

Section I, “One if by Air....”

In the near future....

Minisoft senior executive Jack Williamson finished his walk-around of his new favorite toy. Dark gray and black, the twin engined carbon-fibre and titanium XB-171 was the newest, state-of-the-art personal jet available to the general public. With a forward swept main wing, two canards flanking the pilot’s canopy, and two 12,000 pound thrust jet engines, she had power to spare, if you had the cash to spare. Williamson finished his pre-flight checklist, inserted the security key into the floor-mounted switch, and pressed the pre-start pushbuttons for the twin General Electric engines. Immediately, the APU came on-line, and the turbines growled up to speed. Thumbing through the various sub-system readouts on the triple full-color cockpit VDU’s, Jack was satisfied that everything was working correctly, and signaled the ground crewman to remove the APU power umbilicals and roll the boarding ladder away. He cinched his restraining harness tighter, then released the brakes. The sleek aircraft rolled forward slowly, and took up its position in the queue of planes awaiting take-off permission. The twin engined Cessna in front of him rolled out, then climbed, and he was next.

“November eight seven niner tango, you are go for launch on runway two fiver west,” the bored voice from the tower informed him. “Seven niner tango, switch on your transponder. We are not painting you on the tower radar.”

“Err, roger tower, seven niner tango to runway two fiver west. Rolling out. Transponder is on now, sorry about that, I need to get that automated interlink connected to the flight control system. I keep forgetting to turn it on. Have a nice day, gentlemen.”

“Ditto, seven niner. Looks like a beautiful day for a hop.”

The XB-171 required a repeating transponder, because it’s carbon fibre frame rendered it nearly invisible to radar. Jack straightened the nose of the plane, then pushed the throttles to the stops. Immediate and brutal acceleration pinned him to the leather-covered seat and the XB-171 soon reached rotational velocity. He eased back on the stick, and a few seconds later, retracted the landing gear. ***What a sweet plane. Can’t believe I got this for a performance bonus. We must be doing really well these days. I should e-mail down to accounting and get the latest financials.*** Jack Williamson never got to submit his request. Just over nineteen minutes later, his brand-new XB-171 suddenly turned erratically, lost altitude, accelerated and then crashed into a scrubby, pine brush covered hill. The lead flight controller, in his late forties and too old for this crap, checked his scope twice, leaned back wearily, removed his glasses and picked up the ‘hot-phone’ to the local FAA office.

Low slung, agile, and extremely fast; the exotic, dark blue two door pulled to a quick halt at the curb. The growl from its 388 cubic inch fuel injected Chevrolet engine reverberated off the surrounding buildings, then slowly faded away. Nicholas ‘Mad Dog’ Pantera, Lieutenant Colonel, United States Air Force, retired, stepped out, looked around, then ran a quick finger through his close cropped, salt-and-pepper hair. He then carefully closed the exotic’s door, and checked that his .44 was riding straight in its underarm

holster. He had purchased the car on a whim, a joke to go with his name. A Pantera for a Pantera. The car was complete, but had no engine and a stripped transmission when he purchased it at auction, and it had taken him years of loving work and plenty of his pension money to get it to the condition it was in now. Nick thought it was funny to tweak the gomers who demanded purity, the people that thought that all the chalk marks and undercoat overspray should be photographed and replaced after a restoration was completed. He had decided to replace the missing Ford 351 with an all-aluminum Chevrolet high deck NASCAR racing block. In its current state of tune, the Pantera put out about 550 romping horses and would vault to 180 in nothing flat. Nick had hand timed it once unofficially through the quarter in about eleven seconds, so he figured it was fast enough already. He had once thought about having a supercharger added, then decided his middle-aged reflexes weren't quite ready for a JATO assisted suicide just yet. Nick did love the cosseting tan leather-lined interior and Recaro seats, but found himself driving his Pontiac Grand Prix GTP more and more every year. ***Guess the age thing is finally catching up to me,*** he mused as his knees cracked. He pulled on a U.S. Air Force issue baseball cap, then took off and pocketed his Serengeti sunglasses. He buttoned his windbreaker on the bottom three buttons, to make the underslung holster less visible.

Nick looked around quickly a second time, then crossed the street to the offices of his new, temporary employer. Six years of combat flying and ten years as a police officer had honed his danger sense to a keen edge, and he seemed to find himself 'checking his six' quite often, even in what appeared to be completely safe and ordinary circumstances. Yet, he still remembered well his recuperation in a hospital after a strung-out crackhead

put a nine-millimeter into him during a bust in Chicago. Nick figured being a little on edge all the time beat the alternative, three aces to a pair.

About an hour later, Nick flipped through the dossier again on his way out the office door. ***An executive of Minisoft turns himself into a greasy spot on a hill, and they want me to go eyeball the situation. What a waste of time.*** The insurance company hadn't even balked at his exorbitant fee, so he decided to take the investigation. Nick had just thrown out a huge figure, run it up the flagpole, and waited to see who saluted. They didn't seem to care, which immediately put him on guard, because insurance companies are notoriously the cheapest corporations on Earth, so when they don't care, something is usually more than it seems. Nick decided that one day, his overdeveloped sense of curiosity was going to get him killed, but so far he was enjoying the P.I. life. Not exactly Magnum, but he was working steadily and making enough to pay the bills and throw some back into his depleted IRA, so he felt pretty good about it. ***Lets go have a real look at this stuff, and see what we've gotten into this time, eh?*** Nick took the folder home, stuck the enclosed CD-ROM into his PC and flipped through all the documentation that had come with the dossier. His danger flag was in the fully raised and red position when he decided to quit for the day. ***Something really is rotten in the state of Denmark,*** he decided pretty quickly. ***Now all I have to do is find out what and not get iced in the process.***

After two weeks of beating the streets, Nick was sure that this was a total waste of time, and told his employer just as much. Jack Williamson's death seemed to be just an unfortunate private aircraft disaster, as many were every year. He wondered about his earlier sense that something was very much off, but just chalked it up to nerves and

maybe too many late night detective movies. His employer did not seem impressed, told him as much and reminded him pointedly of his ridiculously large retainer, and told him to keep looking. Nick spent another week, and went back again. This time they handed him a second case. He read through the CD on the second file, then went back and pulled up the first one again. Nick's second case was Jack's wife, Holly. Incredibly, a claim had been submitted for her death, too, and now Nick really thought something had to be quite fishy. His employer informed him that they wanted him to investigate Holly's employer, the Coral Haven resort. This turned out to be a playground for wealthy socialites, mostly men. He thought this could prove to be interesting.

Jack stepped out of the light blue and white painted floatplane, and was immediately greeted by one of the resort's senior partners, Roberto Silvero. Nick disliked him on sight. He knew of his reputation, and thought that he represented everything slippery and repulsive in the business world. Roberto didn't seem to be losing any love for him either. Dressed impeccably in a hand-made dark Italian suit and four hundred-dollar black leather shoes, Roberto oozed insincerity and greasy, ill-gained money from every pore he owned. He looked Nick over quite quickly, seemingly dismissing him as some lower-life mortal in a collarless shirt and khakis. Nick fumed silently and wished that some large, hungry, man eating shark would pop out of the beautiful, azure water under the floatplane and eat him. ***Fat chance of that, though. The shark would offer him professional courtesy.*** Nick smiled faintly at the poor jest he had just constructed, and this seemed to annoy Mr. Silvero even more.

“Come this way, Mr. Pantera. I hope we can resolve this problem in a minimum of time, and recommence full scale operations soon.”

“What do you mean, ‘recommence’? Are you shut down right now? Totally?”

“You didn’t know? Yes, unfortunately, Mr. Pantera,” Silvero answered in a long-suffering tone of voice. “The local police have shut down everything. Even the casinos are closed. They would brook no arguments until the investigator had finished his digging. That would be you, Mr. Pantera.”

Nick felt almost obliged to turn around and see if Ren and Stimpy were standing behind him. ***Of course I’m the investigator, you eeeeeediot!***

“How nice. Is the delay costing you much?” Nick asked sweetly.

“About a million dollars a day, in salaries and lost revenues. Yes, I would say it will amount to some real money, soon.”

Nick followed Silvero, watching his expensive patent leather shoes leave little spots on the dock, where he had walked through some seawater puddles. ***Bet he polishes ‘em every night,*** Nick thought, just to pass the time.

Silvero led Nick to an impressive, rambling glass and brick compound that seemed to both squat before them and menace over them. Nick felt a bit unsettled by this effect, and decided that it was intended to impress their exclusive clientele, but at the same time keep them somewhat off balance. ***All the better to pick your pockets, my dear.***

Silvero didn’t slow, once inside, but headed directly for the security control center in one of the side wings of the complex. Stopping at a solid oak wood door at least ten

feet high, he pressed a sequence of numbers into a keypad almost as fast as Nick could watch. ***He's done that a few times,*** Nick decided.

After passing through an opulent, blow a million dollars style foyer, Silvero led him through a couple more security doors, repeating the automatic weapon fast keypad code routine, then settled himself into an overstuffed black leather chair in front of a bank of LCD color monitors and motioned Nick to sit in a similar chair next to him.

“Mr. Pantera, the only way that we are going to get back on-line is to co-operate fully with you and the police. For some strange reason, the police think you can handle this yourself, and are ready to accept whatever conclusions you draw. You must have either some highly placed or very powerful friends.” Silvero paused for a second or so, as if only considering the implications of his statement after he had made it, then plowed on. “Therefor, as much as I may like or dislike you personally, consider me to be at your disposal for any and all requests or needs.”

Nick wondered how close to choking Silvero had come, having to spit out that speech, but at least the man was upfront about his personal agenda. Nick also knew that a few phone calls from some well-placed friends had kept the local gendarmes from messing with his investigation. ***Nothing like having a bunch of Columbo wannabe's following you around 24-7.***

“Fair enough. I respect a man who makes his personal likes or dislikes known up front. I don't like the type of business that you represent, but I will be impartial in investigating what did or did not happen here. I owe my employer and your investors at least that much.”

Silvero's opinion of him seemed to have raised fractionally, but Nick didn't really worry much about it. He wasn't here to make friends or influence people. Only to find the truth and collect an absurdly large paycheck.

“Who is going to give me what I need? Will you be taking me on a personally guided tour?”

“Unfortunately, no, Mr. Pantera. Even though we are not officially operating, I still have much to do, my schedule precludes that much involvement, so I am going to turn this over to one of my trusted employees. Angellina will help you with whatever you need. She can get in contact with me if something unsolvable arises. Is this acceptable?”

“That depends. Is this Angellina woman familiar with the operations in question?”

“She has worked for us almost since the beginning. Angellina has worked in the casino, as a greeter at the airport, and in the security operations. Currently she is assigned to our biggest, most expensive and most popular attraction, the ‘Beauties of the Deep’ display. She is familiar with just about everything you should need to see. I will fill in anything else required as it comes up.” His eyebrows arched upward a fraction as if to ask, * **did you get all that, and is it acceptable?***

Silvero pressed a red pushbutton next to one of the monitors, and Nick heard a solenoid door click. He swiveled his chair around and with a slight extra stretch, was able to push the door open and made a ‘come here’ motion to someone out of Nick's line-of-sight. Angellina came in, and presented her hand. Nick's thought processes did a staccato two-step. Dressed in a simple button-down aqua blouse and black skirt, with her buttercup streaked hair twined up and pinned; which perfectly complemented her deep, sun-induced tan and piercing, slightly slanted blue-grey eyes. The stunning figure of a

Norse goddess threatened to escape her purposely severe outfit. Nick tried, and failed, to remember a time when he had seen a woman more exotic and beautiful.

Nick took the proffered hand while Silvero made formal introductions. He then excused himself and left.

“Mr. Pantera, Mr. Silvero asked me to take you around the complex and show you whatever you need to see.”

“That should be fine. Oh, and Angellina.....”

“Yes?”

“Call me Nick, okay? Mr. Pantera was my father.”

Angellina laughed and shook her head.

“Fine, Nick. Come on and sit down, and I’ll show you the computerized systems we have here. We can access everything, and I do mean everything, in the entire place from here, with just a few buttons and a little typing”.

Angellina ran Nick through several screens of information, including maps and operational schedules, but whenever their eyes accidentally met, he found it harder and harder to concentrate on what she was saying.

Several hours later, Nick leaned back and rubbed his eyes tiredly.

“Break time, I think,” he stated. “I do believe I am going cross-eyed, or possibly insane.”

“Hungry? I’ll buy lunch,” she offered.

“Well, I couldn’t let you.....”

“Sure you could let me. It’s free,” she stated, then laughed, a short, tinkling laugh.

Nick found himself wishing that he could hear that laugh more, perhaps somewhere far away from here.

“Come on, the elevator is over here. The cafeteria is on the third floor.”

Nick heaved his 5’10” frame out of his chair, his knees cracking, and followed Angellina’s petite 5’2” physique into the elevator. She flashed him another hundred-watt smile as the doors closed, then stared at the floor.

After a really quick tour of part of the casino on the way to the cafeteria, Nick wondered what he should really be looking for. Everything seemed to be standard corporate issue, from the gaudy machines in the casino to the antiseptic standard tables and stainless steel accessories in the lunchroom. ***Not much to go on, so far,*** he acknowledged.

Lunch finished, Angellina’s and Nick’s footfalls echoed loudly off the gleaming polished white tile floor as they walked to another wing of the complex. The corridor reminded Nick of a hospital or a research lab, the insides of both which he had seen at different times in his careers. ***How strangely life turns***, he idly wondered.

Stopping at an unmarked oak wood door with a bored looking bulldog of a security guard posted outside, Angellina looked up questioningly at Nick.

“How are you going to get us in?” she asked.

“I have a pass.”

“How did you get that?” she asked, eyes widening slightly. “I’ve never even been in here.”

“I’ll tell you inside.”

“Uh-huh,” she said, nodding.

The bulldog seemed to ignore them during the entire conversation, content on some trash novel he currently had his nose buried in. ***Probably pushing his vocabulary level,*** Nick mused. He cleared his throat, and the bulldog looked up.

“Yeah?”

“I need to get in.” Nick showed him his pass, knowing he was going to ask and not giving him the satisfaction of allowing him to beat him to it. Bulldog squinted at it, then pulled a large brass keyring, heavy with assorted keys, off his belt loop, and started sorting through it.

“Some time while I’m still young.” Nick deadpanned under his breath. Bulldog didn’t seem to hear him, but Angellina snickered quietly. The guard opened the door, then stood suspiciously aside to let them pass. He looked around quickly then back up at Nick, who stood a good three inches taller and about six inches narrower.

“That will be all.” Nick summarily dismissed him. If bulldog took any offense at such cavalier treatment, he didn’t display it. He simply closed the door and settled his capacious backside back down outside.

Nick turned to her and asked quietly, not sure if Bulldog or other more invisible and perhaps more sinister ears were awake and listening.

“Why didn’t this door have a keypad too? Rather strange with all the super computer security around here that they rely on good old fashioned brass keys, eh?”

He watched her eyes twitch slightly as she processed this question and arrived at numerous interesting answers.

“Yes, that is highly curious,” she answered, just as he stated “Come on, the lab is down here, if the map you showed me was correct.”

Two doors presented themselves at the end of another hallway. Nick chose the thick oak door on the left. He pushed it open slowly and clicked on the lights. The lab was much bigger than he had been expecting. A huge semi-transparent seawater tank dominated the center of the room, with a gleaming stainless steel catwalk circling the entire upper structure. It appeared to be empty.

“Okay, Angellina, you work with this junk every day. Show me how it works, and maybe we can figure out what went wrong.”

Angellina made her way to a stainless four-leg table covered with objects precisely layed out on black velvet. Nick followed slightly behind while quickly surveying the room. Machinery he had never seen before blinked and hummed in various corners, permeating the air with the slight smell of hot electronics and ozone. It wasn't quite able to cover the sea-salty smell from the tank.

“Okay, these are the tools of the trade.”

First, she picked up a small white box that looked like a contact lens carrier for an elephant.

“You put those in your eyes?” he asked.

“Have to. The salt water will kill you. These cover your entire exposed eye, protect your lenses from damage, and with drops that you put in first, keep the salt out so you can see clearly.”

She opened the container and pulled one out.

“Want to try it?”

“Ha, no thanks. They’re huge. Looks mighty uncomfortable to me. What is that?”

Angellina picked up a heavy gold collar that looked faintly Egyptian in design, or so Nick thought.

“This is our King Tut special, the tie point hub. The air line connects on the back of this, right here,” she said, turning it over and indicating a threaded port inset in the rear.

“The nose plugs connect here and here,” indicating fittings on both sides of the port, “and communications goes here”, pointing out a small gold plated electrical connector.

“The feed umbilical brings pressurized air and electrical communications power to the back of this, which is usually mostly hidden by your hair. The small nose ports come over your ears on both sides and go into the nose plugs here and here. A tiny waterproof speaker goes in your left ear, and allows the customers or the command center to issue instructions or requests. You can’t answer back.”

“Okay, so how does it actually work?” Nick asked, slightly perplexed. “Why go to all this trouble?”

“Well, you have to realize that what you are paying a premium for here is illusion. If a mermaid is wearing a giant bubble helmet, that isn’t too realistic, is it?”

Nick nodded.

“So the clear umbilical comes from the fabricated rock behind you. It is invisible from the front, and mostly so from the side. The nose pieces are invisible underwater at any distance over about 3 feet. That way, you appear to be breathing water. Clever, eh?”

“Isn’t this kinda dangerous? Why not just use animatronics or something?”

“Ya, just wait, I’ll get to that. There is more.” Angellina picked up a small, flat tube that looked like a tooth retainer.

“This is a one way valve. You put it in your mouth, like so. The nose tubes are constant pressure, semi-closed loop pressure adjusted feed. To breath in, you just wait. The air feed is a higher pressure than ambient, so your lungs expand. The system runs on a timer, so you have to get used to breathing in a steady rhythm. You get crossed up, you’ll be in trouble pretty fast. You can change the time delay with a control built into the tail. To exhale, you just pop the valve and the stale air bleeds off, along with fresh supply air. A waste system like this would be unacceptable in a tank fed system, but since this is constant umbilical, we just aerate the ocean a little more.”

“Isn’t that really unnatural?”

“Well, there is a pretty intense training and selection process, before they send you out. Here you really do have to be much more than pretty face, this regimen would give some Navy SEALs a good run for underwater endurance. It wouldn’t be seemly to have the customers watching the mermaids drown on their dime, right?” Angellina stopped after she realized what she had just said, then looked at the floor.

Nick nodded. She continued.

“You have to be careful with getting winded, though. Climbers call it ‘oxygen deficit’. You can’t just breathe faster and harder to catch up, so you must make slow, gently timed motions when you move. No heavy exertions. A computer running Minisoft software monitors the whole system. There are two redundant feed systems to the nosepieces; both are monitored by pressure and flow sensors. Central monitoring also watches your pulse rate and blood oxygen content, via a sensor located in the tail. It picks

up off an artery in your leg. If the primary system somehow fails, the other one comes on-line immediately. There is also a back-up system over here behind the rock.”

Angellina moved around to the backside of the tank, and pointed to a red handle.

“All of this is completely out of view of the customer modules. The red handle is a bail-out button. You yank up on the T-handle and the mouthpiece next to it will turn on. This will also signal central monitoring to send a rescue team. The mouthpiece is a standard issue diving regulator. You just breath normally.”

“You ever had to use that contraption?” Nick asked, looking highly skeptical.

“No, but we had one girl here who panicked her second day out on the floor. She lost it and just barely made it to the panic button. She got to the surface okay, but she quit 45 seconds later.”

Nick tried not to laugh, because it really wasn't humorous in the least, but the way Angellina had just strung the whole story together tickled his funny bone, which most of his friends told him was always a little off-center to begin with.

“You seem to know this stuff inside-out. Did you help design it?”

Angellina glared at him for just a second, then turned away. She had thought for a moment that he was patronizing her.

“Um, no, I didn't. I grew up in a fairly strict Baptist household, but my parents divorced when I was 14, and I got mixed up with some bad people. My high-school grades were still good enough, though, to get me a scholarship to the University of Pittsburgh. I started freshman year in pre-med, I wanted to go into sports medicine after graduation. But some of my 'old friends' kept on dropping in, and I got mixed up in some bad stuff again, most of it illegal. Stupid, stupid, stupid. I got booted from U of Pitt and

ended up here after some further misadventures. Guess you might as well trade on your looks if you can't trade on your brains, eh?"

A single unshed tear glistened in her eye.

Nick spent this entire time intently examining the fine cracks in the top of his left brown patent leather shoe. At this point, he felt just like the little piece on the bottom back of the shoe. Or maybe something you would find sticking TO the heel. He made a silent promise that whether or not he actually solved this case, he was going to get Angellina out of this mess. She really deserved better. He caught himself looking at her, then feeling slightly guilty, he looked away again. He thought about his wife. **Ex-wife**, he corrected. ***She left me, though.*** Couldn't handle the strange hours, the strange people and the abundance of guns. Ah, Margie..... He looked at her again, and knew that even though she had an almost picture-perfect body and face, that wasn't really all of it. She was a smart young lady who just had a run of bad luck, and had made some bad calls. She really did deserve better, and she attracted him like nobody had since his divorce. Three years ago. She deserved to be away from these dangerous working conditions and the leeches that are running them, even if she didn't end up with him. And, he decided in about 200 milliseconds, this place ought to be shut down. High tech exploitation, nothing more. Nick didn't consider himself to be a highly religious man, but this place gave even him the willies.

"I'm sorry, reallyyyyy....." he trailed off uncomfortably.

"Ahhh, it's nothing, forget it. And in any case, it's hardly your fault. Come on, I'll show you the uniform."

She walked over to a set of identical blue storage cabinets and rummaged around some. After a few hard pulls and loud grunts, she managed to extract a large greenish flexible tail.

“Can’t be a mermaid without a tail, right?”

Nick chuckled. He made a ‘go-on’ motion with his hand.

“Okay, the front opens like this, with Velcro,” she said, peeling open a ragged break in the front.

“You step in, and close it up here. It is cut ragged like this so you can’t see the seam when it’s closed. It blends in with the scale pattern, like so. The tail has a buoyancy compensator, so you can float or sink just by pushing the control buttons right here. This one here is the air bleed time delay control.”

She arched one fine, perfectly shaded eyebrow in a 'you-remembered-that-control-from-earlier' look. He nodded, so she continued.

"A thick fishing line type cord attaches you to a concrete anchor on the sea floor, so you won't float away. If you got past the length of your umbilical and pulled it out, you would have to make a fifty-five foot free ascent. Not much fun on a good day. You can go from flat rest on the bottom to about five feet up, and anywhere in between. The winch is buried in the seafloor. Some of the displays have turntables built into them, so you have lateral motion capability, sometimes a full circle, and all the wiring and hoses and the winch are built into and connected through the base. The buttons here send commands by a battery powered remote sonar radio. You can't transmit radio waves through water very well."

Nick nodded. He knew that, but to his credit said nothing.

“To use the emergency bail-out button, you have to remove your tail, because the button is too far away to stretch the umbilical out. The girl that quit, that I told you about? Kari? Well she panicked and forgot about that critical step.”

“Ummmmhmmmm”, Nick answered.

“What do you wear with this?” he inquired.

“Well, mostly shorts or spandex riding pants inside the tail, and a halter or bikini top..... usually.” Angellina arched her eyebrows and smiled.

“You mean some of them don’t wear anyth.....??”

“Yeah, well you know, this isn’t the park with the big-eared mouse and dog. Some of our customers ask for the entire group to be dressed alike, some ask for girls that they have taken a special liking to, to be dressed in something that they specify beforehand, and some of ‘em, well.....”

“Go on...” Nick prompted.

“Some of the older or not-so-older wealthy gentlemen have the girls come into the customer module with them, and some of them go outside and have whatever services performed that they desire. The extras are all fee-based and are added to their bill. The girl gets 70% of the extra charge in her next paycheck. Some of these girls are driving Bentley’s, new ones. This is a very special and lucrative entertainment complex.”

“Wait a sec, you mean underwater call girls?”

“It’s off-shore, outside the country boundaries, so it’s all legal. You’d be surprised what some people can think of.”

“Not really”.

Angellina regarded Nick for a moment, calculated their relative age differences, and then decided that with a background in the military and law enforcement, he was probably right. She had read his dossier before he arrived, as well. ***Really jaded, aren't we, macho man***.

"I think our time is just about up, so we should probably get out of here, before the bull-dog comes back."

"Yea, he did kinda look like a bull-dog, huh?"

"Yea, but that's kinda unfair to the canines of the world, right?"

Angellina snickered, then tossed a pen in Nick's general direction. Heading toward the front entrance, they talked as they walked.

"Tomorrow, we go look at the site. The police have the area rigged with sensors so nobody can tamper with the crime scene, but I have a hunch we are going to find something interesting."

"You called it a 'crime scene'? You believe Holly was murdered?" she asked, looking surprised.

"Yea, I did say that, didn't I? What time do I pick you up?"

"Me?"

"Yea, well I'm going to need an assistant to help handle the tools and the digital camera."

"Well, okay, guess I'm in, then." For some reason, Nick had found himself feverishly hoping she was going to say just that.

"I'll meet you here at 9:30."

"Works for me. You forgot to tell me how you got us in here."

“Yea, well I know a few Judges, Congressmen, scientists,..”

“Indian chiefs, chief cooks and bottle washers...” She added playfully, taking a swipe at his shoulder with a mock fist. He easily deflected it and playfully caught her arm. Angellina looked up at him for a moment, then stepped back and made to leave.

"You know all about the equipment, but they never let you into the lab? Why do you suppose that might be?"

"Not really sure", she answered, frowning, "Perhaps they do have something to hide? If they do, I've never heard anything about it."

The frown furrow between his eyebrows got a little wider and a little deeper.

"HMMMMM", was his only answer.

“See ya tomorrow, John Wayne.”

“Wellla. You can count on that there, little missy.”

He watched her until she disappeared out of the parking lot in her little red Chevy.

Section II, “Two if by Sea....”

Nick looked around at the azure colored sky, then at the clear emerald water lapping quietly against the twenty footer’s hull. He finished connecting his equipment and checked his dive weights. Angellina was still pulling up the zipper on her rainbow colored Hobie dive suit, over a 'Choices' tee shirt and “sprayed-on tight” black spandex riding shorts. Nick found himself watching her complete the operation, then looked away. She hadn’t seemed to have noticed.

“Little slow this morning?” Nick asked, joking to cover his slight apprehension.

“Yeah, I guess,” she answered, seeming rather preoccupied and distant.

“Hey, stay frosty”, Nick said, snapping his fingers loudly in front of her nose.

“Yea, okay. I, uhhhh.....I was just thinking about Holly again.....”

“I know, but we may be able to figure out what went wrong, if it wasn’t an accident. We’re doing this for her.”

She nodded somberly, then pulled on her clear plexi ‘fish-bowl’ helmet and rotated it 30 degrees until it locked onto the neck ring with an audible 'click'.

“Okay, comm check.” Angellina’s voice echoed slightly in Nick’s ears.

“Hoooo, too loud.” She tried again.

“Better, thanks.”

“You are gonna love this gadget. Heads-up display. Projects current heart rate, water temperature, and direction. Also tank status, constantly re-calculated to compensate for de-compression time and depth. Hit the ‘up’ button and it will tell you when to stop rising for decompression and how long to stay there. Major cool.”

“I can’t see anything.”

“It won’t work until you’re under.”

“Yea, got it.”

Nick slipped over the side and was immediately greeted by medium sized glowing orange ghost numerals floating in front of him. Wherever he looked, the numbers followed, too.

“This really is amazing. I love gadgets.”

“I figured you would,” she replied, close enough to him that he could see her through her fishbowl helmet, rolling her eyes while answering.

“You have the camera?” he asked.

“Ahkk, I knew I was going to forget something. Now let me see, blond hair, brain, flippers, oh yea, camera. Of course I got it.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Everybody’s a comedian,” Nick replied in a long-suffering tone.

Looking down, he saw station 12 rapidly approaching. The iodine floods were still on, so the whole grotto was actually brighter than the surface. The lights reflected unevenly off the artificial reefs and tiny caves, leaving mysterious half-shadowed openings. ***They must have one whompin’ electric bill,** * he thought silently. Holly’s flexible tail was still lying on the sea floor, looking like some sort of huge, decapitated fish.

“Okay, get the camera out. I am going to remove the rear access plate.”

Angellina nodded, then removed the bulky black object from its bag, switched it on, and ran it through the set-up procedure. Nick began to remove the rear plate from the

artificial rock, noticing as he did so how real it appeared. Looking over, he saw the red emergency button was still in the 'up-active' position. Silently twisting the stainless steel key in the corner locks, he marveled at how easily they turned. ***No fighting rusty build-up here, eh? Curious, if these hadn't been accessed in a while, why no corrosion at all? Seems unusual at the very least and maybe something more, perhaps?***

Suddenly, Nick froze and looked around a full three hundred sixty degrees. Something struck him heavily that he hadn't noticed before.

"Angellina, this water is almost ninety degrees. How come there aren't any sharks here?"

"Yah, I wondered when you would get around to asking about that. There aren't any poisonous or man-eating flora or fauna of any type here. At great expense, the owners of Coral Haven had them all dispatched."

"You mean?....."

Angellina drew her index finger across her throat.

"Good Lord", Nick answered. "Didn't the animal rights guys go bugging?"

"They didn't find out until it was over. There is a protectionary grid around the entire area, and it is checked often for unidentified strays. Can't have the employees or tourists getting eaten, can we?"

"HMMMMPH, yah."

Nick returned to his task. He pulled the heavy stainless steel cover plate out and levered it over to the sand floor. Inside was a mass of wires, cables and components neatly bundled and packaged. He had no idea what any of it really did, but Nick was determined to get all the 3-D photos the memory card would hold. Finishing many

minutes later, he levered the plate back into place and locked it down again. Angellina didn't say a single word until they were safely back aboard the boat, had all their gear stowed and verified that all the comm's were off. Nick's suspicious nature hadn't taken long in becoming infectious, and she was certainly no bleach-head blond despite first appearances.

“Do you think we got anything useful?” she finally asked.

“I couldn't even hazard a guess,” Nick replied, scratching his head thoughtfully while piloting the boat back into the marina slip. Unknowingly, he had actually gotten a lot of value from his little trip, but that information would not unfold until later.

Nick decided to leave the Pantera home, so he wheeled his dark-blue Pontiac Grand Prix GTP sedan into the space marked 'reserved, visiting scientists'. ***Yea, real funny, he-he,*** he thought as he pulled his laptop off the passenger's seat and slung it over his right shoulder. Thumbing the 'lock' button on his keyless remote, Nick headed for the side entrance of the imposing four story brick and mirrored glass structure. ***Funny how these places all look alike,*** he mused as he headed for his long-time friend's office. ***Stainless steel, no-wax floors and formica.*** Nick opened the door.

John Cassidy looked like he always did. Six foot one, hair wild, glasses tilted down, half-crazed eye expression. The typical mad scientist. Who also just happened to have graduated M.I.T. summa cum laude at age 15. Multiple doctorates by age 19. He stopped collecting paper when he figured more degrees would only hinder the start of his career.

John also happened to be one of the best 3D imaging specialists that Nick had ever met. Course, not that he usually hung around many imaging specialists, unless they happened to be young, female and available.

“John, what’s shakin?” Nick gave him his standard opening intro.

“Yo, just your jello, man”, John always replied while giving him a playful shot in the midsection. This time, however; he was greeted by a solid ‘thump’.

“Hmmm, somebody’s been doing sit-ups, eh? Anyhow, what do you have for me today?” he asked as Nick unfolded his laptop Compaq. A small part of Nick’s ego was silently pleased that somebody had recognized his hard work. Fighting the battle of the bulge at his age was getting more and more difficult.

“That’s what I need you to tell me.”

“Plug that bad boy in”, John quipped as he handed Nick a dangling port cable, attached to one of the biggest desktop machines Nick had ever seen.

“Ehhh, hehhh, liquid nitrogen cooled. Great machine. Processor is so fast, if you didn’t keep it air-conditioned, it would melt in about 4 seconds flat.” John proceeded to dazzle and bore Nick by quoting its every specification. When he got to 1/2 nanosecond RAM hard drives running a terrabyte of free space, Nick waved him to silence.

“Can we check the files now, please?”

“Oh, sure. Sorry, Nick.” John went from little boy to full-on scientist mode in about 26 microseconds. Sometimes Nick found it slightly dizzying trying to comprehend how someone could trade personas that fast, but usually gave up trying to fathom the inscrutable thoughts of someone with nearly twice his I.Q.

“Coming through now. Okay, full stereo-optic deep infrared and visual scans. Looking good. What is this stuff?”

“Hoping you can tell me. Some type of air piping controller.”

“Pneumatic hook-up, eh? Why don’t we figure out what we can identify, and then we will go after the ‘X’ parts left over, right?”

“Sounds like a plan.”

John warmed up his 40 inch plasma monitor and the hunt was on. He started by changing everything on the screen to a medium green hue, then changed identifiable parts to a burgundy shade. Manipulating a light pen like a deranged Jedi, John colored away and rotated every part while adding labels. When they were through, about 90 minutes later, they had one circuit board and some hardware left, still in green.

“This appears to be a sonar antenna, and this is a pressure sensor, I think. Could this be a remote control supply valve controller? Remote shut-off? What would you want to turn off? Dual circuit here, too. A switch-over from flow through feed to dump.....”

John looked up at Nick, an expression of growing fear running across his forehead and into his eyes.

“Murder!”

“I don’t believe it. How did that part get in there? It wasn’t officially listed as a sub-system component.”

John pulled up the official parts and hoses schematic again.

“Somebody tampered with this station, and probably expected to be able to get back in to remove the stuff again later without it ever being seen. Look how this dump

tube runs into the seafloor. The bubbles would vent in a random, haphazard pattern and appear to be just natural gas venting. Verrrryyy clever. And this whole section is built on quick-disconnects, even the pass-through piping. The whole piece just slips in and makes the assembly seven inches longer. No rerouting, no stretching hoses. Bet it even taps into the program ROM. This was designed by a pro.”

“John, you do realize what you are suggesting here? This venture has official ties to the Minisoft Corporation. That could be devastating to their next software release if they were indicted, or even suspected. Everybody that even knows this place exists right now just kind of laughs it off as an eccentric rich man’s play yard. That would change in a New York minute. This would probably shut them down forever, off-shore jurisdiction or not.”

“Yea, well Nick, you know I’m not exactly a prude, but would that be such a bad thing? You hear some really wild stories about that place from time to time.....”

“Yea, well when this breaks, the stories are bound to get wilder. Now, what about Jack Williamson’s plane? The XB171 uses fly-by-wire technology licensed from...”

“The Minisoft Corporation” John finished his sentence for him.

“Supposing you tampered with the flight control software?.....”

“Hooo boy, are we in deeeep kimchee now,” was his only answer

Angellina’s phone rang, jarring in the late hour. She pushed back her long blond hair, that had annoyingly covered her face again, then groped for the phone. She only succeeded in knocking it to the floor, and almost ended up following it.

“Wow, did you just light off a nuke over there?” The far-too-cheery-for-three-A.M. voice at the other end asked.

“Ahhhrgh, Nick? Sorry, I dropped the phone. Don't you ever sleep?”

“Apology accepted and yes, sometimes, but not right now. Listen, Angellina, this is worse than I thought. We need to meet very soon. No discussion by telephone. Too risky.”

“Kay, gotcha. John had bad news, huh? See ya tomorrow, then. By the way, where?”

“Well, what you mean is actually today, and how about the marina down where we chartered the float plane.”

“Okay, g'night.”

“See you then. Bye.” Nick wondered why his pulse seemed to be running slightly faster now.

Nick waited apprehensively, his every nerve on edge. He kept his right fingers curled around the blued steel .44 automag in his pocket, and tried to check everywhere at once. His biggest fear, however, was basically unfightable, that someone might intercept Angellina on her way in, and kidnap her or worse. The weather was pleasantly warm and sunny, but a cold chill still knifed his spine until he saw Angellina's rented Ford pull into the lot and park next to his Pontiac. He watched warily as she emerged, making sure no one suspicious (and what does a suspicious guy actually look like?) was around, then relaxed slightly when she hurried over to him.

“Nick, you look like you just saw a ghost? What’s wrong?” Angellina asked worriedly.

“It was murder. No doubt at all. We found physical evidence on that disk we shot.”

“Are you sure? Who checked it out for you?”

“An old friend, the guys a blinkin’ genius, he even scares me. Impeccable credentials, he’s just a little weird.”

“Yea, they usually are. Anyway, what did you actually find?” She seemed a little less worried now, and a little more interested. Nick scanned the area again carefully before continuing. He still had that ‘I’m being watched’ tickle in his gut, and his gut was usually right.

“We found some extra equipment connected to the air supply control module in the number 12 assembly. There is an extra set of control and mixing valves, and a dump valve, all remote sonar controlled. Someone could alter the oxygen balance or cut it off completely by using a small programming keypad.”

“Where would they do this from?”

“Well, from what John said, that would depend on the power that the transmitter could produce. Water is a pretty good conductor of sound, so the range would be far greater than in air. Without more information, we really can’t guess that.”

“I see,” she said, tugging at her chin thoughtfully. “What do we do now? There are only four people in the world who know about this right now.” Angellina stated flatly.

“Four,” Nick asked, “I count three.”

“You, John, myself,.....and the killer.”

“Huh, yea, forgot about that.” Nick tried to sound composed. He didn’t want Angellina to worry more than necessary. He didn’t know how well he was succeeding. Nick scanned the parking lot again, then turned back. Angellina looked slightly more worried than she had when he commenced this operation.

“Do you think you were followed?” he asked.

“Nope. I grew up in Syracuse in the early days after the riots. You learned how to check your six,” she added proudly.

“Check your six, eh? So you heard that I did some Air Force time, did you?”

“I learned that just so I could spring that on you. Why didn’t you go Navy, instead? Didn’t you eat, sleep and dream ‘Top Gun’?”

“Ahhhh, well the idea of landing on something the size of somebody’s back yard, on a pitching black ocean in a storm didn’t strike me as fun. More like suicide. Don’t misunderstand, though, I have the utmost respect for those boys. They may be a few bricks short of a full load, but they have brains and guts of pure steel. God bless ‘em.”

Nick appeared slightly embarrassed with his little speech, as he hadn’t planned on saying that much, but Angellina seemed to be giving him a look that was something a little more than respect now, so he didn’t feel quite so idiotic.

“Anyway, there, Maverick, try to keep yourself alive, eh?”

“You too. By the way, I’ll see you at work tomorrow.”

“What? Don’t you think I should quit? Maybe I’m next?”

“NO, No, no. If you haven’t attracted any attention yet, that would be the worst thing you could do. This may go all the way up the ladder to the Minisoft Corporation, and they have so much money and influence that we would be less than a nuisance. We

just have to hope that we don't bump too many of the web strands, or we may attract the attention of the spider. Got it?" he asked.

"Yes, I see your point. The spider, eh? How poetic."

"Yes, anyhow, listen, you leave now, and I will wait five minutes, then head in the opposite direction. We need to be really careful from now on. You know about Jack's XB171 going down in the mountains last month? We believe that may have been sabotage, too."

"But they combed that plane top to bottom and found nothing in the debris. The FAA's official announcement was pilot error. Why do you think differently?"

"That aircraft uses a fly-by-wire system. One of the first private civilian sport jets available with a fully digital fly-by-wire auto control system. Guess who the prime contractor for the flight control software is?"

Angellina felt a cold chill rocket up her spine.

"Oh, let me guess. Minisoft?"

"Nope. One of their wholly owned former defense sub-contractor subsidiaries."

"So you think Jack and Holly?..... Wouldn't that attract waaaay too much attention? Hard to write that off as a coinkydink."

"Huh? A what?"

"You know, a coinkydink."

"And what language is that?" he asked playfully.

"Nieppturfargullou, I believe. Yea, they just discovered it, in the South Pacific. Its like 100 miles from New Guinea, and ummm the natives....."

"Oh, go on. Get out of here. I'll see ya tomorrow at the office."

“I’ll be there with bells on. Oh, and I took your advice about the car. I got a rental, that I’m gonna swap every day or two.” she answered.

Bells. From what Nick remembered about her descriptions of some of the costumes, he actually wondered if that would happen. He also noticed that he had been having so much fun with their verbal fencing match he had forgotten to be wary. He had no such problems, now, however, as he watched the taillights of Angellina’s green Ford flash briefly, then accelerate off into the distance. He fingered his .44 again and hoped he wouldn’t be cleaning powder residue out of the barrel anytime in the next couple of days.

Nick wondered why everyone at Coral Haven had been so responsive to his inquiries and requests. True, he had some firepower behind him, but a couple of discreet phone calls shouldn’t have engendered the overwhelming helpfulness he was getting. This made him doubly suspicious and wary, but he still had nothing to hang his hat on, besides the tampered equipment they had found. So far as he knew, no one else knew about what he had found, and he hadn’t volunteered any information, so he felt as if an uneasy stalemate currently existed. This bugged him too, because he knew that when he dug a little deeper, the queen might jump out and try to turn stalemate to checkmate. Unfortunately, Nick’s biggest problem was that he didn’t know what this particular board looked like, and how many pieces the opponent still held. ***A dangerous chess game***, he thought, as the airlock door swung shut with a slight thud and bump. He waited until the ‘customer module’ had left the embarkation station and started moving slowly down the launch track before he began examining his surroundings. The module was about the size of a gasoline tanker trailer and looked a lot like one, too. The rounded side walls

were made of thick plexi, forming the ceiling and sloping around to about two thirds the diameter of the cylinder. The lower one-third was solid, and contained tanks, piping, electrical modules, fuel cells and batteries. Both ends of the cylinder were solid also, one end containing an air lock, the other end a small bathroom and kitchen. The main compartment was covered everywhere in fine tan Connelly leather, and luxurious darker tan Wilton carpet covered the floor and consoles. A small control panel equipped with three large touch-sensitive computer screens sat in front of an overstuffed leather recliner. The entire control panel was rimmed in dark burlled oak, polished to a high luster. Several equally over-stuffed couches were placed at random throughout the area. Nick thought the whole place looked like the inside of an immense English automobile, and remembered that he had been told that they had indeed been manufactured in Surrey, U.K. by a contractor that had had some ties to Land Rover and Bentley. Quite bespoke indeed. A low hum emanated from the floor as the module moved forward by magnetic induction at about 3 knots. Nick sat down to examine the controls, hoping he remembered correctly how to operate it, but the software driven control screens provided help when necessary, so it was much like playing a giant computer game. ***Ummmm, some game***, he mused. The cars cost 80 million a piece and rumor had it that Minisoft had dumped about 5 billion into total construction, including the casinos, hotels and ancillaries. Nick quickly scanned the life support screen for any red lights, but everything looked fine. He wasn't sure what all the numbers meant, but had been assured that any anomalous readings would show up in red instead of blue or green, and would flash to attract attention.

Nick turned to the path controls. The module moved on a track, like a very slow train, and each station had a siding where the module could be stopped, and still allow

other cars to pass. The sidings were constructed so that the module would move closer to whatever was being shown at that particular station, and could remain in place for up to 3 days utilizing the on-board power and life support equipment. The entire track was shown as a caterpillar-like looping blue line, winding among the caves and grottos that wound randomly among the natural reefs. His module appeared as a large, bright red dot on the screen. It moved slowly toward the first station, and he noticed that as it approached, the high-power iodine flood lights rendered the semi-murky depth into daylight. The first station came into view, and he switched off the interior lights so there wouldn't be any background glare. The third screen in the console would read out information about each station, giving either the model's name, or her character and fictitious background information, if selected. This would help maintain 'the illusion', he had been told, so he left the biography section of the screen switched off. The screen told him this was Station 1, 'The Pearl of the Orient'.

Nick observed the area had been tunneled out of the base rock, and bedded with fine sand. A fiberglass seashell, the size of a small house, rested quietly on the sand. At irregular intervals, a few small bubbles would escape from the interlocking 'teeth' of the shell's face. Nick wondered what would happen next. He didn't have to wait long. The shell opened, and inside was perched a huge artificial pearl, with a mermaid jealously guarding it. Nick watched her slowly unfold from around the immense pearl, give a jaunty little kick with her tail, then blow him a kiss. He wondered at how real this all appeared. ***No wonder these bozo's will pay such good money. The park in Orlando couldn't top this.*** All of the props that Angellina had described were completely invisible, with the exception of the large gold necklace that Nick knew was the outfit's

main control and support hub. Bubbles streamed at intervals from the model's mouth, and she really did appear to be breathing water. Nick did a quick, unofficial timing on his watch, and counted eight sets of bubbles per minute, all within one second plus or minus.

Just like a machine, how weird. What clever engineers. Nick located the sonar microphone, and clicked the transmit switch to 'on'.

"Hi, how ya doing?" He asked, then immediately felt like a complete moron.

Wet, I guess, right?

She waved back cheerily, and proceeded to make a complete slow circle around the pearl. She moved only in a horizontal direction, and Nick knew that her tether would keep her from moving any higher.

"You know, I'm the only customer today, so you will be getting off-shift early."

She gave a mock high five, then a thumbs-up.

"Happy about that, eh? I know I would be. Have a nice day."

Nick wondered about her answer. If the facility was closed, as he had been told, why didn't she know he would be the only customer? She had seemed genuinely surprised and happy about going home early. Strange. She waved again and smiled, then curled up around the pearl as the upper shell section began to close. The lights went out, and the module started moving again. He pressed one of the sub-menu 'spots' on the screen, and a complete list for today appeared.

1. *Pearl of the Orient*
2. *Pirate Ship of the Caribbean.*
3. *Lost City of Atlantis I*
4. *The Smallest Mermaid*

5. *Lost City of Atlantis II*
6. *The Flying Dutchman*
7. *Dead Men Tell No Tales*
8. *Lost City of Atlantis III*
9. *The Caves of Wonder*
10. *The Lost Gold of Urubamba*

Nick waited as the module stopped at each station, and he marveled at how cleverly the backgrounds and equipment had been integrated to provide an almost seamless presentation. *Dead Men Tell No Tales* was probably the most humorous, the unnamed model cavorting and pretending to tease and dance with the skeletons of her unfortunate sailor prey. She had also opted for only a tail and necklace as accoutrements, and her contours were quite eye-catchingly amazing. His module approached Station nine, and Nick pressed the 'stop on siding' 'spot' on the touch-screen. The module bumped slightly as it came to the switching section, then glided into the center of the siding and stopped. Nick knew that Angellina was on Station nine today. He couldn't see anything at first, though, beyond a dim gleam and a dark cave directly ahead. A small section of tail came sliding out first, then the lights started steplessly increasing in brilliance, until the whole area was brightly lit. Angellina slid across the soft, white sand slowly, completely believable as a half human-half fish hybrid. She smiled shyly, then unfolded completely from the cave and turned around fully. Nick thought he had never seen anyone look so enticing. Her waist length hair floated untethered around her face like a golden halo. She waved and bobbed over as close to the module as her tether would allow. Angellina had added some small gold necklaces to the large Egyptian-style one,

and had chosen a scoop-necked gold mesh fabric halter top, that followed her contours in heart stopping perfection. She tapped her left ear. Nick keyed the microphone.

“Is this a secure line?” he asked quietly.

She shook her head no.

‘Be careful,’ she mouthed to him.

Angellina made a searching gesture, hoping he would understand that she wanted to know if he had found anything else.

“No. not yet. I had hoped that running through the tour like this would give me some better insight, or perhaps suggest a new avenue of investigation. But I haven’t had any luck.”

She placed her index finger against her lips, then shook her head, and pointed up, indicating that he should say nothing more, because someone else might be listening, too. He pressed up close to the window and nodded that he understood. Angellina waved, then looked around warily. She had been rather apprehensive all morning. She turned back toward the cave, then turned toward Nick again. Playfully, she blew some bubble rings for him, then turned deadly serious. She pointed at her arm, mimicking checking a watch. She pointed three times, then held up four fingers.

Four o’clock. Nick nodded understanding, then watched as Angellina slipped back into the cave and the lights went down again. The module started moving again with a slight bump. As the module climbed out of the sea and sunshine flooded through the plexi, Nick noticed with distaste and a slight feeling of unease the small animated door logo of the Minisoft Corporation in the lower right corner of all the control screens.

He got another surprise when the module stopped moving and the door opened. In stepped none other than Roberto Silvero. Nick didn't like him any more the second time around. Dressed impeccably in another hand-made Italian suit and four hundred-dollar pair of black leather shoes, his dark hair slicked straight back and his dark, flat, reptilian eyes skating to and fro, Roberto still squeaked of big money illegally used. Nick shook his hand quickly, then pulled back a step.

“Well, Pantera, when can we expect to be back in full operation again? This delay is costing us millions, as you already know.”

Yea, sure, not to mention employees, but they're much more easily replaced, eh?

“Yes, well, I'm not sure that Mrs. Williamson's tragic death was accidental.”

Silvero's bushy eyebrows almost met in the middle.

“Accident, eh,” he echoed. “Well, do tell. Will this be a long investigation, then? You believe evidence of foul play has turned up?”

Ahhhhkkk, way to go, Nick. Shouldn't have played that card just yet.

“Not yet. But some things still don't quite add up. I will get back to you and your esteemed colleagues on this matter soon. I would like to just say again that I appreciate your help in giving me free reign to conduct this investigation as I see fit.”

Silvero harrumphed. Nick chose not to mention his surprise at the fact that other employee's seemed to be unaware of certain key problems with operations. Little problems, like employees just turning up dead.

“Yes, well, seeing as our insurance company has taken the unprecedented step of joining forces with Mr. Williamson’s life insurance company, apparently the estate of the late Mr. Jack Williamson and I both have something in common.”

“And that would be?”

“We are both at your mercy, and I for one am not one hundred percent thrilled about that. They will not pay until you mark this case closed, and satisfied as accidental. Am I coming through, Mr. Pantera?”

“Five by five, Mr. Silvero. Again, I’ll be in touch.”

With that, Nick turned and strode back into the guest reception building of Coral Haven, leaving an impotent and fuming Roberto Silvero to watch his receding back.

Nick felt like he was at a loss as to how to proceed. This didn’t happen to him often, and he didn’t like the feeling at all. He wanted to keep Angellina out of any more potential danger, so he sneaked back to John’s office, to brainstorm.

“Nick, you look positively put out, my dear boy.” John joked in his best English butler’s accent. Which wasn’t really very good, actually.

“John, this is winding me up. I need to finish this case, or the insurance companies will remove me. They’ll get some knucklehead to rubber-stamp it, pay the claim, and go on with it. That leaves Silvero and his buddies in the clear, free to continue whatever it is that they are actually doing. Which to me, seems darker and darker all the time. I think this might be beyond money, prostitution and gambling, actually into something way more sinister and dangerous, for us and everyone at large.”

“Okay, Nick. Why don’t we try some three-dimensional thinking, and see if we can jump past the logjam. What do we actually have so far, besides the pictures you took already? We don’t even have the actual equipment, so we could try to take it apart and check it out. Maybe find something they inadvertently left behind, like a serial number on a valve, or the manufacturer’s logo on a circuit board.”

“Could we get it released?”

“Yea, but only if we want to fess up to them that we know some of what happened. Would that be wise?” John asked.

“Probably not. If we don’t talk to them , who else can we contact?”

“Well, I’ve got some friends in the industrial sector, and if I send them the holos of the valves and things, maybe they can ID the supplier. It’s probably off the shelf stuff, you know.”

“That’s good. What else?”

“You still think this is related to Jack’s little looper in his XB171? Wouldn’t that really get people thinking?”

“I don’t know. From what I’m hearing, a lot of people think that maybe Holly was on a bender over Jack, maybe some drinking or something, and just had a ‘job-related’ accident. There were some rumours of possible infidelity on his side, and other weirdnesses, and that is a dangerous occupation to begin with, you have to admit.”

“Did you say you were over there again today?”

“Yea, I ran into Roberto Silvero, again.”

“Really, where?”

“At the dock, after the tour”.

“Wait, you ran the whole tour? Okay, then tell me what he said.”

“Yea, I ran the tour. I wanted to see exactly what everyone else sees, and to see if anything new would kinda jump out at me.”

“And....”

“Well, the system is incredible. I have never seen anything that looked more realistic. And the car that you ride in, the ‘customer module’, looks like the inside of a smoking parlor at Winton Castle. Unfortunately, other than amazing me with their engineering prowess, I didn’t discover anything of any real value. Roberto, that little troll, he came up and tried to lean on me. Goes ‘you know, I’m losing millions here. When can I start up again?’ He practically threatened me. How’s that grab ya?”

“Well, now. That might be useful. That means he’s concerned about his investment, and perhaps worried that he hasn’t seen all your cards yet.”

“Yea, but the pack of aces he’s got up his sleeve are the cards I’m concerned about.”

“Mmmmmm.”

“Something else, too, when I was on the tour, the first girl I talked to, she didn’t seem to know that they were closed. How could that be? Is he lying about being shut down? Oh, and the operating system for Coral Haven is Minisoft. All of it. Not only did they put up some cash, they are involved in day-to-day operations. How’s that grab ya?”

“Owww, that’s a grab, I’ll admit. I’m sure that is not common public knowledge. Okay, and have you interviewed the rest of the girls in this ‘Beauties of the Ocean’ thing, or whatever it is? In addition, what about the XB-171 angle? Have you checked out the plane yet? I know someone who owns one.”

“Hoooo-ah. No, I didn't talk to them yet. I'm not sure that that would help me any, right now and I don't know what leverage Silvero has over them anyway. Put that on hold for now. Maybe we should just concentrate on the jet? That could be the big strike.”

“And I bet that you, you big ex-jet ace stud-muffin you, are just dying for some seat time.”

“How did you guess?” Nick grinned maniacally.

Nick had to believe that this was probably about the most bizarre civilian aircraft he had ever encountered. The pilot's bubble canopy perched far forward on the nose, like a military fighter, but the 'side-car' bubble for the passenger on the craft's starboard side was pure civilian. ***Not so great visibility on your 5 o'clock***, he instantly recognized. Looking around, he noticed that on the port side, a series of vents were set into the upper side of the wing/lifting body, balancing the starboard side passenger cockpit. A two by three foot access door forward of the port engine intake allowed access to an inboard storage area under the vents. ***Passenger's need some place to put their clothes, don't they? No jet aces, here. Just Muffy and Jeff, eh?*** The planform wing reminded Nick of an F/A 18A seen from above, and figured the veteran fighter/light attack bomber had been used heavily as inspiration. The small canards poking out on both side of the pilot's canopy promised some spirited handling, and he was just dying to check it out. REAL soon.

“Sir, is this acceptable, sir?” his ground support tech asked.

“Ah, it'll do.”

“Sir, I understand you flew some combat in Desert Storm?”

Nick figured his squire must have been about five at the time.

“Yea, coupla hops.”

“I understand that you were a Lieutenant Colonel then? Ever fly the F18?”

“Sorry, son, only 16’s. A sweet bird. Sad to see her replaced by the Raptor, but the 16 is too visible to those fancy new acquisition radars. The F22 is well-nigh invisible.”

“So I hear, sir. Please take care of this baby, I gotta patch it up if you bend it.”

Nick flashed him a hard look, and he seemed to wilt.

“Bend it? I will bring it back in one piece, soldier. Understood!?”

Nick flashed him his best ‘yes general, I get the picture’ salute. The boy winced, realizing that maybe he hadn’t needed to add the last bit.

“Yes, sir. An honor to work with you, sir.”

“Look, James, you don’t have to call me sir. I’m retired.”

“Uh, yes sir. Thank you, Sir Nick.”

Guess I’m English royalty now, eh? Nick shook his head and smiled. You can get the boy out of the Army, but you can’t get the Army out of the boy. James handed up his helmet and Nick turned back to look down as James pulled the ladder away.

“You sure the safety software is off?”

“Yes, sir. Artificial G-force and reduced thrust safety software disabled by command code. You have full access to all that she’s got.”

“Thank you, James. That will be all.”

Nick checked the cockpit as he pulled on his flight gloves. Some strange contrasts here, alright, he agreed. The seats were semi-recumbent, like an F16, but they were also covered in Connelly leather, power adjustable for rake and lumbar, and tan. A tan leather ejection seat, for crying out loud. Like a Jaguar, kind of. What kinda jet is this, anyhow? The fully reconfigurable multi-screen color displays met his approval, though, reading out every conceivable parameter through multiple, easily accessible software menus. The flight stick had a HOTAS (hands on throttle and stick) switching setup that fit his fingers perfectly, and allowed all the major menus to be selected in seconds. The front panel was low and angled perfectly, so visibility was great on all sides, except to the 5 o'clock, where the second canopy introduced a distorted view. ***Not like that 15A I flew once***, he mused. **What a bus. Couldn't see anything with that giant panel and HUD combiner plate in the way. This is much nicer. So this is what a bunch of out-of-work aeronautical engineers build when they go private.*** Not bad, not bad at all, overall, he thought. Let's see what she's got under the hood.

Nick reveled in getting some seat time again. As the turbines spooled up and the smell of JP permeated the air, he couldn't believe the overwhelming feeling of nostalgia that washed over him. This plane flew just like his old 16, but only about 7/10ths as capably. He couldn't force it to dive, roll or bank as hard, but for a civvy model he thought it was just awesome. He had been told that the flight system wouldn't allow ham-fisted maneuvers at too low an altitude with the safeties 'on', so he tended to doubt pilot error. ***This baby is just too sweet to bite***, he thought. ***Whoever sorted the aerodynamics for them was seriously sharp.*** Keeping a weather eye on his fuel status,

he realized this bird did share another trait with his 16. This was one thirsty puppy at full war-whoop. Without a KC135 waiting to pass gas up, he was going to have to land soon. ***What a bummer.*** Nick wondered why Jack hadn't punched out if he'd had real trouble. The man had over 2000 flight hours in his log, Nick pondered. ***Maybe I really do need to see the plane, or what's left of it.*** Nick's request to analyze the flight software and black box data had been met with a little more than disdain. One of the techs asked him if he realized that the fly-by-wire flight control software contained over 22 million lines of code. ***Hoooo, doggy, I got my hands full, now*** he realized. He got copies of the flight software and black box info, then brought it all over to John's lab again.

John shook his head sadly.

"Nick, there are 22 million lines of code here. It could take years to find anything that had been tampered with, assuming that even there is something here to find. What do you want to do?"

"John, buddy, don't disappoint me. Can't you write something to go through this mess and check it? Like some kinda, uh, I don't know, like comb it, or something?"

"A filter, you mean. Well, it might be possible. This looks like it was compiled from native JavaScript."

"Coffee?"

"No, it's a programming language. Not too hard, but worse than BASIC, by far. Hey, you want to see something cool? Give me about a half an hour, and I think I can

interface this black box stuff to a 3D-flight sim. We can watch dear old Jack meet his maker.”

“That might actually be a help. I’ll go get us some food while you work through that. Food runs, I think I can actually handle.”

“Good plan. See you in a bit.” John had turned back to his computer and had already almost forgotten about Nick’s complete existence. ***The nerd and his machines. Oh well.*** Jumping in his car, his cell phone beeped for attention just as he turned the ignition key. Fumbling with the phone and the transmission lever simultaneously, Nick jammed the unit into his ear.

"Hallo.."

"Angellina?" he asked, momentarily confused.

"No, this is Margie. Who's Angellina?"

"Look Marge, we're divorced, so I don't have to answer that. I'm kinda busy right now, anyway, huh?"

"Yea, busy huh? Another one of your little hussies? Is it?" her voice became increasingly strident as it rose in volume.

"Okay, look, I'm going to hang up now. We've had this conversation already, too many times. I told you I never cheated on you, and that's the truth. Whenever you choose to believe that, that's up to you, and only you. Got it?"

"Nick,.....Ahhh, I'm sorry. What is it with us, anyway? We were good once, weren't we?"

It took him several seconds to answer around the conflicting lump that blocked his throat. He thought of Angellina again. If he was still with Marge, she would have

been a slight distraction, and nothing more. Now, however, everything was different, somehow, twisted a little like the reflection from a cracked mirror.

"Marge, that was a long time ago. What is it that you need?"

"There are some things going on, some complications here, financial complications, ahhh, I need to talk to you...."

"I will call you later."

He pressed the end/send button, and stared blankly through the windshield, not even noticing that the traffic light had gone through a full cycle to red again, or that the car behind him had been there for several miles. After grabbing lunch, a few minutes later, Nick headed back inside the lab, then froze, his free hand going for his .44 again.

My danger radar seems to be running overtime, these days. Seeing nothing suspicious, however, he quickly opened the side door and slipped in.

"Nick, I think I got it. You're gonna love this."

"Okay, wow me daddy."

Nick set the coffee and hoagies down on one of the few empty areas of one of the few uncluttered stainless lab tables in the whole room. John punched in a few quick commands and an XB-171 appeared on the plasma display, zooming along at frighteningly realistic ground speed. Nick could pick out randomly generated buildings, vehicles, and utility poles whizzing by at break-neck speeds.

"Hooo-ahh, the old boy was really moving." Nick observed quietly.

"Yup," John agreed.

"Are the buildings accurate?"

“No, the sim just throws them in. We don’t really know what the terrain looked like, except for where she hit.”

The aircraft commenced several showy but low risk rolls and corkscrews, then suddenly bobbed erratically and lost altitude. The plane accelerated and nosed right into the side of a small hill, spewing pieces of flaming debris in all directions.

“Sweet Lord,” Nick observed, “That sure was graphic.”

“Umpphhhh. As good as its gonna get, old boy.” John chimed in.

“So we have what? Mechanical failure, maybe? How can we tell what happened at that erratic point, right there?”

“We are going to have to map the control surface data onto the flight recorder and find out what the plane itself was doing when it did what we see here on the screen.”

“I think I followed that. How do we proceed?”

“Give me a coupla hours, and I think I can map them together.”

They decided to break to eat first, then John went at his machines with a vengeance.

Nick pulled back on the control stick of his F16C as he thumbed the intercom button.

“Morning, gentlemen. The air temperature is 102 degrees F, and the sky is clear and sunny.”

“Wow, big surprise there. We ever get anything else but sandstorms and sunrises?” his wingman chided.

Lieutenant Colonel Nicholas ‘Mad Dog’ Pantera pulled a 3G positive climb, then leveled off slightly behind and above the other two C’s. Configured for ground attack, they were carrying triple stick 500-pound dumb iron gravity bombs, CBU-528 cluster bombs and napalm canisters, along with two wing mounted AIM 120 Amraam missiles for self defense.

Nick checked his port wing rail and examined the similar Amraam nestled there. He was flying lead and air threat suppression for the other C’s, configured for ground-attack mode. His weapon mix was composed solely of Amraam’s and Sparrow heat-seeking missiles. He rotated his head through a full 320 degrees, then checked his threat-warning screen again.

“Look sharp laddies, Intel says the towel-heads are pretty hot in this area.” Nick warned.

“Those boys don’t have the cojones to come up here and mix it up with us, Sir,” his wingman, Second Lieutenant Roger ‘Hollywood’ Jones, responded. “But I got a package for ‘em. To Saddam with love, six five hundred pounders. Ah haaah!”

“Cat got your tongue today, Junior?” Nick asked.

“No sir, just watching the scenery,” his other pilot added. Sec. Lt. Robert ‘Junior’ Snyder looked like he shouldn’t even be driving yet. Unable to find a suitable call-sign after flight school, his classmates tagged him ‘Junior’. To his detriment and distaste, the name stuck.

“Okay, boys, keep two eyes in front, one in back, and stay frosty. Those towel-heads have this whole area strung up with SAM batteries.”

A pilot's worst nightmare on a low level strike mission, a small, fast surface-to-air missile could ruin your whole day right quick.

"I got nada." Hollywood added.

"Yea, well keep lookin'. I got a bad feeling right now," Nick added. "I'm gonna talk to Looking Glass for a sec. Hold on."

Nick switched to the command channel and conferred with the E-3C 'Sentry' AWACS circling a hundred and fifty miles away and scanning every single square inch of sky in a four hundred-mile sphere.

"Okay, I'm back. Looking Glass's got zip, too, just some slow moving ground traffic, probably a convoy. Look sharp and stay frosty."

"Wish we had a JSTARS out here too," Hollywood added, sotto voce.

Nick detected a bright flash out of the corner of his eye. ***Not good.***

"Step lively, boys, I think we got somebody's attention."

He knew he was right as the rattlesnake buzz of the RHAWS receiver burned in his earphones.

"Incoming. Hollywood, Junior, break right and dump chaff and flares. I'm going left."

"Roger, Mad Dog." Hollywood answered.

"Junior, you got that?"

"Errr, rog that, Mad Dog."

Nick banked left at over four hundred knots, the 9G grip nailing him to his recumbent flight seat. He could see vortex streams cranking off the leading edge of the

wings as he dumped flares and chaff. He also noticed that the lone missile that was still in the chase seemed to be following Junior.

“Junior, execute a split-S and dump a flare. I think it’s an IR.”

About the time he said that, Nick noticed that Junior must have also decided it was following him. However, he performed a fatal maneuver. Attempting to climb for altitude, he advanced the throttle control just a bit too far and engaged the afterburner. The mindless metallic brains inside the missile immediately detected this new, second sun flaring in its flight path and proceeded to chase it down. Almost before he had any idea what was happening, the missile’s Russian built, one hundred seventy six pound HE fragmentation warhead detonated against Junior’s tail. The C immediately snap rolled left and commenced a slow dive. The port tailplane was gone completely, and the starboard aileron was shredded. Nick watched, knowing there would now be only two possible outcomes. Jet fuel had already begun leaking from the ruptured starboard fuel tank.

“Junior, you are on fire. Eject now! That’s an order.”

“Ahhh, I got a real problem here. The seat is stuck! I can’t pull the handle!
Colonel!!!....”

Nick watched helplessly as Robert ‘Junior’ Snyder and eighteen tons of F16C became a roiling, greasy black cloud of smoke, flaming jet fuel, burning pilot, shredded aircraft parts and exploding weaponry slowly raining down onto the dry, tan desert below.

“Ah, Shheeez,” Nick muttered under his breath. “Now I’m gonna have to write another one of those ‘The Defense Department regrets to inform you...’ letters.” This is really

just too much. I need to get out of here. How many fine young men?...Nick wondered, blinking back tears.

“Son of a gun, those carpet selling, camel flea infested, overtanned towel-heads, I’ve had it with ‘em! Sir, request permission to pound that missile battery, sir!” Hollywood yelled into his microphone, then proceeded to continue with a non-stop stream of unrepeatable and much stronger oaths and curses under his breath.

“Well, there are more packets on the way up here, and I guess we need to get them oughta here, so let’s turn and burn.”

Nick wished his mind was as cold and clear as his voice. Turmoil burned in his mind, and a black need for revenge clouded his heart. He had really liked Junior, even if he was a little bit of a screw-up. He had believed that Junior might not have ‘the right stuff’, but he had passed all his quals without any problems, so he was on the mission.

He turned to look at their foe again. Three red-tipped, white-bodied missiles stuck up on rails, supported by what appeared to be a tan camouflage painted tank-type chassis with no gun turret. Nick believed he was looking at a Soviet SA-6 tracked missile carrier. A small radar dish on a tripod squatted on the hot desert sand, next to the vehicle’s left tank track.

“Looks like a Soviet SA-6 battery. I’ll get their attention and you hit ‘em from the blind side. Got it?”

“Oh, yes sir. Make my day, you dirt sucking camel jocks!”

Nick turned hard over the SAM battery and immediately had the rattlesnake warning tone buzzing him again. ***Somebody’s really awake down there. Wish I had a couple of HARM’s under the wings.*** Hollywood buzzed in from their blind side and

popped his whole stick of napalm, then dumped the CBU's, just as another SAM cleared the launch rail. The SAM, carrier, personnel and truck were completely destroyed. The explosion nearly blinded Nick, as he had been looking right at it. After a few seconds, when he looked back again, nothing remained but a huge crater darkly smoking and lit dimly from within by the remnants of burning napalm and missile fuel.

“Think I got ‘em, Colonel,” Hollywood responded with satisfaction.

“Well, let’s go home. I’ve got a dreadful letter to write, and you’re all out of munitions. Nothing I can do with a coupla missiles now....., so we are RTB.”

Nick sat bolt upright with a start, then relaxed. His forehead was covered with gleaming beads of perspiration, and his hands were shaking. He heaved himself up and out of one of John’s nasty green lab chairs where he had accidentally fallen asleep.

“The dream again, Nick?”

“Oh dang, yes, always the same. I try to save him, and he ends up as a smoking greasy spot. Why won’t it go away?”

“Nick, you gotta let him go. A lot of good men died over there, and it wasn’t your fault, any of them. From what I know of you, if I’d been a pilot, I wouldn’t have wanted to fly under anyone else. I mean it.”

“Thanks, John. I know you do..... Did you know some of the boys used to call me ‘The Padre’?”

“No, why?”

“They were always trying to get me to swear like a sailor when I got riled up, but I always refused. Irked ‘em to no end, too. It was kinda fun.”

“You don’t say.” John laughed, a short quiet bark.

“Okay, bucko. Crank it up, let’s see what ya got.”

Nick staggered over to John’s plasma screen, and watched the whole fatal episode unfold again.

“Okay, now watch this screen while I roll this thing at one-tenth speed.”

Nick pasted his attention on the 21 inch monitor nearby and watched the flight surface and thrust information varying as the plane turned and banked.

“YO!, back up. I got something here that doesn’t look kosher.”

“Rolling, pardner.”

“Slow to 1/100th.”

“You got it.”

“Okay, snapshot sequence mode.”

“Yup.”

“Play it back.”

“Ah, hah. Gotcha, my fine feathered friend. A murder on tape. Or disk, or whatever. Did you see that, John?”

“Yea, but I don’t know what I just saw.”

“Okay, here we go. See that tiny spike in graph 12? Hydraulic pressure dump. The emergency system hydraulic boost pressure valve dumped waaay lower than it should have. Unrecoverable nose-over and BOOM.”

“Yah. So how did that happen. Software glitch?”

“Possible, but not too likely. A flaw like that should have shown up by now, with the number of XB-171’s flying currently. I’m gonna bet the answer is behind door

number 22 million. I think that if the plane was on the ground in one piece, we would find a nice hydraulic oil stain under the port side wing root, up by the engine air inlet.”

John let out an audible sigh and then answered.

“You want me to sort that code, don’t you.”

Nick nodded, trying not to grin.

“This is gonna cost you.....”

“It always does. How much this time?”

“Case of scotch.”

“Oooooofah. That stuff’ll kill ya, you know?”

“Yup, and such a fine way to go. You know the brand.”

“Yah, don’t I ever. Okay, deal,” Nick agreed with a pained, I-better-get-my-retainer-soon look.

“I hope my research grant will cover this expenditure. Ouch.....Why didn’t he eject? Could someone have disabled the ejection mechanisms, too?”

“Hey, John, if they were good enough to get that code past the experts, they coulda made her dance on the head of a pin. Everything in that plane goes through Bessy,” Nick answered, pointing to the flight control box sitting quietly on the bench.

The following morning, Nick slipped back to John’s lab, to see if he had made any progress. This time he thought he might have been followed, but couldn’t tell for sure. This had him really edgy by the time he walked in. John was in the back room sorting through some research material and accidentally knocked a large box off a

counter. Nick's .44 automag was out and cocked before the box hit the ground. John turned around and winced.

“You wanna put that cannon away, Nick? By the way, why do you need such a big gun?”

“Because I hit what I shoot at.”

“Hmmmph, yea, you and Clint Eastwood. Over here, I got some great stuff.”

John switched on his 21 and 40 inch screens, then booted the filter routine.

“Get a load of this, right here. This line checks for altitude. Actually, it's a check for altitude at anything under 4000 feet. Right. Now if $alt \leq 4000$, then if G force is higher than 2.0, this sub-routine engages. This will only happen, though, after the plane has performed a barrel roll. That I had to look up. The code didn't make sense to me until I figured out what a barrel roll is. So, $alt \leq 4000$, $Gfx \geq 2.0$ and $rollX = 'yes'$, then the ejection subsystem is disabled, the autopilot, telemetry and comm systems shut down, and the hydraulic dump valve opens. Bingo. KaBoom. Jack was murdered by his own aircraft. How's that grab ya?”

“Right above the left ventricle, there, John. That is amazing. But I am quite worried about something else here. Why hasn't anyone tried to stop us yet? We are putting together a pretty solid case against somebody, and they haven't even tried to kill me yet.”

“Ahhhh, so ah, Nick, are you happy about that, or disappointed?”

Nick laughed, then found he couldn't stop. The past days' stress and anxiety had wrung him out, and it was finally finding a way to escape before something blew. About

three minutes later, after grabbing his ribs, he asked, “What should we do with this now? Go to the DA’s office?”

“We walk in and announce we have evidence that Jack and Holly Williamson were both murdered, but we have no idea by whom, and this is our evidence? It might fly, at that....,” John mused.

“Maybe they aren’t worried?”

“What?...”

“Maybe they aren’t worried, because they will just throw some sacrificial victims to the wolves, then go on with their project.”

“You seeing Reds behind the trees again, Nick?”

“Come on, knock it off, John. I’m serious. Suppose they are doing something weird on Coral Haven, and they just let a few executives get indicted, batter dipped and fried. Business goes on as usual.”

“So they haven’t tried to kill us yet, because it won’t affect their plans. A good possibility, anyway. Go on, what next?”

“Give me a little time. I’ll be in touch. Oh, and John, try to keep your head attached to your shoulders, eh?”

“Ah, such a cheery thought, dear boy,” John retorted, only half-jokingly.

Section III, “The midnight ride....”

Nick drove to Angellina’s apartment, wary of the risk that entailed, and warier of the risks if he didn’t. He parked nearby in a large shopping mall, then ducked and sprinted all the way to her door, trying to watch in three directions at once as he did so.

He made it without feeling like he had been observed, so he quickly knocked. Angellina asked quietly from behind the door, “Who is it?”

“Angellina, it’s me. Open up, it’s worse than we first thought.”

Nick heard the security chain scrape across the mechanism and fall against the doorframe. He slipped inside quickly, then closed and locked the door again. Her hair was down, and she was dressed only in a white tee shirt and heavy dark blue running pants, but he thought she wouldn’t have looked better in anything by Gucci. He also noticed her eyes looked a bit red, and she appeared to be developing faint dark circles under her eyes.

“Hey, are you okay?” Nick asked, concerned.

“Yea, I haven’t been sleeping too well. Whenever a loud truck goes by, I keep thinking somebody is breaking in to get me. This is getting hard. Weren’t you supposed to be here yesterday at four?”

“Oh, man. I knew I was forgetting something. This investigation is really burning me out, too. I’m on edge 24-7. I’m sorry I forgot.”

“I know. You don’t have to explain.”

Nick took a step forward and she fell against his shoulder. Of their own accord, his arms enfolded her in a great protectionary bear hug. He thought she felt absolutely incredible, and that this was just the most natural thing that should happen.

“You can protect me, right, Nick?” Angellina asked quietly, her voice muffled by Nick’s Hawaiian shirt.

“Of course. But I think maybe you should get out of here for a while. You have anywhere safe to go?”

“No, not really.”

“No relatives or anything?”

“Just friends from Coral Haven.”

He decided that would be bad. Nick thought of suggesting that she should move in with him for a little while, so he could protect her better, but that probably wouldn't be received well, anyway. Besides, he had to question his own motives here, too. Was this purely for her protection? He quickly decided something else would probably be better.

“Anyway, ummmm, how did you like my office?” she asked, attempting to inject a little humor into what was rapidly becoming a very dark and complicated conversation.

“Your office, yea. Nice, but where do you get coffee?”

She laughed, then sniffled, then cried quietly against his shirt. Nick wondered how this was going to end up.

“You must have found something really bad to risk coming here,” she stated, after a time.

“Yes, it looks like Jack was murdered, too. Someone added some code to his plane's fly-by-wire computer system, that under very specific circumstances would cause an 'unrecoverable incident'.”

“'Incident', huh? You mean 'crash', right? Well, I don't know much about that, but wouldn't that be incredibly difficult? A complex aircraft like that?”

“Yea, it would be. These guys are pros, maybe Minisoft pros. How's that grab ya?” he asked, quietly.

“Everything's grabbing me lately. I'm scared, Nick. Really scared. I don't know what they were doing to Holly, but I don't want to end up that way, too.”

“I know, I don’t want you to end up that way, either,” and he found that he meant that with all of his cold cop heart.

“Did you know we were roommates for a little while?”

“No, I didn’t,” Nick’s danger radar went on full alert.

“Yea, but she moved out because of health problems, right before she married Jack. She had a lot of strange ailments that nobody could explain. She was in to see the company doctors almost every day, and they brought her in-house for treatment for a while. Nick, I don’t have any proof, but I don’t think that all her sicknesses were natural.”

“Come again??” Nick said, surprised to the soles of his size 10 shoes.

“I think the docs at Coral Haven were doing something to her. I don’t have any proof, just female intuition, but this smells bad. Really bad. I didn’t think of this earlier, because everybody was so shaken up, but I’m starting to worry now. What if Coral Haven is more than just an elaborate entertainment complex?”

Nick found himself imagining all sorts of wild, preposterous thoughts, but is flying an airplane without control cables any more preposterous? Seeing a dead man’s last minutes in living color on a 40 inch picture screen in a lab basement, crazy? Now he really felt cold chills. He decided to send Angellina over to see his friends at the police station. They always had a safe house or two ready to go, and they still owed him a couple of favors. He would call them all in now, and go in debt if he had to. Realizing this made him even more wary. ***Now I have two people’s skins to worry about.*** This prospect both depressed and exhilarated him, and he wondered if adrenaline high’s were habit forming. He wondered what to do next, and some of the possibilities scared and

thrilled him simultaneously. Almost as if she knew exactly what he was thinking, she saved him the thorny problematics of having to make a decision.

"How about you stay, tonight."

"Here, you're sure?", he asked, wondering what 'here' entailed, exactly.

"I don't own any guns. You have a big one, and you know exactly how to use it, if needs be. I won't get any sleep if I don't feel safe. When you're around, I feel like nothing can touch me." She arched her eyebrow again, in that way that he was coming to know so well. "I'll sleep on the couch, if you want," she volunteered.

"No, no, this is your house, after all. Hardly be chivalrous, would it? You know, I don't have any other clothes."

"I don't care. I wouldn't trade this time for anything in the world."

She disappeared into her bedroom for a few moments, then emerged in a new outfit. She had brushed out her hair quickly, and changed into something he believed was commonly called a 'nightshirt'. The shirt was quite faded, as if from repeated washings, and was logo'd with extremely faded letters 'Choices', and some sort of small emblem. From the condition of the hem stitching, he figured that it must either have some sentimental value, or just be too comfortable to throw away. He remembered that the shirt she had worn when they went diving sported the same logo, and wondered what the significance of this particular company was. It moulded to her contours in excruciating detail, and he had to occupy his mind with looking at small items on her curio shelf, to keep inappropriate thoughts from wildly caroming off the interior of his skull. He wasn't too successful. They spent a good portion of the day watching satellite TV or just talking on her oversized, overstuffed burgundy couch, then she headed off to bed, and he spent

half the night listening for strange noises, and a quarter of the other half convincing himself that he should be here at all. He couldn't convince himself how much longer he could remain honorable, as their growing attraction definitely would turn physical, as well.

The following morning, Angellina made him pancakes and orange juice, then they prepared to head to the police station. Nick couldn't help but wonder about such a strange dichotomy, that he had just spent a night in the house of by far the best looking woman he had ever met, slept on the sofa alone, and was now taking her into protective custody. ***What a bizarre world I've moved into,*** he mused.

On the way, she brought up something that he immediately wished he had caught. She spent several minutes, staring out the car window, seemingly rather unfocused, then turned back to him suddenly.

"Why didn't Holly's sensors alert the monitoring station that she was in trouble?" she added without preamble.

"You mentioned....."his eyes frosted over for a second or two. "The pulse monitor. I can't believe I didn't think of that first. Are there tapes or something of all the sensor readings?"

"As far as I'm aware of, yes, but I don't know how they are stored, CD, DVD, hard disk, tape, or what. What do you suppose we will see?"

"We are not going to see anything. I need to get to see this myself. You are going to stay put. I can't keep my mind on keeping you safe and taking these guys out at the same time."

"Are you going to be able to analyze these yourself?" she asked pointedly.

"I'll get John to help."

"Wouldn't the monitoring station tech have to be involved, too? Okay, I give."

She became uncharacteristically silent the rest of the drive. Nick discussed Angellina's situation with his old friend Captain William 'Snakeeyes' Smith, when they reached the station. Nick had flown with Bill in the Gulf, and knew he could be trusted implicitly. She hugged him again and told him to be careful. Nick left the precinct with a heavy heart.

He drove home, then waited by the phone with baited breath until the caller ID identified the police department line coming in from Bill's office.

"Yea, Pantera," he answered, in case it might be someone else in the precinct using the phone.

"Nick, the package has been delivered safely."

Nick breathed a huge sigh of relief. This was their pre-arranged signal that Angellina had made it to the safe house okay, and was now holed up under the watchful eyes of three of Bill's best officers.

"Thanks, Bill. I owe you one."

"No, Nick. You don't. Good night."

Nick hung up the phone carefully, almost gingerly, then tried to get some sleep.

The following morning, Nick slipped over to John's lab again, this time with a far more dangerous and sinister plan in mind.

"John, I need to hack the Coral Haven central computer."

“Yea, sure. Anything else you’d like while I’m out, like maybe the Crown Jewels of the English Royalty?” John asked sarcastically.

“I’m serious. I think I am going to have to break in there and see what they have hidden in the rest of that complex, if anything.”

Nick proceeded to fill John in on Angellina’s suspicions about Holly Williamson’s unexplained ailments and sudden death. John looked more and more alarmed as he went further into his story.

“Okay, I think we can work this. Now, of course they will try to track the breach as soon as they detect it, so I’m going to use a packet router to switch our phone number to a phone booth in Milan, Italy, via London, Tokyo, and Vancouver. Kinda cool, huh?”

“High tech cat-and-mouse game, isn’t it? I hope we don’t end up taking the cheese.”

"Or being eaten by the cat," John deadpanned quietly while powering up some other equipment.

John warmed up another computer, and in about five minutes he was in. He first accessed the complex’s main map, showing all corridors, doors, security checkpoints and computer access terminals. Then he broke into the medical files section and downloaded all he could find on Holly Williamson. Nick looked over the medical files he had pulled and quickly turned a nasty shade of pale.

“John, look at these. Are these what I think they might be? I’m not exactly sure.”

“Hoooh, boy. Yup. Recombinant gene sequencing. Somebody over there is doing some genetic engineering and I’m sure they aren’t looking for a cure for cancer. Nick, this is *really* big. We need to tell someone now.”

“We can’t. Not yet. This won’t be enough evidence. I think the main medical library computer is isolated from the modem network, so no one can do just what we are doing right now. There should be more with this, but there isn’t. This could be animal research. That is only slightly illegal. They would get a good group of attorneys and get off. We need to get proof that they are working on humans, and the whole place goes down. Lock, stock and barrel. You with me?” Nick asked.

“Nick, you have that ‘I’m about to commit four felonies’ look again.”

“I’m gonna have to go in. There isn’t any way around it. They will simply shut down and move out if we turn this in now.”

At that second, John's computer beeped insistently, three times.

“Yea.....oh boy, they found us. I have to shut down, **now**. Their mole program has already figured out that the signal is coming from the United States, not Italy. If I stay on-line, they will track us to here eventually. Pulling the plug.....now.”

John clicked a software button and the modem screen turned gray, signifying that the program was still open, but had disconnected.

“By the way, John, where did you get that program?”

“I wrote it, Nick. Think you can buy that stuff from Minisoft?”

“One never knows.” Nick answered.

John laughed.

“Who is going to go with you? You are going to need a doctor or genetics expert to sort the stuff for you. You can’t just carry the whole lab out, and if you just grab and dash at random, you’ll probably get the wrong items.”

“True. Where do I get a doct....”

Nick's heart clamped tight as he knew what he would have to do, and whom he would probably have to take with him.

Nick called Capt. Smith again.

"Bill, I need you to bring that package back to the station with you tomorrow. I need to take a look at it again."

"Okay, Nick. You're calling the shots. See ya on the A.M."

Nick figured he got about 45 minutes sleep total between 10 P.M. and 6 A.M. He loaded up his Compaq laptop, the DVD-ROM's containing the purloined maps and medical information, his .44 automag, and drove to the police station, his head on a three hundred sixty degree swivel the whole time. Angellina had been brought in in a blacked-out police Suburban and driven to the station's underground parking garage. She was waiting in the building for him when he came in. Bill met him at the door, took him to a locked interrogation cell, then left him. Angellina rushed over to him as soon as the door closed. She threw her arms around him, then pulled him tight.

"I couldn't think of anything else in that dark house. I had three cops guarding me, and all I could think about was your safety."

Nick stroked her long, blond hair quietly, and squeezed her tighter.

"I'll be fine. I wasn't sure where I was on your list yesterday, when you got so quiet on me. That wasn't characteristic of the Angellina I'm getting to know."

"Put that one down to too much stress. I didn't want you to leave, and I guess that's how it chose to come out."

"I understand. Over and done. New business is, we just have one big problem. This is it."

He took a deep breath, then plowed into an explanation of what he and John had discovered, and what he had stored on the DVD disk. Angellina shook her head sadly, not appearing too surprised at what they surmised were the illegal depths that her employer had sunk to. He didn't want to tell her that he thought that she would need to go, too, but she had already figured that out. Angellina didn't believe Nick had risked her safety to bring her here just for a quick medical consultation.

".....So when we get in there, if we find what I think we are going to find, I am going to need you to tell me what information would be the most damaging if it were released. Do you remember enough from your pre-med classes?..."

"I'll get 'em. Don't you worry. I can't believe the moral degeneration this represents. This goes **way** beyond just gambling and prostitution. This is positively Frankenstein-ien. Did you get to check her sensor records?"

"No. I didn't ask for them, and they weren't in the data dump. I don't want them to see how many pieces of this puzzle we've already assembled. Especially Silvero. There's something dark about him, he knows a whole lot, I'd venture."

Nick was surprised at Angellina's outburst, but somewhat comforted that if she felt this strongly about bringing their whole house of cards down, she should have the mental fibre to see it all the way to the end. He also wondered about his own reasons. ***Do I really hate these men, or what their stupendous money represents?*** Nick realized that this gave him the same type of gut-twisting thrill that flying a strike mission engendered. Coupled with that, the feeling he had when he had taken the oath of an

officer in the United States Air Force, and then the police force. ***To serve, and protect.**

You guys are going down. Real soon.*

Section IV, “Hercules and Athena....”

Nick eyed the camera slung under the roof overhang suspiciously, but it seemed to have no desire to follow his movements as he edged up to the security station recessed slightly into the bricks; outside one of the secondary entrances. He slipped over to the station and pressed the ‘power’ button.

“Identify for retina scan,” a digitally sampled female voice asked him.

“Roberto Silvero,” Nick answered nervously. The computer wasn’t programmed to recognize fear or untruths, however, so it simply proceeded to scan his right eye. He hoped mightily that the retinal print contact lens he had slipped in would work.

“Identity confirmed. Have a nice day, Mr. Silvero.” ***Yea, it’s good to have friends that are good at bending laws.***

Nick popped the false contact out of his eye and ground it into the dirt, before opening the door. With the contact in, he couldn’t see anything on his right side, and he knew that a blind spot that big could get him killed. Nick motioned impatiently for Angellina to enter before the timer on the door signaled that it had been left open. She hurried in, and they proceeded to apply black grease paint to their faces and hands, from the small equipment bag that Nick had brought. During this operation, Nick constantly scanned the hallway, his right hand hovering near his holstered .44 automag, fearing a roaming guard would discover them. ***The only wildcard in this operation,*** he thought grimly, ***the unknown human factor.*** They proceeded a short distance down the white, antiseptic corridor, and came to the ventilation duct that was going to be their primary mode of travel for the next fifteen to twenty minutes. Nick removed the stainless steel knurled attaching screws and tilted up the white enameled grille, exposing the yard wide

opening beneath. He boosted Angellina into the duct, then passed her the padded bag containing his computer and tools. He then pulled himself in and carefully closed the grate. He knew the ducts were rigged with intrusion sensors, but they were too dark inside for cameras. Nick trusted that John's hack job had taken care of the sensors for the moment, so they made good time through the innards of the huge structure. He would have preferred a GPS and moving map display, but feared that the oscillators used to time the CPU operations and operate the screen pixel scan chips would be picked up by some sensor that they were unaware of. Paper had no such drawbacks. Quickly consulting a small map with his pen-sized flashlight, Nick motioned Angellina closer.

"I think we're right here," he whispered, pointing to the red 'X' on the paper.
"Time to get out."

Nick reached the air vent outlet and looked down. Unfortunately, this vent appeared to have been built by a different supplier, and was much more substantial in thickness and strength, than the one they had utilized for entry. With a limited field of view, he hoped no one else was in the corridor. Figuring that the vent wouldn't just pop out like it always did in the movies, he drew his silenced .44 and blew out the corners opposite the hinge. With a solid kick from his booted foot, the grate swung down and over. Nick stuck his pistol through the opening first, then dropped his head for a quick recon. He scanned the corridor and saw nothing out of the ordinary. The access hatch that the plan showed sat mutely in the room's far corner.

"Okay, the coast is clear. I'm going to drop down, then you jump. I'll catch you."
"Okay."

Nick silently lowered his laptop case first, then himself; with a lot more noise than he had hoped for. The polished tile floor, white antiseptic walls and industrial issue drop-in grid ceiling revealed no veiled threats, so he turned to help Angellina down. He could have saved his time. Deftly, she came out headfirst and at the last second reached back with both hands and performed a front twisting somersault. She landed on her feet with nary a sound.

“Bravo,” Nick whispered. “Showoff.”

Angellina performed a mock bow, then laughed quietly.

“Where did you learn that?”

“The circus.....ha, no. I wanted to be a gymnast once. A little bit of it stuck with me.”

“I’ll say,” Nick retorted as he placed his pistol on the floor and took out his toolkit. After a few seconds of examination, he decided that removing the access panel should be as simple as it looked. The panel appeared to be nothing more than a stainless steel plate, with a series of fine parallel lines milled into its surface.

“Looks like only two Phillips screws.”

Nick pulled the screwdriver from his hip pouch and removed the access panel retaining screws.

“Are you up for this?” he asked, concern showing on his face. “That’s a long way down.”

“Guess we are going to find out, eh,” Angellina answered, sounding much more confident than she felt. She stripped off her black running pants and pullover fleece, leaving only black shorts and a gray tee shirt. This would give her more flexibility and

speed. Her face looked almost clown-like, black against the pale skin of her exposed arms and neck.

“This is the only way in from this side. On the other side of this door is an alloy gate. Too strong to torch through, way too tough to cut. It is isolated from the central security grid, and apparently serves as an emergency exit in the event of some type of bio-toxic release or fire in the lab. The only other controller is on the other side of the gate. Catch-22 situation.”

“I know. I studied the plans too.”

“Well, good luck, then. I’ll wait right here, and hey, be careful, okay?”

“You are going to have to hold my feet. The shaft doesn’t widen until I hit the horizontal cross. I’m going to have to go head first.”

“Don’t forget, the release switch is on the left side of the grate, when you are facing it. Just reach through and turn it.”

“Got it. See ya in a few. Come on, let’s go. We only have about an hour until those motion sensors reactivate.”

Nick nodded, then hefted her by her ankles. Weighing surprisingly less than he had anticipated, he easily swung her out over the tunnel opening. Warm water lapped less than two feet down.

“Here we go,” Angellina called, then dragging a last deep breath, pulled downward on the ladder rungs that led to the bottom of the vertical shaft. As soon as he let go of her feet, Nick pushed the stopwatch button on his chronograph, and sat down to wait. As the rapidly changing numbers passed one minute, Nick found himself beginning to worry. He crawled back over to the shaft opening and peered inside. Nothing. A small

badger of fear began to gnaw at his brain. Finally, he saw a thin stream of bubbles threading upward. He checked his watch quickly. Two minutes, twelve seconds. She had told him that she had never gone longer than this. Now he really began to worry. He could see her beginning to come back up the shaft; then suddenly, she grabbed one of the rungs and stopped. He immediately knew she wasn't going to make it. A thin stream of bubbles broke surface next to him; became more pronounced, then heavy, then uneven, then slowed and stopped altogether. He could only see the top of her head, and her left hand. She seemed to be drifting up and down slowly, her hair furling and spreading like a golden gossamer shroud. He placed his pistol next to his laptop case, then commenced stripping off his heavy boots. Formulating a plan on the fly, Nick quickly grabbed a deep breath, then levered himself into the narrow shaft. His shoulders scraped both walls at some points, and he wondered if he would get stuck, too. He moved downward quickly, with powerful pulls of his shoulder muscles, reaching her in a matter of seconds.

Okay, what now, genius? Nick realized that there was no way to get past her, and he couldn't back up. With a sudden flash of insight, he remembered that the shaft widened into a tunnel at the bottom of the vertical shaft, where it split off to join three other horizontal shafts. Carefully disengaging her hands from the rungs, Nick pushed Angellina to the bottom of the shaft, then levered himself around and below her. He thought about checking for a pulse, but decided he didn't have time for any secondary considerations. He got behind her, then pushed for the surface with all the strength he could develop. Quickly reaching the top of the shaft, he wondered how to get out. ***Guess I'm just going to have to heave her out first.*** Nick worried about cracking her skull on the hard flooring, but knew that a possible concussion would certainly be preferable to

her present fate, so he put his head under her rear and gave her a good shove, then climbed out himself. Coughing violently, he tried to catch his breath, then quickly turned to check on her condition. Nick found only a weak and thready pulse, and no detectable respiration, so he turned her over and tried to push most of the water out of her lungs. He then flipped her over again and commenced CPR. ***Come on, kiddo, don't leave me now.*** He pinched her nose shut, and commenced artificial respiration. He worked desperately for several minutes, a growing fear constricting his chest. Finally, explosively, she coughed up what appeared to be about a half gallon of seawater, and commenced a terrible-sounding coughing fit. After a few minutes more, she looked up at him and laughed weakly.

“What did you do to me? My chest feels like somebody whacked it with a mallet, then kicked me in the head for dessert.”

“Well, ahhh, I think maybe I got a little carried away with the CPR thing. And I had to push you out of the shaft, so I could get out. I think I cracked your head on the tile while I was doing the hero thing.”

She smiled at him weakly, then commenced another coughing bout. While he waited for some color to return, Nick whispered a silent prayer of thanks. “Lord, you have been merciful. Don't let me lose another one, please.”

Nick noticed that her extended immersion had washed off most of her black grease paint, but what was left had run down her face, creating a ‘Kiss’-like half black, half pale effect. He tried not to laugh, but ended up snickering anyway. The remnants of his adrenaline high were making him kind of dopey; so at this point, just about anything would seem funny.

“You oughta see your face right now. You’ve got black grease paint running down all over. Quite a striking effect, I believe.”

They both laughed, then he helped her to her feet; and quickly slipped back into his boots. She wobbled like a new-born colt, but managed to remain standing. He looped a sinewy arm around her shoulder for a moment, until she appeared to be more steady.

“Did you reach the switch?” he asked, the fingers on both hands crossed behind his back.

“Well if I hadn’t, I would send you back to do it again,” Angellina joked, her voice still a hoarse whisper. “What about the door?”

“I’ve got this one.”

Nick raised his silenced .44 and blew out a neat semi-circle around the door handle. A .38 probably would have had little effect, but the thick oak splintered and yielded to the power of his Magnum rounds. He gave the doorknob a good kick, breaking out the remaining wood, then pulled it open. He had noticed that the pistol was getting louder with each shot, and knew that the high powered rounds were destroying the silencer.

“Here’s the moment of truth,” he whispered. The polished alloy gate stood sentry a few paces beyond, its thick, criss-crossed welded oval section bars bearing mute witness to its massive strength.

At his lightest touch, the gate swung soundlessly open on roller bearings.

“Bingo.”

“What about the sensors?” Angellina asked.

“Forty minutes left. I’m more worried about randomly roaming guards.”

“Well, there’s nothing we can do about that. Let’s get going.”

Nick nodded assent as he swapped out his empty clip and slammed a fresh set of Magnums into the pistol’s butt. They hurried down the seemingly endless corridor and stopped outside the unofficial laboratory entrance.

“This isn’t even supposed to be here. The floor plan says this is a storage area and maintenance garage.”

“Maybe it was, once upon a time. I think this is where we will find the golden fleece. Lead on, Athena.”

Angellina rolled her eyes and looked at him strangely for a moment, then opened the door and went in. Nick turned around and looked up. The red light on the wall mounted motion sensor was still on, but the light underneath remained dark. ***Only for about another thirty minutes, though.*** Angellina turned around when he entered.

“We left my other clothes back in the hallway!” she whispered.

“Yea, well too late to worry about that now, either. Let’s get the goods and beat it.”

Nick placed his laptop case on a convenient table, then began searching for the lab’s main computer terminal. Finally finding it hidden behind a portable divider wall, he called up the medical access file, and typed in ‘Holly Williamson’. Within seconds, unintelligible streams of data were flying across the monitor.

“Oh, yea. Paydirt.”

Nick located a data port on the back of the PC and plugged his laptop into it, with the short USB port cable he had brought in his pack. Soon, the entire contents of the file were being copied to his hard drive, then shunted off to a DVD-RW.

“How many DVD’s did you bring? Angellina asked, while looking around the lab.

“Six. Hope that’s enough.”

“That would be about 48 gigabytes. Should be plenty, unless these guys have been a lot busier than we think.”

While he baby-sat his laptop, like any typical woman, she began rummaging through every cabinet and closet in the entire room. Finding nothing of interest beyond standard medical and lab supplies, she turned her attention to the next room, where stainless tables and monitoring equipment sat, silently gleaming. Angellina opened a cold storage freezer, then stepped back and uttered a muted scream. Nick immediately pulled his .44 and cocked it.

“Oh, my Lord. You have got to see this, this can’t be real,” she exclaimed.

Inside a bottle of formaldehyde floated a baby’s corpse. Nick didn’t notice anything unusual about it until he got closer. This baby had webbing between its fingers and toes, and sharp, almost reptilian eyeteeth poked out around its closed lips. The eyes were open and fixed in a blank stare. The pupils were slitted and yellow, like a feline’s.

“They did not.....” she trailed off, thoroughly repulsed.

“Can we get that out of here? We have got to have that for evidence.”

“No, it’s too cold. We have nothing to carry it in, and your fingers would freeze to the container. We have to leave it. Why didn’t I think to bring a camera? Look, there’s a label on here.”

The tag had been neatly produced on a self-adhesive label, by a laser printer.
'Specimen THD-1244. Born 01/12/2012, 14:17:22 hours. Deceased 01/16/2012, 03:27:53 hours.'

Angellina wasn't sure which shocked her more, the matter-of-fact way that the bottle had been labeled, or that someone had wanted to keep it. Nick's laptop beeped, and he changed DVD's in the RW drive again.

"Nick, they must have detailed records of all these experiments. Do you think any of them lived more than a week?"

Nick shivered, then answered carefully.

"I've had this place under surveillance for the last couple of days. There have been planes coming and going almost 'round the clock. Someone is moving equipment, and I think it is leaving, not coming in. They are packing up their marbles and going home to play."

"We have got to make sure this stuff reaches the police. Forget the police, the Federal authorities. Do you have any idea how many Federal laws these guys have flaunted and violated?"

"I know. Check on that DVD. We only have about five minutes until the sensors turn back on."

"It's full."

"Let's go. No sense in getting greedy."

"Agreed."

Nick unplugged his laptop, put the cables away and shut off the main PC. He pulled his .44, then opened the door quietly. A quick scan revealed nothing. He stepped

out into the corridor, then motioned for Angellina to follow. At that moment, a roaming guard came around a blind bend and into their hall. He saw Nick at the same time Nick saw him. His mistake was to try to go for his gun and radio simultaneously. Nick knew that they had to get out to make their findings known, so it was just this poor slob's unlucky day. Reacting way too slowly, Nick leveled his .44 and shot him twice, then turned and ran. The guard dropped like a marionette with his strings cut. Nick did feel some remorse about this, but decided that it was just a matter of self-preservation.

Besides, I have someone else to look out for, he thought as he turned to make sure that his cohort was keeping up. He needn't have worried. She was right behind him and still gaining.

“Come on, old man. You wanna get left behind?” she yelled as she cleared another corridor door. Nick charged into a full-out sprint to close the distance. Hoping that she was remembering the map correctly, Nick sprinted along behind her until they reached an outside door. The door was at the top of a flight of stairs.

“I think we took a wrong turn. I think this is the roof.”

Just then, the lights went out, leaving them in near darkness. A siren began to wail somewhere in the distance.

“Somebody found your clothes. They're going to come after us with infrared goggles and hunt us down like dogs. We won't even be able to see them coming. We have to go forward. The motion sensors must have turned back on, along with the security cameras. We are soooo hosed.”

“Yea, well, then forward it is. Banzai!”

Angellina pushed the door open and stepped out into the reddening dawn. She quickly ducked back inside.

“There is a vicious looking helicopter out there. Tell me that isn’t what I think it is.”

Nick pushed past her and sneaked a quick peak. ***We are well and truly hosed now,*** he realized. Hovering directly in front of the exit was a large camouflaged helicopter with a multi-piece Perspex windshield, three turbine engines and a very impressive-looking cannon poking out of its nose.

“That is an Mi-24 Hind. I think it’s a 24W model. Soviet military. This is not good.”

“Yea, well looking down the barrel of that cannon made me realize I’m going to have to go home and change my shorts.”

Nick laughed; a short, stress charged bark.

“I think they won’t fire yet. They probably have orders not to chew up the building, and that quad mount 12.7 mike-mike on the chin will do a real nice job. Did you happen to see any missiles?”

“Well, would you like me to go outside with a notebook and take an inventory? I’ll ask the pilot what the standard anti-personnel rounds are for today.”

Nick didn’t feel any happier about their present situation, but he sure had to admire her spunk in the face of an almost certainly painful and bloody death. He could hear the chopper buzzing around like an angry insect, and waited for the noise level and rotor pitch to drop. That would mean they were facing away for a few seconds.

“When I tell you to run, run. I’m going to draw his fire.”

“Whaaat??! Are you nuts? That chain saw is going to rip you to pieces. I’ve seen a few James Bond movies too, you know.”

“I don’t think they will fire until fired upon. Here, take the cell phone. Press *1, REDIAL, then pray a lot. Captain Smith is supposed to answer the phone as soon as I call him. He said he would try to arrange some back-up in case things went sour,” Nick fervently hoped that ‘Snakeeyes’ had managed to come up with a decent plan. “You remember Bill Smith, right? At the police station?”

Angellina’s face clouded over for a second as she thought about the different officers she had briefly met, then recognition flashed.

“Ready?” He handed her the phone.

“Nick, I,.....” she stammered. She reached over and gave him a quick kiss.

“Yea, I know. Me too.”

“Go!” he yelled as he pushed open the door. Angellina sprinted toward a cluster of air ducts and ventilation equipment as Nick bolted behind an air conditioner evaporator tower.

Angellina reached the air ducts, rolled underneath a large piece of equipment, gave Nick a quick ‘thumbs-up’, then started frantically dialing his cellular telephone. Nick checked the clip in his .44, then took a deep breath and briefly wondered what being blown into little quivering chunks of meat by a 12.7mm cannon would feel like. ***Very painful. For a very short time, I’m sure.*** Knowing that the canopy Perspex would be thick and practically bullet proof, Nick decide to try for the helicopter’s most vulnerable point. The delicate turbine inlets. ***And this monster happens to have three.*** Nick rolled quickly out of cover, then stood and aimed in one fluid motion. He could see the look of surprise

on the gunner's face, through the forward multi-paned canopy. He emptied the clip as fast as the .44 would fire, the stock growing quite warm in his ungloved hands. He also noticed that his gunshots had been growing louder and louder, and realized that the overtaxed silencer had finally burned out. ***Happy to see I haven't lost the edge,*** Nick thought, as most of his rounds found new homes in delicate parts of the engine's front section. A few rounds struck the engine oil cooler, centered directly between and above the turbine air inlets. The chopper immediately commenced a slow climb as smoke poured from the injured oil cooler. At the same time, the chain gun went into operation. Nick managed to duck and roll back under the giant air conditioner housing just as 12.7mm shells started tearing up the rubberized roofing. A few hot chunks of lead and blown-off fragments of metal hit him in the cheek and left shoulder. He felt hot blood running down his face. ***Hope it's just a scratch.*** Nick noticed his left arm seemed to be ignoring his brain's commands to move, however, and realized that he had more to contend with than just a scratch. He could hear the wounded wailing of the Hind's turbines, and knew they would have to set down soon, or risk blowing the engines. He sure wouldn't have wanted to try autorotating one of those puppies to a soft landing. ***I'd ditch the missiles, though, if I could. Now, will he try to kill me, or save himself?*** Nick wondered. He saw the chopper turn away and head for what he assumed was its landing pad, so he decided the pilot had opted for self-preservation.

Good call, mate. Wonder if they have any more toys in that price range?

Nick was wondering how long it would take the ground forces to come up their six, when he heard the heavy 'whop-whop-whop' of the rotors of another helicopter.

Come on, give me a bloody break, puhleeeeeeze? By the basso sound of the blades,

however, he immediately realized that this was not another Hind. A camouflaged and heavily armed Sikorsky CH-53 Super Stallion flashed overhead, flanked by two bad-boy AH-64 Apache gunships. The Apache's commenced an attack run on the wounded Hind with their stubby wing mounted Hellfire air to surface missiles, and seconds later an enormous fireball and smoke cloud blanketed the landing field. Nick was buffeted by the concussion of the helicopter's grand demise, and almost fell. The CH-53 settled directly above him, then switched on it's outside intercom system.

“Attention, all combatant personnel. This facility is now under the control of the United States military. Any further acts of aggression will be considered an act of war, and dealt with accordingly. It is recommended that everyone come out with your hands up. We will be charitable, and give you a full thirty seconds.”

To punctuate the message, an F22 Raptor streaked by low over the airfield and dropped a string of parachute flares. Banking sharply, it commenced high station keeping directly over the airfield. Nick watched six ropes unwind from the CH-53, and knew he was about to have some company. Sliding down the ropes came six heavily armed Marines in full combat fatigues and gear. He decided it was safe to show himself now.

“Ho, there. Coming out!” he yelled, to avoid being shot, then rolled out from under the air conditioner.

“Stand and identify yourself!” The lead Marine answered, swinging his M-16 around to a ready stance and blind checking the safety.

“Lieutenant Colonel Nicholas Pantera, United States Air Force, retired, at your service,” Nick responded, then snapped him a sharp salute.

“Sir, I need to see some I.D., sir.”

“Ah, you see there, Marine, I have no pockets, hence no wallet, hence no I.D.”

“I see, sir. Come with me, please. Sorry about this, but we must be sure.”

“I understand completely, Marine. See to the lady while you are at it, will you?”

Angellina rolled out from behind her cover at that moment, and six M16's snapped to the ready, then six pairs of male eyes snapped to attention. Angellina had sweated off most of the remaining black grease paint, so she looked almost presentable. The extended dip in warm salt water had been less than charitable, but nobody else seemed to mind, or notice. Angellina ran over to Nick, looked at the chief Marine questioningly, then buried herself in his arms, almost taking both of them over the edge of the parapet and off the roof. Nick turned back to the Marine after she had clumsily disengaged.

“I don't believe I caught your name, Marine?”

“Lieutenant Pedro Marcos Rivera, United States Marine Corp, sir!” Pedro snapped him a tight salute, then relaxed slightly.

“I believe the lady will vouch for your identity, sir. Would you like to follow us in? And by the way, did you down that Hind yourself?”

“Yes, I did. With this.”

Nick pulled out his blued .44 automag, unscrewed the burned-out silencer, and handed it butt first to the Lieutenant. Pedro took it and looked it over closely.

“A fine weapon, sir. That was some nice shooting. Did you hit the engine? She appeared to be smoking when we arrived.”

“I think I got the oil cooler, too. Bit of good luck there, I'll tell you.”

“If you say so, sir. This a .45?...no, a .44, right.”

“.44 automag. Finest handgun on the planet.”

“Can’t say I could argue much with you there, sir. I have a Ruger .480 at home. Shall we?.....Oh and by the way, Colonel; we should probably have a medic take a look at that arm.” Nick checked his arm, then gingerly probed the wound. A sharp piece of metal had penetrated his sweatshirt and tee shirt, then buried itself in the meaty part of his bicep. He winced as the shard moved under the pressure of his fingertip. ***Must have been on too much of an adrenaline high to notice any pain before,*** he figured. Blood had seeped into his sweatshirt, nearly invisible against the black cotton. Pedro motioned toward the rooftop door, where a second Marine waited with his M-16 pointed down the stairway. He stopped at the door, and put his hand over his ear, listening to a voice only he could hear. Satisfied with the situation report he had just received, Pedro proceeded down, with Nick following closely. As he made his way down the staircase, he felt Angellina slip her tiny hand into the palm of his. Staccato gunfire and the thud-thud of stun grenades could be heard faintly in the distance. Soon, all was quiet.

Later, back at his home, they sat unwinding after the most incredible day either of them could ever remember experiencing.

“How are you, now?” Nick asked quietly, while he stroked her lush auburn hair.

“Well, my headache is gone, but my ribs still hurt. You sure gave me quite a wallop, eh?” she asked playfully.

Nick looked away.

“I thought that you were...you know....oh, man. I thought you were really gone, and I couldn’t deal with it. I felt so helpless and frustrated. I just couldn’t go through that again. I guess I got a little over-zealous.”

“What do you mean, ‘again’?” she asked, looking up at him with her large, luminous blue eyes.

“I’ll have to tell you the whole thing. Sometime.”

“We seem to have plenty of time,” she responded.

So, hesitantly, Nick proceeded to tell her the entire story of ‘Junior’s’ loss, and about the recurring nightmares that he never managed to get over or past.

“He was burning. I saw flames in the cockpit, then.....nothing. Just flames and pieces, dropping like aluminum rain.” he finished.

Angellina was softly crying when he stopped.

“That has to be the saddest story I have ever heard,” she said while wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. “Nick, oh Nick, you could not have done anything differently. It wasn’t your fault. Don’t continue to beat yourself like this. It isn’t right, or fair. You will never have peace with yourself, or let anyone else in, otherwise. I don’t want you to keep me outside, too.”

“You are absolutely right. I don’t want that either.”

He wished he felt as confident as he sounded. He knew it would take him time to make any progress against such a deeply embedded angst. He switched channels on his digital TV while she slept peacefully, curled up against his side.

The following morning, Nick had a quick de-brief with William Smith, in his police station office.

“.....so I think that just about covers what you found, right? You remember anything else you want me to add to the official report?”

“No, I think that’s about it. The eggheads find anything interesting?”

“They sure did. First of all, the lab techs were formatting the hard drives when our troops broke in. They were erasing all the evidence, to guard against it being captured. That DVD-RW set that you brought out was all the evidence the DA’s going to need. The stuff you copied was almost everything they had already deleted. We did lose some more however, in an accident. One of the techs had a .38 hidden behind a computer monitor, and decided to be a cowboy. They took him out in two separate body bags, but some of the servers got shot up pretty good when the Marines opened fire. We lost a bunch of hard drives to bullet damage. And the freezers, Nick, I can’t believe the stuff they had put up in there. That fanged baby you found,” Bill looked up questioningly, to see if he remembered. Nick shivered. He doubted in a thousand years he would ever forget.

“Well, they found more. One of ‘em even had wings. They were experimenting with pressure adaptable specimens, for deep-sea work, with high altitude compensation for space construction, and even skeletal enhancements to build a ‘perfect warrior’. Intelligence enhancements and all. This stuff is just absolutely unbelievable. I can’t believe all this was going on 40 miles from my front windows. And, this is really gonna grab ya! The medical section was in charge of Coral Haven. They found out that the seawater in the area has a certain special mix of acidity, salinity and natural background radiation caused by local rock decay.”

“So you are telling me that if I go paddle around in the ocean out there, my teeth are going to start growing sharper?”

“Not even close. The water was just a catalyst. These knuckleheads were administering experimental drugs to the women, and the seawater exposure catalyzed the effect.”

“Sped it up?”

“That seems to be it. Holly Williamson’s records indicated that she had some type of low level genetic abnormality in her eggs that would benefit the program. So after long term exposure, they removed her ovaries, manipulated them and fertilized them.”

“You mean, those horrendous things in the freezer, some of them were Holly’s babies?” Nick queried.

“Unfortunately, that is exactly what I am saying.”

“Did they find anything on Angellina?” he questioned, fearing the answer.

“Well, some, but nothing spectacular. She seemed to be rather resistant to the effect, so they left her mostly alone. We believe Holly may have been pregnant twice. Some of the information has holes in it, sections that were deleted that your backup didn’t cover.”

“Wouldn’t her husband notice something like that? Couldn’t be all that easy to hide,” Nick asked.

“Yea, he probably did notice. Remember what happened to him, right?”

Nick shivered again.

“So, the whole ‘Beauties of the Deep’ mermaid thing was nothing but an elaborate ruse to subject their employees to highly illegal working conditions and

questionable drugs? They worked two-hour shifts, sometimes twice a day. That would be long enough for this effect to show up?”

“According to the medical records, they had performed extensive beta testing at some hidden lab somewhere. The files called it ‘the first complex.’ Nobody knows yet where that was. Anyway, yes, the immersion had to be for hours, not minutes, so they invented this quite profitable side-line scheme to disguise the true intent. They bought the island and built the whole place just for this. Genius, is it not?”

“Twisted genius, yes. Completely surreal.”

He shook his head, the whole unbelievable scope of the project numbing him to silence.

“They should just dig a big hole and bury these guys.”

“I believe that is exactly what the Justice Department is planning.”

“What happened to Roberto Silvero?”

“Well, apparently he was one of the key players in this whole operation. A much bigger fish than anyone had guessed. Anyway, no one knows his present whereabouts. Apparently the little rat had his own personal hidey-hole. What we could have learned from him.....”

The two men sat for a few moments in silence; each lost in their respective memories of a tiny glimpse into Hades. Finally, Nick looked up again.

“Bill, I’ve been meaning to ask you. How did you get the helos?”

“That was a great story right there. I called the airbase, and they put me through to a Major McKinley. He didn’t believe anything I was telling him, so I gave him my serial number and former rank. Then I told him to do me a big favor. ‘Just check on it,’ I said.

He had me on hold for about ten minutes, then he came back on and asked me where I was calling from again. Then he said ‘what are you going to need?’ I said, ‘I don’t know. How heavily defended could an island resort be?’ So he said ‘I’ve got a CH-53 and two Apaches here right now, ready to fly. If I throw in a contingent of Marines, will that be sufficient?’ I almost fell out of my chair. I thought for sure he had to be kidding. So I said ‘yea, I think that oughta cover it.’ And away we went. The Marines just happened to be there on TDA from Quantico for helo assault training, so they just got to do a ‘live-fire’ exercise.”

“Wow, somebody was sure looking out for my tail. That really is incredible. I gotta tell ya, Bill, when I heard that CH coming in, I thought I was fried. I couldn’t believe those boys had a Hind to start with.”

“Yea, we pulled a trace on that, too. They brought it in illegally. Apparently, in certain parts of Russia, if you have deep pockets full of American Dollars, just about anything is for sale. The company that shipped it over? A dummy front company owned by a division of Minisoft.”

“Hoooo-ahh. Anything else?”

“Yea, didn’t you hear the news this morning? Minisoft stock dropped from 108 ¼ to 43 ½ on news that most of the major corporate executives were going to be indicted. Penta-soft has already put in a hostile takeover bid to snap them up. As of yesterday, the Minisoft empire imploded. Coral Haven has been impounded by the U.S. Marshall’s office pending further investigation and a complete search of all company files. Nice work, Nick. I’m impressed.”

Nick turned a little crimson and grinned.

“Not bad for a coupla fly-boys, eh?”

They both enjoyed a good chuckle.

“How is our fair heroine, by the way?” Bill asked.

“She is well, thanks.”

“Come on, Nick, don’t blow sunshine up my afterburners. I see how she looks at you. As far as she’s concerned, you could walk on water.”

“Yea, I know. That’s what bugs me. Sooner or later, she’s going to see the real me. I hope those rose colored sunglasses she’s wearing don’t fall off any time soon.”

A second good chuckle was enjoyed by all. Nick left soon after, and went home to relax. His phone rang, so he checked the multi-line LCD ID screen to see if he felt like answering it. The ID registered ‘U.S. Dept. of Defense. Pentagon.’ ***This has to be a joke,*** he thought. So he picked it up.

“Mr. Pantera, is this a secure line?” Nick now knew this had to be real.

“It is only a home phone. No encryption.”

“Very well. Stay on the line for Brass Hat.”

Nick knew whom the code ‘Brass Hat’ was usually reserved for, and couldn’t believe this was happening to him in the middle of a bright, sunny day.

“Lieutenant Colonel Nicholas Pantera, United States Air Force? Do you know who this is?”

Nick immediately recognized the Bostonian accent.

“Yes, Mr. President, I certainly do. By the way, sir, I am retired. What can I do for you on this fine day?”

The voice at the other end of the line chuckled.

“Yes, Colonel, I’m aware of that. I am just calling to congratulate you on a fine job, very well done. The United States has had some concerns about rumours escaping the Coral Haven resort, but as a sovereign territory, we were powerless to do anything about them. That would have been an act of war. However, by the powers vested in me by the ‘war powers’ amendment of July, 2004, the danger to American personnel would allow direct military intervention. I am sorry that we can not recognize your contribution to this successful campaign publicly, but the Joint Chiefs have decided that this should remain classified above ‘Top Secret’. The files will remain locked until the year 2050, due to the nature of the materials and data recovered from the island. That same ruling must cover this conversation. Are we clear?”

“Yes, sir. Crystal clear, sir.”

“Good day, Colonel. Enjoy your vacation.”

“I will, sir. Thank you.”

Nick hung up, desperately wishing that there were someone on the planet he could tell this incredible story to, but was fully aware that that could never happen. ***How did he know I’m on vacation? I guess military intelligence does actually work occasionally.***

Many months later, Nick still could not believe his good fortune. Why this beautiful, young, intelligent and motivated woman wanted to stay around him was a mystery, but stay around she did. He waited patiently for her to return from her afternoon medical class, as she had promised to drop by for dinner. Angellina had decided that she

was too old to try for a Doctorate, but a registered nurse still paid handsomely and would fill the need she felt to get involved in medicine. She had been pulling a heavy course load lately, and Nick wished that she would relax and slow down some. She seemed to be showing some signs of over-work. Returning from a trip into town one day, he found her dressed in a silk, floral print skirt, under a long knit top, her glowing hair gloriously brushed out, and a set of keys swinging from her index finger. She winked mischievously as he closed and locked his Pontiac. It was only then that he noticed his Pantera on the side lawn, completely washed and buffed, even down to super-black applied carefully to the tires.

"Get in," she added, while pulling the door open.

"You ever driven this before?....." he asked, somewhat confused.

"You'll see, gotta have some fun sometimes," she added, pulling the door closed while simultaneously engaging the starter. She twisted the radio volume control about half way up, and Shania Twain poured from the speakers.

"Sit down , shut up, and hang on...here we GO....."

She engaged first almost as soon as the starter bendix had quit spinning, and the meaty rear 335/35's bit the pavement in a growling war whoop. The roar of the injected Chevy barely drowned out Nick's own protestations as she hustled the sleek missile faster and faster down the coast highway. Nick believed he had never had the car up this fast, and he had owned it for seven years. Turn after turn came up, in a seemingly endless kaleidoscope of sliding bends and out-of-focus guard rail posts. After about 15 minutes of hair raising, pulse pounding pavement abuse, she slid the car into a small gravel parking lot in front of a miniature restaurant/cafe, and shut the engine off.

"Whatcha think?" she asked proudly, as the sound of the aluminium block cooling, popped and cracked mere inches from their ears.

"Whererrr, ahhh, where did you learn to drive like that?"

"Well, up until about the time I started filling out and looking like a serious woman, I think my father wanted a boy. He would take me cart racing, and I got pretty good. I won some local competitions, and then I kinda lost interest at about that age when girls really start to notice that boys are different."

"Yuh, well I see,.....I think."

"Come on, I've got something else. Surprise number two."

She carefully closed and locked the car, after moving it to the far corner of the lot, where it would be less likely to draw a crowd, or get scratched in passing. She then led him into the café and past the counter.

"Boat all set, Ed?" she asked in passing.

"You got it, sweets. Full tank of gas, and all. Have a good time, see ya when you get back."

She flipped the keys to Ed in an easy underhand toss, and he executed a showy behind-the-back catch, adjusting the chef hat that perched precipitously over his receding sandy blond hairline at the same time. He placed them in a pocket in the apron that covered his generous beer belly and snapped the pocket closed.

"Come on, here we go," she added as they descended a short flight of rickety wooden steps to an even more dubious looking wooden dock.

"I arranged a surprise for you, that is just going to rock you. You are going to see my world."

Angellina made a quick 'shushing' motion when she noticed he was about to ask what that meant.

"This is my treat. Just trust me."

Nick noticed a blanket and a small toolbox in the bottom of the Jon boat. Deciding to go along with the whole scenario, he said nothing else. Starting the small motor, she consulted a handheld GPS unit several times, until they approached what seemed to be a grouping of rocks barely breaking the surface. She then proceeded to pass him a weight belt and two small cans that looked like coffee thermoses. She pulled back the blanket to reveal two pairs of flippers. Able to contain his curiosity no longer, he just had to ask.

"Okay, what are these? You got me into some kind of crazy game here?"

"Trust me, no game, this is going to be something you will never forget."

She proceeded to remove her shirt and skirt, leaving only a minimal pair of dark grey spandex riding shorts and an unlined bikini mini-top, in bright maroon. She then tossed out an anchor, proceeded to buckle on the weight belt, and clipped one of the black thermos-like devices to each side of the belt. Opening the toolbox, she pulled out a double set of black air hoses and a small plastic container, that looked like a sunglass case. Connecting one end of the short hose to the first canister, she wrapped the short section around her back and attached it to the fitting on the second canister. The short hose ended at a 'tee', from which an incredibly small pressure regulator fitted to the other end of a longer hose. Opening a small bottle that looked like eye drops, and turned out to be just that, she placed four drops in each eye, then fitted the 'elephant lens' contacts that were contained in the white plastic case. Mostly amused, Nick cycled between watching

her complete this strange ritual and watching her incredible body jiggle and bounce. She finished up by turning a small stainless steel handle on the top of each canister and verifying air flow.

"Whatcha waiting for there, mister? Christmas? Come on, you're next."

Repeating the operation for him much more quickly, she paused when he hesitated over the huge contact lenses.

"Okay, for all the big babies in the audience, six drops will numb your eyeballs until Thursday. You won't even feel them. Trust me."

"How long are those dinky cans going to last? Don't you need one of those huge, bulky air cylinders?"

"Nope, these are new. Prototype units, titanium core wrapped by Kevlar/Carbon fibre banding. The metal fitting threads into the titanium, and the Kevlar wrap contains the pressure. Thirty eight thousand PSI. One tank is good for about 30 to 40 minutes for an average diver."

"Whoa. Quite impressive. I'll defer to your superior knowledge here, I think."

"Now, are you ready for your *private* retreat?"

"I guess so....."

"Come on, this is the closest you will ever get to being a fish. You won't believe it. It's just amazing."

With her statement finished, she grabbed her pint-sized regulator and with a great 'banzai' yell, jumped overboard. Nick, not feeling quite so brave, or foolhardy, placed the regulator into his mouth, then lowered himself over the side slowly. Below him, he could see her golden hair trailing behind like a gossamer parachute as her weight belt pulled her

toward the sandy bottom. He noticed that she was playfully windmilling her arms, like kids do when they jump from a tree. Likewise, he found himself sinking faster than he had expected, so he just relaxed and soaked in the unusual sensation of being on a weightless elevator. He landed feet first in an irregular bathtub shaped depression, filled with the softest, finest sand he had ever seen, and ringed by a low rock wall maybe a foot high at most. He marveled how unencumbered this felt, compared to the bulky air tanks and ridiculous fish-bowl helmets they had used on their last dive. He really had to admit, that he really did think this had to be as close as a human could get to being completely aquatic. Only the hose bumping him in the shoulder when he turned still reminded him of the extraneous equipment. Thirty seconds or so passed, and Angellina still held her regulator in her right hand, raptly following tiny, multicolored fish that darted around them, and turned to look back, amazed at this intrusion into their watery realm. At intervals, a tiny irregular stream of bubbles would escape her ruby lips, but nothing more. She finally replaced the tiny mouthpiece, and took two long, slow breaths. Taking one last, long look around, she motioned for him to follow her around to the other side of the rock. Amazingly, completely hidden from his view until now; two padded folding lawn chairs had been unfolded and staked into the soft, pearlescent sand. He wondered how long in advance she had been able to prepare for this little adventure. She motioned for him to follow her, and she backed up against a miniature cliff wall. She kicked off her flippers, then swung around in front of him, and removed her regulator again. Drawing him in, she swung her feet around his waist and pulled him tight. Face to face and inches apart, she slowly removed his regulator as well, then drew him into a tight, breathless kiss. They stayed locked this way for several seconds, then she expelled her lungs into

his, sharing her air with him. As her breath tailed off, she pulled her face away and buried it against his neck, embracing him in a surrealistic halo as her hair floated freely around him. He almost felt that he could barely tell where his body ended and hers began. She could tell when he needed more oxygen, and incredibly, was able to repeat the whole procedure still on her one lungful of air. After a total of about one and a half minutes, she rubbed her cheek slowly against his ear, then pulled away slightly, and replaced her mouthpiece once more. Nick knew this would be something that maybe he could never share with anyone, but was sure that he would absolutely, positively never forget. After one more, all too brief, passionate embrace, she turned and removed a small black device, about the size of a keyless auto remote, from her belt. She pressed the button located on the face twice and waited. Angellina didn't have to wait long. Making a sit-down-and-watch motion to Nick, she waited as three bottle-nose dolphins rapidly appeared. Removing her weight belt and regulator, she free dove and cavorted with the dolphins, having them tow her to the surface, then loop back and barrel roll around his seat, all to his complete amazement. He was positive that he had never seen anything like this before. Finally, tiring of the horseplay and exhausted with physical exertion, she patted the bottle-nose on his snout, and watched as he slipped quietly away. Turning, she picked up and slipped on her weight belt and replaced her regulator. Her breathing now was fast and shallower, and Nick believed this was probably the first time he had ever seen her winded. She only weighed about half what he grossed, but he was truly astounded at her physical conditioning. Taking the seat beside him, she watched him observe the other, smaller rainbow colored fish as they darted around and between them; while taking his hand in hers and rubbing his knuckles slowly. Startled by a shadow passing overhead,

they both watched as a porpoise snatched its lunch from inside the rapidly dispersing school. Finally, checking her watch, Angellina motioned 'up', and minutes later they were back inside the Jon boat, laughing tiredly as they stretched out on the flat aluminium floor.

"That was incredible. Completely unbelievable," Nick added, truly meaning it.

"Ever been kissed before like that, Mister jet ace?" she asked humorously.

"With all certainty, I can definitely say no."

"Try it again, some time?"

"With all certainty, I can say,..... definitely yes," he added.

After pulling the boat back into the rickety wood dock, and retrieving his keys from Ed, the cook, she unlocked and started the car.

"Ready? We still have to go home."

"Oh boyyyyyy....."

He wasn't sure if they actually got home faster than they made it out, but the brakes were still smoking when she pulled into the driveway. He was sure that was one ride he would never forget in a thousand years.

Nick had decided to take a sabbatical from his usual caseload, and to explore some alternate career options. ***I get a few more cases like this last one, and I won't live to see retirement,*** he thought idly. He pulled the black velvet box out of his pocket, and checked it for the third time that day. The one-and-a-half carat ring sparkled brilliantly in the reflection from the overhead track lights. ***I hope she likes it,*** he wondered nervously. ***Man, I didn't even get the butterflies this bad pre-fighting for**

a strike mission.* The phone rang, jarring him out of his daydream. He grabbed it on the third ring.

“Nick, this is Bill. I think you need to come down to Mercy Memorial right now. Hurry, It’s urgent.”

Nick felt his gut twisted wrenchingly, and his knees felt like they had just turned to jelly. He knew that Bill was never prone to overstatements, so for him to say something was urgent.....

He grabbed the keys to the Pantera and raced out the front door, almost forgetting to lock it. The car was in gear and the clutch was out almost before the starter motor had stopped spinning. Laying twin black streaks of BF Goodrich’s finest out the driveway, Nick hustled the blue rocket down the winding beach road to the hospital. He dropped the car in the nearest space and sprinted inside. Bill was waiting for him just inside the reception area.

“Nick, settle down first, okay. Here’s what happened. We got a call that a car had gone into River Ravine out by the old bridge. Not an unusual occurrence on that section of road. It’s pretty twisty and kinda narrow. She was helo’d in because they couldn’t climb down to the wreck fast enough. I’m not going to pull your leg here, Nick. It doesn’t look good.”

Nick felt the floor reach up to smack him in the forehead. He lurched forward and Bill caught him by the shoulder.

“Can I see her?” he asked, his heart in his eyes.

“Just for a few moments. They aren’t even sure if she’ll make the night.”

“Take me to her now, please.”

“I don’t know if...”

“Bill, please. This may be all I have,” he pleaded in a hoarse whisper.

“Okay. Come on.”

Bill held the ICU door while Nick limped into the room. The first thing he noticed was that half her face was covered by a huge bandage. The second thing he noticed was that almost all her thick, auburn hair was gone.

“What did they...”

“The paramedics had to bandage the gash in her head. They had to slice off her hair to get to it. They were in a real rush. She’s in pretty bad shape.”

Angellina seemed to recognize that someone else had entered the room, and looked up. Her one exposed eye was heavily bloodshot, crimson against her pale skin. She tried unsuccessfully to move her hand. Nick rushed over and took her hand, then rubbed the side of his face with it. She smiled weakly.

"Do I look as bad as I feel? Hope not." Even in her condition, knowing that death was when and not if, she still managed to cushion his pain with a joke.

“Nick,” she whispered. “I knew you would come. Please.....don’t believe what they are going to tell you. It was them,Nick. This is Minisoft’s final revenge.....they did things to me, to get to.....you. The car, they rolled the car off.....knocked me out.....made it look like.....just don’t believe them. I love you soooo much. Don’t ever forget me.”

“No, never. Don’t do this, please. I can’t go on....”

“No, Nick. I am just going to..... to go on ahead. I’ll get us a good.....table, the oneby the door.”

Nick smiled faintly, remembering the restaurant episode on their four month anniversary.

“I’ll say hi to Junior for you,okay?We’ll be watching out for you,both of us. We’ll look in on you....., from time to time. You mustknow that, don’t ever forget.....”

The monitor above her bed squealed and the display decayed to a flat-line. After three frantic minutes, the doctor wiped his eyes wearily and switched off all the monitoring equipment. The nurses filed out quietly. Nick collapsed into a nearby chair, his hands balled tightly into fists, tears threatening to stream down his face.

“Oh, God, No. Take me instead. I haven’t done anything great to deserve to live. She’s so innocent, take me instead, please.....”

“Come on, Nick, I’ll drive you home,” he heard Bill whisper by his left ear.

Bill asked Nick if he would be okay alone. Nick told him to go home, that surely his family must be worried by now. He took him at his word, and left. Nick didn’t want him around to see him go benders. He knew he had one thing to do first, however.

Nick called John Cassidy again and told him what he needed. John repeatedly tried to dissuade him from what would surely be a career ending, and possibly a life ending decision, but he would not relent. Reluctantly, John agreed. Several days later, he called back and reported that although it had been quite difficult, nigh impossible, he believed that he had actually found Roberto Silvero, and amazingly, he hadn’t left the country. He had run to Miami, to try to loose himself in the Latino population, a gamble, which Nick had to admit, probably would have worked if he hadn’t had one of the best

bloodhounds in the country on his tail. Packing his trusty .44 automag, a new Ruger .480 revolver and a marine issue .50 calibre sniper rifle with variable magnification Leupold scope, Nick headed for Florida. A few extra forged papers were required to get all his hardware past airport security, but they didn't even blink. Renting a car in Daytona, he drove the rest of the way down the peninsula to find the man who had ruined his life. The rental he had picked was also a Pontiac Grand Prix, and wondered if subconsciously, this was his way of closing a door behind him, somehow, or just because he liked the legroom. Watching the endless miles scroll past, as industrial and commercial wasteland gave way to more tourism and more palm trees, he pondered what should be Roberto's demise. ***How have I come to this?*** he wondered, then steeled himself with the remembrance of Angellina's face, broken and bloody, her gorgeous hair shorn haphazardly in a desperate attempt to repair the carnage inflicted on her lovely body. ***This will be the least he deserves. Wherever he goes, I hope he screams for a long, long time.***

Ignoring the curious and sometimes more sinister stares directed his way, Nick aimed his rental through the suburban Miami maze that led to Roberto's oceanfront hideout. He thought of trying to find a vantage point for his sniper rifle, but just decided to go with an old fashioned frontal assault. Finesse and civility had left his mind now, and black revenge burned brightly. He pulled up to the house three doors down, a beautiful rambling structure constructed in the 30's art deco style, and closed and locked the car. He decided to take the Ruger, as he had grown quite attached to its bear-like recoil and bellowing guttural discharge. Slipping around the back of Silvero's Victorian three story, he noticed a short pier and an arrow-like racing boat tied to a pier post. ***That could be**

helpful*, he decided. Loading his Ruger, he tried the rear door. Not surprised to find it locked, he removed an electric lock-pick from his pocket and was inside in seconds. The rear room had full length and height bay windows, offering an incredible panorama of the ocean. Inside, asleep on the massively overstuffed paisley couch, he also found his quarry. Shoeless, snoring inside a pair of Bermuda shorts and a bright Hawaiian print shirt, his target appeared quite harmless. ***You should have turned on your alarm, do-do.*** Drawing the .480, he pressed it tightly and painfully into Roberto's left ear while placing his other hand firmly over his mouth. Roberto's eyes flew open immediately, and he attempted to rise. His sleep induced haze cleared in milliseconds when he recognized who had broken into his house.

"How did you find me?" he tried to ask, around Nick's hand.

"Some help from my friends. Get your boat keys, and turn the TV on, loud. Try to run or make any sort of noise, and the cops will be cleaning your brains off that fake Picasso over there with a spoon and paper towels."

Apparently, Roberto Silvero was much better at stealing other people's money and designing illegal medical experiments than fighting, because throughout the entire operation, he seemed to have no desire to attempt to run, or anything else, for that matter. Perhaps Nick's no-nonsense face transmitted just how far he had slipped towards the edge of insanity, but whatever the reason, Silvero appeared suitably cowed. Grabbing his boat keys as instructed, he closed and locked the door after Nick prodded him out onto the deck. Nick checked to see if anyone else was around, but apparently in this upper-middle class neighborhood, some people still had to work. The coast appeared all clear. Keeping the Ruger buried in his left kidney, he pushed Silvero down the dock and into the boat. A

quick turn of the key started the twin high compression V8's and very soon they were in international waters, heading towards Cuba.

"Nice boat you've got here. How big is it?"

"You are, of course, going to kill me, aren't you?"

"Yea, probably, but that's not what I asked. How big is the boat?"

"it's a Cigarette. Forty six feet. Twin 502 Chevy's."

"Nice. Too bad you won't get to enjoy it."

Nick had just thought about shooting him and dumping the body, but that would be too fast and too clean. Angellina had suffered. It should be even. In the second that Silvero wasn't looking, he dropped the .480 on the padded engine cover/dive platform, and grabbed him by the back of his collar. With a strength born of desperation and hate, he punched him once in the face, instantly breaking his nose and splitting his upper lip. He then punched him in both eyes, blackening them heavily. For an encore, he chose two uppercuts to the kidneys, sure to be a crowd pleaser. Spilling copious amounts of blood, and able to do nothing but groan, Silvero wasn't even able to attempt a defense. Retrieving his pistol, Nick brutally buried the barrel in his right temple and was just milliseconds from applying enough pressure to send Silvero straight to Hades. Suddenly, he stopped. Not quite sure why, but perhaps thinking that Angellina wouldn't want him to do this, this last desperate act that could kick him straight into prison or madness, perhaps both, he cut the throttles on the dash and turned off the engines. The sleek craft soon lost headway and began pitching slowly in the low seas.

"I think, maybe, you get to live with what you've done. Maybe."

With strength born of desperation and a thwarted need for revenge, Nick yelled a primeval scream of rage and threw him bodily over the low chrome side-rail. With a huge splash, Roberto hit the water and immediately tried to scream, even half submerged. The salt water stung his face and nose like nothing he had ever endured before.

"AHHHHHHHH! Forgot about that! How does that feel, huh?! That salt really stings, doesn't it?! That isn't a tenth of what she suffered. Do you hear me?! Can you ever suffer enough, you filth infested maggot, for what you did to her? She was innocent, a hundred times better than the both of us, combined!!!

Surfacing, spitting a commingled mixture of sea water and blood from his broken mouth, Silvero desperately tried to decide what to do next. He never got a change to finish the thought. A hungry great white, attracted by the blood, noise and thrashing, had come around to have a look. Seeing dinner handed over readily, he struck so hard that Silvero's upper half arced five feet into the air. His lower half was swallowed whole. Finishing his meal in only a few more seconds, the shark dove and quickly disappeared, leaving only one floating shoe still encasing parts of a severed foot, to show that the man had ever existed.

Too stunned and surprised to do anything else, Nick reacted instinctively by throwing himself back, and his revolver discharged involuntarily, into the water. The guttural boom of a .480 cartridge rent the still salt air, scattering some gulls who were nosing around for scraps. Still shocked beyond belief, and having no other cognizant retort, he settled for grabbing a cooler that sat by the engine cover and heaving it into the air as hard as he could.

"YEAAAAAHHHH!!!! Guess you didn't get professional courtesy after all!!! That worked better than my plan!!!! Hope your soul burns for eternity, you worthless piece of dung!"

With that, he returned the boat to the house, retrieved his rental, drove to a secluded location to change clothes, returned the car to the airport and flew home.

After a massive three day drinking binge, Nick awoke with the worst hangover he could ever remember. ***I haven't touched the stuff since before Margie left me. No wonder. I've got to knock this off.*** He heaved himself out of bed, dressed quickly, then forced himself to eat a light breakfast. It didn't sit too well, and threatened mightily to come revisit. ***The funeral was yesterday,*** he realized numbly. ***I couldn't have taken that, anyway. They should have just put me in the hole, too. Why didn't anybody call to remind me?*** he wondered, then remembered he had unplugged the phone. It sat mutely on the end table, next to the remotes for his 36 inch TV, DVD player/recorder and stereo system. He checked his caller ID and found that Bill Smith and John Cassidy had both tried to reach him repeatedly. He pondered whether he should call them back. He decided to call Bill first. He answered on the second ring.

"Nick, are you okay?" Bill asked after he identified himself.

"No, I'm not. I have the king of all hangovers, and I feel like shooting myself."

"Okay, okay, that'll be all of that. I thought about stopping by, but I figured you probably needed some space. Do you want to go grab a beer or something?"

"Come on, Bill, you know I don't drink," Nick managed a poor joke.

Bill laughed, longer and harder than he had expected he would.

"Now that's the old 'Mad Dog' I remember. How about we go shoot some pool?"

“Bill, you don’t drink, either. Who’s the beer for?”

“Yea, yea, yea. Alright, already. Anyhow, how about around three? That good?”

“You know, I’m probably going to be miserable company.”

“Yea, well that won’t make it much different than being out with my wife, will it?”

Nick laughed and his head throbbed excruciatingly.

“Oh, man, don’t do that again. Please. That really hurt.”

“Do what?”

“Make me laugh. Ouch.”

“Ummm, look, we got some new info. A bartender came forward the day after the accident and swore that Angellina came into his store and picked up a six pack of beer and a bottle of wine.”

“No possible way. She hated beer. I offered her one once, when we were out to eat. She didn’t even really like any type of alcohol much. He’s lying, and I’ll bet he’s getting paid real well to do just that.”

“Yea, well maybe they just told him they would let him keep breathing, instead.”

“Mmmph, could be that, too.”

“Anyhow, it’s his word against yours. I am going to have to close this case, and it looks like I am going to have to write this up as a DUI fatality. The autopsy tox report came back negative, but with a 0.12 BAC. The officer at the accident scene reported finding two empty beer cans inside the car, and one nearby, that was probably ejected on impact.”

“Come on, Bill. You know that MIL stuff won’t show up on a tox screen. It’s too fast acting and too well designed.”

“We both know that. I can’t write that down.”

“I know,” Nick answered with a heavy sigh. He hated to have Angellina’s memory debased by having her accident listed as ‘alcohol related’, but he could see no way to prove otherwise.

"Bill, this is completely bogus. She took me for a ride down the coast highway one time, and I think we musta broke the sound barrier at least three times. She could drive as well as anyone I've ever met, and she was fearless. That car was sideways half the time."

"You let her beat your Pontiac like that?" Smith responded, half amused and half surprised.

"Pontiac? Haaah, that was the Pantera she kicked the snot outta. Man, that was a ride and a half." For a moment, all he could remember was her incredible body, seemingly one with the black leather racing bucket; her perfume, the smell of tire smoke, the incredible roar of 388 cubic inches of NASCAR power wound up tight, and her tinkling laugh as she realized how terrified he truly was. For a few seconds, he forgot everything else and almost wondered when she would be home, before reality came back with the jarring crash of a two locomotive collision. Smith sensed his mood in the widening silence.

“Oh, yea, did you know that Holly was Angellina’s cousin?”

“Whaaat??!”

“Yah. Check the report again. Look at Holly’s maiden name. Holly Marie and Angellina Lynn Kerinsky. Their mothers are sisters. Surprised you, eh?”

“You did. She never mentioned that. I wonder why?”

“You must be slipping, to let that one get by. Three it is, then, right?”

“Yup. See ya then.”

Nick hung up the phone gingerly, then decided maybe a drive would clear his head. He decided to leave the Pantera home. Too much engine noise. He fired up the Grand Prix and pointed it out the driveway. He rolled down all the windows and left the stereo off. The crisp salt air seemed to help his headache, but the bright sun and azure sky were killing his eyes. He pulled on a pair of dark sunglasses, and hit the coast highway. He reached the next town and slowed for crawling traffic ahead. A sign caught his eye. ‘Traveling evangelist and minister, Bro. Jeremy Jones’. Nick hadn’t been inside a church in many years, but something about this one drew him in. He drove up the steep hill driveway, and found a space in the back corner. When he had locked the car and gone inside, the service had already started. He was surprised by the mix of people, and by the music. It reminded him of what he figured a Baptist church would sound like. He also found that he actually rather enjoyed it. Many people in the congregation were singing with the choir, and some were clapping in time, too. The songs ended soon, and with no further delay, the Pastor introduced their guest. Nick watched as a well-dressed, middle aged black man took the podium, and began to preach. Nick remembered being dragged to Sunday school as a youth, but he could tell this was much different. This man’s preaching had a certain gripping, mesmerizing power that he had never heard or felt before. It drew him in at the same time it unnerved him. Brother Jones preached for little

more than a half an hour, then put out an altar call. Nick decided to leave then, but the white suited, gray haired gentleman behind him asked him to go forward. He reluctantly agreed. Brother Jones approached him almost immediately. He placed a hand on his shoulder, then closed his eyes for a moment, and then looked straight at him, deeply and piercingly.

“You are not a member of this church. That is fine. The Lord calls to whomever He may.”

Nick wondered where this was going to lead.

“You have much pain, my brother. Fear not, she is at peace now. You need to reconcile that for yourself. Two good friends you have lost, and yet, you shall see them both, again, on that final great day of the Lord.”

Nick’s hair stood on end, and he felt like he was being constricted by his collar.

“How do you know that?” he asked, simultaneously suspicious and amazed.

“The Lord knows the burden of everyone’s hearts. Yours is quite heavy. Come, see, His yoke is easy, His burden is light.”

“I still don’t understand.”

“Sometimes I don’t either, my son. He reveals what He will, when He will. Perhaps you are here today only to hear that. I feel the great pain that He has revealed. You have lost much, and yet you still care deeply. Not everyone can say that with honesty.”

Nick mumbled a quick ‘thank you’ and left, too stunned to stay or even ask any more questions. He had never really wondered much about anything bigger than himself, and wondered if God chose to reveal Himself, would this be how He would do it? Nick

checked his watch and wondered if he would make his pool date on time, but also knew that he would have to return to this small stone church on the hill. He felt something different in his heart and soul now, and realized that the feeling was hope, burning like a single, pure, white candle.

Exeunt

Glossary of Terms

Amraam: Advanced, medium range air-to-air missile. A development of the older AIM-7 Sparrow, the Amraam has one big advantage over its predecessor. The AIM-7 required continuous radar illumination of the target, making it necessary for the launching aircraft to continue flying toward the enemy until impact. The missile would lose 'target-lock' if the launching platform deviated from a narrow flight path, a virtual 'ice-cream-cone-in-the-sky.' The Amraam has the colossal advantage of being a 'fire-and-forget' weapon. The launching pilot simply needs to wait for the missile to 'tone', a signal that the radar has locked on, then launch. The launching aircraft can then perform any evasive maneuvers it desires. The missile will continue to follow its target, even if it turns, until it either runs out of fuel, loses contact with the target, or destroys it.

APU: Auxiliary Power Unit, a small generator used to power secondary electrical systems during aircraft pre-flight and starting procedures. It is usually shut off after the main engines reach operating speed and RPM, as the main engines drive an integrated electrical power generator during flight, supplying electricity to all the aircraft's systems.

CBU: Cluster Bomb Unit. A weapon delivered by aircraft, that breaks open at a pre-determined altitude and scatters smaller bombs, from 2 or 3 to a couple hundred. Extremely effective against lightly armored vehicles, automobiles, trucks and personnel.

Checking-your-six: An aviation term that refers to looking behind the aircraft for threats approaching from the rear. The rear of an aircraft is most vulnerable to missile attack, because heat-seeking IR guided missiles will try to lock onto a jet's hot tailpipe gases. This is also the hardest place to see consistently, so a pilot will sometimes make a quick turn or change altitude to see if anyone is hiding in his blind spot.

DVD-RW: A rewriteable computer disk that looks exactly like a standard audio CD or computer CD-ROM, but can be written to and read on both sides, and on two layers. They have the capability of storing up to 16 gigabytes of information on a single disk, in certain versions.

FAA: Federal Aviation Administration, the U.S. government agency that regulates all private and commercial aircraft in the United States. They have the power to legislate upgrades and safety improvements in all planes flying on American soil, and also investigate aircraft crashes and disappearances.

Fly-by-wire: A control system for aircraft that replaces all mechanical control cables with electrical or hydraulic actuators under the control of a central computer system. This reduces the mechanical complexity of the aircraft, and allows an aerodynamically unstable aircraft shape (such as the F16 Fighting Falcon, the F-117A Night Hawk stealth aircraft and the B2 stealth bomber) to fly smoothly. The computers performs millions of calculations and make hundreds of control surface adjustments per second, to keep the aircraft flying in the desired direction. This is faster and way beyond the ability of any

human to match. The control stick in the cockpit is replaced by a video-game like flight stick, which relays electrically the commands the pilot issues, to turn or climb, etc. There are usually at least three and commonly four interlinked redundant flight control computers installed in the aircraft. This is so that in the event of a single computer failure, the other computers can take over and the aircraft can continue to fly.

HARM: High speed Anti-Radiation Missile: A missile specifically designed to home in on the radio waves generated by a radar antenna. The missile will lock onto the radar source and 'ride the beam' all the way to its target, destroying the emitting antenna and probably the command and control center that it is attached to, if the two are in close proximity. Newer, more advanced versions of HARM will remember where the hostile emitter is located; and strike the target even if the radar is subsequently switched off, as during a multiple target attack, where the enemy realizes he is under fire and shuts down his equipment in a futile effort to save it from destruction.

HOTAS: Hands On Throttle and Stick: A revolutionary control arrangement introduced on the United States Air Force's F-15A Eagle in the early 1970's. This allows all major flight systems and weapons to be selected by the pilot, simply by pushing a small button on the flight stick or throttle. There are three or four switches located in various positions, their locations worked out through rigorous ergonomic testing. Before this, the flight stick usually had only one button, which would control the aircraft's machine gun (cannon) or launch missiles, depending on what mode had been selected. The big difference here was that the pilot did not have to remove one of his hands from the

controls to turn or push a weapon select or radar mode control. This allowed him to keep his eyes on the HUD, or outside the cockpit, watching for or tracking enemy aircraft. This greatly increased his chances of being the victor in an air-to-air combat scenario.

HUD: Heads-Up Display: Another device pioneered on the USAF F-15A Eagle, the heads-up display projects important flight information, like air speed and altitude, the current weapon selected, and various firing cues, onto the aircraft's windshield. This produces a 'ghost' display that seems to float in front of the windshield, allowing the pilot to keep his eyes on a target and still have information that he vitally needs to fly and fight effectively. Having to refocus eyes from outside to the instruments inside was determined by the Air Force and Navy as being one of the prime contributors to American fliers losing during dog-fights, especially when faced with multiple opponents. With a HUD and HOTAS, a pilot can fly and fight almost an entire combat mission without ever having to look inside the cockpit.

JATO: Jet Assisted Take-Off unit. A small, solid fuel rocket attached to the wings or fuselage of an aircraft to assist in reaching take-off velocity faster. They are jettisoned after takeoff, and possibly reused if repairable. They are generally used to boost heavily laden aircraft taking off from short fields, where the aircraft would otherwise run out of runway before attaining lift-off (flight) speed.

JSTARS: Joint Surveillance Tactical Airborne Radar System, an aircraft similar to an AWACS, but configured to monitor ground movement, instead of aircraft. A huge, coffin

shaped antenna is grafted onto the bottom of a 707's fuselage, and feeds information to multi-color radar display screens located in the rear cabin. JSTARS was under development during the initial phases of operation 'Desert Shield', and was not slated for deployment until 1993, at the earliest. It was rushed from pre-production trials to the Gulf, under direction of the Air Force, when 'Desert Storm' broke out. Its primary function is to track armored vehicles and cars moving on paved roads. It proved less successful at finding mobile Scud launchers, which with their 6 or 8 wheel drive carrier trucks, can travel the trackless desert sands.

Napalm: Gasoline mixed with a gelling agent and stored in a bomb-shaped canister. The canister is dropped from an aircraft, and at a pre-determined altitude breaks open, dumping flaming gasoline all over the target. Napalm is almost impossible to remove, as it will stick to whatever it lands on, instead of sheeting off like gasoline will. This makes it an especially lethal weapon against ground personnel, automobiles, trucks, lightly armored vehicles and exposed ordinance, such as bullets, missiles and artillery shells.

Port: The left side of an aircraft or ship.

Starboard: The right side of an aircraft or ship.

VDU: Video Display Unit: A black and white or full color television-screen like display mounted in the cockpit of an aircraft. They are usually multi-configurable, which means that the displays can be changed to show the status of various aircraft functions and

performance indicators. A back-up magnetic compass and some other basic instrumentation is usually provided in case the main computer system fails and the VDU's shut down. This would at least allow the pilot to navigate to the nearest airport, in cases of bad weather or at night, where VFR (visual flight rules), or 'fly-by-eyes' would not be possible. In the case of a fly-by-wire aircraft, however, the VDU's would probably be receiving their data from the redundant flight control computers, so if the VDU failure were not just a simple display power supply or wiring failure, the aircraft probably would not continue to fly anyway. This would make seeing where he was going, probably the least of the pilot's problems.