

The Virtual Dead

by

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CHAPTER 1

Diving for bodies was not one of Scott Markman's favorite things. He gazed across the open water at the big orange ball creeping up over the forest horizon. A passing Florida breeze rippled the glassy lake-top and caused swirls within the fading layer of fog lingering at the water's surface. Markman found himself wishing he were somewhere else.

Kneeling awkwardly on the flexible, black bottom of the rubber boat, he wormed the new regulator mouthpiece back into his sore mouth and sucked test air from the fresh aluminum tank. With his left hand he wiggled the black wrap-around mask down over his wet face and kept a gentle grip as he pushed over backward and splashed into the lake. Cool water seeped into the waistband of his suit. Exhaust bubbles gurgled loudly as he rose to the surface and squeezed the side of the raft's inner tube.

He stared through the protective lens across the flat top of the calm water. Other divers were searching at different points along the way. No one had found a thing. The old man had wandered away from the care of his family and had been missing all night. To everyone's dismay he had last been seen standing on the quaint wooden bridge that crossed the narrow portion of this picturesque country mere. Since the elderly man often suffered severe bouts of dementia, the divers feared they indeed might find him.

Markman slipped back beneath the surface to the lonely darkness that lay below. He arched over and pushed down into the unknown, keeping one hand outstretched in distrust of the limited visibility. The lake was as deep as lakes went in the area—fifty feet in some places—and the amber-colored water provided little more than two or three feet of visibility. It was a spooky, uninviting world of liquid emptiness.

His hand found the silty bottom. He withdrew his fingers from the muddy cloud and waved himself weightlessly into an upright position. The lake bottom was flat, mostly mud, decorated with thin brown weeds of varying height; the variety that needed little light to survive. At least it's clean, he thought. The weapons recovery dives in the polluted waters near the industrial centers of the city never failed to leave him feeling dirty, even after the lengthy post-dive shower.

A cloud of silt billowed up around his position on the barren bottom. He took a bearing from his luminous wrist compass and pushed off blindly along the imaginary line of his search perimeter,

trailing bubbles in a rising train behind him. If there were a body to be found, hopefully someone else would have the honor.

Soft kicks from his rocket fins moved him along the flat bottom at a slow crawl. He pushed forward through the solitary darkness, keeping the needle on his small compass fixed. When the lake bottom began to rise sharply upward, he twisted around and headed back the way he had come, traveling a line slightly to the right of his original course. Search and recovery dives were so unlike certification training. The open water excursions on the ocean had been colorful and exotic, crystal clear water, jagged reef beds filled with life and wonder, places comparable only to the imaginary environments that might be found on another planet.

There had been fresh water cave dives also; startling descents into smooth rock tunnels filled with immaculately clear, cold water, tunnels that branched off and went on forever, even back in time thousands of years. He shuddered at the thought of what cave diving had become; unpleasant recovery operations that everyone dreaded; solemn affairs carried out expressly for the purpose of recovering the careless who had lost their way and their lives. There never seemed to be a shortage of adventurers who felt memory would serve just as well as a simple nylon rope lifeline, and the consequences were usually grotesque scenes of the violently desperate who had run out of air trying to find their way back home.

Markman pushed on, straining to focus ahead in the murk, moving delicately so as not to cause clouds of brown in the emptiness around him. This was a place of perpetual silence and stillness, rarely interrupted by aliens from above, and then only by those in search of worldly things lost or hidden.

He tugged on his shifting buoyancy vest, and suddenly realized this place was in some ways more familiar than the complex, foreign land that lay above. The surface world lacked peace. Life was competition. No time for inner reflection. Self-gratification was all-important. He felt more a stranger to that than to the serene darkness that loomed in the watery fog beyond. The steep mountains of China had little in common with the materialistic cities of America. There were no Yaks here to pull the plows; no scroll-packed prayer wheels to spin; no rancid-smelling butter carvings; and no stone-mud temples to crawl forward to in selfless respect for the soul of the Tao. But here in the silent world below the flat, shimmering line of water and air, Markman could almost imagine he was back in the ancient realm of his extraordinary upbringing, and that he had only to surface to be home once again.

The nagging little problem of being too heavy brought him back to reality. Fresh water dives required fewer segments on the black,

nylon weight belt, and he now carried too many. The lack of buoyancy kept dragging him down, causing occasional fin contact with the fine layer of muck. It was greatly diminishing the already poor visibility. He continued to move ahead, but compromised his search in an attempt to see why no air flow was jetting into the small rubber cells in his buoyancy vest.

Looking down at the pesky release valve, his hooded head suddenly bumped against something, something spongy and unexpected. Startled, he waved himself back to see.

He coughed up a burst of air as his eyes met the horrid object of interference, and he kicked frantically back from it in morbid repulsion. The ghostlike form swayed listlessly to and fro in current created by his intrusion. Long silky blonde hair waved hypnotically in the eddies, a complement to the thin flowing gown that moved with it. The small, pretty, chalk-white face stared back at him with wide, dull blue eyes that beckoned him to find her. The shapely, lifeless figure drifted and turned in suspension, its arms frozen outward from the waist like a twirling ballerina. The yellow nylon rope tied tightly to the left ankle had bruised and anchored it to the cement block that lay half buried in the soft mud.

Panic quickly turned to regret. This was not an elderly gentleman lost by consequence of age, but rather a beautiful young woman, probably not thirty years old. And this was not a case of unfortunate circumstance. Someone with a black hole for a heart had found convenience in murder. What earthly desire could have been so blinding? How could such heartlessness exist?

Stunned, he realized from the hollow silence that he had been holding his breath. He forced himself to relax and drew air from his tank. Bubbles rushed from the exhaust vents of the regulator, and raced upward.

Without looking away, he drew the wedge marker from its attachment on his weight belt. He drove the plastic stake deeply into the muddy floor and inflated the red marker buoy. It bobbed upward atop the bubble trail, drawing a thin nylon cord with it. He returned his full attention to the lovely lady that waited before him. I'll be back for you, he thought to her. I promise.

He reached overhead as though grabbing for the surface and propelled himself upward toward the blanket of silver, trying not to disturb further the stillness of the lady's resting place. He broke out above the watery depths, pushed back the well-sealed mask, and searched the shoreline.

Police Chief Wandell had set up a temporary base of operations around a weathered, old picnic table on a nearby shore. A large group of men were now gathered there, some of them black-suited divers.

They had seen him surface, and a few were waving at him to come ashore. In the background stood an elderly-looking gentleman, who was being comforted by a small group of relieved relatives.

Markman rolled on to his back and kicked past the small red police marker on the way to shore. It twisted and swayed as though to remind him someone waited below. Chief Wandell and one other officer broke away from the picnic table celebration and came to meet him as he reached shallow water. He pulled off the long black fins and stepped awkwardly through the muddy shallows to join them on the grassy shore.

"We're done here, Scott," called the Chief, as he wiped away the beads of sweat on his wrinkled brow. "The old man fell asleep in a neighbor's car. We've been searchin' for nothin'."

Water streamed down the sleek black wetsuit as Markman approached the two men and stopped beside them.

"But I sure appreciate you helpin' out during this convention thing. So that's it, go bring your stuff in, everything's okay here," said the Chief matter-of-factly.

Even before Markman could speak, they had translated the somber expression on his face. "No Chief, everything's not okay."

Chapter 2

Federal Agent Resa Merrill pushed lightly forward on the black control yoke, nosing the sleek Piper Arrow III down toward the city lights that decorated the floor of the gray darkness. High altitude overcast blocked the white light from the full moon and concealed any stars bright enough to share the night sky. The shroud of obscurity had made for a dull, uneventful night flight.

Pete Travers gazed passively out of the copilot window at the islands of color and tiny white headlight beams that laced the maze of roadways eight thousand feet below. He loosened his wrinkled tie further, and twisted around to look in the dim cabin light at the lone passenger who was daydreaming in the back seat. He gestured downward in confirmation that there was finally something to see.

"So there is such thing as civilization!" Don Hartman replied, as he rested his head against the small Plexiglas window.

"Not sure I'd call it that," replied Travers with a smirk.

"Well, at least we scored big-time for once."

"Yeah, nobody ever expected us to get our hands on a full suit," added Travers. Hartman reached behind and patted the fat, dull silver utility case that had been stuffed into the cargo area behind his seat.

"Hey, let's have a look at that thing before the lab guys disappear with it forever. What do you think, Don?"

"I'd like to get just a glimpse of it. I mean, after all we went through to get the damn thing. Let's do it," replied Hartman, and he turned in his cramped seat to find the handle of the bulky container.

The unorthodox proposal distracted pilot Merrill as she leveled the obedient airplane. The soft red panel lights highlighted the middle age lines of her face, making her look older than she was. "The higher ups would not take kindly to you guys messing with that thing," she said without turning to look.

"That sounded like a yes to me, didn't it to you, Pete?"

"Absolutely a yes," answered Travers and in the low light he was able to catch a half smile on Merrill's face.

Hartman turned loose his seat belt and hunched over to pull the oversized case from the crowded space behind his seat. He bumped his head on the low ceiling and cursed. The ribbed security container was nearly too large to drag forward. He wrenched it carefully back and forth, finally freeing it and wrestling it to his lap where it came up almost to his shoulders.

Shadowy wisps of thin gray-brown clouds began to pass outside the aircraft like ghosts. The lights from the city below began to strobe in and out as the unexpected weather quickly grew more dense. The aircraft radio suddenly broke in over the steady drone of the aircraft's engine.

"Piper eight-five Whiskey, Nemo approach, be advised, traffic at your three o'clock, heading westward, altitude unknown."

Merrill turned her attention to the copilot window and stared into the dark-gray murk. She saw nothing. "Nemo approach, eight-five Whiskey, negative contact. We'll keep looking."

Hartman cursed again under his breath and shifted positions in the back seat as he struggled with the chrome key locks that governed the two latches on the case. He wrenched at the left hand lock with a small lock pick kept on his key ring.

Merrill continued to search. Pete Travers joined her. The weather outside the airplane grew less and less cooperative.

"Damn, why didn't they forecast this stuff? We were supposed to have good visibility all the way in. If it gets any thicker, we'll be on instruments," Merrill wiped one hand on her pants leg.

"It's not a problem is it?" asked Travers. "I mean, you're certified on instruments, right?"

"Yeah, yeah, I just hate single pilot IFR. There's too much to do with the damn radio and all. How much time you got in Pete? You can probably help with that."

"I've got about twenty hours or so in a Cessna one-fifty-two, but I haven't solo'd yet. My instructor says she wouldn't drive with me in a car on the freeway."

Merrill smiled and scoffed but was drowned out by a jubilant cry from the back.

"I've got it, it's open, turn on the overhead light," Hartman yelled, as he pushed up the lid of the fat briefcase.

Merrill looked back over her shoulder. "No way, Don. It would blow my night vision. A flashlight will be bad enough." She leaned forward and searched under her seat. She extracted a small pocket light and carefully handed it over. With the bulky case jerked sideways against the side wall, Hartman squeezed the tiny gray light on, and held its beam as steady as possible to reveal the contents.

For the trio of agents, it was a treasure box of secrets. Packed within the oversized compartment lay two alien-looking objects. Embedded in the foam-lined case, taking up most of the interior, was a large obtusely shaped, black helmet. Six fat molded ribs ran over the crown, and where a visor should have been, the smooth molded plastic jutted outward, forming a kind of modular, binocular-like shield.

Folded neatly in the compartment beside it, lay an equally strange body suit. Little of it was visible, but enough could be seen to assure its complexity. The suit's irregular surface was packed with tubes and wires that ran between the layers of the slick stretch material with intersecting rectangular shapes that appeared to be electronic sensors. One glove and a portion of one boot were visible. Each was even more densely riddled with sensory matrixes.

"What the hell is it?" asked Travers.

"It's a real live Sensesuit, Pete. The first one we've ever been able to get our hands on," replied Hartman. He struggled to hold both the case and light in position. "Maybe we'll be able to shove this down the throats of those bastards now."

A moment of somber reflection passed. The steady drone of the engine dominated the cabin as they remembered their associates who had died trying to infiltrate the bizarre world of the Dragon Masters. With an angry stare, Hartman gazed at the sensesuit in his lap and realized he was now the only agent left from the original investigation. Those assigned with him had disappeared or been killed. He thought back to all that had been learned, and the heavy price that had been paid for it. Until now, no one had been able to penetrate the binary barriers of the Dragon Masters Club. And no other entry to their strange and twisted existence had been found. What took place among them, took place within a world of bright color and limitless dimension; a place where men became omnipotent and immortal, and some even died that way.

There was no sufferance of race or religion in the computer worlds of the Dragon Masters. The size and physical strength of a player had little impact in deciding victory in computer-physical combat. In a realm of pure syntheses, mere thought translated into sensesuit power. An adept player could emerge quite wealthy from the contests. Funds mysteriously deposited into his account by a central computer apparently originated from nowhere and were impossible to trace. On a less successful day, a warrior might escape quite financially depleted, since the costs of failure were comparable to the rewards of victory. Credit, however, was always forthcoming, for as long as a player lived.

But the suit of war was not for the squeamish. Its power spanned well beyond that of finance. The suit could generate impacts adequate to break any of the larger bones in the human body. And, there were temperature extremes. No area of a player's body was exempt from contact cold or heat. Were a Dragon Master to find himself displaced to a desert terrain scenario, he might indeed perish from heat exhaustion unless he solved the riddle of escape.

It was the incendiary properties that eventually demanded the attention of Hartman's agency. An alarming series of deaths indicated that the sensesuit did not simulate death, it initiated it. In several cases, players had forfeited their lives in a spontaneous combustion that left little trace of suit or player.

Those who continued in the wealthy club apparently did not care to give up the potentially profitable path they had chosen. Had the players themselves been the sole victims of the new kind of underground, the situation might have caused less concern among law enforcement. Unfortunately, the carnage had begun to extend outward to innocent acquaintances of the less fortunate players. Secrecy seemed to be the lifeblood of the Dragon Masters, and anyone inadvertently exposed to their activities was considered a threat. Few players realized executions were taking place outside the membership. Most thought the danger to be confined only to battles within the network. Except to a handful of members, the occasional assassination of uninitiated citizens remained a guarded secret.

But it was no longer a secret from Federal Law Enforcement. The charred remains of players had been much less intriguing than the means by which they had met their ends. The technology required to perform such instantaneous destruction had not existed anywhere until now. The scarce forensic evidence available suggested that some players had broken bones, others had suffocated, and still others had been poisoned. In all cases however, fire had originated within the suit and had destroyed any trace of its origin.

With the start of the investigation, a morbid procession had begun. Veteran Federal agents who should have made the finest Dragon Master players of all, were cut down one by one. Their carefully concealed identities seemed to have been known all along. Some had apparently asked the wrong questions of the wrong individuals. Others, isolated from the outside world, had managed to become initiates in the system, but had burned to death in the suit. Two agents had disappeared completely, possibly after becoming successful players.

The secrets of the sensesuit remained intact. No one knew from where they originated, or how they worked, or who was at the head of the Dragon Masters pyramid. The game went on.

Now for the first time, three Federal agents stared intently at a completely intact suit that was not under the control of the Dragon Master central computer.

"It's not what I expected. How much do we know about it?" asked Travers.

"We don't know much, that's for sure. Some say the thing's partly thought-control. The lab guys will be in seventh heaven when they get their hands on this," Hartman replied.

"Okay boys, close it up and kill that light. It's getting thick. I'm going to have to call in for an instrument approach if we're going to get in to Lanier."

Merrill's passengers quickly assumed strained looks, but could not help returning their attention to the enchanting suit.

Reluctantly, Hartman pulled the case back into a position in front of him. He handed the small flashlight to Travers who took it and turned to look out the window by his seat. All signs of the city below had disappeared from view. Grey-black haze had taken its place. The ocean of air around the aircraft had become completely undefined. There was no longer a sense of depth or altitude, nothing but a colorless emptiness in every direction. The soft red glow from the instrument panel gave reassurance in the dimly-lit cabin. The needles in the circular gauges vibrated with life, and the panel-mounted counters clicked away in precise meter. The magnetic compass bobbed and swayed in its oil-filled bowl near the top of the windshield.

Merrill pinched the small button on the handle of her control yoke and spoke warily into the boom mike attached to her headset. "Nemo approach, eight-five Whiskey."

A few seconds of squelched radio silence passed. A raspy sounding controller's voice came over the cabin overhead speaker. "Eight-five Whiskey, Nemo approach, go ahead."

"Nemo approach, eight-five Whiskey, thirty miles northwest Lanier, level at six thousand. Sir, um, it's closing in on us here. We, ah, would like to open an instrument flight plan that will get us the Lanier runway three-six ILS approach if possible, sir."

A reply came. "Eight-five Whiskey, Nemo approach, turn right heading one-nine-zero degrees, maintain six thousand. Expect vectors to Palmer Intersection and hold. Your flight plan will be processed as soon as possible."

Merrill shook her head. "Damn, why didn't they forecast this crap." She thumbed the button on her yoke handle. "Nemo approach, eight-five Whiskey, understand right turn heading one-nine-zero degrees, maintain six thousand, expect vectors to Palmer and hold."

Pete Travers stared at Merrill from the copilot seat. "No problem, right?"

"We'll be flying ovals awhile. You guys may as well sit back and relax."

"Well, at least this is a nice healthy bird, isn't it?" asked Travers. "I mean this thing looks like new."

"It's the best the crack dealers had to offer," replied Merrill. "A freebie from the last big drug bust."

Travers started to comment on the irony of drug dealers too often having better equipment than civilian agencies, when he was interrupted by cursing from the back.

"Get back in there damn it!"

"Are you flunking out back there as a baggage handler or what, Don?" Travers coughed up a laugh.

"Hey, don't blame me, it's your damn briefcase in the way!" Hartman continued to wrestle the uncooperative silver case to its place among the disrupted baggage.

Travers scoffed. "Blame Resa not me, I didn't bring a briefcase."

"You guys will have to shut up," Merrill complained. "I've got to hear our call sign."

"Sorry, Captain," acknowledged Travers. "Hope there's nothing breakable back there in your briefcase. We'll shut up, promise."

"I don't have a briefcase. Pete, once I get set up here you can help with the radio, okay?"

Before Travers could reply, the air traffic controller's voice again took priority. "Eight-five Whiskey, Nemo approach, turn right heading two-four-zero, cleared direct to Wynn intersection and hold, expect further instructions at zero-three-two-zero Zulu."

Merrill shook her head irately as she read back her instructions to the controller. For a moment there was radio silence.

Travers twisted in his seat and turned back to Don Hartman. The cabin light was low enough that he could not clearly make out his co-worker's expression. Travers was continuing to struggle with the bulky sensesuit case, mumbling under his breath about women always needing to carry too much luggage.

"Don," said Travers in a low tone. "Resa says she doesn't have a briefcase. You sure that thing isn't yours?"

Travers halted his unproductive wrestling match and looked through the darkness at his colleague. "What? No, it's not mine. What are you talking about? Whose is it?"

The two men stared at each other blankly.

"Bring it out here. We'd better take a look at it."

Hartman stared blankly at his co-worker then returned to his wrenched posture over the small cargo area. He gave up on the oversized Sensesuit case and pushed it back out of the way atop the mountain of clothes and bags. He dug down and jerked a standard-size, black briefcase out from beneath the pile. It was a very plain and unobtrusive type of baggage, thin and small, completely unmarked. It looked expensive.

"I don't get it," said Hartman as he maneuvered the case into his lap. "Where'd it come from?"

Merrill twisted at the dials on her navigation console. "Nemo approach, eight-five Whiskey, level at six thousand, entering the hold at five minutes after the hour."

The controller's reply was hurried. "Eight-five Whiskey, roger."

"It's combo-locked Pete. I need a screwdriver or something."

"Pete," called Merrill.

"Yeah, what do you need, Rese?"

"Do you know what an approach plate looks like?"

"Sorry, Captain, haven't the faintest."

"In my travel bag in the back. I need it right now. It's a little white book. Find the page that says Lanier ILS three-six, and tear it out for me."

Travers leaned over sideways and conveyed her request to Hartman. The disgruntled back seat passenger put aside the phantom briefcase and angled himself to begin digging once again in the overloaded compartment. In Merrill's tan shoulder bag he found the small, white manual that was intended to guide pilots safely down to hardened runways.

"Got it," he cried victoriously, as the airplane suddenly dipped down, turning his stomach. Travers took the booklet, hunched over and began flipping through the pages. The Instrument Landing Approach page Merrill had requested was torn out and held out to her.

"Rese, is there any kind of screwdriver around here?" he asked, as she took the approach plate.

Merrill nodded gratefully and clipped the instruction sheet to the yoke in front of her. "In the flap behind your seat. There's a tube to drain the sumps. It's got a screwdriver tip on it."

"Thanks," replied Travers. Hartman had heard the exchange. He dug into the fabric pocket of the copilot seat back and found the clear, plastic drain tube. A second later the unclaimed briefcase was back in his lap, and he again began working on the resistant little latches that secured the cover. Poor lighting made the job difficult. He labored at the left hand lock as Travers looked on. Finally the well-made cast metal hook broke in two, and a small piece of it flew across the tiny cabin, and bounced off the passenger window. The first latch popped up and open.

Rain began to pelt the Piper's windshield, large droplets that hammered in loud and soft waves of intensity. Visibility had become nil. Merrill' attention was intently focused on her timer as she guided the aircraft in a continuous oval pattern, waiting for the controller's coarse voice to call eight-five Whiskey and award its pilot a chance to find the long, black runway in the rainy, black night.

Hartman wrenched at the case with all his strength and the second of the two latches finally bent and broke. He slowly lifted open the thin, lightweight cover, holding the small flashlight down low to prevent it from interfering with the busy pilot. Hartman's eyes opened wide at the first glimpse of the case's interior. Within it lay an unfathomable nightmare.

"My God, it's full of C4!"

Chapter 3

"What the hell are you talking about?" exclaimed Travers. He reached back, grabbed the open lid, and tilted the case back. A brownish, clay-like material filled one-third of the silk-lined interior. The space left over was packed with digital electronics. Wires led to detonators embedded in the explosive. The entire inside of the bomb laden case was covered with a thick, protective layer of clear Plexiglas.

Hartman's cry interrupted Merrill. She looked to Travers with an expression of disbelief, hoping he would reassure her that she had misheard. Travers could only confirm her fears.

"Rese, we've got a damn bomb on board."

Merrill risked taking her attention from the controls as the downpour continued to hammer the windshield. She twisted around to look over her shoulder at Hartman. He turned the case for her to see. Having stolen too many precious seconds away from her flight instruments, she returned to the airplane and made little corrections with the controls to get back on track.

"Can we disarm it?" she asked when her composure had returned.

"I wouldn't try it. The Plexiglas cover is there for only one reason. Remove it and bang!" replied Hartman. "Let's throw it out. Crack your door open Pete."

"Forget it, Don," insisted Merrill. "That's Washington down there. We're not dropping a bomb on innocent civilians."

Merrill keyed her transmit button and looked nervously at the emptiness outside her window. "Nemo approach, eight-five Whiskey."

Static and squeal precluded the controller's reply. An impatient voice acknowledged. "Eight-five Whiskey, go ahead."

"Sir, ah, we'd like to declare an emergency. Request an immediate clearance to the Lanier three-six ILS."

An uncommon pause came over the radio. Even the most impatient pilots in the family of aircraft sharing the frequency became silent and listening.

"Eight-five Whiskey, Nemo approach, please repeat last."

"Nemo approach, sir, we wish to declare an emergency at this time. Request immediate clearance to the Lanier ILS for runway three-six."

"Eight-five Whiskey, what is the nature of your emergency?"

"Sir, ah, we have, ah, a bomb on board!"

Another long second of silence ensued on the suddenly clear radio channel. When the controller's voice returned, there was no

longer impatience in it. Genuine concern was clearly apparent. "Eight-five Whiskey, Nemo approach, descend maintain four thousand. Expect clearance in just a minute, ma'am." The controller's transmit key remained depressed. He did not require a reply from Merrill. He would watch her descent on his radar screen as he used the precious time to divert other traffic. The small, single engine aircraft now took precedence over the commercial heavies that were carrying hundreds of people through the unfriendly night. Merrill pushed the airplane sharply down toward the four-thousand-foot level.

"What can we do? Is there no way at all to deactivate it?" she asked.

Travers continued to lean over the back of his seat, staring into the case with Hartman. "I'm not sure it's been activated," he said. "There's a digital display in it that's dark. The damn thing may not be armed."

"I say we chuck the sucker out the door, right now!" insisted Hartman, wishing dearly that he was anywhere else. He pushed the case off his lap and onto the empty seat beside him.

"I told you Don, forget it. That thing could fall on a busy street or something, just forget it," shouted Merrill.

"Well if the damn thing goes off, we'll be dropping some crap on the city, won't we, this airplane for one thing."

"Let me have a closer look at it," urged Travers. He took the tiny light from Hartman, unstrapped his seat belt, and squirmed back over the seat to get his face as close as possible. With cautious hope he began to study the design.

"Eight-five Whiskey, Nemo approach. Descend to two thousand, heading zero-four-five degrees, cleared to the localizer for immediate approach to runway three-six. Say souls on board."

"Nemo approach, eight-five Whiskey, understand to two thousand, heading zero-four-five degrees, cleared for the ILS to three-six. There are three souls on board, sir."

"Eight-five Whiskey, be advised authorities have been notified. Support services will be waiting your arrival. This channel has been cleared."

"Approach, eight-five Whiskey."

For the first time the radio squelched off. Travers's voice broke in over the drone of the aircraft engines. "The Plexiglas comes off easy. It's just four screws. If we could remove it we could pull out the detonators, they've only got two wires. They can't be booby-trapped."

Hartman regained some of his professionalism. "It's no good, Pete. See this back corner? Those micro-switches. Remove the left rear screw and it's all over." Hartman's control again began to slip. "Damn it, let's throw the thing out."

The rain began to turn to hail, big marbles smacking against the airplane nearly hard enough to mark its lightweight skin. Merrill could pay little attention to the argument going on around her. Too little time had been allowed for the descent to two thousand feet. She brought power back as far as possible and held in left rudder pedal while keeping the aircraft straight with the control yoke. The approach to the airport needed to be made at a constant speed. There was far too much to do now to worry about such trivial matters as a bomb in the back seat.

The airplane began to buck and roll slightly as it came nearer the uneven warming near the ground. This would be a challenging instrument approach even without other distractions. Merrill wiped the sweat from beneath her nose and forced herself to concentrate. She urged the airplane down, scanning her instruments one by one, over and over. The popping of the ears had started. The dynamics of flight had become serious enough to distract her passengers.

Travers stared nervously. "Anything I can do, Rese?"

"Not at the moment. When we catch the signal from the localizer, you can help me with the timer and airspeed."

Travers stared out the rain-drenched windshield and tried to see. It was hopeless.

"Eight-five Whiskey, we show you one mile from the localizer intercept, at three thousand, one hundred."

Merrill did not acknowledge the advisory, nor did the controller expect her to. She pushed the nose of the airplane down still further and watched the airspeed indicator creep up near the redline. The excess speed would have to be dealt with later.

"Buckle up, Pete," said Merrill without taking her eyes from the instruments. "Pack it in back there, Don. Make sure everything's stowed."

"Eight-five Whiskey, you're coming up on the localizer, heading zero-one-zero degrees, we show you well above the intercept."

Again Merrill did not bother to acknowledge. She swung the diving aircraft gently to the left just as the critical indicator needle came to life. Merrill worked intently at the controls to coax it to center.

They were now aligned with a destination runway that lay somewhere ahead in the uncompromising darkness. But the airplane was still much too high to pick up the next radio signal, the one that would lead them safely down. Merrill knew if she blew this attempt, she would have to come around and try again.

The altimeter continued to spin down. Twenty-eight hundred--twenty-seven hundred--twenty-six hundred. The airspeed hung on the redline.

"Pete, in the compartment by your door, get my other timer out."

Travers returned a nervous look and quickly searched out the small, black stop watch. He found the best possible position to see it in the dark cabin.

"When I tell you, start the timer and watch the airspeed indicator for me. Call out my speeds every half minute or so or if it changes. Got it?"

"Ready, just say the word--."

The familiar static-filled voice of the controller interrupted, "Eight-five Whiskey, you are one mile from the outer marker, Lanier Control Tower is standing by on this frequency, you are cleared to land on runway three-six."

Don Hartman had become quiet in the back seat. He was unsure whether to worry about the harsh weather landing or the briefcase bomb on the seat next to him. He fidgeted with the seat belt adjustment and decided not to choose.

Merrill forced the aircraft down. The airspeed now loomed around one hundred and twenty knots, for the moment, that would have to do.

Suddenly a loud beeping broke out in the cabin and a small blue light began to flash insistently on the instrument panel.

"What's wrong?" asked Travers.

"Start the timer, Pete. It's the outer marker. We're five miles from the end of the runway. At this speed we should be there in two and a half minutes."

Merrill pinched the transmit button on her control yoke and spoke quickly. "Lanier Tower, eight-five Whiskey, over the outer marker."

The reply was quick and supportive. "Eight-five Whiskey, the runway is clear, standing by."

"The gear Rese, don't you need it down?" asked Travers.

"No gear yet, Pete, we're too fast, got to slow it down."

Somewhere ahead in the rainy blind, lay an empty five thousand foot runway at an airport with every possible exterior light illuminated. Halfway down the hardened strip, the three men in the Lanier control tower waited tensely by the large, green tinted windows on the south side, watching for any sign of an approaching lights in the murky night sky.

And lurking in the darkness near the wooded, eastern boundary line of the airport, other eyes watched with morbid interest for the Piper's arrival. Beyond the control tower, parked in a secluded section of forest in a spot where the airport was clearly visible, two individuals sat in a black limousine, waiting impatiently.

"Mr. Inkman, can I push the button this time?" asked the driver. His high-collared driver's jacket was buttoned tightly around his throat and pinched at it as he strained to look to the back of the vehicle's spacious interior.

"Yeah, okay, you can do it, Mick. Just wait for my signal, got it? We may not need that, this weather's so bad they might not make it." The back seat occupant spoke with idle amusement. He wore a black loose-fitting silk shirt, and a fat, gold chain around his neck that fell out over the top button. His grooming was careless. He was unshaven and unclean. A hand-held aircraft scanner sat on the seat next to him, broadcasting the plight of eight-five Whiskey.

Merrill gripped the throttle control tightly. With the other hand, she brought the control yoke back further, slowing the still descending airplane.

"Pete--time?"

"Two minutes, twenty seconds, Rese..."

"You see the gear lever?"

"Yes--."

"Pull it out and down, watch for three green panel lights."

"I've got it. I'm on it..."

Travers pulled at the small ring-shaped landing gear lever until it jumped outward. It came free to cock downward and latched there.

"Three green!"

"That's good." Merrill's reply was cut short by a second sudden beeping caused by the airport's middle marker as the aircraft passed over it, a warning that they were now only one half mile from runway three-six.

From his cramped position in the airplane's right front seat, Travers strained to see through the blurry windshield. The ground was near, but how near? Then, a burst of yellow lights, a stepping arrow pointing to destination's end.

"Runway lights, dead ahead," he shouted.

Merrill jerked the airplane to the left, bringing it more on line to the approaching threshold. The wet, blacktop strip glistened from the soft green lamps that marked its borders. It rushed toward them as though to capture the hurried bird that had found home at last. Merrill pulled back on the throttle and let the sleek craft settle.

In the darkness off the end of the runway, the first glimmer of hope emerged through the curtain of rain, casting eerie strobed images of the airplane's tiny silhouette. Flashes of lightning in the distance added to the threatened image, as though its fate lay in unfriendly hands. Watching intently from the south window of the control tower, the lead controller yelled excitedly, "I see it!"

In the limousine waiting nearby, the morbid excitement grew.

"Now, Boss?" asked Mick of his employer, who eyed the lights of the approaching aircraft with surprise.

"One more second, let them get over the runway. We must make a statement you know. ...Okay, now!"

In the rear of the Piper cabin Don Hartman became distracted from his stare out the windshield by a sudden illumination from within the briefcase. The liquid crystal display had suddenly become lighted. It read 001. For one frozen moment, Hartman's mind raced to construct an acceptable reason for the unexpected life within the detonator's display. In desperation, he opened his mouth to scream, "No...," but only a fraction of the word had time to sound.

One fragmented pulse later, current surged through the detonators and the C4 explosive ignited. Instantly it fractured everything around it, incinerating anything flammable, bending and melting anything that was not. A huge, blossoming fireball erupted thirty feet above the end of the Lanier runway, as the remaining fuel within the Piper's wing tanks burned bright orange. For a brief few seconds the airport lit up as though it were day. The continuing downpour sparkled orange and red from the fiery explosion. Eerie shadows of death were cast by the aircraft parked along the service ramps and loading gates. Artificial thunder rolled unimpeded across the flat landscape and echoed ominously through the night.

The Piper's forward momentum carried the ball of destruction down the slick runway centerline, distributing burning pieces along the way, starting small fires here and there. The spinning tri-blade propeller continued on without its power plant and traveled down the glistening runway, finally embedding its leading blade deep into the side of a storage shed by the airport fence.

The controllers in the tower barely had time to fall to the floor, as the reinforced glass around their structure fractured into thousands of small pieces and rained down on them, leaving them covered by debris and momentarily deafened.

When it was over, a heavy silence followed, leaving only the sound of the steady, dispassionate rain to counterpoint the carnage of broken buildings and scattered fires.

"Wow, that was really something, Boss!"

"Yes, quite spectacular, I agree. I'm really quite amazed actually, I never thought they'd make the runway. She was very good."

The dirty, water-streaked limo pulled slowly from its hiding place within the rain-drenched forest, and headed away from the chaos. Inside, Mr. Leo Inkman amused himself with the thought that once again no living Federal agent had ever laid hands on, or even seen a sensesuit up close. The life and death games that went on inside the

phantom solid state mind of the Dragon Master central computer
would continue.

Chapter 4

Chief Hank Wandell stood precariously close to the jagged edge of the gaping sinkhole. It looked like a gateway to hell. It had already swallowed a considerable section of one city block, and seemed unwilling to stabilize. He peered over the one hundred foot drop at the rushing river below, listening to his rescue team coordinator's plea.

"I've never seen anything like this Hank, ever. They had one in Mexico a while back, a real monster, but not like this. That cave entrance and the big rocks at the bottom kinda look like the caves we dive in at Blue Springs. This thing must be ancient. The water's fast but it's still only about chest high. If we took some gear down there and some safety equipment we could probably get in."

Shaking his head, Wandell tried to sound conciliatory. "No one else, I repeat, no one, is going back down into that thing. I don't care, Steve. We know it's blocked by beams farther in. We nearly lost your man on the last try, and he was barely down. For god's sake, you can see the thing's still caving in!"

In silent protest the frustrated team leader walked back to his associates, where he quietly conveyed the Chief's rejection of their plan.

Wandell stared down fearfully into the massive pit. All around, the sides were continuing to collapse, covering the tangled mass of cars, power lines, and ragged chunks of asphalt that had fallen in. This was a granddaddy as sinkholes went, one and one half acres of disappearing parking lot and roadway. It had barely missed several residential homes and one old brick business building. The farthest point across was at least two hundred and fifty feet. The collapse had happened so suddenly it was fortunate that more people had not gone down with it. Had the nearby county office building been open for business, and it would have in another couple of hours, its parking lot would have been routinely busy. He shuddered at the thought of how many might have been lost.

But there was no real relief in the thought, for one family had been unlucky. There had been no chance of escaping the ride down into the mouth of the collapse. The rear door of their late model mini-van marked the spot where their nightmare had begun. The van had crashed into the rushing water and submerged nose first, forcing the horrified parents to escape through open windows as they clutched at their seven year old son. But the current had been too strong. It had taken the boy down into the darkness of the half-filled tunnel at the

deepest end. Wandell's team had arrived in time to save the parents, but the continuing breakup around the pit, and the rushing water, had made it too dangerous to send searchers into the tunnel, though several were asking to go.

Wandell glanced back at his rescue team. For all of man's faults it seemed there was never a shortage of individuals willing to do anything to save a child in trouble. He looked with guilt and anxiety at the several hundred people being held back from the site. They were there partly to gawk at the size of the hole, but mainly to express their concern for the missing boy. They massed around the large, yellow crane mounted on its jacks as close as possible to the edge. The heavy machine easily used up what little parking lot remained. Its boom extended out over the pit with an empty rescue harness suspended from it.

Wandell struggled with his decision. They would wait. The boy's chances were slim to none. The re-formation would have to stabilize enough to risk the life of someone on the rescue team unless a better way could be found. He cursed under his breath and looked up to see a speeding white van suddenly race onto the scene. It maneuvered carefully through the masses, pulled up along side the command station and parked with a jerk. From the passenger's door a bearded, gray-haired man practically jumped out of the vehicle. He appeared disoriented and ruffled from a ride much faster than he was accustomed to. He straightened his outmoded gray suit jacket and ill-matching tie and took in the crowded, disheveled landscape. Behind him, Scott Markman hurriedly emerged from the driver's side. He wrenched up the back of his washed out blue jeans and tucked in his blue cotton dress shirt. He gestured with concern, and moved around to the side of the van to slide open its large loading door.

Cassiopia Cassell climbed out from the shadows within, her slinky figure shaping the soft white shift she wore, her long ivory-blond hair splayed over the right shoulder. The thin, sheer fabric skirt ended above the knee and the stockings and heels were obvious evidence that her presence had been required without warning.

Professor Cassell, finally satisfied he had somehow survived Markman's wild driving, met his daughter as she stepped down. Behind her, the vehicle's principal cargo came dimly into view.

Seated within the equipment-packed van was something that looked alien. Though its form was humanoid, the dull, chrome finish of its body placed it radically apart from anything even close to human. The molded mechanical joints in the arms and legs displayed a complexity that seemed beyond that of modern science. The softly-glowing, gold-tinted wrap-around visor sunken into the smooth metal face suggested life of a different kind. The heavy robot waited

patiently, its elaborate, micro-cable-driven hands resting idly in its lap. A hush began to circulate through the crowd of onlookers.

"Come out, please Tel," commanded Cassiopia.

The robot responded. Those who had not noticed what was transpiring, now stopped to stare at the unearthly sight. The robot lumbered out the open door, carefully placing its massive legs in calculated steps as it crouched below the low ceiling of the rocking, burdened van. It stepped down to the sound of softly whirring motors, straightened up, and assumed its desired position of rest, standing loyally before Cassiopia.

Chief Wandell approached the small group and stopped next to Markman. He appraised the shiny machine with distrust. It had been involved in a previous case in which several people had been killed and a number of odd questions had remained unanswered.

"What is this, Scott?" Wandell looked annoyed.

"Have you sent anyone back down for the kid yet?"

"No. It's still collapsing all around. Nobody can go into that thing."

Markman glanced at the robot and then back at Wandell. "He can."

A moment of doubt and hope was exchanged among the group as they appraised the TEL 100D.

Professor Cassell took his daughter by the arm and led her a short distance away. He brushed an errant ant from her long silver-blond hair and spoke apprehensively. "Daughter, you understand I have extremely serious doubts about this."

"Father, he can do this, I know he can."

"My dear, you have meddled with Tel's intellect to such an extent that I am no longer sure what it will do."

"Why do you say that?"

The Professor sighed and shook his head tiredly. "You have given the thing a mind of its own. Do you know it refuses to do certain mundane tasks when I ask it?"

"What? What are you talking about?"

"It evades some of the menial jobs that are contained in its programming base. It can recite all of the proper steps and sequences, but when the requirement comes due, it somehow manages to be involved with other matters and is very evasive when questioned."

"Father, you're overreacting. After all he saved my life once, didn't he? ...And probably yours, also."

"Yes, yes, that's true, with the help of a certain friend of yours. But that does not justify inconsistency in its actions, daughter."

Cassiopia placed her hand on her father's arm and gazed reassuringly into his brown eyes. "Father, Tel could bring back a small boy."

"Yes, dear daughter, and you understand, that is the only reason I'm going along with this madness."

Markman came up along side them. "We're about ready, Cass. If you're still willing to try this."

With a last reassuring look to her father, Cassiopia returned to the robot. The shadow from the crane's boom passed over them as the operator lowered the nylon harness within reach of Markman.

Cassiopia spoke. "Tel, do you understand the program objective?"

The robot replied coarsely, "Yes, Cassiopia, locate and retrieve designated subject."

"And do you understand this will be a fully autonomous procedure? You may not default to any requirement for supplemental user input?"

"Yes Cassiopia, there will be no user interface until return to starting coordinates."

"Okay, Tel, say assigned time limitations for this task."

"Four hours from user mark. If objective has not been located, return to starting coordinates for user-assisted task termination."

With a nod of affection, she checked the small access doors on the robot's chest plate, the fourth time she had done so. "Tel, say self-protection perimeters."

"No system operations or exposures calculated to be in excess of 100D limitations. Power levels must remain equal to or greater than fifty percent. Violations of these limits constitutes default to return instructions when no other subroutines apply."

"That's good, Tel, very good."

Markman pulled the harness over to the robot and cast a nervous glance at her. She took hold of one of the straps and opened the single-man harness for the robot to see. "Tel, do you understand this lifting attachment?"

"Yes, Cassiopia, a simple quick release mechanism."

With Markman's help she fit the lightweight straps onto Tel's hard body and secured it. A pang of painful affection swept over her as the reality of what they were about to attempt set in.

"Tel, you are to protect yourself at all times. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Cassiopia." The robot's machine voice sounded almost annoyed.

Markman signaled the crane operator, and the harness slowly tightened around Tel's rigid upper body. Its oversized, shoe-shaped feet remained locked in their horizontal position as it was hoisted

upward and gently swung into position over the hole. Its dull, mirrored finish cast random glints of morning light as it turned slowly at the end of the taut cable.

The lowering began, down past the plane of broken earth and into the massive cave-in. The crowd pressed at the police barriers in an attempt to see, as Tel approached a spot within the pile of twisted garbage that was interrupting the flow of water.

The crane operator paused, waiting for the cable's slow, uncontrolled rotation to bring the robot around to face the ragged cave entrance. When the correct posturing had been achieved, he lowered the weighty legs down into the water and continued until Tel was submerged halfway up its chest plate. With one of its powerful hands, Tel held to a half-buried, jagged piece of asphalt, while using the other to press free the harness's quick release. The cable swung upward and away, leaving Tel to mark its time and choose a path into the darkness.

For a moment the robot stood motionless, as though fearful to proceed. Cassiopia, Professor Cassell, Markman, and Chief Wandell watched breathlessly from a position precariously close to the edge. The Professor shook his head with ever-increasing doubt. But a moment later, Tel began its journey without looking back. It reached forward, grabbing whatever was available and pushed through the rushing river, disappearing into the mouth of the underground.

"If only we had time to set up telemetry," said Cassiopia, her eyes staring blankly into the distance. She looked at Markman who returned a supportive stare. "We would have been able to monitor his progress. We would have known he was okay."

"It wouldn't have changed much," he replied. "It would still be out of reach."

The waiting began. The onlookers gradually dispersed into smaller groups, and the low drone of idle conversations again drifted through the air. After thirty minutes of hoping for a quick, miraculous rescue, Wandell and Markman left the edge of the hole and moved over to talk with the restless members of the rescue team. Some of them seemed stunned that a machine might be able to do more than they. Cassiopia and her father returned to the van, where the Professor fell asleep in the back, while Cassiopia pretended to study handwritten scrawls of formulas and programs in the passenger side of the front seat. The worn, aqua-blue notebook in her lap was the only thing she had time to grab on her way out. She found herself repeatedly looking out the open window in the direction of the rescue team, too often to seriously consider the paperwork in hand. Even though she feared greatly for the beloved robot, as well as the small boy it searched for, something else was also troubling her.

Cassiopia felt insecure. It was quite possible that she was in love with Markman. Having spent most of her young life skipping ahead through classes and leaving behind temporary friends, she had found serious social attachment a concept easy to avoid. And though she had excelled at math and science, she was practically illiterate in matters concerning the heart.

So it had come quite unexpectedly that someone equally inept in social protocol had been able to break through the barriers that she had so scrupulously constructed to protect herself from that awkward and illogical custom called intimacy. Now she found herself completely lacking the necessary understanding to sort out her own tangled emotions. Poring over dozens of pages of dry programming data had always been like eating candy to her. But suddenly there were frequent, annoying interruptions from within; feelings that would pop up out of turn, seemingly immune to her usual discipline.

But there was a pleasantness about it all. The distractions left her seeing his face or feeling his touch, such troublesome things. It wasn't supposed to happen this fast. Was it?

Cassiopia took refuge in the fact that she had not yet committed herself to anything. No superficial sentiments were required of her. She didn't actually have to tell him she cared for him, if indeed that's what this unwanted distraction was all about. Besides, she had absolutely no idea how to go about doing such things. Most likely this was a trivial phase reaction to the new socio-physical experience of having made love once, well twice, and it was likely to fade quickly away and bother her no more. That would be that. She returned to her page of robotic personality enhancement programs. They were by far more interesting than anything else. Weren't they?

Would he be feeling similar things? Certainly she wouldn't ask him about such matters, it might imply involvement of her own. Oh well, these things were of no consequence. Back to the safe, familiar world of binary math, where everything in the known universe could be expressed in the wonderful simplicity of zeros and ones; cold and concise, completely reliable and with sufficient time, always understandable.

Could love be expressed in these ways? That didn't seem possible. Too irrational. Too much chaos. Add the interactions of more than one individual and the complexity would be overwhelming. Forget it, back to the real world.

Was there anything to eat around this place?

Cassiopia's mind refocused on the scene surrounding the big, new hole in the earth, and a wave of fear washed over her. She quickly forgot her personal dilemma and said a prayer for the small boy, and for the silver robot searching the dark unknown.

Chapter 5

Inside the hollow earth, the TEL 100D searched. The muddy, half-filled waterway played its games, winding this way and that, narrowing in some places, its ceiling becoming low in others. Garbage and stone jutted from the walls and overhead, adding to the menacing, absolute darkness that concealed the way. For most humans the perilous, claustrophobic environment would have been too much. For Tel, it was of no consequence at all.

The robot measured its progress carefully; testing the floor beneath the roaring rush of water with each step; switching on its small, shoulder-mounted crystalline spotlight; memorizing everything in sight in little more than an instant; then switching back to darkness to save the life-essential energy in its power cells. There was little need for more than momentary light from the visible spectrum. The robot's super-fast visual processors could map the entire scene and store the data in less than one second. From that point on, the machine could see from within itself with an accuracy far greater than that of the human eye. Its scanners and infrared receivers would note any subsequent changes and supplement the search in a dozen different ways. Were it necessary, Tel could continue with no visible light at all.

Within the robot, an enormous data processing network ran continuously, a circulatory system made of electrons, subatomic holes and laser-generated light waves. Hundreds of independently programmed microprocessors carried out their assigned functions: moving the arms, hands, legs and feet; measuring and testing external pressures and temperatures; and relaying term codes, recommendations and evaluations to the central brain. Items of critical importance were tagged for priority while those that had ceased to be significant were discreetly dismissed.

In the mind of Tel, a human-like guidance process took place with a decisiveness exempt from emotion, and a determination that lacked human weakness:

Ambulatory pause-start scan(complete)-integrate
map(complete)-objective search parameters(comparators negative)-
systems check(nominal)-power checks(within limits)-time
elapsed(within limits)-enable ambulatory(complete)-proceed, left
projector, X coordinates 245, Y coordinates 340, Z coordinates 078
and grip(extension complete)-surface integrity subroutine(within

limits)-left gear, X coordinates 350, Y null, Z null, surface integrity subroutine(nominal)-right gear, X coordinates 350, Y null, Z null,(peditation complete) surface integrity subroutine(nominal)-ambulatory pause-start scan....

The robot's slow pace disguised the rate at which data flowed through its electronic nervous system, some of it at the speed of light. It calculated the weight and dimension of each obstacle, the most efficient path for its removal, and the torque required to complete the task. When the water level in the tunnel suddenly began to drop, it was faced with its first real test of decision-making power. The tunnel had divided, sharing the flow of water. The current had become deceptively gentle, and only knee high. Since no preset conditions had been input to resolve the situation, the robot assigned each path a number and simply chose one at random, a machine's best guess. Both paths led more sharply downward into the earth. So there Tel went.

As the descent continued, progress became more difficult. Debris that had been easily swept along by the swifter currents above became lodged and tangled in the curves and dips of the shrinking passageway. Obstacles were becoming frequent, and maneuvering past them or clearing a path more difficult. To continue ahead also meant risking the chance of causing further collapse of unstable tunnel walls.

From above, Markman watched with fading hope as evening began to embrace the equipment-strewn site. Some spectators had begun to lose faith and leave. TV news trucks, with their giant roof-mounted dish antennae came and went, having missed the extraordinary sight of a TEL 100D robot being deposited into the disaster. They had left, mistakenly believing the robot to be a simple radio-controlled police bomb disposal unit, rather than the priceless masterpiece that it was. That mistake had greatly minimized publicity surrounding the robot, which pleased Professor Cassell to no end. Portable floodlights had been set up around the collapsing chasm, throwing eerie reflections off the wasted metal objects at its bottom. The crane operator slept in his control seat with his head tilted uncomfortably over backwards and one foot propped up on the dashboard.

Markman rubbed at his temple and stared down into the hole. Time was becoming critical. There was no way to know how much power the robot was expending, and no way to be sure it would have enough for the return trip. If power levels fell below the required level for its motor drives, the machine would simply shut down to standby mode to preserve its memory and wait for rescue, indefinitely.

Ten hours into the ordeal things were beginning to look very bad. Tel was well overdue. To add to the uncertainty, a ten-foot section of ruptured parking lot had fallen into the hole, covering over most of the underground entrance. Enough water flow still passed into the earth to allow levels to remain stable, but there was no longer any opening for passage by anyone. No one had expected the operation to take so long. More people began to leave, though dozens still remained.

Someone had to start helping Cassiopia adjust to the idea that neither the boy nor her beloved robot would likely be coming back, and Markman knew that job was his. He went to the open passenger door on the van and leaned against the side panel where Cassiopia had faithfully continued to wait. They looked upon each other supportively.

"So, there's a restaurant still open a couple of blocks away. Want me to get you something?"

She shook her head. "No thanks, not hungry."

"We've got the spots all night, and the crane man has agreed to stay as long as we want. This could go on for quite a while. If you and the Professor wanted to head home and get some rest, I could stay here and keep an eye on things." He stammered the last few words, and quickly realized he had already lost the gamble. She did not reply.

"Look, they're working on getting some equipment in here to try and dig out the tunnel, but it's going to be rough trying to do anything down in there. They probably won't get started until morning, so you won't miss anything." He paused and smiled reassuringly. "You know, despite the arguments I get into with that stupid robot, I have come to care about it. If ever there was an example of a chi spirit, that thing is one."

"What is a chi?"

"Where I come from the priests and monks teach us that all things come from the thoughts of the One. You'd probably use the word God in place of the One. They believe everything is alive in its own way, since it comes from the giver of life. They say that life began in the simplest of mineral forms and evolved up to what we are today. They would consider the robot to possess a complex chi, a true spirit of life."

"Scott, why don't you just say God, if that's what you mean?"

"Are you kidding? That name has been so abused, many people have come to avoid it at all costs. There's been more money collected in the name of God than there probably is in the national debt. Somewhere along the way some have come to think God's work can't be done without money. The name God has been used to tell people what to think, how to live, and sometimes to teach them they are

inadequate or inferior, all things that are perfectly contrary to the truth."

She smiled wearily. "Markman, there you go again. One minute you're a gun-toting cowboy, and then the next a philosophical ancient. You're the strangest boyfriend I've ever had..."

Cassiopia bit her lip. The word boyfriend had seemingly escaped of its own volition. It was probably because she was so tired. She silently cursed herself for the slip and wished for a hole to crawl into and hide. Quickly she realized that there was, unfortunately, a large one nearby.

Markman slowly reached up and pulled gently at the collar of her dress, until their faces were nearly touching. "Where I come from they would substitute the word lover, for boyfriend," he said, and gently kissed her on the lips. In the van's back seat, Professor Cassell wondered if his impersonation of a sleeping man was adequate.

"Perhaps you're right. We should try to rest," she said softly.

"I'll get someone to drive you. Give me just a minute."

He headed for the side of the hole, where a woman police officer stood guard on the remaining crowd. As he approached, the officer gestured with frustration at the pit.

"Look, it's collapsing around the opening again."

Markman stared down at the mud-and-asphalt-packed hole where the flowing water continued to disappear underground. Above it, more dirt was sliding sporadically down over the shrinking cavity. The possibility that collapses were also happening farther inside seemed likely.

"Officer, could you call for someone to drive the Cassells back to their place?"

"Sure," she replied.

Markman watched the dirt rain down the side of the sinkhole and wondered what fate the young boy and TEL 100 had met. Perhaps it had been a crazy idea to send the machine in. It had been a gamble at best. Now both were hopelessly lost. He felt a touch of guilt, but quickly dismissed it. No price could ever be put on the life of a child. No risk was ever too great. He thought to see Cassiopia off and started to leave when a glint of light from the debris around the water flow caught his eye. I'm wishing so hard that I'm making myself see things, he thought.

He had begun to turn away again when a second flash of silvery light flicked on and off as more dirt moved downward. His pulse quickened and his stare froze on the spot.

Suddenly, a mud-caked, silver arm jutted out from the cascading dirt flow and quickly withdrew back in. Then it jutted out again, and again.

He yelled hoarsely, "Cass!" and ran toward the crane operator. Cassiopia needed no further explanation. She jumped from her seat in the van, fell harshly to the ground, tearing her stockings, then scrambled back up and ran in her bare feet toward the hole.

A woman bystander who had camped herself as near as possible to the edge climbed frantically to her feet and attempted to yell an alert, but instead emitted an unintelligible scream that made everyone within fifty feet of her jump awake. Since there were few officers left on the scene, the crowd quickly began to push toward the edge of the hole, trampling over the flimsy police tape that had been used to cordon off the area.

At the bottom of the massive hole, a muddied, silver arm continued to dig and push its way into the open. A heavy, mud-caked mechanical leg followed. Like a silver ghost emerging from a grave, the robot pushed through the wall of dirt and into the brilliance of the spotlights. It stood boldly amid the rushing river and tilted its head upward to scan the surface above the hole. Under its right arm, dangled the limp, blue form of a young child. The boy's head hung down. His hair was packed with mud, his right arm swinging freely.

Markman raced furiously to harness himself, and cursed at his ineptness with the release mechanism. As soon as it was locked in place, the crane operator, now wide awake from a rush of adrenaline, raised him and swung him into a position directly over them.

Carefully he was lowered into the hole and met the ragged-looking pair. He hung barely above the angry current and held to one of Tel's shoulders for stability.

"Tel, give me the boy."

The robot complied. It opened its dirty machine arms cautiously and released its delicate package. With its arms still outstretched, it tracked the ascent of the two humans as they quickly disappeared up into the blinding light.

"He's breathing," shouted Markman, and a cheer rose up from the crowd. As they crossed over to the safety of the unbroken earth, the policewoman tenderly retrieved the child and ran to her police car where a second officer had the engine running. Mourning parents would soon receive a dispatcher's call that would seem as though it had come from heaven.

Amid the celebration, a tandem harness was quickly rigged to bring up Tel. Minutes later, its return to the surface brought a second, loud chorus of cheers and applause. Cassiopia greeted her nonsentient friend with a bear hug that covered her ruffled white shift with mud. The indifferent machine responded dutifully by verbalizing, "Cassiopia, task resolved."

At the back of the crowd, a dark figure looked on intently from a rusted, dilapidated, brown and white van. His hair was crudely trimmed, and his face dirty. He observed the proceedings with great interest, and as the gathering dispersed, followed the van to the home of Professor Cassell, where he watched from the shadows, and planned.

Chapter 6

Markman rattled open the worn, brown wooden door to Chief Wandell's office, and tapped on the smudged glass window to get his attention. The Chief sat shuffling through a pile of documents on his desk, a stack that seemed too large for a single man to tackle. "You asked me to come in, Chief?"

"Markman, yeah, come on in. Take a seat. God, anything to get away from this hazardous materials stuff. What crap. You know we got written-up for throwing empty white-out containers in the trash? This shit's getting ridiculous!"

Markman closed the rickety door and took a seat in front of the wide, gray metal desk. He sat back, pushed his shoulder-length, brownish-blond hair aside and tugged at the collar of his black, turtleneck. His brown corduroy sports jacket slipped open as he leaned back.

"Hey, that was damn incredible, that thing bringin' the kid out, eh?" said the Chief.

"Very incredible."

"We could use a few dozen of those things around here. How'd Cassell ever come across it anyway?"

"It's a long story. He had a friend at the TEL corporation. Some kind of informal lease arrangement was made. When the company was destroyed, it gave him legal ownership. He's really uptight about it, though. Keeps worrying that someday the government will show up claiming it in the name of national security, but nothing like that has happened yet."

"Well, I for one hope it doesn't. That thing could save our asses again someday. I'll remember to forget I ever saw it."

Markman nodded. "It's one of the reasons the old man hates publicity so much. He's afraid the wrong bureaucrat will notice."

Wandell tugged at his golf-club tie until it was pulled further away from the collar of his wrinkled blue dress shirt. Sweat lines had formed around the upper arms. He leaned back in his noisy swivel chair and tapped an eraser-tipped pencil on his desk. "So anyway, the reason I called you, I think it's about the lady you found in the lake. I just got a call from Ann Rogers. Remember her?"

"You mean the ice-maiden who performed the Spanish inquisition on me the last time she was here?"

Wandell stifled a laugh. "She must've enjoyed it, she asked about you."

"Why was she asking about me?"

"She wouldn't say, exactly. Easy to guess though, isn't it? When we ran our Jane Doe through the system for ID, it must've rung their bells. They've gotta be working on something to do with her."

"The Feds wouldn't want anything from me. I'm a civilian."

Wandell leaned forward over his desk as far as his over inflated stomach would allow. He pitched a small piece of white paper with an address on it across the desktop at Markman.

"It gets stranger. They're sending a rep over to talk to me, and they want you to meet them at that address."

"Me? I don't get it."

"Beats me. Strictly clandestine stuff. You know the Feds. The secrecy of their work prevents them from knowing what they're doing."

Markman studied the Chiefs poorly written directions as he rose to leave. The address was for the First Federal Bank Building on Main Street, the fifth floor. It was an unsettling request. He opened the office door and started out.

"Scott, by the way, there's an officer out there waiting to come in. Would you ask him to come in. God sometimes I hate this job."

"You mean the guy that looked kind of nervous as I was coming in?"

The Chief nodded and waved at the question in a gesture of frustration. "He went in the doughnut shop and left his cruiser running. Some kids from a street gang hopped in and took it for a joy ride."

"Oh man, did you get it back?"

"Oh yeah, sure, we found it parked in the fountain over at Church Street Station. They cracked the windows just enough so that the damned thing filled with water."

"You're kidding?"

"Hell no! The brazen little bastards even hung around long enough to catch some goldfish and put them in it! Makes us look like real pros, don't it?"

Markman winced and backed out the door, resisting an insensitive smile. As he crossed through the densely populated maze of cluttered desktops, he spotted the patrolman in question.

"Hey, the Chief asked me to tell you to go ahead in."

The young, uniformed officer stopped sifting through papers and looked up with a strained expression.

"Damn kids."

Late afternoon shadows cast moody designs on the dusty, wind-blown streets of the city, as Markman eased his foot back from the accelerator, keeping his journey to the First Federal Building almost within the posted limits. The slick, black Mustang Five-0 was

overpowered by design, because the edge, any edge, was a thing Markman had always had a taste for, a passion that he knew someday might get him killed. Scott Markman was a creature of paradox, raised in a contradictory environment. His isolated upbringing in the mountains of Tibet had somehow failed to prejudice him against modern society and its elaborate toys. As a racing fan, he had taken to the Daytona Speedway like an unchaperoned child in a candy store, and was somewhat notorious for his insistence that the Tao existed beyond one hundred and thirty miles per hour.

It was quitting time for the nine-to-five crowd when Markman arrived at his destination. Through the revolving glass doors came men with pale skin and receding hair lines, and professional women with the look of steel in their eyes. They were citizens from a world within a world, a city within a city, where fluorescence took the place of sunlight, and desk top terrain bore more fearful dangers than those in the real world jungle.

Markman made his way against the flow to the elevator doors, where an executive-type waited as the overhead numbers counted down. The man glanced briefly and coldly at Markman in the manner upper corporate executives usually do, and then tried to pretend he was alone. When the doors opened, they stepped in together, the executive nearer the controls.

"Would you hit five for me," asked Markman.

"Actually you want ten, Mr. Markman," replied the man and he smiled. "Ann is waiting for us there. My name's Hall, I'm an associate. Sorry for the melodramatic introduction, but I think you'll understand shortly."

"What's this all about?"

Agent Hall assumed a practiced smile and waited in silence until the car had stopped. "Ah, we've arrived. Let's go in. Ann will explain everything."

The thirty-ish, very fit agent led Markman down a wide, carpeted hallway and through an open door into a plain, moderately sized meeting room. Ann Rogers sat at the end of a long briefing table near a video machine and monitor screen. Her light brown hair was artfully wrapped up in a swirl and lines of early middle age in her face were made slightly more apparent by the bright room light. She smiled and buttoned the front of her dark business suit jacket as the two men entered.

"Mr. Markman, thank you for coming. Please have a seat. I promise not to waste your time."

Markman and his escort took seats near her. Markman leaned back and folded his hands in such a way that his body language plainly conveyed impatience. Ann Rogers understood.

"You're here because we need your help."

Markman could not help a look of cynicism. "Your agency wants my help?"

Hall spoke up from across the conference table. "Don't look so surprised, Mr. Markman. You have an interesting history. We looked into you after the Cassell affair. Some things just seemed too good to be true

"Just what job is it you think I can do for you?"

Rogers leaned slowly forward. "There is something we think you can do for us, that maybe no one else can."

Markman began to feel increasingly uneasy.

Rogers continued. "We've been investigating a certain radical group for some time now and there have been problems. They call themselves the Dragon Masters. Ever hear of them?"

"No..."

"It's one of those fantasy role-playing kind of games that are so popular. Only this one is different. It's something straight out of the twilight zone. People are disappearing or being killed, and we haven't been able to get to first base. We've lost some very good people on it."

"You've lost people? How many?"

"Rogers looked at Hall with regret. "Seven, three just recently."

A moment of tense silence passed.

Rogers continued, "That's not all. These people aren't just street types playing around. Most of them are professional people with money. They have a toy of sorts they use. It's called a Sensesuit. You play the game wearing it, and if you lose, it kills you."

"Oh come on, you guys are kidding around. What is this really about?"

Rogers ignored the skepticism, leaned back and continued. "We have no idea where the suits come from. We don't understand how they're made, and we haven't even been able to get our hands on one. I know this all sounds crazy, but I have something here that I think will convince you we're serious."

Rogers turned in her seat to the video player. She pushed in a partially-loaded DVD as Hall moved to dim the lights. The agency's investigative logo appeared on the screen and faded to the picture of a large, empty, windowless room.

In the center of the room, the figure of a man stood motionless and alone. Though he faced the overhead camera, none of his features were visible through the odd, form-fitting body suit that he wore. It was rippled with tubular, vein-like irregularities that covered the entire surface area. A strangely contoured black helmet encompassed all of his face and head. It was joined to the suit at the collar by a sealed

joint. The helmet bore molded protrusions where the eyes were located, but no openings had been provided for sight.

The dark form stepped cautiously forward and abruptly dropped to a crouched position. He twisted left and right as though straining to see something that was not there, and then bolted suddenly to the left, stopping just inches from one of the barren, plastered walls that enclosed the spacious room. Though the overhead camera had a sensitive, omni directional microphone working in conjunction with it, there were no sounds other than the man's own footsteps.

The figure turned and stood ready with his back to the wall and his knees bent. Suddenly he clutched his left arm and fell writhing to the floor. He began crawling forward, lashing out with the good arm as though fighting some unseen enemy. With encumbered movement he fought back to his feet and ran, first left, then a cut to the right, then back to the left again. It was an insidious retreat around an empty room that was somehow always diverted from collision with the real-world barriers.

Finally the nervous figure stopped in the far, right hand corner, massaged the injured arm, and turned one hundred and eighty degrees, never stopping, always guarding himself against some invisible assault.

But the second confrontation was even more brutal. The ill-prepared player suddenly stood upright and blocked with the good arm, then buckled over and fell back to the floor. Body parts were systematically damaged one at a time, and the twisting figure grabbed at each as the attack continued. The ruthless onslaught continued for several minutes until the Sensesuit victim became unresponsive, and an eerie silence fell over the scene. A few seconds later a white flash-fire erupted around him, as he became engulfed in a magnesium-like display of white and orange flame. Ann Rogers switched off the monitor and turned to Markman with the very strained expression of someone who had watched something very unpleasant, one too many times.

"He was one of ours, Mr. Markman. We were extraordinarily lucky to get the tape. It's the first thing they've overlooked."

Markman sat back in his seat with an expression of somber disbelief. "Is that how they all died?"

"No, two went that way. Three others to an explosive, and one just disappeared."

"People play this insanity of their own accord?"

"There's money involved, the promise of some kind of priceless reward. But if you die, the club inherits everything you own. Somehow all records of your property cease to exist. It becomes part of the group's financial base. We don't understand how they do that, either."

"Why are you telling me all this? I don't know anything about it. I don't have anything to do with any of it. I'm still not sure I even believe it."

Agent Hall began the well-planned petition. "Hell, you're already on the case, Markman. You found the woman in the lake didn't you? You'd like to see her killers brought in, right?"

"I'm not a cop. They were short of divers. I was just helping out."

"But you do odd jobs that could be called investigative."

"I don't get it. You guys are pros. I'm a civy. Why would you want me involved?"

"Find the Dragon Masters' council and you'll have the people who killed the lady in the lake. She was the girlfriend of an unlucky player. She must have been told something she wasn't supposed to know. She was afraid to go to the police so she ran as far and as fast as she could. She made it as far as Orlando."

A spike of anger arose within Markman as he thought back to the pale white face at the bottom of the cold, pine-stained lake. He looked at Hall, then back at Rogers. "I still don't get it. What could I do that you couldn't?"

Ann Rogers made a faint smile. "You're the perfect choice for this, Scott, for many reasons. As I said we've had some serious problems. One of our people must have been forced to talk. I'm sure it wasn't by choice. Somehow they've got an inside line on federal agents and local law enforcement. That's why we've lost so many. You on the other hand, are invisible. You worked auxiliary for Wandell's department for a while, but they don't keep personal data on civilian volunteers, so there's no record of you. You even got shot once, a story I'd really love to hear sometime, but even in that report they listed you only as a civilian ride-along. There's no record of you for them to find. Like I say, you're invisible. We want to give you a new cover name with a complete history. Then, we want you to become a player."

"What?"

"You would be extremely hard for them to find out. Since so much of your life was spent overseas, there are not a lot of records on you. Getting into the organization is difficult. It takes someone extremely athletic and quick thinking to play the game. You could do it."

"Wait a minute here. I can't just disappear one day."

Hall exchanged wary glances with Rogers. He took a deep breath and spoke cautiously. "You already have."

An atmosphere of hostility suddenly filled the quiet meeting chamber. Ann Rogers shifted nervously in her seat and chose her

words with great care. "We have a substitute Scott Markman already taking your place, but only as much as necessary. Just enough to make it look like you are still around, using your credit card, all the routine things you do."

Markman began to tap his fingers irately on the tabletop. "Gee, and I was starting to follow along so well until now."

"We have an agent who fits your profile perfectly. You'd be surprised at the resemblance. We're quite good at making one person look like another these days. Even your neighbors will not suspect, although your double will be seen only occasionally, and only during off-hours."

"Were you thinking of allowing me any say at all in this," asked Markman indignantly.

"Easy, Scott," said Rogers. "You can refuse to do this right now and no harm will have been done. You can drop out any time you like, in fact. It would just be a matter of exchanging places with your double. You could forget about resolving the case of the lady in the lake though, never mind the seriousness of the problem we've just told you about. It's more than just murder that concerns us, you know. It's the suit technology. There's never been anything like it. Whoever is producing them is dangerous, very dangerous."

"And what about my family and friends?"

Agent Hall sighed and gently straightened a portfolio resting on the conference table in front of him. "You have no family, Scott. Your mother passed away when you were very young. Your father refused to place you with foster parents, so you grew up being shuttled back and forth between the States and Southwest Asia, one or two months here, the rest there. You lost your father in the crash of an Air Force Stealth Bomber. Your few friends are on the force, except for the Cassell's, and you can handle them any way you think best."

"Well, that's all a bit disturbing. I guess there's not too much the two of you don't know about me, is there?"

"It was very necessary, Scott," replied Rogers. "There has to be no way for them to connect you to us. Of the three agents who managed to infiltrate the club, none were able to communicate directly with us afterward. It's a pretty deep cover assignment. As I've said we were just lucky to happen across the tape you saw; our man recorded his own death in the hope we would find it. The way we've chosen to do this there is no way they can ID you as Scott Markman, since he never left. You already have a complete computer history now for a new cover, and there's no way or reason to question it."

"And if I decide to take a chance on becoming body bag number eight, just who am I?"

Rogers smiled. She sensed she was winning her case.

"You are David Julian. You're an arms dealer who specializes on the side in the sport of paint-ball. We know about your abilities with weapons, so it's a perfect fit. You distribute wholesale and are always on the road. We're guessing the Dragon Masters will be very interested in a game player who can provide them with real firearms when necessary."

With that, Agent Hall reached inside his suit jacket and tossed a thick billfold across to Markman. 'There's everything you need to be real, Mr. Julian. Try not to get too extravagant with the credit cards, okay?"

"And if I agree to this madness, who are my contacts?"

Hall replied, 'You're looking at them. The fewer people involved, the better our chances."

"And how do I contact you?"

"Our people will shadow you everywhere you go, unless it compromises your situation," said Rogers. "I doubt even you will make them. You write out your communications on anything handy at the time. When you want delivery, you leave the message in any convenient place, light a cigarette, and then put it out. We'll see it. It's that simple. When we want to communicate with you, you'll know. So what do you say, willing to give it a try?"

"I don't smoke. Nobody smokes anymore."

"We know, but David Julian does. Julian was a real person. We were secretly investigating him for illegal arms sales. He accidentally overdosed one evening, and we stepped in before anyone knew. He had no family, and very few friends. As far as the world is concerned, David Julian is alive and well. Julian bought every quit-smoking gimmick on the market, but they never worked. I guess when you're quietly selling guns to terrorists, you can't quit nervous habits."

"I want some time to think this over. I'll let you know."

Rogers responded. "Well, it starts from the time you leave this room, Scott. You only stopped in here because David Julian has an account with this bank. We'll give you a phone number to call when you're ready. Enter a one-one at the tone. No voice communication. If we don't hear from you by tomorrow, we'll assume you're out of the deal. And Scott, don't take too long to think about it, people are dying."

Chapter 7

Cassiopia struggled to keep both bags of groceries upright as she searched in the front pocket of her white cardigan sweater for the key to her father's door. She twisted open the doorknob lock, let herself in, and walked past the hallway entrance that led to the basement laboratory. The heavy metal door was closed and secured by an electronic, key coded cipher lock on the wall next to it. She shook her head in annoyance, realizing her father was certainly down there, probably dabbling in some quantum physics experiment that resembled something out of a Frankenstein movie. He was seldom anywhere else.

She finished putting away the kitchen supplies, and peered around the corner at the sound of the heavy lab door opening. Her preoccupied father emerged from the basement wearing a stained and wrinkled lab coat and baggy brown work pants. Immediately, he jumped and let out a cry of surprise at finding someone else in the house.

"Dear daughter, you frightened me half out of my wits. I didn't know you were here."

"Just resupplying a few insignificant things such as food, father."

"Well please, you should ring the doorbell so Tel will hear it and advise me so that I don't jump out of my skin that way."

"Sorry, okay. By the way, what are you doing down there? Anything I would find interesting?"

A look of guilt came over the old man's face. "Oh nothing, just cleaning up the SCIP experiment mess. Salvaging the good parts and all. How was your day?"

"Dull and boring. Has Scott come by here or called? I haven't been able to get a hold of him."

"Not to my knowledge. You can check the blasted phone machine. I have not for some time. And we need to resume our little chat about the robot."

The Professor came to the kitchen and irately began searching his pockets. "The briarwood vanishes of its own accord. I'm absolutely convinced of it."

"This one?" she asked, holding up the worn pipe he considered to be a critical vice for thought. He snatched it with an amused stare and resumed his search, this time for his lighter. She held that up in her other hand and raised one eyebrow.

"There are some very interesting things you should know about the robot's retrieval in that sinkhole, dear daughter," he mused, as he begrudgingly took the lighter from her.

"Such as?"

"Come with me."

They went to the small, book-laden study. The dominating figure of the TEL 100D stood at rest in a corner, its visor filled with the soft glow of computer awareness. Its armored body was sparkling clean from the detailed polishing and inspection Cassiopia had performed earlier. They sat by the Professor's antique desk. The Professor began to pack his pipe.

"Look at this." He pushed a stack of documents at her and smiled accusingly.

"My goodness, a printout? You took the time to get a printout, father? Are you feeling well?"

"Yes, yes, have your laugh, but I think you will find the information indicting of a certain dabbling programmer we both know well. Go on look at it."

"Okay, mmmm...., power monitor readouts, from Tel's entry into the cave until he returned. Oh, what beautiful power management. I see he completed the task awfully close to the baseline. Oh, I don't like that..."

"Yes, my dear Cass. And why did it come so close to running out of power, after you so carefully set the limits?"

"Okay, let's see, the largest portion of consumption was...wait a minute that can't be right." Cassiopia became silent as she studied the data. An expression of bewilderment came over her face. Her father tilted his head back and forth victoriously.

"Ha, ha! Something amiss there? Could it be certain instructions weren't followed, my most lovely program meddler?"

"I don't understand this. There's a priority tag in the objective retrieval routine that I don't recall."

"Yes, yes, my dear daughter, the least significant bit subtly altered in the self-protection program, and in the objective-retrieval program, just enough to change certain priorities..."

She looked at her father curiously. "This data suggests that the robot was instructed that bringing out the child was more important than returning. That's not right..."

"Not right...not right? That's what I say. Are those the instructions you gave it?"

"Well...no, he was supposed to abort and return as soon as power levels reached fifty percent. This shows he used seventy percent before starting back. I don't get it. Have you questioned him about this?"

"That, my dear, I have left for you. And I am thoroughly enjoying this, I might add. I have told you time and time again that your continued meddling with artificial personality will eventually corrupt the fundamental programming within in the thing. Our armored friend now awaits his well-deserved scolding. This should be very interesting." He gestured toward the silent, mechanical man who somehow seemed apprehensive.

Cassiopia turned in her seat. "Tel, I want to ask you some questions about the F8500 rescue program. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Cassiopia, the files are open."

"Tel, what power limits were assigned in the program?"

"No operations exceeding TEL 100D limitations, no greater than fifty percent power consumption available for search criteria."

Cassiopia looked confused. "Tel, what were the measured power levels at the time that you located the boy?"

"Fifty-two percent power remaining at detection of objective."

"Okay, and what were the measured power levels at the moment you began your return trip?"

"Power levels at start of return routine were thirty-seven-point-four percent."

"And what was the power used for between the time you located the boy and began your return trip?"

"Problem solving and extraction of objective."

"The boy was stuck? You had to rescue him?"

"Affirmative."

"So Tel, didn't you violate your programming by not returning immediately when power levels reached fifty percent?"

"Negative."

"Explain."

"Employment of no greater than fifty percent power usage during search phase of operation."

Cassiopia looked to her father. "Do you understand what he's saying?"

"Quite clearly. It has reinterpreted your instructions to mean it could stay as long as necessary, provided it didn't use more than fifty percent of its power to search with. When it found the boy, it decided it could then stay as long as was required."

"So did I program him poorly or is it program corruption?"

"I have no idea, daughter. This is what I've been telling you all along. It double-talks with the expertise of a diplomat. It has just successfully debated you into a corner. Do you know it won't take out the garbage to the backyard any more?"

"Father, you have a TEL 100D taking out garbage?"

"I wish I did. It knows the routine perfectly. It can recite it backwards. But when the time comes to do it, the thing is busy elsewhere and when I question it, I get the same robotic double-talk. The thing is worse than the executives at the university, honestly."

Cassiopia paused. "By the way, Father, aren't you supposed to attend the restructure meeting at the university today?"

"Oh my, what day is this?"

"The restructure meeting is today."

"Oh no, I must attend that one; after all, I was partially responsible for the disruption. Cassiopia, you must come with me. I'll need you for moral support."

"But Father, it starts in one hour..."

The question of the robot's intellectual independence was quickly lost in the mad rush to prepare and depart for the forgotten obligation. As they pulled out of the driveway, neither had time to notice the rusted-out, brown and white van conspicuously parked a short distance away. Its two occupants ducked down as the pair drove by and then watched them disappear down the street. They smiled mischievously at the potential good fortune that had been left behind in the Professor's poorly guarded home.

Chapter 8

Leroy Spungin scratched at the stubble on his pointed, unshaven chin as he watched the Cassells drive hurriedly by. He tipped the dirty blue baseball cap back on his head and smiled at his brother Ziggy, who responded with a show of brown and yellow teeth. Ziggy brushed aside the shaggy, oily black hair from his eyes and chuckled gleefully.

"Piece o' cake, right, Leroy?"

"Nobody home but our main man, eh brother?"

"So, what's the plan?"

"Easy! We bust in, throw the robot in the back, meet Icky's semi at the truck stop and bang, we're rich men."

"What'll we get fer it?"

"Prubly ten grand--five apiece. Set fer life, eh?"

"Let's do it, brother--."

The cancer-riddled, two-toned van edged slowly away from the roadside, and rattled its way to the Cassell home. Leroy pulled behind the house, making several uncoordinated attempts before finally backing up to the rear entrance.

The brothers jumped out, slamming the van doors shut with a clamor that would have alerted even a deaf person. At the back door, Leroy tested the doorknob on the remote chance it was unlocked.

"Knock on it, Leroy, case somebody else is in there," said Ziggy in a rare moment of insight.

His brother banged on the window glass of the rickety old door with a hairy fist, alerting the TEL 100D at its station in the study. It chose not to respond.

"Gimme the screwdriver. It's an easy one," said Leroy and he held out an open hand while trying to see inside. He took the tool from his brother, and jammed its blade deeply into the slot in the door, cracking off a large chunk of wood from around the latch.

"Wait, wait. There might be alarms or somethin'. Let's call out an see what happens," insisted Leroy, and he cupped his hands around his mouth. "Hey in there! Anybody home? Hello?"

Since Tel lacked an adequate definition of intruder, it quickly decided investigative input was called for. The robot lurched forward out of the study and down the hall toward where the Spungin brothers were craning their necks to see. Moments later the domineering figure of the robot appeared abruptly in the doorway, causing both brothers to cry out in off-key harmony and jump back. Leroy held his left hand over his heart. Ziggy stood with his knees bent, ready to run.

"Gentleman, please identify yourselves," demanded Tel, as it rotated its head to scan the area. Ziggy, farthest from its menacing form, gestured to the robot with one finger and spoke in a high-pitched, broken tone.

"Would you excuse us for just a second, please." He took his brother by the arm and pulled him a few more feet away, hoping to clarify certain unresolved details without the machine hearing. Tel, with its high-gain audio sensors, heard every word nevertheless.

"Leroy, what the hell you thinkin' 'bout? We ain't gonna throw that thing in the van. It's gotta weigh half a ton."

"Yeah, I didn't think this part out. What'a we do?"

"How 'bout get in the van an get the hell out a here?"

"No way man, we're here to get the robot, that's what we're gonna do."

"Well how you gonna get that thing in the back a the van, man?"

"I'll ask it."

Leroy took two very calculated steps toward the robot, and spoke with wavering uncertainty. "Ah, ...robot...ah, Mr. Cas-sell needs yer help. He sent us here to bring ya to him."

A moment of oafish silence followed, as Tel debated within itself. It could not accept commands from anyone but a few specified individuals. Was this a command relayed from one of them? Additional investigative input was required.

"Gentleman, please elaborate."

Leroy returned to his brother, who stood fidgeting with his dirty, green coveralls. He furrowed his brow. "What's a-lab-er-et?"

"What ya askin' me fer? Ah don't know thet."

Leroy turned back to Tel. "Mr. Cas-sell wants ya ta get in the van and we'll take ya to 'em."

Tel considered. If it did not comply and the command was legitimate, it would mean violating one of its program's prime directives. Clearly still more investigative input was required in this matter. Without further delay, it stepped forward and entered through the open rear doors of the van, taking a seat facing outward, waiting for additional input to aid in its evaluation.

Leroy Spungin shut the van doors while trying to maintain an official appearance for the sake of his stolen cargo. When the doors were secured, the brothers jumped up and down with muted cries, and high-fived each other before racing to the front of the vehicle. They climbed in and pulled quickly out onto the street and headed for the back roads that led out of town.

"What'd ah tell ya Zig, this is a piece a' cake for guys like us. Our ship jest came in."

"Too cool, brother. How'd ya get a line on this thing anyhow?"

"Pure genius, brother Zig. When the big sink happened I was casin' out the neighborhood over there, figgerin' that people would be evacuatin' and all. Ah thought the cops might be all tied up with what was goin' on. I was gonna bust in a few houses and take what I could get quick. So I'm drivin' by, and I see this robot hangin' over the hole, and Ah remembers that Uncle Vini was sayin' how the mob up north was lookin' for some kind a' thing like thet. All we gotta do now is meet Icky, then he delivers it to Uncle Vini and the Mafia shows us all its gratitude. It's the big time, little brother."

"Wow," replied Ziggy, and he nodded approvingly. The two men smiled at each other and continued their trek out of town carrying in the back of their ill-running vehicle a biped machine that was considerably smarter than the two of them combined.

Ten miles outside the city limits, where the countryside turned to untamed forest, bordered by roadside canals, the incongruous trio began to have problems.

"Leroy, pull over quick, will ya'?" Ziggy grimaced.

"Whatsa' matter?"

"I gotta take a trip in the woods, man."

"Man, we just passed a bar and grill, why didn't ya say somethin'?"

"Didn't think of it."

Leroy mumbled under his breath and chose a small clearing along the road. He slowed and pulled into it, turning so that the van faced outward, ready to pull away quickly should the need arise. The brothers both ambled out of the vehicle and headed behind the trees to relieve themselves of the past evening's beer. In the back of the van, Tel quickly registered the stop. It assumed that the intended destination had been reached, opened the rear doors, and exited, well out of sight of the brother's placid stares.

No humans were anywhere in sight. It scanned the general area and found a narrow trail that led into the woods. The path bore infrared signatures indicating it had been used by some form of warm-blooded creatures fairly recently. For lack of a better alternative, the studious machine headed dutifully into the forest in search of Professor Cassell.

Having sufficiently restored themselves to drinking capacity, the Spungin brothers returned to their poorly mistreated van and hopped in. They pulled back out onto the road to resume their journey. Because the TEL had not closed the rear doors, a banging sound that was foreign to the vehicles normal clatter soon attracted their attention.

"What the hell's that, Leroy?"

"Somethin's bangin' in the back."

Ziggy pulled back the soiled burlap dividing curtain behind his seat. Several seconds were required before the reality that the stolen robot was no longer aboard fully registered.

"Leroy..."

"Yea, Zig?"

"There ain't no robot back there."

The worn brakes on the van somehow locked the rear wheels and the bald tires smoked as Leroy Spungin stood on the brake pedal.

"What?" he yelled, and he twisted back to stare out the open doors at the empty back end of his smoking vehicle.

Ten minutes later the inept pair were back at the site of the improvised rest stop. They split up and entered the woodlands in search of their lost, and unexpectedly independent, merchandise.

Within the forest, Tel continued to explore the woods, an environment well known to it, but never before visited. It tracked the movements of small creatures that remained hidden from the visible spectrum and listened carefully to the unceasing music of life that echoed through the forest. Though there were innumerable things worth investigating and documenting here, this setting clearly was not a place where the Professor would likely be found, and since its present directive was to locate and assist its owner, Tel retraced its steps and returned to the rusted-out van.

The back doors of the vehicle were now closed and locked. It went to the side loading door, opened it, and took a seat behind the dividing curtain, shutting the large sliding door in preparation for the journey's resumption. There it waited patiently for its couriers to return.

Leroy and Ziggy tramped through the thick underbrush. Their clothing became torn and dirty as they swatted at the persistent insects that considered them fair game. The poorly prepared brothers persisted for more than an hour before becoming so depressed and angry that they could search no more. Thorn-stabbed and mosquito-bitten, they returned to their van, irate and cursing, arguing fiercely as they climbed in to make the defeated journey home. Once on the road, the argument resumed.

"Stupid plan, Leroy, stupid."

"What you sayin', Ziggy, it's your fault."

"Ain't my fault."

"You was the one had to stop, you dink-head."

"Ain't me, you fergot ta' lock the damn doors."

"Ah did lock the doors. Ah fergot they don't lock on the inside. Ya should'a thought 'a thet."

"Damn robot's lost in the woods and we spent all this gas money. Steal a robot, easy ya said."

Just behind the curtain, Tel immediately triggered on the reference to stealing a robot. Other fragments from the conversation linked much of the unexplained data in its files. It began to understand the situation at hand. Abruptly it pulled aside the worn curtain and in a tone louder than necessary exclaimed, "Gentlemen!"

The Spungin brothers screamed their inharmonious scream. While they stared back in shock at the unexpected sight of Tel, the poorly-aligned van veered off the road, down a short embankment, and crashed into a fat tree stump.

The brothers slammed forward into the collapsing dashboard of the vehicle. The heavy robot ejected through the exploding windshield and splashed into a deep pond at the bottom of the embankment. A small tidal wave rose up as it sank quickly to the bottom.

Leroy sat up in his seat and touched his forehead with one hand. There was blood from a small cut over the left eye. In his lap lay a pile of shattered glass. Ziggy, equally disheveled, resumed the pointless argument.

"Just great, Leroy, just great. Now ya wrecked the van."

Leroy sneered. "Ain't my fault, duffus. Where the hell's the robot?"

"Broke fer sure, and at the bottom a' thet pond. Take a tow truck ta get the thing out now."

The Spungins half-climbed, half-fell from the sprung doors of the wreckage, and in frustration attempted to assess the damage. The engine now lay forced back between the seats and a portion of bumper was visible near the front of it. Both the driver's and the passenger's doors hung by a single hinge, and all of the glass was either cracked or shattered.

The unsightly pair staggered from the twisted remains of the van and continued their arguing as they trudged down the road toward the bar and grill.

Beneath the stagnant water of the pond, the TEL 100D lay. Its creators had designed it to withstand up to eighteen positive G's and pressure depths of one hundred meters. The harsh incident had not caused it to exceed any of these limits, leaving the robot completely unscathed. It lay submerged on the bottom of the canal, face down in the mud and weeds. A few moments were needed to sort out all the unusual and erratic data that had been collected. Fortunately, the last few statements made by the brothers had finally allowed most data to fall neatly into a pattern, although the pattern remained exceedingly nonsensical. Returning to home base was now the next logical priority.

Tel pushed itself up from the canal floor and made its way along the bottom to the surface. It climbed the short incline to the road, barely taking time to observe the van's wreckage. Muddied and wet, it

paused in the roadway to run self-diagnostics. No cellular connection was currently available. Grass and weeds dangled from joints on its dull-chromed body, some dragging on the hot black pavement behind it. It carefully placed itself with its global positioning system and headed off down the road toward home on its oversized tractor driven shoes. Like an accomplished, muddied, rollerblader on a gentle downhill, it cruised along smoothly at a brisk seven miles per hour.

Farther along, the Spungin brothers argued more fiercely than ever. So intent were they on blaming each other that they failed to notice the soft whirring hum of the approaching, weed-covered machine.

When the dominating figure of Tel was nearly on them, the distracted brothers looked back in shock and let out their trademark scream. Thinking the machine was now intent on revenge, they crashed into each other, rolled gracelessly down the embankment, and splashed into the same pond from which Tel had just emerged.

The robot continued its course, rotating its visored head in an attempt to track and understand their actions. As they dog-paddled toward the water's edge, it let out a strange, but quite identifiable sound.

"Neeeck, nck, nck, nck."

Ziggy wiped the water from his face and stared indignantly at his brother. "Now the damn thing's laughin' at us, Leroy!"

"No way, pea brain, it's just a dumb machine."

"Well it's smarter than you, dork."

"Swim home, hoser."

A short time later, Tel reached the isolated roadside bar. It was an old wooden building that had served as several different types of establishments over the years, finally ending up as an out-of-the way drinkery. Gray wooden shingles sagged between the truss lines of the neglected roof. A long, worn porch ran the length of the building's front, ending in three untrustworthy steps on the right. Two painted-over windows were placed on either side of the entrance. The door had its own small, unpainted glass. A weathered sign, unadorned by costly lighting, hung over the front entrance. It read "Ted's Place."

A dozen or so beat-up autos were parked close to the building, leaving most of the gravel filled parking lot empty. Across the sparsely filled lot, where the gravel met the blacktop road, stood an old-fashioned, glass-enclosed telephone booth. Tel quickly decided that a call home was a very logical way to proceed. It stopped and locked its tractor drives and walked across the stony dirt to the booth.

Money was unnecessary. It had Professor Cassell's calling card on file. It awkwardly entered the booth, smearing mud on the streaked glass walls, lifted the handset from the cradle, and broadcast its own

tone-generated numbers into the receiver from the hidden opening at the mouth of its weed-covered head.

At the entrance to the bar, an inebriated patron stepped awkwardly outside for a smoke. The overall-clad man stood swaying at the door, fishing one finger in an empty cigarette pack, trying vainly to make sense out of the sight of a mud-caked, two-legged machine attempting to use a pay phone. He steadied himself and squinted with all his might, hoping to bring reality back into focus, but no matter how hard he tried it still appeared that the infamous swamp thing was apparently making a call. When no sense of reason could be found to prevail, he turned, and lurched back into the bar for a drink he considered to be more medicinal than excessive.

Chapter 9

The telephone at the Cassell residence began to ring. At the front door, Scott Markman gave up waiting for an answer to his knock and let himself in with the key given him by Cassiopia. Hoping that the call was from her, he raced down the hallway to the Professor's study.

"Hello?"

There was no reply.

"Hello?"

A hoarse-sounding, monotone voice responded. "Mr. Markman, this is the TEL 100D, part number 7639620, serial number 000001. I require input."

"Okay, this is a joke...right?"

Silence.

"Come on, who is this--really?"

Again silence.

"This is the TEL 100D, part number 7639620, serial number 000001."

"What? Where are you calling from?"

"Mr. Markman, my present location is, latitude twenty-eight degrees, nineteen minutes, zero-zero seconds, longitude eighty-one degrees, thirty-nine minutes, zero-five seconds."

"Is Cassiopia or Professor Cassell with you?"

"Negative."

Markman paused and stared blankly at the receiver in his hand. Every time I get mixed up with these people something completely absurd happens, he thought. Now I'm standing in a house in central Florida that has a basement and a converted bomb shelter, and I'm talking to a robot on the telephone. These people can't be from this planet.

"Well, what are you doing out of the house alone?"

"Mr. Markman, I require transportation."

"Where are you?"

"My present location is, latitude twenty-eight degrees, nineteen minutes, zero-zero seconds, longitude eighty-one degrees, thirty-nine minutes, zero-five seconds."

"I don't know where that is! Isn't there something recognizable around there, a building or something?"

"Ted's Place."

"What the heck are you doing anyway? How'd you get there? Oh never mind, I'm on my way, I'll find the place."

"Acknowledged."

Satisfied it had fulfilled the necessary communication requirements, Tel backed out of the cramped phone booth and resumed its journey. As it disappeared around the first forest-lined corner, the alcohol-refreshed patron from the bar reemerged with several friends, hoping they could confirm the bizarre sight he thought he had seen. When no monster was to be found, his friends began to laugh and make debasing comments, but the celebration quickly became subdued when one of them pointed out weeds hanging from the free swinging handset in the muddied booth.

Using Cassiopia's laptop, Markman found the location of Ted's Place, and managed to pick up the wayward robot on the road well before reaching the bar. Somehow the persistent machine had managed to coast along the remote country highway without encountering any local traffic. With great effort and numerous seat adjustments, he managed to squeeze the robot's hulk into the front seat of his Mustang, though it required that one arm and shoulder hang out the open window. After piecing together the fractured story of Tel's abduction, he located the remains of the brown and white van and took down the plate number. There was no sign of the Spungin brothers.

Back at the Professor's home, neither Cassiopia nor her father had returned. Tel, having thoroughly soiled the car and strewn pieces of slimy green weed in the Professor's hallway, went to its favorite spot in the study, while Markman anonymously called in an accident report on the Spungin's van. He deliberately said nothing of the break in or theft at the Cassell home. He knew well how the Professor valued his privacy. Without waiting for their return, he secured the broken back door, and locked the house much more properly. A few important things had to be accomplished before accepting the case of the Sensesuit murders, one of which was including Cassiopia in the decision. The other requirement was a very necessary rendezvous with an old friend.

Sergeant Dan Parish squirmed into the most comfortable position he could manage in the driver's seat of his unmarked police car. In the seat next to him, rookie officer Steve Peterson, having recovered for the most part from Chief Wandell's discipline, stared out the window. Flickering amber street lights were just coming on.

"So why are we here, Sergeant?"

"We're meetin' an old friend, Mr. Peterson, somebody I owe a favor to."

"Anyone I know?"

"Markman."

"Oh yeah? What's the deal?"

"Now you never mind, you hear? This is between me and him. You don't know nothin', got it?"

"Yep," replied Peterson.

Parrish paused to gawk at an unsuspecting lady of the evening who had crossed the street to rendezvous with a stopped car. She stood leaning over the open driver's window, her black laced stockings not quite reaching up to her wet-black miniskirt. A wide, black belt joined it to a shear red-pink see-through blouse. Confidential negotiations were taking place.

"So what's the favor for, do I get to know that?" asked Peterson.

"Old war wounds, my boy, old war wounds."

"You guys served in the military together or something?"

Parrish snorted a laugh. "No way man, I'm talkin' about the seven-eleven wars."

"What?"

The overweight Sergeant shifted restlessly in his seat. He cast a warning glance at his inexperienced partner, but quickly abandoned it and smiled.

"Ah, I guess I can tell you that one. Ain't no secret. A few years back Markman was with me as a ride-along, an auxiliary. We had just finished a long stakeout for nothin', on the west side. It was late. I pulled into an all-nighter so I could get a pack a' cigarettes. Can't smoke 'em now you know, damn doctors. We were off duty, I had all my gear off and all. So half-asleep I go ramblin' into this store and walk in on two guys with guns robbin' the place. Before I know it one of 'em puts me against the wall with a nine millimeter at my chest, while the other's holding a Smith and Wesson to the cashier's head. The cashier's so damn scared he can't get the register open."

"Then Markman, who don't know none a' this, decides he wants a freakin' ice cream or somethin' and comes bustin' in on the whole thing, so they put him up against the wall with me. There we are, no guns, no nothin', 'cept Markman's still got his vest on under his shirt cause they was required for all ride-alongs."

"So the cashier's cryin' like a baby, stuffin' money into their sack. It ain't much, stupid robbin' a convenience store and all. About that time the thug whose robbin' the poor kid pulls the hammer back on the Smith and Wesson. I mean, he's gonna kill the kid right there and then. Me and Markman are pinned, can't go left or right 'cause we're between two freezer units. I'm figurin' it's all over. If they're gonna do the kid, they're sure as hell gonna do us, right?"

"All of a sudden out of nowhere Markman slaps the gun right out of the guy's hand who's holdin' us, so fast I didn't even see it happen. I mean it was a blur, the thug never saw it comin', neither. In the

same move, Markman rams the heel of his palm up into the guy's face and drives the guy's nose up into his head. He goes down hard."

"So now we're lookin' straight out at the other dude still holdin' onto the cashier, but he's got his Smith and Wesson leveled at me and I got no place to go.

"So what does Markman do? The crazy bastard steps in front of me and takes three shots in the vest. By that time, I'm on the floor scramblin' for the other guy's nine millimeter, right?"

"Well let me tell you, boy, I ain't never been a sharpshooter. Down at the range, when I got my glasses, I can hit the silhouette good enough to get by, but nothin' special, you understand. So there I am, prone on the floor of the convenience store with a strange nine millimeter in my hand and no glasses. I click off three shots as fast as I can pull the trigger, see?"

Parrish paused to wipe the sweat off his forehead with a white handkerchief he had drawn from his back pocket, as though just remembering the story was an ordeal.

"Man, I still can't believe it. The first shot hits the guy dead center in the chest, the second straight through the throat and the third right below the nose. It was the best shootin' I've ever done in my life."

Peterson stared blankly. "And you guys are both still around to talk about it?"

"Yeah, so they take Markman away on a stretcher half-conscious, mumblin' Chinese, while me and the cashier stand around not believin' we're still alive. Later I asked Markman what the hell he was thinkin'. You know what he said? He said he knew what I'd do, like he knew I'd go for the other gun and take out the second gunman, right? He's one lucky son-of-a-bitch that Markman. Had three big welts on his chest that wept for a month."

Just as Parrish finished his story, a familiar black Mustang crept forward out of the darkness and stopped a short distance in front of them. Parrish opened his door and looked threateningly at his young partner. "You wait here right? Remember, none of this ever happened."

Parrish got out of the car and crossed over to the waiting Mustang. He paused to look around and then climbed in the passenger side and shut the door.

"So how's tricks, old buddy? Ain't seen you around lately. You got somethin' goin'?"

Markman draped his hands over the steering wheel and smiled at his friend. "Thanks for showing, Dan. Nothing I should talk about."

"Say no more, I already figured it. I brought you the present you asked for, not exactly what you wanted." With that Parrish pulled

something wrapped in a piece of oily, brown rag from beneath his black police windbreaker. He unwrapped it carefully in his lap.

"The serial numbers' been ground off, so it's an orphan like you wanted. Couldn't get a Berretta, but it's a Glock. 'Bout the same size. They're kinda' ugly, but they have this mean little habit of hittin' the target every damned time. I think you'll like it."

Markman took the dark metal handgun from the Sergeant. He popped out the clip, checked it and locked it back in place. The safety was on. He leaned over and placed it carefully under the car seat.

"I appreciate it, Dan. What I'm working on, you're about the only person I trust. I wanted something no one in the world knows about."

Parrish looked away out the passenger window in time to see the tiptoeing hooker climb into her client's car. "Glad to do it, Scott. Let me tell you it wasn't easy. They had the disposal cage at headquarters real secure. They don't kid around these days with confiscated weapons. There were more Uzi's down there than handguns. World's goin' crazy, I think."

"Only the best for the drug dealers, I guess," replied Markman with a nod.

"Well, hey, that's not all. I got you somethin' else too." Parrish pushed up from the seat and groped around in his right-hand pants pocket. He pulled out something that looked like a small stuffed toy and handed it over with a grin.

"It's a Cobra nine millimeter derringer. It'll give you two real meaningful shots. Better watch it though, nine millimeter is a lot of lead for that little gun. It's gotta have a real kick to it. See the foam jacket it's in? You keep it in your pants pocket and even if you get patted down there's a good chance it won't get picked up. Pretty good, eh?"

Markman pulled open the white foam cushion and stared down at the small, well-made, nickel-plated derringer. It was designed to fire in the case. One hole for the trigger finger, another at the tip of the dual barrels. He shook his head in surprise and approval. "You're a true blue, Dan. I owe you one."

"Not really, partner. They're gonna take the firein' pins outa' these repo'd guns and sink 'em on a barge at the end of the month anyway. It's a yearly ritual, you were just in time. Besides, I wouldn't want nothin' happenin' to you, whatever you're into, right?"

"I'll be okay."

"Famous last words, partner. If you need me for anything, you just say the word. Got it?"

"Got it."

Markman drove back to the Cassell place. Cassiopia's car was nowhere in sight. A call to her cell phone yielded only the message

service. The Professor's car was parked in the driveway, but there was still no answer at the door. Feeling slightly guilty, he let himself in once more and was looking into the kitchen when the door to the basement lab opened, and the Professor emerged, unaware that he had still another visitor.

"Professor Cassell."

"Ahhhh...", the old gray-haired man let out a loud scream and looked up at Markman with one hand over his heart. When he realized who it was, his shoulders let down in relief and he began to shake his head. "Mr. Markman, you must not surprise me that way. Is this a plot between you and my daughter to be rid of me once and for all or something?"

"I'm sorry, sir. I didn't mean to startle you. I was looking for Cassiopia. Is she downstairs, by any chance?"

The old man suddenly looked guilty, and the tone of his voice became defensive. "No, ah, nothing's downstairs. Just cleaning up, that's all. Nothing that would interest anyone down there. My daughter left about a half hour ago, I'm not sure where she was going."

"Professor, someone tried to run off with Tel this afternoon. Did you know that?"

"The 100D? Someone tried to steal it? Isn't it in the study?"

"It is now. Do you have any idea who would do that?"

"What? Someone tried to steal Tel? ...No, I have no idea who would attempt such a thing. How do you know? What happened?"

"I found it on the road outside of town. From what I could get out of the thing, it must have been some real small time operators. There was no sign of them anywhere. I did not report it. I thought you would prefer it that way."

"Why, yes, though I'm shocked. I never quite expected this. I suppose I should have. Oh my, I'll have to be more careful. It should be kept downstairs, out of sight."

"Professor, maybe you can talk to it and get more information than I was able to. Maybe we can look into this later, when I have time."

"Yes, yes, of course, I'll find out everything I can. How unsettling this is. I should have checked on it when I came in."

"And Professor, I need to talk to Cassiopia, right away. Do you have any idea at all where I might find her?"

"I'm sorry, Scott, in all the confusion I did not ask. She dropped me at the door. I really have no idea."

"Well would you give her a message for me if you see her before I do?. Tell her I'll get in touch with her as soon as I can. I'm not sure where I'll be working. I'll call."

With final assurances from the unsettled Professor, Markman left, annoyed that he had failed to discuss his situation with Cassiopia. He had an uneasy feeling that there would probably not be time left to do so.

His fears were confirmed a short time later when he found a plain brown envelope on the passenger seat of the locked Mustang. There were two items in it, one a plane ticket to New York, and the other a handwritten note.

Mr. Markman, time has become critical. You must be in N.Y. by 10:00 A.M. tomorrow to attend a firearms convention at the Queens Convention Center. --Rogers.

Chapter 10

The night lights of Manhattan played tricks on Markman's tired eyes as he stared through the oval window on the aging seven-sixty-seven. An endless pattern of yellow-white dots blanketed the darkened landscape. The big plane lumbered sluggishly and unexpectedly to the left as it chased the invisible radio wave that pointed it to the green lights bordering the destination runway. There was the dull thud of big tires on a hardened surface and the hesitant whine of reversing jet engines as the fragile nose gear settled. In only a few short hours, Markman had become an unheralded participant of the Big City.

A rental car had already been reserved, a new Lincoln Towncar. David Julian was apparently quite successful as an arms merchant. The glamorous rental agent pushed at her flowing blond hair and provided directions to the Ambassador Hotel without having been asked. She smiled a narrow, pink-lipstick smile that was friendlier than necessary. Markman returned one encumbered by fatigue.

The late-evening city was dressed in neon and fluorescence. Electric make-up hid the dark corners and less desirable niches that were all too familiar. Markman knew the dirty, out-of-the-way places were there in the shadows, visited by the dealers of darkness. They were always close by, ready to bite if the right, unsuspecting prey happened along.

At the hotel, a sharply-cut desk clerk with black, slicked-back hair was enthusiastically helpful, despite the lateness of the hour. He waved his manicured hand and directed a uniformed bellhop with instructions that were completely unnecessary, and the bellhop responded by nodding eagerly as though he were hearing them for the very first time.

The hotel room was too large and too sterile. Picture windows looked down over the city, and up at a few of the lavish towers of the corporate warlords. Soft lights displayed fine architecture and modish decor. Markman dropped his leather jacket on a polished wooden chair by the door and headed for the center of the spacious living area, where a large, inviting, snow-white sofa encircled a round, glass coffee table atop thick, white carpet. Door chimes interrupted him.

At the front door, a hotel clerk stood waiting with a push-cart bearing champagne.

"Complimentary, from the house," The man gave an artificial smile. He pushed his cargo inside the room and paused uncomfortably. Markman made the tip and was rid of him. Champagne was of little interest, but there was a card by the ice holder. Inside it large, gold,

italic printing scrawled, 'Welcome', across the right-hand page. On the left there was a hand-written note in aqua-blue ink, handwriting he recognized.

*Scott, Sleep quickly. Tomorrow you must win the Virtual Death.
And, by the way, wear a suit. You'll find them in the master closet.
Personally, I prefer the deep blue. -Rogers*

Finally he made it to the soft, cloud-like expanse of couch. He dropped the card on the glass top and collapsed into the embrace of smooth, white pillows. From the corner of the one eye not buried in softness, he could make out the interior of the card as it lay open on the crystal table. The hand-written note had vanished. 'Welcome', now stood alone. Too tired to be impressed, he slipped quickly into a merciful sleep.

Morning was marked by the same impersonal chime that had brought the wasted champagne the night before. Complimentary breakfast for one. Small portions of everything possible. Markman showered and begrudgingly put on the blue suit, finding it somewhat unnerving that it fit so well. There was no place for a belt on the trousers; no hanger for the Glock's belt holster. But, the small two-shot fit deeply into the right hand pocket. Several ties hung on a rack in the walk-in closet; and there they remained.

The taxi ride to the convention center revealed a city very different from that of the previous evening. Throngs of people moved hurriedly along in every direction, crossing where they should not, reading papers as they did so. Protected species, thought Markman. Packed traffic moved with excruciating tedium, like a daily evacuation from a business district disaster, one that never ended. Fortunately, the gruff-looking driver knew all the tricks, sections of sidewalk actually intended for cars, parking garages that allowed him to skip payment because he was only planning to exit at the other end, and narrow alleyways where the importance of the garbage pickup schedule was finely understood. With mastered artistry, the driver carved his way through the persistent flow of neurotic civilization.

At the convention center there was no wait. A simple display of fake driver's license compared against a long list of alphabetically arranged computer printouts confirmed the reservation for Mr. David Julian. Markman pushed open one of the large, swinging doors at the entrance and was enveloped by voluminous crowd noise in a place that dazzled him.

The hall was immense, and crowded with people and displays. It was at least as big as a football field, and the high ceiling was covered with advertising banners. Through the crowd to the far right, several

people were fencing competitively. This was not a firearms convention as he had first thought, but rather a weapons consortium of major proportions. Every possible tool created by man either to offend or defend was represented with great diversity, blades; knives; short swords; long swords; samurai, Excalibur-replicas, razor edged, polished steel that had been folded and heated hundreds of times to produce a tone, hardness and strength that was supernatural. There were grips of every imaginable style: steel-wound, pearl, precious stone, shielded, cuffed, all produced in polished beauty by artists of deliberate eccentricity.

Somewhere beyond the room's center, over the heads of the crowd, Markman could just make out a portion of a twirling staff. It whirred like an airplane blade, moving and banking at the hands of some unseen martial artist. For Markman this was like the best amusement park imaginable, for he had been raised as a weapons master in a land where such things were considered a necessity to life, and an art form of the heart.

There was something else, a tension in the air. There were other true masters here. Like an animal's instinct to danger, he could sense them. They were individuals to be encountered carefully. They would control the area around themselves, and two together could conflict, unless there was mutual respect, or unless they were of the Tao. Then harmony only.

Markman moved among the exhibits, absorbing the different weapon styles and the way they reflected the personality of their makers. At occasional exhibits, a wrinkled old craftsman standing behind his creations would stare at him with surprise, having recognized the knowledge behind the young, deep eyes. The Zen-men, Markman's youthful nickname for the wiser elders. There were two kinds of masters after all: the ones who had mastered their weapon or skill, and those who had mastered themselves.

Markman worked his way through the crowd toward the center of the hall where a long line had formed. There the target objective stood waiting to be beaten. It was an odd-looking amusement; a circular section of slightly raised floor six feet in diameter with a blue and green plastic fence-like structure around it that seemed to include an antenna array. Large advertising letters were embedded into it. They read, "VIRTUAL DEATH 3D". A pretty, middle-aged, blond lady wearing a short-skirted suit that made her look like a flight attendant was opening a small gate to allow one person at a time inside to play. A blue and black contoured helmet was carefully fitted over the participant's head. Video displays were mounted within obtuse protrusions at the face.

The right hand of the current player was guided to an odd-looking gun. The device was small, dull-green, and shaped like a mini-machine gun. A large overhead video screen located just outside the combat area was pointed down at the waiting spectators so that they could see what the player saw, though in a less exotic two-dimensional display. The entire line of waiting hopefuls stood gawking upward as the next game commenced.

Oddly, there were as many adults in line as there were younger people, and as Markman maneuvered his way through the human traffic, the reason became apparent. A large sign mounted to the right of the game area offered a substantial reward to the player eighteen years or older who, at the end of the day, had survived the longest in the land of the virtual. For those of younger age, the top twenty would receive expensive leather jackets embellished in such a way as to brag for the wearer and advertise for the company.

The overhead monitor screen flashed to life. The large, elegantly-printed word, "VIRTUAL", glimmered then slowly faded. The computer image of a large, circular, tan-colored room panned into view. Blue, waist-high blocks were scattered around it, amid dark columns that reached upward to the artificial ceiling. The player's computer hand, arm and weapon were visible in the foreground. The game began

Within the electronic fence the inept teenage boy began to shift left and right, bracing for attack. It came quickly. To his left, a alien, brown computer figure emerged from behind a column and fired its weapon. A narrow beam of blue light drew a hot line across the imaginary room, barely missing the poorly-prepared player. He jerked around awkwardly and returned fire, missing his assailant badly. The aggressor's second shot caught him in the right shoulder, causing a burst of brilliant light to blind the display and a warning message to appear in the bottom right-hand corner. As the picture returned, a third shot was already incoming. The player jumped vainly on the platform and was struck in the chest. The vision of the virtual room disappeared into a flash of light, and this time did not return. Instead, a consolatory message scrolled down the display, suggesting the player try again later.

Markman got in line.

The scoring of the players varied as widely as their ages. Some very young children were uninhibitedly fast, while many adults were eliminated in under ten seconds. The record stood firm at three minutes, twenty seconds--set earlier by an athletic type named Richard Baker, a man in his early twenties. Few people were able to approach anywhere near that time. After each game, the names of the ten best players scrolled down the screen as the next victim was

helmeted for battle. Baker's name appeared no less than three times on the list. Markman looked around the area, guessing that Mr. Baker was somewhere nearby, carefully watching over his one-thousand-dollar score.

It was a forty-five minute wait. Finally the demure attendant gave Markman her practiced smile and opened the electronic gate for him. He stepped up onto the thinly carpeted platform and thought himself into relaxation as the helmet was fitted over his head and the real world went dark. A soft hissing sound came from speakers within, and gentle jets of cool air circulated from behind his head. The plastic weapon was placed in his right hand. It felt slightly awkward, but balanced well enough.

A split second later the world became unreal. The computer-generated room that had become so familiar during the long wait was now quite different. It had exotic depth, feel, and color. There was an undeniable feeling of being a real part of it. The three-dimensional effect was too good not to believe. It was a reality in itself, artificial or not. Stereo room noise now came over the speakers. A message illuminated the bottom right-hand corner of his field of vision--words that seemed to hang in the air. They read, "COUNTDOWN, 3...2...1..."

The virtual scene came sharply to life. A faint click echoed from the right hand side of the cartoon-like room. Markman, poised and ready, spun in that direction but held his fire. One of the alien forms stepped into the open to attack. Markman squeezed off his first shot, and the figure fell backwards. More unidentified sounds came from the left, but there was nothing. Abruptly two more shooters jumped up on the right. Markman's rapid fire beam hit both at chest height. Not waiting for them to fall, he spun back to the left, expecting a crossfire, but the next attack was frontal. He jerked the unfamiliar weapon around firing as he did so. The first shot struck a computer player in the left shoulder, the second and third in the empty face.

The game was in full swing. There was no time to think. It was react or die the virtual death. It was the way Markman worked best. An unusual two or three seconds passed without assault, a pause intended to leave the player off-balance. Then the next wave began, more fiercely than the last. Several targets burst into view. Markman had to fire continuously. The attack pattern was broken, the first figures to appear were not necessarily the first to fire. Markman was hit in the shoulder, but blindly eliminated the attacking computer player before the impact flash had subsided. The exchange of electronic gunfire became a barrage, a continuous action of movement and penalty. Markman was hit twice more before finally being beaten by a three-way crossfire in which he eliminated only two of the aggressors.

Messages of colorful congratulations appeared in 3D on the helmet's display. The effort had earned a place among the top ten, fourth highest. A moment later, hands were unlatching the lightweight helmet, and the attendant's surprised expression came into view, as it was lifted off.

"Fabulous sir, just fabulous," she exclaimed. She placed the equipment on its holder by the electronic fence and picked up a small device that looked like a hand-held calculator.

"Could I have your name please, sir, for entry into the system."

"Julian, David Julian."

"Congratulations, Mr. Julian. Could we have your address and occupation? We'd like to mail you updates on our products, if you don't mind."

"Not at all," said Markman, and with the help of his false billfold he provided everything she asked for. As he stepped down from the platform, a nine-year-old near the front of the line patted his arm and said, "Great score, mister. Really great."

All along the line the young ones peered at him with exalted admiration, while most of the adults furrowed their brows in disdain.

Markman, got back in line.

Three hours and twenty minutes later, Markman hit the virtual stratosphere. He had adapted to the new environment and its peculiar ways. When the time score was displayed on the monitor screens it showed a duration of four minutes, thirty-seven seconds. David Julian now held the number one spot.

As the helmet was removed, a loud chorus of applause and whistling broke out within the convention hall. A substantial crowd had formed around the game area as word of a new record being set had quickly spread. Markman flushed with embarrassment at the unexpected notoriety. The astounded lady attendant now required the address at which he was currently staying. "In case your record holds, and I'm sure it will," was her pedantic reasoning. He stepped down from the platform and abruptly ran into the only unpleasant face in the crowd, Mr. Richard Baker. The former record holder put his hands on his hips and shook his head in disbelief.

"I don't believe it," was all he said, and he turned and headed for the end of the line.

Markman stayed until closing time, as did his record. Try as he may, the unseated Mr. Baker was not able to repeat his own best time, much less beat Markman's. The satiated crowd in the convention center emptied into the New York night, dispersing into the city that never slept; finding their way to the places they kept and were kept in, their lairs within the concrete jungle.

Chapter 11

In the morning, Markman awoke to the waiting game. He stared out the suite windows and wondered what to expect next. There had been no further communications from Rogers, though the Virtual Death 3D contest had been won. Subtle things had already begun to happen. He had been followed on his way home from the convention center, and there was now the uneasy feeling of being watched.

Breakfast was served in the suite by a short, nervous man in a glaring-white, high-collared suit. He wore a hair net, and glasses with thick lenses, and he fidgeted around his server cart as though it were the most important event of the day. And despite his own dissatisfaction with the tray arrangement, did not forget to pause for a tip before leaving.

As Markman sipped coffee, a call came through the hotel switchboard, someone representing Salantist Industries. Mister Otto J. Fishkin, politely explained he was responsible for dispensing Virtual Corporation awards. Could Mr. Julian attend a late afternoon dinner in the hotel's dining room, provided as part of the Virtual Death prize? Markman pacing restlessly around the his suite waiting for the appointment. He searched through the picture windows in an attempt to spot his spotters, the allies and the enemies. He did not find any.

At three o'clock the plush, high-speed elevator dropped him to the first floor dining room, an immaculate place with chandeliers and busy kitchen workers still cleaning up from the late lunch crowd. In a far corner, at a table away from the windows, an odd-looking man with a receding hairline and thinning dark blond hair waved aggressively. His face was almond-shaped and pale. It seemed to be unevenly covered with make-up.

Otto J. Fishkin rose but did not offer his hand as Markman approached. He bowed several times in a way that appeared almost comical. His dark gray suit was fashionable, but wrinkled and worn, and his striped tie was poorly knotted. The white dress shirt underneath appeared to be dirty and inside out. He looked as though he had shaved with an electric razor and missed spots. From a distance he could have been a typical sleepless, overworked executive, but closer examination suggested something was amiss.

"Mr. Julian, a pleasure to meet you. Please, rest."

Markman pulled out a chair and sat across from him. There was a twisted smile.

"You'll be glad to hear I've already ordered for us both. Sustenance is on the way, Mr. Julian."

"Thank-you, I'm sure it will be fine, whatever it is."

"Quite a score you turned in yesterday. The highest we've had, quite remarkable!"

"Some luck there, of course, Mr. Fishkin, is it?"

"Yes, that's correct. I was a player myself some time back. Don't get the chance now, just too much to do, too much to do. Ah...here's the first food."

A young, neatly-dressed waiter appeared, balancing a large tray above his head. To Markman's dismay a plate amply loaded with escargot was placed in front of him. Without further small talk, Fishkin dove into his own plate, chopping and devouring the delicacy as though he were the only person in the room. Markman stabbed at his dead snails with a fork and tried to appear content. When his host had completely devoured the food, and Markman had minced his, the conversation resumed.

"So, you deal in firearms, Mr. Julian?"

"Yes, how did you know?"

"A guess, call it innovation."

"You mean intuition?"

"And do you work with the local police in your line of trade, Mr. Julian?"

"Only to the extent that it's necessary. It keeps the surprise audits to a minimum, if you know what I mean. Otherwise I'd have nothing to do with the bastards."

"Ah, some distention there. We share a common disrespect I see. I expect you've had trouble with the law."

"I think you mean dissension, Mr. Fishkin, and yes, I have. Nothing I'd really care to discuss. But what does all this have to do with my prize money, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Oh yes, that. I have it here. Why don't I give it to you."

Fishkin leaned over in his chair and pulled a plain black briefcase onto his lap. He snapped it open and drew out a clip of bills, ten one-hundreds. With a jabbing motion, he stuck them out for Markman to take.

"One thousand dollars, Mr. Julian. You are a most talented competitor. A fine athlete. Ah, the main food."

The waiter approached the table with a server's cart. Markman tucked the money inside his gray suit jacket, wondering why the award had not come in the form of a cashier's check, and why no signed receipt had been asked for. He happily waved off the plate of uneaten snails. It was quickly replaced by a covered dish. Fishkin

smiled a flat smile and quickly discarded his own silver plate cover. Again he attacked the food underneath with ferocity.

Markman would not have chosen the raw fish. He poked at it with the same fork that had been used to simulate eating the snails and waited for the queer man from Salantist Industries to finish.

"So, Mr. Julian," said Fishkin, when his plate contained only clutter, and he had generously massaged his mouth with a big red cloth napkin. "Are you familiar with the sport of paint ball?"

Markman attempted a look of pleasant surprise. "As a matter of fact, I specialize in it. It is a private passion, Mr. Fishkin."

"Wonderful, wonderful! I should have guessed that also. You certainly are well-clothed for it."

"Do you mean-well suited, Mr. Fishkin?"

Ignoring the correction, Fishkin dug deeply into several of his pockets, neurotically searching for something. As he did so, he dumped their contents onto the dining table. Markman stared in amazement at the nonsensical collection, a matchbook cover with a beautiful, naked young woman sitting on an anchor holding an arched sign that read, "Kennedy Point Restaurant and Lounge"; several dozen sunflower seeds; unused packets of restaurant honey; several small green leaves of an unidentifiable species. But most peculiar of all, within the mess on the table lay what appeared to be a frosty colored, walnut-sized, raw diamond. Markman stared at it in disbelief and assumed he was mistaken. Finally the frustrated man pulled a new pack of cigarettes from the inside breast pocket of his suit jacket. He fumbled with the pack, a new one. The cigarettes were so tightly bound that the tired-looking man had to tap them against the ridge of his hand to get a handle on one of the filters. He held a cigarette in his mouth and picked up the stray matches and other items on the table and replaced them in his pocket. He tapped the cigarette on the table and spoke nonchalantly.

"There is a private sportsman's club we have. It meets on my estate. A perfect place for war games. Would you like to join us?"

Before Markman could answer, Fishkin rolled the cigarette under his nose, then popped the entire length of it into his mouth and began to chew. He stared across the table as though it were a completely ordinary thing to do.

"You eat cigarettes?"

"Yes, yes, I know. It's a bad habit. I'm trying to quit. I'm using filters, however. We meet on Sundays, Mr. Julian, that's tomorrow. Are you interested?"

"Yes, very."

"I must warn you, there is a small initiation. We will provide you with an appropriate paint ball weapon, or you may bring your own. Is that acceptable?"

"What is the initiation, exactly?"

"Oh, nothing elaborate. You must make it from point A to point B without getting mortally splattered, that's all."

"Name the time and place. I'm looking forward to it."

"Sunrise, Mr. Julian. I have a map to give you."

Fishkin rose and patted himself down, finally finding a folded piece of paper in the hip pocket of his suit jacket. He set it on the table, bowed awkwardly several times, and abruptly walked away without speaking. His cadence out of the dining room was jerky and disjointed, and he disappeared through the open doors of the dining room without looking back.

Markman felt more than uneasy. He exhaled in relief and sat back to consider the incoherent pattern that was forming in the strange case he had inherited. There was the pretty lady at the bottom of the lake who had been deposited there by people paid to be heartless; next the federal agent in the empty room wearing the funny spacesuit, fighting imaginary adversaries but dying in a very harsh and real way; then the Virtual Death game at the weapons show and its obvious, though limited similarities; and now a paint ball combat contest arranged by a man who was trying to quit eating filtered cigarettes. It was an absurd set of circumstances that made no sense. More answers were needed, quickly.

In a phone book in the hotel lobby Markman found a nearby sporting goods store that carried paintball supplies. Goggles and a few other items would be necessary. The sting of a paint ball against bare flesh was substantial enough. A hit to the eye could cause irreparable damage. The store was close enough to walk to.

The early evening atmosphere of the city was pleasant, shadowy alleys and basement stairways withdrew into darkness. The impetuous pace of people and traffic had slowed noticeably. Lights were just coming on in the high rises and decorated shop picture windows.

With the help of an babbling sporting goods salesman whose New York accent was so strong it was almost like a strange sort of chant, he found the things needed and returned by the street lights to his hotel. He paused in front of the entrance, and tossed a prewritten note into a wire cage wastebasket by the curb, then lit a cigarette and pretended to smoke half of it before gladly stepping it out.

Rogers,

Going well so far? Something is wrong with Fishkin. Maybe cancer, or mental illness, or something. I visit his place tomorrow. Will try for an unscheduled tour. What is Salantist Industries? --Markman

Back in the suite the uneasy feeling returned. He gathered pillows and tucked them into the shape of a man on the enormous bed in the master bedroom. He threw the heavy white bedspread on the floor and covered his fabric sculpture with an amber silk sheet. With an armload of blankets he made himself a place to sleep in one of the walk-in closets. Through the slats in the sliding door, he watched over the true form of Mr. David Julian, a make believe man who was adequate enough in design to accept real-life bullets.

But the night remained uneventful, undisturbed by muffled popping sounds, and silk with powder burn and holes. No one had reason, it seemed, to visit Mr. Julian under the cover of darkness.

Yet.

Chapter 12

Markman took a cab to Fishkin's designated meeting place on the outskirts of Manhattan. A high, gray-toned decorative wall separated his estate from a small park between the Hudson Parkway and the Deegan Expressway. There a group of men in black suits with headphone communicators waited by their parked cars. They eyed Markman suspiciously as he pulled his gear from the taxi and paid the driver, who without speaking urged his yellow, checker-trimmed steed back into the wars of the city traffic.

Markman tucked his wallet back in his jeans. He adjusted the collar of his black, turtleneck T-shirt and pulled the strap of his pack over his shoulder. One of the earphone-clad men greeted him as he approached. The man seemed almost too young for the expensive suit he wore, but there was a deep scar on the left side of his face that suggested some very accelerated maturing.

"Mr. Julian?"

"Armed and ready."

"We would have provided you with a weapon, sir. Did you know that?"

"I'd prefer my own stuff, thanks. I have camouflage. Should I wear it?"

"Sir, I'm only allowed to tell you that you become an eligible target the instant you go over that wall. Your objective is to find and reach the main residence. If you travel too far to either side of the designated perimeter, you will see red flags. Do not go beyond them or you will be in someone else's fight. Head shots are permitted. Did you bring eye protection?"

"Yes."

"Head shots or hits to the main torso are considered mortal wounds. More than one hit to the arms or legs is considered debilitating. Either condition disqualifies you. That rope over there is your starting point. Any time you're ready, good luck."

With that, the man took two steps back in a gesture that implied no further information would be forth-coming. Markman headed between the parked cars and passed the group waiting nearby. They watched him with disconcerting interest. He hoped this was not a set up, that no real bullets would be encountered on the other side of the wall. In his right-hand pant's pocket, Dan Parrish's derringer nudged reassuringly.

At the wall's base the fat brown rope came down barely to face level. The climb did not appear difficult. Markman pulled his goggles

down over his forehead. The small, rolled up pack of camouflage clothing was easily attached to the front of his belt, with a small satchel of paint ball ammunition tied next to it. He tested the rope with a few short tugs and made a quick note of the early morning sun's position relative to the wall and the shadows cast by it. With his rifle strapped in front, he gripped the line with both hands. One of the radio-equipped men behind him mumbled something into his mouthpiece as Markman jumped into the climb and started up, hand over hand.

At the top of the abrasive wall, he paused below the edge. He braced himself with one hand and glanced down at Fishkin's men. Their attention had peaked. It probably meant there was a sniper waiting on the other side. With his free hand, Markman gathered up the slack rope below him and tossed it over the wall. It would provide braking for a quick descent on the other side.

Gripping the rope with one hand, he pulled his goggles down over his face and hooked a leg over the top. With calculated indiscretion he yanked himself over and dropped down the other side, dragging his hands along the coarse line as he fell. Immediately, a rapid-fire popping sound came from somewhere in the distance, and red paintball bullets began to splatter against the wall in a trail that followed him down. Waist-high stalks of dead reed grass covered the landing area. At the last possible moment, He clenched the rope, slowing his crash, taking the brunt of it on his right side and back. He lay still on the cool ground and listened. Nothing. The aggressor had apparently decided against an over-run of the landing spot. A low, spontaneous laugh erupted from deep within Markman, as he noticed the laggard line of paintball marks leading down the gray wall. They had missed by no more than inches. Someone had intended to end the contest before it had started, but had been caught off guard by his death defying-dive.

The cool morning air remained silent except for the muffled sounds of distant city traffic. There was nothing to see but the fortress of tall grass and the hazy white-blue New York sky. Markman remained on his back, gathered his weapon and checked it over. No problems. He loosened the camouflage pack and listened. Keeping his hands low and his movements minimal he wrestled into the pullover pants and green-brown shirt.

The paint marks on the wall had all splattered to the left and downward. He was parallel to the wall, his head pointing south. That put the first aggressor somewhere high and to the west-southwest. Two choices--crawl away from him or toward him. Do not head due west, the probable direction of the game's objective. In the game of

chess, never do what the opponent wants until there is a large hole in the proper place for him to step into.

Markman rolled carefully onto his stomach and began a slow crawl to the south along the line of the estate wall, his weapon leading. He carefully parted the grass rather than trample it--less trail to follow, less movement to detect. By following the wall there was assurance that attack could come only from a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree field-of-fire to his right.

The tall grass finally gave way to a mound of rock and dirt. It was chest-high. He edged up and dared a look at the surrounding terrain. This part of the estate was forest-like, except that it was well-manicured, like a public park. The clearing of tall grass that bordered the wall was thirty yards deep and ended where the dense woodland began. Hardwood trees and large cultivated plants blocked any view of what lay beyond. It was heavy enough cover to make spotting difficult. The natural beauty of it contrasted sharply with the busy city that existed just outside the barriers of the estate wall.

The splash of red paint at the drop site had a downward trend. The sniper had likely used one of the trees that bordered the open area. Maybe he was still there.

Markman relaxed and began a slow methodical scan of the tree line. A few, small sparrows, delinquent in heading south for the winter darted in and around the carefully-arranged foliage, but there was no sign of a human presence. It was possible the aggressor had withdrawn to a secondary position.

Suddenly from the corner of his eye, Markman detected a slight movement high and to his left. He froze. Not more than thirty feet away, a man was perched midway up a fat, densely branched oak tree, restlessly scanning the distant portions of the high grass. He had neglected to study the more immediate terrain, thinking his prey would elect to retreat. The man wore a black jumpsuit and beret. He stood leaning back against a heavy limb, his gun resting in a V formation in the main trunk.

It was a fairly easy shot. Markman relaxed from his surprise. Had he moved any farther to the south, he would surely have been spotted. He rested his paint ball rifle in a comfortable place on the rocks and took careful aim. A single, well-placed shot would attract much less attention than an unnecessary exchange of gunfire, if he was lucky enough to make it. With a steady aim, he gently squeezed the trigger. The barrel of the gun kicked sharply as it discharged with a loud pop, and instantly a blotch of red paint exploded on the right side of the unsuspecting sniper. The man yelped and grimaced at the artificial wound. He looked up and found Markman. He put his hand over his face and slowly shook his head. Without waiting, Markman

moved out across the short distance of grassy clearing, and entered the forest.

It was unlikely any two predators had chosen the same area to wait, but to be safe the advance needed to be methodical and sporadic, stay low, gain ground by moving short distances from cover to cover, long looks at each stop. Markman continued south, paralleling the wall, limiting the conflict area to his right, until he could find the red flags that marked the southern limits of his game perimeter. Then, by advancing along one border, he would be assured that some of his attackers would be uselessly covering the opposite end, at least for a time.

He stealthed across the grassy, leaf-covered ground, traveling at varied intervals from vegetation to vegetation. He crouched within a culvert of tall ferns where the air smelled like rotten wood, and scanned the surrounding area. The red flag line was easy to spot. The flags were crudely-cut pieces of plastic mounted on short lengths of wire pushed into the earth in places that allowed the greatest amount of visibility. Beyond the perimeter line, in the other field of play, another sniper in black sat halfway up a tree, his back to Markman. Per the basic ground rules of this contest, the man was no threat. It was time to begin moving westward in search of the Fishkin mansion.

The way appeared to be clear. A short, open area had to be crossed to reach a cluster of several oak trees with multiple trunks. But the stillness in the air seemed deceptively inviting. As Markman stepped into the open, the vague outline of a stalking man came into view out of the corner of his eye on the left. He swiveled to bring his weapon to bear and found himself face to face with the player from the adjoining contest. The man stood just beyond the boundary flags, equally off guard. To his surprise, the athletic-looking face was familiar. Richard Baker, the virtual death player who had lost to Markman, slowly lowered his weapon and waved a finger scoldingly. He was dressed in a beat-up-looking green sweater and dungarees that had holes in them. Without speaking, Markman pointed behind him to the sniper waiting unaware in the nearby tree. Baker smiled, saluted with two fingers, and quickly disappeared back into the foliage.

Markman reached the cluster of oaks just as a barrage of popping sounds rang out in the air. The noise ceased as suddenly as it had started. It was likely Mr. Baker now had one less adversary to deal with.

The forest area along the flag line became dense and impassable. It was heavily-lined with trees and sculpted floral. Markman found his way laterally, keeping low between rows of carefully trimmed hedges. He came to a small glade where a weathered, wooden picnic table had been placed below the shade of a

large, old oak. There was a glimpse of something moving just behind it. Markman crouched and waited.

Moments later an unsuspecting aggressor appeared, wearing the trademark black jumpsuit. He crossed by the wooden table and moved quickly over to the opposite end of the hedge line that was concealing Markman. It was a poor choice of blind. He moved cautiously along the green row, staying low, passing right by Markman, completely unaware of his presence. As soon as he was clear, Markman stood up, leaned over the hedge top and shoved the gun into the man's back. The man jerked upright and froze.

"Am I allowed to take prisoners?" whispered Markman.

"How the hell did you do that?"

"Shut up. I can't be hanging around here, if you know what I mean. You didn't answer my question."

Markman pushed through the hedge and stood holding his gun on his prisoner. The man lowered his own weapon and turned to face him.

"Well I'm not quite..."

Almost too late Markman noticed the flicker in the man's eye, the telltale signature from within that betrays people who are not practiced at deception. Markman dropped roughly to the ground, twisting around as he fell. He blindly fired a close spread of paint ball bullets behind him as he dropped, and just as suddenly, shots rang out from the same general direction. Paint balls whizzed by, missing him by only inches, striking his prisoner in the stomach and chest.

Markman tilted his head up and looked. At the edge of the clearing, another man in a black suit had been hit twice, once in each shoulder.

"God darn it, Frank, you shot me, you idiot!" said the man nearest Markman.

"Do you have any idea what a poker face is, Pete? You might as well have told him I was coming!"

"Son of a bitch, we'll never live this down."

Markman climbed to his feet and brushed himself off, watching intently for other predators. Without speaking, he took off in a new direction. The three-way clash was certain to attract the attention of those wasting their time on the other areas of the perimeter. He dashed toward what he hoped would be a more central location within the forest. The remaining adversaries were likely converging on the area of the previous conflict. With luck there could be a proper greeting arranged.

He came to a dirt service road that ran through the heart of the woodland and stretched off in the general direction of the wall. Both sides of it were generously contoured with plants and trees. He chose

a large maple tree whose base was surrounded by neatly trimmed brush. He climbed quickly to a comfortable spot and reloaded. From his location he could drop directly to the ground and be within good cover. An exit could be made in any number of directions without difficulty, and he could clearly see in both directions along the grass-dirt road. He wormed himself into the most comfortable position possible, listened, and waited.

Chapter 13

They came a short time later, with less caution than would have been expected. They approached as though they thought the game was already over. The first man emerged onto the road to Markman's right with his goggles pulled up over his forehead and his weapon pointed casually at the ground. It would have been an easy shot except there were the faint rustling sounds from a second hunter somewhere to the left. Markman summoned patience.

The black-suited man on the road's edge squatted and began to look over his weapon. He seemed distracted from the search and was not paying attention. He ruffled one hand through his short brown hair and wiped it down his face in a manner that suggested he had not slept enough the night before.

Suddenly there was motion on the opposite end of the roadway, at Markman's ten o'clock. He tightened up as the second aggressor emerged into the rutted road. This one had ivory-blond hair tucked under a black, longshoreman's cap and wore his goggles in place. He looked carefully in all directions as he waved at his startled partner. Though both men were now in the clear, they were one hundred and eighty degrees apart. The chances of taking them both out in one clean sweep were fifty-fifty at best. The man on the right was closer, and clearly the lesser threat. No more than one shot could be allowed for him if there was any chance of getting them both. The man on the opposite side was too far away for a single shot. To try for him would be to risk losing both. But, there was no time to wait for more opportunity than this.

Markman drew a careful bead on the crouching figure of the nearer aggressor. The man's goggles were still pushed back over his head. The shot had to be placed carefully to avoid hitting him in the face. The well-oiled trigger mechanism squeezed back smoothly. Markman braced. The gun popped. Red paint splattered in the man's lap. It covered his stomach, hand, and gun. He pushed back in vain and cursed out loud. In one smooth motion, Markman swung around and tried to draw a bead on the second target. Looking west down the forest-lined service road, there was nothing to see; no movement in the roadside vegetation; no sound of retreat in the woods. The better of the two had gotten away.

With reckless speed, Markman dropped from his position in the tree and knelt within the brush cover at its base. He scanned as much area as possible, paying close attention to the greenery along the

roadsides. The aggressor that had been eliminated remained in the same spot, wiping red paint from his gun and hands, mumbling something understandable only from its caustic tone.

With weapon poised, Markman lurched across the narrow trail and dove into the forest on the other side. The element of surprise had been lost. The game was even. There had been no way to tell if the enemy had gone to the north or south side of the road. It was unlikely he had retreated from his prey, but there was still a way to make the contest less even, and at the same time put the pursuer on the defensive. It was the oldest and best of tricks for the hunted. Move quickly on ahead, find a good place with the right cover, wait there and strike, then move out and do it all over again. Such a strategy would allow an advance toward the target destination while making it difficult for the pursuer to make progress.

It was a safe bet that the service road would lead to the main house. Following along in the wooded cover beside it would provide a visual break to the left. Markman weaved quickly through the thickest of the plants and trees, taking less time to clear his bursts of forward movement than before. He could account for five aggressors now; four had been defeated, one was stalking, probably somewhere behind.

Through breaks in the trees, the irregular outline of the main mansion became visible at times, though it was far enough away that success was anything but assured. Markman paused briefly in a cluster of young oak trees to scan a leaf-covered stretch of clearing, twenty feet of vulnerability. It felt safe. He broke out into the open and made for the other side, but on the fifth step his right foot sunk and twisted into soft earth. With a distressing lack of grace, he fell face first to the ground.

Fortunately the impact was cushioned. He hurriedly pushed himself up on hands and knees, looked worriedly around, and discovered he had fallen in a small, dry stream bed that had become so filled with dry leaves that it was imperceptible--except by those running ignorantly across it.

He scrambled to his feet and turned with knees bent to look for his pursuer. He thought to lunge for cover but stopped. The trench was an opportunity. It was large enough to conceal a man lying on his back. The only question was, would there be time to do it? He decided to gamble. He dropped to his knees and furiously scooped leaves from the hole until he had formed a coffin-like niche. He lowered himself carefully into a sitting position, facing in the direction of the mansion. The hunter would probably approach from behind. Hastily, he covered his legs and lay back with the paint ball gun resting on his chest, scooping in leaves until all was covered except his left arm and face. With a final adjustment to his goggles, he finished the job and wormed

his left hand down into the bed of leaves and became a hidden part of the forest. The uncomfortable wait began.

The timing had been very close. No more than two minutes passed before the sound of crackling leaves betrayed the pursuer. Something had begun crawling on Markman's face when the crunching noise from the carefully placed footsteps came alongside and to the left of his face. The crackling moved past his position and stopped for a few seconds, then continued on. The hunter, afraid of what might lie beyond the clearing, was picking his way warily.

Whatever was inching, prickling across Markman's face was doing so at an excruciatingly slow crawl. It tickled his nose and sat on his upper lip as though confused by the warmth of the human terrain it had found. The footsteps continued to move lightly away from Markman's buried form. He struggled to concentrate on the separation between himself and the target, three feet; then five; then ten.

As the sounds began to grow faint, he erupted upward from his shallow grave like a dead man coming back to life. He jerked the gun outward, firing repeatedly as his squinted stare came into focus on the aggressor's back. Paint balls splattered on the shoulders and spine as the startled black form jerked away from the onslaught too late. Wavy blond hair that hung to the shoulders escaped from beneath the longshoreman's cap as the hunter turned to face the striking prey. It was an attractive young woman, and with her paint ball gun hanging from her left hand, she put her wrists on her hips and made an exaggerated frown. She gave Markman the middle finger sign and laughed. "First time that ever happened!"

Markman climbed to his feet and bent over to wipe the large red insect from his face. He began brushing dirt and leaves from his clothes and continued to look around. "Couldn't take any chances with you, you're a bit too fast."

"Then I demand a rematch, whatever your name is."

"Maybe some other time. Right now you'll excuse me if I don't hang around to discuss it."

"Five down, one to go...," she called out as he ducked into cover and left her. He doubted her scoring. There was no sense in taking the chance of giving her the last laugh by having her partners, if there were more, drop him this close to the finish.

The mansion was not far. A few steps later he found himself at the inner edge of the Fishkin forest. A thirty-foot stretch of freshly cut, chemically green lawn was all that separated him from the finish line. The building was the textbook definition of extravagance. It was a polished-looking cream-colored castle with a multitude of different roof levels that ended in towers with narrow, high windows. Balconies were placed at different points around the upper floors, some pronounced,

others abbreviated. The highest elevation looked to be three stories, though the towers rose a floor above that. Directly in front of Markman, across the cultivated expanse of green grass, a wide portion of outdoor patio was partly hidden behind a section of ash-colored rock wall. Numerous, pristine-white aluminum umbrellas rose above the wall, suggesting shaded tables were the preferred medium of comfort for those who relaxed in the hospitality of Mr. Fishkin. Beyond the scattered umbrellas, the tops of a dozen sliding glass doors provided access to the mansion. The patio wall was low enough that a diving leap would clear it easily. The fifty foot stretch of lawn could be covered in less than four or five seconds.

But something held Markman back. A nagging little feeling told him the open section of ground was being watched. One way or another that would have to be proven.

He braced himself and charged into the open. He allowed himself only half a dozen steps, then spun around and cut back toward the man-made forest. A storm of paint balls began to fly, but the shootist had expected him to continue for home base and had led the target appropriately. The barrage fell well wide, but the failed shots had been nicely placed. There was no question that they had been delivered by an expert marksman with a powerful gun.

It was time to pull one more trick out of the bag. Markman stood up from his place in the brush and returned several shots in the general direction of the sniper, hoping to make his own hiding place more obvious and with luck draw the hunter in.

The sniper had taken a position on the forest edge with hopes of getting a clean shot just before the finish line. It was doubtful he would approach from that direction, too obvious. He would likely move in a lateral line and attack from the inside with a chance of possibly pinning his victim against the open stretch of grass.

Markman wrenched off his camouflage pullover shirt, keeping a close eye on the surrounding terrain. He strapped his weapon over his shoulder, dropped onto one knee within the brush cover and began stuffing dry, brown leaves into the shirt. When he had finished, the pullover clothing looked like a stiff, headless, overweight torso. Within the green foliage, he quickly found a spot where the brush almost parted, and where it was just thin enough to partially see through. He fastened his makeshift decoy there, in a hunched-over position with its back facing in the direction the predator was most likely to approach. A thin branch from the same bush would provide limited movement for the rogue figure. Holding it, he crawled as far away from his decoy as possible. He pulled his rifle into place and positioned himself on his stomach at the base of the blind, then gathered leaves for added cover and arranged them in such a way as to allow himself a clear shot

across a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree field of fire. He hoped his own black turtleneck would blend in.

This aggressor was more cautious than the others. Ten minutes passed before there was any sign of movement among the trees, and even then it was so slight it remained questionable. Five more minutes passed and there was still nothing obvious. The air grew very still. An ominous presence was somewhere near. Markman could feel it.

Without warning two shots rang out. Red paint splattered on the stuffed camouflaged shirt and brush around it. Markman jerked slightly on the branch he had been holding and animated his poorly constructed decoy. He stifled a laugh and yelled, "Oh no!"

The black jumpsuit of the shooter became visible in the trees. It was a young man with sandy brown hair and deep-muscled features in his face. He stepped forward and cautiously fired again, striking the helpless shirt with a great deal of accuracy. He laughed out loud and lowered his rifle. "What a dummy. You made it all this way!"

Markman squeezed off two quick shots, striking him with two deep thuds in the center of his chest. The man jumped, touched the red paint on his suit and stared at his hand in disbelief. Markman rose up from his hiding place, smiled and shrugged. "Wrong dummy, dummy!"

The man shook his head and moaned, "Damn!"

Markman waved and returned to the edge of the forest. The wall that marked the finish line seemed to dare him to cross. It was now or never. He shouldered his weapon, took a deep breath and broke into the clearing. He raced in zigzag across the open stretch of green carpet and made the wall. No shots were fired. He dove over and rolled on his back on tiled floor to a standing position.

The game was won.

Chapter 14

A colorful assortment of people stared silently from white tables beneath umbrellas that had been visible above the patio wall. A stiff-necked servant in a black tuxedo and bow tie was moving among them with a tray, delivering drinks and removing empty glasses. A large, sparkling blue pool divided their gathering. They watched Markman quietly with smiles and nods of approval as an all-too-familiar monotone voice took command.

"Excellent, Mr. Julian, excellent. My congratulations to you."

Markman tried to brush himself off as he walked past the pool to Fishkin, dressed in the same crumpled suit he had had on the day before. The offbeat host seemed to twitch with excitement, and as Markman approached, held out his hand in a stopping motion. "Mr. Julian, I must warn you, the battle is never really ended, is it?"

Fishkin motioned toward his other guests. Markman turned to face them and found they were holding paint guns of their own, all quite deliberately pointed his way.

There was a brief, pregnant pause before fire-cracker-like popping sounds broke out around the pool. A deluge of red paint splattered Markman from shoulders to waist. The tenacious silence abruptly returned. Then, just as suddenly, joyous laughter and hand-clapping took over. Markman stood staring down at himself, covered in red paint. He looked to Fishkin for an explanation.

"Welcome to the club, Mr. Julian. It's part of the initiation. No one has ever escaped. It's a tradition of sorts." Several guests left their seats to congratulate their newest member. Fishkin spoke as the procession moved past. "There are a few business matters which require my immediate attention, Mr. Julian. My servant will show you to a place where you can clean up. He'll provide you with a fresh shirt and will take yours for cleaning if you wish. Go with him, and I'll join you in a few minutes here on the deck."

Fishkin turned and hurried inside. He disappeared up a wide, winding marble staircase. A very somber, uniformed servant appeared and made an abbreviated bow. He carried Markman's utility bag, a white towel, and a clean, gray sweat-shirt and abruptly motioned him to follow. At the end of a long, elegant hallway they stopped in front of a narrow door that opened to a small bath. It seemed more suited for the household staff than guests. A small open closet on the left, bordered a standard-sized, rectangular tub. On the right, stood a plain white sink, and next to that, a white-paneled booth for the toilet. At the opposite end of the white-tiled room, Markman saw what he had

been hoping for; a small, smoked-glass window, located above a wooden chair.

The servant handed over the bag, towel and shirt, and bowed mechanically. Markman took the items and closed the mirrored door. He quickly peeled off the paint-stained turtleneck, and wrestled out of the camouflage pants, then wrapped them carefully into a bundle, pulled on the replacement shirt and rinsed his face and hands.

The window looked just big enough to squeeze through. He set the timer function on his wrist watch. They would certainly allow him ten minutes before checking in. The narrow window pushed upward easily. It opened to an outside tract that was adjacent to the patio, but cornered enough to be out of sight of any of the guests. The same stretch of freshly cut grass led to trees and a garden area a short distance away. He twisted around to look upward. Overhead twin balconies, trimmed with black wrought iron guard rails jutted out from the second and third floor. Without hesitation, he stepped onto the rickety chair and worked his head and shoulders through the small opening, and adjusted himself into a sitting position on the sill, facing the house. Hurriedly, he worked up to a standing position on the window ledge. Hunched over, with one hand braced on the window top, he found he could almost reach the wide, cement base of the first balcony. With a calculated lunge, he let go and grabbed for the floor of the balcony, catching it cleanly and swinging free from the window.

The black iron guard rail proffered an easy climb. Stepping over it, he checked around and below to be sure he had not been seen. Beige, full-length curtains were drawn behind finely carved French doors. The doors were locked. A split where the curtains joined afforded a narrow look into a lavish, oversized bedroom. It seemed to be deserted.

The climb to the second balcony was easier. He studied the view below as he slid quietly over the rail. His progress had continued to go undetected. This time the delicate double doors were open. A tuft of pink curtain waved gently in the conditioned air escaping the well-lit room. A dull, recognizable voice droned from within. It was Fishkin. He was talking on the telephone.

"Yes, yes, I watched it from the ledge. ...What? Alright, the balcony. ...Yes, it was very impressive. ...Yes, all six. ...Yes, I agree. It is suspicious. Such a specimen, it's a shame. ...Very okay, then it's settled. It is not safe for you and I to meet again until preparations are complete. ...No, I disagree about the Hillock entrance. It is undetectable. ...Absolutely no. The Hillock entrance remains open, it is a commodity. If there is a problem with this Gomez individual, then employ whatever means are necessary. ...Oh that, yes, on the way back I had a minor accident leaving the bridge. ...No, not really

serious. ...a small amount of damage to the front end where it hit the sign. I couldn't stop in time. Yes, there is still a problem with the list, but I'll take care of it. It is my jurisdiction. ...Mr. Inkman, the problem with the list is my responsibility. Modifications can be made. I will see to that, but you are the Captain of the Soldiers. These other matters are your domain. The Hillock entrance is completely undetectable. Take care of the Gomez problem. ...Well, overall our plans are proceeding flatly. ...What? Alright, smoothly then. ...Yes, whatever you decide. ...Very good. I agree. We should not be seen together. When we meet again, it will be at the emergence of the Matriarch. The glorious dividing will begin. It will be a new day."

Markman heard the sound of the telephone receiver being rattled back into its cradle. He flattened against the wall by the door. There was the sound of heavy double doors closing.

Eleven minutes had passed. Hastily, he lowered himself back down to the first balcony. Holding the wrought-iron guard rail, he hung from it and dropped to the lawn. He pulled himself back up into the open bath window, squirming through the tight space head first with his hands out in front of him on the inside wall. When he was halfway through, an insistent pounding began at the door.

"Mr. Julian? Is everything all right in there?"

Markman lowered himself face first to the floor, regained his feet and flushed the toilet.

"Just a minute please, I'll be right there."

With a quick straightening of his clothes, he gathered up the painted clothes left on the floor and answered the door. The prudish servant opened his mouth to speak. Markman cut him off. "Can you discard these for me? They were torn in the contest. I won't be needing them."

"Yes, sir. Mr. Fiskin has asked me to tell you he will not be able to join you as expected. He has been called away on important business. He hopes you enjoyed the outing and wishes you a safe journey."

With no further explanation or offerings, Markman was led unceremoniously to the grand front entrance, an extravagantly decorated area covered by expensive art and tall, burgundy-colored draperies bound at the center. A elderly maidservant looked up blankly at Markman as she continued to polish the base of a pewter-colored fountain in the room's center. At the main entrance, a butler in a black tuxedo stiffly opened one-half of the heavy double doors. Outside, a pathway of gray, diamond-shaped tile bordered by pointed evergreens led to the driveway, where a black limousine was already waiting. The starchy driver bowed facetiously and ushered Markman inside. Nothing

was left to do but watch the Fishkin estate disappear behind, as the huge iron gates swung closed.

The ride back to the hotel was disconcerting. Something had gone wrong. Markman felt like an estranged suitor who had just been dumped by a girl he hadn't actually cared for. It left him off-balance and irate.

By the time he arrived at the hotel it was late morning. The feelings of misgiving persisted. Inside the suite, a sullen, feminine figure, in a white pants suit was waiting on the sofa. It was Rogers.

"What the hell are you doing here? You'll blow my cover."

"Too late, Scott. We've already blown it."

"What are you talking about? I just ran Fishkin's race, didn't I? We should be home free. You shouldn't be here. This room is probably bugged."

"Nope. We scrubbed the room. It's clean. Doesn't matter anyway. They didn't take the bait."

Dumbfounded, Markman took a seat beside her, and shook his head in disbelief. "I don't get it. I worked my way through their stupid paint ball contest without a scratch. They never touched me."

"I know. We watched you from a high rise with high power scopes and infrared. The damned agency wouldn't approve satellite time."

"So what's the problem?"

"Like I said, they didn't take the bait. If everything had gone as it should have, you would have been introduced to a guy named Inkman. He would have offered you a chance in a Sensesuit. You would have had to sign a few legal documents which would have eventually given them the rights to your holdings if you died. They would have set you up as a Dragon Master tonight. That's the routine. They didn't pick you up. Something went wrong."

Markman sat back and exhaled in frustration. "What the hell happened? I blew the top off their damned video game, and my time in the paint ball should have been at least good. What else could I have done?"

"How many guys did you take out?"

"Six."

"Do you know how many there were?"

"No."

"Six."

Markman paused in a silent moment of understanding. "Are you trying to say that I did too well?"

"It's our best guess. Too high a score in the Virtual Death game, then cleaned out the Fishkin forest. You didn't have to run to the patio. You could have walked."

Rogers drew a silver case from her hip pocket, removed a cigarette, and lit it with a matching silver lighter. She inhaled once and blew a cloud of smoke while staring thoughtfully at nothing. "They must have recognized you as a professional. We should have chosen a different cover. In any case it's over. We've hit another dead end. I'm not sure what to do with you. They'll either let you go to make themselves appear legitimate, or they'll try to kill you."

"What about Fishkin and Inkman? Have you checked them out completely?"

"Down to the last detail. Both were born in the U.S. of A. Good families, all deceased. Made their fortunes legally. Have very powerful friends in high places. We have nothing on them, absolutely zero, and it's politically dangerous to mess with them."

"So what are the options? Where does it go from here?"

Rogers paused nervously. "Well, maybe it's time for you to get out. They know your face and you may be in danger."

Markman frowned. "Are you kidding?"

"No, I'm not. We've lost our chance of putting you in a suit. It's a federal operation. There's really no further reason for you to be working on this."

"Oh, right. What happened to that grand little speech about how we're all in this together all one big happy family. You guys throw me into this and now I'm suddenly not worth anything? Doesn't seem to me you're doing too good on this thing yourselves, Agent Rogers. Maybe you're right, maybe I should work this one on my own."

"You could really screw things up for us. What reason would you have to do that?"

"I haven't forgotten the lady in the lake for one thing. That's still bothering me just a bit, if you remember."

Rogers stared back at him with uncertainty. She squirmed in her seat and tried to appear in control. "If I requested that you remain on the case, they'd approve it."

"Take your choice. I can go either way."

"But we've really hit a dead end on this again. We're watching Fishkin and Inkman around the clock, but since we didn't get you in, we really don't have any new leads to go on."

"I can think of a couple."

"Like what?"

"Find out what the names Gomez and Hillock have in common, for one thing."

"Where did you get that?"

"Unescorted tour."

"What? When did that happen? We tracked you every second. You were taken inside to clean up after the other guests painted you,

and then a few minutes later you were booted out the front entrance like a drunken sailor."

"You guys are slipping. You didn't notice me climbing all over the outside of the damned mansion, did you?"

"What?"

"On the third floor balcony I heard Fishkin talking on the phone about some problem with somebody named Gomez, and someplace he was calling Hillock."

Rogers was caught off guard. She winced and recovered. "We can get any information we need from my car."

"Your car?"

"My car. Better than an Ipad."

"Can I have a minute to change these jeans and get cleaned up a little?"

"I'll time you."

Rogers' late model, plain looking four-door Ford was parked in an underground parking garage one block away. She felt lucky at having found a place that close by. The vehicle's deep blue color added blandness to its no-frills edition. Markman climbed into the gray-black interior on the passenger side and found very subtle extras carefully designed into the dash and center column. There was a hidden phone between the seats, and an assortment of scanners and radios that were customized to be unobtrusive and difficult to notice. Rogers took the driver's seat and popped the handset from its cradle. She tapped a single button on the lighted handle and held the receiver to her ear, looking at Markman with a curious stare.

"This is Rogers, zero-zero-three-five-zero. I need data on the names Gomez and Hillock, with correlation. Right away, please."

She tucked the handset back into its holder and slouched back in her seat with a passive sigh. "So what else did you pick up on your little excursion that we inept feds failed to notice?"

Markman smiled. "Fishkin was talking to the guy you mentioned earlier--Inkman. Called Inkman the Captain of the Soldiers; must be a rank in the Dungeon Masters or something. Anyway, they were discussing a meeting with the "Matriarch", whatever that is. It sounded very important."

Rogers again looked taken aback. She stared out her side window and spoke with reserve. "They mentioned the Matriarch? What did they say about it?"

"They agreed not to meet again until it was with the Matriarch, whatever that is. Do you know?"

"Not really. We haven't been able to bug either Fishkin or Inkman. Their friends are too powerful. If an illegal tap were discovered, we'd be in deep. The only things we've been able to pick

up have been by long range microphones when we're in a position to use them. The Matriarch is mentioned more than anything else. It represents some kind of new leadership. Big things are supposed to happen when it arrives on the scene. That's all we know. Was there anything else you heard?"

"They said something about a dividing of some kind. They called it a great new day. It sounded like something out of a damned revolution or something. Oh yeah, and Fishkin was also begging forgiveness about some accident he had on a bridge somewhere. It sounded like he almost rear-ended somebody, or something. There was also an argument going on about a problem with a list. Mean anything?"

Rogers shook her head and started to answer when she was interrupted by a high pitch buzzing sound from the center console of her car. Next to Markman's left knee, a six-inch-wide strip of paper began to ratchet out from a slot in the dash, and an LCD screen began scrolling data.

"Oh good, here it comes." She pulled gently at the edge of the paper and tried to read from the printout as it was dispensed. "Very interesting! A family with the name Gomez lives at 111 Hillock Street, an hour or two from here. Quite a coincidence, wouldn't you say? I think we should take a ride there. Are you game?" She looked at Markman with a devilish smile. He stared back blankly.

"Are you kidding? Let's go."

She twisted the ignition and brought her office on wheels to life. Skillfully she guided the car up and out of the parking garage and headed north out of the city. She chose the back streets that ran through the aging gray and ash-red blocked buildings in the older parts of the city. Structures that had too much historical value to be allowed to perish, bordered new glass skyscrapers in some places. Markman drank in the sights. He had been afforded few since his arrival, though the magic of New York had already enticed him.

"So how'd you end up becoming a cop, Ann?"

She glanced at him, but when their eyes met, quickly looked away. "My father was a detective with the L.A.P.D. I was in college on a liberal arts scholarship when he was tortured and killed by a terrorist named Katalia. He had been planning to blow up a high-rise in the city. My father stumbled across him while investigating a break-in at a Chem-Pak Corporation plant. I got a big run-around from the police after it happened. They said the investigation had been taken over by federal agencies. I couldn't get any answers. I transferred my studies to a law enforcement program a short time later.

"You have other family?"

"Right after the murder, my mother accidentally got hold of the coroner's report. She couldn't handle it. She's been under psychiatric care ever since."

"So did they get the guy?"

"I'm still looking. The day I find him will be my last day in law-enforcement."

"Why's that?"

"Because I'm going to kill him."

Markman clenched his teeth and looked away. "So where's your partner, Agent Hall, these days?"

"He's overseeing the surveillance on Fishkin and Inkman. We thought it was all we had left. Why do you ask?"

"Oh nothing. It doesn't seem like you should be working on this alone, that's all."

"But I'm not. You're here..."

Chapter 15

The endless city slowly began to shrink in majesty. The skyscrapers fell behind, giving way to wooded hills and lower income housing. Eventually, tangled areas of forest began to outnumber the blocks of civilization that had settled the area. To Markman, this was a place on the edge of the inner world and it was helplessly growing into the city that bordered it. It would eventually fall completely to the unrelenting crawl of a sociological glacier.

Hillock street was so old that the roadway had become half-dirt, half-asphalt. A high fence ran the length of it on a side where there were no buildings. Trees and brush poked through the chain links as though trying to escape. The Gomez's basement apartment was across from the mutely captured jungle. Rogers pulled over to the side and stopped in front of the three-story brick building. The place was lower-class but well-cared-for. A broken bicycle lay on the small patch of lawn that was more dirt than grass. A gray-haired old man in worn-out clothes, rocked in a wooden rocker that was probably even older than he was. He was unshaven and singing quietly to himself. He paid no attention to the approach of Markman and Rogers. A middle-aged woman with her graying black hair tightly wrapped in a bun wiped her hands on her flowered apron as she cursed at the hole in the screen door she was trying to repair. She stopped abruptly and turned at the sound of visitors approaching.

"Policia?" she stood erect and became nervous, as they walked toward her.

"Now how'd she know that?" whispered Markman. Rogers ignored the question.

"Yes, ma'am, just a friendly visit," she said, as she flashed a quick glimpse of her ID wallet.

"Eese all okay now. Hee's beene in the yard. Wee'll keepe heem there, I promise you that. No more problems." The woman's voice was musically Spanish but sounded fearful. Before Rogers could persuade her that everything was all right, the old man began to ramble on in Spanish.

"Los muertos salen del hueco y caminan por la noche! Los muertos salen del hueco y caminan por la noche!"

To Markman's surprise Rogers suddenly switched to Spanish and began fluently discussing something with the anxious woman. As they spoke, the nervous lady relaxed and became much more communicative, though Markman was not able to understand a word

of it. Hand gestures began to accent the flurry of Spanish coming from the woman, and she ended by throwing her hands up in frustration. When it was over, Rogers turned to Markman.

"The old man is her father. He's been suffering memory loss and disorientation. Sometimes he wanders off and gets lost. His daughter Maria has to keep an eye on him every minute. Lately he's been particularly agitated. He's taken off in the night several times and the local police have been called by neighbors. That's why she was so worried about us. This looks like a dead end, Scott. She says he just keeps repeating nonsense."

"Such as?"

"Well, what he was just shouting a few moments ago--los muertos salen del hueco y caminan por la noche. It means; the dead come out of the hole and walk in the night."

Together they looked at the old man. He was pointing neurotically toward the fenced-in forest across the road and shaking his head insistently. His eyes were wide and bulging, and he continually sucked his lips in and out of his toothless mouth.

Markman looked across the road at the high, chain link fence. A large red sign was posted halfway up it.

DANGER! POSITIVELY NO TRESPASSING VIOLATORS WILL BE PROSECUTED Federal Offense, citation 18033 Bureau of Land and Water Management

"What's over there, Ann?"

"I don't know."

"I think we should have a look, don't you?" Markman headed for the forbidden fence.

"Grabbing at straws, aren't we?" called Rogers as she trotted up after him.

Markman crossed the uneven street. At the fence, he grabbed a handful of links and tested their strength. Behind them, the old man suddenly became very excited, shouting in Spanish and rocking his chair to its limit. Rogers came up beside seeming almost amused by the whole affair. She touched the no trespassing sign with a rigid index finger and repeated its warning.

"It says no trespassing, Scott, can't you read?"

Markman chose a spot near one of the aluminum fence posts and began to scale the barrier.

"It says federal fence. I've got a federal agent with me. You can't charge a federal agent with a federal fence, can you?"

Rogers looked up with her hands on her hips and rolled her eyes. "That's federal of-fense, Scott, and yes, we can be charged. Ask any

politician." She shook her head and began climbing up behind him, mumbling irate, unintelligible sounds.

Markman maneuvered over the top of the barrier and dropped to the ground below. He paused to wait for her, as she struggled to free the pants of her clean white suit from the barbs at the top of the fence. He stifled a laugh as she climbed down beside him. They worked their way into the thick brush, not knowing what to expect. There were places where rotten or broken branches had fallen to the ground making forward progress difficult. They weaved a path inward and at one point he stopped and drew something from the brush; a dime-sized piece of plaid flannel that looked new.

"Someone has been in here, that's for sure."

Rogers picked at burrs' clinging to her clothes and eyed the evidence dubiously.

"You know, Ann, you really shouldn't wear something like that when you plan on tramping through the woods."

"Oh thank-you very much. I'll make a mental note of that for the next time I get stuck with you."

Markman smirked and continued tramping through the dry underbrush, looking for anything that might make sense out of the old man's gibberish. A few yards ahead, he found it. A clearing appeared beyond a heavy line of shrubs. Markman peered over the brush line and was surprised to find a wide, deep pit hidden within the woods. It carved a rough circle in the earth large enough to swallow a small house.

"Whoa, take a look at this, be careful."

Rogers worked herself up next to him and peered down into the water-filled cavity.

"Wow, it must be a fifty-foot drop to the water."

"Yes, and the water's deep, too. You can't see the bottom. What the hell is this place?"

Rogers gazed over the ledge of the cavernous opening. Vegetation bordered the cliff edge all around.

"My guess is it's an old reservoir that's not used anymore. The fence back there is to keep people and their pets from falling in."

"The walls are steep, but they could be climbed."

"Who the heck would want to? It gives me the creeps."

"Look at the scrub brush and weeds around the edge. It's been trampled in some places. Somebody's been here."

She cast an unimpressed look at him. "Kids probably. It's the perfect place to get in trouble. This whole thing is a dead end, Scott. We're wasting our time and my clothes. The old man has seen kids playing around here at night and thinks it's ghosts. His daughter said he's been very confused."

"What about Fishkin's reference to this place?"

"Coincidence. There are a hundred other Gomezes, and dozens of other Hillocks. He's a business man, Scott. A big business man with lots of things in the fire. He was probably discussing some venture somewhere with pet names or something."

Markman did not appear persuaded. "We need to see what's down there."

"I'll tell you what's down there, water and dirt and junk."

"No, I mean all the way down there."

"What!?"

"I'm going to."

"Going to what?"

"Come back here with some diving gear and see what's at the bottom of this thing."

"Are you crazy? You're going to dive in that crap? Who knows what garbage is down there, or what's in the water for that matter, and how will you get down to the water?"

"Repel."

"How will you get your gear down?"

"You'll lower it to me."

"You're nuts, Markman. You need a rocker next to Maria's father."

The return trip to Manhattan became pensive and quiet. Rogers looked perturbed that the lead had not been more productive. Staring out the side window, Markman impatiently tapped the fingers of one hand on his leg and tried not to appear unsettled. He looked at his partner several times, but made no effort to speak. Finally, Rogers could stand the silence no longer. "It's really a shame you know."

"What's that?"

"That we didn't get you into a Sensesuit. Don't let this go to your head, but I really think you might have beat it."

"Without frying, you mean."

"What I'd give to know what goes on in those things. Damn, we'd thought you'd be in one at midnight tonight. I was sure we had it made. They only use the winners, and you sure as hell were a winner."

A faraway look came over Markman, as he stared out his window at the city night-life rushing by. Abruptly he turned and looked at her. "What did you say?"

She glanced away from the road to look at him. "Don't get offended or anything. It was a compliment, you know. I said they only use winners."

"Can you call in right now and get the address where a man named Richard Baker is staying?"

"Oh brother, here we go again. Who's Richard Baker?"

"He's the player I beat in the virtual game."

"So? I told you they only use winners."

"He was at Fishkin's this morning, in a separate paintball contest. If I hadn't won the virtual death game, he would have."

Rogers paused thoughtfully and decided it was a valid argument. She gave in and with a friendly scowl made the call to her office. Moments later a printout with the address of Richard Baker on it emerged from the car's dash. "It's Dalaney street--a lower-class neighborhood. We'll be there by ten. The Sensesuit games that we know of have all started at midnight. If he's home, we'll know he's not a player and this is another Scott Markman wild goose chase."

"And if he's not home?"

"We'll see."

Rogers forced her way through the late evening traffic to the block where Baker resided. It was a place where the buildings were less carefully maintained; where intentionally broken street lights were left in disrepair. An abundance of colored, party neon filled in where the remaining amber street light left off.

Baker's apartment was on the third floor of a run-down building. The dirty wooden stairway that led to it was narrow and the walls were heavily-decorated with important hand-scrawled messages made by philosophers of the street.

Markman knocked on the apartment door. The number 312 was scribbled on it in crayon near two holes where a small placard had once hung. There was no answer.

"Doesn't seem to be at home, Agent Rogers. Do you think he'd mind if we went in?" Markman twisted the doorknob and found it locked.

"We don't have the right paper to do that, Scott, and we don't have reason enough to get it, either. Just how do you propose to do it?"

Without speaking, he threw his weight against the poorly-fit door. It burst open easily. With a shrug he entered the well-lit room.

"That's breaking and entering!"

"Yeah, you're right, Agent Rogers. What do they give you for that now, three days at Disney World?"

The place was not what they had expected. Though the apartment and its furnishings were old and worn, the single room was immaculately kept. The bed was made; clothes were put away; the floor swept; and the small, makeshift kitchen spotless. Markman began to feel guilty at having robbed Baker of his prize money. They searched the apartment carefully, taking great care not to move or disturb anything. It was a dry search until Rogers finally called out in a half whisper. "Over here!"

He quickly moved over beside her. She was studying an ancient-looking green glass ashtray with a large crack running through it. A small piece of note paper had been burned in it. The paper lay wilted and black, but was still in one piece.

"Not too many reasons to burn something like this." She strained to study the fragment.

"I can make out a few letters, but it's too far gone. We'll never get anything from it."

"We might not, but my car will."

"Your car?" asked Markman, and he quickly realized it was the second time he had asked that.

Rogers made a brisk trip to her portable laboratory, taking time to frequently look over her shoulder on the way. She returned with a hand scanner that looked like a miniature, black vacuum cleaner. She switched it on and a glow of blue light formed at the nozzle. She braced herself and carefully ran the soft light over the fragile, charred note without harming it. A small red light on the top of the scanner began to blink.

"That's it. I've got it. We've got to go down to the car to get the printout. Do you think you can shut the door without breaking it, Markman?"

Markman responded with a low snarling sound as he jerked the door closed.

Chapter 16

2186 Hatcher Ave.
The Conn's Factory
Fifth floor
Midnight sharp

Rogers did not wait to discuss the printout. She threw the strip of paper in Markman's lap and squealed the tires out onto the road before he had even a chance to speak. Her reckless weaving through headlight-blinding traffic quickly inspired him to fasten his seat belt. The GPS display on the dash flashed an insistent red arrow, coercing her on.

"Then I can take this as your way of saying you're a believer now, right?"

"It's ten-thirty. It'll take us almost an hour to get to the place. It's a closed-down garment factory. It's a big place. We may not make it in time."

"Or alive!" Markman gripped the dash as she used the oncoming lane to pass several cars.

"The traffic will be a bitch all the way. It'll be worse just before we get there. It's late. We're liable to offend one of the colors that think they own that section."

"Colors? You mean street gangs?"

Rogers cast an annoyed look. "Really, Scott, where did you grow up?"

Markman raised his eyebrows. "Tibet?"

The cross-town traffic turned out to be particularly uncooperative. Rogers's hair-raising detours onto sidewalks and unlit parking ramps was only partly successful. Her radical driving brought them near the general vicinity of the factory, but not close enough. Finally, halfway down a one-way street, an orange, tank-shaped pest control truck had broken down, blocking the way completely. The long line of car headlights behind meant there would be no retreat, and the narrowness of the walled-in road prevented any possible detours.

Rogers jammed the car into park, stared straight ahead, and swore under her breath. "Well, that's it. We're screwed."

"How far is the place?"

"About five blocks or so."

Markman shoved open the passenger door and climbed out. He turned to face her and stood bent over in the wash of the interior light.

"How can I find it?"

She hesitated. "See that radio tower light behind you?"

He peered over his shoulder. "Yeah?"

"It should be right near there."

"Got it." He began to shut the door but was delayed by an uncommonly passionate plea from his partner.

"Scott..."

"Yeah?"

"Watch yourself, okay?"

He smiled and pushed the door closed. He turned and sprinted away, disappearing into a nearby dark alley. Rogers bit her bottom lip nervously and looked at the green glow from the dashboard clock. Thirty minutes were left.

This was a partially-abandoned section of the Great City. Industry had not done well here. Warehouses and factories, most closed, others adapted to different applications, were scattered everywhere. Occasional yellow light from dirty shop windows was the only sign of life. In the dim light of the wasted back streets, Markman paced himself in his running search for the Conn building. The darkness and desolation left him feeling cold and alone as the blue light on the high tower grew ever larger against the cloudy, half-moon sky. The abandonment of the industrialized surroundings became even more pronounced as he finally reached what he thought was the correct city block.

He crossed a paper-littered, deserted street in the shadows of the empty buildings and raced down an alley spotted with bent and rusted garbage cans. Using one, he scaled a short, broken wooden fence, and dropped to the broken pavement on the other side. In the dim light from a barred window, an even more complicated obstacle awaited him.

In the eerie gloom, a dirty, heavily tattooed man with yellow teeth and a skin-head haircut stood between him and a darkened sign that read "CONN'S". The man's clothing looked oily black, and in his right hand, he was flipping a butterfly knife open and shut. A moment of shared apprehension took place as the two men appraised each other.

"You got money, man?"

"Yeah, some..."

"How much money you got?"

"A hundred and something. I'm kind of in a hurry. How about if I give it to you and be on my way? Deal?"

"Just hand it over, mother. I make the deals."

Markman drew his wallet from the back pocket of his jeans, removed all the cash from it, and carefully placed the money on the

ground between them. The thug responded by stooping forward and picking it up without taking his eyes off his victim.

"You got credit cards, man?"

"Listen buddy, you're starting to piss me off. I'm in a hurry. I keep the rest of the stuff in my wallet. Take off while you're ahead, okay?"

"Ha, ha. That's funny, asshole. I'll cut you up good, man. I'll show you your insides. How 'bout that, mother?"

Markman raised his voice and began to pace back and forth in small steps. "Okay that's it. I am pissed now. You're going to do something? Well shut up and do it now. Just hurry the hell up, will you."

"I'm gonna make your throat bleed like you won't believe, mister. I'll tie you up in your own guts. Come on, try me. I'll stuff your mouth, asshole."

Markman could wait no longer. He took a lunging step toward the man and spoke with cold anger. "Okay let's do it. I can't wait on you. Come on."

The knife-wielding man suddenly appeared off guard. He backed away from Markman's advance, and his voice rose an octave. "Don't push me, man, don't push me. I'll kill ya right here and now."

Markman broke into a fast walk toward him. The man countered by backing away still further. Markman began to run. Astonished, the thug turned and disappeared through a broken alley door.

The main doors to the Conn building were chained and locked. Fifteen minutes were left. Without taking the time to search out an open entrance, Markman kicked in a large side window, sending shattered wood and glass into the darkened building. He climbed through the hole into the dead factory and moved in near total darkness toward an open doorway eerily lit by a flickering exit light. The door led to a large, musty, work area, poorly lighted by a few overhead emergency lights mounted among dingy white ceiling tiles. Long dusty tables stretched the breadth of the huge room. There was no sign of a stairwell.

A loud clanking and grinding sound suddenly intruded into the silence. In the far corner of the work area, fat, swaying cables within a caged car-sized elevator shaft, caught his attention.

He dashed among the long tables and hit the worn, discolored call button. The rusty top of the oversized elevator came into view. He braced himself in front of the wide metal doors as the slow-moving car came to a grinding, screeching halt. With a loud, unpleasant ratchet sound, the heavy door panels split apart. As they parted and exposed the battered interior, his eyes met those of another man. Richard Baker's mouth dropped open as he recognized his former opponent.

He was dressed in the same ragged jeans from the paint ball contest, and a gray sweat shirt similar to the one given Markman by Fishkin's servant. The big doors clanked open wide. Markman stepped in uninvited. Immediately, the noisy doors began to close behind him.

"Why am I not glad to see you, Mr. Julian?"

The overworked elevator clanked into gear and began its slow crawl upward.

"Julian's not my real name. It's Markman. I work for the government."

Baker narrowed his stare. "I don't want to know why you're here, Mr. Markman, or whoever you really are."

Markman eyed Baker for weapons. He had none. "I need your suit."

Baker frowned. "No way. You got my thousand bucks. You're not getting my chance in a Sensesuit."

"I'll give you the thousand."

"Forget it. I can make a lot more in the Virtual."

"Don't count on it. It's a lie. People are disappearing and dying in there."

"Sure, but you want to use it, right? I don't believe you. If you were me, you'd give it a shot."

"I can't let you do that."

The atmosphere became hostile as the elevator rose up through the second floor. Baker turned sideways and took an aggressive stance. "I'm a black belt, Mr. Markman. I've been in a lot of fights. Do you really know anything about fighting? Do you even hold a belt?"

"Where I come from, they don't give belts, Richard."

"Well then, I advise you to get off at the next floor. I'm late. The basement door was blocked off. It was supposed to be open. I don't have time to fool around with you, and I don't want to hurt you."

Markman shrugged a silent refusal. The standoff intensified. Baker's stance tightened. Slowly, he raised both fists in a guarding block and narrowed his stare. Markman bowed his chin slightly in a gesture of understanding and raised his open hands in defense. Baker bent at the knees and moved one small step to the right. Markman waited.

As the elevator crept upward into the third floor, Baker tested his opponent. He lurched across the smooth worn floor of the car, driving his right foot up and out at Markman's chest. Markman twisted slightly sideways and let the kick brush past his stomach. He stepped away laterally and resumed his ready stance. Baker fell forward with the missed kick. He spun around and collected himself. The face-off resumed. He stepped again one step to his right. Markman waited with his open hands raised.

The second attack was a jumping front kick intended for Markman's face. Again it found only empty space, and Baker's recovery was even more awkward than before. Once more he postured to find his intended target suddenly waiting behind him and had to pivot and turn to assume a proper stance.

"That's nice form, Richard, but you should never begin an attack with a single technique. You must use combinations. The first one sets your opponent up. The second or third scores." Markman's voice was neither intimidating nor insulting. It was something he had said hundreds of times. It carried the caring and patience of a teacher.

"Who asked you?" Baker came again with a flurry of punches and round kicks that drove Markman around the car. Markman swayed methodically, avoiding the punches and at the same time blocking each of the round kicks with his open hands. Baker backed away finally, red-faced and breathing hard.

"That's another thing, Richard. You're holding your breath every time you attack. You can't do that. Your breathing must be regular and relaxed. It's why you're running out of air already."

Strobing light from the fourth floor leaked through cracks in the worn elevator doors, causing Baker to notice the handle of Markman's handgun protruding from behind his open jacket.

"You have a gun. Why don't you use it?"

"Because I don't want to hurt you either."

"So what will you do, try to hit me in the head with it?"

"Of course not. That could cause serious injury. The right place is the spot where your neck meets your shoulder, and it must be done with a carefully placed knifehand to be safe."

"And you think I'm going to give you a chance to do that?"

"You already have several times."

Baker's face grew even more red. He charged Markman with such mindless fury that he was almost unstoppable, and though his attack came like lightning, Markman's responses seemed frustratingly casual. Baker's mistakes increased. Markman captured and held his forearm after a failed punch. Blocking an incoming hook with his right hand, he sliced down to Baker's vulnerable left shoulder.

Richard Baker went to sleep.

Markman gently caught the limp body before it could fall. He lowered it carefully as the elevator jerked to a stop and the doors screeched open. He positioned Baker on his stomach and unlaced his black, high-top sneakers. The small silver key to the Sensesuit case fell from the left one as he did. He collected Baker's hands and feet, and used the laces to tie them behind his back. As he was finishing, Baker became semiconscious, twisting his head to look around the open elevator in an attempt to regain his bearings.

Markman checked the time, seven minutes before midnight. He felt a rush of fear at how late it had become and raced to tie the final knot. As he turned to leave in search of the Sensesuit case, Baker's dull, broken voice stopped him.

"Wait..., wait don't go. In my back pocket, take it."

Something in the way Baker spoke stopped Markman. Quickly he stooped over, hesitated, and then checked Baker's worn-out jeans. From the left back pocket he drew a small strip of paper that looked as though it had come from a Chinese fortune cookie. There were eight numbers on it. 00101001

Markman stared in confusion at Baker.

"You'll need it to get in. Like I said, I wouldn't want you getting hurt." Baker craned his neck and the two men exchanged a deep, discerning stare, and in that moment Markman knew he would have burned had Baker not regained consciousness in time to warn him.

Markman broke away and went for the suit. He had five minutes.

The fifth floor of the Conn's building was a hollow, empty shell. Someone had turned on overhead lighting. There were no windows or furniture of any kind. A worn, dark tile floor covered an expanse almost as large as a baseball diamond. There were holes in the water-stained walls, and though most of the dropped ceiling was intact, it had yellowed with age. In a far corner of the room, a silver, hard shell case had been conspicuously left on the floor. There was no time to worry that assassins were watching the wrong player accessing one of their coveted Sensesuits. To break into the secret world of the Dragon Masters was a gamble at best.

Time had slipped to three minutes before midnight. Markman raced to the utility case and knelt by it. He fumbled with the key in the first lock and had to reinsert it. As precious seconds ticked away, the uncooperative latch finally popped open, and a moment later the second one snapped upward also.

He opened the cover cautiously. Inside a gleaming black, protruding helmet was neatly packed beside a vein-riddled black suit. There was no time to wonder what the correct procedure was. Markman awkwardly tore off everything he had on, leaving a tangled pile of clothes in the corner--just like the one he had seen in the macabre film of the last agent who had been incinerated wearing a Sensesuit.

There was a split from the left shoulder to the waist. As carefully as possible, he sat on the floor and worked his legs into the stretch material. The inside of the suit felt slippery--almost like a second skin. As he pulled his feet into the expandable boots, the suit seemed to vacuum-pack around his legs. He wrestled to his feet and convulsed his arms and body into it.

There was a Velcro-type latch on the contact riddled high collar. On the floor among his clothes, Markman could see the second digits of his watch counting down toward midnight. He grabbed for the shiny black helmet and forced it over his head. There was a brief glimpse of two frosty opaque, matchbook-sized video screens, as it swished down in place. The lights went out.

A snapping and popping sound came from around and below the helmet's collar. Contact had been made with the suit. One second later a soft, momentary tone in both ears indicated something extraordinary was about to happen.

Chapter 17

The black, Sensesuited figure of Scott Markman stood motionless and blind in the corner of the abandoned room. Fearfully, he realized that the outside world was now unavailable in anything other than dimension, no sounds, no sights, no feeling, no smell. Within the desensitized blackness, he waited for artificial light or fiery death.

A faint glow of orange began to form a sliver of horizon across the darkness. Then an orange arc cut slowly into the plane of new light. It became a crescent of sun, larger than Earth's, and it rose with increasing speed above an alien skyline. The silhouette of an exotic city began to embellish an aqua sky. It was a city of endlessness, possessing every direction and distance with forms that were not easily understood. Markman viewed it as one would from a mountain top, and the depth and detail were breathtaking.

As the sun rose full in the sky, the colors came. Luminous shapes of pyramids, ovals, triangles and hexagons. Structures that seemed formed by glass or colored light, densely packed and mammoth in size. It was an animated city. Glowing spheres of green and yellow light passed over it; some drifting, others racing by. Within the jeweled ground plane tiny beads of light flowed through crystal clear tubes that ran in and out of the city's complexes. Faint sounds of rushing air came and went, and there was a subtle smell of jasmine.

Markman looked down and was startled by the realism of the two hundred foot drop below the narrow ledge on which he was standing. A tangled area of clear tubes and semitransparent structures lay far below. Though he knew he was alone in an empty room, his mind struggled not to believe the information being supplied to the eyes and brain. In compromise, he took a short step back. He could see his own feet and legs; computer representations garbed in smooth black fabric and high black boots that lacked the slightest imperfection. The ledge was dark granite; a shelf jutting out from the apex of a giant golden pyramid. Its smooth walls led down to the collage of colors on the artificial ground below.

He looked at his hands and arms, tight, black gloves like a sports car enthusiast might wear. Tight, perfect black sleeves covered computer-generated arms. These things moved with him just as perfectly as their real counterparts. There was no difference.

As he stared back out over the city, a second orange sun rose in the sky slightly behind and to the left of the first. Suddenly a row of eight boxes, each containing a zero, appeared as though suspended in

air in front of him. They were just within arm's reach and immediately reminded him of the strip of paper Baker had so unexpectedly provided. He summoned from memory the eight numbers he had seen. The third, fifth, and eight digits needed to be ones. He reached out his computer hand and touched the third window. Instantly, it changed to a one. He moved to the fifth and eight positions and they too changed. The numbered windows disappeared.

Postage-stamp-sized, intricately designed icons began to emerge in the left side of his field of vision. One by one they drew a line straight up to forehead height, then across and back down on the other side. A total of twelve icons surrounded the view of the luminous city. They seemed to hang in the air a foot or so from his face. At the bottom of his view, a flashing green bar appeared with the word "engage" imprinted within it. The gold and silver icon on Markman's bottom left became more brightly lit than the others and began flashing in time with it.

Markman found himself wishing more than ever for Cassiopia. Even the TEL robot would do. For all of the exotic talents and abilities he had mastered in his unorthodox life, computers had not been one of them.

Selections, he thought. These must be choices of some kind. With reluctance he gambled and touched the center overhead icon. It was black and full of tiny, silver dots.

Abruptly the golden pyramid and the luminous city were gone. In their place, an inky-black sky heavily-splashed with stars filled his vision. A deep, low rumble back dropped the quiet, and there was a subtle vibration beneath his feet. He turned and looked behind him. Dozens of colored instrument panels filled a moderate-size, softly lit, semicircular room. A large, black, cushioned chair with a high headrest was fastened to the floor in the center of it. Three men, dressed in black and red, one-piece uniforms stood around him, staring at him as though waiting for instructions. The closest of them stepped forward, and spoke with cautious respect.

"Your orders, Captain?"

Markman ignored the question. It was clear now that the icons did represent different situational choices. He needed one more familiar to him, one that he would have an advantage in. Unfortunately he had no idea what each icon symbolized.

The icon cluster was still displayed. The last of them, the one on the bottom right, was a clear square with an arrow in it, different from the others. Not knowing what else to do, he tried it. The scenario remained the same, but a completely new set of icons appeared. Apparently the choices were unlimited.

He looked at the uniformed men waiting for him. His only option was to keep selecting icons until an appropriate one was found. He turned back and looked out the large viewing screen at the stars. He hesitated too long.

The flashing green engage bar suddenly disappeared, replaced by a printed message.

Select time expired.

Previous selections completed = 0

Default select to 1

An instant later he was back on the ledge of the pyramid, looking out over a city he did not understand. The icons were gone, the imagery complete. A low, musical-sounding voice spoke from behind.

"Mr. Baker, sir, will you be traveling by tube rider or transport?"

Markman turned on the narrow ledge to find himself in front of a star-shaped door looking inside the pyramid. Golden light from within back lighted the cloaked individual who had addressed him. The man appeared to be human, though his eyes were pearl and his hair silver and long. He wore a robe with large cuffed sleeves that concealed his hands. His skin was a soft white and immaculate.

Behind him, crystal formations jutted from an arc-shaped platform attached to the floor. Near it a large clear tube, big enough to hold two people, rose out of the floor and ended in the domed ceiling. There was a door-like cut in one side of it. The base color of the pyramid's interior was gold, but was gradually changing, fading through the colors of the spectrum. To Markman's right a large panel of silver light seem to section off an elevator-like booth.

Markman turned his attention to the strange man who had spoken. "What did you say?"

"Sir, will you be traveling by tube rider or transporter?"

"Who are you?"

"Sir, I am known as Trill. I have been assigned as your protégé."

"Are you real?"

"Sir, I am an artificial reconstruction of an actual personality. To me, however, I am quite real."

"What is this place?"

"Sir, you have selected the Aurora City. A very beautiful and dangerous place."

Markman turned and looked back out over the strange land. Though two suns shone brightly in the aqua sky, the city lights were as brilliant as though it were evening. This was no illusion like that of the Virtual Death game. This was real enough to fool the senses completely. Smell, sight and sound were being controlled to perfection, so much so that it was difficult to keep in mind the empty factory that

lay just outside. Markman turned back to face his host and walked down the gentle ramp that led inside.

"What am I supposed to do here?"

"Sir, you must locate and open the Crillian Coffier of Dreams. It will provide the answers to every question you have ever had, or so it is said."

"And where do I find it?"

"Sir, I cannot say. I can only provide you with the optimum starting point. From there it is said the way is clear, though few players survive it."

"But you will be along to guide me I take it."

"Oh the stars forbid, no sir! Though I am artificial, I possess a strong will to survive. I have done so for over two thousand Crillian years, I might add. You may, however, take a page if you wish to invest the credits. They are a trifle expensive."

"Wait just a minute. Crillian years? What is Crillian?"

"Sir, Crillian. That which is of, or from, the planet Crillia."

"Oh I get it. And you are also supposed to be Crillian. It's part of the game, right?"

"Sir, that is correct."

"And since you said you are based on an actual person, I'm supposed to believe there really is a planet Crillia somewhere, right?"

"Sir, there is indeed such a place."

"Okay, fine, sure, no problem. Okay, what about the credits. I have credits?"

"Sir, one million to start. You may increase that, or become deficit, if you fare poorly. A page will cost you fifty thousand, though he may die in your place, making the expense more than justified."

"And this page is an artificial person also, right?"

"Sir, that is correct, Everyone here is a reconstructed personality based on real individuals except in the case of the other players, of course."

"Other players? There are other players in this place. How can that be? How many?"

"Sir, when the main gate is open, any number of players may access this program from almost any location."

"Any number of them? Are they friend or enemy?"

"Sir, players are generally not aggressive toward one another, although there are exceptions particularly when close to the objective. You must always keep in mind that to harm another player is to do real harm. All can be easily recognized by the blue triangle on their chests."

Markman looked down at his own black computer image and found the blue triangle located over his heart. He raised the image of

his hand and touched it. It changed to red with the touch, and then back to blue when released.

"Sir, I must warn you, the triangle is your abort. When confronted by insurmountable circumstances, you may elect to abort. A simple touch to the triangle initiates the abort sequence. You will have a sixty-forty chance at survival. If you are lucky, you will be transported safely back to this location. Your session will be over. You may resume it at the next opening of the main gate."

"And if I am not lucky?"

"Sir, you will be destroyed. I recommend you use the abort only as a last resort. My last charge was lost to an unsuccessful abort."

Markman reflected for a moment on the advice of a man who did not exist, yet it seemed advice well-taken.

"What can you tell me about the suit? What are its limitations?"

"Sir, what suit are you referring to?"

"The one I'm wearing now."

"Sir, it appears quite appropriate to me."

"No, I mean the outer suit. The one that is making me see you and this place?"

"Sir, I have no knowledge of such a suit."

Markman understood. There would be no compromise of the Sensesuit by its own systems. It had been risky and unwise just asking.

"Okay, what dangers do I face in getting to this coffer thing?"

"Sir, they are too numerous to list. You must analyze and adapt to them as they occur. That is part of the game."

"How long will I have?"

"Sir, the main gate remains open for an indeterminate length of time varying from two to six Terran hours. When time has elapsed, you will be automatically transported back to this location for suit disengagement. You may resume your journey from the point you departed at the next opening of the main gate."

"Suit disengagement? I thought you didn't know anything about the suit?"

"Sir, to what suit are you referring?"

"Okay, okay, two to six Terran hours. What are Terran hours?"

"Sir, it is the time base by which you are accustomed to keeping time."

"So you're saying that nothing I come across in here is real except the other players. Is that correct?"

"Sir, that is an unhealthy perspective. In Crillia it is said that the only things truly dependable are death and dues. By that definition, Aurora City is as real as any. You would do well to treat it as such."

Markman considered the analogy. Perhaps the dangers of this sensually-fabricated place did allow it the essence of true substance. After all, some who came here never left. Markman returned his attention to his very polite emissary. "Alright, well I'm ready. Let's get on with this. You'd better get me the page, I have no idea what I'm supposed to do."

Before Markman had finished speaking, a second figure materialized beside Trill. He was a short, youthful character, dressed in a brown pullover shirt and matching pants that looked like leather except for their flawless design. His face was set with deep but simple features, and his short, black hair was trimmed evenly around his head. His skin was amber, his eyes pearl and the brown leather strap of a well-stuffed satchel was slung over his shoulder.

"Sir, this is Illy. He will act as your page. He carries an assortment of tools. You will need weapons also, but you must win them yourself."

Markman shook his head and felt lost in absurdity. It was as though he were trapped inside a game computer. A sting of panic went through him as he realized he could not even attempt to remove the Sensesuit. To do so would surely bring severe consequence. The bizarre engagement would have to be played out. He had no choice but to adapt to it. He reached up a hand to rub his face and felt it bump the outside of the helmet. At the same time an artificial pressure pressed against his face. The complex world inside the Sensesuit was more real than not.

"How do I get to the starting point?"

"Sir, there are two ways to travel. You may use matter transfer, or you may take a tube rider. Most players use the transfer unit. The tube riders are more often employed for sight-seeing or transporting guarded materials. Occasionally a player will defer to a tube rider if he expects an ambush at the materialization site."

"Fine. We'll transport then. Let's get on with it."

"Very well, sir. Please step into the transporter column. Trill parted his arms and gestured toward the clear, hollow tube at the center of the room. Frowning, Markman went to it and stepped inside. The attentive page made no attempt to follow.

"Isn't he coming?"

"Sir, he will be at the starting point when you arrive. The transfer procedure is intended only as a safeguard against inadvertently transporting you before you are ready. Shall I engage, sir?" Trill moved over to the arched control panel.

"Why not," replied Markman sarcastically.

"Sir, I know of no reason."

"Just do it, please, I'm ready."

"As you wish, sir." Trill waved a sleeve over a crystal control, and for Markman the artificial world within, turned into a soft, white, uncertainty.

Chapter 18

Markman found himself standing in a luminous white hallway with a very low ceiling, no more than six inches above his head. The interior was so perfectly unblemished it was difficult to tell where the walls left off and the ceiling and floor began. In front of him, the hallway disappeared around a sharp corner.

A squeaky voice spoke from behind. "Master, the transport has been successful."

Markman turned and saw the page standing close by. Before he could speak, a blood-curdling howl echoed down the corridor from behind him. "What the hell was that?"

"Master, it is the akida. We must not remain here long."

For a moment, Markman forgot he was alone in an empty room in an abandoned factory. The realism of his surroundings, combined with the threat of actual harm was an overwhelming mixture. He reached out a hand, hoping to prove to himself that the luminous walls were not really there, but yanked it quickly back when the touch produced a searing pressure.

"Master, be careful. Players can sometimes pass through walls, but frequently die doing it."

Markman rubbed his fingers and decided the wall was real enough. "What are the akida?"

"Master, they are vicious four-legged creatures. They come only to the knee, but their tails cut like razors, and their teeth are like sewing needles. They will kill us both if they catch us."

"So what do we do?"

"We must run away from the sound. There will be a gate somewhere ahead. If we can cross it, we will be safe from them."

"Okay. Let's go."

"Master, it is not safe to run blindly ahead. You must use the Eye."

Echoes of howling, slightly closer, came once more.

Markman started to ask for still another explanation, but the page was already digging in his satchel. He drew out a murky, glass sphere the size of a softball and handed it over. A pearl eye was embedded in its center.

"What do I do with it?"

"Master, throw it in the direction we travel, hurry!"

Markman stared with astonishment at the glass eye. He knew that in reality there was nothing in his hand, yet he could somehow feel the pressure of the heavy glass.

"Master, hurry!"

Markman shrugged and made a throwing motion in the direction of their planned escape, and the Eye flew off down the hallway. At the corridor's end it veered to the right and disappeared around the corner.

"Now what?"

"Master, one moment."

No sooner had the page spoken than the crystal ball came racing back around the corner, stopping in Markman's outstretched hand. The eye had vanished, leaving a clear, round crystal.

Again the howling came, this time much closer.

"Master, the way is clear. We must run."

Markman did not question it. He handed the sphere to his nervous assistant and began a slow trot down the passageway. At the corner, he turned and kept the pace. The corridor continued a short distance and turned once more. Illy followed close behind. Another cascade of howls meant the pursuers were still closing. Markman picked up speed. Corner after corner, he ran along the luminous walls, sometimes brushing by them and feeling impact pressure from the suit. The illusory corridor began to seem endless. Each corner revealed only more passageway. The howling was becoming less frequent, as though the akida had picked up the scent. Markman began to perspire as he pivoted around corners and accelerated through the straits.

At last the passage gave way to a large, gold chamber with a domed ceiling that glowed. Roughly cut into the floor at the center of it was a fearsome-looking, wide chasm. A plain, white pedestal stood near the edge. In its cup, lay a bronze-colored, pulsating orb, similar to the crystal Eye. Markman dared the pit's edge and peered over. It was deep, a fifty-foot drop. And it was hot. Molten lava, that looked like liquid gold, bubbled at the bottom. He could feel the heat on his face as he leaned over. Unexpectedly he felt someone grab his arm and turned to find Illy, a synthetic creature from the mind of an alien machine, holding him fearfully.

"Caution, Master, things live in such soup. The hounds have stopped their howling. It means they are on the prowl and are close by. We must cross."

"How?"

"Master, it is a gate. Take the orb from its pedestal. You will see."

Markman looked again at the shiny sphere resting in the ivory cup. He went to it and reached out with his right computer hand. Once

again, he was amazed to feel the gentle pressure from an impostor object. As he lifted the ball from its place, it began to pulse a soft silver light.

"Master hurry. Hold it in your open hand."

With a look of wonder, he opened his hand and the sphere rose to levitate slightly above it. Its colors became kaleidoscopic, and it rotated and drifted weightlessly in the digital air. At the same time, a row of silver stones suddenly appeared and formed a narrow bridge across the gulf. They were no larger than bricks, and they seemed to be made of nothing more than semitransparent light. They did not look safe.

"We must go, Master. They are nearly upon us. You must cross with your hand open and the orb balanced. Drop it, or close your hand, and the bridge collapses. We both will perish should that happen."

Markman closed his hand around the sphere. Instantly the silver bridge of light fell to the superheated river below. He reopened his hand, and silver stones again formed a precarious-looking path across the gulf.

They went quickly to the narrow passage. The illusion was so real Markman again forgot the empty room in which he actually existed. He stepped onto the first of the stones and began crossing. Heat was rising in waves from either side. Carefully placing one foot in front of the other, he inched along, keeping his knees bent and the brilliant orb balanced above his open palm. No further warnings from the page were necessary. Markman knew that to step off the thin line of bridge stones was to burn in the lava bed below.

Halfway across, the akida came. They were creatures of black, no more than shadows on the floor and walls. They came directly to the bridge but seemed fearful to cross. They took turns testing it with one foot, then retreated to pace in irritated circles.

Something began to bother Markman, a sensation in the ears. A radiation from the suit was being used to simulate precarious balance. He stopped to collect himself and had to bend farther at the knees. The akida paused from their restive stalk to watch. The orb jittered above his hand, so badly that he had to divert all of his attention to keep it under control.

With one arm outstretched at his side, he braved another step, then another. The end of the bridge was near. The hounds began to howl in a last desperate effort to fall their intended victim.

With a final jump, he crossed onto the adjacent floor and thought to close his hand around the orb and pause in relief, but remembered Illy. He turned with cautious balance and watched his strange companion step to safety. His hand closed around the orb and the bridge disappeared.

A single hound barked a short, congratulatory bark, and the pack disappeared back down the incandescent corridor, searching again for real players to kill. Markman started to relax, but quickly realized that was probably an unwise thing to do. Nervously, he looked around for any new danger and spoke to his page. "What now?"

"Master, throw the gate orb back."

Markman turned and tossed the sphere out over the abyss. Immediately it turned a brilliant bronze and floated gently back to its resting place.

The way ahead was a circle of darkness at the end of a large funnel-shaped entrance. Without being asked, Illy drew the eye from his satchel and held it out. Markman took it with an appraising stare and threw it in the direction of the ominous doorway. It sped into the opening, disappearing through the blanket of darkness, returning a moment later as a clear, round lens.

Without hesitation they proceeded into the darkness. Markman moved sideways, with his left hand extended outward for protection. He shuffled along the smooth floor, listening for signs of trouble, groping his way through the blackness. Ahead, a small circle of faint light appeared. A few steps later, they emerged into an arena of blacklight and fluorescent-color overlooking a sunken labyrinth. They walked onto a green, glowing, platform that jutted out over a four-foot drop to the flat dark hue of a floor that seemed to move. Slithering, winding, snakelike forms cloaked in oily-black scaly skin covered most of it. Their heads were fat, with beady, red-glowing eyes and they writhed their way around and over each other in an twisted frenzy, searching for escape. Occasionally one would stop and rise up and flare like a threatening cobra, its flattened, fanged head striking just below the platform's edge.

There was no visible ceiling to the chamber. Darkness shrouded the highest parts. Shadows filled the farthest reaches. A large alcove, blanketed in a force field of sparkling light, waited on the opposite end of the pit.

A way across had been provided. It made the hair on Markman's neck bristle, and his stomach turn. He remembered when he, as a child, had idled away the time in a faraway land, jumping from fence post to fence post around the corrals that held the yaks that waited to pull plows for their Tibetan masters. Never could he have guessed that such a childish skill would someday be needed in a game of life and death.

A broken line of waist-high, square columns zigzagged across the serpent-filled pit. They varied in size, some providing a generous ten inch surface to jump to, though many were less than that. As Markman went to the edge of the platform, his movement excited the

slithering mass further. The first post stood four to five feet away. The jump would not be a problem. The landing probably would be. There would be a tendency for momentum to carry him forward past the landing point and into the pit. Of the columns that lay beyond, some appeared less of a jump, but the farthest were impossible to judge.

He took a wide, sideways stance at the edge and began rocking back and forth in the direction of the first jump. He pushed off, crossed over the carpet of snakes and landed on one foot in the center of the first pedestal. He bent sharply at the knees and kept his arms outstretched to keep from falling over. Daring to breath, he worked his other foot onto the post and stood upright to gather himself as the serpents struck futilely at the sides of the column beneath his feet.

The next jump was shorter, but had to be made from the ten-inch square post, and that afforded much less of a base to jump from. The column after that was even smaller, no more than eight inches square. Markman pushed off once more, with both feet, and landed squarely on the upright. He stood on one foot waving his arms for balance, feeling slightly more secure in the effort.

The next three jumps were easy, though the columns continued to shrink in size. He worked himself around and looked behind. Illy stood on the nearest post looking as worried as ever. Behind him something had changed. The glowing columns that had been used to get this far were gone. There was no way back. The horde of snakes was following and growing ever larger. They were gathering in such numbers that he feared they would form a mound high enough to give them striking distance.

In a controlled panic, he braved all but the last of the pedestals. As he prepared for the last two jumps, alarm set in. The final column was large; probably a twelve-inch square surface. But, it was clearly out of reach. No one could hope to make such a vault, ten feet or more. The serpents continued to gather, more casually this time as though they knew victory was at hand.

"Master, it is a test of faith. Jump, you will make it!"

With both hands out for balance, Markman pivoted on one foot and cast a look of skepticism at his follower. He turned back to the gap that separated him from the last post and shook his head in dismay.

"Master, you must jump, time is short!"

The mound of snakes was growing beneath his feet. Some of the bolder ones were slithering straight up the side of the column, coming within inches of the top and then falling over backwards into the pile.

He looked around for an alternative solution. There was none. He reconsidered the leap and fear swept through him. With his eyes closed, he summoned all of his inner strength. In desperation, he jumped with all his might, knowing the touchdown would fall well

short. But the jump immediately felt unnatural. It was as though there had been a running start. Wind was in his face and he was much higher than he should have been. He waved his arms frantically in an effort to maintain balance, and crashed down hard on the next column, so fast that he nearly fell forward. With wind milling and twisting, he steadied himself and crossed over to the other side of the pit.

A moment later, Illy appeared beside him. Together they looked back with relief at the expanse of the snake pit. A new kind of fear began to trouble Markman. There had been no time to rest or eat between the paint ball contest and entry into the unforgiving realm of the Sensesuit. Fatigue was creeping in, and there was nothing he could do about it.

Without speaking, he led the way to the brilliant force field that concealed the next chamber. With a quick shrug to his partner, he faced the glimmering curtain of light and tapped at it with one hand. Nothing happened. He pushed his hand into it and found no ill effects. Without asking for advice, he stepped through the glitter, forcing Illy to chase after him.

An oval, copper-colored room that resembled a lobby came abruptly into view. In the center of it stood a cloaked figure, his dark hood pulled well over his face. In his grasp, he held an extremely beautiful long sword that rested on its tip on the copper floor. The man's long, unadorned sleeves covered his hands. Behind him, three large, deeply-engraved copper doors were embedded in the arcing wall.

A deep, reverberating voice spoke at Markman. "Ah, of course, another incompetent come for the Coffer. Tired am I of the wanting, bereft, excuses for warriors that are portioned to me."

Markman forgot himself for the moment and blurted out an indiscreet laugh. The gatekeeper remained motionless and somber.

Illy offered no advice and gave the impression of someone ready to run. Markman shrugged and returned to his role-playing. With a calculated step forward, he spoke to the grim figure. "What is on the other side of these doors?"

The gatekeeper's raspy voice answered without delay. "Two contain certain death. One, is the Way."

"How do they open?"

"With this very sword."

"Ah, the sword. I see." Markman made an oafish face. He looked to Illy for support and spoke under his breath, keeping an eye on the untrustworthy guardsman.

"Have you got anything in your sack that might, you know, be useful against a guy like that with a sword?"

Illy's blank stare was answer enough. There did not appear to be anything in the sterile confines of the room that would serve as a weapon, either. The cloaked figure seemed reasonably deserving of respect, even without the long sword. It left Markman sincerely hoping for a peaceful negotiation for the sword. He wondered if the crystal Eye could be considered fair trade for it.

In the instant it took for him to put on his most congenial face, an ear-ringing explosion erupted from behind the gate-keeper. The center copper door burst outward into hundreds of pieces and clattered loudly across the metal floor. A split-second later, a black-suited human figure was rudely thrown backward through the ruptured doorway, crashing into the midst of the litter, rolling several times from the force of it. Immediately behind him, a gruesome skeletal figure stepped disjointedly into the room, swinging a great, yellowed bone. Its hollow skull moved grotesquely on its exposed spine in search of the fallen man.

It was then that Markman noticed the blue triangle on the injured man's chest. He wore a hood with a slot for eyes and he backpeddled on the smooth floor as the creature of bones clattered toward him on ugly, exposed feet, its repulsive weapon raised high in the air.

Instinctively, Markman went for the gatekeeper's sword. A two-step leap carried him through the air toward the distracted guard. He plunged through the artificial air with arms wide open, hoping to scissor him between them and drag him down. But instead of colliding with him, Markman sailed through the image as though it were no more than a shadow. He plunged roughly to the floor empty-handed and slid along indignantly on his stomach, crashing abruptly into the base of the left-hand door where he came to rest in a crumpled heap.

Across the oval room the skeletal beast was beating its prey with relentless fury. The sickening thumps came at an unmerciful pace, though the battered player no longer moved to protect himself. His body lay a limp mass in the gutter of the far wall.

There was no time to consider helping him. As Markman recovered to his feet, the gatekeeper raised and leveled his sword. With silent deliberation, he began his advance in quick, long strides, like a macabre samurai. As the distance between them narrowed, the swordsman quickened his pace while keeping the sharpened point of his blade well-aimed at Markman's heart. In the process of taking his last two steps, he thrust the blade forward and lurched into the motion, hoping to fell Markman with the first strike.

At the last possible instant, Markman twisted sideways. The blade sliced by his chest and with an eerie, screeching moan drove deeply into the engravings on the doorway behind him. Fractures spread quickly outward from the embedded blade, until heavy chunks

of door began to break loose and fall. The gatekeeper stepped back, releasing his hold on the sword as the door continued to collapse. Markman dove to the side, shielding himself from the falling debris with one hand. In a matter of seconds, the entire door had fallen in a pile on the floor. The long sword fell also, bouncing from end to end, ringing like a tuning fork, finally settling with a sustained, and ominous tone.

Bright light shone from the new doorway. Behind the frozen figure of the gatekeeper, Markman caught a glimpse of the skeleton-monster, dragging its deceased trophy back through the center passageway. The long sword lay on the floor between him and the gatekeeper. Markman flinched forward in an effort to reach the weapon first, but as he did, something caused him to jerk to a stop and listen.

From within the dim blue light of the newly-opened chamber came a single, hair-raising bellow. An instant later, a reptilian head, so large it barely fit through the opening, shot outward toward the gatekeeper. It rotated its drooling mouth as it came, and clamped down with spiked teeth on him. Its huge, round eyes were tightly dilated and had a childlike expectancy about them. With its prey kicking and flailing, it swaggered back into its den, smashing the gatekeeper's head and feet against the sides of the doorway as it exited.

Silence returned. Markman lay stiffly on his right side, wondering if he would be the monster's second course. The long sword remained a few feet away amid the copper-colored rubble.

Nothing happened.

He pushed himself up onto his hands and knees and shuffled forward to grab the blade by its point, and drag it to him. He backed away from the entrance to the creature's lair and stood, holding the sword ready in both hands. It had no weight at all, but strangely he could feel the pressure of the jeweled grip against his palm. He breathed a short sigh of relief and looked around. There was no sign of Illy. He turned to look back at the glistening curtain from which he had entered. The oval room was now completely empty except for smoke drifting through the broken doors, and debris scattered across the polished floor. Rotating to study the three doors, he immediately caught sight of something that sent a rush of fear up his spine. In the foggy light from the middle door, the skeleton had returned. Holding its heavy bone-club by its side, it stared intently with hollow eyes. Somehow the fleshless, barren teeth seemed to form a sickening little smile.

Markman thought to run, but quickly realized there was no longer a path through the snake pit. The gatekeeper had warned that

two of the doors contained certain death, and only one the correct path. One door still remained sealed, but the skeleton was a barrier to it. The two bad alternatives mattered little, for at that moment the skeleton began its approach. Since no retreat was available, Markman did the next best thing, he advanced.

Chapter 19

They met halfway, in the center of the oval chamber. The skeleton tilted its head in a curious way as though an opponent unafraid was quite an unusual thing. It paused, swinging its bone-club to and fro, with its empty rib cage only inches from Markman's beating heart.

The standoff was brief. The skeleton swung its weapon high with machine-like speed and brought it to bear. So fast was the motion, that Markman barely got his blade up in time to block. He had to step quickly back to set up for the next exchange. The skeleton swung its weapon once more and they became locked in a standoff that seemed to last forever. Then, with a flash of blurred motion, the skeleton let lose its fury.

The battery of cuts and slashes that followed came at a superhuman pace. The echoing-clang of metal against bone was loud enough to make Markman's ears ring. No strength was required to contain the strikes, but the pace necessary to check and sidestep them became fierce. Markman's mind instinctively became the empty vessel of a Tao Chane master. In his eyes, there was a calm resolve. The bizarre creature attacked mercilessly, seeming almost frustrated with its inability to cause harm. Its body jerked and bent. The weapons clashed like bolts of chain lightning. It went on and on with Markman slowly losing ground, first by inches, then feet. For a split second he found himself within the sparkling curtain of light and then backed into the vault of snakes.

The skeleton persisted. It did not tire. Markman made a move to hamper its advance and took a powerful blow to the left upper arm. It hunched him sideways for a second and forced him back even further, and before he could recover to intercept the next strike, it came down hard on his left shoulder. Pain surged so badly it was dizzying. He tried to step back once more, but stumbled. As he planted his right foot, the heel caught on something. He pitched over backwards, barely avoiding a horizontal swipe from the unrelenting skeleton. He spun sideways in midair, keeping the sword raised with his right hand, hoping to break his fall with the left. He looked for the floor. It was not there.

Snakes. He had tripped on the edge of the pit. They were coiled in a pile and waiting. It would be a soft-cushioned landing into a bed of repeated stings. Markman's mind switched on. In midair, he slapped madly for the blue triangle that he knew was somewhere on his chest.

A burst of white light flooded his vision. He crashed hard into the floor. A familiar, melodic voice spoke with earnest dismay.

"The prophets forbid, Mr. Baker. You've aborted from the level one. Oh, dear me!"

Markman was sprawled on the pristine floor within the golden pyramid. Trill stood over him, a distraught look drawn into the simple lines of his face.

"Sir, you were doing so well..."

Markman pushed himself to his feet and inspected his computer body for damage. His left arm and shoulder ached, but there were no visible signs of injury. He looked at his worried protégé and grimaced. "What?"

"Sir, you should not have required use of the abort on the level one. You had nearly reached level two, where it is even more likely such an escape will be needed. You have lost your page, you did not retain the sword, and you were in part responsible for the death of the gatekeeper. It should not have been necessary. It will cost you."

"What is this, some kind of bad dream?" Markman rubbed his sore shoulder. "What are you talking about? The stupid gate guy tried to kill me. How else could I have tried to get the damned sword?"

"Sir, he would have simply given it to you had you asked. There is a one-hundred-thousand-credit penalty for his demise, and another one-hundred-thousand for the loss of your page. You have expended one-fourth of your fortune on only the level one. Sir, you must be more careful."

"Hey, the damn page took off, and the gatekeeper tried to kill me. What the hell could I do?"

The disappointed protégé paused and shook his head. "Sir, at the next opening of the main gate we will better prepare you."

"Fine, just fine!"

"Sir, would you please step into the tube for suit disengagement."

Escaping the insane world of alien virtual reality was Markman's premier wish. Exhausted, he took his place in the transparent vertical shaft. Trill stood by the control arch and, without further discussion, waved his sleeved hand over the crystalline control. There was again a short burst of white light, and in the blink of an eye Markman's vision became one of absolute darkness. An ominous clicking and hissing sound came from the suit collar as the featherweight helmet detached itself. Stale air from the outside room seeped into the helmet.

Completely drained, he pushed the black hood up and off his head. He was standing in the center of the abandoned hall of the factory. The land of the virtual had contained such depth, seemed so real, that adjusting to the transition to reality was difficult to accept.

He looked around the unswept, windowless work area and discovered the impressions of his own footprints, hundreds of them, weaving bizarre patterns in the dust on the floor. Some cast jumping steps, others ninety-degree running cuts, and in several spots, it was disturbed in large irregular circles and lines as though something violent had been recorded from the game. He looked down at the heavily-inlaid suit that covered his tired, sweating body. It seemed immaculately clean. The seam on the left side lay open. He placed the helmet on the floor and quickly peeled off the second skin--happy to be free of it. He stood naked and stunned by the harsh contrast of dingy real life compared to the effervescence of the virtual.

A feminine voice called from somewhere behind him. "So, a real live Dragon Master. I'm impressed."

He turned, still in a daze, forgetting to cover himself, and saw Rogers leaning against the open door of the rusty elevator. She appraised him in a less than professional manner and made no effort to conceal that fact. Too tired to blush, he turned and went to his own clothing that still lay in the shadowy corner of the room. He dropped the crumpled-up Sensesuit into its case and hurriedly squeezed himself back into his jeans. When he had finished dressing, he gathered everything up and joined her at the elevator.

"Why are you here? You'll give us away."

Rogers smiled affectionately. "If they didn't see you beat up Baker and tie him up with his own shoe laces, they sure as hell won't notice me."

"I didn't beat him up, and how is he by the way? He saved my ass."

"Mr. Baker is just fine. He's indisposed at the moment and will be for some time. For all goods and purposes, you are now Mr. Baker. We've called your replacement back. You're now officially on leave of absence. Your double didn't want to come back. Said he had a case he was working on that could be something big. We had to insist."

Markman plunked the dull silver Sensesuit case down onto the elevator floor, as the heavy doors banged shut. The car started down.

"The taxi you called will be waiting in the street by the basement entrance. Give the case to the driver. The lab guys will spend tonight and tomorrow studying what's in it. They'll have it back to us in time for midnight in case we decide to use it again."

"I never called a taxi..."

"Of course you did, Mr. Baker. It'll take you to my apartment. It's the safest place for you now, a secured building. You've been checked out of your hotel. Your bags will be delivered tomorrow. Your job for now is to sleep and rest. I'd say you need it." Rogers held out a

fat white bag from a fast food restaurant. Markman frowned and accepted it.

"If I told you I was beyond exhaustion, would you believe me?"

"I'd believe you if you said you were near death. Tomorrow at nine we meet with the rest of my group. Quite a bit is suddenly happening. In the morning you'll dictate a report of what went on inside the suit. I can't wait to hear that."

"That's something you may not believe."

The elevator suddenly jerked to a stop at the first floor. The big doors opened grudgingly, and Rogers stepped out.

"You're right, I probably won't."

Markman existed in a foggy stupor as he made his way to the cab. The intense, colored emissions from the powerful twin screens within the Sensesuit helmet had left the late-night world of New York looking bland, even in its prided neon. The vague figures that roamed the early morning streets had more life in them than the make-believe cartoon characters that lived inside the Sensesuit, but the artificial lighting robbed them of the fine detail that would have helped validate their existence. The thought of ever returning to Virtual World taxed Markman and sent an unfamiliar trickle of fear through his spine. He put the thought aside.

Rogers's apartment was in a glass-enclosed high rise in the center of the sleepless city. It did not look like a place someone would willingly choose to live in. There was a stark sort of barrenness about it, like the cold, impassioned glare financial institutions tended to possess. Three security guards stationed behind an elaborate console in the small lobby required an electronic palm print of Markman's right hand. They nodded in agreement and rewarded him by clipping a badge to his jacket collar, then provided directions to the elevators.

Rogers's temporary home was on the eighteenth floor. She met him at the door like a marathon coach receiving her charge after the first round of the big race had just been won. She handed him a healthy shot of bourbon in a short glass brimming with ice. A hot shower was already running, steaming the bath windows. The apartment was ultra-modern. Almost the entire washroom was covered by mirrored glass with closet space and cabinets hidden behind it, leaving Markman to search like a tired thief for a towel and washcloth. Somehow in the blur of it all, he finally found himself finishing off the icy-hot drink as it became diluted by the hot water streaming down his face.

He emerged from the merciful relaxation of the shower and found his soiled clothes had disappeared. Wrapped only in a towel, he found his way to the nearest bed and took his final fall of the day into it. The lights went out quickly.

Markman awoke in total darkness, completely lost to any sense of time. He flinched at the memory of the Sensesuit, then gratefully realized he was not in one. His naked body had been carefully covered with a soft blanket. The darkness was so complete he could not even see the watch still strapped to his wrist. It was difficult to tell what had awakened him from such a deep sleep, and his battered body, particularly the bruised left shoulder, refused commands to roll up onto one arm. When it finally did, he realized he could not even see his hand in front of his face.

There was a smell. It was what had brought him to consciousness. A musty dead smell, unpleasantly sweet and extremely strong, like when something has died and can't be located for proper burial. He pulled back the sheets and climbed to his feet. Naked, he felt his way around, remembering nothing of the layout of the borrowed bedroom. His fingers found the cloth covered surface of a bureau top against a wall. He traced along it until it gave way to the shape of an open door. There was no switch on the wall.

A faint, light suggested the hallway. He followed along one wall toward the living room and realized that his guide was moonlight that had turned amber through the heavily tinted glass that was the building's exterior. He felt past the open bathroom door and Rogers's bedroom, also open, and realized the sickening smell was getting stronger.

Near the end of the hall he saw them: a vision that could have been from a nightmare. The main entrance was being held open by one, while nine or ten others milled around the large expanse of the sunken living area. They seemed to move without volition, swaying to and fro, pacing slowly around the sitting room like large wind up toys. The dim light gave only vague detail. Their clothes were torn and ragged, the faces dark and somber. There was no urgency in them. In their seemingly random search, they were gradually growing nearer the hallway.

Markman backed away. His eyes had adjusted as best they could to the low light. He found his way to the silk sheets where Rogers lay sleeping. With a light touch he found her mouth and quickly covered it with one hand. She woke with a start and chopped at his hold before realizing who it was. He led her to the hall, pausing just long enough for her to see that the odds seemed too heavily stacked against them. They retreated from the intruders, taking refuge in the bath.

The door of the concealed mirrored closet made a small click as it was opened. They listened and heard no alarm. They squeezed into the tiny broom closet and clicked the panel quietly shut along side them.

They waited and listened.

In the darkness and intensity of the moment, Markman quickly became aware of a second very awkward distraction. The utter darkness had concealed the fact that Rogers was also wearing nothing. They were now pinned together, face to face, with absolutely nothing between them. His feelings began to flush between presage and embarrassment. His mind repeatedly demanded he push out of the intrusively intimate happenstance, though his instinct for danger kept overriding the impulse. Rogers's body language suggested she was dealing with equally enigmatic emotions. Her right hand clutched fearfully at his upper arm and her left rested on his hip. Her nipples were erect and pressed hard into his chest. The intensity of the moment sent erotic ripples down through his groin where her soft pubic-laced skin was meshed with his own. He struggled not to become excited.

Labored, shuffling footsteps came from just outside the closet door. The sound of toiletries being knocked over, glass clinking against porcelain, came at random. The glass door on the shower stall clicked and oscillated open and then snapped shut. Footsteps stopped outside the closet door. Then quiet. Waiting.

The potency of the moment, combined with Rogers's warm and rapid breath on his shoulder became too much for Markman. He felt himself losing control. His body rose without consent and pushed between them. Rogers's breathing grew erratic and excited. She clung to him unable to move, and they exchanged each other's breath in a fearful passion, both wondering if at any moment the closet door would burst open, leaving them exposed and vulnerable to the unexplained dangers that lurked just outside.

When enough silence had marked the time, Markman carefully pushed open the smooth door and dared a look outside. No lights had been turned on. No sounds filtered into the darkened bath. Together they oozed out from the small closet and hastily collected towels to cover their sweaty bodies. In the deserted living room, the front door was still ajar. Rogers cautiously began to light the apartment. Signs of intrusion were everywhere, though the damage was minor and lacked any obvious pattern. A random trail of displaced belongings was found throughout the flat.

A quick call to the security desk at the building's front entrance proved to be even more disturbing. No intrusions had been detected. No alarms had been triggered. The security staff was completely unaware any violation had occurred. In minutes, a highly argumentative and embarrassed group arrived and began combing the violated apartment. At one point, two of them, wearing distressed

expressions, huddled out of the apartment carrying a black briefcase that had been found under Rogers's bed.

Amid the throngs of confusion, Markman managed to find a long winter overcoat in a hall closet. He pulled it on for added covering and slouched partly sideways on the living room couch. With drooping eyelids and frequent yawns, he watched the erratic parade of disturbed people mill around the apartment. Eventually he ended up slumped over in an unconscious heap on the soft pillows. No level of confusion was enough to deny him sleep.

Chapter 20

Rogers pushed open the heavy metal door to the conference room on the seventeenth floor. Inside, her associates looked up expectantly. Their dress shirts were unbuttoned at the collar, and their ties loosened. Suit jackets hung from the backs of chairs. The large, polished, wood grained table they were using was nearly covered by notebooks, loose documents, and Styrofoam coffee cups. Their expressions became subtly hostile as Markman, wearing jeans and a black sweatshirt, followed her in. Agent Brian Hall broke off his discussion with the man beside him as they took their seats.

Rogers straightened her gray dress jacket, and gave a quick, flat smile to her associates. "Gentleman, we've had some good developments in the past twenty-four hours as well as some disturbing ones. I'm sure the intrusion into my apartment means the pressure must be on them. Let's start with that. Al, has the lab come up with anything yet?"

A slight man with thinning blond hair sat up. Like the others at the table, a red security badge hung from the lapel of his suit jacket. The name on it read, "A. Simmons". He fidgeted with a pencil on the table top as he spoke. "Ah, well yes, we have found something besides the suitcase, but you're not going to like it."

"Okay. Let's have it."

"There's prints all over the place, a dozen or so. It's as if they didn't care."

"Whose prints?"

Simmons paused. "Okay, we've identified prints from a half dozen people so far, but we haven't been able to locate any of the owners. Most of them are street dwellers, people that don't stay in one place too long. That's probably why we haven't picked any of them up yet. But that's not the troubling part."

Simmons discarded the pencil, and rubbed one finger on the side of his nose. "The thing is this; one set of prints belonged to, they belong to Lee. I have no explanation."

A heavy silence came over the room. Markman looked to Rogers for enlightenment. She ignored him.

"What exactly was our last contact with Agent Lee?"

Simmons looked to the man sitting next to him. His brown hair was trimmed in a close crew cut, and the coarse features of his face made him look unfriendly. "His last message was keyed into our switchboard by cell phone. There was no voice contact at all. The

message said he had successfully infiltrated the group and would contact us again when he was able. As you know, we haven't heard from him since."

Rogers wrinkled her brow. "Maybe he did get in. Maybe this is the only way he could let us know he's still on the inside. It's possible we have a deep cover here. Let's play it that way. Do everything you possibly can to help him and make it real easy for contact. This could be good. What about the smell? Did you come up with anything on that, Al?"

"I'm sorry, Ann. No samples, no traces, nothing."

"So how'd they get in?"

"We don't know that either. We're still blanketing the building. Clearly they were after you. They went straight for your quarters, and even got the right room. Oddly enough, it's also likely they did not know Markman was there. There was no particular interest in his room, even though they had missed him by only seconds. Their intelligence gathering is just as erratic as their actions, and yet they managed to identify and find you, as impossible as that seems."

Rogers's voice became irate. "A dozen individuals enter a secured building, and we still don't know how? You're kidding me."

The room remained quiet.

"Gentlemen, that is unacceptable. I expect an explanation by this afternoon." She paused and looked sternly over the room. "Okay, the briefcase, then. Let's see it."

Simmons's raised his eyebrows. He bent over in his chair and brought up the briefcase that had been left in Rogers's apartment. He unlatched it and lifted the cover, then glanced around the room to make certain everyone could see.

"Now of course the composition-four explosive has been removed, and we've replaced it with clay to simulate what you would actually see if you found one of these. It's a very simple mechanism actually. On the left side of the case, you see the count-down timer. It's run by this standard nine-volt battery, and the detonators work off of the circuit next to it. It's got a separate, special, high-voltage squib-type battery that mixes when the timer hits zero and that initiates the detonators. It's made to be set off by remote control. This wire here running around the inside of the case is the antenna. It feeds this circuit next to the countdown timer. When the signal is received, or the case's Plexiglas cover is removed, the nine-volt battery gets switched on, and the sequence begins. Apparently they planned to detonate this thing from somewhere nearby. It's lucky we found it as quickly as we did. It has a two second delay. It's a nice, neat system, but they made a mistake."

Simmons looked up expecting questions. There were none. "You see, they put this Plexiglas cover over the whole thing, and there's this little micro-switch here at the left back corner. It's supposed to be that if you remove the screws and lift off the Plexiglas, the micro-switch closes, and boom, you're done for. But this device is actually very simple to disarm. You remove the two screws here on the front corners and then the one on the right rear corner and you can move the Plexi with the left back screw acting like an axis. You just rotate the Plexi around and the switch stays held in place. Then you simply reach in and unclip the nine-volt battery and that's it. You're safe. You would want to bring it right in, of course, for a complete neutralization."

Rogers broke in. "If anyone doesn't understand the procedure, see that you get it straight before you leave. Everyone here needs to know it. We believe this is the same type of bomb that brought down Merrill's aircraft. Any of us could encounter another just like it, so be prepared, gentleman." She paused for emphasis.

"Okay, next item. I've read the work-up on your long shot, Anders. Why are you so sure you've found somebody on the run from Inkman?"

A studious-looking man sitting next to Markman leaned forward in his seat. He was young and wore wire-rimmed glasses that he repositioned on his face. His plain, blue sports shirt seemed inappropriate. His voice was calm and persuasive. "I don't consider this a long shot at all, Ann. We got real lucky on this. One of our people over in Jersey brought in a small-time con who was using the credit card of a recent murder victim. This guy wanted to plea-bargain real bad. He said that he purchased the card from another ex-con named Mick Pursley, but that we'd never find him because he was in hiding from somebody named Inkman. When our agent put the report into his computer, we already had a system-wide flag out for anything that came through with the name Inkman, so it came up on our terminals almost immediately. We back-tracked and checked on all of the cards stolen from this particular victim. There was only one other and it was used recently to purchase a round-trip ticket to Mexico. The return flight gets in this afternoon at three-fourteen."

"So you plan to greet him at the airport, I assume?" asked Rogers.

"Well, it's not quite as simple as that. We're not sure its the ex-con who's doing the traveling, and the guy we have in custody says he never saw this Mick character in person. The card was sold through a drop-off and pick-up arrangement. We've got nothing in records on a Mick Pursley. It's got to be an alias."

"So we know when he's coming, but we don't know what he looks like, is that what you're saying?"

"That's it. We'll try to contact the flight and get a description, but flight three-forty-two is traveling light. Our man probably won't sit in his assigned seat. We can't detain over two hundred people when they debark, so at this point we're open for suggestions."

"I have one," said Markman unexpectedly. The atmosphere in the meeting chamber again became hostile. Rogers dampened it by casting a cool stare at her subordinates.

"Yes, Scott, go ahead."

"Have Inkman greet this guy when he arrives. If he's so afraid of the man, it's bound to get a reaction."

The stocky agent with the crew cut stifled an inappropriate laugh. He spoke with sarcastic humor. "What'd ya suggest we do, give Inkman a call and ask him to meet us at the airport?" The man looked around the room with a smile to his associates. Rogers cut him off.

"I think what Scott is suggesting, Frank, is that we provide our own version of Inkman. You can follow that can't you?"

A strained look came over the man's face. He sat up and shook his head cordially.

"Very good. Then you can make arrangements with Special Projects to find someone that can be made up to resemble Inkman in time to make the airport, right?"

The man's face became blank, as though he was uncertain whether the assignment was one of consequence or compliment. He continued to nod in approval. "Sure, no problem."

Rogers added, "I think I'll go along on this one. It sounds interesting. Okay, last, but not least. I'm sure you've all read with great interest Mr. Markman's dictated report on the Sensesuit."

"Cartoon land, eh, Markman?" called Brian Hall from the opposite side of the room. His tone was supportive.

"Not really. I watched another player die in there last night."
Silence.

Rogers spoke. "We have confirmed that someone in the Paterson area was killed last night. So far the description fits a Sensesuit death perfectly. They're still working it. The lab has been examining Markman's suit all night. No information is available for release yet. Any data that we come up with pertaining to your work will be disseminated by me as it becomes available. We don't have anything useful right now, and no decision has been made whether or not to use the suit again. That call will be made later. Okay, if there are no questions, that's it for now. Same time here tomorrow unless you hear from me before then."

Chairs rolled back from the table as the group began to leave. Simmons, the lab supervisor, remained seated. Rogers turned to Markman and spoke in a tone that begged tolerance. "Scott, I need to speak with Albert privately. Could you get a cup of coffee down the hall or something, and wait for me?"

Markman made no protest. He nodded and closed the door as he left.

Rogers stared intently at her nervous lab head. The man squirmed in his seat.

"Okay, Al, let's have it."

"Sure, but don't try to tell me I'm crazy."

Rogers narrowed her stare and made no reply. The man's voice rose slightly in pitch, sounding almost pleading. "It's alien!"

"What?"

"Yep, alien. That's all I can say. No way it's from anywhere on this planet, no way."

Rogers's voice became compassionate. "Why do you say that?"

"Well, it's a chip for one thing."

"A computer chip? What's so special about that?"

"No, I mean the suit. The whole damn suit is one big integrated circuit. So is the helmet."

"I don't follow.."

"Hey, join the crowd. You put the suit together with the helmet, and you've got a computer like I've never seen. The thing's got more circuitry compressed in a single millimeter than some full stacks. The data buss', if you can call them that, are room-temperature superconductors. There are atomic-sized peripherals in every square millimeter of the thing. It takes a scanning electron microscope with special programming just to see most of it. It'll take years to analyze the thing, maybe never."

Simmons began to perspire and drew a white handkerchief from his suit jacket to wipe his brow. He shook his head in dismay and began again. "And there's more. Packed into the foam in the case, we found these other two pieces of equipment. One's horseshoe-shaped. It fits around the base of the helmet. The other is some kind of hand held device. We think they are diagnostic stuff used to calibrate and repair the suit. Inductive links. No wires, but several outputs to connect to other stuff. It's bizarre."

"So what have you been able to do with it?"

"Oh yeah, that's another thing. Can't turn it on even if we wanted to. The thing is run by some central computer somewhere. I'd like to see that, I'll tell you. There's an antenna matrix of some kind in the helmet. That's where the power supply is, by the way--whatever it is. We think there's a power-generating element located in the base

that isn't even on the periodic tables. Who the hell knows, not me, I'll tell you that. Anyway, the suit wants a transmission. That must be what happens at midnight. A central computer somewhere transmits a turn-on code, and the suit powers up. All the players actually meet inside this super-computer, wherever it is."

"So if we get set up and send a man back in tonight, could you locate and track the signal to its source?"

"Maybe, maybe not. I wouldn't bet on it, that's for sure. It could be they're using something as simple as pulse-code modulation or it could be something completely beyond us. No way to tell."

"Well, if he goes back in tonight, let's set up for it, okay?"

"No problem. I'll get the vans ready."

Rogers smiled appreciatively. "Okay, that's all, Al. Keep at it, and let me know immediately if you come up with anything else. Have the suit packed and ready to go by nine o'clock tonight. Be careful not to damage it in any way. Keep up the good work."

The anxious engineer rose from his seat and gathered up papers that had been on the table in front of him. He looked fretfully at his boss. "I'll tell you one thing."

"What's that?"

"Who ever designed and built that thing could kick our asses any damn where they please. I wouldn't get back in it for all the tea in China."

Rogers made no reply. She sat in silent agreement, and wondered if Scott Markman would.

Chapter 21

Cassiopia Cassell sat stiffly in the uncomfortable, armless, wooden chair. Her blue denim skirt was hiked high above the knee by the nylon rope binding her to the seat. The duct tape on her mouth was pinching, and her bare arms burned from the tightness of the line. Tel stood quietly alongside, unable to understand without additional input.

The bland, white room was very large and very clean. She was in a small alcove adjoining it. To her right a black, electronics console sat against one wall, looking like something that might have been stolen from a NASA launch complex. On her left, a short, stubby man with bushy brown hair sat with his chair tilted back against the wall, reading a battered paperback. He paid little attention and seemed completely unaffected by her discomfort.

She twisted in her seat, unable to move more than a few inches. She was thirsty and her eyes had bags under them from lack of sleep. The sound of elevator doors opening behind her momentarily distracted her from the unpleasantness. The guard lowered his book and became alert and postured.

“Sir, no problems here. Everything’s just fine.”

A man in his late twenties, wearing an expensive-looking dark suit came around and into view on her left. He was well-groomed and walked with a silver cane. His dark hair was unparted, slightly long and very straight. The features of his face were soft, as though he’d never suffered a day in his life.

He pulled a flat topped stool around from behind and sat directly in front of Cassiopia, taking a moment to admire the glistening hulk of the robot. He spoke with an artificially-affectionate tone that suggested impatience. “Ms. Cassell, my sincere apologies for your sudden inconvenience. I’m here to explain why you and your friend have been made my guests. Actually, you were to arrive here several days ago, but a pair of idiot brothers named Spungin almost blew the entire affair. I had to send professionals more suited to the task to correct the situation. Let’s start with the tape, shall we? I propose to remove it from your mouth. Screaming, or calling out for help would be completely useless. I own this building. It is located in the middle of an industrial complex. There is no one who could hear you, so the effort would be just wasted. A mere unpleasantry if you would. Do you understand?”

Cassiopia nodded reluctantly. The man reached out one hand and carefully peeled away the silver tape. He turned to his very attentive servant. "Max, get some water for our guest, please."

"Yes sir, Mr. Leeds."

"Ms. Cassell, my name is Paul Leeds. I intend you no harm. Everything I need from you, I will get without force. If you cooperate and follow my instructions, you will lose nothing more than a small amount of your time, and we will all get through this just fine. Are you with me so far?"

Cassiopia squinted angrily, but made no reply.

"What I really require is your robotic playmate here, but I need your help to use it. I've been placed in a somewhat awkward position. It's my knee actually." Leeds's voice became remorseful as Max returned with a clear glass of water. It was held out for her to drink, and she did so without altering her expression of anger.

"Have you ever heard of a group called the Dragon Masters, Ms. Cassell?"

Cassiopia refused to answer.

"No? I didn't expect so. They make up a unique club, of sorts. A very serious club. And since you've never heard of them, then I suppose you've also never seen one of these."

With that, he leaned behind her and dragged a large silver case forward. He opened it and drew out the most alien-looking body suit she had ever seen. Smiling, he held it up for her to examine.

Her eyes widened with intrigue. She quickly recognized the complexity of the device draped in front of her. She lost touch with her anger for the moment and became engrossed in the story that was unfolding.

"This suit will take you to one hundred different worlds without ever leaving this room, Ms. Cassell. I was one of the few fortunate enough to gain access to one. As I've said, it's a matter of some seriousness, however, because you can die in one of these very easily. They are catalysts for wealth and combat, an adventurer's greatest dream. I was doing quite well actually. The only real mistake I made was initially allowing the selection process to time out and default me to the Aurora City. I should have chosen a place more directly suited to my specific abilities. I was a triathlon champion, by the way. You see there is a certain undefined treasure involved at the end of any particular contest, something that is said to be priceless. I was close to it, very close, nearly at the end of the third level. I was in mortal combat with a quite hideous beast and had not realized that this particular breed traveled in pairs. Apparently, the first one distracts you while the second strikes from your blind side. I had nearly disposed of the first one when the second clamped down on my knee,

crushing it. I had only a broadsword, of course, but even then I cut it thoroughly and manage to escape. It had driven me all the way back to the second level however, which is where I was forced to eject from the game. But I survived in any case, though my knee did not fare as well. Unfortunately, I have no chance of reentering the contest as I am now."

Leeds paused to silently console himself. Cassiopia stared at the crumpled suit as he dropped it back into its case. Quickly, his gaze returned to her. "I've had some time now to study the suit quite thoroughly, Ms. Cassell, with the help of a very knowledgeable associate. I believe the suit is far beyond any present-day technology. I believe it to be alien. I have no idea who's operating the game, or where they come from, but I'm certain that the treasure that is given to a player who beats the system is beyond comprehension. I must have it, and I will not rest until I do. And that, my dear, is where you and your robot will assist me."

Cassiopia's anger flared. "You're insane. You're nothing but a criminal. I won't do anything for you. My father has probably already informed the police, and they're looking for us right now."

Leeds sighed, managing to contain his short temper. "No...no, I'm afraid not, my dear. Your father is at this moment locked away in his own basement. If you cooperate with us he will be released unharmed, until then, there he will remain. What I require will only take a day or two of your time. That's all I ask."

Cassiopia narrowed her stare. "What is it you want?"

"As I've said, I am unable to continue in the Sensesuit. Only the most skilled individuals tend to survive them. I need someone who is infallible to take my place. The suit really does not care whom. This one will always assume it is I who is using it. I need a Superman to take my place, someone like your TEL for instance."

Leeds waited to allow his statement to sink in. "Of course, the suit was not intended to accommodate something as large and bulky as your mechanical friend, but surprisingly enough we were able to adapt. Somehow I think the game operators were unaware of the diagnostic units included in the case. I doubt they would knowingly have allowed players access to them. I found mine purely by coincidence when I kicked it in anger and the foam packing fell out onto the floor. By acquiring the help of someone skilled in robotics and computers, it became possible to develop that interface console you see here on your right. As a matter of fact I believe you know the gentleman I'm speaking of. He's a former associate of yours."

With that, a third figure emerged from behind Cassiopia. She immediately recognized the familiar, dark-haired man whose beard stubble was always so thick it made him look poorly groomed. He

wore a white lab smock and smiled crookedly as he returned her seething stare.

"Cox! I should have guessed."

"Nice to see you again, Cassiopia. How's the Professor these days? Still a shut-in? Nice TEL you have there. Tell me, how have the tactile sensors been holding up? They were largely my design, if you remember."

"I thought you'd still be in prison."

"Early release. With Mr. Leeds's help, it surprised even me how quickly I got out. Maybe they thought I got a bad deal, eh?"

"For corporate espionage with a foreign government? You sold out the TEL Corporation, and you sold out your own country. They should have kept you in there forever."

"Screw that, babe. I was treated like crap. I was passed over at every turn. Others took credit for nearly everything I did. It was bullshit."

Leeds's temper grew marginal. "Ladies, gentleman,...please. Let us get back to matters at hand." He waited for a tentative calm and resumed. "As I was saying, Ms. Cassell, with Mr. Cox's very capable help and his knowledge of TEL robotics, we were able to develop a system in which the robot can be the primary participant in the game. By extracting and modifying the necessary signals, we can feed them to the robot in such a way that it will see and hear everything that the player normally would. The robot's actions are in turn fed back into the system to make it appear as though the person wearing the suit is playing the game. That person will in fact be sitting idly in the very chair you now occupy. The truth is we don't actually understand how it all works, but fortunately experimentation paid off."

Cassiopia's emotions bounced back and forth between anger and fascination. She stared back at her captors with disgust. "So why have you brought me here, when you only needed the robot?"

"Not true, Cass," offered Cox. "You well know the versatility of the TEL when it comes to microprocessor and software adaptability. With your help we can adapt this particular TEL to the task much more quickly."

"I wouldn't help you if my life depended on it."

Cox looked to Leeds with a raised eyebrow. Leeds smiled and reassumed the role of moderator. "Funny you should mention that, Ms. Cassell, because actually your life will depend on it. You see, though the suit will remain idle, it must have a wearer, and whoever is relegated that role will suffer the pain and injury a normal player would. If the robot fails to block a strike, for example, whoever is wearing the suit will take it. So what better way to insure the robot will

do its utmost to succeed, than to have you in the Sensesuit when it is happening, my dear.”

Cassiopia glared at them. “I won’t put it on. I won’t...”

“Tsk, tsk, tsk, now, now, Ms. Cassell. I must warn you. The suit is intended to be worn with nothing underneath. If you refuse to step into the next room to put it on, we three will be forced to put it on you, and from the looks of your most elegant figure, I dare say that would probably be a very pleasant, and most likely drawn-out affair.”

Cassiopia looked away, realizing the plan had been all too carefully prepared. She stared out over the large empty room and wondered how in so short a time her life could have become so casually and hopelessly invaded. If only Scott Markman knew what was happening.

Chapter 22

They stood on a mezzanine overlooking gate twelve at La Guardia. Rogers leaned against a rail next to Markman, waiting for the empty gate area to overflow with the relieved and fatigued passengers of flight 342. The Inkman decoy was directly below, standing behind two sinister-looking agents dressed in trench coats and low-brimmed hats. They had positioned themselves just outside the waist-high barrier of the small waiting area, off to one side so that their presence was not immediately obvious to those who would be using the debarking ramp.

Suddenly the gates opened, and the colorful crowd poured into the annex and into the rows of plastic seats anchored to the thinly carpeted floor. The group remained subdued and quiet. Rogers smiled and shook her head. It's a traditional thing, she thought, the unwritten rule that suggests the safety of any given flight cannot be assumed until one is well clear of the aircraft in question.

As they began to scatter, the agents that were shielding the fake Inkman moved casually aside. Almost immediately, a disturbance broke out in the crowd. A short, husky man, his black hair trimmed evenly in a Larry-and-Moe haircut, fought his way through the masses in a direction away from the false Inkman.

Rogers watched breathlessly as he unwittingly followed the course she had provided, a roped off area that lead directly to the perfect exit. The level of fear that seemed to be driving him surprised even her. He knocked possessions from his fellow passengers and pushed them rudely aside. He jumped the barrier of the gate area and raced full speed for the rotating doors that led to the pickup area. A taxi was waiting just outside. Rogers shook her head and smiled to herself, knowing his taxi ride would be direct to the headquarters building downtown. There he would be forced to sit and wait until her agents came and opened the self-locking rear doors of the bogus taxi.

"Look, you cooperate and things will go much better for you, Mick."

"I am cooperatin', I'm tellin' ya. I don't know nothin'."

"Come on, Mick. We don't give a damn about the drug deal you were trying to set up in Mexico. It's Inkman we're after. We know you've worked for him. Don't try to deny it."

"Never heard of 'im."

"You were a driver for him, Mick. Does that shake your memory at all?"

"Ain't never heard of the guy."

The interrogator leaned back. He looked into the large, two-way mirror on the wall at the end of the interview table, knowing that Rogers and Markman were watching from behind it. He stood and left the room, and a moment later entered the small observation booth.

"I don't know, Ann. He's a tough nut to crack. What'da you think?"

Rogers nodded agreement. She paused to stare back out the tinted window at the squirrely little man who sat smoking a cigarette, satisfied he had managed a stalemate.

"Okay, go for the 'Hail Mary'. Make it sound good."

The interrogator nodded and pulled at his already loosened tie. He left the cramped booth and quickly reappeared on the other side of the glass. He took a seat directly across from his stubborn suspect and spoke with finality. "Okay, Mick, one last time. I'm going to give it to you straight. I'll tell you what we've got on you, what's going to put you away for good. Then you get two seconds to help me out, or you take a ride to where you start the hard time. It's that's simple."

"But I'm..."

"Just shut up and listen. I'm tired. I get this over with, I go home to ice cold beer and pizza, and I'm done with you forever. So just shut up. Now what we've got is this. We got a protected witness who puts you driving for Inkman down in Washington when one of our planes was brought down. We got an exact copy of the bomb that was used. We know it was remotely detonated. We know it was either you or Inkman. It doesn't matter which. You both get murder one. That's what the witness will give us. So one last time, and I'll leave you alone for good. Was it you or was it Inkman that pushed the button? Last chance..."

Mick's expression darkened. He shifted in his chair and looked nervously around the room for a way out. He tapped his fingers on the tabletop, and searched the interrogator's eyes for deceit. He coughed into his hand and looked away.

Markman whispered to Rogers, "You never said you had a witness."

Rogers leaned close. "We've got nothing."

Mick's voice became hurried and rose in pitch. "I never had nothin' to do with any a' that kind a' stuff. I was just the driver. He said go here, so I went there. I never knew nothin' 'bout what was goin' on."

"So who pushed the button that night? Say it."

"Inkman. Inkman did all that stuff. I never even knew it was goin' down. Couldn't a' stopped it if I tried."

"So why are you running from him, Mick?"

The ruffled man fidgeted in his seat and looked around as though he feared Inkman might show at any moment. "They're a creepy bunch, man, I'll tell ya that. The money was too good to pass up. He's got a big staff, ya know, and every now and then somebody disappears, ya know."

"You mean they leave?"

"No man, I mean they disappear, real quiet like. You don't dare ask nothin'. I thought I was doin' alright, ya know. Then one night I went up to tell 'em the car was ready, and I overheard 'em talkin' on the phone. I heard some stuff I wasn't supposed to and Inkman saw me. I acted dumb 'course, and he played it like nothin' was wrong, but the look he gave me went right through me. Man, it still gives me the creeps when I think about it. I knew it was gettin' late, if you know what I mean. So I took off while I still could. Been hidin' out ever since. He's got ways a' gettin' to people, ya know."

"So just what was it that you heard that was so important?"

"Beats me. All I know is that some VIP thing is happenin' two days from now. Like Inkman's version of the messiah is supposed to be comin' or somethin'. The matredam, somethin' like that."

"Matriarch?"

"Yeah, that's it, the matriarch. How'd you know about that?"

"Never mind, Mick. What else did you hear?"

"That's it. He was carryin' on about it bein' a big, new deal or somethin'. I couldn't make sense out 'a it. Oh yeah, he said it was happenin' at the last place anyone would ever suspect so there was no way this ceremony thing could be interrupted. Hey, you guys got to get me in a good place, you know. Some place he can't get at me. You got to do that, right?"

"No problem, Mick. Give us everything you know and we'll take care of you."

"Okay, there was one other thing. He was always mentionin' someplace called S18. It had to do with the big deal. I never found out what it was. He used to drive himself sometimes. I always thought it was a locker at some bus stop or somethin', you know, with big money in it maybe. It was a pick-up, drop-off place, but I swear I don't know where. It had to do with the big deal they were cookin' up. That's it. That's all I know."

Markman glanced again at Rogers and was surprised to find her staring at the glass in wide-eyed delight. "My God, that's it! You've made Inkman! You've solved the downing of your airplane and linked Inkman directly to the Sensesuit deaths!"

She looked back at him and summoned her composure. "It's not enough. That punk's word is all we've got. We'll let Inkman run free and see where he leads us. There's more to this, a lot more."

"It sounds like you may not have long."

"Two days?"

Markman nodded in agreement. "Two days."

Fifty-nine miles west-northwest of the headquarters building, Cassiopia Cassell remained strapped in her vexatious chair. Her short denim dress and soft white blouse had been exchanged for a dark one-piece form-fitting body suit that made her look like an astronaut held prisoner. The glistening TEL robot stood alone in the center of the adjoining room, a black, brick-sized transmitter-receiver fastened to its reflective chest plate.

She winced but made no protest as the obtrusive, black helmet was lowered over her head. Her world became dark as she waited captively for whatever would come. She sat calmly and quietly, knowing her well-being depended solely on the abilities of a single TEL robot. A methodical clicking and hissing began as the helmet engaged itself to the suit. One brilliant sunrise later, Cassiopia found herself the first unwilling visitor to the wonderland called the Virtual.

Markman stared placidly out the tinted window of the agency's taxi. His attempts to call Cassiopia had gone unanswered. Rogers rode quietly beside him. The overcast night had brought a heavy darkness to the city. The checkerboard lights of the high rise buildings spotted the night sky, as the towers high above them flashed pointed warnings. Steam jets rose from the sewer drains along the street, creating neon-colored columns of evaporating haze. The clamor of jackhammers and steel had faded away.

Markman squeezed the illuminate button on his watch. Eleven thirty. Rogers looked at him with a soulful stare as the taxi pulled to a stop in an alley beside the Conn Building. Without speaking, he got out and withdrew the silver case from the front seat. With a last, reassuring look, he turned and disappeared into the shadows.

The fifth floor was deserted. His footprints from the last Sensesuit battle were still imprinted in the dust. Nervously, he suited up and waited until the last moment before slipping on the helmet. The clicking and snapping sounds told him he was sealed in once more. Moments later, the artificial dawn of the Aurora City returned.

Trill was waiting within the pyramid's apex. Markman listened carefully to his new instructions. No page would be provided this time. A penalty-period was programmed into the game. He took his place in the transport tube and a second later was standing by the glimmering electronic curtain that adjoined the snake pit. The long sword was there, standing on its point within the pit, its intricately carved handle

jutting just above floor level. Quickly, he retrieved it and marched back through the curtain to the chamber of copper doors.

The skeleton was nowhere in sight. The center and left hand doors remained fractured and open. The door on the right was still sealed. Markman went to it and thrust his blade deeply into the copper engravings. The door parted open at the center.

He stepped through the door into a maze of challenges. Corridors of arcing lightning struck explosively and set fires around him. Rivers of liquid mercury had to be forded to avoid collapsing ground. Faceless creatures struck at nearly every turn. Patches of darkness in the distance meant combat was conducted by touch and instinct alone.

Two hours into the quest, the land of the Virtual began to change. Markman cut his way through a curtain of blue light and emerged onto an endless desert. It looked so threatening and impassable he quickly turned to retreat but found the exit had disappeared. Around him, there remained only barren, sandy, wind-blown landscape. In every direction, wisps of sand skimmed the dry horizon. It reminded him of a similar place he had once become lost in with Cassiopia. He took a deep, hot breath and trudged ahead.

The granular, baked ground shifted and gave way under his feet as he walked, making him wonder how such a simulation was possible. The air was uncomfortably hot and growing worse by the minute. In the distance, only the low curves of wind-shaped dunes were visible. His tired body struggled to cool itself with sweat. He licked his dry lips and retreated to within himself, where neither heat nor cold existed, the place where there was only perfection and peace.

Miles into the crossing, he abruptly collided with something. He stepped back in astonishment. The wasteland remained empty and boundless. He reached out with one hand and found a transparent barrier. It was solid and continuous. Swishing through the arid sand, he moved along laterally, following the invisible wall with his fingers. He skirted it in a long, wide arc until something out of place finally caught his eye. In the distance, a door-like opening stood in the midst of the desert sand. Blue light and cool air seemed to be coming from it.

In the ever-increasing heat, he hurried to the opening and pulled himself through, dragging golden sand onto a smooth reflective floor as he went. His sweaty body became chilled by the cool air. He regained his composure and looked around, keeping the long sword held low, but ready.

The region of blue light became a wide, sunken arena. The floor consisted of great squares of varying shades of light and dark, forming a life-size chessboard. In place of a ceiling, there were stars dotting an

inky black sky. Soft illumination came from beneath the floor and behind the high walls. There were no stairwells or balconies. No viewing area of any kind.

Markman continued to scan the perimeter and abruptly discovered he was not alone. Dread flushed through him. To his left, across the open floor in an alcove entrance, the worst of all nightmares stood gloating. The menacing skeleton that had driven him from his place in level one waited, swinging its familiar human bone-club, and clacking its teeth in anticipation.

Chapter 23

Markman knew he had already been seen. Behind him, access to the baking sands of the unmerciful desert had vanished. He stepped brazenly into the open and with sword raised took a ready stance. The skeleton advanced quickly, its bare teeth forming that same morbid smile. Markman tightened up and held his place near the side wall. He studied the creature carefully as it approached. The legs had to be the weak point. Spin and cut for the knees and ankles in the style of the drunken monkey. Don't back away, even under blows. There's no place to go. But as the skeleton continued its disjointed strut, it did not alter its course toward him. Instead it headed for the center of the coliseum. Confused, Markman scanned right. The answer came quickly into view. A second player had entered on the opposite side of the coliseum and had become the primary target. Markman felt a twinge of fear for the man. He wore the same form-fitting body suit; ninja-styled hood; black gloves and boots; blue triangle on the chest. He carried a long sword that was much more decorative than Markman's. Its handle was gold, embedded with glowing, precious stones. Its shimmering chrome blade was slightly long.

Markman relaxed from his combative stance and stared with fascination as the two approached one another. They stopped and paused only a few inches apart. The skeleton tilted its head back and forth with the same curious appraisal it had given Markman. The other player seemed fearless to a careless degree. He held his sword low and unprepared. Markman thought to call out in warning, but the exchange began.

The skeleton brought its weapon down hard, but the player's blade intercepted in time. A left and a right hook came so rapidly they seemed unstoppable, but the player held off both strikes with a speed and accuracy that almost seemed to reflect indifference.

They disengaged and paused. The skeleton again surveyed its prey and charged. The exchange occurred with such speed that Markman was unable to track everything that was happening. The conflict went on and on. Strikes from the skeleton were all deftly countered by its new opponent. The speed of the battle was clearly superhuman. Markman's mind struggled to understand how a human player could react so quickly. There was only one plausible explanation. This had to be a counterfeit player, an image generated by the central computer to add extra dimension to the game. No man could possibly move that quickly and with such accuracy.

To his amazement the tide began to turn. Like an aggressive boxer tiring, the skeleton took its first step back. The player intensified his attack. His chops became heavy and frequent, as the skeleton struggled to defend. Suddenly the player's blade cut down through the skeleton's left shoulder. Bones broke away and scattered across the glossy floor. A second chop sliced ribs from the right side of its chest. Finally, with a horizontal cut, the skeleton was sliced in two and fell clattering and scattering to the floor; its bony club disappearing among its own broken remains.

The triumphant player turned and stared across the lighted floor at Markman. A tense silence followed. Satisfied that Markman was not an additional threat, the player headed for the arched door from which the skeleton had emerged. Without speaking or even glancing back, he crossed the arena and exited, as though he knew exactly where he was headed. Markman followed, but kept his distance.

The exit emptied into a huge, dome-shaped glass enclosure that appeared to be submerged beneath a fast-moving ocean. Aqua-blue water bubbled and eddied around and above it, creating whirling shadows on the glassy white floor. A circular, transparent tunnel at the opposite end of the room provided the only exit. Markman continued to keep his distance as the other player marched determinedly toward it. Halfway across the room, he stopped suddenly and raised his weapon.

A fearful roar echoed from within the tunnel. An instant later, a line of faceless, sword-wielding attackers emerged from the opening. They wore gray, skin-tight suits with full hoods. Their faces were void of eyes, nose, or mouth. Behind the first group, others quickly followed.

The assault was bloodthirsty and continuous. Soldier after soldier spilled into the dome and met the lead player as he fought past the halfway point. The clatter and ringing of blades was loud and furious as aggressors fell from his quick cuts. Markman maneuvered to cover the man's back, though his assistance was required infrequently. Occasionally a fallen attacker would regain his feet only to be dispatched by Markman. The endless flow of attackers failed to slow the furious advance of the two Dragon Masters. Markman quickly realized the lead player's plan. It was an age-old strategy that would allow a single, proficient swordsman to fend off a small army. He would fight his way to the tunnel entrance and then cut down the opposition as they attempted to emerge. No more than one or two at a time could fit through the tunnel door.

The players stood their ground at the tunnel entrance and the slaughter continued. Dozens fell before the invasion began to slow.

The engagement lasted another thirty minutes until the last of the faceless storm-troopers turned and fled back down the tunnel way.

No congratulations were offered by Markman's ally. No celebrations of victory or gestures of appreciation were made. Without turning to look, or even acknowledging Markman's presence, the player entered the deserted tunnel and charged ahead. Markman continued to cautiously shadow him.

The pace quickened. Markman had to be careful not to lose sight of him in the exotic realm through which they raced. Beyond the smooth walls of the reflective tunnel, level three became abstract. Barriers and obstacles of all shapes, sizes, and colors hung suspended in mid-air and bounced or vibrated when disturbed by the runners. Swirling colors came and went overhead like time-elapsed clouds in a hallucinatory dream. Emptiness lay beneath their feet, leaving Markman to feel as though he was running on thin air. On several occasions, he had to vault floating objects as they changed in form and color. There was no clear trail, yet the other player appeared to know exactly where he was headed. He continued on tirelessly, stopping only to confront enemy aggressors. Markman had to fend off several himself, in most cases blocking and then running from the conflict, rather than chance losing sight of his lead.

The sojourn finally ended with the two of them stopped by a red brick wall that blocked the way. It towered overhead, seeming to go on endlessly. Markman looked down. It was still as though he was standing on thin air. The only thing visible was the wall, descending into the nothingness.

For the first time, the other player appeared thwarted. He turned slowly in a circle looking for a way out. Markman watched with intense curiosity and wondered if they had been intentionally led to a dead-end by the central computer.

Something caught Markman's eye. Behind the other player, chin high on the red brick wall, a single brick had been badly placed. One end of it jutted out an inch more than those around it. With caution, he approached his counterpart. The man stood ready, but made no aggressive move. At the wall, the single brick seemed loose and movable. It had a spongy feel to it. Markman worked the computer stone in and out, freeing it slightly more with each try. Finally, it pulled free and dropped into the depths that lay below.

For a fleeting moment, an intense wash of color appeared in the newly-formed hole in the wall. Markman glimpsed an exotic garden of fluorescent ferns and glowing plant life. Something falling on his right distracted him. He looked down and saw a second brick tumbling down below. Then another fell on his left. Then another; then two; then several. Large chunks of the wall began to break away at various

points, avalanching down from above. Both men were forced to twist and turn radically to avoid being struck.

Markman lurched back, but abruptly changed his mind. He yelled loudly in his computer-generated voice and lunged forward, throwing himself at the failing wall. From the corner of his eye, he saw the other player strike its surface at the same instant. Together they burst through the explosion of falling brick. Markman crashed to the ground, breaking his fall with both hands. Diamond sand sprayed out from under him, as he landed prone in an enchanted garden. It was a vision beautiful beyond belief. The rain of brick continued to fall behind him until the garden finally became an oasis in emptiness.

Plants, trees, and flowers, so brightly colored they appeared luminous, covered the landscape. Markman pushed himself up onto his knees and suddenly realized the other player had not fallen. Marks in the soft sand led inward. He climbed hurriedly to his feet and followed them warily.

A narrow trail led to the garden's center, where rainbow light flowed hypnotically from a crystalline fountain. The other player stood knee-deep within its pool of swirling color. He was reaching for a large silica vase that sat atop it.

Markman could only stop and watch as the player brought down the sculptured masterpiece. An oversized, finely-cut ruby stone capped the delicate container. The player, using both hands, carefully set his prize on the base of the fountain. A low hum began to fill the air. As the capstone was touched, the hum rose in pitch, and began to sound like angelic voices coming from every direction. A moment later, the cap was lifted away and a blinding beam of silver light shot upward from the vase. The loud, steady harmony echoed in Markman's ears. Tiny sparks of starlight began to rain down upon the vibrating garden, covering the ground with brilliance and sparkle.

A gentle blossom of white light suddenly blinded Markman from seeing the remainder of the proceedings. As it faded, he found he had been returned to the apex of the golden pyramid, where Trill stood clapping his hands in jubilation.

"Oh, Mr. Baker, marvelous! Just marvelous! A record-setting run. Two players reaching the Coffin within moments of each other, in two separate and unbelievable time spans."

"But the other player. He wasn't real. It was the computer."

Trill's reply was absolute. "Sir, heavens no. I assure you the blue triangle is worn only by true users. The other player was indeed a life form."

"But he was too quick. It's impossible!"

"Sir, I agree it was a remarkable demonstration, but the other player has been searching the Aurora City for some time. He had, in

fact, been to the level three once before, so it is not surprising he knew his way and the dangers involved to the extent he did. Nevertheless, it was a remarkable exhibition, by both of you. You have secured citizen status for yourself in the Aurora City and have doubled your credit wealth."

"But I wasn't the one who opened it. I never even touched the thing!"

"Sir, just to have seen the Coffe of Dreams opened is worthy of your rewards. You are virtually assured of capturing it at the next opening of the main gate. Plus, as a citizen, you may now travel the city freely even when not on crusade, and you are wealthy enough to enjoy yourself in the process."

"I'm a citizen, you say?"

Sir, that is correct, with many associated privileges."

"Then would you answer a question about the game for me?"

"Sir, if I am able."

"Can it be set up so as not to be so,...so deadly?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Can I, for instance, command you to lower the danger level?"

"Sir, only the Salantians may alter the current settings. They are the users presently operating it."

"Who are the Salantians? I want to speak to them."

"Sir, the Salantians are they who are presently operating the mainframe."

"Where are they located?"

"Sir, I do not have that information."

"Where is the mainframe located?"

"Sir, I do not have that information."

"Can you give me the name of the Salantian I would need to speak to?"

An unusual pause took place before Trill began his reply. "Sir, the last field-setting interface was initiated by a Mr... Sir, the main gate is about to close. You must enter the tube immediately. Suit disengagement is not safe any other way."

Markman took heed of the urgency in Trill's voice and went quickly to the transport tube. As Trill raised his right hand Markman called out. "Trill, the name of the programmer?"

As Trill motioned across his control crystals, he replied nonchalantly "Sir, the operator's name is Inkman."

They came from the shadowy depths beneath the streets of the city. They gathered around the newly made entrance to the basement parking area before beginning the search. Their clothing was torn and dirty and their skin a dull, pasty white. Their eyes were blackened and

sunken, and a wretched stench preceded them as they foraged ahead. They moved with persistent indifference, and required no verbal commands to direct them. They divided into two groups and began their labored search for the player who had beaten the Virtual.

Cassiopia remained trapped within her darkened Sensesuit, while her captors celebrated the awesome success a stolen TEL robot had brought them. They laughed and cried, and traded high-fives over the lights of the monitoring console. They did not notice the elevator car being summoned to a lower level, and did not hear the opening of the stairwell door on the far side of the room. Leeds was the first to notice the stagnant, pungent smell. He looked up to see the grotesque ensemble moving into view. For a moment, he thought them to be part of some reward for the taking of the Coffin of Dreams. But, when they reached his hired assistant Cox and the scruffy hired hand next to him, they fell upon the men and began tearing them to pieces. As their screams fell silent, Leeds struck out with his cane, battering his way to the elevator. It opened in time to empty itself of still more of the Virtual Dead. Leeds was captured and dragged into the car. With the same unyielding tears and bites, they dissected and disposed of him there.

They came for Cassiopia and took her with the greatest of care. Spongy hands groped at the restraints that held her. The Sensesuit remained locked in its coupled state, leaving her to wonder at the faint sounds of violence and chaos. Helplessly, she was pulled from her chair and led carefully toward the elevator. She stumbled blindly along, fearful of her destination and her abductors. The TEL robot, its programming greatly inhibited, followed loyally.

Chapter 24

The flow of executive traffic never slowed within the glass tower of the Federal headquarters building. Morning light from tinted windows etched faint, drifting shadows on the impersonal walls of the hallways and offices. Markman followed close behind Rogers as she weaved her way down the busy hallway. She wore a light-gray skirt that came just above the knee and a gray dress-jacket that had big gold buttons on the cuffs. Markman adjusted the white, plastic, temporary badge pinned to his black, turtleneck shirt. He looked down at his washed out jeans and white tennis shoes and wondered if they were too inappropriate. Rogers pushed open the conference room door and they entered the 09:00 meeting and took seats without speaking. Many of the men sitting at the dark, wood grain conference table appeared to have been up all night. Markman's presence seemed much less unwelcome on this occasion.

Rogers brought them to a collective attention. "Okay, everyone, let's start with the Matriarch affair. As I see it, most of our efforts must now be devoted to a better understanding of this upcoming event. It seems to be very important to Inkman and Fishkin. We now know it is going to take place sometime tomorrow. What else have we got?"

Agent Hall, sitting at the other end of the table, took the lead. "We don't have a handle on it yet, Ann. As you mentioned, we know approximately when, but we do not know where. We think this has something to do with the godfather of their organization. Matriarch has a feminine connotation, so perhaps 'godfather' isn't the best of terms. We know Inkman and Fishkin won't meet again until this big deal takes place. The meeting is our best chance right now, and we've made some progress along those lines."

Hall looked over at Al Simmons. The lab chief scratched at the back of his neck and leaned over in his seat. He brought a deep brown briefcase up to the conference table and spoke without looking up. "I've got them right here." He drew a handful of black, matchbook-sized transmitters from his case, and began sliding them across the tabletop. "Most of you have used these at one time or another. They are very specialized proximity sensors. The crystals used in them were manufactured in the space station. We get better than a ninety-nine percent efficiency. We can't risk using a normal transmitter to track these people; they're too good at finding bugs, so what I'm handing out is the master unit of a micro-proximity sensor. These things use a signal so low and slow they're almost impossible to detect. The

companion slave unit is just as small as these, and when the two come anywhere within ten feet of each other, the power will switch on in the master unit and send out a homing signal that we can pick up from thirty miles away. We've already planted a slave unit in Fishkin's suit jacket. He never goes anywhere without it. The only problem now, is to get one of these master units planted on Inkman where he won't notice it.

Hall cut in. "The slave unit was easy. We've had people working at the Fishkin estate for some time now. It was no problem tagging him. He's not the most observant person in the world. Inkman is another matter. Somehow, one of us has got to slip one of these into his regular clothes or baggage. Once that's done we'll set up receiving posts all over the city. When Inkman and Fishkin finally meet for their big deal, these things will switch on and we'll be able to pinpoint the location and be there in minutes. We'll need a little luck, but we've got to get this device planted or there's no ball game at all."

Markman picked up one of the small black boxes. It was amazingly thin. One end of it had an unused nine volt battery connector built into it. "Does this thing need a battery?" he asked, hoping it was not a stupid question.

Simmons replied, "Oh yeah, I almost forgot. For those of you who haven't used one of these before, please don't go plugging a battery into that. This unit has a very small plasma battery built into it that's really got a kick. These can be used to turn on other surveillance devices. On the last job, we used one in a digital recorder that was hidden in a drug lord's car. When his buyer met him to close the deal, the whole affair was recorded automatically. That connector is a nine volt output. Keep it capped and leave it alone, okay?"

Rogers waited briefly for questions and then resumed the floor. "We had another good run in the suit last night. We were not able to track the command signals from the master computer, but we were able to connect Inkman directly to the Sensesuit programming and to the deaths attributed to them. Combined with yesterday's very tactful pickup at the airport of his former driver, we've now tied him into the bombing of our aircraft and the attempted bombing of my place. If we didn't need to get to the bottom of this conspiracy, I'd put out word to have him brought in right now. Instead, we'll play it out and see where the proximity sensors take us. What about the reference Inkman's driver made to S18? Have we got any more on that?"

Hall responded with frustration. "It's another tease, Ann, something very significant that we can't get to first base on. We know S18 is a drop-off, pickup point, but we have no idea where or even what it is. His driver said he thought it was a locker somewhere. You know how many of those there are in this city? It could just as easily

be an apartment or a spot in some parking garage. We have no way of knowing. They have been very good about keeping their secrets. It's like the list Markman overheard them mention. Wouldn't it be nice to get our hands on that, but there's not enough information to give us even a starting point. For the moment, both of those items are cold."

Rogers sat back in her chair and nodded. She paused hoping someone would have something more to offer. No one did. She turned to Simmons. "Al, am I to understand you still have not been able to determine how this building was entered the other night? Can we or can we not consider this place secured?"

Simmons shook his head. "Maybe we should discuss it at length a little later, Ann. You are correct; we have not found their point of entry."

Rogers was taken aback. Her voice became stern. "Okay, then, we need security teams set up on every floor as of now. I want headset communications between everyone assigned. The arrangement will continue until you bring me some answers, gentleman. In the meantime, we don't let Fishkin or Inkman get out of our sight again for one second, and get Inkman tagged as quickly and discreetly as possible. His proximity sensor must be in place in time for their meeting. Are there any comments or questions?"

Silence.

Rogers nodded appreciatively to her associates. "Thanks everybody. I know the pressure's on. Let's keep at it. Tomorrow will be pivotal. I'll be in touch with each of you individually between now and then."

Rogers sat back and took a deep breath. The group began to rise tiredly from the table and file out the door. She looked at Markman.

"I know, you want me to go get a cup of coffee or something, right?"

She smiled back at him and gave a little laugh. "Actually there's one more item that I didn't mention, but I guess I'd better tell you, even though you're bound to make a big deal out of it."

"I'm listening...."

"You remember Mr. Gomez, the old man who keeps his daughter always looking for him and insists the dead come out the reservoir at night to roam around like it's Halloween or something?"

"Of course, what about him?"

"He's disappeared again. Must've wandered off yesterday evening. They still haven't been able to locate him."

"Oh, really? You know that little party of zombies that showed up at your place the other night reminded me a little of the walking dead."

"Oh, come on, Scott. You think the walking dead are going to slowly wander into a high-security building and back out without being picked up?"

"Yeah, pretty wild, I guess. This whole Virtual thing has me ready to believe anything. Guess I just ought to forget it."

"Wow, I'm surprised. Don't go getting too level headed on me all of a sudden, will you?"

"What? Are you starting to believe the dead are coming to life and visiting your place?"

Rogers laughed loudly. "Of course not, but it'd scare me even more if you started acting normal."

Markman scowled.

"Anyway, Scott. I've got some new problems. I can't sit on the Sensesuit any longer. There is a certain high-level government agency that's responsible for containing advanced technology of that sort. I've been forced to bring them in on this. I doubt you'll be taking any more trips in the suit."

"Aw, shucks..."

"I've got a meeting with them in ten minutes. It's confidential. You'll have to go get that cup of coffee after all. I'll catch up with you as soon as I can, okay."

"Sure thing. I'll just hang around here and wait, I guess," he said, as he stretched back in his chair and locked his hands behind his head. Rogers stood and gathered her things from the desk. She cast a distrustful look and left.

One minute later Markman was headed for the lobby. On the way he found a vacant computer terminal with the internet still up. He quickly located an appropriate sporting goods shop and a hardware store, then retrieved his rental car from the basement parking garage.

The sporting goods store turned out to be an unexpectedly good pick. Even in the off-season, it was a treasure chest for divers. Using his David Julian credit card, he fitted himself with a heavy duty, hooded wet suit, a full face mask-regulator, and a lightweight tank and backpack. Including the large-beam underwater light and the other required accessories, the bill came to just over four thousand. He wondered briefly how high the purchase would measure on Rogers's Richter scale. The sale had left a broad smile on the face of the salesman. A quick stop at the hardware store provided nylon line and bolt cutters. His car fully loaded, he headed north, feeling independent and unencumbered, like a teenager who had just climbed out of his bedroom window.

He arrived at the Gomez neighborhood by late morning. Hillock street seemed completely deserted. The Gomez place looked as though no one was at home. He drove past the high chain-link fence,

along the pothole covered street. Around the corner, a short, unpaved county access road cut across a vacant lot. At the end of it, he found a double gate in the brush-entwined fence. It was chained and locked. Warning signs filled with small caliber bullet holes cautioned against entry. The bolt cutters dropped the chain effortlessly. The underbrush was a much more formidable barrier than the gate. Since driving the car through it was out of the question, he slung his clean, new dive pack over his back and headed in on foot.

The long abandoned access road that led to the reservoir was so overgrown it was barely passable. The air within the woods was cool and smelled musty and damp. He struggled to drag the heavy pack through the dense underbrush. Through a cluster of baby oaks, an eerie emptiness finally came into view. The brush concealed the edge of the hole so well, it gave the false impression of a clearing. He approached cautiously and took care to check the footing. As expected, the ground dropped off sharply just beyond the last of the undergrowth. The huge, deep basin came into full view. He peered carefully over the edge at the still, black water that loomed fifty feet below. The rocky, mud cliff walls did not look inviting.

He set down his pack at the cliff edge and made his way back for the rope and tank. There was a strange quietness in the air, as though he was on the verge of invading a monster's hidden lair. But that was not a concern. He had learned long ago that the real monsters live in the deep, bottomless pools inside men, the places they most feared to tread. He had slain his long ago at the base of a waterfall in the mountains of Tibet.

When the remaining equipment had been retrieved and unpacked, he set up for the descent. The trunks of two baby oaks made perfect anchors for the descent lines. It was a violation of standard rules to dive alone this way, even for an advanced diver, but the pool could not be that deep. Except for the drop off, little danger should exist. The worst he might find would be a body, weighted to the bottom, but it would not be his first.

He knelt on the ground and set up his tank and regulator. Carefully, he tied off one of the drop lines to the backpack, fins, and spotlight, and lowered them down to water level. He stripped down and squeezed into the skintight, black wet suit, and hung his new, black vest loosely over his chest. He cinched up the weight belt and checked his weight. This was fresh water, he knew the requirement well. With his depth gauge strapped high on his forearm, he wrapped his climbers' harness about him, and threw the remainder of the two hundred foot line over the side. With a last look over the area, he clipped on, edged over the cliff, and slowly lowered himself down the

vertical wall. Dirt funneled down the sides as he pushed off. The descent was easy. The black water looked grim.

He eased himself into the still water and felt it slowly seep into the waistband of his suit. It was freezing. Ignoring the discomfort, he turned his line loose, wrestled the fins free and squeezed them on. With added control from the rocket fins, he positioned the tank and backpack, making sure the main valve was in the full-on position. He looked up for a brief moment at the top of the pit. The eerie silence persisted. The tops of the trees stared over into the hole, back dropped by the blue sky and late morning sun. He fit the mask over his face and sucked air. The faint ringing from within the tank was reassuring. He untied the light and switched it on. With one hand holding the safety line, he kicked over and started down into the blackness.

The underwater light was powerful. It cut a beam through the cloudy emptiness, occasionally bouncing off the muddy wall on his right. The water in the suit was warming from body heat and had become almost comfortable. His exhaust bubbles gurgled and tightened as he continued down. The hole was deeper than he expected. The big beam tunneled through the murk and disappeared into oblivion. It began to seem as though there was no bottom at all.

Suddenly there was a glimmer of something moving in the water. It was snakelike, an eel waving its body languidly. He waved himself cautiously to a stop and fixed the light on the spot. It was only a piece of rope, moving in the current, tied to an old tire half buried in silt. This was the bottom. He panned the light slowly around. Brown bottles, rusty cans, stones and a few unidentified objects, one of which may have been a shopping cart at some time in the distant past.

The depth gauge read 045. He suddenly realized there was current here. Dragging the line along with him, he headed slowly in its direction, staying high enough above the bottom to keep from clouding the cold water. The rising wall on his right led the way. Foot-long weeds grew from it in some places, flowing listlessly in the steady current. He wound his way along the underwater junkyard and realized this place had probably never before been seen by human eyes. The cliff wall continued to guide him into the current. His spotlight danced from one direction to the next. Cautiously, he peddled forward.

Something ahead carved into the cliff wall suddenly caught his light. A teardrop-shaped darkness etched out of the pit wall. It was large enough to drive a small car through. It was an eerie entrance to a horizontal shaft. The staunch current originated from within it, and flowed outward like an underwater wind. The beam from the spot disappeared into the opening, verifying it was not a simple alcove

formation, but more likely a lengthy waterway. Its walls were smooth, old and water-worn.

For the first time he cursed himself for coming alone. Diving without a partner was indiscreet enough, but to enter an unexplored cave was really pushing it. The fact that he did not have surface support was equally unsettling. He floated in a position next to the intriguing opening and allowed the tips of his fins to touch the silty bottom for stability. He pulled in the large excess of surface line that had been trailing behind him. Plenty was left—enough to venture well into the cavern.

It had to be done. As long as the shaft remained large and undivided, there would be no real danger. Using both hands, he began to coil the excess line for carry. The beam from the dangling spotlight jumped around wildly. He looked up briefly to regain his bearings, and something just inside the mouth of the cave glittered off a flash from the light. He stopped winding and fixed the beam on it. Glass. With a gentle wave, he maneuvered himself into the cave's mouth and retrieved the object.

A man's eyeglasses. New. Someone on the surface must have dropped them, and they had come to rest here. But how could that be? They were well inside the cave and would have had to fall against the current. It didn't make sense.

He thought of his limited air supply and quickly conceded the mystery. He tucked the puzzling lenses into his vest pocket, pulled in the remainder of the line, and kicked forward into the cave. Exhaust bubbles drifted to the rock ceiling and flowed back with the current in search of the surface. Their gurgle, combined with the soft ringing from the tank were the only sounds. Farther inside, the shaft seemed to slant upwards. But there was very little along the way to provide bearing or landmark. He peddled steadily, rotating the spotlight in all directions. The walls continued, unmarked and smooth. Up ahead, they seemed to be narrowing. He wondered if the journey was nearing its end.

To his surprise, just beyond the most narrow part of the tunnel the ceiling gave way and climbed steeply. The walls branched apart, forming a much larger chamber. On the right the floor formed a gentle shelf and sloped upward. Markman ascended.

Keeping one hand extended ahead for protection, he searched for signs of jagged rock or ceiling. There were neither. A familiar, glistening blanket appeared against his light. It was the surface.

He emerged above the water and was startled to find light other than his own. Quickly he pointed his spotlight down and clicked it off. He was in a large inner chamber. The dark rock formed a smaller, half-

filled tunnel to the left, and a large, shallow balcony of rock floor on the right.

It took his shocked mind several seconds to believe what he saw next. The other light was tinted yellow and came from the backdrop of the dry rocky shelf. There, several strange-looking people were busily attending to unrecognizable tasks. A single file line of them was coming from a walkway along the tunnel on the left and approaching a door-like opening in the rock wall. A much brighter yellow light shone from within it. At the jagged doorway, another of them stood waiting. He wore a torn Hawaiian-style shirt that fell open at his left shoulder, baring a good portion of his chest.

His skin was pale white, his eyes blank and darkened, and there was a bruise around his nose and mouth. The line of morbid people met him at the entrance. After a pause, the guard backed away and allowed them passage. The group moved with short steps and downcast faces, and they kept their line very straight. They disappeared through the opening in the stone doorway and immediately the ghost-white guard shuffled back into position.

Markman peeled back his face mask and a rancid stench hit instantly. It was the same sickening smell that had awakened him in Rogers's apartment. The thick, putrid odor of decay was everywhere. Holding his breath, he frantically pulled the mask back over his face and sucked at the air from the tank. He had seen enough. Still grasping the surface line in one hand, he dove down into the darkness, rationing his breath to avoid making more bubbles than necessary. Fearing his bright underwater spotlight might be noticed, he blindly followed the safety line back through the darkness to the tunnel. Once inside, he switched the light back on and let the current carry him quickly out to the pit. He rushed out into the open hole and gently pushed upward to the surface. No sooner had he pulled his mask back than a familiar feminine voice called out.

"Markman, I was wondering, has anyone else ever realized you're nuts?"

He peeled off the face mask and focused up at Rogers. Her long, slender legs were amply exposed by her tight, gray skirt, as she leaned precariously over the grassy edge. He ignored her sarcasm.

"I knew the minute I left that conference room you'd be gone. Of course, I also knew exactly where I'd find you. By the way, did you ever hear of the buddy system, Scott?"

Markman continued to ignore her taunting remarks. He struggled out of his backpack and tied it off to one of the lines hanging down from the cliff. He unhooked his weight belt and wrapped it on top of the tank, then fastened his flippers to it. Without looking up, he hooked his carabineer to the line.

"So you found bottles and cans, right? Nothing but old rusty cans and empty bottles," called Rogers in an amused tone. "But at least you got it out of your system. Right?"

He looked up with a sneer. He braced both feet against the rocky wall and began to bring himself up along the blue nylon. Rogers frowned and rolled her eyes impatiently, waiting for him to reach the top. As he did, he cast her an incriminating stare.

"Nothing but bottles and cans. Right?" Her tone was more hesitant and uncertain this time.

He pulled himself over the muddy ledge and went straight for his pack. He peeled off his diver's hood, grabbed a towel from his things, and began drying his hair.

"People."

Rogers tilted her head slightly forward in disbelief. "What?"

"People. There are people down there."

"You mean bodies? Murder victims at the bottom of this thing?"

"No, live people. There's a horizontal shaft at the bottom. It opens to a large underground cavern. There are people doing something down there."

Rogers's expression instantly turned to one of doubtful shock. "Doing what?"

"I don't know. I didn't stick around to ask them. There's quite a few."

"Come on. This is a joke right? There wasn't a thing down there, and this is your way of trying to avoid being embarrassed."

Markman looked at her and unzipped his wet suit top. "Oh yeah, there is one other thing. These people stink, just like the ones that raided your apartment the other night. No, it's not a joke. Horizontal tunnel, big underground chamber, people who smell bad. It's all down there."

Rogers stared with disbelief down into the hole as though attempting to see some part of his wild description. She took a step back and looked again at Markman, as he pulled up the line holding his equipment. In a dazed tone she mumbled, "Los muertos salen del hueco y caminan por la noche, the dead come out of the pit and walk in the night."

Chapter 25

It had been another long and uncomfortable night for Cassiopia. Strange hands had guided her down and down into the unknown. In the darkness of her sealed Sensesuit, she had seen none of it. There had not been the slightest clue as to where she was being taken. Even in standby, the suit imposed a near total isolation of the senses, though all the necessary functions had been left operating; air was being introduced, temperature controlled. Her captors had led her to a strange and very hard place and left her sitting in the dark. Restraints of some kind were attached. Sounds had been muffled beyond recognition. The night had been long.

When at last she felt a click against the side of the depressive helmet, and heard the sounds of snapping and popping that signaled the suit had disengaged, she closed her eyes in relief that the desensitized blindness was nearly over. As the helmet was lifted off, the first burst of yellow light broke through the blackness, and made her squint and turn away. She wished dearly that her eyes would focus, and reveal where she was. But when her eyes finally did begin to see, she quickly wished they had not. There were neither bellows of flame, nor columns of foggy smoke to be seen anywhere, but apart from that the place was Hell.

The huge rocky cavern was poorly lit by subdued yellowed light that made the pale faces of the busy workers seem even more deranged-looking. A moment later, she inhaled the horrid, inescapable odor that dominated the stale air. The workers were racing to and fro with mechanized steps, groups of them everywhere. Their clothes were tattered, torn and dirty. Their eyes were sunken and dark. They never spoke, but worked hurriedly, carrying out indistinguishable tasks from one chamber to the next. Unfamiliar electronic equipment was strewn everywhere. A steady, unidentifiable hum came from an adjacent chamber on her left. The inert TEL stood just behind her. An unfamiliar voice brought her weary mind to attention.

"Oh, how marvelous, it's a female!" A grim-looking gentleman in a coal black suit clapped his wrinkled hands in glee. He balanced a silver cane on one wrist and stared down at her with jubilant expectation. "Oh my, this is more than we could have hoped for. If only it hadn't happened so late!"

Two chalky-white figures stood on either side of her, resting their dirty white hands on her shoulders. Both were men, and they had bruises around the nose and mouth. Their gazes lacked any emotion, dead stares from dark, sunken eyes.

The man who had spoken was directly in front of her. He was less obtrusively white than the others, but the similarities were still very apparent. His thinning, black hair was combed back sloppily over his head and cut unevenly. He maintained a sick, little smirk and his eyes were a dull, chilling red-brown. "If only we had known. We never expected a female to complete the game. I don't even recall any ever being admitted. How extraordinary!"

Cassiopia thought to protest but gagged on the rancid smell as she opened her mouth to speak. She coughed and choked as she found herself still strapped to the cold, metal seat on which she had spent the long night. The dark-suited man jerked his head back and gave a short, simpering laugh.

"Patience, my dear, patience. All of your questions will be answered. You are unaccustomed to our unusual brand of odor. It is very special. It is one of the many ways we communicate here. Completely harmless, I assure you, and extremely efficient."

Cassiopia regained her composure and winced at the harshness of the foul smell. Her newest captor seemed just as heartless as the others had been. A progression of ghostlike figures passed close behind the rude man, and he paused briefly to admire them.

"You must excuse our disarray, my dear. Usually we would be celebrating your arrival by now, but there has been an intrusion into one of our entrances. It is serious enough that we must relocate immediately. There is so much to do that I fear we might lose some of the workers. Nevertheless, I assure you, you will get a complete tour of the colony, and I apologize for the long wait you have been subjected to. Arrangements had to be made, you understand. No one expected a player to complete the game as quickly as you did. And yet you are a female. You are a prized specimen, indeed. I regret you are not well on your way through the Vortport already, and unfortunately, I doubt we will have time to send you."

Cassiopia, staggered by the incredible scene surrounding her, looked up at her abductor with a blank stare. His frozen smile remained.

"Allow me to formally introduce myself. My new name is Inkman. Leo Inkman. It is the name previously attached to this tenement I now occupy. Its original owner was the first to win at the game, thus paving the way for my journey here. My real number which is my name where I originally come from, cannot be expressed phonetically. I know you are Ms. Leeds. Ms. P. Leeds. It is somewhat embarrassing that my information is incomplete on you. I generally screen all of the prospective specimens, but in your case I was indisposed in Washington on important business. Our evacuation of this transfer site has precluded my catching up, so to speak."

She answered in a hoarse and contemptuous voice, unsure the bizarre nightmare was real. "What...who are you?"

Her captor straightened up in a pathetic gesture of pride. "I am a Salantian. It is the best phonetic verbalization of the term we have found. I am Captain of the Soldiers and administrator of this forward colony. I was the first ranking official to successfully cross the vortex and join the hunter-gatherers here. Only one other high-ranking individual had made the trip before me and his transfer was imperfect. But really, my dear, we must give you the tour so that you may fully understand the glorious role you will play in the dividing."

In shock, she watched as the two pasty-white figures beside her undid the restraints. She was lifted gently to her feet and her hands were bound behind her back. With a nod from Inkman, she was escorted across the uneven, stony floor toward the brightly-lit cavern entrance to the left. Inkman led the way, strutting his cane proudly as he went, like a man walking on a sunny day in the park. Cassiopia staggered behind in the grasp of her guards, gagging on the thick, rotten smell.

They crossed into an adjacent chamber the size of a small house. It was packed with even more electronics than the room before it had been. To her right, a large oval hatchway with a gear-like door that was big enough to drive a tractor trailer through was embedded into the rocky wall. It was constructed of a heavy, dark green metal. Thousands of pairs of giant bolts drew a pattern around its circular frame. A control stand that looked like a movie theater ticket booth stood off to the right, occupied by still another pale-skinned man with an empty gaze. With a single gesture from Inkman, the pathetic-looking creature tugged at the controls in front of him, and the massive portal door came noisily to life. It rolled slowly open on its geared track and exposed the beauty of the kaleidoscopic vortex that lay behind it. Within the circular opening, colors of all shades and luminance sparkled and glowed. There seemed to be no pattern in it. It swirled unceasingly through design after design and cast eerie reflections on the dark cavern walls. The sound of soft, crackling static filled the room as diamond and ruby beads formed and dissolved in a convoluted cascade. The beauty of the vortex was hypnotic.

"This is where it began, Ms. Leeds. You deserve to see it. Many workers fell to make it operate. Many of your Earth-years were required to make it passable. At first we could transmit only inorganic matter, so we sent what you might call remote probes—dozens of them until one finally returned with a large enough sample of the atmosphere to confirm that the vortex configuration was correctly aligned. In our original forms, we were not able to survive here for more than brief periods. The pressure was too much and the

atmosphere too caustic. Several hundred died before we were able to capture and return an actual human to our domain, and the passage through the vortex proved fatal to him as well.

But we learned. We learned exactly what was required to survive here. Everything needed was present in these protoplasmic forms in which you dwell. We developed a process by which we could share such an existence, but it took time. Since your species did not seem able to survive the trip through the vortex, the adjustments had to be made here. We constructed a simple incubator and a small laboratory to make the necessary surgical transformations possible in this very antechamber. It was a simple process really, but so excruciatingly slow. The brain is carefully removed through the nostrils, it makes an excellent pudding, by the way, so nothing is wasted, then the egg is rushed through the vortex at precisely the right moment and implanted in the cranial cavity where it develops to a useful maturity.

Unfortunately this method was crude and required more than ten of your years to finally produce the first administrator-level Salantian. Even now my associate, Mr. Fishkin, still exhibits some imperfections as a consequence. Oh, the system was just fine to produce laborers or soldiers or foragers, but without the higher levels there could be no organization. Once we learned that it was shock to the nervous system that was preventing transfer of your kind through the vortex, we were able to minimize the effect, and by using only those with superior reflexes and physical strength, we were able to begin incubating on our side. That Ms. Leeds, is how I came to be. I was the product of the first implantation on our side of the vortex. The body of the former Mr. Inkman was the first to survive the journey to our world. Come, let me show you the cells."

Psychologically paralyzed, Cassiopia fought nausea as she was dragged along into the next cavern. It was a grand hall with dozens of workers racing to and fro carrying things away to a safer haven. The chamber was the size of a ballroom and had walls that were embedded with cubicles covered with a semitransparent, white, membrane material. Silhouettes of human figures could be seen through the material, dozens of them, the newest members of the colony, the recently implanted. Inkman proudly resumed his story.

"So now, in special cases, the implantation can be done on the Salantian side of the vortex, and then the candidates are quickly brought back here to their own environment for incubation. The process is extremely successful, though we have just begun to use it. I want you to understand, we use only those that are thrown away for the lower castes of workers and soldiers."

Her voice weak and broken, Cassiopia asked, "Thrown away? What are you talking about?"

Inkman answered matter-of-factly, "The ones left in the streets and alleys late at night. The ones nobody wants. We use them for the lower castes. All others are carefully screened. It is the reason for the game. The suit allows us extensive analysis of what you call DNA, as well as ethereal brain patterns. Those that win the Dragon Master's competition are the ones fit enough and compatible enough to survive the trip through the vortport. They are reserved for the elitist class, the leaders. Until now we have not been able to incubate soldiers sophisticated enough to even understand weapons, and that has been a tiresome hindrance."

Anger surged in Cassiopia. "You're invaders. You developed all of these things just to invade other civilizations?"

"Hardly my dear. I dare say we barely are able to operate most of it, much less understand it. The vortex was a gift from..., oh my, I've forgotten their name. Oh well, whoever it was opened the vortex into our world and discovered us. We turned out to be the dominant species, however, since their lack of immunity eventually destroyed them. The vortex has allowed us to divide many times into many different places since then. It is only natural when our numbers grow large that the dividing takes place. The Dragon Master's game, on the other hand, was recovered from the Crillians. They were at first amused when we entered their domain. I'm not sure there are any of them left. They did not seem to coexist well.

In any case, the Dragon Master computer turned out to be exactly what we needed to analyze other species. It allowed us the necessary physical screening, as well as a very convenient way to dispose of infiltrators. Since it was intended for use by a great number of humanoid species, it can translate any language instantly. Odd how things like that work out, isn't it? It's just as interesting how we found there to be tunnels already running everywhere under your domain. They are our natural habitat. We did not even have to make those. It saved an enormous amount of time and many workers. So many fortunate things have contributed to Salantian propagation. It must be an act of providence, don't you think?"

Inkman paused. A look of despair came over his face. "Regretfully, time is short for us at the moment, Ms. Leeds. Which brings me to the end of your abbreviated tour. This last opening over to your left is where we carved our way into the tunnels that run under your city. From here we can travel to almost any district. It was a luxurious convenience, though I fear we have lost that for a time."

Cassiopia's mind felt overloaded. She began to feel light-headed, and her vision blurred as waves of confusion and realization collided in disbelief. She swayed slightly against the grasp of her tormentors. The

foul air added to her discomfort. In a faint voice, she fought off unconsciousness. "What are you going to do to me?"

"Why, my dear, you are a winner. An exceptional athlete. That makes you, as a female, a rare candidate for special impregnation. You could become the first intervortex Matriarch. All of our previous attempts failed horribly. Eventually we had to incubate one on this side, a process that has taken years. In fact, we expect her to emerge from the cocoon tomorrow, but there is no guarantee of success. Until such time as we are able to produce a Matriarch on this side, we have no one to bear eggs and are forced to use the slow and painstaking method of bringing them through the vortex. It is what we have been striving so long to accomplish. With our own Queen, we can generate a massive colony here very quickly. It will be a new day. You could become Queen of your own splinter colony, my dear. The ultimate honor.

Inkman's voice swelled with exhilaration and pride. He hesitated as though relishing the idea of his goals, then quickly sank back into placidity. "Unfortunately, it is likely we will need to solidify the vortex before you could be surgically prepared for the journey. We will have to see..."

Cassiopia could take no more. The underworld began to whirl around her, as Inkman's voice turned to a dull drone. She reeled suddenly over backwards and fell unconscious into an irritating dream about ghouls in doorways of yellow light, and her feet too heavy to run. She was captured and a hollow crown placed crookedly on her head as a chorus of pallid, white angels sang monotone death marches that echoed down an empty black hole. Dreams, it seemed, were no escape from the Salantian underworld.

Chapter 26

Markman leaned against a fat, old oak tree, a restrained look of disgust painted on his Florida-tanned face. He watched the chaotic proceedings taking place around the Hillock reservoir and wondered if anyone was really in charge.

Within twelve hours of the discovery of the Salantian base, a special group of military divers, experienced in combat and capture, had been assembled. They were like no divers Markman had ever seen. He managed to get a glimpse of one of their full face diving masks on the floor of an open van. It appeared to have a heads up display built in, and it was scrolling map and data on the inside of the lens. The wet suits were one piece with boots and gloves included. They had sensory instrumentation that looked like telemetry transmission capability. On the outside of their helmets, stereo cameras were built in. The underwater weapons they were toting around had LCD screens and laser sites. It was becoming difficult to tell the good guys from the bad.

With them, had come a small army of engineers who descended on the Hillock reservoir and set up operations stations complete with satellite communications and classified video coverage. Hillock street was closed off and residents from the area were evacuated. Specially prepared, unmarked Airstream trailers were brought in and parked at various points around the perimeter.

The cover story was simple. A long-disbanded company had secretly disposed of several dozen barrels of highly toxic waste inside the reservoir. The government had arrived to save the day. The bogus story allowed the media a sordid front-page feature, and helped keep them back from sensitive areas.

Last but not least, there were the black-suited men with the dark sunglasses. Markman watched as a group of them stood nearby arguing in low tones whether or not he should accompany the dive team. One of them kept insisting that because he was the only one who knew the actual location of the strange, underground invasion, he had to be included. The debate ended abruptly when a man in a black wet suit joined them and said with finality, "That's it. We're wasting time. He doesn't know the hand signals. He goes, but he goes unarmed." With that, they all looked at Markman.

Gradually the confusion around the site settled into a more business-like atmosphere. Three aluminum ladders were installed on one side of the pit as the dive team gathered and began donning their

gear. They were loaded down with an assortment of weaponry and surveillance electronics. Special pockets on their suits allowed quick access to it. When communications had been reliably established, the team leader waved his men down into the hole.

Markman was second in line. He lowered himself into the cool, black pool and followed the dive master down. At the cave entrance, the dive master looked back through the towers of exhaust bubbles and checked to be sure his team was ready. Satisfied that all was well, he made a bowing gesture to Markman to lead on, and they began their journey into the tunnel.

When the tunnel opened up to the large inner chamber, the group fanned out in preplanned positions that allowed them three hundred and sixty degree coverage. On cue, they slowly surfaced and stayed low in the water.

Grotesque-looking people were still present in the cave. Lines of them were frantically taking turns entering or exiting the guarded doorway in the rock wall. The yellow light escaping it cast eerie shadows on the water and cavern walls. The dive master studied the scene repeatedly, as though he was having trouble comprehending it. He raised his left hand and motioned his men to the edge of the shallow ledge. Markman came up on the side nearest the exit, making sure there was a quick escape available. To his left, on the opposite wall of the dimly-lit cavern, the other tunnel, half-filled with water, disappeared into darkness. A smooth, stone walkway ran along it, and as the divers held to the edge and readied their weapons, another line of chalky, ghost-white figures emerged on their way to the entrance. Like the others, their clothes were worn and dirty, and they walked without interest, like machines in a factory assembly line. There were ten in the group, and their path would lead them very close to several dive team members. Markman was surprised to see how easily the tanks and backpacks slipped off the backs of the divers as they lay in wait. The equipment remained floating just below the glistening black surface, easily available for a quick recovery.

When the line of Salantians approached within ten feet of the closest diver, the dive master held up his hand and pointed at them. As they passed by, one diver shot out of the water and cut them off. A split second later, the rest of the assault force was on them, taking the confused Salantian workers to the ground. Their hands and feet were tied, and they were quickly dragged out of sight. With confused stares, the dive group looked silently at their leader. None of the prisoners had made any attempt to call out or resist. Nothing in the foul-smelling place seemed to make sense.

The alien guard at the cave entrance had seen the entire affair. He assumed an awkward-looking posture and danced in nervous little

steps, like a man trying to stay warm on a cold night. He jerked around in a way that made him seem agitated, but made no attempt to leave his post or call for help. The team leader watched the peculiar antics with a puzzled expression. He lowered his weapon and stood up from his crouched position in the shallow water. The nervous sentry only continued his agitated dance.

Markman watched with intense interest, as the team leader began a guarded walk toward the sentry. He carefully avoided making threatening gestures and kept his weapon held low. At the entrance, the sentry became even more nervous. When the team leader came too close, he tried to usher him back by bumping him with his upper body. His arms hung uselessly at his sides as he did so. The baffled team leader looked back at his men and held his arms up in a gesture of bewilderment.

As the team leader turned back, a loud rumble rose from within the cave. An instant later, a multitude of haggard-looking Salantians burst through the stone doorway. They knocked aside the inept guard and crashed into the unprepared team leader. They dragged him roughly to the ground and fell upon him. With a mindless ferocity, they began to attack everyone in sight. Machine-gun fire began to echo in spurts off the hard walls and in seconds the entire area was filled with groups of unarmed Salantians assaulting dive team members. Markman climbed onto a ledge, and kept his back to the rock wall. He easily kicked away the attackers who came at him, astonished by how badly they fought. They charged blindly ahead, throwing themselves at their intended targets with no clear plan.

As the battle continued, it became clear that the Salantians were no match for the dive team. Gunfire from the team became unnecessary and ceased for fear of ricochet. Salantians had stopped emerging through the yellow light of the entranceway, though occasionally there were glimpses of frantic activity going on within the cave. As the fighting ground down, attack became pointless. The few remaining Salantians lunged hopelessly at their nearest adversary only to be knocked down, leaving fewer to rise up and try again. When the melee was finally over, the assault team members, their black wet suits smeared with a yellow-red, pus-like substitute for blood, stood in disbelief. The ground was littered with the torn and battered bodies of Salantians. They had fought without uttering a sound and were left lying in piles around the site. They had failed to seriously harm anyone, including the team leader. The grotesque sight left everyone speechless until the team leader's voice snapped them back to reality. He waved toward the cave entrance and commanded, "Let's go..."

The inner chambers of the cavern were teeming with still more mutated humans. Some were rushing around gathering all that they

could in hopes of carrying it away. Most ignored the intruders. Others were alarmed by their presence, but made no attempt to attack or hinder them. One by one, they were overtaken and subdued.

A holding area was sectioned off near the entrance, and they were held there in groups seated on the floor. They waited speechlessly and seemed to have no further interest in anything that was happening.

The caverns were in complete disarray. Peculiar-looking metallic furniture had been turned over or partially dismantled. The huge, gray, oval portal was locked in the open position. Within it, molten rock had hardened in a graceful swirl. More than half of the white cocoons built into the stone walls had been torn open and emptied. Their unconscious half-human contents were scattered everywhere in a broken trail that led to a second tunnel connected to the N. Y. sewer system. Electronics consoles throughout the rock chamber were partially disassembled and pulled out of place.

Astonished, Markman wandered through the confusion, trying to make sense of it all. He left the main group and found his way into the deepest cavern of the complex. It looked sacked and abandoned. Several green, metal dividers on his right looked as though they had been used to set up an office area. Strange machines were arranged within, bearing controls not designed for humans.

Intending a passing glance into the last of the cubicles, he moved cautiously forward and peered around a corner. Something standing within it shocked him. A slightly tarnished TEL robot, with a black box fastened to its chest plate, waited silently in standby. It was identical to the robot from the home of Professor Cassell. To find another, here in this pit of desolation, seemed as absurd as everything else. A pang of affection came over him as he approached the TEL. He had come to feel affection for the machines, almost as though they were friends. A touch of homesickness crept in. He moved toward the robot to take a closer look, but something else even more startling suddenly came into view. It was someone in a helmet-less Sensesuit. A powerful wave of emotion hit him as his eyes followed the silver-blond locks of hair up to the soft features of the beautiful, gagged woman held captive in the iron seat. Her eyes were wide with shock and disbelief as they met his.

His throat locked and his stomach turned in fear and anger. The day had become a roller coaster nightmare, with each turn more unpredictable and shocking than the last. His mind fought to believe what he was seeing, and when at last it surrendered, thoughts of the unstoppable player in the Aurora City rushed in, the player who had saved him from the inescapable skeleton-beast. Markman's mind struggled to understand. He lurched to Cassiopia, knelt, and placed

one hand gently on her cheek. A tear formed in his hand. She was warm and soft, and she leaned into his touch. He ripped like a madman at the restraints that held her, and when she was free, pulled her into his arms and clutched her tightly. Between stifled sobs, she managed to speak.

"How did you find us?"

Markman looked over her shoulder at the opening that led into the next cavern. There had been no sign of Inkman or Fishkin. Silently, he promised himself he would find them.

The man in the expensive black suit leaned forward in his seat and stared coldly at Markman. Over his shoulder the gray, sliding doors of the windowless Airstream trailer began to close. Other men in black suits were gathered just outside talking. Markman sat across the small, gray metal table and wondered what government agency the man represented. They had relieved Rogers' staff and taken over the Salantian affair completely. They would not answer his questions, but had many of their own.

They had thoroughly searched and secured the caves. Most of the entourage had been relocated to a nearby abandoned business complex where a section of one city block was cordoned off, and a manhole entrance enlarged to allow removal of equipment, bodies, and people from the underground hideout. A crane was brought in, and pallet jacks and other transport equipment lowered into the sewer system. All of it had been done under the cool stares from these odd men in expensive black suits

"You understand, Mr. Markman, that all of these matters are to be kept in the strictest of confidence. Under no circumstances are you to discuss them with anyone, including others involved here, particularly Ms. Cassell. Your signature here on this affidavit indicates you understand this and agree to comply."

"And if I don't sign?"

"Mr. Markman, I think you will. You seem to be a person concerned with the greater good. Our methods of dealing with people who do not have the welfare of their country foremost at heart are most persuasive. We don't expect to have to consider them with a law abiding citizen such as yourself."

"What will you do with those people?"

"Sign this document, and I'll answer that."

Markman looked tiredly at the stiff expression on the interrogator's face. He picked up the gold-plated pen and signed.

"Those that are deceased will be shipped in a freezer compartment to a remote facility for study. The resulting data will be

used in the most beneficial ways possible, particularly to help suppress any further encroachments that might occur.”

“And the ones that are still alive?”

The stone-faced administrator removed his glasses and pinched at the bridge of his nose. For a fleeting moment, emotion seemed to escape the windows in his eyes. A quick tightening clamped it off.

“They are dying. We have people doing everything possible. They seem unable to exist without their group intact and functioning. It’s unlikely any will survive the day. In any case, that’s it, Mr. Markman. You’re free to go. If we need anything further, we know how to contact you.”

“And what about Inkman and Fishkin?”

“They are of no further concern to you, Mr. Markman. Our people will handle any subsequent investigations.”

Markman left the interrogation trailer feeling deep discontentment. He was leaving a job unfinished, and there wasn’t a thing he could do about it. His mind refused to submit, and secretly he continued to work the problem there, a place where no legal document had jurisdiction.

Chapter 27

With late morning, came a cool drizzle of rain. A mildly despondent weather forecaster on a local radio station was claiming that a fast-moving cold front was on its way. Markman stared through the wet glass of the hotel window. The foggy day seemed reluctant to begin. Despite considerable fatigue, neither he nor Cassiopia had slept well. It was to be a day of preparing for the trip home. Surprisingly, those in charge had relented and released the TEL robot to Cassiopia. That concession had come only after a thorough check of legal ownership had been established, and Cassiopia had exhaustively lectured the bureaucrats about the fragile agreement she had made to remain silent about the Salantian affair. Later, in retaliation, she had told Markman everything.

By early evening, Markman had finally secured the only rental van suitable to transport a TEL 100D robot all the way back to Florida. His misgivings about the timely disappearance of Fishkin and Inkman continued to trouble him. Adding to his discomfort, were the baggy, brown trousers Cassiopia had purchased for him earlier. His luggage had lost the battle to keep up with its owner.

As he drove the glistening black streets of Manhattan, his mind searched for mistakes made by Fishkin or Inkman. The other Salantian immigrants were dying, but they had been of the lower castes. That would not be the case with the hierarchy. The smell of death had not been about those two. They would live on and try to propagate. The Matriarch, the layer of eggs, never had been found. To locate any one of them would be to locate all three. How unfortunate it was that there had been no chance to plant the second proximity sensor on Inkman. Had that happened, a telltale radio signal would have been transmitted the instant the two of them met.

Markman replayed the events leading to his dismissal from the case, over and over in his head. The story had become worn out and empty. Still, something kept tugging at the back of his mind. There was a nagging feeling that something had been overlooked. It was like trying to find the picture hidden within a picture, one that can only be seen by refocusing the mind as well as the eye.

Things left unanswered, what were they? The list. There had been a problem with some sort of list. If only Rogers's group could have gotten their hands on that. It had probably contained the names of those in the organization. And then there was the drop off point, S18. It had never been found.

Fishkin's mysterious car accident on a bridge somewhere was an equally disturbing detail. An extensive records search had been done, and no such accident report had been filed. Rogers's people had been thorough. They had written the incident off as an unreported fender bender, but no one could explain how Fishkin was managing to sometimes escape surveillance.

As the road narrowed and passed close by the Hudson, Markman breathed a sigh of frustration and looked out over the bay. In the misty night, the vague silhouette of a man under the canopy of a large pleasure boat came into view. He was working his spotlight in search of channel markers. He guided his mid-sized cruiser skillfully toward the shore, sweeping the bright spot across the water as he went.

Something in Markman's mind clicked. Boats had bridges. Could Fishkin's accident have been on that kind of bridge? And the problem with the list. Boats could list to one side, couldn't they? In fact, if someone screwed up badly enough on the bridge of a heavily loaded boat, that could cause a list!

No, it was too wild an idea, a fantasy. But there was something else, something to do with water. On his first visit with Fishkin, the man had spilled the contents of his pocket out onto the dining table. There had been something then...a naked girl sitting on an anchor. What was the name? It was easy, a famous president, one that had been assassinated. ...Kennedy! Kennedy Point!

Oh, my God, thought Markman, S18--Slip 18!

Light from an open gas station glistened in the misty rain. He jerked the van hard over and up into the parking area, and leaped out of the vehicle. There was a public phone next to the entrance. The partial phone book was badly torn and tattered but the listing was there. Kennedy Point Marina and Restaurant. A street map from the small store indicated it was not far.

Markman headed briskly for the van. He reached for his cell phone to call Rogers, but hesitated. They had ridiculed him every step of the way. If this was a wild goose chase, he would look bad all over again. Better to check it out and then call in.

At first glance the large expanse of boat yard looked expensive and well-maintained. Through a high, chain-link fence, long, clean white docks, illuminated at even intervals by subdued light, stretched along the shore, and outward in fingers that reached well into deep water. An expensive collage of boats huddled against clean, white bumpers with matching worn spots. In the damp air, the place smelled like seaweed, salt, and fish, mixed unevenly by a steady offshore breeze. Everyone with reason to be here, had long since been chased indoors by the persistent drizzle.

One end of the high chain-link was fastened to a huge boat storage facility. At the halfway point, an open gate had been left unguarded. A darkened, empty guard shack stood next to it. Markman climbed out of the warmth of the van, keeping a watchful eye out as he did so. He reached carefully under the driver's seat, retrieved his unregistered Glock pistol, and shoved it under the back of his leather jacket. He closed the van door quietly and went to the open gate, passing through it unchallenged. Dampness from the wet air collected on his face and clothes. In all directions, the marina appeared deserted.

Each finger pier had a lighted post with a stainless steel marker plate. The slip numbers for each were neatly engraved within a pressed metal rope border. Markman stopped in front of one that read S50-59. The numbers counted down on the columns to his right. He walked casually along, secretly watching and listening.

Water lapped at the crusty pylons that supported the docks, the sounds of it blending faintly with the never-ending noise from distant traffic. He crossed the white planks of the shoreline dock, and passed by the huge, closed doors of the gray storage hanger. Just beyond, the finger pier marker read S10-19. S18 was the second to the last slip at the deep water end. A white, thirty-foot cabin cruiser, new and well kept, sat moored in the spot, her bow facing the shore. Opposite her, a very mean-looking red and white cruiser that resembled a small version of an offshore racer was loosely tied with its canvas pulled back.

Markman walked the length of the finger pier, and with a last, careful look around, climbed aboard the darkened cabin cruiser at S18. She had an elevated, open air command bridge, packed with state-of-the-art electronics that surrounded a white, raised swivel seat. A J-shaped cushioned couch was tightly fit in beside it. The wide walk-around deck, where Markman stood, was clean and uncluttered. He guessed a single diesel lay below. An unusually large wood grain door, split at the middle, led below deck. Gently, he slid it open and bent over to gaze down into the shadowy salon-galley. On the right, a hexagon dining table was positioned next to tan, wraparound seats. A familiar-looking black briefcase sat on the middle of the polished table. On the opposite side, dirty dishes were stacked high in a small double sink.

Suddenly an old familiar feeling crept into Markman's conscious, a feeling of alarm that usually signaled he was being watched. As he straightened up, he caught the first glimpse of three dark silhouettes standing on the pier to his left. He turned, with one hand still on the salon door, to face them.

In the dim evening light, the three men appeared almost like grim reapers from a bad dream. Two athletically-built men in glistening wet trench coats, with the brims of their hats pulled low, stood on the dock. They shielded a third man, who waited behind. The man on the right held a large-caliber handgun with a very long silencer attached to its barrel. It was leveled at Markman. As the tall, dominant man in back began to speak, the two bodyguards parted slightly, revealing his dark, damp suit, and round-rimmed hat. He carried a shiny, silver cane that he tapped twice on the dock to accentuate his position of command.

"Ah, well, I am surprised. It's Julian is it not? David Julian? Of course, I'm sure that is not your real name, but your face is quite familiar to me. Would you mind, Mr. Julian, if we came aboard our boat, since it now seems unavoidably necessary to speak at some length with you?"

Markman straightened up and made no reply. The bodyguards were clearly not amateurs. They boarded the craft with the utmost care, keeping their eyes carefully fixed on their target, allowing no chance of escape or counterattack. Their tall, lanky boss followed with far less skill, resuming his position behind and between them, appraising Markman with a cold, empty stare.

He spoke haughtily. "I am certain you've heard of me, Mr. Julian, or whatever your name is. Mine is Inkman. Leo Inkman. We are quite surprised to find you here. I'll give you that much. It was I who originally doubted your credentials and disapproved your bid to join the Dragon Masters. I don't suppose you would care to tell me your real name, and which agency you work for?"

Markman rested an arm above the open hatchway and tried to appear unimpressed. He stared blankly over Inkman's shoulder and watched the lights of a distant ferry glide by in the night.

"No matter," continued Inkman. "We will know all we need to know before we are done with you. How you managed to find us is of great concern to me. Those pitiful members of our group who were recently captured had no knowledge of our presence here. There is no way they could have conveyed such information to you. Tell me, do you know anything about the Matriarch, Mr. Julian?"

Markman carefully appraised his situation. The bodyguard on the right held his weapon with poise. He was at least three feet away. It was another sign of a true professional. Any closer and there would have been a good chance the gun could have been taken away. At the moment, that option did not exist. On the left, the second guard carried no gun, but his confident stare suggested he felt it unnecessary. The only alternative left was to buy time.

"You mean the egg layer? Yeah, we know all about that. We expect to wrap that end of it up shortly."

An irreverent smirk formed on Inkman's wet face. "I don't think so, Mr. Julian. If what you say is true, where are your boats and men? I can see the Matriarch's lair from here. She is quite undisturbed, I assure you."

Inkman turned slightly and looked out across the deep end of the pier and the open water beyond it. The lights across the bay were not visible through the foggy rain, but in the distance the lights of a large motor yacht anchored off shore glistened. Inkman looked back at Markman. His smile had faded into an expression of affection.

"Can you see her lights, Mr. Julian? One hundred and ten feet, though quite low in the water at the moment. We thought it was the perfect place, a vessel inherited from the Inkman estate. Large enough to hold the central game computer, and also the perfect station to transmit from. It left plenty of room for the Queen's cocoon. We thought it would be the last place anyone would look. We thought if our enemies learned about us they would also learn that we despise water and would, consequently, search elsewhere. It worked, despite Mr. Fishkin's ineptitude on the control bridge."

Markman shifted his weight very carefully and stared out at the lights in the mist. "Although I have managed to find you."

"Yes, that is disturbing, Mr. Julian, but not very. You see, shortly the Matriarch will emerge from her shell and take charge of the establishment of a new colony. Mr. Fishkin is there waiting for me as we speak. We will christen the new Queen and leave with her. A very fast boat will take us to a waiting airplane, where a carefully-predetermined route has been prepared. No longer will we require the painstakingly-slow process of worker insemination. We will produce our colony with no help needed from Salantia. So you see, it is too late, Mr. Julian. Within the hour, we will have disappeared from sight to an even better-prepared hiding place."

"They'll find you, wherever you go."

"Perhaps when it is too late. Perhaps after other Queens have been bred. And there is someone else on board our gracious boat that might interest you, Mr. Julian. Until now the soldiers we have produced have been of very poor quality, not even capable of understanding weapons. The first of a new breed, however, has finally emerged. You see, one of your agents did manage his way into the Dragon Masters. He was sent through the vortex and returned as one of us. The briefcase you saw on the table below is for him. Using his face and fingerprints, he will deliver that briefcase to the place where your records are being kept, and he will set it off at the busiest of times so

as to remove as many in your leadership structure as possible. We have many such plans.”

Markman wished for a chance. He had always believed that, in any given situation, a chance would come. It was the philosophy of the Tao Chane, the Way. Markman waited with quiet transcendence.

Inkman’s voice became impatient and slurred. “Get the tape and don’t take any chances with him. Do it quickly.”

The man who held no weapon went to a compartment built into the side of the deck wall. From it, he pulled a fat roll of wide, silver tape and kept a steady eye on Markman as he did so. It was another sign of professionals. Neither man ever assumed the other had coverage. Something in the background caught Markman’s eye. It was an incoming swell, the wake from the ferryboat that had passed by.

His captors were completely unaware of the incoming wave. The man with the duct tape approached him cautiously and stopped just outside his range. His wet hands slipped as he struggled to start the roll, and he cursed under his breath. He looked up at Markman with a cold stare and spoke matter-of-factly. “Put your hands in your pockets.”

Markman tracked the advancing wave trying not to be obvious. “Gentleman, can’t we discuss this and maybe find some...common ground?”

The gunman on Markman’s right spoke with controlled irritation. “Check him out first. He’s gotta be carryin’.”

The man’s partner, having started the roll of tape, inched slightly closer. He spoke calmly with one hand pointed out in front of him. “Now just be cool, buddy. One wrong move and you’ll get popped three times right here and now, so don’t blow it. Turn around and put your hands on the upper deck. Do it right now.”

The first of the rough water would hit in less than two seconds. Markman held his hands up and out at chest height and slowly started to turn, knowing that one way or another he would never finish.

Chapter 28

The first of the waves formed a nice, fat curl as it hit. It slapped the side of the boat loudly and raised it several inches in a brisk lurch away from the dock. The deck and side rails were already soaked and slippery. Inkman and both his men had to clutch frantically at anything possible to maintain their balance. Markman, expecting the roll, handled it. At the moment of greatest turbulence, he spun right, whipping a right-hand backfist around, and catching the gunman's hand perfectly with his knuckles. Bone crunched and popped and the long-barreled weapon, heavy from its silencer, flew into the air. It made a ticking bounce off the low sidewall and splashed into the black water between the boat and dock.

For one split second, all four men froze in a moment of rocking, fearful assessment. Then the second wave hit.

Markman's thoughts went to the Glock, stuffed into the back of his belt. He slapped for it with his right hand, but not in time. The two off-balance bodyguards had not been intimidated. The one holding the tape flung it wildly at Markman's face and charged. The heavy roll caught Markman in the side of the head in a glancing blow. As the heavy-set thug charged, Markman spun sideways like a bullfighter and grabbed the front of the man's trench coat. He pulled him head first into the bulkhead next to the open hatchway. The second bodyguard lurched at Markman, leading with a right fist aimed for the face. Markman tilted his head sideways in time to avoid it. A quick left hook followed and was intercepted by Markman's open hands. The third punch was an off-balanced slap, again from the left. It burned into the side of Markman's face, but left the attacker vulnerable. Markman caught the outstretched arm just above the elbow and twisted his body sideways, throwing the heavy-set man directly into his partner, who was in the process of getting back up. The impact knocked him back, but not down. He caught the frame of the hatchway with his left hand and used it to push into a dive. His right arm hooked out and caught Markman around the waist. He let out a yell as they plummeted into a pile on the wet deck and slid along it.

The hulky bodyguard ended up sprawled on top of Markman. Instinctively, Markman brought his hands wide apart and clapped hard at the man's ears, sending him rolling and howling in pain, clutching at his head. Markman regained his feet in unison with the man's partner, both of them facing the open hatchway that led below deck. Markman jerked sideways hoping to grab his opponent's face and sweep his feet

from under him. There was the unexpected feel of a cold plug on the back of Markman's neck. A fraction of an instant later pain exploded through his head and down his spine. The dim lights around the dock area collapsed into a blanket of blackness and a piercing ringing blared in his ears. His body shut down completely, leaving him to fall through the open door and down into the galley below. He crashed roughly into the hexagon table and briefcase and brought them down with him as he smashed onto his side on the thinly carpeted floor. Markman's body felt like jelly. The internal sirens continued. In the center of the numb blackness, a small spot of light appeared and stayed there. There was movement within it, light and dark, light and dark, over and over. The beam slowly widened until a pendulum of shadow could be seen swinging in the tunnel of light.

All at once it focused. Wires. Red and black. His tunnel vision grew still larger. The briefcase, lying open on its side, its explosive and associated electronics fully exposed. The Plexiglas had not been installed, and the swinging pendulum turned out to be the wires and connector of the countdown timer, swaying back and forth without a nine volt battery attached. Markman felt the carpet against the right side of his face. His mouth was partially open and drooling, and he was not able to close it. Though the ringing in his head continued, he could hear the sounds of his adversaries coming back to life under the harsh, rebuking voice of Inkman. His left hand began to tingle. It was hanging behind his back. He moved his fingers slightly. They worked. The red and black wires continued to swing back and forth only inches away from his sagging face. The connector seemed so familiar and meaningful. He struggled to focus his mind. A stun gun. It must have been that.

His left elbow began to work, enough that he could pull his arm over to the front and his hand up to his tingling face. The connector continued to insist it deserved a place in his shocked mind. The connector was identical to another that he had recently seen. What was it? The proximity detector handed out by Rogers's people. It had the same connector. Simmons had said it could be used as a battery. It was in the breast pocket of his jacket. He worked his good hand slowly to the little slip of inside pocket and found the battery-sized proximity detector half-fallen out. Not understanding perfectly why, he struggled and moved the tiny detector over to the red and black wires and somehow snapped it in place.

Inkman's irate tone broke through the ringing. "Get the briefcase you fools, and get his gun before he comes to and it starts all over again. You incompetent idiots."

A boot crashed down onto Markman's left shoulder bringing it painfully back to life. Rough hands tore at the back of his jacket and

the bulge of the Glock suddenly disappeared. The panorama of the open briefcase was snapped up out of view. Markman moved the fingers of his right hand. It was wrenched under him.

"Now get him up here and secure him before either he or I dispose of both of you."

Markman was roughly jerked from the floor and dragged up the three steps to the open air deck. They stood him up and held him there, as the feeling began to return to his legs and feet. The cold, damp air tickled his face. Inkman was twisting at the base of his cane, disabling the stun-prod built into the end of it. The distressed face of the bodyguard who had lost his gun came into Markman's close view. He grabbed the front of Markman's throat and supported him with it. Markman's arms came quickly back to life and clutched instinctively at the man's dirty wet wrists.

"Now like we said before, asshole, put your hands in your pockets."

Strength was returning to his legs. Markman released his hold and complied with the demand. He slowly lowered his arms, and as his right hand slid down into the deep pocket of Cassiopia's baggy brown pants, a pleasant little bell went off somewhere deep in the back of his foggy mind.

Markman's fingers had touched the cushioned covering of the Cobra double-barreled derringer.

Nearby there was the ripping sound of tape being pulled from the fat silver roll. A moment later, it was wrapped around him like a belt, covering his arms and hips. The smaller of the two men hugged Markman from behind and continued to wind until the tape covered everything from waist to shoulders. They dropped down and resumed wrapping at the thighs, pulling Markman's legs together and covering them to the knee. It left him crouched over and precariously balanced. The big man released his throat grip and backed away.

"Make sure you deposit him so that he will not be found, and be sure no one sees you," commanded Inkman. "You'll excuse my having to run, Mr. Julian. My associates are waiting for me. It will be a new day."

Inkman stepped onto the pier, carrying the black briefcase loosely in his right hand. He looked quickly around to be sure they were still alone and then climbed into the open cruiser on the other side. Markman called to him in a hoarse, broken voice.

"There's an old Tibetan saying, Inkman: 'Zamen dai li women donqxi zamen pa zui'. It means: That which we fear most, we carry with us."

"Your dreary little philosophies will do you no good now, Mr. Julian. You are alive only because it would be helpful to us to know

what you know. My men here will persuasively extract what we want and then drop you off somewhere convenient. I doubt we will be seeing one another again, a prospect I must admit I find something of a relief. May your next future be more promising than your present one."

Inkman twisted the ignition of the low-riding cruiser, and the dual inboards roared to life. He cast off the single mooring line and without looking back throttled away from the dock and headed in the direction of the colored lights from the distant motor yacht.

Markman teetered in front of the open hatchway, wrapped like a mummy from knees to shoulders in wet, silver tape. He remained hunched over and had to bend at the knees to maintain his balance. His eyes glazed, he scratched at the derringer with his fingers, trying not to call attention to the awkward motion it required. The safety was set. Finding it would be the first obstacle to overcome, and his wrists were so tightly taped that was proving to be a challenge.

The heavy-set bodyguard became overconfident. As Inkman disappeared into the darkness, he growled orders at his partner. "Go below and get the stuff out of the refrigerator. Set it up and bring it here."

The man nodded agreeably and ducked past Markman into the galley.

"That was real cute, you playin' us into the wake and all," he said, turning to Markman. He grabbed him by the collar and slammed him into the bridge wall next to the galleyway. "Well your ass is mine now, mister."

The derringer slipped back out of position. Spikes of pain shot through Markman's back as he worked to regain a hold on the elusive little weapon. Before he could work his fingers around the handle, the second man returned from the galley. To Markman's dismay, he carried a loaded syringe.

"Give it to 'em right through the tape. It don't matter none."

Without preparation, the syringe was stabbed through the duct tape and into Markman's left arm. Its contents emptied so fast it burned.

"Okay, toss off the ropes. I'll back us out."

The syringe was casually thrown over the side. A few minutes later the engine was rumbling, and the cabin cruiser was pulling away from the pier. Markman began to feel light-headed as he leaned against the sidewall for support and continued to work awkwardly at the small gun in his right pocket.

A white water trail formed as the engines were brought up to speed, and the nose of the craft came about to a heading where no lights marked the distance. Amid the roar of the engine and the

churning of white water, the shoreline and dock area quickly faded away and became a faint row of lights in the light rain. Markman's fingers found the exaggerated curve of the gun's hammer. He captured the hardened grip and fumbled at the safety with his thumb. A feeling of well-being began to seep into his consciousness, the feeling that no matter what happened, everything was okay. The rainy night was beautiful. The hum of the boat's powerful engine and the white wake it left behind were splendid. The cold drip of rain water suspended on the tip of his nose seemed like an exquisite, finely cut work of art. In slow motion, it danced, swirled and glistened as it fell to the deck. Markman's body hummed with pleasure. What a wonderful evening this was. He held the full-weight of the derringer ready in his right hand and tipped it up as far as the soaked trousers and tape would allow. A placid half smile began to form on his dripping face, causing the bodyguard watching over him to wonder.

When an area of deep water had been reached, the engine was idled back, and the nose of the big boat dropped gently down to the water. She was allowed to drift forward in her momentum, through a wall of lifting fog. It was a place of darkness. Far on the horizon, the faded city lights had lost their color. Traffic noise had become an almost subliminal hum in the air. A chilling breeze passed in frequent, measured gusts, rippling the black water on the windward side of the boat.

The heavier of the two hit men clamored down the short aluminum ladder that accessed the raised bridge and came up in front of a passively-smiling Markman. He grabbed him rudely by the left shoulder and dragged him aft, sitting him centered on the transom, the open, black water to his back. He turned to his waiting associate and spoke with a sick little tinge of excitement in his voice. "Get that little mushroom anchor we use for the skiff and bring it here with the tape."

Markman's half-smile had grown into a smirk by the time the requested items were brought to the back of the boat and dropped on the deck. His favorite tune was playing loudly in his head. The friendly, big-boned man stooped down and began to tape the eighteen inch pot metal anchor to his lower legs. When it was done, the man rose and thumped his captured prey on the shoulder with the heel of one hand. With the drug in full effect, Markman continued to smile, as he swayed slightly to and fro.

"Okay, wise guy. This is how it works. I ask, you answer. No answer, you go over backwards into the drink on a one way trip down. Sonar puts it at over one hundred feet here. You'll have a lot of time to think on the way down. You got it?"

Adrenaline surged in Markman. He gazed sluggishly up at his captor with a half-serious look, but lost control the instant their eyes met. He spit out a long, involuntary laugh that sprayed the man in the face. The man backed away cursing and wiped the offended area with the wet sleeve of his trench coat.

"Ha, ha, he's gonna die in a minute, but he can't stop laughin'. Ain't that a good one, Frank?"

"Shut up, you asshole. What the hell's goin' on?" The disgruntled man returned to Markman and with his left hand peeled the right eyelid back to get a better look at the iris. "You understand, mister, that when we're done with you you're goin' over the side and down to the bottom, don't you? We'll wait around until your bubbles stop, and then we're gone. Ain't nobody ever gonna find you. You got it?"

To Markman's own amazement, he began a helpless giggle. He held his chin down in an attempt to contain it, but the effort was futile. To his captor's further consternation, the giggle broke into a solid laugh.

A flush of anger came over the man's face. He turned to his amused partner. "What the hell's goin' on? How much of that crap did you give him?"

The other man's smile vanished and he became defensive. "Just up to the one-and-a-half mark, like you said. That's all I give him."

"You imbecile! I said the one-half mark, not the one-and-a-half mark. Where's the hypo?" The heavy set man stomped his way back toward the open hatchway where the needle had been prepared. He was stopped by his worried partner.

"I chucked it overboard. It was empty."

"You asshole. You OD'd him. We'll never get anything out of him now. Throw him the hell overboard and let's get out of here. You can explain it to Inkman, okay?"

For Markman the world was still a wonderful place. He felt wonderful. His senses were made of candy store colors and warm, passionate exhilaration. As the dejected assistant came to dispose of him, he experienced another surge of adrenaline, causing him to howl in laughter despite understanding what was about to happen. The assistant paused for a moment and began to chuckle himself.

"Do you believe it, Frank? I'm about to deep-six this guy, and he can't stop laughin'. Ain't it the damndest thing you ever saw?"

The other man leaned against the raised bridge, shook his head and exhaled a morbid laugh. Except for Markman's appearance, the three seemed more like Saturday night drinking buddies than murderers and their victim.

"Come on, get it over with."

The smaller man advanced toward Markman and reached out one hand. He placed it lightly on the right shoulder and smirked as Markman continued to laugh exhaustedly with his head bowed.

Markman's mind swam in pleasure. He sucked in his laughter enough to try speaking, but the words refused to come. The derringer remained poised and ready to fire, its angle greatly improved by the sitting position he had been rudely forced into.

At the touch of the killer's hand, Markman squeezed off the first shot from the lower barrel of the tiny gun. The pop was muffled slightly but still very loud, like a good-sized fire-cracker. It echoed out over the water, bringing a paralyzing end to the eerie silence of the lingering storm. So intoxicated was Markman that he failed even to notice the stiff kick of the large caliber derringer break his ill-positioned wrist.

The bullet left a small, round, burned hole in the tape as it exited the pocket. It traveled only a few inches before striking its intended target just above the groin, slightly to the left of the navel. The shocked gunshot victim instantly became wide-eyed, silent, and bent over, like a man urgently needing to find a restroom. As shock overcame pain, he broke into a blood-curdling howl and began dancing and jumping around the open deck, holding the badly bleeding wound with both hands. Markman, unable to control himself, again broke into exasperated laughter, tipping dangerously backward, kept in the boat only by the weighty resistance of the anchor taped to his legs.

The second man, stunned by what had happened, stood dazed with one hand holding to the upright of the aluminum ladder that led to the bridge. His mind refused to accept the fact that a shot had been fired. He scanned the open water thinking it must have come from another boat, but in a last final look of disbelief spotted the small hole in Markman's silver binding. His wounded partner, screaming loudly, banged sideways against the boat's port wall and fell headlong over the side, where he splashed and gurgled, and repeatedly lost his battle to stay afloat.

His companion gave him no consideration. Forgetting the Glock pistol on the table in the salon, he charged Markman with arms outstretched, diving and yelling with a hoarse cry that made Markman straighten up in a moment of sobriety. Instinctively, he clicked off his second shot.

The molten bullet found its mark just slightly off-center of the breastbone. It entered at the lower end and passed down through the heart while the two hundred and eighty pound man was still airborne. The heavy body, its eyes frozen open in an empty expression of hatred, crashed to the deck and slid until it came to rest in a heap at Markman's feet. The eerie silence of the night returned.

Markman's fits of laughter had been so severe, and so prolonged, his breathing had become urgent and constricted. He sucked in gasps at the cool, damp air and struggled to his feet in a desperate attempt to open his lungs. He wheezed in short breaths and fought to stay conscious, his mind both drugged and sorely-deprived of oxygen. The heavy anchor strapped to his feet helped buoy him. He jerked himself sideways in hopes of maneuvering around the limp body and away from the threat of the misty black water. The short bursts of breath were becoming longer, but the world was pitching and swaying badly. The fog was continuing to lift. Off the starboard side, far in the distance, the faint lights of Inkman's yacht had become just visible.

Otto J. Fishkin stared with passionate interest at the long, molded canopy that covered the dull-chromed electronic table in front of him. Soft, yellow light tinted the opaque Plexiglas cover, helping to reveal the occasional movements of the semi-human form that lay within. Fishkin clutched his hands in breathless anticipation of the impending emergence of the long awaited, earth-born Salantian Matriarch. Nervously, he squeezed his hands and unsuccessfully straightened his wrinkled suit jacket, unaware that it still carried within its lining the slave unit of a police proximity sensor. For him, the excitement was all-consuming.

The sound of the hatchway door opening momentarily distracted him from his ecstatic torment. A dripping man in a well-fitted black suit carrying a plain-looking black briefcase descended the winding, metal stairway to the large customized stateroom. He opened his mouth to offer greetings, but was cut off by his exhilarated associate.

"Mr. Inkman, at last! It is a joyous occasion that brings us together again."

"A new day, Mr. Fishkin, in a new world. Arrangements for our departure immediately following the emergence are complete. Has everything gone well here?"

"Everything is wonderful, Mr. Inkman. Agent Lee's preparations have been completed. He is ready to leave. Is that the device?"

Inkman crossed the short distance of gray-carpeted floor to a small desk situated below a portal that looked out over the eastern shore. He placed the black briefcase on it and unsnapped the latches, as Fishkin came up beside him. He lifted the lid and stared with approval at his partner, gesturing toward the opened case as he spoke.

"It is much more than we customarily use. The purge must be as complete as possible."

Fishkin stared excitedly down into the case's interior at the large chunk of clay-like explosive within it. Something out of place quickly caught his eye. The countdown timer was illuminated and a liquid crystal "002" was displayed on its screen.

"Mr. Inkman, why is it counting down?"

Inkman's head jerked down to verify his sometimes errant associate's claim. The "002" had become a "001". Inkman's mouth shot open as his lips curled to form a fearful cry of, "No...," but the word was cut off the moment it began.

Markman's vision was again becoming tunneled. Consciousness was gradually abandoning him. He swayed back and forth in his silver suit of tightly-wound tape and tried in frustration to make sense of things. It seemed as though he were standing perfectly still while the world was pitching and spinning uncontrollably. The drizzle had stopped. The air was clearing. Lights from the distant shore were winking on and off.

Abruptly, the night lit up like day, adding to the confusing surrealism that held him captive. A deafening cracking and roaring sound like thunder boomed across the open water. To his left, a giant, orange ball of fire rose high in the night sky. Burning, flare-like fragments cascaded outward in every direction. They streaked like meteors to the water's surface and burned there at scattered points across the horizon, their reflections reaching outward across the water.

Markman's world was thrown rudely up and over. In his shrinking, circular view, the stars rained downward with an accelerating speed. Finally with a bright flash of lightning and a sharp whack of pain on the back of the head, the tiny circle of stars went out altogether.

A blinding bright spot of light danced rudely over Markman's face. Pain throbbed from the back of his head—badly enough to make his ears ring. Unfamiliar hands were pushing and pulling at him, and strange, grave-sounding voices were interrupting the mercy of sleep.

"This one's still alive!"

"Where's all the blood coming from?"

"It's not a gunshot. He must've hit his head when he fell."

"Beats bein' dropped over the side..."

Visored faces peered into Markman's dulled mind. They were cartoon characters, one on either side of a glaring light that stared into his being. The little Coast Guard symbols on their jackets and hats began to come alive and dance in a carefully choreographed salute.

"Let's transfer him to the cutter and get him airlifted in."

“Right, I’ll get the board.”

Once again, the world spun down and faded away into a merciful repose of nonparticipation, and absolute privacy, as Markman slept a long, dreamless sleep.

Chapter 29

The morning of departure was marked in white by the first snow of the season. It gently dusted the city streets and buildings with a light powder. It collected in the alcoves of the steel, glass, and time-worn brick where little whirlpools of wind had formed. Scott Markman stood beside the silver-gray rental van with his brown leather jacket zipped all the way up. A black longshoreman's cap concealed the wide, white bandage around his head. He struggled to keep the new, pink cast on his right arm covered by sleeve or pocket. Despite the effort, his broken wrist was cold, and his middle back ached on the right side where it had hit a fixture on the deck wall of Inkman's cruiser.

Cassiopia and Tel waited patiently in the van, as Ann Rogers's car pulled into the parking lot of the defunct doughnut shop. She parked next to Markman and gathered up a file folder on the seat beside her. She climbed from the driver's seat, tucked the folder under her arm, and at the first cutting gust of wind pulled her long, brown cotton jacket tightly around her. As she approached the van, she gave a big, red lipstick smile and pushed the file at Markman, quickly tucking her hands back in when he had taken it.

"What's this?"

"A little present. It's the file on Chrissy Sumner, your lady in the lake. It's everything they'll need to close out the case when you get back."

"Thanks. Any more news about the big bang on Inkman's yacht?"

"Not much. They must've messed with C4 one too many times. Our friends from the intelligence agency won't say a thing. They're still a bit miffed about you going to the marina alone, although if you hadn't we might never have known Inkman and Fishkin were both on board when it went up. They're still bringing up little pieces of it. They've found a few bits of the Dragon Master computer. Not much is left. That yacht must have been loaded down with diesel. Oh yeah, they did recover the body of the second guy that tried to do you in. Both of those guys had records a mile long. No one has shown up to claim their bodies."

Rogers paused to look over her shoulder at an irate cab driver who had blown his horn in snow-stalled traffic. "There was one puzzling thing, Scott. One of our monitoring stations thought they picked up a blip from a proximity sensor about the same time Inkman's yacht blew up. Problem is, we never got a chance to plant

the master unit. Odd isn't it? By the way, I need yours back. Finance is very sensitive about things like that. Do you have it with you?"

"I lost it."

Rogers cast a questioning look. She started to ask something, but stopped and paused. "Damn, I'll have to write a lost property declaration on that. It won't go well with the new scuba stuff you bought us."

Markman shrugged apologetically. "Sorry. Tell me, what ever happened with Richard Baker? We stole his thousand dollars away from him, worked him over in an elevator, and then held him in custody with no charge. Is he going to sue the hell out of you guys, or what?"

Rogers shook her head and smiled. "You mean Cadet Baker."

"What?"

"Cadet Baker. He works for us now. I'd guess in six months it'll be Agent Baker, and he'll probably eventually come looking for a favor or two from you. After all, he did save your butt, did he not?"

"Agent Baker?"

"He's no slouch. He's got an engineering degree by the way. He was working for Harrier Dynamics and got busted for a small amount of marijuana. It was only a misdemeanor, but the government revoked his secret clearance so he lost his job. He hasn't been able to get work since. We cleared his record and offered him a position. He was glad to accept. All is well that ends well."

"You amaze me, Ann."

"Oh yeah, my upper management people seem to think it's time you considered working for us, also. They say your skills would be better applied on a federal level. They would like to discuss it with you, if you're willing. They wouldn't need the six months; you could learn the system on the job. You'd make considerably more money. I think you should consider it."

Markman shook his head gratefully. "I need some time to sort things out, Ann. I never expected this work to get so, I mean, I didn't expect to have to sacrifice so much so often."

"What do you mean, sacrifice?"

Markman paused uncomfortably. "I mean, I never expected to play a part in so many ten-sevens."

Rogers nodded grimly. "Oh. It's a crowded world, Scott. It is what it is. We make it better."

Markman looked out through the falling snow at the city around him. "You know, I love New York. The real people are good here, don't you think? I'll be back as a tourist, that's for sure, an off-duty tourist. You know, Ann, you should come to Florida and let Cass and me show you around. New York is great, but my heart really belongs to Orlando."

It's the City Beautiful. There's a lot to do down there. Take some time off and come see us."

Rogers raised an eyebrow and smiled. "Okay, who can refuse a sales pitch like that. I'll call you. And Scott, on the way back, don't get car-jacked or something, okay? You need some time off."

With a wave to Cassiopia, the pink-faced agent dashed back to her car, and after a long, last smile, ducked into it. Markman hurried to the driver's door of the van. The temperature was still dropping.

The TEL 100D sat quietly in the back of the roomy van, hidden for the most part by heavily-tinted windows. In spite of playful sarcasm from Cassiopia, Markman had fit a N. Y. Yankees baseball cap on its head, claiming it to be a disguise. The overworked trio pulled out onto the highway, and immediately Cassiopia's realized it was not the shortest route home.

"Aren't we going to take the Lincoln Tunnel to the Jersey Turnpike?"

"I want to make one more quick stop, if it's okay with you."

"Sure. What's bothering you?"

"Nothing."

"Something is. I can tell."

"Nothing."

"Tell me, please."

Markman cast a heavy glance at her as though she were intruding into things she should not. He looked back to the road and spoke remorsefully. "My life has too many surprises."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I think the price is too high."

"Which price is that?"

Markman looked irately back at her. "I mean I never thought I'd have so many notches on my gun so fast, okay?"

Cassiopia paused and gave a questioning stare. "What are you saying, Scott? Would you prefer that harm had come to me?"

"Impossible!"

"Okay, how about yourself. Would it be better if you had been killed?"

"I'm not sure."

Anger surged in Cassiopia. "Well, you'd better get sure, Markman, that is if you care a damn about me."

Markman looked again at her. He knew no words to say, but the soulful caress in his eyes was enough.

"Oh, come on, Scott. Look at yourself. Your head's all bandaged up. Your arm's in a cast, and you're worried about what you did to the two guys who were trying to kill you?"

"Hey, I thought you were the hard-core pacifist!"

Cassiopia became silent and stared thoughtfully out her window. Though she despised violence, Markman's disposal of the two men who had intended to kill him somehow made her feel uplifted. It didn't matter how or why he was safe and with her, only that he was.

The place he was looking for was easy to find. Property had become so scarce in the area that a cemetery was something unusual and hard to miss. He parked the van on the horseshoe-shaped, snow covered driveway and found his way through the many markers to where a more recent grave was heavily adorned with slightly wilted, snow covered flowers. The inscription on the marker read, "Beloved Daughter, Chrissy Sumner". He stood at the foot of the grave and kept his cold hands in his jacket pockets. He spoke with his mind and his heart. Somehow he knew she would hear.

"I told you I wouldn't leave you. It's done and over now, and it wasn't for nothing. You forced me into it. We stopped something very bad from getting very worse."

He sought the inner silence he had learned from the old Tibetan monks, the men who had always seemed to have smiles etched into their face, no matter how trying the day. Suddenly he felt an inner violence. Ugly faces of mean-hearted people were holding him down and hurting him. It was night and the water was cold. Nylon rope burned the ankles. Then emptiness. The inner silence returned.

In the peaceful quiet, a spoken feeling welled up within him. A distant message from a friend. A sentiment of kindness. And in that moment, he somehow came to know that the black-hearted men that had so casually tried to destroy him were the same ones that had harmed the lady in the lake.

Back at the van, emotionally-drained, he turned to stare at his tracks in the snow. Strangely, they had come to look like those of two people. He climbed into the warmth of the idling vehicle and found Cassiopia's dark eyes staring affectionately back. No words were spoken. None were necessary. Markman's inner burden had found its rightful place, in the weightlessness of selfless space.