

Code Red



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Preface

How Transhuman Dream Was Born

This project stems from an idea that took shape over years of role-playing, both as a player and a dungeon master. During this time, the various characters that inhabit the world of *Transhuman Dream* came to life—each one carefully developed in both physical and psychological detail. The plot is inspired by Andrea's passion for sci-fi, cyberpunk, and post-apocalyptic narratives, aiming to tell a compelling story that tackles contemporary themes of a scientific, philosophical, and esoteric nature.

Our Gaming Experience

In 2021, during the height of the pandemic crisis, Andrea decided to involve his close group of friends in an interactive adventure that could entertain them even during that difficult period. In that escape from reality, the three protagonist characters featured on the covers of this trilogy were created: Joseph, Beta, and Blue.

What Is a Role-Playing Game

For those unfamiliar with it, a role-playing game is an interactive experience where participants portray imaginary characters, living adventures guided by a narrator (Dungeon Master). It's a way to explore fantastic worlds, develop collaborative stories, and bring unique characters to life through shared imagination.

The Idea

A few years after the saga ended, Salvatore (a.k.a. Joseph), driven by his passion for the universe he'd experienced through his character's eyes, proposed to Andrea that they attempt this publishing adventure. From that moment, daily commitment and dedication became a cornerstone of their lives, finally leading them to the realization of this work.

Our Objective

We want to introduce our readers to the vast world of role-playing games, particularly the one our characters experienced. The goal is to convey strong emotions: adrenaline, suspense, a vision of humanity's imminent future, and the transformations awaiting our society.

For this project, we studied extensively, trying to develop a personal style: cinematic, tight, and gripping during action scenes; softer and more immersive in sequences describing the characters and their daily lives.

We are not professional writers, but we have a passion that has always driven us to write. We hope our effort has been enough to make the reading enjoyable. We are ready to receive your criticism, hoping for the occasional compliment.

The Evolution

The story of Transhuman Dream was developed by its creator over the course of fifteen years, starting in 2010, but it only came to light in 2021, and then became a literary work three years later, at the beginning of 2024.

Creating a writing style worthy of the work's complexity was not simple: it required great effort, study, and dedication. We are confident we can improve further and that the second and third parts of the trilogy will be even more refined.

Acknowledgments

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We thank all those who believed in our project, particularly our families and our dearest friends.

Andrea thanks his life partner, Laura, who supported and endured him during the long writing process, and his son, little Adam, who inspired him to give his best in this project.

Salvatore thanks his mother, Elisabetta, and his sister, Sara, for spurring him on to the very end, fueling his enthusiasm, and firmly believing in his vision and abilities. He thanks Dr. Martina Truppo for giving him the necessary push to “take flight” and the tools to fearlessly face this journey into the unknown.

Reading Instructions

We recommend our readers pay attention to some narrative devices we used during writing:

- ◇ Under the title of each chapter and during some scene changes, you will find QR codes. We invite you to scan them to enjoy an immersive experience thanks to musical pieces carefully chosen for each specific situation.
- ◇ Some paragraphs contain lines of code. Example: “>> SYSTEM LOG: Running Year 2098, Washington D.C.” These are not mere decorations, but play an active role within the narrative. We recommend paying attention to them.
- ◇ Words between two asterisks suggest a more pronounced tone during reading. Example: “It was *you* who framed me!”
- ◇ Technical and futuristic terminology, in addition to names of important companies or organizations, are presented in *italics* to highlight them (only at first occurrence).

We wish you all a good read. Have fun and get excited alongside our characters on this journey into humanity's future.



Chapter 1

The Hive



>> SYSTEM LOG: Running Year 2098, Washington D.C.

The White House courtyard had become a graveyard of twisted steel. Scorching embers were carried by the wind, burning Red's throat with every breath.

Spirals of black smoke rose skyward, strangling tattered flags that dangled like hanged corpses.

The once-perfect lawn was no more.

In its place, a stretch of jagged craters pulsed like an open wound, while the sky, a molten metal pour, was slashed by the violent beams of defense system spotlights.

Red tightened his fist around the coin while studying the battlefield.

He was the last standing. His unit — scattered, slaughtered — no longer existed. Not that it mattered now.

An implacable army deployed before him: drones slicing the air among ruins, emitting sharp whistles; androids trampled over a field of lifeless soldiers; automated turrets climbed the walls, spitting streams of plasma.

The metallic stench of raw fuel mingled with the sickly-sweet reek of charred flesh.

Red inhaled. A blink.

“Three seconds, three thousand times.”

> rewind()

Time contracted. His pupils vibrated as information flowed. Lightning-fast images pierced his mind. Every trajectory. Every shot. Every enemy countermoves.

Wind: 4.2 knots. Particulate matter concentration: 43 mg/m³

> Winning scenario found: #2112

Then he charged.

The gold coin slipped between his fingers: metallic, cold, lethal.

The ground exploded.

He jumped left anticipating the laser. The counterfeit dollar spun in the air, deflecting the red beam. A flash. Perfection.

The first turret shut down in a hiss.

The android didn't react in time. Red was already in motion, calculating trajectories in real time.

One step. Retrieve. Twist. Throw.

The token ricocheted off the drone's carapace, tracing a precise angle. It pierced the android's synthetic skull, shattering its circuits.

Enemy neutralized.

Red surged forward, snatching his precious relic mid-flight. Warm. Deadly. A perfect weapon in his hands.

New drones emerging from the shadows. Turrets in recalibration.

He brushed his helmet. "Blue, status."

Silence, then a cascade of explosions in his earpiece. Blue's voice was sharp, alive. "I've ripped half the dome. They're deploying thermal shields."

Red scanned the field. Every second counted. Every action had to be flawless.

"Green?"

A calm whisper through the comm. No background fire. Steady breathing.

"General neutralized. Server located on the lower levels."

New variables. New scenario. Time remaining: critical.

"Blue, distract them. Make them turn the shield upward."

"Copy that." Pure ferocity.

The sky trembled. Soon it would become hell.

"Green, reach that server. I'll cover you from outside."

He inhaled again. New simulation.

Then he plunged into the firestorm, coin clenched between his fingers. There was no room for error. Only coded instinct and death calibrated to the millisecond.



>> SYSTEM LOG: Running Year 2097, Neo Babylon

The metropolis throbbed beneath a leaden sky, suspended between artificial twilight and neon gleams that sliced through darkness like electric veins.

Bionic silhouettes streaked by on hoverboards, leaving glowing trails that dissolved in the dense air, heaved by chemical vapors.

In the narrow alleys, amid mountains of discarded tech components, a throng of vendors hawked exotic goods, projecting holograms from handheld devices. Every deal was supervised by insect-like drones buzzing above the crowd.

A body fell from above, landing with a dull thud against the concrete. No one stopped when the dark blood flowed against wastes.

Only small cleaner-bots noticed the scene, clinging to the carcass, disassembling usable implants and recycling organic compounds. Tomorrow, someone else would walk the same pavement, oblivious to what had happened.

The entire system breathed, alive — a hybrid organism of flesh and technology in eternal decomposition and rebirth.

The stench of toxic miasma gave way to purified air as the human mass thinned toward the upper levels, an incurable disease where only the symptoms were treated.

The transition from slums to the corporate district was marked by streets sterilized through chemical nebulizers and *hologlass* barriers separating pedestrians from lower levels, broadcasting relentless propaganda and advertising.

At the edge of this border zone, a loud crash caught the attention of bystanders. A man — six mechanical arms snapping into action, each one independent but coordinated in their movements — didn't hesitate when he struck the public projector, shattering it with his metallic fist.

The fragments rained onto the sidewalk, and his face, distorted by unauthorized facial implants, disappeared from the hologram identifying him: *Class S fugitive*.

“Damn informants,” he hissed, without stopping or looking back. His iron hand trembled, not from fear but from chemical rage, synaptic enhancers melting his nervous system.

Passersby moved aside, some disgusted, others with the morbid curiosity of those living safely enough to afford observing danger. No one called the authorities. No one moved to stop him.

Beneath its opulent veneer, Neo Babylon hid a dark underbelly: crime slithered like a contaminated river, infiltrating every level of society.

As the fugitive vanished into the crowd — several blocks away and twenty floors higher — a crystalline drop of water slid down the spine of the all-seeing system.

Joseph ran a hand through his hair. His fingers lingered on the scar at the base of his skull, brushing the corporate identification mark hidden beneath his dark locks.

He didn’t look in the mirror. He didn’t need to.

He crossed the apartment with measured steps, the towel barely covering the essentials. Droplets of water traced clean trails on his skin like patterns on a living circuit. He stopped in front of the hologlass, dressed in the precision of someone who has every inch of their space down to a science.

His palm rested on the cold silicon. Five seconds of silence triggered, a privilege for level-eight *AndrusDynamics* employees. The incessant whispering of slogans and jingles began to fade.

“Accept,” he murmured to the system, and the advertisements disappeared entirely.

Neo Babylon unfolded before him. The skyscrapers, blades of oxidized steel and opaque glass, pierced the low curtain of industrial smog; their reflecting façades stained by decades of acid rain.

Joseph’s reflection fractured against the skyline; his face sliced by neon signs and surveillance drones. His blue irises captured that image and analyzed it with cold detachment.

His lips curved in an automatic muscular reaction.

“The city, like a tentacled monster, grapples to the sky, devouring the light and hopes of men.”

He recited the ancient verse without emotion, like an access code to a long-forgotten system.

The screen resumed, vomiting a visual cacophony of artificial colors and empty promises. The five seconds had expired with the chronometric precision of an execution.

Joseph stepped away from the window without a backward glance. The droplets on the floor marked the path of his movement — faint footprints that would vanish before his return.

He crossed the threshold into the living room. His right arm stretched automatically toward the control panel. His fingers danced in a familiar sequence: nine precise touches, the same code he used to access his office.

The walls activated. The sterile apartment came alive in a spectacle of floating holograms that filled the empty space. Digital volumes, graphic interfaces, corporate reports — all meticulously arranged according to an invisible taxonomy that only he understood.

The bar drone’s optical sensors detected his presence. It hummed. The cocktail was assembled: amber liquids poured with clockwork precision.

Joseph’s irises glowed; his cybernetic ocular implants calibrated the internal brightness, projecting onto the artificial retina a constant stream of data. News headlines scrolled in one corner of his vision, stock indices pulsed in another, while the center remained free for immediate environmental analysis.

He grabbed the glass. The rum burned — a rare organic sensation in a body growing ever more synthetic. He didn’t drink for pleasure but out of necessity, emotional fuel in an aseptic society.

His workday projected across his augmented mind: fragmented sequences of white corridors, faces of subordinates avoiding his gaze, superiors nodding in approval.

He saw himself walking past rows of technicians bent over their consoles. He walked down the hallway with methodical detachment, checking projects, signing authorizations, performing each task in a mechanical efficiency.

AetherVerse — his creation, his burden. Personalized virtual universes for those who could afford to escape reality without ever leaving it. Digital toys for Neo Babylon’s wealthy, legal drugs that he himself designed but never consumed.

An incoming call cut through the silence. Joseph didn’t flinch, but the glass stopped mid-air. The hologram materialized on its own, there was no need to activate it — a privilege reserved for few contacts on his list.

“Looking good, Wampler.” The figure staring at him had a crown of eyes blinking in asynchronous sequence. “Still drinking that garbage?”

“Better than your eyedrops.” A quick, near-invisible smile. “I still remember when you had only two.”

Malakian blinked all eight of his eyelids — the equivalent to a laugh in his augmented body language. “And remember when you said you’d stay clean? Zero grafts, zero implants?”

“I also remember when we promised to get rich without getting our hands dirty.” Joseph swirled the amber liquid, gaze locked on the reflection of it. “Look at us now.”

The tone shifted. Malakian leaned forward, reducing the virtual space between them. The sudden inclination of his torso betrayed his haste, the urgent need to share information.

“I intercepted an encrypted communication.” The central pupils dilated, the peripheral ones contracted — intense concentration. “There’s an Exo.Co. convoy approaching. Five armored vehicles, at least twenty soldiers with heavy equipment.”

Joseph set down his drink, shifting to a more serious tone. “Exo.Co. went under during the last war. Who’s still using their brand?”

“That’s the point.” Malakian showed a three-dimensional projection on his palm. “Guards’ profiles don’t match any active corporate database. They exist, but officially they don’t.”

“Like our offshore accounts.” The corporative stood up, walking through the hologram with no consideration. “What’s the route?”

“Sector 21, then a diversion toward demilitarized territories. If you observe this pattern...” A luminous path appeared in the projection. “... they’re systematically dodging high-surveillance zones.”

Joseph studied those details for a moment, then gave a curt nod. “They’re using the old maintenance tunnels. There’s one open stretch where we can intercept them before they make it into the city.”

“The abandoned junction under the old runoff tunnel.” Malakian completed that deduction. “But there’s a problem. Sensors indicate they have advanced defense systems. Military-grade stuff, not simple corporate security.”

“Yet they use a defunct logo and obsolete routes.” Joseph traced an invisible line in the air, sifting through data only he could see. “It makes no sense, unless...”

“Unless they’re transporting something that shouldn’t appear in official records.” Malakian’s eyes flashed in sequence. “Something worth hundreds of thousands of millions of *tickets*.”

Joseph paused, head tilted to one side. A nervous tic of the eyelid revealed the excitement concealed by the rest of his body. “How many men do you have available?”

“You’re supplying the men. I only have one associate.”

Joseph returned to his glass, emptied it in a single dry gulp. “Fine. But get ready to crawl out of your hole. This time you’re coming in person.”

Malakian clenched a jaw that was no longer entirely organic. “Last time I went out, I lost two eyes.”

“And gained six in return.” Joseph smiled. “Or are you scared of hitting double digits?”

Malakian’s eyelids blinked in a chaotic pattern, and for a moment he seemed almost human in his irritation. “You’d love to see me covered in eyeballs, wouldn’t you?”

“I’d love that number of tickets.” The corporate ignored the wardrobe as it opened.

“Four hours before they reach the point of no return.”

“We need Beta for this operation.” His finger slid through the air, tracing invisible patterns and selecting clothes maintaining his focus on the hologram.

The suit emerged from the wall: dark fiber treated with kevlar, impeccable cut that hid functionality beneath appearance. Polished shoes completed the ensemble — glossy, sharp, silent.

“I assume you know him.” A statement, not a question. “Talks too much, but knows how to move in the shadows.”

Malakian narrowed his eyelids, visibly puzzled. “The slum guy? The one with the cyber-tongue? He’s not... stable.”

“None of us are.” Joseph arched an eyebrow, a minimal gesture that contained volumes of meaning. “But he knows the streets better than anyone. We need him.”

“You sure?”

“He owes me a favor. A big one.”

The call ended. No goodbyes, no pleasantries. The corporate visualized the neural interface, a private galaxy of icons that only he could explore. He filtered, sorted, discarded — precise mental commands.

Beta appeared, not a name but a composite portrait of information: debts, favors, abilities, risks. A touch of thought established contact.

The man smiled through the connection. “Joe! Thought you’d forgotten about me!”

Every muscle in Joseph’s face tightened, a micro-spasm imperceptible to anyone except Beta.

“For you, it’s Mr. Wampler.” Controlled voice, modulated to convey authority and entirely devoid of irritation.

Beta widened his smile, his tongue flicking visibly between his teeth. “Right, right. Always so formal! How long have we been dancing together? Three years?”

"We've collaborated for thirty-seven months. We're not friends."

A theatrical sigh from the other side of the connection. Beta lowered his shoulders in a studied gesture of surrender. "All right, all right. *Mister* Wampler." The emphasis was a micro-rebellion. "How may I be of service, *Sir*? Couldn't you send me a text like all the other corporates?"

Joseph studied the man, calculating how much to reveal. "Military-grade convoy. Five armored vehicles." The words fell like counted coins. "Non-standard route. Cargo of incalculable value."

Beta stopped smiling. The change in attitude was total and immediate. "When?"

"Three hours, forty-seven minutes." Joseph stifled the surge of emotion: hurry, greed, excitement. "The operational window is twelve minutes. No margin for error."

"Payment?"

"More than you could spend."

Beta tilted his head, evaluating. The calculation was visible in the way his eyes moved, erratic. "All right, I'm in. But I want to know everything." His gaze sharpened. "*Everything*. No secrets, no dark corners. If I die, I want to know why."

Joseph let exactly three seconds pass — no indecision, no hesitation, but a calculated pause to convey seriousness. "Fine. But only in person. Sunlight. One hour."

"Bring a *diver* as advance payment." Beta smiled again, but it was a different smile, professional. "Not a moron like the last one."

Joseph nodded just once, an invisible signature worth more than any contract. The connection broke, leaving only silence to seal the deal.

He turned towards the window, disgusted by the insistent advertisements. For a moment, almost imperceptible, an emotion passed through him: it wasn't greed, it wasn't excitement.

It was hunger.

He remained indifferent when Malakian's avatar invaded his field of vision.

"I'm almost at your place. I brought the friend I told you about."

"Good. But you vouch for him. My driver will arrive shortly."

His thumb caressed his wrist and the *smart-ink* changed shape: time had run out.

Joseph thought of Alonso's name and his image materialized, biometric data scrolling beside the round face.

The driver jumped. A shiver ran through him, shaking the prominent belly that pressed against the steering wheel.

"I need you." Joseph's tone was calm, but the meaning was sharp as a blade.

The driver glanced at the woman in the passenger seat, the blush still vivid on her cheeks.

"A job? Now?" He asked, uncertain. "I'm..."

"I don't care what you're doing." No inflection, just facts. "This is priority."

A curse under his breath. Sweat on Alonso's forehead glistened in the dim light of the cabin.

"You see... I'm in an... important negotiation." The words came out uncertain, one last attempt. "I can't..."

Joseph knew very well what kind of 'negotiations' occupied his driver.

"Listen to me." A command, not a request. "Ten minutes, or you're out."

"Alright, boss." His voice reduced to a whisper.

"Not *all right*. Now! Stop wasting my time."

The hologram disappeared in a cascade of defective pixels.

A mental impulse, and Malakian was back in his field of vision.

"The driver's coming." The corporate lowered his gaze to the *derma-watch* function and activated the timer. "I'm heading out."

Joseph Wampler left the AndrusDynamics-branded building with measured, almost military steps.

A constant hum of underground machinery pulsed through the cracked concrete, blended in the metallic wail of magnetic trains traversing the city.

In a distracted gesture, he adjusted his jacket cuff. The golden dress studs shone in the artificial light, showing his name's initials. Beneath the suit, the *Spar-K handgun* rested in its holster, invisible to most but just as much a part of his being as the silk tie.

The cold wind stung his cheeks, but failed to crack his composure.

He headed toward the white sedan. The corporation logo, a gleaming stylized 'A', unfurled across the hood like an infection. The driver was at the wheel, his massive body leaning forward, peering out the window.

Joseph lowered his sight to the derma-watch. A quick impulse and the timer stopped. Eleven minutes and forty-two seconds. He had granted ten.

"Sir." Alonso trembled slightly. "I apologize for the inconvenience earlier. It won't happen again."

A glance at his wrist, then at Alonso. The corporate was unreadable. "One minute and forty-two seconds late. I'll turn a blind eye this time. Do well tonight, and you'll see something extra in your account."

Hope painted itself across the driver's face. "Thank you, boss. I won't disappoint you."

Alonso's stained jacket said more about the social gap between them than any words ever could.

Two figures emerged from the alley. The metallic clang of Malakian's steps echoed on the asphalt. His white coat hung open over a bare chest, exposing six cybernetic weapons where his arms once were.

"This is Albert Skuler," his voice scratched the silence. "and this is Joseph Wampler, from Andrus."

The two allowed themselves a moment of mutual assessment.

The hooded figure said nothing. A gas mask concealed his appearance, revealing only two yellow slits. The military tactical suit and sniper rifle spoke for him.

Joseph stiffened slightly; his right hand slipped into his pocket, not a casual gesture. The other remained motionless, the slits aimed at him, as if they were crosshairs.

Neither made the slightest movement toward the other.

The hitman wouldn't stoop to touch a man in a suit. The corporate wouldn't sully his skin with that of a killer.

In the car, Alonso held his breath.

"What, too shy for a handshake?" Malakian's grin revealed teeth too white and regular. "Let me introduce my two best friends who already hate each other!"

No one took the bait.

They headed toward the vehicle, without uttering a sound.

The driver got out with surprising speed for his bulk, and opened the doors. "Please, don't sit on the stain in the center..." he warned as the techno-medic was about to settle down. "...it's not fruit juice."

"I'll shoot him Joseph, I swear... capisce?" Malakian's tone had a shade of irony that didn't erase the threat hidden within it.

"We'll pick up Elwin. Beta needs a diver." Joseph's tone was icy.

Albert slid in his seat. Not even a breath escaped the mask, as if nothing human hid behind it.

The car moved into the night, swallowed by shadows. The hunt for the convoy had begun.