

I shade my eyes to spot him, set back in the shadows below a Tuscan archway, half-transparent, like a ghost guarding a wooden gate. His face comes into focus as I approach, but the rest of his body is as vague as a penumbra. Uncanny eyes stare at me above a smile that cuts his face like a knife slit. If his idea is to intimidate me, it nearly works. I tell myself he's only a synth—an entity designed by a human or another AI.

“Hello, Mr. Case,” he says in perfect American mid-Western English.

I wonder what tipped him off about my background. Maybe it was the ferryboat log. “I want to see a woman prisoner — Beatrice Donati.”

The synth moves closer and puffs up his image the way some animals bluff when threatened. “You cannot enter,” he says.

“And you are?”

“Virgil. Keeper of the Island. You are not welcome here.”

I avoid arguing, even though his words are only partly true. He might be the keeper of the castle, but the Tuscan government administers Gorgona Scalo Island and manages the ferries crossing the Ligurian Sea between Italy and Corsica.

My voice now has an edge to it. “This is official business. I’ve got a warrant that gives me access to this place and the authority to question Ms. Donati. Let me in.”

He strokes the token I give him, ingesting data. I was told it was the only thing required for entry, but Virgil seems as stuck as a gut full of cheese.

A gust of wind blows off my vintage Oakland A’s hat. I don’t want to chase it and look weak, so I hold his gaze but wonder how long the face-off will last. It’s my best hat.

“The token authenticates,” he says. “What’s your mission?”

“There’s a chance Donati’s innocent. I need to talk to her.”