

Revolution In America

Noon's Rise
To Power

by
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Dedication

To Bryan, my brother, my buddy, my biggest fan.

At 6:30 p.m. Eastern Standard Time, a small, privately owned Boeing/Lear C7 jet began its final approach to New York's Kennedy Airport. Inside the cabin, the overhead lights were turned off leaving only the row of chair side lamps to illuminate the aisle. The jet's only passenger, Dr. Alexander Noon, placed his palm under his chin and stared out at the Manhattan skyline.

Framed by a curtain of dark gray clouds and underlined by slivers of dying sunlight, the red blinking lights atop the skyscrapers were clearly visible, but few lights emanated from the mostly empty offices below them. The long pearl-like string of lamps once lighting the city's great bridges had fallen into disrepair. Even the rows of white and red lights from the cars below on the FDR and LIE were gone having been replaced by night vision, infrared head and tail lamps.

Along the shore, scores of Nomads and thousands of homeless huddled around flickering bonfires.

Noon shook his head.

The Big Apple was a dying city, its mighty skyscrapers now merely tombstones in a graveyard.

The intercom clicked.

Estimated time of arrival is 6:38, doctor,” the pilot said. “*We have been informed that your associates, Mr. Sullivan and Mr. Maxwell, have a car waiting and will accompany you to the hotel. You should arrive in plenty of time for the ceremonies.”*

The doctor verified the time on his wristscreen, “*We hope you enjoyed your flight and...”*

Suddenly the computer emergency alert snapped on. “Warning! Missile lock! Warning! Missile Lock” the mechanical voice blared over the intercom. The pilot immediately powered up the fusion engines and as the low whisper of the turbines revved into a shrill whine, the jet began a sharp ascent.

Pressed back against his seat, Noon flicked the intercom button. “What type of missile?!” he shouted.

The alerts were turned down. “A COMLOC Stinger missile array has been launched... it’s scanning our position... I’ve turned off the beacon... and am trying to climb out of range.” He had clearly never dealt with anything like this before.

“Turn the beacon back on!” Noon demanded. “Then ease back on the throttle and make a series of quick turns at varying altitudes, but keep leading it to the open seas. Those mini Stingers can’t handle abrupt course changes and the COMLOC housing array can only fire one at a time. They were built to knock out large cargo planes, not small jets.”

“But, Doctor!!” he began but stopped when the emergency alert voice announced the COMLOC had launched the first Stinger and it was racing toward them.

“Do what I told you!” Noon commanded. “I know what I’m talking about.”

The pilot complied. The jet banked quickly and began a steep descent. The first mini missile rocketed past the right wing. A second was launched.

The first exploded twenty-five yards away causing the jet to vibrate wildly; pea size shrapnel pitted the windows and sparks flew from the fusion turbines. As the pilot slowly brought it back under control, the COMLOC array adjusted its course to follow. Seeing this, he ignited the afterburners and the jet charged skyward. A third mini-missile launched.

The alerts cut off.

Noon looked out the window and saw the third mini missile veer off course after passing through the second missile’s heat trail.

The fourth launched while the second doubled back.

“Kill the engines!” Noon shouted.

“But Doctor!”

“Do it, damn you!”

After a moment’s hesitation, the pilot complied. Both engines flamed out, and with the stabilization computers off line, the jet began a free fall.

When the jet's engine signature disappeared, the COMLOC did what it was programmed to do. It exploded, detonating the two remaining missiles.

The explosion, although 150 yards away, had enough force to compress the air above the jet and flatten its angle of descent.

"Restart the engines!" Noon shouted.

The pilot complied; the jet rocketed forward and after a moment began pulling upward.

"It worked, Doctor!" the pilot shouted, his voice heady with excitement and relief. "How did you know?"

Noon didn't reply. He sat back and resumed looking out over the city.

A city he was determined to bring back to life.

The paparazzi stamped their feet and clapped their arms to generate heat as they stood outside the entranceway of the Plaza Hotel. It was an unusually bitter evening for the early part of May and the press was anxious for the Doctor to arrive. No one wanted to be on the streets if the Nomads, who were gathering around the adjoining buildings and alleys, decided to cause trouble.

When word got out Dr. Noon was coming to New York and to the Plaza Hotel in particular, fans and well-wishers rushed to the area in the hope of catching a glimpse of the enigmatic scientist. Many lined the streets holding placards expressing their

love and appreciation for his many accomplishments.

Amid the crowd, one reporter stood over his cameraman as the man downloaded the latest questions. The interview had to be adjusted to include Noon's plane being targeted.

"We're locked and loaded, Steve," the cameraman—a short and stocky Latino named Luis Sonjo said as he flipped the teleprompter to its position above the lens and brought it to his shoulders.

"Okay, let's have a look. Roll it, Luis."

Sonjo nodded and clicked it on. The two stood face-to-face as the teleprompter scrolled the questions.

After reading the first line Steve Mathers threw up his hands. "How do you *feel* about being targeted by a Stinger missile?" he asked in disbelief. "What kind of asinine question is that?"

Sonjo shrugged as Steve rolled his eyes in disgust. "I'm telling you, Luis, the suits are trying to make me look like an imbecile. I mean this is Noon, for heaven's sake, *Doctor*, freaking Noon! Does the M-6 Titan ring any bells, or gene replacement? And those jackasses at the station want me to ask him how he *feels*? What do they expect him to say?"

The reporter pressed his lips together and shook his head in frustration. After a moment, a sly grin appeared on his face. He turned to the cameraman

and bunched up his eyebrows to ape Noon's thick ones.

"Well, Steve," he said, hunching his shoulders and mimicking the Doctor's deep baritone. "When told we had been targeted, I immediately shit my pants and ran up and down the aisles screaming like my dick was on fire. Other than that, I think I handled it rather well."

Sanjo burst out laughing. He loved it when Steve imitated celebrities.

"You know what we *should* be asking, Luis?" Mathers said, now serious as he pulled his parka tight to his chest. "We should be asking why a two time Nobel Prize-winning, media hating recluse like him would agree to take part in this bullshit political fundraiser."

"Why? What's the problem?" Luis asked as he put the camera on stand-by and placed it between his legs.

"Well, for one," Steve said blowing into his fist, "here's a guy who never even bothered to acknowledge his Nobel Prizes, a guy who rarely, if ever, ventured out of the Corinthe University labs. Now he's flying in from Buffalo to address a boatload of muckety-mucks sandwiched inside the dining hall. You know what the first question to the doctor *should* be? It should be, 'Hey, doc, why the 180?'"

Luis shoved his hands into his pockets. "Maybe he felt it was time to get out and meet the people."

Steve shook his head. “Nah, not his style. Guys in his league—Einstein, Oppenheimer, Tesla, Hawking, Popeunfore—none of them were big on being in the spotlight. No, Luis, he’s got an agenda.”

“I think I see the limo!” somebody shouted.

Both Steve and Luis grabbed their equipment and took off for the curb.

The hordes of Nomads followed.

2

The cold light of the arc lamps lit the overpass. Two police officers sat in their patrol car, turned so its headlights and roof rack illuminated the highway below. Both officers, however, were dead, having been shot in the back of their heads. Their assassins, one Low Dog James and his partner, Owsley Chang, just finished pulling two sets of chains, one long and one short, from the van parked alongside and were hastily attaching the hooks to the undercarriage of the police car.

Low Dog was black, tall and powerfully built, wore a black stocking cap and a maroon overcoat. His partner, Owsley, was Asian, with long hair pulled back in a ponytail. He wore a black leather coat and motorcycle boots.

“Back chains are ready,” Low Dog said as he slid from under the vehicle. “How much time we got?”

Owsley checked the set of chains he had attached to the front end, stood, and looked at his wristscreen. “A little under five minutes; you better start cutting the guard rail.”

“Right,” Low Dog replied as he picked up the laser torch and headed toward the railing.

“Make sure you make the hole big enough!” Owsley called out.

“I know what I’m doing!” Dog replied as the crimson light began cutting into the steel. “You just get your ‘eyes’ on so we don’t miss that damned truck!”

Owsley nodded, pulled his night vision glasses from his coat pocket, slipped them on, trotted over and scanned the highway below. No traffic. He checked his computer and radio control panel again. The Merrin-Hoyt truck would be along any minute.

A stiff breeze blew across the overpass. Owsley pulled his arms in tight and flipped up his collar. He eyed his equipment; studied it as the lights and meters flickered and pulsed.

He wanted to check the chains again. Hell, he wanted to check *everything* again, to make sure it was exactly right. There could be no mistakes. This was a one-chance deal. Done right, they would be millionaires. Done wrong, they’d be dead.

Dog snapped off the laser. “Cutting’s done,” he said. “Help me move this railing out the way.”

Owsley took one quick look over the highway and ran to his partner. They dragged the length of guardrail to the side and dropped it with a *clank!* The two then attached the chains from the patrol car to the metal bases of the remaining guardrails.

“Shit, it’s cold!” Dog said hunching his shoulders and rolling his hands. “Steering wheel locked up?”

Owsley nodded. “Clamped tight.” He stopped and pressed his index and middle fingers to his brow. “Okay, it looks like we’re all set. Drive our van to the far end of the overpass. I don’t want those drivers seeing anything but the patrol car.”

Dog did as instructed. On the walk back he studied the scene.

All right, the cop car is in position, the railing’s cut, the chains are hooked. Man! This had better work.

As his partner approached, Owsley decided to take one last precaution. “Dog,” he said, “open the driver’s side window. These drug drivers sometimes flash their high beams as they pass. Since we can’t flash back, I want you to pull the cop’s arm out the window and if they flash, I want you to raise his arm and wave it.”

“What?!! Get the fuck out of here! I ain’t playing puppeteer with no dead man!”

“Listen,” Owsley said firmly, “if they even suspect what’s going on, we’re fucked. So stop arguing and just do it, all right?”

“All right, all right!” Dog said, flinging his hand dismissively. “I’ll open the motherfucking window.”

He walked over, opened the door, checked the seat belts of the dead police officers, then pressed

the button to lower the window. Once done, he slammed the door and pulled the officer's arm out.

"Okay, now what?"

"Take the twine, tie a loop around his wrist, then string it over the roof and under the car. If the truck flashes its lights, you pull the twine, the cop waves and we're home free."

Dog shook his head in disgust, but did as Owsley said.

As he crouched down alongside the driver's door, Dog turned. "I think I hear something."

Owsley slipped his glasses on and ran over to the opposite railing. "It's coming."

"Radio control ready?"

"Yeah, up and on stand-by," Owsley replied. He lay down next to the radar-positioning screen and checked the handheld computer.

"You sure this is going to work?" Dog said.

"Shut up!" Owsley snapped.

20...19...18...

John Dow and his partner Evan Graves had been driving the Merrin-Hoyt truck for sixteen straight hours. Their destination, the Copernicus Building in the Bronx was only fifteen-minutes away. It had been a long haul from Illinois and they were anxious to get some much-needed sleep. Delivering drugs had become very dangerous work but the money, oh the money!

"When's the next police checkpoint?" John asked.

Evan scanned the dashboard screen. “About a half mile down,” he replied, “on top of the next overpass.”

John nodded, smiled and turned down the radio.
“What’s up?” Evan asked.

“I was just thinking about my old man,” John replied. “We were talking recently and he said, ‘When I was your age, people who did what you do were called drug runners and the police put them in jail. Now, anything goes. It’s disgusting!’”

Evan waved off the comment. “Ah, you can’t reason with the old timers with their old-school thinking.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Hey,” Evan said, pointing and leaning forward. “There’s the overpass and the police car. That’s the last checkpoint. Start counting your money, buddy!”

John and Evan smiled, banged knuckles and began thinking about what they were going to buy with all that cash.

17...16...15... “Get ready,” Owsley said. Dog nodded, grabbed the twine from the undercarriage and wrapped it several times around his hand so he wouldn’t have to go looking at the last minute.

Owsley switched the radio control from Stand-By to On.

Evan glanced upward. “Flash the high beams to let them know we appreciate them being out here on such a cold night.”

“Good idea,” John replied and hit the high-beam switch twice.

“Dog!” Owsley shouted. “Pull the twine! Pull the damned twine!”

Dog did, but in his enthusiasm jerked it hard, so instead of the arm looking like it was waving, it looked like it was flapping.

“Well, somebody seems happy to see us,” John commented with a grin.

3...2...1...Zero!” Using the radio control, Owsley punched the accelerator. With rubber burning, the car rocketed backward across the asphalt toward the hole in the railing. But Dog still had the twine wrapped around his hand and was being dragged over the pavement as the car sailed into the air. As he tried to pull free, he saw the twine pull the dead police officer’s arm and part of his shoulder out of the driver’s-side window. The dead man seemed to be waving at Dog, taunting him, as if saying “Hey, asshole! You killed me, now I’m going to kill you!!”

As the drug truck entered the area under the overpass, Evan turned and said. “I just thought of

something. Why would that cop have his window open on such a cold night?"

Dog's shoulder slammed into the overpass curb and the twine ripped free. "Shit! Shit! Shit!" Dog bellowed as the long chains pulled taut stopping the car's descent. Then as the front of the police car fell forward, the short chains tightened and propelled the vehicle like a battering ram into the tunnel.

"That is odd," John said. "Maybe we should call in and..."

"HOLY SHIT!!!" Evan screamed as the patrol car, with its roof rack lights flashing appeared out of nowhere and was barreling right at them.

To John, the final seconds passed slowly. He saw the headlights first, then the two dead officers staring directly at him. *Why weren't the officers trying to swerve out of the way? Why did they look so calm?*

There was a thunderous crash. The patrol car, still attached to the chains, swung back out, followed by the drug truck whose cab and passengers were smashed flat against the cargo box. It wobbled, veered to the left, then came to a slow stop against the guardrail.

“Fucking A!” Owsley shouted as he thrust his fists into the air. “I told you it would work, Dog! I told you!”

“Motherfucking fool!!! That plan of yours nearly got me killed! I ought to shoot your stupid ass! I....Owwwww!” he bellowed as the bones of his bruised shoulder scraped together.

“Oh, stop whining,” Owsley said. “You’re lucky that curb didn’t take your stupid head off. Now c’mon, let’s get those drugs and get out of here!”

3

As Steve Mathers and Luis Sonjo ran for the curb with the rest of the reporters, they saw Nomads oozing out from behind parked trucks, abandoned cars and from darkened alleys. Steve felt his heartbeat quicken at the sight of their torches. Their trademark repetitive trilling echoed against the surrounding high-rises turning his balls into ice cubes. He checked the perimeter. There must have been fifty of them, all with various facial and body tattoos, metal tooth caps, numerous piercings, spiked boots and filthy rags for clothes

“Shit, Luis, you see that?” Steve asked, tipping his head in their direction.

“Kind of hard to miss, Steve,” he replied with a wide-eyed stare. There was apprehension in Luis’ voice. He knew anytime Nomads appeared in a group, things could get ugly.

And deadly.

The Nomads, it was said, no longer possessed souls. The enormous quantity of drugs they took burned away any trace of humanity.

They had only one thought in their collective mind.

Get more drugs. Get them now. Get them anyway you can.

Cops were everywhere but that didn't mean much. They were here only because people with very powerful connections owned the Plaza. And it was those very same people that made sure the police received their weekly paycheck.

The Nomads on the other hand, were psychotic and fearless. On a number of occasions, two or three of them, stoned out of their minds, would casually walk into a crowd and blow themselves up. Seeing this, the other gang members would descend upon the crowd like locust, taking money, jewelry, shoes, clothes, anything they could sell, leaving nothing but battered and often naked bodies in their wake.

“Clear the streets!!!” A bullhorn amplified voice shouted. **“Clear the streets or we will be forced to take action.”** Thirty or so police in riot gear started toward the Nomads, thumping their billy clubs against their Lexaprine shields.

Hissing through thickened tongues, the Nomads slowly backed up, deeper into the darkened alleys.

“I wouldn’t follow them in there, man,” Luis said as the light from their torches melted into the alleyways.

Steve grunted in agreement and swallowed hard.

Surrounded by flashing patrol cars and motorcycles, Noon’s limo pulled up to the curb. As his associates, Oloki Sullivan, Howard Maxwell and

a man referred to only as The Colonel stepped out, the Doctor, following closely behind, was immediately barraged by questions. Most however, were drowned out by the caterwauling, screeching and verbal insults the Nomads made as the police pressed toward them.

A torch flew from the crowd of Nomads and struck the sidewalk alongside Noon's limo.

As Noon rose to his full height—six-five if he was an inch—he looked at the sputtering torch, turned and stared at the Nomads. One could almost feel the fury emanating from him.

“Someone ought to hang those pieces of shit!” he said.

Steve and Luis eyed each other then mouthed the words; *Someone ought to hang those pieces of shit? Woo!*

Noon turned and, accompanied by his associates, ignored all questions and entered the hotel.

With the assistance of hotel security, Dr. Noon and his entourage were rushed through the crowds of reporters, photographers and well-wishers and escorted to their seventeenth floor suite.

The mustached concierge opened the door and swept his hand across the entrance in a grand gesture. “I hope these accommodations are to your satisfaction, gentlemen.”

As they stepped inside, Noon nodded his acceptance at the opulently decorated suite and the complimentary assortment of fruits, nuts, confections and top shelf beverages laid out on a buffet table on the far side of the room.

The man added with a slight bow, “If you need anything, just press the...”

Howard Maxwell took his arm, slipped him a cash driver and said, “Just see we are not disturbed. Got that?”

The concierge stiffened at Maxwell’s terseness but after noticing the cash driver’s LCD flashing \$200.00, his wide grin returned and he made his exit.

They had no more put down their briefcases, hung up their coats and placed their laptops on the conference table when a man wearing a long, shiny gray coat and red-mirrored glasses walked in from the bedroom, did a quick inspection of the dessert table and approached the others

Dr. Noon turned toward the figure. “Now, why am I not surprised?” he said with a grin. “And here I was thinking we were going to have to wait for you.”

The man returned the smile and shook Noon’s hand. “Just wanted to make sure everything that is supposed to be here *is*, and anything that isn’t, *isn’t*.”

After they exchanged greetings with the new arrival, they gathered some of the delicacies from the dessert table and returned to their seats.

Howard Maxwell, after sampling one of the chocolate truffles, checked his wristscreen. “We should get started, one final run-through just to make sure.”

Dr. Noon nodded in agreement and looked around the table. “Right, so let’s begin. Oloki, you want to start us off?”

Oloki Sullivan opened his laptop. “My travel plans have been confirmed. Shortly following your speech, I’ll fly to Los Angeles for my television appearance. During the usual banter I’ll confirm tonight’s announcement. That way it’ll be the top story in the morning media.”

“Very good,” Noon replied. “Howard?”

Howard Maxwell, a stocky man with a square jaw and a naturally aggressive nature leaned back in his chair, unbuttoned his suit jacket and said, “We’re all set. I have close associates from fourteen different law firms prepped and ready.”

“Good!” Noon replied. “Hopefully by the time the PTB realizes what we have done, it will be too late and lawyers won’t be necessary.”

Maxwell pursed his lips and placed his hand on the Doctor’s arm. “Just a warning, Alexander. Don’t underestimate them. I’ve dealt with these people before and they are absolutely ruthless. There will be no second chances.”

Noon made a quick bow of his head. “Duly noted.”

“Oloki?” Noon said. “Those speaking engagements; your e-mail said you’ve received confirmation on all the locations?”

Oloki popped a cashew into his mouth. “Yes, I have, and getting them turned out to be quite a challenge.” He paused for a moment to take a sip of soda. “I originally made a list of the most commonly used trade forums and conference halls with the intention of booking them over the next six months. Then it occurred to me those places are primarily owned and run by organizations affiliated or funded by the PTB. Obviously, those bookings would disappear the minute we became a problem, so I began searching for alternatives.”

The man with the red-mirrored glasses leaned in. “What did you find?”

Oloki grinned. “Public venues, schools, libraries, town halls, public parks and statehouses, technically anything run by the state. By law they have to permit political gatherings so the people can discuss, participate and voice their opinions on public issues.”

Maxwell opened a bowl of fruit salad and stirred. “He’s right. I’ve gone over the permits and we are completely within our rights. It’s constitutional so there’s not a damn thing the PTB can do about it.”

“Well done,” Noon said as he turned to the mysterious man at the far end of the table. “And you, my friend. Has the list been completed?”

The man with the red glasses nodded. “It has and I will be contacting those people personally over the next few days. If we can convince them to become members of what I like to call our ‘Inner Circle,’ we can be three yards ahead of the PTB before they even hear the starter’s pistol. As for our dear friend, Dr. Solace Mopather, I would very much like her involved but, well, you know.”

“Leave her to me,” Noon said. “Now, Colonel, what is the current status of the Guardian Corps?”

The Colonel tapped his wristscreen and said, “Right now we have over 2500 active members. The youngest are fifteen, the oldest twenty-two. Over the last two years the GC has doubled in size and has become the premier shelter for runaways, homeless teens, and those who simply want to be part of a respected organization. I’m very proud to be part of it.”

Noon eyed him closely. “Can I depend on them when the time comes?”

The Colonel’s face turned grim. “Doctor, these young men and women know full well who funds the GC; who made it possible for them to escape violent and dangerous home lives and avoid the clutches of the Nomads, Rattlers and FunBoys. Frankly, these kids would take a disrupter blast for you.”

Satisfied, Noon nodded, turned to the others and said. "Gentlemen, I have discussed my plans with you at length. You know what I intend to do and the danger involved. After I address the public this evening, to use an old phrase, the die will be cast. So if any of you are having second thoughts, now is the time to speak. Because once we step into this hurricane it may not be possible to get out until it is over."

When no one spoke up, Noon smiled and said. "Very well, gentlemen, let us proceed."

4

Owsley and Dog quickly emptied the premium drugs from the Merrin-Hoyt truck and loaded their van. Due to Owsley's obsession with detail, every cubic inch of space was meticulously set aside for a specific box so no room was wasted.

It took twenty-eight minutes, seven longer than their practice runs but so far luck was with them. No interruptions. No problems.

Since the surrounding exits and connecting streets were closed to prevent highjackings, Owsley and Dog created an alternate route to the highway by clearing a long abandoned asphalt bicycle path.

Within forty-five minutes of the ambush and murder of the police officers, Owsley and Dog were racing from the scene and looking at the biggest payoff in their combined careers. This was the pure stuff. The stuff all the other drugs were made from. The pay-off was five million each. Which were small potatoes when you took into account the street value was ten times that.

And what made it even better was this wasn't one of those situations where you had to worry about being taken out once the delivery was made. People capable of pulling off a job as difficult as

this, a job where the truck's route and schedule were top secret, where the police had patrol cars stationed at overpasses just before the truck arrived, where exits and intersects were closed in the areas where the trucks passed were rare to say the least. To pull that kind of heist took exceptional talent and Owsley Chang and Low Dog James, were two of the very few who possessed it.

After following the abandoned bike path back to the main thoroughfare, Dog checked his wristscreen. "Gotta hand it to you, Owsley, even with the loading we're still four minutes ahead. When we get in, I just need one favor. At the payoff, make sure they got my encryption right and that the money went through."

"Dog, I showed you how to do that ten times," Owsley replied as he tapped the brakes for a red light but then resumed normal speed when it changed green.

"Yeah, I know, but this super high tech stuff just ain't my thing. With all that coding and re-coding and all that shit..."

Owsley exhaled and nodded. "Yeah, verification is getting out of hand. Even *I'm* finding it difficult, and I specialize...Hey whoa! What the fuck is that?"

Owsley pointed to the street ahead. Dog leaned forward, muttered, "Shit!" then turned and looked out the van's back windows.

“Fucking Nomads! They’re setting a roach trap on us!” Dog reached into his jacket, pulled his automatic and clicked off the safety.

Owsley slammed his fist on the steering wheel. “Shit! It *is* a roach trap!” He reached for his gun, too.

Behind them the Nomads quickly completed stringing a wall of chain barriers across the length of the street and locked those chains to the street lamps. Just ahead, another chain wall was being erected and attached to the street lamps as well.

Both Low Dog and Owsley knew the deal. If you tried to drive through the chains and failed (which most passenger cars did), the Nomads would not only rob you, they’d kill you for dislodging the streetlight and weakening the chains. On the other hand, if you stopped and handed over your money, and the Nomads were in a particularly forgiving mood, you might be sent on your way unharmed and unmolested.

There were no guarantees however.

Owsley quickly calculated the force, speed and sheer power necessary to break through and decided not to chance it. Even if they did make it, the van’s front end would probably be damaged. Then they’d have to deal with steering problems, possible flat tires and maybe the loss of a headlight. Any of which might attract the police.

Low Dog was doing calculations as well. “Not more than seven or eight as far as I can see,” he said

scanning the area. “So listen up. When we stop and they surround the van, we jump out and start firing. I’ll run to the lamppost, shoot off the locks while you jump back in, pull over and pick me up. Ready?”

“Hold it! Hold it!” Owsley said eying the Nomads as they gathered on the sidewalk. “Check out the vans at either end of the street ahead. I saw something move. There’s Nomad’s in there. We come out shooting and they’re going to open fire. We’d be dead in two steps!”

Dog gritted his teeth and ran the heel of his hand against his forehead. “Shit! Okay, then what do we do?”

“Let me handle this, let me handle this,” Owsley said as he began slowing down.

5

“How does one introduce a legend?” Governor Gerald Tipton asked from the podium at the 3000-seat Plaza Hotel dining room. “What does one say about a man whose very name is synonymous with genius and service to mankind? How does one avoid staring in gap jawed astonishment when in the presence of someone who, over the last thirty years, has done more to change the world than anyone in the last 500? A man who, at the tender age of twenty-five created the gravity pulse generator that caused the giant M-6 Titan meteor to veer from its collision path with Earth? A man whose genetic experiments led to the eradication of several mental illnesses? A man who designed aircraft capable of circumnavigating the globe in less than one hour without subjecting its passengers to painful g-forces? The man who established and finances the Guardian Corps, whose courageous young citizens act as the eyes and ears of the police.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, I could go on and on describing this man’s incredible accomplishments, but fortunately, you are not here to listen to me, but to welcome for the first time in any public venue, Doctor Alexander Noon!”

As the imposing figure of Dr. Noon strode to the podium, the capacity crowd, all of who spent \$10,000 for the opportunity to hear him, leapt to their feet and applauded. This enigmatic recluse, the world's most renowned medical doctor and scientist, was looked upon as the Leonardo da Vinci of the 21st century and everybody wanted to bask in his presence.

The first sign something was a little odd was when the governor stuck out his hand to welcome the Doctor to the stage. Instead of shaking it, the Doctor ignored it and the governor, and strode directly to the podium.

The lights dimmed as the audience, now spellbound, sat back down in their seats.

The Doctor placed his hands on the sides of the podium and looked out over the crowd. At 55 years of age he looked ten years younger. His hair had only the slightest hints of gray and was slightly long, almost below his collar. His bushy eyebrows and deep-set eyes gave him a noticeably intense look. His considerable height and broad shoulders added to his imposing presence but it was his deep booming voice that commanded the most attention.

"We are all busy people," Dr. Noon began as the reporters and camera people surrounding him documented the event. "We all have our place in society and our responsibilities according to that place. As for me, I have dedicated my life to solving problems. As a young man, the first serious

challenge I encountered was the M-6 Titan meteor. I was in my early twenties and kept expecting some brilliant scientist to come forward with a plan that would save us all. But as time passed and the meteor drew ever closer it became frighteningly clear that if *I* didn't do it, if *I* didn't find a way, it would not be done. So...*I* did. *I* found a way. Frankly, that's the reason for everything I have ever accomplished. It needed doing. That's all.

"Now, as for why I am here.

"As you probably know, I was born and have lived in the Empire State all my life. I have spent the majority of my adulthood in the labs of Corinthe University. This is my home. But over the last few decades this home, our home, has become a cesspool. Our utilities are a joke. Mass transit barely functions. Health care is nonexistent, unless you are wealthy. Taxes and personal debt are out of control, drug use is rampant, police only protect the well-to-do and confront criminals only when absolutely necessary. People who once held respected jobs and were contributing members of our society now live out in the streets sifting through dumpsters for food.

"Those presently in control have brought us to the point where, unless immediate action is taken, the state government will collapse, leading to rioting, chaos and wholesale destruction.

"Therefore, on the 20th of January I have decided to assume the governorship of the State of New York. When *I* do, *I* promise, those responsible

for this disastrous state of affairs *will* be held accountable.”

Dr. Noon scanned the audience. They stared blank-faced, startled, dumbstruck, not sure of what they were hearing. Or what it all meant. Even the press seemed momentarily unsure how to react

Noon leaned into the microphone. “That is all I have to say.” He turned and walked off the stage as the reporters scurried after him.

Once stopped, Owsley and Low Dog stared out their respective windows as the Nomads approached. Dog saw the tops of heads peeking out from the windows of the van nearest him. The windows were open. The night was brutally cold. Owsley, it appeared, was right.

One of the Nomads, with a face tattooed to look like a Jamaican voodoo skull and wearing a top hat, casually stepped up and rapped his bony fingers on the driver’s side window.

Owsley nodded and lowered it.

“Cold evening, is thant it?” the Skull man said with a noticeable lisp.

Most of the Nomads spoke with lisps because their favorite drug, Krolla, caused the tongue to swell, hence the lisp. It was a psychotropic drug that, when used in large dosages, brought about blissful hallucinations lasting for hours. The down side was when the drug wore off the user experienced bouts of uncontrollable rage.

“Very cold,” Owsley answered agreeably. “So, if we can just get down to business?”

“Yeth. Hand over your cash driviths.”

Owsley and Low Dog nodded, reached into their shirt pockets and pulled them out.

Otherwise known as electronic wallets, the two handed the two inch pieces of metal to Skull. With a grin he plugged them into a small handheld computer.

He nodded. “Very nithe. Two grand each,” he said, reading the screen.

Nomads preferred cash drivers because the money in them could be transferred without being tracked. It was called a cash driver because it was as untraceable as the old time paper money.

“Yeah, it’s your lucky day, we just got paid.” Owsley said sarcastically. He saw one of the Nomads leave the group and head over to the lamppost. Low Dog heard keys jangle as the man reached into his pocket. It appeared their luck was holding out.

Skull tossed the drained drivers into the window, tipped his top hat and stepped back.

As Owsley and Dog waited for the chains to be unlocked, a canine howl pierced the night air, once, then again.

Owsley and Low Dog eyed each other. Low Dog raised an eyebrow and in a low voice asked, “What the hell is that about?” Not having an answer, Owsley turned back to Skull whose

noncommittal expression was slowly transforming into a menacing grin.

A breeze swept across the street. It rattled the trees and blew grit against the curb, the van rocked gently and Skull pressed his hand to his top hat to keep it from taking to the air.

The canine howled again.

Suddenly a German shepherd came charging out of the dark and toward the van. Before either Owsley or Low Dog could react, it leapt at the open window and tried to paw its way in. It failed, fell to the ground but immediately tried again, its nails tapping and raking the van door.

“Oh!! Now isthn’t thith interesthting?” Skull said.

Both Owsley and Low Dog paled. They had forgotten the Nomads sometimes used drug-sniffing dogs to see if their victims were hiding any inside their vehicles.

The shepherd howled again. Skull looked down, snapped his fingers and the dog trotted back to the crowd.

“Got thsome drugths in there, boyths?” he asked with eyebrows raised.

Owsley gave Low Dog a look that said, ‘get ready, brother, things are going to get ugly,’ then turned, shot his hand out, wrapped his arm around Skull’s neck and yanked him close. In a split second, Owsley had his gun drawn and was pressing it against the tattooed man’s cheek.

“Back off motherfuckers and unlock those chains,” he called to the Nomads, “or I’ll shoot Skull-boy here. Do it now!”

Nobody moved except Skull himself, who simply turned his head until the gun barrel was pressed against his lips. “You don’t share me,” he said and began running his swollen tongue over and around the barrel.

Stunned by the response, Owsley didn’t see the Nomad with the tire iron pressed alongside the van. As he again stuck out his head to demand the chains be unlocked, the Nomad drove the tire iron through Owsley’s skull.

Although his face was spattered with blood, Voodoo Skull chuckled as Owsley’s head, with the tire iron driven completely through it, was twisted to face Low Dog’s. Low Dog jumped back in terror when he saw Owsley’s eyes roll back and his tongue hanging from his mouth like an old rug from an open window. As Owsley began his death rattle, Low Dog roared and emptied his gun in all directions.

The last thing he saw were the dark heads pop up from inside the SUV’s and the bright bursts of gunfire.

6

“It’s being downloaded to the broadcast booth as we speak,” Steve Mathers said into his earpiece as he and Luis sat in the back of a cab. “No, you don’t understand. He didn’t say he was *running* for governor, he said he was going to *be* the next governor, like it was a foregone conclusion! Shit, maybe it is, considering who we are talking about. Wait, say again.”

Steve turned to Luis. “Carpenter wants us to fly out to Corinthe University right now and interview Noon’s fellow scientists. Says other than his scientific accomplishments we know almost nothing about him and that needs to change fast.”

Steve tapped the Lexaprine divider and spoke into the small holes at the bottom. “Driver, take us to the airport instead.”

When the driver nodded, Steve continued the phone conversation. “Okay, Carp, me and Luis are heading out right out, should be at Corinthe in about an hour. We’ll call as soon as we’ve have something to report.”

Steve tapped the earpiece off and took in a deep breath. “I loooooove being at the beginning of a big story, Luis! I just love it! Imagine, Dr. Noon

running for governor. This is the biggest story since the M-6 Titan itself.”

Luis gave him a sideward glance. “Your wife ain’t gonna love it”

“Oh shit, the wife!” he moaned. He tapped his earpiece. “The wife,” he said. Two rings later the connection was made.

“Hello, honey? Remember what I said about coming right home after we downloaded the Noon story? Well, you see, something’s come up and...”

Luis Sonjo, upon hearing the response from the other end slid over to the door, comically yanked his hood up over his head and placed his arms in such a way as not to be injured by the verbal assault Steve’s wife was leveling on her present, and judging from her tone, possibly soon to be former husband.

It was a little before 9 p.m. when Steve and Luis arrived at Corinthe University. The campus was dark, save for a few overhead lights along the quad. Due to the unseasonably cold weather, the surrounding trees were still bare and there were traces of snow piled up along the buildings, but with the university being so close to Lake Erie such sights were not unusual.

After tipping the cab driver, Steve and Luis got out, climbed the stairs and entered the Central Administration Office. While shaking off the cold, Steve walked over to the woman behind the counter

and explained why they had come; her response was less than receptive.

“I’m sorry,” the matronly looking associate director said. She lifted a sheet of paper from the counter and began reading aloud. “All requests for *immediate* interviews with the faculty of Corinthe University are being denied. Interviews will be permitted tomorrow in between classes and during faculty lunch breaks so not to disrupt their schedules, for details go to Corinthefac.edu.”

Before Steve could attempt to work out some sort of arrangement, the woman handed him the sheet and disappeared behind a door.

With a scowl, Steve crumbled the paper and tossed it. Not willing to fight their way through the barrage of reporters who would arrive in the next few hours, Steve and Luis left the Central Administration Office and skulked around the darkened edges and building corners of the campus hoping to come upon someone who could feed them just enough info to crank out a story.

Twenty minutes later, just as they were beginning to think they had wandered off campus, they picked up the distinct odor of marijuana. Seeing a light behind a row of thick bushes, they waded through the foliage until they saw a man wearing a white lab coat leaning against a staircase railing at the back of one of the science buildings. The single wall-mounted lamp cast him in silhouette.

“Nice night we’re having,” Steve said, as he and Luis pressed their way through the branches and approached the casual pot smoker.

Startled, the man spun around. He was bearded, wore a turban and had a ceremonial dagger attached to his belt. “What??!”

“I didn’t mean to scare you,” Steve said, raising his hands. “We’re from NWS Media and we’re looking for...”

The man leaned back against the railing. “Ah, yes. The CA Office said to expect reporters, something in regard to Dr. Noon. Well, then,” he said taking a long toke, “what do you want?”

Steve climbed the stairs, leaned against the railing across from him and dove right in. “Earlier this evening, Dr. Alexander Noon announced his intention to be the next governor of New York. We’d like to get his colleagues opinions.”

“So the rumors are true,” the man said with a look of mild surprise. “Alexander has decided to go into politics.” He took another pull and placed the joint inside the grove in the railing. “Fascinating!”

“So you are a colleague?” Luis asked.

The man nodded vigorously as he expelled the smoke. “Indeed I am! I am Dr. Anwar Singh. I teach physics here at the university and have worked with Alexander for well...” He took a moment to recollect.

“Well, I guess it’s been seventeen years now.”

Pay dirt! Steve said to himself.

“Are you surprised?” Steve asked tapping the record button on his earpiece.

Dr. Singh leaned against the railing and stroked his beard. “Eighteen months ago, I would have been astounded, absolutely astounded, but not so much now.”

“Really? Why?”

Singh pressed his hands together and placed them below his lips. “He has changed considerably over the last year or so. You see, for as long as I have known Alexander, he has always been... Oh what’s the word? Uh... Standoffish? Reserved? Tightlipped? He rarely, if ever, socialized. Seldom tutored students and, until this recent metamorphosis, refused all speaking engagements and honorariums.”

Dr. Singh’s hands motioned expressively as if that would somehow communicate what words couldn’t. “Perhaps he had been uncomfortable around his colleagues. I don’t know. But I have never found him to be rude, impolite or unprofessional. He always wishes me a happy birthday and a happy holiday although I don’t think he has any idea which ones I celebrate,” he added with a laugh. “And he’s always willing to assist and advise whenever I request his input. Others as well,” he said, nodding.

“For example, although not widely known, a good deal of Hassendorfer’s success in space communications was due to Noon’s input. That goes

for Mopather's cybernetic hybrids as well. And that was something she worked on for ten years."

Steve placed his hands on the railing. "And yet he never took advantage of his status or notoriety?"

"Never," Singh replied firmly. As the wind picked up and rattled the trees, he began buttoning his lab coat. "And considering what he's accomplished. If he had asked, they probably would have made him king!"

The physicist shrugged. "But he didn't. After M-6 Titan sailed by, effectively revoking our death sentence, instead of letting the world lavish him with praise and riches, he accepted a research position here at Corinthe with the assurance he would be fully funded and permitted to pursue any scientific endeavor he so chose."

Dr. Singh bowed his head. "He is truly a remarkable man."

"Doctor, if I may," Steve said stepping in. "We all know of Dr. Noon's many accomplishments but what about the everyday man you worked with? What's he like?"

Singh picked up the joint and took a quick drag. His face tightened as he eyed Steve and Luis sideways. "Dr. Noon is a very influential gentleman. Are you looking to cost me my position here?"

"Absolutely not," Steve said with hands raised defensively. "Anything you say from this point on will be referred to as 'comments from a reliable source.'"

Dr. Singh took one last puff then put it out. With his eyes very bloodshot, he looked up and said. "Very well. In my opinion Dr. Noon is, without a doubt, the most brilliant man I have ever encountered, and I have met many in my career. Not only is he an accomplished physicist, he is an outstanding chemist, mathematician and world renowned inventor. His mere dabbling in aerospace technology produced the gravity pulse generator. And if that wasn't enough, his research into brain chemistry brought about the eradication of several mental illnesses, including one of the most difficult to cure, chronic phobias. Quite an impressive array of accomplishments for one lifetime, don't you agree?" Singh asked.

Both men nodded. "Very much so," Steve added.

Singh nodded back, acknowledging their answer, then said, "Now take a moment and imagine such a man ...as your enemy."

Startled, Steve and Luis turned to each other. And when they turned back they saw a momentary flash of terror in Singh's eyes. Clearly, this wasn't the first time he considered that possibility.

Convinced Singh was about to reveal some earth-shattering secret, Steve fingered his earpiece button to make sure it was still recording.

Singh however, merely shrugged, let out a sigh and waved his hand dismissively. "I suppose we

should be thankful this man uses his incredible gifts for the benefit of mankind.”

Singh laughed as if he had said something funny, then added, “Because, gentlemen, if he ever decides to use them against us, well...” he bit down on his lip and shook his head.

He started down the stairs and clapped Luis on the shoulder. “I’m done, gentlemen. Goodnight.”

“Wait! Wait!” Steve called out. “Do you think he has a chance of becoming governor?”

Singh turned and looked at Steve quizzically. “Has a chance? Young man, if Dr. Noon has decided to become governor, he **WILL** become governor. It is a fate accomplished.”

Steve tilted his head and grinned. “Well, it’s not that easy. There are the polls, fund raising, primaries...”

Singh waved him off. “You obviously weren’t listening, so I’ll say it again. If Alexander Noon has decided to be governor, then he *will* be governor. Once he sets his mind on something, nothing can stop him. Do you understand? Nothing!”

Sitting comfortably in the backseat of his limo en route to Kennedy Airport, Martin Keogh, the seventy-two year old billionaire and Chief Executive Officer of the New York Chapter of the POWERS THAT BE, ran his hand through his finely coiffed silver hair then down his face, which had been surgically enhanced to give him the features of a man twenty years younger. He wore an expensive gray suit, a blue and red tie and a cashmere topcoat.

He had just been notified of Dr. Noon's announcement.

It was 9:30 pm. and his flight was scheduled to depart in twenty minutes. The halo of lights surrounding Kennedy airport reflected off the limo's windows.

Keogh glanced at his gold encased wristscreen to check the time. *Most likely a prank*, he surmised. *Why the whole idea is absurd. Why would someone who hasn't appeared in public for thirty years suddenly decide to go into politics? And run for governor no less?*

Keogh reached for the remote to see if the media had picked up on the story. He clicked, the video

screen dropped down and he was greeted with the latest news program in mid commercial.

...And the International Bank and Trust can help you get out from under that Debbie that's siphoning away all your hard earned income. Is your interest rate 35% or 45% or maybe even 49.9%? Well, we here at IB&T have a terrific offer for you! International Bank and Trust will buy your debts from other lenders and lower your monthly rates to...now hold on to your earpieces! Lower your monthly rate to a minuscule 15%. You heard me right! I said a mere 15%! Now, you're probably asking, 'What do I need to do to get that fantastic rate? Well, if you're an able-bodied man or woman, are over twenty-one and under forty-five years of age and have no health problems, well then your opportunity to become debt free is just around the corner. All you need do is work in the new Metro-Mac tunnels six hours a day four days a week. That's right! For just 24 hours of work, the hours of a single day, you can get as much as a 35% discount on your Debbie for that entire week! So don't delay, sign up today and we'll throw in a...

“Stupid commercials.”

Keogh killed the audio, turned and looked out the window. *But what if Noon has decided to run for office? How would that affect us? Could an outsider actually become governor?*

Keogh's face tightened with concern.

Ironically, it had been Noon's saving of the world thirty years earlier that led to the creation of the POWERS THAT BE.

Over the years, as the giant yet slow moving M-6 Titan meteor drew closer and it appeared that a catastrophe of biblical proportions was imminent, many business people cashed in their holdings to spend time with families and friends.

Martin Keogh and others like him, whose sense of acquisition was as much a part of them as breathing, thought otherwise. If it does happen, they thought, we'll be just as dead. But, if on the outside chance it doesn't...well then, we will have more money and power than...

And because of Noon, that's what *did* happen.

But with the danger past, they knew the governments and populace were likely to demand a return to the status quo. So, Keogh, along with hundreds of other like-minded businessmen decided to unite and form an organization powerful enough to prevent government interference and control.

The question was, *how?*

While searching for a template, they came across an event that occurred over sixty years earlier. During the 1970's, organized crime, due to mismanagement, greed, uncontrolled criminal activity from subordinates and a full court legal press from the Nevada gaming commission, found themselves needing to sell off their casino holdings. This 'fire sale' caught the attention of billionaire

Howard Hughes, who saw the possibilities and went on a buying spree. This single event eventually transformed Vegas from a profitable venture into a moneymaking colossus.

After his passing, mega corporations picked up the gauntlet. They purchased newspapers and televisions stations. Banks and credit card companies invested heavily in the pet projects of elected officials in return for consideration of their expansion plans. Eventually, these corporations controlled every single aspect of that city, without anyone, except those in a position of power, knowing it.

So acting with the secrecy of organized crime, yet with the financial muscles of a corporate monolith, Keogh, along with this cadre of billionaire businessmen, formed the POWERS THAT BE. Within ten years nearly every state in the Union was, at least in part, controlled by a section of that organization and because of Keogh's astute business acumen and ruthlessness, New York more than any other.

No! Keogh decided as he turned off the television. Not even someone as popular as Noon could win without our support. We control the media, financing, judges, party affiliates, as well as the people who record the signatures. The PTB's been in control of New York State for years.

Besides, who is going to vote for him? The Mutts are too lazy and stupid to get off their asses. Plus what do they have to complain about? They've done all right. They got their drugs and their food stamps and municipal playgrounds for their mongrel kids, got free television and movie passes and all that nonsense.

Keogh's eyes narrowed when a favorite saying came to mind. One whose wisdom, he believed had been the cornerstone of his success.

Doomed to failure are those who mistake what is unlikely with what is impossible.

Keogh took pride in knowing he was not one of those people. Noon's election? Unlikely, sure. Impossible?

No.

He tapped his earpiece to make a call.

After the commercial break, Howie Wowie, an affable, clownish man with big eyes, a crooked smile, and wearing a polka dot tie and a blue jean jacket, stared into the camera and said, "Welcome back to the Midnight Show. Our next guest is a former small town campaign manager who has made a documentary on the enigmatic and reclusive Dr. Alexander Noon. Since so little is known about the Doctor, this new film should be a real eye opener into the life of one of history's most extraordinary figures.

“Ladies and gentlemen, let’s welcome Oloki Sullivan!”

Oloki, wearing a sharply tailored blue business suit and red-striped power tie, waved to the audience amid the applause as he came out from behind the curtain.

He took a seat alongside the host’s desk.

“Welcome to the show,” Howie began.

“Thanks for having me.”

“So tell us,” Howie said, folding his hands and leaning in, “did you actually meet with the Doctor? Spend time with him? I know reporters who have been trying to interview him for thirty years with no success. So I just gotta ask, why would he speak to a nobody like you and blow off such journalistic notables as Lloyd McGovern and Kathalia Maines-Lungren?”

Oloki chuckled and playfully tapped his hand on the desk. “Well, to answer your first question, yes, I did meet with him. In fact, we spent several months together and believe me, once people see this documentary, they’re going to be amazed at just how brilliant and capable he is. Many times during our conversations I’d be astounded at how quickly he would grasp the core of an issue and devise a solution.”

“Cool!” Howie said smiling. “Maybe the next time you and the world’s most brilliant mind are out for a beer, you can give me a call? I’d like to ask why the Dodgers can’t win a game when it counts.”

The audience laughed and burst into applause.

Oloki looked at his wristscreen. "Well, you seem like a nice guy, Howie, so I'm going to let you in on a little secret. By the time this show airs tonight, Dr. Alexander Noon will have announced he will be the next governor of New York. Now that is going to generate a firestorm of questions and if you like, you can ask some of them now, first and exclusive on the Midnight Show with Howie Wowie."

Howie's face blanched. "You're yanking my noodle! Dr. Noon really is running for governor of New York?"

Oloki smiled. "Well, yes."

"Get out of here!" Howie said wide-eyed. "You've got to be tootin' my Newton! This whole Noon for governor is a prank right?"

Oloki shook his head. "No, I'm serious, Howie. Dr. Noon is going to be New York's next governor and I've been chosen as his campaign manager."

Howie's mouth dropped open and his eyes bulged in slapstick fashion. The audience roared with laughter. "I... don't know what to say. I've never had to handle a real news story before. Walk me through this will you?"

Oloki grinned. "Okay. At New York's Plaza hotel approximately 3 hours ago, six hours ago by the time this airs, Dr. Noon announced his plans to assume the governorship this coming January. You guys are only seeing preliminary crawls because

after that sex-video fiasco with Senator Whiggs supposedly having relations with a thirteen-year-old well... let's say they're being very careful about airing anything until they have solid verification."

Howie grinned. "Yeah, especially since the good Senator cleverly foiled their plans by dropping dead three days before the doctored video began filming. But back to Noon's candidacy, so it's *really* true? No kidding around?"

"No kidding around," Oloki said with a smile.

"Okay," Howie said. "Quick question. Why now, why you, why New York?"

Oloki replied. "Because now is the time, because I am the guy who'll get him in the governor's mansion, and mostly because New York desperately needs him."

"Cute!" Howie said with a grin. "And will he save us from ourselves?

"Only if ourselves need saving."

"Very cute! Now, I watched your documentary last night and I was amazed to learn that... what? Time's up? Ahhhh, shit!" Howie shrugged and turned back to Oloki. "Okay, where can one purchase this very informative and riveting biography of the good doctor?"

Oloki turned to the cameras. "Well, actually it will be given away at the Noon for Governor rallies being held throughout New York State. But if the fine people of California or anywhere else would

like a copy we'd be happy to make it available. Check the Noon for Governor Website for details."

"Okay, well folks, that's our show," Howie said. "Be sure to get your video copy of *By the Light of the Noon*' I've seen it. It's fantastic, and I'm sure you'll enjoy it as much as I did. Good night!"

Noon exited the elevator at the thirty-fifth floor of the Hudson Towers building at 6:30 am and was surprised by a large gold sign that read: *Noon for Governor Election Campaign Headquarters.*

Impressive, Noon thought.

He smiled and entered the offices through the glass doors.

There was still a considerable amount of construction going on so Noon sidestepped his way through the hallway's paint containers and clutter until he caught a glimpse of Oloki inside an office, seated behind a desk and wearing his ratty old 'lucky' Boston Red Sox cap.

"Morning, Oloki," he said.

"Welcome, Alexander," Oloki replied, motioning for him to come in. "So, your assessment of last night?"

Noon hung his hat and coat on the rack and took a seat in front of Oloki's desk. "Pretty much as we anticipated," he replied picking a piece of lint from his pants. "They momentarily looked like stunned cattle but as you said, they want someone to take control. Want someone to lead. I saw far more relief in their faces than fear."

Oloki grinned as he rose from his chair, walked around his desk and sat on its edge. “I had that impression as well.”

“The Midnight Show. I haven’t seen the video yet. How did your appearance go?” Noon asked.

“Good, very good, in fact, I believe we may have made a friend, which, as you say, we are going to sorely need as time goes on.”

Noon nodded.

Oloki leaned forward. “Now, getting down to business. Your announcement is already the top story. And my appearance with Howie Wowie made our Noon for Governor the most visited site on the Web.”

“Excellent!” Noon replied.

“Damn right!” Oloki continued. “So far, everything is going according to plan. This morning, you’re a rating’s superstar and media darling. But by afternoon the PTB will take notice and begin their assault on your campaign. They’ll instruct their media lackeys to accuse you of everything from sedition to leading a coup. By nightfall, the airwaves will be saturated with wild unsubstantiated claims in the hope one or more will stick.

“Over the next few weeks and months, untraceable authors will release unauthorized biographies accusing you of the most unspeakable crimes, then assert you used your influence and vast wealth to silence your victims. Women will say you slept with them and infected them with sexually

transmitted diseases. Gay men will claim you were their lover and then brutalized them. And finally, and you're going to need to brace yourself for this. They are going to claim your late wife's suicide was due to physical and mental abuse."

Oloki folded his arms. "Maxwell and his legal team are already preparing to counter."

Noon nodded, got up, walked over to the filing cabinet and removed the laptop that sat on top of it. He placed it on the table, removed a computer chip from his shirt pocket and inserted it into the machine. After pushing the button, a light flashed and the air was filled with complex holographic mathematical calculations. Noon stepped back and studied them.

"What is that?" Oloki asked as he rose from the desk and stepped in for a closer look.

"That, my friend, is our story so far," Noon replied as he placed his hands behind his back and studied his calculations like a drill sergeant inspecting his troops.

Oloki asked. "What do you mean?"

Noon turned. "I had to be sure my running for governor would be successful. And according to these preliminary calculations, everything is as it should be, including the media assault you just mentioned. However, within two weeks we're going to need something strong to counter these accusations and reassure our supporters. Once

accomplished, the POWERS THAT BE's plan to discredit me will fall into disarray."

Oloki Sullivan stared at Noon awestruck. He motioned to the floating calculations. "These...these equations tell you all that?"

"And more, but we'll get into that later," Noon said as he shut off the device.

Oloki took a breath. "All right. We'll go with that for now. In any case, I just might have the thing you're looking for." Sullivan walked to the couch, leaned over and pulled a poster out from behind it. He showed it the Noon. "The commercial we discussed some weeks ago is completed. This is the climax. What do you think?"

In the sky was the huge M-6 Titan meteor on fire and crashing through the atmosphere. On the ground were people racing through the streets in panic. Standing defiantly in the middle was Noon, facing the heavens with a notepad tablet filled with calculations gripped tightly in the crook of his arm. On the bottom, in bold letters it read:

He saved us once. Let him do it again.

Alexander Noon. Governor.

As Sullivan predicted, the PTB controlled media began their attacks during the early afternoon news and talk shows. Pundits, political analysts and discussion forums from nearly every station were portraying him as an absent-minded professor, a

Hitler-like dictator and a mad scientist all rolled into one.

For the rest of the day Noon's reputation as a genius was ripped, pummeled and ridiculed. So much so, Martin Keogh and other senior members of the POWERS THAT BE felt certain Alexander Noon would be announcing his withdrawal within the week.

At 8:00 pm that same evening as Noon stood at the counter of the break room pouring a cup of coffee, Oloki burst in, his face red with excitement.

"Alex, the media's just gone to phase two. They're trotting out The Voices of Reason."

Noon, with coffee in hand, returned to his table and reached for the television remote. "What station and who are they starting with?"

"Channel L45 and Kathalia Maines-Lungren," he replied as he came over and sat down beside him. "She's featured on the upcoming Nightly Report."

"Refresh my memory. Which one is she?" Noon asked.

"She's the attractive, mid forty-ish, former news anchor, political analyst, and two-term Congresswoman from Illinois, and the former wife of the late media mogul Averill Lungren. A real heavyweight. Can't wait to hear what kind of sappy bullshit she's going to roll out to downplay your announcement."

Appearing on *The Nightly Report*, Kathalia Maines-Lungren was dressed in a beige pants suit, white blouse and red scarf. As the senior political anchor for NWS World Media, she fielded carefully scripted questions about Dr. Noon candidacy. She replied by saying she thoroughly embraced Dr. Noon's frustration with the government monolith and added that she, as a former member of the House of Representatives, often ran into this problem. *But*, she reminded the viewers, and Dr. Noon in particular, that although government does move slowly, the laws are made *by* the people, *for* the people, and that if we want those laws changed, we must change them through the appropriate channels. She added that to bring about real change the people must rely on those politicians who have been the most effective and shouldn't "throw away their precious votes" on "well-meaning" but "inexperienced and unqualified" outsiders.

She ended her VOR appearance with an invitation to Dr. Noon to meet with her to discuss what they could do together to petition Congress. Then, with a thin film of tears in her eyes, Kathalia Maines-Lungren ended her segment with a line attributed to Benjamin Franklin. "For in these troubled time if we do not hang together, we will most assuredly hang separately."

She then wished her viewers a beautiful day and an even better tomorrow.

Oloki Sullivan slapped his leg and laughed out loud. “I swear, they must think you’re retarded!” Because of his Bostonian accent ‘retarded’ was pronounced s retah-ded.”

Noon exhaled and shook his head. “Certainly is convincing, isn’t she?”

Sullivan grinned and bobbed his head in agreement. “The best in the business. I call her the hand wringer. She gets a check from at least four major corporations to keep people like you at bay. Her shtick is to appeal for reason among the warring factions and to offer her services as an intermediary.”

“Intermediary?” Noon said.

“I’ll give you an example,” Oloki replied folding his hands on the table. “Say some messy business for the POWERS THAT BE pops up. Out of nowhere she’ll show up and offer to fight for the little guy and, at first, she seems successful, often wrangling minor concessions. But in the meantime, the corporate giants are preparing mega lawsuits and investigating the backgrounds of their opponents, then attacking with everything they’ve got.

“In the end, the opposition faces monstrous lawsuits, loss of employment, blackmail, tax problems and often, the threat of jail. At this point, she comes in, all teary eyed and hand wringing, and says she fought with everything she had, and will continue to fight, even at the risk of losing her job if

they too, are willing to risk it all and perhaps even face the possibility of jail time.”

Oloki chuckled. “At which point, they all gather around and tell her what a wonderful person she is, but no, they will concede defeat knowing they fought the good fight.

Amid heartfelt tears she then bows her head and slowly nods, as if she too, was savagely hurt, but yet in some way, is a better person for it. Then they all kiss and cry. In the end, the defeated again take on the yoke of a never ending Debbie while she returns to her penthouse, her coffers filled with obscene payoff money.”

“How can she live with herself?” Noon asked.

Oloki eyed Noon. “She’s a monster, plain and simple. And these are the people we want to get rid of, right? Anyway, you wanted all the facts and factors, as you call them, and so feel free to add those to your equations.”

“I will,” Noon replied in all seriousness.

“So,” Oloki said, taking a more relaxed pose, “on to new business. Have you decided where you want your office?” He gestured toward the hallway. “There are twelve large rooms to choose from, although some of our campaign people have set up cots as we gear up for the campaign. In any case, I’m sure they won’t mind moving.”

Noon sipped from his coffee. “I have. I want the gym room and the office behind it. The movers, decorators and computer technicians will arrive

tomorrow morning. I have scheduled a considerable amount of work, but hopefully I'll be able to settle in by the end of the month. I am also having the elevators refitted and upgraded. Should only be a mild inconvenience."

"Well," Oloki said, leaning back and curling his thumbs into his pants pockets. "Since you own the building and are paying all of our salaries, I can assure you that we will all make a special effort to make sure your stay is a pleasant one."

Not catching the hint of sarcasm, Noon replied, "I would expect no less."

Inside the opulently furnished conference room at Nash Financials, one of the country's largest investment concerns, Martin Keogh took his seat at the head of the oval table. Already in attendance were Garland Nash, the CEO of the company, Kathalia Maines-Lungren, Mills Berber and Hans Malibu.

In addition were the holographic faces of Martin's fellow members of the New York PTB, the most notable being Ramses Morganthau, August Moon, Euphrates Pilsner, Anthony Nicoletti and Roy VonHarris.

"Ladies and gentleman," Keogh began, "as you know Dr. Alexander Noon has announced his plans to become governor of New York. In most situations these dark horse candidates self destruct within the first few weeks, but because of Dr. Noon's name recognition and amazingly high Q ratings, we need to be more aggressive in our efforts to stop him."

"What do you suggest?" the holographic face of August Moon inquired.

Keogh turned toward him. "Noon's popularity is based on the people's perception of him. He is

viewed as a scientific genius, an inventor, healer, and humanitarian. A wealthy philanthropist and father figure who has given much to the world and one who, unfortunately, has lost much, i.e. the suicide of his wife and the mysterious disappearance of his son. People's sense of fair play leads them to want to reward him.

"His campaign is built on this. So to counter, I suggest we upend this perception by revealing a dark side. A side filled with twisted needs and obsessive compulsions."

August frowned and shook his head. "Martin, I believe these concerns have been addressed. Hans has several writers putting together a book discrediting him. Kathalia is set to portray Noon's campaign manager as secretive and paranoid and the only poll results being aired are those portraying his candidacy as ineffective and losing ground. What more needs to be done?"

Keogh leaned forward, smiled and made a gesture indicating he appreciated August's input. Inside, however, he was seething. And if not for his associate's considerable influence he would have told him point blank to shut up and pay attention.

But...

"If this were *anyone* else," Keogh replied, "I would be the first to agree that what we have planned is sufficient. But this is *Noon*, ladies and gentlemen. Dr. Alexander –savior of the planet—Noon and I strongly believe this particular case will

require extra effort, and if necessary, the involvement of Victor Holix.”

The mention of the name drew a momentary pause among the attendees. Finally, August spoke up.

“I must ask why you’d find such a drastic step necessary,” he said, clearly not liking the idea.

“I have a presentation prepared.” Keogh reached over and pressed the intercom button. “Jefferies, bring in the documents, please.

“Yes, sir.”

Moments later, Timothy Jefferies, a tall lanky man with an armful of thin video screens entered and placed one before each attending member whether real or holographic.

“Does everyone have a copy?” Keogh asked, gesturing across the table..

“We do,” came the reply.

“For those of you attending holographically, press F4 on your computer to turn the page as we go along. Shall we begin?”

“And welcome back to DayBreaking News. I’m Colleen Perez.”

“And I’m Aristotle Menninger.”

“Well, Ari,” Colleen began as she turned to her colleague, “it’s been two weeks since Dr. Noon announced his candidacy for governor. That announcement was, to say the least,” she paused, then added with a roll of her eyes and a smirk, “probably not as well received as he would have liked. In fact, a DayBreaking News survey indicates less than 10% of those interviewed consider Dr. Noon a viable candidate.”

“That’s quite true, Colleen,” Ari replied with a smug grin. “It appears most New Yorkers believe, with the many challenges facing this state, like rising crime, disenfranchised youth, high unemployment and a lack of appropriate housing, just to name a few, that we need someone with hands on experience, someone who has been in public service and knows how to get things done.”

Colleen tilted her head and smiled. *“I suppose you’re referring to James ‘Sunny Jim’ MacFarland?”*

Ari held up his hands. “Now, I admit to being biased. Everyone knows ‘Sunny Jim’ and I go back a ways. But I think the key here is experience. Now whether you support ‘Sunny Jim’ or Madeline Messerschmitt, who, I must say is also eminently qualified. I think people want someone who’s sharp, who knows the process and can affect change, not some rickety old scientist with a god-complex.”

“I agree, Ari, and judging by the poll results, our viewing public does, as well,” Colleen chirped. “And now, onto the weather with Dou Felix. “Dou?”

The following morning, DayBreaking News along with the other major news media concerns, and forced by one of the few federal laws multinational corporations were unable to change, aired the first Noon for Governor commercial.

It began with photographs showing scores of city families sleeping in leaky subways and rural families huddled inside tents pitched in the brutally cold Adirondacks. Those were followed by videos of indentured Dirtheads as they were called, working in the extremely dangerous massive underground Metro-Mac tunnels that would eventually link New York City, Boston and Philadelphia. Then photos of the charred corpses and burned out cars of the Nomad roach trap victims.

Following all this horror was a presentation of the annual salaries of the top CEO's, followed by the date of their indictment and the subsequent dropping of all charges. As they scrolled, the words NO HELP were superimposed. What followed were photos of families living on the streets, huddled in doorways, eating in soup kitchens, and standing on long lines for the few manual labor jobs that remained. Superimposed were the words NO HOPE.

Then a photo of a small child being rescued by three members of the GC from a FunBoys studio where child pornography was being filmed. That was followed by the words NO MORE!

It concluded with the poster of Noon and the slogan:

**He saved us once. Let him do it again.
Alexander Noon. Governor.**

Within minutes of the commercial's airing, Victor Holix felt the vibration of his cell phone against his leg. Unlike the great majority of people in this day and age, Holix was one of the very few who had not switched to an earpiece. The fact that Holix even carried a cell phone was unusual in itself

Holix was a throwback to another place and time. In this high-tech society, he was a Roman gladiator among the star children. Having spent his life looked upon as an oddity there was one thing he

learned early on. There is always a place at the table for a man with great physical power. And when it came to size and physical strength, Holix possessed them in terrifying amounts.

He pulled out his cell phone, flipped it open. “What?” he said in a deep, raspy voice.

“Would you like to get together and feed the pigeons?” asked the voice on the other end.

“I like feeding pigeons,” Holix replied genuinely enthused. “Where and when?”

“2:30 this afternoon, in Central Park, near the Alice in Wonderland statue.”

Holix repeated, “2:30 this afternoon, Central Park, next to the Alice in Wonderland statue.” He snapped the phone closed.

He told the truth. Holix did indeed enjoy feeding the pigeons. The question was—feeding them to what?

11

“Your quarters, are they suitable?” Oloki asked. As always, he was sharply dressed in an expensive business suit yet continued to wear his ratty old Red Sox cap to show his support for his favorite team. Sipping a steaming cup of coffee, he was staring out from the break room window when he saw the doctor’s reflection.

Now nearly a month into his campaign, Noon had spent his first night in his newly constructed living quarters at the Noon for Governor headquarters. Wearing jeans and an old sweatshirt, he twisted the cricks out of his neck as he stepped into the break room.

“My quarters are quite suitable and comfortable, Oloki,” he replied as he walked over, poured a cup of coffee and spooned in a teaspoon of sugar. “I watched this morning’s newscasts. As expected, our commercial continues to send shockwaves into the status quo. And, although they refuse to air them, our latest poll numbers have them scrambling.”

Oloki turned and shook his fist in a victory salute. “Damn right they have! Frankly, Doctor, I

believe we may have taken our first real step toward the governor's mansion.”

Noon appeared to agree as he sat down at the break room table. “Your thoughts on the media’s next move?”

Oloki came over, sat down across from him and brushed some crumbs to the floor. “Phase 4. This is where the gloves come off and it gets nasty. But before we get into that I have two interesting bits of information. First, over the last few weeks, college kids have begun holding rallies to support you. Gone as far as to collect signatures door to door and hand out pamphlets. Second, and get this... the Bellmen have begun graffitiing your name all over town!” Oloki began nodding as if sure Noon wasn’t going to believe him. “That’s right! On subway cars, billboards, sides of buildings, bridges, you name it. This is literally tons of free publicity! Who’d a thought New York’s biggest radical activist organization would throw its support behind *you*? ”

Noon’s expression tightened. “The Bellmen, huh? Hmm.” He folded his arms and placed his fist under his chin. “So that’s it. The X-factor finally shows its face.”

Oloki’s excitement cooled. His eyebrows rose. “X-factor?”

Noon nodded, placed his hand on the table and began tapping his fingers. “Yes, X the unknown.

The one part of the calculation I couldn't quite resolve."

"You *saw* this coming?"

Noon took a moment, sat back and stared off into space. "In a way, yes. I expected support from the college kids since I come from academia. But the Bellmen..." Noon paused and placed his index finger to his lips. "What concerns me is they're looked upon as a lunatic fringe group. When their founder Isaac Bell wrote the *Re-establishment of Democracy in the 21st Century*, he did it to forestall big business from subjugating Congress and the two- party system. He called for a Constitutional amendment barring corporations from contributing to election campaigns and for placing limits on the amount any one person could contribute. Also called for barring lawyers from running for political office citing conflict of interest." Noon stopped for a moment. "Sorry, it's the professor in me. You already know this, I'm sure."

"Sounds like you admire the guy."

Noon drew a breath. "I admired his integrity and courage, but he possessed the worldview of a ten year old. Did he actually think those in power would let that amendment pass? Damn fool! Anyway, back to the Bellmen. How many of them are there?"

Oloki put down his cup and slid his hands down the sides of his face. "It's been two years since Isaac Bell was killed, so obviously they are no longer the tight knit, power to the people group they once

were. A lot of them have become rabble-rousers. No training, no skills, just troublemakers. Others are corporate terrorists sabotaging manufacturing lines hoping to trigger class action suits. The rest have a variety of skills but are directionless. But, even with Bell dead, there are still several thousand out there.

“But,” he said, holding up a cautionary finger, “I can see where you’re going with this and I strongly advise against it. You can’t acknowledge their support because they’re too unpredictable, and prone to violence. They’ve firebombed business offices and ransacked CEO homes. In one instance, a wife was beaten and raped. These guys got a bad stink on them and you don’t want it rubbing off on you. Let’s just appreciate their re-igniting the public’s interest in you and leave it at that.”

Noon rose from his seat and walked to the window, making a mental note that another vital part had just fallen into place.

As the bold type lettering of...

**He saved us once. Let him do it again.
Alexander Noon. Governor.**

...faded, Chuck Carpenter clicked off the television and took center stage in front of the pressroom. Gathered on the fifth floor of the NWS Media building, thirty-five top investigative journalists, on-air reporters and Internet data liners waited for him to begin.

The forty-two year old, mustached, news-programming editor pointed at the now black screen with sleeves rolled up to his biceps. “Noon’s candidacy is barely a month old and despite our best efforts, that commercial is sending his poll number through the roof!” he said. “Doesn’t anyone of you smart sons-a-bitches have an idea how we can turn this around?”

No one offered a reply.

“All right, people,” Carpenter, or Carp, as he was more commonly known, said as he came around, sat down on the front of his desk and held out his hands. “This is go time. I need someone to step up because Kathalia,” he motioned to the news anchor sitting in the back of the room, “has advised me that those who sign our paychecks,” he then pointed to the upper floors of the building, “want Noon’s bullshit candidacy stopped and stopped now.”

Luis Sonjo, wearing a cut off jean jacket and bandana, tossed a dismissive hand. “We’re reporters,” he said. “I don’t see why we should care if Noon runs or not. Personally, I think I might even vote for the guy.”

Sonjo chuckled but quickly noticed the dead silence surrounding him.

Carp shot Luis a look. His expression asked, “Are you out of your fucking mind?” But that was quickly replaced with one that displayed fatherly compassion and understanding.

“Well, Luis,” he said, clasping his hands. “This is a free country and you, of course, have the right to say what you want and vote as you please. It’s an American right and tradition. In fact, there are tens of thousands, maybe even hundreds of thousands who feel exactly as you do; free spirits and rebels who refuse to be told who they should vote for. Perhaps you might like to join them? They’re easy to find. Why, just go to any soup kitchen, homeless shelter, subway platform or alley doorway.”

Luis paled. “I...I didn’t mean...I didn’t think...”

“That’s right!” Carp snapped back. “You didn’t think! Now...I need team players. Can I depend upon you to be a team player, Luis?”

“Ahhh, yeah sure, Carp,” Luis replied nervously.

Carp shook his head and shrugged. “I’m sorry. I’m not all that convinced, Luis. Perhaps you’d better go.”

He motioned to the door.

Not one person in the room made a sound.

Luis turned ghost white. “No, Carp! Seriously,” he said in near panic. “I am a team player. Really! I don’t know what got into me. You can depend on me one hundred percent. I promise.”

Carp let him stew for a moment.

Eyed him and let him stew a little more.

Carp shrugged. “Ahhhh, I don’t know, Luis. I’m kind of on the fence here.”

“Please, Mister Carpenter,” Luis begged in a shaky voice. “Please let me stay. Please give me another chance.”

Carp let him stew just a little bit longer.

“Ahhh, what the hell!” Carp said, tossing up his hands. “Yeah, you can stay. I guess I’m just an old softy at heart.”

He clapped Luis on the shoulder. Just hard enough to let Luis know that he had just dodged a bullet, and that he would never, ever be that lucky again.

Carp retook center stage. “Okay, now back to topic. I need ideas people. At this point, just about any idea. In fact, I’m willing to entertain the ravings of any jerk with the balls to speak up, regardless of how stupid or asinine.”

Looking to deflect the attention from his friend and co-worker, Steve Mathers put up a hand.

Carp gestured to him and said, “Asinine jerk number one, you have the floor.”

Mathers smirked, then began. “Carp, the way I see it, Noon got off to a good start, okay? But let’s look at the big picture. We have more resources. We control media content. Got strong support from police, firemen, brotherhoods and our teen media programs have a strong influence on the voters of the under twenty-one set.” Steve looked around to see how many of his fellow journalists were agreeing.

“Steve?” Carp said motioning for him to ‘get to the point’.

Steve held out his hand in a stop gesture. “Wait, I haven’t finished my asinine ravings yet. There is an old saying ‘The man who wishes to change the world begins his task buried to his neck in quicksand.’ Ladies and gentlemen, *we* are the quicksand. Noon has to work ten times as hard *and* reinvent the wheel each time he comes out to campaign. The Republicans don’t want him and the Democrats don’t either. So he has to go the independent route, and frankly, an independent hasn’t won the governorship in heaven knows how long. All we need do is continue to dismiss his candidacy as an ego trip for a one-time hero. Declare him irrelevant and, as his poll numbers drop out of sight, so will he.”

“What??!!” Kathalia Maines-Lungren snapped as she leapt to her feet. “Dismiss and declare him irrelevant? Dismiss and declare irrelevant the most important news story in the last twenty years? What journalism school did you go to, jackass?”

With her chestnut-colored hair cut into a bob with frosted blonde tips, wearing a well tailored navy-blue pants suit with the latest shoes, Kathalia stormed to the front of the room. “Have you forgotten who this guy is?” she asked as her friendly girl-next-door features turned hard and aggressive. “This is NOON! He’s not going away! The man saved the world, for heaven’s sake! He doesn’t need

to build name recognition. He doesn't need to establish credibility. He doesn't need the Democrats or Republicans. His following is only going to grow bigger as his political machine gets off the ground. Keep in mind that other than his commercial, he has barely spent a dime on marketing for his campaign and thanks to those radical lunatics, the Bellmen, his name is graffitied all over the city. And the *only* strike the guy has against him is a nutty wife who blew her brains out and a missing kid.

"Now," she said placing her hands on her hips, "considering how famous Noon is, why do we know so little about him? People, we need to get out there and start looking under rocks, going through garbage, and if we can't find anything bad to write about, allude to something. Keep the pressure on day after day. Make accusations, twist his words, misquote. Keep that up and I guarantee the real Dr. Noon will burst out of that academic façade with claws extended and teeth bared. Then we WILL have something to write about. And *what* will we be writing about? We will be writing about the man's inevitable crash and burn and all that goes with it. A total emotional meltdown culminating with his sad and broken withdrawal from the political arena.

"People, if we work this right this could be the story of the decade. Hell, it could be this century's OJ trial!"

12

Shortly before 11 pm. outside the massive entrance to the area where three of the largest tunnels in history were being built, a man wearing a shiny gray, hooded coat and red-mirrored glasses leaned against a car and waited patiently. Within the next hour a large group would emerge and that man would single out one John Appleberry and inform him that he won \$2500.00 dollars just for wearing a “I Listen to TransCast at Work’ button

The man knew John Appleberry would be wearing it because he *saw* him wearing it when John arrived at work that afternoon. Then, after handing John the \$2500.00 cash driver, the red-mirrored glasses man would shake John’s hand and take his picture by pressing a button on his red glass frames.

Deep below the city, in the heart of the massive underground tunnels system, Vladimir Zornekov looked down from his overhead office nicknamed the Skydome, picked up the microphone and made an announcement to the crews below.

“Enough work for today,” he said in a heavy Russian accent that echoed through the tunnel.

“Take rest of night off, I will sign your time sheets. Go! Go home to your families.”

There came a chorus of whoops and hollers and a couple of whistles but the hard working crews of Dirtheads didn’t need to be told twice. Most of them had other jobs that often required a full day at the office. So when the boss let you go home a little early, you got the hell out as fast as your feet could take you.

Vladimir pushed the button that powered the skybox’s motors. In less than thirty seconds, the metal box with its bevy of camera monitors clanked along the ceiling rails and docked with the elevators that would bring him to ground level.

As usual, he would be the last one out. Most times he was also the first one in. This was his world. When he came to America as a young engineer, he made it his life’s mission to know every tunnel, every cave, every subway, every electrical pathway, every sewer system, and every water main. If it existed underground, Vladimir Zornekov knew where it was.

After reviewing the computer stress-fracture analysis reports and making sure the rock-cutting laser blasters had cooled, he completed his paperwork and prepared to leave. He had his own private electric vehicle he drove ‘topside.’ Once there he would take the bus home, have a few vodkas and go to bed.

This night, however, would be different.

“I can’t believe I won! I never win anything!” John Appleberry shouted as he was handed the TeleTransCast cash driver.

“Well, today must be your lucky day!” the man with the red glasses said as he shook John’s hand. “Now if you’ll just step back so I can take a picture...” The man placed his index finger to the side of his frames. There came an audible click and the red glasses man gave John an immediate thumbs up.

“Wow! Thanks man!” John said. “I’m taking the gang here down to the bar to celebrate. Why don’t you come along?”

The man smiled and shook his head. “Sorry, against the rules, but when you get down there hoist one for me, the TeleTransCast man.”

“Will do, buddy, will do!” Appleberry said as he and his friends headed down the street and turned the corner.

The man with the red glasses waited for several minutes before he approached the heavy metal door. He placed his index finger in the small hole, removed his glasses and a blue band of light swept across his eyes.

The LED flashed the name John Appleberry and the door clicked open.

A voice called from the shadows as Vladimir opened the door of his vehicle and prepared to climb in.

“Vladimir Zornekov, may I have a moment of your time?”

Startled, Vladimir spun around. “Who is it? Who is there?”

The voice from the shadows replied in a much softer tone, “A friend.”

“Bah,” Vladimir said with a wave of his hand. “I don’t need friends. Now go, before I have you fired.”

“I am told you are an admirer of Doctor Noon.”

Vladimir stopped, gave a sideways glance, then slowly stepped away from the vehicle. He scanned the shadows. “Who told you that?”

There was a pause. “Does it matter?”

Vladimir turned and placed his hands on his hips. “What do you want?”

“Twenty-eight years ago you sent a letter to the good doctor. The letter was three pages long. Here, let me refresh your memory. ‘And so in conclusion, dear doctor, I owe you my life, the lives of my children, the lives of my family and those of my friends. And in repayment for what you have done I promise you this. If you ever are in need of my services, my talents or for me to lay down my very life on your behalf, you need only ask.’”

Zornekov said nothing. He stared into the shadows and breathed like a bull preparing to charge. “Where did you get that?”

“Did you mean what you said?”

“Who the hell are you?” Vladimir bellowed. He stormed into the shadows but found no one.

He heard the voice again. Only this time it came from behind him. “Did you *mean* what you *said*?” it demanded. “It is a simple question. Answer it!”

Vladimir spun to face the voice. “Yes!” he shouted. “I meant it then and mean it now! I know what you people are trying to do. But you’ll never turn me against him. Never! I was engineer in Russia. I knew what the M-6 Titan would do once it hit the atmosphere. And not one person I knew, not one had been selected to wait out the impact in the underground facilities. Facilities I helped design! That’s right! But I was not considered important enough! Bah,” he grunted with a wave of his hand. “Is all politics. So, while tens of thousands were safe and secure in government built underground bunkers, me, my wife, my children and my loved ones would be outside, alone and unprotected to face the fury of M-6 Titan.

“Then like miracle, this man, this tall lanky man, comes up with gravity pulse generator and the monster, hovering over us like the dark hand of Satan is forced away.”

Vladimir’s hands were shaking, his eyes filling with tears. “I am not religious man but back in those days I swore to whatever god who’d listen that I’d do anything he asked, if he would only save my family.”

Vladimir sniffed and chuckled a little. “The god turned out to be tall, skinny kid in mid-twenties. How is that for surprise? But I am man of my word. And so if you have come to kill me, go ahead. Every man should have at least one thing he’d be willing to die for. Your Nathan Hale proclaimed his before they hanged him and my only regret is that I didn’t shout my allegiance to Dr. Noon from the highest building while I could.”

A man emerged from the shadows on Vladimir’s right. He wore a gray coat that hung below his calves. The coat’s hood was pulled up over his head. His glasses were bright red and reflected the dim light of the tunnel. As he drew near, he held out the letter Vladimir had written over twenty-eight years ago.

“I am not here to harm you,” the man said turning the letter over to Vlad, “but to enlist your help on behalf of Dr. Noon. He has need of your particular talents. And you are right, there are many who would like to see him fail.”

Vlad recognized the letter, then overwhelmed with pride, he straightened up and stuck out his chest. The man who had saved his family and friends was now asking for his help. He bit the inside of his mouth to keep tears of joy from running down his face.

“What would the doctor have me do?” Vladimir asked in an emotion-choked voice.

The man produced a card and held it up for Vladimir to see. As Vlad reached for it, he heard a whirring sound coming from the man's head. He ignored it and read the card. "He wants me to be at 235 Madison Avenue at 10 pm tomorrow evening, thirty-fifth floor?"

"I assume you'll come straight from work?" the man asked. Vladimir heard the whirring sound again.

"Yes," he replied. "Straight from here."

"There are eleven exit channels from this area. Which one will you be using?"

Vladimir turned and pointed to the steel door at the far end. It was situated slightly left of the Skybox elevator.

The man leaned in, strained his neck, shook his head and after a moment's hesitation removed his glasses.

Had not Vladimir seen many, many strange things in the subterranean he might have jerked back in surprise, but he didn't. Instead, he merely glanced in fascination as the man revealed there were not eyes behind those glasses, but two crystal orbs floating in the center of two empty eye sockets. And instead of a solid pupil and iris, each orb was covered with red reflectors the size of pinheads.

Electronic eyes, Vladimir said to himself. He heard of them, even read about them, but had never actually seen them in action.

The man put the glasses back on. “I will have a car waiting for you,” he said, then turned and disappeared back into the shadows.

“Hey, wait a second,” Vladimir called out.
“When I get there, who should I say sent me?”

In the distance came the reply. “Tell them, the Invisible Man”

13

Only after promising to air the feature uncut and unedited, did Kathalia Maines-Lungren receive permission to interview Oloki Sullivan.

She arrived with her film crew at precisely 10 am. As they set up their equipment, Oloki, after quickly stuffing his Boston Red Sox cap in a drawer, went out to welcome her and give her a tour of campaign headquarters.

“We use the entire top floor,” Oloki explained. “There are twelve full-size rooms we have converted into office space, the other six we keep as bedrooms, as we often work into the late hours. Some of our campaign workers prefer to sleep here so they can pick up where they left off. In fact, the Doctor himself has been spending his evenings with us.”

He escorted her down the hall, stopping in each office to say hello to the staff. Maines-Lungren was the epitome of graciousness and décor, taking time to ask questions and to make at least one complimentary remark to each person she was introduced to.

When the crew announced they were ready to begin, Kathalia and Oloki returned to Oloki's office and took a seat on the couch.

Kathalia started with questions about Oloki's childhood, education, and marital status. He admitted he had been engaged for a year but his fiancé broke it off due to his workaholic nature. She asked what qualified him to run a campaign for the governorship of the third most populous state.

"My credentials?" Oloki replied, running his hands down the side of his face. "Well, I got my feet wet as a campaign worker when I was in my teens. That was for Wallace Milfry in Boston. Unfortunately he lost, but I kept my hand in and gained more experience. I got my Masters Degree in Political Science, but went to work for the Massachusetts Planning commission. After my father died I came to New York and became the campaign manager for Rochester's Mayor Edgar Harding and our own present member of the House of Representatives, Stephanie Shanus. Ironically, it was during those elections that I became interested in the career of Dr. Noon. I guess it's because while on the campaign trail, I would often hear people say; 'Why doesn't Dr. Noon run for office? I'd vote for him in a minute,' or 'We need someone smart, like Dr. Noon. He'd straighten things out.' I heard it so frequently I decided to write a book about him. Wound up doing a documentary instead," he said with an off-handed smile. "Anyway, it was while

we were working on the documentary that he made his decision to go into politics. And...since I had campaign experience, he asked me to run his. Naturally, I said yes.”

“So, you started right away?” Kathalia Maines-Lungren asked. The cameramen and audio personnel moved as she did, making sure she was always shown from a complimentary angle.

Oloki shook his head. “No, not quite. I still had editing work to complete but we kept in touch and kicked around ideas. But once the documentary was finished, I drove back to the doctor’s estate and we got started. Believe me, a lot of work went into those first few months. A lot of ideas perfected, some scrapped, some put aside to be used later. But when the doctor decided he was ready to announce, I set up our offices here, brought in campaign personnel and we’ve been working our tails off ever since.”

“Interesting,” Kathalia replied. “Now, while you were staying at Dr. Noon’s home, was the topic of his son ever brought up? Any leads? Any new information?”

Oloki shook his head. “No, but if his son is still alive he would be a grown man, with a life of his own, I assume.”

Kathalia gave a pensive expression for the cameras. “So, at no time during the several months you lived with Dr. Noon did he mention anything as to his son’s possible whereabouts?”

“No, but then I never brought it up. The situation is very painful to him.”

“Did you have free access to the house and grounds?”

“Yes. Sometimes I would go to the kitchen for coffee or a sandwich, or catch the evening news in the living room. Sometimes just sit in the garden.”

“See any photos of Mrs. Noon while you were there?”

“One or two.”

“He ever mention her? Discuss their life together?” Kathalia asked with eyebrows raised.

Oloki pressed his lips together and gave a slow shake of his head. “My documentary on the Doctor focuses primarily on his scientific work. Since his wife has been dead for years, I felt adding her to the mix would only detract from the technical aspect.”

“Really?” she said, giving a look that suggested she didn’t quite believe him. “Considering all the publicity her suicide generated, I’m surprised. Her photo was splattered...” she stopped and brought her hand to her mouth. ”Oh my! I apologize. That was clearly the wrong choice of words. If I may rephrase. Following her untimely passing, the late Mrs. Noon’s photograph was featured on nearly every morning edition in the country. I would think including her would only heighten the public’s interest.”

Oloki gave a noncommittal shrug. “Well, I only had so much time and a very tight budget, so I guess it was a judgment call.”

“Hmmm, interesting,” Kathalia said exhibiting yet another look of disbelief, “now getting back the Dr. Noon’s son.”

“Kathalia,” Oloki interrupted. “I’m sorry, but I don’t know anything about him. Right now I serve only as Dr. Noon’s campaign manager. I make sure all required signatures; necessary forms and documents are submitted in compliance with state law. I also help put together his campaign videos and speak at public rallies to drum up support for his candidacy. And...” Oloki grinned, “I’m sure you already know how political campaigns are run.”

Kathalia flashed her trademark dimpled smile and Oloki immediately understood how she had come so far in such a competitive and cutthroat business. The woman simply radiated charisma and a comforting girl next door quality that made you want to confide in her.

“Just why does Dr. Noon *want* to run for governor?” she asked with a coquettish tilt of her head. “Politics is such a dirty business. For the life of me I can’t figure out why he would risk such an impeccable reputation when he has virtually no chance of winning.”

Oloki leaned back and displayed a look of puzzlement for the cameras. He took an extra

moment before answering, just to let Kathalia know that two could play this game.

“Has virtually no chance of winning?” he replied as if shocked that ‘New York’s Hometown Anchorwoman’ she could be so misinformed. “Kathalia, it’s less than five months to the election and the supposed front-runner, ‘Sunny Jim’ MacFarland, hasn’t even secured his party’s endorsement. Yet, for reasons I don’t understand, you have on several occasions dismissed the Doctor’s campaign as foolhardy and self-indulgent. Why? You said yourself he has an impeccable reputation. And he’s obviously capable of handling complex problems. I mean, we’re all still alive aren’t we? And we know he can’t be bought or influenced. Why, you need only look at the countless opportunities he’s had to capitalize on his name. Frankly, he’s *exactly* the person New York needs.”

Kathalia turned to the cameras and made a quick slashing movement across her throat. “Kill it!” she spat. The camera’s red lights went out.

“Look!” she said with a confrontational glare. “I’m not here so you can pitch Noon to the electorate. What I want to know is what we, as New Yorkers, *don’t* know about the man. Why did his wife kill herself? What happened to his son? Why has Noon chosen to run now? Especially after spending half his life locked up in the university’s science labs?”

“Why are you asking me?” Oloki asked with hands splayed. “You said this interview would be about Dr. Noon’s political aspirations, his platform and what he intends to do once he takes office. Why are you grilling me about his personal life?”

Kathalia slammed closed her laptop. “This is a waste of time! Pack up,” she said to the camera crew. “And as for you, Sullivan,” she said as she stood and walked over to get her coat. “If you think Noon has a chance, you’re out of your mind. Your grass roots support will disappear once I announce I had to cancel this interview because you and the Doctor were uncooperative and evasive.”

Oloki stood as well. “We both know that’s not true, Kathalia. But canceling the interview and claiming I was difficult was the plan all along wasn’t it? You put this together to mislead the people of New York into thinking the Doctor has something to hide. I’ve done enough of these to know you need a signed release to air this interview, and it’s customary to discuss what type of questions will be asked before the taping begins. And yet...” Oloki then pantomimed, searching for release documents.

“Look, Sullivan, grow up,” Kathalia snarled. “You’re playing with the big kids now. You either give me what I want or I’ll portray Noon as a Satanist who bites the heads off baby kittens. And as for the people of New York? Well, I’ll be the

one who decides what the Mutts get to see and hear.”

Oloki pulled back in shock. “Mutts? You think of New Yorkers as Mutts? That’s quite an insult.”

Kathalia closed her briefcase. “Yeah, well, we’re no longer recording. Or maybe you didn’t notice?” She motioned toward the cameramen as they put away their equipment.

“Well, you might not be,” he said, scratching his head, “but I am.” He pointed toward what appeared to be light fixtures in the ceiling.

She looked up, then back to Oloki. “You don’t scare me. Like you just said, you need a signed release to air it on any public venue. And nobody here is going to sign anything, right, gang?”

Her crew responded with a solid, “Right, boss!”

Oloki walked over to the window and looked out. “And I had every intention of asking you to sign, unfortunately,” he said tapping his earpiece, “I’ve just been advised the video of our conversation has just been stolen. Heavens, what a dilemma! Who knows where it might turn up?”

She stormed over. “It had better not! Because I’ll go to court and claim it violates the Patriot Act and Homeland Protection codes for public broadcasting. So you better watch it, mister, ‘cause if that video ever sees the light of day, you will be paying fines for the rest of your life, that is, when, if ever, you get out of jail. You willing to make that kind of sacrifice?”

Oloki folded his arms, turned, and stole Kathalia's breath with a horrifyingly intense and homicidal stare. His response came in a low, lifeless monotone.

"Since none of the punitive actions you're threatening would affect Dr. Noon, they're meaningless, aren't they? Now, as for what I'd be willing to sacrifice. I'd sacrifice my very life if it would ensure Dr. Noon's election. And once he takes office, one of the first things I'll do is see you hanged, you treasonous whore. Now get out and remember if you do anything that compromises Dr. Noon, or his campaign, that video will air on every politically based Website on the net and you'll never work again."

14

“Sunjay, what are you doing, man?” Key-J McMasters asked as he stood over his long-time friend. “You one sad looking, rabba-dabba.”

Seventeen-year-old Sunjay Patel sat on the far side of the cold concrete stairs of James Monroe High School in the Bronx. He pushed his black shoulder-length hair from his face, hunched up his red and blue oversized “New York Starfighters” coat and sighed. “My life blows, man. This city blows. Shit! My parents blow. And I mean that literally.”

As their fellow classmates exited the school and made their way to the buses, Key-J sat down next to his best friend, threw a comforting arm over his shoulder and gave him a playful shake. “Life itself blows, man. Or haven’t you been paying attention? Now what’s got you all in the downtown?”

Sunjay clasped his hands together and pressed them to his head. “Can’t, too embarrassing.”

Key-J pulled out a pick from his inside pocket and teased his Mohawk afro. “Do I need to remind you, you are talking to the guy whose mother was so fucked up during church services she staggered into

the confessional thinking it was a bathroom and shit on the floor?"

Sunjay looked up, his lips pressed tight. "I'm sorry. That must have been a horror for you."

Key-J nodded and smirked. "Yeah, I copy that, but you know, she ain't me. But people looked at me cock-eyed anyway so I said fuck 'em and joined the GC."

"The Guardian Corps, yeah, righteous. Maybe I should join too," Sunjay said. He pointed to the flexible metal soles of Key-J's shoes. "I love watching you GC guys ski-railing through the streets, going somewhere important, doing something important."

Key-J tussled his friend's hair. "Rabba-dabba, ski-railing is cool. I will grant you that. Being able to 'glide' over the traffic control magnetic rails near the curbs like the high speed trains is definitely a perk of being in the GC but seriously, my man, I don't think you're ready for all that goes with it. When you join the GC you are GC for good and always. You give the boot to your old family and the GC steps up and becomes your new one."

Sunjay leaned back, placed his elbows on the stair and crossed his legs. He looked around defiantly and snarled. "Yeah, well I've had it with my parents! Besides, the way you talk about the GC, they sound like my kind of people."

Key-J tilted his head and gave his friend a hard look. "All right, spit it out. What did mommy and

daddy do that was so horrible you want to cut the cord?”

Sunjay sat up, slid in close and waited until the last crop of students passed. “Okay, but this is strictly between us.”

Key-J folded his hands, placed them in his lap and became rigidly serious. “You have my word.”

Sunjay again pushed back his hair. “My parents have a lab in the basement. They are blending Krolla and selling it to the Nomads.”

Startled, Key-J’s eyes widened. “Krolla is banned in every state in the fucking country,” he said in a whisper. “The fed-meds say Krolla is what makes Nomads walk into crowds and blow themselves up.”

Sunjay eyed Key-J. “You think I don’t know that?”

“Your parents are turds, man.”

Sunjay threw up his hands in frustration. “Need I say it again?”

Key-J shook his head. “You already know that. Sorry.” He patted Sunjay’s knee. “Look, you’re seventeen and are going to graduate in a couple of weeks. So you’re old enough to decide what you want to do with your life. I chose the Guardians because I wanted to be part of a group I respect. And I wanted to become a *person* people respect. When people think of me, I want them to see a ‘step up’ guy, not the kid whose mom shit in the church.”

Sunjay made a fist and rapidly shook his head up and down. “I want to join, man. Today!” he said firmly. “Before they haul my parents off to jail and people start thinking I was part of it.”

Key-J stood and extended his hand. “Okay, rabba-dabba, you sold me. Let’s do it.”

After Sunjay finished the three-hour indoctrination he was sent to a small room. Outside the door was the housing for a name plate, but it was empty.

He knocked and poked his head in. “Hello?”

“Come in, Sunjay,” said the man behind the desk. “Please, take a seat.”

Sunjay walked over, pulled back the bulky metal chair and sat down.

The room was stuffy and poorly lit. He picked up a hint of lemon cleaning solution

The man at the desk had a cut and dried, no bullshit military look. Self assured, confident and able. He held up several documents as Sunjay got settled.

“I’ve read your psychological profile and I’m very impressed,” he said, placing them on the desktop. “So I’m going to come right out and say that we want you as a member of our organization. To be one, you’ll need to understand and follow our rules. Our rules, however, are quite simple. “You do not take what is not yours. You do not claim what is not true. You do not harm unless it is to protect the

innocent. You will do everything in your power to accomplish your directives. You will live with us, work with us, eat with us and, if necessary, die with us. Do you understand?"

Sunjay was stirred. Here was something rock solid and above board. Honest, true and upright. This would be his place and these would be his people. He drew a breath. "I do."

The man behind the desk nodded. "Good. You have forty-eight hours to decide. If you don't return, we will understand. But remember, a candidate is asked only once. Inability to make a decision and stick by it is a sign of a weakness and we want no part of that. So, should you return, bring only what you cannot live without. Everything else will be provided. You will continue in school until graduation, then you will be with us full time. That will be all."

Sunjay nodded and rose to his feet. "Sir?" he inquired. "You never told me your name."

The man looked up from his desk. "Everyone here calls me Colonel."

"Yes, sir," Sunjay replied and left the room.

As he closed the door behind him he had to fight a feeling of elation. This was going to be the beginning of the life he had always wanted. He couldn't wait to get started.

On the walls of the living room inside his spacious Manhattan apartment, Ignatius Kennedy Toole had six video screens lit as he simultaneously played chess, 3-D Multipoint, WARFARE, Computask, Invasion Force and Minefield. He was winning every one of them. As he stared at the screens, the lights from the displays played over his bronze facial features. He had eyes the color of caramel and bushy eyebrows thick enough to rival Noon's. He wore a cut off T-shirt that featured the cover of Sgt Peppers Lonely Hearts Club Band with all its members burning in hell as the Devil stood alongside playing the accordion. On top he wore a black leather sports jacket and sported hiking boots.

As he finished winning the fourth of the six games he noticed something out of the corner of his eye. He looked from his video screen as a dark figure opened the front door and entered his apartment even though the door had been secured with several high-tech magnetic locks.

Ignatius leapt out of his chair and bellowed. “Who the hell are you? How did you get in here?”

The man with the reflective red glasses pressed his back against the door and closed it.

Ignatius backed away. He scanned the room for something to use as a weapon. “Get out of here. I’m warning you!”

The man slipped off his gloves and unzipped his gray coat. He casually removed it as he walked into the living room, draped it on the back of a chair and sat down at a table that had a video screens positioned at each end.

“Don’t be afraid,” the man said casually. “Here, have some money.” The man pulled out a stack of bills, placed them on the table and leaned back in the chair.

“What do you want?” Ignatius asked as he edged closer to get a better look.

“I’ll get to that in a moment. First, you’ll want to make sure the money is real. I’ll back away so you can look.” He rolled his chair from the table and toward the window.

Intrigued, Ignatius cautiously approached the table, put his hand on the cash, flipped through it and retreated.

The intruder grinned. “That’s right, real old fashion M-O-N-E-Y. Just as good today as it was a hundred years ago. And there’s no way to trace it. Now that that’s out of the way, let’s get down to business. I’ve come...”

“Wait!” Ignatius said holding up his hand. “I want to know how you got in, those locks are...”

“No, you wait!” the man said. “I’ve been told you are remarkably astute so don’t waste my time.

Your concerns have been addressed. I'm obviously not here to steal or harm you, so" the man with the red glasses gestured to the chair. "Sit down so we can get started."

"I just want..." Ignatius began.

"Do it!" the man commanded.

It was the whirring sound coming from the man's head that convinced Ignatius to comply.

"Good," the intruder said as he rolled back and joined Ignatius at the table. "Now, I've come to offer you a job. There is a need for your talent and..."

"No way!" Ignatius said as he leapt from his seat and quickly began stuffing the money into his pockets. "I don't work for anybody. I do what I want, *when I want*."

The man with the red glasses smirked and said. "No you don't. What you have been doing is squandering your impressive abilities playing *Electrocutioner* on line for five grand a pop. Not a bad way to fleece the idle rich but hardly a proper venue for a man of your talents."

Ignatius stepped back and studied his guest. "What do you know about *Electrocutioner*?"

The man, casual as ever, replied. "I know it's a game requiring a chess master's skill and the strategic abilities of a four star general. As for the mechanics, you lock your hand into a game controller and plug it into the wall. When you or one

of your team is shot by your opponent a mild electric shock is generated and sent up your arm.

“But you and the people you play against have taken it to a whole new level. Now, when someone is hit twenty five thousand volts shoot through the victim’s body, enough to really hurt but not enough to render unconscious. Hit a person enough times and you could have them literally screaming in agony. Not a game for the weak of heart.”

Ignatius’s jaw dropped. “Sonavabitch!” he said, placing his hands on his hips. “I just figured you out! You’ve gone through all this drama just to challenge me to a game! That’s it, isn’t it?” He shook his head and began laughing. “And here I thought you were some nut out for revenge! Hell, you’re just another young gun who wants a crack at the top spot.” He plopped back in his chair, delighted at having put all the pieces together.

“There was ten grand in that pile,” Ignatius continued, pointing to where the money had been. “Twice as much as I usually charge but I got to say, I like your style, friend, so I’m going to cut you a break. I’ll give you back half and send you on your way to tell your friends how you *almost* beat me. Because trust me, if we play *Electrocutioner* you *will* get hurt! I’ve *never* been beaten. Never! Just call any of my opponents and ask how rehab is coming along. For some, it will be months before they can even move their gaming hand.”

“Actually,” the man with the red glasses said, “challenging you to a game will probably save me considerable time. So, enough talk, let’s do it.”

“Listen,” Ignatius said with empathic concern making its way across his face. “I wasn’t kidding. For your own good, you should take my...”

“I heard you the first time. Now here are the stakes. You win, you keep the money. I win, you accept the job offer and begin work within the week.”

Ignatius bit his lower lip and studied his opponent. He tapped his fingers a few times on the table and said, “Okay, deal, wise guy, but only because you’ve got a big mouth and it’s time someone smartened you up.”

Ten minutes later, the man with the red glasses and Ignatius Kennedy Toole sat at the table across from each other, video screens in front of them, each one’s right hand covered in a steel encased game controller and locked closed.

Both controllers had been tested with a voltmeter. Both emitted a twenty-seven thousand volt shock when their avatar suffered a direct body hit. More would be generated for a head or kill shot.

“I assume you’ve played before?” Ignatius asked as he ran through a quick prelim test.

“No, but I’ve read about it and I’m a quick study.”

Ignatius smirked and shook his head. “You are in for a world of hurt, friend.”

Three minutes later, the white pieces, which were to be used by the red-glasses man, and the black pieces, which were to be used by Ignatius, appeared on the screens and the game began.

After two full minutes, Ignatius’s confidence slipped a little when he hadn’t managed, not even once, to get any of his opponent’s avatars in his sights. His team had come within firing distance of his adversary’s grenade-launching White Rook twice but it slipped away before he could take advantage.

“You can’t hide forever,” Ignatius said. “Sooner or later...Yiiiiiiiiiiii” Ignatius howled as a full bore blast struck the rock directly beside his Black Queen’s head. He dropped down, spun and fired several rounds directly at his opponent’s bazooka-firing White Knight, but it already disappeared behind a building wall.

Ignatius’s adrenaline was pumping. Rarely had he come so close to suffering a direct hit.

And this guy supposedly never played before?

The kid gloves were off. Utilizing his years of experience, Ignatius put together a plan to cut off his opponent’s team’s maneuvering room, then take aim from a defensible structure and take them out.

Okay, smart guy, now we’ll see just how good.... “Yiiiiiiiiiiii!!!” he bellowed as a concrete

block from the top of the adjacent building rocketed toward him. Without time to jump out of the way, Ignatius's Black Queen fired and shattered it into pieces. He received mild shocks as small bits of debris pelted his Black Queen avatar but nothing anywhere near what he would have felt should that block have scored a direct hit.

Ignatius took a deep breath. *Whoa, there's no fucking with this guy.* He cautiously turned the corner. If clear, he'd go to the rooftops, into 3-D and...

"Hello, Ignatius!" his opponent's White Queen machine-gun avatar said as it stepped out from the doorway and opened fire.

Ignatius's Black Queen was struck in the shoulder and the controller sent a strong shock up his arm. Hurt and running on instinct, Ignatius responded by spraying the doorway. The shattered brick and mortar pelted his opponent's avatar face and Ignatius felt the table vibrate from the shock his opponent received.

"Yeah, now we're playing!" Ignatius growled as he pursued the White Queen across the checkerboard street. Using a car as a shield, he pumped several more rounds, hitting his opponent once in the calf. Again he felt the electrical vibration coming from the other side of the table. He was beginning to feel more confident when the White Queen slid into the building just as the grenade launching White Rook charged out and

fired into the car. The car became a fireball and sailed several feet into the air. Ignatius's Black Queen was hurled back into the wall as several moderate electric shocks stabbed their way up his arm.

“Shit! Shit! Shit!” he bellowed, but managed to get off several more punishing rounds striking the White Rook as it moved vertically back into the building and then moved horizontally past one of the windows. Ignatius heard electricity sizzle and felt substantial vibration from the other side of the table

Yeah, I'll bet that hurt!

With his opponent on the run, Ignatius switched to his grenade-launching Black Rook and, moving horizontally across the checkerboard street, fired into each of the building's three stories. There was a massive explosion and the structure began tumbling into the street. Any second now he expected to hear his opponent shriek in agony as the full jolt of a death strike seared his body in pain.

Instead, he was shot in the ass.

Sonavabitch! Ignatius winced as the electricity shot up his arm.

As Ignatius' Black Rook spun, he saw the White Queen charging from the adjoining building. She fired another shot but missed.

He darted out of the line of fire and switched back to rifle rounds. *I was sure he'd use the Aleation defense and send his team into 3-D to fire*

down, but the fucker doubled back to the building next door. He took a breath. This guy doesn't use any of the established methodology, Wake up Ignatius or this guy is going to fry your ass!

A staunch believer in the best defense being a good offence, Ignatius doubled back and chased the White Queen into the building as the rest of his team fought on the streets with his opponent's team. Using skills perfected over the years, he quickly caught up and after unloading a stream of cover fire, forced the White Queen to make a diagonal move into a second-story room with only one door.

This is it!

But it wasn't.

Ignatius grimaced in pain as the White team above was barraging his Black team below. With no choice, he took control from the computer and had them spread out —while laying down extensive cover fire—to look for the White King.

Once done, he reassumed control of the Black Queen, yanked open the door and riddled the room with bullets. As he was about to dive in, he saw the White Rook maneuver itself horizontally against the sill of the only window, crank a grenade into the firing chamber and pull the trigger.

Realizing he had only a split second, Ignatius—as the Black Queen—slammed the steel jacketed door closed and tipped over to the floor. He heard the grenade ricochet and explode inside.

He elevated back to a standing position, flung open the door and laid down cover fire. He looked around. The wall with the window was half gone. Ignatius went over and stared down. Outside, one story below lay the White King, attempting to elevate to a standing position.

“Oh no you don’t!” Ignatius yelled as he had his Black Queen jump diagonally to a nearby pile of debris, then another, until he was able to confront his opponent face to face.

When the White King saw him, he spun toward his rifle but before he could reach it Ignatius’s Black Queen placed its rifle against the White King’s head.

“Nuh-uh-uh!”

“Well, it looks like you got me,” the red-glasses man said from the other side of the table.

“Sure does,” Ignatius replied.

“You going to finish me off?”

Ignatius exhaled loudly with both the excitement of having won and with the exhaustion of having almost lost.

“Well, are you?”

Ignatius sniffed. He caught a whiff what he thought smelled like tar but it quickly dissipated. He refocused on the task at hand. “You are very, *very* good,” he said. “I got to admit, you came very close to winning. The closest anyone’s ever come. So, if you concede defeat and shut down, I won’t take the headshot.”

“Why would I concede defeat when I’ve won?”

Ignatius rolled his eyes. “C’mom, don’t be an asshole. I’m told a headshot is unbelievably painful.”

“I have no doubt,” the red-glasses man replied. “And after today you’ll be able to draw from experience.” The White King then spun over and picked up his rifle.

“Big mistake,” Ignatius said as he pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened.

The White King turned and trained his rifle on his opponent. “You and your team are out of ammo. I counted.”

“You counted?” Ignatius screeched as the White King elevated up. “There are one hundred and fifty rounds. Two bazooka charges, six grenades, and a full rifle clip. How could you have counted?”

“I’m very good at math,” came the reply.

The Black Queen dropped the rifle. “So this is it. This is how it feels to lose.” Ignatius drew a deep breath. “Very well. Congratulations. I guess that’s the way it should be. He who lives by the sword should die by the sword. Go ahead. Take your shot.”

The White King pulled back the rifle bolt. “How noble! And no mention of how you showed me mercy when you thought you had the upper hand.”

“Just do it!”

The White King lowered, then tossed his rifle. “I came here to hire, not cripple you. Besides you never had a chance.”

Ignatius’ eyes widened as he pounded his fist on the table. “Damn it! I knew you couldn’t have beaten me fair and square!”

“Oh, I beat you fair and square. What I said was you never had a chance. Unlock the controller and take your hand out, I’ll show you what I mean.”

After doing so, the man with the red glasses came around and reloaded Ignatius’s Black Queen’s rifle, then transferred the firing mechanism from the controller to the space bar on the computer. “Now,” he said, “I’m going to re-attach the voltmeter to your controller, like this,” he said attaching the alligator clip. “Then aim the reloaded rifle at the White King’s head and,” he pressed the space key, “fire!”

The voltmeter needle flew to the redlined 100,000 volt maximum, burst into flame and began to melt.

“Holy shit!” Ignatius bleded and backed away. “If I shot... If I...pulled the trigger. I”

“Yes, if there was a bullet in the chamber you would have been electrocuted. You see,” the man said as he picked up his coat and put it on. “I’ve been studying you, but there was one thing I was unable to figure out. Did you play *Electrocutioner* to display your considerable skill and computer abilities or was it that you enjoyed torturing and

humiliating the less proficient? There was only one way to find out.”

He placed a card on the table. “You are exactly the type of person we are looking for. Be at this address at 10 p.m. Thursday evening to start your new job.”

“Wait, wait,” Ignatius called out as the man walked toward the door. “Who are you? Are you like, Batman? Or Astro-Boy with all that mechanical shit coming out of your head?”

“Actually,” the man replied opening the door, “they call me ‘The Invisible Man.’”

“And welcome to DayBreaking News, I’m Steve Mathers, and here’s our top story. A novelist who has requested anonymity for fear of reprisal from what he calls ‘Noon fanatics’ has published a new biography. The author claims secret government reports indicate the M-6 Titan, although originally on a collision with Earth, had—in the few final days before the introduction of Noon’s gravitational pulse generator—already begun to shift its orbit away from the Earth due to the Sun’s pull on the M-6’s mostly iron core. Citing these reports he claims the M-6 posed no real threat and ‘Noon’s grandstanding theatrics’ were completely unnecessary. He also claims that new clinical tests show the drugs the Doctor created to supposedly cure Obsessive Compulsion Disorder, chronic phobias and bi-polar disorders, over time radically alter the patient’s brainwaves, leading to emotional instability and may have led to his wife’s suicide.

“The author also goes on to accuse Noon of being a heavy drug user who spent much of his early fortune on narcotics and prostitutes, both male and female. The book is titled, ‘High Noon’ a

revelation of a not so remarkable man under the cold light of day.

“It’s available at bookstores and internet downloads everywhere.

In other news...

Hans Malibu sat on his living room couch with his feet on the coffee table and his laptop on his thighs. A muscle shirt was stretched over his broad shoulders and his jeans accented his well-conditioned legs. With blond hair and blue eyes, he came from a long line of Nordic military men and made his living using the many skills he acquired during his twenty years in the service.

He picked up the remote, clicked off the television and smiled. His plans were beginning to take shape. He put in a lot of time making sure that the book was published and that it received good press and sparkling reviews. The man hired to write it claimed much of it was true but that didn’t matter to Hans. True, false, real, imagined, he couldn’t care less. The only thing that mattered was that the book did its part in grinding Noon’s campaign to a halt.

He reached down a typed a checkmark beside “OBJECTIVE 1 on his list.

He scrolled the screen to Objective 2.

That was Keoghs directive to stop college students from hosting voter registration rallies.

Hans grinned.

He put a quick stop to that by amassing video surveillances of the rallies and those participating. Then, using facial recognition software, he identified those involved, located the source of their student loans, had the loans cancelled and the balance owed placed with a collection agency. No reason was given.

He placed a checkmark alongside number 2
Malibu studied the remaining objectives.

The third was to bury Noon's organization and the Doctor in lawsuits.

Malibu knew this one was going to be tough.

It's the inside guys like Maxwell, Noon's attorney, who are going to be the real problem here.

He quickly reviewed Maxwell's background and professional accomplishments.

He pressed his lips together and shook his head.

Shit! Half the New York legal system owes him favors. The other half got their jobs on his recommendation. He's got as many peckers in his pocket as the PTB themselves and has been around long enough to smell a set up a mile away.

Malibu stopped.

This one's going to need a lot more work.

He rubbed his face in frustration when he noted his fourth objective.

Oloki Sullivan's 'Sunshine and Roses' rallies at the schools and the town halls. How am I going to put a stop to that? There is absolutely nothing

illegal about them and the PTB has no leverage to do anything about it. None.

Shit!

Malibu knew putting an end to Noon's run for governor wouldn't be easy. He tried to convince Keogh he needed time to study his opponent, to collect information, to look for patterns, get profiles on Noon's associates.

But Keogh wouldn't listen; he wanted everything done yesterday. Malibu tried to explain the problem with getting everything done yesterday was mistakes inevitably crop up. Rushing causes errors in judgment; miscalculations. And they always came back to bite you on the ass.

Keogh countered by telling Malibu that if he wasn't up to the assignment, to just say so and he would get someone else.

Malibu pursed his lips in frustration. He needed another door in, one where he could get a look-see at Noon's Inner Circle.

He clicked on a folder. Inside were several photos of a man with a long gray coat and red-mirrored glasses.

“Come in, come in.”

Ignatius Kennedy Toole entered the dimly lit office hesitantly. He had his coat draped over his arm. It was dripping rain water onto the plush carpet. In the background was the slow ticking of a grandfather clock.

“Nasty weather isn’t it?” a man asked as he stared out the window. A flash of lightning lit up the room. It was immediately followed by a crack of thunder rendering the question moot.

“I’m here because, well, because I lost a bet,” Ignatius began, laying his coat over the back of a leather chair. “And I’ll keep my end of the deal. But you should know I don’t work well with others, I’m not a team player and, well, I’m a loner. I guess that’s all I’m trying to say.”

The man continued staring out the window. “No, that’s not quite accurate,” he said. “You would work well with others and be an excellent team player if the challenges were interesting enough and you led the team.”

Ignatius folded his arms and raised his head defiantly. “Yeah, well how would you know that?”

“I’m rarely wrong,” the man said, turning.

Ignatius felt as if his blood turned into liquid nitrogen. “Holy shit,” he murmured. “Dr. Noon? You’re the guy they want me to work for? What do you need me to do? Is there another meteor?”

Noon approached and placed his hand on the back of the chair. “No, son, not a meteor, but something equally as dangerous. It needs to be stopped, and I need someone with your considerable computer skills to help me do it.”

Ignatius was barely able to contain his excitement. He fumbled the first few words then said. “Sounds incredible, but... but, there’s something I got to tell you before we go any further, just so you know I’m on the up and up. The reason I never applied for a position in the computer field is because...”

Noon interrupted. “Because of the Treasury Department, yes, I am aware. Walk with me,” Noon said as he headed for the door.

Ignatius picked up his coat and followed. “You know about my... err, problems with the Treasury?”

Noon nodded as the two stepped into the hallway. “Your job title will be campaign phone logger. Naturally, I have other plans for you. Once you settle into your daily routine you will find yourself working with some of the most talented people in the world. And inevitably, you will also find yourself pitted against the very best the POWERS THAT BE can throw at you. But before

we go any further; regarding that bet you made with my associate? I am not going to hold you to it. The position I am offering you is far too important to be placed in the hands of someone who isn't totally committed to the task. So, that being said, are you interested?"

Ignatius jammed his hands in his pockets. "This is a lot to digest, Doctor. And I really appreciate you letting me off the hook. Can I have a few minutes to think it over?"

Noon nodded. "Certainly," he said pointing to a leather couch on the other side of the hall. "Make yourself comfortable. When you decide, I'll be in that office over there."

"I hope I haven't kept you waiting long," Noon said as he entered his office.

"Not at all," the Invisible Man replied. He was sitting at the bar at the far end.

Noon approached. "I am very impressed with the quality of people you have directed to our employ. That Ignatius Kennedy Toole is quite a find, as is Vladimir Zornekov. Oh, I have contacted Solace and she has agreed to join our little family."

"Great! How is she?" the I-Man asked.

Noon smiled. "Very well. In fact, I am often in awe at what that woman can accomplish."

The I-Man grinned. "You don't need to tell me."

Noon slipped behind the bar, walked over to the mahogany liquor cabinet, opened it, brought out a

well-aged bottle of cognac, placed two glasses on the bar and poured.

The Invisible Man took the snifter, swirled the cognac and took a sip. “Malibu has dropped out of sight, but I have Berber under surveillance,” he said. “Judging by his inquiries, he’s planning to make a move against your assets and property holdings.”

Noon pondered that information for a moment. “Stay on top of that. Maxwell says the POWERS THAT BE often dispose of their enemies by entangling them in lawsuits and financial difficulties. Since I own numerous properties, have dozens of licensing agreements and receive royalties in the millions, they’ll have a lot of targets to choose. On the positive side, more targets means more participants. The more participants, the more likely one will stumble onto one of our surveillance videos and reveal something we can use.”

The Invisible Man drained his snifter. “I’ll keep you advised. Oh, how did it go with Toole? Will he be joining us?”

As if on cue, Ignatius knocked and poked his head in. “Dr. Noon? I thought about it,” he said. “I’m in.”

Timothy Jefferies, a thin, blond-haired thirty-something, dressed in an expensive, impeccably tailored suit meekly opened the door and stepped inside. "Mr. Nash?"

Garland Nash, a fiftyish, bejowled, heavily browed lump of a man looked up from his desk. "You have that report, Jefferies?"

The man held a covered and bound document. He raised it in answer to the question.

"Well, bring it here!" Nash bellowed as if he were talking to his dog. "Don't stand there like an idiot!"

Jefferies trotted across the opulently furnished office to Nash's desk.

"Let me see that," he said, snatching it from Jefferies hand.

Garland Nash quickly scanned the pages. Each time his eyes alit on something not meeting with his approval, he growled and shook his head. Several minutes later, after he finished perusing the document, Nash leaned back, folded his arms and pressed his fist against his chin.

"Uh, sir?" Jefferies said, his hands clasped in front of him.

“Shut up! I’m thinking!” Garland huffed. “Up eleven percent! The sonavabitch hasn’t even made a single personal appearance and he’s up eleven percent?!”

Jefferies tried to look prepared and ready to tackle any assignment. “What do you want me to do?”

Garland turned to the window. “Get Keogh, Pilsner, Morganthau, Moon, Van Harris and Nicoletti on a conference call. I need to set up a meeting. Also get me Mills Berber on his private line.”

Two days later, a car pulled in between two large pines trees in a heavily wooded area a block from the entrance Noon’s personal residence in Corinthe, New York. Four men exited the vehicle and approached the grounds of Noon’s property leaving the fifth behind as lookout. After scanning the area to make sure they weren’t being observed, they disabled the locked gate.

The four rushed to the front door, disabled the locks and entered the mansion.

“Be very careful. Very!” Mills Berber said as he closed the door behind them.

“This guy probably has best security money can buy so it’s everything by the book. Initiate scans, check for hidden electronic devices, and audio igniters. There are eighteen rooms in this house, you do not enter any of them unless there is a full, I

repeat full, all clear on your mini screens. Remember, we are looking for computers. Don't waste your time with anything else. As soon as you spot one, signal me.”

A half-hour later, the four men gathered in the living room.

“Not one damn computer in the entire house?” Mills Berber growled. “Not one? How do you run a house this size without a single computer?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know,” the man carrying the black briefcase said. “We ran the protocols and there is no sign of electronic engagement.”

Berber huffed. “What does that mean in English?”

The man pointed to his wristscreen. “It means if there are any computers in this house they aren’t communicating with any outside source. See? The flat line indicates...”

Suddenly the flat line spiked and the pewter leg of a tall, oil-filled antique lamp stationed against the wall broke in half. The lamp toppled over with a resounding crash and bounced from the tile floor to the carpet. The oil inside sprayed the curtains, then as it rolled to a stop, burbled in a wide pattern across the rug. The lamp’s ancient wiring, having been torn by the fall, sparked and crackled. The carpet ignited and the fire spread quickly.

“Ah, shit!” one of the men said, “what else is going to go wrong tonight?!?”

Mills Berber grimaced. “C’mon we got to get out of here. Even with the fire alarms disabled, someone could see the flames.”

When they reached the door, the security locks had somehow reengaged. “Oh for fuck’s sake,” the man with the black briefcase said as he pulled out the security lock decoder. He placed it against the magnetic drive and the mini screen lit up.

“What’s the problem?” Berber hissed.

Briefcase Man frantically reset the dials. “The locks recalibrated after we came in. Why? I have no idea. Okay...okay, finally, here we go!”

The locks disengaged and they opened the door. Only to find the vestibule door has also reengaged.

“Shit!” Briefcase man bellowed as he again pressed the security lock decoder into service.

“C’mon! C’mon!” Berber growled. “Why is this taking so long?”

The man twisted the dials trying to align the sequence. “The batteries are dying down. These are very sophisticated locks and it takes a lot of juice to unravel the codes. They weren’t built to be used this many times without a recharge. Ah, fuck! I was so busy answering your stupid questions I missed the code series! Now I got to reset...”

“The hell you do!” Berber bellowed. He reached into his jacket, pulled a sonic disrupter pistol, held it against the lock housing and pulled the trigger.

The door flew open like a sprung mousetrap.

“C’mon! Let’s get the hell...”

As they stepped outside, all the house and grounds lights began flashing. A mechanical voice boomed from the mansions rafters. “Intruder! Intruder! Warning! Warning!! Intruder! Intruder!”

The four ran toward the front gate. In the distance they heard the blaring sirens of fire trucks.

“I thought the fire alarms were disabled?” Berber shouted.

“They were!” Briefcase shouted back. “Someone must have called 911.”

When they reached the gates the locks there had reengaged as well.

“Sonavabitch!” Berber howled. “And here come the fire trucks! Quick! We’re going to have to go around back.”

As they ran past the house, there was an explosion from inside the building that blew out a wall and literally sent the four flying. Seconds later, they crash landed into the solid dirt with a painful thud.

Dizzy and out of breath, Mills rolled over and attempted to climb to his feet amid the tufts of flame and charred grass. The briefcase was only a few feet away. As for where Briefcase Man was, well, that wasn’t anywhere near as important as getting out of there with the briefcase.

Breathing heavily, Mills got to his feet, then fell over in agony. The explosion had broken his leg.

The Invisible Man watched all this from his perch less than a tenth of a mile away inside the bell tower of St. John's Episcopal Church. He removed his red glasses and stared out into the dark. Since his eyes were electronic, for him there was, technically no dim or bright light. The signal to his brain recalibrated a million times a second to ensure he was always provided with the exact amount of light necessary to see as clearly as possible.

I'm done here, he said to himself as he placed the microwave remote he had used to start the fire and recalibrate the security systems back into his pocket.

Jefferies didn't bother to knock nor ask permission to enter. He simply flung open the door and ran in.

"Mr. Nash," he gasped out of breath, "you are going to want to see this!"

Jefferies ignored the fact Garland was on the phone and what he just dared do was, without question, a fireable offense. Nevertheless, he grabbed the remote and clicked on the video screen.

"*So, in your opinion this was arson?*" the newscaster asked holding the microphone to the fire chief.

"Not an opinion, Dave. It's a fact. My men found the remains of several canisters of liquid pyro inside with detonators attached."

"Thank you, Chief," the newscaster said turning to the man nearby. *"I am now speaking with Detective Wade Marsalis of the Western New York Police Department. Detective, I've been informed the police have arrested a fifth member, the getaway driver?"*

The detective nodded. *"Yes, we have. In addition, we found a detonator and another container of liquid pyro lodged into the wheel well of their vehicle. It seems that one got left behind when they brought in the others."*

"The briefcase that was found?" the newscaster asked.

The detective hunched up his coat from the cold. *"It has been marked as evidence. I can tell you that it contained a number of flash drives and assorted hardware. At this point we don't know if the arsonists brought them or stole them from the house."*

The newscaster was about to ask another question when he suddenly stopped, touched his earpiece and announced:

"The identities of the alleged arsonists have just been released. They are: Mills Berber, his last job is listed as operations manager for a government military contractor. Myles Hargrove, Lester Pennington, Antonio Delgado and the driver Beau La Feete. We will have more on this as it becomes available."

“Again our top story, Arsonists have torched Dr. Alexander Noon’s mansion in western New York. Fortunately the doctor was not at home as he is presently in New York City campaigning for the upcoming gubernatorial election. This is Dave Davies reporting.”

Garland Nash stared bug-eyed at the screen. A thin film of sweat appeared on his brow, his hand was shaking as he brought it to his lips. “Get Keogh on the holograph,” he whispered, then cleared his throat. “Uh-hum. Yes, Keogh. Get him on the holograph, right away.”

Jefferies dropped the remote on the desk and was about to run out of the office when his wristscreen lit up.

He looked down...then up at Nash. “Mr. Keogh on line one.”

One hour later Garland Nash sat at the head of a conference table, the only man physically in the room. Surrounding him were six holographic faces, all of which were turned to face the man whose holographic image was at the other end of the table, opposite Nash.

Keogh.

Keogh’s eyes bored into Nash’s. The fact that Keogh’s holographic image was considerably larger than the others and that its definition was so sharp it looked as if he were actually in the room, made

Nash feel like he had swallowed a belly full of ground glass.

“First thing,” Keogh said, taking immediate control. “We need to stop the hemorrhaging. And by that I mean get the damn newscasters off this story! Redirect your personnel, Kathalia. Convince them the fire at Dr. Noon’s house has nothing to do with the coming elections and they need to refocus on the...issues and... platforms, and all that political nonsense!”

Keogh’s holograph pivoted back to Nash; the other five followed. “Garland,” he began. “I need to know, and I need to know this... very... second!” he said, his voice rising in anger. “How this simple operation, one that could be easily carried out by any third-rate burglar, mushroomed into this most unholy fuck up? What possible advantage could be gained by burning down his house?! This was supposed to be a covert operation. Download a copy of his campaign plans and upload confirmations of wire transfers from our somewhat disgraced PTB friends to a personal Swiss/Cayman bank account set up in his name. Simple.

“Instead, the faces of those five idiots you assured me were top notch are on nearly every video monitor, not only in the state but in the entire damned country. And as for Noon, instead of being discredited, this screw up is turning him into a hero!”

Nash was perspiring so profusely it looked like he just stepped out of the shower. "Mr. Keogh, I assure you. I assure all of you gentlemen and ladies," he said turning to face them, "nobody brought explosives, we didn't start any fires, and I've been advised all the flash drives were erased by Berber before the police got them."

Keogh smirked dismissively. "Well, at least somebody did something right!"

There came some mild laughter

Nash pressed on. "The point, Mr. Keogh, is that this was a good plan. Kathalia's aborted interview shows Sullivan saying both he and Noon did considerable campaign planning at Noon's home. So we naturally assumed he had computers. But that wasn't the reason the plan failed. The reason it failed is our people were set up."

Keogh scowled. "Oh for heaven's sake, Nash!"

"Sir," he continued, "we have a video of the vehicle in the parking garage taken several hours before they left for Noon's mansion. At one point, the trunk lid suddenly opens all by itself! A moment or so later it closes, again, all by itself!"

"Meaning?" Keogh asked.

Nash wiped his brow. "Meaning someone planted the pyro canister in the wheel well."

"Fine," Keogh replied. "Say that is the case. Does your video expose the identity of the person responsible? Show some revealing tattoos or scars? Perhaps a ten-gallon hat, a handlebar mustache or a

red clown nose? Well spit it out, Nash. Do we have a picture of this sonavabitch or not?"

Nash again dabbed his brow. "Well you see, Mr. Keogh. That's the problem. We can clearly see the trunk opening and closing. We can actually hear the sound of feet crunching the grit behind the van but, well, we know there's somebody there but there is no picture."

"No picture? If he's there, there's got to be a picture."

But that's the problem," Nash said attempting to explain. "There is no picture. It's like the guy is invisible or something."

Welcome to NightBreaking news, “I’m Steve Mathers. A recent report from Vallatin University indicates that better than 40% of New York’s adult population is using some sort of recreational drug. Most popular it seems is Neuvocrank, a designer drug made popular by the alternative rock band ‘Off With Your Knickers, Darling’. Skuzzy Skank, the bands lead vocalist has been touting its effects in several of the band’s song’s. One of their most popular and a former number one hit titled, ‘Hey, Check Out The Douche-Bags,’ tells the story about a couple who get so high they float off to another dimension, where they get to look back on their bodies and laugh as people try to revive them.

The drug is inexpensive and lasts almost twelve hours so most people who do use it take it in the morning and stay high all day. This report has been met with considerable concern by the State Legislature and several members of the House of Representatives have indicated their willingness to sign into law a bill requiring a drug test be administered at all voting facilities.

The screen switches to New York Senator Tom Doad addressing reporters.

We can't have drug addled lay-about's making important decisions effecting the welfare and future of everyone in this country," he said. "I don't know about you but I don't want some psycho, mush brained Nomader having a say in the future of me and my family. So I want to go on record as a supporter of this new drug law initiative. If voting is as important to you as it is to me, then get off the drugs and vote with a clear head and a clean conscience."

The screen returns to Mathers.

In other news, the arsonists accused of setting fire to Dr. Noon's mansion are due in court today. The five had been released on bail and have...."

Noon pushed POWER on the remote and the television turned off. "Clever counter move on their part," he said as he placed it on his desk

Oloki nodded, got up and started pacing. "Damn clever. Everyone knows it's a lot more than 40%. And if the recreational drug using public stays home on Election Day for fear of losing whatever crappy job they are barely holding onto, only the people owned by the POWERS THAT BE will vote and you know how that will turn out."

Noon frowned and ran his thumb and index finger down the bridge of his nose. "I do indeed."

Oloki looked over. "So, how do we respond?"

Noon paused for a moment then said, "For the moment we do nothing. There is a disturbing new element making its way into my calculations. This

new X-factor might very well bring about considerable change to which we'll have to adapt."

He killed two people by the time he was twenty-four. He no longer remembered why because there was no need to. Following the automobile accident ten years earlier, he lived inside his head in a world of dark and cold and nothingness; his thoughts dormant and unstirring.

But even in the darkest of worlds there is an occasional, momentary flash of light.

Momentary.

But that spark, at the right moment, for the right reason, can ignite a universe and give birth to a cause, a reason to exist.

One day, as he sat in his parents' basement watching baseball with his father, he saw a campaign commercial that ended with the tag:

He saved us once. Let him do it again.

Alexander Noon. Governor.

It was, as they say, as if someone flicked a switch.

Twenty-seven-year-old Madalone pulled back from the television screen. "Dad," the redhead asked turning and gesturing toward the television. "What

they're saying about this Alexander Noon, is it true?"

Startled, Phil Madalone spun toward him, almost as if expecting to see someone other than his only child. His son almost never spoke and hadn't mentioned events in the outside world in over a decade.

Phil took a breath, smiled and said, "Yes, son, it is true," and told him about the M-6 Titan meteor and how Noon, nearly thirty years ago, had found a way to deflect it.

As his father went into the details, the younger Madalone, (he insisted on being referred to by his last name only) tuned him out.

It is true! Madalone said to himself. *One man single-handedly saved the world!*

Madalone ran his hand through his disheveled red hair as this incredible piece of information took root.

This Noon person! Any man who can accomplish so much at such a young age must indeed be a superior being. And as a superior being, his needs must be addressed and catered to. His path must be made clear.

"And so," Phil continued, "that's how the gravitational pulse was able to deflect the M-6 Titan..."

"Dad," Madalone interrupted. "You are still talking. Stop now. I need to think"

“Okay,” his father replied, far too used to his son’s bizarre behavior to be offended. “Anyway, the game’s back on. Let’s watch.”

As Phil watched the Yankees go to bat in the bottom of the seventh, inside Madalone’s brain, synapses began firing at a furious rate. Cells that lay dormant for over a decade were reenergized and roared back to life. His head was filling with ideas, intentions, ambitions, a lust for knowledge, a passion to be involved, all those things and more.

All those things, but with one single-minded purpose.

Make clear the path.

It took exactly six weeks.

Sunjay Patel stood before the mirror in his small dormitory room at the GC headquarters in downtown Manhattan, marveling at his new physique. Gone were his long black locks. His head was shaved, his eyes clear, his expression, one of keenly focused determination. His body a power plant of muscle and sinew coupled with now razor sharp reflexes. But he was most proud of the Guardian emblem branded onto his upper right arm. The pain had been excruciating, but he remained stoic, making not even the slightest sound. To him it was a rite of passage. Before the GC brand, he was Sunjay the boy; now, he was Sunjay the man.

The metamorphosis was complete.

He pulled a GC T-shirt from the drawer, slipped it on, tucked it into his pants and went back to the mirror.

His reflection confirmed it. He was ready. And it was oh, so worth the almost endless hours of training and study. Through it all, he was tempted to leave only once, when his parents were arrested for blending Krolla for the Nomads. After receiving several calls from them he seriously considered running to their aid.

But he hadn't because frankly, when he thought about it, his parents didn't deserve his help. He saw them now as they really were. Parasites going from city to city preying on the drug addled and simple minded. To them, America was a gold mine to be plundered and laid bare. To Sunjay, America was his country, his home, the place of his birth. A nation inhabited by the best from all over the world, a place where great men and women came to set an example. The place where lawmen on horseback with nothing but six-guns rode into the most dangerous towns imaginable to establish law and order. It was the place where Eliot Ness and the Untouchables risked all to take on Capone and the Chicago mobs. The place where undercover men like Donnie Brasco and Frank Serpico plunged a dagger into very heart of crime and corruption.

Sunjay believed it was time for the cowboy lawmen to return and force back the tide. He and his

triad would go into the belly of the beast this night with nothing but brains and balls.

And before this night was over, both would be put to the test.

For his first assignment, his triad (a group consisting of Sunjay and two other GC members, Paul and Remmy) were to ride the subways and protect the law-abiding public from predatory groups like the Nomads.

They were instructed to stay out of the way of the regular cops, to enlist their aid whenever possible, and go where the regular police didn't. Like patrolling the subway platforms late at night, walking through the subway cars, and restraining with duct tape those whose drug use had made them a danger to themselves and others.

At the beginning of their shift Sunjay got his first real look at how truly bad things were. As he and his triad patrolled the platforms, he saw groups of families peering out from the back ends of the subway stations.

Frail, sickly thin and malnourished faces studied him and his partners as they patrolled the dimly lit areas regular commuters rarely visited. The more homeless people Sunjay saw, the more they took on the ghostly countenance of concentration camp victims.

He forced himself to look away.

As their shift wound down hours later, they returned to the station nearest GC headquarters. They packed away their flashlights and 911 video recorders, somewhat grateful the night had been uneventful. Upon their arrival, they noticed a police patrol had roused the homeless, leaving the platforms empty except for torn makeshift bedding and empty boxes of government cereal and cheese.

“I guess all the bad guys heard we were on the job and took off,” the blond-haired Remmy said trying to lighten the mood. He jumped into a karate pose. “Wham, bam, bam!” he shouted whirling around. “Take that, evildoers!”

Paulie chuckled. “You play too many holograph games, Remmy. Real life is different. When somebody in the real world punches you in the mouth, it hurts like hell! Once, I got into this fight and thought I was doing pretty good when all of a sudden this guy hauls off and...” Paulie grimaced and rubbed his cheek. “Well, all I can say is the next thing I know, I’m on the ground looking out my ear hole.”

The boys laughed.

As they reached the stairs to the street, they heard raucous yelling from above and people descending into the subway.

When Sunjay and his triad looked up into the night skies, they saw an iridescent skull floating toward them. Startled, they jerked back. A moment later, the ‘floating skull’ revealed itself.

It was a tattoo on the face of a Nomad wearing a top hat.

When the Nomad reached the bottom of the stairs he stopped, placed his hands on his hips and said, “Look at these little boyths.”

Sunjay noticed the pronounced lisp, also noticed the five Nomads accompanying him. With metal caps on what few teeth they had, with assorted scars and piercings and wearing clothes that reeked of shit and urine, they looked like something hell had vomited out

“Hey, pretty boyths,” the skull-faced Nomad said as he approached and ogled them. “Got cath driverths?”

“What if we did?” Sunjay asked eying him back.

Skull wrung his hands and circled the triad. “Well then, it would be a good idea if you gave them to me. That is, if you boyths ever want to *thsee* your mommieths again.” He closed one nostril with his finger and blew his nose on the platform.

“Well, how about we give you this instead?” Sunjay replied. As Skull looked up, Sunjay punched him in the face and followed with a kick to the chest.

Blood flew from Skull’s broken nose as he staggered back and hit the platform with the force of an up-ended refrigerator.

Seeing the potential for violence, the previously bored Nomad’s faces lit up. With tire irons, bats and chains they trilled and lunged at the triad.

As Paulie attempted to get into a fighting stance he was struck on the head with a tire iron forming a dent that quickly filled with blood. He collapsed to the floor and began jerking and flailing seizure-like.

The Nomads nearest him found this hysterical and began dancing around him as if the dying boy was performing a new dance step. The festivities came to an end when Sunjay sidestepped a similar attack with a bat, wrested it from his assailant and slammed it against his jaw, sending several teeth flying. Taking advantage of the upper hand, Sunjay struck again and the Nomad stumbled backward and fell down alongside the now expired Paulie.

Two down, four to go. Sunjay thought, flinging off his Starfighter coat.

He could feel the blood racing through him, his fear diminishing. He had exposed their weakness. They were undefeatable only when you chose *not* to fight them. When confronted they were slow, chaotic, and easily distracted.

And most important, Sunjay realized as he ran the back of his hand under his nose, *they bled.*

Remmy, the other triad member, seemed more interested in escaping than winning. “Why didn’t you just give them the fucking cash drivers?” he called to Sunjay as he blocked and parried his approaching attackers. Before he could answer, Sunjay was struck across the back by a heavy spiked chain. The barbs ripped his GC shirt and the skin on

his back. The pain was unlike anything he ever experienced before.

The second blow was like being electrocuted. He saw stars and nausea overwhelmed him. With his back screaming like it was on fire, he fell forward and landed on one knee. The bat flew from his hands, bounced on the platform and rolled away.

Seeing this, Remmy panicked, jumped down to the express tracks and began running with three Nomads pursuing him. Sunjay's attacker snickered at the sight and began casually wrapping the chain around his shoulder as he walked toward the bat that had cart wheeled to the far end of the platform.

"I hope you *danceth* like your dead friend," the Nomad called back as he reached down and picked up the bat. "*That waths thoo* funny!"

Sunjay laid there, letting his stomach settle, feeling his strength return. He had survived the GC branding. He could survive this.

The vibration he felt in his hands told him the local train was approaching. Any second now it would pull in directly behind his attacker.

The growing sound of the train was suddenly drowned out by the whoops and hollers further down on the adjoining tracks where the other Nomads cornered Remmy.

"No! No! Please!" Remmy begged in the distance.

His pleas were cut short by the sound of wood striking bone.

Crack!!

The sound was followed by a scream and another plea for mercy.

Crack!!

Another scream. A slurred plea. “Sumge, hep me,...hep me... my head hurt so bad, I can’t... I can’t ... hep...me...”

Crack!!

Crack!!

Crack!!

Whoops and hollers in the distance.

Sunjay’s assailant grinned, turned from the tunnel and raised the bat over his head. With red-rimmed eyes and the uneven breathing of a person under the influence, he lumbered toward Sunjay.

Sunjay saw the red warning light of an approaching train flash. The sound and the vibration were just right.

Sunjay sprung, caught his foe in the chest and forced him backward and off-balance.

“Noooooooooo!” the Nomad bellowed as Sunjay shoved him off the platform and into the path of the train just as it raced into the station.

The Nomad’s body ricocheted off the engine, flew head over heels in the opposite direction and splattered against the platform wall.

As the blood ran down in long streaks of red, alongside hung an advertisement for the election of Dr Alexander Noon.

He saved us once. Let him do it again.

Emerging from the opposite tunnel and seeing what happened, the remaining Nomads climbed onto the platform but Sunjay had a too much of a head start. With his Starfighters coat under his arm, he turned from the top of the stairs and shouted.

“I’ll come back, and when I do, I’m going to kill every one of you!”

21

Make clear the path.

Over the days that followed, Madalone continued to feed his single-minded obsession with Noon. He went without sleep and often without eating, instead reading everything, watching everything and listening to everything that was in any way related to the Doctor.

The more he read the more he was convinced making clear Noon's path was the reason he was put on Earth. One afternoon following forty-eight straight hours of research he noticed he wasn't retaining as much as he had earlier.

I've made sure to take sufficient nourishment today, had two complete bowel movements. Why is my body faltering?

It wasn't until his vision began to blur that he realized he hadn't slept. After reviewing all other possibilities, Madalone decided lack of sleep was the most likely culprit.

But he didn't want to go home. Valuable time would be wasted traveling. More wasted traveling back.

No! Completely out of the question.

Sleep would have to be done somewhere close-by, so he could resume his mission with the least amount of down time. There was a park outside.

I could sleep there until refreshed.

No, sitting motionless for hours would draw attention. I would be noticed! People would remember my face. No, definitely not. In order to provide the maximum assistance to the Doctor, I need to move about without attracting attention. I must remain unseen and unknown.

And who better for such a job? Since no one ever seems to sense my presence.

It was a bizarre reality he discovered shortly after recovering from the car accident that left him in a six-week coma. Always meticulously observant, Madalone discovered most people could *feel* the presence of another person nearby, could sense being watched. Even from afar. Somehow, they just *knew*.

Strangely, it appeared, they no longer sensed him.

To test his theory, he would stare at people from behind, from windows, from around corners. Focus all his energy and concentration on that one simple act. They never felt his presence.

Never.

In the weeks that followed he grew steadily more uncomfortable each time a person jumped as if he materialized out of thin air when he tapped

them on the shoulder or came up and asked a simple question like: "Where's the dairy section?" or; "What time does the movie start?"

This new and bizarre ability made him feel isolated and out of touch, and he began to withdraw. He lost all interest in his friends, in sports, martial arts, debating, virtually everything he had excelled at in high school.

If I am to live out my life as a ghost among mortals, so be it.

Then one day he entered his room, sat in his chair and stared out the window. He would remain there for eight years, leaving only to use the bathroom and eat. Finally his parents convinced him to move into a newly created basement apartment. Unfortunately, the new environment did little to change his routine, other than agreeing to watch an occasional baseball game with his father.

But now Madalone had been resurrected. The ghost had become whole and it was Noon who was responsible.

He saved us once. Let him do it again.

He remembered a janitor's closet being on the second floor. It was Saturday and the library was closed on Sunday. He could get much accomplished on a day with no one around

Perfect.

When he was sure he wasn't being observed, Madalone slipped into the janitor's closet, closed

and locked the door behind him, stood against the wall across from the sink, and amid the mops, pails and detergents, he closed his eyes, counted to ten and fell fast asleep.

Sunjay laid in a steaming whirlpool bath inside the GC training room. He occasionally moaned as his back throbbed and injured muscles and bones shrieked in pain.

Someone banged on the door.

Sunjay exhaled amid the steamy vapor. “Come in!”

Key-J entered and closed the door behind him. “Rabba-Dabba,” he said, grabbing a metal folding chair and pulling it over.

“I’m so glad you’re all right,” he said as he sat down. He placed his fingers against his temples, exhaled mightily for effect, then pressed his hands into a praying position. “Sunjay, seriously, why on Earth would you take on six Nomads?” he asked as if talking to a small, disobedient child. “Everybody knows those motherfuckers crazy. They’ll kill you as soon as look at you.”

Sunjay tilted his head as if unsure of the question. He turned toward the door, then back, then slid toward Key-J with his teeth gritted. “What do you mean, *why*?” He bobbed his head and raised his shoulders in a confrontational manner. “Isn’t that what we’re supposed to do? Isn’t that what being

GC is all about? Stopping crazy motherfuckers like them? I killed two and busted up another, and I promise you, just as soon as my back heals, I'm going to finish the job.”

Key-J pulled back, startled at Sunjay's intensity. “Rabba-Dabba, this don't sound like you.”

Sunjay's hard expression remained. He ran his arm across his brow to wipe away the sweat. “No, Key-J, this *is* me! This is how I've felt all along.” He slammed his hand against the lip of the metal tub. “The problem with the GC, Key-J, is that too many think this is a game. This ain't no game! Those fucking animals, they...” Sunjay hesitated for a moment as he took a deep breath to hold back the tears, “those fucking, fucking, animals bashed in Paulie's skull with a tire iron and when he fell to the ground dying, they danced around him. Those cocksuckers danced around him! And Remmy, they chased him down the subway tunnel and caved in his skull with a bat. He called for me: he was brain damaged, slurring his words and they laughed... Laughed! As they hit him again and again!”

Sunjay's breath hitched as if he just ran the 100-yard dash.

Key-J pressed his hand on his friend's arm. “Sunjay,” he said, “our job is to provide a presence, to be the eyes and ears of the authorities, not to be vigilantes!”

Sunjay sprang out of the whirlpool as if jettisoned from it. “You cockless motherfucker! The

eyes and ears of the authorities; what authorities? Those rich sons-a-bitches living on top of those half empty skyscrapers? The ones being driven in limos to sex clubs and drug dens? The ones who don't pay a dime in taxes yet have twenty-four-hour police protection? And where are the fucking cops when poor bastards like Paulie and Remmy die on piss-stained platforms and rat infested subway tracks?"

He paused and held out his arms as if inviting an answer.

When none came, Sunjay grabbed a towel, wrapped himself in it and stormed toward the door. "You better grow some balls, Key-J," he said, staring back at him. "The world is getting to be a hard place. We need men out there on the front lines. Not pussies like you."

It was mid-afternoon, early summer. With the sun streaming in from the skylights, Noon and the Invisible Man were sitting at the bar at the far side of Noon's office enjoying a cognac. Nothing had been said for several minutes. Suddenly, Noon placed his snifter down, turned and exclaimed. "I've decided to call him X. Not that the name matters, it's just something to use until we can find out who he really is."

The I-Man placed his elbows on the bar. "Doctor, you know I have the utmost respect for your mathematical expertise," he said as he picked up the snifter and swirled the liqueur. "But to be

honest, your latest calculations border the chaos theory. It's like building a house alongside a tornado. The slightest variation and the tornado will tear all your hard work to shreds."

"I know," Noon replied with a sigh. "But on the positive side, every second the tornado does *not* vary and the house is not destroyed, X's existence moves closer to reality."

The I-Man slowly shook his head. "We both know that if this X person does move into our orbit, so to speak, he will be exceptionally difficult to control."

Noon smiled. "I don't believe control will be an issue. The more I look at the calculations, the more I am reminded of that quote by Albert Einstein. 'God does not play dice with the universe.' To which, I would have responded. 'HE doesn't need to. HE rigged the game.' In any case, I want you to have Ignatius locate this person. Make it a priority."

Before the I-Man could reply there came what sounded like a muffled explosion.

"What in blazes was that?" said the I-Man as he jumped up, placed the snifter on the bar and sprinted to the door.

"I believe a bomb went off in the elevator." Noon replied nonchalantly.

As he reached for the knob, the I-Man stopped and was about to ask 'How would you know that?' but instead took off down the hall.

He arrived at the main corridor and saw smoke coming from the elevator shaft.

“What’s going on?” he said, pressing through the crowd of campaign workers

“We’re reviewing the tapes now,” one of the security guards said.

The I-Man joined the others to watch the video.

It began with a man entering the elevator with a paper bag filled with groceries, he presses the button for the campaign headquarters floor and as the elevator ascends, he shifts the bag from one hand to the other.

A crawl on the bottom of the screen indicates an electronic device has been activated. A magnetic resonance scan indicates explosive material. The man then pushes the button for the third floor and is about to place the bag on the floor when a clear bubbly gel pours from the sides of the elevator’s ceiling. The man looks up and sees it adhering to the walls and pooling on the floor.

The elevator passes the third floor and slows.

Now fearful, the man begins frantically pushing all the buttons. The elevator does not stop. He checks the floor indicator. The LED light reads 4.....5.....6

Within fifteen seconds there is three feet of an adhesive gel on the floor and a thick bubbly coating on the walls and ceiling.

The man bellows for help and seeing that the elevator controls have become immersed in the gel, he begins tearing the bag apart. He starts examining the device looking for a way to shut it down. He then stops as if he suddenly remembers that any attempt to disarm it will trigger the explosion.

The elevator moves at a crawl. The man panics and attempts to bang on the walls only to have his arms covered in thick goo. He again bellows for help; screams, begs. “I had to do it! Don’t you understand?” he shouts at the wall-mounted camera. The goo has not yet reached the lens. “They were going to take my house! My family would wind up on the streets. They were going to prostitute my daughter to pay down my Debbie. Can’t you see I had no choice? Please! Please let me out!”

There is a flash, the screen goes white and transmission stops.

As the video starts over, the I-Man turns and heads down the hall to Noon’s office.

“I assume one of your more recent inventions?” the I-Man asked as he closed the door behind him.

Noon was already back to work. With the electronic fingertip engaged, he was adding new equations to the already existing holographs. “The gel?” he asked not turning around. “Somewhat new. I’ve had the formula for such a thixotropic compound in my head for years but only developed it when I realized the POWERS THAT BE would

resort to something like this once they realized I wasn't going away.

"The Colonel came up with a name. He calls it, 'The rat trap.'"

The I-Man returned to his seat at the bar. "Couldn't you just invent something to deactivate the bomb?" he asked as he picked up his snifter and finished his drink. "It's going to be pretty expensive to keep replacing elevators."

"The elevator is fine." Noon replied as he moved one equation to another hologram. "The gel forms a cocoon that absorbs the explosion. Send the elevator to the basement and have it hosed down with citrus acid. It converts the gel to a liquid which will go right down the drain."

The Doctor turned. "The bone, congealed tissue and partially liquefied organs might be a bit harder to dispose of."

The I-Man tapped his earpiece. "The Colonel," he said and waited for the connection. "Colonel here."

"Colonel, I need some of your GC personnel. One of the rat traps has gone off and I need someone to clean up the mess."

"Understood," came the reply. "I'll send someone directly."

Now following a strict regimen of diet and rigorous physical exercise, meditation and study to build his body to its maximum effectiveness,

Madalone's confidence and self-assuredness grew. Convinced his life was finally on the right path, he took a bus to Corinthe and rented a room just outside Corinthe University.

Day after day he would sit in the university library and pour over every piece of literature written about the doctor. Once he devoured even the most obscure publications, he tracked down a few pages of Noon's personal papers. There he found several regarding the late Isaac Bell.

Recalling the countless tags and graffiti markers the Bellmen had spray painted throughout the city urging people to support Noon, Madalone became intrigued. Like Noon, Madalone was impressed with the man's vision but also saw through to the man's flaws. Bell had the intellect, the formula and the head for detail that often led to success.

What he lacked, was the killer instinct.

Madalone knew that you do not go to war armed only with a philosophy, or into battle to win the hearts of your enemies.

You go to war to destroy your foes, seize power and demand compliance.

And the way to do this, Madalone knew, was to raise an army, an army totally and completely loyal to you and your cause.

And that's the reason Bell failed. He never realized an army was necessary to...

Madalone stopped mid-thought. *The Bellmen!!*

His jaw dropped in astonishment. Isaac *had* done it. He had created an army! But he lacked the ability to carry it through to the next step! Bell had the ideas and the words capable of stirring men into action, but not the capacity to lead them into battle. That was for men like Washington, Grant, Patton.

Madalone decided that in order for Noon to succeed, the Doctor would need a supreme commander, a general to lead and inspire the troops, a man whose loyalty and devotion would never be questioned.

Madalone stood up, placed his fists on his hips and as the sun streamed in the library windows and shone brightly on his face, decided he would be that man. He would turn the Bellmen into Noon's Army.

The time for study was over. There was a world to conquer.

“First, why should we even consider your proposal? You’re a nobody, and a nut as far as I can see.”

Madalone had returned to New York City and was standing before the five members of the Bellmen Central Committee who were casually seated behind a large black lacquered table. He had spent the last half hour at the Bellman mansion outlining his proposal. Determined not to be put off, he continued as if the disparaging comment had not been made.

“As I said, I know as much about the Bellmen as any of you, probably more than the majority of your membership. Why is that?” he asked gesturing toward the committee. “Because fate has intervened. Following the death of your leader, you have been adrift and without direction. Your membership commits petty crimes against, and unleashes ineffective attacks on, the POWERS THAT BE.

“But it’s been two years and what has been accomplished? Nothing, and that’s why your membership is dwindling. There is no cohesion, no loyalty, no progress.

“Let me address the Bellmen membership,” he said, placing his hands on his chest. “And I will outline a new and bold course for the future. At one time you were all deeply committed to the ideas and philosophies of Isaac Bell, committed to seeing them enacted by the government and embraced by the people. This can still happen! The membership simply needs to be put back on path. And that is precisely what I intend to do.”

The five-member Bellmen council looked back and forth among themselves. “Mr. Madalone,” the number one central committee member began.

“Just...Madalone.”

“Very well, Madalone. If you will step into the next room so we may consider your proposal.”

Madalone nodded and left.

After the door closed, the number one central committee member, 40-year-old Bill T-Dore was the first to speak. “Got to admit, this guy is convincing.”

Juan Holloway, the number two member didn’t agree. “I said it to his face and I’ll say it again,” he stated, leaning back and putting his steel-toed boots up on the table. “The guy’s a nut.”

Bill replied with a smirk. “Yes, Juan. Your opinion has been duly noted.”

Number three, a blond-haired woman named Angelicia, placed her elbows on the table and pushed back her long hair. “I think we should

seriously consider letting him address the membership. He seems to know more about what we're supposed to be doing than we do. Let's face it—governing by committee hasn't worked out. We need a strong leader, someone with vision, someone who will force change."

Number four, Milton Finklestein nodded in agreement. "And he makes a valid point. If we continue in our present direction, and the membership continues to fall off, we might as well close up shop. So I say if there is a chance of getting Isaac Bell's ideas before the public again, that should be our first and only concern, not who's running the show."

Juan looked around at his colleagues. "Are you all crazy?" His expression was that of utter disbelief as he gestured to the door of the adjoining room. "That guy's a mental case. I can see it in his eyes. I'm telling you, there is something wrong about him. I say we bring him back in. Tell him thanks, but no thanks, and send him on his way."

Signu Bobipna, the fifth member, shook his head and waved his hand. "No, no, no! Look, I joined this organization because I believed in the cause. I wanted to contribute. There was a time when the Bellmen were considered revolutionary radicals, extremists. 'Power to the people and only the people,' remember? Now we're no more than a social club. So here it is, either we let this guy have his say or I'm resigning."

Juan turned. “Signu, you can’t.”

Signu snapped. “I can and I will. So let’s have a vote. Raise your hands if you want to give Madalone a shot. Four out of five carries it.”

Juan folded his arms in protest. Angelicia raised her hand, as did Milton. So did Signu to no one’s surprise. The deciding vote rested on Bill T-Dore, the central committee leader who had his hands resting on the table.

“Good, only three out of five,” Juan said. “Motion denied.”

Bill stared, deep in thought with his lips pressed tight. Finally, he shook his head. “No, Juan,” he said, looking as if he had been praying for an alternative. “I wish there was another way, but there isn’t. They have a valid point. Regardless of our personal feelings, we must act now or Isaac Bell’s ideology will have died with him. I vote yes,” he said raising his hand. “Madalone gets his shot.”

A week after the incident, Sunjay stormed down West 3rd Street. His back was extremely sore yet he was so obsessed with confronting the Nomads he refused to acknowledge it. He had sworn revenge and had every intention of keeping his word.

He had been walking the streets of Manhattan for hours when he came upon a crowd of people gathering outside an old theater. Curious, he waited for the light, then crossed and went in for a closer look.

Using the skills learned in the GC, he casually made his way around the group, making mental notes on what they wore, carried and the tone of their conversations.

No, these people got nothing to do with the Nomads, he realized disappointedly. *Too well organized, no drugs and a lot of electronic equipment. Expensive stuff, too. A combo package of science geeks and political rads.*

As he began to mingle, a large black man wearing a leather trench coat stepped up behind Sunjay and placed a hand on his shoulder. “Yo, brother,” he said. “What brings...”

When Sunjay winced and stiffened in pain, the man immediately backed off.

“Are you all right?! I wasn’t trying to hurt you. I...”

Sunjay took a deep breath and turned. “Not your fault,” he grimaced as he opened and shook off his coat. “I got into a little bust up and when you touched me, the jacket lining...up against my...”

As Sunjay’s coat slid off, the man saw the GC brand on his upper arm and the deep welts and scarring flesh on his shoulder.

“Oh, bro,” the man said with concern. “That is severe. What happened?”

Sunjay shrugged. Even the shrug caused him to wince.

“Ain’t medicine,” the man said offering a stick of gum, “but it might take your mind off the pain.”

Sunjay looked the man over, then accepted the offering.

The man placed his hands in his pockets and sidled up alongside Sunjay. “Word on the street is the Nomads and the GC had it out in the subway a week or so ago, two Nomad dead, two GC dead. The GC travel in threes, Nomads carry tire irons, bats and chains. Those are chain marks on your back.”

“Well, ain’t you Sherlock-fucking-Jones,” Sunjay grunted folding the gum into his mouth.

“Holmes,” the man corrected with a grin. “I’m the gatekeeper here and I saw you poking around. Was going to tell you to hit the rails but word is, something big going on inside tonight. Something a member of the GC might find interesting. So if you were to walk in with the others, I might be too busy to notice.”

Still fuming, still looking for revenge. Still having no idea where to get it, Sunjay took a moment to consider the offer.

“What if I don’t like it?”

The man shrugged. “I don’t get paid to keep people from walking out.”

Sunjay nodded, adjusted his jacket and got on line.

24

Inside the old yet well maintained movie theater, several spotlights illuminated the stage. As the house lights came down, a well-dressed man with a headset strolled out to greet the audience.

“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to this meeting of the Bellmen organization,” the red haired, dark eyed man said as he raised his arms in greeting. “My name is Madalone, and I have come to revitalize and rejuvenate the organization built by Isaac Bell. First, let me begin by telling you, as a political organization, where we stand right now.”

Sunjay, seated in the sixth row, had no intention of listening to some long-winded diatribe against the government and the POWERS THAT BE. He’d heard it all before. It would no doubt be followed by a plea for everyone to band together and petition your representatives and blah, blah, blah. He snapped his gum, counted how many seats between him and the aisle and debated how long he should wait before making his exit.

“My friends, there is no other way to put it. As an organization, we are dead in the water,” Madalone said. He clasped his hands together with

the solemnness of a mortician. “Dead and buried right there alongside Isaac.”

He gestured to the floor as if Isaac Bell was buried below the stage.

“We meet in secret but it’s unnecessary,” he continued. “The government no longer monitors Bellmen activities. Why? Because we don’t do anything! And the little we actually do doesn’t warrant the expense. Membership is dwindling and the present leadership lacks direction. We all know the POWERS THAT BE killed Isaac Bell. Yet we are considered so insignificant, so impotent, they don’t even bother installing listening devices. And you know what I think about that?”

As Madalone stepped up to the edge of the stage, the edges of his mouth slowly pulled back revealing a menacing grin.

“It’s a mistake they will live to regret.”

This sudden aggressiveness caught Sunjay’s attention. Perhaps he might stay and listen after all.

“Evolve or die!” Madalone growled, slamming his fist into his hand. He strode across the stage with the confidence and self-assuredness of a battle-hardened field general. “This is war!” he thundered, raising a pointed finger into the air. “And we are an army! An army that will bring down the POWERS THAT BE and reinstitute a government that caters to the will of the people and not the wealthy elite.”

Madalone stormed down the steps to the audience. He swaggered in front of the first row,

stopped, reached down, grabbed a man by the front of his coat and yanked him out of his seat. “Are you ready to fight for this cause?” he asked. “Are you ready to do anything and everything necessary to restore the power of government to the people?”

After the initial shock, the man finally found his voice. “Well, I guess,” he said. “I mean as long as it’s within reason. And nobody gets hurt.”

With his hand still tightly wrapped around the man’s coat Madalone glared at him in disbelief. “Within reason?” he thundered. “As long as nobody gets hurt?” Madalone flung him into the aisle. “Get out you gutless piece of shit! Go!” he bellowed, kicking the guy in the ass as the man scrambled to the exit.

Madalone slapped his hands together as if dusting off debris. “Fucking fairy. Now, is there anyone else out there who will only fight if nobody gets hurt?”

A group of people stood up and one called out. “You’re a psycho, man! You can’t take on the POWERS THAT BE. It’s suicide.”

As that group and several others put on their coats and headed for the exits, Madalone called out to the rest of the audience. “Please!” he said as he theatrically fell to one knee. “If you feel as they do, Pleeeeaaase!” he said dragging out the word for effect. “Follow them out. Because the truth is,” he said climbing to his feet, “the Bellmen are finished. Why? Because they like to talk. And philosophize.

And intellectualize. In fact, they like to do everything but fight! And frankly, fighters are the only people I need. I can shit me a trail of philosophers and intellectuals. But the gold I came panning for tonight is soldiers, fighters, rebels, radicals, and rabble-rousers, people with conviction, damn it!"

Sunjay stared with awe as Madalone invaded the crowd, yanking people out of their seats. It had the desired effect. Those not willing to fight quickly ran out bleating accusations of lunacy as they departed. But those who stayed...

Oh, THOSE WHO STAYED....

Within ten minutes the only people still in their seats were

THOSE WHO STAYED.

They were the people Madalone was looking for. And with about half of the original audience determined to be a member of

THOSE WHO STAYED.

To those people, Madalone revealed his plan.

Sunjay listened with rapt attention.

As did the man at the back of the theater, the one with the gray coat and red glasses.

The TV screen featured a picture of a donkey with bulging eyes and a comically open mouth. With great enthusiasm the announcer says: *The Midnight Show with Howie Wowie is brought to you by Screaming Jackass beer. Screaming Jackass!* At

last, the quality and taste we've all been braying for!"

The screen switched to a close-up of Howie Wowie's smiling face

Thank you ladies and gentlemen and welcome back to The Midnight Show, he said. *"We have a special guest here tonight, somebody I've wanted on this show since I took over eleven years ago. Ladies and gentlemen, for the first time on television in over thirty years, let's give an enthusiastic Los Angeles welcome to Dr. Alexander Noon!"*

Stunned, the audience jumped to its feet when the Doctor stepped out from behind the curtain, crossed the stage and took a seat alongside Howie.

It took nearly an entire minute before the applause died down. When it finally did, Howie shook the Doctor's hand and said:

"Boy! Talk about down and dirty elections! I've been doing political humor for twenty five years and I've never seen such name calling and mud-slinging."

The Doctor merely nodded.

Howie looked down solemnly. *"Sir, I must ask,"* he said folding his hands on the desk. *"Are you indeed a 'niggling nabob of nihilism?' as Madeline Messerschmitt has claimed. And if so, how did you become one? And lastly, are there dues involved?"*

Noon, looking relaxed, sat back in his chair and smiled. *"Howie,"* he replied, *"all the name calling*

and accusations are merely a smoke screen. The reality is that the government of the State of New York is about to collapse. I'm not saying maybe; I'm not saying if. I'm saying it's inevitable, period. And those ventriloquist dummies and empty suits the POWERS THAT BE are spending a fortune to elect are simply incapable of preventing it.

"I'm talking about a complete loss of essential services, collapse of infrastructure, riots, looting, and gang warfare. In addition, sky-high taxes and even higher interest rates are inevitable if changes are not made soon.

"This two-class system created by the POWERS THAT BE has drained the lifeblood of the middle class and buried them under insurmountable debt. The PTB claims to be deeply concerned and cite their community action programs. But what are they doing? Doling out cheap food, cheap housing, cheap health care and cheap minimum-wage jobs.

"People want to make their own way. Instead they are being financially bludgeoned into working six hours a night, four nights a week in the dark and damp underground, not for money, mind you, but for a lower interest rate on their debts."

Howie leaned in. *"I know, but what can one man do? From what we're hearing out here, most New Yorkers think you're a crackpot who will only make things worse."*

Noon smiled. *"Well actually, I'm a scientist and a pretty good one..."*

Before Noon could continue, the audience erupted in applause.

Noon waved in acknowledgement. *“Thank you very much, but my point is, who do you believe? A scientist with a proven track record or the very same politicians who created these damnable conditions?”*

Once again the audience applauded wildly.

After the applause died down Howie Wowie said with a smile. *“We’ll be back right after these messages.”*

As Sunjay walked back to the GC headquarters, Madalone’s speech ran over and over in his head. He had begun to sweat and was feeling light-headed.

“That is the kind of guy we need,” Sunjay mumbled as he turned the corner on 8th Street. “With that guy in charge, scum like the Nomads wouldn’t be walking around. Murdering bastards, two kids are dead and not a damn thing will be done because their parents have no money.”

Sunjay took a deep breath. His stomach hitched and a wave of nausea ran through him.

They were just kids, playing cops and robbers, he said to himself, *“Remmy for heaven’s sake cried, no, not cried, blubbered when he got his GC brand. Paulie wasn’t much better. Just two boys from broken homes wanting to prove they had value.*

Wanting to prove they were good kids, trying to do the right thing. And now they're dead."

Sunjay felt the first tear run down his cheek.

Dead because the Colonel never told...

Sunjay stopped.

*They're not dead because of the Colonel.
They're dead because I fucked up.*

He took another deep breath as the night air tightened around him. A car raced past and sent a pothole full of water into the air narrowly missing him. He resumed walking.

Key-J was right. The Colonel never told us to take on the Nomads, or any predator. That's why we got the video communicators. Call in, hit the record button, state the emergency and make the assailant aware you are videoing and transmitting. That's what the Colonel trained us to do. The martial arts were a last resort.

Sunjay recalled that moment on the subway platform.

"*What if I give you this instead?*" he had said just before breaking the Nomad's nose and kicking his chest.

And then...

"*Why didn't you just give them the fucking cash drivers?*" Remmy yelled before he took off down the tracks, running for his very life.

Sunjay's tears were free falling now. His face and neck felt feverishly hot but the cold night air

was sending shivers through him. A police siren wailed in the distance.

Why didn't I give them the cash drivers? I think combined we had about twenty-two dollars. The Nomads probably would have laughed, maybe even given them back.

As the tears continued to fall, the pain in his back and shoulder grew steadily worse. The Colonel warned him taking a man's life would have dire repercussions, both mental and physical. "If possible, avoid it at all costs."

"Serves me right!" Sunjay groaned as sweat poured from him. He was momentarily startled when lightning flickered in the sky.

As the light drizzle increased to a steady rain, his legs began to feel as if he was walking through wet cement. His wet arms hung limp from his shoulders and seemed to weigh several thousand pounds. His back felt like there was a giant foot pressing down; his head was swimming.

There came a crackle of electricity. Thunder exploded like a cannon blast.

"It's my fault!" Sunjay wailed as he held his hands to the sky, staggered a few steps then collapsed into a grouping of assorted garbage bags and cardboard boxes.

Rats scattered from beneath as he hit the ground.

A figure standing in a darkened doorway had seen the entire event. Several moments later, after

making sure the alley was empty and that no one was watching; the figure approached.

“His name is Madalone, and he’s as crazy as a Nomad on Krolla,” the I-Man said with a grin as he sat at the bar in Noon’s office and swirled the cognac. He took a sip and continued. “Sociopathic, clever as Satan, and extremely driven. According to the Internet tags Ignatius put on him, he has read nearly every piece of literature ever written about you. He views you as a savior. One who will right the wrongs and crush the enemy with your terrible swift sword.”

“Terrible swift sword?”

The Invisible Man leaned against the bar and chuckled. “Sorry, just having a ‘Glory, Glory, hallelujah’ moment there. Anyway, I checked his medical files. Unfortunately, his condition is not due to disease, but to brain damage suffered in a car crash ten years ago.”

That comment immediately grabbed Noon’s attention. “Irreparable?”

“Sadly, yes,” the I-Man replied, “which is a damn shame, because before the accident this guy was going places. His father is Phillip Madalone, a former Navy SEAL instructor, twice decorated for valor. As for Madalone himself, he was a top-notch

athlete and had perfect scores on his college prep exams. In fact, all the Ivy League schools were scrambling to make a deal with him when his car skidded and slammed into a wall. The details are in that packet on the table.”

The I-man took another sip, put down the snifter and ran his hand across his lips. “I ran the medical information past Solace and she says that for a period of time he will be in a sort of manic phase. He will be outstanding, absolutely remarkable, then well, when that period ends, he will deteriorate into more of a problem than an asset. As for calculating the time frame, she prefers to leave that to you. Also, there is...” he suddenly stopped. “Damn it! There it goes again,” the I-Man muttered as he reached into his pocket and pulled out a small vial of Actierial fluid.

He was referring to the whirring sound coming from his electronic eyes and the magnetic sockets that held them. Several times a day he had to administer a few drops to keep the mechanism quiet.

He leaned his head back and squeezed a few drops onto each electronic orb. He then pressed his hands to the sides of his temples and the electronic eyes began spinning to equally distribute the fluid.

“Every time this happens,” he said as his eyes slowed then reset, “I think of the Tin Man in *The Wizard of Oz* video. Where he says in a squeaky voice, ‘Oil can, oil can!’”

Noon smiled, which was a rarity in itself.

Amid the battery of offices that made up Nash Financials, Keogh took Nash's arm and leaned in as they arrived at the conference room. "Are you sure the room is clean?"

Garland Nash nodded as he opened the door and escorted Keogh and several others inside. "We have this room electronically scanned once a week and to make sure, I had it done again this morning. Totally and completely secure."

Euphrates Pilsner, August Moon, Ramses Morganthau, Stephen Nicoletti, Roy VonHarris and other charter members of the POWERS THAT BE gathered around the conference table and took their seats. They had been summoned by Keogh to attend this emergency meeting.

Once settled in, Jefferies served coffee and gave each member a paper-thin video screen. After he left, Keogh got down to business.

"Once again we are gathered to address the issue of Noon's campaign," he said, gesturing to accent his disgust and irritation. "What is it going to take to stop this guy? Following his appearance on that ridiculous Howie Wowie show the other night, Noon's poll numbers jumped another three points!"

Nash chimed in. "Well, Wowie's Midnight Show is topical and, and since Noon is the latest..."

Keogh spun toward him. "Shut up, Nash!" he snapped. "It's precisely that kind of 'don't worry, it

will take care of itself' attitude that has forced us to revisit this problem."

Keogh took a breath, pulled at his sleeves and turned back to the membership. "Now, I have been advised by..." he took a moment to swallow, "Mr. Unknown."

A noticeable hush fell over the room. If anyone wasn't paying attention before, they were certainly paying strict attention now

"Yeeesss, that's right. Mr. Unknown," he growled, "and he says that should Noon win, the snowball effect would cripple our business plans and seriously affect our future profits here in New York and perhaps throughout the country. Maybe even the world. Ladies and gentlemen," he said with a determined glare, "when the chief executive of our organization's Northern Hemisphere operations rings in to voice his displeasure, we'd better take action...Now!" he roared, slamming his fist on the desk.

"So, this is how we are going to proceed. With capital being the lifeblood of any venture, our first objective must be to cut off Noon's income. I want it done. And I want it done yesterday! And I want the consequences to be permanent and far-reaching. I want him and his associates not only ruined," he said rising to his feet and slapping both hands on the table, "I want them crushed! I want to send a message to any and all that harbor thoughts of challenging our present political system, the

outcome will be their complete and total annihilation. Is that understood?"

All the men and women at the table nodded.

"Good," Keogh said. "Now, Ramses, get a hold of your contact in the Treasury and..."

Hours later, Sunjay awoke to find himself in a dimly lit apartment. He was covered in old blankets and worn out comforters. His Starfighter jacket was hanging on a piece of rope strung just above an old solar heater. Wooden boards replaced the windows and candles were scattered throughout. The place did not look familiar and he wondered how he got there. As he took his next breath, his lungs filled with something that smelled like ammonia.

His eyes burned and he struggled to get up. He coughed several times as the adrenalin kicked in. He staggered to his feet, and went into a defensive posture.

A dark-haired girl kneeling about a foot back from where his head had been, held up her hands. “Easy. Take it easy,” she said motioning to him. “You’re in no danger. I brought you inside because I was afraid you’d be set upon by the rats, lying like that amid the trash and rain.”

Sunjay slowly lowered his hands and studied her in the faint light. She appeared quite young, somewhere in her mid-teens. “Who are you and,” he asked looking around, “where are we?”

The girl stood. She was tall, wearing thick boots and a heavy coat. She had dark eyes and black hair that flowed gently over her shoulders and down her back. She was pretty, and appeared to be part Chinese and part Asian Indian. Sunjay was curious why a girl so attractive was living alone and in such squalor.

“My name is Bali,” she said, “and we are in the building overlooking the alley where you collapsed. How are you feeling?”

Sunjay took a moment. “I feel okay, I guess. I must have passed out.” He looked around a second time. “How did I get here?”

Bali motioned to the front door. “I dragged you up the two flights of stairs. Which, believe me, was quite the task,” she said with a pleasant smile.

Sunjay looked away, still slightly disoriented. He took several deep breaths to clear his head.

“And you are?” Bali asked.

Startled, he turned back to her. “Oh, uh... Sunjay.”

Bali clasped her hands and nodded demurely.

Sunjay nodded back. His strength was beginning to return and although his back ached, he could live with it. The physical or psychosomatic illness he had suffered earlier had apparently run its course. His eyes still burned, however.

He covered his nose and mouth. “What *is* that awful smell?”

Bali waved her hands to dispel it. “I concocted some smelling salts from chemicals under the sink. You’ve been here several hours. When I brought you in you were soaking wet, had a fever and were shivering. Once I got you out of your jacket, I covered you with blankets and let you sleep. But when I couldn’t wake you a few minutes ago I was afraid you might have slipped into a coma so,” she pointed to the smoldering tin can on the floor. “Here, let me get rid of this so the smell doesn’t linger.” She picked up the smoking tuna can, brought it into the kitchen and poured its chemical contents down the drain.

Sunjay noticed a crumpled green sleeping bag in the corner. As he approached to give it a closer look, he asked. “Is this where you live?”

She took a pitcher of water and cleaned out the remaining chemicals. “For now,” she replied, “going to try to move further south. It’s too cold in New York.”

“How old are you?”

“I’m sixteen,” she replied as she re-entered the room, drying her hands with a towel.

She motioned to him. “And you?”

“Seventeen,” Sunjay replied as he again surveyed the small studio apartment. “It seems dangerous to live here alone, especially with Nomads running around.”

Bali walked over to the apartment’s only chair and sat down. Like the comforters, the stuffing had

broken free in several places but there was still enough to provide comfort. “Nomads don’t bother with me. They know I have no money or drugs and they have no interest in sex.”

Sunjay wandered over to the window, peeked out through a slit between the boards then walked back. “Thanks for bringing me inside,” he said. “It’s raining pretty hard. You probably saved my life.”

“These are difficult times,” she replied, slipping her feet beneath her. “If we are to survive we need to take care of one another.”

“Where are your parents, you know, your people, relatives?”

Bali put her hand to her mouth and lowered her head. “They have...moved on.”

Sunjay sat down on his heels beside the chair. “You mean they passed away?”

The moment the words left his lips he could see in the soft candlelight she was uncomfortable talking about it. “No,” she replied. “Not dead. Not literally, but very much so in the figurative sense. I don’t care to discuss it.”

Sunjay nodded. “All right then, we won’t. But I can’t help but notice you have a somewhat unusual way of speaking, and I’m just curious where you’re from,” He smiled hoping to convince her his interest was mere curiosity.

“When I came to this country, I moved around a lot. I taught myself how to read English from

various textbooks, and to speak it by watching old films. Perhaps that is the reason.”

Having studied body language during GC training, he could tell she was hiding something but decided it made little difference. She saved his life, and for that alone, she deserved the benefit of the doubt.

The conversation moved on and they discovered they had much in common. The hours passed quickly and both were surprised to find the candles had gone out and the room was being lit by the sun shining through the wire-encased glass transom over the boarded fire escape window.

Bali tilted her head. “Hear that?” She got out of the chair and walked over to the window. She pushed a loose board aside. “It stopped raining and the sun is up. Come with me to the roof. Sometimes I think the morning sun is the only beautiful thing left in the world.”

The door to the roof had no lock or knob, so Bali and Sunjay had no problem gaining entrance. They walked to the building’s worn and rusted climate control box and after wiping it dry, sat down.

As the bright rays of the morning sun lit the skies, Sunjay stuffed his hands in the pockets of his now dry New York Starfighters coat and noticed the vapor as he breathed. Bali stared motionless and let the rays wash over her.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” she asked as she opened her coat and leaned back. Her face was illuminated and her long hair fluttered in the morning breeze.

“Yeah, it is,” Sunjay replied as he scanned the horizon.

Bali reached over, picked up some gravel laying near the climate control box and began tossing pebbles at the partially broken glass of the skylight. “I sometimes think it’s pointless for such beauty to shine over such a cold and ugly city. What is there worth seeing? The rats scurrying amid the garbage? The Nomads staggering, vomiting and screaming at their hallucinations? Or at the disgustingly wealthy businessmen traveling from penthouses to plush offices with police escorts?”

“That’s all going to change,” Sunjay replied as he too tossed a piece of gravel at the broken glass.

“You think so?” Bali said, turning. There was a look of surprise and hope on her face.

“I’m sure of it,” he said gazing into her soft brown eyes. “Pretty soon, Bali. Pretty damn soon.”

She dropped her hands into her lap. “How do you know this?”

Sunjay sighed and opened his coat. “I don’t. I feel it. Here,” he said taking her hand and placing it against his chest.

She smiled as she felt the warmth of his body and the rhythm of his heart. As he released her hand, she gently squeezed his before letting go.

He gazed at her, studied her soft features as one would a work of art. “Not so long ago I lived a totally different life,” he said wistfully. “I was a regular guy, went to school, had friends, hung out.” He paused and momentarily shook his head as if he was having difficulty believing it. “But the criminal shit my parents were doing forced me to take off on my own. Well, not really alone. I got the GC at my back which is great but,” he pressed his lips together and looked down. “I feel kind of like I stepped from one world into another. And this new life is the one I was meant to live. You might think this is nuts,” he said looking up, “but I feel I have been singled out. As if the gods have written a part for me in this new world and I have no choice but to play it.”

Bali placed a comforting hand on his arm. “I only hope you don’t think me mad for believing you. Because from the moment I looked into your eyes, I saw something special.” Her gaze saddened momentarily. “And I fear you are right. I think the gods *have* singled you out.”

Sunjay stared at her for a brief moment then...
He kissed her.

He couldn’t help it. Her dark eyes called to him. Her lips begged to have his pressed against hers. The curve of her hips, the contours of her breasts, even though partially covered by the open coat, made it impossible for him to concentrate on anything else. He wanted her. He needed her. And at that moment there was nothing in his world but

her. She opened her mouth and their tongues entwined. He ran his hand through her hair as waves of passion washed over him. He slid his other hand up her blouse and cupped her breast.

Startled, she broke off the kiss and jerked back. “I...I...” she sputtered.

Shaking, he dropped his hands. “I’m sorry, I’m... I’m sorry. ...”

She looked into his eyes and took his hand in hers. “Don’t be,” she said raising it to her lips and gently kissing it. She smiled, then slowly slid it up under her blouse and placed it on her bare breast. “I was startled. Your hand was cold, that’s all. I...I want you to touch me,” she said breathing heavily. She wrapped her arms around him, pulled him down upon the air conditioning unit and resumed kissing him.

He felt his erection swelling as he ran his hand over her supple breasts. She began to moan and pressed her chest forward against his hand. She breathed heavily as she reached down, grasped his erection and began massaging it. She gasped. “I want to be naked. I want to feel your eyes upon me, your hands touching me. I want to feel your tongue in my mouth, on my breasts. I want to feel you inside me. I want to taste you.”

She sat up. “Come, let us go downstairs.”

Together they hurried to the apartment below.

Within one month of Madalone's stirring speech the original Bellmen organization existed in name only. With better than half the membership and the central committee siding with the new leader, the remaining members, who for the most part believed in the ideology, but weren't willing to fight for it, broke off into different political factions that were mostly get-togethers for malcontents and ideologues.

As for Madalone, he came far in a short period of time. He moved out of his parents' basement and into an apartment in the Bellmen Mansion in Manhattan, bequeathed, along with Isaac Bell's fortune, to his followers.

Now solely in charge, Madalone was expected to reenergize and reestablish the Bellmen as a powerful activist group, one with the power and ability to influence political issues and affect change.

But with a month having passed and with nothing of substance having been accomplished, a growing number of Bellmen were having second thoughts.

Madalone's occasional bizarre behavior and unusual choice of attire irritated the hardcore members. And his tendency to gather his long red hair into a topknot infuriated others. Some had gone so far as to demand a recall vote. And to make matters worse, although he had promised a surge of new recruits, membership continued to drop.

Madalone could feel the anger of his detractors and the disappointment of his supporters as he walked the halls. He put in long hours, struggled to reignite the passion and determination of the Bellmen. He outlined new plans to draw attention to their cause, put together pamphlets outlining their political agenda, worked tirelessly to garner support from celebrities and sports players.

None of which had any real or palatable success.

Then fate stepped in.

One afternoon, while alone in his apartment staring at the street below, his new earpiece chimed with a specific series of notes indicating the incoming transmission was on a secure line. Intrigued, he tapped the earpiece and the caller said: "There are those whose goals mirror yours."

The person did not identify himself but suggested it might be to their mutual advantage to meet. Perhaps even discuss the possibility of an alliance. Cautious yet intrigued, Madalone agreed to a face to face at a parking garage in Midtown, one he was familiar with. Both parties agreed to come alone.

Madalone was aware it could be a trap, but with insurrection and malaise eating away at the Bellmen, bold and definitive action was needed. So if there were people whose goals mirrored his, he was going to meet them, danger be damned.

“Where are you? I’m uncomfortable talking to someone I cannot see,” Madalone said as he pressed his hand on the hood of a car at the far end of the parking garage. The area was dimly lit and had that distinctive smell plastic tires gave off when they began to wear out.

“The fact that you cannot see me is unimportant,” came the reply. “Now, as to why I’m here. We are aware of your goals and would like to assist you in attaining them.”

The voice seemed to be coming from all around, making it difficult to pinpoint. Madalone began pacing between the cars, trying to zero in. “Okay, but why?” he asked as he turned to the darkness and placed his hands on his hips.

“To accomplish what you want will require money, weaponry, a secure communications network and a place to train and prepare. We can provide these things.”

Madalone folded his arms and nodded. “This is true and I like what I’m hearing, but you haven’t told me *why* you want to help.”

“On the hood of the car to your left is an envelope,” the voice said. “Inside is the schematic

of the Bellmen mansion. In the basement, where indicated, you and your men are to dig a hole twenty feet deep. But be careful! At that depth you will reach the ceiling of an access tunnel leading to a underground facility, a cave actually, where a cache of guns and ammunition is being kept.”

Madalone shot a look to his left and sure enough, there was an envelope there. It hadn’t been there a few seconds ago.

He picked it up and found a gun underneath. He checked, it was loaded. “Just a warning my friend,” Madalone said placing the gun in his waistband. “If this is a trick, you will not leave this garage alive.”

When no comment was made, Madalone opened the blueprints.

The voice continued. “It is about half the size of a football field, completely soundproof and there are no records of its existence. There are three outside entrances, but they are nearly impossible to find unless you know where to look.”

“Impressive,” Madalone said rifling through the papers. He folded and stuffed them into his coat’s inside pocket. “Still, I would prefer to know who I am dealing with. The PTB would very much want us out of the picture if they knew what we were planning.”

“Yes,” the voice replied, “that is quite true. However, mathematically you have only a small window of opportunity to make an impression on your devoted followers before they lose faith.

Providing weaponry and a training facility would greatly improve your standing among them, don't you think?"

Damn right it would! Madalone thought to himself.

"Very well," Madalone replied. "But I have one last..."

"This meeting is concluded," the voice said.

Still cautious and unwilling to endanger his comrades, Madalone, along with the five members of the central committee and five volunteers he felt he could trust, gathered the necessary equipment and began digging in the basement where the blueprints indicated. Several hours later, covered in sweat and mud, and after driving a six-foot pipe into the bottom of the sixteen-foot deep hole, they broke through the ceiling of the access tunnel.

When the pipe was pulled up and Madalone could peer down into the dimly lit tunnel, he told his men he was going down alone. If he didn't signal an all clear within five minutes, they were to abandon the mansion and lay low until it was safe to return.

Madalone dug until the hole was large enough, then with only a single strap harness to control his fall, he jumped.

He touched down on a bed of soft dirt. To his left, several yards away was an old Airstream silver trailer with two flat tires. To his right, a tunnel with

a single light attached to the ceiling, beneath, a silhouette of a man.

Madalone pulled the gun from his waistband.

The man approached. "Welcome, Madalone," the Colonel said.

Madalone signaled the all clear, and within twenty minutes all the members of the Bellmen in the mansion at the time joined them. Once they were settled in, the Colonel explained his plans to transform the Bellmen into a specialized guerilla attack unit.

The announcement was everything Madalone wanted and more.

Even the malcontents would have to admit he had come through.

Like Washington at Trenton, he had been tested and emerged victorious. Madalone would never doubt his ability again.

Following their first meeting, Sunjay went to Bali's apartment whenever possible. When together, they explored each other's bodies with the passion and desire reserved for only those young souls who had fallen in love for the first time. One night, after making love to celebrate their first month together, they rested in each other's arms.

Sunjay sat up and leaned over her. "Before I met you Bali, it was like going through life missing an arm or a leg. But now that you're here, I feel complete."

Bali reached up and ran her hand through his sweat-drenched hair. "I feel the same way, as if I were a ghost who suddenly joined the living."

They kissed and fell back into each other's arms. Within minutes they were asleep.

A few hours later, Sunjay was awakened by the sound of somebody speaking. He sat up, looked around, listened... nothing. He eyed the small ticking alarm clock and its iridescent dial, then the thin beam of light seeping in from the outside streetlamp. He got up and peeked outside to the streets below.

He heard the voice again. It was behind him. He spun around.

Bali.

She was talking in her sleep.

He sighed and walked back to the sleeping bag. As he was about to slip in beside her, she began to moan. Softly at first, then her voice became panicky, frightened. “Please, please, McGinty. Don’t make me fall away!”

Moments later, she stopped and resumed sleeping normally. Sunjay, seeing that she was all right, passed it off as a bad dream. But it wasn’t just a bad dream. It was a nightmare, one that would soon become reality.

After the Bellmen completed one full month of rigorous and specialized training, the Colonel decided to test their skills in a real life situation. Upon hearing the announcement, the silent, but by no means absent, contingent of malcontents saw this as the perfect opportunity to subject Madalone to a test of their own.

As the exercise was being put together, Madalone’s keen senses and instincts warned him of possible trouble. But instead of trying to piece together who was behind it and what form it would take, he decided to try and force the situation out into the open.

Part of this is my own fault, he said to himself as he watched several Bellmen pull away from their unit after the drill and gather in tight little clandestine groups. *Been so busy working I neglected to open up to my men, failed to give them the opportunity to know me.*

Tomorrow, he decided, as his face grew hard, I will introduce myself. And henceforth they shall know Madalone.

On the night before the wilderness exercise, as the Bellmen lay in bunks that had been set up in the newly discovered tunnel, Madalone purposefully began whistling, “I’m a Little Teapot” while painting his fingernails with red nail polish. When his comrades glared at him, he replied nonchalantly, “Just preparing my battle claws.” When finished, he took a hairbrush and ran it through his long red locks while counting the strokes aloud. When he was met with more copious stares, he shrugged and said, “Just because we’re going into battle tomorrow doesn’t mean one shouldn’t be properly coiffed.”

As he laid down to sleep he could feel their rage radiating like steam off a hot engine.

He smiled.

Early the following morning, long before sunrise, the Colonel woke Madalone and told him to pick thirty-five Bellmen he felt could successfully complete a simulated search-and- capture mission.

Madalone, without hesitation, chose nearly every member of the contingent plotting against him.

Hours later, after they arrived in the Catskills, left the bus and hiked to the chosen location, the Colonel gathered the men and instructed them on what to expect.

“Gentlemen,” he began, his hands clasped behind him, steam coming from his mouth as he paced in the morning air, “we’re going to engage in a military exercise known as predator and prey. Here’s how it works. I’ll need a volunteer to go into the woods there,” he said, pointing to the nearby dense forest. “Find a place to hide, then attempt to ambush and capture the man I send in to bring you out. As the prey, you will not be allowed to bring any supplies or weapons. Your pursuer, the predator, however will be carrying a full survival pack and adequate clothing giving him a distinct advantage. Now, once the prey is captured, we will discuss how it occurred and how it can be prevented in the future. Same goes if the prey wins. Overall, it’s a learning experience we can all gain something from.”

The Colonel had barely finished when Madalone took center stage and announced he would be the prey in order to evaluate the tracking skills of his troops.

The response was a sea of icy stares and predatory grins.

So Madalone, without any supplies and wearing only a T-shirt and jeans walked across the field and entered the forest.

Fifteen minutes later the first predator was sent after him.

As the thirty-four Bellmen sat down around the campfire to await the outcome, a mere ten minutes later the first one in came stumbling out. His hands were bound behind his back with vines, a balled up wad of cloth was jammed in his mouth and his pants were pulled down to his ankles. There were strips of bark tied around his waist making it impossible for him to bend over and pull up his pants.

“The fucker didn’t go more than twenty feet in!” the first pursuer said as his hands were untied, the wad removed and the bark cut loose. “Just as I began to look around, he drops out of nowhere, yanks my jacket down over my arms and spins me around until I’m so dizzy I fall over, then ties me up. Fucker’s a lunatic!” The man drew a shaky breath. “Then get this—and I’m only telling you so you know what you’re dealing with. After he tied me up, he crouched down, patted my head and said. ‘Let me hear you purr, my little kitten. Purr for Madalone.’

“At first I thought he was fucking kidding but he picks up this tent spike and jams it against my throat. Well, the thing must have been laying out

there in the woods for years but he had sharpened an edge to it. Then he says, all crazy like. ‘Perhaps you didn’t hear me, I said purr my little kitten. Purr for Madalone!’

“Well, I’m sure the fucker’s going to slit my throat so I do as he says.”

One of the men explodes with laughter. Several others follow. When the laughing subsides, the one who laughed first asked, “So let me get this straight. You’re telling us you actually purred for him. Purred like a little pussy?”

“You weren’t there, fucko!” the man shouted back. “That prick won’t hesitate to kill you. Believe me, he’s crazy!”

“Now, now, calm down,” his tormentor replied. “You’ve had a rough day. Now just lie back, relax, catch your breath and slip in a fresh tampon while I go bring that crazy fuck back by his balls.”

The man set out with applause and considerable whoopla. Fifteen minutes later he stumbled out of the forest with a broken rib and collapsed lung.

He was rushed to the nearest hospital.

Now viewing Madalone’s capture as a personal challenge and a test of manhood, nearly all volunteered to be the next one in. And as the sun climbed in the sky, one by one each man was sent in, only to come staggering back, defeated and humiliated. And as the day dragged on, what began as a teaching exercise turned into a dangerous

confrontation as Madalone became increasingly violent.

Men far larger, faster and more experienced were beaten bloody and literally had to crawl back to the campfire. Even when the Colonel's most experienced trackers were sent in, they found they were completely unprepared to deal with Madalone's uncanny ability to come up from behind unnoticed.

"You can't sense what doesn't have a soul," one of them said in frustration.

By mid afternoon, not only had Madalone not been captured, on the chest of his last victim he painted these words in blood, "Send more meat!"

As the day came to a close, Madalone's stock had risen considerably. True, he was a little bizarre, a bit flaky perhaps, maybe even flat out nuts, but he was fearless, relentless and had proven himself to be the most dangerous member of them all.

And in wartime, that's all that mattered.

Inside the main conference room at Noon for Governor campaign headquarters, the top members of the Inner Circle gathered for a special meeting chaired by the Invisible Man. At one end of a large oval table was a holographic generator with twelve smaller ones attached to the arms of each chair for video conferencing. The blinds were closed, the maroon curtains drawn, and a sound-dampening scrambler engaged to prevent eavesdropping.

“Ladies, gentlemen,” the I-Man began as he stood, placed his hands in the pockets of his long gray coat and addressed those seated. “As we move forward and our campaign takes on a larger profile, it will be necessary to protect our identities, especially since the PTB has considerable influence over the police and the courts. This way, when they eventually find a way to tap into our transmissions, no actual names will be revealed.

“So starting today, when you activate your earpiece, all you need say is the person’s code name. For example, just say, ‘I-Man’ and you will immediately connect to me on a secure channel.”

He walked over to the person seated nearest him.

“And the person responsible is this gentleman here,” he said, laying his hands on Ignatius Kennedy Tooles shoulders. Ignatius, wearing his usual black leather sport jacket, gave a self-conscious grin and a small wave of his hand. The I-Man patted his shoulder, then continued. “His contact name is the Black Knight and he will be the go-to guy for any issues regarding technology or communications.

“Now this gentleman here,” the I-Man said, walking over to the next chair and placing his hands on Vladimir Zarnekov’s shoulders, “is Pathfinder. Contact him when it becomes necessary to elude pursuers or simply get off the streets. He can direct you to places even the most sophisticated tracking devices cannot detect.”

The I-Man stepped to the next person and said. “You all know the Colonel, and he will be referred to as such in all communications. If you find yourself in need of back-up or require the services of the GC, he’s your man.”

“Now this woman...” the I-Man said as he walked over and placed his hands on the shoulders of a female no one had seen before. She was young, fit and athletic with blond hair barely touching her shoulders. She had freckles across her nose, a small mouth framed by dimples and the long tapered fingers of an artist. Her bright green eyes were outlined by long dark lashes.

“...is Dandelion. Technically, she is a molecular physicist and geneticist. Like Dr. Noon, she has

dedicated her extensive abilities to the cause at hand. I am not at liberty to reveal what other talents Dandelion brings to the fore but suffice it to say, like the rest of you, she will play a significant part in our future endeavors.”

The I-Man smiled, patted Dandelion, and continued to the next man at the table.

“Because Howard Maxwell here is our campaign’s official legal counselor and advisor, his identity is already known to the PTB. However, for the sake of legal anonymity and to keep him from having to testify, you contact him using the codename Sentinel should you be arrested and taken in for questioning. Say nothing until you speak with him.”

The I-Man moved to the next chair.

“Although I am sure each of you know Oloki Sullivan, I would like to take this opportunity to point out how valuable this gentleman is to our organization. Because he’s been on the news and has been the main speaker at our rallies, there is no need for a code name but I like to think of him as our Media Master. The man who has kept the PTB owned media from destroying the Doctor’s campaign. He’s led grass-root rallies for Noon’s election in auditoriums, college campuses and legion halls. Over the last two weeks, we’ve had to turn people away as all the seats had been taken. Keep up the good work, Oloki,” the I-Man said as he returned to his seat.

Those in the room applauded.

“Those of you who have not been assigned code names,” the I-Man gestured to those who had not been singled out, “please understand that is not because you are less important, but because your duties are in-house and not field related. If the PTB manages to crack our code, I don’t want you dragged into situations that could very likely turn violent.”

The I-Man pressed his hands on the table. “Our ranks are growing with each passing day. There are many, many others with us, people whose identities are so secret only the Doctor knows their whereabouts and objectives. However, when the time comes, I have been assured all factions will be united.

“Finally, the election is a mere four months away. Our poll numbers are steadily climbing as our message reaches the voting public. On a level playing field, we would have a considerable chance of winning.”

The I-Man smiled and looked at each of the members of Noon’s Inner Circle. “Unfortunately, it is virtually impossible to have a level playing field when dealing with the PTB. As we speak they are preparing to cut off the doctor’s income and freeze his assets. In addition, the legislature is pushing through a bill requiring each voter to take a drug test before entering the voting booth. And if that isn’t enough, the new voting booths are completely

digital and their accuracy relies totally on the software manufactured by a corporation owned by the POWERS THAT BE.

“So as you can see, winning fair and square is nearly impossible if not completely out of the question.”

“Wait a second,” Howard Maxwell said startled by this revelation. “If there is no chance of winning, why on earth are we risking our careers and possibly our very lives?”

“You misunderstand me,” the I-Man replied, annoyed by the interruption. “I said winning fair and square was nearly impossible. But this is no ordinary election. This is a no-holds-barred struggle for power, for dominance. And when this is all over and the smoke clears, only one will exist. Us or the PTB!”

Late one afternoon while Madalone was walking through the open alleyway to the back of the Bellmen Mansion, a man came up behind him.

“Madalone,” the man said in a low voice, “don’t turn around.”

Ignoring the order, Madalone turned, eyed the man defiantly and declared. “I don’t know who you are, sir, but know this! I have been chosen from on high. So if you have come to kill me, know now that you shall fail!” With that, Madalone placed his fists on his hips, pulled himself to his full height, and stuck out his chest and chin.

“Uh, I... Uh, I don’t want to kill you,” the man said, not knowing what to make of Madalone’s behavior. “In fact, I want to help. I know things.”

Madalone stepped back, folded his arms, looked the man over and scoffed. “So you know things, do you? Well then, what do you know?”

The man looked from side to side to see if there was anyone watching. “Well, for one, you were wrong about the POWERS THAT BE. They do have listening devices planted at your rallies. I know because I’m the one who collects the recordings. But, you were right in saying they don’t care,

because no one's ever asked to hear them. But I have and that is why I have come to you.”

Madalone gave him another once over, this time a little more impressed. “If you truly are an employee of the POWERS THAT BE, then by talking to me you are risking your livelihood and well-being. So I must ask, why?”

The man looked around again. “Because I am privy to information known only to the very top members, and I am appalled, no, make that horrified, at the things they have done and are planning to do. They are ruthless, sir. I have seen them destroy people’s lives by forwarding doctored photos and videos to Homeland Protection. Watched them hack into people’s computers and upload restricted and illegal information. They have murdered people just so they can buy out adversarial corporations. Simply put, I cannot live another day without doing something to stop them!”

Madalone clasped his hands behind his back and began to pace. “Admirable. But what do you want from me?”

“I need to contact Dr. Noon,” the man replied, “but I can’t go anywhere near his campaign headquarters because it is under 24-hour satellite surveillance and is continuously scanned by local voice, face and motion recognition monitors. Everywhere he goes, the Doctor is watched and everyone he comes in contact with is investigated. The Bellmen, however, have written graffiti in favor

of his candidacy all over town. They hold open rallies supporting him. So, if you or one of your people was observed speaking with the Doctor, it would not raise suspicion.”

The mention of Dr. Noon triggered an immediate response from Madalone. He reached out and pulled the man close. “Is Noon in danger? Tell me. I must know!”

The informer, still clearly nervous, removed Madalone’s hand and edged back into the shadows. “I believe so,” he said. “So you see the importance of informing the Doctor.”

“I do indeed!” Madalone replied, now viewing the man in a new light.

“There is another thing,” the man continued, removing a plastic bag from inside his coat. “I have brought something that might assist you and your people in their efforts.” He opened the bag, showed what appeared to be a camouflage jumpsuit to Madalone and after explaining its purpose said, “Although I am not technically a PTB member, I have ‘TOPCARD’ access, which allows me to view proprietary information as well as issue directives to many of the city’s top firms and utilities. This way the higher-ups have full deniability should something go wrong.”

Now more relaxed, he rolled his hands excitedly as he spoke.

“Since I have no intention of going to jail in their stead, I have learned to, shall we say, ‘accomplish things’ without leaving a trail.”

“Your courage and expertise is to be lauded,” Madalone said.

The man shrugged and pulled at his turtleneck collar. “I just want these people stopped.”

Madalone thrust out his hand. “I assure you they will be. Now, what is your name sir?”

The man hesitated. “I...I don’t think...”

Madalone stepped in. “I refuse to deal with cowards. Either be counted, or be gone.”

The man took another deep breath and shook Madalone’s hand. “My name is Timothy Jefferies. I am the executive administrative assistant to Garland Nash of Nash Financials.”

“We have gained an ally, my friends,” Madalone announced as he entered the committee conference room in the great hall of the Bellmen Mansion. He placed his hands on the table and addressed the five central members. “A very important ally,” he added. “One who will provide inside information on the enemy.”

“For example?” Signu asked.

“Well, for one,” Madalone replied, pointing to various parts of the ceiling. “In all future membership meetings we’ll know in advance if we can discuss real business or rehash old Bellmen business because...”

Signu smiled and nodded. “Because certain people will be listening?”

“Exactly! Second, a very important piece of equipment has, shall we say, ‘fallen off a truck’ and into our hands. Permit me to demonstrate.”

Madalone peeled off his coat to reveal the camouflage jumpsuit. As he moved, they saw the suit had a bit of a reflective quality.

“Milton,” Madalone said, “take my picture.”

The committee member tapped his earpiece and a small clear rectangle slid out and dropped in front of the man’s right eye. He tapped the piece a second time and pulled a video screen from his pocket.

“Show us the picture,” Madalone said.

“Oh, hell,” Milton said checking the view screen. “It didn’t come out, just random pixels and the top part of your head.”

“That’s because this is a stealth suit,” Madalone said. “No pictures, no videos. The government constructed these for covert operations. But to prevent them from being stolen and used by rebels such as ourselves, they inserted a decryption code into the head mask which, when activated, cancels the suit’s ability. So, to get around that, my contact cut up several masks, interchanged the material and sewed them back together so the magnetic re-routers can’t reestablish communications. The result,” Madalone said with a twisted grin, “was not exactly what had been expected.”

Madalone reached into his pants pocket, pulled out a reconfigured head mask and showed it to the committee.

There came a brief chuckling and shaking of heads.

Madalone smiled as well. “Yes, I know. It looks like a scarecrow mask. In fact, they all do. We considered re-coloring them but it cancels out the refraction. So...”

The four men and one woman were obviously unconcerned. “As long as it does the job, I don’t care what it looks like,” Angelicia commented. The others quickly agreed.

Angelicia then asked, “How many do we have?”

“Less than a dozen, but my contact believes he may be able to get more. For now, these will have to do.”

“On to other business,” Madalone said, taking his seat at the head of the table. “I have been given the names and business addresses of several upper echelon PTB members which I’m going to share with you. I want these people followed, I want to know who they consort with and most of all, I want to know where they live. The time has come, my friends,” Madalone said with a menacing scowl, “for the prey to become the predators.”

And we're back. As promised we are going to turn this segment of LateBreaking News over to our resident political analyst, Kathalia Maines-Lungren. Kathalia?

The screen switches.

Well, as I've been predicting all along it appears the candidacy of Dr. Alexander Noon is all but over," Kathalia began. "This morning a court order was filed to freeze the assets of the Doctor while an investigation is made into his financial disclosure forms. Various governmental agencies are said to be interested in reviewing his tax returns and leasing agreements.

Since the Doctor is financing a good portion of his campaign this sudden turn of events will most assuredly force him out of the race.

But speaking of the election, it is official: the Republicans have chosen local favorite James 'Sunny Jim' MacFarland as their gubernatorial candidate. MacFarland served in the State Senate for twelve years...

“Well, the PTB just fired its first salvo. Where do we stand?” the Invisible Man asked as he approached Ignatius at a table in the break room.

Still glowing at having been christened ‘The Black Knight’, Ignatius turned from the TV screen, put down his burrito and grinned. “I established a money-go-round earlier this morning. Noon still has twenty-four hour access to his funds but no one else can get near them.”

“Do we know who’s behind this?” the I-Man asked as he sat down in the chair next to him. Ignatius could see his own reflection in the I-Man’s red-mirrored glasses.

Ignatius nodded as he took a sip of soda. “Yeah, Keogh’s boy, Ramses Morganthau. He called in a favor from the deputy director of the New York Treasury Department. Howard and his legal team have filed to stop the asset freeze but he says the boys inside were told to drag their feet for as long as possible. As for the money, I can keep it spinning indefinitely, but sooner or later Noon is going to have to submit to an audit.”

“Unless the investigation gets called off,” the I-Man said rising from his chair.

Ignatius took a sip from his soda. “That would certainly make our job easier.”

When Madalone was informed that Morganthau's plan needed to be stopped, he told his five best to "saddle up."

They did so without question.

"Tonight will be our first mission, our first battle," Madalone said, addressing them. He was wearing the camouflage jumpsuit along with the scarecrow mask as were the others but to show his command status he also donned a plastic army helmet with five gold-star decals.

"And be warned," he continued as he paced in front of his men. "It might become necessary to take extreme action against innocents to accomplish our goal. So anyone who feels they are not up to the task or is unsure of his ability is asked to step out now. Better to admit you need additional training than to endanger your comrades."

All five stood their ground.

Madalone nodded. "Good. Very good. Now as for our assignment, we will be hidden inside a fuel truck and driven to a five story building on the West Side that has only one tenant. Wearing the refraction uniforms to avoid identification and with the lock combination readers provided by our sympathetic friends, we should have no problem entering the facility and proceeding with our objective. Ready gentlemen?"

"Yes sir!" the five replied in unison.

“What do you mean you can’t do it?” Ramses Morganthau bellowed into his earpiece. “Just find his accounts and cut off his access to them.”

Ramses fumed as he stood in his den in front of the table that held his telecommunicator scrambler and holographic generator. He hated business concerns after hours. Once he had slipped into his pajamas and robe, had his two martini’s and had the selected television programs set to play, business calls were the last thing he wanted to deal with.

“What do you think we’ve been trying to do?” the man bellowed back. “Every time we locate one of his accounts and attempt to block it, that very action activates some sort of electronic reroute to an undisclosed location, then redirects the block toward an unregistered corporate account. And because these accounts are unregistered, we have to first track them, find what company they belong to, then release the block. But when we release the block, it transfers the signal back to Noon’s account telling our computers its job is accomplished and reinitiates our search back to start point. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Morganthau heard his man exhale in frustration before continuing. “Ramses, I’m hesitant to try again until we figure out how Noon’s people are doing this because it’s randomly freezing corporate, non registered accounts which mean non-taxpaying. Therefore, several influential people might become

very upset if their quiet little nest eggs, nest eggs comprised of assets I'm sure will be very difficult to explain, become frozen or start popping up on the IRS unverifiable income programs.”

“Shit!” Morganthau huffed as he pressed the heel of his hand to his forehead. “All right, all right. Listen. I want you to contact your top people, tell them to get up, get their asses in a cab, and fix this damn problem, now!

“I’ve just learned four thousand showed up at a high school in Brooklyn just to hear Oloki Sullivan speak *about* Noon. Four thousand and Noon himself hasn’t made one single public appearance! This has gotten completely out of hand. We just had Maines-Lungren announce on LateBreaking News that Noon’s campaign was over. She’s going to lose her credibility if we don’t make that happen!”

“I understand. I’ll get back to you as soon as it’s....”

The earpiece connection went dead. The red lights on the scrambler began flashing indicating the transmission had been cut off.

He tapped the activation button. Still dead. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the door to his study opening and someone coming in. It was his five-year-old son, Ramses Jr.

“Son,” he said, dropping down to one knee as the boy approached. “You know you’re never supposed to come in here. Daddy’s very busy working.”

“I’m sorry, daddy,” the blond boy said with tears in his eyes. He was wearing red footie pajamas and hugging a teddy bear. “I know I’m not supposed to but the Scarecrow soldiers said if you don’t come into the living room right now they are going to shoot Mommy and ‘Lissa in the head. So please, Daddy, can you come now?” he said as tears began rolling down his face.

He ran into his father’s arms. “Please, Daddy, I don’t want them to shoot Mommy and ‘Lissa.””

As Ramses entered the living room with his son, he saw Madalone—outfitted with refractive combat fatigues, a scarecrow mask and a plastic combat helmet—beckon him with an affectatious come hither motion. He was holding a gun to Patsy Morganthau's head. The scarecrow soldiers stood in line behind him. The boy ran to his sister.

“Ramses!” Madalone said as if greeting an old friend. “How good of you to join us. Your wife Patsy and I were just getting acquainted.” He lowered the gun and moved her to the side. “I’m sure we’re all going to get along splendidly. But first, I think it’s best if the children toddled off to sleepy bye land, don’t you?”

Madalone snapped his fingers and two men tapped the children in the neck with punch tab injectors. They instantly keeled over. They were caught and placed side by side on the couch. Their breathing was normal and steady.

Instinctively, Patsy Morganthau ran toward her kids. She was stopped in mid stride with a flat palm to the nose. There was a crack, and she fell with a thump to the carpeted floor. A trickle of blood from her nostrils and mouth stained the fibers.

As Ramses started toward his wife, a soldier stepped in front of him making it clear that if Ramses took another step, he would suffer the same fate.

He slowly backed up. “What do you want?”

“Listen carefully,” Madalone replied. He stepped forward until he and Morganthau were nearly nose to nose. “You are to contact those responsible for the financial assault on Dr. Noon and make it stop. Permanently!”

“What makes you think I can ...” Ramses began.

Madalone snapped his fingers and Patsy was kicked in the face. She screamed as blood gushed from her nose.

Madalone turned and tapped the side of his index finger to his lips signaling Patsy to stop. He then pantomimed that if she didn’t, she’d be kicked again.

“Now,” Madalone said returning to Ramses. “You’re an intelligent man. So take a moment and assess *this* situation.” He swept his hand around the room. “We managed to enter this very secure building without tripping any alarms, security cameras or motion sensors. We are clearly capable of, and will not hesitate to, use violence against you and your family, as I’m sure your lovely wife will testify.

“And as for you,” Madalone said placing his hands on his hips. “At this very second a hundred

different scenarios are racing through your head. How can you outwit me? How can you keep me from getting what I want? The answer? You can't. Why? Because I know, *know*, you are the person behind this attack on the Doctor. So word to the wise. If you lie or attempt in any way to, as they used to say, ‘pull a fast one,’ I will awaken your son and as you and your wife watch, I will cut off his head.

“Now,” Madalone said, stepping back, “go do as I told you. You will not be given a second chance. Understand?”

“I understand,” Ramses said as a cold sweat covered his face. “I’ll need to make some calls, but the phone is dead.”

“It’s back on. Make your calls.”

As Ramses headed toward the study door he noticed Madalone hadn’t followed. “Aren’t you coming?”

Madalone shrugged. “No need. If you don’t comply, I’ll know. And the consequences will be immediate. Now scamper along. My associates and I don’t have all night.”

Five minutes later, Ramses reentered the living room. His wife was now on the couch unconscious with her two children propped up against her. Thinking her dead he ran over, kneeled, checked her pulse, then those of his children.

“You need not be concerned,” Madalone said. “You wisely did as instructed and so your wife and children are unharmed. We anesthetized her because she appeared to be in a lot of pain.”

“Of course she was!” Morganthau said rising to his feet. “Pain caused by you and your men. You break into my home, drug my children, assault my wife. What kind of people are you?”

“What kind of people are *we*?” Madalone replied, his voice rising in anger. He strolled over until they were once more eye to eye. “Why Ramses, I’m surprised you don’t know.” He shook his head in disappointment. “Why is it, you, and people like you, spend a lifetime creating monsters and yet are always surprised when one turns and attacks?”

Madalone placed his hand on Ramses’ shoulder. “So, take a moment, my dear Dr. Frankenstein, and gaze upon us, for we,” he said motioning to his men, “are your creations. And then look to the skies and bellow to the heavens above, ‘It’s alive! It’s alive!’ because in a few moments,” Madalone said, signaling to one of his lieutenants, “*you* won’t be.”

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Bali laid in the sleeping bag, pulling it tight to keep warm. She watched as Sunjay prepared for another day at GC headquarters. “When will you return?” she asked.

“Probably not for a couple of days. My superiors want me to spend more time training. Word is I’m up for a promotion,” he said zipping his pants and pulling his sweater over his head. As he reached for his Starfighters coat he added; “Look, you know I love you, but we’ve got to start focusing on getting out of here. We can’t live like this. No money, no real home. The Colonel seems to have a pretty good handle on things. Maybe I should ask him what to do.”

Bali sat up. “I’ve noticed the police patrols are more frequent. That means some agency is looking to sell the property. I’ll be able to remain here for another week or so, then someone, probably a housing Marshall will show up and I will be forced to the streets.”

He stared at her. Amazed at how this beautiful young woman with her odd way of speaking had suddenly become the most important thing in his life. All he knew was that he wanted to spend the

rest of his life with her, make her happy and keep her safe. “I love you, Bali,” he finally said. “Always will.”

“Oh, Sunjay!” she exclaimed as she jumped from the sleeping bag and ran naked across the room into his arms. “I feel as you do.” She hugged him tightly and whispered. “I know you must go, but come back. Please, find me. Don’t let me fall away.”

He kissed her and ran his hand over her soft skin. More than anything he wanted to stay and hold her in his arms, make love. But that would benefit neither of them. A new world was coming and he was determined to carve out their place in it.

“What’s keeping Morganthau?” Keogh barked as he slammed his hand on the conference room table at Nash Financials. He looked to the other holographic heads in attendance. There was no response.

Frustrated, he changed the topic. “All right, onto other business. Oloki Sullivan said during a speech last night that if Noon uncovers proof that credit card companies targeted individuals in financial difficulties, intentionally sent them low interest cards hoping they’d use them to stay afloat and when they did, maximized the interest to force them to take jobs in the tunnels, he will have all the

executive team members arrested and thrown in jail.”

Euphrates Pilsner’s holographic head momentarily disappeared when he jumped out of his seat. “He can’t do that! We had it researched. There is nothing illegal about offering certain individuals special credit terms. It is a service we offer due to their consumer history.”

Keogh ignored the protest. “In addition, Sullivan says Noon fully intends to deputize the GC and use them to drive the Nomads, FunBoys and other underground organizations out of the city.”

“Is he out of his mind?!” August Moon thundered. “What about all the police we have on the city payroll? If he replaces them with the GC, we’ll have to pay for security out of our own pockets!”

Again Keogh ignored the comments. “He also intends to open a dialogue with the Gang of Four to get them to invest and buy property in New York to...”

Keogh was interrupted when Morganthau’s holographic generator snapped on.

“Well it’s about time!” Keogh said as Morganthau’s image came into view. “Now, listen to me. I told you to freeze Noon’s assets, didn’t I? Then why did I get a call from Bartleby saying you told him to scrap the project? I don’t know where you get the audacity to shut down one of my

programs but... Ramses, pay attention! I... want... that..."

Keogh's tirade slowed, then stopped when the others turned from the holograph and looked back at him.

He studied Morganthau's image. Something was wrong.

For one, Morganthau's eyes were closed, and his face was immobile and lifeless as a marble bust. Keogh moved in for a closer look

"Oooooooooo! Oooooooooo!" came a ghostly voice from Morganthau's speakers.

Startled, Keogh looked around. "What? Who is this? Who is speaking?"

"In life, I was your partner, Jacob Marley."

Keogh turned to Nash and their holographic associates. "Who in blazes is Jacob Marley?"

"You will be haunted by three spirits," the eerie voice continued. "Expect the first tomorrow when the bell tolls one."

"Enough!" Keogh said. "Nash, get your technicians over to Morganthau's place to see what's going on!"

As Nash tapped his earpiece and relayed the instructions, the voice continued. "Look for the second when the clock strikes... well that probably depends on the traffic," the voice said suddenly dropping its ethereal and otherworldly countenance. "Odds are he'll make it on time, but I assure you no later than 2:15. Now as for the third ghost, well,

here we have a serious problem. The truth is, he drinks. And when he drinks, well, he has a tendency to lose his head. Like so!"

Morganthau's head rolled over on its side revealing it had been severed just above the shoulders. As those attending pulled back in horror, the head was put back in the holographic field still expressionless but now wearing a cowboy hat.

Then, in a cowboy drawl, the voice said. "Listen up. This here town ain't big enough for the two of us. So I'm a gonna give you rannies jes' 24 hours to git out, then I'm a gonna come a gunnin'. Better say your prayers, varmints. For the day of reckoning is at hand. Yeeehaaaaa!"

The transmission ended in a burst of static.

Keogh stared awestruck at the other members. "Gentlemen, it appears we have a problem."

"Where have you been, cadet?" the Colonel growled as Sunjay took a seat in the dimly lit office. There was a low hanging cloud of cigar smoke. "Your bunk is empty nearly every night."

"My apologies, Colonel," Sunjay replied, lowering his head. "I have no excuse."

The Colonel rubbed his finger across his upper lip and studied the teen. "Sunjay, I am aware of what happened in the subway. And I have a pretty good idea what you're going through. I have lost men under my command as well."

Sunjay looked up. “Under your command, sir, I’m sure it was necessary, but under mine it wasn’t.” He rested his arms on his knees and again stared at the floor. Although the incident had occurred over two months ago, the circumstances surrounding the deaths of his triad members continued to haunt him.

With fingers splayed, Sunjay raised both hands and jerked them up and down. “These were kids, children! But I was so damn gung-ho to take on the bad guys I didn’t think of the danger. I put them in harm’s way unnecessarily.”

Redding leaned in and eyed Sunjay hard. “Cadet that will be enough whining and self-indulgent bellyaching, I have a lot to say and you will remain quiet until I am finished. Understood?”

Sunjay looked as if he had cold water thrown on him, but after a moment, he collected himself and nodded compliance.

The Colonel took out a cigar, peeled off the cellophane and lit it. “You said you recklessly led children into harm’s way,” he began as he let out a plume of smoke. “Sunjay, the group you tackled has killed close to fifty people. You faced superior numbers and still inflicted causalities upon the enemy, including their leader, who suffered a broken nose and a cracked rib.”

He placed his cigar in the ashtray. “There is a war coming, son. It’s going to be big, it’s going to be ugly, and it’s going to be violent. And when it does come, I’m going to need men like you on the

front lines, shaping these terrorized kids from broken homes into capable soldiers and leading them on the field of battle. I've been following your career closely, son. You've shown a real capacity for leadership. Many GC members are older, and some even have military training yet nearly all follow your lead. And frankly Sunjay, that can't be taught.

"But even with all that, I can't use you if I can't depend on you. And I can't depend on you if I don't know where you are. So...what is the story, cadet? Why the empty bunk?"

Sunjay took a moment. What would happen if he told him about Bali? Would he be asked to choose between her and the GC? He certainly hoped not. He saw the Colonel waiting for an answer. And so, Sunjay made his decision.

One of the many things he respected about the Colonel was his forthrightness. No bullshitting around. When you got it, you got it straight. Take it or leave it.

Soon, Sunjay hoped, people would be saying the same about him.

"I am involved with a girl, sir," Sunjay said. "We are both abandonees. Fortunately, I've got the GC; she however, has nothing. She's living in a condemned building in a Nomad neighborhood."

The Colonel placed his hands on his desk and asked. "So, you go there each night to protect her...?"

“No, sir,” he replied. “I go there because... I love her.”

The Colonel picked up the cigar, took a puff and appeared to be mulling over Sunjay’s situation. After a moment, he announced his decision. “The GC has no interest in who you choose to live with, unless, of course, she has ties to the PTB. Does she have ties to the PTB?”

“No, sir, I’m sure she does not.”

The Colonel, apparently satisfied, returned to the original conversation. “Very well then, as of today you are promoted from triad leader to section commander. In keeping with your new position you will be paid a salary and stationed in one of our safe houses.”

“Sir?”

The Colonel nodded. “Yes, commander, you can bring the girl.”

Inside his office, with the overhead lights turned off, Noon stood in front of the hundreds of floating mathematical holographs as they glowed eerily in the dark, reading, adjusting and then rereading and readjusting. This was his moment of truth. There was no longer any room for error.

Noon long believed one could predict the future, not through astrology or tea leaves, but by utilizing mathematical probabilities. Adding to the groundbreaking process begun by Bruce Bueno de Marguita back in the late twentieth century, Noon's scale was the largest ever attempted.

The variables were monstrous, the possibilities mind-boggling, the introduction of X the unknown into various places within his calculations threatened to tear the whole thing apart.

But Noon knew something no one else did.

In this plane of existence there are boundaries that cannot be exceeded.

He first realized this as a young man when he read Einstein's theory and learned the closer one gets to the speed of light, the greater one's mass becomes, making it impossible to exceed it.

Bottom line? Limited space means limited possibilities.

And with a limited number of possibilities, one can, utilizing keen observation and judicious mathematical analysis plot future events to a near 97% accuracy. No, not perfect but damn close.

Noon referred to it as the Wall of Inevitability.

As the Doctor put down the electronic fingertip and stepped away from the floating equations, he thought back to a conversation he had with the I-Man.

“Sometimes, when I am deeply involved in my computations,” he had said, “and the possibilities narrow and the inevitable becomes clear, I can almost sense the presence of an Almighty Being just around the corner, creating the universe and its laws at a furious pace.”

The I-Man had eyed him suspiciously. “You’re not coming down with illusions of godhood are you?”

“No, most certainly not,” Noon replied dismissively. “I guess I’m just wondering what would happen if I caught up?”

The comment brought a smile to both their faces but now, as Noon continued to decipher the codes, and the possibilities of future events narrowed into probabilities then narrowed into certainties, he found himself imbued with a godlike power he had neither anticipated nor wanted.

He knew who would die and when.

“I wonder if there *is* an afterlife,” Noon pondered as his thoughts traveled back to the day he and his late wife first met.

Although the teenage Alexander Noon would go on to get a medical degree, a PhD in quantum physics, bio-genetics, chemistry and save the world by age twenty-five, at thirteen and a senior in high school, he was looked upon as a freak and an oddity. His classmates perceived his shy, timid and unusually quiet demeanor as elitism and snobbery. Few, if any attempts were made to befriend him and his inability to interact in social situations often made him the butt of jokes and pranks.

And to make matters worse, he was becoming increasingly withdrawn and unresponsive with his science and math teachers. He found their methods of instruction slow, plodding and dull to the point of being almost physically painful. And since he read all his textbooks cover-to-cover by the second week of school, he began spending his class time editing, reediting and eventually rewriting them in a manner his classmates could easily comprehend.

“Now, when x is the unknown, you must first...” the teacher explained to one of the students, “identify the...”

“He won’t get it,” Noon muttered under his breath, realizing the futility of his teacher’s attempt.

“What?” Dr. Walford asked, turning around. “Did someone say something?”

As if waking from a dream the entire class looked up. At last, it appeared something interesting was going to happen. As all eyes fell upon him, Noon sighed and shook his head. “You’re wasting our time. He won’t get it.”

The teacher chose to confront him. “Mr. Noon,” he began, “at what point did you decide you were more qualified to teach mathematics than I am?”

“This has nothing to do with qualifications,” Noon replied. “This is simply about accomplishing a goal. Your goal is to teach Lazlo advanced trig. The method you’re using will not succeed.”

Picking up a thin e-book from his desk, Noon rose from his seat, brought it over and handed it to the teacher. “I rewrote the chapter. Cut it down from eight pages to two and a half. Use it as a guide and I guarantee the entire class, including Lazlo, will score in the upper ten percentile at test time.”

Walford looked at the e-book and his face reddened. “Where do you get off, Noon?” he barked, shoving it against Alexander’s chest. “I don’t care how smart you think you are. How dare you interrupt my class and belittle my teaching regimen?”

Suddenly realizing his attempt to fix the problem and hurry things along had failed, Noon paled and his heart began pounding. “I...I wasn’t belittling you,” he said as a thin film of sweat appeared on his brow. “I was simply trying to

provide a way to accomplish your goal with less time and effort.”

Walford stepped closer, his face filled with rage. “Really?” he said with a dismissive smirk. “Well, to me it sounded like some smart-mouthed geek trying to show off!”

Now completely flustered, Noon replied. “It wasn’t like that. All I was trying to do...”

Walford leaned in confrontationally, “Yeah, well I don’t care what you were *trying* to do. I’m sick of your snotty remarks and superior attitude. Now collect your things,” he said pointing to the boy’s desk, “get the hell out of my classroom and don’t come back!”

Hypersensitive and extremely uncomfortable in confrontational situations, Alexander quickly grabbed his things and ran out.

Once in the empty hallway, Alexander tried to figure out what to do next. Was he expelled? Suspended?

Not sure, he slowly headed down the hallway toward his locker. As he turned a corner, Sophia Wheaten, running to catch a friend before she left on the school bus, plowed into him.

With e-books airborne and arms spinning, Alexander fell cartoonishly to the floor, his eyes wide with shock and embarrassment.

Her jaw agape in surprise, Sophia’s hands flew to her face. “Oh... I’m so sorry!”

As Alexander attempted to get to his feet, she crouched down and helped him collect his things.

“Oh, and there goes Sara’s bus!” she said in frustration as she watched it pull out from the curb through the glass paneled door. “Damn!”

Although a little winded from the collision, Alexander stood up and as Sophia handed him two of his e-books, he studied her. She was pretty, with a winning smile, brown eyes, olive skin and long black hair. Although a little slender for a girl five-foot eight, she was in top physical shape, primarily because she was captain of the school cheerleaders.

“Oh, well,” she said with a shrug.

She looked up at Alexander, playfully pushed back his hair and brushed off the top of his shirt with her hand. “There, good as new, Mr. Alexander Noon, boy genius.”

Perceiving the ‘boy genius’ comment to be yet another insult on a day seemingly filled with them, Alexander’s face reddened.

“Fuck you, bitch!” he blurted.

Stunned, she stood motionless as Alexander turned and stormed down the hall

Three days later she took his arm just as school was letting out. “Just so you know, Alexander, I had nothing to do with you being transferred out of Dr. Walford’s advanced trig class. I didn’t say a word to anyone about your FU comment the other day.”

Suspecting another plot to embarrass him, Noon's face twisted as he yanked his arm from her grasp. "I didn't say you did," he snapped. "I never accused you of anything. Look! Just what do you want from me?"

Startled, she blurted. "I guess... I guess what I want is...is for you to stop hating me."

As tears formed in her eyes, Noon, suddenly realizing she had not intended to embarrass him, felt profound shame and wished more than anything that he could simply evaporate into nothingness. With his embarrassment strangling any ability he might have to apologize, he simply stared for several moments, red faced, horrified and shaking.

Seeing this, and with a look of empathetic concern, Sophia slowly reached over, placed a comforting hand on his shoulder and asked, "Alexander? Are you okay? Do you want to get a drink of water or something?"

He took a moment, then said, "O...Okay."

Once Alexander had sufficiently calmed down and the misunderstandings had been resolved, the two entered the empty cafeteria, got two sodas from the machine and began talking.

"Okay, Alex," she said as she threw her purse on the cafeteria table and took a seat. "You're easily the smartest person I know. I mean you're only thirteen and already have every top college in the country begging you to attend, offering you

scholarships and bucketsful of money and don't try to deny it because word gets around, and soooo, I want to run a theory of mine past you and get your opinion.”

Noon held up his hand. “Okay, but we have to set some ground rules.” He took a sip from his soda and pushed back his hair. “First, don’t ask any questions you don’t want a truthful answer to. Second, people cannot read minds so don’t assume you know what I’m thinking, how I feel or what I’m going to say. Third, I’m thirteen. People expect all kinds of things from me but I’m only thirteen, okay?”

“Whoa,” she said wrapping her arms around her and faking a shiver. “Before you continue with the Ten Commandments can I at least tell you my theory?”

Realizing he had been a little heavy-handed, he smiled and said. “Yeah, commandments aside, go ahead.”

Her face lit up. “Video games,” she said excitedly. “We’ve all played them. We’ve all spent time in cyberspace creating environments, people and situations. Right?”

Noon nodded.

“Okay. Now, what if we were able to make our holographic avatars sentient? Meaning, they not only become aware of their existence, they believe that they, and their environments are real?”

“I know what sentient means but go on,” Noon replied.

“What if... that is what *we* are?”

Noon leaned in. “So what you are asking is, what if we are merely holographic avatars given a sense of sentience by the game players who created our universe and control our actions?”

“Exactly!” she said, her eyes brightening. “And it’s not far-fetched considering computers can now process emotions at an almost human level.”

“True, and there are several commonalities. We do not know where we came from, and the devices we use to gather information are preloaded, meaning the five senses. Strictly speaking, if our senses are rigged, then our eyes can see things that aren’t there, our ears can hear sounds that don’t exist and our hands can touch object that have no substance, etc.”

“So you do find my theory interesting?”

Noon bowed his head and nervously ran his hand through his hair again. “Uh, I wouldn’t go that far.”

Sophia stiffened. “Oh, so it’s just some stupid girly idea?”

He paused, raised his eyebrows and said. “Ground rules remember?”

She threw herself back against the seat. “Oh, that’s right. I’m sorry, Mr. Perfect.”

Noon bristled as a film of sweat appeared and his hands went clammy. “If it is any consolation, the

fact I'm even addressing it might be considered a compliment," he said. "The truth is, I find most people's so-called ideas inane and usually dismiss them out of hand."

Sophia folded her arms and began to pout.

Alexander stared directly into her eyes. "Let me cut through the bullshit," he said. "You come up with this idea, run it past your friends and they all said it was like, really interesting, and like really deep, you know? So you decided to use it to impress me. When I wasn't, you pull a snit." He paused and drew a breath. "Here's the truth, if you can handle it. Your theory has been kicking around for centuries, and is more commonly known as Empiricism, which you would have known if you had bothered to do a little research. And if you had, you would have discovered that it, and similar theories, all boil down to the age-old controversy between evolution and intelligent design."

Sophia's angry look transformed into one of embarrassment as Alexander's overpowering intellect tore away the façade and laid bare her plan to impress him.

"Intelligent design versus natural selection, the controversy, which I assume you already know..." His breathing was becoming increasingly shallow, and he was nervously tapping his fingers on the table.

A look of concern came over Sophia's face.

He swallowed several times. “The truth is, “he continued, then tugged on his shirt to keep it from sticking to him. “Both theories are seriously flawed and should be debunked but, because they have garnered so many zealots on both sides, it’s been transformed from a scientific matter into a political one. Eventually those idiots will probably construct conflicting religions out of it.”

Finally noticing how intently she was eyeing him, he took another sip of soda, folded his arms and slumped against the backrest. “You can storm off now if you like,” he said, waving his hand in a go away gesture. “Although I do appreciate you waiting until I was finished.”

She sat there watching him. Then leaned in, reached over and took his hands. “No. No, you’re right. I was trying to impress you, and apparently you got to be a heck of a lot smarter than me to pull that off.” She shrugged. “I guess I’m jealous at how easily you grasp any subject, regardless of how complex. Seriously, Alex, if I had a wish, I’d want to be as smart as you.”

She gazed at him, smiled and squeezed his hands.

He returned her gaze but not her smile.

“I have a wish too, a prayer actually, that I say every night,” he said with unsettling melancholy as he pulled his hands from hers, “It goes like this: I lay me down yet still awake and pray the Lord my

soul to take, I do not want it, take it back, and let me fade into the black.”

Good morning, I'm Steve Mathers and this is DayBreaking News. Early risers using the Queens Midtown tunnel received a nasty surprise this morning when, as they descended into the tunnel, saw a decapitated head placed atop a Merging Traffic sign.

Many commuters dismissed it as a Halloween mask or part of a mannequin. Officials however have confirmed that the victim is the Chief Executive Officer of TransMart, Ramses Morganthau.

More on this story as it become available.

Keogh stormed into the office of Garland Nash, stepped up to Timothy Jefferies' desk and when Jefferies looked up. Keogh said, "Get your boss, then download the security videos from Ramses Morganthau's building. Now!"

Jefferies nervously nodded and bolted from his desk.

Moments later, Garland Nash and Martin Keogh were walking the halls.

"The first shot has been fired," Keogh said. "And we're all in danger. I've spoken with Patsy,

and she said the intruders all wore some kind of reflective military type jumpsuits and scarecrow masks. What kind of crazy son of a bitch wears scarecrow masks?"

When Nash shrugged, Keogh looked around and nudged him into a corner. "The police are doing their usual investigation—DNA evidence, fingerprints, retina scans, all that bullshit. By the time they figure out who's responsible we could all be dead. Especially since it appears fanatical Noon supporters are behind it."

"Noon supporters?" Nash asked in disbelief.

Keogh nodded. "Patsy said the intruders told Ramses to stop our attempt to freeze Noon's assets. They knew how to bypass security and even verify that Ramses shut down the operation. These aren't Nomads. These people are organized, well-financed and highly trained. The problem is, with groups like the Eco-terrorists, the Oil Raiders, the Dirthead Alliance and those Africa for Africans psychos running around, there's no telling who's behind it.

"At first, I suspected the Bellmen because right after Noon announced, they started spray painting his name everywhere. But my people tell me that lately their membership has fractured and attendance at rallies has dropped off. Now we both know that since Bell died, their attempts at social rebellion have been bumbling and haphazard at best. This, however, was meticulously planned and executed. Frankly, I don't see the Bellmen fitting

that bill. And then there's also the possibility Noon's being blackmailed and Ramses was killed to prevent their money machine from being turned off."

"What are we supposed to do?" Nash asked, starting to sweat. The aggressive Keogh always made him uncomfortable, especially in a one on one situation.

Keogh took Nash's arm and the two walked back to Keogh's office. "Since some extremist outfit seems to have a vested interest in Noon, we're going to need some military types for protection and some techno-geeks to crack his financial firewall. Call Malibu. Tell him to put a team together. Priority one."

"Malibu?" Nash asked, rubbing the heel of his hand against his sweaty brow. "You said he wasn't effective."

Keogh nodded. "Yes, but he did say stopping Noon would require considerable time and effort and judging by the way things have turned out, he was right. So he gets another shot."

As they reentered the office, Keogh walked over to Jefferies' desk. "Are those surveillance videos ready?"

Jefferies nodded nervously, "Yes, I downloaded all the cameras in Mr. Morganthau's building."

"Good. When we're done, I also want the recordings from the Bellmen rallies."

"I'll take care of it immediately, sir."

Keogh came around to the screen. “What have we got?”

Jefferies shrugged. “Nothing really,” he said, gesturing to the monitor, “just disjointed pixels. I thought maybe the cameras were not working but when you run it back, the images are fine until frames 2550 through 2779. See what I mean?”

Keogh watched closely then waved Nash over. He pointed to the action. “See that? Is that what you were talking about when you said your video cameras showed the car in the parking garage’s trunk opening and closing but there was no person in the frame?”

Nash shook his head. “No, this is different. You can see some sort of movement behind those pixels. On my video, whoever is opening and closing the trunk is completely invisible.”

Keogh turned. “Jefferies, you have TOPCARD access, don’t you?”

“Yes, sir,” he replied nodding quickly.

“Upload Noon’s patents and copyrights. Search for products that have invisibility or refraction qualities.”

“Certainly, sir.”

Nash leaned in, “Uh, Martin, I don’t like my underlings exceeding their...”

Keogh turned. “Nash, don’t you have work to do?”

“Well, I...err...Sure, I do.”

“Then go do it!” Keogh’s cold stare meant right now.

As Nash returned to his office, Keogh placed his hands on the backrest of Jefferies chair and leaned down. “You know how to keep your mouth shut, don’t you?”

“Oh, yes sir!” Jefferies said, nodding vigorously. After the search was completed, he sat back and placed his hand on his chin.

“Got anything?” Keogh asked.

“Well, this is odd,” Jefferies replied gesturing to the screen. “Noon doesn’t have any patents or copyrights on light refraction or invisibility devices, but the TOPCARD says such a product does exist and its patent is owned by Harbinger Industries, which is one of ours.

“I could tell you more, but unfortunately, I don’t have the authority to access the file. That requires a six-digit TCMLR.

Keogh checked and placed his finger on the screen. “But it says right here, you have TCMLR access.”

“Yes sir,” Jefferies said turning. “But only as far as Mr. Nash’s position allows. Mr. Nash has a five digit TCMLR. As you can see, this requires a six.”

Keogh stepped back. A six-digit TCMLR was reserved for state managers like himself and their superiors. He folded his arms and stared at the screen as the cursor blinked at the TCMLR code line.

"I could turn around if you'd like to enter your number, sir," Jefferies suggested.

Keogh said nothing. He raised his finger to his lips and tapped them several times.

"Uhhh, sir?" Jefferies said softly. "If you're concerned about accessing someone else's project, perhaps you'd prefer to see just the title page. That can be done without leaving any electronic fingerprints."

Keogh eyed Jefferies coldly and Jefferies immediately paled. "I...err. I mean.... It's nothing illegal. It just shows the first page so you can decide if it's the file you're looking for."

Keogh spun his hand in a circular motion. "Turn around."

Jefferies quickly complied.

With Jefferies' back turned, Keogh punched in his TCMLR, and hit enter. When the screen read Access Granted he tapped Jefferies on the shoulder and said, "You're in."

Jefferies spun back, hit the Control key, File and Escape.

On the screen appeared a jumpsuit followed by the work order D5-787 Harbinger Industries.

Jefferies pointed to the screen. "There it is. Since it is the title page, it doesn't say much, but it's clearly a military type jumpsuit and judging by the design it does appear to have some sort of light-refraction abilities."

Keogh was no longer listening. He had scanned down to the bottom of the page to see whose TCMLR code had authorized it.

His face paled.

The code read MU-followed by six asterisks*****. The six digit TCMLR itself didn't matter. The two-letter prelim said it all. The refractive jumpsuits were ordered by Mr. Unknown.

At ten to three on a Friday afternoon, thirty-seven men entered thirty-seven different commercial banks. Each one entered alone and wore a mini-digital video recorder attached to a headband. Once inside, each one opened his coat to reveal a leather vest laden with explosives.

“Please don’t anybody move. This is a robbery!” each one of the thirty-seven individual robbers announced to the thirty-seven individual tellers in each of the thirty-seven individual banks.

Each one stated his name, job title and the company he worked for. Most were Chief Financial Officers, Treasurers, Comptrollers and assorted high-level moneymen from various banks and investment firms. With faces white with terror and with their eyes constantly checking the blinking lights on their vest, they explained their families were being held hostage and would be killed if they failed to carry out the robbery successfully. They informed the tellers their every move was being recorded, then pointed to the video cameras on top of their heads. They instructed them to fill the

canvas sacks with certificates of international credit, coded but not numbered or scanned.

As the tellers complied, the robbers read the following from a sheet of paper. “Do not attempt to trigger silent alarms, use GPL tracers, code burners or passive ink because if the money isn’t at the designated location at the assigned time or if police are alerted, my...” At this point almost all the robbers had difficulty continuing ...my wife and children will be executed!”

Then as they left, they assured the bank personnel they had considerable personal wealth and guaranteed restitution would be made for the money taken.

Following its debut, Noon’s new campaign commercial was the talk of the town.

An immediate attention grabber, the gritty video featured Nomad assaults being committed in broad daylight with no police response. Makeshift tent cities mysteriously catching fire and burning unchecked. Police using illegal high-powered trans-dazers on Dirthead Alliance protesters and in one particularly horrifying scene, a ten-year-old girl having an epileptic seizure is being dragged out of the emergency room by three hospital security guards because her parents couldn’t afford the treatment.

While these events were being shown, in the background, televisions played snippets of actual

news stories. One showed the CEO of ECHOMEC purchasing the Mona Lisa. Another, the President of Capticore-Ventures christening his yacht, reported to be larger than a twentieth-century aircraft carrier. The third shows a corporate party featuring executives feasting on a specialty dinner that costs more than a city workers annual salary.

The finale showed a man shimmying up a pole toward a traffic-light monitor. He twists it until his voodoo skull face is center screen. He leans in and screams, “I’m going to kill you all and eat the flesh of your children!”

As the camera pulls back, the poster of Noon appears. It reads:

He saved us before. Let him do it again.

And underneath, scrawled in indelible marker:

Before it's too late.

Alexander Noon. Governor.

By nightfall, the stolen certificates of international credit were downloaded into untraceable cash drivers in thousand-dollar increments. The cash drivers were distributed at homeless shelters, tent cities and hospital waiting rooms.

No one asked any questions. Most said, “Bless you, my friend”.

The thirty-seven human bombs that robbed thirty-seven of the city’s largest banks were not

pursued. Since they were all video recorded and had announced who they were, where they worked and why they were there, the police chose not to risk a violent confrontation by chasing them. They were, as they had indicated, wealthy and financially able to compensate the banks for any losses.

That being the case, the POWERS THAT BE instructed the authorities to wait till morning to see how it played out. No sense risking overtime and investigative expenses when the so-called robbers could easily settle up by electronic transfer.

But unbeknownst to the police, those individuals would have a previous engagement.

Their coats flapped like flags in the driving rain.

“What are we doing up here?” one of the human bombers asked after all the blindfolds were been removed and their hands untied. Confused, the man looked around and pulled up his collar to ward off the steady downpour and gusting winds. All were startled to discover they were atop the rain soaked glass roof of a skyscraper.

“What is this place?” another asked, pulling his coat tight and looking around nervously.

The scarecrow-masked Madalone took center stage and addressed the thirty-seven. “Before I answer,” he said pacing in front of them, “I want you to call your families so you can see that we’ve kept our promise and that they’re all safe. Go ahead, call.”

He raised a cautionary finger.

“But! Do not mention where you are. Remember you’re wearing explosives, and the magnetic locks on the harnesses will remain activated until my associates and I are safely away. Hurry. I’ll give you a full minute, starting...” He checked his wristscreen. “Now!”

As the calls were made, looks of relief came over them when they learned their loved ones had been released and were on their way home.

“And... time’s up! Now toss your earpieces over here,” Madalone said as the Scarecrows opened the glass trap door, shoveled the earpieces into it, then began climbing down.

Madalone gave a two-finger salute. “Sorry to leave you folks high and dry, so to speak, but a little rain never killed anyone.”

“Hold it! Where are we? What is this place?” one called out.

As Madalone took the door handle, he said. “For those of you who don’t know, this... my friends, is the old Hydroponics Building. Years ago these top three floors held some of the most advanced vegetation and genetically enhanced plant life ever created. They actually held tours for school children, where they could see, touch and smell what some say were the most beautiful flowers ever created by man or nature.”

Madalone leaned against the glass door. “But what you *really* want to know is why I’m leaving

you on a glass roof atop a fifty-seven story skyscraper. Well, in order to get out, you will need to break the glass with this sledge hammer I am leaving with you and climb down. Now this type of glass makes a considerable amount of noise when shattered so, regardless where we are in the building, we will hear if you try to escape before the allotted time.”

“Allotted time?” the same man asked. “Meaning we have to wait for you to escape before we break the glass and climb to the lower levels?”

“And Bingo was his name-o!” Madalone said, stabbing the air with his index finger. He checked his wristscreen. “It is exactly nine-thirteen. You may commence breakage at exactly... nine forty-eight. Not a minute earlier because we won’t deactivate the explosives until then.”

Madalone lowered himself to the ladder below and closed the door. As pointed to his watch and waved goodbye he thought to himself,

I wonder if I should have mentioned that these top three floors are made of bullet proof Lexaprime not glass and that they can beat on it with that sledge hammer until hell freezes over and it won’t even scratch?

Madalone looked up and saw them waving back at him.

He decided he wasn’t going to be the one to ruin everyone’s good time.

Twenty-four minutes later and a block away, Madalone and his men gathered inside a dark alley. Now dressed in civilian clothes, they studied the illuminated top three stories of the Hydroponics Building.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Madalone commented as the multifaceted clear plastic reflected the many colored spotlights on the top three floors. He took a moment to enjoy the cool evening air.

“Well,” Madalone said, removing a remote control from his pocket. “Let the show begin!” He punched in a code, pointed it at the building and pressed the activation button.

Seconds later, as its hydraulics engaged, the left side of the roof began to lift from the edge of the building like the lid of a cigar box. As it did, the water cascaded down its sides, creating a multicolored waterfall. Of course, this event was only supposed to take place when no one was on the roof.

The roof reached a 35-degree angle when the first of the human bombs lost his footing and slid down the side and out into the air.

Madalone and his men could hear him scream, even a block away.

As he did, Madalone pulled a second remote from his pocket, pointed it at the plummeting figure and pressed Detonate.

The man exploded in mid-descent. His head, arms and legs were blown in different directions, all were on fire and all streaked the sky as they fell.

“Gentlemen,” Madalone said as he reset his original remote to Detonate, “this is far too enjoyable to experience alone. Please, take out your remotes and join me!”

And join him they did. As the roof reached forty-five degrees the human bombs began tumbling off in groups of threes and fours. Completely caught up in the moment, Madalone, now wielding two remotes, pushed the Detonate buttons like he was firing toy pistols and gleefully shouted, ‘Kapow, kapow!’

The explosions echoed through the streets as flaming body parts fell to the ground like spent fireworks on the Fourth of July.

Hello, I'm Steve Mathers, and this is a LateBreaking News Special Report. We have just learned all thirty-seven men involved in this afternoon's bank robberies have been murdered. Residents of Midtown Manhattan were horrified to see...

There was a click and the screen went black.

As the Doctor placed the television remote on the desktop, there is a knock on the door.

“Doctor, do you have a minute for me?” Vladimir “Pathfinder” Zornekov asked as he poked his head in.

“Certainly, Vladimir,” Dr. Noon replied, standing and walking over to welcome the Russian engineer. He shook his hand and directed him to a chair in front of his desk. “What can I do for you?”

As Vladimir took a seat, the Doctor came around and sat as well.

“Congress has approved plans for new bomb shelter for its members. Because of my expertise in underground construction I have been asked to review preliminaries and blueprints. Maybe offer suggestions regarding location, materials, depth, HVAC etc...”

“Fascinating,” Noon said. “How long will they need you for?”

“A few weeks. However, should you prefer I remain here, I will tell them to find somebody else.”

“No need,” Noon said stroking his chin. “I think we can spare you temporarily, but in return I would like a favor.”

“Certainly.”

Noon leaned back in his chair, paused for a moment, then said, “When you review the plans, tell the project manager you want tri-level valves installed in the blast doors instead of bi-levels.”

Vladimir tilted his head and stared as if unsure of what he was hearing. “But, taking in account the depth and the construction materials, the difference between bi and tri-valves is negligible.”

Noon waved his hand dismissively. “I am aware. However, I assure you no member of

Congress will agree to standard issue when a more expensive upgrade is available, especially when their own well being is involved.”

Vladimir nodded. “I will insist upon it.”

“Excellent,” Noon said, rising to his feet and extending his hand. “Please come see me as soon as you return. I will have several questions.”

Vlad nodded. “I will indeed.”

In the basement of the Nash Financials building, in a closed-door meeting, Hans Malibu, wearing a brown shirt, brown pants, combat boots and a newly shaved head, stood in front of a video screen and called for the attention of the fifteen men he handpicked for this special mission. Having been instructed by Keogh to put an end to Noon's campaign once and for all, Malibu decided to begin by finding out who Noon's core associates were and eliminate them.

Malibu pushed the button on the remote and the screen lit up.

"Gentlemen, we know of only one man, outside of Sullivan and Maxwell, who is a member of Noon's Inner Circle." He turned and walked over to the screen. "Unfortunately, we do not know his name or where he came from. Nor do we know what he looks like, as he keeps his head and face covered most of the time. What we do know is he is most likely Noon's top lieutenant and that he often stays at an apartment on the Lower East Side. Now," Hans said clicking the remote, "here is a recent photograph. See anything peculiar about what he is wearing?"

“Looks to me like an old style hooded rain parka,” one of the men offered.

“Look again. You military guys might take special interest.”

It took a few moments but one saw what Malibu was referring to. “I think I got it!” he said as he got up, walked to the front and ran his finger over the screen. “It’s what the Navy SEAL’s used to refer to as the movie screen coat. These black dots are micro holo-projectors.”

Malibu gave him a thumbs up.

Another member called out. “You want to explain, pal? Some of us aren’t from the military.”

The man placed his hands behind his back and began.

“During the Middle East Wars, the military came up with a special coat made from meta materials with micro-cameras that projected a holographic image of the landscape surrounding the soldier on the coat like the picture on an LCD screen. The effect made the soldier nearly invisible. As the technology improved, the coat came in pretty handy in the desert where there is little foliage or objects to hide behind.

“Under the right conditions, you could have a full unit of soldiers standing, say, thirty-yards in front of you and because the front of their uniforms projected what was directly behind them, you couldn’t see them unless you viewed them at an angle, which would throw the image off.

“Military stopped using them when the enemy began using attack drones. Drones sight the enemy through air displacement, not visual image. Also, the scientists at the time couldn’t overcome the problem of image flattening when viewed from the side.”

Malibu thanked him and the young man returned to his seat.

“Want to bet our boy here,” Hans said jerking a thumb at the video image, “knows someone capable of solving that little image flattening problem?”

“Noon!” several of the men said.

Malibu nodded. “Look, I’m going to give it to you straight. This guy is key. We don’t know who else is in Noon’s Inner Circle, or who’s preventing our people from freezing his assets, or who killed Ramses Morganthau, or who’s behind the human bombs. But our boy here,” he said again pointing to the screen, “does! And we need to know what he knows.”

“So, this is a simple grab-and-go operation?” one asked.

“Don’t underestimate him!” Hans said firmly. “We are almost positive he’s the one who set up Berber’s crew at Noon’s mansion. Yet feature recognition software can’t identify him. Even our best long-range retina scanners can’t draw a lock.”

“Hold up,” another said. “I know that parking garage. To get in you have to undergo a fingerprint

and retina scan. So, if he got in, he's got to be one of our own.”

Malibu nodded. “You would think so, but there's a problem. The man the computers say was retina scanned and finger-printed, was standing in front of 600 people giving a quarterly sales presentation while the van was being set up. So watch yourselves. This guy is capable of doing things way off the normality grid. When we grab him, it's by the book, no mistakes.” With a stern expression he pointed at the men. “You got that? NO mistakes!”

That same evening, Malibu's men sighted their objective walking down Avenue A on the Lower East Side. According to their recent intel, the apartment he often stayed at was on the corner of Avenue A and 9th Street, twelfth floor, no roommates or girlfriends.

Their original plan was to break inside and surprise him when he arrived home but discovered they couldn't get to the twelfth floor without jury-rigging the elevator. Even after doing that, they saw he had installed Fall Apart locks on his door. Fall Apart locks were specially made to shatter internally and leave noticeable marks and scratches to warn the owner that someone attempted to pick their way in.

When this information was relayed to Malibu, it spoke volumes about their objective. First, the man kept nothing of monetary value in the apartment.

People who jury-rigged elevators did so to prevent bugging equipment from being installed, not to protect themselves from robberies. Second, using Fall Apart told him the man was expecting professionals, which meant if he wasn't on to them already, he would be soon.

He told them to forgo the locks. They would grab him after he entered.

"Got him in sightline," one of Malibu's men, code named Number 6 said into his earpiece. The car stopped and he stepped out, "and am in pursuit."

"Copy that," came the reply. "Tag him ASAP. We don't want him disappearing and coming up behind us."

Number 6 nodded, knowing the traffic cams were recording and relaying the info back to Malibu. As he stepped onto the sidewalk he casually removed a device about the size of pack of gum from his pocket. He pressed the On button and a blue dot of light appeared on the coat of the man approximately twenty feet ahead. Seeing this, he pushed the second button and, following a minute puff of smoke, the blue dot was replaced with a black one. Only this one wasn't made of light. This one was a tracking device, extremely advanced yet no larger than the head of a pin.

Aware of the growing possibility of violence, the I-Man rarely entered his apartment building through the main entrance. There was a vestibule inside where people could easily lie in wait.

The back entrance presented more of an advantage. It was dark, which gave him the edge over any sighted person, plus the only way in was through a long thin alley in which every sound was amplified. No chance of being snuck up on from behind.

Still, it did not make him safe. It only gave him an advantage. An advantage considerably lessened by the tracking device attached to his coat.

Once inside the long tunnel, and after checking to see he wasn't being followed, the I-Man pressed the button on the inside of his pocket and immediately the hem of his coat fell to the ground and the mini-camera array activated. With his red visor working to analyze light from all angles The Invisible Man became precisely that... Invisible.

He entered the empty elevator and rode to his apartment on the twelfth floor. Since his apartment encompassed the entire floor, whenever the # 12 button was pressed it would activate a laser scan. If the wrong finger pressed that button, the door would open and the elevator would shut down until the person left.

A little security, the I-Man believed, never hurt anyone.

Since his electronic eyes were able to amplify even the smallest light source, the I-Man didn't bother flicking any switches after walking in his apartment and taking off his coat.

And once inside, he did what most people did. He went into the kitchen—which was attached to the living room so he could cook while watching TV—opened the fridge, mulled around what he would have for dinner, grabbed some frozen fries and turned on the burner under the pot of cooking oil, pressed the remote for the television, then walked over and plopped down on the couch.

But before he could get comfortable, he noticed a man hanging from a cable outside his window. To a sighted person, this man would be virtually invisible, as he was dressed completely in black, was hidden deep within the shadows of the unlit corner of the building and was quickly making a hole in the window using a black light coil.

In the scant seconds it took for the I-Man to figure out what was going on, the assailant was placing the nozzle of some sort of weapon through and taking aim.

Moving to either side of the couch wouldn't help. Whatever type of weapon it was, it was certainly automatic and would spray the room from side to side. So instead, he placed his feet on the coffee table, pressed down, arched his back and flipped the couch backward just as the weapon discharged.

Since the ammunition didn't pierce the bottom of the couch or rip apart the cushions, he suspected they were firing trans-dazer darts, a super charged electric projectile that could easily render any full-size man unconscious. And if they were, it meant they wanted him alive.

As he rolled over backward, he saw his coat was too far away to be of any help but believed he could reach the gun taped under the kitchen table.

The darts were flying at a clip of two per second, shattering lamps, mirrors and knick-knacks. A small fire erupted in the couch stuffing but quickly went out.

Although the room was dark, with the television providing the only light, the I-Man could see his assailant pressed against the glass frantically trying to find him. When the man turned to the right, the I-Man took advantage and shoved the couch in that direction.

As the trans-dazer darts flew across the room, the I-Man lunged for the kitchen table, up-ended it and grabbed the gun. He fired twice, shattering the glass and catching his would-be assailant in the throat, severing his carotid artery. The man spun and flopped helplessly from the cable as the blood spurted and sprayed what was left of the window.

Then came the second wave.

Using the jaws of life on the front door, three men burst into the room firing trans-dazers. One caught the I-Man in the hand, two in his leg just

beneath the thigh. The I-Man's bullets caught all three in the head. One slumped to the floor, two fell backward against the stove and jostled the pot filled with cooking oil. It partially spilled on the red-hot burner causing the stovetop, along with the pot itself, to catch fire.

Two men burst through the windows behind him firing randomly. Two darts struck the I-Man in the right forearm, the other directly in the face, just below the cheekbone. His gun now empty, he lunged at his attackers but was struck in the neck by a trans-dazer projectile. The burst of electricity caused the I-Man to temporarily lose consciousness and fall, taking the flaming pot of oil with him.

It spilled on his head and arms setting them aflame.

“Ah shit!!” one of his attackers bellowed as he grabbed two cushions from the overturned couch and lurched forward in an attempt to put out the fire. To his astonishment, the I-Man, with his head and arms ablaze, leapt to his feet and kicked the other assailant in the chest. The force was so powerful the man’s heart stopped and he fell dead.

Seeing this, the remaining assailant dropped the cushions and went for the trans-dazer pistol. Before he could grab it, the I-Man punched him in the face, shattering his jaw.

There was a sudden burst of electricity from one of the darts in the I-Man’s arm. Still aflame and reeling from the effects of the projectiles, he tripped

over the kitchen table leg and fell backward out the shattered window. He tried to grab the cable harness of the dead man still hanging outside but missed.

He fell twelve stories to the street below.

“What do you think?” Sunjay asked, motioning to the inside of the apartment as he closed the door behind them. A whiff of cat urine made him wish he had been able to give the place a thorough scouring before inviting Bali to see it.

When she didn’t answer, he felt embarrassed and tried painting a picture of what it would look like once they got settled. “I’m going to redo the walls, and throw out that ratty chair, fix the leaky toilet and replace the...”

She turned, smiled and placed her index finger to his lips, “Shhh!” she said softly. A single tear ran down her face. “Sunjay, you didn’t let me fall away.” Her hand gently caressed his cheek. “I know you don’t understand, but I was sure it was only a matter of time before I would be found murdered in a dumpster somewhere. A fate I thought inevitable. But...”

Unable to contain herself, she hugged him tightly. “All girls dream of a knight in shining armor,” she said as her tears fell freely, “but until today, that’s what I thought it was, a dream, a child’s fantasy. When I said I felt like my life only began when you entered it, I meant it. And when

you said you felt like I completed you, I believed..."

He hugged her as well. "I meant every word. The world is going crazy and I thank the gods I found someone to face it with."

They kissed.

Their passion may have taken them further, but both stopped and turned when they heard the building's front door swing open and bang loudly against the wall. What followed sounded like someone slamming a metal pole against the floor of the hallway, dragging it, then slamming it again.

It was getting closer.

Sensing danger, Sunjay started maneuvering Bali toward the kitchen. "If he gets in," he said trying to push her through the swinging door. "I'll hold him off until you get out the window."

"No you won't!" she said yanking free. "If he gets in, we'll face him together."

Sunjay's eyes widened. "Bali, I couldn't take it if he harmed you!"

She took his arm. "So I should stand idly by as he harms you? No. If we are meant to die, then let it be here and now, side by side." She whipped off her coat and flung it to the chair.

As they turned toward the door, they heard a key click and the locks deactivated. When they ran over and pressed against it, the door burst open sending them flying.

Landing on the floor nearly halfway across the room, Sunjay and Bali climbed to their feet. A man whose skin bubbled and hung from his face and arms like melting plastic, staggered into the apartment

Sunjay ripped off his jacket, wrapped it around his hands and moved toward him.

The room filled with what smelled like burning tar.

The man turned and saw Sunjay.

Sunjay, who was about to lay into this intruder, suddenly stopped and stared as the man's 'eyes' spun inside his head like the cylinders of a slot machine. When they stopped, the man seemed to focus on Sunjay's bare bicep. He said, "GC? Are you GC?"

Sunjay gave a half nod, then replied. "Yes, I am GC. Who are you?"

The man collapsed into the room's only chair and on top of Bali's coat. "I am your boss, hand me your video communicator. This is an emergency."

Seeing the man's skin bubbling and blackening, he complied if for no other reason than to let him call for help.

The man punched in a code Sunjay didn't recognize, then spoke. "Colonel, core code 7A." After a few quick beeps indicating scrambled transmission, he continued. "PTB attack, Malibu's crew. Clean up at home base and emergency med at GC safe house 105."

The man dropped the phone as he slumped over unconscious.

Not more than a few seconds went by when Sunjay's videophone rang. He picked it up from the floor. It was the Colonel.

"Sunjay!" he said. "Is there an injured man presently in your apartment?"

Sunjay immediately straightened up. "Yes, sir! He claims he's my boss and,"

"Quiet!" the Colonel snapped. "Now listen, you are to protect that man with your life. Do you understand? Let no one in or near him until I arrive. I'm on my way as we speak. If anyone tries to enter the apartment before I arrive, kill them! That is a direct order, Sunjay. Do you understand? Kill anyone who attempts to enter your apartment!"

Sunjay had never heard the Colonel so intense. "Yes, sir. I understand and will follow your orders."

The Colonel hung up.

Sunjay eyed the phone momentarily then placed it back in his pocket.

Bali approached. "Who was that?"

Sunjay headed toward the door to lock it. "The Colonel says I am to protect this man at all costs."

Bali studied the man then brought her hand to her nose to block the smell. "Did he say who this is?"

"No. Oh, crap!" he said after opening and examining the outside of the door. "There is some

kind of goo covering the key he used to get in. It must have dried as it cooled. Now it's as solid as cement. I can't reset the lock."

"This is strange," she said leaning down to examine the barely breathing figure. "This man's been hit a couple of times with trans-dazer darts."

"Be careful!" Sunjay shouted as he ran back in. "If set high enough, trans-dazer darts can kill."

Bali turned to him and placed her hands on her hips. "I know that, Sunjay. But a dead dart is a dead dart. See?" she said pointing to, and then gently removing one from the man's neck "You can tell when the little light in the center of the tail fins goes out." She stopped for a moment and examined it. "Strange thing though. Trans-dazers are programmed to discharge only in living tissue. But the two in his leg and one in his arm are still fully charged. So why...Whoa!"

Someone pushed open the door. It was a man, breathing heavily, holding a gun. He pointed it at Sunjay and Bali.

"Good, there's two of you," Number 6 said trying to catch his breath. "Help me get him outside and I might let you live."

Sunjay moved toward him and 6 cocked the hammer. Bali grabbed Sunjay's arm.

"Don't be a fool. You're not bulletproof," she whispered.

Number 6's chest continued to heave up and down. Clearly he had been running for some time. "Pick him up and take him... to the car out front."

"Pick him up, how?" Bali asked as she moved around the body. "His skin is melting and scalding hot. There is no place to get a proper grip."

"Then grab his fucking ankles, bitch, and drag him!" he shouted waving the gun toward the door.

"Look at his legs," she bellowed back, gesturing to them. "His ankles are smoking."

He came over for a closer look, still keeping the gun on Sunjay. "Damn it," he spat as he gave the man the once over. "His belt. Grab his belt and pull him out through..."

As he turned toward the door, Bali sunk the trans-dazer dart she removed from the melting man's thigh into Number 6's neck. He flailed as if having a seizure before keeling over and slamming face first into the floor.

Sunjay turned to her bug-eyed. "Bali?"

"Like I was saying," she said with a nervous edge to her voice. "It's a live dart until the light goes out. I took one from just above his kneecap." She stepped back. "I got another one ready," she said, opening her hand and showing it to him, "just in case he wakes up before your boss gets here."

Four minutes later the Colonel and a group dressed like movers arrived and brought in a large metal handcart. They laid it on the floor and opened

the flaps until it resembled a large box. Dandelion, wearing thin, non-heat-conducting gloves, examined the I-Man. She applied a soft jelly-like substance to the melting areas, administered several punch tab injections, then carefully wrapped his arms and legs in a special plastic.

After she gave the nod, they carefully lowered the Invisible Man into the box and draped a cloth over it. That, along with the remaining pieces of furniture, were taken out to the van. The unconscious Number 6, however, was afforded somewhat less regal treatment. He was wrapped in the urine stained living room area rug and taken to the van as well.

Under the cover of darkness the van and its inhabitants disappeared.

Hours later, inside a building that was on no city map, in a room not included on any blueprint, the Colonel approached and prepared to press Number 6 for information.

6 eyed him. “I know you. They call you ‘The Colonel. Well, ‘Colonel,’ I’m not going to tell you anything,” he said defiantly as he turned and yanked the plastic ties that bound his hands behind him and his legs to the metal chair. Realizing it was too secure to be broken, he turned his attention to a tooth that had come loose after he fell. After jiggling it with his tongue, it finally popped and he spit it out on the cement floor.

“Your men seriously injured one of mine,” the Colonel growled as he brought over a chair, placed it in front of Number 6 and sat down. “And you’re going to pay for that. How much depends on how much you talk, your choice.”

6 grinned and licked the blood from his lip. “So my boys injured one of yours, eh? Well, your boy, or whatever the hell he is, killed five of mine and shattered another’s jaw so badly the doctors are going to have to replace it with one made from his ribs. I would know more except that, as the info was being relayed through my com-link, I had a trans-dazer dart jammed in my neck. A dart taken from a man who had been on fire and fallen twelve stories to the sidewalk, yet, still able to move well enough to make it to one of your safe houses. And you want to know *my* secrets? Want to know who *I* work for? No problem, you just tell me who, or more accurately, *what*, attacked my men tonight, and I’ll regale you with the aria from Pagliacci.”

The Colonel grinned and shook his head. “Nah, that’s not going to work. Now, back to topic. Who sent you to that apartment?”

6 spit blood on the floor. “Look, tough guy, I’m ex-military, too. You’re wasting your time if you think you can scare me. Why? Because I know what I can take and know you’d wind up killing me before I’d crack.”

The Colonel eyed 6 and nodded. After a moment's pause, he pulled two cigars from his pocket. "Want one?"

"Drugged, is it?"

The Colonel shook his head. "No, and you have my word as a former Colonel in the United States military."

Number 6 mulled it around. "Sure," he finally said. "Why not? It'll give me something to focus on while you and your boys use me as a punching bag."

The Colonel unwrapped the two cigars, asked 6 which one he wanted. Number 6 picked and the Colonel stuck it in his guest's mouth and lit it. The Colonel then lit his own.

"When I was a boy," the Colonel began, "my old man used to say one of the true pleasures in life was a good cigar. Said the thing he regretted most was having to give them up. It seems back in those days tobacco caused cancer and heart disease. Fortunately, we no longer have that problem." He took a long draw and sat back.

Number 6 took a couple of puffs and leaned in. "C'mon, Colonel, level with me, one ex-military to another. Why the hospitality? Why not drag me to the cellar or dungeon or whatever and start with the torture? I'm a busy man you know, and I'd like to get started."

The Colonel laughed but did not answer the question.

The two men said nothing over the next few minutes.

The silence was interrupted when the Colonel's earpiece chimed. After activating it and receiving the information, his persona became noticeably grim. Finally, as their cigars burned down, the Colonel snuffed his out, took Number 6's and did the same.

"I'm still not going to talk," he said with a blood-stained smile.

"I know," the Colonel said with a forlorn look. "And sadly, it no longer matters."

The Colonel rose and stood in front of the chair bound Number 6. "If given the option of physically torturing you, even torturing you to death, slowly and painfully I would still choose that over what is going to happen." He pressed his lips together and looked down remorsefully. "Even if I left you permanently crippled and in pain, at least you could will yourself to endure it. But from what I've seen, what you are about to experience is, well, in my darkest hours, I imagine it's what hell must be like. If it's any consolation, you won't be physically hurt. There won't be a mark on you, but you will never know a moment's peace for the rest of your horrifically miserable life."

At that moment, Dandelion entered the room with a tray of syringes.

"Ahhh, big talk but you don't scare me," Number 6 replied to the Colonel. "I can take anything you dish out."

Number 6 would soon learn how very wrong he could be.

In a broken down silver Airstream trailer placed at the far end of the underground training area christened the Cornfield because, in Madalone's mind, that's where scarecrows were supposed to be, the red-headed firebrand watched Noon's latest campaign commercial again and again with hands fisted, and arms jerking up and down in rage.

"I was not aware!" he said as if apologizing.

He pointed at the video screen and asked Signu Bobipna. "Were *you* aware of this? Were you aware that they were buying yachts the size of aircraft carriers while young fathers and mothers toil in the bowels of the earth to feed their families?"

He didn't wait for an answer. He walked up to the screen and studied the face of the man who purchased the Mona Lisa. "Do we know where this man is?" he bellowed. Again he didn't wait for a reply.

"I have a call to make," he said and stormed to the back of the trailer.

Minutes later he was on the phone.

"Are you sure this line is scrambled?" Jefferies asked.

There was a momentary silence. “Don’t you, ever, ever, ask me a question like that again!” Madalone bellowed. “It is an insult to my ability and my intelligence. You understand me?”

“Yes, I apologize,” Jefferies said meekly.

“Now,” Madalone continued, “have the rest of the items been secured?”

“Yes, they have been forwarded to the location.”

“Excellent, I’ll have them picked up immediately.”

“Remember they can’t be used for two weeks. In order for your refraction suits to be manufactured and shipped I had to create a mirror work order of the original. The second order, the one going to you, will have the same codes and specifications so any inquiries will only access the original. But since they both have the same refractive-code signature, you have to wait until the military changes theirs, which they are under orders to do every two weeks. Once the code is changed, you can then cut up the masks and reconstruct them but not a moment earlier.”

“But I need them now!” Madalone bellowed.

“Can’t be done,” came the reply. The tone was soft but clearly non-negotiable.

A pause.

Madalone huffed in disappointment “Very well, two weeks then. Contact me as soon as the reconfiguration is complete.”

As Madalone tapped the disconnect button, a thin smile came over his face. Fate had once again taken his hand and gently admonished him. In his zeal he had not taken into account the time necessary for preparation. Fate however, did, by making it impossible for him to use the required objects until all the research, planning and implementation had been completed.

He was indeed blessed. Why? Because Fate knew once an objective was placed in his able hands, victory was assured.

Fate, however, was not as kind to Jefferies. Although it would not be discovered for some time, he had just made a fatal mistake.

“So, what’s your name, cutie?” 6 asked, looking up at the statuesque blond..

Dandelion inspected the punch-tab injector before placing it back on the metal tray and swabbing her patient’s arm with alcohol.

“They call me Dandelion,” she replied matter-of-factly.

6 grinned, then laughed. “Dandelion? Or that’s rich! Hey, Colonel, want a military secret? Okay, listen up,” he winked and then said in a conspiratorial tone, “My bosses told me I needed to be exceptionally careful because Noon, being the big egghead he is, had enlisted some of the most talented, skilled and dangerous people out there. Abnormal prodigies, I believe is the term. Now, I

got to admit, the incredible melting Mr. Plastic is one piece of work, and if we ever go head to head again, I'm going to bring the entire fucking military and maybe an A-Bomb just to be on the safe side. But, Nurse Dandelion here?" He looked back at her as she inspected a plastic mask attached to a breathing apparatus, "No offense, sweetheart but in my travels I've come up against some of the most proficient and sadistic torturers in the world and I can tell you that women, well, they just ain't got the balls to play in the major leagues."

"It's comforting to hear you say that," Dandelion replied as she put down the mask and began attaching the punch tabs to the syringes. "Because people like that are seriously deranged. Anyone who enjoys the sight of blood is. To me, you're merely a problem that needs to be fixed."

"Fixed?" Number 6 said, feigning terror. "What? Gonna chop my balls off, little missy?"

Dandelion ignored the comment. "I'm beginning to think people like you, the ultra Alpha males, are disturbed as well. For example, why goad and verbally attack someone who has just brought in a tray of syringes? And why do people like you always need to prove their he-man masculinity by initiating pointless physical assaults on their body? What are you trying to accomplish? To show you are capable of ignoring a bio-chemical, evolutionary fail-safe created to protect you from injury and harm?"

“You’ll never understand what it takes to be a man, little girl,” Number 6 replied with a dismissive snarl.

She snapped on the plastic gloves. “You’re probably right. What was that saying you gung-ho nuts used to say? Oh yeah, I remember. ‘Pain is merely a sign that weakness is leaving the body.’ She shook her head and picked up the syringe and attached the punch-tab injector. “What lunacy.”

Dandelion gave 6 the first injection.

He stiffened.

“Relax,” Dandelion said as she ejected the used injector onto the metal tray. “The serum isn’t going to hurt. No superhuman endurance will be necessary. No teeth gritting, or rapid breathing, or any of that crazy, macho, ‘Thank you, ma’am, may I have another,’ nonsense.”

When he didn’t feel any pain, Number 6 took a breath and began to settle back. “Well, if this isn’t going to hurt, why bother? Let me tell you a secret, gorgeous,” he said with an upward nod. “If you’re going to torture a man, it should at least be a little painful. Not that I’m telling you your business.

“Hey, Colonel,” he said looking over. “Want to come over and slap me around a little? Make me feel like I’m getting my money’s worth?”

The Colonel didn’t reply. Instead he placed his hands behind his back and began to pace.

Dandelion injected the second syringe.

6 stiffened but, after taking several deep breaths with no pain or breathing problems, he began to chuckle.

Dandelion smiled. “Ah, good. I like a man with a positive attitude.”

6 was about to continue the banter when he felt a twinge of anxiety. No problem, his training taught him how to deal with that.

He took several deep breaths, focused on a single object, that beach in San Juan, oh how he loved it there! Just the thought of that place always calmed him.

The anxiety steadily increased.

Okay, he wondered. Why isn't this working? Why can't I shrug this off? I'm not hurt, or in any danger as far as I can tell, so why can't I shake this feeling of panic? Oh, oh, oh, I can't...I can't... Got to distract myself. Got to make myself think of something else.

Using all his strength, 6 twisted the chair hoping to strike Dandelion, maybe start a fight, perhaps goad the Colonel into hitting him, force his attention on something else. Dandelion merely sidestepped as if the move had been anticipated.

“You can't escape the growing panic you're experiencing,” Dandelion said coldly as she gave him another injection.

“What?” 6 asked. He hadn't been listening. This damn anxiety was... was... he couldn't think of anything else. He hadn't felt this anxious since the

ambush during his first battlefield encounter. They had been waiting for them, hiding under the sand.

“Under the sand!” 6 suddenly said aloud.

Dandelion injected the last dose, dropped the used injector onto the tray and sat down alongside 6 to observe his reaction. “The reason one constructs a prison, Mr. Number 6,” she said, as if they were discussing something as mundane as the weather, “is to neutralize one’s enemies. In your case, since we no longer need information from you, my job is to make sure you’ll never be useful to the PTB again. In the old days, you’d be locked in a tower or dungeon somewhere. But the problem with that is the cost and the manpower required. And in many cases, the prisoners escape anyway.”

“They jumped out of the sand!” 6 said, his eyes widening as he recalled the event. “Like trapdoor spiders!”

Dandelion picked up the mask and turned on the oxygen. “So what we’ve done is found a way for the prisoner to bring his prison with him, 24 hours and day, seven days a week, 12 months a year. Well, you’ll see what I mean in a minute.”

6 was pale and no longer listening. “I was thrown in that cell. Hot as a furnace by day, cold as the Arctic by night. And all you could hear were those tiny creatures scurrying around.”

The Colonel watched wide-eyed as Number 6 continued to unravel.

Dandelion stood and placed the oxygen mask over 6's face. "Ahhh, there *were* spiders inside that cell, weren't there?" she asked.

"Just your...regular garden-variety... itsy-bitsy... nothing poisonous or..." Number 6 started to say then lost his train of thought as he resumed breathing rapidly through the mask. He stiffened again when another wave of panic struck and he suddenly recalled the sound the spiders made at night.

He hadn't thought of them in years.

"Are you sure they were just garden-variety types?" Dandelion asked, laying the mask down. "I've heard those jails in northern Africa are filled with the most deadly and predatory spiders there are. Some crawl into your mouth as you sleep, some find their way up your anus, and the tiniest ones are said to be the most frightening. I'm told they are so small they can crawl down through the hole at the tip of your penis and lay eggs inside your scrotum."

Number 6's eyes were widening, his breath coming in short gasps, his heart was beating rapidly and sweat poured from his body. "No, no, nonononono, not true, just a lot of mumbo jumbo, mumbo jumbo, mumbo jumbo."

His eyes darted wildly from side to side as Dandelion removed the mask from the oxygen bottle. He continued scouring the room, especially the floors and ceiling. His head jerked from side to side as if having a seizure.

The Colonel came over and studied Number 6's reaction. "I've never witnessed this part of the procedure before. What's happening to him?"

Dandelion stepped back and folded her arms. "His brain is recalibrating itself to recognize and react to the most dangerous threat to his life and well-being, in his case, spiders."

"Why would he be afraid of spiders?"

"Technically, he's not. Spiders are merely the trigger. We use it to set off a catatonic panic response," she replied, pulling a sheet of cellophane from under the tray.

"Explain."

Dandelion eyed 6 for a moment and seeing all was going as scheduled, turned back to the Colonel. "In each person there is a trigger that will shut down your brain during terrifying and life threatening situations," she began. "It's a stopgap to keep you from going mad. For example, say you're flying in a plane, reading or watching a video when there's a explosion. You look out the window and see the right wing has been blown off. The jet begins to spin and plummet toward the ground. How do you react?"

"I see," the Colonel replied. "A person panics, loses their ability to think clearly or to even think at all."

"Exactly!" Dandelion said. "It triggers the primal fight or flight response. However, in a situation like that, you can do neither, so the body

responds with more adrenaline, cranks everything up to maximum levels until the person either faints, goes into shock or falls into a catatonic state. Now, what if we were to recalibrate your trigger to react to something quite ordinary? Say for example, being outdoors?"

"Being outdoors?" the Colonel said. "How can just being outside trigger a catatonic panic response?"

"Until Dr. Noon discovered a cure for phobias, there were tens of thousands of what were called agoraphobics, people whose catatonic panic response would trigger just by going outside."

Dandelion was about to go into detail when she saw 6 press his chest against his knees.

"How are you feeling?" she asked sitting down beside him. She patted him on the knee, leaned back and casually swung her arm over the back of the chair.

"You had me... there for... a moment," 6 grunted as he attempted to slow his breathing. "I don't know what you did... but I'm..."

In Dandelion's right hand was a remote control light switch; in her left hidden behind the back of the chair was a piece of cellophane. Without warning she shut off the lights.

Both Dandelion and the Colonel could hear the nervous scuffling of Number 6's feet beneath his chair.

Dandelion began to gently crumble the cellophane. To the suggestive mind it eerily resembled a horde of spiders crawling down the wall.

“No!!!!!! No!!!!” Number 6 shrieked, his sudden terror spiking toward madness.

Dandelion and the Colonel could hear 6’s chair bouncing against the floor as he jerked wildly trying to free himself. “Ahhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!!! Ahhhhhhhhhhhhh!” he screamed.

Dandelion brought the cellophane closer and crumpled it again.

6 continued screaming. As he drew in a breath, Dandelion shouted, “I’d close my mouth if I were you. Spiders like places that are warm and wet. And if you ever tell anyone about me, the Colonel or what you saw today, I will send the spiders after you. They know who you are because I’ve gathered them all around us and they are watching you right now.”

The chair bouncing became more frantic. The screams stopped, but were replaced by moaning and heavy nose breathing. Then the chair stopped. In the dark and the sudden silence they could hear the sound of running water.

“Oh, I hope you haven’t wet yourself,” Dandelion cautioned. “I told you the spiders like warm and wet places. Urine draws the tiny ones like flies to honey.”

They heard the sound of the chair bouncing across the floor again. "Got to keep moving," 6 grunted. "Can't get me if I keep moving."

Dandelion crumpled the cellophane as loudly as possible.

Number 6 screamed. The chair stopped bouncing.

A moment later, it fell over.

Sixteen hours later Number 6 was at home, lying on his bed in a bedroom ablaze with light, wattage well into the thousands.

As he lay motionless, he attempted to calm the seemingly unrelenting panic. He reminded himself again and again that he had taken all the proper precautions.

The thick two-sided adhesive tape, used to form a square perimeter along the entire floor, would prevent any land bound insect from getting across. The several rapidly spinning paddle fans would keep any flying insects away. Slathering all doorsills and windows with bug spray and draping mosquito netting all around the bed would surely prevent any other would be invaders.

Just the thought caused his panic to increase.

He took a deep breath.

There is no reason for spiders to come here. No reason at all, he reminded himself. I haven't said anything to anyone. Not a single solitary soul. Plus there are no bugs here to trap in their webs,

therefore, no food. Spiders are smart. They can smell a trap. And this room is the biggest trap of all. They should know that. They do know that!

He sat up and said aloud. “They do know that!” He thought he heard a faint echo of his voice. He laid back down. “They do know that,” he whispered as he wrapped his legs around the pillow.

They are in here and you know it, the inside voice said.

He jerked himself back into a sitting position. “NO! THEY ARE NOT!” he shouted. He clapped his hands three times, blinked his eyes independently, once, twice, three times, and said “Mumbo Jumbo is my name. Mumbo Jumbo is my name. Mumbo Jumbo is my name.”

Three times. Three times, three times.

He had done it right. Absolutely right. The panic began to subside. He was exhausted. He had been fighting this latest attack for three hours. And during that time it had come close.

Close to overwhelming him. Close....

He knew he would probably wake in the middle of the night. By then the timer would have shut off the lights. He’d be in the dark, in the dark where the spiders were.

No! He would not think about that. He was a trained soldier and would not think about that. He was learning to outlast the inside voice. The inside voice... the voice trying to kill him. But the voice would never succeed. Of that, he was sure. He was

sure because he thought about killing himself several times over the last few hours and putting an end to the unrelenting terror.

Yes, a nice big fat bullet through the head would do the trick.

But it wouldn't.

Because hell was filled with spiders. All types of spiders.

And worst of all, the Devil himself was one.

He was sure of it.

The story of Noon, the I-Man, Madalone and the others is just getting started. In the days just before the election the PTB will wage a full scale attack on Noon and his allies, Madalone and the Scarecrows will retaliate and sadly, one of the Inner Circle will be brutally murdered.

Pick up your copy of *Revolution In America 2: The Night of the Scarecrows*. Here's the LINK

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