

Captain Anger

Adventure #1

The Microbotic Menace

Victor Koman

To the late, great Lester Dent, with sincere gratitude and lifelong admiration.

Chapter One

The Silver Angel of Death

Nobody in the diner paid any attention to the little man in the corner. The leggy blonde waitress had given him the once over when he entered. She judged the short, grey-haired man in the drab business suit to be some mid-level manager at one of the computer companies nearby, or maybe a traveling salesman come in to beat the heat. The customers gave him no notice, absorbed in their own concerns. If the little man played an important role in their lives, they showed absolutely no awareness of the fact.

He sat at the far end of the counter, took several deep breaths, and leaned against the wall to which the counter was firmly attached. In a hoarse, rasping voice, he asked the waitress for coffee. He weakly stroked a goatee surrounded by days-old stubble. The skin on his plump hands displayed an odd sheen. In the bright fluorescent lights, it palpitated to motions half-hidden beneath the flesh.

The waitress poured the coffee, eyed him again with her big blues, and moved on to another diner at the far end of the counter.

That insignificant action saved her life.

The small man suddenly looked up, intense agony burning on his face. He seized the arm of a passing customer.

“They’ve crossed the barrier!” he cried out in a terrified voice. “*They*

know what we are!”

The other diners stopped eating and talking to stare at the commotion. Now they noticed the little man. Too late.

“Hey, Mac, get your damn—” The burly construction worker tried to pry the frantic man’s hand from his own sleeveless arm, then jumped back in horror.

The little man’s fingers dissolved into a wet, silvery mess.

The bigger man tried to swab the slime off his arm, watching the other man in shock. He backed into a booth by the window, grabbed a fistful of napkins, and struggled to smear the tingling, viscous fluid off him.

The crumbling man stared at the stump where his wrist ended. He watched the sleeve of his limp jacket bend downward in a sickeningly wet way. Wrist, forearm, elbow softened and liquefied. He looked wildly around him for someone who would comprehend.

“They know what we are!” he shouted again, bits of glistening spittle erupting from his mouth. His wild eyes clouded over. The right arm melted entirely, the sleeve wet and dripping silver liquid on the yellow and grey linoleum squares.

He abruptly sat straight up on the stool, trembling. Suddenly, from somewhere deep inside him, his voice arose resonant and terrifying.

“I am the Angel of Death!”

The voice silenced instantly as the body of the old man collapsed in on itself. With a stomach-churning hiss of gasses, his chest collapsed and his head softened and grew shapeless, like a wax mask melting. The silver liquid gushed to the floor. His suit fell limp, draping wetly over the stool. Then, seconds later, it too disintegrated as if eaten by acid.

The customers ran from the diner in terror.

Some—overcome by nausea—fell to the sidewalk, sick at the curb. The black, muscular cook ran out of the kitchen, mystified at the empty diner until the waitress pointed in mute terror at the gruesome scene.

The silvery liquid drenched the far end of the diner. Worse, the stool on which the man once sat leaned perilously to one side, the chromed steel shaft softening like taffy in the sun. With a squish, the stool fell over into the glimmering slush.

“What the hell happened?” the husky cook demanded.

The waitress, breathless, whispered, “The Angel of Death.”

•

The barricade went up around the diner as soon as the police arrived. The supervising detective put a rookie patrolman in charge of cordoning off the area with the yellow tape that declared

Police Line—Do Not Cross.

Los Gatos was a sleepy suburb of San Jose, California, some of its inhabitants wealthy executives in the Silicon Valley computer industry. Most lived comfortably; a few hung on in desperate straits. Detective R. J. Fleming figured that the victim came from the last group. He ran a hand through his blonde hair and peered in through the door.

“Looks like silver paint, don’t it?” the slender, carrot-topped rookie asked.

“You got that thing tied off?” Fleming demanded, nodding toward the roll of tape in the kid’s hand.

“Yessir.”

“Wrap it once more around your mouth.” Fleming’s gaze turned to the service counter. The section coated in silver appeared withered and sunken. “Baggerly!” he shouted over his shoulder.

“Sir!”

“Get the HazMat team rolling. Tell ‘em we’ve got one dead and another one contaminated.”

“Any idea what it is?”

Fleming shook his head. Turning away from the diner entrance, he observed the two paramedics hovering around the construction worker.

He was a big man, black oily hair and brooding black eyes. He sat on the curb with his left arm in a brace holding it up and out so that the paramedics could examine it easily.

“What do you make of it?” Fleming asked the male medic.

The woman answered. “We can’t figure out if it’s a liquid or a very finely divided powder. Whatever it is, it seems to have penetrated his skin. We can’t wipe it off.”

Fleming lit a cigarette. “Then I’d suggest cutting his arm off before it hits his bloodstream.”

The woman looked at him in professional disgust. “I don’t think we have to be that drastic.”

“Oh, yeah?” The detective jerked his thumb toward the diner. “Did you take a look in there?”

The paramedics shook their heads.

“I didn’t think so.” Fleming looked at their patient. “You want to tell them what happened?”

Terror suddenly filled the huge man’s eyes. He turned toward the woman. “I want you to cut it off. Right now. He touched me. Just like that.” He slapped his hand against the male paramedic’s arm. “And then he melted. Just melted.” He stared up at Fleming, imploring. “You gotta tell them to.”

Fleming looked at the doubting faces, then shrugged. “I’d do it if I were you.”

The female paramedic snorted. “Well, you’re not, lucky for this guy.”

“HazMat on the line,” Officer Baggerly shouted. “They’ll be here in twenty minutes.”

Fleming looked from the worker to the diner to the TV news vans pulling up.

“Twenty minutes,” he muttered.

Chapter Two

The Beauty, the Brute, and the Brain

Leila Weir sat at the computer terminal. Nearly six feet tall, raven-haired with skin the color of fine ivory, and a figure—clad now in a deep navy jump suit—that haunted men forever, her god looks caused a plurality of the automotive damage claims in Southern California.

The screen she watched displayed a false-color image of a man. A riot of carnelian, azure, umber, and violet hues enveloped the body. Around it, loops and spirals of light spun in a crazy rhythm, alternating from red through orange to yellow.

“No ill effects yet,” she noted in the recorder mounted at eye level. She threw a set of switches. A humming sound pervaded the room, electrifying it with an eerie, almost palpable energy. The image on the screen began to throw off points of white light like a child’s sparkler.

“Bozhe moi! *Get me out of here!*” a muffled voice shouted over the comm set. “*Suit is on fire!*”

Weir threw a bank of switches, cutting all power to the system. The humming cycled down to nothing. The colors around the figure on the screen descended the spectral scale into darkness.

To her left, a hatchway slammed open with an ear-splitting hiss. Smoke and steam belched outward like fumes from a mine explosion. With a deep breath, the woman leapt from her console to the crimson cylinder on the nearby wall. With practiced skill, she activated the fire extinguisher and blasted her way into the chamber. The white cloud of carbon dioxide and Halon mingled with the smoke and steam to create a dank, thick billowing fog that permeated the room.

Inside the chamber she could see nothing but darkness and a faint flicker of orange flame. Aiming for that, she continued to blast away. She used up the breath she took before entering and dropped the extinguisher with a loud clank to reach for the still-smoldering form ahead of her. Its own arms extended, the hellish figure staggered toward her, pushing her to the exit.

They burst from the chamber into the marginally fresher air, Weir first, the other second. In the light of the control room, he made for a monstrous vision indeed.

Burnt black all over, the suit he wore consisted of a knobby assemblage of spheres, half-spheres, and short cylinders designed in such a way as to provide freedom of movement in all possible angles of rotation that the human body could achieve. A thick layer of char encrusted the spherical helmet.

Leila dropped to her knees, savoring the fresh air nearer the floor. Clumsily, and with the unsteady creak of roasted rotational surfaces, the suited man eased down to a similar position, struggling to undo his helmet. Weir reached up to help him and after a moment, the sphere rotated counter-clockwise one quarter turn. With a slight pop, it came loose. They lifted it off and stared at each other.

“Safety note,” the man said in a gravelly voice that grated his English through a Russian sieve. “Cavorite Mark Two is flammable under high positron flux.”

“Yes,” Weir said, sitting on the floor inspecting the helmet. “But it works.”

She rose to walk over to the console. Flipping a few switches activated

the smoke blowers. With a whine, they sucked the cloud of blackish-grey haze out through the air-conditioning vents and into the pollution scrubber. There, a series of traps and increasingly finer filters removed every particle of pollutant and molecule of unnatural gas before recycling the purified air into the building. The chemicals and elements trapped in the system accumulated in an array of catalytic converters where an ingenious collection of molecules built toxins into more useful chemicals, or stripped them down to their component elements for future use. The system, powered by the huge solar array outside, operated almost without human attention, guided by the silent decision-making of a portion of the mighty parallel processing computer housed in the complex.

The man in the blackened suit stood and stretched. The flame-singed metal joints creaked with each movement. He disassembled the outfit, beginning with the knobby gloves. He was short, stocky, and powerfully built. He looked not unlike a sumo wrestler—trimmer, though, and more obviously muscled. His skin was deeply tanned, the flesh of his face roughened by years in sun that shone over all parts of the world, from steaming tropics to arid deserts to the frigid polar antipodes. His eyes, buried in a perpetual frown, were black as pools of crude oil, a color that matched his crop of hair. Almost as an anachronism, his hair lay straight back on his head, slicked down by hair oil until it resembled a shiny lacquer skullcap.

Clad in nothing but a pair of bright orange Kevlar boating trunks, Pete “The Rock” Kompantzeff gazed at the pile of charred metal and shook his head. “Going to cost bundle to mix up more Cavorite.”

“Rock,” Leila said, “anti-gravity is worth whatever we—”

A buzzing filled the air around them.

Leila quickly punched at the intercom button.

“Better get over here,” a sharp voice crackled. “We’ve got a big problem.”

Rock and Leila glanced at each other. The speaker, Flash, was not one to utter such extensive and alarmist pronouncements. It must really be something.

Leila powered the system down, shut off the computers, and rushed to the door, a dark bolt of blue under the fluorescent lights. Rock—a thumping blur of brown and orange, pounded behind her on thickly muscled legs. The man and woman made a strange duo.

The hallway they rushed into thundered with people headed this way

and that. The Anger Institute For Advanced Science served as research center, university, and light industrial facility for hundreds of people. It also served as base of operations for Kompantzeff, Weir, and four others under the guidance of their skipper, mentor, and comrade-at-arms, Richard Anger III.

Dodging the solar electric cars used to reach more distant parts of the sprawling campus, they trotted toward a pair of fire doors a hundred yards down at the end of the corridor. Leila activated a transponder on her wristcomm and the doors slid aside on swift, nearly silent runners, then closed behind them with a slam instants after they sped through. A few more yards of running brought them to an opening in the corridor wall. This part of the Institute possessed no doors. The Captain found them unnecessary and obstructive.

“What’s the deal, Flash?” Kompantzeff bellowed upon entering. “I’m still smolderin’ here and Lei—”

“Listen to this.” The man seated at the computer terminal threw a switch. From a SurroundSound speaker system, the crackley noise of radio communication issued with a hiss of static.

“Don’t know what it is,” a voice said, “but eyewitnesses say a customer just dissolved. Touched a Latino male age fifty on the arm, smeared some of the substance on him. Paramedics can’t get it off. EPA HazMat team threw absorbents on the puddle, but they sank into it without a trace. And it’s spreading. Call Bill Harrison over at Lawrence Livermore and have him send a chemical weapons expert if he has one. This doesn’t look like pollution to me. And try Ames Research Cent—”

Flash was a lean young man, thin almost to the point of looking frail. His sparse, dark hair already betrayed the beginnings of baldness. Pale blue eyes gazed out from a face that looked youthful nonetheless. His slenderness made him seem taller than he actually was, but it also made him seem far less strong than he could be when situations demanded.

“It sounds as if we have something serious here.” Flash was usually far more understated. Right now, he looked grave.

Kompantzeff glanced at the computer screen. It read

Transmission Origin: Police Band Radio Path: EPA.HazMat.gov/Local
Wavelength: 79.330 MHz Location: 121° 57’ 50" W; 38° 34’ 30" N City:
Los Gatos, California

The graphic window displayed a map of the area. Los Gatos was just south of San Jose.

“Half an hour from here,” Rock said. “Should we check it out?”

“Where’s Cap?” Leila asked, reaching past Flash to change screens on the terminal. He slapped her wrist away lightly.

“I’ve already tried. He’s undercover and switched off the homer. We’re on our own.”

Leila looked at Rock with a grim expression. “Scramble the jets.”

Chapter Three

Proselytizer

The grizzled old man shuffled along the smog-drenched boulevard, muttering to himself and the world at large. His tattered tweed jacket hung loosely over faded and worn-through denim jeans, held up by a length of dirty clothesline. A torn and repulsively-stained shirt that had at one time been white oxford cloth fitted him poorly. Running shoes—no doubt pulled from a trash bin—slid along the crumbling pavement on feet without socks. Salt and pepper matted greying hair stuck out from under a grimy baseball cap worn backward on his head. A beard crusted with a week’s worth of soup-kitchen overflow looked as stiff as steel wool. His face bore the scars of years of neglect and unremitting exposure to the elements.

The most striking feature about the man was his nose. Bright red and scabby, it seemed to spread over nearly half his face. Pitted, large-pored, and covered with broken capillaries, it had obviously been the recipient of too much sun, too much liquor, and too many fists.

He dragged his feet in a scuffing manner as he pushed the shopping cart full of dirty beer cans and squashed plastic bottles. He stank, but his cargo stank worse. A hideous liquid dribbled continuously from the mess to leave a dotted trail on the sidewalk.

“Damn’ foreign investors,” he muttered loudly. “Damn’ greenmailin’ leveraged buyoutin’ bank *slimeballs!*” He ambled slowly toward the corner where a young man stood handing out pamphlets.

“Stinkin’ banksters stole my *job!*” he cried to the pamphleteer.

The young man, dressed in tan slacks and white long-sleeved business shirt, glanced at the street dweller with a short look of contempt, then

turned his attention to other passersby. The little booklets he handed out were printed on crisp white paper with red and black illustrations on the cover.

The bum stopped his shopping cart in front of the man. “Gimme one,” he said, looking everywhere but directly at the man he addressed.

The proselytizer—short haired, clean, and trim—gazed again at the scrunge piece of scarcely human debris before him. “Butt out,” he said sharply in a voice higher than one might expect. He cleared his throat and it lowered an octave. “Get lost.”

“*Gimme one!*” The old man reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a thick wad of grimy, crumpled bills. Peeling a single off slowly, he offered it to the younger man. “Fer a donation?”

It being the first proffer of money he had received all morning, the young man swapped a pamphlet for the dollar. It stuck to the old man’s fingers for a second. The other gingerly slid it into his pocket, then wiped his hand against his pants before passing his propaganda to the bum. He eyed the wad of money as it disappeared back into the stained tweed jacket.

“Thankee, boy,” the geezer said, then stopped to gaze at the cover. It read

***The Banker’s Conspiracy to Loot
America! How Easy Credit Enslaves Us
All...And What YOU Can Do To Fight
Back!***

“Banksters!” he cried out. “Banksters stole my job!”

The young man feigned sudden interest. “Did they? Why, they stole mine, too, sir.” His eyes glanced unconsciously at the man’s money pocket. “Others like us have banded together to battle them. To restore our country’s former glory.”

The derelict turned the pamphlet over to read the address on the back. “The Order of the Lance and Falcon,” he muttered. “They accept donations?”

“Always,” the young man quickly offered.

“They need people?”

“Always,” he said again, a little warily.

“To hand out this stuff?”

“There is all manner of work to be done.”

“Okay,” the old man said. “Thankee.” He started to wheel his squeaky shopping cart away.

A moment of quick thought and the young man swallowed his initial disgust. “Wait, sir. Perhaps you’d like to hear *more* about us?”

•

Hundreds of miles north, Detective R. J. Fleming stood impatiently in front of the news cameras.

“We don’t know. The EPA is running a check on the substance.” He turned away from one reporter to face the question of another. They clustered about him in front of the police line cordoning off the abandoned diner.

“What about the second man?”

“He’s resting comf—”

An officer shouted to the detective. Fleming turned and strode over to the paramedic van. A line of police kept the reporters behind the barriers.

“Hey! Come back! What’s happening to him?”

Fleming stood beside the horrified paramedics. “Didn’t I tell you to cut off his arm?” he shouted.

The construction worker jerked about in agony as he watched his arm liquefy into a silvery, mercurial rivulet running down the brace on which it had been elevated. Then the brace collapsed as if eaten away by acid. There were no fumes, though, just the surrealistic appearance of metal melting in the warm California sun. The liquid splashed against his torso and ran over his waist and leg. They were eaten away layer by layer, exposing flesh, muscle, and finally bone. The man screamed until his chest cavity opened up under the relentless assault. A rattling hiss of air escaped from the hole, then silence, followed by the sloshing sound of his body dropping into the pool of death.

The paramedics stepped back from the dying man, staring in gape-mouthed horror at the scene. The glistening puddle spread rapidly across the floor of the van, eating into the metal with ease.

“Get out of there!” Fleming cried at the driver. “Everybody get back!”

The hazardous material team rushed to the van in their white, baggy outfits. One of them dumped a sack full of acid-neutralizing

super-absorbent granules on the dissolving body. The pile disappeared almost instantly.

“All right!” the detective shouted. “Now we have *two* danger zones!” He turned to the paramedics. “Get your clothes off and throw them into the van. We’ve got to quarantine the block.” He looked at the HazMat team. “The whole block, right?”

One of them nodded, then the other said through the muffling barrier of her breathing mask, “We’d better have Water and Power shut down the pipes and the sewers to isolate it completely.”

Fleming waved his arms at the line of police. “Back! Everybody back!”

That was when the van crumpled in on itself, disappearing into the ever-widening lake of reflective, mercurial fluid.

Chapter Four

Lunch at Mach 3

“Where’s Cap?” the old man in greasy overalls shouted. He dressed like any other aircraft mechanic except for the stainless-steel autopistol tied to his leg in a fancifully tooled and equally greasy holster.

“Flash tryin’ to find him!” Rock rushed past him to the jet, followed by Leila. Both wore black flight suits made of a thick material possessing such a matte finish that no light reflected from any surface. The outfit made Leila look sleek and pantherish. It made Rock look like a great Russian bear. A bear toting an immense aluminum equipment case, which he stashed in a compartment on the left wing.

Both Rock and Leila wore black holsters made of the same fabric as their flight suits. Both carried pistols similar to the one toted by the mechanic. The ones they carried, though, were black and nearly as unreflective as the rest of their accouterments. Below the holsters, thigh pockets bulged in two strips, outlining the replacement cartridge magazines they carried.

“Is she ready, Jack?” Leila shouted as she followed Rock across the tarmac.

“Full tanks and preheated,” Jack replied. He gazed past them at the jet, once more admiring its sleek, unrefulgent ebon beauty.

It was small, as small as it could be and still have an adequate range. Conforming to the latest stealth technology developed at the Anger Institute, its fuselage, wings, and low-profile V-shaped stabilators consisted of a series of gentle curves none of which reflected enough radar to be visible even on phased-array or lookdown radar systems. And the radar-absorbing coating took care of the rest.

Its bantamweight but powerful engines, constructed of lithium-titanium alloy, gave off little enough waste heat when operating—the air ducts mixed and cooled the remainder before the exhaust escaped from the low-profile vents. Except for the engines, the airframe, and a few enhancements available in no other plane, everything else was state-of-the-art but off-the-shelf, too, which kept the airplane affordable. And that enabled an old aircraft and powerplant mechanic such as Jack to maintain Captain Anger's fleet without needing the farrago of doctorates everyone else around the Institute possessed.

Jack watched with pleasure as Leila ignited the engines. They whined, but much less loudly than those of a military or corporate jet. She turned it, taxied it toward the runway.

"I still say it turns out to be big nothin'," Rock muttered, tapping their flight plan into the Global Positioning Satellite computer.

"What?" Leila said over her shoulder.

Rock plugged the combination earphone/microphone into his right ear and donned the obsidian-colored helmet, leaving the oxygen mask dangling. "I said that this is probably some acid spill out of which idiot cop exaggerated all hell."

"How about it, Flash?" Leila said.

"*Doubtful*," Flash's calm voice said clearly over the headset. "*While you two were heading for the airfield, I picked up a TV remote off satellite that shows a paramedic van melting into nothing. Find me an acid that can do that.*"

•

The dark jet rolled off the runway at one hundred knots and rose swiftly into the afternoon sky, a black arrowhead rapidly vanishing into the hazy air.

Crossing the shoreline just southeast of Point Mugu, Weir eased power upward and put the nimble plane into an accelerating climb that slammed them both against their seats. As they passed through 10,000 feet, she stopped glancing at the airspeed indicator and shifted her attention to the

Mach meter. At 15,000 feet, they had achieved Mach .8. Rock, in the rear seat, had achieved a nearly fluorescent green shade of skin.

“You fly like I drive,” he said, slipping on his oxygen mask.

“And *you*,” Leila muttered, “have no adventure in your soul.” Passing the 35,000 foot mark, she threw more power to the engines and executed a climbing barrel roll. The view outside the cockpit whirled crazily around; the brown haze that covered the entire Los Angeles basin made a 360° loop around them and stopped where it had begun—to their left. To their right and ahead below them spread the deep blue of the Pacific Ocean; ahead and above, the darkening azure sky.

“Flight Level Four-Twenty,” she announced as she leveled off at 42,000 feet. She glanced down to make certain that they were past the Channel Islands, her last checkpoint before breaking the sound barrier. “Hang on for Mach One.”

The aircraft trembled for an instant, then stabilized. “Mach One,” she said, easing the throttles forward.

Rock, his gaze never leaving the collision avoidance radar, said, “TCAS shows us clear.”

“Mach Two coming up.”

“*Take it up to Mach two point nine*,” Flash’s digital-crisp voice said in their ears.

“Hey”—Leila’s voice was sharp—“keep your opinions to yourself. I’m going up to Mach Three.”

“I’ll barely have time to eat lunch,” Rock protested as he flipped up his helmet visor and reached into a cargo pocket for a sandwich from the AI cafeteria.

“Live off your stored fat,” she snapped back happily. “Flash— have you found the good Captain yet?”

“*His transponder is still off, and he isn’t acknowledging messages on his wristcomm.*”

•

“Fork it over, geek!”

The old man looked confused. He stopped in the middle of the alley and looked up at his younger companion. “A donation?”

“Yeah, that’s it.” The young man in the tan slacks grabbed the bum by his worn tweed lapels. “I’ve been listening to you rant about the world for

half an hour and I'm sick of your voice and your stinking breath."

His victim faltered. "I thought we was friends. I bought yer pamphlet. I paid fer coffee. I want to help you people."

"We don't need trash like you. But we can use *this!*" The man's hand slipped into the gritty depths of the tweed jacket pocket. It came out with a roll of singles. "Thanks for your generosity."

The old man's voice hardened, deepened, grew strangely forceful. "That's no way to treat a poor old man."

"Poor old men don't carry wads like this."

The thief stared at the old man. Something had changed about him. Something that made a tremor of fear begin to grow.

"I'm looking for your leader. For Morrison," the twisted, filthy old man said in a cold, even tone.

"He doesn't talk to decrepit—"

Faster than the young man could follow, a gnarled hand gripped his. The tramp seemed to tower over him now, as if he had gained several inches in height. His eyes blazed with a fire that had not been there before. His gaze pierced the other man with an intensity that glared into his soul.

"Tell your exalted leader Erik Morrison that I know what he stole from the Seal Beach weapons bunker. Tell him he'll never have a chance to use it." The derelict's grip tightened.

"Who—who *are* you?" The young man dropped the wad of crumpled dollars and slid backward, catching himself on one knee.

"Tell Morrison that when he finds out who I am"—his fingers ground the pamphleteer's knuckles together—"it will be too late for him."

The spotted old hand released its grip. "Keep the change," the mysterious stranger said, leaving the money behind and turning away. He walked straight now, his strides long and purposeful.

Regaining his shopping cart, he guided it a few yards down the street until he spied another homeless one. Wheeling up to the woman, who could not have been more than forty but looked ancient because of her matted hair, sun-damaged skin, and edentulous mouth, he spoke to her for a moment, then left the cart with her. She stared gratefully at his receding figure, then began to pick through the gift of recyclable goods. There had to be at least ten dollars worth of aluminum and plastic. Then she discovered a roll of twenties stuffed in a dirty Styro cup. Her toothless

face smiled in amazement at the stranger, but he had already vanished into the crowd.

Walking down the busy sidewalks of San Francisco's business district, the bulbous-nosed man reached into another pocket of his tweed jacket and withdrew something that looked like a thick wristwatch. Grimy fingers punched at the keys; his eyes—sharp-gazed, now—read the messages stored in the wristcomm's memory. His deeply furrowed brow wrinkled even more. He pulled a tiny, tan-plastic plug out of his pocket, wiped the lint and tobacco flakes off of it, and inserted it in his ear.

“Voice response,” he said in a clear, strong tone. “Flash.”

“*Flash here,*” a voice said equally clearly over the earpiece. “*What are you doing*”—he paused to check the wristcomm's location—“*in San Francisco?*”

“Looking for alumni. What have Rock and Lei found?” “*Cap—hit the road running. You're an hour's drive from Hell.*”

Chapter Five

The Mirror Pool

“Who are you two, the SWAT team?”

Detective Fleming eyed the odd pair with a weary impatience. Both the short, stout male and the willowy female wore black jump suits. And both wore damnably huge autopistols at their side.

“We are from Anger Institute in L.A.,” Rock said, placing the large silver equipment box on the pavement. “We're here to help.”

“Anger Institute,” Fleming repeated. “We don't need therapists, we need—”

“We're *scientists,*” Leila interjected.

Fleming shook his head. “Not toting those cannons, you're n—”

A scream pierced the sky. Fleming turned to see the male paramedic shriek in horror, watching as his female companion collapsed in on herself, flesh, bone, and organs eaten up in seconds by the glistening nightmare. Then the screaming man looked at his own chest, watched it cave in, seeing ribs, lungs, even his heart melt away like a wax figure in a

blast furnace.

Several of the reporters fainted dead away. Their cameramen—distanced from the terror by watching it through viewfinders— held steady, broadcasting the sickening deaths to millions of TV sets.

Rock opened the case and withdrew a pair of minicam headsets. He slipped his on and inserted the earplug, handing the other set to Leila. The headsets transmitted and received audio and video via their wrist communicators.

“Here’s our own news report, Flash.” Rock slammed the case lid shut and slid the whole thing toward the yellow police line. “People are melting like wicked witch out here.”

Four hundred miles away, Flash observed the two slightly differing perspectives on separate monitors. On Rock’s screen blazed the image of a pair of paramedics’ jump suits rapidly disappearing into a small silvery puddle. On Leila’s monitor, a fifty-yard-wide, roughly oblong lake reflected the buildings around it as accurately as a mirror. She nearly grew disoriented watching it. The diner had completely disappeared, one edge of the lake cutting into the next building. Its foundation undercut by the strange matter, a portion of it collapsed into the pool and sank. Now, beams and broken sections of roof and wall hung precariously over the ever-widening perimeter of destruction.

Rock stepped over the police line. The confident professionalism in his demeanor convinced Fleming not to interfere. The detective merely watched with quiet apprehension.

Leila withdrew two containers from the case—a stainless-steel vacuum bottle and an acid-proof, wax-coated quartz Petri dish. “Heads up!” she shouted at Rock. He turned and caught the two tossed items.

“It’s not a liquid,” Flash announced over their earcomms. *“It runs like a fluid, but once it’s pooled, it seems to harden. Otherwise the wind would cause ripples.”*

Rock picked up a crushed soda can and tossed it into the pool. It bounced once, skidded across the reflective surface, then came to a rest. Within seconds, it softened and disappeared as if sinking into water.

“Fun stuff,” Flash muttered.

“It may seem solid, but look at this.” Rock lowered his head to allow the camera a view of the edge of the mysterious pool. Its shoreline advanced steadily toward him at a slow but perceptible pace.

“Maybe it’s a fluid with a high surface tension,” Leila offered.

“Rock—get out of there,” Flash said. *“It may not be an infectious agent, but it sure seems contagious. You might not even be able to tell if you’ve got any on you.”*

“I just want to try scooping—”

“Do as he says, Rock.”

The voice behind him spoke in a deep, persuasive tone. Turning, he saw a wretched man in tattered, grimy clothes standing behind the police line. His face looked like a traffic accident, a swollen, red nose the most salient feature. The stranger stood, though, with an amazingly imposing posture. Fists on hips, he surveyed the scene through calm, intense eyes.

“You made it!” Leila shouted at the sound of his voice.

The newcomer nodded, his matted, dirty hair barely shaking with the motion. “Get away from that stuff, Rock. It’s too reactive.”

Rock knew better than to argue. Stepping backward over the thin vinyl barricade, he asked, “Plan is what, then?”

The tattered man surveyed the scene. “We’ll freeze that small puddle there”—his dirty hand pointed to where the paramedics had fallen—“and get a sample to analyze.”

He turned toward a black man in a white lab coat who had just arrived with several others. “Dr. Bhotamo,” he said cordially, “If we find that we need it, may we have the use of the Class Three isolation lab at Lawrence Livermore?”

The scientist eyed the filthy man up and down. “Who the hell are you?” he asked.

“I apologize.” The man in the dirty tweed jacket reached up to his weathered face and grasped the red, pocked nose. With a firm tug, he tore it off.

The nose ripped away from his face to reveal another one— thin, sharp, and healthy—beneath it. In quick motions he peeled away bits of latex, exposing smooth tan skin beneath the artifice. His left hand removed the matted wig. Shortly cropped, dark-copper hair shimmered in the sunlight. The disguise dropped to the ground. Reaching up with both hands, the transformed derelict deftly removed a pair of grey contact lenses. Eyes of dark green gazed at Dr. Bhotamo. He peeled the age-spotted and gnarled rubber appliances from his hands and offered his right to his fellow scientist. “Richard Anger,” he said in a resonant voice. “Anger Institute.” “Dr. Anger’s son?” Captain Anger smiled at the mention of his renowned father.

“That’s right.” “You may borrow anything you want,” Bhotamo said, “including my personal staff.”

“Thank you, though I may simply need a steady supply of liquid helium.” Over his shoulder, he shouted toward his two friends. “Lei—get the cryogenics out of my van. Rock—get the fire suit ready.”

•

The fire suit actually served as an all-purpose insulation garment. Made of dozens of layers of insulating fabric and coated with a reflective Mylar surface, it protected equally well against blazing heat or chilling cold. Rock helped Cap seal up inside it, making certain that the internal air conditioning functioned flawlessly.

“How’s the video, Flash?” Cap asked via the communications setup in the fire suit.

“All fine here, boss.”

“If this fails, you know what to do.”

Flash said nothing. He knew what his partner meant. If the bizarre silver stuff should eat through the fire suit before Cap could peel it off and escape, *he* would be the new man in charge.

Leila, wearing thick gloves of the same material as the fire suit, hefted a two-gallon stainless-steel canister to the edge of the police line. A thick layer of frost coated the cylinder. When she set it down, sheets of ice sheared from the sides to melt steamily on the asphalt. She had taken the container from the same place Rock had gotten the fire suit—Cap’s van. On the outside, it looked like nothing special, with an innocuous white paint job and ordinary commercial license plates. Inside that plain exterior, though, resided enough ingenious tools of superscience to supply several university science labs and several more government weapons centers.

Captain Anger stepped under the line and picked up the tank. Speaking now through the comm, he said, “Warm up the atomic force ‘scope, then keep everyone fifty feet away from the van.”

“Right.” Leila spoke to Fleming, who relayed the request to a police sergeant.

Cap opened the cryogenic canister. Inside, a cloud of icy vapor swirled around like a miniature storm. Carefully advancing to the very edge of the small puddle created by the paramedics’ death, he tilted the cylinder to pour a small amount of clear bluish liquid on the boundary. Amid the cloud of evaporating liquid helium, the mirrored surface dulled and grew

grainy. Over the comm, Cap heard a strange, crisp noise, like the sound made by crushing the dried husks of dead insects.

Using a pair of insulated forceps, Cap plucked up a piece of the brittle, frozen grey stuff and deposited it in the quartz dish Rock had left behind the police tape.

“Let’s see if that’s slowed things down enough for us to take a look.” Adding more liquid helium, he handed the vapor-spewing dish to Leila, who rushed it to the van. Laying the forceps near the puddle, Cap sealed the helium canister and stepped to the other side of the police line.

The Hazardous Materials team watched from a safe distance, as did the police and fire personnel. Rock’s angry glare kept reporters at a safe distance.

Inside the van, Leila’s gloved hands carefully placed the dish into the microscope’s sample chamber. She evacuated the chamber and commanded the computer to lower the microscope’s needle to the surface of the sample.

An atomic force microscope creates an image by tracking the point of an infinitesimally thin diamond needle—in this case, just ten atoms wide at the tip—across the sample, letting it rise and fall as it is repelled by the charge of the electrons on the minute features it encounters. A clutch of lasers detects the position of the needle and relays the information to the computer, which generates an image. Leila watched the picture appear line by line while Rock helped the captain out of the fire suit.

“How’s it coming?” Cap asked over the comm.

“I think you’ll be interested in this,” she said.

He climbed inside the van, followed by Rock and Dr. Bhotamo.

“That’s no chemical compound or virus.” She reached over to adjust the monitor. The four gazed at a false-color computer-enhanced image as it focused into a jumble of identical shapes frozen in a sea of elemental atoms.

The shapes—oblong and identical—looked U-shaped, like a length of channel iron. The outer surface bristled with armatures that—if they had been on a bacterium the same size—could have been the hairlike cilia used for locomotion. Those, however, would have been curved. The cilia on these objects consisted of straight sections connected at ball-and-socket joints. More arms clustered inside the lengthwise U-channel. These looked even more complex, some of them ending in tips of various incomprehensible shapes, some in what looked for all the world like

miniature scalpels, and still others that mimicked construction tools. What appeared to be cogwheels or gears a few ten-thousandths of an inch wide connected each to the main body.

Cap turned his attention to Dr. Bhotamo. “Are these yours?” he asked with simple directness.

Bhotamo shook his head, his deep brown eyes gazing intently at the screen. “We make weapons, but we don’t make them this small. One division has been working on microbotics for several years, but all they have so far are some gears and tongs ten times larger than this. And a DC motor, none of which they’d originated. I know of only one researcher who could possibly have gotten this far.”

“Dr. Madsen,” Cap said.

Dr. Bhotamo nodded. “Yes. But how could he have acquired the funding for this after his expulsion from Stanford?”

Cap stared at the screen, shifting the field of view around with a trackball control. “He could have built the prototype in a microfactory the size of a thimble attached to a home computer. All he needed was the conceptual breakthrough this design reveals. Just look at the way those carbon rods attach to the silicon shafts. And that electrostatic motor there—it’s genius in action. He’s got shapes there that no one could get using mask fabrication techni—”

“Cap,” Leila said, “temperature’s rising in the chamber. Should I add more helium?”

Rock perked up. “*Da, chyort vosmi!* I don’t want to see those things come alive again!”

Cap shook his head. “The freeze inactivated them. Look at those cracks along the central channel. I’ll wager they can’t stand up to temperature extremes. Heat or cold. We’ve got a weapon against that lake of them out there, but we need something that will stop them wherever they may appear, including on or inside living tissue.”

“If they’re man-made,” Rock said, “what in hell are they doing melting everything they touch?”

“Simple,” Cap said, saving the microscope scan to the memory of the powerful computer and switching off the screen. “They’re tearing matter apart for raw materials. These things are the ultimate recyclers.”

“But what are they using the matter *for?*” Leila asked.

Cap stood and stretched, bending to do so in the cramped van. “To

build copies of themselves. More scavengers.”

A worried look passed across Dr. Bhotamo’s face. “Something must be wrong with whatever passes for their programming— nothing is telling them to stop making copies. Mechanical cancer.”

Rock ground his teeth together for a moment, then rumbled out, “You mean these things could just keep replicating until they’ve dismantled entire planet?”

Cap nodded grimly. “Left on their own, they’d probably just cover one continent—there’s not much in seawater they could use and the salt would probably corrode them. But people and animals can carry them. Aircraft and automobiles. Ships.” He turned toward his assistants.

“Leila—set up the magnetic trap. I want to isolate an active sample. Rock—coordinate with Dr. Bhotamo on freezing that pool with liquid helium—”

“I don’t think we have enough for that,” Bhotamo said.

“How about nitrogen?”

“Yes, plenty on hand.”

“All right. Nitrogen ought to be cold enough. Have someone bring a truckload. Flash?”

“*Here, skipper.*”

“Locate Dr. Julius Madsen, Ph.D.s in molecular chemistry and electronics. Start with the Bay Area. I suspect we’ll find him somewhere near this mess. And contact the others. Tell them we’ve got a hot one.”

“*Roger—over and out.*” With that, Flash signed off.

Leila stood in the door of the van, gazing outward at the eerie mirror surface of the pool of busy microbots. Overhead, police and TV news helicopters *thwupped* around in circles, vying for prime viewing position.

“Cap...” Her voice held an edge of apprehension. “Take a look at this.”

“What?” he said, stepping over behind her.

“The pool—it’s *moving!*”

Chapter Six

Flash Reports

Phil “The Flash” Hoile—Philip James Hoile, more formally— turned his attention away from the TV monitors to concentrate on the computer screen above him. In the cool, low light of the spacious room, he reclined on a chair that conformed to his body, pulled the large keyboard into position, and lay back to search for Dr. Madsen.

The computer room served as the nerve center of Richard Anger’s non-Institute operations. Inaccessible to faculty or researchers, it was the nexus of activity for Captain Anger and his six gifted partners.

And in it, Flash reigned as undisputed master.

Even though Captain Anger probably knew as much or more about computers and electronics, his knowledge of economics and human organization was even deeper; knowing the value of division of labor allowed Captain Anger the luxury of assigning tasks to others without worry or the constant need to micro-manage. Flash had never met a more trusting, confident man than Richard Anger III.

Hoile’s long, slender fingers raced over the keyboard. His first electronic destination was the inner depths of Cyclops, the Universal Encyclopedia. The brainchild—literally—of Flash, Cap, and the Anger Institute, the ultra-fast computer Cyclops comprised over 1,000,000 parallel processors, each of which could tear apart a problem and work on a part of its solution. Cyclops held within its silicon innards nearly one quadrillion pieces of knowledge. It was more than a huge catalogue, though. Cyclops held its information relationally; that is, every bit of information related to other bits. Its neural nets stored information the way a human brain would—holographically: here and there, all over the net, designed with numerical, probabilistic connections that allowed Cyclops not only to store and retrieve information, but to *interpret* it and acquire more.

It was, at this point in its artificial life, self-learning. Using optical scanners and text-recognition programs, Cyclops could “read” four different human languages (English, German, Japanese, and Russian). One department at the Institute consisted solely of a team of researchers who sliced pages out of books and magazines to feed to the bank of scanners that fed Cyclops its diet of information. Another department did nothing but ask it questions, checking to see if Cyclops was relating its information properly and also to find any new insights the machine might generate.

At the moment, Flash Hoile posed it a simple question. He adjusted the

lightweight voice-input headset and asked, “Can you find Dr. Julius Frederick Madsen, Ph.D.s in molecular biology and electronics?”

Within a seconds, Dr. Madsen’s file appeared on the screen.

Dr. Julius Frederick Madsen

Age: 55 Height: 5’ 4" Weight: 125 Hair: White Eyes: Grey Race: European B Fingerprints: On File, National Security Net Voiceprint: On File, National Security Net Retinaprint: Not On File DNAprint: Not On File

Cyclops listed his education from grade school onward, noting degrees, honors, scholarships, fellowships. Page after page scrolled past on the screen, noting everything in public records concerning the life of Dr. Julius Madsen. Flash read every line, digesting the information into the personal computer behind his eyes.

Dr. Madsen had led a salutary life, creating enough new technology to have contributed significantly to the betterment of mankind. Flash concentrated on Madsen’s career over the past few years. He had been a professor emeritus at Stanford University while performing research at the Drexler College of Nanotechnology. Flash read over the list of patents awarded to Madsen. Certainly enough variety and utility there for him to license and live comfortably off royalties for the rest of his life.

A year ago, the record started to turn spotty. Missed appearances at conferences, research papers scheduled for publication going undelivered, a squabble with a graduate student over credit for a discovery. What discovery, Cyclops did not know. Dr. Madsen, though, had his funding cut off and his position at the college terminated, which indicated to Flash that there had been more to the incident than any public record indicated. The student, in addition, had been found dead—an apparent handgun suicide—three weeks before Dr. Julius Madsen disappeared from the face of the Earth.

He lived in Palo Alto until his disappearance four months ago. Cyclops showed mortgage payments and taxes current, something Flash noted with interest. Utilities also remained on.

He switched on the communications link to Captain Anger and crew.

“Cap—I’ve got an address for Dr. Madsen’s domicile.” He waited a few seconds for a reply. “Cap?” he said.

No reply.

“Skipper?”

Digital silence filled his headphones.

Chapter Seven

The Marching Lake

Captain Anger, Rock, and Dr. Bhotamo turned to stare at the silvery pool. Where once the surface had been flat and reflected the sky and buildings around it like a mirror, now the image seemed to bend. The eastern end of the pool arced like a concave mirror—the reflection of the collapsed building stretched and curved as if printed on taffy. The western end—the part closest to the street and the cluster of reporters—bulged convexly upward, like the rising crest of a silver wave.

“It’s flowing west!” Rock cried.

Without a word, Captain Anger jumped from the van. Still in his grimy disguise, with ripped pieces of flesh-colored rubber hanging from his face, he looked like a nightmare creature racing toward the line of police officers and the throng of reporters and onlookers.

“Get out of its way!” he shouted in a voice that commanded attention. Everyone turned to stare at the bizarre man, then at the microbotic shoreline.

Rather than eat its way through the pavement, the sea of churning electronic life now flowed out of the hole it had made, washing up over the street in a decidedly unfluid manner. Parts of it seemed to extend like the pseudopodia of an amoeba—a quick surge, followed by a resting phase while other rivulets caught up. Within moments, a shiny protuberance reached the police cordon. The officers scattered—all except one, who struggled to move the yellow vinyl tape farther forward, as if that would keep the monster contained.

“Drop it!” Cap cried. “Just get away!” His feet pounded the pavement as he sped toward the man.

A glittering pseudopod shot blindly toward the officer. Cap shoved off the pavement in a flying leap that propelled him along the police line. Sailing past the arm of death just inches below him, Cap tackled the cop with full force. The powerful collision knocked his target five feet sideways and out of the path of the microbotic scavengers.

They hit the ground and rolled across asphalt and gravel, the cop howling with pain and surprise. Cap merely grunted upon impact, rolled, and sprang to his feet, catlike and ready.

Fearful and enraged, the officer yanked the revolver from his holster and fired at the slithering mass. The bullets pounded deep holes and disappeared into the stuff, the cavities quickly filling in. Shooting the parts had in no way harmed the whole.

“Forget it,” Cap said. “You’re just feeding them.”

The cop turned and ran to join his fellows at their new redoubt.

Cap switched on his earcomm. “I think they’re at least partially solar-powered,” he said to the others. “And I think they’re trying to follow the setting sun.” His dark, emerald-hued eyes scanned the horizon. Sunlight glinted off something atop a building.

“Or maybe they’re being *guided!*”

“*Cap!*” Flash’s voice sounded. “*Am I glad you’re back on line! I’ve—*”

“Not now, Flash!” With an alarming burst of speed, Captain Anger rushed down the street toward an ancient brick building, ratty tweed coat fluttering in the breeze.

“Rock—Follow me and bring the guns! Lei—clear everyone away from that stuff. Clear the whole block!”

Rock seized a holstered pistol and jumped from the van, rushing to join Cap at the far corner of the street. His short, thick legs powered him to an impressive speed for his height and ungainly, squat shape. His massive arms swung back and forth with each stride, adding even more force to his motion.

Cap disappeared into a doorway. In seconds, Rock sailed through.

“Cap!” he shouted, forgetting that he still wore his comm earplug.

“*Upstairs,*” Cap replied. The sounds of his footsteps echoed through the building. Rock ran through the lobby of a seedy— and evacuated—hotel, heading for the stairway at the rear.

Four flights brought him to the roof door, which hung open on bent hinges. Cap had slammed through it at full speed.

Rock emerged into daylight, pistol drawn, gaze darting here and there across the tarpaper-and-gravel roofing. Cap stood to his left, peering up into the blue sky.

“Gun!” Rock cried, tossing the holster toward Captain Anger.

Cap's outstretched arm snatched it from mid-air without his turning to look. He strapped it on while examining the object of his attention. In front of him, a small video camera stood mounted on a tripod. Its lens focused on the now-demolished diner. Next to it stood a satellite dish antenna pointed heavenward. Cap stared in the direction its beam would be taking.

Rock holstered his pistol, knowing better than to interrupt the captain while he was thinking. He knew that Captain Anger was deep in calculation, estimating the altitude and azimuth of the transmission's destination. After a moment, he said, "Flash— someone's been watching the action and uplinking to the military satellite *Carnelian Sapphire*. Find where it's downlinking."

"*Might not be traceable,*" Flash radioed back, but set to the task nonetheless.

Cap examined the apparatus closely, searching for brand names and serial numbers. The Anger Institute's computer digitally recorded every word transmitted over their radios as part of its myriad duties. Cap's transmitters scrambled the messages so that anyone even capable of intercepting the spread-spectrum transmissions would interpret the rasping signals as nothing more than static. If they tried to decode the apparent noise, the most powerful computer in the world—even the Anger Institute's—would need centuries to find the incredibly huge prime numbers used as multipliers in the intricate mathematical function known as the One Way Trapdoor that served to encrypt the signal.

"All the serial numbers have been removed," Cap said. "No unique components here. Off-the-shelf technology. I don't expect there to be any fingerprints."

It was when he concentrated on a deep mystery that Cap looked like the genius he truly was. Even in the absurd, almost surreal costume he wore, the power of his intellect shone through. Standing on the roof overlooking the advance of the ocean of silver locusts, he tugged at the last vestiges of his disguise. He stroked his beard in contemplation. Bits of latex rubber and spirit gum peeled away in his fingers, exposing more of his sharp features.

His lean and rugged face, though tanned from exposure to sun and wind, displayed none of the creases and leatheriness associated with sun-damage. His ally and personal physician— Dr. Uriah West—used Institute funds exceptionally well in his research into cell repair. Cap's hair—dark as the rust on ageless steel—lay austerely close to his scalp. Cut

short for utilitarian ease, it still revealed a roguish wave that gave him a piratical look, which was not out of character, considering his ancestry.

His eyes, though, captured the attention of any who saw them. Eyes that looked almost black at first glance revealed themselves to be a deep, rich emerald green when they gazed intently in the search for knowledge and truth. Those eyes gazed now over the parapet at the relentless advance of the microbots.

“Let’s get back down there, Rock. I want a live sample before we freeze that mass.”

That’s when the bullets started exploding around them.

Chapter Eight

Argent Slaughter

One of the helicopters circling overhead among the television and police choppers dropped out of the sky, twin turbine engines whining. From concealed weapons pods blazed the unmistakable flashes of machine gun fire. Lead bullets slammed into the roof with the crack and smash of copper-clad death. Splinters of shattered wood and clouds of exploding concrete blossomed around Cap and Rock.

Cap drew first, whipping the odd black pistol from his holster. Rock—only an instant behind him—snapped the weapon up to aim at the killer swooping in from above. The pistols roared in powerful bursts, firing armor-piercing tracer bullets into the air.

An instant after firing, both men threw themselves aside and rolled out of the path of the oncoming machine gun blasts. Cap’s headband videocam flew from his skull, clattering across the bullet-riddled roof. The rounds tore apart the mystery camera and its satellite dish. Bits of glass, plastic, and aluminum flew everywhere, accompanied by copper swages and lead fragments from the bullets.

“Take this up your tailpipe, *zhopu kozina!*” Rock shouted, using his thumb to flip a switch on the pistol. Fully automatic now, the pistol fired a steady stream of tracers at the retreating helicopter. The orange-red streamers of color flew inexorably toward the aircraft.

Captain Anger joined in, his pistol still semi-auto. Each shot— though

fired in rapid succession—was well-aimed, with Cap swiftly, reflexively calculating the proper angle of fire to ensure that bullet and chopper arrived in the same place at the same time.

Neither of the matte-black pistols ejected any brass casings. The weapons used *caseless* 10mm ammunition, which allowed for more than double the number of rounds in a magazine of similar size. And these pistols sported long, fat, double-column magazines, each holding forty-eight rounds, plus an extra one already chambered.

Rock's volley and Cap's more steadily paced stream of rounds hit the chopper nearly simultaneously, peppering the fuselage with several direct hits. Undaunted, the aircraft rotated about for another assault.

With a loud curse, Rock realized that he had fired off his entire load. He ejected the magazine and drew a second from his ammo pouch, slamming it home and releasing the charger, which had locked open after the last round. There was no slide to drive home for there were no cases to eject. The weapon simply blazed out its projectiles without the chatter and rattle of conventional automatic weapons.

Cap still had half his ammo left. Carefully aiming each rapid shot, he squeezed off an even dozen at the onrushing helicopter. Every one hit their mark, punching twelve holes in the cockpit windshield. He avoided the fuel tanks, knowing that the tracer bullets could turn the onrushing aircraft into a fireball.

Rock blasted another deafening burst at the chopper, many of the fiery streaks making an impact on fuselage, rotor, and turbines.

“Run for it!” he shouted, scrambling to the left.

The chopper, its engines and murderous pilot both dead, hurtled toward them, a mass of metal, glass, and inflammable fuel. Cap estimated where it would hit and jumped far afield, running across the roof to the right and rear, practically under the advancing, falling machine.

With a shattering collision, it hit the edge of the building and tore out a section of the roof. Without even slowing, it dragged the debris along as it twisted and cartwheeled to the pavement four stories below. A sickening crunch of impact arose from the street.

Cap rushed to the demolished edge of the building to look down at the scene.

The helicopter lay in ruins a few yards in front of the advancing silver tide. The smell of spilled jet fuel rose from the wreckage. The other helicopters overhead—police and reporters—jockeyed for the best view of

the disaster.

Without a word, Cap holstered his pistol and climbed down into the gaping wound in the side of the building. Rock followed, warily testing each shattered beam to ensure that it supported his not-inconsiderable weight. Cap moved with far more agility, maneuvering down the tangle of musty old wood and crumbling masonry like an experienced mountain climber on an alpine peak.

The damage reached to the windows of the second story. Cap gained his footing and paused on the ledge to search for a landing spot clear of detritus. After an instant's deliberation, he lightly bounded from the ledge and plummeted feet-first toward the sidewalk. Extending his legs without locking his knees, he braced himself for the impact. Feet slammed against the concrete, powerful leg muscles contracted to absorb the energy of the fall. Like a cat he stayed on his feet, bending under the impact of a twenty-foot drop until his haunches very nearly touched his heels. Hands splayed, his fingertips hit lightly against the pavement to steady him and absorb the last few foot-pounds of energy from his fall.

From that position, he leapt forward like an Olympic sprinter, leaving Rock on the second story to contemplate a less drastic method of reaching ground level.

Captain Anger bounded over to the crushed bubble of the helicopter. Tearing open the door with one mighty hand, he reached in with the other to feel the throat of the blood-spattered corpse inside. Cap regretted the death of someone who could have provided valuable information. A quick pat search of the body turned up no identification. Cap's hand came up from its exploration smeared with kerosene and lifeblood.

He turned the man's head up; having lost his videocam on the roof, he memorized every feature that might still be recognizable. One ten-millimeter slug had hit the pilot in his jaw, shattering the bone and rendering the lower part of his face an unidentifiable red mess.

"Cap!" Leila cried. "Get out *now!*"

Cap's gaze darted around the ruined aircraft interior, lighting upon a set of Jeppesen air charts. He seized the binder and jumped back out of the copter just as the advancing microbotic sea engulfed the wreckage.

The force of his retreat threw him back against the curb. With grunt, he stood and watched the blob overrun the helicopter, coating it as if an invisible artist electroplated everything in sight with a silver patina. Its contours softened. Within less than a minute, the billions of microbots devoured the obstacle and reduced it to microscopic bits. The minuscule

electro-mechanical creatures utilized some of the chemicals—the kerosene and oil in the turbine engines, the glucose and oxygen in the pilot’s flesh and blood—as fuel. Some—the silicon in the electronics, the steel and aluminum in the fuselage—they used to build more copies of themselves.

They moved westward with unstoppable vehemence.

Captain Anger eyed the colony of artificial life coolly, considering his options.

Rock managed to kick in a second story window, climb through, and rush down to join his compeer. He skidded to a halt beside Anger and gaped in renewed awe at the voracious slime, allowing to slip from his tongue one of the few pieces of English slang he’d bothered to incorporate into his vocabulary.

“Geez, Cap,” he said, “that stuff’s *hungry!*”

A truck skidded around the corner at the west end of the street. Cap eyed it with relief. “Here comes an appetite suppressant.”

A harried young man jumped out of the driver’s seat and bounded over to Dr. Bhotamo. Cap and Rock set to unloading the truckload of cryogenic material. Firemen and police joined in—nervously—and within minutes they had surrounded the moving lake with a perimeter of large dewars—insulated fifty-five-gallon drums.

At Captain Anger’s request, the driver from Lawrence Livermore Laboratory handed the cryogenic suits to Rock and Leila. The thick, layered suits—similar to the suit Cap wore, if less versatile—glittered with a reflective coating of silvered Mylar. The three, when fully suited, looked like living extensions of the mirror pool. They surrounded the westward-moving lake at equidistant points, each standing near a drum of liquid nitrogen and holding a cryogenic spray gun.

“Go,” was all Cap had to say.

The three opened the nozzles and doused the lake with the ultra-cold liquefied gas. As the streams hit the warm afternoon air, clouds of icy vapor erupted, filling the street with an eerie mist that imparted the smell of a snowy day to the block.

As soon as the flow of nitrogen touched the microbots, the forward motion ceased. The surface took on an unreflective grey cast. Minuscule cracks appeared all over the frozen zone, making a snapping, popping sound similar to the cracking of an icy pond in a spring thaw.

Whenever a dewar emptied out, they disconnected the nozzle and attached it to another. Working in a clockwise fashion, they soon had the

entire sea of electro-mechanical scavengers frozen solid. Cap continued to pour the liquid nitrogen onto the crumbly puddle, its peripheral edges, and the ditch-like scar it left in its wake.

“Spray everything it might have touched,” Captain Anger said over the commlink. “If even one single unit survives, it could start dismantling the damaged ones and replicate all over again!”

“*Gospodi polimya*,” Rock said in awe. He sprayed even more widely, dousing the unreflective grey mass with every last droplet of the nitrogen.

After a few more moments, Leila’s last drum of nitrogen drained to empty. Cap’s and Rock’s soon followed. Cap set his nozzle on the drum and turned his attention to the smaller puddle that had once been the paramedics and their van. It seemed quiescent at the moment, though Cap knew that a beehive of microbotic activity churned on a molecular level.

Weir and Kompantzeff wrangled a shiny, studded sphere out of the van. About the size of a soccer ball, it possessed the same hexagon/pentagon design on its surface. At the intersection of each silver pentagon, though, a knob protruded. From each knob dangled a cable shielded in wire mesh. The cables ran to a briefcase-sized control board hefted by an assistant of Dr. Bhotamo. The trio set the equipment down beside Captain Anger at the edge of the puddle.

Carefully, Cap—still wearing the cryonic insulation suit— knelt and dipped an acid-resistant probe into the mass. It welled up around the plastic scoop like mercury adhering to gold.

“This stick’s made of long-chain polymers,” Cap said to Dr. Bhotamo, who watched from a respectful distance. “I suspect it will take the microbots longer to break the molecules down than it would something simpler, such as a steel probe.”

With utmost care, Captain Anger lifted up a silvery blob the size of a pea and turned on his knee toward the metal soccer ball. Lei had opened it along its equator. Rock switched on the power and a humming sound registered just below the level of hearing. With utmost care, Cap held the probe over the center of the containment vessel’s lower half and with one controlled snap of his wrist shook the droplet off the end of the rod. The tiny gob fell an inch and then floated, suspended in the absolute center of the sphere. Cap swiftly tossed the probe into the small pool of microbots, its purpose served, and turned his attention back to the magnetic levitation device. He gingerly hinged the upper half of the sphere into position over the lower half, taking care not to jostle the half that

suspended the sample. Until the top was on and all the magnetic beams activated, the slightest motion could send the sample sliding off the magnetic fields and cause it to make contact with part of the machine. If it did that, the microbots would have a new source of raw materials.

The top in place, Cap engaged the locking bolts. “Activate the magnetic guns in sequence, Lei.”

Leila typed instructions to the computer controls and watched the screen that gave a virtual image of what was happening inside the ball. The device hissed lightly.

“Chamber evacuated to pressure of eight torr. Field is on, all beams nominal,” she said. “Sample contained at center of sphere.”

Rock breathed a heavy Slavic sigh of relief. The microbots floated inside the unit suspended on magnetic beams, as sturdily contained as if they were packed in concrete, yet in contact with nothing but the energy fields that hit them from twenty directions. The microscopic creatures might be able to use the energy in some way, but without any materials to strip and convert into more microbots, they were as helpless as a demolition crew stranded in outer space.

Cap nodded. “All right.” He turned to Dr. Bhotamo. “With your permission, I’d like to take this over to Lawrence Livermore and analyze it further.”

“Please, Professor Anger. My lab is your lab.”

“Thank you. Leila—get this into the van. We’ll work on a defense against them in a moment.” He gazed up through his cold-suit visor toward the building through which the rogue helicopter had crashed. “After that, we’ll track down their source.”

He turned to Rock. “Let’s freeze that other pool.”

Chapter Nine

The Weapon Makers

Captain Anger gritted his teeth.

None but his friends and long-time companions Rock and Leila noticed, or even knew why. Only the hardening of his gaze, the tightening of the muscles along his strong jawline gave any clue to his emotion.

The three had entered a place of war.

Lawrence Livermore was a scientific research laboratory very similar to the Anger Institute. In low-lying buildings amid footpaths lined with trees, scientists spent their days in contemplation of fascinating and obscure aspects of the laws of nature. With unbridled enthusiasm, they tinkered with mighty machines and miniature wonders, pushing the limits of physics and engineering to astounding extremes.

But where the Anger Institute dedicated its efforts solely and exclusively toward the betterment of mankind, Lawrence Livermore had another, darker duty. Under contract to the federal government, scientists there daily researched new and more powerful ways to kill.

They did not view their jobs in such a light. In their own minds, these powerful thinkers considered their tasks to be nothing less than the dispassionate inquiry into the workings of nature. They pondered sub-atomic particles and found ways to break them into the fundamental building blocks of the Universe. What the politicians did with such information, they thought, lay beyond their realm of expertise. They were scientists, not philosophers.

Captain Anger knew better. As a merchant marine in his younger days, he had stumbled upon many wars fought with weapons of far less sophistication than those designed by his fellow scientists at Lawrence. Even the crudest devices brought misery and devastation wherever they fell.

Cap could not quite bring himself to hate these scientists who toiled in ignorance of the consequences of their actions, but to him the place spoke of death.

He followed Dr. Bhotamo down the cool, robin's egg blue corridor. Willowy Leila and the ursine Russian brought up the rear, wheeling the magnetic suspension unit on a lab cart.

"I have commandeered a lab for you," Dr. Bhotamo said, "and I give you my personal guarantee that you won't be disturbed by members of the press or any others."

"Thank you, Doctor."

Bhotamo ran his ID card through a slot in a set of double doors, which parted at the priority security clearance. Inside was everything Cap would need.

"What exactly are you planning?" Dr. Bhotamo asked.

Cap smiled with a wry expression. "I'm planning to develop a

microbotic vaccine.”

•

For hours Captain Anger sat in front of the atomic force microscope. It gave him a superb view of one of the microbot’s infinitesimal control circuits. With the computer-enhanced image uplinked to Flash via satellite, Cap was able—between the two of them—to divine the exact workings of the tiny terror’s gallium-arsenide brain.

“*It’s fascinating,*” Flash said from his lab at the Institute. “*Whoever built this has an incredibly fine grasp of three-dimensional circuit design*.”

Cap said nothing. He gazed intently at the complex circuit diagram developing as the computer analyzed the microbot. His deep green eyes drank it all in as though they were bottomless seas of infinite capacity. After a moment, he tapped at the computer keys with swift, sure finger strokes. He superimposed another circuit diagram—different in several ways from the original—over the circuit diagram for the tiny scavenger.

“How’s that, Flash?” was all he said.

After a moment, Flash said, “*Looks fine, Cap. That ought to turn it against its own.*”

“Let’s try it.” Cap programmed the plasma beam to deposit a new circuit on the microbot’s surface. With stupendous precision, the beam alternately vaporized old pathways and fused new ones with near atomic-width tolerances. Within moments, it was done.

Rock stared at the screen in bafflement. “What does *that* do?” Though he was one of the most brilliant aerospace propulsion experts in the world, electronics proved a constant source of bewilderment to him. As far as he was concerned, computers were incomprehensible black boxes that one attached to rockets or jets to make them fly. He used computers every day for design and control, but what went on inside them—their electronic guts—he expressed little desire to understand.

“*Simple, Rock.*” Flash watched the operation on his own terminal screen. Next to that glowed a screen presenting a view of the Lawrence Livermore lab, courtesy of Leila’s videocam. “*Cap’s reprogrammed that microbot to seek out the other microbots and reprogram them to stop scavenging. And to become reprogrammers themselves. And nothing else*.”

“Let’s test it.” Cap used a microscopic probe to position another, unaltered microbot into the vicinity of the reprogrammed one.

Immediately, the latter used its carbon rods to size up the newcomer like one ant feeling out another. When it did, it immediately attacked, carefully cutting new atom-wide pathways into its foe's circuitry, following the commands indelibly etched into its own memory.

"See?" Flash's voice said over the earcomm. "*Now we have two robots working on our side. Now they won't destroy anything in their path—they'll just search for other microbots to reprogram.*"

Rock grunted. "And when they run out of microbots to reprogram?"

"They'll keep searching until they corrode from sunlight and air pollution." Cap held the probe in front of the mandibles of the newly-reprogrammed creature. It felt at the probe but did nothing to it. Neither did the other. He urged the pair into the teeming millions that made up the tiny silver blob floating on the magnetic field. They immediately attacked one microbot apiece. Now there were four anti-scavengers. Shortly there were sixteen. "These microbots have no defense against being reprogrammed. Whoever built them thought they could overrun anything, making new copies of themselves to replace the older ones. We'll unleash this countermeasure at the Los Gatos site to handle any stray microbots that might have escaped the freeze. And we'll keep a few for ourselves."

Thirty-two. Sixty-four. The electromechanical antidote spread through the mass of scavengers. One hundred twenty-eight. Two hundred fifty-six.

"Any big news today, Flash?" Cap asked, sitting on a lab stool and folding his arms. They were muscled not with the lumps and knots of a body builder, but with the smooth, hard lines of a man of action. Captain Anger had made himself into a man of uncommon strength, but his strength lay in more than mere muscle. His was a strength powered by will and an astonishing self-confidence.

"*General Secretary of the United Nations was missing for forty-eight hours,*" Flash announced as if reading from a report. "*Back at work now with no explanation.*"

Cap nodded, storing the piece of information for later consideration. "Anything on Dr. Madsen?"

Flash answered the captain. "*The mortgage and utility payments on his Palo Alto home are current, even though he's been missing for four months.*"

"Let's drop some of these little bugs off in Los Gatos to handle any strays we may have missed, and then go pay his house a personal visit."

Chapter Ten

The Safecracker

The house—an expensive, two story building—sat on a culde-sac in an exclusive suburb of Palo Alto. Cap drove his unassuming white van past the domicile and parked halfway down the block. Leila and Rock stepped out, this time dressed more conservatively. Rock wore a dark blue business suit that attempted but failed to conform to his thickset physique. He wore a wide, garish blue paisley tie around his thick neck. Leila, at least, looked refined in a free-flowing maroon jumpsuit not too different from her more functional black one. Neither of them wore their pistols on the outside. A barely visible bulge under Rock's left arm, though, let the experienced observer know that he was armed.

Cap emerged from the van finally looking like himself. He was a tall man, over six-foot-three, who seemed even taller because of his self-assured and powerful bearing. When in disguise, he could look several inches shorter simply by assuming a poor posture and a weaker attitude. Now, though, he stepped onto the sidewalk with strength and dignity, cleansed of all disguise and wearing an outfit specially designed for his life of action and danger.

Pants, shirt, and jacket of khaki clad his body with comfort and panache. But unlike the mock clothing sold in fashion houses, Captain Anger constructed his gear of a rugged, almost indestructible weave of aramid fibers developed in his own lab. The same cloth composed Rock's business suit and Leila's apparel. The dense fibers provided some protection against low velocity bullets and insulated well against heat and cold while maintaining a constant body temperature for the wearer.

Captain Anger's shirt sported several pockets, two large ones and several smaller ones designed with their openings disguised and not obvious to the casual glance. His pants similarly possessed cargo pockets that did not bulge away from his strong legs, but rather conformed to them without clinging tightly. The jacket hung to mid-thigh and displayed crisp, no-nonsense lines. It hid many secrets in its six outer pockets and ten inner ones. Even the belt that cinched his waist held its share of surprises.

His face, scrubbed clean of the rubber mask he utilized in his guise as

the old bum, looked even more impressive in the afternoon sun. This was a man meant to live in the fire of adventure, born to roam the world and change it wherever he went. Nothing less could please such a man of action.

Yet in his gaze dwelt the soul of a scientist, a rationalist whose every action was ruled by the cool workings of the intellect. Even his boldest, wildest moves operated under the firm yoke of reason.

It was his expertly trained intellect that warned him of danger in the seemingly unthreatening home. He stepped in front of the other two members of his team and strode to the front door. Standing aside to avoid any gun blast that might chance to punch through the closed door, he swung the ornate brass knocker twice.

No response.

Without any urging, as if they had rehearsed a hundred times, Rock and Leila split up, heading to the left and right sides of the home. Captain Anger withdrew a slender, bendable black tube from his jacket and peered around the window frame and through the glass next to the entry. The tube—an infra-red viewer—detected the slightest variance in temperatures and converted it into an image. Looking through it at the hall carpet, Cap saw the blurred heat-outline of footprints. Someone had been there only a few moments ago. The steps led from the foyer up the curved stairway to the second story.

“Someone’s in there,” he subvocalized without moving his lips or even opening his mouth. The tiny but powerful microphone in the earpiece he wore picked up the nearly inaudible tones conducted through jawbone and inner ear, transmitting them to his comrades who wore the same devices and via satellite to Cyclops. A second microphone operated on a different frequency, capturing all the sounds that Cap heard and transmitting them back to the Institute. The earpiece was smaller than the smallest hearing aid so that Captain Anger’s team could be in full communication with one another at all times without anyone suspecting. Cap was one of the most circumspect people imaginable. So much so that his enemies sometimes swore that Cap and his friends were telepathic, or psychic, or black magicians.

Rock crept through the neat bed of bright yellow flowers surrounding the south wall of the house. He discovered a patio and sliding glass door. The door hung jimmied open on one hinge. “My side,” he muttered, “fast!” With that, he jumped from the flower bed and through the doorway, landing on the carpet of the breakfast nook with astonishing silence for a

man of his bulk. He crouched, listening for any sign of movement.

Cap was the first to join him, quietly appearing at his side. Leila crept in an instant later.

Cap peered through the infra-red scope, determined that no one had been in the room for a few minutes, and signaled the others to follow.

Halfway up the hall stairway, they heard a mighty crash, the sound of steel against steel. Captain Anger raced swiftly up the stairs three steps per stride and followed the sound to its source.

The ringing smash sounded again. And again. Cap entered Dr. Madsen's upstairs office to see a long-haired blond teenager frantically swinging a sledgehammer at a wall safe.

The boy, who could not have been more than fifteen, took another swing at the exposed hinges on the safe. Steel hit steel, sending white-hot sparks flying, scenting the air with the smell of burnt iron. He took a moment to wrist away the sweat dripping into his eyes. Then, for whatever reason, he turned around to check the doorway.

And saw the tall, copper-haired man in khaki.

With a startled gasp, the young man raised the hammer and lunged toward the bearded intruder, swinging the weapon with all his might.

Cap caught it in one hand, near the business end of the sledge, and reduced its motion to zero. With his other hand, he gripped both the boy's wrists and pried them away from the handle.

The kid struggled and screamed, "I'll kill you, you murdering bas—"

"Hold on, son," Cap said calmly without releasing his grip. The boy tried to kick him, but he lifted him up by the wrists, out and away from harm in a feat of leverage that would have astonished a professional weightlifter. "We haven't killed anyone lately. Who are you?"

"None of your business. Put me down."

Cap complied, keeping hold of the sledge hammer.

The kid with the shoulder-length yellow hair rubbed a sore wrist and stared up at the stranger. He paused for a moment, then broke and ran for the hallway. He galloped squarely into the block wall that was Pyotr Kompantzeff.

"*Shto tebye*—what have we got here?" Rock caught and held the frightened and angry kid in a Russian bear hug that defied escape. The captive swung a foot at Rock's shin, but the ragged sneaker bounced off the thick bone and sinew of the burly man's gristly leg.

“We’re not who you think,” Leila said, stepping into the kid’s field of view. “Put him down, Rock.”

Freed of Rock’s iron grip, the boy stared at the haunting, raven-haired woman in puzzlement. “You don’t work for Dandridge?”

Cap shook his head. “My name is Richard Anger. This is Leila Weir and Pete Kompantzeff.”

“Are you cops?”

Leila laughed. “Hardly.”

“We’re *scientists*,” Rock said levelly.

The kid eyed him up and down. “Yeah, right.” Rock looked more like an enforcer for the Russian Mafia than a scientist.

Cap leaned the sledge hammer against the wall. “Do you know Dr. Madsen?”

“Who said I should?” The teen’s voice was suspicious, cautious.

“You’re in his home, breaking into his safe.”

The kid shrugged. “So I’m a burglar. What does that make you?”

“Burglars don’t call the people who catch them murderers. Is Dr. Madsen dead?”

The kid walked over to a chair and collapsed into it. Burying his face in one hand, he wept and pounded the chair arm with another. “Dandridge did it. I know he did. I’ll kill him.”

“What’s in the safe?” Cap asked.

The boy looked up, a guarded expression on his face. “Nothing. Money. I need to get out of town.”

Captain Anger nodded. “I see. Maybe I can help.” He stepped over to the safe. “What’s your name?” he asked calmly, his sensitive fingers gently turning the dial.

“What’s it to you?”

Cap shrugged, continuing his work on the safe. “I just like to know the people for whom I serve as safecracker.”

With that, he stopped turning the dial and reached for the locking handle. “Well?”

“Jonathan Madsen.”

The handle rotated with a heavy clack. Cap swung the door open to look

inside. “No money,” he said.

Rock walked over to the desk. “Out with it, boy. Who’s Dandridge and how’d he kill your father?”

“My *grandfather*,” Jonathan Madsen corrected. “Dandridge worked with him at Stanford. Grampa Julie would let me visit now and then. I liked being around the lab. Then something happened to a grad student of his named Barry Feinman and Dandridge took over and had gramps canned.”

“Flash,” Captain Anger murmured, “check status of a Dr. Dandridge at Stanford.”

“*Already working*,” said a voice in his ear. “*William Arthur Dandridge, Ph.D. in electronics. Currently head of research at Drexler College of Nanotechnology.*”

Cap withdrew a sheaf of papers partway from the safe. “Are these patent forms what you’re looking for?”

The young Madsen gazed impassively at the imposing figure before him. “Maybe. Let me see.” He walked over to the open safe and reached in with his right hand, feeling around for a second or two. Then he pulled out the stack of papers with both hands and carried them to the desk by the bookshelf-lined far wall. Putting the papers down, he casually slid his hands into his pockets and sat down behind the desk.

“Yeah. That’s the stuff.”

Cap smiled at the kid’s bold—but crude—effort. “And,” he said, “how about what you palmed into your pocket?”

In a leap that surprised all, Madsen jumped to the desk and took a swift step to its edge. Using it as a diving board, he kicked off and sailed fists first through the glass of the second-story window. The crash of the shattering panes startled the three into action.

“*Gospodi!*” Rock cried, turning to run downstairs.

Cap raced to the window in time to see Jonathan hit the ground shoulder first. With a bone-crunching thud, the boy landed in the soft earth of the floral landscaping. The wind knocked out of him, he fought to rise and run.

With a stronger and more planned jump, Captain Anger sailed from the window to land on his feet a yard from the gasping, bloodied boy. After determining that Madsen was not seriously injured, Cap crouched beside him and waited.

When Jonathan had regained his breath, Cap said, “What’s in your pocket that’s worth dying for?” He held out a hand as the boy struggled in panic. “I won’t take it from you, even though I easily could. I want to help you.”

Rock and Leila arrived by a more mundane route in time to hear the wheezing teen say, “Gramps... and I were... real pals. I wanted... to be a scientist the way... he was. He told me... about his problems at... work. Said corporate intrigue... and spying were... things he wasn’t used to.”

He sat up, with help from Leila. Still laboring for breath, he also fought to restrain sobs of anguish.

“He told me if... anything should happen to him that he had... instructions taped to the inside of his safe. He gave... me the combination once, but I forgot it.” He reached into his pocket and produced a piece of adhesive tape, coated now with lint and dirt. Stuck to it also was a shiny, iridescent disc the size of a quarter.

“Optical storage medium,” Cap said. “Smallest CD I’ve seen.” He slipped it into one of the hidden pockets of his shirt.

“Julie liked small things. He always said that the goal of technology is to do more with less.” The kid began weeping again.

“How’d he die?” Leila asked in her softest tone.

“He confronted Dandridge last week. They fought about something. Then gramps phoned me yesterday sounding really weird. He wasn’t himself. Hasn’t acted normal for a long time. He told me that I knew what to do and then he said goodbye.”

Cap pondered for a moment, then said, “Your grandfather disappeared four months ago. Where has he been?”

“He—” Jonathan’s words were interrupted by the sound of collapsing timbers.

“The house!” Leila cried.

“Stay here,” Cap said, running into the building. Inside, he quickly found the source of the noise.

A portion of the living room wall on the first floor had collapsed into a pool of reflective silver. “More microbots,” he said, the earpiece transmitting the message to those outside.

Pulling a small silicon capsule from one of the hidden pockets in his shirt, he tossed it into the center of the scavenging mass. It immediately melted as the microbots disassembled it, though more slowly than Cap

had expected.

Suddenly, the center of the pool changed. The capsule disgorged a hundred thousand copies of the microbot reprogrammed by Captain Anger. The shiny surface of the pool rippled gently as the machines fought it out in eerie silence on a microscopic scale. The scavengers proved no match for the reprogrammers: their circuitry logically prevented them from dismantling their own kind. The reprogrammers, though, obeyed just as relentlessly their own command to alter *only* the scavengers and to leave all other material unharmed.

The silver pool slowly thinned as the reprogrammed microbots spread out in search of more victims. The entire living room took on a silvery sheen. Now, though, nothing decomposed into raw materials and more microbots. Instead, the furniture, carpets, walls, and drapes looked as if they had been sprinkled with silver dust. Then, with the microbots spreading out even thinner, it seemed as if everything were coated with a sooty powder.

When the robots thinned out to just one layer thick, the color showed through again and the living room appeared normal. Normal, that is, except for the yawning cavity created by the scavengers. Damage already done could not be repaired. But the danger had passed.

Cap returned outside to see that the young Madsen walked with Rock and Leila toward the front of the house. Limped, more accurately, blood still dripping from the glass lacerations on the young man's hands, arms, and shoulders.

The captain spoke to the trio. "Dr. Madsen must have used the phone in the living room when he called you. It was half-devoured by microbots. They're partly solar-powered, so they're slow workers in a dark room, which is why the whole block hasn't been consumed. Our own version of the microbot will work faster on the same amount of light. It takes less energy to reprogram a microbot than to dismantle matter and build copies of itself."

As the four walked toward the street, the kid suddenly pointed and yelled.

"Dandridge!"

He struggled to wrest himself from Rock's grip and rush toward a man in a white lab coat. The bespectacled man looked up, saw them, and turned to run back to the chocolate-brown sedan parked at the curb. He jumped inside and flipped the ignition as Cap sped toward him. With a squeal of peeling rubber, the car roared beyond Cap's reach and

accelerated up the street.

Cap dug into a cargo pocket and withdrew a small pistol. Taking careful aim, he fired one shot at the receding vehicle. A hole appeared in the trunk amid a small cloud of pulverized brown paint.

“Let’s roll!” he shouted to the others, ignoring the fact that he could just as well have whispered the command over the earcomm.

Captain Anger and his team ran to the van and jumped in, Jonathan tucked under Rock’s arm like a football.

They craved this excitement. Cap may have surrounded himself with men and women of exceptional intelligence and abilities, but the glue that bound them together was their shared lust for the galvanizing thrill of adventure. They who possessed powerful intellects and constantly used them needed equally powerful diversions. The members of Captain Anger’s inner circle found diversion aplenty in his fantastic exploits.

Cap gunned the engine into life and pulled away from the curb.

“We’ve lost him!” the kid cried, looking this way and that, his blond, bloodied hair whipping about the sides of his face. “I’ll bet he turned left, though. Back toward the university.”

“Relax, boy,” Rock said. “Captain Anger fired slug with homing device inside.” He tapped his thick, short fingers at the keyboard of the van’s onboard computer. “*Smotri*, look at screen.”

On the screen, a digitized map of Palo Alto displayed a dizzying amount of information: Streets, riverbeds, buildings, topography, political boundaries, government buildings, hospitals, police stations. With a single keystroke, Rock made it show only the streets and two moving dots, one red and one blue. The blue dot remained at the center of the screen while the map rotated and moved.

“We are blue dot,” Rock said. “Top of screen is always front of van. Easier to visualize map overlaid on your real-world view. Red target is Dandridge’s car. We won’t lose him unless he abandons car or finds and destroys homer.” Rock switched the screen to its high-information mode and leaned back in his seat, very satisfied with himself.

Cap and Rock rode in the two front seats. The other two seats, in the compact laboratory/computer center at the rear, were occupied. Jonathan stood behind Rock’s seat, gripping it tightly to remain standing while the van pitched left and right, forward and back. Leila calmly stood at work in the back, pulling a medical kit from a compartment. With catlike steadiness in spite of the bouncing of the vehicle, she advanced on

Jonathan and set the case down, opening it up and administering to his wounds.

“You look like the loser in a cat fight,” she said as she helped him off with his shirt. His skin glistened with sweat and blood, and he smelled of salt and garden soil

Slashes from the plunge through glass crisscrossed his arms and shoulders. Braced for the sting of antiseptics, he felt nothing as the beautiful woman sprayed each cut with a clear, painless liquid and pressed the sides of the wounds together. Much to his amazement, each laceration sealed shut as if glued together, leaving only a red line to indicate that there had ever been a cut.

“It’s a cyanoacrylate compound,” Leila said. “Sort of like super-glue for tissues. Seals the wound but eventually resorbs after healing.” She smiled wickedly. “If your guts had been blown apart, we could spray everything and create a seal to stop the bleeding. Then a surgeon could put you back together. This stuff has saved a lot of lives on the battlefield even before Cap perfected it for peacetime use.”

The van took a turn at high speed. Jonathan put a steadying hand out against the wall. Leila—remarkably—stayed in place simply by shifting weight on her lithe, smoothly muscled legs.

“We’re attracting interest of law enforcement!” Rock shouted. On his screen flickered yellow dots indicating the location of radio transmissions on police-band frequencies. Several of the yellow sparks sped toward the blue.

Cap reached toward the dashboard—a vast array of aircraft-style dials, monitors, and switches—and tapped a small button. On the rear of the van, the commercial license plate morphed into a federal emergency plate with different colors, character styles, and numbers. That would be enough to ward off any attempt to pull the van over, something Captain Anger was reluctant to permit.

The plate actually contained an array of thousands of tiny rods, each with a color changing tip. The rods extended or retracted to form the numbers on the plate and the tips changed color to match the designs of all fifty state license plates, federal and state government plates, and the plates of the Canadian provinces and Mexican states. Each license plate image stored in the van’s database was valid for a white van registered in each jurisdiction.

“He’s heading toward the Palo Alto airport,” Rock said.

Cap nodded, his deep sea-green eyes never turning from his view of the road. Though his mind no doubt followed several trains of thought at the same time, he appeared to be concentrating all his powers on the simple act of high-speed driving.

“Our jet’s in San Jose!” Leila said. “If we can’t stop him or plant a homer on his plane, we’ll lose him!”

Cap monitored the car’s progress on the computer screen, never once coming so close to Dandridge as to make visual contact. The business buildings on El Camino Real whipped past them; cars screeched to a halt, narrowly avoiding the speeding white blur. Twists and turns took them away from California’s oldest highway and toward the bay.

The sedan reached the airport. Cap’s van followed.

And faced a wall of machine guns.

Chapter Eleven

The Electric Zombies

William Arthur Dandridge knew he was being followed.

Even though he could not catch more than an occasional, distant glimpse of the white van, he knew that the people from Madsen’s house hounded his heels. This caused him no fear. It merely forced him to think and act quicker.

William Dandridge enjoyed thinking quickly. Short and wiry, he gave the impression of being a nervous man when in fact his energetic intellect made him impatient with the rest of the world, which he perceived from behind his thick glasses as slothful and irresponsible. Years earlier, he had decided that the majority of mankind *ought* to be responsible—responsible to *him*. And he had spent his subsequent years in an effort to make them so.

Now—on the eve of his triumph—someone had intervened. That mysterious, ragged man on his video monitor. The man with the ursine male and dark, alluring female companions. The man to whom even the police and that quack from Lawrence, Bhotamo, deferred.

Who was he? Dandridge thought as he raced toward his airport destination. Who was it that could shoot a heavily armed assault

helicopter out of the sky? Who was it that discovered the secret of his microbot so quickly and mounted such a swift counterattack? It wasn't Madsen. Madsen was neutralized.

Swerve, brake, accelerate. Dandridge plowed through Palo Alto with a speed that in other men would be reckless. His rapid reaction time, though, made such maneuvers a simple task.

Madsen was slow, he thought. Slow and methodical. The microbots were nothing more than laboratory curiosities for him.

Avoid the station wagon. Run the red light. Crash through the street barrier. Speed across the construction zone.

The airport grew nearer. He was going to make it. There was no doubt in his mind.

He speed-dialed a number on his car phone. "Coming in," he said with terse urgency. "Cover me. Being followed." He dropped the phone to the car seat and slammed on the accelerator. With a thud of shock absorbers, Dandridge crossed the first yellow-striped speed bump that guarded the entrance to the airport. Four men dressed in battle fatigues and at the ready jumped into the street behind the brown sedan as it roared past. Each toted an automatic rifle loaded with .223 caliber ammunition. They formed a line and knelt to take aim at the onrushing van. Almost as one, their fingers squeezed the triggers.

•

Captain Anger saw the line of men and swerved to avoid them. The van's windshield crazed under the impact of dozens of bullets. Jonathan Madsen yelped in pain as the van hit a curb with jarring impact, sending unsecured equipment flying inside the rear of the vehicle. The shooting continued. The van smashed its left side against a brick building and scraped to a halt, still ringing with the sound of rifle fire and bullet impact.

Cap threw a switch on the dashboard. Outside, billows of a purplish mist erupted from vents in the side of the van. It wafted around the riflemen, filling their lungs

They continued their fusillade despite the gas. The cabin reverberated with direct hits.

Madsen tried to cover himself. Rock lifted him up, saying, "Relax, boy. Van is bulletproof. The Skipper doesn't take chances. And knockout gas should have them down in no time."

Captain Anger drew his autopistol. "Not this time."

“What?” Leila Weir climbed out of the jumble of fallen instruments and stared at Cap with a puzzled expression. “They weren’t in full-body insulation suits, were they?”

Cap simply waited. After a moment, the shooting abated. Cap opened the rear doors of the van and jumped from it, hitting the ground and rolling to come up with his pistol aimed directly at the murderous quartet.

The four still knelt, aiming their rifles at the impact-peppered vehicle. Most of its white paint had been blasted away to reveal a gleaming, blue-green metal alloy underneath. It was this material that had stopped the bullets.

Cap coolly observed the riflemen. They stared blankly at the van, aiming down the rifle sights, their fingers spasmodically squeezing the triggers. The chamber of each rifle lay open, their bolts locked back after the last round in the magazine had fed through.

Leila jumped out of the van, pistol drawn. “Are they hypnotized? The gas should have knocked them over no matter what.”

Cap bent down on one knee to see more closely. None of the four reacted at his approach.

“They’re unconscious, all right,” Cap said. “Yet something is keeping them going. Something—”

“There he goes!” Jonathan cried, pointing to the sky. “He’s taking gramps’ plane!”

Cap subvocalized to his earcomm.

“Flash—tap into the air traffic control network. Cessna 152 taking off right now from Palo Alto airport. Course”—he glanced at the sun—“three-ten. Ground speed about one-twenty, climbing through one thousand feet.”

After a moment, Flash radioed back, “*Got a lock on him, Cap. Tracking.*”

Captain Anger ran a powerful hand through his dark red hair and gazed at the horizon. Then he grinned. It was a wide, feral, flashing grin that exposed the twin rows of white teeth in his mouth. The teeth were perfect, except that the four canines were just slightly longer than those of most other men. It gave his smile an animal quality, like that of a wolf, or a lion.

He turned that roguish smile toward Jonathan Madsen. “It looks as if

we've got a hunt on our hands. Maybe you know something that can help us."

Jonathan nodded. "I'll do whatever I can to stop him."

•

While Leila patiently explained to the newly-arrived police the reason for the high-speed chase that ended in the airport ambush, Captain Anger listened to the young man's story. Rock, meanwhile, attended to the van, attempting to make it roadworthy again. At the moment, he was running the flame from a blowtorch over the bullet-spattered windshield. The heat softened the super-strong memory plastic and allowed it to flatten out again into a reasonably transparent sheet.

True to form, Cap listened intently to Madsen while at the same time bent over one of his attackers' bodies, giving the fellow a quick medical examination. He wore a videocam headset and earcomm to send information back to Flash at the Institute.

"Dandridge was Gramps's research assistant for years," young Madsen said. "They'd done all sorts of work on electronics and integrated circuits. Amazing stuff. Julie would have been rich if he'd been working in private industry. But he only held a few patents. Most of his work through the college fell—he thought— into public domain. He felt he worked for mankind that way. Turns out, though, that Dandridge had filed patents on a lot of the work and had begun licensing the most valuable stuff. Julie found out, but then there was this big hush-hush scandal with the grad student who turned up dead. They say he killed himself, but Gramps had his suspicions. Anyway, Dandridge fixed it so that the college administration suspected Julie of driving the kid to suicide, so they canned him."

Cap nodded as he shone an intense light in one eye of his unconscious patient. "Flash," he subvocalized. "Where's Tex?"

"At the clinic in Jamaica," came the radioed reply.

"Tell him to be at A.I. tonight. I've got four head jobs for him."

"Great," Flash chuckled. *"He loves late-night brain surgery."*

"There's not much to add," Madsen said quietly, not noticing the inaudible exchange, "except that Julie considered Dandridge a friend and it turned out that Dandridge considered Julie a rival."

Cap said gently, "Son..."

Jonathan frowned a bit at the term—it seemed quaintly old-fashioned

for the stranger to use it.

“I think Dr. Madsen was the man who walked into that Los Gatos diner. His physical description matches that given by the waitress—short, grey hair, goatee. Dandridge injected him with microscopic robots. That’s what killed him.” He stopped examining the rigid, insensate body on the sidewalk and looked at Jonathan.

“Where was your grandfather these last four months?”

The young man spread his hands helplessly. “I don’t know. When he called me last night, all he said was ‘I’ve seen Hell in the Pacific.’ Then he hung up. That’s when I decided to go for the safe.” He glanced at the four fallen men, the position of their rifles on the street outlined in yellow chalk by the police. One cop was intent on circling the location of every brass casing ejected by the weapons. Another officer snapped digital photos of the scene.

Cap nodded. “With your permission, I’d like to examine the disc.”

Madsen nodded. Cap again murmured just loud enough for his earcomm to detect. To the young man, it looked as if Cap were merely pausing to think, except that his throat pulsed irregularly as he created the imperceptible tones. The strong muscles of his neck hid most of the movement, leaving Jonathan with no clue that Captain Anger maintained constant communication with his aides. “Lei, if you’re through sweettalking Detective Fleming, let’s get these zombies back to A.I. for Tex to examine. Flash—call the team together, no later than midnight tonight. Tell them this is big.”

“Roger.”

“And where’s that plane headed?”

“He headed out over the ocean, then dropped down below radar coverage, probably to turn and throw us off track. I’m trying to connect with satellite lookdown radar now, but I may have lost him.”

“Roger,” Cap said quietly.

Leila raised her voice loud enough for all to hear.

“I don’t *care* what police procedure is, these men need *immediate* and *sophisticated* medical attention! Dr. Uriah West is the finest neurosurgeon in the world. Ask any doctor above the rank of arrant quack!”

Fleming cleared his throat. While his eyes drank in the curvacious Leila Weir, his attention drifted from the subject of brain surgery. He shook his

head after a moment and said, "I can't release these men to anyone but qualified paramedics. Those guys." He jerked a thumb in the direction of two red ambulances.

Leila smiled, excused herself, and strolled over to the gawking paramedics.

"Ready to roll!" Rock hollered. He bent the left front fender away from the tire with his thick, bare hands. The wheels pointed straight and the engine idled unharmed. The tires had a few bullet holes in them, but that made little difference: instead of air, they kept their shape by means of rigid sidewalls and closed-cell plastic foam, almost as light and cushiony as air, but safe from blowouts.

Even in its battered shape, the van possessed power and speed. Its engine roared into life, making a sound subtly different from an ordinary automobile engine.

Captain Anger laid a hand on Jonathan's shoulder. "You'd better be getting back to your parents."

"They're in Europe," he said. "Besides, I have a right to see what's on that disk."

Cap nodded. "All right. You'll fly in my jet."

"Sweet!" Johnny said with awe.

Leila's voice murmured in Cap's ear, "*The paramedics know where to take the patients. Let's hit the road.*"

"Agreed," Cap said.

Cap and Rock exchanged places, Cap maneuvering the van onto the street and Rock in the back with Leila, checking the condition of equipment. Jonathan sat in the creme-white passenger's seat and watched the extraordinary man to his left perform the ordinary act of driving.

Captain Richard Anger handled the vehicle with supreme ease and quiet efficiency. He gave as much concentration to it as he did to flying an aircraft or piloting a ship. It was his nature to use his abilities to their utmost in any endeavor, even when events split his attentions three ways and more.

The act of driving calmed him. The constant forward motion, the awareness of heading somewhere, of adventure laying ahead of him, brought him peace.

Jonathan Madsen wondered how such a man could exist in the world of today. All he had ever seen in the few years of his life had been men and

women of compromise: school teachers more interested in silence than in curiosity; store employees who viewed every teenager as a potential shoplifter; celebrities and even presidents whose confused personal lives tabloid magazines exposed with morbid glee.

Here he sat next to a hero whose name he had never heard before. A man who could follow him out a second-story window and land on his feet. A man who could crack a safe yet asked a kid's permission to take its contents. A man with friends as quietly competent as he, who apparently traveled the world yet who—without hesitation—interrupted their personal and professional lives to give aid to strangers, to battle enormous evil without so much as a thought of the risk. A man and companions who thrived on danger, who sought it out where others would flee.

The only hero Jonathan had known in his life had been his grandfather. Julie also hearkened to another age, an earlier time when a man could still live a life heroically without bowing to the pressures all around him.

In the driver's seat, though, sat a man one-third Gramps's age who embodied all things heroic from ages long past. He was the last of the heroes, Jonathan marveled. *Or perhaps*, he thought with hope, *the first of their return!*

Chapter Twelve

The Gathering

Two sleek black jets soared over the ocean's shore and shredded inland at a dizzying speed. Jonathan Madsen stared out of the cockpit at the blur of golden sands and green-brown sea cliffs that raced by below. The sun, squat on the horizon and red as a ruby, gave up the last of its light to the haze of Los Angeles. That city, off to the right, began to glow as lights inside skyscrapers winked on.

Below their jets, though, spread mountainous and rugged terrain. Only a few wealthy mansions dotted the landscape here and there, and at two thousand feet altitude, the small and superbly crafted jet engines barely whispered to anyone on the ground.

The jets slowed and descended gently to a small runway. Though the sophisticated electronics on the aircraft would have permitted a landing in total darkness, the strip adjacent to the Anger Institute sparkled with

green and white landing lights and the cool blue glow of taxi lights. Cap and Leila followed these to the hanger where they disembarked to leave the jets in the able hands of Jack, the mechanic. Jonathan Madsen followed Captain Anger, Rock, and Leila to a chamber in one of the hangers.

The chamber housed a smooth, stainless-steel cylinder about the length and width of a mid-sized automobile. Cap ushered them inside and sealed the hatch. An invisible hand shoved Jonathan back in his seat as forcefully as the acceleration of the jet had.

Floating on a field of magnetic levitation, the vehicle raced underground through its tunnel, speeding beneath the airfield at over two hundred miles per hour. The trip to the nearby Anger Institute took less than a minute.

•

Captain Anger stood before one of the wide, large windows of his office. Taking up the entire fifth floor of the Anger Institute's administration building, it constituted the tallest point on the sprawling campus. It served as more than an office, housing Cap's own computer and communications center, living quarters, exercise studio, and meditation retreat.

At the moment, it served as a meeting room for five of the most remarkable people in the world.

Of them all, Captain Anger was the most impressive, standing in front of the darkened window gazing out at the softly illuminated complex of laboratories and offices comprising the Anger Institute for Advanced Science. His tall figure, dressed now in a fresh, clean duplicate of his black flight suit, stood silhouetted against the night sky, silent and pensive. If he wanted to, he could have melted into the night without a trace. For now, though, he stood quietly while his aides assembled.

Leila and Rock had arrived at the office before him. Leila— clad in a crème-white, business-style jacket and skirt that accentuated her pale skin and jet-black hair sat in a deep, burgundy-hued leather chair. Rock, wearing a crisp white lab coat over blue slacks and a khaki shirt, paced around the room. Jonathan Madsen had showered and received expert treatment for all his wounds. Clean, bandaged and wearing hospital greens, he sat on another of the plush leather chairs and watched in curious amazement as three newcomers arrived.

Phil "The Flash" Hoile arrived. Slender, dark-haired, and youngish, he looked only a few years older than Jonathan—in his early twenties at best.

He carried with him a small black box, which he placed on the expansive walnut desk at the far end of the room.

The second man to enter was an opposite of Flash in nearly every way. Physically huge at six-foot-five, he strode through the doors with the muscular grace of a circus strongman. The dark brown skin and long black ponytail that announced his African and American Indian heritage contrasted starkly with the dark blue three-piece suit, maroon and navy rep tie, and light blue shirt he wore. Where someone of his build ought to have looked uncomfortable and out of place in such clothes, he seemed perfectly natural and at ease. His massive hands looked like battering rams, as dangerous in a fight as gallon barrels of lead shot. His smooth, clean-shaven face supported eyebrows perpetually knotted in a meditative frown, as if he thought he could be off doing something even more important.

His name was Jefferson Sun Ra Paine, and in his profession he only used his fists to pound on the defense table in passionate pleading for his clients. Paine, quite possibly the finest attorney in the world, practiced criminal, corporate, patent, and tax law. He only defended the unjustly accused and he made his fortune from counter-suits brought against the false accusers.

In his leisure time, he sought to right the monumental wrongs that the law handled either reluctantly or not at all. That was why he enjoyed the company of Captain Anger and his compatriots. They embraced that philosophy to the hilt.

He set his briefcase down beside a chair and sat. In a deep but pleasantly mellow voice, he said, "Skipper, I've got to be back in court by Tuesday. I read everything in the computer on the flight out here. What do you need from me?"

Captain Anger said nothing for a moment, then turned to speak. As he was about to say something, the oak double doors of the office swung wide with a jarring crash.

"Hellfire, boy!" shouted an unmistakably Texan voice. "Ya drag me out here promising four skull jobs and they tell me I've got another hour to wait!"

The man who shouted stood at average height and medium build. The two-inch heels of his grey ostrich-skin cowboy boots, though, coupled with his overbearing attitude, made him appear nearly as tall as the lawyer Paine. Clad in black jeans held up by a silver concho belt and a black cavalry shirt trimmed with silver, he clomped in and made a show of

removing his jacket— a full-length grey duster as formidable as that worn by any gunslinger in the Old West. He wore no gun, though. He reached up to remove the black ten-gallon hat trimmed with a hat band of silver Indian beadwork. From beneath the sweatband exploded a riot of salt-and-pepper grey hair. The man—easily the oldest of the six people present—displayed a little mad scientist’s gleam in his southerner’s eyes. He flung the Stetson so that it frisbeed across the office, landing squarely on a bronze bust of Benjamin Franklin. That was when Jonathan noticed the man’s hands.

The hands of the latest arrival were thin and long, almost half again as long as normal for a man his size. And though the fingers looked slender and the hands and wrists narrow, they grasped, held, and tossed aside hat and jacket with a grace and strength that belied their delicate appearance. For the hands of Dr. Uriah West served as his most powerful tools, instruments of life with a healing ability of incomparable proportions.

Captain Anger nodded at the newcomer. “Tex, Sun Ra—I’d like you to meet Jonathan Madsen, grandson of Dr. Julius Madsen. Jonathan—”

“Call me Johnny, if you’d like, Mr. Anger.”

“All right.” Captain Anger smiled. “And you can call me Cap.” He looked back at Sun Ra and Tex. “Johnny, meet Jefferson Paine, Esquire, and Dr. Uriah West.”

“Call me Sun Ra,” rumbled the attorney’s pleasant, deep voice.

“And my handle’s Tex,” the doctor said with a wide grin, “as if ya couldn’t guess.”

Jonathan nodded at them, a little subdued by the strange assemblage of talent. He had seen some interesting types at his grandfather’s lab, but no one nearly as wild as this crew.

Cap said, “The patients are on a chartered commercial jet out of San Jose. I suspect they have implants controlling their gross motor functions. Your operating room’s ready and your surgical team awaits.” He turned to the other arrival. “Sun Ra, thanks for handling those weapons charges with the Los Gatos police. Where’s Glenn?”

Flash spoke up. “Glennis is in Antarctica with the greenhouse project. There’s no way she could have made it here by midnight.”

Cap shook his head. “World’s still too big,” he muttered. Looking down at the device Flash laid on his desk, Cap pulled the tiny disc out of his pocket. “Let’s see if you can get something out of this.” He tossed the disc to Flash, who peeled off the adhesive tape and cleaned it with alcohol.

Hunched over the compact disc reader, the blond man adjusted the laser tracking so that it would move closer to the center to read everything close to the tiny spindle hole of the diminutive platter. Connecting it up to the computer inside Cap's deceptively antique desk, Flash switched on the reader.

The flat screen built into the desk glowed as text appeared. It said:

Project Lilliput Titan

Drexler College of Nanotechnology

Julius Madsen, Ph.D.

William Arthur Dandridge, Ph.D.

I. Goals and Objectives

II. Flowcharts, Circuit Diagrams, Photo-Masking

III. A History of Microbotics

IV.

The Future of Microbotics

V.

Specific Military Applications

VI. Prototypes and Testing

VII. References

Which?___

Cap tapped in the Roman numeral V and watched the information pop up on the screen. The muscles in his jaw tightened as he read of the military uses imagined by Madsen and Dandridge for their invention. Whether smuggled in over land or dropped down by aircraft or missile, the microbots could lay waste to entire cities, reducing buildings and people to their constituent molecules.

Cap's aides clustered around the desk screen, joined by Jonathan who stared in a disbelief at what he read.

"My grandfather wouldn't suggest such things," he said. "He'd never think up ways to kill people."

Rock spoke as gently as his Slavic tones allowed. "Sometimes people have to say or print things they don't believe in order to get funding. Sometimes scientists don't realize what *they* consider interesting theories somebody else considers real and useable weapons. My own father built missiles for Soviet Union. He dreamt of travelling into space, but missiles he built military just used for atom bombs. He kept doing it, though. He had family to think of. Now rockets used for space travel, but my father is dead." Rock shrugged. "Very little justice in world."

Cap nodded. “Well, we’re going to provide a little in the case of Dr. Dandrige.” He keyed in the section concerning prototypes and testing. After scanning the pages scrolling past, he said, “Johnny, do you know what Pacific Test Site Three is?”

“It could be a pair of islands off Baja California called the Escollos Alijos. Dandrige has a research lab there.”

“Then we’ll go as soon as Tex removes those implants from the zombies. We may need to know what makes them tick.” Captain Anger stood and gazed at his five fellow adventurers. “We can’t stop the spread of technology just because it is sometimes misused. But we *can* stop those who seek to pervert science toward evil ends.”

He switched off the disk reader and called up a map of the Baja California coastline. In the Pacific Ocean roughly 250 miles west of the town of Santo Domingo lay Escollos Alijos.

He looked up at Flash. “Call Long Beach,” he said, “and have the Seamaster prepped for takeoff. *Fully* prepped.”

“What about me? Am I going?” Jonathan asked.

Captain Anger took a moment to address the eager young man. “My friends and I are used to danger—we choose it freely, even enjoy it a bit. I have no right to endanger you, though. Stay here with Flash. You’ll be in radio contact with us every step of the way.”

Jonathan’s expression faded to disappointment. “All right. Say—is there anyplace to eat around here?”

Cap smiled. “Second floor cafeteria. Help yourself.”

After the boy departed, Captain Anger gazed thoughtfully at his five companions. Rock, Leila, Flash, Sun Ra, and Tex quietly watched him with anticipation.

“Friends,” he said, “when my father founded the Anger Institute, he sought to bring together the finest minds to engage in creation and invention for the betterment of mankind. He crossed national lines to do so, ignored the power-plays of governments, and invested his entire fortune in this venture. He thought that science alone could save humanity. What he did not understand was the human capacity to choose evil over good.

“My small contribution to this effort was to seek out the sort of thinkers and creators who were also people of action. Men and women who understand that science has no morality—only people can choose how any tool is used. A hammer can just as easily be wielded to smash a skull as

build a house.

“Our common goal is to stop the skull-smashers before they can swing those hammers.”

Captain Anger paused a moment, then said, “We’ve united before in such efforts. We were successful then. And with your help, I trust we will be again.”

“If we don’t get killed,” Rock muttered to himself.

Chapter Thirteen

Flight of the Seamaster

The jet engines of the Martin P6M Seamaster roared into life. Floating in the channel to the east of the domed shrine to its predecessor, the Hughes Hercules H-1 Spruce Goose, the flying boat lay low in the grey pre-dawn waters. The last of its kind, it had been rescued from an aircraft graveyard and completely rebuilt and restored by Captain Anger. In an age of utilitarian passenger airliners and specialized military aircraft, the Seamaster was a lovely anomaly: a large jet aircraft designed to take off and land on water. Graceful and sleek in design, its engines lay atop the wings, artfully hidden inside wide, thin air intakes. The tips of the high-mounted wings curved downward to touch the water and provide three-point stability between them and the streamlined hull.

The entire aircraft above the water line was painted a deep grey—a color that blended well with the sea and sky and clouds. The bottom of the buoyant hull had been painted a medium blue, with a smooth wave design at the waterline that served as camouflage while on the high seas.

Even though the design of the seagoing jet appeared archaic, the materials Cap used to restore the aircraft made it one of the most technologically advanced planes in the world. Instead of steel and aluminum, the plane’s frame and skin utilized plasma-hardened titanium—light, strong, and uncorrodible. And though the instrument panel and controls came from the original aircraft, much had been added in the way of avionics and electronic equipment. Instead of push-rods and cables, the controls consisted of fly-by-wire (more accurately, fly-by-optical fiber) connected to the sophisticated onboard computer (which in turn uplinked to Cyclops).

Racing across the harbor waters, the sun not yet risen in the blood-red morning sky behind them, Captain Anger piloted the Seamaster with a skill seen nowhere else in the world, except perhaps among his allies. Leila sat to his right in the co-pilot's seat, arguably the next-best pilot of the bunch. And Rock frequently argued the point in defense of his own flying skills.

The sea thumped against the hull of the flying boat. Water sprayed noisily about outside the cockpit, drenching the windshields to create a blurred view of a world consisting of grey water, white foam, and coral sky. Cap stared straight ahead, left hand on the wheel, right hand on the throttles. Occasionally he glanced at the airspeed indicator.

Suddenly, the roughness smoothed as the jet lifted to a higher position on the water.

“On the top,” Leila said with excitement. Breaking free from earthly bonds thrilled her with its primal delight.

Cap fed full power to the engines. With a deceptively quiet roar they accelerated to liftoff speed. After an instant when the hiss of rushing water against the hull threatened to drown out all else, just as suddenly the noise disappeared, left behind and below as the jet climbed out over Los Angeles Harbor. Beneath them drifted the man-made islands named for three American astronauts who had died in the race for the Moon—Island Grissom, Island Chaffee, Island White. Cap banked the plane when it passed through 1000 feet and headed south along a flight path that skirted the California coastline.

Cap flew more by instinct than by instruments. It was that instinct, that feel for how an airplane flies that led him to consult the instruments.

“Knock the elevator trim up a notch,” he said to his co-pilot. “We’re dragging our tail.”

“It matches our weight-and-balance sheet,” she said, a little mystified.

“*Shto tebye!*” the Russian shouted. “Hey, Cap—*smotri!* Kid is *stowaway!*”

Rock climbed forward with an indignant but unstruggling body tucked under his arm. He set the boy down behind the pilot's seat.

Jonathan Madsen thumbed his stray blond hair behind his ears and stared defiantly at Cap.

“I’m not sorry,” the young man said. “I have a right to justice.”

“Really?” Cap said with a hint of a smile. “What right?”

“Revenge.” The stern look in Madsen’s eyes belied his age. “Dandridge killed my grandfather. I have a right to get even.”

Cap sighed, turning his attention away from the controls to let Leila take over for a moment.

“Johnny, vengeance is not justice. If killing Dandridge could bring your grandfather back, I’d be the first to pull the trigger. But the universe doesn’t work that way. A second killing won’t even the score, it will only drag it downward another point. We’re heading out to *stop* Dandridge from any further killing—”

“And you’d kill him if you had to, right?”

Cap put a strong hand on Johnny’s shoulder. “Yes, but only if there were no other way. Justice means making things *right*, and that’s the responsibility of the one who first caused the harm. If Dandridge dies, he wouldn’t be able to do anything to repair the harm he’s already done.”

“His staying alive won’t bring Julie back either.”

“True,” Cap said. “There are others, though, that could benefit from his talents if he chose to turn back toward good. That’s the only way he could make any sort of restitution.” He shifted his attention back to flying the jet, adding, “Reparation is preferable to revenge. It can actually improve the world. And it leaves the streets less bloody.”

The stowaway said nothing.

•

Uriah West, M.D., slouched in one of the seats that folded out of the fuselage wall and tried to doze. All the while, he mentally reviewed the operations he had performed during the last seven hours. All told, he and Cap—with Leila, Rock, Sun Ra, and several additional surgeons assisting—had spent those hours between their midnight meeting and this dawn flight performing brain surgery on one of the four zombie-like gunmen.

With the aid of the Institute’s computerized axial tomography equipment—basically a 3-dimensional X-ray machine—Tex had located the source of the problem in the patient: specialized microbots had attached themselves to nerves in the brain, cutting them with their microscopic scalpels and slipping a tiny silicon chip between the severed ends. Each chip, Cap discovered, possessed thousands of tiny holes, each ringed with an unbelievably small iridium electrode. The nerves had grown back through these holes, allowing the microbots not only to monitor nerve impulses, but to send their own signals to the gunmen’s

brains. In this way, Dandrige could order them to do anything he wanted them to do—including shooting at Captain Anger until they had exhausted all their ammo.

Dandrige—in his rush to escape—had left them on the equivalent of automatic pilot; they could make no decision for themselves and simply kept firing, following the programmed commands of the microbots even after the knockout gas robbed them of their consciousness.

Tex marveled at how Cap had removed one of the microbots from the first man's brain and, with Flash, had analyzed it in the atomic force microscope, tracing its compact, three-dimensional circuits. With the aid of the supercomputer Cyclops, they developed in a few hours a different logic circuit and etched it onto a replacement microbot's gallium-arsenide structure.

The new microbot would travel through the bloodstream in the brain, seeking out the other microbots and delicately sundering the connections between the machines and the patients' nerves. The silicon chips would remain in the nerves—there was no quick way to remove them without causing massive brain damage—but the microbots would no longer be in control. Gradually, as the repair robot moved through the men's brains, the effect of Dandrige's mind control would be undone.

While Tex injected into a repair microbot the fourth and final patient, Sun Ra reported signs of voluntary motion in the first, recuperating patient.

Tex pondered the evil genius behind the microbot and the other genius that swiftly found a way to undo the evil. A chill ran through him as he recalled Cap's first words after studying the device removed from the first man's brain: "It seems Dr. Dandrige is not concerned with simply dismantling matter—he's interested in dominating souls. That makes him more dangerously mad than I'd first thought."

Tex saw the masseter muscles along Captain Anger's jawline tighten up—a sure sign that he was formulating a plan to rid the world of Dr. William Arthur Dandrige.

A sudden, stomach-lurching drop interrupted Dr. West's drowsy reverie as the Seamaster encountered an air pocket. When he opened his eyes, Tex stared at a Cinerama view Pyotr Kompantzeff's khaki-clad rump.

"I could do without the sight of your back forty," Tex drawled, then added, "Make that yer back *eighty*, ya' damn' Rooski."

"*Sookihn sihn*," Rock said with a wide, sarcastic grin. "Your family tree

has your entire maternal branch still living in it eating bananas, and your horse-thief paternal ancestors were hanged from it.”

To say that Rock and Tex enjoyed baiting each other was to understate the case. West, a tenth generation American whose ancestors helped settle Texas, found the immigrant Kompantzeff to be an endless source of amusement, especially his thick Russian accent and foreign pattern of speech. For his part, Rock drew vast entertainment from observing the equally thickaccented Texan, in whom he saw astounding provinciality in his love of the Lone Star State and his small-town view of the world.

And it went without saying that the strong bond of friendship that held all of Captain Anger’s crew together belied the sometimes harsh and earthy banter between the two.

“Hell, boy,” Tex rumbled, “if your rear end were covered with grass, I could send a herd of twenty longhorns there on a winter graze.”

“And if your brains were petrol,” Rock growled, “you could not fill cigarette lighter.”

“Overpaid plumber!”

“Unindicted quack!”

They both grinned at Johnny, who had stumbled upon their exchange on the way to the back of the plane. He stared at the two warily, fully expecting for them to come to blows. Rock waved his thick hand dismissively.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “Cowboy is too much afraid to call me out to showdown. Knows I would beat him to draw.”

The young man nodded, unsure about the burly rocket scientist’s degree of seriousness. “Captain Anger asked me to tell you that we’re about to descend toward Escollos Alijos.”

Rock and Tex exchanged glances. Both knew that they were about to face mortal danger. Both grinned.

Tex rolled one spur against the aircraft deck. “Well, pardner, let’s get ready to whump Dandridge’s donkey!”

Jonathan Madsen wondered what he was getting himself into.

•

Escollos Alijos comprised two small islands separated by a few miles of water. At least, that’s what they looked like on the Seamaster’s computerized map. From the air, though, something appeared terribly different.

In the glittering Pacific waters, the northern island revealed the summer colors of golden brown and dark green. The southern island, though, looked nothing like an ordinary island. It shimmered in the sunlight with the silvery glow of lifeless metal. Cap steered clear of the island, so they could not get close enough for a good view.

Cap brought the plane down in placid water off the shore of the northern island. The Seamaster gently approached the ocean as he reduced power to idle, lowered the flaps, and bled off airspeed until the smooth hull lightly skimmed the surface. Quickly the aircraft slowed, descending into the warm waters. The graceful wingtips touched simultaneously and the airplane coasted swiftly to a standstill. Only the rise and fall of the sea gave any motion to the jet now.

Rock immediately opened the side cargo door and wrangled a large black bundle out into the water. On contact, it inflated with a loud *thwump*, turning into an arrowhead-shaped boat.

Cap went through the water-landing shutdown routine for the Seamaster, then climbed to the cargo area, leaving Weir in charge of the airplane. He opened cabinets and secreted a few items in the hidden recesses of his vest and added a largish cylinder to his left cargo pocket. Strapping on his autopistol and several waterproof ammo pouches, he nodded to Rock, Sun Ra, and Tex. Rock and Sun Ra toted similar arms, though they wore khaki jumpsuits similar to Cap's black one. Rock's broad chest bore a crisscrossed pair of nylon-web straps, bandoliers securing a dozen handball-sized spheres. The hexagonal and pentagonal shapes on their surfaces made them look like miniature soccer balls. The traditional pin-and-spoon grenade fuses, however, made their function perfectly clear.

Tex removed his spurs in preparation for jumping into the inflatable raft. He tightened the straps on the camouflaged backpack he wore. It contained his medical kit, along with electronic equipment Cap had requested him to bring. Instead of a jumpsuit, he wore beige jeans and cavalry shirt made of the same bullet-resistant cloth as the rest of their wardrobe.

Sun Ra patted a walnut-hued hand on his own piece of equipment—a portable missile launcher designed by Rock to deliver a one-pound warhead packed with the most powerful chemical explosive he could devise. Only a nuclear warhead could provide more punch per pound.

The four jumped into the boat. Tex attached the jet motor and fired it up.

“What about me?” Jonathan shouted.

“Guard the plane,” Cap answered over the roar of the engine. “Leila will show you how the rail gun works.”

The reply failed to satisfy Madsen, who feared that he would miss not only all of the action, but also his chance to avenge his grandfather’s death.

Chapter Fourteen

The Fractal Island

The boat sped across the channel between the two islands with impressive speed. The water slapped and whapped beneath the membrane of high tensile strength aramid fabric and rubber that served as the flexible hull. The twin air cells that formed the sides of the boat merged at the prow. Captain Anger knelt there, binoculars to his eyes, gazing at the approaching southern island. What he saw caused his tanned brow to furrow into a frown.

The island no longer consisted of vegetation and rock. Argent columns rose hundreds of feet about the water, roughly conforming to the former topography of the island. Sunlight reflected off the strange objects with a maddening, actinic brightness.

Wind whipped through Cap’s dark red hair and beard, making it ripple as if it were aflame. He took a deep breath, smelling the salt sea air. There was no place he preferred to be than on a ship of any size, even a ten-foot long souped-up rowboat such as this. The sun shimmered on the ocean, breaking into a million images of itself, each one lasting only an instant before being replaced by another. Off to starboard, a marlin broke water and splashed back beneath the blue.

“Skipper?” Sun Ra’s voice shouted above the roar of the jet engine. “You’re not going to have us go ashore on that stuff, are you? I personally don’t want to turn into a puddle of goo.”

Cap shrugged, handing his binoculars to Sun Ra and pointing. “It doesn’t seem to be affecting the natives.”

Sun Ra gazed through the binoculars. Parallel to the metallic shore, a line of twenty Mexicans in tattered clothing carried crates and bundles.

They walked in a dazed, robotic manner toward a dark cavern gaping amid the shining island like a hole punched by a giant's fist. Turning his gaze to the left, Sun Ra observed a landing strip constructed of one seamless piece of dark material. On the runway sat a small single-engine airplane and a pair of heavily armed military helicopters. He directed his captain's attention toward the airstrip.

Cap nodded. "That's the Cessna Dandridge flew out of Palo Alto. Judging from the length of the runway, he may have larger aircraft. Keep an eye peeled for jet fighters."

Cap took over the engine from Rock and navigated toward a smooth part of the mirror-like shoreline, down the coast a few hundred yards from the cave. He led the others in jumping into the waves and touched the metallic surface beneath the churning foam. Instead of slipping, his soles gripped the slope with the squeak of rubber on metal. Pulling the boat ashore above the high water line marked by seaweed and detritus, he motioned to the rest of the team to debark.

Sun Ra stepped out next and bent down for a closer look at the peculiar land on which he stood.

"Look at that weird pattern!" he said in a puzzled tone.

The rest of the crew gazed at their feet. The surface consisted of countless combinations of ridges, each of which formed a four-sided polygon that was shaped like either a fat diamond or a skinny diamond. They connected less like individual bricks and more like molded isogrids. Inside each of these quadrangles lay smaller versions of the same two shapes. Looking up at the artificial mountains rising before them, it was plain that the pattern repeated itself on a larger scale.

"What sort of design is this?" Rock wondered aloud.

"Penrose tiles," Cap said, pulling videocam headsets from Tex's pack. "A mathematician's toy. If they were colored, you'd be able to tell that they make patterns that repeat but never in any regular manner. Dandridge has obviously programmed his microbots to turn this island into a temple for him. Using fractal construction, too. Every Penrose shape is composed of smaller Penrose shapes, probably right down to the molecular level. This island is a gigantic quasi-crystal." He slipped a headset on and handed the others to his crew. "Flash will be fascinated to see this—he's always wanted the lab floor to have Penrose tiles."

Cap switched on the headset and slipped in his earcomm. "Flash?"

The headset broadcast a signal to the nearest communication satellite

overhead, downlinking hundreds of miles away to the Anger Institute.

“*Here, Cap,*” the voice in his ear replied.

“We’re on the island. Start recording.”

“*Roger. Say—is that a Penrose tile pattern on the ground?*”

•

Cap headed toward the cavern, the others walking alongside him. Outwardly, they acted like boaters picnicking on a vacation island. Tex and Sun Ra joked about the heat of the sunlight that reflected dazzlingly from every square inch of their surroundings. Rock whistled a merry Slavic folk song. Only Cap walked quietly, listening to the sounds carried by the warm ocean breeze. He to scan the upper reaches of the island with digital binoculars that sent stereoscopic images back to AI.

“He obviously set this place up for privacy,” Cap subvocalized to Flash, though The others also heard him over their earcomms. “No need for guards. Or maybe—”

He stopped in his tracks to stare at the entrance to the cave.

“*Bozhe moi!*” Rock cried out.

All along the entrance to the cavern stood an eerie phalanx of silver statues. Most of them looked like Mexican peasant men and women, though a pair of them wore the uniforms of Mexican *federales*. Nearby stood two men and a woman in lab coats. Several of the nearly lifelike statues appeared to be sneaking toward the cavern, though some faced in the opposite direction as if running away, their faces contorted with terror. The sculptures possessed incredibly fine detail, down to the weave of the fabric and pore patterns on the skin. Cap did not allow anyone to get close enough to see such detail, though.

“Dandridge has his own brand of security system,” Cap said.

“Microbots that can metal-plate a running man in mid-stride?” Sun Ra asked incredulously.

Cap shook his head. “More likely that Dandridge programmed these particular microbots to swarm over intruders and lock together into a sort of exoskeleton. They’re held in place to suffocate and left as decoration.

“Then how do the zombies get in and out?” Sun Ra asked.

“*Probably have transmitters in their implants,*” Flash said in their ears. “*Broadcasts a signal telling the machines not to attack.*”

Cap pointed to the first line of statues. “See that? That must be the

outer perimeter. If we get any closer, the robots attack.”

“Why didn’t they just melt them?” Tex asked.

“A warning to others, perhaps. Something to scare away the curious.” Cap stepped perilously close to the first rank of statues.

“But there are so many,” Rock said.

“There’s always a few willing to test the odds,” Cap muttered.

“Someone’s coming,” Tex said.

From inside the dark cavern reverberated the sound of slow, methodical footfalls.

“Zombies,” Cap whispered. “Let’s watch.”

Ducking behind a ridge of fractal metal, the four peered out at the half-dozen men who shuffled slowly out of the cave. Wending their way through the forest of motionless victims, the six ragged workers trudged toward the airstrip with a listless yet mechanical determination.

“Look around their feet,” Cap whispered.

Where they walked, the metallic sheen grew dull and unreflective for several feet in all directions.

“The microbots withdraw when they come by. And far enough to prevent them from attacking any cargo the zombies carry.” Cap’s voice held a note of grim respect for Dandridge’s attention to detail. Then he smiled, the green in his eyes catching the sunlight in such a way that they glowed like a matched pair of emeralds in firelight. “There’s the weakness in the system. We’ll act like cargo!”

The four waited for the zombies to return, which they did in half an hour. Each carried a huge, burlap-wrapped bundle on either shoulder that would have tested the strength of most men. Their electronic masters, though, cared not an iota for such concerns as muscle pain or fatigue. Under their programmed commands, the men ignored any warnings their bodies might be giving them and hefted their burdens wordlessly.

As they trooped past the hidden observers, though, Cap saw that the hideous control devices only suppressed the victim’s pain, but could not erase it. Each man’s face revealed a contorted mask of agony, their mouths twisted in torment, their eyebrows knotted in unbearable anguish. Their glazed eyes stared with a vacuous mockery of awareness, as if the computerized masters buried in their brains knew every step of their path and needed no visual input to guide them.

Sweat poured off their brows and trickled into those eyes. The sting

would have driven other men mad. These damned souls trudged forward unflinchingly with their loads, unbidden tears running from their lifeless eyes to trickle down cheeks, lips, and chins.

Cap glanced at Tex. The doctor shook his head with a grim sadness. “High-tech slaves,” was all he said.

“Walk close to them,” Cap said. “We’ll stay in their protective zone to get in, then drop away from them when we’re within the perimeter.”

“What if the sentries are crawling all over the complex?” Sun Ra asked.

Cap shook his head. “Too dangerous even for Dandrige, I suspect. What if they put a piece of equipment down and walked away from it? Look at the statues—there seems to be a distinct starting line twenty yards from the mouth of the cave and an end zone about twenty yards inside.”

“Let’s go,” Rock said, “before they get inside!”

Cap stepped out first, boldly walking over to the line of men and insinuating himself between the first and the second. They tramped far enough apart that this was possible without tripping them up. If any of the zombies noticed him, they gave no reaction. He matched his stride to theirs and signaled the others to join him. First Tex, then Sun Ra, and finally Rock stepped into the gaps between the slaves. Rock positioned his massive body behind the last slave, the only place he fit safely.

They watched with interest as they crossed the invisible perimeter. The silver floor of the cavern turned whitish and unreflective at the entrance of the first worker. Cap’s advance caused no alarm or sudden attack.

They shuffled in at the slow, unchanging pace of the zombies and made their way past the horrifying garden of the dead. Every one of the metalized corpses bore a visage of dread and stark terror. Their deaths came slowly enough—they saw their end coming and it showed in their death masks.

The statues marked a very definite end to the defense zone. Beyond the last preserved body, the cavern floor possessed a semi-glossy look. The passage of the zombie crew caused no reaction. Tex breathed an audible sigh of relief when his feet touched the white flooring.

A few yards beyond that, Cap and the others broke away from the line of cargo handlers and stopped to survey their surroundings.

The interior of the cave formed a gigantic silver dome, braced along the interior in the manner of a geodesic dome, but with the same sort of fractal isogrid construction in which the pentagons and hexagons composing the structure each comprised smaller five- and six-sided

polygons. Those polygons surrounded even smaller polygons and so on, presumably down to the molecular level. It gave the dome a look of almost spherical smoothness.

Tunnels radiated out from the dome at regular intervals around its circumference. Odd, crystalline overhead lights illuminated some while others extended into darkness. Iris-like doorways sealed some corridors shut while others lay wide open, and formidable hatches closed off three on the far side.

Scores of zombies milled about the interior of the chamber, performing tasks that microbots could not. They worked mostly on moving cargo from place to place with silent, unthinking dedication.

Cap pointed to one of the many hatchways dotting the bottom edge of the dome. "That one," he said. "Let's get through it."

"Why?" Rock asked.

"It's the only one with a surveillance camera above it."

Sun Ra unholstered his pistol. "Shall I shoot it out?"

Cap raised his hand and shook his head. "Just keep close to the wall."

The door Cap singled out stood a third of the way around the vast dome. Sticking closely to the perimeter, the four moved slowly toward their goal. Cap watched the camera to make sure it did not rotate toward them. It seemed to be mounted in a fixed position, pointing downward to view anyone approaching the hatchway.

Cap reached the door first and signaled to Paine. With a grin, Sun Ra sighted in on the camera and fired a single shot. Inside the massive cavern, the report sounded dull and muted, as if the dome had absorbed the sound and dampened any echoes.

The camera blew to bits.

Cap examined the locking mechanism, a simple touch pad similar to a telephone. Withdrawing a screwdriver from one of his many vest pockets, Cap removed the pad from the wall. Rock and Tex kept watch for any suspicious movements from the zombies. Some of them walked within a few yards of the four, but none noticed the trespassers.

Cap hotwired the door. It rippled open fluidly from the center as oil floating on water retreats from a droplet of soap.

That impressed even Captain Anger. "Door-microbots that assemble and disassemble." Then he shook his head. "Dandridge could have made a fortune with these inventions. Instead, he's made the choices that bring us

to end his career.”

The same argent material as the dome formed the corridor and curved away toward a stairway a few feet from the entrance. The air smelled of ozone, acid, and solvents. Cap took a step in, but Sun Ra seized him by the arm.

“Cap—what if this tunnel has a defense barrier, too?”

The copper-haired man shook his head. “Once inside a fortress, it’s inefficient and dangerous to put deadfalls and booby traps everywhere. Dandridge is too smart to put himself in mortal danger every time he strolls around here.” He moved a foot toward the threshold.

“What if,” Rock suggested, “Dandridge has own implant to tell his creatures to stay away?”

The captain smiled. “Whom would he trust to implant it? More accurately, does a man such as Dandridge trust even his own creations?”

Tex spoke up. “Didn’t y’all call him—and I quote—’dangerously mad’?”

Cap stared at Tex for a moment, then put his foot down on the deck of the corridor. Nothing happened.

“Let’s go,” he said. Sun Ra, pistol still in hand, joined him. Rock and Tex drew their pistols and followed, Tex bringing up the rear.

As they silently approached the stairway they heard it—an inhuman moan that rose to a wail and fell again, like waves of despair on a sea of dread.

Chapter Fifteen

Target Practice

Jonathan Madsen stared at the strange contraption in the cargo hatch.

Leila threw a switch on the instrument panel and they both watched the device flip up from beneath a plate in the titanium flooring. At one end of the black and blockish four foot long box was a small hole, around which a circle of inward-pointing arrows had been painted in canary yellow, with the simple yet understated notice DANGER printed in the same color neatly below.

Four thick tubes wrapped in shiny gold-hued insulation entered the left

side of the box and exited the right side. The top of the box sported a large and impressive-looking telescopic sight. Below it sat a smaller black tube marked with a laser trefoil.

Johnny—at Leila’s suggestion—stood behind the weapon and studied the control panel.

“These are the cooling pumps,” she said, flipping up four switches. From beneath the deck of the gently rocking Seamaster arose the sound of small compressors. The golden tubes feeding into the railgun grew frosty with condensation. “This is the main power switch.” She turned a dial halfway. Johnny felt a tingle in the air around him. “And this is the laser sight. Forty watts, so don’t even get near it.” She put her left hand on the left grip and pulled the trigger, then stretched to put her right hand out in front of the laser. A dazzlingly bright red spot blazed on her ivory-white palm.

“It feels warm. If I left my hand there long enough, I could actually get burned. And it would definitely blind you if you looked into it.” Her tone grew steadily more enthusiastic as she spoke about the weapon. “The laser’s used for sighting. Here.”

She swung the box about on its gimbaled base and pointed it toward a rock thrusting up from the waters a few hundred yards away between them and the shore. She let him stand at the controls and look through the scope.

The scope’s point of focus hung about eight inches in front of the lens, which made sighting in easy. He saw the brilliant red spot of the laser reflecting off the rock about a foot from its top.

“Want to fire it?” she asked.

“Sure!”

“The rail gun has a very flat trajectory, so wherever you point the laser is generally where the projectile will hit. The accuracy begins to drop off at about three miles, though.”

“What does it shoot?”

She pulled a small steel slug from her pocket. “One of these.” It looked like a miniature rocket about an inch long, pointed on one end with slots cut in the trailing end that gave the raised parts the impression vanes. It felt remarkably light compared to a lead bullet of the same size, which was about .40 caliber.

She stood behind him and directed his hands with hers. Her hair smelled like springtime and her touch was gentle and warm. “Your left

hand controls the laser beam for the sight and your right hand fires the rail gun. It can cycle as fast as five hundred rounds a minute, but we usually keep it on single shot. You'll see why."

Johnny actuated the laser and sighted in again on the boulder. He aimed lower, toward the middle of the rock where the crash of waves left a wet, dark waterline. The red dot scintillated brightly like a ruby aflame. His right hand squeezed the trigger.

With a sharp *schrack* and a brilliant flash, the rail gun kicked backward on its mount.

"Whoa!" Johnny said in surprise. "I didn't expect recoil."

Leila smiled. "The magnetic field pushes backward against the bullet as it moves the bullet forward. Nobody breaks Newton's laws."

Through the lens of the scope, Johnny saw the boulder explode in a flash of light and dust. An instant later, the booming thunder of impact reached them. When the sea breeze swept the air clear, he saw a deep crater in the rock.

"Wow!" was all Jonathan Madsen could say. He swept his long blond hair from his eyes and sighted through the scope again, centering the laser dot in the deepest part of the rock and squeezing off another round. The same flash and report followed. This time, the top of the boulder shattered into three big pieces and a lot of gravel. They toppled over and fell into the waves with large and satisfying plumes of foam. The roar reached them like the sound of a bomb.

"*Sweet!*" Johnny shouted out. "The biggest thing I'd ever fired was my dad's skeet gun. This is *great!*"

Leila smiled and stepped away from the weapon. "Captain Anger developed the rail gun to overcome the inadequacies of gunpowder. There's a limit on the expansion of gases when gunpowder ignites, so there's an upper limit on the muzzle velocity of a bullet. The rail gun uses superconducting electromagnets to accelerate the projectile up to about ten thousand feet per second." She leaned against the side of the aircraft and put her hands in the pockets of her skin-tight black jumpsuit. "That bang when you fired it was the sound of the pellet breaking the sound barrier as it shot out of the muzzle. It superheated and ionized the air by friction, causing the flash. At night it leaves a glowing trail, sort of like tracer bullets. It's pretty."

"What do you do for Captain Anger?" Madsen asked.

"I'm an industrial design engineer. Whatever Cap wants, I model and

test it on computer and then we manufacture it.” She nodded toward the rail gun. “I designed that.”

Johnny cocked an ear toward the hatchway. “What’s that sound?” he asked.

Leila straightened, listening to the high-pitched, distant buzzing noise. “Sounds like a swarm of mosquitoes,” she said.

“But this far from land?”

“Over there!” Madsen shouted, pointing toward the shore.

A transparent darkness whose shape changed from instant to instant in chaotic, random patterns drifted over the shoreline heading out to sea.

Directly toward the Seamaster.

Jonathan gaped in fascination at the pulsating, flying mass. “It looks more like a swarm of bees. Or locusts.”

Leila shook her head with grim realization. “Those aren’t insects,” she said.

The buzzing grew louder. Darkness filled the sky.

Chapter Sixteen

The Devil’s Doorstep

The moaning grew louder as the four ascended the stairs toward darkness. Cap raised a hand. Rock and Sun Ra stopped silently. Tex, who had turned his head to watch their rear, bumped into Rock.

“Watch your step, quack!” the Russian hissed over his shoulder.

Tex ran a hand through his long grey hair and said “When you get outta mah way, short, round, and ugly!”

Cap turned to gaze sternly at the pair. They instantly shut up and he continued along the stairway, climbing the steps with a silent, cat-like tread. Darkness filled the corridor at the top, but at the far end—from whence came the moans—light shone around the edges of hospital-style doors.

“This is maddening,” an exasperated voice behind the door said. “A few simple commands involve so many neurons!”

“This,” another voice insisted, “isn’t as simple as moving cargo from one point to another or firing a rifle. You want coordinated movement and speech that you can control!”

“Try this,” the first voice demanded.

The moaning increased, then became a garbled collection of guttural hisses and glottal clucks.

“That’s closer,” the second voice agreed.

Captain Anger quietly eased the door open. Even with his care, it creaked ever so lightly.

William Arthur Dandridge, leaning with both hands on a computer terminal, turned to see the powerful figure in the doorway. His assistant, bent over a monitor, looked up too. Startled, Dandridge stared into Anger’s deep green eyes and saw the confidence there. He felt that steady gaze peer into the deepest recesses of his soul. Nonetheless, he straightened up from the terminal and spoke in a loud, firm voice.

“Get the hell out of here.”

Sun Ra followed Cap into the room and glanced at the moaning figure—a middle-aged man lying supine on the table, surrounded by a phalanx of computer equipment and monitors. “Hey— that’s the Secretary General of the UN!”

Cap spoke, his voice deep and commanding. “I’ve come for you, Dandridge. Your dreams are finished. It’s nightmare time.”

Dandridge smiled almost wryly. “I don’t know who you are, but you look old enough to know never to threaten a man on his own turf.” He tapped a few keys on the terminal keyboard. With a chunking sound, semi-circular slit appeared in the floor between Dandridge and Captain Anger, spewing a blackish dust that spread toward the four intruders.

Rock and Sun Ra pulled their pistols and aimed in on Dandridge. Cap motioned them to hold their fire. The black stain spread toward them at a speedy clip.

“Don’t be concerned for your lives,” Dandridge said snidely. “These just devour free metals, such as that of your weapons. I want you *alive* for research.” He smiled again. “And don’t worry on my account—they’re programmed to stay away from the center of the room.”

At that, Cap smiled. Crouching down, he kept an eye on the approach of the microbotic horde as he pulled a metal cylinder from a bulging cargo pocket and set it behind him. Just before the dark wave reached his feet,

he sprang toward Dandrige with a long and powerful leap.

Mouth agape, Dandrige watched in shock as the human missile flew toward him. The impact threw him against a bank of monitors, slamming them down together in a hail of shattered glass. The smell and heat of burning insulation choked his stunned senses. Behind him, his assistant sprinted to a door at the rear, abandoning his master to the violent strangers.

Dandrige stared into the white teeth that grinned within his attacker's wild expression. Captain Anger gripped the renegade scientist by his lab coat, ramming him against the shattered equipment. Two nerve-jarring shoves reduced Dandrige to compliance. Rising, Cap dragged the man up with him, then turned to check on his companions' escape from the malicious microbotic horde.

Acting swiftly, Rock gave the lawyer a leg up off the ground. Sun Ra wrapped his huge dark fists around a high-intensity operating lamp and pulled himself up, mighty biceps bulging with power. Rock did the same for Tex, who grabbed on to another lamp and held on with his strong surgeon's hands.

With the tide of microbots closing in on him, Rock looked up to find another lamp. None were in reach.

"Chyort vosmi!" he shouted.

"Here!" Sun Ra extended a foot within Rock's grasp.

"Are you kidding?" Rock shouted. "We'd pull damn' thing out of ceiling! I'll—"

Rock stared with alarm at the black dust as it engulfed the cylinder Cap had placed on the floor. The shiny stainless steel quickly grew pitted and disintegrated, gnawed away by creatures so small that hundreds could ride on the back of an ant.

Cap clamped a tan, muscular hand around Dandrige's throat and lifted him up. "Shut them off," he growled.

"You think they're radio dispatched like taxis?" Dandrige gurgled. "They leave the gate programmed. They keep working till they can't find any more metal in their target zone."

"Sunny!" Rock cried, tossing his pistol up to his comrade. Sun Ra caught the gun in one hand and wrapped the arm back around the lamp.

"Tex!" He slipped off his bandoliers of hand grenades and tossed them up to the doctor, who caught them on the toes of his boots.

“These things weigh a ton!” Tex shouted.

Rock watched as the black dust swarmed about his boots.

“You must have a way to stop them,” Cap uttered in a savage tone.

Purpling, Dandrige managed to choke out: “He won’t be hurt. I swear it.”

The microbots rode up Rock’s boots, devouring steel nails and brass eyelets. They tickled at his legs as he stood frozen for an instant.

“They’re not eating me!” he loudly confirmed, hardly reassured as he shook off the leather remains of his useless boots. The swarm hit his waistline, turning his belt buckle into powder. “Yipes!” he cried as his gut expanded from the released binding. He looked down. “Good thing zipper is nylon!” he yelped, grasping his slacks with one hand, balling the other into a fist, and turning toward Dandrige. “Let me at him, Skipper!”

“Wait.” Cap held his grip on Dandrige. “I want him to see something.” He turned his captive’s head toward the crumbling remnants of the cylinder. Liberated from inside by the hungry black dust, a silvery lump seemed to dissolve into a puddle amidst the ebony attackers.

“Scavengers!” the balding man cried, struggling to get away.

“*Reprogrammed* scavengers,” Cap said. “Watch.”

The silver-grey microbots quickly spread out, overcoming and redesigning the metal-eaters. Within moments, the black and silver dust spread thin and vanished from view. Tex and Sun Ra dropped to the floor.

“I’ve developed an antidote for your machines, Dandrige. And your attack just unleashed them upon your island.”

Dandrige’s eyes widened. He looked up at the grinning man who held him, fearful respect and overwhelming terror in his eyes. “How could you do that? How could you *know* to do that?”

Cap simply kept smiling, then said, “Tex—check out the Secretary General. Dr. Dandrige and I are going to discuss electronics. And his murder of scores of people, including Dr.

Madsen.”

Dandrige gripped Cap’s copper-hued wrists. His feet dangled almost a foot above the floor. “Madsen?” he said. “That’s a laugh. He—”

A voice blared from an overhead loudspeaker. “Drop him!”

“My lab assistant,” Dandrige said with a tone of proud triumph.

“Why should I?” Cap shouted.

“Two reasons,” the voice said. “A woman and a boy.”

Chapter Seventeen

Live Capture

“Flying microbots!” Leila cried, swinging the rail gun toward the amorphous swarm.

“You can’t shoot them down!” Johnny yelled as he watched her power up the weapon. “That’s like trying to machinegun killer bees!”

“Yeah.” Leila didn’t even bother to use the laser sight, but aimed in the general direction of the black cloud. “But if I can set up a shock wave, it’ll tear them apart without having to score direct hits.”

She punched a button. “Cover your ears!”

She switched the rail gun to full auto firing. Every second, eight steel pellets accelerated to nearly ten times the speed of sound. The sonic clap of each shot blurred together into one deafening roar. The blazing trails of ionized, superheated air merged into a single, painfully bright white glare. The cumulative recoil caused the seaplane to pivot about slowly in the water. After two minutes of steady fire, Leila released the trigger.

The air stank of ozone and vaporized salt. Their ears rang with pain. Leila rubbed her aching eyes and stared blinking out the cargo hatch. The cloud of mechanical locusts was gone. A diffuse blanket of particles coated the surface of the water where some of the shattered creatures had fallen, coloring the blue-green water an oily black. Leila turned her gaze toward the rear of the Seamaster.

And stared right into the muzzle brake of a 9mm submachine gun.

The man holding the submachine gun stood in an inflatable boat similar to Cap’s. Mexican, mid-thirties, he dressed not in islander’s clothes but in brown and beige battle fatigues. A scar on the left side of his head ran raggedly from ear to chin. No mind-numbed zombie, he gazed at the pair steadily, carefully, saying nothing. The weapon in his grip said it all.

Leila deliberated for a swift instant. If she had not had the boy on onboard the plane, she might have taken a calculated dive for cover and gone for the pistol at her thigh. As it was, though, Jonathan stood directly

in harm's way. She raised her hands, an angry smile crossing her lips.

"Flash," she subvocalized to her earcomm while maintaining her tight-lipped smile. "Lei's in trouble."

"*What's wrong?*" buzzed the tiny satellite-relayed voice.

She again spoke without moving her lips. "Big man with small gun beat me to the draw."

"*Keep us informed,*" Flash said. "*Let me know when I can lock the plane.*"

"Thanks loads." Subvocalization carried inflections quite well—hers dripped with sarcasm.

Johnny—unaware of the radio exchange—watched her surrender, then lifted his own arms in defeat. The gunman picked up a walkie-talkie and muttered something into it in Spanish.

"What do we do now?" Johnny asked.

"As little as possible," Leila replied.

•

Their captor waited until reinforcements arrived on a second boat before he got close enough to the woman and the boy. Three other armed men covered him while he disarmed Leila and forced them into the boat. On her way out of the cargo hatch, Leila stumbled and grasped the side of the hatchway. Her fingers contracted three times, then she stood and lowered herself into the boat, putting her hand out to help Johnny in. The gunman stood over them grinning for a moment, the scar on his jawline puckering with the action. Then he manacled the pair together with rusty handcuffs.

"¿Dónde duermas, chiquita?" he asked, clamping the cuffs on her wrist.

Leila smiled sweetly, tossed her length of ebony hair behind her, and said: "Canaya."

Her captor stiffened, the smile fading from his face. The crew of the other boat laughed.

"*¡Silencio!*" he shouted. He gazed up and down at the woman, then smiled again. With mock courtliness, he swept an arm gallantly toward the boat, his other arm still gripping the submachine gun.

"Por favor, señorita," he said with a curt bow.

"Gracias, Don Pistolero," she said with equally polite irony.

Jonathan watched the exchange wondering how she could be so cool—almost flippant—in such a dangerous situation. He had never in his life had a gun pointed at him until this week. He tried to be reassured by her calm, but inside he quaked with fear and outrage.

“Are you clear of the plane?” Hoile asked.

“Drop the hatch,” she whispered.

Leila turned to look back at the Seamaster. The crew of the other boat prepared to climb inside when the hatch suddenly whined into life, sliding shut just as one of the men reached to tie a line from the boat to the aircraft. It dropped swiftly down, pinning his arms. The other two struggled to pull him out and eventually succeeded, with no small amount of blood and outcry on the hapless victim’s part. The hatch door sealed and locked.

“Seamaster’s secure, Flash.”

The man piloting the boat saw nothing of the injury. He stared toward the northern island, a brown and green mound thrusting out of the blue Pacific. He guided the boat toward the western end where a sea cave admitted them into the depths of the island.

The hot, dank air inside the cave smelled of iodine and dead fish. The cavern curved sharply, cutting off outside sunlight. Motoring into darkness, the Mexican pulled a remote control unit from his fatigues and pressed one of the rubber buttons.

Lights flicked on along the twisting cavern. He piloted toward a makeshift dock at the far end.

Leila spoke up in a friendly tone, her voice reverberated oddly off the rocky walls.

“Mi nombre es Leila, Señor. ¿Cómo se llama usted?”

The Mexican snorted. “Perez.”

Leila smiled. “¿Habla usted inglés, Perez?”

Perez gave her a quirky sort of smile. It made his scar wrinkle. “Doctor Dandridge no habla español, so he picks people who are at least familiar with English. I speak the best.” He added, “You speak Spanish better than a tourist.”

“Thank you. But this is not my idea of a summer cruise.”

Perez laughed heartily as he brought the boat to a thumping halt by the wooden dock. This far up the inlet, the unbearable stench assaulted their nostrils like a punch to the face. Johnny tried to breath without using his

nose. Leila acted as if she were a guest at the Ritz. He could tell that she was trying to butter up their captor.

On the dock stood a small console with a telephone built into it. Perez lifted the receiver and waited a moment. Then he said, “Doctor Dandridge, we have the boy and the woman.” He listened to his instructions, then said, “Yes, yes.” He placed the receiver back into its cradle.

Stepping back into the boat to undo their shackles, he said, “I will not handcuff you for our walk, but I will stay behind you with a gun to the boy’s spine. Please do only what I ask.”

“Certainly,” Leila said as neutrally as possible, communicating neither defiance nor submission, merely agreement.

Johnny, rage building up inside him at the powerless nature of their situation, felt less threatened by the weapon at his back than he felt insulted at being used to keep the woman under control. His ears burned red at the humiliation, as if Perez expected some sort of maternal instinct of Weir’s to prevent her from striking back.

Worse, that was exactly the case.

The trio marched through a dripping wet and twisting cavern aided only by the flashlight in Perez’s left hand.

“You know Dandridge is turning your people into electronic zombies,” she said conversationally.

Perez sneered out a smile. “You think because we are the same race I should feel kinship with them? People are bound together by interest, not race. My interest is in being on the winning side.”

“What does Dandridge want you to do with us?” Johnny asked.

“Oh, just hold on to you. Hostages. He needs that to control your friends.”

Leila shook her head, undulating her jet-black hair. “It won’t work. Captain Anger doesn’t pay blackmail.”

Perez shrugged. “Then Dr. Dandridge makes his zombie operation on *you*. Believe me, he still needs *plenty* of practice.”

Chapter Eighteen

Consciousness Razing

“You heard him,” Dandridge said. “Put me down. Or the boy and girl are dead.”

“It doesn’t work that way,” Captain Anger said, refusing to release his captive. “You see, *I* don’t accept moral responsibility for *your* actions. And my aides know it. If your henchmen harm Leila or Johnny”—he tightened his grip—“well, I’ve got my own methods.”

“Then let’s talk.” Dandridge’s voice barely squeaked out of his constricting throat.

Cap’s grip increased. “No—let’s *act*.”

“My assistant can blow up this entire island at my command. *Campbell!*”

Campbell’s voice bellowed over the loudspeaker. “My finger’s on the switch! Better let him go!”

Cap’s teeth glinted beneath his grin. His eyes—nearly all pupil in the low light of the operating room—looked like dark, unfathomable pools from which could issue unexpected fury. He held his grip around Dandridge’s throat.

“Then I guess we’ll have to see whose fear of death is greater— and who can deal better with the prospect of eternity.”

Dandridge took a deep, rasping breath and cried, “Do it, Campbell! Code Eighty-Six!”

Something made a chunking sound in the walls. The ventilators hissed.

“Gas!” Cap shouted, releasing Dandridge to reach into his cargo pocket. The other three men did likewise, though Rock withdrew a nothing more than a silicone rubber mouthpiece and some fiber fluff—the microbots had devoured all the metal parts of his pocket-sized gas mask.

“Aw, nuts,” he muttered in perfect American.

Dandridge stayed on the floor where he had fallen, smiling a wild, furious smile of triumph.

“Idiots!” he cried. “Masks won’t do any good against nerve gas!”

Cap slipped his mask on anyway and reached down for the doctor. “Then it can’t be fatal or you wouldn’t be...”

Before his fingers could close around the grinning scientist’s neck, Cap’s

vision blurred. Those dark, penetrating eyes grew unfocused, glassy. Dandridge closed his eyes, head lolling to the side on the floor. Cap took a step forward, steadied himself, then turned to gaze at his partners. In the scintillating, kaleidoscopic numbness that enveloped him, he saw them collapse to the floor. Then his own vision blackened under the power of the void, and he felt himself fall into night.

•

He awakened to the sound of drilling.

The room was brightly lit, immaculately clean, and filled with surgical and electronic equipment.

Cap fought the pounding in his head, suppressed the pain using yogic techniques he had learned as a child and practiced all through life, and tried to rise from his supine position.

He lay strapped to an operating table. Testing the restraints, he found them resistant to what strength he had so far regained. He turned his head toward the source of the squealing sound.

Campbell—Dandridge’s weasely assistant, whose thin and frizzy light-brown hair exploded wildly from his head like mold on old bread—worked feverishly with a drill, installing extra shackles for the captives. Sun Ra and Tex already lay bolted to the metal floor with straps; Campbell knelt over Rock, drilling a hole in the thick plating for the manacle on the captive’s left wrist. His other arm and his legs lay pinned to the ground. Campbell had stripped the shirts off all of them. The bulletproof, gadget-laden clothes lay piled in a heap in the corner of the operating room. Their pistols were nowhere in sight.

All three of his crew still dozed in a chemical-induced slumber. Rock snored with loud, snarfling gulps of air and louder whistle-grunt exhalations. Cap craned his head to scan the room. On the far side lay Dandridge on a large cot, head on a soft pillow, sleeping off the nerve gas in relative comfort.

Quietly, Cap flexed his wrists, pulling at the straps’ weak point: the grommetted holes through which half-inch steel bolts passed, fastening the restraints to the table.

Campbell used an electric impact driver to torque down the self-tapping bolt. Rock groggily awoke just as Campbell tightened the last turn.

“Hey!” Rock bellowed. “*Shto takoi?*”

Campbell dropped the bolt driver with a start and jumped away. When he overcame his surprise, he watched Rock struggle futilely and laughed.

It was a nervous, vicious laugh that rattled sharply around the room.

“Go on, tough guy,” Campbell said gleefully. “Be a big brainless tough guy. Tough guys don’t fare well against the guys with the brains.”

“Look at Captain Anger,” Rock growled. “He is tough guy *with* brains and you won’t fare well against *him!*”

Campbell smiled. “Have so far.” He padded over to Dandridge to inject an antidote for the nerve gas. Within seconds, the evil genius’s eyes opened and he sat upright, staring at his captives.

“So,” he said woozily, “your little task force is neutralized and my plans can proceed. I believe I have a UN Secretary to reprogram. Campbell?”

His crony glanced smirkingly at the four bound men, then helped Dandridge to his feet. He walked unsteadily toward the exit.

“By the way,” Dandridge said casually, a wicked smile crossing his thin face, “you may be distressed to learn that I’ll be reprogramming the four of you next—starting with you, Captain—then the boy and the woman. You men will make fine worker-drones. The woman...” He let his voice trail off portentously.

•

Leila tugged at the leather straps around her wrists. The umber, two-inch-wide strips bound her tightly to the wall against which she stood upright, arms straight out at the shoulder, forearms bent up to form the universal sign of surrender. Johnny Madsen, fettered in the same way, gazed at her with grave concern.

They stood in a smelly little portion of the cavern that looked like a pirate’s torture chamber. The rock wall behind them dripped a dark ooze that soaked their shirts and pants. The air stank of rotting seaweed and worse. Only the flickering light from a portable fluorescent lamp allowed them to see anything at all.

Their captor had not noticed her earcomm. “Flash,” she muttered sub-audibly. “Can you hear me?”

No answer. She suspected that the mass of the mountain above them blocked her uplink to the satellites the Anger Institute used for global communication.

Leila tilted her head as close to Johnny as she could and whispered. “Keep an eye on the entrance. Let me know if you see anyone coming in.”

“Okay,” he whispered back. “Why?”

“You’ll see.”

Grasping the thick leather thongs that held her wrists to rings embedded in the rock, Leila Weir braced her lower back against the cold, dank cavern wall and slowly—silently—slid off her left boot. Tipping it over, she hit the side of the heel twice with her other boot. Something clicked out of a hidden compartment inside the heel. This she grasped with her left toes (through her sheer nylon stockings) and withdrew from its hiding place.

With a look of strong determination on her face, she raised her long legs up to waist level so that they extended straight out from the wall. She continued raising them with a contortionist's limber skill until they were above her head.

Johnny saw that she grasped a small, extremely sharp, serrated-edge knife between her big and second toes. Two depressions in its handle allowed for a firm grip that way.

Flexing at the ankle, she sawed at the strap holding her left wrist until the thick leather surrendered. Transferring the knife from toes to hand, she lowered her legs and slashed at the right-hand restraint. Her raven-black hair swayed side-to-side with each of her movements.

Free, she released Johnny and slipped her boot on again. The knife she kept in her left hand.

“Let's go,” she said a little louder than before.

They crept to the juncture of their small chamber and of the next. Leila moved like a panther, sleek and graceful with lithe power and supple strength. Motioning for Johnny to come to her side, she pointed toward their guard's positions.

The two guards sat in the boat that had brought them to the island. The shallow inlet to the cave barely provided enough clearance at low tide, which Leila estimated it to be. One guard snoozed while the other read a tattered, dog-eared men's magazine in the dim light.

She judged the distances, then whispered, “How well can you throw, Johnny?”

Her companion shrugged. “Well enough for left field,” he said.

“Do you think you could take this rock”—she reached into the water and handed him a stone worn round from wave action— “and hit the guy on the right in the head?”

He hefted the rock and performed the instinctive judgment of mass, distance, and angles that come naturally to anyone who has had to deliver a ball to a precise point. *Finally*, Johnny thought, *a use for sports!*

Leila picked up another rock, slightly larger, and performed the same preparation. Rising and taking a deep breath of salt-and seaweed-tinged air, she hurled the rock at the sleeping man at the same instant as Johnny aimed for the other. For a long second they watched the black stones arc across the width of the cavern, zeroing in on their targets.

The rustle of their clothing as they pitched the missiles caused the guard to look up from his magazine in time to see the incoming attack. Throwing himself aside, he cried "*Caramb—*" just as the stone slammed his right shoulder with numbing force. His companion twitched violently when the rock hit him between the eyes with a coconut-like *klonk*, then slid further down his seat, more unconscious than ever.

Reaching across with his left hand, the other guard struggled to draw his pistol from his right-side holster. Leila crossed thirty feet of sand and rock, leapt up at the waterline, and sailed into him with the speed of a flying tackle. The pistol went off with a report that echoed through the cavern. Startled bats fluttered and flew out with a leathery flap of wings.

"Hate to do this to a fellow lefty," Leila muttered, "but..." She hammered the side of his head with a double fist, stunning him. Swiftly, she seized the pistol and tossed it to Johnny, who leveled it at the man and took aim with deadly intent.

"Don't," she said upon hearing the distinctive click of the semi-auto pistol's hammer pulling back.

"Why not?" Johnny demanded. "They work for Dandridge."

Disarming the other guard, she said, "They treated us quite civilly under the circumstances. They deserve a rap on the head for being rough guards, not death." She nodded toward the boat. "Let's get out of here."

They hit the aluminum deck of the boat with resonant thumps, rolling and sliding into position. Leila gunned the engine into life and roared out of the cavern in a spray of sea foam.

"But we don't know how many people they might have killed!"

"Exactly," Weir said. "And we don't know if they've ever killed *anyone*. We're out to stop Dandridge, not judge everyone who works for him."

Johnny frowned, puzzled and even a little annoyed. "Well, that's a hell of a way to fight evil."

Leila laughed mirthfully. "It works for us."

The boat smacked over the waves. "All right," she shouted over the roar of the engine, "Where'd they hide the plane?"

Johnny scanned the flat, blue horizon and saw nothing but the islands behind them and the sea everywhere else. Salt spray stung his face as the sun—low on the horizon—scintillated on the ocean’s surface.

“Flash!” she called out, confident that she had her earcomm signal back. “I’m going around to the other island. Fill me in!”

“I lost everyone’s signals two hours ago. They towed the Seamaster halfway between the two islands. Cap and the rest must still be somewhere inside the southern island. Be on your guard.”

Her long black hair whipped in the wind as she steered around the northern island. To Johnny, she looked like a golden statue of some Grecian goddess come to life. She gazed intently at the waters ahead, guiding the boat with sure strength. The slap of the metal hull against the swells punctuated the growl of the engine like the sound of a giant animal charging its prey.

He watched in wonder as the southern island came into view. It looked like something out of a mad scientist’s maddest nightmare. In the golden light of the late-day sun, it looked at first like the outline of an ordinary island, then like a tortured city skyline. As they grew closer, the shapes resolved into an intricate array of many-sided pillars that thrust out of the ocean at angles that, combined, lanced upward like a hideous sea creature breaking through the surf.

Off to one side floated the Seamaster. Leila steered toward it, one hand on the wheel, the other gripping the stolen pistol. Her index finger lay alongside the trigger guard, safe from accidental firing but ready to react to the slightest sign of danger.

She shouted over her shoulder to Madsen. “I suppose telling you to lie down and stay hidden would be pointless, so just be careful and work on not getting killed!”

“I can shoot, you know!” he hollered back.

“I don’t think you’ll have to!” She cut back on the throttle a thousand yards away from the aircraft. The boat settled down and drifted.

“Flash—how many boats are out there?”

“I saw three on the last satellite image I nabbed. That was fifteen minutes ago. Now that you’re here, I’ll see what the plane’s cameras can pick up.”

After a moment, his voice buzzed in her ear. *“I still see three. One by the nose, two coming straight toward you.”*

Leila saw the rooster-tail spray from the two speedboats closing in on

their inflatable. “Can you splash them with the portside missiles?”

“Just wanted your say-so. Already locked in.”

She nodded and said, “Fire away.”

Instantly, two white streaks tipped with fire screamed away from a rotating weapons pod under the Seamaster’s left wing. In less than a second, two explosions flung tons of water into the sky, taking the patrol boats with them. Tiny figures scrambled at air as the force of the blast threw them outward in every direction. One boat whirled in space and landed in one piece while the other disintegrated into shattered planks and engines, falling in pieces to the churning sea below.

Leila winked at Johnny as she gunned the engine into life. “We’ll toss out a life raft for them once we’re in the air.”

Her passenger frowned. “Why not let the sharks have ‘em?”

She grinned. “Cap says it totally annoys your enemies to owe you their lives. Besides”—her voice turned somber—“killing for convenience is a trait of the other side.”

She steered around the aft of the Seamaster, past its high T-tail empennage that towered like a diving whale’s powerful flukes, and said, “Open the gate to the castle, Flash.”

Hundreds of miles away in his electronic cocoon at the Anger Institute, Flash tapped into his keyboard the command to unseal the Seamaster. Encrypted with a 512-character prime number, the message darted upward to a commercial satellite and down again to the Seamaster’s computer, which decrypted the message and activated the gun bay door.

The boat bobbing at the prow of the seaplane released its tow line and roared into action, pulling around at the sight of the missile attack. Three men leveled their weapons toward Leila.

She took aim and squeezed off three rapid shots. Two rounds hit home, dropping the men to the deck. The third kept his cool and fired at the deadly woman.

The bullet punched through the boat’s windshield with a nerve-rattling crack. Leila sucked in a gasp of air and fired again. The pistol barked out a bullet that found its mark in her attacker’s chest. Dropping his rifle, he clutched his heart with one hand, gripped his skipper’s shoulder with the other, and sank out of sight to join his fallen comrades in the bottom of the boat.

“You’re shot!” Johnny cried, staring at the dark crimson stain glistening

against the black fabric of her jumpsuit.

She nodded and tucked the pistol in the belt around her waist. “Swim for it!”

With that, she dove into the warm Pacific waters, followed an instant later by her companion. They splashed across the ten yards separating them from the gun bay and climbed aboard, but not before Johnny noticed a pair of threatening dorsal fins.

“Sharks!” he hollered, winding up with a mouthful of saltwater for his trouble. Scrambling for the rising and falling edge of the aircraft hatch, he twisted his head around to see the sharks race toward him with singular intent.

Leila, her blood’s scent luring the creatures, pulled herself into the weapons bay with her left arm, then drew her pistol and aimed behind Johnny.

He extended his hand, scrambling and splashing in his race for safety. Behind him, he felt an impact reverberate through the water, followed by another, then the swirl of churning turbulence. He took Leila’s hand and clambered out of the water, the oily, metallic smell of the Seamaster as welcoming to him as the scent of apple pie and firewood to a weary traveler. Turning about, he glanced at the water outside in time to see a pod of dolphins ramming the sharks with their hard, round noses. The sharks swam away with a few powerful kicks of their tails.

Leila Weir smiled wryly. “See that, Johnny? Captain Anger has friends in the strangest places.”

“You’re still bleeding,” he observed, stepping toward her.

“It’s a clean in-and-out. We’ve got to get in position.” She flipped the switch to seal up the outer hatch and headed for the cockpit. “Flash! What’s Cap up to?”

“*Search me,*” came the radioed reply.

“Tell me where they landed on the island and I’ll position the plane nearby if they have to make a getaway.”

“*All right—head toward the south shore. But stay out of blast range. I don’t think Cap will want to let Dandridge keep his toys.*”

“Why aren’t they out yet? We were held captive for quite a while.”

The concern in Flash’s voice carried over the æther. “*I don’t want know. All we can do is wait. Cap’s gotten out of worse scrapes.*”

Leila stared at the alien landscape of the silver metal island and

frowned. She subvocalized—inaudible to Jonathan—“I’m not too sure about that.”

Chapter Nineteen

Mexican Standoff

Captain Anger watched Dandridge and Campbell depart. As soon as the door clanked shut and locked, he asked the others, “Anything?”

Sun Ra huffed in exasperation. “Campbell stripped us bare.”

“And you know *I* don’t have any metal on me, not even my earcomm.” Rock muttered. He ran a tongue around inside his mouth. “Not even fillings in teeth!” His wide Slavic face grinned at the absurdity of his situation.

The straps resisted even Captain Anger’s powerful muscles. His biceps bulged with effort. Sweat stippled his chest and face. He lay back and stared at the ceiling.

He began to whistle. Not a tune, though the rising and falling notes had a musical quality. Not an unconscious trill some other genius might generate while deep in thought, but a precise and complicated tune. The others listened to the sound intently, catching every change in pitch, every metered vibration. And they understood.

Captain Anger spoke to his loyal band using one of the least-familiar languages on the planet. In fact, Cap had trained his crew to be the foremost authorities on *silbo*, the whistling language of the peasants of La Gomera, one of the Canary Islands. Used by the indigenous *Guanches* before Spanish conquistadors exterminated them in the 15th century, less than nine hundred peasants on the remote island itself knew *silbo* anymore.

And nobody off the island—except for seven Americans and a thimbleful of academics—knew the language even existed.

Anyone listening in on Captain Anger might have known some sort of communication was taking place, but that knowledge would be about as useful as knowing that birdsongs meant something to birds. Even a La Gomera native would not understand a good deal of Anger’s version of *silbo*, since he had out of necessity added new words to the language’s

limited lexicon.

“*By hand tightened them he,*” Cap whistled in the island language’s peculiar syntax. “*Twisting out the bolts try.*”

As one, the three others rotated their wrists back and forth to the limits the manacles allowed. For long minutes nothing happened; the cool air of the operating room filled with the heat of their effort. Cap continued to wrench at the braided nylon straps. They had been designed to restrain the sick and tortured, the drugged and weakened—their designers in no way anticipated an encounter with the likes of Captain Anger.

A metallic squeak resounded in their ears. “*Tagda!*” Rock cried in Russian, then said in *silbo*, “*My right hand free shortly I’ll have.*”

Sun Ra and Tex chimed in with progress reports as Cap strained against the straps. Ultimately, neither the straps nor the bolt gave way: the stainless steel table to which the bolt connected bent under the assault. Cap reversed his effort and bent the sheet metal down, then back up. The back-and-forth motion heated the metal, annealing it, turning it soft. Metal fatigue weakened its structure and with a loud *shank!* a knife-blade-shaped piece broke free.

The others twisted their bolts out as Cap reached over to undo his left hand. Both hands free, he swiftly liberated his feet and leapt from the table to assist his comrades. Rock had already undone one hand by the time Cap joined in. In less than a minute, they rose from the floor and raced for their shirts in the corner.

Dispensing with *silbo*, Cap whispered, “We have to neutralize those two and then help their victims.”

“That’s a fine idea,” Sun Ra muttered, “but Campbell’s taken our guns and my WASP launcher.”

“And what about the microbots?” Tex asked.

“Our own scavengers will take care of them. We just have to make sure the island isn’t designed to self-destruct with us on it.” He looked from man to man. In the eyes of his friends he saw an unwavering devotion to their cause. They would face death at his side and never shrink from their mission: to rid the world of tyrants grand and petty.

Dandridge didn’t stand a chance.

They trod quietly over to the operating room. Hazing a glance through the observation glass, he saw that the UN Secretary General still lay on the operating table, Dandridge feverishly meddling with the man’s brain.

At Anger's silent cue, Sun Ra burst through the doors. Dandridge grunted in shock as the flying tackle slammed him into a supply cabinet. The doors bent inward with the force of impact. From inside came the sound of breaking glass and clattering instruments. Disoriented, the doctor stared at Ra's wicked smile just before an ebon fist slammed the side of his skull, ramming him into unconsciousness at the speed of dark.

Sun Ra let Dandridge slip to the floor, then turned to join his team. Cap had already donned a surgical gown and Latex gloves and peered inside the soft pink-grey recesses of the exposed brain before him. Tex slipped his long, slender fingers into surgical gloves and joined Cap in his effort to save the diplomat.

"He's got a more powerful chip in there," he muttered. Looking up at Rock, he said, "You and Sun Ra find Campbell. Tex"—he glanced at Dr. Uriah West—"we need to disconnect the axons of his brain from this chip and reconnect them to the correct dendrites before they grow into the iridium channels."

Sun Ra and Rock sped from the room, grinning widely at the notion of payback time for Campbell.

Tex swung the microsurgery videocam into position and peered at the infinitesimal nerve strands attached to the equally minuscule squares wired to the microchip. He whistled.

"Cap, this chip is in the portion of the brain that controls deceptive behavior. It looks as if Dandridge wanted Mr. Arafshi to lie for him."

Cap nodded. "What would a diplomat be without *some* ability to lie?" Suddenly he smiled a leprechaun's smile, his red hair and green eyes ablaze with inspiration. "On the other hand, I wonder what the world would do with a diplomat who always told the straight truth?"

Dr. West grinned back, then moved out of the way as Richard Anger, holder of an M.D. among many other degrees, lowered his eyes to the microsurgical scope and deftly disconnected the chip from the brain cells, then reconnected the axons in a pattern slightly different from the norm.

"There," he said, after a long while peering into the hole in Arafshi's head. "Stitch up the dura, put his skull back in place, and zip him up." With a snap of rubber, Cap peeled the gloves from his deft yet powerful hands and bent down to grab the unconscious criminal mastermind. Glancing back at Tex, he said, "I'm taking Dandridge. Get Arafshi to the beach if you can."

"Sure Cap," Tex said. With a quizzical tone in his voice, he shouted

toward the departing man, “Say, who-all’s running the UN while Arafshi’s here?”

“A surgically altered imposter,” Cap shouted back, throwing Dandridge over his shoulder and opening the door to peer cautiously through it. “Just like the Dr. Madsen impersonator who escaped and caused the mess up in Los Gatos.”

“You mean that wasn’t—?” Before he could finish his question, Cap slid through the doorway to race toward the sounds of battle.

•

William Arthur Dandridge awoke to slamming pain in his guts, not to mention a splitting headache. In an exhausted tone, he muttered, “Killing me won’t stop my plans, Anger.”

“Killing you isn’t my plan,” Cap said tersely, negotiating the metallic corridors, moving ever toward the commotion. “Stopping you is all I want. The internal clocks on the scavengers I reprogrammed will trigger them to dismantle this island and everything on it in about an hour. So I’d advise you to join me for our flight out of here.”

Dandridge, trying gently to feel his head bruise despite the bouncing around he received on Cap’s broad shoulder, said, “Campbell will kill you all and I’ll still have time to program a retaliatory microbot.”

“And what makes you think—?” The words caught in Cap’s throat as he raced through a hatchway leading outside the steely fortress. On the gleaming metal shore, he stared in wonder at the giant monstrosity that had cornered his men.

Chapter Twenty

The Silver Beetle

It looked like a cross between an enormous insect and a gargantuan crab. The setting sun drenched the creature in blood-red hues as it thundered across the wet, glittering shore. Thirty feet high and twice as long, the six-legged machine pounded toward Rock and Sun Ra firing tracer bullets that lit up the landscape like laser blasts. Inside its head sat Campbell, furiously working a pair of joysticks and peering down on his victims with an insane gleam in his eyes. He fired wildly, with no attempt

to aim. Cap's powerful legs slammed into action to speed him toward the battle, Dandridge wrapped around his shoulders like a hunter's prize. As he ran, he spoke into his earcomm.

"Leila! Take out that thing with a missile!"

"You're all within the blast radius. I'll use the rail gun."

"Aim for the head." Shrugging Dandridge off his back, Cap freed up his hands for the fight. From his many-pocketed shirt, he withdrew a sphere the size of a golf ball, colored white and dimpled the same as a golf ball. This object, however, had two red stripes slightly off axis from each other. With his powerful hands, he twisted the two hemispheres of the ball until the red lines met at the equator. Something inside chirped electronically. Planting his feet on the unyielding shoreline, he took aim and pitched the ball in a high arc toward the advancing macrobot. Bullets ricocheted around and behind him like electric raindrops.

Rock and Sun Ra saw the sphere rise upward toward its target.

"*Duck!*" Ra cried, turning his back to what he knew came next. Rock belly-flopped to shore, slipping across the wet Penrose tile pattern and nose-diving into the briny foam.

An ear-pounding explosion lit up the gloaming sky, briefly outlining the three men and the towering machine in its white, angry glare. The shock wave roiled across their flesh like waves on water.

Inside the head of the colossal creature, Campbell clapped hands over his ears and stared overhead in agony. Released from his grip, the joysticks fell dead and the machine halted in its tracks. In a burst of furious rage, the undeniably mad scientist seized the controls and fired the machine gun into the growing darkness, peppering the seaside with near misses.

Suddenly, from hundreds of yards over the water lanced an eerie white line of blinding light. The stream curved to shore and slammed into the spidery monster with the force of a god's fist. The battle ended in less than five seconds. The trail of ionized air glowed for an instant or two after the rail gun ceased its deadly roar. In the fading glare, Captain Anger saw the dripping mass of slag that had seconds before been the head of the killing machine. The rest of the macrobot remained standing on its five of its six legs, the right front lifted up as if slain in mid-stride.

Sun Ra joined Cap's side. Looking up at the damage wrought by the Seamaster's mighty superweapon, he smiled and said. "I guess Campbell just lost his head."

From behind them, they heard Tex shout “Need some help here!”

Turning around, Cap saw the doctor at the mouth of the artificial cavern, the secretary general—head wrapped with bandages as if turbaned—cradled in his long arms. Cap also saw that Dandridge had vanished.

“Rock! Help Tex. Sun Ra—find us a boat that can get us to the plane. Then round up the zombies and prisoners for evacuation. I’ll find Dandridge. Leila!”

“Here, boss.”

“Preflight the plane and prepare to take on passengers. We’ll need zipcuffs if any of them get violent.”

“Roger.”

Just before he vanished into the cavern, he added, “If I’m not out in six minutes, drop the canister.”

“But Cap—!”

They heard nothing more from Captain Anger.

Chapter Twenty-One

The Vanishing Island

The gunmetal grey of the corridor merged with darkness as Dandridge cut power to the rest of the island. Cap produced a contact lens case from another pocket. With deft, practiced motions, he inserted the lenses, blinked twice, and put the case away.

Near-darkness blazed into visibility as if a torch had been lit. The lenses consisted of three ultra-thin layers. The first, outer layer gathered every photon of light falling on it; the second layer amplified the light by releasing a hundred photons for every one incoming; the third layer, closest to the eye, projected the amplified image onto the retina. With these, Cap and his crew saw in darkness even better than jungle cats. Now Captain Anger used the lenses to hunt down Dandridge.

He had five minutes.

Racing through the huge inner chamber, Cap scanned the area for any sign of movement. As he expected, his quarry was nowhere to be seen.

Then he glanced at each of the doors that rimmed the cavern. From beyond one of them lanced the barest glimmer of a slice of light. Undetectable by normal eyesight, the beam emanated from a torn gasket around the hatch.

He eased to a stop and listened at the door. Nothing. He withdrew his second—and last—shock grenade and palmed it in his hand. One mighty shove from his muscled shoulder sent the door slamming open.

The corridor lay empty, lit only by the dim glow of an emergency lamp. A hundred yards further in stood another door. Within seconds, Cap crouched at the threshold, listening once more. This time, he heard the voice of Dandrige maniacally rambling.

“Think some steroidal *sailor* can get the better of me? You’ve got another think—*he killed Campbell!* And my plans for the UN. Ruined! I’ll show him some deconstructionism!”

Cap rammed through the door and slammed to a halt in front of Dandrige. Scraped and bloodied, the man looked less like a mad doctor and more like a stir-crazy refugee. His lab coat hung in dirty tatters and the white shirt beneath it revealed two bloody wounds from direct bullet hits. Cap realized that Campbell’s aim may not have been so random after all.

“*You!*” the crazed man shrieked upon seeing his arch-nemesis. In a blur of frenetic speed, Dandrige leapt behind a lab table, seizing a remote unit as he slid out of view.

“You think I’m some sort of extortionist, don’t you?” he cried.

Cap heard electronic sounds issue from behind the bench. With a single kick of his powerful legs, he jumped up and over it to crash down on his foe. Dandrige croaked out something that sounded like “*Foomp!*” and curled up into a groaning ball of pain. Still he clutched the remote in his fear-clenched fingers. A thumb pressed down on a red stud.

“I didn’t want to blackmail the world. I wanted to *pacify* it! Drop my bugs into a war zone and they’d eat all the weapons!”

Cap snorted as he wrenched the device from Dandrige’s hand. “And if men continue to fight like men? Hand-to-hand, tooth and nail? You’d have your other bugs attack their flesh and tear them apart!”

“Convert useless human trash into useful building blocks,” Dandrige gasped as Cap once more threw him over his shoulders. “The ultimate recycling!”

Something on the lab bench *snickked* open. Looking down at the

tabletop, Cap saw a globe the size of a baseball open up at the top like an eye's iris.

“What is it, Dandridge?” One hand, muscled like a Roman god's, clamped down on the wounded man's throat.

“My next stage of development,” he gurgled. “A scavenger with wings! You may have destroyed the swarm I released against your plane, but I'm sending these straight toward the mainland, where they'll begin to devour the world!”

Without any further deliberation, Cap twisted the halves of his grenade, activating it, and tossed the bomb inside the small containment vessel. Turning swiftly, he headed to the door with Dandridge his captive.

Dandridge laughed in wild triumph. “How do you like that, Madsen? You had the idea, but I put it to the most notorious use possible!”

Cap gazed about the room until he saw a small man shackled in a dark corner.

“Cover your ears!” he shouted, clapping his hands over his own an instant before the grenade exploded, sending a hammer-blow shock wave through the lab. Glassware everywhere shattered. Chairs flew away from ground zero, as did everything else not bolted to the floor.

Cap shielded his eyes from the detonation, too. Even though he had designed his contact lenses not to over-amplify bright lighting, they would cease to function after such a dazzling photon blast, and he needed them for his escape.

Glass and metal shards ripped into his skin. Dandridge cried out in further pain and the man in the corner simply whimpered through the ringing in Cap's ears. He threw Dandridge to the floor hard enough to knock the maniac's wind out, incapacitating him. Running to the prisoner's side, Cap grasped the manacles and pulled with all the force of his arms, legs, and back.

On one, a chain link deformed and broke free with a *clink*. The bolt that held the other to the wall protested under the unbelievable strain, only to shear its threads with a crack like a gunshot. Cap gave the goateed man the preferred perch across his broad shoulders; Dandridge—gasping for air—had to settle for being dragged by the back of his blood-drenched lab coat.

Cap's sea legs rammed against the metal floor like twin pistons, propelling him and his human cargo down the dim corridor toward the beachhead. In the distance he heard the sound of the Seamaster roaring to

life. From behind, fainter, a curious buzzing like angry locusts gained on him.

“It’s all over now,” Dandridge muttered weakly as Cap hauled him through the arching central chamber toward the outside. “The scavengers fly all night and use their solar cells to charge up during the day. They *will* reach the mainland. From there they can spread anywhere. And they replicate.”

Captain Anger said nothing as they pounded out of the artificial cavern into the night. Rock stood at the ocean’s edge, holding a longboat in place with one muscular arm while signaling with the other.

“*Paidyom!*” he called out. “You were almost late!”

“In America, we call that ‘on time,’” Sun Ra shouted. He strode toward the boat with a dozen troops and half as many prisoners behind him. “Watch this!” Speaking into a headset boom mike, he barked out the command “*iDerecha!*” and all the electric zombies turned right as one. “*iSube al barco!*” he said, and they marched single file into the water and dutifully climbed into the boat. The freed prisoners followed, elbowing and kicking their former tormentors into position. Dandridge’s unaltered cohorts had fled the island already, no doubt racing toward the Mexican shore.

Gazing at Tex, already sitting in the boat with Secretary General Arafshi, Sun Ra nodded toward the zombies and said, “Looks as if you have some surgery to schedule.”

“To the plane!” Cap shouted, placing the small man gently in the boat and tossing Dandridge in like luggage. The errant scientist hit the gunwale with the sound of a sack of potatoes dropped from a speeding truck and slipped silently to the wet strakes. With a pantherish leap, Cap jumped from shore to ship and landed lightly by the tiller.

Throwing full power to the engine, he guided it toward the Seamaster. Beyond the glare of its spotlight, he saw Leila in the cockpit running through her checklist. Johnny Madsen shone the light in their direction, illuminating the choppy water ahead of the longboat. The slap-slap-slap of hull against waves soothed the captain, though his thoughts never strayed from his mission.

“Leila,” he radioed. “Is the countermeasure ready?”

“*Ready to drop as soon as we’re airborne,*” she replied.

She turned the massive aircraft around in the water and powered it up to move toward the advancing boat. At fifty yards and closing, she

throttled back and turned the plane's bay to face them. Jonathan cycled the hatch open and helped the refugees inside.

In less than a minute, everyone clambered aboard and he sealed the hatch shut. Sun Ra guided the freed captives to their seats—really nothing more than one-foot-square pieces of stamped metal that folded down from the fuselage. He ordered the zombies—in Spanish—to seat themselves. Leila helped Tex strap the UN Secretary General into a rescue basket.

Captain Anger made his way to the cockpit and slipped into the pilot's seat. Without a word of warning, he slid the four throttle levers forward and gunned the engines to full power, the four Pratt & Whitney J75-P-2 turbojets each providing 17,500 pounds of thrust. Anything not bolted or strapped down slid to the nearest rear bulkhead. With a minimum of water-taxiing, the Martin P6M Seamaster rose up on its hull and leapt out of the water.

The ride instantly smoothed out as Cap's deft hands controlled the wheel. Turning and banking steeply yet gracefully to the right, he saw the island below as a dark abomination in the night-shrouded water. A short distance beyond stood its unaltered sister island. As he maneuvered the aircraft into position for a bombing run, he radioed the Anger Institute.

"Flash, dispatch *Falcon III* to monitor the mainland closest to Escollos Alijos. Dandridge tried to release a flying scavenger and a few may have escaped the percussion grenade I set off in the lab."

"Roger." The Falcons—unmanned autonomous aircraft—flew at up to sixty thousand feet altitude and could circle for months or years at a time over a selected site, sending back real-time images of the ground below with a resolution far better than satellite photos. This one—the third in the series of solar-powered, ultra-lightweight spycraft that the Anger Institute had in the air, monitoring danger zones around the world—would watch the mainland for any signs of destruction caused by any winged scavengers that made landfall. Until Captain Anger could devise and release his own flying reprogrammers.

"Heads up back there," Cap said over the intercom. "Rotating the bomb bay door!"

The black titanium rack on the center deck of the bomb bay held only one weapon: a gunmetal grey cylinder four feet long with stubby red vanes on one end. Machinery whirred into life and the entire rack rotated downward as a large section of hull rotated upward. For a few seconds the cool evening air blew into the compartment like a mini-hurricane. Then only the sound of the jet engines and a faint *clunk* as the bomb dropped

toward the island.

Cap glanced out the starboard window as he banked to the right over the island Dandridge engineered. He smiled with satisfaction to see the bomb hit squarely in the mouth of the elemental mountain.

Instead of exploding, though, the bomb burst open to release an inky black cloud into the cavern. Cap maintained a two-minute circle and watched as the stark columns and pillars and patterns of the artificial island lost their luster. The chambers of Dandridge's laboratory collapsed in on themselves as Cap's own scavenger microbots stripped the foul island apart. Within minutes, the towering monument to madness turned fluid and ran into the sea like a melting ice cube.

Just then a scream of unstoppable rage erupted from amidships.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The Last Resort

Captain Anger's meditation on one man's folly ceased the instant he heard the commotion in back. Engaging the plane's powerful artificial intelligence computers, he left the plane flying itself toward California to make his way back to the cargo bay. He had one more fight to break up.

Johnny Madsen squeezed Dandridge's throat with one hand while the other formed a fist that pounded the man's temple with unrestrained fury. Rock wrapped an arm around the boy's waist, trying to separate assailant from target.

Captain Anger clasped Jonathan's wrist in his powerful grip, freezing the boy's arm in mid-swing. His other hand released its grip on Dandridge, who curled up into a fetal ball, whimpering and speaking to himself in a disturbing sing-song whisper.

Cap said, "I think there's someone onboard more deserving of your attention." Cap led a stunned Jonathan Madsen to the small man sitting dazed in one of the folding flight seats.

"Gramps?" he said, staring at the old man with eyes wide in grateful amazement. "Julie?"

Julius Madsen gazed up at his grandson and started to weep uncontrollably. He reached out to hug the young man and whispered in a

hoarse, parched voice, “Johnny boy—you found me.”

His grandson crouched down to look the old man straight in the eyes. “I thought you were dead. The man the scavengers killed first—they said it was *you!*”

The elder Madsen shook his head weakly. “Dandridge and Campbell replaced several key world figures with imposters in the hope it would give them time to perform the surgery on the real people they’ve kidnapped. Then real people would switch places with the imposters and be high-level zombies under Dandridge’s control. I was his first captive, but he wanted my knowledge, so no implant for me.”

Tex tapped on Cap’s shoulder. “I’ve patched up Dandridge’s bullet holes; do y’all think we could put the spurs to this filly? Mr. Arafshi’s got to get some critical care within a couple of hours or his brain won’t be worth a plugged nickel.”

“Sure,” Rock interjected. “With your ten thumbs in his head, it’s wonder he can lie flat on his back without falling over!”

Tex slowly turned his head toward his stocky antagonist, saying, “At least I didn’t get caught with my pants down, robot bait.”

Tex and Rock traded barbs all the way back to Long Beach. Sun Ra used one of the onboard computers in the rear compartment to study in depth the medical/legal ethics of surgical personality alteration. Cap and Tex might need his advice when it came time to dezombify Dandridge’s victims. Leila Weir—after Tex treated her bullet wound—spent the time in the co-pilot’s seat, watching the moon shimmer on the sea and imagining great floating cities resistant to wind, water, sun, and rust. She occasionally conversed with Flash, whom she filled in on the details of their recent exploits.

Jonathan and Julius Madsen simply held each other, grandfather and grandson, happy that a mysterious red-bearded enigma named Captain Anger had saved their lives and vanquished a madman. The freed prisoners conversed among one another, wondering what would happen next.

What happened next was a night landing in Long Beach Harbor followed by disembarkation. The Seamaster was left to its ground crew and everyone took refuge in a dockside hangar. Cap dispersed the crowd with a few quick directions.

“Rock—take anyone with implants back to the institute. Leila—the same goes for the Madsens. Put them up in the guest quarters.

Tex—you've got your work quite literally cut out for you. Sun Ra—handle all the legal problems for our prisoners and find out how to remove *quietly* that imposter at the United Nations.

“As for our visiting professor...” He turned toward the huddled mass that had once been the arrogant and self-possessed William Arthur Dandridge. In a mock TV announcer's voice, he said, “Well, Bill, you didn't win the world this time around, but you did come in second. Wait till you see the lovely parting gift you've earned.”

Dandridge, bloodied, shot up, black and blue, cringed at what might come next.

•

What came next was being dressed in a high altitude pressure suit and strapped into the cockpit of Cap's SeaDart. Ground crew used thick zipcuffs of an odd-colored plastic to fasten Dandridge's wrists and ankles to the ejection seat so that he could not cause any further mischief during the flight.

Captain Anger—dressed in a similar flight outfit—slapped a helmet on Dandridge's head, locked it down, and climbed into the pilot's seat.

Like the Seamaster, the SeaDart used the Los Angeles harbor as its runway, but this jet was a two-seat fighter capable of supersonic flight. Based on the design of the Convair F2Y-2 (officially designated the F-7), its multi-compartmented lower fuselage sat in the water supporting a pair of delta-shaped wings.

Cap sealed up his own helmet, cycled shut the acrylic canopy, and strapped in for takeoff. He ignited the single Pratt and Whitney J-75 turbojet engine, sending a bright orange flame shooting across the water and up the concrete ramp leading from the hanger to the harbor. Steam roiled upward in the pre-dawn air, glowing from within like a ghost. The jet immediately surged forward, breaking the still waters with its prow.

Throttling up, the engine roared to its full 15,000 pounds of thrust, pushing the plane up onto a single extended ski. Shaped like a thin titanium surfboard, the ski lifted the plane out of the water, supporting the entire aircraft on three oleo struts.

Dandridge gazed blearily out the canopy to observe sea spray race past with hurricane speed just inches from his face. The pilot controlled the plane with deft ease, making the bizarre liftoff procedure smooth and certain.

Screaming across the LA harbor at nearly 200 knots, Cap eased the

control stick back. The elevons on the rear edges of the delta wing moved slightly and the plane nosed up twenty degrees. Suddenly, the mild buffeting of ski-on-water ceased and the SeaDart's delta wing took over. With a whine of motors, the ski retracted into the hull of the sea-jet. The SeaDart became a jet with its all-important supersonic area-ruled fuselage. Blazing into the sky with sunrise at his back, Captain Anger raced upward out of southern California at climb rate of 17,100 feet per minute.

William Arthur Dandridge blacked out from the g-force of the climb. Richard Anger III felt nothing but exhilaration.

Leveling off at 36,000 feet, he coaxed the jet to Mach 1, ripped through the sound barrier, and cruised over the sun-goldened Pacific at Mach 1.1, far below the jet's Mach 1.5 potential.

Over his headphones, Anger heard a tired voice from the rear seat ask, "Am I so evil that you have to dispose of my body at sea? You could have just shot me through the head and thrown me in a grave. Or let some scavengers at me."

Cap said nothing.

"I know I've killed people," he continued. "But so have you, Anger. I'm sure you claim to kill for the sake of some floating abstraction such as 'Good' or 'Justice.' That's funny, because those are the names I give to *my* reasons for killing. That's the great thing about abstractions—they can mean anything you want."

Cap, in a low, even tone, said, "I don't kill people for sport, or to gain power over others, or to shock the world with terror. When I must kill, it is to defend the innocent against the aggressor. Justice takes care of itself. And Good will triumph with or without my help, because—and you must face this, Dandridge, if you want to survive on this earth—good people far outnumber the likes of you. And for every evil genius that some chance wiring of the brain creates against all odds, there are a dozen—a hundred—good genii in the world to oppose you."

Dandridge sounded mystified. "You believe in genies and magic lamps?"

Cap smiled a smile unseen by his captive. "I believe you're a genius who doesn't know the real plural of the word 'genius.'"

•

Away from Pacific shipping lanes lay a mysterious volcanic island. On ocean charts, its coordinates—near 141° W latitude, 28° N

longitude—revealed nothing, yet it existed nonetheless.

Cap circled around the island once as a precaution. Since he had raced the sun westward at nearly 900 miles per hour, it was still just shortly after dawn one time-zone away from Los Angeles. The long shadow of the steep lava cone reached miles westward. Clouds ringed the summit, and the slopes that reached to the shore supported only a few patches of greenery. He saw nothing alarming, so he throttled back to descent speed and extended the hydro-ski. Within moments, he touched down feather-lightly onto the shimmering surface of the sea. He idled the engine and the SeaDart slowed and settled into the water, floating on its belly, nose slightly up, slender conformal wingtip floats keeping the sea-jet steady.

The swells topped out at less than two feet in the calm morning hour. The two men sat a thousand yards offshore. Cap opened the canopy, removed his helmet, and took a deep breath of clean ocean air. It smelled of salt and sun.

Unstrapping, he stood and stretched. “Say hello to your new home, Dandridge. It’s a little more hospitable than your fractal island, and I’m sure you and the other guests will have a lot to talk about.”

With that, he removed Dandridge’s helmet and set it on his own seat, then flipped a protective cover up from a red switch. The eyes of his prisoner widened in terror.

“I’m tied down!” he shrieked. “I’ll drown!”

Cap smiled. “Your bonds are water soluble. Whether you make it to shore or not is a function of your will to live.” He lay his finger on the switch and covered his face with his arm.

Angrily, Dandridge cried out, “You’re just as much a cold-blooded ki—”

Cap pressed the switch and the rear ejection seat blasted into the morning air, shoving Dandridge upward at hundreds of feet per second. Specially designed by the Anger Institute to cause minimal damage to the aircraft, the low-flame rocket exhaust barely warmed the pilot as he shielded himself, then turned to gaze upward at the soaring scientist.

At the zenith of the flying chair’s arc toward the island, a parachute shot upward, assisted by an even smaller rocket. It bloomed instantly into full expansion and lowered the seat— and Dandridge—to the waves. He hit the drink halfway to shore: about five hundred yards. Like a popcorn kernel dropped into hot oil, the chair instantly sprouted six bright yellow flotation bags. The parachute settled to the surface in the still morning

air.

For a long moment, nothing happened, and Cap suspected that the g-force of ejection had driven his foe unconscious as it had several previous recipients of Cap's largesse. Pulling ultra-compact binoculars from his flight suit, Cap stood astride the seat of the gently bobbing SeaDart and watched.

It took the bonds about thirty seconds to dissolve in water; a little longer if merely damp. Within a minute or two, Dandridge freed first his legs, then his right arm and then his left.

Unfastening the five-point harness that also kept him safely strapped in for flight, he clumsily splashed into the water and swam frantically toward the beach in a manic dog paddle.

Out of curiosity, Cap scanned the black lava sands for signs of life. He counted seven figures in all standing on the beach. The sound of the SeaDart doubtless roused them. They did not gather together in a group, but stood apart from one another, scheming megalomaniacs ever suspicious of the motives of others. Around them lay the scattered and burnt remains of attempts to build one-man boats, one-man huts, one-man gardens. The polished white bones of several skeletons reflected the morning light like hideous ceramic artworks.

Cap had marooned eleven men there after discovering the new island. Aspiring or actual tyrants all, they were stranded there without henchmen, underlings, toadies, or sycophants: no one to act as their muscle; no one to protect them from one another. Violent, aberrant geni, the concept of cooperation among equals failed to occur to them. So they remained on their barren island without the hallmarks of civilization: trust, exchange, division of labor, or even mutual respect.

Cap lowered his binoculars and smiled. "If you only knew, Professor Dandridge, how little indeed we differ, you would have the answer to all your suffering. You all would. If you knew the one main difference between us, you would discover the way off your island." With that, he sat down, strapped in, closed the canopy and fired up the jet.

Airborne within moments, he accelerated to a mere 200 mph, staying so close to the water that the wide, triangular wing supported the aircraft on ground effect, the same phenomenon seagulls use to conserve energy flying. The wings cruised so close to the surface—about six feet above the swells—that induced drag between the wings and the water slowed the air enough to create added lift. In this way, Captain Anger flew away from the island at a leisurely pace (for him).

Twenty-five miles west of the island—too far for one of them to swim, but close enough for a team-built raft to reach—floated a surplus oil rig. It served as a refueling stop for the SeaDart, which could only carry enough fuel to fly out to the island with a few gallons reserve.

Cap taxied to the center of one side, far from the thick pillars that provided flotation and stability. Connecting the long fuel line to the jet's tank, he turned the nozzle on and filled up.

During moments such as this—quiet, solitary moments on the sea—Captain Anger belied his name. Calm and confident, Cap gazed at the horizon and saw a world bigger than the one envisioned by Dandridge and his ilk. After a moment, he shut of the fuel line, let it retract, and sealed up the tank. Gazing up at the retired oil rig, he pondered its significance.

Onboard, in a comfortable crew building half the size of a football field, lay stores of food, water, and a library of books hand-picked by Captain Anger. He intended it solely for the solace and education of anyone who might finally acquire the *human* genius necessary to escape from the island to this place that he fondly thought of as The Last Resort.

It had not happened yet, and the proof of that lay in pieces on the island's shore. None of them could be satisfied simply to succeed; each had to ensure that the others fail.

Captain Anger fired up the Pratt and Whitney engine, donned his helmet, and lifted off into the sky like a rocket punching through the stratosphere. With a thundering sonic boom that rattled the island and all upon it—including its drenched and wheezing newest inhabitant—Captain Anger vanished into the golden sun like an avenging angel heading homeward.

Epilogue

One True Thing

The land on which the United Nations building stood did not belong to New York City or even the united States. New York had ceded it to the UN half a century before. Maruk Arafshi, head still bandaged, watched the blue-bereted UN military police escort away a violently kicking mirror image of himself.

“I don't know why they needed *you!*” the imposter cried. “I was *good!*”

No one would have checked my fingerprints or my DNA! I was *great* at being you!”

“I’m sure your were,” Arafshi said with honest amazement at the familiar face before him. At the moment, the recovering Secretary General looked less like Maruk Arafshi than did the fake being stuffed into the patrol car.

Welcomed back to his plush, mahogany-lined office with sincere applause from his staff and fellow delegates, he blinked from the flash of camera strobes and video lights. Leaning unsteadily against his broad desk, he said, “Please, I’m back and I am eager to get to work. My recent unpleasantness is not the issue here.”

“What is the issue?” shouted a reporter.

Without a thought of self-censorship, Arafshi honestly replied, “That the last superpower on earth doesn’t even pay its UN dues, yet shamelessly uses the General Assembly and Security Council as a rubber stamp for its policy of economic and cultural expansion and we all go blithely along with it, eager to trade self-determination for World Bank credit and national sovereignty for a false sense of security.”

Arafshi raised his hand to his mouth and nearly bit his tongue off. *Allah take me now*, he thought with growing terror. *What have I said?*

The End

Captain Anger and his companions will return in Adventure #2: *The Ivory Tower*