

THE GANYMEDE PROJECT

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PART ONE: "SOMETHING WAS BORN"

“There has never been a nation... without a conception of good and evil. Reason has never been able to define good and evil, or even to separate good from evil, not even approximately; on the contrary, it had always mixed them up in a most pitiful and disgraceful fashion; as for science, its solutions have always been based on brute force.”

—Dostoyevsky, *The Devils*

1. BEDLAM

Las Vegas, Nevada

Katrina Fontanova shouldered into the throng, listening to Barney Wills recite a mantra of mind-numbing lawyer talk. She knew where the meeting was going—that’s why she was late.

Dull government performances understated the drama. Normally, such a meeting would barely register a public yawn. Today was different. There was tension here, both in the audience and on the row of government speakers—lined up along a podium table, gripping glasses of ice water, thinking the same thing: *Groom*.

Barney Wills—Ichobod Crane with gum disease—stood in front of the microphone, sweating despite the air conditioning.

Just get it over with, Katrina thought. *Do what you’re going to do: sanction this legal charade.*

A parallel thought occurred in the head of Mr. Wills, who aimed for a dignified closure to the proceedings. He banged the gavel three times and pronounced, in a way that he *hoped*sounded sincere, but feared it did not, “The Bureau of Land Management thanks you for your interest in the Nellis Range Complex.”

This statement catalyzed the crowd. The pro-forma hearing immediately degenerated into a free-for-all that was neither *pro*, nor *formanor* conducive to hearing. Catcalls and sticky wads descended on the hapless BLM representative, who ducked various unidentified-but-moist flying objects, crawled behind the podium and shouted, “Order!” into the microphone, again and again, until the PA system squealed in protest.

Marvyn Marvin III, who resembled Abraham Lincoln, but claimed to be an ambassador from the Planet Draconis, climbed onto the cloth-covered table on the stage, dropped his tailored black trousers and defecated onto the tidy pile of carefully tabbed papers which Barney Wills said proved the legality of

BLM's land seizure.

Sitting at the Big Table, Colonel Joe Blazosky, Deputy Commander of the Nellis Range Complex—severely crewcut and outfitted in Air Force dress blues sparkling with chrome—couldn't stop Marvyn Marvin III, even though he was inches away and even though the Colonel could easily press 150 pounds. This is because he was distracted. Harry, a Shoshone Indian, struck him in the face, yelling, "Give us our land back, you bastard!"

"This is supposed to be a democracy!" a well-dressed woman shouted from the floor. "I demand to speak." Around her, as the throng threw elbows and insults, she insisted on her point. "You hear me? I *demand* to speak for the State of Nevada."

Meanwhile, less vocal members of the crowd exited into the lobby, hoping for a quick getaway. Katrina Fontanova was among them—a good-looking, Russian-Ukrainian woman.

Two burly, dark-suited men ushered her aside.

"Leave me alone!" she shouted, indignantly, straining against their hands. "I am a diplomat."

The men didn't speak. They squeezed her arms and forcibly moved her through the hotel lobby, now a Bedlam of politics and paranoid perversity.

"Rape!" she yelled, braking with her feet. "Gangsters! Rape!" A needle pricked her neck. Within seconds, the lobby shimmered and rotated, as if sucked into some pernicious space-time warp.

In a brief moment, she saw the reassuring, familiar face—a tall, muscular waiter with a stubble beard—staring at her from across the room. The drug finally seized her brain. The world dissolved to black.

* * *

When Katrina opened her eyes, she felt the contours of a padded chair and the edge of a wooden table. These were the boundaries of an otherwise invisible universe.

Am I blind? She stared into darkness. *The heat*, she thought. *It's stifling. Is it that warm outside, or are they controlling the temperature?* Her dress felt damp with perspiration. A ripening scent blocked all others. *How long have I been here?*

She licked sweat from her upper lip, almost gagging at the sandpaper tug of a parched throat. Still, she craved a cigarette.

The outline of the door suddenly materialized in cracks of light. Someone fiddled with mechanical locks, turned off the outside illumination, then entered.

Mind games, she thought.

A flashlight probed her face. She squinted, but saw only the glare. A deep, gritty voice resonated in the chamber, straining with urgency.

“Where is he?”

She drew in her breath, determined to mask her feelings.

“Where is Sverdlov?”

She answered with silence.

Plastic slammed against the wood of the table. The violence startled her. She saw a videocassette. Beside it, a thick-fingered, manicured hand dissolved into shadow.

“Did you bring me a good American movie?” she asked, with a subdued laugh. “I like movies.” The sound of her own voice surprised her—like a rasp raking across dry wood.

The man without a face breathed heavily. “This may be hard for you to understand,” he said, in a voice tinged with sarcasm, “but when you join the Company, you take an oath. A very serious oath. Violating that trust has consequences.” Then, in a whisper: “Give me the man who broke the oath. Give me Sverdlov. Do it and go free.”

“The Company? CIA? I thought he was FBI.”

“He was Company once. You know that. You never leave the Company.”

“It’s not the oath, is it?” she croaked. “It’s what he knows. It’s what I know. About Groom. About them. It’s all on the video. Kill us. The organization will release the tape. Got that? Now give me some water, you bastard!” The flashlight seared her brain with the brilliance of a sun. She moved her tongue along a dry lower lip, hoping for a drink.

A chuckle came from the darkness. “What’ve you got? Huh? A crazy story. We can produce hard evidence that Yuri Sverdlov was working for you. For the SVR—the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service. Who do you think people will believe?”

A deep vibration penetrated Katrina’s body—a frequency so low it could not be heard, only felt. It was like a mini-earthquake, or God cracking an eyelid, or a wobble in space-time. Somewhere in the darkness a small animal reacted by scratching at paper.

She watched the man’s fist tighten and sensed an opportunity. She played on his fears.

“Kill me, and you’ll wind up like Billy Stanton.”

The voice in the darkness hesitated. “What do you know about Billy?”

“Rumors.”

“I’ll bet.”

There was a moment of silence, then the shadowy hand pressed a metal cup onto the table. She heard a trickle of water and a splashing sound as the cup filled slowly to the brim. A refreshing spray of drops hit her hand. She hated the man without a face.

“Maybe you’d like a drink.”

She moved her tongue against dry teeth.

The vibrations started again. Water in the cup raised into circular ripples of a standing wave, reflecting the flashlight beam in crazy wiggles of light that played against the man’s face. She recognized his features. *Chisholm*.

Something scampered unseen across the room.

The man’s hand tightened into a fist. When the vibrations stopped, the fist unclenched, but fingers still trembled.

“I’m walking out of here,” Katrina said confidently. She pushed back in the chair, stood up, and braced herself against the table, fighting a wave of nausea. Chisholm did not move.

“We’ll bring you down,” Chisholm said. There was an uncertainty now in his voice. A wavering.

Katrina picked up the cup of water, drinking greedily. A cool wetness flowed down her throat. Some of her strength returned. She put down the cup.

“I don’t think so, Mr. Chisholm,” Katrina said, finally, softly, her voice now lubricated. “We have a balance—like in the Cold War. A balance of power. A balance of terror. Just remember what happened to Billy.”

She stepped to the doorway, opened it, and looked back. “I was with them, you know.” The vibrations started again. She felt for the light switch and flipped it. A fluorescent lamp started erratically, then illuminated the room with green-edged light that jerked to the beat of deep vibrations. She could plainly see Chisholm—a burly, blond-haired man in a cool-looking, seersucker suit. His face was taut. His hands shook—not from the vibrations, but from fear.

She turned, moved through the door and down an empty, dimly lit corridor. Climbing steps toward the exit, she couldn’t resist. “They’ll come for you, Chisholm,” she yelled. “You know that, don’t you?”

He didn’t answer.

She unbolted the lock and stepped through the portal onto the Las Vegas street, where she teetered on shaking ground. Deep vibrations pulsed through the sidewalk as heavy earth-moving equipment convoyed toward a nearby construction site on Paradise Road.

Katrina’s mouth turned up in a smile. *He doesn’t know*, she thought.

She walked briskly away from the doorway, away from danger, away from Chisholm.

* * *

Yuri Sverdlov observed Katrina's exit in "night vision green," then slumped behind the low, roof-top wall of a parking garage, locking the safety catch on the assault rifle.

Thank God, he thought. She looks okay.

He had watched the entire abduction sequence in the Chez Suzanne Hotel. There was barely enough time to grab a small suitcase of "necessities" before following Katrina and two thugs in a taxi to this South-side location.

He had waited patiently, screwing together the components of a weapon. It was an imported piece—A Kalishnikov rifle with starlight scope and silencer.

After three hours, Chisholm arrived. Five minutes later, the two thugs from Chez Suzanne decided to step out for a cigarette. *A fatal error*, Yuri thought. *Cigarettes will kill you*. In this particular case, when they asked what appeared to be a homeless person for a light, the effect was immediate: two slit throats. Yuri stuffed their bodies into a parked car. *Now you're alone, you bastard. Do you know that? What will you do, Chisholm?*

He thought about the mechanics of the shoot. *I can hit him from here. Cleanly. Easily. If I take the shot right after the door opens, he'll fall backwards down the stairs. They won't find him until morning*. It felt good to be focused again, after so many years. He'd never enjoyed the idea of killing. Now he relished it.

The roof vibrated as another earth grader rounded the corner, crawled slowly down the road, then disappeared. Yuri snapped the rifle against the building's ledge and adjusted the scope to view an unmarked metal doorway resembling a fire exit. He spotted movement, flicked off the safety and gently touched the trigger.

A Yellow Cab abruptly blocked his field of view, screeching to a halt near the door. A young couple got out, exchanging light-hearted banter with the driver. Behind them, the door opened. Chisholm departed.

Shit! Yuri thought.

He left the weapon, sprinted to the roof exit and raced down the concrete stairs, his grease-stained "homeless" jacket flapping behind him.

On the ground level of the parking garage, he was surprised to find Chisholm still near the door, staring upward at the night sky—an orange kinetic of neon light.

"I know you're there!" Chisholm yelled, turning around, looking upward. "I know you're watching." He reached toward a bulge inside his jacket, drawing a pistol.

The cab departed. The young couple backed away from the gun-toting man in the seersucker suit who appeared certifiable. "You can't fool me," he said.

Chisholm moved down the sidewalk, whirling around, staring upward, crying out, as if protesting to some unseen, silent deity. Finally, Chisholm turned into the shadows, vanishing into the night.

Yuri thought of Billy Stanton.

2. HEAD HUNTERS

January 1968

Groom Dry Lake Base, Nevada

On the edge of a desert helipad pulsing with strobe lights, Dr. Billy Stanton and Fritz Gottlieb stood, arms crossed, gazing into the night, dreaming different dreams, waiting. Gottlieb dreamed darkly about past ‘might-have-beens’, but Stanton had a vision of the future—built stone-by-stone on noble goals. Darkness cloaked the surrounding Nevada mountains and ridges. The air was as cold and transparent as the animosity between the two men.

The stocky, 48-year-old Gottlieb glanced stiffly and impatiently at his watch, then stuck hands into the pockets of a long tweed overcoat and watched his breath turn to steam. The 30-year-old Stanton, wearing a baseball cap and dark jacket, seemed relaxed, but distracted. He drummed on a clipboard—the rhythm of a tune that played loudly in his head.

Gottlieb sniffed in annoyance. “You *did* brief everyone on the experimental protocol—right?” he asked in a German-accented voice. “No signs, no nametags, nothing to identify people or places.”

When Stanton failed to respond, Gottlieb’s face reddened at what he perceived as either stupidity, carelessness or a deliberate snub. “I asked you—”

“I heard,” Billy said with an easy Texas twang, “and the answer is yes—I took care of it. Relax, Fritz, and remember who pays the bills.”

“I only remember who stands to lose the most,” Gottlieb said, under his breath.

Billy Stanton responded by whistling his favorite Texas tune, remembering the words. *The stars at night, Are big and bright, Thump-thump-thump-thump, Deep in the heart of Texas...*

He watched the Nevada sky and wished on his own rising star as a Ph.D. government bio-physicist. “Ever notice, when you stare at two motionless, point sources of light—one above the other—how they both seem to move in opposite directions?”

Gottlieb’s thoughts moved orthogonally to Billy’s. He checked his watch again, looked toward the horizon, and grew even more irritated by Billy’s ramblings and tapings.

“See the two stars on the left edge of Gemini? Castor and Pollux, I think. Stare at ‘em long enough and they look like they move. Phi-phenomenon, they call it,” Billy said. “Can’t be due to neural processes in the retina. Otherwise, the apparent movement would be in the same direction. The illusion comes from the central nervous system—brain or brain stem.”

“I think you’re hallucinating.”

“Naw. See, a hallucination is when—”

Gottlieb came to attention, his mind now fixed on a moving pinpoint of light. It glided toward them across the desert floor, growing in intensity.

Billy snapped his head around at the sound—a throbbing dull roar. He could see the unmarked, slate-gray fuselage flicker in time with strobe markers on the ground.

The CH-53 hovered above the pad, spotlighting Stanton and Gottlieb, flooding the two men in a powerful, oil-scented downwash of thumping blades. Stanton tucked his baseball cap into his jacket to keep it from blowing away, shivering as cold air hit the now-exposed bald spot on the back of his head. Gottlieb huddled against the cold, unfolding a wide tweed collar to cover his mouth and chin. The craft settled slowly to the ground, boiling up desert dust, forcing both men to look away. Then the engine roar stopped, leaving only the whoosh of decelerating rotors.

Gottlieb and Stanton ducked down and moved closer. Stanton snapped fingers and pointed into the darkness. A parked ambulance switched on its engine and headlights, turned around, then crept backwards toward the pad. On cue, the helicopter’s door slid open. Two men, dressed in black, wrestled a stretcher out of the craft.

As they unfolded the wheels, Gottlieb rushed to see the body—a female torso, wrapped in a blanket, head uncovered, strapped in.

“No!” he cried.

“Put her in. Take her to G Lab. I’ll be along shortly,” Billy said to the other men. As the ambulance hatch slammed shut, Stanton turned to Gottlieb. “Got a problem, Fritz?”

Gottlieb watched the vehicle depart, then sneered at Stanton. “She’s black.”

Billy Stanton slowly removed the cap from the breast of his jacket, slapped it against his hand to remove dust, and placed it on his head. “You got this master race shit down, don’t you?”

“There could be genetic anomalies—”

“Cut the crap. You’re pissed because the experiment just might work this time, and the host is black.” He paused, then looked toward the receding ambulance. “Look, the only reason you’re here is because you’ve got a proven strategy for selection and procurement. You’re a good head hunter. I respect that. But we gave you the parameters of fifty candidates, and based on that, *you* picked that woman.” He flipped through clipboard pages, found the one he needed, and put it on top. Then, he handed the clipboard to Gottlieb. “See for yourself.”

Fritz Gottlieb had seen the profile before. Medical tests were all in order, proving that the woman had no serious disorders, and that she would probably make an excellent host. Mental tests showed both a normal IQ and evidence of Multiple Personality Disorder—MPD. Documented MPD was important for plausible deniability. After all, she could talk. But with MPD, no one would believe her. MPD also made her susceptible to certain mind control techniques—perfected by the CIA’s MK Ultra program. She seemed like the perfect candidate except... He thumbed down through the profile, looking for one item.

Finding it, he stared in disbelief and fumed at his own stupidity. “It’s blank,” he said, hoarsely, handing back the clipboard. “Under race, it’s blank.”

“Equal opportunity,” Stanton said with a smile. “You know, you really irk me. Why is it that whenever people seriously think about pushing the evolutionary envelope, the problem gets all wrapped up in Nazi eugenics? This is America, Fritz. Deal with it. We’re only interested in what works.” He opened the door to the staff car. “Let’s go. We shouldn’t keep the lady waiting.”

* * *

Inside a room configured for microsurgery, Doctor Whit Constantine, outfitted in flesh-tight surgical gloves and a green cap and gown, snapped a fluid-filled vial into a special docking ring. He tapped the vial gently with a finger, and watched a bubble float to the top of the thin, grayish liquid. He checked the apparatus for leaks, but found none. *More precious than gold*, he thought.

He nodded at his two colleagues in one corner of the lab. They attended the black female patient, partially covered with a sheet, strapped in a bed, legs and feet braced in metal stirrups.

Constantine saw Stanton and Gottlieb arrive on the other side of the observation window. “How ya doin’?” he said, in a cheery voice muffled by a surgical mask.

The response came back from Stanton. An external microphone amplified his speech, transmitting it into the chamber. “Just came to watch your magic trick, Doc.”

“You got it,” Constantine said with a wink. “Magic.” He could see Stanton smiling on the other side of the glass—and Gottlieb pouting. “Well,” he said, “glad you folks could make it. We’re just about ready to start.”

He adjusted the binocular microscope until he could see the embryo’s beating heart and large, unblinking eye. He spoke in a loud, clear voice—mainly for the benefit of the tape recorder on an adjacent table.

“I’ve removed the embryo, and have it perfused in a saline bath. It’s in good condition—roughly a Harrison stage 35 or 36. Heart tube has a bulge and twist to the right with distinct, slow pulsation. Looks pretty normal.”

Constantine twisted the X-Y-Z knobs on a micro-manipulator until a filament-like object moved into view. “Now I’m making an injection into the slight dorsal hump of the hindbrain.”

Carefully—ever so carefully—he moved the point of the microelectrode, until it made a dimple-like depression in the tissue. The electrode was a hollow glass tube, drawn out on one end to a diameter thinner than a human hair. Electrolyte and the experimental bio-reactant filled the tube’s interior. “Contact,” he said.

Outside the room, Stanton pressed against the glass. “Exciting, isn’t it?”

Gottlieb harumphed. “Like watching paint dry.”

“Ya know, Fritz, you got no spirit. No soul. Don’t you see the poetry in this?”

Gottlieb harumphed again and crossed his arms. “At least with the human radiation experiments, we have a known objective. Here—”

“Yeah,” Stanton said. “Rad-hard humans—a noble goal. But you know what? Improving the brain’s even nobler.”

“You don’t even know what you have,” Gottlieb sneered.

Constantine’s amplified voice interrupted their conversation. “I’m making the injection.”

Billy looked back into the chamber, then whispered to Gottlieb, “That’s what experiments are for, isn’t it? Without curiosity, where would we be?”

On the other side of the glass window, Constantine toggled a switch, stared into the scope, then looked up. “We’ve got flow,” he announced, watching the counter on the flowmeter slowly advance. *Easy... easy*, he thought, as the meter indexed toward the critical level. After a few seconds, he toggled again. “Now I’ve cut the flow.” He pressed his fingers against the micro-manipulator knobs, beginning a slow rotation. “Backing out.”

Through the binocular scope, Constantine watched the microelectrode edge upward as he rotated the knobs. The withdrawing filament tugged at epidermal tissue, until the tip finally popped clear of the embryo. Then, the tissue sagged back into place. He could see a faint, gray stain on the other side—evidence of success.

The rest of the procedure, lasting perhaps 30 minutes, was mainly clean-up. After that, Constantine handed it over to assistants, stepped out of the chamber, and snapped off his gloves. Stanton and Gottlieb met him coming through the door.

“You must be Dr. Gottlieb,” he said, shaking Gottlieb’s hand. Then to Stanton, he asked, “Is he cleared for—”

“Only MAJIC Five.”

“Ah.” Constantine relaxed his grip. The MAJIC Five clearance level allowed Gottlieb to view certain activities, and discuss certain aspects of the project, but the fundamental technology would have to remain a secret. Gottlieb didn’t have a *Need-to-Know*. “Well, anyway,” he continued, “I’m pleased to meet you Dr. Gottlieb, but I’m afraid you’ll have to wait now in our reception area.”

Billy winked at Constantine. “Let’s get some coffee, huh? We’ll drop Fritz off, then we need to talk about your message.”

Billy Stanton smiled cryptically as they escorted Gottlieb down the corridor. *Compartmentalization of official secrets puts you in control*. Gottlieb only knew certain things. Constantine only knew certain things. The female host—wife of a U.S. Navy serviceman—knew almost nothing. If things went wrong, compartmentalization provided bureaucratic firewalls. Billy knew he would get credit for success, and could plausibly deny responsibility for any failure. *Yessir, a great system*.

* * *

The interior of room G-25 illuminated with the *clack* of a light switch. Constantine opened the door, and led Billy past a slate-topped bench with a metal device containing jaw-like clamps. “That’s our stereotaxic rig,” he said. “We use it for brain mapping.” He walked to the animal cages and equipment racks on one end of the lab, where the stench of rat urine and sawdust seemed overpowering.

Billy rubbed his nose. “Whew, you oughtta clean some cages.”

“You authorize more clearances for this place and maybe we can get a janitor or technician,” Constantine said. “My whole crew was in that chamber today. We figured that was higher priority than house cleaning. Anyway, these animals are pretty hardy.”

He tapped two cages on opposite ends of a metal shelf. The rats jumped in unison and raced around the cages. Then they each came to a dead stop, reared up on hind legs, and froze. “These are the guys I told you about in the message. I’ve named ‘em ‘Yin’ and ‘Yang’. As you can see, they’re a little high strung.”

Billy peered into one of the clear plastic boxes. Coal-black eyes stared back.

“We constantly monitor activity in all of the animals,” Constantine continued. “The cages are wired with sensors. That’s what alerted us to the anomaly.”

He removed a roll of strip chart paper from a shelf above the cages and spread it out on a work bench, weighting down one unruly, curling end with a hemostat. “Yin and Yang received the implants in embryo,” Constantine said. “The procedure was similar to the one we did this evening. The other animals on the shelf are controls—some have had just surgery, others have received implants of placebo.”

Billy slid a finger down the squiggly lines on the chart. Two of the traces seemed to follow each other closely. “I’ll be damned. So the top and bottom—”

“You got it—Yin and Yang. These particular piezo-electric sensors just show gross activity inside the cages. But it made us curious. At first we thought we were getting cross-talk in the amplifier, but we started finding all sorts of correlations in other sensors. We were able to rule out equipment anomalies. The effect is biological.”

“So Yin and Yang—”

“Yeah. Somehow, they’re connected. It’s telepathic.”

* * *

Gottlieb, Constantine and Stanton watched the ambulance back-up into the helipad. Constantine's assistants removed the stretcher carrying the sedated female subject. With help from corpsmen aboard the CH-53, they put her into the helicopter, then returned to the ambulance. Someone hit the strobes, ringing the craft in a moving circle of light.

A crewmember looked toward the cockpit, caught the pilot's eye and made a spinning motion with his hand. Rotor blades turned slowly, accompanied by the high-pitched whine of turbines. The engine roared to life, blasting everyone on the ground with a shock of high velocity wind.

Constantine, hair whipped to a frazzle, informally saluted Stanton, then returned to the ambulance, hands in his pockets.

Stanton hugged his clipboard, grabbed Gottlieb by the arm and motioned to his staff car. They got in and closed the door.

"Now it's your turn to shine," Stanton said, handing the clipboard to Gottlieb. "Sign the ticket, please."

Gottlieb removed a pen from his pocket and scrawled his name. The 'ticket' transferred operational responsibility to Gottlieb.

"Thank you, sir," Stanton said, taking back the form. "You get the lady for psycho-programming. We expect you to take good care of her. And when she gives birth, we get the child."

Gottlieb said nothing for a moment. He watched Stanton's face alternate from a featureless dark shadow to an expression of triumph and determination in the blinking of the strobe light—on, off, on, off. Then Gottlieb nodded, opened the door to blasting wind and walked briskly to the waiting helicopter.

As the CH-53 turned on its lights and lifted slowly from the pad in a storm of dust, Stanton thought, *Yessir. Project Ganymede's the ticket. My ticket to success.*

He watched the helicopter dissolve to a pinpoint of pulsing light. When he blinked, the aerodynamics seemed to change. He saw a craft that zigzagged like an errant, high-speed firefly against the blackness of night. He blinked again, and discovered the fixed star, Sirius, centered in his field of view.

"Hmph," he said, aloud. "Phi-phenomenon."

3. NURSERY

September 1969

Groom Dry Lake Base, Nevada

Dr. Whit Constantine raced down the two-tone green-and-white corridor, stethoscope dangling from his neck like a rock-and-rolling tentacle. Marianne, his white-smocked lab assistant, tried to keep up. “Hurry!” she shouted. “I didn’t want to go in there. I couldn’t. It’s terrible.”

He yanked against the steel vault door with a violent, but ineffectual tug, remembered procedures, then tried to work the cipher lock with shaking hands. He pulled at the door, failing to move it. “Shit,” he muttered, trying again. It still didn’t open. He strained against the massive handle. “What’s the matter with this damn thing?”

Marianne finally caught up, herded him aside, and took two deep breaths. Then she pushed her fingers against the round buttons on the surface of the lock, clicking them rhythmically as she entered the proper combination. The door buzzed and unbolted. They both pulled hard, easing it outward, then rushed past the entry vestibule into the brightly lit vault, where they huffed and puffed, bodies pumping adrenaline, surveying the damage.

The observation area was perfectly intact, except for a wall phone where a broken handset drooped from a spiral plastic cord. But behind the thick wall of safety glass, the nursery was a scene of chaos and death. The bodies of seven children sprawled on the floor like discarded rag dolls. Blood pooled near their faces and necks. Only one child remained alive and untouched. The black-skinned figure stood near the center of the nursery with a cookie.

Constantine tried to speak in a calm voice—a voice that was soft and reassuring. But when words left his mouth, they squeaked like a mis-played piccolo. “Hello, Richard.”

The boy barely looked up, continuing to eat the cookie.

“We’re going to come in now. We just want”—he tried out the words—”to do a few tests.”

The boy walked to the glass door, inches away from Constantine and Marianne, tilting his head, eyes burning like coal-black cinders. As they watched in horrific fascination, he crouched on all fours, tugged at one of the bodies lying like a broken heap near the door, and carefully nibbled on the head. He pulled with one hand, tore away a flap of cheek, and put it in his mouth.

Constantine clenched his jaw and shoved the door. It didn’t move.

On the other side, Richard smiled. Red liquid from the meat bubbled down his chin.

Constantine squinted in disgust.

“It’s locked,” Marianne said. “From the inside.”

* * *

Fort Dietrick, Maryland

"I flew here right away," Constantine said, clicking open his briefcase. "We've got to put an end to this. Here. Look." He handed Billy a sheaf of photographic prints.

Billy scanned them, looked away, and covered his mouth, seized by a hacking cough. "Sorry," he said, finally, clearing his throat.

"What scares me is that these early years—years one through six—are the most critical ones for personality development. But I'm afraid—"

"What? That you're not being a good parent? That the child will turn out badly?"

"Something like that."

"Wa-a-al, shucks," Billy said, reverting to a heavy twang, "ain't nothin' like this ever happened before, so don't blame yourself." He tossed the pictures back on the desk, where Constantine stared at them—pictures of horribly mutilated infants. "See," Billy continued, "we're plowin' new ground." He shuffled through the photos, finally dwelling on one. "Richard doesn't even look normal. So maybe normal rules don't apply."

Constantine held the picture—a black, one-year-old child, muscular, four-and-a-half feet tall, with blood smeared on his hands and mouth.

"His physical and mental age exceeds his chronological age," Constantine said. "It was a mistake—my mistake—to put him in a nursery with playmates of the same age. I thought socialization was important, but now, I'll have to re-think—"

A train of thought steamed its way across Billy's brain, de-railing Constantine's input. "Didn't you say the lab animals exhibited identical behavior?"

"Yes. Similar behavior. We ran experiments to find out how Yin and Yang—the two experimentally treated rats—performed in a social context. We had plenty of food in their area, but access was somewhat limited due to the number of animals. Yin and Yang systematically killed twenty other rats before we could stop them."

Billy got up from his desk and walked, hands in his pockets, to the window, where he looked out on the grounds of Fort Dietrick. "But the animals showed adaptive behavior. What they did seems natural, given their intelligence and unique abilities. They had a problem and they solved it—brutally by our standards, but they solved it, nevertheless"

"Yeah, I guess," Constantine said. "In the long run, there's an evolutionary advantage to using all your assets. But in a natural environment, members of the same species are usually equipped with equal abilities. There's a balance. Their interactions are tuned to each other."

In a patch of sky visible from the window, Billy watched a flock of birds launch from the ground, fly in

formation, then, abruptly, change direction in near-unison.

“Which happened first?” he asked. “The rat killings or the infant killings?”

“They happened at nearly the same time. I’d say within a minute or two. We use different chronometers in the lab and nursery to time-stamp data, so—”

“Wa-a-a-l, what we’ve got here is only a blip in the program. I don’t think there’s goin’ to be a long term problem. Do you? After all, you’d expect primitive thinking and behavior to precede more sophisticated, civilized behavior.”

“Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny.”

“You got it. He’ll grow out of it.”

“Meanwhile?”

“Kill the rats,” Billy said. “We can replicate that experiment later. But Richard... he’s our most valuable asset.”

Constantine nodded, slowly. “What about the dead infants?”

“You got ‘em on ice?”

“Yeah, but their parents—”

“Think we borrowed ‘em for psychological testing. They get paid every day we keep ‘em. A pretty handy addition to their welfare checks, don’t you think? They won’t mind waiting. Still—you’re right, we gotta act quickly.” He thumped his nose thoughtfully. “How many of your folks know about this?”

“Well—everyone. I put ‘em all to work cleaning up the mess, autopsying the bodies, cataloging wounds, freezing specimens and taking care of Richard. They know everything.”

“They’re pretty shook up?”

“Yeah. Very. But they’re professionals.”

“Maybe you need a completely new crew. Let’s give your people psychological counseling and therapy—for the trauma. Gottlieb knows how to finesse this sort of thing. I’ll give him a call, put him in touch with you. He can help with the parents of the children, too.” Billy smiled and patted Constantine on the arm. “Sometimes we need to forget. Sometimes it’s the right thing to do.” He sighed a long sigh and shook his head. “Relax, Whit. You’re doing the best you can. We both are. We’ve got noble goals, you and I. That’s what counts. Don’t let the piss-ants get us.”

He escorted Constantine to the door and shook his hand. “One more thing,” he said. “Some of the folks at Los Alamos think they can duplicate the bio-active material. I’ve got funding for that effort. I’d like you to be part of it.”

“I’m... really... honored,” Constantine stammered. “Of course. The chance of a lifetime.”

“Good,” Billy said. “You’ll need a few more clearances. I can take care of that. And I want you to come

to one of the Majestic meetings.”

Constantine smiled broadly. “I’m finally part of the in-group.”

“Yup. Guess so.”

Billy watched Whit Constantine exit toward the controlled entry point. *A good man*, he thought. *A good mind. A pioneer.*

The buzz of an intercom interrupted his thoughts. “Dr. Stanton, there’s a Mr. Gottlieb here to see you.”

He walked to the desk and pressed the reply button. “Send him in, please.”

“What about your other appointment?”

“Ask him to wait. Mr. Gottlieb has priority. He... has some medicine for me.”

“I’ll send him in.”

Stanton turned away from the desk and walked to the window. Below, on the parade ground, soldiers “Hup! Hup! Hupped!” in a drill. Their steps and arm movements seemed perfectly synchronized. It was like watching a single organism. He heard the leader bark the command, “By the left fla-a-nk, harch!”

In unison, as if the thought propagated simultaneously to thirty different people, the drill team turned, executing the maneuver with flawless precision.

4. YURI

1 May 1980

Annapolis, Maryland

“What devils do you wrestle now, father? What passions stir your soul?”

Yuri Sverdlov gazed at his father’s dead face—an older, mirror image. Rugged features, cleft like chiseled stone, gave no response to his question. He quietly tucked the dummied envelope of a return airline ticket to Moscow into the corpse’s jet black suit, completing the effect. His father embarked on another mission, righting wrongs in a world of chiaroscuro and sharp relief. There were no other colors; no shades of gray.

Yuri wondered—If he could somehow tap his father’s brain and read it like a book, how many chapters would begin with descriptions of pain? Did the eyes, now forever-closed, retain after-images of those passages written in native Russia—images of KGB duplicity, Stalin’s gulag, grinding subservience, the

heart-thumping rush of clandestine escape? Or was his father's brain now gripped only by the last chapter and last line—"The End?"

His father always spoke ambivalently of Russia. He was proud of the culture; insisted Yuri speak Russian at home; taught his own school on Russian poets. This passion masked Alexander Sverdlov's flip side—bitterness. He railed against the Communists; lectured on betrayal; prayed to God for vengeance. The ambivalent vision split his actions like a laser beam caught in a half-silvered mirror. He would make his son love the culture; he would make his son fight the battle.

Even though Yuri shared some of his father's features—broad shoulders, jet black hair, a gaze that could shift rapidly between wildness and intense penetration—his father's passions were not genetic. Yuri, born into a land of plenty, a land of cultural diversity, a land of freedom, could only wonder at the fires in his father's heart. Such fires require external stoking.

"Uh, Mister Sverdlov. Excuse me."

Yuri turned, refocusing on here and now.

A solemn figure stood a respectful distance. "Oh. I see you're... Sorry, I don't know rank."

"It's okay, Mr. Davenport. Midshipman. First Class."

"I thought when you arranged the viewing there'd be more—"

"So did I."

"And tomorrow. Just a small group?"

"Yeah. Not many."

"I have a few more papers for you to sign. Here." He handed them to Yuri, eyeing him with a nervous smile. "You look very young. Are you twenty one?"

"Twenty."

Davenport frowned. "Well, I don't—"

"Next week." Yuri smiled. "I'll turn twenty-one next week. I'll date it the tenth." He scribbled on the paper, then handed it back. "Besides, there's no one else."

"No mother?"

"She died." He remembered Anna Sverdlov's picture. A beautiful woman. A casualty of the Cold War. His father believed Stalin killed her as surely as if he squeezed the trigger himself. Like a flower plucked at the roots, she couldn't survive outside native Russia.

"Well. I know this is difficult for you. But if you could give me just a few words. There's no priest, so unless you—"

"Just say he was a man who knew right from wrong. He did right. He fought wrong. That was his passion." *It was true.* It was his father's defining trait. When he fled to America with his pregnant wife,

Anna, they struggled, tried to look ahead, but Alexander fought the old battles, spending a good portion of his earnings on travel and secret communications with the old network, countering lies, revealing truth.

“A righter of wrongs?” Davenport nodded with a certain smugness. “I see. Well. Ten o’clock, then?”

“Yeah.” Yuri watched the mortician teeter unnervingly back and forth on the balls of his feet, saying nothing, smiling toward the corpse.

Davenport suddenly fidgeted. “Oh—almost forgot.” He reached into his jacket, withdrew a gold, palm-sized object, and handed it to Yuri. “An eagle medallion or coin. Found it in his suit. Think of it as a gift from your father.”

Yuri felt the raised, metallic texture with his fingers. It retained the warmth of his hand and memories. The front showed a gold eagle’s head against a navy-blue field, hovering over a rolled up Stars and Stripes, and a shield embossed with a compass rose. The words, ‘United States of America’ circled the edge. *A beautiful piece*, he thought, rolling it over. *Wonder where he got it?* Inscribed on the back were the words:

In Grateful Appreciation

Alexander Sverdlov

Around the edge was the phrase, “And ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free.”

Yuri pocketed the medallion, then stretched out his hand in a gesture that usually made other people go away. “Thanks for all your help,” he said, in a faltering voice.

Davenport winked, pressed Yuri’s shoulder, then departed.

Yuri watched him fade into the shadows of the funeral home.

Then he snapped a black-brimmed garrison cap to his head, and with a flourish, draped dark tones of a military rain coat over the gold and blue-black of a dress uniform. The material made a quiet, shoosh-shoosh-shoosh sound as he walked to the door, opened it, and hesitated.

Beyond the doorway, nature wept. Tears flooded from the Annapolis sky in a soft hush, pooled on the ground and rolled in gravity’s grip toward the sea. He brushed away a splash of moisture on his cheek. *What else should I say?* he thought. *My father. Words don’t—*

Thunder clapped in the distance, like a call to battle.

He stiffened, pivoted at attention and shot a salute toward the casket. Then, quietly, respectfully, he closed the door. Behind him, Alexander Sverdlov rested forever—a traveler now bound for another world.

* * *

“A good father. A good American. He did right; he fought wrong. May he rest in peace.” Davenport’s voice stopped with finality. A smile spread slowly across his thin, hawk-nosed face. He lifted his arms in a gesture of closure.

A handful of mourners moved slowly away from the plot where the casket hovered on a bed of straps above yawning earth. Yuri’s tall, stiff, muscled figure moved among friends and distant relatives, shaking hands as they departed. “Thank you for coming. Good to see you again. Thank you.” There were a few tears, a few hugs, then the place emptied. He walked back toward the car, alone and thoughtful, preferring solitude to company.

“Midshipman Sverdlov?”

Two gray-suited men blocked the narrow cemetery path. Both were late-thirtyish and ordinary looking in the extreme. The taller man stepped forward.

Yuri stopped, eyeing them both. “Yes sir?”

The tall man extended a hand. “I’m George Nathan. This is Malcolm Geller.”

“Thanks for coming.” He shook their hands, but the men didn’t move.

Nathan smiled, as if suppressing a secret. “So you graduate soon?”

“Yes Sir,” Yuri said.

“Not long after your birthday. Twenty one, right?”

Yuri tightened his lips. “You’ll have to excuse me, I’ve got to get back—”

“To the Academy? Don’t think so,” Nathan winked. “They know you’re with us.”

“And who are you?”

“Friends of your father.”

Yuri sighed. “My father was a very focused man, Mr. Nathan. He had his work. He had his passion. And he had revenge. Which Alexander Sverdlov did you know?”

Nathan fumbled in a coat pocket, then withdrew a wallet, flipping it open in a practiced move. The ID card read *CIA*. It carried the Agency seal—an Eagle’s head hovering over a flag and shield.

“I see,” Yuri said, licking his lips.

“We’d like to talk to you—if you can spare the time.”

“Do I have a choice?”

Geller shook his head. “No.”

Yuri’s stiff, military bearing relaxed when confronted with the inevitable. The two men escorted him in silence back to the parking lot. As he climbed into their car and closed the door, he could still smell damp earth from the grave site. It clung to his shoes. It crowded his brain. Its morbid stain diffused across cumulus clouds layered above the cemetery and molded itself into a dark but familiar effigy.

In those few seconds before the other men joined him in the car, Yuri imagined his father silently mouthing the words, “Duty. Honor. Country.” He leaned back, waiting patiently for the explanation, brushing a hand through close-cropped, neatly trimmed hair.

The two men climbed in, slammed the doors, and sealed off the outside world. Nathan smiled at Yuri, as if thinking secret thoughts.

“After you graduate, we have career plans for you,” he said. “Like to swim?”

5. ARCHANGELSK EVENT

January 1981

Moscow, Russia

The green-and-cream train, dirty with diesel smoke and winter’s grit, decelerated into Moscow’s Leningradsky Station with deep, angry groans of steel-on-steel. A bow wave of fine soot eddied along the tracks, heralding the arrival.

Katrina Fontanova watched a succession of watchers—faces framed in train windows, peering at the platform, gliding toward a final, shuddering stop. After a loud spit of the brakes, the train rested, wheezing. Then, passengers opened the doors and disembarked.

Katrina bundled against the cold in mittens, an oversized fur coat and big brown “Gum” boots. A mop of auburn hair spilled from under a *shapki* fur hat, flopping up and down on her shoulders as she bounced excitedly on tiptoes to see above the crowd. Then she saw him. “Vladimir! Here!” She vigorously waved an arm, catching his attention.

A lanky, dark-haired youth in a Soviet army uniform returned a grin, then closed the distance with a few long strides. He dropped a duffel bag near her feet and hugged her, towering seven inches above her five-foot, ten-inch frame.

“It’s good to see you. Good to be back,” he said.

“You’re not my little brother anymore—you’re all grown up.” She cocked her head and smiled quizzically. “So how does it feel to live and work up there?”

“Cold. Bitter cold. We pee ice cubes. It’s very painful.”

She laughed at the remark. “Did you get the present I sent for your birthday?”

“The socks? Electric socks? You know, I had to re-wire them for Russian current. How’d you get them?”

“Papa met an American at an embassy party. He had a catalog of tricky American inventions. He gave the socks to Papa as a gag gift.”

“Katrina...”

She smiled at him, but Vladimir’s face was now dead serious. “What?” she asked.

“The Americans. They have some amazing defense technology. A lot more amazing than electric socks. I’ll tell you about it in the car.”

“Sure,” she said, studying his face for a long moment. “Sure.” Then she shrugged, grabbed his arm and escorted him through the station. “Electric can openers. Now that’s amazing. And TV dinners, microwave ovens, and vibrating beds. Pretty decadent, huh?”

Vladimir managed a grin.

“I heard they even have personal computers.”

Vladimir halted. “No!”

“Yes,” she said, pulling his hat over his eyes. “The world is changing. Are you ready for it?” She continued walking. “Now that you are seventeen and out on your own, have you learned anything? Do you feel any smarter?”

He looked at her quietly, face contorted into a grimace. “For one thing, I now realize the Americans are a threat. They’re unstoppable. We are in a struggle for survival. For existence.”

They halted below a huge poster of Lenin fixed to the station’s marble wall. Lenin’s mouth curved in a gentle smile, but the eyes cut with the sharpness of a sickle’s blade.

“You’re starting to believe the government’s own propaganda,” Katrina said, a bit too loudly.

Vladimir looked at the poster and felt the eyes penetrate his soul. “Shhh.”

“Don’t shush me, little brother. You’re talking crap! The army filled your brain with horse shit. How can a culture of movies, mobsters and vibrating beds be a threat?”

“Father would slap you if he heard you say that,” Vladimir whispered, looking around.

“He’d just say it was my Ukrainian nature,” she responded, loudly.

A few heads turned in their direction. One head wore a gray fur cap with a red star. Vladimir recognized the uniform—GRU, military intelligence.

Katrina saw him, too, and quieted down. Then she whispered in Vladimir's ear. "Father is so involved with himself and his position that he confuses reality and illusion." She latched onto Vladimir's arm and escorted him toward the station exit. "Anyway, I like America. I want to go there. I want to meet Mickey Mantle and Yogi Berra."

Vladimir laughed. "You and your baseball fixation." Then he grabbed her neck with the crook of an arm and roughed her head.

"Ahh! Let me go," she squealed.

"I'll tell you. I want to go to America, too. As a spy. An attaché."

She halted again in mid stride, looked at him and giggled. "What?"

"I've worked a deal. They're going to send me to the university after my tour at Archangelsk is up. Then I'm going into the GRU. As an officer."

A wave of shock crossed her face. *Her own brother.*

"Excuse me, do you speak English?" A tall man wearing black approached from the front, smiling gently. Katrina thought he looked rather like an eagle, with a beak nose and shining eyes.

"Yes," Katrina said, tentatively. Vladimir nodded.

"Good." The man gazed at the truss-reinforced ceiling. "Do you know you're being watched?"

Vladimir looked up, saw nothing, then glanced around the station, mobbed with people hustling and bustling along different, chaotic, often colliding paths. The only other set of eyes that seemed to stare were those of Vladimir Lenin, from the poster.

"Who is watching?" Katrina asked.

"He is." The stranger popped open a briefcase stuffed with paper. He handed her English printed material. The banner read *The Watchtower*.

"Please take it," the man said. "It explains everything. What we do and what we think has cosmic consequences. He can read our minds. Here, I'll give you my phone number just in case." He scribbled with a black pen, then stretched his hand toward Katrina. Another large hand intercepted, locking his wrist like a vise.

"What are you doing?" a heavily accented voice asked, in English.

Katrina, Vladimir and the tall stranger cranked their heads around. The gray-uniformed GRU agent stood next to them, scowling. "This is forbidden," he said, plucking the paper with the telephone number. He handcuffed the man. Then, to Vladimir and Katrina, he said gruffly, "Get out of here or you'll be in trouble."

Dumbfounded, they walked briskly out of the station, not daring to talk until they were clear of crowds.

"What do you suppose that was all about?" Vladimir asked.

“Jehovah’s Witnesses. They’ve been a problem lately at all the stations. Most of them are Americans. They arrest them and then deport them. The authorities are afraid they will infect Russia with their ideas.”

“Hmm,” Vladimir said, quietly.

She smiled and jabbed at his chin. “So you want to be a GRU goon?”

“No,” he sniffed. “I’m going to be an intelligence analyst. They say I have the aptitude for it. Some people, like you, do well in school. Others, like me, have to incubate for a while before we discover what we’re really good at. They tell me I’m developing a reputation: rational, clever—”

“That bad?”

“Well... I have a smart sister. Maybe it’s in the genes.”

“You know what they say, Vladimir: ‘The tallest blade of grass is the first cut by the scythe.’”

“Yes, but they also say ‘the turtle goes nowhere without first sticking out its neck.’”

Katrina drew a finger across her neck in a knife-like move, mimicking the sound of a cutting blade. “Shh-u-u-nck!”

Vladimir laughed.

They walked to a gray, rusting, but miraculously functional Moskvich automobile, where Katrina unlocked the doors. After they climbed in, she started the engine, let it idle, and waited for the defrost to work. “Well, we’re within the five-to-one window,” she said, smiling. She referred to the well-known five-to-one operating principle of the Moskvich—for every mile you drive, you push another five.

“How are Mother and Papa getting along?” Vladimir asked.

“Nothing’s changed. It’s getting worse. I moved out, to a dorm at the university.” She fished through pockets, found a cigarette, and lit up. “He’s so serious about saving the world for communism. You know? It’s his passion. Mother chides him for it.” She shrugged. “Then, the usual happens. He gets angry.” She blew a long puff of smoke. “She should learn to adapt.”

“And how are you adapting?”

“To the university or to being away from our bickering parents.”

“Both.”

“Well... I graduate next year. So far I have the top rank in my class.

“Very good.”

“I’m hoping for graduate school afterwards.”

“And?”

“And I like being on my own. You know me.”

“Boyfriends? Lovers?”

“Ha! A luxury I can’t afford at this point.”

“You’re becoming a dull person, Katrina. You have to learn to take risks. Like me.”

“What could be duller than a GRU goon?”

“Analyst. And you’ve had that cigarette long enough.”

She took the cigarette from her mouth and stuck it on Vladimir’s lips. “Now maybe you’ll shut up,” she said.

“Never.”

“I’ll ask the questions, Mister GRU analyst. What makes you think you’ll be a good analyst? I would have pegged you for a lowly missile defense crewman. Isn’t that what the arm patch says?”

“Well... I’ll tell you a secret. You’re my sister. I know you won’t snitch on me.”

“Won’t I?”

“I was able to tell them things. I was able to analyze things. After the event.”

“What’s this? Some big, secret? The event?”

“The Americans, Katrina. They were in Archangelsk.”

* * *

“The only thing it could have been,” Vladimir said, “was American technology of very advanced design.” He stopped when his mother, Larisa, entered the room carrying a tray of teacups. Her hair was up in a tidy silver bun laced with red ribbon—a decorative effect in honor of the occasion.

“Something special,” she said. “My son is back, so we do something special.” She poured tea for Vladimir, Katrina and Ilya, her husband. The scent of orange and spices drifted through the tiny apartment. Ilya Fontanov sniffed, then poured a second vodka-on-the-rocks. He cocked a severely shorn, silver-gray head, squinted through a taut, thin face, and pointed accusingly at his wife.

“Why do you always interrupt? The boy was telling a story,” he said, harshly. “Sit down and let him finish. The Soviet Union is in danger, and you’re worried about tea.”

“I’ll leave the tea,” she said, giving her husband a dagger-like look, “and I’d leave your precious Union if I had the chance.” She smiled at Vladimir and Katrina, then departed.

Ilya rubbed his nose with a finger. “So—” he continued, breaking the tension with a question. “What happened next?”

“Uh... It was like a small fireball. It came in from the Northwest. It flew over our SA-6 site at an altitude of a few hundred meters. There was nothing on radar. We were scared. We thought maybe it was a nuclear weapon. But it just hung there, radiating these slow, luminous waves. And there was a blue light, like a spotlight. We tried to call battalion headquarters on the field phone, but it was dead. All our equipment was dead. I tell you, I thought we were dead.”

“Has anything like this ever happened before?” Katrina asked, sipping her tea.

“Not that I know of,” Vladimir said. “But then, the Army is so secretive. Look at it from their point of view. If you were at battalion headquarters, would you notify superiors that the Americans flew over your missile defense site, and you didn’t even shoot? That they glided in and somehow turned off all your equipment? And even if you told the Army, do you think they would tell Moscow? Heads would roll, I tell you.”

“Ahem...” Ilya Fontanov cleared his throat. Katrina and Vladimir turned their gaze. The Russian navy captain swirled vodka around in a glass. “In 1977, a similar thing happened at Petrosawodsk. It was very mysterious. All communications shut down for several hours while a fireball hovered over the city.”

“So what did they do? What did they find out?” Vladimir asked impatiently.

“They—the *vlasti*—the powers-that-be,” Katrina sniffed, “are bureaucrats. They probably wrote memos to each other for a year and tried to decide who to blame.”

“You know,” Ilya Fontanov said, poking a finger toward Katrina, “you have your mother’s Ukrainian nature. You should show more respect. Still...” he cocked a mischievous eyebrow, “you are almost right. They failed to act. They intellectualized.” He grabbed Vladimir’s arm. “This was Hegel’s error, you know. Marx corrected him. Remember that.”

Katrina rolled her eyes. Ilya saw it, and quickly got back on track. “At Petrosawodsk, millions of people saw the event, and newspapers across the border in Finland reported it. Some bureaucrats tried to keep the lid on, but there were too many people involved.”

“So—” Vladimir started.

“So, even under the ice, the river flows.” Ilya said, swirling ice around in his glass, then taking a gulp. He stared at Vladimir. “The KGB has an ongoing investigation. You are correct in supposing the Americans are a prime suspect. However, you are naive in believing GRU motives for wanting you onboard.” He sipped more vodka, then suppressed a little burp. “The Kremlin has kept the GRU out of it until now. The GRU would like to open their own investigation, since they know the matter has high-level political interest in Moscow. You have observed the phenomenon at close range. Therefore, you—a lowly missile crewman—are their lever, their charging horse.”

“Good,” Vladimir said. “I can ride this GRU horse—”

“No,” Ilya said, wagging his finger. “No. Better to ride the KGB horse to success. I’ll help you saddle up. Tomorrow.”

“How can you—”

“Trust me on this, Vladimir. I am your father. I have many connections with the KGB. The T-Directorate will do anything to stop the GRU from muscling in on their operation—even if it means helping you get promoted, and reassigned, and out of the clutches of the GRU. This is a horse that both of us can ride, Vladimir.”

6. WHALEBONE

January 1981

Norfolk, Virginia

“He can swim with the best of ‘em,” Lieutenant Commander Alan Monico said, smiling, as a wet-suited arm grabbed a handhold near the stern of the large, extensively modified Motor Fishing Vessel. The attached body soon flopped over the low freeboard.

George Nathan nodded, and watched the tall, broad-shouldered figure of Yuri Sverdlov climb onto the deck in full gear, where he dropped fins sloshing with water.

“Good to see you again,” Nathan said. “Knew you’d make the grade. Your old man was made of the same stuff.”

Yuri eyed him as he unfastened a quick release harness, removing his tank and Buoyancy Control vest in a single, fluid motion.

Nathan chuckled to himself and shook his head. “Still like to swim?”

Yuri pulled off his mask and pinched his nose with fingers, trying to equalize his middle ear. He felt warm water from his chest trickle down to his leg under the wet suit, then spill onto the deck. “Yeah, well...” he said, lamely, suppressing a snappy comeback in deference to Nathan’s grade.

He turned to Monico. “Commander, McGahn is below, stowing some gear on the vehicle. He’ll be topside shortly.”

“Okay,” Monico said, “we’ll wait to do the briefing. “Meanwhile, why not get dry?”

Yuri pulled off the black, neoprene wet suit, continuing to watch Nathan.

“So whaddya think of Aqua Man?”

“She’s a good boat,” Yuri said, without hesitation. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“You remember Geller?”

“Yes, Sir. The quiet guy. Your CIA pal.”

“Actually, he’s from the Office of Naval Research. He had connections with DARPA—Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency. So when this mission came down, and we wrestled with how to do it, Geller recalled that Aqua Man was a DARPA project. He pulled some strings. The sub’s on loan—just like Geller, and just like you.”

“She’s built for long range and stealth,” Yuri said, matter-of-factly. “So what kind of mission—”

“You’ll see,” Nathan said with a wink. “You’ll see.”

* * *

They waited for McGahn in the cabin below deck. Yuri sipped coffee, trying to piece the puzzle together. He knew that Nathan was primarily interested in his Russian language skills. He knew the mission involved underwater penetration. And he knew that familiarization with submarine pens was critical to mission success. Ergo—

Thump, thump, thump! They all turned their heads as McGahn heavy-footed his way down the steps and into the cabin, his powerful arm rubbing a towel over a damp, strawberry crewcut. “Hi there,” he said. “Hope you’re not waiting for me.”

“We were,” Nathan said. “Have a seat. I’ll get started.” After McGahn settled in, he began. “I don’t have any fancy charts with me. You’ll get all the information you need during the mission planning phase. What I want to do today is introduce you to Project Whalebone.”

Nathan handed Monico a series of black and white photos. They showed a littered underwater landscape interrupted by odd-looking marks and tracks. Monico flipped through them quickly, then gave them to McGahn.

“You’ve probably heard about Soviet submarine incursions in Swedish ports,” Nathan continued. “Well, you may not have heard about the ones in NATO harbors. Those pictures are from the sub base at Holy Loch.”

McGahn cleared his throat. “I heard they was just porpoises or somethin’.”

“Some people in the Swedish Navy would like everyone to believe that fish story,” Nathan continued. “Fact is, we have pictures like these and some hard, classified evidence to the contrary. Part of the

problem is that sonobuoys and other special sensors can't easily detect small-sized submersibles. Mini-subbs can bypass established 'roads'—navigable channels kept open through dredging. They have minimal displacement and the size and sonar signatures are similar to large sea mammals. There are even some Swedes who think they're dealing with Orca packs—killer whales. We know differently."

"Despite your classified evidence," Yuri said, "why would the Soviets do this? I mean, what about *Détente*?"

Nathan cackled loudly, sharply, uncharacteristically, gesturing with a hand, fingers pinched together. "And now, madames et monsieurs, we move from reality into ze realm of pure myth." He laughed again. "Sorry, I was just... The irony of it. The duplicity of it. *Détente*."

He straightened his face and continued. "Their western flank is in turmoil. The Czechoslovakian problem that Brezhnev thought he put to bed in '68 is resurfacing in Poland, where the Solidarity trade union movement is stirring things up. The Soviets blame the influence of foreign thoughts and ideas—a contagion they have to stop. Mini-sub penetrations are one dimension of the problem. Stakes are pretty high. A Soviet move into Jutland and Zealand would sever NATO's air and sea access to the Baltic. Then again, maybe they're just trying to pressure western governments to stay away. Still, it gives them a credible option. Human Intelligence reports say the harbor penetrations are part of a coordinated effort to survey marine sites for the pre-placement of nuclear devices."

The faces in the cabin grew silent and reflective.

Nathan continued in a softer voice. "They're using submersibles of unknown type. That's why we're unilaterally launching a Special Operations Force to investigate—Operation Whalebone. And you, gentlemen, are that hand-picked team."

McGahn smiled. "Hand-picked—as in pulling up flowers by the roots."

"Pay no attention to McGahn," Monico chimed. "He's our delicate little flower."

"Where're we goin'?" McGahn asked, looking cross-eyed at Monico. "Even flowers get curious."

"Poljarny," Nathan said. "A Soviet sub base north of Murmansk, on the Berents Sea."

The men looked at each other. Monico whistled, long and low. "You got our attention, Mr. Nathan. What's the mission?"

"To photograph the mini-subbs and, if possible, retrieve a sample of their hull coating. We need that information to develop countermeasures."

"Why Aqua Man?" Yuri asked.

"Yeah," Monico said. "Why not a standard CRRC insertion?"

"The probability of detection is too high," Nathan said. "We considered CRRC—Combat Rubber Raiding Craft. We also thought about using LO/L1 delivery—blowing you guys out of a submerged Sturgeon class sub. Great macho stuff, but there are problems. Waters above Murmansk are riddled with sensors. We sure as hell can't get a nuclear sub anywhere near the base."

"What about SDVs?" Yuri asked.

“Well, now you’re beginning to see the problem. We need stand-off capability—use a sub to get you in the neighborhood and a mini-submersible to get you within swimming distance. But standard Swimmer Delivery Vehicles—SDVs—are not pressurized. You’d be immersed in Arctic water the whole time. Even in dry suits, you’d risk hypothermia on a long-duration mission.”

“So the purpose of Aqua Man—” Yuri began.

“Is to execute one leg of a multi-stage delivery. You’ll travel from Holy Loch to Poljarny entirely underwater—some four thousand miles as the fish swims.”

“Ain’t no fish swims that way,” McGahn said, grinning.

“SEALS do,” Nathan replied with a wink. “Most of the trip will be aboard the Colby. She’s a ballistic missile sub modified for covert operations. She’ll carry Aqua Man inside a missile tube—a giant air lock. You’ll launch before you hit their sensor fields, then travel through the fjord to the base. The final phase will be an underwater swim into the sub pens.”

A million questions raced through Yuri’s brain. He homed in on one: “Why me? I’ve got no operational experience.”

Nathan smiled. “If things go wrong, the Escape and Evasion plan requires movement on foot across the Kola Peninsula. A Russian linguist is critical for success.”

Yes, Lieutenant Sverdlov, he thought, you may already have won another trip to Hell. He remembered Little Creek, Virginia. After graduation, he endured six weeks of the most grueling torture the military dishes out—BUD, Basic Underwater Demolition training. And a brief, Central Intelligence Agency courses at Langley and Camp Peary. And now, I’m a CIA-trained SEAL—Sea, Air and Land team. That, and sixty cents, will buy me a cup of coffee in some places. Or entitle me to a dignified burial—if they can find the body. Maybe that’s the prize for Operation Whalebone.

“One more thing,” Nathan said. “The next phase of your training will be in Alaskan waters—navigation exercises. Aqua Man’s equipped with an advanced Inertial Nav System similar to what’s used on aircraft, but based on a ring laser. You’ll need it to avoid sensor nets while operating submerged at night.”

“Night,” Monico said.

“SEALS can do anything,” Nathan said. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I gotta run.” He shook hands with Monico, climbed back to the deck, and departed in a small, motorized multihull.

They watched it skim its way back toward Norfolk Naval Base.

Yuri turned to Monico. “We’re going through the looking glass, Commander.” He smiled, then nodded toward the departing boat, now almost lost in the kaleidoscope of undulating waves and low, glinting sunlight. “It has a certain symmetry, don’t you think? Whalebone’s the mirror image of Soviet operations—a mini-sub penetration to get information about Soviet mini-sub penetrations.”

“Well, McGahn said, wiping his mouth with the back of a hand, “I’m ready to kick Russian butt.”

Monico laughed. “You don’t get it, McGahn. We’re not kicking anyone’s butt. We’re collecting

information. Millions of dollars, lots of time, and lots of risk—for some very special information.”

“Yessir, Bossman.”

“And Sverdlov—when you look into that mirror, just remember that we’re the good guys.”

Duty, honor, country, Yuri thought. *Gotcha*. He looked back at the sea, tried to spot Nathan’s boat, but couldn’t find it. It seemed lost in the ambiguity of earth and sky.

7. PRODIGY

June 1981

Fort Dietrick, Maryland

“Wa-a-ll, Richard, you’re real special. You know?” Billy Stanton, now in his early forties, gave the 13-year-old, six-foot tall Richard Chandra a fatherly pat on the arm and smiled.

He realized that the flesh he touched was a chimera—a genetic mosaic, not entirely human. Given the mother’s mental predisposition, maybe not entirely sane. Still, his decision to continue with the experiment had been infinitely rational. It was a risk worth taking. Now, he could see the payoff.

“Not many people can ace both advanced quantum physics and neurophysiology,” he chuckled. “Specially at your age. What am I gonna do with you?” One hand played with a hedge of gray-brown hair surrounding a bald pate.

Richard reached into a jar of cookies on Stanton’s desk.

“Please,” Billy said, “help yourself.”

The boy walked to the window overlooking the parade grounds, and munched, watching the birds. “Is this a career counseling session? Or what?”

“Well, yeah. Sort of. Good guess.”

“I’m glad we’re finally having this talk, Billy.”

“A career, Richard—at least any career worth a damn—is built on hopes and dreams. I know I have my hopes and dreams. They’re big. And noble. And they’ll change the world. I think you share some of those same dreams.”

“If only you could imagine, Billy.”

“Ahem. Well, what I want to propose—it’s kind of a pact.”

Richard nibbled at a cookie, waiting for Billy to finish the thought.

“Yeah, a pact.” Billy rubbed his nose, looked at the floor, and scratched the back of his head. “See, Richard... I’m gonna level with you—tell it like it is. Up to this point, you’ve been... kind of... a guinea pig. Oh—but we helped you. My goodness. We gave you opportunities to learn, a nice place to live, and just a lot of things. But you’re something we’ve been studying. Something special.”

Richard Chandra quietly gazed into Billy’s eyes.

“This is a turning point in our relationship, Richard. I see now that you can help us. You’ve got a gift. There are certain problems—technical and scientific—that we’re tryin’ to solve. Almost all of them are related to you—who you are and how you think.”

“So what’s the deal? What’s this pact?”

“You come on board, and I give you funding to follow your dreams, your intellectual curiosity. I know this means a lot to you. In fact, I know it means everything to you. Solving problems. The riddles of the universe. That sort of thing.”

“But there’s a catch?”

“Yeah. The catch is... once you get in, you can’t get out. Once I give you information—even information about yourself, the rules of the project govern you. We protect information. There are very severe... penalties.”

“I could just walk away. Right now.”

Billy chuckled and shook his head. “No, you couldn’t.”

Chandra bit into the cookie, eyes fixed.

Billy’s face darkened. “We wouldn’t let you.”

“I see.”

“Anyway, why would you do it? We’d be giving you what you want. Think of it Richard. Unlimited resources. Just follow your dreams.”

“Or you’ll invoke severe penalties. That’s the deal?”

“Nobody gets out, Richard. Not even me.”

“Got any more cookies?”

Stanton smiled, looking at the empty jar. “Sure.” He pulled out a bag of ginger snaps from a drawer and put them on the desktop. Then he slit the bag with a letter opener. “Just for you. Anything you want.”

Chandra sat on the edge of the desk. “So what’s the problem? Why do you need my help?”

“Let’s just say that a potential adversary has some very sophisticated technology. We’re trying to reverse engineer it. We have people who are smart in very narrow areas, but we don’t have anyone who can understand all of the pieces—all of the interactions. The big picture. Know what I mean?”

“That’s where I come in?”

“Yeah.”

“And I can have my own lab?”

“Of course.”

“And all I need to do is—”

“Solve the puzzle.”

“I see. And the puzzle—”

“Is really about you.”

“Why am I here? Where am I going? How do I function?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, then. I accept. It’s the scientific equivalent of contemplating my own navel.”

“Great,” Billy said, with a laugh. “I just need to read you in on some pretty classified information. Remember, once you’re in... You can’t...” He stopped. “Let me tell you about Operation Majority.”

Richard smiled, bit a ginger snap, and said casually, “I already know about Operation Majority.”

Billy gaped, then felt his throat clutch. He started coughing—a dry, hacking cough that lingered as the only response to Richard’s statement.

Richard laughed. “What? You think I’m stupid?”

Billy stared in amazement, suppressing another cough.

“Give me your hand, Billy. We need to shake on this deal.”

Billy reached out. In a brief moment—the wink of a coal-black eye—Richard stabbed Billy’s hand with the letter opener. “Ow!” he yelled, backing away, dripping blood.

Richard stalked him, eyes burning, gripping the blade. “Don’t move, Billy. I’m not going to hurt you.”

Billy backed against a safe, hemmed in, eyes flitting, looking for an escape route. Chandra moved his hand close to Billy’s face, then sliced open the palm. He dropped the letter opener with a *clank*.

“Give me your hand again, Billy.”

Billy cowered against the safe.

“I said, give me your hand!” He grabbed Billy’s bleeding hand and squeezed. “Now we’re blood brothers. Now our pact is sealed. Now our fate is intertwined. Isn’t this how it’s done?”

8. THE NORTH

June 1981

North is a compass point, but also a state of mind—a viewpoint in which the world is predictable, peaceful, frozen. Just as Earth’s poles can switch in an instant, so, too, can mental poles shift—to a world that is risky, fluid and terrifying.

Yuri thought about this when they put the Aqua Man submersible through its paces under the Arctic ice pack. From a depth of sixty feet, the world seemed two-toned. On the surface there was the all-encompassing whiteness. Below the surface, there was a pervasive darkness, and the groan of ice shifting and splitting. Formlessness warred with structure. Slithering cracks threatened to spill one world into the next.

In the ambiguities of this nether realm, they practiced their mission, guiding Aqua Man to precise coordinates in murky water. Only the Inertial Navigation System, the INS, could verify their position. Only a box of electronics could keep score. The team became good at this kind of navigation, entrusting their lives to technology, and to the engineers who fashioned it.

In June, 1981, Monico and Nathan said the team had practiced enough. They were ready.

An Air Force C5A moved the mini-sub and entire SOF team to the operational staging area at Holy Loch, Scotland, where they mated Aqua Man with the *Colby*, a nuclear submarine. At Holy Loch, they planned the final details of the mission.

Under cover of darkness, they steamed from Holy Loch, traveling submerged into deep waters on the eastward side of Kolbeinsy Ridge, one of the northern protrusions of the Mid-Atlantic ridge system. They skirted the ridge, maneuvering through the Jan Mayen fracture zone, a system of geologic transform faults. The rugged underwater topography, with steep-walled valleys, provided excellent cover as they moved northward.

North of the Arctic Circle, along the Mohns Ridge, the *Colby* turned eastward in a beeline toward the Kola Gulf, entrance to a fjord-like inlet of the Berents Sea.

As they closed on the Kola Peninsula, deep water, maps of the Soviet sensor nets and a sizable portion of luck allowed the *Colby* to penetrate undetected close to the mouth of the fjord. In cold, turbid water off the coast, Yuri’s three-man team prepared for a night launch.

* * *

“Set condition 1SQ,” the loudspeaker squawked.

Yuri’s adrenaline level peaked. ‘1SQ’ was code for launch of the Special Operations Force.

Lieutenant Commander Alan Monico, team leader, gave the Colby’s Bosun a final thumbs-up.

The pressure door closed with a sharp *clang* that faded to a reverberating rumble inside the modified missile tube. The locking handle spun around, sealing the compartment.

Yuri listened intently to Monico’s instructions. “Remember. We check each other’s gear, then we check the submersible. We see anything that’s not right, we abort. Okay?”

They nodded.

Monico tapped the pressure door, then pulled his mask snug. There was a brief, low whine followed by a loud rush of water. As the chamber filled, Yuri cross-checked his gear with McGahn. Then they both checked Monico.

Seawater boiled upward around Aqua Man, pointed vertically toward the sea hatch.

It’s like a rocket, Yuri thought—a spaceship ready for blast off.

His gloved hand slid over the sub’s clean, dull-black exterior—a function of the non-metallic, carbon-based composite that comprised both the hull and structural members.

He huddled with the others around the base, individually testing their breathing apparatus, a German-made, closed-cycle Draeger system. There were no bubbles. A small tank added pure oxygen to exhaled carbon dioxide, re-cycling their own breath.

Hydraulics lifted Aqua Man and the divers outside the Colby’s pressure hull. Red flood lights illuminated the work area as they gently guided the mini-sub to a horizontal mooring position and unsealed the Open Water Diver Access Hatch, dubbed “The Well.” It allowed divers to move freely between the underwater world and Aqua Man’s air-filled interior.

Yuri and Monico climbed aboard.

Monico moved to the pilot’s seat, shucking his mask and vest. “System’s check, Sverdlov,” he said. “By the numbers.” They both went through the checklist, noting only a minor problem with a pump. When they replaced a fuse, it worked perfectly.

McGahn climbed through the Well, dripped water for a moment as he unhooked quick release straps, then pulled off his mask. “She looks fine on the outside, Skipper,” he said. “Had to stow some loose crap.”

“Seal the Well for running,” Monico said. “I’ll bring us up to one atmosphere.”

Yuri closed the hatch, then felt his ears pop as air pressure dropped

—a move necessary to avoid the bends on this type of mission. He looked at Monico. “Pressure door’s tight. We’re ready to go, Sir.”

“Roger that, sailor. Hold onto your jock straps, gentlemen.” Monico detached from the mooring point, steered a lazy turn into the fjord, then surged forward on quiet electric motors through dark, sub-Arctic waters.

As they moved through the inlet, Monico carefully bypassed navigable channels seeded with Soviet sonobuoys. A navigation error meant certain detection and probable capture or death. The ring laser INS provided continuing position read-outs on the console.

The Phase Two penetration was blissfully uneventful. They glided unseen through shallow waters to the perimeter of the Russian base, adjusted to neutral buoyancy and stopped dead in the water, just short of gates that controlled surface and underwater access to the harbor, and beyond it, the Soviet submarine pens.

“Looks like Intel knew their stuff,” Monico said, dropping anchor and stabilizing the craft. He quietly thanked the anonymous human intelligence source responsible for pinpointing the gates.

Monico carefully increased interior air pressure, balancing it against the pressure of external water. This allowed Yuri to re-open the hatch, exposing the Well to the sea’s liquid membrane.

Monico powered down, leaving just a few systems on ‘standby.’

Yuri strapped on a full-face mask and fins, then plunged through the opening, experiencing an initial temperature shock, and with it, a slight disorientation. Up and down directions were blurred by a combination of icy water and darkness. He gripped a handhold on the sub’s hull, then swam to his gear—sealight, camera and beacon. As he waited for Monico and McGahn, he adjusted to neutral buoyancy. He floated, “weightless” near his two companions.

We can do this, he thought. Find the mini-sub. Photograph them. Get scrapings from the hull. Piece of cake.

He helped McGahn fasten mooring lines to the sub, then moved with the team in a single file to the bottom, leaving the Well’s hatch open in case they needed a fast re-entry, putting their faith in on-board servo systems to keep the sea at bay.

A large, dark form shot between the swimmers.

Yuri tapped Monico, the lead swimmer. He gave the hand signal for “fish” and pointed excitedly.

The three-man team formed a circle, flashlights slicing the darkness. Four large forms flashed by again. This time, they could see the animals clearly—harbor seals. The animals were highly territorial. If they felt threatened, they could be a dangerous nuisance.

Monico cocked a speargun.

The animals made another quick pass, then disappeared.

When the seals didn't return, the swimmers gathered in a circle, inspected each other's gear, then signaled "okay."

As they swam toward the sea gate, they trailed a lifeline behind them.

Yuri moored an acoustic beacon near the gate, built to emit a 180 KHz signal. Sea water absorbed the signal beyond 100 meters, minimizing the risk of detection. On the return trip, compass navigation would get them close. Direction finding on the beacon, using a Digital Range Meter, would guide them the last 100 meters.

They tied the lifeline to the sea fence. If they could find the beacon, the line would get them back to Aqua Man.

The sea gate dissolved into inky blackness beyond the range of their lights. It was an enormous metal frame structure wrapped in steel cable. The sheer size of the gate, and Russian engineering, guaranteed an imperfect fit between the gate and the fence. They found a hole big enough to swim through.

Yuri hoped the next phase of the mission would go as smoothly.

* * *

Vladimir Fontanov reached for a telephone next to a blinking red light on his battalion command post console.

"Central," he said. The handset blasted white noise into his ear, with intermittent fragments of human speech. He picked out the words 'tracking', 'airborne' and 'jamming.' He swiveled in his chair, calling out to an open, hatch-like metal door. "Captain!"

There was no reply. Vladimir thought for a moment about leaving his post to search for the Captain. *Where could he be? What could he be doing?*

There were only six modular shelters in the complex of trailers and antennas. Most of the wheeled shelters were stuffed with electronics, communications or backup power generators needed to launch SA-6 surface-to-air missiles. Four of the shelters were physically connected, to allow shirtsleeve operation and freedom of movement, even during the extreme cold of Siberian winter.

The dull monotony of 'scope watching' had transformed unexpectedly into chaos, and nothing in Vladimir's tech manuals told him what to do.

At a nearby acquisition and tracking scope, Vladimir's teammate, Corporal Ivan Birger—young, thin and tow-headed—raised his voice. "I'm being jammed."

Vladimir put the phone down and waited. Muffled sounds issued from beyond the doorway, but still no captain.

"I can't see anything, here," Birger called in a nervous, squeaky voice. "Why can't I see anything?"

Three more lights lit on Vladimir's console. He picked up one of the phones. "Central."

"This is unit Six-One-Alpha. We have *** sphere moving over position *** and *** jamming. Over."

The Americans, Vladimir thought. *They're over Archangelsk and jamming—again.* "Give me a bearing from your position."

"*** -er, we have bear- ***"

"Captain!" Vladimir yelled.

This time, he heard a body crash to the metal floor. More sounds, then unsteady footsteps. The captain, sans shirt or shoes, belt unhinged, fly open, staggered into the entryway. He rubbed a bleeding forehead. "What? Tell me what?"

"The Americans are over Archangelsk. They're jamming us."

The captain waved his hand and shook his head, as if wishing the problem would go away. "Tell someone in authority," he said.

Lights inside the shelter dimmed, flickered, then returned to normal.

"Evgeny," a female voice called. "Come back here. Won't you? What happened to the lights?"

"Yes," he said. "Tell someone in authority. That will do it." He turned, steadied himself, and wobbled out of the shelter.

I did tell someone in authority, Vladimir thought. He dropped the phones and raced to the outside door of the metal shelter, unlatched it and opened it to the night.

Beyond a small growth of pine forest, outlined by the yellow-white haze of runway lights, lay the airfield. Hovering above it, in a spectacle that defied all logic, was a pulsing fireball that released slowly expanding translucent spheres of orange light.

Vladimir's first thought was, *Bastards!* Then, *Why?* Then, *My God!*

He watched in awe as a huge "Bear-G" reconnaissance aircraft tipped its giant wings in a steep bank around the field, circling the fireball, apparently unable or unwilling to land. It leveled off, then headed out, away from the field, lost beyond the hedge of pine trees.

Vladimir left the door open, then raced back to the console and dialed the tower.

"This is Battery Two Central," Vladimir said, when they answered. "Is the field operational?"

A tense, high-pitched voice responded. "Radar Approach Control equipment and scanner radar are both inoperative. Repeat, both inoperative—due to high frequency jamming from an unknown source. Backup systems are also inoperative. We have no power—a total blackout. I'm surprised this voice line is working—nothing else seems to." A sigh issued from the speaker. "It's happening again, isn't it? Like a few months ago."

“Can you verify—The object appears to be directly over the field.”

“Affirmative.”

“If we can get a missile off, should we do it?”

The voice on the phone paused for a moment. “I can’t see anybody on the field from here. I think they’re afraid to go out. I’ll sound the warning to clear the area. We don’t need power for that. We can crank it mechanically.”

Through the open door, Vladimir heard the wail of the air defense siren.

“When we see your plume,” the tense voice continued, “we’ll duck and cover here in the tower. You could damage equipment or aircraft, but I don’t see any other—Shit! He’s not going to do that, is he?”

Heavy vibrations shook Vladimir’s metal shelter, toppling a half-filled tea cup, as a low-flying turboprop aircraft roared directly overhead. Vladimir dropped the phone and raced to the doorway to see the giant Tu-95 “Bear-G” flying 200 feet off the deck, ventral turret sluing toward the fireball. *Crazy!* Vladimir thought. *He has only the gun for defense.*

At the treeline, the Bear began to climb—slowly at first, then rapidly. When it was over the field and slightly above the fireball, it unleashed a stream of 23 mm rounds, interspersed with tracers—to no effect.

Vladimir watched the Bear recede. *Well, at least that other thing doesn’t shoot back.*

The Bear angled to the northwest, banked steeply, then headed back, straight for the object, firing more rounds and tracers.

Then the aircraft buffeted as it hit one of the expanding orange spheres. Engines abruptly silenced. It glided in toward the SA-6 site, static electricity crackling and popping along the giant wings, four turboprop engines frozen at dead stop.

“What’s going on?”

Vladimir turned to see the Captain propping himself up in the threshold, pale and shaken. *No time for explanations.*

Outside, the falling aircraft loomed larger and larger. One wing tipped into a power line. The aircraft see-sawed, exploded, then hit the ground in a trail of fire that rolled toward Vladimir’s shelter.

“Down!” he yelled.

He slammed the metal door and scampered behind the console just as the shockwave hit, bouncing him inches off the heaving floor, slamming the captain head-first into an equipment rack. Shrapnel pinged against the outer walls. Dirt and stones dropped from above.

When the rain of metal and debris finally stopped, Vladimir got up to survey the damage. The shelter was littered with paper, spilled liquid and numerous small items, but was otherwise intact. Birger coughed, climbed out from behind his chair, and gave a shaky thumbs up.

The captain lay sprawled on the floor, face bleeding. *They'll make him a hero for this*, Vladimir thought, propping him up out of the way.

He touched the door, found it was slightly warm, and carefully opened it. A wall of fire blazed 100 meters away, bellowing acrid, oil-filled smoke into the night. *There won't be survivors*. Vladimir turned back inside, coughing, closing the door.

"Birger!"

"Yes?" his companion said, sliding back into his seat.

"Can you get a bearing on the jamming strobe?"

"We'll see." He looked at his scope, blanketed by indecipherable dancing lights. "The good news is it still seems to be working."

"The bad news," Vladimir said, toggling test switches, "is that we can't launch missiles."

Birger switched tracking modes, couldn't see anything, then switched modes again. The display changed to a snowy line of phosphor. "Got it. Strobe is at two seven zero."

Vladimir moved to the plastic-covered area map, marking the position of the battalion's radar with a grease-penciled dot. He picked up the phone.

"Tower—You still there?"

"Barely," came the reply.

"Give me an optical bearing to the object," Vladimir said, penciling a light line along the jamming strobe's 270 bearing.

"Two-three-zero," the tower responded.

Vladimir plotted the intersect of the two bearing lines with a small X. "Good. Now I'm going to ask for updates from your positions at regular intervals. Birger?"

"Still two-seven zero. Unchanged."

"Tower?"

"Two-three-five."

It's moving away, Vladimir thought. Over the next several minutes, with help from Birger and the tower, he roughed out the object's northwesterly track. *Murmansk. It's headed for Murmansk.*

When the object moved beyond the tower's visual horizon, Vladimir phoned Murmansk district to warn them. They, in turn, alerted all military facilities in the area, including the submarine base at Poljarny.

* * *

Where are the lights? Yuri thought.

They swam on and on, pushing water with their fins, past the same repetitive bottom, into the same repetitive blackness. A bubble of liquid night trapped them in all directions.

Just when Yuri began to think the harbor map was inaccurate, or that they had drifted hopelessly off course in the currents, the bottom sloped upward. He saw the floodlit entrance to the pens.

The lights were more than beacons marking the base. They were a polarity for the mind. An end point.

They cut their sealights, penetrated further, and approached a slick, gray hull.

India, Yuri thought. *Intel was right.*

They skimmed along the submarine's lower pressure hull, swimming upside down for better viewing. The 350 foot length, sharply angled bow and absence of torpedo tubes told them they were looking at an India Class submarine.

They checked for any evidence of peculiar mission-orientation, but found none below the waterline. Monico gave a hand signal. They started to move aft.

Then, the lights went out.

It was a peculiar kind of power outage, plunging the bay into total darkness, silencing all electro-mechanical noise. Even their battery-powered sealights didn't work. Monico's Digital Range Meter wouldn't illuminate. Everything electric was inoperable.

They hung there, clinging to bottom of the India submarine, afraid to surface, afraid to leave.

They've detected us, Yuri thought. *They're watching us. They know where we are. This is a game. They're playing with our minds.*

Lights in the submarine pen flickered. Power returned to a steady flow. They could see each other again.

Monico motioned for them to stay in position, then carefully surfaced. He looked around for a moment, then popped back down, signaling for Yuri and McGahn to follow him up.

Local time was two AM.

Inside the covered pen, there were no signs of guards or naval personnel. They were grateful for Soviet efficiency and for the distractions of an empire in chaos—or an unscheduled power failure.

They were looking at the only India Class sub owned by the Soviet Northern Fleet. U.S. spy satellites monitored its construction at the Komsomolsk shipyard in the early '70s. The Russians launched it in

1975. It had no known weapons—an unusual feature for a Soviet sub. The other unusual feature was an after casing built to carry two submersibles in a ‘piggy back’ fashion, with docking hatches accessible from the mother ship. The Russians leaked the story that the submersibles were DSRVs—underwater rescue vehicles. Naval intelligence suspected this was just a cover—disinformation.

From the water, Yuri could see the top of one submersible just aft of the sail. The second submersible was missing.

Monico signaled to stay in the water. He exchanged his fins for Yuri’s camera, climbed along the edge of the after casing and moved to the submersible docking platform. He looked in. Then he scraped a small amount of material from the side of the submersible, took four photographs from various positions and slipped back into the water. He didn’t put the fins back on until he was safely on the bottom.

Monico gave Yuri the camera, checked his watch, then signaled to terminate the mission.

They had what they came for.

* * *

Just keep a fix on Monico, Yuri thought. Everything will be okay.

He could see Monico’s fins just ahead, beating up and down in the light of the sub pens, going deeper, fading. *Now you see him, now...*

Monico vanished like a black fish in a sea of ink, but Yuri still held the buddy line. Behind him, he felt McGahn’s pull on the rope.

He continued swimming, but his mind played tricks. There were noises. Or so he thought. Dim light played against the water’s rippling, silvery canopy. Or so he thought.

Light? That can’t be. He hit the illumination button on his watch. *It’s not daylight yet. Won’t be for—*

A spotlight blinked ahead. *Monico! It must be okay to turn the sealights back on.* He flicked the switch, throwing a steady beam at the swimmer. Monico reached him, grabbed the light, and switched it off.

Yuri and McGahn huddled next to their leader, floating, neutrally buoyant. Strange sounds—moans and clicks—penetrated the water. In the darkness, Yuri saw another light, in a direct line between their position and the sea gate. It bobbed up and down on the bottom, moved toward them, and seemed to be guided by some intelligence.

Then, the light went out.

Above them, the choppy membrane separating sea from sky turned translucent, tinged by bright light from a giant globe hovering above it.

They've found us, Yuri thought.

In the added light, he could see the outline of a mini-sub, possibly the mate to the one onboard the *India*. It had caterpillar treads.

The sub seemed built to crawl along the sea floor like some giant bottom-dwelling organism. Now, it was as dead as a stone—no lights, frozen.

The ambient light changed to silver, then dimmed as the illumination source above the water moved away.

They were in darkness again.

The tracked submarine's lights came on. Yuri watched it move at a slow but steady clip—perhaps two to three miles per hour—in the direction of the submarine pens.

He listened to its sounds—clicks and whistles and groans. *It makes noises like a whale. Maybe audio camouflage.*

Harbor seals streaked ahead of the mini-sub, briefly caught in its beam.

It's fooling them, too, Yuri thought. *They think the sounds come from a predator. They're frantic. They're scouting.*

He moved behind the submersible, adjusted camera settings and took snapshots.

He let the sub roll forward into the darkness and waited for McGahn and Monico. When it was out of sight, he flashed his sealight in a 360 degree arc around his position. Two other lights winked back. The team rejoined.

Monico took the lead, lighting the path with one hand, watching his Digital Range Meter with the other.

A giant steel-framed structure materialized in front of them. Monico swept it with his light. The sea gate was open. Caterpillar tracks ran through it, along the bottom.

Yuri threw his beam onto the beacon and the lifeline. *Almost home*, he thought.

They swam through the gate. Yuri was tired, puzzled by the mysterious lights, ready to breath normal air again. He suddenly tumbled in the wash from a large moving object. He assumed they were being buzzed by harbor seals.

He felt McGahn's hand grab his vest from behind. *What?* he thought, turning around. A powerful wash of water propelled him sideways. *This is no harbor seal. It's a lot bigger!*

He somersaulted out of control in a liquid vortex.

The mysterious light returned, changing the water canopy to a silvery, glittering mirror, sketching the outlines of dark shapes and undulating sea bottom.

As he oriented toward the light, flipping right-side up, he saw the severed end of McGahn's arm. The hand still gripped his vest. Monico was no longer in front. He had disappeared.

Dimly, he could see the mini-sub, perhaps thirty feet away. He swam for his life, seized a ladder rung below the Well and tried to pull himself up.

A powerful force yanked him backwards.

He tumbled upside down, again and came face to face with Death. The huge black and white sea mammal tugged at Doug's severed arm, still fastened to Yuri's BCD. *Orca!*

He kicked as hard as he could.

The arm came free—one end still in the killer whale's mouth.

He felt a flipper wedge between snapping, razor sharp teeth. Another kick pulled his foot free of the fin, but he lost swimming leverage.

He tumbled away from the Orca. The mysterious light faded back into darkness, leaving him blind. He thought he remembered Aqua Man's position, scrambled toward it, and crashed into the sub's hull, falling downward, dazed.

He felt for handholds.

A bow-wave of water pushed toward him.

He pulled himself through the Well with a single, continuous movement and fell to the deck.

The boat rocked violently.

Water drenched his body as the Orca hit the hull and snapped its jaws through the Well's opening.

Aqua Man's motion dampened down to a quiet, but sickening see-saw.

Yuri pulled himself up. He looked through the observation port. A giant eye, shedding greasy whale tears, looked back. He sensed raw, predatory intelligence behind the huge eating machine.

The Orca backed away. It was fully the size of Aqua Man—roughly 30 feet. It made noises similar to the Russian mini-sub. Low-pitched barks, whistles, screams and moans penetrated the hull. It called other members of the pack.

Yuri turned on the outboard lights to get a better look. Monstrous shadow shapes lurked near the edge of darkness, returning banshee-like calls to their leader.

Smaller, streamlined shapes darted across this field of monsters. *The harbor seals!*

The Orcas recognized a new feeding opportunity and moved quickly in pursuit, not satisfied with recent man-sized meals.

* * *

As Yuri steered Aqua Man back to the extraction point for a rendezvous with the Colby, he was shaken. One part of his brain performed mechanically, working the controls, doing what it was trained to do. The other part of his brain flip-flopped between crushing emotions and wild, intellectual speculation.

Why? My God, why?

What was the light? What did it have to do with the caterpillar sub and the Orcas?

What went wrong?

There was an objective reality he had to deal with—now and forever. Two people died in a split second. His camera broke on impact with the Orca. The sample of hull coating that Monico carried back in a pouch was now inside some whale's belly. Nature or Soviet biological weapons had intervened in their mission, demonstrating the limits of precision planning.

Why? My God, why?

Yuri searched for answers. Maybe the animals had been trained to kill, in a program that paralleled a similar, U.S. Navy effort.

But the pieces don't fit.

Still, there was another possibility—the masking sounds of the Russian mini-sub had unexpected consequences.

By making sounds like an Orca, the sub attracted Orcas. Holy Loch and Karlskrona created an ambiguous picture for naval analysts.

Since no humans understood the Orca language, the Russian may have inadvertently broadcast messages to Orca hunting packs— *here there is food*.

What about the light? The phenomenon was clearly artificial, with profound implications. Yuri decided the Russians had a new, advanced Anti-Submarine Warfare capability. *They were hunting us. They were tracking us. They were trying to kill us.*

This was Yuri's theory—a theory developed by an active mind, based on ambiguous data. It was a theory that he nevertheless believed, as he steered Aqua Man toward the Colby's rendezvous position, then homed in on its acoustic beacon—a beacon designed to mimic the communications signals of other seagoing life forms.

9. POUNCE

June 1981

New Mexico

“Two nine eight, seven six five nine,” the radio squawked.

The patrolman keyed the microphone. “Yeah... This is Sergeant Pete Beach, New Mexico State Patrol. My folks patched me through to your phone. I called the Command Post at Kirtland Air Force Base. They weren’t interested in what I had to say. Maybe you are.” He craned his neck toward the sky, watching.

“What’ve you got?” the radio voice asked.

“Some kind of aircraft. Very peculiar. Hovers like a ‘copter and cruises like an airplane. It moves pretty fast. I saw it land in the Manzano’s between Belen and Albuquerque. I thought maybe it was some kind of experimental thing. But sometimes the maneuvers look pretty dangerous, you know? Out of control. There’s gotta be somebody interested in this. If you aren’t, maybe FAA.”

“What’s it doing now?”

“Rolling on its longitudinal axis. This big ol’ cigar-shaped thing—just hovering in the sky and rolling. I’ve been following it around in my patrol car now for about an hour and—”

Beach watched the object in the sky, transfixed by a sudden change in dynamics.

“You still there?” the radio voice asked. “Hello. Hello.”

“It’s tumbling, like it’s out of control. It’s tumbling horizontally, moving away. Faster and faster. Like it’s falling sideways. You should see it. God, it’s spectacular.”

“Do you see any kind of—”

“Shit!”

“Beach. What’s it doing? Beach?”

Beach looked toward a distant area of mesas and steep rock walls, where a glow perfused the sky in erratic blue light. He took a deep breath, and talked slowly. “Coyote Canyon—That’s the test range, isn’t it? For Air Force Weapons Lab? And Defense Nuclear Agency?”

“What about it?”

“Well, they can’t ignore it now, can they? Kirtland Command Post, I mean.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Cause that’s where it just crashed.”

* * *

The AH-1F Cobra gunship rolled a hard left, narrowly avoiding a jutting mesa. In the front seat, Gottlieb gripped his chest straps and heaved, spitting his stomach into his lap. He fumbled in his pockets, couldn’t find kleenex, then used his sleeve to wipe. His hand trembled as he blindly waved at Gillford Chisholm—young, muscular, cocky—at the stick in the elevated backseat. “Please,” he wheezed into the intercom, “go slower. I’m an old man. My heart...”

Outside the cockpit, the steep yellow-and-rust walls of Coyote Canyon zipped by at over a hundred and fifty miles an hour, almost close enough to touch. Gottlieb dry-heaved.

“Gotta keep up my airspeed if we’re gonna beat the Air Police there,” Chisholm said, matter-of-factly, behind his helmet-mounted display.

Gottlieb nodded, then twisted his face as though in pain. On a narrow dirt road below, a blue jeep sped in the same direction, trailing a plume of dust.

“Air cops,” Chisholm said, as they passed the vehicle. Gottlieb tried to look, but centrifugal force jerked his body backwards as Chisholm pulled on the stick, arcing the craft upward, turning in a tight spiral, dropping back down into the canyon. Gottlieb felt his body float off the seat under negative gs. He dry-heaved again.

The Cobra slowed as it rushed toward the ground, hovering above the road, waiting, boiling up dust.

The blue jeep, marked ‘Air Police’, rounded a bend, then lurched to a stop, blocked by the helicopter, pointed nose-to-nose.

“You have no authority here,” Chisholm announced on the bullhorn. Words and chopper noise reverberated through the canyon. The jeep did not move. The helicopter hovered. “Go back. Operation Pounce has control. Check it out.”

The Cobra held its position as the Air Policemen made the radio call.

After half a minute, Chisholm turned to Gottlieb inside the cockpit. “We need to be on-scene. We can’t wait around for this bureaucratic shit.” Gottlieb nodded, still gray-faced and troubled by a wobbly stomach. Chisholm armed weapons.

Inside the jeep, a new development caught the attention of the two Air Policemen. The Cobra’s gun

turret slued the long-barreled 30mm cannon toward the jeep's windshield.

The driver dropped the radio, slammed the jeep in reverse and accelerated backwards on spinning wheels, rounding a turn, out of harm's way.

Chisholm fired a warning burst.

"You've just gotta get their attention," he said with a grin as he yawed the Cobra around, pulled up and gained airspeed.

Gottlieb made a mental note that he would need a cover story for the incident. *For every action, there is an equal and opposite bureaucratic reaction.*

He began to feel much better. Chisholm made fewer maneuvers, and his stomach had nothing else to contribute.

They pulled up, rolling over a ridge, skimming the top of a mesa in nap-of-the-earth flight, stopping at the edge. Chisholm popped up for a careful peek. In the canyon below, they saw it—metallic remnants, scattered like trash across the canyon floor.

"There," Chisholm said, pointing.

Next to a large object, which Gottlieb assumed to be the crew cabin, were three figures. One of them looked up at the helicopter.

"Okay boss," Chisholm said. "What next?"

"Just follow procedures. Just..." He waved his hand ambiguously.

Chisholm nodded and armed weapons again, sluing the cannon toward the target. An abrupt *br-whIRRRrrr* vibrated through the craft as they streamed 30mm rounds toward the earth. The figures collapsed in heaps of splattered flesh.

They hovered next to the mesa's edge, observing, waiting for any sign of movement. When nothing happened—when the figures appeared as inanimate as the canyon's stone walls—Gottlieb breathed a deep sigh. "Call them in," he said.

Chisholm flicked on the KY-58 secure radio to the preset frequency. "Pounce One to Pounce Two, Over."

Noise squawked from the radio, then, "Roger, Pounce One, over."

"Target's neutralized—"

Gottlieb tapped him from the front seat. "The Devil is in the details," he wheezed "Make sure they bring plenty of dry ice."

10. MIND PROBE

June 1981

Langley, VA

"I feel like I'm being psychoanalyzed," Yuri said.

"So," Martha Grimsley said with a grin, "you feel like you're being psychoanalyzed?"

Yuri frowned.

"Just kidding." Martha tossed long, drooping brown hair away from a pencil and pad, then pushed big, round-lensed glasses up the ridge of her nose. "Actually, it is a kind of therapy. The couch helps you relax and remember. I've found that darkening the office lets the mind see better in the shadows."

"Let's get this over with. I'm—"

"Fearful of bad memories?"

Yuri didn't answer.

"Look, Yuri, I'm going to level with you. As I said, I'm not your therapist. But one big issue here is—you. How much of it was real and how much of it was—"

"Hallucination? I saw what I saw."

"Right. You were submerged in dark water for a very long period of time. And under a lot of stress. Anxious. Cut off. Under those conditions—sensory deprivation—the mind plays tricks. The brain, in the absence of input, starts making things up. People hallucinate."

"You think I have an active imagination?"

"Under those conditions, *anybody* would have an active imagination. When I was a kid and it was dark, I used to think I saw the Bogeyman."

"This was different. The Bogeyman didn't bite."

Grimsley gnawed her pencil for a moment, looking into Yuri's dark eyes. "*In the night, imagining some fear, How easy is a bush supposed a bear*—it's the Midsummer Night's Dream effect. There really is a principle behind it. The mind is an active instrument, not passive. We see what we expect to see—even when reality sharply diverges from expectation. There was a famous perception experiment done by two researchers, Bruner and Postman. They asked subjects to identify playing cards after a short exposure. Many of the cards were normal, but some were unusual—for example, a red six of spades or a black four of hearts. After each exposure to a card, subjects were asked what they saw. Even after several seconds, many couldn't correctly describe the anomalous cards. They weren't what they expected."

"I can see the Poljarny card in my mind very plainly. It's the ace of spades." Then a smile flitted across

his face. “You think I’m not playing with a full deck, don’t you?”

She patted him gently on the arm. “I shouldn’t say this, but your personality profile says you *area* very creative person. You *dohave* an active imagination. For some types of Company missions, that can be a good thing. Other times, it gets you in trouble.”

“Am I in trouble?”

She sighed, pushing back in her chair. “We’ll get through this. Think of Poljarny as just one stage in your development. Everyone gets tested in some way. That’s just part of life. Some people pass the test, other people...” Her voice trailed off. “You’re still very young.”

She carefully labeled a tape *Top Secret*, stuck it in a palm-sized recorder, and hit the switch. “The subject is Lieutenant Yuri Sverdlov, U.S. Marine Corps. The topic is Whalebone. Classification is Top Secret. This is tape number seven in sequence 81 dash oh-six dash twelve.”

She could see the microcassette turning inside the voice-activated device. Everything was operating properly, so she began. “Lieutenant Sverdlov, your report says the vehicle was tracked. Is that true?”

“Yes, Ma’am. Like a tank.”

“Good. Were the tracks the same as the ones in Holy Loch?”

“Hard to say.”

“I wish you would say, Yuri. The whole purpose of this debrief is to reconstruct what happened, as best we can, in the absence of—”

“I had a camera. We took some pictures, but—”

“I know—it’s in the belly of the whale. Like Jonah. All our hard evidence is fish food.”

Yuri nodded as his face turned ashen and his stomach rumbled with tension.

Martha Grimsley shook her head, biting into her lip. “I know this was tough for you. But. This was an expensive mission. The Company would like to get some payback. Okay? Even if it’s only your recollections.”

“What if it’s only hallucinations?”

“We want them, too.”

“The tracks were the same,” he said.

“Good. Did you see anything on the vehicle that could have been an acoustic signaling device?”

“No Ma’am. But I heard—”

“Whale sounds?” She flipped through pages. “That’s what your report says.”

“Yeah. I mean, yes, Ma’am.”

“But how do you *know* the sounds were made by the vehicle? Couldn’t it have been made by the whales? The Orcas? See what I’m saying? You may have been confused.”

“The sounds were different, but the same. The Orcas—”

“What about this strange light?”

His hands opened and closed in a rhythmic movement, groping for words as the scene played back in his head.

“It was hard to see them. Just a faint light. Burning through the top, from early morning sun. But daylight was supposed to be hours away. The light wasn’t supposed to be there. But there was a light and it came from a sphere floating above the surface, moving. Underwater the light was scattered and diffused. When I looked up at the surface it was like a kaleidoscope. Shimmering, shifting. The waves from underneath look like thousands of jagged mirrors. Alice’s looking glass. On this mission, we pushed through the looking glass. And I didn’t see the monsters at first. But when I did see them, it was up close. Like seeing Death up close. They’re two-toned, you know. Black and white. No gray. Like that oriental symbol—what-do-you-call-it—Yin and Yang. And the teeth were sharp. And they were filled with meat. Human meat. And I remember. I’ll always remember.”

Grimsley stopped writing, listening to the stream of consciousness, not knowing what to say.

Yuri’s hands rolled into two clenched fists. They opened and closed a few more times, then finally relaxed.

He got up from the couch and walked to the door. When he opened it, throwing a wedge of light across her face, he said, “I can’t do this anymore. I’m sorry.”

“Yuri... I’m sorry, too. For pushing you. We all have a job to do. Mine is a lot less heroic than yours. I just try to put the pieces together after the fact. Like a detective. I’d appreciate it if you’d... work with me on this.”

“I’m quitting the Corps.”

Grimsley heard the door close and Yuri’s footsteps grow faint in the hallway. She sighed, rewound the last few seconds of tape, then pressed PLAY. The recorder dutifully reproduced the words:

“—And the teeth were sharp. And they were filled with meat. Human meat. And I remember. I’ll always remember.”

11. MEDICINE MAN

July 1981

Fort Dietrick, Maryland

Billy covered his mouth with a hand, coughed quietly for a moment, looking out the window, then turned to Fritz Gottlieb. "Did you bring my medicine?"

Gottlieb smiled. "Yes. Both of them." He tugged at fine leather straps, opened a case and handed Stanton a bottle. "This is for your cough. Your health. And this," he said, reaching into the bag again, "is for your programmatic prosperity." The second item was a stainless steel Dewar flask with a bold, triangular marking.

Stanton put the flask aside, opened the bottle of cough syrup and took a slug, closing his eyes and grimacing, as though swallowing a stiff whiskey. "Can't seem to shake this cough," he said, "Must be nerves. The pressure." He put the cap back on the bottle. "This definitely helps."

"You wanted to talk to me about a few things?"

"Yes. I want to talk." Billy's stiffness, and the hacking cough, seemed to melt away at the thought of finally sharing information with Gottlieb. "You need to know all about the program."

"And the technology."

"Yes. Especially the technology," he said, relaxing into his padded chair, tipping back.

"Which is?"

"We call them Thought Tunneling Devices." He picked up the flask, tilting it this way and that. "We're still maybe a decade away from understanding them and exploiting them. But there are spin-off technologies that have more immediate applications. One of them is a Biefeld-Brown effects generator. We're using the Martin Norris Company as a cover to funnel the device to NASA."

"Interesting. I'd like to know more about that."

"Of course. And there are other things I'd like to get off my chest. It's good medicine. Good therapy. Thanks for listening, Fritz."

12. IMAGES

August 1981

Annapolis, MD

In a crowded bar filled with lonely people, amid the strains of a band that played only slow dances, Yuri Sverdlov watched male and female bodies hug each other for emotional support, twisting rhythmically with the music. Then he swirled brown liquor in a glass, shifting ice cubes like a dirty kaleidoscope, and remembered the distinctions Martha Grimsley once made in a debriefing session.

Perception, she said, is seeing things as they are. The Poljarny incident is over, so whatever you think you're seeing, no matter how vivid, is not perception. Memory is a mind-filtered view of the past—seeing things as they were. A faithful reconstruction is the best we can hope for. Imagination is a vision of what might be. It will be one of your most important contributions, since we'll need help in planning countermeasures against the Soviets. But of all the different types of mental images, there are certain ones we must always avoid. They're not easy to spot, but they can systematically infect an analysis, and reduce its usefulness to zero. I'm talking about hallucination—the confusion of reality and illusion. And delusion—a false judgment or conclusion. And paranoia. And dreams—These are the mental contagion.

A feminine hand briefly touched his forearm, interrupting his thoughts. “My name’s Carrie. Want to dance?”

“Not really,” he said, looking up. On the high ceiling above their heads, a chandelier with a thousand prisms rotated slowly, playing sparkles of light around Carrie’s face and hair. It was a pretty face, with deep, dark eyes that seemed to connect with shadows in the barroom.

“You should get together with Greta Garbo. She always ‘Wants to be alone.’”

Yuri laughed. “You must watch really old movies. I just don’t dance very well.”

“I’ve noticed,” she said, “the best dancers here lack conviction, and the worst have a passionate intensity.”

“I’d step on your feet, then you wouldn’t like me.”

She smiled, waiting for more of a response.

“My name’s Yuri,” he said, finally.

“Yooo-RI,” she repeated, slowly, inflecting the last syllable. “Swedish?”

“Russian. And it’s pronounced ‘YOO-ri.’ My father liked the ring of names from the Old Country. And where does the name Carrie come from?”

“Don’t quite know, actually.” She smiled at him a long moment, then put a hand on his, gently peeling away his emotional barriers. “But maybe it means ‘caring.’ That’s what I’d like to think, anyway. I have this knack for spotting people in need of TLC.”

In the hour that followed, Yuri discovered that Carrie was a good listener, but not much of a talker. Right now, that suited him.

He talked to her about baseball, and about growing up in New York and Annapolis. He talked of his Russian parents, and of joining the Marine Corps. He revealed that he was in trouble, and was trying to cope, but was careful to avoid any discussion of his work. This one side of him resisted all prying. It was a door firmly shut. He skirted around it, ever so gently, knowing all the while it was the root of his

problems.

When they left together, it seemed like a natural consequence of the evening. The chance meeting at an Annapolis bar seemed to resonate with mutual, sympathetic chords. And when he pressed her body close to his in the intimacy of his own bedroom, he was grateful that on this night, while he was in this emotional state, chance had somehow delivered a moment of luck.

Skin slid against skin, bodies arched boldly, and then ecstasy slipped away to exhaustion, sleep, dreams.

* * *

Yuri's eyes blinked open, forehead damp with sweat. Carrie was no longer beside him. He remembered shouting. He remembered dreaming. *I'm not much of a bed partner*, he thought, throwing his feet onto the carpet, standing up. *Carrie's probably sleeping on the couch now*.

As he walked into the hallway, feeling the need to apologize to the woman with whom had shared a moment of passion, the after-images of a dream still seared his brain. He remembered Alexander Sverdlov's eyes—diamonds set in a thick, chiseled face—burning through shadows of a darkened chamber.

"The trick is to anticipate the melody," Alexander had whispered, in a vision.

You're dead, he remembered thinking.

Sverdlov's demon tapped a forehead and replied to Yuri's thought. "Not here. Not in your mind." His father's ghost ceremoniously removed a black coat, loosened a tie and rolled up the sleeves of a white shirt, exposing thick, muscular forearms. One burning eye winked mischievously.

"You are always so somber, so focused, Yuri. But can you dance? To survive, you must learn to dance."

An unseen balalaika and accordion played a Russian folksong with a heavy beat. Alexander's mouth opened in a wide grin that exposed perfect white teeth. He threw back his head and laughed.

Then his father raised an index finger and shook it at him. "Anticipate the melody," Alexander whispered, intimately. "That's the trick to dancing."

Yuri remembered how the music picked up pace, as the balalaika competed with the accordion. Alexander's feet moved deftly to the tune, his body arcing in a widening gyre, faster and faster. An unexpected violin jabbed a long, poignant strain that locked the other instruments into a slower tempo, but bolder rhythm.

A spotlight suddenly turned his father's face an ice-blue hue. Then, the voice spoke loudly, plainly, as if

still alive. “Do you hear the music, Yuri? Can you anticipate the melody?”

Those were the last elements of the dream he remembered.

As he approached the entrance to the living room, he heard Carrie’s voice, talking quietly to someone else.

“Possible post-traumatic. He could be unstable, but still compartmentalizes very well. My recommendation...”

Yuri quietly moved back to the bedroom, loudly cleared his throat, then announced “Carrie?” As he moved noisily again toward the living room, he heard the telephone quietly click in place. “Carrie?” he called, again.

“I’m right here, Yuri,” she said in the darkness.

When he flipped on the light, she was standing by the phone, fully dressed.

“I didn’t want to wake you,” she said. “I just called a taxi. Gotta be at work early tomorrow. You understand.”

“Will I see you again?”

She rubbed his cheek, now rough with fine stubble. “Sure. I was just going to leave you a note.” She jotted down a number on a pad beside the phone, pressed the note in his hand, and gave him a long, lingering kiss. “Call me,” she whispered as she went out the door.

Once again alone in his father’s house, he unraveled the note. *Was it really her phone number?* He wondered, picking up the phone, whether he could stomach the answer.

A thought occurred to him. He pressed the REDIAL button. The phone rang once, then picked up.

“You have reached two-oh-two-five-nine-six-five,” the voice said. “Please leave your message at the tone.”

He hung up, recognizing the protocol. *Only CIA and NSA answer this way. The line is a voice drop.*

* * *

“Well,” George Nathan said. “I want to dispel certain images you may have. We are not the KGB.” He opened Sverdlov’s dossier, flipping quickly through his service record and security background investigation, staring for a moment at a photograph of Yuri in a Marine Corps uniform. It closely resembled the man sitting across from him—close-cropped hair, somewhat rough, chiseled features,

military posture—but he knew they were not the same person. The man in the photograph had never seen people die a violent death, never questioned his own sanity, never felt betrayed by authority. But the man in front of him had experienced all those things.

Sverdlov needed reassurances. Explanations. Promises. Fortunately, Nathan was authorized to supply them. The promises had been choreographed in advance.

“I want you to consider something, Yuri. Something your father would have appreciated. The principal intelligence agency of our global foe has a mission which is purely negative. Do you know what it is? The official mission of the KGB? I know it by heart, and I’m quoting now—’Not to allow the collapse of the Soviet Union from the inside.’”

Nathan’s eyes locked on Yuri’s. “We’re the good guys. Really. Our mission is strictly positive—to enable the success of our way of life through the collection and analysis of foreign intelligence. The difference is very clear. Very profound. And in our quest, we need heroes, Yuri. Creative people who can turn their talent to the service of their country. We need people like you. Like your father.”

Yuri cleared his throat, fighting back anger. “Then why all this cloak and dagger stuff? Why Carrie? What does that have to do with foreign intelligence? Or saving the Western World?”

Nathan grimaced, pressing his hands against his lips in a praying position, as if trying to explain to a small child the facts of life in words and symbols comprehensible to the child. “Counterintelligence is an adjunct mission of the Company. Operational security is another. We have many such adjunct missions. It’s imperative... to protect our own. You can see that, can’t you? We had to be sure about you, your motives and”—he hesitated—”your psychological stability.”

Yuri winced.

“Yes, let me say it again. Stability. A willingness not just to take chances, but to take orders. A willingness to act in support of the team. A penchant for keeping secrets a secret. We can’t afford a weak link. We can’t afford—”

“Psychos? Madmen?”

“You’re hardly...” Nathan let the sentence fade into silence, then jutted a chin forward with conviction. “I don’t apologize for what we did, Yuri. The lives of other agents hang in the balance. There’s too much at stake.”

“My sanity’s at stake.”

“Look. This incident was just a benign encounter, but it gives you an idea of how things work. You’re a Company man, now. You think the events influencing your life—including the most intimate events—are random? They’re not. You think the big decisions you make in your life are your own? They’re not. Free will has been usurped by design. What seems real, isn’t. What seems fantastic isn’t. You’re in our world, now.” Nathan looked wistfully at the closed window, eyes focusing on some hidden scene beyond the frosted security glass. “I’m telling you this because I’m your friend. Your father was my friend. I feel a certain obligation.”

“Then let me go.”

“You don’t get it,” Nathan snapped. “You can never leave the Company.” He closed his eyes for a

moment, as if envisioning options, then raised a single finger, signifying a solution. “But. You can leave the trappings of the Company. You can leave this place.” A practiced smile spread across his face. “We have liaison positions in many government departments and organizations. I can move you to one of them—FBI counterintelligence. Only the Director will know you’re one of us. For all practical purposes, you’ll be an FBI agent. Would you like that?”

Yuri nodded. “In the absence of other options, yes, I’d like that.”

“Good,” Nathan said, reaching for the STU-III encryption phone. “And Yuri...”

“Yes?”

“From time to time, the Company will ask you to do certain things. They will test you.”

13. KATRINA’S WORLD

1987

Moscow

The Party has its flaws, Katrina thought, but it is one way—in Russia, perhaps the only way—to follow your dreams. Her thoughts echoed her mother’s words, spoken before she died of pneumonia in a Moscow hospital a year earlier. The words had come out, reluctantly, between deep, wheezing breaths, as the old woman clasped Katrina’s arm, like a tree limb in some fast moving river. Then the eyes dimmed, the hand relaxed, and her mother went with the flow.

Katrina had hoped things would be different, that the Party would not be the only boat to success. Two years earlier, in her final days of graduate school at the university, it seemed as if the Soviet Union would submerge, like Atlantis, under a tsunami of political dissatisfaction. When hundreds of students rallied in protest of Yeltsin’s ouster from the Gorbachev government, she sympathized, but, like most Russians, watched from the sidelines, keeping her options open, afraid to swim in the treacherous currents.

Her conservatism and loyalty to the Party paid off with a commission in the Army and a good research and development job at ALMAZ, an immense electronics research center located in the heart of Moscow, on Leningradsky Prospect.

ALMAZ was created in the mid 1940s to build anti-aircraft and anti-missile systems. In the mid 1980s, it was one of the principal centers of research on anti-ballistic missile systems—the Soviet response to Ronald Reagan’s Strategic Defense Initiative, *Star Wars*.

And now, in 1987, using the Party as an instrument, Katrina prepared to follow her dreams as a communications engineer, dimly aware that technical brilliance could combine with politics to catapult a career—as it had with her father. Here at ALMAZ, she explored the link between information and

power.

She scanned the room, attempting to read the audience. They were mostly old men—Communist Party bureaucrats without vision or conviction, but politically powerful. Sprinkled among them, however, were a few engineers, scientists and military strategists—some of them top rate.

In order to capture their attention and funding, she needed a circus act. High drama. Fear. Flawless analysis.

To the rear of the room, Sergey Giglavyi, cigarette jutting aggressively from his lips, gave a nod. The ringmaster said it was time. She stepped to the podium and spoke boldly.

“Gentlemen, I give you Brilliant Pebbles.”

Room lights dimmed and the screen behind Katrina illuminated with a video. The picture zoomed to show a small device linked to a pole by an umbilical cord. The device ignited with a rocket plume, then lifted into the air, flying around the pole like an awkward, self-propelled tetherball.

The audience gasped.

“This is a caged rocket motor test for the Brilliant Pebbles kinetic energy weapon. Notice the jerky movements. It’s a function of a very unique flight control system. The Americans have announced that several of these weapons will be housed in orbiting carrier platforms and launched as needed to intercept ballistic missiles. There could be thousands of carrier platforms in orbit when Full Operational Capability is achieved.”

Katrina nodded at Giglavyi, who quickly restored the room lights. She continued the pitch. “The Americans say this test proves that Brilliant Pebbles will work.”

Once again, the room filled with excited murmurs.

She noted the general reaction and Giglavyi’s cynical smile. “Comrades, we are used to viewing the Americans as ten-feet tall. We imagine they can do anything. I tell you that SDI can be defeated. The Strategic Defense Initiative will be a multi-billion dollar Maginot Line in space.”

An objecting hand shot up near the front of the room.

“Wait! Reagan announced his program in 1983. It took the Americans just four years to conduct this proof-of-concept test. How can we defeat this kind of aggressive technology development?”

“A caged rocket motor test does not make a system!” Giglavyi pronounced, from the back of the room.

“He’s right,” Katrina said. “In order for the system to work, the Americans will have to construct the most complex, integrated command and control system ever built. That’s what’s needed to control thousands of Brilliant Pebbles in low Earth orbit. That is a vulnerability we must exploit.”

Colonel Anatoly Kazikov extruded a cigar from pudgy lips, flicked ash carelessly in the direction of a minor technologist sitting to his right and floated a smoke ring in Katrina’s direction.

“How?” he asked.

“By interrupting, delaying or modifying the flow of information in the system.” She smiled, allowing the strategy to sink in. “In order for SDI to work, thousands of elements in the system need to actively cooperate. They need to share accurate information over an area the size of the planet. Minor discrepancies between the actual and perceived position in each of the orbiting vehicles translate into uncertainty—or entropy—of the *entiresystem*. The greater the entropy, the less effective the system. We need to build information warfare systems that can increase the entropy of SDI, rendering it useless. We need to infect its mind with uncertainty.”

“Entropy? Interesting! What do you need in the way of resources?” Colonel Kazikov asked.

“Funding to systematically acquire U.S. computers, telecommunications and—if possible—radar technology. A laboratory to engineer and experiment with offensive information warfare techniques. A staff of first-rate scientists and engineers.” Katrina outlined a detailed program and budget, proposed a schedule wed to SDI’s schedule, and recommended immediate implementation, to avoid technological surprise—and the adverse consequences that it implied.

From the back of the room, Sergey Giglavyi seconded the idea. Half an hour of debate and discussion convinced everyone in attendance.

Colonel Kazikov summed up. “Thank you, Lieutenant Fontanova, for a very provocative proposal—one which seems to have a high potential for success. It is now up to us to make it happen.”

He smiled at the brilliance of the plan. It would be well-received at the highest levels of the Kremlin, because it felt so *right*—they would fool the SDI system by feeding it lies.

“And now,” he continued, “you must excuse us. Our committee has another aggressive American technology effort to consider—reported development of a Biefeld-Brown effects generator and testing at a secret desert base. It is very puzzling. Very troubling. We must talk in private, please.”

When she left the meeting, Katrina was euphoric. Approval of the program meant almost certain promotion. She was on the fast track. She made her way through the corridors of power, clutching the notes and ideas that made success possible. She exited through a control point, head still in the clouds, and was confused when people around her yelled in panic. She heard the sound of an airplane engine.

Then, a small aircraft landed in the middle of Red Square. The event created another ripple which washed through the political landscape.

* * *

“It’s falling apart,” Katrina said.

“No,” Vladimir responded. “It’s evolving. The Communists and Yeltsin are in conflict. Dialectical materialism says this is natural. All change comes through struggle between antagonistic elements.”

They were in the open, yet alone, walking in the immense pedestrian-way known as Red Square. Katrina smiled at occasional passers-by, but threw barbed words at her brother.

“You sound like your father—repeating the mindless chants. I don’t care what you say, there is nothing *natural* about a jackboot on your neck. For seventy years, we’ve been controlled by flawed ideas.”

“No. Social conditions predispose people to certain ideas. *What* we are determines *how* we think. That is a fundamental principle of the universe.”

“Only in Marx’s alternate universe.”

Vladimir stopped as they approached Varvarka Street. “So, we come to a crossroads, you and I.” He glanced at his watch. “I have a meeting in a few minutes.”

“Vladimir, I know how you feel. You are very much... a traditionalist. But please accept how I feel. I can’t live in a prison anymore.” She rubbed his arm with her hand, then adjusted a ribbon on his uniform. “Just remember. We are family. Whatever happens, we help each other.”

“Yes,” he said. “These are uncertain times. We need to think about survival. You’ll be a spy in one camp, I’ll be a spy in another. Anyway, your solution would appeal to Papa’s other side.”

“Which side is that?”

“His Machiavellian side.”

She giggled. “So we have a pact?”

He shook her hand, then kissed her on the cheek. “Whatever happens, we’ll always be family. We have a pact.”

14. SPOOKS AND MONSTERS

February 1991

Florida

Yuri’s stomach rumbled uneasily. *Calm down*, he thought. *Sun’s going down, but we still have daylight.*

From an altitude of 5,000 feet, Highway One appeared as a thin ribbon of white concrete, tying the blue waters of the Straits of Florida like an Earth-scale birthday present. Yuri Sverdlov and Jack Dugan were about to unwrap the prize. As they talked strategy and tactics, the loud, rhythmic thumping of rotor

blades made conversation difficult.

“You sure about the time?” Yuri shouted. The dark-haired, 31-year-old athletic figure sported a jacket that said ‘FBI’ in big, bold letters. He glanced nervously at his watch.

Jack, a crewcut, bespectacled National Security Agency (NSA) agent, three years his senior, yelled back. “All I know is what we got on a coded intercept from the Russian site at Cienfuegos, Cuba. Pick up’s scheduled for five minutes from now. Big Pine Key.”

They both looked down at the causeway unrolling below them at high speed, and at the sinking red sun. Yuri felt a slight nausea.

“Take it to that point!” Jack yelled.

The pilot pulled the SH-60B chopper around in a wide arc to the left, then vectored toward a spit of sand bordered by pine trees. Yuri spotted a metallic glint to the West, tugged on Jack’s arm and pointed.

Jack nodded. “I see it—a sail or periscope!”

The pilot, dressed in a nomex flight suit devoid of nametag or patches, looked, too. “Got it,” he grinned.

The pilot hovered near a wide, flat area of beach, then let down. Yuri made a quick radio call during the approach to verify that backup forces were moving into position.

They didn’t wait for the rotor blades to stop. They slid open the door, covered their faces to protect against blasting sand and ducked below the rotor wash as they ran toward the edge of the trees.

They watched the Sikorsky-made machine lift off in a plume of sand and debris. The Magnetic Anomaly Detector, used for locating and attacking submarines, glinted dull red in the setting sun. Two homing torpedoes interrupted the contours of the Seahawk’s underbelly—lethal eggs waiting to be laid.

“Those guys are good,” Yuri said, nodding at the retreating chopper. “They’ll give that sub something to worry about.”

Jack had a rough idea of what Yuri meant. The troops in the back looked pretty mean. He had personally listened in on two of their operations in the Persian Gulf. He knew that SEAL Team 2 was highly effective. As one of the troops told him, half in jest, *You don’t want to meet us at work unless you’re a friend.*

“Drop point’s just south of here along the beach,” Yuri said. “Saw it on the way in.” Jack nodded in agreement. They skirted the tree line until they spotted the pier. It was a dilapidated structure with rotting timbers. A section had collapsed, piling posts in a heap that spiked the purling surf with rude wooden edges.

Two men in wet suits and diving gear talked rapidly to a casually dressed civilian—a huge man whose oversized shirt barely contained his stomach. A small box and a piece of equipment on the ground appeared to be the focal point of conversation. Yuri saw one of the men put the equipment in the box and seal the lid.

“Spetsnaz,” he said. “Russian naval special operations.” His voice betrayed emotions. He was less concerned about a tactical engagement than with its borders, constraints and dimensions. The Spetsnaz

stood on solid ground, but dark water lapped along a shoreline of seemingly infinite dimensions. He bit into his lip. Finally, he said, reluctantly, “I’ll take the swimmers. You take the civilian.”

“Chrissake, Sverdlov, I’m an analyst! This gun’s for show.”

“That’s all I want you to do. Backup’s in place. When we run toward them, the swimmers ‘ll break for the water. The other guy ‘ll head for his car. Just follow and keep him occupied.” Yuri felt more confident now—in control. Even in the fading daylight, the training kicked in. He went on automatic pilot.

Jack nodded. “Okay. But no macho bullshit. Just a straight arrest.”

“Right,” Yuri replied. “No bullshit.”

Jack took a few deep breaths. “Let’s go.”

They braced their guns and rushed onto the beach.

One of the men looked up.

“FBI!” Yuri shouted. “Stop!”

The swimmers pulled pistols.

Yuri dived forward, squeezing off a single round before he hit the sand.

Two gunshots exploded in rapid point-counterpoint. Yuri’s shot hit in mid-chest. A swimmer collapsed with a mortal wound. The other grabbed the box and ran toward the pier.

Yuri watched the civilian waddle toward the road.

“Go, Jack!” he shouted.

Jack pursued.

Yuri sprinted toward the pier, scrambling along the decaying wood just behind his quarry.

The swimmer jacked one leg over a railing.

Yuri called out in Russian. “Don’t!”

The swimmer turned, startled to hear an order in his native tongue.

A mental duel bound the two in dynamic tension, like a wire stretched and twisted to the breaking point. The swimmer was poised to jump, one hand gripping the box. Yuri was poised to shoot, both hands bracing the stainless steel Smith and Wesson. Yuri moved slowly and deliberately, eyes and gun trained on the chest—slightly off center. It was a ‘dead man’ shot to the heart that would simultaneously puncture the buoyancy control vest and rebreather.

“Put the box down,” Yuri said, again in Russian.

The swimmer did not move.

Yuri closed in. He was almost to the railing when his foot punched through a decayed plank. He stumbled.

The swimmer dropped over the railing into the water.

Yuri extracted his foot, holstered his gun, then jumped in pursuit.

It was a ten-foot plunge to the water. Yuri landed almost on top of the swimmer, knocking him to one side. When he surfaced, all he saw was a turbulent patch of dark water and a face mask floating on bubbles. He dove for it and grabbed a rubber flipper. It came off in his hand. He surfaced, gulped air, then scrambled back down into four feet of water.

He felt a knife blade slice his palm.

He surfaced, backed away and drew his gun. He gambled and squeezed off three rounds, hoping to avoid a misfire. Muzzle flashes outlined dark pier timbers. Gunfire's thunder rolled across the beach.

Yuri squinted at the target area. The rolling draw of waves—like dark and liquid lips—sucked water from the shoreline and disgorged the swimmer's body in a single, fluid motion. The body rolled to the surface momentarily, then disappeared below a surge.

Yuri holstered the gun, then waded toward it.

Currents pushed the body into the area below the pier. It bobbed up and down in undulating surf.

Jack's voice called from shore: "Need any help?"

"No! I can reach it," Yuri said, slogging through chest-deep water.

Wooden planks creaked above his head. Water swirled around greasy pier timbers. A field of wires and rope clutched at his legs and feet.

He stretched a hand toward the Russian's body, gripped a vest strap and pulled. The dead form floated free, one arm wrapping around his neck. He pulled the body toward the edge of the pier in a macabre dance paced by a tidal metronome. Something alive bumped him from behind.

He shouted, "Jeez!" and stumbled back into the darkness under the pier, crouching next to a timber.

The Russian's head bobbed inches from his face. In the water outside the pier, he saw a dorsal fin.

"Jack!" he yelled. "Got a situation!"

The situation was blood in the water and a dorsal fin nearby.

He drew his gun and aimed it toward open water. His hand trembled.

The fin surfaced again, then vanished below the waterline in a continuous, rolling movement.

He shot twice. No sign of the fish. *Good*, he thought, laughing out loud. *Yes! Got the bugger—maybe.*

He towed the Russian's body clear of the pier, then headed toward shore as quickly as he could.

Jack stood on the beach, smiling. He made a megaphone with his hands, "Behind you."

Yuri turned. There was the fin, again.

He released the body and scrambled backwards, drawing his gun. *Click, click, click!* it went, empty chambers firing his imagination. He crawled backwards out of the water onto the beach, like some giant, frantic crab. He fired again— *click, click, click!*

Jack put a hand on his shoulder.

He fired again at the sea monster— *click, click, click!*

Jack laughed. "Pretty soon you'll run out of bullets! I thought you were a tough ex-Marine. It's just a dolphin! What'd you think it was—a shark? Moby Dick?"

Yuri grinned weakly. "Wasn't sure. I just felt trapped. Didn't like it."

He pursed his lips. Blood drained from his face. He put his head between his knees.

"It'll pass," Jack said, more seriously. "Just take it easy."

"I'm okay. Okay. Help me up."

Over the next few hours, Jack and Yuri coordinated activities as a contingent of FBI, local law enforcement officers and Naval intelligence personnel retrieved the bodies, the box and other artifacts, meticulously documenting events on the beach.

SEAL Team Two failed to locate or engage the submarine. The Naval intelligence people speculated it would return to the Cienfuegos base. They promised to get satellite coverage.

The civilian, now in custody, was a NASA aerospace engineer, Louis Weddell, whose contract was about to be terminated and whose marriage had recently collapsed. Sheriff's deputies took him to a Dade County jail.

Yuri and Jack finally left the beach at 11:30 PM. A deputy sheriff drove them to a hotel near Miami International Airport, where they both crashed in exhaustion.

After a few hours sleep, they met in an airport cafeteria for an early breakfast.

* * *

"So what's in the box?" Yuri asked. "What could be so hot the Russians would risk sending in swimmers to pick it up? Pretty stupid, if you ask me. It's not like them to do this."

"Russian security's highly compartmented—just like in the old days under the Soviet system. It could be

that the equipment was so secret they didn't want even the Russian Embassy folks to know about it. There are a few programs like that."

"I thought the Russian attachés were cleared for everything. Guess I was wrong... So what is it?"

"It's called a *Biefeld-Brown effects generator*. At least that's what the Martin Norris Company calls it."

"Never heard of it."

"I'm just a comm engineer," Jack said, stirring his coffee. "But as a kid growing up in the 50s, I used to get turned on reading UFO magazines—you know? It was interesting. They always had some crazy theory or Looney Tune 'authentic picture.' Anyway, there were lots of articles back then about this guy named Thomas Townsend Brown, the inventor of the so-called Biefeld-Brown effect. Brown claimed there was a correlation between the electric field and gravity. He also claimed there was an absolute reference frame in time and space—which, of course, is contrary to Einstein's relativity theory."

"Of course," Yuri said.

"If I'm boring you, just tell me to stop."

Yuri glanced at his watch and grinned. "Not yet. Go on."

"Well, the potential fallout from this theory was the stuff of science fiction—gravitational lasers, atomic structure disintegrators and secret communications techniques that used background noise, because the universal random hiss of microwave radiation was now a decodable pattern. Brown also claimed the effect could be the basis for UFO propulsion systems."

"Sounds like advertising claims for hair tonic. The be-all, end-all. The magic potion."

"Yup... except we now have in our custody a device—stolen from NASA—which the Russians want badly enough to kill for, and which is referred to in coded intercepts and by the Martin Norris Company as a Biefeld-Brown effects generator."

"Do you believe in UFOs?"

Jack reflected for a moment. "I've never seen any evidence that held up under close scrutiny. And I've got a lot of clearances to black programs. I've read about zillions of hoaxes motivated by profit. I'd have to say no—but I'm open to new evidence."

"Maybe it's like the Russians—the program's so secret that not even the NSA guy knows."

Jack shrugged. "We're compartmented, too. Very few people know all the pieces. You have to get to the top for that. I'm not there yet." He beamed a broad grin at Yuri. "When they read me in on those UFO programs, I'll let you know."

"But then you'd have to kill me," Yuri said with a smile. "I'm just a simple guy. I do what they tell me to do and don't ask too many questions. I suppose the only relevant piece of information about this NASA equipment is that it's stolen property." He looked at his watch, then drained a small puddle of coffee remaining in his cup. "Now I gotta run, or I'll miss my plane. Thanks for your help. For an NSA guy, you're okay."

Jack lifted his cup in a toast of token acknowledgment. *He's okay*, Jack thought, watching Yuri hustle toward his gate. *A bit too intense, maybe, but okay. Gotta watch that combat stress syndrome, though. Makes him crazy.*

15. PUTSCH

August 1991

Moscow

The Stalin-era government building was a sculpture in concrete dedicated to repression. It combined the stink of decay with the esthetics of a prison.

Katrina stepped carefully over a pool of leaking water, circumvented an abandoned tile-repair project and trampled firmly on an old Communist Party poster. She opened a door to see Sergey Giglavyi talking rapidly on the phone in a Spartan office.

Like the decor, his conversation was devoid of non-essentials. He slammed the phone down following a short, curt exchange that omitted even ‘goodbye.’ He glowered at Katrina, but failed to intimidate her.

“Speak,” he said.

“I heard news of the coup.”

“Everyone has heard.”

“I briefed your group once—the Committee on Informatization. I heard you were a Yeltsin supporter.”

“Should I be grateful that we helped each other once? Times change. People change. How can you help me *now*, little girl?” He leaned forward in his chair, nervously tapping a pencil to the beat of an impatient brain.

“You remember the SDI project at ALMAZ? Maybe now it will pay off, Giglavyi. I’ve studied both U.S. and Russian telecommunications protocols. I have access to prototype encryption equipment that not even the KGB has. I have a warehouse full of western-made microwave equipment. I have contacts with certain western companies who have dedicated high speed lines out of Moscow—lines that bypass our own KGB-rigged infrastructure. I want to help.”

He dropped the pencil ceremoniously, then eyed her with suspicion. “*Why* do you want to help?”

“Can’t you see? It’s falling apart.”

“You were pretty eager once to play Soviet politics to get project funding. Why should I believe you now?”

She smiled, throwing it back at him. “Times change. People change.”

“Yes,” he said. “These are desperate times, aren’t they? And desperate people. Sometimes we all have to take risks.” He placed a folding chair next to Katrina and straddled it backwards, studying her face. “Institutionalized Communist arrogance makes my gorge rise. It’s my passion to see that it dies a quick death.”

“We want similar things, Giglavyi.”

“How carefully you choose your words.” He squinted for a moment, trying to fathom motives and read body language. She was a blank—an indecipherable code. Any emotions seemed hidden behind large green eyes. If she was Soviet KGB, she was good. Finally he relaxed with a long sigh, then spoke slowly and quietly. “Yeltsin is at his dacha about twenty miles from here, in a forest near Arkhangelskoye. He and his aides are working on an appeal to the nation. We still control the TV stations, but it may be dangerous to travel. I’d like to connect his dacha with the Moscow station. Do you have enough equipment to do it?”

“I think so. A lot depends on terrain, availability of tall structures to hang the equipment on and power. Can you get me a team of trusted engineers, some trucks and winches? And some firepower—just in case?”

Giglavyi nodded, grabbed his pencil and started writing, throttling his energy level to a high peak. “We also need to connect Yeltsin with Washington, New York, London, Paris, Brussels, Bonn and Tokyo. Can you do that?”

She nodded. “I can if you don’t need dedicated circuits.”

“We’ll take what we can get. You’ll bypass Moscow switches?”

“There’s a Microsoft team that has a T-1 circuit on Intelsat—1.544 megabits. They owe me one. We’ll create a spur off the link to Arkhangelskoye.”

“Welcome aboard,” Giglavyi said, handing her a piece of paper. “Now get your ass to this address. Don’t use the phones. Don’t tell anyone else what you’re doing. This is a Top Secret effort. Understand?”

She nodded and left.

* * *

Katrina arrived at the Presidential dacha with a heavily-armed security escort, a team of engineers and a truckload of equipment. The home, nestled in a birch forest, would have been a subdued, restful oasis in other times. On this particular day, it was an armed camp, frantic with activity.

Inside was chaos.

Groups of civilian and military leaders clustered in every room, with maps, documents and, where possible, telephones. A security escort led Katrina to a tall, older, bear-like man behind a desk. Beside him, in the next desk, the silver-haired Boris Yeltsin, beet-red with anger, yelled on the phone.

“We don’t accept you gang of bandits, Gennadi! We will keep in mind everything you do. When it is over, we will try you for treason!” He slammed the phone down, breathed deeply to control his rage, then finally smiled at the older man. “I think I intimidated him,” Yeltsin said. “Gennadi Yanayev is a coward. That’s why we will win! Now, I have to talk to that bastard, Kryuchkov!”

As Yeltsin made another phone call, the man beside him turned to Katrina. “You are Fontanova?”

She extended her hand. “Yes.”

“I’m Pavel Voschchanov. You work for me. Sit down.”

The single chair near Voschchanov’s desk propped up a Kalishnikov assault rifle. Katrina picked it up.

Weapons cocked around her.

Voschchanov paused for a moment, then smiled. “Everyone’s a little nervous. Hand me the rifle, my dear—slowly.”

She did as he asked, then sat down.

“You see what you got yourself into?”

“I know what I’m doing. I just hope you know what you’re doing.”

Pavel Voschchanov laughed a deep laugh. “That’s what we need here—more spirit!” He laughed again, then wiped a mirthful tear from his eye. “You won’t make it very far in a Soviet-style bureaucracy, Miss Fontanova. We have to win here, or we all go to jail. Or worse.”

“Let’s win, then,” she said.

* * *

The idea of winning—of beating a faceless, amorphous opponent who suffocated millions of minds

through a vast experiment in social engineering—energized Katrina as she walked through the abandoned campus of the Russian-American University. Beasts growled in the nearby Moscow Zoo, short-tempered by August's heat, and disturbed by the non-stop rumbling of armored personnel carriers patrolling Sadovaya-Kudrinskaya, Moscow's Garden Ring Road. The pungent smell of jungle predators overpowered summer's scent.

She thought of yellow eyes and padded feet searching for meat, and walked a little faster along the campus path. The sounds connected with her brain, painting vivid images of hunters and hunted. Somewhere a big cat moved in a quick, fluid stalk, exposed fangs and rasped at darkness with a loud, guttural hiss. *Did something move beyond the archway?* She walked faster.

In the twilight haze, a man stepped from shadows into the light and grasped her arm. She yelled in panic, unprepared for the encounter. Then she remembered her mission. The man gripped her arm tightly, steering toward a guarded doorway, where darkness swallowed them both.

"Conceal yourself," the man said. There are eyes everywhere." They entered a lightless hall that seemed to amplify and echo even the quietest of sounds—the muffled scuttling of rats and the guarded whispers of their own voices. "My name is Daniel. Russian KGB. I am with the movement. These are my associates—Mikhail and Anatoly. They work with me."

"Fontanova," she replied, regaining control. "ALMAZ."

"Step through here. Be careful not to trip. We have to close the door first."

She stepped through a portal into more darkness. The door closed, cutting off the last vestige of indirect light. Darkness evaporated with the loud click of a switch.

It took her eyes a moment to adapt. What had once been a library was now an arsenal of rifles and automatic weapons. Ammunition and body armor replaced books on most of the shelves. Daniel reminded her of Vladimir. He was perhaps a few years older than her brother, but he spoke with a similar intensity. His eyes—sharp, clear, military—seemed out of place between lengthening hair and a stubble beard. His face sagged, as though saddened by events. An unwashed, threadbare uniform, with a row of medals, only hinted at a former pride.

Mikhail and Anatoly, similarly dressed, shrouded in the same sadness, positioned themselves near the door. Daniel moved among boxes and clutter to an area with desks.

"This is where we need a hotline to the Parliament building. You must work quickly. Put it in tonight."

She inspected the area, testing the power point and noting the location of windows—now boarded shut.

"There's already a microwave dish on the roof of this building," she said. "I saw it on the way in. A second dish won't be noticed. We'll beam from here to a point just south of the zoo. From there, we'll go direct to government offices on Rochdelskaya. No problem." She smiled at Daniel, hoping for approval.

"Good," he said, lighting a cigarette. "One other matter. Tomorrow afternoon you are to take an Aeroflot flight to Sverdlovsk."

"Why?"

He lowered his voice. "It is Yeltsin's home. The city has publicly defied the Committee." He drew closer and spoke in an intimate whisper. "They make preparations for a Russian government-in-exile. They need your help, Katrina—in case we fail. Here are your instructions. We will stay in Moscow and do what we can, regardless of the outcome."

She took the paper, then looked closely at Daniel's face. The eyes showed no emotion—no fear—at the possibility of failure or death. They were matter-of-fact eyes, like eyes reading crop statistics, body counts or actuarial records.

She nodded to show that she understood.

Katrina made a quick survey of lights and electricity, pushing crates out of the way, moving equipment. She came across a few boxes filled with clothes and personal effects.

"Is this an armory or a boudoir?" she asked.

"Those are my things," Daniel said. "My apartment wasn't safe anymore."

She lifted a cartoon picture from a box, looked at it a moment, then handed it to Daniel and laughed.

"I must say, you have the artistic gift!"

"A message from a relative—Anton. It's supposed to be an eagle. He said he wanted to be free. And he wanted Lithuania to be free." Daniel paused, searching for words. "He died in January when they attacked Vilnius. The Soviet postal system, with typical efficiency, delivered it yesterday. It's a nice little cartoon. He was a good drawer, don't you think, for someone seven years old?"

Katrina nodded solemnly.

"This is why we must not fail," he said. Daniel folded the drawing and tucked it in a pocket.

She made quick sketches of the armory area and a few circuit diagrams, then gave Daniel and the others instructions for preparing the site for equipment installation. She departed without goodbyes, eager to scout a location for the second antenna at the zoological park.

The walk to the zoo was rather pleasant. The night was cooling off. Some animals slept. Big cats paced nervously in their cages. Great apes drew near the bars at the sound of her approach.

She located a potential site for the antenna, figured the cabling and equipment needed to set it up and the angle of the relay shot.

She was about to leave when the animals panicked.

Distant engines rumbled in unison. A swarm of headlights flitted low and fast along the walkways. As the rumble drew nearer, animals reacted with distress calls.

Motorcycles materialized from behind the ape cages. There was a roar, a squeal of tires and racing engines. Headlights formed a sinuous file that swooped toward her, swept around her and encircled her. She could see the long hair and staring eyes of the riders. They were *rockeri*—a motorcycle gang.

She backed against a cage and opened her briefcase.

A tiger bellowed from behind, roaring like another unmuffled engine.

One of the youths revved his bike and pulled close.

She displayed a knife and coolly alternated her attention between the youth and the other riders.

The metal glinted in the artificial light, giving pause.

The rider flicked back a mane of dirty, unkempt hair with a snap of his head.

The engine idled.

He pulled off a pair of round glasses, polished them with his dirty shirt and returned them to a position low on his nose. He slowly eyed her body, beginning with her legs, then breasts, then face. He pushed the glasses upward to the bridge of his nose.

“Are you Fontanova?” he asked.

She nodded slowly.

He curled a lip into a half-smile. “Come with me. Pavel Voschchanov needs to see you. Now!” He snapped his fingers and motioned to the bike.

She tucked the knife into a pocket and gripped it tightly, then climbed up behind him. He smelled of engine oil and ripened sweat.

The biker gunned the engine with a wrist, then launched into the street on the sound of tortured rubber.

They zipped down Konyushkovskaya, weaving around occasional tanks and APCs, detouring through alleys and narrow streets, past drunks and streetwalkers, slicing through Moscow night life.

As they approached the government building, Katrina saw thousands of people constructing a protective wall—a barricade—out of tree trunks, bathtubs and vehicles.

The bike slowed as it approached the human ring.

One group dragged concrete blocks from the nearby U.S. Embassy, to fashion a tank-resistant barrier.

The *rocker* slalomed past people and debris, found a ramp and drove the bike into the Parliament Building.

They rolled to a stop inside the lobby, before the figure of Sergey Giglavyi.

The biker throttled to a low idle.

“So, little girl,” Giglavyi said, grinning through a cigarette, “you have taken up with bikers!”

She climbed off the motorcycle and looked at him, not amused. “So, Giglavyi, now the government of Russia makes deals with street thugs. Will this save us?”

He laughed and stamped a foot. "God, I hope so." He blew a cloud of smoke. "You needn't be concerned. The *rockers* know the streets. They help us track the movement of troops and APCs." He looked at the biker and waved his hand theatrically. "Am I right?"

The biker winked, tossed his long hair with a snap of the head, wheeled the bike around inside the lobby and accelerated out the door with a *VROOM, VROOM*.

Giglavyi shrugged. "It's hard to get good help these days. Come with me."

16. JUST KIDDING

August 1991

Leavenworth, Kansas

Louis Weddell picked up the phone and talked to the man on the other side of the window. "You Yuri Sverdlov?"

"Yeah."

Weddell pressed pudgy fingers against the glass, as if freedom were palpable. "When you brought me down, I thought I was finished."

"You were. You are. At least until your time's up."

"No, I mean really finished. I was suicidal."

"I read the records. You bungled it. They stopped you."

"Yeah. They stopped me. Any wonder I tried? I mean, I betrayed my country."

"Yes, you did."

"Can you understand that?"

"No."

"At first, I abandoned all hope. Felt I was right down there in the bottom-most pit of hell. You know?"

"And now, you're repentant? You want to confess to more crimes?"

"Not exactly."

“Then why did you ask me to come here?”

“A man gets to thinking. About crime and punishment. You know? What I did was a crime. I tried to give away very advanced technology. To the Russians. To anyone—who would pay. That was wrong.”

“I see.”

“But there were other people who also betrayed their country.”

“So it *was* a conspiracy?”

“Yes. It *is* a conspiracy.”

“And you worked with them?”

“No. I stole from them.”

“Who are *they*?”

“Government people.”

“They’re trying to sell secrets, too?”

“No. They’re trying to keep secrets—from the American people. From taxpayers. From voters.”

“I see. And what secrets are they keeping?”

“Horrible secrets. They killed and kidnapped Americans. They experimented on living people.”

“What proof do you have?”

“None.”

“Why am I here?”

Louis Weddell broke out laughing. It was a deep belly laugh that seemed to go on forever. The laugh squeezed out his fat eyes, ran out his bulbous nose and peed out his pants. “Why am I here? Oh, ha, ha, ha!”

The laugh infected Yuri. His lip twitched upward, spread into a broad grin, then teeth pulled apart in a laugh.

Weddell wiped his eyes. “Why am I here? Hee, hee, hoo, ha, ha! Hoo, ha, ha! I thought that was *my* question. Oh, ha, ha, ha!”

“Ahem,” Yuri said. “As amusing as this all is, I’m going to have to—”

“Wait! Hoo, ha, ha! Wait. Ahhhh. Wait, I want to give you something.”

“What?”

“Majority.”

“What’s that?”

“A code name. For the government program that kills people.”

“I’m with the government. How do you know—”

“You didn’t kill me. You could have, but you didn’t.”

“But I killed two Russians.”

“That’s different.”

“Why? Why is it different?”

“Because they were trying to steal secrets.”

Now Yuri’s face broke into another grin. “ *You* were trying to steal secrets.”

“Oh, ah, ha, ha! I was, wasn’t I? Oh, ah, ha, ha!”

Yuri got up to leave.

“Wait! There’s more. Hee, hee, hoo, hoo.”

“What?” Yuri asked, suppressing a laugh.”

“It deals with UFOs. Oh, ah, hee, hee!”

Yuri shook his head, then put down the phone. On the other side of the glass, Weddell stumbled away, his huge girth still doubled over with laughter, crotch wet with pee.

Yuri retrieved Weddell’s envelope from the guard at the security pass-through. The note inside said:

*Operation Majority is a Majic program which
uses Pounce to get TTDs from EBEs.*

More like *DDTs*, he thought, reflecting on the inability of engineers to spell. As he walked out the door, he tore up the note.

17. ORDERS

August 1991

Moscow

“You wanted to see me?”

Pavel Voschchanov nodded, excused himself from a meeting with five other people, then walked Katrina to a corner of the room. “We are all making plans to spend the night in the Parliament Building. You need to be here, too.”

“What about installing the link to the armory at the Russian-American University?”

“It can wait. We think they’re planning an attack on this place. We caught Soviet KGB agents in the building about an hour ago. They were in plainclothes, trying to hide as part of the barricade crowd. One of our own KGB people recognized them. Also, the *rockers* have reported unusual movements of APCs near Vosstaniya Plaza, just down the road. They could be massing Alpha Unit. We thought we needed all hands—just in case.”

He fumbled in a drawer and retrieved a gun. “Take this for protection.”

“No. I’ll use my head. It’s better. Safer.”

“And knowing you, it’s probably more lethal.” He smiled a grandfatherly smile. “Let’s go to the third floor—our crisis center. Yeltsin wants some very specific things done on communications. He didn’t have time to explain them to me. We’ll go together.”

* * *

“She’s with me,” Pavel Voschchanov said to the burly Russian KGB guard. The guard clicked his heels, snapped his rifle to attention and let them pass.

The “War Room” was frantic with activity. There were maps taped to walls and tables. Lists of telephone numbers, troop strengths and supply conditions hung from clipboards on the walls. A model of the Parliament Building had been removed from the glass case in the lobby and set up on a War Room table to plan defensive positions. People talked on telephones, studied maps or lists and engaged in vigorous debate.

Near the center of this organized chaos, Yeltsin held a telephone to each ear, carrying on two

conversations at once.

In one phone, he said: "Is Raisa okay? And the family?" In the second phone, he said: "They're okay. They try to take a lot of walks outside, to show people they're still alive... What?" To the first phone: "What about the nuclear codes?" After a moment, to the second phone: "He says they took the codes from him. Yazov and Moiseyev each have a set of codes. Gorbachev's set went to Boris Pugo, the Interior Minister... Yes, I agree. Most urgent. What? You want to talk? Let me see what I can do. I'm getting off now."

Yeltsin twisted the telephones around and held them together. He looked at Pavel and Katrina. "Gorbachev and John Major's interpreter. I'm the switch," he laughed. "After the revolution, we'll have to get a better phone company." Then, his face turned grim. "We have a serious problem, Pavel."

"What could be more serious than a pending attack?"

"The nuclear codes. All three sets are in the hands of coup leaders. Each is in the form of an electronic suitcase. They call it the 'football.' Yazov and Moiseyev are probably heavily protected. But Pugo... we might be able to get to him."

Pavel nodded. "I'll organize something."

Yeltsin spoke to Pavel, but looked at Katrina. "Send someone who knows encryption systems and codes. How we deal with this issue will determine the level of support we get from the West." Yeltsin dismissed them.

"As you can see," Pavel said as they departed the War Room, "plans and priorities change by the minute."

They walked back to Pavel's office. When they opened the door, Daniel was sitting next to the desk.

"You didn't return to the armory. I thought I'd better find out what happened."

"It's okay. We now have a higher priority task," Pavel said, patting Daniel on the shoulder. "It's good you're here. I need someone who can shoot straight. Find the whereabouts of Boris Pugo. Get Gorbachev's nuclear codes from him. I know him. He's a terrible coward. He may even be hiding in his apartment." He shuffled through papers on his desk, located a telephone list and circled Pugo's name. "Here are his numbers—office and apartment. You can try these to get a fix on his position. Use the *rockeri*. They can get you there quickly."

Daniel followed Katrina down the hall to another small office. Katrina unlocked the door and entered.

"This is a room they gave me. I mostly use it for storage, but there's a telephone here."

She searched through a trunk filled with equipment and retrieved a small device. She cut the cord leading to the telephone and spliced the device in-line.

"What are you doing?" Daniel asked.

Katrina grinned. "We don't want them knowing what we're up to, do we?"

She screwed the brass contact terminals tightly around the spliced wire. "This device mimics the KGB

A-level protocols embedded in the telephone system. They won't be able to monitor the calls."

"And I thought the KGB was good!" Daniel laughed.

They called Pugo's office number—no answer. After five rings, Katrina hung up. "Let's see if he's home." She dialed the apartment number.

"Hello?" a voice answered.

"Yes," she said. "I'm with the telephone service. We need to do some maintenance work on your telephone. I'm calling to arrange an appointment. We need to make some adjustments inside your apartment."

"I just had a new phone installed."

"Well, yes, that may be part of the problem."

"It works fine," he said. "Don't bother me." He hung up.

Katrina returned the handset to its cradle. "He's there. Let's go."

* * *

A motorbike roared up the ramp into the lobby. It circled Sergey Giglavyi, then rolled to a stop. A man with an instrument case and a small duffel bag climbed off the back of the bike.

Giglavyi stared in astonishment. "What have we here? A concert? Music to end the world by?"

The man adjusted his cap, propped the cello case upright and extended his hand in a very formal gesture. "I am Mstislav Rostropovich," he said with a trace of an American accent. "I'm a musician. I emigrated to America a few years ago. When I heard of the coup, I decided to come back—to defend Russia. I am—at your service."

Giglavyi circled the man, noting his expensive clothes and fashionable shoes. He drew a long puff from his cigarette and arched an eyebrow in a look of studied cynicism. "I need to see inside the case—for security." He unlatched the top, then admired the beautiful wooden instrument. "It'll make a hell of a weapon," Giglavyi said. "Peter!" He snapped his fingers. A blond-haired youth came running. "Show Mister Rostropovich the barricade." Giglavyi grinned. "Peter will also introduce you to our Russian capitalists outside. You're just in time for dinner. They're bringing in hundreds of meals from Pizza Hut and McDonald's—like New York."

"Well then," Rostropovich beamed, "I'll feel right at home! Do you have the native drink, too?"

Giglavyi pressed fingers to his lips. "Only the best vodka! One of the many benefits of working the barricade."

"Thank you, sir!" Rostropovich said, with a tilt of the head. He clicked his heels with formality, then walked outside with Peter.

Giglavyi looked at the biker. "Where do we get such people?"

"Excuse me!" a woman's voice said, from behind. "We need to borrow your runner."

Katrina and Daniel paced toward him.

"I'm busy, little girl," Giglavyi said, a cigarette dangling from his lip. "We've got problems."

"So do we. Ours can't wait."

"We need intelligence on troop positions. What could be higher priority?"

"Orders from Yeltsin."

"Oh." He paused for a moment. "Where are you going?"

"Near Moscow State University."

"Shit!" Giglavyi threw his cigarette to the floor and stamped it with a foot. He took a deep breath, then changed his tone of voice. "I'm putting on my most humble demeanor, Ms. Fontanova. I'd be forever grateful if you would swing by Vosstaniya Plaza and see if Alpha Unit is massing for an attack. I'm strapped for resources, you see. This could be life or death for us. I'm asking as politely as I can. Hmmm?"

Daniel nodded in agreement. "If they attack, nothing else will matter."

"Okay," she said. "We'll do it. If it looks like they're going to attack, we'll turn around and come back."

Giglavyi ceremoniously kissed her hand. "Thank you, Fontanova."

The biker wheeled around. "Climb on," he said. "With three people, this'll be pretty tight. Hold on to the waist in front of you." Katrina got on, then Daniel. "What a way to get girls, eh?" the biker said to Giglavyi, winking. He gunned the engine and accelerated slowly out of the lobby.

Beyond the door, thousands of people moved around the barricades. It was a party atmosphere. People sang songs and chanted slogans. Liquor was plentiful. A handful of Soviet soldiers stood outside the barrier with automatic weapons. Young women teased them with promises of sexual favors if they would just go home.

The biker weaved through the human throng. As he piloted his motorcycle into the night, they heard strains of cello music.

18. GOOD AND EVIL

August 1991

Annapolis

Yuri opened the kitchen blinds of his father's Annapolis, Maryland house, eyes fixed on the rippling surface of Chesapeake Bay. Early morning sunlight filtered through slats, painting his face with a grid of alternating light and dark lines. Across a short loop of shoreline partially shrouded in mist, he could see the Academy, where midshipmen marched in unison, "hup-hup-hupping" their way toward a naval career. His hand unconsciously rubbed the surface of a gold medallion, feeling the contours of the eagle, pressing the ridges of the inscription, remembering the words: *And the truth shall make you free*. For a moment, his brain blocked the view of lapping water, and he saw, instead, his father's determined face.

Alexander Sverdlov had his faults, Yuri thought. We all do. And we all make trade-offs. But he knew what was important. He knew there were some things worth fighting for, worth risking your life for. Worth killing for.

A steam kettle's annoying whistle pulled Annapolis back into focus. He turned off the gas stove, washed his hands to remove grime from furnace repairs, then poured a cup of hot java and sat down at the table, opening the large tin box which he had just discovered behind a ventilation grill in a ceiling—artifacts of his father's double life. Memories.

He wrestled with the interpretation of the contents—intellectually and emotionally. Some items had clear-cut meaning. Ticket stubs showed where he had been—Berlin, Istanbul, even Moscow. There were passports, with varying countries of origin, varying names and stamped entries that read like a list of Cold War hotspots.

It was the ambiguous artifacts that he struggled with the most. They were like black-and-white illusions which shift in the mind's eye from figure to ground, back to figure. He played with a wire survival saw—the kind they give to combat aviators, or SEALs. You could grip the ring on each end with a thumb. The wire's rough, chiseled edge was sharp enough to cut through wood or steel—a useful instrument for escaping or evading behind enemy lines. It could also be used as a garrote, to sever necks. He noticed a dark stain which reached almost to the thumb rings. *Tree sap, or blood?*

Certainly, evil in the world needed a counterweight. Alexander Sverdlov had simply balanced such evil against the means and methods required to fight it. The principles of duty, honor, country served as a filter—a way to put things in perspective.

And yet. The idea of cold-bloodedly killing one's own countrymen was difficult to reconcile with other principles. Alien. Inhuman. Hitler and Stalin had done it. But Alexander Sverdlov, his own father...

Yuri decided to go for a walk along the shoreline. It would help him think.

19. LAUNCH CODES

August 1991

Moscow

A light drizzle fell, with spirit-dampening effect. On a speeding motorcycle, it was like riding through sheets of water. The biker slowed as he pulled through a narrow alley next to Vosstaniya, then rolled to a stop, cutting the engine. “It’s just ahead,” he said, face and hair wet from weather. “I don’t want to get too close. They know we’re tracking them. If you get into trouble, yell. I’ll be there, but I may have time for just one pass. Be ready.”

Daniel and Katrina got off the bike and walked toward the square. They heard engine noises and smelled fumes from idling APCs.

“What is this Alpha Unit?” Katrina asked.

“It’s the Soviet KGB’s elite anti-terrorist unit. The same group that assaulted TV facilities in Vilnius last January. They’re good. A crack team of about 200 men. They killed my brother-in-law in that assault and his son.”

“Anton,” she said.

Daniel nodded.

They approached the end of the alley. Daniel pressed a finger to his lips. They moved quietly, then looked into the square.

* * *

Rain beat a drumroll on ten armored vehicles. Idling engines played the bass section. Streetlights ringed the stage. Major Velon Bunyayev posed on the podium—an APC turret, inspecting Alpha Unit. Vehicle commanders waited for his cue.

“I don’t have to tell you,” he shouted, “how critical this mission is!”

Unmindful of the downpour, he scanned the unit.

“The Emergency Committee—specifically, General Varrenikov, of the Army... and General Kryuchkov of the KGB—depend on your success. They have warned the Russian Parliament that they will not tolerate insubordination! Agencies which defy the Committee will be dismantled.” He paused for effect, then said, slowly, “The Russian Parliament has defied the Committee.”

In Bunyayev’s mind the conclusion was inescapable—a matter of pure logic. “We now go to the Parliament Building to execute the wishes of the Committee. We now go to the Parliament Building to restore order. We now go to the Parliament Building to return the Communist Party to its rightful glory. We will secure the building within 30 minutes. That is our goal. You did well at Vilnius. Today there will be heavy casualties, but they will not be your casualties. They will be the fools who now defy the Committee. We go now for honor and Soviet glory! For duty and country!”

Bunyayev opened the hatch, climbed in and thumped the turret.

The driver, who had been listening to Bunyayev’s speech, maneuvered ahead into the single APC-accessible street entering into the square, turned the vehicle sideways and shut off the engine. Other APC drivers observed the rebellious action. One by one, they, too, turned their engines off.

Bunyayev was confused. “What are you doing?” he yelled.

Amid this anti-climax, an unexpected figure approached, moving between the stalled APCs. “Major!” Daniel yelled.

Bunyayev moved his hand to his holster. The figure continued walking toward him.

“I am Russian KGB! I have some information for you!” Daniel walked to the front of the vehicle.

Bunyayev looked down from the hatch, rivulets of water flowing from crooks in his hat.

“Can I come up? Or you come down? Please? I have a communiqué you need to see.”

Bunyayev thought for a moment, nodded, then climbed down. “You have something to give me?”

Daniel nodded. He withdrew a paper from his water-drenched coat and held it high in the air for Alpha Unit to see. He gave it ceremoniously to Bunyayev.

“I don’t understand,” the Major said. What is this? A child’s cartoon?”

He was not expecting Daniel’s round house kick that rocketed him against an armored fender. A second kick flattened him on the ground.

Daniel walked slowly to the sprawled figure and ripped the name tag from Bunyayev’s uniform. “What you did at Vilnius, and what you’re doing today, won’t be forgotten. After the revolution, there will be justice.” He rolled Bunyayev on his stomach and pushed his face into the mud with a boot. He lifted the gun from Bunyayev’s holster. Rounds plunked like metal raindrops in pools of water. Daniel threw the empty weapon onto the wet ground. Before he retreated to the alley, he wiped his boots on Bunyayev’s back. “Let’s go,” he said to Katrina. “there won’t be any problem here.”

Behind them, BMPs started their engines. They filed out of the square, one at a time, leaving Bunyayev wallowing in the mud—alone, beaten, clutching his gun and fishing for bullets.

* * *

The lift carrying Daniel and Katrina moved slowly with creaks and groans to the fifth floor, stopping in a lurch. Daniel opened the cage-style door. They stepped out into a Stalin-era viewscape of cement-floored hallways and buzzing, erratic fluorescent lights.

Even though Boris Pugo was a high ranking Soviet official, the common areas in his apartment building suffered from a type of neglect typical of the communist state. Graffiti, trash and damp gray walls heralded the visitors as they approached Pugo's door.

They heard a faint sobbing inside.

Daniel pushed. The unlocked door swung open. They stepped inside.

The living room was empty, but there were signs of recent human habitation—a drained bottle of vodka on a coffee table and two glasses containing half-melted ice. In the kitchen, a woman's body sprawled on the floor, head centered in a pool of blood.

"Probably his wife," Daniel said.

Sounds of movement came from behind. They heard a gun cock.

"Yes! My wife!" a man yelled.

They spun around.

Boris Pugo braced a pistol with two hands, alternating the barrel between Daniel and Katrina. Sweat dripped from the end of his nose and lazy beads of moisture gravitated downward across chubby, pallid cheeks.

Easy, Katrina thought. No sudden movements. Try to make him relax.

Pugo breathed rapidly and shallowly. Darting, sunken eyes spoke of madness and anger.

"Please—be calm," Daniel said. "Put down the gun."

Their eyes met and locked. Daniel's were serene, blue pools. Pugo's were dark, disturbed storms.

Pugo blinked.

The gun barrel exploded in a deafening *BOOM!*

Daniel stumbled backwards, grabbed at a stack of pots and pans, then—with kitchenware crashing about him—fell dead in a corner. The bullet that hit him was a soft metal dum-dum that whirled like a helicopter's blades, tunneling through his brain. The bloody pulp—all that remained of the delicate web of synapses and neural tissue—made a steady drip-drip-drip sound as it filled a metal pot behind his head.

As Pugo turned to Katrina, the world decelerated into slow motion.

She looked down the barrel of the gun. The shock of Pugo's act seized her brain and wrenched her stomach. She watched a bead of sweat drip from his lip, ease gently through the air, then plunk like a teardrop on his shoe. She watched his fat, shaking fingers tighten on the trigger. She had to think. Quickly.

"The nuclear codes," Katrina said calmly. "That's all we're after. You wouldn't want them to fall into the wrong hands, would you?"

Pugo didn't answer. He continued to hyperventilate.

"Did your wife do this to herself?" she asked, looking at the body.

He nodded, then wiped his mouth with one hand. "We were going to go together," he rasped. "We could see it was all unraveling."

"Where are the codes?"

"She was my only friend... the only one... Oh, God," he bawled, doubling over. "What have we done?" He dropped to his knees. "What have we done?"

"It's okay," she said, moving toward him. "It's okay. I just want the codes."

He nodded and sobbed. "They're in the bedroom. In a special suitcase."

She started to move, then hesitated.

He looked up and laughed, tears streaming from his eyes. With a quick flick of the hand, he pointed the gun at her head. She thought it was all over. In that brief instant, she thought of her mother.

Then Boris Pugo smiled, calmly put the gun in his mouth and pulled the trigger.

* * *

Daniel's body had no pulse. She laid him out and removed the child's cartoon from his pocket.

The world is full of bastards, she thought. Why people like Daniel? Why children?

Daniel's death added an abstract red motif to the edges of the drawing. She wiped her eye with a hand, brushing away the moisture. A tear tickled her cheek before it plunked down onto the cartoon.

Another design, she thought, touching the teardrop with a finger, mixing it with blood. *How many more designs shall we add before it all ends? How much more blood, before we are free, like Anton's eagle?*

She closed Daniel's eyes, tucked the cartoon into Pugo's electronic suitcase, locked the apartment with a key she found on Pugo's body and departed.

The *rocker*isped her back toward the Parliament Building along wet streets.

Atop the barricade, on the highest point, stood the immaculately dressed figure of Mstislav Rostropovich—cello in one hand, AK-47 in the other.

20. DOUBLE BLIND EXPERIMENT

August 1991

Johns Hopkins

"After this is over, there won't be any doubt," Whit Constantine said, adjusting his glasses. "We'll be ready to press for more funding."

Billy Stanton peered through a window which was actually a one-way mirror, built for viewing two rooms separated by a thin wall. In the room on the left, Richard Chandra sat at a table, reading a quantum physics journal. Headphones covered his ears. In the room on the right, a giant maze stretched from wall to wall. An angled mirror near the ceiling allowed the observation room to view activity within the maze.

"Here's the setup," Constantine said. "Inside this observation room we have video cameras synched to a common clock, recording activity in both experimental rooms. We measure the amount of time it takes for rats to navigate the maze. Richard, sitting in the other room, attempts to guide them. It's a double blind experiment. Richard's own eyes can't see into the maze room, and the experimenter scoring each run doesn't know anything about Richard or the experimental treatment."

Billy looked around the darkened observation area, spotting the video cameras near the ceilings.

"If we ramp up in funding, I'm thinking—keep Richard's R&D program at the same level, but add dollars to the Groom lab. We'll develop and test the weapon system there. How'd you like to have that operation?" Billy asked.

“Well—”

“I’m not goin’ to ask twice on this. I need an R&D manager PDQ.”

“Sure, Billy. I’ll do it. I’d like that.”

Billy tapped a Lucite rat cage on a high table near the glass. “What’s this cute guy doin’ in here?”

“In this experiment, we’re using two treated animals. One of them is running the maze. This one’s observing. It sees the entire run from start to finish.”

“So Richard’s working two connections.”

“Yeah.”

“And this terminal?” Billy touched a video screen filled with rows and columns of data.

“It connects to a supercomputer which does three things. First, it records the establishment of each link. Second, it displays the data stream. Third, it acts as a filter to block the flow of certain information.”

“Like what?”

“The nervous system generates a whole melange of assorted data. Most of it isn’t needed to perform experimental tasks. It’s just noise. Getting the right data mix is something we’re working on.”

“What would be an example—”

“Pain. Richard doesn’t like it. He says that by blocking pain he can deal with problems in a way that is more objective. More human.”

“Which seems curious—”

“Wait. They’re getting ready. See? The light’s on. Now the maze door opens.”

Billy looked through the window at the brown animal scampering through the twists and turns of the giant labyrinth. The animal navigated perfectly, without a single hesitation, stopping only at the end point for a reward.

Billy sighed and shook his head. “Beautiful. You know, Whit, we’ve had our ups and downs in this program, and a lot of uncertainty, but it’s times like this where the objective seems palpable. And at the end of this maze, we find a noble goal. One that will point the human race in a new direction.”

“I used to be sure of that, Billy. Now—”

“Don’t doubt yourself now. Of course we’re right. We’ve weighed the good of the many against the hardships of the few. It’s up to us to make that trade-off, Whit. If we don’t decide, who will? Look—there goes another animal.” A broad grin spread across his face as a brown rat flawlessly weaved toward the objective, eating its reward at the end.

“Whatever that is, the animal really seems to like it,” Billy said.

“Yeah. So does Richard. We had to unblock the gustatory portion of the data stream. He wants to taste the food.”

“Pellets?”

“No—meat. Richard likes meat.”

* * *

The door to the observation room opened and Richard Chandra stepped in. He clasped Billy’s hand, shook it, then turned it over to see the jagged scar on the palm. He laughed. “Well, blood brother, what brings you here?”

“Curiosity, Richard. Whit’s been telling me about some of your successes.”

Richard’s eyes flashed at Constantine. “I thought you might have been out here to talk about increasing my funding.”

“I’ll just be going,” Constantine said, sensing a moment of tension. “I need to run a few tests.” He departed and closed the door, leaving Chandra and Stanton facing each other in the darkened shadows of the observation room.

“There’s only so much money, Richard. Sorry.”

“You’re a flim-flam man, Billy.”

“Whaddya mean?”

Richard waved a finger in front of Billy’s nose. “This grows longer when you lie,” he said. “I heard you talking to Whit.” He pointed at the rat cage. “My ears burned.”

Billy winced, shrugged, then broke into an easy grin. “Shucks, Richard,” he said, reverting to heavy twang, “I’ve just been too long in Washington. I’m startin’ to be a politician.”

Chandra put a muscled arm around Billy’s shoulder and whispered in his ear. “We had a bargain, Billy. You need to keep your end of it. I want control over weapons development.”

“It’s out of my hands, Richard. The Majestic Committee wants an independent project manager. Honest.”

“Okay, then this independent project manager works for me. That’s the deal.”

Billy felt his hand crushing under Richard’s grip. “Okay,” he said. “Okay. Stop—”

“I don’t want lies, Billy. I don’t want deception. Play straight with me, or I’ll creep into your office and steal the truth.”

21. NEW WORLD ORDER

August 1991

Moscow

Yeltsin drove the gavel home three times. “My purpose this morning is to bring you up to date on the situation, and to propose a course of action.” He shuffled through notes on the podium. “Our sources tell us that the Minister of Defense and KGB Director could not get the support they needed for continuation of the Emergency Committee. The Minister of Defense was ordered to withdraw troops from Moscow. That withdrawal is scheduled for 3 PM today.”

A wave of applause ripped across the chamber, accompanied by excited whistles. Yeltsin let the emotion play out.

“The second thing I need to tell you is that the Foros rescue mission has succeeded. Gorbachev and his family are preparing to board a plane for Moscow. They are all safe. Kryuchkov and Yazov are under arrest.”

“I propose that when the last tank rolls out of Moscow, we arrest all members of the Emergency Committee. They must pay for their actions, and they must never again pollute the Russian spirit with their foul ideas.”

* * *

Later that day, Katrina and Pavel Voschchanov joined crowds along Moscow’s main streets. They cheered as a 3-mile-long column of armor retreated to bases outside the city. They watched as teen-aged girls tossed flowers to smiling soldiers, who seemed victorious in their retreat.

In the weeks that followed, Katrina worked on several communications-related projects for Yeltsin’s office. She established secure backup voice and data networks that could be accessed from several

points in and around Moscow. It was hectic work, because Yeltsin's advisors weren't sure if or when there might be another coup attempt. Once the systems were in place, things slowed down to a more normal pace.

Then one day, Pavel called her into his office.

It was a spacious, well-appointed suite, suitable for a high level bureaucrat. Katrina sat in a waiting area until the secretary called her in. Pavel stood up, his large frame matching the scale of a massive and polished wooden desk. The Kalishnikov assault rifle lay near the edge—a paper weight evoking memories of near chaos.

“You still have the gun!” she exclaimed, shaking his hand.

“A reminder that we can't play it safe anymore. When government arrogance exceeds my level of tolerance, I will pull it out again. I keep my powder dry.”

“One person with a gun? There is only one outcome.”

“Sometimes one person with a conscience is enough.”

His secretary interrupted. “Mister George Gens to see you.”

“Let him wait!” His face became a reddened mask. “This building is filled with people who caught the diplomatic flu when we were under the gun. Today everyone condemns Yanayev's gang because it is safe to do so. The play-it-safe politicians have become legends in their own minds. We must remember our enemies, Katrina, and we must not forget our friends. You are a friend. I want to reward you. Tell me what you want—within reason.”

Katrina did not hesitate. “I want to go to America. I want to take my brother, Vladimir, with me.”

* * *

She pushed her way out of the Russian parliament building, through an excited throng of people. She wore a broad smile. Pavel Voschchanov had promised a position at the Russian Embassy in Washington, D.C. She was to modernize intelligence collection efforts in the U.S.

Above Katrina, on a sunlit balcony of the Parliament Building, a gray-haired man waved.

Two hundred thousand Russians raised their fists, shouting “Yeltsin! Yeltsin! Yeltsin!”

Later that day, Yeltsin dispatched a squad to Dzerzhinsky Square to remove a monument that stood like a jackboot on Russia's neck. Amid a cheering crowd, they tore down the statue of Felix Dzerzhinsky, founder of the Soviet secret police.

22. NIGHT MUSIC

July 1992

Annapolis, MD

Somewhere between sleeping and waking, beneath the covers of his father's old bed, on a summer's night choking with heat and humidity, a dead face re-animated dim memories of a theatrical setting. Yuri's unconscious mind searched for an exit, but there was none. His body was paralyzed, unable to act. The face drew nearer. Shadows fell away, revealing sharply chiseled features and stiff, formal dress. The soft woodwinds and strings of an orchestra were attacked by the boldly assertive warnings of crashing symbols and trumpets. A moment in time played back in his head.

"The madness—" Alexander Sverdlov said, with an intimate whisper and a smile, leaning close to Yuri's ear. "Sometimes, you can hear it in the music, like the oboe's theme, fading in and out."

"Was he really mad, father?" Yuri asked in a high-pitched, nine-year-old voice, looking down at the stage as lithe dancers blurred motion and music.

His father knitted eyebrows and pressed a forefinger against his lips. "Stress," he said, in a hush. "That's what started the hallucinations. Tchaikovsky's visions began after his First Symphony. They affected him continuously, his whole life. He never escaped them."

Yuri nodded, listening to the music swell, carrying his mind like a leaf drifting across a pond that rippled with the interplay of human and animal, reality and sorcery. The drama unfolded in graceful arabesques and hypnotic orchestration. Yuri leaned into his father's ear. "I think madness made him pick the subject."

Alexander's lips spread in amusement at his son's intellectual spark. "How is that?"

"Well," Yuri said, thinking it through, trying out a big word, "the story is schizophrenic. You have a prince that isn't a prince, a swan that isn't a swan, and an evil magician making things happen."

Alexander winked and nodded, returning a whisper. "You're right. *Swan Lake* is really about what's below the surface. A year after composing this, Tchaikovsky tried to commit suicide. His work was an inward journey. It was also his salvation."

"Why?"

"Because work tamed his wildness. By writing down the music that played in his head, he could control both his inner chaos and the chaos of the external world—the world of musicians, dancers, patrons and friends."

"Father?"

"Yes?"

"Do you think I will ever go crazy?"

Alexander Sverdlov seemed to resonate, struck by a common chord, as the oboe wove its soft theme. Alexander's eyes rapidly traced features on his son's face, finally settling on the darkness at the core of Yuri's pupils. His answer was barely audible. "Not if you have control, my Prince Siegfried. Not if you have control."

The next day, as Agent Yuri Sverdlov pondered an FBI assignment involving the surveillance of Russian agents, words vaguely remembered from a dream took his thoughts in a new direction.

The idea of control became a passion.

PART TWO: "ANIMUS"

"But the main thing was that all this did not seem to occur in me accidentally, but as though it had to be so. As though it were my most normal condition, and not in the least disease or depravity, so that finally I even lost the desire to struggle against this depravity."

Dostoyevsky, *Notes From Underground*

23. INQUISITION

February 1993

NSA Headquarters, Fort George Meade, MD

“I want to get inside their heads. I want to know what they know—when they know it.”

Jack Dugan saw the excitement in Yuri’s eyes—a burning, messianic look. A wildness. Maybe a madness. He’d seen it before—in Florida—and knew he should proceed cautiously. He rubbed his fingers along the textured cover of the carefully prepared document, and read the title: *Operation Inquisition*. It was stamped *Confidential*. “You’re serious?”

“You know me Jack,” Yuri deadpanned, “there’s not a humorous bone in my body.”

“That’s true. I’ve been meaning to tell you to get a life. And you’re coming to me with this idea because—”

“It’s got to be a partnership. I’ve seen what the technology can do. We put Louis Weddell away by working together. We can do it again—on a bigger scale.”

“How?”

“I want to set up a permanent surveillance center using NSA technology.”

“How would it be different from the National Counterintelligence Center?”

“Less bureaucratic. Focused only on the highest payoff intercepts.”

“How’s that?”

“We’ll bug the Russian intelligence collection system.”

Jack whistled. Shivers rippled up his back in a wave that tickled his neck hairs.

Yuri smiled. “If it works, we’ll expand to other systems—the Chinese, the Japanese...”

“I dunno. It’s the kind of thing that could easily backfire.”

“No guts, no glory.”

“I like to consider the other prevailing motto in this town—’Trip and you’re dead.’”

“Look, you’ve read the wires. The Russians are ramping up their Signals Intelligence system. They brought in some top talent to do it. They’re desperate for economic intelligence as well as military intelligence. Operation Inquisition could neutralize that effort.”

“Yeah, I know. This is where you start spouting ‘Duty, Honor, Country.’” Jack looked down at his lap a long moment.

“Spill something?”

“No. I’m just thinking about what kind of protection I need to keep them from cutting off my pecker when things go wrong. Maybe an athletic cup...”

“*If* things go wrong. They won’t. This is a noble goal, Jack. A lot of people will support it.”

“You know I’m a sucker for noble goals. Sure, I’ll help you push this thing, Yuri. I’ll help you sell it.”

“You won’t regret it.”

“I already do. By the way, do you know anything more about the Russian team? Like who’s leading it?”

“Yeah. A communications engineer with a lot of political clout. Katrina Fontanova.”

“Find out all you can. We’ll need it for background.”

24. EAST VERSUS WEST

March 1993

Washington, D.C.

I’m not very good at this, Yuri thought, pushing into the crowded metro car, hoping the bulge of heavy iron under his coat would go unnoticed. He grabbed at a pole for support, locking an elbow around his shoulder holster. *Trailing people is a real art form. You have to look distracted, like you’re not watching. Like you don’t care. You have to melt into the background.*

He tried reading a newspaper—someone else’s newspaper—lifting his chin above a bald head, eyes stealing furtive glances around the car. *Act natural, he thought.*

The man turned, feeling warm breath on his bald pate. He glared at Yuri, who quickly looked away—toward Katrina Fontanova.

* * *

Why do they all have to dress like gangsters? Katrina thought. *Every man on the train wears a suit and tie—like Al Capone. This is so deceptive!*

Intellectually, she knew it was simply the custom—a peculiarity of western culture. She had watched American movies, read American books, and was not bothered by observing such customs in a fictional setting. Up close, it was different. In Moscow, if you dressed in a very formal or lavish way, people

thought you were Russian Mafia. Most of the time, they would be right.

It is naive, she thought, to believe that the men on this metro car are all criminals. And yet—

The car rounded a curve. She watched a particular man—tall, dark, muscular, and dressed immaculately (like a gangster)—lean into the turn, slightly stumble, then catch himself. She skipped a breath.

He has something under his coat.

The man slowly turned his gaze around the car, as though trying to observe without being observed. His eyes eventually locked onto Katrina, who stared back. Then, appearing flustered, he quickly looked in a new direction, over the head of a seated bald man.

This started a chain reaction.

The bald man, reacting to warm breath on a sensitive spot, angrily snapped his newspaper and shifted position. The woman next to him, who now felt the bald man pressing against her side, verbalized her discomfort. “Sir! Will you please?” The man scooted away, overcorrecting, slamming a leg into the standing, well-built man, causing him to lose his balance and reel backwards.

There is definitely something under his coat, Katrina thought. She watched the well-built man straighten his tie and glance quickly in her direction. Stop being so paranoid, Fontanova!

The metro finally slowed, arriving at her destination—the shopping mall at Pentagon City. She got out, gripping a large handbag, easing her way through a mass of humanity, leaving the gangster behind.

Or so she thought.

* * *

Yuri pushed through the crowd, his height and bulk now an obstacle to the pursuit. He could see Fontanova slip away, as men cleared a path in deference to the striking, auburn-haired woman.

She’s probably on her way to a dead drop or brush contact, he thought—passing reports to other agents.

Yuri knew the Russians worked like the CIA—never doing their own dirty work, managing a network of traitors to do it for them. The agent is the person at the end of the line. He or she is the one with the most to gain or lose, and may be working with one or more sub-agents in a spy ring.

He thought he could read Fontanova’s body language. *She’s not dallying. She knows exactly where she’s going. She’s on a mission.*

He felt helpless as he saw Fontanova ride the long escalator toward the top, leaving him floundering in the human herd.

* * *

The little wooden mouse rocked back and forth, walking under the pull of a long string, making cute, chirp-like sounds that caused two pedestrians to reach for their pocketbooks.

Katrina saw it above her, at the top of the escalator, watched it toddle away as her head approached street level, and followed its course with her eyes as she pushed off the moving metal step.

Another amazing American invention, she thought, moving toward the kiosk that sold it.

“How much for the wooden mouse?”

“You’re a foreigner, aren’t you?” the vendor said with a gold-toothed smile. He straightened a pince-nez and corrected the cock of his beret. “Ahem... The price depends on what you want. We have the cheap, little kind, which sort of croaks and crawls, like this one, or the more expensive, hand-painted, self-propelled variety, guaranteed for a year, which—”

“Excuse me!” someone yelled. “Coming through.”

There were muffled sounds of bodies colliding, then Katrina heard the quick stamp of feet climbing the metal escalator. She turned to see the person who would run rather than ride all the way to the top.

It was the man with the bulge under his coat, now out of breath and wet with perspiration. He stumbled shakily from the last elevator step, saw her, silently mouthed the word, *shit*, and walked briskly to a hotdog cart, where he ordered a foot-long bratwurst.

She meant to ask him if he was okay, but he avoided eye contact, acting nonchalant as he bathed the bratwurst bun in a thick layer of brown mustard. Between deep, racing breaths, he inhaled a bite, choked, then coughed for nearly a minute, tears streaming from his eyes, mustard streaming from his nose.

A small poodle without a leash yapped at him from the pavement, apparently spooked by his violent actions. The man, still in a coughing fit, tried to wave it away, but the dog nipped the bratwurst in the process, then scurried into the mall with its meaty treasure.

Katrina decided not to get involved.

* * *

“Like a drink? To help with...”—the vendor waved his hand broadly—“the problem?”

“Yeah,” Yuri rasped, grabbing the offered soda, gulping it down.

“Wouldn’t drink so fast if I were you,” the vendor said. “Ain’t good for ya’. When I do that, I always get—”

“ *Hic!*”

“See what I mean?”

Yuri now saw what he meant, but could do nothing about it, even though he understood the technical mechanism: his throat was seized by involuntary, spasmodic closures of the glottis.

He paid the vendor and entered the mall to search for Fontanova.

* * *

Adult ‘techies’ crowded the mammoth phone store in the Pentagon City mall, touching, trying, talking. It was a dizzying array of cordless phones, PA systems and mobile communications, interconnected in various test configurations.

Yes, Katrina thought, marveling at the spectacle, *here is some of the equipment we need.*

She picked up a cellular phone, began examining the features, and was startled when it ‘talked’ to her.

“Can I help you?”

Across the room, beside a telephone-shaped helium balloon tethered to a ‘TALK TO ME’ sign, a young attendant held a handset and stared in her direction. “Me,” he mouthed, pointing to himself. She walked to the counter, carrying the device.

“Do all the cellular phones work the same way?” Katrina asked, with a smile.

“Pretty much,” the salesman said, straightening his tie and brushing back scraggly brown hair with a hand. “Just punch in the number you want to dial.” He wrinkled his nose in a cute way and smiled back. “Easy.”

“No,” she said. “I mean the wireless transmission protocols. Are they all the same within the city? And does the equipment come with engineering specifications?”

The salesman screwed his face into a troubled expression and stepped back from the counter. Katrina smiled again, batting her eyes.

“Well,” the salesman finally said, “all the cell-phone equipment is interoperable with base stations throughout the city, if that’s what you mean. And no, you don’t get much in the way of engineering specs when you buy a phone. But we do have tech manuals in the back...”

Katrina wrinkled her nose. “Could you bring them out?”

* * *

Yuri Sverdlov, in a moment of recognition punctuated by a violent hiccup, spotted Fontanova on the other side of the display window, where she and a salesman pored over thick tech manuals next to a telephone-shaped balloon.

He moved casually through the crowded store, hiccuping, finally settling near a ‘Touch-N-Talk’ booth where he could watch the Russian while appearing distracted by the technology. Two children—a ten-year-old blond-headed girl and her eight-year-old tow-headed brother—played with equipment next to him, and giggled whenever he hiccuped.

An idea came to him. “You seem to know a lot about the equipment,” he finally said to the little girl. “Is there a way I can listen in to someone else in the store?”

“Without them knowing?”

“Yes... *Hup!*”

She giggled, then said, “Just pick up *that*phone.”

He reached for the phone, saw the girl squeeze her shoulders in excitement while the brother giggled. Against his better judgment, Yuri picked up.

“Hello?” A woman’s accented voice said, startling him. He dropped the phone.

At the counter near the front of the store, Katrina Fontanova stared at him, holding a telephone.

“Hey Mister! Pick it up,” the little girl squealed.

“Yeah, pick it up,” her brother said.

He lifted the handset off the floor. “Hello? *Hup!*” he said, finally.

“You called this phone?”

He saw Katrina’s lips move in synch with the voice.

“Umm... *Hup!*” Thinking quickly, he tried to imitate a drunken slur. “Is thish Mako Lounge? *Hup!* Can I talk to Bubba?”

“Bubba?”

“ *Hup!* Okay. Jusht a minute. He’s right here.”

He handed the phone to the little blond girl. “It’s for you,” he said. She squeezed her shoulders again, excitedly, and made ‘Golly’ eyes at her brother, who stuck out his tongue and grabbed at the handset.

When Yuri turned around, Fontanova was gone. Vanished.

He raced into the mall, stopped, surveyed the moving throng, and searched for signs of a fashionably-dressed, auburn-haired woman.

“Sir?” a voice asked from behind.

When he turned, there was the click of a shutter. Katrina Fontanova smiled as she put a small camera back into her handbag. “Would you like me to send you a copy of the print, Mr...”

Yuri hiccuped in surprise. “Can you shend it to Bubba?” Then he hiccuped again. “He likes pictures.” After looking at her for a long moment, he put his hands into his pockets, jingled change, then attempted to imitate a drunken weave. He stumbled into the crowd, deciding to cut short this first encounter with the enemy.

* * *

“I gave the photograph to the security people. He may not be a gangster. It’s just that in America, everyone dresses like gangsters.” Nikolai Gallagan—fiftyish, white haired, immaculately dressed (like a gangster), beckoned Katrina with the motion of his fingers.

She stepped closer to his desk, turning around, modeling a new evening dress, then assumed a pose she remembered from an old American movie.

Gallagan nodded in approval. “You look very stunning, Fontanova. But do you think you are up to it?”

“Of course, she said. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“You have to make the enemy think you are interested in him. Make him put his guard down, to get what we want—first class American technology.”

“Trust me, Nikolai, I can do it.”

“It is important for Russia. Are you sure?”

“Piece of pie,” she said. “I will act like Marilyn Monroe.”

* * *

Amid the conversational buzz of a Ukrainian Embassy cocktail party, Katrina Fontanova formed her lips into a silent *oooh*, watching her guest’s reaction—a quick, interested smirk.

“So,” she said, in an artfully husky voice, “you think MCI can help with this project?” She batted her eyes and watched the fiftyish American businessman flash a leering smile, eyes dwelling on her breasts.

“I don’t see why not,” he said, sipping a vodka tonic. “Especially if it leads to a bigger contract. We like to start small and work our way in. Know what I mean? COCOM’s pretty much dead—that should keep the U.S. Government out of our knickers on the technology transfer issue. We’d love to”—his eyes lingered again—“keep in touch with you on this.”

Katrina laughed, remembering to show her teeth, as Marilyn Monroe had done, and pressed the man’s face with her hand. She looked around the crowded ballroom, wincing as she spotted a familiar head protruding above the crowd, turtle-like, two cocktail glasses raised in the air, eyes fixed on her position.

She adjusted her revealing black evening gown, attempting to preserve decorum. The man pushed through the crowd and wedged a shoulder between Katrina and the businessman.

“Good to see you, Katrina,” he said, handing her a drink.

She refused to take it, then gave the businessman a pained smile.

“I am Kostiya Baskakov,” he said, “Ukrainian Embassy.”

“And I’m just leaving,” the American replied. “Nice meeting you.” He handed Katrina a card, winked at Baskakov, and departed.

“And say hello to your wife for me,” Baskakov said.

Katrina’s face flushed red.

Baskakov looked at her and smiled lovingly. “Alone at last.”

“You’re an idiot.”

The remark rolled off him. “You don’t come here often enough,” he said, in native Ukrainian, handing her the glass again. “Try it. It’s good Ukrainian wine. Not like the Russian swill.”

She reluctantly took it, tasted, then replied—also in Ukrainian. “The Americans have a saying, Kostiya. If you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything at all.”

“Thumper, wasn’t it?”

“What?”

“The white rabbit in *Bambi*, the cartoon movie. That was Thumper’s line. You remind me of Thumper.”

Her brain alternated between two polarities—rage at his intervention, and amusement at his stupidity. She looked around the room self-consciously, then met Baskakov’s eyes. “Do I have rabbit teeth or something?”

“No. You have fine teeth. A fine face. Like all Ukrainian women, you are very beautiful.”

Katrina blushed. Kostiya Baskakov had caught her off guard. She searched for a witty riposte, but irritation overwhelmed intellect.

He grinned at her discomfort. “No, I just meant that you are like Thumper because you are timid. Afraid to go with your feelings, your passion. You should be here with us, in this embassy, serving the Ukraine, not Russia.”

“You don’t know me very well, Kostiya. You never did. I am only half Ukrainian. I weighed my options. I made my decision. You made yours.”

“You were born in Kiev. That makes you one of us.”

She responded in Russian. “You know, you started out by paying me a backhand compliment. Now you dig a deeper hole for yourself. I’m finding this conversation very tiresome.”

“Why don’t you call me sometime? Or answer the phone when I call you?”

“We used to work side by side in the same office, Kostiya. You and others left our embassy to set up one of your own. Now everyone in your embassy answers the phone only in Ukrainian—and acts stupid when you try to speak in Russian.”

“Do the two love birds fight?” The voice came from a thin, gray-haired Ukrainian man whose massive eyebrows telegraphed ambiguous empathy. He moved between Kostiya and Katrina, hugging them both. “This is a party! Drink and be happy.”

“Gregor!” Katrina said, grabbing the man’s hand and kissing his cheek. “It’s good to see you, dear friend.”

“I’m just an old man who likes pretty girls,” he giggled. “How is Gallagan treating you?”

“We get along okay.”

“You ruined everything, Gregor,” Baskakov said, smiling. “I was trying to seduce her into returning to the Ukrainian fold.”

“The seduction failed,” she said, coldly. “I’m here in America because of Boris Yeltsin, not because of Kravchuk or Kuchma.”

“An accident of history. We could change that.”

“Ah, for the good old days,” Gregor said, hugging the two, again. “Russia and the Ukraine. We were a pair, eh, Katrina.”

“Yes,” she said, grasping his arm, but looking at Baskakov. “We were a pair. No more.”

* * *

As Katrina rode the Metro back to her Crystal City apartment, she thought about many things—Baskakov, the embassy split, and the untidiness of her career and love life.

She looked back at the tidal wash of history and saw Katrina Fontanova as part of the flotsam and jetsam. She got close to Daniel, but a chance wave pulled him under. During a brief period of intelligence training, she flirted with others, but was unable to sustain a relationship as each student drifted away to a separate assignment. The embassy had been a pool of relative stability. There, she met Baskakov. They became intimate, like two pieces of driftwood caught in the same eddy. He asked for her hand. She agonized, then accepted. But when the Russian and Ukrainian embassies went their separate ways, the engagement fizzled. Emotions ran deep. Both had careers that turned on different political currents. Neither was willing to yield. Both were swept away in riptides of separatist politics. Just like the Ukraine and Russia.

And now, Baskakov was trying to reverse the tide. Or swim against the current. His single-minded pursuit was unnerving. *If Vladimir had been there tonight*, she thought, with a smile, *he probably would have flattened Kostiya*. They were oil and water. Vladimir deeply resented the Ukrainian break-away, and seemed to hold Baskakov personally responsible.

Despite harboring very traditional Russian feelings—the desire to re-unite the old empire, the desire for strong leadership—Vladimir had become a contradiction. He still spoke of the return of Party power, but such talk seemed more an intellectual exercise than an actual passion. His lifestyle now bordered on hedonistic. Western ideas infected him. He had no defenses.

And what of Katrina Fontanova? Is she adrift too? Katrina tried to be objective about this most personal of questions as she stared at the sea of faces surrounding her in the Metro car. The passengers

were well dressed. They earned good livings. Back in Moscow, top scientists now went unpaid, or sold cigarettes or chocolates in kiosks on the street. The security of Russia was even more threatened today than during the Cold War. The enemy was invisible—the economy, political turmoil, and the humiliation of having to lick the boots of former capitalist foes.

Here, in Washington, D.C., she could fight those invisible enemies. The stealing of secrets, after all, was a time-honored Russian tradition. If you picked the right economic secrets, it could bring prosperity. If you picked the right military secrets, it could bring security. And if you plucked the deepest, darkest political secrets in a clever way, it could bring respect.

No, she thought. Katrina Fontanova is not adrift. She has a mission.

25. VIEWPOINTS

May 1993 - April 1994

Washington, D.C.

It had been a tough, long fight to get funding, but Yuri and Dugan made a convincing case. The Russians were raising the ante, positioning themselves to conduct very sophisticated economic and military espionage, even bringing in state-of-the-art U.S. communications equipment to do it. Therein lay the opportunity. Yuri's plan would not only provide a counterweight, but would strongly tip the balance in favor of U.S. counterintelligence.

There was only one catch. A political catch. It was a New World Order, and the Russians were now friends—on the surface. And surface appearances were important. The deal struck by the Director of Central Intelligence and the Attorney General emphasized accountability for the operation.

Accountability, Yuri thought, shaking his head, walking along a subterranean corridor. *A word that means what they want it to mean.* In this case, it really meant plausible deniability. If the operation was exposed, if somehow details of the black project spilled into the daylight world of newspapers, press releases and diplomatic posturing, then heads would roll. Yuri's head. Jack's head. Yuri pictured the official response: "Agents of the FBI and NSA acted independently and without authority, illegally tapping funds, jeopardizing the relationship between the U.S. and an important ally." The stakes were high.

He pressed a hand against the palm scanner, watched the light blink and listened for the buzz of the lock.

The FBI Surveillance Center was located in the labyrinthine basement of FBI Headquarters. It was a windowless chamber illuminated by ghostly green CRT phosphor and a myriad of light-emitting diodes—an engineering monument to state-of-the-art spycraft. The Center pulsed with electronic messages, quiet human chatter and visual icons.

Yuri Sverdlov entered through a TEMPEST door, named after the U.S. program for keeping electronic secrets a secret. He walked past racks of spectrum analyzers, tape recorders and crypto boxes, treading over bundles of coaxial cable. The web-like tangle of wires and equipment formed the surveillance system's nerves and organs.

Yuri poured a cup of coffee while Jack Dugan and numerous other Troglodytes, wearing green, orange and black badges, prepared to tap the output of sensors located across town at 1125 16th Street Northwest—the Russian Embassy.

“Scuse me, Agent Sverdlov.”

“Yeah, Pauline, I know.” He said it without looking, gulping coffee, hoping that if he showed no fear, the ‘Hound of Sverdlov’ would not bite. However, she continued to *yap*.

“Contracts wants signature today, and your boss, the Deputy Director, will be really, really sore if—”

He turned, giving a dog-like snarl that made the five-foot, squint-eyed menace back away. “I’m not signing off on anything unless I know it works. Shakedown’s about to start, Pauline. Maybe we could finish this conversation later.”

He walked toward the control console, ignoring Pauline’s call: “Boss wants a briefing after—”

Yuri gritted his teeth at Jack Dugan, surprised by a control panel awash with yellow sticky notes. “These could only be yours, Jack.”

Dugan shrugged. “They’re just labels and tags to make sure we don’t screw up in the heat of battle.”

Yuri patted a technician on the shoulder. “You ready for this battle, Jerry? Have we tested the link, yet?”

Jerry Ramos, NSA’s 22-year-old, Philippine-born technical wizard, shook his head, riveting attention on the status panel at his console. “Couldn’t risk it. They sweep their ops center periodically. They can detect an active bug.” He flipped more switches, locking onto the covert test tone. “They could find the probe a year from now... or the day we turn it on.”

“Depends on how good their procedures and equipment are,” Dugan said.

Yuri took a deep breath and nodded. “Let’s find out.”

Ramos swiveled around to look at his two bosses. “We’re all set up. I’m ready to go if you are.”

Dugan and Yuri put on headsets and connected to the audio panel. Yuri gave a ‘thumbs up.’ Dugan hit the ‘online’ buzzer to alert the Surveillance Center crew. Ramos flipped a switch and crossed his fingers.

All three smiled when they heard American voices. The first voice spoke with a Texas accent: “... *so I’d appreciate it if you’d keep me better informed. I want to make sure my calendar’s clear.*” The second voice said, “*No problem. It’s set for the twenty second. Fourteen thirty hours.*” The first voice responded: “*What about test security?*”

The second voice belonged to Doctor Richard Chandra. The 25-year-old, powerfully built prodigy spoke with an authority unusual for his age, talking into a cellular phone as he guided his automobile along the crowded interstate highway near Greenbelt, Maryland.

“Test security is not my problem, Billy, but I know that Site Security wants to close off access. Dick may need your help on that.”

“*I’m on it,*” came the reply. “*BLM’s already involved.*”

“And we need you to approve a few changes in Operation Majority test procedures for the Event.”

The word “Majority” pricked Yuri’s interest, echoing a previous conversation with Louis Weddell.

It seemed like seconds before Billy Stanton responded. “*This is an open phone, Richard. There’s too much classified stuff here you’re tryin’ to talk around.*”

* * *

In a room that was the dual of the FBI Surveillance Center, Katrina Fontanova listened intently to the conversation between Chandra and Billy. Vladimir Fontanov, 30 years old, now Katrina’s intelligence analyst, stood beside his 33-year-old sister. Dmitry, a short, gnome-like communications engineer, tuned the Signals Intelligence (SIGINT) system for better reception.

“Come on, come on. Keep talking,” Katrina muttered.

Chandra’s voice came in loud and clear over her headset. “*You’re right. Sorry.*”

“Tell us about the test,” Katrina grumbled.

“*Why don’t you come to my office tomorrow with specifics,*” Billy said. “*About ten?*”

“*Right,*” Chandra replied. “*See you then.*”

“No,” Katrina pleaded.

“*Gotta go,*” Billy said. “*Bye.*”

Katrina slumped in her chair and Vladimir uttered a quiet Russian oath. Dmitry flicked a switch to stop the recording.

* * *

While the spy game was over for the Russians, the ball was still in play for the Americans. Yuri Sverdlov and others listened to Russian voices.

“*We lost them,*” a male voice said.

“*We got a few important pieces,*” a female voice responded.

“That’s Fontanova talking,” Yuri said.

In the background, the listeners heard a clatter, like an army of machines gone amok. They assumed the sound came from the SIGINT Operations Center. They were wrong.

* * *

Within the secret recesses of the Russian Embassy, the printer room was separate from the Operations Center. It represented the outer *edge* of the classified Russian system. It was a place where classified and unclassified systems were collocated—a design flaw in the Russian facilities. By bringing the mixture together in a physically controlled space, with measurable air gaps between the two, Russian engineers mistakenly believed that classified data could not *leak* to the unclassified systems.

The other reason for physical separation of the printer room from the SIGINT Ops Center was the noise.

Tanya Dubko, a tiny, frail-looking technical clerk, was partially deaf from years of maintaining the printers. They buzzed, clattered and hissed loudly as impact heads printed at high speed. Over the years, this created a substantial high frequency hearing deficit.

It was at the end of Katrina Fontanova’s signals intercept session that Tanya noticed the problem. First, room power fluctuated erratically. Lights dimmed. Printers began vomiting vast quantities of paper. Then the strangest thing happened. The printers “talked” to Tanya.

The sound they made was like an alien voice—like listening to someone who speaks though an artificial larynx because their throat is eaten away with cancer. It was the buzz, clatter and hiss of printers

modulated into words by variations in paper output. The words were very distinct. They were heard by Katrina and Vladimir on the other side of the door, in the SIGINT Operations Center. They were heard by Sverdlov and Dugan in the FBI Surveillance Center as background clatter. But most of all, they were heard by Tanya Dubko through bone conduction as she serviced one of the printers. They froze her blood. They penetrated her brain. They lifted blond hairs from the back of her neck. The alien voice said, in English, “Majority... Murder... Majority... Murder...” Tanya knew that the system had been penetrated.

* * *

In the FBI Surveillance Center, Yuri heard a door burst open on the Russian end. He strained to translate Tanya’s excited chatter. “She says ‘Major Fontanova... Wait... Shut down... Overlord Condition.’” He slammed his fist on the equipment rack and threw off his headset in disgust. “They found it.”

* * *

Indeed, they found it. And they found out that they had been found out. Secrecy and discovery were the Yin and Yang of spycraft. The Russian SIGINT team was gripped by ironic symmetries, like a flipped coin that lands on edge. The team huddled in a hush around the Man of the Hour—The Operations Security (OPSEC) Chief. He had an array of equipment on a table. Like a wizard with a magic wand, he passed a detector over a small capsule inside the earpiece of a headset. The needle swung. He nodded at the group.

They found the bug.

* * *

Within the FBI Surveillance Center, Sverdlov and Dugan simply stared at each other. They knew that if the Russians could identify the source of the probe—and went public—they could be left twisting slowly in the wind.

Plausible deniability.

“Maybe it was the way we got the data out,” Ramos said. “Using the embassy’s own radiation shield to radiate a spread spectrum signal—that was high risk.”

“But what was all that background noise about?” Yuri asked. “Something peculiar happened in the Russian Op Center.”

“We’ve got some leverage,” Dugan said. “If they make a public stink, we’ve got the tapes showing they were spying on a classified U.S. project.”

Ramos shook his head. “I know you guys are in a box, but we can’t use these tapes. They reveal sources and methods. In order to release this Top Secret material, you’d have to go higher than both the NSA and FBI directors. We’re talking Attorney General and DCI level.”

Yuri crushed his Styrofoam cup. “We have to take the offensive. Expose them before they lodge an official complaint. We’ve still got a shot at surviving this.”

“How’s that?” Dugan asked.

“We go low tech. Gum shoe method.”

* * *

Reality for the Russians seemed to pirouette at the point of discovery. The spymistress unlocked the heavy outer door of the SIGINT Center. With Vladimir at her side, she stepped out.

“That was my headset they bugged,” Katrina said. “I feel like I’ve been violated. Nikolai ordered U.S. origin equipment. He wanted only the best. Big mistake.”

“What were the printers doing?”

Katrina shrugged. “Maybe it was a glitch in their monitoring system.”

“How could they pick up the signal? The room is shielded!”

“They keep getting cleverer and cleverer. It could take us weeks to find the method of transmission.” Katrina put a hand on Vladimir’s shoulder. “They shut down the SIGINT Center for a while,” she said,

“but we have other assets. I want you to task satellite coverage of the Malebolge site. Groom Dry Lake Base. The twenty second. Fourteen thirty hours.”

She lit a cigarette. “We were lucky the cell phone check gave us one of their names. We need to find out more about this Doctor Richard Chandra.”

26. PEEK-A-BOO

15 April 1994

Washington, D.C.

Vladimir Fontanov, sporting a decadent-looking earring, a Red Sox shirt and expensive Nike shoes, pushed into the lobby of an auditorium near the Georgetown University campus, trying to lurk unseen.

The plan worked. In Moscow, his attire would attract attention. But in Georgetown, he could be invisible—a ghost.

He was not just any ghost, but a ghost searching for another invisible person—a shadow. Where does a ghost find a shadow? Answer: attached to the feet of the person who is shadowed.

He moved past a few casually dressed people gathered around a refreshment table, bored by the pontification inside the auditorium. He maintained a bland, ghostly smile, artfully blending with ennui as he approached a poster announcing the seminar. It read:

Department of Physics Presents:

Broken Paradigms—Physics in Transition

- *The Anthropic Principle—Reality or Illusion?*
- *Age of the Universe—Ambiguities in Time*
- *Faster than Light Communications*

The sign identified featured speakers.

He ran a finger down the agenda to the last item. Beside it was Richard Chandra's name and photograph. Amplified voices issued from beyond the double doors.

He looked in.

* * *

"This kind of certainty can't be based on any evidence I've seen!" A balding, rotund debater pressed his point. He was like a prize fighter with a microphone. He pummeled his opponent with data and opinions.

Richard Chandra, the featured speaker, blocked the punch. "Your criticism is circular," Chandra shot back. "By 'evidence' you mean some facts that cause you to believe. You don't and won't believe, so in your mind, there is no evidence."

Chandra and his antagonist glared at each other from opposite sides of a podium table, unmindful of thirty to forty other spectators. Each looked for an opening—a weak defense against damaging information. The scientific discussion degenerated. They forgot form. They forgot footwork. They forgot 'duck-weave-parry-thrust.' They just hit. They began to talk at once.

"I only said, Doctor Chandra..."

"Listen to me."

"... that there are a variety of alternative
explanations..."

"Listen to me!"

"... for the data and you have chosen the most speculative!"

"Asshole!"

Katrina Fontanova, seated at the end of a row in the audience, rubbed her eyes in disbelief at the painful exchange. She was there for information, but invective seemed to be the primary output of this verbal blood sport. She shook her head, stood up and walked slowly toward the exit.

When the 'Asshole' comment temporarily silenced his opponent, Chandra took the offensive, nostrils flaring. "If we excite calcium atoms, each atom gives off two photons. These photon pairs are quantum linked by a faster-than-light process."

Katrina turned at the comment. Here was actual

information—something she could use.

“If we carried one photon to Bernard’s Star and left the other one on Earth, we could force polarization in one photon and induce polarization in the other.”

Between Chandra’s words, Katrina caught a glimpse of Yuri Sverdlov rising tentatively near the edge of the room.

Yuri saw Katrina, looked away, then sat down again—trying hard not to be noticed.

Except for the false intention movement, he could be just another invisible spectator. But she had his picture. The embassy had his dossier. She knew he was a shadow, tracking her.

Clumsy, she thought. *Stupid. Like some GRU goon.* Her mind focused again on the debate.

“We could create a binary channel,” Chandra continued. “Vertically polarize for *one*; horizontally polarize for *zero*.”

“Look,” his opponent responded, “in order to send faster-than-light messages that way, you’d have to measure the polarization of a single photon. Are you saying you can do that?”

“Yes,” Chandra replied.

“How?”

“Do you think I’m going to reveal that kind of patentable secret at this forum? Not likely!”

Katrina shrugged and walked out the double door. Chandra had turned off the information spigot—no need to waste more time here.

She saw Vladimir, hands casually tucked into his carefully ironed Dockers pants. She paid him a furtive glance, a shadowy smile, nodding toward the room where Yuri Sverdlov was rising from his seat. He nodded back, as if reading her mind, and blended—like a Georgetown preppy—into the woodwork.

Her thoughts were still woollified by quantum physics. What she really needed was coffee—the acidified, grab-your-throat, lightning-in-a-cup espresso stuff that leaked in mud-like glops from a special container on the refreshment table.

She poured a steaming cup of brew.

An infant with the largest eyes peeked from behind a mother’s shoulder. The world was big and mysterious to this newcomer. It watched Katrina’s every move. Katrina smiled. The infant smiled. They played peek-a-boo.

Katrina disengaged when she saw Yuri exit the auditorium. He watched Katrina. Behind him, Vladimir crossed his arms, watching Yuri. The debate inside the auditorium raged.

“How do you reconcile with quantum theory’s most puzzling feature?” the debater asked. “A world that is *not*observed is very different from a world that *is*observed?”

“Gentlemen,” came the voice of the moderator, “we’re running out of time. If you have other questions of Doctor Chandra, please get with him one-on-one.”

Katrina glanced toward the auditorium.

Yuri was aware of Katrina’s position, but carefully avoided eye contact. He pretended to read the sign announcing next week’s lecture. It said:

NEXT WEEK: Tellus Foundation Presents

Environmental Crimes at Groom Dry Lake Base

— A Government Cover-Up? —

Katrina’s voice came from behind: “I thought your government’s job was to protect all of humankind. How can they do that and have criminals running the show? Coffee?”

Her voice startled him. Yuri’s eyes locked on to Katrina’s for the first time. “What?” he asked, squinting in disbelief.

Katrina smiled, and thought, *Peek-a-boo!*

“Next week’s seminar,” she said. “You were reading the poster. Maybe you were thinking of something else. Coffee?”

Yuri instinctively accepted the offered cup.

“Sometimes you have to stir it up,” she said.

Someone nudged him from behind. The coffee spilled.

“Oh, no!” Katrina said. “Vladimir, you have soiled the gentleman’s coat.” She began to wipe his coat with paper towels from the coffee bar.

Yuri turned, to see his ‘nudger.’

“I’m very sorry,” she said. “Vladimir is sorry, too, aren’t you, Vladimir?”

“I’m so clumsy!” Vladimir said. “I apologize, Mister...”

“Jones.”

“Ah, Mister Jones... Indiana? Then this wallet you dropped is not yours?”

Yuri spun around again. Katrina had fingered his wallet.

“Strange,” she continued. “The ID picture looks just like you. But it says, *Agent Yuri Sverdlov, FBI*. A

coincidence! We both have Russian names.”

She pulled close to him and whispered softly in his ear, “Do you know Bubba?”

Yuri grasped the wallet, stammering. “I, uh... Bubba and I go way back. Fritzkovsky. Bubba Fritzkovsky.”

She smiled and released his wallet. Yuri returned it to his coat. She glimpsed a gun and holster. *Peek-a-boo*, she thought. “Let’s get some fresh coffee and find a place to sit, Mister Jones. I want to know all about you. And I want to catch up on Mr. Bubba.”

“I’m sorry but I really have to leave. Anyway, the Bubba you know is probably not the same one. Mine’s Polish. I think you have me confused with someone else. Really.”

Vladimir grabbed Yuri around the shoulders, herding him toward a table. “There you are wrong, Mister Jones. We have us all confused with someone else.”

“I like the earring and the hairdo,” Yuri responded.

“Do not trifle with him. That is a very touchy subject with Vladimir, Mr. Jones. He can go wild. Crazy. If we all sit down, he will be less confrontational.”

Vladimir’s face grew stern. Other people in the lobby began to stare.

Yuri smiled. *Be polite*, he thought. *Be nice—even to the enemy*.

“How can I refuse such a gracious invitation?”

The game of spy-versus-spy played out in subtle subterfuge, disingenuous discussion and elusive elocution. They traded small talk at a table in the lobby.

“I grew up speaking Russian,” Yuri said. When I joined the Marines, I had a job as interpreter and translator. My Russian’s pretty good.” He stirred the coffee. “So what brings you to this seminar? Are you a student, Ms. Fontanova?”

She laughed, wagging a finger. “Ah, Mister Jones. You are showing off. I didn’t introduce myself yet. Hi, I’m Katrina Fontanova. I’m a clerk at the Russian Embassy.”

“And I am her assistant,” Vladimir said.

“A Russian file clerk and her assistant, who attend physics seminars in English?”

“We come to watch,” Katrina winked. “A hobby, eh Mister Jones?”

In the background, the seminar broke up and denizens of the auditorium emigrated into the lobby.

At the table, Katrina bobbed her head as though watching a tennis match. “I know that you know that I know.”

Richard Chandra exited the auditorium. Katrina tracked him with her eyes but spoke to Yuri. “You seem like a nice enough person, Mister Sverdlov. Leave us alone. The Cold War is over.”

“We all have a job to do.”

“We are doing nothing illegal. Stay if you like and meet a new friend.” She waved at Chandra. From her point of view, this had been a game of ‘cat and mouse’, played with two cats. Now they had a mouse.

Chandra saw her, hesitated, then moved to the table.

“Yes?” he asked. “Do I know you?”

She held out a hand. “No you don’t. I’m a fan. I was intrigued by your lecture, Doctor Chandra, despite—or perhaps because—of the conflict.”

Chandra’s lip curled in a sneer. “He was an ignorant ass.”

“He simply said what everyone else was thinking. Not all minds work the way yours does.”

Chandra sneered again, offended by the comment. He turned to leave, but she drew him back.

“I believe you, Doctor Chandra. I was probably the only person in the room who did. Here, sit down. I got some coffee for you.” She smiled a pleasant smile and cleared a place at the table. “Sometimes you have to stir it up.”

He looked at her with deep distrust.

“I understand the physics of what you propose. We have a similar project.”

Chandra was visibly shaken, like a priest who hears the unspeakable spoken. Yet, this very violation of protocol attracted him. There was information that needed to be mined from this Russian-accented woman. He probed. “I’ve seen you in the audience at other lectures.”

“I’m flattered you noticed.”

“You obviously know who I am. Who are you?”

Katrina removed a business card from her purse. She placed it on the table.

Sverdlov put his own spin on it.

“She’s a file clerk at the Russian Embassy, and this is her assistant.” He glanced theatrically at the card. “Wait. This says she’s the Chief Information Officer.” He feigned surprise and a look of betrayal aimed at Katrina. “I’m shocked.”

“A private joke,” Katrina said.

Chandra was not amused. “Look, I’d love to talk physics with representatives from the Russian Embassy. But it’s late. I’ve got to go. If you’re a member of my fan club, then we’ll meet again. I like to keep track of my fans... Ms. Fontanova,” he said, looking at her card.

“Maybe we can meet next week. Right here.” She eyed Sverdlov. “I want to hear more about governmental crimes at Groom Dry Lake Base.” Then she looked at Chandra. “Don’t you, Doctor

Chandra?"

"Yes, but I have another engagement." He stood, shook hands with everyone at the table, then walked confidently back toward the auditorium.

Chandra inspected the poster announcing next week's seminar. He frowned at the flyer. Below a picture of the speaker was the name, *John Anderson*. He penned a circle around the photo of a jolly-looking, heavysset, Black-American face, folded the flyer and tucked it in a coat pocket. He raised Katrina's business card in the air and nodded.

She saw Chandra's gesture from across the room and waved back. She projected her voice so that he could hear plainly: "If you change your mind... Next week! We'll find out what's happening at Groom!"

Peek-a-boo, she thought.

27. DESERT MAJIC

Groom Dry Lake Base, Nevada

22 April, 1420 Hours

Richard Chandra stepped with long strides across flat ground, pushing the corrugated soles of dust-colored boots into a thin icing of sand stippled with the tracks of small animals. It was a fine day for a test—eighty-degree weather and clear, blue skies. Perfect. He tipped the brim of a bush hat, shading his eyes from the sun, felt its warmth, then caught Whit Constantine's gaze. One hundred yards away, Constantine, the Test Director, gave him a nod and a thumbs up.

Chandra smiled as he stepped up into an air conditioned test van, eased into the Weapons Director's chair, and began preparations.

It had been an uneasy truce with Constantine, but there was no longer any question of who was in charge. Without Chandra, there could be no test. It was as simple as that. After years of association, Whit Constantine now served at the pleasure of his own creation.

Chandra gazed out the window at his domain—hundreds of dull, green cylinders arranged in a grid of concentric circles. Around this grid, other members of the test team, wearing white hard hats and matching contractor jump suits, scurried like frantic white mice.

Viewed from a distance, the grid pattern resembled a Navajo sand painting—a magic circle—sketched by a giant hand on a powdery and flat expanse. However, the grid's purpose was quite different from that of a sand painting. It was not fashioned by medicine men to heal sick people. It was not made to restore harmony between man and the cosmos. Techno-warriors built it to test a weapon of unusual design.

The crew made adjustments, enabled power sources and rehearsed test sequences. They examined the base of each three-foot high cylinder and looked for biological leaks. The crew did not know or care that the technology under test was foreign, in every sense of the word. Their government contract required only that they evaluate the capabilities and limitations of the technology. They did not need to know its source.

Only the Test Director and Weapons Director knew.

Curiosity carried severe penalties—loss of clearance, loss of contract and worse. And so, with all questions excised from their brains by a harsh and unforgiving government bureaucracy, the men went about their work, focused only on the test at hand.

Within the Test Director's, special cupola atop a high-chassis truck, Whit Constantine concentrated on preparations. His unique vantage point allowed him to survey the entire site. He was not neutral about the test. Project funding was at stake. More importantly, the young Richard Chandra watched his every move like some paranoid Shiva, waiting to destroy him. *No screw-ups*, he thought.

With the clock ticking inexorably toward test time, one last item remained on the critical path. Constantine keyed the microphone and barked an order: "Jackson and Ryder—Install the target."

Wearing fatigues and headsets, the two-man installation crew carried the target toward the center of the grid. They passed several cylinders along the way. Each had a small door at ground level and a ventilation grill above it. Cylinders on the outer ring flashed a pattern of strobe lights. Several trucks were parked beyond the edge of the grid.

Jackson and Ryder arrived at the center—a pad of concrete. They put down the thermally insulated coffin and knelt beside it. Thick gloves protected their hands as they opened the lid. Dry ice vapor spilled from the interior. They grabbed opposite ends of the body bag inside the coffin. Jackson nodded. With a single, coordinated movement, they lifted the bag onto the concrete pad. Opening the top of the bag revealed the frozen face of a corpse. Radio chatter continued over the Test Net. It seemed very matter-of-fact and disconnected from the heightened emotions the two men were now experiencing.

"Marty, you need to reset the Event Chronometer to 14:26:00 on my mark."

There was a crackle of static, then: "Roger. On your mark, over."

"Four, three, two, one, Mark."

"Chronometer reset."

Jackson and Ryder removed the corpse from the bag and locked it in an upright position on a frame.

The corpse wore a suit and tie.

Within the cupola, Constantine inspected status lights and display panels. His video monitor now showed an image of the corpse. As he surveyed the site from his privileged position, reality seemed warped by the shimmering lens of reflected heat.

He ran through a check list, then scrawled his initials at the bottom of the page. He flipped the cover back on his clipboard and tossed it on a seat. It read:

TOP SECRET MAJIC

Project Ganymede Proof-of-Concept Test

Malebolge

22 April

TOP SECRET MAJIC

“Okay, let’s do it,” he announced. “Everyone back in the trucks.” He pushed a button, briefly sounding a warning horn.

The crew began final preparations. Jackson and Ryder tucked the empty body bag into the coffin and carried loose materials away from the pad. Green ready lights illuminated on the cylinders. Combat boots stepped over cables on the ground. Truck doors opened and closed sporadically as the test team returned to the protection of their vehicles.

Inside the cupola, Constantine looked at the video monitor. A slight breeze carried the corpse’s tie like an undulating airfoil. The Director spoke with Richard Chandra on the radio. “On my mark, Richard.”

“Copy, I’m ready.”

“Three, two, one, Mark!”

Constantine pressed a button marked *OPEN*. A cascade of metallic noises issued from the cylinders. The noises were followed closely by the squeals of many small animals and the mechanical *whirrr* of data recording equipment.

High above the desert floor, at an altitude of approximately 400 kilometers, a Russian-made Earth imaging satellite also observed the Event. Successive panchromatic stereo frames recorded an irregular gray-black mass moving out of the cylinders. The mass converged on the concrete pad, engulfed it, then retreated. From low Earth orbit, even with the KVR-1000 high resolution camera system, the mass was indistinguishable from a sea of ink or a giant amoeba.

On the ground, Constantine was unable to communicate verbally during the Event due to the noise level. Human sounds were drowned by thousands of screeches. It was as if a myriad of locusts nested in his head and conspired to stop all thought.

A fog of dust wafted through his open cupola. He punched a button.

On the other side of the site, the *SHUTDOWN* icon appeared on Richard Chandra’s console, signaling

test termination procedures.

As rapidly as it all began, the squeals subsided.

The Test Director punched another button marked *CLOSE*. Metallic doors snapped shut across the grid. He verified the status of each cylinder on his test panel, then visually inspected the area using remote-controlled video cameras. Satisfied, he announced, "Weapon safe," then activated the *ALLCLEAR* signal.

Doors on contractor vans opened and the crew began mop-up procedures. Jackson and Ryder returned to the target pad. The Test Director heard Jackson's excited call on the radio: "I'll be damned!"

Constantine could see results on the video monitor. *Very likely*, he thought. *Very likely we'll all be damned.*

Ryder took still photographs with a Nikon camera. The rapid-fire *click-click-click* of the focal plane shutter was the only noise on an otherwise hushed site.

The corpse was in pieces, like a hunk of meat attacked by piranha. Its head lay among shredded materials on the pad. It was chewed to the bone. Empty eye sockets stared upward into space.

28. INTELLIGENCE INTERMEZZO

23 April 1994

Ben Nightwalker perched like a telephone line repairman atop the 12-foot high sensor station. His Native American face was as weathered as the cowboy hat, jeans and dusty leather boots that comprised his uniform. The station was part of an electronic barrier along the perimeter of Groom Dry Lake Base. Its purpose was to detect, record, analyze and report forbidden entry. The system, including the central security computer, is what made security around the vast Nellis Range Complex possible. It could distinguish between humans and animals, tumble weed and vehicles. A metal plate on the station's instrumentation panel read: *Sentinel Data Station/When security counts.*

It was late afternoon. Ben was running a diagnostic check on the equipment when his test computer sounded an alarm. A light-emitting diode inside the instrumentation box flashed, signaling an intrusion. Ben pulled up the diagram of the sensor fence. A section of fence blinked, indicating the location of the intruders. They were not far away. Ben carefully returned tools to his belt, then looked through binoculars slung from his neck.

He tracked the line of sensor stations to a distant point, where he could see three intruders running into the controlled area. One of them appeared to carry a portable television camera. Another was weighed down by equipment bags. He recognized the third figure. The intruder had a beard, carried a walking stick and hobbled to keep up.

“Zfar, you old rascal,” he murmured.

The distant figures stopped and arranged themselves. The cameraman pointed the lens and appeared to record an interview or news shot.

Ben looked in another direction. “Well, where’s the cavalry?”

He scanned past the Test Area with its circular grid of cylinders. There were a few trucks around the perimeter. He continued to scan, stopping on a group of buildings in the far distance.

Two soldiers in battle dress ran out of a distant metal hut, hurried to a van and drove away. “Aha!” he said.

Ben looked back at the three intruders. The camera shoot ended. They re-packed equipment and raced hurriedly back toward the perimeter. They climbed an embankment to reach a van parked on a dirt road. The man with the cane stumbled, slipping down the embankment. The two others rushed down to help, pulled him up and into the van. They started the engine and drove away.

Ben put down the binoculars, adjusted his hat, then started down the rung ladder. At the bottom, he shaded his eyes and looked toward the adjacent ridge. A cloud of dust receded like a brown rocket contrail, tracing the path of the intruders’ vehicle on the dirt road. Looking to his right, Ben saw another cloud of dust in the far distance—a vehicle on an intercept course.

He smiled, shook his head and walked away.

* * *

The van carrying the three intruders sped along a dusty road. It was packed with broadcasting equipment. The driver, Jeff Bailey, concentrated on avoiding bumps, potholes and sand traps. Shorts, a tank top and baseball cap provided scant respite from the heat. The steering wheel was slick with sweat.

At the sight of the road block, Bailey hit the brakes. He yelled to the crew in back: “We got company, boys and girls!”

The TV control van, marked *ActionNews*, skidded to within ten feet of a police cruiser marked *LincolnCountySheriff’sDept*. The cruiser straddled the dirt road. Behind it was the Groom security van.

Between the cruiser and the security van, a sign read:

WARNING

***YOU ARE ABOUT TO ENTER A
U.S. GOVERNMENT INSTALLATION.
PHOTOGRAPHY PROHIBITED***

A plume of incriminating dust led from Bailey's van to the forbidden installation.

"Don't panic," a female voice said from the back of the truck. "Freedom Ridge is on public land. It's not part of the base. We're okay."

Bailey cracked gum, smiled a tense smile and wiped his forehead. "Thank god for amateur lawyers. We're saved!"

A door opened on the police cruiser. A uniformed sheriff and deputy exited. Two soldiers in desert camouflage left the security van. Each gripped a pistol. Bailey's head sank to the steering wheel. He closed his eyes.

"Sheeit," he muttered.

* * *

Amid the quiet clicking of computer keys at the Russian SIGINT Operations Center in Washington, D.C., Dmitry briefed Katrina.

"We're back online, Major," Dmitry said.

Katrina scanned the area and nodded approvingly.

"We checked all the U.S. origin equipment and found a few more problems."

Katrina cocked an eyebrow.

"I have to admire the Americans," Dmitry volunteered, enthusiastically. "They took a lot of advanced technologies and put them together in new ways. They're good."

"Tell me about the printers."

Dmitry nodded. "The printers are tied to classified systems in the Ops Center. They are physically and electrically isolated. The Americans may have tried to create an audio bridge to the unclassified

system—like a prisoner in solitary tapping out Morse code that someone in another cell block can hear. There may have been a glitch and they got caught. At least that’s my working theory.”

“But we found all their sensors?”

“Right. The printer system may have been the conduit. But without sensors, they’re blind.”

“Do we have enough evidence to lodge a diplomatic protest?”

Dmitry slumped. “Not exactly. It is logical to assume the Americans were behind it, but there is no irrefutable proof. They can plausibly deny it. This code bomb, or whatever you want to call it, is particularly mysterious.”

Vladimir called from across the room, “Katrina?”

She motioned for him to hold on, then finished with Dmitry. “But as far as you know, we’re clean now?”

“We’re clean.”

“I want you to verify the communications path for getting data out of the Center. We need to plug all the holes to stop future penetrations. And if you find any proof it was the Americans, bring it to me, immediately.” She patted Dmitry on the shoulder for a job well done, then walked to Vladimir’s console.

* * *

Back in the desert, the Lincoln County Sheriff smiled. It was an *I’ve-got-you-now-you-son-of-a-bitch* smile. He had perfected it over a five-year reign as King of the Desert. The smile fit nicely with his swarthy face and meticulous manner.

“Can I see your driver’s license, please?” he asked.

Bailey complied.

The Sheriff looked at it and took a few notes. He smiled again. “Did you know that photography of the government installation is prohibited?”

As Bailey’s brain raced to compute a solution to this incriminating line of inquiry, an answer exploded from the back of the truck: “It’s okay. We didn’t take pictures of the installation.”

A blond head popped into view and smiled. The Sheriff frowned.

“We’re only here to observe. We’re getting background for an Action News report.”

“Right,” the Sheriff said matter-of-factly. “And who might you be?”

“I might be Jill Sommer, a producer for Action News. Who might you be?”

With an ease that suggested he had been through this before, the Sheriff handed Sommer a card with his name, rank and badge number.

Sommer retrieved it through the open window. “Thank you, *Sheriff* Gibson,” she said. “So you’re an *elected* official?”

Wa-al... meet the press!”

Bailey rubbed his eyes, slouching against the steering wheel. He thought that if he slouched far enough, he might be invisible. No such luck.

Irving Gibson frowned, but remained calm. “Everyone out of the vehicle, please,” he ordered. Gibson heard low-level mumbling inside the van as the news team discussed options. There were sounds of moving equipment and ripping fabric. Finally, the side door slid open. Sommer and Bailey exited the truck, followed by an older, bearded man with scraggly, shoulder-length white hair and bell-bottom jeans lifted from some 1970s time capsule. Gibson couldn’t decide whether his hobbling walk was from a leg injury or badly made shoes—sandals fabricated from discarded automobile tires. A hammered bronze medallion dangled from the man’s neck. It said *Earth First, Universe Second*.

“Well, Zfar,” Gibson said. “I guess I should have expected this.”

Zfar Jafri’s beard trembled as the thought leapt out. “Sheriff Gibson. Delighted to see you. As you know, I’m only here to search for the truth.”

“Truth is, Zfar, you’re a pain in my butt.”

In a surprise move that quickly raised the temperature of the confrontation, Jill Sommer began video taping the scene with a handheld palmcorder. The Lincoln County Sheriff’s Department and battle-dressed soldiers were about to become news.

“Hey, put that down,” Gibson demanded, shielding the camera lens with his hand.

“This’ll look great,” Sommer said. “Like you’re trying to hide something.”

Looking through an open door into the van, Gibson’s deputy yelled, “Hey Will! There’s a ton of camera equipment in here. Shouldn’t we check it out—to verify their claim?”

Gibson grabbed the camera from Sommer. “Yeah! Looks like we’ll have to confiscate *all* cameras.”

“Wait a minute!” Sommer yelled. “These are company cameras. That’s maybe \$65,000 worth of equipment. You can’t just steal ‘em. Our lawyers ‘ll be all over you like stink on shit!”

“I’m trying to stay professional here, Miz Sommer, and you’re making it very hard. We got a proper search and seizure warrant by radio.”

He showed her a piece of paper. “My Deputy will inventory the equipment. You and I will sign a receipt. Your lawyers can contact my office to find out how and under what conditions you can recover

the cameras. We will review all tape. We will develop all film. If it's not contraband, you can get it back."

"You're gonna develop all the film?" Sommer asked.

"Yes."

"Could you make double prints?"

Gibson's face flamed red. He marched down the line of intruders, like a drill instructor greeting new troops, looking each of them in the eye.

"Now! Every one of you! Turn around! Put your hands on the van!" Gibson—still bug-eyed with anger—was able to smile again. He was in control. He frisked the two men, then came to Jill Sommer.

She looked at him with 'I-double-dare-you' eyes. Her halter top wrapped tightly around her breasts. A bare, slim midriff separated it from an ankle-length skirt. She turned, to profile a majestic mammary glandscape.

"Let's see," she said, framing an imaginary headline with her hands, "*Lincoln County Sheriff Frisks Action News Producer*. We'll include a picture of you in all your swarthinness and a picture of me. We'll follow up with interviews of local residents discussing your sex life. It'll make great copy. Your wife and family will love it."

She drew closer and winked. "Go ahead, Sheriff, make my day."

* * *

Another law enforcement drama unfolded two thousand miles to the east. Yuri and Jack Dugan walked at a fast clip down the corridors at FBI Headquarters. Yuri's eyes flashed with wildness. Craziness. Panic.

"I've got to give your boss and my boss a progress briefing this afternoon. What the hell am I gonna tell 'em?"

"The truth?"

"You're kidding, right?"

"No. I really want them to string us up by the testicles. What's the plan?"

Yuri pulled Jack through emergency exit stairwell. He held a finger to his lip, listening for a moment, but the area seemed empty. "We stall 'em," he said, finally, in an echoing voice.

“How?” Jack whispered.

“We can tell them certain things that are somewhat true.”

Jack rolled his eyes. “Right.”

“No, no. We succeeded in penetrating the Russian system. I can talk about all the technical details of how we did that. I can also say that we learned about Russian interest in a particular classified program.”

“Which one is that?”

Yuri bit his lip. “We’ll get to that.”

“I’m just playing Devil’s advocate. They’ll ask.”

“I know.” Yuri paused for a moment, carefully choosing his words. “How does this sound? Because of our technical limitations, we were unable to determine who the Russians were listening to. Therefore, our project needs some time to establish the pattern of Russian surveillance activities, and to find the targeted U.S. program. We also need more money to redesign our equipment, so we can tunnel into the Russian system and get call identification data. That could help us out on future penetrations.”

Jack whistled. “If you’re going to tell a lie, tell a big one. That’s what I always say.”

Yuri gripped Dugan’s shoulder. “We know she’s after classified project data, Jack. And I’m going to nail her! You with me on this?”

“Yeah. I don’t have much of a choice.”

“Good. First thing I need is more information. I’m going to make sure Fontanova doesn’t shit without me knowing about it.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“We have a classified U.S. project that’s hemorrhaging information. You need to plug the leaks. Find the project manager. Tell him he’s got a Bozo with loose lips.” He released Jack’s shoulder. “Try not to let the Bozo know. I’d like to nail him, too.”

* * *

Ben Nightwalker hiked back toward his truck—the end of a long day. Keeping the Groom sensor perimeter operational was a full-time job, most of it outdoors. He had taken this footpath many times before and relished the views of desert life.

He stopped to watch a biological curiosity—one he had quietly observed for several months. It was a small colony of prairie dogs. They weren't typically found in the wild in the State of Nevada. Their home was North American grasslands from Canada to Mexico. Farmers considered them pests. Mass extermination now threatened survival of the species in their native habitat. At the same time, human commerce brought a few prairie dogs to the State of Nevada as pets. Perhaps that was how they got here.

Ben discovered the small colony struggling in a microclimate with marginal grassland on the edge of Groom. It was a breeding coterie with a male and two females. Here was a species pushing the envelope of existence. It engaged in a life-or-death natural experiment. Perhaps, Ben thought, this was how new species are formed. Evolution is a force which aggressively pushes outward.

As he made notes and sketches of the area, he spotted two animals. Grizzled bodies darted like thoughts. One would pop up over here, hide for a while, then pop up over there. They would tunnel through to someplace you didn't expect.

Likethoughttunnels.

Then Ben saw the unexpected. It was wrapped in dead dark fur and a swarm of flies. He walked to it and crouched. He removed his hat, wiped his forehead with an arm and replaced the hat. He fixed his eyes on the object. He poked it gingerly with a stick. He rolled it over. The long, naked tail was stiffened by rigor mortis. The creature's fur showed no signs of a wound. The small, dead animal was untouched by predators.

Why is this animal here?

* * *

Katrina smiled at her brother. "A kopeck for your thoughts."

Vladimir shook his head, stopped tapping at the keyboard and looked up. "This Operation Majority must be so black that even the budget is invisible. Untraceable." He brought up a new display. "I've looked at the usual government systems and files. Normally, by cross-checking and correlation I can piece together project funding information. This is different. Can't find anything."

"Maybe their funding doesn't come from the government's budget," Katrina said.

He looked at her for a long moment, tugging at his earring. "You mean—like drug money? If that's true, then this exercise is hopeless."

"If that's true, then the Fontanov team has hit pay dirt!"

* * *

It was dusk when the TV control van finally departed the road block.

“Wahoo!” Bailey cried, as he put the van in gear and sped down the road.

Inside, the news crew conducted their own instant replay.

Bailey cracked gum. “Well, on the positive side, we can say that Deputy DeSanto was very thorough.”

“Yup,” Sommer said. “We can certainly say that. His list says they got two video cameras, sound mixing equipment, two tape recorders, three microphones, batteries, cables, a tripod, scanner radios, walkie talkies and video and audio tapes.”

Jafri acknowledged by striking a tuning fork against a crystal. He tried to hum in tune.

“They’ll be able to make the next police picnic a real multi-media event!” she continued.

“The other nice thing we can say,” Jafri remarked, “is that Sheriff Gibson really knows how to treat a lady. He never even touched you.”

“Too bad I’m not a lady,” Sommer grinned. She lifted her ankle-length skirt, revealing a video tape attached to the inside of her thigh.

Bailey looked in the rear view mirror, then whistled long and low. “Beautiful!” The van swerved as Bailey adjusted his mirror.

“Eyes front!” Sommer yelled. “We need to survive the drive into Rachel.” She looked at Jafri and batted her eyes. “Be a dear, Zfar, and help me undo the duct tape.”

Jafri’s face became tense. “Stop,” he said.

“Aw, c’mon. Quit being a prophet. It’s stuck on my leg. Could be painful.”

“No,” Jafri said. “You don’t understand. Stop the vehicle!” He looked out the window toward the distant mountain peak.

“Do it, Jeff,” Sommer said. She removed the duct tape with a painful yank. “Damn!”

The truck slowed and moved to the shoulder of the dirt road. Bailey turned off the engine. Zfar Jafri slid the door open and stepped out. Sommer and Bailey followed. Dusk faded quickly into night. A vault of stars spread across the desert sky.

Jafri pointed with his cane. “Look out there toward White Mountain. See the light?”

The others murmured in amazement. It appeared to be a massless point of light moving between the mountain and the dry lake bed. It was like a hypervelocity firefly that circumvented the laws of momentum and traditional physics. It changed direction instantly.

“Shit!” Bailey said. “They took my cameras!”

Sommer shrugged. “It could be just a flashlight or a searchlight from the base.”

“There’s just clear air between here and the mountain,” Jafri said. “No clouds. Nothing to reflect against.”

“What do you suppose they’re testing?” Bailey asked.

“Hard to say what they’re testing. Hard to say who’s testing it. I’ve seen this before out here, but not like this. It’s got a definite interest in the area where we saw those trucks earlier today.”

They watched the ‘firefly’ trace a near perfect circle over the site of the Event. It flew around five times, then zig-zagged toward White Mountain.

It vanished over the ridge like will-o-the-wisp.

* * *

The small bar in Rachel, Nevada, was a crowded haze of smoke and small talk.

“I’m from Venus,” the lady said. “Do you give discounts?”

Royce, the bartender, shook his head, pointed to the price list. “You’ll have to pay in Earth money—U.S. Since you come from Venus, I’ll have to ask you to pay in advance. You could de-materialize before you pay the tab. Then I’d be stuck. Ha!” He went back to wiping glasses.

She looked at the man sitting next to her—Zfar Jafri.

“Did you know I’m from Venus?”

His beard wiggled at a thought. “I hear it’s even hotter than Rachel.”

“You know,” she said, stroking his hand, “your aura is the same as Quixocotyl’s.”

“Is that the son of Don Quixote and Quetzalcoatl?”

She smiled, not knowing quite where to take the conversation.

But Jafri knew.

He wet his finger, then played a tune on two half-filled beer glasses and a tuning fork. He smiled back at the Lady From Venus. “Music of the beers.”

Before they could form a Vulcan mind-meld, Ben Nightwalker entered the bar and eased onto the stool next to Jafri.

“I thought you might be here—if you weren’t in jail,” Ben said loudly, over the bar noise.

Jafri smiled, but didn’t look up. He had almost achieved resonance—that point where the note of the beer glass matched the note of the tuning fork. You had to drink just the right amount of beer.

“I saw you today at Groom,” Nightwalker said. “Figured the Sheriff and Military Police caught you.”

“They did,” Jafri responded, “but we got away using our Jill Sommer cloaking device.”

“What’ll you have, Ben?” Royce asked.

“The usual. Coca Cola.” Ben turned to Jafri. “What the hell did you think you were doing out there? So conspicuous, like?”

“Just watch the TV tonight.”

“I know how you feel about the base. I feel the same way—and I work there.”

Jafri’s ears perked up. “What made you go negative on the base?”

“Something I saw today. Something I picked up.”

“That’ll be seventy-five cents,” the bartender said.

Nightwalker looked up, paid, then sipped his drink.

“Soooo?” Jafri said. “What was it, Ben? What’d you find?”

“Come to my place now and I’ll show you.”

“Right. But we gotta watch the news. I’ll be famous.”

“Famous?” asked the Lady From Venus. “Can I come, too?”

Jafri touched her nose. “You wouldn’t like it there, hon. Ben’s from a different planet. He only drinks Coca Cola.”

29. NIGHTLY NEWS

23 April 1994

Richard Chandra propped bare feet on the coffee table of his government VIP quarters at Groom and listened to the tail-end of the nightly news. The story was a special feature. It began:

“Finally, from Rachel, Nevada, the road to Dreamland. There is such a place, though you aren’t supposed to know about it. The Dreamland we’re talking about is actually an Air Force Base in Nevada.”

Chandra’s eyes riveted to the television.

“The Russians know about it, so why not you? Jill Sommer has the results of an Action News investigation.”

The TV cut to Jill Sommer, inside the news van.

“We are one hundred miles from Las Vegas, driving across the Nevada desert on public land. There’s more here than meets the eye. A few feet off the dirt road, electronic sensors spot intruders.”

The TV cut to a distant view of large buildings. In the middle ground, the circular grid of the test area was plainly visible. Several trucks surrounded the grid perimeter.

Jill’s voice continued. “This area has been a Mecca for UFO enthusiasts, who claim the government is secretly testing UFO technology in Area 51 and S-4.”

The TV zoomed closer, to show distant buildings.

“The secret installation, which some people call *Dreamland*, is located about 12 miles from where we’re standing. It is clearly visible, but the government won’t acknowledge that it even exists. And to photograph it would violate the Espionage Act. The base does not appear on any map, but for the record, the Pentagon will only say that Groom Lake is part of the vast Nellis Range Complex.”

The TV cut to a view of distant mountains.

Jill’s voice continued. “Thousands of UFO enthusiasts trek each year to nearby White Mountain or the public access road along what is now called *Freedom Ridge*. They hope to glimpse a UFO. They bring hundreds of thousands of tourist dollars to the nearby town of Rachel.”

The TV cut to an exterior view near the edge of the base, with Sommer standing next to Jafri.

“Next to me is Mister Zfar Jafri. He has been a leader in the UFO community, battling to obtain information from the U.S. government on UFOs. He now fights a different kind of a battle—a battle that pits his UFO fringe group against the U.S. Air Force and the Bureau of Land Management. The fight could become a landmark case for the Supreme Court. Tell us about your quest, Mister Jafri.”

Jafri cleared his throat, then responded. “Very simply, the government doesn’t want people accessing

public land in order to view their secret base. They want to annex White Mountain and Freedom Ridge. Call me crazy, but as tax payers, I think it's our right."

"The Air Force says it's concerned about public safety. Isn't that a valid reason to restrict access?" she asked.

"If you talk to them privately, safety is not the reason—it's the excuse. They're concerned about the people with lawn chairs and binoculars. It's driving 'em crazy."

The TV cut close on Sommer.

"The pending land grab has turned these hilltops into a tourist attraction, drawing even more attention to the base. Last month at a Federal hearing in Las Vegas, officials got an earful."

The TV cut to an interior shot of a hearing room.

An angry citizen announced, "The place is big enough already. How much expansion do they need?"

* * *

Two thousand miles away, the reflective, African-American figure of John Anderson, built like the Rock of Gibraltar, watched television in a Washington, D.C. apartment. On TV, a second citizen spoke out at the Las Vegas hearing: "There have already been allegations that environmental crimes were committed there. Now they're asking for 4,000 more acres to hide behind." Anderson rushed to his VCR and popped in a blank tape. He punched the 'RECORD' button.

* * *

Across town, in an office at the Russian Embassy, Katrina typed into a computer and watched TV. The news report on Groom continued, as another angry citizen announced: "What's more, if you buy this model airplane kit, you get—including with the directions—a 1988 photograph of the base taken by a Soviet satellite. The Pentagon says it's okay to show you this picture."

Katrina smiled. She toggled a switch on the intercom. "Nikolai! Come quickly. You've got to see this!"

* * *

Richard Chandra picked up the phone and dialed a number. The news report continued with a pronouncement from another angry citizen: “The only people this base is being kept secret from is the American people—the people who pay for it!”

“Shit,” he said, under his breath.

Chandra’s call went through. “Hello?” someone answered.

“Hi, Ron, this is Richard.”

“Hey, buddy, how ya doin’? Just thinkin’ about you. There’s a conference comin’ up at Los Alamos that needs your special magic...”

Chandra interrupted. “Listen. Don’t talk. Just listen. We’ve got problems. Turn on Channel 13. You’ll see what I mean. We need a special meeting of the Committee, as soon as you can arrange it. I want two items on the agenda—Action News and the Russian Embassy. We need to stop leaks. We need quick, pre-emptive action. Whatever it takes. Get Chisholm involved. Understand? I want to meet with the security enforcement people tomorrow. Bye.”

Chandra hung up. “It’s falling apart,” he said to himself.

* * *

In Nightwalker’s apartment, Ben and Zfar watched TV. The news continued: “And if the Air Force didn’t have enough problems on its hands, last week a sheet metal worker for an EG&G subsidiary contracted hantavirus syndrome at an unspecified Air Force facility within the Nellis Range Complex. Hantavirus was first recognized on Indian reservations and has killed 42 people so far.”

Ben walked to the kitchen and turned on the hot water.

“The virus is transmitted by contact with the saliva, urine or droppings of infected rodents,” the TV voice said. “Makes you wonder—could we have a sanitation problem at Dreamland?”

“Turn it off, will you, Zfar? It gives me the creeps.”

Jafri hobbled to the set and complied.

In the kitchen, Ben used dishwasher soap and sawed at his hands with a scrub brush. The washing turned into a lengthy ritual. After a while, he turned off the faucet, dried his hands with a towel and put on rubber gloves.

Jafri observed the procedure in quiet amazement. “Doctor Nightwalker, I presume? Are we doing brain surgery this evening?”

Nightwalker looked at his friend, then walked to the refrigerator. He pulled out a clear plastic bag and tossed it. Jafri caught it.

“Gaaa!” Jafri exclaimed, dropping it on the ground.

The bag contained a very large, dead rat.

Jafri walked to the sink and began the same washing ritual that Ben just completed.

Ben picked up the bag with gloved hands and held it to the light for inspection. “I found it near the Test Area. It’s not native. Do you think it could be some kind of germ warfare thing? Why would they do that when there’s an Indian reservation next to the base and Rachel’s only a few miles away?”

Zfar stopped washing for a moment. “I think we should get John Anderson to look at this. He’s an environmentalist with the Tellus Foundation in Washington, D.C. His people can test it.”

“Think he’ll want to take on the U.S. Government?”

Jafri smiled. “John’s already got Groom in his sights. He knows how to play hardball.”

30. THE FIRST CIRCLE

29-30 April 1994

It wasn’t the Baltimore Orioles, but Embassy League baseball had its own avid devotees.

There was the *crack* of a bat at a small park in Fairfax, Virginia. Fans screamed as a runner dashed toward home plate. The catcher, Vladimir Fontanov, threw off his mask.

The runner steamed in.

Vladimir extended his mitt.

A hard ball sizzled home.

POW! The ball hit with high impact.

He tagged the sliding runner.

“Yer out!” the umpire yelled, jutting a thumb.

The game broke up, with a mix of cheers and boos.

Vladimir ran toward right field and wildly embraced today’s hero—Katrina. He picked her up, slinging her over a shoulder while she made two ‘victory fists.’

Other team members converged on the two.

“Great throw!” Vladimir said, putting her down and squeezing her biceps. “What an arm!”

The team began a chant: “Uh! Uh! Uh!”

Katrina and Vladimir laughed, then picked up the war cry: “Uh! Uh! Uh! Go Dingoes!”

They all *high-fived*, then stood in line to shake hands with the losing team.

“You look like a dirt ball,” Katrina said, pushing the bill of his cap down over his nose. Vladimir groped around, pretending to be blind. A team mate winked at Katrina and poured soda on Vladimir’s head.

“You rats!” he screamed, in mock anger, throwing off the cap.

They all laughed at the antics hugging each other, feeling good about the win. Their numbers swelled with spouses and children, jostling and pushing each other playfully. A little girl, the four-year-old daughter of a Singapore friend, climbed into Katrina’s arms.

Katrina’s smile turned to a frown when she looked beyond the girl’s happy face to the throng of milling spectators, spotting an unwelcome *voyeur*. The man looked at her through shaded eyes, then removed his hand. She could plainly see his face.

“He’s watching us,” she said, pounding Vladimir’s shoulder with a fist.

“Who?”

“Indiana Jones.”

“Can I see?” the little girl asked, overhearing the remark. “I want to see Indiana Jones.”

“It’s not really him,” Katrina said.

In the distance, Sverdlov saw Katrina looking back at him, ducked behind a dugout, then disappeared into the crowd.

* * *

The apartment was neat except for a littered work area where mountains of Federal environmental regulations leaned precariously against a paper stack of graphs, maps and photographs. A thick black arm reached over one of the mountains and picked up the phone after it rang twice. The face was older than the one in the picture he used to advertise his seminars.

“Anderson,” he said, in a deep, resonant voice.

“John, this is Zfar. Finally we connect.”

“Hi. Good to hear from you! I see you’re becoming a famous personality—maybe even respectable now.”

“Right—I’ve had my fifteen minutes of fame. You saw the piece, then?”

“Yup. Some of it. Incredible timing. I briefed the Tellus Foundation yesterday on some of the environmental problems at Groom. I appreciate the way you helped me get close to the base perimeter. That preliminary data helped clinch funding.”

He paused for a moment, then decided to share information with Jafri. “I had another surprise today. I got an invite from the Russian Embassy to discuss the project. Seems everybody’s interested.”

“The Russians? Hmmm.”

“It’s not like... I mean, they just called me today.”

“Of course. You need all the help you can get.”

“Right.”

“By the way, I may have some more ammo for you.”

“What?”

“Does the Tellus Group still have a pathologist?”

“Yeah, a good one! Rita Li. She teaches at both Johns Hopkins and Georgetown. Also heads up the Foundation. We’ve got a lot of other expertise—biochemistry, embryology, physics. You name it. What’ve you got?”

“Not sure. A dead animal. A rat. Not native to this area. Found it at Groom. It could be nothing.”

“Or...?”

“Or it could be germ warfare.”

“Jeez!”

Anderson paced back and forth. “If that’s true, it’s political dynamite. It could derail the proposed land annexation.” His mind raced. Finally, he said, “Okay... Okay... Here’s what you do. Call my secretary tomorrow. She’ll get you an airplane ticket to DC. I need to see this. Our group needs to see this. And evaluate it. Got me?”

“Gotcha!”

* * *

Zfar Jafri and Deke Dobbs had a business partnership founded on the assumption that people who believed in UFOs would be crazy enough to buy information about them. Oddly, the assumption seemed to hold.

The nerve center of this business was a small trailer on the outskirts of Rachel. It was untidy, filled with computer equipment, file drawers, a makeshift photo lab and bunk beds. A bookshelf stuffed with paranormal literature also archived back issues of *Playboy Magazine*.

The sign over the door read: *International UFO Research Center*. Underwear and Dorito crumbs littered the floor.

“Don’t worry,” Deke said. “When you come back from D.C., everything will be just as you left it.” The short, thin, professorial 26-year-old rubbed a hand across the scarred vinyl tabletop, as though it were a priceless antique.

“I was afraid of that,” Jafri said with a grin. “I’m not sure when I’ll be back. I’ll call periodically and let you know the status.”

“Looks like the Center is moving into the big time, Boss.”

Jafri’s beard trembled at the thought. “Right. You gotta think big to be big. Remember: If Action News wants more of our help, make sure they pay in advance. We’ve got bills. Which reminds me—we need to get the newsletter out by next Friday.”

“Aye, aye Cap’n. Hear that Gray? We got a mission.”

A large dog of ambiguous heritage perked its ears, recognizing its name—barely. When Jafri finished packing, Deke threw his bag into the truck and drove him to the bus station.

* * *

John Anderson walked along 16th Street N.W. in Washington, D.C., mulling over the tradeoffs people make in their lives and careers. Each decision carries a different weight—both positive and negative. And now, a major tradeoff faced him. Access to a unique source of information could spawn an unparalleled career in environmental investigation, righting wrongs, uncovering corporate and governmental misdeeds, protecting the planet. These were all noble goals—the passions propelling John Anderson’s life. But there was a downside. A dark side. If the source of information was exposed, it could ruin him professionally. They would say he was a traitor, no matter how much good he did. They would say his research had a hidden agenda. They would say he made deals. They would be right.

Exposure is what he feared most—an exposure that tested his metal, his principles, the core of his being. And yet, if he was not exposed, the payoff would be very high. He could follow his dreams.

As he calculated the reward-to-risk ratio, he failed to notice the tall, broad-shouldered man with jet-black hair standing in a crowd on the opposite side of the street, stealing occasional glances in his direction—Yuri Sverdlov.

Anderson stopped at the address—1125. There was no sign, perhaps for security reasons. An array of antennas jutted from the roof and what looked like a video camera scanned the entrance with an unblinking, unmoving eye. This seemed like the right place. He pushed a button near the gate. Nothing happened.

“I’m John Anderson. I’m here to see Nikolai Gallagan.”

He made the statement not to a human, but to a metal box. It was a matter of faith that the box was linked to an actual person. The box didn’t respond in any comprehensible way. It acknowledged his existence with a burst of static.

Magically, the iron gate opened with a *clang*.

Anderson walked to the front entrance, where he met a second barrier. He entered a security trap disguised as a mud room. Both doors closed, locking him in.

Again, he stated his name and business, hoping words and intentions would be a passport to a better place. He thought of Dante and the layered path to hell.

When nothing happened for a minute, he yelled, “Hey!”

A speaker in the mud room issued an unintelligible burst of static. “P**s ate **ame,” it announced.

“Hey! Let me outta here!” he yelled.

He pounded on the inner door. There was a muffled conversation on the other side. A woman and man argued in a foreign tongue. This was followed by the mechanical sound of a door unbolting.

As the door swung open, he could see an attractive woman waving her arms wildly at a man behind a

desk. The man was dressed in a Russian Army uniform.

She yelled in Russian.

He doodled with a pencil.

Katrina suddenly remembered Anderson. “Sorry,” she said, in English. The little room lets them look at you and check you out. The guard was asking you to state your name. The technology doesn’t always work.”

* * *

Jack Dugan tapped a pencil back and forth between two pieces of paper on a desk in his NSA Headquarters office. One was a letter, the other, a classified voice transcript. The information was hot. Suggestive. Damning. It opened a door into hell and beckoned him down. *Shall I go there? Just for a peek?* He felt alone, atop a treacherous moral cusp.

The transcript described technology that was pirated from a technology pirate. There was some sort of double-cross. That was clear from the letter. One of the pirates was in a White House office. *The White House!*

Serendipity, he thought. *Chance. Maybe an omen.* The voice transcript had given him a heads up. The letter added another piece to the same puzzle.

He had simply followed up. Done his job. Traced the channels which Katrina Fontanova had intercepted. One of them turned out to be a mobile phone. The other was a government office phone. A White House phone.

Jerry Ramos, his resident technical wizard, had tapped those same channels from the FBI Surveillance Center, using as his authority the broad, discretionary warrant provided to the Center by the Department of Justice. *We had the fishing license, so why not fish?*

A signals intercept from two days ago contained a familiar name—Weddell. He called the Leavenworth prison, but it was too late. Someone made good on the promise of violence hinted at in the intercept. Weddell was dead.

The latest intercept suggested third parties were at risk—one of them, a traditional NSA adversary.

“This is certainly a fine mess you’ve gotten us into,” he said aloud, blaming himself.

I’m not a Boy Scout, he thought. *I know what goes on. The problem is having two sets of rules.* On the one hand, there was the world of FBI justice—right and wrong, clear cut, hard-as-rock, the law. On the other hand, the fluid world of black programs—smoke and mirrors, sociopaths, an ambiguous

netherworld. And Sverdlov's Operation Inquisition was neither land nor sea, but a swamp, somewhere in-between—a swamp that Sverdlov and Dugan had aggressively sold to multiple owners. *I'm caught in the muck.*

Sverdlov demanded justice and closure. *Find the leak. Plug it. Nail the Bozo.* But if he pursued those goals, Jack Dugan risked his career in the black world. Or worse.

One option was to do nothing. But if he did nothing, he would himself be a criminal—by concealing evidence of blatantly criminal acts.

Which set of rules? It came down to personal priorities. *Secrecy? Or justice?*

He puffed up his cheeks and expelled breath in a slow, steady stream. *I'm damned if I do, damned if I don't. What the hell?*

He picked up the phone and dialed a White House number.

* * *

Deke pulled the sweat suit from a hook outside the trailer. This was the safest place to keep it, given the fact that it would fail any known emissions test.

He put it on, then pranced around in a warm-up dance. Gray pranced, too, dimly aware that something BIG was about to happen.

They took off at an easy pace.

An unmarked van, painted Air Force blue, passed him as he rounded the first gravelly turn.

"Groom Goons," he said aloud. "Wonder where they're going?"

Unfortunately, he didn't understand dog language. Gray's response was a cautious "Woof!"

* * *

The Office of Science and Technology Policy overlooked the White House complex. It was an impressive view, evoking history, filled with symbolic artifacts, colored by the spirit of risk takers, revolutionaries and great men. Jack Dugan gazed at the Oval Office on the edge of an immaculate, green lawn, then queried the 56-year-old, bald-headed OSTP Director, Dr. Billy Stanton.

“Do you see my problem?”

Billy flipped through the material, attempting to act cool, throat clutching, blood pressure rising. “Is this the only intercept?”

“Yes,” Dugan said, lying.

Stanton beat a fist on the desk. His lips trembled. “You know it’s illegal to use intelligence assets to spy on American civilians? On your own government? I could have you thrown in jail.”

Dugan remained calm. “With all due respect, Dr. Stanton, I don’t think so. They were nominally FBI assets. And besides, we had a warrant. A very broad, comprehensive warrant.”

The corner of Billy’s mouth twitched. He stonewalled. “I’m sorry. Can’t help you on this one.”

“Standard procedures require that we debrief the source of the leak. I’ve done that. Now I’ve got to report it.”

Billy’s mind raced. “Why? If the Russians are as capable as you say they are, isn’t there a risk that your investigation could expose the very program your tryin’ to protect?”

Dugan looked across the White House lawn again, trying to decide how much to reveal. “There are rumors, from another source, of course, that a Russian—and a member of the press—might be in danger.”

Stanton’s face now flushed red. He could see where this play was going. It was obvious Dugan held more cards.

Dugan recognized the danger signals—the panicked eyes of a trapped animal—and offered a way out. “I have a job to do, Dr. Stanton. You can either help me, or I’ll get my partner involved. He’s FBI. With me, it’s a matter of security. I’m good with secrets. With him, it’s a matter of justice. He’s good with prisons. Now if there are certain unknown parties planning violent acts, if you could help me stop them, then we could keep this whole damn thing under wraps.”

Billy’s face changed to a look of regret. Everything he worked for, all the good, was unraveling. He sighed. “All right. All right.”

“Okay. We’ve got a deal. Now if you’ll tell me about Operation Majority and Project Ganymede—”

“Son, that project is deep black. Hear me?” Billy’s voice was now calm, soothing, reassuring, authoritative. “I’ll work with you on this, but I can’t tell you anything until you get read in.” He wrote out a note and handed it to Dugan. “This fella’ Chisholm will get you started. He’s your contact.”

“Okay.”

“And Mister Dugan... please destroy the paper after you make the phone call.”

Jack nodded.

* * *

When the phone rang, the International UFO Research Center was empty. It rang three times before Jafri's answering machine picked up.

"Hello?" the machine said, in Jafri's voice.

"Hello, Zfar?" came the voice on the phone.

"Hello!" the machine said, louder.

"Zfar, can you hear me?"

"Can't hear you!" the machine yelled. There was a pause, then, "No wonder. I'm not here and you're talking to a machine! At the tone, leave your message."

There was a BEEP.

On the other end of the phone, Jill Sommer laughed.

"Jeez! And I thought prophets didn't kid around! Listen, Zfar, I need to see you today about another shoot. We might be able to prove criminal action at Groom. Could be a great story. You're the only guy that can get me close to the base perimeter without being detected. I'll make it worth your while. I'm at the Holiday Inn. I've got a few errands to run, but I should be back around 3 PM. Give me a call then. Bye."

She hung up.

The answering machine dutifully recorded the message. So did another machine, about the size of a package of cigarettes, taped to the bottom of the telephone table. Telephone wires ran into and out of the device.

* * *

Katrina opened a door. “Through here, please, Dr. Anderson.” Her smile masked an inner tension. A part of her regretted what they were now about to do. Another part felt the triumph of a successful mission. *We have some bait for you*, she thought. *Come nibble at the bait.*

Anderson stepped into Gallagan’s embassy office—a spacious room that reeked of pipe smoke. There was an unnatural tidiness about it. The desk was uncluttered, and every object on it aligned with grid-like precision.

Gallagan, a heavy-set man dressed in a three-piece brown suit, spoke in flawless English. “Ah, Doctor Anderson! Katrina has told me so much about your work. Welcome to the Russian Embassy. I’m the Director of Science and Technology.”

Anderson hesitated, extending a flaccid hand and the non-committal greeting, “Hello.”

Gallagan grabbed and aggressively pumped.

“You shake my hand as though I’m the Devil. I assure you, Doctor Anderson, I am not. The Cold War is over. Sit down, please.”

Katrina sat in a hard, wooden-backed chair next to Anderson, pressing his hand in a comforting gesture. “It’s all right, really. Nikolai wants to help you.”

“I attended one of your lectures,” Gallagan said. “It was very interesting.”

“I didn’t know that environmentalism was a concern in your country,” Anderson said, with a tinge of hostility.

Gallagan put his hand over his heart. “Ah, you cut me to the quick! It’s our new religion. So many things have gone wrong—not because the previous regime disliked nature. They just thought the works of socialist man—technology and industry—were infinitely more important. They were wrong about many things.”

“Is that why you asked me here? To confess to past sins?”

Gallagan smiled, grinding pearl-white teeth. “No. I’m a diplomat, which is a dignified word for ‘politician.’ We never confess to anything unless it’s in our interest to do so.”

“What I heard was a confession.”

“What you heard was an expression of interest.” Gallagan smiled and ground his teeth again.

Anderson remained silent.

“Um, tell us about your theories of eco-responsibility, again,” Katrina said, trying to put a more objective spin on the discussion. “You seem to stress individual responsibility, but in Russia, we have a more collective—”

She stopped, as Gallagan carefully withdrew stacks of U.S. hundred dollar bills from a drawer, piled them like building blocks on one end of his desk, and plopped a photograph on the other end.

“What do you want from me?” Anderson asked softly.

“Life is a balancing act,” Gallagan said, moving his arms as though performing on a high wire. “On the one hand, there are things we all want, such as money, and meaningful work. On the other hand, there are pitfalls to avoid.” He pushed the photograph toward Anderson, shrugging. “Perhaps this is a pitfall for you. I personally do not have a problem working with people of unorthodox sexual orientation. But in more conservative circles—”

Anderson was unprepared for the photograph. Most of his life he remained celibate, aware that he was different, but unwilling to cross the line—until recently. “It was a moment of weakness,” he rasped, as the rhythm of breathing built toward panic. “Again, I ask you, sir, what do you want from me?”

“Doctor Anderson,” Gallagan said, in a comforting tone, “do not be afraid. Please. I want you to continue doing what you do. I’ll help you. I’ll coach you. I’ll be your silent partner. You get what you want. I get what I want. And we both avoid the pitfalls.”

“A deal with the Devil.”

Gallagan smiled. He opened another desk drawer and pulled out a thick file, tossing it on the table in front of Anderson.

“Here’s a hymnal. In these documents, you’ll find a litany of environmental crimes committed by the U.S. government. Read the material. Come back to see me. Katrina will have a briefing for you.”

“On my favorite subject,” she said. “Groom Dry Lake Base.”

* * *

Deke Dobbs returned to the International UFO Research Center smelling like an old tennis shoe. He sat on the stoop and sweated while the Center’s mascot, Gray, padded slowly into the yard.

Gray was not an athlete. He accompanied Deke on these runs because he was paid the dog equivalent of money.

“Here ya go, boy,” Deke said, throwing a biscuit.

Deke carefully removed his sweatshirt and hung it on a hook. It would stay there until the next run. The way he saw it, the shirt gave Gray a scent to follow. Tracking Deke on a run was intellectually taxing and Gray needed all the advantage he could get.

Now Deke watched Gray do his favorite thing, which was to crawl into a cool nook under the trailer and gum a biscuit until it was slavering, pulpy mush.

Deke went inside and switched on equipment, preparing to get back to work at the mission that brought

him here—to seek out and prove the existence of UFOs and extraterrestrial life. And make ends meet by publishing an electronic newsletter for the converted.

He noted the telephone message from Jill Sommer. He called her hotel. She wasn't there, so he left a message that Jafri was "out of the loop." He wasn't sure when he'd be back from D.C., but if Jill needed help from the Center, he would gladly provide his expeditionary services—provided she paid up front.

Deke was almost as familiar as Jafri with secret paths leading to the Groom perimeter. He had spent many nights with Zfar watching the desert sky from the bed of a pickup truck on Freedom Ridge. Most of the time he saw stars, meteor trails and aircraft.

On a few rare occasions, however, the night sky raised cosmic, existential questions.

* * *

Jack Dugan licked an envelope, closed it, and slipped it into a mailbox near the Farragut West metro station. The discussion with Chisholm had gone badly. The man was not what he appeared to be, and it was time to update the Jack Dugan life insurance policy.

The meeting had been a series of miscalculations. Chisholm believed—not without justification—that Dugan, a member of the black-world cabal, and someone who knew all the secret handshakes, would stop trying to expose the information leak once he was briefed on Operation Majority and Project Ganymede. It was, after all, the usual way of the intelligence world. Once you are given access to compartmented information, you are bound by its controlling rules. And Operation Majority was secured by threat of death. To emphasize the risks, Chisholm confirmed what Dugan had already guessed from intercepts—that a reporter and a Russian diplomat had been marked for "downsizing."

The shock of disclosure had been too great, the controlling measures too extreme and Dugan's resulting dyspepsia too aggravated. *Go screw yourself* was not the response that Chisholm was looking for. *It was bad judgment*, Dugan thought. *A momentary lapse. But maybe the error can be repaired.*

First things first. He didn't know the reporter, but he *did* know the Russian—Katrina Fontanova. In order to protect her, he had to get to a semi-private phone. Quickly.

* * *

It was a little after 3 PM. Jill Sommer drove her rental car into the hotel lot near Rachel, Nevada, and parked it close to the *ActionNewsTV* control van.

She removed a heavy bag of groceries—an exercise in acrobatics. She struggled, closed the door with one foot and tried to maintain her balance as she walked toward the hotel.

A car door opened in front of her. A man stepped out—muscular, wearing sunglasses and a Hawaiian shirt.

“Excuse me, Ma’am,” he said. “Aren’t you Jill Sommer, the reporter?”

“Yup,” she said, struggling with the grocery bag. “Whatever you’ve got, make it snappy!”

The man smiled, removed a gun with a silencer and pointed it at her. There was a *POP* as he pulled the trigger.

She stumbled backward. A mixture of spaghetti sauce, clams and shattered glass ‘glopped’ to the asphalt. Jill dropped the bag. A bloody bullet wound punctured her chest. She wheeled toward the pool entrance behind the hotel.

Several small children played in a wading pool. They saw a woman limping out of the parking lot and assumed she was playing a game.

Behind her, the man in a Hawaiian shirt extended his weapon and fired a second shot. Another *POP*.

Jill Sommer stumbled through the open gate, tried to say something, but couldn’t, then collapsed into the wading pool.

Children screamed.

The man in a Hawaiian shirt fled.

A cloud of blood darkened the water.

* * *

It was early evening on the East Coast. In the small study of his Annapolis home—a bedroom now populated with Russian language books, a computer, Marine Corps mementos and only the most basic of furniture, Yuri rolled the cylinder of his Smith and Wesson Model 66 revolver along his arm, inspecting the chambers. He could smell the gun oil.

A ringing telephone interrupted his effort. He crushed a cigarette and picked up. The voice was Dugan’s.

“Yuri? This is Jack. I need a favor.”

“Sure.”

“I can’t tell you too much over the phone, but you know the assignment you gave me? Where you wanted me to clown around?”

“The Bozo search?”

“Yeah. I found Bozo. He’s a pretty nasty guy. False nose and everything.”

“So what’s the favor?”

“I want you to track another part of the circus tonight. A certain female bear. You know the one. You’ve seen her act. Find out if anyone else follows her tonight. There might be trouble.”

“Piece of cake,” he said, glancing at his watch. She should leave in another hour or so. She’s pretty regular about it. I can get there, no problem.”

“One more thing.”

“Name it.”

“Remember the birthday present you got me in Florida?”

The birthday present? Yuri didn’t answer immediately, but his brain went into fast rewind. *He wants to avoid loose talk on the phone. But what birthday present? I don’t even know Jack’s birthday.* The only thing Yuri could think of in Florida was Louis Weddell. “Are you talking about the Buddha figure?” he said, finally.

“Yup. It was a thoughtful gift, but much too expensive. I just want to reciprocate. I know your birthday’s coming up.”

“You’re too sentimental, Jack.”

“Yeah. I know. I wanted to give you something special to think about. It’ll be in the mail, in case I can’t get it to you personally.”

“I look forward to it.”

“Be careful tonight.”

“You know me, Jack. I’m a cautious guy. Talk to you tomorrow. Bye.”

Yuri hung up, his mind filled with questions. “Be careful tonight,” he said to himself aloud. He shook his head, packed his gun with .357 rounds and carefully clicked the cylinder closed. After wiping the pistol with a cloth, he inserted it into a shoulder holster.

He rolled down his sleeves, walked to a mirror and straightened his tie, winking at his own reflection. *You cautious guy, you.*

Then he put on an overcoat and went out into the night.

* * *

In another part of Washington, D.C., a debriefing of the Project Ganymede test was in progress. At the front of the room, Whit Constantine's face was cast in sharp relief by an overhead projector. The classification slide was up.

"This briefing is classified TOP SECRET MAJIC," he said. "The Project Ganymede test falls under the umbrella of special security rules established for Operation Majority." The screen behind him stated tersely: *DECLASSIFY ON ORDER OF THE PRESIDENT*.

"The test was generally a success," Constantine said. "We met all test objectives, came in under project budget and had only a few minor glitches."

He changed the slide.

"The test demonstrated three things: that we can control the animals individually; that we can control them as a group; and that we can scale up to large numbers."

* * *

The exterior door of the Russian Embassy opened. Katrina Fontanova stepped out and walked to the iron security gate. There was a low buzz. The gate opened. She took three strides onto the sidewalk and watched the gate close behind her. The night was cold. A slight drizzle fell. She trembled with a chill. As she turned a corner, she noticed a man behind her at a distance.

He wore a coat and resembled Yuri Sverdlov.

* * *

Constantine stood beside an overhead projector. He removed a chart showing two intersecting curves.

“Now let’s look at a few of the glitches,” he said, putting up a schematic of the circular grid. The chart had arrows and other annotations.

“The flow of animals from the control gates was pretty much as expected... except from this area.” He outlined the area on the chart with a pencil.

“Video tape shows that while all other animals converged on the target, these anomalous animals seemed to freeze. Some oriented toward Richard’s vehicle, others toward White Mountain.”

He put up the next chart. “After the test, we found dead animals in these same areas.” The photograph showed several dead Norwegian rats.

Constantine looked into the darkness. The reality of a long conference table faded into the ambiguity of shadows beyond the overhead projector. A dozen indistinct figures sat at the table. Richard Chandra was closest to the projector. His face was more visible than others.

One of the phantoms spoke.

“I’d like to know what happened from Richard’s point of view.”

“Like someone turned out a light,” Chandra said.

A Germanic voice interrupted. “Maybe the Thought Tunneling Devices are unstable. Has there been any unusual degeneration of tissues from the Roswell sample?”

Billy’s Texas-accented voice countered: “Naw, don’t think that’s the problem. It’s more likely a defect introduced during manufacture. Our ability to replicate TTDs is still pretty crude.”

A file glided across the table.

Billy continued: “This new production process gives us a large yield of nano-devices, but we haven’t figured out yet how to do bulk testing in a satisfactory way.”

“It’s definitely something we’ll have to watch,” Chandra said. “Of course, I’m personally concerned about why the animals died.”

A raspy voice followed. “There’s another possibility. We detected an ET probe circling the Test Area a day after the event. When we talk about site security, I’ll show you some pictures.”

* * *

Katrina walked along a darkened street, avoiding puddles, thinking about getting home quickly before another rain shower hit. *Not too far*, she thought. *Just a quick detour first.*

Home was a fifth floor apartment at Crystal International Suites, one of the tallest structures in Crystal City. It was close to the Pentagon, Office of Naval Research, defense contractors, and Washington National Airport, where countless elected officials and dignitaries parked their cell phone-equipped limousines. The Russian Embassy rented the penthouse, jam-packed with communications intercept equipment. Katrina was its caretaker. The luxury apartment was a fortuitous perk.

This was not the usual route home. Rumor had it that a new building under construction in Crystal City would house computers and databases for the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. If the Russian Embassy could put a few workers on the payroll, it might be possible to bug the place. Gallagan wanted a feasibility report ASAP. The site was almost on the way home—a minor detour.

The street was torn up, hedged by rows of heavy earthmoving equipment that sat idle, awaiting work crews that would arrive in the morning. The pathway narrowed to a temporary covered boardwalk surrounding the site. She traveled along one long, straight section of the pedestrian walkway, then turned a corner, found a peephole, and looked in.

As she thought about microwave angles and other variables, she heard footsteps amplified by wooden planking. They were around the corner, but approaching her position. *With this construction, everyone gets funneled through this point*, she thought. The footsteps stopped.

Curious, she walked to the corner and looked down the walkway. Whoever was there stayed in the shadows. *They probably found another peephole and are looking in*, she thought, walking on.

The footsteps started again. She stopped to look back. The footsteps stopped.

She grew uneasy, moving at a faster clip toward the end of the pedestrian tunnel. The footsteps followed.

I've been stupid, she thought. *He's following me. Trying to see where I go.* She thought about the report she would have to give Gallagan. *The good news is that we can bug the site. The bad news is the FBI knows of our interest.* He would be furious.

She thought of ways to salvage the situation—throw them off. Maybe direct contact was in order. *I'll just call his bluff.* She stopped again, looking back.

“Mister Sverdlov? Yoo-hoo?”

The footsteps stopped. There was no answer.

The dolt thinks he's invisible! Now she was angry. “Leave me alone! Quit following me!”

As she strained to pick out sounds, her own breathing dominated the silence. *Was there another sound? Metallic?* She continued walking, picking up the pace.

There's more than one. Now they're walking faster, almost—

Katrina broke into a run, finally clear of the walkway, and raced across a narrow asphalt alley. She

collided with a trash can, nearly invisible in her path, then caromed off a wall, tumbling to the ground.

Two men raced toward her—one wearing a coat, the other, a sweater. The man in a coat pulled a gun.

No, she thought, turning over, trying to get to her feet, searching for a way to escape.

A shot exploded from behind.

Missed. Now he's—Uhhn!

She felt a body hit. It pinned her against the ground. She rolled over, trapped, then saw the man's face—eyes wide open—pressed against her own face, exuding blood, brains and death.

They're going to kill me, she thought.

The second man, standing above her, drew a gun, hesitated, then fled as more footsteps approached.

“Stop. FBI!” someone shouted.

Yuri Sverdlov materialized from the darkness, braced his gun with both hands and fired a second time.

Footsteps raced into the night, dissolving into the background, finally blending with the tap-tap-tap of tree branches brushing on a metal sign. A cool wind whispered through the alley.

Yuri holstered his weapon and rolled the dead man off Katrina. She looked at him, face frozen in an expression of shock, confusion and vulnerability. He extended a hand and helped her up.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

She nodded, trembled violently, then steadied herself on his arm. He walked her to a shallow brick retaining wall where they both sat down. Yuri made a call on his cellular phone while Katrina's eyes fixed on the corpse sprawled face down on the cement, centered on a dark, wet pool.

“We'll have reinforcements here in a few minutes. By the way, what's a nice girl like you doing in a case like this?”

“You were following me,” she said, teeth chattering.

“I was out for a walk. A coincidence.” He looked toward the construction area. “Just like your prowling around this building—the Patent and Trademark Office?”

She nodded, shivering.

“We'll have to make sure they build it securely—won't we?”

She gritted her teeth. “You killed that man.”

“Yes Ma'am, I did.” Yuri made his fingers into a gun, and blew on the ‘muzzle.’ “Good thing.” Even in the dim light, he could see her lips turning blue. “Here. Take my coat.” He wrapped her up, then walked to the corpse. “You know him?”

She shook her head in a 'No.'

"How about the other one—the one that got away?"

"No."

"Well, I got a good look at his face. How about you?"

"I'll never forget."

* * *

In the darkened conference room, the raspy-voiced Security Chief narrated video footage of a UFO near the Groom Test Area. The video showed a bright light rising over White Mountain. The object performed impossible aerial maneuvers.

"This is combined footage from a handheld palmcorder in Area 51 and a fixed position video camera at the Malebolge site."

He waited as the footage played out. The craft hovered, then accelerated instantly. The Security Chief continued the narrative.

"The flight profile is typical of what we've seen in the past. Witnesses say it came in from the North, executed several very wide turns and departed toward White Mountain... Here you see it circling the Malebolge Site. We think it's a probe."

The footage ended. Room lights went on. Faces around the table became visible. The Security Chief continued his analysis. "We found levels of thirteen short-lived radionuclides in the area where the rats died, including Europium 146 and Tellurium 199m. Each has a half-life of about four and a half days."

"Your point," Chandra asked, "is that there was a radioactive anomaly coinciding in time with the appearance of the probe and in space with the site of the dead animals?"

"Correct."

Henry interrupted. "But the probe occurred *after* the test and *after* the death of the rats."

The Security Chief nodded. "Yes."

"So we don't really know what is cause and what is effect?"

"Correct."

“Do you think the ETs can listen in?”

“We’ve had Richard wired for 24 years. Why would they start showing interest now?” Billy asked.

The Chief thought for a moment. “Maybe our test made them curious.”

* * *

Katrina Fontanova, still wearing Yuri’s coat, clutched his arm as they rode in the back of a police car to her Crystal City apartment.

Outside, pinpricks of icewater stabbed at the windows as windshield wipers dueled with intermittent thrusts. Yuri felt Katrina’s body transmit a shivering spasm.

The driver finally stopped. Yuri opened the door against the push of wind and helped her out.

He knew she still saw him as the enemy. “I’m sorry it took so long with the police paperwork.”

“I’m exhausted,” she said, gripping his arm tighter as the wind gusted.

They stood outside Crystal International Suites for a moment, holding each other, listening to the branches of a cherry tree scrape against the light-filled glass entranceway. “You’re a decent man,” she said, returning his coat.

She looked toward the building, hesitated, then stood on tiptoes, holding his face, kissing him quickly, gently. Then she smiled and walked inside.

He knew it was nothing—the emotions of the moment, played out in the press of warm flesh. He put the jacket back on as a cold wind tapped on the glass.

* * *

She had carefully warmed the drink, hoping it would revive her spirit, but the hand holding the glass trembled as it moved toward her lips. Alcohol flowed down her throat, but a shivering spasm spilled brandy on her nightgown, staining it.

Get a grip, she thought, removing the gown, covering her body with a blanket. She put the gown into the washing machine, turned it on, watched it fill. Soon, the water churned with an inexorable chug-chug-chug, like some boiling, frothing undertow.

She huddled in a corner near the phone and dialed Vladimir's number—no answer. *Partying, again!* She didn't bother trying Gallagan. He was staying overnight on an industrialist's yacht. *He's probably making deals*, she thought, walking to the living room window. *Tonight, I'm alone—no parties, no deals, just my own mortality.* She turned off the light and looked onto the street below.

Why would two people try to kill me? What do I have that they wanted? My body? My purse? My knowledge? My life? There is so much violence here. More than Russia. Psychopaths. Gangsters. They'll kill you for a dime. The way you look. The way you smile.

She remembered how he smiled. *This Sverdlov is a decent man. Yuri. He could have—*

Her gaze turned from the lighted area near the hotel entrance, to more distant, hidden recesses and labyrinthine passages—places where light struggled with shadow. The bright thought about Yuri spawned its negative. *He's an FBI man. His mission is to track me. Expose me. I can't get close.*

She trembled again. *The world is filled with illusions. Maybe the encounter was not what it seemed.*

She downed the last drop of brandy, then drew the curtains closed.

* * *

Morning sunlight dispelled shadows, but Katrina still felt the persistent cold wind in downtown Washington, D.C.

As she approached the Russian Embassy, she saw a man in a sweater reading the newspaper. It reminded her of danger. She slowed her pace.

He folded the paper and looked up. It was Yuri Sverdlov.

They watched each other.

Yuri smiled first, then Katrina.

She touched his shoulder—a stiff touch, without the warmth of the previous night. “Good to see you,” she said.

“Feel okay this morning?”

She nodded, “yes,” but felt unsure.

“We haven’t been able to get much on the muggers. We’ll keep trying. You were lucky.”

“Yes,” she said. “Lucky. You’re on duty—watching me?”

He nodded. “We all have a job to do. I happen to like mine.”

She shivered, not knowing why, then talked into the box. “Fontanova here.”

There was a low buzz. The gate opened. She entered. On the other side, she turned to look at Yuri.

Their eyes met for a long moment as the gate closed and locked.

31. TOWN MEETING

29 April 1994

Rachel, Nevada

“Royce, do you think we can get started here?”

“Sure thing, Colonel.” Royce waded through the crowded barroom and climbed precariously onto the counter, accompanied by hoots and whistles from a rude clientele. He raised his arms, like a conductor cueing an orchestra. Noise from the multitude subsided.

“I’m glad you could all make it, here!” he yelled.

The audience clapped.

“This, over here, is Colonel Joe Blazosky from the Base and Mister Barney Wills from the Bureau of Land Management. They’re gonna tell us why the Air Force needs to expropriate 4,000 more acres of land for the Nellis Range Complex.”

The white-haired, ramrod-straight 0-6 in a spotless blue uniform acknowledged with a raised hand. There was a mixture of clapping and booing. The thin, hawk-nosed BLM representative didn’t bother to look up from his soda.

“Before I turn it over to you, Colonel,” the barkeeper said, “I just want to say that this establishment is proud to do its civic duty. Not only are we hosting this town meeting, but all drinks are half price until eight o’clock.”

He jumped off the bar amid clapping and cheering.

“Can we cut the bank of lights over the screen?” the Colonel asked.

The barkeeper hit a couple of switches on the wall. Half the room went dark.

“That’s better,” the Colonel said.

He looked at the room, waiting for the noise to die down. When it finally did, he spoke.

“I’m the Deputy Commander of the Nellis Range Complex. I’m here to tell you about the planned annexation. I’ll try to answer any questions you might have toward the end of the presentation.”

He turned on the projector. A chart about Nellis, with the USAF logo in the upper right, popped onto the screen.

“Nellis has been critical to the defense of the United States of America. The Military Lands Withdrawal Act of 1986, as amended in 1988, withdrew some of the land currently in the Nellis Range Complex. Certain elevations on the east side of the range were not included as part of the original withdrawal.”

He showed a montage of aerial combat slides, with corkscrew jet trails, air-to-air missiles and square-jawed fighter pilots. “At Nellis, we train pilots to achieve victory in the skies. However, high performance maneuvers over the range are dangerous. An aerial view of Freedom Ridge, taken from Groom, popped up on the screen.

“If an aircraft crashed into this ridge on public land, it could kill the observers. We want to make our operations as safe as possible and avoid risking the lives of civilians.”

“White Mountain,” he continued, “poses a similar risk. Aircraft practicing Air Combat Maneuvers could stray into the mountainside with lethal consequences.”

He switched the projector off.

“There are valid reasons for annexing this land. Not only will it contribute to the defense of our great nation, but it could save the lives of civilians. I urge you to support the annexation. Now, I’d like to take questions.”

He looked around the room and spotted Deke with a hand in the air. “Yes, Sir?”

“Could you tell us about UFOs at the base?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You don’t know what I’m talking about?”

“Is there an echo?”

“Maybe we could help each other.”

“How’s that?”

“Let us continue to observe the base from Freedom Ridge and White Mountain. We’ll report all the

sightings to you. Then you'd know."

"Sorry. Too much of a safety risk. Next question?"

A tall, bearded man in a black suit stood up, clamping his lapels with both hands. "I'd like to inject some reality into this discussion," he said, eyeing Deke.

"Thank you, sir," the Colonel said, gratefully. "And you are?"

"Marvyn Marvin the Third, Ambassador from the Planet Draconis. What I want to know—"

"I'm sorry. We've run out of time. Let's give somebody else a turn."

The Colonel switched the projector off. He pointed toward another man in the audience. "Yes, Sir?"

"I'm Harry."

"Hello, Harry."

"I'm a Shoshone. Er... at least three-quarters Shoshone."

"Okay."

"The land you're after, and most of the land at Nellis, was deeded to the Shoshone Nation by treaty in the 1800s."

"So what are you saying?"

"Get off our land. Stop trying to grab more."

"Do you have an actual copy of the treaty?"

"I don't have the copy. I'm told it's somewhere in Washington."

"I'd have to see it before I could comment. Next question?"

Harry sat down. A well-dressed woman stood up. She was not from Rachel.

"This is the State of Nevada, isn't it?"

"Yes Ma'am."

"Why isn't the Air Force dealing with the state?"

"Excuse me?"

"You are annexing the land, and you are talking only to the Bureau of Land Management."

"We were told to. They own the land."

"It is ironic, isn't it," she said, looking around the room, "that a sizable part of a State of Nevada is not

owned by the people who actually live in the state?”

“Care to respond to that, Mister Wills?” the Colonel asked.

Barney Wills, the BLM rep, stopped sipping soda, issued a silent burp and stood up. “Repeat the question?”

“Why isn’t the annexation decision a state decision?” the woman asked.

“Because BLM owns the land,” he responded, matter-of-factly.

The audience, quiet up to this point, erupted in hisses and boos. They threw paper cups.

“Stop that!” he yelled. “This is unprofessional!”

The noise subsided as some residents shouted, “Let him talk!”

“It’s true, he said, “that most of Lincoln County is public land. BLM just happens to be the landlord. I didn’t make those rules, but there they are.”

“When Nevada was founded, Mister Wills,” the well-dressed woman said, “the state was given authority to manage public lands. BLM has authority only if the state delegates it to you. And we haven’t.”

The crowd whistled and cheered at the woman’s show of irreverence. She continued.

“If you believe you have authority in this matter, Mister Wills, then I have come all the way from Las Vegas to ask you for proof. Here is a Freedom of Information request to see the documents that prove you have such authority.”

She handed him a typed letter.

“I’m the wrong guy. It’s not my bailiwick.”

“Who is the right guy?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Could you find out?”

“Not my job. Call the BLM office in Washington, D.C.”

People yelled curses. They threw more cups—some full of beer. Colonel Joe Blazosky and Mister Barney Wills beat a hasty retreat out the back door. Royce climbed onto the bar and tried to provide a sense of finale.

“Well, that about wraps it up,” he said. “Drinks are on me for the next ten minutes.”

32. MAJOR PUZZLES

30 April 1994

“I measured a small current in the shield, so I began a careful inspection, looking for a fault,” Dmitry said. “What I found was this.” He pointed at an exposed tuck in the wire grid that looped down close to the floor in the interior of the SIGINT Operations Center. “I discovered it was connected to something else—this transparent polymer thread. I smelled a rat.”

Katrina looked carefully through a magnifying glass. The transparent, conductive polymer was nearly invisible. Even if you saw it, you might think it was a snagged thread of cloth, or a spider’s web. The shield it connected to, called a Faraday cage, was supposed to stop leakage of signals from the Center. Leakage was bad. Computers and other equipment inside the Center radiated electromagnetic energy which could be picked up, amplified and read by foreign agents.

She noticed a small glob of polymer. “It’s heat-fused to the metal.”

“Correct.”

“Where does the other end go?”

He pulled up a section of false floor, then pointed to a small metal box that looked like part of a structural member. “Here. There is another thread that connects to the Center’s internal power.”

“Clever.”

“They used the Center’s power supply to distribute intercepted signals,” he continued. “Our own radiation shield acted as an antenna. The spread spectrum modulation would have been nearly impossible for us to detect.”

“But we did detect it. Through the printer.”

Dmitry shrugged. “I’m not sure the two things are related. They may have built backup paths to get the signal out. Maybe it was a technical glitch that exposed their operation.”

Katrina nodded. “Good work. But I want you to search out *all* paths. Tell me how those paths were inserted. Tell me about the printer. We can’t have any leaks.”

Dmitry frowned at the difficulty of what she asked.

Katrina gripped his shoulder. “This is a good Russian detective problem, hmm?”

Dmitry nodded and grinned. “Like a chess game,” he said.

* * *

Yuri's cellular phone rang as he walked toward his car, parked in a garage on K Street, not far from the Russian Embassy. He picked up. "Sverdlov."

"Yuri, this is Briggam."

He pushed the phone into his ear to block street noise. The call was important. Elliott Briggam's FBI office handled homicide-related crimes.

"I've got some bad news about the NSA guy you were working with," Briggam continued.

"Jack Dugan?"

"Yeah. He's dead. They found his body in an alley a couple of hours ago."

Yuri held the phone, mind racing, emotions soaring, stunned by the news.

"You there?" the voice asked.

Yuri closed his eyes, shook his head and exhaled a long breath. He felt like he had just been kneed in the groin. "Yeah, I'm here," he said, after a moment.

"We need to talk to you and take statements. There's a lot of paperwork."

"I'll come down."

* * *

Katrina and Vladimir worked late in Katrina's office. It was a medium-sized room consistent with the character, habits and eclectic interests of an intelligence analyst. A high rise of paper jutted upward from the desk. Large shelves cradled books and reprints of a very technical nature—physics, geology, electrical engineering and manufacturing processes. Some were in Russian, others were in English.

A signed picture of Russian cosmonauts hung on the wall. Next to it was a framed, cartoonish drawing—a child's picture of an eagle—edged in an abstract, red-brown motif.

At a light table in one corner of the room, Vladimir and Katrina pored over satellite photography. Katrina looked through a binocular scope. She focused with one hand and held a cigarette in the other. Vladimir slowly cranked the take-up reel, dragging film across the light table.

“Stop,” Katrina said. This is the area I want. Area 51.” Vladimir stopped cranking. Katrina looked up from the scope. Dark circles underlined her bright green eyes.

“You look like hell,” Vladimir remarked, under his breath.

“And you look like the American cartoon, Orphan Annie,” she said, running a hand through his puffy, frizzed hair.

“Hey, don’t! It’s the style. I’m just trying to blend. Okay?”

“You are becoming decadent.”

“Lenin would approve of my disguise.”

“He’s dead. Hand me the sleeve,” she said, with annoyance.

He gave her a clear plastic sleeve, slightly wider than the film. Katrina took it, then wiped her eyes with the back of a hand. “This business the other night... I can’t seem to sleep, so I just work. At least during the putsch, I knew who the enemy was. I could mentally prepare for that. Here—”

“Maybe you should carry a gun. I’d feel safer. All Americans carry guns.”

“Why would a clerk at the Russian Embassy need protection?”

Vladimir laughed.

She removed the cigarette from her mouth and parked it on Vladimir’s lips for safe keeping. “Here, hold this.”

He didn’t miss a beat. “I’m going to stop smoking, soon. Most Americans don’t smoke. It’s bad for your health.”

She cut the film with a loud, angry SNIP, then stuffed the frame inside the sleeve.

Vladimir grew silent, waiting out the awkward moment as his sister drew boxes around three areas in the frame with a grease pencil.

“I want enlargements of the test area, the research complex and the power plant,” she said. “See if you can find prior coverage for comparison.”

She handed Vladimir the sleeve, removed the cigarette from his mouth and replaced it in her own.

“Katrina?” Vladimir asked.

“What?”

“Sverdlov is FBI counterintelligence.”

“So?”

“Brotherly advice. Don’t let the shooting incident affect your judgment. Don’t fall for some American

cowboy.”

“That’s stupid. He’s a source of information.”

* * *

Yuri stood over a freezer drawer containing Jack’s body. Elliott Briggam, standing beside him, sneezed, tugged on a well-pressed linen handkerchief that flared decoratively from a coat pocket, blew his nose with it, then jammed it back into his rumpled tweed coat, eyes watering.

“I think I’m allergic to some of the chemicals they use here,” he said, teetering on a step stool that compensated for his short height.

Yuri nodded. They closed the drawer.

Briggam stepped down, opened a manilla envelope, and spread pictures across a stainless steel examination table.

“This is how we found him. Ah—tzuuu!” He sneezed again, spattering the photos with tiny spots of spittle.

The pictures showed Jack sprawled in an alley, one hand propped against a gray concrete wall.

“It was the knife wounds that got him,” Briggam said, wiping his nose with a finger.

Yuri flipped through the photos.

“Coroner thinks he was stabbed somewhere else. They dumped him in the alley and left him for dead. Only he wasn’t quite dead.”

Yuri looked at the last photo. It showed the concrete wall next to Jack’s hand. On it was scrawled the word *MAJOR*.

“At first we thought it was gang writing, along with the other crap on the wall. The lab tested it. It was Jack’s blood.”

Briggam put the photos back into the envelope. “What was Jack up to the day he was killed?”

Yuri was far away in thought.

“Hmm? Sorry.”

“What was Jack doing that day? I’ll need a statement.”

“Debriefing a government agency. The Russians were monitoring their conversations. Standard procedure is for NSA to tell them to tighten up. Only Jack was having a hell of a time finding the agency.”

Yuri paused for a moment, then turned with a start. “Fontanova!”

“What?” Briggam asked.

“We had a surveillance operation on the Russian Embassy. Katrina Fontanova discovered what we were doing. She’s a Major in the Russian Army.”

33. RATTUS NORVEGICUS

30 April 1994

John Anderson and Zfar Jafri entered at the rear of the large, 200-seat lecture room. Jafri carried a small plastic cooler. Students filed out of the room, headed toward other classes. A view of live microbes still projected on a screen.

At the front of the room, Doctor Rita Li—sixty years old, white-hair, trim figure—presided over a ‘feeding frenzy’ of information. Students snapped at the tidbits she informally dispensed, then fed off each other.

She moved to one side, talking quietly but enthusiastically to a particular hungry male who could have been a football player. He asked questions about the lecture.

“So, um, meiosis is when the diploid number of chromosomes gets reduced?”

A long necklace of imitation pearls spilled down Doctor Li’s cleavage. As she talked to the male student, she tugged on it, bringing the end up from the depths. It bobbed up and down like a fishing line in search of a fish. The action had a hypnotic effect on the student. She toyed with him.

“*Very*good,” she said. “Just remember, in meiosis we are dealing with sex cells dividing. It’s a cellular maturation process that prepares the egg and sperm to fuse with each other.”

As Anderson and Jafri approached, Li disengaged from the flirtation. “Ah, John. Hello,” she said.

She turned to the male student. “Please excuse me. I think you’re on the right track with this.” She touched the student’s arm and whispered, “If you need more help, see me in my office.”

The student nodded, smiled nervously and departed.

She grinned and took Anderson by the arm. “I have such fun with this course.” She studied him. “I haven’t seen you since the Tellus Board meeting, when we approved your funding request.”

She reached a hand toward Jafri. “Hello. I’m Rita Li. Just call me Rita.”

She tugged at her necklace, hypnotizing Jafri.

“Umm... Zfar Jafri. Just call me Zfar.”

“Zfar, zo good,” she laughed. “Are you working with John on the Groom Lake project?” Jafri nodded, then looked at Anderson.

“Zfar brought me something from Groom that I thought you should see,” Anderson said.

Jafri put the cooler into the sink on the lab workbench. He opened it, revealing a rat encased in a double plastic bag atop a layer of ice.

“Zfar has a friend who works at the site,” Anderson said. “He found this in the Test Area. It’s not native.”

“Of course not,” Li said. “It’s *Rattus Norvegicus*—the brown rat. It’s the species we usually dissect to illustrate mammalian anatomy.” She picked up tongs and began to reach into the bag. “May I?” she asked.

“Before you touch it, I have to warn you. There’s a possibility this animal died in some sort of germ warfare experiment,” Anderson said.

Li retracted her hand and dropped her smile. “Then let’s take it to the containment lab. I’ll work on it there.” She replaced the lid.

* * *

Richard Chandra reviewed analysis of Thought Tunneling Devices, beginning with initial 1947 autopsy reports. Plowing through volumes of uninspired technical material was boring.

He turned on the news as a diversion and poured a drink of ice cold liquor. He wondered which of these things—the TV or the drinking—could kill more brain cells.

He had enough to spare.

Looking at the world through the glow of Jack Daniels, he marveled at how daily news broadcasts could instantly coordinate and synchronize thoughts, ideas and actions on a global scale. What got broadcast

was a mix of reality, speculation and pure lies. He was an expert on the last category.

Caveatemptor.

Mankind had known dimly for centuries that ideas had power. However, until recently, ideas diffused slowly though the collective consciousness.

The Nordic Edda began as a verbal story-telling tradition. It developed over hundreds of years. It seized the minds and viewpoints of particular human tribes for successive generations.

Today's myths were movies, news and TV shows.

Television, telecommunications and computers transformed the lethargic *Zeitgeist* into a fast tempo rap beat.

Even the written word—from newspapers to novels—reflected a world view shaped by a channel-switching ethos. Short. Choppy. Fragmented and fractured. And technology accelerated the pace.

But where was the meaning?

Maybe truth was a Gestalt effect—a mosaic pattern. Maybe if an objective observer took in enough data, the fractured bits and pieces would have some meaning—like a Byzantine mosaic viewed from a distance.

Ideas would connect.

A TV news report suddenly penetrated Chandra's brain like an ice pick.

"Finally, tonight," the news anchor said, "I'd like to pay tribute to Jill Sommer, one of our most intrepid reporters. In what we can only believe was a random act of violence, she was shot at a hotel near Rachel, Nevada. She is now in critical condition—a tough-minded reporter with a nose for blockbuster news. Jill, we're with you. We need you. Pull through."

Chandra punched off the TV.

He teetered into the kitchen and tried to empty his glass in the sink. It dropped, shattering on the floor.

"Shit," he said.

Fractured bits and pieces of glass tore through his bare feet, leaving a mosaic of footprints contoured in blood.

* * *

All the pieces! Dmitry thought. This was a very complex puzzle.

He scanned the strange computer code on his screen. He would have to decompile it into assembly language before he could make sense of it. By cross-checking network logs and other data, he might be able to determine how this code found its way into the embassy's classified system.

The code was surprisingly compact. It attached itself to the print drivers. *That's how it was able to control the printers.* But modulating them to produce an audio output—to make them talk in a human-like voice—was something he had never seen.

There was a level of technology here that baffled him. *A good mystery. A good chess game... Could there be more than one rat?*

34. WALPURGIS NIGHT

30 April 1994

White Mountain

Glowing embers from a campfire filled the black sky, rising and dispersing like clouds of weightless fireflies. The embers were drawn into the night by desert wind and consumed by a predatory darkness.

Ben Nightwalker sat near the fire's edge with Thomas, a seven year old boy, and Lilith, a fourteen year old girl. They were relatives. Fractional kindred spirits.

In the background, they heard a Night Chant. The *hatathli*—medicine man—assisted an elderly woman into the ceremonial *hooghan*.

"She will sit in the Magic Circle," Ben explained. "Then they'll say prayers to the *Yeis*. She has a bad leg, so they'll take sand from the picture and put it on her leg."

Lilith chewed gum, rolled her eyes and shook her head. Thomas listened intently—a wide-eyed believer.

"We're lucky to be here," Nightwalker said to the girl. "It's an honor Old Joe invited us."

Lilith squinted in disbelief. "Uncle, do you know what I could be doing right now? Do you know what I'm missing on TV? You don't have a clue. This is so... bizarro. She's sick. They should get her to a real doctor."

"People can choose how they want to be healed. She has chosen her way. You should respect her for that."

"How can I respect anything when I'm bored?" she asked.

Ben thought for a moment. “Let me tell you a story. It’s one that Joe taught me. It goes back to the earliest times.”

* * *

Yuri scanned the alley—a dead-ended place where Jack had met his dead end—an end now documented in white chalk, patches of semi-dry blood and a signpost to Jack’s last thought—”Major.”

His own blood boiled at the possibility that Major Katrina Fontanova may have orchestrated the killing. *What’s going on here below the surface? Is the vulnerable princess actually an inhuman animal? Did she orchestrate the killing because Jack exposed something? Could she invoke diplomatic immunity and get away with it?*

He ducked under the yellow ‘Crime Scene’ tape and stepped into the darkness, probing with a flashlight.

Maybe there’s something here they missed, he thought. Something that will help make sense out of all this.

* * *

Ben told the story.

“In the land of the Kisani, they didn’t have rain and they didn’t have snow. Late in the autumn, they heard in the east the sound of a great voice calling. They listened. They waited. Pretty soon, the voices got nearer and louder.”

“Weird,” Thomas said.

Ben solemnly nodded. “Strange beings came. They didn’t talk. They made many signs to the people, as if instructing them. But the people didn’t understand.”

“When the gods had gone, the people tried to figure out what it all meant. Then in the morning, when the sun came up, they could see walls of water moving toward them on all horizons except to the West. They all moved out to a high hill, hoping that would save them.”

“Some of the animals tried to use their special skills or knowledge, but no one succeeded.”

“Did the people drown?” the boy asked.

“No,” Ben said. “A young man and an old man came up with a solution. The Elder had seven bags of dirt from the seven sacred mountains. His son spread the earth on the ground and planted reeds. The reeds grew quickly. They all joined together, like a hollow rope, and became a single gigantic reed with a hole in its eastern side. The people entered through the hole and it closed up. The water moved in. It surged outside the reed, saying *Yin, yin, yin*.”

“The water rose fast, but the reed grew faster. By sunset, the reed had grown up close to the sky. The people sent out a badger. When he returned, his legs were stained black with mud. He had clawed through the night sky. The people went through the badger’s hole, where they met other animals and beings. The reed had become a tunnel to another world.”

“What creatures did they find?” the boy asked.

“Well. There were the giants—the alien gods. Most of them were killed by the people. We don’t have to fear them anymore.”

The boy grinned.

“What we have to fear are the devils,” Ben said, in a hushed voice.

The fire popped. The girl shuddered. “Creepy!”

“Tell me about the Devils. I’m not afraid,” Thomas said.

“They are the Tsindi. There is a Tsindi with every corpse. The dead man’s spirit goes to the lower world, but the demon remains with the body.”

The girl shuddered again. The boy laughed nervously.

“The Tsindi looks like a corpse,” Ben said.

* * *

This is where they found his corpse, Yuri thought, looking at the chalk outline. There’s the wall filled with gang markings.

Talk to me, Jack. I’m your partner. Here are your toe marks where they dragged you, face down, into the shadows. They thought you were dead, but you weren’t. They were clumsy. Stupid. You kept your wits, even as life drained out of your body. What were you thinking those last moments?

* * *

The embers burned low, then blossomed back in an explosion of flame, fanned by a night wind from the East. The chant stopped.

Old Joe, the medicine man, materialized from the darkness and approached the fire. “Do you remember what to do and where to go?” he asked, handing Nightwalker a pouch.

Ben nodded.

“Good.”

Joe looked at the boy, smiling the faintest of smiles. “This is a special night. You and Ben have a very special role to play.”

Ben stood and lashed the pouch to his belt. Joe patted him on the shoulder, then returned to the ceremonial *hooghan*. The chant started again, like some vocal narcotic, capturing thoughts and feelings in a convergent world of reality and illusion.

Ben looked at Thomas. “Do you still want to help me?”

The boy nodded.

“You have to be able to follow me—to run fast.”

“I can run fast!”

“Good! They’ve given me the kethawns—little cigarettes and sticks. They’re sacrifices.”

“What for?”

“Payment to the *Yeis* for healing. We have to run to the place of sacrifice. Just follow me. Then we run back. We can’t cross our trail when we return. Also, we can’t walk through an ant hill.”

Lilith rolled her eyes.

“Ready?”

Thomas nodded. They took off running.

* * *

Gillford Chisholm moved tentatively, furtively, like a prickly-haired cat, following Yuri into the alleyway, slinking into shadows, both hunter and hunted. When he heard that Jack Dugan left a message—coded in blood—he thought it was time to revisit the scene. Maybe there was something else he overlooked. Evidence.

And now this FBI man searches. Everyone else is gone, but he still searches. Looking for clues. Looking for me.

He closed and opened his eyes slowly, the way cats do when they think about prey. *He's not so big. I could take him. I could surprise him.* He felt the bulge under his breast pocket. *I could—*

An empty soup can toppled from a garbage heap, jostled by Chisholm's foot. It skidded on the ground and rolled to a stop near Yuri.

Chisholm froze. *Shit*, he thought.

Yuri's flashlight beamed in his face. Like a skittish alley cat, he took off, running.

* * *

Ben and his nephew ran along trails near the mountain. Eventually, they came to a level place near a rocky outcrop. Ben stopped, opened the pouch and arranged materials on a rock.

“What will happen to the kethawns?” the boy asked.

“The gods will come. They'll smoke the cigarettes. While they're enjoying themselves, they'll say, ‘The people have kept their promise, now we must keep ours.’”

“Uncle?”

“What?”

“Here they come!”

From their viewpoint in the mountainous foothills, they saw a shining light glide effortlessly across the

valley. It skimmed the ground. It ascended the slopes toward their position. A blue beam dropped from the craft like a searchlight.

“Run!” Nightwalker yelled.

The two ran down the hill. Nightwalker stumbled. He seemed to fall down the mountain in slow motion, illuminated by the pale blue beam.

* * *

Vanished! Yuri thought, puffing hard, looking down streets alive with automobiles and pedestrians. *I know your face. But what's the connection?*

35. MESSAGES

1 May 1994

Deke opened his electronic mailbox. It was full, as usual. There were messages from Sysop, probably requesting that he archive files in order to free up disk space. There was a message from his girl friend, Alice Landon, an employee at Los Alamos National Laboratories (LANL). It read:

Deke,

Arrived yesterday in Honolulu. What a place! I think I could stay forever in Paradise.

Eat your heart out!

Love

Alice

He sighed. Ah, yes, Paradise. And he was still in Purgatory. He tried not to think about it. He looked at more mail.

There were “junk mail” announcements about various seminars and symposia, with titles that included *edge* or *power* or *high*. They typically involved cameo roles by high government officials. Mere mortals could hobnob with them for only \$800 a shot.

He opened a long-awaited message from “Cyclops.” It read:

Deke,

Here’s something that came in from the Computer UFO Network in Seattle, Washington. You need to put it in the database. Definite evidence of a cover up.

Enjoy.

Regards,

“Cyclops”

The lengthy attached text appeared to be a classified message from the Air Force Office of Special Investigation, AFOSI, concerning authentication of a UFO incident. He carefully filed it. *Good material for the newsletter*, he thought.

There was a small little message that caught Deke’s eye—only 2K bytes in size, but titled simply ‘?’. The single, interrogative byte made him curious. Okay, I’ll bite, he thought. He double clicked to open it up. The message read:

Embed me in electronic mail.

Send me to a computer that denies access.

I open doors.

He noticed that the message had an attached binary file—probably a program. He thought of Alice in Wonderland. *Eat me/Drink me*. Was it really a magic potion? “Okay, okay,” he laughed, “I’m ready for a diversion.”

He knew just the person who should get a message befitting Alice in Wonderland. He sent it to his girlfriend (ALANDO@LANL). He included the note: *Hey Alice, look what I got in the mail today! I call it the ‘White Rabbit Program.’ BTW, the sun is warm and shining here in Rachel, ‘Paradise of the American Wild West.’ Eat your heart out! He signed it, Panting for you... Deke.*

* * *

After ten minutes of dialing into the switchboard, only to get frustrating busy signals, Yuri Sverdlov finally connected with an embassy operator who knew almost nothing, and who did not believe it was her job to mediate communications. When he swore at her in Russian, she responded with an efficient toggle of the line that put him through to Fontanova’s answering machine. He left a message:

“This is Agent Yuri Sverdlov, FBI. I’d like to talk to you about the attack in Crystal City the other day. I have an update on the investigation. Please call me at 202-324-2000.”

It was not a lie, but it was not the complete truth. Yuri really wanted to question her about ties with Jack Dugan.

When your partner is killed, you’re supposed to do something, he thought. Right now, I’ve got nothing—a shadowy face. A foreign diplomat who is not what she seems to be. A hunch.

He looked down at the calendar on his desk, sketching with a pen, doodling dark lines around an appointment scheduled for the next day.

The investigative task force will want answers I don’t have. They’ll want connections I can’t verify. And they’ll want details of Project Inquisition that I can’t discuss.

His doodle changed to a box—the one he felt was closing in around him.

36. WHITE RABBIT TO BLUE ROOK

2 May 1994

Early Monday morning at the International UFO Research Center, Deke checked his electronic mailbox.

It was sparse. One message stood out—labeled *Blue Rook*, sent from LANL. He clicked on it, hoping it was a long letter from Alice. She would be apologetic. She would tell him she longed to see his well-sculpted, flexing pectoral muscles. She would tell him that Hawaii didn't even begin to compare with her visits to Rachel, Nevada.

Right.

It was a short message with an attached 50 KB binary file. It said, *I am a Control Panel program*.

Okay, he thought. I'll put you in the Control Panel folder and see what happens.

Sure enough, the system recognized Blue Rook as a control panel. He double clicked on the program. The disk drive churned. It kept churning.

Whoa! he thought. *Virus attack!*

He powered off the machine, hoping that the harm to his disk drive was minimal.

* * *

"This is Katrina Fontanova," she said, talking to Yuri Sverdlov's answering machine at FBI headquarters. "I am returning your phone call."

She hung up with a smile, grateful that Sverdlov was not actually in the office. If he called back, it would be extremely difficult to get through the embassy switchboard. She would instruct the operators to delay his calls and waste his time. Eventually, he would give up, just as Kostiya Baskakov from the Ukrainian Embassy had given up.

There is something going on, she thought. Something below the surface. Sverdlov's presence during the recent attack was too convenient. Maybe he staged it—to get close. Maybe the dead attacker wasn't actually dead—like in the old Cary Grant movie, 'North By Northwest.'

The corpse had been very realistic, but America, after all, was the land of Hollywood. The land of illusion.

And Washington, D.C. is a Potemkin village, she thought.

* * *

Rain fell in a quiet pitter-patter against glass windows of an FBI conference room, keeping the rhythm of a random gray sky, setting the tone. Agent Jafuskie from homicide—silver hair, pale face, wire-rimmed glasses—shuffled papers in practiced monotony as Yuri Sverdlov took a seat.

On the other side of the table, Elliott Briggam issued a little sneeze, stifled another, sneezed again, then pulled a booger-infested handkerchief from his breast pocket with a quiet “Damn,” and a nasal honk.

“This is just a routine meeting to take a sworn statement, Agent Sverdlov,” Jafuskie said, pressing the button of a tape recorder. Raise your right hand, please. Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you God?”

“I do.”

“Did you know the deceased, Jack Ian Dugan?”

“Yes. He was my partner.”

“Did he tell you where he was going or what he was doing on 30 April, 1994?”

“No.”

“Did you know what he was supposed to be doing?”

“He had some project work to catch up on.”

“What project?”

“Inquisition. You don’t have a clearance, or a need to know. Anyway, it’s not relevant.”

Jafuski stopped the tape, tightening his lips into a thin line. “I’ll be the judge of what’s relevant. Who can read me in on the project?”

“The Attorney General of the United States.”

Jafuski let out a sigh, removed his glasses and polished them with a handkerchief. “That’s all, Agent Sverdlov. You can go.”

“No, it’s not all,” Yuri said. “Not by a long shot. I believe Jack was killed because he stumbled onto something he wasn’t supposed to know about.”

Jafuski lifted an eyebrow, then started the tape again. “What was that? And what’s your evidence?”

The two men from homicide leaned forward. Even with the rain, Yuri could hear the tick-tick-tick of the recorder, waiting for his response.

“I think it had to do with the Russians, and certain advanced technology. As for evidence... I don’t have any yet.”

“The Russians?” Jafuski asked, smiling, looking at his two colleagues.

Yuri felt his breathing tighten as he read the body language. “You know what’s going on, don’t you? You know why Jack was killed.”

“Yes. We think so. But you’ll be disappointed. There was no conspiracy,” Jafuski said. “It was a gang.”

“How can you say that?” Yuri asked, voice trembling. “What was the motive?”

“Maybe he was on their turf. Maybe he was wearing the wrong color shirt. Maybe there was no motive, other than the sheer joy of killing.”

“What about the writing?”

“Gang writing. Sometimes gang members give each other pet names or military-style ranks.”

“They said the message was written in Jack’s own blood.”

“A gang member could have written it, or could have forced Dugan himself to write it, as a kind of ritual domination over the enemy. Maybe it was the killer’s signature.”

“A simpler explanation is that Jack was telling us who killed him.”

“Who do you think killed him?”

“I told you. The Russians. Katrina Fontanova, one of their top-level operatives, is a major in the Russian Army.”

“So? What was the motive?”

“We had them under intense surveillance.”

“To your knowledge, have members of Boris Yeltsin’s regime ever deliberately killed U.S. personnel—for any reason?”

“Not that I am aware of.”

“I am also not aware of any such occurrence. Your theory would be a bizarre anomaly. It’s irrational.”

“I only see that I need more evidence to nail down the connection.”

“You’re counterintelligence, not homicide. If the only tool you have is a hammer, then every problem looks like a nail. That’s just human nature. Please let us do our job, Sverdlov. And stay off the case.”

Back in Rachel, Nevada, Deke was puzzled. Someone had gone to a great deal of trouble to create the Blue Rook program. He was determined to find out what it did—and warn the community. A virus attack was like an act of mental rape. Someone or something had invaded his mass memory and tried to screw his system. He was not about to passively roll over.

This was war!

He tried to reconstruct. He had sent the *I open doors* message, with binary file attached, to his girlfriend at Los Alamos Laboratories. The *Blue Rook* message returned from LANL and said it was a Control Program. *How did it know he had a Macintosh?* he thought. Usually, differences in operating systems represent a natural barrier to viruses.

He booted the system from a diskette in order to avoid re-activating the virus. Then he backed up his entire hard drive, except for *Blue Rook*. At least he might be able to salvage some of his work.

He isolated his machine from the local area network and re-booted. Sure enough, the hard drive began to churn again. “Let’s see what you do, bastard!” he said.

Thirty minutes later, the churning stopped. His desktop appeared normal. There was now a blue, castle-shaped icon sitting in the hard drive window. He double-clicked. It was like being teleported to LANL as a super-user. Super-users have access to everything in the system. They are all powerful. On the screen was a replica of the LANL system, including all the accounts and files—in only 100 megabytes of space!

He navigated through the system with ease. The system did not ask for passwords or IDs. It just let him roam. This was a cracker’s dream!

He entered Alice’s account. It turned out that Alice was corresponding with someone named Phil, and it was more than technical discussion. He would have to ask her about that when she got back.

Exploring the vast terrain of LANL supercomputer and administrative files was going to take a long time. He decided to eat dinner first.

* * *

“If we were in the Dark Ages, we’d be sitting around, befuddled, wondering how demons possessed this place. We are not in the Dark Ages. Your job is to understand this technology. I want you to be thorough. I want you to be systematic. I want you to purge this system,” Katrina said.

Dark circles ringed her eyes. The investigation was not going well. “I want every hard drive written over with alternating zeros and ones—three times, just to make sure. Then re-create the system prior to infection.”

“We’re going to be out of commission for a long time.”

“Just do it...”

As she spoke, lights in the printer room dimmed, then fluctuated erratically. Katrina and Dmitry looked at each other.

“I just deleted all the foreign code,” Dmitry said. “There shouldn’t be anything—”

“Maybe someone or something is inserting a new program.” They heard a cascade of clicks as power levels went sub-critical and systems turned off. Then they heard the soft “washboard” sounds as the systems re-booted. After two minutes, high speed printers burped paper. They spoke: *Ganymede... Groom... Ganymede... Groom...*

* * *

Gallagan paced back and forth, occasionally glancing at Katrina and Dmitry. He was in a dark mood. The gallon of kvass in his belly made it even darker. He wasn’t quite sure what to think or what to say about the extraordinary penetration of the SIGINT Operations Center.

“Are you suggesting,” he said, with an irritated lilt to his voice, “that the American spies are idiot savants?” He paced some more. “On the one hand, they penetrate our systems—right under our very noses. They do it in a way that would be difficult or impossible to find unless they announce themselves. And on the other hand—they announce themselves.”

Katrina and Dmitry both nodded their heads, “Yes.”

“I don’t know which thing I find more incredible—the behavior of this foreign code, or your analysis of it! I mean, does this even make sense to you?”

Katrina and Dmitry shook their heads, “No.”

“An alternate possibility,” Katrina said, “is that they are thumbing their noses at us.”

“That’s stupid.”

“It’s not stupid if they just want to shut us down. In effect, they are showing us they can penetrate the system at any time. Telling us, *Here we are, reading your thoughts and ideas.*” She slammed her fist on his desk. “They do this with impunity, Nikolai!”

* * *

In the LANL files, Deke found an interesting e-mail thread:

TOP SECRET

11/11/81

Harry,

What we are faced with here is the same type of dilemma Oppenheimer faced in the 40's and Teller faced in the 50s. Namely, if a weapon CAN be built from this technology, then shouldn't we be the first ones to do it? After Hiroshima, did Szilard still think he did the right thing?

Regards,

—Andy

TOP SECRET

The reply:

TOP SECRET

11/11/81

Andy,

There really is no issue here. We are scientists. Science is about penetrating Nature's cloak and exposing her secrets. This technology has fallen into our hands as a result of a fortuitous accident. Science can jump ahead, perhaps 10,000 years. Should we put the artifacts on a shelf and make believe we never saw it?

Regards,

—Harry

TOP SECRET

The answer:

TOP SECRET

11/12/81

Harry,

Maybe we should analyze the depth of the water before we jump off the high dive. That's all I'm saying. There were people who thought the first A-bomb might create an uncontrollable chain reaction in the atmosphere that could kill all life on the planet. What if they had been right?

—Andy

TOP SECRET

Conclusion:

TOP SECRET

11/12/81

Andy,

I'll respect your wishes. If you have any doubts about the project, then, quite frankly, I don't want you on it. I happen to think it's the greatest thing that's happened to science in 1000 years, and I want to be part of it. Debrief tomorrow. You're off the team.

—Harry

TOP SECRET

Appeal:

TOP SECRET

11/12/81

Harry,

I want on the team! I was just talking to myself, walking through the arguments as Oppenheimer must have done. No harm there. You convinced me.

—Andy

TOP SECRET

Second chance:

TOP SECRET

11/12/81

Andy,

No harm done. We can certainly use your quantum mechanics expertise on the communications link. I just want to be very clear on what the situation is. Once I give you access to the artifacts and the data, there is no turning back. It's like Sodom and Gomorrah and the pillars of salt. Remember Lot's wife. You don't look back. And if you do, I can't help you. So let me ask you one more time. ARE YOU SURE?

—Harry

TOP SECRET

Decision:

TOP SECRET

11/12/81

Harry,

I'm sure.

—Andy

TOP SECRET

Deal:

TOP SECRET

11/12/81

Come to my office in the Vault tomorrow. I'll have the security people there and brief you in. Once that happens, you'll be given access to Operation Majority documents on file in the System. See you then.

—Harry

TOP SECRET

After a little searching, Deke found the files on Operation Majority. He went in.

* * *

Gallagan pondered the situation. If what Katrina said was correct, then there really was no point in operating the SIGINT Center. It would only provide the Americans with information they could—at any time—use against Russia. If only there were a counterbalance. But they didn't really have any cards in their favor.

Unless...

He swiveled slowly around to face Katrina.

"I want you to shut down the Center for perhaps six months. Meanwhile, I need leverage with the Americans. We will build the case against Groom. If we can prove a government cover up, then I've got something I can negotiate with."

"Getting data will be difficult without the Center."

"We have other sources. And what about this American?"

"The FBI man? Yuri Sverdlov?"

“Yes. See if you can get close to him. Find out what he knows.”

* * *

Deke applied UFO-ology logic to what he saw. It was like close encounters of the first, second and third kind, except it was a conspiracy.

What he had uncovered was a conspiracy of the Third Kind. A conspiracy of the First Kind is when you think you see or smell something funny. You’re suspicious. A conspiracy of the Second Kind is when you have data that is necessary but not quite sufficient to prove conspiracy. You’re on the trail. A conspiracy of the Third Kind is Contact. You have the goods. It’s go-to-jail time for the conspirators.

Deke blinked at what he saw on the screen. He had the goods.

37. MAJESTIC DECISIONS

2 May 1994

The Security Chief tried to rub sleep from his eyes, heart and blood pressure at low ebb. Chandra and the others didn’t seem affected by the early morning session, but without an injection of caffeine, the Security Chief felt intellectually challenged. The darkness of the closed conference room didn’t help matters.

He fumbled with the tape recorder, then pushed a button. A message played, left by Jill Sommer on Zfar Jafri’s answering machine: *Jeez! And I thought prophets didn’t kid around! Listen, Zfar, I need to see you today about another shoot. We might be able to prove criminal action at Groom. Could be a great story...*

The Chief shut off the tape, then looked at Chandra. “We simply followed up on your suggestions, Richard,” he said. “The recording clinched it for Ms. Sommer. Then we had your report, and NSA’s phone tap on Fontanova at the embassy. We had to take action there, too.”

“It’s not the decisions that are at issue here, it’s the execution.”

“We made some mistakes. We can correct them. But if you’re trying to contest MJ-12’s authority to use deadly force to protect information, or MAJI’s oversight of security matters—”

“Of course not,” Chandra said. “Of course not. Let’s stay objective here. I’m just saying we can take a more effective approach. That’s all.”

“And what do you suggest, Doctor Chandra?”

Chandra looked down the conference table—a table that faded into darkness beyond the overhead projector. There was silence, broken only by a momentary cough.

“First, we need information,” he said. “We need to know what’s going on. Based on that knowledge, we can target our actions.”

“How?” the Security Chief asked.

“I want to run some probes. I want a field test of Project Ganymede.”

Chandra waited for a reaction. There was only another cough from the darkened room. He continued.

“I have some Ganymede prototype animals in my lab near Johns Hopkins.”

He lifted a rat cage onto the table.

“We can use those initially until I get the Advanced Demonstration Model from Groom. Gill Chisholm can help me set it up. I want control of the operation.”

From the back of the room came a German-accented response. “I have been listening patiently, Richard, but it seems to me that we are dealing with an unproven technology.”

“The Proof-of-Concept Test was a complete success,” Chandra asserted. “I—”

“Under very controlled conditions.”

Chandra shook his head, “No.”

“It was not the field. These Thought Tunneling Devices may be unstable.”

“We have no evidence of that,” Chandra replied. “I looked at the Roswell tissue. TTDs showed no deterioration. I also looked at some of the early prototypes. They’re still good. So is the recent Advanced Demonstration Model.”

“Maybe it’s only your brain that’s deteriorating, Richard,” the Chief remarked. “No offense.”

“We don’t know how well the animals can be controlled...”

Chandra opened the cage.

A large rat raced down the table in a beeline toward his German-accented opponent. There was a yell in the darkness as the rat made contact. Finally, it ran back toward Chandra, dropped the pencil on the table in front of him and re-entered the cage.

Chandra closed the cage door and picked up the object.

“I needed your pencil to make a point,” he said.

“Come on, folks,” Billy said. “Let’s give Richard a chance.”

* * *

Deke Dobbs, body still reeling from a ‘Red Eye’ flight to Washington, D.C., listened to his stomach rumble hungrily as he followed Jafri through the lunch crowd at Mister Bill’s restaurant, searching for a table.

“Fast food, Zfar,” he said. “That’s what this is supposed to be. That means fast service, fast seating and fast eating.”

“I agree, Jafri said, hobbling to a stop. Time to invoke Plan B.” He cozied next to a table, waved a French fry like a conductor cueing a band, and started *The Act*, beard trembling.

“Open your mind. Transcend time and space!”

“Yes, Master,” Deke said, thumping the tuning fork against a crystal.

Jafri and Dobbs closed their eyes and made loud “Ommm” sounds at roughly the same pitch as the tuning fork. At the occupied table next to them, a woman’s jaw sagged in mid-munch. She looked incredulously at the two men.

They stared back, observing the bits of burger in her half-opened mouth.

“Now we’re coming to *your* part,” Jafri said to the woman. “It’s a singing part.”

She picked up the remains of her meal and left.

Jafri smiled at Deke after she left the table. “*Ommmm*,” they said in unison.

“That was a move with a lot of finesse,” Deke said, respectfully, sitting down. “Very fitting for the Director of the International UFO Research Center.”

“The Center,” Jafri said, gesturing vigorously with the fry, “has definitely hit the big time. I don’t mean to sound uppity or Grey Poupon-ish, but I feel it in my bones. If these documents are half of what you say they are, this administration is finished. Finito. Maybe they’ll impeach the President and put all the previous ones on trial for crimes against humanity.”

“Maybe they’ll kill us first,” Deke said.

“Huh?”

“Look, Zfar, there are a couple of potential problems here that we need to think through. In the first place, some people could argue that we’ve violated the Espionage Act.”

“We’re not foreign spies.”

“I broke into a classified system and stole copies of Top Secret files.”

“Yeah, but those files said the government was engaged in illegal activity.”

Deke framed a headline with his hands. “*FBI kills hacker spies fleeing from arrest. News media bid to view stolen files rejected due to classification level.* That’s how it’ll read.”

“What’s your other point?” Zfar asked, biting into a muffin.

“What?”

“You said there were a couple of problems. What’s the other one?”

“Oh. According to the operations order, the government can terminate leaks with extreme prejudice. They can kill to protect information.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Really.”

“You know,” Jafri said, “there may be a way out of this. Someone sent you the original program. You didn’t ask for it. It just appeared. Unexpectedly.”

“Is this a point for a debate team, or will it prevent us from being killed?”

“Don’t know,” Jafri said, “but a CEO like me has to figure all the angles. So who do you think sent it? The message?”

Dobbs shrugged. “Maybe it was an Operation Majority insider. Maybe the code is alien software.”

“One option is we just destroy the code. Erase it from the disk. Pretend we never saw it.”

“Zfar, this code will crack any system. If we erase it, THEY will still have it. THEY will be omniscient. WE will be blind in the face of this omniscience. Remember W. Ross Ashby’s *Law of Requisite Variety*?”

“No. Refresh my memory. I never was a good student.”

“Well,” Deke said, swallowing, “only variety can destroy variety.”

“Why is this relevant?”

“Variety,” Deke said, “includes information and options. They’re interchangeable, like knowledge and power, matter and energy. If we are playing a game, and I have more options and/or more information than you do, then I will win. For example, if I could see your poker hand, but you couldn’t see mine.”

“Your point is that they can dominate the world.”

“Precisely.”

“That’s a good point. Good point.”

“The dilemma is that they have the code, but we can’t give it to anyone. If it gets out, nothing will be safe. This is the respectable side of me talking now. Banks. Credit transactions. Personal e-mail. Military secrets. It goes on and on. Our civilization couldn’t function if every transaction, every thought, could be inspected by someone else.”

“Yup. We have truly got a dilemma. Give me the Majority papers and I’ll read through them tonight. Maybe there’s another way out.”

Deke grinned. “I’ll trade you the papers for some of that special sauce, Amigo.”

Jafri put the little cup of sauce in the middle. “We share everything. No spitting.”

* * *

So her Majesty will see me? Yuri thought. *Great. But I don’t know if I can stomach this amount of ‘chutzpah.’*

After playing telephone tag for nearly two days, he was surprised by Fontanova’s message on his answering machine at his Annapolis, Maryland residence—an unlisted number.

The message, an invitation to dinner, threw him off balance. He would have preferred to establish the Rules Of Engagement, to be in control. Still—she was showing off her ability to reach out and touch him. Her over-confidence was a vulnerability.

He thought carefully about how to exploit it.

3 May 1994

“One way to look at evolution is in terms of information,” Doctor Li said to a group of graduate seminar students seated around a conference table.

The students began scribbling.

“A species,” she continued, “is a stable genetic configuration. If variety is introduced into the gene pool, then you don’t have a species. No stable configuration. What we call *communications* focuses narrowly on members of the same species. And the purpose of that communications is to *minimize* genetic variety—just the opposite of what evolution does. From the point of view of the gene pool, cross-species communications is really just so much noise.”

A portly male student with an unwashed pony tale put his pencil down and propped his fat chin on two palms. He emitted a suppressed fart that echoed in the room as a quiet, but audible ‘pop.’ “What about predators and prey?” he asked, unmindful of the social *fauxpas*. “Why shouldn’t they intentionally communicate? I mean, if the Orca could disguise its voice, and tell seals, ‘Hey kids, I’m giving away free fish—meet me behind a rock,’ why wouldn’t that be adaptive?”

A female student, offended by the body odor of the portly student, shifted her chair slightly, wrinkled her nose, then attempted to disguise the movements as a spark of academic interest. She raised her hand.

“Yes, Jan?”

“Dr. Li, couldn’t you argue that concepts and ideas may be different even among the *same* species. Humans, for example. When humans communicate with each other, we make the ‘assumption of normality.’ That is, we assume that everyone else thinks as we think and feels as we feel. This going-in assumption could be flat wrong. I have this view that the only thing some people have in common is their bodily functions. For example—Jeffrey Dahmer and Mother Theresa. Their brains and thought processes are as unique as beings from different galaxies.”

* * *

The microtome sliced brain tissue into pieces thinner than onion skin. Anna, Li’s white-smocked assistant, prepared them for microscopic viewing while Li, Anderson and Jafri watched.

Li put her hand on Anderson’s shoulder. “You’ll be happy to know, John, that we found no evidence of communicable disease—or at least diseases that I’m familiar with. We may be able to rule out the germ warfare hypothesis. Thank God.”

Anna finished preparing a slide and handed it to Li.

“My friend at Groom will be happy to hear that,” Jafri said.

Li smiled. “Since we couldn’t find viral or bacteriological pathology, I’ve stopped using biohazard procedures.”

She led the two men to viewing station, placed the slide on the microscope, adjusted the focus and backed away. She motioned to Anderson.

“Hmm? Look at it, John.”

Anderson looked through the microscope. Li stood next to him, bending toward the instrument. Jafri, on the other side of the table, bored with the science, watched Li’s full figure.

“Do you see the faint objects that look like small asterisks?” Li asked.

“Yes,” Anderson said.

“That pattern is formed by converging dendrites—the branching ends of nerve cells. The patterns you see are not found in a normal rat. It’s as though an additional structure has been overlaid onto the neural matrix.”

“How localized is the pattern?”

“You are looking at the Tractus Opticus. I’ve also found it in the Polus Frontalis, the Cingulum and the Commissura Anterior. In fact, I can find it anywhere I look. It appears to be a regular feature of this nervous system.”

Jafri beamed, “I love it when you talk medical, Rita.”

Rita Li appeared amused by the remark, but stayed focused. She removed a photograph from an envelope and placed it between Anderson and Jafri.

“Here’s an electron micrograph of one of these asterisk-shaped areas. At the center of the ‘star’, there’s a very large macromolecule. It’s regular in shape... almost crystalline and roughly the size of a cell. It’s most extraordinary. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Can we tell what it’s made of?” Anderson asked.

“I think it’s mostly a hydrocarbon with a lot of trace elements. It’ll take some time to characterize it in much detail.”

“Please work on it, Rita,” Anderson said. “It may be important.”

“I’ll get some help from our research group,” Li said. “We’ll give it priority.”

* * *

“Billy, I...” Dr. Whit Constantine ran his hand over an aging, threadbare head, uncomfortable with what he was about to say. “I think we need a backup for Richard. I’m concerned that he’s becoming unstable. That demonstration with the rat at the Majestic meeting was just so”—he searched for the word—“atavistic.”

“Dunno, Whit. We tried creating a backup once before.”

“We should try again. We can improve our procedures.”

“It wasn’t procedures that screwed us up.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think it was Richard. I can’t prove it. I just think he knew. As soon as we activated that embryo, he knew. He knows about everything that gets connected to TTDs. It’s some sort of a dominance thing. He wants control. I don’t know whether that’s the human part of

him or—”

“All the more reason for a backup. Look, we’re Operation Majority. We have the brightest people, and the most resources at our disposal. Richard’s one person. We’ll just tell him. Lay down the law. We *will* have backup.”

“How will infinite resources protect you personally from some small animal that sneaks into your bed at night and eats your carotid artery?”

“If he’s that much of a danger, then—”

“He’s a national asset, Whit. You don’t just ‘off’ a national asset.”

“Well, I don’t like it. We’ve put all our eggs in one basket, and his eggs look scrambled. I’m going on record—”

“Then Richard will know. Are you prepared for that?”

“How will he know?”

“It’s easy for him to see what’s going on. Maybe he’s watching us right now.”

* * *

Across town, in his laboratory near Johns Hopkins, Richard Chandra pressed his fingers together, planning and strategizing, while a tiny part of his brain guided a small animal through a duct running from Billy Stanton's White House office.

Good arguments, Billy, he thought. We'll see what develops on the Whit Constantine front. It's not just project goals at stake now. It's a matter of survival. Personal survival. I didn't want it to be this way.

Survival. Not just of the human body named Richard Chandra, but of the extended organism—an organism which absorbed perceptual information from other animals; an organism which distributed memories, information and even emotions redundantly among several brains; an organism which projected control and personality beyond the conventional boundaries.

How I think is what I am.

The implications of Ganymede were becoming clear to Richard Chandra, a species of animal no longer limited to a single gene pool or a single multi-cellular configuration.

I can build a factory, he thought.

He did a few calculations in his head. *Any non-human species will do—as long as it can be dominated. Rats work just fine, with litters at two-month intervals and a two year lifespan. I can make millions of hosts.*

He smiled. *If the issue is survival, I'll beat them at their own game.*

39. DISMAL DAY

3 May 1994

Jack's funeral reminded Yuri of the day they buried his father. It was the same Cossack clouds—riding like a multitude of gray horsemen above the headstones, piercing hearts. The same earth—severed like a raw, brown wound, awaiting the cleansing action of maggots. They gathered around, listened to a few inspirational words, observed the impact on shattered lives, then left Jack Dugan's body at peace.

Jack's family was there—a matronly wife, whom Yuri had met only twice, a college-age daughter, and a high school-aged son.

Yuri gave his condolences, offered the family his help if they needed it, and commiserated with friends.

Jerry Ramos, the Filipino technical wizard from the FBI Surveillance Center was right behind him. “We have to talk,” he whispered, as Yuri moved away from the circle of family and friends.

Yuri stood alone, watching others slowly depart, until finally, Jerry was able to say what was on his mind.

“This probably isn’t the time to kick a friend in the cahoonies, but I think you should know, Yuri. The situation with the Surveillance Center is unraveling—on both the NSA and FBI sides.”

“I’m not surprised.”

“Some of the NSA big-wigs were here at the funeral today. Said they’ve spent a lot of money and haven’t seen product. I get the feeling there’s more to it than that. And guys who said they were FBI came into the Center yesterday while you were out. They wanted to know what you were doing, questioned everybody, then offered the opinion that we were using obsolete technology. Imagine that! We’ve got state-of-the-art stuff.”

“We’ve attracted attention. Now there are two bureaucracies taking potshots.”

“None of this looks good, Yuri. Maybe there’s something you can do. Maybe not.” Ramos shrugged, then patted Yuri on the shoulder. “My condolences.”

“Thanks,” Yuri said, watching him leave.

40. HONEY TRAP

3 May 1994

The male species is so predictable, she thought.

Sverdlov had acted like an infatuated school boy when they finally connected on the phone, stammering about the need to talk privately, agreeing to meet on her terms.

And now she waited at a fashionable restaurant near Georgetown—a place with hypnotic soft lights and classy ambiance. It was an intimate place. A vulnerable place. A honey trap.

She used the window as a mirror, straightened an unruly lock of hair with a dab of saliva, and adjusted the strap on her low-cut black evening dress.

Tonight is not for information, she thought. That will come later. Tonight is for bonding, and bondage.

The first element of bondage would be photographs, taken surreptitiously, documenting an indiscreet

relationship between the FBI man and a known Russian spy. She would build on that error, until there was enough to damn him. Then, and only then, would she ask for information about the American penetration of the Russian SIGINT Center.

Nikolai Gallagan had carefully planned the strategy—a classic, KGB-style ‘honey-trap.’ Somewhere outside the curved window that wrapped like a glass carapace around the rooftop restaurant, Vladimir Fontanov watched with a telescope and camera. He would take pictures as they dined. He would follow them to her apartment.

She lit a cigarette, watching for a response. In the darkened office of an adjacent building, a flashlight acknowledged by signaling three times. *Everything is in place.*

She knew it was difficult for Vladimir. “Don’t do this,” he had pleaded. “If he touches you, I’ll kill him.”

“I want him to touch me,” she had replied. “I will entice him to the apartment. I will drug him. I will pose him. And then you will photograph us. He will be ours.”

She felt sorry for Sverdlov, just as she felt sorry for John Anderson. But that was the job. *You did what you had to do.*

“Excuse me. Ms. Fontanova? A phone call.”

Her thoughts returned to the restaurant. A waiter wearing a black tuxedo and white carnation handed her a wireless telephone. She took it, smiled briefly, and watched the waiter depart.

“Fontanova,” she said.

“I am terribly sorry.”

She recognized Sverdlov’s voice. “Where are you?” she asked, looking at her watch.

“I’m calling from a place just five blocks away. Something came up. We got a break on the case. I have to leave here in just a few minutes, but if you come over, I’ll brief you on what we found.”

She looked out the window again, toward Vladimir. *Things aren’t working out as planned. Still, there must at least be face-to-face contact. That’s the only way to get close.*

“Give me the address, please.”

* * *

The music was loud, raucous and western. The air was thick with cigarettes and beer. The patrons were elbow-to-elbow, dressed mostly in jeans and tee shirts.

As Katrina Fontanova crossed the room toward Yuri Sverdlov, she endured a cacophony of hoots and howls. Drunken hands clutched from the crowd, touching her expensive black evening dress. She slapped them away. By the time she reached Yuri, her face was red, her patience short.

“I am very sorry,” Yuri said, talking loudly into her ear, “But this couldn’t be helped. I’m on another case.”

“I can’t even hear you!” she yelled, angrily.

“What?”

“I said I can’t hear you!”

“Sorry!” he replied, with a smile, taking her hand. “Let’s go outside.”

They moved through the crowd to a side door, then out into an alley, dropping the noise by several decibels. A single spotlight created an island of visibility in a sea of litter near the tavern door.

“I can’t stay long,” Yuri said. “I just wanted you to see this place.”

“Why?”

“It’s where they dumped my partner’s body. Jack Dugan.”

She hugged her arms, trying to keep warm, eyeing him with a puzzled expression. “He was killed? I’m sorry.”

“So am I,” Yuri said. “They eviscerated him with a knife, rolled him out of a car, over there, and left him for dead next to a pile of garbage. Two drunks from the tavern came out this door to take a piss and found him. Those red marks on the ground are where they dragged his entrails.” He watched her reaction. “Does that shock you, Ms. Fontanova? A man’s life—turned to garbage?”

“I have seen men die before,” she said softly.

“Do you know what the most interesting thing is about this case?”

She shook her head.

“We think he named the killer. You can still see the word scrawled in his own blood on this wall.”

The writing on the wall drew her gaze—symbols of death and violence that she found both fascinating and horrifying.

“Can you read it, Major Fontanova?”

It hit her. She felt a wave of nausea radiate from the pit of her bowel as she realized Sverdlov had set her up. “You’re wrong,” she said, angrily. “Very wrong.” She marched into the tavern, slamming the door in his face.

He slapped at a bottle atop a trash can, uncorking the anger, resentment and confusion that frothed in his

soul. The bottle hurtled against the alley wall, shattering into a thousand pieces.

All he could say was, “Shit.”

41. EXECUTIVE ORDER
TS-10222-OM

3 May 1994

It was just before midnight on Tuesday when Zfar opened the thick file on Operation Majority. There was a yellow Post-It note from Deke on the top document. It said, *Read this one first—Deke.*

Below the note was the text of a Presidential Executive Order:

* * *

Immediate Release

EXECUTIVE ORDER TS-10222-OM

CLASSIFIED ANNEX TO

NATIONAL DEFENSE INDUSTRIAL RESOURCES PREPAREDNESS

OPERATION MAJORITY

The overall security classification of this document is Top Secret Majic (TSM). Certain portions are designated Confidential Majic (CM) and Unclassified (U). Handle only within Majic channels. Declassify on Authority of the President.

(U) By the authority vested in me as President by the Constitution and the laws of the United States of America, including the Defense Production Act of 1950 and section 301 of title 3, United States Code and as Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces of the United States, it is hereby ordered as follows:

PART I - PURPOSE, POLICY AND IMPLEMENTATION

Section 101. (TSM) Purpose. This order delegates authorities and addresses national defense policies and programs under the Defense Production Act of 1950, specifically related to products, capabilities, phenomena and biological entities of extra-terrestrial or suspected extra-terrestrial origin.

Section 102. (TSM) Policy. The United States must have an industrial and technology base capable of meeting national defense requirements and capable of contributing to the technological superiority of its defense equipment in peacetime and in times of national emergency. The domestic industrial and technological base is the foundation for national defense preparedness. The authorities provided in the Act shall be used to strengthen this base and to ensure it is capable of responding to all threats to the national security of the United States, including potential threats of extra-terrestrial origin.

Section 103. (TSM) General Functions. Federal departments and agencies responsible for intelligence, defense acquisition and security shall:

(a) (TSM) Identify requirements for the full spectrum of national security emergencies which could be triggered by the appearance or manifestation of capabilities, activities, or phenomena produced by intelligent extra-terrestrial biological entities (EBEs);

(b) (TSM) Assess continually the capability of the domestic industrial and technological base to defend against, nullify the effects of, or otherwise conceal the origin of capabilities, activities or phenomena produced by EBEs.

(c) (TSM) Assess continually the motives, capabilities and objectives of EBEs.

(d) (CM) Be prepared, in the event of a potential threat to the security of the United States, to take actions necessary to ensure the availability of adequate industrial resources and production capability, including services and critical technology for national defense requirements.

** * **

The more Jafri read, the more incredible it all seemed. The 1947 Roswell UFO crash left two alien survivors and a hopelessly damaged ship. One of the survivors died within a few days of the crash. The other was murdered by Operation Majority security personnel. The alien had been captured. But it held captivity captive. It demonstrated an ability to control humans by manipulating their thoughts and ideas. It escaped, made its way to the crashed craft, and destroyed selected devices onboard.

Operation Majority changed tactics after the incident. There was a standing order to kill EBEs on sight and refrigerate their bodies as rapidly as possible for study. In the course of approximately 50 years, the government destroyed seven EBEs.

Then there was another turn of events. In the early 50s, the shootdown of a U-2 over the USSR publicly humiliated a President of the United States and exposed him as a liar. The doctrine of *plausible deniability* failed. This led the administration to reconsider the consequences of exposure in the case of Operation Majority. A Top Secret RAND study suggested that public knowledge of extraterrestrial contact could throw domestic and international relationships into chaos, especially if it became known that the U.S. had acquired alien artifacts, that it had killed aliens and that it had kept this information secret. The potential for social catastrophe, not to mention political catastrophe, was high. There were too many people in the loop. Security mechanisms were significantly impaired by the U.S. Constitution.

The administration decided to cut Operation Majority free from the Federal government, but allow it to use government activities and assets for cover. At the time, it seemed like the right thing to do. It became a government within a government. Security documents cited the authority of the President, but the President no longer knew.

Operation Majority inducted and trained each new National Security Advisor and each new Director of Central Intelligence. There was an unbroken chain of culpability. Funding came through sale of certain government-acquired assets, including drugs, property and private business units. The Operation achieved tight security through an internal balance of terror and a policy of ruthlessly terminating leaks and other potential sources of embarrassment.

Jafri read about *Project Pounce*, whose objective was to recover downed extraterrestrial craft. *Project Grudge* created a database of scientific, technological, medical and socio-political information related to Unidentified Flying Objects (UFOs), Identified Alien Craft (IACs) and Extraterrestrial Biological Entities (EBEs). There were a variety of other, smaller programs, including *Project Ganymede*, a program for reverse engineering Thought Tunneling Devices found in EBE neural tissue.

42. DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE

4 May 1994

Next morning, Katrina Fontanova walked briskly toward the embassy, eager to tell Gallagan. The late night search of the embassy's database revealed that Sverdlov's partner, Jack Dugan, was an analyst assigned to the National Security Agency. *NSA!*

Some of the puzzle pieces came together. Others remained a mystery. If Sverdlov and Dugan planted the bug in the SIGINT Center, and if someone killed Dugan and attacked her, then there could be a third party at work. But who? And for what purpose?

A complicating factor was Sverdlov, who now played out some paranoid fantasy.

"Ms. Fontanova! Wait." Sverdlov's voice came from behind, footsteps racing. He finally caught up. "We didn't finish our conversation last night."

"Yes we did," she said, continuing to walk.

"Did you know Jack Dugan?"

She slowed to a stop, trying out a new tactic. "The NSA man who helped bug the Russian embassy?"

Yuri's eyes probed her face with a wild intensity—his only response.

"Never heard of him," she said, smiling, continuing to walk. Yuri kept up, grabbing her elbow. "What did Jack Dugan stumble on?"

"Let me go! I'm a diplomat. If you have questions, write them down and submit them to the embassy."

"I know you can hide behind diplomatic immunity, Ms. Fontanova, and I know you can simply leave the country if things get too hot. But Jack was my partner. I need to know the truth."

"If you don't—"

A police car interrupted with a burst of siren, flashing its lights, passing them by, screeching to a stop in front of the Russian Embassy, where a noisy crowd of militant environmentalists blocked the entrance. Katrina saw other police cars were parked nearby, lights flashing, officers inside. It was like a carnival with emotional rides.

She angrily pulled away from Yuri, breaking into a jog.

Members of the crowd held signs saying *Russian Nukes Kill; Chernobyl, Tomsk, Now This; Stop Plutonium Production, Now; Kamchatka Subs Leak Radioactive Death; and Vladivostok Waste Site Poisons the Planet.*

The speaker, standing on a box surrounded by followers, was like a lit match—face fiery with anger. The crowd was a powder keg of raw emotions.

"It's time to take the gloves off," he yelled.

The crowd whistled and yelled in agreement.

"When Chernobyl happened, they said they were sorry!"

The crowd booed.

“When the Tomsk plutonium plant exploded, they said it wouldn’t happen again!”

The crowd jeered.

“Now they’ve been caught selling bomb-grade material.” He held up a newspaper headline as proof.

They beat sticks against the Russian Embassy’s iron fence.

“Stop plutonium production. Now!”

The crowd exploded in approval.

Katrina pushed toward a policeman standing near the edge of the throng. “Stop this,” she pleaded, “before someone gets hurt. My friends are in there.”

He shrugged. “They have a parade permit. I can’t do anything unless—”

A wave of people knocked the officer to the ground, herded Katrina to the center, and surrounded her with a thick human fence. “She’s a Russian!” someone shouted. “From the embassy!”

Katrina’s cheeks reddened with rage. “You’re all idiots.” A speaker on a makeshift stage pointed an angry finger at her, like a prophet conferring damnation. “You are a purveyor of lies! You are a killer of children! You are...”

“Mad!” she yelled.

She hit him in the groin with a protest sign, kicked one side out of the platform, and dropped him to the ground.

The crowd attacked.

Yuri pressed through, diving over the top of the human wall, shielding Katrina with his body, toppling people like duckpins. When he could get a clear shot, he drew his gun and fired into the air. *BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!*

* * *

Representative Harold Gladpeak listened to what sounded like a triple backfire, shook his head, and continued to walk. He pondered the implications of what he had been told, as Billy Stanton escorted him back to the Capitol.

“When my predecessor died in office, I had no idea he was involved in a committee this exciting. But I must tell you, I feel like I’m drinking from a firehose.”

“We’ll get you up to speed PDQ,” Billy said. “We have to. You’re the only elected official who’s been completely read in. We’re pretty discriminating.”

“I’m honored. I just hope I can—”

“You have an important duty—an obligation to your country. The technology represents great power. A power whose source can’t be revealed. A power that future leaders, such as yourself, must help guide.”

“Future leaders? I barely have a toehold in Congress, Dr. Stanton. I agree the technology is pretty amazing, but not very practical—yet. There must be others better equipped to help you.”

“Nobody who’s good at keeping secrets,” Billy said. He smiled quickly, then painted a vision he knew Harold Gladpeak would appreciate. “Think of the good we can accomplish with this. The technology is a non-intrusive way to feel the pulse of the electorate. The government will be a lot more responsive. Or consider our relations with foreign powers. We’ll know for certain what their leaders are doing and thinking. And terrorism won’t be a problem, because there will be no place to hide.”

“That would be something,” the Congressman said. “Truly something. All that, and a weapon, too.”

“We just need your help to put the pieces together.”

Harold Gladpeak nodded firmly, shook Billy’s hand and slapped him on the arm. He turned back toward the entrance with a feeling of confidence. *Yes. I can put all the pieces together*, he thought, with a wistful sigh.

There was a biblical phrase—was it Jeremiah? The first time he heard it, the words fascinated him with their power and portent, delivering chills to his spine—just like Billy’s vision. Now the Congressman whispered that phrase softly to himself as he climbed the Capitol steps.

“With you, I break nations in pieces.”

* * *

Gallagan peered through steel security bars in a conference room window. In the street below, a police crowd control unit dispersed militant environmentalists.

“I shall put you in for a hero’s medal, Ms. Fontanova,” he said. “It will read: *Madness in the Line of Duty*.”

He turned to look at Anderson, Vladimir and Katrina, seated at a conference table. Smoke from three

Russian cigarettes cloaked the room in a pungent, surreal haze. Light from the window, like a doorway to an alternate dimension, silhouetted Gallagan's hulk. The room echoed with sounds of movement. Gallagan took his place.

"Back to business." His eyes became slits. "Did you find the materials we gave you interesting, Doctor Anderson?"

"Yes."

"They are dumping untreated toxic materials in open pits."

"Yes."

"There is more." Gallagan slowly exhaled a lungful of smoke. "Doctor Anderson... I have permission from my government to provide you with analysis that has been classified up to this point. Katrina?"

She flipped photos onto the table.

"This is recent coverage of Groom Dry Lake Base, taken with the KVR-1000 satellite imaging system. The dry lake shows some evidence of vehicular traffic. Most of the traffic leads from this circular pattern to this research complex. If I were to guess, I would say the circular pattern represents some sort of test site."

Anderson studied the photo, then nodded.

"The facility... over here... is a Top Secret site."

"How do you know that?" Anderson asked.

"It has a controlled perimeter and other features unique to a U.S. Class A security facility. By definition, these buildings house something Top Secret."

She flipped a second photo, overlaying the first. "The size of the transformer yard located on another part of the base tells us there is an unusually high requirement for power. That requirement could be explained by what appears to be a small-scale particle accelerator... here... and a light manufacturing facility... here."

Anderson looked closely at the photo.

"And what is this?"

"That is most peculiar," she said. It appears to be a biological hazard and containment area."

Anderson became animated. "I'm right back to the germ warfare theory. One of my associates retrieved something from the site—a dead animal."

He paused, aware of where the conversation was leading—disclosure of probable classified information to a foreign power. "Before we go on with this, I want you to level with me. What interest does the Russian government have in this?"

Gallagan laughed, flashed a smile and ground his pearl-white teeth.

“We are interested on several levels. Under the Open Skies Treaty recently signed by your government, we have a right to photograph military installations in the USA. However, this facility was never identified as a military installation. That is not a nice way to do business, do you agree? In addition to resolving the treaty problem, we see an opportunity to advertise the capabilities of our space systems and our scientists and to gain hard currency revenue for Russian entrepreneurs.”

“How?” Anderson asked.

“By benefiting in a class action environmental lawsuit. We supply intelligence to a law firm that initiates the suit. If they win, we get a percentage. A fee for services rendered.”

“I see.”

“It is win-win, right?”

Anderson hesitated, then nodded. “In addition, it makes good PR—Russia exposing the U.S. as an environmental criminal.”

Gallagan shrugged.

“And any information that falls out about U.S. classified projects at Groom becomes public domain. An intelligence coup. You get information for free.”

Gallagan shrugged again.

“I *am* dealing with the Devil,” Anderson said. “You want my soul.”

Gallagan smiled again and ground his teeth. Then he said softly, “Doctor Anderson, I already have your soul.”

He stood up.

“I must attend other business, but I pray for your success.”

Anderson stood. “I also have to leave.”

Gallagan slapped him on the back. “Well, then, I’ll walk you out. We’ll talk the Devil’s catechism.”

As they departed, Gallagan gave a two-fingered salute to Katrina and Vladimir, then closed the door.

Katrina leaned over to Vladimir. “While they were talking, I noticed something. Look at this.”

She shoved the spy satellite image toward him.

Vladimir inspected it with a magnifying glass. “I see what you mean,” he said.

Katrina removed her shoe and scratched a bare foot along the carpet, trying to assuage an itch. A short distance away, directly behind her foot, was a ventilation grill. Behind the grill, a pair of eyes—like beads of dark coal—scanned the room. The animal fluffed its fur. It cocked its ears. It listened.

“It’s not in the previous satellite coverage,” Katrina said.

“You’re right.”

“I want you to enhance this area—use statistical sampling. See if we can re-task one of the current missions to get more coverage.”

Maybe we can task the digital system,” Vladimir said. “It will be faster and we’ll get better resolution.”

“Right.” Katrina put the imagery in a special orange envelope, which she handed to Vladimir.

Behind the ventilation grill, a brown-furred animal briefly bared its teeth, then scampered back into the ductwork.

* * *

Outside the embassy, Yuri talked to a police officer who was filling out a report about the protest incident. Yuri worked on his own incident report. They compared notes. It was friendly and professional—two law officers, helping each other out. The crowd and most of the police had departed. The flow of people along 16th Street NW returned to normal.

It was only a behavioral quirk that caught Yuri’s eye. While most of the pedestrian traffic moved briskly in the north and south directions, Yuri spotted a man loitering close to the iron fence delimiting the embassy compound. He carried a rectangular wire cage. He glanced furtively toward the embassy, then placed the cage on the sidewalk, with the door open. A small brown animal ran through the embassy fence and into the cage. The man closed the door. He turned his face, looking beyond the flow of pedestrians. Yuri recognized him. It was the thug who pursued Katrina. The man he chased out of the alley where Jack died.

Their eyes met.

“Sir!” he yelled.

The man grabbed the cage and ran.

“FBI! Stop!”

Yuri sped after him. They knocked aside people in their path. The runner entered a Metro station with a long, descending escalator. He used the cage as a shield and plowed through people in front of him, stepping over their toppled bodies.

Yuri jumped on the polished metal surface between the up and down escalators and slid down. He arrived at the bottom at about the same time as the runner.

The runner raced ahead, turned, then hurled the cage like a bomb into a crowd. The rat screeched as the cage hit the ground. The door flew open.

The rat tunneled through the mountain of humans.

People screamed. A panicked crowd blocked Yuri's path.

Yuri saw the runner on a lower level of the station. They locked eyes.

The runner vanished into the crowd.

Someone yelled, "Got the bugger!"

Yuri saw a seventy-year-old woman holding a dead rat by the tail. She walked to a garbage can and dropped it in.

* * *

Two hours later, Yuri walked toward the cage of the 'Bulky Room'—a place in the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan Field Office which catalogs and stores evidence from crimes under investigation by the FBI.

Screw the homicide task force, he thought. *They can't tell me what to do on my own time.*

Jack's body was clean when police discovered it—no wallet, no keys, not even a scrap of paper in any of his pockets. Someone had taken great care to remove any possible trace of Jack's last moments, last objectives, last thoughts.

Most of the evidence in the Bulky Room came from Jack's apartment. There were plastic bags containing clothing, a ticket to a ball game, charge slips and other artifacts. Mostly minutia—miscellaneous pieces of flotsam and jetsam of the kind that people shed in the course of their normal lives.

Yuri systematically went through the material and made notes. Jack's appointment book included haircuts, staff meetings and preliminary plans for a future vacation. Yuri would check into all of those. There was a yellow sticky note with the name 'Chisholm' and a telephone number. A possible lead. A business card for a travel agency—probably associated with Jack's vacation plans.

Milo, the diminutive BR clerk, brought in more plastic bags. "Don't say I never did you no favors."

Yuri pulled an odd-looking brown paper bag from the pile, opened it, and extracted a sandwich. "What's this?"

Milo took it back. "Sorry. My lunch." He bit into the sandwich while Yuri went through the other plastic bags. With cheek pouches full of food, he said: "You're lucky."

“How’s that?”

“If you was here an hour later, all this evidence would be locked up tighter ‘n a drum.”

“Why?”

Milo swallowed. “Special team’s gonna look at it.”

“Well, I’m not surprised.”

“It surprises the hell out of me! This guy Stone wasn’t even Bureau until yesterday. He’s leading the charge.”

“Who’s Stone?” Yuri snatched an oatmeal cookie from Milo’s bag and nibbled.

The clerk looked annoyed, as if the stolen item represented an irreplaceable *pièce de résistance*. “You’re welcome,” he muttered under his breath as he searched the bag for something of equal caloric value. Finding a chocolate mint, he smiled. “Stone’s a big gun they brought in from outside. He’s got special connections and credentials. Ya’ know?”

That’s encouraging, Yuri thought. The crew they’ve got working it now is dumber than rocks. Maybe NSA insisted. Someone damaged their goods. They want justice.

Yuri wrote until his hands were cramped and every possible shred of information retrieved, then returned the plastic bags to the clerk. “Jack was a good man. Thanks for your help.”

Milo, who by now had finished eating the mint, a full bag of Cheetos and a box of gum drops, returned to the sandwich, taking another bite. “Ya’ know,” he said, cheeks brimming...

Yuri waited for the completion of the thought.

Instead, Milo grimaced, then extracted food from his mouth, holding the cud in his hand, inspecting it. Without looking up, he said, “You’re tasking this pretty personal. Ya’ know?”

“I think Jack was caught in the middle of something.”

Milo flicked the partially chewed food into the trash. “Yucko. A rotten sandwich.”

“Yeah. And I’m going to follow the smell. Like a little mouse.”

43. SOULS OF ANIMALS

4 May 1994

Jill Sommer, propped up in a hospital bed, tugged unconsciously at two umbilical cords—an intravenous fluid dispenser and a cardiac monitoring device. A fortyish, balding doctor entered and took her pulse. News played on a TV mounted to the ceiling.

“Stranger than fiction,” the news anchor said. “That’s what people are saying about a man believed to have been raised by animals in a Russian forest. Officials say he’s responsible for killing and eating an estimated twenty people over a three year period. Animal rights activists claim that in the absence of civilization, he was just another animal—with a different set of values. He should be protected and studied.”

Jill reached for the newspaper. The TV continued.

“One week ago, Russian officials said they would give him the same protection as bears and other wild things that feed on humans. Today, a firing squad shot him dead for his deeds, ending what officials called a minor dispute about animal rights.”

She clicked the TV off.

“Way to go, Peter. My kind of story.”

“A pretty gruesome story,” the doctor said. “Reminds me of *Merchant of Venice*.”

Jill looked puzzled. “Excuse me?”

“You know!” He cleared his throat, gestured theatrically with his hand, then said, in a Shakespearean voice:

“Souls of animals infuse themselves

Into the trunks of men.”

He grinned. “Shakespeare. I’m studying it.”

“Never would have guessed,” she said. “It’s pretty catchy.”

“Just trying to make a literary impression. You’re a journalist, right?”

“Ha!” she said. “The last time someone asked me that, they tried to kill me.”

“Don’t worry,” he said. “My malpractice insurance would go *way* up. By the way, I’m Bill Deacon.”

“Doc Deacon. I don’t know whether to get ill or pray.”

He ignored her comment, fascinated, instead, by the numbers on the clipboard. He finally put it back on the end of the bed.

“Well,” he said, “you’re looking pretty good.”

She batted her eyes. “Why thank you, Doc Deacon.”

“We’ll let that surgery heal in a place that doesn’t have quite this many plugs and wires. Maybe tomorrow we’ll move you.” He examined her bandages. “I’ll have a nurse get a new dressing.”

Walking to the sink, he washed his hands with soap. There were paper towels in the sink—and wet towels on the floor. “They need to clean up this trash!”

He opened a drawer, found some surgical gloves and put them on. With studied caution, he picked up the wet towels, dropped them into the waste canister, then polished the sink with dry towels. “This is filthy!” he said.

Turning, he spotted a rat dropping in a puddle of water on the floor. *What the hell?* he thought. He rang a bell on Jill’s bed tray, then yelled out the door. “Nurse!”

No answer.

The doctor now noticed other rat droppings leading toward a small crack in the wall. Snatching more towels, he returned to wipe up the mess. As his gloved hand reached toward the crack, a rat crawled up his sleeve.

Deacon yelled out.

Then dozens of rats emerged.

He tried to get up, slipped, cracked his head on the sink basin and fell to the ground in a swarm of rats.

Rats climbed a sheet onto Jill Sommer’s bed.

She screamed. On the floor, she could see Deacon’s hand, stripped to the bone, wiggling under the tug of teeth, his white coat alive with the interior movement of feeding rodents. The swarm covered him.

A rat climbed onto Jill’s leg.

She yanked the sheet and threw it—and the rats—onto the floor. The action toppled the drip solution connected to her arm. She screamed again, then attempted to recover the drip apparatus.

A rat climbed the catheter hose.

She ripped it out of her arm and threw it down, arm gushing blood. She grabbed a newspaper on the bed, rolled it up and swatted rats as they scabbled up the bed frame. With the other hand, she hit the call bell—DING! DING! DING!

44. UNBIRTHDAY

5 May 1994

“Jack Dugan was my partner. I even counted him as a good friend. But I hardly expected to be in his will.”

Raymond Ranjani, the short, well-dressed, Indian-American attorney handling Dugan’s estate motioned for Yuri to sit in the plush chair next to his desk.

“It is not money,” the attorney said, with staccato diction and a sing-song voice typical of the subcontinent. He unlocked a small wall safe with quick, rolling movements of the tumbler. “If it was money, I would have to use it for the estate. But maybe it is something he thought you would find valuable. Like the Buddha.”

“What Buddha?”

“The one he gave you for your birthday.”

“Jack never...” Yuri stopped for a moment, thinking back.

Ranjani opened the safe door and shuffled through papers. “It came in his mail. He had mailed it to himself, don’t you see, just before his death. He just divorced his wife. Did you know that? He had no other relatives. So I have to read his mail. That is all.”

The attorney pulled out a large, white envelope. “This is how it came, you see. It was inside another one. The yellow sticky note is still attached.” He handed it to Yuri. “I tell you, this man was crazy for sticky notes.”

The note read: *To Yuri Sverdlov, FBI, telephone 202-324-3000. Thanks for giving me the Buddha on my birthday. Here’s my gift to you.*

“The phone call,” Yuri said.

“What phone call?”

“He called me before... There was something he couldn’t discuss on the phone. Made up some talk about giving me a birthday present. Only it wasn’t my birthday. I assumed...” He opened the envelope.

“My Dearest Cousin Lewis,” he said, reading the greeting aloud. He quickly scanned the rest of the letter and put it back into the envelope.

“Thank you for giving this to me, Mr. Ranjani. I’m late for an appointment. Really have to run.”

Ranjani gave a weak salute, sticky note clinging to his hand.

Yuri rushed out the door.

* * *

In the parking lot behind the attorney's office, Yuri dumped the contents of the envelope onto the seat of his car. Inside, there was another sticky note in Jack's lazy handwriting: *Found under the mattress in Weddell's cell.*

The letter itself was slightly more informative:

My Dearest Nephew Lewis,

When we began our cooperation years ago, the technology was there for the taking. There were risks, but I thought I could handle them. Now, I am not so sure.

Programs like the one we discussed have only a very small number of people who know anything. But in this smallness, there is a vulnerability. If you know one of the people, especially one of the top people, you can work your way through the organization. This is what I did to get you the contacts.

Now there is something you need to know. I used certain techniques for gathering the information. They were developed partially in Germany, partially in the US. The methods allowed me to tap the knowledge of an important individual while, at the same time, keeping him ignorant.

In my life, I have accumulated many enemies, both in Germany and the United States. And now, it seems, I have more. This man now works in a White House organization. He is very powerful.

He discovered what I was doing. He knows that I was manipulating his mind. Now he is paranoid about everything. I am afraid of what he will do. This letter is a warning that I cannot control the situation anymore.

This leakage of information is regrettable for another reason. There is an entity that I fear, perhaps even more than the one who has found me out. It was born in 1968. It has already killed. I believe It watches.

I am seventy four years old. When I go to bed at night, death nibbles at my dreams. I am not afraid, but you must be. This is the last communication I can send to you. Do not reply. Do not let them establish the link.

Your Uncle,

* * *

“What are you saying?” Yuri asked, speaking into the phone, circling the telephone number of Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, on a doodling pad.

“Just that it’s very peculiar. That’s all,” the voice said. “Weddell’s official records say he has no living relatives.”

“What about outside the U.S.? Gottlieb is a German name.”

“That’s possible, I suppose. His mother was a naturalized U.S. citizen. Germany was the country of origin. I’m reading from the records now.”

“Let’s see if I understand the sequence,” Yuri said, rubbing his head. “Weddell dies of unknown causes...”

“No. The cause was a blow to the head. It’s the assailant that’s unknown.”

“Okay. So he’s killed. You call up Jack Dugan.”

“Why would we call Dugan? No. Dugan called *usa* day after. He asked if Weddell was okay. We told him then what had happened.”

“Sounds like he had some special information.”

“Yeah, but he couldn’t tell us what it was.”

Yuri closed his eyes, trying to visualize how the pieces fit together. “If he couldn’t tell you, that means that it came from a classified source. Not the FBI. Maybe NSA.”

“Could be,” the voice said. But that will be difficult to trace. They’re compartmentalized, and any data would likely be secret, at a minimum. And if they did any illegal phone taps, it’d be blacker than black.”

“So how did Jack get the letter?”

“We fax’d him an inventory of what was in Weddell’s cell. Dugan wanted the letter. We kept the original.”

“I see. But Dugan had no jurisdiction—”

“He said it related to a foreign intelligence case. That’s NSA’s department.”

“Did he give you any specifics?”

“Why would he?”

“Right. Secrets.”

* * *

Yuri found the evening walk along Chesapeake Bay therapeutic. It gave him time to think.

There was a conspiracy, he thought. Weddell and Gottlieb were scamming someone high up, someone now in a White House organization. They were after high payoff technology. But the White House guy found out.

He picked up a stone and threw it, watching it skip across the water’s surface, disturbing the stillness, creating multiple, interacting ripples in a cove’s glassy mirror.

Maybe Weddell wanted help when he asked me to visit. The cover story was crazy—the work of a pathological liar—but he could have buried a grain of truth in it. A truth that might expose his enemies. A truth sandwiched between lies so that everyone could plausibly deny it. But why would a White House staffer retaliate by having people killed? Jeez! What was the name of the project he talked about? Could it be the one we heard about on the SIGINT intercept?

Yuri tossed another pebble.

And what about the Russians? Jack could legitimately use NSA resources to tap their communications. That was foreign intelligence. Fair game. Maybe he thought Fontanova was involved.

He shook his head. *Doesn’t make sense. They tried to kill her, too. And why would she listen in on something she already knew about?* He raked a callused hand through thick black hair, and sighed, looking at the confusing criss-cross of ripples on the water. *Maybe, maybe, maybe.*

Maybe there was a double scam. Weddell and Gottlieb were stealing from another thief—someone high up, someone who stole the technology from someone else, then tried to funnel it to the Russian Mafia. Fontanova suspected. They tried to get her.

He felt alone, isolated, no place to go. *NSA won’t give me data. It’s too black. Fontanova won’t give me data. I’m FBI. I can’t nose around the White House, or I’ll turn up like Jack. Only one useful lead—Gottlieb. Could he still be alive? Did the original of the letter come in an envelope with a return address?* He sighed. *Dream on. But what about a postmark?*

It was the sequence of events that disturbed Yuri the most: *Weddell got the letter, then he died. Jack got the letter, then he died. Now I have the letter.*

The letter nagged at him, like a mental tune that refused to fade. *Something was born in 1968. Something was killed. And something watches.*

He walked back toward his father's house, a distant light beyond the cove, tripping over hidden branches.

45. VANISHED

13 May 1994

"He was like an invisible man. I'm surprised you knew he was here."

"A postmarked letter," Yuri said with a smile. "And a few other pieces of information. Everybody leaves a trace. There's always something."

"Well, I never saw this Weddell person. Nobody ever came around."

Yuri walked slowly beside the landlord, Ms. Manatateo, down a flagstone path toward a rickety wooden porch. The small, nondescript house, hidden behind a jungle of trees and bushes in a rural area near Williamsburg, Virginia, was almost undetectable from the dirt road. These were old stomping grounds for Yuri, near Camp Peary—a CIA training base.

"He was afraid," the old woman said, scratching at a flower print dress with one hand while she climbed the porch steps. "Kept to himself, he did. Went away at odd hours. Sometimes stayed away for a long time. Last two weeks, he claimed he was a born-again Christian. But I don't think so."

"Why not?" Yuri asked.

"He seemed religious about the wrong things. Why would he keep a loaded gun? Why would he keep Nazi mementos in a special, jeweled box, like a bunch of sacred icons? He talked about salvation, but I tell you, this man acted like he was damned." She checked the mailbox. It was empty. "You never know," she said, opening the door.

They stepped into the house's spartan interior. She surveyed the place, scratching an armpit, tugging at a lock of white hair.

"This is all just rental furniture," she said. "Except for that." She pointed to a wall decorated by a single large picture. "His only piece of art. Albrecht Dürer. He called it 'Knight Between Devil and Death.' He listened to a lot of Mozart and Wagner. Said nothing compared with German culture, but didn't like to

talk about his roots. Guess that's not surprising if he was a Nazi."

"Show me the gun."

"Kept it in this drawer," she said, opening a bureau. "It's still here. See?"

Yuri examined the World War Two vintage Luger, then put it back. "So when he vanished, maybe he didn't feel threatened. Maybe he met up with somebody he knew. Or maybe he just wandered off."

"Still don't make sense," she said. "Why would he pull the hinges out of the door—from the inside? Found 'em lying on the floor. And the door was slammed down, like it was pushed in. Wide open. Breeze was just blowing in like crazy when I came along to get the rent. No signs of scuffle."

"You called the police?"

"Yeah."

"Did they investigate?"

"They came by and looked the place over. Other than the clothes in the closet and a few war mementos, there was nothin'. No address books, no scraps of paper with notes on 'em. No wallet. Nothing. Like he had no identity. No links. Like this man who was nobody suddenly became nothing."

"What do you think happened?"

"Hmph," she said scornfully. "I think the Devil got him."

46. PUNCTUATED EQUILIBRIUM

6 May - 12 July 1994

"I'm winning," Vladimir said. "That's why he is so slow."

Katrina Fontanova glanced at Dmitry and Vladimir, facing each other across a cluttered chess board, wrapped in thought, waiting for software to compile in the SIGINT Operations Center. She cautioned Dmitry. "It is your turn."

"I am very careful when I play chess," he said. "And besides, there is no time limit."

"There should be," she said, staring at her watch.

“Patience. The play is complex. Evolving.”

“Glacial.”

“It only seems so,” he said. “Things can appear static for a long period of time, then BANG! Rapid movement. Chaos.”

Katrina drummed her hand on the table, waiting.

“It is like the situation with the Operations Center, Dmitry said. “I continue to investigate in a slow, but methodical way. You collect more information on the FBI and on this Richard Chandra. The pieces will come together. You’ll see.”

Vladimir sighed. “It *is* your move, Dmitry.”

“I appreciate your point,” he said, with the air of a teacher. “On the surface, things seem frozen. But slowly, almost imperceptibly, new information on several fronts can shift reality like the movement of some giant lever. Watch.”

He moved a pawn. There were many pieces on the board, many possible plays. The linkage between Dmitry’s pawn and Vladimir’s king was by no means direct. In fact, after considering it, Vladimir felt there was no relationship. Or if there was, it could only be a linkage determined by chance.

* * *

Quite by chance a transformer feeding electrical power to Rita Li’s lab went on the blink. There was no air conditioning. So—she stopped her experiments and waited, sweating in the unseasonable heat. Quite by chance, she picked up a recent issue of *Science Magazine* to use as a fan. Normally she had little time to read *Science*, relying on Internet communications and electronic abstracts for news about research. The magazine cover story intrigued her: “Mind Meets Machine.” She stopped fanning and read about Peter Fromherz of the Max Planck Institute of Biochemistry near Munich, Germany.

It seems that Fromherz crafted a silicon chip with insulated *stimulation spots* about 10-50 microns wide. He succeeded in interfacing this chip with nerve cells of a leech. The chip applied a voltage to the stimulation spots, causing a buildup of positive charge on the nerve cell, without any electricity actually flowing between the silicon and the cell. Above 4.9 volts, the neuron fired.

Pretty crude, she thought. Nevertheless—state-of-the-art bioengineering. But what about these artifacts in the rat brain that Anderson had given her? They were much smaller than even the stimulation spots on Fromherz’s chip. And yet—

Sitting on the lab stool, sweating in weather that—quite by chance—was unusually warm for the month of May, she planned a series of wide-ranging experiments that would give answers.

* * *

Anderson looked at a maze of textual statements joined by directional arrows. At the far left-hand side of the white board were the top-level objectives—the research questions he needed to answer. Another column, farther to the right, listed a range of possible answers to these research questions. This was the universe of possibilities. Another column, still further to the right, listed criteria for deciding among the various possibilities. These criteria implied measurements and data, listed further to the right. Directional arrows linked the various columns in a ‘flow down’ that would structure his research. All of this was very determinate. He knew what data to collect. Still—there were many unpredictable elements. Where would he collect the data? Would he be arrested for trespassing? Or—given his new relationship with the Russian Embassy—would he be arrested for espionage? He was a scientist, not James Bond.

He tried to plan the project in detail, but ran smack dab into chaos. He needed someone who knew about chaos—someone streetwise about Groom.

He picked up the phone and dialed Jafri’s number.

Jafri answered, “International UFO Research Center. How may I direct your call?”

“Zfar, this is John Anderson. I need you in Washington to help plan my project.”

“Well—I dunno.”

“I want to hire you as a consultant. I’ll pay your way. It’s good money.”

“I’ll be there.”

* * *

It was a small, quiet cafe with outdoor tables and a certain anonymity. And yet, Yuri felt watched.

She’s staring at me, he thought, trying not to look at the woman with big, goggle-like glasses and a scraggly mop of mouse-brown hair. *Maybe I’ve spilled soup on my pants. Maybe my fly is open.*

The woman patted her mouth with a napkin, got up, and walked to his table, smiling, shaking her finger at him, inflecting her voice at the end of a long “Ahhhh!”

He returned the smile.

She nodded, privy to a cosmic secret, unwilling to share it without first inflicting torture. “It’s been a very long time, hasn’t it?”

He glanced at his watch, still smiling. “Yes, it certainly has. I’ve been waiting for my order now for—”

“You don’t recognize me, do you?”

“Of course I do,” he gulped. You’re...”

She flicked an eyebrow upward, waiting.

It came to him—the CIA debriefer on the Poljarny incident. “Martha Grimsley! My God, you’re Martha Grimsley.”

“Ri-i-i-ght,” she said. “Good to see you again, Stan!”

“No. I’m Yuri. Sverdlov.”

She slapped her forehead. “The fish guy.”

He looked around, aware that other people had started to stare. He took a sip of water. “Yeah, the fish guy,” he said, quietly.

“You’re FBI now, right?” She whispered, leaning close to his ear, “Counterintelligence?”

Yuri nodded.

“Mind if I sit down?”

“No,” Yuri said. “I was just...waiting.”

“Some days are lucky,” she whispered.

“Yeah. Listen, it’s really good to see you again, Martha. After all these years, you look the same. Are you still...” He tilted his head.

“Yup. I’m still right where you left me. Interviewing travelers.”

Only very special travelers, Yuri thought. Debriefing people returning from communist countries with unique insights and special experiences was a routine feature of CIA operations. “You’ve got an interesting job, Martha.”

“Not really. I’m just a collector of memories.”

“Ah,” Yuri said with a wink, “but memories have a short useful life span, don’t they? Like butterflies. You chase them down while they’re still alive and fluttering, then pin them, label them and put them in a box.”

“Sometimes memories live a long time.”

“Yes,” he said, sipping water slowly. “They do, don’t they? Speaking of memories, how is George Nathan getting along these days?”

“Say, we could play ‘What-ever-happened-to-old-whatiz-name,’ couldn’t we? George is still there. Don’t usually see him much, except these last two weeks, he’s really been bugging me. He’s getting cantankerous. I think it’s all part of this mental menopause the Company is going through.”

“You mean the New World Order? No clear-cut enemies?”

“Something like that. Yeah. Maybe George is trying to relive past glories battling the Ruskies. But I tell you, I don’t see how they’re much of a threat. I think he’s got job security on his mind, with all this stuff about the Russian Embassy.”

“What stuff?”

Martha paused for a moment, unsure whether to proceed. No one else was seated at the outdoor tables, but she lowered her voice, anyway. “I’m telling you this only because I happen to know you still have the clearance, and in your present job, I think you have a need to know.”

Yuri nodded.

“George got interested in my memory collection. Three weeks ago, I collected one that was full of color, drama and dreams. It has a very long shelf life—unlike most. Something you might enjoy seeing.”

She took a sip of water, clearing her throat so she could whisper better. “I interviewed a guy who has important background information on Yeltsin. He’s a friend of a famous Russian cello player who emigrated to America, found fame and fortune, then returned to help Yeltsin survive the putsch.”

“That’s reaching back a couple of years. Not exactly current intel.”

“Yeah. And I think that’s where George is getting senile. You know? The really good stuff in the report is about Yeltsin. But was George interested in that? No-o-o-o. George was interested in minor background stuff—some underling communications technician who helped Yeltsin. I admit, she’s got a pretty interesting story, too, but if I were a top analyst like George—and I may be one someday—goodness knows, maybe I’ll take George’s spot when his brain finally fails—anyway, if I were the analyst, I’d be much more interested in the big guy. Whattya think? Are my instincts right?”

“Depends on who the underling is.”

“Her name’s Katrina Fontanova.”

At that moment, an older couple sat at the table next to them, adjusting lasagna, salad and drinks in a noisy collision of ceramic plates and glass tabletop. Martha Grimsley mistook the look in Yuri’s eyes as annoyance over an unwanted intrusion. In reality, it was a different set of emotions that screwed his face into a pained, teeth-exposed expression.

Yuri smiled at the couple. They smiled back. Then Yuri smiled at Grimsley. “I really need to see your butterfly collection, Martha.”

“No problem. It’s the new specimen, isn’t it?”

* * *

Yuri suddenly became an avid lepidopterist. He made an appointment with Martha the very next day to view her classified files and raw notes. She wouldn't let him take anything away—not until she got final approval on the database entry. That wouldn't happen for months. So Yuri read quietly in Martha's office—a bookish, quiet place, home for a forest of house plants, icon of a remembered past.

Although the office evoked trauma and terror in a younger Yuri Sverdlov, the pain of those demons had diminished with time, like squeeze points on a worn shoe. The place now seemed almost comfortable.

Martha's notes portrayed a different Katrina Fontanova than the one Yuri imagined. Certainly she was technically gifted, highly focused, and beautiful—a formidable combination for an enemy. But Martha's notes revealed other facets, other dimensions of a complex personality.

Fontanova had risked death for truth and principles. Her rise in the SVR was a reward for bold action and deeply held conviction. Yuri's mental cartoon of this Russian woman metamorphosed into a flesh and blood human. He mentally dropped her from the suspect list in Jack's murder. She was a worthy opponent, with values, integrity, passions.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, Yuri experienced a subtle cognitive shift. This shift was one of several that produced a cascade of chaotic action, the way a butterfly flapping its wings in Africa can produce hurricanes in the Atlantic Ocean.

47. BLACK MASS

13 July 1994

Vladimir puzzled over the amorphous black mass in the satellite photo. It seemed to ooze like some grainy fluid from points around a spider's web. Four successive frames taken seconds apart told the story. The circular grid area, surrounded by trucks, initially had a surface that matched the dry lake bed. The second frame showed dark blotches near connecting points on the grid. The third frame clearly showed an amoeba-like mass coalescing inward. In the final frame, darkness covered the entire grid, hiding the small, white concrete pad at the center. Subsequent frames did not include the grid. The satellite had moved too far along its track.

Another camera on the same satellite acquired simultaneous coverage in the infrared region. This was much more revealing, even though the ground resolution of the IR camera was not as good. It was like peering into an alternate dimension—one in which thermal signatures replaced visual appearance.

The blob that registered as a black mass on the KVR-1000's panchromatic film showed up as a warm target on IR film. The mass emitted slightly more heat than the background.

Vladimir marveled at the information available in these various views from space. Because the panchromatic frames showed the same area from different angles, Vladimir could view the target in stereo. To get a god-like view, he put two 18 centimeter square frames beneath the objective lenses of his stereoscopic viewer. Through a series of mirrors, lenses and prisms, light from each image traveled separately to his two eyes. His brain combined the images into a single, three-dimensional view. It was as if he had a giant head, with eyeballs located hundreds of miles apart, peering down at the Earth from space.

Looking at the grid in this way gave him the impression that the black mass had a very fine, *lumpy* structure. Because it moved and shifted from frame to frame, the mass appeared to 'dance' like some dark mirage above the desert floor. He knew this was an artifact of target motion and sensor geometry.

He took his eyes away from the stereoscope and rubbed them. His analysis was limited by crude equipment and by a photographic camera system that was less than state-of-the-art.

He opened his analytical notebook and described preliminary findings. He also outlined a plan for analysis. He would need to digitize the images at twice the nyquist rate in order to preserve resolution. Then he needed to electronically rectify each image, stretching each into a map-like projection. Then he would have to electronically combine each image. This would significantly improve the ground resolution for static objects.

But what could he do to get a better look at the fluid black mass? Some two-dimensional Fourier analysis, maybe. Edge enhancements. Play with the gamma. But the best thing would be to get coverage from the real time digital high-res system. This was a *veryblack* program. He had been briefed on it once, but had never been given continuing access. Still—he could pull some strings. Getting access would not be a 'slam dunk.'

* * *

Gillford Chisholm slammed the worker's body hard against the concrete wall of the sewer. He heard a snap as the head bent sharply at the neck. The body slumped into a *rag doll* pile on the catwalk, one arm stretching into the river of liquid waste. There was nothing personal as he flicked open a 12-inch blade and carved the man's neck open, beginning at the carotid artery.

It was unfortunate that he had to expend this kind of energy just to keep secrets a secret. He had actually tried to prevent this sort of thing from happening by directing the city to temporarily close this

section of sewer. There was always ten percent that didn't get the word.

He rolled the corpse into the sewage stream. It would be weeks before they found it. Time enough to place biological materials and equipment needed for the Project Ganymede field test.

He rarely thought about the impact of his job. They told him what to do and he just did it. But today... It was bad enough they made him work in this stinking place. Bad enough he had to handle animals.

He had become an animal.

* * *

"Sure. I can get you what you want. But it's a very black program. Close the door, please."

Vladimir smiled at Alexander Lysenko's invitation and complied with his request for privacy. Lysenko was the *resident*, or chief of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service at the embassy. He was also Russia's top spymaster in America. His appearance was ordinary in the extreme. An invisible man who could blend into any crowd. He delivered face-to-face conversations with a poker player style, always holding cards close to his intellectual chest. His mouth could laugh, but his eyes could not.

"I will be forever grateful for your help."

"Yes, I know," he said, smiling easily. "The satellite imagery you ask for is very advanced. The GRU operates it. A mosaic array sensor system—all digital and real time—and in a Molniya orbit." He searched his desk for a pipe, added tobacco to the bowl in a tedious ritual, then lit up, puffing smoke in Vladimir's direction. "We normally don't get any of the material here at the embassy unless it's by a very special request. After all, the Foreign Intelligence Service is separate from the GRU. They expect us to use our own satellites." He laughed. "It's like children wanting their own toys, hmmm? Anyway, I've been following your sister's reports and I think I can make a convincing case." He puffed some more. "You're lucky. I'll be returning to Moscow tomorrow. I'm meeting with Colonel Anatoly Kazikov. He can arrange things."

Vladimir's mouth twitched in a suppressed smile. He knew why Lysenko was returning to Moscow. It wasn't for any meeting. He was being PNG'd—declared persona non grata. It was fallout from the Aldrich Ames case. After the FBI charged Ames with spying for Russia, the Clinton administration retaliated by expelling Lysenko. It was tit for tat. They gave Lysenko a gentlemanly seven days to get out of town.

"Here is a bit of career advice for you, Vladimir. I can see you're ambitious—just like your sister. Do the best you can on this analysis. Operation Majority is starting to get high level attention. Mikhail Barsukov is interested. He has Yeltsin's ear. A lot of people thought that Operation Majority might just be disinformation. Now they aren't so sure." He puffed some more on the pipe. "If you need anything—like special analyses they can do in Moscow—let me know."

Vladimir smiled again. “I just happen to have a list.” He handed Lysenko a page from his notebook.

* * *

Jafri spoke quietly over a beer. “What if you had in your hands something akin to a miracle—technology from—I dunno—10,000, maybe a million years in the future. And what if, simultaneously, you had this systematic perversion of it.”

“That’s what sorcery’s about,” Anderson said, trying to humor what he considered his friend’s fantastic ramblings.

“Yeah. Virtual magic.” Jafri took a swig.

Anderson swirled the beer in his glass and laughed. “No. I mean *actual* sorcery. Six centuries ago, Dante believed in it. Lots of people did. So did the Church. The orthodox Christian and sorcerer of the time agreed that after a priest performs the miracle of the consecration of the Host, the Divine Elements are capable of performing further miracles. Perverting the miracles was a sin—the Black Mass.”

“Black Mass?”

“Yeah. In a Black Mass the magical Host is intrinsically good or—for the sake of argument—not evil. The Black Mass ceremony uses the Host’s magic to gain some unholy advantage. Dante said it was one of the worst sins. He consigned it to the very bottom of Hell. He probably had in mind Simon Magus, who bargained with Saint Peter for the miraculous powers of the Christians. Peter refused him. But to Simon, it seemed like a natural bargain. Maybe the use of great powers for base purposes constitutes the moral equivalent of sorcery—even if the power is technology.”

Jafri nodded. “That’s what we’ve got at Groom—a perversion. Let me tell you about some of the things my partner found.”

The room buzzed with tech talk as minds raced to interpret data. Doctor Rita Li beamed a buoyant, positive smile toward all members of the group, including John Anderson, who sat with arms crossed at the end of the table. Li was ready to talk science. The din faded.

“Has anyone seen Margaret Tjan?” Li asked.

No one answered.

“Very well, we’ll proceed without her.”

She turned on the slide projector. On a screen at the front of the room, a picture popped into view of a dead rat on a dissecting surface.

“This is the animal found dead in the Groom test area,” she said. “Notice the bulge of the skull behind the eyes? Brain volume has been expanded by over fifty percent.”

She changed the slide to show an electron micrograph. It was a 10-micron square image of the cerebellar cortex. At the center of the image was a large circular structure. It looked like a love object caressed by spindly tentacles of protoplasm. Li recognized them as Golgi axon endings and dendritic protrusions.

“Many of you have already seen this electron micrograph. The spherical object is what I am now calling the *Device*. It’s a huge, 4-micron doped fullerene, with a lattice of holes—a scaffolding that could be used to filter or recognize other molecules.”

The audience was silent. Their attention riveted on the slide. At the front of the room, Doctor Li’s body wiggled in excitement over the discoveries.

“I have to admit I was overwhelmed with curiosity,” she said. “I had many questions. Are these structures active or inert? Do they influence nerve cells? If so, how, and for what purpose? How are they associated with anomalous neural development? In order to get answers, I requested a series of measurements, observations and experiments. Karen will summarize.”

Doctor Karen York—small, thin, agitated, still wearing a lab coat—pushed the button for the next slide, and began. “We used chick embryo as a culture, and put a bit of rat tissue infected with devices on top of the growing spinal cord. It stimulated new growth. Here we see a trace of electrical activity in a nerve cell before it contacted a Device. Notice the upward spikes. This means that the direction of travel for neural signals is toward the growing tip of the cell. The bottom trace shows electrical events after contact with a Device. We see both upward and downward spikes. That is, signals flow both toward and away from the Device. These results were confirmed in twenty other samples. Nerve cells begin with all of the standard properties of growing nerve fiber. After contact with the Devices, they transform into bi-directional communications links. The modified nerve cell can be triggered by the Device or it can feed a signal into the device.”

“The Device sends signals?” Anderson asked in astonishment.

“Yes, John,” Li replied. “Let me sum up. What follows is informed speculation, you understand. However, it is at least consistent with experimental results. My working hypothesis is that the Devices are ‘Great Attractors’ which strongly influence and modify embryonic development. The interior of the device is a nano-machine—in effect, an artificial cell.”

Karen York expanded: “We speculate that the Device uses some sort of computational process—similar to a genetic algorithm—to probe its environment. It develops a complete biochemical blueprint of the host.”

Li observed the frowning faces of her colleagues. “I know what you’re thinking. It far exceeds state-of-the art bioengineering.”

“I’m not a geneticist, Rita,” Anderson said. “What do you mean?”

“The first time *ever* that an entire free-living organism was genetically sequenced was *this year*. *Mycoplasma genitalium* took three months. *Hemophilus influenza* took about a year, but it’s slightly bigger. The human genome will take decades—at least using the best currently known techniques—those of Craig Venter’s over at the Institute for Genomic Research. They use some pretty heavy duty equipment for that—ultrasound, some industrial strength software analyzers, gene sequencers. But now, it seems, we have some pinpoint-sized artifact inside an embryo which sequences entire gene structures in a matter of days.”

“I’ve got a question for you,” Anderson said. “If the Device is artificial, then there is a reason—a purpose—behind it. What is it?”

“Yes, purpose!” Li replied, emphatically. “Knowing the biochemical blueprint, the Device can modify the body plan of the host in order to achieve a certain objective—the influence or control of an organism’s nervous system.”

Doctor Anderson sat back in his chair, rubbed his eyes and whistled in amazement.

* * *

Margaret Tjan moved a hand against her head, trying to neaten a mop of dark, frizzled hair. She nudged her way past the stream of departing people and found Rita Li.

“Sorry I’m late,” she said. “Had a class.”

“Too bad. I just briefed everyone on the findings. We can go over it later, in my office. What about your biopsychology experiments with the rat pup? Anything conclusive?”

“Not conclusive, but *very* suggestive. We infected a rat embryo with neural tissue from the Groom rat. The neural seeding operation was fairly simple. I got a lot of help from Karen York. Once we had a rat pup inoculated—if that’s the word—I monitored its behavior.”

She pulled some graphs from a folder.

“The circadian cycle appears relatively normal. That’s on this chart. We also looked for maze learning

effects. We had to wait on that investigation until the pup was a little older. Ricky—that's what I call him—is a quick study. His learning is between one and two standard deviations above the norm for this type of rat. Other than his brilliance, the only truly unusual thing I've noticed are episodes of total inactivity. They typically occur when there is something novel within his surroundings. He stands upright and freezes. It's like a catatonic state."

"Does that ever occur in field behavior?" Li asked.

"Sometimes, but not like this. The catatonia lasts for about five minutes at a time—usually when I am talking to someone else. We wired his cage to a motion detector as part of the experiment to evaluate circadian cycles. That's when we noticed it—periods of absolutely no activity. Zip. As part of the experiment, we had video camera coverage. I was curious about the episodes of inactivity, so I began searching the video record to see what was happening. The camera showed not only what Ricky was doing, but also what was going on in the lab."

"And?"

"The episodes did not appear to be triggered by a mere human presence. There was a lot of video tape showing me in the room, working or humming or writing. Ricky's behavior seemed normal at those times. Normal behavior was not interrupted by the presence of others—the janitor or other workers. The first catatonic episode occurred after Doctor Anderson entered the room and began asking me about experimental results. The camera shows Ricky turning toward us, standing upright and freezing. A similar behavior occurred the next day, when I began discussing the experiment plan and protocols with Ruth, one of my associates. Five other episodes occurred under similar circumstances."

"This is all pretty subjective," Li said.

"I knew you'd say that," Margaret grinned. "After reviewing video tapes of all of the episodes, I decided to informally test my hypothesis. I went up to the cage and talked to Ricky about what we had found so far, and about the next series of tests."

"What happened?"

"He stood up and froze."

Li objected. "But a rat can't..."

"I know," Margaret said. "It doesn't seem possible. It's like he's listening. It's like he understands."

"Show me."

* * *

Doctor Tjan led Rita Li to a corner of the Psychobiology Lab. “Here’s Ricky’s cage. See for yourself.”

Doctor Li opened the cage and looked at a rat nibbling on a food pellet. “There you are,” she said.

Ricky moved to a far corner of the cage. He cocked his head, pointing one eye at Doctor Li. It was a coal-black eye.

“You are one heck of a scientific treasure,” Li said, looking at the rat. “You think you can keep your secret, but we’re finding you out. Where do these nano-machines come from? Hmmm? Who made them? And why? Who or what am I talking to?”

Ricky stood on his hind legs and froze. He stared directly at Doctor Li.

She saw darkness behind the Norwegian rat’s eyes—a darkness that seemed linked to mystery, death and a purgatory of lost souls.

The rat blinked.

She closed the cage.

“What kind of devil are you?” she whispered.

49. DEATH TRAPS

14-15 July 1994

Yuri stood in a hallway looking at the sign. It read: *Occupational Safety and Health Administration/Special Projects*. This was one of the last items to check out on his long list of phone numbers and addresses. It didn’t look very promising. Jack, my man,” he said to himself, quietly, “what the hell were you doing at OSHA?”

He opened the door to see a secretary—or was it a Nordic goddess?—sitting at a desk. She pecked ever-so-slowly at the keyboard of an ancient IBM Selectric.

“I’d like to see Mister Chisholm,” he said, glancing at a scrap of paper in his hand.

She stopped tapping, eyed him, then slowly crossed her long legs. “Do you have an appointment?”

“No, but it’s important.”

“We all have important things to do,” she said, brushing back long blond hair. “What’s this about?”

“It’s private. A government matter.”

She flashed a Hollywood smile. “I’ll see if he’s available, Mister...”

“Sverdlov.”

She winked at him, then waltzed into the inner office. Yuri followed her to the door. He peeked in.

Chisholm’s back was to the door. He was on the phone, gazing out the window.

The secretary stood next to his desk.

He swiveled around. Yuri saw his face. It was the man he chased at the embassy; the man who tried to kill Katrina. *Chisholm!*

The secretary handed Chisholm a note and pointed to the door. When Chisholm looked, the doorway was empty. Sverdlov had disappeared.

Yuri quietly closed the door to the OSHA office. He walked swiftly down the corridor and out of the building.

* * *

Yuri rubbed his eyes. He was elbow-to-elbow with half a dozen other people at a Denny’s lunch counter, but he seemed alone, isolated and filled with questions that had no answers. Why would Jack go to an OSHA project office? Why would an OSHA representative be chasing someone from the Russian Embassy? Why would he try to kill Katrina? Did he kill Jack? Was this government-sanctioned murder?

He stirred his coffee.

Pursuing the Chisholm connection might be dangerous. He would have to proceed cautiously. He needed to know what the game was and who was playing.

Fall back and re-group, he thought.

* * *

The Metro train pulled to a stop. Vladimir stepped out of the car with other disembarking passengers.

He carried an orange envelope containing enhanced satellite pictures, given to him by the courier, who continued on the train.

Vladimir rode the long escalator to the top. The night air was moist and thick. There were very few people around and little traffic on the street. He pulled a raincoat tight around his chest, planted his foot on the concrete sidewalk, and watched a lone rat scurry in front of him.

He moved to a deserted area below a street light, eager to examine the contents of the package. When he opened it, he whistled in disbelief.

After a moment, he put the photos back in the package, walked to a phone booth, put in a quarter and dialed. It rang three times. Katrina picked up.

“Zdrahst’voitye?”

“It’s Vladimir. I have the material Lysenko sent me. The pictures show something astonishing.”

“Not on the phone,” she said. “Come to the apartment.”

* * *

The route to Katrina’s took him along the edge of a park. He traversed a darkened sidewalk with a high curb.

Headlights from an oncoming car temporarily illuminated the area—devoid of people, with a few small animals scampering from a storm drain.

He continued to walk.

Another car approached.

The few rats had now become many. They were a living stream that ran in the street, parallel to his path. *What could they be doing?* he thought.

The car passed. Vladimir’s view was swallowed by darkness. The scampering sounds on the street seemed to counterpoint his own footsteps.

Eventually, headlights strobed again. The stream of rats had become a flood covering half the street.

Again, darkness.

Vladimir stopped, listened intently, heard a rustling. He walked faster, then broke into a run.

In the darkness, he stumbled on something alive.

He fell to the ground and screamed.

* * *

“Does Pooky like hotdogs?” The casually dressed woman held a hotdog in front of the cat’s face. The cat, sitting in the passenger seat next to her, did not respond. It was a Siamese cat with a jeweled collar. Light jazz played on the radio. The woman looked at the cat and smiled. Then she turned her attention back to the road.

“Hmm?” she asked. “I’ll bet Pooky wants to eat.”

She tried to divide her gaze between the cat and the road. “What does Pooky want to eat?”

When her eyes returned to the road, it was too late to react.

Vladimir popped into view a few feet in front of her headlights. Rats covered his body like a living blanket.

The car hit with a dull *whump*!

The windshield darkened with blood and rat bodies.

The woman screamed and hit the brakes.

* * *

As the threesome exited, the door to the morgue rocked back and forth under the pull of heavy springs. Katrina Fontanova felt her legs wobble, then collapse. The hallway spun with slow, uneven motion. She grabbed at Gallagan and Briggam for support, then gagged, burping a blotch of yellow-white fluid on Gallagan’s dark blue suit.

Gallagan held her with one arm and tried to remove the blotch with the other, whipping out tissue from a pocket. He finally put Katrina down on a desk that crammed the hallway.

“Sorry to put you through this, Ms. Fontanova,” Briggam said, eyes leaking tears. He turned his head and sneezed. “Chebbicals,” he said with a sniffle, wiping first with a hand, then reaching for a handkerchief.

Gallagan now dabbed aggressively at the blotch on his suit. “We want the body, Mr. Briggam. As soon as possible. We will ship it back to Moscow for autopsy.”

“Given the circumstances, you’ll need to wait a few more days. Ah—Tzoooo!”

“Bless you. We have a courier flight on the 24th. I’ll need it then.” He looked at Katrina. “Can you walk, Fontanova?”

Katrina—face pale, clothes rumpled, body stiffened to the integrity of a wet dishrag—nodded weakly.

“You’ll get my request tomorrow, through official channels,” Gallagan said firmly, steadying Katrina as she rose to her feet.

“Understand,” Briggam replied, shaking his hand.

Gallagan felt a stickiness in his palm, released Briggam’s hand, and tried to wipe away spittle as he guided Katrina down the dull brown corridor.

* * *

The room was dark. There was a *whir* of a projector fan.

“For those of you who don’t know me, I’m James Stone. I’ll be leading this effort.”

He pushed a button. There was a mechanical sound as the projector brought up a jarring view of the accident scene. Vladimir’s twisted body lay on the hood of the car, sandwiched between a light pole and the car’s windshield.

“These pictures were taken by police during their initial investigation,” he said.

He punched the button again. The slide showed an open passport containing Vladimir’s photograph and identifying information.

“This case was turned over to FBI when police discovered Russian diplomatic papers on the body,” he said. “The victim is Vladimir Fontanov, from the Science and Technology Office of the Russian Embassy.”

He punched the button again. The new slide showed Vladimir’s partially eaten face, viewed from the

interior of the car. Rat bodies nestled around the smashed head. A rat's tail extended from Vladimir's mouth—now locked in an eternal scream.

"It appears that at the time he was hit and killed by the car, Fontanov was being devoured by sewer rats. Obviously a fluke accident," Stone said.

He punched the button again. Air bags were extended inside the car. The windshield was broken. The driver was not present. There was blood on the driver's seat. A cat was visible in the passenger's seat. It was devouring a rat. A partially eaten hotdog was visible on the floor.

Stone continued his summary of the death scene.

"The driver, Ms. Annebelle Courtney, is a cashier at a 7-11 and appears to have no obvious link to the victim. She was found conscious, but fought the Emergency Medical Team when they tried to extract her from the car. She was sent to a local hospital for observation. They released her 24 hours later. She's in reasonably good physical condition. The victim was Dead On Arrival."

Stone turned the room lights back on. He was a balding, well-dressed man in his mid-fifties, who carried his body with a proud, military posture.

"Sverdlov," he said, "I don't have to tell you this is a politically sensitive case. You've met Fontanov?"

Yuri nodded, "Yes. And his sister, Ms. Fontanova."

"Any ideas on how the embassy will react?"

"They'll be suspicious. Paranoid. We'll need good answers. Can you tell me what medical tests were run on the driver and victim?"

"I'll let our medical specialist answer that one. Alan?"

Alan Babcock's voice, like his appearance, lacked any flair, emphasis or interest. "The driver received a fairly extensive battery of tests, including blood tests, psychological tests and tests for physical trauma. Coroner's report on the victim says death resulted from internal and external hemorrhaging due to impact from the automobile. Most of the damage on the face and body is from rat bites inflicted immediately prior to being hit. Here are the files."

He shoved them across the table.

Yuri picked them up and began to read.

"And what about tests on the rats?" Yuri asked.

Babcock shrugged. "They're over at Veterinary Services. I think they're checking for rabies."

Stone paced back and forth at the front of the room, thumping his nose as though thought flowed from nostrils. He stopped, then gazed at Yuri.

"Sverdlov," I know your field is counterintelligence. However, the Russian Ambassador believes you should be handling this. I'm going to humor him. Because of our touchy-feely situation, I'm making you point man with the embassy."

* * *

When she called her father at three o'clock, it was eleven PM, Moscow time. The old man took the news of Vladimir's death like a stab in the heart. He told her, between bouts of drunken sobbing, that Vladimir's unshakable belief in the Communist Party marked him for future greatness. And he offered a theory: "The Americans killed him because of what he knew about Archangelsk."

She reminded him that it had been many years, and the Cold War was over, but he continued to babble about the Party—a rock he had clung to his entire life, a rock now submerged in a sea of change. She let the old man have his say, then finally hung up with a quiet "Goodbye, Papa, I love you."

We disagreed about many things, Katrina thought, gazing at a photograph of her dead brother, but we never disagreed about our need for each other.

She gazed at a picture of a New Year's party. Vladimir and a young girlfriend were laughing. Katrina was blowing a party horn in Vladimir's face. *So long ago.*

Katrina carefully placed the photo in a box on her desk, where relics of Vladimir's life now collected.

The door opened unexpectedly.

She wiped a tear from her eye and tried to assume the role of hardened Russian intelligence officer.

Nikolai Gallagan, John Anderson and Zfar Jafri entered. They could see she was upset.

"This has been very troubling for all of us," Gallagan said, attempting to judge Katrina's emotional stability. He gently touched her shoulder. "Doctor Anderson and Mister Jafri would like to talk to you."

She nodded, then motioned for them to have a seat.

"Nikolai told me about the circumstances surrounding Vladimir's death," Anderson said. "I don't know how to say this gently or delicately. We have evidence that your brother may have been murdered."

Katrina collapsed back in her chair.

"Before reporting this to the authorities," Anderson said, "I wanted to talk to you first. And Nikolai."

Jafri pulled out pictures and put them in front of Katrina. "A friend of mine found a dead animal at the Groom site. We were afraid there might be some sort of germ warfare testing going on. We were wrong."

As Katrina flipped through the photos, Anderson picked up the conversation.

“We did an autopsy on the animal and experiments on its tissue. The brain was modified, probably during embryonic development, with implanted devices.”

“Katrina,” Gallagan said, “they think the Groom test involved control of the animals.”

“This is just a guess,” Anderson said. “We haven’t been able to find any evidence of electromagnetic transmission from the Devices, or any power source implanted within the dead animal that could support such a data link.”

“We’re assuming a data link would be necessary for control,” Jafri said. “Otherwise you’d only be able to influence behavior in generic ways.”

“Frankly, however, we’re dealing with technology we’ve never seen before,” Anderson said.

Katrina’s face darkened. She walked to an open safe drawer.

“I want to show them the file on Groom.”

Gallagan shook his head, “No.”

She slapped at a pile of books perched on the safe, dropping them to the floor. “The file—dammit!” She grabbed Gallagan’s tie near the throat, wrenching his neck in a tight clutch. “Today I saw my brother half eaten by animals, flesh devoured in a coordinated attack. I talked to my father, in Moscow, trying to explain what happened, his heart breaking with grief. Show them the files, Nikolai. This isn’t some stupid government game. This is very, very personal.” She quivered with rage, releasing the tie.

Gallagan replied calmly, smoothing wrinkles from his cravat. “I have release authority over all information we collect here at the embassy. I could do it. Maybe I should do it.” He shrugged. “Go ahead. I give you permission.”

Katrina tossed the file to Anderson. “The data link is invisible to you,” she said. “The devices don’t use an electromagnetic channel. They use a quantum mechanical channel. A faster-than-light channel. We’ve been following this research.”

She rubbed her eyes.

“It’s being done by Richard Chandra.”

She appeared weak, sat down in a chair and took a deep breath.

“He has a small lab near Johns Hopkins. He also acts as advisor for a research activity at Groom.”

“Mister Gallagan,” Jafri said, cautiously, “have you ever heard of a classified U.S. government activity called *Operation Majority*?”

“We’ve heard of it,” Katrina replied, softly. “I opened Pandora’s Box and Vladimir fell in. I feel sick. Help me out of here. Please.”

50. NOBLE GOALS

18-19 July 1994

Back in Rachel, Nevada, Deke's investigation of Operation Majority continued. While penetrating the databases of Livermore Lab, the Justice Department and the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, he stumbled across information on other black programs that spun his interests in new directions.

He developed a theory about government conspiracies.

One evening, in the Rachel bar, after a bout of heavy drinking, he explained this theory to Marvyn Marvin III from the Planet Draconis, who—quite by chance—happened to be visiting Earth in material form in order to propose to the Lady From Venus. Both Marvyn and his bride-to-be were in a genial mood. Marvyn had shaved his Abraham Lincoln style beard with a mini leg shaver, producing a vertical grid of hairy stripes. Marvyn said it was all the rage on Draconis, but Deke thought it made him look weird.

"Secrecy's to blame," Deke said. "Secrecy itself is at the bottom of most government conspiracies."

"Could you talk into this?" Marvyn said, doffing his top hat. "This has a direct voice link to the Planet Draconis. Except when it's on my head. Then, it's a mind link. I want the guys there to hear this."

"And the gals," the Lady From Venus said with an even smile.

"Of course, dear. And we shan't forget about the neutroids."

"No, we shan't."

Marvyn scanned the room, as if tuned to a channel other than reality. Finally, he said, "Okay. They're ready to copy. Even His Most High Boomquat is on the line." He leaned over the top hat. "So tell us, Deke, how the secrecy of Earthlings is the source of government conspiracy."

"Well, it dispenses with accountability. No. That's not quite true. Accountability to *secrecy* is the highest priority. Has to be if you want to keep secrets a secret. Everything else is secondary. Even normal, human morality. As a result, black programs—the most secret programs that our government has—are run and operated by sociopaths—people who don't know or care about right or wrong."

"Interesting," Marvyn said. "On Draconis, the concept of secrecy is alien to our thought process."

The Lady From Venus rolled her eyes, squeezing Marvyn's hand. "Dear—Earthlings *are* aliens."

"What would you do, Marv, if you uncovered some highly secret, but unethical program?" Deke asked.

The Lady From Venus answered before Marvyn could speak. "He'd be outraged. He'd find out all he could, then write a book exposing the whole thing and earn a million dollars for it. Marv's just that kind

of guy.”

Marvyn smiled and gave his fiancé a peck on the cheek. “You are so—”

“So you’d take action?”

Marvyn looked Deke right in the eye. “Darn right. I’m all action—in a theoretical sense.”

Deke nodded. “Action.” He gulped down the last of his root beer and slammed the mug onto the counter. “Thanks, Marv.” He turned and walked out the door.

When Deke was gone, a big man wearing a Hawaiian shirt got up from a stool next to the Lady From Venus. He paid his tab then left the bar in a big hurry.

Marvyn watched him go. “You thinking what I’m thinking, hon?”

“I wasn’t thinking anything right now, Marv, but if—”

“There was something not quite right about that guy in the Hawaiian shirt. I got... bad vibes.”

“I noticed something, too,” she said with a whisper. “He has the same aura as Quetzalcoatl.”

* * *

Deke rounded up the dog, a duffel bag with a few clothes and stacks of print-outs—results of his investigations. He left Gray with Old Missus Doonan, then drove off to the airport. With a seat to himself, he put the arm rests up, took his shoes off and curled into a fetal position. He awoke to the loud rush of landing gear locking in place, and the gentle rhythm of the aircraft as it maneuvered into the approach corridor. It was early morning.

* * *

When Jafri and Deke shook hands, their palms were moist in the warmth of a July afternoon. There was something fateful about the meeting. Each felt it. Each tried to dismiss it.

They bought some Konee Dogs from a street vendor and sat quietly on the grass of Constitution Gardens, with the Lincoln Memorial behind them, the National Academy of Sciences on one side, and the Reflecting Pool on the other.

“When do you go back?” Jafri asked.

Deke licked hot mustard from his fingers. “Tonight,” he said, standing up. He handed Jafri a briefcase. “We need to take action, Boss.”

That was the sum total of the meeting.

Jafri watched Deke’s figure recede across a field of well-manicured grass. He felt the smooth texture of the briefcase, wondering what new secrets were inside. Then he gazed out toward the Reflecting Pool with feelings of caution and growing fear.

51. TISSUE OF LIES

19-20 July 1994

Yuri and Gallagan walked to the back room of a Russian restaurant on I Street, where Anderson, Jafri and Katrina were seated. Yuri watched Katrina pour a cup of black liquid for everyone at the table. Their eyes met momentarily, and he reacted with a quick, awkward smile as he sat down.

Gallagan swallowed the black liquid, then clenched his teeth at the strength of it. “I did not want to trouble you to come to the Embassy. It would have been awkward—you an FBI agent and me, a Russian diplomat. Also, we think the embassy was penetrated. This place seemed safe.”

“Are all of you from the embassy?” Yuri asked, sipping the dark liquid. He choked, then put down the cup.

“It is good Russian kvass,” Katrina said. “You like it?”

Sverdlov shook his head, “No.”

Gallagan made the introductions. “Professor Anderson is from Georgetown University. Mister Jafri is his friend. Vladimir, of course, worked for me. You have met Katrina.”

“Yes,” he said, smiling again.

Gallagan paused for a moment, trying to read Yuri’s face, then gestured, noncommittally. “Katrina trusts you. Frankly, I do not.”

“Why?”

Gallagan shrugged, “You are—”

“We have both been deeply hurt,” Katrina interjected. “We try to solve the same puzzle.” She inspected

the well-chiseled face in front of her, searching the eyes, searching for his Russian heart. “I think you are the only one who can help me.”

Yuri’s response was business-like. “So you think Jack Dugan’s death and your brother’s death are connected?”

Gallagan raised his palms, patting at the air. “All of this frankness makes me uneasy, Fontanova, without first establishing the rules.”

He locked his fingers together in a gentle clasp, looked at Yuri, and smiled. “Agent Sverdlov, you are entrusted with solving this crime. If we do not get satisfaction, we will publicize your bungled efforts, and the efforts of the NSA representative, Mr. Dugan, to penetrate the Russian Embassy. I will turn your distinguished career into troika droppings. Do you understand?”

Yuri nodded, calmly. “You can try, but you may be too late, Mr. Gallagan. Anyway, why do you believe Vladimir was murdered?”

“We have certain evidence which, at the moment, is admittedly circumstantial. I will share it with you. We are working with Professor Anderson’s environmentalist group, called *Tellus*.”

Anderson spoke. “Our group began an environmental study of Groom Dry Lake Base in Nevada. The Russian Embassy supplied us with certain technical and analytical means.”

Yuri frowned and rubbed his eyes.

“I can see you are becoming uncomfortable with this discussion,” Gallagan said. “We are doing nothing illegal. The Open Skies Treaty signed by your government allows us to take pictures of your bases. It is a New World Order, hmmm? Vladimir was working with Katrina analyzing Groom.”

Katrina cleared her throat, averting her eyes. “Vladimir called me about a significant find. He was delivering results of his analysis...”

Gallagan reached across the table, pressed her hand, then finished the thought. “When the police visited us, they returned papers and valuables found on or near the body. The envelope that Vladimir had in his possession—the envelope containing satellite imagery—was not returned.”

Yuri opened his briefcase and flipped through a file folder. “No such item was reported at the scene. I have the complete case file right here. It’s not on the list.”

Gallagan released a plosive *pfft!* “Why am I deeply suspicious of your answer? I believe that someone took the photographs. Someone who wanted to know what Vladimir had discovered.”

“And what exactly did Vladimir discover?” Yuri asked.

Gallagan composed his thoughts behind squinted eyes. “It took us two days to reconstruct what Vladimir had done. We found his requests for additional imagery, requests for digital enhancements and—most importantly—we found his notebook. We have evidence that something remarkable has occurred—is occurring—at Groom Dry Lake Base.”

Katrina spread a sequence of satellite photographs on the table. “This imagery is unclassified—part of a survey of North America. We sell it commercially, which is why I’m showing it to you. The first image

was taken in the morning of April twenty-second. See this area on the dry lake? The shadows are from cylinders of some sort arranged in a regular pattern. Also, there is some vehicular movement from the research complex to the lake area.”

Katrina moved to another image. “This photo was taken in the late afternoon of the same day. An irregular dark pattern covers the area with the cylinders. A stereo frame shows movement of the mass.”

She moved to a third image. “This one was taken the following morning. The area is restored to its original condition. Later photos ruled out shadowing as an explanation for the dark area.”

“Can I see the photo of the dark area?” Yuri asked.

Katrina handed him the photo and a magnifying glass.

“Interesting. I can make out patterns.”

“Yes,” she said, “The dark area appears to be composed of many separate objects. The patterns you see are called *moiré* patterns. In this case, the *moiré* pattern combines linear scan lines of the satellite’s camera system with the regular orientation of many small objects in the dark area.”

“I’m not a photo interpreter,” Yuri said. “I’m having trouble putting all of this together. Help me.”

“We know from other data and other analysis that the dark area is composed of hundreds of objects less than half a meter in length. All the objects are oriented toward the center, and are probably mobile.”

“Mister Jafri’s friend works at the site,” Anderson said. “He found a dead animal—a rat—in the test area. We know that the animal was modified. We found devices implanted in its brain. We believe they control the animals and that the Russian satellite photos show the test.”

“This all seems pretty far fetched,” Yuri said. “But suppose the government did have some fantastic new weapon. They don’t just go out and kill people. Even the crime of treason requires due process.”

“Due process?” Jafri asked. “We’re talking about a government that performed radiation experiments on its own citizens for years without their knowledge or permission. That’s a fact!”

He slammed his fist on the table.

“Not a single official involved in those criminal acts was ever prosecuted. It’s an environment Josef Mengele would have been comfortable in.”

“The U.S. government doesn’t operate that way. We’ve got rules.”

“Normal rules have been suspended,” Jafri said. My organization has linked the base with Operation Majority.”

“What?” Yuri hesitated for a moment. Several pieces came together—Gottlieb, Weddell, the Russian Embassy intercept, Dugan’s death. It seemed too fantastic. He needed independent confirmation. “Let’s put all the cards on the table, shall we?”

Gallagan pouted. “I’m afraid they are ambiguous cards, Agent Sverdlov.”

“What is Operation Majority?”

Jafri responded with certainty. “The exploitation of recovered extraterrestrial technology.”

Yuri laughed—partly out of shock, partly out of the tension of the moment. Inside, his gut wrenched at the possibility. “You’ve got to be kidding!” He looked at the others. No one else was laughing. “Look... look...”

“We are verging on a major diplomatic crisis,” Gallagan said. “You can help bring to justice a single, out-of-control bureaucrat, or watch us supply the press with the damndest story you’ve ever heard.”

“This is crazy,” Yuri said, trying to rationalize, even as emotions swamped his brain. “Number one, I’m just a go-between. Number two, if you’ve got evidence that someone in the government killed Vladimir Fontanov, then give it to me. The FBI will follow up on it. That’s our job.”

“Yuri,” Katrina said, “we are counting on you, not the FBI. I think you’ll do the right thing. That’s the difference between you and them. What we need first is one of the rats recovered near Vladimir’s body. If we find devices in the neural tissue, then we can establish a link with the Groom Lake test site. The second thing we need is a search of a laboratory near Johns Hopkins. It belongs to Richard Chandra. He’s connected with the Groom operation.”

“I’ll do my job.”

“And Yuri, if Operation Majority thinks you know about their activities, you may be their next target. It’s something to consider when you work through official channels. Be careful.”

* * *

Later that day, Yuri sipped a cup of coffee outside FBI Headquarters, wondering about a great many things, mind lurking between troika droppings and dead men.

A web of interconnected ideas drove the investigation. Some points on the web were truth. Some were lies. Some were probably coincidence. He felt like a bug in a spider’s trap. If he moved the wrong way, he’d be stuck. Or dead. Whatever way he moved, the act of movement itself might alert the spider. “Where is the spider? The big question!

Katrina had told him to be careful. He had already figured that part out. What he hadn’t figured out was a plan that allowed him to investigate and stay alive.

He looked for a place to throw away the coffee. All the sugar was in a single glob of goo at the bottom of the cup. A thought occurred to him: *Sometimes you have to stir things up.*

* * *

“They said Katrina Fontanova was here and that you are an acquaintance of hers.”

“They?” Jafri looked up from his plate at the tall, young, well-dressed foreigner.

“The head waiter. I gave him a big tip. I knew she would come here eventually to eat the Russian food. Not many people eat Russian food.”

“I’m not surprised,” Jafri whispered, patting his mouth with a napkin and eyeing a plate of jellied meat. “You’re right, by the way, about Ms. Fontanova. But she’s gone now. Back to the embassy, I suppose. I’m only still here because I have this fascination with foreign food.”

“How do you like it?”

“Disgusting.”

“I agree.” He extended his hand. “I am Kostiya Baskakov, from the Ukrainian Embassy.”

“Zfar Jafri, Embassy of the Planet Earth.” Zfar shook Baskakov’s hand.

The Ukrainian looked puzzled.

“A joke.”

Baskakov nodded, laughed, then sat down.

“So you are a friend of Katrina’s?” Jafri asked. “Close friend, perhaps?”

“Our relationship is... evolving.”

“Ah! One of those kinds of relationships.”

“She won’t see me. I try to call her at home and the embassy, but she refuses to talk to me.”

“You must have really pissed her off. No offense.”

“I asked her to marry me once. We were engaged.”

Jafri’s beard trembled. “That’ll do it.”

“She is very pig-headed, Mister Jafri. I want to help her.”

“Whether she wants your help or not?”

“Yes. How is she taking Vladimir’s death?”

“She seems pretty shook up. And angry. I would be too, if I thought a friend or relative died that way.”

“Look, I know you will see her again. Could you please give her this message?” Baskakov reached into his pocket and pulled out an envelope.

“Sure,” Jafri said. I’ll give it to her.”

After Baskakov departed, Jafri decided to put the letter into the briefcase which Deke Dobbs had given him. Until now, he had been afraid to open it—afraid of new revelations, new horrors. He carried it around all day, like a prosthesis that gimbaled his body and his mind in an unnatural way. *What I don’t know can’t kill me*, he rationalized. But now he had to open it.

The shiny brass latches clicked under the pull of his fingers. The lid pulled back easily. Inside, on the very top of a thick stack of papers, was a congratulatory letter, stamped TOP SECRET MAJIC, dated January 22, 1968. It began:

Dear Whit,

Congratulations on fine experimental technique! Your brilliant efforts have finally put us on the road to a marvelous technical breakthrough. In your operating room, something was born which I believe will change the world as we know it...

Jafri closed the lid, paid the check, and rushed back to his hotel room.

* * *

“I’m sorry,” the Clerk said. “I can’t release any of these animal bodies.”

“Why not?” Yuri asked.

“We got a message saying they all had to be turned over to a special OSHA task force.” He snickered. “Sounds crazy, huh? Hey—maybe OSHA is going to write a reg making rats wear helmets.” He drummed on the counter, laughing at his own punch line.

“Has the Vet Lab ever done this before—failed to release animals to a team investigating a possible homicide?”

“Nope. Never. But, hey—I don’t make the rules, y’know? Seriously, though, you might ask them for

special permission. The guy to call is Mister Chisholm. I can give you his number, or I can call him for you.”

“No. It’s not that important. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Say, can I get you to sign the log? I’m supposed to keep track of people who ask about these particular animals.”

He signed it, *I. Jones*. “Gotta run, sorry.”

* * *

Yuri opened the door to Agent Stone’s office and looked in. “Got a minute?” he asked.

“Sure, c’mon in. I’ve been meaning to talk to you, but just haven’t had the time. What’s up?” Stone swiveled around in the chair behind his desk, meeting Yuri’s eyes.

“Well... first, I’d like to welcome you to the Bureau.” Behind a benign smile, Yuri watched Stone’s reaction.

“What do you mean?”

“Personnel said you just transferred here from another Federal agency.”

“Oh, right.” He crossed a leg, folded his arms and pushed back from the desk, body language sending ‘barrier’ signals. “It’s supposed to be something of a secret. Please don’t spread it around. They wanted me to head up the investigation of this embassy death—because of all the political ramifications.”

“Yeah. That’s the truth!” Yuri said, still smiling. “That brings me to the other reason I’m here—politics. I had a meeting with the Russians today.”

“And? What are they up to besides making fools of themselves?”

“It’s true. They have a crazy story. They say the U.S. Government can either hand over an out-of-control bureaucrat, or they can watch the Russian Government release everything they know about some secret conspiracy.”

“Did they describe this conspiracy to you?” Stone asked, tapping a pencil nervously on his desk.

Yuri waited several seconds before replying. “No. They just said it’s the damnedest thing you’ve ever heard. Weird. Maybe they’re hallucinating just like Lewis Weddell.”

“Who’s he?”

Yuri looked firmly at Stone. “Somebody I put in prison a while back for stealing government secrets, including some very advanced technology.”

Stone smiled a tense smile, tipped back in his chair, and pressed a pencil to his lip, creating a dark spot. “You’re out of your league, Sverdlov.”

“Excuse me?”

“I know you’re trying to do your FBI job—and doing it very well, I might add—but what you see here is not reality.”

“I don’t follow.”

“When George Nathan, your CIA mentor, helped you get this job, I was the one who gave him the approval. I told him to make it clear that we would test you from time to time. Did he tell you that?”

Yuri blinked in astonishment. He held his body stiffly, trying not to register the verbal punch that caved in his stomach.

“It’s now test time, Agent Sverdlov. When I assigned you to the Russian Embassy, I did it because they trust you. They have confidence in you. I also did it because you’re a Company man. That has priority over everything else.”

He looked at Yuri, trying to understand what Yuri really believed.

“It was good that you came to me with this information about the Russians. We like to keep a step ahead of them,” he said, pulling his lip back in a slow, wide smile. “You have a part in a very elaborate, diplomatic dance. The Russians step one way, we step another way, you are dancing in the middle. At the moment, that’s your job.” He leaned forward, lowering his voice. “I will give you the choreography, Agent Sverdlov, and you will follow it. Precisely. That’s an order. You know how to follow orders, right?”

Yuri nodded, slowly.

Stone smiled again. “You’re a man of conscience. That’s why you’re here, at the FBI. Let me assure you that the Russians are wrong. They’ve uncovered something, but it’s not what they think. Don’t let them use you to steal vital national secrets. Don’t betray your country.”

“You can count on me, Sir,” Yuri whispered.

“Good. I thought you’d feel that way.” Stone’s mouth twitched with a sense of irony. “Anyway, how do the Russians expect us to find and prosecute some paranoid delusion?”

“Yeah. How?” Yuri responded.

Mrs. Doonan, a septuagenarian whose eyes resembled the dog's, shuffled out on the porch, leash in hand. "Gray's a good ol' dog, but he missed his master."

The dog spotted Deke and tongued his boots. "Woof!" he exclaimed, in a low, quiet dog voice.

"Thanks for taking care of him, Virginia," Deke said, opening the gate of the corporate truck. He lifted Gray into his arms. "Up ya go, boy." He put the dog in, gave Virginia some money for her troubles and departed.

As he drove back to the Center, Deke thought about options. The biggest immediate question was what to do about the code. It was a fantastic technology and he really wanted to explore its full potential. Having the code made you god-like. He enjoyed omniscience. He could imagine publishing the newsletter with hints of the conspiracy. The government people would scratch their heads, marveling at the perspicacity of these two weirdoes living in a trailer in Rachel, Nevada. Their readership would grow tremendously, since everyone loves a conspiracy. The government would deny everything, of course, leaving the situation ambiguous. But the government's hands would be tied. If they were too overt, they would be exposed. The house of cards would come tumbling down.

Deke opened the trailer door, excited about weaving the wicked web. He sat down in front of the machine, cracking his knuckles like a piano player preparing for a concert.

Odd, he thought. *Could've sworn I left the computer on*. It was corporate policy to turn the displays off but leave the CPUs powered up. Maybe the power went off, he thought, pushing a button. The system booted up.

There was another oddity. The Macintosh Finder always placed windows exactly where the user had left them—even when it rebooted. They were not in the usual place. *Someone screwed with the system!*

He hurriedly opened the hard drive. In his In Box, there was the message titled "?." He also found "Blue Rook" in the expected place on the Apple Control Panel menu. He verified that it still showed the LANL classified file system.

His paranoia escalated rapidly. He decided to thoroughly search the place. He was in the process of unscrewing light fixtures and electrical outlets, looking for bugs, when Gray announced intruders.

Deke rushed outside.

Two men, dressed in black, approached on foot. When he spotted them, they were several hundred yards away, walking purposefully toward the trailer. Their figures shimmered in the heat, like wavy, fluid smoke trails. As they got closer, Deke could see they wore dark suits and carried briefcases. Dark brimmed hats hid their faces in mid-day shadows. They stopped near the edge of the road, on the threshold of the walkway.

They smiled at Deke.

"May we come in?" one of them asked.

Deke did not respond. Gray's barking was now loud and continuous.

The taller man spoke in a firm voice. "You have to invite us in. That's how it works."

Deke nodded slowly.

Both men stepped through the gate. Gray stopped barking, rolled onto his back and assumed a submissive whine. The two men smiled down on the dog.

"We came to share a secret with you," the tall man said.

"What kind of a secret?" Deke asked, uncomfortably.

"He's watching you!"

Deke felt his throat clutch. The fingers on one hand trembled. He put the hand in his pocket and tried to act casual. "So they know, then?"

"Everything! He can read your mind."

"Am I going to get in trouble?"

Deke felt his heart thumping in his chest. He felt sweat breaking on his brow. He needed to urinate badly.

The tall man slowly put down his briefcase, moved close to Deke and wrapped a comforting hand around his shoulder. He looked into Deke's face.

"He knows you've done wrong, but he forgives you."

"Oh..." Deke said, quivering. "I didn't mean it. Honest! I was only trying to... I mean, I thought..."

"Hush. He forgives you..."

Deke sobbed on the man's shoulder. "I only did what it said. It came attached to some e-mail. It wasn't me that did it. The computer program did it!"

"What e-mail?" asked the short man.

"What computer program?" asked the tall man, looking quizzically at Deke's face.

Deke shoved away from the tall man's grip, stumbling backwards onto the steps of the trailer. "Who are you guys!" he yelled.

The short man opened his briefcase and removed a flyer. He handed it to Deke. It was labeled *The Watchtower*.

"Jeez! You guys are Jehovah's Witnesses?"

"We've come to help you," the tall man said.

“Gray...” Deke said, sternly. The dog’s ears perked. Gray stood up. “Kill!” The dog wagged a tail, whined and rolled onto its back.

* * *

Yuri loitered in a coffee shop across from the OSHA building, watching, thinking. *When your partner is killed, you’re supposed to do something. When the law is broken, you’re supposed to do something. And when your handler tells you to dance, like a monkey on a string, you’re supposed to do something. So why don’t I know what to do? Why is it that nothing seems solid? Why does my gut feel like I’m in free-fall?*

Across the street, the door opened and Chisholm came out, dressed in seersucker. There was something bulky under his left arm, inside the suit coat. *A gun?*

Yuri left money to cover the food bill and followed on foot and through the Metro. He and his quarry ended up at a fashionable deli in the Crystal City underground. It had a large glass window that looked out into the exterior passageway. The place was packed with people eating a late lunch.

Chisholm had no idea he was being followed. He entered the deli and waved. “No table yet?” he asked.

Stone was already in line. He returned the wave. “It’s gonna be about five minutes, Gill. I’ve asked for a corner table.”

Stone thought he saw someone familiar in the hallway outside the deli. *Sverdlov?*

The face vanished in the crowd.

52. IN THE STYX

21 July 1994

Yuri put a coin into the phone and dialed. The embassy switchboard answered. He asked for Major Katrina Fontanova’s office.

“Fontanova.”

He spoke in Russian. “It’s me.”

A moment of silence followed as Katrina resolved the ambiguity. Finally, she responded. “Hello.”

“I couldn’t get any of the animal bodies. There *is* something funny going on. I can’t tell you any more until I’ve figured a few things out.”

“Be careful,” she said.

“Can you take me to Chandra’s lab?”

“Be at the embassy in 45 minutes.”

“I’ll be there.”

They hung up.

* * *

Did someone break into the Center? Deke wasn’t sure, but he was very suspicious. His nearest neighbor lived half a mile away. A break-in could easily occur in broad daylight with no witnesses. There was too much at stake here. He should have left Gray at the trailer and paid Virginia to visit him. Gray was a good watchdog. It was the one job he knew how to do—sort of. So much for 20/20 hindsight.

Deke entered a coffee shop in downtown Rachel. A jingling bell announced his arrival. “Hi, Trudy. I need coffee, a doughnut and some information.”

“The coffee and doughnut are free, but information will cost you.”

Deke grinned. “I always pay informants top money. I thought something in the neighborhood of a buck twenty-five might clear your mind.”

“Plus tip,” she said with a poker face, only half joking.

“You drive a hard bargain, but okay.”

She produced the coffee and doughnut. “Whatcha need?”

“I think someone broke into the trailer when I was away. I know you live along that road. See anything unusual the last couple of days?”

“Don’t pay much attention to road traffic. Got other interests, if ya’ know what I mean.” She took a sip of his coffee, then perked up.

“Why not ask Mister Busybody?”

“You mean—”

“Randall Sandall.”

Deke rolled his eyes.

“Sorry. That’s my advice. Buck twenty-five, please. Plus tip.”

* * *

Katrina waited for Yuri, watching late afternoon sun dance with airborne dust in a shaft of light.

Sometimes you see a solid, sometimes a dark vacancy, sometimes a specular blend, but always movement. Where in this spectrum is Yuri Sverdlov? Is his trust solid, or is he an opportunist—like me?

She remembered how John Anderson had trusted her, before she led him, unsuspecting, to Gallagan. In spite of that betrayal, he now helped her. She remembered setting the honey trap for Yuri. If there was now a tenuous trust where none existed before, it was because each of them had nowhere else to go. Trust made them vulnerable. Trust made them strong. A paradox.

Yuri and the janitor arrived, shadows rippling across their bodies. She followed them, listening to their footsteps echo along a corridor in a professional building near Johns Hopkins University.

This was the beginning of swing shift for the janitorial services. Business hours were over. The building was almost empty.

“Doc Chandra hasn’t been here for over a week,” the janitor said. “I guess this is okay, though, you bein’ FBI and all. He’s pretty particular about who he lets in.”

“Know when he’ll be back?” Yuri asked.

“Nope.”

The Janitor sorted through a tangle of keys on a ring.

“Ah, here’s the rascal,” he said, keys jingling. He unlocked the door to the lab. “Don’t know nuthin’ about any lab stuff. George is his assistant. He c’n probably tell ya’ about it. When Doc’s not here,

George only comes in mornin's. Y'know how it is. Just to feed the rats."

"Yeah," Yuri said. "I know how it is."

"Always glad to help the FBI. Just close the door when you're done. It'll lock itself." He departed amid shuffling echoes that died long after he rounded a corner, invisible.

Yuri bit his lip, studying Katrina's fine-boned cheeks and high brow, sketched in chiaroscuro by fading light. *How can I be sure of her?* he wondered. *Trust involves total communication, even the communication of secrets.*

"I'm taking a big chance with you here, Ms. Fontanova."

"I know," she replied, softly.

They went in.

* * *

"Watch what Barney can do. It's amazing! *Kill*," he said.

Deke watched Mister Randall R. Sandall, The Third, throw a sock ball in front of his dog, Barney.

Randall R. Sandall—double-'L', double-'L.' Middle 'R.' He had named his son Randall R. Sandall, The Fourth. All male members of the Sandall dynasty were distinguished from each other by a cipher.

The sock ball rolled on the ground and stopped. Barney sniffed it, then sat on his hind feet.

"What a great trick!" Deke said. "It's like the trick that my dog does. Now I have a question..."

"Ha, ha!" Mister Sandall said. "That's just the *first* part of the trick. It gets better."

"Better?"

Randall R. Sandall, The Third, winked at Deke and tossed the sock ball again. This time, he yelled "BLM!" First the dog growled. Then the dog barked. Then it ripped the sock ball apart in a fierce struggle.

"I can see where the trick would come in handy. BLM? As in Bureau of Land Management?"

"You got it. Now what's on your mind, son?"

"I think someone broke into my place when I was gone. See anything suspicious along that road these last couple of days?"

“Reminds me of the time they broke into my place,” said Mister Randall R. Sandall, the Third, sitting down. He creaked back and forth in a rocker near the front of his store. “Ten years ago. Did I ever tell you about that? The hobo?”

“No,” Deke said, looking at his watch. “Thank God. I mean, thank God you’re still okay. You could have been killed.”

Randall Sandall smiled and creaked some more. Deke made a mental note to award him the ‘Most Boring Person I Have Ever Met’ medallion for life-long achievement. Randall Sandall was truly gifted. He knew a billion ways to induce stupor, deep slumber or stoppage of the heart.

“Look, I just want to know if you saw anyone or anything along the road to our trailer these last couple of days.”

“Maybe.”

He squinted. He twisted. He scratched his head, hoping to sprout an idea.

“Blue truck,” he finally said. “That was it. A blue truck. Want to see another trick?”

* * *

Yuri and Katrina entered the darkened lab, where equipment glowed with unblinking red eyes and animals rustled, unseen.

Yuri switched on a bank of fluorescent lights that oscillated on and off, ticking fitfully, spooking rats inside two wire cages. The lights settled into a steady, green-tinged burn, casting double shadows on workstations and video monitors atop nearby desks.

“Rats,” Yuri said, leaning close to inspect a cage. “These are the ones, aren’t they? They have that bulge behind the eyes you talked about. Little bug brains.”

Inside the cage, the rat eyed Yuri.

“They say, Ms. Fontanova, that next to humans, the rat is the most successful mammal on this planet.”

“My name is Katrina, Yuri. Please call me that.”

“Okay... Katrina. What comes next?”

“First we inspect the equipment, to find out the purpose of the lab. Then we leave with a specimen. You can give it directly to Dr. Li for examination.”

“Minimizing the loss of classified information to third parties. How noble of you.”

“I want your trust.”

Yuri nodded, solemn-faced. “Right.”

She smiled weakly. “This computer is running, but the display unit is off. May I turn it on?”

“Sure. If you don’t think it’ll blow up.”

She pressed the ON button. Within a second, a display appeared—an image of Yuri viewed from inside the rat cage.

“You’re on camera,” she said.

Yuri turned, saw himself on the monitor and backed away from the rat. His image shrank with distance. “Looks like a VCR hook-up. I don’t want this visit recorded. Can you turn the camera off?”

“Right,” she said. “But I don’t see it over here. You’ll need to trace the wires.”

Yuri looked into the cage. “Nothing in here. But look at the image on the monitor—it’s panning. We should be able to see camera motion, or hear the servos.”

Katrina walked quickly to the cage, knelt beside it and looked in. “Back away,” she said.

Yuri shrugged, then stepped back. The rat blinked, and his shrinking image disappeared for an instant.

“It’s the animal,” Katrina whispered. “The monitor sees what the animal sees.”

When the rat cocked its head and turned its body, Katrina’s image replaced Yuri’s.

“Think of the implications,” Katrina said.

Yuri adjusted the nearby monitor. “There’s a color shift and maybe an acuity shift.”

Katrina nodded. “It’s not quite the same as human eyes.”

“They can crawl through small spaces, see, listen, smell and feel,” Yuri said. “If someone discovers the rat, they just blame it on bad housecleaning. The rats are expendable.”

Katrina tried another button. The monitor’s speaker issued a sharp noise—a rat gnawing a food pellet. It was a grating sound, like teeth grinding bone.

“It’s hungry,” she said.

* * *

Kostiya Baskakov sorted through a jungle of flowers, finally settling on red roses. “I will take these,” he said, pointing. “Half a dozen.”

The clerk in the flower shop opened the glass-doored refrigerator. She selected six good specimens, sprayed them with water, then put them in a box.

“You’ll be wanting a card, too?”

“He nodded, then picked a large, ornate, heart-shaped card.”

“That’s a Valentine card.”

“It’s okay. I’ll take it. It is... an affair of the heart.”

After paying, Kostiya stepped gingerly out on the street. He headed for the Metro, playing the mating simulation in his mind:

She would answer the door and be surprised.

He would ask to come in.

She would at first say no.

He would offer the flowers.

She would be delighted and change her mind.

They would spend an evening together. He would console her. With luck, he would spend the night.

Kostiya had developed an elaborate set of contingency plans of the *if-then* variety. Like the Soviet putsch, the plans would all fail to predict reality’s vector.

* * *

As Deke pulled out of his parking space in Rachel, he saw a blue, unmarked van on the opposite side of the street. He slowed to watch it through the rear-view mirror. As he approached a corner, the van started its engine and pulled out.

He turned right. After a few moments, the blue van turned in the same direction.

Deke stopped at a gas station to make a phone call. As he dialed the number, the van rolled past his position and parked on the side of the street. It waited for him. Someone watched.

Maybe Old Roy Robbins can help engineer an escape, he thought.

The phone rang three times, then picked up. “Haloo,” a voice answered.

“Roy? This is Deke. How’re you, old buddy?”

“Old buddy yourself.”

He heard Roy spit on the other end of the phone. It was just Roy’s way. “This may sound crazy here in Rachel, but there’s a car following me and I’m afraid.”

He could hear the rancher’s snicker.

“Nothin’ sounds crazy comin’ from you,” Roy said. “Whattya want me to do?”

“Just open the gate to your property. That’s all. Let me drive through, then close it.”

“I can do that. Come on over. Got nuthin’ better to do than save paranoid nuts like you.”

“Thanks,” Deke said. “You’re a pal, even if you are out to get me.”

* * *

Richard Chandra was on the phone in his laboratory at Groom—a STU-III secure telephone. He sat at a small desk, handset wedged between his shoulder and ear, toying with a large glass jar. As he tilted the jar from side to side, the contents slid back and forth in a formaldehyde brew. The object looked like the head of a man-sized bug. It had large, wrap-around black eyes protruding from gray flesh. Sections of the skull had been removed.

“Yes, Mister Director,” he said. “Termination with extreme prejudice—that’s the option. I just wanted to make sure you agreed. Right. We will. Yes, Sir. Goodbye.”

Chandra smiled, hung up, then walked to a metal workbench at the center of the lab. There was a rat cage on the bench. He put down the large jar next to the cage, then opened the cage door.

“Come to Papa,” he said.

The rat did not move.

Chandra was puzzled. This had never happened before. He reached into the cage.

The animal hissed, then bit him viciously.

“Jeez!” he yelled, retracting a bleeding hand. He slammed the cage door shut, then washed his hand in the lab sink. The bite was deep. He held a paper towel as a compress, then walked to a computer display console. He switched it on. It read:

CRAY 4 SYSTEM

Ganymede Link Status:

LINK	STATUS	ACCESSED BY
------	--------	-------------

G15727	closed	
--------	--------	--

G15728	closed	
--------	--------	--

G15729	closed	
--------	--------	--

G15729	open	?
--------	------	---

G15730	closed	
--------	--------	--

G15731	closed	
--------	--------	--

G15732	closed	
--------	--------	--

[More]

“What?” he asked, aloud.

He frantically dialed the phone. A voice picked up on the other end.

“Systems.”

“Gene? This is Richard. I’m on my way down to talk to you.”

“Okay.”

“Take a look at your link status matrix—link G15729. We’ve either got a serious glitch or someone’s penetrated the system.”

“Penetration? Through this security?”

“Yeah. Be right there.”

He hung up the phone, switched off the display console then quickly exited the lab via the hangar-side door.

He sprinted down steps onto the hangar floor, still holding the compress on his hand, paying little attention to the cordoned-off area near the lab entrance. It was an area he passed by regularly.

Inside were the remains of a craft. The pieces were organized and meticulously labeled as in an aircraft crash investigation, but the craft was not of this earth.

Chandra strode the length of the vast hangar, past a half dozen alien craft. All had crashed. Technicians and crews scooted around one of them like busy ants, performing analysis on the debris.

He glanced at his watch. He would have to get things going quickly with Gene. He had another field test in a few minutes.

* * *

Kostiya Baskakov knocked on the apartment door, roses in hand. His priority was to make peace with Katrina, and try one more time to convince her that a Ukrainian career path could be every bit as satisfying as a Russian career path. He knew that he would have to deal with all of the logical arguments. She had a very logical mind—sometimes too logical. Kostiya was more a man of passion.

He knocked again—this time, louder and with more conviction. *Maybe she's not home. Or playing hard-to-get.*

He tried the knob. It was unlocked.

He pushed the door open slowly, peering into the dark apartment. “Katrina?” he whispered.

There was a rustling inside, but no answer.

He smiled and went in.

* * *

Truth bridged the fault lines dividing belief and disbelief; horror and fascination; humility and hubris. Katrina relayed to Anderson the news of Chandra's lab. He told Li, who hastily convened a meeting in her conference room. They were all there for a free-wheeling session—Li, Anderson, Jafri, Katrina and Yuri. The implications were staggering.

"They killed visitors," Jafri said. "They couldn't control them."

"The alien devices combine a number of technologies to achieve surprising new capabilities," Li explained. "The construction of biochemical blueprints, the modification of the blueprint, the control of neural growth patterns, the interface with a quantum mechanical communications link—it is truly an amazing device."

"Maybe they needed to accelerate evolution by artificial means," Jafri suggested.

"They needed to solve certain problems posed by interstellar travel," Li added. "They plant the devices in developing embryos. The devices alter the biological blueprint of individuals and provide a collective neural interface. Their bodies are a product of both biological and technological evolution."

Katrina pinched her fingers in an explicative gesture. "Human intelligence, reduced to its essentials, is synonymous with communications. Intelligence is the ability to transmit more complex information from one brain to another. What if—"

"They can communicate with each other at interstellar distances," Anderson interjected. "Maybe they all plug into a communal network. A network of minds."

"Chandra exploits this technology to 'wire' animals," Yuri said. "He uses them as both information probes and weapons."

"Something was born at Groom 26 years ago," Jafri said. "Something very special. Deke got that from the LANL files."

Yuri agreed. "I got the same thing from an intercepted letter. I've been thinking about it. Twenty-six years—that's Chandra's age."

"I am troubled by one possibility," Katrina said. "Given the capabilities of this technology, do you think Chandra detected us when we entered his lab?"

"I need to find Chandra," Yuri said. "Before he finds us."

* * *

Katrina stepped out of the elevator onto her floor. She knew exactly what had to be done. First—call Gallagan. This thing had all sorts of political ramifications. Second—an escape plan. If someone was tuned in to the quantum-linked devices, they would know she had been in the lab. They would target her again. Maybe Yuri, too.

She halted in front of the door and dug through her briefcase for the key. Her hands trembled. The key ring seemed to dance from her hand. It dropped to the floor. She picked it up and put the key in the lock. It was already open!

She stumbled backward, away from the door, panicked, then raced back to the elevator. *Maybe, just maybe it was only another 'cleaning anomaly,'* she thought, riding the elevator down. She dialed from the lobby phone.

“Hello?”

Katrina puffed, frightened and out of breath, but tried to control her voice. *Actnatural!*

“Jane! This is Katrina. Today was cleaning day, right?”

The voice on the phone seemed puzzled. “Yeah. I did the bathrooms and the kitchen like you said. But not the work room. You told me to leave that. Is there a problem?”

“Did you leave the door unlocked again?”

“Oh, my God! Did I do that again? Listen, I’m very sorry. What can I say? I had a lot on my mind, you know? I really apologize!”

“It’s okay. It’s okay.”

Katrina laughed, even though it sounded out of place.

“Just don’t let it happen again. Hmm? Bye.” She released pent up breath and emotion, letting the handset slide easily back into the cradle. *Getagrip!*

As Katrina rode the elevator back up, she felt relieved—and terribly paranoid. *Of course,* she thought, *they say that true paranoia is when you know what is actually going on around you.*

She tried the door again. It opened an inch, then stuck. Something lodged against it on the other side. She pushed hard. The door opened.

She saw a body—ripped apart, half skeletonized. There was a valentine card on the floor. Katrina screamed.

* * *

Yuri lay on his bed, eyes closed, clothes on, thinking—about a world and a universe that seemed much smaller than it was yesterday. The phone rang. He fumbled, knocked his holster to the floor, then picked up.

“Hello. Sverdlov.”

“Yuri.” Katrina’s voice was calm, but contained an edge to it—of stress and quiet panic. “I’m in danger. I returned to my apartment after the meeting. The door was open. There was a body on the floor—a friend.”

“Was he—”

The edge in her voice cut to the bone of anger and confusion. “They got him, like Vladimir!”

“I hear you. Talk to me quietly. Tell me the situation.”

A sigh preceded her words. “I phoned my neighbor and asked her to tell the police. I couldn’t get through to Gallagan, so I—”

“You called me. That’s good,” he said. “You can trust me. Where are you now?”

“Shady Grove.”

“Can you meet me at Gallery Place in 45 minutes?”

“Yes.”

He heard teeth chattering on the other end of the phone. “Keep moving. I’ll see you then. Dasvedanya.”

He picked up his gun from the night stand, then stooped to retrieve the holster from the floor. That’s when he saw it—a metal box about the size of a cigarette package, taped to the underside of the table, connected to the phone line.

“Shit!” he murmured.

He checked his gun, holstered it and strapped it on, then threw a duffel bag from the closet onto the bed, filling it with a few clothes, ammo and professional gear. Low on cash, he retrieved an emergency stash of money from an envelope taped behind a picture.

Exiting the apartment building by a side door, he hurried to the street, bag in hand, and maintained cover, waiting by a hedge.

Light from an approaching car illuminated a row of parked vehicles opposite his apartment. A darkly silhouetted figure moved inside one of the cars. Someone watched.

He backed away from the corner of the apartment. *Other routes will be safer*, he thought.

* * *

Deke pulled onto Roy's property.

Roy—shirtless, wearing farmer coveralls and cowboy boots—closed the gate behind him, muttering, “Crazy, paranoid bastard!”

“Thanks, Roy. You're a pal!”

Roy flashed the one-fingered hand salute.

As Deke drove down the private road, he could see the blue van pull up at Roy's gate. A man in camouflaged battle dress got out. Roy tipped his hat and spit.

Deke put pedal to the metal, rocketing down Roy's private road on a shortcut to the trailer. As he pulled up, the coast seemed clear. It would be several minutes before Groom Goons arrived.

He threw camping gear, food and Gray into the back of the truck. Remembering an old James Bond trick, he plucked a hair and stuck it to the door with spit. If the hair was gone when he got back, he would know the Goons had been in the Center. Or that the hair had dropped off. Or whatever.

It was dusk when he neared the Groom perimeter. He pulled off the Freedom Ridge access road, stopped and brushed tracks.

* * *

Yuri craned his neck, scanning the platform as his Metro train pulled to a stop in Gallery Place. It was late and there were few people at the station. The possibility of disaster consumed him. *Where the hell is she?*

The doors rumbled. Yuri stepped out, stood close to the car, and searched the long, man-made cavern for the Russian woman who trusted him with her life. Behind him, the train waited silently, doors open like hungry mouths, waiting to be fed.

Katrina materialized from the shadows, moving from an area below an escalator, faced him for a moment, then walked briskly toward him.

Behind her, on another part of the platform, a man put down a newspaper and paced quickly toward Katrina. It was Chisholm. In one hand, he carried a brown bag.

Yuri walked past Katrina. "Get on the train. Now!"

Chisholm's eyes fixed on Katrina.

As Yuri approached, Chisholm reached into the bag. Yuri tripped him, kicked the bag from his hand, and watched a pistol skid across the loading area.

Lights on the platform blinked. The train issued a *DING-DONG* sound, signaling readiness to depart.

Yuri raced to the Metro car and jumped aboard as doors closed with a *whump*. From a window, he watched Chisholm dash to the dropped weapon.

The train glided forward. Chisholm stood, bracing the gun with both hands.

Yuri grabbed Katrina. "Everyone down!" he shouted.

Bullets shattered glass windows, pierced the thin metal skin of the Metro car and severed electrical wires, plunging the car into partial darkness. The few passengers in the car hit the deck. The train picked up speed, clearing the station.

Yuri crouched on the floor with Katrina. No one was hurt. Three passengers next to them dusted off and got to their feet. They were young, dressed in gang colors and visibly shaken by the gunfire.

"Tough night, huh?" one of them asked, trying to act nonchalant.

Yuri nodded, cleared glass from a seat, then sat with Katrina, whose body still trembled. He removed his coat and placed it over her shoulders.

The gang members eyed Yuri's gun, now visible in the holster under his arm. They whispered among themselves, then moved to the far end of the car, leaving them alone.

"That was a government guy," Yuri said.

"I know."

"His name is Gillford Chisholm. He works in an OSHA Special Projects office. It seems that what he does is very special."

Yuri's face was a mask, hiding a racing brain and seesawing emotions.

The train drove onward.

"All my life I thought I knew who to trust. I thought I was doing the right thing. I thought I could tell the good guys from the bad guys. I'm not sure of anything anymore."

She said nothing, clasping his hand.

The 'No-Smoking' sign on the wall of the bullet-punctured car now seemed irrelevant. She lit a

cigarette, blowing smoke toward a broken window that sucked in air with a continuous, vacuum-like *whoosh*. “What now?”

He reflected for a moment.

“In a court of law, you’d need to show motive, opportunity and evidence.”

“Forget that. We’re dealing with something like the old Soviet police state. Or worse—a government within a government, or a government outside a government. For all we know, they control the courts.”

“Maybe, maybe not. They need secrecy. That means a small organization.”

“Are you willing to bet your life on it,” Katrina asked. “Or the lives of others? The only chance is to go public.”

“Even if we try to get information into the hands of the press, we still need to make the case like in a court of law.”

“Why? I saw a paper the other day with headlines ‘Elvis’ Was A Space Alien.’ We have an even more fantastic story. Why wouldn’t they print it?”

Yuri smirked. “Oh, the tabloid press will print it, and that’s the problem. A lot of people view those stories as pure fabrication. And those that don’t aren’t worth convincing. We need a story so credible that credible newspapers will print it and credible people will believe it. We need a detailed trail of evidence linking Groom, extraterrestrial artifacts and biological weapon and mind control experiments. At the moment, we seem to be missing some key pieces in that story.”

“So what do we do?”

“We’re going to disappear for a while for health reasons. If they know where we are, they can get us. No place is safe—not even your embassy. We have to keep moving. They’ll be looking for us at National Airport. We’ll get off the Metro before then, at the Pentagon, then walk to a rental car place in Crystal City. I’ll call in tomorrow from New York—tell ‘em I have a sick relative there. Then we take small commuter airline hops to Las Vegas.”

“Groom,” she said, leaning on his shoulder. “We’re going to Groom.”

* * *

Deke lay on his sleeping bag in the back of the truck, Gray nestled beside him. It was a secret place in the desert that Zfar used as a base for ‘field expeditions,’ searching for evidence of government UFO testing. Deke loved nights like this out under the stars. He remembered the night a coyote stole their food. He remembered a freakish thunderstorm that caused Zfar, Gray and Deke to sleep in the two-man

cab. He remembered the night he got stoned and woke up stark naked. In their years of observing, they had seen airplanes, helicopters and craft of unusual design in the sky above Groom.

The government built the base in the '50s. Rumor had it that the U-2 and stealth bomber were tested here. Other rumors hinted at the existence of a sizable fleet of Soviet aircraft—bought or captured by the U.S. and secretly transported to the large hangars.

Then there were the UFO rumors.

A fellow by the name of Bob Lazar claimed to have worked on reverse engineering of extra-terrestrial craft at Groom. These rumors attracted Jafri and Dobbs like a magnet. They focused their energy on proving that intelligent extra-terrestrials had visited the planet, and that the government was covering up facts that could have as much impact on society as Copernican theory.

In all of their visits to the base perimeter, they had never been detected by Groom security—except for the one time that they had purposefully attracted attention to themselves, thumbing their noses. Technically they never strayed onto the base. Tonight, a gully shielded the truck from view of the Groom access road.

Deke scanned the sky.

Night in the remote desert was a spectacular show—jet black, with pin pricks of brilliant light. Deke now knew that at least one of those pin pricks was the home of intelligent beings. This knowledge changed his perspective forever. The sky would never seem the same.

And yet, with the knowledge came danger. A secret government-within-a-government claimed the right to kill people who got too close. Deke met the criteria for extermination. Moreover, it appeared that Groom Goons may already have targeted him.

What to do? He tried to think logically.

Option A was “Do nothing.” This was always an option that should be considered. However, it now seemed that the consequence of Option A was certain death.

Option B was to learn karate and marksmanship. Very quickly. He pictured the goons approaching him in the Rachel Bar. They would eye his muscled physique, not quite sure that he was their true target. “Who are you?” they would ask. He would turn slowly, arch an eyebrow and say: “Dobbs. Deke Dobbs.” Then his lightning fast karate kicks would dispatch the goons on the spot. He would expose Operation Majority. The Governor of Nevada would embrace him as his long lost son. He would live happily ever after off of book deals and speeches.

Right.

Option C was to become a super criminal—Ernst Stavro Dobbs. He would use the alien code to break into banking systems, obtain passwords and account codes. He would move millions of dollars into secret Swiss accounts. He would be a criminal with a conscience. He would only steal from the President of the United States and anyone else remotely connected with Operation Majority. He would use the money to create a world-wide counter-Majority organization—Operation Minority.

Option D was to play Prometheus to the masses—give the alien code to everyone. No more secrets. This would surely create world wide chaos and a return to the gold standard. Global productivity

levels would plummet as all companies and individuals minimized exposure to computer networking.

“What do you think, Gray?” he asked, stroking the dog’s ears.

Gray licked him.

“That’s what I think, too,” he said. “Try to stay alive. The only option that doesn’t make us a huge target is option D—give it away.” He stroked the dog’s ears again. “We’ll use information to negate the threat. That’s what we’ll do. The value of perfect information is perfect safety.”

Or so he thought.

53. TRAVEL AND TRANSITION

23 July 1994

Las Vegas, Nevada

“Can they find us here?”

Katrina sat on a large, heart-shaped bed, aware of the awkwardness of the situation—alone in a room with a man she barely knew, on the run, and not in control.

Yuri leaned his duffel bag against the bed, then plopped his six-foot frame into a cramped chair near a cheap formica table, looked at her and grinned. “My dear Ms. Fontanova, this is the kind of Las Vegas hotel where people go when they don’t want to be found. The kind of place where rooms rent by the hour.”

She looked at the coin box for the vibrating bed, and at mirrors on the ceiling. “This is a place where lovers go.”

“Yes. And fugitives like us.”

“I see. Did you ever take a lover to a place like this?”

“That’s a pretty personal question.”

“I don’t mind.”

“High school. I took a girl to a picnic. We had a lot of time afterwards. Our parents weren’t expecting us back. And I had a few bucks in my pocket—enough for an hour in a place like this.”

“And now, where is this girl?”

“I lost track.”

“Are there others?”

“This is getting pretty personal.”

“I don’t mind.”

He sighed. “Yeah. But I might. Sure. There’ve been others.”

“Were they—”

“Look, why don’t you turn off your intelligence officer mode for a moment and tell me about Katrina Fontanova.”

“I’m not sure you’d like her.”

“Try me. I’ve read her dossier. So far, I like what I see.”

“She’s a spy. An opportunist. She’s good at what she does.”

“What you’ve given me is your job description. I want to know about the woman who plays baseball, loved her brother, and wants to change the world.”

“Change the world?” Her eyes drifted. “I suppose I want to change my part of it. I don’t like what I see. Got a cigarette?”

“The nicotine’ll kill you.”

“If I live that long.”

“Good point.” He sat on the edge of the bed, rummaged in his duffel bag, found a pack and handed it to her, along with matches from the hotel room.

“Keep the pack. I’m trying to purify my body. I’m working for a nicotine-free America.”

She laughed, took a puff, then eased back on the bed, tossing off her shoes, stuffing pillows behind her back, pulling up her feet.

“Maybe I’ll just settle for a free America,” Yuri said.

“Ever since I was little, I wanted to come to America. I wanted freedom. I wanted comforts. I wanted vibrating beds.” She smiled at the irony. “I think I confused the two things—freedom and comfort. I thought one came with the other, especially in America.” She sighed. “My father is a communist. A true believer. He thinks I’m stupid.”

“I went to Russia once, with my father. He made me learn about the culture—Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy—”

“Tolstoy? My favorite.”

“I like Dostoyevsky. My favorite’s ‘The Grand Inquisitor’, where ‘... *in the splendid auto da fê, the wicked heretics were burnt.*’

“Why do you say—”

“My father knew what freedom was. He really knew. He fought Stalin. He was imprisoned, sentenced to death for being a heretic. For infecting people with different ideas. He escaped before they could kill him and made his way here.”

“I see. Even now, in Russia, freedom is far away. Maybe also the conception of good and evil. We are in turmoil. Things can go either way.” She smiled quickly. “So what else does my dossier say?”

“That you were a passionate Yeltsin supporter, that you risked everything, and that’s why you got the Embassy job.”

“Yuri?”

“Yes?”

“You’re risking everything, aren’t you?”

He was silent, averting his eyes.

“If you go into Groom, they’ll find you, track you, kill you. You can’t ever go back—to the FBI.”

“My father always drilled me on a slogan: ‘Duty, honor, country.’ Until now, I never considered the order of those three words. I’ll be all right. I’m an ex-SEAL. We can live in swamps and kill with our teeth.”

“I’m serious. I want to help.”

“I’m afraid I can’t accept. They’d say I was a Russian spy, and I’d have a hard time proving them wrong. Anyway, do you trust Nikolai?”

“No.”

“See what I mean?”

“The Russian government won’t have to know. Please let me help.”

He squeezed his eyes at the bridge of his nose. “You’re in trouble, too. We need to get the story out, somehow.”

She smiled. “It will be like my brother, Vladimir. Before the putsch, he was an ardent communist, and I was a Yeltsin supporter. We were opposites. Those were uncertain times. We agreed that whatever happened, we would help each other. Please, Yuri, let’s help each other.”

He looked away for a moment. When he looked back, a tear glistened in his eye. He took her hands, pressed them against his, then kissed her gently on the cheek. “Yes,” he said, “we’ll help each other.”

PART THREE: "SOMETHING WATCHES"

"The pit was calling its children back."

Solzhenitsyn, *The First Circle*

54. DREAMLAND

24 July 1994

Yuri and Katrina stood near their car at a lookout point on Freedom Ridge, blinking at a baked, barren void. A mild sandstorm floated brown haze above the desert floor, lofted it to the ridge where they stood, and dusted their faces and clothes.

"You told me this was a secret base," Yuri said. Maybe it's not secret—just lost." He squinted through binoculars at the parched earth below.

They heard the engine first, straining against incline and heat, then saw a vehicle—a pickup truck—round a bend, pull next to their car and stop. A door opened and closed.

Ben Nightwalker, holding his hat brim tightly against a gusting chinook, walked to meet them.

“You Mister Sverdlov and Ms. Fontanova?” he asked cautiously. They nodded. “I’m Ben Nightwalker.”

“Thanks for helping,” Yuri said, extending his hand.

“No problem. Zfar told me about your situation. Can’t stay long. They’ll miss me. Did you bring the identification pictures, like I asked?”

Yuri handed him an envelope. “Instant photos. Got ‘em in ‘Vegas.”

Ben looked at the pictures. “They’ll do for badges,” he said, pocketing the envelope. “Come here a second.”

He led them to a rocky outcropping. “You don’t want to drive past this point. They’ll spot you. But from this ridge, you can see the whole base.”

Yuri shaded his eyes and watched gossamer snakes of sand curlicue across the desert floor, as Nightwalker continued. “There’s the main entrance and control point... That dirt road runs along a sensor fence. Security Central sends trucks to check out alarms. Guards on the trucks are authorized to use deadly force.”

“How do we get in?” Katrina asked.

“I’m part of the night maintenance crew. The sensor fence will be down for repairs this evening. I’ll make sure it’s down a long time. Just follow that ravine in, and meet me at the maintenance shed. Can’t miss it.”

“Mr. Nightwalker—” Yuri started.

Nightwalker seemed unaware that a stream of blood trickled from one nostril, down his lip, onto his chin. Yuri watched it drip onto his boot.

“You’re bleeding,” Katrina said, stating the obvious.

“Oh.” He touched a hand to his face, saw the problem, then pulled a greasy rag from one pocket, blotting his lips and chin. “Just a nosebleed. I’ve had it since... Doesn’t want to stop.” He started toward his truck, wiped his nose again, and called back. “Meet me at eight o’clock tonight.”

He waved a bloody hand, then drove off.

Deke watched the trailer for an hour to make sure no one was around, then moved stealthily through the darkness, squeezed the latch and quietly opened the door. The computer room light was on, just the way he left it. He powered up the monitor and began work on THE PLAN.

The idea was simple. He would send the White Rabbit code to everyone. In weighing the stakes between a world in which data was secure and a world in which all data was open to inspection, Deke decided in favor of openness. If he were a man from Mars, capable of complete objectivity, he might have decided differently. However, he was being stalked. It was possible his life was in jeopardy. Flinging open the doors to all secret files was the only way he could be sure that the nefarious secret of Operation Majority was exposed to the world.

It wouldn't do to just send the Operation Majority files. It was a deeply epistemological issue—How do we know? How do we understand? Why do we believe?

The UFO community had been frustrated by actual and perceived charlatans within its ranks. There were so many hoaxsters that whenever someone did come across a document that seemed to reveal the existence of extraterrestrials or a government cover-up, it just wasn't believed. The government could plausibly deny the authenticity of any document. However, if Deke gave everyone the ability to penetrate government computers, then such documentation could be independently verified. Plausible deniability would evaporate. At least this was part of Deke's thinking.

The other angle had to do with staying alive. If he unleashed the White Rabbit genie, then Operation Majority security people would have no reason to kill him. There would be no net benefit.

With these ideas in mind, he wrote a generic note:

This message is from Deke Dobbs in Rachel, Nevada. I'm sending it because my life is threatened by "Operation Majority," a quasi-government program for exploiting extraterrestrial technology.

I know. This sounds crazy and paranoid. However, this message is proof that I have stumbled onto some very remarkable technology. The message itself will allow me to prove my claim.

Attached to this message is a machine-executable program which I call "White Rabbit." The program opens doors. That is, it penetrates the security systems of any online computer and returns a searchable image of the secure system. You don't need a big computer. A PC is fine, thanks to an incredible compression algorithm which beats anything else on this planet.

Take the program. Try it out. Give it to a friend. I suggest you start by penetrating any of the

national laboratories conducting weapons research. Look for Top Secret files on Operation Majority, or the Top Secret codeword, "MAJIC."

And, OBTW, if I turn up dead, you'll know it wasn't an accident. They got me.

Regards,

Deke

INSTRUCTIONS FOR USE OF "WHITE RABBIT"

Embed the attached file in an e-mail message.

- 1. Send the message to someone you know at a facility with "impenetrable" computer security;*
- 2. The program will return a message called "Blue Rook." Follow the instructions in the message.*
- 3. You will get a snapshot of the entire system on your desktop.*
- 4. GIVE A COPY OF WHITE RABBIT TO A FRIEND. 8-)*

He attached White Rabbit code to the message.

Now for the labor-intensive part: building the addressee list. His priorities included:

- 1. Close friends*
- 2. Foreign embassies*
- 3. All Mutual UFO Network sites*
- 4. Electronic Frontier Foundation*
- 5. American Civil Liberties Union*

6. *AP, UPI, Dow Jones, CNN*

7. *The rest of the world*

He worked on the list for an hour and a half. It was almost done when a blue van pulled up next to the trailer.

* * *

Outside Yuri's car, wind screamed across Freedom Ridge. Daylight turned to dusk. They waited, playing games.

"Okay," Yuri said, "here's one: American League's Most Valuable Player for 1986?"

Katrina laughed. "Piece of pie. Roger Clements, Boston Red Sox."

"Pretty good."

"Now, my turn. The category is Russian music. What was the name of Petr Ilich Tchaikovsky's last symphony?"

"*Pathétique*. He died ten days after finishing it. Who made a famous sacrifice play that gave the Red Sox a victory in 1993?"

Katrina wrinkled her nose, stumped.

Yuri waited a long moment, then turned solemn. "I should be the one making the sacrifice play tonight. Alone."

"No. We keep with the plan—I go in." She put her head against his shoulder, becoming comfortable.

"I know this wretched place, Yuri. I've memorized it from satellite photos. I've lived with the curse of it. I understand the science of it. I've smelled the stench of death from it. I can do this. I'll bring back the evidence we need to keep us alive."

"You don't need—"

She patted his arm. "Yes, I do. For Vladimir, and for my friend, Kostiya. And for myself."

"They can kill you, Katrina. Like Zfar said—normal protocol has been suspended."

“If you’re with me, they can kill us both. Then we’ve got no chance. Eventually, they’ll kill the others—Anderson, Jafri, Li. They won’t stop. You know it.” She closed her eyes, puffed her cheeks, and exhaled. “We’re both dead people, aren’t we?”

He didn’t answer.

She gave him a soft peck on the cheek. “You need to be out here, my Prince, in case something happens. And I... need to fill in the logical holes. Like documents with the fingerprints of Richard Chandra. Biological material, linking Groom to the Johns Hopkins lab. And if possible, I need to find what you Americans call the smoking gun—evidence of decisions to kill Mr. Dugan, Vladimir and me, and the names of people responsible.”

“We need to add a couple of items to your checklist for tonight. A radio. It’s tuned to the one in the car. Don’t use it unless you have to—they can pick up the signal.” He retrieved a bag from the back seat. “And a remote detonator. It has only a small charge, but you can put it near something combustible.”

“No. We talked about that before. I don’t want that thing.”

“Katrina, *they* have weapons. This just evens the odds. Trust me.”

She sighed. “I trust you, Yuri.”

“Good. All you have to do is place it on the way in. I can trigger it from here. It’ll give us a diversion if we need it.” He unholstered his pistol and began to load rounds. “I’ll come in if you’re in trouble.”

She laughed. “Guns blazing. An American cowboy. A real Russian would use his head. Like in a chess game.”

Yuri smiled, snapping the cylinder shut. “This isn’t chess.”

* * *

Deke peeked out the window.

The blue unmarked van that pulled up to the International UFO Research Center was from Groom. Two men in black got out.

He returned to the computer, hastily preparing to send the White Rabbit message. Outside, he could hear Gray barking and growling. There was a metallic *click* and a loud *POP!*, followed by a short, soulful whimper. Then, silence. He was ready to transmit when a size 12-E boot kicked in the door.

* * *

By eight thirty, darkness engulfed Groom. The wind had stopped. Katrina moved down a ravine, crouching to reduce visibility. She wore Yuri's black turtleneck sweater and carried a small backpack. She saw the maintenance shed located close to the ravine, worked her way to it and entered.

After a minute, she emerged with Ben, wearing a maintenance jumpsuit and a security ID badge. They both carried toolboxes.

As they walked toward the Research Center, Katrina thought she heard the sound of a small animal scampering across the desert floor.

* * *

When the door fell in, Deke spun around. He didn't have time to arch an eyebrow and say, in a Bond-like voice, *Dobbs. Deke Dobbs.*

The men in black were pure action. They hit Deke on the head and broke his right arm.

He awoke on the floor. One of the men in black searched the trailer, the other pointed a gun at his head. He felt incredible pain in his face and arm.

"There's a light on in the attic," one of them said, grinning. Then he tapped the gun on Deke's forehead. "You know—the attic?"

Normally Deke would have responded with a snappy repartee, but all he could think of was pain and survival.

The second man in black stopped searching and moved next to Deke. He smiled.

"Breaking your arm was just the beginning, Mister Dobbs. Are the LANL files the only classified files on your system, or did you steal others?"

Deke tried to speak, but the sounds that spilled from his throat were gurgles, not words.

The second man slapped him.

The other one broke his nose.

Deke blacked out.

* * *

Ben and Katrina entered the Research Center through an emergency door. Ben pointed to a security camera on the ceiling, then opened a small maintenance closet, blocking the camera's view.

"Most of the staff is gone by now," Ben said. "Security cameras can still see us in other parts of the building. Just act like my assistant. I'll tell you what to do. Whatever you want to take out of the building needs to fit in these tool boxes. We're going to Area G, the biological containment area. You said you were interested in rats. That's where they are."

Katrina removed Yuri's radio from the toolbox—her only link to the outside world. She put it in her pocket, just in case.

Ben started down the corridor. She snapped the toolbox shut, and followed.

* * *

Dmitry slouched at attention in front of Gallagan's big desk. He looked at his shoes. He looked at his watch. He looked at the bald spot on the top of Gallagan's head.

Meanwhile, Gallagan silently read Dmitry's report, carefully turning each page, muttering, "hmm" and "umhmmm" in appropriate places. Finally, Gallagan sighed, closed the report and leaned back in his chair, touching the tips of his fingers together in a practiced way.

"The upshot is that you don't know how it works—this computer code that infected our system—but you think you can use it. Is that right?"

"Your secretary doesn't know xerography from pudding, Nikolai, but she can still make copies of your letters. She just puts it in the machine and presses the button."

"I think your head resembles pudding. We're talking about software."

Dmitry almost responded with a quick comeback, but thought better of it. "Using this computer code is

easy. It's executable code, so we just encapsulate it in other pieces of software. Encapsulation is like putting a letter in an envelope. The mail system can't handle bare letters, but it is geared for handling envelopes with proper stamps and addresses."

Gallagan mulled over the analogy. "So if we encapsulated the code, we could send it back to the Americans and screw up their systems?"

"You got it, baby!" Dmitry exclaimed, switching to American slang.

Gallagan grinned. "I like that. Yes, I like that very much. And the report tells how to do it?"

"Yes," Dmitry said. "And the pocket on the back cover of the report contains a diskette with the executable code—just in case they don't understand Russian."

"Good work. Moscow will truly be impressed. Now go home to your family and get some rest. And take Monday off."

"I don't have a family, Nikolai. You are my family."

"Get the hell out of here, will you?"

"Yes, father," Dmitry said, with a wink, a smile and an unmilitary about-face, closing the door on the way out.

It was late. Gallagan was ebullient over the software triumph, but he was also exhausted from dealing with Katrina's situation and the pressure of getting out the weekly report to Moscow—a report rife with critical but delicate political issues. He stared at the ceiling and rubbed his eyes.

Katrina's short phone call from a New York pay phone told him she was running and that Operation Majority was in pursuit. Still, there might be a net benefit to this. She would either flush out and expose the secrets of the program—or she would die.

That meant she was highly motivated.

Secrets, he thought, when exposed to the light of day, are no longer secrets and no longer worth killing for. If you expose a secret—in a way that all the world can independently verify—then the bureaucratic drill becomes *spincontrol*, not revenge. Exposure cuts to the highest bureaucratic priorities—survival of funding, survival of the organization and career survival of bureaucrats.

In order to really help Katrina, Gallagan needed more leverage. Dmitry's software gave him some, but not enough. All he could do was muck up a few U.S. computers. They had no real delivery mechanisms like the American one—a mechanism that dropped the code bomb into computer systems from a safe distance. The idea of a balance of power weighed on his mind when he looked down and saw rapid movement out of the corner of his eye. Hairs crawled on the back of his neck. He tried to remain calm. He did not make any overt intention movements.

He opened a few desk drawers, attempting to move as naturally as possible. He glimpsed a small animal on the floor under the conference table—a furry ball with a whip-like tail, and a head that nodded up and down. He also saw a hole in the side of a ventilation grill—probably the rat's entry point.

He picked up a heavy book, stood up, then walked slowly to the door, closing it, avoiding eye contact.

He turned quickly to look at the rat.

The animal froze in a praying position. Then it scampered rapidly toward the hole.

Gallagan hurled the book.

It caught the rat in mid stride with a loud *WHUMP*.

He raced to the hole, plugged it with a book, then lifted the stunned rat by the tail, noting unusual protrusions behind its eyes. This was a Project Ganymede animal!

The rat's eyes blinked open. It twisted inside loose skin and bit his hand.

Gallagan laughed, dripping blood on the desk. He squeezed the rat behind the head and looked into its eyes.

He laughed again.

* * *

The radio, volume turned low, penetrated Yuri's consciousness: *Janie's got a gun—Her dog day's just begun. Now everybody is on the—run.*

He thought of Katrina, of danger, of time. They had worked out an itinerary. If certain things happened, or didn't happen, then he knew what to do.

He opened his eyes in the darkness, stretched for a long moment, held up his wrist watch and pressed a button for illumination: eight-ten. She should have contacted Ben by now.

The radio tune continued to play: *Dum, Dum, Dum, Honey, what have you done? Dum, Dum, Dum, it's the sound of my gun.*

He switched the radio off, pressed *REWIND* on a tape recorder in the seat next to him, and listened to a mechanical *whirr* that lasted for thirty seconds. When it stopped, he pressed *RECORD*, hoping never to hear the sound of a gun.

* * *

Gallagan's nostrils flared with excitement. He gnashed his teeth, staring at the rat imprisoned inside a jar.

It frantically clawed against the glass walls. It jumped toward the mouth of the jar, attempting to dislodge the book that trapped it.

"I am your worst nightmare," he said, aloud.

He smiled and dialed the phone.

"This is Gallagan. When does the Moscow courier leave?"

"After they load the hearse. Ten minutes," came the answer.

That's right, he thought. *The body is shipped back tonight.* "Hold the courier until we can package some live cargo. Make sure the driver is armed. I have some material that is *very* hot."

He smiled again. The game was afoot. He had leverage.

* * *

On the other side of the planet, there was a portentous knock on a door. Colonel Anatoly Kazikov took a swig of early morning tea, put down a personnel folder and looked up.

"Enter."

Major Velon Bunyayev stepped smartly to the area in front of the polished mahogany desk, snapped his heels and saluted. "Reporting as ordered, Sir!"

Kazikov returned the salute with an informal hand wave. He studied Bunyayev's face for a moment. "I've been looking at your records, Major. Very impressive—up until a few years ago."

Bunyayev did not immediately comment, but stood at rigid attention. He could not tell where the conversation was headed, and felt that the less said, the better. He finally responded with a non-committal, "Yes, Sir!"

"You were in charge of Alpha Unit in August, 1991."

"Yes, Sir."

"That was a crack unit. If you had succeeded in taking the Parliament Building during the putsch, history would be much different. Now your career is in the doldrums, it seems."

Kazikov got up and inspected the Major's spit-and-polish uniform, fingering the medals that hung like ornaments from Bunyayev's chest.

"Many people's careers have been in the doldrums since 1991." He drew close to Bunyayev's face and peered deeply into his eyes. "All of that... is about to change."

The edges of Major Velon Bunyayev's mouth moved upward. "I was loyal," he said.

"I know you were."

"I believed."

"Yes... you did believe. I'm trying to organize all the loyal people—true patriots, who remember the dream. We are growing stronger, again, Velon. We've had political successes in the Parliamentary elections. Soon, we will control the Duma. We have a network of people spread across Russia and elsewhere who think the same way and have the same goals."

"This democracy is a trap—a popularity contest."

"Yes, Velon. You're quite right. The majority wears ideas like fashionable clothes. They look pretty one day, but are out of step the next. Collective dreams, aspirations and hopes have a very short life span and limited value. There is nothing substantial there. The majority's views need to be shaped, molded, focused into a consciousness that can make Russia great again."

"Democracy is for the weak."

"And what we have isn't even a democracy! It's a simulacrum—a crude image of democracy which, by its crudeness, allows us to view the dangers of pure democracy from the safe distance of Hell's outer edge. And what happens when we go deeper? What horrors do we find then, hmmm? We step down through the layers of Hell and at the very bottom is a naked singularity—the raw emotions, contradictions and illogic of the human psyche."

Kazikov admired Bunyayev's well-polished boots—dark mirrors reflecting Kazikov's own image.

"Did you know that the first true democracy, Athens, sentenced their greatest philosopher, Socrates, to death? And they did it by popular vote! That's what happens when the majority rules. It's not what we need, Velon. Russia needs leadership. That implies a few leaders... and a lot of followers. Dominance hierarchies are ingrained in the Russian soul the way territoriality is ingrained in dogs. The majority must be... instructed."

"Strong leadership means a strong country."

"Yes. And leadership—the right kind of leadership—must be supported. Politics has emerged from the corridors of power into the corridors of the mind. It's the dawning of a new age."

"What can we do?"

"I see you will be one of the new breed of leaders, Velon. Therefore I will confide in you. The Americans have a mind weapon. And Nikolai Gallagan, at the Washington, D.C. Embassy, is about to send it to us. We must not let this fall into the wrong hands. Since the current Russian regime is mindless, we must get this technology to the people who can put it to good use. Are you with me on this, Major?"

“I am with you, Colonel Kazikov. My whole heart and mind are with you!”

* * *

Ben and Katrina moved through a mechanical room in the Research Center, surrounded by heating, ventilation and air conditioning—HVAC equipment. The sound of air forced through conduit and the occasional clang of expanding metal pipes echoed eerily in the large chamber.

Ben’s voice, rising above the whooshes, groans and clanks of the room, had an edge to it. “We maintain the security systems, but that doesn’t mean I have access to G Lab. I had to make certain changes in the system. If it works, we get in. If it doesn’t work...”

Katrina put a hand on his shoulder. “Wait.” She stopped to inspect a nexus of plumbing, wires and conduit, running her fingers along a pipe layered with dust.

That’s the propane system,” Ben said.

She nodded and smiled. “Let me leave a present—just in case we have a problem with the security system.” She removed Yuri’s remote detonator from the tool chest, taped it to the pipe, armed it, then stepped away. “I feel better, getting rid of that thing. We’ll pick it up on the way back—with luck.”

A sudden blast from the HVAC system startled the two. They clutched each others arms, then laughed, to release the tension.

“Whew!” Katrina said, wiping her brow. “Let’s get out of here.”

Nightwalker pointed toward steps leading upward. “This is Area G.”

A flood of light spilled into an unlit corridor as Ben opened the door from the mechanical room. The sound of HVAC units throbbed in the background like an immense dynamo.

Ben and Katrina stepped through and closed the door, shutting out sounds, wrapping the corridor once again in a dark shroud. An illuminated red sign marked the entrance—*Area G*. They walked slowly toward it, letting their eyes adjust to low light.

“With luck, my ID card will open the door,” Nightwalker said, wiping the card through a reader. He entered the cipher lock combination. Tiny lights on the reader blinked in a temporal pattern, then turned red.

“Sorry,” he said. “I had it in upside down.”

In a nearby part of the building, they could hear a heavy door open and close. Footsteps approached a

corner of the hallway near Area G.

Katrina's eyes showed concern. Ben wiped the card through the reader again and re-entered the combination. This time the lights blinked green.

The footsteps came closer.

The cipher lock sounded a low buzz, followed by a click. Ben opened the door. They entered into Area G.

* * *

Yuri relaxed in the car. The interior was quiet and dark except for the steady red light of the tape recorder. He waited and wondered. Would Katrina still be alive this time tomorrow? Would he still be alive?

The only sure survivor was the tape recorder, whose run light now seemed like the eye of God, transforming events into polarized magnetic domains in a thin film of metal oxide.

The recorder's light began to blink. A soft luminance rolled away shadows from the interior of the car. In the wink of an eye, the radio, dome light and car headlights turned on, startling Yuri. Noise and lights confused him. He reflexively drew his gun, squinted at the glow beyond the windshield and opened the door.

As he stood next to the car, a small, bright object glided past his position, descending toward the desert floor. The UFO receded. His automobile lights dimmed and the radio faded. Finally, he was alone in the dark on the desert ridge.

* * *

In the Project Ganymede laboratory, Area G, Ben and Katrina pressed against the wall as footsteps approached in the hallway.

Someone tried the door.

A burst of static broke the darkened silence, followed by an unintelligible radio call. A voice on the other side of the door answered.

“Yeah, this is Dumont. Over.”

Katrina gripped her own radio, staring at the transmit button, caressing it with a finger—a button that could call for help, a button that could give away her position. *Only if they find us will I press it*, she thought. *Only if we’ve lost all hope*.

Beyond the door, an unintelligible voice, modulated by static hiss, somehow communicated.

“Be there in three minutes. Dumont out.”

Ben and Katrina heard footsteps recede. They moved away from the wall. It seemed safe to breathe again, so they did.

Katrina fixed her mind on getting what she came for—evidence. Their flashlight beams criss-crossed the laboratory, outlining rat cages and video monitors. Equipment racks cradled electronics, alive with power lights. A metal workbench with a sink, an optical microscope and surgical tools, straddled the room’s center. A small bookcase containing technical manuals snugged up against the bench.

Working manuals, Katrina thought. *Information Chandra would need at his fingertips*.

She removed a thick, loose-leaf binder. There was nothing on the spine, but the cover read *Autopsy Reports*, caveated above and below by the words *TOP SECRET MAJIC*. Inside were reports filled with medical text and pictures—unusual organs exposed beneath flaps of skin pulled back tightly with hemostats. And there was an eye, nearly the size of a dissection tray, faceted like an insect visual organ.

She put the manual into the toolbox and searched for more evidence.

What about the computer? she thought. *It’s like the one in Chandra’s Baltimore lab. It seems integral to the experimental set-up*. She photographed it with a camera from the toolbox. *Could there be a database? Can I tap into it from here?*

The console displayed a status message, written in green phosphor, filled with cryptic references:

CRAY 4 SYSTEM

Ganymede Link Status

LINK	STATUS	ACCESSED BY
G15727	closed	
G15728	closed	
G15729	closed	
G15729	open	C00001

G15730 closed

G15731 closed

G15732 closed

[More]

If it is a database, someone with the coded identifier 'C00001' seems to be accessing it, she thought. Better leave it alone.

Katrina put her tool box down on the bench, then walked along the animal cages, allowing her hand to drag in a soft drumroll of fingernails on steel. Each cage door was secured with a small, thumbwheel lock.

She spoke quietly to Ben. "I'll need a specimen. We'll have to bend a cage or break a lock."

He nodded, then pulled a pry-bar from his box.

"Too big," she said. "Something smaller."

A scalpel atop a cutting surface on the workbench glinted in her beam. She picked it up, twisting it for inspection. It dripped fluorescent, emerald-colored liquid that refused to dry, even in the arid climate of Groom. Bright green drops stained the work bench's surface. *Alien blood?*

A rat screeched. Animals in the room vocalized with increasing agitation. A wall of displays lit up. Each screen showed a live, full-motion video picture of Ben and Katrina— images from the rats' point of view.

"Did you touch any of the equipment?" Katrina asked.

Ben shook his head. They checked the computer console. The screen changed rapidly. It now read:

CRAY 4 SYSTEM

Ganymede Link Status:

LINK	STATUS	ACCESSED BY
G15727	open	C00001
G15728	open	C00001
G15729	open	C00001
G15729	open	C00001

G15730 open C00001

G15731 closed

G15732 closed

[More]

Katrina clutched his arm. “Ben—What’s going on? Something’s accessing these computer links.”

As each line changed from “closed” to “open,” the rats became more frantic. Finally, the screen scrolled with dizzying speed, as hundreds of status lines changed. The screeching and cage rattling were deafening.

Outside the door, security guards shouted. Ben and Katrina backed toward the center of the room. Katrina gripped the radio. She punched the “transmit” button as the door banged open.

Automatic weapons fired through the doorway. Video screens on one wall vaporized in a shower of glass. The noise of squealing rats and clanging cages played as counterpoint in a fugue from hell.

Katrina and Ben dove toward the metal work bench for protection. Ben was hit. His leg exploded with the force of the rounds. He fell to the floor, gushing blood.

“No!” he yelled, as rapid fire riddled his body.

There was a pause in the gunfire.

“Stop!” Katrina shouted. “We’re unarmed!”

The firing stopped. Squeals from the rats stopped. Hushed silence cloaked the room.

Katrina breathed rapidly, hyperventilating. She heard a dripping sound, like water. A stream of blood flowed under the table, emptying into a drain in a concrete section of floor—one life’s essence converted to liquid waste. In the few video monitors which continued to operate, Katrina saw Ben’s body.

“Throw out your weapon!”

“I don’t have a weapon!” Katrina yelled back.

“Come out on your knees, then put your face on the floor.”

Katrina took short, quick breaths. Her face was ashen. Her body shivered uncontrollably.

Following the command, she kneeled in blood. One hand slapped the floor, slipping in the red liquid. The other hand came down to catch her body. There was a loud *clack* as the hand hit the ground. She still gripped the brick radio.

A guard fired a single shot, mistaking the radio for a weapon. Katrina felt a sharp pain in her left wrist.

The radio scooted across the floor. The impact of the round tumbled her onto her back, where she writhed next to Ben's body.

She could see Ben, lying parallel, but oriented in the opposite direction. She felt the warmth and wetness of his blood.

Ben was immobile. His eyes were open. His face was mottled with red tissue. There was a gaping wound in the center of his forehead.

Katrina grimaced in pain, holding her wrist.

Footsteps came closer. Combat boots touched her head. She could see video monitors still operating. They showed a guard in battle dress standing over her, arm stretching out, pointing a gun at head. There was the *click* of a pistol cocking.

Katrina breathed rapidly and shut her eyes.

Static blasted from the radio on the floor, followed by Yuri's voice. "*I have this on tape, you bastards!*"

Over the radio there was the sound of tape rewinding, then an audio replay of the past few moments:

"... *gunfire... Stop... Throw out your weapon!... I don't have a weapon!*"

"How do you think this will play on the local news?" Yuri yelled. "How do you think pictures of this base will play in the House Appropriations Committee? How do you think my special report to the Russian Embassy will play at the next summit meeting? Tell Richard Chandra I'm bringing him down. I'm bringing Operation Majority down."

The Guard in combat boots and neatly bloused trousers walked slowly to the radio. He picked it up and pressed to talk. "Identify yourself... Over."

"Jones. Indiana," came the reply.

An explosion rocked the lab, toppling people like bowling pins. Fluorescent light fixtures and pieces of tile ceiling rained onto the floor. A rack of rat cages tumbled. Animals scampered across the lab.

A security patrol leader climbed to his feet and shouted orders. "Jackson and Dumont—Put her in confinement and call the medic. Peterson—See if we can get a fix on the intruder's transmissions. He can't be far. Mason—I want four perimeter patrols immediately into areas Charlie, Echo, Delta and Foxtrot. Brown—Get chopper coverage along County Road 5. Move!"

Yuri stood by the car, doors open. A fire burned at the Research Center beyond the ridge. He dowsed his head with water from a canteen, then spread dirt from the road across his face. He donned a black nylon jacket with a hood, checked his weapon and filled his pockets with spare rounds. They would find the car fairly quickly. He wanted to make sure they didn't find him. Retracing Katrina's path would be too dangerous. He needed another way in. For the moment, he needed to hide. The moonless black sky promised cover.

* * *

A torrent of rain poured onto the tarmac at Dulles International Airport. Gallagan opened the window of his limousine a crack and talked to the airport security guard.

"Diplomatic pouch," he said, flashing identification. "And the car behind me carries a body for transport."

The guard reached in. "May I?"

Gallagan released the ID. The guard walked back to the control point and checked it against an access roster.

Water poured through the crack in the window, soaking Gallagan and the small box with air vents that he held tightly on his lap. He looked out the rear window, to the hearse carrying Vladimir's steel coffin. *We return to Russia something alive and something dead*, he thought. *A fallen soldier and the weapon that felled him. And now, Vladimir, you will see justice. We will have our revenge.*

The guard returned, handing the ID back through the window. "Okay," he said, with a wave.

The steel security barrier lowered into the ground and the wire fence gate rolled open. The path was clear. Two vehicles drove onto the flightline.

* * *

Katrina imagined running. Her feet were bare. She wore a hospital gown. It was night in the desert. Next to her was another runner—Vladimir, her brother. His face was twisted in terror.

Looking up at the sky gave a trick view of a placid universe. She saw a meteor trail flash, then fade. No matter how hard they ran, the stars stayed fixed. Vladimir and Katrina went nowhere. Yet, behind them was the Terror. It screeched. It pursued them relentlessly. She could hear Vladimir's labored breathing. He stumbled, and a living wave engulfed him.

He cried out.

Katrina wanted to help, but knew that if she stopped, she would die. Everyone would die.

Katrina stumbled.

She watched, like an objective observer, as her own body fell in slow motion. When it hit the ground, there was a clang of metal-on-metal. She saw her face dissolve into the face of Ben Nightwalker—eyes open in death—staring upward.

She shuddered. Her eyes blinked open. The dream vanished. A different nightmare took form.

She was in a bed, wearing a hospital gown. Her good hand was chained to the bedframe. A brown rat crawled slowly up her leg. She didn't move. It climbed slowly onto her chest. She breathed shallowly. Panic and adrenaline pumped sweat to her upper lip and forehead.

Again, she heard the sound of metal-on-metal. The door to the cell opened. Room lights switched on.

She yelled, threw off the rat with her bandaged hand and curled into a ball.

"Hello, Ms. Fontanova," came Chandra's voice. "Good to see you again."

* * *

The Groom security truck parked in the middle of the dirt road, engine idling. The driver picked up a brick radio, looked out the window, then at the clock on the dashboard.

"This is Alpha Romeo calling from point Charlie Two," he said. "Time is ten-thirty one. Over."

There was a burst of static.

The driver and the other patrolman in the cab watched as a bright object moved in the sky like a ship from another world, suddenly bathing the cab in intense light.

Both men looked up, shading their eyes.

The sound of a helicopter erupted overhead, then faded as the craft moved away. It appeared as a

receding bright object in the passenger-side window.

The radio blared: “ *Copy. Any sign of intruders? Over.*”

“Negative, Spyglass,” the driver continued. “We’re moving to the next position and will keep you advised. Alpha Romeo out.”

The two men in the cab could see the helicopter approaching again. The cab filled with light, followed abruptly by the roar of engines. The helicopter hovered above the truck for a moment, spotlights pointed downward, then moved away.

Yuri emerged from a rocky outcrop, paced quickly to the truck, removed his belt, then slid beneath the high chassis. He heard the rush of rotor blades fade to a distant buzz as he strapped himself to the underside of the vehicle.

“Don’t you hate it when they do that?” the driver asked his companion. “You can’t even think.” He put the truck in gear and drove off.

* * *

Gallagan stood outside the parked limousine watching the Aeroflot jet creep down the wet taxiway. The downpour had stopped. Wet tarmac reflected aircraft lights like a dark mirror.

We have put them in check for the moment, he thought. Still, there were pawns that could be lost—Katrina and Yuri. *They are expendable. We’re all expendable in this game.*

The jet turned at the end of the active runway, revved engines, then started the takeoff roll, moving faster and faster.

And what of the end game? he thought. *When Colonel Kazikov receives the package, he will certainly understand the implications. He will soon find people smart enough to turn the technology into weapons and spy systems. We will have a stalemate. The Americans will have lost the gambit.*

The craft launched into the night sky. *I’m just a diplomat*, he thought, with a quiet sigh. *My job is to buy them some time.*

He opened the door to the driver’s compartment. “Take me to the White House,” he said.

He climbed into the back of the limo and thought about the next chess move.

* * *

“Curiosity, Ms. Fontanova, is a powerful force. I knew that curiosity would bring you here.” Richard Chandra smiled at his captive.

“You are the curiosity,” Katrina said. “They modified you, didn’t they? Your nervous system has implants. And FTL links.”

He laughed, nervously. “FTL. Faster-than-light. Faster than logic. Faster than you can imagine. A growing network.”

“Did they implant other people?”

“They tried. I hate competition.”

“You’re a freak.”

He paced back and forth, organizing his thoughts.

“It’s funny how you can hang on to a bit of poetry or prose all your life. I stumbled on Rousseau’s *The Confessions* once. A bit of it stuck to my brain like glue. Rousseau said, *I am made unlike anyone I have ever met; I will even venture to say that I am like no one in the whole world. I may be no better, but at least I am different.*”

He licked his lips.

“Anyway, ‘freak’ is a term for a minority. That will soon change.”

“ *Why* are you?”

“Your curiosity, Ms. Fontanova, is like my hunger. Insatiable. Stimulated by external things. It needs to be fed. I am me because they needed a human embryo to experiment on. No reason—just curiosity. I was chosen. I was famous in certain circles before I could even talk. Lucky me.”

Chandra stood, brushing his hands through his hair.

“Unfortunately, Thought Tunneling Devices were useless until I had something to communicate with. After years of technology development—something I had a lot to do with—my wish came true.” He put his hand on the floor. A rat ran into his palm. He stroked it, lovingly. “Be careful what you wish.”

“What will you do with me?”

He rubbed a finger up and down her arm, feeling smooth, warm skin turn to the texture of gooseflesh.

“Devil!” she shouted in Russian, backing to the end of her chain, as though touched by one of his

animals.

“We’re not communicating, Ms. Fontanova. I don’t speak Russian, but I get the gist.” He licked his lips, again. “What will I do with you?”

* * *

It was after midnight in Washington, D.C., when a black limousine pulled up to the diplomatic entrance of the White House. Nikolai Gallagan stepped out. A security escort accompanied him into the building. They walked briskly up some steps, then down a red-carpeted hallway, stopping next to an office door. The escort knocked.

“C’mon in,” a voice answered.

Gallagan and the escort entered into an empty reception area. A lamp on the desk was the only light in the room. Lights in an inner executive office burned brightly. They heard movement inside, then Billy popped out of the doorway.

“Nikolai! Good to see you. Listen, can you wait for a minute? I’m on the phone. Kind of a crisis?” Billy looked at the escort. “Maybe Nikolai would like to see the new photo montage down the hall? I’ll come down ‘n get you just as soon as I’m done. Promise.”

* * *

The truck carrying Yuri awaited clearance at a security check point. The guard walked around it, looked inside, then waved it through.

Beneath the chassis, hanging like a spider in a leather web, Yuri gripped wires and mounts, hoping his belt would hold. Bumps in the road jostled his feet, wedged in metal nooks, dropping them to the earthen road, where his heels dragged until he could reposition himself.

The truck drove toward the Research Center, slowed as it approached the designated parking area, then finally stopped.

Laughter exploded inside the cab as the truck cut its engine. Doors opened. The driver and patrolman

exited, both in hysterics.

“... and then he said ‘Tail wax!’” the driver roared.

Both men laughed again.

“Whoa, Don’t do this to me. I can’t take this many jokes in one night. My funny bone gets hungry. Time to chow down.” The two men walked off together, continuing to joke and laugh.

Yuri unstrapped himself from the bottom of the truck, crawled out and surveyed the area from a huge wheelwell.

That’s the maintenance shed, he thought, looking ahead toward a small shack near a ravine. *Maybe 100 yards—most of it in the open*. He moved at a low, fast crouch across the ground, melting into the shadows on one side of the shed. He looked through a window, saw no one inside, and entered.

The light was on. He quickly lowered a window shade to mask his movements. There was a blueprint of the Research Center mounted on the wall. His fingers traced the location of security sensors.

In through the roof, then the utility tunnel, then sub-floor access space.

He felt around the edges of the Plexiglas slab covering the map, then ripped it from the wall. The blueprint fell to the floor. He folded it and put it in his pocket, closing the door softly as he headed toward the Research Complex.

He climbed an access ladder to the roof, where he scanned the facility blueprint again. *Ventilation system’s the way in*. He dropped into a large vertical metal vent.

Now the hard part—avoiding detection. He pulled a metal grating away from its frame and poked his head through the hole. *An administrative area. No safes. Probably no motion detectors. Blueprints show no video cameras.*

He jumped the short distance to the floor, waited, and listened. Silence. *Not a creature was stirring...*

He crawled on his belly, commando-style, toward the hallway entrance. Beyond the fire door, he could see the hatch to the utility tunnel. A silhouette passed in front of the windowed door. A worker with a badge put coins into a vending machine. Yuri heard the candy bar thump its way down the chute. He pressed against the wall, waited until the worker departed, then cautiously scurried across the corridor. He removed the hatch, stepped in, and closed it behind him.

The utility tunnel was completely dark. His flashlight cut like a laser beam, illuminating massive, wall-mounted trays carrying coaxial cable. He had to hunch down as he walked, to avoid bumping against the low ceiling.

He moved down a vertical cable chase, and at the bottom, found raised computer flooring.

Near the ladder, a door with a window looked out into a hallway. He put his face to the glass, then backed away when he heard voices.

Chandra! Yuri looked from the corner of the window.

Richard Chandra and two security guards stopped a few feet down the hall, talked momentarily, then moved on. They entered into Area G, closing the door behind them.

Can't go in that way, Yuri thought, eyeing security cameras monitoring the hallway. Besides, it's a vault. The door has a crypto lock. But the sub-floor—

Yes, the subfloor—white tile above, darkness, closeness below.

He teetered for a moment, picturing what he had to do. *There will be a faint visibility, not total darkness. I'll have to be quiet, ever so quiet. Like a mouse. If they hear me, they'll pull away the tiles.*

Then, with a sigh, he muttered, “What the hell,” and lowered himself to his knees. He pointed the flashlight into the opening. There was a rectangular hole in the concrete wall below the raised flooring. Cables ran through it.

He crawled in.

The space below the floor was an ambiguous darkness, broken by cracks of light.

He forced himself forward, slithering between steel supporting posts, over dirty cable bundles that formed the building's nervous system, through the web, deeper and deeper.

He crawled slowly through the tight space. There was a rectangular opening in a concrete wall just large enough to squeeze through. He drew his shoulders together, turned his head sideways and exhaled, inching in.

Voices emanated beyond the opening. He thought he heard a rustling sound.

* * *

“Call off the alert,” Chandra said to the senior security officer. “Return the base to Condition Yellow. Notify the test crew that I want a stand down at the Malebolge site. In the morning tell them they have the day off—as a reward for excellent work.”

“Yes, Sir,” the guard responded.

“I'll take care of the body.”

The Guards departed.

Chandra spoke loudly in the empty room. “Are you curious, Agent Sverdlov? Curious about Project Ganymede? Curious about Ms. Fontanova? Then listen to me...” He smiled slowly, gazing at the cages. “Listen—to me!”

Rats in cages along one wall of Area G began to chatter, squeal and move. Their bodies banged loudly against steel wire. The computer screen, still operating, scrolled rapidly—each new line adding ‘C00001’

to the ‘ACCESSED BY’ column. Finally, Chandra had complete connectivity. Complete control. Then the racket subsided.

“As you may have already guessed, Project Ganymede gave me a special ability. The TTDs in my brain *connectme*. I control other bodies, other limbs, other jaws, other teeth.”

He stared at the section of floor where Yuri hid. His upper lip curled to the top of his teeth.

“I can see you, Yuri—with my other eyes.”

In the crawl space, Yuri heard Chandra’s remarks. He also heard scuttling noises around him in every direction—first faint and distant, then bold and close. Something alive moved in the darkness under the floor—a tick of hate loose in a labyrinth, infecting all pathways.

A furry body screeched. He felt hair in his face, then pain. There was a sound like teeth on bone.

Yuri yelled.

The rat was gone in an instant. His cheek gushed from the bite. He tried to stanch the flow of blood with his hand. He breathed rapidly, scanning the darkness with a pencil beam of light. Dozens of red eyes, naked tails and furry, dark bodies surrounded him. He looked around with growing panic, but found no clear exit path.

From above came Chandra’s voice: “I can pump bullets through the floor, Yuri. I personally don’t like that option—too noisy. Alternatively, you can watch a very personal demonstration of my ability to control the animals... I prefer the latter option.”

Yuri touched the floor panel above his head.

“The only issue is whether you die here, or meet with Fontanova first. This can be hard, or it can be easy. Your choice.”

Death by rats was not a preferred option. Yuri pushed up a section of flooring and emerged into Area G. Chandra covered him with a gun. Glass and blood still littered the floor from the previous fire fight.

In front of Yuri was a body bag, partially open, showing the face of Ben Nightwalker.

“Excellent choice,” Chandra said.

* * *

Gallagan looked at the photographic montage of past U.S. presidents. His escort sat on a couch in the waiting area. When Billy entered from the corridor, the escort rose to his feet.

“Sorry for keepin’ you waitin’, Nikolai. Had to take an important call. ‘Course I know what you’ve got must be pretty important, too. Otherwise, you wouldn’t be over here this late... What’s up?”

“We know about Operation Majority,” Gallagan said.

“I see.”

Stanton turned to the escort. “I’ll escort Mister Gallagan out when I’m done. We’d like to talk privately, please.”

The escort nodded and left.

Gallagan looked at the presidential montage.

“The alien craft crashed at Roswell in this time frame,” he said, pointing to President Truman. “On his watch... Stalin was in power then. The Cold War started. Good people on both sides died to get information about powerful new weapon systems. Nuclear terror brought us to the brink of extinction.”

Gallagan stared at Billy.

“Now alien technology is about to start it all again. We don’t need another Cold War.”

Billy nodded, then said softly: “Nope. We sure don’t.” He cleared his throat. What we have, here, Nikolai, is a bureaucracy tryin’ to out-trick itself. I’m sayin’ this off the record.”

“Off the record,” Gallagan said, “we have one of your people and one of my people running for their lives—Ms. Fontanova, my Information Officer, and Agent Sverdlov, from your FBI. Call off the assassins, or we’ll give everything we have about Operation Majority to the press.”

“Off the record, Operation Majority was a mistake. It was an elaborate deception designed to keep you and others guessin’ about our R&D efforts at Groom.”

Gallagan squinted, caught off guard.

“Nothin’ wrong with tryin’ to keep secrets a secret,” Billy continued. “But we’ve got an out-of-control bureaucrat who started takin’ the game too seriously.”

“This game,” Gallagan said, “has already killed one of my people. Fontanova and Sverdlov may be next. To use the Americanism, I want you to *pull the plug*.”

Billy nodded. “I don’t want anybody else to get hurt. You seem to think highly of Ms. Fontanova—”

“Yeltsin himself sent her here. Did you know that?”

“Frankly, I didn’t. Agent Sverdlov is also one of our best. After your Ambassador said he wanted him on the investigation, I looked at his record. Spotless. Ex-Marine who distinguished himself in combat. A true patriot.”

“Yes. A patriot. Do with him what you will. But if anything should happen to Fontanova, you will have a major diplomatic incident on your hands.”

“Give me 24 hours, Nikolai. If they don’t show up in 24 hours, well... we’ll put everything we have on it. I’ll pull the plug now. I mean that, sincerely, Nikolai.”

* * *

Three intruders ransacked Yuri’s apartment. One of them pulled books from a shelf, looking for hidden notes. The second, Chisholm, disassembled Yuri’s computer, removing his disk drive. The third, Agent Stone, looked through Yuri’s desk, carefully reading and sorting papers.

Chisholm walked to the desk and put down a piece of equipment.

“I’ve replaced Sverdlov’s hard drive with an empty one. I’d like to take this back to the office and start looking at his files. A lot of them are encrypted.”

“Do something for me first,” Stone said, removing papers from a coat pocket. “See if you can find a few appropriate places to put these.”

Chisholm looked through the papers, flashed his eyebrows in surprise and whistled.

“Evidence,” Stone said. “When Sverdlov doesn’t show up, we’ll have police search the apartment. They’ll discover he was working for the Russians. Anything that gets published about Operation Majority will seem like a fantastic Russian disinformation campaign. A cover-up to hide lies and spies. We’ll have plausible deniability.”

* * *

The phone in Billy’s office rang impatiently. The escort had gone. Billy heard the ring and led Gallagan through the hallway, back to his office. He picked up.

“Science Advisor.”

A filtered voice came through the phone. “*Billy, this is Stone. We’re done. Everything’s in place.*”

“Great,” Billy said. “Thanks.”

He hung up, then looked at Gallagan.

“Some unfinished business. Now, where were we?”

* * *

Deke dreamed. He floated up to the ceiling and watched two thugs hammer his body. He seemed to be tied to his body by some sort of umbilical cord. He was a helium-filled thought balloon, and his body still held the string. "That's nice," he thought.

Then it seemed that the string got shorter. Something pulled at the string, reeling him in. He felt pain again. When he finally opened his eyes, two faces from hell crowded his view.

"He's coming around," one of them said. "Prop him up. See if he'd like a drink of water."

Oh, Deke thought, now we're playing nicey-nice. That's nice. He really did feel better after he sipped water. The glass reddened with his blood.

"Feel better?" one of them asked.

He nodded, "Yeah."

"Good. Can you tell us where the other classified files are that you've hidden?"

Deke nodded again, "Yeah."

"Great. I think we're communicating. Can you just show us? I realize talking is kind of a problem now. But listen—you gotta talk or my partner 'll kill you."

Deke pointed to the computer. They lifted him into the seat. At first he felt faint, but it passed. It was important to communicate.

"Online," he said.

"You've hidden the files online?"

Deke nodded.

"Think you can show us the way?"

Deke nodded again, then turned to the keyboard. He couldn't use his right hand at all, so he hit the return key with the left hand. There was a dial tone, then the FSK 'music' of digital dialing. There was the noisy hash of a modem connecting, then silence.

On the screen they saw a spinning icon and a window labeled “Out Basket.”

“What’s that?” Thug One asked.

“Connection protocol,” Deke managed to say.

They watched the spinning icon some more.

“Sure takes a long time,” Thug Two said.

“System’s slow,” Deke said, through broken teeth.

Finally, there was a beep. A window popped up with the notice: *143 messages sent*. Deke laughed.

“What messages?” Thug One asked.

Deke still laughed.

“Bastard!”

Thug One pointed his gun and pulled the trigger. *POP!* Deke slumped over the keyboard. The world dissolved to black.

56. MALEBOLGE

24 July 1994

Midnight approached and the blackness of night lapped against the shoreline of Groom Dry Lake Base. A patrol truck sped toward the Malebolge test site, headlights probing the dirt road. In the covered cargo bed, Yuri and Katrina sat side-by-side, handcuffed, arms intertwined. Both were exhausted. Katrina still wore the hospital gown.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“For what?”

“We were going to help each other. Now—”

“It’s not over ‘till it’s over.”

Her laugh rang with hollow tension. “Yogi Berra?”

She rested her head on his shoulder, trying to relax in an impossible position. The body bag shrouding

the corpse of Ben Nightwalker pushed snug against her feet.

The truck slowed to a stop. The engine cut off. A door opened and closed.

“Yuri,” Katrina whispered, as Chandra’s footsteps moved toward the back of the truck, “I’m sure he doesn’t speak Russian.”

A flashlight beamed in their faces. Katrina saw the metallic glint of a gun. She felt an adrenaline rush.

They exited the truck in a clumsy embrace. Chandra made them sit on the ground. The desert grated against Katrina’s feet and legs. A slight breeze cooled her body. She responded with a shiver.

Chandra hit a light switch and Malebolge became a stage.

Katrina watched as Chandra’s powerful body shoved Nightwalker’s corpse against the upright frame on the target pad. The body locked in place with a *clang*. Chandra looked into Nightwalker’s dead eyes, grinned, then turned.

He tossed a set of keys. They landed near Yuri and Katrina, who clutched at them awkwardly with cuffed hands and intertwined arms.

Chandra trained his gun on the captives. “Please unlock yourselves, then join your friend at the center of the circle.”

Yuri released his handcuffs, then unlocked Katrina. “*We help each other*,” he said, in Russian.

Katrina nodded.

“All set, then,” Chandra said. He walked to a cylinder and flipped a switch. A green ready light illuminated. Strobe lights flashed along the outer rim of the grid. From the air, it resembled a giant, flashing target.

Katrina huddled close to Yuri and whispered in Russian. “*What’s your plan?*”

“You know, it’s rude to whisper—especially in Russian. What did you say?”

“She said,”—Yuri pronounced the words in Russian, for Katrina’s ears—“*It’s a short distance, but I need a distraction.*”

“Okay,” Chandra said, “I’ll forgive you. This is your moment—your last moment. A secret moment. I’ll bury the thought.”

He swept his arms in a broad, arcing gesture. “I call this the ‘multi-target test.’ It’s something I haven’t tried yet. The test objective is to see if I can effectively control multiple animals attacking multiple targets—you.”

Chandra backed away. “Conditions for the test will be free-ranging movement—that’s why I’ve released you. Now let’s bring in the other players.”

He removed a small box from his coat and pressed one of two buttons. Cage doors opened. At first, the rustling was muted, like a flock of birds hovering in unison. Then there were screeches, like hungry

predators closing on prey. Rats poured from the cylinders, encircling the target pad.

Chandra stood twenty feet away, at the edge of a sea of rats. A thousand red eyes pulsed in synchrony with the strobe lights. Wind blew across the site in a low hush.

In the distant sky, a bright object moved toward the Test Site. Chandra didn't notice.

Katrina searched for something to throw—a rock, anything. But the target pad was smooth, clean concrete. A rock of the right size and shape lay just off the edge of the pad. *My throwing arm is okay*, she thought, *but can I reach it?*

“Everything's in position,” Chandra said, adjusting settings on a video camera.

Katrina pressed Yuri's hand, then stepped away from him, moving slowly toward the edge of the concrete.

“What the two of you are about to experience is truth and justice—the kind that nature herself metes out. Survival of the fittest. What could be more natural? What could be closer to the truth? The big fish always eat the little fish—that's justice.”

The sound of squealing animals slowly built to a frenzy. Chandra's lip curled above his teeth, a mood multiplied without loss from one mind to all. He arched an eyebrow, licked his lips and lowered his gun. “So many mouths to feed.”

Katrina grabbed at the desert floor.

Rats scuttled in from all sides.

She picked up the baseball-sized rock with her good hand, wound up and hurled it toward Chandra. It sizzled, captured in winking lights like a tumbling meteor, burning into the tissue and bone of his cheek, impacting with a dull thud. He went down.

Yuri raced across the short, rat-filled distance, pouncing on Chandra.

The bright light in the sky glided over the Test Area—like a helicopter, but silent, shimmering and unearthly.

The craft dropped a blue beam. The sea of rats recoiled like a rippling wave. The blue light hit the wrestling figures, then Katrina.

Time stopped.

Like a disembodied soul, Katrina seemed to float in the bright whiteness of a dimensionless chamber. The place appeared to have more of a mental than physical existence. She looked on as a detached observer. She could see Yuri gripping Chandra by the neck. Both men wore startled expressions. Both were naked. Yuri's expression changed. Chandra's face remained frozen. She tried to talk.

"I think he's dead," she said.

Yuri released Chandra. There was a deep whisper. His body floated upward. It dissolved in smoke, starting with the limbs. Finally the head—with frozen eyes and grinning teeth—melted into vapor. The Cheshire Cat vanished into hell.

When the vapor cleared, nothing was left except Yuri, Katrina and the featureless white background. Then from behind:

"We have removed your clothes to speed our analysis."

They turned. Ben Nightwalker stood before them. A bullet hole marked his forehead, wounds punctured his body.

"You are being scanned," he said.

"Ben?" Katrina asked. "We thought you were dead."

"Nightwalker is dead," he replied. "Nothing is what it seems. A familiar face. We've been listening. We've been waiting—ever since Chandra connected. We tried to communicate with your Operations Center and with another place. They murdered us. Majority murdered us."

"The talking printers!" Katrina exclaimed.

"Subtlety is lost on your species. We need to be much more direct."

"Why didn't you stop Chandra before now?"

"We were curious. Like you."

"Why stop him now?" Yuri asked.

"He infects us."

"What do you think—" Katrina began.

"Yesss... Our question. Exactly."

The thing that resembled Nightwalker tossed a small, coin-like object in the air with a flick of the thumb. It levitated, spun rapidly and hummed with a sound like Jafri's tuning fork.

"A penny for your thoughts?" the Nightwalker thing said.

The spinning object zipped to within an inch of Yuri's face. He shielded with his hand. It shot laterally toward Katrina and burrowed into her forehead. She screamed in pain and surprise. There was no blood. No outer wound.

As the object tunneled through tissue, Katrina's view of the chamber changed. It was no longer white and featureless. She could make out machines, architecture and biological entities. The thing no longer looked like Nightwalker. It resembled an immense, unearthly insect.

Its shape was at once solid and a shimmering mirage, changing appearance and color as a myriad of small pores opened and closed in organized waves, like the rainbow ripples of oiled water along its skin.

The creature moved to within inches of Katrina's naked body, forcing its way into her mind. "Thought Tunneling Devices are not for humans," it said. "We forbid you to use the hive channel."

Katrina convulsed as the probe penetrated deeper into her brain. "We have destroyed the test animals. We have destroyed Chandra. We now destroy the fabrication plant," the creature said. "We protect ourselves from infection, from entropy."

She heard a sound like a continuous exhalation. It began as a whisper and built in amplitude.

"You will remember this," the creature whispered. "You will be our eyes and ears."

Katrina struggled to respond. "Wait! Listen to me! Listen!"

"Yesss... Yessssss... Yesssssssss"

The creature's voice seemed to melt into white noise. She heard an explosion, like the sound of rapid decompression. The alien face shrank like the residual trace of a TV image when the tube is turned off, dissolving like a white pill dropped in a dark glass. She blacked out.

* * *

For Yuri Sverdlov, the universe re-set. Time re-started. He lay face down in desert sand, naked. Whirling dust diffused light from the midday sun. Blue lightning slithered across the sky. He stood up and looked upon the stark geology of the Malebolge Test Site, devoid of animals.

He shaded his eyes against the driving sand, then stumbled forward past dull green cylinders, limping toward the center, where the test rig's metal fingers no longer clutched Nightwalker's body. Below the framework, Katrina sprawled on the concrete pad. He kneeled and gently turned her over. She opened her eyes and coughed. Blood trickled from her nose.

A brilliant blue light seared the sky. Yuri dropped to cover Katrina. The blast hit a second later, tossing the two bodies inches off the ground.

A fireball vaporized the distant research facility. Tornado-strength winds rushed inward. Materials and

ejecta rocketed overhead. The two former enemies hugged tightly, holding their breaths, feeling each other's racing, beating heart. Their trembling flesh seemed the only reality in a firestorm of shimmering blue magic; their mortality seemed the only anchor in a vortex of blowing wind.

After five minutes, the tornado subsided. Two small figures lifted themselves up, as humans have always done after disasters, and surveyed the wreckage. The Research Center lay in flattened ruin—a smoking monument to technological hubris. The metal test rig still jutted upward from the pad, like an obscene finger pointed at the sky.

They held each other for support and walked slowly to the Groom perimeter.

58. FREEDOM RIDGE

25 July 1994

The scrap of cardboard attached to the aerial read TOWING ORDER, and was signed by Sheriff Irving Gibson of the Lincoln County Sheriff's Department. Yuri pulled it off the rental car, crumpled it with one hand and tossed it inside. "We can be grateful for small favors," he said, picking thorns from his feet. "Like government efficiency and full-body suntans."

"And cosmic justice," Katrina responded, sliding into the backseat of the car, out of the sun.

"Don't bet on cosmic justice. Chandra may have been right—survival of the fittest is nature's justice. Why should we expect these entities to treat us any better than we treat ourselves?"

They were at war, and Yuri knew it. Groom was the first battleground in a conflict of genes, ideas and information. A sense of déjà vu hit him. He had once again escaped an existential cusp, where death, technology, and the power of raw nature formed an inexplicable, naked singularity. And once again, he had nothing to show for it except ambiguous evidence, terrifying memories and troubling questions.

Katrina handed clothes to him from an open duffel bag. "Can you start the car?"

"Sure," he said, dressing. "It's not like this is alien technology." He leaned into the back, searching the duffel bag for a tool to pry open the steering column.

"I can't tell Gallagan," Katrina said, buttoning a blouse. "The cover story will be—"

"No," Yuri said. "You have to tell him as quickly as possible to save yourself. Write it up as an official, classified intelligence report. And we have to tell others—especially Jafri and Li. They'll be targets, like us."

"There have to be some secrets, Yuri. Operation Majority has a covert network. We need a similar network—an organization protected from exposure and politics. And there is one more thing we must

never disclose, except to the people we trust the most.” She tapped her forehead with a finger.

He nodded, gently holding her chin with his hand, turning her head. He pulled back the hair from her brow. “I don’t see any marks,” he said, grinning. “You’ll pass for human.”

She took his hand, and kissed it, holding it next to her heart. “It will be our secret.”

Elsewhere in the universe, other minds concurred.

59. EPILOG

The lens adjusted automatically to the short focus across the tabletop. It recorded a kind of truth—a totally objective truth—different from truth seen by the mind’s eye.

John Anderson prepared the camera on its tripod. Yuri Sverdlov, Zfar Jafri and Rita Li took their seats as spectators. Finally, Katrina Fontanova entered. Behind intense, darting eyes, she sat in front of the camera. Anderson turned on a goose-necked lamp, spotlighting her face with harsh intensity. He nodded at Katrina and began recording.

“My name is Katrina Fontanova,” she said, nervously. She cleared her throat and read a prepared statement. “This videotape is a record of events surrounding the U.S. Government’s Groom Dry Lake Base. The Tellus Foundation will distribute copies to several locations world-wide. No single person knows all locations. Upon my death... or upon the death of any other individual associated with this video production, these copies will be made public.”

“God, I need a cigarette,” she said.

Yuri reached across the table with a match. The phosphor seared.

Katrina inhaled deeply, then continued.

“We all make guesses about our place in the universe. Sometimes we mistake our guesses for reality. We assume—incorrectly—that other people and other things feel as we feel and see as we see. Nothing could be further from the truth. Nothing could be less natural. Sometimes, nothing could be more dangerous—than to think that our own viewpoints constrain the entire universe.”

She paused briefly. “It is clear to me now what happened, and how humanity failed. We were naked before the power of their technology. They caught us hacking on the Galactic Internet. The owners of the patent don’t want intruders...”

In the two-hour video taping session which followed, members of the ad hoc group, bound together by threat of death, described the evidence and events. Each contributed a piece to the story. They tried to make the record as accurate as possible, backed up by documents, photographs and artifacts.

They placed 100 copies of the tape in various locations worldwide. They mailed one copy to the Director of Central Intelligence. They mailed the other copy to the President of the United States.

Anderson, Li and Jafri began sharing communications on a regular basis, putting in place an organization to observe and analyze the technology and political aspirations of Operation Majority.

Yuri Sverdlov, now a man without a country, went underground, assisted by a loose network of people associated with the Tellus Foundation.

Katrina Fontanova, a politically well-connected diplomat, now respected within the SVR for plucking secrets from a deep black U.S. program, remained at her post in the Russian Embassy, determined to expose the truth, and to help Yuri Sverdlov in whatever way possible. It was a noble goal.

* * *

Jafri moved the *International UFO Research Center* to new quarters in Rachel. The Tellus Foundation provided funding to monitor Groom using Russian satellite imagery. Jafri failed to observe any further tests at the Groom Dry Lake site known as Malebolge.

Two years after the Event, Jafri received untraceable e-mail reports from an anonymous Internet host. It suggested that the Russians initiated a series of tests similar to Ganymede in an underground complex at Yamantau Mountain in the Beloretsk area of the southern Urals. The Russian government would not sell Jafri coverage of this site. He informed Katrina Fontanova of the development.

* * *

The news of Deke Dobb's death shocked the small community of Rachel, Nevada. Mister Randall R. Sandall, the Third, discovered Deke's body inside the burned trailer on his way to work.

Several of Dobbs' friends said they received a strange e-mail message claiming to demonstrate the existence of extraterrestrial life and a government cover-up. However, the binary file attached to the messages proved to be garbage. The consensus, even among friends, was that Deke Dobbs perpetrated another space alien hoax in an attempt to bolster revenue of the financially shaky International UFO Research Center. The hoax left friends with doubts about his character, and muddled the waters in the

murder investigation.

Local law enforcement quickly announced that they found Deke's killers, with help from a special FBI team led by Agent James Stone. The killers were transients masquerading as Jehovah's Witnesses. One of them had artifacts belonging to Deke Dobbs in their pockets. The circumstantial evidence seemed compelling. A plea bargain arrangement gave one man immunity from prosecution in return for testifying against his accomplice. A jury found the accused guilty and sentenced him to death. Agent Stone received the FBI's highest award for a superb investigative effort and rapid capture of a possible serial killer.

The award was presented to him by the Attorney General of the United States.

* * *

Three years after the Event, an archeological team found a body in an ancient Indian burial ground near White Mountain. It was an anomaly. Teeth showed modern fillings and dental repairs. Radioactive carbon dating confirmed that the skeleton was recent and did not match other remains found in the same geologic strata—dated at 2,000 years. There was a bullet hole in the skull.

The archeologists notified the Lincoln County Sheriff's Department of a possible homicide. A police forensic team initially identified the body as that of Ben Nightwalker, based on dental records and several other pieces of evidence. However, the investigation halted abruptly after ten days.

Jill Sommer, hailed by news professionals as 'an incredible survivor,' attempted to follow up on the Nightwalker story after a tip-off from the Tellus Foundation. She was told by Sheriff Irving Gibson that carbon dating and all subsequent forensic tests had been mistaken, and that the remains had been returned to the burial site. This action could not be confirmed by either the local Tribal Council or by the archeological team that found the remains.

In the absence of evidence about Nightwalker, Sommer's team turned their attention to a piece about the sexual peccadilloes of small town sheriffs, which later drew a large audience on *Geraldo*.

Nightwalker's friends speculated on his disappearance. Some thought he may have encountered drug runners while patrolling the Groom perimeter. Others thought his disappearance and death were the result of a government plot against Native Americans. The more superstitious talked in hushed tones about how he was possessed and killed by Tsindi, and how the spirits moved his dead bones.

Doctor Richard Chandra was never found—dead or alive.

And then there was Billy...

* * *

They say the night smelled of cherry blossoms and early spring when Billy vanished forever. There was no evidence. No trace. Only a vaguely remembered dream told by his wife.

She said the house trembled, as if caught in the aftershock of a distant earthquake.

Billy woke up. He rolled over and tried to go back to sleep, but couldn't. When it happened again, he fretted about impending disaster. He shouted, trying to wake up his wife.

She was paralyzed—eyes closed, brain recording events her eyes couldn't see.

He shook her several times, then gave up. He put on his slippers and robe and shuffled downstairs. "Probably just a jet going supersonic," he muttered.

In the darkened hallway of his plush Washington, D.C. residence, he heard a noise. Someone or something knocked at his door. It was a soft tapping sound, but the entire house shook in sympathy, like the drumbeat of Armageddon.

He pulled a gun from a drawer, made certain it was loaded and moved to a controlling position. He pressed against the wall next to the door.

"Is somebody there?" he asked.

Words seemed to form from the sound of wind in swaying tree branches and the scratching of leaves on masonry steps, driven by an erratic breeze.

"Yesss," came the reply.

Billy began to sweat.

"Who is it?" he asked.

He was startled when the answer came in his own voice, like the echo of some half-forgotten thought. "An acquaintance of Richard Chandra's... I have some information for you, Billy. An answer to something you've been thinking about for a long time. The end of a riddle."

"Come back tomorrow," he said.

Pins in the door lifted slowly from their hinges, then dropped to the floor. The door groaned and fell inward. The hallway flooded with brilliant light.

His wife heard a single shot.

THE END