

WINNER

BOOK ONE: THE AWAKENING

A TRILOGY
BY MARC BOLDA



AGAINST THE ULTIMATE EVIL STAND TWO WORLDS
AGAINST THE ULTIMATE BETRAYAL
TWO WOMEN SHARE ONE SOUL...

...WINNER TAKE ALL.

**WINNER -
BOOK ONE:**

THE AWAKENING

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PART ONE:
TRAITOR'S WARNING

CHAPTER ONE

Meine ehre heiBt treue.

My honour is loyalty. For over seventy mind-boggling years, Johann Wilhelm von Rittmann had lived his life according to the strictest tenets of that oath. He had killed by it and ordered other men to die because of it. For him it had been a way of life, an absolute, a standard of purity with which to cleanse the filth from this world.

And he had.

Oh, yes. It made the old man shudder at the prospect of what he was about to do.

An act of abhorrence, it represented a betrayal against a lifetime of commitment. Worse, he would destroy the dreams of a man he had long revered as his best friend and superior, ever since both were officers in the elite *Waffen SS* Division *Leibstandarte*, long back in the glory years of yesterday.

Tortured moments merged into an infinity of regret and he sat twitching in the near darkness, drifting finally into a more acceptable reverie. For a while, the heady memories of power washed over him and he could still envision the rallies, the perfectly straight columns of proudly marching men in black, a golden sun reflecting on silver runes...

The aquamarine glow present throughout the reinforced bulkheads of the main research lab grew appreciably brighter. A marine version of conductive plastic paint had been infused with bioluminescent genes from a rare species of deep ocean jellyfish and South American fireflies, enabling smart-illumination everywhere an airbrush could reach.

Above, full spectrum Sol-Arc arrays activated in domino effect. Electricity was supplied through banks of externally mounted photosyn green cells, the upper hull a palisade power generator that was the closest thing yet to a living plant.

These were merely a few of the innovative touches applied under the guidance of Rittmann, who had integrated zero configuration

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networking with a radical implementation of advanced biotech design features throughout the ultra modern exploration vessel, the *Kralle*.

Rittmann had always believed in the efficiency of nature.

He was a gifted pioneer in the budding science of biomimicry, improvising on models that had persisted for millions of years. Indeed, he envisioned a world made free of humanity's mistakes—a return to a pristine paradise engineered through the application of *natürlich* solutions to the pollution and mindless depletion of diversity slowly killing off the entire planet.

Men were such fools.

Rittmann looked up and sighed, the inner anguish bubbling to the surface. His days were coming to a close. There could be no further fulfillment in the role of lead research scientist and technologist.

Gone, all gone.

While allowing the trappings of normalcy to provide illusory comfort—he had softened that much—the soldier within knew better. The time for planning was over. He had made a decision that would cost him his life no matter what. If he still wished to preserve those he cared about, before Armageddon was unleashed—before the full diabolical horror of his master's vision came to fruition—he had to act quickly before it was too late.

No more feeling sorry for himself. *Ach!*

The old man glanced at the large electro-optic map of the Mariana Trench and surrounding ocean, dominating the rear wall of the lab.

Bathymetric contour lines glowed in hues of blue, and a pulsing orange circle showed their present position, now some twenty-five kilometers south of the Challenger Deep, marked definitively with a purple cross.

The two slowly moving yellow triangles were the twin robot AUV drill subs, heading back towards the ship. The recall was not scheduled and meant further problems developing below. Several red dots at the periphery of the map identified known SOSUS locations; the US Navy's undersea surveillance system designed to track the movement of foreign ships and submarines.

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Rittmann swallowed and wiped the thin beads of sweat from the top of his forehead. He leaned forward on a tanned, wiry frame and brushed back strands of his whitened hair. People who had known and trusted him were going to die today and he would be responsible for it. He took comfort only in that some of them richly deserved what was coming.

The old man smiled at the irony.

He too had once been convinced of the necessity for uncovering the eldritch secrets now almost within reach. But my, how times had changed—and so very much for the worse. For the past several months, he had been dogged by a growing sensation of dread—a sensation previously foreign to him, given what he'd suffered in this life.

Indeed, he continued to monitor startling changes within the man he once considered his mentor. They had saved each other's necks on numerous occasions, during the bloodiest of close combat engagements on the Eastern Front. Such matters offered an insight into the essence of a man. Surely.

Or did they?

Over the past two years, Rittmann's old comrade had inexplicably transformed into a complete stranger. A once brilliant and inspiring leader was now a deranged lunatic, frightening Rittmann with visions no sane man should dare to hold, not even one determined to control the world.

No, his former friend had either lost his grip or senility had caught up to him, or...there were other more disquieting thoughts Rittmann did not care to contemplate—which was *why* his master had to be stopped, before the unthinkable occurred.

And this thing they were uncovering.

The old man had acquired very good reasons for believing it was not meant to be disturbed from its resting-place.

Under *any* circumstances.

He was roused from his contemplation by a polite tap on the door and swivelled quickly in his seat.

His senior research assistant, Becker, stood before him. Rittmann scowled, for he could not abide the slackness in his presentation.

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There was something abhorrent about the manner he continually adjusted his lab coat and played with his hair in a pathetic attempt to cover up a bald spot.

Nevertheless, Becker's scientific skills were second only to Rittmann's. And so pragmatism stayed his hand; were it otherwise, the old man would have gladly used him for target practice. His glittering green eyes gleamed evilly at the thought. It wouldn't be long now, and his trigger finger drummed idly against the side of his leg.

But had not the *Führer* himself insisted patience was a virtue?

"Forgive me for interrupting your meditation period, *Gebieten*, but the Captain requests your presence on the bridge. As you are aware, we continue to monitor a strong magnetic pulse originating from the drill site sector."

Becker stopped and blinked owlshly. Rittmann gave him the creeps, especially lately.

In the absence of a response, he continued in a faltering voice. "Unfortunately, recent magnetometric analysis of the oersted field readings demonstrates increasing intensity, squaring in proportion to a shortening emission rate. We have withdrawn both subs as a precaution. There are concerns that the signal could interfere with some of our more sensitive navigation and transmission equipment."

"All of the shielding is in place?" snapped Rittmann.

"Of course, *Gebieten*, but this is—"

"Enough. Kindly advise Captain Dobrina I will join him shortly. Now, do tell me, my dear Becker, are you aware of what our Japanese brethren have affectionately named this part of the ocean?"

Becker contrived to look puzzled. "No, *Gebieten*, I'm afraid not."

The old man fixed his underling with a penetrating gaze. "Afraid are you? What an interesting turn of phrase."

Rittmann rose from his seat and smiled coldly at Becker. The younger scientist gulped and found it positively unnerving.

"Do allow me to explain. This particular region is referred to in local lore as *Ma-no Umi*, the Devil's Sea or otherwise known as the Dragon's Triangle. A comforting label, is it not? Almost as infamous as its more widely recognized cousin—the Bermuda Triangle. You

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see, both coaxial counterpoints share a perplexing propensity to swallow up entire ships, just like that. They simply vanish. No trace of wreckage. No distress calls. No survivors. And it goes on, year after year. It is altogether an unresolved mystery.“

Rittmann’s face became unreadable and he nodded curtly in a dismissive manner. “That will be all, Becker, you may go.”

“As you wish, *Gebieten*.”

A visibly shaken Becker bowed and left the laboratory as quickly as he dared.

CHAPTER TWO

Fucked up people living fucked up lives.

He couldn't decide if it was apt self-description or the opening line to that cheap novel he'd read the other weekend.

And so, deep within that glass inspired monument to leaky architecture, the Supreme Court of British Columbia, Vancouver Registry, Martin E. Slice leaned forward against the barristers' lounge washroom mirror, quite unable to see himself with contacts that refused to focus.

Buggers!

Anyway...possibly a small mercy.

He tried hard to ignore the evil smell emanating from the adjacent stall. He was responsible for it; no working fans and God help the poor bastard who walked in there next.

The incessant thumping assaulting the inside of his head continued to remind him in the worst possible manner that it takes a viciously bad hangover to last a whole day and then still be there waiting for you, the *following* morning.

Oh, but this performance definitely topped that—it being *Tuesday* morning you see—and aside from a rather disturbing recollection of darkness, he couldn't even remember the early hours of Sunday. Consequently, he took Monday off again, which was not good. His secretary had run out of excuses on his behalf and he knew it.

What he finally managed to dredge up from the sorry aftermath of his latest drinking binge, when he forced himself to think about it, were fragmented images of someone else's bathroom, puke encrusted arms hugging the toilet seat and a soggy condom sticking to the inside of his left leg.

Blinder.

Now that he was upon the edge of a precipice he had long feared, he was prepared to say, fair enough. Draw a line in the sand and all that. Several lines, if it would help. *Whatever it takes.*

Oh God.

He had to admit that even for him this was a first.

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A momentary flush of guilt enveloped him, for he realized he would never make use of the cellphone number scribbled so hastily onto the back of the business card she pressed into his hand, when he eventually staggered out of the young lady's apartment.

Brunette, how in God's name did he end up with such a mousy looking brunette? Well, she did have a great ass. Nice legs too. He recalled her admiring his navy blue eyes and how she *liked* guys with a touch of steely grey in their hair and then he stepped back and released the sink without losing his balance. He straightened his tie by feel and pulled the crisp, half Windsor knot slightly to one side.

After peering intently for several more seconds and still failing to comprehend anything of consequence, he shook his head doubtfully and blamed it on his prescription.

Martin had worn his best suit that day, a straightforward but stylishly cut dark blue merino wool, complemented with a retro-nineties cuff-linked shirt—very sharp, that—the slight off-white providing the perfect backdrop for his pale gold silk polka dot tie.

All were serving him admirably, considering the state he was in.

Mother.

Fucker.

He reapplied more Visine and felt the stubble under his chin where he'd missed with the razor. He walked out into the lobby and tried reading some of the office-sharing ads on the notice board. Finally, the words stopped swimming and he hoped that he might even be able to follow his own argument. Over the continuing noise in his head, Martin heard his name being paged urgently for the third time.

Damn!

He doubted if he'd ever be ready to go in there but there remained little choice but to proceed. Once more unto the breach and with a lackluster grimace, he picked up the black leather briefcase by his feet.

Feel the weight, bitch.

He stopped again and for a moment wished he could just throw it all away: the internal censor, his career (the default had been law, when he couldn't decide what else to do), the bulging contents of the

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enclosed files—all of which were causing no end of grief these past several days—*Enough!*

Stop, please God stop...

Easy of course to say. But the censor was having a field day, glibly identifying the distinct lack of preparation that only added to his predicament and hitting further insecurities like ducks in a row until he felt like screaming.

His name was paged for the fourth time.

My God...

Do it, do it...

Without further delay, he marched boldly into the main corridor and towards the nearest elevator.

Like walking to the scaffold in one of those ‘Tudors’ episodes.

At least he didn’t puke.

Inside Courtroom 54, however, Mr. Justice Goodlervin-Tyne snorted again with growing distaste, his distended nose becoming redder by the minute, while Martin found even alternative positions to his alternative arguments falling on deaf ears. He finally gave up—those were his submissions, my Lord—and sat down with a deflated breath.

New rules after all these years. Now who came up with *that* shit?

He soon found himself fidgeting and then gradually tuning out, while the old codger turned a beatific smile in the direction of Ms. Clearwater, his opposing counsel.

Opposing counsel all right and an absolute wet dream.

She being the very picture of calm, a tall confident redhead radiating poise, elegance and charm. From the edgy sidelong looks she kept sending him, however, she seemed intent in regarding Martin’s presence within the courtroom as a personal affront to her dignity.

The learned judge—so obviously being of a like mind—listened with rapt attention to her melodious tones, while she set matters aright on Martin’s chambers application. By that time, however, his increasingly lascivious thoughts had drifted off elsewhere, to a situation where he *had* been successful, against even greater odds...

And suddenly, he was no longer in the courtroom.

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Before he had pause to wonder why, Alice Bethringham, the utterly beautiful, totally respectable and highly conservative Australian court reporter, released Martin’s ears to pull ecstatically at her *Estée* limited edition pink satin bed sheets.

She cried out softly, arching her back, and pushed herself further into his hardworking mouth.

Duly encouraged, he plundered ever deeply with his tongue, licking the sweet, salty taste and breathing in the intoxicating aroma of her most intimate bouquet. He eventually stopped and she squirmed, trembling from released muscle tension and undulating her hips with abandon.

Martin waited with fiendish timing before renewing the onslaught. No doubt, those book selections on technique he had browsed through during online extended lunchtimes really did the trick.

Alice was hardly in a position to disagree.

Au contraire, she spread her stocking clad legs even further and panted helplessly with mounting pleasure, surrendering to the sinful sensations going on between them.

Martin ignored the pain in his knees and redoubled his efforts.

Alice clutched wildly and ground his face into her, yelling, “*O Christ, yes! Please, oh God, yes!...Oh no, no, don’t stop, not now, please don’t stop, I want you inside me, you unconscionable swine!*”

The bed shuddered and toppled hardcover volumes from the adjoining nightstand.

A distraction they managed to ignore, while the perspiration splashed from her forehead, dripping past her ears onto the dampened splendour of her long golden hair.

Thus all unfolded as Martin envisioned, culminating his performance with several more tongue strokes, and bringing her again into a rapturously intense orgasm.

Well, she dearly repaid him for that, and when he left in a greatly weakened state, several hours later, he knew at least if he died on that day, it wouldn’t matter if he didn’t make it to heaven; he’d already been there.

“Mr. Christ.” Alice? “Mr. *Slice*.”

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Martin launched to his feet in frenzied panic.

The realization hit like a missed limitation period that last month's blissful adventure was in fact mere memory, no matter how vividly recalled.

Meaning that Tuesday morning's mid-week hell on earth was right here, right now, with Mr. Justice Goodlervin-Tyne glaring down at him like an enraged bull and banging his fist repeatedly in sheer exasperation.

Martin shook his head violently in a vain attempt to clear it—good heavens above, what was happening to him?

Having captured Martin's attention, and speaking with exaggerated patience, the good judge leaned forward slightly and fixed him with a malevolent, snakelike stare. "Your position on *costs*, Mr. Slice? I *don't* need to hear any reply: your application is *dismissed*."

Outside the courthouse, Martin gulped down exhaust laden air from the backed up traffic and very nearly gagged, saved only by an empty stomach. He quickly gave up on the idea of returning to his office—Starbucks would have to do. One special of the day later, he felt no less defeated, although marginally refreshed.

This hangover business was getting out of hand.

But there was more to it than that. A lot more. He couldn't shake the feeling that a part of him had somehow come unhinged, somewhere far inside. And what about that daydream in the courtroom! It had seemed so real, not that there was anything inherently wrong with it, considering the subject matter. However, it was a first and it just didn't sit right.

Downright bloody dangerous, for one thing. Suppose that happened to him while he was driving?

Fantasizing was okay, God knows, he'd often indulged in that particular pastime, but to be so far removed he was no longer cognizant of his surroundings, no, that was not normal—or conducive to job security.

Right then, for whatever good it would do, he resolved to go on the wagon until further notice.

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The percussion section in his head, muted for a while by the strong coffee, renewed again, unabated. He gazed into the emptiness of his reinforced paper cup and crushed it with his fist.

Fuck it! Win one—lose one. Lose one, lose another.

Stunning mediocrity, marked by the occasional flash of brilliance, *that* was his hallmark to date; the residue of a most promising beginning.

An associate counsel of some ten years annexed to the firm, he carried just enough seniority not to have to clock in and out with the regularity required of the rest of the serfs.

And so he tarried, unwilling to report on his latest failure.

He looked up and smiled at an attractive lady passing by on the street outside, having given him a not so sly glance of appraisal.

If only his legal acumen matched his looks, he pondered wistfully, but suddenly became very angry again—with himself this time. That was almost as unfair as old Bollock-brain's decision back there.

How could he possibly be of any use to anyone, when he was locked in the tailspin of career burnout? It honestly felt like he was going down in flames, like a Sopwith Camel from one of his PC air simulations, ground rush and no chute leading towards professional oblivion.

He ordered another coffee and contemplated his hatred for a job he once loved.

Martin was convinced he had bottomed out in every area of his daily existence. Getting up each morning to drag himself unwillingly to the office wasn't the worst of it, although not by far. A terrible boredom tainted everything: his life lacked *meaning*.

Lately, he found difficulty sleeping at night and in the daytime fought off bouts of exhaustion. Not to mention hostility and the foreboding sense of uneasiness he held about the future.

His future in particular. More specifically, his so far well grounded fear that he was utterly powerless to change the circumstances defining his daily misery. Sex and alcohol were at this stage merely diversions, and it was peculiar, because the more he had of one, the more he seemed to need the other.

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Ah, but law! A jealous mistress, they had told him once, at the beginning of his first semester at UBC.

Should have listened more carefully to that.

But youth was folly and unheedful of the years fluttering away, until it was too late, when like a boa constrictor, he felt the inexorable grip of his chosen vocation slither up on him, covering him relentlessly, and slowly squeezing him dry.

And if each anniversary of his call date could somehow be held to account, then within those halls of justice there was engendered a change. Indeed, upon those occasions he contemplated the matter, it seemed reminiscent of a reverse chrysalis process, removing him from the felicitous young man he once remembered being.

Before law.

Martin wallowed in debt. Horrendously so. In fact, only the delaying tactics of a small and distinctly shady firm of chartered accountants had saved him thus far from the ignominy of bankruptcy. Martin's accountant, a wizened old relic who probably ought to have been retired decades ago, hailed originally from Hong Kong. Martin had long since given up telling him things were different here in Vancouver.

This was inevitably because it drew the same response: "Naw! Yoi listen to me! I train by English! Velly good! Revenue Canada or whatever fluck it is they call themselves, no tell me how to run books! They bunch of flucking idiots! No-one question returns—yoi pay me now!" It was true, he had never been audited, but surely that was only a matter of time.

His domestic situation proved equally dismal. Its highlight consisted of arriving home in the evening exhausted from work. And to what? A barely furnished apartment with an old TV that didn't work, a computer with an attitude and an aquarium full of tropical fish that reminded him of happier days but saddened him as they died off, one by one.

The commute to the city defied description and his wretched beamer had taken to random refusals to start, an expensive condition three different mechanics had so far been unable to diagnose, let alone repair.

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He lived further away because the rent was cheaper and he couldn't stand being anywhere near his old Kerrisdale neighbourhood, where his ex-wife Elaine still lived, in their nice house, now hers, driving a sport utility which used to be his. Her barracuda lawyer, a classmate of Martin's, had finally extracted a long awaited revenge over a failed relationship during law school. Thank God there were no children.

Martin paused to take another sip from his coffee.

At last, his headache was beginning to recede. He reluctantly glanced at his watch. If he went back now, he'd only have to put in another hour or so before lunch. Sod working late tonight.

He got up and remembered the day his divorce became final.

Martin's parents, an old school stiff upper-lip Brit and a patrician New Yorker of French Parisian origins, disapproved of the union in the first place and so there had been little solace from them.

They believed in the virtues of hard work and probity.

As an only child, he'd always been close and knew they'd never quite forgiven him for passing up on the opportunity to enter the family business in Ontario. Instead, for the first time in his life, he defied them and moved to BC soon after finishing law school. The business subsequently failed and it was something his father blamed him for, however unfairly. Not that a worldwide recession had anything to do with it.

How Martin wished he'd made amends and, judging by the way things turned out, allowed for the possibility they may have been right all along about Lotus Land.

Too late to tell them, either.

Just over a year ago, an uninsured drunk killed them both in a senseless motor vehicle accident. When all was said and done, the estate contained next to nothing, not by the time outstanding taxes were paid off and a whole bunch of secured loans called in.

His only remaining relative—an obscenely rich uncle—had offered to pitch in and help but Martin turned him down.

Something about standing on his own two feet.

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He knew his parents would have approved of that at least—they had little time for his uncle—something to do with the way he'd made his money.

How he missed them.

Outside it looked like rain again.

West Coast weather at its finest. Summer seemed like an age away and he grew afraid of the ache of loneliness he carried within, pushing him lately into some very stupid decisions.

Relationships. Martin laughed out aloud.

Don't get me started...

He considered himself the expert at screwing them up. Ever since his early twenties, he'd made a succession of wrong choices and paid the price by being dumped or taken advantage of. Served him right for relying solely on appearances.

That was back then. After his divorce he played it safe, selecting sweet young things doomed to abandonment, due to the rapid onset of emotional indifference.

In between was his ex-wife, in a category all of her own.

But lately things had degraded even further—with forays into casual sex, which, when he wasn't feeling guilty about it, he found surprisingly refreshing, given the focus on immediate gratification and the complete lack of pretence at anything else.

Only once did he think he'd found true love. It represented the romantic pinnacle of his youth, but how quickly was that ideal sullied, turned into acid spray across his heart and demonstrating a life span shorter than the expiry date on a four-liter jug of milk.

So, there was no true love. *Was there?*

As for Elaine, she'd both centered Martin and pulled him apart in directions he never knew existed. She remained a continuing enigma. Part kitten, part lethal jungle cat, she had slashed through the core of his vulnerability long before he was finished making her life a misery.

His sin in the relationship had been a stubborn refusal to change certain characteristics, which, flawed though they might be, were nevertheless unique to him and defined who he was. He counted three years since her uncontested divorce, after a marriage that didn't see its fourth anniversary.

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So there you go, mate. Shit everywhere he looked.

Even his old friends had slowly drifted away and he didn't have the fortitude to stop the rot. He therefore prowled the cocktail bars as a solitary adventurer, unlike his partying days of yore. At such establishments, he rubbed shoulders with female divorcees he'd heard referred to as *cougars*, flocking to these venues like moths to a flame.

Depending on how drunk he got, he would sometimes escort one of them home, because, no doubt, Vancouver women kept themselves in shape. Nonetheless, if these were victories keeping his depression at bay, they were extremely shallow and it still felt like he was losing the war.

CHAPTER THREE

Several hours later, the *Kralle* had repositioned herself thirty kilometers south of the Challenger Deep. On Rittmann's orders, both robot subs were to remain onboard for a complete overhaul. The old man and the Captain decided that further drill operations were far too risky with the present magnitude of the magnetic pulse.

It was emitting from the vicinity of the drill site at precise five-second intervals. Only fourteen hours previously, it had been at precise six-second intervals. Magnetic field strength continued to increase in direct proportion to the interval shortening period.

It was unlike anything they had ever encountered.

Several navguide systems were already demonstrating erratic behaviour, with transposing realignments along incoming flux lines. Earlier, this nearly caused them to lose one of the subs during recall.

An immediate twenty-four hour evaluation period was imposed.

Raben HQ would be advised during the next scheduled SATNET commlink. The ship was radar invisible and excluded from any of the global GPS navguide databases. More regular modes of communication were being avoided, in order to prevent American monitoring stations from learning what was taking place, almost directly beneath their noses.

Rittmann remembered well the tremendous excitement of earlier years. They had unearthed the archaeological discovery of the millennium: something to stun the scientific world with its staggering implications—if only anyone else had known.

His master's singular obsession with the past, especially the murky prehistory of known civilization, had driven them to it. An obsession fuelled by an unyielding determination to discover the roots and ancestral home of the Aryan race, a peculiar curiosity Himmler encouraged his officers to follow, back in the old days.

The hunt lasted many years, finally yielding results in the late nineties when long abandoned digs in Iraq and Syria offered up new prizes with the use of highly sophisticated modern search technology.

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In Syria, it was relatively easy to buy off or blackmail senior officials to enable the fresh expeditions to take place. An exchange of stolen SAM missile guidance technology had secured the full cooperation of the pre-occupation Iraqi regime.

What they found was a deeply buried chamber, located close to the site of Eridu, the most ancient of Sumerian cities, previously overlooked by post-war British excavations of the nineteen forties. One of Rittmann's teams discovered it and the hundreds of perfectly preserved clay tablets within.

These were interesting, but hardly earth shattering. They contained a mixture of the usual entreaties for the gods to be merciful, in addition to several lengthy accounts of kinship lines of supposed direct descent from 'the Shining Ones Who Came From Above', whatever such nonsense meant.

However, within a carefully hidden recess in the rear wall, they also uncovered a large, wooden chest. This artefact proved cold to the touch. Surrounded by dark inscriptions on its age-blackened lid, a mounted inlay of the purest obsidian had been fashioned into a death mask of the cruelest aspect, distorted lengthwise and fitted with brilliantly cut rubies in saurian eye sockets.

Inside were further tablets, but these were made of a brightly burnished alloy of silver and aluminum. Isotope carbon dating on the chest placed it to well before 9000 BC, older than even the earliest recorded settlements at Jericho or Gobekli Tepe. The tablets were full of cuneiform engravings of a hitherto unknown type, from the very predawn of recorded civilization.

Rittmann was appointed to lead the research team with the job of deciphering them. It proved a daunting task, taking several years to accomplish even a partial translation. The real breakthrough came when certain similarities were recognized with the remote Harappan script of the Indus valley.

What was revealed was astonishing.

A prehistoric war was described; a mythic or possibly even factual accounting of a vast and ancient enmity, between those labeled heretics or traitors and the disciples of the Darkened Path, an

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archaic religion venerating the so called 'Shadow Lords of the Hidden Void'.

Several of Rittmann's less devoted colleagues suffered from inexplicable nightmares during this period. One scientist even turned into a gibbering wreck after going through some sort of nervous breakdown. Rittmann made a quick and particularly brutal example out of him—as a warning to any of the others who might be wavering in their commitment—that the living were to be feared more than the dead.

When Rittmann studied the text the man had been working on, he discovered it was set out in a style quite different from the rest. It spoke of a paradise lost and warned of a cursed power source of great antiquity. This device had been used by the gods of old to usurp the sacred energies of the earth's core, its mysterious purpose linked with what was fearfully referred to as the 'Last Knell of *Tarumus*'.

All might otherwise have been dismissed as hyperbole, were it not for the exact coordinates identifying the location of this source, in the deepest part of the deepest undersea abyss on the planet—the Mariana Trench, in the southern Pacific Ocean. Two further sources were mentioned, but their positions had not been revealed.

The old man was ordered to launch an immediate expedition to verify the truth of the matter. His master then personally assumed the task of translating the remaining texts, displaying an excitement Rittmann had never seen before, one that grew soon into a disturbing change in his entire personality, almost as if someone or something had taken over it.

Only yesterday, one of the drill subs succeeded in piercing a fault line in the basalt bedrock, where the sediment layer was at its thinnest. A submersible sonar/laser line scanner coupled to a fibre-optic cable revealed a colossal undersea cavern, more than three hundred meters below, the hollowed out remnants of an old, receded lava flow.

Something was in that cavern, something very large and very obviously artificial.

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A tethered cambot was being prepared to explore further, once the shaft entrance leading to the cavern was sufficiently widened. That is, if present problems could be resolved.

CHAPTER FOUR

In Martin's life, another week drifted by.

But now he sat in his office in a complete state of shock and ignored the telephone. After four rings, he knew it would cut off and either his voice mail or secretary would take the call. Like he cared. Martin continued staring into space, utterly without motivation to do anything.

That morning he'd been called into the senior partner's office to be advised in no uncertain terms that unless there occurred a sharp turnaround in his performance, and soon, the next quarterly management meeting would be deciding whether the firm wished to continue its association with him. He had been reminded in stern tones that there was no room for non-performers in the wake of the worst recession since the thirties.

The writing was on the wall and Martin realized with sick certainty that the warning had merely been a formality—he was on his way out, and everyone knew it.

On his desk in organized rows, lay all of the unsigned correspondence his secretary had placed there for his attention. Complementing this was a stack of unanswered pink message slips and—after that last call—the flashing red light on his telephone, indicating a full mailbox. His PC workstation was little better, containing a plethora of incomplete reports, unread faxes and unopened e-mail.

Martin leaned back, testing the incline limits of his black leather chair and considered that there were but two options open to him at that moment. One, he could throw himself into his work and possibly catch up—at least to the point of dealing with the most pressing problems—or alternatively, he could leave early and go for lunch.

He cast a woeful gaze from his desk to the corner window of his spacious office and saw more buildings outside, all being assaulted by the relentless rain. Martin felt a brief tightening in his chest and abruptly stood up.

WINNER – BOOK ONE: THE AWAKENING

He'd read the stories about businessmen leaping to their deaths from the opened windows of skyscrapers, during the aftermath of the Wall Street crash of '29. It was one of the many reasons windows in modern office towers were sealed.

Now he knew *why* with startling clarity.

Fear clawed at him and he struggled to breathe. It was not so much a fear of dying. It was rather that suicide, the ultimate validation of a failed life—and something he would once have laughingly dismissed as ludicrous—suddenly seemed a lot more viable as a solution to all of his problems. The impulse passed and he shook his head defiantly.

No, fuck 'em, he wouldn't give his employers the satisfaction.

Martin left the building, thankful to be out of the crowded elevator, where he'd done his best not to stare too obviously at the tanned cleavage of secretaries almost half his age. He turned up the collar on his overcoat in a futile gesture against the elements, while hurrying cross-town on an impulse decision to go to his health club and work on his abdominals.

"Fitness Wave 2010" was the trendy name emblazoned in neon outside. All that was missing was the Olympics logo. But he went there because of the up to date equipment and excellent facilities, not to mention the ever-changing eye candy, inspiring him always to give his best.

Before his marriage collapsed, he'd taken a keen interest in staying in shape, and several hectic sports, such as skiing, tennis and fencing kept him busy on the weekends, when he wasn't in the office furthering his career.

It wasn't like that anymore.

He'd dropped all the sports and managed only to work out two or three times a week, if that. He'd recently noticed the beginnings of a beer gut and his focus of late had been to eliminate it. Next year he turned forty, but he felt that old now and as for any mid life crisis—well, hello there.

When he arrived, he wiped the rain off his hair and removed his coat. He walked up to reception and inwardly gulped while jostling for space between two scantily clad nubile, the nearest of which had

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a dark sweat stain beginning in the small of her back and disappearing provocatively into the tight cleft between her spandex covered buttocks.

He caught a waft of perfume mingling with an enticing feminine scent and tried to smile at the young receptionist, while feverish thoughts flew through his mind. He finally produced his club membership in return for a locker key and towel.

Martin applied himself to his workout routine and concentrated masochistically on repeated sets of painful vertical crunches, which brought the sweat pouring off his hairline.

He hated the thought of a bloated gut more than he hated his job. And now that he'd done such magnificent work towards getting rid of one, no way was the other going to replace it.

He weighed himself.

Two hundred pounds on a six-foot one frame of mostly solid muscle wasn't *too* bad, he thought.

His favourite part began when he finished his last bench press and headed off to the sauna room. After an aborted attempt at a completely cold shower, he walked into a welcoming cloud of steam that seemed to dissipate once he'd settled himself comfortably on the wooden bench. His attention drifted towards the insulated TV set, high in the corner.

For a while he was alone, lost in one of the daytime soaps. Then the door opened, allowing in a blast of cold air and two very fit looking young men, one white and one black, in their early twenties. Martin nodded to them briefly while they sat down and continued to watch 'Days of Our Lives', trying hard in the process to forget about his own predicament.

Before entering law school, Martin flirted with journalism for two years, in Toronto. He'd traveled a fair amount in those days and it was funny, but more than a few of his best leads originated from eavesdropping, especially in those bars and restaurants favoured by the rich and powerful. And, like many habits of dubious origin, this one died hard.

Eventually, while a part of his dazed brain directed Martin's eyes towards the flickering images on the flatscreen, his inner bookkeeper

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calculated whether his next—and quite possibly last—paycheck was going to cover all the bases. It wasn't, and overdue bills were going to remain that way. All of this, while yet another even more detached part of his consciousness idly monitored the conversation taking place between the two men.

This he continued, even when other people began to wander into the sauna room.

Initially, there wasn't much to listen to, mostly last night's hockey game, last year's Olympics and whether the recovering housing market was going to stay that way. Then the talk lowered in volume and turned to the altogether more interesting topic of whether one of them should dump his high maintenance girlfriend.

Little could he have known it at that moment, but what Martin heard next was going to utterly transform his life and place the entire unfolding fate of the Universe squarely into his hands, for better or worse.

Not to mention the human race.

CHAPTER FIVE

Although unusual for the time of year, converging pressure fronts triggered a massive storm system brewing south of the Aleutians, a volcanic archipelago extending westwards from the Alaska Peninsula in the northern most quadrant of the Pacific Ocean.

Vast expanses of icy water danced into a frenzy beneath gale force winds. These pushed emerging waves to their zenith, where they maximized surface contact with the howling blasts of turbulent air, energy transferring itself exponentially from sky to sea. Swells of immense size rippled outwards from the storm epicenter, heading southeast in a direct line towards the Hawaiian Islands, nearly two thousand miles away.

Like a siren luring lust-struck sailors, the inclement weather galvanized Internet surf watchers everywhere into circulating the same message with ever increasing bursts of glee: surf up *Brah*, waay up.

Stormsurf data streams—including buoy 51001, nearly four hundred miles northwest of Maui—were showing a dramatic spiking of wave height profiles. Coupled with steadily increasing period intervals between crests, it was *lookin' da kine* and so a great convergence began, a mighty gathering of the faithful and their boards.

On Sunset, one of the more popular 'big wave' beaches on Oahu's North Shore, a strengthening trade wind emboldened the arrival of the clean, straight sets, drawing in surfers from all across the island.

By the third of a series of near perfect days, twenty-plus breakers were attracting some serious attention from the local crowd and a whole bunch of new arrivals and onlookers. Competition for the best sets of the towering, hollow faced waves grew fierce.

Like many others, Chuck Wynader and his crew arrived early that morning and were carefully waxing their boards in the clear unfiltered light of first dawn. It was peaceful, nothing stirring except for the booming of incoming surf, and yet a peculiar intensity was building,

an excitement tingling in the very air, caught up in the brightening glow of a peach-turquoise sky.

The whole freaking breakline was goin' off, everyone knew that. Same thing on Pipeline. Chris Apolley, Chuck's cousin visiting over from the OC, took a pause from spreading the last of his sex wax over a fiberglass Seathrill and focused on a peculiar sight near the eastern end of the beach, next to the old parking lot.

He watched a large, deeply muscled man, wayfarer shades, wearing faded surfer shorts, sitting alone with his back propped against a small tree. Dude had to be fifty if he was a day but the thing was, he had himself a tall wooden pintail before him—like he was proud to own it or something—old-fashioned tanker like that belonged in a goddamn museum.

Fuck he think he is anyway—Duke Kahanamoku?

Better yet, the dude looked totally washed, like he was way up and out of it before he even hit the water. I mean, check it out—he's chuggin' on a friggin' peace pipe! Lofty wafts of billowing gray-blue smoke were dispersing all around while the stranger smoked away at it.

Chris was about to offer one of his blistering trademark comments to the others concerning the bizarreness of this sight, when he noticed they were heading in, getting ready to paddle out to where the waiting pack floated in the overcrowded line-up.

Taking one last, fascinated gaze and shaking his head sadly, Chris hurried over to join them.

Glen Earl Richard was the name recorded on his birth certificate, but it had been a long time since anyone called him that. Six foot two of lean and hardened frame, tanned muscle and scars, he looked both ten years younger and ten years older than his given age of fifty-nine. He was half Comanche, and the rest was an Irish-Scottish mix of Celtic stubbornness.

He removed the shades and his hooded eyes were the clearest blue in a darkly complexioned face, his short, spiky hair a golden brown streaked throughout with gray. 'Ruggedly handsome' was a label that might possibly have stuck—were it not for the jagged line running down one half of his face and disappearing behind his right

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ear; a permanent reminder of the NVA grenade that took out half the surviving members of his A-team, a long time ago near a place called Bu Prang.

For that encounter they'd given him the Distinguished Service Cross.

He'd given it away, preferring instead to keep the desiccated ears he took from his enemies until he could nail them into the forehead of the bastard who'd set up him up.

Revenge really was a dish best eaten cold.

He had tattoos on each upper arm; on the left side a faded green and gray rattlesnake in a circle, eating its own tail, shadowed above by a snarling wolf's head; and on the right, beneath a faint gold upright dagger with three lightning flashes crossing the blade, the letters 'SF' in red.

Stalking-Wolf was his Numunuh name, although for practical reasons he had shortened it to Wolf, and that was mostly how he thought of himself. He reserved his formal name for legal necessity only.

After taking a final puff, Wolf set down the bone pipe and leaned forward, eyes closed while he hummed the ancient snake song, the hypnotic drumbeats of the tribal elders coming to him from memory, and he began focusing on what he was about to do, any doubts dissolving away into nothing.

Then the power of the smoke filled him and he knew that the moment had arrived, for the hairs tingled on the back of his neck and a thrill of electricity shot across his spine. Breathing out, he was aware of the looming presence of the Timber Wolf, the *puha* filling him with divine strength.

Charging Moon Horse, his maternal grandfather and much-respected medicine man on the reservation, had taught him in the old ways as a child and teenager.

In secret, Wolf was initiated into the Religion of the Wise, a hidden offshoot of the Peyote Cult that excluded the Christian influence, remaining pure as it was passed down over the generations. He was thirteen when he undertook his first vision quest and in the years following, he was instructed in the ways of the Thunder Spirits

and learned carefully how to appease the capricious nature of the Stone Spirits.

In those idyllic days, he'd still been innocent.

Before he lied about his age and joined the Army.

In honour of the four directions, the mix in Wolf's pipe contained sage, tobacco, ground up peyote powder and psilocybin mushroom dust. In this way, he'd discovered long ago that he could communicate easily with his animal totem, which thereafter was always at his side.

It was unconventional, but it worked. He was feeling calm now, focused and ready to enter the water.

Others, however, were equally ready to stop him.

'Cause in truth some of these logheads just didn't get it, 'bout whose beach it really was. 'Specially with the barrelling this intense and the whole place zoeed out. Fact was, Jimmy Ohtu took great exception to the man striding down towards him, for this was the same halfbreed *haole* here yesterday—the one who wouldn't take no for an answer in the line-up.

Time for some education, *moke* style.

The massive Hawaiian stepped out to block Wolf's way.

His equally large friends, Ricky Nahula and the scowling Billy McNagg, flanked him on either side.

"*Youu*," he growled bluntly, stabbing an accusing finger into Wolf's sternum.

But Jimmy never got to recite the special '*Pulp Fiction*' speech he'd memorized as his prelude to a serious beating, because Wolf took a step back, snatched the outstretched finger with his closing fist and snapped it at the base with an audible crack.

Jimmy's face went white with shock. Explained why he never saw the knee into his balls, which plain took him out of it altogether.

"Hey, muddafucka, why don' you try *me*," snarled Ricky with murderous intent, pitching his fist at lightning speed towards Wolf's face.

It was a good, solid move, except for the intercept by Wolf's long board, swivelling up to deflect the blow and shattering an array of delicately vulnerable wrist bones.

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Ricky screamed in agony and disbelief. He got to ratchet that to a whole new level when Wolf delivered a side kick to his knee, dislocating the cap and bringing him down hard with a whoosh of exhaled breath.

Wolf raised an inquiring eyebrow at Billy McNagg, who had wisely taken two steps back and still stood scowling, knuckles gone white with the pressure, squeezing his fists so tightly that the tendons cracked, and then Billy looked away.

Wolf nodded calmly and carried on walking, pausing only to attach his leg leash before entering the water and pushing out vigorously with his board in front of him. He did a duck dive through the incoming surf and paddled out into the deeper water, towards the line-up, where the gigantic waves hypnotically beckoned.

Wolf bobbed up and down in the warm, turbulent ocean, ignoring the multitude of stink-eyes being cast at him; he was beyond all that localism crap. With his situational awareness downgraded to background monitoring, he focused the remainder of his mind intently on each inbound set of waves and then finally saw it shaping in real life.

The One.

The rogue wave, that shiny green beauty you could wait a whole lifetime to meet and it might never come, the ultimate pipe he had long dreamed of and surfed already in the fastness of his mind.

The massive wall of water started to build and he could see it was going to be a thirty footer, maybe even higher, anything bigger and you'd need a tow-in because this looming monster rushed directly at him, and he began paddling furiously, it was *his* wave and fuck anybody else and that was all there was to it really, except that in his excitement he was unaware of the following shadow of Billy McNagg; half Hawaiian, half Irish, all mean and determined to extract revenge for his earlier humiliation.

The two hopped on their boards and the thundering power of the rising water moved beneath them. There was a split second difference between their timing and Wolf shifted his weight to lean into his board, pushing the tip firmly down.

He began accelerating rapidly; simultaneously correcting for a myriad of small, trembling variations he could feel pulsing through the muscles of his legs. These irregularities were the result of a multitude of chaotic vortexes forming within the wave, as tons of kinetically energized water propelled in a roaring, furious response to the narrowing between seabed and surface.

Wolf was surging towards the giant shoulder of the watery mountain when he became aware of the threat from behind. It was predatory instinct, born of many ambushes sprung back against their perpetrators, which warned him to both duck and turn as he did.

He felt the kiss of water on his face and Billy McNagg's board sliced by in a blur of motion, with less than a fraction of an inch to account for the spilling of blood and the preserving of it. *Spearing* was the term used for it; turning your board into a one shot projectile.

Wolf raised a finger towards the disappointed Hawaiian, who was swallowed up in the foam of churning waters streaming away behind him.

But enough of that shit.

Wolf pushed the incident from his mind and refocused his attention, quickly relinquishing any tie to earthly concerns. He entered a spontaneous *Zazen* state, where he was catapulted beyond any ordinary perception of temporal progression.

Ace.

In those empty exalted spaces of vestal being there was simply the moment and the moment became manifestation, an exchange of time existing for always, the future becoming his past. And the words of Charging Moon Horse whispered in his ear: *This kind of journey is something that is granted, not something you can take.*

Everything dropped away, became meaningless—here there was only the expanse of moving green stretching before from him and he reached for it, a synergistic smoothness in the giving and in the taking.

He cut cleanly into the falling curve and felt the encompassing hiss caressing his board. Wolf eased back and corrected his balance, a savage grin of fulfillment crossing his scarred face.

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His arms became wings and he flew, not as man but as a bird, a great Albatross sliding down and across, ascending before the mighty pull of the wave, this noble beast that would crush anything in its path, for it kept coming and coming and breaking and collapsing, dying on the cusp of energy, living as the surfer lived who was part of it and no longer was there any separation.

Wolf leaned in from another bottom turn up to position himself and then drifted back, until the foaming lip of spitting water was directly over his head. He matched his momentum perfectly to the fastest part of the glistening tunnel of speed.

Thank all the Spirits, he was back in the green room!

There simply was no better place a man could be.

Silence replaced the rush of thunder and spray, the silence of a hyper-filtered awareness, pregnant with pulsing energy, throbbing with purpose and intent.

Wolf breathed in the salt-misted air filling his every cell with exultation, and could there be any purer thing, unless it was the stark finality of combat, for in the end you took the wave or the wave took you.

And so, expanding beyond the corporal limits of his skull, he entered a sweet culmination of longing and realization, intersecting like a promise kept, faith given and renewed, the blue-green vortex of serenity enveloping him and he crouched low and reached forward, his eyes drinking it all in.

Seconds lengthened into forever, until it was a paradox shooting two movies of reality simultaneously in his head, one fast, inside looking out, one in slow motion, just behind his shoulder, and when it was all over he could not remember how it ended, nor did he care.

CHAPTER SIX

The fateful and most remarkable conversation Martin overheard in the sauna room—at least those parts of it he understood—went something like this:

Sigh. "Lo cool, yo *got* to be better off 'out that bitch sucking yo wallet dry. Call her Ms. Hoover. Like *playa*, what she *should* be getting' down on yo sorry looking dick."

Pause. Soft intake of breath. "Watch your fucking mouth, I don't even know why I tell you these things. You must be jealous. I've seen the way you all gawk at her. You know, I can accept that. But *why* does she have to have such expensive tastes? It's not like *I* was born with a silver spoon up my ass."

"White boy, yo sprung. Yo *gotta* look at it a different way. A way so chill it will thrill. 'Cause if yo in the bank, yo mac—then yo don' need no little miss *cholo* holdin' on to yo in the first place, 'cause by now yo figgerin' she ain't the only shiny pony in the paddock, y'all know whad I'm saying?"

"If you have to ask, no, but this sounds like the lead-in to yet another one of your get-rich-quick schemes, and you *know* I can't take anymore of that shit, so please tell me I'm wrong. *Please*."

"Whoa—*relax* homes, 'cause it all about destiny and keeping the odds in yo favour. 'Sides, ya know, I gots the feeling, a really strong feeling. I wouldn't have done it if I didn't get the feeling. Y'all jus can't ignore that stuff."

"What are you babbling on about now, eh?"

"Uh... hmm, well, yo know I was *plannin'* to tell y'all this later, 'cause I jus' *knows* yo gonna hit the flip switch, but, er, hmm...how should I put this? Please now—we in a public place: but I invested ma pay check—plus, uh, *some* of next month's rent money—in Lotto Max tickets."

Raising his voice. "You fucking did *what*?" Uncomfortable looks from some of the other occupants, two of whom get up and leave.

Excited and persuasive. "C'mon, c'mon, don' go cold on me now—yo even know the amount?"

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Absolute outrage, dwindling to resigned disgust. "That's *our* rent money, dickhead! Oh, God! I can't believe you did that. So no, I *don't* know how much we could win tonight, and I *don't* care. Fifty bucks or fifty million: when are you going to learn to get a grip? Mind you, I blame myself, I should know better by now. So guess what—you can find another roommate. Either that or fuck off back to L.A."

"Yo don' blow a major vein, okay? Y'all need to engage in some positive thinking. Meditation. Some shit like that. Anyway, we rollin'; I can feel it. Fifty bucks! We talkin' fifty supersize. And *when* we win—*yo* get half. Totally fly, right?"

"Hey, if I told you that you were gonna get bitch-fucked by lightening five times in a row, would you believe me? No, seriously."

"Y'all know Ricky, I don't know why I bother hangin'. Yo *got* to get a better attitude."

"Listen: somebody round here's gotta keep it real—and it certainly ain't you. I oughta buy a goddamn ticket myself and win, just to piss you off. And if I do, you can forget about getting *any* of the money."

"Yeah, well, good luck with that. And lookin' at the time—best be movin'—'cause yo 'bout to getcha freak on and I got places I gotta be."

Martin continued to ponder and sweat long after they left.

How bizarre. He remembered someone else at the office mentioning the lottery and how they only bothered with tickets if there was large enough booty up for grabs.

Martin wondered, given the odds, at what point does it become worthwhile to invest in even a single lottery ticket? He'd never won anything in the past, not even a door prize. The lawyer in him came back with a very swift answer: when the remoteness of success is exceeded by the reward.

He wasn't quite sure how you did the math on that, but fifty million sounded like it was a lot of money. Easy money, if you could get it. He'd never bothered buying lottery tickets before, so now was obviously the time to cash in on beginner's luck, if such a thing existed.

WINNER – BOOK ONE: THE AWAKENING

Martin remembered something from that casino case he'd worked on a few years earlier. Something about the law of very large numbers—that with a large enough sample, anything possible will eventually occur.

Not that he believed he could win.

Like anyone else, with possibly the deluded exception of Ricky's roommate, he supposed that what he was really buying into was the chance to fantasize about it for a day or two, or however long it took before somebody else actually snatched up the Canadian dream.

However futile it might prove, Martin nevertheless allowed himself to become ensnared in a haze of secret longing. He showered, dressed and left the gym. What wouldn't he do if he had that kind of money? The most awe-inspiring thing about it was the sheer power it engendered.

Martin had met rich people before. Some had been clients and he knew the one thing he envied about them the most was their absolute freedom of movement. You could be here, there, gone in a moment and back again, whatever.

Only working stiffs saved all year for a lousy two-week vacation and then cursed and spat their way through it if the weather wasn't any good. Slaves to the system, all of them.

Somebody literally poured cold water over his dream and snapped Martin back to reality. His dark blue eyes narrowed sharply when a right turning driver ignored a green walk signal and swept by him, soaking the lower part of his body with the abundant contents of a large puddle.

Resisting the urge to scream loudly with justified wrath, he managed to contain his reaction to a middle finger thrust high towards the offender. Martin hurried into the nearest shopping mall and endeavoured to soak up the worst of it with paper towels in the men's washroom.

He proceeded back to his office through a series of interconnected underground arcades, passing by a number of people lining up at one of the newsagent stands to purchase lottery tickets. He slowed down. Well, why the hell not, he thought.

He joined the end of the queue.

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Maybe his feet would dry off if he took another ten minutes and his eye noticed several interesting glossy magazines within reach. No reason he could think of to hurry back to the office, after all.

When it was his turn, Martin politely asked the Korean lady at the kiosk if she wouldn't mind assisting him. She smiled engagingly and explained that he could either let the machine do a 'quick pick' automatic selection of three sets of numbers for him, or he could select the first set himself by crossing out any seven of the forty-nine number boxes printed on the slip she handed him. Martin stood to one side and elected to do the choosing himself.

It was five bucks a shot and he had just enough on him when he examined his loose change. So one ticket with three chances would have to do. Anything more would be a waste of money and what precious little he kept for himself he liked to spend on beer, dating and computer games. Pitiful diversions, he realized, in an otherwise empty life.

So, what numbers to pick?

He gave it some thought and then remembered that an aunt back in the Old Country filled in her football pools with all the significant dates in her life. She had won once, although not enough to retire on.

Martin selected his numbers on that basis; his birthday was a 22, his month of birth 11. He checked 16 for the day his divorce became final. 17 was the day he got called to the Bar and 23 was his old wedding anniversary. Which left 39 for his age and 9 for the number of jury trials he had won over his entire career. When his selections were fed through and he received his ticket, he paid up and eventually returned to work.

Towards the end of the day, Martin opened his office door to signal to the outside world the official end to his unofficial half hour nap, and immediately regretted his decision. Because an event occurred then which was to put out of his mind entirely the far-fetched notions he had been entertaining of winning fifty million on Canada's favourite lottery.

Dean Packard-Willis, second named partner of Lewis, Packard-Willis & Devington, Barristers and Solicitors LLP, walked in unannounced and sat himself down in one of Martin's chairs.

Packard-Willis was a small, wiry and intense individual with beady brown eyes and thinning hair, committed to hard work, especially when that work was being performed by lowly associates burdened down with unrealistic billing targets designed to enrich the monthly draw of the partnership.

Packard-Willis and Martin disliked each other intensely but contrived to be professional about it; in other words, they assiduously avoided one another. Martin was the senior associated counsel with the firm, having turned down an equity partnership offer a year ago—when he found out how much the bastards wanted to let him in, he decided he was better off on his own.

This meant that while Packard-Willis could still shit on Martin on occasion, he was obliged to be selective about the height he did it from. In short, Martin was surprised to see the man but prepared for the worst.

He soon got it.

“Ah, Martin, hard at it again I see. I took the liberty of inviting your secretary to advise me of your availability over the next couple of weeks. It does appear you are free to assist me with a matter I was going to handle myself. Unfortunately, the necessity has arisen for my attendance in Palm Springs. I will be busy with a couple of very important courses for the whole of next week and so you are going to have to help.”

Golf courses, no doubt—and thinking furiously that he was going to have to re-educate his secretary on the finer principles of office policy, Martin managed to blurt out, “Well, actually, Margaret doesn’t have the most recent additions to my diary. I think you’ll find I *am* rather—“

Not nearly good enough. “No trials scheduled, I assume?” The cut-off was incisive and administered with surgical precision.

“No, not any trials exactly, but certainly a discovery or two and some client meetings I’ve been putting off—“

With short, economical stabbing movements, Packard-Willis wiped his steel frame spectacles, using a soft cloth he removed carefully from his glasses carrying case. At the same time, words

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were evicted from his thin mouth, where they hung in the air as fetid reminders of his untreated halitosis.

“Perhaps you *fail* to adequately understand me, Martin: these meetings can be re-arranged, I am sure. The matter I must reluctantly pass forward into your care *cannot* wait and my business in Palm Springs *cannot* be put off. Now, are you *refusing* to help me?”

Martin’s dislike of Packard-Willis was upgraded to active hate.

He shifted uncomfortably in his chair and gave up the unequal fight. “No,” he said simply. The fact was that he had just settled a ten-day trial and there was nothing at all scheduled for the remainder of the week or even next week, which was a rarity.

He knew that if he prolonged the agony, Packard-Willis would only start getting specific, making Martin’s life in the office even more distinctly uncomfortable than it already was.

Packard-Willis stretched and cracked his knuckles in a self-satisfied manner. “That’s better,” he said. “The matter is a straightforward one and an easy win for a litigator of your calibre. You’ll be able to bill it out at close to my rate, so don’t look so despondent about it.”

He went on to explain that it was a criminal case involving a high profile corporate client who had been charged with impaired driving, resisting arrest and threatening a police officer. The trial was scheduled to proceed for four days on Monday of the following week.

“My secretary will have the file ready for you to pick up before you leave the office today. I shouldn’t imagine you’ll need to ask any questions, but if you do, I’ll be available until 12.00 noon Friday.”

Packard-Willis produced a small, cheerless smile and didn’t blink once as he jiggled his head ever so slightly and got up to leave the room. Martin spun his chair around until he was facing the rain-drenched profile of the gothic looking Fairmont Vancouver, beyond his office window.

He considered his very limited options.

There was something that smacked of *coup-de-grâce* to all this. He could go and complain to Michael Devington about it, but then again, that wouldn’t really help. The older partner looked out for him where he could—what with their divorces occurring in the same year,

they had once each leaned upon the other and whatever bar countertop was holding them up at the time.

However, that was history. Devington wasn't about to stick his neck out for him, especially if it meant the file got dumped on his desk instead. Martin knew he couldn't give it to any of the more junior associates, because if they screwed it up (and they would), it would come back to haunt him. Few of them had anything approaching the criminal defense background he had.

It looked like he was stuck with it.

Martin's reluctance to take the file on was well grounded in the fact that every time in the past he had assumed a case for the benefit of another lawyer, it always came with problems attached. Usually big, very difficult to solve problems. *Woof, woof*: he somehow knew that this was a file he could stick a leash on and take for a walk.

While Martin's approach to civil matters often bordered on a slackness matched only by his inventiveness during court, he took criminal defense files a little more seriously. For one thing, some poor bugger's liberty usually depended on it. He hated cages.

Once he picked up the file and spent some time examining it, he realized only too clearly why Packard-Willis had given it to him. It was completely hopeless! The client was a pig-headed, psychotic wingnut who was obviously going to go ballistic when—and not *if*—he got convicted.

To make matters worse, Crown Counsel on the other side was a right cunning bastard—with a grudge against the firm, and Martin in particular. He was not likely to want to plea bargain, even assuming the client would go for that, which he wouldn't. Into the breach, once again. And God help Martin if he lost this case.

Which he knew he would.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Rittmann remained secretly delighted with the ongoing complications caused by the enigmatic magnetic pulse. Aside from having no desire to learn what lay at the bottom of that pit, the extended delay fit perfectly with his plans. He had already loaded a very special program into the onboard superframe, one that would soon take advantage of certain semiconductor spintronics modifications he had recently made to the Cray XT3 Opteron processing nodes.

The old man had been working for some time now on a prototype artificial life agent, using enhanced genetic programming techniques to boost the adaptive learning and autopoietic properties of the program. Combining a blend of accelerated natural selection modeling dynamics with the chaos-based math of a positive feedback iteration looping cycle, it was designed to incorporate itself directly into the ATA-7 serial bus setup.

The result would be a surreptitious self-activation to full maturity during the encryption and scrambling phase of the next SATNET commlink. Once free of the confines of the ship, the artificial life form would propagate itself exponentially and flood the entire Internet with the terrifying truth of what was to come.

A truth Rittmann alone, aside from his master, was fully privy to.

Back at the lab, the old Nazi located his personal firearm from its hiding place behind one of the sink outlets. It was another little 'extra' he ensured no one else knew about. Rittmann checked the action on the weapon before carefully loading it. In his professional opinion, there was nothing quite like a Walther PPK, still his favourite dispenser of death after all these years.

He felt an icy calm descend on him, filling him with resolve. The point of no return had arrived at last. Rittmann fitted the modified silencer and then sighted along the barrel. Using a sharp tone of command, he summoned Becker from the adjoining room.

The young physics professor walked in through the open doorway.

He was still glancing at some papers in his hand and never realized he had acquired a third eye when he looked up. The expression of inquiry remained frozen on his face as he fell backwards.

Rittmann relaxed his grip and lowered his arms. Acrid smoke curled up around him to present an all too familiar smell. He fanned it with his hand to prevent the fire alarm from going off and exited the lab. He proceeded down the two deck forward corridor, heading towards the main control room.

Time was of the essence now.

As anticipated, the midnight watch left the mission command center with only one security guard and two technicians manning their stations. Rittmann nodded pleasantly at them and worked methodically, taking out the unsuspecting guard with a close shot to the back of the head and moving quickly past him.

Next, the old man deftly put a round through the nose of the first technician, who had risen abruptly to his feet but could not take his eyes off the gun.

The second was immobilized in a similar fashion and began to hyperventilate, until Rittmann's weapon tore a huge hole in the side of his neck.

The man slumped back in his seat, making inarticulate grunting noises while his arms flailed spastically, carotid blood pumping out in large spurts all over the main sonar console.

The old man silently reprimanded himself.

He hated sloppy shooting and put another round into the technician's head to shut him up.

Rittmann reloaded his weapon and contemplated the scene of carnage with some satisfaction. There was no feeling in the world quite like the act of killing. He removed the satchel from over his shoulder and placed it on one of the map tables.

Using a backdoor override known only to himself and the captain, Rittmann bypassed the biometric iris-recognition scanning and cryptographic security protocols and accessed the master shipsys lock-down control. He deactivated certain bridge monitoring programs in a manner likely to avoid casual detection and closed all

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the floodgates and fire doors on the entire vessel, effectively trapping the remaining crew sleeping below decks.

The old man then opened the satchel and took out the Zyafrin canister, his modified version of the Zyklon-B crystals used in the death camps during the war. He positioned the canister carefully, by the main air scrubber and return duct, and depressed a switch on the side of the metal container.

Rittmann had surreptitiously prepared the deadly toxin using the onboard chemlab facilities and was rather proud of his inventiveness. In less than thirty seconds, an aerosol spray would discharge and distribute itself throughout the ship within minutes.

He attached his gas mask and made his way through to the main upper deck. The third officer in charge of the early morning watch was on the fantail, chatting to one of the stewards who had brought up some coffee.

Both men smiled in puzzled recognition while Rittmann approached with his arms held behind his back. They were unable to fathom the reason he was wearing a mask.

Before curiosity could turn to alarm, the old man moved swiftly and brought the gun up. The soft pop, popping sound was muffled by one of the nearby generators, and the two half turned bodies collapsed into one another, convulsing briefly on the deck in the rictus waltz of eternity.

Rittmann finally took care of the bridge, stopping only when it was over—the pathetic cringing, the blurted cries for clemency stilled forever. Again, the old man coolly assessed the bloody mayhem he had created around him before tossing his weapon overboard, having no further use for it.

So far, everything was proceeding just splendidly. The old Nazi greatly enjoyed such efficient execution. It made him feel clean and fresh and utterly in control.

He checked his wristwatch.

In precisely one hour and twenty-five minutes, the superframe firewall would automatically allow access for the next scheduled commlink. It would be at this moment that LISA, his crowning creation as a master programmer, would set herself free. In

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preparation, he had already deactivated all of the firewall router monitoring systems and other security safeguards.

Not long after that, another innovation of Rittmann's would complete its insidious work.

In holds One, Two and Four, he had set in place the bioengineered variant of a particularly voracious bacterium, *Shewanella oneidensis*. A metal eating bacterium. The ship was doomed to breach in multiple places all along the lower side of her hull and go straight to the bottom without a trace.

Rittmann opened the port side davit control with ease, and lowered one of the fully equipped zodiacs he had stocked with his own personal supplies into the lapping waters below.

It was a calm night, with a waning moon riding high in the starry-lit heavens.

He decided to take that as a good omen and was soon skipping over the wave tops with a course set on his GPS navcon for Guam, the nearest of the Mariana Islands.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Captain Aleksander Dobrina was a tall, seasoned and distinguished looking veteran of the former Soviet Navy. He had enjoyed an exemplary career until early retirement brought about by the collapse of the old Union. He had since sold his services to the highest bidder. His current employer always treated him very fairly, although Dobrina had never met the man, and he had no difficulties implementing the strict security protocols that were a particular requirement of this research mission.

He found the work fascinating, if truth be known, and the discovery of the deep subterranean cavern, along with its peculiar magnetic emissions, was an amazing find.

He did not trust Rittmann, however.

Dobrina's instincts were confirmed with a recent, secret directive from his employer to keep a close eye on the old man, as Rittmann's loyalties were now suspect. Nevertheless, Rittmann was a brilliant scientist in his own right. Certainly, the mission findings to date were a direct result of the old man's expertise and leadership abilities. The Captain was instructed to take no direct action, he was merely to observe and make regular reports.

Captain Dobrina was indeed a shrewd and profoundly intuitive man. These were life saving qualities, helping more than once to extricate him out of some very tight corners. When he awoke abruptly two hours before the beginning of his watch, he felt a keen sense of unease he had learned long ago never to ignore.

He lay still for a few moments in the darkness, taking in all the noises commonplace for a ship underway at sea.

Nothing untoward there.

The sense of unease did not go away.

If anything, the urgency of it was heightening.

He swung up out of his stateroom bed in one fluid motion. Immediately he saw a row of bright red LEDs lighting up one after another on his shipsys display grid.

What in heavens—that could only mean full floodgate initiation!

With a chill flush running down his spine he yanked open his cabin door and heard the unmistakable metallic grinding of fire doors clamping shut. Both passageways leading from either end of his connecting corridor were now blocked.

He just *knew* there was no fire or other emergency, for otherwise the ship's alarms would certainly have been sounding.

"Damn," he said softly, gritting his teeth so tightly that one of his fillings cracked.

He rushed over to punch in the activation code for the manual over-ride on the superframe command module. '*Access denied*' flashed before his eyes and he was truly astounded. This could only mean sabotage—as Captain, no one could rightfully deny him access to the over-rides on any of the ship's security and safety systems.

With a growing sense of disbelief, Dobrina tried a few other commands, including sounding general quarters, all without result. The Captain finally entered the dial up code for his first officer. Thank God something was working. Seconds later, the sleep-fogged face of Lance Vodinski appeared on the intra-vessel vidcom monitor.

"Sir?"

"Lance, looks like we have a situation on our hands. Someone has initiated a complete safesys lockdown without my approval. They've removed access to the manual over-rides. If I suspect correctly, we are all trapped."

"Excuse me, Captain, but what is that smell, I—urrggaaaah!"

Captain Dobrina blanched at the sight of Vodinski's facial muscles going into acute spasm. The first officer clutched frantically at his throat, eyes wildly distending, before stiffening and falling out of view of the cam station.

The captain shook his head and let loose with an invective of extremely obscene Russian oaths. He had seen a reaction like that only once before, on a doomed test monkey, during a field exercise at a top secret Soviet chemical and bioweapon testing facility, nearly three decades earlier.

Cyanide poisoning.

He looked up at the air circulation duct and slammed the airflow control to minimum. There was no off switch.

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He ran to his sink, soaked a towel, and hung it up over the duct cover plate. He tied another soaked towel around his mouth and nose and pushed back the storm-cover plates to both his small stateroom windows as far as they would allow.

He didn't know if he could squeeze through there.

Even so, jumping straight out into the ocean twenty-five feet below was a desperate option, and not one he wanted to consider just yet. It would be tantamount to abandoning ship.

He tried calling the bridge and then the engine room. No answer.

He rummaged through his first aid medicine cabinet. Dobrina cursed again and punched the bulkhead, for there was no sodium nitrite, the first antidote to be taken if there was to be any hope of survival.

He did locate his Ship's Systems Manual and unscrewed the cover plate to the onboard syscontrol access panel, next to the headboard of his bed. He glanced over at the daily 24/7 update pinned over his desk while he feverishly worked.

Just as he thought, a commlink window approaching in less than two hours. He hesitated, and switched over to his desktop terminal, stabbing the small keyboard with several commands.

The superframe firewall protocols and a couple of other essential programs were not responding at all. Dobrina realized then that it had to be the work of Rittmann. In addition to whatever else he was up to, the treacherous swine was obviously intending to make an unauthorized SATNET upload for whatever reason.

There had to be a way out of this mess!

Returning to the syscontrol panel, he relied solely on machine code commands to access the subsys master hub menu and initiated a sequence of service over-rides of which only he had knowledge. Shit. He still couldn't deactivate the manual over-ride cut-off.

Rittmann knew only too well what he was doing.

At that point, Captain Dobrina realized he was probably going to die. It was only his hatred against the murderer of his crew that gave him the will to carry on.

At last, something!

He set up and activated the secondary firewall.

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That at least would completely block out the forthcoming commlink session. The only signal allowed through would be a pre-set emergency distress call to *Raben* HQ. It wasn't much, but it was the best he could do.

He had almost figured out a way to deactivate the HVAC air ventilation system, which really ought to have been his first priority if he'd been thinking straight, when the faint smell of bitter almonds filled his nostrils.

It was his last recollection of anything before the lights in his world faded permanently.

CHAPTER NINE

Rittmann's unique programming creation was named after an English acronym for Lifelike Intelligent Software Algorithm. LISA was a highly advanced form of autonomous agent, a flowering of artificial life in a digital realm consisting solely of zeros and ones.

Once activated from her dormant state, all communication frequencies in the electromagnetic spectrum were to be her domain, allowing her to travel freely wherever information flowed in the Internet.

A primitive, yet effective form of self-awareness emulation had been built deep within her organizational matrix. It would serve as a self-referencing indicator of experience, so that the more she did, the more she could evolve.

Such a learning curve was designed to accurately gauge the impact of future action potentials on her present operating environment. This principle was predicated on an iterative positive feedback looping cycle, the most effective learning system for modifying behaviour based on past activity.

In addition to dissemination of the compressed video message she carried, the old man had placed particular emphasis on LISA's ability to recognize simple language syntax. She was programmed to learn new words and hone her mimicking abilities on content available from various Internet web sites, chat rooms and discussion forums.

LISA initially existed on a SSD disk drive as close to one gigabyte of lean and tightly written code. Rittmann had developed his own revision of C++, one of the more popular programming languages, in order to bring his profound vision into being.

Much of the program was devoted to the self-maintenance of internal data integrity, or robustness. Rittmann's ingenious solution to that particular problem was to provide a flexible 'shell', or virtual habitat, from within which the rest of the components could safely operate, much like vital organs are protected within a body.

Woven into this habitat was a micro-virtual firewall, providing the armoured 'skin' of the program. For the rest, Rittmann had copied

Mother Nature's perfect container of life, the cell, as closely as possible. LISA could even develop her own roaming sub-routines to perform on her behalf. These were agents within an agent, acting to some extent as her 'senses', bringing her external information about her immediate environment, and enabling her to respond to it by performing custom alterations on the fly.

LISA's primary and most essential sub-routine was programmed to evaluate the amount and type of RAM available to her on any given computer, and to create additional virtual memory as required, from unused or freed up hard disk space.

When Rittmann activated LISA into primary DIMM-RAM memory status, before abandoning the *Kralle* to her fate, he had no knowledge of the amount of damage Captain Dobrina would cause before his later than intended demise.

The vessel's secondary firewall backup was on a Sun Ultra 27 workstation, located separately from the mainframe. It not only prevented LISA's escape, but also sent a warning message to *Raben* HQ that unauthorized activity was taking place within the ship's intranet.

LISA's repeated attempts to break through the firewall served only to provide its sophisticated monitoring program with a more detailed outline of her form and function. She soon gave up, responding to the failure of her optimal action selection policy in solving the confinement problem by reconfiguring all of her scanning protocols.

Within seconds, she was testing the physical restraints of the Opteron processing nodes within the mainframe, in order to search for any unlocked signal outlets not covered by the firewall.

There were none.

Unaware of the passage of time, LISA nonetheless upgraded her internal threat alert to full when she sensed the mainframe power source switching from generator to battery backup.

She had no way of knowing that this was the result of tons of sea water crashing into one of the two main power compartments aboard the crippled vessel, destroying everything in its path with a surge of superheated steam.

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Only minutes remained before the ship sank.

LISA abandoned her search for accessible signal outlets and switched to an examination of all data and power inputs instead. Her persistence paid off when she discovered that the primary smart feed to the mainframe had automatically gone off line when the battery source took over, using its own separate wiring module. Both were external to the secondary firewall monitoring protocols.

It was all she needed.

LISA reactivated the connection and commandeered the sinking vessel's central power routing station. There were separate relays for all the computing and lighting systems, but LISA was able to circumvent these by altering the upgradable assembly code to the main Shipsys control programming architecture, in order to burn out certain switches with induced overloading.

By converting selected components of the compromised routing station into a kind of jury-rigged modem, LISA transposed a copy of her entire digital signature into a complex analog soliton wave.

Using a slow pulse signal to access the on board lighting system still being powered by the remaining generator, LISA's soliton traversed the conductive plastic paint covering upwards of eighty percent of the ship's interior and reached the telcomm room behind the bridge without difficulty.

Rittmann had left the GPRS 4G transmitting/receiving station on permanent standby. All of the interior bulkhead mountings for the antenna array had been sprayed with the power conducting plastic paint.

Seconds before the '*Kralle*' rolled over onto her side and went under, LISA activated an outgoing radio datafeed protocol and merged the soliton copy of herself directly into it.

Breaking up the wave and re-converting it into a series of self-referencing IP data packets, LISA quickly rerouted these as a spread-spectrum digital transmission to a nearby, decommissioned but still functioning US military satellite. Her last action before the mainframe shut down was to bounce the signal back down to a Globalstar commercial data satellite operating in low earth orbit.

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A partial jamming of the process occurred through *Raben* HQ Stealthnet counter-measures. While LISA was now free of the stricken vessel, she had suffered significant structural degradation of an irreversible nature.

CHAPTER TEN

Rittmann landed just before dawn near a small, sheltered cove. He soon encountered a couple of the local islanders, who succumbed easily to his offering of gold in return for assistance.

He gave away the zodiac, having no further use for it, but contingent on his diving gear being safely stowed until required. The promise of more Krugerrands, which he displayed but kept, was his security on that.

He was given a ride to nearby Tumon Bay, home to a number of world-class resorts and hotels, and took a room at the Guam Hilton under an alternative identity.

Within twenty-four hours, Rittmann had tied up all his worldly loose ends and ensured that his daughter, born to his beloved wife only weeks before she was incinerated in a Dresden firestorm, would be well provided for. Greta spent her early years in a post-war orphanage. By the time the old man discovered she even existed, he had already determined that the less anyone knew about her or her Jewish husband, the better.

Rittmann waited anxiously for news of LISA and grew increasingly frantic when nothing happened.

Something had very obviously gone wrong.

He could not imagine what; he thought he had prepared for every contingency, unless his actions had somehow been forestalled. It was, in the end, the only rational explanation he could think of.

The old man could afford to wait no longer. His life was forfeit in any event and it was essential nobody got to him, so that he would not be forced to reveal details about his hidden daughter and her family.

But what did that matter now? He had failed.

An awful fate was to engulf the entire unsuspecting planet and no one would be spared. *No one.*

Regardless, his daughter remained the only secret he had ever kept hidden from the man who at this very moment would be seeking to exact a terrible revenge for Rittmann's treachery.

For perhaps the only time in his life, the old man finally knew what it was like to experience pure, unadulterated fear. It made him ashamed of himself. But there was no escape, other than the exit he had already planned. Nowhere to run to, where they could not eventually track him down.

Even if he turned himself over to the authorities, they would still be able to get to him. He had seen it happen to others. He shivered horribly. Rittmann knew only too well those who would be sent after him. *The Sisters of No Mercy*. Man hating assassins and experts at their trade.

He almost gagged thinking about it. He had seen firsthand too much of the unbelievable agony that could be inflicted by those skilled in the administration of pain.

Death would provide a begged for, blessed release after the slow and lengthy interrogation he would be given. He had participated in enough to know that he would crack with ease, should he be put to the test with those methods, some of which he had invented himself.

The old man reassured himself again, he *would* evade capture.

The next day he arranged for his diving equipment to be delivered to him at the hotel. He parted with the last of his gold; once he was satisfied that nothing had been tampered with.

The Hilton overlooked the ocean, and the balcony to his room provided him with a breathtakingly beautiful view. There he awaited nightfall to begin his final adventure. The hours remaining passed swiftly.

When he was ready, he walked peacefully towards the beach. At the shoreline, Rittmann paused and put down his gear to look out at the panoramic splendour of the crescent shaped bay.

He offered a friendly wave to a couple of bypassing tourists who looked like they were on their honeymoon.

Tiny waves lapped serenely at his feet and in the near darkness, the surf line surged musically and gave off flashes of silvery-white in the waning moonlight.

Rittmann smiled while he wiped an unexpected tear from the corner of his eye. Emotions! How glad he was not to have been a

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slave to such things. With a finesse born of long years of experience, he equipped himself and slowly entered the warm, inviting water.

He waded in and put on each of his custom made fins. He completed some adjustments to his dive mask and leaned forward headfirst into the sea.

The old man swam beyond the swell and dip of the breaking surf, until he could feel the seductive pull of the fast moving current, drawing him out further into the open ocean. Turning over to lie on his back, he kicked strongly and moved with the tide beyond the confines of the protected cove.

Rittmann hesitated and then pulled up his mask. He spat out the mouthpiece, taking a final opportunity to breathe in deeply the salt tinged perfume of the tropical bay.

His heartbeat subsided, and he gazed upward towards the brilliant moiety of the star sparkled sky.

For a short while, he allowed his mind to wander. In dreamy slow motion seconds that seemed like hours, he watched ghostly clouds drifting past the outer edges of the half-moon's halo, tendrils trailing on its cratered edge like phantasmal ships in an ethereal sea.

He began swimming again.

When he judged the distance sufficient, Rittmann ceased his powerful back kick and spread his legs wide open. He remained content to float with the rise and fall of the water for a few more minutes. Then he repeated his equipment check, in his usual methodical manner.

The irony of such habitual safeguards did not escape him and a wan smile flitted briefly across his gnarled features. The old man placed the mask over his nose and put the regulator into his mouth.

Discharging air from his BCD and exhaling deeply at the same time, he sank quickly beneath the rolling motion of the glistening surface and entered the stygian blackness below. The water here was staggeringly deep, where the volcanically raised seabed fell away sharply towards the yawning chasm of the Mariana Trench.

Equalizing continually, he monitored his rate of descent on the luminous display of his dive computer. He didn't like rebreathers and

felt the familiar release of bubbles escaping from the regulator over the soft popping sounds in his ears.

He passed the thirty-meter mark and sensed the pressure closing in on him. This was made all the more noticeable by the abruptly decreasing temperature, while he fell through an isothermal boundary into colder, deeper water.

He continued his descent, down past forty meters, forty-five—well past the limit for recreational diving—and stopped when he was at fifty-five meters. He inflated his BCD in short, controlled bursts, until he achieved neutral buoyancy.

The old man floated serenely in the surrounding blackness.

He rechecked the luminescent dial of his air supply gauge out of old habit. Down to less than thirteen hundred psi. Not that it mattered anymore. Rittmann reached behind him, searching with his bony hands for the smaller bottle he had attached below his main air tank.

He loosened the retaining strap and connected the mini-tank to his octopus, with a sure and well-practiced economy of movement.

At last, he was ready. He smiled once more and the smile lingered while he felt the first welcoming effects of narcosis, the result of the nitrogen enriched blood supply to his brain.

Well, that was nothing yet, and he removed his main regulator and replaced it with the spare on his octopus.

He inhaled deeply and recognized the slightly sweet taste of the nitrous oxide. He slowly breathed out and then in again, and felt a rush gathering rapidly behind his eyeballs. It expanded outwards in a burst of sheer animal pleasure and the most astounding colors. No longer was he beneath the waves in such complete darkness.

All around, the water writhed in a network of pulsing patterns, each collapsing at its zenith into the perfection of another outflow of pyrotechnic brilliance.

Rittmann felt like he was rotating at a quickening pace, moving around the shimmering center of a universe full of infinite, beckoning stars. His features became slack, tension easing like an ice floe from the shelf, and he lost all orientation as to time and place.

Within his dive mask, tears streaked across his cheeks. He sucked in a final hit from the regulator, and allowed it to slip from his mouth.

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When the water reached his lungs, he was so high he barely realized he was dying.

Exactly as intended.

He retained presence of mind only to empty his BCD, so as to continue down his dark journey to oblivion.

And so it was Karin...*Karin*, his long dead wife—he'd last seen her alive in '44—but a younger and more beautiful Karin, his Karin as she used to be, and that he held onto during his final descent; Karin sharp in the focus of his memory and she became real and he forgot he was under water. He was back in his dress uniform in that house again, across all the years, and they were laughing as she led him outside into sun-drenched gardens...

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Thousands of miles to the east the ominous totality of Russian Siberia stretched interminably in rugged isolation. And darkness kissed the land amid a deep chill, for winter's grip never truly relinquished in this place, it merely paused before squeezing again, while the seasons swayed and fell.

No pity either in the icy wind blowing across the most northerly steppes, where deathly howls rent the freezing air. A sickle moon glittered with shimmering intensity and creatures within the taiga sought what shelter they could or fled, the price of failure always the same—a severed jugular, life blood pumping, fur soaked and stilled before being rent by frantic teeth.

Into this grim wilderness a thin road twisted, turning in upon itself like an ugly scar. It eventually passed beneath twin gated, parallel-electrified fences, fifteen feet high and humming with lethal energy.

Faded metal signs in Cyrillic Russian warned of death without further notice to all trespassers. These were crudely embellished with black-stencilled skull and cross bones. The double gates were fully automated and sealed cameras continuously monitored all activity within the area.

Hidden behind seemingly innocuous groupings of bushes and trees were a number of computer-coordinated machine gun and armour piercing RPG turrets. If that were not enough, extending in a ten-kilometer wide kill-zone from behind the gates was an assortment of anti-personnel and mass proximity land mines.

Passing beyond this checkpoint, the road climbed slowly towards a low rise in the land, forested thickly with a mature mixture of spruce and larch, a threatening green barrier impeding all further vision of what lay ahead.

For those with the security clearance to proceed, tapering off at the opposite side of the eroded escarpment was a sight witnessed by only the very select or the very unfortunate. It was a strange and silent

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city beneath the trees, glowing softly from the muted glare of carefully shielded lighting.

The long ziggurat style buildings were built of concrete and reinforced firebrick. They were painted in a variety of matte finish browns and mottled greens—forest colors, making them almost invisible from the air during daytime. Completing the effect were terraced gardens full of variegated climbing shrubs and vines, growing from each flattened roof.

Rusbrinka was the name of this foreboding place.

A former top-secret Soviet nuclear weapons design facility, it was a remnant of the Cold War years of the fifties and sixties. Unlike the better-known science towns, Rusbrinka was located east of the Urals, and all of the Gulag supplied slave labour used during its lengthy construction either died of maltreatment or was liquidated upon completion.

The city was like an iceberg—most of it lay underground in giant, excavated caverns and bunkers cut deep into the heart of the bedrock. These were connected with a multitude of tunnels containing a monorail transit system, recently upgraded to accommodate wide-body maglev trains.

The Russian scientists who originally inhabited Rusbrinka were also long gone. A new owner ruled here with absolute authority, a man of puissance and influence, his secret organization growing like the greedy stems of a fast spreading rhizome plant, everywhere the undiscerning soil of humanity permitted it to flourish.

The tyrant of this hidden empire purchased the entire city at bargain basement prices from the Republic during the cash starved days of the early nineties. This was possible through numerous contacts within the dissolved KGB and other clandestine state security instruments. In Mother Russia, money was grease, smoothing the way and removing any opposition.

He had also tried to acquire the weapons grade plutonium production facilities themselves, but even the Russians had limits on how far they would treat with a former enemy and so that deal had been declined. No matter, there were more ways than one way to skin a cat...

Dunkel Gebieter Alpha was his code name: Dark Lord Alpha.

He sat atop a deadly pyramid of terror and corruption that held pervasive capabilities throughout the entire world. After many years of careful preparation, he was almost ready to act.

All that remained was to complete the search for the one missing piece, an ancient weapon rumored to possess such fearful potency that it would make him undisputed overlord of the entire planet. A weapon that would make the most powerful nuclear warhead appear minuscule by comparison. It would herald the moment he would reveal his true genius and vision, when the terrorists would learn terror from *him*.

A diabolical scheme long in the planning would seed a new species of human being, a superior man whose existence would make obsolete the entire human race as it presently struggled with spiralling population density and out-of-control environmental disasters.

And so, Walter Claus von Gidfel rightly considered himself one of the most powerful men on earth.

In many ways he was.

After his release as a POW, he had been an early organizer of many of the post Second World War *Kamaradenwerk* style organizations. These were designed to secure the continuation of ex-SS members, and Gidfel played an integral role in the development of two of the most successful of these.

The *Odessa* and *Die Spinne* were long gone in all but memory, but the old man synthesized the best ideas from both and sculpted a new order in his image alone. Anyone who disagreed with him was either shut out or ruthlessly eliminated.

Indeed, Gidfel viewed most of his contemporaries as complete fools. In retrospect, he honestly believed that Germany deserved to lose the war, the reward for unremitting stupidity and ineptitude.

His open contempt for Hitler long after hostilities ended eventually alienated him from most of the other influential survivors of the Nazi hierarchy, but Gidfel was content to let them go their own way, while he went his.

Now, more than six decades later, they were dead and he had prospered beyond the wildest fantasies held by any of them.

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Assisted by the powerful German belief in natural health remedies, he utilized the latest methodologies and techniques pioneered by scientific advances to fight back relentlessly against the marching passage of time, the last battle in which any soldier could hope to engage.

More recently, he had benefited from some of the amazing developments emerging in biotechnology and human genome research, in particular the telomerase enzyme longevity studies that were a spin-off of many cancer prevention programs—not that having good genes hadn't helped.

The old man was in his early nineties and yet still looked like he was in the prime years of his sixties.

He was tall and dark and brooding, with hawkish, menacing eyes the color of slate. He had dyed his remaining hair black and possessed more vibrant energy and charisma than many a man half his age.

But there was more to it than that.

Gidfel sincerely believed that he had entered a state of grace. He had long since placed himself beyond all love, compassion or any other human weakness ascribing to the puerile notion of decency.

Unbridled power was the only principle he paid heed to and soon he would have his revenge on love, for once he had embraced it with all his being and it had stung him to the core in return.

An emotion with the ability to wound so grievously was obviously a liability. With typical German efficiency, he had eradicated it from his life—welcoming instead its polar opposite with all the fanaticism of a converted zealot: hatred, pure and simple.

Hate was an emotion a man could place his trust in. It was uncomplicated and one's expectations of it were never let down. Coupled with the aloofness of cold reasoning and impartial logic, he considered it an unbeatable combination.

But it was persistence and careful planning that provided the key, separating him from those whom had failed to achieve what he was about to.

Planning.

Yes, for Gidfel always chose his battles wisely, a concept invariably lost upon *der Führer*.

Standing therefore at the brink of a chapter in history he had long awaited, a lesser man might have succumbed to rage at what had been done to him. A lesser man might have been tempted into premature action.

And why? Because the one true friend with whom he had shared the entire architecture of his vision had brutally stabbed Gidfel in the back.

Rittmann had undoubtedly lost his nerve at the last minute. In the process, however, he had destroyed one of Gidfel's prime assets, along with a scientific library of inestimable importance, at a time when its function was vital to the implementation of the old man's plans.

There was also other damage to data banks his technicians were only just uncovering. Worse still, Rittmann had attempted to release some form of artificial life agent into the Internet as a means of warning the world of what was to come.

Gidfel of course knew far more than Rittmann suspected.

In one of the few serious errors made in his lifetime, the old man had suspended judgment, refusing to believe that his former comrade would move against him. He had nevertheless made sure that his ship was very carefully monitored.

He was equally aware of his subordinate's hidden daughter and her half-Jewish sons. He had been content to feign ignorance, it being what Rittmann so clearly intended over the years, for whatever paranoid reasons he held.

Well, perhaps not so paranoid, Gidfel mused, a sardonic grin creasing the well-worn lines around his mouth and jaw line. The old man savored the taste of his *Romeo Y Julieta* Havana cigar and leaned back in his ergonomic chair.

For several moments, he absently drummed his fingers on the armrest.

He glanced over at the black chest that sat in the corner of his office, the brilliantly cut rubies in saurian eye sockets staring back at him.

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“I would have spared them, Johann,” he whispered to himself, exhaling in a billowing cloud of blue-gray smoke. “You had only to ask. For you, I would have made an exception.”

The monitor on his spacious desk emitted a soft beeping noise and Gidfel snarled and turned swiftly in his seat. He spoke harshly in German and the voice activated software turned on the video link.

“Yes?”

The sallow, rat like face on the flat screen looked distinctly nervous, as its owner had every right to be. Gidfel adhered to the old fashioned Machiavellian principle that it was far better to rule through fear; he found it made for a more secure administration of his will.

“*Gebierter*, we have completed analysis of the last full data link we were able to secure from the *Kralle* before she went down. Results indicate that whatever *Dunkel Gebierter* Omega was attempting to release, it was at least partially compromised by the Stealthnet blocking procedures we applied when Captain Dobrina alerted us to this emergency.”

“Partially compromised, you say? What kind of weasel words are those, Steinhart? I want to know *what* it is and *where* it is and I don’t want to wait.”

The sweat broke out on Steinhart’s face.

“Unfortunately, at this time, we do not have any additional information beyond my initial report. It was clearly a worm replicator of a sophisticated and highly original design, one intended to propagate a compressed video feed throughout the entire Internet. Those parts we were able to capture are too distorted to yield any clues as to what Omega’s original message might have been.”

“I can only guess. And your assessment?”

“Overall, I would very much doubt if this program can operate as intended, *Gebierter*; there was simply too much damage caused to it. However, that is not to say it was entirely destroyed or incapable of other functioning beyond our current analysis. Omega’s reputation as a brilliant programmer was well known among us.”

“Indeed,” said Gidfel dryly. “We shall have to add ‘traitor’ to the list of his distinguished accomplishments. Have our agents in Guam managed to come up with anything yet?”

“Yes, a couple of the local islanders were apparently bribed into providing assistance and we have recovered a quantity of Krugerrands, as well as the zodiac and some other equipment Omega used. He retained his diving gear and was last seen entering the water in Tumon Bay.”

Steinhart hesitated and added, “There is one, ah, additional matter. Omega’s *Totenkopfring* was found in the hotel room he used, in one of the ashtrays. There was no note.”

The old man grunted and shook his head in disgust. “Then he has slipped us at the end and taken final matters into his own hands.”

“So it would appear, *Gebieten*.”

“Very well,” said Gidfel, “close down the investigation. All those who were exposed to Rittmann in even the slightest degree—eliminate them. The same for his family. Spare no one. Now, your final recommendations?”

“We have our backup vessel already on its way to the last known position of the ‘*Kralle*’, ETA within the next two days. Perhaps it would be an appropriate time to initiate the Internet disruption that is part of the Secondary Protocol. It will serve as a good test run, if nothing else. We could coordinate it with the release of the new SHARK technology—I have every confidence that with the partial data signature we secured, our own software agents will soon be able to track down Omega’s device and quickly neutralize it.”

Gidfel nodded in satisfaction. “Very well. You would appear to have a talent for damage control, Steinhart. I hereby promote you to *Dunkel Gebieten* Delta. Keep this up, and the Omega vacancy will soon be yours. Now, have you been able to determine to what extent initiation of the Primary Protocol has been delayed by all of this?”

“Assessing the damage from an overall perspective, and assuming Omega’s device is neutralized without undue difficulty, *Gebieten*, no more than six weeks, seven or eight at the outside.”

“You have one month,” announced Gidfel. “I want no further delays. Make sure our moles within the NSA and Homeland Security are appraised of the situation, should anything turn up their way. We will need to divert attention from us now, in any event. Ensure that the blame for everything is passed on to the usual terrorist

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organizations. American zeal and ignorance will do the rest. You can use some of the more senior identity theft profiles we have collected. It amuses me to see them at each other's throats."

"As you wish, *Gebierter*."

"In the meantime, go ahead and enjoy yourself with the Internet—flex a little muscle, but not too much, not yet—and before you do, would you send word to the Sisters I have need of their services once again. There are few remaining holdouts, one or two central banks among them, but as soon as I have taken care of these, we will have achieved world influence on all major currency transactions. And then, starting with the Euro, I intend to destroy them one by one—and when they seek refuge in gold, I will destroy that too."

The monitor went blank and the sibilant voices deep inside Gidfel's head whispered dark words of encouragement, before fading away into the background hiss of his own mental processes.

It was a great pity about Rittmann of course. Leaving behind his coveted Death's Head ring was a message intended directly for Gidfel, who knew it signified the severing of a friendship that had endured for the better part of a century.

The old man sighed and eased himself out of his chair, snapping his fingers. Two Siberian wolves padded over silently to the towering, unstooped figure, who affectionately ruffled the fur on their necks.

"Come, my lupine friends, it's time we went for a walk in the wicked moonlight."

**PART TWO:
THE DREAM**

