

THE BOX

An Adventure Novel

By

Tom Gnagey

Family of Man Press

© 2006, 2017 (updated)

CHAPTER ONE

The Challenge

"What's with the wooden box?" Kit asked as he topped the stairs, slipped his back pack to the floor, and entered the large loft where his Uncle David lived.

"You tell me?"

The young professor continued to scrutinize the little mahogany box as he slowly circled the table on which it sat. Kit – eighteen and ever curious – approached and reached out, hesitating with a quick glance at David. His uncle nodded and the young man picked up the newest edition to the familiar, comfortably cluttered space.

Dr. Lawrence's loft ran the width and length of the Blue and White Grocery store that sat below it on the north side of Main Street some ten blocks from campus in the small community of North Manford, Indiana. It was a bright, cheerful, expansive area. There were floor to ceiling windows across the front and back with skylights at six foot intervals highlighting both sides of the lofty, steeply sloped, ceiling.

It was mostly clean – well, wherever a dust mop could traverse the ancient, wide plank, wooden floor without necessitating the displacement of boxes, stacks of journals, and various other artifacts plucked from their natural setting in various parts of the world.

David was a professor of philosophy and anthropology at a small, church affiliated, college – *philosophy*, not to be confused with established religion he would point out more often than might have been necessary. He and the members of the Religion Department had forged an association, which allowed feelings of genuine, mutual respect, despite widely divergent belief systems.

David was a man of many interests. His undergraduate degree from Harvard was in languages – modern and ancient. He read voraciously on every conceivable topic and had taken a second area of concentration in anthropology during study at Harvard for his PhD in Philosophy. He was a ranked world class chess player and had won a national cryptogram competition seven years in a row.

Never married, he had become like a second father to Kit, who had lost his father – David's younger brother – when he was two. Kit's mother had remarried a good man but not one the boy could easily relate to. Kit lettered in four sports all four years in high school. His stepfather once indicated he thought Babe Ruth had been a quarterback for the Lakers. Kit was brilliant like his uncle. His stepfather had been a B student at best throughout his two year accounting program. Kit loved to play with ideas – what if's – while his stepfather was very much tied to the concrete here and now just as it was (or at least, as it seemed

to be to him – a abstract prospect Kit and the man could never meaningfully discuss).

Although Kit grew to love the man and was never inclined to base another's worth on such things as those differences between them, it was not surprising that he had become so attached to David.

Although many of Kit's and David's interests were also different, they were both seekers of knowledge and stood in awe of the universe and the processes that governed it (or would that be the processes that it created and maintained? Hmm!)

"What is it? Where'd you get it?" Kit asked at last replacing the box onto the table.

"Not sure of the *what*. It arrived about a half hour ago by a special courier out of Indianapolis."

"So it's nothing you ordered?"

"Yes."

Kit smiled his wonder, full out, ear to ear, smile. "You're saying, 'Yes, it's nothing I ordered'."

"Wouldn't that be the correct response?"

David smiled as well and put his arm around Kit's shoulders. They continued to view the box.

"You tried to open it?"

"A few initial, superficial, attempts. Then I got caught up in the inscriptions and carvings. It was clearly not designed to be beautiful. Notice how asymmetrical the designs and how incongruent the various aspects."

"What's its purpose then?"

"I'd guess, communication."

"What you're saying is that it's an inaccessible container, graced with fully unattractive carved gibberish, the purpose of which, and message from which, are not clear," Kit said summarizing what they knew about the new arrival.

"*Yet!* Not clear *yet*."

"You're proposing a challenge," Kit said, his interest suddenly whetted. "From whom? What purpose?"

"Those seem to be the right questions, at least at the outset."

"Maybe there is something inside that will clear it all up."

"Maybe. It seems like the best next step then is to open it. Want to give it a try?"

"Sure. Maybe it's like one of those Chinese Puzzle Boxes I loved as a kid."

Kit picked it up and took it across the room to his favorite sitting place – the garishly upholstered, sofa acquired years before at a thrift store. David followed and stood behind, watching over the boy's shoulder as he turned the box this way and that unsuccessfully searching for the secret latch.

"How about pressure sensitive points?" David asked.

"Like?"

"Like on that circle there or the diamond there or anything that rises from the surface."

Kit pressed each and every bump.

"Nada!" he said at last.

Some – many, even – would have given up. Not David or Kit. The boy reached it out and placed it on the low coffee table in front of the couch where their visual examination could continue. David took a seat beside him. Several minutes passed.

"How would you design a locking device on such a piece, Kit? Let's say you didn't want just anybody to be able to open it. Not even an accomplished puzzler like yourself."

"Interesting. You mean throw out everything I've already learned about such things and create something new?"

David nodded as he picked up the box. He held it close to his ear as he turned it one way and another.

"Listen," he said, moving it close to Kit's ear and tipping it gently.

"Sounds like something is sliding inside," Kit said.

"Right but it doesn't rattle when you shake it which tells us . . ."

"That it is only free to slide – like it is in a groove or something that maintains hold of it except within the path it can slide. So, maybe the . . . what would you call it . . . the sliding weight has to be in some certain position before the latch allows it to open."

"That's where my head went as well," David said moving it back so he could listen again.

"The construction," Kit said furrowing his brow. "Look how it appears the pieces all slide together – tongue and groove style. I see no evidence of nails or screws. Glue, maybe?"

"Or *no* glue, maybe," David said following Kit's line of thinking.

"Ah! Like they can slide apart, maybe, you mean?"

David nodded, pushing on the ends of the various pieces to see if any would budge. None would.

"Do you think a combination of the position of that sliding thing and pressure on a piece of the box?"

"At least that" David said. "I suppose it depends on how difficult whoever it is wanted the process to be."

At that point Kit reached to take the box from David. In the process it was tilted at an angle and Kit grasped it on one corner. One of the two smaller ends slipped open an inch or so.

"Hold it there!" David said not releasing it to Kit, as he maintained its position. "I'll hold it. You slip open that end piece."

It was soon slid completely off the box leaving that end open. David turned it up and looked inside.

"Two envelopes and a little box all held in place by three elastic bands."

Kit reached in and removed them. The letter sized envelope was addressed simply, "To Dave", with no other markings. It was unsealed, reasonable considering the mailing container in which it had arrived.

David opened it and removed several handwritten sheets. Across the top of the first page were printed the words, *For Your Eyes Only*. David pointed that out to Kit.

"I better read this to myself first, you understand?"

"Sure. I'm more intrigued by this box anyway. The inside of the pieces are every bit as decorated as the outside."

"Just don't put it back together until we master the latch system."

"Okay. Sure. I think I'll take some pictures of it as it is."

"Good idea. Use the digital so we can play with them on the computer."

David returned his attention to the letter.

"Dave. I suppose it was inevitable that this had to come up between us."

David went to the end to see who had signed it.

"Ari, of all the people in the world I never thought I'd hear from again," David said aloud. He read on.

I assume you've read my book, *The Evolution of Intelligence and the Annihilation of Planet Earth*. If not, do so immediately. You will understand what I have to do. I have always known that man was constructed to be basically evil. Even your brilliant arguments back at Harvard never convinced me differently. The evil is at the molecular level; at the level of the DNA. It cannot be controlled as you contend. I'm sure you recall my basic position but let me summarize it as a preface to my main point.

Every time there has been an enduring evolutionary step it has moved life some tiny step toward increased intelligence. It is the basic fact of evolution. All developments in the opposite direction, to less intelligence, soon died out. Up to a point the natural order seemed to have some wisdom about it, a modicum of additional intelligence equaled a longer period for a specie's survival.

At one point, however, there was a great genetic mishap. Man's brain evolved full blown as the ultimate in intelligence. Man's several new capacities moved intelligence beyond that of an improved survival mechanism. It allowed for the development of technology and technology allowed the mass destruction of other species at such an accelerated rate that all species on Earth are now in imminent danger of destruction.

Man, in the service of his technology, has devised a million ways in which to invent toxic waists that pollute the air, the land, the water.

With it has come a fully unnecessary elaboration of the basic survival instinct, the advent and proliferation of emotions, which have displaced nature's universal instinct to devour only what is needed. It has allowed the most devastating leap of all, the ability to go beyond need to want. No other species on the planet 'wants' more than it needs.

In his pursuit of want, man has devalued life to the place he feels it is expendable if necessary to meet one of his wants that can be satisfied in no other easy fashion. As a corollary, man has invented hate partially as a means of justifying the taking of what he wants regardless of its toll on other human life. No other species hates.

In the service of want and hate man's intellectual capacity to build technology has conceived weapons of destruction that go beyond need and harmony and a self-sustaining way of life.

If man were only going to kill off his own species I could live with it. But in the process he is killing off thousands of species of plants and animals every single day as he pollutes and destroys natural habitats from the wet lands to the rainforests, from the woods of rural Indiana to the high meadows of Switzerland.

He fouls and heats the atmosphere so the flora and birds and insects suffocate and mutate in non-evolutionary fashions. The ice caps melt, the oceans rise, and more species are destroyed.

Man's arrogance, another side effect of his and only his intelligence, leads him to believe that the human species (or really, his small, parochial, portion of it) is the only species of any consequence. Although his intellectual capacity gives him the potential to plan ahead for future generations, he seldom utilizes that as he takes and uses and destroys whatever seems to be in his own selfish interest in the here and now.

I have, therefore, decided that the human species must be annihilated in order to set the course of natural evolution back to its proper course. My preparations to do so are complete. There is only one person who can prevent me from carrying out my carefully conceived plan and that is you. Of all the people I have ever met you come closer to contradicting my conception of the universal, innate, evil in human intelligence than anyone.

If, therefore, you choose to use your human intelligence to save mankind, and you are successful, I will have to admit there is some error in my conception of man since it only requires one exception to disprove such a theory of universality.

Here then is your opportunity: Fifteen days from the day you receive this puzzle I will release toxic bombs in six key spots around the planet – six strategic locations which will cause the bio-toxins to rapidly spread across the most populated places on earth. They will carry specially created, human-specific, airborne, strains of anthrax, smallpox, and plague, which will

swiftly spread around the planet. Fifty percent of the human population will be dead within eight weeks and the rest after three months. You and I will be among them.

You may select one assistant to aid you. Should you attempt to contact any governmental, law enforcement, or health agency – anyone else – your opportunity is canceled and the bombs will be exploded immediately. Your every move is being monitored from this moment on. I will not interfere in your legitimate attempts to personally meet my challenge.

To assist you in your efforts I am supplying you with a specially modified executive Jet and pilots, three no limit credit cards (among them you can obtain funds anywhere on earth), a CD containing useful information such as 250 private landing fields which will not require passports or visas, and this box, which contains six keys – each designed to effectively turn off a specific bomb.”

"Good-bye, old friend.

Ari"

PS: to make this a truly legitimate test of the good or evil – selfishness or altruism – in man, I add this final element. In the box you will find a sealed syringe filled with the antitoxin. It holds a sufficient amount to save your life and the lives of eleven others. However, once taken it will render one unable to walk or talk for a full month. It requires two weeks in the human system to provide adequate protection.

PPS: All quite unexpectedly there is a tiny part of me that wishes you well. I do love you, you know. A.S.

David refolded the letter and returned it to the envelope, which he put into his shirt pocket. He opened the other, square, envelope and removed a CD and three credit cards. He laid them on the table.

The small, white, pasteboard, box would contain the antidote. He opened the top and looked inside. There was a long, wide, sealed, syringe in a plastic bag surrounded by four slender sticks of dry ice. He took it to the refrigerator and carefully stashed it toward the rear of the top shelf – sometimes things froze on the lower shelves. The unit was as old as David.

"Want a soda, juice, milk?" he called back to Kit.

"Juice, thanks. Huger the better. Seems beastly hot for mid-June."

David removed the plastic orange container, selected two large plastic glasses from the plastic drainer beside the sink, and returned to the sitting area. He poured for them both.

"You suddenly look serious beyond any serious I've ever seen you look," Kit said his convoluted message unquestionably clear to both of them. "Bad news in that letter?"

"Let me put it this way. You thought you had completed all the

requirements for entry into Harvard come September, right?"

"Yes. I'm sure I have. What are you saying?"

"I'm afraid there is one more and there is no way of avoiding it."

"I'm just confused," Uncle David.

"Let me ask you this. If you were put in the position of being one of only two people in the world who might have a chance – the only chance – to save the human species from immediate extinction would you accept that assignment, knowing your life might be in jeopardy?"

"Of course I would. In a second. So would you. I'm still confused."

David took the letter from his pocket and handed it to Kit. The young man began reading. His brow furrowed and his face flushed. His knees began to bounce. He bit at his lower lip.

"Can this be for real?"

"Oh yes. It's for real?"

"The name – Ari – the Ari from Harvard?"

"The same. Dr. Aristotle Stephanopoulos. I gave you his latest book to read several months ago."

"Sorry. Haven't gotten to it yet. Since graduation I've mostly opted to snuggle up with Megan and her magic lips instead of with books sporting foreboding titles. I can see that has to change now. What's the plan?"

"First, a cover story. Let's see. I received a last minute grant to tour and study several of the Worlds' great cities – not entirely a falsehood. I asked you to accompany me and you agreed – not entirely a falsehood. We will be gone for an extended part of the summer. Only *false* if we fail and that time-line becomes eternity."

"There will be no problem with Mom. She'd let me march into hell with you if you told her it would be a good educational experience."

"We may be doing just that – in a sense."

"I'm suddenly scared to death," Kit said turning to look David squarely in his face.

"Me, too, Son. Me, too. We have to use that to our advantage."

"Huh?"

"Anxiety can sharpen our senses if we use it to keep us focused on our task."

"You sound like Coach Baker before we played Wabash South in football. They outweighed us forty pounds a man. We lost but we survived by keeping focused on our game plan – don't get killed!"

"Ultimately, I suppose, that will be our game plan as well. At least in the football game you knew the rules and the boundaries. In this new 'opportunity' – as Ari referred to it – we know neither."

"Where do we start, then?"

"You study Ari's book – tonight. We need to peruse the contents of the

CD he sent us. Which reminds me, we need to get the most powerful laptop in the world to take with us. It will need to be loaded with the best cryptography software, a complete geography encyclopedia, detailed meteorological maps, wireless internet, encryption strategies, visual recognition programs, and probably more. That's your job – you being the computer whiz of the town. There will be sections of my hard drive I want downloaded into it as well. Then, we must decipher the message or messages on the box. Sniff it."

Though thinking it an odd request, Kit didn't hesitate.

"Mahogany?"

David nodded.

"What does your nose tell you about the carving?"

"I don't know. Let's see. . . . Ah! The smell is so potent that the carving must have been done very recently."

"You're rapidly confirming that I chose the right assistant for this assignment."

It garnered the slightest, quickly retrieved, smile from Kit.

"I'm not sure what that means, David – the recentness of the carving."

"Nor am I, completely. For one thing the box has been tailor made just for us. Why? Because it contains the clues we will need to get underway. Ari may be flirting with insanity but he is an honest, well meaning, trustworthy man. If there are clues to be deciphered they will be genuinely related to the mission."

"Here's a thought," Kit said. "The box has six sides. He mentioned six spots on Earth. Clues pertaining to one spot per side, maybe?"

"Interesting," David said. "Each panel has a series of small carvings on both sides. Does the inside continue the clues for the city designated on the outside or is it perhaps about another city? That could make twelve, in which case we will have to discredit six of them."

"Where are the keys he spoke of in the letter?" Kit asked. "Not in the tiny white box you took out? I take it."

"Correct. That was the antidote. It's in the refrigerator. I should give you the opportunity to opt for its use."

"No way!"

David smiled and put his arm around the boy as he continued.

"There were no keys as such. Maybe there will be something on the CD."

"I don't feel well enough organized about this," Kit said.

"Believe me; I understand that. We are still at the level of scattered thoughts. How about this? One, you tell your mother about our trip. Two, you read the book for background. Three, you spend one last time with Megan. After tonight it's strictly cold shower time for both of us. I'll explain to Molly this evening as well. We have to make certain that we don't telegraph anything about all of this to any of the ladies in our lives. If Ari says we are being monitored you can bet we are."

"How can he afford this?"

"Ari's father is a billionaire ship builder in Greece. Ari's probably financing all of this out of the jar he puts his pocket change into at night."

"He's crazy?"

"A tough question. He knows exactly what he is doing and why he is doing it. That's probably saner than the way 90% of us live our lives. Sanity or insanity often flows from the basic premises one accepts as true. If *his* premise is true – that man has to be evil because of his genetic predispositions – and *mine* is wrong – that we all possess the potential for profound good – then I suppose the case could be made that he is sane and I am insane."

"What about his theory – evolutionary intellectual development presenting a danger to the survival of the planet?"

"I have to agree with most every one of his contentions up to the point of his solution. He believes that because man's level of intelligence allows for things such as technology, want, hate, and arrogance, his presence will inevitably destroy life on the planet. I happen to believe that same intelligence allows man to look into the future and make the necessary decisions and commitments to save life on this planet. I must admit that to date, man's trends in living styles tend to support Ari's arguments a hole lot more than mine. We have evolved – as Ari contends – into a super-selfish species with little bent to engage our foresight in altruistic, positive, ways. We still have to take a new leap. I don't believe it will be evolutionary in the genetic sense. It will have to rest on the development of a sincere and unvarying sense of social conscience – social/ecological responsibility. It has to do with making people more important than the accumulation of stuff and status and power."

"I've read there is good evidence that man's brain is still evolving," Kit said. "Perhaps there will be a more solid social conscience come from it."

"A hundred thousand years from now? I'm afraid that will be way too late."

Kit nodded soberly.

"After we handle all this I want to go into that with you," Uncle David. "How that non-genetic positive social conscience can be developed given the widespread poverty, sickness, and discontent rampant among the billions of *have nots* in the world today."

"It is the next, most essential step for mankind to take. I'm sure we'll spend many long hours working on it together."

"We're sounding pretty positive about the outcome of this mission," Kit said. "Did you hear that?"

"I did. That's the only way to go into it. Now, you go work your list for the evening and I'll finish up some things here – the CD, the box, make a list of the software we'll need, things like that. Let's get started at five in the morning. Time is going to be absolutely precious."

They stood. Kit offered a hug, readily accepted and prolonged by David.

"This is heavy stuff, huh, David?"

"The heaviest. Sorry to put this on your shoulders but in all honesty you're exactly what I need by my side through this. You're young. You're athletic. You're brilliant. You know computers and internet resources inside and out. You have a penchant for thinking outside of the box, if you'll allow that cliché or, in his case, *pun*, perhaps. We've always worked well together. I'm going to agree with Ari and, being realistic not pretentious, if anybody can handle this, the two of us can."

"Wow! I guess I never realized you thought that way about me. If I didn't respect your judgment so much I'd be sure it wasn't deserved but since I do, thanks, I guess."

"Okay, then. Enough with the mutual admiration. When all of this is handled we can toast each other with grape juice or something. Now scat. We both have work to do."

Kit crossed the room to the top of the stairs and shouldered his back pack. As was his habit he turned before leaving.

"Love you, Uncle David."

"Love you, Kit."

He slid the banister – sidesaddle – to the ground floor.

David smiled and shook his head after him, then closed the door. David *never* closed that door. Life had changed.

He noted that it was 5:30, a half hour since the box had arrived. He returned to the sofa and poured another glass of juice – the most potent beverage he drank. That had always irked Ari.

His thoughts returned to his senior year as an undergraduate.

* * * * *

"Going to the Philo-soph-y Club meeting tonight?" Ari said poking his head in the door to David's dorm room.

"What's the program?"

"Open discussion. Was supposed to be an American Indian Medicine man but he got sick – some irony there, huh?"

David smiled and nodded.

"Think I'll skip it then. Open discussions always end up with the freshmen wallowing around in the nature of reality. It's as if that's all undergraduates know about philosophy. You going?"

"How about I hang here and we can talk about something really important like . . ."

". . . Like the negative implications of evolutionary intelligence. Frankly, I'm about as tired of *that* as I am reality. We basically agree that intelligence is great for humans and a disaster for the planet. What's left to discuss?"

"What to do about it?" Ari said making himself at home on the lower bunk. He pounded a pillow into place beneath his head and positioned himself on his

side so he could look at David who turned in his chair to face Ari from his desk.

"That's an interesting question, Ari. My initial less than interesting response would be nothing."

"And just let the planet and all its other species die off at the hands of man?" Ari said, goading his friend into a discussion whether he wanted it or not.

"You're suggesting the initiation of some kinds of social/ecological responsibility programs?" David asked knowing full well it was *not* Ari's position.

"Man's too selfish to ever be ecologically responsible."

"Speak for the collection of humans from *your* own experiences," David said. "Most of those I grew up with are very responsible."

"They didn't drive cars that polluted the atmosphere?" Ari asked. The tone was subtle sarcasm. "They didn't spray dangerous chemicals on their crops and yards? They didn't contribute their waste to unsealed landfills that polluted the aquifer that ran beneath? They didn't pay taxes to support the napalming of Southeast Asia? None of them did any of those things?"

"You know they did, of course, but more out of ignorance than selfishness. Educational programs would shape up most of those dangerous inclinations in short order."

"You really think the farmers back home in Indiana would stop using pesticides and herbicides and chemical fertilizers when they know it will cut yields in half?"

"Some would. There'd be some saving in the cost of chemicals to offset the lower profits."

"Yeah. Sure. Maybe five percent of the difference."

"So, you've put me on the defensive here – like usual. What's *your* solution?"

"Get rid of the human species – maybe the monkey family as well."

"Annihilate all homo sapiens?"

"Can't see another way, really. Intelligent beings are becoming the downfall of the planet. Even you agree with that."

"Not entirely, I don't. The whale and the dolphin and even some squid family members show great intelligence and I don't hear you wanting to do *them* in."

"Those species aren't equipped physically to invent technology and our technology is the real problem."

He waggled his thumb and tongue at David.

"The appositional thumb and verbal ability," he went on to explain. "Those are the culprits that can translate intelligence into planetary devastation. Humans can talk and think about possibilities and then go on to construct them. Those other species can't – regardless of how intelligent they may be."

"I finally see what's going on," David said getting to his feet. With a well-practiced twirl of his chair he mounted it backwards, face to face with Ari. "You

and I don't share a common sense of *purpose* for the process of evolution," he said, beginning to ferret out the essential difference in their positions. "You see evolution as the mere proliferation of increasingly hardy species. I see evolution as the process of evolving an ultimate species that can contemplate who it is, how it came to be, and where it's going. An evolutionary event that allows reflection upon the process of evolution itself."

"You're always trying to interject *purpose* where it doesn't belong," Ari pointed out. "Purpose suggests some ultimate plan to be carried out. I'm not postulating any such thing in nature as a purpose. I'm just saying evolution is a process of upward and onward species building. It is the process and its result that define the law or purpose, not the other way around"

"You're also characterizing it as a well-oiled democracy struggling against the takeover by a malevolent dictatorship."

"What?"

"Seems like you're saying each of the less intelligent species has a right to exist and live together in its natural setting interacting with others according to its natural instincts, but *now*, big, bad, *man* has come along and is pillaging and destroying them."

"Worse than that, *big bad man* is basically a pleasure seeking machine only interested in what makes life more enjoyable for him regardless of what havoc it reeks on the planet and the rest of the species."

"You also have a very one sided view of intelligence," David said nudging the discussion away from a premise with which he had to agree. It was one that did seem to add some credence to Ari's position and a brief retreat for regrouping his thoughts seemed in order.

"Say more," Ari said.

"You believe that when all is said and done, human intelligence can only be a negative, destructive, force on the planet. How do you explain the dozens and dozens of 'Save the Planet' ecological groups? Save the rainforests, save the whales, save the wetlands, save the redwoods, save the spotted owl, the Sierra Club, Greenpeace, and on and on and on?"

"A drop in the bucket when it comes to the collective human mind. How many people are there now, six and a half billion? Seven Billion? How many think in ecologically friendly ways – a million, ten million? Even a hundred million would only be a drop in the bucket. By definition it is an abnormal form of human thought – rare, not usual, and therefore not normal. Your own government methodically sets out to destroy the planet in the service of maintaining the lie that the proliferation of more stuff is the only way to sustain an economy – as if the human economy were the magical, legitimate, bottom line for the planet."

"So your solution is to destroy the good with the bad just to be sure the bad are obliterated."

"I see no other way – no way to save some and destroy others. We can't

ever read the hearts – the intentions – of others. And people change their positions on things – usually for the worse or more self-serving – over time. The idealism of youth erodes into the search for self-centered security by middle age. How would you discriminate between planet friendly and unfriendly humans? Who'd do it and how would they procure their authority? Let's say the *Planetary Protection Czar* decides that *you* can live because of your planet-friendly track record but that brand new little nephew of yours will have to die because it's impossible to know what his inclination will be? How long would the Czar be able to hold power and complete his job? A day, a week, maybe a month before the insurrection erupted. I think it has to be all of us."

"And you expect all of us to just peacefully march into a *Dematerialization Chamber* straight out of some Star Trek Episode?"

"You've put your finger on the major problem – well one of two. How to kill off the intelligent species *and* how to do that without any negative impact on the rest of the planet. We could poison the air or the water but many species would be taken down along with mankind. We could poison the human food supply but the infected carcasses left would be ingested by rodents, insects, worms, and such. I'll admit my plan has some obvious kinks that still need to be worked out."

"Ari, you scare me when you talk like this. I mean you really, really, scare me. What gives *you* the right to determine that all of mankind must die?"

"It's not *me* determining it, Dave. Surely you can see it is dictated by the natural laws that have evolved alongside life."

"I thought the basic natural law of evolution was survival of the fittest. You admit that intelligence – even if less developed – plays a major role in much of that, even at the lower levels. Mankind's intellectual prowess is just a natural extension of the evolution of intelligence. Those species that are less intelligent than man eat the species they can best. It is how life exists. How is man any different?"

"He kills not just to survive like all other species. He kills for pleasure, recklessly and unthinking – unknowing even – for his own selfish needs and wants and whims – *not* for his survival."

"I see. So you have determined that man's evolution does not follow the 'proper' evolutionary laws?"

"Something like that, I guess. Yes."

"But I thought you agreed that evolution made its own laws. That there is no guiding purpose beyond what actually happens. If that's so, how can you determine evolution made a mistake in allowing human intelligence?"

After only a brief pause Ari shot back.

"Perhaps the level of intelligence in man allows man to see the evolutionary error and self-monitor the process by eradicating the problem – itself."

"And maybe Jack really traded for magic beans." David said.

"You're just a hard head, you know," Ari said sitting up and tossing a pillow in David's direction.

"Been told that by others," he said catching it one handed. "I feel the need for pizza. You buy and I'll allow you the pleasure of my company."

"Sounds good. And once again you'll pass up the beer for a Pepsi."

"Why does that irk you so?"

"Because you refuse to lubricate your brain with alcohol to free your basic essence."

"My basic essence is what you see fully un-lubricated. If Mother Nature required alcohol to make me all that I can be, she'd have installed a still in my chest."

Ari shook his head.

"I'll call my driver."

"In that twelve cylinder, carbon monoxide spewing, antique, limousine?"

"It's the only one Daddy could spare this semester. I got to be home by ten. Have two nymphos coming to stay the night."

"Do you even realize that you are the definition of the decadent, pleasure seeking, atmosphere polluting, human being you so despise?"

"I am human. I can be no other way so why fight it? I'll share the girls, you know, if you want to spend the night at my little place."

"Excuse me. A *benevolent*, decadent, pleasure seeking, atmosphere polluting, human being who, by the way, finds it impossible to utilize his superior intelligence to control his human *desires*."

"As if you don't want sex anytime you can get it. Let's see. Go to a Save the Planet Rally or spend the night naked in bed with a beautiful woman eager to please your every sensual need."

David knew Ari had him there, but just how his enjoying sex was going to ruin the planet he couldn't see. Well, he could – substituting a period of pleasure for the socially responsible attendance at the rally.

* * *

As David returned from his reverie he noticed a smile had grown on his cheeks replacing the previously worry creased face. He acknowledged its legitimacy with a nod. He and Ari had been good friends – friends born primarily from proximity at the time, but friends nonetheless. The fact they had not communicated in fifteen years did not change that. They respected each other's intellect if not some aspects of their often divergent philosophic positions. They had each forced intellectual growth upon the other during those six years of friendly, though taxing, mental combat.

Now, everything had changed. It was no longer merely an intellectual war; it was a war in the real world; a war in which the potential casualties would not merely be ideas and values but the human species itself. Kit would no longer be a pawn in some 'what if' scenario about a Planetary Czar spun in the heat of

debate. He had become a potential real life victim – an inescapable real life victim should they fail.

CHAPTER TWO

Preparation

"No kid my age should be up at this hour, you know," Kit said dragging himself up the final steps and into the loft. "I can cite studies."

"You stopped being a kid the moment you accepted this assignment," David pointed out, "and, anyway, you're here twenty minutes early."

"Thought I'd shower over here so I wouldn't wake up the old folks at my place."

"So what's new? Between the locker room and here, do you actually *ever* shower at home?"

"Seldom, I guess. From your dripping wet hair and state of undress I assume you're already done in there," Kit said shedding his shoes and T-shirt.

"All yours. I'll fix breakfast. Eggs or pancakes?"

"Both will be fine. Bacon would improve it considerably and maybe toast with marmalade – assuming biscuits and gravy are out of the question."

David nodded and smiled as Kit continued making himself ready for his shower. "You know where the towels are."

"And you know I prefer to drip dry like you do. Mom and dad get all bent out of shape when I prance around in the nude at home so it's just more comfortable at school or here."

"*Prance* to your heart's content but I wouldn't use that particular verb in the presence of just anybody. Speaking of *anybody* did you see Megan last night?"

"Oh yes! When I told her I'd be gone for a big chunk of the summer she got all sad and weepy, but then I guess she decided to make up for lost kissing and such ahead of time. I didn't get to bed till after midnight and this morning my lips are crying out for physical therapy. You see Molly?"

"For about an hour. I didn't seem to suffer the damage you did. Understandably, I suppose, she seemed a little miffed that I wouldn't give her lots of details."

"Once we get back and all of this is behind us, you can share the details with her, right? Then she'll understand."

"Think about that story. You and I were selected out the six and a half billion people on earth to save the human race from extinction by a mad scientist from Greece? Who do you know who would believe that? And those who might would only be panicked by the possibility. No. I imagine our adventure, whatever it turns out to be, will need to stay just between the three of us."

"Three of us?"

"You, me, and Ari."

Kit nodded and entered the shower. David pulled on some jeans and a sleeveless sweat shirt then began assembling the breakfast.

It really wasn't what could be called a kitchen. It was a mismatched assortment of kitchen parts: a small cabinet with countertop, a sink, refrigerator, stove, and microwave, all spread out in what to David was a logical pattern along the rear, west, wall. All components were serviceable though ancient. David didn't replace things for the sake of 'new' or 'improved looks'. The *stuff* in his life was mostly unimportant. It was ideas that took top billing in his life – well, ideas and people.

David had always been a soft touch when it came to the needs of his fellow man. His students knew he was usually good for a short term loan. Typically he got repaid but that was left strictly to the kid's bookkeeping. He trusted people. That meant sometimes he got taken by the unscrupulous but David had long ago determined he'd not live his life throttled by the possibility somebody out there *might* not be trustworthy.

"It's serve yourself," David called as he heard the reverberating clank indicating the water had been turned off in the shower.

He fixed himself a plate and poured two O.J.s taking his with him to the couch, sitting things on the all purpose low table in front of it. Kit soon followed suit.

"So, where do we begin?" he asked arriving, still dripping, with two plates and his drink. He took a seat in the overstuffed chair across from his uncle.

"I worked with the box last night."

"Yeah. I see you took it apart. Any surprises or obvious clues?"

"I really didn't get down to the nitty-gritty of the engravings. I made clay impressions of all twelve sides – just in case anything should happen to the original. The slip latch mechanism is inside the top panel. Each one is an inch thick – 2.5 centimeters to be exact. That probably only tells us where it was *not* made."

"Here in the states with our arrogant, Reagan led, penchant to avoid the metric system and remain forever isolated from the rest of the measuring world?"

"Right. Each panel is hollow and has two end caps that slide off in grooves to reveal the opening. Inside there is a pattern of straight grooves hanging from the top, running through from end to end."

"What else?"

David picked up one of the panels.

"It appears that on one side each has a crude map and picture of a sort – a building, an interior wall, a geographic feature, something like that. On the other are hieroglyphic like marks and pictographs. A few numbers. An occasional English word."

"Sounds reasonable – like things an archeologist might use," Kit said in

and around a piece of toast. "Not marmalade by the way but pretty good. What is it?"

"Apricot preserves. The good stuff. All fruit. No artificial preservatives."

Somewhat uncharacteristically, Kit ignored the irony of preserves containing no preserves. He nodded and returned to the pancakes.

"Nothing from the maps jumps out at me to say, 'this is where you are'. I assume the information on the other side will provide some direction. Each map does share at least one item in common – an X with a round spot covering the intersection of the lines."

"Any significance? I guess I should ask if you know the significance. I'll bet those apricot preserves would go good on pancakes."

"I'll let you perform your own gastronomical experiment to determine that. And, yes, I think I know the significance. There were many early groups in the British Isles and along the northern European coast that used that mark as a sign of death."

"I remember that. Saw it in a Robin Hood movie, I think."

"Hooray for Errol Flynn and educational cinema!" David said only a bit more humorously than sarcastic.

Kit put down his fork long enough to examine several of the panels.

"Those Xspots – the location of the anthrax bombs, you think?"

"Best idea I have at this point."

Kit continued to sort through the pile.

"This one looks like it could be an island. This one has a grid of straight intersecting lines like streets, maybe, in a city somewhere. I like this one. Looks like a single, big, boob."

"Titillating, you might say?" David joked.

"Oh, yes, and its one clue I'll certainly try to keep abreast of."

David groaned. Kit smiled and licked the final bit of syrup from his plate. Then he downed the last of his orange juice, exhibiting the familiar toothpaste after juice wince.

"In and among all of Megan's charms, did you get Ari's book read last night?"

"Yup! Read it first. Work before play, just like you've always told me. It was fascinating. Scary! The idea that life on our planet is incapable of surviving man's technology is an incredible insight . . . if that's what you'd call it. I saw that he cited quite a few of your papers and books in support of his position."

"And then used others as straw men to help make his point," David said raising his eye brows.

"Your papers on social/ecological responsibility?"

"Right. That's where we long ago agreed to disagree. He believes man's selfishness is so central to our being that we can never really be an altruistic species."

"And," Kit continued, "That coupled with our innate arrogance – believing that the human species is more worthy of survival than that of any other species – we present a double threat to the community of life on the planet."

"Don't forget Ari's pillar number three – our ability to contemplate our own mortality, an ability unique to the human species. It scares the hell out of most folks – knowing that death is inevitable. That leads to a number of interesting technological endeavors."

"Like?"

"Like medicine and vaccine. No other species knows in a true sense that sickness and old age can lead to death. In fact, few other species even know when they are sick. It has led us to develop medicines that protect and save us from untimely death. Members of other species just die when such events come along. That, Ari contends, is the natural order of things that technology suspends.

"And then overpopulation. In all other species when overpopulation occurs – that is too many individuals to be supported by the available sources of essential nutrition – the species either dies out completely or its population is cut back drastically to a place nature can again support it. Not so with man – well not in the technologically advanced societies at least. We can pack ten thousand people into a square block in our cities and support them with resources from hundreds and even thousands of miles away. We develop new high production strains of food and by adding chemicals to the soil, or water, or feed, we have quadrupled and more the production from any given plot of growing surface. The human species is not allowing itself to be naturally pruned the way other species are."

"You're sounding a lot like Ari!"

"I'll take that as a compliment. You have to know the mind of your adversary and the mind of ours is brilliant, if – we think – misguided."

"His take on limiting human reproduction is interesting – at least to a younger guy my age who's every waking second seems to be focused upon the imminent possibility of reproductive activity."

"Actually, he has an interesting *double* take on the subject; did you catch that?" David asked.

"You mean that we are smart enough to devise birth control technology which could help save the species from overproducing itself but certain of the social institutions we have invented forbid all of that to their followers, apparently just flat out denying man's overwhelming drive to enjoy the sexual side of his being, thereby condemning our population to spiral out of control into genocide."

"You must learn to use periods when you speak."

They smiled as David continued.

"Say that in the wrong circles and you'll be attacked unmercifully, you know."

"Unmercifully by those who promise the ultimate mercy, you mean?"

"Interesting. I hadn't verbalized that connection myself. It's one of the most frightening aspects of those who contend that *they* know The Truth and that the rest of us don't. They believe it gives them the right to force their beliefs on others, often trying to legislate it as the law of the land. I remember a discussion about that with Ari the summer between our junior and senior years at Harvard."

* * *

Ari's 'Little Place' as he referred to it was a ten room penthouse atop one of the area's most expensive hotels. David spent a lot of time there, especially during the summer. It was air conditioned and had its own glassed enclosed, rooftop, pool. David's third floor dorm room boasted an aging window fan with long-dry bearings in needing three meals of oil a day to keep it from screeching out as if in agony. His only access to a university pool involved practice sessions with the men's swim team – neither relaxing nor romantic as was Ari's. Beside the door to the glass atrium which housed his pool, Ari had placed a boldly lettered sign: "No suits allowed." It was strictly enforced, especially when members of the fairer sex were there.

To hear Ari tell it – not really in a boastful manner – he had been sexually intimate with more girls before his fourteenth birthday than David had visions of being during his entire lifetime.

By contrast, perhaps, Ari was also a religious young man – appearing, at least, to be a devout member of the Greek Orthodox Church. His father was a financial pillar of the church in Greece and his oldest brother had gone into the priesthood. As far as David could ascertain Ari's father was a legitimate business man – fudging on the laws for personal gain where possible and buying political favors, but certainly not a gangster-like criminal in the usual sense of the term.

The two often enjoyed conversation while bobbing quietly in the pool – well, when there were no distracting female playmates also bobbing about.

"So, what's your take on the tyranny of religion?" Ari said out of the blue, splashing water in David's direction to get his attention.

Ari had a way of always putting the other participant in a conversation on the defensive forcing him to set himself up as a straw man for Ari to assault.

"Tyranny?"

David pleaded ignorance hoping to turn the topic back on Ari. Ari flashed his endearing smile.

"You are a smooth devil, you know."

"Been called worse. Define your terms."

"Simple, really. Religions require adherence to a set of prescribed beliefs. There is typically no latitude for personal interpretation. If a member strays he is punished, ostracized, or expelled from the 'tribe'. Historically, wayward members have been maimed, tortured, and killed in the name of religion; remember the

Salem Witch hunts and the Inquisition. Still today, such things are everyday events in the Middle East where governments are extensions of religion. Prior to World War Two more people had been killed in the name of religion than from all other motives combined – the Crusades is just one such example."

"You know I'm not into organized religion," David said. "I suppose it's hard for an outsider to understand the workings of such belief systems. Of course I can't condone any group that uses its power to intimidate or destroy, or that requires blind obedience to some set of unchangeable tenants. Such things attempt to remove from man two of his most precious gifts, free will and creative thought. If mankind is to progress man must have full access to both."

"But," Ari said feeling he was about to gain the upper hand, "It is just *that* free will and creativity that allows and propels the technology that is killing our planet."

"You'd have us all become horse and buggy Amish."

"It would be a step in the right direction – reject technology and stick close to nature – all enforced by the threat of eternal damnation by an all powerful, intensely vengeful, god, from who's vision you are never hidden."

David pointed to their surroundings at the moment.

"Clearly you do not embrace the philosophy you are propounding."

"Clearly I don't. Like you, the foreboding, eternal, punishments, promised for straying from religious tenants hold no power over me and they would have to in order to make me give up the good life."

"That's not true of course, but define good life, please!"

"Another philosophical offensive, I take it," Ari said smiling.

David felt compelled to drive his point home.

"It's just that you clearly define 'good life' in a way that I don't define it, and when you use the term *absolutely* in your way you denigrate my right to hold my beliefs about it. It's like the Tyranny of Ari. 'I know what the good life is and you poor uninformed heathens, don't'."

Ari smiled and remained silent for a short time.

"I wonder if we'd be friends if we didn't disagree about so many fundamental philosophical issues."

David returned the smile.

"Probably not, actually. Once outside the realm of ideas we exist at opposite poles, don't we?"

"Doesn't have to be that way. My long standing invitation for you to move in with me for life and let daddy support us both is still on the table. A no-limit credit card and three lovely naked ladies a day is only part of the deal."

"I've given you my answer on that a dozen times. I'm no longer going to legitimize the offer with responses. Your offer to share what you have is intriguing, however."

"Intriguing? Now you need to explain your term."

"It's just that I have to wonder if you would be so generous – altruistic, even – if you were in my financial situation, dependent on scholarships and part time work to obtain an education. I do love you, Ari, but I sincerely doubt if you would tender such an offer to share what you have in those circumstances."

"You're right of course. In my present circumstances I'd feel no sacrifice at all if you were to accept my invitation. Without all this, I'd be scrapping with you over every pretty girl who came along and finding ways to relieve you of large portions of your earnings. I'm an immoral, wretch. It's like I'm the poster boy for mankind as I see it."

"And I? How do you characterize me?"

"The Poster Boy for mankind as *you* see it. Don't kid yourself. We're all a Poster Boy for something and everybody else sees it whether we do or not. We can't move far beyond our early experiences, I guess, can we? It's the major reason that you and I hold such divergent pictures of man, I suppose. I hope *you're* right, you know. I sincerely do. I don't believe that you are, but you project the only hope I see for the legitimate survival of the species."

"You feel no responsibility to change?"

"Afraid not. I treasure nature, as you know, but I'm not really willing to modify my life style. In my experience the vast majority of people are like me, not you."

The discussion came to an abrupt halt as three beautiful, giggling, girls entered the pool area – all clearly able to read and willing to obey the rules.

* * *

"Do I remember right," Kit asked, "that all the bombs are to be set off at the same time?"

"That's how the letter reads."

"So, it doesn't matter which one we defuse first?"

"Right. The only aspect of order that may be important is to work out a pattern that minimizes travel distance and time for us among the six locations."

"Yes. I hadn't thought of that. I suppose after we've neutralized the first one we'll have found some pattern that should make the rest easier."

"Perhaps. I wouldn't count on it, though, knowing our antagonist."

"We can hope, I guess," Kit said with a quick, weak, smile.

"Hope, yes, but keep alert to other options. He won't out and out deceive us but he *will* challenge our mental and physical prowess."

"And he's had heaven only knows how much time to work this all out. We have a measly fifteen days to counter his efforts!"

"There is one point that remains somewhat unclear from his letter but I get the idea that somehow *all* the bombs will go off as scheduled unless we get *all* of them neutralized. It seems to me it is an all or nothing arrangement."

"I see," Kit said shifting positions. "I guess I missed that possibility. I suppose that he could link them all together somehow – via satellite or something

– so they all have to be turned off before any one of them is really turned off!"

"Ari lives a capricious personal life but when it comes to his science he is as precise as anyone I've ever known."

"Archeologist, right?"

"Archeologist, anthropologist, biologist. With his financial resources and brain power he just kept going to school following whatever whim caught his intellectual fancy. No telling what he may have added to his resume since I lost track of him."

"A worthy adversary, then?"

"Oh yes!"

"What's the first step?"

"Pick a panel and let's get to work. All we know is that it contains the only clues we'll receive. At the outset, we are assuming each panel refers to one of the six sites. That may or may not be correct."

"So we got nothin' but a chunk of wood bearing equally ugly, asymmetrical, carvings on both sides and sets of grooves running through the hollow core."

"That's about it."

Kit picked up one panel looking at the pattern of grooves in the center. He compared them with those of several others.

"Look here. Each set of grooves seems to be different – different widths of the grooves and the sections that separate them."

"That's important. Let's make sure they are, in fact, *all* different," David said. "Remember each open core has two ends – two perspectives."

Several minutes of meticulous comparisons passed. Kit's first impression had been correct – each one was unique in design.

"Eenie, Meenie, Minie, Moe," Kit said pointing as he spoke. His finger stopped on what had been the top when the box was assembled.

"This one is as good as any, I suppose," he said shifting it into an open space onto the table between them.

"Okay. What do we have?" David said. "Why don't you join me over here on the couch so we can look at it from the same angle."

Kit moved, hesitating long enough to snatch his boxers from the back of the chair and pull them on. The process was accompanied by an intentionally belabored, typically adolescent, angst filled, sigh.

"The wearing of clothing is another senseless habit only practiced by us humans," he said settling onto the couch. "In a setting like this, for example, there is no reason to wear them – its an ideal temperature, dry, pleasant in every way – and yet here I go covering up my genitals as if there is something innately bad about them. The most basic biological purpose of any species is to reproduce its kind, so you'd think we'd all revere and flaunt them instead of dishonoring and hiding them. Another intelligence-driven absurdity of the

species I suppose. Ari have anything to say about that?"

"Ari's a nudist at heart but especially when members of the opposite sex are present. I'm sure he'd agree with what you've just said but the bottom line for him is that he just really likes being naked with naked females. In the end, I suppose he'd blame religion for inventing modesty. He'd extend the discussion by berating the clothing manufacturing industry for the devastating effect its waste products have on the environment and therefore the survival of other species."

"How about you, Uncle David? Any predisposition one way or the other?"

"I agree that clothing is fully useless except to help our bodies regulate temperature. I've never been modest – you know that. I wear clothes mostly just to keep those around me from being uncomfortable *and* to stay out of jail, I suppose. The modesty establishment long ago infused their beliefs into the legal code but even if they hadn't, I would try not to force my preference onto those in our community who are offended by it. When we agree to live in a society rather than as a hermit we automatically have to give up some personal freedoms."

"That becomes an inequitable tight rope, doesn't it – always having to give up *your* preferences and values in deference to *others* who would clearly never do the same for you?"

"When somebody truly believes they have god on their side – meaning that *you don't* if you disagree with *them* – they feel no compunction about treating you badly. In fact, they feel obliged to take away all rights you may think you have to be different from them in whatever way is being contested."

"So, protesting the modesty thing by strolling down Main Street nude probably wouldn't be appropriate, is that what you're saying?"

"It may be very appropriate but since it will *not* change anything and *will* get you into trouble, it might be wise to consider some alternative plans."

"Like?"

"Like finding places you can be nude without negative repercussions for either you or others."

"Not so easy to find, you know."

"I know."

Kit slid his shorts off and tossed them across the room as if in a defiant act of protest.

"Ready to get back to saving the World now?"

"Yes. Thanks for all that. I feel much better."

"Let's start with this side where the Xspot is," David said turning the piece one way and then the other to see if anything popped into focus. It held a single image in outline. [See David's rough sketches of the panels beginning on page 330. They are presented in the order examined here.]

Kit began.

"From this angle it looks a lot like a ghost in its sheet with the Xspot for a

navel. Then there is that other little round dot near the bottom left."

"Turn it on its side like this and it resembles the head of a dog, the Xspot for an eye and that other dot his nostril."

"It's probably a map like you said earlier," Kit said. "Maybe something related to it on the other side."

He turned it over. There was a collection of crude representations. Near the left edge there were three circles in a vertical column. Next to them were two free form figures one above the other.

"Like an exclamation point but inverted, distorted, and leaning," Kit said following their outlines with his finger.

"Have you seen that top one recently?" David asked.

Kit looked puzzled and then flipped the panel over.

"Could well be this ghost thingy but in miniature."

"Sure could be," David agreed. "If it's a map it could represent two islands in close north-south proximity."

"Japan?" Kit asked. It had been offered as a very tentative suggestion being the only two island country he could recall at first.

"Sizes are reversed. Japan's northern island is the longer one."

"New Zealand? Hawaii? Aleutians?" Kit went on. "This suddenly seems impossible."

"Let's move on. What about these two vertical cylinders," David asked, ignoring the boy's impatience and re-engaging his attention on the next set of images.

"They appear to be identical in size and shape. Slender. Very slender. Each with a rounded top and a base that's somewhat narrower than the top section. It looks like each is partially filled with something – the one on the right just a bit fuller. But that one has a diagonal slash across the picture like those on the no smoking signs with a cigarette in the background."

"And, if that one is negated in that way, it leaves the other one for us to consider."

"The other one *what?*" Kit asked really to himself. "The one containing *more* is marked out leaving the one containing *less*. Less of what and why is that in some way better or more useful?"

"Those are the questions. It is about a comparison or else the second one with the slash wouldn't have been presented."

"Let's allow that to percolate in our gray matter and move on to the two images at the far right," David suggested.

Kit nodded and began thinking out loud.

"The one on top could certainly be a volcano or a tent or, even better, the front of a house – the steep roof above and below it what could be a pillared porch; see the vertical lines. A lavish sort of place, even, maybe – a mansion."

"And the drawing below it?" David asked.

"Upside down it looks like a roomy T-shirt with the neck opening at the top and this line on the sleeve could be like a designer label."

"Let's stick to assuming all the images face in the same direction."

"Of course we don't really know that we've been looking at it right side up, you know," Kit pointed out with another sigh.

David acknowledged the problem with a nod but continued without giving it further consideration.

"I see a fireplace with the narrower chimney above and the opening for the fire below – see it's flat on the bottom and arched around the top. The mantel is in three sections, like stair steps, each one a few inches higher as they progress to the right."

"What's the line then there on the top left of the fireplace proper?" Kit asked again reaching out to feel it.

"A damper lever? A crack? I don't know."

"You know, looking at those cylinders from the side they could be darts of some kind," Kit added. "And from that angle the house could be an arrow head and the fireplace a hatchet."

They grew quiet as they continued to stare at the panel. Occasionally one would reach out and reposition it.

"What else could circles be called?" David asked.

"Balls, rings, moons, suns, zeros, marbles, grapes, other assorted fruit?" Kit said. "My favorite would be boobs. Imagine a girl with three boobs – now *that's* the stuff wet dreams are made of."

"I can see that Cold showers may not be enough. Shall I break out the salt peter?"

"Not familiar with it."

"Good. But if your scrambled eggs begin tasting funny and the patty sausages suddenly *don't* remind you of girls, just assume it's working."

A warm smile passed between them.

Again silence. It was clear to them that they needed more direction. Without it the possibilities became endless. David decided to take a different tack.

"Let's put the box aside for a while and use an entirely different approach. Crank up the laptop."

As Kit crossed the room to David's office area he said: "By the way I know just the laptop we need to get. Can order it online and get overnight delivery. Fantastically expensive but as I understand it that's no problem."

"Right. Get it ordered. Software?"

"Got that covered too. Same site. Want you to eyeball it first."

He returned with the computer and reached it out toward David.

"No. That stuff's your realm. Let me tell you what I have in mind and then you can go online and see what you can find."

"Sure. Shoot!"

He took a seat in the big chair, folding one leg under him.

"I want us to try and approach this the same way Ari had to have begun. We need two pieces of information. First, a global map indicating population density worldwide. Then, another map of the major global wind patterns."

"Hey! Very sharp for an *old* guy. Then we compare the two, see where the best sites would be for the bombs so when they explode the winds will carry the deadly cargo to the areas of densest population."

"Right, and forty something is NOT so old. You'll find that out way too soon."

It received a lingering smile from Kit but no eye contact. He was already deep into the web, searching for just the right maps.

"We'll need to print off the best you find. It may take several versions to meet our needs," David suggested hoping he was providing some useful direction for what he assumed would be an arduous task.

"Bad-a-boom, bad-a-bing! Got both," Kit said after a short ninety second voyage through cyber space."

"You're pulling my leg."

"Nope. All right here."

He moved to David's side with the lap top.

"World population *here* . . . and . . . global wind currents *here*."

"They look just like what we're after. Print a couple of copies of each – make that a half dozen so we can mark on them."

While Kit moved to the copier, David continued to talk from the sofa.

"We need to find six natural clumps of population, and wind currents that flow across those areas. Then we follow those winds backwards and find the most likely spots to originate the biological dispersal."

"At least that should narrow things down considerably," Kit said. "I'm feeling like we suddenly moved from willy-nilly to a solid plan."

"Me too. Now that we understand that his clues are obtuse we can begin narrowing the field to hopefully make them relevant. They will become more a source of confirmation than initial clues."

"Make that plural – fields," Kit added. "Six of them and only six of them."

"May not be as difficult as it seems. Lots of out of the way places to include."

"Like?"

"Antarctica, Hawaii, Siberia, Australia – I think that will help rather than hinder when it comes to selecting just six umbrellas. We'll be going for the widest possible spread."

"Here's a list of the most populous cities of the world for starters," Kit said handing over a piece of paper. "Lists twenty of them. Even though they run from Rio de Janeiro at six million on up to Bombay at twelve million that whole list

accounts for fewer than two hundred million out of what did we decide, six and a half *billion* people world wide. Maybe that wasn't such a good idea after all."

"Plan B-1." David said suggesting no discouragement in his tone. "On to the wind current map. Let's start with the United States." [Follow the discussion using the map page 389 if you want.]

"The pattern is definitely northwest to south east across the major mass of the continent; then they split and head north and south as they near the east coast," Kit said pointing out the patterns as he rejoined his uncle on the couch. Expanding the search north so the wind pattern includes Canada, an ideal spot would be . . . here."

Kit indicated a spot just inland to the far north west section of Canada.

"Interesting," David said putting the find into some kind of larger perspective. "Look out in the Pacific how the winds blow north east and then curve back around to the north west. That could catch the airborne junk from your Canadian site and deposit it over Alaska, the Aleutians and the western Siberian Peninsula."

"And then there are these, off the west coast of the United States, that trend off to the south and west which would catch Hawaii and the Pacific islands," Kit added enthusiastically, for the first time indicating some genuine confidence in the methodology.

"Put an X up there as one possibility. So long as we're out in the Pacific let's drop down to the area that includes Australia."

"Seems to be a westerly wind flow to the east side of the continent and then shifts north and north west as you move west. I doubt if the Canadian explosion would fuel the air that far south."

"I agree," David said. There are these pesky westerlies just to the south of Australia. See how they cut New Zealand just about in half – west winds to the south, and east to the north."

"I'd put my money on someplace in New Zealand," Kit said, soon bringing up a map of the country on the lap top. To catch both east and west and get both islands the source will need to be either at the extreme north of the southern island or the south tip of the northern one."

David picked up the panel they had been studying earlier. He turned it to the side containing the single outline – the one he had surmised was a map.

"Look!" he said pointing back and forth from the carving to the map on the screen. "See here and here and here. I think your ghost in the sheet idea just came to life."

"I see it! I see it!" kit said clearly excited. "The exact outline of the northern island. Now the two marks – the Xspot dealeo in the center and the dot at the lower left edge of the protrusion at the bottom. That lower one seems to be exactly where Wellington sits on the north island."

He picked up the panel. "I got it – at least part of it. The inverted

exclamation point is in fact a representation of the two islands. Actually it follows the geographic outlines pretty well. And the two slender cylinders suddenly look like thermometers – the kind you put under your tongue. If that's true, the fuller one would represent a higher temperature. It's marked out so the clue is a lower temperature as indicated on the other one. With a lower temperature would you be sick?"

"No!" David said his face suddenly brightening. "You would be *well* as in *Wellington*. And here *I'm* supposed to be the cryptographer. Good going. Any ideas about the circles. No need. I got it. They are rings. What about Rings and New Zealand go together?"

"It's where the Lord of the Rings movies were filmed and I'll bet they were filmed close to where that Xspot sits."

"We're getting there. Now two symbols left. The tent or volcano or mansion and the T-shirt or fireplace below it."

Silence overtook them again punctuated by a series of 'maybes' followed by the groan of 'nos'. Finally David broke the silence.

"I'm going to postulate there is a mansion near the Xspot that is similar to the pillared house carving and that inside it there is a fireplace shaped like the final carving."

"Let me research the travel information from that area," Kit suggested. "We might get lucky and find pictures. If you're right, what do you postulate we do to turn the damn thing off?"

"I'll ignore the profanity assuming it's a legitimate slip in the heat of elation."

"Sorry. We do need to discuss that sometime – your aversion to it I mean. Anyway. The question?"

"There is only one item we haven't accounted for – that line near the top of the left side of the fireplace. My bet is that it will play the crucial role for us."

By then Kit was reeling through a collage of pictures from the northern island. Periodically he'd hesitate and hold an image for a second comparing it in his mind with the carvings of the house and fireplace.

"Bingo, Uncle David. Bingo! Bingo! Bingo! Look here. *The Treadway Mansion* at the northern confluence of these two, long, narrow, mountains that run southwest to north east just north of Wellington. And it sits fairly close to the Xspot."

"How can you be sure it's the building?" David asked. "Lots of places could compare favorably with that crude carving."

Kit scrolled down the page and pointed.

"How about because it has that exact fireplace in the sitting room?"

"I'd say that was at least a moderately good clincher. Nice going! Let's get back to the wind patterns and don't expect the rest to be this easy."

CHAPTER THREE

Cracking the Code

"So, are we off to New Zealand or do we try to locate all six areas before we begin traveling?" Kit asked having moved from the couch to the floor where it began doing hands-behind-the-head sit-ups well beyond the count of one hundred.

"Better be satisfied with all six before we go," David said. "For example, here's a quandary; the easterlies out over the Atlantic that trail generally north east from Florida toward the European coast and north to England may or may not be able to continue the flow of bio agents from the Canadian source after they have swept down across the US. To make sure Europe is covered I just imagine some secondary source would be planted – provided the sixth spot had not needed to be elsewhere."

Kit crawled over to the couch where David was studying the wind currents on the map in front of him on the low table. He sat back on his legs to position himself for a long look.

"It seems clear that Mexico, Cuba, and Central America *will* be covered by the Canadian outflow," Kit noted. "So, if there is to be a secondary source, right here in the big middle of the Atlantic would seem to be the most likely spot as a backup for Europe."

He pointed to the Azores and added: "Nine islands as I recall from fifth grade geography. How to pick just one?"

"See if you can . . . I must stop starting my requests in that way," David said sincerely apologetically. "Of course you can. Find a map of the local wind tendencies around the islands. All areas have localized, low level, patterns that exist in and about the main, upper level, wind effects. Since the main wind tendency is from west to east which islands would be most likely?"

"The western ones so the killer cloud would have the best chance of contacting the local residents of the islands as it moves east."

"That's what I'd say. Find anything yet?"

"Want to revise that last question as well – in light of your previous comment about my prowess with this gadget?" Kit said kidding his uncle.

David bowed, arms outstretched in mock reverence for the boy's skills. "*What have you found?*" he said delivering the rephrase.

"Interesting. I hadn't thought about local patterns like that but here, see! Sort of a spiral centering on Pico Island. The winds seem to circle north then back west – contrary to the general movement – then south and rise back up into

the general westerly pattern over the eastern islands. Pico looks ideal."

"Let's see what it has to offer up in visual images."

Kit plunked away at various keys and among an extended volley of whispered damn's and yea's soon found what they needed. He began summarizing out loud as he perused the information.

"A volcanic island like all the others. Has a semi-active volcano in its center – Mt. Pico – makes sense. It's a forested island ringed in sandy beaches. Mt. Pico is the highest point at about 2,500 meters – that's what, roughly seventy five hundred feet?"

"About that. What else?"

"Has a small airport. Historically a whaling center. Produces high class wines and cheeses. Lots of tourist traffic. Get this, a Chinese restaurant known all over the world."

"*Hocus Pocus*, you mean?"

"Very good. You've been there I imagine. You've been everywhere."

"I have been there and you can guess with whom."

"Ari?"

"Had you been to New Zealand with him, too?"

"No. We spent part of one summer on the beaches of the gold coast of Australia – considerably north of New Zealand. I don't recall ever even discussing the place with him. Let's see which of the panels seems to fit what we know about Pico?"

They laid them out side by side on the table. After an extended period of pointing, nodding and head shaking, David spoke.

"I'd bet on this one."

"The hat in a rain storm?" Kit asked picking it up.

"How many rain drops as you call them?"

"Eight . . . ah ha! Eight plus the big one – the hat – and you have nine, the number of islands in the Azores. So, it's not a hat with a pointed top and a wide brim it's a volcano surrounded by narrow beaches – Pico."

"Turn it over. What other clues are there that might help us verify our educated guess?"

"Well lets see some numbers – one, six, three – something that looks like a staff with notes on it here and there, a big X – not the X spot symbol – a bottle, like a wine bottle I guess, a long dart-like weapon looking thing and the Greek letters alpha and omega with waves to their left."

"Or if not waves, David said, "Perhaps the mathematical sign for approximately.

"Approximately alpha and omega?" Kit said thinking aloud. "Used together like that they often symbolize beginning and end. Ah! May have it! In the alphabet we might think of it as A to Z the first two letters in Azores. But Z in Greek could also be thought of as zeta – well up toward the front of the Greek

Alphabet. If alpha and omega are to symbolize A to Z it would be an approximate usage in order to make it work for Azores."

"I'll go with that," David said. "I'm thinking that the dart is probably a harpoon representing the whaling industry. The bottle probably does represent the wine industry. Anything about music or the number 163 in that stuff you found?"

Kit went back to the laptop.

"Well, if it's music it's not the Azores national anthem, which is what I was postulating."

He continued his search.

"One bingo at least. Pico Island is 163 square miles in size. Nothing useful about music. That X. Think of it as being two crossed sticks, instead."

"It drew an, 'Ah ha!' from David. Maybe not an X then. Maybe chop sticks. Let's settle on that for now. What about the staff and notes? If not that, then what?"

"Raindrops hanging on lines – strings, wires, ropes?" Kit said, spinning possibilities.

"Good start. What about bunches of grapes hanging on the wires in the vineyards?"

"Probably another bingo."

"What about this side view of a stack of pancakes" Kit asked. "Look to be hovering above a plate."

"Or, that plate could be the lever mark. Remember the thick, straight, line on the fireplace in Wellington. Perhaps a lever or some such device to turn off the bomb."

"But pancakes?"

"Undoubtedly something else. I assume we'll know it when we see it."

Kit nodded and turned the panel over.

"Let's investigate the other side to see if we can hone in on the site we're looking for."

"The Xspot is here at the base of the volcano. Nothing to indicate directions. If it were a map, north would be to the top. It's more a picture or diagram so it's hard to know if that spot is to the east or the west. . . . There, under it, is like a box with little . . . what's? Rockets sitting on top at each side? A launch pad, you think?"

"What does your information say about big buildings – churches and such?"

"Let's see. Churches. . . . Ah! Says there are lots of them; many of them large – 95% Catholic."

"Pictures?"

"Searching . . . How about this one?"

"Looks to be a dead ringer for the image on the panel," David said. "Got a

name?'

"No, but I got a town – *Madalena*. One of three really old, seacoast communities; on the north west shore the way it looks. Look here. In the web picture it shows the church to have perhaps three floors or at least three rows of windows across the front. The image on the panel only shows one window – the top right."

"That may be the spot we have to get to," David said looking at the comparison Kit was making. "I was hoping for some interior image to guide us to a more exact spot."

Kit turned the panel over and tapped the staff and notes or grapes on the wires.

"Maybe this?"

"Any interior shots of that church?"

"Afraid not. It could be what we thought originally – notes on a staff – maybe from a mural or something."

"I'm a bit bothered by the placement of that Xspot," David said. "It's not really where it needs to be if it represents *Madalena* regardless of the direction of the view."

"So," Kit began, ready to summarize, "We're going to go with the idea that there is an Azores bomb and that it's located in the upper right room in the church with the tall, narrow, double, towers, probably – maybe – in the town of *Madalena* on Pico Island though we are somewhat baffled by the placement of the Xspot."

They continued to examine it for some time. Then David spoke.

"We may not have some of the specifics, yet, but I'm content to call that two down and four to go. How about you?"

"Sure makes sense. There is something, though."

"What's that?"

"Doesn't this just seem way too easy, Uncle David? I mean Ari knows you're as brilliant as they come. Wouldn't he make this all more difficult?"

"I've been wondering the same thing. It may be a diversionary ploy on his part."

"What?"

"He may be tempting us with his favorite monster of the mind, as he called it, the *Overthink Ogre*."

"Make us think it's too easy so we look for things that aren't there, confusing everything?"

"*That* and encourage us to waste precious time in the process. Let's just go through the process like we've been doing and see what the overall feel of it is in the end. Then we can review any pieces that still seem bothersome at that point."

* * *

As the elevator doors opened into Ari's penthouse, David was still shivering from his ten block trek through a Cambridge Winter snow storm. He was met by three girls he didn't know, waiting to board for the ride down stairs toward the inhospitable elements outside.

"You must be David," the tall blond said. "Aristotle said you'd be coming. He didn't tell us how handsome you are."

"Not sure handsome's the word but regardless Ari's strictly into woman's charms you know. Doubt if he'd even have an opinion about my looks."

"We gotta go for a swim sometime," the talker girl said drawing her finger tips across his cheek as they traded places – in and out of the elevator."

"I'm sure it will be my pleasure," David said.

It had not been flattery. Any one of the three would have raised his blood pressure. The three together . . . well, enough said.

The doors slid closed and David turned his attention to disengaging himself from his thick Navy P-jacket, rubber boots, scarf, and tall Russian hat.

"*A r i s t o t l e !*" he called out, mimicking the blond in name and tone, hoping to aggravate Ari just a bit.

He appeared from the pool wearing a smile and drying his hair with a white towel.

"I ordered dinner up from the dining room – squab on wild rice with all the trimmings. Hope that's satisfactory."

"Sounds wonderful. Speaking of squab those were some chicks I met at the elevator."

"That was really below you. *Squab? Chicks?* I'll give you a second try."

"It's all I have. Just staring at the women sapped my powers. I can only imagine what they must have done to yours this afternoon."

David laughed. Ari just raised his eyebrows.

"New music?" David asked cocking his head to listen more closely.

"Mama sent me a new album – all Greek music – you'll undoubtedly hate it. A cousin is in the band."

"I'm not surprised; it seems like every-other person in Greece is your cousin."

Ari smiled.

"Mama had ten brothers and sisters and Papa thirteen. From that base it doesn't take a whole lot of whoopee making to propagate the line far and wide."

"That would be *unprotected* whoopee making, of course."

"The very best kind, wouldn't you agree?"

"We'll have to define *best*, I suppose, won't we?"

"Knowing us, yes. That should be fodder for an all-night session. You're shivering. Want to get into the pool? It'll warm you up in a hurry."

"Sure. Sounds great!"

Ari sat on the edge, feet dangling in the water, while David bobbed around

as effortlessly as possible luxuriating in the warmth. He was taken by the fact that he continued shivering for some time.

"So, *best*," Ari said at last, ready for some high level mental sparring.

"Best *what* or *which*, of course, is the bottom line question," David answered. "Let's examine the term in light of your example about unprotected intercourse. Best for a male's sexual pleasure? Best – meaning most convenient – for quickie sex wherever you may be? Best for safety from communicable diseases? Best for maintaining a reasonable population level for the planet? Best because without prophylactics or contraceptive pills sexual activity is cheaper than with? Best because unprotected sex is advocated by one's religion? Well, at least protected sex has been made a *sin* so the church really does appear to require unprotected sex for those who will have sex – and most everybody will. Best because a main purpose of sex is to procreate as often as possible, regardless of one's ability or desire to raise children, perhaps?"

"The Overthink Ogre has overtaken you again," Ari said.

"I don't think so. You're just proposing that as a defense against having to face the reality of your promiscuous sexual life style."

"Promiscuous? I can't be promiscuous unless I profess to hold values contrary to my behaviors. I'd have to believe sex with lots of partners was somehow wrong before I could think of it as promiscuous. You can think I'm promiscuous in terms of your beliefs but when you condemn me on that basis you're the one holding out an absolute value – yours – which suggests I don't have a right to hold to my own values."

"That would be confusing if we hadn't been over it so often. You hold that there are no absolute rights or wrongs. Just about every religion on the planet would disagree with you on that you know."

"Oh, I believe there *is* one absolute *wrong* – mankind's continued existence on the planet he is so selfishly and thoughtlessly decimating."

"Yes. I know that."

"About religious tenants," Ari said not wanting the topic to slip away unassaulted. "They are put in place for the convenience of mindless followers to adhere to and to give the leaders the absolute power of eternal reward or punishment."

"Mindless?"

"Adhering to somebody else's beliefs releases one from having to think through what is truly best, most productive, most compassionate, logical, and reasonable. Religious tenets are for the mentally lazy – people willing to just take on some set of beliefs as their own because they are too lazy, ignorant, or non-insightful to think through the process of value development themselves. And, when they do it's seldom a genuine search. Usually just a defensive foray to justify the beliefs they already hold."

"You've never come right out and said you were an atheist, Ari?"

"I'm not, I suppose. My god is just a whole lot more fun than your god."

"Who said I had a god?"

"Interesting. Your values are so mid-stream Judeo-Christian that I guess I just assumed."

"Values assembled for the purpose of sustaining an ever improving, compassionate, mutually helpful human race don't have to be born out of a god-based religion. They can come most directly, in fact, from just a little clear reflection on what is necessary for us to survive as a happy, productive, loving, species on this living planet. I'd think the real threat of our current day, hate-based, man-against-man, religion against religion, header into the destruction of the race, would be sufficient motivation to change things – all without needing the threat of eternal damnation or whatever to do so."

"I doubt that, you know," Ari said slipping into the pool and treading water a few yards away from David. "Since most humans believe *they* are right – about religion, values, and lifestyles – and most everybody else is wrong, nobody believes that damnation will come their way; it is reserved for everybody else."

"The quintessence of pessimism," David said.

"Each human being is so caught up in his own selfish pursuits that he spends no significant amount of time considering the survival of the species or the planet. It's as if we all believe, 'Damnation be damned'."

"Well, you know we disagree on most of what you have just said – at least the totally inclusive extent which you assert."

"How can you hold out any hope that a truly good human race will ever be spawned from the stock that's around today?" Ari asked appearing to be uncharacteristically sincere with his question.

"In the same way you condemn mankind to destruction because of their innately selfish ways. You admittedly epitomize the destructive selfishness of man – a human tendency I've never denied. I strive to epitomize the opposite. I'm not saying I don't have my own selfish concerns – food, education, health, friendship, sex, and such. But I make thoughtful efforts every day to improve the lot of the people I meet and to go about my life in planet friendly ways. I could do more in all those realms I'm sure, but we're speaking of basic tendencies here and I guess I'm contending that where *yours* will surely destroy life on our planet – just as you postulate – *mine* gives mankind a great chance to survive and live in essential harmony with the other species."

"You're right. I'm a spoiled, self absorbed, pleasure seeker who has no intention of changing. I and my kind need to be . . . let's see, it wouldn't be put out of our *misery*; it would be put out of our *pleasure*, I guess. Your kind needs to be elevated to positions of absolute power over the likes of me."

"Your kind would never really stand for that."

"You're right. It would be an interesting contest though wouldn't it. You and your philosophy against me and mine in one, final, all out competition with

the destruction or survival of life on the planet as the stakes."

"I think that would be absurd and disgusting."

"That's how your philosophy requires you to respond – and feel. I don't mean I believe it's in anyway not genuine," Ari said.

"We approach life and living it from two very different, fully incompatible, bottom lines," David said as if to define the problem between them. "Where I see the basic social purpose of life to be that of honoring the human species by helping to make it everything positive that it can possibly become, you see the purpose of life and living as meeting the basic survival needs of *all* species on the planet and that necessitates the destruction of the human race."

"One difference," Ari suggested. "You actually try to live your positive viewpoint but my every waking moment is dedicated to proving how unworthy the human species really is."

"Each one of us pushing his particular view, I suppose. Does that give us both a sense of *integrity* – living up to one's values?"

Before Ari could respond with anything more than bobbing his head up and down, and left and right indicating momentary confusion, a bell rang signaling the elevator door had opened. It would be room service.

"I specifically requested it be brought up by a waitress. Shall we go show her some skin and give her a thrill?"

"You do as you will do. I'll opt for a towel so as to not risk embarrassing her."

"And if she requests that you drop it?"

"That would define an entirely different situation, wouldn't it? You know I'd join you in that case."

The waitress blushed. Ari shrugged. David's towel stayed in place.

* * *

"What we going to do for lunch, Unc?" Kit asked standing and stretching.

"It isn't even the middle of the morning yet," Son. "Make some toast. Drink some juice. Ice cream in the freezer."

"Think I will. The question remains, though, what about lunch?"

"There's left over chili. We could make grilled cheese sandwiches and toss a salad."

"Sounds good. Now that I have that locked down, let me take a short side trip to the fridge. Won't be five minutes."

David shook his head remembering the good old days when there seemed to be no correlation between calories consumed and belt size. He hoped his nephew appreciated it while it lasted. He wouldn't of course. Adolescents seldom seem able to appreciate their enviable status of being adults mentally and physically with parents still willing to support them in most every way, allowing the most extended period of dependence of any animal species on the planet.

Had Kit lived in the days of the Cave Men, he would have already fathered three to six dozen children – perhaps one of which would have lived. He would have witnessed over half the sunsets his short lifespan would allow him. He would have lived a life of which Ari could approve – man with no technology beyond the spear, the animal skin blanket, and fire, taking from the environment only what he needed. With language skills still at a primitive, pre-grammatical stage, he presented little threat of developing other technological innovations for centuries to come.

It caused David to wonder if, through a search of the information already accumulated on early man, he could determine at just what point man inched beyond his planet friendly living style into that of the planet's destroyer. Perhaps it was the invention of the wheel which showed that labor could be eased and allowed exploration beyond one's insular family group. Perhaps the advent of combs or body painting – the earliest forms of vanity, suggesting some degree of dissatisfaction with the human body as it was. Perhaps the coming of the loincloth which – though originally donned for protection of the male gentiles against the tall, sharp, often thorny underbrush through which he had to run in pursuit of dinner – with time planted the first seeds of physical modesty. Perhaps it was some genetic quirk that suddenly allowed complex organization to occur in the cerebral cortex. Most likely it would have been some combination of those and other things.

Kit reentered the sitting area presenting a humorous contrast of cave man and modern man. He had opted for a drumstick David had forgotten he had. He stood there, fully unclad, his closely cropped hair meticulously combed, his shiny, white teeth tearing at the chicken leg held in the firm grasp of his right hand. He carried a laptop computer in the other as he hesitated long enough to flip the air conditioner's wall switch with his elbow.

"Man's history encapsulated," David said, chuckling through his words.

"What?" Kit asked taking a seat on the couch.

"A private thought only humorous to me, I'm sure. Let's get back to work and find a third likely spot for a center of lethal dissemination."

"That's humorous, too," Kit said.

"That what and how?"

"*Lethal dissemination.* Ari would contend that at this point human reproduction would involve lethal *insemination.*"

David raised his eyebrows unable to coax a chuckle through his deep concern.

Kit felt moved to offer a disclaimer of sorts.

"I guess *that* one seemed far more humorous while in the formulation stage inside my head than eventuated once it was unleashed on the world."

David laughed out loud at the erudite overkill of Kit's explanation, then shook his head trying to move on.

“That first spot you indicated in Canada. Looks to be far northern British Columbia or the southern Yukon. Get us a close up on the wind patterns – say three hundred miles in all directions from that general area.”

Kit described what he found as he studied the screen.

“It’s here at the confluence of the north easterlies coming down from the Arctic and the south westerlies moving up from the Pacific. Inland the cold air from the north seems to immediately split with a small part of it moving west to Alaska and Siberia and the rest moving south and east over Canada and the US.”

“My vote would go to *Whitehorse* in the Yukon,” David said. “What about yours?”

“I’m in. You could say at this point *Whitehorse* is our *Dark Horse* until we can prove it.”

“No. *You* could say that, perhaps, but not me.”

It was worth a smile between them. They returned their attention to the remaining four wooden panels. Again there was the nodding and the shaking of heads, the “How about’s” and the “No, couldn’t be’s”.

“Well, let’s just pick one and see what we can make of it,” David suggested.

They went through two with no positive hits for the Canadian site. Using his index finger, Kit followed the outline of the map on the back of the next panel.

“Looks like Texas to me,” he said.

“Or India,” David pointed out.

“Okay. I got an idea,” Kit said moving with the panel to the scanner. Let’s scan in the outline and then juxtapose it over various parts of maps.”

“Good technology but it could take forever,” David pointed out. “Here’s where that object recognition software would come in handy.”

Kit moved on.

“Let’s begin by supposing it is a map of our elusive Canadian location. There. Now just sharpen the definition in Photo Shop and *viola!* There. We have a transparent outline. Now superimposing the little outline over the Canadian map and sliding the image from the panel here and there maybe we can find a match.”

“David had joined Kit at the 24” screen at the desk. He stood behind and continued to be amazed at his nephew’s prowess with the computer.

Kit dragged the transparent image here and there increasing and decreasing it in size.

“Pull it down here,” David said pointing, “And reduce it so it’s squared off corner nestles into the one on the map of the Yukon. I’ll bet we have one of your Bingos.”

“Very good eye, Unc! And notice the placement of the Xspot? Right smack dab over *Whitehorse*.”

“Let’s see if we can make the other clues confirm what we think we’ve discovered,” David said as they moved back to the couch. What do we have here?”

“Five concentric circles the middle one filled in,” Kit began. “Maybe the ripples spreading away from an object – the dark spot – dropped into water.”

“How does the line protruding from the top of the outer circle fit into it all?” David asked not waiting for a response. “And, see, at the outer end of that line it’s like a short length of grass growing top and bottom.”

“Maybe it’s not a line *protruding* but a line *penetrating* whatever it is. Maybe the line is really a . . . I got it! It’s an arrow sticking into a target – not a great shot I suppose because it just barely hit within the outermost ring.”

“A *white*,” David said without explanation.

“A *white* what?” Kit asked.

“The outer ring on an archery target is always white and an arrow that sticks there is referred to as a *white*.”

“Really! I didn’t know that. How did I miss that?” Kit said kicking himself verbally over the trivia.

“If that’s so it confirms part the city’s name. What else?”

“Well, when I thought the circles were ripples I thought these two sets of squiggly lines were waves. Now I’m back to square one.”

“Could still be waves, or mountain ranges,” David said thinking aloud.

“Or boobs,” Kit added.

“You’d see boobs in graph paper. Probably no boobs in Ari’s clues although they have certainly always been an important part of his life.”

“They are in pairs one over the other,” Kit said describing them out loud. They each sit to the immediate left of an image. The picture next to the top set looks like maybe a coconut needing a shave or wearing a wig. The bottom one is next to what has to be a house – just a very plain, generic, unremarkable, first grader’s rendering of a house.”

David had a thought.

“In mathematics those squiggly lines mean . . .”

“Approximately! Makes no sense. Approximately a house? Approximately a coconut with a wig?”

“Simplify the grammar with which you’re addressing them,” David suggested already having cracked the code.

“You have it don’t you?”

“So will you in a minute. Give it a go!”

“Well, the only way to grammatically simplify ‘Approximately a house’ would be ‘Approximately house’. Interesting. A whole new perspective. Not the word house but something close to it. Mouse, louse, douse? Nothing.”

“Move beyond rhymes. Involve the clue we think we already have.”

“White house. Ah! White *Horse*! Excellent! Then the other. You got that

one, too?”

David nodded. Kit became intent wanting to decipher it on his own.

“Approximately coconut. Approximately wig. Wig. Artificial hair. Hair? Hair? Include our other clues. White hair. Horse hair. Ah. Ha! Mane. Like a horse’s neck hair. Another confirmation of ‘horse’.”

“Two more,” David said. “I think he’s playing games with us. Overloading the plate. What about this figure that looks like a paddle or an old fashioned hand held fan sporting the question mark in its center?”

“Looks like the outline of a road sign to me. Like an informational sign: ‘YIELD’, or ‘S CURVE’ or like that.”

“A good possibility. What about the three identical little mounds or half-circles?” David asked.

“Could be turtles or beetles or bowls turned upside down.”

“Or mounds of bakers dough or little hills,” David added.

“Silica breast implants,” Kit offered all quite seriously.

“Too many possibilities,” David said. “Let’s approach it differently. What would there need to be three of in order to offer the clue? Clearly, *one* of whatever it is won’t do. *Two* won’t do. *Four* or more won’t do. It’s only *three* that works. What does *three* have to tell us?”

“Maybe just that,” Kit said. “Three of something. Three paddles or road signs. That paddle thing could be a broom standing on its handle.”

“Doesn’t feel right,” David said mounting a frown. “What does it take three little humpy things to make complete?”

“Here’s one, WAY out of left field, Unc. You know when we went to New York the summer I was ten and there was that guy with the little table on the street doing the shell game. You let me make a bet, knowing I’d lose, of course. That took exactly three shells. If you hadn’t been there to rein me in I’d have let him con me out of all my trip money. I was so sure every time I knew which one the pea was under.”

“I got it,” David said. “What’s *your* problem kid? Thought you were supposed to be some kind of boy genius?”

“You have it? Really? Well, if I go with either ‘game’ or ‘con’ from those images and ‘yield’ or ‘curve’ or ‘u-turn’ from the other . . . I, too, have a bingo – U con – Yukon. I do believe we have confirmation of Whitehorse, Yukon.”

“Kit held the panel over his head and took it for a turn around the room as if it were a championship trophy.”

“After your premature victory lap we still have the final image from the map side of the panel to consider.”

“Oh. Right. Let’s see. Could be a stalagmite – that’s the one coming up from the floor, right?”

“Right. Stalactites hang down – hang *tight* to the ceiling. It could be a representation of any one of hundreds of slender, pointed, obelisk-like structures.

It must be the five lines radiating from its top that really define it as a clue.”

“Late night TV movies.” Kit said cryptically. “How about that old time movie company logo – *Radio Moving Pictures* or some such name? They used a tower – a radio transmission tower – and had the radio signals radiating out away from the top.”

“Makes good sense. Does that refer to the tower itself or to the station that transmits from it?”

“No idea, of course. It probably does represent the location of the bomb, though.”

“Look closely at the tower – about three fifths of the way up from the bottom.”

“Who but Dr. David Lawrence would divide a tower’s height into fifths?” Kit said shaking his head. “But, yes. There it is just like on the other two. That thick, short, line.”

“Your list. See if you can luck onto the locations of those towers in and around Whitehorse. Then, find out everything we need to know about climbing such towers – dangers, equipment, everything.”

“Got it. I suppose it’s more difficult than climbing the water tower here in town.”

“Your generation courts the girls up there as well?” David asked.

“Translation,” Kit began, turning as if offering an explanation to an imaginary group of youngsters. “Courting is the ancient term for *making out*. He turned back toward David. “Yes. Great private spots transcend the generations, I guess.”

“Kissed my first girl up there, I mean *really* kissed her in the marathon sense of the word,” David said, briefly allowing a happy reverie.

“No kidding. Me too.”

“Hope it wasn’t the same girl.”

“Believe it or not, pops, I *can* do better than that – could even back in the sixth grade.”

“Slow starter, huh?”

“Slow? You beat eleven years old?”

“By a year. Not sure it was a milestone to be proud of. The girl was fourteen and dropped me like a hot potato when a ninth grade boy came along. Not sure if it was my inept, fully unpracticed, approach to kissing, my age, or something else.”

“What base did you get to?” Kit asked.

“Probably none of your business and by that I really mean I had no idea that *bases* even existed at that age. I just knew kissing was supposed to be something real guys did with girls.”

“No bases? Then I declare it a tie since, although slightly older, I got to several that first time plus she didn’t drop me. She still smiles when she sees

me.”

“Tell me,” David asked. “How is it that no matter how a conversation begins with you it always ends up being sexual in nature.”

“The natural nature of the eighteen year old male of the species. I cannot help myself. Without that predilection the species would have died out hundreds of generations ago.”

“I can’t deny any of that, I guess,” David said opening a broad smile. “Three down. Three to go. Let’s roll up our sleeves and get back at it. Oh. That’s right. You have no sleeves. Well, do the best you can.”

“How about going after a site that will cover most of Asia, next?” Kit suggested rolling up his nonexistent sleeves as if to make some esoteric point meaningful only to himself. “See how the wind patterns seem to disburse from right there in Mongolia, going north east to Siberia, south across China, West and southwest to Europe and India and even some heading north to Russia. If we’re missing anything in all of this it’s Russia, which is likely an overlap site, I guess you could say. In addition to those swirling up from Mongolia it also receives winds to some minor extent in the north from Canada, in the south from New Zealand and to the west from the Azores.”

“Most importantly,” David said agreeing, “The outbreak of the winds from Mongolia seem to cover several large land masses only marginally hit by others. It looks like an excellent choice to me and it really can’t vary much from that one point you suggested. What is that on the map”

“Somewhere in Selenge or Tov provinces I’d say. Maybe as far west as Hentiy.”

“Name the cities.”

“My choice would be Ulaanbaaar in Tov. Let me get some info on it.”

A few minutes later.

“Has had lots of names in the past – a political pawn of sorts. Was a center of Buddhism once but now mostly Muslim? Was the capitol of Outer Mongolia and then after the revolution became the capitol of all of Mongolia. One problem I see here.”

“What’s that?”

“It sits in a valley at about 4,300 feet above sea level. The ridges that surround it go up another thousand feet in places.”

“Perhaps the bomb site could be on one of those ridges nearby,” David suggested sifting through the information.

“I’m surprised by what I’m finding out, here,” Kit said. “It’s really a large, modern, well laid out city – a university, science academy, library, a center of commerce, Monastery of the Living Buddha, cultural sites. It’s the main stopover on the route between Russia and China. I thought all of Mongolia was populated by Yak herders.”

“Glad this mission can have its enlightening moments for you. It seems to

be enough to begin our search through the panels. We're down to three, now," David said turning his attention to the table.

"Should be a piece of cake," Kit said. "Gee. Cake. That sounds good."

Ignoring the young man's comment David selected one of the panels.

"Do your juxtaposing thing on the computer with this map."

It was soon accomplished but Kit seemed baffled.

"Looks a bit like Omnigovi Province way to the south but it's a really poor fit even there. That looks to be mostly Gobi desert – way too low considering the mountains in the area."

"I believe we're thinking too parochial, Kit. I think he gave us the outline of the whole country. Enlarge it and see if I'm not right."

"I'll be . . . Whingy Dinged," Kit said.

"Whingy Dinged?" David said furrows in his brow and a smile on his face.

"My original inclination was to use the GD phrase but in deference to you I Whingy Dinged instead. Both convey the identical concept, of course."

"In that case, I appreciate your Whingy Ding."

"I can't see why that bothers you, you know, you being as close to an atheist as an agnostic can be."

"Has very little to do with the fact it is profanity. It represents lazy, non-definitive, speech. Nobody including you really knows what you mean when you swear. It's just a lazy man's substitution so he doesn't have to think through what he really means or needs to convey. Two people can stand and swear at each other all day and neither one ever comes to understand what it's all about – really."

"Interesting. Makes sense. Wow! Thanks for that!"

"You're welcome. I am baffled by where you came to learn to swear so easily. It's not a part of your home and you certainly didn't learn it from me."

"Jerry and Butch. Both my friends for as far back as I can remember. Both of them probably uttered profanity as their first words. The words played an important part in my education, you remember. If it hadn't been for you explaining to me what they meant both my sexual and religious education would be sadly lacking. It made me feel powerful to use those words as a little kid and now it's pure habit. Megan hates it. You hate it. Mom and dad hate it and still I continue to curse my way through life."

David could add nothing any more meaningful so he just bit his parent-like tongue that really still wanted to harangue on about it – a certified, useless effort or not!

"My brain is fried," David said putting the panel down. "Let's take a break and get the computer stuff ordered for delivery tomorrow. Then, we'll rustle up some grub and have a leisurely lunch out on the balcony."

CHAPTER FOUR

By 12:30 they were back on the couch perusing the Mongolian Panel – the reverse side from the map.

"The images are more complex than on the others," Kit noted.

"Let's see what we can make of those in the upper right corner," David suggested.

Kit began talking about what was there.

"A wavy line with three humps; a large circle off to the left and a smaller circle off to the right."

"The central hump is significantly higher than the other two . . . some of those hills or ridges you were reading about, maybe," David said.

"The middle one looks like a volcano," Kit said. "See the line across it near the top as if to suggest the open top."

"Or, that line could be our reoccurring line."

"You're probably right on that. What about the two circles?"

"Well, if those are hills, where would the circles be?"

"In the sky. Ah! The big one the sun and the small one the moon. But why both visible at the same time?"

"If in its entirety it is intended to represent an old Chinese style map with pictures representing various points – and that is certainly its style and the tradition of the area – what do we know about the general set up?"

"Well, the Chinese were the first to always have north at the top. It's how the term 'oriented' came into being. Their maps always being drawn with north at the top – thus the term . . . oriented."

It had been more than was necessary.

"Add the sun and moon and what do we have?"

"Well, let's see. If the top is north, the sun would be to the left – west – of the moon. I don't see any new information."

"The sun is low and the moon is high. Go for the time of day."

"Late in the day. Sunset perhaps or moon rise. Still makes little sense."

"It may relate to the time of day we have to do something," David said.

"And I'm admittedly grasping at straws. We'll hold it in reserve. It may just be padding – *over think* material."

"Okay then," Kit said satisfied with his Uncle's take on it. "What's going on across the bottom?"

"Looks to be two pictures – a set of stick figures on the right and an open

book maybe on the left."

"And the long line running under both with the short vertical lines at the ends," Kit pointed out.

"Perhaps a bracket – an indicator – that the pictures represent a single concept."

"Yeah. Good idea. The stick figures then. One is on its back and the other standing with its foot on the prone guy's chest. It's also holding something up in its raised right arm – a stick, a . . ."

". . . A spear, maybe?" David said jumping in to fill the silence. "As if one warrior had vanquished the other and was claiming victory."

"Victor? Winner? What could it mean?" Kit asked really to himself.

"Let's let it lay for a moment and move on to the book."

Again it was Kit who described the image.

"An open book with lines representing the printed lines of words, I suppose. About half way down the right page is an X – not the Xspot, just an X. The left page is circled. Which is the important part – the circled area or the X marked spot?"

"Interesting dilemma isn't it. We need to extend the meanings of circled areas vs. Xed area," David said not sure where to go with it all.

"Maybe the X is like on those maps in malls that say, 'You Are Here,' Kit suggested.

"Very interesting. If the reader is at the point of the X then what would that encircled left hand page represent?"

"Previously read material?" Kit suggested tentatively.

"If we assume it is like a homophone, *read* – pronounced in the past tense – could become *red the color* – more likely a useful concept in a clue."

"Hero! The winner of the two guys could be a hero," Kit said. "Red Hero? I know something about that."

Kit closed his eyes as if scrolling through his memory center.

"Got it. Edgar Rice Burroughs story, *Apache Devil*, about chapter ten or eleven I'd say. He introduces a character named Red Hero – an Indian."

"I admire your mental prowess but how do we connect Burroughs or an Indian in the old American west with Mongolia?"

"Probably don't. Red also represents Communism as in either China to the south or Russia to the north. Wait. I think we may have it."

Kit scrolled back to the general information page he had located dealing with Mongolian history. There it is! This could be considered great fun if it weren't associated with such a fully terrible contest. *Ulaanbaatar*, the name change that occurred after the communist revolution translates into English as *Red Hero*. Are we good or what?"

That time it required *several* laps around the room with hop steps and twirls to emphasize his joy.

"I do believe we have confirmation of the fourth probable site," David said. "Now just the one final image on the map side."

Kit returned and sat close to his Uncle, arm around his shoulders.

"Could be a crouching monkey with a sober face drawn on its abdomen."

"Think historically about the city. It was once the site of . . ."

"Ah! Yes. That's a Buddha not a monkey. But why the face on his stomach?"

"Reinterpret the eyes in a realistic way," David suggested.

"Tits. His nipples on his chest. Then does that make that straight line mouth into some kind of deformed belly button?"

"Think historically about our set of clues."

"The line? But we already found the line across the top of the center hill on the other side."

"Ari used the Xspot to represent the location of Ulaabaatar on the Map of Mongolia. Perhaps the two lines represent the same spot just presented on two different images one zoomed out and one zoomed in."

"You mean a Buddha statue high on that middle mountain?"

"It's the best I have. You?"

"Nothing better. Makes sense. Now we need to find a set of three hills or ridges that match the outlined image he presents for us. Let me see what I can find."

A few minutes passed. David waited patiently, confident Kit would find something.

"This is *probably* it," came his somewhat tentative response. "The only set of one high between two lower hills. Also all three have generally rounded tops. The rest are more linier – jagged, squared off."

"Great work, Son. One more thing for your list. Get the details on that hill. What's there? Roads or paths. Find that statue – dimensions, access to it, things like that. Oh, and find out how it sits in relation to the sun and moon – well, its east and west orientation I suppose."

"Got it. I'm ready for number five any time you are."

"We haven't covered South America yet," David said. "I've been studying the winds that come in off the Atlantic. Right here in northern Brazil, this most easterly hump on the continent. See how the winds split to cover the continent south and west and how the north blowing winds over in the pacific intertwine with those from the east – they will pick up the airborne bio-stuff and complete its disbursement up along the mountain range."

"Looks like a lock to me," Kit said agreeing with an extended nod.

"If my memory serves me right," David began, "and my first guess is anything like accurate, I know you're *really* going to enjoy that spot in eastern Brazil."

"Really! Let's see. It must involve naked ladies then?"

"Naked everybody, actually. But let's not get ahead of ourselves. I think this panel most likely has the map of the area. It's not only the eastern most point of Brazil but also the eastern-most point of the Americas. See the hump in the map."

"I don't think we even need to use the computer on this one. The fit is obvious."

"Find us a map. The area is known as *Cabo Branco*."

"Portuguese for . . . I'm going to guess using my Spanish . . . that it means something like *White Cape*."

"Right on. The most easterly city is *Joao Pessoa*. There are beautiful wide beaches all up and down the cape."

"You were there with Ari, I assume."

"Three memorable weeks at *Praia da Penka* and *Tambaba*."

"Which means . . . ?"

"Both are wonderful beaches the latter one strictly *nenhuma roupa permitida*."

"I'll take another stab. No clothes allowed."

"Bingo as somebody I know might say."

"We could go there immediately and work the rest of this out on the beach," Kit offered, his inner imp appearing full blown. "Second thought that wouldn't work. Our heads would turn off and our crotches would turn on."

"For you, perhaps at this point in your understanding of the Naturist way of life. Deep breaths. Focus. Here we go. Turning the panel over we see several images to consider. Look at the three in a row across the top. Two little squares one with lines across it and another of those diagonal lines through it. The other is just the outline of a square with no lines. Then, on to the right. It looks to be the profile of a nude woman with a narrow triangle hanging back from her shoulders."

"Okay. So the one with the diagonal line through it is not the right one of whatever the two represent," David said.

"Consider the images as line drawings," Kit said. "The cross-lines in the one could be a way of representing a darkened area and the lack of them in the other a lighter area."

"Yes. I see. Like a wood block print. Ignoring the darker one that's marked through, leaves us with the light one," David said.

"Light," Kit said thinking aloud. "*White*, maybe. If we make that triangle-thingy a cape we have *White Cape*."

"Let's accept that. Makes sense in all ways. What about the bottom row. Again it has that bracket across it as if to indicate a unit."

"The first image looks a lot like Casper with one, two, three, four, curvy lines running across its width and slightly beyond. A ghost in the wind?"

"Or a ghost under water?" David said. "Let's come back to that. Next are

the familiar double curvy lines – perhaps the 'approximately' sign again. It's followed by three stick figures in profile as if they are walking along one after the other."

"Parade?" Kit suggested very tentatively.

"Perhaps. What about the arrow pointing down at the one to the left in the line?"

"Third? Behind? Trailing? End of the line? Last in line. . . . Too many possibilities."

"Let's narrow it," David suggested. "What do the approximations yield. *Behind*, for example."

Silence ensued.

"Not much I guess, Kit offered at last."

"Scratch that one then. What about *trailing*?"

"Bailing, nailing, sailing, mailing, railing, wailing?"

"*End*?"

"Bend, send, rend, fend, lend, mend, tend, vend, wend?"

"Okay, how about *Last*?"

"Cast, fast, mast, past, sassed?" Kit said wearying of the possibilities.

"I suggest we move on to the two shoes facing each other."

"One thing is clearly intended to stand out – the soles," Kit said.

"Good. Now which of those approximations might make a reasonable modifier for *sole* – remember it could be the homophone, sound-alike, *soul*, as well."

"But there are two of them so it would probably be plural, right?" Kit added.

"Yes. Right. Good. So?"

In their heads they each ran down the lists they had just made of rhyming word. At the same moment they said, "Lost."

"Good. Something *lost souls*," David said pointing back at 'Casper' for the first word.

"Instead of a ghost – although that fits well with souls I suppose – it could be an opening of some kind," Kit said.

"And if the wavy lines represent water, it's an underwater *opening*, so instead of an underwater *Casper*, it could be a cave. *Cave of the Lost Souls*. I'm not familiar with it but see what you find doing a search."

"I'm ahead of you," Kit said. "Several things come up on Google but this one is what we're after I imagine. *Caverna de almas perdidas* – Cave of Lost Souls. Says it's a fabled underwater cave just off the White Cape on the Atlantic in Brazil. Thought to have collected the souls of the many sailors who perished there before the lighthouse was erected to warn of the several low and submerged islands just off the coast. An explorer reported finding it during the 1880's but his find has never been verified and his original maps have been lost."

"I just imagine that's our destination."

"I'm sure of it," Kit added. "See the little solid line just above the base of the cave."

"Yes. I've been thinking about that. Back to the map side. The Xspot is probably precisely located. I think it's time to juxtapose and get as specific a location as possible – to within yards if you can. Then, for your list . . ."

"I know everything that has ever been written about *Caverna de almas perdidas* – preferably including maps."

"And the lad is a mind reader as well. One set of things left on the map side."

"Let's take a look. Oh, yes. I remember. The part to the far right looks like an hour glass – a sand clock. It has the top section marked off into what, six sections? I'd guess each one represents an hour. One of those sections looks like it has a bracket beside it as if to call attention either to it specifically or an hour's section in general. It's so small. Then there is an exclamation point following it. Hmmm!"

"Technically an exclamation point follows an interrogatory sentence – a command. Its presence there signifies something about it is of the utmost importance."

Kit moved his attention to the picture to the left of the hour glass. "A box – probably *our* box, I'd guess. What about you?"

"I'm with you on that one. The three wavy lines above it likely represent water considering the other clues. Something about the box *under* water, perhaps?"

"That's it!" Kit said. "The box under water for an hour. The exclamation point would then signify either for *at least* an hour or *no more than* an hour. That's not a really a very helpful hint is it?"

"Much like the time my plants were getting brown at the tips of their leaves. I went to the plant care book. Brown ends, it said, signify either too much watering or too little. Big help."

"One important difference," Kit said. "Our box is wooden and wood swells when it gets wet. Still no help. Does it need to be bigger as if in water for a whole hour, or not to be bigger as if hurry and get things done within an hour?"

"The most generally interesting part of the message is that this is the first solid indication that the box or any part of it will need to be with us when we reach the turn off the bomb switch."

"I see. Yes. As if the box or one of its six panels will play some part in shutting things down. Maybe the six panels are *literally* the six keys Ari spoke of?"

"Could be. Reasonable. Fascinating."

David could have gone on but time was wasting. A thought came to him.

"Would a caution be necessary for too little time under water? It takes

time for a board to get saturated enough so it begins to swell. Unless we come up with some good reason to think otherwise, I'm going with the minimal swelling directive – the 'no more than an hour possibility'. It's just not going to expand significantly in an hour. It's a hard wood. For your list . . ."

"Yes. Expansion rate of mahogany in water – make that salt water of the salinity level of the ocean water just off the Brazilian beach filled with prancing naked women."

"It will be interesting to see what Google does with that *specific, extended*, request."

"I imagine the Goog will understand. He surely has a Googlette in his life."

David shook his head in amazement.

"That's five down and one to go, you know, Kit. Surely it's time for a bowl of ice cream don't you think?"

"Ice cream and one of those cold showers you spoke of. I had no idea this contest was going to be so sexually stimulating."

"You realize that you're letting yourself get horny over the contemplation of a nonexistent female search engine?"

"You really have a way of taking the edge off a good thing, you know?"

"I'll get the ice cream. You can get to work – on your *list*, I mean."

Instead, Kit followed his uncle to the kitchen area needing to talk.

"Do you realize how well we have done? With our original calculations just using wind patterns and population centers we've pinpointed at least five of the areas to within a degree or so on the globe. Ari had great gobs of time to work it all out – probably with computers – and we have it nailed the very first day."

"It remains to be seen how well we do on number six," David pointed out not wanting to dash his enthusiasm but feeling the need to keep him in the same hat size.

"You once indicated most of our problems may occur out there on site, I guess you could say." It had been a question from the boy – an inkblot for David's response.

"That's the big unknown for us. First, locating the spot, being able to recognize it in some cases. Then, gaining access to the area – not knowing what red tape or other barriers there may be. We may even find ourselves initially prohibited from some of the sites. I can't know. Spinning worst case scenarios, I guess."

Two very Greek looking men in their mid to late thirties appeared at the top of the stairs knocking on the door frame. David set the bowls down on the counter beside the refrigerator and moved to greet them. He extended his hand.

"I'm David Lawrence. May I help you?"

"I am Connie – Constantine, if you wish – and this is Alex. We have been assigned to be your pilots – assistants – for the next several weeks. Do you

have an itinerary or are we shooting from the hip as they say in your westerns?"

"No itinerary yet. Should have one within two days. Then it will be go, go, go. Do you have a place to stay?"

"A bed and breakfast at the far end of Main Street. It was arranged for us in advance. Very comfortable. Extremely nice people."

"You could land in our little airport?"

"No. Actually we flew into the one between hear and Wabash. We have a limo and driver."

The one who was speaking looked around the loft.

"One would never guess you could afford such an extravagance as this upcoming journey."

"Special assignment. I'm a professor. Good things fall in your lap sometimes. This young chap is Kit, my nephew. He will be accompanying me and his directions to you will always be as if they were mine. He often wears clothes if that's of any concern."

"We're Greek. Nudity is the natural state. It is honored in our culture."

As an aside to his uncle, Kit said, "I like these guys. Think they have any likeminded sisters?"

Connie handed David a business card.

"You can reach us at the cell phone number on the back. I was instructed to give you these phones – private international satellite hookup. Most powerful in the world I'm told."

Kit accepted the phones and left to examine them.

"You'll be hearing from us the moment we decide on the first step in our journey. What's the range of the plane?"

"Been modified to handle four thousand miles and to be able to take off and land on ridiculously short runways."

"Safe?" Kit asked from across the room.

"The safest plane in the air."

"Parachutes?" It was again Kit.

"More than the four of us can possible ever need. Also an inflatable, enclosed, life raft powered by a high tech saltwater and metal motor which doubles as a sun powered land vehicle in case we get stranded in some God forsaken place – which we've been advised may be a real possibility."

"I assume you two know what you're doing," Kit asked returning to the gathering and continuing his interrogation.

"I've flown combat missions in three wars, son, and Alex spent ten years in our country's equivalent to your Navy Seals. I think we are qualified. Sometime I'll tell you about the tests we had to pass to land this job."

"I assume it pays well, then?" Kit asked realizing he was probably getting too nosey.

"Let's just say we will be able to retire in luxury if we complete this

mission."

"If? I really don't like IF! Did you hear that Uncle David. He said the IF word."

"I just assumed that since it's your mission you realized the potential dangers," Connie said explaining through a puzzled look. "I've said all I know about it. We were left pretty much in the dark beyond 'an exciting and very dangerous mission requiring the most highly skilled team in the world'."

"You seem to be just what we're looking for. Get some rest. There may not be much once we get started. There's a theater in town but not much else in the way of entertainment, I'm afraid."

"Until later, then. By the way what do you prefer we call you?"

"I'm Kit and this is David – he really doesn't like Dave. The kids all call him Doc to which he always seems to answer. In a pinch I always answer to, 'Hey, Handsome,' but that may not be appropriate between us guys."

"Does the kid have an off switch?" Alex asked smiling at David.

"I'll pay big money if you can find it!" David said returning the smile as he put his arm around Kit and drew him close. "Probably the brightest and most loveable eighteen year old boy you'll ever meet but he does babble on sometimes."

The two pilots nodded, shook hands with their new employers and descended the stairs to the sidewalk. Kit followed wanting to get a glance at the limo. As he pushed the screen door open at the street David called down a gentle reminder.

"You're stark naked, Son."

"Modesty laws present such an inconvenience, you know," he called back. He turned and bounded up the stairs two at a time.

"Seem competent and congenial," Kit said, giving the pilots his stamp of approval. "The conversation was unnerving though. Suddenly the game we've been involved in up here morphed into a hugely dangerous – very likely life threatening – mission. There are things I need to say to mom and dad just in case Ari wins, you know."

"You'll need to gather some clothes for the trip," David said. "Do that this evening. Have dinner with your family. That will give you an opportunity to say what you feel you want to leave with them until we return. But then back here for the night. We have a huge amount of studying to do before we leave."

Kit nodded and slipped back into his boxers.

"Protest over?" David asked, smiling.

Kit smiled a sheepish grin. "Probably not, really. I just suddenly feel the need for some protection. I guess these represent my last line of defense against any and all impending dangers. Mom's womb would be better but I'll settle for boxers I guess."

* * *

"Do the Greeks not wear underwear or is that just an idiosyncrasy of Ari Stephanopoulos?" David joked as Ari began dressing for their trip to his parent's Chateau in the Adirondacks.

"I don't make it a habit to search inside other guys' pants," Ari came back. "I suppose I may be the exception. Don't really know. If it's a burning issue I can commission a survey."

"I can live without knowing. Tell me about the Château."

"Run of the mill I suppose – twenty some rooms, indoor and outdoor pools and tennis courts. Sits on top of a ridge. From the balcony off my third floor bedroom you can look north over the mountains for fifty or more miles. A fairly stodgy place when my parents are there. With them out of the country the place will be complete with hot and cold running girls."

"Hot and cold? Strange descriptors for females."

"The hot ones remove their clothes to cool down. The cold ones always want to cuddle with a guy to warm up. It's a win-win situation."

"Win-win for *you* at least."

Ari shrugged as he finished tying his shoes.

"I'm all that counts. By now you surely know that."

"Tell me, Ari, if you had been stranded on a desert island for a month and suddenly a beautiful girl approached you offering you a choice between water and food OR her body, which would you take?"

"I'd take the food and drink and share it with her, sipping the water from her navel and licking the salad dressing from her breasts."

"You changed the problem."

"No. I collapsed it toward my own selfish ends. I'm incorrigible. You know that? Why are you and I friends, again? We have nothing of this world in common."

"We've plowed this territory before. It's the search for and the contemplation of the big ideas that hold our friendship. Our takes come from opposite poles and that tends to insure the most complete kind of scrutiny. Also, I suppose, we each feel some emptiness in our own lifestyles and we have to wonder if there just might be something in the other's that would fill it – make us more complete."

"Not to mention that I always have a girl waiting in the wings – well, in bed – for you anytime you feel the urge, which, by the way seems to come far less frequently for you than it does for me."

"I've noticed. The sexual experience is just more complete, more fully satisfying for me and my partner, I believe, if I engage in it less often."

"Your partner? That's absurd. Sex is for the male's pleasure. Females don't need to enjoy it. They provide the vehicle for us to use. Nature gave males the continual and overpowering need for sex to assure that the passive females would stay pregnant and grow the species. It's that way throughout the animal

kingdom. You're confusing love and relationship with sexual fulfillment for the purpose of procreation. Trying to make sex into something more than merely male sexual release, adds an artificial layer to the process that nature never intended. And that layer costs billions and billions of dollars – entertainment, gifts, romantic getaways, special care products – all of which require technology, and in the end it inevitably and mindlessly, destroys other, fully innocent, non-participating, non-responsible, species."

"You tickle me Ari."

"I know, the way my lifestyle seems absolutely opposite and totally contradictory from the eco-philosophy I espouse. It's just my way of proving how the innate selfishness and decadence of man will inevitably destroy the planet even among those of us who know the score."

"Well, all of that, of course, plus your unwillingness to expend the energy necessary to explore man's positive potential, and use any of your family's considerable resources to pursue it – to develop it – even to just highlight it."

"Would you bet on a twenty year old nag in a race with two year olds?"

"Surely you can do better than that, Ari. You're setting up a marginally legitimate metaphor as a straw man and destroying him all in one sentence."

Ari smiled.

"You're right. It's the intellectual sparring that keeps us together. Limo's waiting. It will be outfitted with three, momentarily scantily clad beauties. I get two, of course, but you can take your pick of the lot."

"A hard offer to refuse."

"You see, I just need to keep reminding you of your willingness to enjoy your darker side, my friend."

"It represents the biological purpose of the species. I don't consider responsible sex between consenting adults as reflective of man's darker side."

"Of course you do. It'll provide interesting conversation material this weekend while we rest up between our marathon sexual encounters."

It was a three hour trip during which few if any socially redeeming behaviors were demonstrated. What Ari had said began eating at David – not enough to spoil the fun but enough to add a level of irritating anxiety he had never experienced before while enjoying adult pleasures.

David and Ari 'rested up' in chez lounges beside the pool as the always giggling girls played in and around the water, bouncing beach balls back and forth and floating on inflatable mattresses.

"So, what's this big thing about me and consensual sex between adults?"

David asked.

"You believe in the necessity of the cohesive family unit in order for society to continue to exist in an orderly fashion and produce well adjusted, positively productive, offspring?"

It had been a fairly accurate summary of David's burgeoning philosophy of

the family delivered with just enough hint of a question in Ari's tone as to require his friend's agreement. David nodded and shrugged clearly not understanding where the idea was headed.

Ari continued with a question.

"The two main reasons a man marries?"

"Love and the desire to raise a family."

"Wrong! Sex and sex. I'll admit some guys do also seem to want those things you mentioned but not at the top of their lists."

"Okay. I'll admit easy access to sex with your very special partner is perhaps a major component in marriage – at least during the hormonal-raging outset."

"But," Ari added sensing a quick win, "If a man can get all the sex he wants without getting married, why would he put up with all that responsibility and nagging and the associated unpleasanties?"

"It seems to keep happening year after year," David said knowing it had been a lame defense.

Ari was ready with figures.

"Divorce rates are climbing every year. Young, unwed couples are living together at a rate higher than newly married couples. Average length of a shack up is something less than three years – and it's the guy who almost always splits."

"So, you're agreeing that when a society allows sex between unmarriees, the family unit disintegrates?" David asked skeptically.

"*Disappears*, is the term I was going for. Well, the term I figured you'd be going for"

David felt the need to cushion the conversation by calling in expert opinion.

"I once read a piece – maybe by Margaret Meade, I'm not sure – in which it divided the years of marriage into three stages. The first five years were held together by sex – much like you characterize the entire relationship. The next twenty by responsibilities to, and give and take with, the children. The rest of the years by love, friendship, and growing mutual respect."

"I'd not disagree I suppose," Ari said, "Except to point out that once sexual activity becomes subservient to family life responsibilities, most males are ready to bail. The cave men had it right. Enjoy sex with whatever females were handy and then let them deal with any children that might result."

"Families were very stable units up until the 1960's," David pointed out. "Husbands not only stuck around, they shared important roles in raising the children. And, prior to that era divorce was nearly unheard of."

"And they stayed why?" Ari asked merely as a prelude to the points he wanted to make. "Because, in the least, our society frowned on – ostracized, even – adults who were divorced. Religions disallowed it and dispatched you to

hell for divorcing. Employers were reluctant to hire the divorced because it meant something was wrong with them. Singles didn't trust divorced folks as date material let alone as potential mates. Back then, if a man wanted social respect and a regular diet of sex he stayed married and put up with whatever crap came his way in order to get those things."

David frowned.

"Unfortunately, I really can't dispute anything you've said – well maybe the *crap* characterization. Historically, religious and social sanctions have been the most powerful control agents man has ever devised – typically based on fear. I'm bothered, of course, by your contention that it is only the natural sexual urge rather than, also, the more abstract, intellectually based, concept we call love that is the *only* real basis for marriage."

"Survey any thousand honest married couples and ask them what the chance is that their marriage will last forever. Then ask them about that chance supposing they would never again be able to have sex with their mate. My guess is that the estimates of a lasting marriage would plummet. Oh, Wait! I just happen to have the results of such a survey."

It had been planned, of course. He removed a reprint from the drawer of the table, which sat between them, and handed it to David.

"Actually, it was a survey of five thousand couples in western Europe, Canada, and the US," Ari went on to explain. "In those married between four and eight years the percentage that *would continue* the marriage without sex dropped from seventy one percent with sex to twelve percent without; actually it broke down as 20% females and 4% males. I was frankly surprised that sex was important to that many women."

David perused the article quickly.

"You ignored, of course, the findings after sixteen years of marriage. First question, 88 % felt it would last forever, and second, without sex, 55% - 25% for men and 85% for women. Still, it's investigating *what if's* rather than the reality of the discontinuation of sexual relations."

"Just admit it. I'm right and you're wrong," Ari said smugly.

"If that's so, then once again, your life style is a vote for social disintegration since kids with two healthy, well-adjusted parents more easily and consistently turn out in most every way better off than those from single parent homes."

"It is," Ari agreed, "But far more fun for me than *that*, is the fact that your willingness – eagerness, even – to have sex outside of marriage puts *you* into *my* camp, proving again that the dark side of human nature truly rules even in the nicest of people."

"You set this weekend up just to prove that point, right?"

"Me. Try to trick you, my best friend in the whole World?"

Ari smiled and looked out over the bobbing girls in the pool.

"You haven't won, Ari. We still have the entire concept of positive social values to consider. Positive values – intellectually crafted rules by which one chooses to live for the obvious wellbeing of the human species now and in the future – trump everything you've ever said about the genetically directed evilness of mankind's existence. Our intelligence – that seems so bothersome to you – can help us rise above that. *All* species are self-centered. That's no special province of man. It may well be that Man's special gifts of intelligence and technology will prove to be the ultimate savior of the planet and its species rather than its downfall."

"It may well take us our entire lifetimes to fully explore just this one concept," Ari said, sobered but not immediately denying David's final position.

Clearly, it had made Ari uncomfortable. Whenever he became intellectually uneasy he distracted himself with sex. He stood and motioned the dark haired beauty to join him. David entered the pool to give them some degree of privacy there on the deck. It was less for Ari's sake than for David's. He believed sex should be a private experience between a man and a woman. He wasn't at all sure why he felt that way, but it was his unexplored belief at that point in his life.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Ready for venue number six?" David asked.

"Will be. Feel the need for a hundred push-ups first. Join me!"

"Certainly I'll join you. You expend the energy and I'll count."

"I know how to count, Chicken."

"Technically it would be Rooster."

"Technically it would be *Frail Old* Rooster. I'll do my own counting so as to not over tax your ancient risibles."

Kit dropped to the floor and began showing off. His muscles rippled. David remembered back to when his nephew was just a little boy, flexing his arms to exhibit his non-existent biceps. David would always squeeze and make some positive comment – walking a very thin line between truth and fiction. It had been his privilege to watch him grow up from chubby baby, through the skinny, hipless, nine year old, to the extremely well built and handsome young man there on the floor.

"Your father would have been so proud of you, you know," David said.

"You say that often – *forty three*. Can I ask you something – *forty four*?"

"Of course. You know you can ask me anything, I hope."

"Why aren't you married – *forty six*?"

"Several reasons, I suppose. I traipse all over the world studying this and that and I guess I don't think that's any life for a wife."

"Ever been in love – *forty nine*?"

"Yes. Several times I suppose. I believe I am now, in fact."

"Molly? – *fifty one*."

"No. Old Mrs. Krumpton the cleaning lady. Of course, Molly!"

"You ask her what she'd think about being married to a globe totter – *fifty two*."

"No."

"Why not – *fifty three*?"

"Not the right time to get married."

"How do you know when it's the right time – *fifty four*?"

"When *you* discover that, *you* can tell *me*."

"Seems like if you love each other you ought to be married – *fifty five*."

"You'd be such a super dad – well, you have been to me you know – *fifty seven*."

"Thank you for that. You've been a great nephson as well."

"Nephson – *sixty*? I get it – *sixty one*. Nephew-son – *sixty two*. That's

great! – *sixty three*. That's really how you feel about me – *sixty four*?"

"Do I lie to you?"

"Never! – well you used to make over my muscles to the excess back when I was in the fourth grade – *sixty six*."

"You realized that at the time?"

"Certainly – *sixty seven*. It was just that you always wanted to feel them so I'd present them before you had to ask – *sixty eight*. Couldn't understand it all, really – *sixty nine*. I couldn't see any progress – *seventy*."

David chuckled. Kit returned to an earlier thought.

"What thing do you think my Father would be the most proud of about me – *seventy two* – we won't try to diagram that last question – *seventy three*?"

"That you are a truly wonderful human being in every sense of the term."

Kit stopped and turned over sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of David who was on the couch.

"That's what I would want it to be for, you know. When I was still little I asked mom what I needed to do to become a great man like my dad had been. You know what she said?"

"No idea. What?"

"Study your Uncle David. That's what I've done."

"Even Uncle David's have their flaws, you know."

"Maybe. Not many. Being nice and being trusting to a fault, maybe – can't really put those in the negative column though. I can hardly wait to be a father and continue the good work."

"The good work?"

"Being a great model for my kids so they in turn can be great ones for theirs and so on into eternity."

"The most noble calling I can think of, Kit. But, speaking of eternity, you and I need to get back to making sure your lineage has a future."

"Yes, Sir."

Kit stood.

"A hug first, Okay?"

"Absolutely. Just don't crush the *frail, old*, man with those *strong, young*, arms."

"I finally got those muscles to grow, didn't I?"

"Nearly perfect. They are a very nice fit to the rest of you."

Kit then readied the laptop and David picked up the final panel from the box, turning it over and over. They sat back on the couch.

"It's the one with all the straight lines – like streets maybe," Kit said remembering back to when they were first looking it over.

"And according to our calculations the final critical area is in the Middle East," David said as Kit brought up a regional map.

"Right here, actually, where the winds sweep generally south across Iran,

Iraq, and across the Red Sea to northern and central Africa."

"Your best guess to pinpoint the location," David asked?

"If it's to be a city that would be Tehran the capital of Iran. There are also some high mountains in the area with lots of wonderful skiing if you can believe that. Best skiing snow in the world it says."

"Let's see what the panel has to tell us," David said.

It was a relief to be that nearly finished establishing the locations but David realized the really difficult part of the mission still lay ahead. There would be no loft with its many amenities and certainties. The absolute safety known there would soon pass into complete uncertainty and very likely dangers beyond anything he could imagine. It was in no way fair to involve Kit but there was no alternative. The boy had already proved he was the partner of choice. During those next several weeks the boy in him would certainly be left behind in favor of the man. That would be both sad and wonderful. David hoped the experience did not dampen Kit's zest for life, his ability to see and appreciate the humorous absurdities of life, and his most remarkable characteristic of all, his ability to love unconditionally.

Kit brought him back to reality.

"I sure hope we get through all this with our gonads intact, you know. We both got a new generation to beget."

"How long has it been since anyone in this entire World uttered the words *gonads* and *beget* in the same breath?"

Kit's wonderful smile sufficed as his answer.

"I got a street map of Tehran here. Let me scan in that map from the panel."

While Kit moved to the desk, David continued to study the map of wind patterns just to make sure they had the entire planet covered. It seemed they had and he put the map aside.

"No doubt. It's Tehran. The map from the box is generalized and incomplete, of course, but important bench marks match up. Let's go to the box."

He returned to David's side.

"Anything about this number jump out at you," Kit asked.

"6611479," David said just reading it aloud.

"661-1479?" Kit offered. "Like a local phone number."

"As I recall phone services don't use that pattern there," David said.

"Cell phone perhaps. Our international number on the new phones is that pattern, though not those numbers."

"Perhaps, though I'd opt for something more esoteric. I'll tell you what *does* jump out at me is the 66. There were 66 US hostages taken there back during the Carter presidency."

"And, that would have included 1979 – the last two numbers in the row," Kit added.

"Find the date they were taken?"

"Good ol' Goog. Plunk it in and out it comes. How did you manage in the olden days, David?"

"Sometimes it's hard to remember."

"Here's a likely source. Click, wait, and now – November fourth of seventy nine."

"That tends to pin it down to Iran, at least, most likely Tehran," David said. "Let's see if we can verify it with the other clues."

"Okay. See here. Looks like two kites – one going up and one coming down."

"One rising and one falling?" David added playing with the concepts.

"They each sport a prominent tail. Can that be part of it?"

"Let it be. Let's move on to a more obvious clue – at least in part," David suggested. "A.S. with an arrow pointing from it to D.L."

"Ari Stephanopoulos, arrow, David Lawrence?"

"The arrow may indicate some relationship – friends?"

"Or enemies if it reflects the current situation," Kit said.

"Ari would never think of him and me as enemies. We fought ferocious intellectual battles for six years at Harvard but never once thought of each other as anything but friends."

"The arrow may indicate that A.S. is something to D.L. A.S. is a friend, a colleague, an opponent, a . . ."

"How about *pal*," Kit offered? "That's a good first syllable and it clearly represents that relationship. Pal plus something related to a female with a big butt."

With Ari it would never be called a butt. It would be an ass and that will give us the word . . ."

"Pal-ass. Palace!"

"There must be a hundred palaces in Tehran, Uncle David. We'll need to gather the other clues."

"Let's drop down here to the two stick figures," David suggested. "One is enclosed in a square or a box or a doorway or some such thing. The other is identical but has nothing around him – is out in the open."

"They each look like a soldier with a rifle held up against its shoulder," Kit added. "*Soldier Palace* doesn't exist, by the way."

"Other terms than soldier, then. Infantryman, GI, sentry, guard."

"If that is a doorway then maybe the first one is entering and the other is soon to follow. Enter? Disappear? Leave? Does that line of thinking get us anywhere?"

They sat quietly for some time then Kit spoke seeing another possibility but without any specific meaning attached to it.

"There is one guard out and one guard in."

"Excellent grasshopper!" David said drawing the boy close with an arm around his shoulder.

"You see something I don't."

"No. I *hear* something you don't. *Guard in?*"

"Ah! *Garden*, maybe?"

"If so we have a Palace with a garden," David said pointing out the obvious. "Now back to that first clue – the set of kites. Did we just ignore the arrow and number up here before?"

"I guess so," Kit said equally as surprised as David. "A short arrow pointing left followed by a 10 apostrophe S to its right. Ten's?"

"Arrow tens? Point tens? Left tens? Back tens?" David went on spinning possibilities that led nowhere.

Kit jumped in.

"In our culture we tend to think from left to right – we read that way, we set up our calendars that way, we construct time lines that way. Could the arrow indicate time?"

"Perhaps. Left would represent what, then, the past?"

"Excellent, Aged Grasshopper," Kit said taking a page from David's earlier comment to him."

"Explain, Oh Master of the Universe," David joked.

"It's complex so listen up."

David crossed his legs, folded his hands over his knee and turned his head to gaze directly into Kit's face.

Kit smiled but didn't comment on his uncle's attempt at humor.

"One kite is rising. One is falling. The rising kite is circled representing our informational part of the set if past experience is relevant here. Assuming the arrow direction does indicate the past, then, the past tens – past *tense* – of *rise* would be *rose*."

"So we have a Palace with a Rose Garden," David said. "Nice going?"

"I think it's actually even better than that," Kit said. "Let me scroll back . . . and back . . . and, yes! Here. The *Golestan Palace*. Golestan translates as *Rose* according to what it says here. We *have* the edifice. Now we just have to locate the specific spot which probably has to do with that urn down in the corner."

David picked up the panel and studied the image for some time.

"From its general shape I'm guessing it is a clay urn, probably ancient in origin and from that general area of the world. Its uniqueness is undoubtedly the scroll design etched into it. Is there a museum associated with the Rose Palace?"

"Let me look. Yes indeed, surrounded by the Rose Garden, in fact. Holds objects from the *Qajar* period. The palace was apparently the official residence of the *Qajar*'s. I feel so dumb. I've never even heard of the *Qajars* and they

seem to have ruled over one of the richest areas and eras in the history of man."

"Our schools tend to ignore the history of the Middle East. However, we are not here to debate the censorship of history and cultures by our educators. Somewhere inside that museum we will find the *scroll urn* and, looking at the thick short line under it, I imagine we will have found switch number six. Your list – see if you can find a name for that particular urn."

"Will do. Wow!" Kit said, sitting back. "The first six innings seem to be ours, Uncle David."

"They do. Clearly, though, Ari began with his bench warmers, so don't get overconfident."

"Bench warmers? You mean he didn't lead with his best effort?"

"Exactly. He gambled a bit setting the box-based clues up on a '0' or '1' base like in computers."

"Huh?"

"If we had stuck to our original approach – trying to decipher the clues on the panels – we'd have ended up in the '0' column and life would be over. We could have never interpreted them precisely enough to locate the targets. But, Ari knew there was another far less obvious approach – the one *he* had used – the '1' approach in this case."

"To study the wind patterns and determine the six most likely spots from which to disburse the deadly junk," Kit went on to finish David's explanation.

"Right. The first approach equaled a dead end – defeated before we could begin really – the '0' column. The second approach, verifiable by the clues from the box, allowed us to make it over the first hurdle – to achieve a '1' and stay alive in the contest."

"So, then, what's next?"

"Work on your lists. Then we need to begin a crash course on all six areas we've located. You select the three you want and I'll take the others. Then, we'll share what we've learned with each other – probably on the plane."

"And we're going for what kind of knowledge?"

"History, customs, laws and social prohibitions, geography, climate and vegetation – especially this time of year – the people, the ways they make their living, tourist things, historical points of interest, how they view Americans specifically those of us from the United States; things like that. We have no way of predicting what we may need once we arrive on site."

"How much time are we allotting ourselves for all this?"

"This is Monday. I want to be in the air no later than Wednesday noon."

Kit gulped.

"I'm not sure how we're going to find time to work those cold showers into such a short timeline."

"You can sleep with the panel for the Brazilian beaches under you pillow."

"If I did that I'd have to pack my groin in ice. I'll just handle things the old

fashioned way."

David understood but would not pursue it.

"Do you have an itinerary in mind?" Kit asked.

"We need to conserve both time and space. What would you think about this?"

David picked up the world map.

"Begin in Canada, then out to the Azores, down to Brazil, across South America and the Pacific to New Zealand, then north to Mongolia and finally southwest to Tehran."

"That's a lot of territory. I guess I can't see any better system that would really use the globe more efficiently."

"Using up the first three days *here*, that only gives us twelve to do the actual work. Around the World in Twelve Days. It could make a catchy book title if we were going to be able to write about it. Maybe we could do it up like fiction so nobody'd realize it had actually taken place."

"An interesting idea. Very interesting, in fact. My vote for a title would be, *The Box*, but then we don't have time to dawdle over that now. First, we have to stay alive through the next fourteen days."

"Thirteen and a third days – I've already begun counting."

"Do you pray, Uncle David? Dumb question. Scratch it."

"Not dumb. You seem to need some verification of your assumption. No, I don't pray. Do you?"

"Sometimes. That image of the tall, white robed, old, gentleman with a long, white beard, sitting up there in heaven on his stone throne that was burned into my mind as a little kid just won't leave."

"I thought you believed in a god," David said.

"I guess it's an on and off again sort of thing. The concept of a supernatural level of existence makes no logical sense to me but like I said, that image is always there haunting me; taunting me would better describe it; 'Just you *try* and not believe in me!!!'"

"I understand that," David said. "It's not an easy thing to set aside – such an image – so you can think the topic through rationally, unencumbered by childhood teachings. Religious leaders are pretty savvy, knowing that such early, forced, teachings tend to stick, so those indoctrinated very young cannot ever really be free to challenge the beliefs they are handed or honestly examine other possibilities."

"You're not being much help."

"Sorry. I'll always respond to your questions and talk to you about my beliefs, but I can't tell *you* how to believe."

"Strange. Nobody else in this town seems to have any problem telling me how I have to believe."

"They have a religious agenda to push – it's sincere, I don't mean to put

them down for it. They just want to make sure you are *saved* according to their beliefs. It's actually pretty nice that they want you to share what they think is best – essential, even – for everyone."

"Were you ever baptized?"

"Oh yes. My parents had me dunked three times before I could sputter any questions about why it was being done."

"Yeah. Me too. I was nine."

"I know. I was there."

"*Why*, if you don't believe in such things?"

"For your mother it was the most important event that will ever take place in your entire life. I was there for her, mostly, realizing that even as bright as you were, you had no way of really knowing at that age what it was all about. You had just been told a number of things that you were supposed to learn, accept, and blindly believe from then on. It wasn't intended as a sales pitch which you could accept or reject and keep shopping."

"I remember you were there. The thing I remember the most about the whole process was during the training sessions leading up to it I argued with the minister about why I had to wear clothes when I entered the water in the baptistery. I could see no good reason to get my clothes wet and then just have to immediately go and change into dry ones."

"His answer?"

"It was a sin to be naked in front of others."

"And?"

"I asked, 'In front of mom when she gives me a bath?' He said no. 'In front of the other guys in the shower room after PE?' He said no. 'In front of my wife when I'm married?' He said I was too young to know about such things and I should stop thinking about it immediately. Even pray for forgiveness for having had such thoughts."

"And you gleaned what from all that?"

"Mainly that he was uncomfortable with the idea of seeing me naked. And, that it was one more irrational thing about the church that he could not satisfactorily explain."

"How did he respond when you said his explanations were not satisfactory?"

"He said I just needed to have faith. I asked why I should have faith in something that made no sense to me. He said because that's how Christians did things. That when you accepted Christ as your savior you promised to believe everything he taught. I asked how I was supposed to know what it was that he really taught when we had seven denominations in town who all thought he taught something different. He said when you join a church you promise to believe what that church teaches."

"Sounds like your conversations were not real helpful. How did you leave

it?"

"He said I really wasn't ready to be baptized. I decided I'd go through with it just in case he was right and – like you said – for mother's sake. At first he wasn't going to let me – said I wasn't sincere so he couldn't baptize me. I asked him if he really wanted to put up with me in Instruction Class for another six months, because my mother *would* insist on it. He offered his hand and said, 'Welcome to the church Brother Lawrence,' and we never spoke of it again."

"You gave in and wore clothes?"

"A swim suit – skimpiest one I could find."

"You realize nobody in the congregation could really see you down in the water behind the pulpit anyway."

"I do now."

"Have you come up with a better method for passing on religious beliefs to the younger generation, Kit?"

"I think I have but no churches would go along with it, well maybe Unitarian-Universalists and Baha'i. Most religions don't want their children to have any honest, studied, free choice about such matters. Organized religions are flat out dictatorships. I'd set up study cells run by each religion – the major religions and then the smaller sects within each, like Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptists I, Baptists II, Baptists III, and so on. The kids, from about age eight or so, would rotate among the cells in a spiral so as they grew older and could comprehend more and question in more mature fashions they'd be exposed to more and more complex ideas and beliefs in each religion. Then by the time they reached nineteen they'd be prepared to select a religious affiliation – or not – based on what they had learned, on what, after all that, made sense to them."

"Fascinating! You *have* been thinking, haven't you?"

"All the time."

"Do you consider yourself a Christian?"

"I don't know. I live a life that seems to be very Christian in values but the spiritual side of it all is really a blur."

"You okay with that?"

"No! You know me too well to even ask that question. I hate being indecisive about important things – about not knowing how things really are."

"That old reality thing rears its head yet one more time."

"If I'm about to die of the plague I'd really like to get this religious thing settled. If there is a supernatural life beyond death I'd sure like to be a part of the comfortable side of it, you know. As it is, if there is a god and if he really knows my heart then he'll know that although I've tried hard to figure it all out, using this brain and the skills he gave me, it still just makes no sense to me. If I say I believe then he'll know I'm lying – being dishonest – and dispatch me to Hell. If I'm honest and say I don't believe then he'll dispatch me to Hell for my disbelief. I'm not sitting in *Eden* here, Uncle David."

"Do you believe a god such as the one you have etched into your mind would give you the benefit of the doubt regardless, if you've lived a good life – compassionate, altruistic, loving?"

"I'd like to say yes. Most of the Religious Right would answer with a definite no. Unless I truly believe according to *their* very specific terms, it makes no difference what kind of stellar life I have led – I'll descend to hell with my last breath. Heaven is apparently not dependent upon good works. Just upon openly confessed belief."

"You've been doing your research, haven't you?"

"Seems like forever. I don't understand how the other kids can just accept what they're told to believe without ever doing the research. There aren't a handful of young people in this town who can tell you what the other great religions believe. If they'd have been born in Tehran, for example they'd believe every bit as fervently in Islam as they now do in Christianity – more fervently, probably. If in India they'd be devout Buddhists or Hindus or some other lesser known religion. In Mongolia it might be a toss-up between Islam and Atheism. But they won't even consider how the *truth*, which they *would* know, would be so different had they been raised elsewhere."

"Will any of them talk about it?"

"A few. Mostly I get something like, 'I'm so thankful I was born in an area where the *real* truth is known and practiced. They don't have any concept that they'd be saying the exact same thing if they'd been born in Iran but it would refer to a very different truth."

"Bottom line?"

"It may be better to live in ignorance of other possibilities and just practice what you are taught to believe. Since the chances seem to be that none of it is true, nobody would be any worse off believing one thing than another so long as it wasn't hurtful to some other group. But, they'd feel a kind of security humans seem to need to have about such things. How do you handle the uncertainty – or do you not feel any?"

"Long ago I decided there were some questions about life and the universe, which I and the limits posed by my human intelligence, would never be able to answer. So, although I don't ignore them, I don't dwell on them or fret over them. I can't leap ten feet off the ground either, but I don't live my life worrying about it. As time permits I enjoy pursuing some of those questions to see just how far I can push the limits of my ability to understand. I enjoy playing with possibilities but I refuse to invent artificial realms – such as the supernatural – to explain that which I can't explain within my physical world. The supernatural is fully as unexplainable as the concepts that realm is touted to explain. It is based on circular thinking and the need to explain the unknown, even at the expense of accepting fully irrational, unfounded, and non-provable concepts. Is there existence beyond death? I don't know. I can't know so I don't fret about it

and I certainly don't make up or embrace myths – like the primitive tribes do – to explain it in order to relieve any anxiety the uncertainty may create."

"I think I understand. I've noted that most people seem willing to live their lives according to opinion – that is myth – rather than take the time to discover the facts. Is that because we, as a species, are just intellectually lazy?"

"A good question. Someday we can play with it. I have no answer but have long found it to be an intriguing area to pursue."

* * *

"So what you're saying, Ari, is that the process of natural selection over the past thirty five thousand years or so has begun degrading the human species rather than improving it contrary to the general rule in evolution."

"Yup. Primarily the brain and its survival mechanisms."

"Tell me more, as if I had to ask."

"Want a beer, coffee, whore, before we continue."

"Coffee. Not very Harvard-like, I'll admit, but right now I prefer it to the others. I'll pour. You?"

"Yeah. Coffee sounds good on a chilly, Fall, evening."

They were in the sitting room at Ari's apartment. The coffee urn was on the low table between the couch, where Ari was reclining, and the large, well cushioned, chair in which David was sitting. They had finished with their swim and their women, and were alone, settled in for their usual *Friday night marathon brain buster* as Ari referred to it. David had just begun the first year of his PhD program in Philosophy and Anthropology and, similarly, Ari was in his first year in Archeology.

"Okay. Go!" David said sipping tentatively at the steaming drink.

"In most animal species that demonstrate something more than minimal intelligence, it is those with the more efficient brains and the higher levels of alertness that survive to add their genes to the species pool. That works to improve intellectual skills and the ability to remain alert to dangers and changes going on around them.

"In man, however, as we have moved away from the dangers of the wild – no longer having to defend ourselves from other animals – we all survive whether smart or dumb, attentive or inattentive. As a result the gene pool is not naturally cleansed of the weak genes. They remain there to infiltrate each new generation."

"So, you're saying we reached our intellectual peak thousands of years ago and now it's all down hill?"

"Pretty much. There are occasional geniuses produced like you and me and the passel of malcontents here and at the other Ivy League schools. But, the general trend is certainly toward mediocrity."

"Yet our technology and science tend to increase at astronomical rates."

"The brain gap."

"Huh?"

"The few bright strains tend to keep getting brighter because bright people consciously choose to have children with other bright people. It's important to them. But, the huge number of strains of average and below average people will procreate with most anybody without thought of intelligence or artistic or creative bents."

"So, according to that theory, the bright get brighter and the rest deteriorate."

"Right," Ari said nodding.

"Let's see if that applies in any way to those who seek after the truth compared with those who don't."

"Interesting," Ari said turning onto his side to face David more directly. "You had some spark of insight that spawned this exploration?"

"It's just that so many people seem content to live according to myths and opinions, never seeming to seek out facts or tried and true solutions."

"Could be tied to our general deterioration in the area of alertness," Ari said beginning to think it through. "Animals that survive in the *eat-or-be-eaten environment* must continue to hone their alertness skills – always searching out the new and the different and the possibly threatening in the environment. Those unable to hone the skill – the less intelligent – perish. Those that have it live and pass it on. Humans no longer require it for survival so it's not an element in natural selection anymore."

"And alertness skill, factors in to my question how?"

"Not entirely sure," Ari said rolling onto his back, knees up, as if that would help him think it through. "Animals that survive in the wild are those that continually learn about surviving and those who are most alert learn best. The ability to be super alert may be related in humans to those who want to know, search out, the facts – a far better basis for survival than opinions."

"Interesting! Like the need to be alert in the wild has been translated into a built-in pressure to learn," David said.

"Here's another thought. Those animals that do survive without adequate built-in alertness do so because they rely on others to protect and take care of them. They accept the rules and procedures required of the others. They no longer have to think about solving problems."

David was ready to take it a step further.

"In primitive societies, *correlation* rules. If 'A' happens before 'B' then it is assumed that 'A' caused 'B' to occur. That sequence may actually have nothing to do with the outcome, but it makes for an easy level of explanation. It is often the first possible explanation that is observed. It's like opinion left unexplored. Once a possible explanation is found, no further effort is made to find a better explanation – to actually determine the facts in the matter. The rule becomes, '*It seemed to happen that way, therefore it did!*' "

"That would appear to be truer of the low alertness folks than the high alertness folks," Ari pointed out.

"Exactly what I was thinking. And if the human species *is* degenerating in such skills – as you postulate – then the future for a fact-based way of life seems to be dimming."

"Dimming is being kind. Dying is more realistic."

"Unless we initiate palatable initiatives that will replace or bolster the skill."

"You and your never ending faith in the fix-ability of the human species," David. "You're just in for the hugest of disappointments if you keep that up."

"Ari the all-knowing has spoken."

"That's pretty close to *Smart Aleck* for the Dave I know."

"You are convinced you know the truth about most topics, Ari. People who claim to know the truth scare the hell out of me. You know that."

"You're saying that I scare you?"

"More than anybody I've ever known or read!"

"Really? Soft and cuddly Ari Stephanopoulos scares you? Why?"

"How could you not know? In a nut shell – emphasis on the *nut* – in order to save the moss and the plankton on this planet you're willing to exterminate the entire human race and with your father's great financial resources at your eventual disposal, you probably could pull it off. That's scary!"

"Lose one species in order to save a billion others. How can that kind of a trade off not make sense to you?"

"You know it doesn't."

"Come now, Dave, you know I'm a world class coward. To exterminate the species – and I don't deny that's what I advocate – I'd have to be willing to take myself out as well. No chance of that, at least not until I'm ready to draw my naturally occurring final breath, my friend. I have to be sedated to have a splinter removed, remember?"

It was both true and humorous. It drew a smile and a quick, natural, chuckle from David though didn't provide any legitimate degree of comfort deep inside.

"What's the big deal about making me the bad guy in all this?" Ari went on. "You agree with virtually everything I believe about the role of man – because of his freakish intelligence – in the ultimate destruction of the planet."

"Where *you* see it as unavoidable due to man's innate and uncontrollable selfishness, *I* see it as preventable because of man's positive potential – both positions, interestingly, stemming from his uniquely superior intelligence."

"Positive potential?" Ari asked. "You keep tossing that phrase around but I'm still in the dark about what it really means."

"You said it, Ari. All species are innately self-centered. When it comes down to the bottom line their own personal survival is all that ever really counts. The cockroaches would take over the world in a second without any regrets for

having killed off mankind in the process.

"Man with his intelligence and the possibilities that stem from it to be compassionate, loving, and forward looking, does not *have to* operate on that strictly self-centered level of the lower life forms – the one that only supports its own species-specific ends. Man has the potential to be positive – constructive – rather than merely destructive in his march to survive alongside the other species. Man has a choice no other species has. He can choose to only utilize the intelligence of the plankton that flows in his genes, or he can activate his positive human intellectual potential. I'll agree that only a small percentage of people choose to live above the level of the plankton. Since I believe we can, and since I cherish the human species, it becomes my responsibility to do something about it – find some way of replacing plankton-like thinking with human level thinking."

David felt he was on a roll. It provided an exhilarating, adrenalin, rush. He sat up straight and continued.

"You say you believe in a god, Ari. It must be like the malevolent gods of the ancient Greeks and Scandinavians who enjoyed taunting and tricking their human creations. 'Let's see,' says your god, 'Let's put an intelligent being in among all the other life forms and see how long it takes him to destroy all life on the planet.' At least that's how it appears to me."

"I'd probably not even dispute your characterization. My god is not one who gives commandments or disapproves or chastises or even rewards. He lets us each set his own rules, using the free-will he gave us. When the rules work we survive happily. When they fail we either die or live in some kind of misery."

He paused thoughtfully before continuing.

"It's not all that different from the modern conception of god as held by most people today. *That* God allows absolutely horrific things to happen to 'his children'. Those who can devise ways of surviving, live. Those who can't, die or as I said, live on in misery bolstered somewhat by their fully unsupportable belief that some reward is awaiting them in a mythical afterlife.

"The god of the Christians and Jews even claimed to feel bad after one such angry incident – a great flood – and with the sudden invention of the rainbow promised to never again wreak such havoc on men. Yet day after day across the planet, famine, disease, poverty, wars, floods, fires, hurricanes, and such, are allowed to continue taking their toll."

"We're not describing *my* god in either case," David said.

"Maybe *you're* the coward, then, Dave. You just ignore the concept of god so you don't have to be uncomfortable."

"Maybe. I'm not sure. It's not something I'm going to lose sleep over, if that's what you mean."

A broad smile broke across Ari's face.

"Me either, pal. If I promise not to kill off your precious human race this

evening will you join me for a swim before you leave?"

"I need to get back to the dorm. Have to finish a big chunk of research for a paper this weekend. Need a good night's sleep."

"That's a series of oxymorons, of course."

"What is – are – were?"

"Good night's sleep, in the dorm, on a weekend."

David smiled and nodded.

"You're right of course. Mind if I crash here?"

"*Mi casa es su casa*. I can have a new set of girls here in fifteen minutes if you're in the mood."

"A male my age is always in the mood but, unlike you, *this* male can control it in the service of more immediately pressing things like sleep, and long terms goals such as education, and the pursuit of self-esteem."

"Slap, slap, slap. If I didn't love you so I could take offense at statements like that, Dave."

"Please *do* because they are fully intended for you to see as being offensive."

"I get your not so subtle message. Nothing in and of itself is offensive. It is only in the eye of the beholder that things are interpreted as being offensive."

They stood, chuckled, and embraced, then David went in search of a bed.

CHAPTER SIX The Journey Begins

It seemed a shame to have to wake the boy as he lay there in the fabled fetal position, his disheveled hair and gently rounded features making him appear younger than his years and undoubtedly more innocent than he was.

"Rise and shine, partner," David said flicking his wet towel, locker room style at Kit's behind. "Today's the day we begin our journey."

"Ouch and no thank you," came the boy's initial, marginally human, response.

"Your choice, of course," David said. "But, FYI, phase two is the dragging of my still wet hair across your face."

"A disgustingly unpleasant event to contemplate," he said pulling the pillow up over his head.

"You're English is precise and quite highbrow when your brain is struggling to switch out of alpha into the necessary wave patterns to become awake and alert."

"So leave me here. Ask me questions and I'll regale you with erudicity."

"Erudicity?"

"The act of being erudite. See, creative as well. . . . Now you've done it; you've forced me to let good ol' alpha slip away. I might as well just get up."

"That was the point of all this, you know."

"Oh! Yeah. Good morning."

David raised the pillow from the boy's head and then dropped it back into place. Kit shrugged it off and sat up on the edge of his bed doing the yawn and stretch thing followed by the scratch and rub routine women seem to find so revolting. David had to wonder if it was an innately natural human pattern or one that had been learned from early modeling. He figured that in the least the guttural sounds that accompanied it had been learned.

He allowed himself one more irrelevant observation before moving on with the more serious endeavors of the day. He had never heard females make such sounds as they stretched themselves into the realm of the living each morning. He wondered why. Once awake they tended to be continually loquacious. The mere contemplation of the concept seemed to require him to repeat the scratch and rub routine.

"Is that patty sausage I smell," Kit asked getting to his feet.

"Figured we needed to begin this adventure with a four star send off – Patty sausage, scrambled eggs, waffles, and grits."

Kit sighed.

"I might as well be honest, Uncle David."

"About?"

"I'm standing here hoping this won't be the last time we get to have our four star breakfast here in the loft."

"Me, too, Son. Me, too. Now. Let's agree *that* will be the final pessimistic thought to pass along our neurons until we find ourselves safely back here on or about July 6th."

"A good plan. I got time to shower before breakfast?"

"Plenty. The sausage patties are pretty thick. Time to dawdle, even."

"Dawdle? Never heard it called *that* before!"

Kit snickered.

"David threw his towel at the boy, missing him by a hair as Kit beat a quick retreat around the corner to the open shower."

David dressed – in and among the removal and re-pouring of waffles, the turning of sausage, and beating and seasoning of the eggs to be scrambled to perfection at the last minute.

They had packed the night before. Each had filled two large suitcases and carefully prepared a backpack apiece for outings away from the plane or hotel rooms. Another suitcase held the hardware – cameras, computer software, a color printer, wrist band global positioning devices, electrical supply converters for most parts of the world, back up cell phones, lapel communicators, and of course, The Box. Reluctantly, David had agreed to take two hand guns in deference to Kit's apprehension about snakes and other unfriendly critters he was fully certain they would encounter along the way.

Temporary equipment to meet specific needs, such as rope, TNT, and who knew what else would be procured locally as needed. The new laptop, which had arrived the day before would stay out in the open, within arms reach.

Kit had spent the previous day – Tuesday – mastering the new computer and downloading the software. Wireless internet was easily accessed through the cell phones and could be patched into the laptop with a small adapter.

Breakfast was served. Kit was full of conversation.

"The thing that bothers me the most so far is discovering how little I really learned during the first twelve year of my education. The sum total of my knowledge of the three sites I chose to study was that I had heard of Whitehorse Canada – but couldn't have called its province; I knew Brazil existed and played host to the Amazon River; and had some faint recollection about the hostage taking in Tehran, Iran. I'm a Merit Scholar and I'm virtually ignorant. How can that be?"

"You're not expecting an answer, right?" David said plopping two more

waffles onto Kit's plate, knowing full well that a full mouth wouldn't really impede his discourse.

"I'd like one but, no, I guess I'm not expecting one. Maybe just the concision of insights from Professor Lawrence?"

"Concision?"

"Concise summarization. Concision! Seems those ol' alphas are resisting normal dissipation this morning."

"Briefly," David began, shaking his head, knowing the boy wouldn't let it go until he had some degree of satisfaction, "The SAT's and similar tests reward the generalist and not the specialist. If you know a little about a lot of things you do well. If you know a lot about fewer things, you do poorly. So, schools tend to push the trivia approach to education in order for their students to rank high on such exercises."

"Test driven curricula? Sounds like high school is set up to just be a skimpy prelude to the real learning of college."

"An astute observation."

"What happens to all the kids who don't go on to college. They graduate with a bunch of useless knowledge?"

"That may be too harsh but I do find myself thinking along those lines sometimes."

* * *

"So, Dave, which subjects were most valuable during your high school career?" Ari asked.

They were juniors, strolling across the Harvard campus on a brisk but bright Sunday morning in March.

"You mean I have to find *two*?" David said smiling, his reference being to the plural in Ari's question.

"One then. Which one?"

"No contest. But I'd like you to guess before I tell you. You know me better than anybody on the face of the Earth."

"My guess is English?"

"My home spoke impeccable English. After six years of grammar in grade school there was nothing new to learn in high school."

"Literature?"

"Maybe a distant second to the winner. It forced me to think about author motivation and provided a basis for recognizing a smattering of literary references, I suppose. Nothing I couldn't have and wouldn't have achieved for myself outside of school, however."

"Science?"

"Unfortunately, my science teachers had been educated in the 'electrons revolve around the nucleus in invariable orbits' era of science plus they still apologized every time they mentioned evolution. So much of what they

presented was opinionated hogwash that it was probably more a confusing complication than a help."

"Math, then?"

"Math can be mastered most efficiently from well organized, programmed books. Teachers often just interfere. It was taught – no, presented – to me by coaches who'd rather diagram plays with their players than teach the rest of us."

"I give up."

"*Typing*, I guess it's called keyboarding these days. I use it every single day. When I was learning the skill no one had yet envisioned the all-encompassing extent of the internet but typing prepared me to seamlessly enter that realm. It also prepared me to make legible presentations of my ideas, to write term papers, and to carry on my correspondence. It was my first and only learning experience with the process – back then it wasn't taught in grade school."

Ari shook his head in disbelief.

"Now it's your turn. What was your most useful course?"

"I'd have to opt for logic. My prep school required four semesters of philosophy. Logic permeates every aspect of life."

"I can't argue that logical processes aren't certainly important in guiding ones thinking and adjustment. But, logic has to be phenomenologically guided."

"Explain!"

"Logic can't be purely abstract. It has to be tied to and serve the real world as interpreted by human beings."

"Maybe."

"When logic isn't based on what's real as we experience it, its end product can be useless or worse, it can be harmful."

"Should I take that personally?"

"I hope so. Your precisely logically developed belief that man needs to be exterminated is based, I believe, on a false premise. If you accept the idea that all species should have an equal right to exist, your logical extension would seem to make sense, since the major species annihilator is clearly man. But, since I don't accept your basic every-species-equal premise, the logic holds no value and certainly provides no proof of your position."

"You're a hard sell, old man. You're the one who is really playing God, you know – saying man is more valuable than the other species and therefore has the right to exterminate them."

"And you're *not* playing God? – contending you have the right to kill of the entire human species."

"My position flows from the natural history of life on this planet – the given certainty since life began. That's not playing God; it's merely readjusting things back to how nature has always before maintained things."

"But nature allowed man to originate and continue as a species. You

contend nature made a mistake. How can that be? It seems to me that what nature makes has to be legitimate by definition. The problem remains. What in nature gives you the right or authority to decide there has been a mistake and to go about setting it right?"

"This is so great, you know!" Ari said placing his arm around David's shoulders.

"The discussion *or* this tactic you've devised to shut off discussion when you find yourself in an uncomfortable corner?"

"You are the best."

"There you go again."

"And yet you keep coming back for more."

"On a more possibly productively note, we must get back to planning a more fruitful educational system," David said conceding the previous exchange of ideas was over for the time being. No discussion *ever* seemed to be over between them – just put on hold for another day.

* * *

"So, tell me what we've learned about Whitehorse; by the way, is that one word or two," David asked lingering over a cup of coffee as Kit cleaned up the grits – he sugared them for a breakfast dessert.

"Interesting. It appears to have taken its name from the White Horse Rapids just north down the Yukon River. *That* White Horse is two words. Not sure how it came about but the city name is spelled as one word – Whitehorse. "

"Go on!"

"Let's see, it's the capital of the Yukon. And, although it only has about 25,000 residents it covers one of the largest land areas of any city in the world – 413 Square kilometers – about 150 square miles I figure. It spreads north and south in a narrow band along the Yukon River. There seems to be a centralized downtown area near the river, which appears to be laid out in straight intersecting streets. The remainder of the town, however, is a hodgepodge of curving, trailing roads connecting smaller pockets of more or less isolated residential areas. There is a lot of green space – woods and open meadowland. From the map it looks to be maybe as much as a quarter of the city area.

The city is 130 kilometers from the Pacific Ocean across the narrow, rugged, Alaskan panhandle to the West.

"The modern airport runs north and south just west of the down town area and can handle huge planes. Mount Churchill, historically a very active volcano, sets to the west. In 800AD it blew its top in a serious way covering the area in fifty feet of white ash and forced the inhabitants to move on. Anthropologists speculate some of them moved south and became the ancestors of the Athapaaskan-speaking people like the Navajo in southwestern United States.

"Expect the day time temps to be in the low sixties this time of year and the nights down into the low 40's. It's daylight almost constantly this time of year

with virtually no dark hours in the day. We should encounter no rain since it's the dry season.

"The highest peak in all of Canada is Mount Logan at about 6,000 meters. It's not far from Whitehorse. There are lots of peaks in the 1,000 meter plus range around there. The lower lying areas absorb the sun's heat during the extended daylight periods in the summer. When that warm air comes in contact with the cold down flows from the mountains, significant updrafts are created in the valleys between mountains. An ideal spot from which to launch the viruses and such in all directions up into the global wind pattern."

David nodded.

"What about the people?"

"From what I can glean very friendly, easy going, frontier stock. Virtually no crime according to the Chamber of Commerce. Generally conservative family values. Mainstream Christian. They sound a whole lot like what we've grown up with right here in north central Indiana."

"Radio stations?"

"Four. Two AM and two FM. I get the idea they share one or two transmission towers with TV and cell phones. That's been hard to determine from a distance. I'm sure it won't be once we arrive. I booked two hotel rooms – one for us and one for the pilots. I made sure they each had double beds. I know I toss and turn too much for your comfort and I understand that according to the Greek tradition two men wouldn't be caught dead sharing the same bed."

"Getting them to share the same room may be difficult – probably not, actually, considering their military history. Come to think of it that inter-male phobia may be more Turkish than Greek. In any event, nice going."

Kit grinned.

"Thanks. I have lots more but it's probably best meted out on a need to know basis rather than cluttering up your head with marginally useful data now."

"I think I even understood that selection of marginally related phrases."

Another quick grin which instantly turned serious.

"I am sooooo scared, Uncle David."

"I know. Nothing inappropriate about being scared of genuinely scary things. Think of it this way; you and I have to carry all the scare there is, because if the situation were generally known the people of the world would panic in terror."

"In that case I can assure you I am doing my part. I just hope I don't wet my pants over it all, you know?"

"That would require that you were *wearing* pants, Son. How about if you get dressed while I do up the dishes? It's already six o'clock. I told Connie we'd be ready for the limo at six thirty."

"This is really going to happen, isn't it?" Kit said helping carry the dishes to the sink.

"In fact, my boy, it *has* been happening for going on three days now."

Kit nodded and began dressing. The night before he had left his traveling clothes hanging from the back of the big chair. He wasn't superstitious in the traditional sense but he did feel better if he followed his usual dressing pattern – sox, shirt, boxers, jeans, and shoes.

"Now would be the best time to give your mom a farewell call if you want to," David called from the sink.

"I think I'll make it a *see you later* call – no pessimism, remember?"

"Excellent! That's really what I meant."

The call was made. A few quiet tears were shed on Kit's end. He then made the beds – an arduous task involving positioning a pillow and pulling the bedspread up over a tailored, bottom sheet.

"I'll skip the mint," he said to himself thinking it far more humorous than it probably was.

"Shall I take the luggage down to the landing?" he asked.

"Might as well. Yes. Thanks."

An hour later they were at the airfield. Connie and Alex had been there for several hours doing whatever preflight checks such a complicated little plane must have. As it turned out it was a large, wide body, Gulf Stream, executive jet modified to meet their special needs.

Inside it felt like they had entered a plush sitting room in a fancy hotel. It was complete with carpeted floors, which ran halfway up the walls; there were recliners, a couch, work desks, a coffee table, and floor lights. Toward the back of the plane and through a set of swinging doors was a sleeping area, four pleasingly wide bunks each with its own lights and temperature controls. A bathroom to the right of the doors and a kitchenette to the left separated the two compartments.

The luggage was stowed below the floor in a space accessible either from the outside or through a trapdoor from inside. There was a sophisticated sound system with CD players and TV's with DVD players. Two, flat, screens above keyboards suggested that a powerful computer system was at their disposal.

The door opened from the pilots' area at the front.

"Ready whenever you are, Sirs."

It was Alex.

"Sooner the better, I guess, Kit said jumping on it before David could respond."

Alex looked at David as if for confirmation.

"What he says. And, remember, you don't *ever* need to receive my verification of any request Kit makes."

"Yes, Sir. You've found everything, I take it."

"We're getting there."

"If you have questions or otherwise want to speak with us we are number

one on the intercom system. Number two gets you an international operator. Number three allows us to contact you."

"Okay then. Thank you," David said issuing a nod and a smile in the pilot's direction."

"Connie *is* up there, right?" Kit asked.

"Skittish about flying?"

"No. Just skittish about flying in planes with no pilot."

It was worth a chuckle among them. Alex returned up front and the door was closed. The dual engines on either side of the tail hummed to life – more quietly than either David or Kit had expected. The plane began to move. Kit stationed himself in a recliner beside a window and buckled up. The plane turned onto an east-west runway and after a brief pause, began accelerating along the concrete. With what appeared to be no effort at all it was immediately into the air.

"I guess Connie was right," Kit said.

"About?"

"About this thing being able to take off on ridiculously short runways."

The seatbelt light went off and Kit was immediately out of the chair and on his feet.

"Where are the parachutes kept?"

"How about looking behind that door up front marked, 'Emergency Equipment'?"

"I suppose it's being able to figure out things like that that qualifies you as our team leader," he said smiling back at his uncle.

Five minutes later Kit had donned a chute and explained its operation to his uncle. That done he put it back and relaxed.

"Twenty four hundred miles as the crow flies," he said. "At four hundred miles an hour that makes it a six hour flight. Leaving central daylight savings time at seven a.m. and crossing three time zones, that will make it mid-morning – about ten or so – when we arrive. I failed to find out about them and daylight savings time."

"I'll just bet there will be a clock somewhere in town that we can check," David kidded.

Kit approached the computer and taking a seat began examining it. He was in many ways like Ari – a bit haphazard in his personal life but precise and organized to a nearly fanatical degree when it came to carrying out responsibilities like his studies or his present mission. People loved his sense of humor. He was kind, generous, and efficient. As a defensive back he would consistently make the tackles that were his to make but would expend no more energy than necessary to accomplish them. His coach would sometimes ride him about not putting more hurt on the opponent. Kit's response would be something like,

"This is supposedly a game among kids. I have no intention of consciously trying to hurt anybody. If that's required count me out."

It always hushed the coach, Kit having been all conference during his last three years in high school.

He had been in love a dozen times prior to his relationship with Megan. They had been a couple throughout their senior year and clearly felt comfortable with each other. He cared for her as if she were a precious porcelain doll. She willingly accepted that – cherished it in fact – but never took advantage of it. Kit was her best friend and confidant as well as her sensitive, seldom demanding, romantic partner. Just how far that romantic partnership had progressed was not shared with others.

He loved his uncle David but felt no small degree of injustice because his father had died so prematurely. Logically he understood that what had happened was just what had happened. Period. Still, part of him couldn't help feeling life had ripped him off.

His favorite sport was swimming. He contended that it was because he got to wear those fully revealing, skimpy, swimsuits in public but in fact it was because it had been David's sport in high school and college. Their relationship had always demonstrated and confirmed mutual respect – an aspect clearly evident to Kit at an early age. It was like no other relationship he had in his life. His parents loved him – of that he had no doubt – but *love* and *respect* were very different. To know he was loved *and* respected at seven and eleven and fourteen or whatever age, became the cornerstone of his immediately obvious, indomitable, self-esteem.

He welcomed the process of maturing and growing up but also continued to treasure the little boy that lived on inside him. From time to time he would have to remind David to look inside himself and re-enjoy *his* child for a while.

David had never talked down to the boy. When a word was clearly appropriate, David used it. Kit would ask its meaning and then interject it into their conversations frequently for a few days. David would help him hone its meaning. It posed a problem of a kind for Kit with his friends – having to revise, on the fly, the more precise vocabulary he would have preferred to use. He once told his Uncle that he often felt like a translator at the U.N. moving between the Precise English of his brain and the Common English required of his tongue in order to make sure he was being understood.

They had discussed how the use of the less precise forms of the language limited ones ability to think and learn and to make the best possible decisions. It had been cause for deep concern on Kit's part from time to time. He realized most of the people he knew seemed destined to function at the lesser level forever. How could they become all that human beings were capable of becoming? How could they raise their families in ways best suited for producing well adjusted, productive, happy offspring? How could they effectively examine

and fend off those pernicious philosophies and movements that preyed on such inexact thinking – such ignorance? He concluded that the imprecise knowledge of language presented a fantastically dangerous situation for mankind.

“Come and look at this baby,” Kit said referring to the computer set up. “I’ve never seen such a sweet machine.”

David took a seat beside him.

“You don’t have to go to specific search engines. You tell it what you want and it pre-searches the search engines and then lists URLs as specific buttons that are ordered down the left side of the screen in their likelihood of meeting your request. Let’s try it. I’ll type in, ‘David Lawrence articles on . . . social disintegration as a function of imprecise language usage’. There. Look. A dozen buttons with more waiting in the wings. When you click one away another appears until it has exhausted the available listings.”

“Sounds like the researchers’ dream come true,” David said. “Try this: ‘Current health of Ari Stephanopoulos, Greek Archeologist’.”

Kit looked over at David.

“You know something I don’t?”

“It’s just a hunch. My guess is that he’s dying. He always referred to himself as too cowardly to pull this stunt he’s sucked us into. I believed him.”

“But he’s barely middle aged,” Kit pointed out as he entered the request. Nothing significant came up.

“Let’s try current location of Ari Stephanopoulos,” Kit suggested.

“Interesting,” David said. “Go!”

“Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minnesota, USA, since January 10th this year. I’d say you were correct, Uncle David. Does that alter our strategy?”

“No. It just specifies our first stop after all of this is over.”

“You love him, don’t you?”

The full and complete answer came through a bittersweet smile and a series of thoughtfully delivered nods. Kit was at a loss for words so turned his attention back to the computer. David stood, patted the young man on his back, and returned to his seat in the middle of the cabin.

Connie’s voice came over the intercom.

“We will be maintaining our altitude of 45,000 feet and air speed of four hundred knots. ETA Whitehorse is four hours and ten minutes. Will enter Canadian air space in just under one hour.”

Kit continued to research his three venues at the plane’s computer and David worked on his at the laptop. Eventually, it was Connie’s voice on the intercom that alerted them to the rapid passage of time.

“Ten minutes to Whitehorse where the air temperature is a pleasant 20 degrees – that’s 69 degrees measured in your more primitive way. We have slowed to 150 knots and dropped to four thousand feet in order to begin the series of circular routes around the area you requested. We will be approaching

the runway from the north. Any specific instructions?"

It was Kit who pushed button number one.

"Just one for Connie. Land this thing in one piece, please."

"I've never done it any other way – of course there *is* always a first time."

Kit turned to David.

"Ol' Connie's beginning to loosen up. I think we're going to get on fine."

He buckled into a recliner, which faced David, and looked out the window surveying the terrain.

"Just as advertised," Kit said. "Lots of three thousand foot peaks in the area and the valley cut by the Yukon River down through the centuries. It is really beautiful isn't it? I wish Megan could see it."

"You'll have to come back with her someday."

Kit looked his uncle directly in the face, curling in his lower lip and nodding. Any remnants of pessimism had been effectively left behind in Indiana.

The touchdown was so perfect neither of them could be sure of the exact moment it occurred.

"We'll need our passports I assume," Kit said unbuckling.

"Better have them handy."

Alex pushed open the outer door and lowered the stairs to the tarmac.

"We will contact you by phone as we need your services," David said to him. "From here we'll be off to the Azores. Not sure when. Can we impose on you to bring the luggage to the hotel?"

"Certainly. My military experience is about to become useful in civilian life, I see."

It was met with two blank expressions.

"I spent a good deal of time extracting the bad guys from caves in Afghanistan. Now, I'm called upon to extract luggage from the cargo hold. There's bound to exist some metaphoric similarity in there somewhere."

"Metaphoric similarity?" Kit repeated as a question, making no effort to hide his surprise at the expression.

"Did I fail to mention that I have a Master's Degree in English Literature?"

"I doubt if I'd have forgotten, had you told us," Kit said.

The boy followed David down the stairs turning back and looking up toward Alex as he reached the bottom step.

"Parting is such sweet sorrow . . . ," he said gesticulating dramatically.

Alex finished the quotation:

" . . . That I shall say good night till it be morrow."

"You're good, Alex."

"I know."

A limo approached slowly and stopped ten yards away. It bore a familiar mark.

"The Stephanopoulos Family Crest there on the door," David pointed out.

"I guess when Ari said our every move would be monitored he meant it," Kit said. "How could he have known we'd be here first?"

"At least two possible answers. First, he has limos prepared at all of the sites for use whenever we might arrive. Second, he just knows my mind so well he could predict my analysis of the over all situation and figure I'd come here first."

"How could he know when we'd arrive?"

"It probably all comes down to flight plans, really."

"Do you think Connie and or Alex are his spies?"

"No, I don't. That's not Ari's style. He promised a fair playing field and I believe he has delivered just that. In fact, it seems he's going out of his way to give us the best possible chance at succeeding."

"It appears he's not the only one who knows the other's mind."

David smiled. The elderly chauffeur got out and opened the rear door. Without hesitation the two entered. Seated again behind the wheel, the portly old man met David's eyes in the mirror.

"To the Sheffield, I assume."

"Yes, Sir. Thank you."

The driver handed back a business card.

"The number will reach me twenty four seven as the saying goes these days. I'm at your disposal. If a limo is not what you need I can provide anything short of a tank on an hour's notice, and given two, I just might be able to at least scrounge up a half track."

His eyes sparkled and he finger-brushed his large, white mustache before slipping the car into gear. The smoked glass divider rolled up proving separation and privacy between the sections.

"Cool. This is only the second limo I've ever been in, and both on the same day," Kit said beginning to poke buttons and turn knobs.

"Better be careful," David said feigning a serious take.

"Why?"

"One of those just might be the 'nosey kid ejection seat button'."

It garnered Kit's chuckle to David's full out laugh. Some of the initial tension had been released.

Passports had not been required to exit the airport nor were they requested at the front desk of the hotel. Whether that was common practice there in the frontier or some special arrangement, David couldn't be sure.

The room was spacious, most certainly an upgrade from what Kit thought he had reserved. The double king beds were merely an inconspicuous part of the interior expanse, which included a sitting area for six, a desk, a dining table and chairs, and a fully appointed deck facing the river – glass enclosed or open at the push of a button.

"There's a hot tub in the bathroom," Kit announced reentering the main

room, "And a shower big enough to handle me and all the girls from my senior class."

"Get up the information on the radio stations," David said. "I need to begin making calls."

The numbers were soon at hand. Kit had been correct. There were just two towers, neither of them close to the city. Each was situated atop a mountain. That halftrack was looking better and better.

Each of the towers had a navigable trail leading to it and a manned, onsite, transmitter shack, in which the actual transmission equipment was housed.

"When the luggage arrives, dig out the camera with the telephoto lens," David said. "We may be able to see what we need to see from a distance, obviating the need for up close inspections of both."

"The hotel has an observation platform on the roof," Kit said. "We should be able to spot them both from there with that NASA developed super gizmo you have on the camera."

"Plot their locations on this map so we'll have some idea where to look."

Kit got to work. The luggage arrived. The pilot's accommodations had been changed to separate rooms. David wondered if, in fact, he even needed to call ahead to the remaining five sites for reservations. He would, of course.

He also wondered about Ari. It was a mixture of irritation and compassion. How would Ari react to David having located the first site? Some combination of joy and displeasure, he figured. Even for Ari the idea of killing off his loved ones would be painfully upsetting – repugnant and reprehensible. Still, his ill-based logic required it of him, so those feelings would be mindfully and unemotionally put aside.

Part of him was probably saying, "Good going, Dave!" Part was thinking, "Oh, well, I've set up five more and he only has to miss one of them. The odds are clearly on my side."

All in all he was undoubtedly still feeling quite confident.

It was another one of those famous win-win situations he so often pre-established for himself. If his plan was successful and mankind was obliterated, Ari won. If David successfully met the challenge and prevented the destruction, Ari's other supposition – albeit reluctant – was proved correct; that David *did* represent that glimmer of hope required for the human race to be spared.

Ari knew by then that David was not going to give into the temptation of saving his own life and those of his loved ones by using the antidote. That had not really ever been seen as a possibility, but for some reason Ari had to have it proved. He knew that had he been in David's shoes he would have taken it. Ari was a self-admitted, fully self-centered, coward.

An interesting compulsion to hurry overtook David. Assuming Ari was in fact dying, David suddenly felt the need to complete the assignment, one way or

the other, in time for his old friend to witness the outcome before his life ended. Allegiance among friends often requires that curious paths be pursued.

"Got the locations," Kit said, bringing David back to the more mundane matters of the moment. "Let's go upstairs and see what we can find."

We, as it turned out, meant *Kit* who commandeered the camera and searched the horizon.

"Tower number one right there," he said pointing north east as he continued to look.

He adjusted and readjusted the zoom and eventually handed it to David.

"Can't see anything that looks like a foreign addition to the tower but can't see what's sitting on that little platform at the very top."

"Nor can I. Let's locate the other one."

He handed the camera back to Kit anticipating a playground tussle over its possession if he didn't. It drew a smile from both of them.

"Unfortunately, Uncle David, I don't see anything on the other one either. Could we have been that wrong on our very first one?"

David took the camera and looked. Then he focused back on the original, running the tower from bottom to top. I'll bet a two headed turtle it's that first one to the east. Follow it up from the top of the building at its base to about half way up. You'll see a slight change take place as you run it."

"A change? Okay. Let's see. Not sure. Oh! Maybe. Yeah! Wow! The reflection. About a fifth of the way up. What is it? It looks like the tower but . . ."

"My best guess is that the area there, about six feet high, has been boxed in and the outside painted to look like the tower and the forests seen between the beams."

"And," Kit said continuing the line of thought, "When the light hits that enclosure it reflects off rather than passing through. You're good, Unc."

"Let's make sure the other one doesn't show a similar feature. There could be a duplicate diversion planted out there."

"A big *nada*, I'd say," Kit said after several minutes of observation. "You better look, too. I missed the other one the first time."

David looked and confirmed Kit's conclusion.

"Ready for a hike?" David asked.

"Sure. What's the plan?"

"Reconnaissance. We need to get out there and get up close and personal with that east tower. We need to learn the habits of the engineers that man the transmitter; find a time we can get access and climb it to examine what we're up against; find out all the poop as Ari would say."

"Sounds like we'll be leaving the luxury of our Spa appointed room for a camp out," Kit said.

"I'll call Fritz?"

"Fritz?"

"The chauffeur. It's the name on his card. Let's see just how well he can come through for us."

They returned to the room.

"Just one spa session before we go?" Kit asked drooling over the prospect.

"Sure. Go. Enjoy. I'll see what I can set up with the old gentleman."

"Fritz. This is David. We need some things – information and stuff. Is camping allowed on the slope of the mountain just to the east of the river?"

"It is. No open fires. It's the dry season. Gets cold up there – down to 3 or so this time of year – that's like 25 in your Fahrenheit. Constant winds. Won't even hint to you at the wind chills."

"Okay. Next, can you fix us up with a green tent, sleeping bags, and necessary, minimal, camping equipment? Enough for several days."

"Twenty minutes."

"Then, what kind of transportation will we need to get around up there?"

"I got an old jeep that knows every inch of that slope. I'll have it loaded and waiting. Give me an hour."

"What time is it here now?"

"Going on eleven."

David reset his watch.

"Make it twelve-thirty, then. We need to eat and I'll have to find some way to extract the boy from the hot tub."

"Tell him the waitresses in the hotel's restaurant are drop dead gorgeous. That should get him out and into some pants in a hurry."

"You seem to know teenagers, Fritz."

"Mama and me had seven kids and that means seven teenagers you know. Will you need me to accompany you?"

"No. But any help pointing the way will be appreciated. We thought we'd start by making camp in the vicinity of that tower thing up there."

"Radio stations, TV stations, and cell phone relay dishes. I'll draw you out a map."

"Great. Keep track of the expenses."

"I've been given a credit card to use for your needs. I figured it had come from you."

"Oh. Yes. Well, I guess our accountant is more efficient than I gave him credit for. At 12:30 then."

"12:30 it is. The venison is great but if you don't have a taste for gamey food, the pot roast is a close second."

A few minutes in the spa before lunch suddenly sounded good to David and he went to join Kit.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Armed with a hand drawn map and well outfitted, fabric covered, Jeep, Kit turned off the main route and headed them north east on a gravel road. It soon left the relatively level valley floor and began a steep climb up the hillside. Compared with the mountains in the distance it was just a hill regardless of its name. David kept his eye on the landmarks and frequently referred to the map.

"There's the cave opening to the right. Fritz suggests we turn just beyond it and follow the fire trail straight up the hill. It will bring us out about a hundred meters east north east of the tower in a gently sloping meadow."

"I wonder why he picked that particular spot," Kit asked.

"Perhaps we will find out if we are patient, Grasshopper."

"Ah so, great mentor!"

"That's a terrible oriental accent!"

"Be careful or you just might have a grasshopper revolt on your hands."

"Would that be an insectrection?"

Kit shook his head.

"Unworthy of even your customary low standards, Uncle David."

The trail quickly became more rugged. That soon translated into low gear and a snail's pace aggravating every fiber of Kit's impatient, adolescent, soul.

Fifteen minutes later they spotted the clearing Fritz had marked. Kit turned off the trail – path, matching ruts, whatever – and cautiously maneuvered the vehicle across the rocky, gently sloping, grass covered, terrain. Near the eastern edge of the meadow he turned the jeep west and stopped, facing down hill toward the tower."

The area was open well beyond the tower giving a good view of the sprawling city below.

"Apparently Fritz went for the postcard perfect panorama and unknowingly got us the exact view we need of the tower," David observed. "Let's find a place for the tent that will not be in the line of sight from the transmitter shack. No need to stir up anybody's curiosity."

"Okay. How about right over there – sort of like a cove cut into the woods?" Kit suggested.

"Excellent," David said, looking around. "Why do you suppose the area was cleared like this? No stumps. Looks to have been cut maybe fifty or more years ago and regularly trimmed back."

A pair of rabbits crossed their path each stopping just long enough to

stand tall on their hind legs and flick their ears in the direction of the Jeep.

"Maybe the area was constructed as a make-out spot for wild little critters like them," Kit suggested.

With the brake set they got out hugging themselves against the unexpectedly chilly air. The sun had heated the fabric enclosed Jeep well above the actual air temperature and both were surprised. They donned heavier jackets.

"Let's get the tent up so it can begin absorbing some of this abundant, free, radiant heat," David suggested."

It had a four pole outer frame to which the thick canvas fabric was tied every foot or so. The Floor was moisture proofed. With grass twelve to eighteen inches tall across the area they first needed to trample it flat, which made a soft base for the tent. Fifteen minutes later the tent was up and the camping equipment stowed inside.

David had brought the Whitehorse Panel from the box. It was protected in a flat, fireproof lockbox, which he stashed underneath his sleeping bag.

Outside, they surveyed the view.

"I'd sure like to spend a week up here with Megan," Kit said.

"I doubt if you two would be considered 'wild little critters', David said, teasing.

"We're both pretty good at pretending, and as to wild . . ."

"I won't ask nor will I listen if you begin explaining."

Kit smiled.

"It's legal to be nude in public in the Yukon; did you know that, Uncle David?"

"Somehow that piece of important information escaped my education, I'm afraid."

"There are a dozen or more agencies that specialize in guided, nude, hiking experiences in the area mostly to the west of here closer to the warmth of the Pacific."

"Not on our agenda this trip."

Kit smiled, his impish child showing through.

"I 'nude' you'd say that, Uncle David."

"You set me up you scoundrel!"

Kit wasn't finished.

"I suppose if we'd bring it to a vote you'd say, 'Nay, Kid!'"

David refused to comment though the prolonged shaking of his head seemed to fully satisfy Kit.

"Bring the camera and let's see what a closer view of the tower can tell us."

Kit ducked into the tent, secured the camera and a pair of binoculars from a backpack, and was soon back at David's side. They moved to within seventy

five yards of the tower.

"Let's settle ourselves down into the grass so we won't be so conspicuous in case somebody chances to glance this way from the shack," David said, suddenly dead serious.

They knelt and sat back on their legs. The slope in front of them was steep and the box-like area on the tower was on a nearly horizontal plain from where they were. They studied it for some time then traded instruments.

"What do you think?" David asked.

"Like you said initially – it's a very cleverly painted disguise. Seems taller than we thought – maybe ten feet rather than six."

David agreed with a nod. "Looking at it with bare eyes I doubt if you'd ever see it even from this close. I imagine from the vertical perspective of the shack and immediate area down there it could never be seen."

"What happens if the tower has to be climbed for some reason?" Kit asked.

"It is so tall that I just imagine they use helicopters to lower workmen onto the platform at the very top. It must be twenty feet square up there."

"You're undoubtedly right. This Ari guy of yours would never leave something like that to chance would he?"

"Never! You're right."

* * * * *

"It's a good thing you were born a rich brat, Ari."

"I was born rich and can take no credit for that. As to the Brat part, I probably had more say so. Why did you make that observation?"

"You've never had to leave anything to chance. Poor folks have to flow from one chance event to another."

"You don't."

"I'm talking about really poor people."

"So am I."

It had been a fully serious response.

"You can't have the perspective that's needed. To you anybody with an annual income of less than what, 250 thousand dollars is poor."

"Somewhere in that vicinity, I suppose."

"Divide that by twenty five and you'll have a more realistic view."

"Ten thousand dollars a year? Daddy pays more than that a month for this apartment. My allowance is almost that much a week."

"You really can't imagine surviving as a poor person can you?"

"I guess not. What was the point you were making about chance?"

"Poor people have to take what comes – whatever work comes along at whatever pay rate the boss chooses to pay them to work whatever hours he sets. They live in whatever shelter they can afford or move often rather than paying rent. They visit food pantries for the staples – taking whatever they're given."

They frequent soup kitchens for a hot meal a day eating whatever is offered. They have no insurance so if fate makes them ill – and their living conditions often promote illness – they have to find a free clinic. That means no appointments. They go in the morning and wait as long as it takes – hours and hours, all day even; they have no say; they have to take what they get. And if it's their child that's sick they're virtually helpless to get them the help they need. If they're elderly they have no money for medicine if they need it. Chance legislates their lives."

"If I had the capacity to be compassionate I suppose I might feel guilty. I'm sure glad that isn't the case."

"You're not being honest about it, of course. You are compassionate. Your personality just never seems to move from compassion to guilt like most do."

"I suppose that's true," Ari said nodding. "I can't ever remember feeling guilty. If you had my money *you'd* handle it very differently, I suppose."

"Do I even need to respond, or have you learned nothing at all about me these past four years."

"Giving people something they haven't earned is a fully foreign concept to my family."

"Yet, you told me your father supports the church in Greece in a huge way."

"He's buying his way into heaven and the rest of us hope to get there on his shirt tail – should there happen to be a heaven. Like you said, a Stephanopoulos leaves nothing to chance. Which reminds me I have girls lined up for later – three at noon and three more at seven. You know I'm always willing to share."

"But wouldn't that be a lot like giving me something I haven't earned?"

"You may not have noticed but I have no friends other than you. That makes you either a masochist, ridiculously compassionate, or a world class sponge. Options one and three don't compute in your case, although I must admit I understand them the best. Your presence here is priceless."

"I seem to disgust most people. I can buy women for my sexual pleasure and get myself treated like one of the boys at the bar so long I continue to buy round after round, but I know none of them really like me. You're different. You won't take my money and that's the only way I know how to show appreciation. So, the use of my women is about all I have to offer you."

"You really don't get it. You just indicated that genuine friendship can't be bought and that although mine is not for sale to you, I continue to be your friend. Don't all those logic classes you took provide an 'if these, then . . .' paradigm for you?"

"They do. I just don't understand."

"If there is any payment for friendship, Ari, it is friendship itself – period,"

the end!"

"You'd be my friend without the girls?"

"Of course I would. I'm not incapable of finding girls that want to have sex with me."

"I know. The girls I bring here will always opt for sex with you over me if given the chance. They seem disappointed when you aren't here. It makes me jealous, you know."

"Perhaps you should try getting sex the old fashioned way – by making yourself attractive to girls as a person and not just a thoughtless jerk with a handsome body willing to ply them with gifts and money."

"Never got sex that way. Daddy got me my first whore for my twelfth birthday. She spent the weekend with me. Why go through the whole, time consuming, courting ritual when a few hundred bucks cuts to the quick in two minutes?"

"I'll bet in all the . . . what . . . *thousands* of time you've had sex, you never once gave any serious thought to making it a wonder-filled experience for the girl."

"What?"

David needed to pursue it no further. For him the measure of a successful night with a woman was that it had been wonderfully pleasurable for both of them. Selfish sex seemed like cheating. He understood why the hired girls preferred private time with him, instead of Ari. He also understood that Ari would never understand that. Risking in such a give and take way would leave way too much to chance."

* * *

The door to the engineer's shack opened and two men stepped outside. They lit cigarettes and chatted, paying no attention to the marvelous panorama. Perhaps years of seeing it had somehow dulled its beauty in their eyes. Ten minutes later they went back inside.

"We need to time the interval between smokes," David said. "It may be our window into their in-and-out timeline."

He handed Kit a pocket sized writing pad and pen. No instructions were needed. They continued to survey the area.

"The grass around the tower is shorter and greener than most of the meadow," Kit said.

"The shorter is understandable I suppose. They mow the area down there. The greener part escapes me for the moment. Perhaps this kind of grass is greener when it's shorter."

Kit nodded and continued to examine the area through the binoculars.

"The trail leading to and from the tower isn't all that worn. Grass grows in the tire tracks. Must not be used all that much. Where's their vehicle, by the way?"

"Must be parked on the other side of the building."

"One window on this side. Looks to be blocked from the inside."

David redirected the camera lens to the window and Zoomed in tightly.

"You're right. Like the back of a cabinet, perhaps."

"That gives us clean access from this direction."

"You feel up to some close order recon?" David asked.

"Go down there and look for windows, a vehicle, and such, you mean?"

"That's what I mean. You're a better fit to that assignment than I am."

"Excellent! It feels like we're finally really doing something. We can keep in contact on the lapel communicators."

"Your prime directive is *not* to be seen. Take no chances. If you should be confronted open the two-way on your communicator so I can hear, then feign being lost looking for a group of those nude hikers or something."

Kit grinned.

"That does make a good cover story – or would that be an un-cover story. At any rate, it's not entirely a falsehood. I'm up for some close order mingling with that kind of a group."

"I can see it now. You and a bunch of plump, naked, senior citizens waddling off into the sunset."

"That revolting image should certainly keep me focused on the here and now."

"You're welcome!"

Kit began making his way down the hill. He bent low, moving slowly and deliberately. David continued to survey the area watching for anything out of the ordinary.

As the boy reached the back of the building, *out of the ordinary* began to unfold.

"A vehicle approaching on the trail down there from the south," David whispered into the mike. "I'd suggest hiding there. They might see you if you try to return."

"Roger!"

The unexpected response would have seemed humorous in other circumstances. A pick up arrived and stopped in front of the building. Two men got out. Each removed a large back pack from the rear of the truck. The door opened and the other two came out to greet the new arrivals.

"Looks to be the replacement team," Kit whispered into his mike, having been close enough to ascertain the situation."

"SHHHH!" came David's response.

The tower abutted the back of the building and Kit began climbing it.

'What a dumb move,' David said to himself, soon to take it back.

Kit moved from the tower onto the flat roof and lay there spread eagle, fully hidden from the ground. David sensed the boy had heard something else of

importance as the four men began circling the building looking at the grass and feeling the wooden walls.

'A strange activity,' David thought.

One of them began climbing up the ladder on the tower. David's heart stopped. So did the man as he began pulling repeatedly on the ladder as if to make sure it was securely attached. He then climbed back down and joined the other three as they moved around to the far side of the building.

Presently they emerged in front and went inside. A minute later the original pair, backpacks in hand stowed them into the truck and were soon on their way back down the trail.

"All's clear," David said into the mike.

"Understood. I'm coming back there."

He was soon up the slope and at David's side.

"The new crew will be here for a forty eight hour shift before the others return. They apparently sleep in shifts as one of them said he was ready to hit the hay and would see Sam in eight hours."

"From their conversation as they checked out the area I got the idea they can't smoke inside because of the equipment so we can expect frequent cancer breaks out front I suppose."

"Did you catch why they were touring the area like that?"

"Fire. Putting one and one together I think the cutting of this meadow is for the protection of the tower and the shack in case of fire. No trees to fall and burn the place up. They also spoke about a water sprinkling system of some kind. There is a small pump house on the other side. Maybe they water the grass near the shack and the outer walls of the building itself as an added precaution against fire."

"Great work and quick thinking down there getting up onto the roof."

"That's thanks to old lady Stephens."

"She crawls up on her roof?"

"No. As kids we'd climb her pear tree every summer and make ourselves sick on her goodies. When she'd come outside we would drop down and hide on the top of her shed that sat underneath the tree."

"So, you're telling me delinquency has its up-side?"

"Something like that. Like you've always told me, 'Try to learn something useful from every situation you encounter'."

"I guess I hadn't considered criminal activity as I was passing on that suggestion."

"Now what?"

"Interestingly to me, none of the men ever looked up at the tower as they were standing around down there."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning once we're up there, chances are we won't be seen if we remain

quiet. We need to plan a strategy to get into that box up there."

"It's a three sided tower with one flat side facing away from the building," Kit said beginning to get oriented.

"What do you estimate the base to be – size I mean?" David asked.

"I stepped it off. Nearly twenty feet per side – probably six meters."

"That makes the engineer's building about twenty feet square then?"

"Yup. A window in the front door and one large one on the other side facing the valley. Evidently electric heat since there is no chimney-type thing. From the size of that electrical cable running up from the valley they should be able to heat the whole city. You see the size of that transformer on the pole down there?"

"Evidently transmitting stations need a lot of power."

"I'll look it up later – just for my own information."

"The ladder goes all the way up to and into the platform at the top of the tower so we can use that to access the box."

"We need to determine what that box is made of, how it's attached and if it has some easy access door or hatch – maybe on top," David said.

"Only one way to do that," Kit said.

"I'm afraid so."

"Me or the two of us?"

"Not sure. Maybe you should do a quick scouting trip, first. You can take pictures and chatter on about everything to me while you're up there."

"Chatter on?"

"Speak to me precisely about the situation as you assess it up there. Is that better?"

"Certainly more accurate, at least. Chatter on?"

"Let it be. You'll need one of the leather safety belts so you can secure it around the ladder. You may have to go up above the box and move across it to the back where you won't be seen. You'll need rope to hang there."

"My summer at survival camp will finally get put to good use."

"Why do you think I insisted you attend?"

"Yeah! Like you had anticipated this."

"No. I can honestly say I could never have anticipated this."

"You've done this kind of thing, too, right?"

"On four continents, Kit. No need to worry."

"With Ari."

"In the Alps."

"Don't suppose there were nude outposts up there."

"Actually lots of naked females up there."

"Really!"

Kit's interest visibly peaked.

"Most of the St. Bernards they used as rescue dogs at that time were

females."

"The second wonderful image you've dashed for me in less than an hour. You get some perverted pleasure from that, don't you?"

"Me? Perverted? Would your mother let you play with me if I were perverted?"

"Mothers typically don't really know squat about what their son's do once they're out the front door."

"That certainly propels me toward parenthood!"

"You know it's true, having been a boy yourself once, I assume."

"Focus! Let's get back to the tent and outfit you for a quick up and down trip."

That done, David watched from a distance as the young man, all quite gracefully, made his way down the slope to the tower and began his long climb.

He was at fifty feet when the front door opened and a man came out, not to smoke but to look around. Perhaps he had heard something. David cautioned Kit to stop. The man circled the building but did not look up. Apparently satisfied, he went back inside.

"He may have heard something," David said. "Be as quiet as you can. Maybe just move more slowly so nothing gets jarred."

"Roger that?"

The boy sounded like an astronaut. Another fifty feet and he was face to face with the side of the box.

"Plywood, painted with a dull finish paint. About eight feet high – one panel high. Three across. Spans the tower's width, which has narrowed by some eight feet at this point. The enclosed area must be nearly as big as my bedroom. It was clearly built right here on the tower. It's screwed into the metal beams. My bet is that this is all just a facade with the real container sitting inside it."

"How many screws per panel?" David asked.

"Let's see. One about every foot. I count twenty per panel. Heads of the screws – flat heads – are about a half inch across – running through inch and half washers flat against the wood. Should only have to remove one panel to gain access."

"Take a look at the most likely candidate around on the back to make sure it has all the same screws and such."

Kit crawled across the top and bellied down so he could look down over the back side.

"Everything the same. We'll need some way to hang the panel once it's unscrewed. Could drill a hole – top center – for a rope."

"Too noisy, I'd guess," David said. "How about using the quarter inch nylon cord and threading it through the existing screw holes – one on either side at the very top of the panel."

"That should work. As I recall it's two hundred pound test. Overkill for

sure. A half inch plywood panel weighs what - twenty five pounds at the most?"

"Not sure but well under the weight limit for the cord. Get some pictures and come down."

Ten minutes later Kit and David were back inside the tent.

"The wind seems pretty constant up there," Kit said. "Out of the north coming down the valley. I'm no judge of wind speed but it's plenty to swish a dangling panel around. It may cause some problems."

"With both of us up there we can move it to one side and then screw it temporarily right over another panel to keep it stable while we work inside."

"That should work. Good thinking, ol' man. I see how it is. I risk my neck up there in the wind, clinging to the metal girders a hundred feet in the air, and you risk a few neurons worth of thought from down here."

"I'm glad you understand the arrangement. Let's look at the pictures."

"I got some looking down and looking up. Then close-ups of the screws and the seams between panels – see they are caulked."

"We'll each need a compact, medium width, flat head screwdriver from the tool pack. Power drivers will be too noisy, I'm guessing. Might send some detectible vibration down the tower."

"My main question is how Ari constructed that thing up there in the first place?"

"I've been wondering, too. Some sort of chicanery, I imagine."

"What?"

"It's clear that it could not have been put in place without the engineer's knowledge and radio stations don't go on vacation. The installation had to have been approved so there had to have been an acceptable reason. I have no idea what it might have been. A scientific data collection station, perhaps."

"Maybe we could just present ourselves as inspectors for that project and do our thing right out in the open."

"Maybe or blow it not knowing what instructions they have been given about it."

"I see. Yeah. Better not risk it, you're saying."

David nodded.

"Wish we knew their sleep schedule. One is apparently sleeping now. I'd guess the other would then sleep overnight but can't be sure of that."

"Use one of our listening devices?" Kit suggested.

"Probably nothing to listen to other than the radio if one of the men is asleep. No conversation."

"Hadn't thought of that. So?"

"It gets dark when?"

"Eleven or eleven thirty to twelve thirty or one. I can find it exactly if you want."

"That should be close enough. I'm going to suggest we make our climb

just at the end of the short dark period – just as the light returns."

"Why? Why not during the dark?"

"Once inside that box chances are we will have to use flashlights – day or night – and I'm afraid that in the dark there's a better chance such light might be seen. About one a.m. or so things should be pretty quiet up here, which should also mean little chance of being discovered. Chances are it may be more than a one trip job."

"We'll take the panel from the little box up with us, right?"

"Oh yes. But not knowing what we'll find inside, it's unlikely we will be adequately prepared on the first trip."

"I see. Yes. That makes sense. I can be the runner up and down the tower."

"Which will be fine if we've brought along what we need. If not, we'll have to procure it and come back another day. We really have no idea what we're up against."

"So, we wait 'til tonight?"

"Essentially. We can precut strands of cord to help us move and secure the panel. We can tie cords around the screwdrivers and make a loop on the other end to secure around our wrists so we don't drop them. We can probably pre-tie some lengths of rope to stand in as we work to remove the screws."

"I know how to do that," Kit said. "Let's look at those pictures again and see just how long those ropes will need to be."

Half an hour later the equipment had been prepared. They kept one eye on the engineer's shack to update the timeline. Being an engineer at a transmission tower in the Yukon seemed to require roughly one cigarette per hour. At a later date, Kit *would* see that they received packets of information detailing the horrors of lung cancer.

It was just after three.

"I'm going to see if I can get some shut eye," David said. "An old guy like me needs his rest before hanging from a tower a hundred feet above a rocky meadow."

"I suppose I should, too. I'd really rather go for a naked stroll out there."

"Why?"

"Partly just because I can – since it's legal and all. Partly to test out that old Indian's adage."

"Which one is that?"

"You know. At the first Thanksgiving one of the settlers reportedly asked an Indian why he didn't get cold being naked in the near freezing temperature. The Indian asked the man if the White man's face got cold in such weather. The Settler thought for a minute and then answered that, interestingly, it didn't. The Indian then went on to explain: 'I'm all face!' "

"Go. Do your thing; just stay out of the line of sight from down below. You

can regale me with the results of your experiment at a later date. Don't get any vital parts frost bit."

"My genitals you mean."

"I was referring to your *fingers*. We'll need them later on unless you're indicating that you've developed a way to direct a screwdriver from your crotch?"

"Go to sleep, Uncle David. Have a kinky dream on me."

It hadn't been kinky – just too short. After three hours Kit was back shaking his uncle's shoulder.

"Fire! David. Wake up!"

"Fire? What fire?" came David's response as he struggled against his desire to remain asleep. He sat up and unzipped the bag.

"Northeast in the woods. No idea how it started. Probably still a mile away. I came upon it after I left the LaHood's campsite. I was walking north."

"The LaWho's?"

"LaHoods. An older couple. They camp up here every June to celebrate their anniversary. This is number fifty one."

"Biography later, Kit. Back to the fire."

"It's coming this way. I didn't know whether to come here first or go warn Tom and Sarah. I figured you could warn the engineers and I'll go back to the LaHood's camp."

"Go! And at least *take* some pants, son."

David slipped into his shoes and grabbed a jacket. As Kit ran up the hill, David made his way down and was soon pounding on the door of the shack.

"Fire!" he called even before the door was opened.

To his surprise the sprinkler system was immediately on and a siren began sounding from somewhere atop the tower.

'First things first, I guess,' David thought to himself.

The door opened. There were no introductions. David provided what he knew.

"Coming from the north. Perhaps still a mile away."

"You camping?"

"Yes. Our tent is just up there to the right – South – maybe a hundred meters or so."

"The sprinklers will drench that area. Do you know about the old couple?"

"My nephew does. Eighteen. He's gone to help them."

"They camp by the pond. Been through this before. They'll get their things onto the raft and wait it out in the middle of the water. Have you run into anybody else?"

"I haven't."

"Things should be fine then. I'm Pierre by the way."

He offered his hand.

“David. My nephew is Kit. Just here for a couple of days. You don’t seem appropriately concerned if I’m allowed that observation.”

“The fire? A way of life up here this time of year. The mountain is honeycombed with wide fire lanes. Most fires burn themselves out inside their own little island. The Rangers were alerted as soon as I hit the siren. They’ll be overhead and jumping into the area in minutes if it seems they are needed.”

The first hint of smoke wafted down the slope. Pierre re-entered the shack and returned moments later with two masks.

“Charcoal. Wear it and you’ll be fine. I’d suggest that either you come inside here or get back to your tent and stay zipped inside to avoid the concentrated smoke. Usually three or four hours and these things are all over. The wind whips them up to a fury but that makes them burn out in a hurry.”

“I think I’ll return to the tent then.”

“Thanks for the warning, by the way. If you have a vehicle I’d move it out into the center of the fire break.”

“Thanks. I appreciate your help.”

As David began the climb back up the slope he placed a call to Kit.

“By the time I got here they already had things loaded onto a big raft – apparently here for just such an emergency – and they’re now poling it out into the center of the little lake like it was some damned sightseeing excursion. I’m heading back to you. You okay? I hear a siren.”

“I’m fine. Siren is on the tower. I alerted the engineers and they took over like this was an everyday occurrence.”

“That’s how the LeHoods were. Said it should be over in a couple of hours. Invited us for breakfast in the morning. The box okay?”

“Big one or little one? Guess it doesn’t matter. Both are safe at this point. I’ll be waiting at the tent. They said that as water soaked as it is it would be safe. Try not to breathe the smoke.”

“I’m on the run holding one pant leg over my mouth.”

“That must be an interesting pose.”

As David arrived at the tent, Kit emerged from the woods. His pants were tied around his neck, legs knotted in front and the rest flapping in the breeze behind him.

“You look like some naked super hero, Son, and that’s *not* what I had in mind when I said to take pants.”

“No time. Things seem to be working out okay. We’re both drenched but a simple toweling down will take care of me. Everything you’re wearing is sopping wet. These sprinklers seem to be very efficient.”

“Aren’t you frozen, Kit?”

“Surprisingly not. Having just run two or three miles probably helps account for that. You?”

“Chilled to the bone. Let’s get inside and start the heater.”

"Will the jeep be okay out there?" Kit asked.

"It's parked right about where the engineer suggested we should put it."

They were soon dry and warm. Kit kept up to date on the fire's progress by periodically raising the flap on the window. He was full of conversation.

"You'll really like the LaHoods, Uncle David. He's a retired railroad engineer. Must be in there mid-seventies. Spry as hell – er spry like you wouldn't expect at their age. They fed me stew. Sopped it up with bread she'd baked right there in a propane oven."

"They were okay with your lack of attire."

"Actually it never came up. I must admit I was a bit hesitant when I first came upon them but Tom spotted me and waved me toward them. Sarah said they had a great grandson about my age who was attending UCLA. After an hour I felt like I'd known them all my life."

"Fascinating!"

"What?"

"You. Them. The situation. The culture here that is in so many ways like the one we grew up in and yet *is* so different in at least one important way."

"You're speaking of Patsy's campfire stew, of course."

"Of course."

"I suppose, then, you could say the culture here is *barely* different from back home," Kit said.

David shook his head. The patter of the water on the tent stopped indicating the sprinklers had been turned off.

"What's the fire doing out there?" David asked.

"Actually, it's burned its way right up to the eastern edge of the meadow. The trees look like huge torches. What a waste of natural resources. Oh, Oh! One just fell into the meadow and another over there."

"Spreading our way?"

"No. Just laying there, burning themselves out. Hooray for the wet meadow!"

His eyes brightened as he turned to David. "You know, if all of this is not real but just a sleep-time image, it could be considered a wet dream."

David groaned.

"If you have enjoyable images of raging fires during your wet dreams remind me to set up an appointment for you with a shrink when we get back home."

"Does this change our itinerary for tonight?" Kit asked ignoring his uncle's comment.

"Can't be sure. If this brings a flock of Rangers into the area to mop up, it may. We'll just have to wait and see. Anything on the radio about it?"

"Let's see."

Kit had soon sampled each of the four local stations but heard nothing

about it.

"I guess it's not a big enough deal to report."

"Guess not," David said.

"Think I'll catch forty winks," Uncle David.

"Good idea, *you* having been fed and entertained by the local social committee and all. I think I'll scrounge through the goodie box Fritz prepared for us, then probably join you."

He feasted on a ham salad sandwich, slaw, and potato salad – much like the picnic fare David had grown up with, spread out on a blanket along the shores of the *Kenapocomoco River*.

The more David had to wait the more eager – no – more anxious he became. It gave him too much time to think. He was concerned about Kit's safety – either way. The mission would be filled with perils but of course without it the worst disaster in the Planet's history would occur.

He managed a quiet chuckle thinking about his nephew's inaugural, foray into the official realm of nudism. It prompted recollections of discussions long ago shelved.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"You knew it wasn't a clothes optional beach, Ari. You had to know you'd get into trouble."

"A Stephanopoulos doesn't get into trouble. The peasants of the world just fail to recognize with whom they are dealing. It'll be fixed before sunrise tomorrow. I'll be back out there in my skin next weekend and nobody will lay a hand on me."

David shook his head; it acknowledged a multitude of dilemmas. First, that Ari had been raised to believe he was above the law and the conventions of acceptable social behavior. Second, that, in fact, *he was*, since his father had always fixed things. Third, that he sincerely assumed that those who believed differently from him had to be wrong. The list could continue but that would serve no additional purpose. Ari was amoral in most every aspect of his life.

"The problem is," Ari continued as the two of them took seats in his living room, "That if we were to hang all the prudes in this country there'd be nobody left to serve and educate us."

"Define prude," David said.

"Prude: He who is either so insecure about his own body and sexuality that he defends his erroneous position of modesty so as to make it seem normal when it most certainly is not, *or* he who has inaccurately collapsed nudity and sexual activity into in a single concept, which he falsely defines as evil."

"Guess I can't disagree. The prudes are in control of that whole area here in the states you know."

"I know. The Europeans have it right – more relaxed and reasonable. Hard to find anybody on that continent that would be offended by one of my nude strolls down the sidewalk."

"Nuns, perhaps?"

"Hey. They don't have to look. Interesting thought. In a blind society, nudity would undoubtedly not be a factor at all."

"Meaning it's not the state of being nude that is relevant – only the state of being able to see the nude that counts."

"Right. The problem is with the viewer not the actor."

"Sometimes I get the idea – like at the beach today – that you actually enjoy offending people more than you do parading around naked."

"Maybe?"

"Then it's not your right *to be nude* that you're exercising; it's your right *to offend people*."

"You're twisting things."

"I don't think so. And although I'd defend your right to be nude – up to a point – I'd not defend your right to be purposefully offensive."

"Remember what Eleanor Roosevelt had to say about that."

"Yes. It's not exactly this issue, however. She said that she refused to accept put downs and therefore no one could ever put her down – that's probably a poor paraphrase but I'm sure she didn't intend to legitimize being offensive."

"If somebody was offended by seeing men without hats on, would you rush to cover your head or just pass on him as an oddball?"

"You've made your point – poorly, however. This culture generally agrees that bare heads on men are acceptable – not so with bare genitals."

"So, if a goodly portion of some group takes offense at some natural, normal, reasonable, activity or state, you'll bow to their point of view and give up your legitimate right to do your thing."

"Sounds reprehensible when you put it that way," David said, perhaps beginning to cave.

"It's akin to book burning or banning in order to make sure that any ideas that are contrary to yours aren't available for comparison."

"I suppose. That's usually just done by those who are basically really insecure about the validity of their own beliefs, of course, and are afraid they will come up short by comparison."

"It's interesting how our discussions segue from one topic to others that are only marginally related, isn't it?" Ari said.

"It's often the very nature of that marginality that is most enlightening. Seeing how topics, which on the surface are unrelated, suddenly become first cousins."

"You are still going to tell me that when I stroll that beach nude I'm being wrongly insensitive to the rights others have to be offended."

"Interestingly, a more precise formulation than I had constructed."

"Being offended is strictly a result of that pesky human intelligence, you know," Ari said, pleased to once again be able to return to his basic point. Just think how much better things would be if nobody let himself react that way. Where does it come from do you suppose – being offended?"

"It comes from feeling your own belief about something is being attacked or at least not accepted. Rather than looking at that as an opportunity to re-examine that belief, the person bypasses that option – unable to legitimize the possibility that his belief could be in error."

"So, taking offense is in reality an unabashed rejection of the other person's disquieting belief without any intention of either examining it or re-examining your own."

"That's how I see it," Ari. "I'd think you'd feel offended constantly," David said breaking a broad smile.

"And that would be why?"

"Because the rest of us hold so many beliefs that are contrary to yours."

"But, I'm *irked* at everybody's stupidity more than I'm offended. What does that do to your theory?"

"Makes me wonder if, perhaps, to be offended one has to believe the other person might have more power to spread his belief than you have to spread yours."

"And . . ." Ari said feeling it was an incomplete response.

"And, since you falsely feel all powerful you can't be offended."

"When are you going to realize that when you're as rich as I am you ARE all powerful?"

* * *

David crawled back into his sleeping bag still considering that final, frightening, statement. If Ari succeeded in this project, he proved himself right – of course he'd probably never know that for sure.

Kit tried to be quiet after he awoke but 'quiet Kit' was an oxymoron.

"What time is it?" David asked turning toward the boy.

"Going on 11:30. I was going to let you sleep until midnight."

"Your upbeat humming of *Abide With Me* was somehow not conducive to continued slumber."

"Is that what it was? Pretty catchy tune when done Rock-A-Billy."

David unzipped and emerged from the warmth of the sleeping bag.

"I see you've rejoined the modest majority," David said poking fun at Kit for being fully dressed.

"And I see that you haven't."

It was worth a chuckle.

"I'm starved," Kit went on. "You?"

"I could eat. What you have there?"

"I'm thinking pimento cheese sandwich, chips and lemonade. Maybe a fruit cup for dessert. Plenty for you."

"Sounds good."

As David dressed Kit arranged the spread on a towel on the floor between them.

"So we go tonight?" he asked.

"Let's do a bit of reconnaissance first."

"Done it."

"And?"

"Not a ranger to be found. They're probably all back in the old bunk house sawing logs."

"Okay. We go, then."

"I got our utility belts outfitted," Kit said. Flashlights, screw drivers, pliers, hammer, hack and keyhole saws, the cords and ropes we cut, and a hand full of

screws in case we drop some."

"We have miner's lamps to wear on our foreheads," David said. "Hands free light. They should be our best friends up there."

"Still going to take the panel from the box this trip?"

"Oh, yes. If there's a chance of finishing it up in one climb I want to be able to do that."

"Any idea how it will be used – what it's really for?" Kit asked.

David worked the combination on the box and removed the panel, turning it one way and then another.

"Your guess is as good mine. I haven't spent much time speculating. Figure we can't know 'til we get there so why expend the energy?"

"Do you think they will all work the same? I mean once we get this one figured out will we have the key to it all?"

"My guess would be yes, but it's a guess," David said setting it aside to continue eating. "I think the game here is in locating the sites and then the bombs, not solving some 'turn it off' puzzle. Ari would only use that as a last resort."

"How will we know if we have really defused – or whatever – the bombs?"

"Again, I don't think Ari would leave any doubt in our minds. He will have designed some way to make it obvious, I'm sure."

"To call this a chess match would be way too cliché but it's fascinating how well the two of you seem to know each other's minds even after all these years."

"I've read everything he's published and you can bet he's done the same with my stuff."

"You haven't had any contact since you left Harvard? That seems really strange since you seemed so close all those years."

"We grew to love each other, Kit, but we never came to really like each other. You understand the difference I'm proposing?"

"Yeah. I think so. If you'd have liked each other you'd have probably kept in contact."

"Exactly."

"We got a *better* deal, huh?" Kit said, putting down his drink and looking his uncle straight in the eyes.

"Meaning?"

"We love each other *and* we really like each other."

It had been delivered not as a question but as an undeniable fact.

"That's how it's always been between us. It is a wonderful relationship."

Kit nodded and then guzzled the last of his lemonade. "I gotta pee. Want to come along and make an X for old time sake?"

"I'm fine. You'll have to find some other form of urinary entertainment."

He was soon back.

"Hit a tree from ten feet."

"Much more than I wanted to know – *ten* feet? Really?"

It was just the response Kit had hoped for.

"I'm still the king!"

"The king?"

"Yeah. Always been able to pee further than any of the guys in my class."

"You held contests?"

"Of course. I'm waiting for it to become an Olympic sport."

"This is not a conversation you could have with just anybody, you know."

"Yes. I do. It's a shame how people get all bent out of shape conversing about such natural human processes. Some make it seem like if you don't speak of it, it doesn't really exist or happen. Like parents having sex or ministers going to the bathroom."

"Do you need more time for this monologue about bodily functions or can we get ourselves down to the tower?"

"I'm ready. My comments about the oft denied, though universal, practice of autoerotic behavior among adolescent males can wait until another time."

"And I appreciate that. It will be cold up there in that north wind. You dressed for it?"

"Got on three pairs of boxers to protect my ecstasy center, double sox, and I'll wear my thermal jacket. What about gloves?"

"They'll be good for the climbs up and down but may get in the way of our actual work up there."

"Gottcha! Wear 'em. Remove 'em. Wear 'em."

Even the darkest moments of the Yukon summer night did not compare with Indiana dark.

They wasted no time and made it to the tower undetected. Kit took the lead up the ladder. David followed a few rungs behind. They were soon bellied down on the top of the box.

Dawn inched its colorful fingers above the horizon. The cords were laid out flat between them. They slid themselves toward the far side away from the shack.

"Secure your safety rope to the tower," David said, immediately realizing it had been unnecessary.

Kit smiled accepting it as merely an alternative form of saying, 'I love you, Kit'.

They then arranged the ropes that would hold him as he slipped over the side and began working to remove the screws on the lower portion of the large panel. David would do the same across the top from his position on his belly. Well before Kit was finished, David threaded the cord into the screw holes on each side of the panel and tied them securely. At that point the panel could not fall.

As Kit removed the final screw a gust of wind pushed him and the panel away from the tower. He struggled to grasp both edges of the wooden sheet. With that accomplished his weight settled it back against the tower. Under control again, the panel was screwed, temporarily, on top of the panel just to Kit's right.

"What do you see inside?" David whispered as he strained to look down over the side from where he lay.

"Like a huge, silver colored, propane tank eight feet in diameter and probably ten feet long. It's sitting on an eighteen inch high wooden platform. Electrical cables running into that platform. Hard to believe I'm less than an inch away from the deadliest bio-toxin ever created."

"Looks to be how much work space in front?" David asked then offered a guess, "Five or so feet?"

"About that. Shall I enter?"

"Yes. I'm coming down now. Don't touch anything, of course."

With a bit more effort than Kit had expended, David was over the side and with a hand from the boy soon onto the platform inside the box.

"My goodness?" he said suddenly overwhelmed by the magnitude of what he was seeing. "A vile six inches tall would contain enough toxin to kill everybody on the planet if it could be appropriately distributed. Can you imagine the devastation this amount would bring?"

"From the way it's constructed it's clearly intended to explode upward," Kit said. "The floor of this thing is four inch thick steel plating resembling the armor used on tanks That should direct it anyway but down. I assume the explosive is in the wooden base."

"We're here to find out how to defuse it," David said. "Begin searching."

"For . . .?"

David shrugged. "Whatever the short, thick, line may represent. My guess is it has to be in this wooden base."

"Like maybe behind this metal plate that's screwed here on the front?"

"Let's take a look."

There were eight screws holding in place a ten by twenty inch piece of sheet metal. Once off, an electrical panel of a sort was exposed. There was one green light – lit – simply labeled 'on' and a white light – unlit – labeled 'off '. No switches or knobs or dials or levers or circuit breakers were visible.

"What do you suppose that second smaller aluminum plate there is about?" Kit asked.

"I believe I know. I think *that* is the thick short line we've run into on each of the panels. Let's get it off."

Again, there were eight screws.

"I'd say that's a bingo, Uncle David."

Inside, it looked to be a slit of approximately the same dimensions as the

end of the Whitehorse panel from the box. David immediately removed it from his back pack."

"See the tongue-like thing there jutting out in the center," Kit said pointing. "It has grooves on top like our panel. I'll bet they're like a barcode that can be read by that gadget when it's slipped into place."

"Okay. Here goes," David said positioning the panel so it could slide into the slot.

It wouldn't budge. He tried again but it would not slip over the tongue.

"Turn it around," Kit suggested. "Those grooves don't match up from that end."

David reversed the panel. "It's a fit!" he answered.

Gently, slowly, steadily he guided it into the opening. In the end they heard a click. The panel had been caught, secured and David could not remove it.

"That better have been the right move, Kit. It won't come out."

A low whirring sound began from somewhere deep inside the base of the platform.

"That's unnerving," Kit said drawing back.

There was another click. The green light flickered once but remained on. There was a second click. The green light flickered again but remained lit.

Kit reached over and took his uncle's hand. David grasped it firmly putting his other one on top.

A third click – louder than the others. Kit's grip intensified. In a single act the green light went dark and the white light lit.

They waited. They watched the lights. They listened for another click. Nothing.

"Nothing's good, wouldn't you say, Unc?"

"Seems to me in this case *nothing* is very good, indeed."

"Let's just sit back and watch and wait a few more minutes. Then, if things continue to seem right, we'll put it back as it was."

"You believe it was really that easy?" Kit asked finally extracting his fingernails from David's flesh."

"Like I said, most likely the game was in the search."

"He'll know we've defused this one, I suppose," Kit said really asking.

"I'm sure he will – does, in fact."

"So, he also knows we've used the wind currents approach rather than basing the search only on his hieroglyphic messages on the box."

"I'm sure he's known that from the moment Connie filed the flight plan."

Kit nodded.

"The six sides of the box *are* the six keys he mentioned in the letter aren't they?"

"It seems so, Kit. Each one tailor made to fit a different slot."

They sat in silence for some time each contemplating the magnitude of the assignment that still lay ahead.

"What if we miscalculated on one of the sites?" Kit asked.

"Then, I suppose, it will be back to the drawing board. We did it once so we should be able to do it again. In light of this experience, my guess is that we've hit each one square on the head. Our problem will be locating the specific place in each venue."

Kit nodded.

"Let's get this puzzle put back together, then," David suggested.

The two plates were soon in place. David climbed back to the top of the big box. Kit took his position suspended by the ropes. Together they moved the plywood panel back into place and reinserted the screws. Kit scrambled back onto the top and untied the ropes. They sat and rested, both tired from the physically taxing activities.

It was 1:47 a.m. The excursion had taken less time than David had allowed. If the nicotine breaks stayed on schedule one should be occurring again at 2:00. That timeline would provide sufficient time for their descent and retreat back to the tent.

David hit the ground first with Kit not far behind. They reached for one another at the same moment. It was a long, powerful, embrace.

"You were great up there, Kit."

"We both were, I'd say."

"I hate heights you know," David admitted.

"If I did, I've forgotten. You okay, then?"

"Both feet on solid ground and both of us safe and sound. I'm just fine."

They made their way back to the tent and shed the utility belts at the door.

"We going to wait around for breakfast with Tom and Sarah?" Kit asked.

"We owe ourselves a treat, I suppose. Sure."

"You're really going to like them."

"We have what . . . probably four hours 'til then?"

"Until six. Yeah."

"We can be packed and ready to go before we leave for their camp," David suggested. "Want a few hours of sleep first?"

"Depends on the plans."

"I'll contact Connie and see about the flight to the Azores. Then we can set our itinerary."

"Not even one night in that wonderfully soft looking, super king size, bed?"

"No but I imagine you'll be able to luxuriate in the spa for several hours. I'll arrange for accommodations in Ponta Delgada. I imagine that's a bit over four thousand miles from here as the crow flies. Probably refuel somewhere on the eastern coast of the United States before setting out over the Atlantic."

"That's a ten to twelve hour trip in the Gulf Stream," Kit added. "I suppose

most of that will be study time."

Depends when we leave. We'll divide the time left between sleep and study. Want to arrive refreshed.

"Ponta Delgada is the capital of the Azores if memory serves me," Kit said. "How will we get to Pico?"

"Either boat or a small prop commuter plane. The Gulf Stream can't land on the island's tiny field. I figure the first night in the capital and then see if Pico has any rooms open. I doubt if it will. It's tourist season year round there with a very limited number of small hotels."

"Hope we get some beach time – girls you know. A growing boy needs his daily dose of girls and frankly, Sarah really doesn't count."

"I'm told the waitresses in the dining room at our hotel here are . . . let's see how did Fritz describe them . . . *drop dead gorgeous*."

"I'll eat light this morning. Then maybe a mid-morning snack in the dining room. Can I invite one back to the room for a quick spa session?"

"You're of legal age. That will be your decision, I guess. I thought you were being loyal to Megan."

"You're saying an hour or so in a tub with a beautiful, naked, girl might not appear to be full out loyalty?"

David shook his head, thinking the boy had answered his own question.

They opted for some shut eye and awoke at five to break camp and load the jeep. By 5:45 they were on the trail to the LaHood's.

"Suppose they'll recognize you all covered up in jeans and jacket?" David joked.

"How could they fail to remember this adorable face?"

He mugged a chin up pose and they both laughed. Each was determined to keep spirits up and laughing had always done that for them.

They kept to the firebreak which though charred into stubble was easier to traverse than the forested area with fallen trees and still smoldering logs.

Tom was clearly watching for them and raised an arm high at first sight. He walked to meet them. They were also met by the aroma of biscuits and the sound of crackling bacon on the griddle.

"Kit! Good to see you. This must be Uncle David."

"Guilty!" David said offering his hand.

They walked to where Sarah was fussing over the several pots and skillets on the compact four burner camp stove. Kit made the introduction.

"This is my Uncle David. David this is Sarah. She makes the best stew this side of . . . well, this side of where ever they might possibly make it better."

They exchanged smiles as she continued poking, turning, and stirring.

"I was chiding Kit on the way up the trail that you folks might not recognize him fully dressed."

Sarah put down her spatula and took Kit's cheeks in her hands.

"Who could ever forget this adorable face?"

Kit looked at David and raised his eyebrows as if to say, 'I told you so'. They shared a chuckle.

Kit found it difficult to stick to his pledge to eat lightly when actually faced with platters of bacon, sausage, eggs, fried potatoes, and fresh, hot, biscuits. Fortunately, he was eighteen so could eat that sized offering six times a day if available.

They enjoyed each other's company and lingered over the natural beauty of the setting well past nine. They exchanged email information so they could stay in contact and the two were then on their way back to the jeep.

"It's reassuring, you know?" Kit said as they walked.

"What?"

"How nice people are."

"More!"

"There I was strolling through a strange forest in a strange country and I came upon a couple of strangers. They were really nice people. I just chanced upon them and what I chanced upon weren't bad people or judgmental people or crazy people or terrorist people or deranged people or offended people or proselytizing people, but they were *nice* people. They had no agenda other than to be nice and accepting and helpful. It supports my belief in the goodness of man – universally. Do you suppose Ari hasn't ever had that experience?"

"He would have interpreted the event quite differently. He'd have seen the technology involved in making the plastic tent and its contents, the propane filled tanks that powered the stove and refrigerator, the pick-up that brought them there, and the gasoline it took to do so, and other things that he would contend prove his point about how destructive humans are to the other species."

"Ari's just a world class party pooper!"

David smiled and put his arm around Kit as they entered the meadow above the tower.

"Ari would enjoy that moniker."

"It wasn't intended as a compliment."

"Ari refuses to be put down even – or especially, perhaps – *when* it's deserved."

"I'd like to meet him."

"I hope you can – when all of this over. He'll be honored to meet you and won't make any bones about it. His faults aside, Ari is honest and gives credit where credit is due."

"This has to be the weirdest situation in the history of man," Kit said.

"How's that?"

"Two brilliant men, who love and respect each other as much as any two men ever have, are now locked in mortal combat with the survival of mankind held in the balance."

"Remember that line. You can use it on the front cover of the book that you'll someday probably write about all this – fictionalized, of course."

"I'm being serious!"

"I know you are, Kit. I just didn't know how to respond to the content."

"But you're never at a loss for words."

"Often, I am, but I find that once I begin talking the right ones usually seem to fall into place."

"Precisely formulating that initial elusive, alluring, speck of an idea . . ."

"What?"

"You wrote that in your Intro to Philosophy book. It's one of my favorite quotes of all time probably because I love that moment in mind. I know there's a concept just out of reach of my consciousness and I have to find a way to reel it in and make it my own."

"I'm impressed. I really wrote that, did I?"

Kit shook himself loose from his uncle and planted a fist into his shoulder.

"Someday I'll have to teach you how to just take a compliment without messing it all up," the boy said.

"I never intend to mess up things you want to say, Kit, and I hope you know I always appreciate such comments coming from you."

"And once again he plays down the tribute, turning it onto the one attempting to deliver it," Kit said as if doing a play by play.

"As the philosophic pig once said, 'I ham what I ham'."

"And, folks, he follows that moderately successful strategy with a brilliant diversionary tactic, blunted only by his choice of punning rather than expending the necessary mental energy to utilize actual humor."

"Think you can stop your string of stinging commentaries long enough to get us down this hill and back to town?"

"When a hot tub filled with gorgeous waitresses is a possible reward, you can just bet I'll find a way to get us there."

"In one piece, was implied, my friend. In one piece!"

Kit smiled as the old jeep jerked itself to life and began picking its way down the slope.

"So, the fantasy has advanced to being a spa filled with girls – plural – now has it?" David said chiding the boy.

"You have to realize I've had virtually no opportunity to 'dawdle' since we arrived here, Unc."

David shook his head, buckled in, and took a firm grip on the armrest in anticipation of a spirited sprint down the slope.

As with everything Kit decided to do well, he was an excellent driver. It was 10:00 on the dot as he drew the key from the ignition in front of their hotel.

Alex was sitting in the lobby waiting for them.

"Glad to see you didn't get singed up there. I hear a transformer blew and

started the fire."

"We survived, enjoyed the beautiful panorama, did some hiking and climbing, enjoyed wonderful cooking, and now we're ready to move on," Kit said.

"I must say that so far this assignment has been nothing like we were told it would be. I'm not complaining, mind you, just don't understand, I guess."

"Let's just say we are holding you in reserve," David said, flashing a smile.

"The flight plan has been filed and we can leave by noon. It will be a direct flight to Halifax where we'll refuel. Then onto the Azores, hopefully without any stops."

"You really enjoy pulling my chain, don't you," Kit said.

"You noticed!"

"Oh yes!" Kit answered. "I will remind you of this famous quote that I try to keep in mind just for times like this: "Courage is not the absence of fear, but rather the judgment that something else is more important than fear."

"Isn't that Ambrose Redmoon?"

"You are *very* good, Sir."

"I will counter your quote with this," Alex said. "I've developed a new philosophy ... I only dread one day at a time."

"I'm afraid you got me," Sir. "I don't know the source."

"The quintessential philosopher of the twentieth century, Charlie Brown!"

"If you two are finished jousting with marginally relevant quotations, we all need to be getting ready. What time of day will we arrive?"

"If we leave here at one p.m. and use a half hour in Halifax we will be landing at about 7:30 tomorrow morning – Azores' time. Both ends of the journey will be on daylight savings time."

"Fine. We'll be at the plane in time to make that schedule," David said.

"That's like skipping eight hours of time?" Kit said a question in his tone. "Will that make me eight hours older than I am or younger than I am?"

"A grand problem for you to contemplate," David said with a wink at Alex, not unnoticed by Kit.

Alex left through the front door. David placed a call to Fritz and arranged for him to pick up the jeep and accessories and for him to get them to the airport by 12:45.

"So, several hours to fill here," Kit said. "I wonder if they allow skinny dipping in the pool? I didn't bring a swimming suit."

"You could ask, of course, rather than standing here speculating or I imagine some of your boxers would pass as a suit."

"You are the Man!" Kit said kidding his Uncle for the unnecessary suggestion.

"Let's meet in the dining room at 11:30 for lunch," David suggested. "We really never unpacked so it won't take long to be on our way."

An hour later Kit arrived for lunch, his hair still wet and uncombed.

"Looks like you opted for the pool over the hot tub?" David observed handing him a menu.

"Yup. Girls everywhere! Couldn't have possibly fit them all into the Spa."

"And, just to quench an old guy's prurient curiosity did you go boxers or skin?"

He smiled his impish grin.

"Both, actually."

"I'll need more!"

"I arrived in boxers, dove in, and surfaced in my skin. The girls all seemed to enjoy it and helped me dive for my wayward togs – or would that be 'tog'. Unfortunately it was located almost immediately – by a guy – so the excitement was too soon over."

"Want to brave the venison this noon?" David asked as if it were really intended as a suggestion.

"I'm game."

"So was the venison, once, of course."

It deserved and received a groan from Kit *and* a man kibitzing from a nearby table.

David was smugly satisfied with himself.

They ordered and Kit got down to business.

"So, the Azores and Pico Island in particular."

David reviewed the basics.

"Pico is the second largest island but only has about 6% of the population of the Azores. It sits in the middle and along the southern edge of the cluster of nine islands. It's largely a volcanic mountain that rises to a height of about 7,300 feet and is surrounded by a narrow lowland ringed in sandy beaches. Lots of tiny vineyards dot the slopes of the mountains. Cattle graze everywhere supporting the cheese industry.

"The clues from the box led us to the third floor of the old church that has the double steeples and the spade shaped plume between them, and to something resembling a staff with notes or a grapevine with grapes on wires."

"So," Kit said laying out the short version of the task, "We locate the church, go up two flights of stairs, enter the southeast room and go about defusing the bomb. Seems pretty straightforward and far less strenuous than what we had to do here."

"It would seem that way. We won't really know until we're there. It does seem that gaining access to that room is the crucial step."

"What else do you consider essential information? It seemed I was way over prepared for Whitehorse."

"It's probably not possible to be over prepared since you can never know which of all the information is going to be relevant."

"You sound like a philosophy professor speaking of life in general."

"Hmm! Wonder why?"

A smile passed between them.

"All of that aside, if things run as smoothly on Pico as they apparently did here, we may not need much more information, David said."

"IF! There you go again with the 'if' word."

"We have to consider the possibility that Ari has intentionally made each venue more difficult than the ones before."

"I hadn't thought of that but I suppose it's a real possibility. Is that how he's put together?"

"Ari had a game he played with himself when he was an undergraduate. Each successive term paper he wrote had to be longer and cite more references than the one before. His Senior Thesis was something over five hundred pages long."

"I see. Well then. We may actually need more than the five days I was just privately projecting."

"If Ari gave us fifteen days, he intended that we would need to use fifteen days. He'd allow us to use up precious time by being lulled into staying here and watching the beautiful women dance at night or laze around the tempting accommodations he arranged for us here. I'm also sure he'd have a bevy of *very* friendly girls knocking at our door every night if we were to hang around."

"You think we missed a set last night?"

"I'd bet on it."

"Darn!"

"You're a one girl guy now, remember?"

"I figure I could have just looked at all their naked charms without ever touching them – Looked and looked and looked."

"Well, *looky* here. The food has arrived," David said trying to move on.

"And *you* wouldn't have looked given an opportunity like that?" Kit asked not ready to let the topic go."

"I'm with Molly now and only Molly. We share our 'charms' with each other and don't go looking elsewhere."

"Very mature, I suppose. Not much fun but very mature."

"I made hotel reservations in Ponta Delgada," David said, "The capital on Sao Miguel, where we will land. Then at the *Aldeia da fonte* hotel in Lajes do Pico on the south eastern part of Pico Island. It is where I stayed before. You'll love it."

"The Chinese restaurant place?"

"Yes. *Hocus Pocus*, assuming it's still there."

"With scantily clad oriental waitresses?"

"Afraid not although there should be plenty of Scantily Clads on the beaches this time of year. The air and water temperatures will be seventy plus degrees."

"Lucked into reservations did you? Thought you figured they'd be booked up a year ahead of time."

"It appears I had already arranged for them last year at this time."

"Ari! He's been at this for at least a year then."

"Seems that way."

"He has great faith in you, doesn't he?"

"It would seem so. It'll be interesting to see if we have been so well prepared for at the rest of the venues. Ari may have figured that we would most likely get to these first two sites."

"What I can't figure is how he knew when we'd be here?"

"The reservation is for three weeks. He's not the kind to take any chances."

"So tonight, which, if my calculations are correct will really be tomorrow night, we'll be in the capital. Then tomorrow – the next day, by which *time* will have caught up with us – we'll move on to Pico and the Scantily Clads."

"That's the plan but if we are rested enough we may go ahead and spend the *first* night on Pico. Time is precious; we just have no way of knowing *how* precious yet."

"Then, once on Pico we start by locating the church depicted on the box panel," Kit added.

"Right. I don't anticipate that should be a problem unless there are a number of look-alike churches."

"Hadn't thought of that," Kit said. "I'll have to say that on the surface, at least, this still looks way too easy."

"I have to agree – with the emphasis on the word, 'looks'. We have to keep in mind the man with whom we are dealing."

"That would have flowed more pleasingly as an exception to the rule."

"What? I'm lost!"

"We have to keep in mind the man with whom we are dealing, would have sounded better if you'd have gone ahead and arranged it with the preposition at the end: 'We have to keep in mind the man whom we are dealing with.' In fact it would really sound more natural to forget the whole objective thing and use the word, 'who'."

"R-i-n-g!!"

"What? Now *you've* lost *me*."

"The bell. End of English class. On to more productive endeavors."

Kit grinned feeling that at least a short explanation was due. "I've decided that if I am going to write about all this someday, I need to hone my grammatical skills."

"So I can expect a running critique of my every utterance from now on?"

"Pretty much. Yes! That's how it will be."

He nodded repeatedly as if to appropriately emphasize it.

David nodded, accepting the challenge.

"Then, from time to time, I'll try to mix in an esoteric metaphor and dangle the occasional participle for your erudite pleasure."

"I won't even ask, but *erudite*? Really!"

CHAPTER NINE

Once again, Kit – eyes closed – held his breath and crossed his fingers. Once again the landing was smooth and uneventful. Once again a limo eased seamlessly into place beside the plane.

"The limo's white this time, Uncle David," Kit offered exploring the area through the window. "Ari's family crest is on the door. Looks like a female driver. Unfortunately, the uniform tends to squash what should be her most excellent charms."

"How frequently is it that a guy your age supposedly thinks about females and sex?" David asked more to make a point than to receive an answer. But this was Kit.

"I believe it's something like once every two minutes provided the boy's mind is focused on something else – like homework or his job. Without such focus it's all quite continuous."

Alex entered the cabin from up front.

"Any particular instructions?"

"None above what I've passed on. We'll need transportation to Pico later this morning. Should we go commercial or can you find something?"

"Connie's already arranged for a six seater biplane. The choices are not wide here but with the constant breeze and unpredictable updrafts we figured a double wing jobber would be most dependable. We'll have it right here ready and waiting anytime after nine."

"Sounds fine. We'll be staying over there indefinitely. You two have rooms here."

"Indefinitely – sounds fortuitous. Your plans are flexible, then, are they?"

Kit pulled out another quotation to test the man with (with which to test the man!).

"It is safer to accept any chance that offers itself, and extemporize a procedure to fit it . . ."

". . . than to get a good plan matured, and wait for a chance of using it. Thomas Hardy in *Far From the Maddening Crowd*."

"This guy's good," David said as an exaggerated aside to Kit, repeatedly raising his eyebrows toward Alex.

"Worse than that," the boy answered in kind. "I've been having to look them up on the web ahead of time and he just pulls them out of his head."

They exited to the limousine.

"My name is Catarina and I'm at your service twenty four hours a day."

David playfully clapped his hand over Kit's mouth as if to restrain him from asking for a more specific list of those services. Had he known her beautiful name meant 'pure' his roster would have immediately shrunk to a few mundane activities hardly worthy of inquiry.

"You know our hotel, I assume," David said, confident Ari had things well under control.

She nodded and closed their door.

"We'll need transportation on Pico. What do you suggest?"

"Your legs or bicycles. It's only about 25 miles long and maybe ten at the widest point. If you're going up the mountains there are some roads with public transportation that can carry you to wherever your start point might be. Very few vehicles over there. The locals frown on them and especially on foreign drivers."

"And how many locals?"

"Depends who you get your information from. Somewhere between 10,000 and 15,000. Some sources include all the visitors who rent rooms. We Portuguese tend to define facts according to whatever serves our purpose at the moment."

Once again the room had been upgraded with all the amenities.

"And we'll have how many minutes to enjoy all of this?" Kit said.

It was teenage for, 'What a gyp this is going to be'.

"Sorry, Unc. I shouldn't use that tone. I know what we're here for. Sometimes it's just hard to believe that we're really mixed up in this terrible thing. I guess I gripe about stuff hoping to ward off the evil spirits."

"No spirits involved; believe me. It is all a very flesh and blood Ari Stephanopoulos."

"ARI could stand for: *A Real Incubus* or *Another Reprehensible Individual* or . . ."

"I get the idea. How is all this vehemence helping?"

"That sounds like you. Keep it cool and unemotional. Well, I can't do that the way you can. I need to blow my top sometimes."

"You've answered my question. Blow away then!"

"Maybe a few laps in a pool full of girls will help or better yet a lap full of girls in the pool."

His word play and rapidly burgeoning fantasy brought a quick grin to his face.

"If you want a real suit to wear, use your credit card at the gift shop," David said.

"Is that a true option or a direct order?"

"Me? You're favorite Uncle who has spoiled you rotten for the better part of eighteen years, giving you a direct order?"

"Okay, I'll get one but I get to select its degree of skimpatude."

"Just so the vitals are more or less covered."

"I can live with that. A tight, knit, string, thing. Red, I think. Everything is covered yet it leaves nothing to the imagination. Shall I pick one up for you as well?"

"Not at this stop, thank you. Remember to be back here in an hour. We have places to go and things to do."

"One hour. I'll be here – more or less presentable."

He broke into laughter as he left the room. Through the magic of adolescent mood swings he exited, suddenly happy, and was soon clad in slightly more than nothing, treating the girls poolside to a visual feast and replenishing his own plate with large portions of ogle-induced, self-esteem. Those next fifty one minutes defined teen boy heaven.

Meanwhile David allowed himself to become fantasy free in the hot tub in their suite. He did take time to recognize that the process of renewal seemed to take widely divergent forms at different stages of life. It was worth a smile before his mind went blank.

"Uncle David," Came Kit's voice. "Time to rise and shine. Lucky you didn't drown in there asleep like you are."

"Was! It's good to see you, too," he said straightening up. "What time is it?"

"Nine forty."

"Into our clothes then. Catarina will be waiting for us downstairs. I had Connie and Alex transfer our luggage into the biplane so we'll have everything with us on Pico."

"And why did we even bother to check in here?" Kit asked clearly puzzled as he struggled to put things into perspective.

"Girls for you. Hot tub for me. A physical break between Whitehorse and Pico. Short as it was it did me a world of good. How about you?"

"You did good, Unc! If I can just believe there will be a girl break waiting between every leg of this adventure, I'm good to go."

"We'll do our best to work it out, *or in*, or whatever."

"What did you think of my suit, by the way?" Kit asked wringing it out over the hot tub.

"Seemed to *contain* everything."

"That's it? Not sexy, or skimpy, or seemed just right for you? Not even, 'Oh, I hadn't noticed you were wearing anything'."

"A guy's swimming suit is for the gal's to evaluate not Uncles, Nephew!"

"And I suppose I should take some solace in that."

"Discussion finished?" David asked.

"Until we hit that nude beach in Brazil. I may need to chat with you about some strategy for maintaining flaccidity!"

David laughed out loud.

"I really do love you, you know," he said.

"What?"

"Your lifelong, totally natural, uninhibited, honesty about things most other guys would be more than hesitant to bring up."

"Like maintaining flaccidity in situations where erection seems very likely, my questions at thirteen about improving my masturbation techniques – things like that, I suppose?"

"Yes. Things like that."

"You always said I could ask you anything and I've just taken you at your word about it."

"And I'm very pleased that you have, Kit. Really I am. I suppose it's the matter of fact, out of the blue nature those questions often take that amuses me."

"Glad to be of service, Unc. I never charge for enticing endorphins to romp among your neurons."

They were soon on the sidewalk out front. In accordance with the well-established fact of chauffeur magic, Catarina appeared at the curb the very moment they arrived. Before she could exit to open the door, Kit was scooting across the rear seat and David was entering.

"You two make it hard for your driver to do her job according to the rules, you know," she said turning and smiling at them. "Airport?"

"Yes. Same spot you picked us up," David answered. "By the way what's the deal about our not needing passports."

"As an executive of *Stephanopoulos Shipping* there is an arrangement with the government here. I'd keep them with you, however. Word may not be out to some of the backwater constables on Pico."

She turned and handed back an envelope containing euros in a number of denominations and a file card.

"Cash for tips, small items and such. On the card you will find phone numbers and addresses you may need: your pilots' rooms, my cell phone, your hotel on Pico. I took the liberty of having two mountain bikes reserved for you at the hotel, by the way, and have a guide on standby – last number on the card."

"And you did all of this why?" Kit asked.

"I do as my employer tells me to do. He pays me very well for doing practically nothing."

A dozen other questions buzzed in Kit's mind but he thought better than to ask. They enjoyed the scenery along the winding route more or less in silence, occasionally pointing to make certain the other did not miss something of interest.

"The girls here are quite beautiful," Kit said, directing his comment to Catarina.

"Many of the girls at the hotel say the same about you – most *all* of you in fact."

She giggled in a most un-chauffeur-like fashion

"Thank you, er, them, er, just thanks I guess."

She smiled at the boy through the mirror. He grinned. The blush that washed across his face effectively highlighted his natural good looks. He turned toward his uncle.

"What can I say?" David began. "Dashing good looks clearly run in the Lawrence genes."

He craned his neck as if to prove the point by noting his own image in the mirror.

It got him an elbow in the ribs – gentle, the kind that was thrown more out of duty or uneasiness than any degree of true passion.

The plane was ready, well, the plane was pronounced ready by Connie although Kit was not fully convinced.

"Why the extra wing on top?"

"In case the other one falls off, of course," Alex said again pulling the boy's chain. "The manufacturer found that attaching the second was less expensive than making sure the bottom one was fully functional."

Kit was ready: "Oh, what a tangled web we weave. . ."

"When first we practice to deceive! Excellent choice, Kit. That was Sir Walter Scott, writing in *Marmion*, I believe."

"Actually," Connie explained, "two wings allow the plane to keep airborne at very slow speeds and allow quick takeoffs from short runways. Great for aerial observation and gaining access to remote places."

Kit looked at Alex.

"See. Would that have really been so difficult?"

"Difficult *is* as difficult *seems*," Alex said, grinning.

"Who said that?"

"I did. Just now. You *must* learn to pay attention, lad!"

Kit had been had, but in the end he enjoyed it as much as the others.

The flight to Pico took a little over one hour. The landing was less than gentle but its safe conclusion was all that mattered to Kit. A van was waiting to take them and their belongings to the hotel.

"Call if you need us or the plane for any reason," Connie said.

"We'll be poolside," Alex added, "Trying to win over some girls by letting them know we're associates of the young man who wears only the red ribbon."

"I imagine it will take a good deal more than that, old man. But, suck in those bellies and give them my regards."

It was on the top floor – the finest master suite in that hotel but would have been considered only mid-level accommodations on the other island. Regardless it was clean, quaint, light, and very pleasant. Up that high, the north-south cross-ventilation made an adequate substitute for the non-existent air conditioning.

"Pretty cool room," Kit said. "We can see the beach from one side and the mountains from the other. That has to be the volcano way over to the east. It's massive. Look! The top's cut off by a flat ring of clouds."

"I got a good look at it as we circled the island before landing – that would have been during your *eyes-closed-so-tightly-they-teared-phase* of the trip."

"I don't think I'm really scared of landing but I tend to be able to both breath and retain my urine if my eyes are closed during the process, so I opt for that brief period of darkness."

"Considering those alternatives, I can see why you do – and appreciate it by the way."

Kit unzipped his backpack and removed the binoculars.

"You can probably get a better view of the mountain from out on the deck," David said.

"Who's looking at the mountain? I'm about to feast my eyes on the promised beech beauties."

"I should have known," David said. "Okay. Ten minutes of ogling then we need to be off to Madalena Village where we think that church is located."

"Don't forget the translator. I've already programmed it for English to Portuguese."

"Most everybody knows some English here" David said. "It harkens back to the days when the American whaling ships frequented the Island. The merchants and their families soon picked up the language. Also, the prostitutes who could speak English seemed to be the most popular among the sailors and became known as the A.I.s short for *Actofalante Ingles*, or something close to that. It translates roughly as English Speaker."

"So, beautiful women who speak English can be counted on to be verrrry friendly?"

"I think your hormones masked both the time-line I presented and the illogic of your *if-then*, argument."

"AH! I didn't hear an end date mentioned and what fun is logic when it only fractures your fantasies."

"Enough with the binoculars, I Think," David said. "Let's find those bikes."

"Got the map?"

"Check. The village is on the far western beach of the island. We'll be racing the sun on the way back so should probably take light jackets."

"Taking the panel from the box?"

"Not this trip. First we need to make sure we have found the correct building. That in itself may present some problems if it turns out to be a common church design. Then, we will have to determine how to gain access to the building and then to the room on the third floor."

"Aren't churches usually just open for folks to use?" Kit asked thinking that was common knowledge.

"We can hope so. There may be areas that are off limits or private quarters. We won't know until we get there."

"And, we really won't know if we have the right church until we gain access to that room and find what we need to find there," Kit pointed out.

"That's right."

"Okay then, let's hope there aren't many churches that look like that. We could be exploring third floors the rest of the week."

"There are several museums on the island," David said thinking through the essence of Kit's comment. "*They* may actually be better places for us to begin. Curators have all kinds of trivia stashed away in their gray matter and file cabinets."

"Good idea. There is a list of places of interest on a sign-like-thingy-who down in the lobby."

"Sounds like a place to begin, at least."

They were soon down stairs perusing the lists.

"How about this one: *Museu das igrejas* – the Museum of Churches?" Kit said. "It seems to be a logical place to start and it's close by."

"The *Museu das igrejas* it is, then."

They went to pick up the bikes.

"I saved you the red, white, and blue pair," the old man said. "That's the colors of the U. S. of A. you know."

"How thoughtful," David said treating it as an observation rather than a question. He had to wonder though, if Ari had arranged things for them as executives in his shipping company from Greece, why the U.S. of A. connection? Perhaps the two of them just reeked U.S. of A!

Lajes was not large and sat on a flat, square, peninsula, jutting out into the ocean forming a cove to the west. At first glance it could have been at home in Holland. Laid out in parallel streets running from the interior out to the sea, it was unique among the villages, which were more typically built along circuitous paths a bit further up the lush green slopes.

The Museum, three blocks from the hotel, was housed in an ancient, low, rock, structure. There were no other visitors. The entrance fee was seven euros per adult. They took credit cards which presented the feeling that history had somehow gone awry within those old walls.

The proprietor was a good match for her surroundings. Once they had found the common ground of Spanish, the conversation moved along in a useful fashion. David drew the outline of the front of the church they were seeking and asked if she knew of it.

"Baroque," she answered, which apparently means 'Baroque' in any language.

She nodded her head saying it was a popular design, the most famous being the *Church of Maria Madalena* clear across the island to the west. It had,

of course, been David's only choice up to that point. All but one church on the island utilized the double tower design. About a quarter of them had the spade shaped shield between them.

"Let's cut that number down to those that have three floors along the front wall," David said.

That made an immediate difference. It seemed that few structures were that high and that most churches were primarily a sanctuary with a few smaller rooms and priest quarters at the rear. She had soon assembled a short list and marked them on an outline map of the island.

The one at Prainha do Norte seemed to be the closest, just over the low mountain range to the north of Lejas. It was then that one of their first important geographic discoveries was made. The easily passable roads ran *around* the coast not *across* the mountains. Perhaps three miles as the crow flies, it would be nearly twenty miles following the road around the eastern tip of the island and then back west to Prainha.

Kit did some quick figuring.

"If we do ten miles an hour it'll take two there and two back. That should give us what . . . three or four hours to explore over there so we can be back before dark?"

The old woman apparently understood enough English to get the gist of the conversation. She added a name and address to the bottom of the map.

"My little brother. He has pick-up. For ten euros he bring you back if stay too long."

"Great. Thank you. Abrigado."

David handed her a large tip. She smiled a nearly toothless grin and nodded, then retrieved the map from Kit and wrote a note to her brother on the back. "*Dez euros e não mais!*" (Ten euros and no more!)

Kit snapped away at the pictures of the churches on her list. By 11:45 they were on the road. They traveled through Ribeiras, Calheta do Nesquim, Manhenga and other villages before finally arriving at Prainha. The tall cliffs at the eastern edge of the island were magnificent and had created a fine excuse to stop and rest, and take in the view.

The towers of the church in Prainha beckoned to them over the roofs and treetops as if to say, "Here I am. What may I do for you?"

That sentiment was echoed by a young priest just exiting the front door.

"Que posso eu fazer para você?" (What can I do for you?)

Kit suddenly realized he had no idea how to answer such an inquiry regardless of the language. Fortunately, David was prepared.

"English?" he asked at the outset.

"Yes. Poco. A little?"

"This will seem odd, I'm sure. We are on an international treasure hunt for charity. We have been given a list of places to visit and then prove by photos

and such that we were actually there. Each place has a unique structure, work of art, design or some such thing. We have only been given this Island and an indication of a room in a church that looks very much like this one. According to our instructions there is something for us to locate in that room, right up there.”

He pointed. The priest moved out onto the sidewalk to look up and follow David’s arm.

“I will have to disappoint you, Sir. That room has been sealed from the World for over one hundred years. The story is that the priest at the time confronted the devil himself in that room. He had left instructions that if he did not return, the room was to be sealed forever. And so it was. I am sorry. There are several other churches of this design. It must be one of the others.”

He turned and hurried back inside. His initial friendly demeanor had quickly changed to an abrupt brush off.

“The priest’s hands were trembling,” Kit said clearly puzzled.

“I noticed. Room *300 South East* intrigues me more now than ever. How about you?”

“If by *intrigues* you mean terrifies, petrifies, fills with awe and fear, then, sure, it intrigues me right down to my knocking knees.”

“Knocking knees are nothing to be ashamed of – provided they are still dry.”

“Can’t guarantee that. The old priest fought with the *devil* in there, David!”

“You believe everything your minister says?”

“No.”

“Then why believe a total stranger – two of them, in fact, speaking a century apart?”

“Good point. As soon as I stop shaking I’ll take that suggestion under advisement.”

“We have to get inside and at least verify that the room is sealed off,” David said. “There’s bound to be a rear entrance.”

“The same one the devil used, no doubt.”

David began walking toward the side of the church. Kit was right behind. Some might say two bodies cannot occupy the same space. They’ve never observed Kit when he’s unnerved!”

There were two rear doors – one in the middle and one closer to the rear side of the building. David chose the closer and turned the handle; it opened easily. They stepped inside to a small, unadorned, entryway. There was a closed door immediately ahead and to the left a narrow, ascending, stairway, dimly lit by slit like windows. David put his finger to his lips and then pointed to the stairs.

Kit was not eager to intrude any further into the devil’s sanctuary but he was even less inclined to remain anywhere alone at that moment. He grasped the back of David’s belt and followed him up to the first landing and then around

and on up to the second floor. Again, ahead was a closed door. The stairway to the second floor curved back to the right. David turned. They made their way to the third floor.

The design was similar there, with a closed door straight ahead. David tried the knob. It turned and the door opened into an equally gloomy, poorly lit, narrow hall that appeared to run the length of the building toward the front. He assumed the three story high sanctuary was to their right with its ceiling close against the roof. They moved forward. Kit had visions of pools and girls – pools of blood and girls with fangs, green complexions, and long, curled, fingernails. He was certain the temperature had increased significantly since they began the climb.

Presently they were at the door to room *300 South East* – that is, they were at the spot where that door should have been. The wall was solid plaster – cement, perhaps. Blocking the hall that ran to the right leading to the doors of several other rooms, there was a row of bars – jail cell bars, four inches apart, set into a wall to wall trough of concrete across the floor and a foot square wooden beam at the ceiling. Clearly the public was not invited from the other direction!

Kit let go of his uncle long enough to see if any of the bars turned thinking it might be a trick out of an old black and white late night horror movie that would suddenly reveal a hidden passageway. None turned.

David indicated the camera around the boy's neck and Kit began taking pictures. He continued until they again found themselves on solid ground behind the church.

"Am I blue?" Kit said. "I think I may have held my breath through that entire excursion."

"I do believe that blue is your color. It'll match the fenders on your bike and show off that almost, swim suit so well."

"Funny man. So, what do you think?"

They walked back to the front as they talked.

"The physical situation up there certainly was true to the young priest's description. I have to wonder if there may be an entrance to it from the room just to the west."

"No! We're not going back up there through the front door are we?"

"Of course not. Follow me."

"Breathing again more or less regularly, Kit followed his uncle right through the front door."

"I thought you said . . ."

Again David's finger was at his lips. He whispered.

"I will go up and take a look. You remain down here out of sight under the stairway."

"Why?"

“You will become Plan B in case anything goes wrong upstairs.”

“What’s Plan B?”

“That’s for you to determine while you’re waiting.”

David started up the stairs. Kit watched for a moment before realizing he was still standing there in the open all alone. He made for the shadows under the steps.

Upstairs the door to the room in question – the one next to 300 – was easily opened. It was essentially vacant housing a few wooden crates and several inquisitive mice. The curtains at the window were in tatters. There was no door into the adjoining corner room nor any evidence there had ever been one. It seemed they had drawn a blank on their first outing at Pico.

On a whim, as David descended to the second floor, he walked the hall and entered the corner room there. It, too, was vacant. Everything was awash in light colored dust as if time itself felt the need to somehow tie together that which did not match. There was a crate and a set of sawhorses in one corner and the outside wall to the East had apparently recently been washed or painted as if, perhaps, it was being refurbished for some purpose. Regardless, it convinced David that building was a dead end.

He and Kit were soon back outside and making themselves ready for the return trip. Kit pointed back and forth from bell tower to bell tower.

“The one on the left looks like it’s being remodeled. It’s open here on the front. The other one is intact.”

“Perhaps some renovation. I noticed some work upstairs as well.”

“Sky looks threatening” Kit observed. “Rain you think?”

“I’d say so. Plenty of rain year round here. Let’s find the guy with the pick up and see if we can salvage a dry ride back to the hotel.”

After a few inquiries – the most helpful encounter being with a heavily mascaraed, middle aged, woman going for twenty – they compiled the directions they needed.

“Seems to me those English speaking prostitutes of old are still working the island, Unc.”

“You just may be right. It was the easiest and safest fifty she ever made, if that’s really the case.”

“Carlos, as turned out to be his name, eagerly agreed to the ten euros – in advance – though feigned back problems so they had to heft the bikes into the bed of the little truck themselves.

Upon arrival back at the hotel the bikes were soaked but David and Kit were dry – dry, and tired, and mentally exhausted. The rain had stopped. Carlos gave them his card with his phone number and said he could be available anytime day or night if he wasn’t busy. It was clearly unintended humor. David took the card.

With the rain, the temperature had quickly dropped into the sixties and

with the sun low in the sky it would not recover that day.

“How about a nice relaxing dip in the pool,” Kit suggested as David opened the door to their room. “Hotel info says it’s heated.”

“I was looking forward to sometime in the hot tub, myself. You go ahead and give the ladies a thrill. I’ll await a full report.”

“Don’t know what you’re missing,” Kit said, rummaging through his backpack for his suit.”

“Remember the sign in the lobby,” David said. “*Natação: Vestes sugeridas dentro do hotel*

“Wear a sugar based vest on your teeth while in the hotel?”

David smiled at the boy’s humorous, Spanish based, garbling of the message. He set the matter straight.

“ ‘Wear a robe coming and going.’ Probably more for the drip and slip factor than the modesty factor. The floors are all stone or tile.”

“When in Rome, I guess,” Kit said finally having arranged everything inside his suit to his satisfaction. “Don’t fall asleep in the tub again. It could be dangerous for OUR health!”

The swirling, warm, water found its way into all the right places and David soon felt the stress of the days just past begin to drain away. He thought he just might look into adding such a piece of equipment to his loft back in Indiana. It brought back memories of the far larger one in Ari’s apartment.

* * * * *

“Were those girls great or what?” Ari said joining David back in the huge hot tub after escorting the shapely visitors to the door.

“Why do you always seem to be so surprised that your girls provide great companionship and superior sex? From what you pay them they *should* be the best females for rent in the entire World. Sometimes I think you are the devil himself.”

“You believe in the devil?”

“No. It was just a figure of speech.”

“The devil was one of man’s greatest inventions – second only to the idea of gods,” Ari said, evading the issue of his own devilishness, clearly intrigued by the broader concept.

“I buy the idea it was man’s invention or creation, but why do you rank that one so high among all the others?”

“The concept of the devil allows man to believe he remains innately pure and good. When he has an evil thought or manifests a wicked or immoral act it is because the second most powerful ‘being’ in the universe planted it or enticed him to act on it. Man, therefore merely has to claim he is, by definition, weaker than that virtually all powerful being. So, when he acts badly, all he really has to deal with is the idea he gave into temptation – that is, was overpowered by a force clearly able to overpower him. Most churches have ways for its believers to

get around that – to be more or less easily forgiven. So, you see, once again man has ingeniously protected himself from damnation – itself, another of his more interesting inventions.”

“You certainly have everything worked out, don’t you?”

“Not quite. I still can’t really figure you and your kind.”

“What *is* me and my kind?”

“People who are nice and kind and helpful and compassionate and altruistic just because they want to be – with no religious, hell-fire spear being held over their head if they aren’t and no heavenly reward on deck if they are. Most religious people are good not because they want to be but for two very different reasons. Their god tells them they *have* to be good *and* because they will be sent to hell for eternity if they aren’t. The bottom line is that personal altruism really has nothing to do with it. Selfishly getting themselves into heaven has everything to do with it.

“You, on the other hand, don’t believe you have any all-powerful being to answer to after all of this is over. You have no hell in which to be punished. You have no heaven in which to be rewarded and coddled. You could steal and do the entire roster of bad things with no fears for your eternal wellbeing and yet you don’t. I just don’t get it.”

“You don’t get it simply because you don’t treasure the human species. I love it. In all of the known universe there is no other species like us – one that can have those positive emotions and motivations you just mentioned – one that can look ahead and plan for not only the survival of future generations but for their increased safety and comfort and general wellbeing. When you love something that much, you act toward it in only positive ways. That’s why I would never consider doing those selfishly harmful, disruptive, hurtful things you say I am free to do. I am *not* free to do them because of my *love of* mankind – love being strictly a human emotion, by the way.”

“It would seem then that the *discretionary*, positive, social, deeds performed by atheists are more genuine, sincere, and truly selfless acts than those which are *required* of devout Jews, Christians, Moslems, Buddhists, Hindus, Shintos, and on and on and on down the long, long, list of groups who cannot agree with each other as to what the god and spiritual things are all about.”

“I have no need to divide the world’s peoples into good guys by choice and good guys by duty, or good guys by logic and good guys by fear of hell and damnation. A socially positive act for whatever reason is a socially positive act and I’ll accept it at face value. My social goals for mankind are very similar to those of the religiously conservative Church of the Brethren, for example, the church that sponsors the little college in the town where I grew up. Except for the single item of spreading a God-based Christianity, my social agenda and theirs is virtually identical: help people in the short term with an eye for the long term

wherever and whenever it is needed.”

“I admire you, you know, David, for always putting your deeds where your beliefs are. I think your basic premise that mankind should be loved and preserved – rather than hated and destroyed – is completely erroneous so I have to think your work is, in fact, malevolent in terms of the planet as a whole.”

“This all got started by your question about my motivation to be a nice guy. I tried to answer you. In the end you tie it all up by telling me that everything I stand for is evil.”

“Yes. I think that summarizes it all very well.”

“And your position, of course is right, while mine is wrong.”

“Correct again. Yours is indefensible in terms of things outside mankind’s selfish arena. In terms of the big picture, mine is not only totally defensible pragmatically – look at how man has already devastated the planet – but logically as well. I win. You lose. Shall I order another set of girls for later? I think I’m ready for a full hand of brunettes.”

CHAPTER TEN

David awoke from his nap to an odd intermingling of the wonderful aroma of chicken chow mien and the noxious, nostril stinging, odor of chlorine wafting up from the hot water. Kit had joined him in the hot tub and a feast of oriental delicacies was spread out around its edge.

"I ordered in from the restaurant. We managed to skip lunch. You seemed exhausted and I seemed famished so I figured this should work out just right."

"Great! It looks and smells wonderful. You got so much, though."

"Couldn't remember what you liked best so I did the throw a dart thing – pointed aimlessly around the menu until I had a dozen dishes. Figured you'd want tea. I got pop. There's orange sherbet in the mini-fridge."

"You're a regular little Geisha, Kit."

"Geishas are Japanese."

"Oh, yes, right! *And* shapelier in the places I'd like my naked companions to be shapely."

Kit grinned his wonderful, full-out, grin. They began loading plates.

"You've been to lots of nude events, right?" Kit asked taking advantage of the narrow crack the remark had opened to the topic.

"Without defining, *lots*, yes, I suppose you could say – on five continents in fact."

"And just how does a guy deal with the fact that the sight of naked females often requires his crotch to all quite automatically salute?"

"In your mind, you merely have to make the clear distinction between nude and naked."

"Huh! Mr. Webster specifies them as synonyms."

"Mr. Webster was undoubtedly a prude – given the era in which he lived. Think of *nude* as meaning the beautiful, natural, unclothed, state of the human body – the way god designed it if you want. Think of *naked* as a throbbing, panting, heaving, body, eager for sex.

"Nudists and Naturists are helped to make that distinction from the time they are tiny. A five minute observation of any Naturist event will convince you there is nothing 'naked' in the minds of the participants. The state of being unclothed has only been made into something nasty and dirty by those who are too uptight to practice it.

"I think that's largely because for so many people growing up in our country – especially females – there are no longer many opportunities for

innocuous mingling in the nude. It only happens on occasions of sex. Most guys are nude together in the pools, showers, and locker rooms at school as they grow up so it's no big deal for them. The same state of mind would exist with regard to both sexes if those showers and pool times had been co-ed events from the time they were small children.

"Tribes that don't wear clothes clearly have no problems related to nudity. The kids from the modern day Scandinavian and European 'tribes' that live nude at home and frequent nude beaches and nude health clubs by the millions – the Naturists – are raised with no problems about nudity. In fact, all reports suggest that, rape, child molestation, impotence, and pregnancy outside of marriage are virtually unheard of among them. They have far and away the lowest STD rates among any group in the world – well, excluding Tibetan monks, perhaps."

Kit managed a short lived smile.

"That's all well and good – interesting and educational, even – but not having been raised to make that essential differentiation, how am I supposed to deal with it there on that Brazilian beach loaded with unclothed females? I've been raised to think that girls without clothes on are *n-a-k-e-d* and I've come to really enjoy thinking of them that way and about all the fantastically pleasurable possibilities that state presents."

"Successive squares."

"What?"

"I was in your same shoes the first time Ari whisked me off to a nudist utopia my freshman year at Harvard. As I grew up, I had learned to be completely comfortable unclothed around other guys but not girls. So, in order to continue thinking with my brain and not my groin I began by looking just at faces and squaring numbers. Two squared is four. Four squared is sixteen. Sixteen squared is . . . you see, it doesn't take long to require the complete engagement of the brain."

"And that worked?"

"Mostly. Gradually – and in less time than you can imagine, in fact – one becomes comfortably accustomed to enjoying the beauty of the female nude rather than merely seeing it as an object to be sexually ravaged."

"Okay. Several good suggestions in there," Kit said. "I'll begin practicing with my playboy collection this very evening. One more thing, though. What if all of that fails?"

"At nude beaches everybody carries a towel. Nonchalantly drape it so your overly eager organ is covered."

Kit nodded then added,

"Of course the only organs so covered on the entire beach will be those that are inappropriately standing at attention, so everybody will know what's going on anyway."

"It's the best I have to offer. The quickest way to be asked to leave a nude

beach is to expose an erection. Keep it behind a towel or keep yourself waist deep in the water; those are my best suggestions until you are able to de-sexualize the unique environment. Anyway, we're not going to be romping on the beach chasing nude virgins here and there. We will be crossing it in order to get to the ocean. We will be carrying scuba gear and will be mentally focused, so you're probably just buying a problem anyway. I assume that the organ in question behaves itself there inside that skimpy suit of yours while you're ogling scantily clad girls poolside."

"Yes. Of course. Interesting. Wearing a suit, I hadn't even considered that problem might come up – so to speak. Maybe I'm good to go after all."

"I just imagine you are."

"Okay then. Thanks. If I get the feeling it's deploying itself in an untimely manner, I'm just going to approach it like a dog trainer," He said in all seriousness.

"What?"

"Down, Boy! Down, Boy!"

David roared in laughter. Kit smiled at his uncle's response, not fully understanding the humor he found there.

By ten o'clock they had stuffed themselves on Chinese, satisfied their sweet teeth with sherbet, and drip dried in the cool breeze as it drifted north to south through the main room of the suite.

"There are three more churches on the list, right," David asked.

"Yup. The one on the westernmost part of the island – the one you had picked out before we arrived – and then two more some distance inland along the south shore."

"I'd like for us to be out of here by five a.m." David said. "Your legs up to more cycling?"

"Don't worry about *my* legs, gramps. It's yours I'm concerned about. I don't want to be towing you home at the end of a rope tomorrow night. It would be easier to just hire Carlos, though, wouldn't it?"

"I'd rather nobody was able to connect the dots – the various stops we make. Can't tell you why for sure but I'm uneasy about letting anybody get too close to all this."

Kit nodded, not sure he understood but he trusted his Uncle's judgment without question.

"I'm going to turn in," David said. "I'll count on you to set the alarm on your phone for four thirty."

"Okay. Done. I'm going to have that practice session with my Playboys, then I'll be along. Well, in all honesty, I'll undoubtedly dawdle a bit first."

David contained his amusement and entered the bedroom. They hadn't agreed between them who would take which bed. David called dibs on the one by the north window and was soon asleep.

As he awoke the next morning he recognized how nice it was to actually have periods of day and night – unlike the situation at Whitehorse. His mind and body seemed to appreciate it as well. He wondered how the people within the Arctic Circle coped.

He sat up on the side of his bed, did his yawn and scratch thing and then pummeled Kit's head with a pillow.

"Or, I could have just said, 'time to rise and shine, Kit,' but what fun would that have been."

"Very funny, Unc."

Kit rolled over onto his back.

"It was surprisingly successful," he said, arm across his forehead, still squinting his eyes into full function.

"The boy's second utterance of the day and I'm already lost."

"The practice session. Last night. The Playboys."

"Oh. Yes. That's great. I'm happy for both you and Fido."

Kit grinned then added, "The restaurant doesn't open until six."

"I figured we could get an hour up the island then find a place to eat. The first church we need to visit is about a half hour beyond that."

"It's really humorous you know," Kit offered beginning to dress.

"What is?"

"By the end of today, you'll have been inside more churches than you have been in, in what . . . ten years?"

"You find that humorous, do you?"

"Yes. Very."

"Glad to be of service."

By 4:55 they were on the road heading west. Kit took the lead, glancing back from time to time to make sure his Uncle was keeping up. He'd keep to a pace that seemed comfortable for David and not make a contest of it.

It was 6:15 when they stopped in front of a small, less than upscale looking cafe. However, the sign on the window read, *International Cuisine* printed in five languages.

David's bacon, scrambled eggs, and grits turned out to be Fried ham, a cheese omelet and overcooked rice. It was call for a double smile, however – one in reference to the local culinary definitions and the second upon tasting it.

"This is delicious," David said catching the eye of the cook behind the counter and offering a thumbs up."

Kit had a whispered caution. "In many parts of the world that sign is equivalent to the extended middle finger in our country."

"Yes. I'm aware of that. Not here, however. You think I didn't do my homework?"

"Sorry. My Texas toast and oatmeal taste remarkably like Texas toast and oatmeal."

"Maybe we can hit this place on the way back for supper."

By 6:45 they were again headed along the road that wound like a buffer between the beaches to the south and the narrow flatlands just inland.

"I can see why the tourist brochures call this the Green Island," Kit said. "It's a vibrant green everywhere you look – well, except for the upper thousand feet or so of the volcano."

The road was generally flat, compared with the more rolling ride they had experienced in the other direction the day before.

A half hour later they turned north and followed a gravel road into a small village, again dominated by a towering church. They rode to it and leaned the bikes against a black stone wall.

"Basalt?" David said pointing at it.

"Gesundheit! Kit said grinning. "Not fresh, I hope. Don't look to be any places to hide should Mt. Pico blow its top."

The wooden sign beside the main door in front told the story of daily masses: six, ten, five and nine. It was going on seven thirty. Nobody was in sight. A small dog that had been sleeping on the bottom step stood, stretched, shook, and trotted toward them.

As they do, it sniffed Kit's crotch.

"It seems Fido is making a new friend," David said. The double chuckles lingered as they entered through the big wooden door.

It was equally as isolated inside the dark, narrow, foyer that ran the width of the building. A set of open stairs occupied the end of the entry to their right.

David opened the door into the sanctuary hoping to find a priest. No one was there.

"I guess this is to be another self-guided tour," He said.

They were soon at the stairs and then at the second floor landing. They continued up the next flight and entered another dark and dreary third floor hall that separated the rear sanctuary wall from the opposite one containing doors to the rooms along the front. The corner room was just across the hall from the top of the stairs.

David approached it and knocked. There was no answer. He tried the door. The handle turned. He pushed and it opened. The room was bright from the single window in the center of the front wall. It appeared to be an austere guest room with a small, uncomfortable looking cot, an antique nightstand and a wooden chair. The plank floor was bare though clean. A crucifix hung on the wall above the bed to their right. Several religious pictures graced the others. There appeared to be no electricity or heat. A tall, fat, candle sat on the night stand beside a prayer book.

"Looks like another dead end," Kit said.

"Examine the pictures closely – front, back and inside."

While Kit undertook that task, David went over everything else with a fine

toothed comb – the nightstand, the prayer book, the cot, its pillow, mattress and blanket.

"I've drawn a blank," he said at last.

"Me, too," Kit said re-positioning the last picture back on the nail where he had found it.

"Take pictures of what's here – walls, ceiling, floor, window, furnishings. Go ahead and get close-ups of those pictures just in case."

"Just in case of what?"

"I have no idea, but something may come up later that will tie them into something."

"Two 'somethings' in one sentence does not bode well for specificity, Unc."

"Well, the good news seems to be that we know at least two places that don't relate to our mission," David said trying to put a positive spin on things."

"I'm afraid Whitehorse spoiled us, Uncle David. Like you said, Ari may be increasing the complexity at every stop."

"May I help you gentlemen?"

It was a deep, quite voice from behind them in the doorway. The perfect English suggested he had overheard at least enough to peg them as English speaking. They turned as one to face a tall, wide shouldered, man with a closely cropped, black, beard. His hooded, black, robe extended to the floor. His folded arms seemed to exaggerate his substantial size and effectively blocked the exit. The long, jagged, scar across his left cheek did nothing to mollify their sudden anxiety.

Kit quivered. David spoke.

"I certainly hope you *can* help us. We looked around earlier but couldn't find anybody. We are on an international treasure hunt to benefit children's charities. One of our stops is here on Pico for the purpose of finding a mural in a church. It is to be found in a third floor room to the right as one faces the front of the building. It was our hope to come in, take a picture of the item in question, and leave without disturbing anyone."

"I am Brother Abbott. Did you find what you needed?"

"No, actually. I'm Dr. David Lawrence and this is my Nephew and associate on this hunt, Kit."

"What led you here?" the monk asked still not giving way at the door.

"The church has been described as resembling this one – Twin towers on either side of a Baroque, spade shaped, feature in a three floor edifice."

"There are several on the island," the man said dropping his arms and suddenly sounding helpful. "The largest and most famous is the Church of Santa Maria at Madalena."

"Yes. It is on our short list. We have already visited the one across the island at Prainha."

"That would leave just one more between here and Madalena. I know

Father Angelino at that church."

"May I ask. Your English and mid-western accent?" Kit said having waited as long as he could.

"Born, raised, and a member of the Abby in Peru, Illinois. I'm here on retreat."

"You being the first Monk I've ever met, may I take your picture?" Kit asked.

"If your camera is large enough to contain all of me, it will be my honor. The light is better out front."

The picture was taken, hands were shaken, and they were on their way back down the gravel road to the main east-west blacktop. It was 7:45 and the sun at their back was still casting long, finger-like, shadows ahead of them. Sprint as Kit would, he could never out run them.

Another half hour passed. They rounded a long curve and came upon the next small town which sat nestled high into the verdant foothills of Mt. Pico. The church, which they again expected to tower over the low buildings of the town, was nowhere to be seen.

David inquired of an older man walking his dog. Kit supplied important words from his translator. Together they apparently got their question across. It was in a valley further up the slope near the mysteries and the hot springs.

"The mysteries?" Kit asked once out of earshot of the old man.

"It's what the earliest settlers called the hardened basalt flows. They were so different in appearance from the rest of the surface on the Island it's easy to see how they got their name."

The road became more trail-like as it wound among pools cut into the basalt. The warm water steamed in the still cool morning air. From time to time narrow streams of hot water would shoot up from the various depressions, one reaching a height of ten feet. It was beautiful. The church came into view just beyond the final turn.

It was smaller in both width and height than the other two. It had the requisite three tiers of windows, double towers and the spade shaped, decorative, structure between them. They parked the bikes and entered the front door.

The interior design was very different, simpler, from the others. There were no rooms across the front. Instead the open sanctuary loomed ahead of them as wide and tall as the building itself. Looking up, they discovered a dropped ceiling some ten feet wide two stories above them. There could have been rooms up there. On the outside there were windows at that height.

"I don't see any stairs," Kit said looking around. How do they get up there?"

Before David could spin a possible explanation they were approached by a priestly looking person more of the appearance they were used to. Black shirt

and clerical collar, with black slacks and shoes.

"I'm Father Angelino."

"David Lawrence and my Nephew Kit. Brother Abbott a few villages back said we would find you here."

"He's a big specimen, isn't he? Gentle as a lamb, however."

"That's how he seemed," Kit said, "Except for that killer scar on his cheek."

The priest smiled.

"I understand he acquired that when he fell off a ladder while volunteering with Habitat for Humanity."

"What a letdown," Kit said.

"I know. Your vision of a knife fighting, Ninja Monk has now been crushed."

Kit hadn't known many priests but if this one was representative, he was impressed. The man continued.

"How can I help you?"

David went through his well-practiced description of the charitable activity."

"There actually is no room up there. It is a balcony – by tradition, here, the place where those who are not members of our congregation sit. It is accessed from a stairway on the outside."

"Are we allowed to go up and look – we are not Catholic."

"Would you like to be?" he snapped with a smile, clearly his humorous offering at that particular opening in conversations. He then continued in answer to the question.

"Certainly. Look to your hearts content. I will be in my office at the other end of the building if I can be of further help. It's the door on the right as you approach from outside."

He turned and left them alone.

"A curious custom," Kit said, "Requiring guests to sit in the balcony."

"I'm sure there is an interesting story associated with the practice. Perhaps we can hear it on our *next* visit to Pico."

"Okay. I get it. We are in a hurry – a rush even. I'm just inquisitive by nature you know."

"I do and I treasure that. I'm glad you understand about the frantic element of our time-line."

As represented, the balcony proved to be an immediate disappointment. Two rows of pews and kneeling rails on two risers and little else. The area was lit from the four windows across the front and one on each side. There were no decorations on the walls or ceiling. The furnishings were plain. The floor was wood – age old, well worn, unfinished, dry splintered, wood. Nothing there could be construed as being related to the clue on the box.

David examined the window itself – the pane on top and the pane on the

bottom. They were plain, frosted glass, again with no pattern to be discerned.

"Pictures?" Kit asked.

David nodded.

"As long as we're here, take some."

He continued to look around, restless about the Pico problem for the first time.

"Three down," Kit said, then hurried to add, "But that still leaves us with one. We must be closing in on the right one."

David nodded and smiled, as much gestures to reassure himself as to agree with the boy.

They moved on without re-contacting Father Angelino and by nine o'clock were back out on the blacktop heading west.

"It would be good to get a drink," Kit said after just a few minutes.

"Yes. Keep your eyes out for something."

"Something like those bikini clad beauties out there on the beach?"

"More like the lemonade stand which sits in close proximity to them."

"Oh, yeah. How did I miss that?"

"Probably because IT wasn't wearing a bikini."

"Probably."

They turned into the sand, which brought them to an abrupt halt. They pushed the bikes across the beach presently laying them over in the sand near the food and drink stand. Kit immediately removed his shirt, shoes, and sox.

"Want a sandwich as well?" David asked.

"Yeah. Sounds Great. Whatever they have. I'll just stroll out toward the water. Only feed me if I'm *not* surrounded by beautiful girls."

During his brief lifetime, Kit had been double blessed in the looks department – beguilingly cute as a little boy and movie star handsome as a young man. There had been that year when he was fourteen that his face played host to more than his share of pimples but his charm and generally appealing personality worked to shroud them from view. He thought of himself as plain looking. Mirrors play interesting tricks on the adolescent perspective. Ten steps beyond the bikes and he was approached by a half dozen girls – well tanned, ship shape, touchy-feely, and scantily clad.

David took the drinks and sandwiches to the single picnic table in the area and enjoyed the view – the azure blue ocean stretching on as if forever toward the deep blue of the horizon. He noted with interest that although the girls needed no excuse to have their hands all over Kit he refrained from touching them. Perhaps that was his idea of loyalty to Megan.

David smiled to himself wondering how Fido was behaving. He would never ask, of course. He'd taken the boy from boo boos and no-girls-allowed-clubs though the uncertain years of junior high and into the wonderful – if often puzzling – world of physical maturation and romance. At that moment he

seemed to be navigating life pretty well. Kit was David's most important reason to best Ari in that ultimate battle, which had now been joined.

Forty five minutes into Kit's Ogle Fest, David caught his eye and tapped his watch. Kit nodded and explained to his lovelies that he had to be going. Six pecks to his cheeks later, he was at the table.

"The natives seem friendly," David said, intending it to be humorous and that is how it was received.

"How could they not be? Look at me!"

He drank and ate as he related his ego-boosting adventure in Bikini Land.

"Two are from Australia, actually, complete with that delightful Aussie accent. They were disappointed that there were no nude beaches nearby. Apparently Australia is rampant with them. They are actually visiting one of the other girls who is from Portugal. They'll be leaving for there in the morning. She said all the beaches in Portugal were clothes optional."

"Did you learn anything else about them other than their desire to get unclothed with you?"

"Oh. Yeah. Lots. Beth and Jill are sophomores at a university in Brisbane. Carla works in her father's real estate business in Lisbon. The other three are all eighteen and live in Parla do Galeao, the little town we just bypassed to its south. They are domestics and work at the hotel."

"It's going on 10:15. We need to get back on the road."

"Really. You allowed us an hour? Thanks. I hope we could really afford it."

"Confucius say: 'Boy who has to rely on *Playboy* at night needs time with flesh and blood girls in morning, chop, chop!'"

Rather than responding with his usual chuckle or smile, Kit became serious.

"I'm doing okay, Uncle David. I don't want us to jeopardize this mission because of my rampant sexual cravings. I've made it with Playboys since I was twelve. I can manage a few more weeks."

It raised an interesting question in David's mind about the actual nature of the boy's relationship with Megan and those who came before her, but, again, he would not ask.

The road remained mostly level until just west of Candelaria. From there on they came upon hill after hill before descending again to the shore a mile south of Madalena.

The *Church of Santa Maria Madelena* was atop a gentle rise and was surrounded by a mix of old and modern structures. It was a magnificent sight, appearing to lord itself over Pico Mountain which loomed in the background. Its twin square towers rose majestically above the city and were topped by tall, stately, cone shaped steeples pointed heavenward. Between them sat an elegant version of what David had been calling the Baroque spade, this one

topped with a cross.

The third floor window in the structure would not be a window at all but a louvered opening in the east bell tower to the right as they stood facing it.

"Doesn't exactly match the rendering on the box panel, David."

"I see that. The picture we were going by had trees in front which partially blocked the lower front. Any of the other three actually matched better on that score, didn't they?"

Kit sighed and nodded.

"Well, let's get on up there and take a look," David suggested.

They rode on up the gently sloping double lane, paved, street and around the easy, long, curve that allowed them access to the building. There were a dozen bikes in the racks out front.

"It interests me," Kit began, "That we haven't seen locks on any of the bikes on this island and none were provided for us by the hotel."

"Pico and the Azores in general, have one of the lowest crime rates in the world. And, if we can believe the National Tourist Bureau, it's almost always outsiders who are the culprits when it does occur. It is a place where historically people have loved and cared for each other."

"Interesting. Whitehorse claimed the same sort of thing. Any connection to our mission, do you think?"

"Coincidence, I imagine. Something to keep in mind, how-ever."

The front door – double doors actually – were massive. They entered into the traditional foyer that ran the width of the building. At each end was a small door, which David assumed gave access to a bell tower.

Kit cracked the door to the sanctuary and peeked inside.

"Beautiful!" he said. "A priest-like guy kneeling up front at the rail. Maybe another dozen sitting and kneeling here and there."

"Let's not bother anybody, yet. I want us to get a look inside the base of that eastern bell tower."

They moved to the door. Kit turned the knob and pushed gently. It squeaked in the tradition of dungeons in the old, flickering, black and whites that Kit loved so.

"Would appear this one isn't used often," Kit said in reference to the noise and spider webs drooping under years of accumulated dust.

They entered and David eased the door closed to minimize the sound. The area was roughly fourteen feet square and lit only by stained glass windows on the front. A steep open stairway clung to the walls as it circled once around the tower on its way to the steeple at the top. They began the climb.

"It's filthy in here, Uncle David and there is no pull rope to ring the bell."

"I imagine all of that tells us the bell, if there is one, is in the other tower."

At the top was a landing – a floor – open to the stairs on the west. Kit looked out through the open louvers.

"High. I can see the whole town to the southeast. Lots of flat roofs. Very different from Whitehorse that way. Not much snow here I assume."

The answer was self-evident and didn't call for a response.

"Break out the flashlights, Kit! Those louvers don't provide the light we need."

They searched the walls and the ceiling. Here and there, David brushed away a century of dust but nothing was revealed underneath.

"The trapdoor in the ceiling must lead up into the pointed steeple," Kit said. "Shall I climb the access ladder there and take a look?"

"It's about all we have left."

Kit was soon up the two dozen rungs and pushing against the trapdoor with his shoulder. It was heavy but gave way to his efforts, releasing a blizzard of century old dust and grime. He advanced another two rungs which put him waist high into the area. He examined every nook and cranny with his light.

"Nada!" Came his final judgment. "Want to come and take a look?"

"No. See what you can get with the camera and come back down."

They shared bitter disappointment and a sense of defeat as they descended to the first floor. Kit turned the doorknob preparing to peek out and make sure the way was clear.

"Problem here, Unc."

"What?"

"The door seems to be locked from the outside. The handle won't turn from this side. 'Won't you join me in my bell tower said the Spider to the Fly!'"

"Apropos, though I don't recognize it," David said.

"Kit Carson Lawrence, 12:13 p.m. June 23rd, Madalena Village, Pico, the Azores."

"I see. Pulling an Alex extemporanean, huh? Remember it for your book. It's most fitting."

"Extemporanean? I think you just coined a new noun."

"Good for me, now find the tool kit in your back pack."

"Ah! You mean we should act like something other than helpless fools trapped forever in some evilly crafted ancient snare."

"Something like that. Providing the floor doesn't open up and send us for a swim with the crocodiles, I think we can handle this. Remove the screws that hold the doorknob plate in place."

With his flashlight, Kit gave the floor a quick once over. David smiled and put his hand on Kit's shoulder.

It took some effort to get each of the four ancient screws started but the deed was eventually accomplished. David then rotated the plate horizontally around the knob so he could look inside. Kit held the flashlight.

"A piece of cake, actually," David reported almost immediately.

Thirty seconds later he had manipulated a lever inside the opening and

the door swung open. They didn't take time to replace the plate, thinking it would be a service for the next unsuspecting victim. Kit wiped their prints from the knob and plate. David smiled but wouldn't say anything. It may well have been a good idea.

Outside in the bright sunshine their grunginess became immediately noticeable so they did what they could to brush themselves off.

"Let's find a place to wash up, eat lunch, and put together Plan B," David suggested.

"I thought I was plan B – that's what you said back in that first church."

It had been a comfortable absurdity intended to do nothing more than stretch time and cheeks.

They found a cafe several blocks down the knoll toward the beach. After minimal discussion, they opted for the seafood platter for two.

"So, Plan B, you say?" Kit said opening the topic.

"Of the four churches we've investigated, which is the only one with a major quirk?"

"Major Quirk. Sounds like a character out of an old MASH rerun," Kit said.

"But seriously . . ." David said with just a touch of humor in his tone aimed at pulling the boy back into the essence of the conversation.

"The one that relegated visitors to the cramped, smelly, balcony seemed odd but that probably only qualifies as a Private Quirk. I suppose that first church at Prainha with the sealed-up room and fight with the devil wins the quirk award hands down."

David nodded.

"Brainstorm about it. What little *things* seemed quirky? Anything at all."

"Well, while you went back upstairs from inside and I was told to sequester myself in the shadows under the steps to formulate Plan B, I did some snooping on my own. I looked into the end room there on the first floor. Odd things about it.?"

"Like?"

"Well, for one, it had recently been remodeled and the side wall had been re-plastered. The paint was sitting in cans and had not yet been applied. And the window wasn't centered on the front wall – it was too far to my left. In all the other rooms on that floor the window is smack dab in the middle of the room. Just before I heard you coming down the steps I was thinking the room was not wide enough. The others were all about ten feet square. That one was ten from front to back okay but only seven or eight, side to side."

"Really? Good observations. We suddenly have new life, young loved one."

"Young loved one is fully confused, old . . . er, older loved one."

David took out his pen and smoothed a paper napkin on the table. He drew three, long, rectangles, each one below the one before.

"First floor, second floor, third floor," He said pointing to each."

"Just the front section where the small rooms are, right?" Kit said needing clarification.

"Right."

David proceeded to draw in the locations of the four rooms by dividing the rectangle into four equal, square, segments.

"But I just said the end room was narrower."

David drew a line representing the wall which split the area and made that room less wide. Then he did the same for the room on the second floor.

"Your description of the problem with the first floor, prompted me to remember that the similarly positioned room on the second floor had the same abnormalities – narrower and the off-centered window."

"A pattern, okay, but it still tells me nothing."

David then drew a series of horizontal lines across the smaller areas he had created near the outside wall.

"Ah! Steps. A hidden stairway recently put in place. Still, I get nothing from it."

David drew another rectangle, the width of the stairs he had just added and below it as if in a basement. He extended it back toward the rear door through which the two of them had entered the building the day before.

"Fascinating, Unc! You're postulating a sunken hallway like thingy running from the back to the front of the building, then a stairway running up along the outer wall in front through the newly constructed and hidden spaces on the first and second floors. And it opens up into the sealed room on floor three – the devil room."

"That's one set of possibilities. The problem with it is that such a thing could not have been accomplished without the knowledge of the people at the church. Why would they allow such an intrusion into their building especially considering the major religious issues surrounding the room they pledged to seal off from the world forever?"

"Wait! Wow! Maybe! Probably, in fact!" Kit said reaching for his backpack.

"Sounds like English but translates as gibberish," David said intrigued by the boy's unabashed enthusiasm for something yet to be articulated."

With the laptop on the table, Kit soon found the information he was seeking.

"Had to retrieve this from stored information. There is more on line."

"And do I, at some point in history, gain access to that information?"

"Oh! Sure! The original bell that hung in the church's bell tower had been a gift from a wealthy merchant in Italy. His son had been shipwrecked in the area of the Azores and was picked up by fisherman and saved. Prainha do Norte was their home port and the church their home church. Thus the gift.

Then, later, during one of the many invasions of the islands by other countries, the bell was taken as pillage and the tower has been silenced since then in protest."

"Interesting but how is that relevant?"

"You asked why the church might be willing to allow such an intrusion. Well, how about in order to get that original bell back? And, who in the entire world is the one guy who could arrange that?"

"Ari! I knew there was some reason I allowed you to tag along."

"Tag along? As I recall you were on your hands and knees begging me to accompany you."

"I think our spirits have reason to be on the rise," David noted.

"As do *other* things – sixteen times sixteen is . . . two hundred and fifty six. Two hundred and fifty six times two hundred and fifty six is . . . that's way too hard – no pun intended though it's really sort of funny."

A truly gorgeous, dark haired, young, woman had just entered the cafe and sat, legs crossed, two tables away. She took more time than seemed necessary to adjust her fish net stockings high up on her thighs and then retied – in front – her bandana top several times before seeming satisfied. There had been no modesty involved in the act. The degree to which she was *not* covered had been clearly calculated to make that which *was* covered uncommonly alluring.

"An *English Speaker*, I assume," Kit said swallowing several times in succession.

"A reasonable assumption, I would think."

She looked at Kit and slowly, deliberately, wet her cherry red lips with her tongue as she began swinging her leg – slowly, rhythmically, erotically.

"You know what I have to wonder at moments like this, Uncle David?" Kit's voice had raised half a register.

"What?"

"Why it is that the World was not over-populated ten centuries ago."

David laughed out loud.

"Perhaps we owe that to the much *later* invention of fish net and bandanas."

A man left his table and went to sit with the young lady. After a short conversation and a private exchange of something between their palms, they left together.

"How much do you suppose?" Kit asked.

"I've not had reason to look into the going rates here. Probably top of the line, however."

"Your best guess?"

"Five hundred, maybe a thousand dollars."

"A day?"

"An hour!"

"Perhaps as I look to my future I should consider the life of a Gigolo."

"Lots of perks, I suppose. But let's think about that for a moment. What sort of women would need the services of such a . . . practitioner?"

"Ah! Those too old or ugly to procure such affection the more natural way. You burst my bubble."

"Good. Ready to head back for Prainha?"

"Fido will need just a few more minutes to relax."

David used the down time – so to speak – to place a call to Carlos. He told himself it was in the service of time; however, the map suggested that the road along the western part of the island was quite hilly. He felt the need to save his legs for things like soaking in the hot tub.

Carlos arrived at 1:30 and they were immediately on their way east.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Carlos was not what one might consider a cautious sort of driver. Not even a careful or watchful or expecting-anybody-else-to-be-on-the-road sort of driver. He talked, pointed, and looked most everywhere but at the road.

Still, at 2:00 sharp, by some modern miracle, the truck – mostly unscathed – pulled safely to a stop a block from the church. David deposited a folded, ten euro bill onto the driver's palm and sent him on his way suggesting they might call him later to take them back to the hotel.

"You made that palm to palm money exchange like you're *well* practiced, Uncle David," Kit said his arms immediately protecting his grinning face, ready to fend off any incoming blows.

"I'm a Lawrence. We're lady killers. Why would I have *ever* needed to pay for romantic services?"

It provided a fully appreciated, light, moment between them before the more serious business that lay ahead.

Kit decided to just let be what he considered his Uncle's blatant misuse of the term 'romantic'. 'Sexual' was the only appropriate term when referring to prostitutes. Romantic was an entirely different matter. Few boys his age understood that important difference but then Kit wasn't just any boy.

The slip had not gone unnoticed by David, either.

* * *

"Tanya said you didn't make love to her last night," Ari said finishing the room-service dinner and pushing the cart away from the couch where he was sitting.

"Oh, but I did!"

"Not according to her. She said you just talked and cuddled and kissed and touched. That's not making love. Did you miss something in your dad's birds and bees talk?"

"No, but apparently you did – well maybe not. I'm not that familiar with the sexual mores of modern Greek culture."

"You're spewing gibberish."

"My culture – or my rural, Midwestern, subculture, more appropriately, perhaps – makes a very specific distinction between romantic and sexual activity."

"I know – the fully annoying foreplay thing."

"That's some tiny part of it, I suppose."

"Then you've lost me."

"Your concept of 'making love' as you refer to it involves intercourse and the immediately juxtaposed activities of kissing, touching, and so on. Am I correct?"

"Yes. So?"

"Romance is the process of demonstrating affection and love in ways other than through the ultimate sexual activity. To equate 'making intercourse' with 'making love' is absurd. Love is man's most precious, altruistic, emotion. Sex is man's most remarkably satisfying physical activity. They represent two entirely different realms of human capacities."

Ari threw up his hands in a halfhearted attempt to express confusion.

David tried again.

"Out in the pool, long before Tanya and I got into bed together last night, I sensed she was feeling down. So, I asked her about it. She began talking. I listened, held her close, and stroked her hair. I rubbed her back and neck and legs and did what I could to make her feel better. We kissed when she initiated it. We went on that way 'til sometime after two, I imagine. When we awoke this morning she had her head on my chest and I had my arm around her shoulders. It had been a very satisfying, person to person, time together – rewarding, even.

"This morning she offered herself for sex – feeling guilty about taking your money under false pretenses I assume – but I just didn't want to spoil the emotional high I was feeling. I'd rather you didn't bring her here for me again, by the way."

"I don't get you. I mean I *really* don't get you. Feelings? Emotions? Affection? Cuddling? Those are female attributes. A man's role is to enjoy sex – to ravage the woman's body as frequently and for as long as possible. To make her understand that her purpose is to give comfort to men. It's how my Papa directed me."

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry?"

"That all this time you have been missing out on the truly best kind of relationship a man and woman can enjoy together."

"Romance?"

"Romance. Love, in the emotional sense. Give and take relationships. The deep, personal, sharing that leads to understanding and bonding between a man and his very special, very precious, female companion."

"That's all superfluous to me."

"Again, I'm sorry. Do you not want your wife to be your best friend, your confidant, your greatest source of joy and comfort? Someone to treasure, protect, and please."

"My wife will be great in bed anytime I want sex and will be unmoved by my involvement with other women. She will have many strong, healthy, babies from me. She will raise them in my tradition. *You* are my best friend and

confidant. Why would I seek that in a woman who, by definition, will never be able to understand how a man thinks? A woman's mind can't possibly ever understand a man's mind. That's a basic law of nature. Trying to be close to a woman that way is inane and you're just fooling yourself if you think you can be."

"So far, I've fooled myself remarkably well, then, old friend. Often, difficulty in understanding stretches one toward valuable new perspectives. Look at us!"

"Bah!"

Ari pushed air in David's direction.

"I'll make you this deal," Ari said at last. "When I order in girls from now on I'll request that none of them be anything but upbeat and perky. That way you can head directly for their loins with no emotional detours or distractions."

David shook his head.

"Thanks for diner. I have a date at eight so probably should be on my way."

"A date?"

"Yes. One of those romantic encounters that I find so satisfying short of sex."

"Your dates don't lead to sack time?"

"Sometimes but that is not my purpose or expectation at the outset."

"You are deranged, you know that, Dave. Somewhere along the line your concept of proper and natural relationships with females got sadly disengaged from your penis. I'll gladly pay for shrink time, you know."

"I know you would, just as I know you will never comprehend what I've tried to convey to you during the past half hour."

Ari smiled his full out smile. David diverted the conversation to something Ari could understand.

"You got girls coming by here later, I imagine."

"Three. I was expecting you to be here. Don't get me wrong. I can handle three naked girls with my balls tied behind me."

"Do me one favor tonight," David said.

"Sure?"

"Tell yourself you're making *sex* and not making *love*."

"Synonymous to me, you know."

"If I were a praying sort of guy, I'd certainly pray for you."

"No worries. I pay a priest handsomely to take care of that for both of us. Reminds me. I have to work in a Mass before the girls show up. Give me a minute to slip into some clothes and I'll ride down with you."

* * *

"I'll feel better if we hide our bikes while we're here today – in the brush over there," David said, immediately moving in that direction.

That accomplished, they hefted their back packs and made their way

along the far side of the church to the rear of the building. The significance of the moment rushed upon them with thumping hearts and catch-up breathing.

David opened the door and they entered. They adjusted their miner's lanterns on their foreheads and proceeded to the door that sat immediately ahead at the end of the entry way and to the left of the stairs they had used the day before.

"It is locked," David said frowning as he contemplated how to handle the first hurdle.

"Let me at it," Kit said. "My years of association with Butchie are about to pay off."

He straightened two short lengths of steel wire procured from his backpack and inserted them into the key slot in the brass door knob. It took several attempts and more than a few whispered 'damns' but eventually the telltale clicks signaled success.

Before he pushed, Kit asked,
"Suppose there will be an alarm?"

"I sincerely doubt it. The lock was to keep out casual snoops, not us. An alarm would serve no purpose."

"Here goes then."

Kit pushed gently on what turned out to be a thick, heavy, all metal door, specially constructed to blend into the old architecture. It opened with ease into pitch blackness.

Their lights revealed a wooden ladder along the outside wall that led down into a freshly cut trench some five feet high and two feet wide. David's supposition had been correct.

"Narrow, dark and smelly," Kit said upon first view. "Do we proceed?"

"Go!"

"Me first?"

"Not necessarily."

Kit shrugged and made his way down the ladder; he was immediately followed by David who pulled the door shut. The latch met the frame with more than the expected metal to metal click. Something slid. Something rapped. Something clanked.

David tried the door. It would not open. He inspected the inside knob with light from his flashlight. There was no key opening, no hole, no slit. He kept that news to himself although Kit knew something was wrong.

"You'll just have to work some Butchie magic when we're ready to leave," he said, thinking there was no reason to alarm the boy.

Kit nodded and turned, stooping down and began making his way along the low, narrow, passage. David followed.

"The floor is solid rock – smooth. What do you make of that?" He asked David.

"I doubt if it's natural. The stones are evenly sectioned. Probably set there to handle the weight of the tank."

"About that." Kit said. "A tank the size of the one at Whitehorse could never have been delivered through this narrow passageway."

"I know and to maintain its effectiveness I'd think it would need to have close to the same capacity," David said. "I guess we'll just have to wait and see what we find."

"You suddenly sound fully convinced we will find a tank and bomb in that corner room."

"I am."

"Look here!" Kit said stopping. "I don't like this."

There was a substantial metal frame running up both walls of the passage and across the top. Attached to the outside – the left – and laid back against the wall, was a door of metal bars similar to the one previously seen up on the third floor; this one, however, led to nowhere and was hinged to swing closed across the passage.

"A locking mechanism here," David said, pointing to a device on the frame opposite the hinges."

"And a latch here on the door that fits into it," Kit added. "Once closed it's locked."

"How is it tripped?" David asked.

"My guess would be that wire up ahead running wall to wall about six inches off the floor."

"Too, easy," David said. "That's like something out of a Tarzan movie. Probably a diversion. You got the duct tape, right?"

"Yes."

"We'll need that and a medium sized tool like a hammer."

"Got 'em both right here," Kit said thinking he understood David's plan.

He placed the hammer over the latch on the inside of the frame and handed the roll of tape to his uncle.

"Great minds think alike they say," David said securing the tool in place with the tape. "Now if it swings across the tunnel it won't be able to lock or even fully shut."

"Why would he have installed it?" Kit asked.

"I don't know at this point. He had a good reason though, I can assure you. When we leave we will set everything back as it was."

"So, you're saying he expected us to find it, disarm it so to speak, and then have sense enough to put back as it was?"

"Yes. That's what I believe. Like I said, we know each other's minds very well. We picked at them relentlessly for six years."

"Move on?" Kit asked.

David nodded. "Let's not trip that wire just in case."

At the front end of the tunnel they were confronted by another, locked, steel, door. Kit opened it with less difficulty than the first.

"Let's tape across the catch so it can't accidentally close and lock behind us," David said.

It was soon done. Just beyond the door were the steps – as predicted by David and shown on his napkin rendering. The exception was that they were constructed as one long, very steep two story high set of steps. The passage was too narrow to accommodate the usual, one floor per section, winding back and forth, design.

"Since I've been point man this far, I'll let you have the honor the rest of the way," Kit said standing aside with a sweep of his arm.

David side stepped by him through the open door and began the climb. The stairway, such as it was, had been prefabricated of sturdy steel, still maroon in color as it had come from the plant. Its massiveness seemed to be overkill. It was not an easy climb and required a firm grip along the side beams. The weight of their backpacks tugged to topple them over backwards.

The staircase was open into the third floor. David stopped short to look inside the room.

"You'll love this," he said to Kit. "Suddenly lots of questions are answered a first sight."

He climbed the last several steps and then stepped to his right onto the floor. Kit's head appeared above the opening.

"Wow! Yes! I see. The *pancakes*, I assume. What are there, a dozen tanks stacked there, all about nine feet long and a foot and a half wide. It looks to be a volume to volume match with the Whitehorse tank. And they are setting on an eighteen inch high platform – containing the bomb no doubt. Have you found the slot for our panel from the box?"

"Not yet. The quarters are really cramped. Need you up here on your hands and knees."

"Just as a point of information do you see the mural anywhere?" Kit asked. "The one with the musical staff slash grapevine or whatever."

David looked around sweeping his flashlight about each wall and the ceiling.

"Oddly, no. What do you make of that?"

"Evidently the image of the third floor window was supposed to be sufficient to get us here. That line and circle thing must represent something else."

"But what? We're here. The bomb and toxin tanks are here. . . . Well, I guess we just need to deal with what we do have."

"May I make one suggestion?"

Kit didn't wait for an answer.

"Let's make some kind of a copy of that mural thingy from the panel before

we slip it into the Never-Never Land slot. I know you have copies and photos back at the hotel but we just might need it here, now."

"Your caution is well advised. I'll make an actual size copy while you find the slot."

Kit lay his backpack aside and crawled up onto the floor to begin his search.

"Right here, David. Just like the other one – a steady on green light and an unlit white one. The long, narrow, metal plate is just to its left. Any reason not to go ahead and remove the screws?"

"None I can see."

David finished copying the picture from the panel. Kit put the plate aside.

"The slot's right here – tongue and all," Kit said looking up at David.

David handed down the panel.

"Let's do it."

Their hearts punched at their chests.

Kit took a moment to study the configuration of the grooves on the inside, turned it end to end, and inserted it on first try. He hesitated before the final push that would secure it in place. David had knelt beside him. Their eyes met. David nodded and Kit pushed the panel into its final resting place.

There are the clicks like before. The green light flickered like before. The low, whirring sound came and went, like before. The green light went off and the white light came on.

"Two down?" Kit said some minimal question in his tone.

"To the best of our knowledge it's two down, yes," David said. "Screw the plate back in place and let's get out of here."

Five minutes later they had retrieved the hammer from the iron frame and were at the rear door – the one that allowed entrance into the passageway. David had taken the lead. He tried the knob. Just as he had feared it still would not turn.

"Got a problem here, Kit. When I shut the door behind us originally, I heard it relock itself. It won't open and there is no key slit in the knob."

"Can we remove the plate like we did at the bottom of the bell tower?"

"There are no screw heads – no plate. Nothing to get under to pry out, even."

"How about the knob. Is it attached in place with a set screw?" Kit asked.

"No. Looks to be a single unit – forged as one piece. We're not going to break it off and I'm not sure what cutting it off would get us."

"Unless it's hollow with some kind of trip switch inside."

"Okay. That's a good enough reason for me. Get out the hacksaw!"

They both turned, a startle reaction to a loud clank behind them in the passageway. David focused his flashlight in that direction.

"The cell door," Kit said. "It closed and, I'll bet, locked itself."

"Check it out!" David said.

Cautiously Kit walked back into the passage and examined the bars.

"Closed and locked tighter than a drum. One more potential problem here, Uncle David."

"What's that?" David asked hurrying toward him as Kit began backing up.

"A thick, green, mist is beginning to roll this way from up by the front door. There's a hissing sound coming from the front of the passage."

"Into your gasmask, now!" David said taking the boy by his arm and pulling him back toward the rear door.

"Poison, you think?"

"If it is, it makes no Ari sense, but we're not taking any chances."

As he struggled to get into his own mask David's head tipped back. His light and eyes briefly met the ceiling above the door.

"Hey! Look!"

He focused his flashlight onto the area.

"My god! The mural, but with *dozens* of the little circles all over the lines. What does it mean?"

"I hope it means what I think it means," David said realizing it had been no answer.

"If it involves getting us out of here, I'd say *now* is the time to act," Kit said watching the leading edge of the thick, green, cloud tumble to within fifteen feet of them.

David reached up and, moving from left to right across the picture, he pushed only on those small circles that were represented in the mural design he had been given. It was like a code – a combination. He knew he must press only on those circles designated on the box panel. He worked deliberately and thoughtfully realizing accuracy was essential regardless of the wall of green vapor steadily creeping toward them.

Click! Slide! Snap!

The door sprung free just as the green mist reached them. David pulled it open and pushed Kit up the ladder and out in front of him. He followed and slammed the door behind them. It was the same click and slide sound he had heard earlier. He didn't try it but hurried them right outside.

They pulled off their masks dropping them to the ground and stood there clinging to each other for a long time.

Kit broke the silence.

"You don't think that green gas was from one of the toxin tanks do you. Surely we didn't damage any of them, did we?"

No chance it was the toxin. Ari's too careful for us to even consider it as a possibility. It was either there to just make things interesting for us – in which case it is harmless – or, more likely, it might serve some purpose to keep others away, now that we've been there."

"Like?"

"I don't know. Maybe as simple as some form of sleeping gas or something to make trespassers momentarily ill so they will leave."

"I doubt if anybody will get past those bars. How do you suppose the gas knew when to begin disbursing? – and, yes, I realize that I have just anthropomorphized the green stuff."

"Probably timed from the moment the panel slipped into place."

"An interesting and valuable lesson," Kit said philosophically. "I'm going to be so careful from here on out that I may just wear a condom at all times."

The absurdity caused a long needed, if nervous, chuckle between them.

David placed a call to Carlos and by 3:45 they were racing around the eastern end of the island below the tall cliffs. They were back in their room at 4:10.

Kit paced, stopping to look out the north window and down toward the pool.

"It seems my public awaits," He said beginning to undress. "Unless we need to debrief or something."

"Debrief?"

"Like the square jawed, older looking gentleman with white hair and English accent always does to the spy upon the completion of his mission."

"Okay, we'll debrief each other," David said. "Are you relieved to have step two behind you, O-O-something-or-other?"

"That I am, Sir."

"And, furthermore, are you ready for some serious T.W.O.P.?"

"You've lost me, square jawed, older looking gentleman with white hair and a really terrible English accent."

"You've failed to memorize the new code book again, O-O?"

"Yes. Sorry. I was out saving the World, Sir."

"You can have a pass this time, then. T.W.O.P. stands for, Two Way Ogling Poolside?"

"Oh! Yes, Sir. I am quite ready for that! Provided I can find my suit. And you, Sir. After *your* recent, strenuous and very successful endeavor, would you care to join me for some T.W.O.P.F.O.G."

"Not until that F.O.G. clears."

Kit grinned as he wiggled into his almost swim suit.

"For Old Guys – T.W.O.P For Old Guys!"

"Can't possibly apply to me, then. I think I'll stay here and enjoy the magic fingers of the hot tub."

"I've heard that if you position the jets just right . . ."

"Go! Ogle! Enjoy! And, by the way, I know a wonderful little steak house down the street. How about we go there tonight to celebrate?"

"Celebrate? What on earth is there to celebrate?"

"Our successful mission at the church. Your soon to be successful mission at the pool. And, hopefully, Fido's successful mission as he accompanies you."

"You know that either way I can make it into a successful mission for him."

Kit donned his robe and sandals and was gone. David smiled; the lad had never moved that fast when it was time for him to take out the trash.

With dinner behind them they arrived back at their room a little after seven. The door had been closed behind them no more than a minute before there was a knock. Kit answered.

"We here for you pleasurement," the dark haired young lady announced. "Me Carla and her Julie. We here for you pleasurement."

"Uncle David," Kit called over his shoulder, unwilling to take his eyes off the feminine feast being served up in full, fleshy, color there before him.

He arrived and the message was repeated.

"We here for you pleasurement."

They both nodded. The blond winked and adjusted her tube-top as if to allow no misinterpretation of their purpose.

"Thank you but we won't need your services this evening. I assume you have already been paid."

They looked at each other puzzled. Apparently they had little experience with such a brush off.

"You sure?" the talkative one asked. "We very good at pleasurement."

"I'm sure you are the best but good night."

David closed the door.

"Wow! What a dilemma, huh?"

"Dilemma? I thought you were being true to Megan."

"There seems to be a hormone regulated switch that periodically turns off such good intentions for short periods. They were gorgeous, Uncle David. Couldn't we have just invited them in to lounge around and maybe take an innocent shower with me?"

"It's done. Over. Finished. Move on."

"Ari's doing, I suppose," Kit suggested.

"Quite definitely. He undoubtedly had girls for us back at Whitehorse too but with the strange schedule we kept there we missed them."

"Is it true there is or was a people who lived in igloos within the Arctic Circle who insisted on sharing their wives and daughters with male travelers?"

"I've read about them, yes. But in terms of first hand experiences, I've never had the pleasure – so to speak."

Kit removed his shirt, kicked off his sandals, dropped to the floor, and began doing pushups.

"Does that really help?" David asked.

"The theory seems sound. By requiring massive blood flow into your

arms, that which is involved in maintaining your erection, should be diverted elsewhere. But no, I've never found it to work."

"Then why expend all that energy?"

"It keeps my hands busy."

"So would knitting."

"Too dangerous!"

"Why?"

"Those flying needles in a guy's lap would surely do serious damage to the pleasure center."

"Push-ups it is then."

Kit nodded and continued.

David thought a change of subject might help. He took a seat in a recliner.

"I figure our next stop in Brazil is right at three thousand miles almost straight south of here. I want us to be on our way by noon tomorrow."

"Have you called Alex?"

"Yes. They'll be ready. Apparently we can fly right into Joao Pessoa. Alex says they have a new international airport."

"And then zip right out to the nude beach?"

"I declare. You'll be doing pushups all night."

Kit grinned and stopped, rolling over onto his back, knees in the air.

"Really, what will our agenda be?" he asked.

"About like the others. Arrive, check into our hotel, then get our bearings and make more specific plans in light of what we find there."

"I really do think we need to reconsider the use of the women Ari arranges for us."

"So do I."

"You do?" Kit said sitting up. "I don't understand. I didn't mean I wanted to have sex with them – let me rephrase that – I really, really, really *would* like to have sex with them but that is not in my immediate future so long as I'm with Megan. What did *you* mean? I just thought we might be able to arrange what you refer to as some ogling time."

"And so we shall."

"You *really* have me confused," Unc.

"The specific beach we need to cross and work from, *Tambaba*, has a few rather strict rules. One is that to enter you have to be nude. A second is that no nude, adult, male is allowed there without a nude female companion. It was initiated to keep out the male voyeurs and maintain an appropriate nudist and naturist, family, atmosphere there."

"Ah! So, we will engage the women to accompany us during the time we need to be there at Tambaba."

"Right."

"And they will be absolutely, fully, and totally nude right there beside us."

"Right."

Kit turned back to the floor and began doing push-ups again. "*Nude* not naked. *Nude* not naked."

"It's time for you to share with me what you've learned about that underwater cave," Kit.

Kit got up and sprawled out on the couch.

"The information about it is not centralized anywhere, so far as I could determine so I have pulled everything together in one file on the computer. It's a hodgepodge of myths, stories of exploration, and I imagine just outright lies. I've separated it into what seems to have been substantiated and what hasn't."

"Excellent work, Kit."

"A problem exists. Even among what seems to be the more reliable information, two separate site descriptions have emerged. One describes it as being on the western edge of a small submerged island or reef about a half mile off shore. The other has it in the deepest part of a trough right off the eastern edge of the beech."

"So, either way our land route is the same?"

"Right. By the way will they ID me for age?"

"No. You'll be with me. There will be hundreds and hundreds of kids and teenagers there with their parents. Actually, probably seventy five percent of the people on the beech will be either under fifteen or over forty. Lot's of retired folks. Lots of extended families."

"Crash!"

"What?"

"That was my nude supermodel-laden picture of the place falling to the floor and shattering."

"Sorry."

"There *is* an upside, though, Unc. Kids and old people *never* excite Fido."

"That would be a case where the upside allows the continuation of the downside."

"You're getting more and more risqué as time passes, you know that."

"If I am, it's because you're raging-teen-male-hormonal-mentality is contagious. You, all quite normally, see sexual things everywhere."

"You're welcome, then. Enjoy!"

"Back to the location of the cave," David suggested. "Any gut feeling?"

"I have wondered if there may actually be two caves that each became associated with the myth. The whole history is disjointed and hit and miss."

"An interesting take on it. In a way like the puzzle Ari presented us here on Pico – more than one option. That possibility had not occurred to me back home."

"Me either but then it was all surreal back there."

"So, which do we look at first?" David asked clearly making Kit the expert.

"Pragmatically we do the easiest – nearest – one first. Its supposed depth also gives it some credibility. Lore about the spirits of lost seafaring men typically involves the sea *bottom*. I'd vote for the eastern coast of Brazil up at the far north end of Tambaba Beach."

"Okay. We'll need to pinpoint it within seconds in terms of latitude and longitude."

"Got it done to within a dozen meters north to south along the beach. Tambaba lays between some high, steep cliffs to the west and the ocean to the east. The spot of interest to us is at the point where the mountain curves out and into the sea dividing that beach from the one to the north – not nude, by the way. It's actually quite narrow there. Locating the exact spot will require our global positioning gear."

"Good work. The beach never closes so we can ostensibly remain there 24/7 until we locate and explore the cave."

"You sound confident," Kit said. "I am, too. I hope that's appropriate – I mean I hope it doesn't have a negative impact on our competence. You understand what I'm trying to say?"

"That confidence doesn't give us the bighead so we become sloppy!"

"Yes. That's it. I guess nickel words sometimes outperform dollar words!"

"We have the human race to save – that includes your parents and Megan and my parents and Molly. I can't imagine either of us becoming sloppy with all that stake; can you, really?"

"No. . . . Thanks. . . . I needed to hear that. And, we have each other. There's nobody in my life that's any more important to me than you, you understand."

"I understand. We've always shared a wonderful bond. It is what I treasure most in my life."

Kit brushed a tear away.

"Remember when I was a little kid and we'd have those terrible, Indiana, summer, thunder storms at night? Blankie and I'd come tearing across the backyards to your place through the rain and climb in bed with you shaking like a leaf."

"I do. Some of my sheets are still not dry."

Kit smiled.

"I've always felt safe when I was near you."

"I'm glad you have. You're a man now. We're a team. We have to depend on each other for that safety."

"It's one of the last remnants of childhood that I'm still fighting to keep hold of I guess. It seemed strange – sort of scary, in fact – when you gave me the responsibility just now of deciding where we start down in *Joao Pessoa*. I resented it, even; I didn't want you to force the responsibility on me – the kid. I wanted you to share in the accountability. Can you understand that?"

"Oh, yes. Been there. When I was thirteen my dad caught me masturbating behind the barn. I knew our church considered it a sin and I figured my dad would naturally share that belief. He put one hand on my shoulder and with the other one he pulled my chin up so we were looking eye to eye. He said: 'You know our beliefs about that but as far as I'm concerned it is strictly between you and God. I'll never refer to it again, but do try to be more discrete. It would send your mother to an early grave'.

"Since I had mostly given up on god by the time I was twelve I figured that conversation left it solely up to me and I wasn't about to give up something that felt that fantastic. In one way I was relieved. In another I was terribly angered because he wouldn't come right out and join me in condoning the activity – which was the message he had sent me. I still get a bit peeved when I think back on it."

Kit smiled broadly.

"He caught you jackin' off? How embarrassing!"

"Did you get the point of my story?"

"Yes, yes! As we grow up we often resent the specific responsibilities thrust upon us when our parents insist on passing them on to us, but that's such a funny image, you know; a little guy, pants around his ankles, whippin' off at ninety per, and his dad strolls up."

"Each to his own delights, I suppose."

"*You* ever see *me* doing it?" Kit asked as if an afterthought.

"I have made every effort not to, as difficult as that has been with my open shower arrangement, your complete lack of modesty, and your unmistakable final crescendo of oos and ahhs."

Kit grinned and nodded.

"I've never been able to do it without expressing my elation and wonder at the process. I always assumed you knew what was going on anyway so I never saw any reason to hide my exuberance and exhilaration – and that does produce exuberance and exhilaration, doesn't it."

"It certainly does."

"Still does when you get old?"

"If by *old* you mean my age, yes, the moment remains fantastic."

"I imagine the feeling is akin to that when it occurs during intercourse."

"If that is a quandary that you want to continue fathoming on your own I'll pass on responding."

"Not really."

"Then my answer is that it is an even more extraordinary feeling when you are endeavoring to make those final moments as wonderful for her as they are for yourself."

"That *must* be wonderful."

"May I make a comment?" David asked.

"Sure. Same ground rules as with you but they are fully unnecessary, you

know.”

“How so?”

“In my whole life neither one of us has ever chose not to answer the other’s question.”

David smiled and shrugged.

“So, what’s your comment?” Kit asked.

“Something I figured was none of my business but you’ve just made it pretty plain.”

“About me never having had intercourse, you mean.”

“Yes. I have to admit I’ve wondered.”

“I’ve done about everything just shy of it. Megan and I get naked together. We enjoy giving each other physical pleasure, I guess you could say.”

“Holding it to no more than that during a naked session with a female requires a tremendous amount of restraint for a boy your age.”

“Interesting. That’s what we’ve concluded. A lot more for me than her, we’ve decided. It’s good that we’ve come to understand that, I think.”

“May I ask if the two of you are considering marriage?”

“You may . . .”

“Are the two of you considering marriage?”

“We both understand that someday we will each be married – maybe to each other and maybe not. It’s why we stop short of intercourse. We both think that should be saved for marriage. It’s mostly religious on her part. It’s mostly social on mine – like you’ve talked about in things you’ve written. History demonstrates pretty clearly that when sex is condoned as legitimate outside of marriage the family unit has always collapsed, crime and mental illness among youngsters has increased exponentially, and the culture has deteriorated into an everybody-for-himself mêlée.”

“Once again, I am very proud of you. You’ve thought it through in terms of the larger picture – the long term results for mankind. Only about one in a billion adolescents ever do that.”

“Me and five and a half other teen guys, you say.”

David smiled.

“My turn, Uncle David.”

“Okay. Seems fair.”

“You’ve never tried to hide the fact from me that you’ve had sex with lots of women. I don’t mean you’ve bragged because you never have. I’m just not sure how that fits with your writings.”

“It doesn’t. At your age I hadn’t had sex either – in fact I’d never felt the flesh of a breast or seen a girl nude. Then I went to college and Ari changed all that. You must remember that was back before I formulated my social conscience about such matters. In fact, I’m sure it helped me do that.”

“What a way to learn a lesson, huh?” Kit said joking. “Sleeping with

dozens and dozens of beautiful women.”

David continued without comment.

“Since those days, my concession has been to always be sexually faithful to the woman who was my significant other at the moment. I’ve had three such relationships since graduate school. I believe that for me to get married just so I can legitimately have sex would be wrong given all the forces in my life that I think dictate against marriage. I have no plans to have children, and I’m not willing to be celibate. If children were to be a part of my life I would most certainly marry.”

“Molly seems to be okay with that?”

“Molly is an exceptional human being. She and I love each other very much. We are as married as a couple can be without the certificate. We have pledged to a long term relationship though we know we can never live together, given the beliefs of the college that employs me.”

“I know I’m just a kid but I think your brain has twisted it all up into a load of crap – no offence intended.”

“None taken – at least at this point.”

David smiled, folded his hands, and waited for his nephew’s elaboration.

“You love each other. You are so good for each other. You need to have kids to be a father to – they’d be the luckiest kids that ever lived. I don’t think you’re giving Molly enough credit to deal with what you just called ‘the forces in your life that dictate against marriage’.”

“I will take that under advisement. Thank you for your candor and frank analysis.”

“No charge. What relation will I be to your kids?”

“Imp!”

“I do believe that’s *cuz imp*, old man!”

CHAPTER TWELVE

"I'm going to land *eyes open* this time. I've decided!" Kit announced as he entered the plane.

"And just how are you going to manage that?" Alex asked winking at David who followed the boy inside.

"I'm going to pick your brain all the way from here to Brazil and find out how *you* do it."

"*You know, a conjuror gets no credit when once he has explained his trick . . .*" Alex began, leaving the quotation hanging.

"I know this one!" Kit said excitedly. "Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in *A Study in Scarlet* I think. . . . *and if I show you too much of my method of working, you will come to the conclusion that I am a very ordinary individual after all.*"

"I'm certainly impressed, David. Are you impressed?"

"I *am* impressed. Perhaps all those nights he stayed up beyond lights out secretly reading the Sherlock Holmes mysteries with a flashlight under his covers he was actually preparing himself for this very moment."

"You knew about that?"

"Why did you think I kept buying new titles to put on the table beside your bed?"

"It probably also explains the never ending supply of double 'A' batteries in the drawer."

"Probably. Being Uncle to a genius is no easy job!"

"I'd never thought about that. Thanks, I suppose."

"You're welcome, I'm sure."

David turned to Alex.

"This thing ready to fly?"

"More or *less*," he said the phrasing and intonation strictly for Kit's benefit.

"You can't deter my resolve," Kit said. "I have a secret motivator: the likelihood of seeing nude females on the beaches as we pass overhead."

"Whatever it takes, I suppose," Alex said. "Strap in. We'll be on our way in minutes."

"And arrive about when?" Kit asked.

"It will be a seven to eight hour flight depending on the actual wind velocities we encounter. From Whitehorse to the Azores they were generally at our tail the whole way. This trip they'll be coming at us erratically from all points as we make our way south. Because of it Connie filed a flight plan that calls for us to fly a bit higher than usual – at 50,000 feet. Leaving here at 11:10 we

should arrive there between six and seven this evening. Same time zone.”

Kit stuck his head into the cockpit. It served two purposes. First, to make sure Connie was really there. Second, to say hello, which was designed to make the first purpose less obvious. He fooled no one.”

“We have time for you to take my blood pressure and pulse if that will comfort you,” Connie said, holding out his arm and smiling back at the boy.

“Won’t be necessary. I figure if you can speak, the other two go without saying.”

The cockpit door was closed and the passengers fastened the belts that would secure them in their seats during the plane’s rapid ascent and immediate, steeply banked, left-hand curve that would head them south.

“I arranged for diving gear at the hotel,” David said. “To rent it we’d have to pass an in-the-water-test before they’d turn us loose. So, I bought it, which will require no such tests and save us time.”

“They’re content to let the rich guys go off and kill themselves, huh?”

“It would seem that way. Do you feel like a rich guy?”

“I feel like a regular guy who momentarily has lots and lots of money. To me there’s a difference.”

“I can see the difference. Me, too, I suppose. An interesting philosophic problem.”

“Here’s another one for you,” Kit said. “If you were unclothed in a forest and nobody was around to see you would you really be nude?”

“Yes, if the proof you require is only in the physical condition, which is agreed to be its own definition with no verbal label, and, *No*, if it requires the observation and intelligent, verbal, interpretation by another human being. To observe that one is *unclothed* requires knowledge of being clothed and to judge it as appropriate or not requires reference to some set of values. It is akin to asking if one’s nose is *not* painted green. It is a question that would never enter anyone’s mind unless green painted noses were somehow likely and, perhaps, required for a decent – that is, value based – presentation of oneself.”

“And, as a philosopher you could continue on and write a two hundred page treatise on the topic.”

“At least – and I just may! Where’s my yellow pad?”

He was pulling Kit’s leg, of course. (Or was he?)

It was by far the nicest hotel they had been in – a four room suite, huge bath with double shower, sauna, and hot tub. Along the east wall of the sitting room and master bedroom were large windows from which the soul-soothing view of the beaches and hypnotic undulation of the deep blue ocean beyond could be enjoyed. The pool and most of the common areas of the hotel were clothes optional. David had approached obtaining those accommodations differently from the others. He merely called the best hotel and asked if his

reservations were in order. They were, even though, of course, he had never made them.

After enjoying dinner in the hotel's five star restaurant, Kit, wearing only his smile and carrying a towel and robe, left the suite to investigate the pool and its denizens. He was not disappointed either in the shapely, nude, feminine members of the species, which he found there in abundance, or in the way Fido behaved himself. He felt a sense of relief. It was more than that. He felt a sense of pride that his mind could be in charge of his historically hormone managed reactions. He could observe and appreciate the beauty of their nude bodies and was fascinated by how his eyes soon seemed equally interested in surveying the more familiar areas of face and hair. It was as if he had suddenly graduated from horny, sheltered, teen-boy to sophisticated adult.

Interesting, to him, was the fact that initiating conversation with a nude girl was by far the most difficult aspect of the situation. Fortunately, that was not the case for the girls.

He reentered the suite at ten thirty.

"Figured you'd died and gone to heaven," David joked, himself still drip drying at the window from his extended stay in the hot tub.

"The prostitutes been here yet," Kit asked, "And if they have been did you go to the door like that?"

"They have and I didn't."

"And?"

"I explained the conditions of their employment, offered them a sizeable bonus – don't you *dare* say it – and arranged for them to be here at seven in the morning."

"Are they pretty?"

"Gorgeous!"

"How old?"

"I'd guess one to be in her early thirties and the other about twenty."

"Ari is seeing to both of us, I guess."

"Seems so," David said. "Somehow he understood I went for the younger ones and you for the older."

Kit smiled and chucked a pillow at his uncle. He suddenly realized it didn't matter. It would be a group outing with no real reason to pair up. He wondered how the four of them would be viewed by the others at the beach – Father, mother, daughter, son, or just two couples mismatched in age. It didn't really matter so long as the beach patrol approved their passage onto the sandy expanse.

He briefly contemplated the idea of a real-life, nude, super hero and the conflicting social responses it would attract. Some would accept him with open arms so long as he performed his services well. Others would reject him outright as a bad person who, regardless of his heroic, world-saving, deeds, and stellar

morals, would be unwelcome and ostracized because of the single characteristic that was offensive to some sets of values.

Because of its apparent ubiquitousness, he often wondered if such prejudice and bigotrous, narrow-mindedness was a natural human trait that a few people, like he and his uncle, had somehow learned to rise above. (Clearly, on-the-fly invention of new word forms was of far less concern to him.) David believed it was a way of self-protection – making something foreign into something evil right from the start meant one didn't have to risk weakening his own value by examining the intruding one. Kit tended to agree.

"So what to do we wear from here to the beach in the morning?" Kit asked.

"I'm wearing a T-shirt, walking shorts, and sandals. We'll carry a plastic sack to put our clothes in when we arrive."

"Okay. T-shirt and shorts for me as well, I guess. We have quite a bit of stuff to carry – the air tanks, the masks, the cameras, the usual backpacks, I suppose. Taking the box panel this first day?"

"No. There are still too many uncertainties about things. Once we locate the cave we can make plans to come back and get it."

"Food?"

"Lots of places to get food on the beach."

"Think we can trust the . . . women? That's odd really."

"What?"

"Suddenly they are not really prostitutes – just companions – employees, really. Anywho, will we be able to trust them with our stuff while we go off diving?"

"The reason for the big bonus."

"What?"

"I planned the bonus to be considerably more than they could get hocking any of our stuff."

"And that bonus is?"

"Five thousand dollars a day. Their usual hourly rate in this part of the World is equivalent to five hundred dollars. Few top of the line working girls manage ten tricks a day. They seemed very happy with the arrangement. It will be like a paid vacation for them."

"I'm still amazed that men will pay that much for sex. A prostitute's services must involve a good deal more than just giving a guy an opportunity to ejaculate in their vaginas. I wish I knew what else was involved."

"Perhaps if you ask, they will share their secrets."

"I'll undoubtedly be better off if I don't find out."

"Why's that?"

"As it is, I make what I think is a really great experience for myself once or twice a day. If I knew what I was missing I might become dissatisfied with my present approach, and my current pragmatic definition of ecstasy might turn into

disappointment. I think I'll pass."

"Ignorance is bliss?"

"You could say that."

"Thought I just did."

"You probably think I'm too young to get married."

"If there is a question inside that statement, the answer is yes. I commend you for waiting until marriage – or until you are certain she is the girl you will marry. Allowing the ready access to sex to become the leading reason to get married is, in my opinion, totally inappropriate."

Kit nodded.

"I'm going to shower *and so forth* then hit the sack. What time we getting up?"

"Five. That will give us time to get breakfast and organize our equipment before our companions arrive. Happy dreams."

"Same to ya!," Kit said walking toward the bathroom. He stopped and turned back toward David before entering the hall. "F.Y.I, Fido was content to just hang around his evening."

David smiled and laughed out loud.

"How did we begin this inane code-talk thing and, more importantly, why? I've always encouraged you to be open in your vocabulary about such things."

"Not sure. Seems fun, though. Sort of nice to have a pet name for my penis and 'dawdling' seems to soften the sinful edge inherent in the term 'masturbation' – *self-abuse*."

He shuddered. David mimicked him – his indication of agreement.

"Fine. You and *Fido* go have a wonderful *dawdle* and I'll see you in the morning."

"When you put it that way is really does sound dumb, doesn't it?"

By 7:15 the introductions had been made and they were on their way to the beach – a three block walk along palm studded streets.

The women were sisters; the older of the two was Juanita and the younger Maria – a name many would not think appropriate for a prostitute. They were good conversationalists and spoke acceptable English. There was something about their personalities that Kit found immediately warm and appealing. He was beginning to formulate a picture of how they went about plying their trade. It seemed to be as much instant friendship as instant sex.

Ten yards onto the beach they encountered the sign that outlined the rules: They were quite simple and stated in five languages. No clothes beyond this point. Children are present so act accordingly. All adult males must be accompanied by an adult female. No acts of sexual consummation.

"I assume that last one means no intercourse," Kit said all quite openly to David.

The women giggled. Kit wouldn't blush but shrugged. David responded.

"Right. It's not intended to prohibit dating behaviors such as cuddling and touching, but crossing the line is prohibited. There is a small beach south of here where discrete, low profile, sexual activity is allowed though not officially condoned."

The men placed their clothes into the bag David had brought and the women found room in there large, straw, shoulder bags. Kit maintained his view across the beach to the ocean.

"The beach is huge," his said.

"I understand something like ten thousand folks frequent the place a day and over three million every year," David explained.

"Swimsuit industry loses money around here," Kit joked.

David spoke, mostly to the women.

"We will be going to the far north edge of the beach."

He pointed as he and Kit slipped back into the backpacks and picked up the diving equipment. The trek took a half hour, which involved several stops to rest and enjoy the scenery – *broadly* interpreted.

At the spot Kit determined would be the best jumping off point for them there was no morning shade and the sun was already hot.

"Our uncle is an umbrella vender. We can call him if you want," Juanita said.

"Yes. Please. I hadn't planned very well. If he could manage a cooler of water and soft drinks, that would be good as well. Have him bring what you think we will need."

The call was placed and within fifteen minutes several men approached carrying four huge umbrellas, four fold-up canvas lounge chairs, the drinks, beach towels, inflatable mattresses, a four poster tent top in case of rain, and a portable radio.

"How do they get by wearing clothes?" Kit asked.

"Registered venders get a pass on that rule," Maria explained.

"I hope your uncle will take a credit card. It seems I failed to get enough local currency," David said.

"It's on us," Juanita said. "You are very nice men."

David nodded appreciatively.

"As I told you, Kit and I will be out in the water much of the time doing our research, so you ladies arrange things here to suit yourselves."

Kit strapped the global positioning device onto his wrist and the two of them left for the water's edge.

"This would be the bingo that defines the southern edge of the area, which I suspect will have the cave. Its depth is uncertain but this spot begins a trench that's about ten meters deep and fifteen meters wide extending due east."

"Do you have a search plan in mind?" David asked.

"I figured we would use this plastic sack like a buoy. Blow it up, tie this sturdy cord to it – the one I've marked off in meters – and then swim sweeps back and forth, each one being a meter deeper than the one before."

"Sounds perfect. That way our bodies will gradually adjust to the increase in pressure. Let's get at it."

Five minutes later they had slipped into their equipment and were in the water. The first six sweeps in the beautiful, clear, water offered a magnificent view of rock formations and sea life but no caves. Half way through number seven they came upon an irregular opening approximately three feet tall and two feet wide. If they hadn't been looking for a cave opening they would not have seen it, opening out at an odd angle like it did. They noted its location and continued the search.

At the very bottom of the trench was what Kit would later refer to as the mini-trench – six feet wide and ten feet deep. At its bottom was a large cave opening a good five feet high and almost as wide.

David engaged his flashlight as Kit prepared the two handgun sized dart guns for protection against the unknown ahead.

David entered first with Kit an arm's length behind and to his right. He also turned on his light. The tunnel remained constant in size back some forty feet where it opened into a much larger room. They swam its circumference finding nothing – almost nothing. Kit picked up a large coin from the floor. It was still shiny and laid on top of a large, flat, stone as if to purposefully keep it out of the black sludge that coated the floor to a depth of several inches.

David searched the ceiling while Kit investigated that flat rock. Neither discovered anything of significance. Upon David's signal they exited the cave and moved back to the first one they had come upon.

Its entrance was narrow and required them to move in sideways. It was immediately large – some twenty feet wide and seven feet high. It continued back beyond the effective reach of the beams of their lights. They swam side by side into the blackness.

The channel narrowed to a three foot circular tunnel. David motioned Kit to remain there as he moved on inside. Not ten feet beyond the opening a boulder fell into place behind David, leaving him trapped beyond it. Although the opening was not completely filled, there was not room for him to slip through.

They tried to push the boulder. It would not budge. Kit removed his second and as yet untapped air tank and passed it through the opening to David. He motioned he was going back up to the surface, presumably to get help. David nodded his understanding. They both understood that David had little more than an hour's supply of air.

Kit turned, moving swiftly to the exit and too rapidly to the surface. He was dizzy and his thinking fuzzy as he removed his mask, fins, and tanks and ran to the women. His first quandary was whether to reveal David's location to a

rescue team or to buy time with additional air tanks. He opted to begin with the second plan. David had ordered the delivery of six more tanks and they had already arrived. Kit figured he now needed two new ones himself and that he could manage to move two more down to David. He asked Juanita to contact her uncle and have him arrange for six more tanks.

Kit made several trips back and forth to the water's edge laying out the equipment there. He maintained a smile and unruffled demeanor for the benefit of the women as he trembled deep inside.

"We need a couple of pry bars. I'm going to borrow two of the poles to the tent top thingy," he announced.

"Thingy?" Juanita asked.

"Slang for any object you can't think of the name for."

He soon had everything arranged for easy access along the water's edge. He put on his equipment and submerged with the extra tanks. Two minutes later he was back at the boulder. He dropped the tanks and went to the opening. David was not there. He shined his light through the opening and moved it here and there trying to attract his uncle's attention. Nothing.

Kit was not dissuaded from his plan. He returned to the surface and picked up the poles. Back again at the boulder he made several attempts at finding positions that offered suitable leverage to roll it back into the area that widened again, just beyond.

With great effort he managed to move it nearly a foot. He repositioned the poles and tried again. Another foot. He took time to look beyond the boulder. He needed to move it at least six more feet before he would be able to slip by it. On each attempt he would position the poles so one rested against each of his shoulders as he squatted, back to the bolder. He would then straighten up, moving the huge chunk of stone those few inches.

Nearly exhausted, he would not stop. Again and again he would squat and lift, squat and lift. At last there was an opening large enough for him to squeeze through. He left the poles but toted the extra tanks with him.

His efforts had stirred up the sludge which made it difficult to see. Thinking David might have passed out for some reason he swam close to the bottom, back and forth searching for him. Not until he had moved some thirty feet further back into the cave was the water clear enough to see through. He had not found his Uncle. He swam on a dozen or so meters. A light appeared in the water ahead.

"David!" he said to himself. He moved on, more slowly than he wished, due the extra baggage.

Arriving at the spot of light he saw it was not David but a beam of light penetrating the water from above. He swam up toward it. To his surprise his head breached the surface. It was a cave; there was an irregular opening some fifty feet above.

"In the cliffs just to the west of the women," he said out loud, having slipped his mask up to his forehead as he treaded water and tried to get his bearings.

"What took you so long. Stop for tea," came his uncle's voice from the shadows just ahead."

"Uncle David! Show yourself. My God! Uncle David. You're okay."

"Up here. There's a ledge."

He turned on his flashlight and guided Kit to the spot.

"How in the World did you move that boulder, Son?" David said taking the tanks as Kit climbed up beside him."

"Had some good help."

"The women?"

"Nope. Good old A. Drenal Lynn."

"Undoubtedly. Did you mention our situation to anyone?"

"Thought better of it. Figured I'd give us at least one more chance to handle it ourselves."

"Excellent! Excellent! You are something else, you know."

"So you've told me repeatedly throughout my life. Some day you must go into detail."

"Ready for an interesting sight?"

"What do you mean?"

David focused his light to the right.

"My god! Looks like a half dozen skeletons and a three old trunks. Pirates with their treasure?"

"That's my guess."

"I suppose the *how* of their getting in here is for later speculation," Kit said really wanting to begin spinning possibilities.

"I'm content to leave it that way though I suspect entry was achieved through the opening up near the ceiling. That would probably make the skeletons those of the pirate's enemies."

"And the *how and why* of the boulder being triggered to pen any intruders inside?"

"Has the makings of an interesting story."

"None of which seems to have been included in the myths surrounding the *Cave of the Lost Souls*, by the way," Kit added.

"We probably should at least take a quick peek in those chests, don't you suppose – for the sake of historical inquiry," Kit said.

"I see no reason why you can't come back after all of this is over and claim the treasure for yourself if you want to," David said.

"Awesome!"

The trunks had deteriorated and the Spanish Doubloons, gold pieces, and jewels burst onto the ledge as Kit attempted to lift the lid.

"It is a genuine fortune, you know," David said.

"Yeah. Can you imagine all the hungry kids that will feed?"

"Like I said, Kit. You're something else."

"Any sign of Ari in here?" Kit asked.

"I've searched this ledge from one end to the other and found nothing indicating he was here."

"So, I guess we leave then."

"Next stop that little, submerged, island you've been telling me about," David said. "You have a good fix on it as well?"

"I guess we'll know once we get out to where I think it should be."

"You certainly hit these square on."

They slipped into the water and made their way back to the opening. Kit did pause long enough to investigate the spot from which the boulder had fallen. It was hardly worthy of a story. Clearly it had just broken loose from where it had been hanging in a dome above the tunnel. Apparently the water motion David had created upon passing under it had been all that was required to break it loose.

"Must be time to eat," Kit said as they arrived at the camp site.

"Maria went down to the food stand and got us Chinese," Juanita said. "Hope Chinese is okay."

"Sounds great!" Kit said.

David nodded his agreement.

They each lingered over their own version of the same thought. There they were, stark naked on a Brazilian beach eating Chinese with two gorgeous prostitutes who they would not be touching.

"You were in the water a long time," Juanita said after lunch was finished. "Why don't you lay down on the mattresses and we will give you massages?"

"I for one am up to that," David said. "Just my back and shoulders." It was as much informational for Kit as it was directions for Juanita.

Kit was hesitant. It sounded great but he feared Fido might also *really* be up *for* or *from* it. Still he figured he could manage taking David's lead and lay on his stomach. He just had to remember his masseuse was nude not naked.

A half hour later the men were back at the edge of the water checking their gear, making ready for the swim out to the submerged island. If Kit's calculations were correct it would be a swim of somewhere between 800 and 900 yards from shore.

David preferred the sidestroke for distances. Kit the breast stroke – big surprise! They talked as they swam setting a leisurely pace to save their strength.

"That coin I found in the cave was a modern Greek coin," Kit said.

"Heads or tails?"

"Tails."

"Ari. His way of teasing us."

"You think? Really? I thought we had decided he was at death's door, so to speak."

"Oh, it wouldn't have been Ari in person under the best of circumstances. He's claustrophobic. He'd have never entered that cave himself even when the picture of health."

"Really."

"It was so bad I used to kid him . . . No, I shouldn't tell that."

"Hey. This is me, Kit, Nephew almost like a son, partner, confidant, we share DNA for gosh sake!"

"It is all quite inelegant – that is my reluctance."

"So. I'm well versed in inelegant. Butchie was my best friend growing up, remember?"

"Okay. I once kidded him saying that he was so claustrophobic I was amazed that his penis didn't have a panic attack every time it entered a vagina."

Kit burst into laughter struggling to maintain his head above water.

"That's hilarious, Uncle David! How did he react?"

"We were in his pool at the time and he almost drowned, laughing about it."

"Me too. Just now."

They swam on in silence for several hundred yards.

"What if there really isn't a cave out here like I think there is?" Kit asked.

"That sounds a bit pessimistic. None of that now! We face things when we face them but never beforehand in our worry corner."

"Good advice. That a quote I should recognize?"

"I heard it from my mother, your grandmother, a worthy person to quote, I'd say."

"I'd say so. She made and raised two wonderful sons."

It required no response but sent a momentary wave of sadness across David's consciousness. He missed his brother every single day. Kit looked so much like him there was no way not to confront it whenever they were together and that had been just about every day since his brother had died. He would miss Kit profoundly when he left for college in September – assuming there would be a September for them.

A small, motor powered boat approached them. There were two, lifeguard looking men aboard. They cut the motor and drifted close to them speaking in Portuguese.

"English?" David said.

"Yes. English. You have passed the swimming limit here. Need to stay within a hundred meters of shore or be accompanied by a boat."

"We're doing scientific research on the plankton life in the area," David said not knowing for sure where his opening volley would lead.

"Oh. With the Stephanopoulos Shipping Group?"

"Yes, Sir. Stephanopoulos."

"Sorry to have bothered you. Last time they had that big barge with them. Were you here then?"

"No. We're like a follow up team you could say."

"I see. Well, our orders are to cooperate in any way. The number on the boat is our phone - the local code plus 1234."

"Thank you. By the way it's just a bit confusing out here with no reference points. Our barge was anchored about a hundred meters straight ahead, right?"

"Straight off the point back there and yes, out about another hundred meters. Tell you what. We'll go on out there and drop a buoy at the approximate location. Make it simpler for you."

"Thanks. You people here are extremely kind and helpful. We appreciate that."

The boat roared to life and cut a sharp turn back out to sea.

"Now, it's *you* who are something else, Uncle David. You not only got us a free pass in prohibited waters and 24/7 back up, but you got the exact site marked. Do you really need me?"

"Hey. We wouldn't have been this close and looking so legitimate without your efforts, partner."

Kit grinned. The buoy was planted and visible. The lifeguards waved as they passed on their way back toward shore.

Not only had the buoy been placed and anchored to the shallow bottom but an uninflated, yellow, life raft had been tied to it.

"Perhaps I'll change my last name to Stephanopoulos," Kit joked. "It seems to open lots of doors and provides a passel of perks."

"A passel of perks – you must become a writer."

"Ready to dive?" Kit asked, clearly eager to get on with the next step.

"After you."

There were several islands in the area that were exposed for just a few hours each day during low tide. This particular one remained three meters below the surface even then.

"Straight down then along the orange anchor rope to see the lay of the land," Kit said. "Once at the bottom we can begin making sweeps using the rope as the central point. How about going fifteen meters on each side of it?"

"Sounds sound to me," David said.

The attempt at humor was noted with a quick grin not so much because it was all that clever but because it was one way Uncle David showed his love. They adjusted their air supplies and submerged following the rope. No opening was found. The sea floor was at a shallow nine meters. Their first sweep to the north found nothing but as they approached the outer limit of the search area going south, there it was.

The opening was eight feet high and almost that wide. The freshly chiseled surface suggested it had been widened with jack hammers or some such tools. Using their flashlights they investigated the area from outside. They could see that the entry tunnel ran back into the island ten feet where it was effectively blocked by a huge rock slab. It would have seemed no more than that to any casual swimmer-bye but to them it was definitely a door.

David pointed up and around the outside opening indicating it needed to be investigated before they entered. He didn't want another door locked behind them like had happened at their previous stop.

It was caution well taken. Another of the now familiar iron bar, cell door-like, structures was hinged to fall into place from the ceiling. A brief search revealed latches in the rock floor at the point of entry.

The beam of Kit's flashlight swept across and returned to a hole perhaps an inch and a half in diameter just under the far end of the door as it lay up against the ceiling. David searched the opposite wall. There was an identical one there as well.

He formed the thumb and index finger of his left hand into a circle then inserted his other index finger into it. Kit understood. It was a safety mechanism build in just for them. With a rod of some kind inserted into each hole the door could not swing down.

Kit offered the metal dart gun to David indicating the metal barrel to use as the rod. David accepted it, nodding. He motioned Kit to remain outside. David moved in and up to the hole where he inserted the gun. It was a loose fit and the gun would fall out. From the floor of the cave he selected several small stones and returned to lodge them in around the barrel, securing it in place. He then repeated the process on the other side of the tunnel with his own gun. It left them defenseless but so far they had not run across any life form that seemed threatening and he would take that risk to ensure safe passage back out of the cave.

David motioned kit inside. They approached their next obstacle – the massive stone door. It didn't budge when pushed and they pushed on every square inch of its surface.

David beat on his chest. Kit understood and began looking for a trip device like the one previously relegated by David to the early black and white Tarzan movies.

Once they knew what they were looking for it jumped out at them at the same moment – a rock clinging to the side of the tunnel as no rock could ever naturally cling. Kit began trying to manipulate it. It turned clockwise and the stone slab snapped open several inches. David pushed and it swung easily.

The cave beyond was wide and deep. As they stood in the doorway, they moved the beams from their flashlights along the bottom. There was no huge tank like they had expected – hoped – would be there. They were convinced it

was the right place – the bars, the specially fashioned rock door.

With his hands, David indicated a form that was a foot or so in all dimensions and pointed to the area on the floor where the door would close against the wall. Kit understood and swam back outside returning a few minutes later rolling a rock along the bottom. He positioned it so it would effectively block the slab door from shutting completely and allow a narrow passage through which they could squeeze in an emergency.

David had been searching the wall just inside the big cave for a second opening device like the rock on the wall outside. None was to be found. He concluded that once that slab closed anyone inside was inside forever.

It had become clear to David that the several booby traps they had encountered – the locked doors and green gas at Pico and the self-locking doors there in the cave – were all intended to protect the sites from unknowing intruders after he and Kit made their visit. Ari counted on them to be savvy enough to avoid them. So far they had lived up to his expectations.

He checked the placement of the rock Kit had set in place. Satisfied, he motioned the boy inside. The cave was generally spherical, measuring some thirty five feet from side to side and top to bottom. It was mostly a natural hole.

The beams from their flashlights met on a large pile of stones in the center of the floor. They swam down to it and circled it several times. It was clearly large enough to cover a tank the size of the one at Whitehorse.

Kit pointed toward the bottom on the far side. They swam close to investigate. They turned off their lights and were met by a most welcome, green glow shining out from between the stones.

Kit removed one of the rocks and revealed a sealed, clear plastic box containing the familiar green and white light bulbs. David moved a long narrow rock to the left of the bulbs and, as expected, the metal cover plate was revealed.

Kit motioned a question to David: 'Should we take a look inside?'

He nodded and removed a screwdriver from his belt. Kit went to work. Behind it lay the slot and tongue. Kit studied the groove pattern on the tongue. David motioned to close it up. That done they swam back through the opening leaving the slab door open. A few minutes later they were back at the surface welcoming nature's own air into their lungs.

A strategy session began immediately.

"Should we really leave that last big door open down there?" Kit asked.

"I understand your concern. I didn't want to risk that once closed it would never open again."

"But what if somebody stumbles upon it?"

"Not likely since it's off limits to swimmers, although the buoy might make this area a point of interest for someone passing in a boat. What time is it?"

"Four thirty. Sunset's at about eight – three and a half hours away."

"How's your stamina holding up?"

"I'm pumped. On a real high. You?"

"The same, though my forty three year old high probably won't pump as long or be as effective as yours."

"So? What's the actual question?"

"Do we go ahead and finish things right now or wait 'til later and if later, tonight or tomorrow morning."

"Here's one possibility," Kit said. "We inflate the rubber raft and you stay here in the raft with the gear and keep an eye on the area for intruders. I'll swim back to shore, go to the hotel and get the panel, bring it back here and we take care of it. Probably take me what . . . an hour and a half to do that and return?"

"I'd think two, at least, and what you're suggesting will be extremely taxing even for such a grand specimen as yourself. Just moving that sizeable boulder in the first cave this morning must have sapped you."

Kit grinned.

"Like you said, I am a *grand* specimen. I know my limits. I can do this. And who knows, there may be another massage in order later on."

"Okay but with one small modification. Let's move the buoy and raft some hundred feet south. Then if somebody comes along I'll be away from the cave opening and yet close enough to monitor it and draw their attention."

"Sounds sound," Kit said mimicking his Uncle's earlier remark, for some reason thinking it much funnier coming from his own lips.

The buoy was moved and the raft inflated and loaded. David climbed aboard.

"Feels good to get out of that tank contraption," Kit said. "I think I'll leave my utility belt here as well, Batman."

"We need a 'bat' signal, Bat Boy, in case something goes wrong," David said.

"What could go wrong? And it's Robin not Bat Boy. You have your forms of entertainment confused."

"I don't know what could go wrong. Intruders out here. You needing help in the water. I don't know."

"Morris Code with the flashlights," Kit suggested. "I'll hang mine around my neck by the cord and take it along."

"You better eat something when you get to the beach. You're going to need lots of calories during the next three hours."

Kit nodded, turned in the water and began swimming toward shore.

"And don't forget to put some pants on before you leave the beach," David called after him. Then, under his breath to himself, "*That's* certainly something I would have never expected to be telling the boy."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

As Kit approached the women, Maria handed him a towel. It was an odd moment for him. He was used to being nude in front of them but the idea of drying off the generally private areas of his body presented a problem.

He explained his immediate plan.

"I need to go back to the hotel and get a piece of equipment. I will need one of you to accompany me so I can cross the beach and then come back."

Maria stood.

"I'll go along. I like walking in the sand, especially when accompanied by such a nice looking young man."

Juanita nodded. "Bring food when you return."

Maria shouldered her bag and Kit dug his clothes out of the plastic sack rolling them together for easy toting.

"Sure you'll be okay here alone," Kit asked Juanita.

"I'll be fine. It's a real treat for me to lay here on my back with only the sun on top."

Maria giggled. Kit blushed. He was getting the idea the women enjoyed embarrassing him – perhaps a half-hearted punishment for his not using their primary service.

There were hundreds of families there many playing catch, Frisbee, or badminton. The kids played chase and had fun in the water. Even the teenagers tended to act like kids. Brothers and sisters treated each other well and seemed to enjoy their families' company. A few were paired off as boy and girl friends. Nothing different from the way Kit and Megan behaved in public. They strolled around hand in hand or with arms around each other. They took time to kiss from time to time. Kit quickly understood that these were regular families, regular kids, doing what regular families and kids do. He was soon blind to their nudity.

There was a definite up side to the custom. Nudity was a great equalizer. No one tried to outdo anyone else in way of clothing. What you saw was what you got and that was clearly accepted as just fine by everybody. He imagined the whole non-judgmental atmosphere had a way of setting positive relationships as well. Each an equal among equals. The boundary between nude and naked was perfectly clear.

At the big sign they paused to dress, another oddly awkward moment for Kit. Out on the sidewalk Maria reached over and took Kit's hand in hers. It was nice yet it was not what he would have done. He allowed it as they made small

talk – weather, architecture, people.

Inside the suite, Kit announced that he would only be a minute and disappeared into the Master bedroom where David had the little strong box. He removed the panel just as it was wrapped in brown paper and relocked the box noting that only left three to go.

For the life of him – back at the beach – he couldn't understand why the two of them *undressing* together was less bothersome to him than dressing had been. Twenty minutes later, food in hand, they arrived back at their camp site. Juanita was asleep.

As Kit downed three tacos and a Pepsi, Maria helped him fashion a water-tight bag to protect the panel and David's supper. She slipped the looped cord around his neck. After some humorous comments about whether or not that constituted clothing – depending on how it was positioned – and after receiving a fully unexpected peck to his cheek, he was back into the water the sack bobbing along above his back.

As he swam, he wondered how Maria had come to be a prostitute. He wondered about her family and what kind of a future she had. He figured prostitutes didn't marry and have families. She was sweet. Maybe later she would fall in love and give up her trade. He hoped so – more because he wanted her to have a wonderful life with a wonderful mate than because of any judgment about the right or wrong of prostitution. It was something he wanted to discuss with David – the appropriate or inappropriate function of prostitution in society.

As he swam out of the long shadow being cast by the high cliffs behind him, he welcomed the sun's warmth. He spotted the yellow raft bobbing gently in the water the length of a football field ahead.

In one of those mental flashes that often appear full blown for no apparent reason, he thought about the backslapping reaction his teammates would have for him if he were to relate to them the story of walking naked, hand in hand with a beautiful young prostitute, through the warm sands of a nude beach in Brazil. They would not understand. *He* would not have understood a few weeks before.

Kit was greeted by a smiling David sitting under a sun screen he had found in the raft and assembled.

"Quoting somebody I know fairly well," he began, "I'm starved!"

"Not to worry naked, old, red, man. Got supper in the bag."

He handed up the sack and David helped pull him into the raft.

"Burrito, apple, panel. Probably want to stop munching before you reach item number three. Have to get your fiber some other way."

"Clever tote arrangement you rigged there."

"Maria helped. She's really okay, you know."

David nodded as he began enjoying his meal.

"So," Kit went on, "We should have this one wrapped up in an hour or so."

"I surely hope so. It's gone very smoothly so far wouldn't you say?"

"I don't understand that," Kit said. "I would have thought Ari would have made a contest more difficult."

"Perhaps this *is* his way of making it difficult."

"Huh?"

"Lull us into a false sense of security. I think I mentioned it before."

"It's why you've been pushing us so hard here at the beginning."

"Have I?"

"Not complaining but three sites in what, *five* actual working days when we have fifteen."

"Perhaps that indicates the more strenuous, time consuming, things I imagine he's planning to put us through during the next ten days," David said.

Kit smiled.

"What?" David asked puzzled.

"Looking at the two of us sitting here in our skins, I was just thinking that we now have *barely* anything else to do here."

"I think it's time to submerge."

"Your way of telling me to go soak my head?"

"Take it as you will. I'm ready to make certain we have this phase wrapped up."

Kit let go the incongruous idea of having something wrapped up on a nude beach.

They helped each other into their gear and slipped over the side. Five minutes later they were inside the opening to the cave. Everything appeared to be just as they had left it. Kit checked to make sure the pistol barrels were still securely in place.

Again, Kit unscrewed the plate at the base of the bomb. David unwrapped the wooden panel and handed it to Kit. He positioned it carefully and slid it into place. That answered the haunting question as to whether the panel needed to have been soaked for more or less than the one hour limit designated as the clue. Underwater no click could be heard. He gave it a tug to make sure it had been secured in the slot. It had. The green light behind the sealed window flickered. They waited. There was no whirring sound to hear. The green light dimmed and the white one came on.

Kit looked up into David's face. They exchanged thumbs ups. The metal plate was put back in place and Kit re-covered it with the rocks that had been there when they arrived.

Kit stood. David aimed his light at the ceiling and directed Kit's attention to a circular opening two meters in diameter. He pushed off and began swimming toward it. Kit followed. At the ceiling they paused and looked up into the hole beyond. It was a smooth sided, man-made, tunnel that rose to near the top of the solid rock island.

David indicated for them to leave the way they had come. Kit remained

puzzled about what they had just seen.

Once beyond the slab door they removed the rock they had set in place and then eased the door shut. They couldn't budge it. Taking hold of the center bar on the outer door, they each removed one of the guns lodged into the support holes. The heavy door released, swinging down toward them. A miscalculation about the weight of the door left Kit on the inside and David on the outside as the door swung to within inches of clicking into the locks. David knelt straining against the weight of the door.

Things became even more grave. The chamber inside began filling with gravel from a hole in the ceiling undoubtedly triggered by the release of the barred door. Kit put his arms up to protect his head. The area was filling fast. If it blocked the arc of the door, Kit would not be able to get out.

Taking a page from Kit's earlier success with the boulder in the other cave, David turned his back to the bars and squatted. He then pushed up with legs. Kit pulled from the inside. Between the two of them they moved it back a foot, perhaps fourteen inches.

Seeing that David had it secured, and feeling the gravel begin filling in around his feet, Kit shed his tanks and belt and bellied backwards out underneath, dragging his equipment and tanks behind him.

Once Kit was safely beyond the opening David let the door swing shut. Kit reattached himself to the air tank. They moved out into the open water watching the scene in the cave. The gravel filled the area spilling through the bars of the doors half way up its height. No one would enter again through that hole.

They made their way back to the surface. David spoke first, reaching out to touch Kit's face.

"You okay, Son?"

"I'll tell you after my wits catch up to me."

"They seemed to be with you down there – the way you wiggled yourself to safety with your air supply. Backing out. That was an extraordinary insight!"

"How about you? Break your back?"

"Actually, I seem to be fine."

"Me, too. Fido may have got *ruffed up* a bit though. There is one advantage to being scared out of your wits while nude, underwater."

"And what would *that* be?"

"You can't wet your pants."

"*That* pronounces you fit enough for one more thing out here," David said. "I want us to do a quick survey of the top of this little island – see if we can find the spot where that vertical tunnel would open."

Kit led the way. What they found was a huge manhole-like circular cover many inches thick. David nodded and they surfaced.

"Sewage?" Kit asked.

"You could say that. I've been wondering how Ari intended to get his toxin

into the air stream from underwater. Originally it was hard to convince myself that it could have been a legitimate site for us to consider. But as you see the construction is a work of art."

"No, I don't."

"The explosion would take place in that spherical cave of solid rock. With that massive stone door and now the added strength of tons and tons of gravel in front of it, the easiest release path for the force is straight up through that six foot tube he's cut through the rock to the surface of the island."

"Like a missile from a submarine," Kit said, getting the idea.

"With the explosive power I suspect is contained in each of those bombs, it would probably spew that toxic gusher two thousand feet into the air allowing the gases to then rise rapidly into the upper level winds with the additional boost it gets from the updraft over the hot sand beaches."

"Very clever," Kit said. "He probably hoped that we would have a problem with his clues that seemed to lead us to an underwater site and that because of it we might try to force some misinterpretation."

"I must admit I tried my darndest to do that very thing," David said. "Until I realized what he was probably doing to us."

"I guess my naiveté kept me to the steady underwater course."

"I vote that we paddle back to shore," David said as they stowed their gear up over the side and into the raft.

"I suppose I can bring myself to bow to the aches, pains, and general decrepitness of an old guy," Kit said.

Still in the water but free of their tanks and belts, David jumped Kit sending him three feet under water. Kit was soon on the offensive himself and the two of them struggled to get free of the other's headlock as they sank lower and lower.

In the end it was Kit who tapped out and they surfaced, gasping, smiling, and laughing.

"Old guy, huh!" David said administering a final, playful, half-hearted, one-handed dunk.

"Been a while since we tussled like that, Uncle David. It was great. Next time it will be on dry land and you better make plans to bring backup."

"Big talk from a drowned rat."

"That's a *grand specimen* of a drowned rat, Sir."

"It is indeed."

David pulled the boy's head close and planted a kiss on his temple.

"We don't do that so often anymore, you know?" Kit said as they climbed up over the side and into the raft.

"Don't do what?"

"Kiss each other. When I was little we'd do it a dozen times a day. I really liked that."

"Me too. I wonder what happened?" David asked.

"Puberty, I suspect."

David smiled.

"Clearly puberty *did* happen but I don't see the connection."

"I went through a period where I was uncertain about whether guys should do that – the 'what if I'm gay thing' so many boys wonder about. And I think you probably sensed my reluctance. I know you were still kissing me a long time after I stopped kissing you – like just now."

"Apparently that issue has been resolved."

"Most certainly."

"Good. Your hugs have always been exceptional but I must admit I've missed the kisses."

"Men don't do that much in our culture, do they?"

"No, they don't. Find a group of Italians or Frenchmen or Arabs, and you'll get your fill."

They positioned themselves side by side on the single seat and broke out the paddles.

"Megan's a great kisser," Kit said. "This whole nude beach thing has been so different than I expected it would be. It's given me a great new perspective."

"On the legitimacy of nudity?"

"Well, that too, I suppose, but mostly it's made me really appreciate my relationship with Megan."

David began paddling quietly knowing it would take no coaching for the boy to say what was on his mind. Kit followed suit with his paddle.

"Maria is far more beautiful than Megan – her face and the rest of her body. But, I cherish Megan's face and body so much more. You've talked about inner beauty but I never really got the hang of the concept until now. There she is – Maria, I'm talking about – nude and firm and slender with wonderful breasts and curves in all the right places and her face is out of this world gorgeous, but I prefer Megan's everything.

"If I decided to, I could have sex with Maria this very evening and I imagine it would be super great – physically. But I'm not even tempted. A month ago I could not have predicted how I'd react in such a situation. This afternoon we held hands on the way to and from the hotel and as we walked on the beach. She initiated it. It was nice. They were soft. But it was for show and I was more than ready to stop once we got back to the camp site. I think she wanted something more but realized it would not happen. Ironic, you know, a prostitute really wanting something from a guy that he was unwilling to give.

"Reverend Hammond has preached about how the purpose of temptation is to strengthen our character. I can't buy the idea that it's all some struggle for our souls between the mythical figures of God and the Devil, but the essence of what he said seems accurate."

"I'm glad you're becoming comfortable with your feelings about Megan."

"Me, too. I suddenly feel I'm an old man before my time."

"Welcome to the club!"

Kit smiled and nodded.

"I always figured I still had my pleasure filled, debaucherous period ahead of me – like you in college."

"Debaucherous? Is that a word?"

"You understand what I meant?"

"Yes. Certainly. Freely engaging in every imaginable form of sexual and erotic pleasure."

"Then it's a word."

"Okay. And, although at *this* point in my life I'm not particularly proud of *that* point, the term does pretty well describe those years with Ari."

Suddenly uncomfortable, David moved on.

"You going to start putting your back into that oar or am I going to have to get us to shore all by myself?"

Kit was still grinning as they pulled the raft out of the water. The air had grown cool in the early evening shadow of the cliffs and the women were wrapped in beach towels. The men dried off and gathered their belongings.

"Our job is finished – one day instead of the two or three we had allowed," David explained. "You'll receive the full three days pay I promised you, of course."

"We have decided to keep one day's pay," Juanita said. "We would like the rest to go to Father Adano at the orphanage for abandoned and homeless children. We have so many here in Brazil."

She crossed herself.

"The money is yours to distribute as you see fit. That is a wonderfully generous act that you propose."

Juanita looked at Maria and then at David.

"May we ask a question?"

"Certainly?"

"Are you both married?"

"Do we act like old married men?"

"Oh, no. Not old. Just married."

Kit laughed out loud.

David responded.

"Neither of us is married. We are each in a relationship with a woman who we cherish and wish to remain faithful to."

"You are so fortunate, you know."

"Yes. We were just speaking of that on the way in."

"Our Uncle will come and gather the things when we leave," Juanita explained.

"Well, Kit and I are ready to go. Will you accompany us across the

beach?"

"It will be our pleasure. You have treated us like ladies. We are not used to that. You are nice men. You have given us many things to think about."

Neither would ask what those things were but they were always pleased when they evoked useful contemplation from a fellow human being.

* * *

"I love arguing with you, you know," Ari said.

"We don't argue we discuss."

"It's more than that. We force each other to stretch the limits of possibilities – to force our beliefs through colanders and see what's left that may be useful or right or fun. We separate the seeds of life and vital pulp from the useless though often attractive rinds and peels."

"We do that, I suppose. Sometimes I think we both get way too much pleasure out of bursting the beliefs held by others."

"We *have* sent a few to *Never, Never Land*, haven't we?"

"Seems unfair, sometimes," David said.

"How so?"

"We demonstrate to someone how his belief is fully untenable but present nothing to replace it."

"The replacement should be self-evident."

"Not always, Ari. You're back to saying there are never more than two options – if not A then B and only B. That's a bunch of crapola."

"We're back to problems based in human intelligence."

"How?"

"Among the lower species most things are A or B. Alive or Dead. Eating or Starving. Reproducing or not reproducing. Man can fathom multiple options. Like having sex for reproduction sans condom or the pill, having sex strictly for erotic pleasure, enjoying sexual pleasure without a partner, enjoying sexual pleasure with a same sex partner, choosing to be celibate, keeping to just one sexual partner or having many, and on and on."

"I'd say hooray for human options."

"You'd be wrong," Ari said. "I model my sex life after the lower species – me and a female on my schedule for my pleasure with no concern about reproducing or not – just pure sex."

"Someday you're going to catch something terrible, you know."

"That's what I pay my doctors for. Anyway all my girls get regular medical checkups."

"I always wear a condom," David said.

"Stupid. So much pleasure is lost that way. They're all on the pill."

"I can make a decision to forego a little of the pleasure for a lot of safety. It's an option I have available because of my human intelligence. "

"See, stupid!"

"See, intelligent!"

"That illustrates another problem with human intelligence – two humans examine the same evidence and come to diametrically opposed conclusions."

"I'll admit that trait has led to some problems."

"Really. You will?" Ari said intrigued if not surprised.

"Take the Bible," David said. "You read it and it tells you one thing. I read it and it says another. Baptists read it and it says still something else."

"Elses," Ari said as if correcting.

"More!"

"There must be how many varieties of Baptists – a dozen, three dozen, more? They each invent interpretations that are substantially enough at odds with the others to require different organizations and places of worship. Add to that the other two hundred Christian denominations and you have virtually no agreement at all about what the 'sacred' scriptures have to say. Some use them to spread love and understanding and freedom. Others spread hate, division, and would do away with freedom in favor of forcing everyone to believe as they do and live according to their values and rules."

"Therefore those writings actually say nothing I suppose," David said. "That which cannot be easily interpreted with general agreement among intelligent people does not communicate clearly enough to purport to represent a truth."

"Or, human intelligence itself is just very unreliable when it comes to accurately interpreting the very abstractions that it has created," Ari suggested.

"And *that loophole*, my friend, tends to give some groups – the scariest people in the universe to me – a way of legitimizing their belief that although *they* have possession of the truth, other, less enlightened folks, do not – cannot. Who can prove them wrong so long as it's the religion game that's being played?"

"So, we are in agreement then?" Ari asked.

"About what? We've managed to breeze over a dozen topics in ten minutes without visiting any one long enough to come to any useful conclusions."

"My. That wonderful human intelligence," Ari said sarcastically. "Hopefully that innate tendency to disagree will lead to the self-destruction of our species before we can destroy all of the others on the planet. Interesting. Mother Nature may just have built in a self-destruct mechanism in case the old IQ failed her evolutionary plan. I must say I have never before contemplated that. See how these arguments – that is *discussions* – stretch our limits!"

* * *

"Okay, what's the plan for the evening?" Kit said upon entering their suite. He was immediately undressed.

"Oh, I figured you'd probably get naked and start asking questions about our plans."

Kit grinned. The response had been wonderfully David-like.

"Seriously. And I'm *nude*. I'll be *naked during* my private time in the shower later on."

"I stand corrected. You have something in mind?"

"Thought I'd like some time down at the pool."

"Sure. Strictly for swimming laps, I assume, in light of our discussion earlier."

"No. Actually for female ogling. I have decided that I can look at nude females, and appreciate their form and beauty, without in anyway being unfaithful to Megan. I am not seeing them as objects for my sexual or erotic activity – my time with gorgeous Maria proved that to me. Plus, it only seems fair to share every nook and cranny of this grand physical specimen that I am with those who can appreciate it the most. Seriously, this may be my last chance for a long, long, time to mingle in the nude like this, you know?"

"I see. Well, go ogle and be ogled then until around nine. Then we can go get some dessert at the restaurant and begin reviewing and strategizing for our next stop."

"Wellington."

"Right. We'll be leaving in the morning."

"No nude beaches there, I suppose."

"Actually yes, just up the west coast a bit – in a class with this one, I'm told."

"Tonight may not have to be the last time, then."

"I didn't promise anything. We have to keep to a quick schedule."

"I know. I know."

"Also, it's winter in Wellington, remember. It's at 40 degrees south latitude. Indiana is at 40 degrees north, so I imagine the temperature and conditions will be a lot like home in November."

"*Peckercicles*, you're saying?"

"I was actually thinking along the more elegant line of *nudes on ice*."

They shared a grin.

"Until nine, then."

"Enjoy!"

David had to admit the idea of taking time to hang out at a nude pool and enjoy the female scenery was appealing but he wouldn't intrude on Kit's space. He picked up his phone and the laptop, and headed for the hot tub.

He placed a call to Connie and made arrangements for the plane. Then he confirmed their reservations in New Zealand.

"As much as I hate to admit it, I'm bushed," Kit said flopping down on the couch after returning from the pool."

"We can order in dessert, if you don't feel like going out."

"Good idea."

The call was made to room service and within a few minutes a cart arrived

brimming with goodies. David slipped into a robe and met it at the door.

They talked as they enjoyed the 'Family Sampler' of treats.

"Connie says the trip is a bit more than eight thousand miles and that we should allow close to twenty two hours," David began. "We will refuel in Lima, Peru, and somewhere in the Society Islands in the Pacific – the general area of Tahiti. Then straight into Wellington. It gives us a day to finish our research on the final three sites. I have New Zealand, you have Mongolia and it may take both of us to work our way through Iran. I figure that will be the most difficult."

"Us being Westerners, you mean?"

"Largely. Our naturally tanned skin will be a big asset I imagine. We should probably let our beards grow from here on out."

"As if a week's growth will even be evident on me," Kit said feeling his cheeks.

"We can darken up whatever fuzz you can produce. How often are you shaving now?"

"Twice a week. Mostly upper lip and chin. Megan hates facial hair. Can't figure that. She really likes the hair on the rest of my body."

"She just doesn't want any part of that handsome face of yours covered up," David joked.

"I can certainly understand that," Kit said mugging for a humorous effect.

"She says I'm handsome. Do you think I'm handsome?"

"There can be no doubt about that, Kit. You're the spittin' image of your father and it was generally agreed that he was the best looking guy in town."

"Really? Can't see it myself – me I mean not him. Megan and her mom say *you* have dashing good looks."

"They are clearly women of superior taste!"

Kit grinned licking the last of the brownie frosting from his fingers.

"Find out what the time will be in Wellington when we arrive if we leave here at seven in the morning," David asked.

Kit picked up the laptop and soon had the figure.

"Figuring a 22 hour trip we'll get in there at 8:00 am the day after tomorrow their time. That will be good. We can sleep on the plane and be fresh and ready to go the minute we touch down."

"Your first assignment once we're on the plane is to find some alternative mansions. So far, if we've learned one thing, it's been that we need backup possibilities."

"And, we've missed a correct one the first time 'round – the church on Pico," Kit added. "I'll see what I can find although I'd bet on the one we've already found. I suppose I should research that fireplace design, too, huh?"

"Always better to have too much rather than too little data," David said agreeing with the idea."

"If we're going to be out of here by seven tomorrow I need to get to bed"

Kit said.

"Good idea. Shouldn't take us long to pack. See that we're up by 5:30, okay?"

"Okay."

"You want the shower first, tonight? I have a feeling I'll be a while."

"I took care of that while you were out. Go ahead."

"You took care of what, the shower or the 'be a while' thing."

"None of your business, I'd say."

"Just gathering data on how it will be when I'm an ancient male."

"I'm sure all of that is readily available on-line."

"But you're so handy and I trust your data."

"Leave my 'data' out of this."

Kit broke up in laughter and left for the bathroom. David turned out the lights and went to bed.

The flight across South America was beautiful – the gently variegated cap of the rainforest of Brazil and then the Andes Mountains, jagged and snowcapped. Lima was engulfed in their famous thick summer time mist, the *garua*. The decent through it caused a few moments of anxiety for Kit but there at ground level – as if by some miracle – the runway appeared and the plane set down. Refueling took longer than usual by a half hour since two small auxiliary fuel tanks had to be slipped into place under the wings.

The pilots had ordered food to be brought on board for the next long legs of the flight. Alex stowed it in the small refrigerator and cabinets in the rear.

The flight across the continent had taken six hours so they were ready for lunch. The hot food for immediate consumption included burgers and fries from the local McDonalds with fried pies for dessert.

Once in the air again, Alex took the controls and Connie went back to the bedroom area to sleep. With nothing but the endless Pacific Ocean below them, distractions suddenly became minimal and they got down to work.

Ten hours later they were taking off from the island stop. David and Kit took to the beds. They could just about get their eight hours in before arriving at Wellington.

Warmer at 52 degrees than David had expected, light jackets were welcome, dashing Kit's hopes for a nude romp on the beach. A limo was waiting and took them to the hotel on the north edge of the down town area. Ari had gone all out, arranging a penthouse with pool, and, no doubt, an assortment of hot and cold running girls to arrive later.

"Sweet!" Kit said after a few minutes of walking through the rooms. "Looks a lot like how you've described the place Ari had in Cambridge."

"It is, actually."

"Where are the girls? I thought he always had naked girls decorating his

place."

"Well, *naked* would be the correct term, I suppose. He'll undoubtedly make them available but without forcing them on us."

"And we will . . ."

"And we will think of them as inappropriate distractions and send them on their way."

"I figured. Maybe they could just join us for one swim?"

"Or maybe not. We have work to do."

Kit sighed.

"We *are* at least going to check out the restaurant first, right. I'm starved."

They talked as they ate.

"I've looked at every fireplace picture I can find, David. The off balance shoulders design of the one on the panel is unique."

"Off balance shoulder design?"

"Yeah. The way the mantel level on the right of the chimney is higher than the mantel level on the left side. The mantel forms like three steps going from the low end on the left to the high end on the right with the middle step being the mantel piece that spans just the width of the chimney section."

"An interesting characterization – off balance shoulders. The professor gives you an "A" for creative verbiage. I must admit I've never seen one like it."

"I'm really getting confused about this Ari guy," Kit said. "If this is a one of a kind fireplace why would he use it? I mean it would seem like anybody with an ounce of intelligence could figure it out."

"You're right. That suggests just one thing to me; we must be very cautious and expect some twist that will make it all the more difficult and probably dangerous."

"More dangerous than dangling in the wind from a rope a hundred feet in the air at Whitehorse, or being chased down a subterranean hallway by some deadly green gas, or working forty feet under water in a skillfully booby trapped cave?"

"Yes. That's what I'm saying. It seems to me that every stop has been more complicated and potentially more lethal than the others."

"So, we can expect really bad stuff by the time we get to Tehran."

"Or before. Ari seems to have had a two tier plan. The first was to see if we could avoid the obvious and move away from the box clues as our initial source of information to find the various sites. Once we did that and merely used the panels to verify our findings – after the fact so to speak – finding the sites has been a piece of cake. I believe he really counted on the cryptographer in me to get caught up in the decoding and overlook the necessary broader picture."

"The second tier seems to be his version of an onsite shell game with one significant difference – pick up the wrong shell and get killed."

"On the flight down here I was wondering about that – worrying about it, I suppose. What do we do if one of us does get killed or hurt too badly to continue?"

"The other one does everything within his power to complete the mission. That one would have to put the tragedy out of his mind until after that last bomb was deactivated. It is what I would want you to do and I'm sure what you would want me to do."

Kit looked David in the face and nodded. It was what he knew he would hear. It was what he had already decided.

Back in the suite Kit determined the exact location of the Treadway Mansion and, using fire lanes and access roads, plotted a route on an outline map of the area. Just north of Wellington and across the flat Hutt Valley, a long narrow mountain range rises and spreads northeast for a hundred miles or so. To its west is a large lowland with many of the island's celebrated beautiful beaches – including the one Kit longed for. To its east lays a valley and then a substantial range of lower, scattered hills along the coast, north.

There are two main roads going north from Wellington – one through the valley to the east and one up along the coast to the west. To access the area of the mansion would take them on a variety of gravel and dirt roads.

It sat about half way up the north edge of a narrow ravine about twenty five miles north east of Wellington and was, by the design of the wealthy hermit who had built it nearly a hundred years before, well off the beaten track.

David contacted the limo driver and arranged for a fully supplied, all-terrain vehicle for their use. The current owner of the mansion was the aging grandson of the original owner and still worked the family vineyards to the east on the other side of the Tararua Mountains in the much drier area known as the Wairarapa.

"What will our cover story be?" Kit asked.

"Well, let's see. Since word has usually preceded us that we are associated with the Stephanopoulos Shipping Company, how about we become a writer and photographer for the Ship Line's Magazine?"

"An awesome deception, Uncle David. You can be the writer and I'll be the photog – that's *Daily Planet* talk."

"Okay. It's a plan. Pull several dozen fireplace pictures off the web so our portfolio will look legitimate."

"I'll print them out on 8 X 10 glossy paper to make it even *more* legitimate."

"Do we make an appointment or just arrive?" David asked thinking out loud.

Kit took it to be a question.

"If they have a tendency to not grant such requests we'd be dead in the water if they refused us in advance. But, if we just arrive on their doorstep we'd probably have a better chance, maybe, you think?"

"I think that's probably a good analysis, Kit. We may be camping out again."

"It figures. Get a six room penthouse to luxuriate in and end up in a ten by ten tent enjoying each other's armpit odor."

"You paint such a graphic picture, perhaps *you* should be the writer and I the *photog*."

"You take really lousy pictures, Unc. No offence."

"None taken, *Animal*."

"Animal?"

"Wasn't that the photographer's name on Superman?"

"No. Jimmy Olsen, cub reporter. Animal was the hippy photographer's name on the TV series Lou Grant."

"How on earth do you know that?"

"My mind clings to trivia like fly paper to flies."

"You *should* be the writer."

"It's *make-believe*, Unc. Nobody's *really* going to write anything."

David smiled and moved on.

"The vehicle will be ready for us by noon," he said. How about doing some of that luxuriating you were mentioning – a dip in the pool."

"Great! At least I'll have that *one* memory of opulence to recall in my waning years."

For the next hour they swam and played and let the little boys within them take full command of their beings. It was a well-earned and important break from the gruesome reality of their mission.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The view was magnificent: the lush, light green valley grasses and the variegated, textured, darker greens and browns from the trees on the mountain and hills in the distance. So much green in the middle of winter came as a surprise.

The main road up the valley was modern in every sense of the word – two lanes, paved, and well maintained. At mile marker 18 Kit turned to the left onto a narrow gravel road. Almost immediately it began to climb the mountain following natural paths which made the route circuitous and kept them to a slow pace. At the outset there were signs posted suggesting four wheel drive vehicles might be best. Just five miles further on the signs indicated that *only* four wheel drive vehicles were allowed.

Gravel thinned to dirt, and wide enough shrunk to way too narrow. The gentle hump in the center gave way to deep ruts on both sides. Where space permitted, Kit avoided the road altogether.

Eventually they descended into a valley where the surface improved and gravel returned. They headed northeast along the narrow valley floor. The mansion was visible ahead. It sat on a ledge several hundred feet above them and a mile or more straight up the pike.

"How in hell . . . er . . . heck, does one get up there?" Kit asked.

"I have the feeling it may not be from this direction," David said.

"Maybe there?" Kit said pointing to a lane that headed off through the trees to the right."

"Maybe," David said. "One way to find out, I guess."

Kit made the turn and shifted into low for the duration. It took them generally north and gradually up the slope. A hundred yards from the building, the road came to an abrupt halt.

"I don't get it," Kit said. "How *do* they get in and out of this place?"

The whirring overhead answered his question as a small helicopter approached the side lawn and lit. Two men got out and walked to the area behind the mansion.

"Looks like we hoof it on from here," David said.

Kit hefted his camera bag and they started the uncomfortable trek across generally rough and rocky terrain.

It was a sizeable, frame, structure with wide siding and ornate, oversized, windows and doors. The roof had the appearance of slate.

The front porch was in the tradition of those that graced the mansions of the plantations of Georgia and Alabama during the heyday of the old south in the United States. The building was three stories high with six dormers evenly spaced across the roof. The ten columns were a full thirty inches thick at their bases and rose the three stories to the roof. Each floor had its own porch, which extended to meet the posts. The ground floor was smooth-cut, native, stone matched to a constant brown hue.

They crossed the wide porch and pulled the plunger that apparently rang a bell inside. After a short wait the door was opened by a tall, slender, white haired gentleman dressed in black. He spoke with an English, English accent.

"May I help you?"

"I certainly hope that you can. We are from the Stephanopoulos Ship Line."

"Oh, yes. You are expected. Something about following up on the recent work done to the fireplace in the first floor sitting room."

David and Kit exchanged glances. David responded.

"Yes. We're also gathering information on the historical development of fireplace designs here in New Zealand for the Ship Line Magazine."

"Well that one is unique and magnificent. If you will wait in the library through that door I will announce you to Madam Treadway."

Several minutes passed before he returned.

"Madam says you are free to take your pictures and such, and you may submit questions in writing if I am unable to offer adequate answers."

"How very kind. Thank you and thank Madam Treadway for us. You have been here long?"

"I was born in the servant's quarters on the fourth floor – second dormer from the east. My father was the butler before me."

Kit sensed an opening.

"I'll bet as a kid you learned every nook and cranny of this place."

"Oh, my, yes. At twelve I received my last switching for peeking into the maid's quarters through a peep hole from the work space between the walls."

"And you saw enough to think it was worth it?" David asked.

"Oh my yes! Enough to keep my adolescent fantasies fueled for weeks."

His eyes danced! The old man was immediately likeable.

"The structure you mention is interesting," David said. "It is apparently like many of these old homes, built with double walls for soundproofing and as you say, several feet for work space, air ducts, and so on in between."

"The place is riddled with them."

"How much do you know about the recent work on the fireplace?" David asked.

"All quite hush, hush. I suspect they were searching for a document sequestered behind one of the bricks. Maybe a treasure map. Now I'm sounding

like a little boy although there are such stories surrounding the place."

"Among other things, we're here to make certain the cosmetic treatment was not damaged by the work. We'll make sure everything was put back like it was."

The Butler led them down the wide center hall to a door near the rear left.

"I will stay or leave as you wish," he said.

"No need to stay. How can we reach you if we have questions, however?"

"Pull the ribbon there beside the window."

The butler left. Kit took pictures from several angles. David approached the left side of the fireplace in search of the slot he expected to be there. It wasn't.

"So, now what?" Kit asked.

"Let's reexamine the panel from the box and see if that helps."

David took the panel from his backpack and unwrapped it. He looked at each side then handed it to Kit who did the same.

"This just has to be the right place, Uncle David."

"I agree. So if it *is* the right place and this *is* the right fireplace and if we can count on Ari's clues to be consistent – which I am sure we can – what does all that suggest?"

"That we are missing something right here in River City."

"Meaning that we have to reconfigure the situation. The slot *is* right here," David said pointing. "If it *is* here, what must we do to expose it?"

"Move some bricks?" Kit asked tentatively.

"Try it!"

Kit pushed and pulled. Nothing happened.

"Let me see the panel again," Kit asked. "Earlier I remember noting that the mantel on this side was thicker in the carving – see?"

David nodded, becoming interested.

"Go on!"

"I figured it was just some glitch in the carving process but now I'm wondering. On the actual fireplace here, all the sections of the mantel are equal in width – top to bottom."

"And how might we use that?" David asked moving back to that section of the mantel.

He slid his hand across its five exposed surfaces and then did the same with the other two sections.

"Look, Kit!"

Kit moved closer and felt where David had been feeling, then commented.

"The tiniest crack or seam on the left section – running the length of the middle on the top. Not visible from the front or the usual angle from above. It's not there in the other two sections."

"That is our key, I imagine" David said. "Now we just have to figure how to

use it.”

Kit began spinning possibilities.

“It could slip apart right there. It could fold down. It could pull out.”

“Does it do any of those things,” David asked.

Kit grinned.

“Oh. Yeah. I suppose I could try rather than speculating, couldn’t I?”

He tried sliding it apart – first to the right then the left. It did not budge. He tried pulling it forward but that did not work either. He tried forcing his fingernails into the crack and pulling. The crack was too narrow – too precisely milled.

David had been examining the right end of the piece. He moved to the other end.

“I have an idea, Kit. Look here at this end. What seems odd about it to you?”

Kit rubbed his hand over it.

“Just stand back and observe it.”

Kit moved back several steps and folded his arms. After several minutes his face cleared.

“Ah, ha. Light bulb time. There is a knot in the end of the slab of wood. Knots only form along the sides where branches have sprouted away from the main branch or trunk. There could not be a knot exposed in a vertically cut section like the end of the mantel.”

Kit immediately pressed it. The knot depressed with ease but nothing happened. He pulled and shoved the large slab as he continued to depress the knot. Still nothing. He stepped back and looked at David.

“So?”

“So, look at the other end.”

Kit moved in front of his uncle.

“Another one.”

He pressed it, not expecting anything to happen.

“So you going to press the other one, Unc, or just ‘leaf’ me stand here ‘knot’ knowing if we’ve got to the ‘root of problem?’”

“After all that I should. Okay, let me push this other one.”

“Click! Click!”

“That sounded promising,” Kit said and it had been.

The top of the front half of the mantel piece sprung open nearly an inch at the seam. They both peered inside but could see little. David cautiously tipped it open. It was hinged inside the bottom. It swung out and then down, hanging from those hinges making it double sized – top to bottom – just as illustrated on the panel.

“One puzzle after the other, huh, Unc?”

“Seems that way.”

The top section housed a slot like they were looking for. It also housed a second, virtually identical slot right beneath it.

"Which is the one we need?" Kit asked searching each close up with his eyes.

"That seems to be our next question."

They stood back looking at their find.

"Notice what's missing, of course, don't you," Kit said.

"The metal plate that covers the lights."

Kit nodded.

"Let me see the panel, again," Kit said reaching for it.

He compared the grooves in the panel with those on each of the slots in the mantel.

"It's the top slot," he said. "Bottom grooves are just slightly different. Shall we try it or take time to invent a host of horrific outcomes if we do it wrong."

"I for one am more than a little intrigued," David said. "With very little study on your part it became clear that the top one is the correct one. So why the bottom one? Clearly it is not a credible foil."

"Could it be we have to somehow locate a second panel before this site will deactivate?" Kit asked.

David again studied the panel.

"We have accounted for every item that's represented on both sides. Do you see anything that suggests we need to find something else?"

"No. Like you said. Everything has been utilized."

"I'm uneasy," David said, frowning.

"I'm shorts wetting scared, myself!"

"Okay. We will insert our panel in the top slot. I'll slide it in this time. You wait out in the hall in case anything goes wrong in here."

"*Backwards*, Uncle David. Completing this mission without *you* is a one in a billion shot. I just don't have the vast mental resources needed. If anybody is going to get blown to bits at this point, it has to be me. This is no time for sentimental hogwash. Get out. I'm going to do it!"

Everything the boy said was true. There was no place for parental protectiveness. It was not the time for David's love for the boy to cloud the facts. It was not just Kit or David who was at stake – it was the totality of mankind.

David said nothing. He drew Kit close and they embraced and exchanged kisses to the temples. Kit drew away first. David turned and left the room. Kit took a deep breath thinking that if he were Catholic he'd cross himself. It made him think of Juanita and Maria and the priest who asked if he wanted to become Catholic. He positioned the panel carefully and then slowly, gently, began to insert it. It fit perfectly and slid easily. He paused just before the point where he expected it to click into place. He looked around as if inspecting his world for one last time then closed his eyes and pushed it in the final inch.

“Click!”

He waited for the whirring from somewhere inside the fireplace or wall behind. It didn't come. He opened his eyes – one at a time. A series of rapid fire clicks came from the area of the second slot. Kit stepped back, instinctively shielding his face with his arms. The sounds stopped. He peeked again at the slots.

A second panel had appeared in the bottom slot. He moved back to eyeball it. He gave the original a quick tug. It had been captured and would not give. He did the same to the bottom one. It slid out easily. He removed it.

“Uncle David. You can come in!”

David was immediately inside.

“This slid out of the bottom slot,” Kit said offering him the new panel.

“Well, I'll be. A two phase site, the way it looks. A new set of clues for us to work on and these will be the start from scratch variety – no predetermined hunches to merely verify. Let's get some pictures and then put this contraption back together.”

With one simple motion they swung the bottom section back up into place. A double click suggested it had been secured. A brief inspection verified that.

“The knothole on this end just turned itself forty five degrees clockwise,” Kit said.

“It appears this one did also though I didn't see it happen. Can you depress that one? I can't depress this one anymore.”

“Nope. Looks like we got one and only one attempt here.”

“That is certainly his pattern. Let's get back to the hotel and start to work on this new piece of evidence.”

With a tug of the ribbon, the butler arrived and showed them to the door. Ten minutes later they were headed back toward the city – faster than David's cautious bent would have preferred and far slower than Kit's impatience desired.

* * *

Ari was upset. He paced back and forth near the entrance to the pool. David was amused at his friend's reaction and had entered the water to warm his extremities after his late afternoon, digit numbing, trek across town through the snow to the penthouse.

“Can you believe the gall of Prof Grant, giving the class a chance to redo the test tomorrow because most of them did so poorly on it today? I hate incompetence and more than that I hate those who reward it.”

“So, we aced it today. We'll ace it again tomorrow,” David said trying to offer some solace. “Remember he said he'd average the two grades, *not* give them the higher one. That's not really a major rewarding of incompetence is it? Maybe it's just a way of helping them to actually learn the material?”

“Life should give one chance and one chance only. Anytime you let somebody slide by, you're rewarding slothfulness. It's a hallmark of the species

– do no more than you have to in order to get by and then don't do it until you're forced to."

"Like you and earning money?" David said thinking it a humorous, if inexact, example.

"I work hard to spend every cent Papa gives me. Some weeks I have to do three or four extra sets of whores just to deplete my budget."

Ari flashed his smile and calmed down, taking a seat on the side of the pool, his legs dangling into the water. He liked that arrangement for discussions with David. It put him in the higher, more solid position and his friend lower and more vulnerable there in the water.

David didn't play such power games. He was what he was wherever he was. If anything, he felt the arrangement gave *him* the advantage because Ari tended to get cocky when he thought he was in the driver's seat.

"You really hate incompetence *in others*, don't you?" David asked phrasing it, as he had, to bate the man.

"You think I'm incompetent?"

"Socially you are completely incompetent, my friend. You need me to provide your sole source of friendship and rented girls for feminine companionship."

"And you aren't willing to enjoy those girls?"

"Oh, yes. Very willing. It's just that I can get feminine companionship without having to pay for it and you don't seem to be able to do that."

Ari changed the subject.

"Every night after dinner my papa would ask each of us boys three questions from our school assignment. If we failed to give what he considered a complete and competent answer he would have us stripped and beaten on the spot by one of his men. If he felt the beating wasn't sufficient his man would be 'handled'. That usually meant he was never seen again. The beatings we got were more than adequate, you can believe that."

"That's terrible!"

"Says you."

"Not you? You believe what he did was right?"

"By the time I was ten I seldom failed to provide him with adequate answers."

"So it was never really knowledge you sought in education but safety?"

"The road one takes to knowledge is not important. It's what you have at the end of the journey that counts."

"So, will you beat your kids?"

"Of course not. A father doesn't beat his children. My man will do it."

"You'd have the whole lot of the professor's class taken out and beaten, would you?"

"Whatever's been tried up to now certainly hasn't worked."

“You are so compartmentalized.”

“I don’t understand.”

“On the one hand you believe man’s intelligence and its *use* is the single greatest mistake of evolution. On the other hand you are saying that those students who don’t utilize their intelligence to the fullest are reprehensible and deserving of punishment. The logical solution to the first problem is to encourage just the opposite in students – learn the least they can so humans cannot produce more technology and kill off more species.”

Ari grew silent and drew up his knees, folding his arms across them and dropped his chin to meet them.

“You have been more than a little disquieting to me so far this evening, Dave.”

“And, I don’t like to be called Dave. Add that to your disquietude!”

David loved it when he had Ari on the defensive. It was not a frequent occurrence so was to be relished. Their discussions typically ended either as a same side agreement or an opposite side draw. David began swimming laps. The girls arrived and Ari went to unwrap them. That always put an end to their discussions.

Although he would never say it, David wondered if one reason Ari enjoyed the company of his ‘girls’ was because they were generally uneducated and therefore ignorant about any truly important aspects of general knowledge so were less of a threat to the planet.

David had to admit that Ari’s girls were certainly competent and reliable at filling their niche in the ecosystem. They never complained or made demands or had opinions about anything. Perhaps he would choose not to kill them off with the rest of mankind.

Several hours later, after they had fully enjoyed the girl’s many charms and talents, the two found themselves in the living room – Ari on his couch and David in the big chair.

“Opinions,” David said as if announcing the next topic.

Ari jumped on it.

“Second only to intelligence in man’s romp toward annihilating life on the planet.”

“Sorry it’s not a topic about which you feel strongly,” David said chuckling as he settled himself into the deep, warm, cushioning of the chair.

Ari returned the smile and raised his eyebrows. “I suppose you are going argue in their favor.”

“In areas where facts are not – cannot – be available it’s all we humans have. You know that I abhor the idea that most people fall back on opinions rather than taking the time to ferret out the facts where they exist, but opinions, recognized as opinions, can be lots of fun in other areas.”

“Like?”

“Like which baseball team you want to have win. Which color is the prettiest? Which is mama’s very best meal? Is summer or winter the better season? Things like that.”

“Useless small talk topics. Strictly below consideration by intelligent beings. No other species has opinions therefore their individual members never take sides and fight over such irresolvable issues. People kill each other over how sports events turn out. People kill doctors who perform abortions. People kill other people who differ from their group in some way – often because of idiosyncratic versions of the Truth, which – please note – they evolved from their own opinions.

“In general, people – especially fact-ignorant people – codify their non-fact-based opinions and treat them and act upon them as though they *were* facts. Once done, those opinions never get re-examined and find their ways into a person’s catalog of Truths. When my Truths are based on my unproven and probably un-provable opinions, and yours are based on your unproven and probably un-provable opinions, they are not only bound to be different but in all likelihood they will clash – touting contradictory and often incompatible versions of the ever illusive Truth.

“Even the most cursory overview of our laws demonstrates that many – perhaps most – are based in opinion rather than fact. Once enacted, a law is treated as Truth even if it got passed only to meet one group’s self-centered wants.”

“May I interject?”

“Be my guest – oh, you are!”

“The severe child rearing technique used by your father is based not in fact but in opinion. The evidence on how to raise well adjusted, happy, productive, cooperative children has been in for a hundred years and yet generation after generation parents just ignore all of that and – preferring to rely on opinion – invent the wheel all over again, often wrong. Is it any wonder mental health, school, and criminal problems multiply every generation? But, the basic point is that as much as you abhor the roles opinions can play in human life and social institutions, you are about to perpetrate the same opinion-based blunders on *your* sons that your father did on *you*.”

“You’re saying I’m not well balanced?”

“You want to kill off the human race for God sake. You are a total social misfit. The only avocation you’re interested in is compulsive sex and you treat it like a sport not a mutually comforting, interpersonal, endeavor. Your logic concerning the bottom-line purpose of education is all screwed up. Yes, Ari, I’m contending you’re not well balanced.”

“Was your girl satisfactory this evening?” Ari asked appearing fully unruffled by David’s blistering assessment.

“Yes. Very satisfactory.”

The evening's discussion had been effectively closed.

* * *

They entered the suite a little after four o'clock. Kit was immediately back into the pool, ostensibly to remove the dust and grit from the back roads that had lodged itself into hair, ears, armpits and other even less elegant crevices. David removed his shoes and socks, and reclined in a chaise lounge, the new panel in hand.

"Like the panels from the box except all the information is on one side," he observed.

"Maybe that's really a clue, too," Kit said. "Since there is no map there, like on the others, it may mean we are already in the correct place – in general at least."

"I'll accept that as a tentative basic premise. So, north island in New Zealand. You and your photographic memory remember the carvings, I assume."

"I see them clearly."

It had been stated merely as fact – no arrogance present. Like his uncle David, Kit was who he was and felt no need to either boast about it or defend it.

"I liked the boobs at the bottom best, of course – lower left corner."

"They could be that, or valleys, or eyes. Knowing Ari, let's tentatively go with boobs or breasts or bosoms or tits or nipples. Did you have some opinion about the two rectangles to the right of those mammary wonders? Each is positioned as if supported on one corner by a line or stick. Then there is that squiggly mark trailing off to the right."

"My first thought was the barrels of two cannons with the cords ready to pull and fire them," Kit said. "Problem is the cords would come out of the back not the front."

"Interesting, though. Perhaps two devices rather than one, each designed to shoot the toxin high into the atmosphere like in Brazil?"

"Hey. Maybe they represent tubes. Combining them with the breasts it could say, 'boob tubes', referring to two TVs. TV transmission towers, maybe?"

"Doubt if Ari would stoop to using the same type of site twice. Do some free association with boob or breast or tit at the outset."

"Titillating, titmouse, titter, tittle, titular – that drains my tits, so to speak. Breast: turkey breast, keeping abreast of situations – got nothing more. Boob: booby, meaning fool; booby trap – zilch!"

"Trap or in this case traps," David said having a light bulb reaction himself. "Remember the rabbit trap you made from a wooden box as a kid. You propped it up one edge with a stick and ran a long string from the bottom of it to your hiding place. Then when the rabbit entered to eat the lettuce – or in your case it was a blackbird that entered – you pulled the support away and the box dropped around the prey."

“Ah! Booby-traps! I don’t get it.”

“Seems he’s warning us against ambush.”

“Why start warning us now? Two of the other sites were booby-trapped.”

“I don’t know. I really don’t know. At any rate, that doesn’t seem to move us toward our specific destination.”

“What else you got there?” Kit said raising himself up out of the water onto the deck and crawling to kneel beside David.

“Drip elsewhere, please!”

“Oh. Sorry.”

David pointed.

“Here’s one of those horizontal brackets we’ve seen before that tied several images into one clue.”

“Could be a reptilian head with eye and mouth being run through by an arrow – no, probably a harpoon seeing as it has several rows of barbs on the end.”

“If not a reptile then . . .”

“Maybe a fish . . . head?”

“Let’s let that be for a moment. To the right of it are two inverted V’s standing next to each other with a straight line or bar or some such thing pivoting on the right one down at an angle so it touches the one on the left about a tenth of the way down from the top. The right end of the line intersects an arc which is set somewhat higher than the pinnacles of the V’s.”

“A titter totter,” Kit said grinning. “See, the V’s are tits and the line is the board. A Titter totter!”

“I got nothing better though I seriously doubt if your characterization will be even close in the end.”

“Maybe not but the fantasy is great. Two such huge . . .”

“Enough, Horny Boy. Return your brains to your head and let’s look at the two objects just above all that.”

“Why are we working from bottom to top?” Kit asked.

“I think we can thank ‘Boob Brain’ for that.”

“Oh. Yes. I did recall them first. Moving on, then, two long, narrow, almost rectangles. The top lines are not straight across from end to end. The one on the left dips into the form slightly and the other humps up a bit.”

David remained silent looking at Kit.

“What?” the boy said puzzled.

“I was just waiting for you to make some crude association with ‘hump’.”

“Oh. I missed that. Probably well I did. Fido’s already getting ready to play.”

“You remind me of the man who was being tested by a psychologist who was having him describe what he saw in a series of ink blots. On each one the patient saw explicitly sexual pictures. The doctor mentioned how often he

described them in sexual terms. The man looked puzzled and said, 'Hey, Doc, you're the one with the dirty pictures!'

"I get your *point* – and no, I'll make no lewd associations to that either. My first interpretation is *concave* and *convex*."

"Mine, too. And the line through the right object either suggests a ray of light through a lens or that it has been crossed through leaving just the first figure."

"If they represent lenses then the ray idea makes sense," Kit said. "Although I can't take it anywhere. If it's crossed out that leaves the concave – a hole in a mountain where an escaped prisoner takes refuge: *con cave!*"

David groaned. Kit joined him.

"It's due to your putrefying influence on my basically stellar sense of humor," Uncle David.

"That may well be the first time 'putrefying' and 'stellar' have ever been used in the same sentence."

"See the influence you are on me! Things like that just keep happening."

"Let's hold onto the concept of 'cave', okay."

"A cavernous concept. Yes."

David ignored the plummeting level of humor. He had noted on other occasions that the quality of their witticisms was inversely proportional to their level of anxiety, and without a doubt it was on the rise.

"Finally the series of numbers at the top separated by colons and preceded by the double wavy lines. Previously they have meant approximately so let's start from there."

"The forms – 6:28 and 7:13 – could be representations of time, but they are written together, combined even by the colon between the eight and seven as 6:28:7:13 as if some sequence. It could be a miswritten, 'six is to twenty eight as seven is to thirteen'."

"What are the chances Ari would miswrite something?"

"Something approaching zero – from the negative side, I suppose," Kit said discarding that idea.

"Six twenty eight? Six twenty eight?" David said. "Today is six twenty seven – June 27th!"

"Hey! Good stuff, Unc. June 28th at 7:13 that would probably be a.m. considering the arrangement of things in the carving."

"If so, we are speaking of some kind of event, right?"

"Right. Something going to take place at 7:13 tomorrow morning. God! I mean Gosh! No, I meant God! Ari has cut us a really short timeline, hasn't he? What if we'd have dawdled around any of the distractions in the previous three venues? We might – check that – probably *would* have, been late for whatever's happening here in the morning."

David nodded. Kit shuddered. Fido retreated.

"I'm sorry that I tried to delay us with erotic treats here and there," Kit said. "No more. I promise!"

"So, it's back to the panel," David said. "Seems I remember something about a fish head in all the stuff I've read about this place. I just can't pull it up. You?"

"I've been concentrating on my sites, I'm afraid. Give me an hour and I can do some speed reading through the web info. Maybe I can dredge something up."

"Yeah, Kit! You just did."

"See! What did I tell you? Actually, what *did* I tell you?"

"It was sparked by the, 'dredge up,' reference. Find the 'Welcome to Wellington' website on the laptop."

Kit pulled up a chair, opened the computer and soon had the page there in front of him.

"Okay. Now what?"

"First paragraph I think. It tells about the history of the original name given to Wellington by the natives."

"Pretty good memory, pops. Let me read it:

"The earliest name for Wellington, from Maori legend, is *Te Upoko o te Ika a Maui*. In Maori it means 'the head of Maui's fish'. Caught and pulled to the surface by Polynesian navigator Maui, the fish became the North Island."

"So, let's assume the reptile/fish thing is that fish head and means, 'Wellington'. Now, does that context help us decipher the two inverted V's beside it?"

"It's the way mountains are depicted on most outline maps," Kit suggested, searching for a useful association.

"Pull up that map of geographic features," David said. "Maybe it will give us a clue."

"Nothing like that on the map. Here. Let me do a search on Wellington Mountains. . . . Nothing."

"Try Wellington Peaks," David suggested. "Singular and plural."

"Bingo, Uncle David. "Says it's a name used only locally to designate two high peaks set across a valley from each other. They look to be maybe thirty miles still north east of the Treadway mansion and a much better fit to the Xspot than the mansion was, actually. Shows no roads within miles of it. Let me look at the road map. . . . Nope. Nothing, and it looks to be way too rugged for any kind of vehicle."

"Any kind of *ground* vehicle," David corrected. "Let's start making Connie and Alex begin earning those big bucks they're receiving."

"Helicopter?" Kit asked.

"I assume so."

David placed a call to Connie outlining the situation and timeline. The

helicopter would be ready for takeoff at five a.m. Between now and then David and Kit had to figure out why they were going and at what spot they were going to disembark.

“The specific time has to be the clue to the clue,” Kit said.

“Amazingly, I believe I understood that,” David said with a smile. “Look here. If this arc represents one side of the sun then might not the line emanating from it represent a light ray or rays? Following the trajectory it indicates, it appears to represent the point on the left peak where the sun will be shining as it rises over the right peak at the moment of that representation.”

“That time being 7:13 a.m.” Kit added his nods becoming more and more definite as he thought it through.

“It’s the best I have,” David said.

“Problem!” Kit added.

“Oh?”

“Where should we each be at 7:13?”

“My thinking is that *you* will be near the top of the right peak on the west side taking pictures so we get the exact sequence of the retreating shadow as the light gradually washes down the east side of the left peak. You’ll pinpoint the 7:13 shots. I’ll be on the left peak physically following the sunshine down the mountain. I’ll mark the position at exactly that same time. It’s not like that ray is a single beam that will locate some specific, quarter-size, area like a spotlight. It will probably be represented by a broad horizontal band of light which will only indicate a height line that spreads across the entire side of the mountain.”

Kit went back to the laptop and soon had additional information.

“The left peak is tall and narrow. At the spot ten percent down from the top it looks to have a width of perhaps a third of a mile. That’s not really all that far – 1,760 feet. It’s approximately six football fields wide.”

“Still, that’s six hindered spots big enough to provide a three foot opening into the mountain,” David said as a caution to becoming overly confident for a quick resolution.”

Kit continued to investigate things related to the peaks.

“We may just be luckier than we thought. Look here. Two views of the eastern peak – the one on the right of our panel. Here’s the view we see in the carving – looks to be a solid cone at the top. But, look here at the shot straight on from the east side. It actually peaks as two small cones sitting north and south from each other; we couldn’t tell that from the view we have.”

“What you’re indicating is that those smaller peaks form a V, like a sighting mechanism on a rifle, David said.”

“Yes. And, the sun *may* just point out a *very* specific spot because of it.”

“This seems too easy, again, Kit. Designed to lull us into complacency, perhaps. Ari provides a warning about booby-traps and then plays the distraction card to divert us.”

“Do you think he really wants to kill us?” Kit said more serious than he had been.

“It’s more like he’s saying if we continue to be extremely cautious we will continue living.”

“Frankly, I don’t see much difference.”

“Nor do I but you can bet Ari does. He allows no false steps therefore he expects that we won’t make any.”

“Then why the booby-traps?”

“More than likely to protect the site from unfortunate passers by who stumble onto something Ari can’t allow them to find or find and report.”

“So Connie and Alex just ferry us to and from?”

“They’ll deposit us as I’ve described. Then once 7:13 passes, you and I will determine the next step. My guess is that will mean you join me on the west peak. That looks like pretty steep real estate we’ll each be on. Since I’m the one who will be moving down the slope to intercept the sun, I’m going to take Alex along. His Seal training just may come in handy. We’ll leave Connie in the Helicopter in case we need things or need to be moved over obstacles we can’t climb or go around.”

“Sounds like a plan to me. Dinner?”

“I’m ready. In or out?”

“Let’s go out then we can at least say we saw part of this city that’s supposed to be so clean and so beautiful and so crime free. Yes, once again we’ve lit in one of the most crime free cities in the world. Maybe there really *is* some correlation between the wind currents and law abiding behavior.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“It’s an E-P Jacket,” Alex explained to Kit as he helped the boy into the awkward fitting vest.

“Extra Protection, Extreme Panic, Excessive Padding, Exceptional Paraphernalia . . .?”

“Does the boy every shut up?” Alex asked David.

“Seldom talks in his sleep but when he does, take notes.”

“Actually, E-P stands for Explosive Protection – like a super version of a flack jacket.”

“And why are we wearing them?”

“Simple,” Alex said. “If you explode from all your yakking, we want your guts contained.”

“Not funny.”

Kit looked to David for an answer.

“Booby traps, remember. I’m taking as few risks as possible. This seemed like a reasonable precaution.”

Kit turned back to Alex.

“See. Would it have been so hard to say that?”

It was David who responded.

“Alex only provided what I requested. The reason had not been given.”

“Oh. Sorry, then, Big Al. Sometimes my angst gets ahead of my good sense.”

They climbed aboard the helicopter and belted in. Alex twirled his fingers as a signal to Connie who was at the controls. The gentle drone rapidly revved into the familiar clattering whirr of the helicopter and they lifted off, turned around in mid air, and moved off to the north following the valley they had driven the day before.

As they approached the peaks Connie climbed to meet them and circled the top as David had requested. They hovered just below the double mini-peaks searching for a good place for Kit to call home for the next several hours. Connie pointed at a spot and dropped to a point just off the west side of a good sized ledge.

“Not wide enough to land this thing,” came Connie’s words through the headsets.

“I’ll go down by rope and check it out first,” Alex said. “At my signal you come down in the basket.”

“I was first in my survival class in repelling, Alex. I can do the rope thing, too.”

Alex looked at David who nodded.

“With a backpack?” Alex asked just making sure.

“With a 110 pound girl who had a broken leg.”

“Got no girls. Think you can make it with a pack?”

They exchanged smiles and Alex was over the side. He spent a few minutes on the ground exploring the site. Presently he motioned for Kit.

“Later, Unc. Love you.”

He was over the side and soon on the ground.

Alex helped him off with his pack, an awkward effort wearing the thick jacket.

“Know how to use a handgun, Kit?”

“Won the marksman award at scout camp three years in a row.”

He failed to mention it was with bow and arrow but he had done some shooting with a friend’s father. Alex handed him a seven millimeter something or other.

“For snakes and such. Nothing big up here to be concerned about. If you fire it, be sure to call us on the communicator so we know what’s going on.”

“Gottcha.”

Kit looked up at the crevasse through which the sun would soon be shining.

“Imagine the gigantic hand shadow pictures I could cast from up here!”

Alex shook his head.

Kit took out his compass and sighted toward the general area on the other peak where the sun should focus as it came through the huge, V formation just above him.

“Help me move this big stone out here for a seat, Sir.”

“So, I’ve gone from Big Al to Sir when you really need my help.”

The stone was moved.

“It’s cold up here in the shadow,” Alex said. “Better get into that quilted, aluminum, shawl in your backpack before your body temperature begins to drop.”

With that arranged and the binoculars and camera at his side Kit gave Alex the thumbs up. Alex was up the fifty foot rope like a monkey on a forest vine. Although Kit couldn’t really see into the helicopter he waved his ‘*All’s well. Safe trip,*’ and the copter dipped forward and left the scene heading across the valley for the other peak.

Kit suddenly felt quite alone. It wasn’t that he was afraid. The majority of his ‘fear’ talk was just to get a rise out of others. He figured it made him seem less the genius and more human – woops! Not the analogy to use when facing down Ari Stephanopoulos.

Suddenly all the careful planning seemed unnecessary. As he scanned

the 'impact area' – as he was characterizing the place he thought the sun would be at 7:13 – he spotted what he figured had to be the opening of a cave. It was so far away and without size references that he couldn't figure its dimensions. He took the laser gun from his back pack. It focused a laser ray that could be seen by others wearing special goggles.

"Kit to David. Come in David."

"This is David. What's up? Your feet cold."

"No cold feet here. Put on your laser goggles and begin scanning the probable site area. I think I've located a cave entrance. I'm aiming the laser at it now."

"I see it. Can't make out any opening from this angle but I'll try to have us dropped in just above it. Good work, Son. Out."

Kit watched as the helicopter positioned itself and the two men lowered themselves onto the mountain side. He monitored the communication.

"Everything solid down here, Connie," Alex said.

"I'll leave you then. I've picked out a spot in the valley to set down. I'll be able to be back at either site within five minutes. Over and out."

With his binoculars, Kit followed the helicopter to its resting place and watched the big blades lumber to a stop.

It was a quarter after six when the men began planning their strategy.

"Kit's finding may alter my plan. You heard him. It is a cave entrance that we are searching for – a very specific cave. Originally my plan was to just follow the sun as it spread down the slope. The spot where it is at 7:13 is the crucial point. If that's where Kit's find is, we're easily in business. If not we've got some searching to do."

"Would you like me to go down and secure the cave entrance?" Alex asked. "Then as you follow the sun line down we'll see if we meet up."

"One might think you've done things like this before. You're not interested in the *why* of all this?"

"Not mine to be interested in. I've done hundreds of missions where we functioned on a need to know only basis. I've completed dozens without a clue as to what it was we did."

"Then I guess you're well prepared for this one. By the way it will be well if you and Connie just forget where these peaks are."

"Peaks? What peaks? In what country are you speaking of peaks, Sir?"

David smiled and nodded. He knew he could trust the man, partly because he had been selected by Ari, but mostly as a judgment made since coming to know him.

"You seem to have a sound plan. Yes, go see if you can locate the cave."

"I'll mark my trail by breaking and let hang three inch end pieces of the underbrush."

"Like Tonto and the Lone Ranger."

“Something like that, Kemo Sabe.”

“You know the reference?”

“Tonto know many things.”

“I’m coming to realize that more every day.”

Alex called Kit to keep a steady beam for him to follow. He then began a careful descent and was soon out of David’s line of sight. At 6:58 David could make out the first glimpse of the sun rising up in the crevice of the V-shaped wedge of the eastern peak. It cast its light well above him. He would welcome the warmth from a few rays when they arrived. He folded his arms across his chest against the cold.

More rapidly than David had expected the belt of light found him and passed on below. Following the trail marked by Alex – and done with more ease than he could have imagined – he made his way down the slope keeping a few feet above the sun’s line for both warmth and light.

As the time drew near he kept a steadier eye on his watch. He cut a sturdy stick with his ax, ready to pound it into the ground at the sun’s mark as the exact moment of 7:13 arrived.

At 7:11 he spotted Alex several yards below him.

“You guys awake over there?” Came Kit’s voice on the communicator. “The time is nigh!”

“We’re on it. I suppose you have us in view.”

“Sure do. Wish I had some of those rays over here. Looks like that cave is just about to be see daylight. Am I good or am I good?”

“We’ll get back to you on that. Here comes the time . . . mark! 7:13.”

David attempted to drive the stake into the ground. It penetrated the full four inch depth of soil.

“Plan B, Alex. Help me pile some stones up around this thing to mark the spot.”

It was soon accomplished.

“You have noted the outer limits – north and south – of the sun’s reach, right?” David asked Kit.

“Right. With a variety of pictures – close-ups and wide angles. Got it tied down. Can’t be more that four meters to each side of you. Note that I speak in metric so Alex won’t be confused.”

He couldn’t see the appreciative smile that crossed the big man’s face.

“Okay,” David continued. “Good. Here’s what I want you to do next. Using the binoculars scan along the laser line Alex will establish for you from here to the outer limits of that sunshine area. It will represent the 7:13 line. See if, just perhaps, you discover anything else that resembles an opening.

“Nada! Zip! Zilch!” Kit offered a few minutes later. “No openings I can see from here. Do I get to come and join you now?”

“See anything reflecting light – like metal, maybe?” David asked.

"Actually, yes. About two meters below you and two other spots some three meters on either side of the opening. What are they and how did you know to have me look?"

"Bra's, remember?"

"Bra's - oh, very good old man. 'Booby traps.' That's really hilarious. I'll laugh later. Do I get to come over there now?"

"Connie," David said. "You hear the impatient imp up on the east peak?"

"Been monitoring. Thought it was just static."

"Think you can bring him this way?"

"Have him there in fifteen minutes – ten if he'll stop talking long enough to listen to my instructions."

"Guys! You're ganging up on me. I'm the kid, remember?"

"No kids on this outing," David said. "Be careful."

David watched across the valley as Kit shinnied up the rope and into the helicopter.

"It's a wonderful thing you and the boy have, you know?" Alex said.

"Yes. It is. I'm going to miss him so much when he leaves for college in the Spring."

"Better go with him."

"The time comes when a boy needs to explore new territory on his own. That time has come."

No more was said on the topic.

"Better let me look into those bras first," Alex said. "There may be trip wires or laser lines, electric eyes, things like that."

"Be my guest," David said, reigning in the additional, 'Be careful,' that crossed his mind.

A few minutes later Alex made his first pronouncement.

"A small explosive device. Do you want it disarmed?"

"Can it be easily done?"

"I'd say so. Has an on-off switch on the left side.

"Sure that isn't a foil of some kind?"

"Absolutely. I've already looked inside."

"Okay, then, turn it off."

"Done. I'll move down to the one directly below the cave entrance."

A few more minutes passed.

"A similar device here. Turned it off. Going on to the last one."

"Not sure it will really be the last one," David said offering a word of caution."

"Number three, then," Alex said. "I've removed all the trip wires."

The noise grew louder and the helicopter was soon overhead.

"Drop him where you dropped us," David suggested. "It's the only semi-level spot around."

"Will do. You want the rest of the supplies, now?"

"Yes. Kit. You receive them on the ground up there and secure them in place for future use."

"Gottcha!"

He was soon on the ground. David addressed Connie.

"I want to use Alex down here for a time yet. Go rest your weary blades. Fuel okay?"

"No problem, there."

Connie left and Kit joined the other two.

"Neat trail you left. Daniel Boone would have been proud of you."

Alex had been shining his flashlight into the opening.

"Two meters tall and one wide. A natural opening, I'd say. No evidence of excavation. The cave takes a sharp left some three meters into it. Rock walls, damp, covered with lichens. Floor is probably slippery. I see nothing to suggest more *bras*, at least as far inside as I can see."

"He's good, David" Kit said. "Glad I thought to bring him along. Where was he when we were at the bottom of the Atlantic shelf?"

"Shall I enter?" Alex asked.

David nodded and moved Kit to be next in line. David brought up the rear. They adjusted their miner's lights and turned on their flashlights.

Alex stopped at the turn and examined the walls and floor. He moved on. After another three meters the cave narrowed briefly forcing them to squeeze through the opening. It took a hard right and began to slope downward at fifteen or so degrees. The tunnel was barely a meter wide at that point.

Alex stopped in front of a spider web that spanned the passage from wall to wall and ceiling to floor.

"Spooky!" Kit said.

"Deadly is probably more like it," Alex said. He squatted down and examined the web at the corners of the floor.

"What?" Kit asked straining to look over his shoulder.

"A major *bra*, fellows. Give me a minute. Probably should stand back."

David pulled Kit with him to a point several meters behind Alex.

"I don't understand, really," Alex said at last. "All of these are child's play. A web of aluminum wire, set to trip an explosive device which again can be deactivated with a flip of a switch."

He stood and undid the web from hooks across the ceiling and down the walls.

"They aren't meant for us, Alex. They're here to protect the area from anyone else who might wander in here before us."

"Obviously," Alex said as if the explanation had not been necessary.

"Would you expect more?" Alex asked as they began moving forward again.

"I have no idea. Sorry."

"No *sorry* to it. That is a sufficient answer."

Alex pointed to the floor.

"Chards of freshly chiseled stone."

They became more numerous as they moved along. Presently the tunnel ahead of them was bathed in light from a wide crevice in the ceiling. The area beneath had been enlarged into a spherical space nearly seven meters in diameter. The cave continued beyond as a smaller tunnel, but that would not be needed. There in the center of the room sat a giant metal tank even larger than the ones at Whitehorse and Brazil.

"I assume I have never seen this," Alex said.

"Correct," David confirmed with a nod. "Kit and I should be able to handle things from here. Feel free to return to the fresh air."

With a nod he turned and left. David and Kit began examining the tank. The vital elements were located on the far side. Kit was immediately to his knees examining the lights and metal plate.

"Looks to be a carbon copy of the others. How did they get it in here?"

"One pieces at a time, I imagine. Then they assembled and filled it right here."

Kit nodded.

"Shall I remove the plate?"

"Let's do it. Sooner we're out of here the better as far as I'm concerned."

"At least there's fresh air coming in from that big crack in the ceiling," Kit said trying to see the positive side of things.

"Yes. That crack looks to be a long narrow fissure through yards of solid rock."

"Solid sounds good," Kit said.

He went to work on the screws.

"There's our slot. Let's see the panel."

David had made it ready and handed it down.

"Grooves are a match. I'm going to slide it in."

It seemed routine. Somehow that fact made David uneasy.

"Perfect fit, of course," Kit said.

As they predicted the green light flickered for a few moments and then went off. The white bulb came on. The deep whirring sound began. The panel was secure and Kit replaced the metal plate.

"Four down, two to go," he said standing up.

Kit shivered and quipped,

"I doubt if Mongolia will be much colder than this."

"I'll give the men a heads up that we're on our way out," David said.

"Connie. Alex. We're coming out."

There was no response.

"Connie. Alex. Do you hear me?"

Still no response.

"Maybe we're too deep inside the mountain for the communicator to work," Kit suggested.

David nodded and walked to a spot directly under the opening in the ceiling. He tried again.

"Connie. Alex. This is David. Do you read me?"

Again there was no answer.

"So much for a head's up. I guess we just pack on out of here," David said.

They helped each other back into their gear and headed up the gentle slope toward the entrance. Almost immediately a loud rumbling emanated from around the next corner and dust began pouring into the tunnel toward them.

"Gas mask time, Kit. Turn around and I'll get yours out of your back pack."

"Now you turn around."

"Get into that mask first, Son."

They retreated from the dust as David struggled to get his own face covered.

"What do you think?" Kit asked as they stopped and faced the dust as it slowed and thinned.

"A rock slide up ahead."

"Courtesy of mother nature or your crazy Greek geek?"

"My guess would be Ari."

"That wouldn't be good. When he seals something he seals it."

"You stay here, Kit. I'll go take a look."

"I'm not staying here, David. Let's go together."

David made no response but moved forward, Kit at his heels. As they expected it had been a rock slide – a million, fist sized, rocks effectively closing the passage.

"Okay. Trying to move those rocks will be our last resort," David said. "Let's go back and check out the tunnel beyond the tank room."

The air remained thick with dust; it could be seen swirling in the light as it was sucked up and out of the crevice.

"Air flow. That's good," Kit said.

"For us yes. For those who could be annihilated by the toxin forced out through it after the explosion, not so good."

Kit gulped.

"I suppose it's fruitless to tell you to remain here while I investigate the tunnel leading away from the other side of this room," David said.

"You learn fast for an old guy. I'm right behind you. "

It quickly became smaller in all dimensions. They had to bend down which made walking difficult. There were rocks strewn along the floor. The air

became heavy and breathing labored.

"Breathing will be easier without the masks," Kit suggested.

"Okay," David agreed

It helped. There was a constant stream of air coming at them sucked into the cave like air into a fireplace. David sat down and Kit bent to his knees.

"I thought this peak was only a third of a mile thick," David said. "It seems like we've walked a mile."

"Let's try the communicator again," Kit suggested. "We may be close enough to the surface to get through."

"Good idea. Go ahead."

"Kit to pilots. Kit to pilots. Do you hear me? Do you hear me?"

There was a burst of static.

"Static is good, don't you think?"

"It may be they are hearing us but for some reason we can't hear them. Give them our status just in case."

"Alex. We are unable to hear you but have reason to think you may be hearing us. We're both okay. No injuries. We are quite a ways into the west end of the tunnel as it leads out of the main room. So far it has headed virtually straight west. Seems like we should be very near the surface. The tunnel is much smaller. Have to hunch down to walk."

Then, as an aside to David, "What else?"

"This is David. We will follow the tunnel as far as we can, hoping to find an exit onto the west side of the mountain. You might look for such an opening. If we get to a place where we can no longer pass through we will return to the main room under that open fault. I suppose you should locate that as well. If this turns into a long stay we'll need supplies lowered through it. It didn't appear to be wide enough to allow us to use it as an exit but size is hard to judge from in here. We can't just blast it bigger hole due to safety considerations down here. David out."

"Let's move on," David said.

That time it was a more distant rumbling noise though it mimicked precisely the one created in the other end of the tunnel when the rock slide occurred. The floor vibrated.

"Oops!" Kit said.

"We know what it is. No need to go check it out. Looks like moving on is the only option we have now. Ready?"

"Oh yes! Why don't I take the lead for a while?" Kit said.

"It's all yours."

The rush of air that had been streaming by them stopped as the passage was blocked behind them. From time to time there would be a prolonged blast of static from the communicators. Each time one of them would respond with an update.

"Kit. Turn your communicator off. We don't need both and later may need all the battery power we can find."

"Good thought. Done! I think there are fewer rocks on the floor up ahead."

He was right. The tunnel became even more cramped, however, and soon they were both on hands and knees shoving their backpacks on ahead of them on the floor.

"We do each have one canister of Oxygen in our backpacks," Kit reminded David.

"I know. That will be for last resort time."

Kit nodded and continued, trying to move some of the rocks out of the way to make the going easier for his uncle.

"I'm ordering pants with padded knees for the next leg of the journey," Kit said trying to keep their spirits up.

"Got an idea about that. Stop," David said. "Roll up your pant legs like this in six inch widths. Stop when it covers your knees. It should help save the skin even if it doesn't really ease the pain."

That accomplished they were on their way again.

"I really don't like what's up ahead, Uncle David."

"There isn't room for me to see around you," David said. "What you got there?"

"Looks like slide on our bellies time – plenty wide but no more than twenty inches high."

"It's all we got, Son. Go for it."

"I know. I'm suddenly glad for all those nights under the covers with Sherlock."

"Why's that?"

"Got inoculated against claustrophobia."

"I love you, Kit."

"I love you, Uncle David."

"I'm going to suggest we break out the O₂ just to have it ready in case we suddenly need it."

"I know we said no pessimism so don't classify this that way," Kit said as he began to squirm his way on ahead. "But if we don't make it out of here, I'm glad I'm going to be with you at the end."

"I couldn't have said it better, Kit, now move that butt – of which, by the way, I've been seeing far too much the past hour or so."

Kit put on a little wiggle and moved on.

"How far ahead can you see?" David asked.

"Forever. I mean the tunnel just seems to stay flat and straight for as far as my light will illuminate things – yet, no light at the end."

"You need to find the laser gun in your backpack. Stop here until you

have it in hand."

"Won't be easy. Sure you want to take the time?"

"Yes. Do it. Once in hand, you can begin shooting its beam straight ahead every once in a while – back and forth a little – up and down a little."

"To help Alex and Connie locate the opening. Good thinking. Remind me to break out the gold stars when all of this is over."

Within minutes they were on their way again. Kit would shove his backpack ahead of him, aim the gun and fire the laser for fifteen seconds. Then he would scoot on ahead another ten feet and do it all over again.

"I'm really having problems breathing, Uncle David."

"Use the O₂ but only as you need it to keep your head clear."

"Okay. . . . Wow! I never appreciated a deep breath like that ever before in my whole life. You okay back there?"

"Fine. Less chatter may help."

They continued in that manner for another fifteen minutes.

"Just remembered," Kit said at last.

"What?"

"This west peak was much wider east to west than north to south. No wonder it's taking us so long."

David noted the information; though long in explanation it was short in hope.

"My oxygen is gone, David."

"Here. Reach back and take mine. Still some left."

"You'll need it."

"My lungs are bigger – my bigger frame you know. I'm still doing fine."

It wasn't true but if they had any hope at all, Kit needed to press on.

The canister was passed. Kit moved on, having taken the 'less chatter' dictum to heart. Unknowingly, he was leaving his Uncle far behind. Without the oxygen David was only able to struggle on several more minutes. He laid his head on his arm and was immediately unconscious.

Five minutes later Kit also lapsed into unconsciousness.

"If I didn't know better I'd of thought the two of you were just going to sleep the day away."

It was Alex's deep, raspy, voice and the first thing Kit heard as he roused back into the world of the awake and alert.

"What in the hell? Alex. Wow! How? David?"

Alex pointed to the boy's right as he lay there on his back. He sat up and turned toward where his uncle lay, still unconscious. There was an oxygen mask across his face.

Kit turned and took one of David's hands, rubbing and patting it.

"He'll be okay, right?"

"Just taking his system a bit longer to bleed off the carbon dioxide."

"What time is it?"

"Nearly one."

"How did you find us? How did you get to us?"

"Some clever young man forced a stone into the trigger guard of the laser gun so it would stay on, and then pointed it straight down the tunnel before passing out. Connie spotted it on a fly by. He dropped me in and in no time at all I found you. You had made your way to within three meters of a shallow but sizeable cave on this side of the mountain."

"And we are now where?"

"In the valley between the mountains. Connie went to refuel. Will be back momentarily."

David groaned himself back into consciousness. Kit began the explanation long before his uncle was ready to comprehend it. What he *did* understand immediately was that somehow they had both survived and that was sufficient for the moment.

"You both have badly scraped elbows, knees and lower legs" Alex noted. "We better get those cleaned out and tended to right now."

By the time Connie returned, the wounds – less severe than they originally looked – had been attended to. David contacted the limo driver and arranged to have new outfits waiting for them at the airport when he picked them up.

All of that was soon behind them.

Back in the comfort of their suite they immediately entered the hot tub to help sooth their aching muscles and power clean the grime still imbedded in their skin.

"Ouch! Ouch! Ouch! Ouch! . . . Ahhhhhhh!"

It had been Kit's initial response as he eased himself into the warm, swirling water allowing it to bathe his scrapes and bruises. They sat in silence for some time each caught up in his own reflections on the events just past.

"Sorry I called Ari your crazy Greek Geek," Kit said at last.

"Quite an accurate description, actually. Why the remorse, now?"

"Well, he *has* provided us with Alex and Connie and they turned out to be just what we needed up there today. We'd be dead without them. In a way he seems to be watching out for us."

David reached out and picked up his shirt lying on the ledge beside the tub. He removed something from the pocket and passed it on to Kit.

"Another Greek coin. How did you come by it?"

"Alex said it was in the center of the floor of our exit cave – heads up."

"Ari's way of saying he had provided the tunnel as a contingency escape route for us?" Kit asked thinking he had it figured.

"I'm sure it's his way of taking credit for our success. Not sure if it was really contingency or the only route he was allowing us. Those rock slides

seemed to come as if timed. I doubt if we did anything specifically to trip them."

"Timed from the moment the panel clicked into place?"

"That's my guess."

"Seems to be the pattern."

David nodded. Kit continued.

"What if we'd have dallied just a bit longer and that last rock slide had occurred *before* we left the tank room? We'd have been trapped in there with no exit."

"Probably would have had to chisel our way straight up through the crevice. That would have been possible, for sure, but it would have dashed any hopes of completing the rest of the mission on time."

"The rule of thumb is certainly, 'get things done as quickly as possible'."

"That it is." David agreed.

"I assume we leave for Mongolia in the morning, then?"

"Six this evening, actually. Remember our Rule of Thumb!"

Kit nodded noting it was 2:30.

"You know what thought flashed across my mind in that tunnel when I was sure we were about to die?"

"Well, let's see. This is Kit doing the thinking – Kit, the continually horny eighteen year old male who has never had intercourse. Am I converging on the general area of thought?"

"You're good. Yeah. I was regretting the fact I wouldn't ever be able to experience that with Megan. It was interesting, really – not that I *hadn't* already done it, but that I *wouldn't* be able to."

"You're a good man Charlie Brown."

"Someday I want us to talk more about that."

"*Charlie Brown?*"

"No! *Good.*"

He splashed water at his uncle.

"I just imagine it is a concept you will be defining and redefining your entire life, Kit. At least I hope you will. Don't ever let yourself become satisfied that you fully understand it. Keep revisiting the idea over and over – keep honing and refining its meaning. But, yes, I look forward to many more discussions about it as well."

"I'm starved," Kit said.

"I'm starved, too, actually."

"I'm exhausted."

"I'm exhausted, too, actually."

"I'm horny as hell."

"I'm exhausted, too, actually."

Kit smiled appreciating the humor.

"Order in?" David asked – really making it a suggestion."

"Are you referring to something to quell our gastronomical appetites or my raw, rampant, horniness?"

"Tell you what, I'll order in a couple of huge steaks with all the trimmings for us to eat, *and* order a nice long soapy shower for you."

"Both sound great but necessarily in reverse order. You be okay here all alone, old man?"

"I'll be fine."

Kit climbed out and gingerly dripped his way toward the bathroom.

"Don't forget about those adjustable jets," he called back over his shoulder giggling as he disappeared around the corner."

David shook his head, thinking: 'Ninety minutes ago he was at death's door, and now he's ready to reproduce the species. From the standpoint of species survival, Mother Nature seemed to know what she was doing when she created teen-boys. Of course there's no way of convincing any teen-*girl's* father of that!'

He placed the order, called Connie, closed his eyes, and leaned his head back against the padded rim.

"Food's here, Uncle David," Kit said rousing him from a deep sleep. "Got it set up in the other room. Here's a towel. Need help getting out?"

"*Of course not!* Just give me a hand."

Kit smiled. He always loved absurdities when they were humorous. He had grown to fear them when they were offered as logical conclusions.

They had just begun enjoying the meal when the doorbell rang.

"I'll get it," Kit said getting up from his chair.

"You do realize you're stark naked."

"You noticed? It will be Ari's girls, you know. Figured I'd give them a thrill before dropping the disappointing news on them."

"At least look through the peep hole to make reasonably sure whose there before opening the door."

"Got it covered and, actually, that's *all* I've got covered."

That handled – it having dragged on *far* longer than David thought reasonable – they continued their dinner.

"A long way to Ulaanbaatar, in Mongolia," Kit said presenting an open-ended topic.

"Much longer trip than I'd counted on. I called Connie while you were dawdling and there are some problems."

"Problems?"

"We can't do a straight line flight from here. That would take us over Chinese air space and they won't approve it. So we'll do it in three legs – three, long, four thousand mile, legs. From here to Mindanao in the Philippians. From there to Nome, Alaska. Then fly in an arc around northern China, through

Siberia and down into Mongolia – Ulaanbaatar or Red Hero as we translate it."

"That's what . . . thirty hours?"

"At least. We can use it to recoup from the trials of this stop," David said.

"And prepare for whatever life endangering encounters may lie ahead." Kit added.

"Your tone is negative, down, sarcastic even," David said. "That's no way to prepare your mind for our next stop. We've beaten Ari four times. Just two more to go. We're doing very well."

"Sorry. I guess the morning's events are just catching up with me. I was really terrified up there, Uncle David. I felt so helpless. I'm not used to feeling helpless. I knew I was going to die. I've never been close to death before. I've thought about it, of course, but never had to really face it."

"You've just perfectly described the feelings I was, also, having up there."

"Really?"

"Really!"

"Wow!"

"Death *will* come someday," David said. "Today was not that day for either of us. You coped with the situation exceptionally well. You saved our lives by rigging the laser gun, you know. I guess I didn't thank you for that. Thanks."

Kit managed a grin.

"You're welcome. Sorry for the gloomy disposition."

"Understandable, actually."

"What do you think happens after death, Uncle David?"

"Sure you want to get into this right now?"

"Why not? It's not like you or anybody else *really* knows what happens? By the very nature of the topic, hard facts are impossible to come by. I'll enter it into my mental database as educated speculation from a respected source."

"You know that the church you've been raised in believes there is a spiritual afterlife."

"Yeah. The heaven or hell thing throughout all eternity."

"You know I'm not a *god guy* – I've never kept that a secret from you, nor, hopefully, has it ever appeared that I've tried to coerce you into adopting that point of view."

"I've never felt any pressure. Sometimes I wished there would have been. Then I wouldn't have been left all out in the cold to make the decision by myself – out behind the barn with my pants down, so to speak."

David smiled and continued.

"I'm not one to be bothered by the fact there are some big questions about life and the universe that I can't answer using this limited human brain of mine and what we have to date been able to figure out about the physical universe. So, when I come up against such a question – like what happens after human death – I'm content to just say I really don't know. Period! I certainly don't feel

the need to invent an entire new realm – the spirit world – itself unexplainable, to explain something else that I cannot explain. It adds another layer of speculation above and beyond what I can know with my human senses. I don't believe 'faith' in the supernatural is a legitimate human sense. I believe humans, with the best of intentions, consistently fabricate it to fool themselves into feeling safe, better, protected, immortal.

"Few of us want to die. Many are scared out of their gourds about it. The idea of *not being* is terrifying for many. The idea of continuing in some other form is therefore extremely appealing – *necessarily* appealing for some to maintain their sanity, you could say."

"So, that's all interesting background info," Kit said. "But, you haven't really spoken to my question. What do you think happens?"

"My best guess is that at death a human being just dies, decays, returns to the soil to feed and become a part of new generations of life forms. I think that's absolutely wonderful – *awesome* in your vernacular. It provides a kind of immortality though not as a conscious entity. These bodies of ours are little more than recycled atoms that have been hanging around the universe since soon after it came into being, and, at some very recent point, got structured by human DNA."

"It's why you want to be cremated so your ashes will immediately mingle with the soil and return to the chain of life."

"Right!"

Kit looked into David's face.

"It's sure tempting – comforting, anxiety reducing – to believe part of you as a person-entity never dies, though, you know. The church really understands and uses that super-powerful need, doesn't it?"

"I believe the church *grew out of* that super-powerful need – man invented it all to quell his fears. He went from fear of dying, to pondering the possibility of in some way living forever, to the opinion it might be able to happen, to making it a fact – a truth – not to be questioned."

"It's funny, you know."

It seemed an odd response, David thought.

"What's funny?"

"If atheists are right about there being no after-life they will never know they were right. If theists are wrong about their views, they will never know that, either."

"Other questions at this point?" David asked appearing tired.

"No. I think I'll just cop out and remain an agnostic for a while. That way I can keep all possibilities open."

"You know of course I'm only 99% atheist. I hang in there with 1% of me being agnostic. I seldom characterize *any* belief in absolute terms and where the Ultimate Truth is concerned I *never* think absolutely."

"He who knows the Ultimate Truth without question, without question leaves himself open to a life of ultimate ignorance."

"I like that," David said nodding. "I'm not familiar with the quotation or its source, however."

"Another *Kit Carson Lawrence* original."

"I must start writing them down."

"Yes, that's *True*."

The boy giggled himself into hysterics.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Sightseeing would not be among the entertainment options on the first two legs of the journey. From Wellington the plane skirted the north eastern coast of Australia and then the south western coast of New Guinea – neither particularly attractive or intriguing from 40,000 feet.

From Mindanao north east to Nome it was blue skies above, blue water below. Kit did make the entering of cloud banks into a game of *fantasy chicken* though he soon tired of that – the plane always won.

He expanded his research on Mongolia and the geography around Red Hero. Although he continued to be impressed by what a modern city it was there in the middle of a desolate nowhere, he was most intrigued by the several clothing optional spas. They were classified as either 'family' or 'stag'. He wondered if he and David qualified as family. That's where he figured the girls his age would be. It was a nice fantasy which soon accompanied him to dreamland as he dozed in the recliner for an extended, lumbar wrenching, sleep.

Soon after takeoff from Mindanao, David had opted for a bed and nearly slept the clock around. He awoke more or less refreshed. Kit groaned with aches and pains from his night in the chair.

The early morning layover in Nome included the installation of extra fuel tanks – four, this time – to see them safely to Red Hero. During the stop, Kit and David opted for a meal at the airport restaurant. Country fried steak, homemade biscuits, and apple pie ala mode served by native tongued English speakers, made it feel like home.

"I figure it will be early afternoon their time when we arrive," Kit said.

David nodded and filled the boy in on flight details.

"Connie says we'll be flying over the Siberian Sea for almost half the journey. Then at the Taymyr Peninsula we have Russian permission to fly straight south to Mongolia."

Kit seemed to have remembered something from his geography.

"That takes us smack dab across the Siberian wastelands – tundra, snow, blizzard force winds, black grizzlies, freeze your nads off in five minutes land."

"Late June is somewhat better than that, I believe," David said amused at Kit's take. "Besides, we'll be far above all that."

"If everything goes *right*, we'll be far above it. If not, break out the snow shoes and buffalo guns."

"Once again you're sounding like *Pessi the Mystic*."

"Clever. Sorry. Connie *did* say we had powered alternative transportation in the hold of the plane, right?"

"He did, indeed."

"Okay then. I think one more piece of this pie will bring me back to my old self."

"Not sure I want *that*?" David said

"What do you mean?" Kit asked, grinning

"Having you go back to being a sex crazed teenager?"

"No, you've missed my transition to *Kitman*, a courageous, stalwart, fighter for justice who, with his loyal, though aging sidekick, is out to save the world from Ari the Madman."

"In that case, eat up. Suppose another slice would help me – aged as I am?"

"Never know 'til you try. Of course, I don't have to watch *my* waistline."

"Yet, interestingly, most girls you pass, do."

"Yes. One of the burdens of studdom."

"Taymyr Peninsula in sight straight ahead," came Alex's voice over the intercom. Will be executing a hard left momentarily. Are in contact with the Russian Air Authority and have been granted final access approval. Kit, that means the chances are rather low that we'll be shot out of the sky. Over and out."

"You gotta love that guy," Kit said grinning and grasping the arms of his chair in preparation for the turn.

"He speaks Russian, you know," Kit added.

"I didn't but I'm not surprised."

"It's still the language of the educated folks in the cities in Mongolia," Kit said. "Official university language. Also several Chinese-like dialects and a dozen local Mongolian languages. English speakers may be hard to find."

"Now he tells me. Do you have anything new regarding the clues on the box panel?" David asked.

"Well, there will be lots of old Buddha statues and one of them seems to be what we're looking for. On the panel it had the slot in its tummy. I'm more sure than ever that I've located the hill with the Xspot on it and because of the placement of the moon and sun we know it's an east-west laying range. By themselves those solar objects seem to tell us nothing about whether our search should be on the north or south slope. However, factoring in the Orienting thing, the view faces north which would indicate the south face may be our best starting place."

The plane leaned into the turn and was soon gentled back on its level course. Kit took the laptop to where David was sitting at the table.

"Here's a view of all three of the hilltops from the South. This one shows

the same set of hills from the North. I have one close-up of the middle hill, *Urga*, from the South but haven't as yet located one from the north."

"Looks like we will be flying directly over it on the way to the airport, which is at the southern edge of the city. Try to get that northern view with our camera."

"Excellent! That second piece of pie seems to be kicking in."

Kit hit the intercom button. "Need to talk stuff with you. Can I come up there?"

Alex responded.

"If there's one thing a cockpit is always in need of it's more 'stuff'. Certainly, come on up."

The door clicked open. Kit entered.

"*Urga Mountain*. I need to get a close-up of the top of it from the north side view. We'll be flying over it. What's the chance of being low enough so I can get some good shots?"

"We'll be so close to it you can drag your foot out the door and touch the snow," Alex said.

"Somehow that's not really reassuring, but if you could let me know a few minutes ahead of time, I'll appreciate it."

"It will be an excellent time to photograph it." Connie said. "Your best shot will be straight out the windshield up here. The sun will be almost directly overhead and slightly to the north. Couldn't arrange it better in a studio."

"Good to know. Thanks. . . . You know, I think there's a whole lot more to you two than we've as yet been privy to."

"*Privyto*?" Alex said directly to Connie. "You know this *Privyto*?"

"I'm afraid I've never been privy to *Privyto*."

"Clowns," Kit called out the door. "Uncle David, we're being chauffeured around the clouds by a couple of clowns."

"In that case bring me a balloon animal – giraffe if they can manage it."

"Am I the lone sane soul, here?" Kit said throwing up his hands, feigning disbelief.

Kit and David returned to studying the maps and photos.

"Any info on a Buddha up there on that mountain?" David asked.

"Not specifically although the carving seems to indicate 'see through' space between the arms and the torso. That's very unusual on a Buddha statue. They are almost always solid. So, I've started searching to see what I can find out about that. What's your take on the carving?"

"I agree with you. I hadn't characterized it as being unique in that way though. It may be our key to locating it."

"I got a problem about it. Unless that statue it absolutely huge – and if it were I'd have thought I could have found out about it – where's the bomb going to be?"

"An interesting observation."

"I thought it was a question."

"An interesting *obserestation*, then."

Kit grinned. David continued.

"Ari innovated on Pico when he couldn't get one big tank into the place he had designated. In New Zealand he had it constructed piece by piece inside the cave. I just imagine something like that could be true for here."

"Seems we're going to need to depend on locals for information," Kit said. "Does that mean we put Alex on a leash and drag him along?"

"I wouldn't trust any leash to hold that man, Son, but it does seem we may need his linguistic skill. Perhaps we can keep him by our side with an offer of a never ending supply of baklava."

"Our translation device isn't going to be of much help except in decoding written Russian like on signs, menus, and such."

"Why's that?"

"Watch. You type in the word or phrase in English and it comes up in Russian letters. I have no idea how to pronounce those things, do you?"

"Did once but wouldn't count on it now."

"Then I'd say order the baklava!"

David chuckled.

"I assume you've used the image recognition software on that Buddha, right?"

"Nothing useful. Recognized it as a Buddha and that was it."

"How high is that mountain or hill or whatever?"

"*Urga*?"

David nodded.

"Well, *Red Hero* sits in sort of a valley some forty three hundred feet above sea level. *Urga's* nearly another thousand above that."

"Terrain?"

"Rugged. There are trails and many caves. They were used by the rebels back during the struggle which led to Outer Mongolia – the area around Red Hero, then called *Urga* – being absorbed into Mongolia proper. Snowcapped in the winter. Not sure about the summer. All my pictures show snow up there."

"Sounds like long underwear time," David said.

"A far cry from the *nowear* beach time in Brazil."

"I'll say. What temperatures can we expect?"

"I'm not sure what they may be up on the mountain side. Down in the city this time of year the average highs and lows are 71 and 53 Fahrenheit. Not tropical by any standard!"

"You know what we need?" David asked.

"Naked stewardesses?"

"Not what I had in mind. We need a really good reproduction – picture –

of that unique Buddha to show folks."

"Let me see what I can create doing a scan from the panel and then having Photo Shop make a line drawing. If that's not good enough we can probably fix it by hand."

"Sounds good. Go to it."

A half hour later Kit presented his effort to David. It had been more complicated than he had anticipated.

"This is superb, Kit. How in the world?"

"A little computer magic. A little whiteout. A few extra lines. A little shading and finally a photo copy."

"Make a dozen more copies, Okay?"

"Sure. Maybe now that it's all fixed up the object recognition software will have more to offer."

It didn't. Kit did, however, get some good shots of the snow covered mountain top as they descended to the airport at Red Hero.

They were directed to the passport line but were immediately processed when the magic phrase was uttered – "Stephanopoulos Shipping".

Turning around from the counter they were approached by a man – clearly a chauffeur.

"Pleased to meet you gentleman," he said in perfect English – American, not English, English. "This way please."

The drive from the airport followed Lenin Avenue generally east to near the sports stadium where it turned north and passed the green, tree dotted, expanse of the National Park. Of interest were the cows grazing there.

Still traveling north they passed the Choyjin Lama Temple and Sukhbaatar Square with its huge statue of the mounted Sukhbaatar, the Mongolian national hero who liberated the country from China and aligned Mongolia with the Soviets in the early 1920's. The impressively beautiful opera house with its high pillared portico sat to the north of the square.

Just past the university the limo turned right onto Big Ring drive, a lumbering thoroughfare that arced around the northern perimeter of the city proper.

Kit had a question for the driver.

"What's with all the hitchhikers?"

The driver smiled. "In this city you will see very few taxi cabs. But, just stand near any street and put up your hand. Every car becomes an instant taxi. They all charge the same by law, twenty five of your cents a kilometer and the drivers are required to reset their odometers for your convenience and peace of mind."

"Pretty cool!"

It was David's turn.

"The air? Haze?"

"Pollution from the soft coal burning power stations. It's our main health hazard here – well that, and getting mugged in the outlying areas of the city near the Ger. That's the area of the traditional Mongolian tent villages where the poorest folks live. Maybe a third of our population. Most are unemployed and many are single mothers with many children. Like getting a taxi here, it's just that easy to get a prostitute – a dollar an hour, *two* if you insist they bathe first."

"And you, Sir. Your English is impeccable," David noted, fishing for more information.

"I teach English at the University for the joy of it. I drive the limo to make a living."

They pulled up in front of an old but well-kept hotel.

"I'll see to your bags. You have the best suite in the place. Hope you enjoy your stay. Here's my card. I can arrange transportation at almost any moment.

David handed him a hundred dollar tip.

"I can't accept so much. I have been well paid for this week with you."

"And you've just become better paid. Don't hurt my feelings."

"Thank you, Sir. Thank you so very much."

They were escorted to their suite by a western clad bellboy eager to try out his grammar school English.

"Very best rooms in City. You be very comfort here. I am Uri. You call me to fix things. I get you *anythings* you want."

He winked as he opened the door. The meaning was clear.

"You *can* get us *other* things we need, too, right?" David asked as they entered. Their luggage had already arrived.

"I can get you anything - watches, cars, guides, goats, camels – you name it, Joe."

"That's good to know. By the way do you recognize this statue – it may not be a really good picture."

He studied it, thoughtfully.

"No. Most sorry. I can ask around, if you like me to."

"I like you to."

David reached for his wallet.

"We still haven't exchanged for local currency. Where do we do that?"

"Desk in lobby."

David peeled off ten one hundred dollar bills and handed them to Kit.

"Go with Uri and change it for whatever is the local equivalent of twenties. See that Uri gets two of them for starters. I have the feeling he is going to get rich off of us in the next few day."

Uri smiled. He couldn't have been much older than Kit though was a good head shorter. His round, always smiling, face suggested a racial mixture of western white and oriental. Straight black hair flopped from side to side across

his forehead as he moved – and he seemed to move more than was necessary. Dark brown eyes, set between his chubby cheeks and round, box, hat, moved furtively from face to face. David believed the boy could get them what they needed. Whether he could be trusted was another matter; time would tell.

"Also find out where we can get a meal that our western stomachs will tolerate," he called after Kit as the boys reentered the elevator across the hall from the suite.

David closed the door, laid his attaché case on a chest under an ornate mirror in the entry hall and entered the sitting room. It was large though not spacious and only modestly oriental with two, large, red framed, octagonal, windows, on the outside wall to his right. *Worldly generic* would be a fit description of the décor and furnishings.

On the wall opposite the windows were three red doors. The ones on each end led into rather compact, though cheery, bed rooms, which shared a bath and spa area between them to the rear. Separating the bedrooms to the front of the bath was a narrow dining room complete with a dumb waiter. David guessed it was for room service. A nice touch if that were true.

If the room rates posted on the back of the door were an indication of the local economy – and from what the driver had said they probably were – the area was the poorest by far of any they had visited. The four room suite with private bath and spa rented for twenty two US dollars a night. The suite of similar size in Brazil, though admittedly more plush, went for twenty five times that amount.

'Perhaps we need to break some of those twenties into ones,' he thought. 'We're likely to cause an economic crisis here as well as set ourselves up for trouble by handing out the big bills.'

Kit returned with the same thought, upon which he had acted. He handed back five, unbroken, hundred dollar bills and counted out one hundred in tens, two hundred in fives and the rest in ones.

"Uri went down the street to get us some good U.S.A. food – so he says at least. He says to visit the 'family spas' we will need a woman, which he can provide with five minutes notice and three dollars – half of which I assume he keeps. On the other hand he says lots of beautiful young women frequent the 'stag spas' – for some, their way of picking up tricks. There's no hanky-panky allowed on the premises, however. Since I'd only be there to ogle I guess 'stag' would work. Uri said I shouldn't go alone but he'd go with me – assuming I'd pay."

"You know that's an extracurricular we may not be able to work in," David said.

"Figured I might do a trade for a couple hours of sleep, sometime."

"Or a meal, or water, or air to breathe?" David joked.

"You definitely understand my priorities."

Ten minutes later Uri arrived with just what he had promised –

cheeseburgers, French fries, Pepsis, and deep fried, hot apple pies.

They chose to eat among the generally curvy, cozy, lines of the sitting area rather than the stark, straight, black and red, plains of the dining room.

"I'm hitting the shower," Kit said when they finished. "Those sponge baths on the plane neither de-stinkified me nor de-horrified me. What are the plans for the rest of the day? Let's see, it's going on three o'clock here."

"Our first step has to be locating that statue. Probably a trip to the Buddhist museum will be our starting place. I'm pretty rank, myself; while you're in the shower I'll soak in the hot tub. Let's plan on leaving here in thirty minutes. I'll make arrangements with the driver – Zora."

"About that. Uri said it's not good policy to drive around in one of the only twelve or so limos in the city. Thieves set their marks from whom they find using them."

"Good point. I'll ask Zora about that."

Twenty minutes later Kit had finished and sat himself on the edge of the spa, legs dangling into the water.

"I feel clean and relaxed. How about you, Unc?"

"I feel clean and relaxed as well, Neph."

"Relaxed the way *I'm* relaxed?"

"None of your business."

Kit smiled.

"We need to get dressed. Doc will be here in a few minutes."

"Doc?"

"When I called the driver he said that's what he's used to being called. He agreed that a regular car would really be best. He offered his so we will be looking for a red, four door, something or other."

Doc had several ideas about locating information on the Buddha. The first stop was the Home of the Living Buddha. Doc knew an attendant there which got them inside. A monk who was apparently in charge of historical things greeted them. Doc supplied the translation.

"I know of the Open Buddha," the monk said. "It is only in the old lore, however. No one has recently looked upon it. Although it was a labor of love by a Brother centuries ago, it was rejected by the brotherhood because it depicted the Buddha after a period of fasting. The Buddha is always shown as full bodied. It represents fulfillment and sufficiency. It is all that is allowed here."

"The lore says the statue's creator took it up Uрга Mountain and placed it in a spot where either the moonbeams or sunshine would always bathe it – hoping to eventually make it pure and acceptable."

"Any idea how large it is?" David asked.

"Small enough to have been transported up the mountain by a man and two or perhaps three camels. The story says it was sculptured from solid stone. A camel can comfortably carry maybe 300 pounds. Two with a sling between

them maybe 600 or 700 pounds. It takes very little stone to make that weight."

"Any idea about north or south slope?"

"My guess is directly on top. Otherwise how could it always be in view of either the moon or sun?"

"But it has never been located?" David asked wanting to make certain he understood.

"We, of course, have never looked for it. It is forbidden. I have no knowledge of it being found. Why all the recent interest in the Open Buddha?"

"There have been others here, asking?"

About a year ago – a little less perhaps. A team of geologists who were doing research on Urga came with questions. They didn't want to disturb it so wondered if we knew of its whereabouts. I gave them the same information I am giving you."

"Thank you for your time," David said, ending the conversation.

Kit had held his tongue inside but could not contain the problem he saw any longer. He took David aside out on the sidewalk while Doc went to get the car.

"A forbidden statue of Buddha, taken to the top of the mountain to hide it from everyone, placed out in the open where the sunshine and moonbeams would constantly bathe it. Does that not seem riddled with fallacies to you?"

"Hiding it out in the open, you mean. It is a myth, remember," David said.

"You mean this picture that the monk immediately recognized as the statue known as the *Open Buddha* represents only a myth – something that never existed – something that has virtually never been seen?"

"It gets stranger and stranger, I'll agree," David said. "At least we have whatever direction the myth presents and, it is clearly the same information Ari's group of 'geologists' had, also."

"Yeah. I suppose it verifies in a way that we have picked out the correct mountain for our search."

"Yes. Isn't that reassuring?"

"I guess," Kit agreed halfheartedly. "Yes, I suppose it really is. When do we get our tails up there?"

"Begin in the morning. We need more information about climbing the mountain. Perhaps Doc will have some insights for us."

He did and shared them as he drove them back toward the hotel.

"An easy, one day, climb up and back. Trails all the way to the top. Nights dip into the teens this time of year. Wind chill is ferocious. Double walled tent if you plan to stay the night. It's not one of the four protected holy mountains near the city so you'll need no permission."

"Are there helicopters for rent at the airport?"

"There is at least one civilian helicopter in the area. I see it aloft from time to time. Don't know to whom it belongs."

"Pardon me, Doc," Kit said looking around, "But this doesn't appear to be the way back to our hotel."

"It isn't. It's the way to the police station."

"Why? You turning us in for Buddha ogling?"

"We are being followed by a car full of thugs. We will be safe at the station and it should discourage them from sticking around."

"Discouraging a band of thugs from hanging around seems good, Doc. Very good!" Kit said. "By the way, may I ask about the *Doc*?"

"PhD in languages from Columbia University. A scholarship fell into my lap a dozen years ago. I am very fortunate."

"That scholarship – from a Greek shipping company?" David asked.

"How on earth could you have known that?"

It was not a question David had prepared himself to answer and wished he could withdraw it.

"We are associated with the Stephanopoulos family."

"That makes sense then. Such a generous group of people."

"You met them?" David asked.

"Just one son, Aristotle. In New York City when I arrived there. That was some shock I'll tell you."

"The city or Ari?" Kit had to know.

"Well, put in that context, *both*, actually. No offense, but it was as if he said, 'Hello, I'm Ari. Got three whores waiting for us back in my hotel room. Blond, redhead or brunette?"

"That's Ari, for sure," David said. "I don't recollect his association with Mongolia – a landlocked country."

"We have an excellent engineering department, which continually improves due to their generous contributions. It does a good deal of work for the Stephanopoulos Ship Building Company. Probably the cheapest eggheads in the World right here. As you can see, Professors are not what you'd call well paid."

"Why did you come back?" Kit asked.

"It is my home. Where else would I want to go?"

"Like my Uncle David, here. Six years at Harvard, Magna cum laude, and he returns to his tiny home town to teach in a tiny college."

"The attraction to ones home is unbelievably strong and knows no logic," Doc said.

"Besides a double walled tent, do you have any other suggestions for our stay on Uрга?"

"Just don't melt the snow to drink. It's heavily polluted from the coal smoke. Just as a heads up, you'll be approached by dozens of young girls during the first several kilometers offering themselves to keep you warm and comfortable during the cold night. Venereal diseases are rampant. Be very

careful."

"Thanks for the warning but just because we know Ari doesn't mean we have adopted his lecherous life style."

"I figured as much. The car of thugs moved on. I'll have you at your hotel in five minutes. I'd advise you not to venture out without a local at night. A third of the people here live in poverty like nothing you have in the States. Most of them survive on four or five dollars' worth of food a month. The reason for the lack of obesity and the rampant crime is pretty obvious. It also all ties into the huge number of female headed households and the highest rate of fatherless children in the World."

"Don't they know about contraception?" Kit asked.

"Know, yes, but can afford, no. The quarter for a condom will also provide a good meal for a family of five."

It was not a happy note on which to end the conversation. David again forced a sizeable bill on Doc. who accepted it graciously though with some embarrassment.

"Well, that didn't take as long as I thought it would," Kit said as David unlocked the door to their suite.

"No, it didn't. Not sure we really learned anything that will break this open for us. It appears we are searching for something, which no one in a position to know seems to believe really exists.

"Let's have Alex gather the supplies we'll need. Anything they didn't bring along on the plane we'll send Uri scavenging for us."

* * *

The girls had just left.

"As long as the laws of *Natural Selection* and *Survival of the Fittest* are applied within the human species, life on the planet is in jeopardy."

It was Ari's pronouncement as he settled himself sidesaddle on the diving board looking down on David who was stretched out on the deck on a beach towel facing him. The ploy was like an adolescent who, rather than asking the question that is really on his mind makes a bold, controversial statement and then sits back and listens to see if the adults' reaction provides a useful answer. David didn't bite.

"I suppose you will need to further explain your complicated concept for me before I can respond," he said pleased with himself both for having side-stepped Ari's strategy and for having bated him to respond by turning his own egotism back against him.

Ari smiled, realizing his initial pawn had just been met with pawn.

"Survival of the Fittest: The strong, healthy – usually meaning the richer – humans live on to reproduce, while the weaker – usually meaning the poverty stricken – die young. It's a system that works well for all the other species on the planet and, generally, for the planet itself. But it is those very strong, healthy,

intelligent, wealthy, fittest human beings who demand and create more and more technology at the expense of the planet.

"Natural Selection: Who mates? The strong, healthy, and intelligent mate with the strong, healthy, and intelligent, producing even more strong, healthy, and intelligent beings to lay waste to the planet. The weak, poor, less intelligent, mate with their kind, dying off in droves from poverty as a result.

"It's the natural system gone seriously awry, you see. Works well – essential, even – for the lower species. Keeps the planet's life system healthy, vital, orderly, and useful. But once nature mistakenly allowed intelligent man with wants beyond needs to enter the scene and play according to the same rules, those laws of nature became devastating.

"The intelligent rich – Nature's pillagers – survive. The less intelligent poor – those who can and by necessity do live more compatibly with nature – die off."

"I'd clap but I need one hand and arm to prop up my head and the other to scratch in disgusting places," David offered as his ho-hum, sarcastic, response.

"So, what *you* got on the subject, then, *High and Mighty David from the Hinterlands?*

"Very little else. Your characterization seems accurate, though tragically one-sided."

"One-sided?"

David ignored the implied request for an explanation.

"So, let's say for some reason you are unable to exterminate the human species. It sounds like you are saying that the next best thing might be to keep everybody dirt poor and ignorant so they couldn't afford technology or the labs in which to produce it or the education to learn how to create it. Minimize human possibilities."

"That would only be a short term, stop gap, measure. The more intelligent would soon find ways to become wealthy and the cycle would begin all over again. Ultimately, the only way to save life on his planet is to kill off the entire human race."

"Perhaps you're overlooking one piece of information. Poor folks across the globe tend to regularly reproduce their kind as a result of their sexual activity, an act which is inevitably universal among humans. Although intercourse is essentially as common among rich people, *they* typically *don't* regularly reproduce because of it; they only reproduce when they choose to. The technology they've developed allows a lifetime of sex without reproduction. The intelligent – low reproducers – may well just die a self-inflicted, natural death based on non-replacement. *Or*, if not, the time should come when the bright, low reproducing, folks are so outnumbered by the dumb, high reproducing, folks, that they will be vanquished – all according to a new law of nature: *survival by overwhelming volume.*"

"Did you use condoms again tonight?" Ari asked as if exasperated at the

implication he had read into David's statement. "You know my girls are all on the pill. Anyway, abortions are routine these days."

"I'm not chancing pregnancy or any kind of infection. I know you believe your girls keep themselves just for you and your favored, male, friend, but I'm not willing to count on that."

Ari shook his head and spoke with some resignation in his tone.

"Well. The upside is that the primitive, rubber, technology you use is undoubtedly more planet friendly than my chemistry driven technology, but then I've never claimed to be anything other than a fully typical, planet butchering, sex driven, human being."

"And you *are* all of that, my friend. You are! It's such a waste, you know – well, no, clearly you don't."

"What I don't?"

They both smiled at the phrase.

"That if you focused your brilliant mind and your huge financial resources on the problem, you could do so much to convert the human species to a more planet friendly way of living."

"I suppose that's a compliment. You're not free with compliments – at least not in my direction. I should thank you."

"Please note that the compliment was buried under my assertion that you are not receptive to the basic premise and therefore your brilliance and wealth will both be squandered in counterproductive, self-centered, pleasure-seeking, money grubbing, endeavors."

"You know me so well, Dave. Of course, in knowing *me* you also know virtually every other person in the civilized world. How you escaped being *normal* like the rest of us I just can't figure."

"*Normal*, from the stem *norm*, has two generally accepted meanings. First, an average, which essentially tosses out the highs and lows and leaves the unremarkable middle ground. Second, it *also* means the sane, the healthy, the high or perfect standard to which one strives.

"I think you and I define the two divergent meanings of the term. Where I was raised, we strive to improve ourselves, which means moving toward some higher standard or norm. You strive toward nothing. You are just what you are in your bare, thoughtless, essence. Even though you recognize that is detrimental to society, you still choose to ignore positive personal growth that could serve to improve the human condition. You favor wallowing your way through life at the sensual, orgiastic, level. Your only motivation is selfish, fueled by your gonads, and the only real pleasure in life that you ever recognize is that of taking your sexual gratification with a female."

"See. You *do* know me!"

"And once again the spoiled rich boy from Greece misses the entire point that his poor, struggling to be altruistic, friend from the backwoods has attempted

to make."

"Didn't *miss* it. Just don't accept it. Let's say we get this Planet Friendly concept across to every person on the face of the planet – something I'm sure even you will agree could never really happen. How much of their technology will people really be willing to give up? Paper, the manufacture of which devastates both the air and water. Textiles, which, world-wide, are even worse. Even solar powered or battery powered vehicles are polluters during the manufacture of the batteries, solar cells, metal or plastic for the car bodies, rubber for the tires. Then there's the asphalt for the roads to run them on. The truly Planet Friendly approach you are calling for would require giving up, motorized, land, vehicles.

"Airplanes would also be gone immediately, of course, because we are not even close to having the technology to fly hundreds of people at a time, or dozens of tons of product through the air on solar cells. And again the manufacturing of the planes alone is massively destructive."

"But we can improve *so much* over what we are doing today," David said in effect conceding much of Ari's argument.

"*Better* isn't *enough*. It's the arrogance of mankind that says, 'I'm the only truly worthy being on the planet,' that remains at fault even under your plan, Dave."

"I grant you that, Ari. My belief is that nature intended that the most highly developed species has some rights and privileges the lower species don't. I see it as part of the natural support process. Conceptually, some species has to be at the top of the chain. You see it as pure, unadulterated arrogance. If we can, though careful planning, save some portion of the *orange eyed, three towed, prickly backed, Amazon beetles* that live high in the canopy of the rainforest, then I say let's be sure to do it. If we can't, in order to maintain the human species in safety and with a good quality of life, then, I'm sorry, but I won't sacrifice this marvelous human being for a beetle or a thousand varieties of beetles."

Arti's response was clear and difficult to rebut.

"Beetles live and grow and die and fertilize the forest floor so other larger species can live and grow and die and fertilize the forest floor. Eventually that beetle's extinction will come back to haunt you because the rubber trees will die for lack of nutrients, the cinnamon trees will die, the trees from which aspirin and other drugs are extracted will die. Without the rainforests the balance of carbon dioxide to oxygen will get out of whack and all surface life will perish.

"With no life support species around, man will eventually perish anyway. Does it seem right and just to kill off all the other species to maintain one that will in the end inevitably die out anyway?"

David was ready.

"I suppose I believe in the creative potential of man and that through its use, we will find ways of living in harmony with many of the other species."

"*Many equals not* all. You're back to selfish arrogance."

"Why do we even discuss this between us, Ari? We will never agree. We'll never even come close to compromise. Fortunately, I suppose, the fate of mankind is not going to be in either of our hands."

Ari sobered, turned away, and shrugged, looking out the windows, across the city sky line into the empty darkness.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Not unbelievably, the pilots had everything David and Kit should need including a tent, which Alex guaranteed would be superior to the old, double-walled design.

“Best pack animals for the mountains will be camels,” Alex said over the phone. “They are used to the cold dessert nights. Donkeys get frightfully obstinate once they get cold; of course, they seldom spit at you the way camels do.”

“I’d like you to accompany us up to the summit and help us set up camp” David said. “If we aren’t finished by tomorrow night, you can come back down here and await our call.”

“Frigid mountain top or cozy hotel room?” Alex said. “It’s such a difficult decision.”

“Can you have things ready by five a.m.?”

“If I can round up three camels.”

“Call Uri down at the hotel desk. Use my name. He claims he can get anything including blonds, brunettes and redheads.”

“I’d question if there are any natural redheads around here – other than the stray camel,” Alex said. “I’ll work things out with the Uri guy, then.”

“He knows I’m good for whatever you order so don’t pay him. I have the idea he’d have no problem double dipping. Until later then.”

“I still have a problem thinking of Mongolia and the Gobi Desert in the same breath,” Kit said stretching out on the sofa as David put his phone away.”

“You think with your lungs, now?” David said chiding the boy for his wording.

Kit ignored the intrusion into his serious consideration.

“In school we studied about the Gobi with its sand and winds and nomads in tents and huge daily fluctuations in temperatures. We also studied about Mongolia with its mountains and generally rural and medieval way of life where tribal loyalties usually took precedence over the loosely centralized government. I just never juxtaposed the two the way they really are: mountains to the north, desert to the south, poverty stricken nomads herding their cows and goats everywhere.”

“See. There *are* perks to this mission,” David joked.

Kit sat up.

“Speaking of perks, is our evening all booked up?”

“Tell you what,” David began. “Once Uri secures our camels, you can

commandeer his companionship until nine but you need to make sure you get a good night's sleep. I expect the next several days will be exhausting. One other suggestion. Take no more money along than you will need *and* make sure Uri knows that. I don't want you rolled for a few bucks."

"You're implying it would meet with your approval if I were rolled for a lot of bucks."

David stood and stepped toward him. He ruffled the boy's hair the way had done so often when Kit was young. Pulling him to his feet he drew him close.

"You're the most precious thing in the universe to me, Kit. I just don't want anything to happen to you. You'll have to excuse my overprotective instincts. I often find that my image of you is hard put to stretch from that of the innocent, defenseless, diapered, little boy who used ride horsy on my crossed leg, to the fully mature, responsible, sexually primed, young man I know you are. Go and ogle to your heart's content. You do have to understand that I'll never be able to let you leave me without cautioning you to be careful."

"I love you, too. In a four way tie for top billing in my life. Hope you can live with that."

"Love I give freely with no strings attached – no reciprocal requirements. If those I love also feel love for me, it's a wonderful, nonobligatory, bonus. I thank you for your love."

Kit emptied his wallet of all the nonessentials and kept five dollars for an evening on the town.

"Boxers, briefs, or thong?" he asked.

"I figure with you nude, nobody will know. Why's it important?"

"I imagine the disrobing is not done in private."

"I have no idea what kind of undergarments – if any – the local men wear," David said.

"I'm wearing boxers. I'll take some briefs along in my back pocket and I can change in the cab on the way if Uri thinks it best."

"Ah. The tribulations of the teenage voyeur. I guess I've never found myself in a quandary about what I should wear so I would look good taking it off."

Kit grinned again.

"I'm off to locate Uri, then."

"Need a towel?"

"Furnished, according to the brochure."

"Remember, you have no way of knowing just how strong the temptations are going to be as those alluring ladies of the evening try to persuade you to rent their bodies for the night."

"I suppose you're right. That only makes the whole thing more attractive – exciting – you know. I'm eighteen!"

"I know."

Kit was at the door. David wasn't finished.

"Have a *great* time, *don't* be tempted, be *very* careful, and be home by nine. *And*, I love you."

Kit smiled his endearing, full-out smile.

"I'll be careful and believe me if I've not been overwhelmed by my lovely naked Megan, I won't be by the ladies of the evening."

David smiled, knowing the boy had no idea what kinds of powerful, well-practiced, 'charms' he might be called upon to resist.

* * *

"Love is a shallow commodity like pork bellies that one trades hoping to increase his standing with somebody."

Again, it was Ari's way of assuring himself another evening of entertainment with David. They had both just lingered over their good-byes to the girls at the elevator and had returned to their preferred perches in Ari's sitting room.

"You tell the girls you have sex with that you love them?" David said, outrage clear in his tone.

"Of course. Don't tell me you don't."

"No. I'd never do that. It would be a lie. I don't love any of them. I barely even like most of them."

"Funny!"

"What's funny?"

"That you *barely* like them. Apropos, even."

"Are you really missing my point or are you just bating me like usual?"

"Both, I suppose, if I were to be truthful. Our concepts of love are probably polar opposites."

"Big surprise!" David said, finally letting a smile sneak across his face. "Your problem is that you need to first of all differentiate between your feelings about things physical and things personal. You can like female bodies. You can enjoy female bodies. But you *can't* love them. You can like a female's personality. You can like being with a female. If she also likes being with you then you are probably friends – it take two to establish friendship. Only when you have deep, personal feeling of caring about a female, see her as a precious person that you want to protect and care for, and help her have a wonderful life even it that means sacrifices on your part, can you speak of loving her in a romantic way."

David was not finished.

"Then, there is an entirely different sort of love – the kind I have toward other human beings in general. I care for them as important, unique, individuals and I want the very best for each of them. I feel their pain when they hurt and their sorrow when they are bereaved. It has nothing to do with how much I *like* them or even how good or bad a person they may be. It's love for my fellow

man. It has to be the basis of all human relationships. Without it we live like the lower animals and destroy each other as we set out to take advantage of others for personal gain. Big business is rampant with the problem. The lack of such love allows hatred, discrimination, prejudice, the harming of others, taking their possessions, even killing, and warring for selfish, shortsighted, reasons.

“Shortsighted?” Ari asked, clearly intrigued by David’s monologue yet pushing him for clarification.

“An oversimplified example: The human beings of the world split into two huge factions. Maybe over religion, maybe over wealth vs poverty. Maybe over white vs color. The reason is not important for this example. Each hates the other and therefore attempts to kill them off. Eventually one group succeeds.

“Subsequently – humans being the diverse, creative, opinionated creatures that we are – that victorious group splits into two, disagreeing, subgroups; again the reason is unimportant. That it *will* happen is a virtual fact surveying the history of the species. They grow to hate each other over the issue. Eventually one of those groups annihilates the other and on and on and on until just two people are left staring at each other across their swords. One kills the other and the species is doomed.

“That scenario can only happen when there is *not* a universal feeling of mutual love – a feeling of mutual preciousness – among all men. It behooves us each to do everything in our power to spread the love and to educate the masses about how essential it is if the species is to survive *in the long run*.”

“Isn’t that what churches do?” Ari said attempting to lure David into a trap.

“A few of them do it very well,” David went on. “Take the one I was raised in, for example, The Church of the Brethren. You won’t find a more loving group of people on the face of the planet. They give selflessly every day of their lives. They are honest and compassionate and dependable. I’m sure there are others also about which I am just not so intimately knowledgeable. But in general I will agree with you in advance of the point I’m sure you are just itching to make, that church affiliation is not necessarily an indication that one possess and practices love for all humanity. Some churches, of course, preach hatred toward certain groups. And in this Christian country of ours, the worst crimes ever committed were by professed Christians. I’m sure you have the most recent data on theists vs atheists in prison populations.”

“I do have that. I don’t come to these brouhahas unprepared, you know,” Ari said, preening.

“Thus my statement about you undoubtedly having the information.”

Ari flashed a quick smile.

“The *Null Hypothesis* would state there is no difference between the number of theists and atheists in the prison population relative to the percentage of theists and atheists in the general population. Then, statistical tests would be performed comparing the actual numbers to establish if that were true. The

results of a half dozen such studies all agree that the hypothesis is *not* supported. There *is* a difference in numbers of atheists vs theists.

“The interesting thing is that most church going theists would fully expect there to be more atheists in prison than theists. The fact is just the opposite and is true at something greater than the .001 level of confidence, even.”

“Let’s see if I understand that in lay language. It means that the proportion of atheists to god believers in prison is significantly lower than would be predicted from the number in the general population and that there is less than one chance in one thousand that the results could be wrong. In a word, there are way fewer atheists in prison than god believers relative to what would be expected.”

“Right. Just about the highest level of confidence ever established in social measurements,” Ari went on to explain.

“What does the latest data say about the relative numbers of the two groups in the United States?” David asked.

“Sixty-five percent theists and thirty-five percent bottom line, atheists and agnostics. The really interesting and hard to explain finding is that fifteen to twenty percent of people who regularly attend church services say they don’t really believe there is a god.”

David felt some inexplicable need to shield the churches.

“Many churchmen would rush to say in their defense that religion is about saving souls first and only secondarily about improving the human condition here on earth.”

“And atheists would say . . .?”

“Most would feel no need to say anything either to puff themselves up or put others down. Facts are facts for thoughtful men to consider. Those who *would* comment might say that when there is no afterlife to count on for better things, and when there is no god to implore for help, one must, *himself*, take on the task of making this life and this World into the very best, very safest, most mutually helpful and compassionate place it can possibly be. That philosophy does not – cannot – allow for thievery, killing, or other crimes against our fellow men.”

“And to think all that came from your inference that I don’t understand about love,” Ari said.

“Well you *don’t* regardless of where my ramblings may have taken us. Why do you tell a girl you love her while you’re having sex with her?”

“It almost always makes her put herself into it for the better.”

“You tell her you love her so she’ll make *your* sexual experience better?”

“Exactly.”

“And the fact you’re lying to her is of no consideration?”

“Of course not. All’s fair in love, war, and business, haven’t you heard.”

“Heard it. Don’t buy it. Right is not one thing in one part of your life and something entirely different in other parts.”

“You are such a child, Dave. I think your sheltered Indiana upbringing has overprotected you from the basic reality of life.”

“And that ‘basic reality of life’ is what?”

“You take what you want before somebody else gets it.”

“That’s the way of life you advocate?”

“Certainly. There really is no other. If you think there is you’re just ignorant about how things are.”

“So, let me get this straight. You are advocating the very way of life that you contend is the reason mankind should be exterminated.”

“An interesting conundrum, I suppose,” Ari said.

“Conundrum, yes. I’d use some adjective other than ‘interesting’ like, disconcerting, terrifying, absurd, bizarre. Oh! *Interesting!* Those just happen to be the *same* ones I use to describe *you*.”

“And yet you claim to love me.”

“Of course. Your beliefs and the illogic of your thought patterns have nothing to do with the fact that I love you.”

Ari shook his head and spoke.

“All my life I’ve known a few things for sure and one of them is that you have to earn love – plain and simple.”

“I’m so sorry that’s how you had to grow up. Perhaps, I feel even sorrier for the children you will raise in accordance with that premise. Have you learned nothing about love from all the church services you have attended over the years?”

“God loves me and he allowed his son to be slaughtered to prove it to me. See, even God has to prove love. I’ll tell you something else I learned for sure growing up. My father would never have let anybody harm a hair on my head – that’s how he proved his love to me.”

“Except of course that he ordered his servants to beat the hell out of you when you did poorly in your homework.”

“That was because he loved me. He wanted to teach me the value of work and the dishonor of sloth.”

“And because of his loving ways you’ve arrived at manhood an immoral, unethical, deranged man who is determined to kill off his kind – out of love, I’m sure.”

“Love for the full spectrum of species and nature’s Master Plan that cannot be fulfilled because of just *one* of those billions of species. Get rid of *it* and the plan can continue on course. You’re not all that perfect yourself, you know.”

“I can hardly wait to hear.”

“You’re a damned Goody Two Shoes, Dave. You spend your time helping others for no reason that will ever come back and help you. That’s a very poor investment!”

“A world, a neighborhood, even, filled with well adjusted, happy,

productive, self-supporting people makes my life easier – happier, safer, less expensive. The same place populated by maladjusted malcontents, is just the opposite – dangerous, depressing, and terribly expensive in terms of social services and law enforcement. So, it only makes good sense to take good care of others whether motivated out of love or pure selfishness.”

“Okay. I’ll grant that you make sense there and that I hadn’t seen that. I help others be happy and safe and I have a better chance of being happy and safe. The bottom line is still man’s selfish desire for personal pleasure and safety.”

“I’m sure that’s how you see it, Ari.”

“And I’m *just* as sure *you’re* the one who’s really screwed up. Look at you, Dave. You love people, good or bad. You let people take advantage of you. In the service of being honest, you let it be known you’re an atheist within a culture, which because of its religiously based prejudices, will, you know, eventually disenfranchise you. You purport to believe that infidelity and promiscuity both undermine the stability of human society and yet you use my girls daily with apparently no guilt. You preach against opulence and yet you never reject the use of my things that you could never ever afford.”

“Shall I attack your statements one at a time or just admit to myself that you will never be able to understand.”

“I prefer the latter. We should just agree to trade that agreement – recognizing that we will never understand each other, and continue our friendship as it is.”

“You never tie things down with any sort of commitment, Ari. Maybe that’s at the basis of your entire problem. You refuse to commit to the ultimate value of the species to which you belong. Without such a commitment you are free to pillage it, exploit it, or expunge it, with no reason for remorse.”

* * *

“Back so early,” David said seeing it was barely 8:30 as Kit came through the door.

“Uri had a date at nine so I figured it best if I have him see me back here.”

“Your overprotective uncle thinks you acted wisely.”

“My overprotective uncle is probably the reason I did act so wisely. Every time the slightest licentious thought crossed my mind this evening your face popped up.”

David didn’t comment but had been wondering.

“Tell me about the place.”

“Fewer folks there than I had anticipated. There was an interesting sign beside the door on the outside of the building. It said something like, ‘The Muslim who enters here is eternally damned.’ Then right under it was a second, as if it had been put there as an afterthought. It said, ‘All others are merely cleaner, healthier, and purer of mind when they leave’. I guess nudity’s a no-no for the

Muslims in this vicinity.’

“Once inside there was a counter where you paid your dollar. You were handed a small wire basket and you undressed right there and put your clothes in the basket. Then the attendant put it up on a numbered shelf, handed you a corresponding numbered medallion on a chain that you wore around your neck. It was your pass to every room and like a coat check number at a restaurant so you could retrieve your belongings later. Uri urged me to tip an extra dollar up front for ‘property protection’. I did and nothing was taken.

“There was a swimming pool with a track around the outside of the room about eight feet above the pool deck. There was a weight room, an aerobic slash exercise room, a sauna with a cold plunge-pool to jump into after finishing – exhilarating – a poolside café of a sort, and at one end an area that sloped gently toward the pool. It had lots of air mattresses to lounge on while enjoying the view.

“And the no hanky-panky you were promised?”

“The prostitutes sat in a section apparently reserved for them near the entrance. Most of the guys who picked them up just came inside, paid their buck to the attendant, selected a girl, negotiated a price with her – usually a dollar – the girl dressed, and they left. The girls didn’t ever hit on any guy who didn’t approach them. Ground rules I guess. Interestingly, I was not really impacted by them at all. There were no more than four dozen people in the entire place this evening. Twenty one, however, were definitely of the female persuasion.”

He grinned.

“You did more than pant and ogle?”

“Yeah. After the first few minutes during which Uri seemed to feel obliged to give me an organ by organ evaluation of each woman there, we got in some swimming and lifting. Most everybody there was serious about the activities. The only naked people there were the prostitutes. The rest of us were strictly nude. That’s a fascinating new concept for me. Wish you had shared it with me years ago. At the end, Uri insisted on the sauna and cold pool. It seemed to be like a religious act to him. He’s one of those guys you can really enjoy being with but wouldn’t trust as far as you could throw them.”

“His religion?”

“Mother is a local Muslim. Father a here and gone white man from Russia – probably Orthodox Christian though he apparently has no way of being sure of that. He’s not a practicing anything. His girlfriend is Muslim – not very strict in her practice if I can believe one tenth of the exploits Uri related. He has four siblings and as the eldest he is the bread winner – has been since he was ten. They have a two bedroom apartment with electricity and running water, the fact, of which, he is clearly very proud. His monthly rent is less than what our suite goes for a night.”

“All in all, a pretty nice evening, then?” David said, really asking for

verification.

“Yes. Pretty nice. What do you think will happen when I try to open such a place back in North Manford?”

“You have a death wish, Son?”

“But the Brethren are pacifists, Unc!”

“*Fully clothed* pacifists, Neph!”

Kit nodded his head.

“Enough said, I suppose. Wabash is a larger place, anyway. Did you eat yet?”

“Steak and eggs from the anytime breakfast menu. It’s a fun service.”

“I never thought I’d hear you using *fun* as an adjective. You hate that denigration of the language so!”

“May I continue with my story about *fun*?”

“Sure, sounds fun to me – *fun tacious*, even.”

David ignored the word play.

“You call room service, and fifteen minutes later the bell rings by the dumbwaiter. You open the door and there’s your meal.”

“Were the steak and eggs good?”

“Fantastic once I got past thinking about what animal may have given up the steak and what foul the eggs.”

“I’m hungry. Think I’ll give it a try.”

Kit ordered. It arrived. They talked.

“I think I’ve solved the problem of where the statue is,” Kit said.

David gave him a surprised look.

“I approached it like the word puzzles we did in logic class. You know: Seven guys have to use a small boat to cross a lake to escape the forest fire. The boat requires one guy at each of two oars and can only carry three, total, at a time. No guy is allowed to row more than twice. How many trips will it take to get them all to safety and how will they accomplish it?”

“I do remember them. What did you discover when you reconfigured our problem in that way?”

“The statue will be found deep in an ice dome at the very top of the mountain. It will be out of sight – due to the thickness of the ice – and yet will receive the light from the sun and moon every day. This stuff *does* taste pretty good. I imagine the meat is yak and the eggs, crow. I read about it.”

“Nice going! Reasonable! Likely, even. And what was the final vision that made it all fall into place?”

“The most magnificent boob you’ve ever seen. The woman to whom it belonged was reclining on a mattress and drinking a fountain drink loaded with ice. She set the glass on her chest holding it in place by cozying it up between her breasts. That perfect dome. That mass of ice. My desire to pinch and feel deep inside that boob. Viola! The answer.”

“So humanity may be saved because of one stray breast in an isolated corner of the planet, and an eighteen year old’s obsession with boobs.”

“It certainly would seem that way at this point. Time will tell. If I’m wrong I hereby volunteer to study every boob in the country if necessary to find the correct answer.”

“Somewhere that logic course seemed to fail you.”

“Hormones trump logic every time. I believe it was you who made that pronouncement on the occasion of my first solo date without you or mom at the wheel.”

“Let’s look over your pictures of Urga Mountain with an ice dome as our point of interest,” David said moving the conversation back to a topic that held some possibility of being useful.

“One came to mind as I was fantasizing over that magnificent mound of flesh.”

David remained resolute and did not comment. Kit brought up the pictures on the laptop.

“It was the last one I took on our approach in the plane – the closest one. Here it is. Let’s see if it can be enlarged without giving up clarity. . . . Well, a little bit. Look. See what you think before I show you what I had in mind.”

“Here, I imagine. Up close it’s easy to see that the peak is actually made up of several small humps running in a north to south line. I suppose it’s the one in the middle that is slightly higher than the others.”

“Yup. That’s my studied guess. I got back-up as well,” Kit went on. “Let me find the same angle from old shots I culled from the web. Here! It’s almost the same angle. Let me get them up side by side. Okay. What do you see?”

David studied the two pictures. The initial shaking of his head and furrowed brow suddenly evolved to nods and smoothed skin.

“That middle one used to be shorter – still a skinch taller than the other two but definitely shorter than the one you just photographed. And that means . . .”

“Probably that Ari’s crew needed it to be higher for some reason after they finished. Maybe a miscalculation. Maybe just not enough room to bury the toxin tank under the statue without raising the roof so to speak. You suppose it’s really ice or some kind of artificial, ice-looking, dome?”

“Regardless of what’s supporting it all, I’ll bet the outside is genuine ice so as to not attract undue attention from the mountain climbers.”

“Makes good sense,” Kit said. “Nine o’clock and time for beddie-bye. See you at what, four?”

“Yes, four, if you don’t dawdle.”

“I’ll arrange *my* activity schedule. *You* just keep track of *yours*.”

Kit grinned as he stood, bent over his uncle, and planted a good sized kiss on his temple. David reciprocated pulling the boy close for a long moment and

patting his back.

"It's four, Uncle David. Time to rise and shine as the trite, though reassuring, old adage goes. How about more from that breakfast menu? It says the kitchen's open twenty four seven."

"You order for us. I'm going to take a quick shower. No telling when we'll get another. Alex brought our mountain clothes by last evening. I assume you found yours on the chair in your room."

"I did. They look like they'll be hot."

"I made the same comment. He said that by the time we've been on the trail an hour we'll be ready for the long coats he's bring along as well."

"I guess I'll take his word for it," Kit said. "Eat first then dress, okay? We'd suffocate wearing them in here."

"Okay. I'll be with you in a jiff. You can gather our things together."

When David entered the dining room, toweling himself dry, he was met by an agitated Kit.

"The worst possible thing, Uncle David. The strong box with the panels in it is gone."

"Gone? It was on the top shelf in my closet."

"I know. I saw you put it there. When I went to find it in order to take out the panel, the box wasn't there. I searched everywhere in your room. Nada!"

"Let me call Alex and put things on hold," David said. "You contact Uri and see how he may be able to help. Don't sound panicky! Panicky quadruples fees."

"Uri could be the thief."

"I suppose."

Kit dressed and went in search of Uri. David continued to search within the suite. It was nowhere to be found. He spoke aloud to himself.

"I think I may now understand the implication of that sign by the dumbwaiter, which says to keep it locked at all times. I didn't. Since I didn't leave the suite from the time I arrived, it had to have occurred while we were asleep. I find nothing else gone. I suppose a lockbox would seem like a sufficient single item to steal."

The bell rang in the dining room and David went to remove the breakfast noting the device was plenty big enough to transport a small person.

"Drat it! How could I have been so careless? I locked the room door and neurotically checked *it* three times before turning in last night."

He poured a cup of coffee – terrible but hot and vaguely familiar. Kit returned.

"Uri's on it. Says it was probably somebody from the kitchen who came up through the dumb waiter. He figures we didn't heed the warning sign and lock it last night."

"He's right, there. Did he give you any hope?"

"Honestly, no. He may be able to buy the box back for us but he's quite sure that anything of value that was in it will be long gone."

"But, the panels are of no value to anybody but us," David said.

"That would seem right. In that case they may just get tossed or used for fire wood," Kit said succumbing to the worst case scenario.

"Eat," David said. "We need to eat."

"Suddenly no appetite."

"Force it! Our day just got turned topsy-turvy. No telling when we'll get a chance to eat next."

While they ate, David placed a call to Doc.

"We've had a small lock box stolen. I just thought if you have any connections on the street I'd appreciate your using them for us. Has my last name engraved into the bottom – Lawrence."

"I have many contacts through the students. Let me see what I can do?"

David described the box and the contents presenting the panels as art work worth lots of money.

"Get the word out that I'll pay big money to whoever finds them."

They finished breakfast, put the dishes back into the dumbwaiter and locked it with some ceremony. Five o'clock came and went. Six came and went. Then seven, and still there was no word from any source.

At 8:10 the room phone rang. It was the brother from the House of the Living Buddha.

"I just had a strange encounter with a lad who offered to sell me what he contended were genuine Buddhist artifacts. He had two small pieces of wood with carvings. He indicated the image of a Buddha statue on one of them to justify his claim. It was clearly of recent origin so held no interest for us. I dismissed him.

"Then, as I thought back on it, I realized that Buddha could have been a representation of the Open Buddha you came inquiring about yesterday. I'm wondering if you have anything missing."

"The wooden panels are ours and yes they were stolen during the night. They are more valuable than you can possibly imagine. Any clue as to whom the boy is or where we might locate him?"

"None, I'm afraid. Urchins don't frequent our compound. Perhaps one thing. The boy had a large scar across his right cheek – wide, rough, unpleasant looking."

"I certainly appreciate your thoughtfulness in making the call. Thank you."

David related the information to Kit.

"Dollars to doughnuts Uri knows or can find the kid now that we have a description especially if he works in the kitchen. I'll go talk to him."

Kit was again out the door and down the stairs – his youthful impatience

convincing him that he could navigate them faster than waiting for the elevator.

"Uri. You know a boy – a thief – with an ugly scar on his right cheek?"

" Sergio! Yes. Do you suspect him?"

"He just tried to sell our stuff to the attendant at the House of the Living Buddha."

"Give me ten minutes. Don't speak to anyone else about it or he may hear we're looking for him and go into hiding. If he gets into the Ger he can stay out of reach for weeks."

Uri left. Kit returned to the suite and related what he had learned.

"So we wait some more," David said beginning to pace.

Fifteen minutes passed. There was a knock on the door.

"It's Uri and the kid," Kit said looking through the peep hole.

He opened the door and the two entered. Uri handled the boy more roughly than seemed necessary.

"Sergio – the thief. I'm ashamed to say he is my brother. He won't admit it but from the thief's description he has to be the one who stole your box. You have my permission to beat him."

"I'm not interested in beating anybody," David said wincing at the idea. What happened to the box?

"He admits to nothing. He just gets stubborn when I beat him."

"How old is he?" Kit asked.

"Fourteen – almost fifteen."

"Give me two minutes with him alone," Kit said gruffly.

David frowned in his direction.

Kit winked as he grabbed the boy by his belt and shoved him into the dining room. The door slammed behind them.

Several minutes later they returned both wearing smiles. Sergio spoke to his brother in their language. A smile spread over Uri's face. He winked at Kit. David watched feeling himself an outsider.

"You are *very* good, my friend," Uri said. "We will have your box back here in twenty minutes. You have the 'goods' here then."

The boys left and Kit shut the door.

"Goods? What's going on?" David asked clearly bewildered.

"What's the one commodity nobody around here seems to have enough of?"

"That would have to be money."

"Right. Now, what commodity is it that no teenage boy, anywhere, ever thinks he has enough of?"

"You offered him sex?"

"Well, not from me, personally, you understand but I figured it was such a shame to waste Ari's girls."

"So, what's the bottom line here, the one I'm sure I am going to frown

upon?"

"Two hundred cash in local currency and two beautiful prostitutes at his disposal for the next twenty four hours."

"Back home that would be contributing to the sexual delinquency of a minor, you know. You'd go to jail."

"Only the religions really ever enforce such laws here. He doesn't profess to be a Muslim so he should be okay."

"And if he were a Muslim boy?"

"He could be hanged or beheaded. Depends mostly on the family's cleric."

"Ouch! They take their religion seriously."

"It's the same punishment for stealing so at least this way he'd go out happy. You break religious law and you die. I imagine it's a pretty effective program."

"And yet, crime is as high here as in any city in the world," David reminded. "*Far* higher than most!"

"Like you've stated over and over again in your writings, punishment and the fear of it never change underlying *values* and seldom even control *behavior* once the enforcer is out of sight."

David nodded. Kit changed the subject.

"How can we contact the girls?" He asked. "I don't believe they've been here yet."

"Actually they have," David said. "They insisted I take their card in case we change our mind. There's a phone number. Ari would have nailed me and my social conscience to the wall if he'd have ever discovered me condoning something like this."

"Look, I questioned the kid. He said he has sex a dozen times a week, so it's not like we're setting him up with something new – just something more mature and probably safer, and more beautiful, *and* in stereo. Also, I made him promise to use ten bucks to buy condoms."

"And you trust that he will?"

"Hey, I tried."

"Sounds like your social conscience is smarting a bit as well."

"Thanks to you!"

"That pleases me more than you can possibly know."

"Smugness does not become you, Unc."

"But it feels so good deep down inside."

"An old guy's equivalent of an orgasm, I assume."

"You assume *incorrectly*. I'll give Alex a heads up that we may be ready to get started within the hour. I'm going to get dressed. You probably need to change into the mountain gear as well."

First, Kit made the call to Ari's girls.

A few minutes later and sporting their new, khaki, adventure-bound, look, they answered the door together, expecting the boys with the box. It was the girls instead.

Kit had explained the change of clientele on the phone and his offer of a hundred dollars each for their cooperation. It was an easily concluded deal using Ari's money out of David's wallet. The boys arrived almost immediately.

David accepted the box and looked inside. The panels were intact. The boys and the women left together. Kit and David collapsed onto the couch.

"I suggest that from now on we sleep in the same bed and keep the panels between us," Kit said.

David nodded suddenly allowing himself to really consider the horrendous picture of what could have been.

"Considering the recent events, I suppose we better take both panels with us."

"I'd say so," Kit agreed.

The phone rang.

"I'm ready when you are," Alex said. "I'll be the guy sitting beside three camels on the street out front."

"We'll be right there. I assume you can handle three of those beasts?"

"Camels are like teenagers. When it is not required that they be moving they will always be found sitting or reclining."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Backpacks in place, the two left the suite not knowing when they would return. Each privately wondered if this leg of the mission would provide another life threatening, possibly future-ending, encounter.

The camel's single humps were piled high with supplies – a fact that seemed to cause them no concern. Alex had donned a Russian style, fur hat and handed duplicates to David and Kit.

"Keep your head, shoulders and feet warm and the rest of you will be fine up there," he said.

He spoke to the camels and they immediately – well, camels do nothing immediately – *gradually* worked themselves into a standing position snorting and huffing during the process like a weight lifter preparing for a record breaking lift. Viewing them from the side they seemed to have a perennial smile. That was enough to endear them to Kit.

"I see you speak camel," Kit said kidding Alex.

"So will you before I leave you alone with them up there."

"Great! I love new stuff."

Alex handed a rein to each of the others and began walking off down the street. David and Kit followed. The fascinating incongruence of camels and sports cars using the same thoroughfare escaped neither of them.

They had been walking forty minutes by the time they finally left the northern edge of the city behind. Kit had already learned one piece of new camel-related 'stuff' – camels always have the right of way. Whether that was in deference to the old ways or because the animal was just too dumb to stop for traffic, he had not yet determined.

Thirty minutes later they began the climb – gentle, along a relatively smooth, wide, path at the outset. Gradually, it narrowed and became strewn with small rocks, which from time to time could be seen bouncing down the hillside and coming to rest on the hard, sun baked surface of the trail.

As forecast by Doc, dozens of young girls were there exposing all the right parts to entice the male of the species. As Kit passed and eyeballed each one, he nodded and said, "Thank you." David and Alex smiled.

Two hours into the climb Alex called a rest stop. As if on cue both the camels and Kit took seats on the ground. Alex winked at David who

acknowledged the observation with a smile and nod. The exchange escaped the boy who seemed more interested in the massive amount of hair growing out of the Camel's ears.

"Protects the ear canals from blowing, desert, sand," Alex explained noticing Kit's interest.

Kit nodded accepting the explanation as logical then lay back and closed his eyes. His experience at survival camp had taught him to take advantage of every opportunity to rest.

"How long until we reach the top?" David asked.

"Three or four hours depending on how long the lad sleeps."

"I heard that. I'm not sleeping. I'm allowing my body to recuperate."

"Good plan," Alex said. "It's just that I didn't know your body had already *cuperated*."

"That was terrible. I'll have to keep you away from Uncle David. His tendency toward that sort of absurdity is insidiously infectious and has no socially redeeming features."

"The boy speaks top of the line English," Alex noted to David.

"As I recall his first word was 'exquisite!' It was offered when he was two as a appraisal of the little neighbor girl on the occasion of his first bath with her."

During the next two hours the winds picked up and they encountered progressively lower temperatures as they moved higher. At Alex's suggestion they put on their gloves and strapped the bottoms of there pant legs tight around their boots.

It wasn't until the final hour of the journey that they began encountering snow on the ground. The air immediately became colder and the glare required tinted goggles to protect their eyes.

"I'm going to suggest that we establish your camp several hundred meters below the top to protect against the winds which, I understand, can blow at forty knots for days on end up here.

"You pick the spot," David said.

Within a half hour they were arranging things within the base of a tall, narrow, cirque, which provided shelter to the north, west, and south. The camels were tethered to large rocks and the tent was erected. Alex helped them pack snow up three feet against the tent. He said it provided both stability – which Kit interpreted to mean made it less likely they'd be blown back to Kansas – and warmth, which Kit would believe when he experienced it!

It was three o'clock when the three of them, sans camels, began the trek up to the very top of the mountain.

"Bend into the wind or you'll find yourself sliding back down to the city on your can," Alex warned.

At last David called for them to stop. It was at a point from which all three bulges of the peak could be seen as they looked west.

The force of the wind and its noise required them to stand close and yell to each other in order to be heard.

"We want to begin by taking a really close look at that center hump," David told Alex.

Alex nodded, adjusted his goggles, and moved out in its direction; the other two followed.

"Odd," Alex said.

"What?" Kit asked.

Alex pointed at the three humps in order from north to south.

"Old ice, new ice, old ice."

In unison David and Kit threw up their arms as if in celebration. It was exactly what had to be if their theory was to be correct. Alex noted the positive reaction with a smile but would not ask.

"I assume the modified flame throwers you ordered are to be used up here," Alex said, really asking.

David nodded, finding body language less taxing than speaking into the wind which mostly just took his breath away.

"Where are they, by the way?" Kit asked stepping in between the men.

"On their way. They need fuel. No way to bring enough on a couple of camels. So Connie will drop it all in from a helicopter which should be arriving any moment."

"It must be dangerous to fly up here in this wind," Kit said, suddenly sobered. "Will he be all right?"

"Connie could fly a course straight through a hurricane if it were required of him."

"How are they modified?" Kit asked.

"More like big torches," Alex explained. "Won't spew the fuel out, just the flame. Each one is six feet long. The flames have a reach of about five feet beyond that on full power – less than a foot on stand-by."

While they waited, David and Kit approached the middle dome and tried to see inside. Seeing the dilemma, Alex handed them a large flashlight he had been carrying.

"A laser light," he said as if a sufficient explanation.

"More!" Kit said.

"It will penetrate the ice with its focused beam, allowing you to see deeper inside."

Kit took the light and began experimenting – looking one place then another.

"Maybe a tank," he said at last, "but no statue I can see."

David had been looking as well and he agreed with a shrug.

Oddly silent, the helicopter suddenly loomed over the mountain top, its engine noise masked by the roar of the wind.

After a brief exchange of hand signals, the cargo doors opened in the belly of the large craft and a net filled with barrels and crates began its descent to the ground. Alex disengaged it from the cable and Connie flew away, not wanting to fight the controls one second longer than necessary.

"So, what do we have and how do we use it?" Kit said, helping to pull the net aside.

It would take Alex the next twenty minutes to explain, demonstrate, and eventually pass on their use of the devices.

"One suggestion before I leave you two," Alex said.

"If you want your privacy up here, as I assume you do, I suggest we initiate a small snow slide just down the slope from your camp and across the trail. It will keep others out."

"And us trapped up here!" Kit observed with no little emotion fueling his delivery.

Alex smiled.

"The flame throwers?"

The tone had been a question. The effect, a satisfactory answer.

Alex took them back to the point on the trail where such a slide could easily be initiated. He said good-bye, climbed well above the snow bank, and dropped a very small charge of TNT into it.

"That was perfect," Kit said clearly amazed at the man's skill.

Alex waved from his perch above and then disappeared on his way south down the slope. David and Kit went back to camp and rested as they munched sandwiches and drank soup from cans heated on the single burner, propane, stove.

After Kit wrote his name in the snow, the way boys have been writing their names in the snow for centuries, they went back to the top to plan strategy.

They wore the lapel fastened communicators to facilitate conversation.

"Can't see into the old ice domes as easily as this new one," Kit said after accessing the situation.

"And, as far as I can tell, we can't see the statue in any of them," David said.

"It's confusing," Kit said. "The clues included this mountain and that Open Buddha. Was the Buddha included just to confirm this mountain location as suggested by the myth or will it actually play a part in the final settlement?"

"On the carving there is that slot in the Buddha's lower stomach area, just like the other ones that have, up to now, indicated a place for the panel," David said trying to sort it out.

"In Wellington it was a two phase panel dealie, remember. Maybe it will be something like that here."

"What do we believe we know?" David said trying to summarize. "We know the Open Buddha lore places that statue up here somewhere and your idea

makes this middle dome the most likely spot. We know the top of this mountain would be an ideal place from which to launch the toxin. We know that middle dome is new ice suggesting the old dome was removed and replaced. We know another expedition was here about a year ago expressing interest in the Open Buddha. Due to the nature of our mission we have every reason to think those men were Ari's people here to plant the bomb and toxin tanks. Anything else?"

"That's pretty much it," Kit agreed nodding. "Maybe *one* thing more. The statue is made from solid rock so it shouldn't be affected by the heat of the flame throwers. Not sure how the toxin tanks might react although they have clearly been designed to stand extremely low temperatures."

"A possible problem," David said. "If the Statue we find is capable of accepting the panel, then it's probably *not* the original statue and we can't count on the fact that it will withstand the punishment our flame throwers will inflict on it."

"Good thinking, Holmes."

"Bring that metal detector up here from the tent, Kit. Let's see what it tells us about what may lurk beneath these ice domes."

He was back in a few minutes. David had continued to investigate with Alex's laser light. By the time Kit returned, David had formulated a new approach.

"I think we may have been using this light wrong. You take the light and stay here with it, shining it back and forth at several depths starting across the bottom. I'll go around to the other side and see if any silhouettes or shadows are cast."

"Excellent. When we try to follow the beam to see what it illuminates we get so much reflection that we really can't see much. Maybe using it as a backlight will show us something."

"That's exactly the idea," David said positioning himself on the opposite side of the dome. "Okay. Let's see what I can see. . . . Nothing. Not even the light. Raise it up to a higher plane. . . . Good! Yes at that level I see the light."

"So, there is something at the lower level that's blocking the light from coming through."

"Like a huge metal tank, perhaps?" David said.

"Like that, yes. Let me do a sweep with the metal detector."

"A massive metal something down there. Too huge to show up on the outline scanner. It seems to occupy the middle two thirds of the dome. That leaves ice that's maybe two or three feet deep all around it."

"See what that thing tells you about the dome to the south," David suggested.

Kit was on it with no comment for a long time.

"I got something. Not very deep. Like a string of metal . . . parts. Way too small to make sense of them on the outline scanner. Like a jumble of metal

pieces and maybe a metal coil of some kind."

"I'll bet its the manufactured Buddha with electronic guts – all ready to accept the panel," David said leaping to a hope driven conclusion.

"You sound so certain based on such shaky evidence," Kit pointed out."

"I'll give you one more educated guess, Kit. I'll bet there is a small tunnel cut into the old ice through which the Buddha was deposited down there. If we find the new ice cylinder that was used to fill it, we've got one of your bingos."

Kit laid down the detector and began to circle the dome shining the light horizontally, through the mass of ice.

"I'm betting right down through the center from the top. This old ice sets up more of a barrier for the light than the new ice does. Maybe due to years of melting and refreezing collecting the coal pollutants. Regardless of why, the very center of this dome – about four feet of it – doesn't seem to conform to that. If I can get up on top I can verify it."

He hooked the laser light to his utility belt and worked his way toward the top. The dome was no more than fifteen feet high, one reason it had not stood out as a prominent landmark on the early photographs they had studied.

At the top Kit bellied down and wiped away several inches of recent snow.

"We have lift off, Uncle David. A circular column of new ice about a meter wide. It's so clear I can make out the top view of what has to be the Buddha down below. Now, how do we get to it without damaging it? If, like you suppose, it's made of a substance or substances that might be damaged by flame we can't just go after the ice that way. Maybe we can go ahead and get rid of most of it though, to within a few feet, say."

"Yes. Something like that," David said.

Kit continued thinking out loud.

"The problem is that if we just melt the new ice column down the center we'll end up with a column of water standing there so our Buddha will still be untouchable."

"Think outside the ice cube, Kit. I really want us to get to that statue first. As you indicated, back in Wellington we needed that fireplace before we could access the final objective."

"Outside the ice cube – very clever, Unc. Well, we could boil away the water in the column with the heat of the flames. That would take forever and probably just melt the old ice on both side of the column thereby making even more water. We could cut a narrow slice out to one side of the column as we go down in order to let the water leak out. Again a long time and a lot of work, leaving a huge sheet of ice on the ground.

"Got it, just like you knew I would," Kit said physically puffing himself up and for some reason flapping the wings he formed by stuffing his thumbs into his armpits. Before all was said and done it became a formidable Banty Rooster strut there atop the dome of ice.

"Do you share this with me or is it being reserved for your flock of hens?"

Kit smiled and stopped, satisfied he had established himself as King of the Moment.

"With the flame thrower on the lowest possible setting – standby I think Alex called it – we position it so we can burn a small, round, hole – a channel – through the bottom of the hump in as far as the column of new ice. It'll be like the hole that runs through the center of a drain pipe. Looks like it will intersect with the column of new ice about a foot above where I calculate the Buddha is sitting. It will eventually become the drain hole. Then we go up top and melt the core of new ice. Since the new ice melts faster than the old ice it will mostly just be the clear ice core that melts. As the water sitting in the top of the hole boils, it will melt the ice in the core below it until it's eventually melted all the way down to the level of the drain. Then whoosh! Out it all flows. Working the flame down from above, we can widen the area just above the statue making room to work. Then I can go down into the hole and chisel out the statue."

"It should work. Okay. That, however, sounds like a job that will take many hours. It's now going on six o'clock. At night the flame throwers just might draw unwanted attention to us up here. We also need to expose the tank, so let's see how much of the central ice dome we can melt away from the tank before sundown. Then we can begin on the Buddha hole with first light in the morning."

It was agreed with a nod.

"Better mark about where we think the top of the tank is," David said. "When we get it melted down close to that point we'll need to be very careful so as to not overheat the tank."

That done they began firing the top of the middle dome. They were both amazed at how much time it took to melt the ice. One unexpected problem was that as the water flowed away down the side of the dome it tended to refreeze and stick, thickening the lower part of the dome.

Kit devised an ingenious method in which he followed the melt away water down the dome with the flame so it couldn't refreeze. It took extra time but it worked well and by sundown they had achieved nearly a quarter of their goal.

They gathered their equipment and stowed it all for the night back at the campsite. With sunset the temperature plummeted and the winds swirled with a ferocity that tumbled small stones along the ground. They broke out a bail of grasses for the camels and spread it within easy reach of where they were sitting well back in the protected area.

They secured themselves inside the tent, lit the propane light, and made supper. In no time it was boxer shorts warm as Kit was soon to demonstrate. Rest was welcomed when finally it was time to recline on the sleeping bags. Being cushioned by air mattresses, it hardly felt like they were roughing it. Neither lingered over wakefulness long enough to really consider it.

For breakfast-in-a-can it really wasn't all that bad, Kit decided. His alarm had run at five. He had dressed and gone outside to tend to the camels. Alex said they could go days without food. Kit figured he *could* also but wouldn't enjoy it so he shook the bales free of snow and spread more of the grasses.

Back inside David had dressed and eaten and was ready to meet the challenges of the day. He exited the tent where he was greeted by Kit.

"So, what's the plan?"

"You take care of the Buddha dome as per the strategy you laid out yesterday afternoon. I'll continue to melt the middle dome down to the tank."

David handed Kit a set of sharp cleats that strapped onto the soles of shoes.

"We'll be laying down ice all over the place up there today. I figure we'll need these to keep us from slipping around."

With cleats attached they gathered their gear, left the fully indifferent camels munching, and headed on up the slope. Things were as they had left them. Without any real conversation each went about his business. The wind, which would gradually pick up as the day wore on, gentled the snow from place to place for apparently no reason other than to prove it could.

Within the first fifteen minutes Kit had completed the drain hole. He then went up top and began melting the column of new ice. It was an odd sight, the water boiling there in its frozen cauldron. He beckoned David to come and look. It was a sight Kit recognized neither of them would ever see again; he wondered if anyone else ever had.

David returned to his task. His progress slowed as he reached wider and wider portions of the dome. He kept the drainage sloping down hill to the west, away from the area in which they had placed the supplies and fuel.

The sun rose and about the time it was overhead, Kit pronounced the second phase of his task complete. Water poured from the drain hole emptying the column. He had not anticipated one problem. As the water flowed through the drain hole, it began to freeze around the circumference and the flow became smaller and smaller. Eventually, however, the last of it dribbled its way out the end of the opening and onto the ice slab, which formed quickly once the water spread thin.

He then inserted the flame thrower into the column at an angle from above and carefully carved out a six by six foot cave just above the statue. It would give him room to work as he chiseled his way down around the Buddha. The melt off also managed to drip its way through the drain and soon the floor was dry and ready for occupancy.

Kit called David to his side.

"I suppose a rope to climb in and out, don't you?"

David nodded.

"Need something strong to put across the top of the hole here to tie it too."
"One of the poles from the camel packs?" Kit suggested.
"Why not use several just to make sure it's strong enough."
Kit nodded and went back to the camp to get them and the rope. While he was gone David's cell rang.
"David, here."
"Luxuriating up there at Spa Uрга?" came Alex's voice.
"Strictly boxer and T-shirt weather up here. What can I do for you or did you just call to make sure we didn't freeze to death last night?"
"Mostly the latter. Also wondered if you needed me to drop in for any reason."
"So far we have everything under control. One question, though."
"What's that?"
"Can camels be overfed? Kit just may be taking *too* good a care of them."
"Camels are smarter than humans when it comes to eating. *They* always stop when they should."
"Are we supposed to exercise them? So far they've just been sitting there like three bumps."
"They will be fine. Camels have been taking good care of themselves for about forty million years."
"Okay, then."
"Any idea how long you'll be up there?"
"Not really. If all goes well, and I'd not count on that, we could have things wrapped up late this afternoon."
"I'm as close as the phone."
"Thanks for the call."
"Who was that?" Kit asked as he returned.
"Alex who seems to have turned into our overprotective baby sitter."
Kit grinned.
"He's a really good man."
David nodded.
"Let's get this thing rigged and you down inside. I'll stick around until we're sure everything is working. It will be iceberg cold down there, you realize."
"Brought a Sterno can. Figured if a single candle can heat a whole igloo it just might do the same for my cave."
Kit was soon down the rope with hammers, chisels, crowbars and a small propane torch.
"So? David called down into the hole after what he figured had been too much time without comment."
"Comfy. Got the Sterno going. I can actually see the statue right under the center of the floor here. Down less than a foot."
"Cut that pretty close, huh?"

"No. I'd rather say planned it perfectly."

"I'll try to call you on your communicator," David said. "I'll feel better knowing you can reach me when I'm not right here."

David slid off the hump and stood below. The communicator came to life with Kit's voice.

"Room service? I'll take a steak and baked potato served by a scantily clad virgin."

"Later," David said content they had a reliable line of communication.

He returned to the job of melting down the middle hump. He had to refuel about every twenty minutes which gave him a break of a kind. The small of his back was sore from holding the heavy device.

At 1:00 his communicator crackled.

"Come see what I got here, Unc. Then, I need to feed my starving adolescentness."

David peered down into the hole. Kit had separated the statue from the ice on all sides.

"Can you wobble it?" David asked.

"Didn't know if I should."

"Have to in order to get it out."

"We hadn't talked about that specifically – what we were going to do with it once we got it free."

"Give a gently try. See if it will tip in some direction."

"Tips in all directions. Shall I pull it up out of its hole?"

"Yes. Go ahead."

Kit looked up into his uncle's face.

"Love you, Uncle David."

"Love you, too, Kit."

It had been one those *just-in-case-something-terrible-happens-here* goodbyes.

"Got it up here beside me. It has a wire coming out the bottom. It was sitting on a coil of wire – lots of spare wire – like so we can move it from place to place. The other end of the wire runs down into the ice below."

"How many feet of wire would you estimate?"

"Let's see; twenty two coilings with a twelve inch diameter. That makes a single circumference about thirty seven inches times twenty two equals 829 inches or about 69 feet – 23 yards."

"So there is plenty of wire to bring it out here."

"With a little luck we can sit it on the ground out there. It has the slot we need with the tongue and the grooves and everything. That's all behind what must be a waterproof, transparent, plastic cover. No lights, however."

"Can you attach it to the climb rope so I can pull it out?"

"Through the arm openings and across the back and chest. . . . There. . .

. It's ready for you. Be really careful so it doesn't sway or twirl and bang against the sides of the hole on the way up."

David had not needed that caution but at least they were on the same page. Kit steadied it with the trailing wire. The ascent was slow and eventually successful. David took it down to the safety of the flat ground beside the hump. He began examining it.

"Do I get the rope back," came Kit's voice over the communicator, "Or is it just going to be me and a spent Sterno can down here for eternity."

"Sorry. Be right there. This thing is fascinating."

Soon, Kit had joined him. The Buddha was two feet tall and sat on a base that was four inches thick and eighteen inches in diameter. It appeared to have been molded from some artificial, relatively soft, waterproofed material that closely resembled limestone in finish. Tipping it onto its back a circular opening became evident on the underside of the base. It had been closed with a round insert and was locked.

"Like the bottom of a kid's bank," Kit said. "Inside, instead of pennies and nickels are the guts of the turn off device."

"Question," David said righting the statue and stepping back. "Do we merely insert the panel and put the whole thing back or do we need to go on and uncover the toxin tank?"

"Without seeing those lights change from green to white, how will we know we've defused it?"

"I understand. Was actually asking myself the same question. So, guess after lunch we continue the melt down of the middle hump in search of those lights at its base."

"How about I chisel out a little cave like shelf here on hump one to keep the statue in until we need it again?" Kit asked.

"Yes. Excellent. Before lunch, I'd say. Protecting it is job one right now."

They worked together and fifteen minutes later had a safe haven dug into the ice. They lifted it onto the shelf and covered it with a small, black, tarp held in place with spikes hammered into the old ice covering of the dome.

"Alex seems to really have a knack for knowing what things to pack for an outing like this, doesn't he," Kit said as he pounded the final nail in place.

"I think he's Ari's way of leveling the playing field a bit. Most everything has been stacked against us – except Alex and Connie."

Back inside the tent they unzipped their thick, padded tops and slipped out there arms while they ate. Kit passed out lunch.

"Lunch-in-a-can – *three* cans, to be exact. One marked, *meal*; one, *drink*; and one *dessert*."

"You did great this morning, Kit."

"Thanks. That thing about one percent inspiration and ninety nine percent perspiration seems pretty accurate. Probably why idea men sit behind desks

paying other guys to sweat it out in the trenches."

"With Ari as example number one?"

Kit nodded.

David's phone rang.

"David here."

"Alex here. Connie's been keeping a close watch on the weather. There's a huge front moving south across Siberia. It's filled with lots of moisture. When it pushes up the north slope of your mountain you can count on getting blanketed with several feet of snow – maybe six or eight. Looks like wet snow that will freeze on contact. That area could be under a huge layer of ice by this time tomorrow. Do you want to come down?"

"We're at a point of no return up here. Have to stay. Keep us posted!"

"I will. I don't like anything about your plan, however. If something happens and you get caught, head for the tent. Fill a flame thrower and have it inside with you. You might have to melt your way out."

"We will hurry. I assume there can't be a helicopter rescue in that kind of snow."

"You're right. No chance once the blizzard begins."

"Will we be able to see it coming?"

"Yes. It'll look like a huge black cliff moving toward you – about half as tall as the mountain and perhaps a hundred miles wide. You'll be looking down on it for quite a while."

"You paint lovely word pictures, Alex."

"My elocution teacher would be so proud to hear that. You guys be careful. Keep your eyes on the north."

Kit had kept his ear close to the phone and understood the situation.

"I got one idea. Not much of one."

"Let's hear it! Eat while you talk. We're suddenly in even more of a hurry."

"We can make an educated guess as to which side of the tank the light box will be and then both of us work to melt down that side. If we've guessed right we may be able to beat the storm. If we've guessed wrong we won't really be any worse off than we are now."

"Do you have a hunch?"

"Yes. The three humps run into each other – north to south sides. That would make it difficult – cramped – to work low in the ice between them. My guess is, then, what we're going to need, will be either on the east or west."

"The computer has removed two of the four possible answers. Would you like to phone a friend or ask the audience?"

"You're a *million* laughs, David. Now it's your turn."

"Pragmatically I choose the east side. I've made a massive ice slide to the west."

"I like pragmatic. Ready! Let's hit it."

The view to the north had already begun to change. A low band of darkness hung close to the horizon. They knew as it neared its full dimensions would become more apparent.

They fired up the flame throwers and went to work. Each foot they cleared left even more to remove at the next, wider layer.

"Only a couple more feet 'til we're down to the top of the tank." Kit noted. "Then how will we proceed?"

"Precisely! That's how we must proceed. Get just close enough with flame so the ice melts away without heating the tank. It will call for the kind of patience you don't usually possess."

"I'll just shift it into mature drive."

"Didn't know you had that."

"And why would I reveal that so long as I can continue to get away with being immature for the purposes of coddling and spoilage?"

"I assume that was rhetorical."

"As I assume *that was*, also."

They both shifted into a cautious mode and an hour later the top of the tank – well the east half of it – had been uncovered. They continued with care. The process speeded up rapidly once they got down to the place where the tank, rather than ice, was occupying most of the space inside the hump.

"That wall of snow out there seems to have moved half way here from wherever it was when we first saw it," Kit said.

David took note with a quick glance to the north.

They continued their task and were soon near ground level.

"I don't see anything down there glowing green, Uncle David. I'd think that we'd see a green glow if the light was there, wouldn't we?"

"I agree. Looks like old man Pragmatism led us astray this time. Go just a little deeper and see if you can find the base like those the other tanks have been anchored to."

"The base is here. Just no lights. It is possible, of course, that there *are* no lights this time."

"I'm going to doubt that, knowing Ari's compulsive tendencies. Let's move around to the other side."

"I need to refuel," Kit said.

"I will, too, before moving over there."

"You've created a super toboggan run here, Uncle David. Not much as a working surface, though. How about cutting in some ledges to stand on, and, yes, consider that rhetorical."

By two o'clock the snow wall had drawn close. Its top remained well below the height at which they stood on the mountain. According to Alex that would change in a hurry once it came along side. Pausing to look down on it, the

storm's dimensions suddenly became clear; it was a boiling, dark, mass stretching all the way to the horizon.

They were still not down to the top of the tank on the west side.

"What do you suppose might happen if we'd just melt our way into it across the bottom and slice out a section so we could slip in there and take a look along the base?"

"I think it would risk a catastrophe – specifically, being buried under ten tons of ice if it gave way."

"That would seem to be a good enough reason not to go with that plan. You know what we should we have done, don't you?"

"Clearly I don't," David said managing a smile.

"We should have come up here last night in the dark and looked for the green glow."

"That certainly would have held promise of helping."

"Your kind way of telling me that my Monday morning quarterbacking is not being helpful."

"Something like that."

"Here's something that should be helpful."

Kit pulled out two granola bars from a zippered pocket.

"Now *that's* helpful," David said with a smile."

They took time to unwrap them but kept working as they munched. Although the frequency of northward glances became more frequent, neither mentioned the gradually increasing wind as it swirled the icy snow from the ground into short, fat, biting, eddies.

The wind deflected the flames in irregular ways making it difficult to keep them in contact with the ice. Progress slowed. The first new snow arrived at three o'clock. It was difficult to tell if it was old snow being blown up hill or a new offering from the dark bank of clouds beginning to scale the peak.

By four, they were experiencing a full blown blizzard – not unfamiliar to two men from northern Indiana. Kit resisted the grand temptation to playfully turn the falling flakes into rain drops with his flame.

They turned on their communicators as the roar of the wind reached the point where they could no longer hear each other over the ten foot distance between them. Snow began to accumulate on the top of the tank. An occasional, quick, sweep with the flame handled that for the time being.

By four-thirty they were exhausted but dared not stop. They had to fight the wind to maintain their balance. Large pieces of ice flew up from the mountain side ricocheting here and there. Some hit them, occasionally knocking them to the ground.

"I'm down to the base over here," Kit yelled into his communicator.

"I'll be there, too, in five minutes," David replied. "See anything familiar?"

"Not over here. If it's not there, we once again miscalculated and will have

to attack the north and south faces of the dome."

Five minutes passed. Kit had made his way to David's side. He knelt down to see what he could see. The snow was so thick he had to get his face to within a few inches of the base and then move himself from right to left.

Eventually he stood and shook his head.

"There's just nothing like we are used to down there, David. What's Plan 'B'?"

"We seem to be beyond that and are now ruminating somewhere in the middle of the alphabet. Let's go back to the tent and do a rethink on this."

"Sitting in the tent isn't finding those lights," Kit pointed out noting the rapidly collapsing time line.

"Collapsing from exhaustion up here isn't either."

"You made your point."

"Before we leave let's make sure the tarp is well secured over the little niche we carved out for the statue," David said.

Kit nodded then added, "And take the third, fully fueled, flame thrower back to the tent like Alex said."

"You fix that and I'll tend to the tarp," David said.

Suddenly the blizzard was upon them ten fold. Neither could see two feet through the wall of swirling snow. Kit's communicator was blown from his lapel and immediately buried.

"Kit! Come in Kit!"

Not knowing what had happened, David continued to try and reach the boy. He took several steps in his direction then thought better of it.

'He'll head for the tent if he can't get through to me,' he thought.

The problem would be finding the tent. David held his wrist-worn, global positioning device close to his eyes and requested a course back to the tent where the main communication unit was set up. The map appeared. With all of the suggested landmarks hidden in the snow, he did his best to estimate the direction of the path.

Ten feet from where he figured he should come upon the tent something ran into him and knocked him to the ground. A camel? A Grizzly? A Yeti?

CHAPTER NINETEEN

It didn't spit or sit on him so he figured it wasn't a camel. It didn't growl or tear at his flesh so it probably wasn't a bear. Just how a Yeti might react, David couldn't figure.

Something grabbed him at the hips and pawed its way up toward his face.

"Dr. Livingston, I presume?" came Kit's voice as they lay there nose to nose.

"Close enough young loved one. My goodness it's wonderful to see you, even if the draining of your nose onto mine does dampen the reunion just a skoosh."

"I figure the tent's some ten feet to our right, middle, right," Kit said.

"Interestingly, I do believe I understand what you're saying."

Kit gave David a hand up and not letting go they cautiously walked right, middle, right.

"Found it," David called.

They were soon inside.

"I better go check on the camels," Kit said.

"I'd tell you I'm sure they're fine but that wouldn't keep you here, would it?"

"You know me well. I'll tie one end of this coil of rope around my waist so I can't lose the tent. Be back in a jiff. By the way, the blizzard confiscated my communicator up there."

"I figured. We have spares here. Go and come right back. We got other things to do."

Five minutes later he had returned. The tent flap was re-zipped and he was ready to sit, eat, and plan.

"I love a camel's disposition," he said turning to sit and remove his gloves.

"They're sitting out there munching on hay as if they were in the bloody Bahamas!"

It was an abrupt change of topic.

"I found the lights," David said.

"You found the lights?"

"Yes. Perhaps that's why I just said, 'I found the lights!'."

"But where. How? Give!"

"Throttle your prattle and I will. When I went to check on the tarp I thought I noticed a halo peeking out from around it. I lifted one corner and there it was. A green glow coming from the inside of the statues torso."

"But why didn't I see it? I worked around that sucker for more than two hours."

"Can't be sure. It may only be visible in the dark – and it got pitch-black dark out there all of a sudden."

"Okay. *Why* may not be important anyway," Kit began. "What's your interpretation?"

"The lights were inside the Buddha all the time, of course, just waiting for the inserted panel to switch the green to clear."

"Diabolical, in a way," Kit said clearly disappointed in Ari. "He changed the rules."

"You can vent later. Right now I think we need to get this panel up there and turn that thing off before the blizzard destroys our only hope, here."

"So, it's break out more rope time, I guess," Kit said.

"I've been thinking that this green, plastic, cord should work. The spool says it's 250 pound test and that there is nearly a half mile of it. If we put the flame thrower across the door at the tent floor and attach the chord to it, then zip the flap closed to the floor, it should stay stable enough to be our anchor, wouldn't you think?"

"I would. I got the spare communicator. Let's get to it. At this rate the tent may be covered by the time we return."

Tied together and trailing the cord, David took the lead following his GPD. The twenty minutes it took to reach the summit seemed an eternity. Then there were a few more minutes of blind staggering around to locate the tarp. The glow was there. Their hearts raced. The snow swirled. The world atop that mountain was black as night.

"It's like being inside a tornado that just demolished a razorblade factory," Kit said pulling his hood forward and his black fur hat low around his ears.

"Get down on your knees, Kit. We'll unroll the tarp up just enough for you squeeze inside. Get your flashlight ready. Once you're in place I'll slip the panel to you and you insert it. Then turn off your light and make certain the green light goes off and the white one comes on."

"Got it. I'm ready. Let's do it."

The process took some time as the blizzard fought against every ounce of effort they expended. At last David saw Kit's flashlight go off. He held his breath and bent close.

"Click!" Kit shouted into his communicator, thinking David would not be able to hear.

. . . "Twinkling!"

. . . "Green off!"

. . . "White on!"

. . . "Panel secured!"

. . . "Wet pants!"

"Me, too," David said, well, figuratively at least."

Kit was immediately out from under the tarp helping to spike it back in place. Against the tarp, they built a hard packed wall of snow high enough to cover and protect the little cave behind the covering.

"Do we put it back where it was, eventually?" Kit asked.

"I imagine so. Depends on 'stuff'," David said wasting a smile and a wink into the darkness. "Let's get back to the tent, now. Need to let Ari know we're doing fine."

"Is *that* what we're doing? I was wondering. Think I'd rather not ever have to be doing *just so-so*, then."

It was a long, strong, embrace that followed there in the bitter, swirling, darkness of that mountain top.

They checked on the camels as they approached the tent, at that point a mound of snow some ten feet tall.

"Gold, here, likes to be chucked under his chin. Frankincense is more a behind the ears guy. Muir's sort of standoffish but she'll let me lay my face close to hers."

"You named them Gold, Frankincense and Muir?"

"Got better?"

"Didn't know names were required. Just assumed they came fully pedigreed."

It took a few minutes to paw away enough snow so the door flap could be unzipped. Once inside Kit lit the propane light that doubled as the only source of heat they needed. They undressed, eager to be rid of the heavy, confining, muscle busting – though admittedly warm – garb Alex had provided.

"Food!" Kit announced looking through the store of supplies. "Looks like a choice between Meal Mexican or Meal Steak Tips. I'm personally going to have one of each."

"Steak Tips for me. One Mexican Methane generator in here should be more than enough tonight."

A memory crossed Kits mind.

"When I was nine or so and I'd have sleepovers, we'd have farting contests. You ever do that?"

"Was I once a nine year old boy? I'll even bet we went you one better. We'd light them and watch them burn. Resembled a flame thrower now that I think back on it."

"Ouch!"

"We used preventative measures that I will go into at some other time if you continue to have this infatuation. Let me just say it involved straws and the generous application of shaving soap as a protective layer around the potentially affected area."

"Gross!"

"Yes. But remember, for nine year old boys, gross is wonderful."

"It's interesting how we tend to forget things like that," Kit said acknowledging the truth in what his uncle had just related.

"You want to call Alex and tell him we'll be ready to start down by mid-morning?" David said.

"Sure. What's the plan for the a.m.?"

"Weather permitting, we'll redeposit the statue to its original spot, refill the column with ice, make sure the blizzard effectively covered up the tank, pack up, and leave."

"And we refill the column with ice, how? We have no water up here."

"Think, Grasshopper. I believe you could have solved this one well before that logic class."

Kit frowned. Kit smiled. Kit spoke.

"Water, water, everywhere and every drop a flake."

"You got it."

"Problem. That column will be filled with snow."

"Again, Grasshopper."

"Guess my mind is fried – or, more likely frozen. We melt the snow. What if the statue isn't water proof? How do we get the water out of its resting place below the drain hole?"

David sat silently. Kit eventually spoke.

"Ah! Boy with fried brain have thought. Since it had to have been covered with water originally so it could freeze into that column, it had to be waterproof."

David nodded.

"Okay, then," Kit said suddenly becoming enthusiastic about the problem. Here's what we do. We plug the drain – assuming it has not already frozen shut, which I'm sure it has, then melt the snow in the column. That wet snow is probably five or six inches to the inch of water after it's melted. So, we'll need to find a way of adding ten or so feet of water to fill the rest of the column."

"One way would just be to melt several feet around the top of the opening until the rest of it floods," David suggested. "The depression left at the top will soon fill with snow."

"Okay, then, we have our plan. Let's get some sleep. I'll call Alex first."

"Al, my man. Kit, mountain climber and camel handler *par excellence* here."

"So far, at least, it would seem that way. What's up?"

"We'll be ready to move down the hill by mid-morning if the weather cooperates. Gold, Frankincense, and Muir are doing well. One problem. Need to clear that snow slide away so we can all make our ways down the mountain."

"I'll clear it like I made it. Expect to here some rumbling about dawn. The blizzard has stalled here but will have blown itself out by sunup. It was a rare event you've witnessed. Such a storm only moves this far south during the

summer once in eighty years."

"I feel so privileged to have been a part of it. One thing I don't understand. How will you get up here through the storm by dawn? Helicopter?"

"Can you keep a secret?"

"Usually, unless it's something really juicy and reputation tarnishing about a girl back home."

"I prevaricated about going back down to the hotel. I've been camping out just down the trail from the snow slide. Figured I just wanted to stick close in case."

"You're a good man, Alex. Thanks. You're safe and sound, I guess. You had so few supplies with you."

"Made an igloo. Gathered enough wood to keep a stick fire going. *Toasty warm* inside, as I believe you rural Americans say. Really, it's been like a great vacation for me. I'm fond of Connie, you know, but he just won't shut up."

"The same Connie who hasn't managed two dozen words in my direction the entire trip?"

"Yes. How do you suppose you can account for that? See you in about ten hours. Over and out."

"The *scoundre!*"

"You're referring, of course, to the '*good man*' as you've been calling him?"

"I'll never get to sleep now, wondering about why Connie won't talk to me."

"You're really going to bite on that? He's pulling your chain, you know."

"I know, but still I'll think it to death all night."

Kit lay back on his sleeping bag hands folded across his chest and was snoring with the Sandman sixty seconds later.

"Now *that's* the way to worry," David said aloud but to himself as he spread a blanket and tucked his precious companion underneath.

It was the muffled rumbling and the instant of jolting earth that awakened David the next morning. Kit had either failed to set the alarm or they had both been sleeping too hard to hear it.

"It's morning, son," David said, reaching over and shaking Kit.

"It's bound to still be the middle of the night somewhere. Let's pretend we're there for another two hours."

"The lad's a clown even when mostly asleep," David said snatching the blanket and walking two fingers up the boy's side toward the tickle zone."

"Okay. Got the message."

He sat up cross-legged and did his morning stretch and scratch.

"I'll sort of miss this place, you know," He said looking around.

"For how many seconds?" David asked, smiling.

The smile was returned as Kit put on a shiver and reached for his long johns.

"Didn't you even hear Alex's explosion a few minutes ago?" David asked.

"When you're laying in bed close to a naked lady a guy tends to overlook such things or interpret them differently."

"Good dreams, huh?"

"I have determined that such dreams are inversely proportional to the frequency of . . . dawdling, and believe me there's been *no* opportunity for dawdling since we began the climb yesterday, or was it the day before. Time flies when you're marooned inside the blizzard of the century."

"Two days ago. This is day three. Grub, then up the mountain for the last time."

"By any miracle is anybody still alive in there?" Came Alex's voice to the accompaniment of the unzipping of the door flap.

"Nobody home," Kit said, feigning a yell.

"Grub time in here," David said. "Come and join us."

"I've eaten. You indicated you still needed a few hours up here this morning."

"One final task up top," David explained. "Hard to say how long it will take, since it's never before been done in the entire history of man."

"I'll break camp and load the camels – Gold, Frankincense, and Muir. Can't imagine how you guessed their names, Kit"

"Really!" Kit asked, clearly excited and amazed.

"Of course not! They all respond to, 'Umph', so that's what I've been calling them. There should be a little whisk broom in a pocket of the tent over there."

"Yes. Used it to comb my hair," Kit said.

"I'll use it to brush the snow from the camel's fur. Camels tend to keep their body temperature a number of degrees below the surrounding temperature. They'll need to heat themselves up to have what it takes to carry their loads."

"Fascinating stuff I've learned about camels," Kit said.

"If you two scholars can take a recess from *Dromedary 101*, Kit and I need to get back to work."

"Will I need a hall pass?" Kit asked breaking into hysterical laughter.

David and Alex shook their heads and exchanged a smile.

At the peak, snow – no longer a blizzard but still falling in swirling eddies – was several feet deep. Kit forged a path with the flamethrower. They removed the snow wall from in front of the Buddha. Kit slipped back under the tarp to make sure it was still intact.

"Steady clear light," he said pulling out.

"Great! Now let's take a look at the drain hole."

"It's buried under all that snow. Let me melt it away."

The snow had soon been dispatched.

"The hole is frozen solid," Kit reported, crouched close.

"Good! Up top then to assess the situation there," David said.

Kit began the climb – an arduous task considering the large amount of snow he had to remove ahead of him. He was finally at the top."

"Just as we predicted. I'll begin the melt down of the snow in the core."

"I'll get the statue secured to the rope and ready for redeposit."

"Where do you suppose the batteries are that operate this thing?" Kit asked.

"My guess is a storage battery attached to solar cells stashed somewhere near by."

"Good possibility."

Ten minutes later the column had been cleared of snow leaving five feet of water at the bottom of the hole. David tossed the end of the rope up to Kit who, with great gentleness and skill, slowly pulled the statue up the slope to where he sat.

"I assume we're going to leave the rope attached," Kit said. It was a question.

"Bad idea in case anybody might happen along."

"Happen along with flame throwers and an insatiable desire to cut a three foot column down fifteen feet through a dome of ice?" Kit said in an attempt to make David's statement sound ridiculous.

"Nonetheless, here's what you do. Untie the rope from the statue. String it through the one arm, around the statue and back through the other arm."

"Done. I see where you're going with this. I just pull the rope through until I have twenty foot lengths on each side. Then I lower it into place, drop one end of the rope, and pull it back through the arms. The statue will sit there rope-free."

"Do it!"

"Potential problem, Unc."

"What's that?"

"Being hollow it may float back to the top of the five feet of water in there."

"It's heavy. Let's not buy that concern until we see what actually happens."

"Good idea. Here he goes. Parting is such sweet sorrow, Little Guy."

He patted the Buddha's head as it entered the opening.

"Going! Going! Still going! Still, still going! Plop! The *Open Buddha* has landed! It sunk right to the bottom. The water down there has already begun to freeze. It should be safe and secure back in its ice cube within the hour."

"Nice work, Kit. Now, melt that hole full of water and we'll call it a success."

"That makes just one to go, David. It's hard to believe everything we've accomplished in these past two weeks, you know?"

"I know."

Although he didn't say it out loud, David believed that what they had

experienced so far would seem like a Hawaiian vacation compared to what lay ahead.

The trek down the mountain was uneventful. Soon after they entered the city proper Alex indicated he would need to follow a different route to return the camels and meet up with the transportation to get the equipment back to the plane.

A half hour later the two of them were back in their suite more than ready for a shower. David was in and out in ten minutes. Kit needed thirty.

David made several calls and ordered in lunch. The signal bell rang as Kit entered the dining room.

"Lemon chicken, mixed vegetables, baked potato and something else the guy at the other end assured me we'd love."

"Could eat a horse – and assume we may have at some point," Kit said. "Anything will be great."

They arranged things on the table and sat.

"Next phase?" Kit asked ready to shift gears.

"Tehran. The museum and the vase with the scroll design, remember the panel?"

"Vaguely. So much data has invaded my mind these past few weeks I'm suffering over load. Another night at the Spa might help."

"Might but won't. We're leaving here in two hours."

"Leaving the land of optional nudity for the land of utmost modesty?"

"It will be healthful to keep that in mind. Touch a woman who is not your wife and it could be a slow and agonizing death at her husband's or father's hands."

"I'll wear mittens and put a padlock on my placket."

"After lunch get on the internet and see what you can find out about current conditions there – weather, religious and governmental events, and things like that. I've confirmed our hotel reservations and alerted Connie."

"I expect this final one to be the most difficult?" Kit said

"That is my expectation as well."

"You know. This one here up on Urga really wouldn't have been half bad if that blizzard hadn't blown in on us. Surely, Ari didn't arrange that."

David smiled.

"He would have if he could have."

"It was different here, though," Kit said.

"*Different?* I believe you referred to it as *Diabolical!*"

"Well, he did send us after the Open Buddha, something that apparently doesn't exist. At any rate, we didn't have to actually find it. He switched the position of the signal lights which required us to go on an ice melting wild goose chase. I'd say it was at least different – like he's changing the rules and

expectations."

"So he is. Just one more, however, and I'm sure we can hold our mental acuteness together to the end, now."

"Is *acuteness* even a word?"

"Did it communicate?"

"Yeah. Yeah. Back to that. We need to turn up the heat in here."

David laughed out loud.

"What?"

"You sleep virtually nude through a raging blizzard – on *top* of your sleeping bag, by the way – and now, in the warmth of these rooms you're complaining about being cold. The most basic function of clothing *is* to keep one warm you know."

"Funny. Where's the thermostat?"

"On the sitting room wall just to the right of the dining room door. I'd suggest boosting it up to at least 78 – maybe 80."

"So, you share my discomfort."

"I didn't admit to that."

The heat was adjusted. The dishes were sent packing and they moved into the sitting room where Kit soon had new information up on the laptop.

"Two hours ahead of us. I never know how to say that. At 2:00 here it will be 12:00 there. Is that ahead or behind?"

"Is it really relevant at this moment?"

Kit shrugged and continued.

It's a twenty five hundred mile trip as the crow flies. Somewhat longer flying to avoid China – west to Kaszkhstan and then south through Uzbektdstan and Turkmenistan. *Nehrabad Airport* on the west edge of Tehran. Twelve million population. From the map it looks to have well laid out square blocks and straight streets. Odd for such an ancient city. Says lots of towering skyscrapers sit beside lower, 19th Century, Baroque, buildings. They have supermarkets and drive through everything.

"The climate is dry. This time of year the highs are in the upper nineties and the lows in the upper seventies. It's a shame to waste weather like that on the Modests of the world."

"Let's not offend our Muslim friends."

"Didn't intend to. . . . Lots of parks and gardens in the city although apparently not much in the way of plantings around the homes. It suggests a drab gray appearance cast by a majority of the small houses.

"Just across the Alborz Mountains to the north and west is a much more humid area. The main mountain, by the way, is Mt Damavand. I know about that. What is it from mythology?"

"Here's a clue. A struggle in an epic between the metaphors for good and evil."

"Yes! *Feraynun* wrestled and defeated the evil giant –named something like *Zahhak*. He chained him in a cave near the peak. When the old volcano starts sputtering or growling the locals say it's *Zahhak* straining to get free."

"Give the lad an A," David said. "What else?"

"Great skiing, like I said back home. Lots of small houses and cafe-like places between the city and the mountains. The eating places feature kebabs. There is no alcohol sold in the country.

"Since the Islamic revolution the country is a Church State, the laws of the country don't fall far from established religious principles. Westerners are viewed with a suspicious eye."

"And that's why we will avoid the main airport," David interjected, "and land on one of the private strips Ari furnished on the CD. Connie knows about it – been there undercover apparently. How's your beard coming, by the way?"

"Me thinks if ye had to ask ye already have thy answer," Kit said making light of it to cover his discomfiture. "I even considered squeezing my nuts to see if that would squirt a few doses of testosterone up to the facial hair zone but, disliking excruciating pain as I do, I decided against it."

"I ordered some tanning cream for both of us. By the time we touch down we'll look like natives."

"Face, neck, arms, torso?" Kit asked.

"That's as far south as I'm going. Use your own judgment below the belt.

"Well, I'd suggest feet and ankles," Kit said. "Everybody wears sandals there."

"A very good point. Suggestion accepted. Thanks. Alex will have clothes for us on the plane."

"If we leave here about five and it takes seven hours for us to get there, we'll arrive there about 2 a.m. their time."

"A good time for a clandestine arrival, I'd say."

"Sounds ominous."

"Hope it won't be."

"Will we wear all black with ski masks?"

"You're kidding of course?"

"Didn't think I was."

There was a knock at the door. Kit was up immediately.

"Use the peep hole," David said. "I'm naked in here. So are you, out there, by the way."

"Just Alex. He's cool with nude, remember."

"Hey, what's up, Big Al?"

"Clearly not your pants."

Kit grinned and ushered him into the sitting room where David had managed to spread a towel across his lap.

"What's up?" David asked.

"That must be standard greeting in small town Indiana, USA."

"It may well just be Lawrenceeze."

"I'll opt to remain confused back one step. I have your passports, visas, employment records, and other identification papers for you in this envelope. There is a letter of credit from your bank suggesting you have several million dollars to spread around as you see fit. I'll suggest that you study all the papers for any little variances in detail from the facts of your life."

"What are you saying?" Kit asked removing the documents."

"You came on a private, government approved flight from Jordan, not Mongolia. You are here to ski and to visit a variety of anthropological sites with an eye toward doing a summer class here with students from the United States. It's done all the time so won't have the faintest aroma of a scam."

"And why are we taking all these precautions for Iran when we didn't do it other places?" Kit asked.

"It is simply Rot Insurance," Alex said."

"Rot Insurance?"

"Insurance that you don't rot away your life in one of their prisons."

"Got it. Sounds like a solid plan, if it will work."

"Your driver will be here in less than an hour. Connie is on his way to the plane. I'll go directly from here to the airport."

"See you in a little while, then," David said.

Alex left. They applied tanning cream to each other, dressed, and packed pausing one last time to examine the single remaining panel.

"It's like I imagine it must be to see your children leaving home one at a time," Kit said.

"*It being what?*"

"Letting go of the six panels one at a time like we have. They've been the driving force in our lives these weeks."

David nodded not wanting to consider the rest of his life without Kit at his elbow.

The fuel truck was pulling away from the plane as Doc deposited their luggage on the tarmac. It required hugs all around, then, their new friend and his red whatever drove away forever into the afternoon sun.

Again Kit did his cockpit check. Again Connie convinced him he was alive, well, and capable of flying the machine.

Alex accompanied Kit back to the main cabin. Kit spoke to him.

"I just want you to know what a privilege and pleasure it has been to be with you and watch you work. I'd like to think later on I will have time to really get to know you. I also know that's not likely to happen."

It was cause for another open-ended quote from the big man.

"Every man's work, whether it be literature or music or pictures or architecture or anything else . . ."

". . . is always a portrait of himself. Samuel Butler in *The Way of all Flesh*. Uncle David first quoted that to me upon the occasion of complaints about carelessly thrown papers from customers on my new newspaper route. I was ten and it's become a part of my style of living."

And, that is obvious, young man."

"Thanks. That means a lot."

"Strap in and be prepared for a turbulent take off. Those winds are still swirling ferociously up at mountain top level.

"*Turbulent and swirling ferociously* are not terms I want to hear at this moment," Kit said.

"You're going for something like, 'Ignorance is bliss, instead?'" Alex said.

"It would seem so, wouldn't it? You misquoted that of course – at least in its earliest form which is attributed to *Anonymous*. The quotation is, 'Marriage is bliss. Ignorance is bliss. Ergo . . .'"

Alex and David laughed full out. Alex responded.

"I must say I didn't know that. Thank you. Now, please strap in for a take off that I am sure will be comparable only to the wisp of smoke, gently wafting skyward from a summer camp fire on a calm July evening."

". . . as it suddenly *slams* into a gathering thunderstorm?"

"Something like that I suppose. You, however, possess something that string of smoke does not?"

"What?"

"A bloody seat belt! Now snap it together!"

Kit would miss his new friend, which only reminded him how he was going to miss his uncle and his parents and Megan when he left for college. It was more than enough to help him slip into a short-lived, strangely comfortable – by way of ample, previous, experience – adolescent session with the blues.

He clicked. He closed his eyes. The plane left the ground and entered the promised washboard left arc heading them south west. His fingers relaxed their death grip on the arms of his seat. He was soon asleep.

The previous several days had been exhausting. David moved to a bed in the rear and followed Kit into sleep.

Thirty minutes before touchdown they were awakened by Alex. At some point Kit had joined David in the sleeping quarters – neither recalled just when.

"We are coming upon the Iranian border. It will be a no lights landing so I'd like you to be dressed and strapped in well before our touchdown in about a half hour. We are now descending to less than two hundred feet to come in under the radar."

"From the maps it looks like they have ground hog burrows higher than 200 feet in these parts," Kit said.

"I assure you, Connie's record is spotlessly clean regarding ground hogs."

Kit flashed a sheepish smile. Alex continued.

"Then we will rise quickly to 20,000 feet so we can skim in just above the mountain tops. From there it will be a severe, 120 degree, right turn during a rapid descent to the landing strip hidden in a valley."

Alex had laid out their clothing on the chairs in the cabin.

"Shucks!" Kit said. "These aren't much different from what we wear back home."

"Dah, as somebody I know used to say," David said playfully. "We are American tourists you know. What else would you have us wear?"

"Why couldn't we just wear our own clothes, then?"

"I'm sure some brand labels are more acceptable here than others. I'll assume Alex knows more about that than we need to know."

"Lots of stuff on his plate right now, I guess. I hadn't thought of us as being a burden on him and Connie until this moment."

"As our babysitter, he is being very well paid. He seemed to know what he might be getting into."

"I know. Just hadn't considered the full extent of what that meant."

"Cabin lights off in one minute," Alex said over the intercom.

"That means get strapped in and ready for some stomach wrenching acrobatics," Kit said offering his unsolicited interpretation of the message.

As it turned out it was all that and more. Kit remained speechless during the following twenty, consecutive, minutes – clearly a record!

"You two still with us?" Alex said as he opened the door to the cockpit and stepped into the cabin.

"Why would you have thought that we wouldn't be?"

"That wet spot in your crotch for one thing."

"Really," Kit said surprised, feeling and looking as if in one set of practiced motions."

"NO! I declare you're so easy! It's hardly a challenge."

"It's just that I have lived my life around such *trustworthy* people."

"Very good! I'll concede that round. Now, to business. There is a vehicle waiting behind the little building that will be about twenty yards straight ahead as you exit the plane. The driver's name is Jakko – I'd trust him with my life – *have*, in fact. He's the one who has arranged all the paper work. He'll get you checked into your hotel. Let him handle the front desk, luggage – *everything*. Call me when you're settled in. Connie and I will be along once we get the plane hid."

"Sounds like our life is Jakko's for the next hour or so."

"More like two. We're in the mountains some forty miles north west of Tehran. Your hotel is on the northern perimeter of the old city. Jakko speaks fluent everything. Never known anybody like him."

"And he drives cars for people, why?" Kit asked.

"Let's just say he likes to," Alex said.

Kit realized the conversation was over although his interest had certainly been whetted.

David and Kit left the plane in pitch darkness and made their way straight ahead as instructed. They followed along the building and had soon located the vehicle. Its door opened.

"Password," came a raspy, tenor voice.

"Alex wears pink tights," Kit said after very little thought.

"You win. I'm Jakko. My friends call me Jakko. Mama prefers Jakko. Alex said I could count on a few laughs from you two. Get in. Kid up front so we look like family. Got bags."

"We each have a back pack. Alex will bring the rest."

"Put them in the back seat – right side. David, sit left."

That done he started the engine. Still in darkness, they rolled silently onto a gravel road heading west. A half mile later he turned on the headlights.

"Nice hotel you're booked into. I play poker with the night clerk. We won't have any problems so just relax. I took the prerogative of downgrading your rooms to a mid-level suite that won't give anyone reason to be suspicious."

"Alex said we could trust you with our lives. We've come to believe in Alex completely," David said. "We appreciate any suggestions."

"Rule one: Don't tell me why you're here."

"And Rule two?" Kit asked.

"Just that one. Do either of you speak the languages here?"

"Only if they include English, Spanish, French and German," Kit said.

"And, Oh, I did just recently learn the Mongolian phrase that means, '*Hi handsome. Wanna have some fun?*' The wink that accompanied it was in Esperanto – universal at any rate."

"I'm to be available 24/7. I've taken a room next to yours. Rest assured my memory is abominable when it comes to both things I have translated and things I have witnessed. I can get you any vehicle or piece of equipment you may need. I know the city and surrounding area as well as anyone. I suggest that you not wander far from my side. Westerners are ready targets here."

Kit decided better than to ask what kind of targets.

At the front desk there seemed to be some haggling over the paperwork. Whatever it had been seemed to be amicably resolved with the exchange of a hundred dollar bill. Jakko left them at their door with his card containing numerous phone numbers and contacts.

"Connie and Alex are on the floor just below you. I'm next door to the north. Room service is excellent here as are the four restaurants on the lower floor. I won't presume to intrude on your table but do keep me informed so I can stay close."

Kit had to ask.

"By the way, what was that rather heated discussion about at the check-in

desk? Anything we need to be concerned about?"

"I predicted a cooler day tomorrow and he predicted continued heat. You're expected to defend your assertions here – and *tact* plays no role in street life."

"Really?"

"Really. Folks take their opinions very seriously around here. It's about all many of them feel they have any control over."

"What about the big bill you handed over?"

"Poker was not my game last week."

He left with a smile. Kit took a self-guided tour of the five rooms and called his findings back to David who had taken a seat in the living room.

"Huge bath with hot tub and sauna, two bedrooms, a dining room and the living room."

He returned to where David was and opened the drapes across the windows on the east side.

"Look at this moonlight view, Uncle David! It's spectacular! Those must be the mountains we flew over on the way in. Snowcapped. Rugged. Hope we don't end up having to climb them."

"It's nearly four a.m. here," David said looking at his watch. "I'm going to get three more hours of sleep. Then, we'll get Jakko and go looking for the museum. What's its name?"

"The Golestan Palace – translates as Rose Palace. It's really the museum on the grounds that we're interested in. The one displaying the objects of the Qajar period."

"Right. It all rolls back on me."

"I'm really not tired," Kit said. "Think I'll see if I can't find out some more about that urn or vase with the scroll on it."

"Fine."

"Don't suppose there's a porno channel on the TV in this country."

"One way to find out. You'll wake me – regardless of the viewing matter?"

"Sure. See you in three."

CHAPTER TWENTY

“Golestan Palace – actually the museum of the artifacts from the Qajar Era in this area’s history,” David said as he got to the point of his early morning phone conversation with Jakko.

“Opens at nine a.m. Heavily guarded, inside and out.”

“Get us there by nine, then, I guess. You’ll need to pick us up when?”

“Eight thirty.”

“Kit and I need to get breakfast. Suggestion?”

“*Ships of the Desert*, first floor.”

“Please join us.”

“Not a good idea, but thanks. It is the distance I maintain from you that will be our greatest advantage if shove comes to push.”

“As you say, then. We’ll be leaving here in fifteen minutes. Thanks.”

David hung up. As their go-to man he seemed everything Uri had not been – trustworthy, wise, experienced in clandestine activities, and possessing of other knowledge they would most certainly need.

They dressed and were soon seated for breakfast. Jakko entered after them and sat at a table across the room. The steak and eggs, grill-toasted slabs of butter dipped bread, and yogurt came as close to an Indiana breakfast as the menu presented, so they both ordered it. The waiter offered an odd mixture of efficiency and aloofness, noticeably cooler and more formal toward them than toward the locals.

David ordered in the waiter’s language. He seemed impressed and bowed as he left the table.

“What was *that*?” Kit said amazed.

“Straight out Persian. It’s the official language here. I guess I must have studied it at some point.”

He smiled at Kit as if to say, “So there, Mr. Smarty pants.”

“But I told Jakko we only spoke western languages.”

“Yes. I heard you tell him that.”

“Why didn’t you correct me?”

“You seemed so certain of my ignorance that I didn’t want to break your bubble. Anyway, I only know enough to get by. I read it much better than I speak it. If conversations get involved I’m sure we’ll need Jakko.”

Kit pursued the topic, clearly impressed with his uncle’s prowess.

“Persian is written with an entirely different set of curly cue letters that look nothing like the western alphabet, right?”

“Right. It’s beautiful. Various symbols represent the same sounds depending on context.”

“So did you understand the native language in Mongolia, too?”

“Caught words and phrases here and there.”

“I’ll be a monkey’s uncle.”

“Not to *my* progeny, kid!”

“That is great! Can slash may I use it?”

“I would be honored. It is so seldom that you want to *ape* me.”

Kit grunted one, non-retractable, automatic grunt and hid the grin in his napkin not wanting to encourage his uncle.

The meal was delicious and was served with a basket of fried pastry-like something-or-others stuffed with dates. David signed for the fare, and left only a modest tip on the table. It had been at Jakko’s suggestion so as to not call undue attention to himself as either cheap or excessive.

They spent a few minutes looking at the wares offered by vendors in the lower hallways near the restaurants and lobby. They were mostly handmade items aimed at tourists. Kit purchased a small, flat, polished, purple stone, which was offered as a good luck pocket piece. It was “Blessed by Allah Himself” the vender assured him. A quarter for a promised lifetime of good luck seemed like a prudent investment.

The Museum was a large, low, ancient looking building with many rooms of various sizes. Not wanting to tip their hand about the specific item, which was of interest, they wandered the halls and viewed the contents of each room in order. It would have gone faster if they had split up but Kit expressed some apprehension about that – something about the ‘rot’ factor – so they stuck together. It was a fascinating exhibit that brought to life an entire era in the history of man about which Kit had never even heard. It was nearing ten when Kit pointed to a corner table in one of the rooms. They approached it and there sat the urn. It stood over two feet tall. It was pear shaped with a flat, spread, fluted, mouth at the top. The finish was shiny and hard and as purple as royalty ever wanted purple to be. It sat on a low, round, table, draped in a white, silk, floor length, table cloth.

“In the carving on the panel the slot was underneath the urn,” David said. “I’ll keep a look out while you quickly pull up the drape and see if it’s there. Ready?”

“Ready. What’s the signal if someone comes?”

“How about I say something like, ‘Someone’s coming?’”

“That should work. Here I go.”

...

“Guess what?” he asked when once again standing beside David.

“Either you found a slot or you didn’t.”

"I found our slot. It's in the side of the table top. But there is nothing resembling a place for the lights and such down there. No clue to tell us if we've succeeded or not. This is the last one. If, by inserting the panel, we really haven't defused it, they'll all six go off. What do we do?"

"We walk through several more rooms acting interested, and then leave to think this thing through."

A half hour later they were back in their suite studying the Tehran panel.

"You know, Uncle David, we've been approaching the carving on the front of the panel as though it were a single map. In light of that concept what's missing from it that we've seen on other panels?"

"Clearly you have an idea and I don't so let's hear it. Oh! Wait. When two or more items were part of a clue that inclusive *bracket* has always been present below it."

"Yes. And here?"

"It isn't. As you said, we've been approaching it as if the mountains and the street map are one representation. If they are in fact *two* maps or depictions of two places then the mountains, which we thought were those adjoining the city to the north east, may be miles away."

"Let me pull up the topographical map of Iran. Then we can zoom in repeatedly until we come upon something resembling the carving."

Kit got to work on the lap top and David talked through the features of the carved mountains on the panel.

"Looks like three levels with the highest in the back. The one in the rear is different from the others in that it has a V-shaped top – an indented area rather than a peak. My first thought is that it's the big volcanic mountain, *Mt. Damavand*. That puts the other three in front of it – front probably meaning southwest toward Tehran. The middle mountain is steep and high. In the foreground it appears the representation is of lower, twin or connected hills or mountains. And the Xspot is not the city of Tehran as we've supposed but a place near the intersection – the valley perhaps – formed by the bases of those twins."

"That's at least twenty five miles from where we are. Look here! I think I even have the same angle as the carving."

"It would seem so. That area have a name?"

"Locally known as *Saberi Valley* also *Valley of the Beheaded*. Not a friendly sounding place to visit."

"Any interesting history associated with the valley?"

"Let's see. . . . Well, yes, actually. Some paranoid king in ancient times is said to have impaled the heads of his enemies on tall sticks that were stuck into the ground in the valley floor. Once a week he'd march his closest associates and house servants through the valley so they could see their fate if they betrayed him. Sounds like a fun guy – pardon that: a guy who enjoyed fun. It

really does sound better the other way, you know.”

“Are there any significant anythings at the entrance there where the Xspot seems to be?”

“I got one low resolution picture of the spot. Can’t really enlarge it in any useful way. Looks like some monuments maybe, but it appears there are monuments all over those valleys. By the way, the chain of mountains is so divided by valleys that few of them have official names. Whatever the locals call them at the moment is what’s used.”

David moved from his seat on the couch beside Kit to a big chair across a coffee table.

“It looks to be another dual site, doesn’t it, son?”

“Yeah. Do we do the panel at the museum before we go up to the valley or go check out Impale Place first?”

“The latter I think. We have several days left. I’d rather know exactly what we have going in both places before we take any action.”

“That makes sense to me.”

“Let me call Jakko.”

David dialed. Jakko answered.

“We need to get to a valley north east of the city – Saberi Valley also known as Valley of the Beheaded. How soon can you arrange transportation?”

“Half an hour. Will it be just there and back or overnight?”

“The plan is for a round trip during daylight. To be on the safe side though let’s plan for the overnight stay.”

“You can get fast food take out at *Shariff’s* down on the main floor. Get enough for the three of us for two meals. I eat anything. Prefer no pork but in a pinch even *that* has worked.”

“At noon they met him in front of the hotel. It was an older model, four wheel drive, SUV-like, vehicle. Inside, it was very comfortable and air-conditioned. Again, Kit road shotgun.”

“What can you tell us about the monuments and such near the entrance to the valley?” David asked.

“Ancient. Most are so weather worn they cannot be deciphered anymore. Fortunately, in the mid-eighteen hundreds a Greek Anthropologist was here studying them. Many were still legible back then. He made both tracings and plaster casts of many of them. The casts are here in a government museum. He took the tracings back to Greece.”

“I don’t recall about that,” David said, scratching the anthropological portion of his head.

“I wish I could remember more but like you USA guys say, ‘Use it or lose it,’ I guess. Wait! *Somebody Aristotle*, I think. Or maybe *Aristotle Somebody*. Sorry that’s all I got.”

“I think it’s coming back to me,” David said. “Could that have been

Aristotle *Stephanopoulos*?”

“Very good, Sir. Yes. That *is* the last name.”

“It’s amazing how the old grey matter holds on to unused information for decades and when you need it, somehow works it to the surface,” David said playing it down.

Kit turned and frowned into the back seat. David tried to answer without being specific.

“I suppose in that case the fact that he was the great, great, great grandfather of one or my college friends probably kept it in place all these years.”

Kit’s face brightened. He understood it had been an out and out guess on David’s part. The outcome was not surprising. David’s guesses were proving to be among the most dependable artillery they had to that point in their mission.

The first dozen or so miles were on a modern, highway which took them straight line, due east to Radchen. From there they turned north for several miles on what passed for a road. The next turn, left, put them on a camel path which slowed the vehicle to a snail’s pace. It wound through arid valleys and around, many, small, low, foothills. They met no other vehicles and only a few small groups on foot.

Eventually, Jakko pointed to a narrow pass between the twin mountains. He stopped the vehicle in a shady spot between huge upturned outcroppings, and turned off the engine.

“We walk from here,” Jakko said.

They got out and he immediately applied a temporary decal to the driver-side window.

“What?” Kit asked.

“The sign of a powerful local cleric. No one will dare bother the vehicle.”

“He’s that powerful?”

“He has a huge following and determines for them everything from what and when they may eat to how and when they must go about having sex with their wives. He is very powerful.”

“A good guy to have on your side, I guess.”

“A cleric is not really on your side. His followers are on *his*. May seem like a subtle difference but it is not so small in the reality of local religious practice.”

“I should go along,” Jakko continued, changing the subject. “Remember, my memory can block out weeks and weeks of experiences when called on to do so.”

“Let’s get a look at those little monuments, David said.

“They look like slabs of rectangular stone set into the ground – like tombstones,” Kit noted.

“You have a way with the obvious,” David said, kidding him. “Would you also like to comment on the large variation in size and the fact many are broken

and laying over on one side?”

“No, actually, you handled that very well for one of the less loquacious members of our species although I do question the implication that such a slab could be laying over on *more* than one side.”

Jakko nodded, entirely for his own benefit, thinking what a fine relationship the two of them had.

They hefted backpacks and walked to the nearest stone some ten meters away. It stood at an angle leaning to their right. It was some five feet high and two feet wide. The images were faint. David could make out some of it near the bottom where shifting sand had undoubtedly covered it from time to time and protected it from the erosive elements.

“I thought desert conditions like this were ideal for preserving things,” Kit said puzzled as he ran his hand across the face of the stone.”

“The blowing sand works likes a sandblaster given enough time,” David said offering the short answer.

Kit nodded and moved on to another some fifteen feet closer to the valley entrance.

“Hey. Uncle David. This is really odd.”

David and Jakko joined him.

“Looks to be very freshly cut – Persian writing, I assume.”

“You’re right on both counts. If my seldom used Persian is still reliable, I read, ‘One of five’. Confirmation, Jakko?”

“Yes. For one who only claims knowledge of the western languages, you do remarkably well with Persian. One of five it is.”

“A scavenger hunt. He’s set up a scavenger hunt here in the desert,” Kit said.

“Looks that way,” David said. “And you know what that means.”

“That we have to look at every single monument until we find the one that says, ‘five of five’. This one must say something else or we could just skip two, three, and four and look for five. Five must hold some clue.”

“Help me Jakko. Underneath. This says something about a cliff?”

“Under the hanging cliff,” he said.

They looked around.

“Probably inside the valley,” Jakko suggested.

They walked on another fifty yards where the steep mountain walls more legitimately formed a valley between them.

“A cliff!” Kit called and he ran the twenty yards toward it.

The other men picked their way more cautiously among the many stones strewn across the narrow valley floor.

“Youth,” Jakko said. “A capricious combination of impatience and agility.”

“Is that a quotation or a Jakko original?”

“Both, actually,” and he said no more.

David had to consider it. If it were both a quotation and an original saying, it meant Jakko was quoting Jakko which probably meant Jakko was published and it had appeared in something he had written. Satisfied with his conclusion David called ahead to Kit.

"Anything?"

"Not much unless, 'Two of Five', should mean something to you."

"The boy reads Persian as well," Jakko asked as a somewhat puzzled aside.

"No, but he has a photographic-like memory. He probably saw the repeated symbol which meant, 'of five,' and fudged on the rest."

"An interesting lad."

"That he is. My nephew in case you didn't know."

"I figured a son but wasn't sure."

"Like a son in many ways. He lost his father – my brother – when he was two. We've been close."

"The love flows obviously between you."

"You are either a philosopher or a poet, Jakko."

"Is there really any difference?"

David nodded as they stopped at the little monument Kit had located.

"Two of five. He's right," Jakko said.

"What's the rest?" Kit asked impatiently.

"Half a trail to highest point."

Kit turned around looking up. The others followed suit. Kit thought out loud.

"Well, we have two high points here. One on *that* mountain and one on *this* one. The one above us here is higher. If there is a trail that goes up this one, then we merely bisect it to locate the half way mark. That should be monument number three."

"Bisecting a winding trail will not be so easy," David said.

"Not in the real world but how about on a map?"

Kit pulled out a carefully folded sheet of paper.

"You have a map of this *particular* mountain out of all the mountains in the area?" Jakko asked, uncharacteristically edging himself into the conversation.

"I had a clue ahead of time. Any way, let's take a look."

He hand ironed it flat against his chest then held it out so they could all have a look.

"Looks to be only one main trail. Do you know about the trails?" Kit asked turning to Jakko.

"Not really. It would seem, however, that it begins right over there."

He pointed.

"That makes it the reasonable choice, I suppose," David said. "Let's head on up there. Can you figure a mid-point?"

“Of course I can. I just don’t know how we’ll recognize it when we get there.”

“Here’s the point on the map. I can just try to follow our progress according to the twists and turns, I suppose.”

“Then, that’s how we’ll do it,” David said. “Let’s go.”

Jakko led the way. David brought up the rear. From time to time Kit would make a pronouncement regarding their most likely position. An hour later he announced they should be at the half way point.

“I vote for a ten minute sit down rest,” David said.

Jakko agreed by silently seating himself on a flat rock.

“Am I good or am I good?” Kit said.

“Well, let’s see. I think I’m going to go with the fact that you just may be good!” David said.

Jakko’s eyes danced enjoying the give and take.

“It’s right here. See it. Flat on the ground behind Jakko. Turn around and give it a look see. . . . if you will please. I didn’t mean to sound tyrannical, Sir.”

Jakko smiled and turned. David joined them.

“It is definitely, *three of five*, my friends,” Jakko said. “It adds, ‘off trail right’. That’s it. Not much to go on, I’m afraid.”

“Let’s take that ten minute rest. We can plan possibilities,” David said. “Are we about half way up the mountain?”

“Less,” Kit said. “The trail only goes about two thirds of the way to the top. It puts us about a third of the way up, I’d guess.”

“All low brush and sporadic clumps of tall grass to the right as far as I can tell,” David said.

“Scrub,” Jakko said. “It’s what they call it around here – well, that’s how it translates into Old Western USA talk, *partners*.”

Kit and David smiled at his humorous offering.

“We’ll run a compass line true to the right here,” David said, “Then we’ll explore ten yards each side of it as we move back west.”

And, once rested, that’s what they did. They secured one end of a line to a shrub and then set a course to the right that kept to a ninety degree angle from the trail. Kit secured the other end a hundred feet or so west and came back to join the men. Jakko went up the hill, Kit stayed to the center and David down hill. They walked together weaving back and forth covering every square foot of the area.

Reaching the hundred foot area without finding anything of significance, Kit moved the line ahead another hundred feet and the process was begun again. For a second time they discovered nothing. As Kit moved toward his next destination he called back to the others.

“I think we may have it here.”

Jakko and David closed on him. It was a carefully hewn, circular, flat,

stone, five feet in diameter and six inches thick; it had recently been laid into the ground. There was a perfect circle cut in six inches from the edge all around.

"It gives no indication that it is, *four of five*," Kit said, "but there is this arrow in the center with some inscription under it. Jakko?"

"Light, dark, light," Jakko said.

David nodded.

"It could be a foil – a false lead, I suppose," he said and yet this one was clearly constructed just for this occasion. There is nothing old about it. In other words the inscription is not an addition to an ancient piece of work."

"Again, that could just set it off as different from the others telling us to ignore it," Kit said.

"What if it really does say, 'four of five'?" David said, his face suddenly brightening. "Then would you take it seriously?" David asked.

Kit shrugged and bounced his head the way one does to convey uncertainty leaning toward yes or maybe.

"Measure the diameter of the inner circle."

"Four feet exactly."

"Measure the diameter of the stone."

"Five feet exactly. Ah! The message is inscribed in the *four of five* measurement. How did you ever see that, Unc?"

"One of those brilliant, Lawrence, genes must have happened by at exactly the right moment."

"Well, don't let it get away. This thing is creepafying me!"

David turned to Jakko.

"Extreme tension tends to propel new word forms from his brain. Do you need translation?"

"I think I got it."

Jakko exaggerated a shudder.

"You got it!" David said. "Okay then let's switch our compass line straight up the mountain following the course set by the shaft of the arrow."

Kit noted the compass setting and soon had it arranged. He went ahead with the compass and the others followed. The climb was steep. The terrain was rugged, strewn with rocks and boulders, and sharp-edged scrub. Vegetation became scant and the hot sun licked at their exposed flesh like the dancing flames at a witch burning. The long, flowing, head to toe, garments of the locals suddenly made sense to Kit.

"Oh, no, Uncle David," came Kit's disappointed assessment of what came into view.

David stepped up beside him.

"I see. Another cave. However, the clue, '*light, dark, light*', would seem to indicate we have to pass *through* the darkness of this one out into the light on the other side."

"I'll accept that hopefully. We go in?"

David looked at Jakko.

"Any reason you know of that we shouldn't?"

"No. Be on the lookout for snakes, bats, and spiders, all of them potentially deadly."

"You want to take the lead?" Kit offered feigning a gracious gesture.

"Sure. It's almost always the second in line who gets struck."

"I'm fine here, then, I guess," Kit said. "You two fight over who gets the strike zone. It will necessitate flashlights. From what I've learned about this mountain, I figure it has to be a quarter to a half mile through to the other side. Can't see through to the other end – assuming this really is a tunnel and not a trap."

"Interesting possibility," David said. "Jakko you stay here. We'll keep you informed of our progress. If anything happens to us in there, see what you can do to help us."

Jakko nodded and turned on his communicator.

"There's lots of ore in these mountains. May interfere with the signal."

"Thanks for that heads up. We'll see you in a little while. I'll check in with you every two minutes."

At about twenty feet into the tunnel the first bat flew and the first snake hissed simultaneously. Kit began singing, *Hush Little Baby*. David smiled but didn't knock it. The hissing stopped.

They continued on in blackness for nearly fifteen minutes. It soon became clear that the tunnel was making a very gentle arc to the left. Its clearly natural dimensions varied little from one point to another. Eventually, the sudden onset of a dim light ahead overwhelmed their eyes. They shielded their faces as they approached its source.

The tunnel opened out into a cirque that extended as a deep indentation on up to the peak, forming a sheltered area and ledge much like the one they had used for their campsite on Urga. There was one addition. The huge tank – twice the size of any of the others. On the side facing the opening was the Persian phrase, "five of five and six of six."

David was sure of the translation.

"Let's get out there and examine it, son."

They took different directions around it.

"Got the panel here, Kit," David called.

Kit joined him and was immediately on his knees, searching his backpack for the screwdriver. Within a minute the plate was off.

"Oh, Oh!" Kit said.

David knelt beside him.

"No slot!" Uncle David. "Six key holes instead – old fashioned key holes. We have no key. We have a wooden panel."

“See if you can see inside the holes. They look to be, what, three quarters of an inch high?”

Kit nodded.

“Pitch black in there even when I shine a light in.”

“Okay!” David said. “Put the cover back. We’ve learned that we need between one and six keys. We also know that back in the museum we need the panel. We have the panel. It must somehow lead us to the keys.”

“You are the positive spin king of all time, Uncle David.”

“Am I not right about what we’ve learned?”

“Yes, Sir. You’re right. My easily detonated adolescent exasperation has just been ignited. Sorry. I’ll do what I can to extinguish it.”

“I assume the 6 of 6 referred to this being the 6th and final bombsite,” Kit said.

“That’s my take on it. Like Ari’s white flag in a way.”

“How could he have known a year in advance that we’d come to this one last?”

“The 6 of 6 could have been put in place this morning as far as we know. In fact, the tank itself could have been deposited here very recently.”

Kit nodded.

“The lack of camouflage you mean?”

David nodded.

The metal panel was replaced and David alerted Jakko they were returning. Back in the darkness of the tunnel Kit continued.

“I’m going to make a lousy father, you know?”

“No. I guess I didn’t.”

“Yeah. This impatience of mine. I’ll get all bent out shape if my kid doesn’t learn to walk when I think he should or to ride a bike after one training session or if he takes more than an evening to master nine times six.”

“You’re a carbon copy of your father – in that way at least. Robert would fly into a rage if he couldn’t master some new thing first try and exhibited no patience with me at all. But you know what?”

“What?”

“From the moment he first held you in his arms, he never again raised his voice, flew off the handle, or expressed his annoyance about his or other people’s ineptness. Having a baby does absolutely marvelous things to a man when he allows it. It will to you, also.”

“Sounds like when a father first holds his son all of his volatile tendencies get transferred to the new generation to be expressed all over again.”

“I suppose that could be one explanation. Not the one I was going for, however.”

“I’m smiling – know you can’t see.”

“Interestingly I can *hear* it, Kit.”

"You're saying love tempers its opposites."

"Write that down. It's profound!"

"Think so, really?"

"Yes I do."

"I suppose I should tell you then."

"Tell me what."

"Page 36 of an essay titled, *Creating a Positive Social Setting Within the Family and Neighborhood.*"

"Sounds familiar."

"From a speech delivered by Dr. David Lawrence to the National Association of Community Psychologists a few years ago."

"That guy is really good, isn't he?"

Those smiles were shared in the light of day as they exited the tunnel where they had entered. Jakko stood but asked nothing about their mission.

"Back to the hotel, Jakko. We found what we came for. We will have to come back at least one more time."

Jakko nodded.

"I assume the impatient lad will lead the way," Jakko said.

"My impatience is all my father's fault. If he hadn't held me when I was first born I'd be as docile as a clam."

Jakko looked at David.

"I won't ask," he said

"Good," David said as an aside. "You'll be much happier that way. He hasn't yet considered why second and third sons also exhibit the teen year's impatience. It will blow his theory and that moment of enlightenment won't be pretty."

At the car, they took time to eat before returning to town. Jakko, eyes dancing, remained close-mouthed and non-committal throughout Kit's less than subtle interrogation.

"We'll see you at 8:30 in the morning then," David said to Jakko as they parted ways on the sidewalk in front of the hotel.

Kit and David went directly upstairs to their suite taking quick turns in the shower. Kit opened the drapes along the west side of the sitting room. Lights were just beginning to come on as the sun, already mostly hidden below the horizon, continued sinking out of sight.

"So, six keys or one key used six times?" He asked David as he fell back into a reclining position on the sofa.

"Any ideas?" David asked.

"Initially I'm opting for six different keys. The idea of one makes no sense *unless* one key has to be inserted and turned in some special sequence."

"A conundrum," David said. "Undoubtedly we will receive some sort of

instructions."

"Instructions seem to be getting esoterically more esoteric," Kit said turning on his side so he could face David in the chair across the low table."

"It appears the next step is to insert the panel and see what happens," David said.

Kit nodded.

"What if nothing happens?"

"Does that make sense?"

"I guess not. There have always been clues."

"I'm ready to turn in," David said. "Really nothing to plan until we receive some new directive at the museum in the morning."

"I'll share channel 222 with you for a while if your old heart is up to it."

"Merely considering the probable content exhausts me. Remember to go to bed. Tomorrow may be very long and very hard."

"You been peeking at 222?"

Kit rolled onto the floor in hysterical laughter. David threw a pillow at him and left the boy to his youthful pleasures.

"Just bring us something you think Americans will enjoy," David said addressing the waiter in Persian as Kit struggled through a series of gaping yawns.

"What did you say to him?"

David explained. Kit saw an opening to create a smile.

"Hope the local lore isn't that Americans like cyanide or botulism."

Apparently it wasn't. Again, they enjoyed a hearty breakfast.

"It's day number fifteen – the last day Ari gave us," Kit said as if reminding his uncle of the most important day in the history of man."

David nodded, hesitantly, as if not wanting to acknowledge it.

"We should make it with time to spare, huh?"

"I assume we will understand our final step immediately upon inserting the panel."

"So, by 9:15 we'll know what lies ahead. Then just back to the tank, do the key thing, and celebrate!"

"Let's assume it will all go just that way."

Kit suddenly looked puzzled.

"So, when does *today* really end – *midnight*?"

"I'm working on the assumption our time started at five p.m. – the moment the box arrived. That being true, I'm also assuming it ends at 4:59 p.m. today."

"Shortens the time line. I have suddenly become very un-comfortable, Uncle David."

They finished the meal with dispatch and left.

"Would you be Dr. Lawrence?" the man behind the counter asked as they entered the museum.

"Yes, Sir."

"I have an envelope for you. If you will just sign here, please."

The man handed David a hand held, electronic device with a window on which he was directed to sign. He passed it back to the clerk who paused several seconds looking at the gadget. A green light came on. A series of beeps sounded. He handed David the letter size envelope. Apparently his signature had been confirmed.

On the front of the envelope was a message. Do not open until 10:00 am. David showed it to Kit and put it in his shirt pocket.

"Thank you for your help, Sir. May I ask how you knew me?"

"Distinguished western man and handsome younger man, both with blue eyes. Not many such pairs enter here."

David translated for Kit. They moved on into the display area. Kit had to say it.

"Handsome, of course, always means handsome. Distinguish-ed, on the other hand, often means elderly with grooved face."

"And walking back to the hotel alone always means walking back to the hotel alone!"

"Isn't it interesting how one saying can immediately put another one into perspective?"

"Room 28 and don't spare the horses," David said urging Kit to pick up the pace – an unusual occurrence, had he given himself time to contemplate it.

There were very few others there that early. Perhaps there were never many there for the same had been true the day before. They entered number 28. David inspected the floor around the table.

"What," Kit asked.

"Wires. Alarm system."

"None that I see? What you thinking?"

"I want to get a look inside the urn and that will entail tipping it toward me slightly."

"Ah! Some sort of pressure sensor you think."

"No wires. Probably not. Here goes."

David tipped the urn and they both peered inside."

"Black," David said.

"Very good," Kit said not understanding.

"It's is a fake. Remember the description of the urn you found before we left home.

"Oh, yeah! Purple on the outside symbolizing royalty and alabaster on the inside symbolizing purity. What do you think?"

"Suddenly there is reason to hope. Insert the panel."

Puzzled, Kit took the panel from his back pack and, as David lifted the cloth, he inserted it.

"Got a click. See no lights."

David had his hand on the urn.

"Vibrations!" he said. "It's doing something."

Kit stood and touched it. He nodded, frowning.

"The thing going to blow?"

There was an unmistakable, all quite solid, metallic, clink, which originated from the marble floor beneath the table. Kit looked at David who nodded. The boy knelt and pulled up the cloth.

"It laid a golden key. I'd say the urn wasn't the original."

He retrieved it and stood, handing it to David who examined it from every angle.

"Like a door key from the 1920's," he said. "Have you ever seen one?"

"At Buchie's grandparent's house. One key fit every room in the house. Not the best security, I thought."

"I imagine we have our answer as to how many keys we'll need. Now, we wait 'til ten and learn how to use it."

"In the envelope, you think?"

David nodded.

"Let's get back to the hotel."

"Why ten o'clock do you think?"

"I can't be sure. Maybe as simple as not wanting us to open it *here* for some reason."

"Maybe thinking we'd try to use the instructions to insert the panel," Kit added. "More likely it's a timed test like in keyboarding class – see how much of the final solution we can get done before *poof!*"

"5,4,3,2,1, lift-off that flap. It's ten."

"You've been practicing that, haven't you?"

"I thought it was very clever."

"I suppose it was. Here goes."

Inside was a single card with a hand printed message.

"Not Ari's handwriting," David said, a sadness registering on his face. "Move close, Son. You'll have to see it to understand it."

*(3 before 1) split by
(2 X 3) over 8 of 12,
that leaves the rest in no logical order though what you were
allowed prevails in the end.*

"Ari was always very good at creating cryptographic puzzles. Not so good

at solving them. We spent many an evening with him creating and me solving. We admired each other's specific prowess."

"Did the girls play too – they are naked in my fantasy letting you make notes in magic marker all over their bodies."

"No. I'm quite sure those girls would have been forever stumped by the first parenthesis."

"And all of this probably refers to . . ."

"I assume to the order in which the key must be put into the six different keyholes under the tank on the mountain," David said.

"So, where do we begin?"

"Parts."

"Three before one seems pretty straight forward," Kit said. "3, 1."

"Okay. Next part then; two times three, that quantity over nine of twelve."

"Two times three is usually six," Kit said. "Then, eight of twelve. Does that mean take eight from twelve, which would leave four or does it mean eight twelfths which would be two thirds – point 66?"

"Interesting dilemma. Let's see. Whatever it is, is divided into the six we just found. Six divided by four would be one and a half. Two thirds of six would be 4. One and a half not being a whole number, let's go with four. And it goes where?"

"Looks like the 1 and 3 are to be split by the 4. That would give us 1, 4, 3 as the beginning of the sequence, Kit said."

"The rest in *no logical order*," David said aloud. "Assuming it is a sequence of the numbers one through six to match the number of keyholes, I suppose the *logical* order of the as yet unused numbers in that sequence would be 2, 5, 6."

"Except," Kit said, "One of those three has to be reserved for *the one that prevails*. What could that mean?"

"It says, 'what you were allowed prevails in the end'. '*In the end*,' could mean *at the end* of the sequence. But *what* were we allowed, Kit?"

"Think back to Ari's original letter," Uncle David. "He allowed you *one* vial of the anti-toxin. He gave you *one* informative CD. He allowed you *fifteen days*. That would put 1 and 5 at the end but 1 has already been used."

"And, he allowed me *one* assistant."

"But we've already used the number one."

"Hmmm."

"Hmmm."

"I think the key word is *allowed*. Ari tended to be precise in his choice of words. If you allow something you do not require it, right?" David asked without waiting. "So it would not be the fifteen day time frame – that was a given, a requirement."

"Big help. That leaves us the 1, which we've already used," Kit pointed

out.

"Let's approach it from a different angle," David said. We have six, five, and two left to arrange. Did he allow six of anything?"

They sat in silence thinking, eventually shaking their heads at one another.

"How about five?" David asked.

Again, silence.

"Or two?"

"The *two* of *us*," Kit suggested half-heartedly."

"That may be it. Yes. Likely, even. He allowed me the choice of selecting and using an assistant which means he allowed a *two* person team – he didn't require it, he allowed it."

"Really? When I said that I was actually just filling silence with noise," Kit said sitting up.

"If '*prevails in the end*' puts that number 2 at the end and if the remaining numbers 5 and 6 are not to be in logical order we have the sequence . . ."

"Three, four, one, six, five, two."

"Let's go back over our thinking – independently – and try to poke holes in it," David said.

"Sauna?" Kit suggested.

"Sounds like a good thinking spot."

"We can make it a three phase think-a-thon," Kit said. "Sauna, hot tub, cold shower."

"I'll *a-thon* with you for the non-rear two over three, but *non-a-thon* during the final six over six, that all over four minus one."

"Your right, Uncle David. You really are *not* as good as Ari when it comes to constructing crypto-stuff."

"Nor do I like to endure cold showers."

"But it was your suggestion that first afternoon in your loft."

"The suggestion was for *you*, my hormonally vigorous teen boy companion."

"That isn't how you phrased it."

"I lied!"

Kit smiled.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

Convinced – well, mostly convinced – that they had the correct solution to the sequence, they were back on the road toward *The Valley of the Beheaded* by noon. Eating as they drove, they remained quiet, still replaying the possibilities.

David continued to stew over the splitting of the *three* and *one* with the *four*. Technically the *three* and the *two* would be split by the *four* if the *four* were anywhere in between them. The *three* could be first. The *one* could be third, fourth, fifth or sixth and the two numbers would still be split by the *four*.

Kit worried about the number two at the end. It could have been that Ari intended to mean he allowed a *two* man team but most accurately what he actually allowed was for David to choose *one* person to assist him. If that were the case, and one went at the end, the sequence in-between was up for grabs. Perhaps that boded well for the current solution which *did* get all the ducks in a row.

They both worried about what would happen if the keys were inserted in the wrong order. Though their conclusions were not openly shared, they each believed the mission would fail at that moment.

In his head Kit rechecked the time-line. His notes had been accurate. This *would* be the final day – July 4th, day fifteen – that Ari had allowed them. There was one problem, however. They had crossed and re-crossed time zones in both directions and landed in places with and without Daylight Savings Time. The box had been delivered to David at five p.m. in a DST zone on June nineteenth. There seemed to be two options. Ari would consider the end of the allotted time to arrive at either four o'clock or five o'clock, local time. To be on the safe side David was therefore working under the assumption it was four o'clock.

So, the time line allowed for very little other than arriving, climbing the mountain, and using the key in sequence to deactivate the final bomb. They figured their schedule allowed for a two hour cushion so were feeling confident.

At last the vehicle made the final turn onto the dusty path, which led to the base of the mountain.

"There may be a problem," Jakko said, pointing to a gathering of people just inside the entrance to the valley.

"What kind of problem?" Kit asked sitting forward, hands on the dash.

"It occurs on a different day in July each year, determined in some way by the phase of the moon. *The Celebration of the Lost.*"

"More, please," Kit urged twirling his finger to encourage a speedy offering.

"There is a secret religious cult, very popular in these hills, dating from twenty five hundred years ago, according to legend, at least. It formed at the time of *King Helbedahma* – the blue eyed king. He was the one who beheaded his enemies and displayed them here.

"The story is that a priest – of what religion there is no information – was possessed of the power to reconnect the body and head in the afterlife. Having ones head severed from his body meant aimlessly wandering through a tortuous, spiritual, afterlife, never allowed to reconnect with his loved ones on the other side. In some ways it survives in local religious belief to this day.

"The only way to reverse that situation was for the closest living, male, relative of the beheaded to implore the Priest's assistance and pay homage to him – or, later, to his successors – once each year, right here."

"Homage?" Kit asked.

"Tribute. Riches. In the old days gold, precious gems, exotic oils, things like that. Now, who knows? Cold, hard, cash perhaps."

"And this may be *them* having *that* ceremony?" David asked.

"No other group I know of ever gathers here," Jakko said.

"And if it's a secret society, I doubt if they will seem real friendly to outsiders like us," Kit added running his hands all the way around his neck.

"I might as well tell you rest of the myth," Jakko said as they continued to sit in the parked car watching from a hundred yards away.

"There's more? Probably not good if you *saved* it," Kit observed.

"This is fully unconfirmed but the lore has it that each year they capture a young descendant of that King and behead him here."

"We have to get up that mountain," David said. "Any suggestions, Jakko?"

"The south face is a difficult, though possible, climb."

"How long would it take?"

"A day perhaps."

"No time for that. Have to be up there by four o'clock."

"Only one way then. We may be able to approach it undetected from this side of the mountain, by angling our way up to the large flat stone that points the way. That should get us well above the activities in the valley without being seen."

"That's the plan then. Let's go."

Suddenly, hearts raced and breathing faltered!

"I'll move the car closer to the hillside to keep it out of their view."

That done, David spoke to Jakko.

"Now that we know our way up there it should only take a couple of hours if we push it, would you agree?"

Jakko thought and then nodded. "If you push it."

They hefted the backpacks.

"You do have the key, right, Unc."

David felt inside the zippered vest pocket on his jacket and nodded. They walked the twenty yards to the base of the little mountain and without hesitating began making their way up the slope.

"I saved the coordinates in my GPD," Kit said referring to the round stone with the arrow. "I got in on the screen."

"We'll follow you, then. Stay low and quiet."

An hour later they drew within sight of the stone. They stopped in a thicket thirty yards away and knelt not believing what they were witnessing.

"Who's the nude dude with the orange turban talking to the sky?"

"Probably the Cult's current Priest, considering the other five *are* on the ground kneeling in his direction," Jakko said.

"Why on our rock?" Kit said.

"Absolutely no idea," Jakko answered.

"I'd guess they just ran onto it by chance and the Priest is using it in some way to increase or prove his power," David offered.

"Religion building on the fly?" Kit asked.

"It always *has* been," David said. "We need to circle wide around them. A confrontation would be time consuming if not downright dangerous."

They moved out to their left some twenty yards and then again began the climb. Making their way to the right would have moved them farther from the gathering in the valley but the ruggedness of the area would have made the climb very time consuming. As things turned out, it had not been a good decision.

They were accosted by a dozen men wearing orange turbans. One pointed at Kit and while David and Jakko were restrained by the others, he approached the boy, pulling his eyelids open wide.

Kit thought he understood the situation. He immediately knew what he had to do.

"Translate me to them, Jakko. 'Great ones with orange turbans. I have been sent to you for the ceremony of the blue eyes. I am yours, but can only cooperate if you let the others go. They are my guides and must report the success of the mission.' "

David frowned straining to free himself. He understood that Kit was trying to buy him time to get on up to the bomb but the uncertainty of the peril into which the boy had placed himself, distressed David.

After an animated and seemingly endless, time consuming, discussion among the men, David and Jakko were released. David wanted to linger but Jakko tugged at him, hurrying them on up the slope and out of sight.

"I have to assume that whatever you are doing here the boy believes it is more important than his life," Jakko said solemnly, still holding onto the David.

"I'll just say yes. I need to call Alex."

"Alex. Trouble here. You got me on your GPD?"

"Yes. I've had you all morning like usual."

"A religious cult that beheads blue eyed young men has just kidnapped Kit for their annual ceremony down in the Valley of the Beheaded. It would be good to retrieve him before . . . well, you understand."

"We're on it. Copter will be fastest though certainly not a silent approach."

"Just get here!"

Land to the south of the entrance into the Valley. Jakko will be waiting with all the details."

"Roger that. Over and out."

He turned to Jakko.

"You go down to meet Alex. Do whatever you need to do. Recovering kidnapped kids is not *my* strength. I'll head on up the mountain."

"Later, then," Jakko said.

There was a brief embrace.

David began the climb to the tunnel entrance. He hurried to make up the precious, lost, time. The vision of Kit being beheaded made him throw up. Tears flowed. He stumbled and slid repeatedly through his charge up the slope. The confrontation had consumed more time than the cushion they had allowed.

His hat snagged on a bush and was left behind. He strained, listening for the helicopter. He knew it was too soon. They had to travel to the airport. He assumed what they needed would be waiting for them there, however.

He was focused and failed to notice the rapidly dropping temperature which met him as he entered the upper altitude of the mountain. His fingers needed gloves; his head needed a hat. There was still a thousand yards to cover.

In the valley, Kit was fairing even less well. It soon became clear that he represented pure evil in the eyes of his captures. It was their mission to vent the hatred of the eons on his body – before the final act.

He was stripped and slapped and beaten with fists. He was pushed inside a circle formed by three dozen or more men. One end of a long leather strap was secured around his neck. The youngest in the gathering – a boy perhaps twelve – was handed the loose end of the strap and instructed to lead the stumbling, wincing, Kit around the circle out close to the men. They wielded long sticks – some thin, stinging, flesh tearing, switches, and others thick, bruising, bone breaking, clubs. As he passed by they beat him from every angle. Each blow was accompanied by the wild, screaming of disdainful phrases.

Kit was not inclined to accept such a thing passively. Though already weakened and injured from the volley of fists and palms, he grabbed the boy from the rear and wound the strap around his neck, moving the two of them into the center of the circle away from the sting of the sticks. Kit ran red in his own

blood. It ran from his forehead into his eyes. It ran from his chest onto his abdomen. It ran from his waist down his legs.

He dragged the young boy with him as he kept turning, round and round, watching the men. The younger boy could not breathe and struggled to free himself. Eventually he stopped struggling and slumped limp into Kit's arms.

It had not been Kit's intention to kill the boy – just use him in a delay tactic. He dropped the boy to the ground and knelt beside him. The Priest approached and apparently pronounced the young man dead.

An angry roar went up from the stick yielding men. Kit's mind searched for possibilities. Almost immediately a plan took shape.

As a Cub Scout he had learned a Native American Rain Dance. He began a vigorous, boisterous, version of it, moving in and out and around the fallen boy for most of a minute. Then he fell to his knees and placed his mouth against the boys. He pressed against his chest and repeated the mouth to mouth. It was all mystical enough to the onlookers that Kit was able to buy precious minutes as they hesitated in interest and uncertainty.

Slowly, though less reticent than they had been when the bizarre dance first caught them off guard, the circle of men began closing in, sticks raised, voices joined in an ever rising, increasingly hostile, chant.

"It's definitely time for the cavalry," Kit said out loud as he continued to press against the lad's frail chest.

On the mountain, David had reached the tunnel. He checked his watch. He had seven minutes. Led by the beam from his flashlight, he ran – as best he could – through the rock strewn tunnel. It seemed to go on forever. He stumbled and fell, slamming his head into a jagged edge of the tunnel wall. He struggled back to his feet, groggy and disorganized. Only one thing seemed certain – he had just been struck several times by snakes. He could not be sure about which direction he should be going.

"I must move on. I'll go in the direction I'm facing."

His pace was slowed. He reached to wipe the perspiration from around his eyes. He touched his forehead and detected a gash. It had not been perspiration. He closed his right eye to keep the stream of stinging blood from entering. He decided not to take time to look at his watch. Time was too precious and he didn't dare risk another fall.

He heard the helicopter. The sound was coming through the tunnel from behind him. It told him he was moving in the right direction – away from the valley. He felt nauseous. He felt suddenly weak and light headed. Perhaps the blood loss had been significant or would it have been the venom? He dared not lose consciousness. Time had become a blur.

A wall of light suddenly brightened in front of him. In his confusion he briefly considered the lore about moving toward the light when you die. He figured he would not be in such tremendous pain if he were dead; he dismissed

the image and stood for a moment just outside the opening letting his eyes adjust.

He removed a screwdriver from his pocket and dropped to his knees in front of the plate in the base.

"Eight screws," he said to himself, then counted as each was removed: one...two...three...four...five...six...seven...eight.

He unzipped his vest pocket. The key was not there.

"What am I doing wrong" he asked himself out loud in an attempt to manage the confusion that was overtaking him. "The *left* pocket, you jackass."

It was there. He took it out.

"Now to remember the sequence," he said. He closed his eyes and repeated it aloud.

"Three, four, one, six, five, two."

He opened his eyes and counted over three openings. He hesitated. They had assumed the sequence was from left to right. But was it? They were in a right to left culture.

He neither had the time nor the quickness of mind needed to delay over it. He slipped the key into hole number three and turned it. Click! He removed it and found opening number four. In, turned, click. Then back to position one. In, turned, click. The same for six and then five. He wanted to hesitate before the final insertion but dared not. Into slot two went the key. It did not turn. He pushed harder. It entered another half inch. He turned it. Click!

"Now the lights. Flicker, green, damn you! Flicker!"

As if obeying his order – or being uncomfortable with the prospect of being damned – it flickered.

David sat back on his legs and focused on the white light, swiping at the blood to give him vision in both eyes. It seemed an eternity. Was it going to come on or could it be that after all of it, they had come to fail in the final seconds of the final leg of their mission?

"Oh my God, and I don't mean that literally in case anybody's listening. *It's on! It's on!*"

With that, his body wanted to collapse – shut down – and give in to the exhaustion and damage it had suffered. David fought the urge in every way he knew.

With fingers clumsy and vision blurred, he replaced the screws not wanting to chance omitting what might be a required step. He leaned forward and hugged the tank. He may have kissed it but that would not be clearly recorded by his failing faculties.

He had to get back to Kit. He had less than willingly left the boy's fate in the hands of the other three. He staggered back through the tunnel. It seemed to go on forever.

Outside, at last, he hurried into the blinding light and tripped, tumbling

down the mountain side, damaging a shoulder and ankle, and suffering abrasions on his hands, neck and face. He came to rest just past the large round stone.

Again he had to muster his wits and not give in to his exhaustion. With strength hidden somewhere in reserve, he stood and pressed on through excruciating pain. It meant nothing, of course, compared with Kit's safety.

"If the ceremony was a long one, my friends might have got to him in time," he said at that point thinking most clearly out loud. "If it was short – I just won't think about that."

His tears washed the blood from his eye and for the first time he had full use of them both.

He reached the valley and not thinking hobbled directly into it, not at all sure what he would do if confronted by more Orange Turbans.

It was not a sight he had envisioned. He had been prepared for the worst. He had been prepared to be caught and slaughtered alongside Kit. He had been prepared to see the worshipers strewn around the ground having been vanquished by his three friends.

What he saw was unbelievable. Kit was standing on the small, square, platform which had clearly been intended as the place of the beheading. Jakko stood beside him. The boy's arms were raised front, up and out at an angle. All of the Orange Turbans – including the High Priest – were on the ground prostrated in supplication to the boy.

Alex spotted David staggering toward the group. He ran to meet and support him.

"What's going on here? I don't understand."

"Your nephew is now *Akkmino Sakka* – The Giver of Life. It seems that in his attempt to save himself, Kit unintentionally strangled a young boy. Using his wits, he turned it into an extravaganza that kept the worshipers stunned and at bay. According to Jakko there was dancing and singing and magical gesturing before he flung himself on the lifeless boy and began administering CPR – an unknown procedure in these parts.

"When the boy began to breath and then got to his feet – which, according to Jakko, was accompanied by Kit's magician-like, fluid, mysterious arm and finger movements – the worshipers were stunned and amazed. The Priest declared Kit a god on the spot and you're seeing what's been going on since.

"Jakko has been translating Kit's new edicts which, among other things, includes no more beheadings. He turned the event forever more into the *Celebration of Life*. He's been sounding a whole lot like a Unitarian minister."

"Who knows? That may be his calling. He's bleeding and looks badly bruised."

"So do you. In fact, you look terrible. What happened?"

"I'm afraid Harvard didn't prepare me very well for traversing unfriendly

mountains on a scramble-for-your-life schedule."

"May I ask if you succeeded?"

"I believe I did – we did. Now, time will tell. If we can figure some way of drawing Kit's performance to an end we need to get immediate medical attention for the both of us."

"I'm sure when he sees you he'll stop. I have the idea he's just stalling. I'll call for a doctor to meet us at the hotel."

David took out a handkerchief and handed it to Alex.

"Can you do something to make my face look less of a disaster – for the boy's sake?"

That done, David stood tall through his pain, planted a smile on his face, and slowly approached Kit. Their eyes met and the boy was immediately off the stage, across the clearing and embracing his Uncle.

"Well?" he asked David

"Success as far as I can determine," he said. One possible problem."

"Time?"

"Yes. I could have been as much as a minute late."

"Or almost an hour early, depending on how Ari interprets the time zones."

"We can hope. That's all we have now."

"Besides each other *and* all my *new* subjects, here."

"I understand you put on quite a show."

"I owe it all to Cub Scouts, Playing the Wizard in my Kindergarten play, and the creativity born of my sheer terror."

"And, just maybe, to a giant sized, Lawrence Family, brain cell or two."

Kit smiled.

"Perhaps I should stay here, Uncle David."

"What on Earth would lead you to say that?"

"Jakko says The High Priest offered me half the yearly tribute he receives and *three* of his daughters as wives!"

It was a small, three person, helicopter. David and Kit flew with Connie while Jakko and Alex returned in the car.

"How did you get here so soon, Connie," David asked.

"Kept this little baby up on the roof of the hotel. Two pads up there. One was reserved for us. The Hotel Doc will meet us up there to determine if I need to fly you on to a hospital. If not, he'll treat you right there in his office. Do you have a destination and time line for the next leg yet?"

"It will be to Rochester, Minnesota – the Mayo Clinic. *When*, depends on our condition, I suppose. Sooner the better."

"That's about twelve thousand miles as the crow flies," Kit offered.

"With that itinerary, we'll likely stop in Lisbon and the Azores for refueling then straight on to Minnesota. I'll get it worked out. Will be nearly a thirty hour

trip unless you plan stopovers."

"As much as I'd personally like to spend a month frolicking on the beaches of Portugal," Kit began quite seriously, "I'd like to get back home even more."

"A girl?" Connie asked, uncharacteristically showing interest in the boy.

"A girl *and* the rest of my life, Sir."

Connie nodded having no way of understanding the full meaning of the boy's comment.

"Will you be for hire in the months to come?" Kit asked.

"Perhaps to you. Not generally."

He didn't ask for details. David understood. There remained the matter of that hidden treasure in the cave in Brazil and all the needy children Kit wanted it to help.

The doctor examined them, complete with X-rays. He determined that Kit's wounds, internal and external, would heal on their own. He counted one hundred and sixty three flesh wounds from the caning he had received. Rather than clean each one – though Kit offered to stay as long as it would take his nurse to attend to each and every one of them – the doctor shot them full of antibiotics and provided oils and antiseptic to add to the bath or hot tub, and sprays for use during travel time. David's cuts and scrapes would benefit from them as well.

David had broken his shoulder in the tumble down the mountain side. It was set in a moisture proofed plaster cast. His ankle was severely sprained – perhaps in need of surgery later. It was bound and fitted with a brace. Kit was instructed in its care. Twelve stitches pulled the gaping wound closed across David's forehead and eyebrow. An anti-venom shot was administered mostly as a precaution. It did not appear to have been poisonous.

"You will both remain in considerable pain for several weeks," the doctor said in the end.

Kit and David smiled into each other's faces.

"No amount of pain will ever matter again, Doctor," Kit said. "It's one of those things where you just had to be there to understand."

Upon returning to their suite their first objective was to ease themselves into the medicated water of the hot tub.

After a chorus of ooo's and ahhhh's Kit had one of his less than elegant – although dependably honest – observations.

"This may be a post-puberty first for me. I'd *really* rather just sit here and recuperate right now than work myself up into an ejaculation. It gives me a deeper appreciation of how it must be for old guys like you."

He giggled then winced in pain.

"Remind me not to laugh for a while. It appears that the only parts on my body that don't reek with pain are my eyelids, and interestingly they seem to play

no part in the physiology of laughing.”

They sat in silence for some time welcoming the relief of the pulsing water and the soothing effects of the balms.

"So you really believe we did it?" Kit said at last. There was still some question in his tone.

"Yes, I do. Ari's a man of determined action in things like this. If we had failed I'm sure he wouldn't have dawdled around this long."

"Kit smiled. From what you've told me about Ari and his constant bevy of female companions, I wouldn't have thought he'd have ever felt the need to dawdle."

He giggled again. He winced again, doubled over with his index finger raised high.

"It was worth it," he said referring to the humor over the pain.

More silence.

"You're going to visit him."

"We, if you're willing."

"A confrontation?" Kit asked.

"A reunion. Very likely a good-bye, I'm afraid."

Kit nodded.

"You love him."

"Yes, I love him."

"He love you?"

"He used to say he did. If he has ever loved anyone I believe he loves me."

"This relationship of yours may be too odd to write about, you know?"

"What do you mean?"

"Two, loving, best friends, fighting to the near death over the fate of the human species."

David nodded with a raised eyebrow. He, too, winced in pain.

"I see what you mean."

"I'm glad I was able to go through it with you, Uncle David. I'm glad you wanted me here beside you. It will be like the greatest secret ever kept, you know?"

David smiled and nodded.

"I'm sorry you had to go through that horrible ordeal today, Kit. You showed unbelievable courage and selflessness. I hurt every time I look at your body."

"I imagine I'll be left with some scars. Not sure how I'll explain them."

"Maybe, you were going for a nude stroll during a hail storm?" David suggested hoping for a smile.

He got one.

"Good as any. Or, I could just say I was beaten unmercifully by a hundred

nude duds in Orange Turbans in a valley somewhere in the Middle East – all that just prior to being elevated to the status of a living god by their high priest."

"I'm sure neither explanation would seem believable."

"About the wounds, I'll have to ask Megan to just . . . I guess I have some thinking to do about how to handle that."

"You'll work it out."

"There is one upside to the beating, you know," Kit said.

"I can hardly wait to hear."

"Well, my dawdling device was so badly damaged that it will be unstrokeable for weeks. That kind of inactivity will undoubtedly work to foster the *best* dreams any guy my age has ever had!"

David shook his head. He knew the boy was totally serious and figured his immediate future would evidence a noticeable increase in the frequency of naps. The thirty hour ride to Rochester should provide a good start, he thought.

David was suddenly restless to get on with things.

"You think you'll be up to leaving in the morning?" he asked Kit.

"Oh yes! I assume the sooner to Ari the sooner home."

"I can't reach my cell," David said. "Can you call Connie and make arrangements?"

"Connie, my man. The Kitster here. We've decided we'd like to be on our way in the morning. Is that a possibility?"

"Already got a flight plan filed. Just awaiting date and time. Six o'clock be satisfactory."

"Six will be great. Will you let Jakko know, please?"

"All set, Unc. You heard. Six in the a.m. I'm excited. I haven't been letting myself think about going home. I suppose we need to nail down a cover story that will be consistent between us."

"For certain. There will be time for that. Right now I'd just like to hang here, lost in time and space for a while."

He closed his eyes.

* * *

Ari was overreacting again, more like a sophomore than a well studied man only hours away from receiving his Ph.D.

"She came here with a scratch on her face! Can you believe that? I pay for perfect bodies and she had the nerve to show up with a scratch on her cheek."

"I'd have gladly taken her so you could have had your usual duo of Miss Perfects," David said.

"You settle too easily. If you don't demand the best you'll never get anything but second best."

"Seems to me your reaction about it earlier *demand*ed yourself into half of the double dose of perfect females you prefer to ravage each evening."

"It was okay. Dotty has lots of stamina."

"Why would a little scratch bother you so, really?"

"I don't like such things. Hate getting cut myself. Makes me sick to see others that way."

"Dates back to your beatings as a boy, no doubt."

Ari grew gravely serious and fixed his gaze on David's eyes.

"They were unmerciful, Dave. I felt so helpless just having to stand there and take punch after punch after punch never knowing when it would stop. I'd pray to pass out. When I'd double over in pain he'd straighten me up by the hair and slap my face 'til I'd be bleeding from my mouth and nose and ears."

"And, even with those horrible memories, you will still have it done to your sons."

He remained silent, then changed the subject.

"I ordered a hearty, Indiana, dinner for us this evening. Smoked ham, corn on the cob, and all the trimmings. Apple pie for dessert."

"What's the occasion?"

"Dave Appreciation Day."

"I'm honored not to mention surprised beyond belief. What gives?"

"You've been my only real friend these past six years. Most people won't put up with me; I'm well aware of that. I don't understand why *you* do. I'm used to buying companionship, but you refuse to take money or gifts from me. You either see something in me others don't or you're an out and out masochist. Since I don't believe the latter, I'm left adrift after all this time. After graduation tomorrow, we'll be taking our brand new PhD's in different directions. I had hoped to have it figured out by then."

"This may be a disappointing start to an answer, Ari, but my liking you is probably less about you than it is about me."

"You are communicating pure confusion."

"I have several needs that you fulfill."

"Sex."

"You may not have noticed but you have personally *never* fulfilled any of my sexual needs."

Ari smiled and waited, realizing he was on the wrong track.

"I have strong needs in the areas of intellectual curiosity, the exploration of ideas of all kinds, wondering about the unknown, argument for argument's sake. There are others. You fulfill them for me."

"So you really don't like me."

"You have to know there is very little about you as a person that I *like*, Ari. We've plowed that ground a hundred times. I love you. You are a precious being to me. I would never want anything bad to happen to you. I would rush to your rescue if that were required."

"Six years and I still haven't figured you out, Dave."

"Worse than that, *Aristotle*, you've failed to figure out how much I dislike being called Dave."

Ari smiled.

"My way of maintaining control. I seem to have a need to do that, in case you hadn't noticed."

They smiled.

"I've never said this to anybody including my family, but I am really going to miss you, *David*. Not just the intellectual stuff you mentioned – that's all important to me, too – but I really am fond of you. In and around your brutal honesty and disgusting, tenacious, belief in the value of man, there are things I admire. People *like* you. People *hate* me. People take you seriously when you speak. People are merely polite enough to hear me out. Your life is built on positive goals – well, goals *you* see as positive. By that I really mean you are working beyond yourself to construct and preserve and improve things – positive in that building rather than the mindless, tearing down, sense.

"My life is clearly centered about me and my pleasures. I have only two passions. Sexual pleasure and the destruction of the Human Species."

"Not so, Ari. You also love knowledge and ideas, and finding and confronting the important perspectives life presents."

"But all that's play. I have no intention of doing anything positive with it. That's not entirely true. I will do what I can to annihilate humans, and to me, and to the long-view of nature that has to be positive."

David furrowed his brow in protest, then responded.

"Your desire to save the planet *is* positive. Killing off man toward that end is *not* positive. Never confuse the two!"

"We'll never agree on so many things and yet we are in full agreement about so much. It has been a strange relationship. Perhaps I'll have to be content to see it in that way."

The food arrived. It was most definitely Indiana good!

* * *

David and Kit laughed well beyond the point at which the pain became just too great – the two of them groaning and wincing, trying to help each other out of the hot tub.

Being so sore they opted to drip dry before heading to bed. Neither was hungry. Both were exhausted.

"Can I sack in with you tonight?" Kit asked when the time finally came.

"Of course. Be like old times. I prefer not to be alone either."

"This may sound strange, Uncle David, love being an absolute term like 'perfect', but either I do love you more now than before all of this started, or I've just been given the opportunity to recognize its depth."

David smiled.

"Either way, there is no one in the universe whose love I cherish more

than yours. Thank you for that, son."

"It wasn't a call for you to confirm your love for me, you know, Uncle David. I've been certain of your love for longer than I've known what love is."

"Then when I say I love you, you understand."

"I do, and with that I pronounce us Uncle and Nephew until whenever do we part."

Gingerly, each reclined on the bed.

"Comfortable?" David asked at last.

"No! You?"

"No! But there is an upside to pain, you know."

"Upside?" Kit asked.

"If you can feel pain you know you're alive. It came to me up in the tunnel this afternoon. I'll never complain about it again."

"Uncle David?"

"Yes."

"I'm thinking of maybe starting college at North Manford in the fall instead of way off at Harvard. I can always go there for my PhD later on."

"As wonderful a school as it is, you're not likely to find your Ari at insular *Manford College*."

"You're saying I need my Ari?"

"I'm saying *everybody* needs their Ari."

"Good night, Uncle David."

"Good night, young loved one."

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO EPILOGUE

No one questioned why Kit opted to make the journey in his birthday suit. By the time they neared Rochester his wounds had healed to the point of constant irritation. The spray eased the itching so he requested it often.

The gash over David's eye had stopped seeping and hardened into a thick, dark, scab, which secured itself around the base of his eyebrow hairs. True to the doctor's pronouncement, his shoulder and ankle continued in pain. He was doing better with the crutches.

They both slept during much of the trip, which worked to shorten it in their minds.

"Set down in fifteen minutes," Alex said poking his head through the cockpit door into the cabin. Need help dressing?"

"Yes. Thanks," Kit said. "I doubt if my old friend, *Lefty*, over there will be of much assistance."

"May I make a suggestion, then, from one who has dealt with more abrasions, cuts, and bruises, than you can possibly imagine."

"Sure!"

"Wear long johns under your outerwear. They will cling to your body rather than sliding back and forth over the wounds. They will shield you against the same from your pants and shirt."

"Long johns in July would not have been my first choice, but you make sense. They are in my big suitcase under my bunk."

Many chuckles later, both Kit and David were dressed and pronounced fit for public display. Alex cut David's shirt to allow passage of his cast and then pinned it back together with deftness suggesting a well-practiced history.

Kit was the first to leave the plane. David spoke to Alex in low tones and they embraced before he followed the boy down the steps. Again, there was a limo waiting. With some effort they entered through separate doors and were soon at the medical center.

"I have instructions to show you to a suite in this building if you want me to," the driver said.

"Yes. Please. That will be helpful," David said.

Inside, they stopped a few yards from the door; it was flanked by two, substantial, Greek looking, bodyguards.

"If he is dying, as I suspect, he may not look so good, Kit. I don't know how to prepare us beyond that."

Kit nodded. He reached over and squeezed his Uncle's hand, understanding this was really between David and Ari. He wasn't sure if he were there as extra baggage or to serve some actual purpose. From *his* standpoint, he was there to support his uncle.

David took a deep breath, adjusted the crutches under his arms, and they approached the door. With no questions one man opened it and the other announced, softly, "Dr. Lawrence and Kit."

They entered a large, open, area, appointed like a lavish living room. There were floor to ceiling windows across the far wall, which allowed a panoramic view of the city and the beauty of Green Minnesota beyond. A hospital bed faced the windows. Two, private duty nurses relaxed in a sitting area near the door.

One stood and approached them speaking low. He is expecting you – eagerly anticipating you would be more accurate. He seems to have been following the progress of a trip you've been on the past few weeks. Quite honestly, that seems to be all that has been keeping him alive."

"Aids I assume," David said very little question in his tone.

She nodded.

"Became acute a little over a year ago."

David moved toward the bed. Kit hesitated until his uncle motioned him to follow.

David fashioned a smile and began speaking with some force and enthusiasm even before he was within Ari's range of vision.

"Ari! Ari! He's our man. If he can't do HER, nobody can!"

He winced upon first glance at the emaciated form, plugged with tubes and wires, and surrounded by electronic boxes and screens where jagged, green, lines tracked as if repeating through a time warp.

David reached down and took Ari's hand.

"It's been too long, old friend," David said.

Ari's hand exhibited no ability to return the squeeze.

"I'd like you meet the grown up version of that new little nephew we used to talk about. Ari, Kit. Kit, Ari."

"Pleased to meet you, Sir. I've endured endless hours listening to my Uncle recount his conversations with you – word . . . by word . . . by word."

Ari's words were labored and his voice weak.

"I like the boy, David. Speaks his mind like you. Harvard, I hear."

"I've been accepted, there. Yes!"

"Girlfriend?"

"Yes, Sir. Megan. Fantastic in every way. I'm more than eager to see her again."

Ari nodded a single nod.

"Sit! . . . Coffee? Soda? Cadillac? The nurses will find whatever's your

pleasure."

"Coffee, Unc? I'll go take care of things with them."

He left.

"An eye for the ladies, I see," Ari said his eyes indicating Kit."

"Very much."

David reached into his shirt pocket and removed the gold coins they had found during the mission. He held them up so Ari could see what they were.

"Found some things, recently, that I believe may belong to you."

He then closed them into Ari's palm.

It produced a faint smile and the hint of a nod.

"You have had a good life since the old days?" Ari asked.

"Extraordinary, I'd say. Doing what I love to do, surrounded by people I love."

"Your lady? Will you be marrying her?"

"A few weeks ago I couldn't have said with any certainty. Now, it's most definitely a yes if she'll have me."

"Will you have children?"

"My nephew has convinced me I need to be a father."

"You've been a father to Kit, I understand."

"You're an incurable snoop, Ari Stephanopoulos."

"What can I say?"

"Is there anything I can do for you, Ari?"

"Stay with me? A month ago they gave me two weeks to live so we're not talking long term commitment here."

"Of course, I'll stay. Do you have family?"

"Never married. Your fault. Convinced me I had no business entering into that sort of a relationship. I do have a son, though, Ari IIX. Hope you can meet him sometime. He's nine. Lives with his mother in Greece. She is very good with him. He'll turn out to be one of the *good guys* that you used to speak of. It seems, now, he will be my only legacy."

Kit returned with the drinks.

"Excuse us a moment, Ari," David said patting his old friend's hand.

David walked with Kit back toward the door.

"I'm going to stay with him. It may be a day. It may be a week. I want you to go on home. By the way, how about explaining your cuts with a story about skydiving into a thicket of tall, spiny, brush?"

"It would be a lie of course."

"It would help maintain a secret the world must never know. No truthful answer can do that. And, the sky diving thing couldn't hurt your image."

"I think it's time we co-authored an essay titled: *Truth Telling: when and where it's appropriate and not.*"

"Good! We'll need something to do come August. I do hope you

understand that I'm not going to keep providing holiday outings like this for you every month."

They embraced.

"Love you Uncle David"

"Love you, Kit. See you soon."

Kit left and David returned to his chair by the bed.

"I have an article marked in that journal on the night stand, there," Ari said.

David sensed some urgency present in his tone. He picked it up and read the cover aloud. "The *New Scientist* of September 24th 1987?"

"Yes," Ari said. "The article by Edward Harrison. I was re-reading it a few weeks ago and that one passage sounds so much like you and me – well, the opposite of that passage, I suppose. I marked it. It's one of those cardinal concepts that we, unlike most people, always understood and agreed to, regardless of our many other philosophic differences. We rose above the arrogance – the security blanket – of the human's here and now. It kept us congenial. It kept us searching and our minds open to new possibilities – if only a crack, sometimes. I now understand that it was the positive basis of our relationship. Read what I've marked – out loud."

Human beings of all societies in all periods of history believe that their ideas on the nature of the real world are the most secure, and that their ideas on religion, ethics and justice are the most enlightened. Like us, they think that final knowledge is at last within reach. Like us, they pity the people in earlier ages for not knowing the true facts. Unfailingly, human beings pity their ancestors for being so ignorant and forget that their descendants will pity them for the same reason."

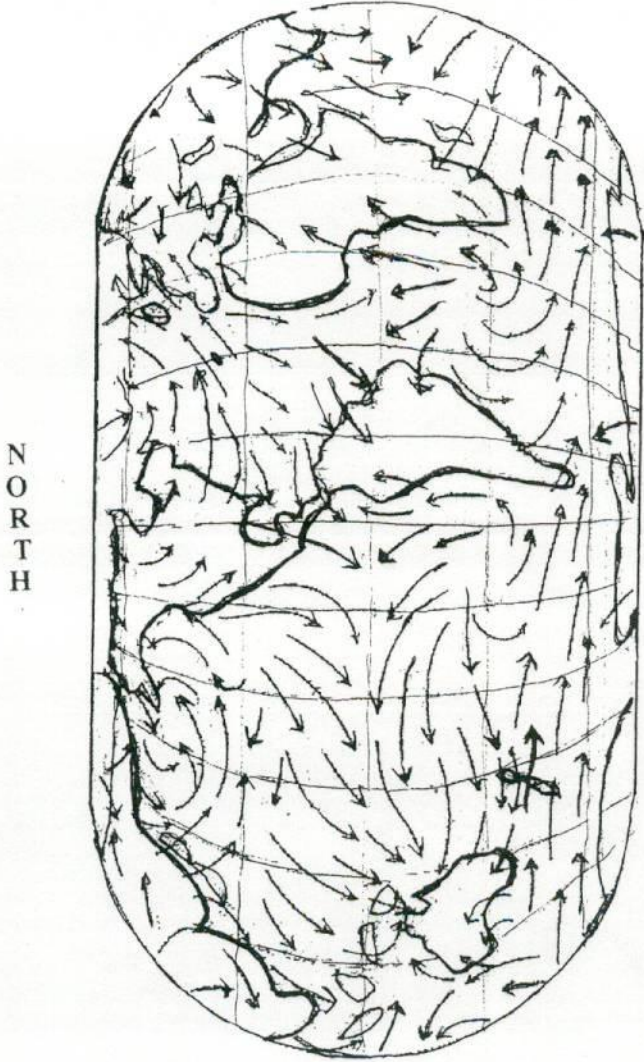
David closed the journal and looked up, nodding and smiling into Ari's face.

"I agree, Ari. Together we kept each other from falling into that insidious trap."

Ari returned the smile and closed his eyes. The coins tumbled to the floor. Ari was gone.

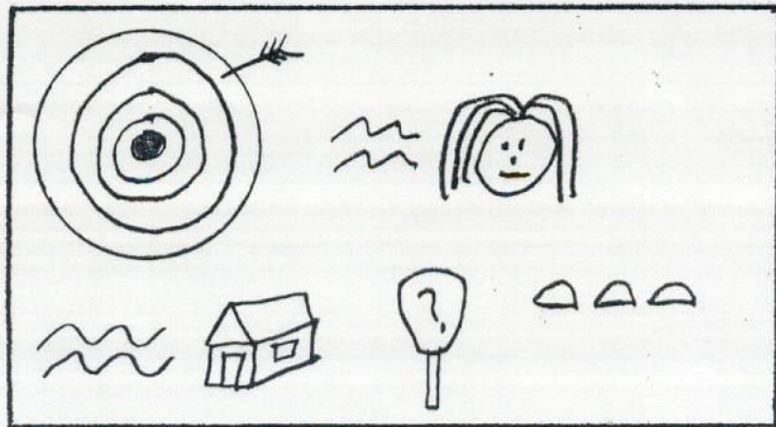
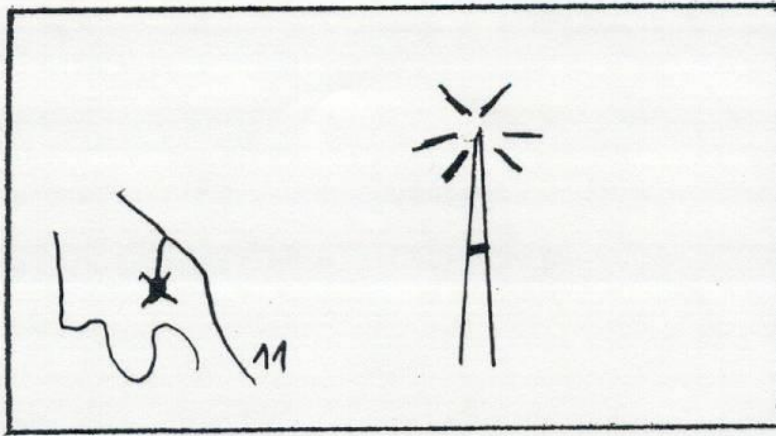
THE END

**Kit's quick sketch of
Global Wind Patterns**

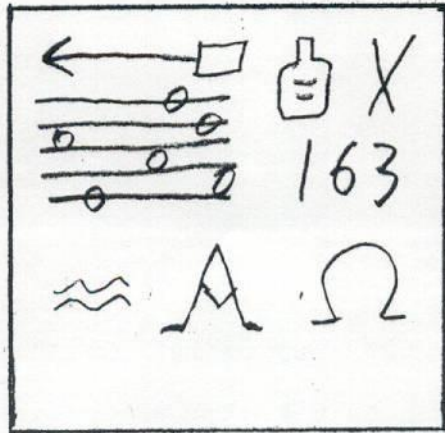
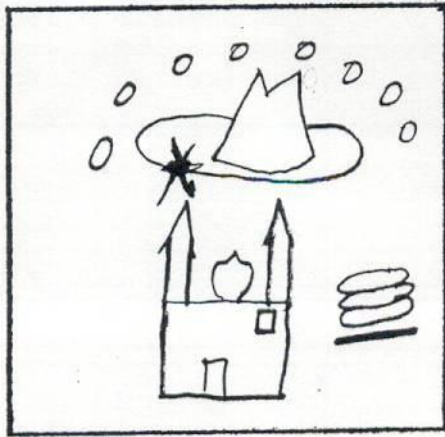


David's renderings of the six box panels

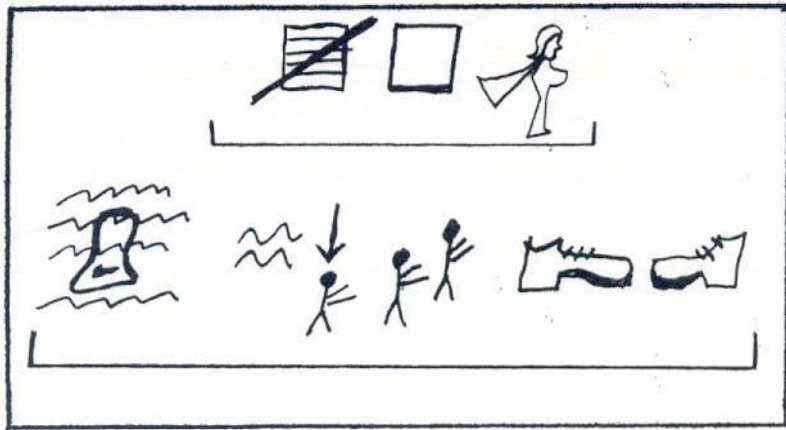
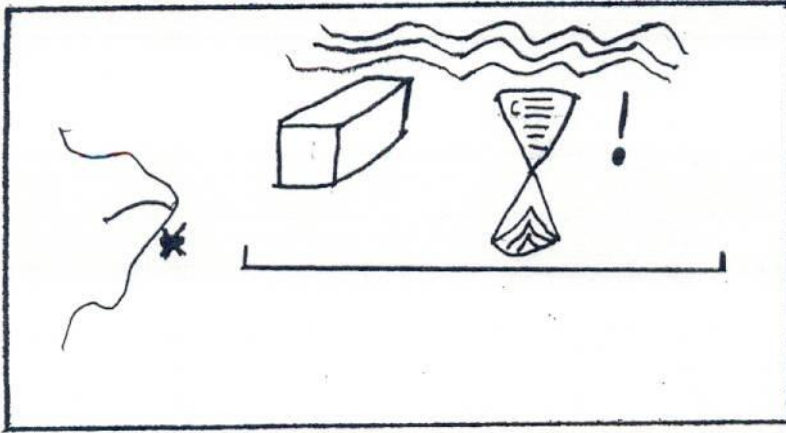
WHITEHORSE, YUKON



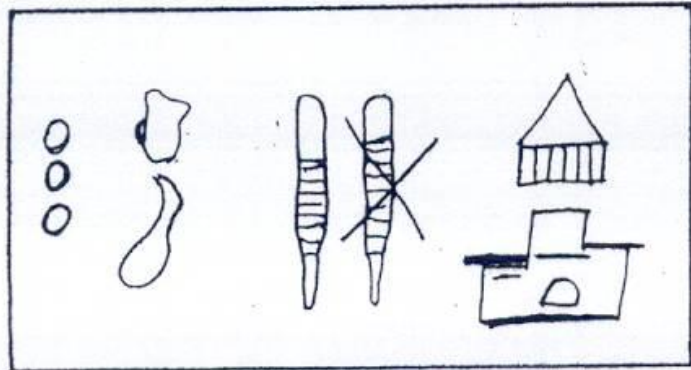
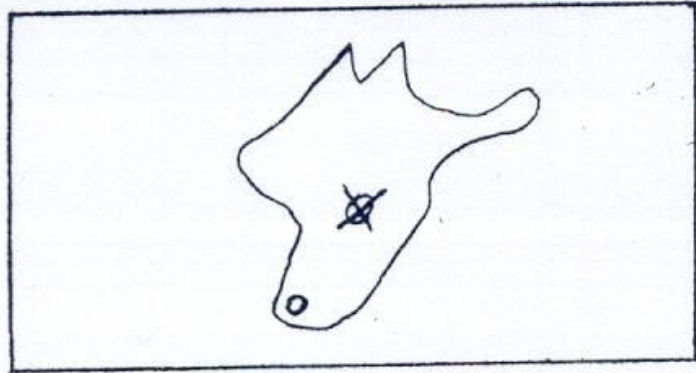
PICO, AZORES



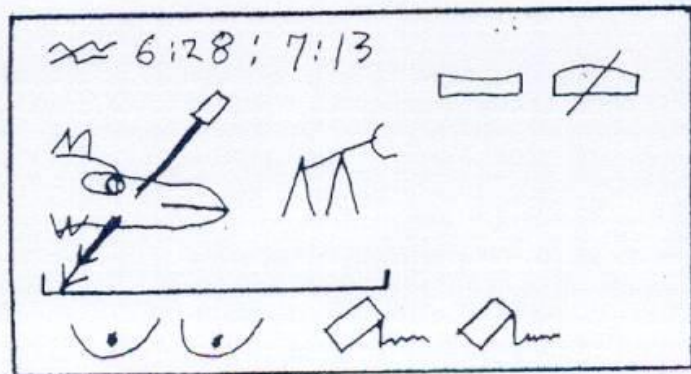
BRAZIL



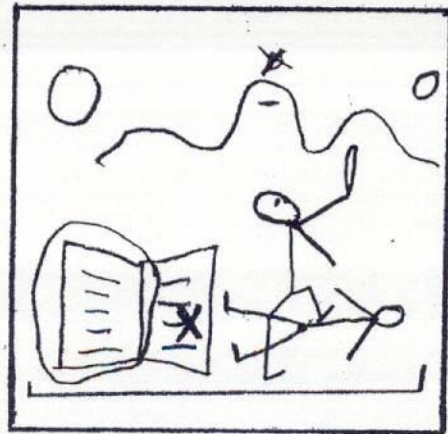
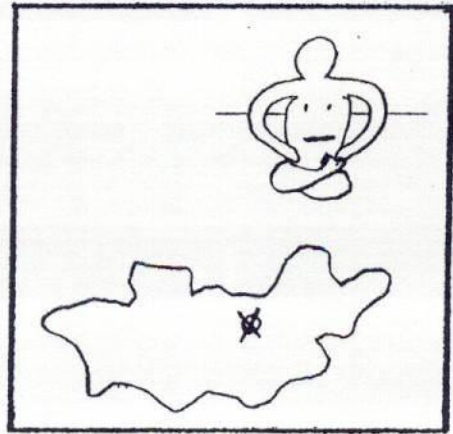
New Zealand



New Zealand, Supplemental



MONGOLIA



TEHRAN

