

## 1

*The end of the world was not so bad. Even at a young age Trebor knew Alta-Shar was collapsing. He held his father's strong callused hand and followed the Montang down the rock terraced, mountain trail. The silver star cruisers had spun out of the vermilion skies, but the morning attack convinced him the Montang survivors would stay on the run and avoid the towering creatures during the final purge.*

*He had seen their green bodies strewn across the river sands. His father called them Creods. They were twice as tall as his father, with long thin bodies and heads larger than Montang foodstuff bags. Their blue-black mesh eyes bore little resemblance to smaller Alta-Sharian eyes. Yellow crusted blood leaked from their open wounds and pink fangs stuck out from their little mouths. Trebor longed for the world he knew before the cluster attacks.*

*The advance scout leaped over the trail rocks and the Montang stopped. “ We cannot leave the mountains!”*

*“ Why not?” asked Sator.*

*“ The cluster ships occupy the skies and cover all the land to Tarcin City. There is no way to cross without being seen.”*

*Many Montang members voiced anger at the news. Too many Alta-Sharians were already dead. Trebor's own Mother and sister were struck down as they ran from the attack last week.*

*The scout tried to yell over their chatter. “ Wait! We have another course! We do... Follow the ancient legends. Listen to what the Learned Ones have taught us and find Ta-Buhn-Shar. We may be the last of the Alta-Sharian people. Ta-Buhn-Shar is the last hope of our people!”*

*Trebor's father stepped forth from the confusion. “ The scout is right. It is said the Shrine of Ta-Buhn-Shar contains the passageway to other worlds.”*

*“ That is only legend,” said a dirty little man named Aoak from across the circle.*

*One of the white bearded Learned Ones held up a well worn, faded red book. The Montang fell to the ground as he lowered the book and opened it slowly in dusk's orange light. Trebor tried to understand his weak voice.*

*“ Hear the word of Ta-Buhn-Shar: ‘ We have left our mark. The Buhnsharf stretches to the sky. It is clear. The haven. The resting place. It is the door to the other worlds*

*and forever. Where the Carpun meets the Berverltin above the Sempta. The way set forth. Trust your convictions and the passage shall be made clear.' The way of Ta-Buhn-Shar!"*

*Thunder again rumbled down the canyon. Trebor scrambled behind the rocks and blocked his ears as the green flashes lit the clouds. The first blast was muffled and far away, but the ground slowly shook. His father's arm was locked around Trebor's back as pebbles and sand trickled down the cliffs. Somehow the mountains protected the Montang from the cluster probes. The Creods could not attack as long as he hid below the rock ledges.*

*The battle was distant as the afternoon light darkened. Occasional blasts soon faded and the frightening flashes stopped. The Montang stayed under the ledge until the cruisers were really gone.*

*Trebor's father hoisted him into the evening air. He raised his arm and spoke loudly. " You heard the Learned One. Between the Carpun and the Berverltin! The two most prominent sky figures and only seen in the upper part of the planet... meeting at the portion of the sky directly overhead, the Sempta."*

*Trebor let his mind be taken by the truth as he resonated to Ta-Buhn-Shar. And his inner soul sensed the need and the purpose to find the Shrine and escape the Creod*

*invaders. He resonated deeply and fell to the ground with the others.*

\* \* \*

Loftus could not halt his mind's journey into wavy, white light. Phil snapped his fingers. A befuddled look swept across his balding, gray haired friend's thin face. After ten sessions, deep under hypnosis, Phil should have deciphered this Creod stuff.

## 2

**July 10, 2048**

“Loftus, are you all right?” asked Phil.

Loftus swiped the sweat puddle off his brow. The regressions always zapped his strength and not understanding his forays to the far away planet frustrated him. “You're the doctor here. What the hell is going on?”

“I don't know.”

Loftus staggered to his feet. Indirect or evasive answers were unacceptable. Phil's psychiatric credentials with the Defense Secret Service were impeccable. “Phil, I brought you over here to find out why I keep having these dreams about aliens... spaceships... Come on. What gives?”

“I listened to a report from the Central Feeds last night. I wasn't going to bring it up.”

“Bring up what?” asked Loftus, shaking his head. “I trust no one. That's my credo.”

“ Fine.” Phil lifted his computer into his palm. “ Well, there was a report in northern Canada... a report of an alien sighting. I transmitted it into my portable.”

“ I'm game.”

Phil stared at the portable. “ Run the Canada audio.”

The machine clicked and the sound blasted. “... was seen two times late Tuesday afternoon. One witness described the creature as alien in nature and well over seven feet tall near an isolated tundra stretch. A man driving home with his family in a pickup truck saw the being, whom he described as green skinned and mesh eyed, board a high powered aircraft, which disappeared north into the evening skies. No further reports have been confirmed.”

“ So what?” asked Loftus.

“ Sounds like your Creed.”

He waved his hand. “ What are you telling me, I'm picking up the Central Feeds in my head now?”

Phil walked over to Loftus's roll top desk and sat in the creaky oak chair. He plopped the portable on the desk and exhaled.

“ Loftus, I tell you, I don't know what's going on.”

“ I've known you for fifteen years. Since the damned Chinese action. You've seen everything that's happened in my life since then. We're good friends... Am I losing my mind? I mean if it's turning to mush, let me know.”

“ I have a theory.”

Loftus folded his arms. “ What is it?”

“ We now live in a time after a worldwide economic crash, when our cities are collapsing and surrounded by barrier walls. The gap between rich and poor has spawned violence in urban areas.”

“ This mess never should have happened.”

“ That's what I'm saying. Our cities are armed military camps. People have joined the gangs opposing the government and are in the streets in open warfare... The Vice President killed by a rocket attack on the White House, itself. Numerous attempts to kill the President.”

“ That news is all distributed by the Central Feeds to the media outlets, Phil. I don't even watch it anymore.”

“ I think you may be assuming responsibility for all of this because of what happened with you six years ago.”

“ I only know these dreams are real. It's like I am *reliving them...*”

“ Well, that's absurd thinking. Look, Go back downstairs to your restaurant, Loftus. Be grateful you live over the bridge, in an area untouched by violence and you're not involved with the Panthers or DSS anymore.”

“ There are power blackouts all the time. I lost a freezer's worth food last week here at the restaurant.”

“ Right, but there aren't armed patrols around this building. People aren't dying in Sausalito.”

Loftus extended his arms. “ If I'm not already crazy, I will be.”

“ You've become edgy.”

Owning The Loft was not the same as fighting in the service and Phil knew it. Loftus paced like a dog waiting for its owner to return home. “ Edgy? Sure, I'm edgy. Here running a restaurant when we're falling into the dark ages and I should be sitting in the Director's office at DSS. Instead we have Norman King as President of the United States and that dumb-ass, Harmon Mundy in charge at DSS. But my dream fell apart six years ago, didn't it Phil?”

Phil nodded slowly. “ Loftus... Loftus, you have a great penchant for taking the world upon your shoulders. Nathan Allsworthy died on your watch. You were head of campaign security, but it wasn't your fault. You can't blame yourself.”

Loftus stopped and clamped his arms again. He concurred with Phil's point and gave him no argument. “ Are you coming downstairs?”

“ Maybe later I'll have some supper. Right now I have to go back to the office.” Phil tightened his hand on Loftus's shoulder as Loftus' wrist phone beeped. “ Loftus, don't worry. I'll get to the bottom of these dreams. I promise.”

Loftus smiled, not really believing his friend would find a solution. He shook Phil's hand and waited as Phil headed down the stairs. Then he pushed the red button on the wrist

phone and spoke the code to the phone's computer. "Computer: Eleven-eleven."

A rolling series of beeps merged into a crackled transmission. The computer adjusted the gain. "Desperado?"

Loftus' face tensed. No one had used his service cover name in years and very few people even knew of its existence. "Who the hell is this?"

"Someone who needs your help, Desperado. Before everything falls apart. Can you hear me?"

"I hear you... Who is your contact?" asked Loftus, looking at the red digits of an external number on his wrist screen.

"I need your help."

"And I need your contact!"

The computer now displayed a blue and yellow map. This guy was standing at the far end of the quickrail station in Oakland. After a short silence the man blurted out more information. "Crow's Peak."

Frank Deluca, Loftus's former service officer, now a special assistant to President King had used Crow's Peak as his DSS name. The voice suddenly gained credibility.

"Okay, I'll bite. Crow's peak... Interesting. What do you want and what is your cover?"

Loftus perked his ears as the man described how he had met Crow's Peak, but he would not say when nor where.

Deluca had designated the guy as Water Balloon and wanted no contact until Loftus had fully debriefed Water Balloon. Loftus listened for ten or fifteen more seconds, but when Water Balloon talked about being involved in a covert operation, Loftus erupted. “ You listen to me, hotshot, we've been on this line for forty-eight seconds. It takes fifty-seven seconds for the best computers to bug a Band 65 transmission!”

Loftus shouted out a safe external number on the San Francisco side of bridge and said he would be there in ten minutes. Then his phone timer light flashed red. But he did not override automatic termination. Dozens of computers in some monitoring station were in the preliminary stages of unscrambling his signal. A civilian having a DSS Band 65 phone was illegal. He could be jailed just for using it.

As he raced across his office, Water Balloon's phone call stirred his stomach like a spinning food blender. Over the past few years he had stayed away from anything resembling intelligence work. Other than his alien nightmares, things at The Loft rolled along smoothly. Getting involved with Frank Deluca, he thought, as he bounded down the stairs, was not the most prudent course, but fighting the lure of adventure proved difficult. Six years had passed since his last official assignment.

In the underground garage he jumped into his red convertible, started the car, but hesitated. Did he really need

aggravation? He pressed his lips and shifted into reverse. His fingers wrapped around the shifter. He wanted redemption in his life and the excitement of covert work. Muscling the clutch, he skidded up the concrete ramp. The sunlight glare hit his eyes as he merged into traffic, flipped his sunshades and thought about Deluca. Not many people would be given access to his old cover. As he drove toward the bridge he wondered about the real importance of Water Balloon's call.

Out of habit, just like the old days, he repeatedly checked his rearview mirror. He shifted with the traffic flow. The easy thing would be to turn around, drive back to the garage, and spend the evening at the restaurant. The traffic clogged and Water Balloon inundated his thoughts as precious minutes ticked by on his wrist clock. He tapped his fingers on the wood steering wheel.

Maybe this was a set-up just like six years ago. As he gazed over the shimmering bay water toward San Francisco, the whole ugly scenario came rushing back like the incoming tide under the bridge. His idol and mentor, D. Nathan Allsworthy had just received the party's nomination in Long Beach, and Captain Thomas B. Loftus commanded all security for the campaign.

He had taken all precautions to clear the harbor and his people had scanned Allsworthy's boat a hundred times. Even the satellites, the sky patrols, and the bay boats saw nothing unusual. Now the explosion rumbled through time

and the fireball flared skyward. Back then he knew immediately his career had disintegrated along with the debris raining through the balmy air. There would be no general election campaign. The scapegoat, Captain Thomas B. Loftus, would brood on the sidelines as the Vice Presidential nominee went down to a stunning defeat against Norman King. Allsworthy never would have walled off the cities. He had walked with the masses through the barrios and slums, and invested in industry zones without polarizing people. His planned inauguration, all the hopes to stabilize the economy through appropriate tax reductions, urban revitalization and new industries were only fleeting incarnations now. Loftus was a fool for rehashing it.

He finally accelerated toward the dull, red Golden Gate, but quickly slowed at the military barricades. Troops clad in olive fatigues rounded green camouflaged convoy trucks. He could remember a time when he crossed the bridge freely. In the distance, over the bay, a fifteen foot cracked concrete wall with internal sensors and barbed wire tangled above, lined the waterfront. Phil was right about his living on the Sausalito side.

The computers evaluated his entry card and the troops waved him through the checkpoint. Loftus drove under the suspended cables and crested the bridge. Once off the bridge he shot off the ramp and slid across the stones to the external phone behind the rest area building. He fixated on

his image in the side mirror. His bright blue eyes longed for action as the wind blew back his sandy hair. Eleven minutes had passed since the end of his wrist phone transmission. He crossed his arms over his chest. To his right the troops moved the traffic across the bridge in pulses like his pounding heart. This was not an ordinary call with Deluca involved.

The phone ring shook him and he ripped the receiver from the hook. “ Yeah...”

“ Desperado?”

“ Who the *hell* is this?”

“ Water Balloon.”

“ Okay, time to level with me, buddy.”

“ I would prefer not to do that,” he said. “ At least not right now.”

“ Look, start talking or I hang up.”

“ Crow's Peak told me to come directly to you. My life is in great danger at this point. I'm on my way to San Francisco.”

Loftus could not resist getting involved and Deluca was asking for his help. He owed Deluca from way back. “ Where are you now?”

“ I cannot comment on that.”

“ Well, you damn as well better if you want my help.”

The line hiss hung in the earpiece. “ Are you there?”

“ Listen, people are being murdered.”

“ What people?” asked Loftus.

“ Crow's Peak said only you could unravel this. He said RIMA is involved.”

“ How do you know about RIMA?”

“ I don't. That's what he told me to tell you.”

Research In Mechanical Application, the advanced scientific development side of DSS, hidden from Congress and the public, had produced striking advancements when he was with the service.

“ That's interesting.”

“ I will contact you again.”

“ Yeah, but-” The transmission ended, he hung up and stared at the phone. Maybe he needed to get to the Oakland quickrail station. He peered around the log building back to the bridge.

“ Loftus, what the hell have you gotten yourself into?”

He turned toward the bay and took a long breath. Water Balloon was directed by one of the most powerful people in the country. The sailboats moving gracefully across the inner bay contrasted the turmoil brewing in his head. His life had slipped into a secure routine at The Loft and he was hesitant to break the cycle, yet the thought of getting involved proved too compelling.

### 3

He had built The Loft to overlook the bay. The city lights twinkled now as he paced the outside deck. Zach left over an hour ago and was overdue. He raised the frost Bourbon and water glass to his lips and smiled, knowing how much he thrived on stress. Even with the current upheaval he missed the field assignments and risking his life chasing down real and perceived enemies. Maybe he needed danger to confirm his own existence.

His wrist phone sounded and **11:11** flashed bright red on the blue crystal display. Zach had just indicated Water Balloon was in the restaurant van. Loftus finished his drink and plowed through his restaurant. As he passed into the main dining room a few patrons waved to him from the congested outside canopy. His staff of waiters, carrying full food trays, darted between the tables, and the room buzzed. It was not a bad showing for a Thursday night.

He veered into the smoky lounge. The music blasted from large floor speakers and the people were rowdy. He jaunted up the wood staircase to his office, pushed the alarm code and, once inside, walked along the window span above the dining areas. At his desk he slid open the drawer containing the monitor control box and switched the main monitor to The Loft's underground garage. At any moment Zach would pilot the white restaurant van through the street entrance.

The adrenaline flowed now. Maybe getting into a clandestine operation after the Allsworthy fiasco was only a dream. By helping Deluca, he forced himself back into active duty, but risked Harmon Mundy keeping him under surveillance. His wrist phone sounded again as he scanned back to the lounge monitors.

" Aloha," said Zach.

The white van, with **THE LOFT** in deep green letters on the side, hurdled over the street hump and dipped into the garage's low light. Loftus smiled as Zach skidded next to the concrete delivery dock. Bushy haired and forever smoking a stale cigar stub, he drew his long barrel handgun as emerged in his jeans and gray sweatshirt. He trotted around the hood and yanked open the passenger side door. Water Balloon was short, in his twenties, with thick glasses and curly orange hair. He gingerly stepped onto the concrete. Loftus had never seen him before, but the monitor computer scanned his

image for a background check. As he followed them on another screen through a kitchen corridor, a composite profile, complete with photo, appeared in the corner of the main viewer.

**O'Brien, Mark J.**

**Appleton, Vermont**

**b. 4-01-36 ms: single**

**Employed: Appleton Police Dept.**

**Appleton, VT**

**NO ARRESTS**

***Further information available***

Loftus compressed his brow. He went to college in Appleton and Kath still there. On the third monitor Zach motioned the kid up the office stairs. Loftus stood and faced the door. Zach entered his code, the door beeped, and O'Brien looked scared as he entered the office.

“ Nobody on the scanner, Captain. We weren't followed.” Zach shut the door and reactivated the security locks. “ He tells me nobody knows he's gone. He has Thursdays and Fridays off.”

Loftus sat on the edge of his desk and stared at O'Brien's innocent face. He would give O'Brien ample opportunity to lie.

“ Drink?”

“ No thank you.”

Loftus moved toward him. “ Okay, who are you?”

“ Maybe I will have that drink.” He wrung hands over his folded blue windbreaker as Loftus opened the cherry wood liquor cabinet across from the monitors. “You are Desperado?”

“ Yup.” Loftus poured a hefty shot of whiskey into the water and mixed it in a heavy clear glass. He retraced his steps across the office and gazed into O'Brien's watery blue eyes.

“ Here, now who are you and why is your life in danger?”

O'Brien sipped the drink and squinted. “ My name is Mark O'Brien. I'm a police officer.”

At least he told the truth. “ Interesting,” said Loftus and he again sat on his desk. “ You don't look like a cop.”

“ Appleton is isolated, a rural area in the mountains... Not like the cities. I joined the Appleton force last November.”

Loftus looked at Zach and back to O'Brien. “ Appleton, Vermont?”

“ Yes, sir.”

“ I went to school in Appleton. New England University.” Loftus shook his head. “ How does some rookie police officer in a small hick college town like Appleton get placed in contact with Crow's Peak?”

O'Brien gripped the glass. His voice quivered. “ I have been given information.”

“ Right, RIMA. That is *classified* information,” said Loftus.

“ Does the name John Garvey mean anything to you?”

Loftus kept his face solid and said nothing. Garvey was a high-ranking DSS service officer, a cowboy, willing to take chances and very sure of himself. Considered ruthless, he carried out orders without question.

“ Perhaps Mr. O'Brien should take things from the top,” said Zach as he looked up from the monitors. He and Loftus both removed their guns.

Loftus trained his weapon at O'Brien's head. The kid's eyes opened wide behind the thick glasses. “ What do you know?”

Now he stammered. “ Back in... Appleton there's a gov... government operation, a project going on west of Southeast Mountain.”

Loftus had never forgotten the area from his college days. He pictured the angled mountain cliffs appearing like a tomahawk against the sky. “ Having to do with RIMA?”

“ I don't know exactly what RIMA is. This place is near the Notch and Route 114.”

“ I know the area you're talking about,” said Loftus.

“ Twenty years ago we all knew there was some kind of government warehouse up there. You could see it when you were hiking.”

O'Brien nodded, still holding the drink. “ Yeah, that's what I'm talking about.”

“ What's the point, O'Brien?”

“ I met a guy a few months back who works inside the project.”

Loftus furrowed his brow as he glanced at Zach. “ Why would there be a project up there?”

O'Brien downed the drink, cleared his throat and his words were raspy. “ I didn't know at first.”

“ What was the guy's name?” asked Zach, adding a flame to his stubby cigar.

“ Joey.”

“ That's it? Just Joey?” asked Loftus, the tension mounting.

“ You said you were a cop and you didn't get his last name?”

“ He was a friend! We met at one of the college bars. I wasn't interrogating him!” Loftus pulled the glass away and set it on the desk. O'Brien paused and then spoke loudly. Maybe the liquor was getting to him. “ He reported to a company called Denver Communications. He told me they

were involved with things that could only be described as science fiction.”

“ Denver Communications. Sounds like a front,” said Zach, puffing.

“ Joey didn't know about the work outside his area in Appleton. But his contacts said the potential for the wrong people in possession of this new technology was staggering. Just what he was doing was unbelievable! They were developing satellite transformers!”

Loftus tilted his head. “ What are satellite transformers?”

“An electrical transformer that transmits electricity subatmospherically.”

Loftus pulled Zach behind the desk and spoke in a low voice.

“ RIMA would attempt something like that. But still that's quite a leap. Maybe there's more to this than RIMA.”

“ What can we do about it, Captain?”

Loftus pressed his lips and studied O'Brien's pale face.

“ Nothing, but if Frank is asking for help. I owe Frank.”

“ We all owe Frank.”

Loftus nodded and tapped Zach on the shoulder as he walked slowly back to O'Brien. “ Number one, I want confirmation from Crow's Peak before I do anything. Second, how does this put your life in danger? You told me on the phone that-”

“ Everyone in town thinks this is a harmless research project. The selectmen, the local committees have been told that superconductor research is going on up there. See, we're away from all the fighting in the cities. The urban collapse didn't really affect Appleton. No one, including the press, questioned the superconductor stuff. But they don't know about the killings.”

O'Brien removed a round, reflective disk, about the size of a quarter and handed it to Loftus. Loftus noted the DSS code bar in the lower right corner. “ Okay, what about the killings? Who's been killed?” asked Loftus.

O'Brien took off his glasses. “ Joey told me people in high places.”

“ Am I supposed to be rattled by people in high places being killed? People are dying everyday in the cities. I want to know specifically *who* has been killed.”

O'Brien pushed his lips together and nodded. “ People who own or control energy concerns. And they've bought out other companies.”

“ Really?”

Zach snuffed out his cigar and crossed the room. “ That would make sense, Captain.”

“ Joey told me they have demonstrated the transformer on a small scale.” Loftus turned back to O'Brien. “ But they're gearing up for something called Phase One. When everything is brought together.”

“ But you don't have a list of those who have been killed?” asked Loftus.

“ Dr. Vandemeer has the list in his office at the University.”

“ Dr. *Horace* Vandemeer?”

“ Yes.”

Loftus rubbed his chin with his clenched fist as Zach mouthed Vandemeer's name. Now two high-ranking people from DSS were involved in this operation. “ He worked through the University... He told Joey that a few deaths were necessary in order to implement Phase One.” O'Brien's eyes moistened. “ He never told Joey the whole picture.”

“ Joey is dead, isn't he?” asked Loftus.

“ Yes... I'm the one who found the car. He had told me he was an engineer not an assassin. Joey was the person who gave me Crow's Peak's site address. He said use it if anything happened to him. Now they've killed him and could just as easily kill me!”

“ I won't argue that point.” Loftus tucked his gun under his sport coat and put his hand on O'Brien's shoulder. “ Listen, kid, it took a lot of guts to follow this thing through and come out here.”

“ They must suspect me just because I hung around with Joey. What can you do for me right now?”

“ I don't know. The first thing we need to do is get you to a safe place. Zach, see if Mikey is in The Loft. We'll put

O'Brien in his apartment for a few days while we figure this thing out.”

“ Yes, Captain.” Zach walked to the monitors. “ And Zach, run a complete background check on Mr. Water Balloon here and I want a guard stationed outside Mikey's apartment. Use one of our security people at the bar. Bring O'Brien over there now. If Mikey is downstairs, tell him I'll be in my place.”

“ Will do, Captain.” Zach gazed up from the monitors and had a cautious look in his eyes. “ Tom, are you sure you want to get involved in this?”

Loftus produced a short laugh and held the disk in his hand.

“ No, but if Frank wants me in this, then I'll get involved.”

“ I'm not worried about Harmon Mundy, but John Garvey scares me.”

“ Agreed. One thing at a time. Let's get O'Brien to safety.”

“ Yes, sir.”

O'Brien stood slowly and gulped. “ Thank you.”

“ Don't mention it.” Loftus smiled, shook his hand and returned to his desk. He watched O'Brien and Zach leave the office. With their departure, the high pressure way of life returned like a rumbling freight train down a darkened track. He stared at the monitors and worried about possible intelligence contacts planted in his restaurant right now.

He held his temples, felt light headed and hoped he would not retreat into his dream world. It was no less real when he was on Alta-Shar, traveling with the Montang and fleeing the Creod creatures. San Francisco seemed more like the dream every time he left Alta-Shar and came back. Maybe getting into this project and working with Frank Deluca would stop the vivid images of star cruisers, aliens, and distant planets.

# 4

Deluca's hair was grayer, but his heavysset frame, long face and bulbous nose had not changed. He sat in front of a picture window with a dozen wood panes and a forested slope outside. Loftus asked the computer to start the frozen image.

“ Tommy, this is going to be short and sweet. O'Brien has stumbled onto DSS shenanigans up at Southeast Mountain where you went to school in Appleton. Mundy has told us they're doing superconductor research. I've been up

there and I thought they were bullshitting me. Joe was my contact. They're doing something with electricity transmission and clearly hiding it. Tommy, you're outside the loop. Either you, Zach or your contacts need to find out what the hell is going on up there. I know Crazy John is involved and so is Horace Vandemeer. I think somebody's tapped into my site and my lines in Washington. Use my old DSS band, but only when you have proof of what's going on. Leave an encrypted report and then get the hell off the band."

Deluca leaned forward and smiled. " I'll tell you one thing, Tommy. When this is over, I'd like to put away a few at Chucky's Bar in El Paso." Loftus grinned and thought about the old days in the service. " Your reward in this gig will be 16 ounce spiker. If you still have your old drinking shoes on. Good luck, Tommy."

Loftus pinched the disk when it popped from the kitchen computer. He crossed the center room and deposited the mirrored disk in the central fireplace's yellow flames. The plastic shriveled and bubbled into quick black puff. Loftus smiled as he thought about staggering out of Chucky's with Deluca ten years ago. After all the time he spent with Frank, he had only spoken to him once since he left; four years back at a conference in the city. He missed Frank and missed the adventure of putting his life on the line.

Outside his own window span the walls and fortifications were not visible at night, but helicopters shined high-powered search lights between the buildings and onto the city streets. The gunfire echoed across the bay when the windows were open. He looked up at the stars. Although he remembered little about his early life, he was always reassured by presence of the stars. The stars were always there no matter what happened in his life.

He looked back into the fireplace's dancing blue and yellow flames. Deluca knew of his college days in Appleton long before the present urban turmoil. So many things were undone when he departed Appleton twenty years ago. On the day he left Vermont Kath stood motionless at the bus terminal downtown. Racked with guilt, he had traded Kath for the service, throwing away all dreams of marrying her, having a family, and settling down in Appleton.

He left Kath because tempting fate with his life on the edge and living to tell about it was the ultimate kick. He always regretted leaving her from the second he stepped on the bus stairs until this very moment and now Frank Deluca wanted him or his operatives back in Appleton.

His security alarm buzzed and he turned from the fire. On the door monitor Mikey stood in his brown leather jacket, blue Oxford shirt, and jeans. He held a frosty beer mug from The Loft. Loftus pushed the remote and the door slid open.

Mikey strolled inside and immediately raised the mug. “Zach tells me you've got a story for me.”

Loftus grinned. “Is that what he said?”

“Yeah, and you guys are sticking some guy in *my apartment?*”

“This is the big one, Mikey...”

“They're all big ones when you are not crossing the wall into the city.” Loftus trailed him into the virtual room. Mikey opened all five hundred and twenty-five bands on the front wall.

“Going to watch them all at once, Mikey?”

Mikey instructed the computer to activate the feeds and he threw his leather coat on the couch. “Don't you want to watch my report from the feeds?”

“I don't watch the news anymore,.” said Loftus. “I thought you worked for Band 65?”

“Central Feeds, baby. They picked it up.” The huge red numbers flashed on the wall screen surround.

## **BAND 65**

They were enveloped by a three dimensional image of the studio. “Look, Tom, it's almost we're right there.”

“Yeah, but it's *not* real.”

“ You should watch the bands and the feeds more often.”

Loftus studied the media reporters at the desk up front and scanned the audience. The scene instantly switched to a band playback of a gang battle in New York City. Part of a barrier wall had exploded north of the city. Loftus cautioned himself he was only watching a simulation. “ This is dangerous.”

“ Cities are battlefields.”

“ No, not the cities, Mikey. This whole scene we're standing in. We're all dependent on the bands and feeds distribution to the bands. It's dangerous to get all your information that way.”

“ Nothing I can do about it. Getting my report on the Central Feeds means advancing my career.”

A commercial inside a fast moving sports car startled Loftus. He smiled at the realistic blue ocean beyond the rocky escarpment. “ We're not really there.”

“ Nothing I can do about that either. Tom, this is my livelihood. I make money at it and when I get the big one and run the Central Feeds. I'll change all that.” Mikey laughed. The screen flipped to troops guarding the outside of a baseball stadium. The scene switched inside and the game was in progress. On the replay Mikey spoke about the team and talked with the some of the players. Loftus felt as if he were at the game. “ What do you think, Tom?”

“ I want you to go back east.”

“ Where back east?” The virtual room moved through the stands, passing armed soldiers as Mikey interviewed some of the fans. “ See that blonde? She gave me her wrist number.”

Loftus smiled. “ Vermont. Appleton, Vermont.”

“ Your Appleton?” He turned as the game continued.

“ New England University Appleton?”

“ Yup.”

“ So, you've finally decided to look her up again?”

“ No... Something else is going on. I want to show you a flat disk of Zach and O'Brien arriving earlier.” Loftus put his hands on his hips. “ Computer dissolve screen. Cue up disk back from my office and create a flat screen ahead.” The virtual image of the game shattered into darkness and a smaller rectangular screen appeared within the larger area.

“ Take a look at this.”

“ Zach joy riding in the restaurant van again?”

“ Has he been joy riding?” asked Loftus as he smiled and let the disk play.

Mikey set down the beer and closely watched O'Brien get out of the van. “ That's the guy you are putting in my apartment!” He looped his leg over the sofa arm as the questioning began in Loftus's office. With his arms folded he never turned from the screen. He looked up at Loftus when he disk ended. “ Why aren't you going back there yourself? ”

“ I need an advance expedition to see if this is real. I know your ambition. You uncover any of this and believe me, it will dominate the feeds!”

Mikey, his arms still crossed, turned in the gray light.  
“ It's her. You don't want to see her again.”

Loftus said nothing, but was amazed Mikey had so quickly analyzed his motives. “ Some things are better left in the past.”

“ You never should have left her.”

Loftus squinted. “ I don't want to talk about it. Listen, Vandemeer is the center of this. Getting to his records at the University would break this open and get you one hell of a story. And then there is this Phase One nonsense.”

“ I don't know if I want to get in the middle of something like this.” He smiled, but Loftus sensed he was considering it. “ Risky, risky.”

“ I'll pay your expenses and double whatever you usually get for a week's work.”

“ Double? Big deal.”

“ Mikey, I need your help.”

Mikey looked at O'Brien's frozen image on the screen. “ I want all rights. I don't want this thing to end up in some DSS classified disk vault!”

“ It won't, I promise.”

He pointed at Loftus. “ You should be doing this and she's the only thing stopping you from going back to Appleton. Someday, you're going to have to resolve this.”

“ I understand that. But I thought you'd jump at this, Mikey. Unless, you just plain don't feel you can do it. “ Loftus spun around and left him inside. He walked over to the kitchen monitors and scanned The Loft.

Mikey appeared in the arched virtual doorway. “ What is your opinion on this?”

“ Have I signed you up?”

“ Yes, yes. You've signed me up. Now, what do you think is going on up there?”

“ Probably a service project but not as grandiose as O'Brien thinks.”

“ What about the murders?” Mikey shook his head and paced around Loftus. “ You want to nail Harmon Mundy and get him out of DSS. Correct?”

“ Oh, I fully admit that.” Loftus opened a wall cabinet and took out another illegal wrist phone. He visualized the bulbous Mundy at a Washington meeting ten years ago.

“ Yeah, that's part of it.”

“ Oh, here we go. A DSS wrist phone. Does that make me a DSS agent now?”

Loftus placed it in his hand. “ It's set to cut any conversation longer than fifty-seven seconds, the time it currently takes them to trace the signal. Be careful and use

this discreetly if you have to and then direct me to an external phone number.”

“ And this thing will work way back on the east coast?”

“ Right through their COMDIV satellite.”

Mikey stared at the phone and then put it around his wrist. “ I want all the rights on this story. “

“ You can make a bundle on it,” said Loftus, patting his shoulder.

“ It's not the money.”

“ Advancing your career?” asked Loftus.

“ No. It's you and all your DSS nonsense. That's all I've ever listened to since I've known you. You and Zach and your careers as elite Panthers.” He pointed at Loftus again. “ I'm going to show you I can do this. And I'm going to get it on the Central Feeds.”

“ Good. When can you leave?”

Mikey fumbled with the phone. “ Sometime tomorrow. Tommy, tell me how this thing works.”

“ Don't touch the band selector unless I tell you. Transmit and receive on the left. The orange button. And the volume is on the front. The white button. Just tell the computer who you want to call. Very simple.”

“ I'm surprised you don't have a visual phone.”

“ I do, but they can pick that up right away on their computers.” He walked Mikey toward the door. “ Speaking

of electronic equipment, Zach has a back pack full of goodies you need to take with you.”

“ No doubt.”

“ Call me as soon as you get to Appleton.”

“ Understood, Captain,” said Mikey, pretending to salute.

“ You don't have to take this story.”

“ I love risking my life, who you kiddin'? I think rural Vermont is a lot safer than the inner cities.”

“ People like John Garvey play for keeps no matter where they are.” Loftus opened the door.

“ What about Mundy?” asked Mikey.

“ Jackass. Don't get me going.”

“ I'll call you tomorrow.”

“ Good. Listen, when you get back, you me and Zach will plan another camping trip up to Tahoe.”

“ Stale cigars and old war stories?”

“ What more could you ask for?” asked Loftus.

Mikey saluted again on the way down the stairs. Loftus wondered if he had baited Mikey with the lure of the big story. He closed the door, returned to the window and thought about Kath. She had married some doctor from the University and had probably never have forgiven him for leaving. Loftus had no compunction about facing John Garvey, but seeing Kath again remained his greatest fear.

## 5

Phil burrowed himself at a booth in the corner, lighted by a metal sconce mounted on the barn board wall. Loftus jaunted across The Loft and stood next to his friend. “ This place has a bad reputation, pal.”

Phil looked up from his plate. “ So, I've been told. Sit down, Tom, I've been doing some thinking about your brain.”

“ Great.” Loftus crawled into the booth and propped his elbows on the wood. “ Figured me out, have you?”

Phil smiled and cut his steak. “ I think you're searching for something. A place that will give you answers to long standing questions. You strongly desire to find a passageway to that ideal place. And on top of that you feel threatened by something in the past that's eating away at you.”

“ Is that all?” Loftus smiled and slid out of the booth.

“ Well, have a nice night, Phil.”

“ Tom, sit down.”

“ No more aliens in Canada?” asked Loftus.

Phil grinned and sipped his coffee. “ I haven't checked... What about your early life?” He pushed his knife into the butter and spread it over a piece of oatmeal bread.

“ You lived in upstate New York, right?”

“ Yeah, normal childhood. Mother, father, brother, sister. What's the point, Phil?”

Phil mashed the bread in his mouth. “ Your earliest memory.”

“ When I was six or seven, traveling down the Thruway with my father. A real bad snowstorm.”

“ You were six or seven? Nothing earlier than that? That's unusual.”

Loftus sat down, ordered a beer, but watched the waitress leave. Then leaned toward Phil and spoke in a low voice. “ You know what?”

“ What?”

“ I always wanted to go into space. You know fine dining with aliens on another planet somewhere... In the dreams, the Montang is trying to find this Shrine.”

“ You mean the Buhnsharf? Why, it's the place with all the answers and the passageway to other worlds. You are looking for answers, my friend. “

“ I've got news for you: I'm not a religious man. I trust nobody but myself.”

“ And Zach.”

“ Yeah.”

“ I think you're still taking responsibility for Allsworthy's death and the ways things degenerated in this country later.”

“ Look, I had all my bases covered at Long Beach! No one can tell me why that boat blew up!” Loftus felt tears in his eyes as his face flushed. “ Damn this!”

“ Tom, why is it important *how* the boat blew up?”

“ Because this country has disintegrated. Children are starving. There's fighting in the streets. You need a pass to get to the suburbs! Allsworthy wouldn't have put walls around the cities. Phil, he walked the cities. He stood with the poor and the captains of industry. His dream is gone because of me.”

“ Tom Loftus, the individual responsible for-“

“ I *was* responsible!”

“ You did the best you could, Tom!”

Loftus banged the table. “ The best wasn't good enough.”

“ Sometimes it has to be.”

“ I don't believe that and neither did Allsworthy.”

“ Right and now look at you, hallucinating about aliens and cluster ships. And I know it's not easy knowing the man who took what would have been your job is totally incompetent.”

“ There's nothing I can do about Harmon Mundy.”

Phil pushed his plate aside and leaned forward. “ Listen to what your body is telling you, Tom. You have roadblocks and you haven't addressed them. If Mundy is so bad, then work to get him out.”

“Easier said than done.” His wrist phone sounded. The display panel lighted with Zach's code numbers. O'Brien was now safely in Mikey's apartment. He looked up at Phil.

“When I was a boy I'd hear a baseball announcer in my mind as I stepped up to the plate. The pitch came in and I connected like I never connected. You know the sound of the wood against the bat. And I keep hearing the play by play... *That ball is going... going... gone!*”

Phil rolled his eyes. “The hero. You and DSS were made for each other.”

“What do you mean?”

“You want to be the hero.” Phil stood and started to put down money for the check, but Loftus pushed his hand back.

“Don't worry about it, Phil.”

“Tommy, there's nothing bad about being the hero unless... you're not being the hero.”

\* \* \*

The last bartender closed the outside oak doors and Loftus wandered along overturned stools on the tables. Only the side sconces lighted the lounge and the silence was welcomed. He skirted the bar and poured himself a strong

Scotch. The decision to become involved with O'Brien had made him suspicious of everyone. Even Phil still worked for the service and the service had a way of making trusted friends into pawns. The whiskey burned his throat as Zach thundered down the office stairs. "Two o'clock and all is well. You want a beer, Zach?"

"I could use a beer." He took one of the stools off the bar and sat down. "None of the detailed checks on O'Brien have turned up anything significant, Captain."

"Did you get those electronic gizmos to Mikey?"

"Full pack."

Loftus nodded. He opened the tap, filled the mug and slid it down the bar. "A perfectly charming day, old buddy, eh?"

Zach gulped the beer. "I'm getting that feeling again."

"Oh?" Loftus swished the ice cubes around his glass.

"And what might that feeling be?"

"The feeling I got when we crossed the mountains into China in the Sino conflict. That feeling I used to get when Deluca would call us into his office and tell us how honored we were to be Panthers and then he'd ship us out somewhere."

Loftus looked at his friend's dark brows and mustache. Zach was the only person he fully trusted. "Look, Zach—"

"The feeling I got when Allsworthy flew us to New York and told you were heading up the campaign security."

“ *Oh, that feeling,*” replied Loftus, laughing loudly. Zach gulped the beer, smacked his lips and slid the mug back for a refill. “ That good old feeling you get when you're running for your life and they're firing right at your butt.”

“ Or having entire countries out to get you.”

“ Yeah, that's it.” Loftus sent down a fresh mug. “ The minor things like torture and assassination. That old time feeling. Yeah... I shook hands with that old time feeling up in my office this afternoon.”

Loftus activated the flat screen behind the bar and flipped through the bands, moving past a twentieth century movie with space ships and flying saucers.

“ Right up your alley, Captain.”

“ Go ahead, rub it in, Zach. They should make a movie about my dreams. Except nobody would believe it. Actually, Phil heard some report of an alien sighting in northern Canada.”

Zach drank more beer and grinned at the strange ships. Then he furrowed his brow. “ I know Deluca was brought into the White House as an internal security advisor after the rocket attack on the Vice President. That was eighteen months ago.”

“ I think he has Mundy looking over his shoulder,” said Loftus.

“ Then we shouldn't send Mikey to Appleton. Don't get me wrong, I think he's sharp and he wants to impress you,

but dealing with the likes of John Garvey and company is another story. They will do anything to protect Vandemeer and any RIMA project.”

Loftus pressed his lips. “ Mikey can do it.”

“ Right, Mikey can do it.”

“ You can speak plainer than that, Zach.”

“ Kath... you're afraid to even be on the eastern seaboard with her!”

“ Listen, I'm aware of all this, okay?”

Zach slowly lowered the beer and cantered around the bar.

“ You should have gone back there a long time ago, Tom. You and I both know that.”

“ She married John Putnam. They have a son. I can't go back there.”

“ She loved you.”

“ That was twenty years ago, old buddy.” Loftus finished the whiskey and pressed his lips. “ We loved each other and I left.”

“ You know you can talk to Phil until you're blue in the face,” said Zach, pointing. “ But I'll tell you what your problem is. You always deny your true feelings and follow what people *expect you to do*.”

Loftus would not have taken such guff except from Zach. “ We all had future dreams and plans, but the dreams were just a defense mechanism for being young.”

“ I don't believe how cynical you're becoming, Captain.”

“ Life will do that to you.” He cut the flat screen signal and did not pour himself another drink.

“ What about O'Brien?” asked Zach.

“ Get him the hell out of the city tomorrow. Put him the San Louis Obispo condo. We need more information on him, even if it means starting to monitor DSS communications. I can't believe he just slipped out of Appleton unnoticed.”

“ Mundy must have taken charge of field operations.”

Loftus laughed and gripped his friend's shoulder.

“ Mundy must know all about this Phase One. And that's scary, having Harmon Mundy running something of this magnitude; something so secret that even Frank doesn't know about it.”

“ Have a good sleep, Captain. And don't take any wooden spaceships.”

Loftus grinned. “ And thanks for laying it on the line, old buddy. Sometimes I need a swift kick in the butt.”

“ I know that, Captain.”

Zach lit a cigar and was still smiling as Loftus trudged up the stairs. He could always count on Zach to make him laugh. With each step he felt himself drawn toward the center of a clandestine operation of great proportions and once immersed in it, he would finally have to face his past, overcome it, or leave it behind forever.