



ADVENTURE

NOMAD

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DAVID ALEXANDER

A bid for ultimate power pits Nomad against a ruthless techno-messiah

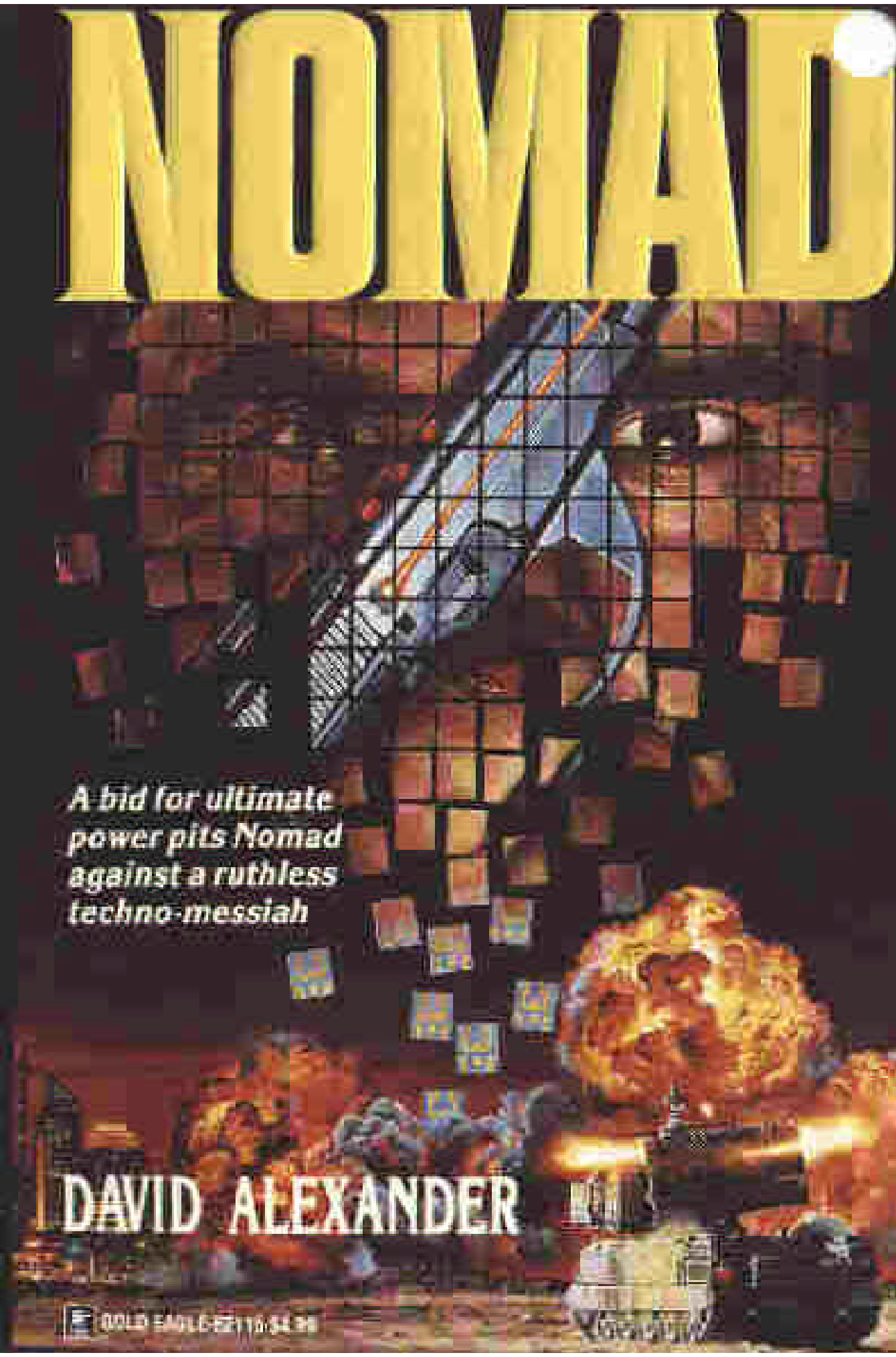
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Nomad #1

(Originally titled The Skyfire Kills)

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.

The mass and majesty of this world, all
That carries weight and always weighs the same
Lay in the hands of others; they were small
And could not hope for help and no help came:
What their foes liked to do was done, their shame
Was all the worst could wish; they lost their pride
And died as men before their bodies died.

-- W.H. Auden,
The Shield of Achilles

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Singapore.

Kim Sung set down his drink at the bar and idly glanced at the lounge singer in the slinky dress who was belting out the usual tasteless rendition of an American pop tune. His own people, Kim had realized after many years spent in the United States, knew nothing about American popular culture. Nevertheless they insisted on doing their best to imitate it every chance they got.

The booze was the raunchy American sour mash whiskey that Kim had acquired a taste for during his student days at Cal Tech but right now the bourbon wasn't doing much for the nuclear physicist's state of mind. The depression he felt had been sudden and uncharacteristic. Kim had at first attributed its onset to a kind of postpartum emotional syndrome.

His involvement with Skyfire had consumed his mental and physical energies for the past five years. Small wonder, Kim had thought, that one would feel the shock of letdown now that one's role in the project was complete. Kim had decided to take a vacation. However even after several weeks enjoying the gaming tables and energetic prostitutes of Monte Carlo his depression had continued to mount.

Now, on his return to Singapore, Kim plunged himself into a new project, hoping that in time his spirits would lift. So far, though, this had not happened.

Kim left the bar and found his car, a brand new Mercedes Tiger, in the lot out front. He gunned the ignition and felt the high performance engine come to life with a roar as fearsome as that of the automobile's animal namesake. Kim toiled out onto the road that switchbacked above

the South China Sea toward his mountaintop villa on the rocky heights which overlooked the ocean.

When he reached the highest point of the steeply winding road, Kim pulled the car over to the shoulder and sat there staring blankly at the sea glittering in the sunlight at the foot of the cliff. Moments later, Kim was rolling forward again. He had stopped the car at the last few hundred feet of a straightaway before it became a deadman's curve over a seventy foot plunge.

Now Kim's foot mashed down on the gas pedal while his hands gripped the wheel with knuckle-whitening tension. The Mercedes crashed through the metal barrier strip and sailed straight off into empty space.

Moments later it slammed head-on into a rock ledge projecting from the escarpment below. It did a complete flip, coasted in free-fall, then plowed upside-down into the boulders on the beach.

Acid from the ruptured fuel cell splashed across bare wire leads. A spark caught the fumes of partially combusted gas rising from the choke. In a pulsebeat the Mercedes and its driver were both consumed in a towering fireball of incinerating flame.

Berlin.

Unter den Linden was thronged with its usual assortment of tourists, hustlers, pimps and pickpockets. Since unification some twenty years before, the once proud capital of Germany had regained much of its former splendor.

While in the cold war years architecture in the GDR had taken on the facelessness typical of postwar Soviet Bloc buildings, much of the structures of old Berlin had been saved in the East and had never been torn down due to the bankrupt communist government. Now they had been restored.

Fritz Geistmann was emerging from a conference at a chemical firm for which he had just been contracted to do consulting work. Although he didn't need the money, the compulsion to work was in his blood. After his involvement with Skyfire nothing else would ever seem as important, but Geistmann's restless mind required constant stimulation. He had taken the assignment more for its therapeutic value than anything else.

It was a beautiful morning. The chemical engineer decided to walk down the Unter den Linden at least part of the distance toward his flat on the Rosa Luxemburg Platz.

As he proceeded on his way, Geistmann reflected on the Nazi Reich that had come of age in this quarter of the ancient capital. Its Prussian architecture still chilled him to the bone. The place had not lost the power to conjure up ghosts of a bygone era. Geistmann was a Jew and a former inmate of the Dora-Nordhausen camp in Southern Germany that had provided the slave labor for the giant Peenemunde rocket facility run by Von Braun and other Nazi scientists. He had only been a young

boy then, but after more than sixty-five years, he could still almost hear the sound of lockstepping jackboots out of Germany's dark past.

On a whim Geistmann decided to ride the U-Bahn the rest of the way to his apartment. The electric trains were clean and free of the graffiti that had plagued them before unification. Geistmann stood on the platform and opened the newspaper he had purchased at the kiosk on the mezzanine level of the subway.

Minutes later the pretty young schoolteacher standing beside him let out a bloodcurdling scream as she was splattered with Geistmann's blood.

Geistmann had thrown the paper to the floor just as the U-Bahn train roared into the station. Eyewitnesses all agreed that the man in the grey tweed overcoat had casually stepped into the path of the oncoming express at the last second before it would have streaked past.

A passenger pulled the emergency cord that stopped the U-Bahn train and the row of cars came screeching to a halt. Commuter traffic was held up for several hours as police and emergency service units labored to retrieve the mangled body parts which had been strewn across the tracks.

All accounts of the incident agreed that the dead man had neither been pushed or fallen, nor had Geistmann uttered a word that might have explained his actions before he committed suicide. He had simply stepped in front of the oncoming train as naturally as if he were boarding an escalator and been instantly killed.

Prague.

The time-stained building overlooked the Charles Bridge. It had been built long before the beginning of World War Two, in a time when Prague was still known as the armory of Eastern Europe and one of its principal cultural centers. Now, decades after the Czechs had freed themselves from the twin evils of Nazi and then Soviet domination, Prague was again something like the city she had once been.

Inside the spacious drawing room, Vlados Havlecek entertained his many guests. The expert on laser-based guidance systems was celebrating his forty-sixth birthday with a gala party. This occasion was doubly auspicious because it also marked the conclusion of many years of work on the Skyfire project's guidance components, critical to the performance of the sophisticated hardware.

Havlecek looked a bit drawn, but his guests all attributed the signs of stress to the scientist's dedication to making Skyfire a reality, efforts that the world media had brought to every Czech's attention during the many phases of the ambitious project.

The salon of the scientist's villa became hushed as servants wheeled in a magnificent birthday cake, its frosted top bedecked with an array of burning candles.

As they stared at the cake, few noticed Havlecek calmly walk toward one of the high windows and quickly cross to the edge of the balcony that fronted the villa. Those guests who saw his face just before he leapt to his death on the ancient cobbles of the Charles Bridge below, related that the scientist's expression was completely blank, bearing no trace of emotion whatsoever.

Taranto, Italy.

The ancient litany droned in the killer's ears. Genesis had paid twenty thousand U.S. dollars to participate in the age-old ceremony among the Perdoni of Taranto's bizarre Easter Pageant.

Their faces hooded, huge crosses of heavy wood cradled in their arms, the Perdoni walk less than two miles across the town of Taranto from dusk of Easter till dawn of Easter Sunday, advancing by tiny steps in emulation of Christ's last trek toward Golgotha.

The pain is excruciating. It is said that only the chosen few granted special grace alone can bear it.

Genesis had not been born into the faith. The killer had discovered the strange ritual completely by accident after executing the termination of the arms dealer in Cairo.

The hit had been carried out perfectly. The arms dealer's death had involved mutilations characteristic of the Muslim Brotherhood. The shipment of small arms that he had been brokering in a complex scam involving the covert intelligence networks of three nations had been thrown into complete disarray.

The arms shipment had been successfully diverted to Alpha's ground assets in preparation for the coming operation. However with each of the three nations busy pointing fingers at one another, Alpha would never be suspected as the principal behind the murder or the theft.

But for Genesis something had changed after the Cairo strike. For the first time Genesis had not felt the exhilaration that had always come with the large payment to a numbered Swiss account and the knowledge of a flawlessly executed assignment. For the first time, Genesis had felt the gnawing of a strange new emotion. *Conscience.*

Conscience was a dangerous thing to carry around in the business Genesis was in. For Genesis, conscience was a slowly ticking bomb.

In Paris there were houses of bondage where surgically altered women could bring sublime forgetfulness through the precise infliction of pleasure and pain. Genesis had drunk of the dark pleasures they offered to the full, had drifted perilously close to the ragged edge of insanity. But not even there could Genesis find tranquility.

In the Taranto Easter Pageant, the assassin had immediately sensed the promise of redemption. Money had been no object. For twice the asking price, Genesis had purchased a position among the Perdoni,

and, through the excruciating ordeal of walking the Stations of the Cross, been purged of the madness that had been lurking nearby.

Afterward, Genesis could kill again. Precisely, efficiently. With the ticking bomb of conscience finally defused.

Taranto had then become a regular ritual. A yearly atonement. A cleansing of the killer's soul.

Now Genesis had been slowly crossing the town's cobblestone streets in bare feet since sunset of the night before. Almost immediately, the killer had lapsed into a trancelike state in which time stood still and became an eternity washed by a warm sea of milky white light.

Suddenly there came the sound of chanting. The procession halted. The leader of the procession knocked three times on the bolted portals of the town cathedral. The huge oaken doors swung ponderously open.

Genesis followed the Perdoni inside the cathedral. Washed in the blood of the Lamb, Genesis was redeemed.

Now Genesis could kill again.

MISSION LOG ONE:

Probe

ONE*Colorado.*

Darkness shrouded the desert launch facility of Orbital Systems Technologies. The night was moonless and starlight was the only source of illumination. Elapsed mission time: 002 minutes.

Shadows cloaked the striker as he advanced on the target. His mission: hard penetration, ultimate destruction.

The night-black stealthsuit worn by the striker fit snugly over his muscular body, elasticized to give as he moved, with no tags or buckles to snag at a dangerous moment. Gloves of a thin polymerized material encased his hands, his head was cowled and high-topped, ripple-soled boots protected his feet.

The thin profile of a virtual reality goggles (VRG) device resembling a diver's mask projected from his face which was cammied in heat-dissipating stripes of nonreflective black combat paint.

A network of microthin plastic tubes sandwiched between the fabric of the stealthsuit crisscrossed every inch of the shadow warrior's body. Temperature diffusing gases constantly circulated through the artificial capillaries of the dark-hued action togs to create a mixed pattern of hot and cold as thermal camouflage.

Even the most sensitive TI (thermal imaging) sensors used by conventional night vision equipment would have extreme difficulty in detecting the heat signature of the operative in the suit. Personal stealth technology had finally given the techno-commando a power that had always been the stuff of myth: invisibility.

Quinn was the striker's name. Quinn and nothing else. He had stopped using his first name years before, rejecting it as irrelevant. The code name he had used during his hitch with Scepter Quinn also never spoke of. Nomad was a handle out of another life as far as Quinn was concerned.

The VRG device worn by Quinn was a revolutionary piece of precision combat gear in its own right. Its multiple sensor array incorporated TI, IR (infra-red) and II (image-intensification) visionics and sensorics.

Invisible Q-switched, neodymium-doped YAG laser beams selectively painted the op zone, illuminating details invisible to both the unaided eye and conventional night observation devices.

All input was filtered through ultra high-speed microprocessors hardwired into the VRGs' 686-based CPU. The result was a multi-mode eyes-up display of sharp resolution.

Tiger duty was the subject of tonight's mission profile. Covert penetration of the hard perimeter and implantation of a compact SADM, a special atomic demolition munition, that was in effect a very small but very deadly nuclear bomb. Base personnel were to be taken down in the process.

Quick in, quick out.

No prisoners.

No excuses.

Quinn reached the fifteen foot high perimeter fence which surrounded the base. There he froze, probing passively, for the present letting the hardware do the grunt work. In zoom mode the VRG raster's graphical user interface displayed the entire expanse of the installation, showing him the concrete blockhouses, Quonset huts and launch gantries that sprawled across a quarter mile of open desert.

Quinn's passive scan continued. Shifting to schematic overlay, another sweep flashed him a glowing 3D wire grid map pinpointing the array of TI and LLTV (low-light television) perimeter sensors linked to the base command center. These passive sensors would issue a silent intruder alarm when triggered by the appropriate threat configuration.

Quinn wasn't overly concerned about the perimeter sensors. The stealthsuit and VRG combo could defeat these. But buried in the sand there were probably motion sensors too -- perhaps linked to area denial submunitions -- which his equipment could not so easily detect and these needed bypassing.

Quinn moved quickly between the blind spots of the swiveling LLTV cameras. Using shears of an ultra-hard nonmetallic polymer he snipped out a section of the perimeter fence.

Replacing the cut-out section with plastic ties to minimize the risk of detection once he was inside the fence, Quinn scanned the terrain ahead through his VRGs. Invisible lasers picked up the faint traces of

buried motion sensor pods which unaided human eyes could not distinguish.

The cordon of hidden motion sensors was arrayed just within the fence, attuned to the body mass of anything larger and heavier than a coyote. Stepping carefully, Quinn avoided these.

Six minutes into the mission, Quinn encountered the first Orbital Systems security guard walking his perimeter. The uniformed guard passed by without taking notice of him as Quinn crouched in the darkness.

Although the guard too was equipped with night vision goggles, the binocular lenses of the sentry's passive infra-red NVGs were blind to Quinn's presence. Well diffused by the stealthsuit, Quinn's heat signature could not be detected by the NVGs worn by the guard.

Invisible in the shadows, Quinn remained perfectly motionless until the guard continued past his position.

Then, breaking from cover, Quinn crouch-walked toward the site of the base's radar tracking module.

The schematic map display showing the module's location was already pre-programmed into the VRGs' random access memory and his eyes-up display depicted another three-dimensional wire diagram which led him directly toward it. All Quinn had to do was follow the flashing yellow line of dashes on the EUD and he was home free.

Quinn was almost at his designated target site when another guard suddenly rounded the corner of a large fuel storage tank and popped up directly in front of him.

The uniformed security man was startled at the dark looming mass but moved fast, raising the black bullpup serial flechette rifle he ported as his night vision goggles gained focus on the intruder, now close enough to be visible as a faint, glimmering manshape in his glowing electronic viewfield.

Quinn was moving too, reacting much faster than the surprised guard, pulling the advanced-design weapon from his breakaway chest rig with the faint rasp of Velcro fastenings disengaging.

The donut-shaped close assault weapon clutched in his fists was comprised of durable high impact plastic.

The FN P90 close assault weapon might resemble an oversized donut equipped with a plastic stock but it was a lethal firearm nevertheless, delivering more than three times the terminal ballistics of a conventional SMG.

Silencer-equipped, the P90 made hardly any sound as it discharged a three round autoburst of needle-nosed 5.70 x 28 mm rounds and softly ejected the spent casings through a port situated at the bottom of the ambidextrous weapon's frame.

The high velocity rounds scored a tight pattern in the center of the target's chest. The sentry went down with a grunt and lay motionless on the ground.

Reholstering the P90 the covert penetrator moved on, following the broken line on his strike management raster interface.

Nine minutes into the mission, Quinn reached the nerve center of the launch facility. The flashing broken line on his goggles' EUD now resolved into a glowing three-dimensional cube superimposed over an icon representing the phased array radar installation that was essential to tracking and controlling the various pieces of orbital hardware that the company launched into space for its international clients.

With a short beeptone in his ear the VRGs indicated that Quinn had reached the mission's target site programmed into its volatile memory. Again there was the rasp of Velcro surfaces disengaging as Quinn unshipped the special ordnance he'd brought with him from a pouch riding ALICE webbing on his back.

The special atomic demolition munition or SADM had been engineered down to the dimensions of an oversized thermos jug which it resembled more closely than anything else except for its matte black finish, the recessed carrying handle on its side and the words: "M/2A Subkiloton Thermonuclear Explosive Device" stenciled in white across its middle.

A metal stirrup or "church key" inserted into a locking mechanism in its top and turned counterclockwise activated a microprocessor chip which placed the SADM in standby mode.

A keypad just below the carrying handle was used to program precise settings into the nuke's computer CMOS ROM chip, alphanumeric which were flashed on a backlit LCD display above the keypad. A final twist of the church key armed the micronuke.

Once armed, its automatic failsafe program would defeat any attempts to neutralize the SADM. Thanks to its sophisticated detection circuitry, tampering with the nuke beyond this point would trigger it into going critical. The nuke would detonate, one way or the other, and nothing this side of hell could prevent it.

Quinn set the SADM's timer and quickly withdrew from ground zero. He was soon back where he'd started, outside the snipped-out section of security fence soon thereafter, with an elapsed mission time of just under fourteen minutes.

As Quinn pulled the VRGs from his head a powerful helium-arc spotlight flashed suddenly to life, pinning Quinn in its Cyclopean glare.

Quinn shaded his eyes as he squinted into the blinding light source. Centered in the glare, a dark manshape was approaching him at a slow amble.

A smile crossed Quinn's lean, hard features. He continued to stare into the light as the figure approached him.

"Damn fine job," the gruff voice of Orbital Systems' security chief said as he stuck out his hand. Quinn grasped the calloused hand and shook hard. "There's a bottle of not half-bad whiskey in my office," the security chief went on. "Let's you and me have a belt while we review the mission specs."

Quinn and the security chief turned and walked out of the light.

TWO

Art Raxwell, chief of base security at Orbital Systems Technologies sat in the truck loaded with high-tech equipment. Quinn was already programming the data for post-mission analysis into his palmtop computer.

"You sure punched a hole in our security cordon," Raxwell told him, shaking his head. "I wouldn't have believed anybody could do it."

"Don't sweat it, Raxwell," Quinn returned, swiveling in his chair to face the greying ex-cop. "Your system wasn't bad. Just wasn't geared to take on the latest technology. Better for me to find and plug the holes than for some terrorist head cases to do it for you."

Raxwell nodded in agreement, now glad that he had opted for Quinn to test the base defenses despite the company bigwigs' reservations. Had a genuine terrorist unit penetrated the base and planted an operational SADM instead of the dummy Quinn had used, then the consequences would have been more than just disastrous for Orbital. If a nuclear disaster had occurred than the whole tri-state area could have been hit.

Terrorist International was no longer unsophisticated. Its members were now dedicated, well-trained and well-equipped. Small, cheap, accurate and readily available weapons systems made a single man as deadly as a whole battalion from a previous era.

The high visibility ops that had been characteristic of the late twentieth century had long since been dropped in favor of well-planned, precision-executed surgical strikes in pursuit of often complex political objectives.

Terror had come of age.

"How long before you can give me the specs on the new plan?" Raxwell asked Quinn. "My chief of operations will be ready to take a rusty razor to my balls when he finds out how quick you got in and planted the nuke."

"Fax you the full data and recommendations by tomorrow afternoon," Quinn told Raxwell as he snapped his palmtop shut and packed up his gear. Now, dressed in street clothes, a black leather jacket, six-pocket pants and high topped sneakers, Quinn walked with the security chief toward the macadam parking lot.

Quinn's high performance Sunhawk was the only vehicle parked there. It was past three A.M. and only the company night shift was on duty.

On the way to his wheels Quinn passed the security guard he had "taken out" on his penetration run, recognizing the effects of high-energy ammo on the shredded flak vest he was now inspecting before chucking into his car. The lightweight flak vest worn under his uniform had stopped the P90 rounds cold. Quinn flashed the guy the thumb's-up and the guard waved back fast before turning away.

Quinn couldn't blame the guy for feeling sullen. He'd be black and blue for a week after being hit by the deflected 5.70s. Quinn would make certain his report would contain a recommendation that no disciplinary action be taken against the security operative. The Orbital employee had been doing his job well and had been surprised due to a system that required upgrading, not because of any dereliction in the performance of his assigned duties.

Raxwell turned to head back and Quinn slid behind the wheel of the sleek, gull-winged vehicle, punching in his security code on the dashboard. If he did not, then the car was programmed to automatically lock its doors and subject whatever unauthorized party had gotten in to a series of nasty surprises including knockout gas that would paralyze a car booster for several hours.

Some time later, Quinn was pulling into the underground parking garage of the high-rise hotel in Denver that Orbital had booked in his name. A figure emerged from behind a concrete support beam and walked toward him across the deserted car park.

"How's it going, Kemo Sabe?"

The voice had a rasp like sandpaper on broken glass.

The figure extended his hand.

Quinn swung the carry-all containing his gear out of the Sunhawk and walked toward the figure. The guy was almost as tall as he, standing a full six feet in height. He had a barrel chest and massive arms, but his gut had long-ago run to suet. His face had a red, permanently flushed look to it and his long jaw was marred by a pale pink scar that ran down his throat and disappeared beneath the turtleneck collar of his shirt.

Quinn remembered the night mission during which he had received that scar. He and the stranger went back a long way. He also remembered that he hated the guy's guts. Quinn ignored the offered handshake and walked past the figure.

"This is important, Kemo Sabe," the stranger said, falling into step beside Quinn who headed for the elevator bank straight ahead of them. "Listen to me, damn it!" The big man placed his hand on Quinn's shoulder, meaning to spin him around to face him.

It was a mistake.

With astonishing speed, Quinn pivoted on his left foot and jacked his balled right fist into the big man's solar plexus. There was plenty of steam behind the punch. Quinn felt the gut give like a bag of dough. The big man wheezed and staggered backwards. His face drained of blood as he gasped for air. His attache case thudded to the concrete.

Quinn turned and watched the big man flop around like a beached whale. His eyes teared with pain and his face went livid. He held his gut and tried to stagger to his feet.

Quinn smiled a graveyard grin.

Some of the tension that had been building in his body at the sight of the man drained from him now. He did not offer to help the guy he'd just decked get to his feet.

He stood over the struggling man and watched.

And smiled.

"You dirty cocksucker," the big guy spluttered, propping himself against the side of a car. "You miserable fucking scumbag. You didn't have to do that."

"I felt like doing it," Quinn said softly, a steel edge in his voice.

He felt like doing it again, in fact. He took a step forward and raised his right leg, as if to deliver a kick to the downed man's face.

The stranger sensed what was coming, sensed the depth of the hatred that Quinn felt for him. He put up his hands in a defensive gesture as he rose to his feet, then dropped them to his aching belly again.

"You won't get rid of me," he told Quinn, clutching his hurt midsection. "This is serious business. I know you hate my guts and I don't blame you, bucko. But I've got authorization from the highest levels."

Quinn looked the fat man over for a long time. "Who exactly do you mean?" he asked.

"The President of the United States," the newcomer responded with a wheeze.

"Tomorrow morning, Bruckner. Nine sharp. My office," Quinn said after a moment's pause. Then he turned and punched the elevator button.

The elevator doors closed behind him. The big man shook his head, picked up his dropped attache case and walked back to a car parked at the other end of the park.

Inside the car another waited, face hidden in the shadows, having witnessed the entire incident.

"You get a good look?" Bruckner asked, still wheezing from the fiery pain in his stomach.

"Yes," replied the one in the passenger seat. "Yes, he is most impressive."

"Better believe it, Kemo Sabe," Bruckner said as he gunned the ignition and screamed the car up one of the sloping ramps of the concrete mausoleum. "Just don't fuck up or he'll waste us both."

"You needn't worry," Genesis said flatly. "I won't."

Quinn sat across the desk from Wild Bill Bruckner in his office at Intervention Systems, the one-man security firm he ran. The man from Quinn's past had arrived promptly at IS. He had brought some audiovisuals with him. The high definition TV screen on Quinn's office wall sprang to life as the video images flashed across it.

The images were shocking.

"That's Kim," Bruckner explained. "He was the first to get it. His body was burned to charcoal in the wreckage of his car so there was a limit to what forensics could determine."

Bruckner fast forwarded to more video cutaway. In rapid succession, Quinn watched a grim montage of the aftermath of the violent deaths of men in Prague, Berlin, Rome, Paris, New York and Jerusalem.

"Any pattern to these?" Quinn asked, transfixed by the onscreen visuals.

"None that we can determine," Bruckner returned. "They've been happening over the last couple of months. Needless to say intelligence and law enforcement have muzzled the media as much as possible."

And done a good job too, Quinn mentally added. Quinn had seen reports of some of the deaths. But he had not suspected a link. After all, the media accounts had stated that all the scientists associated with the Skyfire Net had committed suicide and experts had ruled out any connection.

The people who had sent Bruckner had indeed done a good job on keeping a lid on what had been happening. He was now beginning to understand why they had sent Bruckner to find him.

The pattern of homicides meant that Wilhelm Koenig, the director of the Skyfire development group was also marked for death. Koenig was a hero to the world, his presence drawing billions of dollars in grants and donations to the venture. If he died, then the project might die with him.

"Where do I fit into the picture?" Quinn asked Bruckner.

"Nomad was the best," Bruckner told Quinn as the audio-visuals stopped and the screen blanked. "I ought to know. I helped make you."

"I'm not Nomad anymore," Quinn told him, a dangerous edge coming suddenly into his voice. "I'm just Quinn; businessman, security specialist and pillar of society. Scepter doesn't run me. I don't take any fucking orders from you or anybody else, Bruckner."

Quinn's thoughts turned back to his years with the covert agency called Scepter.

LIC, Low Intensity Conflict, had become the way wars both overt and covert, major and minor, were fought. Scepter had been signed into being by a covert presidential finding of the late nineties. Scepter was tasked to deploy every means to deal with terrorism in all its multifarious forms. Its agents were outfitted with the latest high tech equipment, given a mandate to go out and kick ass.

Then something had gone wrong.

Scepter had become corrupt, a constituent of the selfsame evil it had come into being to combat.

Partly from greed, partly from the corruption that comes with almost limitless power, the men at the top were cooperating in a perpetuation of the bloody status quo ante. Quinn found out about the conspiracy that kept the shadow war alive while ground assets and civilians alike died in pursuit of its twisted aims. Locked into a vicious, perpetual cycle of kill and counterkill, there was no way out.

Quinn himself managed to escape from Scepter. He succeeded in gathering enough intel on the inner circle of dispassionate manipulators who ran the organization to keep himself safe from their retribution.

Bruckner had been one of those unprincipled manipulators, one of the inner circle of the corrupt. Bruckner had been the head of Scepter's elite Directorate One.

His moon face had a permanently florid complexion, looking like he was always recovering from a hangover or had just stepped out of a sauna. Cold blue eyes looked out of that red moon face. Crazy eyes.

At first glance, Bruckner was an unlikely choice to head the Central Intelligence Agency as DCI and later, the deep-cover counterterror unit called Scepter. But then again, Quinn knew all too well, unlikely choices for the post as director was almost a tradition at the Agency. Bruckner's two namesakes, "Wild Bills" Donovan and Casey, were two cases in point.

The first was a loose cannon, a guy who Company legend held once demonstrated a new silenced autopistol just in from the lab by firing it off in the Oval Office while the president was speaking on the phone. The second was an absent-minded professor type from Queens, New York, who couldn't even pronounce the word "Nicaragua" without showering listeners with spit.

But superficial details aside, all three Wild Bills were effective at what they did, adept at navigating through the wilderness of mirrors that

was the domain of covert operations. All three had earned their nicknames by daredevil stunts and a cowboy operational philosophy that produced concrete results where cooler heads had failed.

Bruckner's handling of the Snake River Crisis was a case in point. The covert team he sent into the nuclear launch facility had used banned nerve agents to kill the terrorists which had taken it over and threatened to launch the aging ICBMs at both targets in the U.S. and the U.S.S.R.

It was in the aftermath of this successful if controversial strike that the President had signed another covert finding granting Scepter an even broader mandate in the counterterrorist offensive.

Quinn had been a member of Delta when Bruckner had chosen him to be part of Scepter's elite Directorate One.

Bruckner had taken Quinn and made him into what he became for Scepter -- a human killing machine. Bruckner had seen his lethal talent in the sands of the Iraqi desert during the covert action of the 1991 campaign and molded him into a member of an elite strike crew. As the point man of a highly mobile special forces unit Quinn worked behind the scenes, gathering intelligence and carrying out strategic hits that helped score a lightning victory for the American-led Coalition.

During his years with Scepter Quinn was sent into the hardzones of the new counterterrorist combat environment. The emerging world order had need of men such as him. His identity had been submerged in that of his game-name.

Nomad.

Quinn became the desert wanderer that his alias suggested, traveling to covert firezones across the globe, doing Scepter's bidding.

"You've got to become Nomad again, Kemo Sabe," Bruckner told him, abruptly bringing him back to the present. "This one more time."

THREE

Rome.

The hypersonic scramjet's tires screeched onto the runway at Ciampino International. The pilot applied reverse thrust and the advanced design turbines screamed in protest as rumble strips further slowed the aircraft's forward momentum.

Soon the needle-nosed space plane slowed to a halt and taxied toward the passenger terminal.

The suborbital shuttle run from Washington D.C. to Rome had taken a little less than an hour with the scramjet's circumpolar flight path skimming the near edge of space.

Quinn's only regret was that there was no time in which to watch a full-length inflight movie, as in the days of pre-space plane air travel. Quinn himself rarely suffered from jetlag, but the stresses of hypersonic travel made many travelers long for the good old days of supersonic transcontinental flight.

His sole piece of carry-on luggage consisting of the barrel bag that he pulled from beneath his seat, Quinn smiled at the female flight attendant who stood by the forward hatch and was soon walking into the crowded passenger terminal at Ciampino. Continuing past the check-in desks and videophone kiosks, he walked to the gate where he hailed one of the small green Fiats waiting outside.

Some things never changed.

The Italian taxi driver peeled out with the screech of tires and a shouted oath at his fellow hacks. Once on the Rome-Naples highway, he drove with near-suicidal abandon, turning off the highway ten minutes later to career down the narrow Appian Way toward downtown Rome.

In the back seat of the speeding cab, Quinn rubbed his tired eyes, beginning to feel the one-two punch of the sudden change in time zones and the lingering effects of hypersonic air travel. He decided to phone the contact that Bruckner had said would be waiting to meet him in Rome without further delay.

Reaching into the pocket of his black leather jacket, Quinn took out his phone. He punched the macro key on the keypad of the palmtop wide area cellular phone which automatically dialed the number he had programmed into the phone's memory. He idly watched the scenery stream past -- stubble fields and crumbling stone walls concealing opulent villas from the road with the skyline of Rome in the distance.

"*Pronto*," a female voice answered on the first ring.

"This is Quinn," he told her. "I'm calling to confirm our meeting." Switching to English the female voice on the other end told Quinn to wait a second and he heard the sounds of computer keys clicking softly in the background. "How'd your voice analysis check out?" he asked after a moment's pause.

"Perfectly, Mr. Quinn," the female voice countered. "I can meet you any time you wish today. There have been some new developments that I would like to inform you of."

"Fine," Quinn told her, thinking that she sounded about as sexy as a computer chip, typical of the kind of individuals he'd worked with while part of Bruckner's crew.

By and large they were emotionless killers, men and women who could snuff out human lives without feeling the slightest twinge of remorse, messengers of death dressed in the business suits of the new corporate world order. Quinn had started out as one of Bruckner's zombies, but he had finally found his soul.

"There still a place called Romero's on the Piazza Navona?" Quinn asked, returning to consideration of the business at hand.

"Yes, indeed there is, Mr. Quinn," the woman agent returned.

"Okay. Meet me there at ... " he checked the LCD readout on the phone, "...four sharp. I'll tell the maitre d' to expect you."

After Bruckner's liaison asset hung up, Quinn dialed the number of the Rafael and made sure his reservations were in order. The desk man told him that they were.

He also told Quinn that a package was waiting for him. It had just arrived via special courier. Quinn slipped the phone back in his pocket and settled back into the cushions of the seat as the driver leaned on the horn, narrowly avoiding a head on collision with a lorry in the oncoming lane and stuck his hand out the window to flash the lorryman a universal gesture of contempt.

Quinn peeled off a couple of thousand lira notes and exited the cab. The driver said "*Grazie, signor*," and drove away. As he turned

toward the hotel entrance Quinn did not see him signal to a car parked on the other side of the small square that fronted the hotel.

Inside the car sat two men with hard faces and expressionless eyes. The pair watched Quinn enter the hotel. As he disappeared inside, one of them took a secure phone from his pocket, punched in a priority coded number and began speaking to a voice thousands of miles away.

Signing in, Quinn was handed the package by the deskman who first glanced at the faxed color photo of the American beneath the top of the counter and then at the photo on his passport, assuring himself that both matched the face of the guest.

The package turned out to be the special equipment which Quinn had made sure Bruckner provided him. In his room he checked to make sure that the seals that had been applied by CIA handlers were intact. Everything checked out but Quinn had entertained few doubts of this.

The Rafael had a long history of involvement with western intelligence agencies and had been used as a CIA safe house on more than one occasion. The hotel staff knew better than to tamper with packages which had been placed in their care.

Quinn showered, then pulled open the wide windows and let in the afternoon air. His room faced west and Quinn could see the dome of St. Peter's Basilica and the Tiber River glittering in the distance.

Although it was still light, a swarm of incredibly agile chimney swifts darted around the eaves of a time-stained church across the narrow alley that ran beneath the window.

There was a knock at the door.

"*Con permezzo, signior,*" the chambermaid said as Quinn let her in. "I have only to do the bathroom," she added. She was an old woman with a sagging face and clutched a handful of towels and small packets of soap.

"*Prego,*" Quinn told her and went back to looking out the window as the chambermaid went into the bathroom. He heard her humming a tune as she busied herself with her chores.

Quinn did not see her slide the long, stubby snout of a sound-suppressed Walther semiautomatic from beneath her apron as she placed the folded towels neatly atop the toilet commode, then pivot toward the room, still humming pleasantly.

Quinn turned just as a subsonic round embedded itself in the woodwork a fraction of an inch from the side of his head.

Razor sharp splinters of spinning wood cut the corner of his eye.

Quinn reacted instantly as he heard the second round whizz past his ear, simultaneously ducking down beneath the line of fire. As he did he caught sight of the chambermaid clutching the silenced weapon in the two-handed shooting stance of a professional executioner.

Rolling to one side, Quinn grabbed up one of the heavy ashtrays on the dresser and hurled it at the shooter.

His aim was accurate.

The one pound lump of glass struck her gun hand and she let go of the weapon with an anguished cry of pain.

Quinn moved quickly toward the killer in the chambermaid uniform, but the woman was agile and knew how to deal with sudden setbacks. She moved much faster than her aged appearance would indicate and Quinn suspected that her looks were the result of an expert job of disguise.

From a concealed spring loader in her sleeve, a knife popped into her open hand. She faced him with the naked blade glinting in the light as she waved it back and forth.

She displayed no trace of fear.

Just the opposite.

A mad gleam of almost sexual anticipation lit up her bulging green eyes. Quinn knew there were poisons that could coat the tip of a blade. Fast-acting neurotoxins like Tabun or Soman that would be lethal with only a single nick of the blade.

Quinn took the female shiv artist seriously. He gave the woman a wide berth as she advanced on him, whipping the blade back and forth in deft, side to side motions.

"You have hurt me," she whispered in a hoarse rasp that betrayed neither youth nor age. "I will make you pay for that." The woman's voice was no longer accented. It was flat and middle-American.

Thrusting her hand outward from her hip, she lunged suddenly at Quinn with the blade's cutting edge facing away from her, the classic knife fighter's death swipe. Quinn leapt backward as the razor tip of the knife sliced through the fabric of his shirt.

In this confined space of the hotel room, Quinn had no illusions about eluding a trained knife fighter. Since speed meant more than power when using a knife, a woman could be as lethal a killer with a blade as any man. Quinn knew that his only chance to survive was to counterattack, move as fast as the woman did.

As the woman sprang forward with the knife describing a gleaming arc, he ducked low and came up under the silvery line of death. Before she could follow through with another, more accurate strike, Quinn caught hold of the woman's wrist and squeezed with all his might with fingers as strong as steel cable.

The woman yowled in pain and Quinn felt the delicate wrist bones snap like dry twigs. The knife clattered from the woman's hand and they both collapsed onto the bed in a tangled heap of flailing arms and thrashing legs.

The woman was incredibly strong and despite her injured hand there was still plenty of fight left in her. In the course of the struggle she

reached up with her good hand. Quinn felt her squeeze his windpipe with all her might. Quinn's vision dimmed momentarily as he gasped for breath, now with no choice but to lash out with his fist. Although he hit her solidly in the face several times, it was minutes before her fingers relaxed on his throat and she sagged to the bedsheets in unconsciousness.

Quinn caught his breath then searched the woman's clothing. He discovered no personal effects of any kind, no wallet or money. Even the manufacturer's tags had been removed from the chambermaid's uniform. Reaching beneath her jaw he peeled back the latex mask to reveal a young woman's face that bore the telltale, almost acromegalic, deformity characteristic of long-term steroid use.

Quinn picked up the room phone and dialed out. Bruckner's liaison asset picked up on the first ring, her voice as cool and manner as crisp as before. Quinn told her about the chambermaid as he watched the woman sprawled on the bed moan and weakly move her head from side to side. The liaison asset said she would send someone to deal with the woman.

A few minutes later there was another rap on the door. The deskman and the bellman were standing in the hall.

"We regret the inconvenience," they said as they crossed toward the semi-conscious woman who lay groaning on the bed. "Please accept the management's apologies."

The deskman took a hypodermic from inside his sport coat and plunged the blunt-nosed pneumatic syringe into the woman's arm with practiced skill, injecting the serum with a hiss of pressurized gas.

"A harmless though effective tranquilizer," he explained as the woman stopped moaning and again went completely limp, "with the added benefit of doubling as a truth drug."

The bellman by this time was unfolding a large black trash bag that he had taken from his pocket. Together the bellman and the desk man stuffed the woman into the bag and carried her out of the room.

"She is not one of our employees," the concierge told Quinn as they went out. "We will send up a bottle of champagne with the compliments of the house."

"Better make that a bottle of aspirin," Quinn said as he shut the door behind them. "Your room service has given me the mother of all headaches."

FOUR

Quinn sipped espresso and watched pigeons flutter around the Bernini fountain rising from the center of Piazza Navona. He'd once heard the story that the Renaissance sculptor so detested the design of the church behind the fountain that he turned every face in the sculpture away from the building.

Bruckner's liaison arrived promptly for their meeting. At first blush at least, her appearance fit Quinn's initial assessment of her from his phone conversation.

The dark business ensemble she wore was of a severe cut. It matched her long, angular face which her long, straight black hair that she allowed to fall across her shoulders did little to soften.

Quinn watched Bruckner's agent speak to the Maitre d' then glance his way as they guy pointed to the table. A moment later she was seated across from him.

"There have been new developments," she said after they had each made the required introductions. "Since the demand to turn control of the Skyfire Net to an as yet unknown force Koenig has been placed under round-the-clock surveillance. He has even consented to be implanted with a microchip that monitors his vital signs round the clock."

"Sounds like the powers that be are taking no chances," Quinn concluded.

"They are not," Ramsey returned.

"How about DiMarzio?" Quinn asked.

The Italian Skyfire scientist had dropped out of sight the day before, according to the latest reports Quinn had received. "Have you succeeded in locating him."

"Yes," Ramsey replied. "DiMarzio has been informed of our plans to interview him. At first he balked. However he has consented to meet with us at his villa in Trastevere. The estate is a virtual fortress, equipped with the latest security devices. DiMarzio feels safe there and there only. What are you laughing at?"

"I was thinking," Quinn returned. "The ancient Roman Caesars believed in tight security too. In most cases it was their own mercenary troops which ultimately turned against them. In the end, few of them survived hit attempts by their inner circle of sworn protectors."

The little Radiant pulled up to the gate of the villa. The guard eyed the Vietnamese compact car with hostility. No visitors were expected, and few in such cheaply made vehicles ever paid visits at all.

The guard ported his Beretta M3P bullpup autoshotgun at hip level as he approached the Radiant in open challenge.

"What do you want?" he asked the driver. The pretty young blonde smiled up at him showing an even row of teeth.

"Can you tell me if this is the road to Spoleto?" she asked. "We seem a little lost."

The guard began saying something in answer but his outburst ended in a grunt of surprise and pain as the black clad figure who had slid noiselessly behind him placed the muzzle of the silenced autopistol to the back of his head and fired a silenced hollownosed round into his brain.

The back of the guard's head burst apart in a bright shower of blood. The guard's legs buckled like pipe cleaners. He sagged to his knees on the graveled surface of the access road a moment later then flopped forward onto his face.

The shooter dragged the kayoed guard into the sentry booth and stashed him inside.

At the same time another merc jumped from the car. Moments later he returned and flashed them the thumb's up, indicating that he had just severed the villa's communications lines. Then he got back into the rear seat of the Radiant as the small car rolled up the long sloping road toward the villa's main entrance.

Sagittarius One was right on schedule.

Quinn climbed into the passenger seat of the Ferrari Velos. The engine of the sleek, powerful car roared to life as the Ferrari slid from the curb and entered the lane of Roman traffic. It was rush hour and the roads were choked with traffic, careening crazily everywhere in the Roman style.

"Don't let this gridlock fool you," Ramsey said as she honked her horn at a motorist in front of her who shot her the universal hand gesture of annoyance but moved out of the way of the Ferrari just the same. "We

won't be too long in this bottleneck and then we're out of most of the traffic."

Quinn nodded. He wasn't concentrating on the traffic. He had other matters on his mind.

"Bruckner told me you were with Interpol. I logged into their database before leaving the States. I was informed they had no record of you."

"I was formerly with a special branch," she returned. "As for my connection with Bruckner, like yourself I am a freelancer who is currently affiliated with no organization. When this operation ends, my contract is completed."

"Have you worked with Bruckner long?" Quinn asked.

"No, not long," she replied, somewhat evasively Quinn thought. "At least not as long as you have. I understand that you were affiliated with a top-secret counterterrorism program in the late nineties and early ten. Is that true?"

"Yes, that's right," Quinn returned.

"But you dropped out suddenly," she continued. "Was there any reason in particular?"

"I'd rather not say," Quinn responded. "It might sound like a cliché, but that information happens to be classified."

"I understand," Ramsey answered matter-of-factly. She honked the horn then sped the Velos out of the local traffic and shot ahead on the Rome-Salerno expressway, accelerating to the maximum without so much as a flinch on her masklike face.

All three mercs in the Radiant donned black tactical face masks made of tissue-thin yet ultra-hard synthetic material.

The nonreflective material of their black action togs were crisscrossed with ALICE webbing from which various types of munitions were festooned.

Each Sagittarius striker carried a compact, sound-suppressor equipped Spectre SMG. Jutting from the receiver of each Spectre was a staggered box magazine containing fifty hollow-nose 9 mm rounds which could be ejected at a cycling rate of over 800 rounds per minute.

The high capacity magazine of the Spectre gave the SMG the capability of unleashing devastating firepower at a sustained rate few weapons of its size and dimensions could deliver.

A white minivan was parked near the main entrance to DiMarzio's villa. It was crewed by two men, one in the cab, the other in the rear compartment. As the Radiant screamed up the drive at maximum speed, the van's side door trundled to one side revealing the perforated black barrel of a pintle-mounted .50 caliber Browning machinegun bolted to the floor.

Before the Radiant had stopped completely, the two mercs in back were out of their seats, the sound-suppressed Spectre SMGs chattering in their fists. Low trajectory automatic fire raked the van, killing the two protectors before they had a chance to fire their weapons at the strike team.

With the guards down, the Sagittarius snuff unit initiated the raid's terminal phase. While one of the three mercs blew the front doors with plastique button charges and raked the interior of the ground level with Spectre fire, the merc's companions whipped out harpoon guns and fired the line charges up at the balcony level of the villa.

The steel harpoons sank deep into the villa's stone walls, holding fast, and the two mercs scaled the side of the walls using the fiberglass lines they'd thrown. They found DiMarzio absorbed in his work in front of a portable computer. A moment later the woman member of the team linked up with the two men on the upper story, having secured the ground level.

Classical music was playing on the sound system. The attack had been carried out so swiftly and so silently that the orbital propulsion dynamics specialist had not even been aware that it had taken place.

"What is this?" the stunned DiMarzio cried out as he turned and saw the three dark-clad strikers now inside with him.

Springing forward, the point man placed a gloved hand over his mouth and held him immobilized in a powerful grip. DiMarzio struggled but could not get free.

At a nod from the strike leader, one of the other two unshipped the stubby shape of a disposable plastic injector and jammed the blunt snout against the big dorsal vein on DiMarzio's pulsating throat.

There was a hiss of compressed gas as the Soman nerve agent was injected into his bloodstream. It began to take effect almost instantly. DiMarzio went rigid as his back arced against the powerful hands which held him, then went completely limp. The two male mercs then each grabbed one end of the kill and tossed DiMarzio's body out the window of the upper story. The corpse hit the pool below with a splash and began to do a lazy float.

The Sagittarius strike crew extracted from the villa as quietly and swiftly as they had hit the target. Night had already fallen. Reentering the car they removed their tactical face masks and, the woman merc turned onto the highway, signaling via portable comms unit that the op had gone down as planned.

Inside the eighteen-wheel truck parked several kilometers away that served as their mobile command post, the merc seated at the console of computer banks issued Sagittarius One's next set of instructions. The team was to drive around Rome and await further orders.

The operative then deployed the robotized RPV, raising its launcher from a concealed compartment in the roof of the truck. Powered

by small yet powerful solid propellant engines, the teardrop-fuselaged attack drone was airborne in seconds.

The remote piloted vehicle's LLTV and TI camera gave immediate telemetry to the operative seated behind the console as it began a flight path toward the villa. The attack drone was heavily armed and it was very dangerous.

FIVE

The villa's iron gates swung ponderously in the warm, dry wind. The guardhouse appeared unoccupied. The air of abandonment gave Quinn an immediate sense of unease as the Ferrari turned off the highway and approached the estate.

"I'll go check it out," he told Ramsey, pulling the fully automatic Uzi machinepistol from the shoulder holster worn beneath his windbreaker.

The Uzi's staggered box magazine gave it a twenty-five round capacity. Compensator-equipped, it was as stable as a handgun yet packed the wallop of a full fledged SMG while offering the portability and concealability of a conventional large frame handgun.

If Quinn expected Ramsey to remain in the vehicle, he was mistaken.

Ramsey produced a Glock automatic from inside her handbag and cocked the slide, chambering a 9 mm PB round.

"I'll come with you," she said. Without waiting for Quinn's response she was out of the car.

"Looks like we're not the first visitors of the day," Quinn said as he stared at the bloody remains sprawled on the floor of the sentry box.

Wary of ambush they got back into the car and drove slowly toward the villa's main gate. The evidence of the Sagittarius strike was everywhere.

The shattered minivan stood with its windows blown out and a zigzag line of bullet holes stretching from front to rear fender. The dead driver's gun arm hung limply out the window, his head lolling to one side.

The man inside the rear of the van had been knocked back by the impact of the assault of massed Spectre fire. The barrel of the pintle-mounted Browning .50 was canted upward toward the roof of the van at a ninety degree angle.

Weapons drawn, the two investigators entered the villa through its busted main doors smelling the odors of high explosive and death. Inside the corpses of the murdered guards lay sprawled here and there across the floor of the sunlit atrium. Splitting up, Quinn and Ramsey fanned out and took different paths on their search of the villa.

Following tradecraft they would make certain the area was secure before proceeding, though Quinn for one suspected that the hit team had long since extracted from the scene. Quinn's guess proved correct. The only occupants of the villa beside themselves were the dead.

Quinn found DiMarzio sprawled face-down in his swimming pool. A cloud of blood surrounded his head and stained the water garishly. The underwater lights had been turned on and the corpse floated with its limbs outstretched in the classic deadman's position.

The bloody strike zone was otherwise sterile. Quinn and Ramsey holstered their weapons. Ramsey was already communicating with Bruckner's U.N.-sanctioned covert task force command post via her palmtop phone. Utilizing signal hopping filters for secure communication, the call would be immune to interception and decryption.

"The Rome police will be summoned after a brief delay," she told Quinn, signing off on her call. "We have only a few minutes to conduct a preliminary search before they arrive."

Hauling DiMarzio out of the water Quinn proceeded to check the Skyfire scientist's body. The pockets of DiMarzio's sodden clothing contained nothing of interest. Up in his room, the computer work station that DiMarzio had been using at the time of his death was still turned on.

Quinn scrolled through the document on the screen which apparently dealt with a scientific report DiMarzio had been working on. The computer records on DiMarzio's work station yielded nothing either.

The rest of the records stored in the computer's memory were entry protected. Quinn disengaged the bubble memory module from the machine's data slot, however. He would analyse it later. It might still yield a clue as to what, if anything, DiMarzio knew about the Skyfire deaths.

"I've got all I need," Quinn said to Ramsey. "How are you coming along?"

Ramsey was shooting the strike scene through a handheld 3-D camcorder. She snapped the camcorder shut and dropped it into her purse.

Its removable data module had captured the entire scene in nonvolatile memory. The death zone could be analyzed in detail by holographic video later on.

"I'm through here," she told him. "Let's go."

Small yet powerful rocket engines propelled the attack drone toward its programmed strike coordinates. The viewscreen in front of the merc codenamed Sagittarius flashed a position update as a shrill beeptone was emitted from the equipment. Keystroking in a series of commands, Sagittarius focused in on the Ferrari that was now rolling away from DiMarzio's villa, viewing it through the standoff weapon's advanced sensorics.

Though its headlights were damped, invisible microwave laser light emitted by the RPV's sensor pod painted the car. Against the relative coolness of its surroundings the heat signature of the car's engine and exhaust system caused it to stand out as clearly to the attack drone's thermal imaging sensor head as though it were being viewed in broad daylight.

Seated at the control console in the mobile command center, Sagittarius smiled grimly. Pulling the gooseneck mike close to his thin, bloodless lips, he relayed the location of the Ferrari to the three mercs who'd taken down DiMarzio.

"DiMarzio's killers must have beaten us to the villa by minutes," Ramsey said to Quinn.

"Don't be too hard on yourself," he advised her. "The opposition has been one jump ahead of us all along."

"Still, I -- "

The blinding flash of a proximity fuzed airburst lit up the night. The Ferrari shuddered violently as the blast from the detonating submunition caved in its rear window, littering the back seat with granular debris.

Sixty feet overhead, the remote piloted vehicle fired another one of its rockets at the car. The airburst had shaken up the agents but had not scored a kill.

The second would. Sagittarius was confident.

Through the Ferrari's windshield, Quinn saw something occult the stars in the cloudless night sky. Too small to be a piloted aircraft, Quinn immediately suspected the attack had been generated by an armed RPV.

Deafened by the blast he could see Ramsey's lips move as she tried to speak to him from behind the wheel. Quinn fought to keep his concentration focused on the opposition's next move, indicating by hand signals that he could not hear her.

A brief flash signaled the launch of another warhead from the remote piloted vehicle overhead.

Ramsey jerked the wheel of the car, narrowly evading the second warhead strike by a only few feet. Blast waves slammed into the side of the vehicle and it fishtailed to one side with the scream of tortured

tire rubber, jumping the narrow curb and sideswiping the wall of one of the adjacent buildings.

Wrenching the wheel and floorboarding the gas pedal, Ramsey sent the car roaring down a nearby sidestreet. High overhead, the RPV followed doggedly. On Sagittarius' remote command it switched from rocket bursts at the car to salvos of computer controlled automatic fire from the gymbal-mounted .50 caliber machinegun in its nose assembly.

A zigzag of heavy caliber punctures slashed through the hood of the Ferrari as the MG opened up.

"Get out!" Quinn shouted as Ramsey stopped the car. Both passengers flung the doors open and jumped out, bolting for the protection of a pocket park just as the RPV fired another rocket warhead at the immobilized vehicle.

Scoring a direct hit, the round exploded. White hot, semimolten shrapnel sheared through the fiberglass body of the car, igniting the high octane fuel in the Ferrari's gas tank.

The explosion ripped the car to smithereens and reverberated through the narrow streets of the ancient Roman neighborhood, its blast strobing the surrounding wall with orange flickers.

Quinn raced across the street and grabbed the girl just as a line of automatic fire from the assault drone's .50 caliber gun walked its way across the cobblestones of the street behind her, throwing up a line of yellow sparks. Quinn shoved Ramsey forward into the shadows of an alley mouth as another salvo cut him off from the passage.

Flipping sideways, Quinn flattened against the side of a building, gripped the Uzi machine pistol in both hands and aimed at the dark shape circling overhead. Sighting the attack drone and tracking just ahead of its flight trajectory, Quinn squeezed off a burst of 9 mm parabellums.

The fire was accurate.

The steeljackets stitched the drone aircraft across the sensitive visionic pod situated in its nose assembly. In the mobile command center miles from the scene, Sagittarius simultaneously saw his main video telemetry link blank out. The merc honcho immediately switched to backup systems, but the drone's telemetry was spotty, broken up by earsplitting waves of rasping static.

Now operating without any guidance system to stabilize its flight, the RPV began to weave crazily in the night sky. Suddenly it tipped its nose downward and began a power dive into the streets below. Moments later it crashed with a loud bang into the side of a building and immediately exploded into a cascade of hot white sparks.

Sirens began to howl like banshees in the darkened streets of the city. Quinn booked down the narrow side alley he'd sent the woman into but could find no trace of Ramsey. Failing to locate her, he holstered

his weapon and made his way into the darkness of a maze of alleylike passageways that led away from ground zero.

Quinn figured that his female associate knew the rules of the Game as well as he did. Tradecraft demanded that both of them extract from the hot action site and make contact later, if possible. For his own part, Quinn's priority-one was to put as much distance between himself and the site of the abortive hit.

That, he was to quickly discover, was more easily said than done.

Informed by their command post unit of Quinn's last position, the Radiant with the three strikers who had hit DiMarzio onboard had a fallback option of their own to pursue: *swift termination of their quarry.*

SIX

Quinn now assumed he was being hunted. By pros. The specialized hardware deployed in the strike meant that special operations personnel would almost certainly be deployed on the ground.

The name of the game of deadly hide and seek would be SLAM -- a search, locate and annihilate mission.

Quinn mentally walked through tradecraft procedures the opposition would likely be putting into practice. The mercs would fan out, each taking a sector of the search zone. Street by street they would converge on the center of the zone until their quarry was caught in a multiple crossfire.

In these narrow passageways that turned and twisted and branched into one another without any apparent logic it was a simple matter for a hunted man to become quickly and fatally disoriented. A single misstep could blow the whole game, a turn of a corner at the wrong moment could bring Quinn into firing range of a hostile gun.

Control of the killing ground was the all-important objective. The brass ring would go to whichever side was capable of best navigating through the labyrinth of these meandering Roman alleys.

With the attack drone now out of commission, the three Sagittarius strikers were on their own. Deploying silently through the maze of twisting streets, the wolf pack was on the hunt, on the attack, in their element. Having donned night vision goggles, NVGs, to give them added night-seeing capability, the mercenary snuff detail would pose double the trouble.

Lucking out quickly, one member of the strike trio picked up Quinn near a statue in a shadowy cul-de-sac at the intersection of three narrow alleys. Quarry limned in green raster light, framed in the center of the white target acquisition reticle, the merc raised his SMG for a putaway burst.

He had his target in the kill box. A silenced quickburst would send him straight to hell.

Nomad heard the faint rustle of cloth behind him. He spun around, sighted the lethal shadow profile of the hunter-killer and darted sideways just as a burst of sound-suppressed Spectre fire thudded into the base of the statue.

Fisting his SMG in a two-handed grip, Nomad threw his outstretched arms across the hood of the car behind which he crouched and sighted on the dark alley mouth from which the fire had come ripping, ready to return the compliment. But the striker had already vanished into the shadows.

Quinn blinked hard as he swept his eyes back and forth but still failed to acquire a target. The striker was gone.

Anticipating the nameless terminators stalking him from the shadows to strike again soon, Quinn knew it would be dangerous to stay where he was.

Breaking from cover he ran for an alley, or *febo*, which yawned across the expanse of the cul-de-sac, to one side of the dark passageway from which the merc had struck.

Cloaked in shadows, the merc sighted his SMG on the running man, sent the bolt hammering on a chambered bullet. A deadly salvo of 9 mm hornets buzzed at Quinn's heels. The rotoring PBs punched into the cobblestone street behind him as he beelined for cover.

Gaining the *febo's* mouth one step ahead of the lancing PBs that tore chips of mortar from the building wall, Quinn whipped his own hardware into firing position and instantly brought the Uzi into play.

From a half crouch, with the Uzi studded on full burst fire, Nomad triggered a storm of answering steel in his again exposed antagonist's direction.

The NVG-equipped terminator sprinted back into the cul-de-sac and ducked for the cover of a lorry parked nearby, as quick on his feet as Nomad was. From this secure position he raised his weapon for an instant replay of lethal hellfire.

Nomad was nowhere to be seen.

The striker was puzzled as he scanned the perimeter through the green visual field of the NVGs. *Where the hell had he gone?*

Waiting a few pulsebeats, the merc walked on a stealthy crouch down the line of parked cars, then popped up several feet from his last position. The SMG in his fist tracked this way and that while he scanned the covert firezone through his night-seeing goggles.

There was still no sign of his quarry.

The merc smiled. Quinn might run, but he couldn't hide. Not for long. The merc had his quarry spooked. Endgame was near, he sensed.

Then he saw the flicker of movement just within the mouth of one of the narrow alleys that fed onto the pocket square. *Bingo*, thought the merc. He'd grown up in the streets of Rome and knew that this particular alley was blind.

The merc was up from cover a pulsebeat later, sprinting across the small square. When he reached the alley mouth, he threw suppressing fire into it using his NVGs to pierce through the darkness within. Detecting no sign of movement, the merc loaded a fresh clip into the Spectre then duckwalked into the alley, cautiously panning his head from side to side.

Though the alley was completely dark, the NVGs made the killzone appear as bright as high noon. Quinn would have a hard time drawing an accurate bead on him, whereas the striker's vision was excellent. He had the edge and he would use it to shut his opponent out.

Had the merc taken notice of the empty refrigerator carton lying discarded against a wall, maybe he would have won the game after all.

Inside the box, his Uzi fisted and ready, crouched Quinn. He heard the muffled slap of his hunter's boot soles against the worn cobbles as he slid past in the shadows.

Quinn counted a beat then sprang from the box, SMG stably clutched in a double-fisted sharpshooter's grip.

The striker spun around fast just as Nomad brought his hardware into violent play. The black figure on his green visual field already had the drop on him. Though he knew he was a dead man, the striker triggered a hip-level Spectre burst just as Quinn's gun sounded its chattering knell.

A shining finger of Uzi parabellums reached out and touched the one-upped merc in the center of his chest, shattering the breastbone and collarbone and penetrating beyond to shear through heart and lung tissue which emerged from a gaping exit wound in the striker's back in a splattering crimson plume.

The striker's eyes widened beneath the twin light amplification tubes of his NVG as death's finger moved on, vaporizing his throat into a fine, bloody mist. The merc took a halting step forward and tried to lift his weapon while a flicker of life and strength still remained in his body.

But the Spectre suddenly weighed a thousand pounds. It was the heaviest thing in the universe. With each second that passed the weight of the SMG increased diametrically until he could no longer hold onto it at all.

The Spectre dropped from the shot-up striker's hand as he pitched forward onto his face then rolled sideways to wind up with arms

outstretched and blood draining from the ragged holes the slugs had augered in his body.

Quinn tore the NVGs from the dead merc's head. His gaze came to rest on the sightless eyes, bulging in death. Cruelty was etched into the features of the covert terminator. Even dead, the face had the hard look of a professional thug.

After cleaning them of blood on the dead merc's clothes, Quinn strapped the NVGs around his own neck and pulled the starlight goggles over his face. The darkness of the shadowy street instantly dissolved, replaced by the spectral green glow of the light amplification device's viewing field, confirming that the NVGs were functional.

Quinn rifled quickly through the pockets of the downed merc's clothing. As he had expected, the search yielded no evidence concerning the dead field asset's identity, mission, command center location or operation manager.

Quinn could not find a passport or a wallet on the dead man's person either. There wasn't a single scrap of evidence to even confirm or deny the existence of the merc.

Quinn holstered his Uzi machinepistol and checked the clip of the Spectre SMG captured from the opposition. The compact yet lethal subgun still had twenty-five rounds of 9 mm PB ammo left in its high capacity magazine.

In addition to the clip in the Spectre's receiver, the downed covert striker carried spare clips in the pockets of his windbreaker.

Quinn holstered the Uzi, now choosing to port the Spectre because of its greater firepower and magazine capacity.

He removed the half-empty clip, pocketed it and snapped a full clip of hollownosed PBs into the Spectre. Then Quinn dragged the body of the downed Sagittarius merc into the shadows, stuffing it inside the same refrigerator carton in which he'd taken cover.

With one merc down the rules of the game had shifted in Quinn's favor. His posture could now shift from evasion to attack.

From kill to counterkill.

Quinn waited in the shadows, crouched behind a low wall of ancient masonry that surrounded a small garden, peering through the grille of a wrought iron gate.

The other two members of the covert death squad now came suddenly into view. They were rolling down the street in the Radiant, transmission in low gear, headlights damped.

The driver spotting the telltale pockmarks of recent autofire on the ancient brick walls of a nearby building, the Radiant stopped and the two commandos broke silently through each of the Radiant's doors.

Watching through NVGs Nomad smiled grimly.

Sighting his commandeered SMG he squeezed off a parabellum burst that dropped the taller one of the hostile ground assets in his tracks a few feet from the Radiant.

The lone surviving merc whirled, snapped off a sound-suppressed autoburst on the fly from the Spectre he ported and made tracks around the corner of a nearby *febo* too fast for Quinn to draw an accurate bead.

Up from cover, Quinn booked after the fleeing operative, chasing the small, nimble man down the labyrinth of dark, twisting passageways that were taking them toward the Colosseum area. Nomad soon caught up with his quarry near the gates of the Forum of the Caesars.

The cornered operative whirled and snapped an autoburst at Nomad, then vaulted the high iron fence surrounding the Forum and was quickly lost within the ancient ruins which dated back to the time of the Caesars of Imperial Rome.

Nomad scaled the fence and was inside the Forum right behind the running man, scrambling for cover as a hail of sustained PB autofire roared his way from deeper inside the rubble-littered zone of broken columns, shattered arches and crumbling building walls.

In the open again moments after the firing ceased, Nomad cautiously negotiated the broken terrain. Although his night-seeing goggles provided excellent visibility he was aware that the merc shooter could be lurking anywhere within the maze of ruined masonry waiting to blow him away and that the merc too, was NVG-equipped.

Surrounded by the artifacts of a vanished civilization, Quinn felt like he had stepped backward in time, into another age in which savage gladiatorial combat had been practiced as a blood sport. Stalking his prey, he felt like he was enacting a timeless drama, as though the ancient Roman gods were watching expectantly from above with fiery red eyes.

The merc was waiting in ambush behind the Arch of Constantine. As Quinn came abreast of one of the arch's mammoth supports, the merc stepped from hiding and opened up with a hip-level longburst of SMG steel.

Catching sight of the operative as he brought his hardware into play, fast legwork allowed Quinn to dodge the tracking line of deadly nines and dive behind the cover of a nearby wall section, but not before his NVGs sustained a random hit that knocked them out of commission.

With Quinn's vision now impaired, the nightscope had instantly turned from an asset into a serious liability. Ripping the useless image intensification device from his head, Nomad flung down the NVGs as he hunkered behind the wall, scenting the coolness of earth, feeling the nearness of death.

Afterimages floated across Quinn's eyes, a result of sudden transition from NVGs to unaided sight. Because Quinn's vision had not

had time to adjust to the darkness, he knew he would be almost completely blind for the next few seconds. He crouched in the shadows and listened as the visual impairment slowly began to fade and his night vision returned.

Suddenly Quinn felt something prod the back of his head.

"Stand up, cowboy," the merc hissed.

Quinn rose to his feet. The seconds of blindness and disorientation had been enough to allow his adversary to steal up on his position and get the drop on him. As he stood the merc roughly grabbed the Spectre from Quinn's hand and tossed it into the shadows.

The smaller man smiled as he stepped away from Quinn, keeping the blunt-ended snout of the Spectre SMG pointed at his face. The twin camera lenses of the NVGs he wore glowed with an eerie inner light. He raised the Spectre to shoulder height and sighted along the barrel at the side of Quinn's head.

"You lose," he said with a smile.

A gunshot cracked and Nomad saw the merc stagger forward as if he had just been kicked in the small of the back. There was no one behind him though, and the sudden spout of red that glittered from the center of his chest meant that the merc had been struck from behind by a well-aimed round.

Spinning in place as the merc's legs buckled like soda straws and he sagged to the rubble-strewn earth, Nomad saw the figure standing by the railing of the overlook above the ruins, silhouetted against the faint glow that the streetlights of downtown Rome imparted to the night sky.

It was Ramsey, a weapon in her hand.

Quinn stooped and pulled the NVGs and black nylon watch cap from the cammied face of the terminated striker, realizing with a start that the merc was a woman.

A woman with beautiful blonde hair.

SEVEN

The interactive hologram video shot by Ramsey revealed the execution scene in full detail. Quinn and she were able to walk their way around the killing zone, examining the three dimensional images of the body found at the pool.

The Rome safe house supplied by the Interpol-coordinated intelligence coalition was fully equipped with the latest analysis equipment.

There was a great deal of information to digest.

The clock was ticking toward the date of the Skyfire network's activation and Koenig's speech before the United Nations General Assembly in New York.

Quinn had succeeded in breaking the encryption cipher used to access protect the documents stored in DiMarzio's computer memory. They appeared to be technical documents connected with his research for the international consortium that had constructed the Skyfire satellite network launch system.

DiMarzio's specialty was in the field of advanced software design and the documents appeared to offer no clue as to why he, like the other Skyfire technicians, had been singled out for termination.

Ramsey switched off the interactive video and the hologram faded slowly from view.

"That wraps it up for me," she told him.

Seated at the computer, Quinn turned in the swivel chair. Ramsey was watching him intently, a half smile on her face.

"I'm for the shower, Quinn," she said a moment later, turning to go. "Good night."

Quinn nodded and turned back to the computer. With an operative like her there was no point in attempting to read anything into what might otherwise be a meaningful look. This was just as well.

The risks of fraternizing while on an assignment were far too great to permit emotion to intrude on a professional relationship. Quinn read the lady as a pro and didn't give her lingering glance another thought. Moments later he heard the hiss of the shower in the adjoining bathroom of the safe house. Absorbed in his work at the computer, Quinn lost track of time. Hours passed before he too turned in on a cot set against the wall.

Just before dawn, Quinn was awakened by the presence of someone in the room. He drew the .38 cal H&K pistol he'd hidden beneath his pillow and aimed it at the figure.

"You don't need that," Ramsey whispered, pushing aside the gun as she slid in beside Quinn.

In a place known only as Castle, the lights never went out. The large, sterile chamber in which the Council convened was dominated by a low-slung conference table.

Around the conference table sat a group of men. They were screening a recent address by an individual many hailed as the greatest visionary to have come out of Germany in the last two hundred years.

Wilhelm Koenig stood before the symbol of his peace party, the design of interlocking sevens that symbolized the unity of the new world order of the twenty-first century.

Some claimed that this design was too reminiscent of the Nazi swastika. Koenig's response was that even the swastika was an ancient symbol of good fortune before Hitler had corrupted its meaning forever.

Koenig's weathered face bore the lines of the adversity he had suffered in his life. Every schoolchild on the planet knew the story of Koenig's crusade to make his dream of a new millennium a reality for the human race.

Koenig was born in East Germany to a poor family in the final decades of the cold war. He had always claimed that there was a significance in this, that his coming of age near the historical moment the cold war was declared over was symbolic of his later mission as an adult.

Alpha's holographic telepresence facsimile appeared as the screen blanked out. The three dimensional hologram of Alpha was larger than life, appearing to stand eight feet in height.

There was no way of knowing if the holofax of Alpha depicted their leader's true image or if it were a completely computer-generated simulation.

There was also no way of being sure of where exactly the holofax was being transmitted from.

Alpha could be anywhere on earth. He could just as easily be here in Castle, perhaps in a small room adjacent to the Council itself.

"Aries. Your report."

Alpha's electronically altered voice was as smooth as jet, but as cold as steel. Every member of the Council knew that he was capable of wasting them all without an eyeblink.

The one known as Aries rose from his seat and began his briefing. Those in the room had no identities, their only denominations being the constellations of the zodiac from which they took their names and to which their functions were ascribed.

Aries was the ram and responsible for technological matters, including sabotage and disruption.

"The Skyfire computer has been invaded successfully," Aries declared. The viral codes have already corrupted data beyond all hope of salvage. My unit anticipates no impediments."

"Thank you Aries. Sagittarius, your report."

The second speaker rose and cleared his throat. He was an urbane looking man with greying temples and a deep voice.

Sagittarius, the archer, was responsible for carrying out the strikes in Rome.

"The American agent sent by the intelligence coalition is being tracked," Sagittarius reported. "When he is located again, he will be dealt with."

Silence hung in the air as heavy as a leaden shroud as the second speaker concluded his report.

Sagittarius did not sit.

Instead he continued to stand. Alpha had not yet given Sagittarius permission to do anything else.

"You were issued a termination directive, Sagittarius," the electronic voice of Alpha said softly, almost innocently, like the voice of a child. "Why was it not carried out?"

"It, I mean the coalition's operative codenamed Nomad -- he escaped the hunters."

Sagittarius' voice betrayed the speaker's profound anxiousness. He did not dare risk a glance at those sitting around the table. Sagittarius knew that the other members of the Council silently mocked him, waited like jackals for him to stumble and fall.

Sagittarius would not.

"Don't worry," he went on, trying but failing to sound more confident. "I assure you, Alpha, it will not happen again. Nomad *will* be dealt with."

Alpha's voice seemed especially soft when he next spoke. Most present in the room thought they detected a slight undertone of menace this time, however.

"You are quite correct, Sagittarius," Alpha said. "It shall not happen again." He paused a beat while Sagittarius waited, a cold sweat beading his forehead. "Your presence will not be required for the rest of the council's meeting. You may go, Sagittarius."

"But -- " Sagittarius stammered.

"-- You may go," Alpha interrupted softly.

Sagittarius turned and walked with nervous quickness toward the doorway located many dozen feet from the table. He only got halfway there.

Overhead, a panel in the ceiling slid open on silent runners. A shaft of green laser light struck Sagittarius squarely between the shoulder blades.

Arms outstretched, Sagittarius toppled forward. In the center of his back there was now a smoking hole. The nauseating stench of ozone and cauterized flesh suddenly filled the Council chamber.

The section of floor on which the smoldering corpse of Sagittarius was sprawled began to descend soundlessly, taking Sagittarius with it into the depths of Castle.

Even before the floor panel slid quietly back into place, disposal equipment was already grinding up the remains of the Council member who had failed to carry out his assigned directive.

"We will now proceed to other business," Alpha's strange velveteen voice echoed softly through the Council room. "Capricorn and Virgo. Your reports."

Quinn was running through his morning exercise routine of Tai Chi Chwan exercises.

The slow, graceful movements had been developed as an adjunct to the martial arts.

After a few minutes of preliminary exercises, Quinn found himself slipping into another realm of consciousness. He switched to lightning fast Hwa Rang Do movements, sparring with an opponent in his mind as he went through the *kata* of the ancient fighting technique which blended martial arts with hard combat training.

"Very good," he heard Ramsey's voice say as he assumed a pigeon toed stance and finally allowed himself to relax. "Your form is excellent."

"You've been watching me," he responded.

"Yes, I have," Ramsey told him. "I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all."

She offered him a cup of steaming coffee, saying nothing about what had happened the night before, acting as if nothing whatever had taken place between them. Quinn accepted the steaming cup and drank, realizing that in fact their encounter was a non-starter.

Ramsey had seen fit to use his body for her own selfish reasons and he had taken pleasure from hers in return. It had been an even trade for both of them.

Just then the videophone beeped. It was Bruckner. Over the secure communications link, Bruckner told Quinn and Ramsey both that

the mercs who had attacked them in Rome could not be traced to any source.

Their identities were clean.

No record existed of them.

"There is now conclusive proof that a computer virus or viruses have infected the Skyfire program," Bruckner went on. "It's still preliminary but the tech boys figure it's probably more than one kind. We got a computer emergency response team in there right now going over the system with a fine-toothed comb. So far, though, the CERT team hasn't even scratched the surface."

"How about Koenig's upcoming U.N. address?" Quinn asked. "Can it be changed?"

"Negative," Bruckner replied, shaking his head. "Koenig won't stand for it. The U.N. won't stand for it. The President of the United States won't stand for it. Any change in timing and the entire project could be jeopardized. The speech is still on, no matter what."

"Is Koenig in protective custody?" Ramsey asked.

"Yes, he is," Bruckner told her. "Nothing gets in or out of the net surrounding him without being put through the tightest security screening you ever saw."

Unfortunately, Quinn thought, that in itself didn't mean much. No one had to remind Quinn or Ramsey that some of the remaining Skyfire scientists, including DiMarzio, had met their ends despite stringent security measures.

Quinn and Ramsey signed off. After Quinn had a post-workout shower they left the safe house and headed out to the airport. Their next stop from Ciampino was to be Van Sicklen in Brussels, one of the few Skyfire techs to still remain alive.

EIGHT*Brussels.*

Dr. Gropius Van Sicklen was a portly man of middle years with a Van Dyke moustache and a large, wedgelike nose. Were it not for the grey jogging suit and track shoes which he wore on his regular morning jog, he might have just stepped out of a painting by Rembrandt or Vermeer.

The internationally renowned expert on space-based lasers enjoyed his daily runs around his favorite park in the old quarter of the city. Years of diligent exercise had kept his physique trim and his mind sharp. Van Sicklen believed that a slack body made for a slack mind, and the latter was nothing that a man in his line of work could tolerate.

Since completing work on the Skyfire's microwave laser energy transfer system, Van Sicklen had been feeling oddly depressed. His rigorous exercise regimen was even more important to him now, he felt. Only with the exhilaration of running could he fend off the depression that lurked like a dark shadow at the corners of his mind.

Van Sicklen attributed these feelings of unease to the dual-use aspect of the microwave technology. He had issued numerous warnings as to the dangers inherent in the highly active microwave energy waveforms that beamed the collected solar energy to earth-based receiving stations.

These microwaves were also capable of punching great holes in the atmosphere's ozone layer, he had stated. If control of the Skyfire Net fell into the wrong hands, disaster might ensue. Instead of heeding his warning, however, Van Sicklen had been censured by Skyfire's chief technician.

Wilhelm Koenig was a man with a vision, and like many visionaries before him, intolerant of anyone who challenged his vision or anything that might hinder its becoming a reality. In the end, Van Sicklen's warnings had been brushed aside and work on Skyfire had gone ahead as planned.

Having completed his jog, Van Sicklen got into his car and drove home. He showered and read the morning papers while he watched the latest news reports on the multiple video screens of the media center which occupied most of the south wall of his study, as was another of his daily habits.

There was a sudden knock on the door. His housekeeper, Mrs. Haagen, came into the study a few minutes later. She carried a pile of neatly folded clothing tucked against her matronly frame.

"Your costume is all ready," she told Van Sicklen with a smile that made the corners of her blue eyes crinkle up merrily. "I have made a few special changes this year, sir."

Van Sicklen smiled back at his housekeeper. "Good," he told her. "I know you have done a marvelous job." Mrs. Haagen had served him for many years and he trusted her judgment implicitly when it came to all matters domestic.

Minutes later, having blanked off the giant high definition video screen that delivered the morning news, Van Sicklen put on the clothes that Mrs. Haagen had laid out for him on one of the study's overstuffed easy chairs. Standing in front of a full length mirror, he appraised his housekeeper's handiwork with a critical eye.

Mrs. Haagen had done well, Van Sicklen saw immediately. The Jester's suit was cleanly pressed and small rips made last year had been expertly mended.

When the time came, in a few more hours, he would apply the garish white greasepaint to his face and don the fright wig of carrot colored hair, upon which would perch the long, conical hat with a pom-pom on its end.

Today marked the start of the annual Festival of the Cats, the Belgian Kattestoet. Van Sicklen was once again to take pride of place as the festival's Jester.

As Jester, his role would be to fling stuffed cats from the balcony of the City Hall building that stood at the center of Brussels. Originating in nearby lepers, the Kattestoet had grown in popularity until the huge crowds it attracted each year had made Brussels a more natural site.

In assuming the role of Jester, Van Sicklen was carrying on a tradition that had been passed down from father to son for several generations.

The grim-faced men from Interpol had paid him a visit and Van Sicklen was well aware of the danger he faced from unknown threats.

He did not fully understand the nature of these threats, but had little doubt that they were real. The strange deaths of his fellow Skyfire technicians had convinced him of this beyond all shadow of a doubt.

It had taken a great deal of explaining to the law enforcement personnel, but finally Van Sicklen had made them understand that the role of Jester of the Festival of the Cats was one which he could not possibly turn down.

This was no frivolous carousing, the scientist had insisted, but a solemn duty that he was set on carrying out, come what may. To refuse to act as Jester would be to disgrace his family's good name and betray an ancient trust.

"How do I look?" he asked Mrs. Haagen who had just come back into the study and stood looking at him with a broad grin on her matronly features. "Do I not make a fine Jester?"

"You certainly do, Doctor," the housekeeper replied, nodding vigorously. "But I fear that those men outside don't appreciate the importance of your role in the festival."

"Then the hell with them," Van Sicklen told Mrs. Haagen. A glance out the window of the study and he saw two of the men in dark business suits and sunglasses who had surrounded his house for the past week.

My protectors, he thought to himself, shaking his head in dismay. There was no way that Van Sicklen could rid himself of the policemen but there was also no way that the police could prevent him from attending the Festival as Jester. Van Sicklen supposed that they would simply both have learn to live with one another, at least for a few hours more.

While Van Sicklen stared out the window of his study, Mrs. Haagen busied herself in inspecting the Doctor's Jester suit, making certain that it fit properly and that no loose threads hung out as a result of the mending work she had done on it.

"A little snug around the waist perhaps, sir?" asked the housekeeper. "There's still plenty of time to make a change."

Mrs. Haagen could not help feeling excited at the prospect of her employer playing the Jester of the annual Kattestoet Festival. Ever since she had been a little girl, she had loved this Belgian tradition and even now could not suppress her keen interest.

"No, I think not," Van Sicklen responded, laughing good naturedly at the way that his housekeeper clucked and fussed over him, knowing very well how wrapped up in the ritual of the festival Mrs. Haagen was. "Instead, why don't you offer our caretakers some of that good hot American coffee you've just made?" he asked.

"Very well, sir," Mrs. Haagen responded as she left the room with a sigh, making a sour face at the policemen outside. Minutes later Dr. Van Sicklen saw his housekeeper carrying steaming mugs on a silver tray

out to them. With a laugh, he turned back to admiring his Jester's suit in the full-length mirror.

"You've just missed them, I'm afraid," Mrs. Haagen told Quinn and Ramsey as they arrived at the Skyfire scientist's house. She was carrying a feather duster and wore an apron around her rotund waist. "My employer and the policemen left just a short while ago. For the cat festival, you know."

Quinn looked around. The house was impeccably kept, and every surface gleamed. The place seemed to radiate an atmosphere of comfort and care. The air smelled of shellac from newly polished furniture. If not for the specialized computer equipment that Van Sicklen used in his work, it could have been the house of an old-time Dutch burgher.

"One of the policemen who escorted Dr. Van Sicklen left something for you," Mrs. Haagen went on as she dusted a plaster statuette on the fireplace mantle.

She produced a small plastic cube with a blue push button on its top. It was a standard telefax memo cube. Handing it to Quinn, she went into the kitchen telling them to call her if they needed anything.

"I'm agent Broswith," the telefax said as Quinn played it in Van Sicklen's media center. "My team has the doctor well in hand. You may interview the doctor after he's completed his function as Jester."

The telefax faded and the cube emitted a final beeptone signifying the end of the prerecorded memo. Just then, Mrs. Haagen appeared with a silver tray on which was a ceramic server and two cups.

"You'll at least stay for coffee," she said to them, smiling brightly. "Mr. Van Sicklen asked me to be sure to make you feel at home in his absence."

Quinn thanked the housekeeper and reached for one of the Delft cups. If the Skyfire tech was intent on playing the Jester today, there was no point in rushing. He and Ramsey sipped the coffee and enjoyed some of Mrs. Haagen's fresh-baked pastries that had just come out of her oven.

Having gone through the motions of gracious visitors, Quinn and Ramsey left Van Sicklen's house and climbed back into the Audi that they had driven there from the airport to begin a trip along the highway into the center of town.

As they drove away, they did not see Mrs. Haagen remove a small black telecommunication device from beneath her apron and stud it on. Her face was no longer smiling, her grey eyes no longer radiating a trace of their former warmth.

"This is Scorpio Two. Subjects have just left," she said into the commo unit, in a voice that had completely lost every last trace of its former graciousness. "Scorpio One -- prepare to intercept and terminate."

NINE

Quinn and Ramsey drove along the modern highway complex that ribboned toward the city center. Most of the cars they passed bore indications that their passengers were on their way to the festival.

Adults and children alike wore cat costumes and the highway was much more congested with traffic than was normal, even for an ordinary Sunday afternoon in late spring.

Quinn's mind began drifting from the immediate assignment toward thoughts about the woman sitting beside him. From what he'd seen, Quinn had no doubt that she was a competent professional, cool and dependable under fire.

She had exhibited many of these same attributes in her lovemaking too, at least from Quinn's admittedly limited knowledge of the subject.

Ramsey had so far said nothing about what had gone down at the Rome safe house, almost as if she had already forgotten it as she might any other purely functional biological process. Quinn did not take offense at this fact, indeed he was grateful for it.

He had long since put aside any considerations of male ego when it came to the business of covert operations. In fact, had he felt otherwise or sensed that Ramsey did he would have immediately phoned Bruckner and informed him he was bowing out of the mission.

Feelings of any kind were dangerous to an asset on the ground. They got in the way. In the covert firezone they might well have fatal consequences for all parties concerned.

Quinn sensed that there was a lot more to Bruckner's liaison asset than met the eye, however. He wondered about her personal history

but knew better than to ask her outright. What seductions had she practiced for her paymasters in the past? Where had Bruckner recruited her from? Was she CIA, KGB, Mossad, Mabhukarat or a freelancer like himself?

Quinn's thoughts soon turned back to the business at hand as Ramsey swung the Audi off the highway and approached the center of the city.

The festival was already beginning to take off, he could see. The route that the parade of giant cat floats and feline-costumed marchers would take had been cordoned off to automobile traffic and spectators were already jockeying for their positions along the route, just like crowds of bystanders did at any Thanksgiving or Columbus Day parade back home in the States.

"Might as well go the rest of the way on foot," Quinn told Ramsey as they exited the Audi and merged with the huge crowd of pedestrians, its ranks swelled, Quinn suspected, because of the exceptionally good weather. "There are still a couple of hours to go until we can meet with Van Sicklen and we're probably lucky to have found parking at all."

Hawkers had set up stalls and were selling gaudy wares of all kinds, with special emphasis on souvenirs with a feline theme. Quinn stepped up to one of the stalls which was festooned with every conceivable trinket and geegaw from small, artfully made cat dolls to wristwatches with cat faces.

"What do you know about this festival?" he asked Ramsey as he motioned to the merchant that he did not want to buy a hat that sported a cat's bewhiskered face on its brim.

"It was originally begun in the Middle Ages to guard the populace of lepers against plague," Ramsey answered. "The conventional wisdom of the time held that cats were evil, creatures to be loathed and feared. As such they were considered responsible for all manner of diseases and misfortunes that afflicted mankind."

As Quinn listened he took out a noncarcinogenic filter cigaret, thumbed off its self-igniting cap and inhaled deeply of the rich menthol smoke. His eye caught a couple leading their two children. All four were dressed in color-coordinated cat costumes.

"At first," Ramsey continued, speaking precisely as if reading from a prepared text, "actual cats were hurled from the windows of a high belfry. The barbaric custom was eventually discontinued when it was discovered that cats ate the rats which carried the germs causing bubonic plague. But in 1938 the custom of throwing cats from a belfry was revived -- this time using stuffed cat dolls in place of the live cats of a previous era."

"And these are the cats that the Jester throws down to the onlookers in the square at the conclusion of the parade?"

"That is correct," Ramsey said to Quinn.

Soon the parade was in full swing.

Standing on the sidelines, Quinn and Ramsey watched the gaudy parade floats featuring enormous papier-mache felines glide past them to the cheering of thousands of onlookers.

The floats rivaled anything he had seen in the States, even at Mardi Gras in New Orleans, and although the crowd was much more subdued than a Mardi Gras crowd, the Belgians seemed as enthusiastic as they came, at least as far as parades went.

While Quinn and Ramsey watched the parade floats, other members of the crowd were watching them. One hundred fifty miles above the earth, in a low geosynchronous orbit, a spy satellite had been tracking their car ever since their arrival in Brussels.

The satellite had provided those monitoring its telemetry with the precise location of the U.N.-mandated investigators tracking down the surviving Skyfire personnel. Now that the techint had been confirmed and visual contact had been established by humint assets on the ground, the intelsat was shifted to another orbit, tasked with monitoring other targets.

The assets on the ground grasped the weapons concealed in holsters worn beneath their cat costumes. For the present, their orders were to follow but not to initiate direct contact. They would continue to do this until they received orders to the contrary.

Then they had do what they had been trained to do.

Kill.

In his Jester's suit, Dr. Van Sicklen inspected the bin containing the ceremonial cat dolls that he would fling down to the waiting crowds in only a little while. The stuffed cats were custom-made in Hong Kong to the Festival committee's precise specifications.

Van Sicklen picked up one of the toy cats and inspected it, noting its rhinestone eyes, fiberglass whiskers and tawny nylon fur. He flipped the cat back into the bin among dozens of others just like it.

"Quite a nice batch this year," the Festival committee's chairman, Max Gilparzer, said to him. "We've switched to a new factory. They do excellent work."

"Yes quite," Van Sicklen answered. "Well, it's about time I put on my Jester makeup," he added.

Van Sicklen turned and walked into the dressing room that had been prepared for him. It was the building janitor's office into which an old dressing table had been brought up from the basement, the same one which was used year after year.

As Van Sicklen began applying his makeup, he heard a small rustling sound from somewhere behind him.

Turning, he saw a man wearing green coveralls step from behind the concealment of a row of tall filing cabinets. The man smiled and Van Sicklen recognized him at once.

He was the building's janitor.

"What are you doing here?" Van Sicklen demanded, unable to tear his eyes from the automatic pistol that the newcomer gripped in his hand, a pistol which bore the long cylinder of a sound suppression device jutting from its business end. "What is the meaning of this?"

The janitor's gun spoke for him, coughing again and again as it spat three hollownosed 9 mm rounds in quick succession into his face.

Van Sicklen was catapulted back in his chair by the impact of the consecutively fired rounds. Blood burst from the pulverized cheeks and shattered jaw, streaming in a dark gush down the colorful Jester suit. After a moment the corpse sagged forward and thudded to the floor, crimson fluid pooling around the smashed-in head.

Holstering his weapon, the janitor dragged Van Sicklen to the concealment of the filing cabinets, cleaned up the bloodspill and then retrieved the spent shell casings from the trio of slugs that he had fired into Van Sicklen's makeup-smearred face.

When he'd retrieved the brass, the janitor unzipped his green coveralls. Beneath them he was wearing a Jester suit which was identical in every detail to the one which Van Sicklen was wearing.

Taking the seat in front of the mirror formerly occupied by Van Sicklen, the janitor began applying the heavy theatrical greasepaint to his face, followed by the long red plastic nose, the fright wig of carrot red hair and the floppy jester's hat.

There was a rap on the door and the committee chairman poked his head into the room.

"Are you ready?" Gilparzer asked.

The man in the Jester suit half-turned and waved at the chairman. "Five minutes," he said, as he coughed into his hand, making his voice come out as a muffled rasp.

"Very good. I'll inform the others," said the chairman as he closed the door.

Quinn sipped from a plastic cup full of draft beer as he watched a gaudily painted thirty-foot high papier mache cat roll by on hidden wheels.

Scantly clad girls rode its back and tail, waving at the passersby and throwing small cat dolls into the crowd.

The Kattestoet Parade was now in full swing.

Noisy, bustling crowds lined the path of the parade, waving and clapping and whistling. Many in the crowd were made up to look like cats in addition to wearing cat costumes and a cat blimp passed overhead with a banner in tow advertising a local department store.

"It's almost time for the Jester to appear," said Ramsey as she checked her wristwatch. "Let's get up closer to the City Hall building."

Quinn and she made their way to the edge of the police barricades set up to hold the crowds back from the City Hall's front, just as the Jester made his appearance on the balcony high above them, and the crowd let out a sudden, frantic scream.

TEN

The Jester waved to the crowd as he stepped out onto the balcony. Below him, the assemblage shouted their eagerness to receive the traditional cat dolls that the Jester threw down.

From beside him, Quinn heard a little girl pleading with her father for a cat doll.

"Daddy, catch me a cat this year!" she asked the tall man who held her hand. "You promised me you would this time!"

"Shush," the guy said to her, none too pleasantly Quinn thought, "we'll see what happens."

Now, picking the first of many toy cats from the bin behind him, the Jester hurled his first offering into the anxious crowd waiting below.

As it tumbled end over end through space, the wind caught the doll and it began to drift off course. Moments later it dropped into a mass of outstretched hands.

The crowd gave out a cheer as a man to Quinn's right caught the first cat thrown by the Jester, holding it up in one hand in a gesture of victory while letting out a joyous whoop. It was considered good luck to catch the first cat that the Jester tossed.

"The wind sure can make a difference in who gets a cat," Quinn observed aloud to Ramsey as they watched the Jester snatch up a second cat doll and prepare to hurl it into the crowd.

"The precariousness is part of the fun," Ramsey answered him. "Rather like catching the batter's foul balls at one of your American baseball games, no?"

Quinn wasn't prepared to explain to Ramsey that this wasn't quite the way baseball worked, or on a par with what was now taking place, so he nodded in reply and watched the Jester prepare to hurl down the next cat.

It too was picked up by the gusting winds and wound up sailing several feet from the trajectory it would be expected to follow in less turbulent air.

Now the Jester was beginning to hurl the stuffed felines faster and faster.

The crowd, sensing that the supply of cat dolls would soon dwindle down to nothing, was becoming rowdier and rowdier by the minute.

The little girl nearby who'd been pleading with her father for a cat doll had still not gotten her doll and had begun to cry, begging for a cat toy.

Although the Belgians were showing a restraint that no American crowd Quinn could think of would be capable of displaying under similar circumstances, people were now beginning to push and shove testily in their eagerness to catch the last few cat dolls hurled down by the Jester, showing their frustration at not having caught any of the prized souvenirs.

Finally the Jester picked up a cat and, by hand gestures, communicated to the crowd that this was the last of his dolls to be distributed at this year's festival.

Quinn motioned to Ramsey to get ready to enter the City Hall building for their too-long put off interview with Van Sicklen now that his part in the festival was coming to an end just as the Jester prepared to throw down his final cat doll.

Unlike with his other tosses, however, the Jester now seemed to be looking directly at Quinn as he raised the doll high over his head and hurled it downward.

As the doll fell, Quinn realized that something was wrong.

Something was dangerously wrong.

This cat doll was not behaving the same way the others had behaved. In a sudden flash of comprehension, he realized what that discrepancy was.

The wind.

The wind was not changing the direction of this last cat doll to be hurled by the Jester.

Unlike the other dolls thrown, it was plummeting straight toward them, as an object too heavy to be effected by the wind would behave. *As an object stuffed with a high explosive charge and a proximity fuzed detonator might.*

Quinn reached out to Ramsey, at the same time shouting a warning to her, yet knowing that there was not enough time to react if he

was correct in his assessment of impending danger. He pulled the female agent away toward a gap in the police barricades by which they stood, but bodies to either side and behind them prevented them from taking more than a few steps.

Just as the cat's descent was about to bring it within reach of Quinn and Ramsey, the tall man that Quinn recognized as the father of the little girl who'd been pleading for a cat bulld his way in front of them.

He stretched out both of his arms in a desperate attempt to catch the last cat thrown by the Jester and silence his daughter's maddening pleas.

BUHH-LAMMMMM!

The explosion ripped both of the big man's arms from their sockets and flung the bloody stumps high into the air. With his face and most of his head blown to pulp, the guy who'd taken the full brunt of the high explosive blast began thrashing around in wild spastic convulsions.

Panicking, the crowd dispersed as the mangled torso sprayed bystanders with pumping jets of arterial blood. Flying shrapnel from the bomb had wounded still other bystanders. The crowd began a wild stampede in every direction.

As police on the periphery of the crowd drew their guns and raced forward toward the blast site, some of them speaking into walkie talkies, the Jester on the balcony whipped an AUG submachinegun from the bottom of the bin from which he'd taken his toy cats and opened fire on Quinn and Ramsey.

The 5.56 mm hellfire cranked out by the AUG hammered down on the crowd as Quinn and the woman hightailed it toward the entrance of the City Hall building. Due to distance, windage and angle, though, the AUG fire was inaccurate, cutting down bystanders as they ran away from the scene of the blast.

As Quinn and Ramsey cleared the death zone, the Scorpio termination crew waiting on the fringes pulled blasters from concealed holsters beneath their cat costumes and changed mode from passive surveillance to hot pursuit.

Inside the City Hall building, the Interpol plainclothesmen who had been guarding the man they mistakenly thought was Van Sicklen drew weaponry from beneath their coats and hustled toward the balcony from which the Jester was firing his automatic weapon down into the crowd.

Having lost track of the male and female investigators he had been intent on killing, the Jester whirled and raised the AUG. Pulling the trigger, he raked the interior of the building with side-to-side low trajectory autofire.

The first cop to charge the Jester toppled backward, a messy hole torn in his side and his service pistol skittering on the polished terra cotta floor of the drawing room which gave out on the balcony.

The cops to either side of the downed man switched from assault to defense as the Jester-suited merc sprayed the room with more automatic fire, quickly reloading another clip of 5.56 mm ammo when they dodged for cover, then emptying the clip into the room.

As the gun-brandishing cops readied for another charge, the Jester threw down his now dry weapon and pulled two small but deadly FRAG grenades from inside his suit.

Arming the small conical grenades with a button click on their advanced design detonators, the Jester held the two small black epoxy resin cylinders aloft as he bolted headlong into the drawing room toward the crouching, lead-throwing Interpol cops.

The two small yet powerful FRAG submunitions detonated just as the Jester's bullet-riddled body collapsed in a heap near the hunkered down lawmen.

In themselves, the grenades were not powerful enough to cause massive structural damage. But the shaped plastic charges that the janitor had planted in the drawing room prior to the festival and following the cops' sweeps for hidden booby traps were powerful enough to blow the place to kingdom come.

Although they emptied their guns into him, the incendiary explosion ripped through the drawing room like a blast of dragon's breath. A seething ball of fire roared toward the balcony, blowing its massive glass doors to jagged splinters amid belching tongues of flame.

Before long the entire top floor of the City Hall was ablaze.

Quinn's last glimpse of Ramsey had been of his partner firing the squat black Spectre SMG she'd taken from her oversized handbag at a brace of merc assassins who were crouched at either side of the City Hall entrance.

Some of the hit artists were wearing cat costumes. Others were dressed in plain clothes. All of them were throwing fire from the blasters in their fists.

Quinn had seen one of the Scorpio hitters blown away by a burst of autofire that had stitched him from right hip to left shoulder, laying open his heart zone amid a shower of blood.

As the cooled shooter did a half-roll into eternity, Ramsey had disappeared from view as a police van raced by, two-note siren blaring.

The sudden fierce explosion from the balcony of the City Hall and the twisting coils of noxious black smoke had by then cut Quinn off from any hope of reaching the building, and besides that, he knew full well that there was now little point in heading that way.

Van Sicklen had not been the man in the Jester's suit, he was convinced. Nomad was certain that the next to last surviving Skyfire scientist had been terminated well before the Jester's appearance on the balcony.

As far as Ramsey went, he would hook up with her sooner or later. He now had another, more immediate concern.

Staying alive.

From the crowd, other Scorpio assassins were springing into violent action. Two masked mercs in cat suits were packing lethal heat, directing a lancing stream of rotoring steel Quinn's way.

Bullets whined as they struck the pavement, fragmented and ricocheted off again. Quinn vaulted an iron fence, zigged right on a crouch and snapped off a burst of answering SMG fire from the cover of a parade float that sent the shooters scrambling.

From the way one of them limped, Quinn saw to his satisfaction that he'd been hit.

But two more members of the Scorpio strike force were coming at him fast. Double teaming him, the first merc drew Quinn's fire while the second shooter took careful aim, the stubby shape of a rocket grenade fitted to the muzzle of his weapon.

The float would not withstand a direct hit by shrapnel hurled from a bursting submunition, Quinn realized. He had to take a chance of sustaining a hit on the run or staying put and getting blown all over the landscape.

Throwing a suppressing burst that forced the merc playing decoy to dodge for the cover of a parked car, Quinn prepared to skedaddle from ground zero.

Suddenly a compact car raced up, tires screeching as the driver applied the brakes. Quinn saw Ramsey behind the wheel of the Audi.

"Get in!" she shouted.

Quinn threw the door open and jumped into the shotgun seat just as a near miss from the rocket round launched by Merc Two thundered behind them and shook them in their seats.

Ears ringing from the explosion, Quinn jabbed the snub nose of the Spectre SMG out the rolled-down window and opened up on the shooter who was in the process of fitting another rocket onto the barrel of his weapon.

Leaning on the Spectre's trigger, Quinn's figure-eight burst cut down the shooter just as he was about to launch the second rocket round at them.

Instead, the round slammed straight into the street and exploded, blowing the merc's legs right out from under him. What was left of the mortally injured shooter thrashed around in a mutilated mass of raw, quivering flesh before sagging into lifeless repose on the blood-drenched cobbles.

Ramsey pointed ahead at a car speeding from the scene.

"I saw men rush from the building just before the explosion," she said. "They got into that Saab and drove away in a big hurry."

The Saab seemed to be crewed by three men. There was the driver in the front seat and two others in back.

The Saab careened around a corner, losing a hubcap in the process. Ramsey wrenched the steering wheel and gave chase, her eyes widening as she saw an ambulance heading straight for her from the mouth of a narrow street that intersected the one Quinn and she were on.

Wrenching the wheel to the other side saved their necks, but sent the compact car crashing headlong into the wall of a building.

While the crash only resulted in a badly crumpled right fender, the Saab was now nowhere to be seen.

ELEVEN

|| There she goes!"

Quinn had spotted the escaping Saab again just as they were about to admit that they had lost the car for keeps. The getaway car was directly ahead of them, taking a turn into a walled town square on a deserted street far from the site of the big parade.

With most of the populace attending the Kattestoet, and the curious and concerned drawn there by reports of what the media were now reporting as a "terrorist strike," it was small wonder that the residential neighborhood that made up this part of the city was deserted.

Few pedestrians were on the streets and most of the shops were closed for the Belgian festival day.

Ramsey swung the Audi into the portal giving onto the square. Typical of many old Belgian squares, the medieval stone walls that enclosed the plaza were dotted with the windows of apartment units with shop frontage at street level.

On the other side of the wall, facing the plaza, were more shops that could be entered from the square which on weekends might double as a flea market.

The Saab's wheelman must have spotted the chase car because midway through the circular plaza the small car picked up speed, its tires squealing on the ancient cobblestone pavement as it swerved to one side and vanished into one of the narrow side streets that opened onto the plaza.

Double clutching while she poured on the gas Ramsey pushed the Audi to the max, finally gaining on the speeding Saab.

Using the Spectres' steel buttstocks to smash the rear window to pieces, the two mercs in the rear of the Saab stuck out their hardware.

Studded on full-auto, the SMGs bucked and chattered. Flame and steel gushed from the gun muzzles as the two shooters in back opened up on the Audi behind them as it too shot into the narrow side street.

As Ramsey mashed down on the accelerator pedal, Quinn stuck his Spectre out the window and triggered a longburst of answering fire, hurling a stream of full metal-jacketed 9 mm thunderbolts in the Saab's direction at a cycling rate of 850 rounds per minute.

The Saab sprang forward like a frightened colt, outpacing the burst of automatic fire, but not evading a hit on one of the rear tires from fragmenting rounds that had ricocheted off the paving cobblestones and adjacent curbstones.

The getaway car careered around a corner onto a main street as the blown tire cost the driver control of the Saab.

With one wheelrim grinding against the unevenly paved road surface, the escape vehicle jumped the curb and crashed headlong into the picture window of a flower shop amid a cascade of splintering plate glass.

Dazed but otherwise uninjured, except for superficial cuts, the three Scorpio hitmen in the crashed vehicle staggered from the crumpled, steaming wreck.

Inside the damaged storefront, the old woman who owned the shop had emerged from behind the counter and was shouting curses at the crazy men who had rammed their car into her shop.

She grabbed the first merc to come out of the Saab, oblivious to the shooting iron he brandished in his fist.

"Where's your driver's license?" she demanded as she pulled at the sleeve of his jacket. "Look what you've done to my store!"

Shaking off the old woman with ease, the merc smashed the side of the Spectre's steel receiver across the bridge of the shopkeeper's nose and sent her crashing into a flower display case, blood streaming down the bludgeoned front of her caved-in face.

A split-second behind the merc trio, Ramsey pulled the Audi to a screaming short stop in front of the flower shop. She and Quinn made tracks out of the car.

Quinn took the time to snap a fresh fifty round high-capacity magazine into the Spectre as Ramsey pulled a backup Uzi pistol from a shoulder rig worn beneath her windbreaker, preferring the flexibility of the Uzi in a close-quarters tactical situation to her Spectre's greater stopping power.

Fire greeted the two investigators as they stormed into the shop, glimpsing the backs of two fleeing figures as they hustled down a short corridor to one side of the counter that gave onto the shop's rear entrance as the third merc spun away from the downed storekeeper to face them head-on.

Caught in the open, the third Scorpio hitter launched a burst at Quinn and Ramsey which forced them to duck as he made a break for the corridor.

But with answering fire singing at his heels from the Uzi and the Spectre, the merc lost his nerve. He changed course before reaching the hall and instead dived for cover behind the counter.

Spooked and abandoned by his partners, the boxed-in shooter completely lost his cool, letting his emotions do the thinking for him instead of his brain.

Checking his SMG's clip, he saw that he had twenty more rounds left. He decided to bet the whole pot on making a break for it.

Jumping to his feet, the Scorpio merc threw lead on the fly while he dodged out the open side door of the counter. He figured he could make it to the corridor that gave access to the alleyway behind the flower shop before the two shooters could ventilate him.

The merc's panic burst forced Quinn and Ramsey to tuck their heads down but Quinn was on his feet a pulsebeat after the erratic fire had ended and went charging off after the running man.

Drawing a fast bead, Quinn cut loose with a 9 mm PB salvo. The result was a near miss only. The hastily aimed multiround burst tore out a chunk of wall to one side of the fleeing gunman as he skidded left and dodged into the corridor, then spun around to snap off another salvo from the Spectre.

Quinn never gave him the chance to pull the trigger.

This time Quinn's accurate fire tattooed a jagged pattern of bloody red tatters across the Scorpio merc's upper chest. Pulverized bone and organ tissue spewed in dark crimson pulses from the exit wounds punched in the merc's back. Reflex action triggered a panic burst that went wild and high, hammering holes in the tin ceiling.

Badly shot up by Spectre fire, the merc did a spastic two-step and crashed into the wall behind him. His knees buckled and he slid slowly down the wall to a praying position before keeling over to one side. Hitting bottom with a thunk he shuddered for a few seconds then gave up the ghost.

Grabbing a funeral wreath that said "Rest In Peace" he'd noticed nearby, Quinn dropped it on top of the dusted merc as he and Ramsey pushed past him toward the alleyway.

Late afternoon sunlight bright enough to make them wince streamed in through the open back door. They hugged the wall to either side of the doorway and took it by the numbers.

Quinn tucked left, back hunched, hitting the outer wall on the fleshy part of his shoulder, waving the Specter right and left as he straightened to a semi-crouch as Ramsey covered him with her own armament from the side of the doorway.

The backyard of the flower shop was deserted. The surviving Scorpio assassins were nowhere to be seen. A ten foot high picket fence stretched along the spine of the back alley toward a dead end at the right in a blank brick wall. To the operatives' immediate left, the alley took an eighty-degree dogleg around the corner of the building.

A sizeable crowd was already gathering at the shattered frontage of the flower shop. Quinn and Ramsey booked toward the dogleg in the back alley as voices from the street shouted behind them angrily in French and Walloon.

Around the corner of the alley, the other two Scorpio mercs were waiting in ambush, matte black steel bulging in their fists, ready to dole out punishing autofire.

Wound tight, the spooked shooters opened up right away, not even bothering to wait for Ramsey and Quinn to completely clear the backalley and walk directly into the kill box.

That was their mistake, and one they'd wind up paying the Reaper for. The mercs' premature assault fire gave their targets enough reaction time to duck back around the projecting rim of the building, narrowly evading a scything brace of PB rivets.

Hugging the wall, Quinn stuck the snout of his SMG around the corner and roared out a long, blind burst. Sent scrambling by the sudden blindfire, the mercs were just popping back up to launch another salvo their way when Quinn and Ramsey jumped out into view with their weapons at their hips, spraying the alley with whipsawing steel.

Caught like flies in a pisspot, the trapped merc blasters didn't even have enough time to yank their triggers. The deadly swarm of whizzing steel shredders walloped into their bodies and made them do the terminal buck and wing. Nailed where they stood, the dying men staggered for a moment then collapsed in blood-spattered jumbles.

Quinn and Ramsey had made them ante up.

Big time.

It was cold in the morgue, cold as any meatlocker, Quinn thought, as he and Ramsey entered in the company of the mortician. Metal shelves stacked up against the glazed cinderblock walls were crammed with toe-tagged bodies in transparent zippered bags.

The high body count didn't go with the picture-postcard Flemish architecture, the spotless mass transit and the quaint cafes on picturesque squares, but Brussels was a city of many sides.

It was a city of paradoxes, renowned as much as a market for gemstones as an international clearinghouse for sophisticated small arms

and classified military documents. Its sleepy exterior belied a metropolis where dark undercurrents had flowed for centuries and still did today.

The mortician directed Quinn and Ramsey to one of the freezer compartments and trundled out the stainless steel slab.

The charred remains of Gropius Van Sicklen lay on the slab. The blackened lump of carbon was unrecognizable as anything that had once been human, let alone one of the most prestigious scientists in the world, but the dental work and an implant from recent hip surgery positively ID'd the stiff as Van Sicklen.

The Skyfire scientist's housekeeper had taken a powder by the time Quinn and his partner arrived back at Van Sicklen's residence. Quinn immediately checked Van Sicklen's computer work station databank for any clue to why he'd been iced.

As Quinn had suspected, the databank had been bulk erased -- every byte had been zeroed out, permitting no possibility of recovery. The woman known as "Mrs. Haagen" had put her escape plan into operation immediately. Undoubtedly she was now miles away from the strike zone.

There was little chance she'd be found since despite Van Sicklen's obvious longstanding relationship with his cherished housekeeper, there was not a single scrap of data on her anywhere in the world's intelligence computers.

Quinn removed a data module from his pocket and inserted it into one of the computer's free slots. It contained a powerful unerase utility of his own devising that could sometimes recapture data even from erased mass storage devices. The unerase program loaded, Quinn waited for it to cycle through its routines.

From the depths of the computer's wiped memory, the unerase utility dredged up only a single scrap of data a few bytes in size. The data string was a recognizable word.

The word was CASTLE.

Quinn placed the raster in sleep mode.

He had spent most of the previous day conducting a full-spectrum search of the world's computer databases. Billions of bytes of data had been sifted through electronic filters programmed to collate any and all references to Castle.

He had obtained clearances for, and had sifted through not only the top secret databases of Interpol, the National Security Agency, the CIA, Israeli Mossad, Egyptian Mukabharat, French DGI, German BND, but a host of semi-private university think knowledge banks too, and had turned up thousands of references to Castle.

Not a single one of these, however, could even remotely have any significance to the Skyfire kills.

Sophisticated AI, artificial intelligence-based screening software, had sifted through every reference at lightning speed, but nowhere in the

vast compendium of text and visuals could the program offer Quinn the match of ninety-percent or greater that he had requested of it.

Quinn had reached yet another dead end.

Was Castle an actual reference to an important lead, he wondered? Or was it merely a random glitch in the bulk erase procedure used to wipe Van Sicklen's databank? Could it have even been planted there by the mysterious yet deadly opposition as a red herring to throw him off or as bait to lead him into a trap?

Quinn had no idea. Nothing made sense anymore. All Quinn knew was that men were dying, all across the globe. There was a link to those hits and to the numerous attempts on the lives of himself and Ramsey. That link existed, that much he knew.

Whether or not Castle was part of the equation, Quinn would yet need to find it. But right now he needed something else. His brain felt squeezed and his eyes were aching.

Sleep.

TWELVE

Bavaria, Germany.

Wilhelm Koenig walked the grounds of his sprawling country estate with his prize falcon on his arm. The hunting lodge had originally been built by Hermann Goering, chief of the Nazi Gestapo during the heyday of Hitler's Germany.

Like everything the inventor of the Skyfire Net did, acquiring Goering's hunting lodge for his personal estate was a controversial move, one he knew beforehand was guaranteed to stoke up the rumor mills of the world media.

The media had been abuzz that he was acquiring the estate of one of Nazi Germany's greatest war criminals, a man who had taken cyanide at the Nuremburg trials rather than face the hangman's harsh, though well-deserved, retribution.

Koenig had brushed off all charges of insensitivity which had been leveled against him. He, like Germany itself, was not concerned with the excesses and crimes of the Nazi past, only with the potential for a better future.

As an avid hunter, the vast estate was perfectly suited to his needs. The hunting lodge was situated in prime Bavarian hill country. Its seclusion afforded him the peace and tranquility which he required to conduct his work.

Now this hard-won tranquility had been broken by a chain of unforeseen disasters that had violently claimed the lives of the international scientific committee that had brought his dream of the Skyfire Net within an ace of being realized.

One could not see the small army of intelligence operatives and Bundeswehr policemen, nor could one discern the vast array of detection devices that they had placed everywhere around the perimeter of the estate to guard against intrusion by terrorists, but Koenig's hidden guardians were there just the same.

Koenig was a virtual prisoner on his own estate. The irony of this happening to the very man who many claimed would liberate mankind from its dependence on fossil fuels and potentially destructive nuclear energy was not lost on Koenig.

Reluctantly, Koenig had recognized the necessity for the presence of his protectors. He was no stranger to compromise and once Skyfire was online, he would not care a bit about his personal fate in any event.

The son of parents executed by the dreaded East German Stasi before the Berlin wall came down, Koenig had devoted his life to purging the lurking evil that was the stigma of the German people's soul.

He had realized that much of the cause of war in modern times had not been land, as dictators and demagogues had long claimed. Instead, Koenig had formulated the theory that mankind's hunger for sources of *energy* was the true reason for war and its attendant evils.

In the closing years of the twentieth century, the world's superpowers had been poised to conduct a bloody clash over the precious oil reserves beneath the sands of the Middle East.

The crisis had been resolved only when a miscalculating Saddam Hussein had made the monumental blunder of invading nearby Kuwait at the precise point in history when the arsenal of the west was at its peak strength. Having sown the wind, the Iraqi dictator had reaped the whirlwind when the western democracies chose to fight instead of backing down.

All the same, mankind's need for energy sources had brought it perilously close to Armageddon. Had Saddam Hussein possessed a nuclear capability, the pages of history might have recorded a far bloodier confrontation than what had actually taken place.

Even before Kuwait, there had been Chernobyl, and Three Mile Island, both of which demonstrated that even in peacetime nuclear reactors could unleash disaster on a widespread scale.

So Koenig had reasoned that freeing mankind from energy dependency might mean freeing it from war as well. Armed with this conviction, he devoted his adult years to championing the Skyfire Net concept.

That Germany had built much of the hardware for both the orbital net of solar energy satellites and groundbased receiving stations was in Koenig's eyes another form of atonement for a nation which had once built the gas chambers of Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen.

And now, in the end, his beloved Skyfire project itself might kill him. Very well, then, Koenig thought. *Let it.* Koenig released the falcon and watched it soar into the air. He thought about Yeats' great poem, *The Second Coming*.

In it the poet spoke about a new golden age beckoning mankind, but he also warned against the potential for destruction on a grand scale. What rough beast was now slouching toward Bethlehem, as Yeats had written, wondered Koenig? What new threat could be foretold in the falcon's widening gyre?

Castle.

The one called Alpha faced the glowing screen of the computer terminal. The screen showed him a face. It was the face of a merc who was telling Alpha things that Alpha did not want to hear.

Taurus was fucking up. That was the bottom line. Sagittarius and Scorpio had already paid the ultimate price for their unpardonable failures.

But Taurus was a different matter entirely. Taurus was Alpha's right hand merc. As such he was judged by a different standard than the others.

Alpha had personally selected Taurus to oversee the entire DAYBREAK operation. Ultimately any setbacks that the op suffered were Taurus' direct responsibility.

Alpha did not like hearing things that did not please him, especially when these concerned DAYBREAK. The merc on the other end of the screen knew that all too well.

"It's not my fault," the merc codenamed Taurus informed Alpha. "The ground assets were Dixie Cups. They talked a better fight than they put out."

"We are growing impatient," Alpha's electronic voice said to the face on the screen. "You must not again incur our displeasure."

The eyes in the face on the screen blinked frantically. The mouth churned as the brain of Taurus cast about for the right words, words which would not antagonize Alpha any more than he already was.

"Don't worry. It won't happen again. I promise you it won't," stressed the merc.

There was bravado in the voice but in the end it was hollow, a lying voice without the power to convince. Voice stress analysis corroborated Alpha's gut feel. Retinal analysis readings confirmed the observational results.

What a loathsome, treacherous maggot Taurus was, thought Alpha. Wasn't the merc aware that Alpha knew what he thought before Taurus himself even thought it?

Taurus had been useful to Alpha in the early phases of his initiative. The merc had been instrumental in collecting intelligence

needed to blackmail the right people into supplying the money, political pressure and technology necessary to build his criminal power base.

He had supplied Alpha too with Genesis, the sport killer who had been highly effective in conducting strategic hits against those who knew too much or would not cooperate with Alpha's plans for a new world order.

Now, though, Alpha was beginning to doubt that Taurus had what it took to be part of the program. DAYBREAK was far too important, far too big, to allow substandard personnel to play a hand. Alpha would allow his merc catspaw one more chance to carry out the termination directive without screwing up.

And then he would deal with him.

As he had dealt with the others.

As would eventually deal with anyone or anything that opposed his will.

Storm King Mountain.

WARNING! CHECKSUM ERROR flashed the message on the screen.

The CERT tech in the CPU node threw up his arms in exasperation as he pushed his chair away from the data screen at which he sat. The damn checksum always kept coming up wrong.

Whatever kind of bug had taken control of the Skyfire command and control computer's file allocation tables, boot sector and other critical elements of the software operating system, it seemed impervious to every countermeasure they had tried.

Each checksum routine -- a program that counted the number of databytes on the system, reflecting changes in the data logged on the software and verifying its integrity -- came up showing different results.

Checksum errors were to computer viruses what high temperatures were in human beings. Each indicated that a bug was still running rampant in the system.

Suddenly a warning alarm sounded. The tech looked up and realized what was happening. The glowing LCD characters flashing on one of the big viewscreens on the wall said it all.

STRIKE SYSTEM ACTIVATED.

The doomsday scenario had finally been triggered, he now knew. The viral invader in the Skyfire computer system had triggered STRIKE. The automated anti-terrorist system would bring lasers and other advanced design weapons systems immediately into play.

STRIKE's artificial intelligence-driven, fail-soft, fault-tolerant weapon interface would be ready to hunt down and eradicate anything it identified as hostile.

The Skyfire computer's central processing unit, its CPU, was STRIKE's high priority defense zone. It was at the CPU that the CERT tech was working.

The tech was immediately on his feet, running toward the elevator bank a few hundred feet away at the end of the corridor, but before he reached it he saw that the doors were already closing as STRIKE sealed the CPU off from what it mistakenly believed was a terrorist attack.

From the muzzle of a laser pulse gun high on the wall of the CPU chamber, a coherent beam of lethal red light lanced out with computer-targeted accuracy as the CERT man reached the elevator.

The twenty megawatt laser burst arrowed through his heart with the precision of a surgeon's scalpel, cauterizing flesh and making blood boil in his ventricles and auricles. Identifying the technician as a terrorist saboteur STRIKE had carried out its mandate to acquire, and then immediately destroy the target.

The rest of the CERT unit hustled from the heart of Skyfire's Cray 2010 central processing unit to one of the remote access stations where slave data terminals were located. From there they could still feed data to the Skyfire CPU. The core of the computer system, though, was off-limits now.

STRIKE was armed. It was ready to eradicate anything that moved, just as the body's defense system was primed to destroy any microbic invader. The data virus had now bored deeper into the silicon microchips that made up the inner regions of the computer's brain.

And driven it mad.

MISSION LOG TWO:

Target

THIRTEEN*Hong Kong.*

"Mr. Quinn!" the bald man in the dark business suit called out while he waved his hand over his head. "This way please. I am called Choy," the stranger added as Quinn and Ramsey approached him. "Doctor Zhou has sent me to meet you."

Quinn extended his hand and shook the man's hand who then did the same with Ramsey's. Choy picked up Ramsey's flight bag and gestured toward the interior of the departure terminal.

"Come with me please," he said. "I have a limo waiting outside to take you to your destination."

"And precisely where would that be?" Quinn asked. "Doctor Zhou left no instructions that we were to be met by anyone at the airport. As far as I know, we were to phone to confirm a meeting this evening."

"I regret that will not be possible," Choy told Quinn. "The doctor has been called away on urgent business on the mainland. He will not be available to consult with you until tomorrow morning. All has been arranged to provide for your comfort until then, however. Please come."

Quinn had learned long ago to trust his instincts and these told him that Choy was on the level. The eyes of corrupt men held deception. Choy's did not.

"Okay," Quinn said, shouldering his own bag. "Let's go."

The car that Choy had waiting for the investigators sent by the Interpol-affiliated task force was a Mercedes town car. Cracking the door for Ramsey, he placed their baggage in the Mercedes' trunk, then climbed

behind the wheel of the car. The heat of the tropical day was soon dispelled by the cool crispness of the limo's air conditioned interior.

Behind the wheel of the limo, Choy drove from the terminal and out onto the main highway where he accelerated to a cruising speed of seventy MPH. The route signs they passed indicated that they were heading toward the center of Hong Kong, the skyscrapers of which were visible against a backdrop of spectacular mountains.

Although the Chinese communists had taken over the former British protectorate in 1997, even the conservative Reds had not been stubborn enough to obstruct Hong Kong's potential as a capitalist city state.

Faced with the threat of a massive flight of capital and technology to other parts of the Pacific Rim that had been gathering steam for years prior to the changeover, the communists had left much of Hong Kong's economic infrastructure unchanged.

"Doctor Zhou has left instructions that you are to be made guests in his house," Choy said as he idled down after shifting into the left lane. "You may have the run of the place in his absence with all amenities available to you."

"How far is it to the doctor's place?" Ramsey asked.

"It is not far," Choy said as he slid into the right lane after passing a turnoff sign. "We will be there in only a few more minutes."

Doctor Zhou's house turned out to be one of the mansions perched on the heights above Repulse Bay. Choy rolled up a narrow dirt access road and parked the car in the mansion's garage. Exiting the limo he got out their baggage and ushered them into the house.

The interior of the house was as well appointed as its exterior was elegant. Zhou's mansion was decorated with taste and style in the classical European tradition of a bygone age. One wall, dominated by an immense flat high definition TV screen, served as the media center.

"Doctor Zhou has programmed a brief message for you," Choy said as he indicated the media center's console, giving directions on how to use it. "Please play it at your earliest convenience. As for the rest," he added, "do not hesitate to phone me if there is anything else I can do for you. I can be reached directly at the press of a call button."

"When can we meet the doctor?" Quinn asked Choy as he handed him the keys to the house and the Mercedes parked outside.

"All of that information is contained in the doctor's message," Choy politely told him before turning to leave. "It will adequately answer all your questions."

Moments later Quinn watched Choy pull a small Japanese compact from the car park and drive down onto the highway.

Minutes later, Doctor Zhou's face filled the large flat screen. Quinn and Ramsey sat watching and listening to his message.

The doctor explained that he had been called away from his work on important business in Beijing. One did not question the wisdom of the political elite on the mainland, and so the doctor had left with little advance notice. Zhou apologized for the inconvenience to the United Nations' emissaries, but it could not be helped.

He could assure them, however, that he would be available to answer any questions they had regarding Skyfire promptly the following morning.

He would be waiting for them at his residence on Shantung island, one of the outer islands of the Hong Kong mainland renamed since the '97 takeover. Choy would come to fetch them first thing in the morning, whereupon they would be shuttled to the island on the Lao Tzu, Zhou's private hydrofoil docked at the marina.

"I'm starved," Quinn told Ramsey after they had listened to Zhou's prerecorded message. "How about we head into Kowloon and grab some dinner. Unless things have changed drastically since the Chinese takeover, there's a place that serves the best snake on the island."

"I know the place you mean," Ramsey countered. "It is the Snake King Moon in Snake Alley. I have dined there often myself."

Quinn slid behind the wheel of the Mercedes and tooled the superbly crafted German car onto the highway. Zhou's house was located minutes away from where the action was in Hong Kong and the road signs were still mostly in English. They found a place to park on Nathan Road and walked the short distance to Snake Alley, a small street renowned for its many snake restaurants.

Neon blazed on the main drag, but the narrow street which Quinn and Ramsey turned onto was poorly lit. As they entered, Quinn got the feeling that unseen watchers were lurking in the shadows.

Turning, he could see no one following them, however. He attributed his paranoia to the unanticipated violence that had interfered with the investigation since its start in Rome. When the opposition played hardball, as on this case, paranoia could be a healthy state of mind.

Quinn found the Snake King Moon exactly where he'd recalled it as being located. The small restaurants' nondescript exterior would have been overlooked by any passerby not knowing precisely where to look. It bore no sign, and there was no other indication that the shopfront with black-painted windows was even an active business.

Quinn pushed open the door and was immediately surrounded by the hustle and bustle of a busy restaurant at the dinner hour. The smiling Chinese waiter ushered him in and seated them at the darkened rear at one of the few tables that were not occupied by patrons.

A snake was brought out and expertly skinned in a time-honored ritual before being served. The writhing serpent was promptly beheaded by the waiter, slit open and skinned in their presence before it was

brought back soon after, cooked to perfection. Quinn and Ramsey drank native beer while they waited for their snakes to be served.

"It takes some getting used to," Quinn mused as he sipped his beer, "but it's easy to get hooked on snake."

"Yes, I agree," Ramsey returned. "The meat has a subtle taste. The Chinese believe also that snake has remarkable curative and aphrodisiac properties."

After dining on snake breast meat stuffed with shelled shrimp and stir-fried shredded snake served with brazed chicken liver, they called for the check. The smiling Chinese waiter soon brought them a domed serving dish on a silver tray.

"Dessert is compliments of the house," he said as he set the tray down on a serving table and lifted the lid. Beneath it lay a Walther autopistol. Before Quinn or Ramsey could react, the waiter had the gun in his hand. With the drop on the pair of agents, he would have scored two fast Chinese takeouts had not a figure stepped quickly behind him and jammed a finely honed icepick into his ear with expert skill.

The waiter grunted and collapsed as the figure grabbed the Walther from the decorticated gunman's grip and steered the sagging Chinese toward a vacant booth.

"That's one you owe me, partner," Bruckner told them as Quinn scanned the restaurant. Seated at the darkened rear of the place few had noticed the commotion and patrons and management were only now beginning to glance their way with a mixture of curiosity and fear. "Now let's get out of here. We've got to talk," he went on.

With Bruckner in tow they hustled to their car and were soon lost in the maze of narrow streets feeding off Nathan Road. A few minutes later they pulled into another narrow alley where Bruckner indicated a door they were to enter.

The door gave into a corridor reeking of a mixture of various odors, none of them pleasant. A room opened off the corridor. It was crammed with sophisticated command, control, communications and intelligence gear.

"The place is ELINT-shielded and blast hardened," Bruckner said as he seated himself on one of the chairs placed here and there and indicating the two operatives to seat themselves too. "We can talk here."

"Talk about what?" asked Quinn who chose to stand.

"There's a lot to brief you on," Bruckner responded. "The first thing concerns the Skyfire command and control computer. What the CERT technicians first thought was the data bug was discovered a few days ago. Turns out that it's more like a "worm" than the simple Trojan they first believed."

Bruckner went on to explain how the CERT team made up of the world's top computer specialists was at work at that moment trying to purge the Skyfire ground control system of the rogue viral program.

The big problem was that the computer had armed STRIKE. With the computer's perimeter defensive system on the alert, the underground complex in Storm King Mountain had been turned into a fully mechanized deathtrap.

If anyone was aware of the potential of STRIKE it was Quinn, who had designed STRIKE from the ground up. Bruckner wanted to know now if there was any way to neutralize the system.

"Sure there is," Quinn told him. "Just turn it off. The computer has a security clearance code engineered into the architecture for just such a contingency. It's a built-in failsafe feature."

Bruckner shook his head. "No can do, Kemo Sabe," he answered with a shake of his head. "The virus -- or whatever the fuck it is -- has overridden the failsafe feature. It's closed every electronic back door into the system right in the programmers' faces. The entire system is locked down and completely self-contained."

"Then at this point my advice to you is to continue trying to purge the system of the virus," Quinn told Bruckner. "Don't challenge STRIKE except as a last resort. It's lethal. I know, I made STRIKE."

"That's what I was afraid you would say," Bruckner returned, then with a shrug added, "okay. I'll inform the CERT techs of what you just told me. Now it's your turn. Bring me up to date."

Quinn and Ramsey briefed Bruckner on the events in Rome, Brussels and most recently here in Hong Kong. They explained that Zhou would meet with them the following morning.

Bruckner sent the record of the conversation to the special command post beneath the White House via secure coded facsimile from where it would be unscrambled and disseminated to the U.N.-mandated Skyfire task force.

"One final point," Bruckner said before Quinn and Ramsey left the covert command center. "Koenig is now under twenty-four hour guard at a remote mountain estate. The Germans don't want anything happening to their hero of the moment. Koenig didn't like it but the Germans wouldn't hear of it. It's the heaviest security effort since they threw Speer in Spandau prison."

Quinn hoped it would be good enough to save Koenig's life.

FOURTEEN

At first light next morning, Choy appeared at Zhou's mansion, ready to drive his employer's guests to the marina. Quinn and Ramsey were already waiting for him.

Dr. Zhou's Man Friday drove the town car with the windows rolled down as the morning was still cool. It was late morning by the time they reached the marina some forty minutes later. The subtropical air was already beginning to turn hot and humid.

"There," Choy remarked, pointing to a sleek, low-draft craft berthed at one of the slips. "The captain should already be onboard and the Lao Tzu ready for immediate departure."

"The Lao Tzu," Quinn mused aloud. "Named after the ancient Chinese philosopher."

"Quite so," Choy answered. "Dr. Zhou is a believer in the ancient Way. He claims that it is the only religion compatible with the modern scientific age, an age in which man is reduced to a mere spectator of cosmic events."

"Zhou sounds like an interesting man," Ramsey put in.

"He quite is," replied Choy as he stepped back from the boarding plank. "Please come aboard."

The high-pitched keening of the hydrofoil's powerful turbines filled the air as the engines idled prior to departure.

Choy took the agents forward into the wheelhouse and introduced them to the captain, an amiable Chinese named Lu. The captain declared that the craft was ready to leave the slip.

Choy and Quinn hauled in the lines and Lao Tzu slowly began to pull away from the marina.

"Until we clear the channel and reach open water, we will use the turbines for propulsion in hullborne mode," Choy explained.

He pointed ahead to indicate the deep water channel demarcated by a procession of large buoys that stretched out into the middle of the water beyond the mainland of Hong Kong in a gentle S-curve.

In the distance, the blue-grey shapes of the outer islands were visible against the horizon, appearing much farther away than they actually were. "Once we clear the channel," Choy continued, "we can extend the hydrofoils and achieve maximum speed."

"Travel time?" Ramsey asked.

"Approximately twenty-five minutes," the captain responded, "depending on the wind and the tides."

"How secure is a craft like this?" Quinn asked, noting that there was a great deal of open water lying between the Hong Kong mainland and their destination, Shantung Island. "In twenty-five minutes a hell of a lot can happen."

"Quite so," Choy returned with a smile. "We are well aware of this fact," he answered. "That is why several security measures have been engineered into this custom-built craft. The hull, for example, is constructed of a special thermoplastic polymer, hard yet light in weight. All windows are capable of withstanding high-explosive strikes and are impervious to shrapnel. As for speed, you will witness for yourself the abilities of this craft once the channel is cleared."

"Impressive," Quinn admitted.

"Ah, but there is more," Choy went on, his smile growing broader still. "Come below. I will be pleased to show you."

Choy took Quinn aft and then down into a compartment belowdecks. The compartment took the form of a narrow cylinder, a vertical steel tube.

Inside the tube there stood a black leather swivel chair which was fastened to the deck by a circle of bolts around its base. A visored helmet and gloves of black fabric lay on the cushion of the chair.

"Here is what makes the Lao Tzu impregnable," Choy said with pride. "Its fire control system. The helmet features an eye-motion responsive virtual reality strike management interface with the onboard computer controlling the craft's defensive system. Armament includes Exocet missiles, a 20 mm Vulcan cannon and HARM anti-radar warheads. All of these can be actuated by means of the VRSM interface. I will demonstrate."

Strapping himself into the chair, Choy keystroked his protected access code into a small keypad on the armrest and put on the helmet and gloves. At the same time the chair rose on a pneumatic lift and

cantilevered blast shields made of high-carbon steel retracted with a whirr overhead to reveal a transparent hyperpolymer dome that was both bulletproof and blastproof.

"Now I'm really impressed," Quinn admitted to Zhou, grasping the principle behind the Lao Tzu's battle management system.

Strapped into the catbird seat, the weapon controller commanded a full three hundred sixty degree view onto which could be superimposed a computer-generated real time virtual reality threat display as well as available counterthreat options.

Both eye motions and gloves would enable the wearer to punch virtual "buttons" that would lock on and fire individual weapons systems selected from computer-generated icons.

The flexing of hand muscles inside the touch-sensitive gloves would produce an electronic feedback signal that would cause either hand's virtual counterpart to activate any or all of the weapons icons on the display and launch them into action.

"As you can see," Zhou told Quinn after lowering the command chair, powering down the system and stepping back onto the deck, "the craft is formidably armed and well secured. We are quite safe onboard the Lao Tzu."

The microsub carrying strike team Aquarius One stole through the murky waters of the broad deep-water channel.

Augmented by noise reduction technology, its powerful turbine engine gave the undersea personnel delivery craft the speed and lethal silence of a predatory shark.

The microsub had been following the Lao Tzu since the moment she had slid from her berth and angled her prow into the channel.

Three SCUBA-suited mercs with the stubby profiles of closed-circuit breathing apparatus on their backs were onboard the covert assault sub.

Scrubbed of all traces of carbon dioxide, nitrogen and other blood contaminants, the recycled air would generate no telltale bubbles that might give away the presence of the divers below.

The gear ported by the two mercs of Aquarius One which were to stage the strike also included silenced automatic weapons highly resistant to the harmful effects of exposure to seawater.

The weapons would not be required until the men had resurfaced and would remain safe until then.

The black, torpedo-shaped undersea personnel delivery craft pulled broadside of the keel of the Lao Tzu's hard-chine displacement hull as the vessel knifed a churning white swathe through the channel's waters.

The merc detail had planned the timetable for the strike to perfection, cognizant of the fact that only minutes remained before the hydrofoil cleared the channel and was out in the open sea.

Once this transition occurred and the craft shunted from conventional turbine power to hydrofoil propulsion, the Lao Tzu's hull would be lifted above the waterline and be moving at far too great a speed for them to overtake in the microsub.

Embarkation of the target craft would have to be accomplished before that time.

As far as Aquarius One went, this would not be a problem. The underwater merc duo was already swimming free of the microsub, adhering to the Lao Tzu's keel by pneumatic grapnel devices resembling large black suction cups that were strapped to wrists and knees.

Moments later, the two Aquarius strikers were clambering up over the gunwale of the Lao Tzu. The sound of their arrival masked by the throbbing of the craft's powerful engines and the noise of the salt wake, the merc duo boarded the Lao Tzu amidships and immediately unshipped their weapons.

Soon silenced automatic hardware bulked in their gloved fists. Tanks, masks and fins now stowed near the points where they had boarded, the two wetsuited mercs communicated by hand signals which targets in the wheelhouse dead ahead each striker was to take out.

Weapons in hand, they began moving stealthily toward the wheelhouse.

FIFTEEN

The merc shooter cursed.

The yawing of the vessel's deck was adversely affecting his aim. He gripped the bullpup configured close assault weapon firmly in both hands, sighted on his target through the reticle at the center of the top-mounted scope.

The merc assumed a more stable stance and tried to sight again. This time he got his man in line for a head shot, took a deep breath and began squeezing off a round, nice and easy, going by the numbers.

A sudden swell picked up the vessel and tossed it to one side as the bolt slammed into the firing pin and the round was discharged from the muzzle of the CAW. Even as the merc triggered a second round, he knew that he had blown his chance.

Burrowing into the deck instead of striking its target, the round intended to kill Quinn alerted him instead. Reflexes shunted Quinn into combat mode. Thought gave way to action.

Nomad was already diving for cover as he heard the crack of the first round and then heard the thud of the second round fired by the Aquarius striker wallop into the instrument panel behind him.

From a crouch, Quinn glimpsed the two figures in black wetsuits which had climbed aboard the Lao Tzu. Their element of surprise was now a non-starter. Studying their hardware from select-fire to fully automatic fire the Aquarius terminators were now going for the overkill option.

They were playing for keeps.

Resighting the bullpup-configured assault weapon, the Aquarius terminator prepared to open up again with a three-round salvo of caseless steel that would cycle out at 450 rounds per minute.

As he swung the truncated black plastic weapon to hip level, the Lao Tzu's captain cleared the channel and was out in open ocean. The craft's computer controlled automatic pilot instantly shunted over from standard prop turbopower into hydrofoil propulsion mode.

The Lao Tzu surged forward as its speed increased fivefold. Lift buoyancy raised its prow and keel off the level of surface chop on forward and aft hydrofoils.

The sudden shift into high speed mode pitched the two Aquarius strikers roughly to one side, toppling them over like ninepins and spoiling any chances of drawing an accurate bead on their targets.

Drenched with icy sea spray, the first of the merc hitters to regain his balance rose to a one-kneed crouch and managed to bring his weapon into play. A 2000/RPM burst of 4.73 mm caseless ammo flew wide of its mark, splintering the thermoplastic hull of the speeding craft but doing little other damage as it missed its intended victim by several feet.

"Hold her steady!" Quinn hollered at the captain as he whipped advanced design hardware of his own from beneath his windbreaker. Loaded with 5.70 mm high velocity rounds, the donut shaped P90 close assault weapon was ready for full-auto deployment.

The Lao Tzu's captain signaled to Quinn, holding up two splayed fingers to indicate assent. He was doing his level best to pour on the steam, pulling the throttles wide open, and keeping the craft on course.

Quinn dropped one of the two strikers with a 5.70 mm quickburst from the P90 CAW. The three-round butterfly of spinning steel punched its way through heart and lung tissue at high velocity with punishing force.

As the slugs impacted on their targets, Merc One was hurled to one side. Hydrostatic shock of rapid energy transfer from flying metal to stationary human tissue caused his lungs and spleen to break apart inside his body with rupturing force. A gaping exit wound was testament to the killing power of the 5.70s.

Toppling over sideways in an ungainly tangle of thrashing legs and arms, he teetered for a moment on the verge of plunging into the foaming wake of the speeding seacraft, then was swept to his death in a cloud of spray.

The second merc was still in the action, though, and meaning to survive the unforeseen crimp in Aquarius One's neatly plotted tactical scenario.

The small black APERS grenade he pulled from a clip on the utility belt at his waist was a deadly antipersonnel submunition with a wide splinter radius.

The merc pitched the grenade and Nomad dived to one side, taking cover behind a bulkhead before the grenade exploded and a deadly cocoon of preformed steel shrapnel showered the impact zone.

Quinn was up like a jack in the box a moment later, throwing lethal heat the merc's way. Part of the zigzagging P90 burst caught Merc Two across the belly, effectively cutting him in half.

The merc did a goofy kind of dance as life spewed in a red gush from the bleeding gouge that had been slashed across his midsection by the jackhammering 5.70s. Crashing into a radio pylon amidships, the merc ended his spastic death pavane as he slid down to the deck and landed on his face.

Quinn heaved the limp form of the terminated hitter over the side of the Lao Tzu, into the drink to join his partner.

Rushing back to the prow of the speeding craft, Quinn found the helmsman collapsed against the pilot's seat and Choy lying on the deck nearby.

While unsuccessful in achieving its primary objectives, the assault of Aquarius One had claimed some victims nonetheless. Slug fragments from the bullpup assault weapons had severed one of the major arteries in Choy's neck and he was now permanently out of the running.

"Choy gave me the access code for the boat's defense system before he caught a slug," Ramsey said. She hastily relayed the alphanumeric code to Quinn.

Quinn had a hunch that the Lao Tzu's defense system would prove to be necessary before too long. The merc assassination try had obviously been designed to go down quickly and with a minimum of force expended.

Quinn knew that if he himself had planned the take-out party then he would certainly have backup waiting in the wings in case the op turned sour.

Soon, damn soon, that backup would be due to arrive on scene.

"I see something!" Ramsey shouted, pointing to starboard as the hydrofoil roared past two small islands -- more like big, partially submerged rocks -- that lay just beyond the mouth of the channel.

Three sleek, black CAT-type low-draft pursuit craft had suddenly appeared. They had apparently been berthed behind the concealment of the small islands, ready to take over after the Lao Tzu exited the channel in the event that the two-man merc team failed to carry out their mission.

"What do we do now?" asked Ramsey as she stared at the second wave of fast-closing merc terminators. "Turn back?"

"Negative," Quinn replied with a shake of his head, casting an anxious glance at the pursuit craft which were drawing closer with each passing second.

He knew that turning back now would be playing right into the hands of the enemy. "Can you keep her on course?"

"Yes, I think so," Ramsey answered him. "According to what the captain told me, the Lao Tzu has a sophisticated computer navigation system. She'll take us automatically to our destination. All I really have to do is keep an eye on the controls."

"Do that, then," Quinn said to Ramsey. "I'm going belowdecks to see what kind of armament this thing has."

Quinn was down below a couple of seconds later.

Using the access code and following the procedures that Choy had used in his demonstration of the ship's onboard VRSM system, Quinn strapped himself into the catbird seat and placed the virtual reality helmet on his head after donning the gloves. The chair moved upward as the cantilevered armored blast shield slid back from the shrapnel-proof observation dome above him.

Now Quinn could see the chase craft closing in on the Lao Tzu through the clear hyperpolymer bubble.

Studding the fire control interface system to life, Quinn immediately saw a multicolored graphical computer display superimposed above the real-world scene visible to his naked eyes, almost like a translucent film overlay.

As the defense system's laser target designators electronically interrogated all hardware in the area using IFF conventions and locked onto the threats, each of the three speedboats on Quinn's tail appeared on his virtual reality screen designated as colored icons.

Both the threat icons and the icon representing the Lao Tzu were accurately shown with respect to their actual speeds and positions.

To the left and right axes of the virtual eyes-up display, columns of numerical readouts flashed constantly updated information pertaining to speed, estimated time of contact and other pertinent tactical data.

At the bottom end of the computer-generated tactical display, a row of icons represented the various weapons available to Quinn, including 20 mm Vulcan fire, HARM anti-radar missiles and Exocet sea skimming anti-ship rockets. A flashing arrow cursor could be moved to any of the weapons icons at will, as the cursor responded to the movement of Quinn's eyeballs.

When the weapons icon was highlighted by the cursor, the weapon could be activated and fired at any of the targets, identifying the weapons deployed against it.

Three hundred yards behind the Lao Tzu, the operations manager onboard the point craft shouted into the compact comms unit clutched in his hand.

The merc codenamed Aquarius ordered the two other craft to hold their fire.

His point craft would be the one to initiate contact.

Aquarius next commanded the other mercs to deploy one of the man-portable SMAW, shoulder launched, multipurpose assault weapon systems carried onboard.

The SMAW fired a variety of warheads for an assortment of combat roles. The SMAW tube now ported by the merc in the speedboat was equipped with a laser guided, heat-seeking warhead.

Once the shooter acquired the target, seeing the prompt in his scope reticle, he depressed the trigger. The warhead whooshed from the SMAW's muzzle in a flash as its stabilizer vanes snapped into position. The onboard IR sensor took over, terminally guiding the missile to the engine of the Lao Tzu with yawing burns of rocket exhaust.

Quinn saw the yellow flash on the icon of the lead pursuit craft which quickly turned into an icon of a missile in flight. A broken line of glowing dashes signaled the computer's projection of the SMAW round's attack profile envelope.

By means of eye motions, Quinn immediately moved his weapons control cursor across the screen, merged it with the icon representing the Vulcan cannon, and selected the Vulcan by clicking on the icon. READY flashed the message beside the icon.

The high-tech version of the Gatling gun was capable of setting up a flak front of twenty-millimeter armor piercing hard core rounds. The APHCs were capable of detonating any incoming warhead before it reached its target.

With a solid computer lock on the incoming SMAW round, the Vulcan gun began spitting out 20 mm APHCs, targeting in on the oncoming SMAW warhead with constant updates on speed and trajectory of the ICW.

The SMAW warhead vectored directly into the cloud of spinning APHCs thrown up by the Vulcan cannon.

As a result of the intervention of Vulcan fire, the SMAW's IR seeker head sustained a direct frontal burst resulting in an explosion that disintegrated the SMAW round in a flash of incandescence. The CAT high-speed interceptor craft skimmed the surface of the sea through the low-hanging pall of noxious black smoke and intense heat generated by the explosion.

The operations manger onboard the lead CAT code-named Aquarius had been briefed that the Lao Tzu was equipped with sophisticated defensive equipment. The mercmaster had intended the first strike as a trial balloon, a live-fire test of the system's counterthreat capability.

Through compact field glasses the Aquarius commander saw that more firepower was needed to blow the Lao Tzu out of the water.

He quickly ordered two more SMAWs to be loaded with IR seeking terminally guided munitions and fired at the swiftly moving escape craft ahead of his waterborne strike unit.

In addition, the electrically powered GE Miniguns mounted on the sleek prows of all three CATs were to commence throwing their high velocity 7.62 mm automatic fire at the Lao Tzu.

As the SMAW birds left their pipes, Quinn found himself confronted with a multitude of threat variables on his virtual screen. Several weapons at once were being fired at him and the electronic environment was cluttered.

Sweat gathered on Quinn's brow as he struggled to counter the multiple threats. Although he deployed Vulcan and a variety of missiles, one SMAW exploded close enough to the Lao Tzu to damage its aft hydrofoil. The speeding vessel shuddered as it violently slewed to one side before navigational computers corrected trim.

"Quinn!" he heard Ramsey's voice shout in his headset. "Can you hear me?" she asked.

"Loud and clear," Quinn returned.

"We're losing power," she shouted. "I think that last strike sheared off part of our aft foil."

"Keep her moving," Quinn returned. "Our forward foil alone can get us to the island. Just make sure the nav computer compensates for the damaged aft foil."

Although Quinn tried to sound confident, he wasn't. One more near miss like that and chances were good they'd wind up blasted all over the South China Sea.

SIXTEEN

The second strike team deployed by Aquarius had already made landfall on Shantung Island.

The silenced Zodiacs had been beached and the black-clad strikers deployed inland beneath the cover of the dense early morning mists that hung over the land surface and made unaugmented visual detection difficult.

The house was a former Trappist monastery converted for use as Zhou's personal dwelling.

The Skyfire tech found the Spartan atmosphere of the ancient monastery conducive to his work and he valued the isolation afforded him by the island.

Zhou's personal fortune, derived from his research and development of high-tech munitions systems for China's government-owned arms export bureau, Norinco, allowed him to afford a private army of security guards.

They came with the ruling communist party's blessing. Zhou was too valuable an asset to waste.

Doctor Lionel Zhou wished he had the eyes of a younger man as he watched the pretty Laotian's head move back and forth over his belly through a film of cataracts.

She had begun by using her hands on which she had rubbed sweetly scented oils. Her supreme mastery of the ancient Shiatzu pressure points, learned from her childhood apprenticeship in Hong

Kong's notorious Song houses, was unmatched by any of the others whom he'd employed in recent memory.

Zhou considered himself fortunate to have acquired the Laotian's services.

Once her hands had accomplished their task, bringing new life to the old man's yielding body, the girl brought her mouth into play.

Her lips were like the wings of the Monarch butterfly as she used both these and her long, thin fingers on him.

Soon Zhou was responding as the woman's clients always did.

The three-merc Aquarius penetration crew deployed into the strike perimeter silently and swiftly. Black tactical face masks made of high-tensile strength Kevlar, with slits for eyes and mouth, concealed their faces.

The 5.56 mm AUGs in their black gloved hands wore sound- and flash-suppressed Hush Puppy-type dress. Concentric chamber design incorporated shoot-through baffles to decrease muzzle flash and report to the barest of minimums.

Each AUG already contained a live round in the pipe and was studded for full-auto fire capability.

Death's messengers would strike with a lethal whisper.

With the precise movements of covert professionals, the Aquarius terminators scaled the high stone perimeter wall surrounding Zhou's house. The three perimeter guards encountered at various points on the other side of the wall were taken completely by surprise.

The silenced AUGs wheezed and the sentries were speedily cut down. The dead guards were then dragged from their positions and concealed behind the cover of nearby shrubbery. This was a temporary measure but it would serve to minimize the risk of detection for the duration of the strike.

The kill team moved on through the low-hanging ground fog, converging on the house. Soon they had reached the main entrance of the converted monastery building. Two more guards, armed with autorifles, stood posts here, oblivious to the slayers which stalked them from the swirling eddies of mist.

Selecting their targets, two of the Aquarius shooters tripped the bolts on waiting 5.56s.

Blowback took care of the rest.

Barely audible, the next AUG quickbursts claimed the lives of these inner guardians. Shuddering from the impact of the SS109 tumblers, the terminated sentries went down and lay sprawled in twisted heaps as the ground fog crept over their lifeless forms.

The strike leader smiled.

This was a pushover.

Overdependence on manpower and the complete absence of passive IR, long-range TV or laser perimeter alarm sensors had made penetration a simple matter of pumping a few rounds into a few live bodies. The merc was confident that the remainder of the penetration and death strike would be even simpler.

The doors of the house appeared to be made of oak, but the mercs' intel had confirmed that beneath the wooden veneer lay two inches of high-carbon steel.

No problem there either.

The strike team commander unshipped a prism charge from the musette bag at his waist. The prismatic configuration of the plastic would generate a shaped explosion, funnelling the blast energy of the detonating submunition into a precisely delineated zone of high lethality.

The merc keyed the LED timer on the prism charge for a five second delay and flattened himself against the wall of the building, well away from the direction of any residual blast effect.

As the commando crew waited for the charge to blow, the three strikers stuffed expanding plugs into their ears.

Seconds later, the heavy steel doors blew inward with a muffled report, the echoes of which quickly faded from hearing as the plate steel imploded into petals of ruptured metal under the fierce concussive power of the shaped prism charge.

Even before the acrid blast smoke cleared, the strike leader tossed two black cylinders into the ground floor level. They were sonic disrupters. The disrupters emitted piercing waves of highly disorienting noise.

With the plugs in their ears, the Aquarius strikers were protected from the incapacitating effects of the disrupters. Unlike them, the three protectors inside the house were not.

Taken off guard, they were caught clapping their hands to their ears as the merc crew darted into the ruptured interior.

Each of the three mercs swiftly acquired a target as the banshee shriek of the disrupters split the air. The sound-suppressed AUGs wheezed once again dispensing the verdict of noiseless termination. Three more were added to the mission's body count as the automatic time delay of the disrupters switched off the disabling noise.

Now each of the three Aquarius strikers deployed in search of the individual whose destruction they'd been tasked with carrying out. The house filled with the cadence of combat boots thumping the floor in search of human prey.

One merc hustled up the stairs onto the balcony that circumscribed the ground floor and began kicking in the doors that fronted the balcony railing.

Another merc hustled past the stairs into the kitchen behind them and proceeded to search the rooms in the right wing of the house.

The strike leader took the left wing and the rear of the building. He got lucky right away.

The Skyfire tech was sprawled in his Jacuzzi in the tub room at the back of the house. The old man was partially blind. His eyes were milk-white moonstones in a long face that was ashen with fear as he turned his head to and fro.

A burst of AUG fire caught the naked Laotian whore who was scrambling to escape through a window between the shoulder blades. She fell backwards and landed across the exercycle behind her, her back arched and her outstretched arms swinging limply.

Though almost completely sightless, Zhou had ears and a keen mind. He knew precisely what was taking place and understood the desperateness of the situation he was in.

"No!" Zhou cried out at his unseen assailant. "Please. I have money. I will give you -- "

A silenced autoburst cut short the tech's pathetic pleas and made the old man shudder in the hot tub as the swirling white waters became tinged with curling rivulets of his jetting blood.

"No deal," the killer permitted himself the pleasure of saying to the taken-down tech.

His mission accomplished, the Aquarius strike leader had one final task to perform before he and his raiders extracted from the killzone.

He unshipped the trio of black cylinders and armed each high explosive mine before placing them at triangle points throughout the tub room.

The controlled fragmentation devices were equipped with passive IR triggers which would become operational after an interval configurable by means of a timer touch pad. The antipersonnel submunitions would explode when any newcomers entered the tub room.

Extracting from the operational perimeter the Aquarius strike team deployed in reverse, proceeding to retrace their steps toward their beached and camouflaged landing craft.

Wary of unforeseen surprises they kept their combat senses sharp and their AUGs at the ready but encountered no opposition.

Boarding the Zodiacs, the team moved out on the tide to the yacht anchored offshore.

The leader of the strike team pulled the black tactical face mask up over his head as he climbed onboard the yacht. He wiped away the sweat that had collected on his brow with the back of his hand and helped the next merc over the gunnel.

When the other two members of his team had safely boarded the yacht the Zodiac was also winched onboard. The strike leader looked up at the mission's operation manager who stood on the bridge and flashed him the thumbs-up.

"Any problems?" the operation manager asked the Aquarius strike team's leader. The point merc recognized the op manager as the operative who was code-named Taurus.

A thin cheroot glowed in Taurus' mouth as he inhaled and then let the smoke swirl out through his nostrils in twin curling streams.

Taurus was not taking any more risks with throwaways and fuckups. Taurus was micromanaging the operation this time around.

"None whatsoever, sir," the Aquarius team's top merc replied. "Everything checked out."

"Okay, good job. There'll be a bonus in it for you. Get your ass below," the operation manager barked in response. Then Taurus spun on his heels and strode toward the helmsman in the wheelhouse.

Speaking quickly, he issued immediate orders to exit the area of Shantung Island.

As the yacht got underway, Wild Bill Bruckner cast his soulless blue eyes over Shantung island and smiled toothily, flipping the ash from his cigar into the ship's wake as its screws churned the water into a broiling mass.

SEVENTEEN

The lead CAT high-speed interceptor craft closed fast on the speeding hydrofoil.

While the lead CAT's prow gunner hammered out withering 7.62 mm Minigun autofire, the gunner's mate acquired the Lao Tzu in the laser scope of the man portable SMAW launcher and let fly the terminally guided round.

The IR-seeking missile went streaking away on a laser-designated trajectory at the Lao Tzu. As the warhead exited the launch tube, Quinn saw the computer icon flash to indicate that an ICW was airborne.

Quinn immediately selected the high performance Vulcan gun as a countermeasure.

As soon as Vulcan began chattering out its 20 mm salvos, Quinn also selected an air-to-surface Exocet missile and targeted the ASCM, anti-ship capable missile, on the pursuing point craft.

Fire from the Vulcan successfully exploded the SMAW round at the apex of its flight trajectory.

Quinn received a kill confirm as the dotted line on his eyes-up display described the course of the Exocet as the ASCM skimmed on a low, radar evading flight trajectory over the surface of the sea.

The flanking CAT craft maneuvered out of the way but the Exocet's seeker head had obtained a good, solid lock on the CAT's heat signature.

The speedboat's prow gunner swung the Minigun from the Lao Tzu and now aimed at the ASCM round as the rocket propelled warhead skimmed over the water on its low angle of elevation attack profile.

With a rush of adrenaline, the CAT shooter realized that he was unable to acquire the target.

Proximity fuzed, the Exocet warhead detonated well within the blast radius that would expose the CAT interceptor boat to deadly shrapnel and high-yield explosive shock waves.

The explosion ripped through the hull amidships on the starboard side of the craft.

A churning balloon of flame rose up over the surface of the water as the CAT was smashed to kindling.

The three mercs onboard the craft were killed as blast effect tore off their limbs and blew the mutilated dead into charred hunks of flash-broiled meat.

A flaming cloud of splintered wreckage rose high up into the air before raining down again in small spinning pieces toward the burning surface of the sea.

GOOD KILL, flashed the message on the Lao Tzu's strike management eyes-up display as the icon of the kayoed chase craft blinked out.

That left the point craft and the other surviving flanking craft as contenders Nomad still had to deal with. In the aftermath of the successful Exocet strike neither were taking any chances. They had witnessed first-hand the pure havoc that could be unleashed by the Lao Tzu's sophisticated fire control system.

The merc honcho onboard the lead pursuit craft issued orders for all weapons systems to be brought to bear on the Lao Tzu. The gunners promptly opened up with their prow-mounted Miniguns. SMAW launchers were readied, aimed and fired.

Whizzing steel-jacketed 7.62 mm rounds roared through the air, the tracers glowing as they struck the Lao Tzu's hull at a cycling rate of 6,000 rounds per minute.

The Exocet round having now been expended, Quinn countered this new offensive with more of the Vulcan fire that had been so effective in blowing ICWs out of the air before onboard missile systems blew the craft which had launched them out of the water.

Vulcan again proved an effective countermeasure, the 20 mm flak front it threw up knocking out the IR-seeking warheads which all exploded well before they could detonate on target.

As more SMAWs were fired in rapid succession from the two surviving CAT interceptor craft, Quinn clicked on the Lao Tzu's SCLAR capability.

The dense-packed multiple launcher was capable of computer-controlled simultaneous or staggered launch of multicaliber rocket rounds.

The two SCLAR launchers located to port and starboard of the Lao Tzu each carried thirty rocket rounds of various calibers apiece.

As both Vulcan fire and SCLAR rounds met the SMAW warheads in mid course and took them out, the Lao Tzu's onboard computer allotted the remaining SCLAR rockets to the task of neutralizing the threat of the two remaining CAT pursuit craft still coming on and still throwing Minigun fire.

Before the two chase craft could counter with more brilliant rounds, Quinn expended the remaining SCLAR rockets in a phased burst that was locked onto the IR signatures of the two fast-moving CATs.

Although both speedboats began immediate evasive action, the high explosive warheads fired by Nomad were accurately aimed.

Most struck their targets with perfect coordination and precision.

Twin fireballs merged into a single massive pillar of fire that towered over the surface of the ocean, thundering like an angered sea god disturbed from his eternal sleep.

Obscured by choking black clouds, behind the Lao Tzu the remains of the wrecked CATs were now completely enveloped in flames. There were no survivors. All Aquarius strike personnel onboard the pursuit craft had been wiped out by superior precision-targeted firepower.

Quinn now climbed out of the catbird seat and hightailed it to the prow of the Lao Tzu.

Ramsey, at the helm, had been following the progress of the entire firefight via the Lao Tzu's starboard-located long-range TV capability.

Ramsey pointed ahead through the windshield at a spot on the horizon. "What do you make of that?" she asked Quinn.

Turning his head in the direction she indicated, Quinn was just able to discern the silhouette of a fast ship already some miles distant from Shantung island. The vessel was producing a yacht-sized blip on the Lao Tzu's radar.

He didn't like what he saw because there was no apparent reason for the craft to be where it was.

Shantung island was now only a few thousand feet from their position and the Lao Tzu's automatic pilot beeped to indicate that the Lao Tzu was now being returned to manual steering control.

Taking over the helm, Quinn found the landing easily. Throttling down, he maneuvered the Lao Tzu into the slip a few minutes later. Ramsey got out then and Quinn tossed her the lines which she made fast to the dock.

Drawing their weapons Quinn and Ramsey deployed toward the house which they could now discern beyond the line of jungle foliage at the end of the beach, its upper stories visible from the slightly higher ground on which it stood.

But Shantung island itself was strangely quiet. The eerie stillness was broken every now and then by the cawing of a bird or the rustling of tropical leaves in the stiff sea wind, but there was no other indication of human habitation. Quinn didn't like the look and feel of the mission environment.

Soon they discovered the terminated sentries and knew already that Zhou had fallen victim to the covert assassins that had been checking the boxes of Skyfire technicians all across the globe.

Entering the compound of the house by inserting Lee's computer key card into the slot at the deserted entranceway which unlocked the ponderous main gate, they entered beyond the perimeter wall.

A check of the perimeter revealed one of the terminated sentries behind a row of squat shrubbery. Ramsey bent to touch the guard's neck but Quinn warned her away. He stepped back and hurled a stone onto the center of the dead sentry's stomach.

The trembler-switched submunition that had been placed beneath the body, sensitive to the slightest movement, instantly went off, hurling the body into the air.

Quinn and Ramsey moved with renewed caution toward the house. They found the lifeless Zhou in the Jacuzzi which had already circulated the bloodstained water through its system.

The body was jerking back and forth under the power of the circulating water jet, the head nodding and hands waving in an eery parody of life as the body was buffeted to and fro by the mechanical action of the water impacting on it.

As he stooped to inspect Zhou's remains, Quinn spotted one of the three IR-triggered antipersonnel mines that the Aquarius team leader had placed in the tub room, distracting him from his scrutiny of what appeared at first glance to be a Chinese ideogram that had been scrawled beside the tub in what he presumed was Zhou's own blood. Reacting quickly, Quinn grabbed Ramsey and pushed her ahead of him toward the doorway.

Together they hit the polished stone floor just as the delayed-action APERS mines detonated, producing a simultaneous shock wave and splinter zone that would have ripped apart any living thing in the tub room caught inside the lethal blast radius. Although Quinn and Ramsey had escaped destruction, any additional clues on or near Zhou's person had now also been successfully wiped out.

EIGHTEEN

Storm King Mountain.

The CERT team was being given a run for its money. The virus infecting the Skyfire Network Command Center's (SFNCC) Cray 2010 system had armed the base's STRIKE perimeter defense system.

STRIKE had been conceived as a fail-soft, fault-tolerant umbrella against terrorist attacks, a fully integrated standoff weapons system that was self-implementing and capable of neutralizing a broad spectrum of terrorist offensives.

Software driven, STRIKE went beyond "smart" or even "brilliant." Artificial intelligence (AI) coprocessing gave it the capability of selecting from preprogrammed offensive scenarios, assessing threat levels and automatically initiating counterthreat response by deploying a mix of lethal antipersonnel devices.

Quinn had been instrumental in the STRIKE system's design and had oversight for firms contracted out to manufacture components of STRIKE which had been built to his exacting specifications.

Because SFNCC's Cray 2010 had turned on STRIKE, the underground C3 complex was now a maze studded with deadly weapons. The core of the system, the Cray's CPU at Node Zero -- SFNCC's central command center -- was now a dangerous place to be.

Since the CPU was the heart of Skyfire C3 it was protected by multiple weapon arrays. At the same time, the CERT techs needed access to the CPU to perform critical anti-viral procedures.

It was therefore a matter of urgency to disarm STRIKE, or at least the portion of the system tasked with protecting the Skyfire CPU.

Suiting up in a special rig, one of the CERT technicians was preparing to do precisely that.

The suit was actually a sophisticated remote control unit for an advanced design robotic drone known as a teleoperator.

Every physical motion made by the tech wearing the suit could be translated by telekinetic sensors into identical actions made by a seven foot robot, hardened against ionizing radiation, explosive blast and highly resistant to splinter-zone antipersonnel ordnance.

Video, passive IR and laser sensors emplaced on the robot drone relayed input in a variety of modes by means of a lightweight eyephone rig worn over the technician's head.

As the tech put the drone through its paces, he raised his arm. The drone mimicked his actions. He raised a leg, nodded his head and balled his right hand into a clenched fist. The teleoperator drone followed suit, checking out perfectly.

"Okay, take her in," the tech in the teleoperator rig heard the voice of Jack Redding, SFNCC's Director of Operations who was watching from his office overlooking the main operational level of the base, known as "the Pit."

In Redding's hand was a small comms unit by which he could talk to the tech.

Aside from the tech and the drone, the Pit was occupied by only a handful of other personnel. It had been deemed too dangerous to position STRIKE weapons in the vicinity of highest base activity and so the central control bay was still deemed relatively low-risk.

Nevertheless, there were antipersonnel lasers and nerve gas nozzles that might be activated by the virus at any moment. All personnel in the Pit now worked on a needs-only basis.

"Roger that," Redding heard the tech respond. A moment later, the director saw the hulking armored steel drone shambling toward the most dangerous part of the STRIKE system.

The robot was moving into the AKZ, the automated killing zone that was controlled by advanced design STRIKE weapons, threat sensors and AI-driven computers.

The drone's mission was to deactivate the banks of laser weapons, hyperkinetic guns and other defensive systems designed to neutralize terrorist intruders. Primarily intended to deal with human threats, it was hoped that the heavily armored drone could disable STRIKE's most lethal weapons.

With the clank of metal on floor tile, the drone shambled into a sterile corridor that looked no different from any of the other passageways linking the various C3 nodes of SFNCC.

It was the only corridor that permitted access to the Skyfire CPU and it was designed to put a terrorist strike crew at ease -- until it was too late, that is.

The corridor was known as the AKZ or automated killing zone. It was not what it appeared to be. Behind the ceiling, deck and walls of the passageway lurked an array of deadly antipersonnel weapons systems designed to make mincemeat out of any and all intruders.

Moments after the drone entered the corridor, the trap was sprung.

Concealed blast doors slid down at either end of the corridor, sealing it off from the rest of the base, trapping the drone inside it as panels in walls, ceiling and deck retracted to deploy mankilling antipersonnel devices.

Through the video eyes of the drone, the tech saw the first of the laser weapons deployed by the AKZ descending from the ceiling just ahead of him.

Instantly, the tech raised his arms and used his eyeballs to click on the virtual radio button that would send out 7.62 mm automatic fire from the machinegun muzzles built into each of the drone's palms.

The tech heard the sound of ratcheting as the rounds let fly at the laser gun just as a beam of red coherent light lanced down toward the drone. The tech's video broke up for a second and then sharpened to focus again and the tech could see his MG fire shattering the laser cannon as he heard a deafening boom and clouds of thick smoke filled his field of view.

"Nice going," Redding, who had been following the situation on his own eyephones said into his comms unit. "You sustain any damage?"

"Yeah," the tech said back seconds later. "The drone took a hit in the midsection. I'm having trouble getting it to move."

"Pull out," Redding urgently advised.

"Negative," the tech returned. "The drone's locked in there. Nothing to do but go for broke. I'm -- *oh shit!*"

Redding and the tech both saw the multiple grenade launcher suddenly pop up from the deck of the AKZ and begin cranking out 40 mm high explosive rounds. Before the tech could counter, the drone was walloped by successive punches of armor piercing blast and shrapnel.

There was a sudden flash in both pairs of eyephones, simultaneous with the echoing roar of an explosion before the video link cut out entirely and each eyephone raster went completely blank.

"What the hell happened?" the tech heard Redding shout in his ear beneath a crackle of static.

The tech took it all with good humor. Considering the damage he knew the AKZ was capable of inflicting, the almost fifty-eight seconds that the drone had lasted wasn't too bad an accomplishment.

"Nothing much," the tech said back, "except that a ten million dollar piece of equipment just got totally trashed."

Just then the blast doors of the sterile corridor slid back into concealed spaces in the ceilings. STRIKE had neutralized the threat and detected no further ones.

Inside the AKZ, enormous fans had already blown all traces of toxic blast gases into special filters and retracted all weapons systems into their hidden compartments.

In the center of the sterile corridor lay the shattered and heat-scorched wreckage of the armored robot drone.

Wild Bill Bruckner again arrived at the installation that was codenamed Castle. As usual the rogue intelligence operative found himself in awe of the grandeur of the clandestine hardbase. To him Castle symbolized the incarnation of power, the embodiment of Alpha's will to make his vision of global power a reality.

Alpha awaited the merc codenamed Taurus. He was to be fully briefed on the outcome of the operations thus far.

Although Alpha was shrewd enough to have already checked out everything that had gone down, it was in keeping with his character to be certain that no detail of the operation had been left to chance.

Now Bruckner faced Alpha eyeball to eyeball. He was one of the few trusted to come into Alpha's presence.

Bruckner had come to realize that Alpha was a genius with the power to envision the future and see what lesser men could not and would not see. A man who was destined to lead the world into a bold, if savage, tomorrow.

Alpha had revealed a group of minds attuned to a vision of the future in which those who possessed knowledge, wealth and power ruled those who were born to follow.

It had been an old vision.

Almost a century before, the Nazi SS had espoused it in a somewhat different form. Recognizing a winner's philosophy, America had absorbed the infrastructure of the Nazi elite and had incorporated its genius, thought Bruckner.

The men who had put American astronauts on the moon and designed what was to become the Space Shuttle and its offspring, the Space Plane, had come from the ranks of the original Aryan believers.

Through DAYBREAK, that vision would soon transform history itself.

"You may proceed, Taurus," Alpha said to Bruckner as the merc honcho entered and prepared himself to brief his leader. "We are most anxious to listen to your report."

NINETEEN

Bavaria, Germany.

The chill morning rain lashed Quinn's face as he jogged through the primeval forest. The forest was deep, mysterious and brooding. The rain had begun as a slight drizzle but had intensified steadily until it became a full-fledged downpour.

Quinn had run on through the drenching rain. The cold bite of the fat droplets sharpened his senses and attuned his mind to the secrets hidden in the evergreen forest.

These woods were full of ghosts, Quinn knew. They were the ghosts of Germany's long-dead past.

It was here in these very same woods that the remnants of Adolf Hitler's once triumphant forces were to stage their final redoubt under a plan drawn up by the Nazi *Reichsfuhrer* Heinrich Himmler.

As he looked around him, Quinn had no doubt that the hard core of the German SS could have put up a long and bloody, if foredoomed fight in these ancient hills, had Eisenhower's forces not closed in fast, preventing the Nazi redoubt from materializing according to Himmler's plans.

Still, some elements of the Reich did put up a last-ditch fight here and Quinn could almost hear the ghosts of Allied paratroops and the final diehard SS units as they fought the final *Gotterdammerung* of the Third Reich in these high, pine-forested mountains.

Quinn ran until he pushed himself to the limits of physical endurance, determined to run on until he hit "the wall" if need be and was forced to stop.

The perplexing assignment had drained his mental and physical reserves. Quinn knew that he had already hit another kind of wall with the execution of Zhou -- the final Skyfire tech, aside from Koenig himself, to remain alive.

Quinn needed to sort out the details, empty himself of all contradictions. He had to find his center and once there arrive at the essence of the truth.

Pushing his body to the maximum, he kept up a punishing pace, hurling himself forward until his every muscle ached, until he was close to hitting the wall.

Quinn would exert every ounce of speed and energy he could muster in order to push out the poisons in his cells and his brain.

The killers of the Skyfire technicians had been one step ahead of him and Bruckner's female ground asset all the time. It was almost as if the sinister and mysterious opposition had known their every move in advance.

Quinn was left with only the most tenuous of clues. "Castle" was foremost among these.

Though he had wracked his brain and hacked his way into global database networks in an attempt to trace the name or reference, Quinn as yet had no inkling as to what Castle could mean.

Was it a place? Did it describe some covert weapons development program? Or was Castle the code name of a clandestine operative? A killer perhaps, the mastermind behind what he had come to refer to by now as "the Skyfire kills?"

The dogged search through the databases had yielded nothing to enlighten him. Nowhere was Castle referenced. Yet this fact alone was of high significance, Quinn believed.

It was as if someone had gone to extraordinarily great lengths to expunge any mention of Castle. As though someone wanted Castle to remain unknown and invisible.

Which could mean that Castle was something too big or too important to merit even the smallest of leaks.

Yet the bloody Chinese character on the floor of the tub room that Zhou had managed to scrawl in the moments of life remaining before death claimed him had also turned out to be the ideogram for "Castle."

That Zhou had undoubtedly struggled with his last reserves of waning strength to scrawl this single ideogram and no other meant that he attached special significance to it.

What was the meaning of this phraseword, Quinn wondered? What tied it to the murders of the Skyfire techs?

At this stage only Koenig out of all the Skyfire scientists still remained alive.

Quinn sensed that Koenig was the key or *held* the key to the solution of the puzzle that confronted Quinn. Maybe he would discover from Koenig the missing pieces that he needed.

Quinn reached a clearing in the woods from which he had a view of a pine-studded Alpine ridge. He had finally hit his runner's wall. With the rain now beginning to taper off again and the sun coming out, he sat and rested on a big lichen-encrusted boulder.

Suddenly he saw the glint of something reflecting the sunlight through the pine trees growing in a coppice between himself and the ridge.

Curious, he stood and stared toward where he'd seen the sudden flash. The flash was not repeated. Was it the window of a car passing on an Autobahn winding through these hills that had caused the flash of light?

If so, then why had he noticed no other flashes before or after? The event piqued Quinn's curiosity.

He decided to investigate, if for no other reason than to relieve the pressure of grappling with the insolvable problem of the unexplainable terminations of the Skyfire research team.

Quinn had not gone into the woods unarmed. The lightweight yet lethal Uzi Micro MP was worn behind his back in a breakaway holster.

Hidden beneath his sweatshirt it was instantly accessible from its special Velcro rig.

Suddenly Quinn heard squealing sounds in the distance echoing through the Alpine woods.

A little further on he came upon a wild boar caught in a snare trap, a kind usually set as an antipersonnel device.

Further on there was evidence of an encampment in a small box canyon screened from view by an entrance so narrow it appeared to be a crevice in the rock face at first glance.

Quinn had come upon the box canyon by accident.

Unless you knew where to look or had stumbled on it unintentionally as he had done it would have appeared as nothing more than a gap between a jumble of granite boulders.

Inside the box canyon Quinn found signs of a recent cooking fire. Its occupants had tried to obliterate the spoor, but hadn't been successful, either due to inexperience or to haste.

There was enough evidence to indicate to Quinn that somebody had been holed up in this box canyon, maybe as recently as a half hour before, which would make it at just around the time he had seen the flash of light in the hills.

Quinn returned to Koenig's hunting lodge and showered. Breakfast was now being served in the spacious dining room.

Koenig was already seated at the grand table. Quinn heard Koenig's bluff, booming voice and Ramsey's, followed by a burst of laughter as he entered the huge dining room.

The table at which they sat was long and heaped with a bewildering assortment of foods. Koenig was not a man who disdained flaunting his wealth and privilege.

"Ach, Herr Quinn," Koenig roared, standing to his full height of six feet and beckoning Quinn forward with expansive arm gestures. Like a Junker of old, Koenig was dressed in the traditional Bavarian costume of lederhosen and suspenders. "You're late. Come, join us. The good food is getting cold."

Quinn sat at the table opposite Ramsey. Koenig regarded Quinn with his penetrating grey eyes.

"How was your morning jog?" he asked. "Good? The fresh air, the odor of the pine resin. Ach, how I envy you your youth and strength. The mountain air is perfect for the outdoorsman."

"It can certainly be exhilarating," Quinn replied, helping himself to a plate of crisp bacon, "especially when the unexpected happens."

"The unexpected?" Koenig asked, his mouth full of sausage. "How precisely do you mean?"

Quinn related his experience during his jog concerning his having found the signs of an encampment in the box canyon.

"I thought perhaps that you might know something about that?" he concluded. "After all, all of this acreage is your property, isn't it?"

"Ja, ja, this is so. And the local people have been poaching on these lands since the days of Frederick the Great," Koenig said, perplexed. "But it is something that the security people will want to know about. I will have to remember to inform them. It may even keep them busy enough to give me a moment's peace," he concluded with a laugh.

"You don't have to bother," said Quinn, "I already have."

"Good, then," Koenig countered. "Then to other business, ja? Later today, the hunt," Koenig went on. "I have just been telling your beautiful associate about it."

"Yes," Ramsey put in. "It's quite an old custom. The Bavarians hunt boar at this time every year. It's an almost sacred harvest festival."

"Ach, so," Koenig said. "And at the end we roast the meat. Wunderbar! I am sure you will enjoy it."

That afternoon, the hunt began. The hunting party drove into a section of woods where herds of wild razorback hogs roamed wild, climbed out of the four-wheel drive vehicles that had brought them and entered the thick pine forest.

Since no conventions dictated the correct weapon to use, each member of the party chose their own. Koenig carried an old pump-action shotgun. Ramsey was outfitted with a Remington rifle mounted with a glass scope.

Quinn's weapon was a .357 Colt Python, also equipped with a scope. He had hunted boar with a handgun before, in the Virginia panhandle, and enjoyed using that particular weapon against that particular type of game animal.

As the hunters spread out, Koenig took Quinn aside. The trackers had gone on ahead to scout out the game. His eyes darted furtively from side to side, as if trying to establish that they were alone.

"There are things you don't know about Skyfire," he told Quinn. "Matters that I think you should be informed regarding."

"Such as what?" Quinn asked.

"Later," Koenig told him. "After the hunt we will speak."

Quinn decided to try a shot in the dark.

"Castle," he told Koenig. "What's it got to do with Skyfire?"

Koenig's eyes widened as he stared at Quinn. His face went ashen and his lips trembled.

"Where did you hear that word?" He asked. "What do you know about Castle?"

"Nothing yet," Quinn told Koenig. "I was hoping you might be able to enlighten me."

"Castle should have been dismantled years ago," Koenig said with a strange light in his eyes. "The fools should have --"

Just then one of the trackers shouted that they had sighted a herd of razorbacks. Before Koenig could utter another word, the hunters were readying their weapons as they confronted the herd.

Quinn caught sight of the first of the boars, charging through a break in the underbrush. Their eyes were small and piglike, their hides reddish and fearsome looking tusks protruded from their curled underlips.

Koenig was fast and agile. All traces of the strange terror that had seemed to grip him minutes before had vanished as he brought his shotgun into play and started cutting loose with a load of 00 buck before any of the other members of the hunting party could fire.

The edge of the fan of buckshot caught one of the boars on the edge of the herd just behind the right shoulder, opening up an ugly ragged red gash.

It was a big razorback and it turned tail immediately and went squealing off into the woods as the others scattered to all corners. Koenig tried to finish the critter off but the boar disappeared into the brush before he could draw a second bead.

As Koenig charged into the brush after his boar, Quinn found himself facing off against the biggest razorback of them all. The boar either felt he was cornered or wanted to stand and fight.

The animal snorted, pawed the earth and then charged Quinn with his head down and his hooked yellow tusks in striking position.

The enraged game attacked with surprising speed for so ungainly looking a beast.

Quinn had no illusions as to the killing power of those wickedly hooked tusks. He knew full well that they were easily capable of disemboweling him if he gave the boar half the chance to strike him in a vulnerable point.

Quinn had no intention of letting that happen though. Raising the Python and sighting through the scope, Quinn unleashed round after round of hollowpoint slugs into the charging boar.

The slugs all hit their marks.

The first slug came pounding in low on the boar's back, tearing a bloody red hole in its side. But the .357 magnum rounds didn't slow the razorback boar down.

As more magnum slugs impacted, the boar swerved to one side but still kept right on coming.

Quinn's final shot was a headshot.

In a flash of crimson, the game animal's head exploded.

The mortally wounded creature let out a bloodcurdling squeal and his hooved legs went out from under him.

The heavy carcass fell down with a crash into the underbrush, staining the foliage with its dark blood. The dying boar breathed spasmodically for a few moments then finally went still.

As twilight fell by the end of the afternoon, the party had bagged several wild boars. All the razorbacks were large, and the one killed by Quinn -- the largest of them all -- had apparently been their leader. His time-yellowed tusks were long and keenly honed from constant sharpening.

Back at Koenig's lodge, mammoth braziers standing on high wrought iron stanchions were lit against the encroaching chill of evening in the high Alpine mountains as the game was laid out on beds of branches and leaves.

The bonfires roared as Koenig, wearing the cockaded Tyrolean hat of the Master of the Hunt, strode forth to make a speech to his guests, as was an old Junker custom dating back to the days of Germany's feudal barons.

Quinn watched the members of Koenig's household stare at him transfixedly as Koenig began to speak, praising the hunters and reminding them that their efforts had helped thin the herds of game and worked in harmony with the forces that maintained the balance of nature.

When Koenig had finished speaking, the members of the hunting party and his household staff raised their hands in a token of allegiance to the great man as he stood limned in the deep copper glow of the fires.

Suddenly, Koenig's smile left his face. His grey eyes bugged outward. When he opened his mouth, a plume of bright blood spewed from it. Koenig clutched at his throat and pitched forward, landing face-first atop one of the boar carcasses laid out between the burning torches as fierce convulsions shook his body.

The cause of death was no mystery.

It was the steel bolt which a hidden assassin had fired into the side of his neck.

TWENTY

By the time anyone was able to reach him, Koenig was already dead. He had died as mysteriously and as unexplainably as the other terminated Skyfire scientists.

While all eyes were focused on Koenig, Quinn cast his glance elsewhere. He turned toward the perimeter of the hunting lodge, toward the dark pine forest which brooded at its fringes.

For an instant, Quinn thought he detected movement amid the trees off to his left.

In the smoke-tinged gloaming of deepening twilight visibility was poor and Quinn could not be certain of what he had actually witnessed. He decided to have himself a closer look.

Telling Ramsey to keep watch on the proceedings at the lodge, Quinn drew his Uzi SMG and walked toward the edge of the woods. Penetrating the line of ancient firs, he stopped and scanned the surrounding forest.

There. Up ahead.

For a fleeting instant a shadowy manform was visible in the gloaming. The stocky figure wore black and in a concealed position would be virtually invisible. But when he moved from cover he showed himself.

Uzi clenched in his fist, Quinn took off after the running man. He knew he was being drawn deeper into the dark woods -- perhaps deliberately so -- but there was no other way to play it.

Quinn had to count on the likelihood that the shooter's role had been to kill Koenig and extract from the strike zone and not to draw him into a trap as well.

A few hundred feet into the woods, the black-clad figure suddenly turned and Quinn knew that he was already whipping a concealed weapon into assault position. Anticipating the coming autofire salvo, Quinn broke sideways behind the protection of a granite overhang.

Almost simultaneous with Quinn's sideward break, stuttering fire twinkled at the black figure's hip level.

Quinn heard ricochets whine like forest demons as they spanged off a jumbled heap of boulders nearby. He edged laterally and came up at the far end of the overhang fisting the compact SMG in a two-handed shooter's stance, ready to throw answering fire at the terminator.

His eyes sweeping back and forth, his senses on full alert, Quinn whipped the Uzi to and fro, seeking target acquisition. But the shooter had already dropped out of sight.

The forest was deserted, silent in the gathering darkness.

Continuing to clutch the Uzi in a two-handed combat grip, Quinn treaded cautiously through woods as black as anything out of a Hansel and Gretel story, trying to pick up the running man's trail.

He found signs of it a few hundred paces ahead. Snapped twigs and leaf litter displaced on the forest floor, the textured print of a sneaker heel, all testified to the shooter's passage through the area a few minutes beforehand.

The nature of the spoor also suggested to Quinn that his quarry was panicking. It gave indications of a man moving too fast to pay adequate attention to standard overland escape and evasion procedure which called for sanitizing the trail a striker left behind.

The shooter seemed, Quinn thought, like a man in a hurry to get somewhere, perhaps to a place of safety deeper in the black Bavarian woods.

Twilight had by now fully deepened to night. Without benefit of night vision equipment, the level of darkness in the ancient pine woods was nearly total. Quinn was forced to judge direction by means of audial cues, had to use his ears instead of his eyes, catching occasional glimpses of his fleeing quarry in the deadly game of hide-and-seek which the two of them played.

Now Quinn recognized the route which the killer was taking and understood why it had begun to feel familiar. The killer seemed to be leading Quinn back in the direction of the encampment that he had stumbled across during his jog of that morning.

Cresting a tree-studded hill with only sparse growth at its exposed stone top, Quinn caught sight of the elusive killer again. The

black-garbed striker was silhouetted against a big, just-risen moon as he stood below the hilltop looking back and forth.

Hearing sounds from above, the shooter looked up and Quinn caught a glimpse of his face. The face had a coarse, peasant quality to it, with narrow set eyes, flat nose and a mouth tightened into a grim line. The killer had daubed it with streaks of black camo paint and a black watch cap was worn low on his head.

Autofire twinkled from the muzzle of the SMG blaster in the fleeing man's hand as the shooter unfroze and brought his automatic weapon into play. Quinn tucked left behind tree cover and returned fire using a longburst of parabellum rounds in order to have a better chance of hitting his difficult-to-see target.

Quinn's salvo didn't nail the shooter, however. Instead it sent the stocky man scurrying through the woods below toward the cluster of granite boulders that concealed the small box canyon which Quinn had stumbled upon that morning. Quinn scrambled down the hillside in pursuit of his quarry, losing sight of him as he booked into the woods.

Suddenly a scream of agony pierced the night. The scream rose to a lunatic crescendo that echoed off the surrounding hills, then sank down again and finally died.

Quinn reached the foot of the hill and witnessed a horrifying sight that explained the bloodcurdling sound he'd heard. Just ahead, his quarry was impaled on the wooden stake of what appeared to be a variation on the Burmese crossbow trap.

In his haste and carelessness, he had apparently stumbled into the tripline of one of the booby traps set by his own backup. The sixteen inch spike had nailed him right through the heart and the dead merc now sagged like bloody meat hanging from a butcher's hook.

Now, without warning, lightning flashed and lit up the sky. Rain again began to beat down on Quinn and the iced terminator dangling from the crossbow trap.

Over the increasingly loud patter of the quickening rain, Quinn thought he detected the sound of stealthy movement off to his rear. Alarm bells were going off in his mind. He knew he was being stalked by the dead killer's backup.

Quinn spun around, dashing for the cover of a nearby thicket just as a silenced round from a sound-suppressed rifle crashed into the forest floor kicking up gobbits of earth around his feet. As Quinn had predicted he would, the shooter's backup had arrived on scene.

Gemini had oversight over the Koenig hit.

The second merc of the two-man hit team deployed by Gemini had been waiting for the shooter in the concealment of the Bavarian night. He was equipped with a nightscope-mounted, sound-suppressed AUG using II detection apparatus.

Unphased by the weather conditions in the op zone, the Gemini merc had seen the shooter coming and was ready to interdict and terminate the lone man on his tail.

But the Gemini shooter had panicked and run right into the booby trap they had set for pursuers. The merc had lost his head in a most unprofessional manner. But he had paid the ultimate failure penalty and anyway it was no skin off the second merc's ass if he died or not. Both of them had been well compensated, in advance, and the risks went with the territory.

Now Gemini-Two acquired Quinn in the scope reticle of his AUG weapon. The green raster image clearly showed Quinn moving at a crouch through the forest. Despite the rain and the cover of the dense brush in which he squatted, electro-optical II showed up the target silhouette with perfect clarity.

No sweat, thought Gemini-Two. *Easy kill.*

With his target framed in the crosshairs, the Gemini backup squeezed off the 5.56 mm round. Quinn felt stone chips sting his cheek as the near-silent round struck a big flat rock nearby. There had been scant muzzle flash from the sound-suppressed AUG, and Quinn had no true sense of the direction of the attack.

But he knew that the sniper was out there, somewhere within the operational limits of the AUG's range.

Somewhere close.

Nomad had a good idea of what he was up against and he had to respect the shooter's ability to take him down. A crack shot with a nightscope firing at him from good cover would have him outgunned for sure.

The Uzi was a handy piece to have in a close-in firefight. Up against a guy with a rifle, though, it was no contest. The higher-powered, longer-ranged weapon would shut an SMG out every time.

Lightning flashed again, a big, jagged bolt that lit up the night, exposing the rainswept boulders and tall trees and the rivulets of water that sluiced through the mountain mud.

A few seconds later a deafening clap of thunder rolled through the ancient Bavarian hills. The epicenter of the storm cell was coming closer. It was almost on him, thought Quinn.

Quinn knew he would have to even the odds if he was to make it out of these deadly hills alive.

The storm would help him.

The NOD that the merc was squinting through would be operating at minimum effectiveness during the flashes of lightning. Bloom-out occurred when the sensitive image intensification apparatus was overexposed to a light source. Even electronic antibloom technology could only do so much to prevent this from happening. It was an inherent design element in II hardware.

Waiting until the next flash of lightning occurred, Quinn made his move. Breaking from cover while the woods were lit up as brightly as day went against his every instinct, but Quinn forced his brain to override these inhibiting reflexes.

He gambled that despite the brightness of the lightning flash the NOD mounted on the rifle would be functioning at greatly reduced efficiency. Depending on where he was looking and how fast Quinn acted, the merc could be as good as blind to his movements throughout the few seconds during which the woods were lit up.

He had guessed right, he realized, when he had not been shot at. Additionally, Quinn's fast scan of the area had revealed the suppressor-augmented muzzle of the AUG projecting from some shrubbery a few yards away from his position. As the lightning flickered out and a peal of thunder boomed across the hills, Quinn crouch-walked from the thicket he'd sheltered in.

As Quinn stole up to one side of the gunman, the shooter did not suspect that Quinn had crossed laterally to his left and was now hidden behind the trunk of a tree on his blind side.

Uzi in hand, Quinn picked up a rock and flung it across the shooter's path. The guy went for the ploy hook, line and sinker, firing a subdecibel 5.56 mm burst at the tumbling rock. As he loosed his heat, Quinn broke from cover and hustled toward the shooter's concealed position.

Gemini-Two had already realized what was happening and was whipping the business end of the AUG in the direction he suspected the assault would come from. Quinn shot first and caught him on the shoulder and neck with a salvo of 9 mm PB fire from the Uzi before the merc could get off a burst of tumbling NATO-caliber steel.

The AUG dropped to the ground, useless to the almost terminal merc now, followed a pulsebeat later by the shooter himself. Quinn found Gemini-Two sprawled in some bushes with a huge hole in the side of his face. Blood was leaking out of the hole. The burst had sheared away most of the shooter's lower jaw, leaving behind an ugly red-raw mess in its place.

The merc was trying to tell him something, Quinn realized, though only dark bubbles of blood came from his frantically working mouth. Quinn quickly understood what the downed man was trying to say despite his inability to speak anymore. Raising the Uzi with a nod, Quinn fired a mercy round into the pulverized face, releasing the merc forever from his sudden unbearable torment.

Quinn returned to the hunting lodge after searching the bodies of the terminated Gemini crew. Like all the other mercs sent by the opposition so far, the clothes they wore turned out to be completely sterile.

Ramsey shook her head as she saw Quinn return to the lodge. Quinn arrived just in time to see them covering Koenig's face with a sheet. Koenig was the final Skyfire scientist to be murdered by faceless, nameless assassins for no apparent reason.

MISSION LOG THREE:

Kill

TWENTY-ONE*Berlin.*

Ramsey emerged from the shower with a towel wrapped around her hair. She was otherwise unclothed. Approaching the bed in which Quinn lay, she tossed the towel to the hotel room floor and tilted back her head in a motion both sensual and defiant.

Seventeen hours earlier, the investigation into the deaths of the Skyfire scientists had run into its final dead end, at least as far as Quinn was concerned, with the death of Wilhelm Koenig.

That Quinn had been tantalizingly close to a breakthrough was an added source of frustration. Just before the unknown assassin had struck, the creator of the Skyfire project had intimated to Quinn that there was something of importance he'd wanted to say.

Now Quinn's hope for a breakthrough had ended in a wash. At a briefing earlier that day, Quinn and Ramsey had brought Bruckner up to date.

Bruckner had told them in return that the unofficial word now was that despite Koenig's absence from the population count, the Skyfire Net was scheduled to go online as planned. The world could now only watch and wait as the CERT team at Storm King Mountain worked behind the scenes to purge the malfunctioning Skyfire computer of viral contamination.

Bruckner had informed Quinn that payment into his numbered Swiss account had already been made. A handshake ended the briefing and Quinn's involvement with Skyfire.

Ramsey had demanded a farewell on other terms, however. She made love to Quinn with a passion that would not abate, that only seemed to grow in intensity with each successive climax.

Now she seated herself astride him and began to move with slow deliberate undulations that were reciprocated by Quinn beneath her. Her eyes shut tightly, she felt the heat and pressure building within, and then followed by her own sudden release from those same pressures.

It was time to end the game, she thought, as she reached behind her back and unfastened the small hypodermic injector no bigger than the cap of a pen that was filled with a fast acting neurotoxin distilled from shellfish that she had taped to the nape of her neck.

It was time for Genesis to fulfill her contract.

In a fluid, practiced motion, Ramsey pressed the blunt nose of the injector against the pulsating vein in Quinn's throat.

There was a hiss of pneumatic pressure as the neurotoxin was released into Quinn's bloodstream. Ramsey climaxed again as she felt his body stiffen and saw his eyes bulge in his head.

Genesis knew that there would be no struggle.

The poison acted almost instantaneously.

She uncoupled herself as Quinn arched his back in a final spasm then collapsed back down to the bed and stood watching him with the injector still clutched in her hand.

Bending over Quinn's body, she placed her ear to his chest. There was still a faint heartbeat but that would fade soon too, she knew.

Still naked, Ramsey went to her purse and removed the Sig semiautomatic pistol and the silencer from it. Threading the silencer into the barrel she snapped a round into the Sig's chamber and aimed the business end of the 9 mm PB weapon at Quinn's face.

She did not want to complete the act of murder in this way, but tradecraft called for her confirming the kill.

She knew she had to.

Ramsey's finger tightened on the trigger of the Sig but she was unable to squeeze it past the breakpoint. A look of amazement crossed her face.

This had never happened before.

Genesis had seduced her other victims in this way and had always carried out the assigned termination directive. There had never been any question that she would fail, either in her own mind or in the minds of her paymasters.

She had walked the Stations of the Cross at Taranto and there had thought she'd been purged of the weakness that had afflicted her after her last contract termination. She had believed she had made her peace with herself and would be able to continue killing without suffering conscience, without feeling remorse.

The ordeal at Taranto had never failed to empty her psyche of guilt or bolster her resolve to continue the deadly game.

Yet it had now.

There had been feelings for some of the black widow's prior kills, but emotion had never entered into the equation before. Sex had always been a part of the web that Genesis had spun to ensnare her victims, and at the center of that web of pleasure, at the precise moment of release, she had exposed her stinger and struck.

Ramsey took a deep breath as she had been trained to do, re-aimed the Sig and tried once more to squeeze off the round into the immobilized man's face.

The weapon shook in her trembling hand. Her finger tightened on the trigger but again would not squeeze past the breakpoint. Genesis was still unable to complete the task of termination.

She realized in the end that she could not.

Ramsey dressed quickly and put the spent injector and the again broken-down pistol into her purse.

Quinn was a goner anyway.

The neurotoxin alone would have to do the job.

She glanced once more at Quinn's motionless form prostrate on the bed and picked up the telephone, punched in the number at which her case officer waited to receive confirmation of the kill.

"It's done," she said the moment that the line was picked up.

"You know the meeting place," she heard Bruckner's gravel coated voice rasp on the other end of the phone circuit. "Meet me there in twenty minutes."

Replacing the handset on the cradle, Ramsey left the room without daring to look back at Quinn.

Cold black rain fell in twisting sheets as the cab stopped on a deserted street in the Berlin warehouse district near the site of the old wall that had once stood between east and west. The taxi driver was perplexed.

"Are you sure this is the place you want?" he asked the woman in the back seat.

She did not reply except to hand the driver her fare and a tip that was neither stingy nor overly generous and exited the car. The driver thanked her, then drove away with a shrug.

His business, after all, was to take fares to their destinations, not to ask questions.

Ramsey turned and walked through the pelting rain through the vacant streets. The place she would meet her control was several blocks from the spot where she had been let off and she hurried there against the bad weather.

She reached the warehouse and let herself in, punching in the access code on the lock's touch pad and hearing the metal bar in the door snap back.

Bruckner was waiting for her inside. A flash of lightning cast dingy grey light in through the high casement windows set in the upper story of the warehouse and illuminated the solitary figure who stood on the catwalk which wound around the windowline, leaning on the railing and looking down into the interior of the warehouse.

"Stay where you are," Bruckner called down to Ramsey, "I'll be right down."

Moments later she heard the whining of the lift that brought Bruckner down to her level as another lightning bolt lit up the slowly descending steel cage with the man inside it.

"You look like hell, babe," he told her as he let himself out of the cage and walked toward her, footsteps echoing on the pavement.

"I carried out your directive," she answered Bruckner. "That's all you need to know. Now pay me, Taurus, and let me get out of here."

Bruckner smiled and reached into his pocket. Instead of an envelope he drew a small silenced .38 caliber Walther and pointed the pistol at Ramsey's face.

"I don't think so," he said, shaking his head. "With Quinn taken care of and the Skyfire scientists out of the picture you're no longer an asset. In fact," Bruckner went on, "you're a distinct liability, babycakes."

"Put the gun away," she told Bruckner. "You don't have the authority."

Her eyes steady on his, she was reaching into the pocket of her raincoat where a .25 caliber backup piece was nestled. Her fingers closed around the handgrip as she prepared to jerk it into play.

Bruckner's face went dead and his fingers closed around her arm, tightening like steel coils.

"Don't try it, babe," he snarled, shoving the sound-suppressed muzzle of the .38 against Ramsey's temple and cocking the hammer of the double-action weapon. "Don't even think of it."

Holding the .38 on her, Bruckner reached into her pocket and came up holding the .25.

"You're bluffing, Taurus," she snapped. "I repeat, you don't have the authority to terminate. You and I are run by the same man." With her other hand she pulled a spring-loaded knife from concealment within her coat sleeve.

Bruckner laughed. It was not a pleasant sound.

"If you're thinking about Alpha, forget it," he told her. "I and I alone answer to Alpha. You were Alpha's whore, nothing more. You were never anything but a tool to be used by him. To coin a phrase, babe, you were *expendable*. Still, maybe you still do have a use or two left in you at that," Bruckner concluded with a snort of depraved laughter.

Bruckner reached out quickly, his hand a white blur. There was the tearing sound as Ramsey's dress was torn, exposing bare pink flesh.

She moved just as quickly, snapping open the spring-loaded knife and bringing it up in a vicious swipe at Bruckner's heart. Bruckner was half-expecting the move, though and he was ready. Sidestepping the thrust, he brought the base of the Walther's handgrip down on her wrist with crushing force.

"That was dumb," he told her as the knife clattered to the concrete deck. "Now I'll make you wish I had killed you right away," he snorted. "In the end you'll beg me, bitch. That's a promise."

Suddenly Bruckner lashed out with the flat of the gun against Ramsey's bared breasts and knocked her to the concrete floor of the warehouse.

She groaned, fighting to keep from blacking out but already beginning to lose the battle.

Bruckner put the gun away and began fiddling with his belt buckle as he swayed over her, the sound of thunder roaring in his ears and a dull, animalistic light kindled in his soulless blue eyes.

TWENTY-TWO

Masked by the thunder, Bruckner failed to hear the trouble coming his way. Without warning he was grabbed from behind and spun quickly around by powerful hands. Now he was looking straight into the grinning face of a dead man.

"Quinn!" he shouted. "How the hell did you -- "

The rest of Bruckner's sentence never got spoken. Quinn smiled menacingly and hauled off with a punishing right straight from the shoulder that drowned his words in a bloody froth.

The clenched fist walloped into Bruckner's face with piledriving force. His nose burst apart under the impact of the blow and blood began spraying.

Knocked back on his heels by Quinn's Sunday punch, Bruckner flung out his arms like a scarecrow. He went down on the concrete in a floundering heap and lay there pie-eyed. Regaining his wits he managed to climb to a sitting position and propped himself up on his hands with blood gushing out of his nose and running down his shirt.

The merc codenamed Taurus looked up and saw the room spinning around in a kaleidoscopic array of multiple images. From the center of the spinning tunnel four Quinns were lumbering toward him. Every one of the Quinns had a most malicious look on his face.

Quinn got over to Bruckner just as Bruckner reached inside his jacket and whipped the Walther .38 autopistol from shoulder leather. Bruckner's draw was slow and jittery, but it was fast enough.

The black-framed 9 mm PB firearm was already emerging from its nesting place inside his black leather pit holster as Quinn moved in.

Quinn had expected Bruckner to reach for heat, though, and was prepared to deal with the contingency.

Countering the pistol draw with an accurately delivered Hwa Rang Do toe kick, Quinn knocked the silenced weapon from Bruckner's grasp. The Walther went skittering across the concrete floor of the warehouse and stopped with a muffled thud somewhere in the shadows.

Bruckner bellowed in rage, pushing himself up off his feet with manic strength borne of rage and defiance. Tucking his head down he charged Quinn like the bull that was his namesake.

Quinn sidestepped the wild charge but Bruckner's adrenaline level achieved what his reflexes and fighting skill alone had been unable to.

The big man's shoulder grazed Quinn's ribcage with enough steam behind it to send him reeling. Bruckner managed to grab ahold of Quinn in the process and both antagonists were sent sprawling to the hard concrete deck of the warehouse by the momentum of their collision.

Thrashing and rolling on the floor, each man struggled to gain supremacy over the other as they lashed out with hand blows and kicks in a furious contest. In the course of the free for all, Bruckner got lucky with a finger jab he managed to get into Quinn's eyes.

Quinn saw novas explode and reflexively relaxed his grasp on his adversary's windpipe. With Quinn momentarily blinded by the finger strike Bruckner scrambled erect.

He cast about for a weapon and spotted a steel pry bar lying on the floor near a heap of wooden packing crates. Scrabbling for the pry bar, he grasped the weapon securely in both hands and swung it viciously down at Quinn's head.

Quinn rolled aside at the last possible instant, but caught part of the pulverizing blow on the fleshy part of his right shoulder.

A ball of flame spread throbbing waves of pain down his arm and the right side of his chest. Bruckner raised the heavy pry bar high overhead, this time to deliver the stopper.

With the pry bar still raised in Bruckner's hands, Quinn lashed out with the sole of his foot and caught Bruckner squarely in the groin. Bruckner let out a howl of agony as the foot blow to his testicles sent a bolt of lightning spearing through his nervous system.

Bellowing like a wounded ram, he let go of the steel rod which dropped to the floor with a dull clang and sank to his knees, clutching his badly injured groin.

Before Quinn could muster enough strength to get up himself, Bruckner staggered to his feet and dodged out of sight, cursing and hollering in pain. Wincing from his own injuries as he rose to his feet,

Quinn drew his Uzi from his shoulder holster and doubled back to check on Ramsey before he went after Bruckner.

The girl was recovering from the beating Bruckner had given her but she had a nasty lump on her head which was the size of a robin's egg sustained during her fall. Quinn helped her behind some crates and told her to stay put. Then he went after the merc.

By this time Bruckner had reached the steel weapons locker that he kept at the warehouse against unforeseen contingencies. He would deal with Quinn the no-risk way, shut the creep out for good.

Casting backward glances, sweat beading his florid face, the spook terminator fumbled with the combination on the touch pad of the lock as he heard Quinn's footfalls growing louder behind him.

There was a beep and the lock sprang open. Bruckner reached inside the gun safe and closed his mitts around the advanced design hardware he'd cached within.

Working quickly, he crammed spare ammo clips into his pockets and hefted the lightweight black, bullpup-configured weapon from the rack inside the gun safe.

The spook was already starting to feel a whole lot better as he snapped a fresh clip of ammo into the bullpup's receiver and chambered the first round by retracting the bullpup's cocking lever.

Next he clicked on the laser designator that was secured by clamps to the bullpup's receiver frame. A thin pencil line of ruby light immediately issued from the scope.

Bruckner waved the bullpup back and forth, watching the ruler-straight laser beam trace a crimson line across the crates and walls of the warehouse storage area.

Now Quinn would have a surprise coming. The bullpup was loaded with some special ordnance. A kind that would pay the fucker back the way he deserved.

With the bullpup locked and loaded with its unconventional ammo, Bruckner spun on his heels toward the entrance to the room.

Suddenly he saw Quinn dart into view, his antagonist illuminated by a flash of lightning streaming in through one of the warehouse skylights.

Bruckner laughed a madman's laugh as he raised the bullpup to chest height and sighted the thin blood-red beam on the running man's chest, then squeezed off a burst in Quinn's direction.

The spook felt the bullpup buck in his fists and he heard the faint metallic sound of the blowback driven rounds as they whizzed out the muzzle of the weapon.

No brass was expelled because the bullpup fired caseless ammo. There was little sound either except for the faint *pfitt* of the rounds ejecting and the thud of impact into the opposite wall. Otherwise the bullpup was completely silent.

No muss, no fuss.

Just pure fucking hell.

"Good thing I wasn't trying to hit you, Quinn," Bruckner shouted out as Quinn broke for cover, scrambling behind some empty steel drums. "If I did you'd be cat chow by now, Kemo Sabe."

Bruckner laughed and stepped confidently into the open. The crimson pencil line of the laser target designator beam lanced out into the shadows like the probing antenna of a poisonous monster wasp.

"This here's the latest and the greatest. Fires flechettes made from the same depleted uranium rods they use in tank ammo. Hyperkinetic rounds, bucko. They pack a mean fuckin' wallop."

The gleaming ruby beam of the laser designator came to rest on one of the big crates at the other end of the room.

Bruckner aimed the bullpup and fired another multiround burst of flechette ammo into the crate. The inch-long depleted uranium kinetic energy needles ripped through the crate, reducing it to a pulverized cloud of wood.

"Just think what this little honey of a weapon'll do to your worthless hide, good buddy," Bruckner shouted gleefully. "Just you think about it. For the next few seconds you got to live, you think real hard about it!"

The ruby light of the laser spotter scope skittered across more crates and came to rest on the empty fuel drum behind which Bruckner had seen Quinn dodge.

Just as his index finger jerked the bullpup's trigger, Quinn broke from cover, snapping a burst of Uzi fire at his spook opponent. Bruckner jerked backward in reflex action just as his finger passed the breakpoint.

The whizzing burst of flechette rounds followed the beam of the laser and slammed into the metal drum.

The force of impact, releasing scores of times more kinetic energy than any conventional bullet strike, created terrific stresses on the metal of the drum, causing it to explode as if the flechettes had been tipped with explosive warheads.

Lethal shrapnel razored through the air as Quinn tucked left and rolled to the safety of a ceiling-high stack of wooden crates, snapped off another burst of 9 mm Uzi PBs and hightailed it out the door.

Bruckner recovered his balance and launched another flechette burst at Quinn, chewing up the side of the doorway but nevertheless failing to hit his intended mark.

Ejecting the spent clip and snapping in a fresh flechette magazine he pulled from his pocket, Bruckner again went after Quinn.

Quinn's Uzi had run dry by now.

He was fresh out of reloads.

Just then he spotted a stack of old aluminum signs lying in a dusty corner. As he rushed toward them he devised a desperate gambit to survive the shootout.

From the room beyond, the shaft of ruby light was walking toward him with jittering psychotic movements. It was seeking him, sniffing him out, and when it found him it would give him away to the merc who wielded the deadly gun.

Quinn wheeled around a heartbeat before the laser beam would touch his shoulder. In both hands he clutched one of the signs he had taken from the stack, its bare aluminum reverse side turned toward Bruckner.

Bruckner screamed as the ruby laser radiation bounced off the reflective back of the sign and struck him squarely in the face. Now he was temporarily blinded by the designator beam of his own weapon.

With his eyes on fire, he pumped the trigger of the bullpup in a homicidal fury, jerking the barrel to and fro in a desperate attempt to nail his unseen target. Blindfire was not accurate but it served something of its purpose.

Quinn was forced to keep his head tucked down.

A single good strike, even a ricochet from a partially spent flechette round, could literally tear him to pieces. The kinetic energy that the deadly needles transferred to anything they hit would shatter him like a plaster saint knocked off a mantelpiece.

Quinn had no choice but to hunker down behind the cover of a metal dumpster as Bruckner fired the weapon in a wild frenzy of hatred, then reloaded and discharged another clip.

Fortunately for Quinn, Bruckner was nearly blind. The spook's only concern by this point was in staging a getaway as quickly as possible. He would deal with Quinn another day. Before his weapon ran dry he was beating a path toward a fire door that gave out onto the rainswept street where his wheels were parked.

Quinn heard the sound of a powerful car engine revving from the street outside. Rushing to the swinging exit door he saw the small compact car accelerate from the curb and careen back and forth on the rain-slicked asphalt before rounding a corner. Then Bruckner was gone into the night. Quinn knew that he too would have some unfinished business to transact.

Ramsey had found her gun and was holding it in a two-handed firing stance as Quinn approached her.

She stared at him with wild, frightened eyes as the automatic pistol shook in her trembling hands.

"You don't need that anymore," Quinn told her, reaching to take away the gun.

TWENTY-THREE

Parked in a geosynchronous orbit two hundred miles above the surface of the earth, the phased-array network of Skyfire energy satellites gleamed in the light of the distant sun.

Four giant mylar radiation collectors extended outward from the central core of each satellite. Each solar collection panel contained thousands of individual photovoltaic panels and was tethered to the main unit by fifty foot long umbilicals.

Inside the main unit of each satellite a small yet powerful nuclear reactor generated millions of volts of electrical current from the harnessed energy of the sun.

The electrical power was then converted to microwave energy and beamed down via the dish antenna situated at the center of each Skyfire satellite to a complex of collection stations based around the earth.

Girdling the globe, Skyfire promised to yield a virtually limitless supply of cheap energy to mankind as soon as the network went online. The world awaited the moment when the ambitious program would finally provide it with an alternative to fossil fuels and dangerous nuclear power stations.

But on the earth below, in the tunnel complex with Storm King Mountain where the Cray 2010 command and control computer which governed Skyfire was located, optimism was low while anxiety ran high.

The Skyfire mission control center was situated at the heart of an underground installation that stretched for many hundreds of feet

through the heart of the mountain in a labyrinthine maze of immense burrows drilled and blasted into the heart of the stony-iron core.

After a massive feasibility study, Storm King had been selected to house the SFMCC because its rock contained a high percentage of ferrous ore, hardening it naturally against the threat of EMPs that were released by nuclear explosions and were lethal to all forms of electronic equipment.

Neither nuclear terrorism, acts of war or Chernobyl-type disaster scenarios could effect the vital role of the Skyfire Net.

The layout of SFMCC's nerve center, its ready room, resembled that of an amphitheater, with tiers of telemetry console stations arranged in a series of concentric circles that spiraled downward to a central bank nicknamed "the Pit" by the technicians which worked down there.

Command, control and communications consoles requiring the highest security clearances made up the central ring of the control center with the outer tiers -- each built one level above the next -- devoted to progressively lower-level functions and backup systems telemetry.

Occupying most of one hemispherical wall of SFMCC's ready room was a patchwork of giant digital viewscreens on which could be seen ever-changing computer generated maps of the earth showing the Skyfire orbits overlaid on the globe, real-time video of the spaceborne enersats and other constantly updated data.

One of the screens now was tuned to WNN, the World News Network, which was broadcasting the funeral services taking place in Germany for Wilhelm Koenig, the man who had devoted his life to singlehandedly turning Skyfire from a dream into a reality.

Among the dignitaries attending the funeral were the President of the United States and his opposite number from the Soviet Union. Thus far, a combined effort by global intelligence agencies had managed to keep the truth about Koenig's manner of death a secret.

The world believed that Koenig had succumbed to a sudden stroke during a hunting party at his mountain estate. Much like the other Skyfire Kills, Koenig had died a martyr to the cause he had championed throughout his entire life.

Directly across the vast bunker housing the nerve center's computer consoles, glass-paneled observation rooms and administrative offices looked out on the viewscreens and the proceedings down in the Pit below.

SFMCC Mission Control Director Jack Redding's office was situated in one of those glass-paneled rooms.

A man of medium height with steel grey hair whose movements hinted at the energy that he brought to every task, Redding had been a natural choice to head the Skyfire command center.

For years he had been czar of the U.S. Department of Energy and had been instrumental in convincing the President to support Koenig's Skyfire initiative in the 1990s.

Now, precisely an hour and fifteen minutes after being awakened by his deputy's call from a much needed sleep break, the Skyfire mission director stood holding a mug of steaming black coffee and looking down on the furious activity in the command center below.

Redding turned from looking down into the Pit and back toward the key members of his staff who were seated at the conference table in the room.

Their faces were drawn and grim. Redding realized that his must certainly look that way too. It would have to if it mirrored the chagrin he felt at the multiple blows that had just sent the Skyfire program reeling.

The problems with the Cray had been bad enough, but now that Wilhelm Koenig -- the human symbol of Skyfire -- had been killed, he wondered if the program could survive the setback.

For a fleeting instant he had caught sight of his face reflected in the glass of his office window. With a shock, he saw the hollow eyes and gaunt cheeks, evidence of the tremendous strain he was under.

After many days of wrestling with the destructive worm that had infected the Skyfire C3 computer, the CERT experts could still not state with any degree of certainty how much of the malicious program they had purged from the system.

Redding's most recent intel was that the virus' front-end -- the so-called user interface or program shell that the virus hid behind -- was some launch vector stabilization code written for the Cray by a Silicon Valley consulting firm.

When the FBI came calling at the firm's last known address, they found that no such business had ever occupied the laundromat and kiche bar located at the site. Nor did the audit trail lead anywhere either. Every supplier of Skyfire software programs had checked out clean.

But the infected Skyfire software was anything but clean. It was a breeding ground for system-crashing bugs that were too fast and too smart for the world's best minds to deal with so far.

Some of the CERT techs believed that it was only the software that had been infected with the bugs.

Others claimed that the hardware too had been infected, that the virus had hidden parts of itself inside the microchips that comprised the Cray 2010's silicon brain, ready to replicate themselves and infect any new software program that was transferred into the system.

To fine-tune the parameters of the situation was one of the purposes of the present crisis assessment meeting. Another purpose was to determine if the CERT team could even arrive at a conclusion as to how to proceed.

The declared deadline for announcing the online status of the Skyfire Net was quickly approaching.

In another seventy-two hours, the President of the United States, in place of Wilhelm Koenig, would announce before the world at a special session of the United Nations that the Skyfire Net was fully operational.

Right now, every person in Redding's office could watch the big screen on the other side of the Pit and see the President attending the final rites of Wilhelm Koenig in Berlin who was receiving the solemn honors of Germany's greatest modern hero, a man whose vision of the future had redeemed his country, in the eyes of many, from the gas chambers and the rape and plunder of half the world.

Redding turned back to the CERT team and the members of his staff.

"People," he said, "I know I'm asking you to make a tough call. But it's necessary. The Challenger disaster in the '80s hamstrung America's space program. The National Space Telescope was a boondoggle for NASA for the Nineties. The Mars Mission of 1997 almost killed the exploration of outer space. I don't have to remind you of that nightmare."

Redding needed to say no more. Many of the men and women seated at the conference table had been directly associated with the U.S.-Soviet effort to put a team of astronauts on Mars.

Every one of them winced involuntarily at memories of the video images of the Mars probe spacecraft smashing up against the enormous nickel-iron asteroid that had come out of nowhere, a big space rock whose orbit had been too erratic for the mission's course computers to track or predict.

"I don't have to tell you that Skyfire is of potentially greater importance to humanity than any space mission yet launched," Redding went on. "Not only will a disaster threaten to doom the world's space exploration efforts for the rest of the century, but it will deprive developing nations of immediate benefits. Skyfire can transform the world. We must be damn sure of our options."

One by one, the CERT specialists delivered their reports. The first to be heard from stated that he believed that enough of the computer virus had been purged from the Cray 2010 computer to permit partial energizing of the satellite system.

However another tech contested this assertion.

The tech stood and claimed that the Skyfire computer virus was far too unpredictable for any claims to be made at this stage. He could say that the invading code was mostly a "worm," a rogue program that slithered through the system, making copies of itself as it went along to spread the infection further.

"The problem with a worm," the tech went on, "is integral to the software that runs the Skyfire computer itself which uses what we call 'knowbots' to function."

"I'm somewhat familiar with the concept," Redding said with a nod.

During the SDI or Star Wars research of the eighties and nineties software programs were not fast enough to detect incoming warheads with any degree of accuracy.

Something more was needed.

"The knowbot concept came about as a direct result of some of the most deadly computer viruses known," Redding concluded.

"Correct," another CERT member put in. "Specifically the Pakistani Brain Virus and the SCORES viruses. At any rate, the idea was to create benign virus programs that did exactly what the destructive viruses did, which was to run in the background and handle specific tasks on their own without the intervention of the main program. This speeded up operations to the extent where space-based lasers could and did function within acceptable performance parameters."

"Okay," Redding assented, "but I still don't get your point."

"The point is," the first CERT man who had spoken said, "that the Skyfire virus is not really a virus at all. It is in fact something entirely new because it corrupts the operation of the knowbots and not the main program per se."

The speaker paused and looked searchingly into the faces of every member of the CERT panel convened in his office. "I think everyone here comprehends what I'm saying."

"Yes," Redding exclaimed, turning to watch the President on the video viewscreen, showing pictures from a funeral in Berlin. "It's not a virus anymore, is it? It's more like a computer cancer."

Then Redding nodded to himself and picked up the handset of the phone on his desk. "I'm informing the President," he said, his haggard face now grim. "I'm going to recommend that the activation of the Skyfire Net be put on hold and the computer destroyed."

TWENTY-FOUR

Quinn hunched over the video display terminal. Shifting patterns of colored light traversed his harsh features. Facial muscles taught with concentration, he punched in sequence after coded sequence at the keypad.

The object of this exercise was one of singular importance. Quinn was to break into the Skyfire task force computer system linked to the National Security Council's covert data retrieval system.

Only in this top secret database could Quinn hope to uncover the significance of the mysterious "Castle" which now seemed central to cracking the case.

Although the NSC DBMS had been among the first he'd searched because of its relationship to Skyfire, Quinn had not suspected that the database was only the "front end" of a covert information storage and retrieval system. Purely by chance Quinn had decided to try it once again and had stumbled on the electronic "back door" that was a portal into the covert DBMS.

As he worked he recalled his conversation with Ramsey about the nature of the code-name or phraseword "Castle." "Was Castle a place?" he had asked her.

"Yes," she had answered him. "It's a place. I've been there. But I don't know where it is."

"Why not?" Quinn had asked, puzzled.

"Bruckner always took precautions. I was put into a semi-drugged state when I was taken there. One minute I'm getting into a

car to head for the airport -- or someplace -- the next thing I know I'm there."

"With the one they call 'Alpha?'"

"Right," she had answered, turning away. "He did ... things with me. He was unlike anyone else. Other men might use a woman's body. Alpha, he takes your mind, rips out your soul."

"And you never really saw him?" Quinn asked. "You never heard his voice?"

"No," she returned. "Alpha was cloaked electronically whenever I was with him. Some kind of neural disrupter chip under his skin, he once said it was. It distorted visual and audial perception of his face and voice." She shivered involuntarily. "When I think of how that bastard used me..." Her voice trailed off.

"He's used us all," Quinn had said back to her. "Now it's our turn to get even with the dirtbag."

Bruckner too had used them both. Bruckner and the mystery man called Alpha. After the deadly turnaround play at the Berlin warehouse Quinn realized that the spook freelancer had run a classic "false flag" operation on him, sent him on his mission as a stalking horse.

It was Quinn himself who had set up the remaining Skyfire scientists for the kill. He had flushed them out of hiding, drawn them into the open for the strike teams to knock them down, and been expertly distracted from suspecting the truth by repeated hit attempts directed against him.

Bruckner had turned Quinn into his cutout.

Ramsey had been Bruckner's insurance policy, Quinn surmised. She was the spook's way of making certain that every loose end was tied up. Bruckner himself had tried to tie up the final loose end by taking care of Ramsey after he had issued her the termination directive on Quinn.

Quinn had suspected Ramsey early on. He had found himself in what former CIA director Stansfield Turner had once called "a wilderness of mirrors."

Quinn hadn't known when or how it would go down, but he knew that a putaway hit was in the offing and he also knew that Ramsey was the logical candidate to do the deed.

But Quinn needed to be certain. In case Ramsey were to use poison, he had shot himself full of a broad-spectrum antidote specific to neurotoxins. This had been a calculated risk, but he had figured that only the fastest acting neurotoxin serum would be the weapon of choice.

Quinn had gambled correctly but had almost paid the ultimate price despite his preparedness. The highly active shellfish neurotoxin she had injected into his neck had in fact almost killed him.

Skyfire was only part of the equation, though, Quinn was sure. If the energy satellite network were sabotaged, what then? Who would stand to benefit most from it?

There had to be another dimension to the entire equation. Some factor that Quinn didn't yet grasp. Something tied in with Skyfire. Something that required the silencing of all the technicians who had worked on designing and building the system.

Castle was the key to determining the nature of that missing link as well as the identity of the individual at the center of the web, the unseen mover who pulled the strings of all the other puppets including Bruckner.

Alpha.

Castle was the lair of the beast, it was the place from which the criminal mastermind spun his web of deception, death and intrigue.

Somewhere in the clandestine super database maintained by the NSC Quinn was betting that there was a reference to Castle.

"We're in," Quinn said to Ramsey as the computer screen suddenly flashed the message that connection to the database was initiated.

"But it's asking for an entry code before we can access any information," she replied.

"I know," Quinn told her. "Let's try a couple."

At the prompt, Quinn input the word "Taurus."

UNAUTHORIZED ENTRY CODE the screen flashed him.

"Damn," Quinn cursed, drumming his fingers on the table. He tried dozens of other words and word combinations, but in every case access was denied him. Then in a flash he thought of the one word that he had not yet tried, the one he suspected would work.

TRIPSTONE he typed in at the prompt.

THANK YOU the screen flashed. STAND BY FOR PROCESSING.

"We're home free," Quinn said to Ramsey. Now displayed on the screen were row after row of indexed entry listings. Quinn switched on his printer and began to check off those listings he was interested in accessing.

"How did you know which code would work?" Ramsey asked.

"It was only a guess, really," Quinn returned, his eyes glued to the screen. "Bruckner's code name with Scepter was 'Tripstone.' I figured that it was at least worth a shot. Looks like I hit the bullseye."

Putting a check mark next to the entry titled CASTLE, Quinn hit the enter key. His printer immediately began to spit out page after page as the columns of data appeared on the screen.

There it all was now, right in front of them. Quinn would have to sift through the hard copy for depth but what he saw now clarified many mysteries. Castle was a secret no longer, not at least from Quinn.

"Now for the piece de resistance," Quinn said as he logged off the information to CD storage media and keystroked in another sequence.

"What's that?" Ramsey asked, bending to watch the lines of computer code which appeared on the computer screen as Quinn stroked the keys.

"A little viral nasty of my own I've cooked up," Quinn returned with a smile. "We don't want to alert anyone to the fact that we've been strolling through their database at will. This little honey of a Trojan Horse program will neatly cover our tracks but in another ten days will cause Bruckner's computer to explode in his face the moment he turns it on."

Saying that, Quinn hit the enter key, loading the electronic booby trap into mass storage memory.

Nevada.

It was the false dawn that preceded sunrise, the time when the faintest tinge of cobalt edges the seamless black of night. Out in the desert coolness, away from the lights of any major city, the stars still shone bright as diamond chips through the clear night air.

Quinn sat behind the wheel of the rental car they had driven from the small local airport outside of Reno. He and Ramsey had landed at midnight in the rented Beech. They had been driving since then toward their destination.

"There it is," Ramsey said, gesturing ahead of them.

Quinn nodded. He could see it too.

Looming ahead was the high, double row of cyclone fencing beyond which the squat bulks of concrete blockhouses and Quonset huts was visible beneath the gleam of helium-arc perimeter lighting.

Although Quinn could not see them, he also knew that guards in crow's nests spaced at compass points on high towers thirty feet above the desert floor would soon have the car in the IR sights of their automatic weapons and MANPADS missile launchers.

There was no question that the car would have been challenged by now had Quinn and Ramsey not been expected to arrive.

For that matter, the vehicle would have been challenged or blown off the road had Quinn's covert penetration of the NSC database network been detected. The fact that they had gotten this far was partial confirmation that they had not yet been found out and maybe might not be until after their objective was secured.

The penetration of the NSC computer system had been only a prelude to Quinn's next actions. Once inside the system, once he had learned the truth concerning Castle, there was another covert computer penetration to be carried out.

It was one that would allow Quinn and Ramsey to penetrate Castle itself. It was the only way in the universe that they could carry out the penetration and destruction of Castle. Though deceptively simple now that Quinn was armed with the classified data he'd acquired via his break-in it was nevertheless a dangerous gambit.

Bruckner's access code was one which provided the bearer with unrestricted privileges regarding entry to Castle. Once the code was in his possession, Quinn used it as a key to unlock the door to the covert hardbase.

The situation was not without irony, Quinn realized.

The ancient Greeks had used a gigantic horse fashioned of wood, so legend had it, to sneak their troops past the gates of the citadel of Troy.

This act had led to the computer-age slang of "Trojan" when referring to a covert destructive computer code.

Now Quinn had broken into a computer network so that he and Ramsey could become human Trojan horses and invade the secret installation known as Castle.

Suddenly they heard the thuk-a-thuk of helicopter rotors churning overhead. The incandescent white light in the sky above was blinding in its intensity. Glancing up through the windshield, Quinn saw the chopper hovering above them, shining the searchlight beacon down on the roof of the car.

"Proceed directly to the main gate," the amplified voice boomed down at them as the pilot's throat mike picked up the vibrations of his larynx. "Follow the instructions of the sentry."

The chopper shadowed the car for the remaining distance until they reached the perimeter of the installation. Then it banked and shot away into the night, its search beacon now damped.

Quinn slid the vehicle up to the main gate of the installation and slowed to take the concrete speed bumps before he stopped short at the striped barrier post.

A concrete guard house stood to one side.

While the car's engine idled, a soldier in paramilitary camo fatigues stepped from the guardhouse and approached the vehicle.

"Your personal identification codeword sir," the guard asked, eyeing Quinn and Ramsey with careful, professional scrutiny.

"Rainbird Sysgen Vail," Quinn said to the guard, speaking clearly.

The guard nodded and produced a small electronic instrument shaped something like a large utility flashlight. A small green status light glowed on the side of the device as he held it level with Quinn's face and squeezed the trigger on its pistol-like handgrip.

First Quinn, then Ramsey, stared into the glowing red light of the scanning laser beam.

Like the scanner at a supermarket checkout counter, the scanning laser was wrapping itself over every contour of their faces.

It took only a microinstant for its computer chip to compare their faces with the holographic images stored in its data bank. The scanner then emitted two confirmation tones.

The soldier put away the scanner and next produced a one foot square touch pad which was contoured for the human hand. Quinn placed his right hand into the depression on the face of the device.

"Please repeat your code sequence, sir," the soldier instructed him, "and stare into the red light."

"Rainbird Sysgen Vail," Quinn said, speaking evenly as the microprocessor compared his fingerprints, voice and retinal patterns with those stored in memory.

The touch pad too emitted a confirmation tone whereupon the soldier subjected Ramsey to the same sequence of thorough identity checks.

"Thank you," the soldier told them when the checks had been completed. "Proceed directly to departure area number three. It's directly ahead and indicated by directional arrows."

The soldier added nothing more nor did he smile. The people who passed routinely through the gates of this particular installation were not individuals you smiled at.

They were not individuals used to being smiled at either. They were individuals who had numbers instead of names and icewater in their veins.

They were also individuals who generally carried no identification. It was the single most glaring flaw in the Castle security control system that Quinn was counting on to enable himself and Ramsey to enter the clandestine hardbase.

The godlike technology that the spooks routinely used made them slaves to its ability to screen truth from falsehood, reality from unreality. The battery of ID checks were considered virtually flawless, capable of detecting all unauthorized entrants who would then be executed without trial on capture.

But the opposition's own fetish for secrecy had given Quinn the back door he needed to enter Castle by. The voiceprints, facial holograms, palmprints and other identification data had all been created by Quinn, manufactured at the computer terminal.

All belonged to Quinn and Ramsey but were now linked to fictitious names and professional histories which Quinn had covertly inserted into the computer data banks. These digitized "legends" which Quinn had created for himself and Ramsey now went with the faces and other identifying data that he had also scanned into the system.

Until such time as the penetration and data tampering were detected, Quinn and Ramsey would be known by the code names Berber and Fleet, deep cover operatives so secret that not even the ultra sophisticated NSA computer at Fort Meade knew anything of their whereabouts.

Operatives of an organization that Quinn had thought long ago disbanded, an organization he had resigned from when he had

discovered the depths of its corruption, an organization which still carried out its lethal business under a different guise.

Scepter.

TWENTY-FIVE

“Isn't that -- ?” Ramsey began to ask.

“Yeah. That's it,” Quinn replied, tightlipped.

He too had simultaneously eyeballed the black, smoothly contoured structure that was silhouetted against the lightening horizon. Adrenaline coursed through his system at the thought of the chain reaction of events that would come next.

Moments later they reached the second security checkpoint where an armed guard halted the car and asked for the gate passes they had been handed by the first sentry.

Quinn and Ramsey presented the guard with their gate passes which bore their holographic likenesses imprinted on each mylar card. He compared both of these, then handed back the passes.

“Park in one of the free bays,” he instructed Quinn. “Then climb aboard.”

The soldier indicated the APC which waited a few score feet away, engine idling. He watched Quinn and Ramsey through gimlet eyes as they exited their vehicle and walked the short distance to the APC.

The personnel carrier's unspeaking driver immediately got the APC mobile and began rolling across the wide apron of tarmac toward the black object that Quinn and Ramsey had seen on their arrival at the high security area a few minutes before.

It was an ASP or aerospace plane, a hypersonic scramjet with runway-to-orbit capability, one of the few such advanced aircraft that had been constructed since the end of the Space Shuttle era in the mid-nineties.

Bearing no identifying markings, the Space Plane's profile displayed the rounded curvatures characteristic of stealthy aerodynamic surfaces.

Its nose assembly was disklike and flattened and its mission-adaptable wings were canted slightly forward from the sides of the fuselage. Engine nacelles were incorporated into the framework of the wings and the engines themselves sunk deep into the airframe. The plane resembled nothing else more nearly than an immense mechanical manta.

The scramjet was the key to penetrating the place known as Castle.

Quinn and Ramsey were again asked to present their gate passes to the armed guard posted by the Space Plane and then boarded the plane via the ASP's boarding ramp. The interior of the Space Plane was outfitted with seating for twenty-five passengers.

Ramsey and Quinn strapped themselves into their seats. The pilot was already warming up the aircraft's high pressure propane-oxygen thrusters as the hatch dogged shut with a muted hiss of hydraulic pressure.

Now the two agents were sealed within the fuselage of the advanced hypersonic aircraft.

"Estimated flight time twenty-two minutes," the voice of the pilot said, coming in over the cockpit-to-cabin intercom link. "Please remain seated until you receive permission to debark."

Soon the manta-shaped, black-hulled paramilitary aircraft began taxiing onto the runway.

The takeoff of the Space Plane was like that of any conventional supersonic jet. In fact the supersonic combustion ramjet or "scramjet" turbines which powered the Space Plane in hypersonic flight would function as ordinary jet engines while the aircraft remained in the lower atmosphere.

Quinn felt himself pressed back into his seat as the cabin tilted sharply upward. The ASP gained altitude quickly and was soon many thousands of feet off the ground.

Unlike a conventional jet aircraft, however, the space-capable sky stalker did not level off at thirty thousand feet.

Instead it continued to climb straight up until the sky which had already turned a deep indigo with the passing of night again turned pitch black until the ASP reached its hypersonic cruising speed of Mach 25 at an altitude of nearly eighty thousand feet.

Quinn knew that now they were at the edge of space. Outside the cabin window, he could again see the stars, but they were far brighter now, blazing through the microatmosphere at that altitude like hot sparks. Below him, through light cloud cover, a thin sliver of a brilliant blue earth was also visible.

Inside the cockpit, the computer generated eyes-up display of the ASP pilot's advanced avionics system flashed him graphical data indicating that the Space Plane's fly-by-wire navigational system had locked onto the docking coordinates preprogrammed into its onboard flight computer system.

Beams of invisible microwave laser radiation were now lancing through the microatmosphere, obtaining a flight profile confirm on the orbiting entity that was the Space Plane's destination.

Quinn looked out the cabin window and thought he saw their destination somewhere in the distance, visible against the blackness of near space, but could not be certain.

Castle had, after all, been designed and constructed to be virtually invisible from ground- or space-based detection systems.

America's experiments with SDI had been funded by billions of dollars since their inception in the latter years of the Reagan and early years of the Bush administrations, and perfected during the succeeding administration.

Billions more dollars, however, had been secretly funnelled into the imprest fund of a covert project, a project intended to insert a stealth-equipped military space station into earth orbit by the beginning of the 21st century.

The code name for this project was Castle.

What had begun as "a castle in the air" in the minds of secret warplanners had ultimately become translated into the most ambitious clandestine project in the history of American covert planning.

Stealth construction materials and architecture had been integrated into the orbital station's design to make Castle invisible to the probing beams of ground-, air- or space-based radars.

Its stealthy design would reduce its radar signature so that all ELINT devices would see it as a piece of orbiting space junk. Intelligence and private sector computers had been covertly programmed with a "legend" identifying the station as an aging telecommunications satellite in a decaying orbit too erratic to permit safe approaches to the sector by spacecraft.

From its orbit in space, Castle also evaded detection by means of sophisticated electronic cloaking.

The space platform was shrouded in a latticework of precisely interweaved laser beams which had the effect of refracting visible light in a manner that made Castle appear to be optically transparent.

Both the human eye and video sensors would detect only a starfield tinged with only a faint translucency to indicate that a solid object might in fact be hanging in their field of view.

Of course, they would first have to know precisely where to look. This was because the stealthy station's orbit was constantly changing and its exact coordinates were as secret as the existence of Castle itself.

Somehow, the man known as Alpha had gained control of Castle, turned the orbiting platform into his private domain. From Castle, the mystery merc had set about to undermine the world's last shot at energy independence from fossil fuels for reasons which were at that point best known only to Alpha himself.

Once it was activated, the orbiting phased array network of Skyfire solar energy conversion stations would free mankind from its centuries-long dependence on fossil and nuclear fuels.

Skyfire would make possible energy independence on a scale never before known.

Quinn didn't yet know the precise nature of the link between Castle and the deaths of the Skyfire technicians.

But he was certain that this link existed. Castle was inextricably connected with the plot to undermine the Skyfire Net and the bloody chain of global homicides. When Quinn boarded Castle he hoped to finally learn the whys and wherefores of that link and put an end to the wave of terror which had been sweeping the earth below.

Three rapid tones signaled that the Space Plane was about to make its final approach to its assigned docking module. Its navigational computers were already zeroing in on the covert space station's transponder beacon.

Minutes later, the space-capable aircraft was nestled safely in its berth.

Quinn and Ramsey were ordered to remain seated until the module's inner airlock chamber was pressurized to an earth level of one atmosphere. When the docking module's pressure became equal to the interior cabin pressure of the ASP the hatch would be undogged and the ASP's two passengers would then be allowed to exit the Space Plane.

Quinn and Ramsey deplaned as soon as the atmospheric interlock was sealed and the pressure on both sides of the module was equalized at one atmosphere.

Sentries wearing grey jumpsuits and armed with advanced design bullpup weapons waited inside the module's debarkation ramp. Quinn and Ramsey were again asked to present the passes that had been issued at the ASP's earth-based clandestine launch facility to one of the sentries who stepped forward to challenge the newcomers. The sentry took the passes from both "Berber" and "Fleet" and passed them through.

Wild Bill Bruckner was waiting for them at the end of the ramp. By contrast with the armed security squad which stood behind him, all attired in grey jumpsuits, Taurus was wearing a black jumpsuit and high lace-up combat boots.

A handgun bulged in the pit holster which he wore crosswise on his barrel chest, the stubby black cone of a sound-suppressor protruding through the open bottom of the holster.

A broad smile was on his perpetually flushed looking face as Bruckner slid the pistol from his chest rig and, extending his right arm, pointed its business end at Quinn's chest.

"Nice try," the merc called Taurus growled, as with a nod of his head the soldier boys stationed behind him ran forward and jammed their weapons into the two agents' backs. "But no cigar, Kemo Sabe."

Bruckner squeezed the trigger of the weapon clutched in his hand. The gun wheezed twice in quick succession. Quinn saw the corridor's overhead lights suddenly tilt and go streaking into space.

Then the darkness engulfed him.

TWENTY-SIX

Quinn awoke suddenly, jerking upright from a half-remembered nightmare.

The room was small, bare, white and antiseptic. His head ached like hell and his chest throbbed painfully from where the tranquilizer dart fired by Bruckner had pierced his flesh.

Shaking his head to clear it, Quinn took stock of his situation. As he had expected, the Glock sidearm he'd carried in a shoulder holster was missing, as well as his watch, wallet and belt.

It would also have been standard operating procedure for his captors to subject him to a broad spectrum scan for other concealed weapons before throwing him into the cell.

It was a cell, of course.

Quinn had no doubt about it.

Still groggy from the effects of the drug, he went to the door and pressed random sequences on the touchpad on the wall beside it.

The door did not open. Quinn tried forcing the door but it would not slide open either.

Confirmed: it was a cell.

Quinn knew also that Bruckner's goons would come for him. They would come for him soon. They might be watching him now, probably were via concealed pinhead-sized fiber optic video cameras which could be hidden anywhere in the room.

If his captors were surveilling him, then they would know by now that he had come around.

Wait for them.

That was the only option left open to Quinn. He decided that he would maximize his tactical position. When they came for him, he would be ready.

Standing atop the low-rise stainless steel gurney on which they had laid him, Quinn was just able to reach the lighting panel on the drop ceiling overhead.

He slid the crackle-finished plastic square from its slot in the support framework and reached inside the crawlspace to unplug the lighting tube from its electrical socket.

The room was immediately plunged into total darkness. Quinn knew that if anyone were surveilling him they would not expect a captive to act in the manner he had acted.

The opposition would be disoriented.

If their psych-out game called for disorienting the captive, then Quinn would have suddenly changed the ground rules.

Quinn rolled the stainless steel table that he'd awakened on to one side of the door on its trundle wheels.

He didn't think that the fiber optic video was low light or passive IR. There was no need for it here and the additional technology would demand a trade-off in sensor size. Since there was no overt sign of surveillance cameras, Quinn felt he could assume that the pinpoint lenses sure to be present incorporated no low-light observation features.

Quinn positioned himself in a comfortable sitting position beside the stainless steel table and waited, engaging in Hwa Rang Do breathing exercises to clear his mind of the lingering aftereffects of the knock-out drug.

At first the darkness was total, the silence complete, broken only by the faintest hairline of light seeping in from the corridor outside the cell and the faint sounds of Castle's life support system from deep within the station.

Soon, though, Quinn's eyes and ears adjusted to the new visual environment to the point where he could make out the blurred outlines of the table in front of him and the lock pad to the side of the door.

A moment later, Quinn heard the sound of footfalls from the corridor outside. He knew that the moment of reckoning was coming.

He had spooked them.

Now he had to be ready for what would happen next.

The cell door slid open, its electronic lock activated by the correct combination entered from the corridor outside. Framed in the doorway, a guard's silhouette loomed suddenly in the light streaming in from the corridor.

The jumpsuited trooper hesitated for a moment, his SMG ported at the ready as he peered into the darkness of the cell.

Then, cautiously, he ventured a step inside.

Quinn shoved hard against the heavy steel cart and sent it careening toward the guard.

It struck him squarely in the shins, hurling him off balance. Quinn was on him instantly, taking advantage of the guard's surprise to press home his attack.

Following through on his shutout play, Quinn lashed out with a savage pounding wave fist combo to the guard's jaw that splintered teeth and fractured bone.

With a grunt of pain, the guard suddenly let go of his SMG. It spun from his nerveless fingers, striking the floor of the cell with a crash.

Quinn whirled from the injured guard and made a fast grab for the weapon lying on the floor. A sideways swipe and the guard was down for the count.

Fists now bulging with steel-blue heat, Nomad was loose in the corridor a second later, blinking against the sudden intensity of the light from the overhead lighting panels in the corridor ceiling.

Turning abruptly, though, he saw that he was not alone in the corridor. Bruckner and a squad of Castle guards were waiting a little further along, weapons pointing menacingly at him.

Quinn did a half-turn to the other side and saw more of the same type of reception committee deployed at the other end of the corridor.

The passageway was sealed off and Quinn was boxed in.

"You're smooth, Kemo Sabe," Bruckner said to him with a smile. "But I'm king of the hill. Now drop the weapon and kick it away from you. You don't have any cards left to play."

Quinn wasn't holding squat, and he knew he had nothing to bluff with. He placed the commandeered SMG on the corridor deck and kicked it to one side as Bruckner instructed him too.

"That's smart," Bruckner acknowledged, nodding. "Put your hands up and clasp them behind your head."

There was sudden movement behind Quinn as he did this. Out the corner of his eye, Quinn saw the Castle guard he'd wounded in the fight stagger from the cell he'd just escaped from.

Blood was trickling from the corners of the guard's mouth. More blood had stained his grey jump suit a dark brown.

"Look what you did to him," Bruckner said to Quinn, shaking his head morosely. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to make an example out of you, babycakes."

Bruckner ordered the injured man to step to one side and raised the silenced automatic pistol in his hands to aim its stubby muzzle at Quinn's face.

Quinn braced for the bullet that would claim his life as he stared unflinchingly into Bruckner's homicidal blue eyes. Just before Bruckner's finger passed the breakpoint, though, the mercmaster suddenly jerked the weapon to one side.

The sound-suppressed automatic pistol coughed once and the head of the injured guard who stood to one side of Quinn broke apart into bloody jigsaw puzzle pieces.

Spun half-around by the force of the bullet, the kayoed guard crashed into the bulkhead and slid down to the deck in a sitting position, trailing a mixture of brain matter, bone and blood behind him.

Bruckner tucked the silenced blaster into the pit holster he wore riding high on his barrel chest.

"You can put your hands down now, Kemo Sabe," he said to Quinn with a demented grin.

Force-marched along the corridor at gunpoint, Quinn rode a high-capacity utility elevator down a few levels. When the doors opened he found himself in a large round-walled operations bay with a ceiling that rose at least thirty feet overhead.

"Come with me," Bruckner ordered him.

Quinn was led toward an isolated bank of instrument consoles raised from the others in the bay on a glass-encased observation platform. A man in a grey uniform identical to the ones worn by the space station personnel, except for the Greek character for "alpha," was seated at the work station in a chair before the bank of constantly phasing viewscreens.

He spun around as Bruckner approached.

The man had no face.

To the naked eye it appeared to be a puttylike grey mask with only the vaguest traces of eyes, nose, ears and mouth to indicate the human visage. Quinn knew that this was the result of sophisticated electronic masking which refracted light in such a way as to distort the image his eyes received.

Quinn was aware that he was in the presence of the supercriminal they called Alpha.

"Mr. Quinn," Alpha said to the newcomer. His voice too -- a cold, metallic sounding whisper -- was an electronic simulation. It went with the optically distorted face. "How good of you to honor us with your presence."

Alpha stood. He was tall, almost as tall as Quinn himself was. "Leave us," he said to Bruckner.

"Where's the girl?" Quinn growled at Alpha as Bruckner went away.

"She is alive," Alpha's inhuman mechanical voice returned after a brief pause. "Perhaps you would care to see her?"

Without waiting for a reply, Alpha turned and keystroked in a command set at the keyboard of the work station at which he stood. A large flat digital screen flickered immediately to life.

Quinn was looking down at Ramsey who sat with her head slumped limply between her shoulders. For a moment she looked up at

the hidden video sensor head and made a forlorn moaning sound. Quinn could see the dark purple marks of bruises on her face.

"You bastard!" Quinn shouted, taking a step forward. Alpha raised his hand, beckoning to armed personnel behind them.

"Careful, Mr. Quinn," he said in his eerily soft voice. "Our guardians have itchy trigger fingers. You almost had your head blown off. As for the girl, she was a reluctant participant in some amusing games. But don't worry. She is safe, at least for the present. As for you, we would like you to see what we have accomplished here," Alpha went on, "while we decide whether to kill you or not."

The words came out evenly, emotionlessly, as though to Alpha life and death were inconsequential trifles. With Bruckner following close behind, the Castle's bizarre king turned on his heels and walked towards a nearby access elevator.

As Alpha led Quinn below through the command and control center of the covert space station, Quinn found that he was indeed impressed.

Giant viewscreens provided instant real-time telemetry of all earth- and space-based targets. At banks of data terminals, operatives in grey coveralls were busily at work. Beyond the command center Alpha stopped before the large windows of an observation area.

"You rightly supposed that the deaths of the Skyfire technicians were connected to Castle," Alpha told Quinn as they stood looking out one of the picture windows at the earth below. "They knew the details of this installation, and so had to die."

"The first suicides, how were they accomplished?" asked Quinn.

"Our most capable operative Taurus saw to those easily enough," Alpha's electronic voice replied. "It was an easy enough matter to implant a microminiature device in the skull of each. The implant resulted in suicidal actions. The remaining technicians could not be so easily implanted for various reasons, including limited time." Alpha went on.

"And that's where I fit into the picture," Quinn said, "to set them up so your hitters could knock them down."

"Precisely, Mr. Quinn," Alpha answered, then turned back toward the viewing window. "From this vantage point the world looks so pristine, so pure, so unified. Don't you think so, Mr. Quinn?" he asked after a beat.

"Yes," Quinn returned. "But so what?" Quinn knew that he had to keep Alpha talking. Once an adversary began talking, his control began to erode. While the opposition talked, it was time to think, think desperately about a way out of the trap that Alpha had prepared.

"But it is anything but pristine," Alpha went on calmly. "Chaos rules below. Mankind infests the planet with a plague of violence. We will

put an end to the violence. We will usher in a new era of universal peace and cooperation."

"How?" Quinn asked. "How the hell do you plan to do that?"

"By using Skyfire, of course," responded Alpha. "The Skyfire satellite network is the key to our grand design. The satellites can radiate clean, safe energy to power the machinery mankind depends on."

Alpha threw back his head and stretched out his arms as if to embrace the entire shining blue planet as it hung in space below the orbital station.

"Or the tremendous energy they radiate can rip a gaping hole in the ozone layer capable of obliterating all life on earth. It was we who placed the virus within the Skyfire computer system," he continued. "From Castle we now control it."

"And you want tribute," Quinn stated.

"No, not merely tribute," Alpha returned. "We wish to fulfill our birthright. If the nations of the world agree to our just demands for unified control of all world governments, then Skyfire will be allowed to fulfill its mission. If not, then we will unleash death and terror on a scale never before seen."

"You're out of your fucking skull, partner," Quinn said.

Alpha paused.

"We had hoped you might not feel that way, Mr. Quinn," his mechanical voice said with perfect calm. "We had even hoped that you might be persuaded to join us, as Taurus has done. That is why we did not kill you originally as Taurus insisted we do. Now we see that he was right all along."

Alpha signaled to Bruckner who was waiting on the sidelines. At a nod from Bruckner, a brace of grey-jumpsuited goons grabbed hold of Quinn's arms. Drawing his silenced piece, Bruckner motioned with it for them to hold Quinn prisoner.

"What do you want me to do with him?" Bruckner asked his faceless, emotionless master.

"Kill him, of course," Alpha told his merc enforcer, then turned back to contemplate the beauty of the glowing blue planet hanging in the darkness of space below him.

TWENTY-SEVEN

“Wish I could say I was sorry, Quinn,” Bruckner told him as Quinn was marched at SMG-point to one of the space station's airlock modules. “But since I'm gonna enjoy doing you to the max, I guess I won't bother pretending.”

“You're all heart, Bruckner,” Quinn told him.

“And you're history, Kemo Sabe,” Bruckner countered as they reached the place that he had decided would be perfect for punching his former protege's ticket.

The airlock permitted access to the space station's exterior. Repair crews used it to conduct routine maintenance to the outer hull which was regularly bombarded by thousands of meteoroid strikes per day.

Bruckner motioned to one of the members of the Castle security crew flanking them to dog open the inner airlock hatch with a keystroked command on the touch pad to one side of the electronic doorway.

The heavy armored panel slid into the bulkhead with a soft whir, revealing the airlock chamber. At its far end was a second sliding hatchway that gave onto the black void of outer space. For Quinn the outer hatch was the last stop before a free fall through an eternal vacuum.

“What we're gonna do here, Quinn,” Bruckner went on once the inner hatch was fully undogged, “is turn you into one more piece of orbiting space junk.”

The mercs bracketing Quinn and the black-garbed Taurus guffawed loudly at this remark. Bruckner silenced them with a wave of his hand.

"Of course you'll eventually burn up in the atmosphere like any other piece of space debris once your orbit decays," Bruckner went on, "but we all burn out sooner or later, don't we, compadre?"

Without pausing a beat, Bruckner lashed out against the side of Quinn's jaw with the side of the heavy steel barrel of the silenced automatic in his hand.

The vicious unexpected blow sent Quinn reeling into the airlock, whereupon Bruckner immediately dogged the hatch shut again.

"That's much better," Bruckner said once the hatch was made completely airtight, speaking into a commo grille set into the doorframe.

On the other side of the airlock hatch Quinn heard Bruckner's voice rasping over the opposite speaker grille.

"Now as I was saying, Kemo Sabe, we're gonna see exactly what you're made of. I mean that in more ways than one, since once the air pressure drops to zero your internal pressure should make you pop right open."

More guffawing from the contingent of sky troopers accompanied Bruckner's last remark.

Quinn picked himself up off the deck plates and mentally tuned Bruckner out. He knew there was more than garden-variety sadism in Bruckner's taunts. The merc was trying to psych him out, neutralize his capability to think of a way out before he pulled the chain on him.

Quinn forced himself to stop listening to Bruckner's monologue. He knew that the most important thing now was to concentrate on his predicament, find a means of evading the terrible death that the merc honcho was preparing to send him to.

There was an LED readout panel above the outer hatchway that was counting down toward zero. Quinn didn't need Bruckner's macabre play-by-play to grasp the fact that when zero came up, the outer hatch would slide open and Quinn would be sucked out into the icy cold and total vacuum of space.

Working quickly, Quinn removed his shirt, beginning to tear it into strips roughly an inch in width.

The opposition had checked him over for weapons and had stripped him of his gun.

Quinn had anticipated that they would.

Since there was a strong possibility that his gambit to enter Castle would be discovered before his arrival, he knew that if captured any weapon he carried would be forfeit.

However since he would also certainly be searched and stripped of any weapon, he needed something on a special order.

He had masked his true weapon by taking along a sidearm and spare ammo clips.

Quinn had counted on whoever searched him missing the real weapons he was carrying concealed on his person, and they apparently had failed to do so as predicted.

Quinn's shirt was woven of a special polymer, an insensitive munitions compound that was inert except when detonated by a precisely determined method. To do this, you had to use a special chemical detonator. It then became a high-energy explosive.

Detonation was based on the time pencil principle first used by the O.S.S. in the second world war.

The time pencil detonators used chemical as opposed to mechanical detonators to set off munitions charges.

Quinn's chemical time pencil was actually more like a time splinter. The tiny snippets of wirelike plastic alloy were each coded by color for detonation duration. Quinn had secreted them in the stiffener of his shirt collar.

Now he selected the red time splinter, preset to detonate in ten seconds, and inserted it into one end of the strip of shirt fabric that he had twisted into a tight strand and laid across the bolted down square on the floor that Quinn hoped covered a service node for the station's fiber optic conduits.

Arming the time splinter by bending it double, Quinn stepped back against the airlock bulkhead. Right on cue ten seconds later, the high-energy explosive detonated with a muffled report.

The low-decibel but high-yield blast punched a hole in the steel plate. The hole looked barely wide enough for a man to slither through on hands and knees. Squatting down, Quinn tried to squeeze his body into the rupture in the deck.

To his dismay he found that it was somewhat too narrow. Quinn took a deep breath and forced himself to relax. He expelled all the air in his lungs, contracting his stomach and chest muscles.

On his next attempt to squeeze down into the hole, Quinn succeeded in wedging his body through the aperture in the deck and hoped that there was crawlspace below him.

As it turned out there was.

The crawlspace extended downward to a depth of about ten feet. It then branched sideways to dovetail with the main line of a maintenance shaft infrastructure that connected every section of the orbiting space platform.

Inching his way along the narrow tunnel on all fours, Quinn struggled to put as much distance between himself and the airlock above him. He was only too well aware that he had mere seconds to spare before the lock timer caused the outer airlock hatch to undog.

Once that happened, the powerful vacuum of space would begin sucking atmosphere up through the conduit.

If Quinn was too close to the airlock when it decompressed, the force of the violent suction might conceivably be great enough to pull his body back through the shaftway, either ejecting him into space or trapping him where he would slowly asphyxiate in the microthin air remaining in the shaftway.

Suddenly there was a tremendous whoosh of air being sucked up into the tunnel behind him. Quinn felt the tug of the powerful suction at his back and heard the roar of atmosphere being drawn up through the hole in the ruptured floor plate at high speed.

Now he knew that the airlock hatch had opened above him and that the lock was rapidly decompressing. Fighting the powerful wind drag, Quinn crawled forward on elbows and knees as fast as he was able.

"That's enough," Bruckner said to his mercs after a few minutes had elapsed. "Open the hatch."

One of his grey-suited goons punched in the code that undogged the airlock and the hatchway slid back into the bulkhead after the chamber was repressurized.

Bruckner stepped inside the resealed airlock and stood there with his lantern jaw agape. He had immediately spotted the hole that Quinn had blown in the floor plate.

"He's gone!" he shouted. "Damn it. Order a condition one alert! Find him. And when you do, dust the fucker on sight!"

TWENTY-EIGHT

Klaxons shrieked in Quinn's ears as he peered into the corridor beyond a rectangular wire mesh grille. The grille was not securely bolted to the duct cowling which held it in place.

Striking out with the heels of his hands Quinn was able to dislodge the grille from its cowling and he pulled it sideways into the duct behind him as noiselessly as possible.

Pausing before exiting the ventway, Quinn listened and watched for any indications of activity coming from the corridor beyond.

He detected none.

Quinn quickly eased himself down from the rectangular space in the bulkhead of the space station. The muscles of his thighs cushioned the impact of landing, silenced his entry into the corridor.

Nomad moved like a cat on the balls of his feet, hugging the wall. With the klaxons blaring, he did not hear the sound of the door opening just to his right and almost crashed headlong into a grey-jumpsuited Castle technician.

The tech was carrying a clipboard in his hand and was speaking over his shoulder to someone inside the room as he raced out into the corridor and disappeared around a bend. Quinn heard the sound of nearby elevator doors trundling open and then closing again.

Quinn strained his ears but detected no other presence nearby. He rapped on the door from which the tech had emerged. As soon as it was open a crack he forced himself inside.

The lone Castle tech fell easy victim. Quinn slamdanced him up against the wall and applied pressure to his windpipe.

The face of the man in the white jumpsuit twisted up in a mixture of surprise and terror. With desperate strength he broke free and he made an attempt to reach the door leading to the corridor.

Quinn smashed him across the face with a hard right that fractured his cheekbone before he got very far. He hauled the bleeding tech to his feet and pushed him up against the wall again with his elbow across the tech's trachea.

The tech's breath was foul against Quinn's face as he heard cartilage snap and the tech slid down the side of the wall, unconscious.

Moving fast, Quinn stripped the tech and hid both the tech and the bundle of his own clothes behind a lab table.

Now dressed as a tech, minus the downed man's glasses, Quinn stepped into the corridor. The klaxons that signaled a condition one alert status were still wailing nonstop as he rounded a dogleg in the corridor.

A squad of jumpsuited, Specter-toting Castle guardsmen were heading straight toward him, moving at a fast trot, weapons at the ready. Quinn buttonholed the commander who was bringing up the rear of the squad.

"Just a minute," he said to the guy, feigning timidity. "I caught a fellow in my lab who had no business being there. Fortunately I was able to knock him senseless using a beam scale before he noticed I was behind him."

The soldier regarded the tech through narrowed eyes. "You sure about that?" he asked gruffly.

"Oh, I'm quite positive," Quinn replied. He was already leading the way for the obliging guardman. "Here it is. Right inside. He's unconscious but I think you had better be careful. He looked quite dangerous."

"Don't worry about me, computer weenie," the soldier barked as he stepped inside and pointed his SMG at the moaning figure lying behind a lab table.

Stepping quickly behind the merc, Quinn smashed him over the head with a stainless steel centrifuge he snatched from the top of a nearby lab table.

The heavy piece of equipment whacked the merc's noggin with a solid thump. The Castle space cadet crumpled to the deck, completely unconscious.

Quinn brought the hardguy around by dumping a beaker full of foul-smelling yellow liquid into the merc's face. He had a couple of questions to ask the trooper before he was through with him.

"You know who I am," Quinn told the trooper, shoving the point of his own commandeered SMG into his face.

"Yeah, you scumbag," he grunted in pain and anger. "Yeah, I know who you fucking are."

"The woman who came with me," Quinn went on, deliberately grinding the muzzle of the Spectre SMG into the bloody gash in the downed merc's skull. "I want to know where she is."

"I don't know," the sky soldier groaned.

"That's the wrong answer, partner," Quinn returned, smashing the buttstock of the SMG down on the bridge of the guard's nose and shattering his septum. "Next time I'm gonna shoot off your jewels," he rasped. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

"Okay, okay," the wounded and badly shaken guard proclaimed, blood pouring down his shattered face, "they got her down in Node Five, D-Section. One of the holding cells there. It's no big secret anyway."

"You better not be selling me a line of bullshit, maggot face," Quinn told the merc. "Because if you are, I'll come back and put a couple of live ones in your eyes."

"I swear it, pal," the merc told Quinn, terrified now of the man with the gun. "I'm telling you the truth."

Believing the frightened trooper, Quinn gagged the guard and tied his hands behind him using a hunk of wire from the lab's equipment. Quinn had exchanged the guard's grey paramilitary jumpsuit for the tech's all-white lab togs in seconds.

The reassuring feel of the SMG in his fists and the mini grenades hanging from ALICE webbing felt extra good.

Quinn took one more look inside the lab, satisfying himself that everything was in order then let himself out. In the corridor he used the Spectre's heavy buttplate to smash the combination touch pad to useless scrap.

It would hopefully put the electronically activated door out of commission in the event the other tech decided to come back soon and play with his Bunsen burner.

Pandemonium now held sway throughout the corridors of the covert space station.

Grey-clad Castle guardsmen were mobilizing everywhere, searching frantically for the intruder in their midst.

Quinn might have been the single solitary human being onboard Castle at that moment who had any clear conception of where he was going and what he was doing.

Quinn had two objectives.

The first concerned dealing a terminal blow to Castle's operational capabilities.

The multi-billion dollar piece of high-tech space hardware was nothing more than another covert military boondoggle in his eyes.

It had been designed and constructed at the behest of conscienceless, venal men for unconscionable purposes.

Quinn had originally set out to destroy this orbiting nest of would-be slavemasters. Nomad's objective was now to destroy the criminal mastermind called Alpha along with his stealth-cloaked eyrie in the heavens.

Quinn had pored over computer schematics of the space platform when he had hacked his way into the clandestine database prior to forging the electronic passes he'd used to get himself and Ramsey aboard the ASP.

Quinn was aware that the station's weakest point was the nuclear reactor that powered all onboard systems, including life support infrastructure, hydroponic machinery, gravity synthesizers and the solid-fuel rocket thrusters that moved its ever-changing orbital trajectories.

Destroy the nuclear reactor that pumped the energy lifeblood through Castle and you effectively ripped out its heart.

That is what Quinn aimed to do as he hustled toward the innermost level of Castle. Area maps posted on the walls gave clear directions to all sections of the orbiting skybase.

Dressed in the commandeered grey paramilitary togs that he'd taken from the downed trooper and in the confusion that held sway everywhere in Castle, Quinn went unrecognized as he elevatored down to the central power plant at the core node of the space station.

Two guards were posted at a checkpoint directly ahead of Quinn as he stepped from the elevator car into the corridor surrounding a vast chamber he could see through windows behind them. The chamber housed banks of flashing instrument panels and clusters of humming machinery.

The guards regarded him suspiciously as he approached them.

"Okay. You two bozos," Quinn shouted, sticking out his chest as he swaggered up to the mercs. "You're both wanted up at comm center on the double. Didn't you hear the page?"

At first the two mercs bought it, but then they quickly turned on Quinn. "Hey, wait a minute," one of them said as his eyes went to the name tag on Quinn's right chest.

Went there and noticed that the name and face didn't match.

"You're not Henderson. You're -- "

But the merc never got the chance to articulate his sudden insight into the identity of the man with the gun.

The hardstriker had already whipped the SMG to assault position and had unleashed blitzing PB fire at the challenger's belly. Point-blank nines to the gut ripped his abdomen wide open and sent bits of his ruptured internal organs showering in all directions.

The dusted merc's partner managed to get off a stuttering quickburst from his SMG but Quinn cut him down too and the 9 mm PB salvo did no more than pock the bulkhead with bulletholes. Above the

maddening screech of the alert klaxons, Quinn hoped the sound of autofire wouldn't carry very far.

Quinn fished the key to the generator node hatch from the pockets of one of the kayoed mercs.

He slid the credit card-sized key into the slot to one side of the lock touchpad and the hatch slid open. There were two more mercs stationed on a catwalk on the other side.

Quinn dusted both skybase troopers with two Spectre 9 mm quickbursts.

He was now alone on the catwalk that surrounded the mammoth generator room where the turbine wail of powerful machinery rose to a whining crescendo. Metal ladders zigzagged up to the steel catwalk from which technicians could monitor the status of the furiously revving electrical conversion equipment.

At the center of the huge pit there stood the nuclear engine that converted the heat energy soaked up by the solar collection panels that were always kept pointed at the sun into electrical power.

The nuclear dynamo was slated to be Quinn's next target. Destroy this structure and he could send the entire station raining down to terra firma in small glowing chunks of orbital debris. Quinn hustled down into the pit at the foot of the catwalk.

He did not see the tech rise quietly from one of the banks of computer work stations and swing the heavy spanner at his head. Quinn heard the whistle of the bludgeon slicing the air, though, and spun just in time to avoid getting the side of his skull caved in.

The swing by the amateur went completely wide of its intended mark. Quinn put the reckless tech out of the running with a double-fisted swipe of the SMG's buttstock that sent the guy crashing into a control panel nearby. His eyes rolling up in his head, the tech slid down to the floor in a moaning bundle of bloody flesh and darkly stained fabric.

Quinn then proceeded to check out one of the control panels. The menu driven, knowledge-based software which governed the operation of the power station apparatus looked like a piece of cake to penetrate and master.

In no time flat, Quinn had hacked his way into the central processor module's software user interface. This meant he now effectively had his hand on the throttle of the base's nuclear turbine.

A quick check of the software command menu provided Quinn with several different slants on how he might rig the nuclear reactor to program itself to go critical fast. Total, irreversible destruction could then be only a keystroke or two away.

Just then Quinn abruptly heard a weird clanking sound behind him and to his left. Coiled-spring reflexes whirled him around just in time to see a familiar yet at the same time bizarre figure approaching him from the elevator bank.

It was Bruckner.

What was unfamiliar about Bruckner was the metallic superstructure that now cocooned his barrel-chested torso, head, legs and arms.

It was a cocoon of gleaming stainless steel. One mean sonofabitch of a contraption from the looks of it, Quinn could tell right off the bat.

"Jig's up, Kemo Sabe," Bruckner shouted. "Ditch the shooter. With this ultrahard titanium-stainless steel alloy body armor I'm wearing, those nines might as well be peas from a soda straw."

Although Quinn fired off a Spectre salvo without hesitation, it turned out that Bruckner was telling the truth.

The ricocheting steeljacketed parabellum rounds merely spanged off the combat cocoon worn by the merc without leaving behind so much as a dent.

Reaching down suddenly, Bruckner peeled off a hunk of floor plating as though it were a sheet of aluminum foil despite its rows of mounting rivet heads. Taurus hurled the sixty pound hunk of ragged-edged steel plate like a discus whirling around at better than ninety miles per hour.

Sidestepping quickly, Quinn heard the earsplitting crash as the lethal debris hurled by Bruckner whopped into the console at which he'd been seated. Circuits blew with loud popping sounds as hot, yellow sparks cascaded to the deck. The ionized air filled with the noxious stench of ozone.

"Just a little demonstration to show you what this advanced body armor cocoon is capable of, good buddy," Bruckner said with a demented laugh. "Now it's time to face the music and dance."

Bruckner began lumbering forward on servomotorized metal legs.

Quinn raised the SMG and fired off another salvo but the 9 mm PB slugs merely bounced off the high-tensile strength stainless steel exoskeleton like so many dried beans. Reaching out, Bruckner cackled dementedly and snatched the automatic weapon from Quinn's fists as easily as taking a rattle from an infant's hand.

Then he crushed the SMG's drop-forged steel receiver as though it were a beer can in his mechanically augmented fist. After doing this he flung the now useless heap of scrap metal clear across the huge chamber.

"You poor dumb fuck," Bruckner growled as he charged Quinn. "You just pissed me off big time."

TWENTY-NINE

Quinn hurled himself to one side across a long instrumentation panel studded with flashing buttons, digital readout displays and video terminals as Bruckner bore down on him.

The merc honcho's momentum propelled him forward and his stainless steel-sheathed fist came hammering down onto the panel with tremendous force.

Instead of striking Quinn, the fist crashed like a mace into the metal surface of the instrument panel, sending sparks cascading and billows of acrid smoke geysering into the air.

The pneumatic servos powering Bruckner's combat cocoon whined and grated as they labored to free the fist trapped in the twisted metal wreckage to which the merc's punch had reduced the control panel.

Straightening up now that he'd gotten loose, Bruckner spun around to face his antagonist.

Quinn had vanished.

Bruckner turned left and right but Quinn was nowhere to be seen.

"You can run, Kemo Sabe. But you can't hide," Bruckner shouted as he strode lengthwise through the rows of instrument panels like a vengeful Titan. "Dying's about the only option you've got left."

Just ahead of Bruckner, Quinn was crouching between two other banks of control panels. Two mini grenades were clutched in Quinn's fists, courtesy of the Castle skytrooper whom he'd taken out before reaching the station's power generation module.

As he came abreast of the next bank of instrument panels, Bruckner saw Quinn jump from cover and hurl the two small black globes at him.

Bruckner got out of harm's way with surprising speed for a man wearing a half-ton armored exoskeleton, but the bouncing submunitions detonated closely enough to catch him in the lethal radius of their blast and splinter zone.

Bruckner hit the deck with a thunderous crash that resounded through the huge chamber. He lay there flat on his face, his arms outstretched. Caustic smoke rushed up from the hardsuit's overloaded power servos and from damaged instrumentation clusters on the panels nearby.

Quinn cautiously approached the still immobile spook in the hardened combat rig. Suddenly he saw Bruckner shudder like a man fitfully returning to consciousness. Sweeping his arms beneath him, Bruckner slowly and laboriously climbed to his feet.

The concussion and shrapnel from the grenades had done only minor damage to Bruckner's combat armor. Blast effect had flung him to the deck and the merc honcho's ears rang like fire alarms but the suit's fail-soft systems reported sustainable damage.

The upshot was that Bruckner was still ready to rock and roll.

"No show, Quinn," Bruckner shouted. "You didn't do anything except piss me off. Now it's my turn to whale on you, old buddy."

Bruckner advanced on Quinn with rapid strides on servomechanized legs. Quinn dodged nimbly out of his heavier, slower adversary's grasp, sheltering behind a row of squat, cylindrical chemical waste canisters.

As the merc honcho came nearer, Quinn opened the valves and spigots protruding from piping that ran between the tanks, releasing a flood of oily, green-black waste liquid that gushed from the canisters in a furious stream.

The steel boot soles of Bruckner's combat exoskeleton had trouble negotiating through the slippery covering which now lay across the deck.

With a curse, the merc slipped and went crashing headlong into one of the waste receptacles. Caught in the spray of gummy waste fluid the gleaming exterior of his stainless steel suit was soon covered with sticky residue that clogged flexion joints and the moving parts inside them.

Bruckner still kept on coming toward Quinn, but his movements became sluggish as the damaged propulsive system of the combat rig struggled to keep pace with its command load.

"You can't continue playing tag much longer," Bruckner shouted as he chased Quinn toward the far end of the chamber. "Sooner or later I'll connect. Then it's dying time, bucko."

Quinn knew that Bruckner was right. There was no place to hide, nowhere to go. Unencumbered by the weight of any combat exoskeleton, Quinn was more mobile than Bruckner, but his antagonist had strength and staying power going for him which tended to even things out.

Quinn backed up against a flight of steel utility stairs which led up to the catwalk that encircled the enormous generator node.

Quinn ducked under another swing of Bruckner's motorized, armor-encased fist and smashed a hastily grabbed up dispenser jug into the side of Bruckner's metal-cowled head.

Lubrication grease dripped down into Bruckner's unprotected eyes, temporarily blinding him and Quinn took advantage of the seconds he'd bought with the surprise maneuver to scramble up the stairs toward the catwalk.

Quickly recovering, Bruckner was up the steps after him, gaining the top of the stairwell moments after Quinn reached it. At the top of the stairwell, Bruckner turned and saw Quinn booking to the left.

Bruckner followed in a series of seven-league-boot steps, seeing Quinn stop and grab for something in the dimly lit area at one of the bends in the square-cornered catwalk.

A light flared in Quinn's hand and Bruckner soon could tell that it was the flame of an oxyacetylene cutting torch that Quinn had snatched up from a work table on which equipment used by a repair crew was scattered.

Bruckner froze in his tracks. He feared that the ultra-hot torch might be effective enough to cut through the armor of his combat exoskeleton. Anything capable of slicing through construction-grade steel he had to have a healthy respect for.

Quinn saw Bruckner hesitate for a moment and lunged at him with the oxyacetylene flame, his eyes protected by welder's goggles that he had snatched up from the table in addition to the cutting tool.

Confronted with the incandescent jet from the nozzle of the torch Bruckner lost his nerve. Spooked, he backed against the railing.

Quinn thrust the nozzle of the cutting torch into Bruckner's steel-clad chest. Sparks of flashmelted metal sprayed from the suit in a fiery gout.

Bruckner could feel the intense heat penetrate right through his combat armor. A yowl of pain escaped his lips as he crabbed sideways along the railing of the parapet, desperate to avoid the torch's searing flame.

"Now wait a minute, good buddy," he begged Quinn. "Maybe we can work something out after all."

Bruckner's systems diagnostics were reporting that his suit's servomotors had been severely damaged by the heat of the oxyacetylene

cutting torch. Indeed, Bruckner could feel new stiffness in his robotic legs as he continued to slide his way along the railing of the catwalk.

"I've got a better idea," Quinn retorted, as he jabbed at Bruckner with the torch's cutting edge. "How about if you just die."

Quinn lunged at Bruckner's midsection with the cutting torch flame and Bruckner shrieked in panic and threw up his arms in a reflexive posture of submission and defense.

As a result of the malfunctioning suit system, the sudden movements propelled Bruckner straight over the edge of the catwalk railing.

The five hundred pound combat suit plummeted directly down towards the deck of the generator node. The trajectory of Bruckner's fall dropped him squarely into the row of squat waste fluid tanks that were still gushing their oily green-black contents onto the deck.

Stanching the flow of gaseous fuel, Quinn threw down the spluttering torch, pulled off the mask and peered over the edge of the catwalk. The weight of Bruckner's exoskeleton had sent him crashing right through the shell of one of the huge chemical waste tanks.

Plumes of green-black spray from the pressurized tank were leaping and dancing all around the floundering spook. Bruckner's upper torso still remained outside the shell of the tank while the rest of the exoskeleton was inside, immersed in toxic slurry.

Encased in the heavy combat suit, the slippery waste fluid was as good as quicksand. With each passing moment, Bruckner sank deeper and deeper into the pool of highly corrosive chemical soup.

"Help me Quinn!" he yelled, sinking lower and lower despite his violent thrashing. "I'm going down!"

Quinn watched Bruckner struggle but there was nothing he could do even if he had wanted to intervene on the merc's behalf. Like a man falling through a sheet of ice, Bruckner's torso kept slipping down and down into the tank of toxic residue.

Moments later he had fallen completely through the rupture in the shell, as the rush of fluid gushing from the tank began to slow to a trickle.

As Bruckner's head disappeared completely from view, Quinn hustled to the other end of the catwalk and made tracks down a stairwell toward the front of the generator room that had not yet been contaminated by the rapidly spreading film of waste slurry, still hearing the alarm klaxons wailing in his ears.

He found an undamaged work station with the objective of keying in a fast acting "bomb" program that would cause the nuclear reactor to quickly go critical.

The computer screen was already issuing a warning, however. Bruckner's tumble into the waste receptacle had overloaded the delicately balanced waste purification system. The computer was attempting to take

emergency measures to seal off the system and had alerted technicians to the problem.

The fail-soft program that had been triggered gave Quinn a fast lane into the heart of the system that he had not had before. Primed for technical intervention, the computer had already opened an override cell into which emergency code could be entered.

Instead of code that would correct the problem, Quinn input his bomb program and set it to cause the nuclear reactor to go critical in a matter of minutes.

At the same time, Quinn informed the base computer that an emergency repair crew was already on the scene and to revert to normal operational status immediately, after which the system would be blocked to all attempts at access.

With no emergency status being signalled, the overload would continue to grow in severity.

Already the floor of the generator node was covered with steam from pressurized pipes that were beginning to reach the point of bursting.

Sparks were being ejected from electrical cable conduits as increased current flow caused them to seriously overheat and the lights were dimming with power surges coursing through the circuitry.

His sabotage accomplished, Quinn raced back toward the utility elevator that provided access to the dynamo node. As he reached the elevator, he saw the level indicator above the doors blink on at the level number of the node.

The doors promptly opened and Quinn stood face to face with a squad of heavily armed, greysuited space mercs.

"Hell, it's about time you assholes got down here!" Quinn shouted at them, thinking fast, gambling that his own commandeered guard uniform would continue to deceive the opposition. "I've been trying to get a line to central comm for the last fifteen minutes!"

"We received orders from -- "

"I know *damn well* you received orders," Quinn shouted back at the merc who had spoken. "I sent them, shithead! Now get going. Search the whole damn place. The guy you want is somewhere in here. The motherfucker coldcocked me and took my weapon."

"You'll have to turn in a report," demanded the cowed merc after Quinn as he strode toward the elevator car.

"I know damn well what I have to do," Quinn shouted back. "But first I'm heading for the infirmary. Hell, I might have a concussion here." He hit the button that set the elevator doors opening.

"Alright, what are you waiting for," the head sky soldier shouted at his crew. "Fan out and find the intruder. Hop to it."

Quinn's ploy was working. The squad of station mercs was off and running, fanning out through the generator room as their leader watched with his SMG ported on his shoulder.

Quinn had even managed to pull rank and commandeer one of the mercs' SMGs before he left the scene.

Now Quinn rode the utility elevator toward the level on which the guard he'd disarmed earlier had said that Ramsey was being kept on ice.

He would find her.

THIRTY

Minutes later Quinn reached the level of Castle's D-Section node.

Just as the doors of the utility elevator slid aside, he saw the overhead lights suddenly dim and felt the station shudder as a shock wave from a distant explosion caused the deck to sway wildly beneath his booted feet.

The sudden impact rocked Quinn on his heels as he exited the car and almost sent him sprawling. Outside in the corridor, anarchy reigned.

Panic-stricken Castle personnel in their grey and white jumpsuits were hustling everywhere, shouting out in consternation as the lights went out entirely, then snapped back to life again, dimmer than they had originally been.

Quinn made his way along the Node 5 corridor until he reached a section marked "Restricted Area. Authorized Personnel Only Beyond This Point." Despite the bedlam around him, Quinn noted that there were still two SMG-porting guards standing their posts.

Without waiting for the skytroopers to react, Quinn triggered a chattering longburst of SMG fire that dropped them both in their tracks.

Quinn frisked both takedowns and found the key on one of them. He slid the specially coded "smart card" into its wall receptacle and the D-Section bulkhead hatch immediately slid open in response.

Beyond the bulkhead there was a narrower branch corridor running perpendicular to the main passageway. There were several steel

doors lining either side of the passageway, each closely spaced with the ones adjoining it.

Cell doors, without a doubt, Quinn surmised. Each door featured a Judas hole configuration where a metal plate could be raised to allow a guard in the corridor to peer through a small window at prisoners in the cells.

The first cell in from the access door was empty. Mummified remains were shackled to a wall inside the second cage. The third was empty as well.

Ramsey was inside the fourth cell.

Clothes soiled and torn, she lay in a fetal position on the bare floor against the crotch of a wall. She didn't move when Quinn called her name and rapped on the door. She seemed oblivious to the chaos going on around her.

There was no slot for a card-key and no time to be overly careful about the risks to the prisoner within so Quinn used one of his last commandeered grenades to blow the cell door off its hinges.

The explosion blasted the door inward, skewing it in its frame with one massive hinge still holding fast. Nevertheless there was enough space for Quinn to squeeze himself through.

Quinn was inside the cell moments later.

"You okay?" he asked, stooping to lift Ramsey's head. She stared up at him with glazed eyes that could not focus on any one point for very long. Ramsey was apparently drugged to the gills.

Grabbing Ramsey's limp body under one arm, Quinn dragged her toward the blown cell door. As they reached the outer corridor again, the station was rocked by an even stronger tremor and the lights dimmed again.

When they came back on long seconds later, a brace of grey-clad sky troopers was blocking their path through the corridor.

"Freeze, candyass!" one of them shouted at Quinn who was already pushing Ramsey toward cover and jerking his SMG up into takedown position.

Before another pulsebeat could pass Quinn sent Spectre fire blazing, salvoing the 9 mm PB weapon one-handed before any of the jumpsuited goons could get off a clean shot at him. He dropped the merc who had issued the command and seriously wounded the second of the three hardmen.

The third hitter managed to get off an SMG quickburst in answer but Quinn had by this time unshipped a grenade from ALICE webbing. Exploding an instant later, the bouncing ball of doom caught the gun-toting sky-guy in its lethal splinter zone, ending the contest. With Ramsey in tow, Quinn hustled down the corridor leaving the terminally wounded merc writhing on the deck, a twisted, bloody thing.

By now the tremors which had started to rock the station as Quinn had reached the detention section were beginning to come in rapid pulses. Entire sections of the node corridor had been plunged into darkness. The station was vibrating fiercely as it was torn asunder by titanic stresses.

Castle was breaking apart.

Chunks of debris were now falling from the overhead drop ceiling. Cascades of hot, fiery sparks showered Quinn as circuits exploded and clouds of steam escaped from rows of conduit tubing which snaked along the corridor walls.

It would not be long before the orbital station would disintegrate completely.

Quinn knew what he was searching for as he half-pushed, half-carried the semiconscious woman through corridors filled with acrid, choking smoke and sparks thrown off by exposed live cables. Quinn was searching for one of the orbital reentry rescue modules, ORRMs, that were engineered into the station as orbit-to-ground lifeboats.

There were several ORRMs located at various points along the perimeter of the space-based installation, according to the computer plans and schematics that Quinn had uncovered during his computer hacking. Each escape module had room enough for only two occupants.

One module, Quinn knew, was located on the detention level of the station. When Quinn reached it with Ramsey in tow there were two Castle troopers already there ahead of them, fighting each other to get control of the life-saving rescue vehicle.

A third was already inside the ORRM. He had an SMG in his fist and was fixing to shoot the other two Castle mercs but fear of damaging the equipment in the rescue module with a poorly aimed burst prevented him from firing.

Quinn had no such problems in deploying his own commandeered SMG.

Two quickbursts neatly dusted the guards who'd been wrestling one another as they quickly separated and dipped for heaters to take on the newcomer with the ready gun.

The skytrooper inside the module angled his weapon at Quinn but realized at the last minute that he was better off simply dogging the armored hatch and popping the lifeboat into space, leaving the opposition to die along with the rapidly disintegrating station.

Quinn realized what was going down as the rescue module's hatch slid closed. Moving fast he managed to jam the SMG's muzzle between the hatch and its frame before it shut completely.

Through the narrow aperture still open Quinn saw a flash of grey coveralls from within the module. He risked a two-round burst and heard a muffled grunt from inside the rescue pod as fire ripped from the muzzle of the Spectre.

The hatch slid slowly open again.

The bleeding merc inside the rescue module toppled out onto the deck, his eyes staring wide open, a ragged red entry wound gaping in the center of his chest.

Quinn dragged the stiff from the lifeboat as yet another tremor shook the station and pushed Ramsey inside the module. As he dogged the ORRM's hatch he heard the sounds of running feet and shouting from further along the corridor as another group of mercs rushed toward the rescue vehicle.

"Let us in, damn you!" Quinn heard a gruff voice shout, accompanied by the thudding of fists and SMG butts pounding against the hemisphere of the armored steel ORRM hull protruding into the corridor.

Quinn had no intention of opening up.

He busied himself strapping Ramsey into one of the two G-seats in the orbit-to-ground rescue vehicle, then climbed behind the module's instrumentation panel which was undamaged by the SMG burst.

The pounding, pleading and threatening of the mercs out in the corridor had stopped.

Now the rapid thwacks of impacting bullet rounds were heard as the frantic mercs fired in blind rage into the hull of the rescue module. Designed to withstand the tremendous heat and shock of atmospheric reentry, the bullets did nothing more than ricochet back at the shooters.

The command sequence for ORRM launch was designed to be self-initiating. A push of the large red button on the console started the doors closing and triggered the rescue module's jettison sequence.

JETTISONING ORBITAL REENTRY RESCUE MODULE flashed the message on the computer screen.

There was the steady hiss of forced pressure oxygen flow and the staccato report of phased rocket burns and the module lurched free of the station moorings.

Back inside the corridor, the doomed Castle mercs screamed as the tremendous suction of escaping atmosphere pulled their thrashing bodies out into the frigid vacuum of space.

Despite their grabbing desperately for handholds, they were quickly sucked through the opening in the hull to their deaths.

As the rescue module disengaged, Quinn and Ramsey were suddenly in a state of microgravity. Quinn buckled himself into the molded g-seat as he began to levitate and float around the small spherical passenger compartment of the reentry-capable lifeboat.

REENTERING EARTH ATMOSPHERE the computer screen flashed minutes later.

Quinn checked his wrist chronometer. Castle's nuclear core should very rapidly be reaching the point of going critical, he surmised.

Within moments Castle would explode into a million fragments in space, consumed in a nuclear fireball.

If the rescue module were not far enough away when the nuclear blast triggered, then it too would be swept away by the burgeoning ring of scathing heat, shock waves and radiation from the exploding station.

Now the data terminal began flashing a series of numbers that listed the rate of descent of the rescue module as well as a map of the terrain below.

The map showed the continental United States and a broken arrow indicated that the ORRM's pre-programmed angle of descent would bring it down over the Pacific Northwest area, inside Washington State. Quinn prayed that the module wouldn't land in the ocean instead.

Miles away, beyond the envelope of the earth's atmosphere, Castle exploded as its nuclear fuel supply went critical, triggering an atomic detonation.

The spaceborne fireball was intense as a miniature nova. The nuke blast blossomed out in all directions, forming a great sphere many miles in diameter as thousands of cubic tons of structural steel was instantly vaporized in a cataclysmic blast that lit up the heavens.

The flash was visible all over the world and EMPs or electromagnetic pulses released by the orbital nuclear detonation produced massive power surges that damaged sensitive electronic equipment from Washington to Moscow.

Suddenly Quinn felt the rescue module teeter-totter with a savage lurch. The air conditioning in the module labored to compensate for the tremendous blast of heat as Castle exploded, bathing the atmosphere below with shock effect, EMPs and ionizing radiation.

Quinn saw the projected glide path of the buffeted ORRM shift further east as the onboard computer calculated the new potential landing spot based on the forces of the titanic blast which had picked up the rescue module and flung it many miles off its preprogrammed trajectory.

Quinn was relieved to see that the orbit-to-ground rescue vehicle would still set down on land instead of the ocean.

MAIN DRAG CHUTES NOW DEPLOYING the computer screen's next message flashed as the rescue module drifted down to an elevation of three thousand feet.

Plummeting earthward at hundreds of miles per second, the drag chute's sudden deployment jerked Quinn and Ramsey in their seats with a powerful tug. Had both not been strapped into their gravity cushioned seats, they would have been knocked unconscious by the radical and sudden shift in angular momentum resulting in G-LOC or gravity induced loss of consciousness.

LANDING SUCCESSFUL the video terminal announced minutes later as the ORRM touched down with a massive lurch. RADIO BEACON REQUESTING ASSISTANCE OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES. PLEASE REMAIN IN ORBITAL REENTRY RESCUE MODULE IF POSSIBLE.

PRESS BUTTON MARKED "SURVIVAL OPTIONS" IF HELP DOES NOT ARRIVE.

No thanks, Quinn thought to himself. He wasn't waiting around for more trouble to come calling. Jettisoning the hatch by hitting the black button which blew the explosive bolts that dogged it securely to the spherical hull of the ORRM Quinn squinted into the mellow sunshine of a country morning.

He unstrapped Ramsey from her g-seat and pulled the still-groggy woman from the ORRM.

Nearby Quinn could see a highway. Quinn noticed that an old brick-red pickup truck had stopped short on the road and its driver was now running toward them. He looked like a local farmer wearing a checkered Mackinaw and faded blue overalls.

"Take me to your leader," Quinn said to the farmer when he reached the lifeboat.

"Huh? What's that?" the arriving man asked perplexedly.

"Forget it," Quinn told the farmer. "Just make it the nearest strip mall instead, chief. I've got some important calls to make."

THIRTY-ONE*Storm King Mountain.*

The advanced design LHX heli­craft used by the Secret Service set down on the landing pad. Nomad hopped from the passenger compartment to the ground, ducking the jetwash from the twin turbines at the rear of the fuselage.

He had just returned from a private meeting with the President in a bugproof briefing room situated within the complex of sterile corridors that stretched beneath the White House.

During this briefing Quinn had given the commander in chief a full accounting of the events leading up to his successful escape from the covert space platform.

The President had looked like a man struck by a poleax as he listened to what the operative called Nomad had to relate. The most powerful man on earth had believed all along that Castle was an experimental station only, one devoted to secret military research and exotic weapons development projects.

The President, Quinn had explained, had been cut entirely out of the loop by the circle of DAYBREAK conspirators. The plot engineered by Alpha had been supported by a cabal of co-conspirators reaching from the lowest to the highest echelons of government.

There was no other way to explain how the vast sums of money, manpower and materiel could have been diverted toward an undertaking on such a grand scale as the Castle project.

"I will begin an immediate investigation," the President had pledged, smashing his fist angrily into his open palm. "Those responsible for this outrage will not evade the people's right to hold them accountable," he had promised.

Quinn had no doubt that the President would be as good as his word. He was also well aware, however, that the full details of the DAYBREAK conspiracy and the Skyfire kills could never be completely made public.

One such detail concerned the female patient now undergoing therapy at the Bethesda psycho ward. The doctors had told Quinn that Ramsey might never regain her sanity. Alpha's drugs had turned her into a near-vegetable.

Aside from spelling the end of the President's personal political future, the exposure of such a thoroughgoing conspiracy might result in widespread panic as Americans questioned the basic tenets of democratic government.

"And the identity of Alpha," the President had gone on, "you say that you never got a look at him."

"That's right," Quinn returned. "His face and voice were both electronically cloaked."

"Amazing," the President mused. "And you were not able to confirm his death when the station blew, is that right too?"

"Correct, sir," Quinn returned. "For all we know Alpha is right here in Washington at this moment, alive and well."

"Incredible, Mr. Quinn," the President exclaimed.

Just then the intercom on his desk beeped. The President went around his desk to pick up the phone's handset.

"A helicopter is waiting for you, Quinn," the President had said as he cradled the handset. "We'll continue our discussion at some later date. Right now your expertise is urgently needed to deal with STRIKE."

The STRIKE system had been activated by the worm program that had burrowed its way into the silicon grey matter of the Skyfire command and control software.

The worm had to be purged from the system, rooted out pronto.

This presented several major tactical problems.

The first of these concerned reaching the Cray 2010's central processing unit. The new antivirus program prepared by the CERT team was a last ditch attempt to purge the worm.

But the code could only be input directly at the Skyfire computer's CPU. Therein lay the sticking point to the operation.

With STRIKE now activated by the worm in the Cray 2010's memory bank, the knowledge-based security network was designed to present a gauntlet of death to any invader attempting to attack the CPU.

The techs had already tried to breach STRIKE's deadly security cordon by means of their remote controlled robot drone and had failed dismally.

The only alternative at this point would be the complete shutdown of the Skyfire system. The CERT team had urged the President to order a low-yield nuclear airburst as a strategem of last resort.

The airburst would have the capability of shutting down the system by bathing the ground-based computer in EMPs. The problem with this tactic was that the electromagnetic pulse which would destroy the silicon brain of the system would do so beyond all hope of recovery.

Skyfire would be destroyed beyond all possibility of salvage. Moreover, there would then be the very real likelihood that the Skyfire satellite array might begin to malfunction despite Castle's destruction, fulfilling the doomsday scenario that Alpha had planned if his demands were not met.

Quinn decided that he would attempt to breach STRIKE himself in a solo penetration. One man pitting himself against the combined firepower of a dozen computer controlled weapon systems.

Quinn knew the STRIKE system better than anyone else on earth. Its strengths and its weaknesses were a result of his own design. Quinn and Quinn alone could challenge the deadly gauntlet posed by STRIKE.

Unlike the walls of the Skyfire command center's other passageways, the bulkheads of the corridor which gave sole access to the Skyfire CPU node were fashioned from armored plate steel, far too heavy a gauge for ordinary construction purposes.

A terrorist might not pick up on this discrepancy. Nor might such an unauthorized person notice that there were no doors in the walls, no ventilation ducts, no ports of any kind whatever.

The corridor was simply a long steel tube with access possible at either end, but nowhere else.

Quinn had designed STRIKE to initially present a neutral facade to any personnel which entered the lethal corridors, luring intruders into the heart of STRIKE -- its AKZ or automated killing zone -- much as a Venus fly trap lures unwary insects into its jaws with the treacherous bait of easy nectar.

Nomad stepped into the evenly lit sterile corridor, aware of the deadly threat that lurked just beyond its blank white walls which were actually phased array sensor laden "smart skins." Clothed in an all-black stealthsuit and wearing virtual reality goggles strapped to his head, Quinn wielded an AUG 5.56 mm SMG as his sole item of personal armament.

The digital readout on the raster of the VRGs' eyes-up display informed Quinn that elapsed mission time was ten seconds and counting.

Quinn knew what would happen next. When it did he was ready. Massive steel plates suddenly slid down at either end of the corridor which Quinn had just entered, clicking crisply into hidden mortises.

The motion of the plates was both virtually noiseless and quicksilver-swift, effectively sealing the corridor off from the rest of the underground complex and whoever happened to be caught inside the corridor from the outside world. The sterile corridor had now become a potentially deadly trap.

At the same time as the plates slid down to seal off the AKZ from the rest of the Skyfire command center, the corridor walls to the left and the right of Nomad rolled back into hidden receptacles in the floor of the passageway to create an empty area approximately thirty feet long by fifty feet wide -- the AKZ's "containment chamber."

AUTOMATED KILLING ZONE ACTIVATED flashed the message on the graphical display of Quinn's VRGs.

Quinn didn't need his VRGs' warning message to recognize exactly what was about to happen. After all, it had been he himself who had been the driving force behind the Automated Killing Zone perimeter defense concept.

The Automated Killing Zone concept was based on two principles.

The first principle was containment of the threat.

The second principal was annihilation of the threat.

Total annihilation.

These objectives were to be accomplished by shutting up the hostile forces in what was essentially a gigantic kill box. The containment chamber of the AKZ was studded everywhere by sophisticated arrays of artificial-intelligence-driven weapons.

Just like the ancient Egyptians who had constructed false tunnels in the interiors of their pyramids designed to confuse and destroy grave robbers, the access corridor to the Skyfire CPU could suddenly turn into a deathtrap to wipe out terrorist assault squads.

Under the annihilating saturation fire produced by the advanced weapons incorporated into the STRIKE concept, the terrorist threat would be overwhelmed by precision-targeted automatic fire, pulse laser strikes, hyperkinetic energy rounds, antiarmor submunitions and other types of lethal armament.

The levels of intense saturation fire combined with the lightning rapidity of the firepower that could be brought to bear on intruders in this way was geared to tax situational awareness beyond the limits of human capability.

Regardless of the nature of the threat facing Skyfire's command center, the STRIKE system guaranteed that the fight would be over practically before it got started.

Quinn steeled himself for the coming onslaught, his VRGs' electronic threat sensors and finely honed combat senses working in tandem with his superbly trained physique to challenge STRIKE's Automated Killing Zone and enable him to emerge unharmed into the Skyfire CPU at the other end of the deadly corridor.

Now the snouts of lethal weapons of automated destruction sprang from the walls and ceiling of the AKZ containment chamber.

At the same time, the insectlike profiles of other advanced weapons emplacements popped up from floor plates beneath the booted feet of the twenty-first century gladiator. Sensor heads swiveled this way and that on servomechanized stalks seeking target acquisition.

A beep sounded in Nomad's ears, signaling that his VRG confirmed target lock by the AKZ's battle management computer system.

Almost instantaneously, Nomad found himself engulfed in a storm of lethal fire.

The Automated Killing Zone was now active.

White hot as the nucleus of hell.

THIRTY-TWO

In a pulsebeat the laser cannon tracked on Nomad and began firing phased bursts of its mankilling light. But the barrage of VRG-assisted AUG fire unleashed by Nomad made it through the laser's defensive shield to devastating effect.

In a whooshing fireball the armored casing of the pulse gun shattered to jagged smithereens. Once this threat was neutralized by Nomad's quick and deadly action, he rushed through the burning wreckage of the blasted weapon station.

Nomad was by no means home safe, though. The Automated Killing Zone still had a world of nasty surprises in store.

Just up ahead of him, high-speed coil guns firing armor piercing hyperkinetic energy rounds popped suddenly out of the floor and ceiling. Caught in a crossfire whirlwind of HKE rounds, Nomad tucked and rolled to evade the deadly barrage of lethal antipersonnel flechettes.

The hyperkinetic penetrator rounds had no explosive power in themselves.

But they were manufactured from ultra-dense depleted uranium and the energy pulses which propelled them from the coil guns' muzzles with incredible speed and accuracy gave each of the HKE rounds the capability of striking their targets with the impact of exploding meteors.

A single strike from one of these dartlike HKE rounds was enough to disable or kill a man.

As Nomad tucked and rolled through the eerily soundless and terrifyingly deadly coil gun barrage, he managed to take out one of the guns with a sustained AUG salvo of tumbling 5.56s.

Another coil gun fired a burst at the square foot of deck space on which Quinn had just stood. The nonexplosive strike blasted a smoking crater in the floor constructed of two-inch thick titanium steel due to pure energy transfer effect.

Now the coil gun was already tracking around to target Nomad in its fast and lethal computerized sights.

But before it could achieve target acquisition on him, Nomad raised his right arm and used the split-second that the gun needed to retarget and swing its barrel around to cut loose with a disabling burst of AUG fire.

The burst was accurate. Struck dead-on by the AUG's steel tumblers just as another HKE round was discharged, the sudden energy overload blasted the weapon emplacement to smithereens.

Quinn had now managed to get two-thirds of the way through the AKZ. But the final third could very well claim his life.

Up from the deckplates of the corridor now popped a weird looking contraption that was made up of two stainless steel hemispheres which swung to and fro on ball bearing mounts at a rapid rate of speed.

The interior of each hemisphere was lined with rows of gleaming serrated cutting edges each two inches in length.

The device was technically known as a nonexplosive interception antipersonnel device or NIAD. Since it was designed to operate as a shredding machine for disposable human beings, most familiar with the device simply called it "the manshredder."

The manshredder's whirling steel blades made it a highly efficient killing machine. Not only could it reduce a human being to biodegradable muck in seconds, but it was psychologically devastating on survivors witnessing what it did. In tests using condemned murderers as subjects, a large percentage chose to blow their brains out rather than face the NIAD.

Since by the time an intruder came up against the manshredder there was nowhere else to go except back toward the devastating fire of the corridor entrance, anyone trapped in the AKZ was forced to head right into the madly spinning steel jaws of the NIAD.

Quinn found himself in that position as he reached the three-quarter mark in the advanced design gauntlet. Herded toward the manshredder by phased weapons fire there was no other way to go except straight ahead into the gleaming steel jaws of death or back into the blazing hellzone at his back.

Quinn had designed it this way. Only the best and most resourceful members of any terrorist strike team could ever hope to get this far along the AKZ.

Placing such men in a no-win position -- one where they were caught almost literally between the rock and the hard place -- was designed to break them psychologically. Video and other sensors would

be recording the spectacle of terrorist hitters turned into whimpering mush before they were either exterminated by weapons fire or shredded to crimson goop by the NIAD.

Quinn knew that there was a brief instant between the time when the manshredder's whirling blades passed each other during which a perfectly executed leap and tumble might get a man through the gap.

While a man might theoretically jump through the aperture, computer calculations gave him only a point two percent chance of survival.

Because the STRIKE system's Automated Killing Zone had been designed to neutralize a strike by a terrorist group that was estimated to be between four and seven men strong, such a small risk factor was deemed acceptable.

A single escapee, possibly mangled and mutilated by the whirling blades, would present little problem for security forces stationed at the other end of the death corridor.

Nomad tensed as he readied himself to take the gamble of his life. He had no choice now but to challenge the manshredder and emerge uninjured from the other side of the lethal antipersonnel device.

His VRGs' targeting laser strobed, electronically painting the whirling blades and calculating the precise launch window for his leap through space. Quinn set the countdown for ten seconds.

Five ... four ... three ... two --

Quinn took a running jump at the sound of the beeptone shrilling in his ears. As his feet left the floor he tucked his body into a compact ball to minimize exposed body area. Executing a full three hundred sixty, Quinn tumbled through the centrifuging jaws of the manshredder, hearing the whoosh of wind generated by the swinging steel hemispheres.

Landing on his feet, Quinn sprinted from the AKZ corridor. He turned to see the manshredder's rapidly whirling stainless steel jaws slow to a halt as computer sensors indicated that there were no personnel remaining in the AKZ. Moments later the manshredder sank down into the deck plates with a hydraulic whirr and disappeared.

The corridor of death was silent again.

Directly ahead, inside the Skyfire CPU node, Nomad could now see the corpse of the tech who had died when the laser pulse guns were activated by STRIKE still slumped near one of the Cray 2010 instrumentation consoles where he'd been killed.

Because STRIKE was still triggered, those laser blasters were still engaged, Quinn knew. However their passive TI sensor heads were completely spoofed by the advanced heat signature suppression technology of Quinn's stealthsuit.

Invisible to the sensor eyes of the ceiling mounted lasers, Quinn raised the AUG in a two-handed grip and launched a salvo of 5.56 mm

rippers at the stubby black snout of each pulse cannon, knocking them out of commission before they could even see him.

With the lasers neutralized Quinn seated himself at one of the video display terminals of the CPU's command and control instrument console. The raster screen flashed instantly to life as Nomad input the activation code sequence at the terminal.

Calling up a blank data screen for the advanced AMOS language that the Skyfire system's software was written in, Quinn began logging in the antiviral code that he had committed to memory.

With the final keystroke entered, Quinn copied the code into the software operating system of the Cray, thereby sending his virus-killing algorithms coursing through the infected computer like a potent healing medicine.

The results of Quinn's digitized hypodermic needle were spectacular and virtually instantaneous. The Skyfire CPU began painting flashing patterns on the video display screen as the antiviral program started blocking off the computer's memory register addresses from control by the DAYBREAK virus agent.

One by one, the Cray 2010's memory registers were processed and sanitized of all lingering traces of the invading code. The antiviral program then proceeded to the CMOS segment of the Skyfire computer BIOS, then attacked the bugs lurking in its software operating system, applications programs and finally its logged files.

CHECKSUM ERRORS: 0 flashed the on-screen message.
SYSTEM DECONTAMINATION SUCCESSFUL.

Suddenly the grille of the commo unit to Quinn's side beeped.

Quinn picked up one of the phone handsets nearby and put it to his ear.

Skyfire Operations Director Jack Redding was on the other end of the comline.

"You just made a lot of peoples' day, Quinn," he said, the jubilation he felt evident in his voice. In the background Quinn could hear the sound of the CERT techs wildly cheering, like a bunch of schoolkids whose team had just won the big game. "The CPU reads clean. *We've got Skyfire back!*"

EPILOG

New York City.

The President of the United States stood before the burnished mahogany podium to address the United Nations General Assembly. The subject of his address was the Skyfire Net.

"Citizens of the world," the President began as he smiled into the camera lenses of the world newsmedia. "Today marks the beginning of a shining era where virtually limitless energy can supply mankind with clean, safe power; power derived from the light of the sun itself."

To the left and right of the President two immense flat video screens that towered to the ceiling relayed real time images of the Skyfire satellites taken from Space Planes cruising in low earth orbit.

Astronauts of many nations were onboard the manta-shaped ASPs, charged with the mission of verifying the energization of the Skyfire Net. Some astronauts had gone EVA, clustering around each orbiting Skyfire solar collection platform like ministering angels, subjecting each satellite to batteries of sophisticated on-site computer diagnostic checks.

"The full story of the behind-the-scenes struggle that had to be fought before Skyfire could become a reality may never be known," the President went on, his address being beamed to billions of viewers across the planet.

"We will reveal further details as they become available. All we know now is that a conspiracy to deprive humanity of this great benefit has been rooted out by the efforts of a valiant few."

A chorus of applause greeted the President's final remarks as statesmen from around the world rose from their seats and gave the American leader a standing ovation.

The President knew a great deal more about how the Skyfire project had been salvaged than he was saying. Nobody but a handful knew the complete story, and none beyond this privileged circle might ever learn the truth, but the world owed the operative known as Quinn. It owed him its future.

The black-garbed figure dragged the inflatable raft up from the waterline and hid it in the concealment of some big rocks. A black nylon watch cap covered the striker's head, and as he turned to scramble up the rise at the end of the beach zone, a shaft of moonlight lighted his face for a few brief pulsebeats.

The face was a festering mass of scar tissue. One ear was little more than a shriveled stump while the lower jaw was twisted all out of shape.

Only the eyes were alive.

The mad blue eyes glowed with an inner fire.

The burning, seething fire of unquenchable hate.

Hate for the shadow warrior they called Nomad, hate that gnawed at Wild Bill Bruckner's soul and demanded the satisfaction that his warped psyche knew he could never obtain except by killing Quinn.

Tonight, Bruckner would get the satisfaction he craved. He would pay Quinn back many times over for what he had done to him onboard the covert space station.

Quinn had left him for dead but Bruckner didn't die so easily. His combat cocoon was still kicking as he slid down into the chemical waste tank. It was barely functional, but despite being encrusted with slippery toxic slime it still had enough wallop left in it to go the distance.

Bruckner had been able to smash his way out through the hull of the waste storage canister before the armored exoskeleton shorted out and died on him completely.

Still high on his own adrenaline and numb to the pain from the corrosive fluids that had eaten away his skin practically to the bone, Bruckner had shucked the steel cocoon, checked a systems control console in the generator node and seen that Quinn had overridden the fail-soft safeguards preventing the nuclear furnace from exploding.

As he realized that destruction was imminent he had felt the entire station shudder violently. Debris had rained down on his head as the deck seesawed under his feet.

Bruckner knew then that it was too late by then for anything but escape. He had found his way to the Space Plane docked at the station just as the ASP's crew was dogging its boarding hatch. Despite the pain from the toxic slime which he could now feel consuming his flesh, Bruckner swore he would get revenge on Quinn.

Now that time had come.

Dues paying time.

Up close and personal.