

Enzo's Shadow

I stand guard in the neon half-light, a silent sentinel at the edge of a penthouse atrium. Far below, the city is a patchwork of corporate enclaves and burbclaves—fractured city-states carved out of the old world. Throughout history, the powerful have always kept someone like me in the wings. Once, I might have been a Persian Immortal guarding a pharaoh, or a Praetorian watching over a Roman emperor. Today, I wear smart glasses instead of a bronze helm, a tailored armored jacket instead of chainmail, but the role is the same: to anticipate threats and neutralize them before they strike.

My employer—Uncle Enzo—moves through the crowd ahead of me with easy grace. He's older now, silver hair and a grandfather's smile, but no less formidable. To the guests at this gathering, he is an affable old man trading jokes and handshakes. To me, he is the locus of a thousand potential threats. Each laugh, each clinked champagne glass, is a note in a symphony of signals I'm analyzing. With a subtle blink, I toggle through augmented reality overlays on my retinal HUD. Data streams cascade down the edges of my vision, highlighting concealed weapons under tuxedos, detecting the elevated heartbeat of a man at the bar, and decrypting fragments of hushed conversations in a dozen languages.

Physical and digital perils intertwine seamlessly here. In one corner of the room, a sleek drone waiter glides by with a tray of canapés—its blinking sensor tells me it's benign, but I keep an eye on it. Across the atrium, an executive's avatar flickers in and out on a telepresence screen, attending virtually from half a world away. His image glitches for a half-second longer than bad bandwidth would account for. Possibly an impostor. My HUD flags the anomaly: someone might be spoofing his identity.

A quick tap on my wrist console launches a silent challenge-response to the avatar's cryptographic ID. The code comes back clean—authentic. It was just lag after all. I exhale slowly, shifting my stance. In this line of work, paranoia isn't a quirk; it's a survival skill.

Ever since Snow Crash, nothing is taken at face value. That old metavirus—half code, half myth—taught the world how easily information can kill. In its wake, the battlefield evolved. Now assassination may come as a smart contract exploit or a data torrent designed to fry a brain through an optic nerve. My job is to guard against threats I can't simply put a bullet into. I still carry a pistol at my hip and a ceramic knife strapped to my calf, but I also wield custom intrusion countermeasures in the cloud, ready to deploy at a moment's notice. I'm as much analyst as bodyguard—paid to notice the subtlest shift in tone or the faintest red flag in a sea of data.

Tonight's event is a private summit between Enzo and a handful of powerful figures—finance barons, tech moguls, syndicate bosses—gathered to broker a new alliance. The air smells of

expensive whiskey and high stakes. I can practically taste the tension beneath the polite laughter. Enzo stands near a floor-to-ceiling window, engaged in low conversation with a young software tycoon to his left and a senator-for-hire to his right. I position myself at a respectful distance behind him, far enough to be unobtrusive, close enough to intervene in a heartbeat. From this vantage, I see everything: the holographic name-tags hovering over each attendee, the security detail at the doors, the city lights reflecting off the polished marble floor.

As the discussions deepen, I remain vigilant. Through my earpiece, a soft whisper of updates flows in from an AI agent monitoring external threat vectors. Blockchain telemetry pings softly in my ear; it's tracking currency movements across open ledgers for any hint of a bounty or payoff tied to this meeting.

One alert catches my attention—an unusually large transfer of cryptocurrency has just been routed to a wallet address my threat database knows too well. It's the kind of wallet that lights up before a hit job. My jaw tightens. The payment was made only minutes ago, laundered through mixers but flagged by our algorithms. Someone just got paid to cause trouble here tonight.

I scan the room anew, heart thudding a measured beat against my ribcage. Who? Everyone here passed vetting... but money has a way of slipping killers through any net.

I focus on the one variable we control least: the waitstaff and service drones. Most are contracted by the hotel, but a few were brought in by guests. One in particular stands by a pillar, half-observed in shadow, carrying an empty tray. He's been stationary too long—eyes not on the guests or his duties. His gaze is fixed intently on Enzo.

Zooming in slightly with my smart glasses, I overlay his profile. The facial recognition system struggles—there's a distortion rippling across his features. Biometric spoofing. Whoever he is, he's wearing someone else's face, projected via light-bending implants. My HUD silently reverts to a thermal spectrum; the outline of a handgun glows crimson, tucked under his vest. A chill, electric and urgent, shoots through me.

In the same breath, a new alert flashes in my HUD: a local network node just went down. The building's private server is under attack, likely being spoofed or jammed. Overhead, the chandelier lights flicker—just a brownout, or something more? I switch to an overlay mapping the network integrity: an intrusion trace blinks like a jagged crack, converging on this room's AR projector systems. If they compromise it, our augmented reality feeds could become lethal: false emergency alarms, blinding strobe lights, or something far worse. I recall Snow Crash, how a simple bitmap image carried a brain-killing payload. A similar linguistic or visual virus could be injected through the hacked AR, turning our own eyes into the attack vector.

Two threats: one physical, one digital, coming at once. A classic pincer move in this era—hit the body and the mind at the same time.

I murmur a single codeword into my throat mic, triggering the countermeasures I'd prepared. Immediately, the suite's smart-glass windows polarize to opaque, cutting off any remote visual feed into the room. Simultaneously, my personal drone—disguised as a potted plant in the corner—springs to life. It silently projects a localized mesh network bubble that isolates us from external networks. A temporary measure—five, maybe ten seconds of jammed signals and frozen connections, buying me a narrow window to act.

The lights dim and a hush of confusion ripples through the guests. Time slows in the adrenal clarity of imminent danger. The bogus caterer makes his move, tossing his tray aside and pulling a sleek pistol from under his vest, training it on Enzo. In the augmented twilight, I am already in motion.

Force meets finesse: I vault over a table with cybernetic speed, my prosthetic-enhanced legs propelling me faster than any normal human. A shard of shattered glass from an upended champagne flute crunches under my boot as I close the distance. He fires—once, twice—a whisper of suppressed gunfire. The first bullet sparks off an active barrier field; my drone intercepts it inches from Enzo's chest in a crackle of light. The second round never finds its mark—I'm on him. My left forearm, reinforced with subdermal armor, slams against his gun hand as I deflect his aim. Pain blossoms in my arm, sharp and hot, but I grit my teeth and push through it. With my right hand, I drive my knife up under his ribcage in one precise, fluid motion. A wet gasp escapes him. His holographic disguise falters and then shatters, revealing a hard-faced man with a buzz cut, his augmented eyes wide in shock.

Even as I deal with the shooter, my mind stays on the parallel attack. In my peripheral vision, ghostly shapes stutter across the walls as the compromised AR system struggles to inject its malicious imagery. Static-laced symbols and shapes coil in the air, on the verge of resolving into something comprehensible. Maybe it's a kill-code, maybe a memetic hack designed to hijack the mind with a glance. But my drone's jamming field and the polarized glass keep the worst at bay, containing the assault to a flicker of light on the periphery. Still, I can't be certain that some fragment of the attack didn't slip through.

The attacker in my grip coughs wetly, blood flecking his lips in the dim light. He rasps out in a distorted whisper, "You can't stop the future..." There's a fanatic gleam in his one natural eye—an echo of the ideology that sent him here.

I rip the pistol from his hand and fling it aside. "This is the future," I hiss, almost gentle, as I lower him to the floor, his lifeblood spreading over marble. "And you chose the wrong side of

it.” My words aren’t bravado; they’re a simple statement of fact. His eyes dull as the last spark of life leaves them. I allow myself a single slow breath as I withdraw my knife — necessary or not, a life is a life.

All of this has transpired in mere seconds. Around the room, guests are frozen in various states of shock—some crouch behind overturned chairs, others simply stand pale and trembling. As my drone’s countermeasure timer lapses, the lights return to full brightness and the gentle hum of the ventilation system resumes. Murmurs begin to swell: confusion, fear, indignation.

Enzo stands steady at the center of it all, straightening his jacket. The pristine white fabric now sports a singed bullet hole over the left breast—proof of how close death came. He catches my eye and gives a slight nod. In that subtle gesture, I read gratitude and pride.

Ever the gracious host, Uncle Enzo raises his hands and speaks in a calm, authoritative voice that carries across the atrium. “Please, my friends—remain calm. A minor technical issue, it’s being handled.” His tone is practiced, soothing; the consummate executive defusing a crisis. At his signal, two of our security staff—late to the action, but efficient in the aftermath—swiftly begin escorting the rattled guests to an adjacent lounge, away from the scene.

With the immediate audience gone, Enzo steps over the body at his feet and comes to my side. He places a hand on my shoulder. For a man in his late seventies, his grip is still iron-strong. “Thank you, my friend,” he says quietly, just for me. In those words I hear more than gratitude. I hear his acknowledgement that the world has changed—and that tonight, we’ve witnessed just how much. Once upon a time, an assassination attempt would have come with tommy guns blazing. Now it’s a polymorphic virus and a man with a borrowed face. Enzo’s eyes drift to the fallen attacker, and he sighs, a mix of disappointment and resolve. “They never learn,” he mutters, almost sadly. I’m not sure whether he means young fools like this dead zealot, or the shadowy powers that keep testing him.

Medics—human and robotic—arrive a minute later, swarming the scene to secure the area and tend to those suffering from shock or minor injuries. Only once I see that Enzo is unhurt and the area is under control do I let myself take a deeper breath. The immediate threat is over. But my work, as always, is just beginning.

Already my HUD is lighting up with new data. The building’s servers are coming back online, and my AI assistant feeds me a stream of forensic highlights. I swipe a finger along my forearm display, scrolling through preliminary reports on the malware that tried to infiltrate our system. What exactly was their endgame? A fragment of the malicious code comes up in my view: a dense block of ones and zeros, repeating in an eerie, almost linguistic pattern. A chill prickles the back of my neck. It looks disturbingly similar to the Snow Crash metavirus—perhaps a mutated

offspring of that ancient digital contagion. A linguistic payload, meant to hijack neural pathways through sights or sounds. In different circumstances, if we hadn't caught it in time, that little piece of demon code might have floored everyone in the room, leaving us slack-jawed and drooling—puppets ready to be picked apart. Not tonight.

Enzo's voice pulls me from my thoughts. "Walk with me."

He leads me out onto a balcony that wraps around the penthouse. The night air is cool against my skin, carrying the faint scent of ozone and rain on distant asphalt. Below us sprawls the metropolis—gleaming and fragmented. The patchwork of franchise-nations and corporate territories glitters in neon and holo-lights, each patch of city a world unto itself. Highways alive with autonomous traffic weave between clusters of high-rise enclaves. Above, neon advertisements and virtual billboards dance across the skyline, their reflections painting the clouds. This is the world we navigate now—borderless in a sense, yet fractured along lines of code and corporate charter. A civilization alive with data, danger, and opportunity.

For a moment, we stand in companionable silence, gazing out at the electric tapestry of the city. I remain alert—hand still resting near my holster out of habit—but I sense we've entered a brief lull, a liminal moment between crisis and whatever comes next.

Enzo breaks the silence, his voice thoughtful. "The old ways are bleeding into the new," he says, mostly to himself. His eyes follow a police drone blinking across the sky. "Once, loyalty was earned in blood and oaths. Now it's encoded in smart contracts and algorithms." He gives a soft, dry chuckle. "Still... blood and oaths seem to matter, don't they?"

I incline my head. I know what he means. Loyalty. My pulse has settled, the adrenaline ebbing, and with it comes a clarity. I realize that by tomorrow morning, half the people at tonight's gathering will be clamoring to hire me away. Offers will flow through the network—lucrative contracts, token deposits flashing in my accounts as bounties for my allegiance. But I'm not going anywhere. Loyalty may be contractual in this era, but for me it's also deeply personal. Enzo gave me a chance when I was just a hungry kid with more illegal hacks to my name than meals. He taught me that honor and trust still have value—even here, even now.

"The battlefield changes," I murmur in agreement, "but the duty of a protector remains."

Enzo turns toward me and smiles, the city's glow reflecting faintly in his eyes. "Spoken like a true soldier-poet." The old man claps me lightly on the arm. He doesn't need to say anything else. We both understand: I am more than an employee to him, and this job is more than a contract to me. In a world of ever-shifting threats, we've formed a pact of old-school trust bolstered by new-age savvy.

After a moment, Enzo nods and heads back inside to tend to the aftermath, leaving me on the balcony to gather myself. I flex my left arm; the ache where the bullet struck is already fading, though I'll need a regen patch later. Below, the city hums and blinks, a living circuit board of human ambition. I can almost see the contours of invisible territories overlapping the physical streets: spheres of influence, data havens, encrypted citadels on the mesh. Territory here isn't marked by lines on a map, but by firewalls and influence, by alliances and reputation. Power isn't rooted in soil; it floats in the cloud, defined by who commands the flows of information and trust.

It's a dynamic battleground. Figures like Enzo—part old-world don, part new-age tech magnate—rule as digital sovereigns, their authority emanating from code as much as from charisma. And as long as such power exists, there will be those who challenge it with every tool of the new age. Memetic weapons, AI-driven assassins, economic attacks on cryptocurrency markets—the weapons of tomorrow aimed squarely at the rulers of today.

I roll my shoulders and step away from the railing. In the darkness beyond the balcony's edge, I imagine the ghosts of all who held this post before me. Immortals, Praetorians, samurai, secret agents—an unbroken lineage of guardians stretching back through time. They wouldn't recognize the tools I use, but they would know the look in my eyes and the weight on my shoulders. We have all lived with one foot in chaos and the other in resolve.

When I finally re-enter the atrium, I blend into the background once more—a ghost in service to a living legend. I carry ancient responsibilities into the future on modern shoulders. Guardian, sentinel, shield—call me what you will. In the end, I am simply his shadow, sworn to keep my ward one step ahead of the coming darkness.