

# **D R I F T E R S**

## **THE FINAL TESTAMENT**

### **BOOK ONE OF THE DRIFTERS TRILOGY**

## CHAPTER ONE

### MEMORIES

Midnight and still a hundred degrees in Death Valley. The full August moon hung like a lamp in the hot desert sky. Deep in thought, Captain Jonathan Jefferson Ladd gazed at the shining orb as a lone coyote howled in the distance and waited for its mate to reply. A higher pitched howl soon responded from even further away. The Captain smiled faintly. If only his life was that simple. A part of him wished he'd learned to shape-shift like an Indian shaman. His old friend, White Eagle, had offered to teach him, way back when but he was always too busy fighting the Beast to take time to learn the sacred art. Right now, running free with a pack of coyotes seemed a good idea.

In his sixty years on Earth, he had been engaged in more special ops missions than anyone he knew, but nothing had prepared him for what he was about to do next. He'd survived many a suicide mission over the years, starting with Viet Nam and now, in the Year of our Lord 2001, arguably, the first year of the new millennium, for the first time, he worried that he'd taken on a mission bigger than himself. It was the mother of all missions.

Two miles west from the large boulder on which he sat, the Panamint Mountains soared up out of Death Valley, California, glowing eerily in the stillness of the moonlight. The heat rising up from the valley floor, almost 300 feet below sea level, caused the mountain range to shimmer like a mirage. The Captain held a steady gaze as he sat and waited. He could stalk and wait as well as any Apache brave who had ever lived, including his hero Geronimo, and had been out in this blistering desert for two weeks waiting for his chance. He would be out here for as long as it took. This deed had to be done, even if it killed him. The world would never know of it, however. He and his mission would be lost in time and anonymity. That was okay with him, as long as he completed it successfully. And humanity would never know the bullet they'd collectively dodged. And if he failed, there would be no humanity left to care.

Jonathan fought to keep his mind from returning to the past, but his whole life passed before his eyes anyway. He knew that happened to men who are sure they're about to die. His thoughts transported him back to when he'd first met Max Draco. In 1964, as lieutenants in Naval Intelligence, they'd both been posted to the same destroyer, charged with lobbing shells into Viet Nam. To slow down the flow of the communist men and material, he and Max had gone on dozens of sorties together behind enemy lines to identify targets for shelling, such as bridges and mountain passes. Many times, they'd saved each other's lives, and became inseparable friends.

In those days, Jonathan had been an idealistic patriot who'd believed in the infallibility of the chain of command. If told to target a village for blanket shelling, he'd assumed that there was a good reason for it, even though civilians would die. He'd justified the many "accidents" as just part of war.

Field promotions came easily and both men had made lieutenant commander in 1966. Max had returned Stateside after one tour, and Jonathan had signed up for a second, during which he'd become progressively disillusioned about how and why the war was being conducted. But he still gave the benefit of the doubt to the government, believing that you had to take the bad with the good. However, he tried to scratch the more aggressive missions that would involve civilian massacres.

In spring 1969, he too returned to the States, requesting an assignment out west so that he could be closer to his beloved Wyoming. He'd been offered an intelligence post at the China

Lake Naval Weapons Center in the California desert and, having some leave coming, had jumped on his Harley-Davidson and ridden to the base to check the area out. He had heard that Max had also been posted to China Lake, but the two had lost contact. Jonathan had been surprised when he had been enjoying a beer in the officers club one Friday evening when Max had flopped down at his booth and said, "Hello, sailor. I heard you were in the neighborhood."

Half a dozen beers later, the two had done all their catching up, and Max had explained that although he was officially posted to China Lake, unofficially he worked on a project called Deep Cover buried in an underground base. The subterranean facility, a mile below the desert, could house senior military and government officials in the event of a nuclear war threat. "At least that's what Congress is told so they'll fork over the money," Max had added.

"What's it really for then?" Jonathan had asked.

"Advanced research and development. Above top secret stuff," Max revealed.

"Like what?" Jonathan had asked.

"Sorry, bud. Without an Ultra clearance, I can't tell you, but I will say that we're working with stuff that's not from around here, if you get my drift. Hey, why not come and work with my outfit? Once you have the right clearance, then I'll personally give you the grand tour," Max had promised.

"I told the admiral I'd give him my answer on Monday, so let me think about it over the weekend, okay," Jonathan said, looking forward to two days of hiking in the Sierra Nevada mountains.

Early Saturday morning, Jonathan had ridden north on Route 395 to Lone Pine and headed west into the mountains. All during the two-hour drive, he mused on Max's remark "about not from around here." Was it an oblique reference to UFO technology, he wondered, having believed until then that the whole subject was just speculation. Still puzzling about it, he had parked his Harley, shouldered a huge backpack, and struck out into the wilderness. All had gone well until mid-afternoon when he had heard the throaty growl of a mountain lion and a woman's cry just up the canyon a ways. He had hurried forward and froze at the sight of a young woman on her knees, trapped in a dead-ended canyon, a ferocious cougar slowly advancing on her. He had picked up a rock and hurled it at the creature, striking it on the left haunch. The sudden surprise had caused the animal to howl and run off.

Expecting profuse thanks for saving her life, he had strutted towards the woman and had been surprised to hear, "Hey, I was talking to her. How dare you throw stones at my friend, you big lug? And she's pregnant, if that matters to your red-neck pea brain."

Jonathan had been stunned, never having heard of anyone talking to animals, and had shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot. "Sorry, ma'am. Didn't mean any harm. I thought you were in danger. How can I make it up to you? Jonathan Ladd at your service, by the way," he said with a mock salute.

When he had heard her laugh, he knew he was in trouble. "At my service, eh? Well, you can begin by collecting wood for a campfire. You're cooking dinner tonight. Then I might forgive you. My name's Johanna Starling, by the way."

"Right on it, ma'am and again, I'm sorry about the mountain lion. I had no idea."

Over the next three hours, while Jonathan fried up steak and canned potatoes, they had exchanged life stories, amazed at many the synchronicities in their lives. Jonathan's bottle of Jack Daniel's defrosted Johanna's initial hostility and soon they were laughing like old friends. To Jonathan, she was the most beautiful woman he had seen, especially in the firelight that caught highlights in her cascading chestnut hair. Jonathan had stared into her startlingly blue eyes,

fascinated to learn that she was an assistant professor specializing in human-animal communication at JFK University, a haven for new thought near San Francisco.

Both had been hungry and soon demolished the steak and fries, and settled down beside the fire on their sleeping bags. She $\ae$  shivered in the cool evening air and he $\ae$  instinctively wrapped his jacket round her. As she $\ae$  looked up at him in thanks, he noted her tongue dart out to moisten her lips. Taking that as a signal, he $\ae$  kissed her, tenderly at first, and progressively more passionately, to match her mounting passion. Almost immediately, they $\ae$  shed their clothes and slipped into one of the sleeping bags, but not before Jonathan had noted her lean, muscular body and full breasts. Even more, he noticed the warmth growing in his heart. It was ecstasy just to touch her. She too felt the radiance and a love was born that was destined to light up the stars. Jonathan had only heard about such love. He never dreamed it could actually happen to him. The passion they shared was beyond measure.

Afterwards, they $\ae$  gazed up into the heavens together, Jonathan naming the stars for her. Suddenly, one star moved, not in a straight line but zigzagging across the sky. She $\ae$  laughed in a strange way, "Did you see that?"

Jonathan nodded, looking at her. "The pilots call them foo fighters, you know. What do you think it was?"

"I think they $\ae$ re highly advanced beings who are here to help us." She said, eyeing him evenly with a slight smile.

Jonathan smiled back. He wanted to join her in the prayer. "I want to believe you $\ae$ re right. One day, I think we $\ae$ ll find out for sure. Till then, I guess we can only hope."

Johanna warmed to him again and they fell back into passion, as if the very stars had just blessed their union.

Johanna $\ae$ s innocent longing for extraterrestrial intervention had clinched Jonathan $\ae$ s future and, unknown to him, determined the future of humanity. On Monday, he $\ae$  told his superior that he wanted a transfer to the Deep Cover project, and a word from Max guaranteed the posting. He got an immediate Ultra-3 clearance and Max had followed through and given him the tour. A week later, his Ultra-7 had come through and he had the run of the place. But he and Max were still a long way from the coveted Umbra clearances reserved for members of Majestic-12, the overseers of the UFO conspiracy, and those who worked directly with extraterrestrial biological entities, affectionately known as EBEs.

For the next 12 years, the two lieutenant commanders headed a team that recovered downed UFOs and took them underground for analysis and hopefully reverse engineering to discover how they worked.

The alien project was a so-called "gray" project hidden behind a "black" project to do with advanced propulsion and antigravity systems, in turn hidden behind the top-secret Deep Cover underground bunker systems. This "onion-ring" arrangement was cleverly designed to prevent inquisitive members of Congress from getting in too deep. Not even the China Lake CO knew what went on in the underground base.

In addition, Jonathan often took on clandestine missions that the U.S. military couldn't officially get involved with, and was paid in untraceable gold coin and bullion, which he secreted in various places "just in case." He always made sure that Johanna was with him whenever he spirited away another bag of gold into one of his secret caches. If anything ever happened to him, he wanted to be sure she $\ae$  be taken care of.

Over the years, the love between them deepened, and she $\ae$  quit her Bay Area teaching job to manage a metaphysical bookstore and spiritual center in nearby Ridgecrest, "to bring light to the

area,ö she joked. They rented a beautiful pueblo-styled home next to the store because she refused to live on base and be ða good little Navy wife,ö as she termed it. Theyø never married, although she wanted children badly. He just couldnø risk that with the dangerous life he led. He always seemed to be off on a mission somewhere and, with each one, he never knew whether or not heød be coming home. But the time they had spent together was another world entirely, a totally magical escape from the horrors of his life. Theyø loved traveling through the Wild West, discovering hidden bed-and-breakfasts, and hiking and horseback riding. On their travels, they also hooked up with several patriot groups, establishing a network of contacts and hideaways that intuition told them they might need one day.

As an antidote to his dangerous line of work, sheød said more than once, ðYou should consider becoming a movie star. With your rugged good looks, you could make more money than you do from your secret missions. I think you look like one of those old time western movie stars. Maybe a cross between Errol Flynn and John Wayne.ö

He hadnø known whether to be flattered or drop her pants and spank her playfully. Anyway, he knew she was only half-kidding, hoping heød listen one day, maybe becoming a businessman living in a sprawling ranch-style house in the hills overlooking Phoenix, or running a mountain retreat center for spiritual seekers. He would just nudge her off the subject by making her laugh. ðHow about if I just go beat up Sylvester Stallone and take over the Rambo role?ö That had put her in stitches. She laughed so easily and made him forget lifeø ugly side. They were an odd couple. After a hard dayø hike and an evening of passionate lovemaking, theyød sit up all night discussing topics such as the nature of God. Jonathan took the traditional position that God was a personal deity as most religions claimed but she held that God was a vast amorphous field of probability out of which came the events of our daily lives, governed by our soulø flight plan for each life. He still smiled at the memory of how passionate she was about spiritual growth and the search for truth. She also had a child-like side, with a habit of running up to him and wrapping her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist. If they were naked, such a move would lead to obvious consequences, a memory that caused him to laugh out loud in the still desert.

In 1974, the UFO recovery team had captured a Paladin starcraft in almost pristine condition. It had revealed all its secrets except oneö the interstellar drive systemö that apparently needed some kind of mind-meld between the navigator and the craft, a feat beyond Earthmen. However, that recovery earned them both the rank of captain.

Jonathan thought back to the command posts in which heød worked, such as the High-energy Active Auroral Research Project, or HAARP, up in Alaska. Publicly, it had been touted as a means for exploring the high atmosphere, but its hidden agenda had been far more sinister. It could set up an energy shield against incoming missiles and manipulate the weather by altering the jet stream anywhere on the planet, but far more deadly was its ability to target a city or country and blanket it with energy modulated to alter mood, induce confusion, and even scramble the energy of citizens to bring on a coma-like state. Thus an enemy could be rendered unconscious and the UN global military could just walk in and take over without a shot being fired.

Heød also worked on the Strategic Defense Initiative, the so-called Star Wars project. Publicly, it had been touted as a barrier against incoming hostile missiles, and involved a system

of orbiting satellites armed with powerful laser cannons under ground control. Privately, however, the story was very different. The uneasy alliance between a top-secret faction in the U.S. government and the Draco, an alien reptilian species, was unraveling. In the fifties, the Draco had agreed to give sophisticated alien technology to the military in exchange for the government looking the other way regarding alien abductions. A quota of abductions had been agreed and those abducted were housed at the vast underground base under Dulce, New Mexico, where the Draco had been given sole access to the two lowest floors. However, in 1975, several MPs had died in a dispute over access. Then in 1979, scientists at Dulce had discovered a horrible truth that the Draco and their genetically engineered worker race, the Grays, were flouting the abduction quota by a factor of hundreds. As a result, the satellites were not aimed primarily down at the ground to destroy ground-launched missiles but up at the heavens to deal with incoming Draco reinforcements. However, the primitive laser weapons were sixties technology, ironically a gift from the Draco in return for the government turning a blind eye to the Draco abduction program and no match for the Draco ships, so the weaponry had had to be upgraded. Having heard that the Draco motherships exceeded five miles in length, Jonathan privately had his doubts that it would be enough.

In 1980, the job had fallen to the Navy to install the latest above top-secret photonic technology, which converted any matter in its beam back to light. This too had been a Draco bribe, so as to quell suspicions as to what was really going on at Dulce. Jonathan had been chosen as project leader because the technology had been developed and tested at China Lake. As a result he had spent many weeks in the satellite command center deep buried under Cheyenne Mountain near Colorado Springs. The hollowed-out mountain was also home to NORAD, the system that scanned the skies, logging anything that moved in U.S. airspace, including missiles and fast walkers, or UFOs.

The power demands of the photonic converter exceeded the capacity of the satellites' twin nuclear reactors, so the weapons had had to be powered by a particle stream from the ground. The power up-link had to be synchronized with the satellites' orbits whenever they were in U.S. airspace, to recharge them. An automatic shutoff had also been required in case an aircraft came within ten miles of the particle beam, which often happened with two busy commercial airports close by. All this was on top of the usual control systems for the converter beam's aiming, width and intensity settings. In fact, so much could go wrong that Jonathan was amazed when his admiral had told him that he'd planned a system readiness test for the following day.

An unarmed missile was launched from a destroyer about 100 miles out of San Diego, and the system had worked perfectly. The missile had just 'disappeared,' converted back into photons in a bright flash. The test had been conducted at 16:00 PDT, so that the photonic flash could be attributed to a trick of the sunlight. Within minutes, the Pentagon had been buzzing with the news and several senior admirals and generals, organized a flight to Fort Carson, just outside Colorado Springs. They would arrive the following day.

Jonathan had spent the rest of the day and night coordinating the demonstration, in between organizing work details to make sure that not a speck of dust could be found in the areas the brass would see. They'd arrived at 13:00, with the launch set for an hour later. Jonathan's technicians worked hard to ensure that the satellite had been fully charged, and after a few

speeches about the importance of a sound defense, Jonathan had told the destroyer captain to launch. Again, the intercept had been flawless, and the group had watched on satellite and ground images as the missile had simply vanished in a bright flash. The congratulations and Scotch had flowed freely.

In November 1980, Jonathan had returned to China Lake and the warmth of Southern California. After a friendly greeting by MPs at the gate, he'd gone to the nondescript building that housed the elevator down to the underground facility, and to (retina scan, palm print and security checks.). On level 2, he'd entered Max's office, and the two had greeted each other warmly.

Max greeted him, "Hey, Jonathan. Glad to be back?"

Jonathan had said, "You bet. I sure wouldn't want to be a brass monkey in Colorado. So what's new?"

Max had told him, "We've just received a downed UFO in excellent condition. Wanna see it? It's down on five."

"Sure. Maybe now we can figure out how the star-drive works," Jonathan said.

Security was intense. As the two had stood in front of the two-way security screen for a full-body X-ray, Jonathan had joked, "Do you think there's some cute little petty officer chick on the other side of the screen, getting off on seeing us like this?"

"We can only hope," Max had replied as the green light signaled that they could change into tight-fitting white jumpsuits. "Nothing goes in; nothing comes out," Jonathan joked grimly.

The two walked by several craft with various degrees of damage until they came to one in mint condition. Not even a scratch. "Only fifty million light-years on the clock," Max joked. They'd explored it, fascinated with its clean lines and subdued lighting. But still no clue about how the star-drive worked. No controls at all. "Damn. Another of those telepathic links," Max sighed.

After repeating the X-ray routine, they donned their uniforms, and on the way back to level 2, Jonathan had told Max he needed to make some changes to the Deep Cover system design. "After all, that's what pays for our ultra top-secret toys. What's the latest password?"

Max had looked around and whispered, "ECHELON."

Once Jonathan had accessed the system, he'd brought up the plans for a huge underground city, complete with homes, schools, factories, etc. As he'd been working on upgrading the communications array, by chance, he'd noticed something odd about a recent modification to the air filtering system. This had led him to an obscure reference to something called the Four Horsemen project. Several hours later, he was in shock at what he'd read. In a state of mounting horror, he'd called it a day, and casually left for home. There'd been nothing casual about the look on his face, however.

That evening at home with Johanna, he'd been restless. When he'd excused himself and sat out on the patio, Johanna knew he was deeply troubled about something, and when she'd asked him about it, he'd barked, "You know damned well I can't tell you."

Now she *really* was worried, for he'd never brought his job home before. "You never use that tone with me, so I know it's bad."

“Bad doesn’t even begin to describe it,” was all he’d said. “Don’t wait up for me. I’ve got some thinking to do.”

One warm, sunny Saturday early in 1981, Jonathan had casually said to Max, “We need to talk and not around here. Can we meet at the picnic site at Red Rock Canyon to avoid being overheard.”

The Mojave Desert picnic area had been deserted, and Jonathan felt he could speak freely. He’d told Max, “I found out a few things about Deep Cover that you need to know.”

Max had taken a step backwards. “Like what?”

Jonathan had said, “It’s a set-up, Max. The admirals didn’t tell us everything. They never do.”

“Go on.” Max said impatiently.

“You’re not gonna believe this, but they plan to annihilate most of humanity, Max. Deep Cover is much more than the front for our UFO recovery operation. They plan to build a network of underground cities, complete with their own ecosystems and God knows what else. Once the selected personnel and families are safe in their hermetically sealed cities, they plan to unleash what they’re calling the Four Horsemen on an unsuspecting mankind. A virulent super-virus, that kills in eighteen hours. Not only that, but they plan to make it look like a natural epidemic, an act of God, as if God would ever do something like that. It’s their ultimate Machiavellian masterpiece. They’ve got to be stopped.”

Max’s reaction had stunned him. He’d smiled wryly. “So you found out. Who told you?”

Jonathan’s eyes widened in disbelief. “You already knew about this? You mean you’re in on it. And you’re for it?”

Max stood upright again. “Not only *for* it, Jonathan. I helped plan it. Christ, Jonathan, what the hell’s wrong with you? This is what we’ve been waiting and working for all these years. They’re gonna give us command of the entire fucking operation. And you’re getting cold feet? Goddamn it, we’re so close to having control of the ultimate solution for this planet’s problems, and I will *not* let anyone or anything get in my way.”

Stunned, a speechless Jonathan had stared as Max had continued, “Don’t play the shocked little Boy Scout, brother. How many times have we talked about the probable end of humanity and this planet? Look, the way I see it, we have only two choices. We can let the world spin out of control and destroy itself willy-nilly or we can control the burn-off intelligently and sanely.”

“Sanely? You call killing the better part of six billion people sane? You’re the only insanity around here. How can you possibly be part of this, Max?” Jonathan had asked in a barely controlled rage.

Max had shrugged. “Just making the best of the inevitable, Jonathan. Look at Noah and the Ark. At least we’ll be able to save a few million and start over once the epidemic has run its course. I’m trying to save humanity the best way I can. And there are some very powerful people with bottomless pockets behind this, as you know. They’ve studied the matter from every angle for decades. This *is* a workable plan. It’ll ensure that enough of us survive to rebuild humanity.”

Jonathan had begun to pace slowly while he thought. He knew that “bottomless pockets” was a reference to the shadowy Council of Nine that was bankrolling the scheme from the profits of

arms dealing and drug smuggling. He appealed to Max again. "What about all the good their money could do instead, the free energy technology, the frequency healer, the agri-miracles, anti-gravity? We can change the hearts and minds out there. We don't have to kill them all. We can put an end to war and terrorism. We can stop want and ignorance. For the first time in history, all this is within our grasp."

Max had slowly shaken his head as Jonathan had raved on in desperation. "In the end, it still leads to Soy lent Green, Jonathan. Sorry, but you can't change human nature. Look, if it's any consolation, you and Johanna are guaranteed a place down there. And an office right next to mine. I'll need good men like you. Think about it and you'll see there's really no other way."

"There's *always* another way." Jonathan was in a passionate rage by now.

Max had peered back at him, studying his friend's response. "Why not sleep on this, Jonathan? Take a week. Take two. A month. Two months. Whatever. Let me present you with everything properly. Not off the cuff in the middle of fucking nowhere like this. And above all, don't do anything rash you may live to regret."

Jonathan had shaken his head. "I've already had months to think about it and have made my decision. I'm gonna do everything I can to stop this, including going to the media."

Max had laughed. "Oh, Jonathan, wake up. We already control the media. You're just gonna look like another conspiracy theory crazy, and the world's already full of them."

Jonathan sighed. "You were always on the hawkish side, Max, but I can't believe you're part of this abomination. I'm gonna fight you and your monstrous financiers every step of the way. I know that you're at least twenty years away from having those bases ready, and I'm going to do everything in my power to stop you and prove you wrong. You hear me?"

Max had sighed, a stern, resigned look on his face. "I hear you, Jonathan. I was afraid you'd feel this way. You realize, of course, that I can't let you do that," he'd said, reaching for the holstered weapon he wore at all times.

Before Max had reached his pistol, Jonathan had leapt at him and KO'd him. "I don't recall asking for your permission, Max old buddy," he'd said to his unconscious former friend. Standing back, he looked long and hard at the unconscious Max. He considered killing him but let go of that thought for two reasons. One, he still hoped that Max would come around and join his protest. They shared a deep bond that was only shared by men who warred together. Two, killing Max would not stop this thing. The black hearts would only put someone else in his place. At least Jon knew who he was dealing with, with Max and how Max's thought process worked.

Jonathan knew his days with the Navy were now over, and he'd have to be miles away before Max came round. He ran to his car and took a towrope from the trunk. He moved Max's body to the shade of a large rock and trussed him up like a turkey. He knew the Sheriff or Highway Patrol would spot Max's parked car within hours and would investigate. But they were precious hours for him to disappear.

A chilling thought then hit him. Johanna! Sure he could go underground and hide out in the Montana hills with his patriot buddies, but what about her? He knew Max's rage at him would cause him to seek revenge on her, so she'd have to disappear too, but roughing it in the Montana backwoods was no life for her. No, they'd have to split up, with her living under a new identity. But Max is very resourceful, Jonathan thought. She'd have to be buried way deep under cover.

Heð hurried to the bookstore and said grimly, "The day we never wanted to come is here. Grab your emergency bag. We've gotta go underground."

One phone call to the storeowner later and they were on the way north to Montana. After driving through the night, they finally pulled up to a huge sprawling ranch, where Hans, a trusted friend, maintained several labs filled with advanced alternative science projects. Throwing off the binding oath heð taken, Jonathan had taken Hans aside and, on a long walk, had poured out the entire story, ending with the need for Johanna to "disappear."

Hans had contacted a mysterious figure called Miles who could only be reached by secure cell phone. After agreeing on the price for services, Miles guaranteed to take care of the problem. No one ever met him or knew how he went about his business. He used his clandestine network to arrange for Johanna's new life and identity, so neither Miles, Hans, nor Jonathan would know where she had gone or who sheð become. Jonathan's only comfort lay in knowing that if he couldn't find her, neither could Max.

Next came the hard part. Telling Johanna. The sound of her sobbing on the day theyð parted had haunted him every night since then, and sometimes the ache for her was beyond bearing.

A pack of coyotes yipping shrilly in the distance snapped him back to the present. He slid off the boulder and stretched his muscles. He was in amazingly good shape for a man of sixty and could easily pass for forty. He even had all his teeth and a full head of light brown hair, although a couple of gray streaks had sneaked in over the last few years. His whole muscle structure was toned and rippled with strength as a result of the project he and Max had worked on a decade ago. The Genesis Project that promised the world immortality had been just another miracle stolen by the selfish elite. Only the "chosen few" could have these things, and the hell with the "useless eaters," as Max liked to call them. How he hated that attitude. Fortunately, Hans had somehow spirited a Genesis device from the base and had enhanced it tenfold because of his insights into the human genome, the DNA signature that uniquely defines each person's body. Before going into hiding, Johanna had also received several treatments.

He ran both hands through his thick mane as if to peel away the memories of her. It was worse at times such as this when he was waiting and his mind was free to roam. Out in the wilderness, with no distractions but the mournful wind and the lonely howl of coyotes, her face was so real that he wanted to reach out and touch her. This was just the kind of place they loved to haunt. Theyð spend days hiking and nights gazing up at the heavens as heð named the stars for her. She always wanted to probe his soul and take him into the mysteries of life. Heð go along with it for a while, but his work would always pull him back to Earth. He just couldn't afford to go spacing off too often. Lack of focus gets people killed on missions like this, he thought.

He hadn't seen Johanna in 20 years. He didn't even know where she was or if she was dead or alive. He had always cherished the thought that, some day, things would work out and they could live happily ever after. It was the dream that kept him going. When a man lives in a nightmare, he has to have a dream or heð just roll over and die. The only thing worse than not being with her was the thought of what Max would do to her to punish him. Quickly, he dispatched that ugly thought but, even after twenty years, her absence in his life gnawed like a rat in his belly.

A silent rush of air swept past Jonathan's face. He instinctively crouched and turned. It was an owl, the great night hunter, harbinger of the grim reaper. "Bad sign," he said out loud, shaking his head. "Damn bad sign."

Suddenly he stiffened and raised his night-vision glasses. A light had appeared in the distance. It streamed out of an opening in the side of the Panamints, built into one of the huge natural arched windows in the soaring 6,000-foot range. In his mind, he marked all the ghostly landmarks around the spot of light. He picked up his knapsack and loaded up. AK-47, sidearm, desert battle fatigues, night vision gear, trail food, and his knapsack containing what Hans jokingly called Bad Baby—a one hundred-megaton nuclear bomb. He felt like the American Mujhadeen.

He began to jog towards the Panamints. He reached down to his web belt and removed a small electronic box and held it in front of his eyes. "Stealth! Check! Thank you, Hans," he whispered to himself, thanking his old friend. He didn't know how he would have managed the last 20 years without his help. Hans's little miracle was a clever stealth device that essentially made the wearer electronically invisible to radar, heat sensors, motion sensors, and virtually any other frequencies that might be thrown at you. Invisibility was often a life and death issue, especially where Jonathan was headed.

He began a final, mental scan of all that Hans had told him about the layout of the Deep Cover underground world. Hans was two rungs below their security clearance, but by keeping his eyes and ears open, he managed to stay more or less current with everything. It was from Hans that Jonathan had found out about the reconnaissance flights. The Deep Cover boys would take off from isolated locations for routine survey missions. Since he'd left Deep Cover in 1981, Max had perfected reverse-engineering captured UFO technology, and was maybe centuries ahead of the outside world when it came to technology. They had also perfected the post-WWII MK-Ultra project's use of electromagnetic wave frequencies for mind control and manipulation of the world's population. MK-Ultra had been established to continue the work of the Third Reich, and recruiting Hitler's scientists had been America's best-kept secret, although we had more or less divided them equally with the USSR after the Great War. The EM signals were broadcast through the normal microwave network and the HAARP phased array hidden in Alaska. A strong-willed and aware individual could avoid being influenced but, unfortunately, those were few and far between. And who would listen to such conspiracy theory madmen anyway, with their crazy talk? Most people were content just to make it through the week before their paycheck ran out, or to focus on their favorite TV soap opera—sheeple—as Max called them when he got tired of "useless eaters."

Jonathan pushed the thought from his mind and dragged his focus back on point. Normally he was totally focused on a mission, but this was a mission like no other. This was the finale. Do-or-die time. The whole world hung in the balance, and he'd have just one shot. No second chances. If his "Darling Starling" was alive and well, he wanted her to have a future. A small part of him even hoped she'd found a good man and had the family she had always wanted. He wanted only happiness for her. Of course, part of him hoped that someday they would be able share their lives again, but it was a part that was usually stifled, thanks to Max.

He was surprised at a sudden surge of anger at Max and the shadowy figures that supported him and his underground world—the Council of Nine. Jonathan knew that just a handful of powerful men really controlled the world and used their power to attract and control monsters like Max. Over the last decade, this tiny elite had actually created Max as their tool, and given him the reigns to the world's most sophisticated technology so that he could do their evil work for them while they lurked behind the scenes. From there, they would start wars just so that they could supply arms to both sides. Then fathers, husbands, brothers and sons would die while the

elite boosted their fortunes. Having lost the love of his life, Jonathan felt as much a victim as anyone who died to enrich the elite, and he cursed under his breath, "Damn the power masters and damn their lapdogs like Max."

What really pisses me off, he thought, is what they're doing to my country. An avid patriot, he knew the cost that early Americans had paid to rid their land of British oppression. During long hard campaigns, a brave but ragtag band with few resources had bested the mighty British Army. And now, the greedy fat cat Council of Nine was eroding everything The Founding Fathers had fought for, and jeopardizing the freedom of good people the world over.

Jonathan's reverie was broken by the emergence of a flying craft from the illuminated opening in the mountain. Then the huge door slowly closed and sealed shut, and the mountain was back to being a shimmering ghost. The craft was one of the Pleadian bell-shaped vehicles that used the mountain as a hangar. The whirling lights around its edge began to strobe, and it picked up speed. About two hundred feet off the ground, it headed right for him but, just as it was almost on top of him, it made a sharp right angle turn and took off at Mach 5, flying upward at a 45 degree angle. Jonathan didn't start breathing again until it disappeared into the starry sky. Thank God for Hans' electronic shield, he thought.

"Well, I guess the UFO buffs are in for more sightings tonight," he said to the sky.

Jonathan re-started his jog toward the area from which the craft had first appeared. He knew from Hans that he had at least two hours before they returned. "At least that long," Hans had said, "and probably more."

Jonathan's eyes were suddenly captured by another flying object. The owl again. It flew directly across his path about fifty feet ahead and then on down the line of flight, hooting loudly. He grimly wondered if the bird could actually read death in his aura. White Eagle believed that the owl was drawn to death. "All birds are messengers," he would say. "Each of them has its own special message." White Eagle often spoke about the return of the "Bird Tribes," adding, "You know them as Pleadian."

When he and Max had discovered the fallen spacecraft back in the seventies, Space Command had no idea where it was from. White Eagle had said it was Pleadian. Jonathan had met White Eagle just after his falling-out with Max. On one of his trips to find a cave to stash some of his gold in a cave, he accidentally wandered on to the Hopi reservation. When he'd emerged from the cave, an old Indian had been sitting on a rock smoking a pipe. Jonathan had frozen in complete surprise. *No one* ever crept up on Jonathan Ladd. At least not until now. But as he was about to find out, White Eagle wasn't just anyone.

The gnarled old Indian had just grinned and chuckled. "Howdy, white man. Sit down and have a smoke."

White Eagle had no security clearance but seemed to know everything about Jonathan, his bust-up with Max and what was happening at the Space Command with Deep Cover. It deeply perplexed and fascinated Jonathan, and the two became fast friends. When Jonathan defected, White Eagle had hid him on the reservation for a while and "worked on his soul," as he put it. He called Jonathan a "great warrior spirit." Johanna used to tell him the same thing in her own way, but Jonathan never could figure what they saw in him. He just did what he did and was what he was.

Each time Jonathan had gone to visit White Eagle unannounced over the years, the old shaman had always seemed to be expecting him and was there to meet him. How White Eagle was always where he was needed was definitely a mystery, even now. He'd take Jonathan on what he called "power walks," to meditate, renew himself and rest. The shaman would tantalize

him with comments such as, "You'll be a great teacher one day, Jonathan Ladd," but when Jonathan had asked for more, the old Indian would just clam up and puff furiously on his pipe.

The last time he'd seen White Eagle had been eight months ago, when he'd confided his plans for the demise of the Deep Cover project. He'd asked him what he thought of the idea. White Eagle sat for several moments in deep thought as he puffed his old craggy pipe. Finally, all he said, with a deadpan expression, was, "I guess a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do, Johnny."

Jonathan had stared at his friend with a dumb expression and then burst out laughing. He realized that was all the old shaman was going to say and that was probably just enough. His mind had been totally made up anyway, and he'd just been looking for confirmation.

Jonathan found himself remembering all the people he had met on his 20-year sojourn through the underground. Old soldiers and other warriors of life left behind by time and events, voices censored from the mainstream all flashed through his mind as he ran across the still-hot moonlit desert towards his final destination. Victims of the system, who had been raped by the IRS, or some other government agency, or blackballed because of their politics. Burned out from drugs or alcohol, trying to kill the pain of what they knew. Jonathan had been the Lone Ranger to a lot of them, giving them money and support on many occasions. He'd helped a lot of people out of a lot of bad deals and righted a lot of wrongs. Max's agents always seemed to be just days behind him and a lot of people had helped him out when he'd needed a hideout or a fast getaway. Each knew him by a different name, none of them the right one. Now and then, one of his aliases would come up on talk radio in connection with information he'd leaked about the "secret government" and its plans for the world. He'd hear some of this information repeated on various radio shows and web-sites, fueling controversy about whether he was a "deep throat" insider or government disinformation source. He'd chuckle to himself on hearing it. "I'm a regular walking X-Files."

Finally at the foot of the cliff that had opened to allow the UFO to leave, he stopped to catch his breath, grateful for the Genesis technology that had given him the physique of a much younger man. The night was still and quiet. No sign of any more starcraft. The temperature had dropped to 92 degrees. "Finally, cooling off a little," he whispered to the night. "The climb won't be so rough now."

He could see the spot he had to stake out, about a quarter of a mile up the 45-degree slope that then went vertical. The hidden door was right where the cliff met the downward slope in a large canyon, well off the beaten path. There were no roads out this way. A man had to hike in on foot or horseback. There was nothing here but wind, sand, and stars, along with the owls and coyotes. And the occasional UFO.

Swinging his backpack on, the feel of the bomb brought home the full weight of the impending operation and he shuddered. A last apparition of Johanna's face filled his mind. She was smiling her hauntingly beautiful smile at him, her long rich chestnut hair cascading around her face and shoulders. He heard her say, "I love you, Jonathan," and lost control for a moment, as a deep sob wracked his body at the realization that he would probably never see her again. He'd resolved himself to the fact that if he couldn't get out again after planting the bomb, this would be a suicide mission, and shivered with premonition. He caught himself and shook it off with a muffled growl, "Getting soft in your old age, Johnny."

Summoning up his old commando resolve, he began the climb and 30 minutes later had reached the gate to the underworld. It had been a tough climb, the way riddled with rocks, boulders and patches of shale that had threatened to become rockslides. It would have been a

difficult climb even in daylight, let alone by moonlight, but the Genesis Program had not only preserved his youth, but had also doubled his physical strength and stamina. It was a miracle that he and Max had planned to share with the whole world. At least until everything had gone to hell.

Jonathan carefully examined the cliff face. He knew he was right in front of the huge door, but couldn't find any trace cracks. The craggy and uneven surface concealed them perfectly. "Okay, guys. I'll wait for you to show me," he said, and settled down behind a large boulder, just to the left of the opening, by his calculations. When the UFO came back after jacking all the sighting buffs, he planned to bolt into the mountain entrance right after it, before the door was once again sealed tight.

From his pack, he retrieved a bar of high-energy trail food to recharge himself. He was going to need every bit of energy he could get. After he finished eating, he opened up the knapsack to check the bomb.

Hans had built this, too. An ultra-compact, high-yield device, not only with a powerful blast, but a high-yield toxic neutron radiation, that had a 250,000-year half-life for long-term anti-personnel effect. No one would be using this base for a quarter of a million years, he thought grimly. And the fact that the base was hermetically sealed would keep the poisonous toxins down where they belonged.

Jonathan knew they had greatly expanded the tunnels and dome caverns since he'd last been down there but he knew he could take the subway train to the main China Lake base and place the bomb in a key location. The blast would take out not only key equipment and personnel, but also send shock waves and radiation through the tunnel system and ideally disrupt the entire underground network. He couldn't actually accomplish total destruction, but he could set the whole project back a generation, time enough for the world to solve its problems in a more civilized manner. It was a long shot, one he'd willingly give his life for if it freed the world of a madman such as Max and his evil cabal.

From maps Hans had provided, Jonathan knew where the best placement of the bomb should be for the maximum effect. He also had an escape route planned out using one of the old airshafts. All the shafts had long ago been sealed after the air renewal and recycling system had been perfected, but the C4 explosive in his pack should open one of the shafts enough for his escape before the bomb detonated. That is, if he wasn't caught or shot first. If they caught him after he placed the bomb, he would meet his Maker along with them. If they caught him before he placed it, his pocket detonator would do the deed on the spot. One way or another, this evil enclave was gonna burn. He had braced himself for that.

One thought, however, saddened him greatly. Most of the people down there were totally ignorant of the Four Horsemen project. As usual, a small clique was behind the evil, well-funded by what Hans called "Hell's Covenant" The secret Council of Nine, who had built their own ark for themselves and their chosen few. They planned to recreate the New World Order in their own image after they'd unleashed the furies of death on an unsuspecting humanity. Any survivors would be enslaved by the new masters, with nary a peep of protest remaining anywhere. In the great and noble minds of these elite, the world just had too many useless eaters to sustain. The responsibilities of running a teeming planet had become just too great a challenge and they wanted out. A vicious viral epidemic would do the job nicely, and leave the infrastructure viable, not to mention the thriving wildlife and plant life.

Jonathan was appalled yet fascinated by this mentality, and often wondered if it had ever occurred to the elite to just let people solve their own problems. Why not let the natural geniuses

be free to share the creative wealth of their minds with all mankind? Why did they feel the need to have iron grip control over everything that moved? What kind of a sick trip was that? He and his fellow patriots the world over had tried every conceivable plea, but nothing would change their minds.

George Washington and the people of his time had had the same problem with the British. The King would simply not be moved, so they had to move him by force of arms. Jonathan identified directly with those great spirits of yesterday. He had come to understand what they had confronted and endured for their freedom. He was about to fire a similar shot that would be literally felt around the world. At least a seven on the Richter scale, he thought grimly.

And where's God in all this, if He even exists, Jonathan wondered? Is this remote planet too small a stake in the cosmic crap game? Einstein had once said, "God doesn't play dice," but is He even watching how the dice roll? Does He care? Or has He cast me in the role of dark avenging angel, righting a monumental wrong-in-the-making? Christ, I wish I knew whether I'm being a monster or global savior. Well, we'll soon find out.

As Jonathan waited, he reflected on all those reverse-engineered ET marvels that would not be lost, but harnessed to better the lot of *all* people, not just the elite few. The cure for all diseases, free, clean and limitless energy, anti-gravity devices, and, of course, the Genesis Project. Jonathan, Hans, and Johanna were all living proof of the miracle. They hadn't aged a day in two decades.

Other technology included an amazingly effective desalinization process that could give the world clean and limitless water, and a means to re-oxygenate the Earth's atmosphere and thus revitalize all living things. It would even clean the now unbreathable air in Mexico City and Tokyo, and cleanse the world's oceans and lands of all pollution. Soil and crop enhancement techniques could quadruple crop yields, allowing the world's population to first stabilize and then reduce as all people were allowed to prosper and come into true knowledge. The group had the ways and means to establish a true "Heaven on Earth." Until a few people had gotten greedy and wanted it all for themselves, that is.

The elite just couldn't seem to accept the idea of a free and empowered humanity not under their control. Jonathan now knew that "absolute power corrupts absolutely." With all this promise and miracles afoot, all the elite could think to do was hog it all for themselves and then release the Four Riders of the Apocalypse: plague and disease, widespread flooding, violent storms, and finally global drought. The resulting wars and famines would kill off any "excess humans" that survived the viral plague. The madmen had actually gone beyond being mere kings, and saw themselves as "gods," or Olympians, as Max called them, masters of the universe. Johanna used to joke that they just weren't taking their medication. Having exhausted every other option, and trying a hundred times in a hundred different ways, he was at the gates of hell with a one hundred-megaton firestorm by his side and the world was out of time. A sudden rustling startled him. The owl had landed on the boulder behind which Jonathan sheltered. The two stared at each other for several long moments. A chill went up his spine, and he finally spoke to the bird. "I guess you really do know what's coming, don't you, old buddy?"

The big bird ruffled its wings and hooted several times at him. Big, startled eyes gazed down at him. The owl suddenly turned its head to look at something, and seemingly startled, spread its wings and flew into the night.

Jonathan turned to see what had spooked the owl. A beautiful multi-colored light on the horizon signaled the return of the craft. With a deep mechanical rumble, the great door in the cliff began to slide open. An eerie light flooded out into the canyon. Jonathan bolted into action

and went into full commando mode. A lifetime of training and experience was now swinging into action. He donned his knapsack and prepared to enter the underground world.

Show time!

## CHAPTER TWO THE OPENING

Still hidden from view by the boulder, Captain Ladd crouched about six feet from the massive opening in the cliff. As the star craft slowed its approach, he could hear the electronic hum and the powerful electrical field it generated made the hair on the back of his head, stand up straight. His stealth device was working perfectly. The sophisticated detection system had no idea he was there.

The ship glided smoothly through the enormous doorway that was easily seventy-five feet across and fifty feet high. These doors were a new development since he'd been part of the operation. In his day, all the entrances had been on military bases only, such as China Lake, Edwards and Nellis, with tunnel systems and underground trains connecting them all.

As the huge door began to close behind the ship, Jonathan lunged for the opening and slid inside at the last second. He found himself in a vast, long hallway and saw the ship floating about two hundred feet ahead of him. It disappeared around a corner, its eerie hum finally fading out of hearing range. No alarms went off, so he assumed his stealth equipment was really working.

“So far, so good,” he whispered.

The bomb had its own stealth device built into it to prevent detection of its electronic emissions. Jonathan was confident he could successfully hide the explosive device. He was less confident of his ability to get out in time, however.

Moving to the smooth wall of the installation, he walked stealthily alongside it. The complex was well lit by an eerie yellow-orange light that seemed to emanate from the walls themselves. He ran his hand along the surface. “Christ, it’s as smooth as glass. We had nuclear-powered laser drillers in the eighties, so there’s no telling how much progress they’ve made.”

Hans hadn’t mentioned anything about the drillers to him, and Jonathan guessed that his security clearance hadn’t been quite high enough to find out about this.

Jonathan walked along for about a mile down into the mountain. He rounded the same corner where the ship had disappeared, and saw that the huge passage sloped downward about thirty degrees. Blocked by another huge door as big as the first but made of solid steel, he saw the small door in the side-wall that he was looking for. He tried the handle. Locked, of course. He pulled another electronic device from his web belt, aimed it at the lock, and pressed on the switch. The lock clicked open. Hans’s genius had worked again. Carefully, he opened the door and peeked around the edge. There was no one on the other side, so he went into what seemed to be an elevator lobby. He pressed the button and the doors swished open silently. He stepped in and the doors closed. Now another moment of truth, Hans, let’s see how good you really are, he thought. He pointed another device at the control panel, and the device in his hand displayed the numbers 5-7-9-8. He punched the numbers into the elevator control panel and waited tensely. If those numbers were wrong, a powerful laser beam mounted in the elevator ceiling would end the mission right there.

After a moment, a green light came on and the mag-lev elevator began its rapid, one-mile descent. He was aware of the sheer drop just an inch below his feet and shuddered. Hope this job didn’t go to the lowest bidder, he thought grimly, and focused on the panel display that ticked off the fast descent in feet. At 5,285 feet, the elevator stopped and the doors opened to reveal a subway station, but more modern and spotlessly clean than any subway he’d ever seen. The benches were clear glass-like and the tracks came out of round tubes as smooth as the entryway.

Wanting to find a hiding place to allow him to get his bearings, he walked along the platform and, about a hundred feet down the ramp, spotted another door. It looked like a service door but in this strange world he couldn't be sure. He turned the handle. It opened. Inside, he found a touch plate light switch and, with the light on, he saw a room filled with various switch panels and a control board, plus what he was really hoping to find—a service uniform hanging on the wall. He quickly changed clothes and hid his own uniform behind a panel. He grabbed a tote bag big enough for the bomb and his other equipment. He left the AK-47 but kept his sidearm and the special stun gun that Hans had devised. Now he could move around freely and blend in with the people.

Returning to the platform, Jonathan found it still empty so sat down on one of the crystal benches and opened the tote bag. He smiled at the foot-long cylinder with its panel of red LED numbers preset to 180:00. He figured that three hours would be long enough to get away once he'd armed Bad Baby. He pulled out the map Hans had given him. This station was called "Death Valley" and his destination lay to the southwest, the major operations center for the western region, under the China Lake base. The sleek mag-lev train would cover the 75-mile distance in about 15 minutes. He looked at his watch. 1:07, just five minutes before the hourly train was due.

Hearing voices and footsteps coming down the stairs, Jonathan pocketed the map and sat casually waiting for the train. Several people spilled into the platform, happily chatting with each other. Their uniforms were similar to his, but of an obviously higher rank. They eyed him briefly and when he nodded in recognition, they simply ignored him and resumed their conversation. Perfect, he thought. I'm just a regular grunt on some errand or other, and practically invisible.

A lot had changed since he'd been down here last. It had been a pretty crude place back then, but now everything was sleek and high tech. Hans had filled him in on all the changes as much as possible, but it still was a foreign place. A map on the wall showed a network of the subway system, apparently covering the entire western United States. Names such as Dulce and Groom Lake jumped out at him.

On schedule and with a muffled roar, the train burst out of the tunnel and came to a stop. Jesus! he thought. It's like something out of a science fiction movie. Sleek, shiny, and extremely fast, it looked more like a rocketship than a train.

"Our tax dollars at work," he muttered.

Painfully, he reflected on how much he, Hans and company, could have accomplished in the world with all the black budget money that had been poured into this project. Now it was all going to be wasted by his little surprise package. Far better than the alternative, he thought wryly.

As the sleek doors of the train opened, Jonathan let the others go in first. The six of them were still gabbing away, seemingly oblivious that he was even there. He sat down a few seats away, hoping to avoid any conversation.

Their conversation had shifted to a more serious subject—the cancellation of all leave. Nobody in this circle seemed to know why. A man with a neat well-trimmed beard who looked like a scientist turned to Jonathan. "Hey, soldier, do you happen to have any idea what might be going on with all the leave cancellations?"

Stunned by how fast the train was going—at least two hundred miles an hour—Jonathan was startled at the sudden intrusion on his invisibility. He looked dumbly at the man and shrugged, "You got me, sir. They don't tell me nothin'."

The man with the beard nodded as if he'd heard just what he'd expected to hear, and went back to talking to his associates, but in a lowered voice so Jonathan could no longer eavesdrop on their discussion.

The signs outside the window of the train told Jonathan that they passed through Smithtown, Stepford, Marstown and finally Capitol Dome. This was the one he wanted. Capitol Dome, the nexus in a natural cavern deep under China Lake.

Bag in hand, Jonathan was the last one to depart the train. The station, about ten times the size of Death Valley station, bustled with activity, as about a hundred people milled around waiting to board. Jonathan was increasingly awed by the progress down here. There were more civilians here than soldiers, with everybody going somewhere. It truly was a growing civilization. How could those who lived and worked here not know that something was odd about all this, suspicious even? Or maybe they knew and didn't care. Hans didn't really know either. He worked on the surface and hadn't been down here in a while. Everyone seemed extremely happy and healthy, apparently without a care in the world. He dubbed them, "the people of the ark."

Jonathan started up the gradual exit passage. After about two hundred feet, he emerged to be met with a truly grand sight. A small city built under a huge dome cut out of the solid rock, about a mile across by his estimation. The streets had name signs, and were complete with shops with planter boxes filled with flowers outside their windows, sidewalks with trees, quaint little streetlights, and bicycles everywhere. "Just like Disneyland," Jonathan muttered. He was completely unprepared for all this. He heard music in the air coming from some unseen source and could see the Capitol building in the distance.

A civilian man walked by with a large parrot on his shoulder. "Auk! Polly-wanna-crackerjack! Auk!" the parrot screeched. The man smiled and chuckled at Jonathan as he walked by. Jonathan smiled back, thinking that he must have had a dumb look on his face.

"Excuse me, sir!" a voice commanded from behind him.

Jonathan wheeled around and found himself gazing up at an MP, who stood at least six foot seven and 250 pounds of pure muscle. About 25 years old, he had light blond wavy hair and steely blue eyes.

Good God! Jonathan thought. It's Hitler's wet dream. Jonathan stood six foot two himself, but this behemoth not only looked down on him but also outweighed him by 50 pounds. If this guy had the same combat training as me, and if he had the benefit of the Genesis project, then he could take me apart, Jonathan thought.

"Yessir," he said, trying to sound humble.

"Papers please, sir," the giant commanded.

Wide-eyed and innocent, Jonathan looked up at the giant superman, "Oh, of course. No trouble, officer." Reaching in his front shirt pocket, he produced the official work order that Hans had smuggled out for him that ordered him to do electrical repairs on the Capitol building.

While Superman briskly read through the papers, Jonathan wondered whether this guy was actually a human replicant like The Terminator. Before he could decide one way or another, the giant returned his papers just as briskly as he'd taken them.

"Everything seems to be in order. I'll need to see in the tote bag, too."

Jonathan's blood froze. He'd never expected this. To buy time, he knelt, placed the pack on the ground and fumbled with the zipper. "Shit, what do I do now?" "Sorry, officer," he said, "this zip's a bugger."

A cry suddenly went up down the street and Jonathan looked up just in time to see a garbage receptacle going up flames. The MP ran to investigate, calling over his shoulder, "Carry on, soldier."

Jonathan watched him go, and muttered, "Christ, that was too damned close." He was relieved that his papers had passed inspection, however. Hans was good. He continued toward the Capitol building, which seemed to be smack in the middle of the great domed city. He was anxious to unload his fearsome burden before he was stopped again.

A small parade of children crossed one of the streets up ahead. Ranging from age six to the early teens, they appeared happy and healthy, laughing and joking just like any other children. He realized they must be on their way to school since they were carrying books. Suddenly, he was mortified with guilt and doubt. He was about to turn their rosy young faces to ash. The terrible feeling transported him to Viet Nam, where he'd seen small children burning up in a napalm attack. That had been the last time he'd ever witnessed such horrible acts of war and he'd sworn that he would never again be a part of such atrocities. Now here he was, about to vaporize a town full of innocent American children who would pay for the sins of their fathers. No warning. Just an intense flash and they'd never know what hit them. They knew nothing of the Four-Horseman project or that five billion of their fellow Earthmen were about to die. Five thousand or five billion. Just do the math, he thought.

What about all the kids on the surface? he mused. I'm their advocate and they have a right to live too, don't they? Damn! Why do children always seem to be the victims of the miserable bastards of the world? And right now, I feel like one of those miserable bastards. God, how I hate this mission and what they're making me do, but I'd never ask anyone to do anything that I wouldn't do myself. Ha, Jonathan Ladd, protector of the free world.

As he walked on down the Disneyland-like boulevard, Jonathan tried not to look at the children. Instead, he marveled at the architecture and engineering before him. The ceiling of the dome emanated its own light just as the tunnels had. The dome was as smooth as glass and had no inner supports of any kind. Several tunnel openings led out of the complex and Jonathan knew that the blast would be transported in every direction from here, causing enormous damage to the whole installation, as well as to the plans of the would-be masters of the world. Without their high tech ark as a refuge, they wouldn't be so quick to go forward with their planned world genocide. Jonathan knew they had other shelter systems, in Australia, Europe, and Russia but, according to his intelligence sources, none of them rivaled this one. Its destruction would set them back decades.

A pretty little manicured park lay between him and the Capitol building, now only a block away. He looked at his watch. Only nine o'clock and his work order was scheduled for ten, still a whole hour yet. He didn't want to arouse suspicion by arriving too early, so he sat on one of the benches and waited. He took some of his trail food from his tote bag. He wanted to be fully charged up when it was time to flee the scene. He never knew what he might have to go through or what he might have to deal with next.

He marveled at the landscaping job of the one-acre park. Among the wonderful variety of trees and flowers, he noticed maples, birch, pines and copper beeches, all known to be powerful oxygen producers. Pansies, roses and bushes surrounded an immaculate lawn. For the first time, he noticed a breeze blowing—artificial of course, but it varied in intensity, producing the illusion of being out in nature.

As he finished eating, he began to reflect on his present situation and wondered for the hundredth time if what he was about to do was wrong. Now, after seeing this operation close up,

with its happy people and rosy children, he wondered more deeply than ever before. Wracked by angst and uncertainty, he wondered if maybe the power meisters weren't right after all. Maybe, like Noah, they had received a message from God. Maybe the doubt he felt was inspired by God Himself, in order to turn him from this heinous plan. Maybe he should stay right here and join up with them and help out here instead. Maybe í .

“Excuse me, soldier. Do you mind if I join you?”

Jonathan was jolted out of his reverie. Outwardly he was calm, thanks to decades of training, but inwardly, he was panicked to the core. He looked up at the congenial, friendly face and smiled faintly back at the man. He didn't want to raise any suspicions, so he went along and smiled. “Sure thing. Be my guest” he replied, waving the fellow to sit down.

The stranger sat at the opposite end of the bench and took out a sandwich. He wore civilian clothes and looked like a schoolteacher. Aged about 45, he sported a neatly trimmed beard with gray streaks. “I do hope I'm not intruding, but it's such a lovely day and I so enjoy good conversation whenever I can get it.”

Jonathan tried not to squirm with discomfort, thinking, shit he's a talker. “Absolutely. I'm with you,” he said, pleased with his job of being easy going and nonchalant.

The man took a bite of his sandwich and gazed at the foliage. “So, I hear they've canceled all the leave. I hope it didn't spoil any of your plans. It is interesting to get out and go topside once in a while, don't you think? I don't mind saying that I actually enjoy getting dirty every so often.”

Jonathan almost started laughing but reeled it in. “Yeah, I know what you mean.”

“Well, of course, you would. You're a soldier, aren't you?”

Jonathan nodded in agreement. “That I am, sir,”

“By the way, Hans sends his regards,” the man said casually.

Jonathan almost lost it completely, but merely blushed with total surprise. Again, his decades of training paid off.

“I don't believe I know any Hans,” he said, his instincts and training keeping him calm, while his emotions told him to kill this guy, make it look like he was asleep on the bench, then plant the bomb, and get the hell out of here as fast as he could without drawing any attention to himself.

The man just stared straight ahead as he spoke. “Don't be afraid, Jonathan. You and I and Hans are all on the same team. Hans sent me to meet you in case you needed assistance of any kind, as you did with that Nordic gorilla.”

Jonathan breathed a great sigh of relief and also stared straight ahead as he spoke. “Buddy, you scared the crap out of me. I thought you were some kind of Gestapo or something. I was about to dispatch you in a very unpleasant way.”

The man chuckled a little at that. “I'm very glad you didn't. Your reputation precedes you. Sorry about the fright, but I had to look casual about this. I'm sure you understand.”

“Of course, and thanks for the pyrotechnics in the garbage can,” Jonathan replied, greatly relieved.

“The name's Miles by the way,” the man said matter-of-factly.

Jonathan almost fainted but managed to finally say, “Pleased to meet you in the flesh. How is Johanna?”

Miles was about to take another bite of his sandwich but stopped himself and looked right at Jonathan as he spoke. “She's magnificent, Jonathan. She misses you as much as you miss her, I'm sure.”

Jonathan gulped hard. "That's not possible." He paused, almost too afraid to ask the next question. "Where is she, Miles, do you know?"

Miles hesitated as he struggled for the right words. Finally, he said, "I'll tell you after this operation is over. You know it's too dangerous for you both until the Beast is dethroned."

Jonathan nodded stiffly and turned his gaze away. "You're right. I just miss her so much. But she's alive and well?"

"Yes on both counts."

"Why are you here, really, Miles? How did you get in here? Do you work down here?"

Jonathan was anxious to know why Miles of all people was here, now, with him in the middle of this incredible mission. He hadn't expected to meet anyone he knew.

"I'm a trouble shooter, Jonathan. Both above and below ground, and I mean that in both senses. I take care of what needs to be taken care of." Miles smiled. "Hans and I also thought you may need a little support. So here I am."

"Thanks for telling me about Johanna, Miles. You have no idea how much that means to me."

"You're welcome. It's almost ten. Not having second thoughts are you?"

Startled by this question, Jonathan wondered if Miles was also psychic. "As a matter of fact, I was wondering again if we were making a mistake. Maybe all this down here really is the best hope for mankind? Maybe this whole operation is really God's word and planning in action. Are we so sure we're right?"

Miles said slowly, "We are as sure of ourselves as men can be, Jonathan. You know very well what we've gone through with these people. The research, the cross-referencing, the pleading. What did the great master say about how to know whether men were good and true or not?"

"By their works shall ye know them."

"Exactly," Miles replied emphatically. "Neither the Earth nor mankind belong to these power-meisters, do they? Yet they behave as if they hold the deeds to both in their hands. They behave as if they were God Himself. It is an ancient story, as old as man. Men have not only tried to dominate one another, but also their very Creator and Creation itself. It's the original fall of the Luciferians."

Miles paused for emphasis. "As the old adage goes, Jonathan, 'The only thing necessary for evil to succeed is for enough good men to do nothing.' You know what you have to do now, don't you?"

Jonathan nodded in resignation. "Thanks for the Ethics 101 lesson. This operation has not been a simple thing to embrace. Not at all easy."

Miles put his sandwich away and got up. "I know, Jonathan. But don't be hard on yourself. I'd just like you to know how refreshing it is to deal with a man of conscience. I spend most of my time next to the devil. After all, someone has to keep an eye on him." Miles chuckled. "It's a dirty job but someone has to do it, right?"

Jonathan smiled weakly. "Guess you're right. By the way, how do you plan to get out of here before the blast?"

Miles chuckled again. "Simple. I'm taking the elevator. I'm free to move around as I please. Max trusts me implicitly." He said.

Standing up. "See you topside, my friend. Then we'll see about Johanna."

Jonathan stood up too. "Okay, Miles. Thanks for all your help. I think I'm all right now."

"You're more than all right, Jonathan. Listen, you better get going. It's almost time."

Jonathan looked at his watch. "You're right," He said, picking up the tote bag.

"Oh, by the way, Jonathan."

Jonathan turned to face him and found Miles smiling wryly at him. "Yes, I am quite psychic by the way."

Then he turned and walked away. Jonathan watched him head toward the train station. "That figures," he muttered, and headed through the park to the Capitol building.

His rendezvous with destiny had finally arrived. He was ready now. In spite of the terrible task ahead, he felt elated at hearing news of his beloved Johanna. He came to the steps of the Capitol and stopped to look up at the impressive building.

It was made of beautiful white marble with loads of brass trim. At least he thought it was brass from afar but, as he ascended the steps of the two-story structure, he realized that the handrail was actually gold plate. The opulence disgusted him. What an extravagant waste of the people's money. I guess they figured they might as well since the people weren't going to be around that much longer anyway, he thought.

As he entered the building through gold-plated doors, the young, pretty receptionist gave him a friendly greeting. She reminded him of a Barbie doll.

"Good morning," she said with music in her voice. "Can I help you, sir?"

Jonathan smiled back at her and handed her the work order. "I'm here to fix an electrical problem with the ventilation."

She nodded, looking over the order. "Oh yes. Have you been here before?"

"No, It's very impressive."

"Yes, it is," she said, true pride and sincerity in her voice. "You need to go to the roof. Just take the elevator straight up," she said, pointing to the shaft entrance.

"Thank you," Jonathan replied curtly and politely. "You have a fine day."

"Same to you, sir."

The elevator was trimmed in gold just as the rest of the building. It moved so quickly that the door opened to let him out before he expected it to. He spotted the ventilation unit in the center of the roof. From the roof, he could see several little parks dotted around, filled with people headed for work. Two policemen rode in a golf cart type vehicle, seemingly on regular patrol. People were coming and going from about twelve openings in the dome. He could also see the opening that he had come through and noted how to get back to it. Automatically, he developed two alternative routes in his mind, just in case.

From a flagpole, a flag flapped in the artificial breeze. Jonathan had seen the flag from the ground, but hadn't been able to make out what was on it. Now he saw that it portrayed planet Earth from out in space. It had a rainbow over it and the peace insignia of the United Nations on either side. Jonathan felt like barfing at the joke on the human race.

He knelt down and got to work. The cover to the ventilator came off easily, to reveal ample room for the bomb. He opened the backpack and removed the deadly device. He quickly punched in the activation code and watched the countdown begin from 180.00. He set the unit in the ventilator shaft where the magnetic pad snapped onto the metal. Any attempt to remove it would instantly detonate it. He replaced the cover, zipped up the pack and set out for the elevator, not looking back.

In the elevator, he took the bomb's portable detonator unit out of his pocket and hooked it onto his service belt. The receptionist didn't look up from her paperwork when he left the building. As he made his way briskly back through the park and down Main Street, he could feel the force of the bomb breathing down his neck. It was now an active, pregnant event and he just

wanted to get as far away from it as possible and as fast as possible. All the guilt and angst was gone. The decision had been made and the deed done.

As he came to the exit for the train station, he took one last look back at the city. He also wanted to make sure no one was following him. His plan was to take the train back to Death Valley and leave via an old airshaft that Hans had marked on the map. About a hundred people waited on the platform for the train. Jonathan stood near them trying to blend in with the crowd. With a whoosh, the train shot out of the tunnel and came to a halt. Six burly MPs exited the rear car, in a box formation around a woman with cascading chestnut hair. Jonathan's blood froze when he saw her. It was Johanna in handcuffs! As she swung her head to toss the hair out of her eyes, they made eye contact. He was about to shout to her when she subtly shook her head to remain silent and not attempt rescue. She turned to face ahead and allowed the MPs to march her away.

Jonathan was trapped. His emotions tumbling over each other. What to do? Rescue wasn't an option, but neither was returning to the bomb because even he couldn't disarm it. He'd just consigned his darling starling to death. He figured that she'd known why he was there and had bravely sacrificed herself. Jonathan felt vomit rising in his throat. He felt like Bruce Lee had just ripped his heart from his chest and handed it to him with an evil grin.

His turmoil was broken by the sight of a man in a seemingly highly agitated state coming down the ramp onto the platform.

It was Miles, completely disheveled and out of breath. Jonathan scanned over the heads of the passengers still gawking at Johanna's entourage, for signs of pursuit. As Miles reached him, he grabbed Jonathan's arm and led him hurriedly down the platform. "Hurry, Jonathan. Get on the train. There's no time to lose."

Jonathan moved with him. "Miles, they have Johanna. I just saw her led away in handcuffs. How can we stop this thing?"

Miles ducked behind one of the large pillars, taking Jonathan with him. "Listen, I was arrested. I've been under suspicion for some time now, apparently. I was picked up for questioning. Is everything in place?"

"Yes. How did you get free? What about Johanna and now you?" His mind reeled with the dilemma. Then his heart took over. "We have to scrap the mission."

Miles frantically shook his head. "Jon, they're re-running the surveillance tapes with my picture in the computer. The computer will trace my every move since I came down here. They'll see us talking in the park and will be after you, too. It may be too late already." Miles hesitated with sadness in his eyes. "Never mind about me. As for Johanna, I'm sorry. I have no idea how they found her. I guess you'll just have to decide what the best thing is for all concerned."

Jonathan heard the train's "one minute to departure" signal. "Come on, Miles. We're getting out of here, right now. Then I'm calling the base on the cell phone and telling them where the bomb is, after calling Hans as to how to disarm it."

Guiding Miles towards the train. "You may be my only hope of ever seeing Johanna again. You know Max and his whole operation inside out. No way am I leaving you behind."

"No, wait." Miles protested. "We can't risk the train. They could stop it in a tunnel. We'd be trapped. There's an airshaft."

Miles never got to finish. A stun ray put him out cold. As Miles slipped to the floor, Jonathan drew his own stun gun from his service belt. He fired a wide beam at the first three

MPs, and they all collapsed. The other four fanned out to surround him. The people about to board the train ran screaming up the ramp to safety.

A loud siren began to wail, which only added to the panicking melee. The MPs were now all firing at the pillar Jonathan was using as a shield. He realized that he was hopelessly out-gunned and was bound to be caught. If they caught him, the game was over. He and Johanna would be executed and there would be no chance to ever stop Max again or to rescue his true love from the hands of evil. He just had to make good his escape. He took out another electronic device and pressed its button. He then slid the device out to the middle of the platform. A moment later, it emitted a bright flash, and an electromagnetic pulse melted the chips in all the stun guns within a hundred yards, including his own.

The automatic train gave the doors closing signal, and Jonathan leapt towards the door. All the MPs lunged for him at once. As the first two approached, Jonathan held onto the closing doors for leverage, lifted both boots off the floor and planted a foot in each face. They both went down, out cold. From there, he became a flurry of feet and hands. The third MP had martial arts training but nowhere near Jonathan's experience and training. Still fighting with the doors as they repeatedly tried to close, Jonathan was suddenly facing the mountain of a cop who'd stopped him earlier. As the giant man lunged for him, Jonathan brought both feet up to the man's face and kicked with full force, pushing the cartilage in the cop's up into his brain.

Jonathan let the doors close completely, and the train started moving automatically. More MPs appeared with intact stun guns and tried to fire at him through the windows as he ran low to the forward control cockpit. He kicked in the door and quickly found the manual override control exactly where Hans had told him it would be. That would stop the central computer from bringing him back to the station. He pulled a panel off the console and pushed the large red lever all the way forward. This activated the manual speed and brake controls. He the speed control slider all the way forward. The sudden lunge forward threw him backwards. The LED panel was showing 348, 48 beyond the red line.

"Damn," he said out loud. "Damn, damn, damn," he repeated, pounding his fist on the console. "Johanna, hear my heart. I'll stop this and get you free, no matter what it takes. Just hold on, baby."

Back in Death Valley station, he slowed the train to 150. For a split second, he saw the blurred faces of people waiting for the train as its pressure wave bowled them backwards. He slowed to 60 as he approached the old airshaft vent opening. He was looking for the number 30 on the side of the tube wall. 28 - 29. Just before number 30, he slammed on the powerful magnetic brakes and brought the train to a dead stop. He pushed the manual door button and jumped out onto the track bed. He walked out in front of the train and found the old vent opening about twenty feet ahead. Sealed with masonry of some kind, it almost blended in with the rest of the tunnel.

He pulled a device from his belt, aimed it at the ceiling, and fired. A thin cord shot up and lodged in the ceiling. He pressed a button and was slowly winched up to the ceiling by the cord. He then unclipped a C4 pack from his belt, stuck it to the old vent door, released the winch control button and slid downwards. He leapt behind the train for cover. Ten seconds later, the tunnel was filled with dust and flying debris. He returned to check the damage.

Hearing another train coming from the opposite direction, he removed a second winch from his belt and hoisted himself to the hole he had created. He scrambled into the hole just as the other train slowed and stopped. As he searched frantically for a ladder, he heard orders being

shouted down below. Finally, in the pitch black, his hands found the ladder and he began to climb for his life.

### CHAPTER THREE CAVE OF THE ANCIENTS

Rapidly ascending the ladder, Jonathan was about five hundred feet up when he stopped to look down. The squad of police that had scrambled from the other train had found a way up to the hole he'd made and were now at the bottom of his ladder, scanning for him with powerful beams of light. He pulled out a tear gas bomb and dropped it. Through the coughing and yelling below, he thought he heard one of them shout down the hole for someone to send up gas masks. Jonathan continued his desperate climb, as wild shots zinged and ricocheted off the airshaft walls. They were using good old-fashioned bullets now.

Another two hundred feet up, Jonathan saw a tunnel leading off the main shaft. He beamed his light into it but couldn't see where it stopped, so he decided to keep going up. After another two hundred feet, the shaft ended with a solid steel hatch. He banged on it with his flashlight and was dismayed to hear only a deep thud of thick metal. "Shit," he cursed out loud to himself. "A damned blast door. Guess it's plan B."

He hurriedly descended the ladder to the sideways tunnel. He could hear the police squad clattering up the ladder, maybe fifty feet below him. He could almost make out their muffled speech as they talked through their gas masks. He lunged into the smaller tunnel. It was only six feet high, so he had to duck as he ran through it.

"He's in here," one of his pursuers yelled, starting down the tunnel.

"Wait. Launch a grenade," another voice commanded.

Jonathan stopped, fully aware of what a rocket-propelled grenade could do. He stuck another C4 pack to the ceiling and ran like hell. It had only a five-second fuse. He heard the "whoosh" of the rocket-propelled grenade a split second before the C4 exploded. The grenade detonated against the falling debris and added to the explosion he wanted to create. He hoped they thought he was dead now and would give up the chase.

I might very well be dead, he thought, and just don't know it yet. He continued down the tunnel, slowing to a quick trot. In his flash light beam, he noticed that much cruder tools, than had made the laser shafts had made this tunnel.

After a mile, the shaft slanted upwards. He'd heard no sounds of pursuit, so he figured either they believed him dead or were trying to dig through the good 20 feet of rubble to find a body.

His heart sank when the powerful light illuminated the result of an earlier cave-in. He was trapped. The immediate detonation couldn't directly harm him, but a 100-megaton blast 75 miles away could bring the tunnel down, or at least bury him alive. Now, of course, he had also decided to put a stop to the whole thing. The thought of his other half being vaporized, burned in his mind like acid. The thought closed in on him like the dark tunnel he was trapped in. A dire feeling washed over him that if he failed to free himself and stop the blast, that he would prefer to be buried alive, rather than live with the thought of having fried the love of his life. His well-trained commando part, snapped him back into action. Nothing was over till the fat lady sang, he thought fiercely to himself.

He scanned the rubble pile closely. It appeared to be a solid mass but, as he dug into it a ways, he found a gap and felt a draft of fresh air. "Well, well. Maybe we have something here." He muttered

Removing his last C4 pack from his belt, he placed it in the gap. This was it. Either the C4 would clear the way or bring the roof down and entomb him. He set the charge and ran back 50 feet. He lay flat facing away from the blast, and covered his head with his hands. The tunnel

roared with deafening thunder and filled with acrid, ancient dust. Coughing, he got up and went to the hole. As the dust cleared, he shone his light through the opening. His heart soared as he dug a hole open, just wide enough for him to squeeze through. After a minute of scrabbling, he wriggled into the opening, and crashed down in pitch dark on to a smooth floor-like surface.

“What the hell?” he exclaimed, surprised by the echo.

To his surprise, the air in the chamber was fresh, with a faint scent of incense hanging in the air. He beamed his light in an arc as he checked his surroundings. He was in a very large chamber whose walls were of a smooth, shiny, dark substance. In the center of the chamber was a line of huge pillars, with three doorways leading off the chamber.

“My God,” his voice echoed. “What is this place?”

Seeing what looked like a table by one of the pillars, he walked over to investigate. When the light hit the table, he saw unfamiliar symbols carved into the top of it. As he reached out and touched one of the symbols—a circle with lines radiating outward—the whole room began to glow with some kind of source-less lighting that had been used in the underground city. He saw that all the walls and pillars were covered with ancient carvings. It was the most beautiful ancient art he had ever seen, more elaborate than the Egyptian, or Mayan works.

Except for the table and pillars, the room was empty. He decided to try the doors. He couldn’t help gasping in awe as he walked.

As Jonathan reached the first doorway, he saw it had no handle. He tried pushing against it. It was solid black rock, as were the walls and floor of the whole chamber. The edges of the floor and ceiling had other kinds of carved stone overlaid as a border. Jonathan ran his hands along the black surface. At first, he thought that it might be onyx but then he realized what it was and why his Deep Cover surveyors had not discovered it. It was obsidian. He remembered reading that, treated in a certain way, obsidian could block out psychic probes, sonar, radar, as well as other sonic resonators. That’s why this place had remained untouched. When he’d been on the Deep Cover team, they had used sonic equipment to locate natural caves that could be used for the project. If not for the shielding of the black rock, this ancient installation would definitely have been discovered in those earlier probes.

He tried the other two doors, but they were the same, all immovable. Standing at least fifteen feet tall by ten feet wide, the doors were massive, as if giants had once haunted this place.

He returned to the table and studied the three other symbols. The first one—the sun symbol had turned on the lights. The second looked like a cross between a rocket ship and an ear of corn, and the third, a square with ornate carvings and the fourth, finally, a chair with some kind of symbol on the backrest. Jonathan didn’t have any idea what any of them meant, so he just pushed on the corn-spaceship. The door at the far end opened up, sliding silently to one side. Smiling, he walked over to the pitch black opening. He hesitated at first and then walked in. As he entered, the source-less light came on for him all by itself. What he beheld took his very breath away. Measuring 50 by 100 feet and 20 feet high, the room was filled entirely with treasure. Along both sides of the wall and along the back of the room, thick, round, solid gold ingots were stacked ten deep almost to the ceiling.

Each ingot weighed about 50 pounds, he estimated, or 800 ounces. He did some quick mental math. \$200,000 each, and there are maybe 10,000 of them. That’s a good God. He whistled quietly. “Two billion dollars. Trouble is, I’d need a damned truck to move all this.”

Several large bins made of beautiful white marble stood in the center of the room, filled with what appeared to be precious gems—enormous beautiful diamonds, rubies, sapphires, emeralds, and others that he couldn’t identify. All different sizes, and some as big as his fist, they were the

most beautiful jewels he had ever seen, exquisitely cut. The treasure would have made Solomon faint. Who does all this wealth belong to, he wondered? Why and how is everything still so clean? Do people still use this place? He sighed in wonderment of it

Lost in thoughts of how rich he'd just become, he suddenly snapped back to reality. A glance at his watch revealed a countdown of 29: 48. In less than 30 minutes, this place could become his tomb if he didn't find a way out. Johanna's face also loomed in front of him. His heart began to race with the thought. He had two calls to make to stop the bomb, one to Hans and one to the China Lake Base and he could not make them from inside here. There would be plenty of time to deal with all this mystery later. For now, getting to the surface was everything.

At the control panel, he touched the two remaining symbols, which opened the other two doors. When he went to the next one, again the room was pitch black, but as he entered, the lights came on automatically. In the center of the room was the same square he had seen symbolized on the panel. It was actually a ten-by-ten square hole in the floor with carved ornate borders around it. Three gold discs about three feet in diameter were slightly inlaid into the floor around the hole. He went over to the hole and looked down into the pitch-black abyss. His flashlight shone into it, but could find no bottom, only blackness. He went over to the golden disks, and stepped on one, as that seemed to be the thing to do. It immediately levitated and hovered about six inches off the floor. He gasped and held his breath for a moment. He shifted his weight to try and move it, but it was just as immovable as if it were still on the floor. He surmised that the disk was a transport device for traveling through the complex and probably would take him down the hole. The minute he had that thought, the disk slid itself over the hole and began to descend. Something told him not to go down the shaft yet but to check out the other door first, so he stopped the disk with another thought. He thought of the disk replacing itself in its slot and it did so immediately. He stepped off and stood back from the whole operation. "Now that's some kinda technology. I wonder who built all this?"

He left the room and went to the other door. The room also lit up when he entered. He had expected to find a chair inside that matched the symbol on the control table and, sure enough, there it was, a throne for a giant. He walked round it, studying it. It was the only thing in the 20-by-20 square room, whose walls, unlike the other rooms, were not of obsidian but something like pink granite, as was the throne itself. The symbol on the backrest resembled a flower. Recognition dawned. It was the Flower of Life, a universal symbol in ancient Sacred Geometry. Jonathan was irresistibly drawn, to sit down in the chair. The thought crossed his mind that it might teleport him to the surface. Anything seemed possible now. He was willing to try anything at this point. He said a silent prayer, as he sat down.

Smaller flower symbols were carved into the arms where the hands would be while seated. However, this throne was obviously made for a much bigger being than he was. When he sat in the great chair, he felt like a child sitting in a grownup's seat. He realized that in this world where he now found himself, he would probably have the stature of a child. Whoever had built this ancient chamber was obviously superior in many ways. He could only wonder who they might have been, or perhaps, still were.

He looked at his watch. 20:36. Quickly, he looked over the symbols on the arms of the mammoth chair but couldn't decipher them. As he touched one on the left armrest, the throne began to vibrate with a faint humming sound. He panicked and tried to get up but couldn't move. The great chair emitted a blinding pink light, and he felt as if every cell in his body was electric. After 30 seconds, it stopped. Then he touched the symbol on the right, and the chair emitted a white light and the walls of the room shimmered. Even the air seemed to vibrate.

After being frozen in place for what seemed like a timeless period, the great throne returned to normal. "What was *that* all about? No time to wonder about it now." He said, with a tense whisper, and checked his watch. 18:35. Only a minute had actually passed. He rose hurriedly from the chair and looked back at it, shaking his head. He had no idea what, if anything, had happened, but knew only that he was running out of time. He ran back to the other room with the disks. The light came on again and he stepped onto the golden disk. He willed it over to the abyss and then decided to enter and see where it led. Obeying his thought, the disc began the descent. He found the sensation of flying exhilarating, like the magic carpet ride that had enthralled him as a little boy. Descending at about fifty miles an hour, the disk dropped straight down for about a quarter of a mile, until then the tunnel hit a curve and he found himself traveling horizontally through a 15-foot tube.

He looked at his watch. 14.53 minutes! And he was sure that the bomb would detonate for, even if they found it and tried to pry it off the ventilator unit, it would explode, triggered by the magnetic booby trap. He'd told Hans to make arming it a one-way deal, and Hans had. However, Hans had told him that he himself could disarm it if anything happened that warranted such a move. Jonathan had to find a way out of here first though, and fast. The agony of pressure was ripping his heart out. He simply did not know where he was, or how far away the surface was, or even if there was a way out at all.

The disk slowed down and Jonathan saw a light at the end of the tunnel. The disk emerged into a large room, hovered over a circular indentation in the floor, and gently lowered itself into it. Jonathan found himself in another vast chamber, even larger than the last one. His watch indicated 10:14. "Now how do I get out of this place?" He stood up and looked around the great chamber. Twice the size of the previous one, its obsidian walls were ringed with large stone benches. A great round table stood in the center of the room, surrounded by high back chairs. Both the table and chairs looked to be made of rose quartz. He idly ran his hands over them, as he scanned the room for a door. The chairs were as smooth as glass, the clearest, most beautiful quartz he had ever seen. The chairs almost seemed to glow.

He suddenly saw an open archway at the end of the chamber and ran to it, entering a wide passageway that sloped slightly upwards. As he ran on, the walls lit themselves to illuminate his path. He passed smaller passageways off the larger, but decided to stick to this main artery. After a several hundred feet or so, a solid wall of obsidian blocked the passage. He ran his hands over the wall, and found, over to the right, a slight indentation. It was a giant handprint indented into the stone.

"Yes! Yes! Common Johnny boy, you can make it." He didn't even stop to look at his watch. That would take more time. Time he didn't have.

He placed his much smaller hand into the indented space, and the great wall slid slowly and noiselessly to the left. Jonathan found himself gazing into a large, natural cave, with stalagmites and stalactites of all sizes and colors everywhere. A flurry of startled bats skittered about and he watched where they headed, figuring that the bats had a way in and out which he might be able to use to escape.

The moment he entered the cave, the wall slid shut behind him and blended perfectly with the natural cavern walls. Unless you knew the door was there, you'd never notice it. He turned with his light to see if he would be able to open it again. He felt around and searched for another mechanism. None was visible. He was locked out.

He turned to explore and noticed that the stalagmites up ahead glowed with an eerie greenish light. He turned his flashlight off and realizing that the cave walls were luminescent. He could

see quite well without the aid of his artificial light, so he went on without it. About a quarter mile down, the tunnel suddenly opened up into another vast domed natural cavern. A pathway seemed to wind through it, which he followed, and at the opposite end, he came to yet another large tunnel. At this point he forced himself to look at his watch. Only two minutes remained to detonation. "Damn it to hell!" He said out loud to the bats. Jonathan ripped his cell phone from his belt and punched Hans' number. "Common, common, work damnit!" Hans had invented a special scaler-wave phone that would even go through solid rock, if one were not too far from the surface. To Jonathan deep dismay, all that came on the phone was empty static. He looked at his watch. 00:35 seconds remained before detonation. A sob escaped him, as he sat down and leaned against a stalagmite to wait. He had failed. He looked up towards the ceiling and wondered if one of the giant stalactite spikes might fall from the shock of the blast and run through him like a spear. That would be fine, he thought cynically. He looked back at his watch. 1 61 51 41 31 21 1.. he held his breath. Nothing. Not even a quiver in the ground. Half-delirious laughter escaped him and a wide grin animated his face. He stood up and raised his arms in salutation. "Thank you God. I thank you with all my heart. I don't know how you did it, but thank you. Now perhaps you'll see me out of this cave." Jonathan began to casually walk down the path. A huge sense of relief flooded his whole being. He now realized that Miles had probably spilled the beans about the bomb and had called Hans for the de-activation process. That had to have been it. "You did the right thing, Miles. We'll deal with Max another time. Now I just have to work on getting you and Johanna out of his clutches."

After about half a mile, he came to a bend, and saw daylight sneaking around the corner.

"At last," he said with a great sigh. "Sunlight."

Jogging the rest of the way, he rounded a bend and came to the end of the tunnel. A large boulder stood in front of the entrance, but did not block the way. He raced up to it, slid out between the rock and the cave opening and rounded the boulder. Blinded by the bright sunlight, he felt his way through the lush green grass, and sat down to allow his eyes to adjust.

With his hand shading his eyes, he tried to look around and was struck with the feeling that something was very wrong. Something was extremely out of place. "Wait a minute," he said, "This is the Mojave Desert. Why am I sitting in a grassy field. It's supposed to be an arid moonscape, so where did the grass come from?"

His eyes finally adjusted to the intense light, and when he lowered his hand and took in the view, his face expressed total awe of what he now beheld. "Good God Almighty," he gasped breathlessly. "It's *í* this is incredible. It's so *í* beautiful. Where the hell am I? Where is this place?"

(AUTHOR'S NOTE)

"This is where the grand tour of the New, Glorified World begins"