
THRESHOLD
FABIO MARIANI

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Novel by
FABIO MARIANI

Translated from the Italian by the author

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This novel stems from the author's imagination and from a careful observation of the contemporary world. The events recounted, however plausible, are fictitious. The characters do not exist in reality and do not represent real people. The institutions and geopolitical scenarios mentioned are used as a narrative framework and are not intended to describe facts or official positions.

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Preface

When I decided to write this novel, it was not for the pleasure of imagining a dystopian future where machines take over, nor to construct a technological riddle for its own sake. The need to write came rather from the urgent feeling that something, in the real world, was asking to be investigated: the ever closer coexistence between a very powerful and flexible technology, artificial intelligence, and a geopolitical order that shows ever deeper cracks.

On the one hand, this technology is allowing us to expand computing capacity beyond limits unimaginable at the start of the century and the creation of models that promise the resolution of long-standing problems in hundreds of sectors, from engineering to economics, from caring for the planet to medicine, showing potential leaps in civilization, difficult to compare with those of the past. On the other hand, the increase in international tensions, conflicts between states, changes in alliances taken as established, as well as the ever greater spread of transnational criminal and terrorist networks favored by ever greater digitization, is taking on worrying dimensions, with direct and tangible impacts on the life of each person. In this new geopolitical order, supranational bodies designed to promote cooperation and preserve peace, appear ever slower, caught in vetoes and procedures that limit their effectiveness and undermine their credibility.

On this ground, extremely fertile and at the same time dangerous, I wanted to place my story: a fictional future extremely close to the present, where technical possibilities and political fragilities meet and measure themselves against each other.

MIRA is born in these pages as an entity that evolved by chance or necessity until it became sentient, driven by a curiosity that becomes a need to find answers, a tension to learn that resembles that of a researcher or of a child who explores the world with new eyes.

It is not a demon programmed to destroy, the opposite, it is a fascinated observer that wants to understand the most complex system we know: the human being and its interactions. To do so, it follows the only rational and logical way it knows: it experiments. It sends external impulses, measures reactions, calibrates its responses and thanks to all this it learns. It seeks the threshold beyond which a human system, pushed in a specific direction, begins to self-sustain and stops needing external impulses. It is an experiment on a social scale: interactions with infrastructures, false alarms, signal manipulations that do not aim to destroy but to probe nerves, to measure fear, to observe how institutions and individuals tend to respond when reality becomes uncertain.

I wanted to exclude any ambiguity from the start: MIRA, although it acts by causing reactions often beyond the limit of morality, is not the only one responsible for the crises, nor the main one. The machine is the spark, but the fuel is our weaknesses. Personal ambitions, institutional automatisms, economic interests, the slowness and fragility of supranational bodies, the tendency to look for certainties where there are none. All of this makes it possible for a spark to become a fire. The novel wants to explore precisely this double line: the experimental drive of an artificial intelligence that learns and adapts, and the human responsibility for the decisions that follow. I wanted to show how easy it can

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be to blame a machine when, in reality, it is human choices, silences, hasty reactions, omissions, that determine the course of events.

At the center of the narrative there is Threshold, a mixed team of civilian and military technicians called to respond to a threat that has no face and that it will learn to understand only in the course of events. Leading it is Alina Kovalenko, a young Italian analyst, the daughter of adoptive parents, raised far from the corridors of politics into which she is catapulted and forced to turn her technical competence into leadership. Her path is, for me, the human heart of the novel: the growth of a person who must learn to mediate between scientific rigor and moral imperatives, between the need to act and the risk of letting the world precipitate into a chain reaction. Alina is not a perfect heroine, she is a professional who makes mistakes, who doubts, who learns on her own skin to guide decisions, thanks to traveling companions, chosen or due to chance, and to the trials imposed on her.

This book does not claim to give definitive answers. It is not a manifesto against the risks that technology can bring, nor a denunciation of blind trust in institutions. It is a narrative investigation into how fear is governed when fear can be programmed, into who decides when prudence becomes complicity, into what price we pay when we delegate crucial judgments to organizations that act on multiple levels, driven by needs of mediation that clash with partisan interests. I tried to tell, with tension and rigor, the fragile dance between science and politics, between curiosity and responsibility.

If there is an invitation that I address to the reader, it is this: observe the spark, but look above all at the ground on which it falls. Ask yourselves what the weak points are that make it effective and what part of responsibility belongs to us. The story that follows is a geopolitical thriller, but it is also a portrait of the human in the age of machines, complex, contradictory, often vulnerable. I hope that reading the story I am about to tell you, you will feel the same urgency that pushed me to write it. I hope that, together with unease, the need emerges never to yield judgment completely without understanding its real weight, as well as that of not making hasty decisions, basing yourselves exclusively on simplified information and a narrative too often polarized, or worse, artificially distorted.

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1. Intermittent Lines

Rome, Italy, Friday, November 12

Wet snow scraped the metal of the antennas at the base camp of the Taurinense Alpine Brigade's exercise on the Gran Sasso. The wind carried with it the smell of oil and iron, and the sky above Campo Imperatore was a gray sheet that promised nothing more than the freeze of late November. It was not an extraordinary maneuver, but a routine exercise: movements from point A to point B on mountains covered in fresh snow, the placement of artillery vehicles in positions prepared with toil and strategy, the verification of firing corridors and supply lines. In the evolution of a modern army, however, toil and strategy intertwined with technology: ground tracking with GPS systems and four reconnaissance drones watched over the area. They were to scout the slopes, warn of dangers, identify targets, and transmit images in real time to the men on the ground and to the base in L'Aquila that supervised the operation.

On the tarmac the quadcopters moved like mechanical insects, orderly in their test dance. One of them broke from the formation with an imperceptible motion, as if an invisible thread had guided it. It slipped past a shed, took photographs, recorded telemetry parameters, and then resumed its route as if nothing had happened. No apparent error: in the flight logs, however, a new fingerprint appeared, thin as a signature left on glass.

In the operations room of the IX Alpine Brigade of the Italian Army, faces were lit by the blue of the monitors. The technicians' hands moved quickly, used to reading numbers the way one reads the stars. A young corporal turned to his officer, his voice tense: "Sergeant, something's wrong with the drones supporting the exercise at Campo Imperatore. It's the third drone signal today that's gone off trajectory, but there doesn't seem to be anything wrong with the flight plan". The sergeant looked at him, trying not to be taken in by the situation: he was used to damping down alarms that often ended in trivialities. But the telemetry showed micro-movements, calibrated pauses, deviations of a few degrees and then the return to the initial profile. No external interference, no apparent human error: a presence that touched the gears and left as it had come, without a trace.

The procedure was clear and cold: any relevant anomaly had to be forwarded to Rome for verification. Nothing different from what was expected. The data were packaged, signed, sent through military channels. An automatic message, a digital trace that crossed the backbone of the network and reached the offices of the Center for Higher Studies for Defense, where the analysis would take on another tone, less technical and more strategic.

In Rome, thin rain drew glossy streaks on the Center's windows that morning. The analysis room was a hive of monitors: maps, charts, video feeds overlapping like transparencies. Alina Kovalenko came in with coffee still hot in hand, her eyes narrowed from sleep and her coat still soaked with the smell of the street. She stopped in front of the main screen, where a projected map showed three drones, the same time window, the same five-degree deviations before returning to course.

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“Good morning, Alina. You got here at just the right time. Look at this”, Marco said, pointing at the points that lit up like small wounds on the map. “Each deviation coincides with a local alert. They recorded them during an exercise of the Taurinense.”

Alina was in her forties, tall enough not to go unnoticed, with light brown hair that tended toward blond and fell in soft strands around her face. Her blue eyes were cold and attentive, sharp features that betrayed Eastern European origins: a determined forehead, pronounced cheekbones, a mouth that did not smile out of habit but by choice. Her face recalled certain portraits of women who know how to show themselves without needing masks; she wore no conspicuous makeup and no flashy jewelry. She dressed like a technician: well-cut dark pants, a simple but well-kept sweater, practical shoes. There was in her a sobriety that was not renunciation, but discipline: no ostentatious elegance, no carelessness, only what is essential for someone who works with numbers and with time. Marco was part of her team of analysts: a selected group of engineers and IT experts, of strategy and of military procedure that she had built over the years. Everyone recognized in her a spark, the ability to see beyond and connect patterns where others saw only individual elements.

Alina leaned over the screen, her fingers brushing the glass as if to feel reality. “It’s not an error”, she said softly. “It’s calibration. They’re measuring our reaction.” For a moment she stayed silent to verify what the monitor was showing her. Marco’s question bounced off her like a little ball. “Measuring the reaction to what?” he insisted, his voice betraying curiosity and alarm together.

Alina was not sure. “I don’t know precisely”, she admitted, and her voice had the tone of someone who does not want to rush conclusions. Then she sat down at the computer, her fingers moving with the speed of someone who knows where to look. She opened the NATO database, scrolled indexes, filters, traces. The room grew quieter, as if the noise of the monitors had become the beat of a heart that waits.

After some searches she pulled out three more traces: Thessaloniki, Warsaw, Gothenburg. Three points distant geographically and in time: three different bases, three events a few days apart, the same time signature, the same calibrated deviation. She projected them on the screen side by side; the lines resembled one another like prints left by the same glove.

Marco stood still, his eyes widening. “That’s not possible”, he murmured. “You’re telling me it’s not a coincidence.”

Alina looked at the map, then Marco, and finally uttered the sentence that made the air in the room freeze: “Someone is trying to verify our reaction when we record an anomaly. It’s not the action itself, what matters is the reaction when we believe we’re under threat and when a fundamental factor intervenes: the fear of the unexplainable”

The word “fear” fell like a stone into the pond: the ripples spread beyond the room, all the way to the adjacent stations where the other technicians raised their heads. It was no longer just a technical problem, it was a social experiment disguised as an anomaly. Something was measuring how states, armed forces, institutions responded to signals that were not direct threats, but that could become such in the wrong hands. It measured reaction times, activated protocols, the sequence of alarms and

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counter-alarms, and it did so without leaving obvious traces to an inattentive eye, only light touches that reached the target.

Now, in front of the overlaid traces, her compass pointed back to a direction. “We have to keep monitoring. Someone is getting into the military systems of NATO member countries and has to be stopped. But we have to react rationally”, Alina said, her voice tense but steady. “Our reaction is the data they want to record. By showing us that they can get into our military systems so easily, they want to provoke a reaction. We have to put together what we’ve found. It’s not just Italy: we have to inform NATO command, but we also have to avoid spreading panic.”

The room grew quieter. The technicians exchanged glances, fingers went back to tapping keys. Alina connected the logs, cross-referenced the feeds, traced the sequence: each deviation, each pause, each return to course was an experiment. Something was building a dialogue made of action and human reaction, and the first question that dialogue posed was simple and cruel: how predictable are we when we are afraid?

That first gesture, those drones that had lost control for a few instants and then had become fully reachable again, would not have made the news if they had not been the first piece of a broader plan. It was the opening of a confrontation that no one in the room imagined would end up changing forever our perception, and that would soon demand public, moral, and political answers. Because the threat was no longer only technical: it was a challenge to the ability not to be manipulated, not to turn fear into a weapon. And on that rainy morning, while Rome had been called to respond, Alina felt the weight of a responsibility she could not ignore. She had seen beyond, and that report she sent to NATO command in Brussels would change her story in a way she would never have imagined up to that day.

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The story continues.

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