to pin down the signature of the weapon? Because of the plastic?"

"Precisely. The barrel is made of a frictionless ceramic-plastic alloy. The ammunition is unjacketed and also made of plastic. Unlike metal rounds, this makes it very difficult to match bullets to barrel. Fewer rifling traces. If we found the murder weapon, it might be possible. But it's highly unlikely that we will."

"Says who? Terry?"

"I say, Aart. This is a shitty case."

Instead of replying right away, I finish chewing my licorice. Then I say softly, "I'm afraid I have the same feeling."

"What are we going to do first?" Ava asks.

"I'd like start by going in and looking at the crime scene.  
There's a VR mirroring record, right?"

She nods, opens the office door, and takes off. I follow her.  
We go into one of the virtual reality rooms. Ava sits down on a  
rolling stool, activates two wall screens, and locks the double  
security door. Then she watches with interest as I untie my ascot  
and take off my jacket, then my shirt. She hands me an escape patch  
that I stick to my left pec. Then I lie back in one of the  
upholstered recliners and pull on my VR helmet.

From this comfortable position I observe how Ava opens her  
training jacket. Under it she wears nothing but a tight sports bra.  
She lifts it up to attach her patch. I can see the dark areola  
around her nipple and feel my penis start to swell. It's truly no  
wonder that so many inspectors and analysts are couples.

Ava comes over to me and hands me an inhaler mask, then lies  
down on the recliner next to me. I turn the dispenser so that the  
curved opening points at me. Hypnoremorol, a detective's best  
friend. Theoretically you could go under without this stuff, but  
it's not recommended. The human brain reacts to the change to  
immersive computer simulations much like an old car reacts to  
shifting gears without first using the clutch -- with groaning and  
grinding. If you do it too often, dissociative gaps or amnesia will  
result, and for an inspector those are serious afflictions.

The hypnoremorol will bring you over gently. As soon as it  
floods synapses, the transition takes place immediately when the VR  
helmet is activated. I test whether the voltage is turned on to the  
helmet. Only then do I take the inhaler in my lips and press down  
the cartridge. With a hiss the aerosol injects into my airway. As  
I do every time, I wonder what the smell is that's rising up in my

nasal passages. I imagine that it has a tinge of raspberry, or maybe vanilla mixed with . . .

Just before I have the answer I'm gone, as always.

When I come to, the first thing I hear is the "plum rain." It's splatting on the top of the tent that Ava has kindly set up at the edge of the highway. I get up out of the camp chair and step outside through the tarp opening. The rain whips into my face, just as it did at the time of the murder. Ava is already waiting for me beside the tent.

"Congrats on your realism," I grumble. "But could you please stop the rain now and lighten things up a bit?"

She mutters something incomprehensible. The sun moves in time-lapse and the rain abruptly stops. Puffy white clouds are floating across the sky of Flanders. It's the first time in three weeks that I've been outside without getting soaked.

I take a few steps across the field and look around. A strange feeling comes over me. As always during mirroring sessions, something inside me is rebelling. I'm aware of a slight nausea and at first have difficulty focusing. It's not because of the simulation, which is excellent. It's probably a mental thing.

I take a deep breath. The air has the freshness it possesses only after a downpour; it smells of soil and ocean salt. The whole thing has been done damned well. Terry gets better from one year to the next.

The dead man lies over there on the ground, a bit drier and less pale than he was a few hours ago. That's because this Pazzi and the 3D orthomosaic of the surroundings have been compiled from those hundreds of thousands of still photos that were taken before I

arrived at the scene. Even the footprints that Paul and his trampling techs left behind in the marsh are gone. My specs tell me that the VR mirroring corresponds to the crime scene as of 0329 hours Central European Time, or ninety-two minutes before I showed up this morning. In a way Ava and I are undertaking a trip through time. You can't think about it too much or you'll go nuts.

I'd like another piece of licorice, but I'm all out and would have to ask Ava to mirror me another tin. Instead I go over to Pazzi's corpse and examine his gunshot wound once again. Bluish glowing letters and numbers appear next to him, along with arrows pointing to various parts of the body. I hear Ava approaching from behind.

When she comes alongside me, she says, "Time of death about 0219 hours. According to his mediwatch he died instantly. One bullet to the back of the head."

"How unsporting."

"Maybe, but viewed professionally an excellent shot at that distance and considering the lighting. The high-velocity shot penetrated his cranium. The enormous shock waves destroyed his brain instantly, with associated damage to the spinal cord, rupture of one carotid artery, and explosion of the eyeball."

"I know what you're trying to tell me."

She continued unperturbed. "Exited a little below the center of the eye. That's probably why some of the skull was left intact, but because of the exit channel the face is mostly gone."

"Show me the ballistics."

Ava gestured with her hand. A red line appeared, leading from our vantage point to a hedgerow on the west side of the field made up of eight poplars. The line ended at the third tree, a bit above

a large branch that looked stable enough to provide a perch for a sniper.

"Original weather," I say.

Ava turns on the rain and the sun is hidden by clouds. Now I see what I had already suspected. The poplar is 104.34 meters away, and through the veil of rain in the dark I can just make out the shape of the tree. Unless Pazzi had his specs connected to a scout drone, he wouldn't have seen the sniper.

"Any drone movements before the murder, Ava?"

She seems to be listening to something only she can hear. Then she says, "None at all. According to Terry's data bank the last recorded drone flew over the field two days earlier, a small delivery helo from UDS."

I notice that the water dripping from my trench coat is forming small puddles on the ground. With one finger I point at the clouds. "That's enough, thank you."

The rain stops.

"What else have we got, Ava? Can you run the whole thing again?"

She nods, and the dead MEP vanishes. She points at the road. "At a spot in the background the mollies found some material abraded from his leather soles. That's where the trail starts."

"So a car must have dropped him off there. Do we know what kind of car?"

"Terry says there was no vehicle that stopped here at the time in question."

"At least not a registered one."

"Right. Every car with a Union number plate and also all transit trucks have a geosignature, and their movements must be

stored indefinitely according to the Enhanced Privacy Act. Of course an experienced criminal could jam it. But our drones would be on top of him within an hour. They don't like cars that refuse to be identified. But maybe the vehicle was sending out a bogus signature from some other registered car. Then it would be left alone for a long time, at least until the original is reported stolen."

"The good old fake-out method. Like the separatists used in the old days in Munich."

"Exactly. One thing is for sure: it must have passed by here somehow." She waved her hand in the air, and Pazzi appeared on the shoulder of the highway. "This is what happened next."

The MEP walks in our direction with measured steps. His gait looks very natural.

"Well done," I compliment my analyst.

She gives a shrug. "A person in public life. Terry has thousands of hours of video material. It's child's play."

Pazzi walks down the slope. Then he stops and lights a cigarette, which makes me envious. After flicking the ash once, he continues walking. Now he is 29.34 meters away from us. Pazzi takes another drag and then throws away the butt and stands still. Slowly he tips his head back, his arms hanging at his sides, and begins to murmur something. It can only mean one thing.

"He's looking at something in his specs."

Ava freeze-frames him and says, "According to Terry he sent a text to Peter Heuberger."

"So early in the morning?"

"Delayed delivery. It was set for delivery at 8:30."

"Contents?"

"It said: 'Have to talk. Dinner at 7:30 tonight at Hotel Lotte?' He seemed certain that Heuberger would accept, because he also reserved a table for three at the same time."

"How come three? Who else was invited?"

"Terry says there's no data on that."

"Prognosis based on previous meetings?"

"Based on his social contacts and his dining history, the most likely persons are Alan Thompson, British MEP; Heidi Garcia, lobbyist for the Solar Energy Association; or Jong de Klerk, a jazz musician. All friends of Pazzi. But according to Terry the probability is less than 25 percent, because in 91 percent of recorded instances Pazzi and Heuberger would dine together with no other guests – and if I'm looking at the data right, always in restaurants outside the Europa district."

"Very discreet, these boys."

"Looks that way. After making the reservation he didn't use the specs again. And there were no point-of-view recordings either." Ava mutters something, and Pazzi is again in motion. He paces back and forth a bit and looks straight through us into the rain. He stops one meter to the left of Ava. He waits, pacing a little, looking all around – at least that's how Terry interprets his movements. Then Pazzi's face explodes in a pink cloud, and he falls. He turns as he falls, landing on his right shoulder and rolling onto his back. Shortly before impact I hear the boom of the rifle.

Pazzi has to die many more times before I'm satisfied. Ava makes him march across the field over and over. From various angles I watch him fall: in real time, in slow motion, in stop-motion.

"Now let's go to the poplars," I say. Ava could zoom us over

there, but I'm old-fashioned. All these special effects give me a headache. So I walk. When I arrive, Ava is already sitting on the branch in question, 5.21 meters above me. She looks down at me in amusement.

"You don't actually want to climb up here, do you, Aart?"

"Yes, I certainly do."

"But why? I can fly you up here. If that's too surreal for you, I can also conjure up a hydraulic lift, that will —"

"The world is full of obvious things that no one ever notices."

"Was that a quote?"

I nod. "Arthur Conan Doyle. One drawback of virtual forensics is that it makes us forget the obvious."

Ava rolls her eyes like a teenager hearing a dusty old story from my youth. I ignore her reaction, pull off my trench coat, and start looking for a good handhold.

"The obvious," I gasp as I swing up onto one of the lower branches, "in this case is that we can fly. The murderer, on the other hand, had to climb the tree in the conventional manner."

It takes me about two minutes to make it to the branch. I skip asking Ava for another rain shower, which would have made the climb more realistic. Because then I might have fallen from the slippery pixel-poplar into the virtual mud, and I didn't want to give my analyst the satisfaction. But even this way I'm pretty sure that any man in halfway decent shape would be able to reach that branch without climbing equipment. As we sit there looking over at Pazzi, who is standing motionless in the middle of the field, I realize that this must have been a William Tell shot. First the rain, the darkness, and the somewhat too steep angle. Add to this the fact that the shooter must have held the weapon very still to make such a

shot to the head. Possible if he's standing on solid ground.  
Difficult if he's crouching on a wet branch.

"Any traces?" I ask.

"The molly drones found abrasions from his clothes and equipment, but no viable DNA. Just a sec, I've got a projection."

Next to us on the branch a man without a face appears. He looks a little like those holographic display-window puppets in the Galleries Lafayette. He's wearing black army boots, black cargo pants, and a camo poncho whose colors match the bark and foliage. In his hands he holds a Jericho 42C pointed at Pazzi, who is still awaiting his inevitable fate.

Ava lets the killer fire. "The plastic of the bullet ridges is largely vaporized with no residue, but a few molecules adhere to the tree trunk. He fired only one shot."

I shake my head. "That doesn't make sense. That's not how a pro would do it."

"I'm about to hear some soldier wisdom coming from the Solar War, right?"

"Right. If I wanted to shoot someone from the rear with an assault rifle that is practically recoilless, I'd set it to full automatic."

Ava frowned. "While balancing on a tree branch?"

"Okay, then maybe just semi-auto. But after the first hit I'd do a double-tap to make sure."

"But Pazzi was killed instantly by the first shot to the head. So the shooter could save his ammo."

"And how would he know that? Pazzi is only a tiny figure viewed from here. Pros never worry about saving ammo. And they never aim at the head."

She mutters something and then nods. "Terry agrees with you. Based on the cases in his data bank."

"What's in there?"

"Europol forensics, mirroring of separatist actions, attacks by North African terrorists, mafia contract killings, stuff like that. Terry has evaluated all lethal shots from distances of fifty to three hundred meters. His prediction is that a professional shooter in the current scenario would opt for a body shot to the upper part of the back, with 93 percent probability."

It's great to have statistical backup even though I already knew this.

Ava gives me an expectant look. "Where would you have aimed, Aart?"

"I was never a sharpshooter. But the best spot is definitely the upper back. That way you shred the spine, lungs, and maybe the aorta and heart. You can't get much deadier than that."

"But he aimed at the head," she objected. "What does that tell us about the killer?"

"Probably that he's rather arrogant. Convinced of his skill."

"And obviously with good reason."

I point at the surrounding area. "Do we know where he came from and where he went to afterward?"

"Judging by the traces he came from the road, like Pazzi. How much earlier is impossible to determine. Terry estimates an hour. And he went back the same way. Here too there's no sign there was a vehicle involved."

This is a lousy case. Every added detail, or rather the lack thereof, makes that crystal clear. With a probability bordering on certainty it was a politically motivated hit. The only run-of-the-

mill criminals who manage to wipe out their tracks so professionally are the British-Russian mob, but I'd rather not think about the Britskis.

And as if all that isn't bad enough, Ava suddenly says, "You have a priority call."

I rub my eyes. "Patch it through."

Polite people conceal their unannounced entry into an ongoing mirroring session by selecting the most subtle method of communication. A dial telephone icon on a tablet is popular for paging, and once a white dove with a letter in its beak landed on my hand.

Naturally such refinements are foreign to Vogel. He simply barges into a session, and his bellowing voice seems to be coming from somewhere beyond the fluffy white clouds. Moses must have felt something similar when his wrathful Old Testament God thundered reproaches. I ask myself whether the effect is intentional, or whether Vogel is simply incapable of doing it any other way. I'm betting on the latter.

"Westerhuizen! Get out of there! I want to see you in my office now!"

"Gladly, Chief." I give Ava a sign and everything around me goes black.

As always after a mirroring session, I feel like I killed a whole bottle of gin the night before. But it was no more than three or four glasses. Apparently people can pick up on my hung-over mood, because when I run into Marquez and Kaczynski at the elevator they abstain from the stupid wisecracks they usually regale me with. Instead Marquez gives me an almost sympathetic look through his

bluish-tinted specs.

"The Pazzi case, Westerhuizen?" I nod and dig in my pocket for some licorice. Marquez and Kaczynski have been tied up for weeks trying to infiltrate a smuggling ring that brings drugs and weapons from abroad into the Union, presumably through Sicily. The case seems to have stalled.

"Still working on the smugglers?"

Marquez grunts. He has the face of a bulldog who stayed out in the sun too long. Since it's been pouring in Brussels for more than three weeks, I suggest he take tanning pills. He tilts his blocky head back and forth as if he's trying to loosen up his neck muscles. "A fucking lousy case. But not as shitty as yours, right? A dead MEP. That'll stir things up."

"Is it true you have hardly any leads?" Kaczynski asks. While Marquez looks like a dogfight contender, the Pole reminds me more of a vulture: long neck, a hectically bouncing Adam's apple, and tousled flaxen hair that has been on the retreat for several years, letting his pale scalp shine through. A few of Marquez's tanning tablets would do him good.

His sanctimonious questions make me furious. He could get the basic points about the Pazzi case anytime from Terry. Apparently he's been reading the crap straight off his specs. But he asks me anyway out of sheer cussedness.

"We don't know how Pazzi and his killer arrived at the crime scene, and we have no signature for the weapon. But we will soon."

At that instant I have an idea. "You guys are experts on smuggling. How would someone get an assault rifle from the war zone into the Union undetected?"

Kaczynski shrugs. "There are plenty of ways."

"How? You guys have been digging around in that case of yours for over a week, but you still don't have any idea how it works?"

As I expected, Marquez's bulldog jaw started snapping up and down in the face of this accusation. He tries to look fierce. "We know exactly how it works, Westerhuizen."

"Then how?"

Marquez pauses for effect. He probably thinks he's building tension that way. But the only thing building up is boredom. After an eternity he says, "Human mules are passé. Terry's predictive software can identify smugglers before they've even shoved the goods halfway up their asshole. The newest thing is hobo drones."

"What's a hobo?" I ask.

"It's English. That's what they used to call tramps in the States who traveled the country riding the blinds on trains."

"They hung underneath the train cars," Kaczynski explained. "Back then they didn't go faster than 40 kilometers an hour."

"That must have been a really long time ago," I venture.

Marquez grunts in agreement. "Around 1970 or so. These hobo drones do the same thing. They look for a train or a megatruck and latch on underneath it. Then they shut down all their systems so they can't be detected by scanners. They don't have much cargo space, they're only about so big." He holds his hands to indicate something about the size of a mop bucket. "But it's enough room for dismantled weapons, explosives, drugs, human organs, whatever."

"Interesting," I say tonelessly. "If you'll excuse me, I have to go see Vogel."

The two look at each other and grin. "Oh, Vogel? My condolences," says Kaczynski. "Better you than me."

"No problem, pal. If you keep floundering around with that

smuggling ring for another couple of weeks, you'll probably get an audience with him too."

Without another word I leave both of them standing there and get into the elevator. I tell it that I'm going to the chief's office, which is on the top floor of the building. Before you're allowed into the office of Jérôme Vogel, you have to go through no fewer than three security checkpoints. I walk with measured steps down the long corridor to give the hummers and scanners plenty of time to inspect every crevice of my skin. At regular intervals on both sides of the wide hallway stand neoclassical statues, no doubt reproductions that are stuffed with security and defense technology. In between hang picture frames of gilded plaster whose media foils depict important symbols of the Union. I pass by New Brandenburg Gate, the Eiffel Tower, the Colosseum, and the Temple Mount. Right next to the door to Vogel's office hang Buckingham Palace and Stonehenge, providing a little comic relief.

I stand in front of the entrance. Since the systems have already announced my arrival, I walk in without knocking. Vogel is sitting at his immense desk. Behind him there's a panoramic window reaching almost to the floor through which he can look down upon Regentschapstraat. That's where the old Palais Royal is located, now the seat of the European Commission. So Vogel sits there with his employer literally looking over his shoulder, but the situation doesn't seem to faze him.

Anyway, it's scarcely imaginable that anything would bother Jérôme Vogel. The Alsatian possesses not only the sensitivity of a hippopotamus, but also its thick skin. He's in his late sixties and has already outlived half a dozen Commission presidents, dozens of intrigues, and at least four assassination attempts. He weighs 310

pounds and leaves his office chair only when absolutely necessary – which means almost never, because of the steadily improving mirroring technology. When he catches sight of me, he runs his right hand over the shaved back of his head and fixes his penetrating steel-blue eyes on me.

“Good morning, Westerhuizen.”

This is the friendliest greeting I’ve heard from Vogel in at least two years. It makes me suspicious at once.

“Good morning, Chief.”

He motions toward the visitor’s chair. “I’ve just been on the phone with Ms. Özal. The Commission President is extremely upset about Pazzi’s death.”

“She’s probably more upset about the constitutional plebiscite.”

“Six weeks before the vote this case comes at a really bad time. For all of us, I might add.”

“You follow the political circus more closely than I do, Chief. Was Pazzi somehow involved in this whole constitutional affair?”

Vogel attempts to shake his head. Not too easy when you have practically no neck. “He wasn’t one of those pulling the strings, if that’s what you mean. But he was always opposed to the withdrawal of the Brits and in favor of the integrity of the Union.”

“There’s a certain irony in hearing an Italian say something like that.”

The Chief waves his hand dismissively. “Unlike the Mezzogiorno, we would have liked to retain Great Britain. Wasn’t your wife from England?”

Once again Vogel shows his enormous tact by mentioning my late wife. “She was from Wales.”

“I see. Anyway, the United Kingdom is out; in six weeks the

exit clause takes effect. Pazzi was neutral on the matter.”

“According to political observers?”

“According to Terry. After all his data streams were unsealed, I had a political congruence program written,” he says, casting me a disapproving glance, “which you apparently have so far neglected.”

“I considered it more important to reconstruct the sequence of events, Chief.”

“And I await your report ASAP. Terry’s congruence analysis shows that Pazzi’s public and private remarks agreed with 77 percent of the Liberal Party’s platform.”

“Not a bad number. Almost an honest politician.”

Vogel, a member of the Conservatives, ignores my remark. “With regard to the constitutional reform, however, the matter is somewhat more vague. There was a 57 percent probability that he would have voted in favor of it.”

“That’s just Terry’s way of saying that he doesn’t know which way Pazzi would have voted, isn’t it? Do you suspect a political motive?”

Vogel lays his massive paw on the oak desk. “We have to assume the worst. What do you think, Westerhuizen? Separatists? Mafiosi?”

I give a shrug. “Nothing in his dossier hints that Pazzi had any contact with either the Britskis or the ‘Ndrangheta in Calabria. The current terrorist groups are possible suspects because he was an MEP. So far all we know for sure is that it was pros who pulled off the hit. There are almost no usable leads at the scene.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

So much for his previous cordiality.

“I’ve run mirroring two and three times, molecular scans,

hummingbirds, the whole schmear. But so far we don't even know how Pazzi got to that field. Everything seems to indicate that it was a well-planned execution. With terrorists we always get a statement claiming responsibility – and the Web would have been full of 360-degree views of Pazzi's head exploding. You know how much these guys love execution videos."

I tell Vogel what I gleaned from the mirroring session, and that Pazzi was possibly whacked with a weapon from the Cohesion Forces. His expression turns even darker, if that's possible.

"You are to stop what you're doing at once, Westerhuizen!"

"Understood, Chief."

"I want this case cleared up within 48 hours."

I feel my throat go dry. "I can't promise you –"

"I'm not demanding that you have the case completely solved by then. But I am demanding a report on the investigative status, which will permit me to feed a story to the guys over there," he motions with his thumb over his right shoulder toward the Commission Palace, "and to the members of Parliament, the Council, and of course the fucking public that will make the late Pazzi look as boring as possible. Initially the media will do its spin, but after that I need to restore peace and quiet."

"I'll do my best."

- End of sample -