

Saturn Protocol

Burns hurried down the hallway with a thick sheaf of papers in his hand. He stepped into Tom Smith's office, dropping the papers on his desk. "Here it is, boss, the first output of the Saturn Protocol."

Smith frowned at the pile of papers. "What I am supposed to do with this? It's got to be a thousand pages long? I'm not going to read it."

"No need, Mr. Smith," Burns replied. "The report has been sent to the FBI. They can track down these bastards. Our job was to compile, that's it."

"So, no one vetted this data? We're relying on software alone to identify domestic terrorists? What if there are bugs?"

Burns replied, "Vetting is the FBI's job, but Saturn is no ordinary software. It cost \$1.2 billion. It has multiple levels of self-checking. It constantly reviews global phone, e-mail and social media. This data is bulletproof."

A week later, Miller said, "Agent Martin, I've been watching the targets for days, and they seem like an ordinary couple. No evidence confirms the Saturn data."

"Frank, listen to me. The protocol picked them out, and FISA approved. You need to do your job now. Release the flyers!"

"But they're just normal people. This is murder!"

"Do you want your pension, Frank? Do you like your job?"

Miller shook his head and opened the box. Two drone insects flew away. "I don't like my job right now."

Karl and his wife loved to sit in the backyard late on summer evenings, playing with their dogs and having a drink together. "How did that microstory contest turn out, sweetie?" she asked.

"It was great fun. I hope my next one gets more likes," Karl laughed. "The terrorism angle might have turned some folks off." Mosquitoes are not common in San Diego, and neither noticed the silvery bugs landing and inserting their titanium proboscises in their necks. The metal bugs extracted a blood sample to confirm their kills and flew away. Karl's glass of whisky fell from his hand and crashed on the concrete and the dogs began to howl.

Two months later, NSA Assistant Director Tom Smith was sitting before the Oversight Committee. "Mr. Smith, can you explain the request for the Saturn Protocol?" the chairman asked.

“Of course, Mr. Chairman,” Smith said. “There were flaws in the code, and we need another billion to fix it.”

The chairman grimaced. “A few glitches, you say?” Smith nodded his head. “Well, we provided you with a binder of the obituaries for more than 1,000 Americans who were killed by your Saturn Protocol. Were these folks the flaws you noted?”

“With all due respect, Mr. Chairman, Saturn was developed to fight terror. What is your position on the war on terror?”

“How dare you say that in this house!” the chairman shouted.

“I apologize, sir. While the NSA had no role in those deaths, we are saddened by them. If the FBI acted hastily, I know the DOJ will take action.”

“I wish I had your confidence, Mr. Smith. So far, the DOJ has done little to resolve any open issues, like Fast and Furious, Benghazi, or freedom of the press. Now the NSA admits to gathering private data on every US citizen for data mining? Whatever happened to the Bill of Rights?”

“9/11 happened, sir. We have enemies that want to kill us.”

“It seems we can add the NSA to that list, Mr. Smith,” the chairman growled. “What about these dead Americans? Let’s take a look.” He opened the book at random and read, “Karl Morgan, novelist, and his wife found dead in their backyard. Cause of death is unknown.” He looked at Smith and said, “How did you kill them?”

Before he could respond, a drone mosquito landed on his neck and injected its poison. His head fell forward onto the table. The bug landed on the table, spread its wings and deactivated. Outside, Agent Miller pulled his car onto the highway, headed north to Canada.