

SANDS OF TIME

BOOK III

THE ISOMER PROTOCOL

40 YEARS IN THE SHADOW GOVERNMENT



BASED ON THE INCREDIBLE TRUE STORY

SEAN DAVID MORTON

PROLOGUE

A MESSAGE FROM THE GROUP DIRECTOR

Dr. THEODORE HUMPHRY, JR. PhD.

JOURNAL ENTRY: 0227 ZULU. Somewhere over the North Atlantic:

It is so very late. I sit on my throne in the sky, Zeus-like, cutting with amazing speed through this inky, velvet night, feeling very alone in this strange universe consisting of an infinite layer of cotton like gunmetal greyish silver clouds beneath me and the vault of heavenly stars above.

As I get older I've found I'm definitely built for comfort and not speed. I've always hated this type of travel anyway. As the years go by I have more and more trouble sleeping within the tubular vibrating rumbling thrum of airplanes. My requirement to do it has multiplied exponentially against my loathing and hatred of it. Probably has more to do with the fact that it seems death is approaching each of us so much faster now in the fall of my years, and I am now closer to the end than I am to the beginning. And yet, still, there is so much left to do. So much left undone. An ungodly amount, in fact, of things to do!

The cabin lighting of the Gulfstream G-3 has been dimmed to assist with sleep, the exception being the recessed curved flush wooden panel sidelight softly illuminating the aircraft's interior floor and the ghostly glistening glow of my computer. Two other men are sleeping near me. As men who are always with me, they are my personal assistants, advisers, "friends" and, if necessary, my very own, personally custom trained assassins.

That would include assassinating me, by the way.

They would strongly object with "Extreme Prejudice" if they knew I was even thinking about keeping this journal for someone out there to publish

one day when I have... “Moved On.” But that is part of my master plan to see to it that this planet knows its true history and what I have done, for good or ill, warts and all, to protect it.

Make no mistake, if you are brave, or foolish enough to be somehow reading this now, I am most certainly dead or maybe lost somewhere in time. I might be lucky enough at some point to move ahead in the time stream and return at some later date, or be lost in it unable to navigate its violent currents and eddies, but the way my life is going, believe me, dead is much more likely.

A few years ago I realized that someone needed to have a record of what went on in my world and what it is we do in it. More importantly, *WHY WE DID WHAT WE DID*. I have turned over a batch of my own notes and journals and those of my predecessor’s to a crack team of particularly vicious attorneys in Century City, California, as part of the probate of my eventual estate and last will and testament.

These attorneys have been entrusted with the legal and fiduciary responsibility to hold this material when I go, and get all my notes, journals and documents to a man I trust implicitly. One who has been gifted with the talent and the sheer guts to get this story out to the public so at least there would be some attempt to warn the world of what I have dealt with all of these years, and to warn all the people of Earth of what is coming.

Will he be listened to? Maybe. Will he be savagely attacked, smeared, arrested by some federal alphabet agency on some trumped up charge or... killed? Most definitely.

Probably the most important question that should and will be asked about what will be presented in these journals is; “Who am I?” “Why do I know these things?” and “Why should I believe any of it?” Those are the primary, secondary, tertiary and the most logical questions you should be

asking if you dare to read on.

The answer to all of them is really quite simple: I am the Boogie Man. The real life Man In Black. I am the man in the closet. The monster under the bed, the man peering through the window that every single conspiracy theorist and “nut case” (although they are far more sane than you can imagine) talks about, all the time.

I’m the man who runs the “Shadow Government” inside these united States of America, or The United States, as you would call this façade of a corporation everyone pretends is a “Country”, as well as in about 20 other major industrialized “nations”.

I am the person who knows all the raw congealed viscous stuff of nightmares and comes in the dark of night to scare congressmen, senators, popes, prime ministers, politicians and presidents into doing my bidding. And probably the most important point that needs to hit its target here: I am the head of the only group on this planet that is committed, actively and totally (to the very death if need be), to fighting the war against those who would place each and every man, woman and child on this planet, into a can and call it Spam.

If one were to render and strip all the facades of my world down to its minimalist bare bones spine, I am the man who runs all the secret programs that no government on Earth knows about. All of that, with its dire consequences, including fighting a war where the very existence of our people, our planet, and all that any of us ever were, are, or will ever be, is at stake.

And it all started over seventy years ago.

I do not plan to spend my time rehashing information presented elsewhere, and in a form far better than I ever could. Needless to say that I’ve been dealing with ever increasing numbers of secret projects from the time I

finished my undergraduate degree at the University of Southern California and my doctorate at Cal Tech in Pasadena over forty years ago. It all started with the heart of a German “time machine” and has grown into a vast panoply of far more complex systems.

Right now I’m flying back to the United States from Russia. I was there visiting my ex-wife and children. Irina is a brilliant, headstrong and gifted scientist. Several years ago she decided it would be safer for our son and daughter to be raised in her Motherland where she works as a professor of physics, and, on occasion, on special projects for The Group. She said she hated what she saw America becoming, and she had no intention of watching it become the USSA, the United Socialist States of America. She vehemently railed that she’d already lived through the oppression of one Communist empire, and she would not live through another. I could not disagree with her. So I relented, extremely reluctantly, to let them all go.

Now, if I’m lucky, I see them once or twice a year for maybe seven to ten days at most. No one sees me silently cry on the way home. Of those children I once held in my arms and threw into the air, one, Pasha, is now fully grown, educated and every bit as opinionated and bullheaded as her mother, which is part and parcel of what made me love her so. The other, Theodore, my little precious Teddy, is a world-class boy genius that can only be part of some new Blue, Indigo or Violet vibration now reaching this planet. Or maybe some one, or some thing, slipped some super alien DNA into the wood pile when I wasn’t looking.

My Russian trip was cut short this year because an accident happened. I am not sure why or how it occurred, but it had a distinct effect on my world and possibly heralded a new and frightening Age. A phase we should all fear. All I know for sure is that my time, and the time for our world is growing short and hopefully, by telling this story, people will figure out what to do

and then do it for themselves and their families. Clearly, the reason being that your guns, your friends, your neighborhoods, your police, your armies and your governments, wherever you live, will not be able to protect or defend you. That is what I do. Protect you.

It is just that simple.

I will include as part of this package to my posterity, all the notes and reports from all those involved that pertain to these incidents and events, so that my chronicler can get several perspectives on this story from numerous points of view that are not solely my own. I have laid everything out in chronological order as best I can for whom ever dares put it out there into the wild blue yonder.

All of this pertains to the reality behind the scenes in which you live, whether you know it or not, with men like me keeping it from you.

Why?

So all of you can all sleep at night.

PART ONE:

“ WE’VE LOST GAGE NOBLE
SEVEN ”

CHAPTER ONE

Dyna-Tech Industries was a highly successful prototyping firm located in the exact center of the country. Smack in the heart of Kansas, in a town called Noble, a small town that, every day, lived up to its name in the hearts and minds and souls of its citizens. The company was a vital part of the community, supporting various local sports, educational and charitable church organizations, drives, sponsorships and programs. The local Applebee's had its walls covered in photos of the smiling, triumphant sports teams it had sponsored over the years. The management was deeply involved in everything in Noble and almost everyone in town knew them. Their one-story tilt-up cement building out on Route 35 was about one hundred thousand feet of containment of the most modern fabrication and prototyping equipment in the country. Sales were strong and the company employed a varied and diverse cross section of the local community.

The only thing which caught some people off guard at first was the fact that they had located their business a way out and away from the industrial park that had been built as a business and industrial campus to the west of Noble. The people in charge of Dyna-Tech had picked one of the worst pieces of ground around. Like something that had been pillaged, razed and salted by some Biblical horde like the Philistines, Assyrians and Moabites bulldozing the whole thing flat, while they drove the sobbing women before them. Their whole facility was located over the old Coventry Salt Mine that shut down at the turn of the twentieth century. An obsolete haunted hulk.

The old timers in the town could remember when they were young, how several people had gotten lost in the labyrinth of tunnels and passageways underground, and were never found again. Or that was the legend.

It was exactly for this reason that Dyna-Tech was here. Part of the main building was shut off from the rest. It was plastered with signs, which told everyone that this is where the top-secret government prototyping went on and that no one without proper credentials could enter the area. Only five people worked in that department and they seldom mixed in with the other employees.

The people in Noble had some minor, passing curiosities. They also knew the “secret division” brought a lot of money into their town and that was as far as the wondering went. Young people now had a chance to work somewhere that was still local, close to their families and friends, and not all be pig farmers.

Behind those signs and secret doors was a maze of prep rooms, storage areas and special holding facilities. Two closed loading areas were fenced off and the place had its own security force. In the middle of the area was a black and yellow striped hydraulic elevator that led down to the third floor underground gallery. From there, branches moved in three different directions to various parts of the old salt mine that had been revitalized, retrofitted and modernized. This complex employed another seventy people full time that came to work via an alternate route. The lower level was known as the Gage Complex, Simpson Division, which ended up being known as Gage Noble or GN for short.

The Gage level consisted of seven long salt runs. This was in the seventh run, hence its name. Each were twelve feet high, twenty feet wide and their walls had been sealed with a special polymer that not only made the walls like steel in strength, but also prevented anything from being absorbed into them. Each run had to be a minimum of a thousand feet long, had to have at least two forty-five degree turns within the run and had to be perfectly level. At the end of Gage Noble Seven a room had been hewed out. It was a

perfect square one hundred feet wide and equally long. The multiple wires, cables, ventilator tubes, water lines and waste lines going back out, all entered the room and then immediately connected to a glass building, supported on huge earthquake shocks.

Vantex Seven was the end of the line for the Gage Seven tunnel. It was a forty-by-forty glass building. But right there the similarity to anything in Sunset Magazine ended. Vantex had glass-like walls that were four inches thick. The seams between panels were undetectable and the connections with the solid floor or ceiling could not be distinguished.

Inside it was one big room, with several laboratory station workbenches. There was a double door entrance, utilizing higher than atmospheric pressure to assure nothing got into the room. This was not a biological laboratory, nor a room for pathogens of any kind. It was designed to analyze artifacts. Anomalous artifacts. Things that somehow existed but shouldn't. Animal, mineral, vegetable, ancient, alien, terrestrial, extraterrestrial, or ultra-dimensional. The stuff all the great cable TV shows were made up of. One floor up from this lab were storage rooms in another salt gallery that contained hundreds of thousands of such items, none of which would ever see the light of day, nor grace the glass cases of any museum no matter how exotic.

There were four members to the team that worked exclusively in Vantex Seven. The head of the team was Dr. Joseph Levine, a materials physicist, Dr. Lorry Hunter, a chemist, Edgar Ramirez, a systems expert and Peter Dodson, an engineer and generalist. They had worked closely for four years at this point and respected and liked each other more than any of them cared to let on. They'd taken apart stuff that they knew did not come from this planet, this dimension, or even this time. Theirs was not to reason why, or ask any questions at all... though, it was their job to provide the best

answers they could on how something came into existence and how it worked. The job was beyond thrilling for every one of them and they looked forward to each new challenge as it was presented.

It was just after 1100 hours in the morning when the team assembled in the Vantex Seven hall. Edgar was the last to come in, since he had to roll the cart all the way down to the lab from the primary blast doors, where he'd taken possession of it from the security officer. The cart was rather large, with way oversized, spring-loaded wheels. It felt like it was driving and pushing itself, like some old, friendly pet horse, and he wished his own rickety jalopy could move with such ease, as he pushed it down towards the illuminated glass cubicle where he performed his magical prestidigitations.

“It says here on the report,” he said as he held open a large folder, “‘small circular object with intelligent markings on surface’. Hmm....” Levine made a face and closed the document file, which had at least three “CLASSIFICATION” stamps on its cover, all of which were way Above Top Secret. “Great!” Levine huffed to anyone that would listen. “Another South African diamond mine ball from the Jurassic Period with Assyrian or Sumerian inscriptions on it?”

“Ah, fer Pete’s sake!” Lorry said, throwing up her hands in mock exasperation, “Finish your coffee Joe. Edgar can’t bring it in until that cup is gone and you are in a more inquisitive mood.” Lorry had just finished pulling on her blue lab gown and was now fussing with putting on her lunch lady like head cover which she hated more than death.

“So sue me! I’m inquisitive!” Levine responded with his usual curmudgeonly ire. “It’s just that the guys who write up these descriptions in the file are the same circus clowns that write up the stupid log lines for Netflix. Normally they have nothing to do with the movie whatsoever!”

Levine tossed his cup down the chute in the corner of the room with some angry force and listened to it whoosh away into the blackness of the vacuum. Then there was a pressure snap of the trash lid resealing. He stood staring at it, slowly mulling a thought. “I wonder what would happen,” he said at last, “if I got my hand caught in that thing?”

“Texas,” Dodson said in his dry, off-hand, authoritative way, as if he had the last word of truth on all things. “Your hand would end up in Texas... with the rest of the trash.”

“My, my, my! Aren’t we pleasant today,” Lorry winked at her team partner.

“Sorry,” Dodson said sheepishly. “I was just reading last night about this gi-normous, hu-gantic island of trash in the Pacific as big as Texas. Then farther down in the article someone was recommending that it be hauled out and shipped to Texas, since no one there would care.” Peter could say anything with a straight face just to observe the reaction.

“Oh give me a break!” Lorry giggled while rolling her eyes.

“Okay, here it is. Today’s blue-plate special,” Edgar walked in through the pressure doors and strode up to the low table between them all and laid down a small solid gray box. He immediately went over and pulled off his gloves and gown and trashed them down the vacuum chute and started to put on new clean ones with Lorry’s help.

“So, Peter, you want the honors to pull the lid off this thing? It has Phillips screws holding it closed...” Levine stood back and allowed the other man to start opening the secured case with a small electric screwdriver.

Peter stood back as Levine worked his lips counting. “I got twenty screws?”

“Agreed,” Levine put the lid on the small plastic box that Peter had been dropping the screws into and sealed it up with yellow tape that had the

word “SAMPLE” printed on it every inch and a half.

“Let me see now....” Levine pulled out a scuffed round ball, deep blue-black in color with deep scars of impairment and scorched burned patches all around it.

“Light ‘em up, Omar!” Edgar said to the air and the space around him, moving back with a magician’s flourish.

All at once, twenty cameras surrounding the outer rim of the glass room and eight inside the enclosure came on. All of them springing to life with small beady red LED eyes, like cyclopean rats in the darkness, that meant they were functioning, watching with their ever open baleful lens and recording every movement.

Lorry looked at Levine and then over at the other two men, and lowered his voice to a stage whisper. “Have any of you ever met Omar?”

“No,” Levine nodded at the two other men stroking his chin, as if this was the introduction of some great mystery, to see if they had any comments. “Don’t even know where he works in the building. Don’t really know if ‘he’ is a ‘he’ or not.” He raised his finger in the air as if some great shining bulb had gone off over his head. “When we’re done today, let’s make it our priority for the sake of our own sanity to hunt him down and see if he’s actually real!” Edgar slapped the palm of his hand lightly on the table to bring emphasis to his will and desire to solve this grand mystery. He was always setting challenges for the team that no one ever followed up on, but they all nodded their agreement in a silent majority vote anyway.

“The object is twelve centimeters in diameter,” Lorry brought the team back on task and into the moment and the job at hand. “Weight: exactly fourteen ounces.”

“There are no clearly indicated openings or seams on the sphere. There appears to be a central stripe around it which contains...” Levine counted to

himself, “fourteen symbols of an as yet undetermined series of foreign or alien characters or writing, but having a highly geometric pattern.”

“I concur,” Lorry took out a small hand-held, lighted examination instrument, bent down in close and started to move it slowly around the globe. The instrument had a coiled cable going into it, so that the magnified image was being recorded somewhere in the facility. She took a set of highly polished probes from a soft brown leather case and started to scrape the object with each one and then examined the results on her scope. Each time she made a scratch she called off a specific number. She went through all ten of her instruments and then straightened up and twitched her neck to the side and arched her back.

“That is very strange,” she mused with a perplexed look, as she squinted her eyes and tilted her head. “The object is totally off the Mol scale for hardness. None of our tools seem to even make any kind of impression on it.” She put her gleaming implements back and scooted over to one side in order to allow another one of the team members to look at the sphere close up.

Peter pulled on a strange pair of glasses making him look like a huge Praying Mantis, that had a baffle of sliding interchangeable lenses the size of coke bottle bottoms, and had some weird numbering on the attached adjustable round rings. He plugged them into one of the outlets of a device on the table and then picked up the ball in his gloved hands and leaned in pulling it about an inch from his face.

“Hey Poncho, pull on your Captain America glasses and get your tiniest laser over here.” It was a personal joke between the two men. Peter was left-handed so naturally someone started calling him Lefty and it just kind of stuck. Therefore, in the Man Law world of office good-natured interactions, his sixth generation Hispanic partner was going to always get the brunt of it, now dubbed “Poncho.”

“Yes sir, Patrone! Right away Boss. Hold on until I find the off and on switch.” Edgar was already hovering over the object from the other side of the table and he had a device in his hand that looked like a flashlight with a dental probe connected to its business end.

“Clowns!” Lorry said still trying to see what Peter was doing with interest.

“There looks like there is a place...right...here,” he said pointing to an area on the ominous ball, “...to open this, boss. What do you want me do?” Peter stood up and looked at Levine with an expression on his face, like something he had just seen out of a really bad horror movie.

“Hey...” Levine shrugged. “Doesn’t look to me like this little mother bugger is giving us any other way in. If you think it will open without damaging it...do it, I guess,” he said shrugging his shoulders. “Lorry?” Levine turned and looked at the woman. “Comments, questions, opinions, announcements, pinnings, engagements?”

“Oh hells yes!” Lorry said, more genuinely excited than any of these men had seen her for a very long time. “We’ve played with so many things that turned out to be just plain empty before,” she said looking around, letting her enthusiasm for adventure and discovery flow over the other men. “This is going to so much different. Pop the cork on that baby Peter, and let’s see what’s inside. Maybe its tickets for the Rolling Stones!” Lorry pulled on her pair of high-powered glasses and took a look where Peter was pointing with his probe.

“Okay Edgar,” he pointed at the sphere with his index and middle finger, “Run the cutting edge of that light right.... here.... in this crevice.” Peter’s probe was lying right on target inside the microscopic line on the sphere.

“Okay...setting to the very smallest beam size in the upper red zone.”

He fired up the laser and set the power level with a small knob and leaned into the mysterious alien object as he focused his vision and bit his lower lip.

“And here we... go!”

CHAPTER TWO

The ground suddenly moved with a minor tremor that rolled through the entire compound like a gentle swelling wave, an extremely unusual experience for those citizens living in the Heartland of the American Midwest. Everyone inside Dyna-Tech laughed about it because it was not really very bad inside the structure. Earthquakes did happen, but very seldom here in Kansas. The lights swung gently side to side, the lobby fish tank rippled a bit and people looked around, then back at each other, smiled or laughed, then got back to work.

A few took several moments to call their homes and loved ones to see if everything was all right. More just to touch base and break up the monotony of the day, but then life went on. Even when Mother Nature gave folks a little reminder as to who was really in charge.

However, four hundred feet below, that was not the story. Panic was the order of business. Something had ripped through Gage Noble Seven. The blast doors had sealed completely and the non-override system was engaged. No one was getting in there until a primary response team showed up.

When the fail-safe system on the blast door engaged, it sent out a series of radio and short-wave messages. The first always went to the P.R.T.— the Primary Response Team. The closest to Gage Noble Seven was several hundred miles away in Texas.

Within ten minutes, PRT was scrambled on emergency alert and in the air on an Air Force transport flying at super-sonic velocity to the Noble National Airport, which was closer to their target than the Kansas McConnell, Shilling or Forbes Air Force Bases. The PRT had two fully equipped vans and eight members inside the bird that were zooming through the open cleared space at top speed.

The team membership was varied and as strange as could be. A mixture

of combat specialists, CDC flash team responders, and Haz-Mat cleanup crew, all wrapped into eight individuals professionally cross-training for years with each other into a stunning precision team of exceptional highly motivated individuals who lived and dreamed for the thrill of the alarm going off, getting them up and moving into the unpredictable dangers of the wild blue yonder.

These men and women all had psychological profiles that went off the genius charts in so many different areas. They were the people the Navy searched high and low for to be elite Navy Seals. Coaches wanted them as Olympic athletes, and intelligence agencies as NOCs. They were far from normal, living on great gouts of adrenaline and they needed the action to carve and chisel meaning and purpose out of the block hard marble of their lives. In secret there are around a hundred clandestine teams like this warehoused all around the world just waiting for the “*Flit To Hit The San*”.

The second set of panicked messages went out over the satellite system. The encoded signal transmitted in a very specific way and it would only set off about thirty global units. The team, now in the air, told the owner of the unit that a major happening had occurred. The first set of codes showing up on the screen of the unit, told them “THE WHERE” and the second code gave them “THE WHAT”. That was all. Unbreakable, with no rhyme nor reason to the coding. But it gave a sheer mass of information to the person reading it.

* * * *

Dr. Theodore “Ted” Humphrey, Jr. PhD. was sitting in his former/estranged/current wife’s living room in her house in Moscow, Russia. Their relationship was now...officially....”Complicated”, which the Russians

seem to not just prefer, but LOVE! The more Byzantine for them the better.

He felt the signal unit go off in his pants pocket and looked over at Captain Robert “Bob” Hanson, United States Navy, his assistant, friend, confidante, sidekick and protector for the many years since Colonel Jack Thomson had retired to Florida.

When the quiet hum of the vibrating device came on, Ted merely tilted his head and clenched his jaw, which would have been imperceptible to any casual observer. Ted’s wife Irina looked at both men suspiciously, narrowing her beautiful piercing crystal blue eyes that had lost none of their luster and power over the years. They’d all been sipping a late night brandy out of gold rimmed snifters and listening to her speak of her latest research at the Moscow Technological University. She’d been with Ted so long she knew by now very well how to read his face and that of his friend who had lived with both of them for several years, and, of course, always accompanied him on his trips to Moscow.

However, both men cringed slightly with a subtle inner terror, knowing that whatever was going on, a presidential assassination or planet killing mother ship, it was breaking Irina’s iron fisted rule of NO BUSINESS IN HER HOUSE!

Better to let the Earth die a violent death than make Irina angry.

Irina finally put her snifter down on the table, cleared her throat and put her hands daintily in her lap.

In a slow, measured voice that barely disguised the storm she was about to unleash, she said calmly: “Vat has just happened?”

“What? Oh.... nothing....” Ted lied as he and Bob both tried to sit back nonchalantly and act as if everything was fine.

“Bullshoot...” She could never pronounce the word properly with her Russian accent. “You are both such little boys and stills suck terrible

liars! Bob, vat has just happened? Maybe you will be polite to me still in my own home!”

Bob raised his eyebrow to Ted who nodded. Ted wanted to know as well, but did not want to ruin the perfectly good evening, or take the rap, by looking at the signaling unit still obviously vibrating and flashing through the fabric of his pants like some rude erection in church.

Bob looked over at Ted, who looked up at the ceiling, telling Bob clearly that he was on his own, and that it was not going to be him to bring down the wrath of the goddess.

Bob shook his head and mumbled, “You big coward...”

Finally, with a growl, Bob pulled out his flashing buzzing unit, looked at it and frowned hard. Suddenly, he jumped to his feet, went to the end of the couch, and pulled up his bullet proof spider silk re-enforced black briefcase, never more than six feet from him at any given time. Quickly and expertly he twisted the locking tumblers with his thumbs and it popped them open with a load CLACK. He threw it open and pulled out a small notebook. He frantically flipped the pages with his thumb, came to the one he wanted and ran his finger down the page. His lower jaw slid forward and as he slowly expelled air from his nose, rubbed his face and looked up at Ted and Irina.

He sat there for a moment waiting.

“We just lost Gage Noble Seven, out at Vantex.”

Ted leaned forward with concern. “Who runs it?”

“Joe Levine. Do you know him?” Bob pulled out his special communications phones out of the briefcase, that he also carried with him at all times.

“Met him once or twice at meetings at Gage, that’s all. They were working on what... weird artifacts?” Ted closed his eyes and tried to remember the man’s face.

“Yes. But what they were screwing with was the salvage from the Ajax’s last mission.” Bob was looking again in his book.

“Da Ajax Mission? Why didn’t you tell me dat vas completed?” Irina looked at Ted with a strange hard look. “I was told, or I believed, because I never know if vat comes out of my ‘husband’ is true, you promised dat I would have a part in dat one.”

“Yes...you were,” Ted said, exasperated, “until right before the mission your last physical came in.” Ted looked directly back at her. It was for her own good and safety and he was not going to back down or be ashamed of not telling her something to protect her.

“Oh...” She looked away hurt down to her glass and picked it up. “I thought the doctor vas not going to report that for me out of friendship.” She took a long sip of the superb Marquis de Montesquiou 1904 Vintage Armagnac brandy.

“He didn’t,” Ted said, sitting there for a long moment looking at the woman he had loved for years. “I told him to come clean or I would have him take a long walk with Ben Reilly. He started talking to me like my long lost Dutch uncle. There was no way I was sending you on an off planet mission that dangerous with those kinds of pressures on you and under those conditions.”

Bob broke the silence hanging between them with a question. “We got PRT out of Texas already inbound. Sylvester’s group has been notified to get there to start the primary report before containment is broken. Who’s getting the call here for Overall?”

“Overall” is a term used by The Group when speaking about who is going to manage a problem, incident, or accident. There were two levels to any problem they faced: a #1 or a #2. It was that simple. A #2 type of incident came under the heading of anything and everything. Those were

handled by people who had been brought into The Group to serve in various roles and during their term of service to be judged as to whether they had the unspoken “Right Stuff” necessary to move up to a higher level of responsibility. Things in The Group were not done by committees, study groups or collective agreements. Decisions were reached by an individual, in the field, on the hot seat, who would take total and complete responsibility for those decisions and actions. There was no way of pointing at some other member or indicting the whole team for the decision. A very simple, direct, and character building system, which more often than not, broke more people than it made.

A Number One was a world ending, paradigm shifting, major blowup. That took what used to be called a “Boss” way back in the day. Back when Ted was recruited into The Group by dear old Admiral Jacobs and his traitorous Negro henchman Max. There were fourteen of them spread around the world and Ted was the head, the Boss One now. Ted had changed the names a few years ago to “The Directors”, trying to give a more benevolent and benign feel to all the skullduggery in line with the overall movement towards “Political Correctness”, whatever that was. The clear, present, simple and stark reality was that all the Bosses carried life and death in their hands, morning, noon and night, individually and collectively, as well as worldwide, for men in their service as well as the world.

Ted picked up his snifter, got up and walked over to the sideboard of his liquor bar and filled it again with more of the swirling deep golden liquid that ran for over \$7000 a bottle. He filled his senses with its deep, rich, indescribable aroma and took a long draw.

“Matthew Fassbinder. Out of Adeline,” he said after a long thoughtful pause, as he exhaled the scent of the liquor.

“This is a make it or break it for him, isn’t it, Boss?” Bob had a

problem with changing the old way of referring to his friend as “The Director.” Just the old cowboy in him.

“It is. When we head to Kansas ask Ed Reilly to join us. In fact have him fly over here so that he can go back with us.” Ted turned to Irina. “That is if we still have the honor of staying here and basking in the warm glow of your sunny personality for five more days?”

“Theodore!” Irina said with mock indignation. “You and this old pet wolf of ours can stay here as long as he wants. Besides both of the children are coming up tomorrow to see their Da and their Uncle Bob. You won’t be needed back there in the USSA,” her pet name for America now, “until this Matthew person is finished.”

She gave Ted a warm and loving smile. “Besides I still want you to see my new paintings,” she said beaming with pride. “They are now on display at the nice gallery in the old part of the city.”

“Thank you, my dear,” Ted bowed to her. “I have always loved your paintings.”

“You used to make fun of them in Nevada when I started,” she smiled.

“Never!” Ted said trying to sound hurt and as truthful as he could.

They all laughed together, as they all knew the truth.

CHAPTER THREE

Ted had only been in the bowels of the Gage Noble Seven complex once. That had been several years ago now. All he really knew was that in this bizarre and entirely out of the way place, this dungeonesque salt mine, they were good people that had always done a good job and made his life easier because of it. So he had no need to darken their door with the ominous shadow of his presence.

He decided to ride to the end of tunnel in the golf cart provided. The air always seemed thick and fetid to him this far down below ground no matter how you lit the place up. It was all still a deep dark cave to Ted and he had seen one too many of them over the years. The Dulce Archeletta Mesa had been enough for him for several lifetimes.

Bob Hanson jumped in behind the wheel and Ed Reilly got in the back seat facing backwards. It only took a short time to get to the end of the shaft once they got past the blast door, which now stood agape like the mouth of some huge misshapen whale. Ted had the Sylvester Report in his hand, which had been underlined, and yellow highlighted. The Sylvester Team had only been in here for a few minutes to take samples and then left and shut the place back up tight until Fassbinder could arrive. They prepared their primary report and shot it off to Ted and Fassbinder, then moved off the stage and waited to see if anyone needed anything else before they went back to where it was they presently called home. In this case, it was Cleveland, Ohio for the time being.

Vantex Seven was still there, complete and whole. The glass looked like it was frosted opaque that had been hot glazed from the inside, and nothing could be seen inside, with the exception of a moving shadow play of souls against the solid glare of the lights. Ted got out and started to walk up the

ramp.

“Boss you want either of us with you?” Bob sat there in the cart.

Ted just nodded in the negative not looking back. He pushed the door open and then the other. The inside of the glass cubicle was clean and empty except for a folding table situated in the dead center of the room, along with two green leather padded folding chairs. A pile of papers were splayed on the table, attempting to escape from various multi-colored folders, and a man sucking on what looked like an orange flavored tootsie pop was sitting in one of the chairs. He was hunched over a portable computer on the table with an electronic tablet next to it, along with four large white coffee cups. Ted noticed the lids had been sealed into place with duct tape.

Ted scanned the room with the keen eye of an LAPD Homicide Detective like his uncle Captain Bob Humphrey had taught him, checking the evidence. With no other preliminaries he spoke, filling the room with the bass echo of his voice.

“What happened to the glass?”

The man at the table jumped up with a start, so engrossed in his task he was unaware of anything around him, looking around like he had been kissed by a ghost. He was in his very early thirties, looking more like a grad student than a professional government scientist. He wore a loose, dirty white lab coat, with the obligatory ink stained plastic pocket protector. He looked like he at one time tried his best to fit in with civilization, but gave up when he realized he didn't know what that was exactly. His hair was stringy and greasy, sweeping up over a prodigious forehead, about down to his shoulders and it looked like as though he thought about shaving about a week ago, failed at the attempt, but then forgot. He wore a plaid shirt with a design that looked like it was the tartan of the Scottish clan that discovered LSD. He completed the look with a badly red knit tie, purple jeans and black Converse

Chuck Taylor All Star High tops. Ted thought he looked like Bruce Banner after rolling for about a week on Molly at a Burning Coachella Man Rave, or whatever they were called. He rolled the tootsie-pop into his cheek to speak with a lazy but clearly Oxford bred English accent.

“Um, well, that’s the thing actually. I really don’t think its glass, mate, I mean....um, sir,” he said correcting himself, running his hand nervously through his greasy hair. “More of a steel plate, like transparent titanium, of a highly matrixed polymer... but definitely not glass. It’s exactly eleven millimeters less in thickness than it was originally, and I have no bloody clue how that would even be possible.” The man extended his right hand while taking the sucker out his mouth with his left.

“You must be the chap that hired me, what? Like seven years ago?”

“I am,” Ted absently shook the man’s hand with its cold, floppy, fishlike grip, while still looking around.

“Doctor Fassbinder,” he said putting the sucker back in his mouth and grabbing his chest with both hands. “Oh, ah....Matthew...Fassbinder, that is...Matt...would be...ah...me.”

Ted just let the awkward silence hang in the air, while Fassbinder rolled up on his toes, in that peculiar quirk of Englishmen.

“Dr. Ted Humphrey, Senior Director.” Ted walked over and rubbed his hand on the glass wall that had an uneven roughness to it. “Did you have all the wreckage taken out of here before your investigation?”

“There wasn’t any. With the exception of being tidied up a bit, and this table and chairs...and these, er, papers, of course, you are seeing this in all its splendour exactly the way I saw it all five days ago,” the man sat back down, “oh, uh....Mister...Senior, doctor, Director...Sir!” The man went back to sucking his lollipop, looking Ted up and down, clearly impressed and

in awe. “My oh my! Boss One! Wow. The legend lives!” He shot out his arms like a stage magician, palms out, in a presentational gesture of respect.

“There was several million dollars of high tech equipment in this room,” Ted took the other chair and sat down across from Fassbinder and crossed his arms in displeasure.

“Right! I saw some of it in the pre-blast video. Nice toys!” He noticed that Ted was holding the Sylvester Report. “Oh! Hullo!” He said pointing at Ted’s report. “I have one of those too!” He thumbed through his stack of papers and pulled it out. “Pure shiite! Those blokes used the videos only. But you know what they were missing?” Fassbinder pulled out his tootsie-pop and tapped it on his forehead for emphasis. “Imagination! Whatever you think that says is meaningless.”

Fassbinder tossed his copy of the report onto the table contemptuously. He then reached up and rubbed his forehead, realizing he had gotten it sticky, and now it was on his hand, so he wiped it on his coat, with a grimace, but it was now a chain reaction.

Ted could not help but hide a slight smirk. “So you know more than four Ph.D.’s that spend all their days and nights and weekends taking apart crime scenes and chasing terrorists?” Ted challenged him on purpose, because he wanted to see if this strange person he had hired, site unseen, all those years ago, was as good as advertised.

“Well, sir, they might all be very bloody good at looking at, say, ordinary, run of the mill, nitrate based explosive scenes, but THIS is nowhere near that kind of chemical reaction nonsense.” Fassbinder leaned back in his rickety folding chair and rolled his sucker back and forth in his mouth, bouncing it from cheek to cheek with his tongue. He pulled a thermos out of his briefcase on the floor, unscrewed the two built in red cups off the top and poured a full cup of hot coffee in each, then motioned Ted to take the bigger

one, which the Director did.

The first sip hit Ted with a wallop. “That is some tainted brew there!” He sat the cup back down with its alcoholic punch as Fassbinder sipped more of his.

“Yeah mate, it is. But when you spend your days looking at all the ways a human being can be torn to shreds and blown to smithereens and, well, killed, obviously, by being reduced to something resembling quantum foam, well, it takes a little of the edge off of it all, don’t it, eh?”

“Well,” Ted said unfolding his arms impatiently, “this doesn’t get us any closer to finding out what happened to my people.”

“AH! Yes. Well, about that...” He motioned Ted’s attention to the cups with the sealed lids. “Allow me to introduce you to...” he gently, and reverently picked up each sealed cup in turn, “Doctors Levine, Hunter, Ramirez and a chap named Dodson.” He moved the cups over one by one in front of Ted, like little soldiers all in a row standing at Styrofoam attention. “That, Mr. Director, ah, Boss One, sir, is truly all that is left of them.” Ted lowered his head and raised his eyebrows in disbelief. Fassbinder just kept rambling on. “I used a brand new vacuum and then measured it out equally. If there is any next of kin, one might want to buy a really expensive casket, weld and baton the fucker down right tight after adding sixty kilos of sand in bags and tell the families it has to be a...” he touched each cup again gingerly and with great respect, “a closed casket ceremony.”

To Ted it had all been an abstraction until that moment. The dead laid out before him. The ultimate cost of the work they all did. What were they working on? What had gone wrong? Why had the whole facility been blown up? This strange man just put human names on these people who had worked so loyally for Ted and his organization. Had he been in this business too long, not to even think about people first anymore? Had they all just become

human “resources” to be used up like oil, or gas, or fuel for the fire of this machine he ran? He found an old anger rising in himself he had not felt in years. He thought about what he felt when his father had disappeared and of his own choices when he was still just a young man. The incalculable rage that filled him when he met his dad, Dr. Ted Humphrey, SENIOR, almost thirty years later and his father still tried to treat him like a child. The anger when he had to give up Sally, pregnant with his child, as a casualty of his “Quest” to burrow into The Group. Or when Ellen had left after being so brutally mind-raped by the likes of Simon Ratterman and his demonic alien minions. When Max had died from a Visitor probe exploding in his skull. The times he had been in uniform and buried all his old friends and colleagues one by one; Harvey Glipsen, George Bellamy, who had giving their whole lives and existences to these projects. Chronos, Time-Runner, High Binder, Tempus Fugit and Ajax. Men who never enjoyed a moment of life, except for Harv maybe, for they were all slaves owned by The Group and its demands came first and foremost above and beyond all else.

“Shit!” Ted exploded. Fassbinder watched calmly as Ted shot up out his folding chair, knocking it backwards, picked up the cup of laced coffee and stormed outside.

Matthew watched with detached interest through the opaque, fractured kaleidoscope like “glass” the fragmented outlined figures of Ted Humphrey speaking to Bob Hanson, who was nodding and shaking his head and trying to catch up with the animated conversation that was really more of a ranting diatribe from Ted, that came echoing back into the lab as more of a muffled faraway rolling storm.

Ted walked purposefully back into the cubicle, picked up the chair, set it upright, and sat back down heavily across from Fassbinder. Ted grabbed the red plastic thermos cup and held it out for more. Fassbinder held the

Thermos aloft then hesitated.

“Oh, wait! I love this bit!” Making a satisfied face, there was a loud crunch, as Dr. Matthew Fassbinder, finally bit into the tootsie roll center of his orange tootsie pop. “Ahhh....” he said, as a wave of orgiastic pleasure rolled over him. “It is the little things in life!”

The other man nodded his agreement as Fassbinder poured his spiked coffee concoction.

“I want to know why four of my people are dead!” Ted fumed, holding the steaming cup in both his hands. “I don’t want generalities or quips or goddamn motherfucking fairy tales. I want hard, concrete facts. You’re the guy who everyone says knows how all this shit works. I am going to sit here and let you prove it to me right now, in depth. ‘Cause we ain’t leaving this place until I have all the facts. Is that clear?” Ted finished his coffee in a single gulp.

“Yes. Yes it is Boss One, sir. As an unmuddied lake of purest azure. And it is about time someone decided to do that.”

Then, Dr. Matthew Michael Fassbinder, Ph.D., started to lay out, step by step, what had happened in GAGE NOBLE SEVEN, and why they lost it, in all its minute and tedious gory details.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dr. Matthew Michael Fassbinder, PhD. was a star when he came out of the Exeter, Christ Church and Magdalene Colleges at Oxford University. He had taken double doctorates: one in Theoretical Physics and the other in Complex Systems. At twenty-six everyone on the faculty said he was on his way to a Nobel Prize without question. At twenty-eight he disappeared from the academic scene. No one could find him for several years. Finally, he allowed himself to be found in Adeline, New South Wales, working for a quantum physics institute, which had no record of accomplishments that anyone could find. Several writers went to him to get his story, but in his self-effacing manner he shined them on and left them with very much of nothing to hang a story onto.

For the past few years he'd been involved in unwrapping one of the greatest mysteries that The Group had ever puzzled over. How could a human being pass through an inter-dimensional time field and not be permanently harmed? At the end of World War Two when the original Group founders ripped and raped every cache and file they could find in Germany about time and space travel they had collected almost six hundred tons of written material. Much of it was used to build our first time machine, Project: Chronos. That was the system Ted had perfected for The Group and what had moved him up in the ranks. But ultimately they could only move inorganic objects. Any teleportation or time movement of anything living came with horrible side effects: loss of memory, seizures, black outs, blank time periods, paralysis, heart attacks, phasic disruptions, and, well, most always, death. At those were for the lucky ones that even came back in one whole piece. It was like being fed into and torn apart by an exploding jigsaw and never being put

back together quite right. The puzzle never again quite fit the picture on the box, even if you started at the corners.

In many cases, subjects, such as the first accidental experiment, came out the other side freezing, shaking, terrified and covered in ectoplasmic goo, which vaporized very quickly, but then died horribly sometime after. Like they were sucked down a river after clinging to a rock in a roiling Colorado rapid into the time-stream one small piece at a time.

Ted had permanently damaged his heart going through it once and never fully regained his health. Had it not been for the intervention of Rufus T. Henry and his father from further down the time stream, he would have died. Yet others who had worked on the original unit in Germany had used it and did not suffer any side effects at all. Namely his own father, Ted Sr., Dr. Simon Ratterman, (that murdering, sadistic bitch) Ann Corbett, and Ted's old friend, Dr. Rufus T. Henry.

This was the task given to Matthew Fassbinder, who was handed a complete working machine, unlimited funding and personnel of his choice. His only restriction was that he could never, of course, publish any of his findings. For a true researcher this was the Heavens opening and the hand of God Himself handing out a job made just for him. It did not come with any glory or any fame or the laurels and kudos of working in the ivy covered ivory towers of academia, publishing your ground breaking research, making the cover of Time with a Nobel Prize around your neck. What it was, was what the true business of physics was really and truly all about.

After five years, Ted finally came to the stark realization that so many of Fassbinder's skills were being wasted. So to keep him interested, Ted moved him into the Overall Group to conduct all kinds of different scientifically based investigations. Matthew had been exposed to a great deal of new sections and offshoots of The Group, but not the center core. Whether

he would make that next move depended entirely on him, for within the next two or three hours, his analysis of what happened in this underground hollowed out glass cubicle in this old rambling hulk of a salt mine would determine his next career move, and ultimately, the course of the rest of his life.

* * * * *

Bob Hanson came tearing back down to the salt gallery in the golf cart and came to a screeching halt, sliding the cart sideways to park it against the wall. He had a couple more chairs with him, another foldout table and a collection of drinks, sandwiches, snacks and other items necessary and essential to conduct a meeting of this sort. Ed Reilly met him immediately and started to unload the items into the glass cage. Matthew looked on with detached quizzical interest, but just kind of shook his head, wondering why a couple of hired thug cowboys, for that is how he saw them, would be sitting in on a formal breakdown and analysis meeting. When everything was ready Ted looked around the room and then started in with it.

“First item of business right here, right now is a couple of introductions. Dr. Fassbinder...may I call you Matthew or Matt?”

“As you wish, sir,” Fassbinder said with a bow and a wave of his hand. “Matt will be fine or mate...what they called me in Adeline.”

“Thank you...Matt. I’m sorry as hell to tell you, but these two men here know a lot more about you than you do about them.” Ted waited.

Fassbinder hesitated for a second or two. He folded his arms and put his right hand on his chin and then went on. “I would like to know what to call you? Sir? Boss? Boss One? Mr. Director or Dr. Humphrey.”

“That would be Ted. Ted...is just fine,” Ted looked at the other

men as he was pulling out his formal identification portfolio from his inside coat pocket. He laid his down in front of Matt as did the other two men. In descending order they indicated that each man was a subject of, and in service to, the United States Navy. All three were higher-level officers. Ted's ID showed his three blue stars in the background and stated clearly that he was a Major Flag Admiral. Bob and Ed's IDs showed their ranks as Naval Captains, one rank below Admiral. It was clear from Matt's face that the point was driven home he was not dealing with front row dancers or players in the chorus but he was reporting to the men who ran and produced the play and made things happen.

“And these are our part time jobs,” Ted offered up while replacing his case into his inside pocket. “I am the Senior Director of The Group, the same organization you work for, except, I know every part of it and you only know about a tenth of it all right now. We answer to no government. We are loosely aligned with the United States, more out of birth than anything else. There are fourteen directors in the whole world and we sit on top of the organization that very few even know about. But let me make it clear, no one controls any of us...but us. We span not just countries and continents but space as well. Besides NASA and the Air Force, we have our own small program that has been working in space research since the early fifties.” Ted sat back to give Matt the time to process what was being said.

“That is, and would be... before NASA?” Matt took his hand from his chin, looked over at all of them, and rolled his hand in the air.

“That is correct. We were in space long before any of the Mercury Astronauts ever crawled into a capsule.” Ted looked over at Bob who spoke next in his soft Texas drawl.

“The reason we are telling you all of this background is because you are at a career point here that you need to know about. One of

my roles in The Group is to watch for talent and see if we can move them through enough different programs to make them viable contenders for a higher spot in The Group. My responsibility is to mentor and move folks around and then give them chances to prove themselves. At Adeline you did as much or more than anyone could. The problem has beaten many of our best minds, but still we need to continue to work on it. The second component issue as we call it, is vital for us to continue on with using the ‘Thing in the Pit’ to move through time, where it gives us a chance to use it to its full potential. Time travel is worthless if your people are brain dead when they come back to you.” Bob took a moment and opened a soft drink can. “I started to move you around five years ago to see how you functioned in other areas. I admit I was skeptical at first but you handled yourself very well. That is why today’s analysis is so vital, to both you and us.”

Ed spoke up next. “I taught two years at the Academy at Annapolis. I was one of the most disliked professors, because I demanded so much of the midshipman taking my classes. But almost to the person, upon finishing the training each one of them clearly stated in written evaluations that they had learned more in my class than in any two others they had taken. I am the one who has picked most of your investigations in the last year to see how far in-depth you could go if pushed. The Director decided it was time for a tough final exam. You got this mess, here in Noble, Kansas.” Ed sat back for a few beats and looked at the man. “The next few hours are going to determine if you go deeper into this organization, or if you return to Adeline and continue your research there, or if we cut you loose and send you back to the world with our thanks, excellent references and enough money that you will never have to work again for as long as you live.”

“Well isn’t this all just Jim-Dandy,” Matt actually laughed. “Your third option there sounds the best, but I am sure that when ‘I go back

to the world' I will not have my own memories at all. I will believe that I became an entrepreneur of some kind in Australia, made a fortune and then decided to move into the challenging field of Lepidoptery, collecting butterflies in the Amazon for some ecological movement that I've funded."

Ed and Bob both smiled as well. Ed added jokingly, "You're pretty close, but we love to make people have transgender problems and worry about their fingernails being too long."

"You are all really twisted bastards aren't you?" Matt smiled with his dark English humor. "I'm in the hot seat now, aren't I? Either I perform or I get mind melded with some dink that thinks everyone wants a small box that speaks to him like HAL 9000. Exactly who or what gives you the right to play with people's lives this way?" Matt's mood moved rapidly from jovial to deadly serious, his own moral compass being offended by these totalitarian strong arm tactics.

"Because we've been at war, since 1953 when Major Daniel Gray was blown out of the sky over Muroc Air Force Base, what we now call Edwards, in California. All just to show President Eisenhower just how little power he had over an invading alien force!" Ted slammed his hand down on the table hard enough to make everything jump. "Since then we have seen good men and women die fighting this war and no one really knows about them or this war and they shouldn't. I run The Group, like my boss before me. I try very hard to be tough but fair. But make no mistake; your opinion as to whether we have a right to do what we do is not worth a plug nickel here. You sir, are a unit, and as that you have a function and a purpose. When that function and purpose is used up, a new unit will replace you. This will go on as long we can fight in the shadows and keep over half a dozen rotten little alien races from overwhelming this planet. We have few friends and lots of enemies. So if you have so many objections about how we play this game, I

would remind you the door out of this room is right there,” Ted jerked his thumb over his shoulder toward the exit. “But before you leave, look very carefully at these four cups. They weren’t given the choice that you have.”

“Easy Ted!” Bob said quietly.

Matt took a long moment, looking down at the table, pursing his lips and gently bobbing his head. Finally he spoke.

“My apologies to you and to the Director,” Matt said to Bob quietly. “My statement was uncalled for.” Matt pushed his open hand across the table in a gesture of friendship and understanding. Ted, without hesitation, took it.

“All good?” Bob said. “All friends? All pals?” Ted and Matt nodded. “Now let’s get down to business, Dr. Fassbinder...” Ed pulled out an electronic notebook and sat back, “...and tell us what happened in this room five days ago.”

PART TWO:

A SONG OF
WOE TO
THE UNIVERSE

CHAPTER FIVE

“There were three mistakes that caused this accident,” Dr. Matthew Fassbinder started to read from his extensive notes. “Two by the team and one by the person who set up these facilities. The team was doing everything according to the manual. By the book. Jot and tittle. They described the object as well as they could, as you can see from their extensive notes. They filmed it properly and then, methodically, moved from A to Zed through the four-step examination process. Everything was going fine. Bob’s your uncle. No Barney at all. The one mistake being that the team did not consult their own records. See, none of them double checked if anyone had ever processed one of these spheres before, or checking that one sphere might just be weighted more than another.”

“Weighted more?” Ted asked, raising a finger.

“Yes. Clearly from the conversation going on the team had seen this kind and type of object, or objects, before. I went through the records and all the storage units one floor up and found that Vantex Seven had examined three other spheres like this one.” Matt reached into his briefcase and pulled out another sphere, identical to the one that had just been destroyed in this very room and killed the entire team. He held it aloft, like an offering to some dark personal god. “The only difference between them...” he brought it down onto the table with a bass, heavy thud, which made all the other men jump, “...is the weight.” He sat back and folded his arms, immensely pleased with achieving his desired effect.

“I’m hoping this is not the real thing?” Ed asked picking the item up gingerly with his fingertips and twisting it slowly in the space before him.

“No,” Matt said, a bit disappointed. “I went next door and had

them make a replica. It is what they do over there.” Matt moved down his yellow legal notepad checking off the points in his mind. “The second mistake happens seconds before the incident occurred. Dodson had found a slight opening in the sphere and requested permission to try to open it. Clearly a mistake. Levine should have backed off at that point and considered all that it meant to open this thing. That is where the administrative mistake was made and what really cost these poor people their lives.” Matt looked up from his notes, tilting his head at Ted in a sarcastically accusatory manner. “No one told them where this accursed thing came from, did they?” He paused for dramatic impact. “Because that would have made all the difference in this situation.”

Ted clenched his teeth, and pushed his lower jaw back and forth, and a pulsing blue vein became more pronounced at his temple. It was that old anger and underlying rage surfacing in him again. It was in no way directed at Dr. Fassbinder. He had done superb work from all he could see so far. It was the culture and attitude within The Group and all the subsidiary organizations that he directly and indirectly controlled, that he had fought so hard to change over the decades since Admiral Jacobs and Max had recruited him all those years ago. And here it was rearing its ugly, scaly head once again. These people were dead because no one trusted them. Men and women working together just as hard to save the Earth and push back the envelope of Mankind’s knowledge as he was, now just...gone, because layer upon layer of bureaucracy did not allow them the vital information they needed to do their jobs. This was George Bellamy all over again. Ted in his mind, vowed then and there to stop it and to somehow make this right.

“They presumed,” Fassbinder continued, unaware and/or immune to Ted’s visible building rage, “that it was just another inert artifact found someplace on Earth. That would only be logical since all the others

they had seen were just that; found someplace on Earth and it had been there for well over a thousand or tens of thousands of years. The activation systems were all still there, but nothing was left of the material inside the sphere. If they had known, or if anyone from your level, had told them this was a ‘new find’ they would have approached this object, and this entire situation, far differently...I am sure.”

Matt stopped and waited while each of the men exchanged nervous, knowing glances, but mostly because they knew Ted could explode just as this artifact had, as he burned in his slow building anger, looking straight ahead as Fassbinder spoke. Ted finally took a deep breath and turned down the flame on the boiling pot in his brain.

“You have made some giant leaps, mostly without knowledge or information,” Ted said slowly and deliberately. “I am not saying that your conclusions are incorrect, but I am at a loss as to how you got there. In this case it is a dilemma of algebra, where I cannot have just the answer, Doctor, but I am going to require that you show your work.”

“Well...” Fassbinder said, pulling a grape Tootsie-Pop from a seemingly endless supply out of his deep lab coat pocket, “the equation for the knowledge needed to make this conclusion is based on what happened one second after all the video and audio recorders were destroyed.” Matt slowly unwrapped the sucker and finally stuck it in his jaw, firmly in his right cheek. The white paper stick toggled back and forth as he pondered. “That is the period of time that makes up the ‘X’ factor that we must solve for here.” He delved deeper into the hieroglyphic scribbled writings in his notebook. He fished a pair of black horned-rimmed glasses out of his breast pocket to help him decipher the Mayan Codex like inscriptions of his own handwriting, and made an apologetic gesture as he slipped them on.

“Then this is all conjecture on your part, Dr. Fassbinder, is it

not?” Bob Hanson asked while unwrapping his ham and cheese sandwich, figuring he needed some sustenance for the next part of the show.

“I would not agree with that out of general principal,” Matt said, holding up his sucker for emphasis, “but I shall wait to answer that question in more depth after my presentation. You must understand I was compiling this information in the belief that I was going to submit it in written, properly footnoted and formatted form, like all my other papers, not give an oral report for the whole class. I also never knew if ANY of my work was actually ever read or not, since I don’t see or ever get any feedback one way or the other.” Matt took his glasses off to look at Bob directly. “I have lived my life in a vacuum in this organization, Mr. Hanson, and I was not planning or prepared to give it like my Presentation, or as you American’s call it, my ‘Show And Tell’ project for the week at primary school. Of course in English schools we have the good sense to not let the students actually speak.”

Bob leaned forward menacingly over his ham and cheese sandwich. “Do you have a deep-seated inner need to be offensive all of the time or just in the presence of those who you feel are less intelligent than you?” Bob was very precise in his question, pointed and directed to make his feelings and those of his colleagues very clear.

Ted shook his head slightly and put out one hand to rein Bob in. What Bob Hanson saw as disrespect, Ted saw as refreshing freethinking. It was the kind of honesty he’d tried to foster in his regime, and so far Fassbinder had been right on, and Ted needed to see the vistas on the journey and the ultimate destination this train of thought would arrive at.

“I am making a muck up of this, aren’t I?” Matt said, finally coming to the revelation that he was somehow upsetting these very dangerous men. “It has, ah, become a habit to speak down to those less...um...

evolved...than I, which is 99.999 per cent of the population, and with sarcasm to people around me in general. My therapist, who I guess I have you to thank as you pay for her,” he gestured at Ted, “says it is a way to isolate myself from personal loss. A compensation mechanism.” Matt looked back at Bob with a blank inscrutable deadpan expression, being a unique trait of the English.

“You freaky limey nerd...” Bob said as he rose from his chair, while Matt, not understanding his aggression at all, just looked at him in shock, totally non-plussed, like he was a laboratory chimp that had just learned how to open his cage. Humphrey had finally had enough, as all of this was getting them all nowhere.

“Hey...HEY!” Ted barked “YOU! Stand down!”

Reluctantly Bob sat with a scowl. Ted then turned the laser onto Fassbinder.

“Now get this... and I will only say this once: I personally don’t give a good goddamn about your feelings, your therapist or your sense of insecurity in the presence of those you work for. Either you have or have not been able to ascribe a reason, meaning, and solution to what happened here and right now all I care about is that single, important fact.” He pointed two fingers at Hanson. “If you two want to have a pissing contest, then take it outside and finish it in the salt mine.” Bob cracked his knuckles menacingly. “And if you,” Ted said, looking over at Matt again, “are not going to go out into the mine area, then lose the insufferable attitude that you are being put upon to explain to us lesser mortals things that only you know, for that is not the case here I promise you!”

Ted rubbed his eyes. It had already been a very long day and he was feeling his age. “So now. Please! Doctor, get on with it without the Globe Theatre Old Vic Peter O’Toole dramatics. Make it short, precise and clean.

You are not teaching Introduction To Physics 101. God as my witness, all of us poor old simple boys, can keep up with you.”

“Very well, Mr. Director. Let me start at the base point of the equation when that laser beam was inserted into the recess of the sphere.”

Matt pulled out a loose stack of still photos from his briefcase and started to lay them out in a storyboard pattern on the flimsy card table.

CHAPTER SIX

“After studying all the available photos, the other artifacts and the reports related to them, I found that each and every one of these spheres had four identical small openings on an equally spaced area around a single parameter. The opening was less than a millimeter and wasn’t very deep. The bottom of the opening was made of exactly the same material as the rest of the sphere. So I am puzzled over what it could be and why a laser would affect it.

“So I found an identical laser tool here,” he jabbed his finger at the model sphere, “used in one of the other labs and started to examine it very carefully. The one that this lab used is very stable, I would say, both hyperstable in wavelength and frequency. This led to a dead end. Deciding that I could go no farther without finding out about the mechanism that opens the sphere, I went up one floor to the storage area and collected three of them and brought them down here.” He reached into his briefcase again and pulled out half of an identical sphere and laid it on the table. “This sample was found in South Africa associated with a craft that was found at about a thousand feet of overburden. Roughly 250,000 years old. Here....” he handed Ted a powerful magnifying glass with a thick brass handle that extended up around the lens. “Now watch that lip. Can you see it clearly?” Matt asked while turning on the laser.

“Yes I can. You’re talking about the small tab here, right?” Ted was holding the hemisphere and looking at it with extreme care.

“Correct,” Matt placed the laser over it and turned it on. “See that?”

“Holy shit...!” Ted handed Bob the glass. He examined it and looked at the reaction. He then finally give it to Ed Reilly, who’d been sitting

quietly all this time scrawling away frantically like some mad school-boy on his yellow legal sized notepad.

“So what we have is a sealing device that closes and holds the two parts and keeps the hemispheres together in a single ball,” Fassbinder continued as if it was obvious to everyone by now. “Once those tabs are closed you could not get this open with an atom bomb. But a simple light pulse and SHAZAM! BLAMMO! KRACK-A-DOOM! Open sesame! However, it has to be at exactly 448,000 Gigahertz plus or minus 2 GHZ or so.” He wobbled his hand in the air. Matt turned off the laser and set the artifact aside, then sat back and crossed his legs, one knee fitting perfectly over the other, with effete English style. “I took this sample over to another lab on Six, or was it Five. Hmm...? I really don’t remember which one. Anyway, whatever or whichever floor has that lovely tunable laser? I ran it from 650 nanometers up to 690. The only place I could get a reaction was at 670 nanometers. Exactly 448,000 Gigahertz. Fact one was established. How the device opens and closes and what happened when Dr. Ramirez placed his laser probe into the groove at the equator of the sphere.” Matt gathered up his first set of notes into a random pile, and tapped the bottom on the table in an attempt to put them in some kind of uniform stack, failed miserably, then placed those notes aside and set the artifact down, again with a heavy resonant thud, atop the handwritten notes.

“Very good.” Ed held his left hand up for a pause, and then finished his own section of copious notes on his yellow pad. Finally he looked up and took in the group. “So. Theory? Speculation? Balls out wild ass guesses? I don’t care. What do you think was inside?”

“AH!” Fassbinder nodded forward, took out his lolly with a pop sound and started to wave it like a conductor’s stick, or a magic fairy wand. “That, of course, was the next big question for me as well. I realized

that the device was to be used to deliver...something...and whatever effect the laser had to trigger whatever its function was.”

Fassbinder got up and began to pace the room like Sherlock Holmes at a crime scene, who was exactly who Matt reminded Ted of. “So I started to methodically work through the room slice by slice. This was not what we would call an ‘explosive’, or even a bomb.... not in the normal sense of the word as anything we currently understand. Oh my! This is all much more wondrously complex than that. This meant many things, which I had to start narrow down.” Matt sat down again and proceeded to lean precariously back in his chair, doing a circus balancing act on its two back legs and pointed to the glass walls.

“Those,” he waved the Tootsie-Pop above his head in a circle, as if conjuring a spirit, then put the sucker back in his mouth, and bit down hard and shivered as waves of pleasure swept over him again as he made it to the tootsie roll gooey center, “gave me the answer. The *glass!* Well, not glass, really, or whatever it is. So I asked myself...Self...if I had an explosion that went off so fast and hot as to incinerate everything in the room, why wouldn’t it blow that glass into a million tiny bits? Or melt it, no matter how strong it is? Initially, I guess I knew it held one of the keys. So I measured, tested, analyzed and spent a lot of hours rubbing my hands over it.

“Then it all started to make sense, or at least lead me down a different path.” Matt got up and walked to the glass wall. “If you have looked at really old glass, you will see a slump in it. There’s a bloke in Sydney, an artist who goes walk-about in the Outback and finds old miner’s shacks. If they have glass in them he basically takes it, wraps it up and ships it back to his studio. There, he cuts it, into long strips and mounts it upside down. So it looks like you have a pool of glass on top forming an inch wide canal running down to the base. He calls this shiite ‘Transparent Sculpture’ and makes

about a thousand Quid apiece for ‘his art’ when in reality, it’s really just nature’s patterns and an effect of gravity.” Matt waved his now chewed nude white tootsie-pop stick around in the air. “Long, boring story, and I’m sorry I had to go by way of Dublin trying to make a point. Anyway, I measured all these plates. There is no slump, which under high-pressure and a high temperature I would imagine would be here.

“Secondly, I looked for a collection or any kind of pooling at the bottom, of melted glass that ran or dripped down. Nothing. So, eliminate the impossible and what you have left...well, I was left with the fact that a certain amount of the material was...well...just gone. Simply vanished! It had not transformed into anything else but none this less it has disappeared.”

Matt pulled out an erasable marker from his lab coat pocket and started to write a formula on the glass wall. The other men were watching the notations very carefully. At a certain point, Matt stopped. He stood back to admire or critique his handiwork and take in his work of art for additional details.

Bob Hanson got up and sauntered over to stand shoulder to shoulder with Matt, surveying the board. He held out his hand, and Matt, somewhat confused, gave Hanson the writing implement. Bob took the dry erase Sharpie and wrote a second equation and formula on the next panel and looked over at Ted, who just nodded his agreement. Then Bob handed the marker back to Matt, who took it from him absently as he marveled at the new formula, realizations washing over him like summer waves.

“Of course! Where did it go?” Matt sat back down.

“You have to have a bench-mark,” Bob offered. “Without it, this does not work.”

“Of course, you’re right,” Matt said offhandedly. “It’s all conjecture and hyperbole without one key piece of evidence.” Matt reached

into his pocket again and set a glass vial on the table with a screw-on white plastic top. It contained within it a small, red bead. All the men looked at each other as if this was some kind of trick being pulled on them by this eccentric English madman. Bob was the first to suspiciously lean over the table and pick it up. His eyes went wide as he bounced his hand up and down to measure the heft of the thing.

“Jesus H. Christ in a fuzzy sweater! Super-compression! This damn thing must weigh about ten pounds.” Bob handed it to Ted.

“The glass?” Ted asked and handed it over to Ed.

“The glass, the instruments, the tables, the cameras...the people,” Matt gestured respectfully at the duct tape sealed coffee cups on the table, “everything! It utilized everything in this room because, one: it is a high-pressure oxygen rich environment and, two: the glass walls, or whatever they are, since we have not established their true composition, became a breeder source for the reaction. Gentlemen, Mr. Director,” the jolly drained from his voice. He tossed his chewed white lolly stick over into the corner of the room with a flick of his middle finger, lurched his chair forward, and leaned deep into the middle of the table, cupping his hands around the dark grey spherical replica of the artifact.

“This device was made to send out a simple signal. A distress call. Their own last... song of woe...into deep space, to all the Universe. What it did in this room was a billion, billion times greater.” He let his words hang in the air for the greatest effect, as he looked each man in the eye. “I would say that whoever this song was meant to be sung to.... they definitely got the message.”

Matt leaned back, and pulled out a few more of his notes, thinking he might have to continue.

Ted raised his hand to stop everyone. They all turned in the

direction Ted was looking. A string of shiny black golf carts were rolling down the salt gallery with their buzzing electric hum, to properly handle the remains of the Vantex Seven Team.

Everyone stood up respectfully around the table. Even Matthew Fassbinder once he was clued in to what was going on. Ed and Bob moved the food and drinks to the smaller table and moved it to one side of the room. The way it was handled was proper, touching and demonstrated a high degree of care that an advanced culture can show to its members who died heroically in the line of their duty.

Ted had learned a new lesson this day and he was very glad for it.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Vat you mean...a code?”

Irina was standing in the kitchen in a red and white dotted Minnie Mouse apron cleaning some vegetables into the sink, while Teodore, her son stood next to her with a paper in his hand.

“Someone was using a very complex key driven code when they wrote this paper,” Teodore said. “This is one of the one’s Poppy gave to me. They belonged to Grandpa-pa.” The fresh-faced young boy was tall for his age and strikingly handsome. His wavy black hair was like his father’s and his eyes were crystal ice Arctic wolf blue like his mother’s. Irina could see he had yet to grow into his broad shoulders and lantern jaw that was far more pronounced than his father’s and more like his Uncle Bob’s.

“It’s in this Nazi document written in Kornberg in 1942 by Herr Dr. Professor Wilhelm Schulman. *‘Verfahren zum Komprimieren der Zeit in einem statischen Feld.’* The paper is a simple theoretical thesis at the university level. Not really very thrilling and nothing anyone would get all excited about. However, the coded message inside it is about fifteen pages worth of a description of a device called a *‘Zeit Läufer’* or in English a ‘Time Runner’. It’s supposed to be used with something called ‘The Bell’.”

Irina wiped down her knife and slid it into the wooden holder by the sink, then washed her hands and dried them on her apron. She took the paper with the translation of the coded message from her son, put her arm lovingly around his waist and walked into the living room where she sat on the couch and he plopped his lanky frame into the chair kitty corner to her. Very slowly she thoroughly read the document four complete times. Finally she placed the paper gingerly on the coffee table in front of her as if it was made of fine Waterford crystal.

“Your father had spent years trying to figure out the importance of this paper,” she said looking sideways down at the piece of writing as if it was a coiled snake that could strike at anytime. “No. That is untrue. He spent decades. It never seemed to fit in with everything else. But because it was in the bundle he never removed it.”

“It actually fits very well,” Theodore said picking up the paper with building excitement. “If you build the Bell and you have the carrier ship, you have to have one of these to protect your people. Without it one would see genetic mutations, physical impairments and most likely mental deterioration at a major level. It’s a shield against what they call the...um...” he looked at the paper again and found the word, “the ‘*zeitwelle*’.”

The boy handed her another piece of heavy paper with a drawing on it. Irina hesitated, deciding how deep she wanted to get into this. Finally deciding to dive in, she took the drawing. “The unit would look like that,” her son leaned over and pointed. “Each person would need one. But from what I can understand of grandpa-pa’s work he was building a small portable unit for one person. So he’d have only needed one for himself.” The young boy got up from the chair. “They’ve actually had the guts to make it all work since 1945, from this weird little box that was invented by a man named Captain Hans Coler. I mean it looks to me like everyone has just been missing the obvious for so long. If it was a snake it would have bit them all!” He laughed liltily, like a little boy does, then he tilted his head to one side quizzically like a puppy. “I mean, is any of this even important to anyone anymore?”

“Theodore, you cannot imagine how important this is. But I have one question. You make it sound like Grandpa-pa understood this code. Is that true or just your belief? I know he had a Time Runner device, but I always thought he got it from someone else,” She looked at the drawing again.

“No. He knew the code well and actually used it in his own diary a few times. On Schulman’s documents there are specific break marks where a sentence would end. Grandfather put them there with a pencil, so he could pull out just the one’s he needed. Why would Schulman use a code? Who was he hiding the information from?” Teodore took his cell phone out of his back pocket, as it lit up and vibrated. He swiped his fingers across the screen and made a face as if he smelled something bad.

“Oh, and,” he said rolling his eyes, “you need to go pick up the airhead from her dance class.”

“Do NOT call your sister that name!” Irina said, hitting him with a close by dishrag. “You know better,” Irina took all the papers and clutched them to her ample bosom. “Could you build one of these units in the basement on the bench? Do you have enough equipment?”

“To build that?” He shrugged. “Yeah. It would take a soldering iron, fifty antique electronic parts like resistors and capacitors, a couple rolls of thin copper wire and a variable transformer. Which makes the unit a hit and miss as to how close you can get to a certain setting. But of course I can. Do you want one?” He looked at her strangely.

“Oh yes, my dear! I want two!” She came over and hugged him.

“You also want two that are modernized, with closed looped circuits and digital settings so it can be fine tuned exactly to a specific time frame?” He picked up his phone again, and rolled his eyes up into space. Another call from his sister, and he held the face of it out to his mother so she could see that she still needed to be picked up from dance class and was now waiting for them.

“How much time will it take you to build them?” She said waiving away the phone. “I don’t want this to interfere with your school schedule.” Irina was always practical if nothing else.

“Not a problem, mother. A week, maybe ten days, I’ll have them for you. Now we have to go get...” he looked at his mother’s face and then added, clutching his hands to his heart with comedic drama...“my beloved sister...Sasha!”

They both laughed, while Irina hugged him, as they headed out for the car.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Pedro McCoy was an Old World Hidalgo, a Spanish gentlemen of Madrid. His family name had entered Spain during the 13th Century AD. A poor Scottish lord seeking adventure and fortune in the Holy Lands, he had made it by ship as far as Spain. After seeing the beaches, the rich golden sun filled land and the cobalt blue sea; the man decided he did not need to wander further in any direction. Since that time the McCoy family for generations upon generations had been a permanent fixture on the eastern coast of Spain.

Pedro was the latest head of the large, proud and noble family. To the world he was a fine attorney on retainer to a very large industrial complex spanning Europe. He was invited to all governmental and social functions of any note in the region and attended the conferences at the EU center in Brussels several times a year.

He also ran a sweatshop from his office complex in an old but beautiful traditional Spanish hacienda-style building in Barcelona. He employed twelve college graduates on two-year contracts to read books, magazines, newspapers and technical articles written in Spanish, French, German, Italian and Portuguese. They searched endlessly for information about UFOs, abductions, strange occurrences, paranormal activities and a complete buffet of other weird topics du jour.

Each day a massive amount of data would be transferred across the Atlantic to another non-profit research facility in Washington, D.C. There, another team, all very serious people in suits and ties, the antithesis of his rag-tag band of students, would be sorting, collating, processing and mining the raw information collected by his own special beatniks.

It had been raining hard all day in Barcelona on a sad and soggy Tuesday. No one wanted to go out to lunch in the pouring deluge, so several of the staff continued to work, while a couple of volunteers went out and

brought back some ham and cheese, fresh baked Panini bread and a couple bottles of cheap red wine, turning an otherwise dreary day into a somewhat romantic Spanish indoor picnic. In Spain, they used every excuse to turn anything into a party.

While all of this was happening Emilia Sanchez came across a set of pictures in a Spanish tabloid from the alternative language press in London. It claimed to be pictures of a base on the moon. They came from a book that a man had just self-published in Great Britain. She sat at her computer and called up a special account and sent all the information she had gathered directly into it. She tossed the tabloid on the re-cycling pile and went off to eat some ham and cheese finger sandwiches and drink some wine, with the other struggling students who bitched and moaned about the work they did here.

CHAPTER NINE

“The device could only be built in a rarefied environment. And that would be a big fat ‘no’ to your question Captain Hanson.” Dr. Matthew Fassbinder looked tired and had been rubbing his eyes for a good hour while going through the rest of his report.

“This is not traditional anti-matter we are dealing with here, gentlemen. It’s what we would theoretically call,” he made air quotes with his fingers, “‘non-positive matter’ that, when exposed to positive matter, creates a...” he searched for just the right term, “...pulse. Or, at least, that was, I believe, the original design.” He picked up the heavy model sphere and shook it vengefully, to bring home his point. “This thing came off a spacecraft. It’s like a flare really. A cosmic distress call, or in this case more like a song, ...a requiem, really, if you want to get poetic about it.” He put the sphere down on the table with a heavy thud, and leaned forward, steepeling his fingers. “Simply put, you fire these balls out and away from the craft, hit it with a laser and BA-BLAMMO! It goes off. And that ‘Ba-Blammo’, right there,” he said sheepishly, “was my own personal sound effect, because, as we all know, there is no sound in space.” The other men smiled at Matt’s nerdish attention to detail. “But any material in space,” he continued, “would be affected close to the unit and react causing the pulse. The unit was never meant, designed or I imagine, expected, to be set off inside an atmosphere. We are now sitting in the middle of the.... results...of that.” Fassbinder concluded, moving his arms to take in the wreckage around them, before neatly clasping his hands and gingerly placing them on his perfectly crossed knees.

“So once it started,” Ted said, breaking the silence, summarizing, “inside the room it would feed on all this material as fuel until it burned up as much as possible and finally stopped, leaving only...” Ted picked up the

unusually heavy glass vial, “this super-heavy ball?” Fassbinder nodded and raised his hand limply and let it drop into his lap in a ‘there you have it’ gesture, being too exhausted now to actually speak the words.

“Anything else we should know so that this does not happen again?” Ted added.

“Not really,” Matt quickly answered. “Then there are two factors I need answers to...if you can provide them.” Ted leaned forward on his elbows, and clasped his hands, waiting for the bad news. Fassbinder then stated grimly, “And now it’s time for me to give you the worse news.”

“What?” Bob almost exploded. “What do you mean the WORSE news? So this facility being destroyed and all our people being reduced to piles of dirt in Dixie cups is not bad enough?”

“This?” Fassbinder gestured to the destruction around them. “This is mouse farts, mate, in comparison to what there is left to report. But I want something in exchange for my... how shall I say this...diligent and dedicated work here.” Matt was trying to position himself in an offensive mode. Ted sat back and waited. He was genuinely starting to like this quirky Brit. He would make a good poker player, and it was clear he was going for the inside straight. A way to use this tragedy to position himself with a greater stake, jockeying for a seat at the high stakes table. Just as Ted had done so many years ago. Knowledge is power. He had the big black chip of knowing something they didn’t. He had the power now, and he was laying it down on the green felt and pushing it forward into the pot.

“Don’t think for one minute you can blackmail anyone here to find out something that you don’t need to know, mister! You are way out of line here and totally outside your wheelhouse boy!” Bob was clearly angered by the other man’s comments.

“You simplistic stuup!” Fassbinder snapped. The mouse finally starting

to roar. Ted thrived on this kind of conflict. It was competition that made people better. He wanted to see how it played out. “First and foremost,” Fassbinder snarled, pointing his index finger like a knife, “I want the information I NEED to do my job better.” Fassbinder ranted, jabbing his finger down into the table. “That device is a relic found in some ancient crash site. It was live, armed and ready to be used. Which means it may not be that old, but who can tell what the half-life is on some kind of extraterrestrial bomb? But it also means it came off an honest to goodness real life spacecraft, which I am assuming is alien, as none of you, with Q clearances one level below God Almighty, know anything about it or I would not be wasting my time here! And it did not come from this planet or from anywhere within our solar system.

“Secondly, either it was given to us by a friendly source or we found it somewhere out there and made the huge mistake bringing it home. And you’re goddamn bloody lucky it didn’t start a chain reaction that could have destroyed the world!”

Matt saw Bob starting to build up to another diatribe or worse, but Matt raised the palm of his hand and Ted motioned for Bob to stand down.

“I have worked carefully and diligently for ten years now,” Fassbinder continued calmly and quietly. “Never asking very much and the work load has increased exponentially, so it is clear that you, Mr. Director, or a concerted conspiracy of all three of you, if that is how this works, have been working me over to see if I can handle the next step up the ladder of The Group, or whatever ungodly coven of hell-spawned warlocks this all leads too. I am just advancing the time schedule to meet some of my needs. I’ve got a teleportation machine down in Australia that I can use to bounce stuff all around the galaxy and back, but yet I can’t send a butterfly to Sydney without killing it. From everything I have been able to put together this

Group started out trying to break the coding of this as some kind of time travel system that some Nazi, somehow, got to work.

“The Die Glocke! The Bell! The GOD...DAMN...BELL!” Matt checked the faces of each man for clues. Unblinking. Stone. “But somehow”, he continued, “it quickly outgrew that phase and morphed into something a lot more complex. Much like Jack Parsons and the start of the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in California. Which is nothing like it was when Jack was alive. So here’s my deal.”

This is what Ted was waiting for. Dr. Fassbinder had the cards, and now he was putting everything into the pot. Including the keys to the Aston Martin DB-5.

“I will walk out that door right now Mr. Director and accept the offer of a lifetime. This means money and comfort which I have eschewed in my existence up until now. I will play...on my own...on the projects that truly interest me. But from the moment I leave, I will never come back, no matter what is said. If I am not trusted right here and right now, then I am done. That’s it. As you Americans say, ‘Play me or trade me, Coach!’ The choice right now is all up to you.”

Dr. Matthew Michael Fassbinder gathered up his things, his hands visibly shaking, putting away everything he was to take with him, and separating those items that he would leave behind here in the salt mine if he was to carry out his threat and walk.

He also knew he may never leave this room alive.

Ted remembered having a very similar conversation with Max and Admiral Jacobs on that yacht sailing into hell all those thousands of years ago. It was there he gave up Sally, his son, a family, and any hope of a normal happy life. All to pursue the mystery of his father’s death, and get to where he was now. That still shone in his memory like a bright gold coin

minted yesterday. This whole conversation had the same tone and ring to it, like a crystal bell. It was out of frustration as well.

Fassbinder put his heels together, and with a curt little bow, turned to leave.

“You got a quarter in your pocket?” Ted asked.

Matt slowly turned, perplexed, fully expecting to be staring down the black hollow barrel of a gun.

“I think so. Why?”

“Put it on the table. That is only if you really want to ante up into the high stakes game.” Ted looked at Bob, who had suddenly relaxed and started to smile. Matt dug down and pulled out a quarter and set it down on the table and straightened up. He took in the smiling faces of the three men, then bent down and slowly moved it to the center of the table with one finger and waited.

Bob reached out and picked it up. “You just bought into the best game in this world, Dr. Fassbinder.”

Bob handed the coin over to Ted, who flipped it into the air with his thumb, like some old time Chicago mob boss. Dr. Theodore Humphrey, Jr., global head and Director of The Group, started in on his tale, told to a man they now desperately needed.

“Seven weeks ago, aboard the USS Virgil S. Grissom, under the command of Captain Mark P. Beventon, U.S.N.S.F., while on an expedition to Mars, his team encountered a wrecked Altarian space craft that had crashed six months ago. A good amount of material was recovered and sent to laboratories all over the world for analysis and logging.

“The Altarian ship had been in a fire-fight with a rogue trader that was taking illegal materials off Earth. Those materials were a hundred human beings in stasis that had been kidnapped from six or eight places around the

world. Mostly children. They were going to be sold for genetic materials and research to two or three different groups that are highly interested in creating a breed of hybrid humans that can pass for us on the streets but, in their heads, are completely and totally different.

“This just goes to show you what a fantastically diverse and valuable mix of DNA we are. Like the bloodline royalty of the galaxy, each and every human being is an invaluable storehouse or library of thousands of genetic mutations amongst dozens of races that came here from all over the Universe and even other dimensions.”

Ted got up and poured himself one more drink in preparation for the long story that he had only had to tell once or twice in his life. The true history of Planet Earth and Mankind.

“Hold on to your ass kid, cuz here it comes.”

PART THREE:

THE ISOMER PROTOCOL

CHAPTER TEN

“On February 19th, 1954, a small powerful force of tall white aliens landed in the high desert of California. We called them the Etherians, primarily because they wouldn’t tell us where they were from, and had technology that could make them invisible. They demanded to meet with the President of the United States. There was a cover story that they offered us technology to help ‘ascend mankind’ and all that happy horse shit if we just gave up our atomic weapons,” Ted snorted with derision. “They came because they saw our first missions to the Moon. The Army and Air Force were way out in front of the space program at this time, before there was any kind of space program...at least publicly. But it was actually the National Security Agency, under The Group, that took control of everything.

“Since 1945 the Research Division of the Air Force out of Dyden AFB were designing and preparing the base modules for the Expeditionary Forces to set up a permanent station on the Moon for Military Operations and control of the high ground of space during the Cold War. But defending ourselves from whatever was ‘Out There’ is the real story of all of this. The Nazi’s we imported under PROJECT: PAPERCLIP were busting their nuts to finalize all the stuff they’d been working on in Germany. The US used A.V. Roe out of Canada as the place to develop the frame sections and housing for the lunar craft.

“Rand and the US Corps of Engineers had been working heavily on habitats and life support systems for a lunar base. So just after our first set of launches and the establishment of Lunar Base One, we had a whole pack of these Nordic fuckers show up first, and then later those nasty little vermin bastards the Grays who gave small and deadly demonstrations to Ike.

“Ike disappeared for a day, when they said he went to the dentist, on February 20, 1954. The treaty (the first one) was signed, sealed and delivered in that same two-day period. For a period of sixty hours the skies over the high desert of California were in complete control of the Aliens. They forced us to sign this deal that stated we would not use the Moon for a military base and would limit our access to it. Everything went black after that, out of necessity to hide what we were doing from them.

“In November of that that year, the Greys showed up, and offered up a deal that gave us more tech, in exchange for limited abductions and allowing them to take genetic samples. Ike being the cold-blooded treacherous politician that he was saw no problems with a double-cross and some serious double-dealing. So arrangements and agreements were made with them as well.

“Ike worked to set up a group already in existence, to take over the projects and fund them. That was THE GROUP, which by this time, was already moving and shaking things. Ike and his gang called it a bunch of different names, which were all really just concentric rings within rings to make everyone think they knew the whole story. With unlimited funds, Harvey Glipsen, George Bellamy and company went rat ass crazy and started their own space program.

“The second, or I guess third one by now, the SIGMA Treaty, was in the mid-sixties when we were committed to another space program on the public civilian side by Kennedy and Johnson. Kennedy was unaware and was never told of the first treaty. Of course presidents have security clearances that let them know two things: Jack and Shit. Kennedy suspected there was another space program, only seeing a bit of it breaking the surface of this ocean of secrecy everyone was swimming in. He did at one point ask the question, ‘why aren’t we using all this other technology?’ Then he got

ganked. Shot down in the street like a dog in broad daylight. I'm not saying those questions got him killed. The question is never 'who killed Kennedy?' It should be who DIDN'T kill Kennedy?' Because that Irish prick pissed off pretty much everybody. Johnson was well aware of most of it all but continued on with the Mercury, Gemini and Apollo missions to move Mission Control to Houston in exchange for giving Ike's feared and distrusted Military Industrial Complex an open hand in Vietnam, and provide cover and a flying bank account for the real stuff happening behind the Black World curtain.

"Since all this violated the first treaty, again, the Aliens invaded. This time they set up shop in the Dulce Archeleta Mesa. This came to a head under Carter when he found out about it and sent in Secret Services and Special Forces. We all know the outcome of that little nasty piece of history.

"So another treaty was set up and this time we could continue to send 'rockets' into low Earth orbit, but could not use our heavier non-chemical platforms. That did not exclude us from improving them. Normalization was established once more and we still had two space programs.

"Only a few people outside a tightly controlled group within the government and The Group found that a new and unknown race, which we believed to be from Aldebaran, had teamed up with the Nazi's as far back as 1919, giving technical information using a group of psychic women called the 'Vril Damen'. After the war a gang of fugitive Nazi scientists, set up a base in the jungles of Brazil on the Matamoros Plain with this same group from Aldebaran. It was clearly a mining operation of some kind. They worked to enslave the tribes, wiping out several different indigenous peoples in the process. The thing turned into a monster of a facility. Ships were coming and going several times a day. Carter already had his ass kicked once in the first minor Dulce Mesa Engagement, which was really just a minor

squabble, and was not going to do that again. But when Dutch Reagan got into office, everything changed in the covert space programs. His name wasn't 'Ray-Gun' for nothing."

Ted allowed himself an ironic smirk at the pun, remembering all he had been through with the man.

"Sometime around '83-'84 the POTUS ordered a major strike. There could be no witnesses to this, so planners decided to wipe the area out completely. It had to be quick and sterile. But clearly he couldn't use nuclear weapons. We were still in a Cold War and an action like that would bring too much attention and the wrath of the Soviet Union down upon us. So three fuel-air M.O.A.B.s were used. These Mother Of All Bombs were deployed using simple air transports to fly them out of Brakedales AFB and we dropped them simultaneously. MOABs are only a little less effective than a tactical nuke but leave no radiation signature. The whole area was decimated. A major fire consumed what the bombs didn't destroy.

"Sometime after that our Mole Men completing the high-speed underground Red Line found a massive abattoir of thousands of headless human skeletons directly underneath the Dulce Mesa in northern New Mexico. We discovered our 'Guests' at the lower levels of the base were boiling abducted people down as food storage for a coming future invasion. This led to the Dulce War."

Ted took a long pull on his drink. He just felt so tired and hopeless going through what seemed to him like this litany of his failures.

"Am I boring you yet?" He said to the enraptured Michael Fassbinder.

Michael had almost forgotten to breathe as Ted spun his tale. It was all the things he'd heard of, read of or dreamed about for all these years. Now the man at the core, the primum mobile, who made it all happen...who was THERE for most of it, was now tearing back the dimensional curtain of the

Twilight Zone.

“Oh GOD NO!” Michael said, shaking his head and pulling in a deep breath.

“Because this is all the general background you will need to do this job. I’m leaving out most of the gory details. Just giving you the warp and weave and Sturm Und Drang of what we have had to deal with for all these years.”

Matthew leaned in further, and rolled his hand. “Go on, please!”

“Directly after this the Visitors returned to set up a new treaty called the ISOMER PROTOCOL.” Ted’s nostrils flared with anger, as he clenched his jaw. “An entire series of near fatal mistakes that occurred when I was...not with...The Group.”

Fassbinder snapped out of his spell, and began to hit his head, while snapping his fingers! “Wait!” He said excitedly. “Even I’ve heard of this part. You near single handedly won the war at Dulce! Cleaned out the whole place! To this day it’s a mystery...I mean nobody knows how you bloody did it. Then shot their leader, some asshole alien Nordic prince right in the face, like a dozen times! Just...EPIC!” Fassbinder said in awe. “And when you got out of hospital, they basically court martialed you, made you walk the plank and sent you into exile. That was when everyone believed Bellamy had gone starkers...just simply barking mad.”

All the men at the table stared at him in shock.

“What?” He said nervously looking around. “You’re not going to...kill me now or anything, are you? I mean even us lowly tech geekasaurs hear stuff...that you...are...NOT...going to...murder me for, right?”

Ted deadpanned and let that hang in the air and continued. The men behind Fassbinder’s back smiled.

“When the new treaty was finalized it provided a little more room for us to explore the solar system and do limited access, but all of it unmanned. The

Aliens were represented by three races; one of them being the Altarians, that are more aggressive and the policemen of their loose confederation from out of the constellation of Andromeda. We don't think that is where any of them are from, but it seems to be a neutral area of space they meet up in.

“None of them really gave a shit about the gang that got snuffed in Brazil, and the Dulce War was a group they considered the scum of the universe anyway that all of them have been fighting for thousands of years. Whatever we did on this planet was up to us. They were more concerned about contamination in space, since from their point of view humanity is more of a virus than a species. I do suppose they have a point,” Ted rubbed his face and looked up at the ceiling. “Our war, our greed, our savagery, our sheer joy at killing and enslaving one another. Hell, even our language and thought processes are considered a contagious disease in some parts of the galaxy.

“So they ‘granted us’ the right to put up a space station and use unmanned remote sensing rockets and drone shuttles, as long as we did not acknowledge their existence to the public and what they were doing here.

“ISOMER is a contraction of The Isolation Memorandum and the series of ‘protocols’ it lays out makes the jail they’ve put us all in sound so much more civilized. It’s limited us to tonnage and payload. The facts behind all this was they did not want us to use the I.S.S. as a platform to build larger spaceships in orbit and start to prowl around the inner solar system.

“They also promised us protection and support when, and if, the invading force that is coming towards us gets here in the early 2020s.

“One of the cold hard facts that came out of the negotiations was that; even though the Aliens had much more advanced technology than we did, they didn't have the manpower to pull off a full fledged invasion on the ground. Our atmosphere would have wiped them out in days. They could hit

our surface installations, but so much of our stuff is subterranean that they knew that in any long-term engagement we'd beat them and take their advanced technology. And they can't just blow us up, as Earth is still the most valuable resource of flora, fauna, minerals, DNA and water in this quadrant of the galaxy.

"Ike put this massive underground system of bases and tunnels in place, using the Chi Coms, the Soviets and the Cold War as cover, when he knew all along that they would eventually be needed when push was going to come to shove with these ET fuckers.

"So.... they cut us some deals. If we stayed inside our limit, roughly between here and the Moon, they'd leave us in peace for right now and protect us.

"They put the Altarians in charge of monitoring us, since they occasionally had ships in the area. They're more of a muscle race; not terribly advanced, but moldable to the will of the stronger groups of other Alien races.

"So since the signing of the treaty, we've been constantly pushing the edges of it through our private space program. Lunar One as you know it, or Cape Malabar Radio, is just one example.

"Our sensor arrays are far better than they suspect, so our advancement into space has been a huge game of hide and seek from these self-appointed 'guardians' whose job it is to contain us, I guess until we 'grow up.'

"Our three main battleships, the Sheppard, the Glenn and our flagship the USS Grissom are constantly going and coming on the dark side of the Moon and the advancements in our weapons systems have made us more of a threat and yet 'they' have not wanted to push it. Our response to all of this was Reagan's STAR WARS Initiative. Another project that started openly and then went underground and is still working and building more and more

advanced systems.

“We’re allowed to send unmanned probes and drones anywhere we like, but that’s why we’ve never ‘officially’ been back with manned missions to the Moon or been allowed to colonize Mars. The secret Apollo 18, 19 and 20 missions, all had special dispensations.”

Ted looked around at the wreckage and soaked it all in and sadly shook his head.

“But our luck seems to have run out and it looks like we’re about to deal with the consequences. I sent the *Ajax*, one of our smaller triangular Viper ships to Mars to salvage that Altarian ship because we needed to know what we are up against. That’s how we came to be in possession of the dandy little item that killed everyone in this laboratory.”

Ted drained his glass, put it down on the table with a clank, and collapsed back into his chair, drained from spilling out the cascading flood of information that had been dammed inside him all these years.

“Now I have answered your questions, more completely I would imagine than you expected. With those answers your level in this organization just changed...dramatically.”

Ted paused for several beats for effect and took a long breath. “Now, it’s time to try to answer the one last question I have left. All afternoon you’ve spoken about that device being a flare or signaling device. What is it and how does it work?”

Ted sat back and watched the other man trying to catch up and process all the data his brain had just downloaded. He now had the raw information but all three other men watched in amusement as Dr. Fassbinder tried to find a folder or a drawer in his skull to file it all in. After a moment or two, he gave up, and came back to the here and now with a shake of his shaggy head, and dealt with what he knew.

“It is designed to be used when the craft is in danger...uhm...let’s see,” Matt closed his eyes and realized just how tired he was. “Engineered to engage upon opening in the vacuum of space and making contact with a micro amount of antimatter particles, or whatever they are, in the vacuum of space. It would come in contact with a minimum amount of normal matter that occupies the same space. We are talking about a few hundred particles in a cubic yard of empty space. When this happens the unit ‘lights up’ and creates a gravitational signal, marked with coding to indicate the craft has sent out a distress call.

“When this little beauty went off in this laboratory, in an atmosphere, on Earth...even here in Kansas, it had a billion-billion times the amount of material it needed to work with;” Michael smiled at his own inside joke, “so the signal was that much greater and stronger. It’s well beyond the far superluminal range. When Einstein said, ‘I wiggle my little finger and the very stars do quake,’ he wasn’t kidding. Gravitational events like this are felt, or ‘heard’, everywhere...virtually... instantaneously.” He gave a circular flourish with his scare-crow like arms, looking like he was trying to frighten some wayward crows. “By this time that simple last mournful final song for help has reached the boundaries of the known universe and beyond. The gravitational wave this device generated is what caused the earth tremors here in Noble and set off every seismic and gravitational monitor on the planet. I called a few friends that have them and they’re getting ready to write papers and submit articles on the most powerful episode anyone has ever witnessed of a longitudinal gravitational wave. Something the textbooks say cannot exist.”

“Why so?” Ed finally asked, not looking up from his frantic writing. “It would take years for a radio signal to get to even the next star. Like Altair, 16.7 light years away. How does something travel 5.13 parsecs that fast?”

“But that’s just the thing!” Fassbinder emphasized. “It was not a wave nor a particle, but an impulse. A gravitational impulse, without mass, without frequency! Therefore, it was not limited to the inverse rule. Hell, it’s not even controlled by General or Specific relatively. This proves Einstein dead wrong! When the unit pulsed, anyone with a gravitational monitor on the other-side of the universe saw it go off. Whoever built this thing, knows... they...or...IT...KNOWS... that it was used five days ago. If their systems are good enough, with some simple triangulation, then they also know where it went off. So someone out there,” Matt motioned toward the ceiling and to the infinite, horrifying space beyond, “are well aware that it is here on Earth, that it was a distress call for help, and that it was the United States of America that set it off.”

“Holy Shit!” Bob said.

Ed bowed his head and shook it slowly back and forth. “We are so fucked!”

Bob pulled his calculator out and started to punch in some numbers and factors, as did Ed. They compared results and turned to Ted.

“Let’s have it,” Ted waited.

“Again, assuming they’re coming all the way from home, and aren’t close by, 16.7 light years, 5.13 parsecs, what we know about the star drives on the Altarian ship we salvaged on Mars: nine days minimum travel time. And that is only if no one is in the neighborhood. We’ve already wasted five days figuring this out. We have four days or less before the Visitors come a calling.” Bob started to put things away in his cases, as did Ed.

“Dr. Fassbinder, congratulations,” Ted stood up and extended his hand. Matt took it and Ted purposely shook it up and down and squeezed hard enough to cause the fay English scientist to wince with pain. “You just got your wish. Now, like all great fairy tales you get to hear the down side of

making a wish on the Monkey's Paw. You are now in this for life. There is no quitting your new job. All there is left in the end...is dying. You will know things no one on this planet is privileged to know. They are things and events you can never speak of to anyone ever. You will fight beside the finest men and women this world or this universe has to offer, but their heroism and yours will never be rewarded or recognized by anyone other than your colleagues and comrades in arms. By the way did I tell you with that quarter you anted up, comes a new title?" Ted waited and watched.

"No you didn't."

"Your title now is Assistant Director. Get your stuff together here. Ed will be taking you to Washington to meet Mr. Gibson tomorrow. Trent Gibson, or rip-roaring Wild Trent they call him. You will hate him. Then love him, and then wonder how you ever lived without him. After that Ed will get you settled in at your new digs and start to get all your paperwork in order. I expect you to be online in less than ten days, probably sooner considering that a little quicker than that, possibly in four days, we may all be going to war."

Ted got up and started to leave with Bob.

"My place in Adeline, my stuff...?" Matt called after them. "All of those...my... things." Matt looked worried now, and a bit forlorn.

"It's already being dealt with. That is why we have people that handle that kind of stuff for us." Ted turned and walked out leaving Matt to Ed's tender mercies.

"What exactly are you to me right now Captain Reilly?" Matt looked at the relatively quiet man he had just spent the afternoon with.

"Me?" He gave him a cold hard smile. "I am now your best friend, your confidant, assistant, whipping boy and, if needed, the last person you will ever see," Ed turned deadly and frighteningly serious. "Because I am also the

man who will put a bullet with your name on it in your skull if you fuck up. Outside of that,” the huge grin spread across his face again like a crack in the earth, “I am just like you. A great fun loving guy, Bwa-HA-HA!” He slapped Matthew on the back almost knocking him over, then picked up everything and motioned to the glass doors. “We got a plane to catch. And you got a month’s worth of reading to do in the next twenty-four hours.”

“This is some kind of faggoty relationship starting up here, isn’t it mate?” Matt tried to be a little funny, although his head was swimming.

“Naw. I won’t sleep with you. Just be really, really, REALLY close, though.” Ed laughed at his own joke.

“That is...brilliant. Just brilliant...” Matt added not knowing what else to say.

As they gathered up their things and trundled out into the hall with his new bestest “Mate” in tow, Matt flashed back to his favorite episode of classic STAR TREK, called AMOK TIME. Spock comes out of the brain madness of the mating ritual of PON FAR, thinking he’s just killed Captain Kirk, his best friend, and learns how he has now been totally played by his would be fiancé’ T’Pring and her lover Staan.

Spock says, “There are two great tragedies in life. Wanting and getting. It is not logical, but you will find it to be true.”

Now all Dr. Matthew Michael Fassbinder had wanted or dreamed of in life, he was now getting, and he truly did not know which one, right now, was worse.

PART FOUR:

DC-HQ

CHAPTER ELEVEN

On the aircraft heading back from Kansas to Washington, DC, Dr. Theodore Humphrey, Jr., the Senior Director of The Group, was sitting next to the window, the twilight sun shadowing his face, working through his

copious notes. He wrestled with calculating what needed to be done first and who needed notifications in a descending order of importance and necessity. He pulled up his standard response plan on his hyper-advanced tablet pad computer which would several years hence become the prototype for the Apple iPad, the Microsoft Surface, and everything else out there in the next decade whenever they decided to release the tech from the R&D phase out to the general public. They just had to figure out how to downgrade it from the near indestructible military grade, to the obsolescent consumer level where the device would break months, days or moments after the warranty expired.

He went down his list, swiping his fingers from right to left across the screen to scan the pages, absorbing it all at an amazing speed. Damn it! He thought to himself, and clenched his fist and his jaw, shaking his head quietly. So many things had changed since the Grand Ol' Days when Ronald Reagan was President. Dutch Reagan was the guy you wanted in the White House if you were heading into a bloody knock down drag out fistfight with a superior alien race copping an attitude.

Ted sat back and remembered the time when Reagan, after they had told him the whole story about what was really going on here on Earth, and after, God still only knows why, they were victorious at the Battle of the Dulce Mesa facility, that he showed up out at FIVE-ONE, or Area 51, as it was known by outsiders.

By the time he came they had already built the S-4 facility through a pass and up over the hill at the Papoose Dry Lakebed in the next valley over. A dune colored camouflaged hanger for the nine ships they kept there built into the side of a mountain. It went down five levels and the bottom level even had biological containment cells, called jokingly The Ambassador Suites, for "Visitors" or various beings they'd captured alive. There were also storage tubes for an assortment of alien beings they'd managed to collect

over the years. They even kept the ship that Ted had blown a hole in with the Bug Zapper laser turret.

They did a demonstration of the small scout ship for the President to show him what it could do. Dutch was like a kid on his first trip to Disneyland. No sooner had he seen it fly, but he wanted a ride. Ted still smiled at the memory of the absolute freak fest fit his Secret Service detail and Science Adviser threw, going positively nuts at the suggestion. It almost looked like the S.S. was going to wrestle him to the ground, and the science guys were going to chew his legs to protect him from himself. But he put his foot down, reminded them who exactly was in charge here by yelling; “I’M THE FUCKING PRESIDENT!” Ah.... priceless!

After all the shouting was over, he climbed onto the little football-sized seat in the rear of the craft with Ted in front. Reagan’s eyes went wide with delight; surprise and astonishment as the seat came alive beneath him and grew to perfectly mold itself to his body. After about twenty minutes and a few quick and easy tutorials, and some shaky turns which for the two men seemed like mild turbulence, but for anyone observing from the outside were right angle 90° turns at 40,000 mph, Ronald “Dutch” Reagan was flying the damn thing! It wasn’t until he seemed to get overly stimulated and wanted to try the weapons system out over Mexico, that Ted decided it was time to haul it in, call it a day, and get the horses back to the barn.

Ted allowed himself a good quiet personal laugh at one of his fondest memories, and then went back to his electronic documents. The religious nut job clown who was in that rented white washed house on Pennsylvania Avenue now was some kind of bi-sexual, S and M loving, sadistic eccentric warmongering extremist. Tell him that something had happened on Titan, one of the moons of Saturn, and that whatever it was needed investigating and he made a federal case out of it.

Since his “Appointment” to the Presidency via the rigging, blackmail and shenanigans of his only slightly less retarded brother and those black robed demons sitting on the Supreme Court and the dealings of the Richie Rich lower-level politicians of the Council on Foreign Relations/Trilateralist/Bilderberger thugs, this President had been an obstructionist in everything that The Group was trying to do. He was like a helmeted short yellow bus “special class” kid who showed up at a chess championship when suddenly his parents got called away.

But that was unfair. Challenged kids usually had an inherent sweetness that made you forgive them most things. This man was shrewd and cunning in the basest way, and really just plain sadistic and mean. Savage pain and suffering brought him the most perverse kind of pleasure.

First and foremost, though he totally, completely and utterly lacked the intellect or capacity to understand anything he was told. He wanted to be included in the decision-making processes. He felt his input was needed and vital to the survival of the “cunt-tree”, whatever his fuzzy little brain considered that to be, all so he could be remembered by history as “The Great Decider”.

When that got shot down, he decided to make it difficult for The Group to function, through cutting various funding sources coming through and from Congress. That didn’t work really well either. Especially when the military raised up its great hoary head and started making ugly noises.

Then the “Resident In Chief” started his now infamous R.I.F. program where he started to replace serving staff and flag officers with “his” people! Oh sweet Lordy Jesus! Mostly glassy eyed Praise The Lord, 700 Club fanatical “Born AH-gin” Christian types who might as well have been double agents and citizens of Israel, many of whom actually were. All believing that Jesus would someday return, rapture all of them to Heaven, kill all the bad

people and then...what? They would return from the sky to be, what? Put in charge?

Intelligence personnel who didn't speak the language of the country they were supposed to gather Intel from, but all good Bob Jones or Oral Roberts University graduates. Uninformed personnel who had never seen combat were placed in charge of entire combat groups and divisions, and America plunged into the two longest wars in her history that resembled a simian orgy in a banded wooden tubular container.

It seemed like everything "W" touched either got tainted, screwed up or just plain destroyed. Now according to "P&P" (Practice and Protocol), the unenviable task now fell upon Ted of informing him of any pending situation where a possible extraterrestrial enemy task-force would be approaching Earth to see if it was the United States that had violated some absurd and illegal treaty that he had nothing to do with entered into while he was drinking beer, tinkering with his inventions, and sweating his ass off in the infernal heat of Barstow.

This could be a total disaster if the Altarians did not show up and Ted had juked the whole world to Def-Con 1, to light up every board on Earth. Or if he did nothing, and no alerts were issued, and then they did show up, the clown who really did nothing but wave at people in front of the hamburger store, would now want his "input" laid down as law and gospel. He would probably want to negotiate with the Altarians directly, which would always just piss them off even more, and though we had done nothing wrong, would most likely get our entire solar system blasted to smithereens to make way for some Intergalactic Highway! Douglas Adams was more right about the Universe than he could ever possibly imagine, Ted thought with a grim smile. The Altarians, who had worked marginally with The Group in the past, were not exactly filled with the milk of "human" kindness. In fact they looked

upon Earth, and her people, and her language as nothing more than a virus that needed to be contained, if not out right exterminated.

Altair was 16.7 light years away, which was never far enough for Ted.

No matter how you sliced the baloney, it would be nothing but several clowns short of a circus and 3 ham sandwiches short of a picnic from start to finish.

“Item seventeen dash four,” Ted finally snapped out of the reverie that was giving him a massive headache and spoke to Bob sitting across from him in the airplane with a the ubiquitous computer pad and on his knees.

“Sir, yes sir!” Bob looked up and waited hoping he was not going to hear what he knew would be coming next.

“No notification?” Ted went back into his work.

“That means, The President, National Science Adviser, National Intelligence Director, Chief of Staff and Defense Coordinator,” Bob needed to make sure that Ted was writing them all off.

“We can’t risk it, Bob. If this turns into a shooting war, everyone will be advised of that right away,” Ted knew the risk, but he had considered those old adages the lesser of two evils and better the devil you know.

“Affirmative,” Bob started to write on his pad. “Do you think he’s going to make it?” Bob asked without looking up.

Ted removed his glasses and looked out the window at the landscape below. He absorbed the view of the purple mountain majesty and waves of grain, and the blissfully unawares and unconscious people in their tiny towns and the open brown fields spread in all directions, with little patches of green here and there. “I truly do not know. That was a rough introduction to the job. He has the smarts. I just do not know if he can reach down far enough to make the hard calls.”

“That takes years, Boss. Did you have it, when you were tossed into the

arena the first time?” Bob sat back and studied the crags, cliffs, lines and cracks on the older man’s face.

“Surprisingly.... yeah. I ran a bluff on an arrogant alien noble that was planning to take out Washington, DC, and most of the rest of the Earth if we didn’t comply. Boss One in those days, George Bellamy, just sat there stone-faced and watched me. He literally bet the fate of this entire planet on his faith I could do the job. Absolutely nothing in the form of emotions, and I won. When it was done I realized I was in something a lot bigger than I’d ever planned for, bitten off way more than I could chew, and had to run like hell to keep up. But in those days I had way more balls than brains. Matt will have to be a quick study, because I think he is just the opposite. And that means he better grow a mighty big pair of cajones, pretty damn quick. I mean like one of silver and one of brass. Because I tell you, if lightning doesn’t shoot out of his ass and he fails here, he is done. His personality wouldn’t let him live with himself if he can’t beat the problems. That is his Achilles heel.” Ted put his glasses back on and went onto the next section of the manual.

The sky-phone rang next to Bob on the armrest. He picked up the receiver expecting the worst.

“Runner Four, speak to me.” He closed his eyes and listened, and after a moment he opened his eyes in dull surprise as his face lit up. “You never call us here. What a surprise! Fine and yes. Good!” He listened some more, and then his face went glum again. “Yes.... Noble was very bad. Matthew did... he did fine. Yes indeed! He joined the Inner Circle...thanks to your husband.” He listened again. “That is the question darling, for how long? Four days and counting. Okay, sure, just a minute,” he handed the phone to Ted who looked confused to say the least.

“Hello?” Ted held the phone still a little annoyed that anyone would call while he was in the air. It had been a rule for years not to. “I would never

believe that you would call, how did you know that we were airborne? Who is Jerry? Our pilot. I didn't know his name. I know that's dreadful," Ted sat back and looked out the window and listened for a good length of time. "Really? You did the calculations as well, and he's right? No, no I am not questioning his expertise, it's just that I had looked at that so many times and didn't see it." Again, a long period of silence in the airplane.

Bob popped the buckle on his seat belt and walked back to speak with the cabin attendant sitting in a jump-seat reading a flight manual. They chatted nonchalantly for a few moments until it was clear that Ted had hung up. He excused himself and went back up and sat back across from him.

"Strange phone call?" Bob picked up his note pad again.

"Set that down for a moment please, Bob." Ted looked perplexed.

"What's wrong? Irina, the kids?" Bob knew them all like they were his own family, and mostly they were. He'd lived with Ted for almost ten years and spent most of his waking moments with the man and his family. He'd been there in the days in Nevada when things started to become unraveled and when she finally decided to go back to Russia and teach. She said it was for the sake of the children, but in reality she could no longer stand to see Ted growing farther and farther away from her and more engulfed, absorbed and swallowed by the great amorphous blob that was his job. As the limits, lines and boundaries between his work and life became thinner and fainter, until they disappeared altogether. It'd become an obsession to him, like everyone else before him. After finally seeing his father after nearly 40 years in a small cafe in Washington State and almost being killed by a woman he hated and who now traveled the time stream hunting him like some big game jungle cat. Bob pretty much knew everything. He was figuratively, for all intents and purposes, married to Ted, in some weird polyandrous triangle.

Ted had said he would slow down and relax. It didn't take. Before long

he was back to eighteen hour days, trying to keep the space program moving ahead, solving the problems with the time machine and being frustrated to think that the Nazi's had somehow done it and he couldn't.

She had needed some kind of life more than that. Ted had accepted it and went on acting like nothing had happened. But he had changed as well. He'd become quieter and colder. People had lost a lot of their value to him and he used more and more of them to get his job done, without a lot of care and concern about what became of them after they were used up. It was watching Ted that had convinced Bob not to take the Directorship when it was offered to him three different times. He did not want to go down the same route so many others had gone down.

"No, no. They're fine, thank you." Ted looked questioningly at his aide-camp and friend. "How many times have you read Schulman's paper, the one my dad had?"

"Probably a half dozen times. I never knew why it was important. That's why I kept reading I guess," Bob shrugged as he tried to remember it completely but just knew that it was odd.

"Irina just told me, Theodore found a code inside the paper and broke it. After performing that minor miracle he told her that he would build the device. The one Schulman describes in the coded text," Ted was just shaking his head.

"What device?" Bob looked completely confused. "That paper was about time compression."

"Exactly. But inside it had the completed working plan for the Time Runner. The one thing that Herr Doktor General Hans Kammler could not get his hands on and that is why he was left behind for the Soviets to scoop up. Shit!"

Ted unbuckled himself and walked back to get a drink from Ariel,

the flight attendant. She gave it to him with a sly secret smile, and her hand lingered on his just a moment longer than it needed to. Ted smiled softly and turned to look out the window of the flight door, down at the lights of some far off city on the ground below. He took a sip of his drink, tipped it up towards Ariel with a gesture of satisfaction and thanks, then walked back up to his seat, more falling than sitting in his chair.

“We’ve had it for fifty years. I walked around with it for all that time in my god damn briefcase. Jesus! How can any one person be so fucking dumb?” Ted rubbed his hands through his thinning hair. “With just one of these Project: Tempus Fugit would have worked! And Chronos and Time Runner One and High-Binder...” he let out a long breath. “So much suffering, so many wasted lives. Hell, Bobby, I wouldn’t have this electronic gadget in my chest keeping me alive and a lot of other good people would not be mad and/or dead...”

“Oh stop with the recriminations already,” Bob said. “It wasn’t just you that missed it. There’s been a whole batcha of us ‘smart guys’ that let it slip through the cracks as well,” Bob was pulling a copy of the German documents up on his portable machine. He just sat there shaking his head over and over again, completely stumped. “I still can’t see anything that looks even remotely like a pattern here.”

“Remember where he was and when Schulman created the code?” Ted said, still trying to track the work that solved for ‘X’. “Three and four cylinder rotor machines back then. Enigma. He clearly built his own, using a seven-rotor system, which, in and of it self, would be unbelievable,” Ted jabbed his finger on the screen. “Look for my dad’s pencil marks.”

“Okay, yeah, I see that,” Bob responded.

“Copy everything to the next pencil mark,” Ted pointed to where it was.

“Okay got it.” Bob said pushing him away as he pulled up another

window with z decoding program in it.

“Use the first word of the sentence as a key control, no matter if it’s five, six or seven letters. And then run the decoder.” Ted stood back and watched the words pop up on the screen.

“It’s still in code, now,” Bob looked puzzled again.

“It is and will remain so, until you’ve done that same operation twelve times.” Ted sat back down.

“The man sure didn’t want anyone to find the facts did he?” Bob sat back and looked across at Ted.

“Clearly he was a little...paranoid. Not surprising, for who he was working with. We’ll have our guys in DC run it out fully, but you and I still need to be in Russia in ten days to see what kind of device Time Runner looks like when built by a genius artist and mathematician.” Ted smiled at the thought.

“Your 8 year old son?” Bob asked quietly. “Teodore is building one?”

“Four actually. Two from the original design and two modernized to today.” Ted nodded his head. “Our guys in the lab will beat his time schedule, but I’m not going to rob his thunder on this one. I will make him feel that he was the first to build the new unit.”

“He’ll know, but that’s okay. It’s a good game families play,” Bob smiled.

“How is Cindy? When was the last time you saw her?” Ted sipped his drink.

“Two weeks ago for a weekday. She’s great. Tan, in shape and plays golf every day in Florida. Has a lot of friends that feel sorry for her that she has a husband in the service on special assignment. She loves it. Lives on a beach in Boca, member of a country club, can go and do whatever she wants and does not have to worry about someone leaving the toilet seat up,” Bob

smiled and motioned for the flight attendant.

“Never talks about slipping up?” Ted waited while Bob ordered something to drink.

“No! Why should she? She can do anything she wants. She tells me that she’s like a Yankee Wife in New Bedford. Captain Ahab comes home twice a year for a week and then is back out there hunting Moby Dick. Her widow walk is just a little longer by eighteen holes.”

Bob took his drink from Ariel and dug back into his computer to move farther down the list of needed items that had to be handled before all hell broke loose.

Ted had realized for a long time just how many peoples lives had been altered, affected, saved and or destroyed by the work that The Group did over the course of all these years.

All he had ever hoped for was that all of it, in the long run, would have truly made a difference.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Cape Malabar Radio was a call sign for the most secret base that The Group and the US Navy ran joint operations on. It was the monitoring station that could process millions of Earth based radio signals a second and monitored every conceivable frequency that could carry any form of information, all the way from radio long wave at one end to X-ray and gamma rays at the other and all laser based signals used by the Nebraska Navy which was one of the nick-names for US Space Command's extra terrestrial star fleet. If it was in the electromagnetic spectrum anywhere in this solar system and far beyond and carried a signal, than Cape Malabar Radio heard it.

Twenty technicians rotated six months on and six months off. For the Navy personnel it was the best and worst duty station that anyone could get. It had everything anybody could ever want or need inside the base. But along with Five Star accommodations and luxurious accouterments was the sheer loneliness and isolation that went married hand in hand with the lodgings.

There were no emergency leaves or weekend getaways to go to. The view was awe inspiring and terrifying all at the same time. The fulfillment of a life long dream that was almost beyond imagination for those that made it here. And those that fit in loved it and asked to be returned to it on a regular basis. Those who could not hack it were quietly moved off at the end of their rotation and planted in some other field of endeavor where they could finish up their enlistment in peace and then take a quiet government job, or a fat cushy private sector gig after leaving the service. Knowing darn well that they would be under surveillance for the rest of their lives. Everyone knew working at this level for the "Gubermment" or whatever you wanted to call it, was like being a Made Man in the Mob. Everyone knew: You Never LEAVE!

The Group employees were a whole different breed. They were so jazzed by being at this facility and working here, it was often hard to get them to go home for their six month leave. If anyone didn't show up to replace them, they were just fine with that. Any of them could do a double assignment and never even mutter a discouraging word.

Part of the reason was the pay grade. These guys were making a yacht sized boatload of money for six months. Six-figures, at usually well over two hundred thousand dollars, tax free, with every and all expenses paid, and no place and no need to spend it per assignment. Everything they ever needed or wanted was at Cape Malabar. And if it wasn't there, all they had to do was think of it and SOME ONE would some how get it for them.

There was no BX or PX, however, there was one store. Whatever they wanted they just made arrangements and signed for it as a Group member. Costs were always covered and somehow the items would most always get to them. More than a half dozen navy officers and enlisted men had transferred at the end of their assignments to a job with The Group doing the same job. Even though the naval personnel were the highest paid in the service, it was not up to what the civilians made. Those that loved this place worked out all the details in their heads and how to become a permanent party for a while here, and then retired out to a great life.

The only major problem with Cape Malabar and the job: it was as dangerous an assignment as you could pull in all the services or the private sector. The risk of death was higher than any actuarial table could calculate. But most of the men and women that worked here did not talk about that issue. They had all seen death at one time or another up close and personal.

Cape Malabar Radio had grown since its start in 1974. It started out as a long-range detection station and relay point, hence the name 'radio' in the moniker, which, over the years had just stuck. The original base had been

only four modules. One housed the station kitchen; living area and two four bed dormitories. The second had been a warehouse and power station. The third was a makeshift medical bay and lab, with the fourth being the largest and most complex, the actual monitoring station. Early on, it housed maybe twenty different types of receivers and a half a dozen transmitters.

If anyone can remember the start of MacMurdo Bay Station in Antarctica they will have an idea of what Malabar looked like and what it has grown into. The complex looks similar to MacMurdo only bigger. Winters in MacMurdo are about the same as the worst winter you can imagine, except at Malabar it was all the time. One must dress properly if they plan to go outside at either one of the stations. The only difference is that at MacMurdo you need thermal underwear, heavy outer garments and a lot of insulation. At Cape Malabar you need a complete pressure suit, hooked up to a self contained heater, air re-breathers, bio-monitors and when you are dressing and leaving, one does it out of an airlock.

Malabar is located and hidden in a medium sized crater on the demarcation line between the light and dark sides of the moon at the north pole tapping the north pole ice field for water. The actual station itself is constructed under a self-tinting para-glass dome that gives breathtaking views looking out at the night sky. The rest of the station had been built into the wall of the crater with over one hundred thousand feet of space, housing the most complex place conceived by man, which cost well into the billions of dollars. It was being built with the least amount of knowledge put out to the public about it. If one wasn't involved in the project, than there was no need to let anyone in on the secret. This feat would be impossible for The Group to repeat nowadays in the present political economic and information environment.

The base could contain up to 250 people. Basically about half and half

of civilians and Navy personnel. It was the home of the United States Navy Space Force. Homeport of the huge fleet flagship the USS Virgil I. Grissom, the USS John Glenn and the USS Alan Shepard.

The Grissom was a first rate top-notch flagship of the line. A Constitution Class vessel with one-hundred and thirty-two officers, men and a contingent of Marines. Its job was to explore the solar system and to patrol Mars and the Asteroid Belt for any activities. That is what it says in the “official/unofficial” manual. In reality its role was to engage any enemy with plans of entering Earth orbit and provide an application for preliminary defense until another group of fighting ships could be brought to bear from Earth to enter the engagement as reinforcements. The Grissom’s crew, or the “Gloomy Gus” as she was better known, all knew they were, like the heroic Apollo One astronaut whose name she bore, a suicide boat. The Grissom was a stop-gap measure, meant to buy time if necessary.

Within United States Space Command there were always far more requests to be a member of the Grissom’s crew than there ever were vacant spots available. Which says volumes about the men and women who took two oaths to serve both their country and the Earth as a whole.

The USS Glenn and USS Shepard were transporters mostly. High-speed runners made to go back and forth to Earth as needed. Fast Craft, as they were known. They could handle tonnage and people in huge volume with at least one of them doing journeys once a week. Jokingly, these are also known as the Pirate Ships, the black marketeers that worked at Malabar. Everyone now and then wants something special. The only rules that applied to this known/unknown activity was no drugs, no weapons, no hard booze and no pornography. There’s almost always a huge movement of prototype book reader computer pads that would later become iPads, Nooks or Kindles loaded with all the latest best sellers and, every now and then, on birthdays

and special occasions, boxes of Uncle Bennie's Home Made Pizza from a place in China Lake, California.

Everyone expected a new lot of uncooked pizzas to be pulling in sometime after six o'clock LLT, Local Lunar Time. It had turned into something of a custom by now that became Thank God It's Friday pizza night. Everyone loved it, a literal heavenly slice of home kept up spirits and morale.

Chief Petty Officer Josephine 'Jo' Parker was a lifer at Cape Malabar. There was no question in anyone's mind about that fact. She had joined the Navy at eighteen, ten days after graduating top of her high school class in Perkins, Colorado, on the western side of the state. She told the naval recruiter she wanted the Navy to give her a college education in engineering and she would give them a lifetime of service. She had foiled the whole system by making the recruiter put it in writing and then had his Commander sign it, so there would be no question if the Navy tried to do anything else. She had completed college in three years with an 'A' average. Her rank came after that and quickly. She moved through various communications positions like she had done them her whole life. Her evaluations were off the scales. Her commanders would recommend her for schools, harder positions and any movement up through the rank system that normally took years. She had already served ten years and was carrying more stripes than guys that had twenty years in the regular navy. "Respectful, duty bound and always there" was what "Kit" Johnson the Commander of Malabar said about her in report after report. He also stated that he wished to keep her on board and not have The Group, steal her from him ever. He was well aware that she would eventually go over to them. She could not help but do that.

Right now he needed her as his lynch pin on the floor of Malabar. She knew every system and how to break them down and put them back together.

Jo was one of the most highly respected persons on the Moon and everyone listened when she spoke.

She was speaking now:

“Skipper! I got flash traffic from the Grissom coming in on the laser-com system.” She had picked up the phone and dialed Kit’s number. He was up on the platform overlooking the operations center inside the glass dome. From there he could see every spot on the floor of the operations center.

“What kind of priority Jo?” He picked up his phone and looked down at her thirty feet below him.

She raised five fingers. Captain Beventon had seen something that worried him, which would be the only reason he’d be sending flash traffic with that high a classification.

Kit turned to his Lieutenant J. G. sitting next to him. He was a young man out of the academy named Rinslow, who was still awestruck at being in space and on the Moon.

“Lieutenant, get the Boss on the line, right now!” Kit turned back to the floor. “Send it up here as well when it comes in on your board, Jo.”

“Aye aye, skipper!” She was still standing and working her board when; “Holy....!” She hesitated and then pushed the forward button to Kit. “We got trouble Skip!”

“Reading Chief...” Captain Johnson was reading the printout that had taken a total of twenty-two minutes to travel through space to them. He double checked it and then stepped over to the edge of the balcony with his handset still to his ear.

“Jo! Talk to me. I am thinking this is really hot!”

“Skipper, there is only one reason this is happening. They know something that we don’t. If that were the case, I would punch that red button on your console and ruin everyone’s Friday pizza night. If you don’t there

could be hot holy hell to pay!” Jo was biting her nails into the quick, a bad habit she had since high school.

“It’s not just our party we’re going to poop!” He looked at various clocks on the wall above him to see what time it was in the various time zones in the US.

“You know some of those parasites are going to stay to the last minute, especially those who pull minerals off asteroids. If they’re bugging out, than there’s a reason, and we don’t know what it is, ‘cause no one down there on our big blue marble has told us diddily squat.” Jo let a little of her sarcasm show, but she was always far more gentle with her Captain than she ever was with anyone else.

“I am trying to find Boss One,” Kit wanted all the help he could get right now. “The clock is still running though. Six minutes is all I am willing to give. You ready?”

“With you in charge Skip, anytime, anywhere.” She turned and gave him a huge, loving smile.

“Bless you girl... I would marry you if they’d let me.” Kit and Jo played back and forth on the Com system when no one could hear them.

“Nah. You’d find out very quickly that I can’t cook, am a really messy slob and, oh... a total bitch.” Jo turned back to her console. She really liked her commander, but knew until she was out of the Navy, that there was no chance for a relationship between them.

The Commander turned to a large red phone, known as the secondary line, and picked up the receiver. Everyone instinctively turned to look up at him, knowing the hot line BRP, the BIG RED PHONE, meant BFT, Big F**king Trouble.

“Robert Hanson? Bob! This is Kit. Can you pull the Director in on this line please Captain? We got a situation.” By the tone and phrases Bob

Hanson knew that this one was all business.

“I presume you lunatics know what time is it here, Kit?” Bob was doing his best job of protecting the Boss from unwarranted interruptions in the middle of the night.

“Bob, unless you are ready to make a Type One call, I think Ted really needs to hear this.”

That was enough for Bob to hear and recognize that this call was important.

“Give me three minutes.” The line went to hold.

“What’s happening Skip?” Jo looked back up at him. “The clock is running down fast.”

“I’m on hold. Now I just need to get the big man on the line personally.” Kit stood shifting his weight from one foot to the other in a nervous fashion while holding a telephone in each ear. By now, at least fifteen people on the floor knew that something big was happening. Desks were being cleared of any personal items and everyone had pulled on their headsets so they could by-pass the telephone handset if necessary.

“Captain? This is Ted Humphrey. Sit-Rep?” Ted was standing in his dimly lit library at his home wearing a dressing gown and slippers. He had just been awakened from a deep sleep.

“Seven minutes ago we received flash traffic from the USS Grissom. She’s detected at least seventeen Fast Walkers bugging out of the solar system at high speed. That included the ones mining the belt,” Ted stood there for a minute and ran what he had just heard with his other information presented to him earlier that day.

“Is Jo on the floor?” Ted asked without explanations

“Yes Sir. Do you want her on this line?” Kit asked with no reservations.

“I do, Captain,” Ted answered

She picked up immediately when Kit motioned for her to plug in.

“Chief Petty Officer Parker here, sir.”

“Jo, it’s Ted. How are you?” It seemed a dumb question but it was vital to know if she was up to par before telling her the next set of moves.

“I am better than good sir. I’ve been on the board for six hours with no incidents, that is up until this came in and I quickly told Captain Johnson about it. He started a six-minute clock. We are now two minutes past that.” She was looking at the floor and gripping the telephone so tight to the point where her fingers had turned white.

“Would you call the ball?” Ted asked her.

“Most definitely. We don’t know what is coming in, sir, but it looks bad and far better safe than sorry, sir.” Jo answered in a true professional manner.

“Nobody likes sorry. Captain Johnson, do you concur and confirm?” Ted asked buying himself some time.

“Yes sir. The captain and crew of the Grissom are the very best there is at what they do. They wouldn’t send this message if it wasn’t important.” Kit closed his eyes and hoped he was right.

“At this point this is strictly on a need to know basis only. That will change I am sure in the next twenty-four hours. But for right now, you are the only two outside The Group that will know these facts. We have not yet had time to alert others in the chain of command, so use this information I am giving you now with all prudence: Five days ago an emergency distress beacon was accidentally set off on Earth which destroyed the Gage Noble Seven Vantax facility. That beacon had been on the Altarian craft that Beventon and the Grissom assisted the Ajax with the survey, salvage and recovery. It will bring a swarm of pissed off aliens straight at us. They will also discover that we have broken, and been in violation of, the Isomer

Protocol Treaty for quite some time. They could be here in three days or three hours depending on their current position. They could be all back on Altair or just outside our system, we have no way of tracking them until they are almost within striking distance.” Ted paused, not just for effect, but because he was so bone dead tired. “Now that you know this... what’s your call?” Ted waited to hear the response.

Jo was the first to answer.

“Director? I would highly suggest we light up ALL the boards.”

“Total agreement, Director,” Captain Johnson immediately confirmed.

“When you do this Jo, there will be hell to pay down here and Captain Hanson and I are going to be moving targets for everyone. I will have Ed Reilly head for Five-One and dust off the Vipers.” Ted knew that once that signal went out there would be no recalling it. NORAD would explode with questions. Persinksy in Russia would be burning up phone lines, and no one in DC would know what was going on. Ted looked over at his best friend standing there drinking a glass of milk. “God help us, Bob, we may well just be starting a war.”

“Do what must be done, Ted. That is what you’ve always told me.” Bob poured another glass of milk and handed it to Ted. He took it and pulled a long draught.

“Captain Johnson, Chief Parker, call the ball. Light all the boards. That is a direct order from me. Note it and time stamp it in your logs. And thank you both. Stay safe you two.” Ted hung up the phone.

“I need to get dressed. We’re making the midnight ride of Paul Revere.” Ted drained his glass of milk, brought it down on the counter with a thud and started to move with purpose.

“Where are we going first? The White House or the Pentagon?” Bob was already walking toward his part of the house.

“Neither. Our Ops Center. I want our folks lined up and ready. In twenty minutes everyone who is inside The Group will be hauling ass to get on station. We need to be there to greet them. There is nothing the President can do or the Joint Chiefs either. Oh, they’ll make a big fuss and a whole lot of noise. But they can’t handle this. It’s completely and totally up to us. As usual.”

“Fate of the world, pal. Wouldn’t miss it for anything.” Bob grinned his crooked cowboy smile.

Ted left and went back to his room to prepare for the start of a war they had little chance of winning.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The USS Virgil I. Grissom was huge; nearly 1,600 feet from stem to stern, approximately the length of the sea going USS Enterprise...but in space. It had a blunt shovel prow and looked like two wedges sealed together, with the bottom half being a jet-black onyx and the top a whitish silver. All that broke the line of the wedge design was a small raised scoop-like hump where the ship's bridge sat, and allowed the command crew an unfettered view of the stars. The stern swept up elegantly like the rear of a 1966 Corvette, with three huge rockets, bristling a light blue with power. She was massive to anyone who had never seen her, and surprisingly many people had not in the last ten years. It had test flown all over the world and especially in the US. But it was tested at night over much of the Mid-West.

Random reports had come up and a lot of people had told others about it. No one had ever gotten a close up photo of it, since the craft had a coating that would not reflect light. Distance shots that had been obtained of it always looked like a wedge shaped blob, a result of the power system used aboard her. Making sure that every part worked perfectly, they had to do this test flying here. No one wanted to find out about engineering mistakes when the craft was beyond the LaGrange Point 148,000 miles out. Working out every little bug and anomaly before anyone was going to send it out into deep space, had been Ted's priority.

He'd been the one who conceptualized the craft and laid out the basic working systems on it. The rest had been done by a corps of highly skilled engineers and scientists. The craft had been built at the Tonopah Test Range by forty people. They were the ones who actually put every part into place and turned every screw. The parts had been built by over five thousand different companies worldwide and shipped to one location in Texas, where then they were trucked in secret up to Nevada. The construction had taken

four years, two months and twenty-six days start to finish. Testing had required two thousand hours of flight time for another four-year period. But very close to the tenth anniversary of the craft's primary design, Ted had gone up in it and flew around the world, pole to pole. It was his baby and he was very proud of it. He'd named it after a man he truly admired for his sheer guts and courage. A man everyone knew was going to be the first man "officially" on the moon, had he not died in the tragic way he did in a fire during a ground test of the systems on Apollo One.

Ironically, Grissom lost his capsule the Liberty Bell 7, when the explosive bolts on the blast doors blew due to the turbulence of the sea when he splashed down. Gus contended for years that the doors "just blew", but it was enough to cast doubt and shade on him for the rest of his career. Because of this accident the blast bolts were taken off the door of the Apollo One, and so all three men burned to death when the fire broke out with no way to escape. Years later Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg paid to have the Liberty Bell 7 salvaged from the ocean floor and proved once and for all that the blast door bolts were defective, that they DID, "just blow" and vindicated Gus Grissom once and for all.

The USS Grissom had a core of nearly twenty-four feet. A meson-nuclear reactor that had been modified from a wrecked UFO in The Group's possession powered it. By the time the engine team finished, blueprinting and twixting the mill, the craft could out perform much larger and more powerful alien craft. It had the force and power as well as body mass that was like no other.

Ted had found the design and the plans in the 1,600 tons of Nazi documents that'd been 'liberated' after the war. An aircraft/space-craft design, it did not have an engine assigned to it, but the body was something of artistic beauty, sheer strength and pure blue-sky imagination. The materials

the designers had called for were not even invented when he drew up the plans. His notations simply made reference to “new” materials that would have to do this or that. The fabrication and material science guys for The Group had taken out over six hundred new patents on structural materials that no one had ever seen before, making The Group even more worthy. The inside was a clean, modern almost submarine looking ship. There was no waste in the interior. Everything had function and elegant purpose. The bridge was the only spot that had a forward view. All other ports were looking to one side or the other. The inside of the craft had about the same amount of room as the USS Ronald Reagan, a Nimitz class aircraft carrier, which was about 600 feet shorter but all on one level, and minus the need for the aircraft obviously. Inside it had everything that any modern warship has on it.

A crew of one hundred and thirty-two, including officers, enlisted men and a cadre of US Marines made up the ship’s complement. Every one of them was screened medically and psychologically beyond any rigorous test applied by any other service in the world. These men were the most physically fit, most psychologically sound, and most well educated crew that ever stepped off a gangplank. They knew it, and they were proud of it. To wear that gold emblem of THE UNITED STATES SPACE COMMAND and the patch of the Gloomy Gus on their tunics showed the mettle of the Grissom in relief was one of the greatest honors anyone could have from their planet.

Captain Mark Beventon was a career officer with the Navy. He’d moved up fast through the ranks and after two tours as EX-O (Executive Officer) on a Los Angeles class nuclear submarine The Group approached him. He accepted the transfer to the Detached Officers List or DOL of the US Navy. Upon completion of an introduction course to The Group and basic

operations he immediately went to Nevada and took control of the oversight on the final construction of the Grissom.

He was out on every one of her test flights and test maneuvers. When it was commissioned, it was his name on the placard that stated he was the first to captain the great ship. The Grissom was his baby. He loved her and in return she gave her the finest service any commanding officer could ask for. People would joke about the way the Captain would be walking to the bridge with a red machinist rag in his back pocket, like some mechanic from Jiffy-Lube, and how he would stop to check an instrument or wipe down the stainless steel on a panel, or wipe off a scuff mark on “his boat”. It was said, and every member of the crew believed, they could eat off the floor of the bridge and it was cleaner than any dinner plate in any restaurant in the world.

The lighting was always low on the bridge. It had a blue gray tint to it. Colored consoles illuminated the working deck. However, the rest of the atmosphere was tinted and gave everyone on the bridge an excellent view out the front panels looking down over the forward deck and out into the spectacular and glorious view of space.

Beventon was sitting at the Con in his command seat on the right side of the bridge, looking at his screens. His chair was the closest to any window. He could turn to his right and look out over the starboard side of the craft as well as ahead. Sitting back he was watching a large rock move past them out in the asteroid belt about a half-mile away.

The bridge ran silent. There was no talking while on duty. Everyone was there to do a job and only the information that was needed was spoken. It was the Captain’s rule. Anyplace else on his boat it was fine to joke, yell, scream, laugh or cry, but his bridge was all business. The crewmembers left their personalities at the elevator hatch walking in. It was as if one had just

entered a tenth century Catholic Cathedral on Sunday. The engines hummed just like Benedictine Monks at lauds or vespers. All that was missing was the pungent wafting smell of frankincense and myrrh.

“Skip! In-coming laser light transmission.” The communications officer noted and Beventon turned back to his consoles. No thanks was given but everyone knew they were there hanging in the silence.

Beventon read the full text three times. Someone down on the ground wanted him back over the moon, pronto. That would have to be a communication from the Director himself. He would be the only one capable of issuing this kind of directive. This order had never come before, and Captain Beventon knew Ted Humphrey, and never knew him to panic, abuse his power, or, for that matter, ever be wrong. He also knew that if this came from him, then an F-5 fecal hurricane was brewing planet-side.

The USS Virgil I. Grissom had only been at sub-light speed three times and those were carefully controlled and conducted tests, in and around home base in L.E.O.—Low Earth Orbit. A few of those tests had gone wrong with the ship’s gravitational field going out of phase, forcing them to fly over Southern California and land at the FIVE-ONE Groom facility in Nevada. The vibrations and double sonic booms rolling off the underbelly from the massive craft created a pair of 3.2 earthquakes on the ground, that Kate Hutton at Cal-Tech dubbed “Sky-Quakes” and it made all the local news.

No one could believe something this huge could be in the air, so the cover story was that two ships, travelling at Mach 25, came in from space and “landed at the mysterious Area-51 facility at Groom Lake. The US Military denies all knowledge of any such craft.”

The Captain got up and briskly strode over to the Nav station. “Jason, lay in a course to get us out of this boulder farm in the most expeditious manner.”

“Aye Captain, laying in the plot.” The man’s fingers moved effortlessly over the keyboard. Then he hit the run button after double-checking all the courses and inputs.

Captain Beventon, took a deep breath, rubbed the back of his neck and looked straight ahead out the main view screen. “Then set up a jump. Fifty percent power. End point destination one hundred clicks over the light side of the Moon. We are going home kids.”

Jason turned and looked up at his boss. The entire bridge crew looked over in shock and concern, and the usual monastic quiet on the bridge took on an entirely new depth. The Captain did not look around.

“I know this is our first real space time, ladies and gentleman. But we are headed back probably because it is for the worst possible reason. We knew this day would come. Earn your paychecks.”

“Course plotted and standing by,” Jason said, breaking the nervous dead calm. “Will commence on completion of current course lay in.” Jason finished the inputting of the second course. “Ops Two please check and confirm second lay in?”

Another officer looked carefully at his console and tapped his screen several times. He then ran two or three other possibilities and found that Jason’s was the best and fastest course. He looked over and nodded.

“Confirmed. Plot and course,” Jason barked.

Beventon pulled down the microphone from the mast next to the Nav position, hit a button on his command chair, and his PA announcement went ship wide as his voice boomed and echoed with metallic thunder.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, it is my duty and honor to inform you that we are going to maximum sub-light speed in approximately fourteen minutes. Secure all stations and equipment and be prepared for the Jump-Bounce when it happens. We have reason to believe that this is not a pleasure trip we are

about to embrace. We may be entering a full engagement when we come out of sub-light speed. Our transit time will be,” he quickly checked a console chronometer, “thirty-six hours nineteen minutes. One hour before planet fall, we are going to full battle alert. Spend the next few hours preparing your areas for a fight. Make sure you get some quality down time, enough sleep, and that you’ve eaten well before we come out of the jump. I know we’ve all enjoyed the quarter jumps when we went from the moon to Mars, but this is heading for full tilt. Keep an eye on each other and report any illness, sickness or unusual behavior. Right now our lives depend on each other. I shall be on the bridge for the next two hours to meet with any section chiefs who have any issues whatsoever.” He paused for a moment and ended lamely. “Let’s see if we can enjoy the ride.”

Beventon thought of all the great lines captains in the past have used before a battle, just none came to him when he was making his announcement. He replaced the microphone and went back to his seat, put his safety belt on and hung his damping goggles around his neck for protection, so when the time came he would not have to look for them.

Quietly to himself he prayed:

“Sweet Jesus, don’t let me screw this up. Amen.”

PART FIVE:

A PRAYER
BEFORE DYING

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Mayfair Research Complex, or M.R.C., was on Williamsburg's Blvd. just northeast of Mills Church. It was a twenty-acre site with three levels of fences hemming it in keeping everyone not supposed to be there out. Mobile and foot patrols with K-9 units prowled the perimeter. Because of its proximity to DC and Spook Central at Langley, no one thought anything about it. It was just one more major governmental or private research lab that paid millions in taxes to the County of Fairfax, Virginia.

MRC was called "The New Place" in Group jargon. It replaced the old brownstone in downtown DC and pulled together several other functions from around the country into one spot. It was not a hole in the ground, or near a nuclear waste dump on the corner of NO and WHERE about 10 clicks past where Jesus lost his shoes. It was near opulent lavish civilization and kingly amenities. Something many of The Group's upper members had missed during their tours of duty at such spits of dirt and underground holes such as Groom Lake, Fallon Naval Air Station, China Lake, Fort Hero, or Fort Collins as well as Sophieland, South Africa, Pine Gap, Australia and Vinestock, Chile. These were not what anyone would call high spots on the Gray Line Tours, nor ideal vacation getaways.

The DC Mayfair Research Complex was able to plug right into the massive underground transport system that covers all of Northern Virginia and the DC Metroplex. All secret, unpublished, high-speed lines that move the brass, elite and "World's Most Dangerous" around the area without any media attention. The story of the underground transit system is a whole book in and of itself. But essentially if one is a major player in any of the games in DC (Ted and company clearly fit that criteria), they quickly found out after all the years in the great out backs of various countries it was really nice not to have to travel thousand of miles to accomplish their business.

The facilities were two hundred thousand square feet of offices, labs, lecture halls, and in the heart of it was the sixth floor lower level Operations Center. It looked like many of the others they had all been in before, but this was bigger by far, more modern and highly advanced, and you could actually go outside if you so choose. It was also bomb proofed, C.B.W.-Chemical Bio Warfare, proofed, totally independent and could survive for six months once the big doors were sealed, with at least three hundred people inside.

It was known as Op-1, the center of action when aliens were involved. If, for any reason, it went off-line, then Op-2 would take over. It had been in the same location in South Africa for over thirty-five years. Op-3 was in Singapore, or rather under it. Most of the government of that country-city did not even know it had been there for years, its cover was so good. Op-4 was Rio De Janeiro, Brazil, actually sixteen miles out of Rio in the mountains to the south. Op-5 still remained directly outside London, a carry over from the Second World War. Old facilities had been constantly refurbished and upgraded.

The last Command and Control Center was Op-6, the second to the newest. It was at the edge of the Ural Mountains in Russia. It had its own landing field, underground city, and all that it needed. Each one of these stations could handle all the resources available to The Group and each Op-Center had a collective of Bosses or Directors, just one step down from Ted's level. One of the largest private or public operations in the world and yet few people ever knew it existed.... and has for over a Biblical generation now. It's what you get when you spend 55% of the entire budget of the federal government of the United States of America, every year, for seventy-years!

Year in and year out, as most people don't know, though it's never hidden, is that the budget for the Pentagon and "Defense" to support the Military/Industrial Complex, for one year, is equal to the budgets of all

FIFTY STATES COMBINED. If you shut it all down for one year and returned the money to the Sovereign States, you could literally pave the streets of America with gold.

Their driver dropped Dr. Ted Humphrey and Captain Robert Hanson off at the back entrance. This was the fastest way to get inside the complex and used only by the very top execs. Security was done by facial recognition, eyeprint, as well as biometrics. If someone showed up with a department head and the security officer didn't recognize them, they were not getting in, no matter how much the department head bitched, moaned or threatened.

Ted and Bob had uniformed security guys opening doors and holding their briefcases while they were eye scanned, hand scanned and turned inside out. Then they walked straight back down the hallway and hit the special elevator that would take them to the "Glory Hole" at the bottom.

The door had security guards outside of it as well. Ted handed each of them a day pass for the room. It was coded and could only be used for that one day. The following day if one tried to use it, it would set off enough alarms to start a war, with a small army of security guys with no questions asked, beating the bubbles out of the poor lost unfortunate soul who had made the mistake. In this way, Bob and Ted, and anyone else that had a day pass, could not come and go out of operations without going through this invasive, time consuming scanning all over again.

"The Nest" was the top level or gallery of the Operations Center. It's where the "Heavies" perched in their aerie in the common lingo of the facility. A slanted glass wall overlooked the Ops Center thirty feet below them. A five story tall IMAX screen filled one whole wall that everyone could view called the Big Board. Already flashing across it were twenty different screen views running up on the display. All kinds of information was pouring in. The altar had done its job. All stations and centers were

reporting online and ready.

Ted pulled on a wireless headset, as did Bob. They had small extensions attached to their belts that had a box with a button for activation and close down mode.

Ted cleared his throat and hit his first.

“This is Director Ted Humphrey.” Everyone went quiet and turned to look up at the two men in the window. “For everyone here, and all of you hearing my voice at the remote stations, I presently have two comments.

“The first is: thank you for being here or wherever the rest of you are at your stations. The second thing is: this is not, and I repeat NOT... a drill. We are in the thick of the real deal here people. We will be getting back to all of you with the details of what is going on in a short while as new information comes in. So for right now keep doing what you are doing. I know that all of you are the very best there is at what you do, or you would not be here. Please just get everything ready with standard housekeeping. Thank you.” Ted clicked off.

Dave Mason was a huge African-American engineer who had been an all-star football player at Arizona State. He held two masters in various fields of engineering and was the NOC Supervisor up in the NEST. He strode in without preamble or introductions, as they were all currently at Def-Con 2 battle stations status. His voice was a deep resonant basso profundo as he spoke.

“Boss One,” his voice booming out deeply, “we got a lot of traffic from NORAD backing up. Some folks over there are wanting answers.”

His role as NOC--Network Operations Co-coordinator, were to filter messages through to where they needed to go and made sure nothing got backed up or slowed down in or by the system. “You’ve got NORAD, the NASA PRIVATE LINE, O.N.I and someone over at NATIONAL RECON,

all wanting a piece of you, Boss.” Dave was rough, gruff and really, really, good at his job.

“Who’s on first, Mr. Dave?” Ted was watching everything on the board.

“I would say NORAD. That guy is going to bust a nut or just flat stroke out if someone doesn’t talk him off the ledge, or at least wave a banana at him to get him to climb down out of his tree!” Dave moved the hot line to Ted’s extension for pickup.

“This is the Director, “ Ted waited.

“What in the hell is going on, Humphrey?” The man sounded even angrier amplified over the loudspeaker system on the back wall that everyone could hear. Ted jerked back his head at the sudden onslaught. “You guys must have something huge happening and you have told us two things: JACK and SHIT!”

“Why would you think we have something going on?” Ted made a face at Bob, who rolled his eyes, then waited again to see if the General was just fishing here. Bob nudged Ted, and Ted clicked his mute button. “This guy is looking for brownie points. I swear to God he is,” Bob whispered. “Tell him anything and he’s going to be calling National Security and that whole bunch of ass...”

“Cut the crap mister!” The General started in again on his harangue. “You can NOT bullshit an old Texas BULL SHITTER! Something happened a few hours ago that caught our attention. I had some of our resources start to check your guys’ parking lots. Four of your facilities have filled up in the last hour and a half. It’s a godless 0300 in the morning on a Sunday for Chrissakes! Only Jesus on EASTER gets up this early on a Sunday! So WHAT in the name God’s holy underpants is GOING ON?” That last section of his tirade sent a titter of amusement through the whole Ops Command Center. Even Ted pursed his lips and tilted his head in appreciation of the

anecdote. The General turned and mumbled something to someone else on his end.

“Why?” Ted said, playing the innocent rube. “What happened that caught your attention, General?” Ted asked politely.

“The FLY OUT! You know it happened GODDAMITT! That is what you guys are dealing with. Shit through a goose! Is there someone there higher than you that doesn’t have guacamole for brains, who can answer these questions for me?”

Dave Mason threw his hands into the air, with a wingspan of maybe 10 feet, and made an unbelieving face, silently mouthing the words “FUCKING REALLY?”

Ted just smiled and rubbed his nose, while Bob almost lost it with both hands over his mouth.

“Hold on there General,” Ted said in his best guacamole brained voice, “I will hunt high and low over here to see if I can find someone with the rank, qualifications and required intelligence to answer your burning questions sir...”

“ARE YOU YANKIN’ MY FUCKIN....”

Ted clicked the button on his belt device to put the General onto terminal hold. The Command Center burst into polite golf clap applause. Ted bowed slightly with a rolling wave of his hand to acknowledge their appreciation.

“What a jerk!” Dave pointed to the line again. “Now, NRO.”

Ted clicked over to NRO.

“Ted Humphrey here.”

“Ted? Malcolm at NRO. Good to hear your voice pal. Hey, I got satellites showing us all kinds of movement around out by the asteroid belt. Is this something spooky you’re working? NASA called and asked the same

question. If you can confirm this is you, I will, as the Beatles say, Let It Be.”

Malcolm Donald was one of the nicest men Ted knew. He was a pure scientist and didn't care about the muck and mire of politics at all. He was very comfortable in his job and did not want to go anywhere else. They had always done favors for each other over the years.

“You saw the Fast Walkers bugging out of the asteroid belt?” Ted asked quietly.

“Sure did. Folks over here gettin' a little worried.” His voice never changed ranges.

“Malcolm, I assure you, we got this, and are working the problem. Could you share that with NASA and NASA PRIVATE? They've been calling, as well, and it would save me some time and trouble,” Ted waited for the response but he could already tell what it would be.

“I got it Ted. Share one thing. Is it big?”

“Could be. Don't know yet. Could be nothing at all. Only time will tell.” Ted liked him a lot and wanted to be as honest as he could with this man.

“You guys need us...we are here. Just call me, Ted.”

“Okay...you're Ted.”

“Bwa-Hah!”

“Thank you Malcolm. There is one thing. We got us a new brass nob polisher at NORAD burning up the phone lines. He's just fishing for info. Please keep this one tight, cards to the vest,” Ted waited.

“Hah-ha! Already talked to him. The Yelling and Demanding stuff kind. No problems. I have a teen-age daughter! Love those types. ‘My naaame... Jose He-men-ezz. Me, no speak'a da En-Glass.....Yust de janertor.’” A chuckle came down the line.

“Love ya, buddy. I'll get back to you.” Ted cleared the line.

* * * * *

The night drew on to a close with the dawning purple gold break of day and everyone was finally informed inside all of the Op-Centers and now just waiting for the penny to drop and for the next move.

Dave Mason hit the private line button that excluded everyone but he and Ted in the conversation. “So, you leave for ten days and decided to start a freaking war with all of outer space?”

“No,” Ted watched the moving lines on the big board. “It was someone else that screwed up.”

“No way Boss-man. You can’t dump this one on all the little folks. I’d been tracking you as usual and you did it. Else-wise, how come you be off on the Big Bird in four hours and then everyone gets all excited like.” Dave clicked off once to tell someone on the floor to do something proper.

“Come on, man!” Ted loved this guy. “I pay you clowns so much, I need to wring you out now and then to keep you from getting all fat and lumpy.”

“Oh yeah. Well I bet it was George Lincoln Rockwell’s grandson over there that got you to do this. You know that he hates us black folks. We like get all Ed-JEW-Ma-Cated and uppity and stuff, then he gets worried that his cushion of a job is in danger.” Dave hit another call and blew off someone calling so Ted would not have to handle it.

“Are you talking about my principal assistant and fellow traveler in this business the Right Honorable Captain Robert D. Hanson, pilot, astronaut, officer and gentlemen extraordinaire? And that he is of the bloodline of the posthumous leader of the American Nazi Party?”

Dave Mason was the most erudite man Ted had ever known, but he

loved to do da po' boy Black Panther Richard Prior ghetto shtick whenever he could, and he knew it broke the horrible tension and strain that Ted was always under by making him laugh. Almost always at Bob Hanson's expense.

"Yeah, the guy dat has my job wit-chu'. Boss Honkie ONE. Big dummy, white power, big hat patrone', ultra supremacist. Ya mean Captain Keepda Niggerdown Hanson? He knows his days are numbered and that I am hot on his ass. I would look good in those suits he wears. A hell of a lot better than him. And ugly. A cannibal took one look at him and said, 'I'll have the salad!' Shit, boss... did I mention he's really old too?" Dave had a way with words.

"I'm older... much older." Ted added with a huge grin. Things were starting to pick up speed and taking good shape on the Big Board now.

"Yeah but, you're a distinguished, elegant handsome man of the world. Chicks still dig you cause you display real power. Not like him that lives in fear that you be stopping quick or something and he breaks his nose."

Dave never let up when they were together. Hanson was always the target. Mason had Bob responsible for everything and anything that had gone wrong in the last fifty years, including pulling the trigger for the headshot on JFK.

"I am betting he's going to be flying out of here with you in the morning," Dave added.

"I am joining him, David. You think I want to be in here when they seal this place up like a tomb? No way. Just more rats leaving a sinking ship," Ted could get into character when needed, then noticed a glitch on his board and shifted back to all business. "Why is 17 not working," he toggled a switch, "on either A or B?"

"HEY!" Dave yelled out. "Station 22. You goddamn white trash pot addled HIPPIY! Yeah...YOU! Get that shit up on the board. Don't matter if

you can't spell it, get it up there!" Dave clicked back into the private line, all black cool and collected dudeness.

"You got any ideas of how many are coming to our little potluck party here?" Dave pointed to Sky Box 2. He could see three operational directors he recognized were just now filing in and taking up their assigned positions.

"I would be hoping no more than seven cruisers and even that would be overkill, I promise you."

David gave out a low whistle of awe.

"If who I think this is are really coming to dinner, they could lay waste to this entire system with just that. Or, why bother? Just blow up the Sun! But then you lose all the water, mineral rights, and human horse flesh, I guess..." David just went rambling on.

Ted nodded to the men in the other gallery overlooking the main floor when they waved at him. The one in the middle in a maroon sport coat was Hugh Fox, a retired fleet admiral, and a guy who was close to a lot of politicians, and was somehow invited everywhere and did everything. He looked more like a playboy from a rich country club for senior citizens, with his silver white wave styled mane of hair and his deep rich tan. He'd been in The Group as a director much longer than Ted and yet he'd only been in on two major incidents. The one they were currently working and one way back in 1973 when Ted had been made a Boss in one minute flat, then was thrown feet first into the lion's den to handle a whole planet killing incident on his own.

"Three would do the job," Ted said absently to David, though his own mumbling monologue had long since moved off that topic.

"So if they are using more," Dave shook his head and immediately dove into the river at the current point of conversation, "it's a show of force. They're going to want to negotiate for major stuff down here. Do they have

any idea about the Grissom and the Viper Fleet?”

Dave turned to see a man on the other side of the glass door come in and motioned toward the Director. The man was carrying a large packet with him. Bob stopped him and looked at it carefully while questioning him. Then Hanson took it, shook the other man’s hand and brought it across the master control room to the isolation room. Dave reached back and opened the door.

“The Director needs that,” Bob smiled.

Dave nodded his thanks and then slid the sound proof door back into place, closing it in Bob’s face. “Grand Wizard of the Invisible Empire, just took possession of this for you. He even signed for it.” Dave handed it to Ted, who had to look at it before he realized what it was. He placed it into his briefcase by his feet.

“You’re killing me up here! What the hell is in that?” Dave hit a couple more buttons and pointed to a blank spot on the huge IMAX screen that they were all looking at.

“Gold certificates. All of the ones from the safe in accounting. Probably a half a billion dollars worth.” Ted tapped in some lines and filled the space in the moving dialog on the screen.

“Great! You got a bird waiting, probably has one of the slick ‘coffee, tea or me,’ chicks on board in that blue outfit that they wear and a bundle of gold. You’re so out of here. You’re beating feet and leaving po’ ol’ Dave to handle the shit storm that you kicked up. Damn! I hate it when I am right!” Dave pounded on his keyboard and started a second screen for everyone to see. It was feeding information on how complete the set up was at any given point of time.

“Her name is Ariel. She is French and her complexion... oh my god!” Ted pointed to Bob and then the screen and made writing signs. Bob nodded and picked up a clipboard and started to follow the track. Ted also noticed

that Ed Reilly and Dr. Matthew Fassbinder had walked in.

Matt was transfixed. Stunned by the sheer magnitude of what he was seeing for the very first time. He quickly just sat down at one of the consoles and started to watch the set being conducted. Six major Operations Station online, all at one time, all going through the same exercises and blending all that information to make sure everyone was not only on the same page, but exactly at the same line and word on those pages. It would be a coordinator's nightmare for any other organization that did not have a single, direct control from the top.

"Oh stop!" Mason said, pretending to cry. "You're killing me. Literally. Every time you send me somewhere I get the smallest Cessna anyone has every seen, two fat pilots with stale breath that smell like cabbage and a thermos of lukewarm coffee." Dave looked at his watch out of habit.

Ted started to really lay it on thick. "Ariel brings me these really cute little plates with fresh fruit, warm bread, cheese and some of that velvety expensive ham from Spain. You know, the high priced animals that are fed only acorns and oysters through all their short lives. That and a glass of French Rhone Valley wine from the Pope's Papal reserve, and then a snifter night cap of brandy from a \$70000 bottle. It's tough running this outfit, David. It truly is rough," Ted started to break and was beginning to smile, even though it was the absolute truth.

"The idea of MY woman, Ariel, rubbing against that pathetic loser cow poker from East Rusty Nut, Georgia, just makes me sick." Dave was smiling as well. "I know she likes him. You know, people can tell the way she looks at him."

Ted's grin slid off his face as he pointed out at the floor.

David turned in a panic and raised his hand. "Sector Five! I need a response team to console sixteen! I have a flipper! NOW, NOW, NOW!"

“How can you tell?” Ted asked.

“They normally start by sitting down. Then they start to rock forward and backward. Then, when they do they lean over with their head down almost to their knees and...they’re gone. The reality of the situation has hit and they understand this is not a drill. They let their mind run too far out in front of them and then it’s all over, man. Total decomposition and they lose their frame of reference plane.” Dave held up the count down for security to quietly take the breaking man off the floor. “Get him to sick bay and have the on-call head shrinker start to work on him immediately. That’s an order straight from the Director.”

“I did?” Ted looked at him.

“Makes you sound like you give a shit, which you and I both know you don’t, otherwise I would be flying out of here with you, to Cancun, Tangiers or where ever the hell you are going to get away from the mess that you and that geek cracker Mouth of the South started.” Dave pushed some more buttons. “Christy, darling, I need a live body in the identification section, preferably someone with morph changing, patterns and modules ID knowledge.” Dave listened. “Have they ever been in a live fire situation before?” Dave looked at the board then pointed to the time. Singapore was holding them up on the schedule. Ted hit a button and told Bob to handle it. “Well then, if you would stay with him for one round of calls and stay on a headset I’m sure they’ll see this is just as horrible or even worse than they feared...” he chuckled.

“Who the hell is Christy and what is she doing on the personnel placement?” Ted looked miffed.

“Cuz the love of your life, Jan...the big, beautiful Italian with the huge big beautiful,” he cupped his hands out in front of his chest, “...eyes... with the set of long, gorgeous 44 inch legs, broke one of them yesterday at the

King's Mill golf course in Williamsburg. She's is in traction at Williamsburg's Community Hospital. I mean how do you break your leg playing golf?" Dave shook his head sadly. "White people!" He handed Ted the clipboard, with a page folded back to a memo that had come in yesterday afternoon.

"Oh shit!" Ted said. "Well this is worse than the invasion. Janet DeBonno with a blemish, or God forbid, a scar, on one of those legs would be an insult to nature and all of mankind. But to have that leg not grow back properly and in the perfect shape where it tapers down into those four inch stiletto heels would be a sin against God's creation." Ted handed the pad back.

"Daaaa-mn! You do like her!" Dave had to pick up a flashing line coming in. "Yes sir! He is right where he belongs, next to me. Stand by, please." He pushed the hold button. "I admit those are the finest legs I have every seen as well. I can understand your official concerns. It's some joker on line four. Says he's the Vice President. HA! The nerve of some people." Dave clicked off the line.

"Dick? This is Ted." Ted answered the line, really wanting to continue the discussion about Mrs. DeBonno's favorite daughter. "What can I do for you on an early Sunday morning when no one else is up?" Ted listened intently and rolled his eyes a couple of times. Dave was still running the board and pointing to various points.

"Now, Dick...there is not one psychic bone in your body, so don't give me that routine. This is that nit-wit, Don, parked out at Cheyenne Mountain, who thinks he has some part of this action, isn't it?" Ted listened again. "He's got nothing that can help. We don't even know what they're going to throw at us." Ted listened again as one of his oldest friends in government let off some steam in the only way he knew how. By swearing a blue streak and

telling Ted just how stupid other people are that he has to work with. “What? He’s going to launch a hundred B-52’s? Then what? Maybe not, but he’s not demonstrating a great understanding of the larger picture when I talked to him. And I don’t care if he is looking for brownie points over at the rented house on Pennsylvania Avenue. Jesus, that idiot would just want a photo opp like he did on the carrier last year. Mission: Accomplished! Seriously? The big banner might as well have been Mickey Mouse yelling, ‘Seven with One Blow’.” Dave took a step to the left away from Ted to let Ted know that he was stepping really hard on the caller’s boss. “You should have run, Dick. I told you that. You’re running the show now anyway and everyone who counts knows.” Ted took a deep breath and continued. “Okay, okay. We got everyone and their brother running away and out of the system. A distress message got out, which meant we had one of their devices here on the planet and no one would have given it to us. That means they know the Isomer Protocol Treaty has been broken. So we got best travel time for them at somewhere starting tomorrow night local time.” Ted waited and listened. “Yes I do. My advice is grab your wife, your mistress, all the gold you can carry and head up to the Ranch as fast as Air Force Two can get you there. If you talk to Don tell him the same thing. Don’t expect the hole under the Pentagon to save his ass ...cause it won’t. If this goes really shitty, Washington will be toast in about two minutes. We will need you alive to run the country... or what will be left of it,” Ted stepped back and closed his eyes for a long moment. “I am heading to Five-One in an hour or so.” The response was quick. “Why do you ask...? Because I wanted to be on the front line of this one. I need to wind Chucky up to do some stuff that no one has ever considering doing that could absolutely destroy a half billion dollar facility,” Again a long pause. “Chucky....? Sweet Jesus....Charles Gordon White...head of the Fallon NAS High-Binder Station. The most modern time

distortion machine we have.”

Ted watched as section eighty-six of one hundred crossed the Big Board. “Since you asked, yes.... Get me four nukes over to Fallon before I am on the ground at Groom Lake.”

Dave looked at him and then pointed to his watch and raised two fingers. Ted nodded. “NO! I’m going to put them in the time stream in current time, with proximity fuses and have Chuck put them right on the bridge of all four Altarian battle cruisers if they don’t see things my way.” Ted opened his eyes and looked at the board. More time, I need more time. That was racing through his head. “Thank you, Dick. Now get out of town for my sake if nothing else,” Ted pushed the button to clear the line.

“Damn Ted!” Mason said at last. “You are going to have his defibrillator going off in his chest like mad. You just gave him a brand new way of killing folks he hadn’t thought of.” Dave was watching his friend who was now starting to show signs of wear and tear generally. “Come on Boss, hold it together for fifteen more rounds and then we will get you out of this pit.” Ted smiled at him took a deep breath and started to work the problem again.

“Washington will be toast in two minutes, and then you were going to tell me that we were exempt from that ‘cause we are all the way down here in Virginia. Just about five miles as the crow flies. I designed this building to stand up to anything once it’s sealed, so don’t worry.” Ted tried to be funny and failed.

“That is just going to be the topping on my breakfast, Boss.” David, checked off another line on the ‘to do’ list.

Ted turned to see an attractive long black haired woman come into the master control. She had two white bags with her and two large cups of what looked like coffee. Dave walked over and hit the button that opened the door.

“Thanks Gabby... you’re a love. This old guy is about to fall down from lack of nutrition.” He gave her a peck on her cheek and sealed the isolation chamber back up.

“Where’s the closest McDonald’s?” Ted took the coffee and the bag that Dave offered to him. “It’s got be all the way in town up at Oak Mill?”

“Nope,” Dave said sipping on the hot black coffee. “Right here in the corner of the main assembly hall and the cafeteria. You know there are people who cannot eat that institutional bland shit that our kitchen shovels out onto a shingle everyday. Maybe Captain American out there can...” Dave pointed at Bob, “ ‘cause he was like raised on Navy dog food. He probably thinks it’s all-good, cuz his blood type is brown gravy. You know, some kind of mystery meat with a lot of rice and shit with it. Not me, I may still be in the Navy officially, unofficially, maybe officially, whatever, but I’m not eating powdered eggs for breakfast with nothing else except white gravy like glue over something that might have been bread once. Nope,” Dave chowed down on his breakfast McMuffin.

“Did your Director sign a franchise with the company?” Ted took out the packaged box portion of hash browns and bit into it. It was tasting too good to him right now.

“Oh hell no. He wouldn’t do that. Do something without running up to you and making sure about three times you said ‘yes’.” Dave shook his head. “That guy was first violin here until you relocated him back from Nevada. Then he became an optional extra. No. I signed for it.”

“How the hell did you sign it? You’ve got to be a Director or assigned by a Director to do that kind of stuff.” Ted took another bite and looked in the bag for what other mystery treat lay inside. There was a lull on the board, since Cape Town Station was doing some housekeeping stuff that locked everything down for five minutes.

“The lovely and most desired object of your perverse desire, Jan Debonno, just one day upon a request from ‘moi’ pulled three levels of supervision off the org chart and the line now magically runs from me directly to you. Fox asked her one day who had ordered it and she told him I did, after speaking to you. Fox thought about it and did not want to look like a bigger asshole than he already is, by questioning it. Well, two months later and a McDonald’s golden arches and then a Taco Bell graced our main building. You, by the way, are getting twenty percent profit off the top, thanks very much to yours truly, Mr. David Mason, Esquire.”

Dave’s laugh was infectious when he let go and this morning was no exception.

“This is really good,” Ted said with his mouth full trying to get all the food down before they had to get back to the hard work. “Good idea. I should give you a raise.”

“Oh, you have.” Dave set his potatoes down and started to hit buttons again. Cape Town had caught up. “Just kidding.”

“Right. You’re probably already making one dollar more than Bob just to spite him,” Ted laughed.

“Oh no Boss...I actually work for a living, so, yeah, about three hundred thousand more a year,” Dave hit a button. “Talk to us, we’re here.”

Ted was bent over coughing and laughing. He could believe it all with this gang.

“Come on, Boss man, look professional. The world as we know it ends in thirty-six hours, give or take a day, so act like it matters.” Dave was keeping two other conversations going at the same time on his board.

“Shit you are trying to kill me off, I’m sure of that.” Ted wiped his eyes and straightened up.

“When will the Gloomy Gus come online?” Dave asked. Ted turned to

Bob and motioned making three symbols. Bob held up eight fingers.

“The Grissom arrives in eight minutes,” Ted answered.

“Someone told me it took about thirty-six hours for the crossing?” Dave looked concerned about the information.

“It does. That is how long it will feel and be for them. For us outside the time sphere they’re in, it will be about four hours total from the time I made the call. We always measure both parts and use the transit length to talk about it. That way we can consider how they’ll be coming out of the jump,” Ted looked at the board.

“That is what you’ve been waiting and stalling for hasn’t it?” Dave lit up another board that was a large empty space on the giant screen.

“I guess so. The rest of this, what we’re doing, could be nothing but disaster maintenance if the Grissom wasn’t coming.”

“Every night I say the same prayer over and over,” Dave stepped back and watched the boards going live at their own speeds now.

“You Pray? To whom?” Ted looked at him.

“Anybody that’s listening. ‘Please take care of my mother’s favorite son and bless and protect Captain Mark B. Beventon’.” Dave sounded sincere as he spoke.

“Why him?” Ted looked confused.

“Cause he is the biggest, baddest, meanest mother in the valley. Everybody else talks a good game, but him and those twelve hyper-velocity rail guns and his almost maniacal desire to kill scum sucking alien bastards makes me sleep well at night.” Dave had a second clock running in the blank screen. “That dude is stone cold, bro. If he runs out of ammo and you told him to clear your skies, he will punch that space craft into a jump going right through anyone else’s ship out there and rip Jupiter, Saturn and half the Asteroid belt to shreds with him. Just to take more of them than him down

the tube.” Dave hit his fist into his other hand. “That is my idea of a warrior. Not like General Lee’s butt-boy out here in a Viper. He’ll go up and be yelling and running around the cockpit, telling all of us that he got a busted stabulator with mal functioning whatchamafuckit and is holding everything together with a paperclip, a piece of Beeman’s and a string in his teeth. He makes two passes and then runs for the barn. Not my man Beventon. He’ll fall into a deep depression if there are not a lot of them to kill this time. The man is a cross between Charlie Manson and Hannibal Lector. The guy is just a born killer. Ted, did mention I love his style, oh, and...him!”

“I’m sure he won’t want you at his next fitness review. Jesus, Dave...” Ted was laughing again.

“Ops-1?” Jo’s voice came in loud and clear in their headsets only. “This is Cape Malabar Radio, I have a laser-com signal on two for you guys.” On Ted’s console was the magnificent and majestic sight of the USS Virgil I. Grissom, hovering over Malabar at one hundred kilometers doing a slow circle.

“YEAH!” Dave yelled. “NOW THAT’S WHAT I’M TALKING ABOUT! WOO!” David punched his fist in the air. “May I?” Dave asked Ted and pointed at the large empty space on the main screen that everyone was looking out.

“It would be my pleasure if you did, sir,” Ted motioned to Bob and Ed to watch the board. Suddenly, there was a huge image of a wedge shaped shovel nosed spacecraft with her elegant and sexy scooped rear end and three huge aft engines, slowly circling on a section of the screen in the glass room. The Gloomy Gus was on station and ready to dispatch righteous retribution to all that threatened either her or what was hers.

Dave reached up and tossed a switch connected to a set of main microphones that listened into the floor of the Main Control. It started with

just one person and then suddenly the whole room exploded in raucous applause.

“Pipe that up to Malabar Radio and the Grissom, Dave.” Ted asked.

“Already all over it, my friend.”

As the applause died down a voice came booming out over the air.

“Be advised Main Control, the USS Grissom is on station and all sections and hands are reporting. We are ready.”

Dave turned to Ted and motioned for him to say something. Ted touched Dave’s arm and pointed over to Hugh Fox. Director Fox stood up and started in on one of his well-known long-winded speeches about space, and aliens and the dedicated service that everyone was doing. Dave turned the volume down in the booth.

Dave took his head set off for a moment. “This means you’re going?”

“ ’Fraid so pard. I’m needed elsewhere,” Ted was pulling his black trench coat on and picking up his Fedora and briefcase.

“Who was that masked man?” Dave smiled. “Last chance to take me along.” Dave looked at him.

Ted stopped and thought for a moment. “Call someone to replace you here and you can have the whole back of the plane,” Ted laughed.

“Sure, now I’m needed here more than ever and you give me the word. By the way my mother called when you were in bum-fuck Kansas. Are you coming to Thanksgiving dinner this year?” Dave pulled out his PDA and made a note or two on it.

“I will if she promises not to try to hook me up with any of her divorced black widows from Beverly Hills or Brentwood friends.” Ted loved Dave’s whole family.

“I don’t know Boss, that Jewish American Princess was pretty sharp for a forty year old last year.” Dave hit the button that opened the blast door from

the isolation chamber out into the master control room.

“If we live through this, the answer is yes. And we will use my plane to go out to it this time.” Ted turned to go. “Thanks Dave...for everything.”

“Call if you need to scream or if the walls close in, Ted...” Dave put his thumb to his ear and his pinky by his lips and mouthed the words ‘Call Me’ as he walked with him out into the Master Control to look it over. Director Fox was still talking up a storm of a speech.

“Yo! Brother Bob. Be careful and take good care of the old guy,” Dave gave Bob a warm hug.

“You know it. Call if you need to get out of here. You know I’ll come,” Bob put an arm around the other man.

“I know that, skipper. Just don’t try to be no hero. My mom will kill me if you go and get yourself all murdered and shit,” Dave turned and went back inside and pulled his headset back on. It was time to shut the old guy down and save the staff from death by boredom. He was already aware that Beventon had turned the speech off from Director Fox.

Ted, Bob, Ed and Matthew Fassbinder were about ready to leave the Master Control when the speaker came on.

“Boss, can I have Jan Debonno moved to our hospital here this morning? I would like her inside this place.” Dave hit the pickup on the microphones to hear the answer.

“She better be here, safe and happy when we get back, Assistant Director Mason.”

Pregnant pause... “Did I hear right? Assistant Director?sweet... good. Thank you!” Dave nodded and already had a phone in his hand.

“When Jan feels up to it, have her make that org chart reflect that fact permanently. That sir, is an order. Make it so.”

Ted waved as he stepped through the outer door.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

When the Knights Baleen had to hold Jerusalem against Saladin, he had no knights left inside the walls. In one grand sweeping gesture he raised a thousand men to the status of Knighthood. The grand chronicler of all these events, Efren, told this story in his works and how each newly raised and minted Knights of the Cross, cost the great Arab leader ten men for every one of Baleen's, due to that one simple act of faith and trust. That story ran through Ted's mind as he stepped into the hallway with the others.

"I need to go to my office for a few minutes and pick up some things before we leave," Ted pulled back his sleeve and looked at his Rolex Mariner. It was 0725. Just a little longer than expected. "Have you guys eaten anything?"

All three men looked at each other and then back at Ted, like they didn't know they were allowed that luxury at Def-Con 2.

"No sir, we have not," Bob answered for all of them. "Us poor old sad sack working stiffs didn't get that special delivery service."

Ted grimaced and rolled his eyes, putting up his hands.

"Don't! Just... don't. I've just come off four hours with that wild man Dave Mason. God knows that's no way to go through start up. My head will bust in two and Athena will jump out of my skull or something, if you guys start in on me with that stuff." Ted rubbed his face. "Look. Why don't you gentlemen head down to the 'new' food court and get something for yourselves. I need about twenty minutes of privacy anyway. So let's call it," he looked at his Rolex again, "thirty minutes, 0810 at the T-2 entrance?"

"Great boss. And no, it's okay. We'll pay for our own breakfast. If that's all right with you. Isn't it?" Ted shook his fist at him as he walked away.

Bob could not resist the counter-attack. He knew what it was like three

years before when he and David Mason had been in Pine Gap, Australia, when a Fast Walker came into the system and MRC was down for major maintenance. The Director at Pine Gap had asked them to light the boards and run the start up. It'd taken five hours to complete.

Apparently, as Ted had heard it, for the whole time they were there David had worked Bob over about whether he and Ted were gay, with beard wives for window dressing just to fool upper management. These two were the constants in Ted's world that were never going to change...ever.

Right up until everyone died.

Ted got into the elevator to take him up the four floors to the second story level. He leaned against the elevator wall, like all the air had just gone out of him, taking a moment to press his haggard stubbled face against the kiss of the cold metal siding. He closed his eyes and took a long, deep breath, when he noticed something was wrong.

Suddenly, he thought, this brief glimpse of peace and quiet was based on him breaking his own strict protocols, which had kept him alive all this time, and no one else had caught it.

Rule # 1: "A Director was never to be alone".

Ted dismissed it as pure paranoia brought on by stress and exhaustion. He was in one of the safest most secure buildings in the world, his own, and he should be able to move about it freely. He laughed at himself.

The door opened onto the glass walkway that led down to his office. He was looking out into the small garden between the buildings while walking. He turned to look at something that caught his eye in the hallway. It was 0730 exactly, on a Sunday morning. There should be no one up here.

But a woman was standing in the hallway, facing away from him. She wore a sheer white blouse with no bra. The padded shoulders of the shirt accentuated her athletic broad shoulders to bring out the triangular line

tapering down to her waist with a wide black patent leather belt around it. She had on shiny, patent leather heavier thick spiked high heels that wrapped around the back of her ankle and laced in front, which matched the material of the belt.

He noticed also something different about the hemline of her slit pencil skirt. It seemed longer than normal, and she wore her jet black colored hair in a stylish bob cut. It was all out of place. She did not look like she worked as support personnel in one of the most secure on-site facilities on Earth, but looked like she had escaped from some other dimensional Themyscira Super Model world where all the girls like her lived, in a magical land of lipstick, and eye shadow and translucent base make-up, by jumping off the cover of *VOGUE* or *DER SPIEGEL*.

Ted thought about approaching her to find out who she was and what she was doing here. He thought better of it, as it would disturb his brief miraculous moment of privacy and alone time. So he shifted to the far left of the corridor to go around her to give this dazzling creature a wide berth.

But suddenly, she turned, moving towards him, her hips swinging from side to side with panther like grace, while Ted was still looking straight ahead. And then she was glaring right at him, and Ted's head turned and she held his gaze with her huge, luminous crystal wolf blue eyes. Ted slowed and was transfixed by those eyes and just hung in space for a moment, like a rat being hypnotized by some great snake.

In her hand, at waist level, blending into the jet onyx color of her skirt and wide patent leather belt was a 9 mm P-08 German Luger. She took it in both hands, adjusted her grip and raised it in a perfectly steady line.

Realization flooded over Ted like he had been pushed into a Himalayan waterfall, but it did him no good. What was some animal, predatory instinct and attraction, now became shock and awe that he was in mortal danger from

someone he had not seen in a very, very long time. The affect was exactly the same: the inability to act or move, even to save one's own life.

He gathered the strength for a single breath, to utter, what would be his last words:

“Ann Corbett!”

She took a breath, and pulled the trigger and a tongue of blue flame shot from the barrel as the Luger spoke, echoing with a deafening roar in the glass close quarters corridor. Corbett did not even blink.

Ted spun and was thrown violently back and sideways, being lifted off his feet in a combination of his reaction and the sheer force of the bullet smashing into the flesh, sinews and bone of his right shoulder. He hit the glass wall holding his right shoulder with his left hand. He felt the searing, burning pain as he slid down the wall onto the floor and with a final sickening THUD he went down face first. His head filled with a discordant high-pitched ringing tone from the report of the weapon. He felt a warm, strangely comforting puddle of blood pooling around his cheek, and managed to move his head so he had only a plane of sight along the floor. He saw the glistening pointed patent leather shoes, and heard the CLICK*CLACK*CLICK*CLACK of them through the din in his skull coming slowly towards him.

With the pointed toe of her shoe she applied pressure to his wounded shoulder, and he yowled in pain like a wounded tiger, as she flipped him on his back. In a balletic pirouette, she spun and was now straddling him at the waist, the gun in her hand now hanging lazily at her thigh.

Ted looked up. Just over the top of her magnificent breasts, bursting to be free from the tight white blouse, a button straining to pop at the cleavage, her nipples erect from the sheer thrill of murder, her bob haircut, pointed at the ends, framed the bone structure and high cheekbones of her perfect

sculptured face.

As she looked down the bangs and pointed accents of her hairstyle outlined her jaw making them look like fangs, or the mandibles of a Praying Mantis preparing to eat her mate after sex.

She had not aged a day since Ted had seen her last. In fact, she was somehow even more beautiful than he remembered. She tilted her head, like some great cat waiting to see what the wounded prey would do next.

“Long time no see, *leibshin!*”

She took the stylish pointed toe of her Louie Vitton shoe, and toyed with the buttons on Ted’s shirt, while he gasped for air, then leaned in and drove the spike of her heel into his heart. Ted let out a guttural growl of pain.

“But now it is time to say good-bye, Herr Doktor Humphrey!”

She brought the Luger to bear, and Dr. Theodore Humphrey, Jr., heard the bell like singing voices of the Choir Celestial for the second time in his life. He stared into the black eternal abyss of the Lugar’s cruel, merciless muzzle, as it joined the angelic chorus roaring in his ears.

The Lugar spoke, spitting its blue gold tongue of fire again, and again and again...

PART SIX

Zeit-Läufer

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

DATELINE: DECEMBER 9, 1944.

RIESE, NEAR WALDENBURG, GERMANY.

In the murderously brutal closing winter days of the Second World War, it was truly mankind's darkest hour, on every side. The German railway system had all but been completely destroyed, and since supplies could not be transported it left troops on the front lines to starve and die of typhus, just as it did those in the concentration camps. Massive fleets of Allied Aircraft met paltry resistance from the Axis Luftwaffe. The Allies had total control of European and German skies.

With the savage bombing of Dresden, a city with no military significance, other than that it was bursting with mostly women and children refugees, and was built of medieval wooden churches that would "burn well", the extermination of the Germanic race by Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower had begun.

Desperate troop movements took place on the ground from the Germans fighting beyond hope to defend their Fatherland. All with the Allies, still fully understanding that even with their superior numbers and supremacy in the skies, they could still lose this war.

Tank battles between Allied and Axis troops became even more ferocious, as men on both sides fought and died for every inch of ground they gained humping through ice covered forests over the new driven snow splattered with blood. A heroic Wagnerian Opera all played out to the mournful chorus of civilians fleeing, cities ablaze and women clutching their starving children crying, screaming and dying.

In a handful of months the Fat Lady was about to sing and it would soon all be over.

The newspaper headlines howled of their tales of Allied victories, and

bloody Axis defeats, as Gen. George S. Patton and his 3rd Army beat back the “Hun” and drove the German forces into an hourglass shape across Europe with Berlin as the focal point eye and ultimate prize.

But a small idyllic town nestled high in the Alps, a break in the battled scarred landscape of war torn winter Deutschland, seemed to have been spared the horrific ravages around it.

The small hamlet of Riese was near Waldenburg, which had taken the brunt of the bombing. It was far enough out of the way, and thought to be of no strategic military significance or value to the Allies. No ball bearing factories, no heavy industry at all, so they focused their machinations on other more inviting and important targets. Riese consisted of quaint homes with A-frame Bavarian roofs and steeples and window boxes with flowers long since withered. Its cobblestone streets looked very much like a place where the Brothers Grimm had lived and written their fairy tales.

But on closer inspection there were camouflaged power lines on the slopes of the huge mountain and Alpine range that protected the small burg nestled in its mighty shadow.

If what appeared to be the only remaining train tracks left in all of Germany were followed, they led down into a tunnel the unsuspecting outside world, and Allied Intelligence, would think to be only an abandoned mine shaft spiraling down into total darkness. Until, on the other side of an 8-foot thick vault-like stainless steel and titanium door, the lights came up.

Inside massive banks of Klieg lights lighted the huge hollowed out stomach of the majestic mountain, with the rough-hewn stonewalls looming up into the darkness beyond.

On the illuminated floor of the cavernous military base, soldiers were running in every direction. Red warning lights spun in a panicked staccato dance of hectic light and shadow as klaxons whooped and blared in baleful

warning. Battle stations were being prepped and manned for the upcoming test. A test upon which victory in a global war hung in the balance.

PROJEKT: KRIEGSENTSCHIDE, which translated loosely as “PROJECT: DECISIVE FOR THE WAR”, one way or another, was about to spell victory or defeat for the NAZIS and the 3rd Reich.

Built of shining steel and glass into a recess half way up along the northern stonewall like an eagle’s nest was a huge semi-circular brightly lit Control And Command Center. At the heart of it all was a single base command chair, with two sub-command chairs set forward and a foot lower than the central dais.

In that central chair, the brutal beating heart of this desperate operation, sat the Obergruppenführer of all Nazi Germany, Herr Doktor General Hans Kammler.

General Dr. Hans Friedrich Karl Franz Kammler, born 26 August 1901, was an engineer and high-ranking officer of the SS. He oversaw SS construction projects, and towards the end of World War II was put in charge of the V-2 missile program as an engineer and high-ranking officer of the SS.

He was the last SS officer in Nazi Germany to receive a promotion to the rank of SS-Obergruppenführer with date of rank from 1 March 1945. Kammler was born in Stettin, Germany. In 1919, after volunteering for army service, he served in the Rossbach Freikorps. From 1919 to 1923 he studied civil engineering in Munich and Danzig. He joined the NSDAP in 1932 and held a variety of administrative positions when the Nazi government came to power, initially in the Reichsluftfahrtministerium or RLM, the Aviation Ministry.

In 1940 he joined the SS, where from 1942 he worked at designing facilities for the extermination camps, including gas chambers and crematoria. Kammler eventually became Oswald Pohl's Deputy in the

WVHA (Reich Administrative and Economic Main Office), which oversaw Amtsgruppe D (Amt D), the Administration of the concentration camp system, and was also Chief of Amt C, which designed and constructed all of the concentration and extermination camps.

From 1919 to 1923, Hans Kammler studied civil engineering at the Technische Hochschule der Freien Stadt Danzig in Munich, and was awarded his Dr. Ing. in November 1932, following some years of practical work in local building of the administration of Amtsgruppe D (Amt D), the Administration of the concentration camp system, and was also Chief of Amt C, which designed and constructed all of the concentration camps. In this latter capacity he oversaw the installation of cremation facilities at Auschwitz-Birkenau as a way to deal with typhus and all the diseased bodies.

Kammler was able to lead programs resulting in never seen before inventive weapons, all while being unable to conceive of efficient "gas chambers" and crematories.

In fact the Soviets made one of the top engineers, Fritz Sander, "confess" on March 21, 1946, that he'd invented a new super crematory oven which had been installed at Auschwitz but then destroyed, nowhere to be found at the end of WWII, and not mentioned by any of the tens of thousands of Auschwitz "survivors" liberated by the Allies.

Following the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in 1943, Heinrich Himmler assigned Kammler to overseeing the demolition of the entire ghetto in retaliation.

Kammler was also charged with constructing facilities for various secret weapons projects, including manufacturing plants and test stands for the Messerschmitt Me-262 and V-2 rockets. Following the Allied bombing raids on Peenemünde in "Operation Hydra" on August 17, 1943, Kammler was assigned to moving these production facilities underground, which

resulted in the Mittelwerk facility and its attendant concentration camp complex, Mittelbau-Dora, which housed slave labor for constructing the factories and working on the production lines. During this period, Kammler also was involved in the attempt to finish the Blockhaus d'Éperlecques known also as the Watten Bunker, a rather unsuccessful project to create a fortified V-2 launch base. He was also assigned to the construction of facilities at Jonastal and Riesengebirge for nuclear weapons research and at Ebensee to develop a V-2 derived Inter Continental Ballistic Missile, the world's first ICBM.

In 1944, Himmler convinced Hitler to put the V-2 project directly under SS control, and on 6 August, replaced Walter Dornberger with Kammler as its director.

The SS began simply as Hitler's bodyguards. From humble beginnings it was transformed into the most powerful entity within the Third Reich after Hitler himself. The military arm of the SS, the Waffen SS, became the most elite military force in Germany. The SS also took over many research, development and production facilities from the Army and Air Force. The SS took over control of civilian research and development facilities. The SS began taking facilities and power away from Albert Speer's Ministry of Arms and the RLM headed by Hermann Göring.

As the war progressed, the SS organized, built and ran many underground manufacturing facilities. They even appropriated the huge industrial firm, the Skoda Works, its subsidiaries and related firms, centered near Prague, for their in-house projects. The SS became an empire within an empire, answerable only to Adolf Hitler.

The SS also set up special research facilities for politically unreliable scientists. Research projects arose within these facilities that were in part staffed by technical people drawn from the prisoner pool. Such facilities were

set up at Oranieburg, Nordhausen, Mechlenburg and Mauthausen.

As the SS rose within Germany, so did the fortunes of Doctor of Engineering, General Hans Kammler. Kammler came into prominence through his talent at designing and building massive underground facilities. Soon, Hitler placed Kammler in charge of V-weapons (Vergeltungswaffen). Meaning Kammler was in charge of the facilities at Peenemunde and Nordhausen. He was General Doctor Walther Dornberger's boss who, in turn was the boss of Dr. Werner von Braun, who later became the chief scientist at NASA, along with all his other PROJECT: PAPERCLIP pals.

Further, Kammler headed up an advanced R & D group associated with the Skoda Works, later dubbed the Kammler Group. These special projects held the most advanced technical secrets of the Third Reich. And now here Kammler stood at the heart of the most advanced and secret experiment the Third Reich would ever attempt.

The test was about ready to commence as he surveyed the scene with his cold, cruel, critical eye. This would be their last opportunity with all the failures they had already faced, and the war one way or another would be over by the time they got another chance.

On his right in the 1st position commander chair, feverishly working at a computer screen in a slanted outward angle relative to Kammler, was Dr. Simon Ratterman. An inelegant, abrasive, rat-faced man, with really no noble blood at all, and a mad, almost insatiable lust for power. Kammler half suspected him of being a Jew, but he was also one the most brilliant scientists the General had ever seen, and, unlike Hitler, he was not one to hastily waste resources just because of his impure tainted bloodline.

Ratterman also had no real interest in politics or moving up in the Reich, as he saw science and knowledge as the only real power, a view Kammler shared with him. But Kammler himself had become disaffected as

well, now that Hitler had been driven into madness. His own people had already tried to kill him. If they were successful here on this stormy winter night, Kammler knew that he would arise like a Phoenix from the ashes, as the true hero of the Fatherland and after that the little Austrian painter could be easily replaced.

In the sub-command chair on his left, with the diamond jaw and aquiline hawk like nose of breeding and true nobility, looking out from the nest like a mother eagle, was Dr. Ann Corbett. She was intelligent, beautiful, ruthless and deliciously cruel. Kammler took a breath and fantasized for a moment that after his victory here, and in all the victories that would follow, he would take Ann to his heart and have her as a prize and the queen of the new reality they would forge together.

Between him and the main panoramic window were his team of crack scientists, sitting at rows of low, blinking consoles, speaking softly into their headsets to stay in contact with each other and coordinate the activity on the floor.

Kammler rose from his chair, placed his hands behind his back, and strode down the clear main aisle directly in front of his dais, his gleaming knee-high buckled jack-boots making a crisp click-clack on the hard tiled floor. No one stood as he did this, but there was a palatable rustle, as all the men and women bristled, sitting slightly more upright and adjusting their chairs to be closer to their screens. When Kammler got to the front he surveyed with pride all his handiwork, thinking that it would be he that would ultimately save the Reich and snatch victory from the slathering jaws of Hitler's defeat.

Cut into the rock directly across from him on the far South end was the maw leading to the abyss that was the vaulted down camouflaged entrance to the cavern. Railroad tracks led up into it vanishing into the gloom.

On his right to the west was a high barb-wired electrified semi-circle of cyclone fence. It formed a temporary prison for about 100 damned huddled Jewish prisoners, the strongest of the ones Kammler had transported up from his gulag of concentration camps up and down Eastern Europe. Seeing him framed in the center of the huge window, the impossibly gaunt prisoners, looked up at him with their hollow hopeless eyes. Numbers burned on their arms, in their striped uniforms and pillbox hats, fenced in against the walls, looking like dead men walking with no hope of life or escape, they silently pleaded with him from their enclosure, knowing no mercy would come.

The General paid them no heed. They were animals being led to the slaughter, nothing more. And if they served some purpose in their last moments with their vile lives that served his purposes and the Reich, well then everyone was better off, weren't they?

Kammler looked away at the soldiers scurrying about and the trucks, tanks and aircraft cluttered around the concrete floor of the base, like drones all serving the collective hive. The rough-hewn stone ceiling stretching up into the darkness.

Finally, at the heart of the hive, brightly lit with four spotlights mounted at each corner of the cave, at the center of the maelstrom of activity on a raised platform, sat a gunmetal grey bell shaped object, ten feet high and six feet in radial diameter. Across its face was the German eagle clutching the laurel wreath of victory with the Nazi swastika at its heart. Around the flattened base of the lip of the bell was something clearly written in some indecipherable gold alien script, looking much like Nordic runes, that circled its circumference

It was dwarfed by the size of the cavern around it, but was the "Star of the Show!" The bell was ringed with two shining metal bands, as if the object was some feared and powerful animal being kept prisoner, with four gigantic

chains attached to the bands and bolting it to the floor. Huge cables and wires came from the bottom of the device linked to power boards and all the computer consoles.

At a respectful distance, the bell at the center was ringed with concentric circles of banks of merrily blinking computers, all lighting up like Christmas trees, with endless spinning spools of tape to record the results of the upcoming experiment. The consoles were manned by an army of German scientists in white lab coats, clipboards and slide-rules clacking away at their calculations before the crucial moment arrived.

A young scientist approached Kammler, breaking him from his reverie. He clicked his heels and bent slightly at the waist.

“Herr Doctor General Kammler,” he handed Kammler a clipboard of data. Kammler turned on his heel and strode back to his dais as he flipped through the data on the sheets. The tech followed behind him, as Kammler mounted the dais and sat in his chair, still perusing the data with a scowl.

“The maximum power flux readings from the external grid?” Kammler said with an annoyed growl, not in the least pleased. Ratterman and Corbett stood and hovered nearby, knowing this was crucial for their success.

“Herr General,” the young scientist stammered, “there must be some flux coming from the....”

Before he could finish Ann Corbett, moved forward with panther like speed, and savagely struck the man across the face with the back of her fist. He fell into a heap on the floor, blood spurting through his fingers as he held his nose in pain. Two SS guards stepped forward and grabbed the hapless man by the arms, lifting him to his feet, as the blood ran down his face and began to drip off his chin.

“IDIOT!” She screamed. “It must be PERFECT! The future of the Fatherland and the Reich rests on this test! Take him out...and shoot him!”

Dr. Simon Ratterman stepped forward, his hands clasped together in what looked like supplication and prayer. He put his hand on Ann's shoulder to calm her rage.

"Dr. Corbett...Ann...please!" Ratterman said with his soothing sibilant snake-like voice. "Nothing so unpleasant. It will bring us bad luck, yes?" Ann began to breathe and calm down. Simon smiled and looked up at Kammler. "What do you say we just put him in the pen...with the Jews?"

Kammler smiled an evil grin that made his face look even more like a death's head skull. "Ah, Simon, always the pragmatist. Two birds with one throw, eh?"

Kammler nodded his head slightly and the guards dragged him away as he screamed for mercy.

Down at the pen on the west side, the guards took the man, and after taking the charge off the fence and screaming for the captive prisoners to stand back, they tossed the scientist in, where he fell to his hands and knees. His clean pure white lab coat made him look like an angel tossed into Tartarus against the grimy grey of their filthy black and white striped uniforms. The prisoners just stared at him, no longer having the strength to even hate or pity him. Mostly they just smiled, as now he was going to share the same fate as all of them, and divine justice had been served.

However, one of the German scientists took notice of the scene. Herr Doktor Colonel Wolf Davis looked up from his clipboard. Seeing one of his best men tossed into the pen with the other prisoners, where he would surely meet their same fate.

He walked over and spoke to the guards after they had locked the gate.

"What is the meaning of this?" Davis asked, trying to stay as polite and calm as possible.

"The orders of Herr Kammler," said the smaller of the two soldiers.

“What has he done?”

The smaller man shrugged, but this time the larger man spoke.

“He gave a report that Kammler didn’t like.”

“Ja,” the smaller man chimed in, remembering. “Something about not being able to draw enough power from the grid.”

“And this is his fault?” Davis said softly.

Both men shrugged.

“Orders are orders,” said the big man. “You go argue with the general Herr Colonel.”

They both lumbered off back to their stations, but Davis knew that Kammler had long since gone mad and this was just further proof of it. He looked up towards the command center, and clenched his jaw hard.

Back in the C and C, Kammler crossed his legs in his chair as he continued to read through the report. “Your impressive temper notwithstanding Fraulien, I see the mistakes that fool has made, but it still leaves us with the underlying problem. Do you think it will matter to the overall test if we overload the grid, Dr. Ratterman?”

“Not if things go as planned Herr General,” Ratterman said confidently. “It should generate the interdimensional soliton levels that should break through the barrier we need and by-pass Newton’s 2nd law of thermodynamics fairly quickly.”

“A long time since we found this artifact together in the Black Forest back in the 1930s, eh, Simon?” Kammler reminisced.

“It was a gift from the Smokey Gods that will give us victory over these pigs that overrun the Fatherland!” Ann said, the true fanatic, puffing up her impressive chest with pride.

“Jah,” Kammler responded, “we will all make our Furher proud!”

Ratterman, rolled his eyes, and turned away, sniggering under his breath.

“You wish to make a comment, Dr. Ratterman?” Kammler said with deadly menace, not sure what he just heard or saw.

Ratterman caught himself just in time, coughing and pulling a handkerchief out of the pocket of his lab coat!

“No sir, Herr Doctor General! Just a bit of dust! This cave is filled with it.”

Corbett and Kammler both tilted their heads at Ratterman like attack dogs suddenly denied their raw steak.

Hearing a beeping sound, Corbett turned to look at her console and slid into the chair behind it.

“It is time!” She said, and everyone in the control room hustled to their stations. Flipping a switch, Ann leaned into a microphone. Her voice boomed like an angry goddess throughout the cavernous complex.

“ATTENTION! Test commences in T-minus-sixty seconds! This is NOT a drill. REPEAT: THIS IS NO DRILL!”

Her announcement triggered the final controlled chaos on the cavern floor. Support, medical and fire personnel ran to their positions, as lights flashed their final countdown sequence, and the scientists sweated over their consoles while sirens blared, and sitting implacably above it all at the center, the mysterious bell shaped alien artifact.

Corbett continued her countdown. “T-minus 50...49...48...”

Kammler flicked a switch on his console, and spoke into his microphone. “Trigger the external grid.”

Outside, soldiers on the hillside with a picturesque view of the quaint little German town, lit as well as it could be for Christmas, started to throw huge switches on the side of banks of fuses and the heavily camouflaged power station crackled to life. Electricity rippled like blue white snakes of lightening down the cables into the mountain’s heart.

Inside the power began to hit the Bell in shimmering waves.

Corbett's voice echoed like a Valkyrie's against the solid granite cave walls. "Three...two...Ignition!"

The bell hummed to life with an anti-climatic, soft, gentle, almost friendly hum.

Back in the C and C, Corbett seemed pleased with what she was seeing on her screens and the needles of the dials on her console. "Ignition successful! Power levels are holding at an even 20%..."

There was a rippling cheer that went up over the men manning the entire Command and Control center. There were actual smiles, and handshakes and pats on the back at what they now all viewed as a success under impossible circumstances. It was a victory in a year where there were none for Germany as they had gone from masters of the world to a war that was spiraling down and out of their control.

Ratterman, checking his screen and all the dials on his console, chimed in adding to all the good cheer. "Well within the safety parameters. No solitons detected yet, Herr Doctor...."

Kammler leaned forward in his command chair. "Increase power by 30%." Corbett and Ratterman both began to slowly turn a series of dials.

"Steady at 50% Herr Doctor..." Corbett said, pleased and relieved.

"Detecting soliton radiation..." Ratterman said with apprehension, as he suspected and had theorized what might happen next "solitons" being their term for the measurement of the interdimensional time energy that the Bell generated.

Down in the cavern, a murmur of concern amongst the flight deck floor scientists turned to fear as the soft even friendly hum of the bell took on an evil, discordant tone.

With a shiver and a quaking shimmy the bell began to slowly rise in the

air, floating in a cute bouncy manner, like a child's balloon at the end of a string, and a faint violet glow began to radiate as an aura around the alien device.

Back in C and C, Ratterman was now beaming with confidence. "Soliton levels at 100 particles per million. We have levitation..."

Kammler knew the war was at stake. They had been fortunate and he now needed to rape Lady Luck till she screamed for mercy.

"Another 30%!" He said, staring straight ahead at the bell.

Corbett and Ratterman exchanged worried glances. It was Ann that finally spoke with concern in her voice. "We have never taken it..."

"DO NOT question my ORDERS, Fraulein! Or you will find yourself down in the pit with the Jews. Take it to 80%!"

Corbett jerked her head back in shock, then turned back to her console. "Yes, Herr Doctor..."

She began to slowly and cautiously twist her controls. Carefully watching her screens and the flicking needles on her dials, bouncing merrily up against the top red danger section.

The increase in power just seemed to make the bell angry. The violet glow expanded, now filling the cavern with the soothing deep indigo color, when suddenly it shot off into the air, straining at the gigantic chains that bound it to the Earth like Prometheus to his stone prison when the eagles came at dawn to eat out his liver. It started bucking back and forth and up and down like a stallion that had just seen a snake in his stall and was now trying desperately to escape his paddock.

Ratterman was now officially terrified. "Solitons at 10,000 per million..."

Kammler stood up slowly, clenching his fist.

"ONE HUNDRED PERCENT!" He yelled.

Anne Corbett stood up to face him, now begging for all their lives.

“The tests tell us...” she pleaded, looking over her shoulder at the now crazed device, then looking back to plead with Kammler, “...we have never.”

Kammler came down a step from his chair, and delivered a resounding, bruising slap across her face with the full weight of his body. She went flying back, stumbling on the lower step and crashing to the floor. Ratterman rose, thinking to jump to her defense, but saw the SS guards flanking the dais and thought better of it, shrinking back to the safety of his chair. Ann raised herself up on one arm, and rubbed her purpling cheek, then touched the blood trickling out the side of her mouth.

“The American PIGS ARE RIGHT OUTSIDE OUR DOOR!” Kammler screamed. “DO YOU WANT THEM TO DESTROY US? THIS COULD WIN US THE WAR!”

Kammler jumped to Corbett’s console and cranked up the power dial as far as it could go!

The surge of power to the bell took its motions from simply erratic to insane, juking almost faster than the eye could see. The violet radiation, that was a gentle comforting aura, now flew around the cavern, like a slashing mace swung by an advancing gladiator.

Suddenly, one of the chains mooring it down, broke loose from the bolts on the floor, and slashed back and forth like an angry snake.

Kammler jumped back to his command chair, as Corbett crawled slowly back to her station, only semi-conscious and still seeing stars with her head ringing like a steady chime.

“IT’S BROKEN LOOSE!” Ratterman yelled, as several of the scientists in C&C jumped up and rushed to the main window.

Kammler flicked the main PA switch and his voice boomed out like a

Nordic god throughout the base.

“SEND IN THE JEWS! SECURE THE BELL AT ALL COSTS.”

The SS Shock Troop guards, fell into formation, and marched to the pen where the prisoners were held. They took up a formation at points around the pen and leveled their Barnitzke machine guns at the huddled mass hugging the wall at the back of the enclosure. Two guards broke ranks and opened the gates wide.

“SECURE THE DEVICE!” The SS captain screamed.

At the very back, cowering against the wall, was the doomed scientist from the C&C center, glowing like a beacon in his now blood soaked, pure white lab coat. The prisoners began to move forward towards the opening of the pen, preferring to take their chances in the cavern staging area, than be gunned down like dogs right then and there.

The first wave of men moved forward hesitantly, prodded by the machine guns. As they reached the edge of the testing circle, the device was still bucking like an angry bull at a terrifying speed. But suddenly, there was a brief lull in the gyrations, and the huge chain that had broken loose, lay still before them, resting on the stone grey floor. Three of the men broke from the main group and fell on it. Then the other men followed suit. They picked up the chain, and took up the slack, dragging it back to what was left of the mooring bolt still halfway in the floor.

But then, as if it sensed it was about to be bound again, the bell spit out a whiplash of swirling violet energy which sliced in a circular motion through the cavern. It struck the men hanging onto the chain, and their flesh and bone disintegrated. They simply turned to a gray ash of base chemicals as the quantum space within them lost their cohesion and flew apart, broken into molecules on an atomic level.

The chain began to whip wildly back and forth, as the guards prodded

the next wave of men forward to the same disastrous result. The group just melted into thin air.

Suddenly, the color of the radiation of the bell changed to a bright, sparkling rose pink, and the sound of the bell took on a totally different tone.

Outside the mountain, on the idyllic hillside, the power station exploded. Showers of sparks set the camouflage on fire, and the twinkling Christmas lights that were a last small beam of hope in this dark night of the soul in the towns of Riese, and nearby Waldenberg, both went dark.

Inside C&C Dr. Simon Ratterman had just enough time to yell, “External power is offline!” As the lights in the base, and many of the consoles nearest the window, exploded in a cascading firework hail of sparks. For a brief, eerie moment, the only source of light in the pitch-black cave was the soft rosy pink glow of the bell.

The back-up generators kicked in with a sturdy whirring hum. Ratterman checked his screens as they flashed and blinked and sputtered back to life.

“Soliton levels now...off our scales!” Ratterman yelled over the bang, crackle and flash of consoles still exploding.

Ann Corbett, back at her screen, the pain from the purple bruise on her cheek helped give her a point of focus to clear her head, the blood still dripping from the side of her perfect mouth formed droplets on her gunmetal gray console. She shook her head to ward off unconsciousness, but still could not believe her eyes.

“Impossible!” She gasped at last in shock and awe. What she was seeing violated everything she had ever known or studied in her quest to become a scientist. She was at heart a German, and the universe had set parameters and laws. Before her eyes they were all being broken and violated. “It has crossed the thermodynamic threshold! It’s generating more

power than it is taking in. Power level at 170%!”

Ratterman confirmed what she was seeing. “It’s generating its own field now as we theorized. It’s completely disconnected...” Ratterman just shook his head in disbelief.

Kammler just grinned. Gloating and confident. “Now...” he hissed, “we shall SEE!”

The bell had stabilized, glowing a sparkling pink and now gently bobbing up and down like a buoy on a calmed sea. Slowly, majestically, it began to rise unhurriedly and deliberately, and one by one, it now effortlessly broke the other three remaining chains holding it to the earth.

Kammler’s voice came booming over the PA once more.

“STABILZE THE CRAFT! SCHNELL!”

The guards forced the rest of the prisoners forward who in turn drove the Nazi scientist in front of them forcing him to lead the charge. The group spread out, and this time, a small band of the prisoners grabbed and wrestled each one of the chains, holding them down with the weight of their bodies.

Suddenly, with an ominous bass “WHOOOOMMM!” a huge rainbow hued transparent sphere appeared around the bell. Everything within this soap-like bubble was frozen, totally stopped in space and time!

Ratterman could not believe what he was seeing on his console. He jumped up and ran to the window, putting his hands up against it.

“The solitons have SOLIDIFIED!” He yelled back at Kammler. “It’s.... it’s creating TIME as a STANDING WAVE!”

“YES! YES!” Kammler was ecstatic; pounding his fists on the sides of his chair in mad joy and vengeful victory, he being the only one who knew this experiment would turn out this way.

Inside the solidified soliton time bubble, the men hung like insects trapped in amber, then the sparkling pink radiation created what looked like a

tear in the fabric of time and space. Suddenly, the glittering pink light snaked out like the whip of some angered fairy queen! All the men frozen in time within the sphere, hanging onto the chains, disappeared, like being covered by a blanket of glowing twinkling stars, as they simply winked out of this reality.

But going to...where?

Ann Corbett had finally come to her senses, and she sincerely wished she had not. She began to toggle switches and turn all of her knobs and dials every different which way, all to no avail!

“IT’S TEARING APART THE SPACE/TIME CONTINUUM!” She screamed. “It will destroy everything! WE HAVE TO SHUT IT DOWN!”

Kammler had simply lost his mind. Just laughing in the ecstasy that he was right and everyone else was wrong. Simon Ratterman grabbed him by the shoulders and shook his old friend like a hound with a muskrat.

“IT’S TOO LATE!” Simon screamed in his face. “IT’S TAPPED INTO AN ULTRA-DIMENSIONAL ENERGY NOW! WE HAVE TO GO!”

Ratterman pulled Kammler by the scruff of the neck, and lunged down the dais, grabbing Ann by the hand, as they all together stumbled for the exit stairs at the rear of the C&C complex.

Colonel Wolf Davis, from his vantage point on the cavern floor, saw that everything was going straight to hell, and was barking orders at his men, to try anything he could to stem the tide of sheer destruction.

Then he saw Ratterman, Corbett and Kammler, all tumbling down the exposed emergency stairs, where he knew they were heading to an escape tunnel at the back of the cave.

Looking around one last time, taking in the entire scene, calculating the insane impossible scenario he was witnessing, against his chance of survival, he tossed his clipboard away, tore off his lab coat, and headed on a dead run

towards the tunnel, while his three superior officers were still staggering towards it, stumbling down the stairs.

Suddenly, the bubble and the pink light filled the dark space of the cavern, and the entire cave fluxed inwards like a huge lung inhaling one last deep rattling breath before death.

All the windows in the Command and Control center exploded inwards, killing anyone that did not have the sense to have already fled. Kammler, Corbett and Ratterman were still running down the winding emergency stairs as the blast sent a rainbow colored hail of shattered shards of glass raining down around their heads, bouncing with deadly force off the walls of the enclosed twisting space.

As it exhaled the fluxing cavern exploded outwards, taking off the top of the mountain like an angry volcano god. But above the rupturing Alpine peak, a massive gash appeared, wounding the sky and the very universe itself, above the destruction!

The bell shot skyward and then stopped for a moment, gaining strength, vibrating wildly just below rift! Clouds roiled around it as lightning bolts crisscrossed the sky.

Corbett, Kammler, and Ratterman rose from the wreckage of the base, uniforms torn to shreds, battered and bloody. They watched the sky as, in one last display of fireworks and power, the bell energized. The clouds all across the sky, swirled like a giant child's pinwheel with the bell at its nexus point. But within the flashing psychedelic pandemonium of color within the sphere it was creating, all three people could clearly see the men hanging onto the chains, still frozen within the field.

“Oh my God!” Exclaimed Corbett. “What have we done?”

Kammler shook his head in despair. “Lost the weapon that could have won us the war.”

“And ripped a hole in our universe,” Ratterman said thoughtfully, thinking all of this through, and seeing the infinite possibilities, “and set something loose...in time!”

As if it had heard them, the bell, in a bursting flash, shot into the center swirling clouds around the hole in the sky.

In what seemed like the same instant, the gash opened another hole in the sky only about 50 feet over a sleepy farm community, in a field with huge bales of hay stacked up in humping piles and cows lowing, quietly chewing their cud.

Announced by lightening and a peal of thunder so great it was as if Thor himself had beaten his hammer Mjolnir upon the anvil of the Earth.

But instead of rain, men began to fall from the sky.

One by one, they came out of the rift, in their black and white striped prison uniforms, some being lucky enough to hit the bales of hay, and others plummeting down into the field for a less pleasant landing, but still cushioned by the crop and the newly plowed red clay of the earth.

From out of the heart of one of the bales, emerged Volker Stout, the blonde haired blue-eyed man in the white lab coat. Confused and terrified, but stunned to be alive. He looked around and saw the other prisoners running for their lives in every direction, whooping and hollering at the miracle that they were not only alive, but also free!

Another flash of light, a streak of lightening, and an ear shattering peal of thunder made the German cover his ears and look up. Suddenly, the bell came screaming out of the rift, now far away over the Eastern horizon. A ball of red and gold twirling fire came careening across the sky, changing course as it zigged and zagged wildly slashing the sky, with a screaming sound like a woman in savage pain. It arched at an angle where it plowed into the forest at the edge of the collection of farms, cutting down the trees and leaving a huge,

red hot, smoking gash in the earth about a mile long.

The young scientist, overcome by his curiosity, followed the smoking path of destruction through the burned destroyed trees, to a long ditch where the bell had finally come to a resting place, blue white hot and smoking.

But from out on the road, he heard the roar of military jeeps and transport trucks screeching up to the section of forest the device had split like the Red Sea. Armed troops poured out, flicking on their flashlights as they began to move into the thick copse of trees in his direction.

Volker knew the war was still on, and he had obviously been somehow transported into enemy territory. He thought for a moment that this war was almost over. Maybe he could make a deal. Sell his talents to the Allies and sit out the rest of this horror in a fairly cushy American POW camp. But his fear and ingrained patriotism and hatred of the Americans and propaganda about their atrocities kicked in and overrode his common sense. As the inchoate flashlights, stomping boots and yells of the soldiers got closer, he stripped everything from his coat, pens, pencils, IDs, and stuffed them all in his pants pockets and ripped off the white lab coat, which would shine and mark him like a beacon in the darkness, and threw it over the bell device where it immediately burst into flames as he turned and fled into the heart of the blackness of the forest.

The fire acted like a flare, and the scouting party encircled the object as bright yellowish white beams of light moved into the direction of the source, and in a few moments the Nazi Bell was illuminated by dozens of high-powered military flashlights, splitting open the night.

The Nazi symbol with its wreath and eagle had been burned off in transit, and the rough gray gunmetal skin was now clean, pristine and as mysterious and impenetrable as ever. But the alien symbols engraved around the lower lip were alight with an inner golden glow, and they pulsed as if the

bell was slowly breathing. Panting after its long, arduous trip through space.

The soldiers began clearing a path as a man in a black fedora, black woolen trench coat with a white shirt and black tie and gloves, strode through them on his way to the device. The man stood at the edge of the crater and surveyed the scene.

A young soldier jumped into the pit. Inching forward, his gun pointed at it raised to his cheek. He cautiously put his hand out and slapped at it with his open palm. He smiled when he found it was cool to the touch, though everything around it was still a smoking hot red and gold. He pounded it with the flat of his naked hand and turned and looked up at the man in the Fedora.

“Doesn’t look like anything from around here, sir!” He said.

The man in the Fedora lit a cigarette. The flare from his Zippo lighter in the darkness illuminated the half of his face that was disfigured from a horrible puckered purple scar. He flipped the Zippo closed with a sharp clack, and took a long draw on his cigarette.

“No it doesn’t son,” George Bellamy said in his deep gravelly voice. “It does not indeed.” He looked around and took the cigarette from his lips.

Bellamy was now Boss #1. Head Director of The Group here in December 1965. Years ago in World War II, he’d been Captain George Bellamy and was assigned to the famed O.S.S.-Office of Strategic Services, on loan from the Allied US G-2 intelligence unit from the regular Army. In the early part of 1945 he was assigned to what in all literature and legend is now called the “T-Group”. Originally known as the G.G.T. Group. Political Correctness came into play even in the 1950s.

GGT meant “Grab and Go Team” the forerunner of what later became known as PROJECT: POUNCE. Bellamy got the horrible disfiguring scar on his face in a fight that broke out at one of the Nazi super science secret sites they were raiding, when they stumbled into a very similar Russian/Polish

NKVD Team. The NKVD was not aware that Bellamy's GGT commandos were ripping off the same secret Nazi sites they were taking control of in the now so-called Russian sector, as the Iron Curtain was beginning to fall, with the blood of millions gushing out from under it.

It was a bloody, scrabbling, biting, clawing, scratching race between the "Allies" to get their hands on as much of this glorious German Super Science Wonder Tech before the next war they all saw coming between each other, got underway for real. Even Churchill was publicly calling for a war with Stalin stating, "We have stuck the wrong pig!"

The brutal purple scar was the result of a partial hit from a hand grenade that took out half his face and killed George's partner and his only true friend.

Until the end of his life George Bellamy really, really hated Russians.

Now, ironically, intelligence they'd received from the Russians, told them where the Bell, what the Nazi's called Die Glocke, would show up. Information that was obtained from a man that had been one of their long time "guests" after the war, Herr Doktor General Hans Kammler. The second in command and Obergruppenführer of the entire 3rd Reich was being held on some god-forsaken frozen Russian island hell in the Artic Circle. An island ultimately nuked by the Russians themselves, to keep his boy Ted from escaping with all of Kammler's secrets. His boy was right again. Boss One grinned at the memory, then got back to the here and now.

"Where do you think it comes from, sir?" Said the young corporal, excited to be out on his first POUNCE retrieval mission.

"Hell if I know, son," Bellamy said, rubbing the stubble near the horrible scar on his face. "This shit has been falling out of the sky since 1943." He looked up and around, as a soft, gentle snow began to fall between the trees, making the scene even more surreal.

Another man approached, dressed in a black leather trench coat and black Fedora, with a rapid, stomping, goose-stepping gait. He lifted his feet to storm through the forest floor, now covered in a light white frosting of snow, as if he were punishing the ground beneath him. Bellamy looked up and squinted.

“So, Wolfie...” said Bellamy, not really able or trying to hide his contempt for the man, “...this the toy you lost?”

The German just stared at the device, his eyes wide in pure, rapt wonder.

“Jawhol!”

“So, Herr Doktor Davis, where the hell is this place anyway? The corner of NO and WHERE?”

“Kecksburg, sir.” Said Colonel Dr. Wolf Davis absently, with a thick, clipped superior German accent, but speaking as if he was startled from out of a deep trance.

Bellamy grunted and took one last deep satisfying drag and with his gloved middle finger, he flicked his cigarette away.

“I hate goddamn Pennsylvania.” He also thought he hated Nazis more than Pennsylvania, but not quite as much as Ruskie Commies, as he looked over at Col. Wolf Davis, former operational project head of the German Die Glocke project. He got lucky enough to be bundled together under PROJECT: PAPERCLIP with Werner Von Braun and all the other V-2 rocket Nazis that came out of Penemunde. We took half the German scientists, and the Russians took the other half, and together they dragged us all into the modern supersonic rocket age 20th Century, Bellamy thought. Well, until that UFO fell out of the sky in Roswell which had set Bellamy and his people on an entirely separate evolutionary track than the rest of ignorant, unknowing humanity.

With a mere nod of George's head, men in yellow HAZ-MAT suits, looking like clumsy spacemen, came stumbling into the clearing, waddling along with their lighted helmets and sensing equipment and spray guns.

“All right Wolfie boy,” Bellamy said at long last, “she’s all yours. Get your NASA boys up here before the local yokels start getting curious. Get whatever this whatchamafuckit is up on the truck and out of here and wrap it up for Christmas.”

PART SEVEN

PETER DASH'S
“TALES TO ASTONISH”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“ARRRRRRRRRRGGGGGGHHHHH!”

Ted was screaming, rolling on the institutional cold linoleum floor of the hallway.

Ted opened his eyes, took his face off the floor and looked up at the woman...with...the.... gun? Or, at least...where she...was?

Vanished.

Poof.

Thin...meet...air....

He jumped to his feet like a cat in a fighting crouch and jerked his head both ways looking up and down the hallway from left to right, almost snapping his neck.

It was still empty.

“OOOH! WHAT THE FUCK?” He yelled, pounding the walls with rage and frustration.

He pulled his hand away from the “wound”, and started to check his body, thinking he was either already dead, or in shock. He looked at his hands. Nothing on them. No blood, no fluid, no fiber, no holes, no nothing. He looked down at the point of impact and there was no wound. His breathing was shallow and rapid. He felt his stomach turning and he thought for sure he was going to vomit. He doubled over with his hands on his knees, panting hard, while still being supported by the glass wall and tried breathing deeply and slowly to calm his system and himself down.

“Oh man!” He said to himself. “I am too old for this crap!”

Ted finally straightened up and leaned back against the glass wall and let his body relax as the shock began to wear off. But then an electric charge ran through him, and he stood up ramrod straight as a lightening bolt of stunning blue white realization struck every cell in his body.

OH...MY...GOD!

Ann????

ANN CORBETT??

He had seen, and been shot by...ANN CORBETT!

Ann Corbett had been in that hallway! Just NOW! Dressed in a stylish circa 1940s professional outfit? That is why it didn't fit. Ted asked himself a terrible question: Was he dead? Or had he slipped between the seconds of the clock into some other universe? A parallel reality? Or was he starting to fall apart from the stress. Cracking under the strain he had taken on for 40 years and now completely losing it like so many others before him who had gone down that road in this business. Winding up a blithering, straightjacketed foaming idiot in a rubber room, using a box of crayons to draw obscene pictures on the padded walls with his toes.

OR...he was just dead. They say when you're dead you don't know you're dead and that only others know you are dead. Very much like being stupid, Ted thought, trying to deal with all this using his dark sense of humor.

Either way, no matter how he sliced the pie, the answer was horrid. After what seemed like an eternity, Ted finally pushed himself away from the support of the glass wall and turned to finish the simple walk to what he thought was his office when his destination had really become...*THE TWILIGHT ZONE!*

Ted's office was huge. He always joked that he could put his father's entire desert house, and the lab behind it, into this room and still have space to spare, nitro-glycerin, rattlesnakes and all. Modern, sleek and refined were all the words to describe this room. To Ted it possessed a complete and total lack of human personality. It missed warmth, comfort and seemed ultimately unlivable and completely non-inviting. He was in here for business and meetings only, and if at all possible, the rest of his time was in his laboratory

on the first floor.

Being amongst a jumbled mess of equipment, literature, parts, stained coffee cups, empty pizza boxes holding memory boards of broken computers, books, books, books and posters of mostly his favorite movies and psychedelic day glow scenes from comic books. “HULK NOW SMALL LIKE BUG!” “DOCTOR STRANGE FIGHTS THE MINDLESS ONES!” “THE SILVER SURFER RIDES AGAIN!” They would fill all the wall space that wasn’t covered with equation stained white boards. THAT was his idea of a Sanctum Sanctorum. His Fortress of Solitude.

He unlocked his desk and pulled on the drawer to snatch up his trusty shining silver .45 Colt Auto. When he slid the carriage back and cracked a round into the chamber with a solid CLACK, the sound was comforting. He slipped the safety on and set it on his desk. Then he reached into the lower right hand drawer and pulled up a two-thirds full bottle of Jack Daniels and a tumbler that said THE LIL’ ALE’INN on the side, a souvenir from Joe and Pat Travis in Rachel, Nevada, a burger joint and bar on the outskirts of FIVE-ONE. He poured himself a shot, raised it in supplication to some unknown god...Thor or Crom, or whoever protected this God-Forsaken world and those who fought within it, and tossed it down his gullet in one fell swoop.

But the jolt of the high-octane amber liquid of the Kentucky whiskey brought memories flooding back with it. He was only seventeen at the Barstow High Aztecs football awards dinner that he never expected his father to show up to. Ann Corbett was there, disguised as a waitress, working there all those months, knowing that his father had to show up there sometime. Or was it always him she was trying to kill? Whatever she was doing there, it forced his father to flee and dive head first into the rushing, roiling, crushing rapids and eddies of the time stream leaving him to grow up without a dad.

She was the gun moll and henchwoman of Dr. Simon Ratterman, and

they both had hunted him his entire life, moving in and out of the time-stream like demonic ghosts.

Corbett had kidnapped his wife Ellen, and handed her over to the most malevolent alien race imaginable, to be physically and mentally raped on a soul level so horrible that it eventually caused her to lose her mind, divorce Ted, and leave him alone...again. If it had not of been for good old Dr. Harvey Glipsen they would have lost her for good.

Harv. Long dead and gone.

God, had he just lived too long?

Corbett had found a way to bi-locate and crack the most secure Black-Site library The Group maintained, by playing on the loneliness of an old man named Rafferty, and Ted's attempt to entrap her in that incorporeal state wound up costing Rafferty his life.

Ultimately, Corbett and Ratterman had, literally, killed him. A state which would have been permanent had his father not left when Ted was seventeen, with a perfected man portable Time-Runner device, gone far enough into the future and then come back just in time to reset the timeline and miraculously, save his life. Ratterman was killed, but Corbett was still loose in the time stream, in THIS time-line, with a small, belt mounted PDA sized Time Runner device that Ted assumed would give her access to all time and all space, within the limits of the power that was needed to generate a jump.

Could that scene he just experienced in the hallway be a bleed-through from another dimension, or a parallel reality, or was it one of his uncanny premonitions that seemed to be the result of some kind of fallout from the jumps he had taken himself, and all the time he had spent around alternative time fields in the years of development of all the equipment which ultimately jumbled and jangled up the entire universe. It was all just ungodly, unnatural,

and this was the price he was paying.

But using Occam's Razor you can toss all the Science Fiction mumbo jumbo and boil it down to the simplest solution: THIS... is exactly how it all starts. The madness and paranoia always begins with the false illusion that you can handle it all with a gun. He also thought he would never be able to tell anyone about what had happened now with whiskey on his breath. With that thought he took one more shot to calm his nerves.

SCREW IT! I can go crazy later. Right now I don't have the time!

Picking up two notebooks on his desk he placed them into his briefcase and sat there looking at the phone.

He should call Irina.

He loved her and missed her so much, and she kept running further and further away. Could he blame her? She should know what's going on. Russia had the Yamantau Complex, an underground city that could now hold five million people to survive a "Nuclear War", which was a joke, as everyone knew it was for a situation just like this. An Alien Invasion. It's only fair, Ted thought, that Irina have a chance to head for a safe harbor. Her and the children.

The children.

They weren't children anymore. Teodore, or Pasha as his mother sometimes called him, was just nine now, a certified genius who seemed to channel knowledge from some other reality, a computer whiz and already working for the Russian Academy of Science in Moscow. Pasha was dancing, and doing her art. It was not a great dance company, but it was no minor one either. Lead ballerina at 26 was not all that bad.

He would call. Irina would thank him for the advice. He would insist and she would tell him again why she left. She was not going to die in a hole in the ground. When it came time she wanted to be standing in the sunshine.

Twenty-five years of living like a prisoner in her own home, constantly being shadowed and guarded by armed men, having every word recorded by someone, mostly strangers, was just too much for her. She had lived under the later days of a declining Soviet Empire, with all the fear and terror that went with that. Now she was watching in horror the emerging U.S.S.A. The United Socialist States of America! That now, no matter where you looked, America, her dream of freedom and streets paved with gold, was now the global BAD GUY!

Irina would not do that again, not for money, nor freedom, or even love. She was still a raving beauty who had taken care of her body. Slim, powerful and brilliant. She did not need him to protect her and she had proven it over and over again. Her position at the University was formidable and her research was prize winning. She joked, drank and rowed a scull on the river in St. Petersburg in the summer. He could imagine that she had a lover, someone closer to her own age, as Russians were very sexual and just practical like that and did not have all the hang-ups about sex that prudish puritan Americans did. But she either cared or pitied Ted enough not to flaunt it in front of him.

He had wondered if the rage would ever build up in him. He looked at his own life so analytically and hers as well. He had been set on this course when he was young and had a lot of help to get here, to this one spot. He had only felt free once in his life. It was after he left Montauk, New York out at the end of Long Island and that miserable place that held so many memories. He'd lived in Boulder City, Nevada working on research that had little to do with time travel and messing with hyper-dimensional physics.

Just when he thought he was out... "They dragged me back in!"

One step at a time. Damn!

This reminiscing would get him nowhere now, he thought. He got up,

locked his desk and put the automatic in his coat pocket. This was stupid to allow this human garbage to get in the way of him doing his job. He walked to his door and locked it after looking both up and down the hallway.

Around the corner standing in the hallway, was a slight man in jeans and a sweater. He was looking at a folder.

“Can I help you?” Ted asked after he placed his hand into his pocket. Happiness is a warm gun.

“Dr. Humphrey, is that you?” The man was short, thin and wore glasses that were too large for his face. His manner was shy and not aggressive at all. Ted switched the safety off on his gun.

“I am.” Ted stood there watching carefully making sure the man could not get inside that invisible ring he had around him out to about six feet. Outside of that someone would have to use a device; a gun, dart, spray, Taser, something. However, inside those six feet, hands and feet could do the job very quickly.

“I’m Peter Dash, from R-7 Research. I have some, ah, things... I think you might be interested in.” He held up the file.

“You guys weren’t called in this morning,” Ted watched very carefully. “Research is non-critical.”

“Funny thing about that. I was already here when all hell broke loose. I’d come in early to finish this up.” He held the file out to Ted.

“What is it? You can just tell me,” Ted was not allowing him inside the six-foot ring.

“Um...ho-kay,” he pulled back the file and tucked it under his arm, looked up at the ceiling then launched into his spiel. “Two weeks ago, our Barcelona clipping service sent a page into us. It was out of a Spanish-speaking English Tabloid. It was a single page article about a new book that got published by a guy who claims we have a base on the moon and that we

have space ships to get back and forth and none of them belong to the government. That would be curious enough, but included were ten photos of a place he called Lunar One. I saw the dedication and it rang a bell for me. So I went over to our Silver Lake annex and started to go through the German files from '45 and '46. My God! There are a lot of them. But I narrowed it down with the card index to the teams that went in for rapid recovery. The person he dedicated the book to was with the same team that your father, Dr. Theodore Humphrey, Sr., was with. That was too wild for me, so I dug deeper.” He waited to see the reaction.

“Whom did he dedicate it to?” Ted realized that his voice was no more than a whisper.

“Dr. Ann Jean Corbett, U.S. Army, G-2.” Ed stood there waiting to hear a response.

A long minute passed. Ted re-set the safety on his weapon, again. Twice in one day. He looked up and down the hallway then back at the young man standing across from him.

“How much research do you have and where is it?” Ted asked regaining his composure.

“A medium sized U-Haul moving box and the two copies of the book. They’re all on my desk downstairs.” Peter took a step or two back wondering if he had crossed some invisible line and was about to be handed his walking papers.

“Don’t call anyone,” Ted said, realizing how desperate and frantic he was starting to sound. “Don’t even think of getting your cellphone from the lockers. Go to your desk and get the material. Bring it and yourself to the T-2 exit as fast as you can. We are going on a little trip with some of my friends. Have I made myself perfectly clear?”

Peter wordlessly nodded a confused and frightened yes, as Ted spun on

his heel and staggered down the hallway.

“If we’re going to be gone long, I’ll need get my meds?” Peter said loudly to the back of the man walking away.

“I promise you Peter, you’ll get anything and everything you need or want. Just get moving. Time counts right now!”

Ted stumbled into the elevator and hit the button.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Peter Dash was not what you would call a frequent flier. He made his three-point-seven trips a year on commercial airlines. He sat in economy class and complained about leg room, poor service, lousy food and the new TSA, which stood for TOUCH SOMEONE'S ASS. All in all normal for most people, so as he sat in the large comfy leather chair in the front cabin of the aircraft, his mind slowly came uncorked.

Additionally, it was love at first sight. He was still sitting in his chair about twenty minutes after takeoff holding in his lap the large U-Haul box. But his mind was fixed on the one vision of exquisite, existential loveliness in the goddess-like form and manner of the cabin attendant: Ariel Gee.

As she moved around the cabin after takeoff, in her high heels and short tight sky blue skirt, his eyes took all of her in. Peter could not remember when he had been this close to a woman this gloriously beautiful.

Peter Dash was thirty-one, a doctorate graduate from Stanford in history and there the story of Peter Dash ended. He had worked for MRC for six years after graduating, lived in Oak Mill in a small apartment, drove a Toyota to work. Read, wrote and thought about history. That is until this particular Sunday, when the universe seemed a lot brighter to him. Finally Ariel took the box off his lap and set it under the conference table and handed him a glass of orange juice and a small warmed croissant stuffed with brie, where she smelled like vanilla and honey in spring, with a smile that showed the dimple on her left cheek.

Everyone had seen his enraptured wide-eyed schoolboy crush enchantment and the other men on the plane just smiled to themselves, but no one made fun of him. Ariel had that effect on everyone who flew on this bird, and would no doubt have had that effect on all of Mankind, if anyone had ever seen her outside this environment.

She was disarming, gorgeous, fantastically well educated with numerous advanced degrees, and held two different black belts in martial arts and Krav Magav. She'd proven her worth more than once to the men now present on this flight. Ariel, named for the angel of fire, was just one more of the tight, integral parts of a well oiled machine that did its job so fantastically well that no one noticed.

The plane had a mid-cabin space where Ariel had her area, desk, comfortable chair, and all the standard accouterments for an in-flight service on any first class section of any airline in the world. The front of the cabin had a lounge area with six chairs and a couch. The next section in front of the mid-cabin had a conference room set up for eight. Then Ariel's space and finally the back portion of the cabin had bathrooms, showers, clothing lockers, and supplies. Ted had left when they reached cruising altitude to grab a shower and put on some soft clothing. He came back forward to see that Ariel had set up the conference table for six with a selection of soft and hard drinks, snacks and pads and pencils. She'd pulled a lot of the cabin window shades down and adjusted the lighting perfectly.

Ted came forward in khaki shorts, blue flip-flops and a Ron-Jon Tee shirt. His hair was wet and a mess.

"God...comfort...finally," he sighed as he dropped into one of the large chairs around the table and poured himself a scotch and water. He grabbed some mixed nuts and started writing on his provided yellow legal note pad.

The others moved in around the table, after dropping their jackets over their chairs, pulling off shoulder holsters and kicking their shoes off. Ties were also hanging on the backs of several of the lounge chairs. The once clean and spotless room was taking on the scene of a frat house during finals.

"Love the shirt, Ted!" Ed sat there and pulled a beer out of the cooler.

"Yeah, well, Dave Mason claimed we were skipping the country with

all the royal family jewels and heading for the sunny beaches in Mexico with both hot and cold running women. So I thought I'd live up to the part." Everyone laughed.

"He didn't quit asking you to take him along, did he?" Ed tossed out.

"Actually I got him this time. I told him if I just found someone who could take over for him, he could go with us!" Everyone around the table but Peter Dash was clapping and hooting.

"Ooo!" Ed grinned evilly. "You are a cruel evil man, Ted Humphrey."

"So, I got him! Finally!"

"You men are all so mean!" Ariel was standing next to the doorway. She had a very slight exotic accent, which could have been French or Greek or Israeli, which just added to her crazy hotness. "David is a lovely man and you all make such fun of him."

Ted looked at her quizzically. "You haven't met him, have you?"

Silence filled the cabin.

"Of course not, but he sent me an e-mail before you gentlemen got here. Told me to poison your drinks, take the gold certificates and call him from Mexico. That he would join me to sell them and we could live happily every after."

There was a long, worried silence as she perfectly deadpanned. Then she smiled. She knew she had got back at the usual passengers. "If you need anything just call. Enjoy your drinks by the way."

"I need something, Ariel," Ed smiled at her with a devilish grin.

"Ed...?" She smiled back and then added, "Honey, at your pay grade you can't afford me. Jet jockeys are a dime a dozen."

There was a collective moan from the group with the exception of Peter that was clearly not amused at their lack of decorum in front of the new love of his life. Also Ariel never used the same line twice to put Ed back in line. It

had become a game between them.

“Okay, fine!” Ted started. “Now that we know that Captain Reilly will be speaking with a very high voice, since his balls are now in a jar in mid-cabin, we can get going. Has everyone met our very bestest new friend here? He’s from Research. Dr. Peter Dash, PhD.?”

Everyone nodded blankly and looked at the young man.

“Ah...I was given first names when I got on board but I really don’t know what you each of you do and where you fit into the program at MRC.” Peter took up his pad and pencil.

“We work at MRC and other places, Peter,” Ted said. “It’s a little complex to understand at first but we will work you through it. For comfort’s sake, Bob is Captain Robert Hanson USN, assigned to Air Deployment within the MRC parent group. Captain Edward Reilly, USN, head of space program engineering for that same group. Dr. Mathew Fassbinder is lead researcher in Adeline at New South Wales Electromagnetic Research Institute and an Assistant Director for the parent company of MRC. I could say without a problem that you should consider us as major stakeholders in MRC and other concerns.” Ted tried to make a very complex structure seem simple.

“Got that...” Peter said bobbing his head up and down like a parrot wanting a grape, “...and... thank you. And could you tell me...where are we going?” Peter seemed even more wide-eyed now that he understood the immensity of who he was sitting down to play poker with.

“That is a little more difficult to answer right now, so let me just move on and tell you that your career, Dr. Dash, thanks to all your exceptional research and years of very hard work, is now at a turning point. You’ve made some pretty impressive discoveries and how all of this fits together I am not sure yet. So... we can do this two ways: we can sit here and ask you

questions for the next couple of hours until we feel that we know everything that you have learned and then put you back in a comfortable room in the rear of the airplane. We land, we get off and it takes off and flies you back to Virginia. That is a safe way to go. You go back to work, get several impressive upgrades in your pay scale, a better office and probably never see any of us again. The other way is that you agree to work with us and sign your life away and we tell you why and how your information is important to us. The choice is yours. We are not going to influence you in any way. So think about this for a few minutes, while you toss your research up here on the table and we look through it.”

Ted sat back and knew very well what he had done. It was totally unfair, but if this man had put that much information together without a clearance, Ted and The Group needed to know how. They could always use another good researcher. The guy had the credentials; he just didn't have the killer instinct to sell himself. He was a scholar not a politician.

Peter put the files out and scattered them around. Each was neatly labeled on the edge and the inside continued with copies of documents in German that had been translated. He had the originals and the translations all in order. Photos and copies of the photos. Each folder was one of the cleanest presentations anyone could have asked for.

Everyone picked up a couple of folders and started to flip through them and read. People were handing folders back and forth. Ariel had come forward and took Peter to the front of the aircraft and fixed him a light elegant cocktail so that he could think. She sat up there with him, leaning forward on the chair and talking to him quietly. She wasn't trying to convince him to come onboard, in fact and truth, just the opposite. She was doing everything to show him it, this path he was on and this entire world was a very bad idea. He was entranced by her and never realized that she was the

only counsel he had and she was working very hard to keep him out of all of this.

“You must use your logic and lay out all your precautions,” she said in her lilting singsong tone of voice, touching him occasionally on the knee as he she spoke. “It is all about doing the right thing for yourself. Don’t let them lure you into this job, because it is not what it seems on the outside.”

She made confessions that she could not leave. That she was owned on paper by legal and political restraints. All of this was actually for him, just in a very short form, because they did not have time to let him think about it for two weeks or a month. How he had put Ted into this loop was very important and that alone needed resolving.

When Peter was away from the table, Ted explained that to the others. They understood immediately. Peter could be a liability if he went elsewhere to work. They had very little control of him right now, with the exception of an NDA; Non-Disclosure Agreement, which could only run five years, and carried really only civil penalties. Ted did not like loose ends of any kind.

Ariel left him to think and told him he had about twenty minutes. She walked past the table and touched Bob on his back. He could tell that this part of her job was the toughest. He got up and went into her space to fill in the details that Ted had told the rest of the group.

She nodded with understanding.

“What do you think?” Bob spoke in a low voice to her. “Will he bite?”

“He is...good.” She said at length, lifting her eyes to the ceiling. When they came back down, she locked Bob’s eyes into hers and Ariel’s analysis became laser keen. She had dropped all the masks of sexy feminine coyness and frivolity. “He is not trained in human relationships very well. A loner by nature. Stuck in the Nazi era, which is his specific area of expertise: technology development in the Third Reich. Hasn’t had a real relationship

with a woman at all. Something in college, probably a mutual sex buddy non-exclusive 'friends with benefits' arrangement, but nothing ever with any depth or meaning.

"He fills in the void," she continued, "with fantasies about being discovered as a great researcher and winning prizes. Immature for his age. Still plays video games at home. Space Raiders is his game of choice. Version 6.5 not the old one.

"Likes one girl in the office, but she is dating someone else, which appeals to his general feelings of being rejected by women, and that they are usually evil, cruel and uncaring.

"Feels victimized by society. He did not make it into the CIA and was refused by the Military Services. Poor health as his eyesight disqualified him as Four-F.

"Outside of that he is...totally and utterly... ordinary."

Ariel made a viola' gesture, clapped her hands and sat back in her chair like a Vegas card dealer at the end of her shift backing away from a gaming table and worked sipping on a Diet Coke, rolling the little red cocktail straw between her fingers, as she sipped and sucked at it with her perfectly formed bow shaped mouth.

Bob gave a low whistle. "You got all of that in ten minutes?" Bob said. "Jesus, I wonder what your annual Eval of me is going to look like, Doctor."

"As long as you continue to buy me roses and send me chocolates and not sleep with that bitch of a wife of yours, I will let you slide." She laughed and showed her dimple. It was like angels dancing through wind chimes. But then her brow furrowed and her face became a perfect little Shirley Temple pout. "You've been worrying too much lately, though. Mostly about Ted. I am thinking I should put you on rotation again and let Ed handle him for a while. You up to that?"

“Not until we get through this mess, darlin’.” Bob leaned forward on his knees and rubbed his hands together like he was warming them on a campfire, a serious look of concern on his face. “Something happened after Ted went up to his office. He’s rattled, and he never gets rattled. Worse, he’s not talking about it, so it has to be something all kinds of bad.”

“He was alone?” Ariel said with mild shock and anger. “You know what his enemies are capable of? Oui?” Bob nodded guiltily. “And how did this happen?”

“It just...did. So we don’t know what went down, and this is all just a gloss show for the kid. Ted is not his animated self, so he’s covering something up. He might have called Irina,” Bob leaned against her desk.

“Oooo! That crazy Russian cow!” Ariel had never met or spoken to Irina, but she hated her with a maternal rage that a mother tigress has when she sees a threat to her cubs. She loved Ted deeply, and wanted to protect him, and she interpreted everything Irina had ever done as being selfish and cruel and hurtful. She hated her as only passionate French women can hate, because she saw the ultimate affect and ramifications it had on him. Just one more stressor building subduction pressure at the tectonic cracks in his psyche. One of the world’s greatest and most important men, she thought, being brought low and wrapped around the finger of a woman who seemed to only want to play with Ted and his heart like a cat with a mouse out of sheer spite.

“That will always set him off. She does this to get back at him, but I surely don’t know why.” Ariel got up, adjusted all her clothing, made sure she looked her cabin attendant part again, took a breath, and did a little twirling motion with her hands, and curtsied slightly.

She walked back up to the front of the aircraft and brought Peter back to the table.

“Lots and lots of good stuff,” Matt patted the chair next to him for Peter to sit down. “Where did you find all of this ancient original material? Not in the Silver Lake Annex, I hope?”

“Exactly. Silver Lake is where it all came from with the exception of the G-2 reports. Those came from the archives of the Army at Over-Brook, Maryland. This crazy man in England who wrote this book, gave me the leads. It had names, dates and places in it,” Peter had a habit of slightly bouncing his head as he spoke.

“What G-2 reports?” Bob asked looking over the table.

“These,” Peter pulled them out of the box; they had a different cover on them. “I wasn’t ready to show you these until I could place them in a true context for you.”

“Be our guest, but first tell me how you worked at Silver Lake?” Matt wanted to follow-up on this because of all the time he had wasted there himself over the last ten years looking for specific things that he never could find.

“The person who set it up was a genius. They only had the Dewey-Decimal system in those days. That wouldn’t work. So they created their own cataloging system, which had to be one huge task. They put everything into general areas and then kept reducing the numbers down and down until you got into small manageable groups.” He opened his binder and pulled out a printed document and handed it to Matt.

“The Key to O.D.W.G. The Ober-Donnen Werk Gruppen.” Matt looked at it and cocked his head backwards in confusion. “What the hell is the ‘Ober-Donnen work group’?”

“That was the secret organization inside the SS that handled all the really scary shit. Time-travel, flying disks, laser beams, all of the stuff that people want to believe the Nazi’s had, but orthodox science and history won’t

let people believe them to have had.” Peter puffed himself up, looking proud. As well he should, having been the one to bust this whole thing wide open. “Mostly because the winning side writes the history. Or maybe all of it worked and just was...absorbed...into other places and programs.”

“We always thought that was Section Four under Hans Kammler?” Matt added.

“He had overall control of all of it. But O.D.W.G. was his special baby. Only the really bright folks got in there. They had two major places they worked out of on the supposed crazy ‘Time Machine’ stuff, of which I’m thinking is one of the biggest items they were doing,” Peter looked through his own notebook.

“How does this relate to the book published in England recently?” Ted asked trying to pull some divergent strings together in the loom of his mind into a cogent tapestry.

“The book is about the hidden US space program that exists outside of, or deep inside of, or parallel to, the governments of the world, the USA and Russia mostly. I mean really out there wild stuff, like that the NSA used it to land on the moon in 1953, hahaha!” Peter laughed, but the other men didn’t and just shared stoic glances between each other.

Peter looked around and the smile melted off his face as he continued. “Um, uh....anyway.... he says it was all developed from the ODWG stuff brought back after the war. We are talking tons of documents and over 750,000 new words that had to be added to our lexicons, for scientific advances and stuff that we didn’t even have names for. The author claims that this secret government organization has control of time machines, super-weapons, flying craft, with implosion, anti-matter and mercury drive propulsion and, last but not least, bases on the moon. He has lots of NASA pictures of these supposed moon bases, but it only represents one chapter in

the book. The rest is about ODWG and how their research was used to both fund and operate a secret group that ran far ahead of the government's space program as well as our aviation and defense programs. He's claiming that this 'Group' controls literally thousands of patents and soaks the governments of several countries out of huge amounts of money, to let them use the systems that they perfected from the ODWG."

Peter paused, while looks amongst the others were exchanged around the table.

"Okay. So, what is in the G-2 files?" Ed asked.

"Hold on," Peter said as he gave his box a good rummaging. "Let me set all this up for you, please, then we will get to those." Peter laid his book out, while Ariel placed a fresh orange juice next to him. He looked up at her and his gaze went all moony as he lingered on her smiling face and then thanked her.

Ted scowled. "Ariel! Kee-ripes! Dial the Love Goddess of Venus routine down a few notches...like BELOW eleven, will you? You're going to give the poor boy a heart attack before he finishes."

Everyone laughed. Ariel batted her eyelashes coquettishly, and put her white-gloved hand to her lips with a slight curtsy.

Peter looked uncomfortable but when Ted rolled his hand impatiently in the air he continued after a few moment. It was not lost on Peter Dash that his field of study, his passion, his hobby, what he ate, dreamt, slept and swam in 24/7, was about to be finally listened to, on a private jet with a mysterious destination, with a roundtable of the most powerful men in the world. This was his shot. His moment to shine!

With his books all in place, open to the photo sections, he scooted up to the edge of his chair, adjusted his glasses and splayed his arms out wide to tell his impossible tale of wonder.

“It is the ending of the war,” he said in a low dramatic storyteller tone, “and everything is going bad. The trains and rail systems had all been destroyed. The Allies have complete control of the skies. The 3rd Reich is collapsing in an hourglass shape with Berlin in the center from the Russians driving in from the East, and Patton’s 3rd Army from the West. There are only so many resources left and everyone is trying to get them for their own projects. Ober-gruppen-führer Doktor General Hans Kammler, the most powerful man outside of Berlin and the Reich’s number 2 in command, knows they’ve lost the war, and believes Hitler to have long since gone insane. So he’s working around the clock to build a system where he can get away with a few loyal henchman and friends. The time machines look like the only possibility for escape, either into time, or to even teleport them somewhere else here on Earth. That may or may not have been true. Remember none of these monsters are playing with a full deck anymore. They really couldn’t believe they, The MASTER RACE, were going to lose the war to Americans and a mob of Slavic mongrels. The deeper they got into the Nietzsche madness of super power, man and superman, Red Hat Monks, the Black Sun, Hollow Earth, Vril Energy and Smokey Gods theories, the more their grasp on reality was lost. I mean a time machine? That was okay for H. G. Wells, but give me a break! We haven’t done that yet ourselves and we are way past where they were.”

Again, the men around the table exchanged virtually unnoticeable sideways glances. Dash was too far into his own Neverland to notice anything that nuanced.

“Anyway...” Peter was just getting warmed up, “...Kammler, losing his marbles now mind you, sets up two projects using all the information from a man called Dr. Wilhelm Schulman’s research. So he has a major and minor device being completed. The major one is at Der Riese, ‘The Giant’, which is

located at the old mining site of the Wenceslaus Mine close to the Czech border. It had everything anyone would want. Protection from bombing raids, isolation, its own off grid and protected power supply from the dams on the rivers. Just everything. He had about three hundred folks working around the clock there. Most of the details were removed from all the records in '44 and '45 by his staff. But enough remained to show that he was seriously pushing this project. And, he also had a backup. That was at Nordhausen," Peter stopped for dramatic affect and took a long pull on his orange juice. Ted steepled his fingers and put his index fingers on the bridge of his nose, closed his eyes and went down the slippery slope, knowing the next part of the story only to well.

"At Nordhausen he also built, or maybe found, what we call 'The Bell', which was weird considering they called it a 'Die Glocke': The Clock. Smaller but actually it looked more effective, at least in principal. I'm not a physicist so I can't fill in any of the technical stuff, but it's in those reports if any of you want to try your hand at deciphering German logic and science."

"He didn't!" Fassbinder stopped him, throwing his hands up in disgust, in his version of an English intellectual tantrum. "There was no bell found at Nordhausen! That was clearly an A-4 surrounded by a damnable warehouse full of aircraft parts! That is all that was bloody there!"

"Not according to this report..." Peter leaned forward and pulled a folder out from across the table and opened it. Pointing to a section that was talking about the special operations center at Nordhausen with a coded number for it. He opened it and turned it around and slid it towards Fassbinder "...and that number relates to this..." like a rabbit out of a hat, he pulled another document from the endless cardboard U-Haul box on the floor.

"This tells us that in February of 1945, a test run was made of the

‘Inferno Machine’. There were twenty-one scientists present in the control room and over fifty Jewish prisoners from the Dora-Mittelbau concentration camp, supposedly trying to hold the machine in place when they energized it. The writer tells us that the chains were whipping around and crushing people right and left! However, it held the field for ninety seconds”. He paused for dramatic effect and chopped the air with his hands. “I repeat, it.... held.... the field for...ninety seconds! That seems to be a major key. It did something, probably a huge burst of electromagnetic energy that went straight into the rocks. The test room had to be at least two hundred yards away from anything electric otherwise it would fry them. So it was in the special area of Mittelwerk II.”

Matt Fassbinder had been through what was left of the Mittelwerk facility. He could draw it for anyone who wanted a plan and he did just that. He grabbed a yellow notepad and scribbled a quick sketch of two lines forming a lazy ‘S’ and a bunch of lines connecting the two lines.

“Okay,” Matt leaned over and jabbed at the sketch using his pen like a dagger, “one and two. 6,210 feet long, 46 galleries connecting the two main lines, each 500 feet long. Nothing else! AND we have been through every bloody one of them.”

“Really?” Peter looked at him. “Xavier Dorsch built this place. I found the original drawings. There’s an extended gallery on the east side just above Gallery 43. It travels 1,000 feet and then divides into seven different areas. One of them I would suppose should still have the stone circular gantry for where the Bell sat.”

Matt would not back down and was sure of his empirical facts, but he did calm down, and said evenly: “That side gallery only runs a hundred feet with a couple of short galleries off it. It was used for storage.”

Peter opened his own notebook and took a photo out of the back that

was lodged between plastic sheath protectors. “Then what is this a photograph of?”

He threw it down like the last Ace that completed a Royal Flush to win the pot at Monte Carlo. “It was taken in June, 1945. Read what it says!” He laid the picture out that showed another Bell, one that no one on this airplane had ever seen.

Fassbinder picked up the picture, and held it aloft so everyone could see it, then read the writing on the front: “It says it was taken in the ‘Time Experiment Center’ at Nordhausen.” Fassbinder looked beaten, and set the photo respectfully back down on the table.

“What is really curious,” Dash stood up and handed the photograph to Ted, who snapped out of his reverie and took the picture from his hand, “is the legend on the back, placed there by the Army.”

Ted looked at the young, excited man standing over him, as he turned the faded yellowing photograph over and saw the old style block typewriter printing on a faded strip stuck to the back.

Ted sat bolt upright in his chair and leaned forward with amazement mixed with concern, then read it aloud:

“Photograph taken by Dr. Maria Sholar with...Dr. Ted Humphrey of the O.D.W.G.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“I checked all the Army records very carefully,” Dash continued, breaking the stunned silence. “I believe that Dr. Theodore Humphrey, Sr....is your father, is that correct Mr. Director?” Peter had a strange smile on his face. “He left a full report about Dr. Maria Sholar. He clearly indicated that she was one of the major players in the building of the Inferno Machine and helped design it. That and something else called a ‘Zeit-Läufer’. A small box like device that was needed to make the larger machine work properly.”

“I’ve read a lot about all the work that was done at the end of the war,” Ted said slowly, still holding the photo like a dear and treasured holy family relic, which, in fact, it was. “And the follow-up work continued in this country with many of the same scientists thanks to PROJECT: PAPERCLIP. There is no question that the US military aircraft and space programs were the products of all those captured German engineers and scientists, including the atomic bomb, along with several other issues of applied sciences in various fields.” Ted hesitated. “But I’m having a hard time bringing the two parts of this discussion together Peter. You brought me the book and I found it interesting at a brief cursory glance, enough to bring you along with us. But let’s cut to the chase. Can you get to at least the oblong end of the point that you are trying to make here?”

“Fair question,” Peter leaned back in his chair looking a little more confident, clasping his hands across his chest. He was still basking in the WOW FACTOR with which he had stunned them all. “The book had all of these things in it about your father, a woman scientist and German officer named Ann Corbett, and a very nasty piece of work named Dr. Simon Ratterman, even though I was not able to find out much about him and some

others. The information was all dated. Old by seventy years, except for the chapter on the moon base and the photos. Those seemed new to me. Like the author was trying to lay down an argument that he was going to follow-up on later with all the subsidiary documents to prove his hypothesis. I think somehow he got them all from this Corbett woman.”

“Come on Peter! Stop taking the piss. You’re loading your hand, mate!” Fassbinder broke in. Ted was more than willing to let the geeks fight it out. But it was more like watching two clumsy T-Rexes in a slap fight. “Answer Ted’s question so we can get on with business!” Matt was drawing lines on his pad and adding circles, then jabbing it with his pen in impatient frustration.

“Look,” Peter said, exasperated at what he saw as Fassbinder trying to steal the limelight of his thunder. “This material has sat for seventy years in a hole in the ground...in Maryland, that no one EVER goes to. I checked all the access records and no one else has been there...well...at ALL... this year! That is with the sole exception of the two people that maintain the place. MRC owns it and controls the documents. I am an MRC historian and researcher. This whole area of history, for whatever reason, has been completely and totally ignored!”

Because it’s all been classified Above Top Secret, Ted thought.

“And it proves one other very important thing!” Peter did his magician routine again, and pulled one more photo out of his file, like an Ace up his sleeve for the million-dollar pot. “THIS... is a picture of the Bell...AT the Inferno Machine...AT Mittelwerks! Notice the pattern and design around the bottom.” He pulled out another paper. “This is a drawing made at the scene by a researcher of an event called the Kecksburg Incident. A bell shaped UFO that crashed there in Pennsylvania on December 9th in 1964. It’s been debated for years. Looking at them together, side-by-side, one would realize

instantly that it was not a UFO at ALL, but the Bell from Mittelwerks. This photo proves it!”

“Proves what?” Ted asked with deadly seriousness.

Peter Dash stood up, threw his hands in the air, and his voice went up a full octave with excitement.

“THAT IT WORKED!”

Everyone just sat there for a moment as Peter breathed heavily from exertion, and finally sat back down.

“You are telling us,” Ed said slowly at last, “that you believe that someone got one of these German Bells to...actually...work?”

“Yes!” Peter said, still panting.

“And that then it came forwards through time and crashed in Kecksburg?” Ed asked, and then looked over at Bob. “Didn’t your friend Colonel White do some scary story about this like ten years back?”

“Yeah, Tim White. That’s right, he did.” Bob didn’t seem overly interested.

“Who? What? Colonel White?” Peter asked showing that someone had missed him.

“A buddy of Bob’s had a TV show called Sightings, I think? Caused us a bunch of trouble. It was all about UFOs and cover-ups. Weird shit mostly. Ran a season and got pulled. Everyone thought we did it, but it was over some legal pissing contest with the producers demanding FOX order more episodes or something. So they killed it themselves. All these people who think the government is after them, but if you just put a bunch of UFO researchers in a room and give them free beer, they’ll all kill each other! HA! It popped up in syndication for a few years, then kind of faded away.” Ed said dismissively.

“You men know Tim White the host? Wow! That’s impressive!”

Clearly this had caught Peter by surprise, as all the other men just collectively shrugged. “But what do you mean ‘Colonel’?”

Bob joined in. “Tim White is really Dale Timothy White, a full bird Colonel in the US Air Force. When I met him he worked for the Secretary of the Air Force in DC. Real nice guy and a fairly good friend.”

“So that’s why he tried to bury this story?” Peter said, making notes and connecting a few more dots. “He was in on the cover-up.”

“What cover-up, Peter?” Ted asked looking bored.

“The one your father started... and...”

“One thing you need to realize,” Ted interrupted, “I really don’t care what kind of records you found. My father worked throughout the war in Los Angeles for a large aircraft company. He never went to Germany, not even to see it after the war. So you need to hang your argument on some other Ted Humphrey that I have no idea about.” Ted raised his hand slightly, glancing at his Rolex Sub-Mariner, indicating that Peter had a little more time, but not much.

“Oh, okay. Very sorry, it just seemed to fit together. I thought you were originally hired by MRC because of your relationship to someone in the know within the government.” Everyone could tell Peter was making poor attempts at the strenuous removal of his foot out of his facial orifice.

“Never mind that,” Ted said unaffectedly. “We’ve got all the facts about the book. This is all hearsay. It sounds like someone talked to somebody, who gossiped over the back fence on wash day with everyone else, and used a lot of super market tabloid crap and urban legends to make non-associated points link up. So far what you’ve given me is Weekly World News page five. But also I am understanding that because of these photos you...found... you think you can show proof that ONE:” Ted counted on his fingers, “time travel works and, TWO: that there is a larger government

cover-up of the truth. Is that pretty much it?"

Ted sat back and looked carefully at the other man with a hard, even, laser like stare that has made Presidents blink.

"Well, um...yes. That is it. I need your help and permission to put this all together. I would like to use my official status with MRC to get this, well..."

"Well, what?" Ted said menacingly.

"Well...published." Peter said with a shrug.

A frozen chill went through the room that everyone but Dash picked up on.

"I mean," he expelled a nervous, nerdy staccato laugh, "this will totally make me a superstar in my field of historical research." Peter sat back and folded his hands across his stomach. "It's a once in a lifetime opportunity."

"Do you really feel you have that much proof?" Bob asked him.

Ariel came in and stood just inside the cabin and looked at her watch and softly counted out loud moving the fingers of her other hand.

"And, three, and two and..."

She pointed at Peter's head with her index finger and thumb, like a gun, who was still in the process of answering Ed's question.

"Pow!" Ariel cocked her thumb down, jerking up her dainty hand.

"Well, sir, of course, I absolutely do! I door...I ab-sore-loop-ly doooooop....de...doop-a-lee..."

Peter Dash, like a marionette with its strings suddenly cut, in comic slow motion, took a nosedive into the table and his face slid across its polished faux wooden surface with a high pitched "squeee" sound. He then slid out of his chair onto the floor, as if all of his bones had just turned gelatinous, then onto his knees and finally, like some lumbering giant Gulliver felled by the slings and arrows of the puny Lilliputian villagers, he

bent forward at the waist, crashing to the floor, his rump sticking vertically up in the air, his face being mashed by the carpet, with a bit of drool running lazily out the side of his mouth.

Matt got up to help, but Bob grabbed him by the scruff of the neck like a bad puppy and sat him back down.

“He could be dying!” Matt wriggled to pull away to absolutely no avail.

“Nope!” Ed said as he got up, and bent over to look into Peter’s squished up face. With a grunt, Ed stood up and tipped Peter over with the toe of his shoe. He fell to one side with an OOF and a thick thudding sound like a bag of wet potatoes. Ed bent down and straightened him out on the floor. He reached over to the couch, grabbed a pillow, gave it a good brutal fluffing and put it under his head, took off his glasses, stuffed them into Peter’s shirt pocket and folded his arms across his chest.

“Well, he’s not dead,” Ed grinned. “But he’s as good as. Good-bye, Peter Dash. We barely knew ye!”

Ed stood board straight and shot a salute at the man lying there. The other men all stood up and joined in on the salute, then headed for the bar.

PART EIGHT:

The analysis of
DR. ARIEL GEE

CHAPTER TWENTY

Everyone just sat around the table looking at each other as if each of them were waiting for the other to say something. Anything. At least a full pregnant minute passed in silence. It only broke when Ed clinked the ice in his tumbler and took a long slurping sip of his drink.

Matthew turned to Ted and took a breath through his teeth.

“I am guessing it’s not a good idea to say anything cross about your father...or your family? Assuming you haven’t killed and eaten them all.”

Ted smiled and nodded his head up and down in agreement. “Actually Matt, it was my father who took that picture. I just didn’t want Dr. Dash to know that,” Ted hit a button on the side of the table. “...and no, I didn’t kill him.”

“Actually, I was wondering what the protocol is for what happens to lowly Assistant Directors who witness murders committed by their Bosses?” Matt tried to make light of the situation, but looking at what looked like a dead Peter Dash on the floor of the aircraft bothered him.

Suddenly, Ariel came around the corner with a large shoulder bag and went directly to kneel down next to Peter’s supine form. She placed the shoulder bag on the floor next to her and flipped back the flap. She did a quick rummage around in the sack and pulled out a small electronic device then expertly undid the buttons on Dash’s shirt with one exquisitely manicured hand, and opened it. She placed the electrodes in six different spots on his chest. She hooked the cables into another small device and checked everything out carefully on the meter. Then she pulled out a hypodermic syringe and a vial filled with a clear liquid. Ariel rolled up Peter’s sleeve, used a disposable alcohol swab to clean a spot on his arm, then held the vial of amber liquid in the air, expertly filled the syringe, held it

up to the light, squirting out a small stream while clicking the cylinder with her magnificent French manicured nails, slapped his arm with the back of her hand, found a vein that pleased her and drove the needle home.

Ariel checked the meter again, then pulled out a strap that fit around the upper part of his arm that had a pouch on it. She took the meter, put it into the pouch and put a holding strap over it. Ariel then closed his shirt, rolled down his sleeve and took a bright silver thermal blanket from the bag and laid it over him.

Her final act with Peter in this scene was taking his glasses from his shirt pocket and putting them in a break-proof case and gently replacing them. Ariel closed up the shoulder bag, got up and sat down at the end chair of the conference table. She then looked up with a billion-candle laser beam glare directed over at Ted. It took the other men back as most of them had felt her wrath before.

“Go ahead, Doctor...” Ted nodded to her with a waiving motion of his hand, unfazed by the warning salvo in the onslaught he knew was coming. “I am, none the less, expecting your comments, Dr. Gee.”

Ariel looked down, crossed her perfect bare legs, shining with lotion, straightened her uniform, pulled her dress up and over her knees and suddenly lit into Ted with the ferocity of a pirate queen.

“When, for ONE INSANE MINUTE, did you think it was the right thing to do to bring him,” pointing down at the still seemingly lifeless Peter Dash, with a contemptuous snarl and a face as if she smelled something noxious, “aboard this aircraft?” Having made her point, her entire countenance changed back again, as she reached up and undid the clip holding up her hair in a bun, then shook her auburn mane loose, her hair draping well below her shoulders.

“I love it, when French women get mad.” Ed smiled at her.

“Be a darling Ed and get me a diet Coke out of the main refrigerator, please,” Ariel smiled back at him.

“Sure, right away.” Ed got up and went into the service area.

Ted saw that Ariel had made her point and was now back to Love Goddess of Venus mode. She spat the vinegar, and now for the honey.

“He walked into my office,” Ted began nodding at Dash, “just after I had a visionary hallucination, possibly a time slip, with what, at the moment, seemed incredibly valuable information. Within two weeks, I have learned more about the Time Runner, the *Der Zeit-Laufen*, than we have in the last forty-five years of research. The key to this whole bloody system is just about in our hands and we have a minor inconvenience going on in the form of a possible attack by a fleet of pissed off Altarians, coming to enforce a treaty entered into by the biggest morons this galaxy has to offer. So I am truly sorry that I made an error.” Ted held up his hands. “Mea Culpa.”

“Oh *merde!!*” Ariel swore in surprise as she took the Coke Ed brought back and handed to her as he sat back down. “When did all this start... with the Altarians?”

“Five days ago. Kansas. Noble Gage Seven was totally destroyed when we cracked open a spherical distress beacon from one of their ships we found crashed on Mars. That’s why we didn’t fly back with you to DC and sent Ed and, of course, young squire Matt here.” Ted started to look frustrated at the inadequacy of his weak explanation.

“You two took Red Route One?” Ariel asked in mild surprise as the gravity of the situation was only now beginning to sink in.

“Yes we did,” Bob interjected to buffer the emotional tension between Ariel and Ted. “It was faster and we needed to get some things into place.”

“Then last night or early this morning,” Ted continued, “we got word

from the Grissom patrolling the asteroid belt that all high holy hell was breaking loose in the solar system. Every Fastwalker was bugging out heading for the outside of it in a very rapid and unorganized exit that makes an Irish Bar at closing time look like tea at Buckingham Palace. We lit all the boards starting at 0300 today. Sites are still up but not yet sealed.”

“Pardon the stupidity on my part, but I did not quite catch the reference to ‘and of course... Matt’ ?” Matt leaned forward at the table while gymnastically fingering a pencil as a nervous habit.

“We will get to that, in a little while,” Ted only turned momentarily to Matt holding up the palm of his hand, and then back to Ariel.

“So why the Mickey Finn?” He asked her flatly.

“From the moment Mr. Dash came aboard this aircraft, and I realized he was not part of today’s game plan, I hooked up the VSA—Voice Stress Analysis unit,” she said for Matthew’s benefit. “All the time he was talking he kept moving into more and more dangerous areas. After my interview with him up front, I knew that I needed to act. I gave him twenty-five minutes to give up the keys to what he knew. All that time, he thought he had information that you, Ted, needed. This gave him the impression that he was gaining importance in your eyes. His ego was being fed and his confidence was growing rapidly. When he finally dropped the fact about your father, and then your answer, I heard him start to question himself. From then on it was going to be a cat and mouse game. He was going to try to make you pull the stuff out of him. Not worth the time, so I dropped him,” Ariel sat back and wrapped the lips of her perfect bow shaped mouth around the red cocktail straw that matched her lipstick, and sucked, nursing her soft drink.

“What do you mean, you dropped him? How did you do that?” Matt looked at the woman with new appreciation.

She motioned to Ed for the large tray sitting next to him on the

conference table. He moved it over to her. Ariel took the remains in the orange juice glass and emptied the juice onto the tray. She picked up, out of the liquid, a small orange ball. Then handed it to Matt for his inspection.

“It’s an electronic dispenser. It works on FM. I hit a button in my section of the aircraft and this opens up and puts a non-lethal amount of a heavy hypnotic that will place the person into a deep coma.” Ariel wiped her hands and went back to her Coke. “I put a heart monitor on him just now, and gave him a knock-out drug that will keep him in that comatose state for close to thirty-six hours. I can extend it once, for maybe twenty-four hours more. At that point someone will have to make a decision to send him to the dentist,” everyone but Matt knew what this meant. That Dash was to be re-programmed, or his memories completely wiped, “or,” Ariel said with deadly cold finality, “terminate him.” She coyly shrugged her shoulders, as if turning down a pastry. “That call is not up to me.” She clapped and threw her hands in the air then replaced them in her lap.

“Well it’s pretty clear to me,” Matt said, still in shock, “that you are not the average beautiful flight attendant who everyone here makes you out to be. You’re more like some kind of predator just laying in wait for someone to screw up,” Matt’s voice was going up in volume and rising an octave more than even he expected it too. “Jesus, who the hell are you?”

“Take a deep breath and calm down pal,” Bob turned towards Matt with what should have been kind words but they came out like a punch in the gut. “This is all our stock-in-trade, and you better get used to it damn quick. A lot of bets are riding on your ability to handle tough situations.”

Matt looked at Bob like he had never seen him before.

“What?” Matt exclaimed in a fearful, almost a panicked yell. “What the fuck are you bloody talking about, now? BETS? What *BETS*?”

“You were originally the point of this entire flight, Matt.” Ted

said in a dead even tone. “Mr. Dash here was an...appendum. The in-flight entertainment, if you will. If we had not needed the time to prepare you for some up and coming news, we would have all crawled into a slick, comfy, pressurized supersonic underground bullet train and been at the Groom Lake Five-One facility by now.” Ted looked directly at Matt and leaned into him. “But lets take care of one set of questions at a time.” Ted hesitated, closed his eyes, steepled his fingers on the bridge of his nose as he took a breath, and then picked up again.

“By the numbers Dr. Fassbinder. Question one: who is Ariel?”

Ted looked at her holding out his hands like a magician presenting his ravishing assistant while he put the rabbit in the hat, and then back at Matt. “Dr. Ariel Gee, is a medical doctor, childhood genius and the daughter of famed Nobel Prize winning Dr. Andrew Gee and granddaughter of Dr. Gaston Gee, all of the Sorbonne Brain Institute of Paris. Ariel is an Assistant Director in our little group. She does deep evaluations of personality and motives, using her own particular genius in her field of study and the beyond State of the Art equipment at our disposal. This aircraft is just one of her laboratories. We use it when she does not need it or when we need to evaluate someone. That is why the gorgeous flight attendant routine. Disarming as hell and everyone, especially males, will spill their guts to a pretty stewardess. It is a habit of the modern technological nomad who flies too much.”

“At the university, years ago,” Matt interrupted, “I took a bioethics class in the area of psychology. I remember the professor talking about the Gee Graph and how it took away all human variations in behavior. It was presented as the way to understand how someone was ‘modeled’ from birth. But it was highly discredited and I thought it was kicked to the side of the academic world. Now you’re telling me, we are using some voodoo

system that no one believes works?” Matt was doing his best condescending speech about something he was not fully appraised of.

“My predecessor spent millions to discredit it, and many more millions to enlist the services of the Gee’s with us. It was a lot more important to us to have and use the system, than for any pimply faced college kids to debate about it.” Ted looked at Ariel and nodded.

“The Gee Graph,” Ariel began, taking her cue, “is designed to measure all aspects of human potential with the smallest amounts of inputs and variables. We have found that language and speech are two of the greatest clues to understanding the thinking of another person. The language will tell one a great deal about how one forms abstract thought and patterns their world. Speech, especially the sub-components of the patterns of linguistic formation, the tone, texture, pitch and range along with the stress factors will give us invaluable insights into how the individual thinks and what they base their views on... normally. Our friend here on the floor,” Ariel tilted her head in a coy pout with her hands next to her face, “thought he had a winning hand and was going to push it as hard as he could to get into Ted’s game. He had one or two really important facts and should have conveyed them openly and without trying to build up a storyboard around them when he never really had enough for an entire movie based on his scenario. In that way he would have been rewarded with a great deal of money, advancement, and security. Most likely, he could’ve had a chance to grow slowly in the organization.”

She sat back and sipped at her Diet Coke puckering her lips and sucking in her cheeks, making it look sexier than should have been legal. She wanted to give Matt some time to internalize this information and for him to start to ask the hard questions.

“So, right now, this...this right now...is another test for me?”

Isn't it?" Matt asked as he looked from Ariel to Ted.

Ted displayed his ultimate poker face. Giving up nothing. Ariel just turned to Matt and in an instant her visage changed to a beaming, loving smile, and she gave a few little rapid claps. "You have passed most of your examinations, Matthew. This is really to familiarize you with one of our methods of mind control."

"Bullshit!" Matt got up with a half laugh and walked around the table. He went into the attendant's cabin and came back with a beer and a lime. "You're all just takin' the piss ain't cha? As I see it, it's how I react to the use of force, and the idea that you have control over everyone is what you are selling. I already know that. No one can run an organization this big and work so hard to stay hidden without using every tool in the kit, including mind control, programming of individuals or cultures, nations, or the whole bloody world, as well as the old fashioned stuff, like, oh, outright killing someone to shut their gob. I also understand that some folks have gone through some really terrible experiences, in dealing with Aliens or Visitors, or whatever we are calling them this week. I am equally sure that you had a hand in removing those memories as well. Or, hell, even creating them in the first place! Am I right?"

"Yes Matt, you are right. But why are you so angry over it?" Ariel while still sitting at the table, watched him intensely.

"My basic nature is not to conform. I don't like the idea that you have power over me. I have not given you that right. So I feel violated by your actions against Peter there on the floor. Not that I really give a shiite about him. I don't even know anything about him other than he is some weird bloke with a great degree, likes to hang out in dusty archives and reads lorry loads of crap in German, that most people don't even care about any longer. But in your opinion he fucked up. So you pop him with a drug and let

someone else decide his fate. Does that not bother you, at all?" Matt pulled on his beer.

"Good counter. Place the responsibility on me, to explain the actions. Force me to defend, that way you can move in closer and find the weak spots." She smiled. "It might work, if only I did not know that this is your style in confrontations."

"How did you become so twisted at such a young age?" Matt said leaning over, torquing his head and jamming his finger at his temple. "Christ, you must have had a wonderful childhood, while putting electrodes in monkey's brains or slow cooking frogs to see how long it takes till they jump out of the pot!" Matt turned away. He was done.

"You asked me in Noble, did we have a space craft that worked. You got to see one a few hours ago. What do you think?" Ted tried to move away for a while from the Peter Dash equation, which was difficult because he still lay on the floor positioned like a corpse and they were all around him drinking like it was his Irish wake.

Clearly Matt was not pleased with Ariel or her methods. Ted knew how effective they were and did not want to get down into judgmental levels with her. It was another tool he used. That was all it was to him. He could remember when someone had done the same to him in England a long time ago. He left his then wife and married another woman he hardly knew. He only found out about twenty-two years later in a report he read.

"It all looks good if it's the real thing. I could believe that everything you allowed me to see this morning in the master control room was staged for my benefit. The ship, what is it? The USS Grissom? Was it a wonderful special effect or, what is the new term for that, CGI? I'm still not sure why you pulled me away from Adeline and put me into investigations of major events. I had my hands filled still trying to move a biological system

through the Beast machine.” Matt never let go of his beer.

“And I thought I was cynical,” Bob interjected.

“No my friend...No-no-no!” Matt shot back jabbing his index finger in the air. “I’m not bloody cynical at all. It is the hallmark of a non-believer in anything I have not touched, smelled, tasted, seen in person, or, like a good dog, pissed on.” Matt raised his beer in a salute. “Yes or No?”

Ted turned his attention to Ariel. She sat there and looked around the table. Then she looked directly at Matt. He stared right back at her, however, there was no warmth in his eyes.

“I still say...yes.” Ariel got up after speaking those words and left the cabin.

“I do too.” Bob was looking at his hands, turning them over and then back several times.

“I have no hesitation on this one Boss. Matt is the one in my view.” Ed got up and left to see if Ariel was okay.

“Oh! What? Brilliant! I win, I guess?” Matt looked over at Ted first, then Bob.

“You haven’t got my vote yet. The jury is still out,” Ted reached into his briefcase and pulled out two items. One was the large package he had received while in the Master Control room. The other was a small notebook. “I would like to ask you to read through this for an hour while we are still in flight, then let’s sit back down and talk again. If you would cater to me on this request?” Teds voice was very calm and controlled.

Matt nodded his consent. “Of course, if you think it is important?”

“I do.” Ted handed it to Bob who in turn handed it to Matt. Ted got up and was followed by Bob. They both went forward into the lounge area of the aircraft.

Ted picked up the only phone on board the plane, from its cradle and punched a couple of buttons. The conversation he had was very quiet with Ted doing a lot of listening.

Bob walked forward and went onto the flight deck.

Matt was left alone sitting at the conference table and he started to read the small fine handwriting of someone who knew very well how to take methodical notes. Matt's mood when he started to read was borderline distracted but within two pages that state of mind turned to deeply involved. The time went by then seemed to stop for him as he went on, flipping page after page after.

PART NINE

FASTWALKERS INBOUND

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Meanwhile, on the Moon at Cape Malabar Radio the white shift was on duty. Jo was at her station monitoring as much as she could of the various rumblings and roar of the vast infinite ocean of the universe directly outside her safe little crater near the lunar North Pole.

Three hours and fourteen minutes into her shift, she picked up the red panic phone and called the conning tower where Captain Johnson was standing.

“Skip, we got gravitational waves coming in scores at us right now. Three possibilities. Number one: we got the biggest ship anyone could build, coming out of a jump way outside the orbit of Pluto. Two: we got more than fifteen Altarian ships coming out of a jump. Or three is: something nearby and or outside the solar system just blew up and went supernova!” She clicked off on standby to hear what her boss had to say.

“Call the Grissom and see if they have got anything on their board?” Johnson asked her.

“Beventon already called it in over his low power,” Jo answered.

“Check South Africa, please.” Skip was pulling on his headset to free up his hands.

“Confirmed from Watterrand Station up in the Veld. Receiving it strong and pulsating,” Jo responded.

“Keep monitoring it Jo, and I will make notifications. By the way, thank you, and hit the button that sounds battle stations for me, if you would please be so kind,” Johnson lit up the laser-com unit that went directly to MRC.

“Control. David Mason.”

“Johnson at CMR. We have incoming Fastwalkers and lots of them. Possible one -five. I repeat one-five Fastwalkers.” Johnson then listened to

Master Control.

“Seal up and go dark Captain. Put the Grissom on battle patrol plan four. Repeat order back to me,” Mason stood by, while Johnson did exactly that.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Dave Mason turned away for a brief moment and crossed himself. It was something he had learned in childhood at American Martyrs Catholic School and never forgot. He was not sure that it would help or not, but it clearly could not hurt. He turned back and pushed the ALL COMM button on his console and spoke:

“All stations, all stations, all controls, all controls, this is not a drill, I repeat this is NO DRILL! At this time, thirteen forty-five Zulu at Master Control, I am instituting a seal order. I repeat! I am instituting a seal order. Log it and mark it. AD Mason, M.C. Master Control.”

The next thing that David did was push the red button that notified everyone in the system, that they were going dark, closing all portals and entering a condition of survival. For those inside the bunker at MRC, the outside world no longer existed.

“All stations report in that my order is clearly acknowledged as affirmative and understood.” He beeped one of the folks on the floor to start the logging of all stations on the big screen in front of them. They had four minutes until the hard seal went into place.

“Okay folks, if any of you want out of this place, do it now and don’t hesitate cause I am sealing it up. You’ve got four minutes, and counting on my mark. MARK!” He let go of the “push to talk” button and grabbed a

phone to call downstairs.

“Cristy on landline.” She answered.

“Is Jan inside from the hospital?”

“Yes, ten minutes ago. I didn’t know if that was important to tell you?”

She sounded scared. They all were.

“That’s fine Cristy. You staying or going?” Dave did not even know what she looked like.

“I’m afraid and think I want to go, but I don’t know what to do?”

“Take your headset off, drop this phone and walk directly out. It’s right behind you. It’s fifty feet to that door. Go home and be safe.” Dave waited, then heard her suck in a long labored sob.

“Oh God....!” David could hear her crying. “No! I can do this! I’ll stay!”

“Cristy we may be down here a long time. Are you sure?” Dave liked her and did not really know why. It was probably that he actually felt like he could help someone in all of this.

“No, I’m here and I’m okay. If you’re staying so am I.” She still didn’t sound certain.

“Don’t do it ‘cause of me. I’m crazy. Once those doors close kid, nothing is going to open them back up until this shit is over,” Dave looked at the timer and hit the ‘all comm’ button again. “You have two minutes to exit before lock down.”

“I can’t Dave. I need to go. I just...can’t...” She trailed off in a confused state.

“Drop the phone and pull that headset off Cristy and walk out of here. Go home and enjoy the rest of the day. Now go!” Dave hung up.

“Hard seal in one minute,” Mason pointed to Fox who had just walked back into his control room and pulled on his headset. “We are going live, Director. You should call Ted, shouldn’t you?” Dave watched the stations

now reporting in.

“Could you do it Dave? We got ah.... A minor problem up here.” Fox said back on the line.

“What kind of ‘Minor’ problem, Mr. Director?” Dave closed his eyes and listened.

“Ahm...ah...well...Director Williams just had a massive heart attack and we are trying to get him out of the building.” Fox was clearly frustrated and now on the verge of panic.

“Got it. You have thirty seconds, Mr. Director,” Dave waited knowing what was coming next.

“Mason can you hold the count for five minutes?” Fox pleaded and ordered at the same time.

“You know I can not do that sir!”

“Mason we need some time. He needs to be in a real hospital, in a cardiac care unit.” Fox was unraveling as well.

“Complete the Seal. Time is now, now, now. Log it and date it. We are presently at Def-Con 2, war conditions ladies and gentlemen. Repeat: WAR CONDITIONS. Get comfortable and sit down. Nothing is going to happen just yet,” Dave pulled his headset off and walked outside isolation. “Danny take over, I need to do something.”

A bewildered assistant walked into isolation control, pulled on a headset and was hoping and praying no one would call him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Bob Hanson was on the flight deck joking with the command pilot and co-pilot. He was in the jump seat that sat right behind the co-pilot's spot. The day outside was clear and bright. He knew that Groom Lake would be hotter than normal, which never pleased him. The pilot was telling a story about a recent sports event he'd attended. A single red lamp on the flight console started to blink rapidly.

"I'll go tell him," Bob got up and grabbed his PDA and headed back into the flight cabin. After closing the connecting door to the cockpit, he opened a small closet area. He pulled out a telephone handset that had a long cord on it plugged into an attachment at the other end. He walked over to Ted who was still talking while leaning back in his chair with his eyes closed.

Bob touched his shoulder and Ted looked up. Bob pointed at the telephone cradle and the flashing light, then sat down across from Ted and prepared to hook himself into the line.

"Humphrey." Ted answered as Bob plugged in.

"The Rabbit Hole, sir." It was the calm voice of David Mason at MRC. "I have one down and one cycling out of phase."

"Go with the traffic," Bob answered to let him know that he was on the line as well.

"Williams zeroed. Fox tread-milling." David kept each sentence as short as possible. He was well aware that they were on an open line, and even though it was scrambled, it could still be monitored.

"Who's in the booth?" Ted asked.

"Jasper," Dave did not want to volunteer any information without being asked.

"Current status?" Bob asked while making notes.

"Sealed up plus seven." Dave emphasized the time count.

“Confirm Hard Seal?” Bob was drilling a hole in the floor by just staring in one place.

“That is confirmed Big Bird.” The code name for Bob, which David would only use in a situation of major concern.

“Copy that.” Bob switched his handset off and mouthed the words to Ted. “Do you need Ariel for this?”

Ted waved him off. “Have announcements been made yet?” The whole system worked as a single unit. MRC would have to start the controlled run. If it did not make announcements in less than ten more minutes, South Africa would assume MRC was down or compromised and Cape Station would take the lead. All lines and transmissions to MRC would be automatically cut, leaving it out of the control loop.

“Negative. Seven minutes, thirty seconds.” Dave was running the stopwatch.

“Conference Jasper to over-ride all other calls if necessary. Now.” Ted leaned back and looked at the ceiling. Ariel had walked up to the front after seeing Bob on the phone as well.

She looked over Bob’s shoulder and read his notes. Bob moved the screen back up so she could see what had been happening. She gasped and covered her mouth in shock.

“Director Jasper.” A calm soft voice answered.

“Director Humphrey. Security code, mark Alpha One Seven dash Delta. Confirm?” Ted sat back knowing this would eat up time which he could not afford to lose right now.

“Confirmed.” Jasper answered.

“Booth is compromised. You are now Lead One. AD David Mason will be coming up to be Lead Two. Who else do you trust to be Lead Three?”

Again time and space kept quick answers from coming.

“Harold King in Space Comm. He’s an AD as well,” Jasper responded.

“Make it so. Have security confine the Fox away from ALL activities.

Jasper, it is imperative that you start the announcements and maintain control. Now. We will get people up there to fill out paperwork and oaths and all that other stuff, later as we move along. I will be in a secure point in forty minutes. But we must start now!” Ted waited.

“Understood Direct.....zzzzzzzzzz.....” The line went dead.

“What the fuck!” Bob stood up looking at the phone.

“David are you still there?” Ted asked.

“Affirmative Boss.” David hesitated. “Announcements have started. All stations have answered back. We are good to go.”

“Thank you David.” With that, Ted hung up the phone.

“‘The moving finger writes and having writ moves on....’” Bob quoted Khyam.

“That’s why today is so important.” Ted looked off into a place that no one else saw.

“Why are you pushing so hard with all the rest of this happening right now? I don’t understand unless you had some kind of premonition?” Ariel asked him.

“Concern, that’s all,” Ted got up and stretched. “Let’s get everything we need, because when we land it will be all elbows and assholes.”

“Aye aye, sir.” Bob turned and went looking for Ed. Ariel stood there looking deeply into Ted’s eyes.

“Are we going to get a chance to talk at all today?” She asked him.

“Not much. Things have been moving rather quickly in the last week. Did I tell you that we may have found the ‘Time Runner’ design?” Ted picked up his old beat-up leather briefcase.

“No! Really?” She looked at him carefully. “You are not planning to be the first test subject are you? Cause, I will stop that.”

“Oh God, no! But if it works we have four great big mass movers that will be able to send people to various places, and not just satellites and equipment.” He started to move toward the table.

She momentarily blocked his path. “Will it work in the time stream as well, so it will not just be a transport but a full time machine?”

“Yes.” Ted touched her upper arm softly.

“That scares me,” Ariel was not being her cool self at the moment.

“If we get through this problem, we... you and I, will talk about the plans for the system modifications and applications.” Ted gently turned her toward the table. “But right now we have an ancient and mystical rite to perform on our friend here.”

“You make it sound like we are taking him into the Mason’s, or worse yet, the Rosicrucian Order...when in reality we are dumping a world of hurt on him.” Ariel closed her eyes for a moment and then reached up and touched Ted’s hand.

“Could not happen to a better prepared and nicer guy,” Ted smiled evilly at her.

“A joke... always a joke with you. Okay, let me get my stuff ready.” She let go of his hand and walked back to her little area. Ted moved over to the head of the table and sat down, after stopping for a moment and looking at Peter Dash in his coma-like state on the floor.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Matt was sitting and still looking through the notebook. His finger rested at a spot about three-fourths through. He looked over at Ted in a

completely different way as the other man sat down at the table.

“Something happen?” Matt asked as he crossed his legs in that effete English style and leaned forward on his elbows crossing his forearms like a yogi or a twisted scarecrow

“Yes it did,” Ted answered. “We are at a hard lock down. So that means that we have a ship, or ships, at the outer parameter of the satellites. They’re coming in and there are more of them than we expected. Secondly, we just lost two Directors at MRC. One down with a heart attack, the other overcome with grief and unable to function. We are forty minutes out from Five-One and I have a million things to get done before we have a bunch of pissed off Aliens in our front yard. How is that for a bunch of fun in a three and half hour flight so far?” Ted paused and then looked over at the still comatose Peter Dash, then back at Matt. “Besides the minor interruption with our friend here.”

“After what I’ve read, I’m surprised you can even function. All of this? Crikey! No one man should have to handle this. I never knew Ted. I think I may be aware of twelve percent of what we do and I thought even that was way too much involvement for me. You’re running a small country here. Over four hundred enterprises, corporations and banks beside all the black sites we operate. We have to be close to being one of the largest employers in this country?” Matt just sat there.

“And six others combined. Our budgets run into the billions. And the man who sits in this chair has to pick extremely good and loyal kinsman to handle all of this. My job is one of managing people at the highest level and at the same highest level of information. I have now done this job for fifteen years. We’ve seen a lot of changes and more are coming. This new system that is really taking off called the Internet is going to make our jobs a hundred times more difficult. I can’t even imagine! Do you know how much of our

information base will double with something like that in place?”

Ted looked up to see the others coming back in with papers and other needed items in hand. “Matt, you’ve been tested for the past six months. You have come through everything with flying colors. You are stubborn, arrogant and at the same time, brilliant. Now here is where the rubber meets the road.”

Ted took a file out of his briefcase and opened it up. “Are we ready?”

He looked at the others at the table. They in turn nodded their agreement.

“Dr. Fassbinder, you have been recommended, tested and approved to move a long ways up in our organization. We only know ourselves as The Group. That has been our name for a long time. We at this level we have no formal structure, no organizational charts and no comparables. Basically, we are what we are. We’re trying to protect our world from those that would take it, conquer it and enslave mankind.

“Over the last seventy years we have had no desire to let that happen. So we assumed all power and all authority without anyone giving it to us. We are a roll and tumble, rough and ready organization that has influence and control in many various areas of the government and politics. We answer to no one. Yet we will if necessary remove anyone from our path to complete our stated mission. We have no rules, no boundaries and no limits. We could be despots if we so chose to do that. But we are not. However, we will not try to save the individual, as we are more concerned with all of humanity and our various societies and cultures on this planet. That is what we do.

“Now, if you are ready to receive the next mantle of responsibility you must complete several tasks in the next few minutes of your own free will. No promises are made to you and nothing is being offered as an incentive. Do you understand?”

Ted paused and waited.

“I do.” Matt nodded his head when he said those words.

“Are you ready to proceed?” Ted asked again.

“I am... I think?” Matt smiled sheepishly.

“Bad answer. This must be a definitive, solid, honorable and unequivocal yes or a no.” The formality and menace oozed from his pours.

“Yes.Yes Sir.” Matt regained his composure.

Ted nodded to Ariel. She then placed a large document in front of Matt and pulled it open to one section.

“You have seen this document before. You signed one when you went to work for MRC. This is the same document with the exceptions that there are four additional pages. They start right here,” she pointed, “and continued through the next four pages. “Please read them carefully and we will try to answer any questions you may have.”

She sat back and waited. The others were savoring the moments of quiet time while Matt’s lips moved in silent prayer as he absorbed all the words that would change his life.

As Matt sat there reading, he went back and forth between some of the pages and then looked back only once, and then moved forward again. It took a good seven minutes to completely read everything to his satisfaction and understanding.

“Am I to understand that this is a Top Secret section of the Uniform Code of Military Justice, covering only the United States Naval Space Wing. Is that correct?” Matt looked over at Bob for that answer.

“That is correct.” Bob answered and offered no more.

“How does that apply to me?” Matt looked at the pages again.

“Please do not sign that document as of yet,” Ariel interjected.

“Dr. Fassbinder, would you please stand up.” Ed was holding a paper in

his hand.

Matt got up and stood looking straight at him.

“Please repeat after me,” Ed read him the enlisting pledge of the US Military. Upon finishing and Matt agreeing to it, Ed added, “As a senior officer of the US Navy, I have now enlisted you into the services of the United States military. You are now a subject and the property of the government of the United States of America.”

Bob then got up and motioned for Matt to stay standing.

“As a command level officer I am allowed in time of a national emergency and any grave danger, to advance any man in rank to the level that I personally believe he is fit to hold and serve within. In doing so, I am commissioning you, Doctor Matthew M. Fassbinder, Lieutenant Commander, United States Naval Space Wing. I shall in my role as Adjutant pass these papers with recommendations to the Secretary of the Navy, and request that he signs them and forwards them with recommendations to the Congress of the United States, so that our commission will not remain a brevet, but be full and secure.” Bob signed the documents he had and then had Matt sign them as well.

“Welcome aboard Lt. Commander Fassbinder.” Bob threw his hand out to Matt, and they shook on it.

“Now if you would, since you are a naval officer, now, sign and return the documents of service in front of you, please,” Ariel said to him. Matt did so and handed them over to her. She pulled out what looked like a notary stamp and placed the stamped seal on the papers and counter signed them. She nodded at him and then got up and left the table as did both Ed and Bob carrying some papers with them.

Ted slid the huge envelope he had obtained at MRC down the table to Matt.

“Open it and see the new you.”

Matt did so and started to read the various documents inside the leather portfolio case. It held US Navy identification sets, a weapons license for concealed carry for every type and make of firearm, BLACK LEVEL Q clearance documents, a new wallet with business cards showing that he was now the director of MRC in Maryland, two American Express cards, five thousand dollars in cash tucked in the wallet, and there was a set of keys, which Matt held up looking at a loss towards Ted.

“Your new home in Chevy Chase, Maryland, and a penthouse flat in London on Half Moon Street.” Ted filled in Matt’s blank look. “There is also a car that comes with it. Any make and model you like, but that is for you to pick out. I am not your goddamn Mum.”

“And what’s my new title, besides officer and a gentlemen, which clearly I am not.” Matt looked at him, just as Bob came back to the table with a cup of coffee.

“Matt you are the brand new Assistant Senior Director of the Group. Ed is your Dog Robber for the next three months. During that time we will start a process of you going through files and picking a couple of naval officers or marines who you want as constant companions.” Bob looked at Ted for additional comments, of which, there were none.

“As I understand our structure, there is only one Senior Director, and that is you Ted?” Matt was speaking very slowly and carefully.

“There were two before today. I was the oldest and Ariel was the youngest. Now you’re the middle child.” Ted smiled at him. “It is truly a curse I have placed upon you. You do know that don’t you?”

“I think that reality will set in, in a little while. But exactly what is my role? I know what Directors do and Assistant Directors. But this is all new to me.” Matt waited.

“All other jobs as required.” Bob said quietly. “To be prepared and ready to fill the role and responsibility of the Senior Director if he is killed, injured, incapacitated or removed from his position.” Bob raised his coffee cup to him. “Generally right now, continue to be the total asshole that everyone thinks you are. The only difference is that you trump everyone else in power oh, and in your ass-holiness.” Bob smiled that crooked cowboy grin of his.

“Shite!” Matt sat back, shaking his head and trying to catch up. The overhead announcement from the pilot said that they were starting their descent 30 minutes out of Groom Lake.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

During the last few minutes of the flight, each man had gone back to the rear of the aircraft and changed out of their civilian clothing and donned green flight suits and shiny black ankle boots. Matt had been shocked when Ed showed him the neatly piled set for him, with a Velcro leather tag that had his name emblazoned on it in embossed gold letters against the crinkly leather of the patch and gold leaves indicating his newly minted rank already on the collar.

“LT. COMMANDER MATTHEW M. FASSBINDER.” Matt picked up the neatly folded pile of clothes, and just stared at them and the badge for a moment in awe. All his life he’d been the iconoclast, the outsider, the outcast, the loner, the picked on boy that really secretly just always wanted to belong. Now he was the definitive Insider; in fact the lord god king and prophet of the Insiders, making a real difference to the world, and he didn’t care if no one ever knew about what he did. All the covert cloak and dagger secrecy gave him a perverse delight, like being rocketed here from another planet having the ultimate super hero identity.

Bob and Ed both wore shoulder holsters outside their flight suits. Ed explained about the new identification card Matt had that was fixed with a clip to hang from his pocket. It would provide access to everything at FIVE-ONE.

“Lose this and you will become a target of opportunity,” Ed said, half-jokingly.

“A target of...” Matt said, confused.

“Your will run around until they shoot you, dumb-ass...er, Lt. Commander Dumb-Ass...SIR!” Ed saluted.

Matt took the small notebook Ted gave him and looked his body up and down to pick a pocket to put it in. Pockets, pockets...so many pockets! Matt had usually only ever worn light slacks, and a white shirt with a breast pocket for his glasses and pocket protector and pens. Did people actually pilot aircraft with this much junk stuffed next to their bodies? Finally, mostly out of frustration, he unzipped and jammed the journal in his lower leg pocket and zipped it in tightly for further reading.

Ed stood next to Matt while Matt rummaged through the pockets of his normal clothing and pulled out all kinds of odds and ends. Ed just smiled and handed him a large plastic zip lock baggy. Ed took it back full of Matt's personal items and dropped it into Matt's briefcase. This brought a smile from the other man as he was nodding.

"So all these pockets and you don't use them?" Matt smiled.

"Ruins the sexy lines of the suit," Ed grinned. "Ya want the ladies to get a view of the complete package."

"My jacket?" Matt held it up for Ed to see. "This is my most favorite sport coat. I can't just leave it behind for the coyotes." Matt was holding it up, admiring it, petting it like his favorite dog. It was one of those well-worn hound's tooth tweed jackets, with leather patches at the elbows.

"Don't worry Boss, it'll be cleaned and hung with care in the closet at your new house in Maryland." Ed took it and folded it up and placed it in the large black clothes holder with Matt's name on the outside. "Are you handy with firearms? Especially handguns?"

Matt stopped for a moment and looked over at Ed. "I had a bunch of friends in Australia who loved guns. Pistols as well as rifles, even though they were illegal. We used to go out in the bush and blast the hell out of beer cans we'd only just previously emptied."

"There you go, Boss," Ed handed Matt a small black .380 Auto. "Inside

your left breast pocket is a built in holster so it won't show. It's a lot better if folks don't think you're armed. But if you should need it, you can easily grab it, and of course, use it. You will know when."

The main cabin had been transformed by the others into what looked like a military flight deck. Ed and Matt walked into the area joining Ted and Bob. The four men were all in their tight olive drab flight suits. Ariel had cleaned everything up and was sitting in her office checking through forms and documents. As the last two men took their seats, Ted began his introductory lecture to Matt.

"There are two parts of Groom Lake, or Five-One as most people on the inside call it. The east section is known as S-2. That's where the first High-Binder device is located. That is pretty much a civilian contractor operated facility, with military guards. The west building is where we are heading. That is A-2. It's the headquarters of the USNSF. It's under the command of Captain John T. Crandell, and let me tell you, he makes Captains Bly, Lowe, Caine and Hook look like the Skipper from Gilligan's Island. He runs a highly ordered and strict command, where all naval rules are observed to the letter. So be very careful with the personnel there. You have no worries as a boss, but by accident you can get one them in a lot of trouble with Crandell. You don't want to ruin some poor well-meaning soldier's life. This is 'Old School' rules, pal. So I am asking you, as a comrade, associate, employee and as a friend, don't be too cute, too clever, or too sarcastic in front of any of them. You are in charge now, and that comes with unimaginable power, and anything you say or do has resounding repercussions all around you that you may or may not see." Ted nodded to Matt.

"I understand." Matt nodded and waited for him to continue

"After we settle in for a few minutes, you and I need to get on board and see what has, and is happening, at MRC." Ted looked out the window to

see the landing strip coming into view. “But you need to get a feel for our part of the base. So from here until we’re in our area, it might be a good idea to keep conversation to an absolute minimum. This base is only second in security and secrets to Cape Malabar Radio, our base on the moon. You need to realize that.”

“I’m getting that impression very clearly, sir,” Matt added and Ted smiled.

Four hours and ten minutes after take off from MRC, the jet set down on the seven and a half mile long runway at the Groom Dry Lake Bed, and pulled to a stop in front of Hanger 18, the largest aircraft hanger in the world, at the far northern end of the Nellis Test Range in the Great Silver State of Nevada.

PART TEN:

NO BEACH
TO WALK ON

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

As the sleek jet pulled to a halt on the enormous apron in front of Hanger 18, the largest aircraft hanger on Earth, four vehicles raced up and skidded to a halt around the plane. One of the vehicles was a large transport van with tinted windows and a special air conditioning package atop the roof. The others were refueling and stocking trucks and lastly an ambulance with no markings on it.

The main hatch of the jet opened and the steps gracefully unfolded and descended down to the ground from within the underbelly of the fuselage of the bird. Inside the plane the temperature rapidly changed as the hatch door was opened. The warm desert air rushed into the cabin space. The portal quickly filled with the bright white light from the hot sun above the base. Speedy good-byes were said by three of the men before they went down the ramp looking for the cool air-conditioned comfort of the transport van. Bob Hanson took Ted's briefcase with him and sported his own nylon duffel slung over his shoulder.

Ariel lingered coyly just inside the door as Ted pulled his military issued teardrop Ray Ban sunglasses out of his flight suit breast pocket, squared his shoulders and turned to Ariel. The ultimate graceful feminine to Ted's dominant uber Alpha male. She leaned up against the bulkhead just looking him over up and down with a deep breath.

"So," Ariel sighed, "I read Bob's notes. I was unaware that we had a full-blown operation in progress," she pouted. "Were you going to tell me before you left?"

"I was. There just didn't seem to be enough time, with everything else happening up here," Ted stood there squinting out at the daylight and

fumbling to get his sunglasses on. “I need you to do something very important for me?”

“What would that be, Theodore?” Ariel had a slightly dreamy look in her eyes.

“I need you to fly back to Paris today. I don’t want you spending any time in Boston or in DC or on anything that is work or business related. You’ve had enough of this boy band, skull and bones cloak and dagger nonsense for a lifetime. Right now, Ariel, with what is coming, you need to be home.” Ted finally looked at her, took a quick glance out the door, then moved slightly closer to her.

She reached out and laid her hand gently on his chest and moved it slowly up to caress the nape of his neck. “Is it that bad?”

“The way this one’s playing out, it could be our last hurrah. I had fully expected the Altarians to come with a few ships, paint the fleet white, show us a big stick, give us a rush up and do some saber rattling just to show us who’s boss. But they’re coming in force. At least that’s what it looks like right now. I can’t believe they would send this many ships just to scare us or strong arm us into signing some new awful treaty.” He put his hand over hers and leaned in closer, breathing deep, the sheer stunning dizzying scent of this amazing woman filling his head.

“You seem to be planning something very complex for yourself right now,” Ariel leaned into him and laid her head on broad his chest.

“Ariel, you are too good an analyst not to see this. I’ve been involved with all of this for over fifty years. I’ve lived through four of these situations with aliens coming to wipe us out before, and the Earth is still here. In the past we’ve wiped out the one’s that were here twice, bluffed once and then capitulated most of the other times. A gang of fools and cowards has given them rights they don’t deserve, to take liberties with our planet and our

people.” He put his arms around her and squeezed. “I swear to you, not this time. Win, lose or draw, we are taking a stand. We will throw whatever they’ve got right back at them. Our forces are outgunned, out manned and out matched and there really aren’t enough of us. And very, very few people outside The Group know that the fate of this world is going to hang in the balance in the next few days. No elected official or other leader on Earth has agreed to this. This is my desire, my will, and my game now. Just me.”

“There is no one I would trust more in this world than you to make that decision.” Ariel pulled in tighter to him. “But I am prejudiced.”

“Go home and take good care of Sean...please.” Ted started to pull back, but Ariel clung to him like a loving child not wanting her daddy to go.

“Come with me,” she begged, looking up at him, “be with us.” She then wrapped herself around his thick muscled frame again and held him tight. He was so much taller and larger than she.

“I can’t,” Ted pulled away and cupped her doll like face with those porcelain blue eyes and perfect golden hued flawless skin in his rough, broad battered hands. The sheer beauty and brilliance of this woman left him breathless, and it made him reflect back on the wreckage he had left behind in his own personal life. All those he’d destroyed in his wake. Irina who fled and exiled herself in fear of him, his work and what his country had become. Ellen, abducted, tortured and raped on levels few people could ever imagine. Sally, who raised his son, her father brutally murdered, mind-fucked into loving another man. It was easier and more merciful, he felt, to just swear off women and relationships altogether, since they were always a weakness his enemies used against him. Now he knew why super heroes had secret identities.

Until Ariel came along, and even then, looking down into her face of unearthly goddess like beauty, he felt like the ultimate selfish bastard because

of the constant feeling of impending doom that she would be just one more heart that he would mangle and toss on the heap with all the other lives he, and this job, had destroyed. He took in and exhaled a long deep sigh of mournful regret.

No beach to walk on.

“I need to be here,” he said at last. “I need to do this. For you, for Sean, for every blessed soul on this world. This time I’m not watching it all come down from a hole in the ground. I could not survive this one to come up six months from now and know that everyone and everything I ever loved or ever cared about was gone. I can’t and I won’t do that this time. I love you, but I can’t live with myself if I walk away from this fight. I still have a couple of very important things to do in my life, as well as seeking some time to be with you and Sean. But right now, I need to do and be what I’ve spent a lifetime learning to be. A man that leads from the front.”

“You’re not going to do something stupid are you?” She looked deeply into his eyes.

“I am not going to do anything more than I would ask of anyone else or others to do, if that is what you mean?” Ted finally stood back disengaging himself and looked out again at the harsh reality of the brightness of the day. Both of them left the brief fleeting dreamscape they’d created and reattached the masks they presented to the world.

“You are too old to be a command pilot,” Ariel’s professional analysis kicked in. “Your reflexes aren’t fast enough. Your heart can’t stand that kind of strain. If you don’t die, you’ll be crippled for the rest of your life.” As they both looked out at the tarmac from the door of the plane out at the waiting soldiers tears welled in her eyes as the mask slipped one last time.

“I need you. Sean needs you. Your two other children need you. We all need you...as does The Group. In fact, you are The Group. You’ve made this

organization into more than it ever was in the past. They were a bunch of tinkerers, playing with an ancient Nazi clock before you. You, with the sheer force of your will, made this into a star spanning space fleet filled with great heroic men and women. Theodore, you've created something greater than any other leader, king, president, country or empire has ever accomplished in the history of Mankind. And you have done this all single handedly. Don't be so quick to throw it all away." She hugged him one last time.

"Darling...not in front of the men!" He smiled, and they both laughed, as he kissed her on the forehead one last time, smelling the sweet aroma of her hair. "I need to go." Ted pulled away and put on his Ray Bans. "Please, do as I said. Go home. Take care of our world for both of us while I take care of everyone else's." He leaned down and kissed her on the cheek and turned to leave.

She reached out and grabbed a handful of his chest and kissed him on the mouth, with deep and powerful emotion. The men on the tarmac shifted their feet and exchanged grinning sideways glances.

"I love you!" She whispered in his ear.

"I know."

Ted turned without another word and rushed down the steps. Two grinning naval security officers were standing at the bottom of the steps, and threw a salute towards him in unison. He returned the salute and walked briskly down the stairs and into the waiting van.

Ted was seated in the front passenger seat and motioned to the driver to take off. Bob was sitting behind him and reached up and placed his hand on Ted's shoulder, without a word. Ted reached up and gripped the other man's hand in acknowledgment. Bob then patted Ted's shoulder and sat back.

Matt was looking out the back and watched as three men with a stretcher walked up the steps and entered the plane. "Ariel's not coming with

us? That's a shame. She added some class to this Animal House frat party."

"This isn't a place for her to be right now, Boss." Ed never turned his head. "Stay close to me and do what I do. This place is all military and they'll expect you to be like they are: quiet, disciplined and formal."

"We're burning daylight!" Ted yelled, doing his best John Wayne.

The van pulled out and the driver hit the gas. They went zooming across the gigantic apron and up to a hundred miles an hour in less than fifteen seconds. They were three miles from A-2 and time was a wasting.

No one spoke for the rest of the ride.

CHAPTER Twenty-Seven

The Melton J. Anderson Flight and Test Center was located in a small set of hills at the south end of the Groom Dry Lake. It had been built almost completely inside the surrounding hills. The only outside building was the entrance hall that was a long, low cement structure painted a desert tan color, jutting out from the side of the cliff face. There was a single sign placed over the only entrance of two double glass doors. The building had no windows and looked no bigger than an average home that someone hadn't lived in for a while. Yet, it housed a complex of over five hundred naval personnel, all of whom were lifers. They had all signed the same forms Dr. Matthew Fassbinder had just autographed hours ago on the plane.

Their careers in the Navy were encompassed by this building and one other much like it at the China Lake Naval Air Station in the high desert of Central California. A man could serve out his whole career in the Navy here or in the middle of any number of barren deserts, all of which looked like the surface of the moon and then retire, never having set foot on a ship or a beach or ever see an ocean or even a lake.

A man might never set foot on another base after coming to this site... unless he was fortunate enough to be part of the select, honored, chosen few 'off planet' teams. Then the wonders of the universe awaited him. But space was really just another ocean.

The screening process for deployment here was beyond intense. It made the Seals, Green Berets and Airborne Rangers look like getting picked for a game of elementary school kickball. The process was long, arduous and in depth, and only the very best could be chosen for this assignment. This was a beyond Top Secret unit of individuals. No one outside this base and China Lake even knew this assignment existed until they got it. Even the Navy had little to no control over this base. It was a "BLACK SITE" on all their

organizational charts. The Commandant at Nellis AFB, which this place was “officially” part of, or even the President of the United States didn’t have clearance to be here. It was truly a “don’t ask, don’t tell” facility in a different sense of the word. The advanced research that came out of this location was given to the Navy for implementation aboard the fleet and in the air. And by ‘Air’ that meant above the Earth and out into the universe. It was a research facility that just kept giving and no one had to provide oversight. All the upper levels of ‘management’ straight through to the Joint Chiefs of Staff were not really sure how this site was budgeted or paid for. No one had the privilege of knowing, and that meant NO ONE! Not even Congress had any idea of what went on here, and even the top level cleared Committees only knew the name, and that it turned out some powerful systems. There were no Congressional visits or photo ops here. Senior Naval officers who did get invited never got past the main entrance building reception area that had only small offices and a complex of conference rooms. So most inquiring minds preferred to have video-conferences with those at the Anderson Flight and Test Center, known to most on the inside only as A-2.

The naval personnel here did not mop floors, clean toilets, or cook. That was controlled by a tightly screened group of civilians who were shadowed by Marines all the time they were inside Complex A. No civilians ever went into Complex B, only naval personnel with the highest security clearances on the planet could gain entry into that area.

No personal vehicles were allowed to park within five miles of the complex. Everyone who had a car had to park at the main complex building’s covered parking garage at the Groom Flight Center and take the BBB, the Big Blue Bus with the blacked out windows out to A-2. A large number of the personnel did not even have their cars on the Groom base at all. They’d come up from Vegas from the EE&G airfield at the corner of McCarran

Airport on a JANET shuttle aircraft that flew several times a day. It stood for Johnson Airfield and Nevada Experimental Test-site, after the famed Northrop SKUNKWORKS engineer Kelly Johnson. Until Johnson's death when it was memorialized JANET it was called GLANET for Groom Lake Airfield Nevada Experimental Test-site.

But AREA 51 was nothing like the Grand Old Days of the late 1980s and 1990s. The famed S-4 site built into the side of a mountain over the hill at Papoose Lake had been mothballed years ago. So much of what happened here had been transferred to the new massive underground United States Space Command facility under King's Peak, in the vast wilderness heart of Utah's Uinta National Forest.

A majority of naval personnel who stayed at A-2 found it was much cheaper, and better, than what they could ever rent in Vegas, and a whole lot less hassle. This applied especially to those who were not married without families.

In Complex A, there were offices, lunch and conference rooms, workshops, research labs, actual open workplaces, and general common areas. The rest of the complex was devoted to living quarters, a complete hospital with fully paid health-care, recreational facilities, libraries, dining facilities, a bowling alley, a full gym with basketball courts, handball, and racket ball courts, an Olympic sized indoor swimming pool, theater, chapel, class rooms and name outlet shops as part of the PX that carried both military and civilian items at a greatly reduced price.

Circling the whole complex inside the mountain was a track nearly three miles around. The complex was kept at exactly sixty-eight degrees. The air was purified four times over through filters and negative ion generators with oxygen added, and everywhere there were alkaline bottled water dispensers.

A connecting set of tunnels went to two different places. The ones on the south side of Complex A led to the storage areas and warehouses. This was the only way in and out of that complex. There was nearly a million square feet in this area and it had its own security, military force, fire department and a loading and unloading area that was at the base of the hills on the east side.

The tunnel connecting them was a “no go” place for those who lived and worked on either side of the connecting tunnel. Orders were placed from inside Complex A and then those in the warehouse area would fill them and place them on an automatic mover. The auto movers traversed throughout the tunnel and took items, with no human involvement, from one side to the other. The standing order was, “if anyone was found inside the tunnel, they were to be shot on sight”, no questions asked.

The Complex A side had a set of two blast doors that could be closed and sealed in emergencies. They also could close off the loading docks as well with another set of rapid drop blast doors.

Complex B was the heart and soul of the base. It had one hundred offices, sixteen huge laboratories, nine major construction areas, and two huge hangars. Hangar 1 was filled with six alien spacecraft moved over from S-4, that had been recovered over the last sixty or so years. Most of them had been torn apart, rebuilt, torn apart again, upgraded, rebuilt again and were still being tested or in some form of an ongoing undertaking. It was a flight museum of the incredible where one would stand in awe of these truly amazing ships.

Hangar 2 was the end product of all the work that had ever been done at A-2. Housed in it were the four “A.R.V.s”-Alien Reproduction Vehicles—the man made craft that were every bit as good as any that had been recovered.

They were known only as “The Vipers”.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The van stopped in front of the administration building and all four men got out and walked into the structure through the front main door. The coolness hit them instantly after stepping out of the Africa-like heat. The air seemed sweeter, more comfortable and easier to breathe. The one Marine sitting behind a desk immediately stood straight up along with the other two Marines stationed by the only door with a loud clack as their boots banged together going from at-ease to full attention.

“Admiral on deck!” The tough, hard looking Marine Gunnery Sergeant yelled out.

“At easy, Gunny,” Ted casually returned the salute.

“Good as hell to see you, sir!” The Marine spoke with a decided southern accent.

“Like wise. It’s good to be home.” Ted then put out his hand to the other man, who shook it vigorously with a firm grip.

“Gunnery Sergeant Thompson, this is Lt. Commander Fassbinder, your new base commander.” Ted pointed to Matt who was pulling off his sunglasses and fumbling to put on his horn-rimmed eyeglasses on so he could see them and make eye contact.

The Gunnery Sergeant shot him a salute and Matt was quick enough to give it back, then he extended his hand out to him as well.

“Welcome aboard, Skipper.” The Marine sat back down and started to enter a code into a dump terminal on his desk. “Gentlemen, if I may have your identification cards please?”

Everyone pulled their ID off their flight suits and handed them to him. He punched in each of their codes and then ran them through a reader on his desk. The Marine focused carefully on the screen and about a minute of silence passed until his mouth bowed into a hard frown.

“Captain Hanson, sir? You need a dental check-up. Shall I schedule it now?” The Marine looked up at him.

“A little later Gunny. But thank you for reminding me. How have you been?” Bob reached over and shook the man’s hand.

“Still breathin’ and still standin’ Boss. How ‘bout you?” The Marine smiled back at a man he liked very much.

“ ‘Bout the same, Gunny. Three pounds over fighting weight. Softer and squishier but still ready and able.” Bob took his ID card back from the Marine and clipped it back on his flight suit pocket.

“Jump on the track for three days and you’ll be ready to go for a couple of rounds with Lance Corporal Vasquez here,” the Marine jerked his thumb toward one of the young men at attention by the door, who was now displaying a slight smile.

“You China Coast Bum,” Bob smiled. “You’d make a fortune on side bets and I’ll just get my head handed to me on a platter. Thanks all the same.” Both men laughed.

“You gentlemen are cleared to enter. I presume you’re all armed?” The Sergeant was handing them back their ID’s. He turned to Matt. “Skipper, glad to meet you. If you need anything, let us know. I am sure you already have a Dog Robber working for you? However, us boys can find things your ‘gentlemen’ types here probably can’t.” As much as he liked them, he was still an enlisted Marine and proud of it. Every now and then he would give any of them a little nudge to remind them.

“You bet, ah...Gunny. I will find you first.” Matt gave a wink and a finger gun, then clumsily followed the others through the doors, which closed and sealed quickly behind them.

They entered a long hallway with doors off to both sides, and Matt jogged to catch up with Bob and asked, “What was that all about with the

Corporal?”

“Oh. Huh...Corporal Vasquez was with the First Marine Division before he came here. He was their middle-weight boxing champion. He could have made all kinds of big money going public and leaving the Corps. He chose to come here instead. He supports a family of eight in Barstow, the world famous, star studded and glamorous hometown of our very own Dr. Humphrey here. His family, his father, his mother, his two sisters and their children. They would've been down and out for the count if it weren't for him. He has leave every three weeks for a week to go home. While he's there, I've seen him work for seven straight days making sure the house is fixed up and everything is okay. His dad was hurt years ago in an agricultural accident, and got nothing for it. So the Corporal became the man of the house. A couple years ago there was an emergency and he had to get off base. I cleared it and in fact, flew him home. I stayed with the family and had one of the best times ever. Great people. So loving and caring. His mom told me to come back anytime and stay as long as I wanted. One of his sisters is a doll. Big Momma had plans for her and me. I had to tell her I already had a wife. That was still okay with her! Shit...I almost stayed.” Before Bob could finish, Ted was snickering to himself.

“I told him if he did, I was coming too!” Ed chimed in.

“Me too,” Ted offered up. “His momma is the best cook in the world. His father knows so much about Mexican history it's unbelievable. What a card he is. Has a dirty joke for every situation, and he can only tell them to us on the back porch drinking cold beer with the women in the house, cuz if Momma hears them she comes out and boxes his ears!”

“Wow!” Matt had never seen the human side of these men before. “Will I get a chance to meet them?”

“If you want. When this dance is done. Hell, we'll all go. But we'll

probably have to buy them a bigger house. I think we can probably afford that.”

“ ’Cuz in Barstow,” Ed grinned, “that would be a whole ‘nother thirty-six bucks!”

“Shut up, you! Don’t you mock my beloved and glamorous hometown!” Ted smiled to himself as he was picturing sitting there on the back porch in the warm desert evenings watching the night skies. Something he didn’t do much anymore. Since he learned what was out there.

They turned a corner and were facing a set of double doors. Hanging over the lintel was a sign, “Flight Operations and Commander Officers.” The room was large, with a light gray carpet, had wooden book cases along the walls, with oversized pictures of various astronomical objects in glass frames illuminated by indirect lighting hanging higher up.

On each opposing side were small offices with a plate glass window looking into the large room. The offices were small, with bookshelves lining the walls, a white board, a desk under the window, two computer terminals on a side table, a comfortable chair, visitor chairs and a small refrigerator with an alkaline water dispenser.

The main room had four conference tables, a lounge area with comfortable chairs and a couch. There was a large statue to one side that looked to Matt like it was Mayan or Aztec. It was about six feet tall, made of a hard rock and beautifully chiseled in stunning detail. The statue was on a piece of highly polished granite and had a light shining out of the ceiling down on it. It was also highly polished and should have probably been in a world-class museum. Next to it was a long chrome rod running from the ceiling to the floor. In the middle of it was a round circle of stainless steel that had been highly polished as well. The circle free floated and with the slightest touch turned in a slow rotating motion.

Matt stood there looking at it. Ed came up from behind and stood next to him.

“What’s this? It’s Mayan isn’t it?” Matt asked without turning around to Ed.

“Yup. It’s Eighteen Rabbit, Uaxaclajunn Ub’aah K’awiil, a Mayan king and shaman, and probably one of the first recorded time travelers. The circle next to him represents the portal through which he passed to the ‘nether world’ and then came back to bring his people knowledge.” Ed motioned to an office for Matt to follow him into.

“Seems strange to be in a hard core Naval facility, don’t you think?” Matt turned to follow him.

“Not at all,” Ed said cryptically. “It’s our first business.” Ed pointed to a door, and Matt stood before it. It was painted with gold leaf and told the world that this was the office of the Base Commander.

“Get situated and look around. We all need a few minutes to get squared away and then after that we’ll probably be hitting it hard.”

Matt nodded and walked in. It was small but very workable and comfortable. He took off his thin cloth service cap and laid it down on the edge of the desk and placed his briefcase next to it. He tried the chair and examined the desk a little closer. On it was a white cup that had an emblazoned logo: “One hundred and thirty-third Space Wing.” Under that it spelled out:

“This cup belongs to Lt. Commander Dr. Matthew Fassbinder, Wing Commander. Touch this cup on pain of death!”

Matthew was SOOO loving this place!

PART ELEVEN:

COMMANDER
BAD ASS

CHAPTER Twenty-Nine

Charles Armstrong was a very unhappy man. His job was over at S-2 as the operations coordinator and facility manager. Fifty-two years old, overweight, normally puffy, red faced, bloodshot eyes and angry with a vein on the side of his forehead that looked like it was about to burst open and spurt toxic poisonous blood like a horned frog on all those around him at any second.

But make no mistake about it: Charles Armstrong truly did hate the whole world. He was one of Ted's loose ends that had not yet been cleaned up. Armstrong had managed the second Chronos machine for the past fifteen years. It had gone through six major re-works, most of which, unbeknownst to Armstrong, had been developed in Matt's laboratory in Australia.

During a critical period three years before the Chronos Two had been used around the clock to deploy one of the most modern and advanced satellites ever built. They were deep space units powered by on-board fission battery reactors, something Ted had actually developed in his enforced "Down Time" in exile back in Barstow. They had a life expectancy of over forty years with sensor arrays that were five times more advanced than any military satellite and they used gravitational beam communications back to the Earth stations that monitored them for near instantaneous networking.

Charles Armstrong had to work around the clock for nearly four months to place one hundred and twenty of these units inside the outer solar system and beyond Pluto. They'd tried to place and activate one a day. It was a Herculean task, but he had done it, through yelling, brow beating and dire threats. Not the style that anyone was used to around there. Almost every person to a man and woman in the command staff at S-2 under Armstrong

had filed a complaint with Ted.

It had also been during this time that Charles' wife became lonely, not being satisfied with a beautiful palatial home in Las Vegas with a lawn and a swimming pool. She found warmth in another set of arms. She proceeded to clean out the bank accounts, sued for a divorce and had basically taken Charles to the cleaners. He ended up in a small apartment with rented furniture and all his money gone, along with losing half his paycheck every month to alimony, while the wife lived in his house with her new boyfriend. Some might have felt he had cause to be upset, but everyone agreed that he should never have brought it onto the base and taken it out on everyone around him.

Armstrong had taken the tram that runs underground between S-2 and A-2 which was five miles away and went up the three story elevator to the entrance area of A-2. He cleared the Marine guard and was escorted by Vasquez to the Commander's Office. This, in and of itself, angered him even more. He felt he should have a free hand in this place as well. But that was never going to happen. Vasquez added insult to injury by making him wait outside the door until the young Marine announced him to Ted. Ted came out of his office and stood by one of the tables. Ted looked over at Matt and motioned for him to join them. Matt knew Charles and had thought of him as being like something he would scrape off the bottom of his shoes on a hot day.

Charles walked in already displaying his flushed red face and mincing black snake-like eyes. With no introductions he launched into it and dove, head first, down everyone's throat.

"Really? You just show up and don't bother to tell anyone. That is just great! I would expect at least a courtesy call while you're on MY base. What? Did you fly in on Pussy Air with sluts working a brass pole and doing lap

dances for you guys all the way?” The man stood there and looked around the room at the others, taking in Bob and Ed. “Wonderful! If it isn’t Orville and Wilbur here...the last of the failed NASA astronauts. Oh, and look! Fassbinder just got a new jolly jumpin’ Romper Room play suit too. Well I am impressed...oh gosh!” He looked back at Ted. Nothing was exchanged or said. “Oh my. Did I interrupt your hippie mediation session? I want to know whose bright idea it was to bring nuclear weapons onto my site without asking my permission?”

Ted rocked back and forth on his toes, shot a look at Matt, then turned on his heel and beat a retreat back into his own office, closed the door and sat down. This was one of the reasons Matt had been brought aboard and Ted just tossed him in the deep end to sink or swim on his first day.

Fassbinder rolled back and forth on his heels, and bounced on his toes for a moment or two, looking at the floor. He ran his hand through his hair, pushing it out of his eyes, and adjusted his glasses.

“Lance Corporal Vasquez,” Matt looked at the young Marine, speaking in a low, soft tone.

“Sir! Yes, sir!” Vasquez answered.

“Umm...please take out your side arm.”

Vasquez, like a striking cobra, drew his weapon, ran his thumb across the red dot of the safety, taking it off, rested his index finger lightly outside the trigger guard and placed his left hand over his right, and dropped the weapon to over his groin in the “At-Ease” position. This took, literally, less than a fraction of a second.

“Now, Corporal,” Matt was all calm, cool and collected English charm and grace itself, “if I tell you to shoot Mr. Armstrong, I want you to fire directly into his head. But would you be so kind as to angle your shot in such a way as to not get brains all over my brand new freshly painted walls.”

Matt looked back at Charles who was snickering.

“Oh come on, Puss-binder!” He said tossing his arms out wide. “Seriously? First day and they didn’t teach you better than this?” Charles smirked at Matt. “This place can’t function without me. I mean, who do you think you are exactly? You crawled out of some hole in the ground where they found you, some kind of geek in a lab...from the edge of the world....out in, where? Australia? Just another rat to be experimented on and dissected later. You have no power in this Group! You’re nothing!”

Matt crossed his arms and put his hand to his mouth, bouncing his finger off his pursed lips, pondering.

“Hummm....On second thought, please don’t shoot him in here at all, Corporal,” he shook his head, “No, no....I don’t want blood and brains on the new carpet either. That just won’t do....” Vasquez slid the carriage back on the automatic and chambered a round with a deadly metallic clack. The sound was deafening in the room and reverberated off the walls.

“But you may shoot him in the hallway,” Matt bent at the waist and looked around the beet red sweaty man, to see beyond the open door. “It is all tile, right?”

“Sir! Yes, sir! That is affirmative. All tile...SIR!” said Vasquez.

“Good enough, then.”

Vasquez raised his weapon and took aim at the back of Armstrong’s head. Charles turned around to see the black Beretta aimed right at the center of his face.

“Mr. Armstrong,” Vasquez barked. “Please exit this room and move into the tiled hallway!”

“Put that down you lowlife bastard or I will have you busted out of the service!” Charles turned back around and noticed that Matt had a small nasty looking automatic in his hand as well.

“Maybe, Lance Corporal, we will have to replace the carpeting and repaint in here after all.” Matt cocked his pistol and took a step forward. There was no sign of humor on his face at all. “Do you know just how much I want to kill you right now? You fat, disgusting, blow hard, bullying bastard,” Fassbinder raised the gun and put the barrel up against Armstrong’s forehead.

“You know how MANY men like you I have known throughout my life? How many beatings I have suffered at the hands of the likes of you? Schoolyard bullies, college bullies, my FATHER! People that drove me into isolation to lead the life I have led.”

Charles burst into a shower of cold sweat, as Fassbinder dug the barrel of his into his skull.

“The sheer beauty of all this? They tell me I can do it. Just...murder you...right here and now...and there would be no consequences...at all! They’d probably give me a medal for doing it. No one has jurisdiction over anyone here. We might as well be on the moon! They would just dump your lifeless corpse out by where all those Mormon settlers died to feed the buzzards and the coyotes,” Fassbinder let out a dark chuckle, “and they said your life wouldn’t amount to shit! You’d become just one more archeological artifact, remembered and mourned by NO ONE! You walk in here and speak to the Director of The Group in a tone that no one should ever use to anyone and start to demand things? You stupid bloody FUCK!”

Matt gritted his teeth and let out one last guttural growl, desperately fighting with his better angels to not just blow this wanker away, and with one final roar, he yanked the gun away from the trembling man’s forehead.

“At ease, Corporal.”

Vasquez with a disappointed grunt, lowered his weapon, but held it at the ready over his crotch.

“You are fired,” Matt said at length. “Effective as of right now! And if

you say anything else, either I, or the Lance Corporal here, is going to kill you. I really don't care who does it. I've already seen one man killed today, another won't matter!"

Charles regained his composure, thinking he had just called this little English faggots bluff, and the ire poured back into his face. But Armstrong was also intensely confused and the reality of the situation was finally starting to sink in.

"What are you talking about? What's going on?! You can't treat me this way!"

Fassbinder finally blew.

"THIS is WHAT is GOING ON! This isn't YOUR base anymore. It's MINE now! I can treat you anyway I bloody well please, because I OWN you, Porky McPorkums, and right now I am going to have you shipped out to San Antonio for processing. At some point, sometime, in the rest of this year either the Director or myself will make a decision on what happens to you."

Matt holstered his weapon back into his flight suit, as his rage passed. He nodded at Vasquez and he holstered his as well with a spinning Billy The Kid gunslinger flourish.

"Who are you to say that to me?" There was still fight in the angry man.

"At MRC my title is that of Senior Director. Here I am a Wing Commander. And THAT is who I am to say THAT to you!" Matt gave up that much.

"There's only one Senior Director," Charles wiped the side of his mouth. He suddenly had a dry throat and his bowels had grown warm.

"Actually there are three. However, we don't tell the lower level members of The Group those things, now do we?" Matt looked over at Bob, who had walked back into the room.

“I called for a Security Detail, Wing Commander, to take Mr. Armstrong away,” Bob glared directly at Armstrong with a satisfied grin.

“You guys are all kidding aren’t you?” Charles looked at everyone and no one was smiling. “You can’t do this! I have rights! I want to speak with Humphrey... right now!”

Matt turned and walked towards his office and shut the door after Ed followed him in.

Bob looked at Vasquez. “Take him into the hallway and wait for the security detail, LC.”

Vasquez placed a hand on Armstrong’s shoulder and led him out the door and then put his head up against a wall facing out into the hallway. By this time the reality had set in and Armstrong broke. He started to cry, covering his face with both hands and slumped onto the floor. In a few minutes four other Marines showed up. Ed and Matt came out of his office, and Matt stood in the doorway. The lead M.P. pointed to the rumped sobbing heap of a man, and Fassbinder nodded once. The four MPs gently picked him up and helped him walk as they led him off.

“Ed, how do I get hold of Gunny Thompson?” Matt turned and looked at the other man after he watched the team take away the shell of what was once an incredibly obnoxious little man, who had been beaten by life and decided to just take it out on everyone else around him. A tale as old as time, Matt thought. A little man given a little power.

“I will get him on the horn for you...sir.”

It was the first time Matt had heard him really say that to him. The implication of that one word set in. A shiver went down his spine as he reached into his chest holster and pushed the safety back into position on his automatic. He was right at the verge of murdering a man in cold blood, and it terrified him that he had...liked it...so much.

But his hands were still shaking.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Matt hung up the phone. Ed stood in Matt's office and had listened to Fassbinder's side of the conversation. Matt mused for a few moments.

"Tommy Chin. One of your blokes, isn't he?"

"If you mean did he work for me, oh yeah! Bright, fast, easily adaptable. I want to take him in to meet Ted when he gets over here and recommend him as the new boss at S-2."

Ed closed the door. Matt looked up quizzically and raised an eyebrow.

"I think you and I need a come to Jesus meeting from yer ol' 'uncle' Ed," Ed said.

"All right...Uncle Ed," he tossed his pen on the desk and rocked back and swiveled from side to side in his high-back leather chair. Ed took the other office chair and sat down across from Matt.

"Matthew, we have an open door office policy here. We keep our doors open unless we're on a personal call or meeting with someone we wish to protect. I sit right over there," he pointed across the open room. "I face your office. Bob is next door to you and faces Ted's. You need anything, and I mean anything, you catch my eye and raise your hand. I will be in here in less than two heartbeats. With that being said, I need to clear up some minor misunderstandings you seem to have." He opened his briefcase and pulled out a file. "This is the new Org chart. All the stuff in light blue is under your control. You don't make recommendations to Ted. Believe me, he doesn't want to know, and has so much on his plate that bringing mundane things to him is just cruisin' for a brusin'. It's a one-way ticket to an ass-whuppin'. You act on your own. For good, for bad, for ugly! Right or wrong. That is why you were brought aboard. To make those tough decisions on your own. These parts are all yours as of today. This place and S-2 are yours to command and run as you see fit. There are no committees or higher ups or

study groups to second-guess you. No review boards, and no superiors to you. Except Ted. Dr. Theodore Humphrey is your only commanding officer. But he will not do anything unless you ask him to step in. This last little show of force was an example of that power you now have. Understood?”

“Did I handle that wrongly in your opinion?” Matt asked as he reached over to open the refrigerator door and pull out two sodas.

“See? Right there,” Ed said, splaying out his hands. “It doesn’t matter what I think. Or what anybody thinks. You handled it. Maybe not the way Ted would have, but it was the best show of direct action I’ve seen in a long time. You’ve made everyone in this place very happy by sending that prick down, and by tonight, every Marine in this place will know that the new rookie Wing Commander is no pussy and not, to use their terms, ‘a dude to be fucked with.’ Equally that will spread to the Naval personnel as well. So for your first impression you have made a solid one. But you have also painted yourself into a corner. You came out of your corner swinging as a bad ass. So ‘Bad Ass’ is your role from now on, until something major changes.” Ed took the drink and nodded his thanks.

“What could change that major?” Matt looked at him questioningly.

“Ted dies or is killed. You then are ‘The Man’. You might be able to soften up your approach then, but not now. You’re going to be expected to be the hard ass. I’m right behind you to make sure it sticks.” Ed looked off into the room and saw Bob walk into Ted’s office. “Ted’s planning something big and he’s not shared it with either of us. But when you have been around a guy as long as Bob and I have, we almost know what he is thinking. This time that is not happening. All of this happened so quickly with the Altarians that none of us have caught up yet.”

Matt was flipping absently through several pages of the Org Chart, while the other man spoke. “This wasn’t done in the last two hours, Ed,”

“You were actually picked six or seven months ago.” Matt’s jaw dropped. “We did this chart back then to see what it would look like. Ted gave Bob the assignment of trying to break you. That’s why he pushed you so hard and came up with every dirty, miserable job his twisted, warped, devious squirmy mind could concoct and conceive of.”

Matt was still totally non-plussed. “I thought you were going to fire me? I thought you wanted to make me quit?”

“Nope. You skated right through all of them. So a week ago, after Noble 7, the final decision was made right after Ariel finished her final psych evals on you.” Ed sat back and closed his eyes.

“On the plane?”

“Yup.” Bob still had his eyes closed.

“So that’s what Ariel meant that I was already in a mind control op?”

Ed smiled and opened his eyes, returning to our dimension.

“I need to show you around some other rooms, the layout and a weeks worth of other things, because I’m sure in a few minutes Ted is going to grab his new puppy by the scruff of the neck and he will take you out for walkies off to Communications. We still have a full operation happening and you two have not yet checked in.”

“I don’t know which way I am going right about now, Ed. Any suggestions?” Matt closed the Org Chart file.

“Go see Chin the ‘Amazin’ Asian’. Set that in motion. Then head over to Comm with Ted. That will be a few hours. I imagine you’re going to be isolated in another booth. You hungry? Need anything? ‘Round here you gots to eats when ya can, not when you have to.” Ed got up and opened the door to leave.

“I could just murder a sandwich right about now. Oh, and a spot of tea

that is tainted with some mind control pharmaceuticals, if that's possible?" Matt smiled up at him.

"Yeah, watch out for the Kool-Aid, or anything that smells like Pine-Sol. Haha!" Ed laughed, referring to the smell of the famed mind control alterant.

"And thank you, Captain."

"My pleasure Dr. Lt. Wing Commander Fassbinder, sir. The sandwich will be coming quickly and a tea, but a machine will be arriving so you can brew or steep your own tea, coffees, Americana, latte or hot chocolate. Sorry about the tainting, but no alcohol is allowed on base. Remember you're in the Navy now." Ed picked up his briefcase and left the room.

Matt watched as Ed walked over into his office and picked up the phone. Matt muttered to himself and flipped up his tie:

"Well, Stanley! This is another fine mess you've got me into."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

After a very shocked Dr. Chin left Matt's office, Ted walked in and watched as the other man was walking out the main door.

"Looks to me like he was not expecting to see you, Matthew?" Ted turned and looked at the other man.

Matt jumped up and yelled, "NO ONE EXPECTS THE SPANISH INQUISITION!"

Ted just blinked.

"Monty Python? Flying Circus? Micky Palin? John Cleese? Nothing?"

"Do I look to you like a person that watched British television?"

"Yeah, right. Okay....Well, that is now the new site manager over at S-2." Matt had to say it just that way to see the reaction.

"He's only the mine site manager if you are not there to oversee him. Otherwise he is yours." Ted smiled again. "Come on, we need to get online and see if we still have a world out there to save."

Matt picked up his briefcase and followed Ted out into the hallway. As they walked past various areas, Ted played tour guide and pointed them out and told him what they were for. The mental notes were stacking up as they turned the corner and a young naval officer was just coming out of a room. He did not salute.

"Ah! Admiral! I was hoping to bump into you. All systems are up and operational."

"Lt. Tom Roy one of our communications geniuses," Ted said to Matt. "Tommy, Wing Commander Matt Fassbinder, your new boss." Both men shook hands and Roy excused himself. Inside the room was a small glass booth, which looked remarkably familiar to the one at MRC.

"The Isolation Tank" as Ed had called it, where Ted and Dave Mason worked at MRC. Ted opened the door, picked up a headset and handed it to

Matt. Then he pulled another one off the desk and put it on himself. He expertly flipped a couple of switches, hit a couple of buttons and the screens in front of them lit up with the faces of the three men in the similar Control Booth at MRC.

“Director Jasper, can you see and hear us?” Ted asked to the floating images on the screens in front of him.

“Perfectly Director.” Jasper was best known for his short, clear, concise answers. Ted loved him for that. Not some blowhard windbag like Hugh Fox.

“Current status and conditions?” Ted adjusted a couple of gain controls and intensified the image.

“Confidence is high. All stations are online and ready. With your permission I shall hand this off to Director Mason for a line-by-line reporting.” Jasper waited.

“Thank you Director. Director Mason, kick a beat and start your... flow,” Ted smiled at going ‘all ghetto’ as Dave called it. “We are on a secure line, now, now, now...” Ted hit a recognition button that only Dave at the other end knew by responding with a punch code back to Ted.

“No compromises detected.” Dave now was looking into the camera when he spoke.

“Agreed. Continue.” Ted locked the circuit so that no one else could break into it. The only people on this line were the working Directors at each station around the globe and two or three other monitoring stations that needed to know this traffic.

“As Director Jasper reported, we have a high degree of confidence. Cape Malabar Radio has reported that their sensors are now picking up the outside gravity waves of the flotilla. Long-range sensors are showing exactly one-three bandits, that is one-three. They are inside Neptune’s path. They’ve

fanned out into a semi-circle and are approaching cloaked and at a sub-jump impulse speed. But still very high. They can't be seen, but they are throwing off enough gravitational waves to have the devices at Cal-Tech hemorrhaging. Their speed and formation is...confusing. They're not in agreement with either an intercept for Earth, or a direct attack on us or a monitoring and negotiating pattern."

Dave touched a button that flashed a light on Ted's console. This indicated that he had finished for a moment and was waiting for Ted to respond. Ted stared off into space for a long moment until his eyes narrowed and he shook his head.

"What in the hell are they doing?" Ted mused aloud. "Ball park this for me David. Best guess scenario?" Ted flashed him back.

"We talked to the brainiacs in Analysis. Their only conclusion was that the Altarians must think we've cut a deal with someone else and then set off the alarm on purpose to somehow pull an 'Admiral Akbar' and lure them into a trap for the kill. Let's say they're sending in half their fleet on the outside chance whichever bad-ass race we cut the deal with wipes them out. They know, or think they know, we don't have the capacity to do that. But if they do get ganked, they'd be losing a lot of real estate in space that they now control. So by sending just these 13 ships they could be just a scout squadron, or an expeditionary force to see what's what. But that is a balls out wild ass guess on every level." Dave flashed back.

"Jeez." Ted sat back and just looked at the board shaking his head.

Matt leaned forward: "MRC, what is the status of the other defense boards around the world?" Matt asked and then hit the flash button.

"Lt. Commander," David had taken in the rank on Matt's uniform quickly and responded accordingly, "no one else has a board lit any more

than normal. The North Koreans are running war games, so both Japan and South Korea are higher priorities. But nothing unusual on anyone's screens. It would appear we've pulled this off well below the radar. However, I should caution that this won't last much past today. Someone will get curious and put out some feelers and when they find that we are sealed up, they will nudge up the defense status slowly. That will have a domino effect on everyone else. So by this time tomorrow, there will be a lot of questions. Everyone and their Uncle Remus and Aunt Jemima will be hunting you gangstas down to see where you is, to put a cap in yo ass."

"Talk to me Dave about putting out the alert. We are what, fourteen hours now and running since the primary call?" Ted asked and looked at the run board on his screen.

"That is correct, Admiral. T Plus Fourteen and change. We've spoken about the alert amongst ourselves while you were airborne. It is the general accord that we do not put out any flash traffic yet. If we do, the military will have to react first, lighting up their boards. Then if we start to have all the military folks that need to go underground start that, other nations will have to do the same, thinking that we are getting ready to hit someone. Next if we pull the Jason's list of personnel and start to stuff them into caves and holes, all hell will break loose. No one will be happy when their professors are not at work tomorrow, the doctors aren't at surgery and the Rotor-Rooter guy is nowhere to be found." David flashed back.

"Really...we actually have a Rotor-Rooter guy on the Jason Scholars list? I thought we only had really important people on it." Ted and Matt both laughed as Ted rolled his eyes.

"Oh, yeah, well tell Dr. Sandoval from Princeton to clear out the toilet drain and see how far you get!" Dave hit the "confirm or not confirmed" button for all the Directors at other stations to respond to Ted. Matt turned to

see a board beside him light up with a lot of red lights.

“I’d say that is a no!” Ted smiled. “Best guess again, when are they going to be in our back yard?”

Dave’s response came right back. “We are doing a whole lot of guessing here Teddy, but current course and speed, unless they pull a couple of Crazy Ivans, Monday night, early Tuesday morning. DC Zulu.” Short and sweet, with an old joke about Cold War Russian sub maneuvers tossed in to boot.

“That won’t leave a lot of time for the Administration to respond and get folks underground.” Ted did not like playing it this close, but this was a new problem that neither he, nor anyone else on Earth, had ever been through.

The Private line light flashed. Ted reached over and switched Matt’s on, so he could hear what Dave wanted no one else but the men in his booth and them to hear.

“Boss, let’s just call that chuckling clown with the shit eating grin over at the rented White House and hand this bucket of snakes to him. Let’s see what he’ll do with it.” The sarcasm was heavy in that comment. The private line light went off.

“Considered and rejected, Director Mason. I think this is way above his pay grade, clearance level or I.Q. Besides I like the Earth. It’s where I keep all my stuff. ” Ted tried to keep a straight face. Jasper was holding his hand over his mouth laughing and hitting Dave on the back.

“Fleet actions if any?” Ted tried to move on.

“Cape Malabar is high in confidence. Johnson moved the USS Glenn and the Sheppard to the La Grange Point, for decoys if needed. Beventon and everyone on the Gloomy Gus is taking tranquilizers to stay calm cuz they want to kill aliens so bad. And I could use a pitcher of Ultra Premium Ley

.925 Pasion Azteca Margaritas my own damn self.” Dave was talking about the Holy Grail of tequilas that ran \$225,000 a bottle.

“Leave it to a barbarian like you to put margarita mix in something like that. Philistine!” Dave shrugged. “Second complaint today on the same subject regarding the Gus,” Ted answered him. “I need to take that under advisement and have the Wing Commander look into it.”

“Alright, Boss. What are the current orders and/or even anticipated orders? We are all just hanging fire out here.” Even Dave thought the last exchange was a bit much, but since he always starts the flow, he needed to end it as well.

“Continue as you are at all stations and centers. Highest Alert Status. Not a drill. We’ll meet again tomorrow and evaluate at that time. All channels are open and we will be monitoring everything. Five-One clearing off.”

Ted nodded to Dave and he hit the off-line button. Ted pushed his chair back and rubbed his face hard with both hands. He could still see but not hear both men at all their stations.

“There is a whole set of big questions and discussions that just went around the world isn’t it?” Matt pulled his headset off.

“There surely are. The biggest worry is the timing of all this. If we wait too long to notify the world’s governments, they may not be able to get everyone that should make it to shelter in on time. If we do start it now, there’ll be a panic and that could lead to a world war and then none of this we are working on will really matter.” Ted sat there looking at the screen and the flowing river and cascading waterfall of details running down it.

Line by line new entries were happening every few seconds. Status of equipment, malfunctions, repairs, personnel moving, equipment upgrades continuing, on and on it went. “And all of this stops right here in this room

right now. You and I are the lynch pins for all of this.” Ted waived his hand at all the screens and let it go limp in a gesture of mock surrender.

“I really didn’t ask for this job, Ted.” Matt said quietly.

“Truth is neither did I, kid.” Ted got up. “All I ever wanted to do was find out what happened to my dad. Then one day it happened and I’ve been here in this seat ever since. I’ll be in my office.” Ted turned and walked out.

A line started to flash on the board that flashed ‘private line’. For a moment Matt looked after Ted, then picked it up and answered.

“Fassbinder.”

“Is he okay?” It was Dave on a phone somewhere beside the Control Booth at MRC.

“Why do you ask, Dave?” Matt wasn’t sure if this was another test.

“The Boss just looks really tried. Both Jasper as well as Evans in South Africa noted it for the record.” Dave sounded concerned.

“He is. We all are. Tell them all they have no idea what it is like to be that man. He is the best of all of us.”

Matt hung up the phone without anything else being said.

He got up and started out into the hallway and suddenly realized he did not know the way back to the command center. He just started to walk and look around while he went this way and that.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Vasquez was off duty and sitting in his room. A total of four Marines shared a room more like a dormitory than a barracks. Each man had his own bed. There were no bunk beds stacked in these rooms. A closet, a bureau and a locker with a set of tables with computers on them and books on the shelves took up the available space. Vasquez sat there in his white V-Neck tee and a pair of BARSTOW HIGH SCHOOL AZTECS shorts. Two other men were in the room with him.

“I shit you not, Esse’. He told me to pop a cap in that asshole’s head. Then I asked him if we should do it in the hallway. He pulled out his service pistol and was getting ready to do it himself. He said he already killed one pendajo today and it didn’t matter to him if this was going to be number two.” The man was animated. “He is a cold hard bastard, that Fassbinder. This guy is no bullshiter.”

“Did the Boss say anything?” Miller was a guy from up-state New York and always felt a little out of place with his western roommates.

“Nay, not a thing. I mean this guy was what everyone wanted in the fleet. Boy howdy! You can see it in his eyes. The Admiral man, he was too cool for this type of scene. So is Captain Bob. But our new Wing Commander is not the man I want to ever cross. That is all I know.” Vasquez got up. “I need to hit the gym.”

“I’ll go with you. I could use a workout. Do you have any idea what’s going on?” Miller grabbed his gym bag off his bed.

“Something big, I think. These guys are stoic right now. We may be going to war. Who knows?” Vasquez walked out and Miller followed him into the hallway. “I need to speak with the cook on swing shift, he knows like everything, I think.”

They walked toward the gym.

* * * * *

A young woman dressed in whites was walking down the hallway in Fassbinder's direction as he wandered aimlessly, rubbernecking to find his way. She had a couple of bottles of water in her hands. Matt smiled and looked directly at her.

"Ah, um....excuse me," he felt like a complete fool. "I'm Matt... and I'm new here. I am also so lost. Can you tell me where the Wing Commander's Office is?"

"Sure. But what do you do here?" She moved the water bottles to one hand and held the tops between her fingers.

"I am the a...bit embarrassing, really..." Matt was now just running on mercy, "...New Wing Commander."

"Oh. I see. And you are...lost?" She smiled. Matt just shrank, but the nurse let him off the hook. "I'm Nurse Windslow from the base hospital. Nancy Windslow..." She tilted her head and read his badge hanging from his flight suit, "sir..." The color, the symbols and the background all told her that this unassuming, nerdy, foppish little English fellow was so high on the food chain, that they had to pump oxygen up to his elevation.

"That's nice. I mean that, you...your name... beautiful...is a nice name...Nancy. Oh good heavens." Matt started to laugh a bit like a horse. "Are you in the Navy?"

"Yes sir, that I would be. Aye aye. Arr." She gave a cute little salute. "I'm a lieutenant over in medical. And thank you. I've always liked my name very much." They both just hung in space for a long moment. "Okay. Come on then, I will show you the way and some tricks to dropping bread crumbs to remember your way around this place." She motioned and started walking and he fell in next to her.

"Have you been here long?" He looked at her profile. She was blond,

very pretty and in exquisitely good shape.

“A couple of years. I really enjoy it. I never thought the Navy would offer anything like this to me. I’m working in a great hospital with the latest equipment and some of the most brilliant doctors and nurses anywhere. I’ve learned so much.”

“Do you get out of here much?” Matt was feeling really foolish now. “I mean where do you go when you are not here?”

“You don’t do this small talk very well do you, Commander?” She slightly laughed at him and then cleared her face.

“I am horrible at it. I hate myself because of this. Give me a problem and I can handle it. I can talk for hours about fractional variables and distortions and temporal movements. But a simple conversation...eludes me.” He was totally embarrassed by now.

“I have no idea what you are talking about? But since you are the Wing Commander, does that mean you work with Captain Reilly?” She lit up a little more.

“Ed and I work very closely together, yes.” Matt felt a sinking sensation in his gut.

“Right around this corner and there you are,” she pointed at the double doors at the end of the hallway. “Say hi to the Captain for me. If you will, sir.” She smiled and walked off.

“I thought you’d gone AWOL Boss.” Ed met him at the door. “I’m truly sorry, I thought Ted was with you. By the time I got to Comm you were gone. This will not happen again, I can assure you.”

“I got lost. Nurse Windslow, Nancy, brought me back here. She said to say ‘hi’ to you, Ed. So...’HI!’” Matt rose up on his toes and wiggled his fingers at him, then schlepped into his office and plunked himself like a wet doll down behind his desk.

“That’s great. A true charmer, that one.” Ed walked back across the room and sat down in his office. He pulled up a file on his computer and went back to work.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

The remainder of Sunday afternoon moved by and everyone turned in early. It had been a very long, long day. At 0600 hours Monday morning, the small beeping started in each officer's quarters. It was an audible voice notification that breakfast would be ready in thirty minutes.

For the most part everything at A-2 was regulated to time. The Naval station operated on a normal week, with the majority of activities handled in three shifts for five days of the week. This allowed those who preferred to live in Las Vegas or Henderson and its bedroom communities to have a relatively normal life with families. There was a rotation system that every fourth week the weekends were covered by three shifts so the Station always had response capacity in any situation.

All off duty personnel were given special pagers and it was mandatory they keep those with them at all times. Some of the personnel would take the Groom Lake JANET plane home, which landed and picked up at the private EE&G section of McCarran International Airport. That required about three hours travel time. When leaving A-2 by bus, it took traveling fifteen miles north to Groom Field, then catching the Boeing 737 with no windows and the big red stripe along the side to Las Vegas and then commuting across town to their individual homes. Once a month, one quarter of the naval staff had to do that, mostly for show. The remainder of the staff, just walked up to the front of the building, took the elevator down to the fourth sub-floor level and got onto one of the high-speed underground trams that run every thirty minutes, back and forth to Las Vegas.

On the east side of the city in a relatively new shopping center was a large building that housed the Nevada branch of the Naval Credit Union. It really was a working credit union, and a pretty good one, but, like almost everything the military and the government did, it was also a front. Three

flights down was the transit center for the Five-One high-speed rail line. Personnel would arrive and then leave by bus or be picked up by family, in groups of three or four. Considering the size of the shopping center with the mall and all the restaurants around it, no one ever seemed to notice the men and women coming out. Friday night and Monday mornings were just one more day at work, and the area was always crowded.

Ted was in the office mess hall already finished with his breakfast. He was reading down his pages of notes and actually had a great night's sleep; the first real rest he'd had in over a week. The Groom Lake Five-One facility was a place that he truly enjoyed being. Well, maybe second really on his list. The Fallon Navel Air Station in upstate Nevada being the first, though. He'd completely designed and built that complex from the ground up and could not have seen a more functional operations center. It'd also been the cause of his failed marriage to Irina. He'd spent more time inside that place than at home, and granted, Fallon was not one of the great *Bolshi* cultural centers of the world for Irina. Though she ranted and raved about AmeriKA and everything else, Ted felt she left ultimately out of boredom. She was too brilliant and far too beautiful to be left alone, and Ted did that for far too long. Plus, this weird instinctive genetic thing Russian's had about their 'Homeland', and they seemed to only be happy when they were SAD and missing it! Stark. Bleak. Bitter cold...ALL THE TIME! But they were like...salmon or something, Ted thought. They must swim upstream to where they came from to spawn or die.

A steward came by dressed in his whites offering more coffee, which Ted took gratefully and then exchanged a few words with the man. Captain Robert Hanson was catching up with some old friends and other officers at another table. Every now and then a roar of laughter would come up from Bob's group as someone told a story that was beyond belief. The camaraderie

with his gang of Navy pals was huge. Most of these men had served at one time or another in Fleet Ops in the regular Navy and all of them had stories of other officers, incidents and happenings that carried over to this place.

After a short while, Matt and Ed came in. Ed lingered at the counter to flirt with the attractive hostess, and they some beautiful women here, and Ted always marveled at how exactly they got them to come here. She was laughing at the things Ed was telling her. Matt placed his order and came over to the table and sat down with Ted and nursed his cup of coffee, blowing on it tenderly while taking short slurping sips while waiting for his breakfast.

“Good morning my good sir,” Ted took off his tortoise-shell horn-rimmed glasses that he only used for reading and sat back holding his cup of Joe. “How did you sleep last night?”

“At first I read for awhile. I finished the notebook you gave me. When I clicked off the light and laid there in the dark, I realized just how quiet this place is. The only thing I could hear was the air coming out of the vent. It took awhile to drift off, but when I did, I didn’t move until that soft and gentle voice next to my head, told me to get my ass out of bed, shower and get down here for breakfast. I know I’m in the service now, but sweet fancy Jesus Ted, this is an ungodly hour to be having breakfast, don’t you think?” Matt sipped at his coffee. “Do you wish that book back, by the way?”

“Nope. Yours to keep and to use. If I may suggest, pick up another one of those notebooks at the naval store here and continue to add to it. That’s truly the only record of what we do. It’s not a historical document for anyone else to read. It’s just for us. One of the ways we’ve survived so long is not leaving an audit trail of any kind. All of our businesses and enterprises have records for taxes and other legal reasons. The Group decided years ago not to keep anything that can show evidence of what we’re involved with.” Ted was still enjoying the warmth of his coffee. “So each Director keeps his own

notebook. When he dies, retires, or is removed, those are turned over to Boss One as I used to be known. That task is being moved over to you. These are the most valuable and damning books ever written. These little black books tell everything.”

Ted stopped as the man in the whites rolled a large wheeled cart over to the table and started to set out Matt’s breakfast. A white, gold trimmed plate with the legend writing around the rim ‘Groom Lake NAS’. The plate was a masterpiece, with the items placed on it with care. Matt’s plate was attractively garnished and had a side bowl of fresh fruit. The man also placed a white linen napkin down and a heavy set of flatware, with the initials USNSF on the flat area at the bottom. Very quietly the cart rolled away.

“What a work of art. I’m ashamed to eat on this let alone mess up this perfect display of food.” Matt picked up his fork and took a bite. He closed his eyes for a moment. “I am not leaving here Admiral. Ever! Not with food like this.”

“I know. When things are really running smoothly, sometimes Bob and I come here or up to Fallon just to hang out and get some work done. This place has the best auxiliary services in the world. Five-star food, a great track to run on, a huge gym and always enough people around to have a pick up game of basketball or get your ass kicked on the racket-ball court. There are some kids here that can run your legs off. I pretty much stick to handball. It’s slower and at least I tell myself I have a chance of scoring some points.” Ted laughed.

“At Adeline, catering is not in the lab building, it was put out for bid. That means the cheapest rotters make all your bloody kit. So we got the same folks that do airline food, I think. The tucker is just so bloody awful. Our complex, as you know, is about an hour and a half drive outside of Adeline. So going off campus isn’t happening. So some of the Indian engineer’s wives

started to make food for their husbands. And, sweet fancy Moses, this turned into a cottage industry. Before long they had sign-up sheets and these little tin pots started to come in filled with all kinds of wonderful, spicy things. It started with one wife driving out and delivering the food in her car. By the time I left and you called me out to Noble, it'd grown to a group of four wives who had a utility van, some insulated plastic boxes and handcarts to roll it into the cafeteria. The company that was running the food service was raising holy hell with me. I couldn't do much, since I was on the list and getting my fair share of the Bombay potatoes and lamb curry for lunch." Matt laughed and finished up his meal.

"That explains why I'm not making a profit on food service there." Ted looked at Matt with a straight face and then busted out laughing. Matt grabbed his chest like he was having a heart attack.

"Don't do that, Boss! I was ready to have a heart attack!" Matt sat back and looked around. He was enjoying himself for once.

"What are you doing here...I mean, really." Matt became serious. "It seems to me that all the action's back at MRC and we're sitting around a great place with nice people who don't even know what the hell is happening right now."

"I didn't want to wreck anyone else's weekend. We did a good enough job with all the Op Centers. In about fifteen or twenty more minutes, this place will be alive with activity. People will be back on base and then we're going to go into the Red Zone. Our 'friends' are not expected until tonight or tomorrow. If anything about that timeline were to have changed Dave would have called us here. So I'm pretty much assured that things are running their proper course. After a few phone calls this morning, I'll show you exactly why we're all here. It will all fall into place then." Ted got up. "But for now, I need to call the Vice President and chat with him. I want to make sure he

stays put at his ranch, and doesn't shoot anyone in the face.”

Ted motioned Ed over. “Ed, give Matt the \$2.00 tour and introduce him to the senior staff officers. I'm sure by now they already know about him, but they need to meet him.” Ted hesitated. “Matt, you set yourself in a role yesterday, as I told you. Don't confuse people today. You are now an official 100% USDA Choice stamped and approved ‘Hard Ass’ in their minds.

“That is COMMANDER BAD Ass!” Ed reiterated and laughed. “You can't buy that kinda PR!”

Ted smiled at Matt's new moniker. “For now, at all costs, for your own survival here, stay in that role. We can soften it up later, but not now. You led with your right, we can work the body later. Is that clear?”

“Aye aye, Skipper.” Matt stood up and wiped his hands on his napkin.

“Bad ass, okay? Not crazy. Not unreasonable or harsh. Just tough.” Ted walked away.

“You heard the Admiral,” Matt grinned, adjusting his horn-rimmed glasses. “Let's go kiss babies, steal their candy and sell all their lollypops.”

Ed turned off his charm and went straight faced out the door.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Matt and Ed had spent about two hours meeting with the senior naval staff on the base. It had been pleasant and positive, however, firm in all their actions. By the time they'd returned to base headquarters, the general consensus among those officers who had just met the new Wing Commander was that they had an old time Fleet Officer now on staff. They were in agreement, that Fassbinder must have been one son of a bitch to serve on a ship with. But yet no one had known of him. This made their questions about him even more difficult for finding out about Matt. They were all well aware that there was no reason to try to find any answers to their questions that would only lead to other problems that no one wanted to deal with.

At headquarters Bob was looming over a conference table splayed with documents. As soon as Matt walked in, Bob asked him to come over.

Bob suddenly lashed out and pulled off Matt's Velcro backed leather flight suit name tag.

"Hey! What the bloody...." Matt protested, clutching the empty space on his chest. Bob stepped in, put one hand firmly on Matt's back, and with the other, slapped on Matt's chest and rubbed hard.

"KA-POW!" Bob yelled as he stepped away, throwing his arms wide, then turned his fingers into guns and pointed at Fassbinder's chest.

Matt looked down and saw a new leather badge. His name was emblazoned in gold lettering and under that was: WING COMMANDER. Under that: 133RD SPACE WING. However, what grabbed Matt's attention and filled him with awe was the senior command flight wings over his name.

"This is strange," Matt said, still stunned. "When you told me to learn to fly three years ago, I had no idea why. Then when you pushed me to go multi-engine, retractable gear, instrument, night flying, and then go to the

business jet school, I was totally at a loss. I have now, what? Nine type ratings and I don't even get to fly...unless...I'm learning something new? Now this?" Matt pointed at it.

"This is what they call in the movies 'dressing a scene', " Bob said, explaining it all now for him with the missing pieces of the puzzle. "See, for me, you're the actor, and I have been the writer and director behind the scenes that has been turning your life into a movie, with YOU as the hero. We are about to change your life in a way you will not believe. You are, in the next hour my friend, going to have to shift most of your life long paradigms. And this is part of it." He jumped in again, hugged him and patted the name-tag on Matt's chest. "You are a lower Lt. Commander, who has been given the responsibility of a Naval Wing. At least six men, who you will meet in the next short period of time, who out rank you by two steps, but yet you are their boss. That would seem confusing if it were not for the fact that this is a military service. In the business or commercial world, this would be unheard of and people would file grievances until the personnel office was swimming in papers. Not here. These men and women are going to see you in a completely different light. They will assume, and rightly I must tell you, that you have been hand picked for this job, by folks way up the food chain. That means the Secretary or a Joint Chief has given you the nod and that you are just waiting for the papers to be signed by the President. Everyone who you meet in Complex-2 will know that you are going to be carrying a star on your shoulder before long and will treat you that way. Now..." Bob stepped back and looked down at a document on the table. "The only thing you did not get to in your training was high-speed maneuvering in... jets! Is that right?"

"That's correct. I had that school lined up to take next month in Sydney." Matt was still feeling that he was not up on the curve yet.

“That’s okay. I’ll help you with that.” Bob gathered up the papers on the table, shoved them in a file and closed it. “Admiral, we are ready.”

Ted came out smiling from his office. “Dick was yelling and screaming about wanting to be here. I told him you’d forbidden it because of his heart. Then he went into thirty minutes of profanity, and never used the same swear word twice about how he was going to find a way to bust you down to an Ensign and ship you off to count ice crystals in Antarctica.”

“Well there goes the elk hunting trip in Montana this year. Thanks for that, big guy.” Bob laughed and walked out and into his office. He came back with a few three-leg boards. the type that pilots use that have the built in calculators. Bob handed one to Matt who just looked at it and one to Ted.

“Shall we gentlemen?” Before leaving Bob told Matt to leave his briefcase in his office.

They walked across the complex to a set of blast doors and then everyone stopped before entering. Ted put on his service flight cap as did everyone else. Ted pushed through the blast doors into a long hallway, nearly a quarter mile in length.

“Lt. Commander Matthew Fassbinder, we are taking you through the looking glass. You are about to find out why we all are here today.”

Ted and Bob smiled broadly while Matthew looked nervous and trepidatious.

“Welcome to Wonderland!” Ted said.

Chapter THIRTY-FIVE

At the end of the hallway was another set of blast-doors. However, standing at full attention at this end were six Marines in full combat gear and carrying rifles. A pedestal sat on the left hand side of the hallway with a sensor and scanner array on the top. The Marines did not have their rifles slung, but at high port, ready, and pointed at them as they came down the hall and to a stop. There were sets of yellow and red lines on the floor.

“You stop here at this line”, Ed said in deadly earnest. “First we get our IDs registered and that device scans your eye. Then you put your hand on that plate. It measures blood flow as well as line patterns. That’s so no one can cut your hand off and use it.” Ed conveyed the tutorial to Matt in a very low voice. “Then we move to that mean looking gentlemen in the middle there. He’ll pat you down and ask you to unzip your flight suit. He will then attach to your chest a small sensor that will report every place you are in this complex and relay that info to a board in another area. These men here have orders to shoot anyone that fails that sensor test on the spot,” Ed added. “Two years ago we had a ‘Transit’ get in here and he almost made it into the hanger bay.”

“What the hell is a... ‘Transit’ ?” Matt looked at him.

“Hybrid human clone made to look like Captain Hanson. Right down to his fingerprints. What gave him away was the blood flow pattern in the Transit’s hand. Not enough hemoglobin...too much nitrogen.” Ed never smiled.

“An...*ALIEN*... got in...here?” Matt’s head started to swim.

“Sure as shit did.”

“That looked like...Bob?”

“Yup. See those marks on the wall over there. The three long black strips?” Ed asked him.

“Yes...” Matt answered in disbelief.

“Those are ‘kill strips’. Like notches on a six-gun. One for each intruder that these here old boys have aced. With each one comes a hundred thousand dollar bonus, split evenly among the group working that day. These Marines drive some of the finest cars any military men could own or have pools in their backyards or their kids education is already completely paid for. That’s why there’s no bullshit at this station. These guys are stone cold killers, and all about their job here. Not to mention, they are damn proud of it.” Ed smiled slightly.

Bob moved through after the Admiral and then Matt followed by Ed. After they had all cleared and were standing inside the red box painted on the floor, the Marine sergeant in charge of the group walked over and cleared the sensor and scanner.

“At ease.” He said and the Marine guards slung their rifles and moved back against a wall.

“Gentlemen. Admiral, it is a pleasure to have you in our complex. Allow me,” with formality, the tough young man hit a button on the side of the wall, then placed a key that hung around his neck into a lock and twisted it. The blast doors opened up and they walked into Complex 1. The hangar was huge and at least fifty feet high, a hundred and fifty feet across one way and half that the other way. The floor looked like something out of Sunset Magazine, a highly polished and stained cement, that one could see their reflection in. It was so bright, that each man had to put on his sunglasses in the wide-open area as they walked across toward six craft that sat mounted at the static section of the hangar. Like pieces in a museum.

They were six different alien spacecraft. Two scout models, one transport, one hibernator for keeping biological systems alive in transport off the earth, and two of what were clearly combat craft showing the violent

stripes and scorch-marks of battle. Each had been mended and restored. Matt walked up and touched one of them, running his hand over it like the most beautiful woman he had ever caressed. The skin felt like a combination of portabella mushrooms or a manta ray's hide. It did not feel like metal at all. He walked around it in wonderment, his jaw stuck open and agape. Matt continued touching here and there and looking, or at least trying, to see everything possible.

"Excuse me Matt, but we have people waiting for us," Ted called to him as Matt was pointing at one of the craft and trying to form a sentence in his brain.

"Those are space craft! Flying saucers, UFOs.... the real fucking deal....." Matt was still looking back as he came over to the others. "Where.....?"

"Later Commander. Pull it together, you're going to have an audience in a few." Bob looked over at Matt. "Your next assignment is to be welcomed aboard by the flight crew and then you must tell them what is happening in our world."

It was like being hit with a wet fish in the face. The words sunk in and he looked from Bob to Ted. Ted nodded in agreement. They continued to walk across what was known as the small hangar to another short hallway and another set of doors. This led to the stupendously strange universe of Complex 2.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Captain Robert Hanson walked through the double doors first. Thirty folding chairs were neatly set up aligned in six rows, all of which had Naval Flight Officers and RIOs standing around them. Loitering behind them was a group of one hundred flight technicians, engineers, maintenance workers and mechanics. All personnel were dressed in their in-flight suits or blue mechanic work coveralls. Hanson made three steps inside the hanger and yelled out:

“Admiral on deck!”

Immediately there was a rushing sound of shuffling dancing feet as everyone got into a place and stood rigidly at attention. The doors opened again and Ted walked in straight as an arrow and was immediately followed by Bob. Both Ted and Bob made their way up to the short podium. Bob stood to one side of Ted.

“Good morning,” Ted said into the microphone that reverberated like the voice of God in the huge room.

The answer came back to him from all those standing. “Good morning, Admiral.”

“It is my pleasure this morning to introduce to you, your new wing commander of the 133rd Space Wing and allow him to apprise you of the current situation. Wing Commander, Lt. Commander Dr. Matthew Fassbinder.” Ted took a step away from the mic and stood back to clear a path.

“You’re on your own, pal. Don’t fuck this up!” Ed whispered to Matt as he opened the door for him and then followed him onto the stage.

“Ah...good morning,” Matt spoke into the mic. The group rose and started to clap with a round of applause. Matt acknowledged the assembly by raising his hand and then added. “Be seated or stand at ease, please.”

They all took their seats while Fassbinder gathered his thoughts and his courage.

“There are a lot of nice things I would like to say this morning by way of introduction, but time forbids it. However, thank you for the warm welcome.” Matt cleared his throat and then continued. “Yesterday at zero three hundred hours, we were required to light the boards of all of our Operational Control facilities around the world. Within twelve hours I was required to give the order for a hard seal to go into place. That is when the Admiral and our staff decided to come here. It was with a clear mind and good conscience that we desired to be here with our Naval Flight Wing, if we were going into what I expect to be...a bloody fist fight.”

The whole floor exploded in rousing applause, which startled Matthew. He'd worked with scientists, not fighting men, and faced snarkish cynicism every day, not esprit 'de corp. As the clapping died down, Matt, a bit jangled, but encouraged and emboldened, continued.

“Late yesterday a fleet of thirteen Altarian war cruisers entered our solar system. But it is still not clear from their course and speed if their intent is to challenge us and come towards the Earth. We must, and can only, presume they have hostile intentions. Last night the Admiral placed all units on a war footing. Cape Malabar is locked down and ready.”

Matt looked around the hanger for a moment and saw the four huge ships with naval insignias on them. Matt made a quantum leap. “The USS Virgil I. Grissom is in battle ready position, and with the Gloomy Gus on station, we are here to oversee the deployment of the 133rd as a support to all other activities.”

Again, the hanger filled with applause and cheering. Matt let them have their uplifting moment, and waited uncomfortably for the swell of their good spirits to die down.

“Clearly, as you all know,” Fassbinder continued, getting his bearings and now stoking the boiler to a full head of steam, “we may not be able to win this battle, for our numbers are small in comparison to those that would try to do harm us. But we are the best this world has to offer and we are going to show our mettle as to who we are in this galaxy and in this universe!”

Again the place just exploded with hurrah’s and cheering.

Bob turned to Ted and winked at him. Ted nodded slightly.

“You have all trained and given up so much of your lives to be here. You could all be set for a life of comfort out there, due to your talents, your dedication and your genius,” he pointed to a far distant open hangar door that looked a long way off towards Las Vegas, “you could all be out there where no one even knows that this is happening, and be blissfully ignorant. That is correct. No official, leader or government has been appraised to this situation as of yet. Command does not believe that we should start a panic among the nations that would discredit The Group if we are wrong and would cause great woe among our Naval brothers and sisters in higher commands. We cannot afford that. If we fail in the next few days to put this genie back in the bottle I would not expect the standard and ordinary military services to be able to handle the problem anyway. They do not have the equipment nor the training, or the men and women of the 133rd !”

More clapping.

“We are all warriors and want the good fight, but right now our main goal is containment and control of this situation and to get through this without a shot being fired. But if they start it, we are going to be heard from, I promise you, with God as my witness...we...will... FINISH IT!”

Matt stepped back and stood there looking out over the crowd below him, as they went crazy at the spirited and heroic rhetoric. He folded his arms and nodded his head up and down, like a super star rapper dropping the mic.

“Thank you Commander,” Ted said as he shook his hand and stepped back up to the podium. “I need Vipers One and Two wound up. And I will need a couple of chase and pace jets for inside the dome. The rest need to go about normal ops until you hear the bell.” Ted stepped back.

“Atten--TION!” Someone called out. Everyone jumped and straightened right up. “Dismissed.” The men started to walk away and some others started to close up the folding chairs and put them on to carts to move them out of the hanger area.

“Nice speech,” Ted said under his breath to Matt. “I liked it. It actually sounded like you knew what you were talking about.”

“I was in a university theater group at Oxford when I was younger. I played Richard II.” Matt wiped his brow. “I almost did Henry V’s St. Crispin’s Day speech. But I thought that that was a little to...grand... for me, don’t you think?”

“Probably more fitting considering the situation,” Ted walked toward the Vipers, “because the British actually won that one, and frankly, we’re the French right now as it doesn’t look like we have a chance in hell.”

“You know Ted, I am a time bandit. I work on the time machines for you. I am so far over my head right now, I can’t even think straight.” Matt added.

“If we live through this, we got a whole bunch of new things to work with now. We’ve found the plans to the final piece to make the Time Runner go and I know were both dying to see it work. My nine-year-old son figured it out! It’ll complete forty-five years of work for me. But right now, we have other, bigger, badder and much nastier fish to fry and no one else is able to do this but us. So we do double duty and with, as Kipling said, no canteens.”

They both stopped just short of the first Viper.

PART TWELVE:

HAZEL

CHAPTER Thirty-Seven

There were several craft in the cavernous hanger. Three grouped in one area and four in another. Toward the gigantic doors were seven operational standard naval fighters, wings furled, the kind seen on Nimitz Class aircraft carriers. But it was the knot of four that held Matt's attention. They were... different.

First of all, they were huge, as big as double-decker jumbo jets. Except triangular in shape. Each side of the craft was a good hundred and twenty feet long. The thickness was nearly two stories high and just the landing gear rods looked like vast giant Sequoias in diameter, the kind you could drive a car through in the Giant Sequoia Redwood Forest Parks just north of San Francisco. The onyx black outside was coated with some kind of strange film that reflected light in a peacock hued Neptunian spectrum in various shades of deep greens and indigos.

These were the Consolidated Naval Advance Flight Design Platforms: Model Three. Lovingly known as "The Vipers". Named in a contest by those working at A-2. Sixteen names had been submitted and then voted on. Ghostface Killa McKill-Face got one vote. Fortunately, the name Viper won hands down.

It was the end product of a program started in the 1950's where A.V. Roe of Canada got the contract to design and build a circular craft. That craft was under the tutelage of John Frost, one of the finest aircraft designers that every lived. The man that created the Avro Arrow for the Canadians, the most advanced fighter plane anyone had every seen, that went afoul of the major aerospace companies in America and the US government. They all forced Canada to scrap it and destroy the four prototypes. It seemed like some American aerospace companies were not up to speed on this design and had spent a fortune that they wanted a return on by selling a far less effective

airplane to our European allies in NATO.

The original project had been named the AVRO-CAR. The comic clumsy Keystone Cops style black and white films that are still shown of it today were of a decoy model, underpowered, ill-equipped and purposely made to make A.V. Roe, and the Canadians, look like fools. The project was scrapped but AVRO went on.

The number two design Frost had built from the original flapjack flying wing Schumann German design was fabulous. It had powerful flight characteristics and dynamic handling. It could out perform any aircraft from any military in the world by 1960. The company had been bought up by The Group and everything, including the models and templates, were shipped to the old Groom Lake Airfield, back when it was still called the Docketown Strip, in the early sixties.

When Ted first came to S-2 and saw the primary working models and the alien craft at the old A-2 facility, he started a new program. The construction went at high speed at A-2 and Ted increased the staff and then implementation by the Navy became part and parcel of the program.

What had been solely a civilian contracting effort had all the lines blurred, as always happens, when Ted brought the Navy on board. The Navy Squids were getting all kinds of advances and new systems given to them without having to contract or pay for them. Ted was getting all the naval personnel to man and work the base, along with the design institute that was associated with it, and the actual flight-testing facilities, to boot.

A good number of Naval brass had been inside Complex-1 and “ooed” and “awed” and Gomer Pyle “Gooolll-eeeey’d” at the alien craft. But none of the Navy mooks had ever set a tentacle or a flipper inside Complex 2. They would have gone all One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest, straight-jacketed, rabid, foaming, bat-shit, dog-balls crazy if they’d seen the Naval Space

Fighters there and they would lose their collective soggy little minds if they found out they couldn't get their hands on them.

The outside of the Viper was painted in gray with small black lines forming a shield pattern of scales like on a snake or a dragon. The front of the ship had two snake eyes painted on it, and directly in the middle a red viper's tongue was extended out with its fork probing the air. To Matt it was something right out of a Steven Spielberg or Dean Devlin movie.

"Now *THIS*," Bob said opening his arms wide and gleaming with pride, "is my girl Hazel. Hazel this is Matt. Matt, this is Hazel." Bob turned to Ted and waited.

"Oh...um...how do you do? Ah...Hazel..." Matt said haltingly, then bowed instinctively with a sleight flourish. "Hazel?"

"Yup! Named her after my ex-wife, who was also just as fast and mean as a snake! And unlike a viper she never gave me the courtesy of coiling up and hissing or rattling her tail, before she sprang at my face and spat venom in my eyes!"

Bob rubbed Hazel with both his hands and put his face against her alien looking flesh, like he was petting and loving his very own favorite horse, or rubbing oil on some Rubenesque love goddess. Bob then stood behind Matt to give him an unobstructed view of how gorgeous his girlfriend was while talking to him, by almost whispering in his ear, like a pimp describing his sensuous erotic merchandise of pleasure.

"Ted designed most of this, or at least rough sketched it out and enumerated what each part should do. We have a firm in Dallas that works on various design components, not knowing what the whole system looks like. Kinda like Hitler making machine guns that everyone thought were baby carriages. Parts are manufactured all over the world and shipped here for final assembly. It's all modular so any part can be replaced in a short time period.

The skin is metal laminate that has flexibility and rigidity.”

“Fucking beautiful, mate!” Matt just stood there in sheer worshipful wonderment and stared at the Viper. Standing naked before him was the wet dream of every science geek on Earth. “There are no other words for it: Just...bloody...fucking...beautiful!”

“Yes it is!” Bob beamed. “But wait! There’s MORE!” He said like a Sham-Wow pitch man. “Cuz this...is just the outside...”

Exactly on cue, as if Hazel was listening to them and quivering with anticipation for her man to arrive, a spiral staircase lowered from a circular port in the belly of the craft and gently rested on the gleaming polished hanger floor with a loving shhhhh sound. It made Matt shiver with glee.

Bob smiled and motioned for Matt to follow him to the staircase. As they walked toward it, Matt could not resist reaching up with both hands and running his palms along the underbelly. It had the same feeling as the alien spacecraft he touched before. Soft and firm and rubbery all at the same time, like rubbing a mother dolphin’s belly.

As Matt moved along the under carriage of the ship, he noticed something stenciled on the bottom of the vehicle that stood out against the jet-black hull. In small deep crimson English letters was spelled out the word "RESCUE" and then an arrow, which pointed to a small square saying: "Emergency Release " with a recessed red lever.

“The craft has three different power systems within it,” Bob explained, pointing. “Four different drive components and is actually nothing but a flying gun platform. It’s not as bad ass or has as many weapons as the Gloomy Gus, but the ones that these babies carry are a whole lot more deadly...Boy Howdy, I promise you that!” Bob gushed with pride as he spoke.

Matt had not seen any exhaust ports at all while walking around it.

“What kind of drive systems?”

“An impulse drive system, somewhat like an ion propulsion drive for use inside the dome, or the atmosphere. Something that T. Townsend Brown was working on for years. It’s silent and allows good low speed maneuvering in what we call ‘heavy air’ down here in the ‘Atmo’. Once we get outside the dome, we can push it up to sub-light speed with her mercury vapor magnetic engine. The mercury is running at super high temps, much like in the prototype we used to prove it out, that we called the Aurora. The Aurora had a plutonium pulse drive that didn’t give out anywhere near the power Hazel does, and, yee-gods, it made the devil’s own goddamn noise and left this goofy donuts on a rope contrail that every yahoo out in the Tickaboo Valley took pictures of.

“Then we have this baby! The big gun right in there! Oh-oh-OH!” Bob made a grunting ape-like Tim “The Toolman” Allen sound, which only confused Fassbinder. “The super-driver! A direct gravitational longitudinal wave power system that will push her into the trough, baay-bee!”

“The...trough?” Matt asked, completely stunned by all the new extraordinary information.

“Well now, the ‘trough’, as we call it, is the part of space that has no matter, no waves, and, well,” Bob shrugged, “ain’t gots no nothin’ in it at t’all! You might call it the ‘Taint’ of the Space/Time Continuum. Cuz it ‘t’aint’ one thing and it ‘t’aint’ another. The only way to describe it is it’s actually a place between space and time. That’s where real distance disappears. This is where the Relativity Rubber meets the Time/Space road. On board Hazel, like being with any great woman, well, son, time just flies. It’ll seem like two days journey to get out to say...Pluto, but in our standard time here it’s only about ten to fourteen hours. It’s a curiosity of space/time that we haven’t completely got a handle on yet. But that doesn’t mean that we

don't use it all the same. I'm sure big brain Ted has it all figured out somewheres, but it's over this cowboy's head."

They got to the spiral staircase, and Hanson started up with Fassbinder right behind him on the second step, and then he stopped. Bob turned back to Matt with a huge grin, and, again, on cue, with that gentle loving 'Shhhhh' sound, the DNA-like staircase rose into the air pulling both her lovers into her jet-black womb.

Once inside they were in an area that was squared with three corridors leading off in different directions. Bob pointed with his index and middle fingers.

"Crew quarters, Mess space, Sick Bay, and the lounge is a-that-a-way." Bob pointed down one hallway, then turned to the next. "Tactical, Command and Control, Targeting. Aiming and Defense is down there."

They walked toward the front of the ship. "This is the bread and butter space though." They walked onto a flight deck where nothing was recognizable to Matt. The chairs were over stuffed leather recliners, there were no windows, only super thin flat screens of some sort. No instruments were visible and the whole room was a bright stark colorless white.

"Ted tore apart one of the scout craft almost single handed and worked it all out, with some help, how each part worked and what had to be done to replicate it. This is the end product. I came aboard about halfway through while this one was being built right here. He picked me for his assistant as well, because I was holding a graduate engineer degree in aeronautics. I was so far out of my depth when I started on this I thought I would never make it to the surface again. But that man, Dr. Theodore Humphrey, Jr." he gave a low whistle and shook his head in awe, "is so clever he figured out how to make this thing work completely intuitively for anyone who could fly a plane.

“Power on,” Bob said to the air around him and suddenly Matt could feel a low soft, vibrating, almost comforting hum under his feet that went all the way into his body.

Matt narrowed his eyes suspiciously at the other man.

“What exactly are we doing here, Bob?”

“We’re giving you a test ride in one of the ‘Wings’ that you command...Wing Commander.” Bob jumped into one of the recliners and with an Oof sound as he bent forward and unlaced his boots. He motioned for Matt to do the same, and Matt, in what looked like a standing yoga pose, pulled each of his feet up to his knees, unlaced his boots and slid them off.

There was a small storage unit under the seat where they stowed their shiny black high-topped flight boots. Then Matt cautiously straddled the recliner and sat down with some effort on the chair next to Bob.

“Take off your glasses, please.” Matt folded them up and placed them in their soft mesh holder and put them in his breast shirt pocket. “I presume you don’t have any pressing engagements for the next oh, twelve hours or so, do you?” Bob grinned.

“I guess not now,” Matt found the seat much too small and uncomfortable even for his slim, lanky frame but then with a gentle hiss it started to mold itself to his body and grew and adjusted around him. As he sunk into it, it felt like he was laying on some kind of oozing, slowly expanding foam or gel.

A stalk with a small circular device that looked like a Jewish yarmulke came down from the ceiling. Matt shied away from it, as he couldn’t quite make it out through the blur of his impaired vision without his glasses.

“Just let it happen,” Bob said reassuringly. “Tilt your head forward a smidge.” Matt did so hesitantly, and the device fitted itself perfectly on the crown of his head toward the back. It started to extend outward in scaled

metallic sections and completely went around his face and covered his eyes and everything went black.

It was immensely sensuous and comfortable, and felt like someone had just pushed a goose down feather pillow onto his head and face. He was blind but in a couple of moments all that changed. With a sudden burst of colored static and rainbow light, he focused his eyes and he could see out of the front of the craft. Even without his glasses, his vision was now crystal high-definition clear. In fact, brighter and clearer than he had ever seen in his life, as if some kind of high definition super bright 3-D version of reality was being fed directly into his brain. As he turned his head he could see all around the hanger outside the ship.

“Touch the middle finger on your left hand to the pad underneath it. You feel that?” Bob asked.

“Yes,” Matt laid his hand on the arm extensions as Bob had done.

“If you push lightly, that will zoom in your view and then use your first finger to zoom back out to normal.” Bob said while the vibration and hum in the craft changed again.

Matt focused on a man standing at the far end of the hanger sitting on a bench working on something. He moved his middle finger slightly down and the man started to enlarge with no distortion. He kept holding it down until he could actually see a mole on the man’s neck. Then he zoomed back out.

“I want one of these for when we go visit Hermosa Beach!” Matt said.

“Don’t we all!” Bob started to move his hands expertly across the other controls. “Look down at your hands.” Matt did and he could see his fingers sitting over various buttons. “Don’t touch anything else yet, my friend otherwise we could find ourselves having lunch in another galaxy.” Matt immediately lifted both his hands and obediently put them on his lap. He just continued to look up and out the hangar door, which seemed to be moving

towards them.

“This is Viper-1. Captain Hanson and Lt. Commander Fassbinder preparing for a straight out over Papoose Lake on impulse.” Bob moved some other controls.

“You are cleared Captain. Mark time, 0741 hours Zulu. Hack.” A voice filled the cabin.

“Check. Two chase and pace on my ass please.” Bob waited.

“We are on you Boss. Hit it and we’ll catch up.” Another voice from nowhere could now be heard.

“Will anyone see us leaving?” Said Matt raising his voice for no clear reason.

“Matt, you don’t need to talk over anything. In fact a less than normal voice is better in here so you don’t shatter my eardrums.” Bob moved the craft out the hanger door and turned to the left side very quickly. He moved down the ramp a quarter of a mile and then suddenly they were flying.

“My head is still back there on the runway!” Matt tried not to raise his voice as he was observing with his heart racing!

“It will be for the first couple of times you do this,” Bob had the craft way out over the Pacific by then.

“This is the low power engine you’re using right now?” Matt was looking down at the speed indicator that was a bar graph type display.

“Oh yeah, slow poke.” Bob looked round and checked the radar screen. “Chase and pace are you clear?”

“Roger that sir,” A voice again from nowhere and everywhere.

“I am leaving the dome.” Bob replied.

“Good hunting, Cap.” The voice trailed off.

Matt looked up and saw the curving line where the blue sky dome of the Earth’s atmosphere met the black blanket of stars and just as suddenly they

were in space.

Everything was silent.

Matt just sat there looking out like a goldfish gawking out of a bowl.

CHAPTER Thirty-Eight

Ted was in his office listening on the speakerphone to the sit-rep from David Mason at MRC, making copious notes during their conversation.

“Well, they are still outside Martian orbit, Boss, just...I don’t know... loitering...out there. The Altarian craft have been doing crisscrosses and then working back and forth, doing some kind of systematic re-con, checking around asteroids as well as any large rocks. Beventon moved out in a polar orbit a good hundred thousand clicks, keeping the planet between him and them, peeking around the corner just enough to see if he could make out their purpose. We’re...confused as hell as to what in the Cheeses H. Rice they are doing on this one,” Dave sounded frustrated. “God damn aliens! You got any ideas to illuminate and enlighten us as to what is going on?”

“Absolutely!” Ted smiled to himself.

“Ahhhh, MAN!” Dave said, his voice going up a sing-song octave. “Don’t do this to me, bro! Don’t make me play twenty questions wit’ chu. I got a room full of truly nasty people down below who are wound up and looking for anyone to lash out at right about now. I never knew how bloodthirsty these bastards are that work for us. They got bets going as to how long Beventon will survive before he goes native and starts shooting anything that moves. There are lotteries running here that you will just blast out in a Viper and kill whatever gets in your way, too. Honestly, I’ve never seen a bunch of people this hostile locked up in a tight room for this long. These would not be good hostages. I would kill them all myself waaay before I got the cash!” David was unable to compose a short sentence in his head.

“They’re trying to find the wreck of one of their ships that crashed on Mars.”

“And I am guessin’ that it is not there,” Dave said in exasperation, knowing now what was coming next.

“It’s the one we took the sphere off of that took out Gage Nobel Seven.”
Ted just waited.

“I guess that’d be why you run this bunch, isn’t it?” Dave was clearly caught short.

“Yup, that’s the reason.” Ted gave him no room, ever.

“Where is it, if you don’t mind me asking?” Dave needed the last piece of the puzzle.

“Utah, 15. Area 6413, to be a bit more specific.” Ted answered. That simple statement represented about a million words to Dave.

“Oooh MAN! You didn’t, did you?” David asked.

“Personally, no. But some folks here at Wonderland wanted some space suit time and thought it would be a good idea to bring it home and play with it. Along with some nearly mummified corpses for Dr. Goodwin to play with in England. So yeah, I ordered it. They did it and now we got one that we’re trying to figure out what killed it,” Ted hated keeping everyone on high alert, “and, just for the record, it was not us.”

“By the way... ‘herself’ called from Paris. She is home.” Dave added nothing else.

“Thank you Dave. That is good to know,” Ted was relieved that Ariel had not gone off on one of her independent jags again, and for once, had done as she was told.

“She has such a great voice. I would love to meet her sometime.” Dave added.

“Two part answer on the chances of that happening: Slim to none.” Ted laughed.

“Wow, what a buddy!” Dave hit the ‘lock out’ button for a moment so only Ted could hear.

“We got something happening out there. I will get back on station and

call you if we need the cavalry.” Ted pushed his ‘clear’ button and dropped off.

Ted walked over to the boardroom off the hangar floor and walked in to see a few people watching the action on the big display. People started to get up and he waved them down. He stood against the back wall, watching the new inputs hit the board.

“They are done looking.” An officer in the front row who had not noticed Ted come in said. “Kick the tires and light the fires, people! Hopefully we can go scalp hunting soon!” Another officer bumped him and pointed towards the Admiral. He looked and saw Ted leaning against the wall. It was a Kodak moment to the fullest, the expression on the man’s face. Ted just nodded to him and walked out.

Ted was walking across the hanger floor when Ed called out to him. “S-2 is on line three for Fassbinder.”

Ted nodded and walked back over to a wall with a phone. He picked up and heard the voice say, “Humphrey?”

“You got me.”

“I was trying to reach Dr. Fassbinder. This is Tommy Chin at S-2.” The man was talking very fast and slurred his words.

“He is away from his desk for awhile. What can I do for you?” Ted waited.

“I don’t think anything. I really need to talk to him. He’s the only one with authority to handle what I need...I think!?” Chin had tried to slow down.

“I can probably help you, Dr. Chin.” Ted said, quietly laughing to himself.

“Who are you? I’m sorry, I didn’t get your name.” Chin’s voice was exuding about 10 levels of “annoyed” by now.

“Dr. Chin, this is Dr. Ted Humphrey. The guy that signs your checks.”

Chin clearly still did not get it.

“No, no! I do not want the accounting department! I need to find Dr. Fassbinder!” Enough was enough to Ted. Clearly the soft approach wasn’t sinking in.

“Look, Tommy... I am the guy that runs this whole freak show here. I’m the ringmaster of this whole circus! Got that?” Ted had no patience to hear an answer to that question. “Fassbinder works for me. You work for him. And that means you work for me as well. What part of that do you not understand, because if you can’t spell that out back to me clearly and in proper sequence you are going to be the shortest lived manager that S-2 has ever had.” Ted waited for several moments. There was stone dead silence on the phone, as he imagined Chin at the other end just standing there with his mouth open like a goldfish that had jumped out of his tank. Ted shook his head and just dropped the phone and walked away.

Ed had seen and overheard all of this. He ran over to the phone and listened to it intensely then hung it up.

Ted turned to Ed as he was walking away. “I don’t have the time for this kind of bullshit. Go over there to S-2 and shoot that slant-eyed gook zipperhead son of a bitch and find someone who speaks and clearly understands the English language. Appoint them as the manager, now. I want those nuclear warheads out of ME-3 and on the old bombing range. Triple the security out there too. I need at least four Kinkade devices armed and primed with forty-two second proximity fuses on them and someone who can aim that machine and hit a moving target in less than thirty seconds for Christ sakes!”

Everyone within a hundred feet of the Admiral started to do something, anything, to be busy, and not look up.

Ed tossed his clipboard to someone nearby and took off on a flat run.

Two other armed security types fell in directly behind him. Ted was standing there just fuming. He suddenly didn't feel well, and his head twirled with a sudden vertigo, as all the skin on his body prickled, like he was exposed to some kind of static field, but it just heightened his rage.

“They had better do something pretty god-damn quick or we are going out there and we are going to kill those fucking orange-skinned bastards for just good measure!”

He picked up a wrench that was laying on the floor close by him and hurled it across the hangar. The hangar reverberated where it hit with a loud clang, sparking and making a grinding metal sound as it slid across the floor. “And if I find another FUCKING tool just laying around... someone is going to have it for LUNCH and it will hurt like HELL when they take their next SHIT, I promise you!”

There was the sound of one person slowly clapping, that echoed throughout the humongous hangar.

“My, my! Aren't we impressive?” A woman's voice came softly from behind him, taunting him. Ted spun toward the voice, almost losing his footing on the slick concrete floor as he saw a woman standing there smiling at him. Shock and realization hit him like winter wave.

Ann Corbett.

“Cat got your tongue, Teddy?” She smiled, as she slinked slowly towards him, her hips swaying slowly, oozing sex and erotic pleasure.

Ted pulled his .380 automatic and blasted away. Face! Heart! Torso! Direct hits! Eight rounds flew the full length of the hangar and out into the sunlight, as Ann Corbett vaporized into the hot desert air.

Ted just hung in space, panting, standing, hunched, clutching the device in his chest, waiting for something to happen. Then he tossed his gun onto the deck, where it clattered and slid to a stop about 50 yards away, and he turned,

like the Phantom of the Opera and walked back into the office.

One stunned officer said to another. “Was he shooting at something or just that pissed off?”

The other guy was just shaking his head, and continued to do so without answering.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

“Hazel take over,” Bob said loudly to the open space around him. “We want to be at La Grange Point, zero three. Notify us on arrival and put on a full smear.”

Bob got up, stretched like an orangutan hanging from a tree, and pulled his flight boots back on. “Come on Matt, let me show you the guts of our little winged demon here.”

Matt pulled his boots back on and laced them up tight with double knots.

Bob walked aft to where they’d entered the craft, then stopped and opened a rear hatchway that showed a closed out chamber for at least four people.

“This is the EVA hatch area, where we can both exit and enter the ship. We can use this in space and also when we’re landed somewhere. It has an auxiliary ladder that drops down for easy movement.” He closed that hatch and sealed it back up again. He pulled open another door and this new room had space suits and other equipment that could be used for Extra Vehicular Activity as well.

Matt just nodded his understanding, which was mixed with stunned amazement, taking mental pictures and notes of where everything was, what it was for, how it was going to work and how all the puzzle pieces fit together.

He would not forget. Never in his life would he forget!

Then they walked down to the staff area. It was small, compact and well laid out in an ergonomic, totally user friendly design. Matt looked into one of the sleeping quarters that had four beds in it. The lounge area was comfortable as well as handsome, and almost elegant, like something you would see on an Ashley Bros. showroom floor.

“How many people are normally on a mission?” Matt inquired.

“Hmm...really depends on the mission. But kind of on average it’s usually twelve. Two shifts, white and blue teams that rotate, with a single captain and an executive officer. We decided that for this type of craft we could ‘hot bunk’ folks,” he pointed with his index and middle finger together towards the room with the four beds, “with little trouble. No one ever undresses up here anyway.” Bob pushed open the door to the head, which had two units and a sink.

“We still have gravity?” Matt realized it for some time and now was the right time to address it.

“Yup, it’s internal to the craft. Hazel keeps us all from getting muscle atrophy and osteopenia of the bones with true Earth gravity set at 1 G. As well as to keep us oriented to up and down...or at least Earth up and down.” Bob was a reference book of information.

“No showers?” Matt looked around and then raised his eyebrow.

“We can’t waste the water, or even carry it really. We re-cycle, re-use, recirculate and still we have to carry a thousand pounds of it aboard for even short trips. It’s probably the single greatest problem we have in going out to deep space. We still can’t make it without using more chemicals that weigh as much as the water they produce for us. If we hadn’t of found the frozen water polar ice cap on the Moon, we probably could never have made Cape Malabar work. ‘Course there is still a lot of freaky stuff about the Moon we are still finding out about.” Bob then walked over to the Command and Control Center. The CNC looked a lot like the bridge with the same kind of space-age recliner chairs and the high tone white shades as the color.

“Sit here and give it a moment to adjust,” Bob pointed and Matt went over to sit down, and now expected the sensuous “magic expanding bean-bag chair” effect.

It started to move and envelop his body in its soft, womb-like cushion and he jerked for a second in surprise as the visor came over his eyes and enveloped his eyes and the back of his skull. Matt started to look around.

“This is all the targeting information?” Matt asked moving his head quizzically from side to side. “Jesus! It displays a lot of information to handle so quickly.” Matt pushed up and the chair retracted. He turned to look at it more closely.

“Sure is, but some of the young fellows at the base can play this like a video game. It’s unbelievable to watch.” Bob walked over and hit a spot on the wall and a bench slid out which they both sat down on.

“Who is Hazel again? For a moment I thought she was an officer on board with us.” Matt was still processing an awfully lot of information.

“Oh she is!” Bob smiled. “She’s our automatic pilot and flight controller. We named her Hazel, really after my ex-wife like I told you... but to sell the name I said she was supposed to be HAL 9000’s girlfriend...” Bob sorta smiled, hoping their little inside joke would fly with the rookie, and looked at a clearly puzzled Matt. Bob’s eyes rolled up in disbelief and frustration. “Sweet fancy Moses, son! You really were raised in a cardboard box, in a closet...on the Moon! You know! ‘Space Odyssey’? 2001? Arthur C. Clark...?” Bob made a question out of each statement.

“Oh! Of course! Right! The movie! Stanley Kubrick! The rogue computer that tries to kill everyone. I just didn’t...” Matt just gave up as Bob put his hands over his face and shook his head.

“If they didn’t go for that, which thank God they did, I would have had to come up with some kind of fancy, science-like acronym to make the name fly like...like High Altitude Zapper of Extraterrestrial...Lady...” he ending lamely, shrugging his shoulders. “What does something like this

cost?” Matt asked still visibly stunned.

“These babies run us about seven billion each. That’s billion with a ‘B’. That’s why we only have four.” Bob touched a panel and the video display came up on the impossibly thin screen. “The engines, power systems and safety controls are all imbedded. No one can get to them from in here. That’s very important since if we were to open one of the blast proof panels, this craft would be flooded with nuclear particles the likes of which not even God almighty has ever seen.” Bob pulled up a graph and showed Matt the layout of the interior systems. “When we work on these birds, we have to drop the power core first and have a special site down range from A-2.”

“How much nuclear power are we using in here now?” Matt looked up at the ceiling like he could feel something.

“More than any nuclear power generator on the earth. About thirty rods worth.” Bob smiled at the thought.

“So, this is all in and of itself a gigantic bomb?” Matt said.

“You don’t know the half it, buckeroo! This also has a mono-crystal Athiam-flex drive in it. That little honey can run this alone for about a thousand years in space.” Bob waited. Matt stared at him totally non-plussed.

“I have no idea what that is,” Matt sat there looking a little more stunned than he had been previously.

“We took it off a Nagas Harachi ship we found. About the size of a shoebox. Can’t replicate it because we don’t have Athiam. We don’t even know what it fucking is, really.” Bob pushed the wall and the screen retracted back into it as a perfectly flat surface, where you would never know it had ever been there.

“You easily could rule the world with these four ships. No one could stop you. Why haven’t you done that?” Matt opened his hands wide

with the question. “I mean just swooped in and straightened everything else out for the rest of us?” Matt spoke philosophically.

“Hold your horses thar, pard,” Bob said going a bit extra cowboy. “It’s not ‘us guys’, pal. You’re one of us now, remember that. And no, that is not our bag. Think about what you just said. You really want to baby-sit *THIS* world? That opens up about a jillion other problems: politics, governing people, greed, power, influence, the poor, the sick... everyone would have a hand out. No, leave that to others who actually enjoy it or thrive on it. We are warriors in a quiet war that has been going on longer than you have been alive, and will probably be going on long after me and you are dead.” Bob was watching Matt to see if the cogs were fitting in place for him yet. “This subject comes up every now and then when we have classes for new people and our naval personnel. It’s the ‘Superman Conundrum.’ Lots of people think about this as being an answer, but it’s not. We’re an immature planet and society, just hitting our pimply, violent puberty. We’re still caught in loops of politics and religions. Much more advanced societies are beyond all of that. We still measure things in money. They look at everything in terms of energy allocations. To have a hundred ships like this in a fleet, would require more power than has ever been produced on the Earth. That’s why we’ve learned that most major groups out there in the universe only have small numbers of large and powerful crafts. The resource requirements to conduct deep space explorations and aggressive actions will directly affect those who live on the planet. It’s a balancing act for those in power. It would be that for every major space cruiser. A world would have to reduce its population by ten million or a hundred million consumers. Because we live in a for-profit world, we can pump the monies back into our organizations and companies. We offset the rest with our collective savings from all the new systems, devices and things we’ve made from tearing apart alien ships and modifying

them to make them into consumer goods. The final portion comes indirectly from the government.” Bob looked around and shook his head. “We run six major operations centers, fourteen laboratories, three observatories, four time machine facilities, which we can’t figure out how to make work, so they had to become teleport mass movers for us, which only saves us on transport costs. We have over two hundred deep space satellites that we monitor, fifty satellite laser gun platforms in the solar system as well. A base on the Moon that costs us a fortune in operational costs, four Vipers like this beauty and three Constellation Class Destroyers. That does not include all the cars, airplanes, underground trains, secret bases and on top of all of that over five hundred major and minor corporations and companies. And all of that, Ted sits in final control of. The idea of taking on one more responsibility would probably drive him completely over the edge. But I will tell you this... when you run this outfit, you can take over whatever you want as long as you can handle it. But some of us are too old and too tired even to think about such a thing. Come on now, we are going to see how you fly.”

“Oh brilliant! I haven’t thrown up since breakfast.” Matt got up and looked around once more and headed back up to the bridge. “And as far of my idea of tinkering with any of this, just forget I mentioned it.”

CHAPTER FORTY

A forty-something Senior Master Chief abruptly burst into Ted's office off the hangar floor without knocking, announcement or ceremony. He occupied the spot directly in front of the desk and stood for a long moment. Ted stopped what he was doing, looked up, clasped his fingers across his stomach, and rocked back in his chair.

The Master Chief had in his hand Ted's gleaming .380 Auto that he had obviously picked up off the hangar floor, after Ted had thrown it there. He brought it up to in front of this face and turned it to the left and then the right so Ted could inspect it.

He expertly checked it for rounds in the clip and slid it open and closed it a half dozen times with a staccato clackety-clack to check the chamber. Ted just coolly and calmly sat and watched him. He had a small tool box with him. The officer sat down in a chair in the corner across from Ted and in seconds tore the weapon down into its component parts and pieces and laid them on the low coffee table.

He opened and reached into his kit of tools and cleaned the gun thoroughly. Then he put it back together and checked the action again with another solid metallic clickity-clack. He picked up the clip and reached into his kit and pulled out a handful of bullets and put them into the same fist that held the clip. With one hand the bullets magically appeared out of his palm and he loaded the clip to full capacity with a crook of his thumb. He then slid the clip home into the butt of the weapon with a forceful strike of his palm.

Eight new rounds in it and he slid one into the chamber and pushed the safety back on with his thumb, the red dot showing now against the silver metal. He wiped it down again, flipping it around he walked back over to the desk, and laid it gingerly back atop the stack of files where it had previously been.

As suddenly as he had come, he was gone, turning on his heel to stride out of the office without saying a word. Ted just sat at his desk in amazement. He'd just pulled this dumb boner of a stunt and this guy was only concerned that his Admiral had a clean, totally functional, fully loaded weapon.

Ted just shook his head in wonderment. No judgment, no looks of "What the hell do you think you're doing, you ignorant fool!" Nope... nothing. Clearly the Master Chief believed that Ted had a reason to do what he did, otherwise he would not have done it. Or if it was some psychotic freak out, then GOOD! He was the Boss. He deserved one every now and then.

It had always amazed Ted, still on the inside, really, just an orphan kid from Barstow, the quality and loyalty he had been privileged to work around in all of his years. His first encounter had been with Max in that Washington State coffee shop, and then Admiral Jacobs all those years ago on a yacht in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. But Ted finally had the reflection time he needed to psychoanalyze his own personal Freudian day-mare.

Ted tried to work out the details again in his mind, step-by-step. Was he actually seeing Anne Corbett or not? Corbett would easily be able to defeat any security they had, no matter how advanced. She could literally dance between raindrops, moving in and out of the time-stream and our dimensional space. He had seen Dr. Simon Ratterman do it first hand. She could simply bathe in the Quantum Foam if it pleased her. She was loose in the time-stream somewhere, and fear and respect for her abilities, intellect, scheming and sheer hatred of him, drove virtually every measure and cautionary action he ever took.

If she was in the hangar, he would have killed her, because, he

reasoned, that not even with a futuristic belt mounted Time-Runner device would the bitch be able to dodge a close range bullet. Not even she was that fast. So she was either a temporal anomaly, some premonition or an event on a future time-line, or a fever dream hallucination from too much stress. Worst of all; a delusion. That meant he was losing it at the very worst possible time.

He should file for medical leave, or flat out resign.

But resign to whom? Himself?

And even if he did there was no one to hand it off to. It was not through ego or some kind of megalomania that The Group had become monolithic in structure. He had done his best to spread out as much power and responsibility as he could. But with the passing of George Bellamy and dear old Harv back in...GOD! Had it been that long ago? He was the only one left that knew the warp and weave and Sturm Und Drang of everything going on, on this planet and out in space.

The phone rang on his desk. Ted stared at it for a long moment, deciding whether or not to answer, but finally decided he'd spent enough time tip-toeing through the tulips of the mine-field of his own explosive thoughts. With a heavy sigh, Ted finally, reluctantly, picked it up. The operator identified herself and then put the call through.

“Ted? THEODORE! GODDAMNIT! Tell me that your boy, that cracker, honky, hush-puppy shoe man racist bigot that hates good looking, well educated black men like myself, is NOT out in space popping wheelies with one of your toys?! Please tell me this is not true!!”

Dave was hanging on every word.

“You betcha,” Ted drawled slowly. “That’s him. Giving Fassbinder a flying lesson.”

“THE Robert Hanson?” Dave asked, incredulous.

“Yes.”

“Cowboy Bob...Hanson?”

“Yes.”

“Giving Matt a...flying lesson?”

“Yes.”

“In space?”

“Affirmative.”

“IN A VIPER STAR FIGHTER?”

“Yee-up!” Ted felt his mood shift again.

“Boss? No shit? He’s throwing gravitational waves like typhoons all over the God blessed universe! I got every L.I.G.O. counter on earth rupturing, practically throwing up! Is he trying to pull the entire Altarian fleet in for a fight?” Dave held his breath for the answer.

The Laser Interferometer Gravitational-Wave Observatories in Livingston, Louisiana, and the Hanford Nuclear Site in Washington State were the two public sites, but The Group maintained the same, but far more advanced equipment, at each of their main bases, just for cases like this. A D.E.W. line, Defense Early Warning system, for anything unexpectedly dropping out of hyper-space coming towards us.

“You know ‘David’ old buddy... I think that is just what our good ol’ Captain has in mind. You want to know what is really, really scary?” Ted waited for a long set of seconds. “It’s just the two of them out there.”

David let out a low whistle.

“Yeah. No gun crew, no staff, no....nothing.”

“That is balls out, man. Ted,” Dave was suddenly deadly serious. There were people besides him David Mason had to report to, and he did not want to tell them that the head director of The Group had lost his mind. “Did you authorize this?”

“Do you think for one minute I would authorize these kinds of wild,

irresponsible actions in our present circumstances?” Ted said in a sing-song calming voice. “He did this on his own. All he told me was he was going to be taking Wing Commander Fassbinder outside the dome for a training mission,” Ted felt the blood flowing up to his face again. “Why do you ask, Director?”

Dave caught the sudden change of tone and the edge in Ted’s voice.

“Because they’ve stopped looking around for whatever it was they were digging through the garbage can for, and are heading...in. And by IN I mean towards...US. At least three ships are coming right at us, as another four are moving right and left in a sweep motion. But they all look like they’re heading towards a La Grange point between Earth and lunar orbit I would say. The rest are holding position out by Mars.” Dave’s words were measured and accurate.

“Good, then Bob did it. Thank you Dave. I’ll be getting back to you.” Ted hung up without waiting for a reply.

He got up and walked back down to the hanger and went into the Comm Shack. “Are you monitoring Viper One?” Ted spoke to Sparks, the main officer on duty with the headphones.

The Comm officer slid his ‘phones down around his neck as he stood up.

“Affirmative sir.” The officer smiled. “He’s putting on one helluva fireworks show, sir!”

“Contact him, please.”

The man sat and adjusted his headset back over his head. “Hen House to Viper One. Hen House to Viper One. High, high, high.” The man sat back and listened.

A few seconds later Bob's distinctive Southern drawl came out of the speaker.

"Viper One standing by."

Ted asked for the microphone. The Sparks handed it to him and watched Ted carefully. He leaned in, pressed the talk button and held one earphone to his head.

"Viper One, want to do your Pony Express Act, now? Clock is running and I want to see if you can break your own record." Ted let up on the 'talk' button and waited.

"All the way?" Bob asked.

"All the way, Captain!" Ted was smiling to himself.

"I am going to dust a lot of Southern California, Admiral." Bob was showing concern and wanted that to be clear.

"Dust 'em! You have clearance to buzz the tower, Maverick. In the door in less than thirty or it's back to nothing but your wife and golf all day with a rocker and a gold watch and I'll get a new, younger Batman." An old joke between them.

"Want to bet? Jab in the spurs boy! We are now...gone! YUP! YUP! GIDDY UP!" Before the radio went silent Ted swore he could hear the high-pitched terrified scream of an Englishman.

Ted slowly straightened up and handed the mic and the phones back to the now smiling Sparks. Ted rubbed his forehead. They were locked in a hole. Outgunned, outmanned, out numbered, back against the wall, painted in a corner, facing an unknown alien menace with the fate of the world hanging in the balance. If he was going crazy, then by God, he was going to go out crazy! Everyone needed a morale booster and his forces needed something to galvanize them and bring them up with some good ol' fashion esprit de corp.

Ted strode out of the Comm shack then jogged towards the small display boardroom. He was calling and waving to all the pilots and RIOs.

“Come on! ROLL UP! ROLL UP! Once in a lifetime stuff here people!”

Ted ran in slightly out of breath, and already two officers were watching the screen, as more piled in behind Ted to see what the action was all about. The room was too small for everyone.

“Put that on the big display board in the hanger. Hell, put it on all the boards in the hanger!”

Ted walked out to give way for a few more of the personnel a chance to watch it on an eight-foot screen elevated off the ground. Three more of the same type of boards lit up and all the men and women on the floor gathered around the screens to watch.

David Mason’s deep resonant voice came up, like a god, over all the systems.

“All Controls and Stations! Be advised. We got a hot Fastwalker coming in from the far side. He is one of ours and he is streaking. All stations confirm, and present!” Dave shouted down the lines. Ted was all smiles.

“Hamilton, get the space camera on them and show it on the big board. We may never see this again as long as we live!” Dave had done the unthinkable. He was broadcasting on closed circuit a Viper ripping back toward the earth at the highest speed it could do inside the solar system. The special electronic telescope at Mt. Hamilton that few knew about was now focused on the Viper and tracking.

The Viper was vivid and pure and clean against the black velvet background of the outside space. The sunlight painted three quarters of the ship with a brush of gold and purple, like the colors of truth and hope, as the

cloaking smear was turned off. Hanson wanted everyone, including God and all the angels and all His children, to see him. NORAD, the Russians, the Chinese, the Aliens, and anybody else in this whole Goddamn Universe that wanted to *FUCK* with us!

“Put the spurs to that pony, Cowboy Bob....!” Dave’s voice rang out. He’d plugged into the tactical command channel. Everyone on the floor was whooping and yelling and jumping up and down, fists pumping in the air. The sight of a naval spacecraft blazing across the sky was beautiful to every pilot and crew member in that hanger.

“Put him on the big speaker, Dave,” Ted said on the private link.

There was a brief rushing burst of static then Bob was on all the speakers all over the base.

“YEEEEEEEEEEEE—HAAAAH! YIP-YIP! YEEEE-HAAAAAAH!”

Then every man and woman at Five-One, Groom Lake, S-2, S-3, S-4, the most top-secret bases in the world, began to yell along with him!

They were all riding with cowboy Captain Robert ‘Bob’ Hanson and Wing Commander Matthew ‘Bad Ass’ Fassbinder in their minds and in their hearts.

It sounded like...victory!

PART THIRTEEN:

“ MAVERICK :
Permission toBUZZ ...”

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Matt had been trying his hand at controlling the Viper. It was easier than he thought. The way it handled was very, very nice. Smooth. Like the cushioned bobbing ride of his old man's Cadillac Coupe De Ville. He found himself relaxing as he put it through its paces. It was truly a dream to fly. He'd found some soft music to listen to as he gently moved the controls and constantly changed the attitude of the craft. He was keeping his speed down so that there were no radical movements at all from the velocity on the Viper. He listened to the exchange between Ted and Bob and was unsure of what that meant. However, when the conversation was over, he went back to trying to make the Viper move to the rhythm of the music when Bob intercepted him and the ship slowly fell out of his control. He felt a sinking feeling, had a twinge of wanting to reach in his pocket for more quarters so the video game wouldn't stop and he wouldn't have to suffer the blippity-bloobity sound of "GAME OVER."

"I have command now Matthew. Hit your release button and take your hands off the control plates." Matt followed his instructions and then turned and looked at Bob through his visor.

"What's happening?" Matt asked.

"Hit the button that displays the word 'SAFE' Matt, and hold it down. I would also suggest you look straight ahead." Bob was punching all kinds of buttons and jabbing in sequences at expert lightning speed.

After following the last order, Matt looked up and out at the screen and into space. He felt something different around his body and looked down. The three restraints that had come out of the chair and wrapped around him in that cushiony warmth when he first sat down, were now

pulling him deeper into the device.

“Ah....Bob...?” The question contained about a hundred other questions all at the same time.

“Relax and enjoy the rodeo, Bucko! We’re going to be frightening the hell out of a lot of folks momentarily.” Bob touched two more buttons and the inside of the bridge phased through the color spectrum to a deep, dark blurred violet.

Suddenly, without feeling it, Matt realized that they had made a sharp turn and were moving very rapidly away from where they’d been. He looked at the Earth and it was starting to get larger in his visor very quickly.

“Hazel, darling, we’re heading straight to the barn at seven tenths sub-light speed!” Bob was touching more buttons.

“Bad move Bob,” Hazel’s voice stayed calm and clear. “Very bad move. I strongly advise again.....”

“Calculate an in-flight path, where we enter the dome over the Mid-Pacific and head in at ninety thousand,” Bob hesitated. “At fifty kilometers out from the coastline, take it to eight thousand and plot the run directly over Hermosa Beach, California. You said you wanted to see that place, right kid? Just don’t blink. Drop the cloak and reduce the smear to minimum.”

“Done. This is still a bad idea, Bob. We are currently visible to radar, Light-Dar and both upper and lower bands of the light spectrum.” Hazel’s seductive automatic voice, actually finally took on a scolding tone.

“Yeap. I am well aware, Hazel.” Bob took a quick look over at Matt who was holding his hands clasped together in his lap, his knuckles turning white, looking very much like he was praying for dear life. “In about seventeen minutes we are going to get the crap kicked out of us, Matt. It will seem like we’re going to rip apart and blow up at the same time. But I

guarantee you, that is NOT going to happen. So be ready for it, as well as enjoying the hell out of it. It's kind of like the D ticket on the Wild Mouse Ride, in Jersey"

"Why will that be happening?" Matt's voice was a little shaky

"Well, sir, that would be 'cuz we're entering the atmosphere at nearly seventy percent power on our second drive system. That's strictly forbidden by the flight operations and the safety manual. But it does make a beautiful display when you see it from the ground." Bob was pushing more buttons and Matt unclasped his hand and wrapped his arms around his shoulders, holding himself even tighter.

"How fast are we going to be traveling inside...the dome?" Matt was noticing the Earth was looming greater now, and filling most of the screen.

"Umm...Mach twenty-five," Bob pulled another piece of the chair around his lower face, which form fitted into a mask. "I would suggest you do the same, before we hit the 'Doom Wall.' Just look to your right and you'll see the handle."

Matt got his mask set and found the air coming into his nose was cool, slightly moist and very fresh. He folded his arms over his chest and sat a little deeper in the chair and was actually starting to enjoy the ride.

"Here...we...GO!" Bob let go of everything and sat back as well. "Let me hear it, Hazel!"

Through the headset that connected him to central computer brain of the Viper at Hazel's heart, Matt began to hear a song, and he and Bob both began to sing along.

Rhinestone Cowboy by Glenn Campbell.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

“HOLY SHIT!” One of the young naval aviators exclaimed while watching the screen with shock and amazement. “He’s coming in hotter than hell!”

“No one is supposed to do that!” Another pilot blurted out while standing there in astonishment as he watched the video from Hamilton coming in. “He’s going to burn that bird up!” The craft was covered in a searing red fireball as it blasted into the atmosphere.

“I built that bird you’re talking about to do just that.” Both men turned around to see the Admiral right behind them watching the same screen.

“Apologies sir.” One of them said.

“For what? Making an accurate statement, in any other scenario or case like this? Don’t apologize son. The Vipers are built to do just that and much, much, more. I just don’t want any of you guys trying this stunt without proper training though. Captain Hanson and myself have perfected this over a goodly amount of time.” Ted actually caught himself smiling, for the first time since he could remember. He smiled all the time when Harv Glipsen was alive. He looked at his Rolex Submariner chronograph and noted the time on his stopwatch function.

“Admiral, is he going to do a high speed drop over the base?” One of the officers asked Ted.

“No. We found that damping it over the ocean is best. It pulls off a lot of her heat very quickly. I’m just hoping Hamilton can keep on him as he crosses the coast and heads for here. That should be a sight to see.” Ted moved to another screen and leaned up against a large tool caddy. A Chief handed him a cup of coffee. Ted nodded his thanks and continued to be amazed by the way the Viper was performing.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, inside the Viper it was an entirely different action/adventure movie. The buffeting and banging was deafeningly loud. Once they'd entered the "Doom Wall" of the Earth's stratosphere, all the sounds of the universe came crashing back. The interior reverberated like an Alabama hailstorm in a hillbilly tin roofed shotgun shed. Like mystic Mjolnir the hammer of Thor beating in the hull. Hazel sounded like she was going to quite simply dissolve into smithereens any second.

"Is it supposed to do this?!" Matt yelled, now well beyond the verge of terror, being shaken like a rat in a Terrier's jaws.

Bob looked over at him and he could see the whites of his eyes, looking like a spooked horse that had seen a snake! He gave out a maniacal laugh that only amplified Matt's horror.

"Oh no!" Bob said. "It's much worse if I turn off the damping field. Want to see?" Bob reached for a button.

"Oh Please, Almighty God NO!"

With an evil grin, Bob did it anyway. Matt was almost blown out of his seat and would have bounced off the ceiling if not for the harness he was strapped in by, and the central seat buckle at his chest bruised his sternum as it dug into it. Or at least that was how it felt to him.

"I can only presume we have a reason for doing this?" Matt was still feeling like he was upside down, or maybe inside out, which was what his stomach was telling him.

"Yes there is. Coming out of the dome wall." Bob hit the buttons like he was conducting Wagner's FLIGHT OF THE VALKERIES. There was one large thump and then the air got smooth.

“Yippee-Ki-YAY MOTHERFUCKER! We be in!” Bob went back to hitting buttons.

Matt could see the ocean rushing up at him as they were streaking across the sky. His mind was having a hard time keeping up with the rattling movement in the visor.

“See? Back over Hermosa Beach! Safe and sound.”

Though they were far from it, Hazel had been programmed to give Fassbinder a brief glimpse of the idyllic little town. For a fleeting instant, Matt saw the blue water, the brilliant strand of sand, Scotty’s Restaurant, Hennessey’s Irish bar upper dining section and the Poop Deck bar, and the women made of gold playing volley...and BLAM! It was gone.

“Cloak with a heavy smear, Hazel.” Bob said into the headset.

“Engaged, Captain,” came the soft, sexy submissive voice.

“Squeeze yer butts and hold onto yer guts Saint Matthew! This is going to absolutely blow your mind.” Bob raised his index finger in the air for dramatic effect, and brought it down to hit one more button.

“Hazel, my love, you have the Comm. Our lives are now in your hands,” Bob sat back.

“Plotted, planned and set for minimal damage, Captain.” Hazel responded. “All the way into the hangar, Robert?” She said getting unexpectedly personal.

“That’s an affirmative, darling.” Bob relaxed in his seat and tucked his thumbs under the chest straps, like a Southern lawyer about to give a long closing speech to the jury. Matt could have sworn he heard the A.I. computer giggle in girlish delight but he quickly followed suit and drove his hands under the chest straps digging into him so savagely and hung on for dear life.

He had also come to the conclusion that Captain Robert “Cowboy Bob” Hanson was clinically insane!

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

The effect of a one-hundred ton aircraft traveling at twenty-five times the speed of sound is ominous and awe-inspiring. Even as it was slowing in the Earth's Atmo, there are two pressure waves that are passing off the body of the craft at the same time. One, going up and dissipating in the ambient air, and the second wave going downward behind the trailing edge of the ship. At her current speed and with the sheer size, displacement and volume of the Viper, that traveling wave was now like Paul Bunyan's swinging hatchet, only now as big as the Empire State Building.

Millions of pounds of force punched into the Pacific Ocean at a single point, putting up a spraying fan-shaped typhoon rooster tail behind the cloak of the now invisible ship, nearly a thousand feet high. The water was also being superheated and turned into steam, which was cooling the fuselage, as it moved up into the column of air, like some god-like sign from Jehovah leading the Israelites out of the Land of the Pharaohs.

Some sailors, when they've observed this phenomenon, have called it a White Squall. Meteorologists just shake their heads because they don't understand any natural phenomenon that can cause this to happen. As the Viper approached the coastline, Bob had turned enough that they were coming up on a deserted stretch of beach in central California. Matt could see the line of the beach to the surf. Bob hit a button that turned both of their chairs all the way around, so that they would be looking out the back of the Viper.

When they crossed the shoreline, they watched the land behind them exploding upward. Anything that was not nailed down, was blown apart and went airborne. The buffeting inside the craft was major. The force of the pressure wave was causing micro-quakes to occur on small fault lines. Seismographs all over the west were watching a string of mini-quakes going

off. Hazel was doing her best to miss vehicles, houses, orchards and businesses.

The movement of the craft, was truly like riding the Coney Island Wild Mouse. Hazel had slowed a little over the western part of California, but once over Tehachapi and dropping down into the high desert, the Viper ramped up again, causing a one hundred and fifty mile long dust storm wake in the gently rolling picturesque sand dunes below. The sound on the ground was deafening as the craft passed over. Coming out of the desert the Viper swung up and headed to the north over Death Valley. Within moments, it was north again of Mt. Charleston and then headed in a bee-line for the seven mile runway and her Hanger 18 barn at Groom Lake.

Everyone in the hanger was transfixed to the screen. A satellite had also been tasked to watch from above. No one could see the ship after it went smeared, but the results on the ground were awesome to see in real time. It was like watching an Angel of the Apocalypse arrive on Earth. When she had gone up over the western mountains in Nevada, everyone turned to the main hangar door.

The Viper, as if a magician had pulled away a curtain, came out of the smear and cloak at the end of the runway and then rapidly reduced speed and glided into the hanger where it set down gently inside a bright red set of triangles that warned everyone off of that specific landing area.

The skin was radiating and heat waves were roiling off the bird like a shimmering desert mirage. A set of pipes came down from above and another set rose from the floor extending upwards. The first spray was a foam mixture hitting the craft and everyone could hear it sizzle like a hot griddle hitting cold water in the sink. Then clear cold water followed. The wash down lasted a good five minutes and high-speed drains were pulling off the water as it hit the floor. As the cooling devices retracted into their original

housings, the flashing red light spinning in the center of the hanger stopped and everything went deadly quiet.

No one moved on the hangar floor. Then the ramp lowered down from Hazel's pregnant belly and gave birth to Bob Hanson and a wobbling, green around the gills Dr. Matthew Fassbinder. Bob hit the hanger floor, and Matt came stumbling after him, and Bob put his arms around him and gave him a crushing hug that made Matt almost pass out. Then he turned with his arm still around him, holding Matt up, and tossed his other arm up in the air!

Cheers and whoops of joy came from all the people in the hangar! Bob waved like a guy who had just sunk a hole in one at St. Andrew's. Matt limply moved his arm up and down like an under inflated balloon man outside a car dealership.

Ted led the charge of people coming over to congratulate them and give them handshakes and the inevitable group-hug. Ted looked down at his watch.

“Twenty-four minutes.”

“THAT is a new world record, if I am not mistaken?” Bob pulled off his leg clipboard and tossed it to the flight engineer who had run over as well to the group.

“Matt?” Ted asked. “Are you okay?”

Matt slipped out from under Bob's arm and went down on one knee and looked up turning from one man to the other.

“You two are...insane!”

He put one hand on the ground to steady himself, the other on his stomach and hung his head. He took his hand off his belly, and pointed back up at the Viper and yelled at the top of his lungs:

“But I...LOVE...that....BLOODY....SHIP!”

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Ted, Bob and Matt were all in the isolation room in the Communications Center located inside the headquarters building. Ted and Matt were sitting as Bob leaned up against the wall chewing a stick of Beeman's gum. All three of them were wearing headsets.

David Mason at MRC filled the screen in front of them.

"Jasper opened the seal three hours ago, but with a caution that everyone had to be back in the building within four hours. So we've got a lot of folks drifting back in now. But some sunshine, fresh air, real food and taking a good shit that lasted for awhile, will make the most distraught person pleasant again."

"T.M.I., Mason," Bob said in his headset.

"Okay, so now where are they?" Ted continued, rolling things along.

"They bugged out from Mars, and now they're between Jupiter and Saturn in a holding orbit. They pulled back really fast when they started to read the gravitational data pouring in from those wheelies and that run Captain Hanson made. The flankers beat-feet back to the main body of ships as well. Analysis says you caused them, to use their words, 'deep concern.' "

Dave sat there and started to smile. "What you did was change the game so rapidly that they don't know what to do. They don't know if that ship belongs to us or someone...else. Either way they know three things right now. First: we are in outrageous and flagrant violation of the Isomer Protocol Treaty. Two: we got something in space that can cause them some major heartburn, and/or third; we double crossed them and have some new pals from space. We have now become the Oliver Dill to some new super bad ass alien Scott Farcus." They all smiled at the classic "A Christmas Story" movie reference to the famed back alley school bully.

"That was the point," Ted said speaking quietly. "I am not going to sit

here and let them conduct an action in our space, inside our system, without having our say as well. What else you got, Dave?”

“Well as you would imagine, NORAD just went off its nut. They lit up all their boards. Russians did the same, and the Chinese and the Indians,” he rolled his hand in the air. “They have at least fifteen teams in the field in California with Geiger counters, test sets, video cameras and the like, trying to find out which alien species had the gall and sheer nerve to bring a Fastwalker made exclusively for space, down to the deck,” Dave rolled his eyes. “Then your old pal Dick called using the POTUS phone. I told him it was you out joy riding. He laughed his ass off. He asked me to ask you if he can head back to DC yet?”

“Not yet,” Ted concluded. “We need to see their next move. It’s okay to slacken up a little, but let’s not get sloppy about this. We still have a fleet of un-friendlies inside our solar system and we still do not know their intentions?” Ted turned to Matt. “Anything to add?”

“One general question. Have we ever seen what one of their ships can do? I mean besides cross interstellar space, of course?” Matt leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers.

“One heck of a good question,” Dave came back. “I can not say that we do... at least nothing I have seen yet.”

“Neither have I.” Bob chimed in.

“In running the bluff, and that is what we did out there today,” Matt continued, “we watched a reaction that did not fit a pattern of outright aggression. We have clearly seriously violated a treaty with the group they represent, and yet, upon seeing a Fastwalker around the earth, they, so far, have regrouped and pulled back from the playing field. From my understanding of game theory only, I would call that a plan that does not wish to lose any assets or pieces on the board.”

“Or they are waiting for new orders now that the game has changed?” Ted added knowing that what happened today would be exactly how he would have played it.

“That’s all well and good,” Bob chimed in, still smacking his Beeman’s gum. “But now we have a whole ‘nother horse of a different color that we created. We have the military boards all over the world on high alert. The defense status has probably been raised to the highest level on the scale short of war at Def-Con 2 or whatever the Chinks and Ruskie’s are using these days. That does two things that directly oppose each other,” he counted on his fingers. “One: that allows us to move more openly and quickly. And two: it requires us to be very, very careful that we do not trigger a response at a military level on this planet.” Bob had clearly been giving this a great deal of thought after the “Viper Gambit”, as history would someday call it.

“Dave, tell Jasper to scale back two levels only. Leave the Op Centers on alert, but two levels down for right now. Keep all the warm bodies you need inside, but take the pressure off some. Tell them to ‘Fly Casual’, but keep their guard up, ” Ted paused. “Keep Cape Malabar and the Grissom at the current levels of preparedness though.”

“Aye, aye, Sir.” Dave was making notes on that issue.

“We still have a small mess at S-2 that we need to clean up. But by tomorrow mid-day, we should all be heading back to MRC.” Ted looked around at the others for comments with his hands flat on the table, ready to get up, which meant last chance for comments or opinions.

“Do you want me to send Big Bird for you?” Dave looked up.

“No, we need to get there fast, so we’ll be hitting it on Red Route One,” Ted nodded and started the shut down routine and the comm link. “Have a good rest of the day, Dave,” Ted said. Matt and Bob nodded to him also.

“I will be glad when you guys are back here.” Dave shut down his end.

There was a brief silence as all the men waited for the line to clear, took each other in, and breathed a collective sigh of relief that they seem to have won the day. Earth was saved once more.

Finally, breaking the silence, Matt looked over at Ted. “What’s wrong over at S-2?”

“I sent Ed over there to shoot your new boy and fill his shoes with someone who speaks and understands the English language in an emergency.” Ted got up.

“Oh shit!” Matt said in terror, thinking that his friend had been killed for being an anti-social geek. “He’s terrible on the phone. Did I forget to mention that?” Matt picked up his notebook and then looked around the room. “Can I do anything to correct this?”

“Sure. He’s not dead, by the way. Head over there and see what kind of patch Ed put on the situation and move folks around to meet the needs of the organization and the mission.” Ted left the room. Bob followed and Matt did not delay much behind them.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

0700 found the four men sitting around the officer's mess table with their mugs of coffee. Breakfast was over and the day's activities were being planned. Ed was still smiling and flirting at the hostess, who brought over the fresh pot of coffee for everyone.

"I got a call at 0500," Ted waited until she had left. "It was Jasper. Sometime around 0100 Zulu our time, the Visitors decided that they no longer wanted to be in our solar system and headed out. They did not go as slowly as they came in. Once outside Pluto's orbit they hit the gas and were gone." Ted put his mug down and crossed his arms over his chest. "It would look as if we live to fight another day, gentlemen." He broke into a smile.

"Fuckin' 'A' Bubba!" Ed and Bob slapped a high five across the table. Ed then patted Matt on the back. Matt held up his hand to make him stop as his brow furrowed into a worried look.

"Doesn't anyone think this seems a little...anti-climactic?" Matt looked puzzled and concerned. "They get a distress call, arrive with a fleet, look for their crashed ship and don't find it. Then we wind 'em up and then they just... run off? That doesn't seem just a little weird to everyone here?"

"Not everything can be Star Wars, buddy," Bob was quick to answer to him. "I mean play out the alternative, Matt. Billions of people dead here, we get a few licks in on them, the planet in ruins, they go limping home with a bloody nose, and we all come up like moles from our holes, to find the rest of the world living in 1840 again."

"Well that's a different perspective than I had thought about?" Matt sipped at his coffee.

"It is what we do, Matt," Ted said with calm reassurance. "We prepare. We train. We build and we test. If we never have to fire a shot, we've won... again. We have extended our lease on this planet until the next crisis comes

up. And there will be a next one. There always is.” Ted looked at Matt and then over at Bob. “You got everything ready?”

“Absolutely Admiral.” Bob reached into his flight suit and pulled out two small black boxes. He laid them on the table and pushed them over toward Matt.

Matt reached over and opened them. In one was the symbol of the USN Space Force, a gold insignia that had an eagle flying above a spacecraft. The other box had a pilot’s command wings, that was like nothing he had ever seen before.

“What’s this?” Matt inquired.

“Naval Space Force Pilot’s Wings.” Bob said grinning from ear to ear. “You got certified yesterday...by me. These go on your dress blues that Ed has not gotten for you yet. Wear them with pride. There are only twenty-nine pilot wings in this service.” Bob reached over and shook Matt’s hand.

“Thank you. Thank you so very much, but...” Matt started.

“You earned them, flying next to me. You’re also an astronaut now. Did you know that?” Bob smiled at him.

“I hadn’t thought about that, no...” Matt looked puzzled.

“You went over one hundred kilometers above the earth. That makes you one of the very few.” Bob got up and pushed his chair in.

“Okay. All very exciting, yes? Crisis averted. Back from the brink as we few hidden heroes have once again saved an unknowing and unsuspecting world that hates and fears us. We’re heading back to MRC this morning.” Ted got up as well after finishing his coffee. “Back to business suits and meetings. I do love it here, though. The place, the people.”

“The food and the good looking women,” Ed had to drop that in.

“Ed...” Bob asked him, “when was the last time you actually got laid?” It was one of their on-going jokes. “With...a *WOMAN*, that is.”

Ed motioned with his hand like he was getting something out of his pocket. “Wait a minute, I have all three of those dates printed on the back of my ID, so I don’t forget them. The first one is ’96...” Ed got up and both man laughed.

“I’ll go and get my kit together,” Matt got up as well. “I wasn’t aware that we were bugging out of here.”

“Oh, Lt. Commander Dr. Fassbinder, you...are not going anywhere,” Ted looked at him. “You’ve got a Space Wing command to learn how to manage, and over at S-2 you need to be upgrading and ready for a new set of experiments that are going to be heading down the line soon. We think we’ve found the key to moving biological systems in the time stream. So you are here for at least the next four weeks, minimum.” Ted reached out to him. “Ed will be here to help you. Call Bob or I if the walls push in, but get up to speed. That is essential right now.”

“I aaah...I am.....” Matt was trying to compose some words into a sentence.

“We will be talking very soon, Commander.” Ted slapped him on the back as he and Bob walked out.

“Shall we have another mug of coffee Ed, before we go off to kill more dragons and nobly and daringly rescue virgin maidens before we defile them?” Matt sat back down, and was watching the two leave while they were stopping to chat with a couple of other lady officers before they went out of sight, and suddenly felt very abandoned and alone.

Ed commented back, “Always have time for more coffee, especially when the hostess is serving it to me. What wonderful eye-candy”.

They both had devilish grins on their faces.

* * * * *

Red Route One, the top-secret subway that stretched the width of the country, thrummed smoothly along underground at supersonic speed. There was just something steady, calming and...reassuring, Ted thought, about a train over an aircraft. The station was also just beneath FIVE-ONE and came up an elevator ride and steps away from the MRC at the Washington DC HQ. No tarmacs or panicked take offs, or rumbling landings.

Trains had just always made Ted...happy. Maybe because he grew up in Barstow, the sound of a passing train in the distance, the chugging wheels and the mournful wail of the horn in the velvet night, always made him think there was always some thing, or some where, better out there, and anything better than where he was.

Red Route One still came with the ambient lighting, and Ted, because of what he'd become, could never escape the posse-like entourage. The assistants, scientists and bodyguards in different twisted, tortured "Irish yoga" positions of uncomfortable sleep around him, as if they had all passed out that way after a raucous St. Patty's Day bender.

With a sudden inspiration, Ted picked up the phone near him. They had not yet hit the straight-a-way across the flats of the middle section of the line which ran under the Heartland of America, so the massive static electricity had not yet built up around the ceramic porcelain skin coated over the hollow tube hull of the bullet train making communications still possible.

"Sir, yes, sir!" Matthew Fassbinder answered sounding as chipper and up-beat as the British could sound.

"Matthew, you and I both know that the Altarians will be back."

"Not a question of if, sir, " Fassbinder agreed in his understated English manner, "only a question of when."

"So we are in alignment on this then," Ted concluded. "And you were

debriefed on all the intel we could gather?”

“Well, if you mean have I gone through all the specs and capabilities from the salvaged ship on Mars, yes.”

“And from what the long range sensors gathered from the last incursion?” Ted asked.

“Of course”, Matt said stating the obvious.

“What are our chances?” Ted asked in deadly earnest.

“You mean toe to toe? In a full on balls out knock down drag out bust up McGilla?”

“Yes.”

“Well, we still have so many rabbits in our hat that I don’t know about yet...”

“Best guess. Answer the question!” Ted finally blurted in frustration.

“Slim to none, Ted.” Matt said, dropping the formality and being as honest as he could. “I mean they would walk away bloody, but they could blow through the first round of ships, not that the Grissom et al. aren’t impressive, but we are talking College vs. Pro here. Farm vs. Majors. Manchester United vs. Madron FC. Then they’d blow past Malabar Radio, which they would obliterate as it is in total violation of the Isomer treaty and, frankly, I am stunned they haven’t found it before now. Once they got past us nothing in the ‘real world’ of the global military joke could stop them.”

“I see,” Ted said, thinking hard.

“We could use the Mass Transports to drop nukes into the time-stream, but from what I could see, their shields would have to be down, and I believe their sensors would detect the disturbance in surrounding and time/space way before it got there. But no one ever won a war with airpower. They don’t have the men...or, whatever they are, to invade and occupy. They can’t fight a land war in Asia.” Matt concluded, quoting Gen. Douglass MacArthur.

“But once we came up from our holes in the ground, there would not be much of a world left.”

“Sad but true, Director,” Matt said, shaking his shaggy head. “It would really not be a question anymore of us moving out and infecting their galaxy. It would be a question of when we could crawl back into the 19th Century. They do have destructive capacity on a planetary scale. We just better hope we all still have things they want and need, and are such a valuable resource for water, mineral...and biological DNA material. Although I believe that is not their wicket exactly.” Meaning hybridization and kidnapping Earth beings for raw genetic material, as so many other races had been wont to do.

“Matt,” Ted said at last with steel and determination. “Pull any and all resources you need from all the departments or bases, pull from anything we have, to get that Time Runner up and running. Pass out clearances if you have to, I don’t care about who knows what, just do not let anyone know if and or when you succeed. It has to be priority one.”

“Aye, sir. Understood.”

“Matt, I need an organic test as soon as you can.”

“You mean....on a person?” Matt said in horror.

“No, of course not,” Ted said in frustration, “we aren’t that desperate yet. But on a test subject.”

“From the files I read, we ended the primate program a long time ago. Who would you suggest?”

Ted thought for a long while, rummaging through the data-base in his head. “Dr. Annalisa Balfour, DVM. She still has one of the chimpanzees from when the program was up and running. She went private and has a sanctuary I think, so she might need to be recommissioned. You are on my direct authority to give her all the clearances she needs. You might get a fight out of her, but this is war, and she, and any of her monkeys, are all still

government property. Do what you need to.”

“Sounds stunningly unpleasant.” Matt quipped.

“Not as unpleasant as getting the whole fucking world blown to hell. Get it done Matt!” Ted hung up the phone with no further ceremony or explanations.

PART FOURTEEN:

BEDTIME FOR BONZO

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

Dr. Annaliesa Balfour, Phd., DVM, doctor of veterinary medicine, strode confidently into the Pit staging hanger at Area 51, looking like an angel of light fresh out of Heaven pushing back the dinghy darkness. She was tall and sleek, lithe and muscular in just the right places for a woman that was active and adventurous. Her lean statuesque figure was accentuated by her dancer's posture, head held high, shoulders back. Her curly ringlets of blonde hair cascaded like a waterfall of molten gold around her face and down to the shoulders of her white lab coat which illuminated her and the space around her like she had just fallen out of the sky. She had a spectacular swimmers body, high cheekbones with a longish face and a strong dynamic slightly pointed chin, that gave just the touch of determination and toughness that overlaid her magnetic, attractive femininity. Her small tight perky breasts were only a base counter point to her mane of hair of spun silken flax, looking as if she was made of the coveted yellow metal as it came bubbling out of the top of her head.

She was flanked by Corporal Vasquez and Corporal Edwin "Buzz" Goodwin, as they pushed a large cage on wheels, solid plastic with holes on the top and sides, but closed on the front with a shining silver gate. There was an animal inside that hugged the comforting darkness and safety at the back of the cage. She stopped and looked around, taking in the dimly lit surroundings, squinting into the dark cavern looking for whom to speak to about her forced assignment. She saw the three huge rings of the Beast mass transport mover, one at the base two tilted at 45° angles to each side, in the center of the floor and realization washed over her like a cold, dirty rogue wave. She hung her head with a hard grimace on her face. It was going to be one of *those days* she thought to herself with fatality and fear.

The twins, Chief Jacob and James Bixby popped up from behind the DeBolt Dias of the main console, where they had been making adjustments to the control panel. Using the mass transporter of the three ringed Beast machine, it controlled the point in time and space where the hole could open so that whatever they were transporting could go through. The challenge was, that once they had opened the hole, it could not close without a massive amount of power to reverse the process.

“Hello?” Annaliesa said, lifting up on her tip-toes to see just barely the tops of the heads of the men looking at her. She caught the most momentary glimpse and, just as quickly, like prairie dogs, both heads disappeared, as if neither man wanted to face her directly.

Suddenly, a booming voice came over the PA system of the voluminous hanger space.

“COMMANDER FASBINDER. YOU HAVE COMPANY!” The voice rang out. It startled Dr. Balfour, and the cage behind her rattled slightly with some low whimpering sounds coming from the creature within. From around another console that sat low and squat on the ground, in the farthest corner of the hanger came Matthew Fassbinder in his form-fitting green flight suit. Today he was wearing it more as coveralls, wiping his greasy hands on a red mechanics rag, which, once his hands were clean, he then stuffed halfway into his back pocket. He broke into a jog to cover the distance of the hanger more quickly, and as he neared Dr. Balfour he extended his hand. She broke the silence first.

“Dr. Annaliesa Balfour,” she said in a stern tone without ceremony.

Matt was taken aback by just how beautiful she was, and what a contrast she presented to this shadowed hell that was populated mostly with the death demons of Dark World science and the Black Ops military.

“Matt Fastbinder,” he said gently taking just the fingers of her hand,

bringing all his English charm to bear. She twisted her fingers around and took his hand with a full crushing grip and squeezed it hard, with a thrusting pumping motion. Matt resisted wincing. What is it with these people and their bruising handshakes, Matt thought? “I am the wing commander of this little operation,” he blurted at last, hiding the pain.

“Oh?” Balfour said with surprise and a bit of embarrassment. “I didn’t realize you were the big banana around here. I thought it was a password or a clearance that we had to know or something to go with all the other skull and dagger stuff of this...place.”

Matt tilted his head in confusion. “What would you make you think that, doctor?”

She made a face and turned, then squatted down and gave a nod to Vasquez. He came forward, undid the latch and opened the front of the cage. Balfour bounced down and squatted on her haunches and tapped the cement floor with the back of her knuckles.

“Bonzo! Come here baby! Come on! Nothing to be afraid of!” There was a pause, and then Dr. Balfour signed the signals for “It’s alright,” and a middle aged fully-grown chimpanzee came out of the cage, tentatively at first, then ran across the floor to jump up into Annaliesa’s arms, and hug her neck. She stood up with the ape clinging to her like a big hairy baby. He was dressed in a little green zippered flight-suit exactly like the one worn by Fassbinder, looking like it had been custom made just for him.

“It didn’t make much sense to me at the time,” Dr. Balfour continued, “but they said he had to wear this to get past all the security protocols.”

“The flight suit?” Fassbinder said, now completely chagrined.

“Well, yes. That and...this....” Balfour pulled the animal away from her, and he detached one arm from around her neck, and hung from her hips

with his legs, and Matt could see that over the ape's left breast pocket was a professionally custom made little black leather crinkled yellow stitched patch with embossed gold letters.

Matt leaned in to read it:

*“LT.COMMANDER MATTHEW FASSBINDER. WING
COMMANDER.”*

At the moment recognition dawned, Bonzo snatched Matt's glasses off his face, and put them on. Matt jerked his hands up to try to stop him but was not quick enough. Bonzo grinned from ear to ear, chattered his jaw up and down in glorious staccato chimpanzee delight, then gave him a loud and long raspberry. Fassbinder just hung in in the air not knowing what to do next as monkey spit covered his face. Balfour just let the scene play out, offering no help, but smiling for the first time, flashing a billion candle watt smile with rows of absolutely perfect white teeth that seemed to glow with a light of their own.

Matt was taken aback again with the sheer beauty of this vision that had walked onto his base. She was made even more eerily beautiful by the soft focus of his unbespectacled eyes, and he stood for a moment, transfixed. Or was it the contrast between her and the antics and visage of the little chimp that made her even more gorgeous? His pale English complexion was now flushed a deep beet red in embarrassment. He took a deep breath and then reached out and wrestled with the chimp to get his glasses back, who easily fended him off with his free arm as he hung around Annaliesa's neck and waist, playfully pushing him away with chimp OO-OO and EE-EE noises, then alternately slapping him in the face as he sputtered in frustration and murderous humiliation.

Matt then heard uncontrollable peals of laughter coming from the Bixby twins who were falling all over themselves up on the main control

DeBolt Dias, obviously the masterminds of this mischievous prank. Even Vasquez and Goodwin could not hold in the laughter bubbling up and over in these two hard, disciplined, deadly men.

“Right! Great! Brilliant!” Matt said good-naturedly, giving up his girlish slap fight with the animal, as he stepped back out of this little hairy black demon’s reach, putting his fists on his hips. With a hand signal for “enough” from Annaliesa, she let Bonzo down, and he waddled over to Matt and apologetically offered up the eyewear with both hands.

“Thank you!” Matt said as he took them back from the little thief. Bonzo lifted his arms and waved his hands. Fassbinder bent down and with a grip like iron, Bonzo grabbed him behind the neck, pulled his head down, and gave him a big, wet, slobbery chimpanzee kiss right on the lips. He then let him go and knuckle scampered back up into Annaliesa’s waiting arms.

The Bixby’s and the guards exploded with even louder peals of laughter.

“Now I had nothing to do with that last part,” Balfour said, now not being able to control herself as the giggles just came out. “He just really, really likes you!”

“Sorry,” he said sputtering, as he wiped his face and glasses with his red rag, trying to get the taste of monkey out of his mouth, and then put his glasses back on. “Just a couple of my mates taking the piss.” The Bixby’s were still laughing, and could not seem to stop themselves.

“Well it does seem to serve you right,” Balfour said scolding him. “You did have us kidnapped, conscripted and enslaved back onto your little military/industrial plantation.”

“I assure you that I had nothing to do with that,” Matt said indignantly.

“Ted!” She spat with malice, as she figured it all out.

“Um...yes. That would be Dr. Humphrey, who I assume had something to do with naming our little...friend here?” Matt said, feeling a bit guilty for using the Director as the scapegoat, just to get back in the good graces of this amazing woman.

“How did you know that?” She asked.

“Oh...he has this Ronald Reagan fixation, so I am not sure if he did it out of a sense of humor, respect or awe, and I think that is his favorite movie.”

Fassbinder had of course been given Dr. Balfour’s file to provide the animal and her as the handler, trainer, wrangler...mother, really, for the experiment they needed to conduct. For Bonzo was much more like her child than some mere lab experiment. The successful side, which no one knew about because of its Group connections, of the Project: Nim experiment that had gone so horribly wrong. Matt had signed a stack of paperwork to pull her back in and to give her clearance to a place that a mere handful of people had ever seen much less had access to. It was obvious that Ted trusted her implicitly or she would never be here. She had been one of Humphrey’s hand-picked “projects” and so had been pulled into the very lower levels of The Group, much as he had been, so he had somewhat of an affinity for this gorgeous woman. Her achievements would have been heralded worldwide in Academia had it not been for Ted’s shadowy hand championing her work, and, of course, benefiting from them.

Fassbinder had argued for a laboratory rat or hamster or something, but Ted had insisted they test the Time Runner device on something as close to human as they could get, and Dr. Annaliesa Balfour is whom he wanted, specifically, for the job. You just did not say no to the Executive Director of The Group, especially when he had the bit in his teeth like he did. He had dumped all this on Fassbinder and hopped onto the Red Line train to DC HQ

convinced that Visitors were going to show up and destroy the world any day now.

Annaliesa Balfour had been born in Flekkfjord, Norway, to a pair of bookish university professors. But she had a wanderlust that could not be contained in such a small academic environment. Her parents had taken her on a summer trip to the Stockholm Zoo. She had disappeared, which triggered a hunt for the child that involved the entire zoo staff, then the police, and the military was about to be called in when her frantic parents found her in the Great Ape habitat where she had climbed a tree and dropped in over the fence. The local Press had also arrived, and filmed much of what became the almost comic turned horrifying events making it an international story. To everyone's stunned surprise, the band did not attack or harm her in the least. In an amazingly short time, in the course of only a few brief hours of an afternoon, she had been accepted by the troop. No one could see or find her, because she was nestled in the arms of a mother gorilla, named Shiquala, part of the harem of a huge male Silverback aptly named Kong. Shiquala had lost her infant several months before to a rare flu, and the fair golden haired child with the crystal blue eyes was found with Shiquala cooing and rocking her back and forth like her own infant, in stark contrast to her ebony jet black fur.

When the zookeepers stormed the habitat trying to get Annaliesa back, Shiquala and Kong, and the rest of the troop had other ideas. She did not want to give her newfound baby back. In fact, the mother howled in protest and anger, and when the zookeepers got close Shiquala ran up a tree, as Kong and the rest of the band charged the hapless staff, scattering them like ten-pins, with Annaliesa laughing and giggling the whole time.

They finally cornered her and shot both her and Kong to get the mother ape to give up the screaming child. Annaliesa was traumatized and

cried for days after the incident. But it was what made her dedicate her life to the protection and study of these animals and a greater human understanding of them.

She had gone on to do her undergraduate work at Oxford and then came to the States to get her doctor of veterinary medicine at the University of California at Davis, where she graduated at the very top of her class.

Women were doing amazing work in primatology, the study of monkeys, apes, prosimians, and even humans. Although many were working on furthering our understanding of our closest relatives, Doctor Annaliesa Balfour was an unsung heroine and one of the most prominent working behind the scenes.

Her current research interests were animal cognition, with a particular interest in the acquisition of counting abilities and numerical competence in nonhuman primates, cognitive development in the great apes, including attribution, self-recognition, intentional behavior, and social behavior and tool use in captive lowland gorillas. Collaborative research included the application of non-invasive psycho-physiological measures in regards to the attention and cognition in primates, and cardiac indices of visual and auditory recognition in the great apes.

[Francine "Penny" Patterson](#), was one of what became to be called “Leakey’s Angels”, began an experiment as a graduate student in 1972. Almost 40 years later, the experiment is still going! Balfour had made sure Patterson was fully funded, and dropped in frequently to check on her progress. Patterson received permission from the San Francisco Zoo to work with a [one-year-old gorilla](#) on language acquisition. So in Woodside, California, Patterson began training a happy little infant female gorilla named Koko to use American Sign Language. The gorilla began using words within a couple of weeks, and now has a vocabulary of over a thousand words in

["Gorilla Sign Language"](#), a slightly modified form of American Sign Language. Work with Koko led Patterson to found [The Gorilla Foundation](#), a non-profit organization dedicated to the preservation of the lowland gorilla. Koko reminded Balfour of Shiquala and adapted Patterson's "Gorilla Sign Language" as a base for all the work she had done for The Group.

[Dian Fossey](#), like Patterson was another of [Leakey's Angels](#). Fossey lived in Rwanda for 18 years studying the lowland gorilla in its natural habitat. She approached and befriended a colony of gorillas, gaining their trust over time, and was even accepted as a member of their group. Over the years, Fossey wrote about her relationship with the gorillas, which led to the supporting of her work through [the Digit Fund](#) (named after her favorite juvenile gorilla), which later grew into the organization [The Gorilla Fund](#). Fossey's conservation efforts were not welcomed by Rwandan poachers, whom she fought tooth and nail. She was found murdered in her cabin in 1985. The crime was never solved. Fossey had already written the book *Gorillas in the Mist*, which became [a major motion picture](#) starring Sigourney Weaver in 1988.

Sometime during the day on [New Year's Eve](#) 1977, Fossey's favorite gorilla, Digit, was killed by poachers. As the sentry of "Study Group 4", he defended the group against six poachers and their dogs, who ran across the gorilla study group while checking [antelope](#) trap lines. Digit took five spear wounds in ferocious self-defense and managed to kill one of the poachers' dogs, allowing the other 13 members of his group to escape. Digit was decapitated, and his hands cut off for an ashtray, all for the going market price of \$20. After his mutilated body was discovered by research assistant Ian Redmond, Fossey's group captured one of the killers. He revealed the names of his five accomplices, three of whom were later imprisoned.

Fossey subsequently created the Digit Fund to raise money for anti-

poaching patrols. It was renamed as the "Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund International" in 1992. Start up funding came directly from The Group, authorized by Ted and funneled through all the appropriate channels.

Fossey mostly opposed the efforts of the international organizations, which she felt inefficiently directed their funds towards more equipment for Rwandan park officials some of whom were alleged to have ordered some of the gorilla poaching in the first place. Digit's death had a profound effect on her approach to conservationism, and she commented, "I have tried not to allow myself to think of Digit's anguish, pain and the total comprehension he must have suffered in knowing what humans were doing to him. From that moment on, I came to live within an insulated part of myself."

All of this had not only proved as an inspiration for Dr. Annaliesa Balfour's work, but Matt could clearly see that Ted Humphrey had a direct hand in all of her unlimited funding and protection, and all those in her field over the years. And through Ted, Annaliesa had been his eyes, ears and hands in this movement, working behind the scenes to further her goals and research and that of her colleagues whether she knew it or not. It all made sense to Fassbinder now when Ted used to say, "What was the point of saving the world when there was nothing amazing and wonderful left in the world to save?"

"So," Annaliesa said at last, "why are we here?"

"Ah, yes, well," Fassbinder started, flummoxed by her directness. Matt coughed into his hand, clearing his throat and began: "We need your, ah, little friend here..."

"Bonzo!" Dr. Balfour interrupted, making sure that this queer little bloodless scientist knew the name of her "little friend" and companion, to humanize him and make him more than just some "thing" to be experimented on and torn to shreds in some inhuman lab. "His name is Bonzo, and he has an

IQ probably higher than yours.”

“Well, right about now, that would probably be true,” Fassbinder let out a nervous laugh that sounded like a braying zebra. Annaliesa and Bonzo turned towards each other and shared a look as both of them rolled their eyes and turned back to him, non-plussed.

“Look, I understand the drill here,” she said unsympathetically, her slight Norwegian accent rising to the surface with her upset and anger. “Even though I have raised Bonzo over all these years as, essentially, my...a human, child, to think and communicate as he does with human beings, I know this, and my work and education and support of my colleagues have all cost enormous amounts of money. I know that Ted Humphrey and The Group have financed all this and now the chit has come due. So what are we doing and why us?”

Things became clearer for Fassbinder now, and he knew that this was one of those audible calls in the field upon which his head would be placed on the block if he thought or acted wrongly. She was part of The Group. She had been exposed at whatever level to what they did and what they knew. She was part of their Team and she was in the Army now, like it or not, for good or for ill. He took a long deep breath and made an executive decision that the truth, with this remarkable woman, would work best. She deserved it.

“You were chosen for your ability to keep secrets, Dr. Balfour, and what you are about to be shown is the biggest secret in this world. We need you and Bonzo to partake in an experiment upon which the fate of this planet hangs.”

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

“There were several ‘Pits’ and what we call ‘Beasts’ or ‘Monsters’ just like this device over the years,” Fassbinder explained. They were standing at the edge of the red warning circle, gazing over at the three huge rings. Balfour held Bonzo by the hand like an obedient child as Matthew led them around the hanger area. If she was going to risk the life of something... or some ONE...as precious to her as Bonzo, then Fassbinder made the executive decision that she needed to understand the process and magnitude of what they both were becoming part of.

“We owe the Germans a great deal, as the first device was created in Nordhausen, Germany. They used the original of what we call the Coler Device to protect them as they moved through Time/Space, though we didn’t realize it for sixty years, and that is what has finally led us to today.”

“To move through...time?” Balfour said, not with disbelief, as she had seen what these sorcerers were capable of, but just to make sure she had heard him correctly.

“Yes,” Fassbinder said with a relief that he had someone to talk to about all of this that didn’t write him off as a complete loony. “They received a massive amount of technical data from a race of beings who called themselves the Sumi from the Aldebaran star system that was channeled through a psychic named Maria Orsic and her group of women called the Vrill Damen, starting back in about 1919.”

Annaliesa tilted her head down and looked askance at him from under her golden eyebrows. Bonzo was sitting on his haunches with his arms crossed and one hand stroking his chin, perfectly mimicking Fassbinder’s lecture style. “So, psychics...all channeling...space men? Gave you this...

thing...that punches big giant holes in the universe?”

Fassbinder was turning red again, as he realized how absurd this all sounded when she broke it down into each of its ludicrous components.

“Look, you wanted the truth, and you are owed that much, and as you have come to know truth, in our world, is stranger than fiction...and could you please make him stop doing that!”

Balfour looked down at Bonzo imitating Fassbinder and smiled that wide luminous smile.

“No,” she said flatly. “Go on.”

Fassbinder rolled his eyes and accepted his fate that he was going to be just utterly humiliated by this woman and her...monkey, er, APE...no matter what he did.

“Actually the very first device was the heart of an alien spacecraft found by the Germans in the Black Forrest in the 1930s. They chained the drive system they found to the center of a huge concrete ring, and then floated their version of a saucer shaped ship over the ring and used the drive to open a portal or a gate of some kind so they could travel to Aldebaran. The travel time was about four hours. But eventually these experiments ended in disaster with the ship returning looking like it had aged over 100 years, and the crew all now Flying Dutchman skeletons, as if time had caught up with them all at once. But what it did was open holes in the space/time continuum, which stayed open, and could only be closed with...well, great difficulty.”

Matt turned from the Beast machine and walked her up to the DeBolt Dias, where he shooed James and Jacob away, and they scampered off like bad children. “I will deal with you two jokers later!” Fassbinder threatened shaking his fist at them.

“YES SIR WING COMMANDER!” They both said saluting. Bonzo saluted them back. “And you too Matt!” James said, and they left the hanger

and moved to the office space still beside themselves with laughter.

“Did I...?” Annaliesa began apologetically.

“No, no...” Matt said, smiling, with a wave of his hand. “I am... somewhat new here, and that is just the older boys taking the piss, er, playing jokes,” he said, translating the British colloquialism. “Nothing like public school in England. I’ve been pranked and hazed by professionals.”

He rubbed the back of his neck, and for the first time Annaliesa smiled...at him. Not at the jokes or at Bonzo’s antics, or laughing AT him... but right at...him! It was like a light went off in his heart at the unconditional feminine love she seemed to exude as an aura around her. Maybe she dealt with animals all her life because humans couldn’t handle this beacon that shone out from within her heart, he thought, especially in this Black World Boys Club of Death that was his life now.

“So?” She said, rolling her hand, gesturing him to continue.

“Oh, yes. Well...” Matt said gathering the wool his thoughts had become. “Right, so we’ve had a device like this one since the early 1960s out in Montauk, New York, that was destroyed. Long story. We’ve used them as transporters. Moving inorganic mass from one place to another, which comes out the other side mostly the worse for wear. So now you are looking at our latest model here, with the other at Fallon NAS...Naval Air Station...upstate. Ted was the pioneer of much of this and he said they had something similar to this in his dad’s workshop behind his house in Barstow, where ever that God forsaken place is.”

“Ted did tell me something about that,” she said, revealing an intimacy with Ted that Fassbinder did not expect.

“Right, so those rings,” Matt gestured toward the Beast machine in the middle of the hangar, “rotate in opposite directions, one clockwise, the other counter-clockwise, with the base ring on the floor creating and holding

the neutral space in the center. We have to use this to ‘punch a hole in the universe’, as you said, or in the space/time continuum, only if it is a place or space that we have never traveled to before. Once we open the hole, as I said, it stays open, and then we can use it as a point of reference to jump back and forth to that place in space. It somehow remains stable due to the morphogenic field around the Earth, or something like that.”

She picked up Bonzo and let him sit on the top edge of the console. “And all of this?” She asked, gesturing to the rows of dials, layout of screens and sliding controls laid out in an arched semi-circle before them.

“This is what we call the DeBolt Dias, and that section is called the High Binder, which enters our time/space coordinates. Don’t even ask me how that part works. Lots of computers doing lots of different things when you consider that even us standing still, relatively, are still moving at something like 70,000 miles per hour. Once we enter the coordinates here all of this guides the force in the center of the rings and controls the point in both space and time where we want our portal to open.”

“In...time?” She asked, a bit awe struck.

“Well, if you are transporting something almost instantaneously, you would be certainly going faster than light, and any jump through space is in fact a jump through time. But because we are moving inter-dimensionally and really bending space, it does not, technically, break any of Einstein’s theories or any major laws of physics.”

“And what is that over there?” She pointed to the far end of the hanger. “Is that what you were working on when I came in?”

“Oh, yes. That’s my station. Please...walk this way.”

Matt put his hand out for Bonzo, and he took it and swung down from the console onto the floor, as Matt did a bit of a silly monkey walk, which made both Bonzo and Annaliesa both laugh. He was so very much

enjoying both their company that he was certainly hoping he could find a way to see more of her when this experiment was over. Who else would he ever meet that would even have access to this shadow world he inhabited.

They walked across the floor to the second console, laid out very much like the first one in a curved hemisphere of dials and switches but with far more screens.

“That one we call the DeBolt device,” he said pointing across the hanger, “and this station, which will be mine for the test, controls the power settings and levels for the rings and then allows us to monitor the jump itself with the TV monitors here. Both out and back.”

She nodded her head and pursed her lips, crossing her arms and taking in the entire setup with impressed awe and suspicion, as if she was now in the belly of some sorcerer’s castle looking for a way out.

“You keep saying ‘us’ and ‘jump’ and ‘experiment’, ” she said finally getting down to business. “So why are we here?” She said gesturing between Bonzo and herself, taking the chimp back into her arms, as he clung to her waist and her neck.

As if on cue, Jacob and James Bixby re-entered the hanger pushing a cart with some equipment laid out flat on it, and the rest mounted on a chimpanzee sized tailor’s mannequin. As they came in, Fassbinder moved out from behind the console and headed towards them with Dr. Balfour and Bonzo in tow. They intercepted each other near the center of the hanger just outside the red warning ring of the Beast device.

There was a full harness with a gun-metal grey bullet shaped sealed backpack attached to it. It had been clearly scaled to fit a chimpanzee sized test subject. The backpack was connected to a white gauntlet that fit on the forearm that was the control mechanism. There was a keypad with a small monitor screen. Just the keypad had been locked and all Greeked out replaced

with a big red button, obviously so a simian could operate the device. There was even a small crash helmet with a visor that looked exactly like what a fighter pilot would wear into combat. But there was a miniature camera on top of the helmet and coiled metal antenna that came out from the sides and then turned back in to view the face plate. And it was, of course, emblazoned with wings on the front, lightning bolts on the side, and on the forehead it read:

LT.COMMANDER MICHAEL FASSBINDER, WING
COMMANDER.

The Bixby's had really thought this thing through, Matt thought with some admiration at the extent they had gone for their prankstership.

"This is the prototype for what we call the Time Runner," Matt said after a long pause while Annaliesa took the whole thing in. "We have a camera on the top so we can see what the 'Chrono-naut' is seeing, and these," he tweaked the antenna, "are a combined motion stabilized light and camera so we can see his face for a visual of what is happening with him and check his vitals and all."

"And this thing does...what, exactly?" She asked.

"Well, someone wearing the Time Runner is protected from the teleport jump and starts out in the middle of the mass transporter rings which then take the subject to where ever it is we open the hole in time/space. They fly out of the top of the Pit here to go wherever it is we send them. Well, they don't fly really," Matt said, clumsily correcting himself, "more like a... door...or more accurately a tunnel, really, that they step through. So by knowing where a hole goes, one can use the Time Runner as a movement control device within the hole. This backpack is the Coler Device I was telling you about that we just discovered, that provides power and a protective shell around the biological entity and also let's them move at faster

than light speeds....which...again...you aren't really doing because of the whole...door/tunnel...thingy.”

His stumbling explanation was not filling Dr. Balfour with anything close to brimming confidence in him, or this device's viability.

“You can walk into what looks like an empty space and...POOF... you are just gone. Well, sorry, not *GONE* gone...you will come out the other end, hypothetically, wherever that is. Then all you have to do is step back into the flow and...poof... you are back where you started.”

“And what powers this...device?” Balfour asked incredulously.

“Well, it's powered by the rings in the Beast and then by the energy of the tunnel that's created when we crank it up to punch the original 'hole in the universe', as you so aptly said. The Coler device in the backpack, which acts as a shield, as I said, then acts as the power source after that. Once you create the hole, or tunnel really, through time, you can come and go at will. That is the true beauty of the system. The only draw back is that anyone else with a Time Runner can use that same hole we've created as well.”

“And Bonzo is testing this thing?” She asked dangerously.

This was where Fassbinder knew he had to tread lightly. He could just order her to do all of this. She, and her chimp, were both government property and were technically under his command, but he needed her cooperation, and this would be infinitely easier with her help than without it.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because we have not yet been able to use it to transport...organic material.”

“And that 'organic material' you are talking about,” the rage building inside her, “is my most valuable asset? An animal where millions of tax dollars have gone into his education and training? Who I have raised as

my....” She stopped just short of saying child, before Matt interrupted her.

“We’ve had a series of amazing breakthroughs,” Matt pleaded. “We’ve taken every precaution for his safety, and learned how to protect him for both the jump out and back. That is what the Coler Device in the backpack is for. Plus, we needed a subject that can communicate and handle some fairly complex commands.”

“And the life of a mere lowly chimpanzee is not worth the life of a human being, right?”

Now Dr. Fassbinder was getting his ire up. There was only so much accommodating he could do for this woman no matter how beautiful she was.

“Dr. Balfour...Annaliesa,” he said softening, being as gentle as he could, but now with a knife in his voice, “if you really have to ask that question then you’re in the entirely wrong profession. I’ve told you, we have done everything we can to make this as safe as we can make it, using a new breakthrough that has been sitting right in front of our faces for sixty years. But you and I both know, that we cannot strap a test pilot into this thing without an animal test. That is common sense. That is science and that is just the way it is.”

Tears were welling up in Annaliesa’s eyes, and Bonzo, sensing her upset, put up his arms so she would pick him up. She did and he hugged her tight. He then turned on Matt and let out a sharp shriek, knowing it was him that was upsetting his “mother”.

Fassbinder needed to do his job and get this done, and all the cajoling and charming in the world might not convince her.

“Dr. Balfour,” he said, now with steel in his voice, “this is the hand we’ve been dealt. This is going to happen with or without your help. We are all forced to be soldiers here now. I can only tell you this is much, there are things happening here much bigger than you or I or any of us, and when I tell

you that getting this technology to work is of vital importance and that I am not exaggerating in the least when I tell you that right here, right now, what hangs in the balance is the future of the human race.”

After deep thought, wrestling with a conflict that was tearing her apart, her dedication to science, her job, her profession and her maternal instincts, every bit as great now as that magnificent mother gorilla who had spirited her up a tree in her arms, and brought her into this amazing world. Finally, with tears welling up in her eyes, she nodded her head.

“Just for the record,” she said, “I never cared much for the human race.”

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

Bonzo was suited up inside the red warning circle at the center of the three rings of the Beast device, looking like the bravest little astronaut there ever was. He wore the harness over his shoulders, buckled across his chest at the center and then straddled in around his legs bracing the bullet shaped Coler device snug against his back. The chinstrap of the flight helmet was cinched tight under his jaw. The erect coiled antenna of the steady-cam illuminated his face, as he waited calmly and patiently for the test to begin. Definitely the coolest life form in the room. Chuck Yeager, the man who broke the sound barrier in secret, used to comment that a monkey didn't *know* he was sitting on a twenty-story stick of dynamite that could explode when they lit the candle. "Them astronaut boys do!"

Dr. Jacob and James Bixby worked feverishly behind the DeBolt console, while Dr. Matthew Fassbinder checked all the monitors and Bonzo's vitals, while Dr. Annaliesa Balfour, perched in a high backed barstool style chair, had her arms folded in dread concern.

Dr. Jacob Bixby hit a button, which lit the COM light at Fassbinder's station.

"Co-ordinates punched in." Bixby said.

"Affirmative." Fassbinder responded.

Bonzo looked down, as the gauntlet screen on his right forearm lit up with a series of red numbers.

Balfour stood up and took a step forward. Fassbinder pointed at a button, a mic on a stalk jutting up from the console and a small camera mounted on the edge of the console. She pressed it and leaned into the mic

Her face appeared on Bonzo's gauntlet screen, and he smiled making a happy sound when he saw her.

“It’s okay buddy,” she said in a calm soothing voice, which he could hear through the helmet radio. “It’s all good. This will be over in a few minutes. Just breathe.” She released the button and stepped back. “Where’s he going?” Annaliesa asked.

“To... ah.... A super computer calculated pre-set location. Somewhere safe.” Fassbinder reassured her, lying through his teeth. If he had told her they were teleporting her little hairy baby to Cape Malabar Radio, the US base on the Moon, it would have caused a meltdown he was not ready to deal with. What she didn’t know, at this point, couldn’t hurt her. Also, they had to see how the entire system reacted to a transport outside the morphagenic field of the Earth, if they were going to use the monstrosity for what Fassbinder suspected Ted and The Group were going to use it for. All of it was truly frightening when Fassbinder considered the potential for destruction and abuse.

“All systems green and go Commander,” James Bixby said over the hanger PA.

“Roger that.” Fassbinder responded, also over the hanger PA. “You are green and go to commence.”

James and Jacob moved quickly behind the DeBolt Dias, in perfect synch as if they shared the telepathic connection that everyone expects from twins, looking like superstar night-club Dee-Jays in the flow throwing down a mix, as the light from the screens and sensors did a diabolical dance on their under lit faces.

A deep, resonating, basso profundo hum, shook the building and everyone in it to the core. The two guards, Vasquez and Goodwin who stood at the far door, broke concentration for a brief second to look around. Annaliesa put her hand to her chest in surprise as the sonic frequency shook the very air in her lungs.

The rings on the Beast began to spin, one a deep burgundy red moving clockwise and the other a light sky blue moving counter clockwise, and the ring at the base luminesced a bright brilliant dazzling white. Bonzo flipped down the visor on his helmet, and began to nervously rock back and forth on his knuckles.

“JUMP...” James’ voice came over the hanger PA now, “...in FIVE...FOUR...THREE...”

A faint bluish white glow covered Bonzo now, like an aura just over his skin.

“...TWO...ONE!”

The thrum and whirling of the Beast machine reached a crescendo.

With no warning or fanfare, Bonzo just disappeared.

All the screens on Fassbinder’s console turned to white noise static. Balfour came off the perch of her highchair and took a step forward in concern.

“Don’t worry,” Fassbinder reassured her. “It’s all normal so far.”

As he spoke, the screens all cleared and came back on line one by one. Fassbinder looked up over across the hanger as the twins both gave him a thumbs up, that everything appeared fine on their end.

On one of the monitors was a long shot from a high angle of a cleared staging area that had a red circle on the floor like the one around the Beast in their area. Bonzo was inside of it now, swaying slowly back and forth.

Suddenly on one of the screens came the full face of the pretty and competent Chief Petty Officer Josephine ‘Jo’ Parker, the woman who ran almost everything at Cape Malabar Radio. She smiled brightly showing the deep dimples on her fair skinned Irish face.

“Good Morning Commander Fassbinder!” She said chirping

cheerily. “Your Chrononaut has arrived safe and sound. And he is soooo cute!”

Before Matt could answer another screen came up with the face of Kit Johnson.

“Congratulations Commander!” Johnson said in his gruff, good old boy style. “Must say, I don’t think we’ve ever had a monkey up here at Lunar One, which seems kinda unfair since they were in space before we were.”

Dr. Annaliesa Balfour’s face flushed with rage as a wave of realization washed over her. She punched Fassbinder as hard as she could in the arm.

“YOU SENT HIM TO THE MOON?” She yelled. Matt flinched with pain, and rubbed his shoulder where she had hit him.

“OWWW!” He winced. “That REALLY hurt!”

“To the...FUCKING...MOON?” She said, this time stomping her foot.

As Fassbinder held up his arms to fend off another possible barrage, another screen came up and caught his eye. This time it was Bonzo, and he was moving slowly, but in a slow, almost supernatural manner.

“Wait!” Matt pushed Balfour aside and leaned into the screen. “Tell him to raise his visor.”

Balfour, understanding the urgency in Fassbinder’s voice, hit the button and leaned into the mic. “Bonzo!” She passed her hand up and down over her face. “Raise the visor.”

Bonzo, slowly, lifted the visor and shook his head, but the chimpanzee’s lips and jaw moved in slow motion like a hi-def super slow-mo sports replay of a boxer or MMA fighter getting punched in the face. Even the spit coming from his mouth flew in nearly static droplets from his lips.

“Something’s wrong,” Matt said. “He’s out of phase!” Matt jumped

to the other side of the console and hit a button. “Jo! Give me a sit-rep!”

“You’re right! Something is wrong,” she said. “It’s like he’s underwater. He’s moving very slowly.”

“Has anyone else been affected? Who is in there with him?”

“We have people at the far edges...and they seem to be fine.”

“Okay...it’s localized to within about 20 feet...” he turned to Annaliesa while flipping switches and turning knobs. “Bring him back now! RED BUTTON! RED BUTTON!”

Balfour pressed the COM button and leaned back from the camera. She raised her hands up high enough to be seen, then rapidly slapped the back of her right wrist with her hand. “Bonzo! Red button! Hit the red button NOW!”

Comprehension came slowly, and Bonzo pursed his lips into an O shape, then looked down, and with a painful effort, and if he was fighting liquid G-forces of intensely heavy gravity and time, he brought his now greying wrinkled gnarled fist down on the big red button on the gauntlet, and all the screens on the console went back to the static hot white noise.

With a crash and a sharp popping sound, Bonzo reappeared in the big red warning circle on the base ring of the Beast, still smoking from the transport. But as Bonzo turned towards Matt and Annaliesa it was like he was picked up in the jaws of some huge invisible dog, as his whole body began to shake at hyper-speed, like he had been clamped into the vice of a paint blender.

Fassbinder, James and Jacob Bixby, and the two guards Vasquez and Goodwin, all just froze in awe and wonder. Matt snapped out of it first, and hit the COM button to the DeBolt Dias.

“What the FUCK is happening?”

There was no response. At the same moment, Matt and Annaliesa

turned and looked at each other. Matt, in a panic, suddenly, intuitively, knew what Balfour was going to do and only had the chance to yell, “NOOOOO!” As Annaliesa vaulted over the front of the console. She ran like a loping Thomson Gazelle with long, graceful strides, as she ran, her hands like knives, thumbs tucked, slicing the air. Years of running over veldts and jungle and climbing trees, all in that purposeful stride as she ran to save her friend.

Matt fumbled for the hanger PA and yelled into it, shaking the walls, “STOP HER!”

Vasquez, in one flowing motion, put his arm up under the strap of his rifle, and let it clatter off his back to the floor, and he ran towards the rings of the Beast, while Goodwin just swung his rifle onto his back, and dashed in the other direction, so they were both coming around either side of the device, outside the red warning circle, having nothing but fear and respect for this fearsome, monstrous creature. They came to the point to intercept her, but in one, graceful, simian-like motion, Annaliesa slid on the ground between them on the polished smooth concrete floor, like Sammy Sousa sliding into second base, and the men crashed into each other, grabbing at the space where they thought she would be.

She tumbled forward in a tight ball, then bounded up and dove head first into the red circle. With no fear, she leaped at Bonzo, still suspended in mid-air, wildly shaking at hyper speed and grabbed him and hung on for dear life. She shook as he did for a moment, but then, miraculously, they both started to slow. As if her body, her mere presence, and her love, brought him back into line with the vibrational flow of the time and space of this universe.

In short, sharp, spurts, they gradually went slower, and slower and slower, until they both appeared to now be back moving at normal speed in the space/time continuum.

The soldiers looked over at Fassbinder, still behind the far console. He grabbed the hanger PA mic. “Stay back! Don’t go near them! Back up!” Matt came out and walked cautiously across the floor towards them, with a look of fear and concern on his face.

Balfour pulled away from Bonzo, and undid the chin-strap on his helmet and tossed it away, where it clattered hollowly across the hanger floor. Matt came closer as she cradled Bonzo’s furry, rubbery face in both her hands, rubbing it gently. His fur was now grey and it looked as though he had aged forty years.

“Oh baby...” she said as tears began to roll down Balfour’s face. “What have they done to you? What have they done?” She hugged him close, rocked him back and forth and cooed in his ear, telling him it was going to be all right.

With the very last of his strength, Bonzo pushed back from her, and with his hands he began to sign. A-N-N-A-L-E-I-S-A.....

“Yes, yes! Annaliesa. That’s my name!” She said crying.

Matt clenched his jaw as he came closer, water welling up in his own eyes, thinking what have I done? Where did this all go wrong? What calculation did he miss that has now resulted in this suffering?

Bonzo then made the universal sign of his clenched hand with the thumb and pinky extended.

I-LOVE-YOU.

Dr. Annaliesa Balfour began to sob and she clutched him close hugging him desperately.

“I love you too! So much!”

And with that the chimpanzee began to howl, and a wind from nowhere came up in the hanger. The guards took a step forward.

“STAY BACK!” Fassbinder yelled.

It was as if an invisible storm tore at the bodies of Bonzo and Annaliesa. In a shattering shear of cosmic forces, the raw power of the raging hurricane of the motions of the universe caught up with them all at once, and one slice at a time, like an image pixelating in a fast roiling river rapid, they froze like statues which just blew away grain by grain.

Becoming one with the sands of time.

Together.

PART FIFTEEN

CAPTAIN
HANS COLER

CHAPTER Forty-nine

Ted was on a plane. AGAIN! Heading to Russia. It had been far too long since he had seen his family, and now he needed their help. He needed to speak with total freedom about subjects and topics that he could not trust anyone else on this earth with. He also knew with Irina's background in the nuts and bolts engineering of the mass movers, Pasha's artistic mind, and Teodor with his ability to think totally outside the box, with no restrictions or parameters, he could make quantum leaps that his stilted calcified brain was long since past. Also it was a way for him to finally mix some business with pleasure in this brief respite where the world had been saved, yet again...at least for the time being.

He had some time now after the Altarian Incursion, as it came to be known, but it was time that he knew was running out. It was all just too easy and he knew they would be back in greater numbers and with a much larger force. They and their "Andromedan Council" would quite simply not stand for the advancements that Humanity had made. It didn't matter that really only a handful of people on Earth had even an inkling of an idea of what The Group was capable of, as he was sure that they felt this viral war-like race was on the verge of invading and infecting the rest of THEIR universe with our war, and cruelty, our diseased language, perverse sexuality and culture of oppression and slavery.

Ted wasn't even so sure he disagreed with them. Humphrey was at the spear point of the cutting edge of what was really a 90° divergent tangent to humanity's evolution. If they unleashed even a small fraction of the technology that they possessed, some of it for over 80 years now, would it destroy the entire socio-economic-political fabric of the planet? Free energy. Teleportation. Gravity generators. Dealing with mass without dealing with

weight. Food production on an unlimited scale. Continent-sized deserts that could be made to bloom with abundance, and he didn't even dare think about what would happen if anyone, outside of himself, got access to man portable time-travel technology.

All of this was at his fingertips, to contain or unleash or give as some Promethean gift of fire stolen from the gods of Mount Olympus. But every scenario he ran in his mind turned to disaster. If you helped one group or nation, another group would suffer, as no matter where you turned, ANY technology could ultimately be turned into a weapon...by some one.

You just could not hand a loaded gun to a sandbox filled with children.

My God, Ted thought, no wonder so many of these races had just given up on helping us, and why they feared us so.

But Ted knew one thing, balls to bone, in every strand of his DNA, there was a line being drawn in the sands of time, that he would simply never allow them to come and destroy what his version of The Group had built. Ultimately he and what he had designed and accomplished was the only real hope humanity would ever have.

He also understood that pollution and overpopulation drove civilizations to explore new worlds and expand outwards. Isn't that what viruses do, he thought darkly? Destroy everything and move on? Was he Patient Zero for that virus?

NO!

All of the problems that mankind faced would eventually need the technology that he was developing in secret. Yes, we would destroy the environment. Over population would consume the world. We would breed ourselves out of existence, as famine and poverty overtook every inch of space. Seven billion people becoming fourteen billion, then twenty-eight

billion and on and on! According to all his best studies and quantum human brain wet-ware interface computer projections, by the year 2025 we would need the food resources of an entirely brand new planet just to feed the population of China! And the Chinese were already buying up farmland in America, and pretty soon his home would be on its knees to them, getting rationed food from their new Asian masters. All done with our own money.

When production does not keep up with consumption you have famine, on a global scale. When you could not make enough food, everyone just...dies, and nature gets Her way. War, disease, pestilence and death.

There were plenty of people in his Group and even in his circle that saw this genocide as a viable alternative. They could use genetically engineered viruses that would target only certain races of people. Then who decides who lives and dies? Wipe out the Negroes? The Chinese? The Jews? Wipe out “just” the “Useless Eaters”, cull the population to a “manageable 500 million” and then the whole world could be...what? A huge beautifully manicured park for those Elite that survived? Once you had robots that could build robots that could build other robots, who needs people anymore?

Dr. Theodore Humphrey, Jr. swore that this would never happen. That there was no point in protecting the world from Extra or Ultra-terrestrial invasions, only to let a cabal of “Blue-Blood” royals, who were quite possibly all related to the scum of the universe that he fought, wipe them all out from within.

Ted believed in a *STAR TREK* universe, rather than a *STAR WARS* reality. That it was ultimately pollution and over-population, as awful as all that was, that would drive humanity out into the solar system, to colonize the planets near us, and then launch ourselves heavenwards towards the stars beyond the sky.

“You can’t get to the moon in a boat,” Ted said quietly to himself.

He knew that you could not solve old problems with the technology and the people that started them in the first place. He knew that he, with the help of the men sleeping around him, and all those under his command, would slowly and surely introduce the science that would save us all.

But it all had to start with defeating the idiocy of the Isomer Protocols.

“God damn you George!” Ted swore to himself. He knew that when Bellamy kicked him out of The Group that George was slowly losing his mind, and the Treaty was what he saw as a last ditch effort to buy time, and get some protection against the unstoppable threat that was coming this way in the decade of the 2020s. But our only real hope WAS to move out into the solar system, and maybe these races all meant well, but it was time for it to stop. Time for us to leave the nest. Time to tell Mommy and Daddy we don’t want to live at home anymore.

He had to stop the Altarians and he didn’t know how to do it.

The Time-Runner had hit an entire series of snags. His son Theodore had found the code that allowed them to build it and make it single-man portable, but they still could not crack why it could not transport organic material. It had beaten the very best of them, including Ted, giving him now a heart that was only kept beating by a machine in his chest. He had now become the technology he feared.

So he was on his way to Moscow. To see his family. To see his son. Teddy seemed to have looked at all of this with a child-like spiritual wonder, which was an angle none of them could really fathom. Teddy saw the true glowing heart of all they were doing, while all of Ted’s people were getting stumped and beaten by the tech.

“There was a machine,” Theodore told him, “built a long time ago, by a man named Hans Coler. Read about him, and I think you will get a few

ideas.”

Ted had a working knowledge of what Coler was about. He invented a device called the “*magnetromapparata*” in 1933. It needed no outside power sources to function. Since an official interest was noted from the heads of the German Navy at the time who felt an investigation was necessary, and an official report was produced.

Experts examined the device and could find no fraud. It was judged Coler was an honest experimenter but no expert opinion was forthcoming to how the unit operated. The device consisted of permanent magnets of steel, copper coils and capacitors in a special holding arrangement.

The device incorporated six steel magnets in a six-sided arrangement where the magnets were connected in a series with the coils of about .33 ohm resistance to form part of the circuit. That is a conducting path was made through the magnet core.

The design also incorporated two small capacitors, a switch and a pair of sliding solenoid coils, one fitting inside the other, as shown in illustrations inside the report he had with him.

To allow the device to power up the following was done:

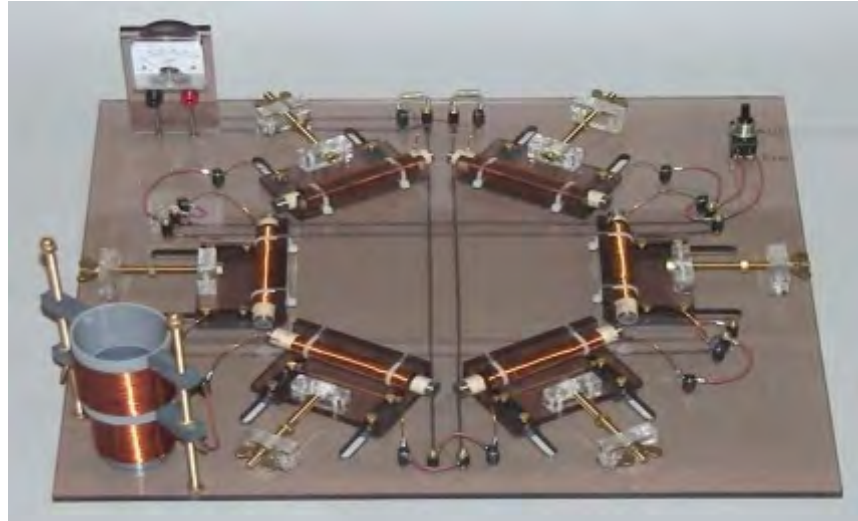
The switch was left open. The magnet and coil combination were moved slightly apart using a mechanical arrangement of cranks and sliders that allowed each magno-coil combination to be altered equally. There was a wait of several minutes between changes. The sliding coils were also set to different positions relative to one another.

These changes were made often until a precise point was reached as indicated on the volt meter. The switch was then closed. There were still more changes, more slowly this time until the best result was achieved.

Several tests gave them 450 millivolts for a period of some hours other times 60 millivolts was all they could get.

The best voltage obtained was about 12 volts and remained there indefinitely until the unit was shut down.

Wanting more information than what he already knew, Ted contacted his friends over in British Intelligence, and the M.I.-6 chaps were only too happy to oblige. After his long musings on “Life, the Universe and Everything” he rolled the combo numbers on the sides of his briefcase and pulled out the report on Captain Hans Coler. According to his son, Hans Coler, with a machine that they had since the 1940s, somehow held the key to conquering all time and space. There was a current color picture of a makeshift Coler device at the front of the dossier.



Ted flipped open the MI-6 FOR YOUR EYES ONLY folder:

The following is a collection of sections of text that are quoted from the British Intelligence Objectives Sub-Committee Trip Report No. 2394 BIOS Target Number: C31/4799) entitled: 'THE INVENTION OF HANS COLER, RELATING TO AN ALLEGED NEW SOURCE OF POWER', BIOS FINAL REPORT No. 1043: ITEM No. 31', as made available to the public by the U.K. Department of Scientific and Industrial Research, National Lending Library for Science and Technology. The author of the report is

named as R. Hurst, Ministry of Supply.

OBJECT OF VISIT AND SUMMARY:

Coler is the inventor of two devices by which it is alleged electrical energy may be derived without a chemical or mechanical source of power. Since an official interest was taken in his inventions by the German Admiralty it was felt that investigation was warranted, although normally it would be considered that such a claim could only be fraudulent.

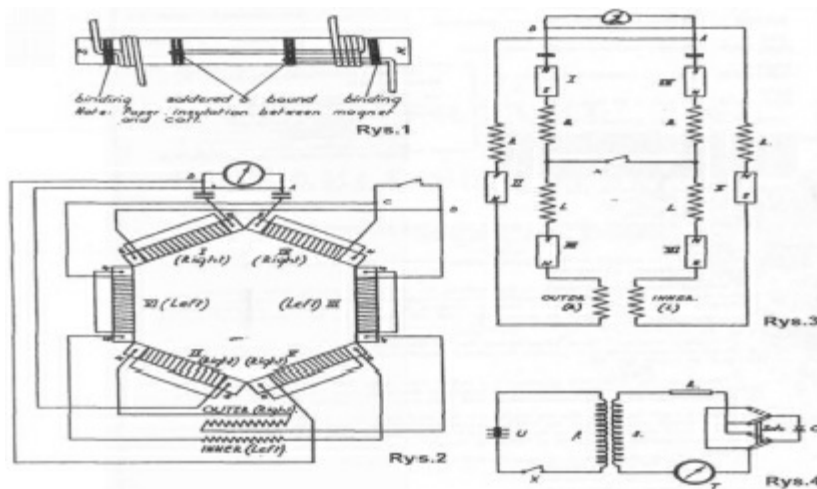
Accordingly Coler was visited and interrogated. He proved to be co-operative and willing to disclose all details of his devices, and consented to build up and put into operation a small model of the so-called 'Magnetstromapparat' using material supplied to him by us, and working only in our presence. With this device, consisting only of permanent magnets, copper coils, and condensers in a static arrangement he showed that he could obtain a tension of 450 millivolts for a period of some hours: and in a repetition of the experiment the next day 60 millivolts was recorded for a short period. The apparatus has been brought back and is now being further investigated.

Coler also discussed another device called the 'Stromerzeuger', from which he claimed that, with an input of a few watts from a dry battery an output of 6 kilowatts could be obtained indefinitely. No example of this apparatus exists, but Coler expressed his willingness to construct it, given the materials, the time required being about three weeks.

Opportunity was taken to interrogate Dr. F. Modersohn who had been associated with Coler for ten years and had provided financial backing. He corroborated Coler's story in every detail.

Neither Coler nor Modersohn were able to give any theory to account for the working of these devices, using acceptable scientific notions.

1. The 'Magnetstromapparat'



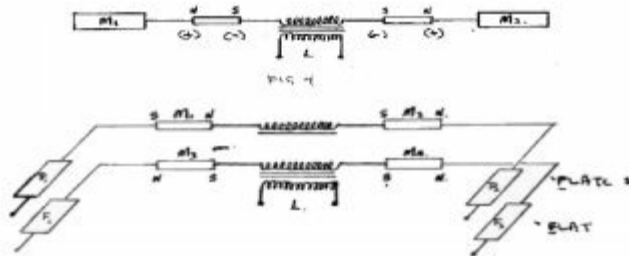
This device consists of six permanent magnets wound in a special way so that the circuit includes the magnet itself as well as the winding. (See Fig. 1).

These six magnet-coils are arranged in a hexagon and connected as shown in the diagrams (Figs. 2 and 3), in a circuit which includes two small condensers, a switch and a pair of solenoidal coils, one sliding inside the other. To bring the device into operation the switch is left open, the magnets are moved slightly apart, and the sliding coil set into various positions, with a

wait of several minutes between adjustments. The magnets are then separated still further, and the coils moved again. This process is repeated until, at a critical separation of the magnets, an indication appears on the voltmeter. The switch is now closed and the procedure continued more slowly. The tension then builds up gradually to a maximum, and should then remain indefinitely. The greatest tension obtained was stated to be 12 volts.

The 'Magnetostromapparat' was developed by Coler and von Unruh (now dead) early in 1933, and they were later assisted by Franz Haid of Siemens-Schukert, who built himself a model which worked in December 1933. This was seen by Dr. Kurt Mie of Berlin Technische Hochschule and Herr Fehr (Haber's assistant at K.W.I.), who reported that the device apparently worked and that they could detect no fraud. One model is said to have worked for 3 months locked in a room in the Norwegian Legation in Berlin in 1933. No further work appears to have been done on this system since that date.

2. The 'Stromerzeuger'



This device consists of an arrangement of magnets, flat coils and copper plates, with a primary circuit energized by a small dry battery. The output from the secondary was used to light a bank of lamps and was claimed to be many times the original input and to continue indefinitely. Details of the circuit and a theory as to its mode of operation were given (summarized in Appendix I). (Note by H. Aspden: This Appendix is not included in these

Web pages. I cannot accept Coler's theory, which suggests that electrical charges are also tiny magnetic poles, of north or south polarity, which can move with current through the magnet and somehow gain energy from the magnet. Quite clearly, Coler did not understand why his device worked.)

In 1925 Coler showed a small (10-watt) version to Prof. Kloss (Berlin), who asked the Government to give it a thorough investigation, but this was refused, as was also a patent, on the grounds that it was a "perpetual motion machine". This version was also seen by Profs. Schumann (Munich), Bragstad (Trondheim) and Knuden (Copenhagen). Reports by Kloss and Schumann are translated in Appendices II and III.

In 1933 Coler and von Unruh made a slightly larger model with an output of 70 watts. This was demonstrated to Dr. F. Modersohn, who obtained from Schumann and Kloss confirmation of their tests in 1926. Modersohn then consented to back the invention and formed a company (Coler G.m.b.h.) to continue the development. At the same time a Norwegian group had been giving financial support to Coler, and these two groups clashed. Modersohn's connection with Rheinmetall Borsig, and hence with the official Hermann Goering, combined to give him an advantage in this. Coler then in 1937 built for the Company a larger version with an output of six kilowatts.

In 1943 Modersohn brought the device to the attention of the Research Department of the O.K.M. The investigation was placed under the direction of Oberbaurat Seysen, who set Dr. H. Frohlich to work with Coler from April 1, 1943 to September 25, 1943. Frohlich was convinced of the reality of the phenomena and set about investigating the fundamentals of the device. He apparently concentrated on a study of the energy changes which occur on the opening and closing of inductive circuits. At the end of the

period he was transferred to B.M.W. to work on aerodynamic problems and is now working in Moscow.

In 1944 a contract was arranged by O.K.M. with Continental Metall A.G. for further development, but this was never carried out owing to the state of the country. In 1945 the apparatus was destroyed by a bomb, in Kolberg, whither Coler had evacuated. Since that time Coler had been employed sometimes as a labourer. Modersohn had severed his connection with Rheinmetall Borsig, of which he had been a Director, and was working for the Russian authorities as a consultant in chemical engineering.

Following the above historical background commentary, the next three sections presented the REPORT as being, respectively, an interrogation of Coler, an interrogation of Modersohn and the actual construction and testing of the device by Coler in the presence of the visiting U.K. Government scientists:

1. Interrogation of Coler

Coler was questioned first about the history of his inventions, when the details above were given.

He was then questioned about the theory of the devices, but he was unable to give any coherent suggestions as to the mechanism. He stated that his researches (apparently conducted with crude apparatus) into the nature of magnetism had led him to conclude that ferromagnetism was an oscillating phenomenon, of frequency about 180 kHz. This oscillation took place in the magnetic circuit of the apparatus and induced, in the electrical circuit, oscillations the frequency of which, of course, depended on the values of the components used. These two phenomena interacted and gradually built up tension (meaning voltage). As the mechanism was not understood the proper

arrangement could not be worked out, but had been arrived at by experiment, and the apparatus had to be brought into adjustment by similar trial and error methods. Coler stated that the strength of the magnets did not decrease during use of the apparatus; and suggested that he was tapping a new sort of energy hitherto unknown, - "Raumenergie" (Space-energy). Coler gave a resume of the work done by Dr. Frohlich for O.K.M., and produced a copy of Frohlich's report (translation reproduced as Appendix IV) and a report of his own (part of which is given in Appendix V).

Coler was next asked if he would consent to build models of these devices if material was made available. He agreed that he could do this and stated that it would take one week to construct a 'Magnetstromapparat' and a month to construct 'Stromerzeuger'. Accordingly we supplied the magnets, condensers and copper wire needed for the former, and Coler proceeded to build an apparatus as discussed in Section 3. A list of the material required to build the 'Stromerzeuger' was drawn up by Coler.

2. Interrogation of Dr. F. Modersohn

Modersohn was questioned about the history of these devices, with which he had been concerned financially, and corroborated the details given by Coler. He stated that he had at first disbelieved Coler's claims, but had taken great precautions to eliminate fraud. He had seen the 70 watt 'Stromerzeuger' working on a number of occasions and had taken it while working from one room to another. All parts were visible and nothing was hidden. As he was himself not an expert he had tried to get experts to examine it thoroughly, but reputable scientists either refused to have anything to do with it at all, or else were more concerned to find a fraud than to see how it worked. The exception was Dr. Frohlich, who was convinced of the reality of the effect and who also believed that the secret was to be found in

the energy changes in the special inductive circuit used. He had made experiments to test his ideas, but Modersohn denied knowledge of his results. Modersohn was extremely methodical and showed his files on the subject: these contained copies of all letters and reports concerning the device, since 1933.

3. Construction and Testing of the 'Magnetstromapparat'

In our presence and with material supplied by us (some brought from England and the rest bought locally) Coler built an apparatus as shown in Figs. 1 and 2 . It is to be noted that some magnets are wound in a clockwise direction looking at the N pole (called left) and others in an anti-clockwise direction (called right). The magnets were selected to be as nearly equal in strength as possible, and the resistance of the magnet-coil was uniform (about 0.33 ohm). The physical arrangement was as shown in Fig. 2 in a breadboard style. Measurements of voltage and current across A-B were made by Mavometer. A mechanical arrangement of sliders and cranks for separating the magnets evenly all round was made up.

On July 1, 1946 experiments were being continued after three days of fruitless adjusting, and when the magnets were at a separation of about 7 mm the first small deflection was noted (about 9 a.m.). The switch was closed and, by slow adjustment of the sliding coil and by increasing the separation of the magnets to just over 8 mm, by 11 a.m., the tension was raised to 250 millivolts and by 12.30 p.m. it was 450 millivolts. This was maintained for another 3 hours, when a soldered tag became disconnected, and the meter slowly dropped back to zero. Soldering up the broken connection did not restore the tension. The magnets were closed up and left overnight and the same procedure for finding the adjustment was repeated on

July 2, 1946. After about three hours a deflection of 60 millivolt was obtained; this was maintained for more than 30 minutes, but then decreased to zero when further adjustments were tried.

During all this work the model was completely open, and nothing could be hidden in it. The breadboard and meter could be picked up and moved round the room, tilted, or turned, without effect.

The apparatus would appear to be too crude to act as a receiver of broadcast energy, or to operate by induction from the mains (the nearest cable being at least 6 feet away), and the result must for the moment be regarded as inexplicable.

'CONCLUSIONS':

1. It was judged that Coler was an honest experimenter and not a fraud, and due respect must be paid to the judgment of Frohlich in the matter, as deduced from his report to Seysen.

2. The result obtained was genuine in so far as could be tested with the facilities available, but no attempt has yet been made to find an explanation of the phenomenon.

3. It is felt that further investigation by an expert in electromagnetic theory is warranted and that Coler's offer to construct a model of the "Stromerzeuger" should be taken up.

* * * * *

Ted shut the file. Theodore had been right again and, remarkably, had figured all this out on his own. Coler's device had been right in front of their noses for years, until someone in The Group finally realized the potential of all that it could do. But even with his son Teddy's modified designs the tests

on “organics”, meaning horribly mangled and destroyed lab animals, had been...disappointing.

Ted balled up his fist and punched it down on his thigh. With all his power, unlimited resources, hundreds of scientists and dozens of companies and corporations at his disposal, he STILL could not do what his father had done, by himself, in a ramshackle tin roofed rattlesnake riddled Barstow shed in back of his house. Or what Simon Ratterman and Ann Corbett had done, and that bitch was still loose somewhere in the time stream ready to strike at anytime. But this had ceased to become about his own personal survival and become about the ultimate fate and future of all Mankind.

PART SIXTEEN

LEAVE IT TO BEAVER

CHAPTER FIFTY

Captain Irina Tolsky-Humphrey, Ret. Formerly of the Naval Forces of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, graduated top of her class from Moscow University with a Masters in Theoretical Physics and spoke four languages besides Russian and English, although her fluidity in that latter language was debatable depending on how angry or drunk she got.

Her last command assignment for the USSR was the Mount Grace Naval Submarine Station in the Artic Circle, which was....unexpectedly... terminated. As in blown to Kingdom Come by a Russian nuclear missile exploding in the launch tube of a November Class Soviet submarine when someone had accidentally/on-purpose, forgot to actually open the hatch. Or, for that matter, take the sub out of the pen...into the ocean.

She now had two lovely children, although they weren't really children anymore. Theodore, or Pasha as his mother sometimes affectionately called him, and Teddy or "The Beaver" as his gruff American father nicknamed him teasingly. Irina had no idea why he called him this awful rat-like name, having not grown up on American TV. "His front teeth are just fine", Irina always thought. "He looks nothing like this indigenous North American dam building muskrat. He is beautiful boy!"

Theodore was just now nine, a computer whiz and a certified genius with an IQ that simply defied measurement and limits. He was already working for the Russian Academy of Science in Moscow with, and sometimes for, his mother. Ted always wondered if somehow his interaction with all the time fields and extraterrestrial science had somehow altered his and Irina's DNA, by some means turned his son's DNA into something wonderful and certainly different.

Pasha was dancing, and doing her art. She'd graduated in the top 1% of her class on a full ride art scholarship at Oxford University's Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art. But dance became her grand passion and, like any great athlete, she was going to do it as long as she physically could while still keeping up her art portfolio. She danced for not a great company, but it was no joke either. Lead ballerina at 26 for one of what they called the "Mini-Major" troupes, she was just a bit older than was usual, but it certainly was not all that bad. It was a stepping-stone to what she hoped someday would be the big time bright lights of the Bolshoi. Although with her beauty and exquisite artistic talents she could do anything she wanted.

Irina and her little family lived in Moscow, not too far from the Kremlin and Red Square, in the Patriarshy Ponds District on an old side street that was littered with one hundred and fifty year old mansions, built in the heyday of the last of the Czars. She found her Russian "City Dream Home" just off the Bolshoi Patriarshiy Per. It was just south of the Pond and a couple of short blocks north of the European Medical Center.

When she'd stumbled on it just walking the street on a fall day, it was dour and dilapidated, but Ted Humphrey had worked his magic. Within hours of just making the wish of wanting it, the home had been bought, paid for and placed in her name, unheard of in even post Soviet Russia. In Moscow the paperwork and bureaucratic labyrinth alone made the Byzantine Empire at its height look like a Chinese finger puzzle. One of the largest work crews she had ever seen seemed to just grow out of the ground, and within a week it was better than new, with all the modern conveniences unheard of in Russia. But most especially...HEAT!

GLORIOUS HEAT!

She could punch a button on a happily glowing blue panel and be gorgeously nude and sweating whenever she liked, (when the children

weren't around of course.) And it was all powered by some new fangled gizmo Ted gleaned from one of his Black Projects which gave her all the power she wanted or would ever need, and all completely off the dilapidated antiquated old Soviet power grid system. She could probably power the entire city by hooking it all up to her house...but that would be telling. And she did not care about anyone else being warm.

The loving but estranged Humphrey family sat around the table in the sumptuous dining room of the old traditional style mansion under a sparkling Waterford crystal chandelier that threw soft yellow light and rainbows all around the room as they finished up their dinner.

Irina had made an old style cultural Russian feast of Pelmeni, roast duck with apples, cutlets and mash potatoes. She believed that no one in "Amerika" was taking care of Ted and really did wish in her heart that he would find a good woman to do so. Also that everyone in the United States ate at McDonalds morning, noon and night, which was why they were all so fat and stupid.

Irina and Pasha had brought out a desert of Blinchiki with a choice of toppings of caviar or honey. Ted didn't really care for Russian cuisine, as he never found anyone that did it well, teasing Irina by calling it all "starving peasant food". But she was, of course, a genius at anything she did.

Ted had brought a stack of Marie Calendar pies and French vanilla ice cream with him from the States for the kids, but tonight Irina was the gourmet and Ted wanted to let her show off, and he was genuinely dazzled.

When all the deserts had been eaten and all the dishes cleared, Ted and his family all sat around the table in the loving afterglow of a fantastic meal and the delight of each other's company after not seeing one another for far to long.

"So..." Ted said, rubbing his hands together mysteriously, "I have..."

presents!”

They all laughed happily and Ted took his briefcase out from the corner behind his chair, slid the combination locks into place and popped the top. He crouched down behind the screen of the rich reddish brown leather lid. He suddenly peeked out from behind it once, with a vaudeville villain grimace, and they all jumped back and giggled helplessly. Then like a mad magician he produced a series of brightly wrapped gifts, all with red bows fringed with gold. Chuckling like Krampus, an old Russian Christmas dark elf, one by one he handed them out into their eagerly waiting grasping hands, basking in the light of their smiling faces. Taking a breathe and breaking out of his character he flipped the lid of the briefcase down and put it back on the floor beside him.

In a tradition from far back in their family history, Ted slapped his hands down on the table and yelled, “GO!”

With joyous laughter they all tore into the gaily-wrapped packages to see who could be the first to get theirs open. Inside each were solid gunmetal grey stainless steal cases.

“Go ahead,” Ted encouraged, “open them.”

They lifted the hinged lids of the cases. They were thin square black screens around flexible bands for wearing on the wrist. Pasha’s was pink, Pasha’s was silver and Irina’s was a deep red. Ted pulled up his sleeve and showed that he was sporting an onyx black device on his wrist.

“These are what some people would call watches, but are really a next-gen wearable technology that is a super computer, but for wearing on your wrist. Go ahead...put them on.” They did so in stunned silence, as they all literally did not know what to say.

“I have an instruction manual for them, but it’s classified as top secret and can’t ever leave the house. Touch the screen.” They did so and the

watches sprang to life with crystal clear 3-D images that came alive against the black field. Pasha's had a twirling ballerina with a pink parasol, Theodore's was a souped up race car, and Irina's was the head of Minnie Mouse batting her eyelashes and blowing a kiss. Irina put her hand to her mouth, not quite believing her eyes.

"So these watches are tapped into our global super-computer system," Ted explained. "You will have to learn all the various applications from the manual, as they have global mapping, GPS, will monitor all your body functions, temp, B.P., heart-rate. You can use the telephone numerical keyboard screen to dial a number or, all you have to do is say the name of anyone you want to talk to, and it will hook through the exchange and call them for you. Also," Ted said mischievously, looking at each of them in turn, "let's play hide and seek!"

The children immediately ran for different corners of the house. Irina looked more suspicious, and slowly left her chair and went into the kitchen. Ted touched the screen on the phone and said, "Conference call my family."

The sound of old style telephone jangling bells came out of the wrist phones from all corners of the house, and Sasha and Pasha screamed with delight.

"Hello?" They all said.

Ted cupped his hand over the device and breathed heavily into it and said: "No! I...am your FATHER!"

They all came tumbling back into the room, howling with laughter. Irina came in slowly, looking like she had been tricked.

"So you are talking, but there is no sound coming from the watch. How is it that I can hear you speaking inside my head?"

"There is a feature that turns on the speaker for group listening, but

the tech used is a version of something called an osteophone. There were a number of models marketed to the public out there called neurophones, but we miniaturized it and made it more powerful. It transmits the sound directly into the bones in your wrist that then bypasses your audio canal and goes directly into the bones in the inner ear. So it's sending the signal directly into your brain, for complete privacy. I mean people can hear your end of the conversation, of course, but not whoever is speaking to you."

"That is SO COOL!" Theodore said, admiring the device on his wrist. "What else does it do?"

"Well, when we cracked, or were given, actually, the Unified Field Theory, we used it to create a sub-space communications system which these watches tap into and facilitate. So not only can no one ever track or eavesdrop on our conversations, but the communication is instantaneous. And when I say instantaneous, I mean it transcends space and possibly time."

"So you are saying," Teddy said with awe, "that we can talk to each other no matter where we are, anywhere...in the universe?"

"That, my excellent first born son, is absolutely correct! So if you get a call from the moon...or Mars...or where ever else in whatever galaxy I am visiting or living in, you will know it's your dear old dad."

They all got up and huddled around him, and Ted spread his arms wide and took them all in as they kissed his face and thanked him for the amazing gifts. He kissed them all back as he was reminded exactly what he had fought all these years for.

"Now," Ted said, releasing them all, as they went back to their chairs around the table, "it is Monday, which is family fun night, yes?"

"YES! YES!" Pasha and Sasha both clapped their hands.

"But tonight is going to be a little bit different, because tonight you are going to earn those watches. We, altogether, the ever amazing and

stupendous Humphrey family, are going to figure out the nature of TIME, and how to travel through it!”

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

Ted spread the large flat palms of his hands out on the table before him, took a deep breath and began the discussion.

“So Teodore, we began building the man portable Time Runner devices that you figured out the plans for from the codes that you broke, incorporating the Coler Device. We also took your prototypes that you, somehow, someway, remarkably managed to build here in the basement.” Ted shook his head in wonder. “Just...unbelievable!”

Teddy blushed and hung his head. “Just trying to help you, dad!”

“Oh! And you did! You did!” Ted reached over and rubbed his head. “You showed us that we had missed so many things that had been right in our faces for 60 years. The Hans Coler device solved all of our power problems and made the unit man-portable, considering it gives an amplification of about 12 times what is put in. It all fits into a crude back-pack sized device, but with some refinements, I am sure next-gen models will probably be no bigger than these watches or pagers. Just sheer...genius! However,” and here his tone became more dramatic, “we still do not seem to be able to transport organic matter through time/space. We did an animal test that did not...end well.” He hung his head as the children grimaced. “So we are still missing something here. Something...obvious. Something...right *there*.”

“So you are thinking we must go back to the beginning to solve problem?” Irina said.

“Yes,” Ted said grimly. “I’ve always found that if you get to a certain level and get stuck, then you’re missing something. If your answer is wrong in Algebra, then your process is wrong and you have to go back and find the step you missed. Also, each block builds on the one before it, so if all

of us, together get down to the foundation of all this, I think we can fix the problem.”

There was a long silence, as they all pondered the challenge of the gauntlet Ted had thrown down.

“So, start at the beginning,” Irina said bluntly. Ted took a long breath.

“The first project I ever worked on was at Montauk. I eventually took the whole thing over and it became our first big success, and in some ways, personally, my greatest failure.” The ghosts of his darling Sally and Dr. Leonard Bates still haunted him. Sally, pregnant with his child, mind-raped and controlled and given to another man by The Group, at his command really, and the brutal murder of Dr. Leonard Bates, all neatly made to look like a clumsy suicide. A Group trademark. It was the trail of death and betrayal he had left behind him at the ironically named Camp Hero.

“We were teleporting objects just fine back then in the early ‘60s,” he continued, shaking the hauntings of the past out of his head and his heart, “into the heart of Soviet nuclear bomb tests. We were learning all kinds of things about how nuclear fission at the heart of an explosion effected both time, and space, really ripping holes in the time space continuum, doors, really, allowing us access to other dimensions. So I came up with the bright idea of jumping the probes outside the morphogenic bio-field of the Earth up to the surface of the moon. This allowed the probe to super-cool in nearly absolute zero temperatures, and then we would jump them into the blast, which made them last much longer, then back to the moon to cool, then back to the lab. Well, jumping it off Earth and back, caused havoc with the time continuum, where we almost lost a man, who did die later of complications of God knows what when he made it back to us.

“When we got the probe back after bouncing it both ways, it looked

like it'd been in space for fifty years and had burns, dents and marks all over it. The reason for this is that once inside the operating field of the three rings of the old Beast machine, the unit was expanded, contracted and deformed in many ways. It was only the fact that it was made of solid metal that allowed it to make the trip. That was the reason that we had to back all the film in the canisters we used with aluminum foil, so that it would hold together and keep the emulsion in place. The single biggest factor was that the unit elongated as it was 'pulled' through the oculus of the time-space field. The rings of the Beast unit transporting it were tuned to allow the item to go out through the ceiling of the cave and then outside buildings. Otherwise it would have been completely destroyed going out the bottom into the earth. The return trip came in from the ceiling, recombining on the platform as each and every part relocated to their original form."

Ted stopped and looked at his family to see they were all keeping up, completely understood what he was saying, and gave him a look that everything he was saying was obvious to them, when it would be the wildest of science fiction to almost anyone else on Earth. He rubbed his forehead and leaned forward. God he needed a cigarette, but Irina forbid him to smoke in the house.

"So we are faced with two goals and challenges here: Make the device man portable so you could self contain it to wear on the body, or be able to put it in a car or truck. You could use the Beast and the three rotating rings, but it would be a one-way trip, and sending someone back in time where they could never come home would be either a suicide mission, or condemn them to reliving their lives from the past point forward. But with knowledge of the future, they could do an infinite amount of damage to the time line. That is IF the past can be actually changed. We are pretty sure you can change the Quinta of time, on a smaller scale, but not the Quantum of

time, which would really take a shift in mass consciousness, or so the theory goes. Who knows really?

“Secondly, we obviously need to move a biological system, that being a person, through the device in the first place. So it was necessary to have a force field around the subject that would prevent the dislocation of the all the intricate parts of the whole being and hold the sample together in one uniform system. Ergo, Beaver,” he pointed at Teddy, who smiled at the nickname as Irina made a face, “as you discovered, the Coler Device. Which gives it the portable power we have always been looking for, and the protective field. Or at least that is what we thought.”

“So what’s the problem?” Theodore asked.

“We calibrated the man portable Time-Runner to move a test chimpanzee to the Lunar One Base outside the Earth’s morphogenic field and back...and it...didn’t end well.”

“You killed Bonzo!” Pasha said in horror. She had met and played with him when she was living at the Fallon facility, and was raised with him like a brother. They had all been loving friends with Annaliesa Balfour, who really acted as a surrogate mother to Sasha, as Irina worked so much at the Jacobs Faculty before she decided to move both the children back to Russia.

“Yes,” Ted said with regret and sadness, which was followed by a long solemn pause, out of respect for a hero that had lost his life in the line of duty. Ted could not bear to tell them just then that Annaliesa had been killed in the test as well. He needed to solve problems here, not give a eulogy at a memorial service. But Theodore’s mind just kept working, seeing the death of a lab animal as an essential sacrifice to science.

“Mama,” Theodore said, breaking the silence, “can we draw?”

Ted tilted his head in miffed confusion looking at Teddy and then Irina. Irina’s face lit up, as she clapped her hands together.

“YES!” She exclaimed. “That is a wonderful idea. Monday is family night anyway, so, go get the paper!”

The children disappeared into other parts of the house, and when they returned, Theodore was carrying a large roll of butcher paper about 5 feet high, and Sasha carried a brightly colored Day-Glo psychedelic bucket, with all manner of Crayola Crayons, and Sharpies, art pencils, charcoal sticks and glitter crayons and chalk. Teddy put down the huge roll of paper on the already cleared table with a thick thud, and then pushed it towards his mother while he held the other end down. Ted threw up his hands and leaned back as it rolled past him. Irina grabbed the roll and with an expert slice of her hand, tore it downwards against the table’s edge, then set the unused part of the roll on its end in the corner.

They now had a clean white paper canvas before them with which to solve the mysteries of the universe. The children greedily grabbed the art supplies. Irina waved at them and they rolled her some Sharpies and crayons. Sasha helped herself to the charcoal stick and the finer art colored pencils, where she began to sketch a face.

“I think that maybe we are looking at the problem here too much like scientists,” Irina started.

“What do you mean?” Ted said. “How can we look at it any other way?”

“I mean we have no problems putting machines through space. Teleporting them from place to place, da?”

“Da. Yes.”

“So what is so different about things that are alive from things that are dead?” Irina said, pointing a salmon colored crayon in the air, to make her point.

“Um...life? Living things are...moving systems. They have....” Ted

was stuck.

“Souls?” Sasha said. “They have...souls. So what makes up the soul, and how do we move this soul matter from place to place?”

Irina made a face. “Well, I think when we live, we live, and when we die, we die. Kaput! No more. You kids grew up with this New Age mumbo jumbo. But Sasha is right. How do we move this living system through the oculus of time/space, and why is it so much different from inorganic matter?”

There was a long pause, until finally, Teddy picked up a Gamma Green crayon and began to draw on the butcher paper canvas before him.

“From the view of our outer world, energies come together from the six other levels of consciousness,” he drew a stick figure, and then circles around that with different colors. Sasha’s portrait began to take the shape of a woman, “being the Causal, Etheric, Astral, Spiritual, Emotional, Mental and finally the Physical. Each one has its own time frame of inner space, and they all collide with the present here in the outer world, or the physical plane of the seventh level of consciousness. This merging of time and energies is modulated by the Universal Consciousness, which are the individual mind and the mass mind of a shared consciousness and reality. Because when people start incarnating on the physical plane, like, say Adam and Eve...”

Irina interrupted him by snorting in derision. “Shame on you! I thought you were learning to be a scientist? You are going to use this Bible mythology nonsense to solve this problem?”

Teddy looked over at his mother with raised eyebrows, and she just shook her head and threw up her hands. “Voo doo and religious hoo-ba-jew!” She crossed her arms defiantly and went quiet and surly.

“They begin to reflect their likenesses and differences,” Teddy continued, “and karma begins between them. Actions with consequences.”

“So now you are Buddhist?” Irina protested.

Teddy smiled softly at his mother and continued. “So they have a baby and now there are three beings on the physical plane of existence, and now we go from singular time to dual time and graduate into tertiary or trinity time. Because the summation of the human auric fields on the physical plane creates the astral plane, the karma and the dharma from the physical plane activity seeds the probability for character expression in the future incarnating souls, and as they form the present in future incarnations, they are in fact the future.”

“It’s usually the tortured souls that can’t move forward,” Sasha said, looking up from her art, interjecting the classic Russian pessimism of the horror of existence. “They get stuck there, which is why so many people who have purposely or accidentally gone there have such horrible experiences.”

“And get slimed!” Teddy joked with his sister, and they both laughed and went, “EWWWW!” together.

“Now the funny thing,” Theodore continued, “about traversing back and forth to and from the astral plane, like in astral travel, is you’re out of body and you’re out of physical incarnation, *BUT*...you are still in time. You’re in the time field that’s created as a secondary field from the third dimension, so now the time relationship in the fourth dimension is a reaction, at this point in time, the field that’s created in the third dimension.”

“So,” Irina chimed in, getting over her momentary grump, “you have a third and fourth dimensional interchange. The Astral, being the auspices for the beginning phase of the fourth dimension is of a higher energy and frequency, therefore everything is self-illuminating. So when you bring our so-called ‘physics’ and ‘science’ into the astral, we realize we don’t have the speed of light any more.”

“Yes,” Teddy said, his eyes lighting up. “Everything is

instantaneous. Like the Unified Field Theory you discovered Dad that our watches are based on with instantaneous communication anywhere in the universe. On the astral plane everything is instantaneous in its energy form. So if everything is instantaneous, then we don't have anything in SPACE! So 'Space' as we know it, doesn't exist!"

"In between the third and fourth dimensions is zero space," Irina said, completing the thought. "So if we could access this plane between the third and fourth dimension as zero space, that means we could access anything ... anywhere...in all the Universe...instantly! Sound like anyone we know?"

"*OH MY GOD!*" Ted exclaimed in utter shock. "THAT was what Simon Ratterman meant when he bragged about 'dancing in between the raindrops'! THAT was why he and that...woman...Corbett could go anywhere they pleased! That's how they always beat all of our security!" Irina knowingly nodded her head slowly up and down.

"So now we have the ability to not only overcome time," Teddy continued, "but to overcome space as well. And when you have this understanding, then it's very simple to take the time problem and transpose and convert it into something like an interstellar flight machine. So now you begin to glimpse the horizon of the technology and principles of extraterrestrial technology, like the UFOs you have at Area 51."

"How do you know about that?" Ted said with mock seriousness.

"I got the Bob Lazar Area 51 sport model UFO for Christmas when I was six. You people aren't very good at keeping these big secrets!" Teddy giggled, then picked up another handful of crayons and slid down to start drawing on another piece of the table. Ted looked over and saw the sheer beaming joy in Irina's face, getting this first hand demonstration on just how amazing her children were.

“The past is like...an echo,” Teodore said scribbling furiously. “The light, the sound, all of it does exist somewhere in physical space, where we are probably the people of some distant star’s favorite reality show, so there are two theories. If you go into the future on the astral plane, you either run into the ‘planning committee’ that’s planning to come back here and reincarnate again here and live out all their karma and dharma, and it is space-less in relation to the whole time continuum. But it is ALL being created at the moment we interact with it.

“Because the energy is centered on the third dimension, not the fourth, the ‘Be Here Now’ rule applies. It all becomes about vibration and frequency. We are all vibrating at the frequency of RIGHT NOW. If we vibrated at the frequency of back before desert we could go back and have razzleberry pie and slow churned French vanilla ice cream instead of Blinchiki.” Teddy and Pasha both made faces at the same time, sticking out their tongues as Irina tossed a wadded up napkin at him, which he playfully dodged. “So time really is a circular river, and when you jump out of the Time Stream into the shore of the Astral then dive back in, you have to flow with the river, or all kinds of bad things happen. So when you jump to THEN still vibing at the frequency of NOW, all you will see is maybe the black void or the violet diagram of the architect’s construct of the L.E.R.M., the Light Encoded Reality Matrix, that the universe is made up of, which is all it is until we interact with it.”

“ ‘An apple is not an apple until you perceive it to be as such,’ says the Buddha,” Pasha interjected and then went back to drawing a stunning Crayon portrait of what was turning out to be her mother from across the table.

“But, change your vibe to the vibe of NEXT, and POOF! The future appears, because time really IS all happening all at once. But that is also why

it's so hard to change the past, because it's all a contract based on a level of mass consciousness and agreement and tradition.”

“So you can't just go back and shoot Stalin?” Irina asked.

“No, or Hitler, or Mao... 'cuz someone else would just take their place and maybe be worse.”

“Any leader, good or bad is just the creation of the mass consciousness,” Sasha said.

“Yeah,” Teddy continued. “They're like really tough teachers in school. They teach you hard lessons, but you thank them later.”

Irina's face displayed shock at his callous comparison. “Pasha! These horrible men murdered millions of people!”

“But,” Teddy smiled, “that is only if you believe in death. And science says that energy cannot be created or destroyed, therefore, nobody ever really dies, do they Momma?” Irina just folded her arms in disgust. “But take a million people back to the past,” Teddy went on, “and if they all knew how terrible these people would be, then they could work together to change it all. That is the power of prophecy really. The number and power of imaginations affected in the present determines how much and how strong and how powerful the field is in the past---and what you can do to it.

“We have to look at time on a macro-level, and, again, the whole universe is really a hologram of light. The first cause of creation is that a white light fills the black velvet void of what is called *'The Infolute'* creating existence. Time separates into the seven days or layers of existence, all made of light, and each color is a level of consciousness in primal creation. So in order to travel in time, you must enter into the primal energy fields or layers of existence. We are all luminous beings of frozen light, drawing from the “infolute”, the source of creation, and the very energies that animate our atomic structures, our DNA, our cells, our organs and our organisms. As we

encounter each other, our karma, creates a shadow across the path of existence we occupy, and our future shines from our ideals.

“Within this concept of mind we have to start somewhere. That somewhere is the doorway between the fourth dimension, timelessness, and the physical plane, 3-D world. Here our atoms of the third dimension of creation received their life from the higher worlds within.”

Now Theodore seemed to have moved into some kind of trance/fugue state and he drew more furiously.

“Basically with all this in mind, we need to accomplish a few more things with the Time-Runner to make it work:”

Teddy wrote them out, lettering each point.

“A. Start an energy flow from the lower astral plane, which is the fourth dimension. (Do NOT confuse the higher astral plane with the lower—the higher astral contains beings and worlds, whereas the lower is only energy.) The lower plane is all frozen light that we call atoms, forming matter.

“B. Construct a reciprocating receptacle on the physical plane to receive and utilize this portal to timelessness.

“C. Create a medium within the receiving receptacle that will allow our physical bodies to adapt to the disconnection of mass, mind and form in the 3-D world.

“D. Develop a means to track this time travel process in both directions, or, don’t get lost in time.”

Ted was looking daunted now, and even with the baffling brilliance of his son, he now doubted more than ever they could manufacture a single-man portable Time-Runner that didn’t turn its human component into inside out mush on the other end. Or that they could do it in time for what he knew was coming. Ted took a long deep breath, and breathed out through his

clenched jaw, seeming to shrink smaller, like an old tire when all the air escapes.

Teodore saw how crestfallen his father was, and went around the table and put his arms around his neck and hugged him.

Ted turned to Irina who knew much of the next part of the story.

“The Coler Device was a simple force field generator of such low power, no one could understand how to use in for military applications.” Irina said matter of factly. “Probably because Coler himself was so humble he didn’t realize the full implications of the device. So The *Kriegsmarine* never spoke with the Luftwaffe or the Waffen SS or the *Deutsche Heer* about their research or developments. It was only in late '44 that our old pal Hans Kammler stumbled on the report done by the Navy and suddenly realized it was the missing piece. After that everything that had been all pointless useless theory and worthless research suddenly made sense. He made a decision not to share the knowledge with his higher ups. He already knew the war was lost and that his only way out was by moving through time-space. It took months to perfect the system to work properly. Then he had compiled a list of those he would need for further work and those that needed to be totally silenced. Of the thirty-nine people on his list, all but three were sent to different places where research could and would continue.”

“It’s okay, papa,” Teodore said cheerily. “You want the H.G. Wells experience? I’m sure I’ve figured it out. We’ll have you bouncing into Tomorrowland in no...time! Ha-ha!”

He dove across the table and drew all his Crayons towards him in a pile, grabbed a flesh colored one, and drew a big stick man.

“The first step is to change the physical body. That means rerouting orbital patterns of the electrons within our cells and then reversing the direction of the animating energies. This all has to happen within micro-Nano

seconds, or you lose your life force as it separates and evaporates back to the source of creation in big gooey chunks. SPLA-BLOOEY!” He made a big wet exploding noise as his arms made a huge exaggerated circle. “Also, during this Nano-second of time....” He scrawled out an equation as an after thought:

$$“1 \times 10^{-8} \times \infty”$$

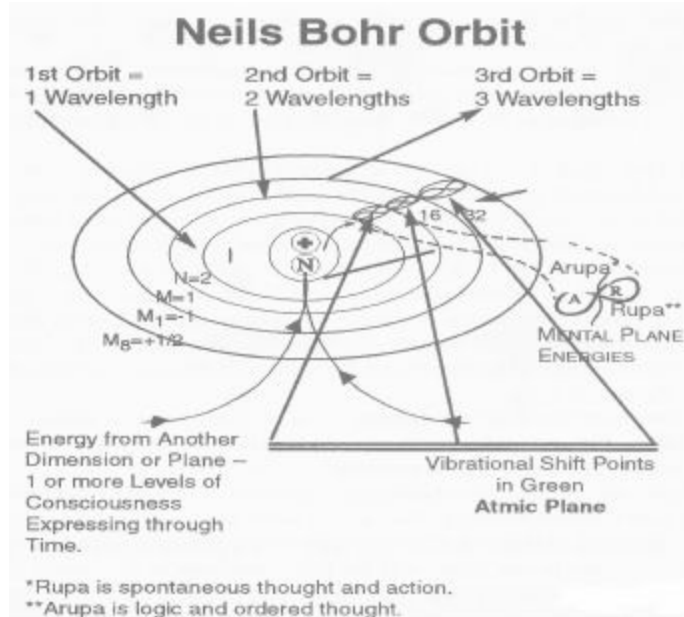
“...we must tune our disconnected being into a previously unified past mass mind, wherein we make a perfect interface or connection. This, of course, is for traveling backwards in time. Remember you have to jump in the time stream and swim with it so you don’t drown in the river of time.

“To go forward, into the future, which is all probability, we must further accelerate beyond the speed of light, then enter the probability factor of some potentials of where mass mind would be based on its location in the present. This feat is far more dangerous than traveling into the past, as in the past the roads are already paved, and in the future, like Doc Brown says to Marty, ‘Where we’re going there are no roads!’ Or even really worlds for that matter!”

“But I’ve received information from people in the future that changed time, or the past. At least...their past,” Ted said, realizing how much time travel made his hair hurt.

“Or did you?” Teddy smiled. “Really, what you got only accelerated what was already there and being done, and what mass consciousness was on the very edge of creating anyway. So an acceleration, in speed and in time, is like a runner or a race car catching a gust of wind, is not a change in destination or destiny.”

Irina grabbed a handful of Crayons and dove into the conversation drawing a series of concentric spirals around a circle in the center with a + and an N in the middle.



“We all know Neils Bohr and the Neils Bohr Orbit, da?” she said. Ted nodded and smiled, having more fun right now watching the sheer genius of his family, than he can ever remember having for a very long time. “We observe the quantum energy frequency shells or orbital rings around a theoretical atom. The heavier the element, the more shells or orbital rings or orbital ring of electrons will be found around the nucleus. If we subject a magnetic field to our atom, the electron clouds or patterns will change shape and frequency. These shapes and frequencies are called orbital patterns. In normal, old world stupid people physics these patterns then form matter in the three-dimensional world.

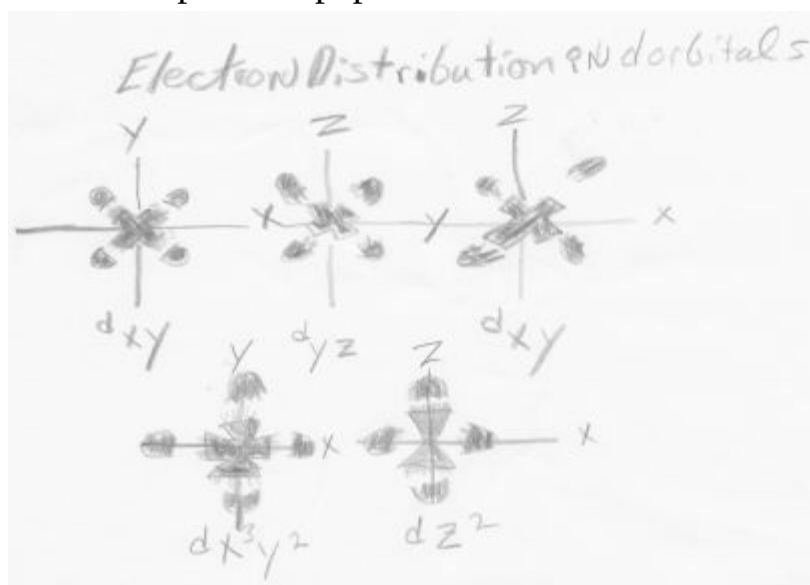
“Now we have determined that the electrons move in ‘particle waves’ around the nucleus, reversing direction. The next thing we need to do is determine the shape of these waves, especially if we are going to change orbital patterns.

“These waves are different orbital patterns. The waves within these patterns form different shapes with different densities. Also, as you move between the different shells, N=2, M=1, etc., the shape of the orbit differs. In

other words, the atom has no resemblance to a solar system as many fools wrongly think, with the proton/neutron as the central sun and the electrons symmetrically orbiting like good little boys and girls. HERE!!” She jabbed at her drawing of the Neils Bohr orbit. “This! This is shape of atoms! Within these shapes are the sub shapes and these sub shapes are made of electron wave clouds in the variety of orbital cloud patterns.

“Although the P orbital is dumbbell shaped, it can be oriented in different directions. This is determined by the type of field the atom is subjected to. As small as the difference may be, these still can be determined spectroscopically. In quantum math the figure y or y^2 is used to represent the exact orientation or location of the densest part of the cloud or shell.”

She tapped on the table in Teddy’s direction. “Draw this thing for your mother. The quantum math diagram.” Teddy scribbled away. When he was finished, he tore off the piece of paper and slid it over to his father.



“Electron distribution in D orbitals.” Ted read from the childish scrawl at the top.

Irina leaned over and stabbed at it with her Crayon. “So here is the most well-kept secret of time travel: subjugation of elements to ‘special’ fields, without transmutation, in this case it would appear as destruction,

within the element itself.”

“So?” Ted asked, still not really clear on where they were going with all this. “That is the problem. We are destroying everything organic we pull through this thing, and that is just in the teleport process. Never mind time travel. ”

“Remember,” Teodore chimed in, standing up, but then leaning over the table on his elbows in one of those odd positions children are so fond of, “we only want to change the location in time of an element, or in the core of the human body, several elements, not the composition. It is the hook, the Zero Time Point, that we resonate with at the center of the galaxy, at the heart of the black hole that beats in ALL of us. But, we have to deal with the heartbeat of the atomic structure we are attempting to transpose, and this is a delicate process.”

“Now we introduce a Mobius curve into the quantum signature of the hydrogen atom.” She grabbed the charcoal stick and tossed it to Sasha. “My princess, draw Mama a Mobius loop.”

With amazing speed Sasha drew and fleshed out a Mobius strip using the light and dark shading of the stick of charcoal and the side of her had to expertly blend the silvers and grays.



“Da! Beautiful my darling! Now, when subjected to non-standard fields, like a Mobius loop, they form antimatter!” There was fire in her crystal blue eyes as she got to finally speak freely about all she had learned. “If we oscillate atoms in a field between normal magnetic and a Mobius, we obtain a momentary atomic on atomic movement that can then be directed into another TIME altogether. This is done with scalar waves as the third ingredient.”

“The Mobius Field is our atom twister and the scalar wave is our time locator. The two are all we need! The rest is easy!”

Ted remembered that August F. Mobius, a German mathematician at the turn of the century, created the Mobius Pattern, another theorem that will eventually leave the world of secret super science and enter the realm of “accepted” physics someday. It wasn’t uncommon for ideas such as this to sit on the shelves of science for many decades before someone found a practical application in the 3-D world.

“If we apply a magnetic field into the quantum field levels of the electrons that encircle an atom, in a Mobius pattern, then we would change the characteristics of the matter involved, but not the matter itself.” She grabbed the front of her blouse and pulled it away from her magnificent breasts. “You put on a shirt,” she then twisted the material all around, “but you decide to turn it inside out. Shirt is still shirt! Da? And if there is pattern the pattern would be backward out to you, yes?” She unrumpled her blouse and smoothed it out. “The same is true with time! TIME still exists, but now is traveling backwards. Just how far backwards is determined by exactly where in the Mobius field we injected our second component: the scalar

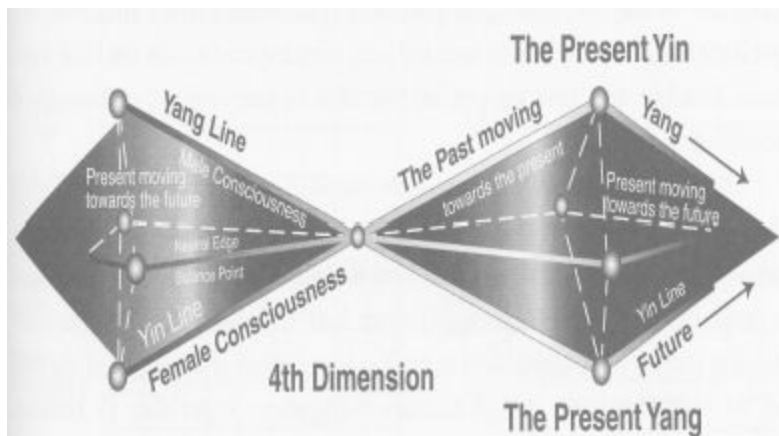
wave.

“The scalar wave is in itself timeless but is a vehicle for time. It becomes infinite in the amount of time it can contain. Because it is also of mind!”

“Remember, all reality is made of linked thoughts of mind, so it can be controlled by mind,” Sasha interjected, not looking up from her Crayola masterpiece of her mother.

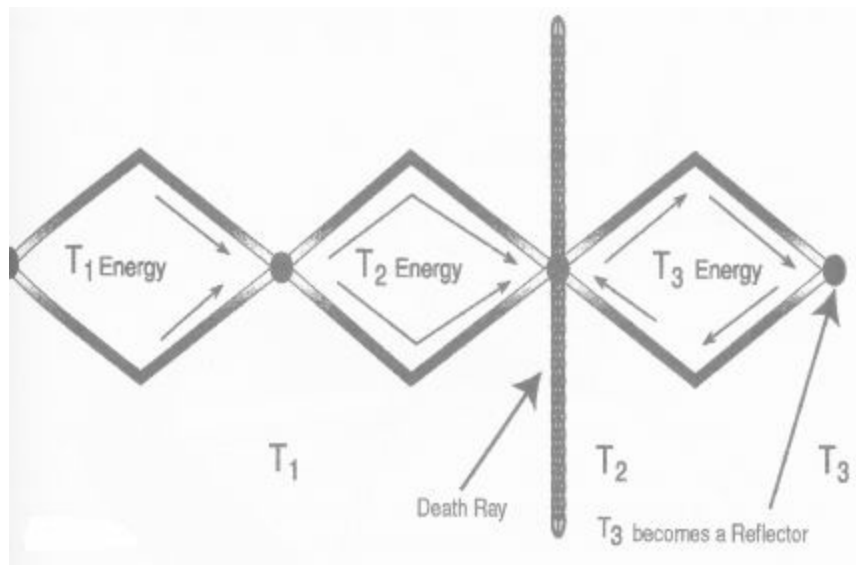
“It originates in present mind and can be directed in past, present or future directions.” Irina went on. “However, if we direct it towards the future, we need an additional ingredient; acceleration, so that matter being transposed can enter upon multiples of the fourth dimension. Because the scalar wave is composed of energy, including that of minds, it has mass, and will respond to the principle of acceleration, or $E = mc^2$.

“The scalar wave can be viewed as a reflection in the mirror,” she pointed behind her, “the past, and the object being reflected,” she put her hands on her chest, “the present, and where the object could be reflected from...” she pointed straight ahead, and everyone chimed in saying, “the future!”



“When combined with, for example,” Theodore said, “a strong

neutron source modulated in a Mobius electron field it becomes...”



“A death ray,” Ted interrupted. “Yeah, I know. If the time gradient is directed into the fourth dimension momentarily and then reflected back into the frequency of now, you have a beam that will totally disassemble matter in the present.”

“Cool, huh?” Teodore smiled. “As the Mobius field reaches its peak intensity, the electron clouds, or orbital patterns, are then subjected to the time orientation by the scalar wave component as it’s injected within the electrons, protons, neutrons, etc., of the structure. Then the structure is collapsed on the molecular level and moved in the fourth dimensional window. From the window, it exits in the time reality you program for it.”

“All great. FOR MACHINES!” Ted said in frustration, not meaning to raise his voice. “But how do we put PEOPLE through this damn thing without turning them all inside OUT?”

CHAPTER FIFTY -TWO

There was a long thoughtful pause at the table. It was interrupted by Sasha, tilting her head and smiling, putting the last touches on her creation. She put down her colored pencil and pulled the entire butcher paper table cloth canvas towards her. Then she folded her end of the paper over her artwork, creased it, and licked the side of her hand, and ran it over the crease several times, then tore it away in a perfect line.

She rose and went to her mother and presented her with the portrait.

“Bolshi horrorshow!” Irina exclaimed. “This is,” she began to tear up, “so beautiful! Oh! Thank you!” She hugged her daughter close.

“I have a big day tomorrow, so I am going to bed now.”

She went over to her father and gave him a long hug and a kiss. He kissed her forehead, and she went off to bed.

Ted and Theodore now both tapped pencils on the table, back to being lost in the conundrum at hand.

At long last Teddy spoke. “You told me about the men in Project: Rainbow. The Philadelphia Experiment, yes?”

“Yes.”

“They went through time and came back.”

“Well,” Ted said, “some of them. Eighteen were phased into the deck and...”

“But the men who survived,” Teddy said interrupting. “What about them?”

“Well, it seems they got somehow pulled into the time stream I guess. Many of them were carrying magnetic equipment, compasses and so on, and began to go wildly out of phase with our universe. At first the other

men around them would jump to their aid and grab them, and somehow that physical touch would...ground them I suppose, back into our reality...our universe, or the vibration of it at least. But there came a time when that stopped working, and about a dozen men all held onto one out of phase sailor, and it was like grabbing a man holding a downed electrical cable. They all got pulled in. They had to build a huge quanset hut around them. After about two weeks they all disappeared.”

“So,” Teddy said, “would you say they all got pulled into the time stream? Like a temporal rip-tide?”

“Yes. I suppose you could say that.”

Teodore laid his head on the table and drew in front of his nose with a grape purple crayon. “So big stuff and small stuff are the same. Macro and Micro. At the center of the galaxy is a light year across black hole. But at the center is a Zero Time Point. So time out here in the fourth arm of the Milky Way galaxy is substantially different than time in the middle...but every system that spins has a different set of physics, because it all creates that same zero time point....”

“But people are different!” Irina said. “We are back to that nonsense mumbo jumbo about the power of the soul!”

“THAT’S IT, MAMA!” Teodore yelled, tossing his crayons in the air! “You are a GENIUS!”

“This I know!” Irina said, crossing her arms with a confident nod of her head.

“Papa, how far ahead in time did the USS Eldridge travel?”

“From the planetary bio-rhythmic low point in August 1943 to the next low point in August 2003, ripping gaping holes in the space/time continuum on the way out and on the way back in 20 year increments. Blacked out most of the East Coast in August 2003 when she snapped back

on the tether to 1943.”

“But the men who survived, the ones that weren’t phased into the decks, they came back in one piece, until they all started to...what?”

“As I said, pulled into the time stream.”

Teddy yanked the white paper towards him and began to madly scribble on the table again. “Exactly!”

He drew another man, that was more fleshed out this time, and he put a clock in the middle of his chest. “So, let’s say we all have a zero time point in all of us, that not only somehow links us to the zeitgeist of the galactic ...personality... that created us, but that that clock, is like a hook that we hang all our OTHER bodies on.”

“You lost me...”

“I mean that you can’t just look at the seven chakra color and energy system. Each chakra has seven chakras going out to the causal field where we butt up against it, and are co-creators of all reality!”

“Hooo-kay...?” Ted said slowly.

“So look at these poor sailors on the Eldridge. When they come back they’re splayed through the time stream. Like a man desperately clutching at a rock in the center of a raging river, and little by little pieces of him get torn off and go down stream; his shoes and pants and shirt, all the layers, and eventually he loses his grip and away he goes down the rapids. For awhile the soul fields of the other sailors could interact and keep each other together, but it was only a matter of time before they all drowned, because they didn’t come back put together right!”

“Again, like a loaf of bread that falls apart, you have to align all the slices with one another to put the loaf back together?” Irina said, finally understanding what Teddy was saying.

“Right. So the reason nothing is working on the organic level, is we

are launching people into the void of creation, but what happens is that the causal body way out at the very far edge of the human energy field is what is getting taken first, and it literally turns you inside out and takes the physical body last! Like the probe you talked about getting elongated and pulled through the eye of the Oculus, right?”

Ted was finally seeing the light of day on this. “So what do we do?” He said leaning forward, listening harder than he ever had in his life.

“You looked at all the stuff on the Hans Coler device I told you to read, right?”

“Yes, yes! It’s at the core of the design you decoded.”

Teodore took different colored crayons and began to draw circles around his crude Vitruvian Man on the butcher paper canvas. Red, orange, yellow, green, baby blue, indigo with the outer most ring a violet color. Ted was losing his mind with suspense, but he had seen his brilliant prodigy son’s mind work before, and he knew he just had to be patient with his process. He gestured for his mother to toss him a thick black Sharpie, and she tossed it over, as excited as Ted was, both standing up and leaning forward on the table. He flipped off the lid with his thumb and began to draw huge black circles around the entire caricature. When he was done, he stood up and wiped his nose, leaving a big black marker smudge on his face.

“So what is the Coler Device really, besides a power source?” Teddy asked.

Ted thought long and hard. “Well, a force field I suppose.”

“The Coler Device itself is a tuned feedback loop,” Teddy said creating speckled marks with his Sharpie as he tapped on the drawing. “Inside the Time Runner ring there is a standing field charge in the millions of electron volts. The unit could be set up in resonance with the main coils and create an eight to twenty foot circle emanating out from inside

the drive unit. Whatever was inside the plasma bubble force field, 'cuz that's what it is, would not undergo a change in structure or function like your probe did getting sucked through the Oculus of time, thereby protecting a biological sample, or Chrononaut, being propelled outward. The biological system inside the plasma bubble is 'frozen' in space-time.

"It's only when the plasma bubble loses its force will the specimen 'become' alive again," Irina chimed in, finally fitting the puzzle pieces together and seeing the brilliance in the sheer simplicity of it all. "They are existing in zero time. The plasma bubble creates a field where it would appear that there is NO MASS inside it, so no mass means it can travel much faster than the speed of light without violating Einstein's rules of relativity. Because of Strange Entanglement the device will continue to keep someone in status, until all the parameters of the jump are met."

"If you look closely at the new plans I gave you from the coded documents," Teddy went on, "the second part of the unit, is that it is tunable. So someone can dial in a new set of coordinates and jump again, because no time has passed at the main Time Runner facility and the system has not been shut down. If it's set on automatic, the unit will allow the person to walk around, look at things, meet other beings, have visits and talk to people outside of time and then flash back to the main facility and anyone there will not have noticed that any time has passed at all and yet the person may have been away for weeks, months and sometimes even years.

"Once the return trip starts the field effect will examine the biological entity and reset the original biological pattern which is stored in the unit, so that there will be no visible change in the person. HOWEVER, it should not effect the memory of the traveller at all. So even if you somehow reset the timeline to some alternate future, the Traveller would be the only one to know it was any different."

“Your people were thinking too much like scientists in the literal sense,” Irina said with a huge smile. “They think only in terms of transporting the physical body, without thinking in terms of all the psychic baggage that goes along with being human.”

“So...” Ted said in a state of complete shock, awe and wonderment, “all we really have to do is just increase the power on the Coler generator, widen the field to the edge of the Causal Field, seal it off, and you take the Time Traveller as a complete system!”

Dr. Theodore Humphrey, Jr., without a word, went around the table, and hugged his son with a squeeze that knocked the breath out of him, and picked him up off his feet.

Ted cried for the first time he could remember.

* * * * *

The children had gone to bed upstairs, and Ted and Irina sat on the red velvet antique overstuffed buttoned Rococo couch in front of a friendly crimson and gold fire. Irina nestled in Ted’s arm where she felt comfortable and safe.

“You so bring out the best in those children,” Irina said.

“Hmm...at least I bring it out in some one.” Ted said.

“Oh, in everyone! Is just hard to be big boss leader man. Get’s very lonely. I was hoping you would have found some kind of good woman to take care of you.”

“Just too busy for that. It just wouldn’t be fair to her.”

They sat quiet for a long time, Ted really gathering courage for what he had to say next. Batoning down the hatches in his mind for the gale force squall that was to ensue once he said what he had to.

“I need you back.”

Irina pushed away from his body and sat up to look him in the face.

“Back...how?” She said suspiciously.

Ted rubbed his face and leaned forward towards the fire, the red and orange colored flames dancing on his face so he wouldn't have to look Irina in the eye. “I mean back...at work. In Nevada. At Fallon.”

“Well, that will not be happening I would think.” She said in a matter of fact defiant voice she could muster.

“There are things going on here Irina, that are just...bigger than you and me. Bigger than all of us.”

“There were reasons I ran away. Why I could not be in this horrible world of yours. It is just too much!”

“It would only be for a short while, I promise. Theodore has summer break now, and Sasha is all grown up and will be fine on her own...”

“I am supposed to bring my SON into this....”

“He's my son too Irina...” Ted said, with a bite in his voice. “And I...need him. You just saw how brilliant he is. How he has a perspective on all of this that is so multi-level and multi-dimensional. I have never seen anything like it. I...we...all of us on this planet...need him.”

“NO! This will not be! Look at how many people this life has taken from you! I am not going to let that little boy be another casualty in this... crusade of yours...”

Suddenly, the entire house shuddered and the lights flickered on and off, fluttering like a faulty heart.

“Dat's veird!” Irina said, looking around. “Must be some power overload.” She said shrugging it off.

“It's also impossible,” Ted said with more concern, sliding his arm out from behind Irina's neck and getting up off the couch. “I have this place wired to a power source that could light up all Russia like the sun. You don't

get ‘power surges’.” Ted said. He walked over and checked the thermostat, and everything looked normal. He shook his head, and looked down at his arms to see all the hair prickling and standing on end. He only felt like this when....Oh, nevermind. He dismissed it all and took a breath. Here we go, he thought.

“We had an...incursion,” Ted began, turning to look her in the eye. Irina knew exactly what that meant.

“How bad?”

“An Altarian scouting party it looked like. We salvaged one of their crashed ships...”

“Where?”

“Mars.”

“AND YOU BROUGHT IT HERE?” Irina said, just beside herself at the sheer stupidity she still saw at many levels of The Group that Ted was supposed to have control over. “And what exactly were you thinking when this was done? Dat dey would not be coming looking for it? Dat dey would all not learn how badly we have broken this assinine treaty that monstrous fool George Bellamy saddled us all with?” Her English got worse the madder she got, and she was still pretty tipsy and tired.

Irina bolted to her feet and started to pace in front of the fire while Ted leaned his weight heavily on the back of the velvet divan.

“They are going to be back. In greater force. We need to be ready.”

Ted bowed his head and took a deep breath then looked up at her from under his heavy dark Irish brows. “I need you to come with me. Back to America. To take over the program at Fallon and get it back on its feet. Just for a short while.”

Irina stopped pacing and turned to face him, her mouth falling open in utter shock. She closed her mouth, pursing her lips, the lower one coming

out slightly as she folded her arms in protection and rejection of the very thought of the idea.

“Nyet. Never.” She said with surprising calm resolve. “I know the tyranny Amerika has become under this Shrub person. I have seen what his wars have done to the world and what his new Gestapo has turned your country into. I lived and served under one Communist Empire and I will not do so again!”

“I still have the old bunny farm ranch house where you and Teddy can stay,” Ted continued, as if her coming with him were a foregone conclusion.

“I have a life here!” She said now making the point with her hands. “I have friends, and work that depends on me, helping to heal a world it seems your people only want to destroy. And what about the children?”

“Teddy’s on summer break, and Sasha is already on her own. She isn’t your...our...baby girl anymore.” Ted paused and straightened up to his full height and squared his shoulders. “There are bigger things going on here than you and I Irina. I do not want to be melodramatic but the literal fate and destiny of mankind on this planet, and our future moving out into space, depends on what we do now. I know it’s over between us and that we can’t be anything more than friends and parents to our kids. But....” Ted felt that weird combination of rage and a crushing loneliness like a great darkness curling in at the corners of his consciousness. He could force her to do anything he wanted. He was for all intents and purposes the most powerful man on the planet. But forcing Irina into something she didn’t want was a line in the sands of time that he would not, could not cross.

At long last he mustered his courage and resolve.

“I...need you.” He said at long last. “Without the two of you...I’m not sure what we are going to do. As I said, this is bigger than us.”

The fire in Irina's ice blue eyes was like an Antarctic volcano, as she crossed her arms in defiance.

“Papa?”

The childish voice rang like a crystal bell from behind them. Ted spun and Irina craned her neck to see Theodore in his pajamas standing behind them, the light from the reddish orange fire casting an eerie dancing glow on his face.

Irina came around the couch in concern to hug and comfort him, but stopped in her tracks, taken aback by the deadly earnest look on Theodore's face, a light in his eyes and an expression she had never seen before.

“Pasha, what is it, darling?” She said with frightened concern.

“I've just had a visit from Grandpa-pa.” He said unsteadily. “He says we have to go to America. And...father?”

“Yes son?”

“He told me...to tell..you...that...it's time.”

PART SEVENTEEN

FINAL INCURSION

Chapter Fifty-three

Ted had been back at the Fallon Naval Air Station for four weeks and had seen more happening there than during his last thirty years. Having Irina and Theodore with him was a sheer joy, even under the circumstances they faced. He had the Bunny Ranch house as they called it totally cleaned up and refurbished, and, being the nostalgic creatures Russians were, Irina cried when she saw it again, and maybe that Russian nostalgia had seeped through Ted's skin as well, as he could never bring himself to sell the place and just kept it there as a museum to the life he should have had, would have had, if not for....

Irina was given complete control over the launch bay, and crews were working feverishly on new mass transporters and an assembly line of the bluish grey squat, angry looking "Bug Zapper" turrets, all of which may, or may not, do any good should the Altarians decide to return.

Theodore's summer vacation was to be put down in R & D, given a lab coat and an all access badge, and was put in with the team building the man-portable Time Runner device. He could not have been happier. There were some raised eyebrows and ruffled feathers at first, but Teddy was not only friendly and affable, but he was brilliant, enthusiastic, respectful and charming as hell. Nothing like his gruff and hard nosed parents, thank God! In no time "The Beaver" was promoted to being their mascot, their friend and their brightest light. Ted could not have been more proud.

Ted went to the Bunny Ranch for dinners along with his constant shadow Bob Hanson, but stayed on the base to give Irina her space. They loved each other with a depth of those that had been through so many wars together, but she made it clear that there was to be nothing more between

them, and her only wish was that he “find good woman!” to finally take care of him, once all “this” was over.

It was a mid-Tuesday morning and Ted was back down at Five-One, and Groom Lake was starting to feel like home again, having slept in this morning. Yesterday he’d given instructions to everyone in the Pit that nothing was to occur until he was up and present in the area. He had a weird feeling it was going to be a busy day, and when that happened he needed people to jump when he said so and only ask how high. He wore his black slacks, white shirt and black tie, with his spit shined but very comfortable patent leather shoes. He also knew he was going to be spending time in the Pit today, so he brought along his black Fedora with his long London Fog trench coat as it sometimes got cold as hell in the huge hangar space. He made his shower purposely long and hot, and then dosed himself in ice-cold water to close the pores and wake him up. He’d taken extra time to shave, splash the aromatic Lilac Vegetal aftershave in its old style barbershop green ridged decanter on his face, hair and arms as his father had always done, and carefully do all the little things for himself that he normally forgot about daily.

Today they were finally going to perform the first live test of the Time Runner here at Five-One. And by “Live” that meant one of his men was going to strap this thing on and get launched into space. It was risky and dazzlingly dangerous, but Ted also knew, balls to bones, that they were running out of time. All of his intuition, which had served him well for years, told him the Altarians were coming back, and soon, and that they had to be ready.

He ate breakfast alone. He’d used the time to finish up on four letters he wanted to make sure were accurate and precise. He lingered over his second cup of hot, black coffee, swirling the bitter liquid around in his

mouth, just waiting for one thing to happen before he moved from that spot.

Bob came in and got a cup of coffee at 0907. He was dressed in Levis, a dark blue sweatshirt with 'NAVY' emblazoned on it in gold pillow embossed letters across the chest. He had his gleaming silver Colt .45 Auto in an open carry holster on his side under his arm and on his other side in a leather case were a set of loaded back-up clips. Bob turned a chair around with a spinning flourish, straddled it and plopped down across from Ted, leaned his arms across the back of the chair and smiled.

“Good morning, Boss. We are looking stunningly handsome, authoritative and,” he wafted his hand towards his face, “aromatic. Lilac Vegetal?” Ted nodded. “My old man swore by the stuff. Also very Man In Black today I see, and,” Bob said, craning his neck to look over at the cards and letters laid out on the table in front of Ted, “...working I see? Big head start on those Christmas cards there Santa Claus?”

Ted looked up and put his hands flat on the table and took a long breath while clenching his jaw.

“Bob...I am going to ask you to do the toughest job I’ve ever asked of you. Can you do it?” Ted did not amplify on the request, but pushed the stack of papers over to him like poker chips going all in, which was really exactly what they were. The biggest gamble of his life.

Before giving a response, Bob quietly read through them. A series of letters and small wallet sized cards. He re-read one of the letters, twice. He put them down, stacking them neatly and finally raised his head with a strange look in his eyes. “I did think that I was going someplace today, but this is truly a surprise, Ted.” Bob folded them up and placed them into the various assigned envelopes. “Of course I will do this for you, Theodore. How can I not?”

“Not today. But it’s coming soon I would imagine,” Ted sat taking in his surroundings. Would he miss all this?

As Bob placed the cards in his wallet, he hesitated and held up one and asked. “This one is for, 'When I Want Or Need It?' Correct? ” Bob needed to know before he tucked that one card away in a very special place in his wallet.

“Which ever happens first.”? Ted hung his head and shook it from side to side, like some weary buffalo. “This just proves how much of a coward I am really...doesn't it?” Ted attempted a smile but couldn't manage it as the expression came across his face as a pained grimace.

“Nothing of the sort. We still have a great battle on our hands, Admiral. We use whatever and whoever is necessary in that bloody venture. That is the very nature of war.” Ted had always believed that Bob would have been a great professor at the Naval Academy. He just had that gifted way about him.

“Thank you my friend.” Bob always made him feel better about whatever he needed to do. “I would imagine they’re going crazy in the Pit right about now waiting for me?” Ted took one last gulp of his cold coffee and put his cup down.

“Screw them!” Bob pounded his fist lightly on the table, smiling. “Those whacky weasels can wait for you and for their orders. Otherwise what good is it to be the boss?” Bob held up another one of the cards and fluttered it in the air. “Are you sure about this one?”

“No!” Ted finally laughed grimly. “Not in the least. But can you see me going to Paris or St. Petersburg?” Ted started to get up, held his back, having sat much too long, and flexed his arms and shoulders.

“No sir, I cannot.” Bob got up as well.

“Urg. Getting too old for this shit. You're carrying some extra

firepower today?” Ted motioned toward Bob's service automatic in the holster with the extra clips.

“Yes sir. A present from a friend I know and deeply respect, if things go...bad.” Bob said as they left the room and headed for the Pit. Of course this meant that should his friend Bixby come out of the experiment a misshapen mass of flesh, a bullet to the head was preferable than what he would ultimately suffer.

“Same applies for another friend, Bob,” Ted said to his dearest pal and companion before stopping to glance around the cafeteria one last time.

“I understand.” Bob waved at one of the cooks behind the counter before turning to go out the door with Ted.

CHAPTER Fifty-four

In the hallway a young naval enlisted man from the communications section, sprinted up to Ted and Bob and came to a stuttering halt, almost bowling the two of them over.

“Sorry I’m late! Had one... helluva time.... finding you... SIR.” The man was breathing like he’d been running a four-forty. “No one thought you might still be in mess this late but me, so I hot-footed it here...sir!” He bent over to catch his breath.

Bob rubbed his back and looked at Ted squinting his eyes. “Come on, my son. Get it together quickly. What’s going on?”

“They’re back!” the young man said, wide-eyed.

“How many?” Ted asked, fearing the worst.

“Fucking ALL OF THEM, sir! Just outside Martian orbit and... coming hard and fast on an intercept for Earth!”

“What?” Ted looked at the young man and grabbed him by the shoulders to straighten him up so he could look him in the eyes.

“Twenty...or more...” he panted between breaths. “Altarian battle cruisers... came in so fast no one had a chance to warn anyone. They were just...there! Commander Mason is chewing everybody’s ass over the open line, and he’s screaming to find you. He sealed up NRC just now and everybody else is going to ground. NORAD is lit up like its opera night.” The young sailor finally was able to stand up straight. “Excuse me, sir.”

“Forget it. You did a good job today.” Ted turned around and looked at Bob. “Get us a golf cart, Captain, I can't run as fast as this young buck anymore.”

“Aye-aye, sir!” Bob tore off down the hall flying at low altitude.

Less than seven minutes later the cart came screeching to a halt at

the door of the Pit.

“We still have to make the test shot, Bob. But then we may have to call an audible and change the plan.” Ted jumped off the cart and walked in. “Is everyone ready for this little exercise?”

Ted walked over and put on a set of headphones and dove into the Data Stream that was to be Earth’s Last Stand.

But would we be Crazy Horse or George Custer?

CHAPTER Fifty-five

The Pit was dimly lit this late Tuesday morning. James Bixby was standing at the DeBolt console where the code for the pre-determined location was being inserted into the High Binder. The co-ordinates for the destination at a fixed point on the main command deck at Cape Malabar Radio had taken weeks for a human wet-ware wired B.E.A.S.T. super computer to calculate. The Battle Engagement Arena Simulation and Tracking monster was specifically assigned to just this task, which caused high holy hell with numerous agencies and departments. If you took into consideration the Earth rotating at 8,000 mph, and then the moon going around it, and then both of them moving at 17,000 mph around galactic center, etc. etc. If you just jumped up in the air and froze you would wind up in space thousands of miles away. It was like hitting a bullet with another bullet in mid-air. But they had done it, they thought, and the test just so happened to be occurring just in the nick of time.

Jacob Bixby was sitting in a chair just outside the big red warning circle where the three main and regenerative coils were situated. The whole machine was up and humming, and now waiting in idle for the next set of instructions. Bob went over by James Bixby and started to speak with him, quietly. James nodded and looked up at Bob and then agreed to what was being said. Ted left it up to Bob. If he had to put Jacob down, Bob would want to tell James why, in his own words. James slapped Bob on the arm and laughed about something. Then Bob came back to join Ted where he was standing.

In a few minutes, Jacob walked over and looked at Ted.

“Permission to leave the facility, sir?”

“Granted.” Ted extended his hand and Jacob took it, shaking it firmly. “Good luck!” Ted pointed two fingers at his eyes and then pointed them at Jacob. “Jake, I want to see you in ten minutes. Understood?”

“Aye aye, sir!” Jacob walked into the middle of the Pit and pushed the buttons of the keypad on the gauntlet sized Time Runner device that was mounted to his forearm. A series of red numbers came up on the small black screen.

“To quote the late great Gus Grissom ‘*Fuckin’ A Bubba!*’ Light this candle, bro! Let’s get gone!” He yelled up at his brother on the DeBolt Dias.

“SYSTEMS ALL GREEN. ALL GO!” Came Dr. Matt Fassbinder’s voice over the hanger PA from the Control and Monitor Dias at the far end.

The machine wound up very quickly, the red and blue wheels spinning in their opposite directions and the blue haze started as it always did, flowing in a wild circuit around the center of the Pit. But suddenly a far different effect occurred. A color shift around Jacob turned the air and space just above his skin a deep pulsing red. Jacob looked down at his arms and hands, as another orange field of energy laid it self on top of that. Then a band of yellow, then green, then a swirling baby blue, then a deep indigo, and finally in a complete circle extending about six feet out from his body, a final ring of violet light with sparks and glittering flecks of golden light. It was like a rainbow had appeared from out of his heart in a cogent standing wave.

“Son of a bitch!” Ted said in awe and wonder. “With the Coler device amped up we’re actually seeing the subtle fields that surround and move outwards from each chakra in the body! Thought that was all New Age Who-Ba-Jew Woo-woo nonsense,” he said as he shook his head. “Amazing!”

A burst of power came from the gauntlet on Jacob’s wrist, and it formed a huge golden white protective shield just outside the soft gently

pulsing undulating violet sphere. This much larger circle reached out to the outer limit of Jacob's causal field, sealing him in, generating a much larger system of energy than any of the machines they had transported before. The edge of the rainbow cloud was fifteen feet above them on the ceiling and had small static electrical lightening bolts firing off into the grounded collector.

Jacob pulled his dark goggles up over his eyes and crossed his arms while slightly bowing his head downward, took a deep breath in and then slowly blew all the air out of his lungs. The flash and the boom hit at the same time, reverberating off the walls of the chamber with a deep bass THRUMMM, as it imploded with a resounding sucking WHOOOSH sound, and with a loud POP, like a mini-sonic boom of air filling the vacuum of where some one just was... Jacob was gone.

Bob walked over when James gave him the "all clear" sign and turned on the monitor located inside a Faraday cage so it would not blow up when the flash happened.

"I have all greens across the board, Director." James called out to Ted.

"I am confirming that," Matt Fassbinder said from the other side of the room where he was sitting in front of a monitoring board. "The launch was a success."

"From here," Ted said. "Let's see that Jacob didn't arrive DOA." Ted turned and looked at the monitors now running the diagnostics and mission information and parameters. The main screen displayed a picture of the main command floor area of the Cape Malabar Radio lunar base. All the screens went blank for a moment, then came back with static black and white noise, then a brilliant flash, and the screens all started to come back into focus.

From out of the electronic fog of pixelated hi-tech sand, came the

smiling face of Jacob Bixby looking directly into the camera, waving frantically like a goofy kid who had just gotten his CAPTAIN MIDNIGHT goggles and decoder ring in the mail.

“Obviously,” Ted deadpanned, “the jump has driven him insane.” The joke broke the tension and everyone laughed. Ted called out, “Have Malabar check his vitals. Make sure he is still in phase.”

Fassbinder relined the order. On his screens he saw a small mob of EMT Med tech rush over to Bixby and give him the once over, shoving high intensity penlight in every visible orifice, take his BP, temperature. Bixby started pushing them away, and almost got in a fight with one of them.

“He is fine, Boss!” Fassbinder said over the hanger PA.

“Halfway,” Ted said glumly as he walked back to check the instruments at various locations around the room. “So far, so good. MATT?” Ted yelled, not bothering to use the COM.

“The field is holding, sir,” Matt put one thumb in the air, with his head down, focused on his screens. “All systems and sub-systems are in the green. Count down being started for back travel.”

“I never thought you and I would see this?” Bob leaned over and said quietly to Ted standing next to him.

“We’ve let the genie out of the bottle Bob. There’s no putting him back in the lamp and corking it back up. Hopefully we can contain this for a short while, but it will eventually get away from us. You know that, don’t you?” Ted said while not diverting his eyes from the center of the room.

“That is exactly why Kammler killed eighty scientists and technicians. He was well aware of the potential of this thing. Equally, that is why even he could never bring himself to give it to Hitler to use.” Bob noted. “And you have clown in that rented white house that is probably worse.” Ted shook his head.

“If he had given it to Hitler, you and I would be living on Mars right now defending the Third Reich in those stylish white dress SS uniforms.” Ted was checking the time with his new universal communicator stopwatch application.

“Not me. Grandma was Jewish.” Bob unsnapped his holster restraint.

“I did not know that,” Ted replied with some mild surprise.

“It would not have helped in my career to be open about it no matter what anyone says. There’s still a lot of prejudice in the Navy.” Bob looked over at the monitors as there was a rainbow cacophony of color and another pure white flash and Jacob was gone from the visual monitors on the moon base. Bob stepped in close and whispered in Ted’s ear.

“Walk out of here now, Boss,” Bob hissed like a snake. “I will blow this whole fucking facility to Kingdom Come and terminate everyone in it if you want me to, Ted!”

Ted shook his head sadly. “Part of me wants to scream at you to do just that. Another part of me, and not the good part either, wants to keep it... just for us. If any of that is even possible. I just have this feeling in my gut this will all end in tears.” Ted clenched his fists and turned away. “Shit! I never knew I would feel this way.” Ted looked around the room. “We have three more facilities that don't even know we can do this, yet. If we can only keep it under wraps for just a little awhile longer.” Ted rubbed his face. “No. We must keep going forward on this. Do you not agree?”

“I’m here for you, Ted. Nothing else. If you say so, I will die protecting this secret. You know that, right?” Ted nodded grimly. “I won't let the 'political types' get their hands on it, no matter what. I will destroy it before they could ever use it!” Bob was intensely watching the center of the room changing again.

“Thank you Bob. You have no idea how much that means.” Ted stepped forward a few steps then pulled on a headset. “Commander David Mason. Talk to me.”

“Where in the fuck have you been....ah...sir?” David exploded down the line. “I’m about ready to burn down half the sky and I can’t talk to my main man?”

“Calm down Othello, you big drama queen. We at least guessed right on their approach vector,” Ted leaned back and watched what was going on in the Pit. “Tell the Grissom to take up a position directly in front of that leading command ship. Let them see you coming. I need that lead ship stopped dead in space.”

“What the hell for? I mean by the sweet holy shit of Jesus Himself, man, are we really doing this Boss?” David was yelling at someone else as well.

“We are David. There is a plan in place. I am sick and tired of these assholes and their Isomer Protocol treaty. I fully plan on tearing it up and stuffing it down their goddamn throats! Now they’re going to realize the full might and power of the United States Naval Space Command in this part of the universe. I am sick of hiding, aren’t you?”

Ted was carefully watching the biggest experiment he had ever performed, as he was about to start a cosmic star spanning intra-galactic war.

“Dave, have the Glenn and Shepard take up flanking support positions behind the Grissom. Spread them out. Maximum power and have all weapons online, ports open, safety locks off. This is not a drill. I repeat: THIS IS NO DRILL! Change all status boards the Def-Con ONE! That is ONE! Humphrey Sigma Alpha Gamma, 10 01 1958.” Ted called down the endless length of cable that circled the globe many times over.

“Yes sir, Admiral. Copy affirmative and confirmed. We are now

globally at Def-Con ONE, sir. Dave Mason realized this was the real deal and nothing to joke about.

“Captain, get on the horn and get all those Vipers off their fat asses and the hell out of the hangers at Five-One and out into space, stat. It is GO TIME! I don’t care how much dust they have to clear or quakes they leave in their wake. Have the Vipers run on either side in a wide field. I want them backing up the Grissom ready to engage at a moment’s notice.”

Ted saw Bob’s reaction as he tensed for a fight with a grimace, pursing his lips, clenching his teeth as a bluish vein pulsed on his jaw. This was not a time for Ted’s authority or decisions to be challenged, and he knew what Bob was thinking.

“The answer to your question is no,” Ted said sternly. “You are needed here. Those kids can do their jobs without you this time.” He put his hand on Bob’s shoulder to reassure his old friend. “You trained these kids, now it’s time for dad to trust his children.”

Bob nodded, biting his lower lip and turned to the job at hand.

“Aye-aye, sir.” He said with resignation and regret, that this would be the biggest fight Earth and this solar system would ever see, and he was left out of it. He felt like Patton in the doghouse.

“Working it!” Bob moved to a phone and was burning up the lines and talking very quickly with clipped animation as his free hand chopped the air as he spoke. Bob and Ted both looked up presciently, feeling it coming, the hair prickling all over their bodies, when suddenly the flashing red lights in the ceiling, went ballistic, spinning in a wild dangerous panic.

“Incoming!” James spoke up over the increasing roar in the Pit area. The bluish white haze returned and started whirling heavily. It went through several color changes but this time the reverse of when it left, the sphere glowing violet, then indigo, sky blue, green, yellow, orange, then the red

outline of a human figure appeared. As the lightning returned, there was a deafening exploding pop, and the hangar bay started to clear.

Standing in the center of the room was Jacob Bixby pulling off his goggles as the rainbow colored smoke rolled off his body as he pushed the red button on the forearm gauntlet of the Time Runner. He waited until his brother James gave the “all clear” before walking out of the ring, heading straight towards Ted.

“I brought back something more than I left with!” Jacob handed Ted a leather name patch off a uniform. It said 'CCMR – JOHNSON'. “You did it Ted! You finally did it!!” The older man was actually hugging Ted, almost in tears.

Ted took Bixby’s face in both of his hands, checking his eyes, and just the solidness of his very being. “You okay?” Ted asked Jacob.

“Okay....?! Oh I am so...WAY better than okay! Once the power wave starts and all those wild freaky-deaky rainbow colors appear, and the blue haze shows up sealed in by the white sphere, you don't see anything. You are just... BAM... THERE! Standing in the center of the Moon Base. No feeling of time or movement or even distance. I was a little out of breath when I got there. Nerves I guess. But, just nothing! Just you are here and then...BLAM! You are there! Un-FUCKING-believable!”

Jacob reached over and shook Bob's hand firmly and a bit too vigorously in his excited state. “WOO WHO!” He finally exclaimed, not being able to contain his excitement, grinning from ear to ear he started jumping in the air.

“David Mason,” Ted turned and barked, “light up Cape Malabar Radio and tell Johnson I got another surprise for him. Have him arm all...and I repeat ALL of his weapons and disconnect the safeties. On Captain Hanson’s orders you tell him to blow as many holes in those ships as he can,

but do not, I repeat, DO NOT hit the lead vessel command flagship, is that clear?”

“Yes Admiral,” Mason said. “Grissom is in position. Being flanked by the Glenn and Sheppard. Vipers are outbound and at full balls out haul ass speed. Should be at wide flank in T minus 2 minutes.”

“The Command ship?”

“Stopped. Nose to nose with the Grissom. Dead in space, sir. All ports open. Sheesh! They are loaded for bear Boss. We might not stand much of a chance here. I hope to God no one sneezes.”

“Yeah, well we’re going down swinging. They started this, but I swear to God, we are going to finish it!” Ted turned to Jacob Bixby, shuffled off his trench coat and dropped it on the floor.

“Gimme!” Ted said holding out his hands.

“What?” Jacob said in shock.

“I need the rig. Right now! That’s an order soldier!”

Bob’s jaw hung open for a full five seconds, as Jacob, in a complete state of confusion, pulled off all the equipment as Ted took it piece by piece and began strapping it on, putting the back pack section up over his shoulders, tightening the buckles, and then cinched on the gauntlet to his right forearm. Ted bent down, picked up his trench coat and with a flourish he twirled it over his head then stuck his arms through the sleeves. Bob looked at them nonplussed and the realization moved across his face like a rising dawn at exactly what Ted had in mind.

“You...you can't do this Ted, it...it's...suicide.”

“Let’s sure fucking hope not.” Ted moved to the Dias, and began flipping switches on the monitor board, adjusting dials.

“This is NOT the plan we discussed!” Bob protested, the blood rushing to his fair skinned face, making him almost completely beet red.

“It is actually. The same plan, and you have the exact same responsibilities. This is an... appendix. A side trip. C’mon Bob. It’ll be fun.”

“Doing what I think you are going to do is NOT A ‘SIDE TRIP!’ ” Bob yelled. “And it is completely within my mission parameters to stop you from killing yourself!”

Ted ignored him and punched the face of his watch.

“Irina?”

“Yes sir?” She said, all death and business.

“You ready?”

“Yes sir!”

“Is Theodore with you?”

“Da!”

“Yes Papa?” Ted could hear him now on the bone-phone through the watch inside his head, but no one else could hear their side of the conversation.

“Irina, pull up the position of the lead Altarian...”

“Got it!” Knowing what he was going say. Being married that long had its advantages.

“Theodore, I have everything set up for you through the main console you are on. I need DeBolt coordinates that will put me on the main command bridge of that lead flagship. The biggest one.”

“Yes Papa!”

Bob grabbed his friend hard by the arm, twisting him around, now considering using physical force to stop him. “This is INSANE! My job, my mission directive in life is to protect you! And that includes protecting YOU from yourself! Are you understanding me?”

“Let me go, Captain Hanson.” Ted said with deadly menace.

“It took a guy with six bolts drilled into the lobes of his brain, wetware interfacing with the most advanced quantum computer ever devised by the mind of man to come up with that last heading just to get us to someplace where we knew it was going to be up at Malabar! Now your 9 year old KID is going to get you to a random point in space...OUT between here and FUCKING MARS?” Bob put his hand on his gun. “If I have to shoot you in the GOD DAMN KNEE, you are NOT doing this! Ted, we can take these big orange motherfuckers! Let us do our jobs!”

“No, Robert. No we can't.” Ted said looking his oldest friend in the face. “Even if we stop them, at what cost? Burn up this whole sector of space? And after that, what then? They send more and more. And when we kill all of them whom do they send next? The Arcturians?” Bob flinched at the thought, having had one horrifying encounter with them. Humphrey reached out and grabbed a handful of Hanson's shirt and pulled him in close. With his lips to his ear, Ted whispered, “I can do this. I can stop them! I swear to God! When have you ever known me to be wrong? We can DO this now!”

“Father?”

Ted turned away from Bob at the voice in his head coming through his watch.

“Yes, Teddy?”

“I have it. Sending to your watch.”

Ted looked down at his watch, and then punched the DeBolt numbers onto the Time Runner's gauntlet keypad. He hit the send button and they wirelessly synched with the main console.

“Got it sir,” Bixby confirmed.

“It may be off by a few feet or so due to some drift which I have compensated for,” Teddy came through again, “but the new Time Runner field should automatically bounce you away from a bulkhead or any other

solid object so you don't materialize inside of anything. Like being inside a big beach ball."

"Irina?" Ted said, all of them being in conference mode.

"I have checked co-ordinates as well as I can. I mean...it is...the calculations...just incredible! But looks all *bolshi moi horrorshow!*"

"Papa?" Teddy said.

"Yes, son?"

"I love you. Please come home."

"I love you more. More than anything. I will see you...well...soon, I hope, in time." Ted winced when he realized those were the last words his father had said to him before leaving him an orphan for most of his life.

Ted touched his watch and cut the link. Bixby picked the goggles up off the console and held them out to his friend. Ted shook his head and pulled his jet-black Ray-Ban wrap around sunglasses out of his trench coat breast pocket, put them on and adjusted them snugly to his head. He refitted his Fedora on tight and down to his brow and straightened the brim with a jaunty crease.

"Five minutes on the bridge of that Altarian lead ship if you please, Captain."

Ted held out his hand. Bob made an angry growl, and spun on his heel in frustration at how pig-headed and impossible Ted was being, but he had no other choice now. Rubbing his face hard and scratching his nose, Hanson finally reached down and handed him his gleaming sidearm and the two spare clips.

"God help me if you're wrong, Teddy, 'cause then I got this gigantic mess to clean up." Bob looked at his boss and friend with a hard stare.

"Bob, please. Really, I haven't come this far to screw the pooch. And if I am buying the farm, I'll be taking all of them with me. We can solve

several problems in the next five minutes.” Ted laughed grimly. “That should be one hell of a conclusion for any one man's life. Hey, look at me,” he smiled darkly, “for a change I get to be the hero.”

He shook Bob's hand then broke down, pulled him in and hugged him hard, thumping his back with his free hand. He pulled away, looked his friend in the eyes one last time and strode purposefully to the center of the room.

Bob walked over to the Dais. “Chief James Bixby will you insert this new secondary coordinate please.” Handing him a piece of paper with yet another DeBolt code scrawled across it. Bixby looked perplexed and shook his head, but did as he was instructed, muttering to himself at all the craziness.

“All in place, Captain. Ready and winding up, as ordered!” James called to him.

Matthew Fassbinder in the far corner of the hangar began to look around as he heard all the machines begin their deep bass thrum for another jump.

“What the bloody hell is going on?” Matt yelled out, echoing across the hanger, as he started to move around and away from his console. “I was informed that we had only one test run scheduled for today?!” He then saw Ted geared up with the Time Runner gauntlet. “What THE Faa...?” He threw his hands up in sheer shock.

“Stay at your station, mister!” Ted called back at him while looking menacing with the gleaming silver Colt .45 in his hand pointed down but in Matt's general direction.

“Engaging!” James called out, as Ted pulled down the brim of his Fedora.

“Good luck, Boss. And thank you!” Jacob stood at attention and

threw Ted a full salute.

“We are going hot,” he counted holding up his fingers, “in T-minus three, two, one!” James called out as he made a fist on ONE. The colored sequence began to surround Ted from deep red out to the soft violet, then the blue white of the causal field haze that butted up against creation covered the Pit again and Ted was caught up in the whirling maelstrom and then the blue flash and the explosion sounded all the way up to the gallery above them.

“Systems are in the green. Package away, Captain.”

Ted vanished with a popping thunderclap.

Matthew Fassbinder just ran hopelessly into the space where Dr. Theodore Humphrey used to be.

CHAPTER Fifty-six

“All ships dead stop.”

The main control bridge of the enormous flagship of the Altarian Fleet was lit with a hazy ambient violet, their version of red alert battle stations lighting, as the Commander sat in the central captain’s chair looking bored.

“Commander, three ships have just flown into a position directly in front of us. Four more are incoming on trajectories to take up positions on either side, attempting to flank us. Their weapons are primed and ready.” The crewman looked back at his console.

The Altarians usually used mostly telepathy, but for military operations such as this, spoken words in their guttural language made for more clear and specific communications.

““Well, well, well... if it is not the enforcement arm from their miserable little planet.” The Altarian Commander sneered. “So, it appears the Earther pups have grown some teeth,” the Commander said still bored and completely unconcerned at what he saw as a mere nuisance to completing his mission and getting out of this fallen infected area of space and back home. He was here to make a point and make an example of Earth to other systems that broke their treaties and agreements and dared stand up to the Andromedan Council. Earth was greedy, petulant and cruel. They murdered each other with joy by the millions, and then entered into agreements with races that were considered the scum of the universe by every civilized race in the galaxy. And for what? So a small group could obtain more power to further murder and enslave their fellow beings?

He took in the telemetry on the huge screen that took up the entire far wall bulkhead of the Command Bridge. So one fairly impressive

battleship directly ahead, bristling with its puny weapons, like peashooters against his forces with two destroyer escorts on either side. The four black triangular ships moved into position, using some kind of stealth camouflage, were wild and quick, tossing off gravity waves in looping rings as they came around the corners of his screen. Their tech sensors immediately had defeated their feeble invisibility cover. He gave a snort in derision.

“So...what? That pathetic excuse for a General fled from a gravitational wave of ‘energy’ being generated from a single scout ship? He did not even get a full look at these children’s toys. It will be short work for our weapons.” The Commander picked up his drink from the arm of his chair and slurped up a glowing greenish yellow liquid. He stretched out his tall, lanky 7 foot 4 inch frame and rolled his shoulders. “These Earthers only have primitive weapons at best.”

“Sir, it looks like they have particle beams and advanced lasers. We are also being scanned by something from the north pole of their moon.” The crewmen looked worried.

“Nice of them to send a beacon to guide us towards what we are here to destroy,” the large being said as he yawned.

“They are hailing us, sir.”

“Who?”

“The ship directly ahead, sir.”

“Well this should be mildly interesting,” the Commander said, finally sitting up then leaning forward in his command chair. “Train all the guns of the fleet on that lead ship, in case I don’t enjoy the conversation.” He waived his hand. “Put him on.”

The huge screen filled with a close up of a stern angry human face.

“This is Captain Mark P. Beventon of the United States Navel Space Forces in command of the USS Virgil I. Grissom, representing the United

States Space Command.”

Even through the universal translator the disgusting sound, tone and vibration of human speech made the Altarian wince. No wonder it was considered a disease throughout most of the galaxy.

“I can only imagine what you want.” The Commander said with contempt and the closest the Altarians could come to sarcasm.

“You will vacate this space immediately or be destroyed.” Beventon said as he looked down at his sensors, to see all the Fleet’s guns now energized and trained on him, although he was given crystal clear orders to not shoot first. He thought for a moment that one first shot might be all he would get.

“Under whose authority do you give this order, Captain? Please enlighten me.”

“Under the authority of the US Space Command and the United Nations Council that you will...”

“No!” The Commander got up, rising to his full height now. “You do not give orders here. You have no rights out this far. It is you who are in violation of the Isolation Memorandum Treaty and the Accords and Protocols it demands and the will and jurisdiction of the Andromedan Council, which your system is under. Of course you knew all this when you built these ships and your moon base, so nothing that is about to happen is going to come as any unexpected surprise. It is you who will step aside and clear a path or be destroyed. Your only option is to take your ships to a neutral site and abandon them, then evacuate your bases so that they may all be destroyed.”

“Well, THAT is not going to happen!” Beventon said defiantly.

“As you wish.” The Commander sent a quick thought to his communications officer and the screen went back to the starry sky of space, with the Grissom, Sheppard and Glenn floating before them, like fat lazy

cattle chewing cud before the slaughter. He sent another thought to his tactical officer.

“Prepare to destroy this...Grisss-omm... on my mark,” the Commander said. “Have the fleet fan out and destroy the black triad stealth ships first then move in on the flanking craft. When we have dispatched them, set a course for this polar base on their moon. From there we will move on to their upper atmosphere and take out any and all of the facilities that give them any deep space capabilities.”

“Yes, Comma...” the tactical officer began.

“Sir...” the helmsman interrupted with concern, “...something is wrong in...” he checked his instruments again, “...the space around us?” He concluded with a mystified tone, narrowing his eyes, as if the gauges were telling him a tale he did not believe.

“Shields?” The Commander said.

“They are up and at full power, sir!”

“Ah...sir...?” said the Science Officer off to the Commander’s left with equal consternation, “...it is a...disturbance...of some kind. Our instruments do not seem to be able to measure it. It would appear,” he just shook his head in complete confusion. “All I can read or make out is it is a... flux... in the time/space continuum around us.”

“What am I flying with?” the Commander yelled, finally losing his temper. “A pack of scared little scrufflings?” He rose from his chair and came up the steps to the science station and looked at the monitor, and clenched his fists and leaned on the console in equal mystification.

Suddenly, the crackling snapping sound of blue white lightning crashed like a thunderous wave across the bridge. The lightning jumped like twin striking hooded cobras of pure energy from the console, sending hot flesh-searing shocks up the Commander’s arms. He gave a feral growl and

spun towards the view screen to see a bluish white sphere about 15 feet in diameter, the same color as the lightning cascading from it. The main viewer went from a coherent view of the battle, the ships blocking their path and the universe around them to a cacophonous shattered jumble of jagged shards of psychedelic static light. The ball bounced from first the right side bulkhead, over to the left then slowly rose towards the ceiling of the bridge. When it hit, it exploded with a deep basso gut-punching THRUMMM, sending ripples of a shockwave of indigo light across the bridge, like an oversized stone thrown by an angry child into a small pond, tossing the huge Altarians back.

From out of the wondrous dazzling display, a man, in a black trench coat, white shirt, black tie and black Fedora dropped six feet to the floor, landing in a combat crouch. His left hand and knee steadied him on the ground, his right knee cocked and ready to strike, a gleaming silver Colt .45 Automatic in his right hand up against the right side of his head with his sunglass shaded eyes bowed down towards the deck. The multiple auric colors came off his body and clothes like a sensuous rainbow of smoke, melting into vapor around him.

The entire crew stood up, rising to their full height, which was anywhere from seven feet four inches to nearly eight feet tall. They were all in utter shock at what they saw as an impossible intrusion, with all their shields and defenses up in a combat situation.

Dr. Theodore Humphrey, Jr., Ph.D., had arrived on the command bridge of the Altarian fleet's battle flagship.

Slowly, Ted raised his eyes taking in the scene. He was still slightly dazed and discombobulated from the astounding jump through both space and time. He rose to his full height of 6'2 and squared his impressively wide shoulders, looking like a small petulant child against these tall sleek lithe creatures. He had forgotten how big they were, with their orange hued skin,

longish shoulder length blond hair that was always swept straight back off the forehead, and their large pointed ears, swept back close into the skull. Their eyes were a piercing white with a crystal blue ring around the iris, making them almost glow in the soft violet hue of the bridge battle station emergency lighting.

Then it came in full force. The telepathic barrage rushing towards him like a stampede of angry cattle, but sounding like every warning signal and combat siren and klaxon he had ever heard. They were attempting to take control of his mind, to overwhelm and neutralize him. He could see their focus and concentration, as they took a step towards him and closed their eyes and slightly bent their heads forward. The cacophony was painful and deafening, like dozens of knives being stabbed into his skull over and over. He felt his will and his strength slowing flowing out of him like someone had removed a brick from a dam that forded a mighty river.

But from out of the dreadful noise in his head, the small bright, blue brilliant light of his training shone at its heart and center. This was nothing compared to the Greys, Lord Tugy and the Hive at Dulce, or the Alpha Draconians, or any of the myriad races of beings he had engaged, and defeated, through out the years.

Ted began to fill his mind with thoughts of raw, brutal, glorious, sensual, spectacular sex. A savage grin spread across his face, as he stared them down, with thoughts none of them could fathom. The earthy sensuality of Irina, the passionate violated innocence of Ellen, the sheer artful technique of Ariel and....Sally! Oh, sweet, sweet Sally! Her ruby red lips and platinum blonde hair. Looking like a 1930s movie star. Riding him like a stallion closing the far home stretch turn in the Preakness from around the outside.

The noise and clawing hands trying to wrench control of him started to fade, driven back by the shining beacon of pornography in his head, when

suddenly the tonal quality of the klaxons changed to a metallic SCHWING sound like the ringing of a sword scraping its breadth and length across a large silver bell. It was, Ted realized almost too late, a desperate command.

Ted saw what he instantly knew was the Commander; imperceptibly twitch towards the tactical officer. He actually felt it in his mind, more than he even saw what he had done, with the decibel level in his head taking on this new sonic signal. Ted had studied and memorized the layout of the Altarian ship they had salvaged on Mars, and this craft not only followed the same layout logic, but it seemed that all battleships followed the same general ergonomic logistics. The weapons officer took a step toward his board, and raised his hand to press the button that would trigger the sequence that would fire a full barrage of weapons at the USS Grissom bravely and fearlessly standing in their path.

The silver Colt .45 looked like a twisting, angry living thing in Ted's flexing hand as it came up and reflected the hallucinogenic light that framed him like the dark silhouette of Death himself against the multi-colored brilliant blaze of the view screen static.

"NOT TODAY!" Ted yelled.

The Colt spoke with a deafening voice and a tongue of smoky blue flame, as he shot the Altarian officer in the face. The bullet struck between the corner of his left eye and the bridge of his nose, shattering both it and the unearthly handsomeness of his visage, exploding his eye in a spurt of white and bluish gore.

The Altarian's head jerked back and then forward as if it was on a tight spring. He just hung in space for a moment as if nothing had happened, but then began to shudder all over in a systemic shut down of his body as it died, and then he suddenly stiffened and came down like a board, crashing into the console before he fell to the deck with a grey-blue liquid oozing from

the hole between the eye-socket and his shattered nose.

The Commander took a step down towards Ted, his huge body moving with amazing speed, as Ted leveled his weapon directly at the commander's midsection.

“Who are you?” The Commander demanded, barely controlling his blinding rage.

“Dr. Theodore Humphrey, Director of The Group. Basically the Chief Executive Operating Officer of the planet we call Earth.”

“What is the meaning of this?”

“This?” Ted laughed mirthlessly. “This...is ME...stopping YOU!”

The Commander gazed down at him with a look of sheer haughty disgust, mixed with the painful infection he felt in his mind whenever he heard or had to speak this diseased viral Earth language. He laconically strode across the bridge and sat in his commander chair.

“We are here under the full faith and authority of the Andromedan Council to enforce a treaty your people agreed to, and have reaped the benefits and privileges of. I do not know how you performed this...” he waived his hand dismissively, “prestidigitation of transporting here and defeating our shields and defenses, but they will do you no good.”

“I guess you really have not thought this through, have you?” Ted said darkly.

“You are outmatched, outgunned, out maneuvered and clearly in the wrong politically, which will certainly be noted with the other members of the Council. Your forces are like...children’s toys to us, as are all of you.”

“Well, you certainly seem susceptible to acute lead poisoning,” Ted said as he motioned to the being in a pool of his blue-gray blood on the deck.

A vein on the Commander’s neck pulsed with his rising anger. “And you will be denied access to other areas of space until you outgrow your...

savagery.”

“Oh, you have not even begun to see savagery yet.”

With his Colt sweeping the crew on the bridge, Ted stepped away from the main viewer, which was now beginning to clear up in sharp staccato starts and stops.

“You might want to take a look at this all powerful force of yours.”

The Commander hit a button on his captain’s chair to turn the view to his forces.

Ted touched his watch.

“Now Irina.”

Around the Altarian fleet dozens of flashes like eight pointed blue white diamond stars against a field of black velvet, pulsed brightly into view, leaving sparkling, stocky, gleaming silver objects at the heart of where the dazzling diamond lights faded. Looking like the squat naked engines of 1932 Ford Deuce Coupes with their sweeping duel chrome pipes crossed with the business end of a Sherman tank cannon mounted across the main manifold, the Bug Zappers, as they had been so fondly dubbed, brutally and mercilessly opened fire.

The, until now, invisible shields of the battle fleet lit up as the Bug Zappers peeled them away like the skin on an onion. In short order the blue beams began to superheat the main fuselage of the ships in burning cardinal and gold patches. Ted could hear the screams of the crewmen on the ships coming through in their guttural language, asking for support, instruction and commands.

Ted spoke into his watch. “Cease fire.”

The withering barrage stopped just as suddenly as it had started, and the black velvet night of space lit up again with the blue white diamond stars as the mass transporters at Fallon NAS in Nevada, called them all home.

“That’s Act One.” Ted said with deadly menace. “The rest of my dogs of war are slathering on their leashes to take a shot at you. Which if we were the ‘Savages’ you think we are, I would gladly let them do. All of your ships are vulnerable now, your shields are gone, but I have made sure you are not so badly damaged that you cannot all limp home to tell the tale. I still have an entire battle fleet that we, sadly, have not even used yet. That was just a demonstration of Phase One. And let’s say you get through all of my ship, which you no doubt could, then you would have to get through the defenses of Lunar Base One. Assuming you blow that sky high, you then need to look to what we have planned for you down on Earth, which has defenses you would not believe. You know that all of our facilities are so far underground, you would have to crack the Earth in two to get at them, which I am fairly sure is beyond your Isolation Memorandum directives.”

Ted raised his right fist in the air and pulled back his sleeve.

“But, what you and your masters should really be worried about is the device I am wearing that now gives my people the ultimate power: the ability to travel not only to any point in space, which allows me the pleasure to be here with all you gentlemen, despite all your shields and defenses....but to any point in TIME as well.”

The Commander could not hide under his calm façade any longer, and finally showed his shock and horror at the implications of what Ted had just said.

“See?” Ted said with satisfaction. “Now you are beginning to understand the big picture. Defeating your shields to transport myself here means I can go anywhere in space and time. Had I wished it I would have sent strike teams into the engine rooms on each of your ships, destroyed them, and just teleported away. Like dancing between the raindrops. So none of you are safe from us now. None of you can exploit us any longer. We now,

whether you like it or not, have a seat at the table with all the grown-ups.”

Ted strode over and pointed his Colt up into the Commander’s face.

“Now, if you don't want the rest of your fleet imminently destroyed, put your safeties on, close your ports and stand down.”

The Commander was physically shaking and hit a button on his chair. “All weapons off line. Now...”

The Commander bowed his head and opened his hands in surrender. “So...what is it that you want, Earthman?”

“The Isolation Memorandum Treaty is completed and done at this moment. You have threatened us for the last time. You forced us into it years ago when we were weak. But we are no longer in that state. You cannot keep us from moving through space and advancing any more. You have lost your job Commander. We no longer need guards like you.” Ted paused for effect, and swept his weapon across the bridge, tuning in a circle to face the Commander again.

“Order your ships about and go home. If you ever enter this part of space again, I will personally lead the attack on your home world and kill every living thing on it. In fact, I can do far worse than that. I will use this device to travel back in time and see that your entire species never comes to be. I will find you when you first crawl out of the slime and crush whatever protoplasm you sprang from under the heel of my boot.” Ted stepped back, lowered his weapon, and then tucked it into his belt in the small of his back under his trench coat.

“If you think I am lying,” he opened his arms wide, palms flat, “kill me now. See what happens.”

“There will come a time,” the Commander said contemptuously, “very soon in fact, when you will need us. When you will need allies to face what is coming. You are making a big mistake.”

“That is why I am allowing all of you to live. And I am sure we will come to some other arrangement when that time comes. Tell all the rest of your friends and your Council and those that pay you, Earth is now off limits to them. Any ship in my space I will destroy without warning and then hunt down their planets and wipe them out. Good fences make for good neighbors, and we want to be good neighbors, but we will not have you meddling or interfering with us anymore. Is that understood?”

Ted stood there for a moment exchanging steely gazes with the Commander, and, for the first time he had dealt with any alien race, he saw what he interpreted as a glimmer of...respect.

“AM...I...CLEAR!” Ted yelled, startling the Commander.

With more scorn than he believed he had ever seen the Commander replied softly: “Yes.”

Ted pulled up the sleeve of his trench coat, checked the coordinate, and pressed the red button. The blue-white sphere enveloped and encircled him in its unnatural haze and he was gone.

The Commander looked at the space where he had been then turned to his crew.

“Turn about,” he barked. “We are done here.”

“Commander.....?” A young officer spoke to him.

“You have the Con, Oreac. I shall be in my quarters figuring out how to report any of this to the Council.”

The Commander stormed off the bridge.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

“Captain, what in the fuck just happened?” David Mason’s voice came in over the headset.

“I would say, Commander that our boy Ted Humphrey just ripped up the Isomer Treaty and threw it in some one's, or some *thing's*, face.” Bob smiled to himself.

“You are kidding me.... aren't you? How did he get aboard that ship? What the hell is going on?” Dave was screaming now.

“Bring the alert back down to Yellow. We are only halfway done here. So far so good.” Bob was staring intently at the center of the room. Then, in the lull, he walked back to check the instruments at various locations around the command area.

“The field is holding. All systems and sub-systems are in the green. Count down being started for back travel.” One of the technicians spoke out, while high fiving another man next to him.

“Incoming!” James spoke up over the increasing roar in the Pit area. The blue-white haze returned and started whirling heavily with a deep nebula-like bluish green. It went through several color changes and then the lightening came back. There was a very loud pop of explosive thunder, and the room started to clear up.

Standing in the center of the room, as the colored smoke cleared, was Ted Humphrey. He winced and shook his head, squinting hard and pinching the bridge of his nose to relieve the pressure between his ears and the ringing in his skull. He opened his eyes, shook the sweat off his face, and pushed a button in front of him on the Time Runner. He waited until James gave the 'all clear' before walking out of the ring, heading straight toward Bob.

Everyone in the hanger began to clap. Ted was barely aware of the sounds of heroic congratulations, threw the noise and the fog he was trying to shake off in his head.

“You did it Ted! You finally did it!!” The older man was actually hugging Ted and was almost in tears. “You okay?”

“Okay... I'm better than okay! Just like you said Jake. Once the power wave starts and the blue haze shows up, you don't see anything. You are just there... where I was standing on the Altarian Bridge. No feeling of time movement, distance, nothing. A bit fuzzy and disoriented, and I suppose it will take some getting used to. I did fall about six feet but that made for one helluva an entrance. But as far as the general affect goes, you are just here and then you are there. Unbelievable!” Ted reached over and shook Bob's hand firmly.

“I never thought you and I would see this?” Bob said quietly to Ted as he pulled the man closer to him. Ted shook his head with both hope and despair.

“Again...NO ONE can know we can do this. With this kind of power, in the wrong hands, it would be...beyond catastrophic.”

“As I said, I will burn this mother down my brother, with everyone in it before I let that happen. I know the risks, and I, better than anyone, know what's at stake.”

“Thank you Bob, but now...it's time to go.” Ted took a few steps forward and pointed at the Dias. “Let's light this candle, Bob.”

“Chief James Bixby! Will you insert the secondary co-ordinates as instructed!” Bob yelled to him.

“All in place Captain. Ready and winding up, as ordered!” James called back.

Ted took the Colt .45 Auto out from his belt behind his back

“I won't be needing this, hopefully,” Ted flipped the gun butt first, and handed it over to Bob. “That is one helluva a weapon, sir,” Ted said. “And it has the distinction of having now killed an alien.”

Bob took the weapon back with some awe. “Well that is a story I will need to hear.”

“And I promise to tell it to you over the best bottle of Scotch we can find in all time and space. Or maybe a Bourbon directly out of Napoleon's private stash.” Ted slapped Bob on the shoulder. “See you later...but it may be some time my friend. For you, anyway,” Ted looked at Bob a long time squarely in the eye. “Without me as your ‘Mission Purpose’, you could actually have something of a grand and decent life.” Ted then turned to walk towards the middle of the Pit, as the machine began to hum to life once more and the rings began their colorful fireworks pinwheel effect.

“What is going on?” Matthew Fassbinder called out as he started to move around and away from his console. “We did the test, and that ridiculously dangerous jump out into space, which no one in their right mind would do. Why is the machine being wound up again? You aren't seriously considering another jump here? I was informed that we would only be doing the one test...and now....?!” Matt was getting hysterical at what he saw as being insanely dangerous risks being taken by the very invaluable indispensable men that were in charge of this entire Beyond Top Secret Black World Circus.

“Stay at your station, mister!” Bob called back at him while looking menacing with the silver Colt in his hand waving it in Matt's general direction.

“Well this time you are just going to have to shoot me!” Matt yelled in frustration.

“Engaging!” James called out.

“Good luck, Boss... and thank you!” Jacob threw Ted a full salute.

Ted saluted back, then pulled up his sleeve and hit a series of buttons on the Time Runner gauntlet.

“We are going hot, in three, two, one!” James called out.

“WHAT??” Fassbinder screamed.

The rainbow chakra progression and the blue white haze covered the Pit again and Ted was caught up in the whirling sphere and then the blue flash and the implosion thunderclap sounded all the way up in the gallery above them.

“Systems are in the green. Package away, Captain.”

Fassbinder ran towards the control Dias to see if he could reverse the wave and get Ted back, but as he bounded up the steps, James wildly raked both of his hands up and down on the control panel like a concert pianist ending his performance with a grand flourish and cleared all the codes, then put his hands in the air.

“OH MY GOD!” Matt screamed at the man. “Don't do that! He can't get back!!!”

James, his hands still in the air, just took one step back, as Matt pushed him out of the way, frantically trying to do something. Matt then pounded the console in impotent rage and just hung his head in despair, defeated by some master plan that he was obviously not made privy to.

“The board is clear, Captain.” James started the shut down procedure around him. The other technicians were standing with their mouths open and looking at each other terrified. They were confused, dumbfounded and pole-axed as to what they had just witnessed.

Matt trudged down the steps of the Dais and came around the console and walked towards Bob. “What did you just do?”

“Stand easy, Director! All will be made clear as crystal...in time.”

Bob said cryptically as he turned and looked over at Ed Reilly. “He's all yours for the time being, Eddy.”

Ed nodded back to Bob and walked over to Matt. Ed just stood next to the man making sure that Matt did not do anything else or touch any controls on the consoles.

EPILOUGE:

THE LONG GOOD-BYE

CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

Irina was on her knees, sobbing, clutching the crumpled letter in her fist, and pounding on her forehead. She had slid down from the couch in her office, and now leaned the weight of her body on the coffee table in front of the couch as she cried. Theodore, not knowing what was happening, just knew his mother was upset, and he began to cry too, as he leaned forward and put his arms around her back in a futile attempt to comfort her.

She had only come to clean up a few loose ends, point a number of projects she was working on in one last final direction, say good-bye to Ted and head back to her real home in Moscow.

Captain Robert Hanson, the Black Death, the Grim Reaper, the Bearer Of The Bad News, the messenger whose job it was to be killed for delivering sad tidings, just stood there like some ectoplasmic wraith, standing over them both, not knowing what to say. This is what Ted had tasked him with. He put on his hat and slowly turned, quietly exiting, holding the door gently so it would not bang when it shut. It was better she be with her son, and that she be the one to explain what was going on, or where his father had gone. Hanson knew Ted had grown up orphaned by this stinking world of Black Ops secret science, intrigue and death they were all trapped in.

Bob softly padded down the hallway holding his topcoat in one hand, his briefcase in the other. It'd been a long three days. Finally he was going to finish up Ted's last set of orders with what, maybe, was going to border on some good news. He stopped and looked out into the garden at the Washington MRC complex and gazed out over at the remarkable sculptures gracing the landscape. He'd always admired the three-dimensional figures with their modern motif and their futuristic, hopeful and outer space themes. He had not spent much time in that garden, but he knew many who did, and they seemed better for it. More calm and relaxed. More at peace with the lot

they all had drawn in a world where recognition and acknowledgement was really never forthcoming. It was such a wonderful area to have lunch and take breaks during the decent weather. Today it was drizzling, windy and looked stark and cold outside. Fitting, he thought as he chuckled mirthlessly to himself, as it was just how he felt inside.

Once again he repeated his mantra; “Just one more set of lies for today”.

He knocked first then stood in the open doorway to Dr. Ariel Gee’s office. She was sitting behind her desk looking stunning and movie star glamorous as always. Looking truly like some otherworldly Venusian goddess creature who had somehow fallen to earth. She was just plain and simply a fantastically beautiful woman; there was no question about that obvious fact. He had never seen her anywhere else other than on an airplane in her fantasy flight attendant persona. She seemed smaller in this setting, much like pulling back the curtain on the magic she created there, seeing the backstage of some amazing movie or Broadway show. She was never here much, and it was tricky to arrange her schedule and actually catch her on the ground. But it was all worked out just so Hanson could do what he was here to do.

“Dr. Gee?” He still hovered in the doorway. “May I come in?”

“Why, Captain Hanson,” Ariel stood up and smiled widely at him. “A pleasure to see you. Of course you may.” She gestured with a flourish at the chairs in front of her desk, and her exotic accent made her every word like a soft sweet nibble on his ears.

“Thank you.” He placed his stuff in one of the chairs and sat down in the other next to it. She followed suit and, gracefully smoothing the material of dress, repositioned herself behind her desk, just perching on the edge of her chair.

“And to what do I owe this rare visit?” She ran a hand through her honey colored silky hair, getting strands of it out of her porcelain face and tucking it behind her perfect ears adorned with sparkling diamond studs on the lobes.

“A knight's errand, M' Lady, mostly for his liege Lord.” Bob rubbed his tired bloodshot eyes, pinched the bridge of his nose and shook the cobwebs out of his head. “How are you?”

“Oh, I'm fine...but you look like hell, my friend.” Her countenance changed to one of motherly concern, as she tilted her head and pouted out her lips, covered in just the right shade of lipstick to pull together the tones of her skin and the sheen of her Paris Haute Couture jacket and blouse.

“Just tired. So...tired. Right now I'm still working on Paris time.” Bob opened his briefcase and pulled out a long gold box with a red ribbon tied in a bow and handed it to her. She smiled with a girlish gasp.

“For me? Oh, Robere´ you old smoothie!” She pronounced his name Ro-bear, without the T in the French fashion, and it made him blush for some weird reason. Man-o-man, he thought, the power this woman had over men was just oh so wrong and oh so right all at the same time. Ariel gleefully pulled at the ribbon and opened the box. There, lain on a white and green bed of baby's breath was a single long stem red rose with a blue ribbon wrapped around the arranged ensemble. She bowed her head and batted her lashes coquettishly, then raised her eyes, fastening Hanson in her limpid stunning gaze.

“Is this just a request, Robere´, or a formal proposal?” She said only half teasingly with a girlish giggle. “Most gentlemen don't start off with giving me a rose unless I have done something very good to deserve it, or they are expecting something in return, or there is a matter beyond a personnel issue that they wish my counsel about.”

She took it gently out of the box, cradling the head like a newborn infant child and got up to find a vase in her cupboard. Of course there was the perfect one there, white porcelain and gilded gold, looking like it had been a gift from Louis XIV the Sun King himself. She placed the rose gingerly in the vase and then added some bottled water to it and put the rose on her desk directly in front of her. She fluffed it out with soft little waves of her hands, and suddenly, it was just perfect.

“It’s...a...um... gift,” Bob said clumsily stretching out his hands to give the offering some weight. Oh God he was terrible at this! Couldn’t Ted have just given him a list of people to KILL? That would have been so much less painful than this! “...from a friend of ours...yours...ah...yours and mine. For you.”

She raised her eyebrows and tilted her head quizzically.

“Oh!” Bob said leaning forward pointing, then rummaging gracelessly through the disemboweled gold box. He produced a small, white envelope, with Ariel’s name on it done in calligraphic gold cursive. “Um, there is also a note, or a card...um, with it, I mean.” Bob held it up like an offering to this Venusian goddess and sat back and waited, sweating profusely now.

Ariel opened the small white envelope, sliding her exquisitely French manicured fingernails under the flap, took out the card and read it. Bob put his hand over his mouth and rubbed his face as he saw the sparkling tears glisten as they formed at the corners of her perfect sky-blue eyes, matching the glinting light on her gleaming diamond earrings.

She flashed with what looked like anger through the tears, as she threw down the card, and put her dainty hand up to her perfect bow-shaped mouth.

“Did he send you to brush me off, Bob?”

“Oh! Ariel! Nothing could be farther from the truth.” Hanson stood up, and put his hands on his hips and shook his head, then looked at the sky pleading for the Gods to give him strength. Now he has made this goddess cry. He would burn in hell for sure.

“Goddamn you Ted!” He said as he took a deep breath. “I am totally botching this up aren’t I?”

“If I knew what your were doing,” Ariel said, “then I could tell you how badly you are doing at it, oui?”

Bob turned and grabbed for his briefcase, like a drowning man for a rope, and put it up on Ariel’s desk with a thump, which made her jump like a frightened fawn. Bob reached into his case and pulled out a small black velvet box, shut the lid of the case and handed it to her.

“I was going through his things after he...left.” Now Bob was gritting his teeth to hold back his emotions. “Ted had this in his desk drawer and it was addressed to you.”

Ariel took the case from Bob’s sweating hand, and held it, putting her other hand on her heart, but looking at it with a combination of perplexed confusion and suspicion. Every woman on Earth knew there could only be one thing in a velvet box of that size. Slowly, she opened the lid like a cobra was going to jump out and bite her, and then looked down apprehensively at the stunningly brilliant six-carat diamond set in a platinum band.

Her mouth fell open in stunned surprise. She quickly snapped the box shut, and the hand that had been over her heart, jumped to her mouth to close her jaw. Speaking through her fingers she said in French, “*Je ne comprends pas?*”

Ariel cracked open the box to peek inside, as if it was part of some magic trick where the ring, through some act of prestidigitation, would just disappear. It was still there and she just stared at it. The waterworks of the

tears began to flow down her face, cutting rivulets in her foundation powder base makeup, with black streaks from her mascara.

“There's a, uh, um...sentiment...inscribed... inside.... the ring I mean. You might wish to read.” Bob hated himself right about now.

Ariel read it and looked up at him confused. “With all my Love... Ted?”

“Yeap... that's about the size of it, Ariel.” Bob finally sat down and leaned back in the chair and twisted back and forth trying to relax his lumbar region.

“I have been calling him now for the last couple of days and been, how you say? ‘Blown off’ by his secretary telling me ‘he’s away right now,’” she used a mocking voice to mimic what she thought dumb American’s sounded like, “then.... this!” Ariel slammed the box closed and placed it on her desk next to the rose.

“I know. I was just up there telling his assistant Abbey, about...all of this.” Bob responded.

“So what? Then it was my turn?” Ariel glared, squinting her eyes looking over at him sternly as if billion watt lasers were charging ready to shoot from them and incinerate him where he sat. Oh crap! Bob thought. Now he had incurred the wrath of the Love Goddess of Venus, and he would burn now for sure. GODDAMN YOU TED! YOU MOTHERLESS BAST...

“Where is he, Bob?” She yelled, as she stamped her foot on the floor, and banged the flat palm of her beautifully manicured hand on the desk. “Answer me! And tell the truth! Because if you don’t I...WILL... KNOW!”

Bob cowered back, and tried to melt into the chair, and somehow will that chair through the floor.

“He...left.” Bob just sat looking at Ariel, dreading the next round.

“That part I think I am understanding, Bob!” She said, coming around the desk like a mother panther, tears still streaming down her face, which was now wet with rage. She put her hands on either side of the arms of the chair and leaned into Hanson’s face.

“Left...For...WHERE?” She said with a menace, that Bob had never heard in his life. “And for how long?” The water from Ariel’s eyes beaded on her nose, and dripped down on Hanson’s face.

“Well, there’s the rub, isn’t it?” He said sheepishly.

Ariel pushed herself up right and put her hands firmly on her hips as she stood over him. Bob ran his hands through his hair, then leaned forward, and put his palms together, slapping them softly and nervously together. “Ted is just, well...gone.”

“Thank you Captain Robert Obvious,” she folded her arms across her spectacular breasts, and was really now beyond angry. “Gone where?”

“Umm...” Bob rubbed his hands together then rubbed the back of his neck. “Off Earth.” Bob could not believe he was actually saying this to her. “No one knows for how long or where he went.”

“So...” Ariel said, turning her emotional rage into hard logic to do the needed detective work of trying to suss out the mystery here. Ted had disappeared before, but usually under some immense pressure or some type of psychotic break.

“Cape Malabar? Out on the Grissom? Did he take a Viper?”

“Neither. He went through the Jump Room at Five-One.” Bob was well aware that this would bring on the avalanche of questions that he had anticipated to come someday anyway, just not today.

“We can’t send anything organic through there. Ted tried that once before and it almost killed him. How could you let him do that?” Ariel was trying to process the last 10 minutes of her life, and her anger was projected

directly at Bob. He expected that and was waiting for it. He'd already answered that question a few times in the last three days as he had to meet with station heads around the world to somehow explain, without really giving any of the details he had just explained to Dr. Ariel Gee, what had happened to the Executive Director of The Group, basically the CEO and CFO of Planet Earth.

“We found the key to the system. He used it after we'd tested it and found that it worked. He asked me to tell you personally and to give you these things. He did not know if he would make it back but he did not want you to think that he didn't care, nor that he was not aware of your feelings and his own, as well. Hence, the ring.” Bob thought to himself that this was a cheap, but needed, trick.

“Oh merde, Robere..!!!” She just sat there and picked up the ring case again and opened it to make sure it was still there.

“Is he alright?” Ariel's voice, and her composure, was cracking. “Do you know?”

“He had given me a code sign, that would tell me that he had made it safely to where he was heading. I got that. So I can only believe that he is there. He also told me that he would try to come back and see you now and then and would work something out with you, if he can. I don't know what that means, so please don't ask me any further questions on that matter.” Bob went silent again and just looked down at his hands.

“Oh,” Bob said putting his finger in the air, just now remembering a vital detail. “Ted said he promised to take you somewhere...with sand... where you could take a stroll?” He finished lamely, guessing, still not trusting his memory.

“A beach to walk on?” She said.

Bob snapped his fingers triumphantly. “That's it!” He said. “Bingo!”

Dr. Ariel Gee shook her head sadly.

“This has got to be the worst proposal any woman has ever gotten since the beginning of TIME! So he turns his best friend into his henchman now to give me thi?” She held the box close to his nose, snapped it closed like the jaws of a shark, and held it up like a weapon, shaking it in his face. “You tell me that this man, your master, loves me, however, that he is off gallivanting around the universe somewhere, and nobody has any idea of where or when he is coming back to consummate the deal! That is just fucking GREAT, BOB!” She spit out his name like an accusation of murder. “There are just....no other words..... to describe it.” Ariel moved back behind her desk and sat, desperately trying to tightly control the torrential emotional tsunami raging inside her, and failing, and it came seeping out the seams.

“Ariel...” Bob started to speak, but she raised her hand to him to stop.

“I will get through this,” she said, her hand trembling and her jaw quaking, cracking under the strain. “Thank you Robere,´ but please right now...just...go. We will talk later...” She got up and walked out into the garden even though it was raining, and stood like one of the statues there. She raised her face to the sky and let the heavens wash her clean of all this.

Captain Robert Hanson, henchman, emotional assassin and professional heel, picked up his topcoat and briefcase and walked down the hallway toward the lobby. He checked out and walked outside to the waiting limo. The Navy Chief held the door open for him, slammed it tight, and then slid into the front seat behind the wheel and buckled his seatbelt.

“Where to Captain Hanson?” The Chief asked cheerily as he started the car.

“Just that-a-way,” Bob said waiving with a heavy sigh as he rubbed his eyes and face. “Anywhere but this goddamn place. Just...anywhere but

here.”

COMING SOON:

SANDS OF TIME:

BOOK IV:

Tempus fugit