

NO NINJA

DESERT FIRE



*Past and future
collide with deadly
force in the
Middle East*

DAVID ALEXANDER



GOLD EAGLE 02110 \$4.99

Nomad #4

(Originally titled Time Break)

by
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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.

Things may be the same again; and we must fight
Not in the hope of winning but rather of keeping
Something alive: so that when we meet our end,
It may be said that we tackled wherever we could,
That battle-fit we lived, and though defeated,
Not without glory fought.

-- Henry Reed,
Lessons of the War

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

The descriptions of time travel devices and technologies cited in this novel are based on actual theoretical models. While I have attempted to keep the segments dealing with the Gulf War accurate in the main, the names of certain principal figures or their specific roles have been changed for the purposes of the narrative.

-- D.A.

MISSION LOG ONE:

Strike Vector

ONE

The warden of Ironstone Federal Prison dragged on a ginseng cigaret as she stared out of her office window. A thick, brown haze of air pollution hovered over the shattered rubble of downtown Detroit like a dirty wall between heaven and earth.

It looked especially grim this morning, and the warden figured that the severe acid rainstorm alert she'd heard on the morning weather report would probably turn out to be as bad as the forecasters had predicted.

Alice Guthrie was glad that she had decided to take them at their word and wear her Kevlar-plastic weave raincoat to work.

Other than the threatening cloud cover, the outdoor temperature of the spring day was pleasantly warm. There seemed even to be the remote possibility of the sun peeking out once or twice. Despite the early hour and the unpredictable weather, there were already a few of ... *them* outside the prison gates.

A wave of sickness crashed over the warden as she realized that there would soon be even more of them milling around.

Within a matter of hours, the prison grounds would be thronged with them. She thought of their blank, soulless eyes and mindlessly beaming faces and shuddered involuntarily.

Her own daughter was but that was a thought she couldn't continue on with. Not now. It was far too painful.

Finishing her noncarcinogenic cigaret, Alice Guthrie consulted her desktop computer appointment scheduler. She was going through the motions because she knew full well what today's chief business concerned and who she was scheduled to meet with in her office in just a little while.

Warden Guthrie at once wanted to get the troublesome task over with but at the same time wished she didn't have to play any part in the ghastly charade.

But there was nothing she could do to stop the lawful release of prisoner number zero-two-two-nine-five-zero.

He had served his time, making parole after only two years of incarceration at Ironstone Prison. The record showed that he was a model prisoner in every respect, and psychological tests demonstrated that he had completely reformed.

Still, Warden Guthrie felt like she would better serve the interests of society by shooting number zero-two-two-nine-five-zero down in cold blood, rather than permitting him go free.

She would never stop believing that the prisoner was a menace to society, even if society itself had chosen to shut its eyes to the danger he posed it.

Warden Guthrie busied herself with some paperwork that lay strewn across her desk, pretending that she didn't hear the chanting that had just started up outside the prison walls.

As the warden of Ironstone prison was thinking her private thoughts, the object of those thoughts sat on an examination table in the prison infirmary.

He was there to go through a battery of prerelease medical tests. As well as these there was the critically important implantation of his BioTrak unit.

The device, no larger than a cherry pit and powered by an atomic battery, was to be implanted in his skull as part of the requirements of his parole.

The BioTrak unit would send out a continuous signal that would enable the parole authorities to keep accurate tabs on the prisoner's every movement. With the implant in his skull, the inmate would in effect be spending his parole in a prison without walls.

It was virtually impossible to remove, neutralize or phreak, and the fact that the BioTrak unit contained a tiny, yet extremely powerful explosive charge, easily sufficient to shatter the wearer's head to hundreds of bloody fragments, added an extra incentive to good behavior.

"There you go," the doctor, a bearded young man, said cheerfully, consulting his watch, "the topical anesthetic I gave you should be working by now. Feel numb yet?"

"Yes, I do," returned the prisoner, nodding his head.

He was a man of medium height and build. His features were regular and, except for his eyes, he might have had one of those faces that were quickly forgotten.

But the eyes, the left one gray and the right speckled with what looked like flecked gold, made that impossible. Those hypnotic eyes could not be

ignored, and had been the secret of the prisoner's meteoric rise to power and fame.

"Good," replied the doctor, raising a white plastic cylinder about six inches long from a nearby implements table and bringing it quickly to the side of the prisoner's neck. "Just hold still, then. It should all be over in a flash."

The doctor lightly touched the snout of the implanter to the side of the prisoner's neck. The prisoner experienced a momentary tickling sensation as the compressed air injector inserted the small electronic transmitter but nothing more than that.

"All over," said the doctor, putting away the implanter and swabbing the side of his patient's neck with an antiseptic wipe as he inspected the implantation site, through a digital magnifier.

A sweep of a handheld scanner across the implantation site produced a series of beeps and the message:

BIOTRAK UNIT 07205-22
IMPLANT SUCCESSFUL

"How does it feel?"

"I don't even know it's there," the prisoner replied.

"You're not supposed to," the doctor told him with a smile. "And whenever your parole maxes out, we can remove it just as painlessly, quickly and safely." The doctor held out his hand. "Good luck," he told the prisoner.

"Thank you," the prisoner replied, knowing that the doctor's sentiments were genuine. "I appreciate that. I really do."

From the look in the doctor's eyes, the prisoner knew that he had just won a potential convert to his cause. He felt a sudden elation, aware his gift for winning hearts and minds was still as strong as ever. As soon as he got out, he would put that gift to use again.

Warden Guthrie looked up from the papers that cluttered her desk as the prisoner arrived. In the background, she could hear the constant chanting. It was loud now, and she could no longer shut it out of her mind no matter how hard she tried.

With the monotonous chanting came memories of how her daughter had -- there was no other word for it -- *self-destructed* a few years ago.

She had been a beautiful girl of twenty-five with everything to live for. And then she had become something else ... something obscene.

Almost overnight, they had changed her. When the hideous transformation was complete, the thing without a heart and liver remained

on life support for months, until Alice finally and reluctantly had opted for clinical euthanasia.

That the man responsible for her daughter's fate now sat in front of her, and that she was about to send that same man back into society, scott free, filled her with an unspeakable revulsion.

Who would blame her if she killed him right now? Who could deny her the satisfaction of seeing this ghoul die as he had caused her daughter to die just as surely as if he had shot her with a pistol or stabbed her with a knife?

But she couldn't do a thing.

Alice Guthrie was a professional, and she knew that she had to soldier on. The parole board stated that the prisoner was completely reformed. He was to be released. It would serve nobody's purpose if she made a travesty of the system to suit her own selfish needs.

"Mr. Lux Vadim," the warden began. "The Federal government says that you've served your time. I disagree with that assessment very strongly. I think you're a danger to society and that letting you go, even wearing a biotransponder implant, might well turn out to be a tragic mistake."

"I'm sorry you feel that way, warden," the prisoner responded in a velvet soft voice, his strange, mismatched eyes boring into hers with laser-beam intensity.

Those eyes held the key to the prisoner's power, she knew, feeling the force that seemed to radiate from them, sucking her unwillingly into a bottomless vortex. "I have completely reformed," he said, his voice tranquilizingly calm, hypnotically soothing. "But may I remind you that my official title is still 'Reverend.' The fact that I have spent time in prison does not change the fact that I am the titular head of a recognized church."

"Very well," Guthrie replied. "*Reverend* Vadim, then. You have done nothing but make fools of the parole board and officials of this prison," the warden countered, shaking off the mesmerizing effects of the prisoner's gaze.

"But you can't fool me. I know who you are and what you are capable of doing. And I warn you, others know you for what you are too. Step out of line, and you'll wind up right back here, and next time your incarceration will be for the rest of your life."

"Thank you for sharing your thoughts with me, warden," the prisoner said, holding her gaze without blinking. "Am I free to go now?"

"Yes," she replied, now eager to be rid of him, and knowing that there was nothing more she could say or do.

"Then I won't take up any of your time," he told her as he rose from his chair and turned toward the door. "Thank you again, warden. May heaven shine on your buffers."

TWO

"A present, Jimmi."

"Wow, quantum, man! Where'd you get that?"

"That shouldn't concern you," Vadim replied, holding the small plug drug in the hollow of his hand. "You really shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth."

"I didn't mean to hassle you, man," Jimmi said, snatching away the black integrated circuit chip before the Reverend Vadim changed his mind.

He was a tall, rangy guy with an accent that spoke of the corn fields of his native Nebraska, who was serving a life sentence for a brutal rampage of robbery and murder that had left fourteen victims in its wake.

Vadim had found Jimmi useful in the performance of odd jobs. He had found out quickly that Jimmi had a talent for packratting things. He also had performed more unsavory tasks that a model prisoner of the Reverend's ilk could not allow himself to be given credit for.

A number of prisoners whom the Reverend had found troublesome during his stay at the Ironstone correctional facility had been sent to a better place by his cell mate and trusted friend.

"It's just that, I mean ... " Jimmi went on, fingering the chip's smooth black surface, "this here's some expensive shit, man."

"Indeed it is, Jimmi," the Reverend replied with a short laugh. "But as a parting gift it's the least I can do for my most trusted associate while I languished here in durance vile, a man with whom I have shared my most intimate secrets."

"We *were* pretty tight, man," Jimmi said back, nodding his head. "That's a natural fact."

"As inseparable as a Great White and its sucker fish," the Reverend answered his cell mate.

"Hey, what do you mean by that crack?"

"Just my little jest, Jimmi," the Reverend assured his cell mate with a pat on the shoulder. "At any rate, I want you to think of me while you enjoy this vintage hardware narcotic. It's your favorite memory chip, Jimmi."

"Wow, super quantum, man!" he exclaimed as he looked from the "plug" to the Reverend, forgetting all about the slight he'd just received. "You mean..."

"That's right, Jimmi. Woodstock," he replied. "Every glorious minute of that legendary rock festival held almost sixty-two years ago in August of 1969 as seen through the eyes of a nineteen-year-old hippie zonked on Owsley acid. It's seven straight, mindbending days of sex, drugs and rock and roll, Jimmi. You'll love it."

"I'm all choked up man," Jimmi replied, abashedly, his dull brown eyes growing moist. "What can I say?"

"Simply let me see you place my humble gift in your socket, Jimmi," the Reverend replied softly. "That's all I need to warm the cockles of my cardiac region."

Vadim watched Jimmi lift the memory chip and insert its pins into the thirty-two pin socket connector that had been bioengineered into the side of his skull.

The hardware narcotic immediately took effect, patching the virtual reality memories that it contained directly into Jimmi's hardwired brain, which plug drug users called a "McBrain."

"Wow, this is too much," Jimmi replied as he began to relive the Woodstock music festival, tapping his feet and snapping his fingers. "Hey, we'll get together after I get out of stir?" he asked.

"Don't worry," the Reverend Vadim replied. "We'll certainly stay in touch. Be well, Jimmi. Time flies and so must I."

Vadim left the cell, with Jimmi staring at the steel plate ceiling as he lay on the lower bunk of the bed, hearing, seeing and feeling the vintage rock of a bygone era.

The throng of chanting, shaven-headed acolytes began to cheer in wild unison. A mad frenzy of discordant voices filled the air as the milling crowd saw the Reverend Vadim walk to freedom through Ironstone Prison's main gate.

Uniformed members of Vadim's private mercenary army were already waiting to meet him as he left the prison gates. Instantly, they formed a protective cordon, forcing back the Reverend's own impetuous followers in order to usher him safely into a waiting electric limo.

The media was on the scene too, and newspeople were already shouting questions at him as the Reverend rushed toward the waiting stretch.

"What are your plans now?" asked one of the newspeople.

"To integrate all subfunctions with the universal dharma," the Reverend replied. "Such has always been my root path."

"Will you be returning to your space station headquarters, Reverend?" another mediaperson asked him, shouting to be heard over the deafening roar of the surging crowd.

"All data emerges, dis-emerges and becomes non-data," he responded. "The lotus has opened and from within its mysterious depths the arrow of Arjuna flies to heaven."

Vadim was already nearing the limo. While a crew of his blacksuited mercs held back the surging, chanting crowd that was desperate to touch the Reverend's person, other flunkies of Vadim's were holding the door of the limo open for him.

"Reverend!" another mediaperson shouted above the din. "A report has just come in that your cell mate, a man named Jimmi Jones, has just killed himself in an apparent hardware drug-induced suicide. Have you any comment on this breaking story?"

"This is indeed tragic news. I just left my good friend Jimmi only a little while ago," the Reverend replied, pausing before entering the limo. "If this news is true then I grieve deeply for my young friend. He had so much to live for."

With that, the Reverend Vadim slid completely into the limo's dark interior. He was bracketed by two merc guardians, one of whom immediately slammed shut the rear door. A third hardman sitting behind the wheel of the electric vehicle sent the limo screeching toward the highway outside the prison.

Behind the opaqued windows of the large, bulletproof vehicle, no camera lens could pick up the broad smile of deep satisfaction on the Reverend's face as he thought about his late friend Jimmi. Dead men, after all, told no tales.

THREE

The aerospace plane skimmed the near edge of space, cruising at hypersonic speeds in excess of Mach five.

At an altitude of one hundred thousand feet, the sky was an inverted bowl of polished ebony and the curvature of the luminous blue earth below could be seen from the cockpit of the ASP.

In the crew compartment of the sleek, delta-winged passenger aircraft, the commuter flight was progressing smoothly.

The captain thought about enjoying a cold stein of draft beer laced with just enough hallucinogenic drugs to put him in the mood for some fun and games with triple-breasted women when the scramjet landed at Sydney, Australia, less than two hours after departing the greater Boston area out of Logan International Airport.

Aft of the crew compartment, passengers in the wide-bodied aircraft enjoyed complimentary drinks, noncarcinogenic cigarets, and five hundred virtual reality cable channels available on their 3D eyephones.

Traveling in the first-class compartment just aft of the cockpit, on his way from a meeting with a client and en route to a symposium on international techno-terrorism before returning to home base for some much-needed rest, one of the passengers was watching an all-news channel on his complimentary eyephones.

The scene depicted the besieged entrance to Ironstone prison where the religious fanatics who dubbed themselves "Motherboarders" had turned out in droves to witness and cheer their leader's release from two years spent behind bars.

"This is indeed tragic news. I just left my good friend Jimmi only a little a little while ago," Reverend Lux Vadim replied to a reporter's shouted question regarding the unexpected suicide of his cellmate, then quickly disappeared into the back of the limo which promptly drove away.

The hardware drug overdose had caused Jimmi's McBrain to malfunction. As neural circuits popped, a massive cerebral hemorrhage caused blood to pour from his ears, nose and mouth. He was dead in a matter of seconds.

In his first-class seat, the passenger on the transonic flight switched off the eyephones. Removing them from his head he tucked them away in the pouch on the back of the seat in front of him.

His jaw was set and his gray eyes narrowed to tight slits as he stroked the point of his angular chin. A female flight attendant passed and asked if she could get him anything, perhaps sensing the tension the passenger felt. The passenger shook his head and politely turned down the offer.

At the moment, the man named Quinn and who a select few knew by his code-name Nomad, desired a great many things, but nothing on his wish list was within the flight attendant's power to provide. Chief among his wants at the moment was for the Reverend Lux Vadim to be sent back to prison immediately.

Quinn's thoughts turned back to events that had taken place some two years before.

They had been events leading to the arrest, trial, conviction and incarceration of the Reverend Lux Vadim for atrocities he had committed against all humanity.

Quinn had played a pivotal role in these affairs. As the scramjet sped through the ultrathin atmosphere of near-space, Quinn's mind sped backward to another time and another place....

The place was Los Angeles, and death was in season. A series of grisly mutilations had plagued the nation's second largest city, spreading panic throughout the urban population.

Bodies were turning up, their organs apparently removed with a surgical precision. It was apparent that an individual or group was going around and taking out the organs, though for reasons then unknown.

The best theory that the Los Angeles Police Department Corporation had to go on was that they had been removed from healthy bodies and then sold on the black market.

Quinn had been hired as a consultant by the Los Angeles Police Department Corporation to conduct a probe into the serial killings. The multiple fatalities had stymied the cops and had sent politicians of every political stripe clamoring for the violence to end.

Quinn's private security organization, Intervention Systems or IS, had placed agents on the street in undercover roles. From one of these

undercover assets, who had been recruited by the Reverend Vadim's followers, came a critical lead that was to be the first break unraveling the twisted meaning behind a baffling spate of senseless violence.

Converts new to the fold were disappearing from the Reverend's Church of the Divine Motherboard, the IS agent had reported.

On the surface, at least, there appeared to be no pattern to the disappearances. Followers joined the Motherboarders and left just as quickly in a constant ebb and flow.

It was discovered that the disappearances had been carefully orchestrated to exploit the normal changing of the guard as cover. The candidates selected for killing and subsequent organ removal were those whose absence would not attract undue attention. Those who would not easily or quickly be missed were fated to die.

Quinn's ongoing probe of the Motherboard Church had led to the piecing together of the grisly process by which acolytes were culled from the group, euthanized, and then surgically cannibalized so that their body parts could be harvested and sold at black market auctions.

Those selected were taken to several "retreats" established outside the city. The retreats were actually psychological conditioning centers where the Motherboarders were brainwashed using shock neuroprogramming techniques and potent psychotropic drugs.

Once they had been changed into catatonic zombies, little more than living robots, they were induced into signing away all their worldly possessions to the Motherboard Church.

Since many of the new converts were wealthy, this strategy reaped an added king's ransom in plunder for the Motherboarders. Once this was accomplished, the organ donors were taken to their place of euthanasia, the Reverend's headquarters.

This was a station in space. It was named Sunyata, after the Hindu word for "suchness" or the ultimate reality. After the fact, the newsmedia made much of this name, for it had a gruesome double meaning. To the Reverend Vadim, the ultimate reality was death.

There, in the station, the organ donors were slaughtered like barnyard animals. Their organs were removed from the freshly euthanized bodies and stored cryogenically.

After piecing together the mechanics of liquidation practiced by the Motherboard Church, Quinn's next task was to prove that the Reverend Vadim was responsible for masterminding the organ theft and sales operations on the black market which followed.

Quinn set about to prove that it was the Reverend who was behind these crimes and who sanctioned them at every level. He got his chance when word came down to him about a secret organ auction where some of Vadim's hijacked body parts would be sold to the highest bidders.

Spearheading a bust of the auction, a Los Angeles Police Department Corporation task force led by Quinn seized dozens of surgically removed hearts, livers, spleens, bladders, colons and other human viscera taken by Vadim from his victims.

Using genetic imprinting and other forensic technologies to prove that the organs originally came from murdered Motherboarders, Quinn succeeded in putting across his theory to the World Police organization. The Reverend was arrested on the basis of the evidence that Quinn and his IS operatives had compiled.

Vadim was tried and convicted, though not after a great deal of deliberation and courtroom pyrotechnics had taken place. Vadim's personal fortune of billions of dollars had enabled him to hire the best lawyers in the business to defend him.

In the end, most claimed that Vadim might have walked if it had not been for Quinn whose testimony had led to the conviction that had put the Reverend in a federal correction facility.

Learning that the Reverend had recently qualified for parole, Quinn had been among those who had pleaded with the courts to keep him locked up, for the rest of his life, if need be. But the courts had overruled Quinn.

The Reverend Vadim had reformed, they claimed. He was a changed man, one who had paid his debt to society and could now live a productive existence. Brain scans and expert testimony had backed up these assertions. Vadim was fit to be released.

The purpose of prison, society's watchdogs had told Quinn, was not to warehouse criminals, but to turn them into useful members of society. These were not the primitive days of the twentieth century, after all, they added. These were enlightened times.

Quinn had answered at the parole hearings that the Reverend Vadim could as soon be a useful member of society as an infectious virus could be a friend to mankind. The Reverend was a disease, he had argued. One as deadly as a cancer.

But he had been overruled....

The flight attendant came by again.

"Are you sure you wouldn't like me to get you something, sir?" the attractive greenette with fashionable purple eyes asked Quinn, her smile suggesting something other than a drink or sandwich.

"No thank you," Quinn replied, shaking his head. Turning, he caught sight of his reflection against the mirrorlike surface of the double-paned glass, backed by the seamless blackness of space.

His jaw was tight and his lips were drawn back in a snarl. But it was the eyes in the reflected image that held Quinn's attention.

He now knew why the flight attendant had been so solicitous. The eyes staring back at Quinn were the eyes of a man in pain. And the source of that pain was the man who had just been freed from Ironstone Prison.

FOUR

Some months after the Reverend Vadim's release from Ironstone Prison, the world bore witness to an amazing exodus. It was called the Day of Ascension.

At airport terminals across the continental United States from Los Angeles to New York City, planes chartered by the Reverend's organization were taking off in a mass migration never before seen on earth.

Their destination was the Sunyata.

In its high orbit more than twenty thousand miles above the planet, the space station looked down upon the spinning blue globe from which the aerospace planes took off on their skyward journeys.

Among the thousands of acolytes heading for the runway-to-orbit capable aircraft, was Mike Bodhi Tree.

Mike was the unhappy product of a broken home. He had run away at an early age, earning a meager and precarious living as a teenage prostitute who worked the mean streets of Los Angeles in order to stay alive.

He had been picked up off the streets by one of the mobile recruitment teams sent out by the Reverend's Church of the Motherboard to scour the city streets for new converts to the cause.

Like most other recruitment targets, once the mobile team hooked Mike they easily reeled him in. The teams rarely lost a recruit. Nor was Mike given a chance to think too long about the possibility that he might have made a tragic mistake in going with the Motherboarders.

From the moment that the mobile team had picked him up, the cult began the process that would culminate by turning him into one of its own.

While it put hot food into Mike's belly the cult put their twisted doctrines into his vulnerable mind. Soon his shaven head was as bald as a cue ball and his worn street clothes had been replaced by flowing white robes of a Phase One Motherboarder clone.

After days of psychological conditioning and the ingestion of mind-altering drugs that his food was laced with, Mike had moved onto the next and final phase of his membership in the Motherboard Church. He had "volunteered" to be implanted with a hardware drug module interface.

This would permit him, his keepers told him, to be "plugged directly into the great cosmic Motherboard" and become a Phase Two clone.

The name he had been given at birth had been changed as Mike underwent the initiation ceremony from which he would emerge a full-fledged Motherboarder. From that moment on, he adopted the surname "Bodhi Tree."

Mike saw visions of the paradise that awaited him through being plugged directly into the Divine Motherboard as a Phase Two clone. The integrated circuit chip that was inserted into his skull interface showed Mike images of the destruction of the wicked and the rewarding of the just.

Seas of fire, lakes of burning lava, swarms of pestilential killer bees and other hellish plagues tortured the unbelievers. Most of humanity died horribly under these afflictions, for humanity was wicked and evil and rotten to the core.

Mankind deserved to suffer such a fate, preached the Reverend Vadim. Only those who joined his Motherboard Church as holy clones would be saved. Only the Motherboarders deserved salvation by becoming one with the Cosmic circuit of Mu, the Divine Mother.

Now, on the Day of Ascension, Mike Bodhi Tree as a Phase Two clone, trudged with the crowd toward the waiting scramjet. There he was seated and sat quietly, lulled by the alpha waves coming from the chip in his skull.

Songs praising the glory of the lost mother continent, Mu, were struck up as the scramjet began rolling down its taxi way. Mike joined in, joyously singing "My Interface is in Thy Hands, Oh Mother."

Quickly getting airborne, the ASP reached transonic velocities and rocketed upward toward the microatmosphere and microgravity of near space, where the mothership Sunyata waited to receive him into her electric bosom.

"It is perfection itself," Reverend Vadim cried with joy as he looked out into the blackness of space through one of Sunyata's oversized viewing windows.

The station was a dual-keel type, constructed of a network of modular components linked by connecting nodes. Immense solar collector arrays

were kept pointed at the sun at all times, gathering solar energy for conversion to electrical power.

A spinning hub at the center of the station maintained an artificially generated earth gravity of one-g. Also at the station's central hub were the main docking platform, housing launch and landing facilities for space shuttles, aerospace planes, orbital tractor vehicles and other craft.

Glistening silver specks were rising from the continental land mass earth-side as the Reverend Vadim looked down on the shining blue orb below, and Vadim knew that these were the planes that contained his followers, drawn to him like filings of metal to a powerful magnetic field.

"They come by the thousands. How many have we, Tabor?"

"I've lost count," Donald Martin Tabor replied gruffly.

He was a stocky man with thickly muscled arms, a barrel chest and a head that looked small by comparison with the rest of his body, especially because of the crewcut that he sported which accented the hollow flesh that sagged against the high bones of his skeletal cheeks. "Enough, anyway," he concluded with a laugh.

"Fine. That's how I like it," Vadim answered the former circus strongman and longtime associate, for it was Tabor who had managed the Motherboard Church in the Reverend's absence. "Is the earth-based operation on-line yet?"

"Yeah," Tabor replied, nodding. "The plug factory in Elay is ready to begin production."

"Uh-uh. I meant the new mega-chips, Tabor," Vadim stressed. "What about them? Don't jerk me on this."

"Well," answered Tabor, drawing out the one-syllable word and spreading his hands, "that might take a little longer. But not too long."

"Make sure it doesn't, Tabor," Vadim replied, turning from the crewcut man to the large window in which the planet earth hung against the blackness of outer space. "And above all, make damned sure you don't get caught."

The Reverend walked out onto the rostrum. He was resplendent in his flowing white robes, almost godlike.

His Phase Two clones filled the assemblage hall, orbiting in the space station Sunyata high above the planet earth.

"Chips socketed on the great cosmic Motherboard," he began. "I bring you tidings of salvation, hosannas of praise, proclamations of glory," he went on.

A cheer went up from the assemblage in the great hall.

Among the crowd was Mike Bodhi Tree, Phase Two clone. Like the rest of the acolytes filling the Great Hall of Worship, he applauded the appearance of the Reverend with all his heart and soul.

A deep hungering to merge his being with the spirit of Mu, the Mother, she who had installed the Motherboard at the dawn of history, filled Mike's soul.

"Now I shall channel Abraxas, the high priest of Mu," the Reverend said. "It is he who hid the crystals of power before that terrible day when Mu sank beneath the waves forever. Now the spirit of Abraxas will discourse through these lips of flesh. Listen well, for he speaks for the ancient Mother."

A hush fell across the assemblage.

The Reverend's features changed as he underwent a complete transformation.

His eyes became hollow black orbs staring out from infinite depths. His lips trembled. His body seemed to shake and shudder as if seized by terrible convulsions.

"Ahhhhhhh," the deep voice that came from his lips proclaimed. "Abraxas comes forth!"

Channeled through Vadim, Abraxas spoke and prophesied from his place in the spirit realm. The Muan priest did not have good news to report. He told his faithful flock about the cataclysm that would soon strike the earth below.

Mountains would quake and split apart like ridges on a crust of rising bread. The planets would swing out of orbit like beads spilling from a broken string as the sun enlarged to fill the entire sky, burning all living things before the coming of redemption for the faithful.

The Reverend Vadim, said the voice of the Muan priest, had been released from Ironstone Prison just before this tragedy would strike.

The cataclysm would befall the nations of mankind in the twenty-first century because of the same wickedness that had doomed his own people millions of years before, on the primal continent of Mu, the land of the Mother.

"Debug your flesh program!" cried the spirit of Abraxas from Vadim's lips. "Cleanse the virus of ignorance from your source code! Socket your chips upon the bosom of the cosmic Motherboard!"

At the conclusion of the ceremony, Mike Bodhi Tree was among those "clones" who volunteered to donate their flesh to the Motherboard. With gladness in his heart, he signed a standard waver form legal under the National Euthanasia Act of 2010 and was led to a far chamber of the space station.

When the group to be euthanized was assembled there, a technician punched a series of keystrokes into a computer keyboard. A code number flashed on the computer screen, along with a message:

TERMINATING NUMBER 0987-655

The plug module in Mike Bodhi Tree's McBrain instantly sent out a lethal signal inducing a massive cerebral hemorrhage.

Mike's eyes rolled up in his head within a second. Even as the blood from his rupturing McBrain began to ooze from his ears, nose and mouth, he was being wheeled on a gurney into an operating room.

There, medical technicians in sterile gowns waited to harvest the precious organs before necrosis set in and they lost all commercial value to the Motherboard Church.

FIVE

The warehouse stood on a burned-out city block that itself occupied a place on a forlorn grid of trashed streets. Riots sparked by food shortages and fanned to flames by the mob's lust for destruction had claimed most of the buildings here years before.

Now there was not a lot of the original architecture left standing and nobody in their right mind would have even thought of building there since the riots.

Constructed of cinderblocks and cement, the warehouse dominated the bleak, eerily desolate landscape of what Los Angelinos, and indeed the rest of America, called the L.A. Burnout Zone.

Outside its walls, in the barren city streets, all appeared deceptively quiet.

Inside the lone warehouse, it was another matter entirely.

The earth below the two story cement block building had been tunneled out extensively into a network of huge cement-walled bunkers. Hardware narcotics manufacturing plants and research and development facilities had then been installed into every square foot of this subterranean facility.

Tabor, the Reverend's chief enforcer, had come down to earth from the space station Sunyata to oversee the operation. He toured the facility, determined to get the production of the mega-plug chips started before the Reverend lost patience with him.

That, he had learned, could prove hazardous to the health.

Quinn sat before the console screens in the darkened interior of the surveillance van parked on a street on the perimeter of the Burnout Zone.

The only source of light came from the banks of blinking data terminals that crammed every spare inch of wall space in the vehicle. The only sounds were the click of computer keys and the whirring of disk drive mechanisms and high speed printers.

The Black Shadow satellite imaging platform used by IS, Quinn's firm, was about to come on line.

In moments, downlinked telemetry flashed across the console view screen as the Black Shadow satellite made another of several high altitude passes over the city that it was scheduled to make that night.

The computer systems inside the van recorded every byte of data sent down from the orbital imaging platform. Sophisticated sensing filters combed the digitized surveillance telemetry utilizing artificial intelligence encoding.

The computers had been programmed to search through the stream of telemetry for indications of drug manufacturing, and the intelligent machines went about their task with speed and efficiency.

Quinn was aware that the Reverend Vadim knew his business and had perfected his modus operandi. As shrewd as he was insane, Vadim would have taken care to use thermal imaging countermeasures to hide any drug manufacturing activities in the Burnout Zone.

Stealth would insure the continuance of his illegal industrial activities, and Vadim would have installed the best systems that money could buy, if he acted true to form.

The sensitive cameras orbiting in space had now come on-line, transmitting real-time video of the desolation below.

The screens relaying satellite imaging data showed Quinn a slow pan of the landscape of South Central Los Angeles. The bleak urban grid made up of city blocks crisscrossed by streets and avenues was covered by rubble, looking just like the urban combat zone that in fact it was.

As Quinn watched the telemetry, the signals processing computer, which had been filtering the transmission for signs of illegal drug manufacture, flashed him a message indicating that he might have hit paydirt.

HIGH PROBABILITY OF MATCH PARAMETERS DETECTED

read the text block that had popped up over the images beamed down from space. Quinn keystroked in commands that told the computer that the data was to be saved for another look-see after the satellite had completed its orbital pass.

After a period of time, the Black Shadow surveillance platform had completed its sweep across the skies far above the city. Now all of the millions of bytes of visual data that the "overhead system" had scanned and

recorded was logged into the mass storage memory of the computers onboard the van.

There were thirty-odd possibles, announced the computer, after it had analyzed all of the possible sites that it had detected from the satellite scan.

All of these possible sites exhibited thermal signatures that seemed to be incongruous with their apparent function. A chimney, for example, would display a heat pattern that normally would be different from that made by the engine of a car.

In each of the "possibles" flagged by the computer, there was a discrepancy between the known thermal signatures of the objects and those which had been detected by the overhead imaging platform. The very fact that it looked as if someone had taken precautions to disguise the thermal signatures made the flagged sites look suspicious.

Of course, these readings could also be attributable to environmental causes, or even artificial factors that were of non-human origin, such as debris blocking a ventilation duct in such a manner that the dispersal pattern of escaping heat was such that the computer flagged it as suspicious.

Hours more went by as Quinn painstakingly pored over every one of the possibles that the computers' evaluation programs had logged.

Item by item, he scanned the Black Shadow recce satellite's transmitted data, until his eyes hurt and his mind throbbed. Quinn was driven by the haunting images of the victims of Vadim's ghoulish crimes, and by his obsession to prevent the same obscenities from happening all over again.

A long while later, Quinn had narrowed down the field of possibles to three high-grade target sites. The satellite had done its work, and now had come the moment for Nomad to take a closer look from a different observational perspective. Quinn swiveled in his chair and switched to another viewing window on the main computer screen.

He selected the menu option called LAUNCH DRONE.

Within moments, the remote piloted drone lifted silently from the roof of the van. It soared to a height of eighty feet then began cruising across the darkened city in a westerly direction, heading toward the first site that Nomad had targeted for a closer look.

Clutching a yoke-type piloting device, Quinn steered the rotor-powered miniature aircraft across the dark, cloud-streaked skies.

Television and thermal imaging sensors arranged on its outer hull in a phased array sent multimode data to the stationary van. Quinn steered the drone aircraft with a naturalness as if the distant machine were an extension of himself.

Within a matter of minutes, the pilotless drone had reached the first of the preselected surveillance sites. Quinn slowed the RPV's forward speed and put it into a holding pattern above the initial target site.

This was a building where an unusual thermal pattern had been detected by the computers. Quinn descended the RPV to investigate the target close-in.

On the rooftop he saw the reason for the odd patterns: a group of winos were sleeping there, their body heat in addition to the smoldering remains of a cooking fire had been the cause of the discordant readings.

Ascending the drone again, Quinn piloted the unmanned surveillance aircraft toward its next target site. This too, turned out to be a dead end. But on his third try, Quinn found what he thought might in fact be pay dirt.

He zoomed in the image on the screen before him. There was the telltale structure -- a system of metal vanes that was part of a roof-mounted ventilation duct that had looked suspicious to the computers, as in fact it did to his own eyes. He called up IMAGE ENHANCEMENT on the computer's icon menu.

The image of the duct was zoomed up and digitally refurbished. Now what Quinn saw on the view screen convinced him that the structure, which on close inspection appeared to be made out of hundreds of thin metal tubes, was definitely out of place on the rooftop of the warehouse.

Quinn called up COMPARISON mode on the screen. The computer's artificial intelligence drivers matched the image to entries in a digital library containing the specifications of millions of technological components of U.S. and international manufacture. In a matter of moments it flashed the message MATCH PROBABILITY 98% to Quinn.

The definition of the object was a Thermal Interface Distorter, part number EV-78901.

It was manufactured by Cybertron Military Supplies of Greenview, Texas as a niche product for what the on-line parts description said was "for changing the thermal signature of vehicles and structures and to facilitate the possibility of detection by both ground-based and overhead imaging platforms with a high order of effectiveness."

Quinn phoned Cybertron Military Supplies and was linked to its computer by high-speed modem.

"Thank you for calling Cybertron Military Supplies," the androgynous voice of a service computer answered when the line engaged. "None of our sales representatives are here at the moment, but if you would like to engage our on-line database, please do so at your first convenience."

Quinn's own computers were soon linked to Cybertron's and the military supply company's database yielded its most protected information to the security clearance that Quinn had electronically "forged" to gain access to the system.

The hack was illegal, but so what? If he could save one life that Lux Vadim was destined to take now that he was free, then Quinn was not above hacking the Cybertron computer. His system penetration provided him with the data that the part had been sold to a reseller outfit known as Data Integration Products of Los Angeles.

Quinn checked farther, closing down the Cybertron hack and clandestinely entering the computer systems of several banks, commodities exchanges and even the federal courts system to secure the data he required to nail Lux Vadim to the wall.

Data Integration Products, it turned out, was actually a shell corporation leased to an offshore corporate entity, the South Breeze Conglomerate based in the Cayman Islands, B.W.I.

By now, Quinn knew enough to convince him that an on-site inspection of the warehouse was warranted by the highly suspicious linkages among these corporate entities, triggered by the discovery of the Thermal Interface Distorter detected on the warehouse roof. Placing all systems on standby, Quinn prepared to pay the warehouse building an unscheduled visit in the dead of the night.

SIX

Some time after the moon had set over the city of Los Angeles, one of two wandering homeless men drinking cheap wine cut with hallucinogens chanced to glance up into the starlit sky. The one who had looked up suddenly cried out and pointed his finger at the stars.

"Yo! Check that shit out!" he shouted to his companion.

He had seen what appeared to be a huge bird or bat flying directly overhead. The frightening apparition glimpsed by the homeless man was silhouetted against the field of stars, its immense wings propelling it across the heavens at a fantastic rate of speed.

"Don't see nothing, man," the wino's companion answered with a shake of his head.

He had followed his partner's pointing finger and seen nothing out of the ordinary in the sky above. Except for the outlines of the skyscrapers in the distance, and the seamier skyline of the squat buildings in the Burnout Zone, the night sky was as empty as the bottle of cheap hooch he'd just chucked into a rubble-strewn lot.

"It was there, I tell you!" the first man cried out. "I seen it! Some kinda giant fucking bird!"

"You been drinking too much rotgut, man," the second wino told the first. "You're losing your mind. Lemme take you to the euth center."

"Fuck you, motherscut!" the first man protested, shoving the second man in the chest. "Maybe it's me who's gonna take *you* to the euth center!"

Instead of shoving back, the second man drew a long combat dagger. Without saying another word he plunged it into the belly of the first derelict. Blood began to gush and he turned the knife in the wound, drawing it up

from navel to clavicle and feeling hot blood gush all over the filthy rags he wore as his buddy's entrails ruptured.

"You should'a kept your stinkin' mouth shut," he said to the mutilated corpse as he wiped the bloody blade with the dirty scrap of a discarded cellophane bag. Hearing the sound of growling as a feral dog pack sniffed the blood scent on the wind, the second man got scared and ran away, his thoughts already turning to how he could cadge the money for a fresh bottle of LSD wine.

The second man would not have been as skeptical had he looked at the skies a pulse beat sooner. Then he would have seen the winged figure pass almost directly over his head.

That figure was now approximately a quarter mile from the vacant lot where the two men had argued over the apparition that the first had seen in the night skies overhead. But it had been no bird, bat or other flying creature that was glimpsed by the dead man who had spoken up.

What had been mistaken in the darkness for an animal was in fact a highly sophisticated machine.

Its wings were mechanical, linked to an onboard computer processor that controlled their upsweep and downbeat with precisely timed rhythms, while rear elevons and control surfaces made up the tail assembly.

The device was an ornithopter, and it was piloted by the man called Nomad.

The target zone flashed on the virtual screen as invisible lasers painted the ground below and subminiature computer hardware enhanced the image, throughputting a constant stream of tactical data.

Quinn circled the warehouse as he subjected the strike site to a series of multiple-mode scans.

Thermal imaging continued to yield evidence that the site was a likely candidate for search and interdiction: a great deal of effort had seemingly gone into dissipating the thermal patterns rising from the warehouse.

Using his wrist-top keypad, Quinn punched in a fast command sequence. The ornithopter's navigational computer immediately put the unique, moveable-winged aircraft into its automatic landing sequence.

The rapid beating of mechanical pinions against cool night air was the only sound that disturbed the stillness of the night as Quinn's combat booted feet touched down lightly on the rooftop of the building below.

Inputting another sequence on his wrist-top keypad, Quinn unfastened the wings and fuselage of the ornithopter from the quick release fittings that fused the various components to his body. In previous eras, fliers talked of "strapping aircraft to their backs." Now that expression had finally become a reality.

Each of the ornithopter's wing, tail assembly and airframe elements neatly collapsed and folded up into modular units that Quinn stashed quickly in the darkness of the warehouse rooftop.

He might need these components later for escape. But if anyone but himself tampered with them, computer-linked antipersonnel submunitions would go into autodestruct mode, blowing away all traces of the advanced design flying machine.

Invisible to night-vision instruments, Quinn trod stealthily across the rooftop on specially cushioned boots. All forms of thermal imaging and passive infra-red scanning were defeated by the stealth suit that encased his body in a cocoon of virtual invisibility.

The unique combat garb functioned by breaking up the thermal patterning produced by the human body. It accomplished this feat by means of a crisscrossing network of microthin plastic tubes sandwiched between the fabric of the stealth suit.

This mixed pattern of heat and cold could be "sculpted" to match the thermal signature of the surrounding environment. This was to prevent the production of "black holes" -- areas of negative thermal activity -- which would be telltale giveaways of attempts to conceal a heat source.

Also unique was the battle mask worn by the striker. The virtual reality goggles (VRGs) Quinn wore covered most of his head area, the two large sensor arrays fronting the goggles resembling the eyes of a predatory mantis.

The VRGs constantly scanned the combat environment with invisible Q-switched lasers, sonars and radars, mixing the scans or selecting one mode above the other according to the situational dynamics of the ops zone. Constantly updated tactical data could be flashed on the virtual screen for use by strike personnel in real time.

The VRGs could also be cybernetically linked to one or several personal defense weapons, such as the P-90 close assault weapon (CAW) that Quinn now ported, enabling him to put a pipper or "death dot" on the target display which in turn would automatically trigger the weapon and release computer-guided burst fire.

Moving swiftly, Quinn found an entrance on the rooftop and crossed toward it. Although this access point was secured by an electronic keypad lock, it wasn't a problem to the cybernetic warrior on the roof. Quinn unshipped a lock decrypter mechanism from one of the gear pouches on his stealthsuit and proceeded to phreak the lock.

He placed the lock decrypter over the punch pad of the lock. At once the decrypter went to work, intercepting and decoding the locking sequence. In a few moments, the message LOCK DECRYPTED. COMBINATION 22 55 98 09. UNLOCKING... flashed across the LCD display window.

A few seconds later, the lock had been popped right open. Swinging aside the doorway, Quinn stole down a set of fire stairs. Probing ahead of him, the invisible laser beams of his VRGs scanned the strike perimeter. No sign of threat was detected in the darkness below.

At the foot of the stairs, the striker's inboard audio amplifier picked up the sounds of voices. The upper stories of the building were pitch dark and

Quinn moved with the confidence that he could not be seen in the absence of light.

This was not the case for the two mercenary troopers who were making the rounds of their patrol perimeter below. The fact that the patrol walkers wore passive infrared (IR) night seeing goggles explained the reason for the total darkness.

The strategy behind their security patrol activity was to capture penetrators in the darkness who could not see them coming until it was too late. This strategy was about to backfire.

Nomad passed directly in front of the two-man perimeter patrol, the heat signature of his stealth suit making him seem to blend into the enveloping darkness. Through his VRGs he could clearly see his targets as easily as though it were high noon. They were staring directly at him, unaware of his presence despite the image intensifying goggles that jutted from their masked faces.

Using the buttstock of the P90, Quinn lashed out at the jaw of the first sentry. The man let out a grunt and crumpled to the deck, knocked unconscious. The second perimeter-walker heard the dull thud of the body toppling to the floor nearby and whipped his weapon toward the source of the sounds.

He saw nothing, except for his partner lying in a heap on the floor.

"Scudder?" he called out, sweeping the muzzle of his AUG bullpup left and right, unsure of whether to go toward his partner or not. "Scudder, what the fu -- "

A savage sidekick to the merc's head using the side of the foot as a striking point made what seemed like a bright flash of lightning explode inside his brain. Knees buckling, the second merc collapsed with a loud grunt onto the deck a few feet from his kayoed partner.

Quinn checked the conditions of both mercs with the VRGs set on bioscan tracking mode. A graph showing vital signs traces of Quinn's victims confirmed that the mercs had not been seriously injured, but would remain unconscious for some time.

To make certain that the unconscious security crewmen would present no further threat or raise any alarms, Quinn unshipped a roll of duct tape and used strips he cut from it to bind their hands and feet and to gag their mouths.

Some things couldn't be improved upon, and as far as securing captives quickly and efficiently went, the sticky silver tape was an old, reliable solution. As he left his immobilized captives, Quinn was certain that they would remain on ice for the duration of the assault.

SEVEN

In the glassed-in booth that looked down onto the main mezzanine of the assembly line, Tabor was on the secure satcom uplink to the space station Sunyata.

"Make sure that production quotas are raised by three percent," the voice coming from the face on the phone's viewscreen commanded Tabor. "Quality control standards have been piss-poor too."

"I'm working on it," Tabor told the figure on the satcom line, addressing the Reverend Lux Vadim who was orbiting thousands of miles above the earth. "But it's rough. These new people, they're green. Don't forget that all the old pros are gone."

"I'm well aware of that, Tabor," the Reverend Lux told his flunky as he faced the monitor screen in his private communications center onboard the orbital station Sunyata. "Nevertheless, I want to see results. That's what you're paid a great deal of money for, in case you've forgotten."

"Production levels *will* rise," Tabor promised. "I personally guarantee it."

There was sudden static over the connection as the face on the screen began to waver, to break up as noise bands crisscrossed the screen. The space station Sunyata was passing out of telemetry range overhead. Soon all transmission would be cut off.

"Keep me posted," the Reverend Vadim said, and quickly severed the connection link.

As the screen blanked, Tabor spun around on his heel and walked over to the observation window.

In the drug manufactory below, he could see the shaven-headed Motherboarders busy at their work stations. They were all engaged in various activities ranging from testing the chip matrices to assembling the finished product, ready to be shoved into the skull sockets of plug-drug junkies across America.

Tabor took out a noncarc cigaret and popped the self-lighting cap on its end. He inhaled ginseng-flavored smoke and cursed under his breath as he continued to scan the activity down below the observation window of the sky suite.

These people were no damned good, he thought as he shook his head in disgust. They just plodded along like robots, which of course, they were.

The secret was in the supervisory people who could speed up the process and squeeze every drop of productivity out of the "clone" labor force.

But all of those upper echelon people had gone down with the Reverend when he had been busted a few years ago. They were either dead, had taken a powder, or were waiting to max out behind the bars of cells in the federal penitentiary system.

No way was Tabor going to up production quotas the way things were going. He could see the handwriting on the wall.

Tabor turned and walked out the door of the sky suite. He would have to talk to the new supervisors he'd just hired. Somehow, he'd have to get his point across to them.

If promises of more money wouldn't work, then he would just have to put the fear of God in them. Maybe, he thought, he should kill a few right now, just to set an example for the others.

Elapsed mission time was nearing the twelve minute mark. As he moved stealthily through the darkness of the factory above, Quinn's VRGs pierced the curtain of darkness and gave him night-seeing capability.

He crossed the warehouse area to inspect some of the shipping cartons which were stacked against the bare concrete wall. The boxes bore markings indicating that they contained nonprescription drugs and medical supplies of various kinds.

Using his wrist-top keypad, Quinn punched in a command string that placed his VRGs in real-time recording mode. The data block reading VIDEO RECORDER ACTIVE. ELAPSED TIME 00:00 SECONDS flashed on the upper right corner of his virtual screen before popping out of existence again.

Lifting one of the storage cartons up off the warehouse floor, Quinn was not surprised to find that the carton seemed to be feather-light. Using a

spring-loaded knife to slit open the box, he found that it was completely empty.

Repeating his search throughout the storage area, Quinn discovered that the remainder of the boxes stacked in the area were just as empty as the first carton had turned out to be.

This confirmed Quinn's impression that the warehouse was only a shell and that the entire building housed a front operation for the genuine business being conducted elsewhere on the premises: illicit plug-drug manufacture, most likely.

Before turning his attention away from the storage cartons, Quinn panned the VRGs across the empty boxes littering the floor, recording the crime scene as evidence against the Reverend Vadim.

Because he did not have a warrant, his search was not legal, and would not hold up in court. Nevertheless, there was those who would be highly interested in the data he brought back, obtained according to Hoyle or not.

With the VRGs still on video recorder mode, Quinn crossed to one of the exitways and used his lockpad decrypter to silently open the door and defeat its intruder alarm.

The passive IR sensors built into the corridor's smart walls failed to register the passage of the stealth-suited striker as Quinn hustled down a flight of stairs that quickly brought him into the lowest levels of the building.

At the foot of the steps he came upon another door, this one bearing only a crash bar and no lock. Reaching toward his right wrist, Quinn punched up farfoom mode on his wrist-top pad.

Standing stock still, he listened for a while. From beyond the door there came the muted sounds of voices, the jingling of metal fastenings, the rustling of fabric and the noises made by the soft treading of footsteps.

ANALYSIS...read the data block superimposed on the VRG screen after Quinn keystroked another command set on his wrist-top pad and artificial intelligence hardware initialized...

SECURITY STATION FIFTEEN METERS BEYOND DOOR ... VOICE DATA INDICATES 84% PROBABILITY OF THREE GUARDS ON STATION ... HIT ANY KEY IF YOU WANT MAP OF CORRIDOR BASED ON ACOUSTICAL DATA.

Quinn hit a key on his wrist-top pad. The screen immediately flashed him a wire diagram in glowing red that indicated that the corridor made an L-shaped blind turn before opening out onto a security station.

Three dimensional green colored wire diagrams showed human figures seated at a console station beyond the bend.

Switching the VRGs to full-automatic scan modes, Quinn reached down and pulled the donut-shaped P90 close assault weapon (CAW) from the Velcro quick-draw fastenings at his thigh. A targeting piper

automatically appeared on the virtual screen as he silently pushed against the crash bar and swung open the door.

Invisible lasers swept the corridor and redrew the VRG screen to process new data streaming in from the ops zone.

Numerals indicating the distance to the security station around the corridor's L-bend augmented the wire diagram in glowing red as Quinn darted around the bend, bringing him into the line of sight of the guards occupying the security station.

The 3D wire diagrams indicating the figures of the guards began to move as the first guard recovered from his initial shock at scoping the black-clad striker in the high-tech battle mask pop into view. In Quinn's cyberspatial viewing envelope, the three guards were immediately assigned targeting priorities.

As the first guard spun around, simultaneously drawing the weapon holstered at his hip, Quinn put the death dot at the center of the cross reticle that had appeared over the graphical diagram of the target's head.

A trigger squeeze on the P90 and a silenced autoburst of precision-targeted 5.70 mm flechette fire roared from the black plastic donut in Quinn's gloved fist, hurled with lethal accuracy at the target simulation on his VRG screen.

Quinn scored two more takedowns in quick succession after the first guard was terminated clean and fast. The two other security personnel had both made the wrong moves, reaching for their Glock side arms instead of raising their hands in the air. They had paid the price for acting in haste rather than surrendering.

Moving quickly to the guard station, Quinn subjected the combat zone to a fast perimeter scan. The VRGs reclassified the strike environment's status as threat-neutral.

Holstering the CAW, Quinn crossed quickly to the blood-spattered security console and unshipped the phreaker he had brought with him.

Before deploying the phreaker, Quinn wanted a full schematic of the mission site. If one were available, the main security computer was the place from which to get it.

Locating an RS-232 serial port, Quinn attached a cable to the twenty-six pin interface and punched in a command set on his wrist-top keypad. Within a matter of seconds, the VRGs' inboard computer had found the floor plan of the site and copied the data to its high capacity bubble memory.

Now it was time to put the phreaker into action. Punching a command set into the keypad on the small black box, Quinn placed the phreaker beneath one of the consoles. Its magnetized surface held fast to the metal housing. Quinn checked the security console screens and noted with satisfaction that the area of penetration continued to remain tactically sterile.

Hunched over one of the keyboards of the security station, Quinn tried to patch a playback of the last six to eight minutes of monitoring the

area onto the security screen. Again, to his satisfaction, the screen showed no indication of his presence.

These data told Quinn that his phreaker was functioning properly. Its integrated circuitry would continue to override the security channel with its own signals, spoofing the perimeter security sensors.

Rising from the security station, Quinn's black-gloved hands again reached for the lethal black donut holstered at his thigh. His VRGs indicated that its clip was seventy-five percent full of 5.70 mm rounds and Quinn decided to pop a fresh clip into the mag well that sat vertically atop the P90's receiver.

The VRGs had also redrawn the virtual screen to display an updated 3D wire diagram of the area based on the floor plans that Quinn had copied earlier. Following the glowing digital arrow, Quinn continued on his probe through the three-dimensional maze of cybernetic space.

EIGHT

Tabor was in the matrix room, looking at Armageddon.

Projected onto one of the walls was an immense blowup of one of the WIRE hardware drug chips, the core layer known as the "matrix."

A technician was explaining how this new plug drug, to be called "Armageddon," would be twice as potent as any drug of its type that had been manufactured before.

"We've squeezed in a million more transistors," the tech explained proudly to Tabor. "A hit of one of these can be incredibly addictive."

"What's the downside?" Tabor asked the techie. "And why hasn't production on this line been instituted yet?"

"Well," answered the tech a little sheepishly, "there have been some problems in our development cycle. I'll show you if you'll permit me."

He asked Tabor to come with him. They went from the projection room into the research wing.

Here, a thick pane of double-layered glass gave vantage into a testing area. A recording camera was also pointed at the pane of glass, staring into the room like Tabor and the tech were doing.

Inside the room beyond the large glass panel were two shaven headed Motherboarder clones in their flowing white robes. The acolytes were sitting on the floor, staring at the walls with blank expressions on their faces.

"Everything ready?" the tech asked a woman in a blue laboratory coat like the one he wore who was seated at a console filled with multiple view

screens and flashing digital displays. At her nod of assent, the tech turned to Tabor and said, "they can't see or hear us. The glass is one-way."

"I assume that these two are testing the new chip you're developing," Tabor surmised, inspecting the experimental subjects through the large pane of shatterproof glass.

"That's correct," the tech acknowledged with a nod. "The prototypes are identical to ordinary plugs except for the fact that they can only be activated from the remote console here."

He gestured toward the tech at the console. "Care to see a demonstration?" he asked Tabor. "I have to warn you, it may get a little hairy."

"I'm ready," Tabor told him, waving his arm impatiently. "Just do it."

"Corinne, please initialize," the tech said.

The tech at the console nodded and input a series of commands. "Showing deep alpha wave readings," the console technician declaimed, her eyes tracking across the array of data terminals. "They're feeling the effects."

Tabor watched the Wireheads inside the glassed-in room begin to stir from their catatonia. Suddenly their motions became spasmodic. Within seconds they went into drug-induced convulsions.

One of them began repeatedly striking his skull against the shatterproof window. Soon blood had begun to streak the double-walled glass. The other test subject walked, fell, picked himself up, and repeated the process all over again.

Seconds later, the test subjects began lashing out at each other. The one that had been banging his head on the window grabbed hold of the other's shoulders and bit into his face, sinking his front teeth into the fleshy skin of his right cheek just below the eyelid, and pulling his head sharply back with a tearing noise.

Flesh ripped away and an eye popped out of its socket, trailing a bloody cord of nerve fibers behind it. As the eyeless subject primaled in agony, the attacker bit him again, this time tearing off a hunk of cheek containing part of an ear and some lip tissue as well.

"Gas them," the head tech said to his assistant, "we've seen quite enough."

The tech at the console quickly input a series of commands at her keyboard. Tabor immediately saw a greenish haze fill the glassed-in testing chamber as nerve gas was ejected from nozzles in the ceiling and floor.

Both of the subjects inside the observation chamber quickly dropped to the deck and all movement ceased, except for an occasional twitch and the seepage of blood from the bitten-up face of the badly lacerated subject who had been cannibalized by the first one.

"We have to kill them when they go haywire," explained the tech to Tabor, "once the plugs are initialized, we can't turn them off again." He looked away for a moment. "As you can see, we've got some problems with this new chip matrix," he finished.

"How many of them have you tested it on?" Tabor asked.

"Dozens," the tech replied. "I can get you the exact number if you really need it."

"Not necessary," Tabor said back. "Just keep working on the problem. In the meantime, I want production increased on the regular flavors of our standard line of hardware narcotics. That order comes directly from upstairs."

"The man himself," the head tech grunted as he nodded. "All right, I'll try my best. You'll see results in twenty-four hours."

"I'd better," Tabor threatened. "Or the next poor suckers in that room might just be you and Corinne."

Grasping it by the feet, Quinn dragged the body of the taken-down security guard behind some cylindrical storage modules marked with the yellow and black sign indicating the presence of hazardous substances.

With the schematic of the underground installation beneath the dummy warehouse building in the Los Angeles Burnout Zone bitmapped into semiconductor memory, Quinn had followed the flashing broken line on his VRG screen to the power station of the facility.

Having terminated the guard, Quinn now unshipped a high-energy explosive charge from one of the ordnance pouches on his black action garb. The fist-sized black cylinder bore an LED readout panel at one end. Quinn calibrated the munition for delayed detonation.

Before exiting the zone slated for total demolition, he scanned the strike environment with his virtual reality goggles.

The storage modules yielded components that were critical to the creation of silicon masks used in the manufacture of integrated circuit chip matrices, the basic components of illegal hardware narcotics.

Tapping a series of keys on his wrist-top touchpad, Quinn asked his inboard computer to flash him data on the next prioritized target site.

The VRG screen promptly showed him a glowing box which highlighted the part of the 3D wire diagram showing the next sublevel of the multistory underground manufactory installation one story below his present position.

Guided by his inboard computer, Quinn negotiated the corridor, avoiding a contingent of security troops who came around a sudden dogleg in the passageway after a threat warning popped up on his screen. When they were gone from sight, he stole into a storage area which the VRGs indicated was a storage dump for highly flammable chemicals.

This area he slotted with demo charges, using another of the small black super explosive cylinders he'd unshipped from its carrying pouch.

Leaving the storage area, Quinn soon came to yet another doorway. Phreaking the lock, he pushed inside and found himself within one of the observation suites high above the production line area below.

Crossing the carpeted floor to the picture window, Quinn looked down into the manufactory on the lower level. The VRGs were still on video recording mode. While Quinn scanned the activity below, he punched up wrist-top commands telling the computer to cue him if it found a match with any of the Reverend Vadim's known associates among the personnel in the manufactory.

Within seconds, a zoom window appeared at the center of the real-time video picture. The zoom window showed a close-up shot of the face of a target subject. He was speaking with a tech in the production facility many stories below the sky suite.

The data block above the zoom window informed Quinn that he was looking at DONALD MARTIN TABOR CONVICTED FELON ... KNOWN ASSOCIATE OF REVEREND LUX VADIM.

Saving this data to random access memory, Quinn exited the sky suite. Just as a threat warning popped up on his VRG screen he was confronted by a group of security guards coming out of an elevator whose doors had just slid open a short distance along the corridor.

Though startled, the mercs reacted at the sight of the blacksuiting intruder in the bizarre headgear. As they reached for the micro-SMGs holstered at their hips, Nomad put the targeting pipper on the first takedown and squeezed off a burst of precision vectored P90 automatic fire.

As he retargeted and fired again, a second, and then a third target was terminated by 5.70 mm needlepoint rounds cycling from the lethal donut of black plastic in the striker's gloved fist.

But the fourth and final target was luckier than his brackets. He managed to skid around a blind corner as a round bored into the wall a fraction of an inch from striking his face.

Quinn shifted position and saw the merc reaching for an alarm button set high on the wall. Even as the pipper touched the edge of the glowing killbox on Quinn's virtual screen, the striker knew that it was too late to silence the merc before all hell broke loose.

Sirens were now klaxoning from everywhere at once.

Three stories below in the manufactory pit, Tabor heard the sudden din. Jerking his head up at one of the large, flat, digital security screens that projected from the wall above, he saw a security camera shot of the black-clad striker who was responsible for the carnage hustle around a bend in the corridor and disappear from the frame.

Tabor didn't know who or what he had just been looking at and he didn't care. All Tabor needed to know was that he was looking at trouble. Big trouble. He had seen that at a glance.

"Damn!" he cursed.

Pulling the micro-SMG from its shoulder rig nestled beneath his jacket, Tabor hotfooted it from the manufactory level on a flat-out run. Somehow, he had to get things back under control. Tabor's job security and his life depended on taking down the man in black.

NINE

Quinn had ducked into an elevator car, his destination the warehouse rooftop. It rose several levels at his voice command, then came to an abrupt halt.

From a command node outside the elevator shaft, one of the bullpup-toting mercs had tripped an emergency circuit breaker and stopped the rising car as it ascended toward the warehouse above them.

"You don't have a snowball's chance," a voice said from the speaker grille of the car in place of the simulated voice of the elevator. "We're restarting the elevator. When you reach the next level, lay down any weaponry immediately or you will be shot."

An emergency hatch with a quick-release bolt covered a section of the roof of the elevator car. Quinn put the pipper on the flashing box that framed the release lever and fired an auto-targeted 5.70 mm round that struck the lever and popped the hatch.

Jumping up, Quinn's gripper-gloved fingers closed around the sides of the hole in the roof. Pulling himself up, Quinn soon waited, crouched in darkness at the top of the car. When it once again came to a stop he heard the sounds of shouting voices as mercs rushed inside after their cornered quarry.

The sonic disrupter grenade no larger than a ballpoint pen was clutched in Quinn's hand as he crouched in the darkness of the elevator shaft. A moment later, as the mercs rushed the elevator, he dropped the

grenade through the hole in the roof of the elevator car. The electronic "flashbang" went off in a heartbeat.

Strobing laser flashes and earsplitting high-decibel noise was generated by the small black cylinder. The shattering combination of effects produced an instant suppressive effect on the human central nervous system.

The mercs were incapacitated as Quinn jumped back down into the elevator car and used a flurry of lashing foot blows and bludgeoning swipes of the buttstock of the P90 to take out those mercs still capable of putting up any resistance.

He was out in the corridor in a matter of seconds.

His VRG screen showed him a three-dimensional wire diagram drawn from a schematic of the layout of the installation that Quinn had copied from the main security computer earlier in the strike. Quinn followed the flashing yellow broken line which led him toward an emergency access stairwell.

The stairwell brought Quinn back up into the warehouse from which he had entered the subterranean research and development levels of the drug production facility. Back in the lightless environment of the warehouse, his VRGs automatically switched over to night vision capability.

A brace of mercs equipped with night-vision goggles confronted him there within a matter of seconds. Whether or not they had an inkling that the stealth suit rendered Quinn virtually invisible to their image intensification apparatus, they were taking additional precautions.

WARNING ... flashed the VRGs ... ACTIVE INFRARED EMISSIONS DETECTED.

Quinn realized that the mercs had augmented the passive infrared detection systems of the NVGs they wore with active IR. Emitters attached to their NVGs were pulsing out beams of infrared radiation. Against active IR, the stealthsuit operated at only limited effectiveness levels.

Now capable of being seen by the NVG-equipped mercs, Quinn became a target of coordinated bursts of time-on-target fire from the caseless 4.73 mm flechette bullpups packed by the patrol personnel.

The near-silent needles of high-density depleted uranium whooshed through the air in a lethal shower as Quinn tucked and rolled out of the line of whipsawing automatic fire.

From a half-crouch, he launched an answering salvo of 5.70 mm steel at the opposition. He scored a clean takedown as one of the hired guns grunted and fell spread-eagled onto the floor with a small hole punched in one end of his chest and a gaping exit wound high on his rear shoulder.

But there were more mercs still up and shooting.

Time was not on Quinn's side.

WARNING ... another VRG readout flashed in a data block above the real-time video display ... FINAL COUNTDOWN TO DETONATION COMMENCING. FIFTEEN MINUTES AND COUNTING AT MARK...

The mark was signaled by a one-second beep tone indicating to Quinn that he would need to deal with the mercs quickly and decisively or be caught at ground zero himself when the small yet lethal munitions he had slotted throughout the installation detonated.

When the charges went up, the entire complex would become a blazing mushroom cloud, disintegrating everything above and below ground in a devouring firestorm.

Quinn broke right and left as more lethal heat was directed his way by the brace of merc shooters. At the end of his zigzagging run he took cover behind some modularized cargo crates that were stacked against one of the warehouse walls.

In an attempt to distract the shooter detail, Quinn tossed more advanced-design flashbangs their way. As the neural disrupters detonated, strobing light combined with deafening sound effects overloaded the IR sensors, temporarily blinding the NVG-equipped opposition forces.

Using the precious seconds he'd gained by this maneuver, Quinn hosed down the opposition with automatically targeted pulses of P90 5.70 mm fire, killing all the mercs as they groped sightlessly in the dark.

He wasted no time in climbing the access stairs toward the rooftop where his VRG display showed him that only a matter of a few minutes remained until the installation shot into the stratosphere in a broiling pillar of flame.

As Quinn was quick-assembling the ornithopter on the warehouse rooftop, attaching the ten-foot, carbon-fiber laminate wings to his arms and the lightweight magnesium-aluminum alloy airframe to his back, Tabor with two gun-toting backups, was roaring out of an underground garage in an armored vehicle.

The view screens on the dashboard of the truck showed a variety of scenes relayed via downlink from different vantage points inside the installation.

On the screen labeled WAREHOUSE -- LOW LIGHT, Tabor's mercs were firing their bullpups as they chased the black-clad figure, who seemed to be more than a match for his entire crew.

Who was that guy, Tabor wondered? He'd never seen anything like him before.

A high-low tone sounded from the dashboard grille as a face appeared on one of the view screens linked to a console back at the manufactory.

"Sir, I've got some bad news," the merc reported as the sound of gunfire was heard in the background. "We lost the guy. He was fast and tricky. I'm afraid he turned in a high body count."

"Just keep -- " Tabor began when suddenly a tremendous explosion shattered the night to pieces.

Tabor saw the sudden blinding flash of almost supernatural brilliance before he heard the thunderous sonic pulse that followed a heartbeat behind the hell-white detonation flash.

The ten-ton armored vehicle was suddenly rocked on its oversized, run-flat tires by a tremendous shock wave as the warehouse blew itself to kingdom come.

"Damn that bastard!" Tabor cursed to himself as he fought the steering wheel to speedball the vehicle through the streets of the Burnout Zone, thinking about all the things he would do to the guy if he had the luck to meet him face to face.

MISSION LOG TWO:

Lethal Envelope

TEN

A hot night wind blew across South Central Los Angeles as Quinn launched himself into an empty black void.

In the popup window on his VRG screen he could see the glowing numbers running down to the zero mark as the computer clock ticked off the time remaining until the countdown terminated in mass destruction.

Only a matter of seconds remained until the demo charges blew and the hardware narcotic manufactory blew straight to hell in a searing pillar of flame.

Linked cybernetically to the onboard navigational and flight computer on the ornithopter, Quinn pushed the flight envelope to gain maximum speed and lift.

Using the thermals rising from the shattered streets of the Burnout Zone, Quinn succeeded in climbing to three hundred feet before the primary explosion took place.

There was an earsplitting boom from below Quinn as the countdown reached zero and the charges ignited, right on schedule.

A heartbeat later, the entire top story of the warehouse building below and to Quinn's rear disintegrated in a seething death cloud of incinerating fire.

In the space that asphalt and concrete had occupied only a matter of moments before, a roiling toadstool of yellow and black flame erupted skyward.

The fireball expanded like a balloon as it zoomed high into the night. Within a matter of seconds the envelope of incandescent gasses and micropulverized rubble had attained a dizzying altitude of several hundred feet.

Quinn had gained more altitude and distance from the blast site as the demolition charges he had placed had exploded. Helped in his upward climb by the shockwave and sudden updraft from the superheated gasses produced by the explosion, he soared higher and higher with each passing second.

Yet Quinn knew that like the latter-day Icarus that the ornithopter made him resemble, the superheated bubble of gasses could roast him alive. It would burn him to a blackened crisp in midair if he remained too close to the rapidly expanding cloud of burning plasma for too long.

Quinn felt the sudden rise in temperature as he rose into the turbulent night air.

He was bathed in the flickering white light of the blast as the thermal pulse of the explosion washed over him with pounding waves of broiling heat. Without warning the gases in the capillary tubes lining his stealth suit burst as those gases expanded beyond the tolerance limits of the tubing that contained them.

The fabric of the stealth suit began to smolder and his inboard computer started to fail as operating temperatures began to exceed the VRGs' performance specifications. Severely buffeted by yet another powerful shock wave from a final pair of explosions, Quinn began to plummet earthward.

Then, only a matter of feet before striking the jagged rubble on the ground directly below, the danger had suddenly passed. The intense blast heat began to ebb as the leading edge of the superheated gas bubble began to withdraw back toward the nucleus of the firestorm that was beginning to burn itself out.

As he began to rise again, shakily in the turbulent air, Quinn realized that he had narrowly escaped serious injury or death.

His mechanical pinions beat against the disturbed air currents as he gained altitude and leveled off at a stable cruising altitude above the riot-torn streets of the Burnout Zone.

There was a vehicle below, negotiating the shattered streets at high speeds. From the route it was taking, Quinn had a gut feeling that the armored van contained escapees from the burning installation.

He punched in a combination on his wrist-top keypad and directed his VRGs to zoom in on the vehicle below.

From the blurred outline of half a face reflected in the side view mirror of the truck, the VRGs' online computer was able to construct a match.

MATCH PROBABILITY 65% THAT FACE BELONGS TO DONALD MARTIN TABOR ... the text block on Quinn's virtual screen stated, then winked out of existence again.

The match probability given by the computer was high enough for Quinn to proceed with an interdiction strike on the vehicle below.

Increasing power to the ornithopter's carbon-fiber wings, Nomad swooped down in the direction of the truck on a low trajectory attack vector. He had already unshipped the P90 close assault weapon.

As he held the black plastic donut in one hand, the target below was already framed in the glowing crosshairs of his virtual screen.

"What the fuck is *that*?" asked one of the goons riding shotgun in the back of the armored van.

"It's got wings!" shouted the other one, a look of awe on his beefy face. "It's some kinda mutant bird, man. Christ! I can't believe this is happening!"

Tabor swiveled his eyes up through the windshield and peered above the truck. Against the starlit night sky he saw the gliding winged shape and caught a gleam of the multiscan sensors of Quinn's VRGs.

"That's no bird, you dumb piece of crap," he shouted back at his gunsels. "It's the same cocksucker that wasted our people. Blow his fucking ass out of the sky!"

At once the two goons in back of the armored truck took up the hardware they ported.

One of them got behind the 7.62 mm MAG machinegun whose black snout jutted from the rooftop of the van and pointed it up at the sky. The smart weapon's targeting computer automatically acquired the flying form, computing range and azimuth as it continued to track the airborne target.

Fire bratted from the big gun and glowing tracers lit up the night from below as the triggerman behind the heavy gun opened up.

Quinn's VRGs had spotted the armament below and he took evasive action, swooping out of the line of fire as he put the pipper on the target and loosed a salvo of 5.70 mm flechette fire from the P90 that razored downward with computer-guided accuracy.

Tabor lost control of the armored truck and crashed against the wall of a building to the right as the burst of 5.70 mm penetrator rounds pierced the hull of the fleeing escape vehicle. Its front end collapsed under the impact of the high-speed crash. Cursing as he gunned the van's ignition, Tabor tried unsuccessfully to get the stricken war wagon started again.

The lone surviving hardman in back pushed open one of the truck's rear doors and jumped to the street, the black wedge shape of an advanced combat rifle jutting upward in his clenched fists. As the red pencil line of the bullpup's targeting laser arched upward, he opened up with a 4.73 mm longburst at the strange winged target.

Putting the pipper on the target below, Quinn felt the P90 automatically engage the threat and loose its fire as the hardman was acquired by the VRGs' computer.

Struck high on the chest by a 5.70 mm bolt out of the blue, the shooter went down in a sprawling tangle of arms and legs to land in the rubble, dead from a precisely placed bullet to the head.

As his final bodyguard went down, Tabor took matters into his own hands. He brought out a man-portable HEMP or high explosive multipurpose rocket launcher.

Tabor had enough of playing around. It was time to get serious with the birdman. He would make him trade his mechanical wings for the wings of an angel. The eighty-millimeter, thermal-seeking beauty perched on his shoulders would blow the sucker sky-high.

"I'm gonna teach you to fuck with me!" Tabor shouted, tracking the airborne commando via the image intensifying targeting scope. "I'm gonna teach you a lesson, scumbag!"

As the HEMP unit's laser tracker sighted in on the heat signature of the flying figure, he hit the fire button.

With a loud ka-thunk! and a furious rush of backblast, the high explosive multipurpose HEMP round streaked from the launch tube and vectored up into the black skies.

Although Tabor did not realize it, Quinn was now highly vulnerable to acquisition by an infrared seeker round. The effects of the superheated thermal cloud had bubbled away the gases that rendered his stealth suit invisible to heat-emission imaging sensors. The HEMP rocket's seeker head could now lock onto him -- and it did.

WARNING: LAUNCH SIGNATURE DETECTED. PARAMETERS: HEMP ROUND, THERMAL SEEKER SENSOR ARRAY. STATUS: TARGET LOCK-ON ACQUIRED.

The round was homing in on the areas at the roots of his wings where the motors that powered each upstroke and downstroke were generating heat.

The rocket powered warhead was a lot faster than Quinn was. He could not run from it and he could not evade it. Only a single strategy was feasible: make it de-acquire him by forcing a break-lock.

To do this, Quinn flew directly toward the round, bombarding it with laser energy from his VRGs' front-mounted sensors. Overloading the rocket's sensors, the energy bombardment secured a break lock on the warhead. The missile veered to one side just before its proximity fuzed warhead detonated.

But the explosion took place close enough, however, to send Quinn reeling from the skies. With one ten-foot wing almost useless due to shrapnel strikes, he went spiraling down to the rubble-strewn streets of the Burnout Zone.

Tabor had his Glock 25 SMG clutched in a two-handed grip, having tossed aside the now useless HEMP firing tube. A graveyard grin twisted his sallow, goblin's features as he hustled over to the prone figure, eager to deliver a putaway stroke to his downed and apparently injured adversary.

So intent was Tabor on killing his blacksuited antagonist that he took no notice of the stream of fuel that had been leaking steadily from the rear of the truck ever since its crash.

Struggling to stand after plummeting to earth, Quinn saw Tabor hustling toward him, the deadly silhouette of the weapon he clutched waving menacingly against the sky. A dagger of pain stabbed through his side and he fell back in the dirt with a groan, almost blacking out.

Then something cold touched his face, its sharp odor stinging his nose to bring him around. Quinn's pulse raced: he had smelled the stench of gasoline. There in the moonlight, he could see the rainbow stream of fluid stretching from where he lay to the rear of the damaged truck.

Grimacing in pain, Quinn reached for his bullpup assault weapon, knowing there were only heartbeats until Tabor put a salvo of bullets into him.

But the P90 had shaken loose from its breakaway rig on impact. Having skidded several feet it now lay too far for him to take hold of the black plastic autoweapon. Instead, Nomad reached for the less accurate backup piece holstered on his chest. Drawing the double-action Sig he aimed the small plastic 10 mm handgun at the gas spill.

The 10 mm bullet ignited the trail of gasoline that flowed along the ground. Quinn grunted as burning fuel splashed him, burning his clothing. But flame was also racing up the spill line toward the leaking gas tank of the stalled armored van as Tabor raised the Glock 25 SMG in both hands and walked the red pencil line of laser light toward the writhing figure on the ground.

All at once, Tabor saw the flame and understood its meaning. The knowledge of what lay in store filled his mind with horror. Spinning, he dropped the Glock and tried to run from certain death. But Tabor had reacted too late to save himself. In a pulse beat the burning fuel had ignited the truck's gas tank causing a tremendous explosion.

Razor-edged shrapnel from the ruptured tank sheared through Tabor's body as the truck blew sky high with a deafening bang. Jagged shards of plate steel went pinwheeling through the night. Scorching yellow tongues licked obscenely from blazing fuel spills. The tires of the wrecked truck melted to become foul-smelling puddles as a wall of fire swaddled the vehicle in a cocoon of flame.

Within a matter of minutes, the heat had become so intense that the vehicle's armored metal chassis had begun to liquify and turn into a lump of white-hot molten slag.

Quinn picked himself up from the shattered killing ground as Tabor's funeral pyre lit up the shattered streets of the L.A. Burnout Zone. He discarded the useless wings of the now irreparably damaged ornithopter.

Like Icarus, he had fallen to earth as fire scorched his artificial wings. But unlike his predecessor, Quinn had survived the crash to carry on the fight. Tabor was down and the drug operation was out of commission. Next it would be Vadim's turn to fall.

ELEVEN

"You demons have corrupted my interface! But you have not reformatted my soul!"

At most, the kid calling himself Govinda Software was no more than twenty-one. His skin bore the waxy paleness that was characteristic of most of the Reverend Vadim's minions that Quinn had seen, a result of bad food, drugs and relentless psychological conditioning.

The eyes were the worst part.

They were empty black holes, the mirrors, not of the soul as the poets had it, but of a brain already damaged by lengthy exposure to hardware drugs and months of psychological conditioning.

"Maybe you're right," Quinn told the kid. "Maybe we are demons. But what are you? You're not even human anymore, pal."

"I am a node on my savior's network, a pixel on his screen," he replied. "If I walk in the light of his raster I will fear no evil."

The room was soundproof and electronically cloaked against hostile surveillance measures. It was impenetrable to even the most sophisticated eavesdropping techniques.

Behind the one-way mirror, the members of the special task force that Quinn had set up to deal with the threat posed by the Reverend Vadim watched the progress of the cult deprogramming encounter.

Since Quinn's bust of the hardware drug facility in the L.A. Burnout Zone had gone down, and the subsequent viewing of the data he had collected during the strike, the World Police Agency, WorldPol, had opened a new case file on the Reverend.

While there were as yet no smoking guns to firmly link Lux Vadim to the illegal hardware drug facility, enough questions had been raised by the search data gathered by Quinn to warrant further efforts to penetrate the Reverend's quasi-religious organization.

From other reports that had come trickling in over the course of the months that the Reverend Lux Vadim had reestablished himself onboard the Sunyata, his space station headquarters, evidence that he had renewed his trafficking activities on the organ black market had surfaced.

"You think the Reverend is your savior? Then maybe you don't know who and what you're really dealing with," Quinn said on, trying to get through to the kid despite the walls that had been erected between his mind and the truth.

After hammering away at him for the last ten hours, he had yet to see a crack in the Motherboarder's mental conditioning.

"The guy is dirt, plain and simple," pressed Quinn. "He uses jerks like you. He sucks you dry, then throws you away. Lux Vadim is a master manipulator."

"My write protection interface locks out your lies," the kid said in a faraway voice. "My program integrity remains uncorrupted. Praise be my data, for it is saved."

"What do you know about the Reverend Vadim?" Quinn asked the kid in a softer voice, now trying a different tack.

"That he integrates all systems into the feedback loop of suchness," the kid replied. "That we are all microprocessor chips plugged into the infinite cosmic Motherboard. Get thee behind me, demon! You do not write to my screen! You have an ugly interface!"

"Look at *this* screen, babycakes," Quinn insisted, going to a console and starting up the taped data on the Reverend's case file. The large flat digital screen showed a younger version of the Reverend being led through a crowd of newsmedia people. He was wearing handcuffs poorly concealed by the jacket that one of his flunkies had draped across his hands and his head was bowed with guilt.

"This video was shot after Lux Vadim was arrested for ripping off his own company to the tune of at least a billion dollars. You know what his company did?

"It manufactured electronics components for aerospace and defense. You know what those components were made out of? Shit, kid. Pure, unadulterated *shit*."

Quinn punched up another command sequence on the console keyboard. The giant digital screen immediately flashed to a scene all too familiar to the world's viewing audiences, one that had become iconic.

It was telemetry of the Mars mission astronauts trapped in a space vehicle that was burning up in the atmosphere.

The face of Sismondi Napoleon, the Mars mission commander, begging for help as his crew went through the hell of slow oxygen starvation

bore the signs of a mind driven half-insane by the torture of his predicament.

More sickening images of the doomed astronauts of the Mars mission flashed on the screen, until the last member of the crew died in fits of horrible convulsions.

"Those components were made by Vadim's company, Centurion Development," Quinn said to the kid as he froze the final image of death. "They were what malfunctioned during the Mars mission. Backup systems failed too. Your Reverend Vadim is responsible for killing those twenty-four astronauts, just as surely as if he'd shot them all with a gun."

The kid stared blankly at the terrifying images on the giant digital screen. But this time he said nothing in his own or the Reverend's defense.

"It was after serving his first prison term that your 'savior' began his 'religious conversion,'" Quinn went on. "But that was all a put-on. Vadim was washed up as far as the technology industry went. Who wanted to deal with a convicted racketeer who had lined his pockets at the expense of the Mars astronauts?"

"So Vadim became a 'Reverend' and started channeling what he claims is some high priest of this fictitious lost continent he calls 'Mu' the Mother.

"But he was, and is, still the same piece of garbage he'd been before. Only this time instead of selling faulty components to NASA he sold a philosophy that was every bit as faulty -- and every bit as dangerous to those who believe in it."

"He channels the Great Abraxas, High Priest of vanished Mu, mother continent of all mankind," the kid retorted hesitantly. "Abraxas speaks through his voice and in union with his spirit we are patched into the Great Motherboard of Mu."

"Vadim is as phony as a three dollar bill, kid," Quinn persisted, shaking his head. "He channels nothing. He sees nothing. He is nothing. It's all an act, a twisted charade designed to take in suckers like you, kids and adults who are so alienated by an admittedly lousy world that they're ready to grasp any straw to keep their sanity."

Quinn unfroze the image on the screen and punched up another video sequence to replace it. This one was even more startlingly graphic in the horror that it displayed.

The scene on the screen depicted a grim tableau reminiscent of Auschwitz or Belsen after the liberation of the Nazi death camps at the end of World War Two. As the video panned across the bleak room, the corpses on the tables were exposed in ghastly detail.

All of the cadavers showed the evidence of extensive removal of organ tissue. Some of these gruesome surgical specimens had their abdomens propped open with clamps and their entrails excised, lying on the table next to the mutilated human corpses.

With other mortal remains, it was the skull which had been sliced open and a ragged hole remaining where the brain had been surgically

excised. Still other cadavers were missing limbs, eyes and other assorted body parts.

"This is what got your savior, your fucking high priest of Mu, your holy master, thrown into prison the second time, my misguided young friend," Quinn went on, unconcealed disgust now clear in his voice. "This is just one of the illegal organ extraction facilities that were linked to the Reverend Vadim."

"He was not convicted for that," the kid blurted out, no longer repeating catch phrases by rote, and something other than blankness had come into his eyes.

"At least you're right about that, he *wasn't*," Quinn acknowledged. "They got the psychopathic fucker on a tax evasion rap. Lux was smart enough not to leave behind a paper trail and had the savvy to kill any witnesses that might have turned on him. Just like Adolf Hitler and Saddam Hussein, two guys he admires and calls reincarnations of the holy spirit.

"But he was behind it all. Just the same as Hitler was behind the concentration camps of the Third Reich. Just the same as Hussein massacred tens of thousands of his own people. I know it and you know it, kid. You're not that dumb."

"I...I...am ... a node on ... my savior's network ... " he stammered, beginning to rock back and forth. "If I ... walk in ...the light..."

Suddenly the kid's composure had cracked and he began sobbing disconsolately. He leaned forward, his elbows jammed into the tops of his knees as his body was wracked with sobs brought on by suffering and emotion.

Quinn had broken through, he realized finally. But now would come the hardest part of all, as well as possibly the most dangerous. He would have to turn the kid, convince him to become the eyes and ears of WorldPol in the Reverend's own backyard.

Quinn watched the Motherboarder weep uncontrollably. He went over to the water cooler in the corner and drew a cup of de-acidified water.

"Here kid," he said. "Drink this. I'll be back in a little while. Then we'll talk some more."

Sunyata circled the earth twice every twenty-four hours. Onboard, some five hundred of the Reverend's followers lived and worked and prayed in their orbital commune.

On the earth below, thousands more Motherboarders lived in giant communes that the Reverend had established across the globe, each of them in turn responsible for bringing new blood into the fold.

But in the space station Sunyata, the elite of the Reverend's acolytes lived in their own version of heaven. Believing that they were close to the infinite suchness of the cosmos, they cast their thoughts toward the distant stars.

Now the faithful assembled. In the steel belly of Sunyata, the great meeting hall quickly became filled to capacity.

An array of enormous flat digital screens encircled the vast womb-like spherical space. The screens were blank at present, but as soon as the hundreds of acolytes were seated and ready, the screens flashed instantly to life.

"I channel the great Abraxas of Mu," spoke the voice of the Reverend Vadim, whose face was painted across the screens viewed by the acolytes in the great meeting hall. "With his help we will rewire the human consciousness and receive alien signals from distant galactic realms."

"Receive alien signals from distant galactic realms," the assemblage chanted in unison as they opened their minds to the Reverend. The Reverend was seen to shudder and gasp as the spirit of Abraxas, the High Priest of Mu entered his consciousness.

"The Reverend Lux Vadim is now in sleep mode. I, Abraxas, have made my program active. I bring thee greetings from the Mother continent. I wish thee peace, prosperity and cooperative multitasking."

"Peace unto you, Priest Abraxas," the assemblage chanted. "We patch our the BIOS of our souls into the great Motherboard."

Now the eyes of Vadim became filled with tears. The head of the Master reared back as he raised his hands to his watering eyes.

"I weep, my children, oh how I weep!" wailed the Muan priest Abraxas from the lips of the Reverend Vadim.

"Why do you weep, Great Teacher?" they cried in unison. "Pray, tell us why you weep."

"I weep for the planet, oh my children," the voice of Abraxas/Vadim cried out between tremendous sobs. "I weep for the cosmic Motherboard. For there are those who persecute us, those who would rip our circuits from the Motherboard and recycle us into the junk pile of dark oblivion."

"Who are they?" cried the auditors of the Priest of Mu. "Why do they persecute us?"

"Oh, my children," Abraxas/Vadim answered, "they are demons, they are demons of WorldPol! They wish to destroy all our good works, to screen dump the boot record of bodhidarma and call down the pestilential darkness of total systems failure. Even now, they are plotting to take us away, to kill us all in their chambers of torture!"

"What are we to do, Great Teacher?" the masses cried in chagrin. "Oh tell us what we must do!"

"Hold fast to the Motherboard," Abraxas/Vadim answered the faithful who awaited his reply. "And prepare for the great systems crash that may take place if our enemies assault us. When they come to tear our pins from the Motherboard, we will never go willingly. Sooner than let them take us, we will all die!"

"Yes," they chanted. "Never will we leave the Motherboard. Instead we will die. Our pins will never be removed! In death our interface will shine forever in the light of heaven's screen!"

TWELVE

Govinda Software's heart beat like a jackhammer. He had forgotten what it was like to be terrified after months of Motherboarder conditioning had numbed his mind.

But that had changed since the intensive deprogramming effort conducted by Quinn. Now he remembered the sensation of fear with painful clarity. Now, Govinda Software was stricken with panic.

He had spent a week in deprogramming. During that time the psychological conditioning that he had been subjected too during his time spent with the Reverend Vadim's Church of the Divine Motherboard had been reversed.

In its place a great anger welled up inside the reformed Motherboarder. It was an anger that at first Govinda directed at himself for being dumb enough to allow himself to be used by the Reverend's organization, to fall for his clever lies.

But in the course of the deprogramming experience that initial self-contempt had been redirected. It had finally come to be leveled against the true cause of Govinda's suffering, the Reverend Vadim and his soul-destroying machinery that masqueraded as spiritual enlightenment.

Govinda Software had consented to go back into the Motherboarder fold as an informer for WorldPol. He had also consented to have his left eye temporarily removed from its socket.

In its place, WorldPol biotechnicians had implanted a subminiature audio-video (AV) recording unit. The unit, despite its tiny size, was highly accurate and had a data storage capacity which was the equivalent of hundreds of conventional videotape cassettes.

The AV implant would record everything that Govinda heard and saw for the next thirty days or until its battery ran dry, which would be considerably longer.

The implant would automatically activate when Govinda awoke and remain dormant when he slept, sensing and responding to the changes in brain patterns.

At the conclusion of the thirty days, Govinda would be through with the Reverend and the Church of the Divine Motherboard forever. A specially chartered extraction team headed by Quinn would stand ready to take him out of the operations zone and give him a second chance at life.

Now, some thirty-days after implantation, it was nearing that time.

Govinda had been informed that he was scheduled to depart from one of the Reverend's earthbound retreats for mothership Sunyata the following day. He realized that he had to seize the moment at once or risk it being lost to him forever.

Once he was on the space station, he doubted that he could easily be rescued. He realized that the data stored inside his eye socket AV implant made him a target for elimination by the Motherboarders.

In the course of the last month during which he had acted as a human camera in the bowels of the Reverend's organization, Govinda Software had borne witness to things that had turned his stomach.

Often, he had come perilously close to expressing revulsion at the sights to which he was exposed. Such a lapse would have proven fatal. Any deviation from the blank stares of a Motherboarder acolyte would be immediately noticed.

The worst part of the entire grim charade came when Govinda witnessed the vivisection of a live subject for the purpose of removing the organs from the body for resale on the black market.

The scene where this took place was in an operating theater. The room was hidden beneath the facade of a warehouse on the waterfront of the San Francisco Tenderloin district. The worst part of the experience for Govinda was that the subject was another acolyte that Govinda Software had brought into the fold only a few scant days before.

"Praise to the lifeblood that nourishes the Motherboard," the shaven-headed surgeon muttered as he made incisions in the pulmonary artery just above the Arch of the Aorta leading away from the beating heart, his actions directed by impulses from the IC chip that was socketed in his skull.

There was no blood flow from the beating organ because the pulmonary, carotid and other arteries and veins had been shunted off into a pump that drew off the blood and sent it to a storage vat, from which it would be packaged for resale as well.

After a few more deft strokes of the laser scalpel he wielded, the clone surgeon had freed the last scraps of spongy epicardial tissue that had adhered the heart to the rib cage.

Reaching down and muttering more thanks to "Mu, the Mother of All Systems," the acolyte-surgeon lifted the heart free, blood trickling down his surgical-gloved hands. Those others in the operating room chanted more blessings on the beating organ as it was placed at once in a cryogenic storage module.

At that moment, Govinda Software realized that he could no longer stand to be in the room watching the obscene spectacle played out.

Fortunately, he was ushered from the surgical chamber of horrors and told that he was to be honored with the sacred task of being the courier that was to bear the cryogenically preserved heart to the aerospaceport. From there it would be taken from him and flown to its final destination, a private hospital facility somewhere in Southeast Asia.

Govinda was in the company of his two of the church's "spiritual guides" as he began the journey to the aerospaceport. Now was the time to signal the WorldPol agents who would be waiting for his danger signal that needed to be immediately extracted.

To activate the warning signal, Govinda had been told to concentrate hard on his code word, a unique phrase that would trigger specific brain wave patterns.

The tiny electrical impulses in the brain waves would be picked up by the sensitive processor in his AV implant and turn on a transponder beacon engineered into the implant, enabling his "guardian angels" to home in on his position.

As he arrived at the aerospaceport, Govinda Software thought hard. He thought about his code word harder than he'd thought about anything in his life.

He chanted it silently to himself like a mantra, and this time Govinda was praying for a different kind of salvation than the Reverend had promised him.

"We've got a signal," the tech manning the telemetry console declared with sudden excitement. At the touch of a button, a warning signal was transmitted to comms units ported by all members of the extraction team, regardless of their respective locations.

The tech had been part of a site team monitoring the equipment around the clock during the course of the last thirty days. The console was constantly manned on three daily duty cycles and never left unattended in anticipation of the signal coming in at any time.

"Where?" Quinn asked the tech via portable comms as he reported back to the site base. He was several miles distant from the monitoring station, but he received the message instantly via the small satcom unit linked to a cellular net.

"Punching up the coordinates now," said the tech. As the map grid lit up on the large digital screen in the control room, a smaller but identical map flashed on the wrist-top screen of Quinn's satcom cellular phone link.

Artificial intelligence filters crunched numbers, already interpolating possible destination points by analyzing the routes that the vehicle carrying Govinda was taking.

"The aerospaceport's a strong possible," the tech declared, interpreting the data.

"I'm on my way over there," Quinn informed him. "Get the rest of the extraction team in gear. This might turn out to be a messy one."

"You got it," said the tech, who had already punched the dedicated key on his console keyboard which relayed the telemetry to the extraction team standing by.

Within a matter of seconds, all members of the extraction team had received their instructions and were racing to their designated rally point at the scene of the operation.

At the aerospaceport, Quinn linked up with the extraction team. The four men and two women were counterterrorism experts working for IS under contract with WorldPol who had staged dozens of successful extractions in their time.

Some ops didn't go that well, though. Quinn hoped that this go-round wouldn't be one of those. He had bonded with the kid during the grueling deprogramming session, and wanted to see him come out of this bad situation with all his ducks in line.

The handheld tracer's screen that was linked to the transponder in the AV implant in Govinda's eye socket displayed a target icon representing Govinda Software. The flashing icon was progressing through the schematic of one of the main departures building, twisting left and right as Govinda followed the corridor network.

Quinn punched a button marked POS and the tracer's screen showed him map coordinates corresponding to Govinda's position as well as mean distance of the target from the extraction team's rally point.

Issuing instructions for the team to split into groups that could offer mutual support and spread out to work the airport terminal, Quinn hoped that Govinda could keep his act together long enough for the snatch operation to be successfully carried out.

The flashing screen icon on the tracer showed Quinn vital signs data that showed a highly elevated pulse rate. Govinda was freaking out, Quinn knew, as he drew closer and closer to the departure gate.

What Quinn could not see from the tracer data was the sweat that had begun to bead the Motherboarder's face as he tried desperately to keep the blank expression from changing into one that betrayed the consternation he felt inside. His keepers, the "spiritual guardians" assigned to watch over him, had noticed the perspiration and had asked him a couple of times if he was feeling all right.

Govinda had repeated the usual platitudes that Motherboarder acolytes used to answer questions and his brackets had lapsed into sullen

silence. But he had caught them watching him suspiciously out of the corner of their eyes, and Govinda knew that they were not buying his response.

The extraction team's first visual contact was made by one of the three groups circulating through the airport terminal, who alerted the others. Quinn cautioned them all to take it easy.

Quinn moved in as close as he dared, getting a visual confirm himself as he rounded a corridor turn and caught sight of Govinda up ahead beyond a crush of bodies. He put away the tracer unit and eyeballed the subjects of the op.

The two guys with the kid were heavies. Although they sported the cleanly shaven heads and wore baggy clothes like the rest of the Motherboarders, they didn't walk like robots and their chunky bodies and beefy faces marked them as anything but "clones." Their gait was springy and their heads turned from side to side, sweeping the area with the wariness of professionals.

Quinn moved into position for a fast snatch, but just then something unexpected happened.

Govinda had begun to crack completely. He had reached the point of snapping, the point where he could no longer hold his mounting terror back any longer.

Govinda had begun to shiver and shake as he blew his cool. Gesturing frantically, he was quickly engaged in a scuffle with his two guardians. The hardmen bracketing the kid had become alert to danger. They spotted Quinn coming toward them in a second flat. Recognizing that he harbingered trouble, they tried to hustle Govinda away from the crowded terminal while dipping under their jackets in grabs for weaponry.

For men of religion, the lethal plastic they came up brandishing was considerably out of character. Both hardguys waved around 10 mm MAC 12 SMGs, the double-action subguns automatically cocked and unlocked as lasers lanced from them like the feelers of poisonous insects.

Yelling for the crowd to get down around him, Quinn raised and aimed the P90 bullpup at the heavy closest to him. As the red laser line of the MAC 12 swept his way, Quinn triggered a three-round burst of 5.70 mm flechette fire.

A putaway burst of needlepoint steel roared from the muzzle of the black plastic donut. There was little ballistic spreading, and the burst pattern hit the SMG-toter with all the shots placed squarely within the heart zone. An obscene hole edged with flayed meat opened up on his upper left chest as the MAC went flying and landed with a tinny crash on the hard floor, followed in a pulse beat by the wasted shooter himself.

"Get down!" Quinn shouted at the kid as pandemonium spread through the terminal lobby. Govinda tripped over his own two feet, dropping the cryogenic container with the frozen human heart inside it.

The container skidded and broke apart as it hit the floor. The cryogenically preserved heart fell out of it and lay in a gathering pool of melting blood ice.

Seeing the teams converge on him and realizing that he was turkey on a slab, the second hardguy dropped his weapon and stuck up his hands.

He faced his captors with a smile on his face and bit down on something in his mouth. Almost instantly, he began going into convulsions.

His eyes rolled up in his head as his legs went limp and he sagged to the floor. It took several minutes before his arms and legs stopped jerking.

Going down on one knee, Quinn bent over the now still corpse of the gunman. Rigor mortis had already set in and the stiff's face was drawn back in a grinning rictus.

Quinn held his nose to the dead man's lips and sniffed. There was the strong odor of bitter almonds coming from it. "Cyanide," he said to the rest of the extraction team.

It was an oldie, but still a deadly.

Getting up, he crossed to where some of the team members already had Govinda in custody. To Quinn's relief, he got a nod from one of them as he approached the kid.

THIRTEEN

Early morning darkness shrouded the clandestine launch facility that was located in a remote section of the Nevada desert. The ready room for operation Redball was housed in a geodesic dome. It looked out across a heavily guarded private spaceport.

On the covert runway, a cluster of sleek black aircraft with wings that were angled steeply forward toward the nose assembly stood postured for immediate takeoff. The ASPs, aerospace planes, were capable of runway-to-orbit flight.

Their General Electric scramjet engines could not only generate transonic flight speeds in excess of Mach 5, but could breathe the microthin atmosphere of near space, using it as a basis for internal combustion.

Once reaching their orbital trajectories in the airless void of near space, the ASPs would shunt over into their solid fuel propulsion systems, enabling the transonic aerospace craft to cruise beyond the gaseous envelope of the earth's atmosphere.

Waiting inside the ready room, Quinn was among those personnel who had been assembled inside the geodesic dome to face a digital screen to receive preflight instructions via a global teleconferencing link.

The force was largely comprised of World Police Organization elements, though it was under the leadership of the U.S.-Canadian run North American Aerospace Defense force, and under the direct command of Brigadier General Maxwell Swope of the U.S.A.F., the United States Aerospace Force.

Quinn himself was a deputized member of the WorldPol-NORAD strike team, his presence deemed vital due to both his technical knowledge of the target and of the single man who was the object of the strike force's coming action, Reverend Lux Vadim.

The team's destination was the space station Sunyata, at which the Reverend Vadim had set up his warped replica of heaven and had set himself up there as a two-bit god.

The NORAD-WorldPol strike force was tasked with apprehending the Reverend, charged with violating the fifty-year-old RICO antiracketeering laws, and taking into custody the members of his organization.

At all costs, the Sunyata itself was not to be damaged.

To assault the space station with direct firepower would be to immediately condemn hundreds of innocent civilians to certain death. Such an outcome conflicted with the objective of the NORAD-WorldPol strike, which aimed at saving lives, not taking them.

"As of now, Operation Redball has commenced," the general said via the teleconferencing link to the assembled aerospace strike force element.

The general went on to explain to the members of the Redball strike force that the spacebound assault would commence as soon as all of the separate components of the mission had reached sub-orbital trajectory.

While these elements included aerospace planes at the razor-edged strike point of the operational pyramid, the broad base had also pressed several obsolescent space shuttle craft into service.

Though outdated, these legendary aerospace craft which had ushered in the age of routine ground-to-orbit missions were still dependable.

They would be used for ferrying prisoners taken into custody back to earth as would HAAWACS -- high altitude AWACS -- aircraft to serve the command, control, communications and intelligence role in the mission.

"Two days ago, the two Phalanx Domino-class surveillance satellites shown here on the screen were secretly fitted with jamming upgrade packages," General Swope went on to say. "When the jammers go online, the Sunyata will be effectively blind to all video, audio, radio and telemetry reception.

"If we're lucky, we should be able to dock with the station which will recognize us as a scheduled supplies flight. If our luck isn't as good as we hope, then we issue the target spacecraft a warning. Above all, a paramount rule: we fire only if fired upon."

The General asked for questions and received none in return. The team members were professionals and all of them had individually rehearsed the roles they were expected to play.

He dismissed the strike crew with a curt nod and watched as the elements of the crews filed toward the hyperjets that were waiting on the runway, via the large digital screen in front of him. Then he himself left to man the mission's command, control, communication and intelligence center onboard the lead HAAWACS aircraft.

Precisely as the ASP reached orbital trajectory, the Phalanx Domino satellites turned on their jamming modules and began spoofing the target with an array of powerful electronic countermeasures.

"What was that?" asked the chief technical officer who oversaw the space operations center of the Sunyata to his operations manager.

The chief technician, like most of the members of his crew, were among the few personnel onboard the station who were not themselves Motherboarders.

"Fuck if I know," the ops manager said back with a shrug. He was looking at the sudden wave of static that had just passed across the viewing screen.

"Did you run a systems integrity check?" the chief tech officer asked.

"Doing that right now, boss," the op manager reported back. "All parameters read green, lean and mean," he went on, raising his hands in exasperation.

"Then it's sun spots," the chief tech told him. "Call me if you catch another glitch like that again. And don't wake me up unless it's important with a capital 'I'."

"You got it, chief," said the ops manager, and watched the phone screen wink off, grabbing for the remnants of the turkey sandwich he had been eating just as the glitch had once again passed across the monitors, this time totally unseen.

Beneath the electronic masking laid down by the Phalanx Domino satellite imaging platforms, the strike ASP came arcing over the Sunyata's visual horizon.

This was when things could get hairy, Quinn knew, as he scanned one of the view screens on the bulkhead which showed the video input from the ASP's nose-mounted sensors. The orbital station loomed ahead of the assault force, highlighted against the star field of space.

The Sunyata was a composite of several generations of space stations.

Planned originally as a space-based facility for manufacturing pharmaceuticals, the first station had been assembled in orbit in the closing years of the twentieth century using a node-and-module building scheme developed by NASA in the 1960s.

The venture went bust, however. For the next few decades, the station had changed hands several times, each turnover resulting in a new layer of modules being added to the original structure.

Like the other members of the Redball strike and rescue team, Quinn's flak vest was emblazoned with the word "WorldPol" in bright, high-visibility characters.

His weapon was standard-issue, a Heckler & Koch LSW caseless bullpup rifle with a three hundred round magazine that contained 4.73 mm flechette ammo.

In addition to the bullpup, Quinn also carried stun grenades, plastic handcuffs, a wrist-top comm unit and emergency medical field kit, all of which had been standardly issued to mission personnel.

Within a few minutes, the captain of the ASP transmitted a ten minute alert to the strike team members via intership commo.

"Right now we're flying in under the electronic curtain," Quinn heard the captain's voice rasp in the earphones of the protective helmet he wore. "Weapons are to remain safed until we are successfully docked."

In the cockpit of the ASP, the captain punched up the automatic telemetry that exactly duplicated the call sign of an aerospace craft expected by Sunyata to be making a scheduled resupply run.

The bogus telemetry was transparent to the computers onboard the Sunyata's command center. They would not be able to tell it apart from the real "eighteen-wheeler" scheduled to make the delivery.

In fact the space command center had been tracking the aerospacecraft ever since it had reached orbital trajectory without either the chief technician or the ops manager suspecting that anything might be amiss.

"Flight 903, you are cleared for docking at bay number four," the voice of the operations manager who had noticed the glitch not too long before said as his face appeared on the view screen in the ASP's cockpit. "Hope you guys brought some Scotch with you. The commissary's dry as a bone."

"Thought you religious people only ate brown rice and stuff like that," the captain of the aerospace plane replied cheerfully as another console screen displayed the progress of the ASP as its automatic docking sequencers brought it into a slow-motion collision with the station's number four docking bay.

"That's for the 'Motherfuckers,'" the tech answered derisively, corrupting the word by which the occupants of the station were commonly known. "In this section, you got the burgers and beer contingent."

"Well, don't worry, partner," said the captain as the ASP's nose locked with the grapplers arrayed in a ring around the landing bay, "we got plenty of everything. Plus a few surprises."

"I'll get an offloading party right down," the tech said. "Love surprises, especially good ones."

"Roger that," the captain answered back. "This one's as good as it gets. Out."

As soon as he signed off, the captain relayed the order to the strike force personnel sitting aft of the cockpit in the crew compartment that the ASP was now securely docked.

All weapons were now to be moved from safe to unsafe position and all combat gear and body armor was to be strapped into place.

The strike was a definite go.

FOURTEEN

The offloading detail was comprised of elements of the Sunyata's operations staff.

This was a jealously guarded privilege because it enabled these personnel to skim some of the supplies off the top, for the sole use of the crew dogs on the ops staff.

"Man, I can't wait to wrap my mitts around a cold brewskie," one member of the detail said to his partner as they watched the LED readout showing that the airlock was cycling down. "Here they come now. Yeah, yeah, come to papa, baby!"

Pressure had equalized and the airlock was already in the process of sliding open.

Their jaws dropped as the offloading party were confronted with not the delivery men they had expected, but a group of heavily armed commandos rushing toward them from out of the airlock.

Bullpup autoweapons were pointed menacingly at them by grim-visaged assault personnel and the loading detail was quickly subdued.

Once the prisoners were taken into custody by the Redball strikers they were ordered to lie down on the deck while they were handcuffed and read their rights by their captors.

At the almost same time, General Swope in the mission control center in a specially modified HAAWACS, or high altitude AWACS plane, relayed orders that would set the next phase of the strike into motion.

The three other strike aerospace craft that were orbiting just out of the visual and radio horizons of the Sunyata were now to converge toward the station at flank speed.

One element of the NORAD-WorldPol strike detail hustled through the corridors of the space station to occupy the Sunyata's main operations area.

Here it was to prepare the docking modules for the arrival of the other ASPs.

While this element began its mission critical tasks, the main body of the strike force rushed toward the inner rings of the space station and secured these priority areas as well.

The station was arranged in the form of concentric circles, with life support areas located on the outside rings and the living quarters clustered toward the central hub.

The centrifugal force in the central hub generated by the slowly spinning orbital platform created roughly one-g of gravity, equal to that found on the surface of the earth.

With the peripheral layers of the station secure, the central nervous system of the station was next in line to fall under the control of the Redball strike force.

With Quinn on point, a black-garbed detachment of strike force personnel negotiated the corridors of the space station.

The primary target of this elite assault element was the Reverend Vadim himself.

The tracer device clutched in Quinn's hand -- identical to the unit which had led the earth-based extraction team to the confidential informant earlier -- was now attuned to the BioTrak transponder beacon that had been implanted inside the Reverend's skull.

"I have a fix on our target," Quinn said in only a short while, noting the map coordinates flashing above the glowing wire diagram representing the station's interconnecting corridors.

The tracer's screen icons indicated that their quarry was located just beyond the next bulkhead. Only a few twists and turns of the corridor network now separated the strike team from the Reverend Vadim.

Quinn's strike detachment reached the final bulkhead between them and the target icon within a matter of minutes. According to the data on the tracer's readout screen, Vadim was to be found just beyond the bulkhead.

"Get into position," Quinn ordered the three other members of the point team as he emplaced a lock decrypter over the locking mechanism of the door. "We're going in," he said.

Punching in the initialization codes that activated the delocking mechanism, Quinn stepped aside and let the computer-controlled burglar tool do its work.

He crouched by the door, the black wedge of the H&K 4.73 mm autoweapon gripped in both his hands as he tensely waited to lead the team inside the moment that the door slid aside.

The decrypter did its work and the pneumatically controlled bulkhead slid into its niche in the double-baffled wall a few moments later.

Quinn hustled into the chamber beyond on a half-crouch, the rest of his crew jumping in after him and breaking to left and right. Quinn's bullpup weapon was already probing for target acquisition, sweeping the room as his eyes did the same.

In the foreground was a large freeform sculpture of burnished metal. Beyond, a shaven-headed Motherboarder in a flowing robe squatted in the lotus position at the center of the room, sitting like a thing made out of stone. Apparently deep in meditation, the seated acolyte did not stir at all.

A heartbeat passed, and Quinn's combat-stressed senses told him that something was wrong with the apparently tranquil scene.

Something was damned wrong.

In a pulse beat, he knew what that dangerous something was.

The robed figure had jumped to its feet in the center of the room.

Beyond a doubt, it was not the Reverend Vadim.

Quinn realized with a flash of insight that the Reverend had either removed his BioTrak skull implant or was able to suppress its beacon and create a phreaker unit of some kind that would duplicate its signal.

"Don't move, and don't think," Quinn commanded the shaven-headed Motherboarder clone who faced him with a blank expression on his or her face, as it was impossible to tell the clone's gender. "Lock your hands behind your head."

At first seeming to heed the shouted instructions, the figure raised its arms high overhead. But then the clone began to shiver uncontrollably. Its entire body had suddenly begun jerking and shuddering as the clone seemed to struggle to draw breath.

The God freak's face was turning blue and now the blank expression of a Motherboarder clone was replaced with a sudden grimace of extreme pain, mounting to intolerable limits.

Soon a faint wisp of smoke rose from the center of the clone's chest, beneath the flowing white robes that the Motherboarder wore.

"Get down! *Fast!*"

Quinn hollered his warning at the rest of the team as he took a dive behind the protection of the heavy piece of burnished steel, free form sculpture that he had noticed as he'd first entered the room.

A deafening bang filled the universe as Quinn hit the floor. A ball of blinding white light expanded to the edge of consciousness. It was not the light of nirvana.

It was the radiation of sudden death.

The Reverend Vadim slung the heavy pack across his right shoulder. The pack contained a small fortune; millions of dollars in international credits.

He had already crammed a score of fifty- and sixty-round ammunition modules into his pockets. These went into the small black plastic autopistol he had charged and which now hung from a breakaway shoulder rig for quick deployment.

A weapon with more stopping power than the autopistol hung from a strap around his back.

The M20 caseless autorifle was loaded with explosive-tipped flechettes and was equipped with a laser range finder that would automatically trigger the weapon when the beam touched a vital targeting area.

The Sunyata was under attack. Soon the space station would be in the hands of the government.

But Vadim had been expecting something like this to go down all along. Forewarned was forearmed, and if Vadim was anything, it wasn't stupid. He had his backup plan all worked out and was now about to put that very plan into effect.

Not far away, an escape craft was waiting.

The aerospace plane was kept in a continual state of readiness, in anticipation of the Reverend's potential need to make a hasty exit from the Sunyata if the station came under attack.

Now that this contingency had materialized, the Reverend would waste no time in getting onboard the ASP and using the aerospace plane to escape the long arm of WorldPol.

Before he took his final leave of the Sunyata, there was just one more thing that he needed to do.

The Reverend took a remote unit from his pocket. He input a special access code on its small keypad.

A series of beep tones and a message that flashed across its LCD screen informed Vadim that the device was now ready to receive the special coded instruction that he had prepared for it.

The special instruction was simple: Set the auto-destruct timer to blow the Sunyata and all personnel onboard on a trip through outer space to the fringes of the universe.

FIFTEEN

Covered with chunks of blast debris, Quinn slowly picked himself off the floor, brushing pieces of the ceiling off his body armor. A dense, foul-smelling cloud of munitions smoke now filled the chamber. In a single destructive instant, everything in sight had been trashed.

As for the androgynous Motherboarder who had been used as a human bomb, he or she was nowhere to be seen, having been blown to bits and splattered all over the place by the high-energy explosion.

Quinn's first actions on recovering were to check on the status of his team. Though far from the blast center when the bomb exploded, one of his people had been killed by a chunk of flying glass that had sheared off the side of his head.

Another team member had sustained serious injuries when razor sharp fragments of a metal bulkhead had ripped into his groin, from which a bloody stain was now seeping.

Quinn used his emergency medical kit to help attend to the badly wounded team member while he also used his portable comms to order up the assault force's emergency medical support unit on the double.

Quinn also had another concern to deal with in the aftermath of leading the arrest detail into the booby-trapped room.

The escape gambit orchestrated by Vadim had been a brilliant if lethal piece of planning and execution.

He had deliberately countered the tracking implant, either by removing it entirely, which was doubtful to Quinn, or by generating a spoof signal, which was more than likely.

Quinn had no doubts whatsoever that Vadim was at that moment carrying out an escape bid that he had planned down to the most minuscule details.

It was sure to succeed unless Quinn managed to find the Reverend and take him down before he fled the Sunyata.

No other suitable explanation for why Quinn's team had not found their quarry existed. Vadim had been conclusively placed onboard the Sunyata prior to the commencement of the NORAD-WorldPol raid.

Unless he had somehow managed to evade some of the most sophisticated surveillance tactics and technology available, Vadim was still somewhere close by.

In the excitement of the explosion's deadly aftermath Quinn had forgotten to check his tracer unit.

Pulling the unit from the Velcro quick-release mounts that secured it to his belt, he punched up a data screen. Vadim's icon was still there, blinking steadily on and off, although its position had shifted.

This confirmed to Quinn that he *had* created a spoof signal to distract his pursuers.

"Can you hold down the fort till the medical support unit arrives?" Quinn asked the uninjured team member who was administering first aid to her wounded comrade.

She answered in the affirmative, applying a pressure bandage to the still bleeding wound.

"Get that sonofabitch," she said, then looked down at the semiconscious figure on the floor. "Murchison's had it."

Receiving acknowledgment, Quinn rushed from the blast site, following the transponder icon on the screen.

Within minutes after the raid on the Sunyata had commenced, the WorldPol-NORAD strike force had issued a communiqué to the world newsmedia.

The announcement declared that the joint task force had secured the orbital station. Seven fatalities had occurred during the operation, three sustained by task force members, the others by personnel onboard the station.

As the breaking story traveled across the global media network, the Redball mission manager onboard the HAAWACS C3I plane initiated a secure transmission to the ground base station almost one hundred thousand miles below his high-altitude orbit.

"Activate Corona," General Swope said.

"Roger that," said the base station at NORAD located at Cheyenne Mountain, Colorado. "ETA for Corona is ten minutes."

Corona was the code name used to denote the convoy of space shuttles that had been orbiting well out of the Sunyata's radar and visual horizons.

The shuttles of the Corona phase of the mission would pick up those onboard who were being placed under mass arrest. Then they would ferry

the prisoners back down to earth to complete the most ambitious bust operation in history.

The strikers had directed their strongest efforts into corralling the elite guardian element of the Motherboarders.

At the hard nucleus of Vadim's operation were the paramilitaries with the guns and security training. Vadim's merc forces were not mere drones.

They were full partners in Vadim's scams. Since many of them were former commandos, they were thought to pose the highest risk to the raiding forces.

With the elite elements now in full custody and presently being advised of their rights under both respective national laws and World Police Organization statutes, the strikers easily cowed the more docile acolytes into submission.

These rank and file "clones" were instructed to move toward the large central meeting hall which was located at the inmost ring of the Sunyata station. There they would be identified, informed of their legal rights and processed for earthbound transference.

The first of these rank-and-file prisoners were now being directed toward the first of the waiting space shuttles to begin the trip back earthside.

When the last personnel had been vacated, the station would be confiscated under RICO statutes as constituting the material assets of a continuing criminal enterprise and a WorldPol force left to man the station until the case was disposed in the judicial system.

The tracker's steady pings began to rise higher in pitch. The constantly changing audio output indicated that the target was within twenty five meters of the hunter's position.

Quinn ported his LSW autoweapon as he neared his guileful quarry. The bullpup weapon was fully charged with a 4.73 mm caseless round in its chamber and several hundred more hardnose bullets in its buttstock mag well.

The liquid crystal digital readout panel on the side of the H&K's black plastic receiver indicated that all its systems, including laser autotarget designator, were fully operational.

Suddenly Quinn glanced up at one of the flat digital screens slanted from the ceiling. All over the station, the screens transmitted Vadim's channeling of Abraxas throughout the Sunyata, as well as constant messages aimed at maintaining the spiritual purity of the Motherboarder clones.

The last screen Quinn had passed had borne messages such as: BLESSED BE FUNCTION 02H, MY DHARMA IS MY SEARCH PATH and BUDDHA WAS A TIME TRAVELER.

But there was another message on this next screen, one that made his blood run cold. What the readout was telling him was WARNING:

MOTHERSHIP SUNYATA WILL AUTO-DESTRUCT IN TWENTY-TWO MINUTES. ALL PERSONNEL PLEASE CLEAR THE AREA.

The striker immediately pulled commo from his belt.

"This is Quinn," he said. "The base is set to self-destruct. This is a Juke Box emergency. Evacuate immediately."

"Impossible, the station is secure." It was General Swope's gravel voice on the comlink. "Nobody's reported hearing any alarms," the Redball mission manager went on.

"Vadim silenced the alarms," Quinn replied. "But he apparently forgot about the monitors. See for yourself."

Quinn held up his commo unit, pointing its TV camera toward the digital monitor screen and held down the video zoom button.

"Hot damn!" General Swope shouted as he saw the message, relaying the alert immediately.

"I copy that as Juke Box emergency condition," said the voice of the strike team leader onboard the ASP that had shuttled the strike force up from earth to the Sunyata's orbital ring. "Do you affirm?"

"That's affirm," Quinn replied and signed off.

Quinn's comset immediately crackled with the repeated, hastily-issued instructions for all personnel to head for the shuttles and hyperjets which would clear the doomed space station as soon as possible.

But the squawking from Quinn's re-holstered comset had alerted another figure who had stopped in mid-stride and flattened his body against a wall.

Cold sweat poured down his face and the fists grasping the wedge-shaped bullpup tight to his chest were white at the knuckles. His mismatched eyes full of wild surmise, he heard the footfalls of the other man approaching the blind turn in the corridor that he knew lay only a few feet away.

Pivoting suddenly, Vadim darted from cover as his quarry negotiated the turn.

The beam of the laser autotargeter shot out in a line thin as a razor's edge and as red as fresh blood. Quinn sidestepped as a rotoring burst of 4.73 mm caseless autofire lashed his way, pockmarking the bulkhead behind him.

Tucking sideward as the crimson death beam again sought him out, Quinn hit the floor on a fast shoulder roll inches ahead of a new deathburst of caseless needles.

Rolling full around and popping back up on a half-crouch, Quinn jerked the H&K bullpup to chest height but could no longer acquire a target. Vadim had taken the hit and git option. With the ratcheting of gunfire still echoing in Quinn's ears, His Celestial Holiness was nowhere in sight.

Vadim was at that moment under the dogged-down cockpit canopy of the ASP that he always kept ready and waiting for immediate departure, his fingers playing across the preflight section of the plane's control panel. The

hypersonic aerospace vehicle was set to initialize all flight systems as soon as Vadim entered his personal access code.

Taking the Sunyata's corridors on a run, Quinn reached the docking module bay. Four tubular modules ringed the bay at compass points. The red warning light flashing above one of them indicated that Vadim's getaway scramjet had achieved final separation from its docking module.

The hard charger saw right off that Vadim had beaten him to the punch. Even if he could have reached the docking module, Quinn could not have opened the module's airlock hatch. He could not survive the airless vacuum of space long enough to draw a bead on the departing plane.

In order to intercept Lux Vadim, Quinn needed to get his hands on the controls of another ASP.

Since the three other modules in the bay were empty the only other such aerospace craft in the vicinity were those of the strike force. But the assault squadron was docked along the rim of the station, while Quinn was now at the station's inner hub, thousands of feet away from that point.

It was then that Quinn saw to his surprise that in fact one of the three remaining docking modules had a second ASP berthed in the tubular enclosure. Tarp had partially hidden its nose assembly, making it nearly invisible in the darkness of the tube as Quinn squinted through the small viewing window.

But as he waited for the inner airlock hatch to slide open Quinn still doubted that the plane would prove functional: the fact that it was covered with tarp indicated it was probably either down for repairs or used as a source of spare parts.

Pulling off the tarp, Quinn climbed into the teardrop shaped bubble cockpit of the orbit-to-ground capable craft. He was familiar with the controls of the advanced tactical fighter craft. To his surprise the hyperplane was fueled and ready to go.

Though prudence dictated that he run a full systems check, Quinn initialized the ASP's systems right away. He couldn't afford to wait and would just have to take his chances.

Departure sequencers automatically began undocking the plane from the module, closing the inner airlock door and pumping out the atmosphere to equalize pressure before opening the outer door. Even as the plane backed out of its tube at the bottom of the space station's hub, Quinn had turned on the craft's track-while-scan radars.

A target icon immediately flashed on the cockpit's main tactical screen, representing the ASP piloted by the Reverend Vadim.

According to the accompanying data block, the icon's position was already nearly a thousand miles from his own position and would quickly progress beyond the range of his long range search capabilities. Quinn had to make tracks or risk losing his quarry altogether. Opening up the throttle, he sent the ASP streaking through orbital space at high Mach numbers.

SIXTEEN

The first of the aerospace planes and space shuttles were pulling away from the doomed station. Shortly before their arrival, the ASP piloted by Nomad streaked away from the Sunyata on an earthbound flight trajectory in pursuit of his dangerous quarry.

Quinn closely monitored his scopes, mindful both of the now considerable distance that lay between himself and the screen icon representing his quarry's ASP and the distance between himself and the Sunyata.

The space station hung in orbit like a stick of TNT with a slow-burning fuse, ready to burst asunder. It was only a matter of time before it blew to nuclear smithereens.

Suddenly, the auto-destruct sequence terminated by cycling down to zero. The booby-trapped reactor core that had been rigged to double as a sub-kiloton nuclear bomb exploded immediately into an atomic fireball of just under a hundred tons of dynamite in blast yield.

The nuclear detonation flash lit up the heavens as the Sunyata went critical. By this time most of the other escape craft had already succeeded in putting enough distance between themselves and the station that they survived.

But those few aerospace craft that were closest to the epicenter of the blast were not as fortunate as the first to escape the doomed station.

Quinn's cockpit real-time video display was whited out as the fast-growing perimeter of the fireball stretched out its searing tentacles and consumed a space shuttle and an ASP at the same instant. The aerospace craft exploded, it and the shuttle becoming two more brilliant fireballs that

merged their seething fire with the plasma cloud and shock waves of the detonating Sunyata.

Anger at the Reverend Vadim's latest mass murders filled Quinn's heart and soul. But he had to accept the strong possibility that he might never succeed at bringing the wily Reverend to justice because of the speed of his escape.

Quinn was now the only force that stood between the Reverend's complete escape and the retribution before the world that he deserved. Quinn had to be good, he had to be very good in order to apprehend Vadim.

In the teardrop bubble cockpit of the escape ASP, the fleeing felon kept flicking his eyes to the threat icon that flashed on his multimode screen.

Although he had spotted the long-range contact on his scope as soon as the aerospace plane had left the Sunyata, Vadim had assumed that it was merely the first of the assault force's shuttle craft to leave the station behind. He had calculated that his own escape had gone unnoticed in the confusion.

But in the aftermath of the explosion which had consumed the Sunyata in a ball of nuclear hellfire, the Reverend Vadim realized that the ASP registering on his computer-augmented radarscope was not only far closer to his scramjet than the other vehicles now on earthbound trajectory, but that it was in fact following him.

To test out his suspicions, the Reverend executed a series of evasive pitches and yaws that swung the transonic craft to port and starboard. Just as he figured that it would do, the pursuing aerospace plane hugged his tail cones.

It was following him down, all right. That was now a certainty.

Well, thought the Reverend, that was okay too. The ASP was not only fast and stealthy, but he had insured that his escape vehicle came complete with an assortment of deadly attack options, just in case of the contingency he now faced arose.

Punching up a command set on his console keyboard, the Reverend selected one of the icons representing a Killshot air-to-air cruise missile.

This was a modified ASAT, or antisatellite cruise missile, designed for orbit-to-airpace use. The advanced tactical warhead was capable of reaching multimach speeds on its path to its target.

It was also as "brilliant" as they came, an Einstein among missiles. The Reverend's former company, Centurion, had designed it under his personal supervision in collaboration with the weapons genius Newcomb Straker before his untimely death.

With the computer-enhanced radar scopes set on track-while-scan modes, the Reverend used a trackball pointing device to first select the Killshot icon. Hitting AUTO as the trackball cursor touched the screen

selection "button," he instructed the ASP's battle management computer to take care of the rest.

It was so easy to kill, he reflected, when you could just fire and forget.

The sudden growling in the cockpit informed Quinn of a threat intercept confirm. This electronic warning tone was echoed by the console screens which lit up as a launch signature was recorded by IR sensors positioned in the nose of the ASP.

Because no radar signature was detected, threat identification systems identified the incoming round as a thermal seeker by default.

The thermal "tail chaser" had already acquired his aerospace craft and was locked onto the ASP's scramjet exhaust nacelles. It was fast too, closing on him at a speed of Mach four and increasing its terminal velocity by the second.

To his dismay, Quinn realized that the ASP was not equipped with any missiles of its own. Why the plane had not been outfitted with defensive arms was immaterial.

Probably the orbit-to-ground vehicle was being kept in readiness as a backup system or an easily cannibalized source of spare parts to service the first plane. That would have explained the fact that its nose had been covered with tarp in the docking module.

Suspending all further thought, Quinn performed a ninety-degree wingover maneuver. The ASP accelerated as it traded altitude for speed, its nose assembly glowing an incandescent white from friction with the outer atmosphere at the transonic velocities that it was traveling.

A quick check of his instrument scopes told Quinn that his quarry's ASP was again widening the gap between them and that the Killshot round had only been momentarily sidetracked by his evasive maneuver. It was now apparent too that since Quinn could not outpace the incoming warhead, he would have to go for the break lock option.

As brilliant as the air-to-air cruise missile might be, blind spots were inherent in any targeting system's design. All systems that either radiated energy, passively sensed energy or used a combination of both seeker methods to acquire and track targets had these.

This round, whatever its strong points, would have its own blind spot too. Quinn had to find and exploit that blind spot in order to create a break lock condition, and he needed to accomplish this objective as of five minutes ago in order to survive the strike.

Quinn was flying in darkness now, but ahead of him, just across the line between night and day called the global terminator, he saw that the sky was lightening. If he could move quickly enough, he might yet beat the Killshot round to the punch.

But he had little time in which to push the ASP's performance envelope. The multimach round's speed was increasing steadily, and it was eating up the distance between it and the ASP with each passing time-tick.

Pulling back the sidestick controller that throttled the ASP up to its maximum cruising speed of Mach six, Quinn shot the transonic scramjet toward the horizon line.

His instruments reported that the ASP was dangerously overheating as he approached the terminator. The LCD temperature gauge on the cockpit console was already redzoned. Never mind that, he had to keep up the pressure because the high velocity cruise missile launched by Vadim was steadily gaining on him.

The incoming tail chaser was now less than a mile away, his instruments reported. In only a second or two, the rocket powered, stub-winged cruise missile would reach its detonation zone.

At that point its proximity fuze would initiate an explosive airburst. The splinter zone created by the detonating warhead would catch the speeding ASP in its lethal perimeter, destroying the aerospace plane utterly.

A pulse beat passed, and then Quinn saw the blinding ball of light.

It was the light of the sun that was exposed just around the hemispherical curvature of the terminator, the dividing line between night and day on the earth's horizon.

He was flying over the southern hemisphere now, and the sun was large and bright as it filled the black sky overhead, causing Quinn's helmet visor to automatically opaque in order to screen out the intense light and protect his eyes from solar radiation.

But the stub-winged round on his tail was now only a second or two away from detonation.

Quinn pushed the sidestick controller all the way to its final stop, ignoring the engine overheat warnings the ASP was giving him.

The scramjet went into a steep nosedive as it plunged almost straight downward, air friction and g-forces on its airframe causing the entire aerospace plane's fuselage to shudder violently, threatening to break it completely apart.

Quinn paid no attention to the tremendous forces that would have sent him into G-LOC, gravity induced loss of consciousness, and might yet do so despite the protective gear he wore.

His eyes were riveted on the track-while-scan window in his multimode display scope that showed the path of the Killshot missile behind him.

For a moment, it seemed to hesitate in its deadly course. Then, with the brilliant disk of the sun eclipsing the thermal signature of the ASP it was chasing, the round veered sharply to starboard, then swung to port again. Its targeting microprocessor was confused. Quinn had achieved his breaklock.

Then, with almost surprising suddenness, the round exploded. Quinn was too far away from the splinter zone to be destroyed, but the ASP was close enough nevertheless to be struck by the spreading envelope of razor-sharp fragmentation particles of prefragmented steel.

Some of these fragments struck one of his forward-canted wings. The ASP, its airframe already near the point of disintegration because of the titanic g-forces that buffeted the fuselage from every angle, now gave one finally shudder as one of its scramjet engines flamed out, and the hypersonic vehicle pitched crazily across the skies.

SEVENTEEN

Quinn hit the restart button on the ASP's main console panel. The onboard computer executed a series of precision-timed restarts, but none of them were successful in reversing the partial flameout induced by the shrapnel burst.

Fighting to keep from blacking out from G-LOC, Quinn grappled the frozen sidestick controller in an effort to level the aerospace plane out. With one of its wings all shot up, the ASP bucked and shuddered, refusing to respond to Quinn's efforts to steady the vehicle.

Slowly, as the ASP lost altitude and descended into "thicker" air, the violent convulsions began to quiet down somewhat.

Imminence of breakup flattened out to mere balkiness as Quinn grew assured that the worst of the crisis had passed. In the space of two dozen seconds he had descended hundreds of miles from the point where he had first put the ASP into its steep downward plunge.

But where was he now? Quinn punched up his GPS and the ASP's global positioning system immediately flashed his current position along lines of latitude and longitude on one of the cockpit's multimode view screens.

Quinn could see that the ASP was far off its original northwesterly glide path, having veered eastward to such a degree that its course would soon slingshot it across the southernmost tip of the Florida panhandle.

Using the trackball on the instrumentation console to pop up another window on the multimode display of his main scope, Quinn called up track-while-scan radar.

The long range scan revealed no sign of the ASP that he had been pursuing through the skies for thousands of miles.

Nevertheless, it did show Quinn that the remainder of the strike force aerospace planes and space shuttles were moving out of orbital trajectory and into their atmospheric cruise vectors. They would soon be landing on earthbound bases, presumably having sustained minimal blast damage.

Going for a long shot, Quinn popped up another display window on his main scope and tried to obtain a probable position fix on the flight vector of the ASP he was pursuing.

The artificial intelligence hardware crunched the numbers and gave Quinn the finished data in the space of a pulse beat.

According to the data on the scope, there was a high probability that the ASP with the Reverend Vadim at the controls was flying toward the southwestern sector of the continental United States, based on its previous heading, speed and other performance factors.

Quinn shunted the ASP into a pursuit trajectory, hampered by the lack of speed as a result of flying on only a single burner and able to go no faster than a relatively slow Mach three.

He was running dangerously low on fuel when a target icon popped up on the track-while-scan window of his multimode radar screen. Quinn's pulse quickened: he had found the needle in the haystack, he was again on Vadim's tail!

The computer-enhanced display calculated the mean distance and probable destination of the target scramjet. These data flashed on a pop-up window on the multimode cockpit screen.

Quinn saw from these displays that the ASP he was bird-dogging through the skies was hundreds of miles downwind of him and moving much faster than he was capable of going in his blast-crippled vehicle.

The pilot of the fleeing space plane had probably seen him too, by now, and that added to Quinn's problems. Pushing the wounded bird to the max, Quinn followed, flying as much on determination as on fuel reserves and burners.

This was the end of the line.

The Reverend felt the entire airframe lurch violently as all three landing gear bit down into the crusty surface of the desert salt pan, the remnant of what had been an arm of a shallow inland sea millions of years ago but was now flat as a board and dry as a bone.

He could feel the baking Nevada desert sun beating down on him through the clear polycarbonate teardrop cockpit canopy of the ASP. He knew that outside the dome the mean daytime temperature rose to highs in excess of one hundred twenty-five degrees Fahrenheit. That was hot enough to fry your bacon and eggs without your having to light a fire.

But the Reverend also knew that if he allowed himself to be captured by WorldPol, the heat would be turned up a great deal higher. Hot enough

to fry *him*: he would not escape the death penalty for blowing away scores of innocents onboard the Sunyata -- forget about his other crimes.

Vadim didn't know which alternative he feared and hated the most about dying in the electric chair: the fact that the execution would be televised live to a global audience or the fact that the authorities would probably adjust the execution device to kill him slowly and painfully, which was now permitted by federal law.

All of that to the contrary, the Reverend had no plans to go that route. In fact, the Reverend's plans called for an escape of an entirely different sort. Instead of being sent into the afterlife, he would send himself to a previous lifetime.

He had piloted the ASP to this location for a specific reason. Not far from where he had landed the advanced technology scramjet was a way out of his predicament that nobody besides himself had even dared to consider as a serious possibility.

Except, of course, *for* himself. Lux Vadim had not only considered this unthinkable option, but fully intended to turn his plans into reality in just a little while.

As expected, the heat of the afternoon was searing in its intensity as he stepped down from the ASP's cockpit. The heat burned his flesh and dazzled his eyes as the Reverend hauled his gear out of the cockpit, setting the auto-destruct sequence in the scramjet that would blow the ASP to useless wreckage and destroy the plane beyond the ability of WorldPol to reconstruct it.

Hustling from the landing site, because he knew that the plane would explode in only a few scant seconds more, the Reverend hit the blazing-hot desert sand behind a jumble of large boulders nearby.

In a heartbeat he heard the scramjet aircraft go up with a tremendous boom, and a wave of heat even more searing than the scalding Nevada sun washed over him as the fireball expanded from the burning wreckage in all directions.

Climbing back up to his feet again, the Reverend watched what was left of the ASP burn for a few long minutes.

A smile of satisfaction played across his gaunt features, plucking at the corners of this thin, bloodless lips. If his luck ran true, then WorldPol might even get the impression that he had crash landed and burned up in the wreckage.

Then he suddenly remembered the damned tracker implant that was still pinging away inside his skull. Even Vadim had not yet been able to figure out a way of getting rid of the infernal contraption without blowing his brains out at the same time.

The Reverend was about to turn from the blast site as the flames began to die down and the charred airframe wreckage blackened, when he caught sight of a distant flicker of light on the far horizon.

The glint was like that made by a fast-moving aircraft, still high up and far away, and a wispy contrail of exhaust trailed the pinpoint of light that

seemed to crawl across the seamless azure sky. He held his hands up to shade his eyes and frowned.

A gut check said that, yes, it had to be Quinn up there.

Cursing the man he detested above all others, the Reverend Vadim shouldered his pack of money and weapons and hustled away from the burning wreckage. The sun filled the sky and the air was hot enough to scald his lungs. But the Reverend didn't have far to go before reaching the point of no return.

Then nobody, not even Quinn, would be able to touch him.

When the second scramjet engine flamed out, Quinn knew that he had finally run flat out of luck. There was no mystery as to the cause of the flameout: his readouts told him he had run out of fuel. There wasn't any way he was liable to cure that problem, short of working a miracle, and he had exhausted his supply of those.

Far below him, rising up from the brilliant white expanse that Quinn knew to be the sand desert of southwestern Nevada, was a plume of black smoke that marked the spot where the aerospace plane he had been following had come down to earth again.

On the face of it, a crash was the most likely explanation for the visual evidence he saw below. But there could be other explanations too, including a deliberate effort by Vadim to cover his tracks. Quinn would not be satisfied until he had the opportunity to take a close-up look at the landing site with his own eyes.

Quinn's altitude began sharply dropping as the ASP went into a glide slope beginning at approximately thirty thousand feet.

Because the ASP, minus hundreds of pounds of fuel, was now much lighter than it had been when he had first set out on the chase, and because the ASP was also an aerodynamically stable craft, Quinn was able to keep the angle of descent from deteriorating into a full-out tailspin.

Soon he was cruising a few thousand feet above the desert of southwestern Nevada. At this altitude, he felt the sudden lurch that would have bounced his head off the cockpit dome were he not strapped securely in his seat as the lightened ASP swept through thermals rising off the superheated desert floor.

Down at this low altitude the air was turbulent, but the high-energy thermal currents also helped to give the airframe desperately needed lift and keep it airborne much longer than a controlled decel-descent through calmer, cooler air would have done.

Keeping his eyes on the dense pall of black, sooty smoke that rose up from the crash site a few score miles away and over a thousand feet below him, Quinn fought the stick controller to keep the ASP airborne and squeeze every last ounce of velocity out of the tortured airframe.

He was helped now by surface effect, the added lift which aircraft pick up when gliding very low over land masses or across water.

Thanks to the aerodynamics of surface effect, the ASP scudded across the flat landscape like a desert eagle swooping after its prey, and Quinn realized that he would make it to the site of the apparent crash in one piece -- *if* he was lucky.

Within minutes, his extended front landing gear bit down on the hard, flaky crust of the salt flats. The other two hind gear touched down in similar fashion seconds later.

The ASP began rolling forward, not needing a drag chute or the reversal of its thrusters since its landing was hundreds of times slower than its normal supersonic landing speed of approximately Mach two.

Pausing to wipe the sweat from his brow, Quinn pneumatically retracted the cockpit canopy bubble.

Climbing out of the cockpit, he turned on the ASP's transponder beacon and re-closed the cockpit canopy as the transponder sent out a continuous radio signal that would be used for later retrieval by the NORAD-World Pol search teams.

Quinn next set about inspecting the crash site of the Reverend's ASP. There was no sign of organic debris amid the now smoldering wreckage of the airframe, no sign that the Reverend had perished in the crash.

In fact, Quinn did not believe that it had been a crash so much as a deliberate attempt to scuttle the plane.

The scattering of wreckage, for one thing, was not consonant with how pieces of a crashed aircraft would spread. The wreckage was uniformly scattered in the way that a blast from a stationary explosion would produce.

Perhaps most importantly, there were faint, though distinguishable, signs of footprints leading away from the site. Someone, probably Lux Vadim himself, had attempted to disguise the traces of footprints leading from the scene by retracing his steps and brushing the tracks over with sand, but had not quite succeeded.

Quinn pulled his GPS unit from his belt pouch and got a position fix on his location. He was, as the ASP's instruments had told him earlier, on Federal lands.

In fact, he was not far from Groom Lake, a site he knew to have been used by the military and other, more esoteric entities, as test areas for a host of clandestine projects, not the least of which was Upcard.

Quinn flashed momentarily on how the cybernetically augmented supersoldier clone code-named Griffin had nearly blown the earth to radioactive embers after emerging from a buried sleep chamber that had been located in a spot not far from here.

Replacing the GPS, Quinn unshipped the tracker unit from another pouch. Activating it, he picked up a clear signal from a source whose code number designated the icon as belonging to Reverend Vadim.

Quinn began using the tracker beacon as a guide, while he unshipped his Satcom commo device. It was time that he turned in a situation report to the NORAD-WorldPol mission command center.

EIGHTEEN

It was amazing how quickly the body became dehydrated in this baking heat, thought the Reverend to himself as he approached the cool shadow cast by the towering red sandstone mesa.

Not that it mattered much, though. In just a little while he would be out of the heat of the day and in a pleasantly air-conditioned environment.

Despite his "conversion" to a cult religion and the preachments of life on a new and higher plane after his imprisonment for racketeering in the wake of the Mars Mission deaths, the Reverend had made certain that the umbilical cord to his previous existence had not been completely cut.

That previous life had centered around his company, Centurion Development Corporation, and the high-technology industry that the company had served.

His clients had included advanced research and development projects for DARPA, the Defense Advanced Research Programs Agency, the CIA and certain highly placed foreign sources, among others.

A crooked smile corkscrewed across the Reverend's dust-caked and already sunburned face as he recalled the fact that the keys he held to a variety of skeletons in peoples' closets had insured that his stay in prison was relatively short and his time behind bars had gone easy.

His intimate knowledge of the dirty little secrets of the Pentagon's top brass -- and a few CIA projects so black that the world would be turned upside down if even a syllable leaked out -- had also insured that the Reverend would breeze through the parole board hearings, despite the

highly vocal pleas by those such as Quinn for his continued stay behind bars.

It was one of those dirty, dangerous and highly damaging little secrets that the Reverend was now counting on to assist him in pulling his chestnuts out of yet another fire.

A solid reason, not mere chance, had brought him to his destination. He had piloted the ASP to this remote corner of the Nevada desert because in it lay the site of one of DARPA's most ambitious military technology projects -- Project Toymaker.

At another place and time, the portals of the Toymaker project would have been guarded by a contingent of special forces troops. Not so today.

Intelligent machines were counted upon to do all the grunt work that humans shunned, and even now, the Reverend Vadim knew that a line of hidden sensors had long since picked up his thermal signature as he approached the mountainside.

Computers had relayed these data to a command post deep within the mountain that now cast its long, cool shadow over him.

But the wafer-thin flash ROM identification card he carried in the pocket of his flight suit insured that the computer did not trigger any alarms.

The card emitted a weak field of coded magnetic pulses that identified its holder as a person carrying the highest access priority. The card bestowed ask-no-questions authority on a level so high that it permitted the holder to come and go at will.

Such a high priority clearance would not cause the base computer, which monitored the perimeter, to issue an interdiction alert.

In addition, the card would unlock and slide open the pneumatically controlled blast door hidden around the opening of a small box canyon at the mountain's base.

His feet crunching on pulverized rock as he entered the canyon, the Reverend slid the flash card from his pocket.

He sighted the dull metallic finish of the blast door amid the gray-brown of wrinkled granite and inserted the flash card into the slot beside it.

The steel door, otherwise impervious to shock forces up to those produced by a sub-kiloton nuclear blast, slid effortlessly aside with a faint whirring sound.

The Reverend slipped his card back into one of the pockets of his "zoom bag" as the door closed behind him once again.

He entered the sterile corridor with brushed steel walls that lay beyond the computer-actuated portal.

The base was largely robotically controlled, staffed by only a handful of technicians at any given time. Even security forces were severely restricted on a tightly controlled need-to-know basis.

This situation was due to both the fact that Project Toymaker was arguably the most ultra-secret project yet developed by the U.S.

Government and the fact that robotic security measures considered highly dependable were in force to guard the base perimeter.

The former factor had motivated the overseers of Toymaker to keep even the number of security troops deployed on site to the smallest possible minimum, while the latter had meant that the base could be plausibly denied if the need ever arose to disclaim any knowledge of its existence.

There were enough trained killers on base to drastically change the Reverend's plans, though. But if he had to deal with them, so be it. The Reverend had come prepared. As he always was.

He checked the LED readout on his black, wedge-shaped 4.73 mm bullpup assault weapon.

All systems were go.

Wielding the 4.73 mm bullpup, he moved quickly, with the deftness of a man to whom the layout of the base was well known, toward the mission objective that was hidden deep within the mountain's labyrinthine depths.

As good as he was, the trooper never knew what hit him.

With point-and-shoot accuracy, thanks to the weapon's laser auto-targeter, the Reverend opened up with the M20 bullpup, spraying the security station with dozens of 4.73 mm explosive-tipped flechettes.

Launched with computerized accuracy, the multiple detonations came so close together that the individual blast pulses merged in what sounded like a continuous peal of thunder.

When it was all over, the shock attack had taken out the entire security detail on the first level of the covert installation.

The strike objective that the Reverend was seeking would be found another level down, he knew.

Hustling into the elevator car, he rode it down to the limit, watching the status lights on the panel overhead move from left to right as they tracked the car's descent from Surface Level all the way down to Level One.

When the elevator doors opened some quarter mile below the Nevadan desert, Vadim was pumped up on adrenaline to take on the brace of fresh troopers that came at him from down the corridor.

Already holding the electronic flashbangs in his hands, and wearing goggles and ear protection that would render him unaffected by the paralyzing effects of the detonating submunitions, the Reverend tossed the two black cylinders at the advancing troops.

Cocooned in disruptive sound and light waves, troops sank to their knees, convulsing in pain as the corridor filled with ultrasound highly damaging to the nervous system while strobing lights further disoriented the visual senses.

With the troopers incapacitated and unable to put up even token resistance, the Reverend had himself a relatively simple task of killing all of the personnel in the corridor.

Almost casually, he walked through the mass of writhing, moaning figures who lay prostrate on the floor.

Firing burst after burst, he blew this one's head into a crimson obscenity, shattered that one's face with a two-round burst, pulped the heart of another victim into splattering red jelly, until he had killed every last member of the base security detail.

At the end of this corridor, the Reverend could see the sign that warned unauthorized personnel that they were about to enter a restricted area and that only those bearing the highest security clearance were allowed access beyond that point.

The data on the flash ROM card in his pocket gave the Reverend that privilege, but even if it hadn't, he had just taken out the last of those forces capable of stopping him.

He inserted the card into the slot in the wall near the door, and its auto-locking mechanism permitted him instant entry.

His pulse hammering in his ears in anticipation of the incredible discovery that lay just beyond the door, the Reverend pushed against the crash bar.

He knew that after he walked through that door, nothing in the world might ever be the same again.

MISSION LOG THREE:

Terminal Velocity

NINETEEN

Quinn's comm unit bleeped.

"We're receiving reports of a crisis situation going down near your position," the gravel voice of Operation Redball commander, General Swope apprised him via comsat downlink. "I'm sending a detail down right now."

Quinn checked the coordinates relayed by the airborne command center to his GPS unit. They matched the last known point at which the signal that he had been following had faded.

"What am I walking into?" Quinn asked.

"Can't tell you," Swope reported. "Subject has a one-zero priority code. Need to know regs are in force."

"Fuck 'need to know,'" Quinn shot back. "I'm looking at getting my ass shot off. That's *my* need to know."

"All right," the general's voice resignedly said back. "I'm clearing you under emergency provisions. It's a spook installation. A special technical project is being conducted there."

The Operation Redball commander told Quinn about the concealed entrance to the base, code-named Gamma, and added that his mission ID card would now open the door.

Already walking in the shadow of the high sandstone mesa, Quinn could soon easily pick up the impressions left by recent footsteps in the fine grey sand.

The trail led directly toward the box canyon from which the entryway to Gamma could be accessed. Quinn had no doubt, as he followed the trail to its ending, that it had been made by Vadim.

Finding the concealed doorway, Quinn input the emergency access code that he had been issued him by General Swope by the base commander at the keypad beside the pneumatic hatch. After a series of beeps and other electronic sounds, the door slid open.

Munitions smoke billowed out of a sterile corridor with stainless steel walls. With the lancing red line of his weapon's laser projector tracking through the obscuring fog, Quinn entered the secret base, his bullpup ported, his senses alert.

Soon he came upon the first of the many corpses that littered the corridor in pools of their own blood.

The heart of Project Toymaker was a sphere thirty feet in circumference. The sphere was made out of a transparent polycarbonate material.

This immense, clear-walled globe stood at the center of a large operations area which was filled with banks of sophisticated mainframe computer equipment. Consoles containing monitors, keyboards and banks of readouts occupied the rest of the floor area.

At one of those consoles, sat the Reverend Vadim. His oddly colored eyes were wide with deep concentration as he keyed in command sequences from memory at the keyboard in front of him.

Sweat had begun to bead his forehead and upper lip as he concentrated on the precise series of keystrokes necessary to initialize the unit.

Here came the dicey part. Vadim knew he had to get the codes exactly right the first time.

Because every passing minute made capture more likely, there would be no second chance.

The huge sphere's interior was already beginning to light up with a soft, pulsating glow. Scintillations of light danced inside this throbbing cloud of power and a low whine, barely audible at first, had started to fill the room until it now pervaded every corner of the command and control center.

He had done it!

Certain that he was on his way, the Reverend Vadim set the digital timer on a small explosive charge as he logged in the final command sequence and rechecked the data on the monitor screen one last time.

Satisfied that the program was up and running, the Reverend gathered his gear and placed the demo charge beneath the console where it attached itself magnetically. The charge would detonate a few minutes after he entered the sphere.

If all went well, then he would be free.

If things didn't work out, he would be dead.

But those were the breaks, and the Reverend had the satisfaction of knowing that he would be dead anyway if he allowed himself to be captured.

The Reverend Vadim stepped toward the sphere. There was a hatchless opening through which a single person could walk unobstructed.

He stood at the center of the sphere. Swirling motes of colored light circled around him in a quickening vortex that merged to cocoon him in a glowing, flickering plasma cloud that filled the transparent shell.

There was a momentary feeling of disorientation, as if every cell in his body were being torn apart.

Then, as he began to translate, he saw something through the clear walls of the sphere that made him laugh out loud. Fate, he knew, had been kind to him in the end.

What the Reverend Vadim had found so amusing was the sight of Quinn bursting into the restricted area, weapon in hand, just as the Reverend translated completely.

It took a split-instant for Quinn's situational awareness to take in the totality of what was happening in the large research zone he'd just entered.

As he stormed into the restricted operations area, he heard the earsplitting whine of the dynamo effect generated by the powerful electromagnetic pulses that powered the Toymaker sphere.

His attention screened out the banks of flashing digital readouts and console data screens at either side. His awareness focused tightly on the sphere at the center of the spacious area. As though viewed through a screen of milky light, he could dimly see a human figure.

Quinn raised the wedge-shaped 4.73 mm caseless bullpup. But as he prepared to fire he saw the milk-white radiance suddenly darken.

Within the space of a pulse beat it had gone completely black. The interior of the sphere looked as though it had been suddenly filled with black enamel.

Just as quickly, the blackness vanished. Once more the clear polycarbonate shell of the sphere showed nothing within. The human figure that Quinn had seen inside the strange device for a fleeting instant was now gone.

Letting his weapon drop to point toward the floor, Quinn approached the enormous globe-shaped machine when a warning tone sounded and the screen of the tracker hung at his waist flashed him threat data.

Across the screen a graphic display was painted of one of the control consoles. A glowing red triangle highlighted a small cylindrical shape that the tracker's microprocessor indicated was magnetically attached to the underside of the console.

WARNING ... THREAT PARAMETERS MATCH M45 HIGH-ENERGY FRAGMENTATION MINE.... read the accompanying text block.

For a split instant, Quinn wondered if there was enough time to disarm the mine. But the M45 made the decision for him. It exploded with sudden violence, ripping apart the console and sending sparks flying in all directions

as dense, choking smoke billowed through the air of the high-technology center.

Far enough from the blast to escape injury in his assault team body armor, Quinn was nevertheless hurled several feet across the room. As he picked himself up from the floor, he grabbed up a fire extinguisher from a wall and put out the fire.

As the blaze flickered out beneath the quenching halon spray, Quinn stared at the smoldering wreckage of the console, realizing that the Reverend Vadim had just evaded him completely.

If Quinn's hunch was right, the Reverend Vadim might just have sent himself on a one-way trip to a place that put him beyond the reach of WorldPol forever.

TWENTY

Like wildfire, the repercussions of what had gone down at Gamma Base had rapidly spread to every corner of the globe.

Secret, hastily convened and high-level meetings became the urgent focus of political centers of gravity from Washington to Beijing, from Moscow to Tokyo.

Though the media had not yet picked up the scent, the ramifications of this event of unprecedented importance was a matter of grave concern to the frightened policy makers of the world.

The heads of state had good reason to be concerned even more than frightened.

The sphere in the Gamma research center was a CTL generator, and this in turn was a time machine, although the techs never used that word, preferring the term "causality violation" for time travel and "closed time-like line (CTL) generator" for the device that made time travel possible.

Gamma Base housed a technical achievement that was the fruition of almost a half-century of development of the most secret military undertaking since the Manhattan Project of World War II which had split the atom and developed the first atomic bomb.

Begun by German scientists operating at the Peenemunde Rocket Proving Grounds in Northern Germany in the closing months of World War Two, the research into time travel was imported to the U.S. with those same ex-Nazi scientists, who, among other things, went on to work on the U.S. space program.

In the late 1950s, the Toymaker project had succeeded in "translating" a rat through a CTL. In the process of translating, only a portion of the rat vanished, leaving a thrashing obscenity behind which lived for a few seconds before dying.

During the 1960s, a refined version of the CTL generator, or time machine, had successfully transported animals of small biomass into the past. But the device had not been able to retrieve these test subjects from what the techs called "downtime," i.e., the past.

The problem of sending live test subjects downtime and bringing them back uptime had eluded the scientists until well past the turn of the twenty-first century, when humans were translated a few days backward in time.

It was during this phase of experimentation that Lux Vadim, then at the helm of the Centurion Development which had worked closely with DARPA in conducting secret projects, had gotten wind of what was happening at the secret desert base.

Intrigued by the advanced research he knew to be underway at Gamma and determined to exploit it for his own profit, Vadim, as president of Centurion, had pulled strings and called in long-uncollected political markers.

In the end, Centurion was awarded a lucrative outsourcing contract toward manufacturing critical components for the CTL generator and installing the systems on-site.

On fulfillment of the outsourcing contract, Vadim himself was able to witness the CTL generator in action, through the obtainment of a high security clearance.

After his release, Vadim had satisfied himself that the time travel device was fully operational.

He knew that if his Motherboarder operation fell apart, as indeed it ultimately did, and he found himself out of the religious cult leader business, then he would use the CTL generator to escape back into the past, the one place where his pursuers would have little hope of finding him or bringing him back to stand trial.

Vadim had apparently succeeded in carrying out his plan, according to all evidence. Entering Gamma via his security clearance privileges, he had activated the CTL generator and disappeared downtime through a closed time-like line.

But spacetime, though it behaved like a fluid in some respects, acted more like a crystal lattice in others. The introduction of a destabilizing force might shatter the delicate latticework of causality with disastrous consequences.

Vadim was a loose cannon, careening his way through spacetime. Sooner or later, it was feared, he would throw the entire continuum out of balance. Causality could go haywire. Like a machine out of control it might even blow itself apart.

Quinn faced the smart wall.

The millions of pixels glowing on the huge liquid crystal display plates coalesced into a montage of life-sized high definition images. Omnidirectional audio filled the room.

"The world of the 1990s was considerably different than our own time," the voice of the tech narrator told Quinn. "It was an era which witnessed the breakup of the Soviet Union and the fighting in the Baltic States and Yugoslavia."

The smartwall's giant digital video display showed Russian President Boris Yeltsin facing off against Russian tanks during the August coup of 1991.

The images changed, showing Serbian troops facing off against their Croatian opponents in the slaughterhouse that had once been Yugoslavia before the Soviet breakup. Both sides ported the ubiquitous AK-47 assault rifles commonplace in the world at the time as they fired across no man's land in trench warfare reminiscent of World War I.

"But these events, although of great importance to the history of our own century, nevertheless follow in the wake of an event that took place some months before the Soviet Union's disintegration. This was an event which, although not recognized at the time, has proven to be one of the most significant turning points of the late twentieth century."

Now the scenes on the smartwall shifted to show a panoramic display of attack helicopters filling the skies of what appeared to be a Middle Eastern City. Tanks and APCs rolled through streets lined with date palms in the shadow of spires and minarets.

The images segued to show a sinister looking figure in a khaki uniform and black beret whose fleshy face sported a thick black mustache. Holding a semiautomatic pistol pointed at the sky in one hand, he gestured with the other hand balled into a clenched fist.

His dark, glittering eyes swept across the crowd that thronged the large square below the balcony on which the uniformed figure stood as he harangued the assembled populace.

"Saddam Hussein," said the tech's voice-over. "It was this Mideast despot whose invasion of Kuwait on August second, 1990, began a domino effect that led to the formation of what is now called the First Coalition to launch the assault known as Desert Storm, the avowed purpose of which was to free Kuwait from Saddam's iron-fisted rule."

The smart walls segued to depict yet another battleground. This one was in the flat sand desert of Southeastern Iraq.

Here, a montage of violent images and cacophonous sounds showed a cascade of brilliant lights over Baghdad as Coalition fighter-bombers commenced the first salvos of the operation that had come to be known in its entirety as Desert Storm.

These scenes gave way to images of Scud missile attacks on Riyadh and Tel Aviv, and later to the crossing of the Euphrates by mechanized troops, the tank battle and the surrender of scores of thousands of Iraqi

soldiers who had been pounded for weeks in their bunkers, expecting a land attack that had never materialized the way their leaders had told them it would.

"For almost nine years, the Iraqis and the Iranians hurled wave after wave of their citizens at one another on this same desert battlefield. Saddam believed that he was facing a similar threat from the United Nations Coalition confronting him in 1990-1991.

"Saddam was proven wrong in the course of events. The military might assembled against him put on a martial display never before seen. Within a matter of weeks, Iraq was bombed practically back to the stone age.

"But after the victory parades, and after the relief that so few combatants had died in the fighting," the narrator went on, "the war quickly faded from the headlines. The final death throes of the old Soviet Union issues on the domestic scene soon drove events in the Gulf completely from memory. America was fighting other battles, battles on its home front."

Now the scenes shifted to the urban riots that had plagued the last few years of the twentieth century. The slaughter in Los Angeles in 1992 was followed by scenes of the carnage in Chicago two years later, ending in the tactical nuclear explosion that had struck the Republican National Convention in San Francisco in 1998.

"Desert Storm had been forgotten," the tech's voice went on. "It would be decades before its true significance was realized after the domestic troubles had been settled. Now, as you may know, we have come to view it far differently.

"We know now that what happened in Iraq was as dramatic a turning point in world events as was the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805, when British warships decisively defeated a Franco-Spanish coalition and fixed the map of Europe for the next two centuries.

"Had American and the Western powers permitted Saddam to control the flow of Middle Eastern oil, then North America would have been hit by an Oil Shock of a magnitude that would have made the severe OPEC embargoes of the seventies look tame by comparison.

"The domestic strife that marred the late nineties would have escalated to full-blown civil war. America might have collapsed under the weight of these destabilizing burdens, had the Coalition not defeated Saddam as soundly as it was done in early 1991."

Quinn rose from his seat. He walked toward the smart wall where the image of Saddam Hussein appeared as large as its normal dimensions and studied the cruel features of the Iraqi dictator.

Here was an enigma, thought Quinn.

Saddam was a man who had held his country in thrall, and yet who had hung on for years following the Coalition's victory as the unchallenged, if now reclusive, master of Iraq.

"You think that Lux Vadim has gone back to the Desert Storm era?" Quinn asked.

"We're virtually certain," replied the tech, now stepping away from the smartwall. "Apart from the fact that in the Motherboarder's bizarre pantheon of avatars, Saddam was equated with the reincarnation of the high priest of Mu -- this we know was just a pose on Vadim's part -- we believe that Vadim entertained a genuine, slavish, admiration for Saddam.

"Furthermore, we know that Vadim, who is an expert on military technology, could stand to make a fortune if, back in 1990-1991, he could sell his expertise to Saddam. Can you imagine how sophisticated high-energy laser systems might have changed the course of the war? It boggles the mind to contemplate."

"But the past *hasn't* changed," Quinn responded at once. "Had Vadim been able to alter the past, then we would have a different history even as we speak. Yet history hasn't changed at all. Desert Storm is still the victory for the Coalition that it always has been. Saddam was defeated, as history shows. Nothing whatever has changed."

"That, I'm afraid, is open to question," replied the tech. "Subtle changes in the framework of causality might have occurred due to Vadim's temporal translation. These changes might not fully manifest themselves for years to come. Also, there is another issue to be considered: the Muan power crystals that Vadim believed to have been buried eons before in the Iraqi desert."

"They're just a myth," Quinn ventured, shrugging off the prospect as farfetched. "Part of the line of pseudo-religious bullshit that kept the suckers flocking by the thousands to join Vadim's Motherboard Church."

The tech shook his head.

"That's not entirely correct. In fact, there is compelling evidence that such crystals did actually exist, just as Vadim claimed. Did you ever hear of the Ancestral Heritage Society? Of operation Wotan?"

"Yes to both," Quinn answered with a nod. "It was a Nazi organization founded by Himmler. Wotan was a bizarre expedition, staged by the Nazis, to find the lost continent of Atlantis in the 1930s, wasn't it?"

"That's right," the tech affirmed. "The full story is still classified. It reveals that Nazi archaeologists did find something during the Wotan digs, and that the cache included a crystal of strange power. Ancient scripts identified another cache of far more, and far larger, crystals buried somewhere along the Iran-Iraq border centuries ago. Both of these caches were said to have come from Mu."

"And you're telling me that Vadim is after the Muan crystals," Quinn summed up. "Why?"

"Because of their potential for use in the construction of the ultimate particle beam weapons, weapons that can generate tremendous laser energies with incredibly small power requirements and that can be built in extremely small sizes. It is that, more than anything else, that we are concerned with.

"You see, Saddam Hussein was a mystic. He spent millions excavating what he believed to be the site of ancient Babylon and

constructing a replica of the city-state in Baghdad. He believed himself to be the reincarnation of Nebuchadnezzar, king of ancient Mesopotamia.

"As incredible as it may sound, there is the possibility that if Vadim finds a way of contacting Saddam, he could convince him of his ability to find the Muon crystals and use them to create weapons of devastating power. Because of certain time paradoxes, that new reality could come crashing down on us tomorrow, or the day after, even if our 'now' stays unchanged."

Quinn looked past the tech and again studied the giant face of Saddam that was frozen on the large digital video screen. Across the gulf of years, it seemed to taunt him. Could Vadim get to Saddam, he wondered?

The answer, Quinn realized suddenly, was yes. Saddam had considered himself a Messiah. Vadim would be his perfect apostle -- and apostle of death.

TWENTY-ONE

Swarming like human ants in a futuristic hive, jumpsuited personnel busied themselves at tasks throughout the high security technical installation.

Six stories beneath the burning desert sands, a bank of superdynamos capable of generating enough electricity to power a small city began to charge storage batteries each the size of a grain silo. Millions of volts of raw power drained into the batteries that would release their load to energize gold vapor lasers.

The nucleus of activity in the Gamma Base command center was the thirty foot transparent polycarbonate sphere from which His Celestial Holiness Reverend Lux Vadim had vanished into the past.

To Quinn, who watched from the sidelines, it seemed as if the CTL generator was more like a living thing than a machine. It almost seemed to control the men and women who swarmed around it like bees in a hive, rather than the other way around.

Quinn was aware of the focus behind all the activity in the research center.

The techs were preparing the time machine to send him back into the past where the mission he had been tasked with per a service contract signed with WorldPol was to bring Lux Vadim back to stand trial.

Only as a last resort or in self defense was Vadim to be killed. As an incentive against a misapplication of the termination directive, Quinn's contract called for only half his completion bonus to be paid in the event of the felon's death, whereas bringing Vadim back alive would net him an additional twenty percent commission.

Before Quinn himself would be sent downtime, an unmanned temporal drone unit would be translated via the CTL sphere. Containing video and audio recorders as well as sensors for data on the atmosphere, weather and other environmental factors, the drone had already been placed inside the sphere.

This phase of the process was necessary to insure that Quinn, catapulted back in time to that identical spot to which the drone would soon be sent, did not wind up embedded in solid rock or find himself stuck in a cavern filled with poisonous gases.

Sampling the environment downtime, the drone's sensor data could then be analyzed for factors that a human subject would encounter on CTL translation.

"Energize," ordered the mission control manager from his command console.

For the second time since entering the base after Vadim, Quinn heard the rising crescendo of power generators charging to peak loads deep in the bowels of the installation.

Step-up transformers were expanding hundreds of volts worth of input into millions of volts output as power was sucked from the gigantic storage batteries.

Beneath the roots of the high mesa, radioactive particles were being accelerated in a ring a mile in circumference as a phased array of gold vapor lasers were computer-fired at a plasma comprised of vaporized uranium.

Powerful field effect magnets had imparted a counterclockwise spin to the plasma at a rate of millions of revolutions per second.

The bombardment of the spinning plasma core by the lasers held the secret of causality violation. For the space of a few brief instants, the controlled nuclear detonations would duplicate one of the most awesome forces in the known universe: the spinning black hole.

Gravitational forces generated by this phenomenon resulted in the creation of what the techs called "light cones." Through these flowed the CTLs or closed time-like lines that were pathways backward into the past or forward into the future.

The key to controlling where a time traveler ended up lay in tipping the light cones over along their axis of spin. Once tipped over, a CTL could in theory lead through a light cone to any point in the past or future.

"Ready for translation," reported a technician monitoring one of the banks of data screens and lighted digital readout panels.

These instruments now showed that the artificial black hole had begun to tip the light cone created by gravitational forces produced by its mass and spin.

Using computer algorithms developed by a CIA technical focus group on time travel in the year 2012, the light cone could be pointed with precision toward any known year in the past or projected into the future by manipulating the spin of the simulated black hole.

"Engage auto sequencing," the mission control manager reported, his eyes moving from the CTL translation sphere to his own banks of screens and back again as a data block calibrated in microseconds completed the countdown to December, 1990, the drone's destination.

"Auto sequencing engaged," another tech replied as the supercomputer completed the tilting of the light cone by manipulating the spin of the simulated black hole to aim the CTL at the target year downtime in 1990. "Countdown in progress. Mark at zero-zero-niner-zero-five."

The large digital display panel registered the countdown toward zero when the light cone would be aimed at the past. As the numbers cycled toward the point of temporal translation, the milky light that Quinn had observed just before the Reverend Vadim translated back in time filled the clear-walled sphere.

Then suddenly, the interior of the time travel device went completely black. This phenomenon was due, Quinn knew, to the fact that gravitational forces within the artificial micro-black hole had created an "event horizon."

Beyond this barrier no visible light could escape through the clear walls of the CTL sphere, and in the absence of light, the human eye perceived blackness.

"Prepare for probe retranslation," the mission control manager declared into a gooseneck microphone a few moments after the CTL probe had disappeared downtime to the target date, consulting his screens.

"Probe retranslation sequencing initialized," a tech replied, affirming the command. "Countdown in progress. Mark."

Events reversed themselves after this second countdown.

A second bank of fully charged gold vapor lasers powered up and millions of volts were generated to culminate in the creation of a second tipped light cone.

At the conclusion of the process, the probe reappeared inside the CTL sphere, once more back uptime in the year 2035.

Technicians now swarmed around the retranslated CTL probe. After removing the probe from the interior of the sphere they connected interface cables to the probe's many input-output ports.

The interface connectors linked the probe to the supercomputer systems at Gamma, downloading the sensor input into the high level number crunchers that would translate the raw data into meaningful form.

"We'll complete your preparation while the data's being processed," the mission control manager said to Quinn who was standing by.

The Mission Support Team at Gamma Base had already attached medical sensors to Quinn's body and were checking his vital signs prior to temporal translation.

The team had been responsible for managing all the manifold aspects of Quinn's trip into the past, including detailed research into the era he would

visit and furnishing the temponaut with all appropriate mission support materials.

Quinn already was dressed in fashions that were current during the latter half of the year 1990, to which he would soon, if the systems checked out properly, be translated.

The leisure attire included sneakers with an old fashioned vulcanized rubber sole that did not have the "memory" features common to twenty-first century sneaker soles.

But the six-pocket trousers and black leather jacket were of an almost contemporary cut, though high-wear-rated plastic-paper hybrids were the materials of choice in the twenty-first century.

The mission support engineer laid a wallet and money belt on the table. In addition to these two items he placed a wristwatch and other forms of "pocket litter," as the spooks called it, on the table.

"The wallet contains a thousand dollars in worn currency," the tech told Quinn. "The bills have been artificially aged and the serial numbers are authentic. There are also major credit cards, as you can see.

"The cards are a lot trickier than the paper money. We can't be a hundred percent sure the plastic will work downtime. We've manufactured duplicates of cards held by CIA imprest funds during the late twentieth century, but we've had no way to test them out."

Quinn opened the wallet, counted the bills and inspected the credit cards that Gamma had furnished him.

There were a dozen of them, of the old fashioned type backed by a brown mylar strip, without any three-dimensional laser photo of the holder on the reverse as current cards had.

These cards, Quinn recalled, would have been issued before more modern cards containing flash ROM chips came into use around the turn of the century, cards which were essentially miniature databanks and performed many more functions than their predecessors.

Thumbing through some of the other contents of the wallet, Quinn found some old-style two-dimensional photographs. He pulled them out and inspected them, noting the family portrait with Quinn posing in the center of the group.

"That's your 'family,'" replied the chief mission support engineer. "Adam Jackson, your alter ego in 1990, is a family man. That's his family. Computer simulated, of course."

"Jackson looks like a happy man," Quinn told the tech. "Almost a pity that he never actually existed."

Quinn replaced the photos in the wallet and placed the wallet into one of the pockets of his trousers. He picked up the money belt and unfastened one of its Velcro-backed pockets. Inside the belt were several sheaves of bills in mixed denominations.

"You have thirty thousand dollars in that money belt," the chief mission support engineer informed Quinn. "Because of our uncertainty about the

performance of the simulated credit cards it was decided to give you plenty of cash."

"Hope I don't get mugged," Quinn said, strapping on the money belt as he caught sight of the technicians inspecting the data downloaded from the newly recovered time probe.

"Just don't flash it around," the technician advised with a smile. He picked up another item on the table. This was a black leather carryall of medium size equipped with a shoulder strap. "Your 'special gear' is inside the luggage."

Quinn nodded. The support personnel had done a reasonably good job of packing a great deal of specialized matériel into a very small space. The case contained Quinn's stealth suit and VRG ensemble. In addition it also contained a variety of weapons.

Niched in foam padding were a P90 5.70 mm close assault weapon and a Glock 20 laser equipped semiautomatic pistol. The Glock fired the ten millimeter ammunition which was obtainable during the year 1990.

In addition to extra ammo clips for the weaponry, silencers had been issued as well. The laser targeting enhancements, though of a recent design, could be powered by batteries available down the time stream.

Quinn zipped up the black leather suitcase and replaced it on the table. "There's one possible glitch," the chief tech warned Quinn. "At this stage, we are not at all certain about how electronic components will behave once translated. We've encountered problems with sensor probes sent back in time before. They malfunction unpredictably.

"As yet we're at a loss to explain the malfunctions. It's possible that your gear won't work, or function only part of the time or at limited capacity. Then again, everything might function perfectly. Just make sure you factor this into your plans."

"Your warning is well taken," answered Quinn. "And I suppose the same would apply to any electronics taken down the time line by Vadim too?"

"It would, yes," replied the tech with a nod.

"So you're saying there's also the possibility that I won't be able to track Vadim by reading telemetry from his skull transponder?"

"That's also correct," the tech replied. "You might wind up going by nothing but instinct."

The briefing was interrupted by one of the Gamma personnel whose voice over the speaker grille informed the mission control manager that the inspection of the time probe had been completed.

"Put the data on my screen," the mission control manager told the caller who had just reported.

He inspected visual and hypertext data, showing him that back in the year 1990, the area now occupied by a wing of the underground installation was an empty cavern with a side tunnel leading directly to the desert exterior.

"Looks like it's a go," the tech told Quinn, noting that no sign of toxic gases or other environmental hazards was revealed by the probe. "You'll find a map in your pocket that will lead you to the highway. Though we can't pinpoint the exact time that Vadim entered the time line of 1990, we think we can guarantee that you'll arrive *after* he did."

"Which means that it hopefully will be long enough following his arrival to avoid the risk that Vadim will be ambushing me and not too long afterward so his trail will have gone completely cold," Quinn put in.

"That's right," the chief mission support engineer said, adding, "there are two main points you should know about. One concerns the phenomenon known as 'Velikovsky's Paradox' I mentioned before -- electronic equipment can malfunction when causality is violated.

"Temporal translation shock syndrome or TTSS is the second, and it may be of even more critical importance. In a nutshell, a subject translated through a CTL can begin to deteriorate mentally and physically. There is no way to predict who will suffer from TTSS."

"You mean that Vadim might be cracking up back there in 1990," Quinn conjectured.

"That's right," replied the tech. "It also means that you might do the same. If that's the case, I'm afraid there's nothing anybody can do to prevent it."

The temponaut crouched within the time travel device. The hunched posture was necessary because of the data brought back by the time probe.

The cavern's roof was low and clearance with its walls was minimal. Should Quinn arrive at his time travel destination in an upright position, then his upper torso would materialize inside solid rock, killing him instantly.

Quinn looked out through the walls of the transparent globe surrounding him on all sides at the activity in the command center. All external sounds were muffled by the thick spherical walls which seemed to separate Quinn from another reality.

"Systems initialized," reported the voice of the Chief Mission Support Engineer via an intercom link. "Temporal translation in five seconds. Good luck."

All at once, at the zero mark, Quinn's perspective underwent a radical phase shift. The transparent walls of the sphere turned a seamless black, shutting out all external sights and sounds as a maelstrom of color began to surround the time traveler whose light cone was now tipping back into the past.

In the space of a heartbeat the Gamma Base mission control center had disappeared. Quinn now felt the hard rock floor of the cavern beneath his bent knee. There was the coolness of the rock beneath his palms. The silence was so total it made his ears ring.

The Gamma Base techs had been right about the clearance, Quinn saw right off. He barely had enough room to walk on a crouch toward the

cave entrance a few dozen yards up ahead. Apparently Vadim, through luck or foreknowledge, had avoided the hazards posed by the clearance factor on his own translation.

Drawing the P90 bullpup from the quick release rig on his thigh, Quinn proceeded cautiously toward the cavern's mouth. There was no way to be certain that he had actually traveled back to the time that the techs had tried to put him in, despite what his senses were telling him.

There was no guarantee either that Vadim was not waiting around a blind bend in the tunnel formed by the cavern walls, armed and ready to blow Quinn away.

As it turned out, though, the cave was deserted.

Quinn saw no signs indicating Vadim's presence anywhere in the vicinity. Taking his BioTrak scanner from his carryall, he activated the unit but wasn't able to pick up a position icon on Vadim's skull implant. Replacing the tracer in his carrying bag, Quinn walked out into pitch darkness.

Beyond the cave, darkness primeval had fallen across the desert landscape. Quinn had just traveled back approximately forty years in time, but had he not known that there was a highway less than a mile from the cave, he might as easily have thought he had traveled back forty million years.

Shouldering his carryall, Quinn checked his wrist chronometer. By its glowing dial he saw that it was a little past two o'clock in the morning as he began walking toward the highway across the cool desert sands.

TWENTY-TWO

The occupant of room 502 checked out of the Endicott Inn outside of Tucson, Arizona and climbed into the driver's seat of the rented Prisma sedan.

The powerful V-8 engine under the muscle car's hood roared immediately to life. The driver tooted the vehicle out onto the highway, reaching forward to switch on the FM stereo radio that the car was equipped with.

Less than three days after he had walked out of the cave in the Nevada desert after translating into a CTL terminating in 1990, the Reverend Vadim had already immersed himself in his new time.

The basics came first, that was a rule Vadim lived by. In order to establish a new identity Vadim had attended to the basics and had done so thoroughly.

In his wallet was a suite of credit cards. These identified Vadim as one Abbott Motherwell who was a traveling salesman from Encino, California.

A recently issued passport was also in Motherwell's possession, every bit as legitimate as were all the other assorted pieces of identification he carried on him, including his valid Los Angeles drivers license and social security card.

The Reverend also kept the Glock 20 with autotargeting laser he'd taken downtime with him in a shoulder holster.

The windbreaker he wore kept the small, high capacity weapon well concealed. Hidden in the attaché case carried by the "traveling salesman" was the H&K 4.73 mm flechette-firing autoweapon, plus several hundred rounds of ammo for both futuristic weapons.

The weapons stood ready just in case any unforeseen contingencies popped up, contingencies that might call for Vadim to take drastic action.

Among these contingencies was the possibility that his sabotage to the CTL generator system had not been as crippling to a pursuit mission as Vadim had intended it to be.

Another consideration was that World Pol might have sent an agent back after him from Gamma Base, or even from some other secret time travel research and development installation that he didn't even know about, for that matter. The spooks were a devious bunch, and anything was possible when dealing with them.

Vadim steered with one hand and continued to play around with the dials and buttons of the dashboard FM radio. The music was a popular rock song by someone called Magdalena the Virgin. His grandmother had liked that one, as he vaguely recalled. Those old-time songs were really the best, he thought, as he began thumping his foot in tempo to the driving beat.

On foot, Quinn had reached the highway after treading sand in the early morning gloaming. The four-laner was precisely where it was marked on the road atlas of the southwest provided by the CIA.

A distant dot on the flat horizon grew into a shimmering white splotch created by headlight beams and thermal distortion and finally resolved itself into the cab of an eighteen-wheel truck.

Sticking out his thumb in the timeless gesture of a hitchhiker looking for a lift, Quinn caught a ride with the trucker, a produce hauler out of Medford, Oregon, and bound for Phoenix, Arizona.

Thanking the driver, who regaled Quinn with tales of Vietnam -- what his era knew as "the forgotten war"-- Quinn got off at the nearest town, Four Corners.

It was still early morning, and though the sun would soon rise and vehicles had already taken to the highways, a sense of quiet reigned over the land. Beyond the town, the sawtooth ridge line of distant mountains was etched against an indigo sky.

A warm, bone-dry wind blew strongly along the main street of the small Nevada town. Within a few hours, it would become as hot as the air from an industrial oven, Quinn knew.

Ducking into an alley, Quinn unshipped the BioTrak scanner from the queer-looking pouch that hung from his belt. Quinn hadn't seen a fanny pack since attending family gatherings at his grandmother's house when he was a kid. He had to admit that they could come in handy, though.

The tracer still didn't show any indication of Vadim's presence, though its range encompassed several miles in all directions. But then again, Quinn hadn't expected an easy go of it.

Two possibilities existed to explain the absence of any location readings on Vadim.

The first was that the transponder implant had ceased to function due to Velikovsky's Paradox that the chief mission support engineer at Gamma had mentioned to Quinn. A less exotic explanation was simply that Vadim was out of range, which was to be expected if he was moving fast from his point of temporal translation.

Vadim was smart enough to suspect that he might be followed down the time stream.

He would have had to have been a fool to have remained in Four Corners -- if he'd come here at all -- any longer than the shortest time necessary to establish a new identity and prepare himself for the next leg of his trip. Whatever else Vadim might be, he was no fool, Quinn knew.

Putting the tracker back in the fanny pack, Quinn slung the black leather carryall over his shoulder and left the alley for the main street.

There on the sidewalk he stopped, wondering where to go next, as his eye caught the flashing neon sign of a local branch of the national Arrow car rental agency located across the main street and a block to one side.

Just then a pair of headlights suddenly came into view at the far end of the street. Quinn stepped quickly back into the shadows of the alley as the police cruiser glided past and disappeared down the road.

The street was deserted again as he stepped back out and walked down to the car rental agency, seeing the first glow of dawn paint the sky in lavender streaks on the eastern horizon.

As he neared the parking lot of the rental business, a dog barked from behind a chain link fence that wound around the parking lot.

Quinn carefully studied the area, convincing himself that there were no perimeter alarms present before consulting his watch. It was a little before four o'clock in the morning. He had plenty of time to do what was necessary.

Passing the car rental agency, Quinn headed down the street toward a strip mall with two of its stores still open. One of them was an all-night newsstand. The other was a combination burger joint and taco stand.

Quinn went into the newsstand first and scanned one of the newspapers. The date above the headline was December 14th, 1990.

The techs at Gamma Base had translated him back down the timeline with surgical precision. As the headlines telling of the buildup of U.S. Forces in Saudi Arabia attested, he had arrived a few weeks before the beginning of the Desert Storm campaign.

"I can't sleep," Quinn told the guy behind the counter. "Maybe you've got something I can take."

The guy scratched his head and reached behind him to a line of over the counter drugs on a row of shelves. From one of the shelves he brought down a small plastic bottle containing some E-Zee Do-Zee nonprescription sleeping pills.

"These here work pretty good," he said. "I use 'em myself, chief."

Quinn paid for the sleeping pills, pocketed the small cardboard box and walked down the narrow pavement of the strip mall toward the burger

joint. There he ordered one of their deluxe quarter pound patty hamburgers from a sleepy looking counterman.

As he paid for the burger, he noticed that the police cruiser he had been surprised by earlier had just passed by the strip mall. He made a mental note to keep an eye out for the local constabulary as the car passed out of sight once again.

In an alley behind a pile of empty cartons left out for trash pickup, Quinn dumped the contents of several capsules of the over the counter sleeping medication and sprinkled them over the hamburger patty. Reclosing the styrofoam container, he walked back toward the car rental agency.

The dog inside the fenced-off lot started barking again as the intruder came near. Quinn looked around, established that he wasn't being watched and waved the hamburger under the dog's nose. The barking turned into a few halfhearted whelps before it ceased completely. The tantalizing aroma of food had overcome the animal's natural wariness.

Quinn tossed the hamburger over the fence and watched the dog forget all about him and go for the tempting meat. As he climbed the fence, the dog momentarily looked up from its meal, as though it were trying to decide whether the intruder was more important than the free breakfast.

The decision went to the hamburger and Quinn was not troubled by the dog who seconds later, began to wobble on its legs as the Ee-Zee Do-Zee powder that Quinn had spiked the patties with began to take effect.

Quinn negotiated the parking lot quickly, past an assortment of sedans, station wagons and four-by-four vehicles, heading for the office area of the car rental agency. The office, housed in a converted trailer raised off the dirt lot on cinderblocks, was wired to an alarm system that could nevertheless be circumvented by a phreaker, several flavors of which Quinn had brought downtime with him from Gamma.

Quinn unshipped the advanced, special-purpose electronic device and flipped it on. The phreaker's LCD readout displayed ALARM SYSTEM NEUTRALIZED a few moments later. He left the phreaker in place and continued on his run.

Once inside the office, Quinn succeeded in booting up the agency's computer system and slaving it to a palmtop master unit he unshipped from his black leather barrel bag. He accomplished this by mating the Kosmos palmtop to the server unit via an RS-232 interface attached to the serial port at the rear of the computer housing.

With the computer system phreaked, Quinn had no problem in logging onto the company's database. The database of the agency branch here in Four Corners was linked to the Arrow national database via a submenu option, which though it required another password and access privileges, Quinn was easily able to enter, via the palmtop master unit.

Calling up the records of automobile rentals that had been made during the last couple of days, Quinn was on the alert for any patrons who had paid cash exclusively.

As it turned out, there was only one such patron matching these parameters -- a Mr. Abbott Motherwell of Los Angeles, California. According to the Arrow computer he had rented a Prisma luxury sedan the previous day and had paid for the rental with cash.

Quinn used the site office phone to dial the number that Motherwell had given as his home phone number and received a message stating that the number was no longer in service.

Another call placed to a telephone company information operator showed no listing for Motherwell either. It was a good bet that "Motherwell" was in fact Reverend Vadim. The destination listed for the car to be returned at was given as one of the Arrow rental offices in New York City. The address of the office put its position on the West Side of Midtown Manhattan.

Using the palmtop unit to power down the host computer while covering his electronic tracks so that no record of his unauthorized break-in remained behind, Quinn shut off the computer and put the palmtop master unit back in his carryall.

Just as he was about to leave the site office, he spotted the weaving flicker of a flashlight beam and heard the crunch of footsteps outside on the gravel-topped surface of the parking lot area.

Looking out the window, Quinn saw a uniformed police officer shining his flashlight down on the drugged guard dog. Another cop was already radioing in a report via a handheld communications device. Quinn realized that he was caught in a zero-sum response loop unless he took the initiative, and took it quickly.

Keys to the various rental vehicles were hanging on a board on one of the walls with rows of numbered pegs. He found the keys whose tags identified them as belonging to one of the four-bys he'd seen parked in the lot on his way in.

There was a rear door leading from the office that would enable him to exit unseen by the police. Pocketing the keys, Quinn quietly opened the door and then closed it behind him. Exiting the office building, he crept through the shadows and retrieved the phreaker that had neutralized the office alarm system.

The sound of the four-by's engine being gunned alerted the cops near the fence. But by that time Quinn was burning rubber toward the padlocked gate, which buckled and tore loose as the heavy vehicle collided with it at high speed. The four-by's powerful engine sent the truck bumping over the pavement and out onto the street on oversized steel belted radials.

Quinn already had the P90 CAW propped against the window frame of the speeding four wheel drive vehicle. With the CAW set on full auto burstfire mode, Quinn stopped the vehicle and hosed down the blue and white police car.

The police cruiser's tires popped with four loud, near-simultaneous bangs, as the car sank down to sit on its naked wheel rims. Quinn screamed the four-by away from the police car as the deputies got off some inaccurate

shots from the Glock 9 mm semiautos they packed, but none of the rounds came close to striking the highballing truck.

As he roared down main street toward the highway, Quinn heard the sounds of sirens on his tail as more patrol vehicles joined in the chase.

TWENTY-THREE

Halogen high beams knifed through the night as two police cars careened around a corner. They were coming straight at Quinn, and they were loaded for bear.

Instead of slackening his pace, Quinn floorboarded the gas pedal, pushing the four hundred and ninety horses under the vehicle's hood to their tolerance limit.

The four-by shot up the highway at speeds better than one hundred miles per hour until the velocity needle was redzoned.

The two police cruisers separated slightly, not wanting to risk a head-on collision with the speedballing truck. But they were too slow to get out of the heavy vehicle's way.

The oncoming four-by made its own room as it bore down on the cruisers now breaking left and right. Metal shrieked, sparks flew and headlights blew out with loud pops as the truck's front end plowed right through the two vehicles.

The two police cars were bulldozed aside, the impact of the collision ripping off the front fenders of both vehicles and sending them skidding across the blacktop.

With a screech of tire rubber spun without mercy against asphalt until it burned and smoked, Quinn felt the four-by pull free of the embrace of twisted, ruptured metal and shoot up the highway.

Mobile once again, the truck raced up the main street of the desert town, straddling the broken white line with two wheels in each lane.

The two deputies in either cop car were unable to get their badly damaged cruisers started again. Grating and wheezing noises from under the crumpled hoods told them not to even bother trying to play amateur mechanic.

"That sumbitch got past us," the wheelman of one car told the base station as he gunned the ignition but couldn't get the alternator to turn over.

"Ten four," the base station replied to the crippled cruiser team. "We're setting up a road block up ahead. Got a chopper warming up for takeoff in case it's needed. Don't worry, the guy's toast."

Not far ahead, and directly in his path, Quinn could now see a bus painted in police colors rolling into position at the head of the street. Two patrol cars pulled up to flank the large, heavy vehicle.

The SWAT guys taking up positions on either side of the bus were not there to play tag, it was apparent. They had their hats on backwards, their flak vests strapped down and their weapons armed and ready.

The M16 automatic carbine rifles they ported might be outdated in Quinn's time but the SS-109 tumbling rounds the short barreled weapons could fire in full-auto burst mode would kill you just as dead as a laser-guided caseless 4.73 mm flechette round could.

Not wanting to risk taking on the roadblock head-on and get a face full of hot 5.56 mm lead, Quinn viciously wrenched the four-by's steering wheel.

His knuckles whitened and sweat poured across his grimacing features as Quinn hung a tight, screaming, skidding left turn around the corner of the intersection at the next traffic light.

There were more police cruisers already in position there, he saw through slitted eyes as he came out of the wrenching turn. Deputies packing pump action shotguns were already crouched behind the doors of the parked vehicles, their gun muzzles pointed his way.

Using brake pedal and hand brake to pull a fast bootlegger turn, Quinn did a three hundred sixty degree about-face in just under two seconds flat.

Acrid black smoke that billowed from the four-by's burning tire treads encircled the hardspinning vehicle as the truck swung all the way around to point in the opposite direction it had been going.

As all four wheels of the rugged vehicle found purchase on the tarmac and the four-by shot back up the avenue toward the town center, Quinn heard the rear window implode and disintegrate into round-edged flakes as it was struck by part of a fan of 30.06 gauge shotgun pellets.

He heard the staccato, cracking reports of more small arms shooting as M16 fire opened up, but took no other hits as far as he could tell as he poured on more steam and highballed the rig down the avenue.

This, at least, looked like one escape corridor that the sheriff's men had neglected to cover.

A few hundred feet up ahead, Quinn could discern that the street passed directly under an old black trestle bridge and continued on a straightaway that ran perpendicular to a railroad crossing a short distance beyond the bridge.

Beyond the crossing, the street fish-hooked into a turnoff onto the highway.

Reflexively, Quinn reached out toward the dashboard to punch up a GPS map display so he could get some idea of where the highway network would take him once he was on it. In that instant he realized that it would be at least thirty years before such options were standard in American automobiles.

Even the rearview mirror was still actually a glass "mirror" instead of a zoom-capable digital display.

And in that primitive analog rearview mirror Quinn now saw headlight beams lancing and juddering toward him as more of the sheriff's deputies gave chase in the police cruisers that had been taken off the roadblocks and tasked with pursuit and interception.

For the next mile or so until it passed the railroad crossing, the road ran ruler straight, with no intersections in sight. At the sides of the road were brick warehouse structures, the narrow lanes between them potential dead ends.

Suddenly, the stop signals flanking the railroad crossing began to flash red and orange and the warning sounds of an alarm bell filled the air with loud, repetitious clanging.

The yellow-and-black striped wooden barrier was already being lowered to bar access to the railroad crossing as a freight train out of Albuquerque, New Mexico, came barreling down the tracks running perpendicular to the route Quinn was on.

Now the glaring headlight beams of the pursuing police cruisers were growing brighter in the four-by's rearview. The chase cars were closing in, eating up the road as the cops poured on the speed.

The constant clanging of the warning bell at the railroad crossing up ahead grew louder as Quinn came nearer. Added now to the din was the mournful, eerie whistle of the diesel locomotive piercing the night from less than a mile away.

Risking everything on a single throw of the dice, Quinn double clutched the gear shift and floored the gas pedal for a final burst of speed. Tension twisted his features into a snarl of defiance and rivers of sweat pasted his hair flat against his forehead.

The four-by growled as he goosed the accelerator, arrowing the big truck forward toward the railroad crossing at a speed in excess of the one hundred twenty miles per hour that its velocity gauge stopped at.

Behind the cab windows of the onrushing diesel locomotive, the motorman reacted with wide-eyed horror as he saw the front end of the truck come crashing through the striped barricade only a few feet from the bullet-shaped nose of the oncoming train.

Taking his hand off the throttle, he reacted as quickly as he could and applied the air brakes. But the motorman knew that at the speed the train was traveling, there was no way that he could stop the inevitable collision from happening.

An instant seemed to compress itself into the space of a lifetime for Quinn.

He saw the striped wooden barrier splinter in half and go flying to either side of the four-by and was aware of the black nose of the speeding diesel locomotive hurtling toward him, a huge black shape screaming out of the night like an onrushing specter of doom, its brakes screeching, its whistle howling, the Cyclops beam of its headlight blinding his sweat-stung eyes.

The ominous shape grew larger and nearer until it filled the world and the banshee scream of the air brakes of the locomotive merged with the scream of the truck's overdriven V-8 engine and the splintering of the two-inch thick wood beam of the barricade bar.

The four-by passed broadside of the oncoming train, mere inches from the point of a shattering collision.

Gritting his teeth, Quinn clutched the truck's steering wheel until his knuckles whitened, his booted foot stomping down on the accelerator pedal.

Time stopped altogether as hell sounds and high velocity merged into a single primal scream of overheated metal driven beyond the razor edge of shrieking madness.

Time snapped back into synchronization just as suddenly.

The black death shape hurtling out of the night was now behind the four-by. Its rear tires were bumping across the outer rails of the tracks to find purchase again on the blacktop surface of the road.

On the other side of the railroad crossing, the column of patrol cars came screeching en masse to a sudden halt. Due to the velocity of the high speed chase, the cars could not stop in time. As tightening brake shoes bit into spinning axles, the cruisers went crashing into one another, creating a multiple car pileup on the road.

Car doors slammed as deputies climbed out of the immobilized vehicles, cursing their bad luck.

The train was highballing across the tracks now, but it would be a long time yet before the many boxcars of the long freight train cleared the crossing completely.

Until that time, the chase cars were stopped dead bang.

TWENTY-FOUR

Ah, global warming, the man calling himself Abbott Motherwell thought to himself as he strolled along the street identified on maps as Avenue of the Americas but which all New Yorkers simply called Sixth Avenue.

The ozone layer had not yet deteriorated to the point where the inhabitants of the five boros could grow cactus in mid-December.

The last time he had visited New York -- in the year 2030 -- he recalled that window boxes with cactus were all the rage, their gaudy flowers rioting in the blazing winter sun, attracting the swarms of mutant Brazilian bees that were feared to spread a deadly form of Lyme disease.

But the weather was still unseasonably warm for December, and the visitor from the future walked the crowded streets of Midtown Manhattan comfortable in the windbreaker and turtleneck shirt that he had bought at a Fifth Avenue haberdashery located in the lobby of the Park Central Hotel, at which he stayed.

As "Motherwell," the Reverend Vadim felt a strange tingling as he turned the corner at Radio City Music Hall and followed Forty-seventh Street eastward toward Rockefeller Center.

Decades from now, his internationally famous face -- familiar to any viewer of the electronic media of the day -- would have turned heads had he appeared in public.

But he was now downtime a few years before his birth in Iowa City, Iowa, and the Reverend Lux Vadim was a completely anonymous face in the lunch-hour crowd of Midtown.

In this anonymity came a strange sense of hidden power.

He knew things about the world and what surprises lay in store for it that those people he passed on his way had no inkling of.

Many of them would die for lack of an over-the-counter cancer medication, marketed under such trade names as Cancer Gone and C-Off that was available up to for only a few dollars.

Other passersby would complacently go about their business, never dreaming as they planned for a better future that the worst recession since the end of World War II was looming just around the corner, one that would snatch their livelihoods away from them almost overnight.

As the euphoria brought on by the Gulf War's easy victories faded from memory, economic miseries would put many of the trendy shops that Vadim was now strolling past on this Manhattan street out of business forever.

One of the other things he knew about was what lay just a few weeks away from his "now."

As the headlines of newspapers proclaimed from the streetside stands he passed, the buildup of troops and war materiel in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia code-named Operation Desert Shield, would soon turn into the twin blitzkriegs called Desert Wind and Desert Storm, respectively.

Before long all of these busy people swarming around him would be riveted to television screens.

The obsession with the day-to-day progress of the war in the Gulf would be unlike anything seen since the population huddled around radios during the dark days of World War II.

At first they would be terrified by the images of warplanes taking off from secret air bases to conduct precision bombing sorties over Iraq in the largest-scale American military invasion in over four decades.

The terror of the masses as the reality of the war sank in, a reality that meant their loved ones overseas might die by the thousands and that they themselves might become the victims of terrorist rampages in the U.S., would soon change to an almost hypnotic fascination as they watched the waves of strike aircraft and fighter bombers thunder in over fortress Baghdad.

With the fascination would come a sense of relief as it became apparent that the Iraqi air force, painted as one of Saddam's strongest military assets by the media, had chosen to run instead of fight, leaving Iraq to become little more than a gigantic target for Coalition bombs.

The initial terror would return temporarily as the first round of Scud missile attacks commenced and Saddam Hussein tried in vain to drag Israel into the war, an act that he felt with good reason might drive an alliance-busting wedge between the Arab members of the U.N. mandated Coalition.

The fear would fade again as hastily upgraded and emplaced Patriot missile batteries blasted the Iraqi Scuds out of the night skies over Tel Aviv, Israel and the Saudi cities of Riyadh and Dahrhan, and no evidence of

chemical or biological warheads were discovered in the twisted wreckage of the downed missiles.

And then the terror would build for the final time as the land battle commenced before evaporating in almost comical anticlimax with many thousands of Iraqi regulars surrendering to rapidly advancing Coalition troops that were drawn from the fifteen participating nations of Desert Storm.

Knowing all of this in advance, as did Lux Vadim while he stood at the railing encircling the Wollman Memorial Skating Rink at Rockefeller Center, gave the temporal traveler a strange adrenaline high.

It was almost like having the gift of prophesy.

No, it was more that.

Prophets could only see their visions and utter their truths. Whether of not any attention was paid them had nothing whatever to do with the prophets themselves or the truths they uttered.

Unlike the Jeremiahs of the world, the Reverend Vadim had something better going for him than mere prophesy. He possessed the ability to change reality, to mold the stuff of causality to fit the shape of the visions of futurity which he saw cast on the present, to make the future into his own self-fulfilling prophesy.

The events in the Iraqi desert had not yet come about, despite the fact that the Reverend Vadim's memory told him that they had already happened. No prophet could change the future, but the Reverend Vadim could do precisely that if he wished.

The Reverend Vadim could make Desert Storm turn out differently. Very differently.

He could cause those Coalition fighters to drop from the skies, render F117A Stealth planes visible to Iraqi radar.

He could retrofit the Iraqi Scud missile warheads with deadly biological payloads that would draw Israel into the fight as the conventional warheads had failed to accomplish, just as Saddam had hoped would happen.

And he could make certain that those Iraqi troops stood pat in their desert bunkers to make the allies pay with blood and screams of pain for every inch of desert they captured, instead of surrendering in droves.

And he knew that if he could convince Saddam Hussein that he was who he claimed to be, then the Reverend Vadim could name his own price. He already knew what that price was: the Muan crystals of power, sitting in the desert, waiting to be brought once more into the light of day after their millennial sleep.

With the crystals of Mu the Mother in his possession, he could develop a time travel capability downtime in the twentieth century. He could mold reality like a sculptor molded a lump of soft, wet clay, twisting and shaping it to suit his whims and designs.

"My designs," Vadim heard his own voice say.

Suddenly he realized that he had been speaking aloud. People nearby were staring at him as though he were a lunatic. What was happening to him, he wondered?

How much had he said? He caught sight of a beat cop standing nearby, who also was watching him, though not making any motion toward him. In another minute that might change. The Reverend pushed past the pedestrians near him, his face burning, eager to get away from where he was.

He did not know that he was suffering from TTSS disorder and that temporal translation shock syndrome was making him deteriorate faster and faster each day he spent downtime. Lux Vadim did not realize that he was cracking up.

The car was a spanking new Japanese import. You could still smell the vinyl upholstery. Quinn had paid cash for the vehicle in Dallas, Texas.

Purchasing the car in that manner might have raised an eyebrow or two at the car dealership. Unlike Vadim's rental strategy, though, curiosity went no further than that.

There was no documentation logged on a computer network, no identification that needed to be presented, and no clue as to Quinn's final destination.

Three days of hard driving after leaving Texas behind, Quinn had merged with the Interstate highway to complete the final leg of his journey to New York where he hoped to have a shot at apprehending the Reverend Vadim and taking him back to 2035 in order to pay for his crimes.

According to the schedule he'd been given at Gamma Base, the next closed time line translation window would be opening up in Lower Manhattan near the Brooklyn Bridge.

The generation of a closed time line by tilting a light cone toward a different "now" would produce what the techs called a CTL window. The first of several such doorways to the future would pop into Quinn's now in approximately ten hours time.

Three CTL windows had been scheduled for opening in 1990, the first was the one from which Quinn emerged into the past. The second would be the New York window. The third window would open in Iraq, near the site believed to be where the Muan crystals were buried, in case Quinn had to go the distance with Vadim.

The possibility existed that Quinn had traveled half a continent in pursuit of a red herring. His only lead in chasing down Vadim to New York had been the destination on the rental car that he had copied from his hack of the Arrow Car Agency computer system back in Four Corners, Nevada.

Despite the possibility that he was chasing shadows, Quinn strongly believed that the Reverend Vadim was in fact heading for New York City.

In these culminating days of the Desert Shield buildup and the imminent launch of the Desert Wind Coalition air strikes against Baghdad, the United Nations building on the East Side of Manhattan had become the focus of world attention as last-minute talks were held there.

If Vadim wanted to contact Saddam Hussein, then Manhattan would be the perfect jumping off point.

Here, as at no other time in history, high-echelon Iraqi government agents were collected in one compact area within the continental United States. It was a situation that was made to order for Vadim to carry out his intended contact with Saddam.

But the proof of the pudding would be in the tasting.

If Quinn could establish that the car that "Abbott Motherwell" had rented in Four Corners, Nevada had been returned to the Arrow agency parking lot in New York City, then he had strong reason to believe that Vadim was nearby. And he was willing to bet that he would have his confirmation.

It was over an hour later when Quinn pulled the Toyota sports car into the underground parking garage of the Remington House hotel in Midtown Manhattan.

He gave the attendant his car keys and received a claim check ticket in exchange, then followed the directional signs depending from the ceiling toward the elevator. The elevator car took him up to the lobby level of the hotel where Quinn next walked directly over to the front desk.

Due to the early morning hour, the lobby was virtually deserted. An attractive black girl was seated behind the desk, wearing a pert looking uniform. Quinn asked her for a room and requested that some hot coffee and a sandwich be set up.

The room was spacious and afforded a panoramic view of northern Manhattan. The skyscrapers marching toward Central Park were lit up in a spectacular gridwork of a million windows against the black rectangles thrust high into the night, and the headlight beams of cars passing over the bridges that spanned the Hudson and East Rivers was a psychedelic light show.

A bellhop soon appeared with the food and coffee he'd ordered from the hotel's kitchen.

Quinn tipped the guy and filled the hole in his stomach before doing anything else. As he finished his sandwich, he linked the Kosmos palmtop computer to the phone line and began to hack into the Arrow Car Rental Agency's computer system.

More powerful than a supercomputer of the 1990s, the Kosmos palmtop soon defeated the safeguards of the Unix-based operating system that the Arrow agency's database records were stored on. Once inside the system, Quinn began giving himself top-priority data access privileges -- it was almost child's play hacking these antique computer systems.

The database at the New York end of the Arrow operation were far more extensive than at Four Corners.

There were numerous entries.

The Kosmos was able to filter these in only a few seconds, after which the small screen showed Quinn that: VEHICLE NUMBER X87000-09 ...

POINT OF ORIGIN: FOUR CORNERS, NEVADA ... POINT OF
DESTINATION: MANHATTAN ... TIME OF DEPARTURE: 09:02 11 DEC 90
... TIME OF ARRIVAL: 17:23 14 DEC 90.

Quinn logged the entry to the ten gigabyte memory of the Kosmos palmtop, shut down the system and disconnected the computer from the modular phone jack.

It looked like Quinn's trail was warming up. Vadim might be somewhere in New York City. Quinn had a few more hours to find him before the time translation window opened up and only seconds to get him inside before it closed again and popped out of existence forever.

TWENTY-FIVE

"My name is Abbott Motherwell. Yes, with two 'b's' and two 't's,'" said the man on the phone. "I would like to speak with Ambassador Rafiq Mafkouz."

"The Ambassador cannot take any calls," the woman with the exotically accented voice replied. "I will connect you with someone else who can help you."

The next voice that came on the line was a deep baritone. Its clipped diction and controlled modulation announced to the Reverend Vadim that he was dealing with Iraqi intelligence. This was, in fact, the case; the new voice on the line belonged to the dreaded Iraqi Moukhabarat.

In the privacy of his hotel room, Vadim permitted himself a smile: "Iraqi intelligence" was oxymoron, wasn't it? At any rate, he had expected to be connected to an embassy spook instead of Mafkouz and was prepared to deal with the situation.

"This is Nazir Yamani speaking, special assistant to the Ambassador," the male voice announced. "How may I help you, sir?"

"By permitting me to help *you*," replied the caller.

"Oh?" asked Yamani, a short, muscular man whose sharp, cold eyes betrayed a professional distrust of everything and everyone, suspecting another of the many cranks the embassy had received in recent weeks was on the line. "And what would be the nature of this help to which you refer?"

"That is something I am afraid I can only discuss with the Ambassador, and in private, I might add," Vadim replied.

There was a brief pause during which no response was made to his last statement. Vadim figured that the Iraqi intelligence officer was gesturing

for somebody else in the room to listen in, had himself switched on recording instruments, or was doing both.

"Mr. Motherwell," the voice returned promptly, "you will appreciate that the Ambassador cannot see anybody at this time. The people of Iraq stand on the brink of war with the United States and several other countries. What you ask is impossible."

"Write this down," Vadim told the man on the other end, although he knew that there would be no need to do so since the entire conversation was being taped by the Iraqis as a matter of routine.

"Umar-19 is a weapons development facility and test bed located in the mountainous region a few kilometers northeast of Q'ayyara. As we speak, a project to develop a nuclear explosive device is stalled due to a lack of kryton switches. These were delivered from a German manufacturer several weeks ago, but most of the krytons turned out to be defective."

Now there was dead silence over the line. Vadim knew that he had finally begun to hook his fish.

"Make a note of this too...."

Vadim continued to describe, in graphic detail, situations and events that were at present among the most closely guarded military secrets of the Iraqi government. These were secrets that would not be fully revealed to the world at large until after the conclusion of the War in the Gulf.

After the fog of war that had rolled in with Operation Desert Storm had lifted, and in the aftermath of United Nations forces subjecting the defeated Iraqi republic's military infrastructure to intensive scrutiny, all the facts that Vadim cited would be common knowledge.

But those events would not take place for another few months yet. Now, weeks before the commencement of the Gulf War they were among the most closely guarded secrets on earth.

"Stop!" the voice of Yamani shouted before the man calling himself Motherwell could complete his description of Iraq's greatest secrets. At the other end of the line, Yamani, a colonel in the Iraqi intelligence service, had begun to break out in a cold sweat.

Much of what this man Motherwell was telling him he had no direct means of verifying or disproving at the moment.

However, the intelligence colonel had personally heard certain rumors which far too closely matched what he was being told now to be attributable to mere coincidence.

At first Colonel Yamani had been inclined to dismiss this American caller as a crank.

In recent days and weeks the embassy had been besieged by many lunatics, some hostile, others claiming to be helpful, even some callers bearing Messianic messages or purporting to be inspired by the prophets.

But this man was of a different stripe than these mad ones, Yamani could tell this right away.

An unmanly fear seized hold of the intelligence colonel's heart, making him furrow his brow and nervously stroke his mustache as he

realized that such words spoken on an open line, even by a person other than himself, could seal his own death warrant.

"What's the problem," asked Vadim, an edge of playfulness in his voice, "am I going too fast for you?" He was beginning to enjoy the feeling of control over his adversary. He knew fully well what the Iraqi was thinking.

Indeed, his words had been calculated as a dominance strategy, intended to produce the maximum shock effect and quickly gain him the upper hand.

"Please say no more," Yamani replied, the tension evident in his strained voice. "This is an open phone line. I can make no promises except that someone will call you back shortly, Mr. Motherwell."

"That's what I thought," Vadim told the Iraqi before hanging up the phone. "I'll be waiting."

The Iraqi ambassador sat across from the American caller who had contacted him some hours before.

Vadim had been called back promptly by the stunned Iraqis, just as he had surmised would be the case.

The information he had given Yamani was not only accurate, it encompassed a collection of compartmented data that was known, in its entirety, to only a handful of men at the apex of the Iraqi intelligence pyramid.

The "dangle" was too good to pass up.

The very audacity and improvisational feel to the intelligence initiative seemed to be an indication that the contact was genuine.

Under analysis, it simply did not appear to be the kind of dangle operation that the CIA or any other intelligence service would mount.

Mindful of surveillance, the Iraqis had implemented an elaborate plan to move the defector -- for that is the only term that they could use to define the American caller -- to a safe house in the outer boro of Queens.

An effective variation on a time-tested deception ploy was carried out.

An Iraqi agent, dressed as Motherwell, was sent to exit the hotel and get into Motherwell's car. All the while the real caller was moved to a waiting van parked in the underground garage of the hotel and spirited away down a darkened street.

Blindfolded, Motherwell was then driven around in circles.

"Driving a square," as the maneuver was known to intelligence operatives, would both disorient their guest so that he could not recall details about the route taken to the safe house.

It would permit the Moukhabarat personnel to detect and evade any pursuers that might be on their tails.

Since there did not seem to be any pursuers, the van broke away from its circular route through the streets of Forest Hills and proceeded directly to the safe house in the wooded section only minutes from Midtown Manhattan yet resembling the suburbs in most respects.

The entire operation, carried out flawlessly by the Iraqis, took only two hours. The Ambassador was already waiting for him when he arrived at the safe house.

"You have made some highly provocative statements, Mr. Motherwell," the ambassador was saying to the American. "I would like you now to tell me why you have made them."

"To get your attention, of course," Motherwell told Mafkouz. "And I see that I've gotten it."

The Ambassador's face turned a beet red. He was not a man used to being spoken to flippantly and given to frequent rages when incensed.

He had picked up a pitcher of water from the negotiation table and thrown it into the face of the Kuwaiti ambassador sitting across the negotiating table just the previous day, when the man had the temerity to ask for his stinking little country back.

"Sir, I warn you that I am not here to play games," he told Motherwell. "You are now in no position to joke with me."

"Okay," Vadim told the Ambassador. "You want to know all about me, I'll tell you about me. I came here from fifty years in the future in a time machine. There are technological matters and historical matters known to me that could result in Iraq winning the coming war instead of losing it. In return for my services I want something from Iraq."

"This is getting us nowhere," the Ambassador shouted, rising to his feet and throwing open his arms in a dismissive gesture.

Picking up on the cue, the Iraqi hard men looking on reached for their weapons, sensing that Mafkouz had reached critical mass. They anticipated the order to send a few silenced rounds into the head of a man who was obviously insane.

"You are in very deep trouble, my game-playing friend," Mafkhouz growled, seconds away from giving the order to have the man killed where he sat. "You, as well as your CIA handlers, will learn that we have little sense of humor in these difficult times."

"Uh-uh," Vadim said with a smile, shaking his head. "*You're* going to learn something; that I'm here to cut a deal not screw around. Now you listen to me: you've taken my keys when you searched me. One of those keys unlocks a safety deposit box back at the hotel. In that box you will find some items. Analyze them."

The ambassador's rage began to drain away a little. There was something in the confidence with which this man spoke that made the Iraqi feel that he was not as insane as he appeared on the surface. Could it really be that there was a germ of truth in the wild story he was telling?

"Why?" Mafkhouz asked simply. "What's to be gained from that?"

"Just do it, my friend," Motherwell told him. "Do it if you want to grasp the life raft I'm offering the pile of sand you call a country. Do you know what kind of massive assault you're about to get hit with? Of course you do. You have to know."

"Let me tell you, Mafkouz, it's going to be worse than anything your intel people imagined. It's going to be pure fucking hell. Hundreds of thousands of your troops will die in the desert like rats burned up in their holes. In the end you will see Kuwaiti war wagons chasing them across the desert. And for Saddam, it will be the beginning of the end. Unless, of course, you do what I tell you."

The Iraqi stared hard at this man, and glanced at Colonel Yamani with equal intensity. A few moments ago Mafkouz had been prepared to have Yamani arrested as a spy and executed for treason along with the CIA dangle.

But now he had begun to feel a strange fear that gnawed at his entrails. For this man was not a madman and he did not appear to be a fool either. He was something else entirely, and that thing, Mafkouz was starting to realize, might just be a prophet of God.

"We will do as you ask," the ambassador said after another moment's deliberation. "But if you have wasted our time, I promise you that your death will be painfully slow."

Vadim smiled toothily. Despite the threat Mafkouz had just made, he knew that he had the Iraqis scared.

Vadim could feel their fear hanging in the close air of the room, he could smell it like a dog can smell it on the skin of a man. He began to feel high again, high on his ability to control the Iraqis that his knowledge provided him.

The thought momentarily struck Vadim that this euphoria was out of place, that he was not acting like himself, that his speech and mannerisms had changed from his normally cautious deportment and demeanor.

Vadim realized he had undergone a personality change, but he was enjoying the high too much to care about it, and the realization that he was cracking up under TTSS disorder was the farthest thing from his mind.

"There's one more thing," he told Mafkouz. "Somebody else, also from the future, may be in this time too. Be careful. Because he is one very dangerous man, and he will kick your asses before you even know what hit you."

TWENTY-SIX

Among the flash ID that the mission support team had provided Quinn before his time translation from Gamma Base were CIA and FBI shields and cards as well as police shields of major American cities, including New York.

For the last few hours, Quinn had been canvassing the leading hotels in midtown Manhattan with a photograph of the Reverend Vadim, a.k.a. Abbott Motherwell. It was deep December and the days were short. Darkness had fallen quickly.

Some time after nightfall, Quinn was still pounding the New York pavement, but had yet to get a break in his bid to track down his elusive quarry.

Beginning with the most expensive hotels on Park Avenue, Quinn had begun working his way down his list, while he headed downtown at the same time. He was acting on the assumption that Vadim would frequent only the best establishments.

Quinn had two or three more of the premier hotels on his list as he arrived at a hotel in the vicinity of the late Forties. It was already past the dinner hour and the rush hour crowds had abated. Something resembling calm had drifted over the city as a light rain had begun to fall, although with

Christmas decorations everywhere, snow might have been more in character.

Just off Fifth Avenue, the hotel Quinn approached sported a liveried doorman and a red carpet outside, the added touches of elegance probably intended to make up for the seediness of the neighborhood, which included a drug rehabilitation center and rows of drab looking office buildings.

Farther down the street there was a cab stand at which a group of cabbies stood around discussing the day's news and smoking cigarets.

Like everywhere else in the boro of Manhattan, the block also had its fair share of homeless persons who lurked on the fringes. He saw a group of them scrounging through a dumpster piled high with trash at the corner of the block in the shadows cast by a streetlight that had either died or been smashed into malfunctioning.

Other derelicts hovered at the edges of the red-carpeted entrance to the elegant midtown hotel, where Quinn could see a group of well dressed Japanese businessmen being helped to a waiting taxi cab by the liveried hotel doorman.

It was strange how life's throwaways could live in the midst of society and yet be treated as though they didn't exist. They were like ghosts inhabiting another plane of reality, the living dead drifting through their own universe half in and half out of the world of the living.

As Quinn walked up the street toward the brightly lit hotel entrance, he eyeballed a car that had just pulled up in front of the hotel. The vehicle braked to a stop just beyond the entranceway where a yellow strip and signs declaring NO STANDING were conspicuously posted.

What attracted Quinn's attention to the vehicle were the diplomatic tags it carried, identified by the letters DPL for the diplomatic corps.

He stopped still and watched, unseen and apparently unnoticed by the occupants of the vehicle, two of whom climbed out of the car's back seat and walked briskly past the doorman, through the doors and straight into the hotel's lobby.

On the night wind, Quinn caught a snatch of conversation in a language that sounded Middle Eastern to him before the hardmen ascended the stairs and were out of earshot entirely.

Remaining behind the wheel of the stationary vehicle, the driver switched off the ignition. Quinn saw the tail lights wink off, then a flicker of flame limn a cruel slash mouth and aquiline nose as the wheelman lit up a cigaret and sat smoking in the darkened vehicle's interior.

A gut check told Quinn that it was no mere coincidence that he and the stocky enforcer types who had gotten out of the car with the diplomatic tags had arrived at the Park Central hotel at approximately the same time.

But if in fact those guys were Iraqi Moukhabarat operatives, what was the purpose of their visit?

Were they coming to talk to Vadim? To snatch him? To terminate him? Or was there some other aim in their visit to the Park Central, one that had nothing to do with Nomad's mission downtime?

Regardless of the reasons, Quinn knew that he had to act quickly or lose what might be his only solid lead in tracking Vadim down.

For Vadim was surely close by, probably in the New York City environs if not in the hotel directly across the street -- a smart move as it would not be the first place that a pursuer familiar with his m.o. would look for him. But he would not remain long; his final destination was Iraq itself.

There were two homeless men foraging in a pile of trash left in the dumpster he'd noticed earlier for late-night pickup outside the entrance to a second-rate office building near where Quinn stood his vigil.

He noticed them stealing glances at him as they went about their scavenging activities. Now he saw that one of them was eyeing him directly, making no attempt to conceal the mixture of hostility and avarice that crossed his face.

The derelict spat on the ground.

"What you lookin' at, motherfucker?" the guy growled at Quinn, meeting his glance and holding it menacingly.

Keeping the car parked outside the hotel in view, Quinn crossed over and got in the homeless man's face, noting the ugly purple lump that had deformed the lower lid of one of his eyes.

His partner had stopped what he was doing and was staring at Quinn too. He also launched a gob of spit at the sidewalk.

Their combined rage was like a force field that he could feel radiating at him like heat from a furnace. Their anger was as palpable as the odors of their soiled clothing and unwashed bodies.

"I'm looking at two guys who stand to make ten thousand bucks apiece for about five minutes work," Quinn replied calmly, confident that he could break the jaws of these two slobs if they chose not to be reasonable and attacked him.

The look of rage immediately softened. The hooded eyes widened, and in its place there was the glimmer of astonishment which in a heartbeat changed to doubt.

They had been screwed by everyone. Here was another guy trying to screw them. It had to be that way. No other explanation was possible.

"Yeah, sure," the first homeless man said. "Show us your money, man."

Quinn did.

"Now that I've got your attention, I'm gonna tell you what I need," Quinn declared. "You tell me if you can do it. Then you get the money, it's as simple as that."

"What do you need?" the other homeless man asked.

"There's a car across the street," Quinn told them. "Don't look at it. I want you to get the attention of the dude behind the wheel. I want you to hold his attention until you see me nod. That should take three to five minutes. Can you do it?"

The answer was yes. Quinn paid each of the homeless men ten one thousand dollar bills and shortly thereafter, they crossed the street obliquely toward the car.

Keeping the hotel entrance in constant focus, and reasonably sure that the wheelman had not noticed him, Quinn too crossed the street on the diagonal, but away from the two men he'd recruited.

Moments later, the derelicts had crossed directly in front of the vehicle with the diplomatic tags.

They right away began to launch into a convincing shoving match which ended with one of them sent sprawling directly across the hood of the target vehicle.

The homeless man who had taken the tumble jumped to his feet and took a wild overhand swing at the other guy, and the fight continued directly in front of the driver of the car with the DPL tags.

Quinn had taken a miniaturized tracking device from his pocket as they had crossed the street. He was ready to deploy the tracker the moment that the altercation broke out.

Quinn saw that the driver was leaning his head out the window, shouting at the two men flailing at each other on his hood, his attention completely focused on them.

In a matter of seconds, Quinn had attached the magnetized tracker to the interior of the rear wheel housing.

Catching the eyes of one of the combatants, Quinn nodded slightly. His two recruits immediately stopped their diversion and in a matter of seconds had melted away into the shadows.

Out the corner of his eye, Quinn saw the driver get out of the parked car and look around suspiciously. The Iraqi was not only staring at the backs of the two homeless men as they ran down the rain-slicked street but looked all around him as well.

These actions told Quinn that he was more than just a civilian: he had suspected a diversion after the initial shock had worn off and was checking the surrounding area for signs of surveillance.

Taking care not to make eye contact with the glowering driver, Quinn headed up the red-carpeted stairs toward the lobby entranceway of the Park Central.

As he reached the double glass doors, he could see the two men who'd left the car nod to the desk clerk and turn back toward the hotel entrance. Avoiding direct eye contact with them as well, Quinn kept moving toward the front desk.

Examining some travel brochures on a Lucite stand, Quinn kept his eye on the lobby entrance, first checking to make certain that the two hardguys had actually left the premises and secondarily sweeping the lobby for indications that he was being surveilled by a third party.

Reasonably confident that the area was sterile, Quinn went up to the deskman. The ID he flashed was an NYPD detective shield, with a perfectly forged photo identification card in the lower half of the leather holder.

"What can I do for you, lieutenant?" asked the desk clerk. He sensed trouble and his face wore a forced smile. In his experience trouble and cops seldom did not go together.

"Those two guys who just left," Quinn said. "What was their business?"

"Well," he replied, "they were removing something from the hotel's safe. We have safe deposit strongboxes for use by guests."

"But they weren't guests," Quinn prodded the nervous deskman.

"No, they weren't," the deskman answered. "But they had a letter of authorization from one of our guests and the keys to the strong box. So I had no reason to prevent them."

"No, of course not," Quinn said, taking something else from the pocket of his black leather jacket. It was a photograph of the Reverend Vadim. "Was this man the guest whose property they had authorization to retrieve?"

"Yes," said the deskman, nodding. "That's him, all right. Mr. Abbott Motherwell, suite 745."

"Is Mr. Motherwell in right now?" Quinn asked. The desk clerk turned around and scanned the racks containing room keys behind him.

"No, he's not," he said. "His key is gone."

"Ring his room, please," Quinn asked.

After a few minutes with no response, Quinn debated having a look at the room.

He weighed the possibility of what this strategy might yield against the potential of those Moukhabarat types leading him to where Vadim might be at a remote location.

The more he considered it, the more it was likely that Vadim was somewhere else, and that the men were now going to that very place.

"Don't discuss this visit with anybody," Quinn warned the deskman. "If Mr. Motherwell returns, say nothing. This is official business and it could involve criminal charges if it came out you didn't cooperate."

"My lips are sealed," the desk clerk told Quinn who slipped him a fifty dollar bill to insure that they stayed that way. The desk clerk's experience with cops also told him to make sure he kept his promise.

"You with the FBI or the CIA?" asked the cabbie. Quinn had gotten into his hack a few minutes ago and told him he would pay him extra to go exactly where he told him.

In the rearview, the cabbie saw his fare take up a device resembling a handheld computer. Flipping up an antenna, the fare started punching up a storm on the "computer's" keypad as the device emitted a series of beeps and trilling sounds.

With a mixture of satisfaction and relief Quinn saw that the tracker was giving him a strong reading on the location of the car he had planted the bug on.

The icon representing the vehicle moved slowly across a grid of streets and avenues as it sped across the 59th Street Bridge into the boro of Queens.

The techs at Gamma Base had promised Quinn that the tracker would interface flawlessly with the array of Navstar satellites that had been installed in the latter years of the twentieth century to create the first operational global positioning system.

The GPS system would enable the tracker to interpret signals bounced off the satellites from the satcom-capable subminiature bug, giving the sub-palmtop device in Quinn's hand tremendous range.

Keeping his eyes on the tracker's screen, Quinn asked the cabbie why he had asked him if he was either with the FBI or the CIA.

"Look, buddy," the cabbie went on conspiratorially. "I ain't stupid. I been hackin' a cab for like twenty years. Before that, I was into some heavy doings in 'Nam and I know a spook when I see one. This a bust or somethin'? You can level with me."

Quinn searched his memory for the criminal enterprises taking place in the early 1990s. He recalled that the Colombian cocaine cartel had been prominent in the headlines of the era. The Cali-based narcobarons had been engaging in a guerilla style war against their own government for some years.

Indeed, the cartel was still active uptime, even after merging with the Japanese Yakuza by 1999, although in Quinn's time biopharmaceutical and hardware drugs had replaced coke as the mind altering substances of choice. The names, faces and places changed, but the human need to alter consciousness would never stop, Quinn reflected.

"Okay, I'm gonna level with you, chief," Quinn told the cabbie. "You're right on the money. I'm with the FBI. All I can tell you is that a major Colombian drug lord is about to go down for a hard fall."

"Christ, I fuckin' knew it!" the driver shouted, slamming his palm against the steering wheel as he turned onto the 59th Street Bridge. "We're heading into Queens. Lot of Colombians down there."

"There you go, partner," Quinn said, hoping that his patter would keep the cab driver satisfied, but doubting it if New York cabbies of 1990 were anything like their loquacious counterparts of his own era.

Quinn again fixed his eyes on the sub-palmtop tracker unit and continued to direct the cabbie according to the movements of the icon on the screen.

Thanks to a gridlock condition at a traffic intersection in Forest Hills, they were able to make visual contact with the vehicle Quinn was pursuing.

Quinn put the tracker on standby mode and kept his eyes on the car. It was just a few hundred feet along, its tail lights glowing red as it sped up the gleaming wet street.

TWENTY-SEVEN

The Iraqi ambassador examined the electronics items that had been brought back by the search team he had dispatched to the Park Central. The team had just returned after conducting evasive maneuvers intended to dodge surveillance, reporting no apparent sign of pursuit or attempts at interdiction.

Mafkhouz was astonished as he studied what he held in his hand.

The items all appeared to be of radical design.

Having been trained at a French technical university and knowing something of electronics himself, the ambassador was impressed, although he took care not to allow any hint of excitement on his face to betray his inmost thoughts.

He handed the devices over to the technician seated at the table. The man adjusted the lighted magnifier he wore clipped to his eyeglasses and began to disassemble the unit's case with a small, battery powered screwdriver.

With the case open, he inspected the circuitry with logic probes, using a chip extractor to pull integrated circuit chips so he could examine them close-up, immediately noting that the dates of manufacture stamped on the chips were decades from the present.

"Well, what is your impression?" asked Mafkhouz after impatiently watching the tech conduct his inspection.

"This is extraordinary," he replied. "These components are at least twenty years ahead of anything available today. I've never seen anything like it!"

He held one of the chips up to Mafkhouz and pointed to the label adhering to its surface. The label bore a strange pattern of interlocking light and dark squares.

"Do you see this label?" asked the technician?

"Yes," the ambassador answered with annoyance. "Get to the point."

"This is a special two-dimensional bar code. I have only recently read an article in a technical journal concerning it. Ordinary bar codes are of a type called 'Code-39.' This is a new type containing many pages of data on the chip which to my knowledge has not been used commercially. If I can decipher it, then we may know still more."

"What about the possibility of a secret governmental project?" asked Mafkhouz.

"Impossible," the tech replied, shaking his head from side to side. "It will need verification, of course. Both in reading the bar code and in reverse engineering which can only be carried out by a fully equipped laboratory. But my initial impression remains that this technology is like nothing currently produced anywhere on earth, either in secret or the open market."

"Very well," Mafkhouz assented, nodding to the technician by way of dismissal.

After the Moukhabarat agents saw the electronics specialist to the door, he turned to Vadim.

"It appears that these technical artifacts lend credence to your story," he admitted. "I will ask for further instructions and recommend that your proposition be aired at the highest levels."

"In the meantime," Vadim pressed the Iraqi U.N. ambassador, "I'd like to get back to my hotel. I'm getting a little tired of sitting around cooling my heels."

"In the meantime, sir," Mafkhouz replied with an edge in his voice, "you will be the guest of the People's Republic of Iraq. For your own safety, you will remain here where we can protect you until further notice."

The Iraqis had no intention of allowing their new ally to go elsewhere. If it turned out that he was what and who he claimed to be, then he was now an essential part of the Iraqi war effort, far too valuable to even be left alive, after his usefulness had ended.

The safe house was situated on a dead end street in a wooded section of Queens, not very far from the Long Island border.

The location had been chosen with considerable care for the clandestine purposes to which the Iraqis had put the house.

The access lane to the property could be kept under constant surveillance. Though the wood lined street was dark, men wearing night

vision goggles could be stationed throughout the perimeter, hidden among the trees.

In the virtual screen of his VRGs, Quinn received power-on confirmation that all systems diagnostic checks had been carried out. His stealth suit and battle mask were now interfaced with the bullpup autoweapon he clutched in his gloved hands.

Quinn stole through the darkness, invisible Q-switched lasers scanning the operational perimeter. Within a matter of moments he came upon a covert watcher armed with an assault weapon. The merc was patrolling the wooded stretch surrounding the safe house.

Garbed in paramilitary camos in a forest green pattern that were made of chamois to cut down on rustle as he moved against tree branches and leaves, the watcher was wearing conventional NVGs and carried a sound-suppressed short-barreled M16A2 class weapon.

The guy moved with the caution of a professional merc but after a few minutes of real-time video surveillance, Quinn did not detect a high level of fieldcraft. He had not expected to, since perimeter walkers were generally selected from a pool of throwaways and were valued one step above watchdogs.

Since Quinn enjoyed an overwhelming technological superiority over his opponent, whatever woodcraft he possessed would not make a difference to the final outcome, but a guy who was on the ball might still cause some problems despite this uneven match situation. Above all, it was necessary that the sentry be taken down quickly and silently.

With the VRGs directing Quinn toward his quarry with a glowing red line superimposed over the real-time video display, the cybercommando was able to duck-walk close to the watcher in the woods.

The guy heard sounds of movement and was alerted to the presence of something coming in the darkness. Grasping his weapon at hipfire position, he pivoted fast, jerking the gun around.

Now he swept the area from which the sounds had come but saw nothing but shadow in the green view field of his NVGs. Quinn's stealth suit had broken up the thermal signature to blend perfectly into the background.

Putting the death dot on the target icon representing his quarry, Quinn squeezed the trigger of the P90. The silenced weapon hardly moved in his black-gloved fist as a three-round burst of sound-suppressed 5.70 mm steel chewed up the watcher's head at nearly point blank range with hardly any recoil.

Quinn stalked on past the terminated sentry whose dark blood now smeared the leaf-matted earth. He was now tracking the house, his virtual screen crunching numbers to compute the optimum access points for penetration of the Iraqi stronghold.

In a pulse beat, two options were highlighted on the virtual screen. One route in was via the drainpipe, hand-over-hand and up to the topmost story of the house at which a lone window was lighted against the night.

The other route to Nomad's target objective concerned entering the structure through its rear entrance, a strike vector which would take Quinn across the ground floor level of the house.

Several feet along, a message appeared reading WARNING: PERIMETER DEFENSE SYSTEM ENCOUNTERED.

The VRG screen highlighted in red the area around the house that was ringed by an invisible cordon of perimeter sensors. These had been emplaced to detect the presence of intruders and trigger an alarm inside the structure.

INTRUSION DETECTOR SYSTEM IS FIELD EFFECT RESISTANCE TYPE the data block at the top of the virtual screen added.

Unshipping one of the several flavors of phreaker from a gear pouch, Quinn activated the small black cylinder with a group of key presses.

Instantly, three black wire prongs popped out of one end while a small antenna rose from the other. Quinn pushed the phreaker down into the earth on the near side of the highlighted line signifying the field area.

PERIMETER DEFENSE NEUTRALIZED flashed the message on his virtual screen a few moments later, and the red highlighting changed to a blue to indicate its neutral status as the phreaker overrode the sensors and transmitted signals indicating that the invisible electromagnetic field remained unbroken.

Quinn stepped across the invisible sensor line without tripping any intruder alarms in the perimeter detection grid.

By now he was positioned only a few scant feet from the side of the house at the top of which was the lighted window.

Quinn stopped and panned up at the window.

Punching a series of commands on his wrist-top keypad, he sent invisible laser beams lancing across the glass windowpane.

The laser beams were able to pick up the faint vibrations of sounds within the room against the glass. The VRGs' audio processors could then magnify these vibrations many times, adjusting for clarity.

"...will stay here as a guest of the Iraqi government, Mr. Motherwell," an accented voice was saying in English. "Believe me, it is for the best all around."

Quinn heard the voice of the man whom the original speaker had been addressing protest in strident tones. A new command set entered at the wrist-top keypad threw a voice analysis graph on the screen.

MATCH PROBABILITY 97% THAT SPEAKER IS TARGET REVEREND LUX VADIM the screen reported.

The original speaker next began talking in a foreign language as he addressed others in the room, who answered him with a series of monosyllabic replies. Another coded command set put the VRGs microprocessor into simultaneous translation mode.

LANGUAGE SPOKEN IDENTIFIED AS IRAQI DIALECT OF ARABIC the screen reported.

Text is: SPEAKER ONE: "Watch this man and make certain that he does not leave, Jameel."

SPEAKER TWO: "Do not worry, excellency. If this venomous serpent attempts to leave we will snap him like a dry twig."

SPEAKER ONE: "Make certain that this is so. Your lives depend on it."

SPEAKER TWO: "We will not fail you, excellency."

With that, there was the sound of a door opening and closing. Quinn continued to monitor the room as the lights above the entrance came on and Mafkouz, accompanied by another man who was the tech, got into a parked vehicle outside.

The car's headlight beams snapped on and the car rolled down the gravel-topped dirt road toward the main route that ribboned past the woods in which the safe house was located.

Quinn waited until the vehicle had left the premises. Then he proceeded to enter the house.

Grasping the drainpipe, he hoisted himself up, using special grippers on his gloved hands and boot soles for support. The taxing climb brought him to a smaller side roof that ran below the lighted window a few minutes later.

To one side at shoulder level there was a small porch or portico that was encircled by a wooden railing. Quinn swung one leg across the railing and was soon crouched on the porch facing a darkened window.

As his VRG screen redrew, it flashed him the glowing red 3D wire diagram of a darkened corridor running the length of the upper story of the house.

The window was taped with conductive circuit traces and was wired to an alarm system that would be activated if the glass was broken and the traces cut. There would be a magnetically operated switch on the window too, which would operate similarly if the window were forced open.

Unshipping a second flavor of phreaker, Quinn placed the black oblong against the window sill where it was held securely by spiked anchors ejected at high speed.

As he punched the phreaker's activation code in at the small keypad on the oblong, a text box popped onto his VRG screen informing him that the alarm system had been deactivated. Jimmying the window, Quinn raised the sash and entered the corridor.

With the P90 close assault weapon gripped in his right fist, he crept along the darkened hallway on a stealthy half-crouch toward the door set midway along its length that stood at the end of the flashing display on his VRG screen.

The door was located at the foot of a flight of stairs that led down toward the ground level.

Quinn paused for a moment, scanning the downstairs level for passive sonar data on the threat environment. The scan revealed that there were

three other men downstairs, all of them armed. He could deal with those odds.

Quinn stood outside the locked door and took a deep breath. He lifted his booted right foot and kicked hard, hearing the sound of splintering wood as the door flew open.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Frozen in shock, the three men inside the room reacted to the sudden bust-in with stunned expressions.

Two of them were the selfsame Iraqis that Nomad had seen getting out of the vehicle he'd bugged outside the Park Central. The third man was Vadim himself, and the petrified look on his face was the look of a man who knew his time was up.

As startled as the Iraqis were at the sight of the black-clad figure whose head was encased in the weird battle mask of advanced design, the Moukhabarat agents had been trained to react quickly under conditions of high stress.

The first shooter was in the act of dipping for the Sig-Sauer P-220 .45 ACP pistol holstered at his chest in a speed rig as Quinn put the flashing pipper on the glowing blue target acquisition reticle that formed a box around the Iraqi's head.

The instant the pipper touched the edge of the target the P90 CAW wheezed as a brace of silenced 5.70 mm needle nosed rounds augered through space. The burst struck the target within a micro-inch of the "death dot's" position.

The shot pattern was tight and lethal. Three bullets ripped away the target's left eye, taking most of the temple and upper jaw with it in a splatter of crimson gore.

As the Iraqi's face disintegrated into a bloody mist of pulverized bone, momentum thrust him sideways. The body crashed through a window and disappeared, amid a shower of breaking glass. It hit the sloping rooftop with a dull thud, rolled down and crashed to the ground twenty feet below.

Quinn saw Vadim dive behind the sofa as he acquired the second target which the VRG had ranked next to die. The other Iraqi gunman had been a half-second slower in dipping for his hand cannon, so the VRGs' battle management computer had assigned him the second kill priority.

But by now, seconds into Quinn's triple takedown, the Iraqi already pulled his 9 mm Colt semiautomatic pistol from the pit holster worn halter-fashion across his chest. Holding it in a match grip, he whipped up the deadly little Colt, hollering for backup as he squeezed the trigger to the point of letback.

The Iraqi was already history as Quinn cooked off another burst of 5.70 mm needlepoints from the P90 bullpup. Computer targeted, the rounds blew off most of his hand and part of his wrist and sent the pistol cartwheeling through space.

As blood spurted out of the stump of the Iraqi's wrist where the hand had been torn clean off, Quinn put the pimper on the guy's heart and automatically triggered another burst of P90 fire into his upper left chest zone.

The putaway burst struck its mark with high ballistic energy transfer. With his punctured heart draining its life out inside his chest cavity, the Iraqi triggerman became dead weight and crumpled against the couch behind him, ending up with his face in the cushions and his hindquarters jacked clownishly up in the air.

Vadim was wide-eyed with fear as Quinn grabbed him by the collar and hauled him to his feet. Behind the tactical mask of the VRGs Vadim could not recognize the man who had blown the Iraqis away. But he had no doubts as to where he had come from.

"You're from my time!" he jibbered in an unmaning panic. "They sent you to kill me!"

"They sent me, Vadim," Quinn snarled. "But if you die -- which I sincerely hope you do -- my job is to make sure a jury of twelve orders the sentence carried out. Now let's get going."

"I recognize your voice," Vadim cried out. "You're -- "

"Shut up."

Steel whipcord fingers closed around Vadim's hand as Quinn shoved him toward the open doorway, cutting him off. The second dead Iraqi's shouts had brought the backup he had intended. More shooters were now on their way.

The audio signatures of voices came from the ground level at the foot of the stairs, and threat icons representing three running figures moved through the graphical schematic of the house on the VRG screen.

With the P90 bullpup in tracking mode, Quinn moved toward the stairway when suddenly a door at the end of the hall flew open. A dark haired woman toting a SPAS 12 combat shotgun jumped out, the black stinger at belt level.

Quinn had acquired her but had hesitated a split-instant because the shooter was a woman.

She, on the other hand, had no such qualms.

The SPAS 12 clutched in her fists roared, belching scorching fire and lethalizing steel.

Quinn's armored stealth suit stopped most of the fan of deadly pellets as he shoved Vadim behind him. Targeting fast on the wild card shooter before she could jack another shell into the pumpgun's chamber, Quinn put the death dot on the killbox and launched a putaway burst of 5.70s from the plastic donut in his fist.

The nailed shooter flung out her arms, hollering in pain as the quickburst plowed up her chest and exited her back in a bloody wound, splattering the wall behind her with gore. Her eyes clouded over and she slid down the wall to wind up in a sitting position, blood pooling around her.

Then she went terminal.

With Vadim still in tow, Quinn turned his attention to the stairway where the heads of the first two Iraqi backups were coming into view.

The pipper changed color and flashed, indicating acquisition as it touched a portion of a human cheek framed in the crosshair sights on Quinn's virtual screen. But the gun-toter moved out of range a puls beat later, jerking back his head.

ACQUISITION LOST reported the VRG screen, RETARGET.

Quinn ducked back around the bannister as a 900 RPM salvo of 9 mm SMG fire came angling up the stairwell, the para rounds ricocheting off the corners of the wall and fragmenting as they rebounded back into space again.

Quinn momentarily re-holstered the P90 and whipped two neural disrupter grenades from munitions pouches. Arming the electronic flashbangs and setting time delay parameters by clicking "chords" on the buttons studded along their sides, he flung the black cylinders down the stairs. The bouncing, rolling grenades initialized moments later.

Disorientating high frequency sound and flashing light pounded through the lower level. The potent combination hit the Iraqis on the floor below like a flurry of hammer blows. The SMG fire ceased abruptly as Quinn hustled down the stairs, pulling Vadim after him by the arm.

Immune to the effects of the ND submunition burst due to the protection offered by his VRGs, Quinn found the Iraqis staggering about in a dazed condition.

They saw him coming at them through a haze of cordite smoke and each tried to draw a bead, their limbs shaking and their vision blurring due to the neural assault. But the Iraqis were already lunch.

With the VRGs having prioritized the kills, Quinn swung the targeting pipper up to the first, second and third target, taking them all down with mechanical precision under hammering 5.70 mm automatic fire.

Retrieving the neural disrupter grenades, Quinn deactivated them and stowed the reusable rounds back away in his gear pouch. An added bonus of the disrupter effect was that Vadim himself was somewhat incapacitated.

This made Quinn's prisoner easier to manage as Quinn hustled the Motherboarder guru out the door of the safe house and into a truck parked outside.

The disorientating effect soon passed, though.

Vadim came out of his stupor as Quinn, having sliced through the metal collar protecting the steering column with a laser cutting torch, and hotwired the ignition cables, had jumpstarted the engine and pulled away from the house peeling rubber.

Quinn had removed his VRG helmet, and as the truck began steamrolling down the gravel-topped access road toward the highway, Vadim reacted with shock as he finally recognized who his captor was.

"Quinn!" he shouted. "I should have known it would be you."

"Shut up, Vadim," Quinn warned, as he pushed on the brakes to slow the truck as he approached the highway.

"Listen Quinn," Vadim pressed his abductor. "Why bother with me? Back here in this now, we can both get rich."

"I'm already rich, Vadim," Quinn retorted, checking both sides of the highway.

"I mean *really* rich, Quinn," Vadim insisted. "The kind of wealth that only monarchs know about. The kind of wealth that goes hand in hand with absolute power. With what we know we can rule this entire planet."

"I told you to shut up, Vadim," Quinn finally shouted. "You're a psychopath. We're going back to where you came from."

Quinn wrenched the steering wheel and bounced the four-by from the dirt road onto the macadam highway, highballing the vehicle in the direction of Manhattan.

As he did so, Vadim decided to make a desperate break for freedom. He wrenched open the passenger door and tried to bail out, hesitating long enough, as he saw the road streaking past below the open door, for Quinn to grab him with one hand and yank him back inside the cab.

In the process of grappling with the prisoner, Quinn almost lost control of the truck, however. The heavy vehicle swerved to one side, careening toward the ditch on the road shoulder before Quinn managed to pull the struggling Vadim back into the van.

Slamming hard on the brakes Quinn managed to stop the truck in the middle of the road, regretting that he had not taken the necessary steps to subdue his captive right away as it skidded to a lurching, diagonal halt across the median line.

"No!" Vadim protested as Quinn produced a pneumatic injector the size of a thimble from his pocket. The injector was filled with an APAP 50/50-Talacen mixture that would paralyze Vadim for the duration of the trip.

Holding the squirming passenger as tightly as he could, Quinn pressed the snout of the injector against the side of his throat and dispensed the fast-acting drug with a touch of the snout.

Vadim went limp a second later, and sagged against the car seat. Quinn reached over the prone man, pulled shut the passenger side door and thumbed down the locking tab.

Taking his foot off the brake he resumed his route down the highway. A check of his wrist chronometer told Quinn that there was now less than an hour remaining until the CTL window materialized in this now.

He would have to make tracks if he were to reach it before his destination popped out of existence again.

It was early in the morning when Quinn reached the end of his run at the foot of the Brooklyn Bridge on the Manhattan side of the span.

The area appeared to be completely deserted.

Out in the harbor, the fog-shrouded silhouette of a moored freighter rose from the gunmetal colored water like a ghost ship. Across the river on the Brooklyn waterfront were old warehouse buildings dating back to the Civil War.

Quinn knew that this initial impression could be deceptive. There could be homeless people, drug addicts, cops or any number of other city denizens in the vicinity. Nevertheless, a continued VRG check of the area gave Quinn no indication that anyone else beside himself and Vadim were lurking nearby.

Vadim had begun to stir by now.

Quinn knew that he would soon begin to come out of his drug-induced stupor. That was all right too. The Reverend could soon be as frisky as he liked in the custody of WorldPol uptime in the year 2035.

Unshipping the Kosmos unit, Quinn punched up the button marked AUT-OR which put the powerful subpalmtop computer into automatic orientation mode.

A graphical screen popped up on the flat display panel. The flashing icon revealed the exact spot where the CTL window would materialize. The digital clock at the upper right was counting down from 4:02 minutes.

Quinn needed to hustle.

He pulled the semiconscious Reverend from the passenger side of the parked truck. Locking his arm beneath his, he forced his groggy captive toward a spot within the shadows of the bridge beneath one of its stone and concrete supports, already over a hundred years old in 1990.

As the countdown on the Kosmos computer reached the zero mark, the air became charged as though an electrical storm were coming.

Winds began to churn up as the local disruption in the electromagnetic field caused by the tilting light cone created a vortex effect. Candy wrappers and sheets of newspaper were blown off the dusty pavement and began spinning crazily through the air.

Soon, jagged blue bolts of static electricity crackled and writhed like snakes as the fabric of space and time began to warp back on itself, opening a tunnel forward into the future. The CTL window had materialized.

With a secure lock on Vadim's arm, Quinn dragged his quarry toward the rainbow-edged circle that hung like a hole ripped in space.

It was a split-second before Quinn shoved Vadim inside that headlights appeared from down a narrow street running perpendicular to the

bridge trestle, casting their blinding beams across the faces of both captor and captive.

In a split-instant, the cops, who had seen the strange lights from down the street and gone to investigate with headlights doused, were right on top of them. Twisting free of Quinn's grasp as the headlights came on again, Vadim booked toward the police cruiser.

Reacting quickly, Quinn pulled the P90 from its breakaway rig and stepped from the mouth of the CTL window. The glaring headlights were extinguished with the shattering of glass and the double pops made by air rushing twice into a vacuum. More 5.70 mm fire from the bullpup totaled the cruiser and sent the cops ducking for cover behind a stone buttress.

Tracking for his quarry, Quinn saw to his chagrin that Vadim was gone, either having taken cover nearby or having run up one of the many narrow, cobbled streets that snaked past warehouses that hunkered in the shadows of the bridge. Suddenly there was a crack and a bullet ricocheted off concrete pavement as the cops opened fire.

Knowing he had to move fast but not wanting to injure the cops if he could help it, Quinn pitched a neural disrupter at the shooters and went off after the fleeing Reverend as the cops sank down to the ground, writhing in agony as their nervous systems went haywire.

He was away from the strike zone in seconds after retrieving the ND grenade, following the Reverend into the shadows. But the shadows had swallowed him up, and Quinn heard the shriek of sirens in the distance, getting closer by the second.

TWENTY-NINE

Saddam Hussein, the supreme ruler of the sixteen million people who made up the Republic of Iraq, a man who claimed direct descent from the legendary warrior-potentates of ancient Babylon, dismissed the whisperer with a curt wave of his hand.

General Izmir Zambrani, chief of his brutal state security agency, the hated Iraqi Moukhabarat, had just informed Saddam of the final analysis of the artifacts that had recently arrived in Baghdad via diplomatic pouch by a technical focus group.

The technical specialists employed by the Iraqi state security service were the best in the country. Having been educated at Western universities through a government financed program and enjoying privileges that the average Iraqi would never know, they were loyal to the ruling regime.

The unanimous opinion of the focus group was that the electronic components were of radically advanced design specifications. It would not be possible to produce such components at the present time, simply because the precision laser tools and integrated chip production techniques necessary had not yet been devised.

The focus group's report cited one instance in which a single microchip no larger than the circle made by looping the thumb and forefinger was found to contain the equivalent of a Japanese supercomputer that had just been purchased by Iraq.

Nobody, not even the Americans, could duplicate such an engineering miracle. Such a device had to have only come from the future. There was no other explanation possible.

Although the artifacts had been received weeks before, the report from the hastily assembled technical focus group had been delayed. None

of its members had forgotten that safety, in Saddam's Iraq, lay not only in numbers but in making certain that the supreme leader did not perceive reports as threatening to his exalted position.

The memory of what Saddam had done to Iraq's Minister of Health and member of his cabinet, Doctor Riyadh Ibrahim, was still fresh in the minds of all who served the Iraqi president. According to reliable accounts, Saddam had asked his advisors to speak frankly regarding the options facing the country in the face of occupation by the Iranian army during the Iran-Iraq war.

All around the council table had repledged their support to Saddam, giving him a unanimous show of faith. All except Ibrahim who, at Saddam's urging to speak his mind without fear, expressed to the leader the candid opinion that he should at once step down in favor of a democratically elected president.

Saddam politely thanked his advisor and smiled at Ibrahim.

Then, quickly drawing his pistol, he shot him between the eyes. The doctor's wife, inquiring after her husband soon after the incident, was told by Saddam that he would return her husband the following day.

Though Saddam was true to his word, the results were not to Mrs. Ibrahim's liking. Security agents placed a large black plastic bag containing the bloody, hacked-up pieces of her husband on her doorstep.

The technical focus group had arrived at their collective decision about the authenticity of the components almost immediately. What had taken the assemblage weeks of deliberation was the precise nature of how to frame their report so as to make certain that their necks were not forfeited in the process of giving it to their leader.

Saddam would read the complete report which, said Zambrani, would be on his desk on his return to his office in the Presidential palace in the heart of Baghdad.

For the present, Saddam was otherwise occupied.

Early that morning, the President of Iraq had risen, washed and prostrated himself on the polished terra cotta floor to say his daily morning prayers. He had then embarked on a tour of the countryside, visiting a town peopled by the fedayeen or peasant class, from whose ranks he had risen to control the entire country.

Saddam had only gotten out of one of the cream colored Mercedes sedans that had made up the entourage that had climbed the steep, dusty road to his home town of Tikrit where an Iraqi film crew had waited to record the leader as he walked among the people.

The sun-baked town was located some one hundred miles northwest of Baghdad in a region straddling the Tigris river. Sporting his trademark black beret and attired in the olive drab uniform of the leader of the Iraqi armed forces, Saddam strode through the dusty streets of the town of his birth.

Here, amid narrow cobbled alleys and mud-brick peasant houses, he had imbibed the bloody spirit of revolution under his uncle Khairallah's

tutelage and dreamed his first dreams of one day ruling the nation then ruled by Abd al-Karim Qassim, the dictator who, years before, had overthrown the centuries-old Iraqi monarchy.

As the cameras watched him, Saddam sat on a mat woven of reeds and smoked a hand-rolled cigaret of strong local tobacco with one of the fedayeen villagers.

The old man spoke to him of earlier days, days when he had known him as a young ruffian, for even then the child whose name meant "he who confronts" was a cause of trouble. But Saddam's mind was occupied elsewhere and his thoughts had turned in another direction entirely.

Storm clouds were brewing over the ancient lands. The western powers were assembling a massive army on the territory of the spineless Saudi dogs who had turned their backs on the pan-Islamic republic that Saddam sought to meld together from the disunited peoples of the region.

But listening to the old man with the wizened face, Saddam began to relax.

Some ancient spirit from the parched clay soil reached up and entered him, suffusing him with a sense of all-embracing tranquility.

There was power in this land, hidden power that had whispered seductively to Saddam of great works he could accomplish when he was very young. Now the desert was speaking to him again. The ghosts of Babylonian warrior-kings called out to him from their eternal slumber beneath the baking earth.

These ghostly voices were telling Saddam that he could win if he believed. Not in Allah, but in the baneful might of his own strong right hand, just as his brutal predecessors had done thousands of years before.

The man whose identification papers had him down as Abbott Motherwell blinked in the dazzling sunlight of the Iraqi afternoon.

The plane trip across the Mediterranean sea and the tip of North African from Malta had been longer than he had expected a shuttle flight to be. The trip had been a culmination of a zigzag across the globe with Iraq as its ultimate destination.

The Reverend Vadim had no intention of being followed or intercepted, and the twists and turns had been intended to thwart pursuit.

Quinn was both deadly and inhumanly efficient, almost like a machine. The Iraqis had been fools and had not paid attention to the warning he had issued them at the safe house in Queens.

Between the two forces whose conflicting interests in him pulled in two completely opposite directions, Vadim could find himself torn apart if he wasn't extraordinarily careful.

His escape from Quinn in the final seconds before the closed time-like line window opened into a tilted light cone to the future had been nothing short of a miracle.

Another few heartbeats longer and Vadim had no doubt that he would right now or very soon be facing a jury of his peers in the year 2035 that would convict him of mass murder and a judge who would order the death penalty without blinking an eye.

Like a cornered rat back in Manhattan, Vadim had cowered in an abandoned building, fearing the manhunter out of time.

Whether due to the dense material that had been used to construct the old building foundation at the turn of the twentieth century or to Velikovsky's Paradox, the effect of causality violation that made electronic components unreliable, the BioTrak transponder embedded in Vadim's skull had not functioned normally.

Days later, for the first time feeling out of danger, Vadim had reestablished contact with the Iraqis. The Iraqi embassy in New York had given him instructions to wait at certain phone booth at a certain time.

The call had come through right on the money.

"What the hell happened, Motherwell?"

The voice on the other end belonged to ambassador Rafiq Mafkouz. Vadim enjoyed the recognition that the ambassador was a frightened man. He had the unexplained deaths of a half-dozen or so Moukhabarat operatives to account for and had no explanations.

Vadim had appreciated the ambassador's predicament.

Being at such a loss in Saddam's government could well cost Mafkouz his head. The knowledge that he was the sole man who held all the answers gave Vadim an added measure of satisfaction.

"I warned you idiots about Quinn," Vadim declared testily. "You weren't paying attention. I told you he was dangerous. Now you know just how dangerous I meant."

"I apologize for doubting your word," Mafkouz replied, his anger again in check. "It appears that there is much we do not understand. But I am relieved to find you well."

"So am I," Vadim answered with a sarcastic snort.

"I can now tell you that those to whom we discussed sending the materials have had the chance to go over them," Mafkouz continued. "They have now been deemed conclusively genuine. My, ah, superior, is quite impressed."

"I want to meet with him," Vadim pressed. "Personally."

"That can now be arranged," Mafkouz had replied with hardly a pause. He had already come to his decision, Vadim knew, and had been expecting the American's demand this time. "Tell me your location. We can have someone to fetch you in no time."

"Uh-uh," Vadim answered the Iraqi, getting the uncomfortable feeling that he had spent enough time at this location already. "That's not how we're playing it this go-round."

"Oh? And how exactly are we 'playing it?'" Mafkouz responded with more than a trace of annoyance.

"By *my* rules," Vadim answered. "Tell your 'superior' that I will take steps to get myself out to his headquarters within a few days. I will make contact with him at that end and a meeting can then be arranged."

"That may not be wise," Mafkouz remarked right away. "Other, ah, parties may be injecting themselves into the situation. You may be watchlisted."

"There are no 'other parties,'" Vadim challenged. "I told you that before. There is only one man, and he can't afford to go to any outside 'parties.' He would be laughed at or put in a lunatic asylum. Two, three days," Vadim said before hanging up the receiver of the pay telephone. "Put the word out."

He cradled the handset's earpiece in its metal hook and left the area as quickly as possible.

Now, in Iraq, as he exited the dusty landing strip, Vadim easily found motor transportation.

His credentials identified him as a reporter for a major cable news network organization. Hordes of reporters from print and electronic media, representing every shade and nuance of the political spectrum in addition to every newspaper and magazine with a national circulation, were descending on Baghdad in these final weeks before Operation Desert Storm commenced.

Lost in the crowd of foreigners, Vadim had what amounted to perfect cover.

The Iraqi locals were benefiting by the influx of foreigners too.

On the outskirts of the deserted airstrip, were posted several men with vehicles who, in broken English and sign language, made it clear that they would drive him wherever he wanted for only a few American dollars, for Iraqi dinars were accepted only as a last resort.

Vadim chose one of these entrepreneurs and got into a beat-up Ford sedan that bore the battle scars of many harsh years of negotiating narrow alleys and driving on poorly paved desert roads under the heat of the blazing desert sun.

It was a wonder that such old jalopies existed at all, but there seemed to be hundreds of them everywhere, all in good operating condition despite the rough environment and what must be a difficulty in getting spare parts.

Communicating to the driver that he wanted go to the Baghdad International, Vadim settled back into the hard cushions of the back seat. The side of his head throbbed where the transponder implant lay just beneath the skin, although he knew that this was probably only a psychological reaction and not an actual pain.

Vadim cursed that pea-sized implant inside him, but knew that there was no way to safely remove the transponder. He hated the thing because it linked him to Quinn and he knew that Quinn was out there tracking him, maybe even here in Baghdad. Or soon to be, if not yet in the country.

But Vadim would soon be in the protection of Saddam. Even Quinn couldn't reach him in the heart of Saddam's police state. No, not even Quinn was good enough to pull off a stunt like that.

THIRTY

Though Vadim was not aware of it, the object of his fear and loathing had himself arrived in Baghdad only a little while after his own arrival.

After leaving New York, Quinn had made the rest of the trip free from detection.

Unlike Vadim, whose paranoia had caused him to see his pursuer lurking around every corner, Quinn knew that the events of the previous night would go down in the books as unsolved and end at that stage.

The cops back in Manhattan had reacted quickly in the aftermath of the confrontation at the Brooklyn Bridge.

From Battery Park to Chinatown, the screech of sirens had competed with the moaning of the chill wind New Yorkers called the Hawk as patrol cars converged on the crime scene in response to a report of officers in trouble.

Reports were sketchy, and barring the insistence of the two harness bulls that a strangely dressed man in a "space helmet" was dragging another guy into "some kind of space warp" that had opened up in thin air, the incident went down as a botched drug shooting.

Proceeding along that official line, the dragnet launched by the N.Y.P.D. was bound to fizzle as Quinn's path quickly grew cold.

Police choppers were gotten airborne, their searchlight beacons crisscrossing the skies above lower Manhattan while squad cars patrolled the dark, narrow streets, sending lights of their own lancing into shadowed alleyways and basement entrances.

But by the time the sun rose, the manhunt was called off. Had the cops at the scene of the bizarre incident been seriously injured or killed, it might have been a different story.

Since the cops had not suffered more than superficial injuries, the focus of the police turned to new problems, chalking up the stories about "space warps" and "aliens" to the effects of stress.

Though it had been a far cry from aerospace plane travel which could reach any spot on the globe within two hours, Quinn's plane trip from New York's JFK airport had been fast by the standards of the late twentieth century.

The SST, practically a prehistoric relic of pre-ASP air travel in his own era, was the height of opulence and speed downtime in 1990.

Quinn had booked the next available flight out of JFK which had landed him at Orly Airport in Paris, France in about two hours. From there, he had to travel the rest of the distance to Baghdad, Iraq, via an even slower 747 turbojet, adding an additional six hours to his overall trip.

Quinn now sat in the back seat of a taxi cab driven by an Iraqi who had begun by asking him if he had any relatives in Brooklyn. He had graduated to suggestions of taking Quinn to meet some women he knew. These ladies could provide delights such as not even the fabled courtesans of the court of Nebuchadnezzar were equal to delivering.

Quinn had politely yet firmly refused and turned his thoughts to other, less pleasant, pursuits.

Once again, Quinn had staked the success of his mission on journeying to Baghdad in pursuit of the rogue time traveler. Yet Quinn's choice of his Middle Eastern destination, like New York City before it, was based on much more than just playing a hunch.

Every aspect concerning Vadim's patterns of movement and behavior pointed to Baghdad as the Reverend's final destination. The clandestine contact and subsequent meeting between Vadim and the Iraqis in New York City had confirmed this hypothesis.

Vadim was obsessed with the Muan power crystals and knew that he had only a matter of weeks in which to get his hands on them.

Operation Desert Shield, which was stockpiling men and materiel in forward staging areas around Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in the greatest airlift in history, would soon give way to the Desert Wind and Desert Storm phases of the attack on Saddam's Iraq.

The commencement of the aerial exploitation bombing strikes on Baghdad would begin in a matter of days.

After these violent events were set in motion, Saddam would not be conducive to Vadim's stories, verifiable or not.

He would have other problems on his hands and his mental state would remain precarious until he finally went stark, raving mad in 1995 and was delivered by his own people to the Kuwaitis to stand trial for war crimes stretching back three decades.

The window of opportunity for Vadim to take possession of the Muan crystals was between now and the commencement of Desert Wind on January 16th, 1991.

This told Quinn that of all the possible places in the world to search out his quarry, Baghdad was the first on the list.

Quinn's reflections were interrupted by the jolt of the taxi as it came to a halt directly in front of the Baghdad International hotel.

Quinn realized that the driver had been telling him something during the ride which had taken the cab through narrow, twisting streets on the last portion of the trip, although he had been so wrapped up in his thoughts that he hadn't been paying the Iraqi any attention.

"...hotel is full up, mister," the driver was saying. "You have reservation? If not, Ahmed can show you nice, small pension. Very clean, very reasonable price."

Quinn didn't think he'd have any problem getting himself a room at the International, but he thought the cabbie's suggestion might be a good one to keep in mind.

Taking down the address of the place mentioned by the driver, Quinn tipped him substantially and hauled his carryall into the hotel lobby.

As he had expected, the International was packed to the rafters.

Newsmedia personnel from all over the globe had converged on the few world-class hotels in Baghdad like a swarm of desert locusts. No-vacancy signs had been put up by the management for the first time in years.

Throughout the jammed lobby, newsmedia people were typing up reports on laptops, conducting interviews and, also predictably, packing the hotel bar with a record crowd of foreigners.

Quinn made his way to the front desk where a harried looking concierge with a weasel's face said something into a phone as he made eye contact with Quinn. Hanging up, he came forward.

Quinn asked him for a room.

"Do you have a reservation?" he asked. Quinn already caught the look in the guy's eyes that was a mixture of pity and scorn. A "yes" answer would have undoubtedly provoked the predictable response that without one, he might as well sleep in the street.

"No," Quinn answered the deskman. "But I have something better."

The concierge looked down at what the newcomer was sliding across the top of the front desk toward him. It was a traveler's cheque and the sum across its face was five thousand dollars.

The deskman knew enough about such matters to realize immediately that it was genuine.

The expression in his hooded eyes underwent a quick transformation as he surreptitiously glanced from side to side to make certain the transaction was not being seen.

"Well," he said, reaching for the small fortune in Iraqi dinars the traveler's check would bring him, "there *is* a small room available, sir. I am afraid I had overlooked it initially."

The traveler's check was safely tucked away in his coat pocket as he turned and handed Quinn a room key. "Enjoy your stay in Baghdad, sir," he concluded.

"I'll do that, partner," Quinn told the Iraqi. "And you do something for me. Keep your mouth shut about our little arrangement. If you can do that, there'll be a fat bonus for your discretion when I check out."

"My lips are sealed, sir," the Iraqi replied with a smile. His dark eyes followed Quinn as the new guest walked toward the elevator.

The concierge wondered who the newcomer really was, for he was certainly no reporter and could not possibly be a tourist either.

CIA perhaps, or even Mossad. Maybe KGB. Or perhaps he was just a freelancer, this final choice seemed the most likely one.

Not that any of it really mattered to him.

In Saddam Hussein's Iraq, the acceptance of the bribe from the newcomer was in itself sufficient grounds for treason, and once charged, summary execution was a virtual certainty.

The deskman's elation at his sudden good fortune was tempered by the dawning fear that he might have been seen accepting the gratuity in exchange for a room.

As the concierge daydreamed about what the money would buy him and how he would safely get it out of the country into the Egyptian bank where he kept an account, the new arrival was entering his room.

Quinn found the accommodations comfortable after a long time in transit.

The bar downstairs would both serve as a place to begin his search and a place to unwind with a bourbon -- providing they served bourbon, that is.

In the meantime, Quinn unpacked his bags, paying special attention to the padded carrying case for his laptop computer.

In one of its pockets, blending in well with the other electronic components used by writers on foreign assignments, was nestled the tracker. It looked enough, and worked enough like, a handheld personal computer of the late twentieth century to be overlooked by baggage handlers.

Due to the Velikovsky Paradox, the BioTrak unit functioned only intermittently and unreliably. But because it was impossible to know when the principle named after the Russian researcher would cause malfunctions, there was no telling when Quinn might get a tracking icon from the implant in Vadim's skull.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Quinn keyed on the tracker and its screen instantly came to life. To Quinn's shock and amazement, the icon representing Vadim was positioned only a few hundred feet from the very spot in which he sat.

Vadim was somewhere in the hotel!

THIRTY-ONE

The shocking realization that Vadim was right there at the International, almost literally under Quinn's nose hit him with the force of a hammer blow.

Having originally resigned himself to a lengthy, dangerous and potentially fruitless search in a city that was the heart of one of the most brutally repressive police states on the face of the earth, he was unprepared for this surprisingly good turn of luck.

Still, it *did* make a kind of sense.

Like himself, Vadim was probably posing as a journalist too. It was the best kind of cover to have in such a situation, the classic cover of soldiers of fortune because of the ease of forging press credentials and the freedom to move around such cover gave the mercenary operative.

Stowing his baggage in the room's closet, Quinn made his way downstairs to the hotel lobby.

His VRGs, stealth suit and other specialized gear were all stowed in his carryall, although broken down into compact, modularized form. The collapsible field equipment was hidden among his laptop, tape recorder and the other journalist's equipment of his now.

If these exotic items were found and examined while Quinn was out of the room they would undergo a delayed self-destruct, killing whoever happened to be unfortunate enough to be within the small radius of the explosions. Hopefully that would give Quinn some lead time to engineer an escape.

Quinn's appearance was disguised as well since leaving New York for the Mideast. His hair was cropped close against his skull and shaven at the edges to create a widow's peak. He had dyed it blonde too, while tinted

aviators helped to mask the shape of his face and completed the masquerade.

Effective disguise depended as much on acting ability as it did on physical alterations. Quinn had changed his walk and mannerisms as well as making cosmetic changes to his features. Body language could be more of a giveaway than appearance.

As he crossed the hotel lobby, Quinn's eyes scanned the area from behind the smoked gray lenses of his aviator shades. Although the lobby appeared even more crowded than when he had come in earlier that afternoon, Vadim seemed not to be anywhere in sight.

Quinn thought of methods he might try to discover Vadim's room number through the bribable deskman.

But without knowing the alias used by his quarry it would be difficult not to attract the wrong kind of attention. A second bribe might have a boomerang effect, spooking the Iraqi into calling in the Moukhabarat.

Bypassing the front desk entirely, Quinn crossed the lobby and went into the packed bar.

He spotted Vadim almost immediately.

In the sudden space created by the shifting of position of the crowd in the packed bar, Quinn spied his quarry seated by himself at a table, drinking alone.

Quinn was only able to watch Vadim for a minute or two before the press of bodies once more obscured his line of sight. Pushing through the jostling, shoulder-to-shoulder crowd, Quinn got another look at the table a few moments later.

Now he saw that Vadim was not the only patron sitting at the table any more.

He had been joined by two newcomers.

Elbowing his way through the noisy crowd of multinational media people, Quinn made his way to the bar which was just close enough to the table to give Quinn a chance of eavesdropping on what was being said there.

Ordering a bourbon and soda -- which the bar seemed indeed to be well stocked with -- Quinn reached up and appeared to be adjusting the tinted aviators he wore.

What he was really doing was activating the farfoen built into the lightweight tinted glasses.

Sounds picked up by the subminiature microphone array located on the glasses' sweat bar fed into amplification circuitry within the hollow wire frame. Output was via tiny directional speakers at either side of the earpieces.

"...I'm afraid you have no choice," he heard one of the men at the table say to Vadim. "The matter has been decided at the very highest levels."

"You people screwed me once before," Vadim protested sotto voce. "I don't want it to happen again. What the hell kind of guarantees do I have?"

"This is Iraq, Mr. Motherwell," the other man vouched, his voice deeper and calmer than the first speaker's. "Here it is somewhat different than in America. In this country we can provide absolute protection. Forget about your difficulties in New York."

He waved his hand as if to brush away a thought that was as unimportant as a bothersome mosquito.

"Anyway, my terms were a meeting with Saddam," Vadim specified. "You're telling me something different."

"What we are saying comes directly from the leader's own lips," the first speaker came back, annoyance obvious in his voice. "You must understand that in this current crisis situation we must be extremely careful. The safe house will be secure and comfortable, and your stay in Baghdad will be brief, I can promise you that."

"No," Vadim rejected that statement with a shake of his head. "I don't think so. That's not the way I'm playing it."

The Iraqis at the table exchanged meaningful glances with one another.

The first one spoke up again, leaning closer as he addressed the third man and intoned, "You do not understand, Mr. Motherwell. As I said, this is Iraq, and we act with the leader's full approval. I am afraid you have no choice but to accede to our request."

The Iraqi leaned back in his chair and Quinn saw Vadim's glance move down a few notches to come to rest just beneath his left armpit. Quinn knew that he was staring at the butt of a handgun.

"Do not force us to take measures that will prove regrettable," the first Iraqi added. "Cooperate with us and I can assure you that all your goals will be met. We are as eager to do business with you as you are with us."

"Okay," Vadim conceded, standing up and reaching into his pocket. "Just let me pay the bar tab."

He made to cross toward the cashier's table, but the second Iraqi had already risen to his feet and quickly stood beside Vadim, his hand clutching the foreigner's arm.

"The bill has already been taken care of, Mr. Motherwell," the first one said as he too stood. "Our car is waiting outside. Come with us, if you please."

Quinn watched the trio edge through the capacity crowd toward the entrance as he downed the last of his drink. He had seen enough to know that the Moukhabarat had beaten him to the punch.

Again Quinn was one step behind Vadim.

Now as before, he would have to play a game of catch-up ball.

The drive through Baghdad took them down a meandering labyrinth of narrow, snaking streets, sun-drenched plazas and whitewashed two-story buildings concealing cool interior gardens.

The official vehicle came to a stop at the end of a street that was blind at one end and dead-ended at the other.

To one side, near the terminus of the cul-de-sac, a brick building stood, fronted by a high gate of black-painted wrought iron.

Armored security cameras on motorized swivel mounts were posted atop the gate, providing security personnel inside the walls of the building with real-time video of the approach to the building.

One of the Iraqis jabbed his finger at a door bell and a few moments later a buzzer sounded as the lock on the gate snapped open with a loud metallic click.

Bracketed by the Moukhabarat agents, Vadim was swept through the gate by his two handlers. Inside the vestibule, Iraqi red berets porting AKM rifles snapped to attention as the trio entered the building.

A corner of the hall was turned and Vadim's escorts conducted him along a short breezeway which bore locked steel doors and had the Spartan look of a military headquarters building.

"Stop here," Vadim was told, and the Iraqis rapped smartly on a door at the corridor's end. The door was promptly opened by another uniformed Iraqi soldier and Vadim was brought inside the room.

An official in a uniform was waiting there, sitting at a desk of polished mahogany. From the moment Vadim entered the room, the man watched him with languid, watery brown eyes, almost black beneath the hooded lids, eyes which nevertheless missed nothing they saw.

Darkly complected, he sported a thick black mustache. Black hair was slicked back over a fleshy, Levantine face pocked with the deep scars left by a childhood bout with scarlet fever.

"Sit down," the uniformed individual said to Vadim, using a voice of command. He introduced himself as Major General Izmir Zambrani of the Iraqi Intelligence and Security Service.

"Let us get right down to business," Zambrani said gruffly to the new arrival, his accent that of the English schools he had attended in his youth, the privilege of being born into the ranks of the Iraqi elite.

"It is in the interest of both of us to conclude this phase of your stay in Baghdad as quickly as possible, wouldn't you agree?"

"I agree," Vadim told Zambrani. "Therefore I can't understand all of this cloak and dagger bullshit you people seem to be addicted to. You've authenticated the sample materials I've provided. Why this charade?"

Major General Zambrani lit up a gnarled cheroot that looked hand-rolled and leaned back in his chair which creaked as he shifted his weight. He regarded his visitor for a long moment through his languid black eyes as he blew a pungent cloud of gray-blue smoke at the ceiling.

"Put yourself in our position," he said after taking another drag on the cheroot as more smoke trailed from his flaring nostrils. "We receive a contact from a man claiming to be from the future. He offers to provide us with revolutionary weapons technology in order to help us defeat our foes and realize our great leader's ambition of a Pan-Islamic republic.

"As proof of his claim, this man next provides us with various artifacts, again supposedly manufactured in the future. Incredibly, a cursory investigation shows some promise that they are quite as advertised."

Blowing more smoke at the ceiling, Zambrani went on, "but then, as we await final word, our 'visitor from the future' is abducted under violent and mysterious circumstances from the safe house where we have taken him for his own protection, and then disappears entirely from view."

"Look, I told you about Quinn," Vadim interjected with a jab of his finger toward Zambrani's barrel chest. "The world police force of my time sent their best operative after me. To bring me back."

"Yes, so you have claimed," Major General Zambrani replied with amusement, fitting the burning cheroot into a niche in the ashtray atop the desk, and now meditatively stroking his mustache as the trace of a smile played across his lips, "and a contemporary New York City police report that we have obtained citing certain strange events of later that night lends added credence to this story."

"But despite all of that, and the fact that the materials you submitted for scrutiny are beyond the ability of our technicians to satisfactorily explain or reverse-engineer, we must still consider the possibility of a CIA 'dangle' operation being run."

"It would be a bold gambit, and one built on an unlikely chain of events, I grant you that, but we must be careful. President Hussein himself needs this assurance before granting you the privilege of the personal interview that you request."

"All right," Vadim reacted, "let's get it over with."

There was no point in arguing with the general, he realized. He was in the hands of the Iraqi state security service in the heart of Baghdad and they were suspicious as hell. He supposed that he would be too, if their places were reversed.

Vadim would just have to play ball by their rules. For the present, at least.

"Splendid," declared Zambrani, extinguishing his cheroot after chain-lighting another smoke, this time a Turkish cigaret. "Then let us begin. I will ask you several questions and you will reply. Take your time answering," he concluded. "Take all the time you require. We have all night."

THIRTY-TWO

In the dazzling sunlight of the Baghdad afternoon, no passerby would take notice of the dark-tinted aviator glasses that the blonde haired Westerner wore as he walked down a street in a residential section of the ancient Iraqi city.

The aviators doubled as eyephones which were linked via microwave telemetry to the tracker unit that Quinn carried in one of the big thigh pockets of his six-pocket jeans.

As Quinn walked along the Baghdad street, the icon showing the location of the Reverend Vadim was superimposed over the images of the surrounding streets and buildings.

Invisible to anyone besides Quinn, the tracker icon had been leading Quinn toward his quarry since he had left the Baghdad International almost an hour ago.

Having taken a taxi to the outskirts of the neighborhood, Quinn set the eyephones to a local scan mode and proceeded the rest of the way on foot.

As he approached a street that dog-legged left to a dead end, Quinn saw a box form around the tracker icon. This indicated that his quarry was within two hundred feet of Quinn's position.

Reaching into his side pocket, Quinn used his thumb and four fingers to keystroke in a two-key "chord" command to redraw the screen of his eyephones.

The overlay underwent a phase shift, as the GPS-linked tracker computer offered Quinn a glowing wire grid map of the neighborhood.

The boxed tracker icon was now blinking from a point with grid coordinates that placed Vadim in the brick building fronted by a wrought iron gate which stood at the dead end at the top of the street.

Just then, Quinn noticed that a uniformed Baghdad cop was eyeballing him from across the street with what seemed to be an undue amount of curiosity.

The cop's uniform consisted of brown pants and short sleeved shirt open at the neck. A billed cap and a Sam Browne belt holstering a wheel gun and ammo completed the outfit. After a few seconds, the Iraqi harness cop came walking over to him.

"American, yes?" he asked Quinn.

"Reporter," Quinn told the Iraqi beat man. "Trying to learn about Baghdad. The people's Baghdad."

"Your passport and press card, please," the cop demanded of Quinn, extending his hand. He eyed the American as Quinn produced both documents and scanned the identification carefully before handing them back.

"The people of Iraq do not want war," the cop lectured him. "It is George Bush and the Zionists who force war on the innocent Iraqi people. You write that in your story. You tell Americans the truth about Iraq."

Quinn assured the cop that he would honor his wishes to the letter, grateful that the cop had apparently just happened by and was merely curious.

It could just as easily have happened that he might have met up with a Moukhabarat operative, and the situation would have been considerably different. An Iraqi spook would have looked beneath the surface at once, and even if Quinn had his disguise down to the hilt, his nose might have sniffed him out.

When the beat cop had turned the corner, Quinn passed the street on which the safe-house was located. Suddenly remembering something that had been at the back of his mind, Quinn reached into one of his pockets and brought out a folded slip of paper.

The street name on the paper matched that of the one he was on. Confirming this with a quick glance at the signs painted on the walls per Middle Eastern fashion, Quinn walked past the mouth of the dead end and walked along the street in search of the address that Ahmed the cabbie had given him on his arrival.

The address, he soon discovered, belonged to a white stucco building few houses down the street. Knocking on the door, Quinn was soon greeted by an old woman in a shapeless dress.

Her snow white hair was pulled tightly back against her head and the skin of her face had a waxy, almost translucent quality about it. She looked at him quizzically, her brown eyes wrinkling into crows feet at the corners.

"I'm looking to rent a room," Quinn told her. "Ahmed told me I might find one here."

The old woman nodded and gestured for Quinn to follow her. She led him into the cool, shadowed interior of the house and up a short flight of stairs by which Quinn saw a flash of green from a small walled garden hidden from the street.

"Here is the room," she said in broken English. "Sixty-five American dollars a day. Breakfast is included."

Quinn smiled as he counted out the money into the old woman's hand. In her case, looks were probably deceiving. She had known enough to overcharge the American, and had known that he would pay, in light of the crunch of rentable rooms in Baghdad at the time.

Going to the window, Quinn pulled up the sash and spread the wooden shutters that kept out the harsh afternoon sun.

A rush of street noise and baking heat assaulted him as he looked out. But the view was better than he had dared hope.

Directly below the window there angled down a clay tiled roof that was spaced mere inches from the other rooftops of the surrounding architecture. From the window, Quinn had a direct line of sight of the cul-de-sac in which the Iraqis were keeping Vadim.

"I'll be back soon with my baggage," Quinn told the old woman who nodded and walked back downstairs with him.

Returning to the International, Quinn retrieved the pieces of luggage containing his VRGs, stealth suit and other combat gear, ascertaining that these had not been tampered with in his absence.

This time he took a cab directly to the street that the Iraqi bed-and-breakfast was located on, but not directly to the house itself.

Getting out of the cab, Quinn negotiated the street and was soon inside the house. The sun was riding low on the horizon now, bathing the mud brick, plaster walled buildings with a bronze light.

Iraq would be dark soon.

With the coming of night the killing ground would be ready.

After the big crescent moon had set over the rooftops of Baghdad and the dusty street was silent except for the occasional barking of stray dogs, a shadow moved low across the rooftops.

Having donned VRGs and stealth suit, Quinn exited the window of the pension run by the old woman. From there he had jumped to the roof of the adjoining house and scanned the area.

Painting the operational environment with invisible lasers and programmed to respond to the transponder in Vadim's skull the same as the portable tracker units Quinn carried, the VRGs showed the target icon as he subjected the night to a high-speed scan.

The scan revealed the heat signature of a rifle-armed sentry posted on the rooftop of the safe house.

Quinn used his wrist-top keypad to focus on the target and the VRGs flashed him an image of an NVG-equipped shooter in black togs and black watch cap. He was equipped with a long-barreled automatic weapon, a sniper's gun.

Crouch-walking toward his quarry to keep his profile low against the horizon and prevent him from being skylighted, Quinn moved stealthily toward the sniper position.

The passive infrared night vision goggles worn by the Iraqi shooter who was posted on the flat rooftop were blind to the random heat diffusion patterns produced by Quinn's stealth suit.

Popping up a heartbeat and pulse rate graph on the virtual screen, Quinn was confident from reviewing these patterns that the sniper was completely unaware of the deadly shadow stalking him.

A digital display showing Quinn's distance from the target cycled down to zero at the top of the VRG screen as Quinn approached the black-clad shooter who neither saw or heard him draw silently to within a few scant feet of his position.

Standing to one side of the shooter who lay prone only a short distance away, Quinn popped up the crosshair reticles on his virtual screen. Lifting the lethal black donut in his right hand, Nomad watched the death dot glide across the electronic view field.

The pipper tracked across the screen and the sound-suppressed weapon went off the moment that Quinn put it into the center of the crosshairs that framed the blacksuited figure hunching on the roof.

The sniper grunted, tried to get up but never made it. He rolled over on his back with arms outflung as the spiking lines on the vital signs graph display flattened out, indicating to Quinn that pulse rate and heartbeat had both dropped off to zero.

With the sniper taken down swiftly and silently, Quinn phreaked the perimeter sensors on the roof and unlocked the access door.

Inside now, on the top level of the safe house, his VRG screen redrew, showing Quinn a glowing 3D wire diagram of the building's interior based on laser probes as well as the location of the transponder implant worn by Vadim marked by a triangular icon in contrasting color.

A warning message popped up as Quinn was halfway down the flight of stairs leading to the floor below, indicating that a threat signature with armed personnel parameters had been identified by the VRGs' onboard microprocessor.

In real-time video mode, Quinn saw the Iraqi commando in OD fatigues come striding into view as he mounted the stairway. The Red Beret was toting a Krinov assault weapon, the short-barreled SMG version of the heavier Avtomat Kalashnikov autorifle.

Quinn got set to put him down with a silenced CAW burst when the stairs creaked under his booted foot.

The Iraqi whirled in place, already bringing the Krinov into firing position as he had been drilled countless times to do, reacting instead of thinking, because thinking made you freeze.

Quinn's reactions were quicker and, set on AUTOTARGET mode, the VRG automatically triggered a three round burst of 5.70 mm flechette fire as soon as the target was acquired.

Legs buckling under him, the Red Beret sagged to the floor with a thud that was loud enough to alert a sentry on the level below.

Quinn heard the sound of footsteps and moved quickly away from the body that sprawled in its own pooling blood.

There was no time to drag the corpse of the takedown out of sight. Already sweeping the stairway as the other trooper came into view, Quinn raised the P90 and took down the third kill of the penetration with a precision-targeted head shot.

At close range, the high velocity needlepoint rounds sheared off the upper left quadrant of the Iraqi's skull, sending plugs of bone and brain matter spattering the wall behind him with dozen simultaneous wet slaps.

The cortex of the brain bulging out the jagged-edged deficit in his shattered skull, the takedown sagged to his knees, producing little in the way of noise besides the telltale death rattle caused by the gurgling of air trapped in the lungs percolating up through bloody mucous.

Quinn waited, scanning the strike perimeter with multiple mode VRG scans in real time.

The operational area remained secure.

Quinn proceeded on toward the boxed tracker icon which the data block at the top of the screen indicated was situated beyond the door that was coming up on Quinn's right.

Beyond that door Quinn would come to the end of the line. But he was well aware that the mission parameters had changed considerably since the New York phase of operations.

Under the circumstances, there could be no guarantee of Quinn's being able to bring Vadim back to stand trial for his crimes.

In that case, Quinn would carry out his fallback directive and terminate Vadim before he was able to assist Saddam in winning the Gulf War and in gaining possession of the Muan power crystals.

Quinn booted in the door and surveyed the strike zone. The target icon of his VRG display was positioned squarely on Vadim.

Inside the room with the time traveler were an Iraqi in a military uniform and several paramilitary types. Receiving target prioritization, Quinn shot Major General Izmir Zambrani first as he went for the .38 caliber wheel gun holstered at his hip, killing him with a flechette burst in the heart.

Another computer targeted burst salvo settled accounts with the men in paramilitary uniforms. In the confines of the room, the bursts of high velocity autofire from the silenced weapon caused the bodies to open up, spewing blood as they jerked convulsively.

Vadim saw Quinn and cowered with fear.

"No!" he shrieked. "Don't kill me, Quinn! Please don't kill me!"

Lux Vadim realized that he was about to die.

Quinn dragged the pipper across the virtual screen and put the death dot on the crosshairs framing the cowering man's left chest and pulled the trigger. A silenced quickburst of 5.70 mm flechettes augered through space and struck Vadim in the heartzone, flinging the kill target backward against the wall with arms outthrust.

Suddenly Quinn's VRG screen lit up with multiple threat warnings.

Almost simultaneously, a heavily armed squad of Iraqis was busting through connecting doors at either side of the room to Quinn's left and right.

More threat readings indicated that another squad of armed Iraqis was mounting the stairs.

At the same time as this, Quinn saw that Vadim was stirring on the floor to where the burst had hurled him. Quinn realized that he had been set up.

Vadim had been wearing body armor which, if made properly, could even withstand hits by the high-penetration-capable 5.70 mm rounds fired by the P90.

Having been pleading moments before, Vadim was now laughing with maniacal glee as Quinn reacted to the sudden shift in the tactical situation by pulling a high-blast-yield incendiary grenade from a pouch at his side and tossing the ballpoint-pen-sized black cylinder into the center of the room.

A tremendous explosion followed as Quinn backtracked out into the corridor, flattened against the side of the wall and spun his body full around to face the squad of armed men double-timing up the stairs. He whipped up the P90 as a firestorm swept the room behind him.

With the op zone having reached the point of meltdown, Quinn tossed another mini grenade, this one APERS type, into the group of Iraqis storming the stairs as he raced back toward the rooftop level, his VRGs indicating that more men were already on the roof.

Black smoke was now rising toward the sky in a thick plume as fire licked up from the window of the blast-damaged, hell-visited room.

With the VRGs set on AUTOTARGET mode, Quinn took down more Iraqi opposition personnel on the rooftop with lightning quick bursts of precision targeted 5.70 mm flechette fire.

Reinforcements were already on their way as the Iraqis mustered up more troops from a nearby army barracks. Quinn raced across the rooftops of Baghdad, alone in hostile territory as the dragnet was deployed.

THIRTY-THREE

Saddam Hussein paced his opulent office like a lion in a gilded cage. Despite the overwhelming evidence that the man seated there was telling the truth, his mind refused to accept what he could see with his own eyes and hear with his ears.

The Iraqi president had lived his entire life by cultivating paranoia and sharpening his inborn cunning to a razor's edge until he could use it like a knife to cut effortlessly through the snares woven by his enemies.

Saddam had learned that in order to survive in the viper's den of Iraqi politics -- let alone claw one's way to the highest echelons of power in its government -- one must doubt everything except one's own will to succeed at any price. One must even doubt what one saw or heard or felt.

Saddam was of two minds on the subject of the man from the future.

One part of him wanted to believe the incredible facts that he had been presented with by this strange American.

Another part of his intellect urged him to draw the pearl handled .45 ACP automatic that he rarely failed to carry with him and shoot the American where he sat, then send him in blood-dripping pieces back to George Bush's CIA.

In the end, it had been God himself that had shown Saddam the way, as His divine presence had shown the Iraqi dictator the true path to follow at so many other critical junctures in his turbulent life and tempestuous political career.

As he slept in the arms of his mistress, Saddam was visited by an angel sent to him by Allah.

The angel was of astonishing beauty.

Its curving wings glistened with a million magical colors. Its flowing robes shimmered like the rainbow arching from earth to heaven. When the angel spoke to the sleeping Saddam, its voice was as melodious as a thousand musical instruments played by the world's finest musicians.

The angel which had come down from heaven in Saddam's dream warned the Iraqi president against acting rashly, for in the world of man's living and dying many things are not what they seem, and wonders beyond belief have come to pass.

The angelic emissary in the dictator's dream told him as well that God performed miracles for Iraq, and that the coming of the American was His special gift to Saddam, whom he cherished above all others among the faithful.

"Listen to what the newcomer tells you, Saddam, for it is Allah's will that he lead you to the glorious future you envision," spoke the angel before vanishing in a haze of incandescent brilliance.

When Saddam awoke he saw a star glittering brightly in the dark heavens above Baghdad as brightly as the Star of Bethlehem. Surely this was another omen, he knew, and resolved to follow the path shown him in his dream.

And so, despite his fiercer instincts which called for a more brutal reception for the American, Saddam had taken Abbott Motherwell into his presence, and had welcomed the newcomer as a guest in his house. Saddam was prepared to listen to what Motherwell had to say.

The American spoke of the shattering events that were to follow his arrival within a brief matter of time.

He spoke of how Iraq would be attacked shortly after an historic ultimatum dictated by President George Bush had expired, and how the Coalition forces would follow-on with an air assault that would rain death and destruction down on Baghdad on a scale never before seen.

He spoke of things even more incredible still. Tens of thousands of Iraq's soldiers would perish in the unrelenting air strikes.

Unlike during Iraq's war against Iran, during which they had fought bravely and died willingly for God and glory, his troops would be reduced to whimpering dogs by the might of Coalition firepower.

B-52 Stratofortresses, F-16 and Tornado fighter-bombers and F117A stealth planes would be among those aircraft that dropped thousands of tons of bombs on the bunkers in which they hid.

Hell itself would seem to touch the earth as fuel-air explosives with blast yields exceeded only by nuclear weapons were dropped, making the desert shudder to its roots as fiery mushroom clouds billowed up into the sky.

His Russian tanks that lay buried beneath the sand would be reduced to flaming hulks in the Desert Wind air strikes and the elaborate network of sand berms, revetments and firetraps that had worked so effectively against the Iranian human wave attacks would be bypassed entirely in a lightning

armored push that would see Coalition forces within striking distance of Baghdad within days after the ground assault commenced.

The billions of dollars worth of advanced weaponry he had purchased from American, Japanese and European suppliers would prove worthless. Those same contractors who had assured Saddam of bombproof bunkers were even now supplying Coalition military commanders with the blueprints and suggestions on where to best strike them.

Saddam would turn to the desperate gambit of launching Scud attacks on Israel in an effort to turn Israel against the Arab states and snatch victory from the jaws of defeat as those nations banded together.

But this bleak strategy would end in failure too as precision bombing by night and by day would destroy the Scud launchers on the ground. And batteries of improved Patriot missiles would knock them from the skies as they arced in on their trajectories toward Tel Aviv and Riyadh.

Then would come the ground assault, where Coalition forces would find Iraqis surrendering by the thousands.

Occupied Kuwait would fall quickly and troops fleeing Iraq's formerly subjugated neighbor would be killed like cattle running through a slaughterhouse pen on the highway to Basra, leaving a morass of smoldering vehicles and charred, putrefying corpses in its wake.

With the fall of the elite Republican Guard units in a swift tank battle outside the southern city of Basra, the allies would be poised to enter Baghdad herself.

At that time, his army decimated, his people having gone for weeks without food, water, electricity or medicine, Saddam would have no choice except to accept the Coalition's terms of unconditional surrender.

Never since the days of the ancients mentioned in the Bible and the Koran had a ruler heard such doomsaying by a prophet from God. But Saddam knew all of what the American was telling him even as he listened to him speak.

He had earlier read the full report of Motherwell's debriefing under the late Major General Zambrani.

But among Saddam's other time-honed abilities was one that even his enemies would come to understand and grudgingly admire.

This was patience.

Among the many blessings that the All-Wise had bestowed upon Saddam was the gift of seeing the truth in men's eyes as sculptors are said to see the finished statue in blocks of uncut stone.

He had used this heaven-bestowed Gift on several occasions, penetrating the artifice of his enemies and revealing the evil or the goodness that lay in their hearts.

The Gift had served Saddam well during the time of the great purge on his coming to power. He recalled with joy how he had convened a meeting of the Baath Party Regional Congress. "We have treason among us!" he shouted from the podium to the assemblage, then began to call out

the names of twenty accused plotters. Led away by armed police, their treachery would soon be punished by death.

The Gift was the most important test of all, the litmus of truth to Saddam. As Saddam listened, he used The Gift to peer deep into the soul of the American.

To his own amazement, Saddam saw there that this man Motherwell was speaking truthfully and without guile. The Gift never lied and it did not do so at present. Now he was certain that this was no CIA dangle operation.

This was a miracle of God!

Yet there were new revelations yet to come, Saddam quickly learned. For soon the American had begun to tell him things that he had concealed even from Major General Zambrani's probing mind.

"Zambrani wouldn't have believed me," Vadim told Saddam as he faced the mustached figure who sat across the polished desk top smoking a cigar while watched him with a penetrating gaze. "Only you will understand what I am about to tell you," Vadim said.

He knew that Saddam would understand him. For the first time in his life, Vadim felt himself in the presence of a mind that thought like his own.

"Out in the desert between Basra and the Iran border, there lies buried a treasure trove of the ancient Babylonian kings," Vadim continued. "It is called 'The Abraxas Hoard.'"

"Show me where, exactly," Saddam said through his interpreter, pointing to a map on the wall behind him with a stubby finger, his eyes widening in their sockets as The Gift filled them with heaven's own unearthly light.

Vadim rose and made a circle with his fingertip over the area that he was referring to. Saddam nodded. This too was a sign from God that the American was destined to work a miracle.

"I am familiar with the area you point out," Saddam replied, through his interpreter, nodding his head at the American. "You may be aware that I have been involved in certain archaeological excavations to bring the past glory of the Iraqi people to the recognition of the world. It is an area rich in hidden caves and ancient ruins."

"It is also the repository of unique crystals of extremely ancient origin," Vadim explained, picking up the thread of narrative. "They can be used as a means of generating tremendous energies."

"Bombard them with laser radiation of the proper frequencies, for example, and no light will be reflected back. All of the photonic energy in the light will be retained by the crystals, as though they were storage batteries. But the capacity of the crystals is tremendous, maybe even limitless."

"I know how to turn them into weapons of incalculable power," Vadim added. "With them you could turn the tide of the coming defeat. I have already sketched out how the American stealth aircraft can be detected on radar. Once targeted, they could be vaporized in the skies."

"And what do you want in return?" asked Saddam, his all-seeing eyes again boring deep into the soul of the American who had been brought to him by the angels of the All-Wise.

"To share in the glory," answered Vadim truthfully, "and to share in the spoils of victory."

Saddam nodded at the visitor and blew smoke at the ceiling. For the first time since their meeting had begun, Vadim saw a smile play across the face of Saddam Hussein as the Iraqi president leaned forward and extended his hand in the eternal gesture of a man who was about to strike a deal with another.

General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, supreme commander of Coalition forces stationed in the Gulf Theater of Operations picked up the handset of the telephone on the desk at which he sat.

The air conditioned office was comfortable although the desert heat outside was a broiling one hundred four degrees Fahrenheit. It would cool soon enough, he knew, well in time for the land invasion, but for now it was the nearest thing to hell the general ever wanted to know about.

Informing the major on the other end of the line that he would receive the visitor, the general turned in his swivel chair and set his eyes on the door. First impressions could tell a great deal, and he would need all his wits to respond properly to what was about to walk into his office.

"Please pull yourself up a chair," he said to the visitor who entered, instantly sizing him up as a guy who was not, in a phrase he was fond of using, "bovine excrement."

"I don't know why I consented to see you, but here you are. Now, you got exactly ten minutes of my time before I kick your butt out of my office, so you better make it good," Schwarzkopf said without smiling.

Quinn had done some sizing up himself as he'd entered the military commander's office. Schwarzkopf in the flesh was even more of the bear than his nickname described.

There was a keenly penetrating perception evident in those blue eyes and Quinn knew that the general could spot deception the way an Arkansas sheepdog could sniff gopher on the wind.

"General," Quinn began, "right now there could be one of the sickest minds in criminal history sitting with Saddam just as I'm doing with you.

"This is a man who has preached the twisted gospel that Adolph Hitler and Saddam Hussein are messiahs and that humanity is garbage.

"I was able to track him down and locate him twice, but each time he slipped through my fingers. I need your help for a third try. And, General, if the man I'm after isn't caught or killed, Saddam will win in the Gulf."

All the while Schwarzkopf had not taken his eyes off his visitor.

He had already been briefed -- verbally briefed with no written or electronic documentation -- on how this man called only Quinn had appeared out of nowhere and asked to see him.

Quinn was carrying a CIA identification card that was authenticated as a valid Agency document yet bearing a coded agent's number that computer extrapolation had concluded could be issued fifty years in the future.

The weapons and tactical gear that Quinn carried were also highly advanced, decades ahead of anything the military had now, yet clearly based on classified designs currently on the DARPA drawing boards and prototypes in the Agency's secret labs.

Quinn was an enigma, and Schwarzkopf didn't like enigmas. He liked, in fact he needed, solutions.

The most disturbing aspect of all to the Bear was the fact that if this Quinn fellow was really from the future, then he knew all about the "Hail Mary play" that the general was planning, a masterfully conceived military flanking operation that was already in progress and required the utmost secrecy in order to work as intended.

Those military plans were the linchpin around which the prosecution of the entire Gulf War turned. Military victory or crushing defeat for the Coalition depended on Saddam thinking the allies would hit him in one place while in fact they were hitting him where he least expected the strike to come.

This meant that a guy who knew these plans in advance could blow the entire operation. Still, the general thought, Quinn had been thoroughly vetted by the intelligence people. And besides that, his gut feel told him to go with this guy, as screwy as the story he told seemed.

"I don't believe it myself," Schwarzkopf said evenly, "but I believe *you*. I'll have a crack Delta squad go out with you to get this whacko."

"No good, General," Quinn replied, shaking his head dismissively. "I took a big chance in coming here to see you personally. Not because I distrust you, but because of the dynamics of causality violation."

"Whoah there, guy! You just lost me," Schwarzkopf protested. "What was that again?"

"Time travel, General," replied Quinn. "It's tricky, very tricky. In my time, about fifty years from now, we've only begun to scratch the surface of the phenomenon. But what's been discovered is that the fabric of time is very fragile, a lot like a crystal lattice in which every part is linked to the rest of the continuum. Even small actions can create large rifts farther down the time line.

"That's one reason why my target had to be brought back alive, if at all possible," Quinn went on to Schwarzkopf. "Killing him in this 'now' might have worse consequences for my time than allowing him free reign. But this dynamic principle also means that the involvement of three or four additional personnel could also have negative consequences. I'll need your help in getting near the area I think Vadim will go for, but the rest of the way I have to go alone."

"Okay, partner, I'll back you the whole nine yards," Schwarzkopf said finally after silently sorting out what Quinn had just told him. "I don't know how you did it, but you just made a believer out of me. In fact, I've got a new

piece of big ticket military hardware that I think will be just the thing to get you where you're going."

THIRTY-FOUR

The SWATH craft cruised through the darkness that hung like a shroud over the seamless black waters of the Persian Gulf.

Riding the surface of the inland sea a few kilometers off the rugged coastline that encompassed Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Iraq, the black craft seemed to stride the waves like a slumbering leviathan roused from the ocean's depths.

The twin pylons of the small waterplane twin hull SWATH craft were part of an advanced design military prototype. Among the most highly classified weapons in the military arsenal being assembled to assault Iraq, the SWATH craft was the maritime equivalent of the F117A stealth fighter.

Its matte black hull constructed out of radar absorbing materials, the SWATH vessel incorporated radical geometries into its design configuration. Above the waterplanes of its twin hull was a deck area that was disk shaped.

All sonar, radar and laser targeting fairings were of a conformal hull design, scab- and blister-podded to match hull contours so that radar echoes were kept to a minimum.

Its propulsion system borrowed quieting technology from Trident submarines while rocket launchers, deck guns and other weaponry were all kept hidden behind retractable panels prior to combat deployment.

The SWATH craft was what the techs called "low observable." Its radar cross section was only about the size of a raft of seaweed floating on the ocean.

To the Iraqi coastal defense radars that scanned the Persian Gulf for signs of enemy incursion, the SWATH vessel was as good as invisible.

Quinn had boarded the stealth ship from a clandestine dock facility on the Saudi Arabian coast.

The crew of the SWATH craft had been told nothing about the passenger that had come aboard under strictest secrecy. Quinn was ushered to the captain's quarters and kept sequestered as soon as the ship was underway to its secret objective.

He now awaited the captain's signal that it was time to move to the staging area.

From there, Quinn would embark on the final leg of his journey into the southeastern desert of Iraq. It was there that he hoped to intercept Vadim before the Reverend could finalize his plans.

For the third time since his leaving Gamma Base in pursuit of his quarry, uptime in the year 2035 Quinn was betting the farm on being right about where the Reverend would next be found.

But Quinn had been correct in the two previous judgment calls. Like those earlier actions, he was now proceeding on the basis of sound analysis.

The time traveler's burning obsession to find the Muan power crystals of the Abraxas Hoard said to be buried in the sand desert west of the Iraqi city of Basra had been overwhelming.

It had been a driving force behind his every move so far. Quinn had every reason to believe that this motivation would continue to drive Vadim toward a predictable climax.

Furthermore, secret intelligence reports originating from highly placed ground assets channeled to him by General Schwarzkopf had indicated that Saddam had not only met Vadim but had installed him in his palatial residence as a guest.

Psychologically, the two psychopaths were a perfect match. Both were megalomaniacs with delusions of grandeur.

Both claimed to have been inspired by no less than God Himself. Add to that the Reverend's insane idolatry of Saddam, and it was not difficult to envision the Iraqi dictator placing every means to retrieve the crystals at his honored guest's disposal.

Vadim would be there, Quinn knew.

It was a certainty.

And Nomad would be there too, waiting and watching for the right moment to move on his quarry. This time he would not leave the strike zone without either bringing Vadim back to the future or taking him down in this now, for the desert jackals to pick clean his rotting bones.

The flight deck of the SWATH ship was located beneath the hull area. Circular in shape, it ringed the central core of the advanced design vessel which contained living quarters, command and control stations and the craft's propulsion system.

Sections of the deck could be raised to facilitate the launch of helos, tilt-rotorcraft or VSTOL aircraft such as the Hawker Harrier.

The flight deck crew paid only minimum attention to the black-garbed figure whose head was completely enveloped by a tactical helmet of strange design.

Selected from the most highly qualified Navy personnel available, the crew of the SWATH vessel had all signed secrecy oaths preventing them from divulging anything having to do with the ship on which they served on penalty of a federal prison term.

Since the SWATH ship itself was ultra-classified, the crew was prepared for any contingency and also prepared to promptly forget about everything they had seen while working their duty cycles.

The personnel who readied the Seahawk helicopter for immediate takeoff on the flight deck of the stealth ship assumed that the guy about to get into the copter was testing out some new gear and that the rest was none of their business.

The chopper parked within the elevator section of the flight deck marked off with yellow-and-black hazard tape was a multipurpose workhorse that Quinn knew would soon be a Gulf War veteran.

The Sikorsky SH-60B helo was a vertical take off and landing aircraft with all weather operational capability.

The terrain-following forward looking infra-red or FLIR targeting and navigational system that the rotorcraft was equipped with would permit it to engage in low trajectory flight at high speed across the Iraqi desert.

Flying under the radar curtain, the Seahawk had been postured for a black-coded mission that would take it deep into Iraqi airspace.

The helo driver had been instructed to descend to a hover, drop combat matériel, allow his passenger to debark and then swiftly return to the SWATH vessel where the crew would be debriefed. What the pilot did not know was that the crew would then be rotated Stateside, to keep as tight a lid as possible on the clandestine mission.

As the engines began to whine as they were charged to full power and the chopper's rotors began to turn, Quinn climbed through the open hatchway into the crew compartment of the chopper. The dropmaster strapped him to an elastic safety tether and indicated a seat against one of the bulkheads.

As the props revolved up to speed and alarms klaxoned to warn personnel on the flight deck that the moveable section would soon begin to rise, Quinn stood. Still tethered to the bulkhead he looked out through the open hatchway and saw the flight deck fall away as the Seahawk was lifted above the level of the outer deck.

Once the takeoff platform was stationary, the pilot received final clearance for takeoff and applied pressure to the collective pitch stick while simultaneously manipulating the chopper's cyclical controls.

The four-bladed propeller mounted atop the rotorcraft supplied lift and the helo began to rise straight up with the speed of a freight elevator.

Thirty feet above the deck of the SWATH vessel, the Seahawk's pilot applied lateral thrust to the aircraft by means of the powerful rotor at the end of the tail boom.

The combat helo then nosed forward through the night. It was soon knifing over the sand desert of southern Iraq on its way to the most secret drop zone of the entire Gulf War, perhaps in the history of all war.

The mechanized column ground through the desert wastes. Hours before, the vehicles had set out under cover of darkness from the Republican Guard barracks located in the Iraqi city of Basra.

Making up the column were two MICVs of the German Fox class. These armored vehicles were painted in a desert camouflage format.

Each of the military infantry command vehicles carried a contingent of elite commandos. All were fully indoctrinated members of the Republican Guard, the most highly trained and combat-capable echelon in the Iraqi armed forces.

Outfitted in desert camo combat fatigues like the other men who sat beside and across from him in the lead MICV, the Reverend Vadim consulted the backlit dial of his digital wrist chronometer.

Since setting out from Basra he had been eagerly looking ahead to accomplishing the crowning achievement of his life.

By the digital readout Vadim could see that it would only be a short time before the column reached the dig site. It wasn't really appropriate to call it a "dig site" per se, Vadim mused, because there would not be a tremendous amount of digging involved in the recovery of the Muan artifacts.

Once the sensor instrument that the Iraqis had built to his specifications indicated to him that they had reached the site of the cache of Muan treasures, including the lost power crystals, drilling tools would be unshipped and an entry hole bored into the cave that lay just beneath the ground.

According to legend, the burial cave was formed entirely of natural crystals. It was an enormous geode, whose walls were encrusted with mineral deposits of quartz, selenite and other semiprecious gemstones that had built up, layer upon layer, over the course of millions of years.

The desert was vast and the region in which the cave was located was uncharted.

If one knew precisely where to look, as did Vadim, then the cave could be located by using crude seismic instruments available for hundreds of years.

With the advanced sonar probe the Iraqis had built for Vadim, it would be child's play to find what he sought. In only a little while, Vadim knew he would be face to face with the greatest treasure trove of all time, and the source of almost limitless power.

THIRTY-FIVE

The chopper reached its drop zone without incident.

The Seahawk helo's stealthy, hedgehopping flight path had brought it in under the enemy's radar curtain. Its FLIR terrain mapping and navigational system confirmed that the dry wadi that was its destination now lay directly below the rotorcraft.

The night skies over Iraq had been made deliberately busy that night with incursions into its airspace by U.S. "ferret" aircraft to draw the attention of enemy sentinels.

Once tripwire radars were turned on, EW-12A Raven aircraft equipped for electronic countermeasures missions used active jamming techniques to render these radars useless.

Once over the drop zone, the helo pilot manipulated cyclical and pitch controls to bring the nimble rotorcraft to a low hover only a few feet above the flat surface of the desert floor.

The all-terrain-capable fast attack vehicle (FAV) went out the open hatchway first.

The ruggedly militarized dune-buggy bounced twice on its oversized tires before coming to a complete stop. It finally settled down amid a cloud of powdery desert grit that its impact with the ground had sent skirling into the cold night air.

The FAV was followed by the modularized drop packaging containing the specialized gear Quinn had drawn from Coalition stocks back in Saudi. He had programmed the VRGs to integrate this new equipment into their targeting system.

Flashing the thumbs-up to the dropmaster, Quinn followed the gear drop down to the desert floor, cushioning the impact of landing on the salt pan with boot soles and corded calve muscles.

Rising quickly to his feet, Quinn watched through real-time video on his virtual screen as the combat helicopter ascended to its low trajectory cruising elevation. It then turned and headed back to the safety of the SWATH vessel prototype awaiting its return in the dark waters of the Persian Gulf.

Quinn had plenty to keep him occupied now that he had touched down on the almost lunar landscape of the Iraqi desert. His first order of business was to trundle the FAV down into the shallow bowl of the wadi.

When this feat had been accomplished Quinn next dragged the modularized gear storage containers down the sloping side of the dry hole and placed them in close proximity to the dune buggy.

Spring-loaded latches were thumbed up and the gear containers were quickly broken down. From the shockproof storage cases Quinn unloaded the weapons systems that he had requisitioned for the clandestine night mission.

Hefting the multiple AT4 manpads unit to his shoulder, Quinn checked out the computer interface between the armor-busting rocket launcher and his VRG system.

After he had punched in commands on his wrist-top keypad, the VRGs' onboard computer was ready to go through a simulated fire exercise routine.

It took less than five minutes for the computer simulation of multiple AT4 rocket launches to cycle through the diagnostics routine. Autotargeting and kill confirmation tests were also conducted until the combat-readiness of the equipment was validated.

Powering down his VRGs and placing them in standby mode after conducting the field simulation tests, Quinn got down to what would certainly be the hardest part of the entire mission to handle: *waiting*.

Hunkered below the lip of the wadi, Quinn scanned the flat, nearly pitch dark terrain and bided his time until his dangerous quarry made his appearance.

Quinn heard a beep tone sound in his ear.

ATTENTION ... read the data block that had popped up over a glowing multicolored wire diagram of the desert landscape. The three-dimensional diagram duplicated every dip and rise of the sandy wasteland surrounding him.

MULTITON VEHICLES OF MICV CONFIGURATIONS SIGHTED AT COORDINATES ZERO-TWO-ZERO NINE-SEVEN-ZERO. RANGE IS ONE-POINT-FIVE-FIVE MILES. HEADING IS SOUTH BY SOUTHWEST.

Quinn experienced a sudden rush of exhilaration as he watched the blue icon representing the two MICVs trundle slowly across the red

schematic of crosshatching lines that was superimposed over the real-time video of the undulating desert landscape.

Numerical data showing speed, distance and estimated time to contact were also displayed on the borders of the virtual screen as a glowing digital readout.

There could be no doubt about what he was looking at, Quinn knew.

Onboard this convoy was Reverend Vadim.

Somewhere close by, probably within a radius of only a few miles, lay the objective that the night convoy of camouflage patterned military vehicles was headed toward across the dark, empty desert. The destination of the column had to be the site of the Muan power crystals, the legendary Abraxas Hoard.

Minutes later, the mechanized column had advanced from the farthest edge of the VRGs' sensor range into the middle distance.

Keystroking in new commands at his wrist-top keypad, Quinn dissolved the graphical display on his virtual screen. The wire diagram overlay vanished in the space of an eyeblink.

Quinn's video viewing mode was now real-time with image-intensification enhancement to penetrate the blackness of night.

Zooming the image of the halted column, Quinn watched the convoy of trucks grind to a sudden halt. Camo-fatigued Iraqi troops were soon jumping from the rear hatch of both MICVs and taking up flanking positions nearby the halted column.

Within moments, the VRGs flashed Quinn the message: SIGHTING OF TARGET CONFIRMED and augmented this display by highlighting one of the figures that had emerged from the armored personnel carriers.

The computer had drawn a glowing double blue contour line around one of the figures that had disembarked from the trucks.

It had done this because the visual parameters of the individual had registered as a match with the digitized image of Reverend Vadim that was stored in the computer's memory.

Having confirmed his target with the new data, Quinn prepared to move away from his secure position.

Keeping his profile low, though he was certain he had not been spotted by the opposition, he crawled down into the shallow bowl of the wadi and started up the silent-running FAV.

Minutes later, the black clad striker rolled the militarized dune buggy stealthily across the desert floor, steering along the computer track that glowed on his VRG screen.

With headlights damped, the FAV was invisible against the black horizon. Quinn's targets would not see or hear him approach until he was right on top of them.

Like the rest of the members of the two squads of Iraqi special forces personnel, the Reverend Vadim had donned passive IR night vision goggles before debarking the MICV.

The use of the NVGs was deemed an operational necessity to defeat detection by surveillance platforms of various types. Light sources of any kind would prove an invitation to disaster, and passive IR goggles did not require an external light source in order to function.

In the weeks following the United Nations resolution to sanction force unless Saddam pulled his entrenched troops out of Kuwait, paving the way for a Coalition-launched series of exploitation strikes, the skies above Iraq were cluttered with layer upon layer of aerial and suborbital reconnaissance platforms of various configurations.

At the lowest altitude level of the recon network were F117A stealth fighters armed with infrared imaging systems.

Higher up, at a cruising altitude of approximately seventy thousand feet, flew TR1 recon birds piloted by combination Air Force-CIA crews and equipped with both IR and electro-optical imaging technologies.

Orbiting silently and invisibly at the highest end of the surveillance ring were the recon satellites.

These platforms encompassed KH-11 and KH-12 satellites which were sensitive enough to read the numbers on a license plate from eighty thousand feet and Rhyolite class radar satellites whose pulsed Doppler imaging systems were highly accurate through cloud cover which limited the feasibility of the photint KH platforms.

Without the benefit of passive night imaging technology systems, the special detail mobilized in the Iraqi desert would almost certainly be spotted by Coalition watchers.

Such a sighting might invite closer inspection by other surveillance systems, manned or unmanned. This in turn would lead most likely to the enemies of Iraq gleaning the purpose of the foray into the sand wastes in the desert south of Basra.

Saddam understood the value of operational secrecy and was as fanatical about strict adherence to this principle as he was about everything else.

Despite his belief that his ultimate success had been decreed by the All-Wise who had sent an angelic emissary to him while he dreamed, the Iraqi dictator was a man who believed that Allah helped those best who were able to help themselves.

Through the luminous green stereoscopic view field of the NVGs he wore, the Reverend Vadim scanned the desert terrain surrounding him.

The map he carried was based on ancient Vedic texts, which were in turn based on far more ancient writings of Babylonian priest-scribes dating back to one thousand B.C.

He had used the map as the basis for his navigational calculations. According to it, the natural cavern containing the Muan power crystals was located nearby, possibly within a radius of only fifty-odd feet.

The sonar probe built to the Reverend's specifications by the Iraqis resembled a conventional metal detector.

Its operating principle involved bouncing high frequency sound waves off the desert floor and comparing the echoes that returned by means of a small but extremely powerful computer microprocessor.

In a matter of minutes, the Reverend's sweep of the flat desert floor ended as a high pitched tone sounded in his ear.

It alerted him to the fact that he was standing directly above a hollow in the earth's crust some thirty feet in diameter, according to the LCD readout with which the probe was equipped.

He knew he had found what he had been searching for.

"Here," he called to the Iraqis, barely able to restrain the excitement in his voice, though he knew that on the desert even the slightest sounds carried great distances and immense care had to be taken to evade surveillance.

"Dig right here."

Soon, using jackhammers powered by a portable compressed air pump which the crew had brought along, and silenced with special foam casings, the Iraqi combat engineer team had broken through the thin layer of surface rock.

Peering down into the hollow using an infrared flashlight to illuminate the cavern, the Reverend Vadim immediately noticed the sparkle of the encrusted mineral deposits that the ancient texts spoke of as lining the cavern walls.

With a feeling of mounting excitement, Vadim called for a rope to be provided for him. It was lowered down to the floor of the cavern. Then he climbed down into the darkened depths.

There, on the ancient rock floor, the Reverend found what resembled a large stone sarcophagus. The object was roughly fifteen feet in length, three feet wide and five feet in height. It was sealed with a stone slab that had been precisely dressed to merge seamlessly with the dimensions of the repository.

Vadim tried to push aside the heavy stone cover but was unable to do so unassisted. He would not have been surprised to find that the slab weighed in excess of half a ton.

Only when he called for two of the Iraqis to help him was he able to make any progress in moving the heavy slab. It finally slid to one side, grating noisily against the sides of the repository.

Shining infrared torches down into the space that had been exposed after the slab had been moved, all three men gasped as they peered down into the interior of the container placed there millennia before.

The sight that greeted their startled eyes was like nothing any of them had ever seen, or even imagined possible. They had found the Abraxas Hoard.

THIRTY-SIX

Real-time video scanned the strike perimeter.

Through the computer enhanced night imaging system of the VRGs Quinn saw the activity at the dig site with a sharpness and clarity comparable to viewing conditions in broad daylight.

Nomad had reached a forward observation position just as a stone sarcophagus, its sides carved in high relief, was hoisted up out of the cavern using a portable electric winch.

The sides of the receptacle were decorated with hieroglyphic writing of a kind with which Quinn was totally unfamiliar. It seemed to be a cross between Chinese pictographs and Egyptian hieratic script.

Once completely removed from the cavern, the large, heavy object was then loaded onboard the Iraqi deuce-and-a-half and the hole in the earth covered up with plywood, which was then covered over with shovelfuls of sand to camouflage the scar in the desert.

Preparing to go ballistic on the Iraqis, Quinn took notice of every aspect of the operations zone that might impinge on his attack strategy. Of primary importance to him at the moment was the fact that there were no lights of any kind positioned around the dig to illuminate the excavation site.

All personnel were wearing night vision goggles of an image intensification type. Quinn guessed that this was deemed necessary because the Iraqis did not want to risk the threat of being easily spotted by the array of surveillance systems in the air in these tense weeks before the Gulf conflict began.

That was tactically sound thinking from one standpoint. From another perspective, though, it revealed shoddy planning.

Use of passive night vision equipment might successfully hide the excavation detachment from planes and satellites, but it would also give Quinn a sizable tactical advantage.

With his VRGs and stealth suit combination, he could see the Iraqis clearly, but they would have a very hard time spotting him.

The FAV had taken him in close to the strike objective. He would have to negotiate the rest of the distance on foot.

The optimum opportunity window to hit the opposition was opening right up.

Some of the Iraqi detail had already returned to the sanctuary of the armored MICVs and Quinn wanted to take his targets down while they were without the protection of the hardened vehicles.

Raising the shoulder fire AT4 system, Quinn set his VRGs to autotarget mode. Their onboard computer crunched numbers and prioritized the targets according to range, position and threat management force levels.

Putting the piper on the first of the MICVs, Quinn felt the launcher buck atop his shoulder.

Scorching blue flame belched from both ends of the launch tube, lighting up the desert for an instant as his battle management system propelled the first of the four HEMP rocket rounds toward the target.

Ka-boom!

A seething fireball mushroomed up into the night as the first MICV was hit broadside. The rocket's penetrator head pierced the light outer armor covering the war wagon's turret.

The hollow shaped charge detonated in a rapidly expanding ring that produced a superheated thermal pulse.

Exerting pressures approaching two hundred tons per square inch, a high speed spike of semimolten steel augered its way into the interior of the armored carrier with lethal consequences for the crew.

Iraqi Republican Guardsman inside the armored vehicle were killed where they sat as blast effect tore their limbs from their bodies and ripped the flesh and sinew from their bones.

Atop the other MICV, a .50 caliber machinegun belched flame and spat hot lead as its frenzied bolt clatter echoed through the night.

Questing for vengeance, glowing tracers whipped toward the spot where a sudden flash of fire had marked the launch of the HEMP warhead seconds before. Darkness had swallowed up the shooter, and Quinn's stealth suit was invisible to the night vision goggles worn by the Iraqis.

Now, rapid tracer fire pulses mercilessly raked the desert sands.

But the fire was blind, its inaccuracy heightened by the fact that the surviving Iraqi MICV was already in motion as stragglers scrambled to board the heavy transport truck on which the Muan artifacts had been loaded just before the rocket attack had commenced.

Swinging the AT4 launcher again into position, Quinn put the VRG death dot broadside of the MICV that was kicking up sand and leaving deep

tracks on the desert floor as it moved away at the highest speeds that it could muster.

Quinn felt the shoulder-fire launcher buck again as back-blast sent a plume of luminescent gases spraying into the night. His virtual screen tracked the round as it left the pipe on its lethal trajectory toward its fleeing target.

Ka-booom!

One more thunderous explosion marked the destruction of the second MICV, whose passengers died in a manner just as brutal as the Iraqis in the first destroyed armored vehicle that was now burning vigorously on the desert floor.

A few troops who had escaped the death rain were now peppering the desert with heavy caliber AK-47 fire.

Because Quinn's thermal image-defeating stealth suit denied them target acquisition through their night vision goggles, the troops could only use the muzzle flash of the rocket launcher to sight their 7.62 mm autobursts on.

Quinn defeated this tactic by sprinting away from his last position as soon as he had launched his second computer-aimed AT-4 round.

The Iraqi small arms fire fell wide of the intended mark: the opposition troops were shooting at the empty space that Quinn had occupied seconds before, not where he was when the bullets struck.

Using the VRG targeting screen to acquire the third and final vehicle of the Iraqi convoy, Quinn got a target confirm on the heavy transport truck. Seconds before the HEMP round was vectoring from the pipe, Vadim leapt from the vehicle's rear, realizing that the truck was doomed.

Unlike the Iraqis who had died without even knowing what had hit them, Vadim knew what exactly what he was up against.

Vadim realized that Nomad was out there somewhere, deadly and unseen, and he also knew that the deuce-and-a-half containing the stone chest and the Muan crystals was next in line to be blasted to burning debris.

As the truck blew apart in a pyrotechnic shower of spinning smithereens in a third explosion that lit up the night with a thousand shooting stars, Quinn put his fourth and final HEMP round into the deuce-and-a-half, intending to insure that the Muan artifacts were completely destroyed, and put well beyond the reach of Saddam Hussein or anyone else who intended to benefit from their lethal power.

Tossing aside the spent multiple launcher tube, Quinn sprinted across the fire-scorched sands toward the strike zone, the P90 in his fist cybernetically linked to the VRGs' tracking screen.

Iraqi stragglers were still alive in the burning hell of the wreckage-strewn killground.

In the flickering light of multiple fires they could see the dark figure silhouetted against the flames licking up from the strike perimeter. The superstitious Iraqis were terrified of death and even more terrified by the

certainty that they had invoked an ancient curse by excavating the stone chest from the desert cave.

Wide-eyed with unmanly fear, the troops hurled massed 7.62 mm autofire at the fast-darting figure that stitched between the funeral pyres of the burning wreckage like a specter thrust up from hell. The battle-crazed Iraqis believed the deadly shadow that was visiting destruction on them must surely be a spirit of the ancient dead who had been angered by their transgression of the desert burial site.

With his VRGs set on autotargeting mode, Quinn had already prioritized the handful of Iraqis left alive on the ground. With the targeting pipper resting on one Iraqi commando, the P90 directed silenced 5.70 mm burstfire on its lethal trajectory through poison clouds of toxic smoke billowing up from the burning wreckage.

As the gore from the Iraqi's shattered face splattered the dusty fatigues of the man beside him, Quinn had already moved his arm a few inches to the right and within a heartbeat had automatically launched a brace of needlepoint 5.70 mm flechettes at the second Iraqi trooper.

A third Iraqi rose to his feet, jacking off flaming hip-level 7.62 mm bursts of his Kalashnikov Avtomat as he ran into the night, screaming like a man gone insane.

The VRG pipper flicked across the runner's ribcage, and a quickburst of 5.70 mm needles penetrated his heart zone, twisting up his legs beneath his body in mid-stride and sending the terminated Republican Guardsman sprawling face-down into the bloody desert sands as the AK rifle cartwheeled through the night and plunged barrel-first into the soft ground.

Through cybernetic space, Quinn scanned the fire zone for survivors.

Only one man showed vital signs still intact, and that man was Lux Vadim. His features turned into a bizarre mask by the flickering light of the burning vehicles, the Reverend pulled a pistol from a belt holster and held it outstretched in a two-handed combat grasp.

Shakily, he rose to his feet, brandishing the 9 mm semiauto at the mocking shadows.

"I see you, Quinn!" he shouted at the battle-helmeted specter who strode through the hellflames on the desert toward him, rising up out of the inky darkness of the desert night. "And if I see you I can kill you!"

But Quinn didn't stop.

He kept striding closer as the Reverend squeezed the trigger of the semiautomatic pistol. A parabellum bullet cracked as it rushed past Quinn's face, followed by another and then a third round in quick succession.

Still Quinn came forward and stopped still a few paces from Vadim. The targeting pipper flashed on the center of the Reverend's face as Quinn stared into the muzzle of the Reverend's raised handgun.

For a heartbeat, Quinn debated whether to take justice into his hands then and there.

But termination was a directive to be carried out only as a last resort, and Quinn still had a chance at bringing Vadim back alive.

Vadim squeezed the combat pistol's trigger again, cursing his shaking hands as a mis-aimed bullet made the desert dust leap up in a sand spout near Quinn's booted feet.

Quinn moved the death dot from Vadim's head to the frame of the black Beretta pistol that he clutched in his hands. The P90 whispered once and a computer-targeted 5.70 mm round lanced out with surgical precision, knocking the 9 mm handgun from the Reverend's quavering grip.

With an animalistic snarl of combined rage and fury, the injured man hurled himself at Quinn. As the Reverend came at him, fists balled, Quinn raised the P90 and brought the buttstock smashing down against the side of Vadim's head with savage force.

Grunting in pain and gushing blood from the ugly gash in his scalp, the Reverend dropped to the sand in a senseless, moaning heap.

A few minutes later, Quinn had secured his quarry's hands behind his back with cable ties, propped Vadim in the seat of the FAV and strapped him down securely.

His VRG screen was already counting down toward the crunch point as he gunned the militarized dune buggy's powerful engine and raced away from the strike zone across the rising and falling desert terrain at maximum speed.

Superimposed over the real-time image-enhanced video display of the desert landscape was a glowing red 3D wire diagram that snaked away to a triangle at its end. It was at the coordinates represented by that triangle icon that the CTL window would appear in just a little while.

Suddenly, a data block popped up on Quinn's VRG screen. WARNING ... the data block read ... HIGH LEVEL OF ELECTROMAGNETIC RADIATION DETECTED ... EXPLOSION IMMINENT!

THIRTY-SEVEN

Extracting every last possible ounce of speed from the FAV, Quinn roared the militarized dune buggy across the desert.

Less than a mile from the strike zone, an explosion of tremendous magnitude lit up the night with a blinding incandescence. Thunder boomed and echoed across the desert. Shock pulses sent shuddering force waves coursing through the bedrock of the desert floor.

The Muan crystals had caused the titanic blast.

Absorbing energy from the explosive strikes of Quinn's rocket attack on the Iraqi convoy, the crystals had remained undamaged within the protection of their stone sarcophagus. But the unstable materials of which they were composed had reacted to the energy bombardment by reaching a sort of critical mass.

Deflected upward by the desert floor, the vertical column of blast energy geysered up into the night in a hellfire stream. Its almost nuclear heat fused the sands below into a solid sheet of glass.

The intense light given off by the powerful blast had not gone unnoticed by either Coalition surveillance assets or the Iraqis themselves.

From an Iraqi military installation based at Jalibah, Iraqi warplanes were scrambled to investigate the explosion in the desert that was believed to have been caused by an American nuclear weapon. As Quinn screamed the overdriven FAV across the desert, the warbirds were already airborne.

Before long, Quinn's destination drew near.

In the darkness of the desert a mile or so ahead of him, Quinn's VRGs detected the presence of an electromagnetic energy vortex. Its configuration matched that of a closed time-like line, or CTL, window that opened onto a light cone tilting back toward Quinn's future.

A three-dimensional wire grid diagram in glowing red crosshatching flashed on the striker's virtual screen. The double-ended, hourglass-shaped funnel that the computer display showed him was a warp in the fabric of space and time, a rift in causality opened temporarily by the black hole generator at Gamma Base.

The CTL window was the doorway back uptime to the year 2035.

On one side of the maelstroming funnel was the Iraqi desert and Quinn's "now," the year 1990. Uptime, at the other end, was Quinn's future time line and Gamma Base, from which the CTL window was being generated decades away in the twenty-first century.

When Quinn was less than five hundred yards away from the CTL window, the energy levels had warped the spacetime continuum to the point where the CTL window was visible to the naked eye.

Real-time video showed Quinn a glowing portal in space, funneling down into infinity through a throat tinged with scintillating lights of spinning rainbow colors. Around its edges there flashed an ever-changing light display, gleaming and glistening like an aurora borealis.

This anomaly was also seen by the pilot of the Iraqi MiG 29 and his wingman in the cockpit of a Sukhoi Flanker as both fighter aircraft overflew the scene of the strange, high magnitude explosion that had taken place in the southern desert.

The sortie leader radioed his base that he also saw an unidentified vehicle heading toward the anomaly and asked for instructions.

"Attack the vehicle!" he was promptly informed. "Mark the position by jettisoning a radio beacon and then immediately return to base."

"Roger," replied the pilot of the MiG 29.

The MiG pilot instructed his wingman to execute a turn and descend to strafe the target with Vulcan cannon fire.

"I copy that," the wingman reported and readied his firing systems.

Quinn's virtual screen lit up with threat warnings as the two Soviet-built fighter planes approached on a low trajectory attack vector that skimmed their underbellies only a few dozen feet above the surface of the desert.

Thirty millimeter fire from the Vulcan cannons mounted on the leader's wing tips hammered down toward the vehicle with an eerie moaning roar characteristic of the weapon, narrowly missing the FAV as the MiG roared overhead.

Quinn stomped hard on the brakes to halt the FAV and then used a spring-loaded knife to quickly cut the restraints securing Lux Vadim to his seat. There was no way to outrun the supersonic fighters in the FAV and no nearby cover in which to hide from their deadly armament.

A hard shove sent the Reverend sprawling to the desert floor before Quinn too jumped out of his seat. Within a matter of moments, the Sukhoi's cannon fire walked along the desert floor and punched into the dune buggy with devastating results.

The thirty millimeter rounds chewed up the chassis of the open-topped vehicle before an incandescent tracer bullet penetrated its gas tank, igniting

the high-octane fuel inside the tank. The FAV blew apart in a pyrotechnic shower of twisted, flaming metal as the gasoline vaporized, turning into a spreading cloud of incandescent yellow plasma that ballooned skyward with an earsplitting boom.

The countdown window at the top of Quinn's VRG screen gave him less than three minutes before the time translation window would disappear. At that point his pipeline back to his departure year would be blocked, probably forever.

This CTL window had popped into being at the final pre-planned location. Gamma Base would not open another one. Quinn and Vadim would be stuck in the past with no way out.

The lead Iraqi strike aircraft, the MiG 29, had taken a few minutes to complete its turn, due to the high speeds it was traveling which carried it long distances in a short time. But the MiG was now heading back toward Quinn's position.

In the hellish, flickering light cast by the nearby fire of the burning FAV, Quinn's stealthiness was compromised.

He could be seen and so he could also be effectively targeted.

Setting the P90 on full burstfire mode, Quinn tracked the bullpup weapon upward toward the attack planes with the VRG on automatic target acquisition mode.

At the same time, the pilot was moving the death dot on his head-up display screen onto the figure of the black-clad figure on the ground below. The Iraqi's hand clutched the joystick button that would send the Vulcan fire lancing down to quickly terminate the soft target.

A heartbeat before the Iraqi launched his deadly rounds, the P90 cycled out a full clip of fifty 5.70 mm needle bullets at the nose assembly of the low-flying attack plane.

Computer-aimed at the cockpit of the plane, the needlepoint rounds penetrated the plexiglas canopy, smashed through the pilot's helmet visor, and struck the Iraqi pilot in the face, caving it in and splattering the instrumentation panel with an obscene crimson shower.

Still more sustained autofire from the rotoring P90 ricocheted off the plane's controls and bounced around the cockpit at high velocity like a swarm of ravenous metal bees.

As the dead pilot's finger relaxed on the joystick fire button, the MiG veered suddenly out of control.

Yawing sharply to one side, the stricken fighter turned belly-up then pitched steeply down toward the desert floor.

The jet exploded a few moments later as the plane's spinout terminated in a violent crash and burn, scattering pieces of burning wreckage and fiery aviation gasoline all over the desert floor to a radius of sixty feet from the impact zone.

In the blinding flash of the explosion, Quinn grabbed up the groggy Vadim as the MiG's wingman in the Sukhoi completed his turn and screamed back toward the kill basket.

His jaw set in a grim line, his finger hovered over the joystick button that controlled the Sukhoi's 30 mm cannon. The pilot of the downed MiG had been his friend and he wanted to exact a heavy vengeance on whoever was responsible for his death.

The CTL window was now at the peak of its warp energies and would soon pop back out of the physical universe again. When that happened, the gash in the spacetime continuum would close like a fast-healing wound. Quinn had only those few pulse beats left in which to reach the time window and translate out of Iraq and up the time line to 2035.

Half-pushing, half-dragging the bleeding, semiconscious Vadim toward the CTL window, Quinn struggled to reach the crackling, sparkling tunnel in time as the Sukhoi fighter raced toward them at subsonic speeds.

Flying down through licking fire and blinding smoke, the Sukhoi pilot could not see the two figures scrambling across the sands at all through the cockpit windscreen.

Then, with unexpected suddenness, bulleting out of the black smoke plume belched skyward from the wreckage of the burning MiG aircraft, the Sukhoi pilot eyeballed the figures who had almost reached the mouth of the incredible what-ever-it-was that had opened up in the night.

Without wasting another second or stopping to think, the Iraqi wingman put the flashing pipper on the targets and punched the joystick fire control button, raining down heavy caliber Vulcan fire on the two fleeing figures on the burning sands below.

Quinn heard the sound of keening, moaning death from the fast-rotoring electric cannon and the rapid thudding of the heavy Vulcan rounds as they slammed into the desert sands inches from his body.

Quinn dared not look back, although he knew that in a second or two the lethal strafing fire would reach him. Mustering a final burst of speed, Nomad shoved Vadim ahead of him into the mouth of the time translation window as it began to shrink in size and then leapt inside himself, feeling a line of fiery pain rasp across his side.

Some twenty feet overhead, the Sukhoi pilot thought he had seen at least one of the brilliantly glowing tracer bullets strike one of the running men as both disappeared into the fairy ring of radiantly sparkling lights that hovered over the desert floor.

A heartbeat later, he saw the apparition shrink down to a tiny, glowing dot in the night and then vanish completely. At that point the Sukhoi streaked over the black emptiness of the desert below and the pilot could see nothing more until he was able to complete his turn.

When he flew back over the area once again, he saw only the sand and the wreckage of the blasted vehicle and the crashed MiG. The two running targets he had been chasing at low altitude had disappeared completely. It was as if the desert itself had swallowed them up into its bottomless depths.

Maybe it had done so at that, he thought, as he turned the Sukhoi and headed back toward Jalibah on full afterburner after deploying a marker beacon as instructed.

But their fate was no longer his problem. The Sukhoi fighter pilot had carried out his duty and would now turn in his after-action report. It would be up to others to deal with the ramifications of these puzzling events.

More than four decades from that moment, yet only a few seconds later, the techs at Gamma Base saw the blackness opaqueing the CTL sphere vanish and the rounded hull of the thirty-foot orb suddenly clear.

Within the again transparent bubble of the time travel device, Gamma personnel saw two human figures materialize, the taller of whom held a tight restraining grip on the other.

The technical support staff rushed to the temporal translation sphere, now seeing blood streak the curved, transparent walls.

Flanked by the contingent of bullpup-toting commandos who had been standing at the ready, a medical crew helped both arrivals from the sphere. One of the temponauts immediately slumped to the floor of the operations center.

Quinn was bleeding heavily from his side as the medical support team administered emergency treatment to the serious bullet wound. Blackness had begun to close in. Quinn's final sight before darkness swallowed him up was of the Reverend Vadim laughing maniacally, like a man who had completely lost his mind.

"A stitch in time saves nine," he shouted over and over again as he was handcuffed and read his legal rights, then taken away for processing. "A stitch in time saves nine. But they won't save you, Quinn!"