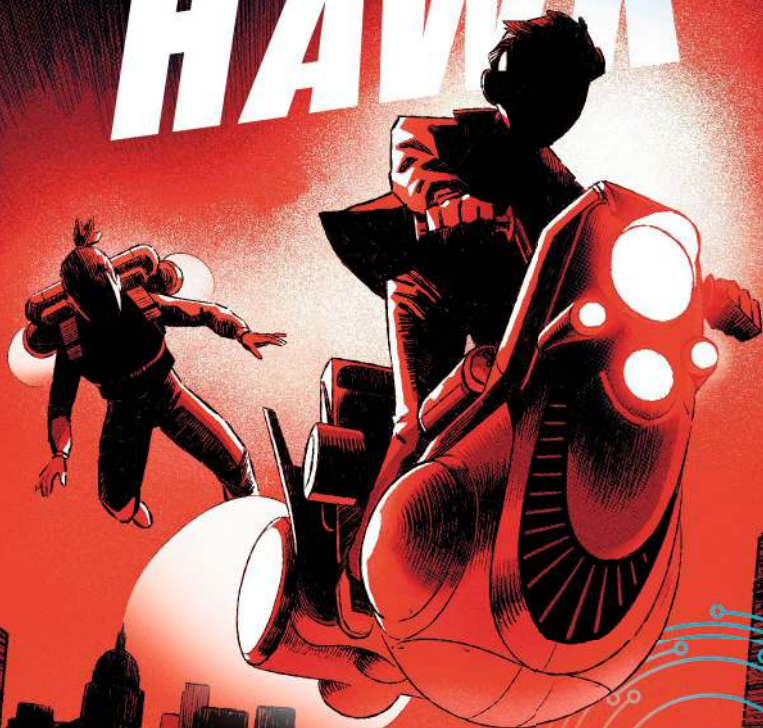


An undercover mission.  
A deadly game of spies.

# SWIFT AND HAWK



**UNDERCOVER**  
LOGAN MACX



**SWIFT**   
**AND**  
**HAWK**



**SWIFT**   
**AND**  
**HAWK**  
*UNDERCOVER*

LOGAN MACX



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BOOKS

## ***FOR TALLY AND SHARKO***

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# ***SWIFT AND HAWK TO THE RESCUE***



**T**his was an emergency. Caleb Quinn and Zen Rafiq – codenamed Swift and Hawk – were strapped into the back of a specially converted Aston Martin, watching the British countryside race by at close to one hundred and seventy kilometres per hour. They were heading to a research facility in Cambridge, owned by the American robotics company SolTec. Some kind of cybersecurity breach had occurred, and their mission – Professor Clay had explained to them back in London – was “to stop an embarrassing mess from turning into a very public disaster”.

Caleb and Zen both went to a specialist computing and technology school called the ARC Institute, which stood for AI, Robotics and Cybertech. A few months earlier, they’d been recruited into the Möbius Programme – a secretive organization run by Professor Clay, the ARC’s deputy head teacher, that used the unique skills of the ARC’s pupils to solve high-tech spy problems. Clay had personally taken them out of their morning classes and scrambled them into one of the ARC’s prototype electric cars.

“Why are we helping SolTec, exactly?” Caleb had asked.

“It’s a favour,” Clay had replied. “Call for back-up if you need it. Mr Mitchell will get you there.”

And it was Lance Mitchell who was now at the wheel of the car – weaving in and out of the regular motorway traffic with incredible precision, anticipating gaps and accelerating into empty lanes – all at heart-stopping speed. Mitch, as everyone called him, was the new head of security at the ARC Institute. Nearly two metres tall, white, with a square jaw and short dark hair, he’d been a US Navy SEAL and then a special agent with the CIA, before going freelance at the age of forty-seven.

The tyres squealed as the car flew across three lanes, racing down the hard shoulder. Caleb could not stop himself from wincing and grabbing at the dashboard. He glanced in the rear-view mirror; Zen was reading the briefing Clay had given them at the ARC, completely unconcerned.

“You know,” he said, “I think it would be way better if this was a self-driving car.”

Mitch grinned as he eased back into the middle lane between two lorries. “Welcome to old school ops, kid. Back in the day, we solved all our problems with gasoline and guns.” He stood hard on the accelerator. “Let’s give this baby some gas.”

“It’s an electric car, Mitch,” Caleb said. “There is no gas.”

“And your generation didn’t solve any problems,” said Zen from the back seat, without looking up. “You just made everything ten times worse.”

Mitch shook his head. "You ARC kids ... you're too smart for your own good."

He yanked at the wheel and dragged them down the outside of a luxury coach. The gap between it and the barrier was almost too tight – but they shot through before it could close any further.

"If this is how you handle our security," Caleb said, "I'd hate to see you on a reckless streak."

An even, synthesized voice spoke through the car's speakers. "Our journey would be seventeen minutes faster if we left at the next police ramp."

It was Sam, Caleb's artificial intelligence program. The name was short for Simulated Autonomous Medic; Sam had originally been coded by Caleb's dad, Patrick, as a medical AI, but Caleb had significantly upgraded and expanded him since his dad had passed away two years ago. Sam mostly interacted with the world via a special handset Caleb had made, which he'd called the Flex.

"This route leads through the back of a farm," Sam continued, "and then along some very minor roads. But we would avoid a considerable amount of congestion ahead."

"Let's do it," Caleb said. "We need all the time we can get."

Mitch was now tailgating a plumber's van with some intensity. "Please don't tell me that we're going to let that Alexa thing of yours give us directions."

"Be nice, Mitch," Caleb said. "Sam is a thousand times more sophisticated than Alexa and Siri put together."

“The ramp is five hundred metres ahead,” the AI said.  
“Just off the hard shoulder.”

The car cut through a gap in the traffic, picking up speed.

“Given the weight of this car and its occupants,” Sam said, “we will need to hit the ramp at an angle of twenty degrees off-centre and a velocity of one hundred and twenty-seven kilometres per hour to clear the fence and land safely on the track on the far side.”

“What?” Mitch exclaimed. “Who said anything about jumping a *fence*?”

“Come on, Mitch,” said Zen, putting the Möbius briefing aside. “I thought we were doing this old school.”

“You guys have no idea what it takes to pull off a car jump so that we don’t roll and crash,” said Mitch through gritted teeth. “*No idea.*”

“You are quite heavy for your height and age, Mr Mitchell,” said Sam. “We will need to accelerate if we are to clear the fence and make the track.”

“I won’t take that personally...” Mitch said. “OK, hold on. Here we go.”

Caleb was pushed back in his seat as the car sped towards the small ramp of the police-only vantage point, off to the side of the hard shoulder. They soared into the air, flying over the low fence at the edge of the motorway. Caleb gripped the ceiling handle above his head – the car was surely going to crash into the field beyond. But then a farm track appeared, and half a second later they were bumping down again, bouncing forward, careening from side to side.

Mitch hit the accelerator and fought with the wheel, trying to bring the car under some kind of control without sliding into a nearby ditch.

“Nice!” Caleb cried.

“You’ve got some serious driving skills, Mitch!” said Zen.

“I’m getting too old for this,” muttered the security chief.

“Now what, Sam?”

“Proceed straight past those trees ahead,” the AI replied.

“Then follow the dirt track to the right – among the farm buildings that you will see in roughly thirty seconds’ time.”

The sleek black car shot by a coppice of trees and jolted over a cattle grid into a farmyard. Just as they rounded the corner of a barn, however, a tractor appeared, driving directly towards them with prongs lowered. Caleb ducked in his seat, certain they were going to be impaled. Somehow, though, Mitch was already executing a handbrake turn – sending them sliding through a towering heap of ... horse manure.

For a moment, everything went dark – then the wipers came on, clearing wide crescents in the muck. Caleb looked out through the one-way glass. The farmer was gazing down from his tractor with pure astonishment at what must have looked to him like a cross between a stealth bomber and some of the fastest travelling horse dung in the world.

“Great route, Sam,” said Mitch. “Really great.”

“Is that sarcasm, Mr Mitchell? Should I engage my sarcasm-learning subroutine, Caleb?”

“Not right now,” Caleb said. “We need some new directions.”

The AI guided them out of the farmyard and along a series of narrow, twisty lanes. A couple of minutes later, they reached a main road heading into the centre of Cambridge. Mitch accelerated again, tearing through the last few kilometres before swerving deftly across a busy roundabout, to a chorus of angry horns. Shortly afterwards, the car was racing alongside a perimeter fence.

"I think this is the SolTec facility," said Zen, peering through her filth-splattered window.

"That is correct, Zen," said Sam. "The entry road is on the left. I am detecting a security gate. Should I—"

"Hack it, Sam," Caleb told him, gripping the dashboard as Mitch threw them into a screeching left-hand turn. "Get us in."

They whizzed along a short driveway as the gate slid open ahead. The gap was only just wide enough, but Mitch squeezed them through without slowing down. A large white-and-blue sign flashed by, saying **SOLTEC: ROBOTICS FOR TOMORROW.**

Caleb saw Zen roll her eyes. "Nice slogan," she said. "Totally original."

"More sarcasm there, Sam," Mitch said with a grin. "You're going to have to learn it someday. Might be the defining human characteristic."

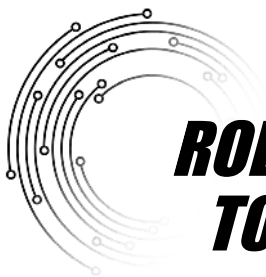
The manure-plastered car skidded to a halt in front of the compound's main building, reflected in the dark, mirrored glass that covered its facade. A sandy-haired man with a goatee, rimless glasses and a shiny black

SolTec shirt was standing by the front entrance. He'd been talking into a smartphone but was now staring at them in utter mystification.

"I'm guessing he's the welcoming committee," said Caleb.

"Facial scans indicate that he is Dr Aidan Lennox," said Sam, "the director of this facility."

Mitch turned off the engine, straightened his black tie and adjusted the holster under his jacket. "Stay close, you two," he said. "Let me handle this."



# ***ROBOTICS FOR TOMORROW***

**T**hey all got out of the car. The smell of manure was terrible; lumps of it were sliding off the bonnet and doors and plopping steamily onto the tarmac. Caleb had to admit – it wasn't quite the ice-cool super-spy entrance he'd been hoping for.

"Tell me you're not..." Dr Lennox began in an American accent, lowering his phone. "Tell me you're not the people Tilda Clay sent."

Mitch walked around the car. "Dr Lennox," he said, "I'm Lance Mitchell, head of security at the ARC Institute. And these two here are Caleb and Zen."

Lennox's disbelief was turning to anger. He looked over Zen, with her denim jacket and neon-blue trainers; and then Caleb, with his olive-green hoodie with orange piranhas swimming down the sleeves.

"OK," he said, "I knew there'd be kids – Clay's prodigies or whatever they are, from her special programme. But I thought there'd be a team of technicians as well. A whole truckload of equipment. You know – *professionals*." He

glanced past them, towards the gate. "Are you honestly all that's coming?"

"Yep," said Caleb. "We're it."

He slid the Flex from his pocket and wrapped it around his wrist. Although it looked like an ordinary smartphone, this handset was loaded with extra features and capabilities – and it had a unique flex-tech shell, which meant it could be bent or stretched to almost any shape. Until recently, he'd operated it using a set of self-programmed apps, but an emergency upgrade to Sam meant that he could now do everything via the AI instead. He stepped away from the stinking car, taking in the compound. Across the car park, a crowd of thirty or so SolTec employees were talking to one another in low, nervous voices; they seemed to have just been evacuated from the buildings.

Mitch motioned for Caleb and Zen to stay put and walked over to Lennox; he was almost a head taller than the SolTec director.

"What d'you know about SolTec, Zen?" Caleb asked in a low voice.

Zen was a robotics specialist, as good with ultra-sophisticated hardware as Caleb was with software; her particular expertise was in building incredible insect-sized microbots.

"It's one of the world's major robotics companies," she said. "This is its main research and development centre. Most of it is underground." She refastened the band at the end of her black plait. "Try reading the briefing next time, Caleb."

“Sorry, Zen,” he retorted, “but I was finding the experience of practically breaking the land speed record on the M11 just a *little* bit distracting – not to mention Sam’s detour through that pile of—”

Zen nudged him in the ribs to shut him up, nodding towards where Mitch and Lennox were now talking. They moved closer to listen.

“Here’s what we’ve been told,” Mitch said matter-of-factly. “You’ve experienced a serious cybersecurity breach and your entire facility is in meltdown. Every in-house countermeasure has failed. The last thing SolTec needs is this mess going public and the UK authorities getting involved – so you called your old friend Tilda Clay to see if there might be another way of dealing with it.”

“It’s a virus, right?” Caleb chipped in. “Someone’s got past your firewalls – released something really nasty into your system?”

Lennox pinched the bridge of his nose. “If you think,” he began, “that I’m going to let a pair of kids and their ... their babysitter, who have just shown up in a car covered in horse dung, have full access to this facility, to our most confidential research, then you must be out of your—”

“Call Professor Clay,” Mitch interrupted. He nodded at the phone in Lennox’s hand. “She’ll clarify the situation for you.”

Lennox glared at him for a moment. Then he tapped the phone a couple of times, raised it to his ear and stalked off into the car park until he was out of earshot.

Caleb glanced over at Zen. "Think we can justify tapping this?" he murmured.

"One hundred per cent," she replied. "Can you find the signal, Sam?"

"Of course, Zen," the AI said. "Patching it through."

Lennox's voice came out of the Flex's speaker, just loud enough for Caleb and Zen to hear.

"Is this some kind of joke, Tilda? We're in the middle of a major crisis here. I ask for your top operatives and this is what you send me? How old are these two, anyway? Twelve? Thirteen?"

Mitch gave Caleb a sideways look, realizing at once what was going on. The ARC security chief put his hands in his pockets and sighed; then he leaned in closer, angling his head to listen.

Professor Clay came on the line. She sounded distinctly unimpressed. "I don't *joke*, Aiden. You told me that you had an urgent situation your own people couldn't handle. Caleb and Zen are extremely resourceful, with a combined skill set that is perfectly matched to your problem. They've proved themselves before now, believe me."

There was a short silence. Lennox paced in a circle, trying to absorb what he'd been told, while gazing up at the main building with increasing anxiety.

"Jeez," said Caleb. "He looks like he's expecting it to burst into flames."

Zen was watching the SolTec director closely. "This can't be good, Caleb."

"I need *complete secrecy*," Lennox hissed. "You know that, right? I can't have the – the local police or fire department or anyone else going into the facility. The SolTec board would have my head on a stick. There are things that—"

"You can trust the Möbius Programme, Aiden," Clay interrupted. "And remember – if we fix this, you owe me."

With that she hung up. Lennox frowned at his phone; then he put it in his pocket, turned back towards them and nodded. He was going to let them in.

"Nice one, Professor Clay," said Caleb softly. "Very clarifying."

A faint half-smile crossed Zen's face. "She can be pretty persuasive."

They were led quickly through the entrance of the main building into a wide, empty atrium with a silvery tree standing in its centre. Every surface had the smooth shine of polished glass. Massive screens were streaming films of sophisticated robots working in hospitals, chopping vegetables, or lifting girders on construction sites. The SolTec logo – a stylized copper sun – popped up repeatedly, along with the *Robotics for Tomorrow* slogan.

"Here's the deal," said Lennox, speaking directly to Caleb and Zen for the first time. "Tilda Clay is someone I have a lot of respect for. She speaks highly of you two, so I'm prepared to give you a shot. The clock's really ticking, OK?" He handed Mitch a security keycard. "This will get you into a couple of the restricted levels. That's where—"

Something changed in the atrium. Caleb looked around. The screens were freezing up; directly above them, a film of a robotic hand picking a daisy began to flicker backwards and forwards.

“What’s going on, Sam?” Caleb whispered. “You getting anything?”

“I am, Caleb,” the AI responded. “I’m afraid the fail-safes are giving out and a full system collapse is underway. There is a seventy-five per cent probability that SolTec has been infected by some kind of advanced multipartite malware. It is attempting a full takeover, probably by rewriting the codebase.”

A familiar, determined look had appeared on Zen’s face. “We need to get to the server farm,” she said. “Right now.”

Caleb turned to Lennox. “That’ll be somewhere underground, won’t it – at the base of the building?”

The director nodded, striding off towards a row of elevator doors. “The lowest level,” he said. “Minus six.”

Mitch hung back. “What can we expect down there, Dr Lennox? These two are my responsibility. I need to know exactly what we’re getting ourselves into.”

“It’s a software breach, Mr Mitchell.” Lennox hesitated. “There have been some ... odd reports from those who were down in the labs. But we operate strict containment procedures in this facility. As long as you go directly to the server farms, there shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Don’t worry, Mitch,” said Caleb. “Sam and I have already taken a look at SolTec’s operating system. And Zen knows

basically everything there is to know about robotics. We've got this."

Lennox was blinking in alarm. "Who is *Sam*, precisely? And what do you mean by *taken a look*?"

Mitch ignored him. "OK, smart guy," he said to Caleb, touching the keycard against a security panel. "But I go first, you hear? Just in case."

A set of doors opened and Mitch stepped into a lift that was as immaculate as the lobby, with another screen filling its rear wall. Caleb and Zen followed him in – but Lennox stayed behind in the atrium.

"Aren't you coming, Dr Lennox?" Mitch asked.

"Ah, no," said the SolTec director, taking a small step backwards. "I believe I'll remain up here."

Caleb and Zen exchanged a glance.

"Don't you want to see what's going on?" said Mitch, a note of suspicion entering his voice.

"No, my duty lies with the staff. I want regular updates, though – a full account of everything you do."

"We really have to get moving," Zen said.

Mitch nodded and pressed the button for level minus six. "Probably for the best," he muttered as the doors closed with a slight *swoosh*. "I don't think Dr Lennox would've been a whole lot of use."

Caleb couldn't help grinning with excitement as the lift began to descend. He met Zen's eye again. She smiled back at him; she was clearly feeling it too. This was it. Swift and Hawk were back in action.

All of a sudden, the lift jerked to a halt. The screen went blank, the light panel overhead flickered and a low creak echoed through the shaft below them.

"We have stopped between levels minus three and minus four," Sam reported. "I don't think this lift will travel any further. The virus has jammed it somehow."

"It's deliberately blocking our path," Caleb said.

"To slow us down?" Zen asked. "To stop us getting to the server farm in time?"

"Yep." Caleb let out a low whistle. "Whoever wrote it really knows what they're doing."

"Hey, Mitch," said Zen, "can we get the doors open?"

"We can try." Mitch stepped up to the lift doors and began to force them apart. A tiny crack soon appeared, letting in the wail of an electronic alarm. Zen and Caleb went to help and together they widened the gap a little more.

Directly in front of them was the concrete wall of the lift shaft – but by their feet was an opening, perhaps fifty centimetres high, looking out at ceiling level into another large lobby. The room was bathed in the deep red glow of emergency lighting. Its smart modern furniture had been knocked out of place, as if by a crowd of fleeing people. Papers were scattered across the floor, along with a couple of discarded lab coats, a smashed tablet and a single box-fresh trainer.

"The virus will be continuing its takeover," Sam informed them. "We need to hurry."

"Let's find the stairs," Zen said. "Get to level minus six."

"All right." Mitch grunted as he pushed at the doors. "I'll climb down. Then you can—"

But Zen was already ducking through the opening, dangling briefly from the edge of the lift, then dropping into the lobby below.

"I said I go first," Mitch called after her.

"She does stuff like that," Caleb told him. "You'll get used to it."

They went after Zen. Mitch landed heavily, stumbling a little on the shiny floor.

"Where are we, Sam?" Caleb asked. "Can you pull up any plans of this place?"

"I have the basic schematics from SolTec's central archive," Sam answered. "This level is set aside for prototype testing. There are three stairwells that can be used to gain access to the server farm. The closest can be reached via the corridor directly ahead of you."

Zen was walking quickly towards this corridor when there was a movement to her left, behind an observation window. A horrible, grating whine started up – and just inside the corridor, a circular sawblade sliced through a sealed laboratory door in a dazzling spray of sparks.

Mitch drew his pistol at once, flicking off the safety catch with his thumb. "What the heck is *that*?"

The door crashed forward, cut off its hinges, and a construction robot like the ones in the films upstairs lumbered into view. It had no head to speak of, just three enormous arms bristling with industrial saws, drills and

pile-drivers, and a set of short insectoid legs. It angled itself towards them, a cluster of LEDs at the top of its torso turning from yellow to red.

“It’s scanning us,” said Zen. “I think it’s getting ready to—”

Abruptly, the robot charged at her, scuttling forward into the lobby. Zen dived to the side, just managing to avoid its path. The machine spun about as it passed, swiping at her with its circular saw and chopping a low black leather sofa neatly in half.

Mitch was levelling his pistol. “Zen!” he yelled. “Where do I shoot this thing?”

“Legs – go for the legs!”

The shots were deafening – five of them, fired so quickly the sounds blurred together. The robot pitched to the side, one of its legs blown clean off, servos straining as it tried to keep its balance.

Something zipped by close to Caleb’s head, flashing in the red gloom like a tiny silver hummingbird.

“*Beetlebat!*” he cried.

Beetlebat was one of the many powerful miniature robots Zen had built back in the ARC tower, and her personal favourite. It looked like a metallic beetle with bat wings and a twisting mouse-like tail, and it had already helped them out of several hair-raising situations.

Across the lobby, Zen had jumped onto a sleek reception desk. She whistled one of Beetlebat’s special commands – two short, high notes – and pointed at the stricken construction robot, providing a homing signal with

a microdevice fitted on her forefinger. Beetlebat swept in, landed beside the robot's LED cluster and attached its mandibles to a protruding wire, which it then pulled loose as it flew upwards. The machine jolted to a complete stop and clanged down to the floor.

Zen's bot flew back to her shoulder. "Good work, girl," she said, as it folded in its wings. Then she hopped off the desk and looked over at Caleb. "Come on – we've got to get to the stairs."

"Agreed."

Caleb stepped around the fallen robot and they set off together into the corridor ahead.

Mitch was only a few paces behind, his pistol still at the ready. "Why did it attack us like that?" he asked. "Why did it try to..."

His voice trailed off as they advanced. There were observation windows on either side, facing into several different laboratories and testing zones. Every robot they could see was going haywire: thrashing around their enclosures, pounding against doors and walls, destroying anything within reach. All of the rooms were soundproofed – meaning that this mass robotic frenzy was eerily silent.

"OK," said Zen. "This is officially terrifying."

Mitch's mouth was hanging open. "What ... what is going on here?"

"It's the virus," said Caleb. "This is what it was written to do. It's been replacing the code that handles the standard operating parameters for these robots. It's turning them into

a load of killing machines.” He watched something roughly L-shaped, striped with luminous yellow safety paint, bash away at one of the windows with the huge adjustable wrench it had for an arm. “Sooner or later, they’re going to break out of there. And then they’ll go for us just like that other one did.”

Zen frowned. “Imagine doing this deliberately.”

Mitch looked from Caleb to Zen. “So ... how do we stop it?”

“We have to get to the servers before the codebase is completely rewritten,” Caleb told him. “Then we can isolate the virus. Perform a hard reset of the whole system. Force these things to crash.”

Zen was nodding. “That should work.”

“Why didn’t SolTec try this?” Mitch asked.

“It’s kind of a last resort,” Zen explained. “It’ll trash all the bots’ software. Could do some permanent damage. But it’s the only chance we’ve got left.”

“Get Lennox on the line,” said Mitch. “Let’s see what he thinks.”

“I’m afraid there is no signal,” Sam told him. “We cannot contact the surface. This may be due to the virus. If it does manage to rewrite the codebase, SolTec’s robots will effectively become autonomous. We will be locked out – unable to control or influence them. The machines will be guided only by their brutal new programming.”

Caleb shook his head. “Killer robots on the rampage. Not what any of us expected when we got up this morning.”

Mitch was cursing under his breath.

“There’s a lot SolTec aren’t telling us,” Zen said, gesturing towards the windows. “These models are beyond anything they’ve made public. Way more advanced.” Her lip curled. “I guess *Robotics for Tomorrow* was right after all.”

Mitch fished a pencil flashlight from his pocket and attached it to his gun. “Hard reset it is,” he said. “How long have we got, Sam?”

“It is difficult to be precise, Mr Mitchell,” the AI replied, “but—”

“Call me Mitch.”

“It is difficult to be precise, Mitch, but I would estimate that the original codebase will be gone in no more than four minutes and thirty-two seconds.”

The Möbius team looked at one another. Then all at once they started to run.