

NOW MAD

S M A R T B O M B

*A new age of
terrorism calls for
a new breed of hero*

D A V I D A L E X A N D E R

 GOLD EAGLE-62117-54.99

Nomad #3

(Originally titled Tripwire)

by
David Alexander

Copyright (C) 1992, 2005 David Alexander. All rights reserved.

Except where specifically noted
or contextually apparent,
all references to weapons and/or
combat systems and technologies
now in use refer to next-
generation versions thereof.

Original Manuscript

His mind forebodes his own destruction;
Actaeon who saw the goddess naked among leaves
and his hounds tore him.
A little knowledge, a pebble from the shingle,
A drop from the oceans; who would have dreamed
this infinitely little too much?

-- Robinson Jeffers,
Science

From Original Manuscript

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

The term "Wirehead," as used in this book, describes a person who has had a cybernetic interface placed in their skull. Linked directly to the brain, various programs on integrated circuit chip can be pumped directly into the mind. I would like to point out that I first used the term "Wirehead" in 1978. To the best of my knowledge this predates any current usage of the term, and if so, I take full credit for having coined it. As for other terms used herein to connote future weaponry and miscellaneous items of all types, they are of my own devising as well, and bear no relationship to any existing contemporary counterparts unless indicated as such.

-- D.A.

From Original Manuscript

**PROLOG:
A Time to Kill**

"Your limo is outside, sir," the secretary's voice said over the office intercom.

"Thank you," answered the businessman who was seated behind the oak-topped desk in the wingback chair. "Tell Jack with that I'll be right down. Make sure he's ready to go immediately."

"Certainly, sir," came the reply.

The businessman rose from his black leather wingback chair. Behind him, the picture window revealed a panoramic view of the Reflecting Pool and the Lincoln Memorial in the background. Behind these, the Arlington Memorial Bridge across the Potomac River glistened in the early morning sunlight.

The sweeping view of Washington D.C. shifted continually as the top five floors of the circular skyscraper slowly revolved.

It had been designed to make a full circuit every twelve hours, and from the suite's vantage point, all of the Capital's famous landmarks from the Lincoln Memorial to Bright Phoenix, the recent statue erected in memoriam of the twenty American astronauts who had been killed in the Mars mission, were visible.

A light traveler by habit, the departing businessman had packed a single piece of carry-on luggage for his trip onboard the transonic flight that was scheduled to take him to the Saigon Convention Center in Vietnam. There he would begin a week of negotiations for the leveraged buyout of the factories of an Asian arms consortium.

His secretary kept a list of telephone numbers at which her boss could be reached and a copy of his itinerary. The checklist was

comprehensive. It accounted for practically every hour of her boss's scheduled two-week trip abroad.

She did not realize that every single one of the telephone numbers on her list was fraudulent.

Dialing any of them would connect her with a supercomputer located inside a communications satellite more than two thousand miles in space. The computer's artificial intelligence hardware could fool even a voice analysis expert into believing the businessman was on the line, when in fact it was only an electronic simulation that had been reached.

"Bon voyage," the secretary wished her boss as he left the office. "Bring me back some of that Southeast Asian sunshine," she asked. "And don't forget to visit the Chu Chi tunnel shopping mall, I hear it's fabulous."

"I'll do my best," the businessman replied and flashed a broad smile that endeared him to the middle aged spinster as he left the office.

He had not bothered to add that it was currently monsoon season on the Asian subcontinent and that the tunnels were closed for renovation. His dotting gal Friday had meant well but was not exactly long on brains. But there was no need to burden her with any explanations.

Outside, the gull-wing doors of the limo parked in front of the building entrance were already open. The driver had the engine fully charged and had checked all of the vehicle's auxiliary batteries and security systems to make sure they were functioning properly.

With a nod to his driver, the businessman stepped into the spacious, carpeted interior. The gull-wing doors closed tightly with a faint electric whirr as the driver eased his foot down on the accelerator pedal and the car's battery powered electric motor made the large vehicle speed into the traffic stream at sixty miles per hour.

Once they had gotten underway, and the chauffeur pulled into the left lane of the highway reserved for Master Drivers who were entitled to drive at the highest speed limit, the businessman turned on the satellite downlinked video consoles at the vehicle's rear with a voice-recognized command.

Flashing to life, the view screens were currently showing the Planetary News Network channel where a blonde with a familiar face was doing her piece on preparations for the second Mars landing mission attempt. Little else of importance seemed to be happening on this otherwise slow news day.

The businessman allowed himself the pleasure of a small grin. The media's doldrums would be ending, and very soon, he knew. The world did not yet realize it, but news of major importance was in the offing.

Soon the limo had reached a private airfield at the Dulles International terminal complex where the transonic aerospace plane was waiting on the tarmac. The Learjet-sized ASP could reach any point on the planet within a maximum flight time of two hours, arcing through near space on scramjet power.

The ASP's pilot and copilot were already in the aircraft's cockpit running down their pre-takeoff checklist, and a flight plan direct to Vietnam had already been filed with the appropriate international flight control computers.

Although this flight plan was false, an identical ASP would land at Saigon International Airport when the first plane was expected, but its destination was entirely different.

The businessman entered the rear of the scramjet aircraft and eased himself into one of the plane's comfortable seats made out of a formfitting material. The chair retained a "memory" of the businessman's physical contours and now fit around him as snugly as a mirror image of his own body.

Immediately coming over to the aircraft's single passenger, the steward asked the businessman if he wished to have a drink. He replied in the affirmative and ordered the usual, spiced vodka on the rocks with a twist of lime.

As he waited for his drink to arrive, the businessman loosened his jeweled collar stud and the top shirt button directly beneath it.

Perhaps another man might have removed his jacket and rolled up his sleeves, but the businessman followed these actions by instead reaching under his collar and then pulling sharply upward, ripping off his face in a single smooth and practiced tug.

In a split-second the electronic masking that concealed his actual features had been initialized.

Resonating sound waves distorted air molecules to generate an opaque grey blur that made the face resemble a mass of raw putty in which had been drawn three slits for eyes and a mouth and two small dots for nostrils.

"Your drink, sir," the steward said as he returned a few moments later with the glass sitting atop the tray, not batting an eye at the sudden and spectacular change that had come over the businessman.

Like the pilots themselves, the steward was a trusted member of Force Three, the organization headed by the passenger in the private scramjet, and he knew that his life depended on his ability to keep silent about what he had seen.

As the steward exited the cabin, the man with no face inserted a poison control indicator into the vodka. If the bulb on the end of the device (which resembled a swizzle stick) changed color, then the steward would have a great deal to explain.

But the PCI did not undergo any color change and the traveler leaned back in his seat and enjoyed his drink as the ASP began rolling down the taxiway, having received clearance for immediate takeoff from the airport control tower.

Within a matter of moments, the supercriminal who called himself Alpha was airborne and the world was once again about to

confront the threat of global blackmail while tottering on the brink of megadeath.

From Original Manuscript

MISSION LOG ONE:

Tripwire

ONE

The man who was not submarine captain Neil Claggett, but whose resemblance to Claggett was identical in every possible way, right down to the whorls and ridges of his laser-altered fingerprints, inspected the crew of the SSBN Okeanos.

For the present the nuclear ballistic submarine was berthed at its dock at Naval Submarine Base Bangor, in Washington State, screened by its tender vessel, the USS Nimrod. But the nuclear "boomer" would soon be setting off on its scheduled deterrence patrol. A Wichita class boat, the Okeanos was the newest -- and so far the only -- boat in its class.

Advanced submarine technology had gone into making the Okeanos stealthy and deadly. In both these areas the boat exceeded the performance parameters of all other subs ever built.

Stealth was guaranteed by the sub's hull design and construction. Formed of laminated sheets of a thermoplastic material, the hull of the Okeanos was highly resistant to sonar detection. This rivetless hull was in turn covered with a specially developed polycarbonate-based paint that reduced the sonar signature of the Okeanos still further.

Low-observability was additionally enhanced by the absence of a submarine sail, hull-penetrating periscope or towed sonar array to trail behind the Okeanos as the boat cruised noiselessly through the earth's oceans.

In place of these artifacts of a former age of submarine technology, multimode sensors were built into the hull of the submarine itself.

The boat's centralized Rigel supercomputer was capable of fusing the imagery and sonar data from the multiple hull sensor array into

a single, unified display that could be changed to suit given operational requirements.

Perhaps the least stealthy aspect of conventional subs -- the giant blades that propelled them through the water -- were absent from the Okeanos as well. Thrust for the boat was provided instead by multiple jets of seawater which propelled the huge submarine through the oceans as quietly as a whisper.

One feature the Okeanos shared with the nuclear subs of yesteryear still existed, though. Midway between her fore and aft sections was located what its crew dogs referred to as the boat's "Christmas Tree Farm," so named because of the Gorgon multipurpose missiles ranked there in a deadly double row of vertical launcher tubes.

The Gorgons could be armed with nuclear or conventional warheads and were MarVed, meaning that each multiple automatically targetable reentry vehicle was self-guiding. Each "brilliant" re-entry vehicle could be programmed to direct itself to its target, acting like a lethal cross between a conventional MIRVed round and a nuclear cruise missile.

The conclusion of the Cold War decades before had changed the face of geopolitical threats forever. But new threats had emerged to fill the void left by the old ones that had shaped world power dynamics for the better part of the last century.

While the East and the West had temporarily arrived at a concordat, as far as North and South went, that was another matter entirely.

The Third World now possessed stockpiles of nuclear weapons and sophisticated delivery systems. More importantly, it possessed the will to use this lethal military hardware against the dominant powers of the new global order.

The presence of a boat like Okeanos insured that those lethal weapons systems remained kept in constant check. The dictators of Middle Eastern and Latin American dictatorships alike, though they possessed stockpiles of conventional nuclear delivery systems, knew that against a weapon platform like Okeanos they could not hope to countervail.

The Okeanos was one of a kind, and her crew was likewise the best that had ever put out to sea.

Right now "Blue Crew" had just come off their biannual shift during which they studied new techniques and kept their already acquired skills sharply honed. Lined up on the dock, they completed a final inspection by the skipper of the sub, and would now hear the captain's customary address delivered to the crew before boarding the boat to commence patrol duty.

"You've spent the last six months polishing your skills, sharpening them to a razor edge, and you've got one heck of an important job to do," Claggett concluded his brief speech after a few minutes of talking to the men, "make me proud."

Claggett dismissed his crew, which then filed past him, each saluting him in turn. And then the captain of the boat watched his crew wave their last goodbyes to loved ones waiting on the dockside of sub base Bangor.

The imposter smiled as he took in the scene, through slitted grey eyes. He knew something that no one else on the dock had any knowledge of. None of the seamen suspected, as they boarded the sub on that chilly morning, that they would never be seeing their wives, sweethearts and children again.

By 0150 hours Okeanos had already sailed hundreds of miles from the Bangor sub pens, embarking on the first leg of its scheduled six month patrol cycle.

The route that the boat was to take on its globe-spanning underwater odyssey was a highly classified secret. Only a handful of individuals postured in the government and the military knew where the boomer would be at any given time during its six month long mission beneath the world's oceans.

Technically, the Okeanos did not have a bridge, though many of the sub's crewmembers still thought of what passed for the bridge in an anachronistic way. Instead, what was called a control and imaging center or CIC was the nerve center of the advanced design submersible boat.

Over three times the size of a conventional sub's bridge, the control and imaging center was a spacious battle cab.

Conspicuous by its absence was the periscope mast housing that would take up the central portion of the bridge.

Where this would normally be located, the Okeanos had a central control console made up of a large, high resolution digital video screen, a central keyboard, an interphone, two auxiliary keyboards and two sidestick controllers at right and left of the screen.

At the front of the CIC, in direct line-of-sight from the control console, was a larger flat digital screen. This was the sub's main tactical screen, and it could mirror the data on the smaller screen of the central control console, or display a wide spectrum of other real-time video or graphical data.

Encircling the central control console were technical stations. Here sonar, navigation, weapons systems and other personnel sat before their own dedicated screens and keyboards, each of them linked directly to the captain's control console by the sub's integrated computer and communications network.

Seated at his control console, the boomer skipper called for a position report. Anderson, his first mate, replied that the Okeanos' position currently put it just beyond the Cascadia Channel abutting the Pacific Northwest coast. It was there that the sub was to submerge to its cruising depth.

"Diving officer, make your depth seven zero feet," commanded the skipper from his position at the sub's control console.

"Aye, helm, make my depth seven zero feet," responded the Diving Officer, "helm, twenty degrees up on the fairwater planes," as he relayed the orders to the Okeanos' helmsman, who responded too with the traditional, "Sir, my planes are up twenty degrees."

The technology might have changed radically, but the old Navy phrases that would have been readily understandable to sub crews of the twentieth century still echoed off the bulkheads of the submarines that cruised the twenty-first century seas. Some things would never change no matter how advanced the boomers got.

With the Okeanos now on its course along the circumpolar route from Seattle to Japan, cruising far enough below the main thermocline layer so that it passed through water that was relatively turbulence free for smooth and silent running, the skipper excused himself and removed himself to his quarters in the aft section of the sub.

It was hours after changing course and the vast majority of the Okeanos' crew were now asleep in their comfortable bunks (hot-bunking too, was also a thing of the past), except for those crew members who were on watch duty.

From among his personal gear, the skipper took out a canister about the size and shape of a large pocket flashlight.

The canister was made of a dull metal and bore no identifying markings of any kind whatever, except for a readout display panel showing that the canister was filled to capacity. From its appearance few observers would recognize that it contained one of the deadliest substances known to man. This was Rutin, a neurotoxic agent in highly concentrated gaseous form.

The skipper also took out a sidearm and cocked the 10 mm Glock SMG to chamber a hollownose round. Then he concealed the plastic weapon beneath his jacket.

Moving swiftly through the wide companionways of the huge submersible vessel, the skipper of the Okeanos soon reached the high security area forward of the Reactor Compartment. Here life support equipment that recycled air and water lined the bulkheads with pipes and cable conduits running along the top and sides.

"Sir," said the crewman manning the station, saluting by reflex as he saw the sub's commander approach his position, arms crossed behind his back.

"At ease," the skipper told the seaman on watch duty.

"Yes, sir," the crew dog replied and saluted.

Returning the salute, the man posing as Captain Claggett smiled and stretched out the other arm that had stayed crossed behind his back. In his hand he gripped the small, silenced Glock pistol that he'd concealed from the crewman, its hammer cocked and a 10 mm round sitting in its chamber.

The look of puzzlement had barely enough time to turn to sudden fear as two silenced rounds pierced the crewman's skull, plowed through his brain and exited the back of his skull amid a crimson shower of pulped cerebral matter.

Dragging the corpse of the takedown out of sight, the skipper laid the Glock down on a control console where it would be within reach if he needed it in a hurry. Then the imposter went to work.

Sliding the Rutin canister from his pants pocket, the skipper followed a set of preplanned steps. Taking the seat of the crewman he'd just killed, the man posing as Captain Claggett punched in the three secret code words. These had been known only to Claggett, until chemical interrogation had extracted them from his mind.

The code words placed the Okeanos' main computer into an emergency mode in which several options could be taken. One of them permitted the release of poison or neurotoxic agents into the breathable air of the submarine. From memory, the rogue skipper input the command sequences that would permit him to do precisely this.

When the READY TO PROCEED message came on screen, he got up and crossed to the main life support panel. There was a flange on the top of the canister that attached it to a coupling on the panel.

Screwing it down tightly enough to insure a perfect seal, the skipper put on a gas mask, also compact enough to have fit in one of his pockets. Then he opened the petcock on the top of the cylinder. Beneath his mask he smiled as he saw the red needle begin to move across the face of the electronic display.

The neurotoxic agent was being released from the canister in the form of a colorless, odorless, tasteless gas. One that worked very quickly. Within a matter of seconds, everyone onboard Okeanos, except the captain himself, would be dead.

TWO

Elektra Brady said goodnight to her fellow employees and left the cafeteria on Sublevel One of the complex of buildings known as Omnivore Towers.

A multistory network of concrete, steel and glass forming a complex of shops, living accommodations, administrative offices, and other amenities, the Towers were the central hub around which life at Omnivore City revolved.

Located in what had once been miles of virgin tropical rainforest in the Amazonas region of Brazil, Omnivore City itself was a sprawling industrial municipality solely owned and operated by Omnivore Corporation of the World.

In the short time she had been employed by Omnivore, Elektra had found that the cafeteria was one of the better places to eat, and its robot waiters were a pleasant diversion.

Apart from providing jobs to the ten thousand odd employees who lived there, Omnivore city also provided housing, food, medical and child care and even burial, cremation and euthanasia services for its thousands of employees.

Omnivore City also had its own police and fire departments too, just as it had its own courts and a fully staffed hospital with state-of-the-art diagnostic facilities. It even produced its own holovideo shows, news programs and infomercials.

The complex could rightfully boast that like Detroit, San Francisco and Trenton, New Jersey, its police force contract was with the

Continental Police Security Corporation or C.O.P.S., and thus it was the most professional law enforcement that money could buy.

Officially, Elektra had been hired as an assistant computer-aided manufacturing technician, manning a small-particle sintering lathe in the research and development section of the factory zone.

She had been working and living at Omnivore City for almost a month and had already earned herself a two-level raise in pay, having demonstrated the initiative and leadership qualities that were valued by the conglomerate.

That the pretty young brunette was anything but a hard-working if somewhat ambitious employee of the multinational giant would have surprised most if not all of her coworkers at Omnivore.

But Elektra was not what she seemed.

In fact she was a plant, and she was actually working for a firm called Intervention Systems Incorporated, a much smaller firm than C.O.P.S., but one with a far more sophisticated type of expertise in its own highly specialized field.

Elektra's undercover mission concerned the fact that Omnivore City had fallen under suspicion of engaging in a variety of illegal activities. Not that any corporation was squeaky clean, but there were lines that were not crossed.

One of those lines barred the dealing of illegal narcotics.

Over the years, reliable sources had reported that the worldwide corporation was involved in illicit traffic in SPASM and WIRE, two potent hardware narcotics. Acting electronically, they created a man-machine interface that turned reality into a video game world with dangerous consequences for the user.

Some called them "drugs on a chip," or "plug drugs" or simply "plugs."

This was because instead of pills or blotters, hardware narcotics came in the form of integrated circuit chips that were plugged directly into an interface implanted in the skulls of those who used them, who were known as "Wireheads."

WorldPol, the World Police Agency, still called Interpol by many, believed that a large part of Omnivore City's industrial output was in the form of illicit hardware modules or "plugs" for these psychoactive computer programs.

Elektra's undercover assignment at Omnivore was to find out if this was the case, and if so, just how deep Omnivore's involvement with the underground plug traffic ran.

In the few weeks that she'd worked at the Brazil-based industrial complex, she had unearthed a great deal that convinced her that Omnivore was in fact as dirty as WorldPol's sources had claimed. Earlier that same day she had transmitted her findings to her boss, chief of Intervention Systems, via secure comlink and promised a major breakthrough soon.

This breakthrough concerned something else she'd gotten wind of; something that she'd learned about while working in the complex's underground research and development facility. Part of the zone was completely screened off from most personnel. Only the company's higher-ups were allowed in.

Nobody would say what was going on in the area, but there had been terrifying rumors. What Elektra had heard had made her suddenly afraid. She knew that her boss would want to know all about it.

Elektra had taken a chance and bootlegged a key card by reprogramming the small integrated chip inside her own employee card. The blue stripe on Elektra's card signified that she was cleared for only low-level access, and the wafer-thin chip inside the card would not unlock any of the high-security doors at Omnivore.

But by reprogramming the chip with ultraviolet light, Elektra had upgraded its access code to priority-one level. Now her blue-striped key card would open the highest security doors in the complex. Or at least so she hoped.

Elektra realized that she was overreaching herself, getting well beyond the scope of her assignment. She had been warned by her boss before undertaking the assignment that she was to establish a link to illicit hardware narcotics and then extract.

But Elektra was determined to find out as much as she could about what was going down at Omnivore's R&D section before she bailed out.

She knew that there was much more going on at Omnivore than even just drug manufacture and smuggling operations. And Elektra was determined to learn the entire truth about what Omnivore City was manufacturing besides the electronic consumer goods it was famous for around the world.

Negotiating the corridor, Elektra came in time to the restricted area where a sign declared that it was off-limits to all unauthorized personnel.

She realized that she had already crossed the threshold of no return: hidden sensors were logging her entry and the use of the bootleg card key would not go undiscovered for long.

As she passed through the door, which slid shut and locked in place behind her, Elektra did not suspect that the intrusion of the bootleg key had already registered on perimeter alarm systems and was being monitored at that moment at a nearby security station.

The skipper of the Okeanos made sure that his entire crew had been wiped out by the nerve gas he had released into the sub's breathable air supply.

Had any of the crewmen survived the poisoning he was prepared to deliver the coup de grace with the small, yet powerful, machinepistol in his hand.

But the Rutin gas had done its work quickly and quite thoroughly. There were no survivors that the skipper could determine. Satisfied that all hands beside himself had gone to meet their makers, the pirate submariner proceeded to the Okeanos' bridge.

Though it was easy to think he was home safe, that would have been a dangerous error in judgment. Killing the crew was only half of his job. There was still a great deal more that he needed to accomplish before he was finished and could claim his just reward.

The helmsman was still clutching the controls, seated where he had died when the fast-acting neurotoxic gas took him.

Grimacing from exertion beneath his gas mask, the skipper pried loose the helmsman's hands, which were frozen at the controls in a clawlike death grip.

Nevertheless, all instruments showed that the Okeanos was still proceeding on course toward her next waypoint under computer navigational control. The ballistic sub was cruising to its destination completely independent of human direction.

The boomer would never arrive at the planned end of its journey, though. The next step that the killer would take was to see to this beyond any shadow of a doubt.

The skipper was already interfacing the small palmtop computer unit with the submarine's main computer. In order to safeguard against the threat of hijacking, the submarine's design had included certain failsafe mechanisms that would abort an attempted override of the sub's scheduled patrol route unless the proper clearances were received.

The pirate commander had no such clearance, nor would he be able to get them, since they would have to come directly from CINCPAC, the Commander in Chief of the Pacific Naval command on direct orders from the President. But the vampire computer unit would take care of that problem, overriding the navigational program logged into random access memory and establish a new course heading for the submarine.

When the new coordinates were burned into computer memory and the Okeanos had passed its first waypoint toward its revamped destination, the skipper was ready to report in to his clandestine control.

"Trojan Horse to Scorpio," he said as he faced the glowing viewscreen on the console in front of him. The transmission was real-time and encrypted by an unbreakable algorithm based on random noise generated by sunspot activity, making it completely secure from eavesdropping.

The image of a man's face appeared on the digital viewscreen in a matter of moments as the transmission was received at its destination.

"Trojan Horse, have you secured target?" asked the remotely based operative called Scorpio.

"Affirmative," the skipper replied.

"And what of the crew?" the figure on the screen went on to inquire, the cold voice uttering its words with clinical calm. "Have they been dealt with in the appropriate manner?"

"Also affirmative," he replied to Scorpio.

"Then you are to be congratulated, Trojan Horse," Scorpio went on, his voice not changing pitch, "you have performed your duties commendably."

"There should never have been any doubt," answered the hijacker, displaying a pride he immediately regretted having shown. It was not a professional's way of working. You stated your facts dispassionately and let them speak for themselves.

"There was never the slightest doubt," the man at the other end of the comlink answered. "You will rendezvous at the prearranged location."

"And precisely on schedule," the skipper replied. "I'll expect full payment then."

"Rest assured," the control said before the screen went blank, "when we meet you shall be paid ... in full measure."

Elektra needed to do some fast thinking.

Further along the corridor she had just penetrated by using her bootleg key card, a light above an elevator had just winked on, accompanied by a beep tone. She flattened against the corridor wall as the doors opened and heard the sound of two male voices.

The cadence of ripple-soled boots was coming her way a moment later. Elektra was not far from the entranceway she'd used to get in, but not close enough to avoid detection either before she would be able to get clear. Her only shot was the locked door a few feet away she'd passed a few moments ago.

Her pulse racing, Elektra fed her card key to the slot. Nothing happened except for the sound of the two men coming nearer. She tried again and this time the door's lock snapped open. With a feeling of relief washing over her, Elektra ducked inside the door and closed it as silently as possible. Flattened against the wall, she waited until the sound of footsteps went past.

As her pulse rate diminished, she quickly became aware that she was not alone in the restricted area she had just broken into. This was an operations center with smart walls capable of giant, multiple image displays. Tiers of control consoles containing rack mounted display screens, keyboards and various gauges and readouts filled the room. Elektra heard voices from somewhere deeper inside the room.

Moving carefully on a crouch and using the tiers of control consoles for cover, Elektra came upon the source of the sounds she'd heard. Seated at a control console which was itself in front of a section of

smart wall that showed a giant display of a face wearing a gas mask, was a man she instantly recognized.

It was Angel Metaxos himself, Omnivore's Chief Executive Officer. From this close, Elektra could distinguish most of what was being said. She quickly learned that Metaxos was engaged in a long distance videophone conversation with the figure on the screen, a man who called himself "Trojan Horse."

Knowing in her gut that she was onto something important, Elektra activated the video sensor implant in her left eye socket and the audio implant linked to her auditory nerve using her code words, a phrase known only to herself. She had lost the eye in a childhood car accident, but as with most other things in her life, Elektra had turned what would have been a handicap to another person into an advantage. The implant she had installed had helped to make her one of the highest paid private operatives in the business.

Elektra thought of her code words, and the tiny electrical patterns produced by her brain triggered the subminiature logic chip in her skull, turning on the camera and mikes.

"There should never have been any doubt," the gas-masked figure on the big screen was saying to Metaxos.

Another few seconds of looking over Metaxos' shoulder and listening in on the conversation and Elektra realized that an event of momentous importance was taking place right before her eyes.

Could it be that she was eavesdropping on the hijacking of a nuclear missile submarine? Despite her disbelief, all indications were that she was in fact doing precisely this.

Just before Metaxos told the man in the submarine called Trojan Horse to rendezvous somewhere, Elektra decided that it was time to get out while the getting was still good. She had enough intelligence recorded to bring in WorldPol by now. Switching off the implants, Elektra turned around and headed back for the doorway.

But crouching for an extended length of time had made her legs wobbly, and as she turned she brushed against a digitizer pad that a careless tech had left teetering precariously close to the edge of the console beside her. She reached out to stop it from falling but not in time. The digitizer fell to the floor with a crash that seemed as loud as a thunderclap in the comparative stillness of the room.

Instinct now took over, and Elektra stood and ran for the exit, the card key already in her hand as she glimpsed Metaxos standing at his console, his tall, gaunt frame lit eerily by the giant display screen in the background. The image of the tremendous, gas-masked face on the screen was burned on her mind as she ran for the exit, filled with a primal fear of having just witnessed what was forbidden for her to see.

Hardly believing her luck, she managed to reopen the door with her bootleg key card. The corridor outside was deserted. Her mind raced

ahead, already beginning to plan her next moves. Maybe she could still make it.

Rounding a turn in the corridor, Elektra's hopes evaporated. The jumpsuited Omnivore security guards had their SMG weapons drawn and pointing at her in seconds.

"I was lost," she began, stammering, groping to find the words that would permit her to slip through the tightening noose.

The C.O.P.S. guard grabbed Elektra's arm tightly. "No you weren't," he told her. "You're coming with me."

He brought Elektra to the gaunt-framed man from whom she had run away from. Elektra saw Metaxos' cruel face break into a smile as he reached out to stroke her face. She recoiled in horror. His touch sickened her.

"So very beautiful," he said softly, drawing close, his dead eyes going wide as realization dawned in him. What he had just seen was highly interesting. "Such a pity that you have stumbled in on something far over your pretty head."

With that, Metaxos jabbed two fingers into the socket of Elektra's left eye and clamped them around the video sensor implanted in the socket. A numbing pain gripped her as Metaxos ripped the tiny fiber optic video camera from the socket amid a shower of blood.

"You were misnamed," he said as he held the sensor up to the light and examined it with blood dripping down his skeletal fingers. "It was Elektra's brother Oedipus who lost his eyes in the end."

"Damn you, you bastard," Elektra shouted, her eyes misting over with a red haze. "That data was already sent to WorldPol. They know everything."

"You're lying, of course," Metaxos calmly replied. "But that is understandable. You want to live. And you think that lying might save you. It won't."

One of the two security men holding their furiously struggling captive was getting impatient. "What should I do about her?" he asked the goateed man. "She's bleeding all over the fucking place."

"I'm afraid the usual will be necessary, Gunther," replied Metaxos who placed the bloody video sensor in the pocket of his jacket before he turned back to face the glowing screen behind him without giving a second thought to the death sentence that he had just handed down.

THREE

The Diavolo was a 125-foot yacht and the prize possession of billionaire executive Angel Metaxos.

Her chined displacement hull and hydrofoils enabled the Diavolo to make the clandestine rendezvous point in the North Atlantic ocean in record time.

And make it in style too -- while the Diavolo sped to the covert meeting point, the owner enjoyed all the accoutrements of a stay at a stylish European health spa.

Now, after feasting on a late dinner of truffles, roast goose and white chardonnay, Metaxos enjoyed the favors of two charming, and very expensive, female traveling companions he had invited on the journey. Having sent the prostitutes away, he emerged from his stateroom and the Greek tycoon took up a position on the foredeck of the sleek, aerodynamically streamlined yacht.

Metaxos consulted his wrist chronometer which was set on Greenwich mean time, known to the military as Zulu time. Dawn would soon break. The yachtsman could see the first pink streaks spread across the distant horizon, underlighting a bank of clouds to the west.

The Diavolo had made good time, and Metaxos was pleased. She was well ahead of schedule, and Metaxos was on the threshold of making history while feeling the afterglow of good food and wine and even better sex. For what more could a man ask, he wondered?

Metaxos smiled: he knew the answer to that question, of course. In a word, *power*.

All his long life, in one form or another, first while committing petty larceny on the streets of Athens, then as the single largest shipper in the country, and most recently with the ambitious Omnivore operation, Metaxos had been chasing after power all his life, the way other men chased after beautiful women.

The owner's face remained impassive as he stared across the expanse of the slowly lightening ocean. Despite Metaxos's outer calm, he was in a state of high excitement bordering on mania.

The enterprise to which he had devoted the last two years of his life was at long last about to begin in earnest. What had started out as no more than an ambitious dream, and had gradually taken on the flesh and blood of reality, was about to reach a shattering climax.

Soon the world itself would change.

The balance of global power would shift like the magnetic poles of the planet had done a million years ago. New power would flow to its rightful inheritors, those who should have assumed it in the first place. Those who were strong.

Metaxos's musings were interrupted by a report from his captain.

The captain cleared his throat.

He had been standing behind the yacht's owner for several minutes and had not been noticed. Only now did he dare to speak.

"Sir, sorry to interrupt," he began, "but we are now in position." He had to hold himself back from cringing as Metaxos faced him, silhouetted against the faintly lit arc of the far horizon.

That strange gleam in the Greek tycoon's cold grey eyes was frightening in its intensity. "You asked me to --" he stammered.

"Yes, Radermann, I did," Metaxos said calmly. "And I trust that everything stands in readiness?"

"You may rest assured that it does, sir," the captain responded, relieved that the owner was in a placid mood. He had seen what could happen when he wasn't and still had nightmares about those memories.

"Then proceed with the operation."

"Aye, sir," answered the captain and left his master alone again with his thoughts.

Now the owner of the yacht left the foredeck and went below. He found the underwater hatch already open. Crewmembers were crowding around the small craft bobbing in the thirty foot long pool.

"Step this way, sir," one of them said to him.

Metaxos threw off the crewman's arm with a gesture of contempt. With a burning glare he made it clear that he needed no one's help to board the small craft.

He had climbed inside and dogged down the hatch of the one-man submersible unit in a matter of moments.

The manta-winged craft had a single cockpit bubble of a transparent thermoplastic material resistant to extremely high pressures that would crack ordinary glass. The craft was named the Sea Scorpion.

Behind the Sea Scorpion's controls, Metaxos checked the micro-submarine's instrumentation banks. He assured himself that all of the Sea Scorpion's systems were functioning as expected.

"Preparing to cast off," he said. "Switch on underwater lighting system."

"Underwater lighting system switched on," he heard the voice of the mate say soon after.

"Commence lowering craft by servomotor actuators," he went on, going down his pre-dive checklist.

"Servomotor actuators lowering away," came the reply a moment later.

"Engaging final separation sequencers," Metaxos said into his throat mike. "Disengage safety interlock now."

"Safety interlock now disengaged," the reply of the crew dog came back.

"Casting off," Metaxos finalized, "and by the way -- that crewman who reached for my arm as I came below, do you know him?"

"Yes, sir," the voice replied. "That would be Luckenbill, sir."

"Have him killed," Metaxos replied and punched a series of lighted buttons on the Sea Scorpion's main instrumentation panel.

There was a sudden lurch as the Sea Scorpion slid from its umbilicals and shot through the water at high speed.

Propelled by a stream of virtually soundless jet exhaust, the microsub sped through the water in a manner more resembling an airplane than a submersible craft. It was on its way to its destination far below in the dark waters of the sea.

Some three hundred nautical miles to the southeast of the Diavolo's position above the North Atlantic Ocean's West European Basin, the U.S. nuclear submarine Okeanos cruised silently through the depths of the region called the Iberian Abyssal Plain on a due north heading.

The destination of the boomer was the same as that of Metaxos as the Omnivore Chief Executive Officer piloted the Sea Scorpion microsub downward in a steeply angled dive path.

The sole surviving member of the Okeanos' crew onboard sat in the captain's chair behind the central control console, presiding over the silent control and imaging center of the immense submersible vessel that had now become an abattoir.

Despite recycled air that was kept constantly scrubbed of toxic pollutants, the stench of the rotting corpses of the dead had gone beyond the point where the odor could be contained by the equipment. The stench of death pervaded the hijacked submarine as it stole like a thief through the sea.

The pirate skipper couldn't help thinking about the legend of the Ancient Mariner. How did that old poem go, he wondered? Something about a ship's captain whose whole crew got wiped out except for him, and then he had to spend a lot of time walking the decks with an albatross hung around his neck.

But the man who had done the killing as he had killed to the boat's skipper too, knew that his journey would last only a matter of minutes longer. He didn't have an albatross around his neck but he did have a gun in his pocket, just in case of trouble.

Trojan Horse could stand the mounting smell of the cadavers that much longer, especially for the king's ransom he would earn for his part in the sub's hijacking.

Before too long, a five second warning buzzer sounded from the speaker grilles of the console. It was accompanied by an screen message that indicated that the Okeanos had reached the outer perimeter of its destination envelope. Within minutes the ballistic sub would have come to its journey's end.

The man with no face sat swaddled in the cocoon of fuzzy light, looking down into the pit below him.

Down there, in the control center of the secret installation known as Xanadu, a crew of technical staff monitored banks of equipment on which view screens phased and status lights winked on and off in a constantly shifting array.

The man with no face monitored the large digital display screen that showed him the image of the Okeanos as the stolen nuclear boomer approached Xanadu's outer perimeter.

The advanced design boat was magnificent. The nuclear submarine was far more impressive than even he had imagined it would be. Sleek and manta-shaped, it looked more like some gigantic sea creature than a thing of plastic and metal powered by forces much like the nuclear heat of the sun.

"Sierra One contact within sensor range, sir," the faceless one heard a voice from a speaker grille on the console to one side.

"Proceed with initialization of tractor sequencing," he replied into the end of a gooseneck microphone, his electronic voice phasing up and down the tonal spectrum.

"Tractor sequencing initialized," the crew dog's voice came back a few moments later.

The man with no face watched the huge, sleek-hulled submersible vessel approach on his viewscreen. It was now only a matter of a few hundred yards away.

As Okeanos got closer and closer to Xanadu, the sonar-linked computers onboard the undersea installation automatically extended a

huge, jointed tractor arm and the man with no face saw the sub glide directly into its mechanical caress.

"We have tractor engagement," the voice of the base's chief technical officer said in his earbud a moment later. "Repeat. We have tractor engagement."

"Secure the submarine and bring Trojan Horse into the reception chamber," the faceless man said to his chief in his voice that was not a voice but an electronic simulation of one.

"At once, sir," came the reply.

The faceless one rose from his seat. With a wave of his hand the glass door to the room slid open. Two blacksuited guards wearing red berets outside sprang to attention and flanked him as he strode along the observation level to his private elevator.

The two armed escorts accompanied the faceless being to the main level of Xanadu.

As he descended, so the skipper of the stolen submarine ascended the ladder that led up from the sub and breathed the scrubbed air of Xanadu. It was air that was free of the sickening stench of his lethal handiwork.

The skipper was met by a contingent of guards armed with Heckler and Koch advanced combat rifles firing 4.73 mm caseless ammo and was escorted to the main level of the base. He saw the faceless man and Metaxos both awaiting him.

"You have performed your mission well," the electronic voice said to the skipper in nonhuman tones. "You are to be congratulated."

"All in a day's work," the skipper returned. "And now my payment, where is it?" he asked.

"Your payment is at hand," answered the faceless man as he signaled to the two Red Berets at either side and they leveled their weapons to aim them at the skipper.

"What's going on?" asked the hijacker who had posed as Captain Claggett.

"Though you are a man of ability, you are also treacherous," the faceless man explained. "Because of this you are dangerous to Us." Turning to the gunmen in black jumpsuits and red berets who bracketed him, he said simply, "Kill him."

"You first!" the hijacker shouted back and grabbed the crewman standing beside him while simultaneously whipping out his gun and pointing it at Alpha. He had half-expected a double-cross and was prepared to take as many of his killers with him, starting with alpha himself.

As the Red Berets opened up on the seajacker, his human shield absorbed the salvo of caseless 4.73 mm bullets, spurting blood in all directions. But the hardmen had already closed ranks between the rogue submariner and Alpha, and though he dropped one para in his tracks, Trojan Horse's prime target was already escaping the fray.

With more Red Berets double-timing it to the area, Trojan Horse dropped the blood-seeping corpse and tried to make a break for it. But the odds were stacked against him. Having made it as far as the main airlock through which he'd come, he rapidly used up ammo in the Glock SMG's clip and was cut down by superior numbers and firepower.

Spun around by the impact of dozens of rounds, Trojan Horse collapsed to the deck, eyes staring sightlessly, his sub captain's fatigues drenched with his flowing blood. Trojan Horse's last earthly sight was the electronically masked face of Alpha towering above him. Then his eyes failed him and his heart stopped beating.

"Dispose of him," the faceless man ordered and left the area, preferring others to do the dirty work. "Report to Us when the sub has been made mission-ready."

FOUR

The samurai swordsman completed the ceremonial movements demonstrating respect for the teacher, hidden strength, humility, prayer and alertness.

Then he split himself in two.

Each samurai now strode forward across the rope bridge that stretched above a pool of boiling lava, swords cleaving the air in dangerous, glittering arcs.

Quinn faced his opponents at the center of the bridge in a Hwa Rang Do action stance, one hand outstretched from the right shoulder, its fingers hooked like an eagle's talon, the other a bunched fist clutched tightly at his waist.

A holographic face materialized in the sky above as the two samurai froze and began to shimmer. The computer-generated holograms were now in standby mode.

"Sorry to interrupt your workout, boss," spoke the three-dimensional face that had materialized and hovered in the air, "but something has come in that you'll want to know about right away."

"Give me a minute, Hatcher," Quinn said to his assistant.

With his left hand he touched the keypad at his right wrist and input a few strokes on its multiple rows of small, color-coded buttons.

Taken off standby, the two samurai swordsmen vanished completely, as well as the mountains in the distance and fiery lake of molten lava that boiled and bubbled beneath the rope bridge stretching across it.

In its place there now materialized a sterile room whose antiseptic white "smart" walls concealed banks of lasers and computers. Virtual reality had just been translated back to its opposite form, analog reality.

Quinn was pleased with the new cybernetic sphere he had just had installed in his office headquarters complex. The cybersphere would still need to have some glitches worked out of it, though, but technical support came with the two-million dollar package.

"What is it?" Quinn asked the face echoed on the small color screen above the keypad on his wrist.

"Got some image data," said Hatcher. "Where you want me to put them?"

"Just a minute," Quinn said, punching in another command set on the keypad, then going on, "Okay, let's have what you've got."

A few seconds later, what was left of Elektra Brady floated in the air in front of Quinn. The three-dimensional holographic image hovered in space like a disembodied specter.

Quinn walked around the three dimensional image of his agent's corpse. He noted the gory details of death. The posture of the head indicated that the neck was broken. As was characteristic of death by this means, there were relatively few marks on the neck area.

"Feed me the autopsy data," Quinn asked Hatcher.

A moment later, the flowing characters flashed across a virtual viewscreen that had popped up beside the three-d image of Elektra's body.

Quinn moved the virtual screen about the cybersphere so that it followed him like an obedient pet as he continued to scan the three-dimensional image of the corpse, noting that bits of skin lodged beneath the fingernails and other factors indicated that Elektra had fought her killers until the bitter end.

Quinn also noted that the body had been discovered a few hours before by an early morning jogger walking along the beach in Belem, Brazil. This was many score miles from Elektra's last known whereabouts, Omnivore City.

"Got anything else?" Quinn asked Hatcher.

"That's all for now," he replied.

"Okay," Quinn told his executive assistant. "Keep me posted."

"Will do, boss," Hatcher said. The three-dimensional face promptly disappeared from view, as quickly as it had popped into being. Quinn smiled: Hatcher didn't know that "he" was only a few hundred pages of high level code on a computer chip.

As the hologram blanked out of existence, literally vanishing into thin air, Quinn again accessed his wrist keypad and punched in a new command sequence, shunting the cybernetic sphere into interactive mode.

This mode was designed to stimulate and aid thinking by allowing the user to call up free-associated images. Quinn downloaded all

the data he had on the Omnivore case so far. As he scrolled through his database files, he refreshed his mind on the chronology of the case.

Intervention Systems had been contracted by the World Police Agency to get the goods on Angel Metaxos, to prove that the Omnivore City industrial complex was being used to turn out illegal hardware drugs. With that evidence, Metaxos could be prosecuted under the old but still useful RICO statutes for heading up a continuing criminal enterprise.

Quinn jumped ahead to Elektra's last situation report transmission. According to the computer it had been logged only a few days before.

"Date: April 20th, 2032," she said as the holo of the sitrep came on line. "I'm filing a report on Omnivore City. I think I've found what we're looking for, boss."

Quinn studied Elektra's face as she continued speaking, the video implant in her eye socket showing her reflection in a bathroom mirror. She looked healthy and sun-bronzed, and as usual, the danger of the assignment seemed to turn her on. Like Quinn himself, Elektra had been a danger junkie, craving the adrenaline rush of living on the edge.

But she was afraid as well. Quinn could sense the fear in her face and her voice as she logged the tape and began the sitrep, extending her hand toward the lens of the subminiature holocamcorder inside her skull.

Cupped in the palm of the open hand, were three small rectangles of a black plasticlike material. They all had double rows of small metal prongs extending from their undersides.

Quinn used the holographic cut-and-paste feature of the cybersphere to take the three dimensional virtual objects from Elektra's hand and study them in his own as if they were real.

"See these?" Elektra's hologram asked. "They're SPASM modules. Omnivore's turning out millions of them. WIRE too, boss. The operation is sophisticated and my guess is it's ultra-high volume too."

Quinn watched as his agent put away the SPASM modules and turned the camera around to point at her face once again.

"But there's more, boss," she continued. "The honcho around here, a Greek business mogul named Angel Metaxos, is connected to some even larger operation, and it has nothing to do with hardware narcotics. Something big and very hush-hush is going on in the research and development section. I've just --"

Suddenly Elektra stopped and turned around as if she had heard something.

"Gotta sign off now, Quinn," she finished up by saying, her voice lowering somewhat to a near-whisper. "Get back to you soon with the full details. Know you wanted me to extract as soon as things started getting heavy but it's getting too interesting to stop."

The virtual screen hovering in the air went blank and Quinn dissolved it.

"You should have quit while you were ahead, kid," he said to no one in particular.

The large moving map display on the smart wall of the office of Central Communications and Reconnaissance, Central Atlantic Submarine Command, based at Woods Hole, California, showed the positions of search aircraft and vessels that scoured the ocean in a wide-ranging grid pattern. These had been deployed in a hunt for the Okeanos.

Major General Wilton Mulholland scanned the wide-area electronic display, checking constantly for updated telemetry that appeared in red highlights. Mulholland had been placed in charge of the search for the missing nuclear boomer.

The man in charge of the global search for the Okeanos was as baffled as the man on the street was concerning the location of the missing sub.

The skipper of the Okeanos was an able seaman. Possibilities for the reason behind the sub's disappearance plagued Mulholland. Since the hijacking had taken place, Mulholland had fallen asleep at night poring over the possibilities the way normal people counted sheep.

Any number of things could have caused a disaster at sea.

The nuclear reactor that powered the seawater propulsion system used by Okeanos could have been damaged. Accident or sabotage could have caused the hardware to malfunction.

Then too, the electronic systems on which navigation depended could also have been affected.

There was also the unthinkable which had to be considered along with everything else: the possibility of mutiny or some other catastrophic event along those lines.

Yet why had not Captain Claggett deployed the radio emergency buoy that would have broadcasted his position for rescue teams?

Why had not the array of phased satellites in orbit, their sensitive tracking devices aimed downward to scan every visible foot of the earth's oceans for magnetic and thermal anomalies caused by nuclear submarines, been able to detect not the slightest trace of the hijacked boat?

Humint sources had been quickly mobilized where techint assets had failed to produce useable intelligence data.

Unknown and unsuspected to the world at large, which had its eyes focused, via the global newsmedia, on the search for the missing sub, another search just as intense was going on.

It was a search conducted by men and women at every operational level where agents were in place. Any scrap of intelligence, no matter how small, or seemingly insignificant, was hungrily snatched up and added to a growing intelligence database.

On the boards of giant multinational corporations, in the halls of world capitals from Moscow to Washington, humint assets were gathering intel on the crew of the missing sub.

What was Blue Crew doing during the last few months prior to leaving Sub Base Bangor? The amount of data already turned in was staggering and supercomputers had been brought into play to crunch the numbers.

The intelligent machines had processed the raw intelligence data that had been dumped into them, filtering it and combing it, sifting and evaluating and finally organized the raw data into hard, finished intelligence.

Now Mulholland received the estimate that had been first processed by machine and then prepared by human intelligence analysts for dissemination on an Umbra-coded basis.

The captain of the Okeanos had been engaged in questionable activities. There was a period of time unaccounted for. During this period the captain had dropped out of sight. He could have --

"General, this just came in," said an aide, ducking into the office.

The aide handed Mulholland a sheet of paper. At the top its classification was Umbra-coded.

It confirmed Mulholland's worst suspicions: the evidence was overwhelming that the skipper of the Okeanos had been killed twenty-four to forty-eight hours prior to the sub setting out.

And if this was true, it begged the question: who was onboard the sub as its skipper? What had he done with the sub? And what in the name of heaven was he going to tell his superiors when they asked him to explain how it could have happened at all.

FIVE

The Pegasus smart car slogged up the muddy mountain road at thirty miles per hour.

The drive from the international airport at Brasilia had been reasonably fast, although nothing seemed fast compared to the speed of a transonic aerospace plane, which had flown the driver some three thousand miles in less than an hour.

Behind the smart car's steering wheel, Quinn consulted the moving map display on the Pegasus' main dashboard screen.

The flashing arrow on the console showed Quinn that he was right on course for Omnivore City. The glowing red screen icon showing his car's relative position was updated by constant data from navigational satellite phased arrays circling the earth in low orbit.

"Position update," Quinn said as he drove.

"Processing," the Gay Male Voice of the smart car said.

A window popped into view on the smart car's navigational console screen. The data that it showed informed Quinn that he had completed most of his preprogrammed drive plan toward his final destination.

A few minutes later, the screen icon representing the smart car changed color and the console gave out a long beeptone.

"We have reached our final destination," said the Gay Male Voice coming from the console. "The pleasure of driving you was all mine."

Voice options for the smart car included Female Voice, Heterosexual Male Voice, Gay Male Voice and Gender Neutral Voice, but Quinn had been unable to change from the Gay Male Voice setting the Pegasus had been on when he'd driven from the airport parking lot as Quinn halted the smart car in front of the striped barrier.

"We hope that your trip has been a smooth one," the Gay Male Voice went on. "And please rent from Worldwide Car Rentals again."

On either side of the main gate were guard posts. Sentries wearing paramilitary style fatigues and carrying bullpup assault weapons were stationed at the posts.

At first glance, Omnivore's security arrangements looked impressive. The security people appeared to be well trained, well armed and professional in their bearing.

A brief look around convinced Quinn that vehicles trying to break into or out of the complex would face an array of automatic Vulcan guns positioned on either side and computer targeted to blow the insurgents to smithereens.

Quinn climbed out of the smart car which automatically locked its doors and went into security mode. After a complete systems check, the Pegasus would turn on its electric ignition and drive itself back to the airport, a practice against the law in the United States but legal here in Brazil.

"Your name, sir?" asked one of the sentries of the visitor as he trudged toward the post over gravel covered earth.

Quinn gave it as Matt Keller, whose personal data and itinerary should have already been programmed into the security control computer system.

Quinn had made the arrangements himself before his departure, using one of the electronic "legends" he had spent years inserting into worldwide identity databases for the purposes of covert penetration.

Keller was supposed to be an investigator from Universal Personnel, the dummy personnel agency Quinn had set up to provide plausible cover for Elektra during her assignment at Omnivore City.

The sentry stationed at the gate carried an identiconsole, a one foot square touch pad which was contoured for the human hand. Quinn placed his right hand into the depression on the face of the device.

"Please state your name and corporate affiliation, sir," the soldier instructed him, "and stare into the red light."

"Matt Keller, Universal Personnel Agency," Quinn said, speaking evenly as the microprocessor compared his fingerprints, voice and retinal patterns with those stored in memory. "Our motto is, 'you hire the best when you hire from Universal Personnel'."

"Wait here, Mr. Keller," the security man told the visitor after the identiconsole check was completed. "Someone from Visitor Orientation will be around to meet you presently."

As Quinn waited for his Visitor Orientation staffer to come around and fetch him, he watched the large digital flat screen on which an in-house video narrative was in progress.

First the splashy Omnivore logo came up with stirring theme music, followed by an aerial pan of the vast municipal-industrial complex carved out of the jungle.

"Omnivore City..." the voiceover began, "...end product of years of work ... the realization of ambitious dreams ... proud, bold ... the shining face of a better tomorrow!"

The synthesized theme music rose to a crescendo and the voiceover continued to recount the glories of Omnivore, citing facts and figures designed to impress as the video imagery showed a panorama of sky-challenging buildings and broad, ruler-straight streets linked by a central monorail system.

Despite the flashy video presentation, Quinn found that it was difficult to compile a mental map of Omnivore City from his vantage point near the guard booths at the city's main entrance.

Had he flown in directly, he might have had a better idea of the layout, but he had missed the last chopper flight of the day into the complex and had been forced to rent the smart car as his only means of travel.

Quinn did know that the Omnivore complex was vast. It was a city in every sense of the word including its sprawling acreage.

Omnivore City was almost as large as Dallas, Texas and dwarfed many smaller cities across the world.

The corporate municipality had been the brainchild of Angel Metaxos, the billionaire's far-reaching vision of the future where big business, big government and high technology all converged.

After profits had soared along with productivity levels, Metaxos' bold commercial venture had already given rise to several other such corporate cities across the world, in Japan, Europe and in the United States.

While controversial, they promised jobs, health care and a place where families could be raised free from the scourge of dope, DRUG-RAIDS (or drug-resistant AIDS), and urban violence that plagued the developed nations.

Omnivore might be the wave of the future, and Quinn could see the day when the final barriers between government and business were dissolved completely.

Then the corporate state would have become a reality. Whether that was entirely bad or good Quinn didn't know. As with most things, it would benefit some and leave others in the lurch.

Quinn's thoughts were interrupted by the appearance of a jitney. The jitney pulled over to him and a uniformed figure looking to be in his early twenties called out to him.

"Welcome to Omnivore City," he told Quinn. "My name is Roger and I will be your escort," the driver went on.

Quinn climbed aboard the jitney which Roger promptly put into gear. Up close Quinn realized that Roger was not what he had seemed to be at first glance.

"Roger the robot," Quinn commented.

"Correct, sir," replied the driver of the jitney as he swung the slowly moving electrically powered vehicle through the streets of Omnivore City. "I am a Mark-3 Visitor Orientation Unit.

"I am programmed to provide you with basic visitor orientation as required by Omnivore City Charter of 2006, Article One, Section Two, Subsection Fifteen."

"Is that right?" asked Quinn. "What's the square root of pi times eighteen to the twenty-seventh power?"

"Fifty-seven trillion point two-nine-zero," Roger responded without missing a beat. "Care to ask me another, sir?" the jitney driver replied. "I am equipped with a V-780 math coprocessor capable of fifth level algorithmic functions. Are there any other computations you would like me to perform?"

"Forget it, babycakes," Quinn replied. "Just give me the plain vanilla tour."

"My pleasure, sir," replied the jitney driver. "As I was saying..."

Quinn listened to Roger's orientation lecture as the robotized solar-electric powered jitney took him across streets that were obviously planned on computer screens and executed by faceless bureaucrats.

As Quinn recalled, the environmentalists had been up in arms over the loss of thousands of square miles of some of the last virgin rainforest left on the planet. It had been cut down in order to make the space for Omnivore City in the early part of the twenty-first century.

The project had remained stalled for years while a small, guerilla-style war over its legitimacy had raged, first in Brazil, and then across the entire length and breadth of South America before it finally went global.

The environmentalists had seen what was looming on the horizon. They knew that Omnivore City represented the ultimate crossing of the line of demarcation which lay between efforts to preserve and to destroy earth's remaining natural resources.

Once the construction of Omnivore had become a fait accompli it would mean that the environmentalists had lost their struggle.

For years a growing backlash had been building.

The war had become fierce, but in the end the international big money interests and the promise of thousands of new jobs prevailed over the ideals of a handful of would-be preservationists.

Omnivore was finally built and staffed by a work force of thousands recruited from all over the world. Now the earth's rainforests were disappearing at an alarming rate as more such corporate cities

sprang up and began to grow as more space for manufacturing and living quarters was needed.

"And here is the medical building," Roger declaimed. "Some of the finest diagnostic computers available to -- "

Bursts of gunfire had started up, drowning out the robot guide's words with their sudden patter.

Acting on reflex, Quinn whipped his auto-acquiring Glock 10 mm pistol from beneath his bush jacket and pointed its laser targeting beam this way and that, trying to overcome the disorientation from the unexpected burst.

He soon got an eyeful of the cause of the commotion.

Off to the left of the jitney, a paramilitary-style assault squad was coming up on a fast hustle, their blazing guns throwing out a continuing hail of autofire.

Arriving to challenge the attackers behind the protection of two armored personnel carriers was a squadron of bullpup-equipped internal security personnel wearing black SWAT style uniforms and matching ball caps. The insignia on their uniforms identified the SWAT team as members of the C.O.P.S.-supplied Omnivore City Police Force.

The defenders were quick and professional in dealing with the armed insurgents. While point shooters threw up a wall of flechette fire using the 4.73 mm caseless bullpup weapons they ported, a squad weapon detail set up a multiple grenade launcher. Soon the sound of rapid explosions from the vortexing 40 mm grenade rounds cracked like thunder.

The counterstrike was effective, killing the point members of the assault team and scattering the survivors. These broke for the cover of the jungle perimeter amid dense clouds of cordite smoke.

"Don't worry, sir," Roger said as he hit a series of buttons on the jitney's instrumentation panel. "We are fully protected. The police are efficient. They will take care of the problem."

"Who are they?" asked Quinn, meaning the attackers.

"Environmental terrorists," Roger replied. "They stage raids inside the municipal regions. Again, do not be concerned. We are equipped to deal with the threat."

Gunfire- and blast-proof shields were now sliding up over the flanks of the robotized vehicle. Their appearance came just in time too, because automatic weapons fire was sparking as the bullets bounced off the ultra-hard thermoplastic surface of the shields.

The jitney was moving fast too, as Roger the robot swung the small electrically powered vehicle into a narrow street and emerged from it into a small paved square flanked by glass-walled buildings.

"My apologies for the problem, sir," Roger told Quinn as the sounds of the firefight diminished in the background. "We may now proceed in safety."

"You spoke too soon, cyberfriend," Quinn replied, seeing sudden sideward motion in his peripheral vision.

In a flash, a group of enviroterrorists appeared, charging in from concealed positions from across the small plaza.

They were a ragtag bunch, garbed in a variety of combat fatigue types and carrying outmoded assault weapons, Quinn could see. But one of them was toting a SMAW rocket. Before Roger could bring the jitney around and roll down another side street, the high explosive warhead burst from the man-portable rocket launcher.

Quinn dived from the jitney and hit the ground on a roll as the round left the pipe amid a rush of fierce backblast, dodging for cover amid a hail of autofire as the high explosive multipurpose HEMP warhead fired by SMAW struck the jitney and exploded in a brilliant fireball of destruction.

As Quinn righted himself, he caught sight of the jitney careering forward into the group of attackers, its robot driver wreathed in flames behind the steering joystick.

The onrushing vehicle forced the commando strike crew to scatter as it crashed into a wall and went up in a ballooning fireball. Holding his piece in a stiff-armed match grip, Quinn sighted on one of the insurgents and knocked the guy down with a burst of Glock fire from his small-framed autoweapon.

More jungle rangers were now coming at him as Quinn ejected the spent magazine and jammed another one into the autopistol's receiver.

Just as Quinn was chambering a fresh round, a chopper appeared overhead. Automatic fire came hurtling down from the helo in a lethal, cycling hail of glowing white tracers.

Computer-targeted, the heavy caliber rounds made short work of the attackers. As the survivors melted back into the surrounding rainforest, the chopper set down in the midst of the carnage littering the plaza. Quinn straightened from cover, holding his hands up to clearly demonstrate that he was not part of the attacker group.

"Please put your hands down, sir," a member of the chopper crew told him. "We apologize for the trouble. The mandatory orientation tour is hereby waived. Please come aboard and we will take you to our medical office for a complete examination."

"Just show me to a cold shower," Quinn told the guy as the chopper lifted off. Looking down, he saw that Roger the robot had fallen clear of the crashed jitney and was strewn all over the ground in smoldering fragments.

The attackers, he reflected, had not had the numbers in their favor, yet despite that drawback, Quinn had to admit that they had been good. That told Quinn something. He was dealing with troops fighting for a cause they believed in more than life itself.

SIX

The hologram displayed the three-dimensional image of a man without a human face.

Electronic masking made the visage seem like a mass of crudely fashioned putty. The voice of the speaker had the fuzzy tones of a mechanical simulation.

The faceless man spoke, and his voice possessed the hollow, metallic ring of something produced by a computer sound chip.

"The nuclear submarine Okeanos was taken by Force Three shock forces at 0738 hours two days ago. It is now under Our complete control."

From his seat in the National Security Council Situation Room in the White House basement, the President watched the face. It had never been seen before, but computer simulations based on eyewitness reports had reconstructed it.

Alpha, the super criminal who had nearly been responsible for destroying the human race in his previous bid for global supremacy, had resurfaced. The supercriminal had engineered the takeover of the Prometheus energy satellites.

Encircling the globe in a phased orbital array, the satellite network had been designed to provide mankind with an almost limitless source of energy, intending to usher humanity into a new age of peace and prosperity.

Alpha had entertained other plans. Bent on global domination he had infected the earth-based computers that controlled Prometheus with a

virus that would cause them to spread massive destruction if his blackmail demands were not met.

Although Alpha's bid for global conquest had failed, owing in large part to the intervention of Quinn, reactivated in his role as Nomad, Prometheus was still unable to function at more than minimal output levels due to the viral contamination Alpha had subjected it to.

The Prometheus Project's technical staff at the Storm King Mountain facility was still working on purging the computer system that controlled the phased satellite array of the supervirus Alpha had infected it with.

"Our demand is simple. Global security forces are not to interfere in any way with the takeover of the African republic of Kalemby Force Three's private defense forces," Alpha went on.

The best intelligence could not establish who Alpha really was. His identity remained as much a mystery as his ability to manipulate world events with the precision control of a master puppeteer.

He had believed to have been killed during the destruction of Castle, the secret military space station placed in a stealthy earth orbit. Apparently the reports of his death had been exaggerated. Alpha still lived, and was more dangerous than ever before because of the power that was now in his hands.

"If this demand is not met, severe retaliation using the Okeanos to deliver advanced weapons on priority targets will commence," Alpha went on in his simulated voice.

"Be forewarned that the strategic missiles normally carried by the submarine have been augmented and replaced with far more advanced weaponry which cannot be interdicted."

This claim was nothing short of astonishing.

How could it be possible?

The President listened in growing amazement and a mounting sense of fear.

"To demonstrate the seriousness of Our intentions," Alpha went on, "We will deploy a single one of these advanced weapons to destroy the North American Aerospace Defense Command headquarters located at Cheyenne Mountain, Colorado.

"Destruction of the base is to commence at 2300 hours Zulu, tomorrow precisely. The governments of the United States and Canada are hereby advised to evacuate their personnel from the base if they wish to save their lives. We repeat that our weapon cannot be destroyed and the destruction of Cheyenne Mountain is assured."

That was all there was of the transmission, except for a footnote that Alpha would be contacting them with further demands after Cheyenne Mountain was finally destroyed.

After showering and putting on fresh clothes, the man whose legend identified him as "Matt Keller" had a meeting with Angel Metaxos, Chief Executive Officer of the Omnivore Corporation as well as the man who singlehandedly ran Omnivore City.

A visitor was just leaving Metaxos' office. Quinn recognized him immediately as he waited in the outer reception area. It was Newcomb Straker, the billionaire weapons manufacturer and international playboy.

The media had dubbed him "Nuke 'Em" because of the advanced technology nuclear missiles systems he had developed, and subsequently placed on the auction block to anyone with the money to pay for them, including corrupt dictators of Third, Fourth and Fifth World countries.

After Straker left, Quinn was ushered into the office, cutting short his time to wonder about what a man like "Nuke 'Em" was doing at Omnivore. The corporate leader awaited Quinn in his luxuriously appointed office suite, rising from his desk and striding toward the door with outstretched hand as Quinn entered.

Metaxos was wearing a black suit with a collar stud of flashing star sapphire. His face had chiseled features, and the smile showed brilliant teeth. Despite the executive's grey hair, there was no mistaking the coiled energy that his stride held within it. Metaxos' grip was strong as he shook Quinn's hand.

It was rumored that Metaxos had been the recipient of organ grafts and genetic engineering to keep himself young beyond his one hundred years, and Quinn had no doubt that Metaxos cherished life with a greed that few other mortals could understand.

Everywhere in the room were to be seen the trappings of the power that Metaxos wielded over the length and breadth of his jungle empire. From its collection of sound-sculptures by modern masters to its glass display cases containing pre-Columbian carvings, the spacious office bore the unmistakable stamp of power, wealth and taste.

Its curving picture windows looked out on a panoramic view of Omnivore City and the jungle beyond. Great sawtoothed hills, their flanks carpeted with a lush, vibrant green, surrounded the city which had been carved out of the most remote reaches of the Amazon jungle.

"Mr. Keller," Metaxos told his guest after shaking hands with him. "Very good to meet you. Please sit down."

Nomad sat and Metaxos joined him on the settee. The corporate honcho exuded a powerful charisma and his smile had a politician's practiced, professional warmth. But Quinn knew that buccaneer's blood coursed through his veins, and the engaging smile concealed a miser's unquenchable lust for gold.

Metaxos had climbed to the top of the corporate ladder in a series of ruthlessly executed and highly questionable mergers and acquisitions. He had staged more than one palace coup and unkinged

more than one corporate potentate during that rise to power and wealth and had never shied away from playing dirty.

"First let me say that I deeply regret the accident which claimed the life of Ms. Brady," Metaxos began. "She was well liked by all."

"You knew her, then?" Quinn asked, seizing on the executive's words.

"No, Mr. Keller. Let me correct myself: I did not personally know Ms. Brady," Metaxos responded. "I must clarify: my knowledge is solely based on reports by my intelligence people."

"I see," said Quinn.

"Do you really?" asked Metaxos. "Perhaps you don't. Let me make myself crystal clear. Omnivore is a city in every sense of the word. In my capacity as CEO I am far more than the just the equivalent of its Mayor. I am more akin to its heart, its lungs, its brain, indeed, its very soul. The police report can tell you a great deal more than I can."

"I would like to see it," Quinn put in.

"And you shall, Mr. Keller," Metaxos told him. "A copy of the full report will be made available to you. We have every intention of cooperating with your investigation, I assure you."

"Good," answered Quinn. "I would like to begin right away."

"Everything you require will be made available to you," Metaxos told his visitor. "However I must also address another matter: the reception you received. It was not the sort we had intended."

"I didn't think it was," Quinn told Metaxos with a smile, "unless you have a strange sense of theatrics."

"I assure you that those eco-terrorists will not go unpunished. In this raid alone they destroyed millions of international purchasing credits worth of private property."

"And seemed to have suffered heavy losses in the course of the action," Quinn observed.

"Be that as it may, Mr. Keller," Metaxos countered, "they will suffer much more, and quite soon. You see, a counterstrike is being prepared as we speak. In fact, I would like you to come along on the raid as an observer. You will be quite safe, I can assure you."

"I appreciate the offer," Quinn replied, "but it's not necessary."

"If not for yourself, then come along for my sake, Mr. Keller," Metaxos pressed, using Quinn's assumed name. "I am a Greek, and you are my guest. If you have read the Odyssey of Homer then you have some idea of how ancient and important the tradition of hospitality runs. You must help restore my sense of honor."

"Then I suppose I'll have to come along, since you put it that way," Quinn acknowledged.

"That's right, Mr. Keller," Metaxos replied with a nod of his head. "You must. But I'm keeping you. The raid on the jungle redoubt of the eco-terrorists will commence in two hours. You will be escorted to the staging area by my security people. I hope to see you then."

As Quinn left the office, Metaxos consulted the three security screens visible through the semiopaque surface of his desktop.

They showed "Keller's" back as the visitor walked away from the office along the sterile corridor.

With the visitor gone, Metaxos' expression underwent a complete change. All traces of its former warmth and charm had left the angular face. The disarming smile had turned into a deep frown and the gleam of the grey eyes had filmed to a dull patina.

Metaxos took a key from a chain around his neck and unlocked a secure drawer under the desktop. He pulled it out to reveal a pair of eyephones and an encryptor/descrambler unit.

"Scorpio reporting. Our visitor has arrived," he spoke to the electronic simulation of a human face that had appeared on the eyephones' virtual screen, which to Metaxos seemed to fill his entire field of view. "He is under constant surveillance."

"We are troubled, Scorpio," said the simulacrum that had winked to life on the viewscreen. "Mr. Quinn has been most bothersome to Us in the past. We must take measures to insure he will not prove an obstacle to this present enterprise."

"Do not be troubled," Metaxos went on. "Quinn is a dead man. I will *not* fail."

"I trust that you will not, Scorpio," the being on the other end intoned. "Not if your long life still holds sweetness for you."

A steadily mounting tension gripped those seated in immense battle crib of the National Military Command Center, situated beneath the sprawling Pentagon building. It was now some ten hours since the receipt of the Alpha hologram.

Commander Virgil Jersperson was linked via secure telecommunications with the President, the head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Commander of the Strategic Air Command which occupies some fifty stories of corridor space beneath the oak tree of Offut Air Force Base at Omaha, Nebraska.

The purpose of the hemisphere-wide teleconferencing was to permit the commanders of the United States' nuclear defense forces to poll one another on whether to change the Defense Condition or DEFCON status from its current status of five to status 3, mandated on nuclear flash detection or threat confirmation of nuclear attack.

Because the threat received from the Force Three criminal organization was deemed to be serious, the present meeting had been hastily convened. After polling one another, the heads of American nuclear defense forces ordered an immediate shift in status from DEFCON 5 to DEFCON 3.

The United States was now two DEFCON stages away from Cocked Pistol, the state of maximum readiness that would signal the

imminence of thermonuclear attack. The world now stood a heartbeat away from total disaster.

From Original Manuscript

SEVEN

The two Rapaho LHX technology combat helicopters dusted off the Omnivore City helipad and were soon airborne, the stub wings situated at port and starboard of each fuselage helping to supply lift and keep the helos stable.

The helicopters were large, ungainly beasts, their ceramic-armored skins capable of withstanding direct hits from bursting shrapnel and even twenty-millimeter hard core penetrator rounds fired by computer-tracked Vulcan cannons.

From within each helo's air-conditioned cockpit and aft personnel compartment, its standard four-man aircrew commanded a potent array of weapons systems.

These were assisted in putting accurate fire on their targets by a sophisticated avionics suite including FLIR, GPS and real-time satellite downlinked telemetry.

In addition to thirty-five millimeter Vulcan cannons positioned at port and starboard, the Rapaho combat-capable helicopters could fire off fifty high performance rocket warheads of various types, including low-yield, nuclear-tipped rounds if necessary.

The Rapaho choppers were spacious enough to loft a fully outfitted platoon of combat personnel to a hot spot, yet fleet and nimble enough to get in and out of trouble quickly.

In the point chopper's crew compartment located aft of the cockpit, Quinn was strapped in beside Metaxos who was busy punching in coded keyboard sequences at his battle management station.

Banks of rack-mounted multimode display screens flashed constantly updated position data and real-time television imagery of the skies around them and of the jungle passing below them.

The position data came from Omnivore's own array of navigational satellites parked in geosynchronous orbit, while the real-time video came from the hull-mounted cameras of the helo itself.

"We'll be coming up on the site of the ecoterrorist camp within a matter of minutes," Metaxos said to his guest.

"As you may have been able to surmise, Mr. Keller, this rotorcraft and the one flying beside us can deliver withering firepower on the target," he went on. "But just to cover all bases, we have deployed ground forces too."

To underscore this fact, Metaxos now pointed with a smile toward the leftmost color display of the battle station. But Quinn's eyes were already focused on the image the screen presented.

Weaving through the dense green jungle foliage like a trail of black beetles with ungainly square-sided shells, Quinn recognized a mechanized column of military infantry command vehicles.

Bristling with weaponry, the MICVs were every bit as formidable as they looked. The war wagons looked like variants of the time-tested Mowag design, and Quinn was familiar enough with the specs of the vehicles to know they packed plenty of wallop.

"You're not playing any games with those guys in the jungle," Quinn opined to Metaxos.

"No, we are not, Mr. Keller," the Omnivore honcho replied. "The ecoterrorists are nothing more than vicious criminals and dangerous psychopaths. The name by which they call themselves -- 'Age of Reptiles' -- should speak for itself. The fact that they pay lip service to a bizarre ecological ideology does not change these basic facts. We will hunt them down and we will exterminate them, like the extinct creatures for which they have so aptly named themselves."

Metaxos fell silent as he returned to his tactical display console and the helo continued its terrain-following path across the skies.

Within a matter of minutes they had reached the perimeter of the strike zone.

"Sir, we just got a visual confirm on the targets," the pilot's voice suddenly came over the helo's cockpit-to-cabin interphone. "What are your orders?"

"Hit them!" Metaxos ordered, scanning his tactical console, whose multiple screens confirmed the pilot's report of activity in the jungle below. "Hit them -- *hard!*"

"Aye, sir," came the pilot's reply.

Quinn, too, caught televised glimpses of the manshapes scurrying below through the dense canopy of the treetops as the two attack helos shot overhead.

But on infra-red imaging mode, the heat of their bodies showed up clearly on the thermal imaging sensors, giving Quinn a good idea of the numbers of the paramilitary group down below.

There were dozens of the forces Metaxos had tagged as "eco-terrorists" who were racing to find cover beneath the jungle canopy, aiming their weapons skyward once they'd hunkered in.

All of a sudden, the air exploded with the rapid cadences of heavy caliber automatic fire coming from multiple weapons below. Where the TI imaging screens showed bright white flashes, automatic salvos were hurtling up at the underbelly of the assault choppers.

But the fire crews onboard the helos had already started answering the bursts with concentrated pulses of air-to-ground fire. Vulcan cannons were in action now, and Quinn could see the glowing tracers spat out at a fantastic rate of speed by the weapons' rotating drums streak down into the jungle treeline below.

As the aerial assault commenced, ground forces had made contact with the enemy as well as the mechanized column punched a hole in the encampment's outer perimeter and steamrolled directly into the heart of the jungle hot zone.

Above the ratcheting of the helo's rotors Quinn now heard the unmistakable sound of the heavy caliber machineguns mounted on the MICVs opening up, followed almost immediately by the echoing thunder of the first rocket strike.

The tactical view screens confirmed this assessment.

The screen showed that the MICVs below were unleashing withering rocket strikes and heavy caliber fire on a fortified encampment of what Metaxos had referred to as "ecoterrorists."

Although they had deployed to defensive positions, it was clear that the target group had little chance of prevailing over the massive military might being brought to bear against them.

The heaviest pieces of armament that the force in the jungle had available for deployment was a Vulcan gun mounted on the rear of a flatbed truck and some shoulder-fire capable rocket systems.

In addition to conventional small arms fire, both of the aforementioned were now being trained on the MICVs and the helos which were hammering them from above.

The billowing smoke of high explosive and rocket exhaust further obscured naked-eye and photomechanical surveillance of the strike zone, but the TI sensors mounted in protective fairings beneath the chopper showed the battle in progress with electronically augmented clarity.

"Those bastards down there are being taught a lesson they've deserved for a long time," Metaxos observed without trying to hide his glee. "They're -- "

Just then a brilliant flash of light filled up the TI screen.

Overloaded, the electronic image bloomed, but the unmistakable signature of a HEAT rocket strike had caused the blooming.

When the TI screen cleared moments later as microprocessors corrected for the new thermal imaging conditions in the combat environment, it was apparent that one of the two MICVs had been severely damaged by a broadside armor-piercing rocket strike and was now burning furiously.

In seconds, another brilliant flash made the screens bloom yet again as a second HEAT strike reduced the second of the three MICVs that had been sent into the strike zone to masses of mangled, burning slag.

Metaxos was already on-line to the third and final surviving MICV. Its frantic crew were reporting taking heavy fire.

"Get out of there fast!" Metaxos shouted into the battle management center's goosenecked tactical console mike.

"What about survivors?" the voice of the MICV's crew chief came back over the comlink. "There may be some of our people still alive down there!"

"I said get out of the area!" Metaxos shouted back again. "Now *do it!*"

Without waiting for a reply, Metaxos punched up a direct interphone comlink to the pilot of the flanking Rapaho LHX helicopter.

As he began issuing a rapid string of attack orders to the pilot, Quinn watched the tactical display screens which showed him that the MICV was withdrawing from the strike zone under heavy fire but seemed to be making it.

"Incoming round detected!" the navigator's voice suddenly was heard over the interphone. "IR-seeker head engaged. Round is locked onto chopper two."

A moment later the second chopper exploded into an airborne fireball, completely disintegrating the helicopter and its crew in the flaming airburst.

The tremendous shockwave from the direct hit sent the first chopper pitching through the air, and would have flung Quinn and Metaxos tumbling from their seats had they not been securely strapped in.

"Launch signature of second incoming round detected," the navigator's voice said again in professional no-sweat tones.

"Deploy ECM and dipole chaff! Quickly!" shouted Metaxos. Perspiration was now beading his high forehead, and the gleam of the hunt had been replaced by the wide-eyed stare of primeval fear. "Get us the hell out of here! *Fast!*"

"ECM initialized and chaff deployed," the navigator's far more controlled voice replied as he repeatedly hit the button that pumped the radar-deflecting foil strips from the helo's rear.

"Ascending. Executing ninety degree attitude change." A pulsebeat passed, then, "ICM at fifty feet and closing ... thirty feet and closing," another pulsebeat and then, "we have break lock on ICM! Break -- "

A world-shaking explosion drowned out the navigator's final utterances as the warhead which had automatically armed itself seconds before, now exploded only a few score yards from the chopper.

As the navigator had reported, the electronic countermeasures and dipole chaff which had been deployed had caused a break on the incoming warhead's target lock.

The ground-to-air missile's warhead exploded before penetrating its destructive envelope, however the outcome of the explosion was still too close to call.

As it happened, the shock wave of compressed and superheated air pounded the armored hull of the Rapaho chopper instants before semimolten shrapnel reached it.

The combination of dynamic forces resulted in an overpressure condition which made bulkheads buckle and double-reinforced cockpit windows deform inward, but the rotorcraft managed to hold itself together.

If not for the ceramic, Chobham-type armoring of the chopper's hull, the outcome of the missile attack would probably have been considerably different, though.

As it happened all hands reported only minimal damage sustained by the blast.

Within a matter of seconds, the fast-moving helicopter was out of range of any more ground-launched missile attacks, with a malfunctioning engine pan as its only major systems fault.

Realizing that he was finally out of danger, the sweat which had collected on Metaxos' brow began to cool and dry.

His eyes lost their last traces of fear as he saw the strike zone growing smaller on his tactical screens as the chopper left it behind.

"I'm glad you were along to see this, Mr. Keller," he bragged to Quinn. "Our side sustained some losses, yes, but the scum on the ground took a far greater beating. I predict that we have dealt the would-be insurgents a truly crushing blow."

Quinn did not respond to what the boastful Omnivore CEO had just told him.

He had other thoughts of his own concerning the outcome of the abortive raid, thoughts that he did not think that his host would have been too pleased to hear as the blast-damaged chopper limped back to base.

EIGHT

Embryjoe opened the plastic packet and gingerly took out the WIRE module nestled inside.

A corrupt thrill raced through his nervous system as he felt the cool, smooth surface of the plug drug against his fingertips. Had he still been capable of it after years of abusing the potent hardware psychoactives, he might have had an erection at the almost sexual delight it brought him.

Seated on the edge of the bed in his single-room efficiency unit, Embryjoe raised up the small black rectangle with the projecting double row of sixteen metal pins to the side of his head.

Sweeping back the purple hair that hung down in a lank fringe from a shaven crown, Embryjoe exposed the rectangular thirty-two-pin interface connector mounted in the side of his head.

Anchored to the bone of his skull, the interface was linked by electrodes thinner than strands of human hair to various centers of his brain controlling vision, hearing and other zones of sensory perception.

Plugging the WIRE hardware drug module into its interface connector would activate its program, cybernetically altering brain function and launching him on a trip into expanded reality.

Embryjoe licked his lips as he fitted the hardware drug module into its skull-socketed interface connector. A pulsebeat later, the WIRE program initialized with a powerful psychedelic rush. Embryjoe began to shiver and moan as reality became a glowing mosaic of trillions of tiny squares as the plug drug called "Jabberwocky" took effect.

Getting up, Embryjoe went to the mirror.

The gleaming multicolored scales of a robotoid entity shone back at him from the reflective surface. The eyes in the Jabberwock's head were black orbs, gleaming like polished agate.

Embryjoe held up his fist, seeing a smile cross the Jabberwock's face as razor-keen, wickedly glinting spikes popped from the knuckles of his hand.

WIRE had transformed Embryjoe into something larger than life, more than human. He was now Jabberwock, dealer of death as long as the program ran.

Keying open the door, Embryjoe left his unit in Omnivore City's personnel housing zone zone.

He knew what his instructions were, knew that he had been given the expensive hardware drug as payment for a task he had to perform.

That task was to take the life of the man named Matt Keller.

As Embryjoe strode through the corridors of the dwelling complex, his quarry was leaving the Omnivore City Hall of Records. The personnel computer located there contained an index of all facts concerning Omnivore's employees.

Elektra's particulars were on this main database as well.

They told Quinn little that added to the database that he had built up after several days of interviewing Elektra's coworkers on the two assembly lines she had worked while undercover.

All of the Omnivore employees whom Quinn had interviewed during his stay at the complex had told him that Elektra was personable, intelligent and apparently aggressively pursuing a career jump.

"She didn't just want to be a line dog," one of them had recalled. "Elektra had her eyes on bigger things."

That Elektra had blended in well with her coworkers was what she had been expected to do.

She had been an accomplished undercover operative whom Quinn had used on a variety of assignments, many of them highly dangerous.

But Elektra's very effectiveness in assuming the roles she played also meant that Quinn's chances of finding a clue to why Elektra had been taken out were slim because, any secret she might have turned up would have been hidden too well to be found without a clue to its whereabouts, of which there were none.

So far, Quinn's findings tended to confirm his first impressions that Omnivore would prove to be no more than a dead end. Without a solid lead, the only person at Omnivore who could enlighten Quinn was Metaxos, and he was stonewalling, not talking.

Leaving the records hall, Quinn headed across streets laid out in a neat but sterile grid pattern. His destination was the nearby stop of Omnivore's magnetic levitation or mag-lev monorail transit system.

Car traffic was discouraged at Omnivore. Even the electric jitneys were mainly used to shuttle visitors around the city on sightseeing tours and for other special purposes.

For most commuter activities, the monorail system was the primary method of transportation.

The system was a good one, Quinn had to admit. The monorail looped around the city in a ring with interconnecting hubs linking the entire network together.

Quinn recalled that he had been informed during his brief orientation lecture by the late Roger the robot that any point in Omnivore City could be reached within fifteen minutes by monorail, and Quinn had found this statement to be borne out during his interview sessions.

Wearing the blue clip-on tag of a visiting dignitary, "Matt Keller" could have arranged for a company jitney had he chosen to do so.

But Quinn was glad that he had trusted his instincts and used the Omnivore monorail system, finding it a fast and efficient means of getting around the sprawling metropolis.

The monorail soon arrived, pulling into the station in almost total silence on its cushion of magnetic force. Taking a seat on one of the monorail's cars, Quinn swung out the travel service computer screen by his seat on its jointed pivot-arm and punched the button marked "Main Menu."

An on-screen menu appeared requesting passengers to select from various options. One of these, called "Personal Therapist" caught his eye. Choosing it on a whim, Quinn was asked to select either male, female or gender-neutral therapist. He chose "female."

"You have received a terrible shock," the computer therapist began in a soothing voice. "But don't worry. We can help. We can make you feel much, much better."

Not wanting to hear any more of Personal Therapist, Quinn went back to the main menu and picked out what he originally wanted, the Monorail Transit Guide. He was asked to input the name of the stop he desired or call up a second menu screen which would give him an electronic map of the city.

Quinn called up the second menu, found his departure zone on the screen and moved the arrow cursor across several data fields to indicate his selection.

The screen disappeared and the message materialized telling Quinn that the stop he wanted was Sector 7, the stop after next, and gave an ETA of eleven minutes. The screen asked Quinn if he desired help with anything else. He hit the "no" button and the screen returned to showing the flashy Omnivore logo.

Swinging aside the computer screen on its retractable pivot-arm so it was again out of his way, Quinn looked out the window at the ultramodern buildings that rose into the dark sky on either side of him.

Omnivore City was unique in the ambitious scope of its municipal layout. Unlike most urban environments, every piece of architecture had been simultaneously planned and erected.

The spare, clean lines of the corporate city brought a chill to the mind, though. Omnivore represented a computer's idea of stark perfection, not a human one. Quinn would be glad to leave this place once he was finished here. Others, however, had different plans for Quinn.

Now transformed by WIRE into Jabberwock, Embryjoe got on at the Sector 6 monorail stop and entered the car.

It was deserted. That was all to the good. Embryjoe stepped forward as the Jabberwock program's thermal imaging detector registered the heat signature of a human body, the microprocessor chip patched into his brain turning his eyes into multimode scanning mechanisms.

Embryjoe smiled as he pushed through the door into the car beyond and acquired his target, matching the visual data with the image stored on the plug drug chip socketed in his skull. Keller was just sitting there, oblivious to the fact that he was marked for death as he watched Jabberwock cross into the car, not suspecting that he would not be watching anything else after too much longer if Jabberwock had its way.

Quinn took little notice of the weirdo in the spiky purple hair entering the monorail car from the next one down the line, other than to note the slight glazed look in his eyes. He figured the Omnivore line dog had been spending time at one of the corporate city's drug parlors and was homeward bound in a somewhat inebriated state.

Had Embryjoe been presenting the other side of his head, Quinn might have noticed the WIRE module plugged into its skull interface, but he did not.

When Embryjoe suddenly whirled in place and lashed out at Quinn's head with a foot blow, the unexpected attack almost killed him as the Wirehead had intended it to. But even half alert, combat-honed reflexes took over to save Quinn's life.

As the martial arts kick landed against the wall behind the seat with a loud thud, Quinn's upper body no longer occupied the space of a second before.

He had jerked right, presenting a narrow profile to the attacker while thigh and calve muscles combined to thrust him from the seat. Pivoting, Quinn faced the Wirehead in a martial art's cat stance with left balled into a fist at his thigh and right hand held in the tiger claw position, palm-upward and fingers hooked.

Embryjoe lost much of his initiative along with the advantage of surprise, but he soon recovered his balance. The agile martial arts exhibition that Nomad's adversary put on was impressive. He danced and leapt around with the grace of a prima ballerina.

In fact, the martial arts style the Wirehead was using, was very much like dancing. Quinn recognized the forms as *capoeira*, the native Brazilian martial arts style which had evolved by incorporating native creole dance movements with kick-boxing tactics. Like many martial arts styles, including kung fu, it had evolved under a harsh political climate where native populations were forbidden to go about armed. In the case of *capoeira*, the creole population of Brazil could hide martial arts training sessions under the guise of free-form dancing.

Capoeira was a style that used the feet to deadly advantage, and Quinn knew he would have to steer clear of the Brazilian's lightning-quick footwork. As graceful as the creole martial arts style looked, it was also lethal if practiced by a master.

Due to the smoothness of the monorail's mag-lev system that propelled the monorail above its track by an invisible force field from superconductor magnets, the ride was highly stable. But the narrowness of the confined space made maneuvering difficult in the hand-to-hand combat situation.

Now, as his adversary spun around, Quinn caught sight of the WIRE module niched in the side of his antagonist's skull which had been previously hidden from view and suddenly flashed on what he was up against.

He realized then that he was facing a most dangerous adversary, one who was probably so high on the psychoactive hardware narcotic that he would experience little pain. At the same time, the plug drug would make the Wirehead highly aggressive and could even augment his natural abilities with potentially heightened physical and mental powers.

Completing his initial forms, Embryjoe launched himself at Quinn with a series of spinning side kicks. Using his hands and forearms, Quinn soft-blocked the foot blows with Whipping Branch parries but was driven backwards along the aisle by the force and speed of the attack until a glancing backward blow with the sole of the Wirehead's foot sent him colliding against the clear polycarbonate glass door.

Though the glass did not shatter under the impact, the force of Quinn's body slamming against the doors jarred one of the view screens loose and activated it as it extended on its pivot arm. It let out a loud squeal and Quinn heard the Personal Therapist say, "You have received a terrible shock," as his attacker launched a punishing series of edge-fisted hammerblows to his midsection. "But don't worry," the screen went on, "we can help. We can make you feel much, much better."

Another high kick shattered the computer screen, which exploded in a spray of fire and choking clouds of smoke. From out of the

dark, noxious haze came the Wirhead's right hand. The knife-edged finger strike was aimed directly at Quinn's throat.

Executing a cross-body parry, Quinn deflected the lethal throat strike while sidestepping and dropping fast to his right knee to counter with a series of double Ram's Head knuckle punches to the solar plexus, causing the Wirhead to howl in agony and backpedal through the poison haze that was now pouring out of the damaged screen.

"This is your transport officer. You have reached Sector 7 Station," a cheerful simulated female voice suddenly announced. "Please watch your step getting off and have a pleasant evening."

With that, the doors of the monorail car slid open, and Quinn went sprawling out onto the platform almost losing his balance at the suddenness of the event. Winded and coughing fitfully as he inhaled the noxious smoke, Embryjoe staggered toward the doors, but not fast enough to prevent one arm getting caught as the door closed again.

"Damn it!" Quinn heard him howl as he struggled to pry loose the arm, reaching out with his free hand while he was forced to trot forward at an ever increasing pace as the monorail began pulling out of the station and briskly gathering speed.

His efforts to free himself were to no avail. The Wirehead was trapped and Quinn watched as the departing monorail train dragged him along the platform at high speed, slamming him with crushing force into an upright steel support beam and ripping his arm out of its socket. Free now, but minus one arm, Embryjoe thrashed and writhed on the concrete floor of the platform as the monorail screamed out of the station at high speed, with the ruptured limb sticking out from between its closed doors at a perpendicular angle, trailing wires that sparked and smoked.

To his amazement, Quinn saw Embryjoe stagger to his feet, moments later and realized to his chagrin that the limb was an advanced prosthetic. Letting out an insane yell, and seemingly no worse for wear apart from missing an arm, Embryjoe charged Quinn again with a display of high leaps and spinning kicks.

The loss of the right arm didn't seem to phase Quinn's attacker in the least, and as Quinn blocked the punishing foot blows, the Wirehead countered with a flurry of whipping fist punches using his surviving good arm in addition to his fast, lethal footwork. In this way, the deadly pavane of blow and counterblow eventually brought both combatants onto a wide plaza that topped the monorail junction of Sector 7.

Both combatants were winded now and each man knew that the contest would end soon. Despite the Wirehead's earlier enhanced performance levels induced by the plug drug module, he was now faltering. His delivery had lost much of its crispness and his kicks and punches had lost much of their steam. Quinn's edge lay in the fact that, though tired, he could draw upon reserves of strength and skill which came from the heart and soul and not from a computer chip.

These factors came into decisive play as the Wirehead pressed home his final attack, putting all of his waning energies into a last effort at putting away his tenacious opponent.

Quinn countered a lethal salvo of lightning *capoeria* kicks from the front and to the side with cross-body parries, turning the final parry into a footlock with his left hand while with his right, Quinn delivered a series of back-knuckle Scorpion blows directly onto the plug-drug module with the speed and whip characteristic of the creature for which the blow is named. With each smash to the side of his skull, Embryjoe's thermal imaging display went static. He was beginning to lose it, he realized, after a few long moments of being pummeled by Quinn.

Pushed backwards into the railing that ran around the elevated plaza atop the monorail junction, the Wirehead came to a spine-jarring halt against the top of the railing. Reality was now like a television screen with a broken picture tube. He saw Quinn advancing toward him, the image rolling vertically and no way to put it into synch again.

He tried to crab his way along the railing, but didn't get very far before he saw Quinn launch himself through space. A split-second later, Quinn's double flying kick struck him in the solar plexus with enough force to shatter his ribs and pelvis, crush his internal organs and have enough force left over to shear the bolts securing the section of railing behind him.

The Wirehead went tumbling backwards through empty space, amid a shower of spinning metal debris. Two stories down, the body crashed through the plate glass roof of a restaurant below. Directly beneath the roof, secured by a framework of steel I-beams, was a huge fan that ventilated the restaurant and sent air circulating over its collection of giant cacti and tropical plants.

Already near death, the Wirehead struck the mangling blades of the fan and was instantly sucked inside the machinery amid a shower of blood and pulverized organ matter that spewed in all directions. The only part of him left intact was a bloody scrap containing the left process of his skull, to which the plug drug module was still attached, and his left eyeball. Miraculously, a flicker of consciousness remained even as the scrap flew through space and became impaled on one of the huge thorns of a giant cactus. In the instants before the chip failed and blackness overwhelmed it, that last remaining part of Embryjoe screamed in pain.

NINE

"You have not justified the faith We have placed in you, Scorpio," intoned the man whose face was a grey electronic blur.

Framed in the high definition screen that Alpha watched from the clandestine facility codenamed Xanadu was the image of Angel Metaxos. Beads of sweat now stood out on the industrial magnate's high forehead.

Metaxos was truly a frightened man, and with very good reason: he had failed to deal with Quinn as he had been ordered, and Alpha did not look kindly on failure.

"The target had luck in his favor," replied Metaxos. "He survived the hit through no fault of mine."

"You are wrong, Scorpio," challenged Alpha. "Nomad is a formidable adversary. He is the sort of man who thrives on chaos. I am afraid that you have underestimated your opponent, Scorpio."

"It won't happen again," Metaxos pleaded, trying to control the fear he felt rising in his entrails, and trying hard not to allow the outward signs show on his face or in his voice, lest Alpha think he was weak and therefore expendable. "Believe me, it *won't*."

Metaxos knew all too well about the severe retribution that had been the desserts of those who had screwed up and fallen from Alpha's favor. "Nomad will not leave Omnivore City alive," he persisted.

"Make it so," Alpha instructed his underling, then severed the scrambled communications link. He had no more time to waste on throwaways like Metaxos who had failed once and would almost certainly fail again.

Alpha had already decided to deal with the Greek and replace him with a more competent choice. He was still weighing whether to eliminate Metaxos quietly or to make an example of him.

But that was a matter for the future. Right now, he had other business to conduct.

Alpha next turned to direct his attention to the large high definition screen set along one of the walls.

The real-time video display on the flat digital view screen showed Alpha that the assemblage of the Force Three Council was in place as he had ordered.

Thousands of miles away, in the heart of the Paris business district, men and women had converged on an office building from a variety of conveyances.

Limousines, taxis and private vehicles all had brought them to the building, and all arrivals had proceeded to a private elevator not easily noticed by casual passersby.

Operated by means of a special coded keypad, the elevator went in only one direction: it went down.

It also made a single stop only.

This stop brought the elevator to a halt at the deepest sublevel of the building.

There, the men and women who had punched in the correct codes completed the trip to the elevator's final stop in safety.

Incorrect keystrokes would have resulted in the prompt discharge of fast-acting neurotoxic gas from hidden nozzles, followed by a drop through a trap door in the floor of the elevator car into a waste disposal unit capable of grinding a human being to crimson pulp in a matter of seconds.

Exiting the elevator car, the travelers spoke their code names into an electronic voice recognition system and if passed through this final choke point, emerged through a steel pneumatic door into a large room beyond.

The chamber was softly lighted from overhead glow panels. In the center of the spacious assembly hall there stood a horseshoe-shaped table with a seating capacity of several dozen people.

Slowly, chairs surrounding the table had been occupied by recent arrivals that entered the room in a constant flow. Soon the bare thermoplastic walls of the chamber began to echo with the muted conversation of those seated around the table.

Now, mere seconds after Alpha had terminated his teleconference with Scorpio, each seat (minus those of the absent Scorpio and Pisces) was occupied by its assigned personnel.

Safeguarded from electronic penetration by a double layer of electronic- and laser-absorbent materials, monitored by robotic sensors, and a closely guarded secret as well, the chamber was inviolate, a

cathedral to the supercriminal organization known as Force Three, whose high priest was the man known only as Alpha.

Hitting a button on the control panel in front of him, Alpha activated the interactive mode comlink. It would allow two-way communication between himself and those assembled in the Council chamber who would see him as a larger-than-life hologram floating in the air above the conference table.

"Sagittarius," Alpha intoned.

Far away, the voice of Alpha's hologram hovering above the conference chamber -- a hologram transmitted from a location unknown to everyone in the Council room -- also spoke. "Please rise and begin your report," the voice went on to say.

"The psychological warfare operations are proceeding apace," the man bearing a pink crescent scar that ran down one side of his otherwise patrician jaw, began. "The American President and his advisors are gripped with fear and indecision. Not being able to pinpoint the threat is something they have never experienced before."

"And you imply, they are therefore not able to deal with it?" Alpha finished for his subordinate.

"Precisely, sir," Sagittarius replied.

"Please be seated," Alpha's simulated voice spoke, then said, "Aquarius, rise and present your report."

"Amphibious assault teams are at maximum readiness," he began after the first speaker resumed his seat at the Council table, reading from the statement that lay flat atop the polished surface of the conference table. "They await your command to commence their operations."

"Very good, Aquarius," Alpha's soft yet inhumanly modulated voice replied. "See too it that readiness levels are maintained at a razor-fine edge."

"It will be done," the speaker replied and took his seat.

Alpha next called for a report from the Force Three operative who was code named Libra.

Libra was in charge of preparing the weapons systems which were to be critical to the success of Operation Green Thunder, an operation on a scale far grander than any world-class criminal enterprise ever before attempted.

Libra was an attractive brunette whose good looks were obvious despite the conservative business attire she wore.

She gave her report as her predecessors had done, reciting facts and figures which proved that all elements of the plan were in place and were at maximum levels of force readiness.

When Libra had taken her seat, the remaining members of the Council were heard from, each in turn.

Cancer, whose responsibility was armored assignments, then Gemini, whose two-man strike teams were in readiness, both reported on

the status of their respective projects, as did the rest of those in the vast meeting chamber.

In time, each member of Council had turned in their reports and all were now seated at the table.

"Members of the Council," Alpha began. "Our impression is that you have all acquitted yourselves well. You bring honor to this organization."

Alpha waited a few beats, seeing all eyes on his holographic representation thousands of miles from his actual location, then went on, "However distressing facts have come to light. We are sorry to report that there is at this moment a traitor in your midst."

This time the tension in the room was palpable.

Each member of Council dared not look away from the holographic image for fear of making themselves appear guilty by drawing attention away from the other members of the group.

But out of the corner of their eyes they all cast doubtful glances each others' way.

"Libra and Aquarius, please rise," Alpha's calm voice went on.

"Sir, I am blameless!" the grey-haired man in the pinstriped suit began in protest, now no longer able to control the thick flow of sweat which drenched his florid face. "I am --"

"-- *Silence*, Aquarius," Alpha admonished. "You were not given permission to address Us."

Alpha paused a beat, when his cowed underling had fallen silent, then went on. "Aquarius, reach forward and brush aside Libra's hair."

Aquarius hesitated for a moment, wondering whether to try to make a run for it or accept the death blow that was sure to come at any time.

Realizing he would not make it more than a few steps from the table, Aquarius reached out and swept streamers of shiny black hair away from the beautiful woman's face. As he did so he gasped: the hardware drug module was clearly in place.

"Incredible! She's --" he began to say.

But his utterances were abruptly cut short as the woman hurled him aside with superhuman strength and bolted from the horseshoe-shaped conference table like a pistol shot.

It looked like she was heading for the pneumatic door of the Council chamber, but it soon became apparent that she had no intention of reaching it.

Instead, midway between the conference table and the exit, Libra tore open her prim business suit and blouse, baring her breasts. Reaching between them, she began manipulating something that lay just beneath the surface of her flesh.

Libra had only enough time to touch whatever it was she was manipulating before the twenty megawatt helium-neon laser that had deployed from the ceiling engaged the target.

It took an additional half-second for the flash-pumped laser weapon to charge completely, but then firing commenced with a brilliant green bolt of light which lanced down and struck the woman directly between her breasts, auguring right through to the other side and hurling her backward where she lay with a smoking hole in her upper abdomen.

The nauseating stench of burnt and cauterized human flesh filled the chamber.

Those seated at the Council table had been thrown into panic. Except for Aquarius, who was relieved that it had not been he who had been chosen to die.

"Calm yourselves," Alpha's voice commanded. "The danger has passed. Had We not acted you would have all been dead. The real Libra was taken down forty-eight hours ago by unknown assassins. A double was substituted in her place.

"Sagittarius," Alpha concluded with a command.

"Yes sir," came the reply of the resident explosives expert who headed Force Three's demolition teams.

"Go to the body and describe to Us what you find," commanded Alpha.

"This is extraordinary!" shouted Sagittarius after a few minutes had passed, inspecting the damage while trying not to breathe the stench which was horrifying at this close distance to the corpse. "It appears to be ... yes ... it's a small nuclear device!"

"Still with shielding intact, We might add," ventured Alpha, "or it would have detonated by now. Thankfully the new Mark-10 helium-neon laser is highly accurate and quick to reach full power.

"Sagittarius, you are in charge of conducting forensic study of the body and the nuclear device. We will expect a full and detailed report from you by tomorrow this time."

"You shall have it, sir!" shouted Sagittarius.

"That is all," replied Alpha. "Blindness We may forgive, but baseness We will smite."

His holographic image faded and those left in the Force Three Council chamber were left to deal with the drastic situation by means of their own resourcefulness, each of them glad that the hand of death had fallen on someone else.

TEN

Nomad turned out the ceiling light panels. He waited in the moonlit darkness of the room at the Omnivore Towers, the multilevel complex that was a combination hotel for visitors, meeting area and shopping complex all rolled into one.

Currently on sleep cycle, the complex was quiet. Consulting his wrist chronometer, Nomad partially de-opaqueted the window of the room and peered down on the interior level below. It was deserted, except for the pair of security guards who he saw walking their perimeters a few moments later.

As they passed, he rechecked his chronometer and smiled. They had made their rounds with almost clockwork precision. Quinn could now be fairly confident that the guards wouldn't be back again for another fifteen minutes at least.

Not long thereafter, Quinn was stealing out the sub-basement level of the complex. Garbed in black, he wanted to keep away from ground level and the inner confines of the Towers complex where security activity was heaviest.

Earlier that day, Metaxos had apologized profusely to his guest for what he had termed "the unfortunate mugging by a hardware drug addict" that had taken place onboard the Omnivore monorail system the night before.

Although Metaxos promised the man he addressed as Keller, Quinn's cover name, that a full investigation of the incident would be conducted by Omnivore City's police force, Quinn knew what the corporate honcho's pledges were worth -- zero.

There was no doubt in his mind that it had been none other than Metaxos himself who had sent the Wirehead to take him down. Quinn had no intention of presenting himself as a stationary target again.

If Metaxos had him on his hit list, then taking his chances on a night recce of the heavily guarded complex was probably safer than sleeping in his hotel bed at the Omnivore Towers.

Quinn had collected the intelligence he'd come to Omnivore in order to gather. He was now certain that Metaxos was responsible for his agent's demise and that Metaxos was as dirty as a coal miner's lunch bucket, even if he couldn't prove the one, thanks to Elektra's reports he could prove the other. That would have to be enough.

Normally, the investigation would end with a full report to WorldPol, Intervention Systems' insurers and other agencies.

But this was more than just business.

Now the matter had gotten downright personal. Metaxos had not stopped at killing his agent -- the Omnivore honcho had just tried to waste him too.

And besides that, Quinn's gut instinct assured him that Elektra had not been chasing shadows: there was definitely more going on at Omnivore than even a criminal enterprise as big time as a multibillion dollar per year drug manufacturing and distribution operation.

This gut check told Quinn there was another dimension to the Metaxos operation that he was missing. Quinn wanted to know what that certain missing something was before he pulled up stakes and took his leave of Omnivore.

Before he extracted from Omnivore City, Quinn decided to take a final look around at the operation, hoping that a recon of the place might yield some clues that his investigation had not succeeded in turning up.

Working his way through the dimly lit tunnels of the sub-basement level of the Towers complex, along whose walls power and other conduits ran in thick bunches, Nomad stopped short as he caught sight of a flurry of activity a short distance ahead of his position.

Where the tunnel widened into a kind of alcove, a heavy door swung open and a man in a light-blue coat, the kind worn by Omnivore techs, stepped out into the spill of light from an overhead bulb.

As Quinn watched from concealment, the tech looked right and left, then disappeared from view behind a steel support beam that was shrouded in a cone of shadow. Quinn heard the sound of something scraping against concrete as he stole up on the tech.

What he saw confirmed his suspicions.

The tech was a Jiggler freak, a user of a special kind of superdrug. The blob of bioengineered protoplasm was crawling up the side of his face and it had already started to insert a jellylike pseudopod into his right eyeball.

As Quinn watched, the rest of the Jiggler crawled into the tech's eye and disappeared in the socket where it dissolved to send a potent dose of psychoactive drug straight to the Jiggler freak's brain.

Feeling the rush, the user began to shiver and then slumped where he sat.

Quinn couldn't have asked for a better opportunity. A sharp palm strike to the base of the druggie's neck put the tech away for a more permanent type of trip than the one he had planned on taking. His commandeered card key opened the steel door with ease.

"Wait a minute," Quinn heard a voice behind him say as he entered the well-lighted corridor, wearing the unconscious tech's labcoat. "You're not Baxtor! Who the hell are you?"

Quinn was already spinning around, delivering a flurry of whipping finger strikes to the startled security man's head and upper body that made him reel. A flying side-kick to the base of his neck finished the job, sending him dropping toward the concrete floor with a severe concussion.

Dragging the guard down the corridor, Nomad found a supply locker. The door's conventional pin tumbler lock yielded to one of the keys hanging on a ring from the taken-down sentry's belt and the door swung open.

Inside the room he found some duct tape and applied it over the unconscious man's mouth, then secured his arms and legs in the same manner. The guard was disabled but unhurt. He would come away with nothing more than a bad headache. Having to hunt for a new job would at least be preferable to being stone-cold dead.

Quinn moved on through the sterile corridors. There were more security drones stationed here too, but they waved the labcoated figure past each checkpoint without glancing too hard at the druggie's photo ID tag clipped to Quinn's breast pocket.

Before too long he knew he had entered a research and development facility. He could tell from the glass-paneled rooms through which large, well-equipped labs and equipment bays could be seen. Most of these rooms were empty, but a little farther along, Quinn came upon one in which there was some activity taking place. He decided to have a look inside.

"Just checking the systems here," he said to the occupants of the lab as he inserted Baxtor's card key and stepped into the research zone.

Nomad immediately recognized the scientist in charge of the techs as the same guy whom he had momentarily glimpsed leaving Metaxos' office on the day of his arrival at Omnivore: Nuke 'Em Straker.

Straker's arrogant face was almost well enough known throughout the world to make his name a household word. The flamboyant scientist, who specialized in advanced weapons research, was also a semi-professional yachtsman and high-stakes gambler whose name had been linked romantically to some of the world's most renowned holovideo stars.

The scientist was a man of many parts and seemed to glory in whatever publicity he could get. Be it the good or the bad kind, every sort was grist for Straker's mill.

It didn't look as though Straker recognized Quinn, though. All that seemed to be going through his mind at the moment he spotted the newcomer was that an unauthorized tech had suddenly barged into his lab and interrupted him while he was at work.

"This is a restricted area!" he shouted, face livid with rage. "You have no clearance to be here! Leave at once!"

Straker's temper was also renowned, Quinn suddenly remembered, and Quinn was getting a good sample of it right now as the scientist strode over to him, sticking out his chest and shouting at the top of his lungs.

Quinn took the opportunity to gather as much visual data as possible on the goings-on in the lab. What he saw taking place was highly interesting.

From the type of components and the streamlined aerodynamic hulls, whose ramjet nacelles clearly indicated an air-breathing propulsion principle, it looked as if he was witnessing the assembly of an advanced-design ballistic cruise missile system. If that were the case it would go a long way toward explaining why Straker was so angry at being dropped in on unexpectedly.

"Didn't you call Tech Section about a faulty interface connection in your laser sintering module?" Quinn asked the scientist.

"Faulty connection? Sintering module?" the mustached man in civilian clothes asked. "There is no faulty connection here! Out with you, this instant, or I'll call security!"

"Don't be so hasty," Quinn answered, moving to the left to insure that he got himself an even closer look at the apparent rocket assembly in the top secret lab bay. "That order might have been logged automatically by your fail-soft, fail-tolerant production line sensing array."

"We have no such system!" Straker returned, almost shouting by now. "You are in the wrong section, you simpleton! You have no clearance! Out immediately or I will have you fired on the spot and physically removed!"

Quinn had seen enough by now.

He was now completely certain that what he was looking at was the assemblage of components for an advanced-design ballistic cruise system.

Something about the light refracted off the streamlined hulls in faint rainbow colors sparked a memory too. Quinn dimly recalled a technical paper that he had read some years ago by Straker detailing a stealthy hull design incorporating "smartskins" containing millions of liquid crystal diodes to mask a ballistic nuclear round. The specifics of the system eluded him at the moment, but they would come to him, he was certain.

"Sorry, sir. I'm leaving," Quinn apologized, knowing he'd overplayed his hand and not wanting to risk remaining in the lab any longer. "But I'm going to have to file a report with Tech Section."

"File it then, you cretinous dunce!" Straker blustered. "Just get out of my lab immediately and don't ever come back!"

Quinn heard the hiss of the pneumatically actuated doors sliding shut behind him as he reentered the sterile corridor once again from the confines of the lab, catching his reflection in the glass-paneled walls.

Although he'd seen plenty, Nomad's curiosity had gotten the better of him.

The scope of Metaxos' operation here in the high security section which ran beneath the streets of Omnivore City seemed enormous.

If the directional signs located on the walls at intervals were any indication, there were some thirty stories of sublevels here, each one honeycombed with a maze of corridors.

A research and development facility on this order of magnitude could outstrip the capabilities of any corporation anywhere on earth.

If what he had just seen was any indication as to the extent of the operation here, then Quinn had no doubt that Elektra's reports of the manufacture of hardware narcotics was completely true.

What's more, Omnivore City could well be the biggest manufacturing center in the world of the illicit mind-altering silicon chips.

Quinn used the elevator to vector him down a few sublevels and looked in on chip manufacturing operations. He did not realize that he had stayed too long in the high security area.

Less than ten minutes after having his lights knocked out, the guard Quinn had trussed up in the supply room had begun to thrash around. The thumping sounds coming from within the locked storage area had alerted a tech who had chanced to pass by.

Moments later, the general alarm had been sounded.

"Freeze, rاتفucker!"

The shout came from a squad of jumpsuited security guards who had just left Straker's lab and had chased him down the length of the corridor.

The guards drew their weapons as Quinn sprinted past them. Quinn highballed into yet another corridor, turning abruptly to race down an L-shaped bend.

But the corridor was already being sealed off by steel bulkheads which were descended from the ceiling. As they locked into place with loud, metallic clicks, Quinn found his line of retreat completely blocked.

Jets of choking gas quickly began to spray from nozzles set high on the walls, and Quinn cast about desperately for an alternate escape route. There was none.

Even as he realized the opposition had him dead bang, he saw the chamber become a funnel with spinning yellow walls. At the other end of the funnel was a minuscule black dot that was infinity. The dot quickly began to grow as Quinn hurtled toward it.

ELEVEN

"Ah, so you have finally returned to the land of the living, Mr. Keller."

The voice Quinn heard seemed like it was coming from far off. It was as if he were listening to a distant echo.

He struggled to shake off the paralyzing effects of the air-dispersed antipersonnel agent and managed to clear his head somewhat. Fortunately for him, the fast-acting drug was already being purged from his bloodstream.

"Or should I say Mr. *Quinn*?" Metaxos went on to ask.

"All the same to me," Nomad replied, tasting what seemed to be a metallic glaze in his mouth, another lingering aftereffect of the sleep gassing, he surmised.

"Well, then, Mr. Quinn," Metaxos went on, "you have been having yourself an enlightening look around our restricted area, I gather from reports. Have you seen anything of interest to you?"

"I was just looking for the disco," Quinn retorted. "I do a pretty mean Lambada."

"Your bravado is admirable, considering the dire circumstances you are presently facing," Metaxos intoned. "However my question was put to you in all seriousness. What have you seen here, Mr. Quinn?"

"Nothing much," he answered. "Except for a sorry looking bunch of shithheads. Do you always string your V.I.P. visitors up by their wrists, Metaxos?"

"No, not generally," Metaxos replied. "But then again you are no ordinary guest. In the first place, you misrepresented yourself. In the second, your reputation precedes you. I have heard much about the redoubtable Nomad."

"Maybe you'd like my autograph," Quinn returned.

"A most amusing proposition," Metaxos said with a smile. "But rest assured that my respect for you is genuine, Mr. Quinn," he went on to say. "Nevertheless it does not alter the present circumstances. You place me in a most awkward situation. I ask you again, what have you seen here?"

"I already gave you my answer, Metaxos," was Quinn's response.

"Very well," Metaxos countered, heaving a sigh. "Then you will have to be persuaded by other means." He raised his hand and gestured at two enforcers standing nearby. "Tibbs, Klanner -- bring him."

At Metaxos' command, the two jumpsuited security crew dogs dragged a securely bound figure across Quinn's field of view.

Quinn recognized the poor sucker immediately. It was the security drone he'd kayoed before reconning the restricted area and left tied up in a supplies locker. The hapless sentry's mouth was still covered with the duct tape that Quinn had applied.

"This gentleman was careless," Metaxos began as the bound man was winched up to hang in the middle of an array of gleaming metal cylinders. "He allowed you to get the better of him. Now he must pay the price for his carelessness."

The security guard's eyes were popping with fear and he kicked and thrashed in a futile attempt to free himself from his restraints. It was to no avail, though.

Klanner and Tibbs made sure that he was chained to a winch and hoisted about eight feet off the ground, then they tied his legs to another pair of fastenings so he hung spreadeagled in space.

After they'd finished with this, Metaxos instructed the other techs in the lab to put in place a cluster of a dozen laser nozzles, levering these into place with electrically controlled servo-actuators until all the nozzles where pointed at the writhing, squirming, whimpering and doomed tech.

Straker had now entered the lab and -- along with Metaxos and the other guards -- were already putting on smoked goggles. One of the guards secured a pair of the goggles over Quinn's head as well.

"Now we begin," Metaxos said.

At the same time Quinn heard a high pitched, low decibel whining noise which grew louder with each passing second.

"That sound you hear is the power supply of the gold vapor laser in front of us charging up," Metaxos explained, although Quinn had guessed the answer already from the increasingly shrill whine of the charging dynamos: gold vapor lasers required a long warmup time because of the need to first heat the gold to a gaseous state.

"One of the important research and development projects here at Omnivore is in the area of affordable nuclear fusion. In point of fact you are presently in our fusion lab," he went on, obviously relishing what was happening.

Quinn had already guessed as much as well from the layout of the place. The array of phased laser guns were all pointed toward a central area.

Unlike nuclear fission, which powered conventional reactors, nuclear fusion generated power by a diametrically opposite process.

Instead of causing the atom to split apart in a violent explosion that sent smashed nuclei and electrons flying in all directions, fusion smashed the subatomic particles together, thereby releasing energy in a far more controllable and far less violent manner.

But the downside of fusion was the energy investment necessary to start the process rolling: large amounts of energy had to be put into the system right up front, thereby reducing its cost-effectiveness.

High-power lasers of twenty-megawatts and upward seemed to be the best and the cheapest method of initializing a fusion reaction.

The principle was simple enough: suspend a sphere of radioactive metal between a clustered array of powerful lasers. When bombarded with the lasers' coherent light, nuclear fusion took place.

Only now, in place of a sphere of U-238 or some comparable radioactive substance, the guard that Quinn had kayoed hung suspended between the phased array of gold vapor lasers.

Among the most powerful such devices known, the lasers belonged to the pulsed neutral-vapor class capable of discharging tens of megawatts of energy in the form of coherent light.

By now the high-pitched whining Quinn had heard earlier had risen to a crescendo shriek. This meant that the lasers were almost fully charged up and ready to discharge their tremendously powerful beams.

"The security guard will provide an object lesson for the other members of the company team," Metaxos said as he adjusted his visor, necessary to protect the human eye which was sensitive to even the slightest exposure to laser radiation. "We may even publish some photos in our company newsletter.

"Hopefully his example will persuade you to tell me what I wish to know, Mr. Quinn," Metaxos went on. "You see, if you do not acquiesce to my demand, you will be next. *Energize*," he concluded.

On Metaxos' orders the techs seated at a control console initialized the gold vapor laser array.

In a dazzling burst of brilliance, twelve beams from the cluster of laser guns pulsed out. In a blinding flash they converged on the thrashing guard, as his screams of pain and horror and pleas for mercy drowned out the screech of the discharging gold vapor lasers.

A few pulsebeats later, there was little left of the guard. His torso had been vaporized completely, and only the bloody stumps of his hands and arms still dangled from their restraints, along with his severed legs lying on the floor of the lab.

"Reinitialize the laser," Metaxos instructed the techs, pushing his dark goggles up on his head. "And put Mr. Quinn up where that unfortunate fellow was hanging."

Minutes later, after a cleanup crew took away the gory remains of the tech, Quinn found himself suspended where the dead man had been hung.

He looked down and saw the snoutlike emitters of the lasers pointing at him from all angles.

The whine of the dynamos which were being charged with power in order to flash-pump the laser was growing louder and louder.

"One last chance before we reach full power levels, Mr. Quinn," Metaxos shouted above the increasing whine, looking up at him, goggles perched on his head. When Quinn did not answer, he went on, "A pity that you are so intransigent. The lasers will reach peak voltage in a few seconds. One final time, Mr. Quinn!"

Quinn steeled himself for what was to come as the whining of the power generators increased to an earsplitting shriek. His single consolation was that death would come quickly and that he wouldn't live to see its gruesome aftermath. A single searing moment of pain and then it would be all over.

But instead of the burst of light he expected, Quinn heard the sound of a violent explosion a split-second before the earsplitting whine of the charging dynamos reached its peak level and the bank of lasers discharged.

Looking down and to one side, Quinn saw the steel door to the lab blow inward, the metal surface petaling under the impact of a high explosive strike. In a heartbeat assault weapon-armed troops were spilling into the lab, their SMG weapons tracking for target acquisition.

Thinking fast, Metaxos grabbed one of the techs standing nearby and held him across his body to form a flesh-and-blood shield as a hail of caseless bullets thudded into it. The tech's body opened up, punctured from chest to groin, gushing blood everywhere.

Throwing aside the bullet-riddled guard, Metaxos whipped out a P90 close assault weapon and launched a 5.70 mm salvo at the attackers who rushed him. Forcing them to tuck down their heads he made a beeline for an exit with Straker bringing up the rear a few steps behind him.

One jump ahead of the assault crew, the Omnivore honcho and the playboy-scientist both reached the exitway and were able to secure a sliding blast door just as a fusillade of bullets peppered its surface with a pattern of pockmarks.

The guards in the lab were put out of commission quickly and Quinn was being helped down by members of the attack force from where he was suspended between the laser guns.

Quinn recognized the paramilitary fatigues of his rescuers. These were the very same troops whom Metaxos had dubbed

"ecoterrorists" and had boasted about having almost completely wiped out on the retaliatory raid of a few days ago.

"Come with us," the leader of the squad said to Quinn after lowering him to the deck and releasing him from the chains that bound him. He was a big bear of a man with a red beard and dark, piercing eyes, whose face bore the telltale scars of a life on the edge.

The squad leader handed Quinn a caseless assault weapon too. Following the big guy's lead, Quinn and the rest of the assault crew moved quickly through the corridors of the Omnivore underground research and development area.

Quinn saw to his satisfaction that the strike detail had the area secure. There were more of them outside, and despite the klaxoning alarms, they had the security SWAT team pinned down by autofire and grenades.

But Quinn had no illusions that the stalemate would last much longer. The commando force of insurgents would be sharply outnumbered by Omnivore security.

Apparently the invaders had their escape route all mapped out, though. After being hustled down a maintenance stairway into a sub-basement area, Quinn and the group emerged into a natural limestone cavern.

Igniting makeshift torches, the squad walked what seemed to Quinn like a well-trodden pathway to reach the jungle beyond within a matter of minutes. Signs of pursuit were nowhere in sight.

TWELVE

The guerilla band's name was Age of Reptiles, and its leader was called Fulgencio Parana. Right now, Parana was debriefing Quinn about what had gone down at Omnivore at the commando raiders' base in the jungle.

Elsewhere, those members of the strike crew who had been injured in the daring penetration of the Omnivore City complex were being tended to by camp physicians.

"There won't be much time left," Parana was telling Quinn. "Metaxos and his mercenary forces will be coming after us."

"You're right," Quinn acknowledged. "And you know they'll be retaliating for the strike with everything they have."

"Yes, we anticipated that when we came in to get you, my American friend," Age of Reptiles' commander agreed, laying a comradely hand on Quinn's shoulder.

Parana had explained to Nomad that their breakout raid was motivated by intelligence coming from an informant at Omnivore indicating that Metaxos was planning to kill Quinn.

But the militant ecological commando army was determined to break Quinn out at any price, though they knew that an all-out raid on Omnivore would be costly, and though he had wounded one of their number on his arrival, reacting to the suddenness of the strike.

Their motivation rested on Age of Reptiles' need for a respected observer to tell the world at large about Omnivore and the kind of business the sprawling corporation was actually engaged in. Quinn fit the bill perfectly. As a man who was rumored to have the U.S. President's ear, saving his life had become a top priority.

Parana had told Quinn about Straker's true role at the Omnivore research and development facility. Straker was developing a superweapon, not conducting work on nuclear fusion, Parana made clear.

"This jibes with what we know about the countdown," Parana concluded while Quinn listened.

"What countdown?" Quinn asked.

"You have been out of touch, my friend," Parana replied with a laugh. "While you were at Omnivore much has been happening in the outside world. A group calling itself 'Force Three' has threatened to destroy a major defense installation in the United States if a demand to turn over a Third World country to it are not met."

Parana saw the astonished look cross Quinn's face when he had mentioned the name 'Force Three' and asked him what was the matter.

"I'm familiar with that group," he declared. "Force Three is the same criminal organization responsible for the Prometheus blackmail attempt of some years back.

"I remember it," Parana answered. "It took place just before Omnivore was built. Could there be a link between the two events?"

"It's possible," Quinn said back with a nod. "But what you just said about the Force Three blackmail gambit tells me something even more important right now. Just before she died, my agent at Omnivore mentioned something about a breakthrough unconnected with the case she was on. Something big, she claimed."

"And you're thinking that Force Three was involved?" asked Parana.

Quinn nodded.

"I'm certain of it," he proclaimed. "That would explain what Straker was doing there assembling what looked to be some type of advanced cruise missile system. Straker's expertise doesn't lie in the type of computer hardware Omnivore manufactures. He's a weapons designer. Omnivore must be connected with this new bid for power by Alpha."

"Then it would seem that we are both joined by common cause," Parana said to Quinn after a moment's reflection. "You see, we have good reason to believe that Omnivore plans to enlarge their size considerably, doubling or tripling their present area and destroying vast areas of the rainforest."

But there was more, according to Parana.

Omnivore was engaged in a plan to take over the corporate structure of the world's governments. Metaxos' aim was to create more cities like Omnivore, in the process destroying what precious little was left of the world's ecosystems.

Along with all the rest he would create a worldwide network of power bases which would give him a virtual stranglehold on the world's diminishing natural resources.

"It is ironic that Metaxos refers to my group as 'eco-terrorists,' Parana went on, "when he himself is engaged in a conspiracy to wage what amounts to ecological warfare on the world!"

"The force option is the only tactically sound one now," Quinn advised. "Hit them hard and fast. Do as much damage as possible. We need to take out that drug lab. And we need to get Straker."

"There might be a way," Parana was saying, stroking his long red beard as he reflected on the means to achieve those ends." We have a consignment of man portable rocket systems."

"I know, I saw what they did before, when Omnivore forces came into your turf." He was thinking of the drubbing Metaxos' armored and airborne force had taken at the hands of Age of Reptiles.

"We also have some choppers. *Old choppers*," Parana added. "But we've been working on them. Come, let me show you."

What Parana showed Quinn was not all that encouraging. There were two Desert Storm-era Apache attack chopper systems, timeworn and broken down.

Once state of the art, the choppers were now rusted relics of a bygone age. Still, they seemed to be loaded with rockets and their Vulcan cannons were intact, largely free from corrosion despite the heat and humidity of the Brazilian jungle.

In addition to the Apache choppers there was a surplus Blackhawk helo.

All of these systems were hidden from view beneath a double layer of jungle foliage and thermal imaging tarp, highly resistant to detection from orbital reconnaissance satellites and ground based sensors.

"We have been working on refurbishing these systems for some time," Parana told Quinn. "We realized all along that the fight with Omnivore would come to this. We're as ready as we'll ever be to attack."

"Then let's do it," Quinn declared, knowing that they could win. Not only because, man for man, they were better than the opposition, but for the only reason that ever really counted: they were right.

Angel Metaxos saw the screen wink off and shivered in his office at Omnivore Towers.

He had just been given his final chance.

He would not, *could* not, fail.

Metaxos at once called up the head of Omnivore City's private security force. He told the head of the force that it was time to raid the environmentalists. No half measures this time. Just go in and kick ass.

"I want you to hit the bastards with everything we've got," he instructed the security chief. "Don't let any of that jungle scum live. Do you understand me?"

"Yes sir," the security boss replied. "Can do."

"Then get on it," Metaxos said before punching off the screen. "And don't let me hear that you fucked up."

"You got it, sir," he heard the guard say as the comlink was severed.

Suddenly Metaxos saw the bright detonation flash from outside his window. Going to it he eyeballed the second rocket flash as a rocket burst from the firing rack of one of the Apache combat choppers that had overflowed the compound.

Looking down, he further saw to his horror that the choppers parked on the Towers helipad were being taken down on the ground.

The surprise attack had been well coordinated. It was beating his forces even as they were preparing to strike the environmentalist raiders in their jungle hideout. Gritting his teeth, Metaxos realized that he had acted too late: the enemy already was on the offensive.

"Sir, we're under attack!" the familiar voice from the newly awakened screen shouted.

It was the voice of the selfsame security chief Metaxos had just been instructing to hit the force that was now hitting him. The security chief's face had returned to the screen with one notable difference: it was now red with fear and covered with sweat.

"I can see that for myself!" Metaxos shouted. "Do something, damn it!"

"We're trying, sir," the security chief stammered, "but they've moved in too damn quick."

Metaxos thought that this was the understatement of the century. It was more like they had popped right out of the thin air.

In fact, Parana and his crew had used nap-of-the-earth flying techniques to cruise in their phalanx of helos just at treetop level.

This maneuver put them both out of radar and visual range of the opposition forces. When the jungle commandos finally unmasked the choppers and popped up above Omnivore City, the heliborne assault crew had the target-rich environment all to themselves.

With the element of surprise working for them now, the two aged Apache gunships were scoring stunning victories, as they put their lethal fire on target in precision bursts.

They had already taken out the two advanced design LHX Rapaho gunships on the ground and were now in the process of decimating the MICVs and APCs of the Omnivore Combat Force ground units.

Now, some minutes after the attack, computer-targeted ground batteries had opened up with Triple-A fire. But the attackers pressed their advantage despite the wall of flak spreading across the skies in clusters of orange-black puffballs.

Cruising in just behind the attacking point gunships was the Blackhawk multipurpose chopper.

Inside the helo were Parana, Quinn, and a detachment of hand-picked Age of Reptile elite forces. All personnel were wearing bullet-resistant body armor and packing an assortment of SMGs and assault weapons.

"That's where we're setting down," directed Parana, pointing his finger through the bulkhead viewing port at the top of one of the buildings. "That's the Omnivore Tower Building roof. That's where we're most likely to find that dirtbag Metaxos."

"Roger that," Quinn said, and checked his weapon, a P90 close assault weapon loaded with 5.70 mm needlepoints.

Below, Metaxos could see the Blackhawk helo hovering over the top of the building from his office window.

With his forces in disarray and his own force of advanced LHX strike helicopters destroyed before they were able to even get airborne, Metaxos knew that he was facing a losing battle.

As the Blackhawk's angle of descent swept it past his plateglass window and out of his view, Metaxos ran toward a wall and pulled back a bookcase which swung out on concealed hinges. Behind the facade there was a hidden entranceway that opened onto a concrete-walled passageway built to provide a fast escape.

Metaxos ran pell-mell through the doorway as more explosions and the bolt clatter of autofire from many small arms sounded raucously from outside as a pitched firefight broke out between defense personnel and the attacking Age of Reptiles force.

As the Omnivore honcho grabbed weapons from an open gun locker and was hightailing it out of the danger zone, Straker was already several miles away from Omnivore City, in the passenger compartment of a light plane heading for the capital city of Brasilia.

He had completed his end of the Skybolt cruise missile project and had just left Omnivore a matter of minutes before the surprise attack had commenced.

"What's that?" he asked the pilot of the light plane, seeing a column of dense black smoke rise from the jungle behind them.

"They're under attack back there," the pilot returned. "The eco-terrorists are hitting Omnivore!"

"Step on it," Straker told the flyboy. "I don't want to get caught up in it."

He glanced nervously to his right. There, in a shockproof storage module, was the product of several years of hard work. He had no intention of blowing it because of Metaxos' problems with the locals. Straker was a man for whom looking out for number one was always the first order of business.

THIRTEEN

While the heliborne assault elements were landing beyond the Omnivore City perimeter, Age of Reptiles ground forces had commenced a frontal assault on the main entry points of the Omnivore City industrial complex.

The ground strikers were encountering heavy resistance from the corporate complex's well-trained and highly disciplined security forces. This was expected, though, and the environmentalist troops continued to make steady territorial gains as the assault progressed.

Within a matter of minutes from the attack's savage commencement, they had recovered from the initial hammerblow of the fierce confrontation.

Their training in guerilla tactics and their dedication to achieving their strike objective were combining to weld the Age of Reptiles raiders into an unstoppable force that dominated the battlezone.

The ground forces sweeping in from the jungle perimeter continued to drive a lethal spearpoint in through the ruptured gates of Omnivore City and some elements of the attack force had already reached the main motor pool area.

Other elements of the commando raiding force, surging in from the eastern sector of the city, were now in the process of securing Omnivore's airport and preventing further flights out of the municipal zone. Those aircraft that had not been destroyed on the ground were now in the hands of the raiders.

Motivated largely by personal gain, Omnivore City's mercenary security forces saw little point in putting up a fight beyond a certain point.

In droves they began to lay down their arms and surrender to the invading Age of Reptiles troops.

The strike zone was fast becoming secure as Quinn and three of Parana's handpicked commando raiders were Stabo-dropping from the bay hatches of the Blackhawk helo onto the roof of Omnivore City's main industrial complex on long tethers.

"Good luck," Parana told him, standing behind him in the helo's personnel cabin.

"Thanks," Quinn replied. "I'll damn sure need it."

Using an incendiary cutting charge, Quinn melted through the heavy steel chains securing the locked door of the rooftop entrance.

With the constant chatter of small arms fire in the background masking the sounds of his movements, Nomad was inside the building undetected within a matter of seconds.

The Blackhawk strike chopper was already ascending from the DZ and Quinn could feel the powerful vortex of its rotorwash as the big helicopter gained lift in the heavy subtropical air and swept across the city to disgorge its contingent of elite troops elsewhere in the fray.

Inside Omnivore Tower, Quinn and his three companions met with resistance on the upper stories of the structure. The crack crew of Omnivore security forces had set up a fire station.

The blacksuited SWAT detail opened up with automatic weapons fire from a light machinegun. The squad gun was augmented with autorifle-equipped troops laying down a steady stream of razoring flechette rounds.

Countering with bursts of caseless and conventional ammo from their high capacity assault weapons, Quinn and the Age of Reptiles commandos answered with fire from their bullpup gun systems.

The firefight was brief but intense.

Though Quinn's force won the contest, one of the Age of Reptiles commandos sustained minor injuries in the battle. The wounded man kept his head though. Showing grace under fire, he applied a speed bandage and hobbled on with the unit, favoring one leg.

Quinn's assault force raced on toward its strike objective with Nomad consulting the hand-held navigational probe supplied by Parana.

Into the probe's microcomputer, which generated a moving map display of the building corridors relative to a target objective selected by the user, had been programmed the blueprints for the Omnivore Tower Building.

The probe's moving navigational blip surefootedly guided Quinn to Metaxos' office.

The security door to the office was locked as Quinn reached it, though.

But a salvo of rocket fire blew open the steel plate blast door as if it were made of flimsy sheet metal. Sprinting inside, Nomad caught sight

of the door leading to the Omnivore honcho's escape route passageway just as it was about to close.

Nomad gave chase just as the pneumatic door locked securely behind Metaxos with a hiss of compressed air. Launching another rocket strike into the blast door, Nomad found that it was a lot sturdier made than the outer door and it held.

Quinn wasted precious time and more ammo but finally punched a hole in the stubborn armor of the door. He raced through the breach into the corridor beyond. Metaxos was nowhere to be seen, having run around the bend at the corridor's far end.

Quinn caught up with his quarry as he reached an underground garage. There was a single vehicle parked in a numbered space. The car had its gull-winged doors open and Metaxos was stepping in.

Quinn launched a salvo of P90 automatic fire at the car, but Metaxos managed to duck the incoming and scuttle behind a thick concrete support beam with a black bullpup weapon of some kind in his hands as the car's fuel cells exploded, geysering bright flame.

"You sonofabitch!" Metaxos cursed and opened up on Quinn as soon as he heard the electronic growl signaling that the computer-targeted weapon system in his hands had locked onto one of its designated target zones.

The bullpup flechette gun Metaxos packed was equipped by a targeting laser and electronic gyro-stabilizer.

Its three-hundred round magazine gave it more bang for the buck. Because of the gun's stabilizing electronics, there would be little in the way of muzzle whip to skew the trajectory of a burst once the laser targeter had acquired.

Though Nomad managed to tuck and roll out of the lance-line of autofire pumped out by Metaxos' weapon, he took glancing hits from some of the rounds. The body armor he wore above his jungle fatigues barely was able to stop the needle-pointed rounds from penetrating through to the vulnerable flesh.

Metaxos leveled another quickburst at Quinn but fired before he could fully acquire. His aim was not to kill but to make Quinn tuck his head down, buying himself enough time to make a run for it.

As Nomad caught up with his elusive quarry again, Metaxos had hustled from the parking area through a doorway that led to another corridor. Quinn heard a shot echo off the concrete walls and rounded a corner to catch sight of Metaxos as he dashed into a room off to the side.

Following Metaxos, Quinn felt the blast of searing heat from a furnace at one end of the room. It was a laser furnace capable of destroying entire libraries of computer disks and document folders within a matter of seconds, thousands of times more effective than any mechanical shredder. Quinn also flashed on the fact that the laser furnace would do just as good a job in obliterating the evidence of illegal plug-drug manufacturing.

Highlighted against the brilliant core of the furnace, Metaxos was hustling for the protection of one of the big conveyor belts which was feeding shreddables into the furnace's maw.

Hearing Quinn behind him, the Omnivore honcho whirled in place and launched a burst of caseless automatic fire at his pursuer. The storm of cycling high velocity bullets forced Quinn to take cover while Metaxos scuttled for safety.

Quinn returned fire but his weapon jammed as the last 5.70 mm round left the muzzle. He hurled the empty P90 at Metaxos and sprinted across the floor, dodging a fast-rotating hail of bullpup fire. But Metaxos' weapon had run dry too as he tried to nail his fast-breaking target. Reaching down, he picked up a long piece of scrap iron from a conveyor belt that was about to feed it into the furnace. Holding the makeshift weapon like a spear, he lunged at Quinn with its sharp business-end.

The hundred-odd-year-old man was incredibly strong, and as Quinn nimbly sidestepped the death strike, the point of the spear was driven deep into a thick bunch of high voltage cables leading to the laser furnace, sending hot white sparks showering everywhere at once.

Letting go of the metal spear, Metaxos turned to confront Quinn. In the process, he tore his shirtsleeve on a spike projecting from the wall, and Quinn saw that Metaxos' right arm was bionic. Now he understood the reason for the superhuman display of strength he'd just witnessed.

Metaxos charged Quinn, swinging his biomechanical fist toward him in a piledriving roundhouse. Powerful though it might have been, the blow's delivery was clumsy and slow. Quinn was able to sidestep easily, but in taking his swing, Metaxos lost his footing and went stumbling into the laser furnace. His bionic hand vaporized immediately in the broiling heat of the laser core.

"Help me!" He shrieked. "I'll pay you anything! Just name your price!"

But he couldn't pull himself out of the laser furnace whose feed unit was dragging him into it. Launching himself through space, Quinn made sure that Metaxos got his just desserts: a spinning back-kick sent the Omnivore honcho sprawling into the heart of the furnace.

"That was for Elektra, you piece of shit," Quinn snarled as the screaming man fell into the seething core of the laser shredder. "Fuck you and die."

An instant before Metaxos disappeared amid a blaze of light, Quinn saw the telltale tattoo on his left forearm, exposed through the torn fabric of his sleeve. It was the circular tattoo of the twelve signs of the zodiac.

Quinn realized that he had seen such tattoos before. They were worn by high-level operatives of Force Three. It was renewed confirmation of Alpha's involvement with Omnivore.

Hustling back upstairs, Quinn searched Omnivore Tower for Straker but the playboy scientist was nowhere to be found. Quinn went

back into Metaxos' office and searched his computer system for a clue to Straker's whereabouts.

Punching in command strings in an attempt to get the unit to function, Quinn found something of great interest to him. It was a hidden menu for which no documented commands existed. It was a communications menu and selecting the "enable" icon produced several immediate results.

On the screen Nomad now saw a familiar face appear.

It was Alpha's face, the face of the supercriminal responsible for the Prometheus episode that had brought Quinn out of retirement as Nomad.

"So Mr. Quinn," Alpha's inhuman voice declared. "It appears that you have saved Us the trouble of dealing with Metaxos."

"I suspected he was your man when I saw the tattoo," Quinn said. "You have a thing for the zodiac, don't you Alpha?"

"You are not surprised to discover that We are still alive?" Alpha asked Quinn.

"Not really," he answered with a shake of his head. "When Castle exploded I couldn't confirm your demise. And your enforcer Bruckner also seemed to live a charmed life."

"That's right, Nomad," Alpha retorted. "It is a pity that your life is about to come to an abrupt halt. Metaxos' office is mined, you know. Goodbye."

Quinn was already in motion before Alpha's final syllable had been spoken, knowing that he had only a pulsebeat in which to act and having had no doubts whatever that the threat just made by Alpha was in deadly earnest.

As he launched himself into space, the whole room lit up with intense white light. The noise of the explosion came a pulsebeat later.

It came as a thunderclap as a bubble of shocked air slammed into Quinn with the force of a sledgehammer blow. Concussion rings picked Quinn up as if he were made of papier mache and hurled his body forward into the corridor beyond Metaxos' office.

Most of the force of the blast had been absorbed by the heavy door and the walls and floor of the room. But had Quinn reacted a fraction of an instant later, he would have moved to slowly to avoid being blown to pieces.

His ears ringing, Quinn picked himself up and saw that Metaxos' office was now engulfed in flames. It was too bad that those flames would consume vital information contained in the Omnivore honcho's computer memory banks.

With the office on fire, Quinn rushed toward the exitway, fighting to shake off the dazedness of shock in the aftermath of the explosion, and thanking his lucky stars that nothing seemed broken. Soon he was outside the Omnivore Tower Building. There he saw that Age of Reptiles had the Omnivore City security forces fully suppressed.

"So what will you do now?" Quinn asked Parana.

"We'll wait here," Parana answered. "Most of the workers at this place are glad that we have taken control. They were treated more like slaves than employees. Metaxos was exploiting them," Parana continued, "using many of them as guinea pigs to test the hardware drugs he was manufacturing here."

"You know that the Brazilian authorities will not take this lightly," Quinn told Parana. "You'll be branded as outlaws. They'll send in troops."

"Let them do their worst," Parana told Quinn with a smile. "Here in Brazil we have been waging a battle for decades against those who would rape the environment. Many brave fighters have fallen in the battle and many will continue to fall before we succeed."

"I wish you luck," Quinn said.

"Thank you, my friend," answered Parana. "But now you must go. Before the authorities from Brasilia arrive. The Blackhawk is warmed up and ready to dust off. If what you suspect is true, then you have a role to play in an environmental crime every bit as great as this."

Quinn waved to Parana as he boarded the helo.

Soon he was streaking across the Brazilian skies, leaving the burning ruins of Omnivore, and an age-old conflict, behind him.

MISSION LOG TWO:

Aimpoint

FOURTEEN

The nine hundred eighty-foot-long sub broke the surface of the lead colored sea. Like some gigantic behemoth rising from the ocean's depths, the spillage streamed from its sleek hull as the sea water drained over the more than ten thousand tons of ocean displaced by the sub.

The Okeanos was a beast built for stealth and power. The smooth, tapering lines of her hull were unbroken by the protrusions of either periscope, antenna fairings or submarine sail.

The submarine's periscope was of an advanced design that did not penetrate the hull. It was really not a single piece of equipment at all.

Instead, the "periscope" was really the aggregate of multiple banks of sensor arrays, including, but not limited to, its advanced optronics package. Linked together by computers, image-fusion technology combined the data on a central viewing screen where the sensor input could be manipulated in various ways.

In the control and imaging center of the surfacing sub, seated at the submarine's central control console positioned where the periscope would normally be located on conventional boats, sat the captain of the Okeanos.

The central control console was dominated by a large high definition viewscreen. Keyboards located in front of the screen and to its left and right, as well as two sidestick controllers positioned at either side of the screen, gave the sub skipper direct access to every one of the Okeanos' many interlinked systems.

The skipper's alert eyes now scanned the multimode high definition display screen directly in front of him.

According to the azimuth display data overlaying the crystal-clear video image, the skipper's line-of-sight was due north. The

position of the Okeanos was sixty degrees latitude and thirty longitude in the North Atlantic.

Using one of the two sidestick controllers positioned at either side of the screen, the captain thumbed one of the dedicated buttons at its top. Instantly the view screen zoomed to a wide-angle scan from horizon to horizon.

As the scan painted its zoomar view across the display terminal, the captain punched in a command set at one of the three keyboards of the console.

Image fusion technology called up a viewing window at the screen's upper right corner, showing the skipper a map of the northern hemisphere with a flashing blue icon graphically indicating the position of the sub as it cruised the seas on a northerly course heading.

Satisfied with what he saw on the screen, the captain replaced the sidestick controller in its recess and next picked up the intership phone to his left, keying in the weapons system officer.

"Initialize modular standoff weapon system," the captain ordered.

"Aye, sir," the WSO responded at once. "Modular standoff weapon system initializing."

Two screens were in front of the WSO. One of them was flush with the bulkhead at eye level. The other screen was angled at the technical officer at chest level.

The topmost screen showed the WSO real-time status data on each of the missiles carried by the sub. The lowermost screen showed the status of subsystems.

On this run the WSO was aware that only two out of the twenty missiles clustered in the Okeanos' Christmas Tree Farm were capable of being launched. The technical officer was also aware that he would only be launching a single operational Skybolt ballistic cruise missile on this run.

Soon the status of the launch control management system was listed as Ready by the onboard systems computer. The automatic target engagement sequencer quickly reported that the status check run on the target coordinates that had been downloaded from the Okeanos' computer banks were accurate down to the last byte.

"Enable automatic missile launch sequencing," the captain informed the WSO through intership comms.

"Aye sir," the weapons system officer replied, flipping back the plastic cover of the red button at the head of the rows of smaller lighted buttons and depressing it to launch the missile. "Automatic missile launch sequencing enabled." And then, less than a minute later, "Missile away."

At the port side of the control and imaging center, the sub's main tactical screen switched from a map grid display to a real-time zoomar view of the missile launch as relayed by hull sensors tracking the launch from the top of the boat.

As the booster stage catapulted the Skybolt high over the ocean on an arcing trajectory, the missile leveled off. "We have separation," the WSO reported as the booster stage separated soon after and fell away as the sea launched cruise missile reached its low trajectory operational altitude.

At that point the advanced design modular stand-off weapon or MSOW engaged its rocket engines and streaked out across the ocean on a low trajectory flight path that would render its already low-observable shape invisible to defensive radar.

"Diving officer," the captain said next over interphone commo. "Make your depth seven-five feet."

"Aye, make my depth seven-five feet," the diving officer returned. "Helm, ten degrees down on the fairwater planes."

"Sir, my planes are down ten degrees," the helmsman replied as he executed the order.

"Come right to one seven niner," the captain next instructed his crew.

"Aye-aye, sir," the diving officer said again. "Helm, right six degrees rudder come to new course one seven niner."

"Right six degrees rudder, aye. Sir, my rudder is right six degrees. Coming to new course one seven niner."

The giant seagoing vessel submerged beneath the ocean as the "brilliant" sea-launched modular standoff weapon sped through space on its lethal trajectory.

The mission clock on the Big Board had finally counted down to zero.

Time had run out for the men and women marked for death in the Cheyenne Mountain headquarters of NORAD, the North American Aerospace Defense system. Although the sixty-year-old Cheyenne Mountain facility was being phased out and new headquarters were being built in the form of a space station, there were still thousands of personnel at risk.

If the threat made by Alpha was legitimate, then an advanced-technology missile, undetectable by any conventional means, would have already been launched on Cheyenne Mountain.

That those inside the missile defense complex had unanimously elected to stay behind and say not to the demands was a gesture of supreme courage. Across the nation and the world, millions were praying for the safety of the men and women who had chosen to stand their ground at NORAD and not capitulate to Force Three's ultimatum.

The array of digital display screens which together made up the "Big Board" in NORAD's main battle cab were all lit up, showing multiple mode data-fusion in real-time video, computer-generated map displays

and mixed data from remote tracking sites patched into NORAD's missile alert grid.

The DEFCON status had since been upgraded from status three to status one. This was the highest possible defense posture, the one code named "Cocked Pistol" and the level reserved for situations requiring the highest state of global alert where the world was only a figurative hammerstrike away from all-out nuclear war.

The U.S. President had gone on national newsmedia telling a shocked nation about the threat that faced it. From a safe distance, an army of reporters had now gathered to witness would occur.

Suddenly the Big Board underwent another phase shift.

"What's happening?" NORAD Commander in Chief General Warren Blankenship USAF said into the gooseneck mike to his chief of operations whose technical station was located in the pit below.

"Don't know, sir," he replied. "It appears that our sensors are being jammed by a powerful signal."

The face that materialized on the Big Board seconds later was unearthly. Its electronic masking gave it a cold, machinelike quality that chilled the blood.

The image of Alpha produced an audible gasp from those manning the array of consoles and seated in the gallery level of the immense underground battle cab. Even hardened soldiers shivered involuntarily on seeing the visage.

All observers stood riveted to the image of the electronic mask that hid the true face of the supercriminal who controlled Force Three.

"The deadline has passed," the chilling electronic voice of the blackmailer informed the personnel in the NORAD situation room. "We are now informing you that the modular stand-off weapon has already been launched. You have less than twenty minutes to vacate Cheyenne Mountain. If you do not you will suffer the consequences."

"Go to hell," said General Blankenship.

"You have better things to do than mouth obscenities, General," Alpha responded. "And your time is quickly running out. We repeat, you now have less than eighteen minutes of safety time remaining before the missile reaches you."

The gigantic image of Alpha on the Big Board wavered and then disappeared entirely from view.

"Has contact been established?" the general asked of his Chief of Operations who had been standing by to deploy targeting equipment for a hopeful fix on the origin of the signal as were National Security Agency personnel at a secret location across CONUS, the continental United States.

"Negative. No sightings reported."

As the minutes after the launch warning ticked down, an interlocking shield of search radars, AWACS aircraft and airbreathing

strike forces flying combat air patrol kept a steady watch over Cheyenne Mountain.

The President, the Vice President, his chief advisers and the Joint Chiefs of Staff had already deployed to Looking Glass and Kneecap aircraft, following a scenario originally drafted in the event of nuclear war between the superpowers of the old world order. At the Canadian end of the NORAD binational command, the Prime Minister and Chiefs of the Canadian Defense Staff were taking similar measures.

While these precautionary actions were being implemented, Force Three's sea-launched Skybolt MSOW went into its final pre-strike maneuvers.

Made up of millions of tiny picture elements -- pixels -- its smartskin mimicked the environment with such precision that it passed directly beneath F-25 scramjet fighter aircraft flying combat air patrol without being seen.

Only as it neared Cheyenne Mountain did ground-based observers stationed some miles away detect the flight profile of the cruise missile. But by then it was too late to stop the round which was moving at nearly Mach Two from putting itself on target and exploding.

Moments later, the Skybolt cruise missile went into its final pre-detonation maneuver. It popped up and drove its titanium-cadmium penetrator head into the granite face of Cheyenne Mountain. Boring thirty feet down in seconds, its thermonuclear warhead fuzed automatically.

The resulting fission explosion was not severe enough to raze the mountain to the ground. But it packed enough of a wallop to send a bubble of superheated air mushrooming into the breached bunker in which the NORAD facility was housed.

With a surface temperature well past the boiling point of titanium, the ultra-hot gas jet caused each of the fifteen three-story steel buildings that made up the vast NORAD bunker to explode. Riding a shock wave of deadly concussive force, a front of searing gases and molten metal punched into the main battle cab at the heart of the base, creating a firestorm that consumed everything in its path within an annihilating vortex.

Personnel and those nearest the detonation zone were vaporized as their flesh and bones caught fire. The Big Board exploded into a thousand pieces as a deadly pulse of electromagnetic energy blew every circuit in it, raining millions of jagged shards down on the NORAD situation room.

An all-devouring wall of hellfire raced through the 4,675-foot, north-south tunnel linking the NORAD main bunker with the surface of Cheyenne Mountain, incinerating support personnel who tried to flee the thermonuclear deathwind.

But a tremendously powerful pressure wave continued to force the jet of seething hellfire through Cheyenne Mountain's main access tunnel where it sluiced outward in a gusher of burning incandescence.

The cone of hot gases and vaporized rock and steel speared hundreds of feet into the air, and was visible to observers on the moon. In addition to a thousand lives, it took with it any last shred of doubt concerning Alpha's ability to project his power anywhere on the planet, and to destroy whatever he pleased.

From Original Manuscript

FIFTEEN

Newcomb Straker breathed stertorously as he neared an explosive climax. The woman in his suite at one of Monte Carlo's most expensive hotels did not come cheap, but Nefertiti Jones did deliver as promised.

Inside the teledildonic sex chamber, Straker's manhood was stimulated by actuators that were linked cybernetically to the matching implant worn by his consort.

The small yet powerful Organ Responsive Genital Interface, or O.R.G.I., computer system translated every movement of her gyrating pelvis into a procession of ones and zeroes, a digital progression of bytes and bits.

The advanced computer language drove software programs which duplicated sexuality on the virtual reality interface that linked Straker and the prostitute.

Teledildonic sex not only offered the benefit of being the ultimate "electronic condom," but of also being the ultimate insurance against blackmail as well.

The record of their virtual reality sexual play was captured on rewritable compact disk. This record constituted proof positive that no actual physical contact had ever occurred, and that therefore no pregnancy was possible.

This also meant that both (or more) parties to the teledildonic sexual encounter could engage in any sort of sadomasochistic or other kinky behavior they desired.

Despite its seeming totally realistic while they experienced it, lacking nothing of the genuine experience, teledildonic sex was nonetheless completely simulated, and free from any physical contact.

However, due to a number of sensational cases had surfaced in the tabloid newsmedia, Straker had foresworn certain teledildonic fetishes he enjoyed, at least for the present. In his line of work Straker had found that it was wise to take no unnecessary risks.

Straker soon reached the supreme moment of pleasure, and with the interface calibrated for non-ejaculatory mode, there was no discharge of semen. The good sex had all taken place in electronic cyberspace.

"You were simply quantum my pet," Straker said to the beautiful prostitute when they had disengaged from the teledildonic sensors, showered and dressed, now clad in formal evening attire preparatory to going down for a night of high stakes gambling in the hotel casino

"I know how to please you, Nuke 'Em," the hooker replied as he slipped the expensive silverback mountain gorilla fur over her bare white shoulders. Linking arms, they proceeded along the carpeted hall.

The hotel building in which the La Ronde Casino was located was a structure built in an age where architecture was judged for its grandeur and its opulence.

The La Ronde resembled a palace, and indeed that is what it had once been. Built during the time of the French Sun Kings, its original purpose was as a summer residence for one of the Royal Dauphins. Situated on choice harborfront property it commanded a breathtaking view of the Mediterranean ocean.

Tonight, as every night, the gambling casino played host to a star-studded array of dignitaries hailing from across the globe and even from as far away as the moon colony. Millions were won and lost on every turn of the roulette wheels.

But despite the celebrities and high rollers that filled the gambling hall, most eyes in the casino were fixed on the figure in the white tuxedo and emerald collar stud who had just entered the high-ceilinged chamber, especially female eyes.

The newcomer walked purposefully through the crowds at the gaming table, projecting an animal magnetism that drew all onlookers toward him.

Nomad's mission in Monte Carlo could be summed up in nine words: find Straker and hold his feet to the fire.

It had been John Lorimer, now occupying the Director's chair at CIA's Langley headquarters, who had contacted Quinn. Still enshrouded by a cloak of official secrecy, the complete details of what had gone down at Cheyenne Mountain were revealed to Quinn.

Nomad's debriefing had yielded a vital clue to the weapons system that had taken out NORAD. From Quinn's analysis of what he'd witnessed at the Omnivore R&D center, intelligence analysts were at work trying to piece together the advanced stealth technology that had made the cruise missile unstoppable as it skirted defense radar toward its target.

Quinn saw the action at the Baccarat table and focused his attention on it. A high-stakes game of *chemin-de-fer* was now in full swing. As Quinn had guessed, the center of the activity at the green felt gaming table was Newcomb Straker.

Taking a seat directly opposite the one that was occupied by the billionaire weapons scientist, Quinn asked the dealer for the shoe containing three mixed fifty-two card decks. All eyes were fixed on him as Quinn nodded to the man sitting across from him. He felt Straker's heavy stare on him as he reached into the pocket of his tux jacket and produced a gold cigaret case. Snapping off the end cap of a noncarcinogenic cigaret, Quinn inhaled deeply of the filtered ginseng smoke.

The dark eyes of the high-priced call girl in the low cut evening gown whose translucent "smartskin" hid and revealed parts of her body in a randomly shifting pattern gleamed as she stood with her hands on Straker's shoulders. Thoughts of lust and money ran through her mercenary brain as she eyed the handsome newcomer to the casino.

The eyes of the two regulation size hard men positioned at either side of Straker and Nefertiti burned with a duller, though far more dangerous light. Thoughts of a brutal nature were also directed toward the man in the tux.

"Banco," said the dealer as Quinn's cards on the table showed he had drawn a seven and a two.

Nomad had just won the first game.

Straker tried hard to disguise his anger which Quinn's fast win had brought to a boiling point. Failing at this he glared at Quinn with smoldering hatred.

"We have met before, have we not?" Straker asked the challenger. "I recognize your face but I cannot seem to place it."

"I'm not surprised you've forgotten, Straker," Quinn returned with the trace of a smile playing across his lips as he dragged on the ginseng cigaret. "The humidity of the Brazilian rainforest can sometimes make the memory a little hazy."

"Ah yes," Straker replied, connecting the face of the man in white tux with the blue-labcoated tech who had barged into the Omnivore underground lab weeks before. "Now I recall. Omnivore City, wasn't it?"

"That's right," Quinn replied. "It's lucky for you that you left before the shooting began. You might have gotten what your friend Metaxos wound up getting."

"Yes, poor fellow," Straker replied, ignoring the sarcasm in Quinn's veiled barb. "A tragedy that such genius ended that way. But we

are here to enjoy ourselves tonight, not to discuss such morbid events. Might I suggest upping the ante to, say, one million dollars?"

The tension that had hung in the air of the game room at this remark increased to an almost electrical levels.

Quinn felt the eyes of all spectators surrounding the gaming tables fixed on him, now aware that more had joined the onlookers who were piled many levels deep.

"A good idea," Quinn replied calmly, reaching for his chits as he blew a stream of ginseng smoke at Straker. "But why not make it really interesting."

He flung several hundred thousand dollar chits into the center of the table, adding, "three million dollars."

Now there came audible gasps from the crowd that encircled the baccarat table.

Sweat was standing out on Straker's high forehead in large beads and a muscle had begun to pulse on the bottom of his jaw. He had caught the feverish tension too now, and he knew that Quinn had maneuvered him into a trap.

Straker would have liked to have walked away from the game at that moment, realizing that he had been expertly outmaneuvered. But he could not afford to lose face in such a manner.

Word would get out that Straker was weak. Straker's enemies in business, politics and the terrorist subculture would all unsheathed their claws. No, Straker would have to take Quinn's gambit and let it lead him where it might.

"I'll see that bid," he said, tossing the remaining chits onto the center of the baize table covering, "and I'll raise it, Mr. Quinn."

Nomad reached for the Baccarat shoe and drew a series of playing cards in quick succession.

Straker watched Quinn place them face down on the baize felt tabletop. Though he tried to keep his face expressionless, he could not stop sweating or stop the twitching of the muscle in his jaw.

Daubing at his brow with the handkerchief he'd taken from his pocket, Straker watched the dealer retake possession of the shoe and present it to him, then Straker too drew a fresh series of playing cards from the shoe.

"Banco," said the dealer after Straker laid the hand he had just drawn face-up on the table, "the house wins."

Quinn said, "I believe I've beaten you, Straker."

The crowd burst into a chorus as it was realized that Quinn had just amassed six million dollars in a few seconds of play.

Nomad collected his chits and handed them to the croupier for conversion to a cashier's check, flipping ten thousand dollars as a tip on top of the green baize table.

"Mr. Quinn, just a moment if you will."

Quinn heard Straker's gruff voice after he had risen from the Baccarat table and had gotten midway to the cashier's window. Quinn had expected this to happen and was ready for what he was certain would go down next. Straker was walking abreast of him a moment later.

"I wonder if I might interest you in a real game of skill," he said to Quinn, "one that it is the right of exclusive members of the casino only to enjoy."

"I don't think so, Straker," Nomad replied. "I'm looking forward to collecting my winnings and getting a good night's rest. Money calms the nerves, you know."

"You don't understand, Mr. Quinn," Straker replied, and this time Quinn felt the pressure of hard metal against his ribs. "I am not asking you to come with me. I'm *telling* you."

Looking to either side, Quinn saw that the two goons he'd seen earlier at Straker's flanks had their hands in their pockets in a manner that made it clear that they were holding concealed weapons, somehow having gotten them past the casino's surveillance screens.

"Now that you put it that way, Straker," Nomad told the scientist, "let's play your game."

"I had a feeling that you'd come around to seeing it my way, Mr. Quinn," Straker replied with a mocking smile as he steered his captive from the main hall of the casino and out into the lobby.

The captive and his captors continued walking until they came to a bank of elevators leading up to hotel rooms on the level above.

But Straker turned left and went to a small elevator that was operated by a specially coded key card.

Quinn and his captors soon emerged into a vestibule. This area, several floors above the casino, was marble floored and topped by an arched ceiling on which lunettes contained paintings by the Florentine masters of the Italian Renaissance. It was not hard to imagine one of the kings of ancient France holding court in such a room centuries before.

But at the head of the chamber now there was a control console with banks of screens. The console fronted a large geodesic dome whose appearance was familiar to Quinn.

"You know what this is, I trust?" Straker asked him, indicating the dome.

"It's a virtual reality room, a cybersphere," Quinn answered. "I've recently had one installed myself."

"I envy you, Mr. Quinn. You are a braver man than I, who have not the intestinal fortitude to take my chances inside a virtual room."

"That's right, Straker -- I've heard teledildonic sex is more your speed," Quinn replied.

"Gently, Mr. Quinn, go very gently," Straker warned, his face suddenly flushing crimson at the slight, "your contentiousness will not help your chances of leaving here alive."

After a beat he went on more calmly, "I am a sporting man. I will permit you to live if you survive a contest in the virtual room.

"Very generous of you," Quinn replied. Straker's two oversized henchmen were already shoving their weapons into the small of his back.

In a moment they had force-marched Quinn into the cybersphere and one of them had stepped in behind him. Then the door to the cybersphere closed and Quinn heard the telltale whine of pulsed lasers powering up.

Within a matter of seconds, the red light of a low-power scanning laser swept across Quinn's body and those of the goon inside the cybersphere with him.

The beams wrapped themselves around both participants, mapping data regarding size, weight, height and body contours, into random access memory.

These data would be used to maintain the players "cocooned" in a virtual envelope of sound, touch and image which would follow their every movement.

It took only a few moments for the scans to be completed. And then the interior of the cybersphere underwent a reality phase shift. The hard man inside the cybersphere with Quinn were beginning to change in appearance.

And so was Quinn...

SIXTEEN

Nomad stood in total blackness, waiting for the computers and lasers to unravel the fabric of reality and then re-weave it into an electronic simulation of itself.

In the virtual sphere he had just installed at his office complex, Quinn had programmed in the various operational modes he intended to use for recreational purposes.

He had no idea which modes the casino had programmed in to its own unit, nor at what skill level of play the casino's cybersphere was capable of operating.

Although none of what happened in a cybersphere was "real" in a literal sense, at the highest skill levels of play the shock to the human nervous system could result in serious injury or fatalities.

If a player happened to be injured or died in virtual reality, it might turn out that the same would happen to that player in analog reality.

From the configuration of the casino cybersphere, Quinn judged that it was a Mahabarata Cybersystems model UX37 that he had been herded into by Straker's gun-packing torpedos.

The Mahabarata was state-of-the-art and capable of generating a full range of multisensory virtual environments. The UX37 was also configurable to the highest skill levels and had been the official cybersphere of the Winter Olympics which had just been held on the moon.

Of course, the programming and customizing of any single cybersphere might vary according to individual options packages. But there were still finite limitations on what a cybersphere could do.

Fortunately, Quinn was familiar enough with the basics of cybersphere technology from experimenting with his own system to have

a clear expectation of what this one was capable of -- and not capable of -- doing.

What it all boiled down to was that in order to survive, he would have to put every iota of his experience to use. In a Mahabarata cybersphere, anything was possible.

Suddenly the blackness lifted. Everything in Nomad's field of vision became transformed into a mosaic of pixel blocks of random shapes and colors, glittering in the air like flecks of electronic confetti. Within seconds, the multitude of blocks resolved themselves into normal imagery.

But things had changed radically on this side of the event horizon.

Where before there was a regulation hardman facing Quinn in white dinner jacket, black shirt and emerald collar stud, there now appeared an eight foot tall robot of dull grey metal. Spikes bristled at knuckles, elbow and knee joints as the gleaming automaton menacingly lumbered Quinn's way.

Nomad's appearance had changed too, just as that of his opponent had altered. Holding up his hand, Quinn took stock of the fact that it was now made of a gleaming silvery metal.

It was a robot hand, and it fit in with the rest of his virtual robot body. Quinn wondered if he could call up any offensive weapons and tried his luck. At his right wrist there were rows of dedicated keys, with labels such as "Spikes," "Auto Select" or "Edged Weap."

Hitting the first button, rows of spikes sprang up from his knuckles and his chest as soon as he punched the wrist-top keypad. But Quinn had no more time to experiment with the weapons options that came with the package.

His opponent in the cybersphere closed with him and ducked to one side, delivering a series of spinning side-kicks with pulverizing force.

Quinn was knocked backwards by the impact of the savagely delivered side kicks. He went crashing into, and partly through, a brick wall that had suddenly materialized behind him. But just as suddenly it wasn't made out of brick anymore. Instead, the wall had become a vertical panel composed of a gleaming liquid metal, and was sucking him in as an airborne quicksand pit might.

It was a virtual trap he'd fallen into, but to Quinn it felt as real as anything else. Quinn knew that one of the first ground rules of using a cybersphere was never to try to convince yourself that you were not really where you thought you were or that what was happening wasn't actually happening.

From the fixed reference point of a person inside a cybersphere, everything happening was completely real, and to think otherwise could be highly dangerous. While it was a normal human reaction to conceptualize in such a manner, it was a way of thinking which had to be unlearned.

Quinn waged war against that part of his mind which tried to tell him that it was all an illusion, concentrating instead on freeing himself from the virtual wall trap as his assailant pressed home his advantage.

He popped loose from the virtual trap a split-second before a smashing hand blow would have landed with crushing impact. Had he not chosen to "go with the flow" as cybersphere rules dictated, Quinn might have been severely injured or killed outright by the blow.

Switching from defense to offense, Quinn pulled a martial arts duck-and-strike maneuver, crouching down and delivering power punches with the stabbing edges of his spiked knuckles to the midsection of the other player in the cybersphere. He saw metal dent and puncture as the spikes penetrated the metallic hide.

Quinn's opponent howled in pain and countered the attack with a wild overhand swing that missed Quinn but gave him an opening for launching a counterblow to his adversary's head.

Quinn slashed at the gleaming automaton with a sideways knife-hand blow, driving the edged striking surface of the hand into his antagonist's face which buckled inward with the shriek and groan of shattering metal.

Half the face was sheared away as a consequence of the head blow, becoming a hideous looking mixture of twisted metal and deformed human flesh. But in this virtual world no blood issued from the gaping wound, and no unsurvivable damage had been done to the injured party.

Instead, the piece of the other player's head that was hanging off the rest of it slid back into place and the rupture closed seamlessly as Quinn's opponent kicked out and sent Quinn sprawling to the deck.

Dazed by the lurching impact of the fast, hard blow, Quinn dodged the follow-through lunge of a spike-soled metal foot and countered with a spinning series of back and side kicks, catching his assailant in the midsection and puncturing the metal skin. But the dull metal closed around the rupture in an eyeblink, trapping Quinn's foot inside the body of the robot warrior.

With Nomad's foot still embedded in his entrails, the other combatant extended one arm. The arm was now tipped by a whirling rotor which sported rows of wickedly razor-edged power blades.

The other player jabbed the rapidly spinning rotor into Quinn's heartzone as he struggled to pull his trapped foot out of his belly.

The rotor penetrated Quinn's chest and he felt a lancing pain in his innards as shards of sparking metal sprayed out of the exit wound that had been torn high on his left shoulder.

Before the robot warrior could try again for another buzzsawing putaway strike, Quinn balled his hand and jabbed the spiked fist into the other player's dully glistening metal face.

Hit by the piledriving hand blow, the warrior's face caved in completely, as Quinn's fist crashed out through the back of his head, creating what looked like a foil bag that bore the indentations of a

bunched fist embossed on its surface. What was left of the face was a large, uneven hole that eyes, nose and mouth had once occupied.

The weird thing with no face flailed about and went crashing to the deck. But even as it hit bottom, the bag of deformed metal trailing from the back of the ruptured head began to shrink. Seconds later, the face of Nomad's antagonist reformed. With surprising quickness, the other player sprang to his feet.

Now the other combatant came at Quinn head down, going for a head-butt attack. A long spike, a unicorn's horn of gleaming metal, now jutted menacingly from the top of his head. Sidestepping the power strike, Nomad wasn't quick enough on his feet to avoid being stabbed through the side and hurled backwards to crash into another vertical wall made of sticky liquid metal.

This time he fell completely through the wall trap and saw that there were three large, spinning, hooked buzzsaw blades with razor-sharp edges hanging in the air directly behind him. Having lost his balance, he had gone sprawling into the virtual slicing and dicing machine.

Not knowing what else to do, Quinn hit one of the buttons on the wrist control marked "Auto Select" as he tumbled toward the shredder. All at once a section in the side of his head opened up and a barbed metal bolt, trailing a ribbed metal cable, shot from it at high speed.

The bolt struck the other player through the throat while the ribbed cable began to coil itself first around his head, then around his body, pinning his arms to his sides and pulling Quinn from the spinning maw in the process. The other player made gargling sounds and struggled to unpin his arms in an attempt to free them from the cable. It wouldn't give an inch, though, in fact it flexed tighter to accommodate the struggles of the squirming player.

Wasting no time, Quinn launched a series of spinning side and back kicks at his trapped opponent. Wrapped in the cable like a high-tech mummy in metal burial rags, the other player toppled to the floor like a felled oak.

Quinn didn't make the same mistake as he'd made on his first attempt to nail the guy. He kept slamming his spiked fist into his head until the face was reduced to a hammered-down sheet of metal a hundredth of an inch in thickness.

His opponent no longer moved after taking such a severe pummeling. Quinn looked down at the unmoving thing below him, a thing whose head had been beaten down to a paper-thin sheet. He wondered how much of the fight was real and how much was hallucination, but with the cybersphere still active, he could not tell which.

Moments later, the cybersphere returned Quinn to analog reality. The lights in the virtual reality sphere winked back on. Quinn now saw that the other man was unhurt but knocked unconscious. He would wake up with a very nasty headache, but probably no more than that.

"Very well done, Mr. Quinn," Newcomb Straker's voice said from the control room outside as his face appeared on the smartwall which had turned into a giant digital screen. "But I'm afraid that I must be a poor loser. You simply cannot be permitted to leave this place alive."

From Original Manuscript

SEVENTEEN

Nomad steeled himself for action as the door to the now deactivated cybernetic sphere flew open.

This time there would be nothing virtual about the reality of the threat. The guns facing Quinn would be as real as they got and so would the bullets which they fired.

The first hardman into the cybersphere held his autoweapon at hip level, sweeping it back and forth as he charged in to draw a fast bead on his target.

Quinn was waiting for him and expecting the action to come fast and hard.

As the triggerman pivoted at the flicker of motion glimpsed out the corner of his eye, Nomad jammed his finger behind the trigger with uncanny precision and almost inhuman speed, immobilizing the weapon.

Wearing a stunned expression, the hard charger flexed his index finger, but could not pull the trigger past the point of letback. With the gun unable to be fired, Nomad pushed the weapon's barrel upward and wrenched it from the enforcer's vicelike grip with a savage twist.

Following the take-away move with a vicious smash to the side of his opponent's jawline on the follow-through, Quinn dodged sideways as the unconscious enforcer keeled over like an oak felled by a blow from an axe.

Two more hardmen were charging in behind the guy before he even hit the floor.

Quinn was already firing at the backups, scoring with pulsed bursts of 4.73 mm caseless autofire from the LSW close assault weapon he'd taken away from hitter number one.

But reinforcements were coming in faster than Nomad could ice them with accurately targeted full-auto heat. Straker had obviously called up the reserves of his private army, and the opposition had gone ballistic. Quinn's strategy wouldn't work much longer and the game was quickly turning zero-sum.

Nomad took three long steps backward.

Straker's moon face was all around him, displayed on the smartwalls of the cybersphere, its features twisted up in a feral snarl of livid rage. The guy was mad as a hatter and not used to being forced to take the dirty end of the stick.

"You sonofabitch!" Straker's hovering, three-dimensional image shouted. "You're dead. Do you hear me, fucker? You're dea -- "

Quinn launched a 4.73 mm autoburst at the smartwalls closest to the door, shattering the liquid crystal displays in a shower of plastic and Straker's face disappeared amid the crash of the fracturing interior of the sphere.

Thick, foul-smelling smoke had begun to pour into the cybersphere as the newcomers bulling their ways into the room were temporarily disoriented.

Nomad took another backwards step until he had almost reached the far wall of the cybersphere.

Pointing the three hundred round capacity caseless assault weapon at the ceiling of the virtual reality chamber, Quinn aimed at a spot at the center and pulled the trigger of the LSW.

Behind that spot he guessed that the powerful helium-argon lasers that produced much of the effects inside the cybersphere were located.

As the fast-rotoring rounds sliced through the thin smart panels forming the ceiling of the sphere, they pierced the tubes of lasing gasses and penetrated the flimsy metal jacketing of the power cells necessary to charge the immensely powerful laser for flash-pumping.

The highly combustible materials exploded instantaneously under the fusillade of rotoring steel belched from the six pointed star of flame at the advanced combat rifle's muzzle.

There was a tremendous explosion as the rounds struck home. Suddenly, tongues of flame were being ejected down into the cybersphere from the shattered mechanisms blown apart by the barrage of caseless ammo.

Caught directly beneath the lancing fire stream, Straker's henchmen shouted and cursed in pain and horror.

Nomad was already turning.

Checking the digital ammo readout on the bullpup assault weapon and noting that he still had some two hundred odd rounds

remaining in the gun, Quinn again squeezed the trigger and fired point blank into the smart panels of the rear wall in front of him.

The panels shattered as if they were made of candy glass, exposing the dark airspace beyond them and a curvilinear sheet of softwall.

Nomad used his final remaining ammo reserves in perforating a six foot square of the wall space.

Bright light shone through from the drawing room outside in brilliant smoky shafts where the hundreds of flechette rounds had augured their way through the drywall.

Nomad flung the now empty close assault weapon down to the floor of the smoke-filled cybersphere and lashed out with the tip of his Italian loafer-shod foot.

The square he'd cookie-cut from the rest of the softwall fell with a hollow crash that echoed in the smoke-filled chamber beyond.

Nomad dodged out of the opening into the seventeenth century chamber outside the sphere, his tux covered with a layer of dust and particles of fallen debris.

Now that the din of the explosions had died away Quinn could hear the shouts of angry men crashing through the virtual reality sphere. His pursuers would be out after him in a matter of seconds.

Quickly surveying the area, Nomad took note of the fact that he was on an upper story of the casino.

The vaulted ceiling and polished marble floor told him that this was a drawing room dating back hundreds of years to the time of the ancient dukes of Saxony which had founded the city in the fourteenth century, little dreaming that it would one day become a gambler's mecca.

Through one of the room's many high windows, Quinn could see the lights of Monte Carlo with the boat marina in the distance.

There was no sign of a door or other exitway from the chamber and Quinn guessed that the exitway lay beyond the cybersphere, directly opposite from the direction he had rushed.

By now the angry shouts of his enraged pursuers were growing louder as Straker's homicidal underlings spilled through the hole in the wall through billowing clouds of pulverized debris. The gun-toting kill crew was getting closer and closer, and the mercs were bent on making Quinn pay his dues for the humiliating defeat of one of their own.

It became obvious that the only way out of the trap was through the window at Quinn's right.

Nomad raised the heavy wooden window frame and stepped from the wide casement out onto the narrow decorative stone ledge that ran around the building. Sudden gunfire erupted from below, and chips of ancient brickwork stung his face as they were sent spraying by bullet strikes.

Realizing that there was no escape in climbing down, Quinn scrambled up to the flat roof of the casino.

Keeping his profile low to prevent his being skylighted against the lights of the marina in the near distance, Quinn made for the side of the casino that ran parallel to hotel standing beside it.

A narrow alleyway leading to a rear parking area separated the two ancient structures.

"There he is!" he heard a gruff voice shout out. "Up on the goddamn roof! Shoot that cocksucker! Blow his fucking ass to hell!"

Light streamed from the body-checked door to the roof as three dark manshapes scattered for different parts of the roofscape.

Whirling rotors of yellow-blue flame lit up the shooters for brief instants as the SMGs bratting in their fists launched bolts of flying steel in Nomad's direction.

Dodging and twisting to avoid the hellstorm of fleshripping studs, Quinn leapt across the five-foot divide between the two adjacent rooftops.

He made a four point landing -- hands down flat and feet spread apart -- to absorb the shock of impact.

More fast-cycling bullets spanged and whined at his feet as Quinn took a second flying jump off the top of the roof onto the porte-cochere of the hotel next to the casino.

The thick canvas of the porte-cochere absorbed the shock of two hundred pounds of flesh and muscle hitting at a speed of almost thirty miles per hour. Quinn took a few wobbly steps on the resilient material and lowered himself onto the pavement.

A liveried doorman sporting a flopping blue velvet beret was rushing toward him, shouting something in rapid gutter French. Though Quinn had trouble with the syntax, the doorman's gestural language left him in no doubt whatever that the guy was hopping mad at the commotion he had caused.

The doorman reached out to grab Quinn but was quickly sorry he'd let himself get carried away. Though the dude was a big, rawboned guy, and taking care of undesirables for the hotel's rich patrons had become a source of extra income for him, he was nowhere in the same league as the guy he'd picked to tangle with.

A rock smash blow, using the two large knuckles of the hand as primary striking surfaces, delivered to the doorman's Adam's apple, quickly reduced the would-be hero of the day to a gargling, spluttering casualty who collapsed on the pavement, his face turning as blue as gus dropped beret as he labored to catch his breath.

Gunfire from the rooftop of a building across the street suddenly erupted, as Quinn made fast for the open door of the elegant, black Aladdin town car the doorman had cracked for a hotel guest minutes before his sudden arrival.

Unfortunately for the doorman, his prone position made him a sitting duck for stray rounds which had been meant for Quinn.

Struck by several high-velocity bullets, the doorman went limp as everyone else in the firezone ducked for cover except for the matron in the silverback mountain gorilla fur wrapper who was in the process of reaching for the open door of the town car.

Quinn pushed aside the rich old lady and slid into the Aladdin's front seat.

The driver must have been through some kind of anti-terrorist training course because he was pulling a small H&K 10 mm squeeze-cocker from a side holster and in the process of pointing its business end at Quinn's face.

Grabbing the driver's gun arm, Quinn applied pressure to the guy's wrist, preventing the driver from unsafelying the squeeze-cocking bar of the weapon and then driving his fist straight into the man's nose.

Nomad heard the satisfying snap of nasal cartilage as his fist connected and then blood began gushing from the driver's ripped up face.

"Out!" Quinn hollered, now in possession of the weapon that had been pointed at him moments earlier.

The driver cursed at him but did as he was told, helped a long by a swiftly delivered kick to his rear end. Quinn quickly slid over and shifted the vehicle into drive.

The town car picked up smoothly and quietly, accelerating quickly despite the fact that it was an electric powered vehicle.

As Quinn pulled away he heard the deadly ka-thunk of bullets striking the car's rear windshield.

A glance in the digital-zoom rearview told Nomad that the glass it was made of was not prone to shattering under the impact of bullets.

The car was probably a highly secure vehicle intended to protect its rich owners from terrorist attack.

Now away from the hotel's driveway entrance and out on the street, Nomad punched up the options menu on the Aladdin's main dashboard screen.

The menu option confirmed to Quinn that the car was indeed a security engineered vehicle.

According to the data displayed on screen, the car included a laminated Kevlar and high tensile steel chassis, run-flat tires and a floor resistant to shrapnel in addition to its bulletproof windows.

A moment later, Quinn was glad that he'd been lucky enough to hijack a vehicle this good.

A pair of headlights had appeared in his slipstream.

Nomad hit the zoom control button on the digital rearview and saw the figure in the process of leaning out the passenger side window of a low-slung Spectron muscle car as he looked into the screen mounted at the top of the windshield.

Something boxy and black was clutched in both his hands and for sure it wasn't a Christmas present.

Pulses of autofire thundered out through the hundreds of yards separating the pursuit vehicles from the speeding chase car as the first of the rounds impacted on Quinn's rear tires.

The run-flat tires absorbed the penetrations of the rounds without any problem and Nomad took control of the wheel with a savage wrench to whip-turn the Aladdin into one of the narrow, twisting sidestreets that snaked through the mountainous coastal town.

The hard charger in the hijacked vehicle did not know that at that moment preparations were being made that would make the pursuit cars the least of Quinn's worries for the evening.

EIGHTEEN

"Target acquired," said Capricorn One.

The jumpsuited figure in the catbird seat faced the rack-mounted banks of multimode display screens. A variegated stream of light flickered across his hard-edged features as his slate-grey eyes darted from screen to screen.

"Requesting immediate clearance for launch."

Straker was on the other end of the secure comlink, monitoring the data on his own terminals from his Monte Carlo pid a terre.

The flashing digital icon on one of those screens represented the Aladdin town car hijacked by Quinn in Monte Carlo.

Straker could see that the vehicle was now outdistancing the group of screen icons which stood for his men who had given chase.

On Nomad's escape from the cybersphere and the subsequent casino shootout, Straker had immediately contacted his Force Three-supplied fallback crew, code named Capricorn.

This prepositioned strike unit was tasked to provide standoff assistance in the event that Straker's normal security people screwed up.

"Capricorn One. You now have clearance," Straker said into the mike. He had made his decision. "Launch immediately."

"Affirmative," the sandpaper voice of Capricorn One said back over the comset. "Initializing launch auto-sequencing."

A few miles away from the casino's upper floor where Straker sat at the control console, pneumatic servo-actuators lifted part of the roof of an eighteen-wheel truck parked in shadow off the side of the road. The section was raised to an eighty degree angle, exposing the launch canister mounted directly beneath it.

A burst of flame lit up the night as the ramjet motors of the air breathing drone aircraft ignited and the stealth-black remote piloted vehicle (RPV) streaked skyward to its cruising altitude of sixty feet.

"Drone is away," Straker heard Capricorn's One's gruff voice in his earbuds. "Launch is successful."

Streaking through the moonless night sky on its low trajectory flight path, the ramjet-powered drone cruised fast and low across the rooftops of Monte Carlo.

Already the far-seeing FLIR sensors mounted in its nose assembly had acquired the target that its inboard computers had been programmed to recognize.

The moving map display on Capricorn's main tactical viewscreen now showed Quinn's car represented by a triangular yellow icon pursued by three blue square icons representing the chase vehicles. The color shift indicated that the drone had acquired its target and was closing in for the kill.

A sadistic smile played across Capricorn One's slash-shaped mouth. As he watched the display screens, the merc knew in his heart that the target didn't even have the chance of a straw man in a hurricane.

By now Quinn had succeeded in scrolling through the various menus on the Aladdin town car's dashboard options screens.

He'd been acting on the hunch that the high security road machine might be equipped with other hidden extras in the form of electronic detection systems in addition to its bulletproof exterior.

Nomad's hunch had paid off when the techno-warrior had logged onto a screen menu headed THREAT RADARS. A few keystrokes later, he had mapped the chase and pursuit vehicles into random access memory on the inboard computer's silicon-based microprocessor.

Designed to warn the driver of the number and range of the threats he might face in a terrorist alert situation, the car's onboard computer-linked pulse-dopplar radar displayed the Aladdin and its pursuers as a series of graphic icons on a moving map display.

Not that Quinn needed any electronic watchdogs to tell him what his own two eyes could see in the Aladdin's digital zoom rearview "mirror."

The headlights of the chase vehicles were growing larger as the mobile pursuit teams sent out by Straker stitched up the gap between themselves and Quinn amid squeals of burning rubber as Quinn led them on a zigzagging course through the backstreets of the high-rollers' town.

But the Aladdin's computer-enhanced radar was able to supply Nomad with data of extreme usefulness.

In addition to the flashing icons on the moving map display, a data block at the upper left hand of the screen offered Quinn a series of tactical options, among which were an array of possible escape routes preloaded into the car computer's inboard memory.

With the gap closed, glowing white rivets began to whip from the lead chase vehicle and ricocheted off the Aladdin's hardened polycarbonate rear windshield.

Straker's crews were throwing tracer fire at him, all the better to get him taped and ignite any flammables they might strike should they succeed in penetrating the Aladdin's armored skin.

Quinn hit the button marked AUTO on the smartcar's navigational panel.

The computer issued a brief WAIT alert while it cycled automatically through its database to select the best escape routes vis-a-vis his present course and position and prioritize them in descending order of magnitude.

Quinn froze the first selection on his console screen. Because he was running out of lead time he was forced to go with the computer's best guess and hope it was the right guess.

The Aladdin's main dashboard screen split into two parallel windows.

The first continued to show the progress of the chase vehicles through the dark, labyrinthine streets of Monte Carlo.

The screen window on the left showed Nomad a schematic map of the area of Southern French coastline on which the chase was taking place.

A broken crimson line which flashed on and off was connected at one end to the icon indicating the Aladdin.

This line stretched out of the maze of backstreets toward the highway beyond and terminated in a WorldPol security barracks about three miles distant along the coastal highway.

Wrenching the wheel of the town car with slitted eyes and gritted teeth, Nomad began following the escape route map, noticing the temporary disappearance of the chase vehicles' headlights as he rounded the corner with a screech of smoking rubber on black asphalt.

In a heartbeat, though, a shrill tone sounded in his ears and the smartcar's main console screen went through a fast phase shift.

Quinn noticed now that a new icon had been added to the threats already logged on the dashboard's main console screen.

It was shaped differently from the others and its azimuth indicated that the threat it showed was almost directly overhead. Suspecting a bug in the program or a random glitch, Nomad asked for a confirm on the data from the Aladdin's computer, but the icon still showed on the screen.

Glancing up through the windshield, Quinn now saw something occult the stars overhead.

An RPV! he thought, and braced himself for the attack he was certain would commence.

As expected, the blitzkrieg commenced moments later as Capricorn One -- in the darkened control room hidden in the lorry parked

miles away -- issued orders for the pursuit vehicles to stand off from the escape car and allow his remote-controlled drone unit to take over the fight.

Positioning a screen cursor by means of a trackball pointing device, Capricorn placed the electronic pipper on the target icon symbolizing Quinn's car and clicked the button on his joystick controller that would release the specially designed weaponry that the drone carried.

Each silver globe was roughly equal to a baseball in size.

The lethal bomblets were packed with high energy explosives and set to detonate in proximity fuzed airbursts.

In addition to these lethal features, each aerial submunition was equipped with tiny infra-red seeker heads and miniaturized rocket motors, permitting the cluster of precision-guided bomblets to track targets before detonating.

Nomad wrenched the wheel as he saw something glitter above him with the faint sparkle of reflected highway lights.

At the same time he noticed that the pursuit vehicles' position was frozen on the dashboard screen and that the speed of the cars had dropped as distance readings increased.

He sensed a fraction of a second before the first of the phased submunitions detonated that the RPV had put rounds on target.

Twisting the Aladdin's steering wheel savagely while applying pressure on the car's power pedal, Quinn sped away from the impact zone at eighty miles per hour as the first aerial bomblet exploded off to his rear.

Despite the fact that he was several yards away when the first bomblet fuzed with a fierce detonation, blast-driven overpressure buckled his back window and chunks of razor edged shrapnel hurtled in on the speeding car.

The only thing that had prevented the razor-edged shrapnel from rupturing the car's fuel tanks was the blast-resistant body of the Aladdin and its strike-resistant polycarbonate windows.

But although these defenses had proven well able to withstand an indirect munitions burst, Nomad was not so certain about how he would fare if exposed to a direct hit.

The probability of this happening increased with each passing second as Quinn realized that the dispersal cloud of aerial bomblets -- which now clearly registered on his threat display screen -- had not remained where it had fallen.

On the contrary, the surviving bomblets were now whizzing through empty air, doggedly following the path of the Aladdin as Quinn continued to follow the flashing red line toward the highway.

At the same time, he saw that the chase cars were moving, but now following a different plan: their computers slaved toward some central CPU (it would have to be the same base station responsible for sending

out the drone) they had broken ranks and were now converging on the Aladdin from three separate positions in an attempt to both avoid destruction by the bomblets and cut Quinn off.

Nomad diverged from the computer's escape plan as he pitched the smartcar down a narrow street little wider than the girth of the vehicle itself in an attempt to shake off the remaining smart bomblets.

The dashboard threat display screen showed that these small but powerful warheads were keeping pace with his car, streaking down the narrow street directly behind him as if they were enormous intelligent bullets.

Coming up fast, Nomad saw that he would come to a blank concrete wall in just a few seconds. Standing to lose little at this point, he decided to go for getting a break-lock on the guidance systems of the smart bombs.

Crunching the numbers, Quinn saw from his moving map display that before he would slam head-on into the wall, he could make a sharp left into another narrow street that gave out on the avenue, putting him back on his preplanned route.

Nomad goosed the Aladdin forward, not braking until the last possible instant before colliding with the wall. Then he executed a screaming left turn that slammed the Aladdin broadside against the adjacent buildings and sent Quinn lurching savagely in the opposite direction before his tires gained purchase again and the car leapt forward.

Unable to turn quickly enough, the smart aerial bomblets at the front of the moving dispersal cloud turned to retrack their quarry. But the questing rounds weren't agile enough to gain the alley that Quinn had just swerved into.

Their target lock broken, some of the silver globes smashed directly into the blank wall at the end of the dead-end street. They exploded instantly, turning the upper stories of the building into a mushroom cloud of fire while a number of others careened into the side of the building to the right of the small alley where they too exploded.

Some of the brilliant bomblets did succeed in making the turn onto the street, though, and they were right behind Quinn as he punched the power pedal and screamed past the close-in building walls at either side.

By his dashboard threat screens Quinn now saw that the few remaining silver globes were hugging his butt and closing fast. In seconds they would collide directly into the hot spot of his rear-mounted engine and blow the vehicle to smithereens.

A heartbeat before that happened, one of the three chase vehicles screamed down the alley the wrong way, on a collision course with Quinn's car.

Automatic fire cycled from the compact yet powerful SMG gripped in the shooter's fist, only to be sent ricocheting by the polycarbonate windshield of the Aladdin's front windshield.

Caught between the proverbial rock and the hard place, Nomad saw no other alternative than to meet the threat head-on.

Punching the accelerator pedal he steamrolled the Aladdin directly at the shooter car, a souped-up Sunburst, at his top speed of one hundred miles per hour. Simultaneously he flipped on his bright headlight beams and leaned on the horn, set to maximum volume level.

In a split second, the driver of the shooter car had lost his cool. Automatic reflexes took control of his judgment and he made a sharp panic turn to the left, smashing the Sunburst's front end into the building wall as Nomad sped past close enough to scrape his fender on the side of the totaled car.

A moment later Quinn came bumping out onto the main boulevard, reacquiring his computerized escape plan as the surviving bomblets retargeted on the shooter team in the immobilized Sunburst.

The surviving aerial munitions that had been pursuing Quinn had reacquired the stationary target posed by the crash car, homing in on the hot spot of the halted vehicle's conventional internal combustion engine.

The flying silver globes went streaking into the ruptured front end of the Sunburst.

Exploding on contact, the high explosive airbursts ripped the limbs from the occupants' maimed torsos and hurled their eyes from their sockets as overpressure turned the chassis and windshield into a dozen types of lethal shrapnel.

The men in the totaled vehicle barely had time enough to scream as they were scissored apart by the force of blast waves, imploding metal and disintegrating safety glass which -- though it had shattered in rounded pieces -- was propelled by the force of the blast violently enough to be driven into their flesh with the impact of bullet strikes.

As the fuel lines of the nonelectric vehicle caught fire, the secondary explosion of the gas tank going ballistic sent wreckage of the Sunburst fountaining brightly up into the night sky.

Safely out on the main boulevard, Quinn saw and heard the explosions behind him as he highballed the Aladdin straight for the highway, guided by the flashing red line on his dashboard screen.

One car had been taken out, but the other two pursuit vehicles were now gaining on him and while the attack drone dispatched by Capricorn had vanished from his main console screen, Quinn knew that it was out there somewhere, orbiting the action zone, ready for a shot at a second, confirmable, kill.

NINETEEN

With the two surviving chase cars still in pursuit, Quinn put the Aladdin on autopilot mode on the switchbacking mountain highway.

Despite the often tight twists and turns, the road was cleared by the computer as a predesignated automatic pilot zone.

As the car's terrain-following radar took over and the Aladdin steered itself around the hairpin turns with flawless precision, Quinn leaned out the driver's-side window, weapon clutched in a shooter's grip.

Down the road behind him he spotted the deadly sparkle of automatic weapons fire as the lead chase car rounded a sudden s-curve.

A moment later Quinn thought he heard the whine of a round whizz past his ear at supersonic speed but with the terrific keening of the wind he couldn't be certain of exactly what he'd heard.

Extending his arms while stabilizing himself against the wrenching of the Aladdin, Quinn steadied his aim and sighted through the commandeered 10 mm Heckler & Koch semiautomatic pistol's glowing laser-calibrated sight.

With the laser scope calculating for windage, range and elevation, Quinn squeezed off three of the fifteen rounds in the magazine as soon as the car was in the crosshairs. Instantly he saw the windshield shatter into a thousand pieces.

Peppered with bullets, the car careened to the left, hot white sparks flying everywhere as its fenders grated on the side of the mountain.

But the car was back on the road in no time, more autofire salvaging from the passenger side, and Quinn knew he hadn't scored any bull's-eyes yet. As the Aladdin whipped around another tight turn he drew

another bead on the chase car and squeezed off five rounds in rapid succession.

This time he hit paydirt with two shots that struck the driver full in the face, all but decapitating him.

With blood spurting hot and thick from the severed jugular of the wounded driver, the shooter in the death seat forgot about his quarry and lunged to his left, reaching for the steering wheel even as the fishtailing vehicle screeched toward the flimsy median divider.

But with the driver's dead weight leaning on the steering wheel, the shooter couldn't budge it. Within seconds the lead chase vehicle went crashing through the median.

Diving off the mountainside, the car plunged into free fall, flipping end-over-end and tumbling toward the jagged rocks below where it exploded with a loud bang into a tremendous ball of fire.

Quinn cooked off the remaining 10 mm rounds in the H&K at the second chase vehicle, and he thought he had struck the driver as he lost track of it as his own car rounded a sudden hairpin turn.

At this point, there was a shrill warning tone that told Quinn that the smartcar's autopilot feature was shutting off and shunting the Aladdin back to Quinn's control as a light rain made the road surface treacherously slick.

Zigzagging through the soaring cliffs that towered above the sea below, the treacherous road hugged the granite flanks of the mountain, and there was only a thin rail standing between traffic and a sheer drop to the coastal tidal zone some two hundred feet below.

A quick check of the Aladdin's onboard computer told Quinn that he was already almost two thirds of the way to the police station that was the preprogrammed destination of the escape route.

But as Quinn consulted the dash-mounted view screens he heard a second shrill warning tone.

Now flashing on the main dashboard tactical screen, Quinn saw the text block that warned him that his engine power supply was dangerously low and that auxiliary power was kicking in.

With a conventionally fueled vehicle, he might have been able to "ride the fumes" for some time yet. But with an all-electric vehicle like the Aladdin Quinn knew that the car would grind to a complete halt once he lost power.

Although the graphic bar on the screen gave him ten more minutes of remaining energy, Quinn was savvy enough to subtract half that number, giving him an actual power reserve of only five minutes or less.

Quinn hit the flashing buttons on the dashboard to shut down as many energy-hungry systems as possible as more automatic fire was cycled his way.

A glance in the digital rearview showed Quinn the headlight beams of the sole surviving chase car shining like the eyes of a nocturnal

predator as it roared around another twisting bend in the high mountain road.

For now, the rotoring autofire wasn't penetrating the armored hull and windshield of the Aladdin. But once Quinn lost power and the car stalled he would be a sitting duck for a putaway strike.

Speed-searching the smartcar's moving map display, Quinn tried to locate some fortified position he could in which to take refuge and ditch the vehicle. He was looking for a place from which he might have some chance of escape on foot.

Rejecting one site after another, Quinn thought he found what he was looking for in the form of a ruined medieval abbey situated less than a half-mile away, overlooking the beach zone from the heights of the towering bluffs.

The dashboard's main tactical screen indicated that an access track would be coming up with a forty-five second ETA.

Soon sighting the track on his right, Quinn double-handed the steering wheel to wrench it hard and in moments was careering up the track, the bright headlight beams of the chase car sliding away to the left and flickering out as he passed out of view.

But the warning tones were becoming shriller as the extra power consumption from the high speed maneuver cut down on Quinn's borderline remaining time. Quinn knew that it was even money that he would make it to his destination before the Aladdin finally conked out and left him high and dry.

Seconds after gaining the track and speeding along it at almost eighty miles per hour, Quinn caught sight of the abbey ruins in the gloaming up ahead.

At the same time he again saw the twin beams of the high intensity headlights belonging to the chase car. The pursuit crew had picked him up again and were closing in for the kill.

It was time to jump ship.

Wrenching the steering wheel hard one final time, Quinn swerved the Aladdin so that the vehicle blocked the narrow track and jumped out the driver's side door, H&K semiauto in hand.

As the bolt clatter of automatic fire stuttered in the background and ricochets whined off nearby rocks, Quinn hightailed it up the steep grade toward the abbey ruins. He gained their protection as the firing ceased and he heard the shouts of men behind him amid the thuds of car doors being slammed shut.

Quinn took a flight of ancient stone steps on a desperate run.

Tucking right, he glanced down through the ancient crenellations of medieval battlements to see three armed manshapes huddling around the halted vehicle.

The hardguys were not going after him just yet and Quinn reasoned that they were calling in for orders and/or reinforcements before moving in.

Quinn gained entrance to a chamber of the ruined building and leaned against the ancient stone wall. Framed in a cone of moonlight that streamed in through the high window at the opposite wall he caught his breath and wiped the sweat from his face with the sleeve of his shirt.

Temporarily forgetting about the RPV that had also been deployed on the chase, Quinn looked down through the casement window and saw the Mediterranean sea crashing its white-topped combers against the jagged black rocks below.

Turning back into the shadowed room from the dizzying heights, Quinn saw little to convince him that he was anything other than trapped with almost no hope of survival.

Miles away from the strike zone, sitting in his catbird seat within the mobile command center, the field asset codenamed Capricorn One took the sitrep communication from the surviving chase team on secure voice datalink.

"We need backup," the driver of the Spectron sedan was telling Capricorn. "That jerkoff cocksucker took out Merchant and Valdez' teams!"

"Backup is already dispatched. Remain in position," Capricorn advised them. "Repeat. Do not attempt to follow subject. Executing a Blue Ark condition."

There was silence for a moment over the comlink.

"Did you say Blue Ark?" asked the wheelman.

"Affirmative," replied Capricorn. "Blue Ark condition is now in force."

"I copy Blue Ark," said the wheelman as he severed the comlink.

Crossing over to the trunk of the Spectron, the hardguy took out the special equipment mandated for a Blue Ark condition and began passing out the gear to the mercs clustered around him, a strange, cold gleam in his narrowed eyes.

Nomad wondered why his pursuers had not yet launched the attack which had to be in the offing. There had already been plenty of time for reinforcements to arrive on scene.

He realized why this was so a few moments later as the cone of bright moonlight was momentarily obstructed by a moving shadow cast by an object that passed between the window of the ruined abbey and the moon at an eighty degree angle.

It was the RPV, Quinn saw at a glance, as the remote piloted vehicle made a second pass around the castle ruins, remained stationary and then slipped silently away in the night.

The fact that the drone was again gone from view filled Quinn with an icy dread that would not be dispelled.

Dread filled his mind because Quinn knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he would not be fired on by the drone.

Instead he was being *scanned* by it.

Which told Quinn that something much bigger and potentially far more destructive would be brought into play to take him out. In a *metanoia* of paranoid clarity Quinn realized that he had only a few moments left to live. Death's messenger had passed silently in the night.

Soon it would be time to shake hands with the Reaper.

Tactical options were limited to a single gambit, Quinn knew.

In truth he had known about the option for several minutes as he gathered his strength, but his fatigued mind would not accept the fact for it too meant almost certain death.

Yet now that remaining in his present position meant the same thing, Quinn's mind began to accept what he had to do.

He had to dive into the cold black waters below.

Nomad rushed toward the casement and stood in the windowless space looking down on the dizzying scene lost in plunging shadows. He forced himself to concentrate on the waters far beneath the casement, programming his mind as though it were a homing computer.

And then he leapt from his perch into the empty air of the night.

As Nomad extended his arms to help control his glide path into the black waters below, a targeting computer in a satellite parked in low earth orbit approximately one hundred thousand miles up had obtained a firing solution on a target on the spinning blue sphere below.

Although the atmospheric conditions were good that night and the air was relatively clear and free from particles of dust and thermal distortion, the targeting computer still had to correct for the inevitable deflection produced by the earth's atmosphere at any given time.

Once these calculations had been made, the computer initialized its onboard weapon system and put fire on the target.

Lancing down from space, the glowing green shaft of coherent radiation produced by the copper-vapor laser vectored in on the ruined abbey that was its target.

When the powerful pulsed beam struck the ancient stone walls of the abbey it transmitted more than one thousand megawatts of naked destructive power to the structural materials, jackhammering them with light at millions of pulses per second.

There was enough energy transferred by the laser strike to almost instantly superheat the materials to millions of degrees Kelvin.

It was enough power to make the medieval abbey explode with a force greater than that would have occurred had it been struck by a fuel air explosive or a small nuke.

On the ground below, well away from the danger zone, the eyes of the Capricorn shooter team were dazzled as the ground assets hunkered behind the protection of the parked vehicles despite the fact that

they had donned special goggles attuned to the specific frequency of the copper-vapor laser per the Blue Ark condition alert.

In the air some one hundred feet below the window of the abbey which had long since been vaporized into a cloud of glowing dust, Quinn heard the peal of sudden thunder as the abbey exploded behind him.

Although the shock wave was fierce, it was far less fierce than that which might have been produced by the detonation of a conventional munitions airburst.

In that event Quinn would have been crushed by an expanding bubble of superheated gases and micropulverized rubble traveling at near supersonic speeds.

But the destruction wreaked by the orbital laser weapon was almost surgical in its aftereffects.

While the strike from space did produce a rapidly expanding concussion dome which seared Quinn's flesh with heat on a par with what might be encountered by opening a blast furnace door, it was not great enough to injure or kill him.

The expanding bubble of shocked air and searing vapors only helped Quinn, its tremendous force pushing him further out to sea, insuring that he avoided crashing into the jagged rocks waiting for him below.

Moments later, Quinn's body knifed into the cool waters of the Mediterranean.

Its steep angle of descent and the narrow, head-on profile Quinn assumed as he dropped helped to evenly distribute the shock of entering the water and Quinn was able to quickly orient himself and stroke his way to the surface.

Bobbing up he immediately saw that the abbey on the cliff had been vaporized by the burst while a cloud of atomized rubble hovered in a mistlike cloud around the top of the cliff where it was sinking down to the sea level.

Scanning the surf zone, Quinn detected no sign of Capricorn's watchers anywhere in the night. But that did not mean there were no ground assets present in the strike perimeter. Quinn would have to be careful or he might still be stalked, caught and killed.

Taking several deep breaths, the techno-warrior resubmerged and swam several hundred yards below the wind-whipped surface of the sea before bobbing up for another look around.

Only then did he wade cautiously toward the moonlit French shoreline, clothes dripping wet, blood afire and mind bent on lethal payback.

TWENTY

Beefed up now by the addition of fresh mercenary strikers that had just arrived by car from Monte Carlo, the shooter team changed roles. On Capricorn's direct orders it took on the duties of a battle damage assessment site team.

Donning night vision goggles, some members of the site team began to conduct a thorough grid search of the smoking ruins of the laser-blasted abbey.

The remaining personnel of the hunter-killer crew hung back and guarded the rear flanks, positioned to bar access to the ruins. Packing laser-sighted automatic weapons they blocked the narrow access road which was the only overland route into the area.

This containment strategy would only stay user-friendly for a relatively short time, though.

It was only a matter of minutes before municipal fire and police elements arrived on scene. In fact, Capricorn One had reported that these forces had been dispatched and were already en route via land and air.

What this boiled down to was that the battle damage assessment teams now on-site had only a few minutes in which to conduct their search and make it a thorough one. They needed to get it right the first time out because there would be no second chance to go over the area.

Inside the blast crater at the center of the all-but-vaporized ruins, the Capricorn search team was combing the area for survivors.

One element worked the inside of the cone-shaped crater, whose narrow bottom and funnelling sides were made up of earth and

rock that had been fused into a rock-hard, glassy sheet by the thermal pulse of the space-to-ground laser strike.

While they were doing this, the other element of the search detail scoured the far perimeter of the target zone.

"We're coming up with full negit readings."

Capricorn received this report from Search Team White moments later as he sat in the control van miles from the strike area.

"Black Team leader, do your findings corroborate White Team's report?" Capricorn asked the leader of the second battle damage assessment team which was out on the perimeter, checking for collateral blast damage.

There was a moment of dead air on Capricorn One's comlink, and then, "Affirmative," Team Black leader replied. "We show no sign of subject in the area."

Capricorn did not like what he had heard, though on the face of things the reports from the two BDA teams might have seemed like welcome news.

Despite the formidable power of the space-based laser shot that had destroyed the ruined hilltop abbey, Capricorn knew that there should have been some organic matter left behind.

No matter how tiny the remains there should have been tangible artifacts of what had once been flesh and blood left behind as evidence that Quinn had been taken down during the strike.

Be that as it may, the end results of the damage assessment were now Capricorn's call to make.

He could rule the strike a good kill or downgrade its status to inconclusive.

There was danger to Capricorn no matter which way he called it. If Nomad turned up after Capricorn One had ruled the strike a good kill, then he would have a great deal to answer for.

But if he ruled the laser strike inconclusive, Alpha's anger might not be contained.

Capricorn One might be right and still lose.

During the hour-long chase that the mission clock recorded, techint and humint assets had been brought into play at a combined cost of millions of dollars.

Alpha would not like to be told that Nomad still was numbered among the living after expending so many resources in money, materiel and manpower trying to terminate him. He would not like to be told that his best shot had been a fizzle.

"I'm calling it a good kill," Capricorn One said into his throat mike, noting that the ETA for municipal law enforcement and rescue forces was only a few minutes. "Deploy from the area immediately. Get your asses out of there on the double."

"Affirmative," was Capricorn's reply from the site team leader. "We're pulling out right now."

At once, Capricorn One shut down all active radar and telemetry systems. Only passive systems were left operational.

He had spent entirely too long a time in the area already and was currently vulnerable to detection, he knew all too well.

As the site crew at the abbey strike zone packed up their gear, climbed back into their vehicles and sped off in two different directions, Capricorn One ordered the semi trailer truck to be moved from its site and driven to its secure parking base in a warehouse some one hundred fifty miles away on the Marseilles docks.

The mood was grim as the special crisis planning group sat around the large conference table in the situation room of the Pentagon's National Military Command Center.

The sit room was arranged in the form of an amphitheater with rows of seats facing banks of wide screen arrays and glassed-in observation booths near the ceiling level of the chamber. It was 0567 hours local time, some days following the destruction of Cheyenne Mountain.

The Joint Chiefs were represented, as was the National Security Council, Strategic Air Command and NORAD.

Patched into the emergency session was the President, who per the single integrated operations plan, or SIOP, mandated in time of nuclear threat, was orbiting in near space on the Looking Glass aerospace plane, technically safe from the aftereffects of a decapitating nuclear first strike.

The topic at hand was to determine what steps to take in the aftermath of the near-total destruction of Cheyenne Mountain by an as-yet-unknown type of "brilliant" cruise missile.

The first speaker was General Maurice Donovan, chief of JSOC. Donovan, a grey haired man with the bearing of the career military man that he was, stood up and nodded, a sign for the tech officer to run the presentation he'd brought along on computer memory module.

The visuals promptly came on one of the multiple screens of the "Big Board" that faced the semicircular rows of seats that rose in tiers from the central pit of the high-tech battle cab to the sky suites high up at ceiling level.

"Here we have the aftermath of the explosion," he said, using a laser pointer pen to highlight high-altitude satellite reconnaissance photos taken from low earth orbit, voice amplified by the compact transmitter he wore. "You can see that the damage is quite extensive."

"Why couldn't we see that incoming warhead?" asked the NSC representative, SecDef Kenan Frazenius, speaking into the mike in front of him which fed his voice into the base public address system.

"I can give you a guesstimate only, I'm afraid," responded the General.

A former academic, the SecDef was not a military man and he didn't take well to being patronized by the JSOC brass. "Let's have it, then," he replied stiffly.

"We believe that the key to the incoming round's method of evading detection lay in a revolutionary liquid crystal 'smart skin' which surrounded the cruise missile," the General replied.

"Yes, and how precisely did it work?" asked the Secretary of Defense, unable to conceal his impatience. "Please be specific."

"Site teams have recovered evidence that the 'smart skin' was made up of tens of millions of liquid crystal digital displays," the General explained.

"Each of these was linked to TV sensors on the cruise missile round and were thus able to mimic the environment so the airbreathing nuke appeared invisible."

"And this combined with its already stealthy radar cross-section made it nearly impossible to detect?" the SecDef filled in.

"Essentially correct," General Donovan responded with a nod of his head. "The round was already low-observable and would have been following a low trajectory terrain hugging flight profile to its target."

The men and women seated around the conference table all considered the clearly ominous implications of this final remark.

If the round was as swift as General Donovan had just claimed that it was, then it meant that there would have been little or nothing that Cheyenne could have done to avert destruction.

"What countermeasures do we have against such a weapon?" asked the Secretary of Defense.

"We're currently examining the options for -- "

" -- Damn it, man!" the SecDef cut in, rising to his feet in an unusual outburst for a man known for his calm and reserve and gesturing angrily. "I don't want dissembling. I want facts!"

"All right, Mr. Secretary!" the General shouted back, "I'll provide you with facts."

"Given the performance of the round thus far, and given the fact that our investigation bears out what I've just said then I would characterize the effectiveness of countermeasures as practically zero."

"Thank you, General," the SecDef replied, having retaken his seat. "And I apologize for my outburst. But the time frame of the demands leave the President with little time to craft a response to the demands on the table."

The SecDef rose from his observer's station and hastily gathered papers to stuff them into his attache case.

He apologized for having to leave the conference, but his presence was urgently needed at a high-level meeting of the National Security Council to convene in only a short time.

"One more item," he asked before he left the NSCC sitroom. "There was a report of a lone humint asset on the ground -- an

'off-the-shelfer' who was to have been tasked with penetrating the organization."

"That is correct, Mr. Secretary," replied Central Intelligence's representative, the Deputy Director of Operations whose boss was already arriving at the White House for the scheduled emergency NSC meeting that the SecDef was hurrying to attend. "There is an 'off-the-shelf' asset working the field."

"What is the status of this operation?" he asked the Agency representative.

"I'm afraid that we've lost him, Mr. Secretary," the DDO replied. "His last sitrep was from Monte Carlo but that was a couple of days ago. It's almost as if, well, as if Nomad has vanished right off the face of the earth!"

MISSION LOG THREE:

Fusion

From Original Manuscript

TWENTY-ONE

In addition to being one of the largest yachts ever constructed, the Matador was also one of the most radical oceangoing vessels ever designed.

Measuring some two hundred thirty feet in length, the Matador boasted an aerodynamic hull construction of poly laminated materials. These were far lighter and stronger than conventional materials and made the yacht capable of great speed under most sailing conditions.

The feature of the yacht that captivated most onlookers was the Matador's unique SWATH -- small waterplane area twin hull -- design that made her resemble few other seagoing vessels and certainly no other pleasure craft berthed in the Monte Carlo boat basin.

Because of her SWATH double-hull construction, the Matador seemed to stride across the surface of the ocean on two long legs if viewed head-on. Between the tapering pylons there was a stretch of open ocean the girth of two Olympic sized swimming pools.

Guests could descend into the water from hatchways on each pylon to enjoy daytime or nighttime swims in perfect security, regardless of weather conditions.

There were other unique features about the Matador too. Her spacious cabins, appointed with the most luxurious appurtenances, were among these.

The yacht's fine international cuisine, prepared by one of the world's most renowned chefs, was another.

And the roster of legendary beauties of stage and screen who had cavorted on the vessel's decks at one time or another were also the stuff of media legend.

But among the most striking aspects of the advanced-technology design SWATH vessel were those which remained hidden from all but a select handful of personnel permitted to see them.

These hidden features of the Matador were the suite of sophisticated electronics and data fusion systems that were built into the Matador. Beyond a bulkhead marked ENTRY RESTRICTED lay the yacht's command and control (C2) center.

In the C2 center, satellite-uplinked digital console screens, parallel processing computer equipment, long-range search and threat radars and other sophisticated hardware was shoehorned into every available inch of space.

Blinking, multicolored status lights complemented the ever-shifting phase patterns of the screens in front of which were seated technicians who constantly input sequences at keypads.

Few of these systems were expressly designed as navigational tools or served any standard maritime purpose.

On the contrary, the Matador's data fusion suite was designed to conduct virtually undetectable real-time surveillance of sea, land and air and to carry out jam-proof communications with bases separated from the Matador by vast distances, both on the earth and in near space.

The control room was now abuzz with activity of a level somewhat greater than normal.

In only a few hours time, the Matador would be casting off from the Monte Carlo marina and head out to open sea on an historic voyage.

The vessel's mission was a dangerous one and would have to be carried out to within precise tolerances in order for it to have any chance of success.

Any deviation would prove disastrous to the Matador and her crew and to the entire mission as well.

Another secret that few outsiders were aware of, was that the Matador had been designed and constructed in anticipation of just such a grand mission on which she was about to embark.

It was because of this mission that the crew was now engaged in such a flurry of activity.

Each member of the select mission team in the command and control center of the Matador was going through simulator exercises designed to place them in peak condition for carrying out the mission.

On digital video screens, glowing pixels painted constantly shifting wire diagrams of the operational environment.

The black-jumpsuited operators seated at the video display consoles jockeyed joysticks and thumbed trackball pointing devices, their eyes riveted on the viewscreens, gauges and LED readouts before them.

Adding to the already high stress levels of the tactical exercise were verbal commands which fed into the earbuds of the head sets the crewmembers wore in an endless stream of data.

The personnel in the Matador's C2 center needed to act on these commands while at the same time maintaining complete control over the slippery images on their screens.

Observing the activities in the command and control center of the Matador was the yacht's owner, Newcomb Straker.

The scientist-playboy inspected the exercise with a cool, critical eye. Although detached from the activity below him in the pit, Straker missed nothing that went on around him.

Straker had personally coded the software programs and designed much of the hardware components to be used in the simulation runs for his crew.

In turn, Straker was also familiar with each module of software code and every byte of data hardwired into the silicon chips which processed this highly specialized computer source code.

Straker knew that the outcome of the operation on which the Matador would soon be launched would either enrich him beyond his wildest dreams or end his career in a burst of lethal steel and fire.

Although the crew dogs onboard the Matador had cursed him outright, Straker had driven them hard in a grueling series of mission exercises which had lasted over the course of the last ten days.

"I think the men are ready," Straker's crew chief, Blodwine, told him as he stood beside the yacht owner in his black jumpsuit with its trident patch on the right sleeve and blue military style beret bearing the same emblem. "They've been at it all day."

They were now fully ready, Straker judged, although the performance parameters could stand some tightening up, despite Blodwine's advisory.

"Have the men run through the exercises another time," Straker informed his crew chief. "Section D is a trifle slow on the docking engagement sequencing. I want to see it tightened up. And I mean *considerably* tightened up."

"Yes, sir," Blodwine replied, his cold blue eyes not daring to shift from Straker's hawklike stare to the eyes of his sublieutenants nearby.

The crew dogs in the C2 center could overhear every word of the conversation between Straker and their chief, who was straining with every ounce of self-control to keep from grinding his teeth.

"Section E has demonstrated three instances of sloppiness in recognizing and acting on an abort-coded alert," Straker went on dryly, paying no notice to his underling's growing ill-ease. "I want to see this deficiency immediately corrected as well."

"Yes, sir," Blodwine replied stonily.

"And one more item," Straker went on in the same bland vein, knowing that he was making the merc do a slow burn but not giving a damn. "Make sure that Section J is pushed extra hard on the rapid download and data migration status contingencies. I'll expect these important matters to be addressed when I next come around to make my

unscheduled inspection. If you should need me, I can be reached on the aft deck."

"Yes, sir...." Blodwine replied, and Straker turned to leave the control room, "...you bloody, stinking *pig*," he added in a barely audible whisper only when he was absolutely certain that the owner could not hear him any longer.

Then the merc honcho wheeled around to the crew dogs in the control room.

Those personnel who were not engaged in critical tasks were staring at him, their jaws set, their eyes gleaming, their jaws clenched in simmering rage.

Blodwine knew what they were thinking.

He was thinking the same thing himself.

But there was no way around it.

"All right, you incompetent bastards," he shouted at his men. "Let's get to work. And this time, no fucking up! Understand, *no fucking up....*"

Straker lay on the bed in his private stateroom. The two surgically altered women were beautiful, in a strange and exotic way, although to most people they would seem like bizarre freaks.

The Oriental one rubbed Straker's naked back while he watched the dark African one play with her third breast, which was smaller than the two others which flanked it and covered with ribald tattoos in the current fashion.

Straker produced a blue plastic box and handed one of the two high priced call girls the box.

"Oooh, Jigglers!" she squealed delightedly, immediately recognizing the treat she was being given by their rich client.

The blonde and the brunette both eagerly took one of the Jigglers and placed the writhing blobs of matter on their bare breasts.

The Jigglers were classed as bionarcotics. They were produced in one of the pharms that Straker owned in the pampas of Argentina.

On Straker's pharm, livestock were injected with specially prepared viruses.

The viruses had been altered by gene-splicing technology to make them secrete specific types of mind-altering chemical substances.

When the viruses replicated, they turned the host animal into a large, mobile drug laboratory.

From the pharm's livestock, large masses of drug-laden cells were then grafted to raw clonal tissue masses which had the power of limited independent movement.

These were what eventually came to be known on the street as "Jigglers."

The Jigglers gravitated to places of darkness and warmth, crawling up, via the nasal cavities, into the brain of the user where they

decomposed and infused the brain directly with an awesome rush of potent drug.

Straker watched as the two Jigglers crawled from the breasts of his two well-endowed playmates into their nostrils and began burrowing their way inside their skulls.

Soon they had disappeared entirely.

"Oooh, so quantum! Humungous!" the Oriental and the African both cried rapturously as the drug was released in a matter of seconds. "Man, what a fucking quantum rush!"

Straker watched the two hookers play with one another in their drug-intoxicated state.

Privately he had no use for Jigglers or WIRE or any other intoxicant, be it biological or hardware-based.

Science and technology taxed his intellect to the fullest. However women were his one major weakness -- the younger and the prettier, the better.

Straker enjoyed watching the two stoned women perform with one another.

It was only then that he could derive sexual satisfaction.

He was now at that point.

Parting his robe, Straker reached down excitedly and joined the two writhing, naked females in the only way that he had ever been able to perform successfully as a man.

TWENTY-TWO

The underwater night vision goggles (U-NVGs) cut through the inky blackness of the dark Mediterranean waters.

Scissoring his legs, while keeping his hands pinned flat against his sides to streamline his body profile, Nomad paddled with powerful, even strokes.

Though the compact propulsion system strapped to his back was capable of getting him to his destination all by itself, the flippers helped to propel him through the dense liquid medium of the cold ocean water as well as steer him along.

Quinn heard his own breath sound rhythmically in his ears in a steady cadence, but knew that no telltale bubbles were being left behind in his wake to give his position away. The compact rebreather unit he wore insured this, scrubbing the recycled air of nitrogen, carbon dioxide and other blood toxins.

The night was dark and the moon had waned to the point of invisibility. Quinn had selected this time frame as the right window of opportunity that seemed best able to guarantee success.

He had been laying low for the last twenty-four hours after his hairbreadth escape from the ruined abbey.

Quinn had not been idle in the interim. Hours after reaching shore he was at his cache of combat gear that he had secreted shortly after arriving in Monte Carlo. A gut check had told Quinn that Straker would have to be taken down the dirty way and he hadn't been wrong.

The hide site for the gear Quinn had chosen was a van in an underground garage. From the van he had withdrawn some necessary equipment. The equipment would be critical to his penetration of the Matador's security perimeter and his solving the mystery of the hijacked nuclear ballistic submarine, Okeanos.

The rubber wetsuit and carbon dioxide-scrubbing rebreather unit went over the black stealthsuit that Quinn wore. Highly resistant to detection by electronic night imaging technology, the stealthsuit had been designed by Quinn provide its wearer with a virtual cloak of invisibility. Worn in combination with virtual reality goggles, or VRGs, the techno-commando was equipped with a deadly man-machine interface and could strike with unstoppable efficiency.

Quinn's long hours of surveilling the yacht from the vantage point of the building rooftops above the marina had paid off.

He had gotten to the point of being able to recognize patterns of activity that told him conclusively that the Matador was in the final stages of preparation to put out to sea.

There was much more than just the yacht's departure in the offing, though, Quinn had also clearly seen.

Great care had been taken to disguise the Matador's electronics suite as much as possible, but there was only so much that could be done to make radar domes and the fairings of ultra-sensitive electronic sensors blend into the streamlined hull.

From his soft probe Quinn surmised that preparations were being made for an operation of significant importance. He had to get onboard the Matador and then make certain that he was putting out to sea along with her.

Becoming a stowaway was the tactic of choice, yet with most other yachts would have been impractical. Even a big yacht would not have given Quinn enough freedom of movement or enough places to hide.

But that wasn't true in the Matador's case. The SWATH vessel's outsized proportions would assist Quinn in achieving this mission objective.

Because the yacht was so large and her construction so radical, there were places that Quinn could hide in that wouldn't be found on conventional vessels of her class.

Once onboard the big yacht, Quinn would try to seek out such places until the time came to move.

He was moving now too, knifing through the inky waters, narrowing the distance between himself and the docked megayacht with each powerful thrust of his flippered legs.

Within a matter of minutes, Quinn had reached the point where he would have to pause and make certain that he was not in danger of breaching any underwater surveillance devices.

Now using his hands as well as his flippered feet to maneuver his wetsuited body into a head-up position, Quinn input a series of keystrokes on the keypad of the passive electronic countermeasures (P-ECM) unit secured to his right wrist by Velcro fittings.

The small liquid crystal display panel above the keypad indicated that the wrist-top unit was now scanning for electronic security measures.

ESM DETECTED came the message a few moments after scan mode was enabled. ACTIVATE PASSIVE COUNTERMEASURES? asked the LCD on completion of the scan.

Quinn hit the enter key to initialize passive countermeasures programmed into the P-ECM unit.

The powerful microprocessor frequency analyzer calculated a solution and immediately cocooned Quinn in an electronic spoofing envelope. When Quinn received the PASSIVE COUNTERMEASURES ENABLED message, he began to swim through the invisible electronic corridor created by the wrist-top unit.

At that moment, a crew dog walking deck patrol onboard the Matador three stories above Quinn's underwater position heard an electronic squeal coming from his belt. Unclipping the perimeter security module from his belt, the merc eyeballed its black-on-white liquid crystal digital screen.

The PSM resembled a conventional handheld GPS unit and its digital screen showed the merc a blip that was moving beneath a schematic representation of the Matador's hull.

Slaved to the onboard security computer, the PSM was activated automatically when the Matador's threat sensors received stimuli from the environment.

"Three to bridge," the sentry said into handheld comms, "PSM reports a large contact directly below the hull."

"Copy that as biological," the bridge replied a few moments later after the watch officer ran some checks of his own. "I read the contact as a school of fish. You can relax, Stallings."

"That's affirm," said the merc who stowed the PSM back on its rip-stop Velcro mount at his side and resumed walking his perimeter as Nomad swam directly beneath the hull, his electronic signature reading as a school of small marine animals to the Matador's threat warning system.

Within a matter of seconds, Quinn had reached his objective.

This was the section of the Matador's hull from which he would proceed to climb aboard the vessel undetected. Or so he hoped.

But prior to attempting to scale the hull Nomad unshipped a special surprise package that he had brought along for Newcomb Straker and his crew of mercenary deck hands.

The Marine Anti-Naval Technology Armament or MANTA was a disc-shaped underwater robot composed of a stealthy poly laminate composite and shaped to be highly resistant to sonar and visual detection.

MANTA was propelled by tiny yet powerful one-horsepower motors and could reach a top speed of twenty knots.

In addition to being fast and stealthy, the "brilliant" munition was equipped with small segmented metal feet to facilitate slow, crawling movement across the uneven surface of the sea bottom.

Quinn released MANTA and watched the small device scuttle over the muddy sea bed on its eight segmented robotic legs. Burrowing beneath the silty bottom of the sea bed, MANTA was soon invisible.

Now, high performance sucker clamps were already attached to Nomad's palms, to his elbows, to his boot toes and to his knees. This specialized combat gear would enable Quinn to scale the hull of the Matador with the agility of a human fly.

Extending one hand and then the other, Quinn made contact with the Matador's hull.

He hoisted himself up and drew up his legs until the suckers at his knees and toes engaged the slightly moist hull surface. Now adhering to the hull, Nomad began climbing up the side of the megayacht, swathed in ragged mist that swirled upward from the surface of the black sea.

As he ascended the vessel Quinn paused every few seconds to reconnoiter the area, watching and listening for any indication that his presence had been discovered by those onboard the Matador.

Moving carefully, yet with surprising quickness and precision, Quinn reached the side of the railing of the yacht within a matter of minutes.

Dipping his hand into a pouch clamped to his leg, Quinn withdrew a long, slender device and attached one end of it to the goggles of his U-NVGs by means of special clips.

The motorized periscope ascended noiselessly, its slender stalk so thin that it was invisible against the blackness of the moonless night sky.

The periscope's rice-grain-sized fiber optic sensor head began to swivel back and forth, providing Nomad with an image-intensified view of the aft deck of the Matador while he hung from the side of the hull two stories above the ink-black Mediterranean.

Interfaced with his U-NVGs, the periscope showed him one of the sentries walking his perimeter.

The crew dog was porting a wedge-shaped, caseless H&K autoweapon, and he had his back turned to Quinn as he looked over the side.

Another armed sentry was positioned on the bridge of the yacht.

He was leaning over its railing with his autoweapon slung over his shoulder, his alert eyes scanning the line of boats docked at the Monte Carlo marina, lit up by overhead lamps positioned at intervals along the concrete seawall.

Nomad continued to scan the strike perimeter from concealment as the first sentry abruptly turned and peered over the side of the

Matador. He drew himself up then began walking toward the stern of the vessel.

Quinn realized that the crew dog was heading directly for him.

If the watcher spotted him hanging from his precarious perch, then the mission would have to be aborted and Quinn would have to immediately disengage and hope that he could survive the drop into the sea and the swim away amid a hail of gunfire.

The sentry kept coming toward Quinn as he drew a silenced 10 mm semiautomatic pistol from its waterproof sheath and held it pointing at the stern.

In his U-NVG viewframe, the sentry continued drawing near, looking larger than life due to the slight magnification factor of the periscope sensor head.

In another moment Nomad knew that the perimeter-walker would spot him. He tensed his finger on the trigger mechanism as the guard placed both hands on the railing and....

A woman's shrill scream broke the silence of the marina.

Other voices were soon shouting too in a jumbled chorus, borne aloft on the soft night wind. The sound of the sudden commotion made the approaching sentry suddenly rise and spin around to face the port side of the yacht.

Nomad saw the watcher stride quickly abeam of him and look over the starboard side of the Matador where a party onboard one of the yachts berthed at the marina had produced a moment's rowdiness.

Quinn took advantage of that heartbeat of time to hoist himself over the gunwale of the yacht and gain the deck.

In a series of smooth, steady motions he removed the surveillance periscope and stowed it away in its sheath but kept the silenced 10 mm semiauto in his black-gloved hand.

A quick glance around through U-NVG-augmented night vision told Quinn that he had not been detected.

Fine.

He had more to do before he could proceed.

With quick, precise movements, Quinn duckwalked his way around the corner of the bulkhead directly in front of him. There he waited beneath a slanting row of metal stairs which led to the foredeck above him.

He had already unshipped the rebreather gear and other encumbrances and had stripped off his wetsuit. Only the U-NVG mask remained in place, giving Quinn the capabilities of stealth and night vision.

The quick-drying material of which the suit was composed had already insured that Quinn would leave little in the way of a trail of watery footprints behind him on the deck.

There was only the slightest trace of moisture to give him away, though.

It was this trace of moisture that the returning sentry detected as he swung around on his next orbit of the deck.

He might have overlooked it entirely had not the sudden gleam of light from a passing helicopter coming in for a landing at the marina's heliport illuminated the patch of wetness for a split second before the chopper arced across the sky.

The merc swiveled his head but saw nothing, the muzzle of his autoweapon probing empty shadows. Wearing the stealth suit, Quinn had passed within only a few inches of the crew dog's position, but thanks to the low-observable properties of the advanced technology battle dress, had remained unseen.

Figuring that his tired eyes were playing tricks on him, the sentry shrugged and began to continue to walk his perimeter around the deck of the Matador.

As he stretched his arms overhead and yawned, thinking that what he needed was some sack time, the crew dog was unaware that a deadly shadow had crept onboard and was now hidden from view as final preparations to cast off from the marina were being made.

TWENTY-THREE

Bantu Zingara, the United Nations ambassador from the African republic of Kalemise, looked around him at grim faces during an emergency meeting of the United Nations Security Council in New York City.

None of those faces held a trace of compassion for himself or for the suffering of his beleaguered people. To Zingara's chagrin, African faces seemed as cold as any others in the room.

In the special closed session of the United Nations Security Council, the critical issue of how to deal with the demands made on the ambassador's country by Force Three were being discussed.

Perhaps the most painful part of the whole drama for the ambassador to bear was the fact that he was being referred to in the third person. It was as though he were not present at the meeting, consigned to the passive role of a mere bystander at his own execution.

It was as though he did not even exist, his people and his land already sold out by the universal constant of self-interest that consumes nation states and individuals alike.

"This is preposterous!" Bantu Zingara shouted as he rose to his feet, unable to take sitting there in impotent silence any longer. "You have condemned my country to a sack the likes of nothing seen since the barbarians stormed Rome! You have sold out the Kalemise as though we were slaves at a bazaar!"

"We have done nothing of the sort," the Chairman, the ambassador from Zaire, and a fellow African, responded to the ambassador's outburst. "We are merely considering the options available to us."

"Options?" shouted the Kalemise ambassador. "These ... options you speak of sound more like terms of unconditional surrender!"

"Sit down, Mr. Ambassador," the Chairman insisted. "You are out of order."

Zingara had no choice but to resume his seat and remain silent while the rest of the members of the council went about the dismembering of his nation. They would not listen. They did not care. To them his small republic was a sacrifice the world was prepared to make.

The rest of the Security Council members ignored the agitated Zingara as they debated in the clinical language of politicians the manner in which to deal with the ultimatum that the world had been given.

The American representative, Heather Jellicoe, spoke next.

"As you know, the criminal cartel calling itself 'Force Three' has demanded that the United Nations adopt a universal resolution proclaiming that it will refrain from taking any action to stop Force Three from taking over Kalemi."

She went on to explain the specifics of the demands made by the world-class blackmailers calling themselves Force Three.

These demands included the establishment of a sterile cordon around the area and a commitment by the U.N. not to impede the actions of the invasion force by naval blockade or other means.

"From analysis by experts it is apparent that the chief aim of the criminal cartel is to begin mining operations of two rare metals -- Nyobium and Tantalum -- which are found in commercial grade nowhere else in the world," Jellicoe went on to explain.

The two precious metals were vital to the production of high technology components. They were integral parts of supercomputers and orbital satellites.

Although these substances were mined on Kalemise territory in miniscule quantities when compared with iron, lead or even precious metals such as gold or silver, they were vital to the functioning of critical hardware. Without small amounts of the rare metals it would be impossible to build certain new supercomputers now in the final stages of development.

This fact was not lost on the Security Council's two most powerful members, Japan and the United States, who had both teamed up in a joint consortium to develop a neural network supercomputer more powerful than any other device made before it.

Key components of the advanced-design supercomputer were to be manufactured from Nyobium and Tantalum, both of which metals the two nations had stockpiled in sufficient quantities to last them for a decade at least.

Although allowing the mercenary forces in the pay of the Force Three crime cartel to overrun Kalemi and potentially deplete that country's precious reserves, the alternative was far worse.

The sophisticated stealth technology in the MSOWs under Force Three's control made the cruise missiles impossible to detect.

The opposition had already demonstrated its willingness and its capability to launch the Skybolt modular standoff weapons on targets of its choosing, destroying them without thought to the taking of countless lives.

Intelligence experts believed that Force Three was the same global criminal organization behind this present blackmail attempt that was behind the unsuccessful Prometheus episode of some years back.

At that time, a previously unknown multinational criminal cartel had gained control of the supercomputer based at Storm King Mountain which controlled the array of Prometheus energy satellites placed in geosynchronous earth orbit.

The cartel had threatened to use the enormous solar energy harnessed by the Prometheus array to cause catastrophic environmental damage if its demands were not met.

Most of the details of how the plot was neutralized still remained a closely guarded secret, however a number of recent books on the subject as well as a holovision docudrama had indicated that the world was saved by only the slimmest of margins.

"A question," ventured the Russian representative whose country had already cut a deal with the U.S.-Japan alliance to acquire supplies of the critical metals if a world shortage occurred. "How is it possible for this 'Force Three' to carry off the operation? Surely they must know that we will soon have countermeasures in place to detect and neutralize these MSOWs."

"They know this, Mr. Chernyenko," replied Jellicoe. "But they must also be aware that the combination of modern high-speed mining techniques and the small quantity of the material to be mined and processed, they can deplete Kalemi's reserves of these strategic metals well before such countermeasures are put in place."

"Ladies and Gentlemen of the Council," the Chairman from Zaire next announced. "Time is growing short. It is necessary that we vote on our response to the proposal on the table. I will call for a brief show of hands to indicate yea or nay."

The vote took only a few minutes. In the end, with only a few no votes and even fewer abstentions, the sovereign state of Kalemi had effectively ceased to exist.

Pisces sat before his high tech god screen, viewing eternity through a glowing digital eye as the Okeanos slid through the North Atlantic waters of the deep West European basin.

Reaching out, Pisces gripped the sidestick controller sticking up from the console to his right. He thumbed one of the three buttons at the controller's top and shrank the righthand screen which was flashing navigational data to a small rectangle on the upper right hand.

At the same time Pisces placed the rest of the main video screen in track-while-scan mode. The tracking scan told Pisces that he was approaching the undersea docking area within excellent time.

The latter-day buccaneer switched to sonar control and logged onto the sonarman's computer-linked sensor array. The graphical screen showed the raw passive sonar data being picked up by the scan.

Inputting another command set, Pisces instructed the submarine's main tactical console to translate the raw data into a graphical representation of the underwater terrain of the West European basin above which the Okeanos moved.

The computer-generated wire diagram showed the rogue sub skipper the peaks and valleys of the West European Basin. Elevation data linked to topographical features in data blocks provided interesting reading: towering above the sea floor, the range of mountains put Everest to shame.

These topographical features rose some thirty-five thousand feet high and were rimmed by valleys and canyons that dwarfed comparable ecosystems the world over, under the sea or on the land.

The Okeanos lacked only a single thing to make it into the most awesome piece of machinery ever built by mankind.

What it lacked was dragon's teeth.

Dragon's teeth in the form of fully ballistic-capable MSOWs, modular stand off weapons, lethal cruise missiles that packed a thermonuclear punch.

The sub had already launched its single operational missile to initiate the Cheyenne Mountain death strike. The launch of the warhead had been a complete and unqualified success, both from the strategic and the political standpoints.

The sea launched cruise missile had effortlessly evaded the best military technology that the North American Aerospace Defense command could bring to bear to stop it from reaching and destroying its target.

Thanks to its smartskin equipped hull, the MSOW warhead had slipped effortlessly through the mesh of interlocking electronic nets that had been thrown up to ensnare it.

The ultra-stealthy cruise missile had put its lethal warhead directly on its designated target.

The result had been utter and complete annihilation of the Cheyenne Mountain bunker complex, a perfect kill that had crippled NORAD and made the targets of Force Three's blackmail even more vulnerable than they had been to begin with.

Soon enough, Pisces knew, this deficiency would be rectified. Once the Okeanos reached her special rendezvous coordinates, the rest of the Blindfire data integration upgrade packages that were necessary to make the remaining twelve MSOWs onboard fully operational would be offloaded and installed.

Then Pisces would have all the firepower he needed. More firepower, in fact, than any single man had ever commanded in the entire bloody history of human warfare.

The Okeanos would then be an unstoppable juggernaut that cruised with deadly silence beneath the enveloping seas. The sub would be the ultimate weapon. And Pisces would be its master.

From Original Manuscript

TWENTY-FOUR

Nomad carefully negotiated the vacant companionway of the SWATH-design megayacht. The Matador had departed the Monte Carlo marina days before and was now knifing through the darkened water of the central Atlantic ocean.

Straker's craft was operating on a night schedule now. The crew of the vessel was for the most part asleep in their bunks.

Only the deck sentries walking their perimeters were awake and in a state of full alertness. In addition to them, the crew dogs who attended to the Matador's propulsion systems and the captain's mate who currently drowsed over the banks of instruments in the wheelhouse, were also awake.

Where was Straker's vessel heading? What purpose underlay the extensive preparations being made?

These were the two questions Quinn needed to answer. When he had his answers he would activate a beacon that would call in an air strike by a worldwide military Coalition made up of U.S. and international forces.

Readied in secret, the defense Coalition was an ad hoc international allegiance sanctioned by a secret U.N. vote. Its mission was to interdict and neutralize the Force Three nuclear capability if possible before the ransom demand was met.

Nomad had already recced most of the huge oceangoing vessel. Unfortunately his search of the Matador had turned up little that could answer his questions and satisfy the Coalition's rules of engagement.

This companionway terminated in a steel door. It was clearly marked with warnings that no unauthorized personnel were to enter.

A jumpsuited sentry armed with a close assault weapon stood guard duty outside the entrance.

Whatever was behind the door was clearly of extreme importance to Newcomb Straker. Nomad had found no other armed personnel posted anywhere else onboard the yacht so far, except for the perimeter sentries stationed topside on the Matador's deck.

Quinn broke from his hiding place and hustled around a bend in the companionway. His VRGs were already tracking their target. Crosshair reticles overlay the computerized image of the guard, flashing to indicate optimal strike points. Nearby on the virtual screen of the VRGs, the targeting pipper was blinking.

Catching sight of the strangely garbed figure who had suddenly popped into view, the startled guard reacted after a pulsebeat of indecision. He swung his autoweapon around but not nearly fast enough to prevent the black-clad techno-warrior from smashing the receiver of the P90 weapon across his jawline with piledriving impact.

There was easily enough steel in the plastic-framed weapon to strike the guard a knockout blow. As doubled fists sent the P90's buttstock crashing into his skull, the guard grunted and folded up against the bulkhead. But this guard had a stronger constitution than most.

He didn't pass right out. Instead, dazed and disoriented by the head blow, he groped for the red button to one side that would sound a general alarm and alert all other personnel to the danger in his area.

Nomad didn't give the stunned guard the chance to hit the panic button. A straight-armed right drove a bunched, black-gloved fist into his solar plexus, completing the job of taking him down that the cold-cocking hadn't accomplished all by itself.

Listening through electronically augmented hearing, seeing through the beams of invisible scanning lasers, Nomad determined that the companionway was silent. Satisfied that he remained undetected, Quinn unshipped a lockpad decryptor and positioned the device above the keypad.

Without making contact with the keys (which might be programmed to automatically trigger an alarm or explosive charge if an incorrect sequence were entered one or more times) the decryptor read the integrated circuit chips that controlled the locking mechanism with low-level electromagnetic scans.

It took no more than a few seconds for the keypad decryptor's powerful inboard microprocessor to extract the correct unlocking code from the read only memory of the microchips inside the unit.

DECRYPT SUCCESSFUL ... CODE SEQUENCE IS: 09 86 989 32 ... SAVING TO LIBRARY ... UNLOCKING read the message on the keypad lock decryptor's LCD screen as it went about its calculations.

Once it had obtained a solution, its actuators went into play. These mechanical "fingers" went about flawlessly punching in the correct code sequence and quickly unlocking the door.

Quinn had also programmed the decryptor to deactivate the door's whistling alarm and reset it to normal mode. Doing this meant that the door would open silently for him but that no trace of his break-in would be left behind to alert others.

Removing the decryptor and stowing the miniaturized unit in a ripstop side pocket of his stealthsuit, Quinn entered the room, dragging the unconscious sentry behind him in black-gloved hands.

As the door closed with a soft hiss on pneumatic actuators, Nomad found a suitable place to stash the guard, whom he insured would remain out of commission for a while longer by dosing him with a potent tranquilizer by injection from a thimble-sized high pressure air syringe.

Quinn's situational awareness was total as he scanned the area through his laser-scanning VRGs. The lasers, Q-switched for maximum power, strobed the area, wrapping themselves around the racks of components that lined the secure area.

While the lasers scanned the op zone, the VRGs' inboard computer crunched numbers with the speed of data processing devices many times its size.

A moment or two later, Nomad saw the readout display pinpointing the location of two possible sites which the computer had tagged as containing sensitive electronics.

On his first look, Quinn came up empty. But Quinn's second try turned up paydirt.

As he broke open the shock-cushioned, modularized containers, Quinn subjected the contents to another multiple mode scan. The rhomboid-shaped components looked unimpressive on the face of it. But to the contour-matching program of his VRGs the objects were of great importance.

OBJECTS REGISTER AS BLINDFIRE LONG RANGE GUIDANCE UPGRADE PACKAGES... reported the onboard computer, adding: MATCH PROBABILITY 90%.

If this were true, and Nomad had no reason to believe otherwise, then he had found what he had been searching for. The Blindfire guidance packages were necessary to upgrade missile range and performance. Specifically they were necessary to extend the capability of cruise missiles such as the one that had smashed into Cheyenne Mountain and turned it into a pile of smoldering, radioactive cinders so that they could strike anywhere on the planet.

Extrapolating from this new data, Quinn began fitting the puzzle pieces together. With the discovery of the Blindfire upgradges onboard the Matador he had found the key to the puzzle. Quinn now thought he knew exactly why the Matador was heading out into the ocean and what the mission was that had brought the stealthy and fast SWATH vessel out to the area.

A sudden noise shattered Nomad's thoughts.

At that moment he heard the pneumatic hiss of the door opening behind him.

Wheeling around in a tight pivot, Nomad found himself face-to-face with the black-jumpsuited merc who stood in the entranceway, an expression of shock on his features as he scoped out the bizarrely attired figure in what he'd considered a secure room.

Nomad was already bringing the sound-suppressor-equipped 5.70 mm weapon clutched in one fist into play. But the time he had the P90 CAW in hip-fire position the guard unfroze and bashed his fist down hard on the red panic button located on the wall beside the doorway.

Klaxoning alarm sirens were suddenly howling like banshees all over the ship.

Quinn had to get out of the room or risk being trapped with his rear end against the wall. He quickly switched the VRGs to auto-targeting mode and a crosshair reticle popped up above the glowing image of the guard outside who was now raising his autoweapon for a putaway burst of lethal fire.

Only a small sliver of his left shoulder and hand were exposed, but to the VRGs' precision contour matching capabilities, that was enough of a target to hit accurately.

On the VRG screen Nomad lined up the pipper representing the donut-shaped plastic P90 close assault weapon in his hands with the target crosshairs superimposed on the exposed area of the merc's body zone. The pipper flashed, indicating a high strike probability.

Nomad reacted instantly. A trigger squeeze launched a 5.70 mm high velocity round on a flawless trajectory straight to the guard's jaw.

As the round impacted on the left dorsal process of the guard's skull, fragments of the deforming and shattering bullet razored through cranial bone and brain matter.

The combination of these ballistic factors resulted in the destruction of over forty percent of cranial mass. Mortally wounded, the merc sagged to the deck with a massive, blood-aspirating exit wound in his skull region.

As the totaled mercenary went down in a bloody mess, Quinn sprinted into the corridor. His VRGs were flashing warning messages as they redrew the virtual screen to input new threat data streaming from the combat environment.

On a glowing red wire diagram of the corridor through which he ran, Nomad scanned the computer icons representing two jumpsuited guards. The bad guys were hustling up directly in front of him, weapons bulging in their fists as they bolted through the corridor.

The guards were on the lookout for an intruder. But they were stunned nevertheless when they suddenly confronted the blacksuited figure dressed in the bizarre headgear that gave him the appearance of someone not of this earth.

In Quinn's computer-enhanced field of view, the targeting reticle now appeared over the nearest bandit calculated by the VRGs' inboard microprocessor. Nearby, the bright yellow dot of the targeting pipper linked to his body movements was flashing off and on.

Quinn lined up the pipper with the icon pinned in the crosshairs and squeezed the P90's trigger, swinging on the follow-through toward the second target to repeat the sequence of putting the pipper on the target and opening up with a lethal salvo of 5.70 mm high-ballistic rounds.

Hit by the P90's needle-nosed bullets, more terminated sentries lost their footing and fell mortally wounded or already dead to the Matador's decks. Quinn hustled past the takedowns along the companionway, his VRGs flashing real-time video data on the tactical environment, constantly updating Nomad's situational awareness of the fast-changing combat zone.

Data blocks and computer icons now showed Quinn the way to the topside of the ship, highlighting threats as Q-switched lasers probed the strike zone with invisible beams.

A reverse target icon indicated more mercs bringing up the rear. Quinn wheeled around, with the VRGs' microprocessor already having calculated a targeting solution.

Putting the pipper on his newly acquired targets, Quinn squeezed off another multiple burst of 5.70 mm needle-nosed bullets, dropping the opposition personnel and sending the autoweapons that had been stuttering in their fists clattering to the decks.

The onboard computer of his VRGs had been automatically keeping count of the number of rounds remaining in the horizontal ammo magazine of Quinn's advanced design P90 close assault weapon.

It now flashed him the CHANGE MAGAZINE warning and displayed icons of three bullets to indicate the ammo level remaining in the clip.

Nomad ejected the spent clear plastic mag and snapped another containing fifty more rounds into the clip well across the top of the P90's receiver. As the shadow warrior stole deftly around a bend in the megayacht's companionway, the low ammo warning disappeared from his virtual viewscreen.

Now Quinn had gained the upper decks of the Matador. Reaching into a quick-open pouch on his stealthsuit, the high-tech hammerman removed a slim black cylinder. A finger press on the button at its top produced an infra-red flash that was invisible to the naked human eyeball but clearly visible to Quinn's VRGs. The flash indicated that the transponder beacon was active.

Automatically uplinked to a reconnaissance satellite in low earth orbit, the miniaturized unit was now transmitting a powerful, scrambled signal. In a burst of high-frequency radio energy, data that had been saved in a mission library was dumped to the orbiting intelligence platform to be used in preparing the strike on the Matador.

Suddenly Nomad's VRG threat indicators were lighting up with threat icons as the Matador's full contingent of security personnel poured onto the deck in a shut-out play.

Now the combat environment was target-rich and time-critical. With the VRGs set on auto-acquisition mode, Quinn began putting the lethal pipper on the first of the fresh targets, a merc with a bullpup autorifle hustling around a corner. Sighting in on him, Quinn scored another fast takedown with a tight shot pattern to the heartzone.

But though fatally hit, the merc had been running at a fast clip and his momentum carried him forward directly into Quinn. He had enough life left in him to clamp Quinn in a semi-bearhug. Putting a burst into the merc's head, Quinn struggled to push away the faceless corpse, seeing the electronic image of another merc farther along the deck raise his weapon while the VRG screen flashed him the message: WARNING: UNABLE TO ACQUIRE!

In the timetick left before the merc triggered an autoburst, Quinn did the only thing possible: he stopped trying to get rid of the the taken-down crew dog and instead used the body as a human shield.

Bullets from the shooter up front punched into the corpse's chest, tearing huge, blood-spattering gashes in his torso and making the dead merc jump and buck in Nomad's hand. While he was taking fire, a threat warning icon flashed on Quinn's VRGs. It showed that another shooter had just popped up from the small deck above some steps to his left.

But the VRGs had reacquired by now. With the death-dot squarely on the crosshairs, merc one took a burst in the belly that knocked him right down as Quinn pivoted left on his heels to shield his body with the bullet-riddled corpse which took another brace of high velocity rounds to the midsection.

"That's enough!" a commanding voice rang out suddenly as the pipper on Quinn's VRG screen swung toward the next of the merc targets on the Matador's deck, matching the sweep of Quinn's arm. "Cease fire!"

It was Newcomb Straker, looking down on Quinn from the Matador's flying bridge, a full story above his head.

Quinn's VRG threat indicators now showed stationary targets surrounding him on all sides. Quinn froze, caught in a standoff situation. In a moment the mercs on the stairs made way for Straker who was coming down. Quinn phased to real-time video imaging of the strike zone, and the computer generated graphics changed to a normal viewing mode.

"Your situation is quite hopeless," Straker advised Quinn when he had come down and was bracketed by his gun-toting troops. "Put down your weapon now. You really have little other choice ... except to die."

With the odds stacked heavily against him, Nomad did in fact see no choice but to do as Straker ordered. He laid the P90 down on the Matador's deck and kicked the black plastic donut away from him.

"That was wise of you," Straker continued in his emotionless voice, nodding his head in approval. "Now remove your rather exotic headgear, if you please." He added, "Do so most carefully. If you try anything my men will shoot to kill. I need not add that at this range they can hardly miss."

Quinn reached up to the unlocking sensors and touched his thumbs to each thermo-optical pad located on the sides of the VRGs. His fingerprints and body heat triggered the computer unlocking sequence and the VRGs' helmetlike casing popped loose.

Unknown to Straker, this action also triggered a preprogrammed security autodestruct routine that would trigger concealed charges and cause the both the VRGs and the stealth suit to detonate when Quinn spoke the command keyword.

AUTOSEQUENCER ARMED flashed the VRG screen as Quinn removed the unit's head assembly.

A moment later the VRG screen went completely blank as the unit powered down and went into standby mode.

"So it is *you*, Mr. Quinn!" Straker exclaimed as he recognized the face beneath the high-tech battle mask. "You have come aboard the Matador unannounced. Such a pity. Had I known of your arrival in advance, perhaps you would have received a less, shall we say, unpleasant welcome."

Straker gestured and Quinn felt the hard point of a bullpup autoweapon jammed between his shoulder blades.

"Place both your hands behind your head, Mr. Quinn," Straker ordered his prisoner. "And please come with me."

TWENTY-FIVE

The cold-water flat was littered with junk. Three days following the Monte Carlo operation it stank of mildew and the stench of rotting fish carried by the balmy wind of a Mediterranean afternoon on the Marseilles waterfront.

Capricorn had no time for niceties.

His only concern was in getting out of Marseilles alive. And of staying that way for as long as humanly possible.

As soon as he had received intelligence of Quinn's resurfacing on Straker's yacht, Capricorn had known that he was a man who was marked for an especially unpleasant death.

Capricorn had informed Alpha that Quinn had died in the laser-blasted ruins of the French abbey on the night before the Matador's departure from the marina at Monte Carlo.

Capricorn was nobody's fool. He knew enough about Force Three and the criminal mastermind who ran the worldwide criminal organization to be certain that his bad judgment call would insure that he be terminated.

He had one chance and one chance alone to save his life. Capricorn knew that he had to contact the WorldPol cops.

If he turned himself in, offering to spill what he knew about Force Three and the mystery man at its top who called himself Alpha, then he might be able to arrange for protection. As a lone man on the run, Capricorn had no illusions about how long he would last.

It was while Capricorn was stuffing a sheaf of bills of various currencies and denominations into a carryall that he heard the familiar

electronically simulated voice. At first Capricorn believed the voice to be hanging in the air, coming from all around him.

Then Capricorn realized that this assumption was all wrong.

The voice was not coming from all around him. It was coming from inside Capricorn's own head.

"Capricorn," the voice called out softly, an electronic voice that was both innocently childlike and unspeakably evil at the same time. "Where are you going, Capricorn?"

An implant! he thought.

Somehow -- he had no idea when or how -- they had performed a simple surgical procedure and implanted him with the remote sensing unit. With an obscene thrill of pure horror, Capricorn realized that Force Three had known where he had made it to his Marseilles bolthole all along.

Yet they could have killed him days ago. Alpha had waited, Capricorn realized. Alpha had allowed him to live in blissful ignorance, to scheme and hope to save his life. And all the while Alpha had been toying with him, to make Capricorn's final moments of destruction as terrible as possible.

"Capricorn," the soft voice of death came again from inside Capricorn's head. "We wish to have an answer from you."

What did it remind him of? Capricorn asked himself maddeningly.

Then the dim, memory from childhood took clear focus: Bible class at the Sunday school in the old church in Eastville, Texas, where he had grown up.

The Old Testament.

The part in Genesis where the Lord had discovered Adam and Eve walking in the Garden of Eden. They had just eaten from the Tree of Knowledge.

They had learned the meaning of good and evil and were hiding their nakedness against the Lord's all-seeing gaze. They had sinned against the Lord, and now the Lord was angry.

Just as Alpha was now angry at Capricorn.

But Alpha was no deity. Alpha was only a common criminal, a glorified hustler, slick as eel snot, sure, but nothing more than that.

"Capricorn...." the soft voice continued in the mercenary's head, the voice of death itself.

"Don't fuck with me, Alpha!" Capricorn shouted at the blank walls of the flat that overlooked a dingy backstreet near the Marseilles harbor. "I know things about you. I've kept records, Alpha! Do you hear me -- *records!* Anything happens to me, those records get sent straight to WorldPol!"

"Do not bargain with Us, Capricorn," Alpha's voice said softly, using the royal "We" that he customarily used. "We are heedless of your

threats. Accept your punishment with honor. You have a weapon. Use it on yourself. Use it now."

"Fuck you!" Capricorn shouted, stuffing the final items into his carryall and checking the clip on the .45 ACP semiauto which he had no intention of using on himself.

"One final chance, Capricorn," Alpha's voice echoed in his brain. "Use the weapon on yourself. Let your death be an honorable one."

Capricorn no longer replied.

He would find a doctor to remove the implant, it would be a simple enough procedure. The subminiaturized unit would be close to the surface of the skin. It could be out in a matter of seconds.

But first he had to get out of the bolthole.

Capricorn pulled open the door of the flat and found himself staring into the muzzle of a silenced automatic weapon. He recognized the youthful face above it. The face belonged to his second in command, Capricorn Two.

"You rotten motherf -- "

Two rounds wheezed from the silenced gun muzzle in quick succession.

The first bullet strike catapulted Capricorn back into the room, his arms outstretched.

The second finished him off, penetrating his chest and bursting his heart, drowning Capricorn in his own hot, bubbling blood.

"You have done well," the disembodied voice of Alpha now whispered softly in the shooter's head. "Consider yourself chief of Capricorn Section."

"Thank you, sir," the new Capricorn replied. "I won't let you down."

"We know that," Alpha replied dispassionately. "You have just witnessed the consequences of doing otherwise. Dispose of the body," Alpha concluded, "in the usual manner."

The Matador's command and control center was lit up by the combined brilliance cast by multiple banks of computer screens as it cruised the waters of the central Atlantic on a nearly moonless night.

The eerie, multicolored glow lit the faces of Straker and Quinn as they stood watching the proceedings taking place in the nerve center of the SWATH seagoing vessel.

"I am afraid that your position report will do a U.N.-backed Coalition strike force little good," Straker was saying to his captive, who was kept under the watchful eyes of Straker's gun-toting mercs.

"Yes, Mr. Quinn, my technical staff have gleaned the transmitter's function," Straker went on coolly. "We are now far from our last course position which, unfortunately for you, was part of an evasive-movement pattern from the very start."

"And soon to link up with the Okeanos," Nomad retorted.

"Highly perceptive of you, Mr. Quinn," the playboy-scientist replied with a tight, mirthless smile. "Indeed this vessel is currently on a course heading that will rendezvous the Matador with the Okeanos. What else do you surmise?"

"A couple of things," Quinn replied. "For example, the Blindfire guidance upgrade packages I discovered in the compartment down below lead me to the conclusion that they will be offloaded to arm the remaining Skybolt cruise missiles onboard the Okeanos."

"Again, perfectly correct," Straker told Quinn. "And since you are going to die anyway, I might as well show you around," he continued. "I am actually quite proud of my accomplishments."

Straker, Quinn soon saw to his chagrin, had every reason to be proud of the operation onboard the Matador.

The sophisticated banks of data terminals in the Matador's battle cab belowdecks were even now showing the approach of the Okeanos which was only a short distance away.

Quinn watched as the screens displayed data fusion maps and wire grid diagrams of the Okeanos coming into position. This is where the Matador's unique double hull with its hollow middle area came into play.

The interior space between the two sections of the Matador's hull planes had been engineered to specifications precise in tolerance to the thousandth of an inch.

From the image data on the viewscreens in the Matador's command center it was apparent to Quinn why this was so. The Matador had been designed to dock with the Okeanos after the immense nuclear submarine surfaced. The SWATH vessel would form a perfect fit with the hull of the Okeanos.

"Okeanos reports reaching target position," one of the crewmembers seated at the command consoles reported. "Automatic docking sequencer engaged."

Now the computer-enhanced sonar images turned to real-time video on the immense tactical screen on the wall as the Okeanos surfaced with her midsection just beneath the hollow between the Matador's double hull.

Quinn could feel the vibrations caused by the immense undersea boat's surfacing and displacing tens of thousands of cubic tons of seawater.

These titanic forces were what made the computer docking maneuvers necessary. No human error factor could be tolerated. A single slip-up could result in a serious accident that would destroy both the Matador and the Okeanos.

"Automatic docking sequencer counting down," another technician reported from his console. "Couplings are stabilized. We have a lock on Okeanos. Repeat. We have a lock on Okeanos."

Straker looked pleased at the results of the docking maneuvers.

"Commence offloading procedures," he said to his chief technical officer who relayed the boatmaster's orders to the crew dogs in the pit below.

"Offloading procedures engaged," the response came after Blodwine relayed the instructions to his techs. "Countdown beginning now."

"Things are running smoothly, Mr. Quinn," Straker beamed, again turning his full attention to his prisoner. "Within a matter of minutes the Blindfire upgrade packages will be offloaded to the Okeanos. The sub will submerge again and we will be gone from this area before anyone can find us."

Quinn visibly tensed, his restlessness noted by the gun-toting mercs surrounding him, their fingers coiled on the triggers of their automatic weapons.

"If you have any ideas of interfering with this operation, I would suggest that you drop them now, Mr. Quinn," Straker said, his smile fading quickly to a malevolent scowl. "As you can see, we have you completely covered."

Quinn eyed his VRGs and stealth suit where Straker's mercs had deposited the gear on a nearby table. He edged toward the gun-toter near his position.

"What are you staring at, Mr. Quinn," Straker asked, his eyes going back and forth. "What -- "

"Explode," Quinn said.

Buhh-LOOOOM!

The VRG and stealth suit both self-destructed at Quinn's articulated voice command. Tensed for action, he wrenched the autoweapon from the hands of the sentry standing beside him and put two rounds into Straker's belly as sparks flew from ruptured power mains and computer screens blew out from spiking electrical loads.

In the sudden pandemonium that now held sway in the Matador's command center, Quinn poured more fire into the command consoles, raking the SMG from side to side to cycle out hip level bursts into the machinery.

More tactical display screens exploded under the impact of the rotoring steel, flames licking from the shattered consoles as thick noxious smoke poured from igniting insulation and other burnables.

Nomad raced through the billowing clouds of noxious smoke and quickly made it onto the topside deck of the Matador. There he realized that it was already too late: the Okeanos was beginning to submerge. The sub had already completed docking with the megayacht and the Blindfire upgrade packages had already been offloaded.

Clutching his wounded stomach as he slowly bled to death, Straker was outside at the head of a group of mercs.

"Shoot him!" he cried. "Shoot him, you idiots!"

Quinn was already diving over the side of the Matador, crashing into the ice-cold waters of the Atlantic ocean as a fusillade of bullets followed the angle of his dive.

SMG-fisting mercs piled on the sides of the big yacht, their guns spitting hot lead down into the cold seawater until Straker commanded the mercs to stop. Although they had already expended hundreds of rounds, they hadn't hit a thing.

"Should we mount a search mission?" the chief merc asked Straker.

Straker stared down into the dull grey waters for a long moment, playing the beam of light from the battery powered torch in his hand across the dark sea, while more blood spilled from his worsening stomach wound.

The Okeanos had already submerged, Straker thought to himself. There was no sign of bubbles or blood in the water. No sign of life whatever in the dark ocean below.

"Negative," Straker replied to his crew chief, having finally made up his mind. "There's no time. Sound general quarters and order the engine room team to fire up. We're moving out of the area." He added that he wanted the ship's doctor immediately, and promptly collapsed.

As these instructions were being carried out, Quinn was swimming along the underside of the immense submarine. The Okeanos had descended to its periscope depth only a few feet beneath the choppy surface.

Ahead of him, midway along the submarine's underbelly, Quinn saw a patch of diffused light. This came from the Okeanos' pressurized diving hatch from which divers and minisubs could be deployed.

Before he made for the hatch, Quinn sentenced Straker and his crew onboard the Matador to death.

Before setting out from the Monte Carlo marina he had injected a subcutaneous implant under topical anesthetic into the fleshy part of his inner thigh.

The implant was small and it did one thing. The implant sent a very low frequency signal a distance of some thirty feet in all directions.

This was the distance at which MANTA had been following the Matador throughout her zigzagging journey.

Rising to the surface during the day to replenish its inboard battery cells by solar power, hiding on the silty ocean bottom when the Matador was stationary, MANTA had been trailing the yacht since Quinn had released the smart munition before boarding.

Programmed into MANTA'S memory chips was the sonar signature of the Matador's engines, a signature MANTA had learned and remembered as it lay on the bottom of the marina and listened to the Matador pulled out to sea.

On receiving Quinn's burst transmission, MANTA was programmed to arm itself and enable its terminal destruct routine.

As Quinn neared the open hatchway on the understructure of the Okeanos, MANTA sped from the sea bottom on a jet of high pressure fluid. Soon it had fastened itself by means of a fast-hardening glue to the thermoplastic hull of the departing Matador.

From Original Manuscript

TWENTY-SIX

A tremendous fireball brighter than the sun engulfed the Matador. The ball of hellflame shot skyward to a distance of several hundred feet as MANTA detonated beneath the megayacht's unique double-walled hull.

Following close behind the initial blast, shock waves pulsed downward through the cold sea water below the disintegrating vessel, registering clearly on the Okeanos' hull-based sensor array.

"Captain, the Matador has just been destroyed by a powerful explosion," the sonarman declared via intership commo.

"Request permission to surface and commence an immediate search for survivors," the chief of the boat put in as news of the sonar contact spread across the sub's control and imaging center.

"Negative," Pisces declared from his catbird seat behind the central control console screen. "There may be a strike underway. Crash dive."

"Aye, sir," declared the helmsman who immediately placed the Okeanos into a crash dive as ordered.

Within minutes the giant submarine's powerful pumps had sucked thousands of gallons of seawater into her ballast tanks. Laden with this sudden weight, the sub nosedived several hundred feet down into the deep ocean channel as its crew felt their ears pop and grabbed for handholds throughout the boat.

As for the Matador, the vessel and her entire crew, including Newcomb Straker himself, had been vaporized by MANTA's lethal sting.

The small chunks of debris burning on the sea had already winked out in the enfolding darkness of night.

Elsewhere within the vast interior of the Okeanos, antinoise technology countered the deafening noise produced by the powerful nuclear powerplant which drove the sub.

But here in the aft section of the enormous submersible vessel the throbbing of the nuclear powerplant that sped the boat through the ocean's depths was deafening.

So large was the nuclear boomer, and so radically different in design than subs which had preceded it, that the situational awareness inside her hull was more like a cross between being inside an aircraft carrier and a shopping mall than in an undersea vessel.

Companionways were spacious corridors. They gave access into compartments, control centers and equipment bays in a complex interlocking structure.

Taking advantage of the ambitious size and magnitude of the Okeanos, Nomad used these factors to hide out in as he evaded pursuit. Service mains mapped out a "shadow" network of routes that Quinn used to get around the sub undetected.

More than preserving the status quo was necessary, though.

Quinn had prioritized mission parameters as follows:

Strike objective one: he needed to neutralize the threat to the world posed by the MSOWs onboard Okeanos' missile launch tubes.

Strike objective two: he needed to insure himself that Alpha, who was masterminding the entire operation from some yet-to-be-discovered hideout, was also dealt a decapitating blow.

Strike objective three: he needed to recover the Okeanos, if possible, and return the multi-billion dollar boat to active service so that the boomer could continue to be the "big stick" that enabled America to walk softly in keeping the global peace.

Before accomplishing any of these strike objectives, Quinn had one other task to complete.

He needed to imprint the Okeanos with a signature of some kind, mark the boat in such a way that it would be easily recognizable to himself but not to its crew.

This was necessary in the event that he was not able to carry out strike objectives one and two or in case the Okeanos was successful in making an escape from Coalition strike forces sent after it.

If this were the case, the ultra-stealthy submersible vessel could easily survive a global hunt.

Her nuclear power plant could enable the Okeanos to remain submerged for months on end, and then surface without warning to start the entire deadly game of hide-and-seek all over again.

The crewman sensed the presence of something behind him and tried to turn. He wasn't able to make it. By the time the thought had passed through his brain, a powerfully muscled arm had coiled itself around his throat. The sleeper hold did the job fast. His brain starved of oxygen, the guy lost consciousness and went limp in Quinn's arms.

Minutes later, Quinn had hidden the kayoed crewperson and shed his own drenched clothing, putting on the dry shirt, trousers and shoes of the seaman that he'd taken down.

Keeping alert, Quinn exited the room where he'd stashed the unconscious man and took a walk through the companionway. Quinn's search had a purpose. His gimleted eyes scanned back and forth, on the lookout for one thing in particular.

He soon thought he had located the thing that he had been searching for.

The room appeared to be a back office type affair. Its door was well secured but the mechanical lock seemed to match one of the keys he'd taken from the guy he'd just knocked cold. It turned out that the key fit the lock perfectly. Quinn was able enter the room undetected.

Inside the room he found a computer console. Seating himself at the console, he turned on the system and the screen came to life in front of him.

An opening menu provided Quinn with a series of command options. To his satisfaction Quinn saw that the computer would permit him to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the operating system of the computer.

Now would come the dicey part.

Nomad at once began to play a game of intellectual tag with the computer system. Searching through the software programming code he found the operating system's electronic "back doors."

Walking softly and stealthily inside the main memory module through these breaches in the system security without setting off any alarms, Quinn began to input code sequences of his own devising.

The code he input would technically be called a virus, more specifically a Tempest Bug. The Tempest Bug would hide from the central nervous system of the computer.

The virus would do one thing.

It would trigger the emission of a specific electronic frequency, a "Tempest" burst from the sub's electronic gear that would not be sensed unless it was sensed accidentally or unless someone knew what to look for and where to look for it.

The Tempest emissions from the Okeanos would be brief pulses measuring microinstants. But these would be sufficient to tell a search radar where to find the sub if it knew the frequency range to listen for.

In addition to this, Quinn's Tempest Bug would make a hasty retreat from the software of the operating system into silicon memory --

the hardware portion of the system -- after it had triggered off a burst of Tempest emissions.

This fact was important because in the event that one of the techs onboard the sub noticed something strange going on the Tempest Bug that caused it would be virtually impossible to detect, trace and neutralize.

Having completed the entry of the viral code, Quinn reversed his steps. He sneaked back out through the electronic backdoors into the main tactical computer that he had opened.

If he had done his work right, Quinn would have disappeared from the Okeanos computer system without leaving a single trace of his presence behind.

Sleep cycle.

Nomad was active now. He rose from a crosslegged lotus position and began performing a series of Tae Kwon Do warmup exercises. When he'd finished these, he dropped down on the deck. Pushups and situps inside the dark storage compartment completed Nomad's exercises.

Mind clear, body relaxed from exertion, Quinn needed food. The journey of the submarine would not last much longer. Soon it would reach its hidden destination. When the Okeanos came to the last stop, Nomad needed to be ready to move.

He needed energy from the food.

The boat's pantry turned out to be as well stocked as it was lightly guarded. Quinn grabbed some fresh fruits and canned goods and hustled back to his stash site to eat his meal.

His luck ran out as a technician working on one of the boomer's electrical mains spotted the stowaway as he was climbing down from doing his repairs.

"What's going on!" he hollered, then thought fast. Grabbing the commo unit from his utility belt, he hit the preprogrammed Mayday button. The electronic alert sounded immediately all over the base.

A toe kick to the midsection dropped the guy in his tracks as he tried to play hero and draw a side-holstered gun, but reinforcements were already on the way as the gun skittered along the deck and disappeared beneath a freezer locker.

Since the squawk box already gave them an electronic fix, the security party was running down the companionway in seconds.

Grabbing a fire axe off its clamps on the bulkhead as he spotted the point guy who was coming up the top of a row of metal access stairs, Quinn smashed it across one crewmember's face, splitting his skull in two from forehead to chin.

With a death shriek, the decorticated crew dog went sprawling backward down the stairway into the rest of his crew who were coming up,

his bloodied brains spurting out all over them as his wildly thrashing body forced them back down, broke their ranks and spoiled their combined aim.

Quinn's fast thinking had bought him precious seconds. He hustled through the corridor into the next watertight bulkhead down the line, sealed the hatch and dogged it down after him manually. But the sounds of running feet were coming from down the corridor as the search crew outside wrenched at the wheel to reopen the hatch.

Casting about for a way to pull his fat out of the fire, Quinn caught sight of the ventilation grating in the wall. Raising up his arms he succeeded in pulling it from its niche. With mere seconds to spare before the hatch opened, Quinn hoisted himself up and climbed into the ventilation grating, pulling the mesh cover up after him.

He had almost succeeded in replacing the cover when the hatch flew open and his pursuers spilled into the watertight compartment.

"There's the maggot!" one of the mercs hollered. "I see him! He's only a couple of yards away!"

A second later a burst of automatic weapons fire cycled out rounds that spanged against the sides of the grating. Quinn wasted no time in getting out of harm's way. He crawled fast around a corner into a side branch of the ventilation duct network.

"Don't fire, you shit-for-brains!" his superior yelled at the green recruit. "Can't you see the flammable gas conduits! A bullet goes into one of those and we're all fucking history."

"Sorry," the crewman returned, putting his pistol away in its belt holster.

"Should we go in there after him, sir?" asked another one of the crewman. "You want volunteers, you got me. After what the scumbag did to Prescott, I owe him one."

"Negative," returned the black jumpsuited chief of the merc detail. "I've got a better idea."

He stared for a long moment at the dark rectangle into which the elusive stowaway had escaped. The network of ventilation ducts was extensive, he could hide for a long time in there. But he was also trapped. "Get me in touch with engineering section," the chief said. "I want maps of the entire system as of five minutes ago."

TWENTY-SEVEN

In the claustrophobic confines of the sub's ventilation system through which he crawled like a human worm, Nomad moved with agonizing slowness, knowing that death was at his back.

All hands from among the Okeanos' pirate crew that could be spared had been pressed into service to shut him into the network of steel shaftways.

Behind him, echoing through the narrow confines of the square-sided tunnel through which he shuffled at a snail's pace on hands and knees, Quinn could make out the voices of crewmen shouting to one another as they spread out through the companionways of the Okeanos.

It didn't look to Quinn as though any of the crew dogs had been sent into the tunnel network after him. Had that been the case, he would have known about it by now.

Quinn's guess was that the search parties were fanning out through the sub with the aim of keeping him penned up inside the branching network of steel ducts like a cornered animal.

But the metal burrows that turned and twisted through the guts of the steel leviathan were as extensive as the sub itself was huge.

The very grand scope and extreme size of the Okeanos tilted the odds somewhat in Nomad's favor, helping to screen him from detection by his pursuers. Another thing that Quinn had going in his favor was the limited manpower available to be put into a search party. The pirate crew of the Okeanos was at half the sub's normal level.

Somewhere, there had to be an exitway that was not sealed off, overlooked by the searchers taken from Okeanos' skeleton crew. Somewhere, there had to be a crevice in the tightening net through which Nomad could squeeze before the inevitable happened.

Suddenly Quinn suddenly heard two soft but distinct pops coming from somewhere behind him, the sounds of gas grenades going off. Moments later he smelled a faint, though telltale odor that sent a shiver of fear racing through him.

He knew then that his time had just run out. It was the rotten-fruit odor of neurotoxic gas that he smelled.

Desperate to escape this new threat, Quinn racked his brain for the key to save his life, the means by which to escape from the deadly nerve gas wafted through the system by currents of circulating air.

Then he eyeballed a tiny flicker of movement up ahead.

At first Quinn thought that the gas might be already effecting his mind, but when he saw the tiny shape skurry across the metal floor of the conduit in a spill of light from a grating, Quinn knew that he was looking at nothing less than his salvation.

It was a tiny mouse. And the mouse was standing on its hind legs, its bewhiskered snout in the air as it sniffed the foreign odor carried on the sluggish currents of air.

With a sudden squeak of panic, the mouse took off. Quinn watched it dash ahead and then suddenly vanish from sight.

Moving quickly as the odor of gas got stronger, Quinn was able to discern the outlines of a riveted patch in the wall of the conduit. Rivets had popped from a corner of the metal boilerplate and a section of the large square was exposed.

It was into this corner that the mouse had scampered when its instincts had warned it of danger. Had Quinn not spotted the mouse he might have missed noticing the patch entirely in the shadowed recesses of the dark passageway.

Gaining as much purchase as he could on the exposed corner of the patch, Quinn yanked at the steel plate with all his might as he now saw a fine smoke drifting toward him from the lower reaches of the tunnel network.

He held his breath, not daring to breath any longer as he again tugged frantically at the loosened plate. Though only two bolts secured the patch, the boilerplate would not give.

Fighting the ache in his lungs that screamed for oxygen, Quinn tried one more time, using all his strength, and was almost flung against the opposite wall as the plate ripped lose from the wall with a protesting shriek of the rusted metal bolts snapping in two.

Inside the hole he'd exposed it was pitch black.

The darkness was so total that Quinn could not tell how far the opening extended or if it were really an opening at all and not merely a narrow crawlspace between a bulkhead and the outside of the duct.

But with no choice except to try his luck, he slid inside, feeling hard metal beneath his groping palms and turned to replace the patch as securely as he could.

Now he could tell that he had entered another conduit, and Quinn moved into it as quickly as he was able, daring to breathe again as his bursting lungs greedily sucked in the air.

But the atmosphere inside this conduit was untainted from the gas, which had not yet seeped into the replaced section of boilerplate Quinn had put back over the opening.

"Thanks a million, little buddy," Quinn said to the darkness, meaning the mouse who had shown him the way to safety.

He continued to crawl along, finally seeing a faint dusting of light in the distance.

Crawling toward it, Quinn found himself at another opening of the ventilation system and peered through the grating. Seeing no one outside, he cautiously lowered himself to the deckplates.

Now Quinn quickly took stock of his situation. From the cramped interior of the ventilation conduit he had emerged into a compartment of considerable size. It was filled with humming banks of what looked like electrical generators.

Quinn guessed that he was now in the sub's dynamo room, located aft of engineering section. And he seemed to be the only person in the otherwise unoccupied area.

That situation changed quickly, though, as a search crew came on scene. Suddenly Quinn heard the sound of heavy footfalls above and to the right of his position on the floor of the dynamo pit.

"There he is!" came the shout from a section of the rectangular catwalk surrounding the directly above Quinn. "Control -- I've spotted the intruder! Repeat -- I have a visual confirm on the intruder!"

All at once, klaxons began howling all around him as automatic fire came blitzing Nomad's way from several directions at once. More crew dogs had deployed onto the catwalk in the last few seconds. In this area of the boat the dragnet of security troops could cook off as many rounds as their hearts desired without risking harm to themselves or to the vessel.

Using the huge, cylindrical dynamos for cover, Quinn ducked the incoming and bought himself a few ticks of time, hustling from one generator station to another as he made for the other side of the room. Mercs had poured in by now, though, and while some kept laying down fire from the catwalk, others began fanning out through the lower level too.

Quinn had managed to work his way toward a stack of modularized plastic storage drums in an area cordoned off by red and white striped barricade tapes bearing the warning: Caution Chemical Hazard. The plastic drums were piled almost to the level of the catwalk. They bore labels declaring: Danger Highly Flammable.

Moments ahead of the point men of the crew on the floor level, Quinn heaved at the pile, tipping over a dozen drums and sending them

rolling fast across the deck. Quinn eyeballed an unguarded exit on the catwalk level and broke for a flight of utility stairs a few yards away, just as the point mercs caught the sudden movement of the rolling barrels.

"Hold your -- " Quinn heard someone shout, but it was too late. An autoburst drowned out the shouted words as one of the merc hotdogs cut loose at the moving target that had startled him. Almost simultaneously there came an earsplitting boom as the rounds ignited the flammable chemicals inside.

More detonations followed as the rest of the volatile liquids in the other barrels cooked off, mixed with the screams of mercs who'd had their limbs blown off. Human torches ran howling through the room, flailing their arms as dense toxic smoke began to fill the room.

Quinn meanwhile dodged through the open hatchway to his left into a watertight compartment. Emergency sirens had joined the mad howl of the klaxons as metal bulkheads began to descend at great speed, sealing off the burning area until damage control teams could go to work.

Breaking sideward and tucking low, Quinn ducked under the descending steel panel as it thudded closed behind him. He had company. A squad of crew dogs had followed him in and ricochets whined as their fire bounced off the other side of the armored bulkhead.

But just ahead of him, on the other side of the watertight compartment, a second boilerplate metal bulkhead was already in the process of coming down to lock against its mortise on the deck just as the one behind Quinn had done.

Quinn sprinted for this second door, but he already knew that he was shut out. A moment later Nomad's escape route had been sealed off once again. Both bulkheads had slid securely into their respective niches. The techno-striker was now trapped within the watertight compartment created as the two automatically sealing plates of two-inch steel clanked into place.

All of a sudden the sirens shut off. A few minutes later, Nomad heard a loud whirring sound as powerful motors began to raise the second bulkhead again. As it rose, Quinn saw a dozen crewmen standing on the other side. Each one of them held a bullpup assault weapon pointing at his belly.

"The captain wants to see you, ratfucker," said one member of the detail, and shoved Quinn at gunpoint through the companionways of the sub. "Step this way."

"You've done a lot of damage to my boat," the skipper said to his captive. "Personally I'd have you loaded into one of the torpedo tubes and gotten rid of that way."

"But you have orders," Quinn put in, anticipating the pirate skipper's next statement.

"That's right, my smartassed friend," the captain answered with a curt nod. "I do have my orders. My one consolation is that one way or the other, you'll be out of my hair pretty soon."

The captain of the pirate submarine directed Quinn's attention to the main tactical screen that occupied most of the forward bulkhead of the Okeanos' control and imaging center.

The screen showed a scene in the middle distance. Quinn noted from the data block that glowed on its upper right hand portion that the distance was several score nautical miles from the boat's position.

But as the gap was narrowed with each passing second, the submarine's destination became clearer and clearer on the high resolution digital viewscreen.

Quinn saw that this was a vast undersea complex. The complex had been constructed on a modular design plan based on a multitude of bubble-shaped nodes.

Each of these nodes was linked by a sealed tubular passageway to another and another and so on. There must have been at least twenty of the nodes and many more spokes linking the entire chain, Quinn surmised.

Diver crews were at work in the environs of the base. Most of these would be performing routine maintenance functions which would be vital to insuring that a base of such complexity stayed functional.

Others would be on sentry duty, and they would be carrying weapons. Indeed as Quinn watched, a minisub swam into focus and grew larger as it came into view.

"Rain Dancer One to Ran Dancer Three," the minisub hailed the Okeanos using predetermined call signs. "Welcome back. You are cleared for immediate docking. We'll help guide you in."

"I copy that," Pisces returned, his sandpaper voice picked up by microphones concealed somewhere because Quinn did not see him speak into any external mike. "Enabling fore and aft transponder beacons. Enabling infra-red hull strobes. Computer augmented docking sequencer engaged."

Soon the docking area of the huge undersea base came into direct view for the first time. The entire time the minisub stayed close to the flanks of the huge submarine like a small sucker fish in the vicinity of a prowling shark.

Within a matter of minutes the colossal submarine had been maneuvered by computerized sequencing into its docking tether. At the end of the tether, an interlock pod fit snugly around the section of hull that contained the sub's main logistical hatch. The message flashing on the main tactical screen of the control and imaging center confirmed that it was now safe to open the hatch.

Pisces turned to Quinn. A cruel smile slashed his gaunt features. "Welcome to hell, asshole," he said.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Through the transparent wall of the glassed-in room, the large digital viewscreen showed the United Nations General Assembly convened in full emergency session.

The U.S. President now had the podium. He was addressing the assembled representatives of the member nations of the world body who faced him in rows of seats forming a horseshoe around the great meeting chamber.

On the agenda was an ultimatum by Force Three, whose consequences would likely mark the blackest day in world history.

The purpose for which this extraordinary session had been convened was a bid to turn over the African republic of Kalemí to the invasion force of mercenaries controlled by the master-criminal who called himself Alpha.

Nomad kept one eye on the screen and the other on the bullpup-toting mercs who stood to either side of him in their black jumpsuits and red berets. They were hard-eyed men who would not hesitate to put a burst into his belly if he made a single wrong move.

"You see, Mr. Quinn, We are on the verge of winning the day," said the muted electronic voice of the other person in the room, wearing a grey jumpsuit bearing only a single insignia on its right shoulder: the representation of the first letter of the Greek alphabet.

That person was Alpha himself, who watched beside Quinn within the confines of the observation room high above the pit below in

which his technical crew monitored panels of instrumentation. They were in the clandestine undersea installation known as Xanadu.

Upon docking at Alpha's undersea base, the submarine's crew had handed Nomad off to a merc detail already waiting for him.

The power behind Force Three had asked that Quinn be brought to him. Alpha relished what lay in store. It would be his crowning triumph.

Not only would his gambit make him the single most powerful man on the planet, but he would also bring down the final humiliation on the man who had stopped his previous bid for global domination, the notorious Prometheus kills.

As events continued to unfold on the giant viewscreen, the U.S. President was wrapping up his speech. Now, the President of the U.N. General Assembly, the President of the Russian Republic, took the floor.

"Honored representatives of the world governments," he said, his Russian instantly interpreted by computer translation. "You have heard all the facts in the case. You know that the world faces the threat of advanced technology weapons it does not possess the means to neutralize if you vote no."

The speaker concluded his address by asking the assemblage to now vote their consciences. Then he began to call for a show of hands to indicate the overall consensus. One by one, the representatives of the members of the Assembly were queried on the proposal, and one by one they began to reply.

Within a matter of minutes, the shocking conclusion had been reached as all the votes were tallied before an anxiously watching world. The result was nothing short of a devastating blow.

"No! It cannot be!" the electronic voice was still muted, but the consternation was plain in the words it had spoken. "This is impossible!"

The vote had been an almost unanimous "no" to Alpha's unprecedented blackmail demands. Nation by nation, the world's highest arbitrating body had rallied to tiny Kalemi's cause and rejected the plan to sanction an act of piracy on a global scale.

"They've fucked you, Alpha," Quinn replied, a smile on his face. "You underestimated the world's response to your blackmail ultimatum. Maybe I did too. I really didn't think they had the guts."

"They will pay," Alpha said in his soft, electronic voice. "They will all pay dearl -- "

Suddenly the entire base was rocked with a devastating shock wave. A second boom, this one of even greater intensity, came hard and close on the first tremor, shaking Xanadu to the couplings which anchored it to the sea floor.

The decking beneath their feet began to violently shake and sparks cascaded in all directions from severed high tension cables. The entire sea floor seemed to be in motion, trembling and heaving in a series of fitful convulsions.

What was happening? Alpha asked himself. *A seaquake?* But the geological studies had confirmed the sea floor was stable here. It was --

"We're under attack, sir!" came the answer a heartbeat later from technical section in the operations pit below the glassed-in observation room. "Sonar contact signature indicates high explosive charges have detonated. I have new launch signatures. More charges have just been launched. We're going to be -- "

Another series of thunderous booms came even closer behind the first hammering pulses of shock waves, and the rest of the tech's words were lost in a sudden burst of heavy static that cut the commo link.

The entire base now trembled fiercely, gripped by a shuddering paroxysm of terrific violence.

"Sir, report ruptures in hull sections nine, ten and fourteen," the voice of another tech reported as the comlink cleared again. "Sea water rushing in. Several fatalities reported in Modules three and seven."

"Call in damage crews," Alpha ordered as the image of the U.N. satellite feed wavered and blinked out as cables linked to buoy-mounted receiving antennas were severed and ripped from their linkages. "Make ready escape procedures. What is Okeanos' status?"

"Sir, report that Okeanos has concluded Blindfire guidance upgrade transfer procedures," the tech section communicated right away. "Nuclear ballistic submarine is fully ready to cast off."

"Splendid. Execute emergency cast-off procedures," Alpha returned. "Inform Pisces that he is to fire his missiles on predesignated targets at first opportunity. Repeat: fire missiles at first opportunity."

"Roger, sir," came the reply.

Alpha now swung away from the console screen to regard his captive with a cold, silent stare. Nomad's mocking presence had suddenly become intolerable. If nothing else, Alpha could derive some consolation from the fact that Quinn would now be dealt with permanently.

The master criminal's electronic mask betrayed no hint whatever of the human features which lay behind the grey screen of visual distortion.

But Quinn knew that behind the blank robot facade there was one very worried human being.

"You are responsible for this outrage," Alpha accused him.

A weapon had appeared in his hand. The muzzle of the silenced Walther pistol was pointed straight at Quinn's head.

"I sure hope so," Quinn acknowledged, a gallows smile on his angular face. "It could have been that the Coalition strike package managed to pick up the sub from the last coordinates I transmitted."

"But no matter how you cut it, Alpha," Quinn went on, "right now you're standing on the edge of a windy bridge with an anvil tied to your dick."

"You will die for your temerity!" Alpha threatened, and Quinn could see the masked killer's finger tighten on the handgun's trigger.

The gun went off a second later and the body fell with a heavy thud much louder than the sound of the bullet that had punched a ragged crimson hole high on the target's left chest.

"*W-Why?*" came the strangled moan of the dying crew dog who now crawled on the bloody deck.

"Because you have failed Us," Alpha replied, firing another round into the doomed merc's face.

He had jerked the weapon away from Quinn a moment before the trigger had passed the letback point and the 10 mm round had cooked off in its chamber. "You, Mr. Quinn are a different matter. A bullet would bring you far too merciful a death."

Still training the 10 mm weapon on Quinn, Alpha gestured with his free hand and in moments a group of jumpsuited Red Berets was standing at his side.

"Your instructions, sir?"

"Take Mr. Quinn away," Alpha said to the gun-packing drones. "Dispose of him in a manner befitting his supreme arrogance."

"This way, dirtbag," growled the crew's leader, shoving his gun into Quinn's back.

At a forced march, Quinn was shoved ahead onto the promenade that ran around the gallery level of the base's huge command and control center. A quick glance to his right showed Quinn that Alpha was moving too.

Force Three's leader had exited the glassed-in room and was making for an elevator at the opposite end of the promenade, its entrance guarded by another Red Beret contingent.

Suddenly the base shuddered once again as more depth charges exploded within a few thousand feet of the main node's location.

Nomad saw Alpha stumble as debris rained from the ceiling and shattering glass of control room panels on the gallery level showered the technical personnel in the operations pit below with razor-edged fragments.

Soon Alpha was lost from view amidst the pandemonium that now held sway in the beleaguered base.

Nomad quickly calculated his chances of escaping while time remained. The base was under attack but he saw that the infrastructure around him was still holding.

Alpha's crew, if nothing else, was well-trained and they had the fear of retribution keeping them in line, even in the face of an all-out exploitation attack. For the present at least, the system was intact.

"This way, you wad of crud," the crew dog with the gun in Quinn's back said, pushing Quinn ahead through a corridor filling with smoke and personnel racing this way and that in frantic efforts to reach

emergency exits in time to save their lives. "If I had a bullet to waste, I'd blow you straight to hell right here and now."

Though the majority of base personnel were now hustling for emergency craft, Nomad's merc brackets were not among those who seemed to care about escape. The Red Berets were Alpha's elite shock troops, and they possessed the unconcern for death common to blooded combat veterans and fanatics alike.

The two other members of the execution team hit a stud on the corridor wall.

The steel door in front of the elevator gondola slid aside exposing the empty interior of beyond. Quinn was shoved into the elevator. Soon he and his warders had traveled down a few levels. The doors came open again and bullpup muzzles prodded Quinn in the direction of an emergency airlock.

"Get the fuck in!" the merc honcho commanded, plainly meaning to strand Quinn in the outer part of the double-walled lock and then drown him by flooding the chamber. "Move it!" the merc shouted as the inner door slid open and shoved his weapon into the small of Quinn's back.

At that moment the entire base was walloped by another tremendous explosion. The Xanadu complex shook, as a series of violent convulsions gripped it. Both Nomad and his would-be executioners were sent sprawling to the deck that swayed under their feet.

From somewhere nearby, Quinn heard the sounds of almost inhuman wailing, a sound like something made by terrified livestock facing the slaughterer. He understood the reason behind the maddening screams in a matter of seconds.

Sea water had begun to pour in through a ragged, gaping breach torn in the hull of the underwater base.

From the speed and force of the torrent that was rushing in through the breached hull, Quinn surmised that the huge crack in the hull must have been made by a torpedo strike.

Lying on the wet deck just off Quinn's right shoulder was a black plastic caseless bullpup. One of the Red Berets had dropped the gun as he fell. Quinn lunged for the assault weapon just as its former owner made an almost simultaneous grab for the advanced combat rifle.

Quinn was faster than the other guy. Locking his fists on the weapon, he swung it like a mace, feeling its stock-end strike the merc's temple with a satisfying thud. The blow only staggered the Red Beret, and he came at Quinn again, rage twisting his features into a grim mask.

A trigger-pull and the merc was history. Fired at nearly point-blank range, the burst of 4.73 mm rounds made red garbage out of the merc's stomach. With most of his entrails hanging out of his destroyed belly, the merc went flying backwards, catapulted with outflung arms by the ballistic energy transfer effect of the high-velocity rounds to hit a bulkhead and slide down to a sitting position.

Slipping on the treacherously flooded deck as they tried to retrieve their dropped weapons, the other two jumpsuited mercs were quickly washed away as the big hole made by the torpedo strike widened under the tremendous pressure of the ocean and a cascade of freezing salt water came washing over them.

Quinn eyed the bulkhead door that was just off to his right as the compartment began filling up with water. Running for his life as seawater poured into the compartment, Quinn made a desperate rush for safety.

The water level was rising rapidly. As Quinn struggled to undog the hatch leading to the next compartment down the line it was already chest-high. Once on the other side, he could dog it down and form a watertight seal.

But the hatch was frozen in place.

Nomad cast about and finally used the weapon in his hands as a makeshift crowbar, inserting the autorifle through the rounded spokes of the turncock as the water level reached his neckline and he felt the thud of a heavy object strike his back, an object that he knew without having to turn around was the body of one of the dead mercs.

With a tortured shriek, the frozen metal finally gave way and Nomad was able to undog the steel hatch with seconds to spare: the water level in the room was already at eye-level. Another second or two and Quinn would have been drowned with the rest of the men inside the flooded area.

As things presently stood Quinn was able to hustle into the next compartment amid a torrent of fast-rising seawater. But he was not able to secure the hatch behind him again. The force of the water that almost filled the compartment beyond was too powerful to resist. Quinn stopped fighting the door and raced down the length of the compartment, where the water was now at knee-level.

A pair of Red Berets tried to rush him before he reached the next airlock. Quinn raked both of them with caseless autofire and raced through into the next compartment as they fell dead with twin splashes. Water was already spilling into the compartment, but the level was low enough to allow Quinn to dog the hatch down without much of problem. Seconds later, the compartment beyond had completely filled up.

Although he was winded from his ordeal and soaked to the skin, Quinn was painfully aware that he couldn't afford to slacken his pace for a second. If it were humanly possible, he had to find a way of escaping the doomed installation alive.

The Coalition strike on Xanadu might have commenced, but it had started too late. The Okeanos would have had plenty of time to complete its transloading sequence. The nuclear boat was probably already in the process of departing the base as the first torpedos were launched.

Quinn knew that no one else but himself could stop the sub in time. With the Tempest Bug virus he had installed in the boat's computer system, it could be detected anywhere on the planet.

But not without knowing what frequency to listen for. Without that vital key, the Okeanos would be unstoppable. The Skybolt missiles onboard could turn the world into a giant burial urn containing the ashes of ten billion victims.

From Original Manuscript

TWENTY-NINE

The base was in a state of total panic as the sea began to crush it like the cracked shell of an egg.

Xanadu personnel were pushing and shoving each other as they stampeded for the underwater emergency vehicles (UEVs) that were supposed to take them clear of the stricken base. They had been told that the survival craft would bring them to the surface, slowly decompressing their bodies to prevent the crippling bends from setting in.

The hundreds of men and women had a nasty surprise in store for them, though. Xanadu personnel arriving at the UEV stations were already discovering that the giant metal pods were only mock-ups. The survival craft wouldn't take them anywhere except to hell. Alpha had no intention of anyone leaving the base alive but himself.

Quinn fought to cut a swathe through the frantic crush of the stampeding crowd as emergency alarms shrieked and the base shook and shuddered as it began its final disintegration.

The striker forced his way through the jammed companionways of the stricken base which was still taking fire from the Coalition attack force.

Unlike the rest of the base personnel, Nomad's destination was the rubble-strewn situation room where he hoped to find a still functional communications link to the surface.

Survival odds looked like zero, and Quinn figured he was a goner. But before he died in the assault on Xanadu, Quinn needed to inform the strike force that both the Okeanos and Alpha were escaping the trap.

But a quick look around the heaped wreckage of the blast-damaged situation room told Quinn that he was out of luck.

Most of the instrumentation consoles at the center of the pit had been shattered by wreckage that had fallen from the ceiling of the dome.

The rest were burning as a result of shorts in their internal wiring caused by voltage spikes. Those display terminals that had miraculously not been blown out were completely dead.

Just then, Nomad heard a groan coming from a heap of wreckage nearby. Pivoting toward the sound he saw a leg sticking out from under the pile of broken rubble.

It was one of the sit room techs.

A steel beam had fallen across his chest, pinning him down while more falling rubble had knocked him unconscious. He had come around but was injured and still much too weak to move.

"Easy, friend," Nomad said, straining to move the heavy beam from the trapped man. Miraculously, it looked like the guy had sustained injuries no more serious than a couple of broken ribs, although he seemed to be in a state of near-shock. Quinn wrapped them tight with strips torn from his shirt and the tech's jumpsuit.

"I know where he went," the tech weakly said to Quinn.

"Who?"

"Alpha," he returned. "He's got a sub kept ready at all times. I know where it is. And I also know that he's left us here to die."

"Can you take me there?" Quinn asked the bleeding, injured man, not trusting him but having no better alternative at the moment.

"Yeah, I think so," the tech answered dazedly.

Propping the patched-up tech against one of the smashed consoles, Quinn made a quick search through the situation room wreckage and found a dead Red Beret whose head had been caved in by a heavy chunk of fallen debris.

The merc's bullpup assault weapon was intact, though. Its three hundred round mag was filled to capacity with 4.73 mm caseless ammo. There was another mega-mag also available on a pouch on the corpse's belt.

Apart from being covered with dust and shards of glass resulting from the blown-out windows of the observation rooms above the pit, his uniform was pretty much intact too.

Quickly stripping the Red Beret, Quinn helped himself to the dead man's uniform. Lacing up the black jump boots he set the paramilitary style beret on his head and adjusted it so it was cocked at an arrogant angle.

"How do I look?" he asked the tech.

The injured man smiled. "Perfect," he replied.

"Come on," Quinn told the tech, and looped his arm around his shoulder. Following the tech's directions, they reached the spot where Alpha's sub was supposed to be docked within a matter of minutes.

"It's just up ahead," the tech told Quinn who peeked around the corner and saw that the bulkhead was in fact guarded by a contingent of elite mercenary troops liveried in red berets and black jumpsuits just like he himself now wore.

"Okay," Quinn began to explain to the tech. "From here on in you keep your mouth shut. Let me do the talking. Got that?"

"I got you," the tech replied with a nod.

With the tech propped on his shoulder, Quinn rounded the walkway's bend and crossed into plain view of the Red Beret guard detail. The merc troopers immediately eyed him and the tech, their minds registering an unknown quantity that might possibly mask a hidden threat.

A glance through the open door behind them confirmed the tech's information to Quinn.

In the pool of seawater kept out of the base by atmospheric pressure, a microsub of advanced design was making final preparations to submerge. Quinn had no doubt that Alpha was its passenger, though he could not clearly make out who it was that was seated within the microsub's clear plastic dome.

"What's going on?" one of the Red Berets wanted to know.

"Bryant here's got some vital intel for the boss," Quinn growled, jerking his head toward the room beyond. "We've got to get to him before he submerges."

"You kidding me, man? Nobody gets in there," the merc retorted with a shake of his head, now eyeing Quinn and the tech with open suspicion. "You got some data, I'm the guy you want to give it to."

The merc's hand was hovering near the holster at his belt as he stepped in close and got up in Quinn's face. Another two mercs had come around and were now bracketing them.

It was only a matter of seconds, Quinn knew, before one of the Red Berets realized that he wasn't who he claimed that he was. And with every passing second, both the Okeanos and Alpha were moving further and further from the just retribution that Force Three deserved.

"Ready main power plant cooling system unit," Alpha said into his throat mike.

Minutes before, Force Three's honcho had climbed into the microsub and sealed the electrically actuated bubble canopy.

The instrumentation chiclets on his main control panel were all reading green as Alpha went through his final systems checks before making his getaway from the doomed underwater strongbase.

"Power plant cooling system activated sir," said the synthesized female voice of the artificial intelligence program on the outboard computer.

The computer system was performing final system diagnostics checks on the microsub, linked to the vessel by cable while it was taking on a final supply of fuel and powering up.

"Execute launch procedures," commanded Alpha when the systems had all validated themselves.

"Launch procedures activated," the female voice of the computer replied a few moments later. "Initializing."

Alpha grasped the sidestick controllers of the advanced design miniature submersible vessel as the bowel-churning lurch of disengagement from its umbilical first pushed him forward into the strap restraints and then whipped him back into the cushions of the formfit seat.

The sub's motors automatically engaged as the sleek, manta-shaped craft broke free of the base and sped into the dark waters of the Atlantic ocean.

"Hey, this guy isn't -- "

The challenge came from one of the new mercs who had come on scene from further down the passageway.

Two shots rang out before he could get the rest of the words out of his mouth.

Quinn snapped his head to one side in time to see Bryant clutching a small black pistol in his hands. It was a gun small enough to have been concealed in one of his jumpsuit pockets all along.

Reacting fast, going with the flow of the action rather than risk losing precious moments by trying to size up the situation, Quinn whipped around the commandeered bullpup and put a burst into the belly of the Red Beret who had been questioning him.

The big merc already had his finger on the trigger of his unholstered SMG as a plug of red aortal matter splattered the wall behind him from the massive exit wound high on his back.

Having tripped the sear, a bolt-slam on the SMG's firing pin set off a blowback-driven volley of 10 mm steel that missed Quinn but struck the already wounded tech as he turned his weapon on two more hardmen coming up fast down the corridor.

"Get Alpha!" the tech shouted at Quinn, before turning his gun on the fresh mercs who were now moving in. "There's a backup sub in there. Take it!"

Nomad knew the guy was already a goner. There was nothing he could do for the tech except to haul his tail into the bay and grab the second sub. And maybe light a candle for him when it was all over.

As he sprinted inside, the tech fired off the rest of the ammo in the weapon's clip. The precious few seconds Bryant had bought him

allowed Quinn to hustle through into the chamber, just as a burst of automatic fire cut down the tech in a spray of hot red blood.

Spotting the punch pad on the inner side of the airlock, Quinn hit the red main button and the bulkhead closed fast. Seconds before the crew pushed past the dead tech and dropped down to a crouch to fire a salvo at the door, there was only a sliver of space remaining between its edge and the frame.

Automatic weapons fire thudded against the plate steel but didn't get through the armored bulkhead. To make certain he didn't have any unwanted company, Quinn fired an autoburst into the locking mechanism, jamming it behind him beyond repair.

Up ahead, he spotted two more Red Berets who were trying to get the backup sub started and conduct their own getaway. Quinn used the close assault weapon and launched a salvo of 4.73 mm needles at them.

Caught unawares, the mercs popped and dropped under a hail of high velocity caseless rounds. Soon the water contained floating corpses in addition to the backup microsub.

Undogging the hatch of the two-man undersea vessel, Quinn climbed into the sub and strapped himself down into the formfitting control seat.

The instrumentation panel was well laid out, its flashing banks of LED readouts telling him that the onboard systems were all fired up and ready for action. Quinn familiarized himself with the routines in the few seconds which were available to learn the drill.

Fortunately the super cockpit type displays were easy to learn. They were designed to be as skill-neutral and user-friendly as possible.

In a matter of heartbeats, Quinn had opened up a computer screen navigation window and had gotten the craft seaborne. He was knifing through the liquid darkness a few moments later in the discus-shaped craft as the main dome of Xanadu finally caved in and seawater filled it, the deluge killing everyone inside.

Inside the control and imaging center on the bridge of the Okeanos, the pirate skipper code named Pisces issued a firecracker string of instructions to his crew.

They were to reach their first computerized missile launch site, surface to launch depth, and then prepare the birds for deployment.

At that time they were to open fire, launching all their Skybolt cruise missiles on their designated targets.

"Sir," the voice of the sonar operator crackled from the speaker grille at the central control console at which Pisces was seated on the bridge. "I'm detecting something strange."

"What exactly?" he asked.

"I don't know, exactly," he replied. "It's as if there was a trace of a computer program there but not anymore."

The captain's interest was piqued.

He had long since learned never to ignore details, even those scraps of intel which superficially seemed to be unimportant. In the end, a long and profitable merc career had taught him, those were always the ones that got you into bad trouble.

"Run a full spectrum trace," Pisces ordered. "And dump all the data directly to my screen."

"Aye, sir," the sonar operator replied via intership comms, and proceeded to do as he was ordered.

Within a matter of minutes, the Okeanos' high speed computers had traced the power spikes that the alert crewman had noticed. There was a definite pattern emerging.

The energy source was a small one but Pisces knew that it was sufficiently powerful to act as a beacon if a searcher knew where to look, what to look for, and the right equipment available.

"Continue scanning for the bug," he ordered. "I want it found as soon as possible. And then I want it destroyed."

"Aye, sir," replied the crewman, and turned back to his screens.

THIRTY

With advanced sonars set on track-while-scan mode, Nomad soon got a target lock confirm on the escaping Okeanos.

The microsub's in-hull sonar array was sensitive enough to detect the presence of the sub at the edge of the sensor scan envelope. Quinn's console screens showed the nuclear submarine to be knifing through the black waters at a speed of some thirty knots.

Its submerged depth put it well below the isothermal layer where warm surface water came into contact with colder water below. At such a depth the vessel could run silent and fast, as it had been designed to do for long periods of time.

In the cockpit bubble of the microsub, Nomad followed on, intending to close with the fleeing submarine while he still was able to get into range. Severely outclassed in every department by the larger nuclear boat, he had little time in which to interdict it.

The nuclear boomer had the small one-man craft he was piloting beaten by miles. The Okeanos could cruise farther and longer and submerge far deeper than the microsub was able to do. Compared to the Okeanos, the microsub was a pathetic toy.

Nomad would have to reach the Okeanos quickly if he was going to have any chance of stopping the boomer.

The screeching sound in the cockpit bubble alerted Nomad to the presence of an imminent threat. Quinn consulted his main tactical

screen which displayed a computer icon of a submerged contact that sonar had just picked up.

Another microsub was in the area!

In the cockpit bubble of the second sub that had just come up on Nomad's screens, Alpha had already acquired Quinn's submersible on his escape boat's sonar system.

Now that his sub's battle management computer had calculated a targeting solution, glowing crosshairs popped up on the screen to frame the icon of Quinn's sub.

Alpha took his hand off one of the two sidestick controllers and touched the trackball pointing device that would move the targeting pipper and place the "death-dot" squarely in the center of the crosshairs. A few seconds later, a growling tone informed Alpha that the pipper was now lined up.

Alpha's finger hovered over the firing button located at the top of the sidestick controller he clutched in his other hand.

When he hit the pickle, two sonar-guided torpedos would execute an immediate launch, bulleting their way through the icy seawater in fleet pursuit of Quinn's microsub.

Alpha was not about to allow this interloper to prevent the Okeanos from delivering her nuclear weaponry on target.

The world had chosen to say no to Alpha's non-negotiable demands for tribute. It had chosen to quash his bid to become a latter-day Caesar or Napoleon, to dominate the planet and to rule over its ten billion inhabitants with his iron hand.

In that case the world would pay the price for its suicidal folly.

Maybe next time around the planet would have learned its lesson. Alpha would not be denied what he wanted, what he deserved, what he craved. And what Alpha wanted, what he rightfully deserved, was *power*.

Raw, naked, absolute power.

All of it that he could grab.

Alpha's finger still hovered over the red kill button that would pickle off the ordnance from the microsub's in-hull launchers. He could take out Quinn in an instant. He could blow him clean out of the water with the ease of smashing a troublesome insect.

But neither could he resist taunting Quinn via ship-to-ship radio, before he killed him, though. The death of a man whom Alpha loathed more than any other man on earth was much too rare a pleasure not to savor for a few moments longer.

"We want you to think about dying," he told Quinn in the microsub behind him via undersea comlink. "We want to think about how it will feel when the torpedos hit you, when the warhead explodes inside

the cockpit and molten metal is injected into your heart and sent scything through your brain."

"That's colorful dialog," Quinn replied via intership commo. "Did you make that up all by yourself?"

"Do not mock Us Quinn!" Alpha's eerie, sardonic voice replied. "We know you are afraid. We can sense your fear like a long, cold needle thrust in your stomach, dripping slow poison. Die, Nomad. Die like the concatenation of filth that you are!"

Alpha trained his eyes on the computer-enhanced targeting display on the microsub's lighted instrumentation panel. The pipper was still lined up on the target icon. Quinn's death was only a button press away. Alpha decided to press that magic button.

Now.

"Damn it!" he shouted before a pulsebeat had passed. "It's not possible!" his finger jumped from the kill button as though it had suddenly become red-hot. Suddenly the target icon had vanished from view. Nomad had disappeared!

Wrenching the airplane-type wheel whose ends terminated in two sidestick controllers, Quinn swung the microsub hard to port, putting the craft into a steep ballistic dive as soon as he skirted the underwater ridgeline and disappeared into the black depths of the deep channel his sonar indicated was just beyond it.

Checking his screen again, Quinn smiled. The threat icon representing Alpha's microsub was above him now. Before he could reacquire his sub, Quinn executed a tight ninety-degree turn maneuver that looped the microsub around in the manner of a plane performing a wingover maneuver.

The dynamics of piloting one of these fantastic undersea vessels were much similar to those of flying a fighter plane due to their common hull design configurations, Quinn had found. If not for the medium through which he moved being water instead of air, the experience was fundamentally the same.

The discus-shaped microsub presented its thinnest profile to the scanning array of Alpha's tracking and targeting in-hull sensors as Quinn swung it around and then below an overhang of rock at the top of an undersea mountain.

Using the speed that he had just traded for elevation by executing the ballistic dive, Quinn advanced the throttle to shoot forward, climbed again, and within moments the sub's tactical screen confirmed that he was now behind Alpha's craft.

Now, using the top button of the sidestick controller in his right hand, Quinn launched a salvo of computer-targeted thirty-millimeter hydrodynamic flechette fire at the manta-winged sub he was now pursuing.

But Alpha had already applied evasive measures and was breaking sharply to starboard to put an outcropping of rock between himself and the swift, lethal rounds.

The speeding explosive warheads missed Alpha's sub, slamming instead into a jutting tower of basalt. Hitting at high speed, the warheads detonated with a tremendous flash that eerily lit up the undersea canyons through which the subs sped, throwing up great clouds of pulverized rock into the water behind a fast-spreading shock bubble.

Now Alpha's craft was temporarily obscured by both the cloud of rubble and the "blue-out zone" of severe turbulence caused by the explosions and the fall of dislodged boulders which had quickly worsened into a full-fledged underwater landslide.

Quinn's screens could no longer detect any trace of the fleeing criminal's sub. Until...

Suddenly there was the Alpha microsub, coming at Quinn from out of the spreading black particle cloud. Without warning its magnetic coil guns came on, salvoing out a hail of flechettes.

Most of the fan of depleted uranium darts missed their mark due to Quinn's fast evasive maneuvers, but the edge of the fan struck Quinn's minisub at a transverse angle. Onboard damage assessment systems flashed the schematic of the sub showing that a portion of its rear stabilizer fin had been shot away.

The damage wasn't extensive enough to cripple the sub, but it would slow it down somewhat. Under any circumstances that was bad news, but to Quinn -- who faced a problem that did not confront Alpha, one of *time* -- it was even worse news.

Time was on Alpha's side and not on Quinn's.

For Quinn to win the confrontation he would have to score a shut-out against his determined adversary. Nothing less would be good enough. For Nomad, the game had become zero-sum.

The same rule did not apply to Alpha. His tactical objective need only be confined to slowing Quinn down long enough for the Okeanos to coast out of range and he would win the engagement by default.

Nothing above or below the seas could hope to detect the silent, deep-running nuclear submarine. Nothing could prevent Pisces from putting his MarVed thermonuclear warheads on their targets, obliterating most of human civilization in a single, massive death strike.

Quinn was acutely aware of this strategic disadvantage.

He had to make certain that he conserved enough torpedos to use against the Okeanos, while still taking out Alpha's sub, and a quick check of his reserves showed that he had only a handful of the weapons in his launchers.

Going for the force-multiplication option, Quinn launched a manifold torpedo strike, but Alpha's reflexes were sharp and his navigational skills were good. With the benefit of acoustical jamming, not

a single one of the torpedos Nomad launched scored a hit. Now, only two out of six torpedos remained in his arsenal.

With escape his only remaining option, Quinn sharply turned the sub. His terrain mapping sonar flashed him video data on a narrow trough formed by a submerged mountain valley. Quinn dived deep, maneuvering the sub along the steep-walled submerged canyon with Alpha close on his tracks.

A flash on his threat display showed that another torpedo had just been launched from the pursuit craft. Quickly executing a series of port-to-starboard jinks, Quinn managed to dodge the incoming round, which struck the canyon wall and exploded, sending a landslide of rubble straight to the sea bottom.

Up ahead, Quinn's instruments revealed the presence of a high underwater massif. Suddenly Quinn flashed on a desperate gambit to turn the lethal game around.

He launched one of his two remaining torpedos, targeting the round on the narrow summit of the submerged peak, then crash-dived to the depths of the underwater cavern directly ahead, narrowly passing through its mouth as the torpedo struck the massif and shattered thousands of tons of rock into a mass of jagged boulders.

Close on Quinn's tail, Alpha saw the torpedo explode and the boulders disperse through the water in a deadly cloud of pulverized rock. Fierce turbulence in the blast's wake suddenly made the sidestick controllers fight his efforts to govern them as the microsub pitched hard to port.

With only moments remaining before the expanding rubble cloud engulfed the miniature submarine, Alpha made for the mouth of the tunnel that Quinn's sub had just entered.

The leading edge of the rock storm penetrated his safety envelope a pulsebeat before Alpha reached his objective, though. Pieces of the falling mountaintop slammed into the hull of the small sub, ripping the titanium-steel hull apart like so much cheap foil.

Moments later, the manta-winged sub slammed into the side of the tunnel and exploded in a flurry of fierce detonations just as Quinn's sub shot out the other side of the cave.

No longer was there any trace remaining of Alpha's sub on his threat recognition screen. Quinn would have liked to visually confirm the kill, but under the circumstances there wasn't time. The Okeanos was leaving his tracking envelope. In a matter of minutes, he would have lost it entirely.

Nomad's threat screens lit up as active sonar acquired the Okeanos just as it would have reached the outside limits of his sensor envelope. Apparently the boomer had picked up his contact and executed immediate countermeasures, because his threat screen immediately lit up with the icon of a Mark 10 torpedo.

Turning on acoustic jamming, Quinn set up an electronic blue-out zone of shocked water with poor sound conductance properties to confuse the guidance system of the incoming round.

The torpedo round's sonar seeker head lost target acquisition and the round went astray. Unable to reacquire, the torpedo's autonomous guidance locked onto false echoes coming off the sea floor. The torpedo changed course and nosedived toward the bottom where it detonated, carving out a deep hole.

Quinn launched his single remaining torpedo while his active jamming was still operational and his small sonar cross-section, combined with the turbulence caused by the torpedo strike, rendered the microsub virtually invisible to the Okeanos. Small as it was, the "brilliant" underwater munition fired by Quinn packed enough wallop to severely damage the Okeanos if it succeeded in scoring a direct hit.

Predictably the sub crash-dived as it picked up the sonar contact of the incoming warhead, and it turned on its active deception jamming. The combination of quick evasive maneuvers and electronic spoofing threw the torpedo off course, but not enough to prevent it from slamming into the row of propulsion nacelles at the rear of the Okeanos.

There was a tremendous explosion as the torpedo plowed directly into one of the central thrust nacelles, tracking on the warmth generated by the nuclear-heated jet of high velocity seawater that spewed from it. A cloud of wreckage made up of debris blown from the stern of the Okeanos spewed quickly through the ocean depths.

But though it had been hit, the nuclear submarine had survived the strike. Damaged though it undeniably was, the Okeanos still retained enough mobility to enable it to disappear into the depths like some wounded behemoth of the sea.

At the controls of the microsub, Quinn clenched his fists in helpless rage. He had screwed up big time. His last torpedo had been expended and his tracking screens no longer showed any flicker of the sub. Having won the battle, he might still have lost the war.

THIRTY-ONE

The jet-assisted parafoils skimmed across the night skies in a broken line, the shock troops hanging from their risers armed with bullpup assault weapons, their NVG-equipped electronic eyes scanning the black sea below for a tiny piece of rock called Mutineer's Island.

At the head of the contingent of high-tech sky troopers, Quinn scanned the column of paracommandos whose night vision was enhanced by holographic VRGs.

Nomad's headset contained microphone and earbuds linking him via signal-hopping comms to the rest of the commando paratroops coming down behind him.

This was to be an unmarked night drop, the most difficult type of paradrop to execute safely and in a coordinated manner. There would be no transponder beacon to guide the paracommandos to the drop site on the wave-hammered beach zone below.

Mutineer's Island itself was the descending strikers' only available landmark.

ALERT warned the text block which suddenly appeared at the top of Nomad's VRG screen.

At the same time the screen was painted with an overlay showing the schematic representation of the island that was their target. CONFIRM TARGET SIGHTING ... FIVE DEGREES LATITUDE ... NINETEEN DEGREES LONGITUDE.

"I have a sighting on the drop zone," Quinn advised within a matter of minutes after dropping from the plane's hatch. "Scan along a forty degree azimuth and prepare for landfall within thirty seconds."

He pulled on his risers to correct his descent attitude, using his body to help keep his earthward plunge steady and on course to the drop zone still many hundreds of feet below his position.

Moments later Quinn was coming down on the beach, rolling with the impact and hitting the quick-release straps of his chute harness.

The rest of the strike team was down on the ground too as Quinn hit a series of keystrokes on his wrist top keypad which sent off a coded burst transmission. The transmission informed the rest of the Coalition strike package that the point team was in position and ready to commence its preemptive assault.

"Let's move in," Quinn said to the commando who had come dog-running up to his position after stashing his chute. "The strike fighters are already airborne."

Fulgencio Parana answered, "my pleasure," and waved to the hunched manshapes crouched behind him on the windswept ground, flashing Quinn a mirthless smile.

The Brazilian eco-commando group had been contacted by Nomad following the strike on Force Three's underwater hardbase. The backchannel operation was not known to the world at large, nor would it ever be confirmed as a sanctioned operation.

To the militant environmentalists, a secret invitation had been extended to join Nomad on the final strike against Force Three, whose global blackmail bid was still a serious threat as long as the Okeanos remained at large.

The Brazilians had a personal stake in protecting the environment from the danger that both Force Three's demands and the nuclear submarine posed and had readily agreed to support Quinn on the ground phase of the strike.

Leaving the rest of the Age of Reptiles assault force to hold their positions against the ongoing battle for Omnivore back home in Brazil, Parana and the same elite force that had stormed Omnivore earlier linked up with Quinn via aerospace plane in under two hours.

Now, hunched figures deployed quickly across the windswept beach of the speck of black rock in the wave-tossed Atlantic. Zero hour had arrived.

On the other side of the island, the Okeanos was moored.

The advanced design sub had headed to Mutineer's Island for a good reason after sustaining heavy damage to its propulsion nacelle array had as a result of the torpedo strike.

Mutineer's Island had been the site of a U-boat refueling and repair station during World War Two.

Hitler's Nazis had long since left the island behind, a relic of their failed bid for global supremacy. But the huge sub pens made out of stressed concrete and structural steel that they had constructed on the

island were still intact even after almost a full century of lying idle and exposed to the lashing of the wind and the pounding of the sea.

The sub base had been retrofitted by Alpha's engineering group and manned to backstop the Okeanos after the theft of the submarine, providing it with an alternate base at which to go to ground if need be.

Now Pisces was glad of the existence of the base.

Pushing his crew dogs to the max, making them hustle around the clock, his technical details had pulled out all the stops to repair the damage to the ship's reactor cooling system as a result of the torpedo strike.

Less than forty-eight hours after reaching the island sanctuary, the mission-capability status of the Okeanos had been upgraded. The boomer was now again nearly one hundred percent seaworthy.

Only a final computer systems check remained to be carried out, both to purge the system of the mysterious virus that had been detected by the sharp-eyed crewmember and to recalibrate the Skybolt MSOWs for their new strike priorities.

Pisces was now overseeing the crews as they labored to make final patches to the Okeanos' hull. Glad though he was at having been able to withdraw to Mutineer's Island to make the desperately needed repairs, Pisces did not like remaining in one place for too long. His thoughts were on the departure of the sub at first light when suddenly he heard the baneful chatter of small arms fire.

A split-second later, alarms were klaxoning throughout the island sub pens as all hell began breaking loose.

"What's going on?" he asked via his comset.

"We're under attack by paramilitary ground assault elements," came the reply from his perimeter watch detail. "Repeat: we are under attack!" the chief of the watch said again as the entire operation began to quickly come apart.

While the commando forces deployed on the ground staged an assault on the base, a strike package of transonic F-25 "Death Ray" advanced tactical fighters was postured for a follow-on strike. Orbiting at the edge of the island's radar envelope, the low-observable, wedge-shaped fighter planes were an unseen, though lethal, presence.

However, the transonic jets would not attack the island sub base until the ground crew that had inserted just prior to the attack called in top cover.

Now the two elements of the commando assault force hit the base from two directions, Parana leading one strike element, Axe Handle, and Quinn leading the other action team, Cobra Teal.

Parana's group was tasked with securing the sub pens while Quinn's crew would attempt to storm the Okeanos herself and secure the nuclear sub. If at all possible they were to attempt take the sub intact.

Submachinegun fire started cycling out from fortified emplacements on the perimeter of the sub pens as defensive units became active, the slower, duller cadence of the heavy guns sounding in grim counterpoint to the staccato bolt clatter of automatic weapons ported by the raiders.

A security cordon made up of NVG-equipped troops manning squad automatic weapons ringed the approaches to the base. Whatever else he might have been, Pisces was no fool. The rogue submarine commander had not ruled out the contingency of an assault and had taken the precautions dictated by warcraft.

Glowing green tracer fire lashed out from the defense positions on the high ground and flares lit up the night sky as the Cobra Teal and Axe Handle assault forces launched a two-pronged attack on the sub pens with Quinn's group sweeping in from one flank and Parana's crew hammering the mercs from the other.

Parana and his commando team prosecuted the strike with speed and power, their holographic NVGs providing them with high-definition, bloom-resistant night vision in the battlezone with computer enhanced displays showing terrain features with extreme clarity.

Dropping down and digging in, the Brazilians kept up their withering time-on-target fire, flame and rotoring steel belching from their fast-cycling automatic guns. Laser targeted, the caseless weapons ejected no spent cartridges and were highly stable and accurate even when deployed in full burstfire modes.

While the rifle team kept the shooters crewing the fire pits above them busy, Parana signaled to his missileers, who raised man-portable SADARM weapons to their shoulders and acquired targets through laser targeting.

Soaring into the air to a height of some sixty feet, the SADARM warhead blew apart in a brilliant orange fireball. From the center of the fireball a preformed metal charge shaped itself into a deadly lance of semimolten titanium, slamming downward into the cluster of squad gunners emplaced behind their earthen revetments.

As the machinegun teams on the heights were consumed in an all-obliterating holocaust of fire and steel, Quinn's paracommando squad on the other flank of the pincer was pinned down by heavy fire, launched at them from the interior of the sub pen by determined troops.

On the gantry above the hijacked nuclear sub, Pisces pushed past the crew dog who had been hit in a vital spot by a high velocity 4.73 mm bullet fragment. His belly torn open to expose the steaming intestines, he fell with a splash to the water below.

The merc honcho had to get to the Okeanos and put the sub out to sea before the commandos entered the pens, he knew. Once that

critical point in the battle had been passed, it would be all over for his side.

Picking up the bullpup dropped by the fallen crewman and putting it into play, Pisces launched a burst of automatic fire to cover his sprint down the gantry stairs just as its main portion was hit by a Manpads HEMP round and disintegrated in a ragged puffball of flame.

While a fire team covered them, a spearhead with Quinn taking the point made a break from the unit's pinned-down position just outside the yawning mouth of the huge concrete bunker.

Quinn's assault element sprinted through the dense black battle smoke across windswept, rocky ground toward the huge concrete tunnel where the sub was berthed while the rifle team drew the fire of opposition forces.

Taking heavy casualties during their frontal assault on the base, Quinn and his squad took up positions at either side of the opening and deployed their automatic weapons to lay down heavy suppressing fire.

While an autogrenade launcher team set up and began pouring high explosive 40 mm submunitions into the interior of the pens, Quinn and the rest of the squad set up a shock front of massed autofire as they ramrodded into the entrance of the pens.

Tracking quickly, they trained their weapons for more focused precision shooting.

Laser-targeted autobursts of 4.73 mm steel took out men high on the intact gantry segment overhead who were pouring sustained fire into the shock troops storming the sub pens. Struck by multiple hits, the defenders in positions on the concrete bulkheads bracketing the slips and on the catwalk above the sub pens plummeted into the waters, now afire with burning fuel and blazing debris from the leveled gantry.

As the fire from the base interior abated somewhat due to attrition, the strikers' point element was joined by the rest of the squad, spreading out to secure the area.

Outside the sub pens, Parana's unit was now enveloping the last surviving elements of hostile forces. These were deployed in blast-hardened bunkers on the perimeter of the island.

Dug in on the craggy slopes of the rocky terrain, the defenders were well sited and used their heavy guns to crank out time-on-target fire. The result was that despite using SADARM, SMAW and other bunker-busters, the assault crew had sustained a high casualty rate and a standoff situation prevailed.

"Hold your fire," Parana instructed his commando assault crew via secure commo when he'd judged that the time was right.

It was time to call in top cover.

Switching to another secure frequency, Parana transmitted the signal that the combat wing of F-25 "Death Ray" strike fighters orbiting the island had been waiting for.

Suddenly scramjet thunder banshees overhead.

Scudding over the surface of the ocean, the F-25 advanced tactical fighter group executed a sudden pop up maneuver. Unmasking, the sleek planes swept low across the island and pickled off their bomb loads with computer coordinated targeting. The air-to-ground THRESH cluster bombs soon deployed hundreds of submunitions from automatic dispensers.

Each containing its own tiny rocket motor, the swirling cloud of "brilliant" bombs set up a spinning vortex of explosive spheres. The obliterating cyclone of THRESH submunitions enveloped the troops that were dug in on the heights above the beachzone and detonated in a series of timed pulses. Despite the fortified bunkers, the troops were burned up in a firestorm that swept the emplacements clean off the face of the earth.

The entire island shook to its foundations as the night went berserk with thunder, flame, steel and the screams of wounded combatants. The Death Ray exploitation strike had turned the fire pits on the heights into a high-tech killing zone. With no escape corridor open to them, the merc defenders died in droves as the brilliant THRESH bomblets cocooned them in a mangling whirlwind of assured destruction.

The F-25 fighter group reassumed attack formation but didn't need to make a second bomb run. A few badly burned survivors staggered from their holes and fell to the fire-scorched and blast-cratered earth, more dead than alive. Their mission accomplished, the F-25 bomb trucks turned around. Pulling high Mach numbers, they headed for home.

THIRTY-TWO

“Diving officer, make your depth two zero feet and take her out,” the rogue skipper instructed his helmsman via intership comms, seated at the central control console on the bridge of the advanced submersible boat. The helmsman “ayed” that order and put the Nautilus into a steeply angled dive.

Pisces would have to make do with a crew far below optimum manpower levels in order to operate the Okeanos after he made his escape from the embattled sub pens of Mutineer’s Island.

But with the sophisticated computers onboard the sub, these less than perfect operating conditions would be all the pirate skipper needed to assure a safe withdrawal and an undetectable run through the oceans to his missile launch position.

Using the keyboard in front of him, Pisces opened up a viewing window on the computer screen of his main tactical console. Painted across the computer window, a wire-grid topographical map showed Pisces a view of the sea bottom lying beyond the island.

Punching up another window, Pisces called up system diagnostics for propulsion and weapons. The computer interrogated all systems and reported that the sub’s nuclear power plant was functioning perfectly and that the Skybolt MSOWs were secure in their launch tubes. Just to be on the safe side, Pisces immediately began the missile arming sequence.

He would launch his lethal thermonuclear birds as soon as he was clear of the sub pen. His window of opportunity would not be as wide, but Pisces was a man who appreciated the value of compromise.

The pirate would be satisfied with a slightly higher error probability in the final trajectories of the nuclear missiles.

A few million bodies more or less wouldn't make that much difference. No difference to him, anyway.

Once the MSOWs were in the air there was no way that any power on earth could prevent the stealthy long-range cruise missiles from reaching their designated targets. When they came within range, nuclear destruction was a foregone conclusion.

Having enabled the process that downloaded targeting parameters into the Skybolt ballistic cruise missiles from the memory banks of the Okeanos' missile launch computer, the skipper went back to the terrain mapping window and zoomed it to fill the entire screen.

Once the birds were launched, he wanted to get the boat out of the area as fast as he could in order to avoid detection by the Coalition strike package that had inflicted such sudden and catastrophic damage to Mutineer's Island.

Pisces smiled at what he now saw. From the data the computer was giving him, he thought he might be able to pull it off.

In the twisting maze of yawning undersea caverns that dotted the West European Basin which extended from the island for hundreds of miles until it reached the spine of twisting mountains called the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, Pisces would easily be able to give his pursuers the slip, even in a boat as large as the Okeanos, he could elude their global dragnet.

It was time to start the ball rolling. Pisces picked up the intership phone at his left and called Navigation Section.

"Make your depth eight zero feet then come to new course six zero sev -- "

Without warning, Pisces was almost thrown from his seat before the central control console by a powerful set of pulsed explosions that seemed to rock the island to its very foundations.

Because the Okeanos was still within the protected channel which led from the sub pens to the open sea, Pisces was blind and deaf and dumb, his hull sensors incapable of receiving data on what had caused the massive shock wave that had just violently rocked the sub.

Still, he didn't need high-tech electronics to tell him what was abundantly clear.

Air support had just made a reappearance. The wedge-shaped black F-25 bomb trucks were sticking it to the base big time. From the intensity of the shock, Pisces figured the Death Rays must be hitting the place with fuel-air explosives or maybe even something bigger.

And this new development meant that it was high time Pisces left the fighting and the dying to the troops on Mutineer's Island and took

to the protection of the deep ocean. From its depths he would show the world what killing was really all about.

As the Okeanos was sliding from her berth in the Mutineer's Island pens, the digital display panel on Quinn's keypad decoder reported that the unit had unlocked one of the sub's upper logistical hatches.

The hatch was set flush with the gently curving top of the Okeanos. Now it slid aside to expose a steel ladder that led down into the interior of the boomer.

Gesturing to the squad of black-clad commandos who backed him up, Quinn was the first man to descend into the sub. As he climbed down, his VRGs painted the interior of the nuclear boomer with invisible, high frequency lasers. The laser scans revealed that the immediate area was clear of hazardous personnel.

Single file behind Quinn, the three Age of Reptiles commando strikers hustled down the ladder, bullpup autoweapons ported and at the ready.

On point, the cybercommando received a sudden threat advisory that popped up on his virtual screen as he jumped onto the deck. A merc squad was coming up the companionway, packing automatic weapons and out for blood.

Reacting fast, Quinn tracked the P90 CAW in a swift arc, putting the piper on the first highlighted target icon. As the lethal black donut bucked softly in his hand, taking down the kill, Nomad put the death dot on another target and blew him away with a precision targeted burst of 5.70 mm needle nosed steel.

As the point mercs took hits and went down, Nomad's backup crew double-timed through the companionways toward sub's control and imaging center located at the bridge. Soon the hijackers in the sub's nerve center had been herded into a corner, their hands locked behind their heads and the fight knocked out of them. All but one crewmember, that is: Pisces was not among them.

The rogue skipper was missing, having vacated his central control console catbird seat moments before the arrival of Quinn and his troops. Like a crafty fox, Pisces was still one step ahead of the hunters on his tail.

Pausing to catch his breath, the master of the Okeanos grabbed at the advanced design bullpup assault weapon. The LSW's high capacity three hundred round magazine was locked in place and an ample supply of reloads for the weapon were festooned at his belt within quick reach.

The weapon's laser rangefinder was working too, its green beam of coherent light probing the air in search of target acquisition.

Pisces knew exactly what he had to do.

The sub was now in open ocean, cruising through a natural deep water channel. Pisces would have to launch the Skybolt missiles, and in order to do so would have to manually execute the launch. He could still pull off this maneuver but he would have to move fast.

Sprinting through the companionways of the sub, Pisces heard the staccato bolt clatter of automatic weapons fire as the strikers mowed down those among his mercenary crew who were dumb enough or fanatically dedicated enough to offer more than token resistance to the commando assault force.

Beyond the confines of the sub all hell was breaking loose too, as the explosions that destroyed the Mutineer's Island base sent powerful shock pulses hammering through the cold sea water.

The surviving merc crewmen onboard the Okeanos were faced with the choice of either fighting it out or putting down their weapons. They laid them on the deck and placed their hands behind their heads, then joined their weapons on deck, wisely choosing the path of least resistance.

Nomad called up a schematic of the Okeanos which he'd preprogrammed into his VRGs before the mission parafoil drop.

The spacious companionways of the submarine turned into a computer generated representation, and a glowing electronic ribbon showed Quinn the fastest route to take through the corridors of the nuclear boomer toward the Christmas Tree Farm.

Nomad reached the vertical rows of missile launch tubes, marveling again at the eery cathedral-like quality that the vast area in the center of the submarine evoked.

But this was anything but a place visited by the Divine. Instead, it was a charnel house from which death took flight to destroy with fantastic power at world-spanning range.

In sane hands, such destructive power had averted a third world war and now helped safeguard the global peace of the twenty-first century. But in the hands of an Alpha or Pisces, it was nothing less than a war dog unleashed to savage the world at its pleasure.

Just ahead, Quinn now saw the Christmas Tree Farm.

Row upon row of multistage ballistic missiles stood ranked in the huge chamber of death. Once fired from their launch tubes they would break the ocean's surface.

A few hundred feet in the air the booster stages would separate as each Skybolt cruise missile's air breathing ramjet engine came on. Blindfire guidance packages would then take over, directing the lethal nukes halfway around the world to strike their designated targets with pinpoint accuracy.

Somewhere within the vast missile launch area, Pisces moved stealthily, a hunted beast skulking through an obscene forest of towering metal stalks.

Quinn switched his VRGs to thermal imaging scan mode, electronically probing the combat zone for his armed and very dangerous quarry.

On TI scan he immediately picked up a thermal signature corresponding to human heat diffusion patterning. Almost a pulsebeat too late, Quinn realized that the sub skipper's TI signature was originating from just above him on the catwalk surrounding the missile bay of the vast submarine.

A vortex of automatic fire augured down through space as Quinn executed a fast sideward break. Bullets whined, bounced off the metal deck plates as Pisces walked his fire at Quinn. With ricochets sparking at his heels, Quinn vaulted a railing and tucked behind the cover of a steel bulkhead.

Perched on the high gantry above the rows of missile launch tubes, Pisces checked his fire. He mouthed an obscenity as he ejected the spent cartridge, snapped a reload into the hot weapon and checked its LED status display to insure that it had automatically chambered the first of its three hundred rounds.

He saw that his target had vanished as the weapon's internal diagnostics reported it ready to fire.

And Pisces had recognized his quarry.

It was Nomad, a most dangerous adversary to have survived the destruction of Xanadu intact.

Pisces raced along the catwalk of the high gantry as Nomad's man-machine interface put the targeting piper on the moving electronic crosshairs of his virtual reality screen.

Quinn triggered a burst of P90 fire the merc's way but Pisces ducked behind one of the steel missile tubes a split-instant before the first round left the muzzle, saving his life as 5.70 mm bullets roared against the gleaming metal cylinder, sparked, and then harmlessly bounced off again.

Quinn picked up the merc's TI signature again on the other side of the Christmas Tree Farm.

As Nomad repositioned himself and retracked the glowing piper on his virtual screen, his line of sight brought him directly into the probing green beam of the laser auto-targeter built into Pisces' bullpup which shone directly into his VRGs.

Despite the VRGs' antibloom features which automatically dimmed the display intensity and protected the wearer's eyes from harmful laser radiation, Quinn was blinded for a few instants. All his imaging systems, including real-time video, were temporarily knocked out. The split-second of exposure to the beam had taken a severe toll.

With most of his viewfield whited-out from the effects of the freak laser strike, Quinn dropped down to present the narrowest target profile possible and put the electronic piper as close to the target's last known

position as he was able to bring it. He was going for the blindfire option now, the only one left on the menu.

On full auto, Quinn raked the area with needlepoint P90 5.70 mm steel, using wide-angle burstfire to saturate the target zone with deadly high-velocity needles.

Although he didn't hit Pisces with the sustained fire front that he'd thrown up, the effect of the blindfire salvo made the merc sub skipper panic, and he bolted from his protected position behind the launch tube. Hustling down access stairs, he sprinted toward a control interface panel on the gantry's middle tier.

When Quinn's VRG screen cleared again and he was once more able to track the merc, Pisces had already swung open the hinged cover of the armored manual launch control locker.

Emergency launch procedures were deliberately uncomplicated. They had been designed so that a single crewman -- presumably the sub skipper -- could execute a missile launch, bypassing the standard countdown if launch parameters were programmed into the boat's tactical computer, which they were.

As long as he knew the access codes that opened the armored locker and deactivated the explosive charge that would otherwise destroy the mechanism, that is. And Pisces knew the codes. They had been extracted from the drugged brain of Captain Neil Claggett before those same chemicals had reduced him to a drooling vegetable.

With the cover of the control locker now pulled away and the manual launch controls exposed, Pisces pulled out the cotter pin that held a yellow-and-black striped T-bar in an upright position. Grasping the horizontal crosspiece atop the lever with one hand, he smiled balefully down through intersecting levels of the gantry. Although he couldn't see Quinn in the shadows, Pisces had a pretty good idea of where he was. He kept the bullpup trained on that spot with his other hand.

In the split-instant before Pisces could pull it down and execute a manual launch of all Skybolt missiles onboard, Nomad's systems cleared. He put his pipper on the crosshairs, got a target confirm, and squeezed the trigger of the P90 weapon in his hand.

"HANGFIRE!" Quinn's onboard computer reported after no bullet discharged. "RETRY WEAPON."

Nomad jerked the trigger of the 5.70 mm bullpup once more. But again, nothing happened except for a repeat message on the screen that told Quinn that the weapon was jammed.

"Looks like I just won the whole bag of marbles," Pisces shouted.

With Quinn's position revealed by his movements, Pisces now had a target. He launched a salvo of caseless 4.73 mm steel at Quinn who tucked sideways and executed a half roll on his left shoulder to land on another level of the gantry and reach for auxiliary weaponry with his right hand as he bounced back up.

From a perfectly balanced half-crouch, Quinn drew his standby piece from his chest holster. Though he'd kept a round already chambered in the 10 mm Glock semiauto, Quinn knew that it would be too late to stop Pisces as he watched his targeting pipper streak across the virtual screen.

Seconds before Quinn could even acquire Pisces with the Glock, blood spurted from the ragged wound high on Pisces' left chest. The pirate skipper stood still for a moment, succeeding in turning his head upward at the source of the gunfire.

Then his strength ebbed completely and the merc shooter tumbled forward off the edge of the catwalk, dropping down to strike the deck some twenty feet below with a sharp, dull thud.

On the high gantry above, one of Quinn's backup troopers stood holding the autoweapon that he'd used to shoot down the merc before he could wrench down the T-bar and manually launch the Skybolt ballistic cruise missiles on their terminating flight path to assured destruction.

"I figured you might need some help," the Brazilian called down to Quinn, his weapon still pointed at the unmoving figure below.

"Thanks," Quinn returned. "Keep your weapon trained on him."

"No sweat," the guy answered Quinn who went over to where the merc lay in a crimson pool of spreading blood.

Quinn looked at the merc sprawled on the blood-drenched metal grating of the catwalk floor. He was still alive, but only barely breathing. Already crossing over from life into death, Pisces could no longer feel sensation in his limbs, only a quickly spreading coldness that in seconds would enclose his heart in an icy grasp.

"You were lucky," he said feebly, coughing up blood that made bubbles break across his lips. "I was this goddamn close...."

Nomad shook his head, and watched the light leave Pisces' filmed-over eyes forever as the eternal coldness filled his chest and his head lolled sideways.

"You were never even in the ballpark, asshole," replied Quinn, and thumbed closed the dead man's sightlessly staring eyes.

Then he stood and flashed the SWAT-suited commando on the high gantry the thumbs-down and told him that Pisces had bought it. Before heading back to the bridge, Nomad paused to look up at the banks of deadly Skybolt missiles arrayed in their gleaming vertical tubes and consider the consequences to the world if they had been launched.

But the Skybolts hadn't been launched. That was all he needed to focus on for the present.

One point nagged at Quinn, though, despite his relief that the sub had finally been secured.

He had never confirmed the death of Alpha.

Nomad didn't like thinking that Alpha might still be alive somewhere. Because if it turned out that he was, then chances were good that he would be back, more determined than ever to make humankind

pay him tribute, and more eager than ever to settle accounts with the man who had twice thwarted his ambitions of global domination.

Quinn knew that he could not afford to let his guard down, not even for a second. Because all things being equal, Alpha *would* be back. And at the top of his hit list would be a single name.

That name would be Nomad's.

From Original Manuscript

EPILOG

From Original Manuscript

*Dulles International Airport.
Some miles outside of Washington D.C.*

The grey haired businessman climbing into the back of the limo had traveled a far greater distance than might be guessed at first glance.

From the cut of his well tailored suit, an onlooker would not guess that he had been fished from a polycarbonate globe floating on the wave tossed surface of the Atlantic ocean only a few hours before.

Nor would the angular line of the businessman's jaw -- a line owing its countours to the hand of one of the nation's top plastic surgeons -- give a hint that an electronic visual scrambler had screened the elegantly dressed man's face for the past several days.

The businessman gave the driver directions and settled back into his formfitting seat. A voice command turned on the video consoles and the businessman watched the world newsmedia via a direct satellite downlink.

As might have been expected, the big news story concerned the Nautilus incident. Reports of the event were all over the airwaves, and the self-congratulation and the mindless euphoria had already begun, he saw.

There were several parades already taking place at several places worldwide and an international summmit against global crime was being planned.

In the back seat of the limo, the businessman closed his tired eyes for a brief moment, massaging his temples as though fatigued from his long, transonic flight which had spanned three continents.

Images came to his mind unbidden.

He recalled the flight from the undersea base in the microsub.

The Nautilus had just made it clean away, but he had seen that another minisub was following.

Not surprisingly, Nomad was at the controls of the one-man submarine.

He had given chase but again had come close to destruction. Had he not bailed out at the last moment before the sub's power plant had caught a spark and exploded, he might not have survived.

But the special polycarbonate bubble had survived. It had been designed to do so.

As soon as it had reached the surface, the coded transponder beacon had activated. Alpha's search crews found the bubble within a matter of hours.

The businessman exited the limo and told the driver to pick him up later. He walked up the stairs to the high rise building in the expensive section of the city, passing aides in the halls.

His office was on the fifth floor of the building, and when he reached it he was already expected.

"Welcome back, sir," his secretary told her boss. "How was your trip?"

"Productive," he told her with a practiced smile. "How have things been here?"

"Hectic, considering what's been happening," she replied. "I mean with that submarine and the United Nations thing and all."

"Ah yes," he told her, "that. I see I have some catching up to do."

He walked past his secretary into his office. Seated behind his desk he began to punch up the computerized list of calls and business items on his personal information manager that Maude had prepared for him.

Alpha would return soon, he told himself.

And next time the world and especially the man known as Nomad, would find themselves facing Force Three. With one important difference: the last two times it had been business.

Next time, it would be personal.