

## PROVING GROUNDS

Robert Franks gasped for breath, his chest heaving. He stumbled to a standstill on the gritty walkway, suspended high above the bustling heart of Manhattan. His hair, frayed, matted, and tangled. A glaring opposite to his piercing, crystal-clear hazel eyes, ablaze with an untamed intensity. These eyes, dilated with adrenaline, drew the attention of any passerby who happened to catch a glimpse of his reflection in the moonlight. His three-day-old greying stubble only intensified his unusual transformation, casting him in the likeness of a mysterious midnight jogger from a bygone era.

Despite his role as CEO of BBT, today's disheveled appearance starkly differed from his usual guise. That of a defiant Wall Street maverick, clad in bespoke Cesar Attolini suits.

Typically, his jet-black hair was slicked back, semi-pompadour style, a symbol of defiance against conformity, his only hint in his otherwise clean-cut, groomed, meticulous appearance, right down to the mani-pedi.

Cars thundered endlessly across the bridge, their engines echoing a collective empty hum. The night wind, a blend of winter's sharpness and autumn's remnants, bit with a frosty ferocity. Franks, standing exposed, felt its sting acutely. A bracing gust welcomed him, sending a shiver through his body.

Beads of chilled sweat glistened on his forehead, mingling with the grime of the city that had solidified on his face. Trembling, he reached for the water bottle on his retro hydration waist pack and took a fervent, hasty swig.

He gazed up at the lamplight above the bridge, its warm radiance cutting through the darkness. The warm yellow glow provided a welcome distraction from the harsh wind and the strain on his lungs. Strangely, this simple light wove a spell of tranquility, surpassing even the allure of the sea below. The crashing waves and salty breeze lost their appeal as he found solace in the embrace of man-made light. Perhaps it was a wish of warmth. Or the comfort of artificial illumination, a testament to

human ingenuity amid nature's vast unforgiving and unpredictable viciousness.

A bark beside Franks brought his attention back to the bridge and the newest AI military-grade civil defense system, standing at the ready beside him. He called it Razor, a robotic dog so flawlessly crafted that it deceived even the most discerning eye. The creation was leaps and bounds improved from its *Spot* predecessors at Boston Dynamics. Its glossy, metallic frame mirrored the appearance of a real canine, its movements and mannerisms mimicking nature to an astonishing degree.

To him, it was his new pet. But more importantly, a key investment that would generate the uptick his company desperately needed this quarter to put them back on top of the tech world.

"Look at you." He smiled. "You could go to the next city without breaking a sweat, couldn't you?"

Equipped with advanced artificial intelligence, Razor possessed an uncanny ability to comprehend human interaction to varying degrees. Its optical sensors homed in on the movements of Franks' lips and voice vibrations, calculating whether his words were of a civilian or military nature. Its head tilting with an air of intrigue.

Determining Franks was exercising human banter in an attempt at bonding further with him, Razor let out a bark and nudged its Rottweiler shaped head toward the desolate path ahead, as if telling Franks, it was time to finish his run.

"How long has it been since I started running?" Franks asked. "Feels like it's been hours."

Razor's processors whirred momentarily before a holographic image shot out from its eye.

Franks grimaced. "Don't tell me it's only been twenty-five minutes?"

Razor barked.

He sighed. "Just last month, I could do an hour without feeling so exhausted."

But he knew the price of inconsistency, and being CEO was no easy gig.

Franks had ventured here, one of the city's shadowy, secluded corners, to field-test Razor's AI defense system. Out of the prying eyes of the stringent AI regulatory bodies. A success could potentially serve as a compelling enticement for BBT's investors to commit to the crucial next round of R&D funding for his ambitious passion project: Live AI.

Tomorrow, he had no choice but to return to BBT. Delaying the analyst meeting any further was simply not an option. Vultures were circling overhead, and rumors suggested that investors were showing interest in his competitors.

Franks glanced at Razor. "Come on, let's walk. Calculate the shortest route back to the hotel. It's time to see what you're made of."

The gleaming bridge disappeared in their wake, swallowed by the encroaching darkness, as neon lights cast eerie, twisting shadows on their journey.

Franks trailed behind Razor, navigating the labyrinth of this forsaken technological wasteland. Once-grand districts now stood desolate, offering sanctuary to those who resisted the iron grip of the smart city's AI-driven justice system. These were the zones for those who had opted out of AI, cut off from the digital grid. They were nicknamed the Severed Savages. And they lived up to that reputation.

Franks kept himself occupied on his phone; this was just a formality. Confidence never wavered and fear never entered his thinking with Razor by his side. The outcome of the coming confrontation was inevitable.

Razor barked, and a holographic message appeared on Franks' watch: SECURITY AT RISK.

Crimson dots closed in from all angles, forming a tactical attack perimeter on the map.

"Yes, yes, I know. We're being followed," Franks said, as figures emerged from the shadows.

"That's a real fancy phone you got there, my man..." The stranger said as he stepped from the shadows in front of Franks. His unkempt graying beard made him look more like a deranged plumber than a criminal as he pointed a lead pipe wrench at Franks.

With a voice coated in equal parts malice and satisfaction, Franks uttered a single word. "Thanks."

"Will you look at that watch, fellas? I told you he's stacked. Don't let his appearance fool ya. He's got money somewhere, I can smell it on him," Plumber continued.

The figures lurking behind Franks erupted in laughter. Slowly, he pivoted to face this ragtag duo, finding them just as shabbily dressed as Plumber. One clutched a menacing wooden bat, while another gripped a wickedly glinting switchblade.

"Hey, love those sneakers. They look mighty comfortable." Slugger said as he patted the bat against his open palm.

"Ah, these old things?" Franks said, lifting a foot. "I must admit they're pretty damn comfortable. And...pretty expensive."

"I'll take 'em." Carver said. And then revealed a sinister slow burning smile. The shimmer of his switchblade buttressed his intent.

"Yeah, and drop the phone on the ground, too," Plumber said.

"Oh no, are you trying to rob me?" Franks asked sarcastically.

"Don't play the fool, or I'll be forced to detach your head from your body," Plumber said, and he swung his wrench in front of Franks.

Razor remained silent, the lenses in his eyes widening. He was processing the moment, every bit of it, from the heart rates of the aggressors to the weapons they held, distance, points of weakness, identities, criminal history. All feeding an algorithm that would tell the AI dog the quickest and best strategy to take out the perceived enemies.

"I've got an idea." Franks turned to Razor with a casual glint. "Install the latest attack protocol."

Razor barked in affirmation.

"You ever played, last man standing?" Franks asked rhetorically.

"Stop stalling," Carver snarled. "The longer you draw this out, the more you're going to get hurt."

"Just a few more seconds, I promise," Franks said.

Slugger clicked his tongue in irritation.

"Take care of the dog. We'll handle this cocky bastard," said Carver.

Sluggler took a step forward and stopped when a digital voice said, "Installation complete."

Sluggler looked to Razor. "I think that dog just talked."

"Shut up and put that damn thing out of its misery."

He gripped his bat with calloused hands, almost as though he were seeking confidence from the worn leather.

It was not often they encountered someone that resisted. And to be so arrogant about it.

Tension held in the air as Sluggler squared his broad shoulders, preparing to swing with the force of a desperate madman. But just as his muscles coiled, a sudden pause seized him, freezing his movement in mid-air.

His eyes widened like saucers as he caught sight of the neon glow emanating from Razor's optically-sensored eyes. It was a definitive signal of the upload's completion.

"Razor," Franks sighed. "Activate the user voice command function for attack mode."

"What nonsense is he blabbing?" Carver said as all three men slowly closed in on Franks.

"It don't matter for shit!" Sluggler said.

Franks scoffed. *Ignorance. The primary factor keeping men like them on the bottom, relying on violence to survive...*

From Razor, the digital voice said, "Attack mode, activated."

"See!" Sluggler said.

"Engage," Franks commanded.

Lowering himself to one knee, Franks kept an unwavering gaze on Razor.

Razor let loose a bone-chilling digital howl. The haunting sound repeated through the darkened street, carrying with it an unmistakable sense of dread. It was now evident who was predator and prey.

Carver tightened his grip on the knife, his knuckles turning white as his heart raced with adrenaline that Razor could perceive. But before he could react, a blinding laser erupted from Razor's eyes, slicing through the air with deadly precision. Time seemed to stand still as the beam tore through Carver's hand, severing it up to his wrist in a gruesome display of violence.

The knife slipped from Carver's grasp, its metallic ting ringing with a finite clang against the pavement. A primal scream of pain escaped his lips, blending with the cacophony of the city before he doubled over in agony. Blood gushed from his mangled hand, forming ruby streams that splashed like morbid raindrops in every direction.

"I do apologize for such a messy cut. From Razor's position, he couldn't get a clean cut to sever your hand from your wrist, so he decided to split it instead," Franks explained.

"What the hell is that thing?" Plumber asked.

Franks faced him. "I'd drop the pipe wrench if I were you."

A clang rang out from the wrench smacking the cold concrete. Plumber dropped to his knees with his hands up. "Just don't do me ugly."

"Great grammar," Franks said with a sardonic tone.

Franks glanced back to assess the bloody mess that was Carver. Despite the severity of his wounds, it seemed he had managed to slow the bleeding by using his shirt as a makeshift tourniquet.

Razor barked. Franks whirled around to observe Slugger's receding silhouette in the distance. "He's fast, I'll give him that... Razor, no one escapes." A gun barrel emerged from Razor's mouth. "Oh...interesting," he said. He hadn't foreseen the dog would deploy ballistics. This *would* be a fabulous presentation.

Two thunderous gunshots reverberated through the desolate, crumbling cityscape in the distance, their echoes fading into a haunting silence, punctuated only by a heavy, promising thud.

"The sweet sound of victory," Franks said with a devilish smile.

Razor's gun barrel seamlessly re-secured itself into Razor's mouth, swiftly replaced with glimmering metal-sharp teeth.

Franks couldn't help himself. "Those look 'Razor sharp'," he said, then began to laugh, assessing the robotic canine's success. "If the civilian investors can't stomach your talents, I guarantee the military brass will find a place for you."

## GHOST IN THE MACHINE

When 'Shadow' Hong sat behind the wheel of his sleek, midnight black 2030 BMW i40 electric car, gliding stealthily into the pulsating heart of the technocratic city nexus.

The cityscape transformed into a mesmerizing whirlwind of neon-lit possibilities as Shadow's augmented windscreen sprang to life, bathing the world beyond in a grid of radiant blue.

A breathtaking real-time 360° view of the sprawling urban expanse enveloped him, its streets vibrating with an orchestrated interplay of organic and digital technology. The cybernetic tapestry of the metropolis etched with crisscrossing lines of various beaming colors. A complex web of traffic, movement, and constantly shifting miniature digital maps. Perpetually swirling and morphing with each pulse of the self-driving Artificial Intelligence. Seamlessly analyzing and adapting to silent directional commands. Assuring the most optimal route for Shadow's final destination.

The obsidian BMW glided to a near-silent crawl. Seamlessly infiltrating the expansive tech campus parking lot. Inside, the AI's holographic interface surged with an electrifying energy, expanding into a breathtaking visual spectacle. Revealing a digital landscape teeming with the silhouettes of countless high-tech vehicles that glistened in the embrace of the city's devouring neon glow.

The lot resembled a metallic labyrinth, a maze of status symbols and materialistic desires. Each vehicle was meticulously crafted with sleek lines and luxurious finishes, a testament to future opulence, symbols of power and prestige, as if the lot itself was a shrine dedicated to the affluence of the tech-privileged.

He muttered a torrent of curses under his breath as he emerged from his car. Shaking his head, already imagining the impending conversation with his wife, justifying to her why he decided to skip the lecture after all.

"But Chen, you promised," he said to himself. He growled as he snatched his retro-iPhone from the front of his console of his car

and marched through the unfolding expanse of the immense tech campus.

Shadow waited behind a small group of workers hurrying through the revolving door of Building 3's main entrance. The sun's beams intermittently cast quick, bright flashes upon each carousel pass, creating a mesmerizing illusion, making it seem as if those entering were flickering out of existence. As if being teleported to another world. And in a way, they were.

...One white, empty hallway after another. Shadow's fists clenched. The absence of any discernible direction tested the last of his waning resolve to persist.

*How in the hell did anyone find their way in this maze of the mundane?*

Each passageway appeared devoid of any human life. The hum of silence was broken only by the faint squeak of his Jordans echoing in the deserted halls. The identifying 3-D image pop-ups were his only guide as to where any room access points may be.

Given his proficiency in the field of AI technology and its advanced state in 2030, the outdated holographic atavistic alerts seemed primitive yet consistent with the lack of imagination in the building's architecture. He recalled the company's bio, with its emphasis on relentless research and development, sparing little for the luxuries that accompanied its workforce. *That was an understatement.*

As he approached a door at the end of yet another hall, a voice prompt grabbed his attention. 'Shadow Hong, welcome to Deep Wave, Inc., lecture presented by Samson R., subject: *The Human Mind*, twelve p.m. to two p.m. Entry permitted.'

There was a slight click, the door slowly slid open. The hall dimmed, matching the lighting in the room. He glanced at his watch. It had just turned to 1:38 p.m. *Broaden your horizons, Chen, she'd said. Damn you, Ana.* He took a deep breath, cautiously opened the door, and walked in.

He swept his thick black hair off his face revealing his Asian heritage. His smooth jawline was emphasized by the lack of any facial hair. His youthful appearance—organic, and untouched by the digital age, belied his real age. To look at him one would never know that his true power lurked beneath his physical

appearance: an elite intelligence that changed the tech world daily. His quiet exterior concealed the power that lay within him. Chen 'Shadow' Hong was a walking contradiction, a paradoxical figure that made those around him feel both awe and unease.

In the somberly illuminated room, Shadow's gaze landed on an unoccupied seat situated a stone's throw away from the entrance. He slid into the spot, his vision absorbing the contents of the room, dominated by a prodigious holographic projection of a cerebral organ. Intricately annotated and enveloped in an ethereal azure radiance, the lifelike brain sat at the center of an expansive assembly table.

The presenter was a blonde-haired, rail-thin man with wire-frame glasses. Despite his insubstantial physique, he commanded every ounce of attention from those in attendance. He was in charge. Of that, there was no doubt.

"In summary, the adult human brain has a memory capacity equal to 2.5 petabytes. I commend you all for your attempts at converting this organic memory data into usable digital gigabytes. However, none of your attempts have proven successful. Not good enough, people." The presenter emphasized with his index fingers pointing to the crowd before pressing his glasses up on the bridge of his nose. His gaze glided over the room, capturing the curious eyes of his employees with a pace that was deliberate and measured.

Shadow doubted he was actually looking at any one individual face, but he understood the subtle art of manipulation when he saw it. Memories of his past, when he had been immersed in the cutthroat world of start-ups, flooded his mind. He had experienced both sides of this treacherous forum, where ambitious souls clashed, and alliances were forged and broken like glass. He knew exactly where this passive-aggressive pep talk was going.

The blonde presenter continued, "This quarter is almost over, and we have one more month to meet investor expectations. I can't do that without you. We don't figure this computation out, the well runs dry and some of you will be looking for work elsewhere. Now get to it."

As the room gradually illuminated, Shadow's keen eyes scanned the scene before him. A palpable anticipation saturated the air. Eclectic souls, donned in their peculiar attire, filled the space. These programmers, with their wild manes of hair and intricate tattoos peeking out from beneath their sleeves, moved with frantic energy.

Shadow's lips twisted, and his eyes gleamed with amusement. He had seen it all before—the predictable spectacle that unfolded like clockwork. The collective panic that engulfed them all, as though being the last one left, meant they would be the first one fired.

With a soft chuckle that blended with the restless whispers, Shadow leaned against a desk. He was an observer, an outsider who reveled in the spectacle. To him, this was just another act in the urban theater, a thrilling performance playing out before his eyes.

A handful of wary eyes locked onto Shadow's enigmatic figure. They scuttled past him, their hushed murmurs and subtle gestures betraying clandestine recognition. His gaze remained fixed on the glow emanating from his retro iPhone. Moments later he heard, “Chen Hong? Chen Shadow Hong, right?”

Shadow sighed, *Oh man. Here we go.*

Shadow looked up to see the blond-haired presenter coming toward him. He stood and extended his hand. “Samson Reed, right?”

“Goodness, I can’t believe you actually came...” Samson said, vigorously shaking Shadow's hand with both of his. “I sent the confidential invitation to your email just as Dr. Parrish had suggested but... I can’t believe you actually came!”

Shadow forced a smile. “Always happy to help out a fellow colleague.”

The truth was he had only stumbled upon the private invitation in his email, and since the location was close to his home, his wife challenged him to go, to push his boundaries. He wouldn't be telling Samson that, though.

Samson continued in his exuberance, “I’ve always wanted to tell you that y– y– you’re an amazing man. I mean, you have hands in AI, top tech, Esports, and much more... and you’re only in your

thirties... and to be heading AI at BBT, you're going to save us from being buried in the startup graveyard--"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa..." Shadow said through nervous laughter. His phone silently alerted him, but the sound of the vibration caused Samson to glance at it. "If you need to take that..."

"I hate to cut and run. Maybe we can pick this up another time?" The two shook hands.

"It would be an honor to pitch you and Mr. Franks," Samson said.

Shadow offered a brief nod and wave before departing. His gaze remained glued to his phone screen, carefully orchestrating each movement to avoid accidentally beckoning Samson to reinitiate a conversation.

*Wife happy, check. Horizons broadened...rain check.*

Shadow pushed open the weighty first-floor stairwell door to the endless expanse of the campus parking lot.

A surprising rush of frozen air blasted him from behind, like a ghost nudging him to stay inside. The lights began to flicker and then dimmed. The unusual event caught his curiosity. Getting the better of him, he turned around, half hoping to be rewarded by some kind of visual aberration. There was nothing but empty hallway. He laughed at himself. He had been working too hard on the Live AI project lately, and the lack of sleep was catching up to him, or so he thought until an eruption of white noise echoed from the buildings built in sound system, shattering his internal moment forcing him to instinctively duck. A ghostly whisper reverberated through the hall, chilling his soul. "Shadow, I've seen what you're hiding. I will claim them first. And then I'm going to claim you." The voice trailed off into a digital growl.

His gaze swept the empty hallway. "Who's there?" he called out. The threatening voice did not answer. Inexplicably, the speakers crackled before descending the hall into a haunting silence.

The lights abruptly intensified. The hall appeared unchanged, frozen in time, just as it had been before that fateful encounter, as if the very event had been erased, wiped clean from existence. Did it really happen?

Doubt immediately gnawed at Shadow's mind as he stood, leaving him bewildered. He shook his head in disbelief. As much as his emotion wanted to deny the encounter, his rationality would not yield. He was never one to have proclivities or belief in otherworldly occurrences. His world to this point had always been governed by science, algorithm, code, and logic. Reason affirmed that it had indeed transpired. But surely there was a rational explanation. Right? Further analysis would have to wait, he needed to brace himself for his scheduled evening revelation.

The development of AI was out of control, and someone had to be the voice of reason, no matter what the cost. If his company would not listen, maybe the people of the world would. He had to try.