

# THE ALCHEMIST CONSPIRACY

**Jay Lumbert**



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This is a work of fiction. All names, characters and events are a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, businesses, events or places is purely coincidental.

For Deb.

Still more than what I ever dared to pray that I would find.

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“Alchemy may be compared to the man who told his sons he had left the gold buried somewhere in his vineyard; where they by digging found no gold, but by turning up the mould, about the roots of their vines, procured a plentiful vintage. So the search and endeavors to make gold have brought many useful inventions and instructive experiments to light.”

"It is true, that a little philosophy inclineth man's mind to atheism, but depth in philosophy bringeth men's minds about to religion; for while the mind of man looketh upon second causes scattered, it may sometimes rest in them, and go no further; but when it beholdeth the chain of them confederate, and linked together, it must needs fly to Providence and Deity."

Sir Francis Bacon

“You are an alchemist; make gold of that.”

William Shakespeare

“Amid the vastness of the things among which we live, the existence of nothingness holds the first place; its function extends over all things that have no existence, and its essence, as regards time, lies precisely between the past and the future, and has nothing in the present. This nothingness has the part equal to the whole, and the whole to the part, the divisible to the indivisible; and the product of the sum is the same whether we divide or multiply, and in addition as in subtraction; as is proved by arithmeticians by their tenth figure which represents zero; and its power has not extension among the things of Nature.”

Leonardo da Vinci

# PROLOGUE



**December, 1924**

The train chugged eastward, rocking gently as it carved its way through endless rows of snow-capped mountain peaks. A thick plume of smoke snaked from its engines and clung to the valley floor like heavy fog. The first of a hundred railcars sliced through the smoke, all of them laden with chemicals, coal, oil, iron, and finished steel.

At the rear of the train rolled two private railcars. Inside the first, twenty men sat playing cards and smoking cigars. They wore identical uniforms of navy blue, each trimmed with delicate layers of spun gold thread. Their boots were black and expensive, all polished to a gleaming spit shine. A leather holster rested on each man's hip, its flap held shut by a golden eagle snap. Rifles hung along the walls in racks, forty of them, loaded and ready to fire.

The train's last car, coupled in the final moments before departure, was a custom Pullman. Like those used by Vanderbilt and Morgan, it was elegant beyond all reason and function. Inside the car, a man lay sprawled across a blue velour couch, snoring loudly as he slept for the first time in days. His belly full, his body warm, he was content.

The rails squealed as the train approached the outskirts of Salzburg, Austria. The car shuddered and the man awoke. He opened his eyes and blinked, until he remembered where he was and how he'd gotten there. His eyes narrowed and he shivered, as he remembered his years in prison, the empty echo of his stomach, the hollow meaning of the words he'd written in those tortured days. Now this.

The man stood and poked his nose through the red velour curtains that covered the broad side window. His eyes were stung by bright sunlight, and he pulled away. He walked across the cabin and stood before a metal-framed mirror. He ran his fingers across the smooth edges, then leaned forward and bit into the frame. The metal yielded to his teeth and he smiled. Gold. He tried to lift the mirror from its perch upon the wall, and found it too heavy to move.

He took three steps backward and tried to gauge the weight of the frame, but found himself looking at his image in the glass instead.

The man was short and sickly thin. His face looked like a rotting pear, abandoned in the hot summer sun, its juice sucked away to leave skin as patchy and frail as old parchment. Hollow gray circles surrounded his eyes, which sparkled out like shiny black marbles. His eyes were embedded underneath a pair of bushy, overgrown brows. Below, his mustache was thick and trimmed tightly at the sides. Long black hair hung unevenly along his forehead. It was flattened and matted across the right side from sleep, and he scratched at it to bring it back to life. The man frowned, as he felt the dirty oil in his scalp. Once again, he vowed to escape his poverty.

The man adjusted his baggy, threadbare pants, and pulled down the sleeves of his faded shirt. He took another step, lifting his head high as he looked into the mirror.

“Someday they’ll pay,” he said defiantly in German. “Men will quake at the mere mention of my name.”

The train jerked to a halt. Within moments, the private car was slowly moving again. Only this time, it traveled in the opposite direction, as it was removed from the train. The car finally stopped and the door swung open.

Outside, a tall man loomed on the platform. He wore a long crimson robe with a wide fur collar. His face was weathered, with a charcoal beard that reached down to the middle of his chest. In his hand he held a smooth black cane, with a thick gold knob nestled in thin, bony fingers.

“Hello, Adolph,” he said quietly.

“Who are you?” said the man.

“I have been following you.”

“Who are you?”

“I have read your writing.”

“Who are you?”

“You are a man with great vision.”

“Who are you?”

“I will publish your work.”

Adolph looked upon this new, unexpected mentor with curiosity and innate hatred. “Who are you?” he said once more.

“I am known as von Hoffenburg. I am answering your prayers. I will make you great and you will call me father. Together, we shall rule the world.”

## Sunday, December 17, 1940

General Thaddeus Swanson stared grimly at the thick, well-worn manila folders that sat on his desk. He glanced at the charts and the figures circled in red grease stick pencil. He shook his head, gave a long sigh and said, “Major Miller, this may be the biggest load of cow pie I have ever seen.”

“I’m sorry, sir. I know that you have important—”

“You bet your butt I’ve got important things to do. Hitler is blitzing his way across Europe and I’m sitting here getting hemorrhoids working on ways to get us into the war before the Limey’s hand him London with morning tea. ‘Good morning, Herr Chancellor...how do you like your new city? Isn’t London beautiful this time of year?’ I can hear the goddamn Limeys now.” He drew a heavy breath and shook his head. “Gutless politicians—”

“If these reports are true, it could very well mean the difference between winning and losing the war.”

“Major Miller, doesn’t the British SIS have anything better to do than concoct stories about some German Prince—”

“Austrian Baron, sir,” interrupted Miller. Swanson gave him a sharp look.

“Penwell *is* head of the British secret service, sir.”

“But this project is not sanctioned by his government?”

“Correct.”

“Let me get this straight. We are supposed to stop what we are doing, switch our focus, marshal our resources and risk our men for something the British government refuses to do?”

“Yes, sir.”

Miller tapped his fingers on the general’s desk in contemplation of his next words. After several moments he said, “Whether he has his government’s support or not, what he says makes sense.”

“That there is some Austrian Prince holed up in a castle sending gold to Hitler from his dungeons? C’mon, Major, give us a break here.”

Thaddeus “Bulldog” Swanson, the Army Chief of Staff shoved a wide cigar into his mouth and jutted his chin toward the man he called Creampuff. Miller was one of FDR’s Ivy League bureaucrats, chosen for his brain, not his brawn, the kind of man that made the general imagine himself a surgeon, doing facial reconstruction with his bare knuckles.

Michael Miller was tall and thin, and he wore a delicate pair of rounded tortoise shell glasses. He spoke with a clipped Boston accent and reeked of



education, money and breeding—the very type of man the general despised. It was men like Miller that were born with names like Thaddeus, not Bulldog Swanson.

“Baron...Austrian Baron, sir.” Miller sighed. Why did he have to deal with such Neanderthals? He would much rather be sailing or playing squash. He continued. “I have given the matter a great deal of consideration, General. Whatever you may feel, the British secret service is actually quite competent. They are not a group to raise whimsical notions without a well-researched premise supported by documented facts. I have taken the liberty of speaking with the other members of *The Room*, as well as a number of my contacts in the banks and on Wall Street. Although I, too, consider Penwell’s theory to be no more than a jumble of unsubstantiated myth, folklore, and innuendo, there is little doubt that Hitler is being financed from Austria.”

Miller paused to make sure that Swanson had heard him. He watched as the general shuffled through the folders in an exasperated manner. He waited until Swanson finally looked him in the eye. “The British and French did a marvelous job at ensuring German economic impotence at Versailles—sentencing them to an enduring financial purgatory, if you will. But in less than twenty years they rebuilt their army and their economy to the extent that they can now lay waste to the entire continent.” He paused to make his point. “I expect they intend to do so, now. Who among us could have conceived that this was physically and financially possible? No one, General. I submit that the Germans could not have done it alone. It is my opinion, that when we finally do engage in war with the Germans, we will be fighting only half the enemy. If we don’t address their financing soon, it could be the end of us all. Now, I have been conducting an in-depth study—”

“You are a pain in the butt. You know that, Miller?” Swanson spit a small piece of tobacco onto the floor.

“Yes, thank you, General. Now, may I continue?”

Swanson shrugged. “Suit yourself. You’ve got two more minutes before I throw you out on your tail.”

The general looked at him vaguely, doing his best to feign interest. He watched as Miller reached into his attaché case and withdrew another sheath of papers.

“As I was saying, General...With a little help from my friends I have been able to trace the movement of money through Austria and Germany for the past several years.”

Miller took several wide sheets of paper and placed them before Swanson. “Before determining the actual war reparations that Germany was to pay to the Allies, we made a detailed study of their economy. We made careful projections

as to their industrial capacity and their ability to repay the debts of the nations that fought against them. This page shows you the estimated, and documented, output levels of various industries in Germany. Coal...steel...lumber...manufacturing...You can see here what the estimated production was to be, and the surplus that would remain to repay the Allies. The Allies wanted it all, as you can see.”

Miller waited until Swanson nodded his head. “This page shows what the actual figures have been. Far different, wouldn’t you say? Notice how the funds correspond to Hitler’s rise to power? I have other documentation that shows how much of these funds have been funneled directly through Hitler’s organization. This kind of money could buy a lot of guns and planes to use against you, couldn’t it, General?”

Swanson sat forward. “Where the hell did all of that goddamn money come from, Major? And what’s your source for this information?” The general’s eyes were now alert. His breathing began to quicken. Instinctively, the general was preparing for battle.

“My sources are private, General. But I assure you that they are reliable.”

Swanson glanced at Miller, and his eyes narrowed into malicious slits. *You pompous little shit*, he thought. But he shrugged his shoulders, deciding Miller had reason to protect his sources.

Miller removed another set of papers from his case and laid them before the general. Swanson’s cheeks reddened and his eyes were suddenly clear. *He looks almost intelligent*, thought Miller, ruefully. *We should only be so lucky.*

“These are the estimated production figures for the entire nation of Austria...the Gross National Product...financial reserves. Bear in mind that until only recently the Austrians have ruled much of the world. They have had little need to develop basic industries, as their vassal states were providing much of what they needed—”

“I am well aware of the territories that the Austrians have controlled over the centuries. I am a soldier, Major, unlike you. Soldiers deal in power and control. The Habsburg’s...Austria, once had extraordinary power and control. Nearly ruled the world...” The general pressed his thick, pudgy hands together and brought them against his lips. His mind wandered as Miller droned on, his eyes searching some deep corner of his memories.

“Ah...yes...General...now compare these figures to the amount of money that we think has been leaving the country.”

Miller removed two documents and set them in front of Swanson. He had taken great care to present them in a way the general’s mind could understand. *Even this financial baboon will be able to see that more money has been leaving the country each year than is conceivably possible*, he thought to himself.

“Very interesting, Miller.” Bulldog ran his right hand over his balding head as he scowled at the papers.

*He can't follow it*, thought Miller. “I’ll make it simple, General. Each year, more money has been leaving Austria, all of it bound for Germany, than the entire nation could have earned. Of course, these figures have been extrapolated from many pieces of data and are subject to error. But there is one painful fact, and it is quite clear.”

“The Fifth Column?”

Miller gave a thin smile. “Someone or something in Austria is financing Hitler.”

Realization seemed to sweep through the general. What began as an instinctual reaction made its way into his conscious thoughts. Miller saw the mounting intensity in the general’s stare, and the unconscious movement of his ears. He understood now. He believed now. Soon he would begin to sweat.

Swanson began to slowly nod his head. “And do you also believe the British theory that this Ger...ah...Austrian Prince...er...Baron...has been trying to control the world for the past thousand years? What kind of bull hockey do you expect me to believe?”

“I believe that I can go so far as to state, categorically, that without this money, Hitler would not be where he is today. In fact, I don’t think that we would even know his name. I’m not sure, yet, of the exact source of the money, or in what manner it has been made. I know nothing about this von Hoffenburg. But I do know one thing, General. If we don’t get to the bottom of this, it may very well cost us the war, and our way of life.”

*Perhaps this guy isn't such a shit after all*, thought the general. *This is crazy, but...* “Send in Penwell.”

The president’s man nodded and moved slowly toward the door. “Wise choice, sir.” He pulled open the door.

“Wise choice,” mimicked Swanson with a scowl.

Miller reentered the room two minutes later. A willowy man followed closely behind him. The man had a long, sloping forehead and a receding hairline, with silver hair combed straight back over his head. In his right hand he held a walking cane topped by a golden eagle holding the world in its talons. As he reached Swanson, he stooped to greet him. He reached out his left hand, palm down, as if waiting for Swanson to kiss his ring.

“General.”

Bulldog Swanson felt an immediate hatred for this man. “Penwell.”

“Thank you for seeing me.”

“Get to the point.”

Penwell tapped his left palm with the end of his cane. He pursed his lips, as

if wondering just how to begin. “Are you are aware of the myths surrounding the study of Alchemy?”

“Turning lead into gold?”

“Ah...something like that. Men have been writing about the subject for thousands of years. Carl Jung, the famous psychologist, has spent years giving it study. Isaac Newton, Roger Bacon, Leonardo DaVinci. Hundreds have claimed that they perfected the process, writing their formulas in code so that no one could decipher their secrets. The Bible talks about men living hundreds of years in the days before Christ. Perhaps this, too, is a reference to Alchemy?

“The key in Alchemy is to isolate the *Philosophers Stone*, the *Elixir of Life*, which, theoretically, exists in nature as the purest of things. The Elixir is said to cure any disease, and if taken internally, it can bring about virtual immortality...”

The general began to pace the room. He walked with his right hand against his head, absentmindedly massaging his shiny scalp, his head slung forward, a *Thinker* in motion.

“The Fountain of Youth, General...Shangri-la in modern times,” continued Penwell.

“You must have bad water over there, Penwell. You’ve got shit for brains.”

“Has anyone ever told you that your language is rather vulgar?”

“Sit on it, Penwell.”

“Right, sir.” Penwell took a deep breath and continued. “As crazy as it seems, we think that someone may actually have perfected the alchemical process.”

Swanson frowned.

“Turning base metals into gold,” continued Penwell. “Is it that far fetched? I mean, it involves only a basic transformation of matter...we do it every day...synthetic diamonds...rubber...steel. There are many theories on how it can be done, theories proposed by learned men, General.”

Swanson closed his eyes. He didn’t need this.

Penwell continued. “Legend says that this happened more than a thousand years ago, somewhere near Salzburg. The story has been floating around for centuries...”

“Legend or rumor?” interrupted the general.

“Both, sir. Legend holds that sometime before the year 1000 an Austrian nobleman, perhaps even an early Habsburg, employed his own court alchemist, a Merlin, if you will, who perfected the alchemical process. He turned lead into gold, sir. Infinite wealth.”

Penwell grew animated. “The alchemist kept the discovery from his lord, but was betrayed by his own daughter, who was being held as a concubine by the nobleman. Greed swept the lord. It is said that he forced the alchemist to

translate his formula, tested it, and then brutally strangled the alchemist with his own bare hands.

“With the alchemist dead, the lord controlled the formula and was free to make gold at will. It has been with gold that he has been seeking to rule the world ever since. Given virtual eternal life by the Elixir, it was he that was behind the Habsburg dynasty from beginning to end...Maximillian I, the Holy Roman Emperor...He financed Genghis Khan and Napoleon. He even married Napoleon off to a Habsburg...And now he is behind Hitler.”

“Right,” said Swanson. *Something is really unbalanced about this man.*

Miller, standing slightly behind Penwell, began to shake his head.

“Legend says that the alchemist’s daughter escaped with her own supply of Elixir, and that she has been waiting for the day when she can take her revenge.”

Miller walked to a delicate table against the wall and poured a glass of water from a squat, crystal pitcher. He took a sip, and then rested the glass on the corner of Swanson’s desk.

Penwell continued, “I received the same response from my superiors in England, General. That’s why I came to you.”

“You expect me to believe what you say?”

“No, sir.”

“Then what do you want?”

“I know that you and your kind are itching to get into this war.” He paused. “This would give you a way to begin fighting.”

Bulldog Swanson sat back in his chair and began to rock back and forth. With a blank, inner-directed stare he placed the worn manila folders into a haphazard stack. “The whole damn thing is nuts...all this Elixir crap, eternal life. But this other stuff...” Swanson tapped his finger on top of the pile of folders. “...all the money passing from Austria to Germany... No doubt in your mind?”

“No, sir.”

“Balls! We are in deep shit.” He exhaled forcefully. “It is bad enough that I have to deal with that waffler, Roosevelt. Now this.” He looked at Penwell.

“What the hell do you suggest?”

“I need you to infiltrate the Baron’s castle.”

“You want me to attack an Austrian baron on foreign soil?”

Penwell shook his head. “What we need is the book.”

“What book?”

“The Baron keeps a notebook on him at all times. It’s written in code.”

“I’ll need to run this by the president—”

Penwell shook his head. “No go, General. I already tried this one on that fool, and he won’t touch it. Not a very popular political maneuver. You know how

he is. Don't even think about it. There is no changing his mind. More influential men than you have tried."

"Roosevelt spends too much time pussyfooting with the isolationists. He knows what's right, but he wants to build a consensus. "I can't conduct this operation behind his back, can I? Why that's...that's—"

"Treason, General?" Miller spoke from behind Penwell, wearing a wan smile.

Swanson's reply came as a whisper. "Don't use that goddamn word around me, Miller. I'm protecting my president." Veins bulged along the side of the general's thick neck. A large, twisted purple line worked its way under the skin from the top of his head along his forehead to his left eye. He bit down upon his cigar, sending bitter raw juices into his throat. He swallowed hard as he pondered Miller's words. Treason? Could doing the best thing for your country be treason? He may be a little rough about the edges, maybe even a little trigger-happy. But treason? No man in America loved his nation more than Bulldog Swanson. He would die for it in a minute, nearly had, several times. Swanson rose from his chair, fingered the two purple hearts he kept in his pocket, and began to pace the room.

"They'd hang us if we got caught."

"I believe they would, sir," said Miller. "But FDR would always have plausible deniability."

"We've got to do it, though, don't we?" A good soldier learns to listen to his inner voice, his gut, and right now his insides left him no doubt. A thousand years in the pursuit of world domination? Lead into gold? Unbelievable. But the numbers...the money...the seemingly unstoppable rise of Hitler...Hitler had to be stopped. He'd have to fall on his sword.

"I am afraid so, sir."

Swanson nodded to Penwell and then looked at Miller. "Then get your ass on it. God help us."

There was a soft knock against the carved oak door that led ominously into the dimly lit office. It was barely a tap, made by a set of gentle knuckles against the thick hard wood. But it sounded like thunder to the six men huddled in the corner. They were talking in hushed tones, looking warily about the room—at the silent walls and the cold, highly polished floor, as if someone might suddenly appear out of nowhere and catch them at their great world game. Although their eyes and ears were alert for any sights or sounds that signaled an intrusion into their thoughts, nothing could have prepared them for the rush of fear and excitement caused by the knock against the door. It had begun.

The general looked at the men around him, one by one, staring contemplatively into their worried faces. He noticed the beads of sweat forming along

their foreheads, every one of them afraid, but anxious to begin. He felt his own fingers tremble as he made his way toward the door. His hands were hot and slippery, like the rest of his body. His shirt made a soggy mold of his back.

“Anyone want out?” said Swanson, turning back from the door. Resolute stares were his answer. “All right, here we go.” The general opened the door, smiled, and in a cheerful voice said, “Lieutenant Trance. So nice of you to drop by.” He gave a short salute and held out his hand.

The younger man gripped Swanson’s fingers and replied, “It is not often that someone gets a late-night call and is ordered to the office of the Army Chief of Staff, General.” Trance noticed the sweat on the general’s palm.

“Yes...well...I want you to know from the outset that what we are about to ask you to do is without the authorization of Congress and against direct orders of the president.”

“I see. What happens if I agree with the president?”

“You won’t leave this room alive.”

“Ah.” Trance paused. “Could I have some tea?” There was nervous laughter about the room. Trance continued, “Lao Tzu said that a sound leader’s aim is to open people’s hearts, and that good government comes of itself.”

“And what the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Perhaps you do what is right,” said Trance quietly.

“Of course we are doing what is right!” shouted the general. Then, as if startled by his outburst, he quietly continued, “At least I hope it is.”

Swanson’s eyes wandered across Trance’s face, and then down along his body to his toes. What was it that made this man so special? He had never heard of him before. But Penwell and Miller had insisted there was no other man as qualified to do the job. Trance wasn’t tall, perhaps five foot nine. He wasn’t big, although Swanson could see that the man was muscular. Yet, when they shook hands, Swanson had felt that Trance could have crushed his fingers with the slightest squeeze. It was like he was shaking hands with the head of a sledgehammer, the hand so hard and cool. But there was a kindness to his eyes, and something else—they were ever-so-slightly Oriental. When he moved he was unassuming, and mildly deferential in his manner. He showed respect, not just to his superiors but to everyone.

“The truth is that some creatures go before and others follow behind,” Trance continued.

Swanson began thumbing through Trance’s file, which was stacked inside another manila folder. He ignored Trance’s comment and said, “It says that you are the army’s best in hand-to-hand combat. Is that so?”

“I do not know, General.”

“They said you were strange. Your file says that you knocked out the army

boxing champion in twelve seconds. Is that true?"

"I did not hurt him, sir. I only wanted to keep him from hitting me. They made us fight. It is not my nature to fight."

"You were born in America, but your mother is Japanese?"

"My father was a chemical engineer, working overseas."

"You spent much of your childhood in Japan?"

"Yes. My mother was an only child. It was necessary that I learn the ways to carry on the heritage of my family."

"Then you later lived in Germany?"

"My father had business there."

"You speak German?"

"Yes, sir."

*Yet you have no accents...not even an Oriental one. You look far more Caucasian than Oriental. I may not have even suspected that you weren't entirely white, unless I knew...I can see it now. It's in the eyes...subtle...* He continued speaking. "You studied religion at Boston University, then engineering at MIT." The general read on, occasionally raising his eyebrows. He continued. "It also says that you were trained in secret Oriental ways of fighting. What the hell is that?" Swanson looked over at Miller, who shrugged his shoulders. He continued, "It says that you come from a family of mountain climbers?"

Trance answered quietly. "I was taught many things. I was schooled in the *I CHING*. I studied Zen and the art of mountain climbing." Swanson waited for him to continue. "I studied Bujutsu, and methods of self defense and mind control that are little known, even in Japan. Buddhist monks developed many of these ways, as protection during their travels. Others come from the darker sides—"

"You were trained to kill."

"I was trained to protect. In Japan we are people of tradition and honor. My mother's village is in Japan's Iga province. For centuries my family has had the honor of serving our lords in a special way. That tradition continues."

"You are assassins. Mercenaries."

"Not my family, General. It is true that others from our village might be what you call assassins. But you cannot understand our culture, General. In my family we follow the divine way of the Spirit. We practice the art of harmonizing with the Universal Force. We are the bearers of the Universal Light in a world that can often grow dim."

"But you were trained as a ninja, and the primary purpose of a ninja is being a spy? Trained to be invisible? Trained in the use of weapons?"

"And where did you learn of ninja, General?" Trance smiled in his gentle manner. "Yes, I have learned the ninja ways, but I am not ninja. Ninja come



from the lower classes of Japanese society. I am Samurai. We are those of the highest class. There is a world of difference between the two. We follow a code of Bushido, a chivalry that the ninja do not follow. It was the Samurai who brought the ninja to prominence during feudal times. They hired them to do the deeds that their own honor forbade them to do. Please do not insult me, General. What I have learned is more art and honor. Just as you serve your president and your people—so too, have the people of my village. But I am a scientist. I—”

“You are now a spy.”

“But America has no spies. We—” Trance tried to protest. But the general cut him off.

“We do now. Do you recognize any of the men in this room?” Trance looked slowly from man to man, and then shook his head.

“America has no official secret service, but with the war going on it won’t be long. You are our first recruit. Sorry, you have no choice, son. This man here is Bill Donovan, a lawyer on Wall Street. To his right is Artemus Penwell.”

The general pointed at two stern-faced men by his side. “Penwell is the head of the British secret service, the SIS. With any luck, these men will be able to convince FDR to join the war.” The general walked to a wooden cabinet against the wall and removed a fresh bottle of brandy. “Anyone for a drink?” Five men murmured, all of them shaking and bobbing their heads in various directions.

Trance looked perplexed. “I was hoping for some tea?” he said quietly.

The general ignored his plea. He poured seven glasses of brandy, handed one to each of the men, and said, “To the war effort,” raising his glass into the air. There was a quiet moment, as six men let the hot liquid melt the icy fear. Trance stared off into space.

The general swept his arms toward the remaining men and said, “These four are from a group called the *Room*. The Room was founded in 1917 by men such as Astor, Roosevelt, Doubleday and Aldrich, all men with a passion for the safety of America. They have been our unofficial intelligence service for over twenty years now. They meet every month at 34 East 62nd Street, in New York City.”

“Excuse me, General. But I don’t see what any of this has to do with me?”

“Ah...yes...well...er...” The general felt bile force its way into his throat. He was about to countermand the president, and commit what could be deemed an act of treason, even an act of war. The U.S. was loath to enter another war. But there was something else, some other feeling he could not yet quite understand. He continued nervously. “The Room is tied into the international banking system.” The general angled his eyes toward one of the men, and continued. “Jacob, here, is a director of Western Union and has been intercepting cables

in the U.S. and abroad. We have found some very disturbing patterns. As you know, Hitler is pounding the shit out of Europe with his Blitzkriegs. Penwell and Donovan are convinced that there is a hidden Fifth Column of spies, financed to the tune of hundreds of millions, maybe billions per year and run by elements of the Gestapo. Hitler will attempt to control the world, of that we are sure. But what about this other force? Penwell thinks that if Hitler wins the world, he will only lose his throne to another dictator, someone more ruthless and powerful than that madman.”

Trance remained expressionless. He looked serene, relaxed, as the general paced about the room. Trance had surrendered himself to the Cosmic Will.

*What an interesting twist of fate, he thought. I must consult the Sage to see what it is I must do.*

“We are sending you to Europe, Trance.”

“I see.”

“You will be leaving in three days.”

“And what will I be doing, sir?”

“Hitler is being financed out of Austria. Someone has been sending him huge sums of money, funneled through a labyrinth of international financial networks. We believe that we have been able to pinpoint the source to a certain Baron von Hoffenburg. He lives somewhere near Salzburg. We want you to infiltrate his castle. We need evidence that the man is involved with the Nazis. He keeps a book on him at all times. It is written in code. We want the book, along with any other financial proof you can muster.”

The details of Trance’s mission were outlined carefully in those final hours before dawn. By four thirty in the morning Trance was fully briefed, and an initial timetable constructed for the mission was in place.

The general rose from his seat, motioned to Trance, and said, “That will be all for this evening, Lieutenant. I will see you again at O Nine Hundred.”

“I’m sorry, General, but I am not sure whether or not I am to accept this mission.”

Swanson looked puzzled. “What?” He paused. “I told you that if you don’t accept this mission we would kill you on the spot.” The general stared incredulously at the young soldier before him.

“You did, sir.”

“Well?”

“I do not know yet what I am supposed to do.”

“And how the hell do you intend to make that decision in the next few minutes?” Swanson brought a set of angry eyes to within inches of Trance’s face. “I give the orders and you say, ‘Yes, sir!’”

“Oh, I can’t make that decision, General.”

“What?” Bulldog Swanson was at a loss for words. He paced back and forth in front of Trance, his arms held out from his side in exasperation. He bit halfway through his cigar and spit a large wad of tobacco into a dented, brass spittoon on the floor.

“This is a decision that must be made by the Sage,” said Trance. There was no challenge in his eyes.

“The Sage?” *This guy has screws loose*, thought Swanson. *If he wasn't so goddamn qualified for this job, I think I just might boot his ass out of the army.* He reached his arms toward the ceiling in a cry for divine help.

A thin smile crossed Trance's lips. “Yes. The Sage. May I have a few minutes alone?”

“Alone? I thought that you had to meet with some Sage?” *This guy is Section Eight.*

“As I said before, General. There is no way that you could learn to understand my culture, the culture of my family. We think differently than you. In my family we do not make important decisions. They are made for us, as they have been for over five thousand years. I must consult the Sage of the *I Ching*. The *I* came to Japan from China. It is the basis of the Chinese culture. Some of us in Japan have learned to use its wisdom. It will allow me to consult with the Sage. Then I will know what I must do.”

“And how-the-hell-long do you expect this to take?” *Should I shoot him now?*

“I do not know,” said Trance.

“Well, could you possibly guess?” said Swanson. *What the hell am I doing?*

“Perhaps ten minutes, General.”

“And where in the goddamn hell do we find this Sage of yours?”

“He is here with us now, General.”

“Oh, shit.” Swanson looked toward the other men in the room. No man could speak. “This is a life and death matter, Trance. I want you to cut with this crap.”

“I'm sorry, General. But I will need a few minutes alone. This decision is too great for me to make.”

Swanson stared at the soldier before him. He tried to read the expression in his eyes. He searched for guile or guilt, some kind of clue as to what was going on in Trance's mind. But he could see nothing. The eyes had no expression; they said nothing. *Who the hell is this man?*

“All right,” he said. He walked to the edge of his office. “This door leads to a small room that I use for sleeping when I work through the night. In it you'll find a bed and a desk. There are no windows and no other doors. I don't know what the hell you are up to, but in fifteen minutes I am going to open this door with a gun in my hand. You are going to agree to this mission or I am going to blow your goddamn brains out. Have you got that?”

“Yes. Thank you, General.” Trance gave a small bow and began to walk through the door.

“Wait,” said the general. “I’ll bite. Tell me about this Sage.”

Trance turned and bowed deferentially toward Swanson. “As a boy, part of my life training was to memorize the *I Ching*, the Book of Changes. My mother was a direct descendent of Confucius. You see, twenty-five hundred years ago Confucius edited and annotated the *I*, which is also known as the *easy the changing* and the *constant*. Through the *I* one can touch the fundamental forces of the Yin and the Yang. It provides the gateway to understanding the highest of truths, and gives perspective to the meaning of life. In much of China, and parts of Japan, no major decision is made without it.”

“Sorry I asked.”

“It is difficult for Americans to understand.”

Trance smiled and left the room. He removed a penny from his pocket and began to flip the coin. He thought of how Americans use a coin toss to decide the most trivial of matters, like who kicks off in a football game. His own family used it only for the most important of choices. He always used a penny—the underlying common denominator of all numbers and values, the primal one. He recorded each flip until he had formed the six lines of one of the sixty-four Hexagrams. The Hexagram he formed was called Splitting Apart—with the first, fifth, and sixth lines as changing lines. He let out a long sigh when he saw that the reversal of his changing lines formed the Hexagram *Deliverance*. The first line described the doubt in his mind. The fourth line told of the splitting apart caused by the doubt that had already reached its peak. The top line told him that the splitting apart had reached its end, and that the seeds of goodness were waiting to grow anew.

“Your time is up, Trance.” The door eased open and Swanson ambled through. “What’ll it be?” he continued, pointing a gun at Trance.

“The Sage has instructed that it is in the highest good that I accept this mission,” came the soft-spoken reply.

“Figured you would come to your senses, Lieutenant.”

“Of course, General.” There was no use in trying to make the general understand.

Swanson patted Trance on the back. “That’s it for tonight, Lieutenant. Now get the hell out of here and get some sleep. You’re going to need it.”

After Trance left the room the general sank into a worn leather chair behind his desk. Desperately seeking to rid the tension from his body, he gave a long sigh, closed his eyes and tried to imagine himself sitting on a warm sunny beach—Miami—with a girl on each arm...But this wasn’t Miami, this was Washington and there was snow on the ground. The air wasn’t warm and the

sun wasn't shining. It was dark and the air outside was cold. Inside, the air felt stifling and it took painful effort for the general to breathe, let alone relax. As he swallowed, he could feel his spit waging war against the lump in his throat.

The room was silent. All the men stood with their eyes focused on the general. This was his show now; it would have to be done his way. They had placed their lives, perhaps the future of the nation, in his hands.

Finally Swanson spoke. "Well, boys, it's done. God knows how you got my butt into this sling, but there is no backing out now." He grew animated, like a weight had been lifted from his mind. "Miller, I want you to work out the final details with Donovan and Penwell. This is strictly a non-military operation. Everything is to be run on a need-to-know basis. Trance may already know too much, and I am not going to bother his mind with any of this mythical hocus pocus about gold and eternal life. All he need ever know is that he is to steal financial records for his country, and that's it."

Swanson was exhausted from the day's events and it was beginning to show in subtle ways. It was in the way that he carried himself. He had begun to stoop. There was a faint slur to his words. He was pushing sixty now, and although his mind had him convinced that he could still handle the long, tedious hours of preparation, his body was giving him a good argument. He gave a long sigh and continued, "Penwell, this was your idea. Do I have your assurance that the SIS is committed to its success?"

"I am the SIS, General." *And even if I were including them in this matter, they would support me*, he thought. *But this is far too important to involve those worthless idiots. I wouldn't be using you, you crude, effete dinosaur if I didn't have to.*

The general regarded Penwell with a wary stare. "Tell me something. Why the hell did you come to me? Except for Trance, this is really your show."

"Perhaps, General. But now you are in." *And I can blame you if we fail.*

"And what is that supposed to mean?"

"It means that, while on the outside, we British are keeping a stiff upper lip, on the inside we are shaking in our boots. Did you know that we have transferred all of our gold to Canada?"

"But Churchill says—"

"A facade, General. Without America in the war, Europe is...how would you say it...going down for the count. You know that I have been meeting with FDR. God knows I've tried to convince him of the sheer folly of your neutrality. I've given him the same information, but he's got his bloody head stuck in the sand. Our only chance was to get you involved, only then will any *proof* have meaning. You wouldn't fabricate it. Your president doesn't believe what we are saying. But he trusts you, General. You can convince him of the strength

of our enemy. You can get him into the war.”

“You are risking my life,” said Swanson. He spread his arm around the room. “Mine and those of all these other patriotic Americans.”

“You are a soldier, General. You are an ally. I knew you would understand.”

“The hell I understand,” said Swanson. “All I know is that you come to me with some trumped up story about some secret Fifth Column of spies, and money, and gold, and some German Prince financing Hitler—”

“Austrian Baron,” interrupted Penwell.

“All I know...” Swanson felt his blood pressure rising fast. His face grew crimson, the muscles twitching around his eyes “...is that I do have the sense to realize that if there is any truth to what you say we could all be in deep shit. I can’t ignore that.”

Swanson shrugged his tired shoulders and slumped into his chair. After a long moment he continued softly. “So I put my whole career, my life on the line. I put one of our best in harm’s way.”

“You did the right thing, General.”

“And Trance?” His voice was little more like a croak. “What becomes of him?”

“We searched your files for months, General, long before we contacted you. Trance is the one we need. There is no one else like him. No one else could get those records. It’s almost too bad that he will have to die.”

Swanson stared at Penwell in silence. He felt his stomach tighten, twisting against all sense of honor. There was something vulgar about spying. They called it the world’s second oldest profession. Sometimes he wondered if the second and the first weren’t one in the same. Finally he said, “No loose ends, Penwell?”

“No loose ends, General.”

“May God help us all.”

The wind blasted through the airplane door as it flew open. Icy shards of frozen needles whipped against the faces of the men inside. Down below, the snow-capped peaks of the Austrian Alps glowed in the moonlight. The jagged shafts of stone were smothered with pillow-soft mounds of snow, dripping along their sides like smooth vanilla ice cream.

Trance stared out into the void, letting his eyes and mind wander through the darkness. He thought of himself sitting in sunlight, warmed by summer breezes, and he felt relaxed. His breathing came in a slow rhythm, his pulse calm and regular, his hands warm and dry.

Trance looked down the dark tube of the plane. It was bare, except for a long

strip of rope webbing hanging from the sides. He made one last slow and deliberate check of his pack, his climbing gear and his weapons. He looked across the narrow chamber to the man chosen to support him in the mission. They had met for the first time that morning. He knew little about the man. He had simply been introduced as Netherby, a British officer, a communications and alpine specialist. That was all he needed to know, all he wanted to know.

William Netherby was half a head taller than Trance, but he was thinner. His face was gaunt and tinged the color of aging newsprint. A sickly child, his life had been one unending attempt to prove himself. He had played rugby. He was a boxer. He was a member of the British biathlon team, where he starred in this demanding combination of cross-country skiing and shooting. Few sports required this unique blend of endurance, patience and skill. Netherby had taken a gold medal in the 1936 Olympics demonstration of the sport.

Netherby had drawn the interest of the British Secret Service, and for ten years he'd accepted every assignment willingly, until now. This one had been hell to accept; it seemed so senseless.

William did his best to appear calm as he thought through the plan one last time. His job was really quite simple—a nighttime jump into the Austrian wilderness and a long march through deep snow to the mountain peak that bore the Baron's castle. They would climb with skis and snowshoes until the snows yielded to rock and ice. At eight thousand feet they would switch to picks, spikes and ropes until they reached the base of the massive natural wall—the wall that had shielded the castle from outside intruders for centuries. It seemed easy enough for a man with his skills. Unfortunately, this may not be his ultimate mission. He might have to kill Trance.

Trance was to scale the final two thousand feet alone. In its easy stretches the wall was vertical. Close to the top, it pitched outwards at an angle exceeding fifteen degrees. For his final five hundred feet of climb, Trance would dangle with nothing below him but air, and a long fall to death. But he may never get that far...

One other man sat in the rear cabin of the plane. He was thick and broad in the shoulders. His features were dark—black hair, brown skin, and a three-day stubble of angry whiskers that obscured the contours of his weathered face. He seemed like a grizzled sailor. The plane was his ship and he rocked easily in the wind. He stood in the doorway peering out at the mountains below, listening intently to the set of earphones strapped against his head. Any moment now he would motion the soldiers forward, and then shove the men and their gear into the empty space. Any moment now...

Trance watched him through hooded lids, as he sat quietly in his inner sunshine. The bone-chilling air whipped around him, but he felt warm, balanced

comfortably by meditation.

“Thirty seconds!” shouted the man. The time had come.

Both men rose slowly, William with trepidation, Trance with great calm. The air sailor pulled at their gear, making sure the lines were secure and their packs were fastened tightly. He began counting backwards from ten...nine...eight...

They jumped, and fell into the arctic blast of high altitude flight. The noise was deafening as they left the plane. The air spill tore at their white-masked faces. Then, as quickly as it began, everything seemed calm...quiet...as they drifted, tightly bundled toward the ground.

William giggled as his fear melted into the darkness. He could just make out Trance smiling serenely, and felt a sudden rush of emotion toward his partner, although he couldn't name what emotion it was. Was it comfort, companionship, maybe trust? There was something about Trance that made William feel safe.

“You poor bastard,” he muttered beneath his smile.

The calmness ended when the ground rushed toward them. The men angled their parachutes toward a large patch of white, an open meadow surrounded on all sides by towering mountain peaks.

“That's the spot,” said William to himself, remembering the films he had been shown by Penwell at the SIS. *Perfect.*

The men fell with a quiet whoosh into ten feet of freshly fallen powder. When William's feet hit the snow he gave a thankful sigh and started to relax his knees and roll to one side. His comfort was shattered as he plunged deep into the snow. William gasped for breath and began to blindly claw at the dark, amorphous prison growing around him. His breath came in choking gasps as he struggled to lift his head toward the winter sky. Snow was everywhere. It filled his eyes and mouth with its cold wetness, and it sucked the oxygen from his lungs, until there was nothing left. William waved his arms wildly and twisted himself, slowly wrapping into his parachute cord. The more he struggled, the deeper he sank into the snow. He tried to yell, but it came out as a whimper. His strength gave way. He was dying. They had barely started and he was about to die. He began to let himself drift. “I failed,” he mouthed silently.

William felt a sudden shudder as a strong hand gripped his shoulder and pulled his head into the cool night air.

“Are you all right?” asked Trance.

William's face emerged into the moonlight, his mouth wide as it sucked air back into his lungs. “Yeah...yeah...thanks...”

“Sorry I didn't find you sooner,” said Trance. “I should have looked for you, but I was putting these on.” Trance looked down to his snowshoes. “You've never been in this kind of snow before, have you?”



“This isn’t snow, Trance. This is...this—”

The two men laughed.

“I’ve spent a few winters skiing this stuff. The Austrians call it *tief schnee*, deep snow,” said Trance.

“You bet your bloody bum it’s deep. It’s like quicksand. I’ve seen plenty of deep snow, but not like this, and only with my skis on. I’ve never been buried, with no ground to touch or purchase for my feet... I nearly drowned.”

“It is like many things in life, William. You can’t fight it. The harder you struggle, the more difficult it becomes. The best way to deal with this snow is to relax. Allow yourself to emerge from it, become one with it.”

“I’d like to become one with a bottle of scotch right about now,” said William. “By the way, call me Bill.”

“And you should call me John. Now sink back into the snow, Bill.”

“Are you daft?”

“Do it, then allow yourself to *emerge* from it...be in harmony with the snow.”

“No thanks, John. I’ll just harmonize with those snowshoes.”

Bill reached for the snowshoes in Trance’s hand. But as Bill stretched his arm forward, Trance kept them just out of his reach.

“This is what my master would have done, Bill. You have an unusual opportunity to learn, and we cannot let it pass.” Trance’s eyes willed Bill back into the snow. His voice was calm, almost hypnotic.

“Pass? A learning opportunity? They warned me that you were a strange duck. Now give me those bloody shoes.”

“Relax, Bill. Allow yourself to be in harmony with your surroundings. Relax.”

Bill found himself drifting back into the snow. He began to panic, but in the background he could hear Trance murmuring, “Relax, Bill. Relax.”

Bill realized he was safe. He let his body melt into the snow and felt the softness. He heard Trance repeat the melodic words, *relax*, and he stopped struggling against the world. He felt almost giddy when he realized that he could emerge from the snow with just a little movement, a little support from surrounding objects, a little leverage. It was all so simple.

“Hey, you were right. A piece of cake. Well, what d’ya know.”

“We cannot struggle against the limitless and the unknown. We must become one with ourselves and with nature.”

“Yeah, right. While you’re being one with nature, I’m going to get these snowshoes on and then get our gear. We’ve got less than eight hours of darkness left and over fifty kilometers to cover before sunrise. Think you can handle it?”

Trance stood silently, then said, “We shall see.” Trance took his bearings and

continued, “At two hundred miles per hour our plane was traveling close to three hundred feet per second. I estimate fifteen seconds for our crewman to maneuver the supply crate to the doorway and drop it safely. That’s nearly a mile.” Trance sniffed the air. “These mountain winds are tricky and unpredictable when they snake through the peaks.”

Trance pointed toward the far end of the valley. “The wind is funneling this way. I’m guessing our gear was blown a mile or two in this direction.”

“Oh, bloody hell,” said Bill. “That means we’ve got to walk through this shit in snowshoes?”

Trance nodded, turned and began moving again.

The powder was deep, but light. Walking was more awkward than difficult, but the lifting and thrusting motion needed for snowshoes used muscles Bill didn’t know he had. In a few short minutes he was dripping sweat in the cold mountain air. Steam wafted from his body, like mist from a heated pool in a Minnesota winter. Trance hardly breathed.

Bill stopped to shed his facemask. “Hey, stop for a moment, will you?” He stripped down to his white Icelandic sweater. Trance did the same.

“Can you believe that people do this for sport?” asked Bill, still struggling for breath.

“Actually, I rather enjoy this,” replied Trance. “It’s not often these days that I get the chance to be in the mountains. The air is so clean and refreshing. The purity of nature is unspoiled by the intrusion of man. I remember when I was a boy—”

“I didn’t ask for a speech, Trance.” Bill paused. “Hey, how come you’re not tired?”

“Why should I be tired, Bill?”

“You’re carrying ten kilos of gear on your back and breaking tracks through the snow. That’s why.”

*I’m carrying a lot more than that.* Trance thought about the special items he had added, some of them handed down in his family for dozens of generations...shuriken throwing blades, a hanbo cane and a Samurai short-sword that had been in his family for nearly 500 years. He also carried a 32-caliber Colt Automatic pistol. He hoped that he wouldn’t have to use any weapons at all.

“Tiredness is more of a state of mind, Bill. Accept what you are doing. Don’t fight it, and it will be easier for you. Just like getting out of the snow. Besides, we will be carrying far more weight shortly.” Trance moved on at a heavy pace.

It took half an hour for the men to reach the white wooden crate holding their supplies. Trance pried open the box and laid out their packs, cross-country skis, ropes, boots for climbing, pick axes, spikes, crampons, and ice pitons. He checked the radio, and secured their dried food.

Satisfied, he began to fill his pack. “I was told that you climbed the north wall of the Eiger,” he said. “Quite a climb, isn’t it?”

“North wall, hell,” said Bill. “Only fools attempt the north wall, Trance. I did scale the east flank with Hans Lauper.” *Of course, we paid him well. He carried the gear...and did the real work.*

“That, too, is a difficult climb. Well done.”

“Thanks. Why do you ask?”

“No reason.” Trance had hoped that they would have something in common. He was one of the few who *had* climbed the Eiger’s north wall, and also the north face of the Matterhorn in that same busy year.

“You must have had a bloody reason.”

“We’ll be climbing together. I’m glad that you have the experience we will need. This looks like a difficult climb.”

“They said you’re a climber, too. Any majors?”

“Nothing to talk about. But I do know my way around a mountain.”

“If you need any advice, don’t be afraid to ask.”

“Thank you, Bill. I’ll remember that.”

Trance consulted his compass, lowered his head and began to ski. Because of the deep snow his legs had to work hard to break their trail. He charged forward, with his ski tips raised high to break and push down the snow. Bill struggled to follow, despite skiing a far smoother trail. Trance pushed on, half madman, half packhorse, rarely taking a break. He felt a bone-tired weariness dragging each step as he fought against the snow, and the sixty pounds on his back. But he wrapped the pain in a soft blanket and put it in a closet. Out of sight, out of mind.

Bill labored behind Trance, watching for some sign of fatigue or weakness. His lungs were on fire. His legs grew so heavy he was sure that each step would be his last. He knew what effort it took him to heft the weight and keep up the pace. But he was a top Olympic-class competitor and he weighed twenty kilos more than Trance. He was following behind, a far less demanding task than breaking the trail. He could only watch Trance in wonder, as his own time passed in agony.

They were getting close. Just two more ravines to traverse before they could put up for rest. Trance began to attack the snow with what seemed like joy. He pounded forward leaving behind an easier trail for his companion to follow. Even so, Bill began to fall back. He could not maintain Trance’s manic pace.

“Stop!” yelled Bill. He doubled over and gasped for breath. “Don’t you get tired, Trance? I’m a member of the goddamn bloody British National Biathlon Team, and I’ve never seen anyone ski like you. You’re a bloody animal. Almost inhuman, I’d say.”

Trance stopped at once. He turned around and smiled. "Of course I'm tired, Bill." His breath was already returning to normal. "But if we move slowly, we must suffer for that much longer. I don't care to suffer, so I get it over quickly."

"Well, slow down."

"So sorry, Bill. I will be more considerate."

It was nearly dawn when the outlines of Baron von Hoffenburg's immense fortress emerged against the opaque sky. Swirling clouds smothered the castle. They seemed to form out of nowhere, and dodged in and about the cold-gray stone turrets with an angry fury. Even from a distance the castle called out a warning to the curious, and issued unveiled threats to those who might wish to venture forward.

Trance pushed the final feet to a mountain crest and stopped. Suddenly it was there. Trance felt a rush through his body as his eyes fell upon the weathered stone. Bill gasped and stood motionless, as if under the influence of a witch's hypnotic stare, slowly swaying from side to side in the wind. There was an ineffable energy, a surrealistic evil force that seemed to take hold of their thoughts. Their eyes were drawn upward, higher and higher, to the massive walls of ice that Trance must climb, and then to the sheer stone face that guarded the castle walls. This was a vicious mountain, and it bid them fair warning. The two men stood silently, feeling the power before them, neither of them wishing to acknowledge its presence.

"We can't climb that," mumbled Bill. He raised his voice, "not without more preparation, John, maybe not even then. If you've never made a major climb, you don't know what you are up against." He wiped his lips with his glove and continued, "That face makes the Eiger look like a picnic. You can't climb it. Not in one night. Not alone. Not in the dead of winter...not without preparations...not without...maybe not ever. I'm sorry, but there's got to be some other way..." *Maybe if we turn back now we both can live.*

"It does look like a bit of a challenge, doesn't it, Bill?" replied Trance. He smiled. "If there was another way, don't you think they would have tried it? There is more going on than they are telling us...I *feel* it. Besides, I'm afraid that we have no choice but to try, Bill. What good is failing without trying?"

"But this is suicide." *Doesn't he know?*

"Is it? We will both die sometime, Bill. I expect death will come at a time we wouldn't choose." Trance reached into his pocket and fingered his penny. "We are part of a large Cosmic Order, something we cannot change or fight, at least for long. All I know is that we are here, Bill, and we have a job to do. So I suggest that we go do it."

The men found a shelter among the rocks, near the base of the mountain. It

was a hollow, glacial carving that dug far into the stone, not quite a cave, but calmly protected from the wind and the biting cold. They set up a makeshift camp and ate from food tins that they kept close to their bodies so they wouldn't freeze. They camouflaged themselves with white and prepared to sleep through the daylight hours. As the sun began to peek over the mountains, the two men dug themselves into the snow. Trance fell into an easy sleep, somewhere along a warm beach in his mind, while Bill struggled against his clothing and the wetness in his face.

After struggling for hours, Bill drifted into a fitful, tossing sleep. Throughout the day he dreamt of falling into an abyss, clutching vainly for a rope that remained only inches outside of his grasp. He was falling when the gentle shaking of Trance awakened him. It took him a moment to remember where he was. When he finally did, he had the urge to return to the comparative pleasantness of his dream.

"Time to go," said Trance. "I've got us packed."

"Bloody hell. What time is it?"

"Just after four. We've got to move quickly. Here's your lunch." Trance handed him a piece of jellied bread.

Trance fingered the animal skins he had put on their skis for the upward trek. The animal fur let the skis slide easily forward, but provided solid resistance when pushing against the grain.

"You brought skins," said Bill. "How did you know to bring those along?"

"A good climber never travels without skins. Let's go. I'll lead."

"But I'm supposed to lead..." Bill began to protest. He was the one with all the climbing experience. Then he remembered the previous day and he knew it was Trance that should lead them up the mountain. They stored much of their gear in their small canvas tent, choosing to carry only the bare essentials—ropes, crampons, picks and pitons. Bill took the radio. There was one extra bag that Trance placed carefully, almost religiously into his pack. These were the tools he hoped he wouldn't need.

"Why are you bringing the radio?" asked Trance. "Wouldn't it be better off at the base?" He waited, but Bill stayed silent. "I see no sense in carrying it all that way, unless it's for safety. But they'd never come in to pick us off the mountain."

"They didn't tell you?" said Bill.

"Tell me what?" asked Trance.

"Before you go in, you are to survey the entire grounds and describe what you see. You are to relay your message with this." Bill produced a smaller radio from his bag.

"But they might hear us, Bill," said Trance quietly.

“Yes, I know. But those are the orders, Trance. You know that I am in charge—”

“But the risks of being caught—”

“Don’t complain to me about the risks, Trance. You know there isn’t a snowball’s chance in hell you’ll come out of this alive. They say this place is overrun with soldiers, Gestapo. If that is true, we need to know. Your first priority is to find proof that the Baron is tied to Hitler. We also need his book, the one he carries at all times.”

Bill’s eyes held a look of compassion. Trance stood silently, so he spoke on.

“Once I have a rough body count of the castle grounds, you’re to find the Baron, secure some documents and get the book.” Trance nodded and Bill continued. “By the way, how will you do it?” He looked up. “How will you climb that thing?”

“Haven’t been told, yet,” replied Trance.

Bill noticed a strange look upon Trance’s face...pain...confusion.

“They don’t expect us to survive, do they?” said Trance.

“Of course not, John. Didn’t you know?”

“Never thought about it.”

Bill searched his soul for compassion, but it fought against his sense of duty and honor toward his country. He, and he alone, was to return with the book. Then he was to be killed. He sighed and said, “I’ve made arrangements with the authorities to look after my family. They’ll be well taken care of.”

“I see,” said Trance softly. “You are afraid of death, aren’t you, Bill?”

“Of course I am.” There was a look of puzzlement on Bill’s face. “Aren’t you?”

“No, I suppose I am not. Why fear the inevitable?”

“But you can control when it is you die, Trance.”

“Can we?” Trance turned and began striding up the mountain.

Something had triggered an unfamiliar feeling in Trance, anger. He thought back to his first painful years of training. His teachers had told him, “Anger can only spring from within. One cannot be truly angry at someone or something else, but only at oneself.” Why was he angry with himself? It was time to consult his *I*. Consciously there was no reason to feel this way. He began to ski with a vengeance, driving himself up the mountain toward exhaustion. Perhaps there was no message. Perhaps it was just tension. He could hear Bill straining behind him, doing his best to maintain the pace. Trance pushed harder, then harder until Bill yelled for help.

“For God sakes, Trance, slow down! You’ll have no energy left for the climb.”

Trance stopped abruptly and gazed at his companion. There was a strange

fire in his eyes. All peacefulness was gone.

“What’s the matter, John?” said Bill, between gasps.

“I’m not sure,” replied Trance. “Could we stop for a few minutes?”

“If you must.” Bill fought to regain his breath. “What the devil is wrong with you?”

“I hope to know in a few minutes. Relax. I’ll be back shortly.” Trance pushed off into the snow to find a secluded place to flip his penny. He found a rock ledge that acted as a natural barrier against the wind, and sat down upon the rocks. Slowly he withdrew his special coin and began to flip. He made a mental note of each, and tossed his coin eighteen times before he finished. Then he leaned back against the rock and pondered his message. He was being used. There was treachery all around, and he was moving headlong into it. Was he acting against the higher good? He wondered. He flipped his coin again, eighteen times, until his new Hexagram was formed. He was following the highest good. That was plain. So what could it be? He flipped again—then again. After he had formed a total of six hexagrams he was convinced there was much more behind his mission than he had been told. The force he was about to confront was far more than just a money source to Hitler. It was the seat of power...control. There was something that he must search for, something he must obtain. But he could not understand yet what it was. It was something old, and something powerful, something that men would kill for. He could trust no one, especially those who had sent him.

Trance flipped his coin for one final set to determine how much he should tell Bill. Was he one of them? Was he trustworthy? His answer came in the form that said *a little knowledge shared with others could be of great help*. He should tell Bill about his fears, at least some of them. Trance returned to Bill’s resting place, smiling again, his inner and outer selves once again in balance. Bill was stretched out in a patch of packed snow, his eyes closed as if he were asleep. He looked almost peaceful, for a change.

“Wasn’t sure you were coming back,” said Bill as Trance approached. “I got in a good little nap.” His eyes searched Trance’s peaceful face. “Well, it’s nice to see you back to your old self. What got into you back there?”

“There is a lot more to this than they are telling us, Bill.”

“No shit, Sherlock,” replied Bill. *You poor fool.*

“There are things that our leaders are not sharing among themselves. There is treachery going on, Bill, of the greatest magnitude. I don’t know what it is, yet, but it is there. Beware...my friend.” Bill looked for a sign of humor in Trance’s face, but there was none. Of course there were things that they were not being told. They were spies.

“Can you elaborate, ol’ boy?”

“So sorry, I cannot.” Trance made an almost imperceptible bow toward Bill.

“So what do we do?”

“Continue. It is in order.” Trance pushed onward.

Before long the men were forced to remove their skis and continue on foot. The mountain sloped steadily upward. Soon they had to break out their ropes. Bill had been climbing for most of his life. He had been on major climbs, climbed with men considered to be the best in the world. But he had never seen anyone who could scale a rock face as quickly and effortlessly as John Trance.

“Are you sure you’ve never made a major climb?” he asked.

“Perhaps I have been on a few.”

“The way you move, I am sure that you have.” Both men fell silent until Bill finally continued. “Which peaks?”

“Does it matter?”

“I’d like to know.”

“Climbing is not something I talk about. It is like a religion—best observed in the company of one’s own thoughts.”

Bill ignored him. “So, where have you climbed?”

“Oh, Asia...Europe...America...” *What difference did it make exactly which peaks he’d climbed? Why should it matter to others that he had conquered the most challenging mountains?*

Bill fell silent.

The men climbed through the night. Just before dawn they approached the base of the final mountain wall. It towered above, a menacing face of ice and rock rising vertically before curving outward to form the final jagged lip. A treacherous wall to climb.

“Holy mother of God...” said Bill as he took in its grandeur. Most of the wall was flat and vertical. There were a few scattered ledges protruding outward, all covered with light snow that the wind whipped into the air to form a constant blizzard. Now that they were close they could see thousands of chip marks on the wall. Bill and Trance looked at each other. “This wall has been *made* impossible to climb,” said Bill. “Who the hell—”

“This is where we camp,” said Trance. “It feels like snow in the air. If it comes I’ll be able to start the climb before dusk, without risking discovery.”

“You’re not going to climb in the bloody snow, are you? If the winds pick up—”

“Of course.” Trance smiled. “Once I get the proof, we’ll need a five hour lead time to clear out of here. You can bet your bloody bloomers they’ll be all over this mountain if they discover anything missing, so be ready to fly.”

Bill watched Trance closely as he spoke. *He doesn’t know...He doesn’t know. The goddamn fool is making jokes.* Bill’s pursed his lips as he prepared to



speak. He had grown to like and respect this unique man.

“You really don’t know, do you?”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what you mean?”

“You expect to live.”

“I suppose I do. But, that is out of my hands. Whatever will be...will be.”

“You’re not supposed to live...*We’re* not supposed to live, Trance. That’s not part of the plan. I thought you knew.”

“I don’t understand?”

“They expect us to die.” Bill pulled a Browning P-35 Hi-Power automatic from his coat pocket. It was a killing machine, 9 millimeters of powerful sting with no grip safety. “I’m going to have to kill you.”

Trance replied calmly, “What do you mean, Bill? We haven’t even begun.”

“This whole operation is a ruse designed to draw America into the war, John. I have the option of whether or not to let you climb. I let you climb only if I think you have a chance of returning with the documents and the book. If you return with the documents, I am to kill you. If I feel you have no chance of returning, I am to kill you before you begin. Once you are dead I am to radio that what we suspected is true, that the castle compound is loaded with Nazi’s. I am to turn on a homing beacon, and then kill myself...”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“Oh? Do you expect Penwell to tip his hand by sending just one man into that castle? After I send the message, Penwell will launch a team to find our dead bodies. He will produce his own set of documents. He will draw America into the war. Then he will come in here with an assault force flown in out of the sky. They’ll storm the castle and kill the Baron. They have no need for you and me, except as cover. We are just pawns in the game they play.”

“I see.”

“I’m sorry, John. I rather grew to like you—” Bill began to squeeze the trigger of the automatic. He looked directly into the eyes of his friend. “Goodbye,” he said and fired his gun. A booming crack split the hollow silence of the night, sending echoes through the mountains. It sounded like thunder, pounding through the valley on the wings of a storm. Bill saw the muzzle flash. Then he was flat on his back, with Trance above him holding his weapon. Trance pointed the pistol at his face, moving it to within inches of Bill’s right eye.

“Do you really want to die?” asked Trance.

“We have no choice,” replied Bill with a whisper. “Kill me,” he said. “I’ve got to die.”

“But I don’t want to kill you,” said Trance.

“Then they will.”

“I don’t think so.”

Trance took hold of the gun with his left hand and offered it, handle first, to his prone companion. "I don't need this," he said.

Bill stared back at Trance, with no move for the gun.

"Take it. You may need it. I'm going to make that climb, and you're going to help me. But don't think of killing me. I have been trained against far more dangerous men than you, and more dangerous weapons than this."

"How did you do that?"

"You would never understand."

Trance turned and walked toward his pack. His senses were on edge as he listened for Bill's reaction. Had he judged him correctly?

"Who are you?" came the words.

"I'm going to sleep for six hours."

When Trance awoke, the afternoon sky was dark with clouds. It was snowing but the winds were calm. Trance emerged from a restful sleep to find Bill sitting across from him, pistol in his gloved hand, staring intently at his face, wondering if he should kill him as he slept. If Bill didn't, and somehow they both survived, what would they do to them? *Perhaps I should just kill myself and give up on the whole thing*, thought Bill.

Trance arose slowly, gave a wink and said, "You're not going to try to use that on me again, are you?"

"I...What in the bloody hell do you plan to do?"

"I must do what I am destined to do. I will climb this wall and obtain documentation to prove that von Hoffenburg is financing Hitler..." *And I will find whatever it is I am supposed to take from within those walls.*

"Then what?"

"Deliver them to Bulldog Swanson..." *And keep what I must.*

"They'll kill you, John."

"They sent me here to do a job. I will do it. It is the right thing to do." Trance looked up at the sky. "I learned many years ago that if you are right, you are right. That is the only way to be."

"Then I suppose I should wish you luck." *Perhaps, if we're lucky, you'll fall and smash your head against the rocks—*

"With the vision so poor, I am starting now. If I'm not back by O Three Hundred, please leave without me."

"But—"

There were so many things to say, but Trance wasn't listening. He attached his twelve point high angle crampons securely to a well-worn pair of stiff-soled climbing shoes and began to scale the ice. These were his own custom-built spikes, with the outside front point slightly longer, so he could splay his feet farther outward for better balance and still keep two spikes securely driven into

the ice.

Soon the wall grew vertical. Trance climbed with an ice axe in each hand using the *piolet poignard* technique. The ice was somewhat soft, so he drove the axes securely into it by using them like daggers. When the ice hardened he would need to switch to the *piolet ancre* technique and wield his axes by the shafts for more head speed. He climbed with the longest axes he could swing accurately. They were fitted with 10-millimeter webbing for wrist loops. The webbing was run through the top hole of each axe and sewn into loops that extended just to the end of the spikes at the base of the handles. They were whipped securely onto the shafts just above the balance points of the axes, leaving just enough room to accept a gloved hand. For much of his climb he would have to hang suspended from these wrist loops, with nothing else holding him above the empty space below.

Climbing alone, Trance opted to use no rope for his upward ascent until he reached the overhang. Any mistake would be his last, so he climbed with care. Trance drove his axes one after the other into the ice, alternately digging secure footholds into the vertical wall with his spikes. Fatigue began setting in after he had climbed less than half way up the face. Under normal circumstances he would have trained for months for such a climb. With only three days notice, there had been no time for that. His arms grew heavy with the continual pounding of the axes into the ice and he felt like a punch-drunk boxer. The snow fell harder and wind began to spin around him. The snow came in small, hard crystals that stung his face as they pelted through the air.

Bill watched from below as Trance climbed out of sight. He stood, staring upwards in amazement from his camp down below. *This is truly a madman*, he thought.

Trance was alone now. He liked it that way. He felt at peace. His arms ached painfully. His legs began to quiver. With each thrust of an ice axe he felt a searing heat shoot through his arm. His arms felt dead, and he began to wonder just how he could scale the overhang with no support from his feet.

Trance carried too much weight. Under normal circumstances he would make this climb with nothing but a light pack on his back. This was anything but normal. This was uncharted territory. Five hundred feet of thin rope was slung across his shoulders. Its dead weight torched his arms each time he muscled his way upward. He needed this rope for a rapid decent. But would it be enough? A string of pitons weighed heavily upon a strap hitched around his hips. Tucked inside his pack was a pair of soft rubber-soled shoes. He would need these to move silently through the castle. Beside the shoes rested a black wool uniform and mask. With these he could remain unseen when he dropped within the castle walls, provided everything went according to plan. Then, of course, he

carried weapons.

Trance reached the outward sloping overhang of solid rock and stopped to rest. Less than two hundred yards of climbing and he would reach the top. He grasped one of his custom-designed 28-centimeter tube screw pitons and pounded it into the rock. The piton's teeth were filed to razor sharpness and it cut through the ice like a canoe paddle on a peaceful lake. He followed this with two more, then slung his rope through them and drew it up through the center piton. He let himself hang, gradually removing his weight from his axes until nothing was supporting him but the rope. He rested. Then he set about to scale the rest of the peak.

Trance climbed methodically. Each foot upward was fought for with the same laborious routine. He would make a hole with his pick, and then hammer the piton into the ice until the threads would catch. Then he would take another piton, or his axe head, and screw it into the ice. He would unhitch the rope from the piton below so that the rope would remain free except for the one supporting piton. Later he would need the rope to swing freely, if he lived that long.

After two more hours Trance let himself rest upon the rope and waited until the strength came back to his arms. It was an eerie feeling, to have his body hanging above two thousand feet of empty space in a driving snowstorm, but he felt his calmness return. He was close.

Trance reached the lip of the cliff before midnight. He set several pitons into the ice and made a small dangling cot out of the rope. He lay there, suspended upon the cliff, with the snow piling upon him, and soon fell into a deep meditation. He collected his "Chi," the energy, the vital life force that he would need for his mission. Tranquility flowed through him. Soon he felt refreshed, his psychic energy replenished, his muscles renewed.

Trance's black-gloved hand emerged from outside the castle walls. It was followed by his darkened figure, moving quietly and quickly through the night. The fluid shape seemed to mold into the wall, passing like a shadow from stone to stone. Within minutes the shadow filtered its way around a dozen uniformed soldiers, often crossing silently within inches of their backs. The soldiers stood in small groups, huddled against the cold, smoking cigarettes and talking quietly about women and beer. The shadow listened to the night for direction, feeling its way forward, until it had darkened the entire perimeter of the castle wall.

They had been right, thought Trance. The castle was a fortress, a heavily manned garrison, replete with stores of weapons, and enough grain and animals to withstand a ten-year siege. It smelled like a country barnyard. Trance worked

his way inside the perimeter guards and located the military command post. It lay within a cluster of small buildings and stood halfway between the wall and the center of the grounds. He moved in and about the buildings, surveying each one, making mental notes until he could visualize the entire compound as a whole. This knowledge could be vital to his survival.

An unconscious fear swept through the castle guards, as the shadow shifted from observer to predator. There was a new danger lurking, one that the soldiers would not acknowledge to each other, yet could not quite ignore. Their voices grew perceptibly louder, and their laughter more boisterous as they fought to appear calm to one another.

Underneath his blackened hood, Trance's watchful eyes glinted with unwavering determination. Nothing would stop him as he made his way toward the central castle, this ageless core of power. Trance's heritage held centuries of commitment to a purpose, and he had years of training for this moment. He was part of the Cosmic Order.

He gazed upward. The castle rose skyward, reaching toward the heavens in a vain attempt to dominate his will. It had been built to impose fear, with oppressive size, massive iron doors, hundreds of gargoyles and dragons glowering from above...and now, with soldiers patrolling its walls. But Trance felt no fear, only a peaceful sense of oneness with his surroundings. He was having fun.

Trance searched the dark recesses along the outside of the castle until he found a corner where the walls obscured all light. He began to climb. As he rose toward the sky he could hear the voice of his master. "Always keep three points of your body against the wall at all times...There is no need to hurry." He smiled as he remembered the little man with the long gray beard.

The stone was cold and slippery with the snow, but Trance climbed like a squirrel on a tree. He reached the top and angled his legs over a balcony wall. The wall surrounded a small patio that lead into a large chamber that looked like a library. It was lit by torchlight. Through a window he could make out tall shelves of leather-bound books, stacked to the ceiling throughout the cavernous hall. He picked the lock on the balcony door and slowly stepped inside. He felt the thickness of deep Persian carpets through his rubber shoes. His eyes wandered to the faded tapestries that were scattered along the walls of the room to ward off the cold drafts of winter.

Trance dissected the room, searching for the proof that Swanson demanded. He knew information would present itself to him, if it were meant for him to have. He worked like a surgeon, picking first through the large desk of inlaid mahogany that ruled the far corner of the office. There were volumes of papers inside. Some related obliquely to the financing of the Nazi war machine. There

were summary reports detailing the industrial production of dozens of companies throughout the world, profit and loss statements, budgets and marketing strategies. Somehow, von Hoffenburg was privy to a myriad of financial details concerning some of the world's largest international corporations. These figures seemed interesting, but Trance could not see how they would constitute the "proof" that the general required.

Trance turned to several large filing cabinets built into the panel-covered walls. He worked like a machine, systematically moving from file to file. He had hoped that the information would present itself to him; he had such a short time to find it. But as the minutes dragged on he grew anxious that he would fail. He could not cover the entire castle, so he had made the decision to concentrate upon the two areas most likely to produce results—the Baron's library and his sleeping quarters, whose locations had been disclosed to him by Penwell. If the papers he needed were not in the files or the Baron's desk, perhaps they were hidden somewhere in a safe, or some other secret hiding place.

Trance exhausted the Baron's library and decided to move to the Baron's bedchamber. He had hoped it wouldn't come to this. The risk of detection had just multiplied, and no matter how good he was, it would be difficult to survive being hunted by hundreds of Hitler's best.

Trance was turning to slip back out through the balcony when he heard the muted sound of shuffling footsteps. There was the distinct step-step-stepping of a solitary walker, someone older, perhaps. The gait was slow and steady. He couldn't quite tell where the footsteps were coming from, but he moved as best he could toward the sounds. If the intruder came into the room he would have to be right upon him. A warning cry would be his death knell.

An entire section of books began to slide inward towards the center of the room. It moved in absolute silence on hidden hinges and rollers. Trance pressed his back against the rolling bookshelves, sure that whomever he had heard would be following quickly behind them. Could this be the Baron? He had hoped to avoid confrontation; but now with time perilously short, perhaps this was a stroke of fate. He hugged the wall as a lean, towering figure emerged from behind the shelves. The man was dressed in a thick black robe with gold filigree trim. His face was lined, weathered, but of indeterminate age. A mane of charcoal-colored hair flowed well over his shoulders. It was speckled with patches of white along the sides. A full, thick beard stretched a foot below his lips. In his hand the man held a thin, tattered book. He walked with it held delicately in front of his face. With his eyes resting upon his precious book, he was murmuring a soft chant as he entered the room. The man walked in front of Trance, without noticing his presence. As he passed, Trance slipped behind

him, wrapped his mouth with one hand and shoved violently outward against his back with the knuckles of the other. The older man was thrown off balance. An indignant, muffled roar replaced his first cry of shock. "Who dares to attack me!" the Baron screamed in German. He struggled to twist out of his captor's grasp, surprising Trance with his strength. He nearly broke free. Trance reacted by digging his thumb and forefinger into the Baron's neck, until he located a nerve that made the Baron stagger.

"Cry out and you're a dead man," said Trance in German. The Baron spit into Trance's hand and raked him with fingernails that felt like claws.

"Who are you?" cried the Baron.

"I am your assassin, if you wish. Or I am a seeker of information. Which shall it be?"

"You can't kill me," said the Baron in disgust. Trance struck the Baron in the chest with an open palm. The Baron doubled over and fought for breath. Trance pressed up on the Baron's neck with his right hand, just under the chin with his thumb and fingers on either side of the Baron's Adam's apple. The Baron seemed to jump off his feet, then sank to the floor as Trance let him go. He lay choking on the antique carpet. The Baron couldn't move. His eyes bulged as he struggled to regain his breath. His bowels let go and filled the room with the stench of death.

"Your next threat is your last," whispered Trance. "I don't like this any more than you do. But like you, I have no choice."

"What do you want?" stammered the Baron.

"You are financing Hitler. I want evidence. Give it to me and I will let you live. You have my word on it."

"Is that all you have come for?" said the Baron.

*What a strange question*, thought Trance. "No. There is something else." Trance watched as the old man shuddered and grew pale in the dim light. The Baron's knuckles flashed white, as his hands clutched the small book. Trance watched as the Baron buried the book in the folds of his robe, while staring into Trance's masked face.

"No! I will give you nothing else. I will die first!"

Trance was surprised by the strength of the outburst. The man should be like wet spaghetti at his feet, but somehow the Baron had summoned strength and rage from somewhere deep inside. Trance searched the man's eyes and he knew that he had spoken the truth. He *would* die first. But it didn't matter now. He had found what he was sent for. He stood for a moment, staring intently at the Baron's defiant face. He said, "I don't wish to kill you. Just give me the proof of your support of Hitler and I will leave. You will never see me again."

The Baron's face twisted into a contorted grin, the grin of a madman. He

became strangely jubilant and began to bounce up and down like a small child at an amusement park.

“Of course, of course!” he cried. “Right this way!”

The Baron shuffled to another part of his library. As he turned, Trance caught a glimpse of the Baron’s eyes. He shuddered. This man was dangerous, with the hollow, carved-out eyes of a deranged killer.

The Baron opened a hidden cabinet and removed a pile of papers.

“Here. Here you are. Now leave!”

Trance reached for the documents. With a glance he could see that they were the ones he needed. On top was a list of companies, hundreds of them. Beside each name it showed the percentage owned. Trance shuddered again. Many of the company names were household words in America. He wondered what sort of power, what sort of spell could possess a man to part with these documents so easily. What could it be that took such hold of the man that he would give anything and sacrifice everything to keep it? Soon he would know...

There was a blur of movement. Before the Baron could react, Trance stood above him with the ancient book in his hands. The Baron cowered like a child, his precious rattle suddenly gone. A scream began to leave his throat, but it was cut off by another blur as Trance thrust forward with a fist against the base of his skull. The Baron fell in a lump on the floor. He wouldn’t die, thought Trance. Not today. It wasn’t Trance’s place to kill him. The Baron would lie unconscious for hours, though, long after he had made his escape. What happened to him next was out of his hands.

Trance looked at the Baron lying at his feet and paused. Perhaps he should end his life? No, he thought. His training had been to kill only when he must. Life is sacred. Better to let live than to fight the Cosmic Good. He lifted the Baron, carried him to a far closet and stuffed him inside. The Baron would emerge long after Trance had made his escape.

“You won’t feel very well tomorrow I’m afraid,” said Trance. “Sorry.”

Trance turned his attention to the still-opened doorway behind the library wall. What could be so important? He walked softly down the stairs, deep into the bowels of the castle, to an old dungeon, which was being used as a laboratory of some sort. He could smell the acrid scent of sulfur, and he felt the heat of fire. Slowly he moved his head beyond the staircase, and saw an immense cavern. At one end of the room stood a large work area filled with smoke and fire. Through the hot haze he could see a row of great stone containers. They were filled with various substances—powders, liquids and metals. At the other end of the room stretched a long, tall pile of mottled canvas. It towered over the room. He walked carefully along the floor until he reached the pile. He lifted one end of the canvas. Suddenly all of the questions fell into place. Underneath



the protective covering he found a thick bar of gold...and hundreds more...

Trance spent just a moment more in the dungeon. He had found what he had come for. There was no sense in overstaying his welcome. He took one last look at the room and smiled. What would he do with such a fortune? He took the stairs three at a time until he reached the top. He walked to the Baron's desk and grabbed another stack of files. He placed the two sets of papers into waterproof pouches and stuffed them into separate pockets of his knapsack. He did the same with the Baron's book. This he placed carefully into a special compartment sewn into the bottom of his bag.

Trance slung the knapsack over his shoulder and poked his head out the doorway leading to the Baron's snow-covered patio. Seeing no one, he found his rope and climbed over the side. Removing himself undetected from the castle grounds proved far easier than getting inside. He quickly rappelled through his 500 feet of rope, but it ended abruptly, thirty feet above a small ledge. He was another thirty feet out from the rock wall.

Trance stared into the darkness, trying to sense where he was. He could see nothing in the driving snow. He laughed. How easy this could have been.

After a moment's reflection Trance began to swing on the rope. He pushed out with his feet, then back. Out, then back. Soon he was swinging in a wide arc, with the snow pelting into his face. How long would the rope withstand rubbing against the rocks? Would someone discover him from above and cut the rope? Or let fly with a shower of bullets?

Trance's feet struck the ice-covered rock wall. He let himself swing backward, then pushed as hard as he could with his feet. At the last moment he leaned forward and grasped for the wall. His hand slipped on the ice, and he swung back into the void.

This wasn't going to work. Trance slithered down to the end of the rope and tied a quick bowline knot at the base. He took a carabiner, clipped it to his climbing harness and then around the rope. He checked the knot to make sure it was secure, then let himself hang by the end like a spider. He reached around to the back of his pack and removed two climbing axes, slinging a loop around each wrist. He began to swing again. Soon his boots hit the wall. He pushed out with all his strength and swung himself backward into the night. He counted off the seconds and leaned forward. Just as he saw the wall before him, he dug the axes deep into the ice and braced himself for a fall. The fall didn't come. The axes held. Trance took a deep breath, reached down with one hand and unclipped the carabiner. He was now at the mercy of the fates, again.

Trance struggled down the rock face. By the time he reached solid footing his arms hung lifeless by his side. He sat quietly to give thanks for his safety. With effort, he stood and slowly began crawling backwards down the mountain.

When Trance approached the camp, Bill Netherby was sitting opposite the base of the wall. He was absentmindedly throwing snowballs toward a distant crevice to his left when Trance eased down from above. Netherby nearly wet his pants. He stared up at Trance, wide-eyed in fright, then began to laugh. He wasn't sure whether he should rejoice or cry; he had no clue how they would extricate themselves from Austria. There would be no rescue plane unless he called in dead. If he made it back to England, his fate was dubious, at best. Even so, as the shock waned he felt the thrill of accomplishment and the warmest of joy at Trance's safe return.

"Well, I'll be bloody damned," he said.

"Good to see you, too," said Trance. "We got what we needed. Now let's get out of here."

"Where to?" said Bill. "There's no one to help us."

"Not a problem," said Trance. "Get your gear. I have a friend that lives close to here. We should be there for lunch."

"No shit?"

"No shit."

After an hour of intense skiing Bill called for a break. Trance, with little energy of his own, gladly stopped. He dusted snow off an old log and sat down for a breather.

After a few minutes Bill caught his breath enough to ask, "How does one get to know someone in the middle of nowhere?"

"It's a long story," said Trance.

"I'm not going anywhere."

Trance pondered Bill for nearly a minute. How far could he be trusted? Would he be putting his family friend in danger?

"Wait a moment," said Trance. He took out his penny and began to flip it to form the hexagrams that would tell him how to act. Should he tell Bill that Alfred Breitfuss lived barely one hundred kilometers from the Baron's castle? That he owned and operated a small inn called the Pinzgau Hutte, halfway down the Schmittenhohe Mountain in Zell am See?

"What are you doing?" said his companion.

"I must consult the Sage to see whether or not it is safe to tell you."

Bill Netherby shook his head. "Whatever..." he said under his breath.

Three minutes later Trance faced him and said, "We are going to see a man who lives in a small town here in the Alps. This man, my father, and I have made several climbs together. Our families go back generations. In fact, my father arranged the loan for this man to buy his business. I will not burden you with his name or the town where he lives." Trance paused. "Let's go."

Four hours later they came to a village, whose post office had a working

phone. Trance placed a call, hung up the receiver and smiled.

“He will be here soon,” he said. “Let’s go eat.”

“I thought we were going to eat with your friend?” said Bill.

“Change of plan.”

Bill shrugged and followed Trance to an inn along the main street of the small town. It was nestled between a bakery and a butcher shop. Two pairs of wooden cross-country skis were nailed to each side of the front door, and three dead ducks hung from a ceiling overhanging the porch.

Inside, there was a small entryway. Stairs lead to the left and a narrow corridor angled off to the right. Trance followed the passage until it ended at a squat wooden desk. Behind it stood a square, matronly woman dressed in Lederhosen, with peppered hair tied up in a bun. She had an unfiltered cigarette hanging from her lips, which moved up and down as she said, “Grus Gott.”

“A room and a meal would be nice,” said Trance in the same Austrian dialect.

The woman offered Trance a guest book to sign and rang a bell for someone to lead them to a room.

“The kitchen is down there,” she said, pointing to her left. “It looks out onto the street.”

Three hours later a Volvo swung to a stop outside the inn. Trance saw the driver and waved. “Time to go,” he said. He picked up his gear and walked out the door.

Alfred Breitfuss opened his car door and walked around the front to embrace John Trance. “It is good to see you, my friend.” He was wearing a pair of loose blue ski pants and furry après ski boots. Black hair wandered across his forehead and over his ears. A thick mustache sat neatly on his upper lip.

Trance smiled and nodded. He turned to Bill Netherby, “Mr. A, this is B.”

Breitfuss nodded toward Bill, then looked back to Trance with a questioning glance.

“Where are we going?” he said.

“Can you head toward Zurs? I’ll direct you from there.”

“Ya.”

That night the two men made a clandestine crossing into Switzerland. The next morning they caught a train to Berne where Trance contacted his mother’s cousin, a Japanese diplomat posted there. The diplomat brought them by limousine to the British embassy. Along the way, Trance and his uncle carried on a long conversation in Japanese, occasionally nodding somberly, as if agreeing to some secret pact. That evening the men were on their way to England.

Penwell was sitting in a deep, red leather chair, smoking a pipe and reading

the *Times* when the phone rang.

“Mr. Penwell? It’s Bill Netherby.”

Netherby could hear Penwell inhale deeply. He waited through the silence, until Penwell replied quietly. “Well?”

“We have the proof you wanted.”

“You have the book?”

“The book?”

“Yes, the book. Have you got the book?”

A muffled silence hung over the loud static on the receiver, as Netherby asked Trance about the book.

“Trance is opening his pack to see if the book is in there. He says he took a pile of documents, the only ones that seemed to be about business.”

Penwell muttered to himself as he waited impatiently for the results of the search.

“No. Nothing I can see,” said Netherby. “What’s so important—”

“Goddamn son-of-a-bitch!” Penwell dropped the receiver back into its place. He turned on his short wave radio, which was connected to a large tower structure that rose high above his residence.

Five minutes later Bulldog Swanson was crackling faintly on the airwaves.

“Any word?” said Swanson

“No, not yet. You hear anything?”

“No, sir.”

“Let me know when you do.”

Penwell picked up the phone, dialed a series of numbers and arranged a greeting party for the two men entering the country.

At the same time, Trance placed a call back to his uncle at the Japanese legation in Berne. He thanked him again, in Japanese, for his help, then informed him that he and Netherby would soon be on their way to England, via Lisbon. “Would you be so kind as to do the favor we discussed?” asked Trance.

“Of course, my son. Do not worry. You will be safe.” After all, they were family. They were also Samurai—honor bound forever. “Be careful,” continued his uncle. “It will not be long before Japan engages America in the war. Your loyalties may be questioned. You must distance yourself from your family—however hard it may be. We will always be here for you if you need us—but you must protect yourself.”

When Lieutenant John Trance and special agent William Netherby emerged from the military transport there was no welcoming celebration. There were no marching bands to hail heroes of the war, no welcoming smiles of faithful women they had left behind. There were no colorful signs to ease the fear and

fatigue they had felt throughout their silent trip. Six uniformed men met them at the plane. Each soldier carried a rifle, and a holstered sidearm. Trance and Netherby were escorted separately to waiting Mercedes limousines, and whisked to Penwell's home. Penwell lived in a 17<sup>th</sup> century castle along the Thames. It was surrounded by a full moat, harboring a scattering of contented ducks chuckling as they fed. Ivy-covered walls rose high into the air, and stretched several hundred feet to each side. The men crossed a drawbridge and were led along a drafty corridor that was dimly lit by electric torches, until they came to a cozy, book-lined study. Penwell rose from his soft leather chair to greet them.

Penwell reached out his hand for Netherby to shake. Then he drew Netherby close to him and whispered, "You are a dead man."

"I know," said Netherby.

Penwell motioned for the men to sit. Penwell was accompanied by another man, who wore a white lab coat and carried a black leather case. They all waited in silence, until a dozen soldiers entered the room and escorted them away at gunpoint. Within minutes they were locked into separate cells for an SIS debriefing by Penwell.

"How in the holy hell could you have let this happen, Netherby?" The words came from the shadows behind a glaring light. It shined like a laser into the agent's tired eyes. Netherby's story hadn't changed in twenty-four hours of interrogation. Penwell was beginning to lose an already splayed temper. He'd had the same difficulty with Trance.

Penwell pulled his medical assistant to the side and said, "Deprive them of sleep for another twenty-four hours."

"Wouldn't it be better just to give them a couple of injections?" said the man. "I could—"

"Not yet, doctor. I want their minds clear for a while longer," said Penwell. He paused. "Besides, we still have to have our fun."

Interrogation was one of Penwell's favorite activities. There were so many ways to bend the mind—ways that were far more entertaining than the drugs, and more predictable, too. Pain had its way of producing results. One just had to have patience.

Penwell forced Trance and Netherby to remain awake. He allowed each man to come within a blink of sleep, before shocking him with bright lights and a full-fisted slap on the face. Soon they would begin to lose the energy, thought Penwell. He'd let them cling to their sense of self for a little while longer. Then he would destroy their will with crushing ferocity. Yes, soon they would be willing to tell him anything, confess to any crime he told them they had com-

mited.

Penwell was interrogating Bill Netherby when he was interrupted by a knock on the thick steel door.

“Yeah,” said Penwell.

The door opened and his male secretary came scurrying over to him. The aid was in his late forties, willowy, with just a few dozen hairs remaining in a small tuft in the middle of his otherwise bald head.

“Sir. I hate to disturb you but—”

“What is it?” shouted Penwell.

“Sir. We’ve had two telephone calls for Mr. Trance from someone claiming to be a Japanese diplomat.”

“How in the bloody hell did someone find this number? Another goddamn security breach. Tell them he’s not here...Tell them he’s never been here...Tell them we don’t know who the hell Trance is.”

“Yes, sir.” The aide clicked his heels, preened himself like a bird and scurried away.

Penwell was running out of time. He walked to the edge of the room. Along the wall there was a series of pegs built into the wood. From them hung various “instruments of delight,” as Penwell called them. He selected a small, leather riding whip and carried it casually back to Bill Netherby.

“You mean to tell me that you took a shot at Trance from ten feet away and missed? You? A member of the bloody National Biathlon Team? Then, after you shot at him he handed your weapon back to you and you let him live?”

“I couldn’t shoot him. We had a mission. Besides, he had some kind of...power...or...something over me—”

Penwell slashed the whip across Netherby’s face. “Do you mean to tell me that you never asked to see the information that Trance took off of that mountain?”

“It wasn’t my place to ask. Besides, you don’t know him—”

“Enough!” Penwell slapped the whip against his palm. “Do you realize that the information he supplied is absolutely useless to us? It is junk, things we already know. We sent you there to get information!” Penwell lowered his voice. “I sent you there for a book.”

“I thought you sent us there to die?” Bill struggled against the lights, trying to see into Penwell’s eyes. Bloodied spit dripped from his chin.

“You are going to die. But not until you tell me what really went on between you and Trance. Now, whom are you working for? What did they pay you?”

Penwell cracked the whip in a wide arc, slashing Netherby across the face. “Once again, from the top,” he said.

Trance endured the same torture. But where Bill had told the truth, Trance hid

everything. He never told Penwell that he had left documents with Breitfuss. That the most incriminating papers, as well as the Baron's formula, were now buried safely under four feet of dirt and ten feet of snow, somewhere halfway up a mountainside in the Austrian Alps.

Penwell could sense the lies. The stories were not identical, and the slightest variations loomed large under the magnifying glass of anger. He was hell-bent to tear out the truth. He had been easy on them so far—a few bruises, a little blood. Soon he would open the floodgates to pain. If that didn't work, he would lay on the drugs. The drugs would be the last, for there was always the risk that the mind would never return. He may need them coherent before he killed them.

What should he use next? He loved this feeling of anticipation. Perhaps a little burning? A little flame...hot irons...glowing embers...maybe a little acid in the eyes? Electricity? Maybe a cattle prod? That was always stimulating. Castration? That had a way of making a man talk. Or perhaps the gradual crushing of the fingers...or toes? Maybe a little intrusion into the body orifices...Penwell was having fun anticipating his next delicious action, despite his billowing anger.

*He's got my goddamn formula. I know he does. That formula was for me. Not that madman Hitler. He's only got one ball for Christ's sake! He's half the man I am...*

Penwell made his choice. He selected a thin canvas tube filled with small ball bearings. It was perfect for crushing bone and cartilage without marring the outer surface of skin. He worked on Netherby until, mercifully, he drifted into unconsciousness.

"Doctor. Wake this sonofabitch," said Penwell. The doctor injected Bill with a powerful mixture of stimulants, followed by a wave of smelling salts under his nose. Within moments Bill was coughing and choking into a dazed wakefulness.

"All right, you bloody shit. Tell me where you and Trance hid the book."

"I...I...We didn't hide any book. We..." Blood streamed down Bill's forehead and mixed with the sweat to form a dripping river of agony under the broil of the lamp and heat of the room. Bill's vision blurred into blindness. All he had the energy to say was..."Why....sir?"

"Doctor. Make this man talk!"

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

The doctor withdrew a needle from his bag and slowly filled the syringe with a clear liquid. It had a slight greenish tint in the naked light. He pulled back Netherby's shirtsleeve and swabbed his arm with cotton and alcohol in a highly meticulous in his manner. Then with a compassionate motion he injected it all into the semi-conscious life form.

Two minutes later Bill Netherby was dead.

“You killed him, you bloody shit. What in-the-goddamn-name-of-hell did you give him?”

“It’s the same—”

“Get out of here! Get me Trance.”

It was nearly six o’clock in the morning. Penwell was beginning to ready himself for one final session with Trance. The son-of-a-bitch kept mumbling about everything being in Cosmic Order and Penwell could take it no more. He was going to break Trance’s teeth. *Maybe this will keep him from escaping into that sick world he keeps falling into...*

Trance was tethered into a chair before him. Penwell grabbed hold of his hair and strained his head back. Trance’s eyes remained closed, and Penwell shook him violently to keep him from drifting away. His hot breath felt like dragon smoke against Trance’s face, and it seeped through his eyelids to burn against his weary eyes.

“I am going to break your teeth now. If that won’t make you talk, I am going to shove this little glass tube up your privates and crush it—”

As Penwell spoke, the door behind him opened and a hooded figure crept into the room. The man moved like a shadow, dressed entirely in black.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” came a quiet voice. “You have already killed one too many.”

“What the—” Penwell reached for his pistol. But before he could move, the gun lay on the floor, and his hand was stinging from the blow of the shadow’s wooden tube.

“You will let him go.”

“The hell I will. You’ll never get out of this place alive. I’ll have you strung up by—”

“Pick up the phone.” The voice spoke cultured English, with a soft Oriental lilt to the accent.

“What?”

“Pick up the phone. Or I will break your leg.”

Penwell reached for the phone. The shadow continued, “At this moment there are three other men with visitors such as myself. Swanson, who you have so neatly manipulated...your Prime Minister...and the American President.”

“You’re full of shit.”

“Call your Prime Minister at his home. Here is the number.” The voice was nearly a whisper. Penwell called the operator. A minute later he had Churchill on the line.

“Penwell. What the hell is going on?” said the agitated Prime Minister.

“Sir, is someone with you there, right now?”



“You bet your bloody bum there is. Some guy dressed in a costume holding a knife at my throat. He says that only you can call him off. I suggest you do that.”

“Ah...Wait a minute.” Penwell looked up and said, “You don’t expect me to believe that you have men holding knives to the throats of Swanson and Roosevelt, do you?”

The shadow nodded. “You will use the short wave radio to check overseas with Swanson. You and he will explain to your leaders that you felt they were not being adequately protected. So you arranged a test of security, which failed. My men will leave as soon as they hear, from me, that Trance is safe. You will now tell Churchill he must contact the American President in exactly...” The shadow looked at his watch. “...six minutes. He is to explain to Roosevelt that this was a joint mission with the British SIS, and that his security was similarly breeched.

“Then you will tell Swanson that Trance will be arriving in Washington, from London, and that he will be treated as a hero, which he is. My man there will give him more specific instructions.”

Churchill received Penwell’s explanation with a mixture of gratitude, awe, and outrage. As Penwell set down the phone he looked into the eyes of the shadow and said, “I’ll see that you are dead for this. All of you.”

The shadow drew close to Penwell and touched a razor-sharp knife blade against his throat. He slowly pressed it into the flesh until there was a steady dropping of blood onto the glistening steel.

“For what you have done I should kill you now. But for the sake of my...this man...I will let you live. But I warn you, if any harm ever comes to this man, I will come looking for you and I will kill you. Don’t think that you can stop me, because you can’t. And don’t think that you can kill me and live. Because there will always be others behind me—always.”

With that the shadow unstrapped his brother from the chair, and they were gone.

## CHAPTER 1



### **Many years later**

Retired general John Trance was sitting comfortably in the waning summer twilight. He was ensconced in his favorite chair, with his evening constitutional martini by his left side—a ritual he had acquired rather late in life. His wife of many years sat by his side. They were relaxing in a whitewashed gazebo off their back porch, gazing at the sun setting over the purple mountains of Williamstown, Massachusetts. Upon his retirement from active duty, Trance had accepted a one-year visitor’s chair at the Williams College Graduate School of Developmental Economics. He and his wife Patricia had lived there ever since. They had found life peaceful in the secluded valley, far from the everyday hustle of the urban sprawl.

Each summer Trance made a ritual of skiing the Austrian glacier of Kaprun, where he would secretly meet with Breitfuss. Trance and his wife would then tour Europe, starting with the Mozart Fest in Salzburg at the end of July, and finishing with the Oktober Fest in Munich. They would visit the mineral baths of Badgastein and Badhofgastein, swimming in the thick hot waters, which always seemed to take years from John’s bones.

Although John Trance had reached an advanced age, he could still outpace men thirty years younger. His wife, Patricia, criticized him for his excessive activities, often wondering aloud how he managed to stay so young.

As the last faint rays of the orange sun dipped below the mountains, the phone rang.

Patricia watched out of the corner of her eye as Trance slowly lifted himself out of his chair. She knew of the pain he must feel. Wounds from the Second World War had left him with shattered knees and multiple contusions pressing mercilessly against his spine. It was a miracle he could walk at all.

“Good evening,” he said quietly. “Trance residence.”

“General John!”

Trance pressed the phone against his thigh and said to his wife “It’s your brother.” Then he said warmly, “Good evening, Senator. Patty and I were just talking about you. How are things in Washington? And to what do we owe the pleasure of your call?”

Winthrop Hopewell was the senior senator from Massachusetts, with over thirty years in Washington on his résumé. His closest friends called him *Winner*, as did the voting public he did not know at all. After his wife and children had perished in a tragic, summer boating accident, Hopewell had thrown his hat into the ring for the presidency. His traditional popularity combined with the sympathy vote made him a lock for the White House.

“Aw, you know Washington, John. A veritable steam bath, with more hot air coming from the mouths of politicians than even I can stand.”

“The more things change the more they remain the same,” said Trance. “How’s the campaign?”

“Looking good, John. Real good. Now if I can just keep my ass out of trouble...” The two men laughed. Their friendship was not intimate, but it was amiable and based upon a deep mutual respect.

“You will make a fine president, Winner.” Trance spoke quietly and with ingratiating politeness.

“Thanks...Hey, did you get the tickets I sent?” Knowing Trance’s passion for the annual music festival in Salzburg, he had pulled his weight to secure the best seats, along with engraved invitations to all the right parties.

“Yes, this morning. Patricia was very pleased.”

“Ah, they were offered to me by the Austrian Ambassador last week. My wife used to love the symphony, but I’ll get no use from them...Look, I don’t mean to cut the conversation short, John. But I am worried about Jack.”

“Oh? So is his mother,” replied Trance. “But I am confident he will work things out. He’s had a rough go of it these past few years.”

“I feel responsible,” said the Senator.

“For appointing him to Annapolis? For treating him like your own son? For steering him to the CIA like his father? Or for aiming him toward law after Janice...” Trance’s words trailed away.

“Was murdered,” finished Hopewell coldly.

“The CIA didn’t kill her, Winner. She was sworn to the Company, and she tried to support her husband in the best way she could. She knew what she was doing.”

“Did she?” said Hopewell. “I call it murder, John. The girl was three months pregnant. Her resignation had been tendered, and she was supposed to be shuffling paperwork, not meeting with terrorists. That ass Miller had her killed.... You should have let me set up a Congressional committee to—”

“What was done was done, my friend.” *How could they have let that happen to her? Her own people! She had no business in the line of fire.*

“By the way, General, your son just pulled off another miracle. Ambassador Abrams was returned unharmed after his kidnapping in Italy. Never made the papers. The President’s wants to pin another medal on Jack’s chest, privately of course. No publicity for his kind of work.” Hopewell paused. “But Jack’s disappeared,” he said slowly. “Any idea where he might be this time?” His deep concern showed in his voice.

“He was in Nepal,” said Trance. “He returned yesterday. The Italy affair disturbed his inner harmony, Senator. The missions always do.” *He only takes them as punishment*, he thought ruefully. “He had to kill six men.”

“It was a messy business. But he was the only one we could count on. God knows we didn’t need another hostage crisis.”

“Use someone else for these missions. It takes so much—”

The Senator interrupted. “You think we haven’t tried? We sent the 121. They were decimated. Jack went in alone and returned Abrams unharmed. In fifteen years your son hasn’t failed once. Sometimes there’s just no one else we can send. You must know that, John. When it’s a matter of national security, national stature...” The Senator let the words trail off. This was always their excuse.

John Trance knew it well, what it was like to be the only person they would send. Yes, he knew it only too well. He knew the bastards would never step forward to defend his son if he were caught. Jack wasn’t military now, not officially. He was a civilian, ever since the death of his wife. He worked privately, ostensibly for the money, paid to him in numbered Swiss bank accounts. But John Trance knew better.

It was true that his son made more money in two weeks than he had made in a lifetime. But John knew the real reason his son couldn’t quit. It was his destiny. His son was following The Creator’s will. John’s *I Ching* had told him so.

“When you see him, have him call me?”

“But of course, Senator. Good luck on the campaign.”

“Thanks, my friend.”

John Trance sat back to reflect. He thought of how he had escaped death at the hands of Penwell. How his younger brother, Tony, had rescued him from the interrogation compound with the help of three cousins. Of the years they had trained together in Japan.

He thought of his long recuperation and his surprising, immediate promotion to captain. He thought of those days long ago, when he had become the first Army liaison to the newly formed Office of the Coordinator of Information,

later rechristened the Office of Strategic Services, the OSS. In 1946 he was assigned to the Central Intelligence Group, which soon became known as the Central Intelligence Agency, the CIA. In the ensuing years Trance was a leader behind the scenes, helping shape and control the nation's entire spy network. Spies that were needed to ensure the continuing freedom of America. John Trance had done his part.

Then there was Patricia. She had started as his secretary in 1957, a bright dedicated girl of eighteen, barely half his age. She was an heiress; but he didn't know that then. They had fallen in love and were married the following year. They had one child, John, Jr., and they called him Jack.

Trance and his wife had grown apart over the years. It saddened him, but there seemed to be no tangible thing he could fix. Outwardly, there was nothing wrong with their marriage. Neither complained. But Patricia had grown distant, not only with her husband, but with her son as well. Neither man could bridge the chasm.

Jack had spent his childhood living in a dozen countries. He was raised as an American, but also as an Oriental child—trained in the Oriental languages, religion, the martial and mystic arts. For three of his teenage years he had lived among his people in the Iga Province of Japan, and he had learned to follow the honorable traditions of his family.

Jack had inherited his father's mental and physical prowess, and he had been able to excel in both cultures. It came as no surprise when his uncle, Senator Winthrop Hopewell, had appointed him to Annapolis.

Trance was graduated Summa Cum Laude. He lettered in football and track. More importantly, he was the school's top theoretical and practical war strategist. He worked with the top brass in designing game scenarios, and he had helped construct and moderate the annual Navy Global War Games.

Trance went on to Top Gun, then the Seals, where he helped execute covert campaigns against terrorists in more than a dozen countries. From there he was recruited to build and run an elite team of soldiers known as *T Force*, chosen from the country's four major military branches and trained in the most effective methods of fighting and espionage. Trance vanished into the joint operation between the military and the CIA.

This was where Jack met his wife. She was a new CIA recruit, training under Trance at the covert training facility known as The Farm. She had made him happy and they had married. When she became pregnant they decided that she would retire from public service, only to have her gunned down on the Washington Mall by the terrorists Jack had worked so hard to stop. Now Jack was driven by his own guilt, never shedding the pain, lost somewhere between life and death.

John Trance closed his eyes and wept. He thought of the book, the formula. His son was the only person he could trust with this burden. He was the only person who could carry the great secret he had been hiding for more than fifty years. Someday his son would hoist the world on his shoulders. This was the Way, his *I Ching* had told him so. John Trance relaxed and fell into uncluttered sleep. It was almost time.

## CHAPTER 2



### Present Day

There was a slight chill to the mountain air, with the morning sun beginning to peek over the hills in the distance. The ground was still wet with dew, and it had begun to sparkle with the first light of day. Water gurgled in the small man-shaped stream that ran through the neatly manicured garden stretching out from the back of Trance's Vermont home. The sound was relaxing, hypnotic, carefully created over a period of many years. The air smelled faintly of flowers.

Trance had finished his daily ten-mile run. It had taken him fifty-five minutes, not bad for a man in his middle thirties. He'd lifted weights and run through twenty katas, shaved and showered, and was now dressed in a pair of running shorts and a workout shirt that said, *Takuro Spirit* on the back. His feet were bare.

Trance carried a plate of bacon and eggs and a pot of coffee outside the house to a small round table that sat at the far end of the garden. Surrounding the table on three sides was a large alcove of polished marble. Two ponderous bronze doors stood at the entrance. They opened to the outside, revealing a small altar of hand-chiseled stone and wood within. Above the altar sat a vase of delicate porcelain, and beside it, a smaller one. Trance removed a single red rose from the small vase and replaced it.

"Good morning," he said. "I miss you today."

Trance sat back by the table and began to eat. He spoke to an empty place setting across the table.

"You know, when I was a boy, I used to have breakfast like this with my father. Mom never joined us...I don't know why." Trance laughed. "I asked dad about it once, and he said that 'every flower must grow in its own place.' Just like him to speak like that." Trance paused to reflect. "You know, the only time I ever really felt like I belonged anywhere was with you."

Trance dabbed at the egg yolks with the corner of a piece of toast.

“Today it’s going to be bright and sunny...a great day for painting. I’ll set up an easel by your window.”

Trance’s eyes began to mist and he wiped them absentmindedly with his napkin.

“I’m still mad at you, you know...You should have known better than to listen to Miller...Leaving me here alone like this...I hope it’s sunny where you are so you can paint.”

Trance heard the low hum of an alarm sensor coming from the receiver on his belt.

“Crazy to have to live this way...” He put his mind on alert.

Trance walked to his study, where he twisted a round light switch on the wall. The study’s wooden paneling slid back to reveal a bank of wide screen monitors. Trance caught a glimpse of white cloth in the woods behind his house. He smiled, then returned to his eating, keeping his senses stretched out behind him.

Trance faced away from his house, toward Janice’s shrine. He made no motion as a man emerged from the bushes and approached him quietly.

“Get out of here,” said Trance.

The man stopped. Trance turned and peered into the eyes of his intruder.

Jacob Miller smiled and held out his hands palms up, as if to say ‘I’m unarmed.’ His gaze turned from Trance to the shrine behind him.

“You’re not welcome here.” Trance followed Miller’s eyes as he studied the altar.

When Miller’s eyes stopped on the porcelain vase, Trance said, “That’s what’s left of my wife...after you sent her to die.”

“Jack, I—”

“I said get out of here.”

“If you would—”

“If I would what? What can you say that I would want to hear? Tell me that it wasn’t your fault? Or that the country needs me for some other bullshit mission?”

Trance slowly stood, walked to the great bronze doors, and gently closed them. “I’m sorry, honey. I’ll make him leave.”

“You’ve got to let go of her, Jack...Let go of the past. It’s been six years—”

“Six years?” asked Trance softly. Then he laughed. “No, Miller. It’s been a lifetime.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Just leave.”

“I can’t...I had to come here myself...Jack, it’s your parents.”

Trance felt his heart stop. His lungs fought for air, then he began to pace. Miller watched the muscles ripple along Trance’s body as he moved. Not a



spare ounce of fat anywhere. Each sculptured part had been formed through years of painstaking work on free weights and specialized machines, countless hours of exercise and training. Drill and re-drill, tune and retune, until Trance's entire being could function as a unit with perfection. *What a waste*, thought Miller, *to have him so dead*.

Miller waited in silence. He was glad that Trance had not greeted him with a handshake. Whenever they shook, Miller felt like his hand was in a nutcracker. The many years of martial arts training had turned Trance's hands into weapons, his fingers so strong and hard they could crumble bricks. Like a full-grown Saint Bernard who still acted like a puppy, when Trance shook hands, he crunched fingers.

Miller studied Trance's face, focusing on the prominent cheekbones that gave it a distinctively angular look when he set his jaw. He knew that Trance could neutralize this feature at will, suddenly looking like the boy next door. It was the kind of face you could never forget, and never remember when you had to. Trance's eyes shifted color depending upon the light. They could be intense and alert, a laser that never blinked, so powerful that they could back off any man who dared to stare into them. But they could also be compassionate, vulnerable, and filled with pain.

Like his father, there was a slight Oriental hint to his eyes. They were almond shaped, and surrounded by a smooth baby-face. Now in his middle thirties, Trance's face had taken on maturity, still young looking, but weathered.

Trance was less than six feet tall. But when he took a step toward Miller, Miller felt himself cower involuntarily. What was it about Trance that gave him such power? Perhaps it was that Trance could kill him in seconds, with no effort at all. Miller hated himself for that.

"Your parents were kidnapped and killed while in Salzburg," said Miller. "Their bodies washed up on the banks of the Salzach River yesterday. We have no suspects."

Trance closed his eyes. When would this end? He felt his chest tighten and burn. His father had been his anchor, his tether to the world of the living. There were so many questions, yet nothing to say. He felt only emptiness. He shrugged his shoulders, and said, "I see."

"We thought you might want to prepare the funeral. The President has offered Arlington."

"He liked it in Williamstown," said Trance. Then, as if with an afterthought, he said, "Were they tortured?"

Miller nodded his head solemnly. "Your father was."

"I see."

"There are no leads, Jack."

“They’ll pay...” Trance stared ahead blankly. “Whoever did this...This time I won’t stand by...Heads are going to roll.”

After Jacob Miller left, Jack Trance walked to his bedroom, dropped to the floor and curled himself into a ball. He began to cry with loud, powerful sobs. Rage and sadness rode through his mind, like dark wraiths, spinning in confused circles. Around and around with no place to fly. Eventually the tears went dry, leaving bitter thoughts of revenge etched forever on his heart.

Early the next day, Trance drove south towards Williamstown. As the world passed by Trance thought about his father.

Trance’s father had been an anomaly among the army elite. His fellow officers had never understood him, or trusted him with their personal lives. They had kept him at a distance, treating him with a mixture of awe and contempt, like they might a famous movie star with a drinking problem.

There were few who would call him a friend, but none who would call him an enemy. He had been quiet and unassuming, yet his toughness was legendary. No one had stood in the way of his success, yet no one had actively worked to help him succeed. He had done everything on his own; though very few knew what that true job had been. Few knew exactly how, or why, but whenever his name had been mentioned, it was in hushed tones. It was the same with his son.

When Trance entered his father’s home he found it ripped apart, room-by-room. The furniture was slit and overturned. The covers had been torn out of every book, and his father’s personal files lay strewn along the floors.

His father’s desk was cleared of debris, with a solitary piece of paper resting on the polished wood.

*Your father would not return what was mine. Now he is dead. I will have less patience with you.*

“And I with you,” said Trance.

Trance stood alone along the secluded bike path. Beside him stretched a well-manicured garden sporting roses, marigolds, dahlias, petunias, hydrangeas and an assortment of other perennial flowers. There were no walkers or bikers to break his morning solitude, and Trance let his mind drift back to when he and his father used to walk this same path. His father had often commented on how lovely it would be to put a Japanese garden off the path, just far enough away to allow quietude and a natural place to meditate. There were a hundred and forty unspoiled acres here, a bucolic setting where one could ponder the emotional and artistic attributes of man. Today he would get his wish.

The air was crisp and clean, as a high-pressure system swept in from Canada, drying the morning dew and buffing the air to a shine. *A great day to be buried,*

thought Trance. He looked at his watch and sighed. It was time. He headed back along the path until he came to the rear entrance to the white marble building that housed the Sterling Clark Art Museum. He could see a crowd of people milling about—far more than he had expected. He approached the throng and positioned himself at the entrance to the museum. The crowd began to organize into a jagged line that stretched well toward South Street.

The first to greet him was Marshall Abrams, vice president of the United States. Beside him stood his wife, Miriam.

“Hello, Marsh,” said Trance. “Thank you so much for coming.” They embraced briefly.

“The country will miss both your parents,” said the Vice President.

“Thank you. They would be proud to have you here.”

Trance gave an air kiss and a hug to Miriam Abrams, the vice president’s wife. “We will both miss her,” he said to his mother’s younger sister.

“She was a true patron of the arts,” said Miriam. “She would be proud of what you are doing.”

“Thank you,” said Trance. “She did love her art, and she loved this place.”

Behind the vice president followed Senator Winner Hopewell.

“Hello, Jack,” he said. He embraced his nephew, pulling Trance toward him like a big bear.

“I’m sorry for your loss,” said Trance. “This must be terribly difficult for you, after...” Trance lowered his head.

Hopewell kept his arm around his nephew. “I’ve come to grips with that, son. How are you?” He paused. “What can I do? Just name it.”

“How about if you do the talking today?” said Trance. “I’m a little—” The words trailed off.

“Sure, Jack. No problem.”

The Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of State, two Cardinals and an emissary from Rome, twelve former cabinet members, four U.S. senators, sixteen congressmen, business leaders and several heads of state followed Senator Hopewell.

As the procession thinned, an unfamiliar man approached Trance. The man appeared to be in his middle fifties, and carried himself with elegance. His hair was silver, and combed straight back on his head. His skin was tanned and smooth. His eyes were slate blue and lifeless. He wore an immaculately tailored dark blue suit, and sported a woman half his age on one arm.

“Hello, Mr. Trance. My name is Guillermo Vasquez. I manage my family’s interests in Buenos Aires. Your father and I conducted business on a number of occasions. We shared a passion for gold.”

“Gold?” said Trance.

“Yes, alchemy, in particular. I lent him an old book of mine.” Vasquez handed Trance a card. “Please call me if you come across any old alchemist’s notebooks. Mine has a red leather cover. It is an old family heirloom.”

Trance took the card. *How odd*, he thought. “I’ll call you if I find anything.”

Moments later Trance was approached again. “Mr. Trance. My name is Henri Villiers. I am the chairman of Villiers Industries in France. We had many dealings with your parents over the years. Did they ever speak of me?”

“We didn’t talk much about others,” said Trance. “But I am glad you came. Thank you.”

Trance turned to greet the next person in line, but Villiers grasped his shoulder and whispered, “Did your father ever mention his interest in gold?”

Trance shook his head. “I’m sorry. He did not.” *What is going on here?*

Other men and women made this same request during the next half hour, and Trance became keenly aware that many of the people attending the memorial service had a far different agenda than paying last respects.

Near the end of the line Trance saw a slim, dark-haired woman dressed in a simple black dress. Her hair was tinged with gray, which she seemed to wear with pride. Beside her walked a man in his early sixties, with white hair and mirth lines creasing his eyes. The man walked with an easy grace, but wore the solemn countenance of a man in grief. These were the parents of Trance’s closest friend, Lauren Haverford.

The woman reached her arms around Trance and held him. “We are so sorry for your loss, Jack.” Trance embraced the woman and gave her a soft kiss on the cheek. “Thanks Angie.”

“Lauren’s in China and we can’t reach her.”

“I know,” said Trance.

“We’ll call her every hour. She’ll want to be here.”

“When you reach her tell her I’m okay. Tell her to finish what she’s doing. There’s nothing she can do, but I do want to see her. I’ll go to Boston after I’ve settled things here—”

“But—”

The man patted Angie on the shoulder. “It’s okay, sweetheart. Jack can handle this. You know that.”

“It’s just so sad...”

The man extended his hand to shake, and then pulled Trance against his chest and whispered, “We’re here for you, son. Just let us know what we can do.”

Trance sniffed and broke away. “Thanks, Max. Guess I better get this done.”

Trance gazed toward South Street and saw a small bus from Enterprise Rent-A-Car turn in the drive. It stopped behind a line of cars. Twelve men with shaved heads wearing black silk robes emerged and floated toward the art insti-

tute. Trance's jaw dropped and he began to smile. He ran toward the men and embraced them like a football team.

"I am so glad to see you," he said in Japanese. "My father would be so honored."

The leader took Trance by the shoulders and gazed at him for more than a minute. His eyes twinkled, but there was a solemn look on his face. "It has been a long time, Red Dragon," he said. "You appear wiser, but the years wear heavy on your frame."

"The burdens of the few are many," said Trance.

"The wise man carries only one burden, my son—to be spiritually pure and serve others honorably."

Trance bowed. "Thank you, Sensei. I am learning still."

"As are we all, Red Dragon. As are we all."

The other men embraced Trance one-by-one, each murmuring words in his ear. Each time Trance nodded and bowed.

After all the men had passed Trance made his way through the reception area toward the amphitheater. He gazed at the hundreds of people packed side-by-side in the confines of the room, all waiting to pay their last respects. How many of these people had his parents really known? How many were here for some other reason?

Trance passed along a well-lit hallway that led to a set of wide alcoves that had been hastily converted to show a portion of the Trance art collection, one part fine European impressionist paintings, the other part an enormously rare assortment of Japanese feudal art and weaponry. He threaded among the pieces, acutely aware that he had never laid eyes on most of it.

Until two days before, he had paid no attention to the family wealth or his parents' collections. It had been the call from Boston that had forced him to accept his family legacy.

"Hello. Mr. Trance, my name is Jason Ricard. I am an attorney with Hale and Dorr in Boston. I represent your parents' estate. As you probably know, you are the sole heir—"

Trance interrupted him. "Did they make any provisions for charities?"

"No. They wanted to leave you with flexibility...and the burden."

Trance closed his eyes. He wasn't ready for this; he wasn't ready to have them gone. "I think I want to give it all to charity," said Trance. "Any suggestions?"

"Perhaps you don't know what we are dealing with here," countered Ricard. "Your mother's investment portfolio exceeds eight hundred million dollars. Then there is her stock in Hopewell Industries. As you know, this is privately held, but exceedingly valuable. It's probably worth another three to ten billion,

but we'll need to do a full valuation." He paused. "Then there is her art collection, which is priceless.

"Your father also left you many rare, one-of-a-kind articles from Japan. He wanted you to know that some of them have been handed down in your family for centuries. Sotheby's estimates the worth of this collection to be in excess two hundred million."

"That should go to my uncle, Tony. My father's brother."

"It was all left to you—"

"Mr. Ricard, I know this might sound funny to you, but my father and I were simple people. Because of her name, my mother was sometimes thrust into the spotlight, but even she shied away from the glitz that can come with wealth. We were comfortable, but we used our money as a credit card to bring good to others. Please humor me, leave my father's heirlooms to my uncle."

"Yes, Mr. Trance. I will contact him. You will need to pay the tax on that...a hundred million, give or take."

"Please do it."

"All told, Mr. Trance, the estate you have inherited easily exceeds five billion dollars...probably closer to ten."

"I don't need that kind of responsibility," said Trance. "Let this money help others." Then he hesitated, thinking better of his decision. "No, that's not right. I will retain the real estate. That, I want. Set aside enough to pay the estate taxes and maintain the properties. Then put everything else into a charitable lead trust, say, for thirty years—enough time to zero out the tax."

"Then what do we do with the trust?"

"Leave it to my cousins, on my father's side, I guess."

"You...ah...don't plan to have a family?" asked Ricard. "You're not that old...I could have the trust default to your children if you ever—"

*I have no family.* Trance had lost his chance for a family, years before. But, he decided, the world was unpredictable. "All right. Let's do it that way, then."

Trance entered the amphitheater and walked to the podium. He attached a portable microphone to his lapel. Beside him rested the closed coffins of his parents. He waited for each seat to be filled, and for the remaining mourners to pack into the auditorium. All three hundred and fifteen seats were filled, and the aisles were packed like a rock concert.

"Thank you all for coming," he said softly. "You must be wondering why we have gathered here." There was a murmur through the crowd. "Most of you know that my mother's family traces back to the early American settlers. Over the years her family has been able to collect a little art—"

Another loud murmur spread through the crowd, accompanied by a spatter-

ing of laughter. The Hopewell family was considered an American dynasty. They were well known around the country—for their triumphs, their tragedies, and their devotion to charities.

“My mother was a passionate, unbridled patron of the arts. She devoted her time toward bringing fine art to all levels of society.

“Many of you do not know that my father was a collector as well.” Trance paused. “He could trace his family back more than fifty generations. Over the centuries, his family, too, was able to accumulate a collection of rare artifacts.

He paused. “My father’s life was spent in the service of this country. Those of you outside our government will never know how much he served us. Perhaps his true legacy rests inside me...if I am worthy.

“My mother was an extraordinary woman. She will be fondly remembered for the exemplary life she lived and those whose lives she has touched.”

Trance could feel his fingers tremble, and he fought to keep his emotions under control.

“How do you sum a life in a few short minutes? How do you ensure that the legacy of two great people is not wasted or forgotten?

“My father helped ensure the safety of our nation. My mother helped shape our culture.”

Trance looked out over the crowd. What were they expecting? He smiled. “I have asked you here today because I was given the burden of deciding what to do with what they left behind. Their shadow is long, and I can only hope to be worthy of their legacy.

“The trustees of this fine art institution have graciously accepted my outright gift of two hundred million dollars to build and maintain a new wing that will house the Trance art collection for at least the next thirty years. This money will also be used to provide community outreach programs designed to bring our finest art to those who might otherwise never have the chance to see and appreciate it.

“I have also established the John and Patricia Trance Foundation. The foundation will sponsor college scholarships for high school graduates with great ambitions but modest means. It will also provide educational funds for patriots leaving our military, particularly those who have helped pay for our freedom with pieces of mind and body. I am pleased to announce that the first scholarships have been offered to five outstanding men and women who have been accepted here at Williams. The foundation will also sponsor young individuals from developing nations who have overcome the enormous obstacles placed in their way.

“I have chosen this path as a lasting tribute to my parents and their way of life. They were outstanding people in very different ways. I only hope that I can

follow their example.”

Trance cleared his throat and took a sip from a bottle of Poland Spring water. He fought to remain composed, but felt like a flag whipping in a strong wind. “My uncle, Senator Winthrop Hopewell, has agreed to speak on behalf of the family.” Trance backed away from the podium, turned off his microphone and took a seat between Angie and Max Haverford as Hopewell took his place.

“My friends, colleagues, guests and countrymen. We mourn here together. Our nation mourns with us. Rarely have the lives of others touched us so much.” He looked to Trance and motioned with his hand. “Rarely have two parents left a legacy like the son who sits before me....”

By the time Senator Hopewell finished speaking the auditorium was filled with sniffing noses and looked like it had been dusted white with tissues.

After the service, John Trance’s brother, Tony, drew Jack aside and said, “Are you all right, Jackie?”

“Sure, uncle Tony. I’m just going to miss them.” Trance paused. “Why didn’t you take it?”

“What would an old man do with a bunch of old art and obsolete weapons?”

“It is from your family, Tony. There is nothing more important than family.”

“Oh?” said Tony. “I have something for you. Perhaps you will change your mind.”

“What’s that?”

“Your father asked me to give you this when he died.” Tony withdrew an envelope from his jacket pocket and pressed it into his nephew’s hand. There were tears in his eyes. Jack wondered if they were tears for the father or for the son.

“When did he give this to you?”

“Ten years ago. But this letter results from an event that happened before we entered the big war. Your father was recruited for a mission in Europe, one he nearly didn’t survive.” Tony’s lips spread into a grim smile, remembering the night he had snatched his brother out of Penwell’s grasp. “There are things you don’t know.”

Trance chuckled. *That’s for sure.* He took a long look at his uncle. Tony was so much like his father, and yet so different. Both had risen to high positions in government service—dedicated, loyal and generous to others. Trance’s father seemed driven toward achievement, more taciturn, while Tony was far more apt to laugh and make friends. John Trance seemed consumed with destiny, convinced that greater powers controlled his life. Perhaps this was why he never seemed to age; he never worried. His life was controlled by the flip of a coin. Tony was more American. He believed that men could change the outcome,



that individuals had a choice in their actions.

Tony was two inches shorter than Trance, but still lean and straight. He had aged, but gracefully. He bowed politely as he spoke, glancing over a set of half-rimmed glasses that rested upon the end of his nose.

“I know,” said Trance. “My father was different. There was always this undercurrent—the way people treated him, something I could never quite grasp. I used to think it was because he was part Japanese, and fought for our side during the big war. But it wasn’t that. They treated him with respect, but also like a pariah.”

“I am afraid that what was once his burden will now become yours.”

Trance glanced sideways at his uncle. His uncle’s hair was still onyx black, the years wearing lightly upon him. Trance opened the letter from his father and laughed.

“He did this in that silly code we developed when I was a kid.”

“No one has ever broken that ‘silly code,’” said Tony.

Trance laughed again. “I’m sorry to disappoint you, Tony. But the NSA could break this code within an hour.”

“Or so you think.”

Trance shrugged his shoulders. “It’s really not that complicated. It has a single roving key—a simple function of dates, combined with specified books from our library. That is what provides the challenge. The books are from our own *unpublished* books, books in nobody’s database. A referenced event in the text triggers a new date that alters the code. Events are used for the key. A birthday, graduation, anniversary, vacation... It could never be used in the field between strangers, but within the family it worked well. We had a lot of fun with it.”

“I’ll leave you alone now. I’m tired...and my kids are flying me back to a new home—a transition community in Miami.” He shook his head. “It’s called the Final Rest.” He smiled at Trance. “A fitting name don’t you think? They are sending me off to die.” He sighed. “I’ve got to go. I am afraid an old man like me can’t be of any help to you.”

“Tony, you’re not old and you know it. Your children just have their own lives now. Come stay with me. You are always welcome here. Remember that.”

“Oh, Jackie. You know that your cousins will deny me visits with my grandchildren unless I am *safely taken care of* in Miami.” He patted Trance on the shoulder. “You’re a good kid, Jackie.” He paused. “You’ve shouldered more than your share of responsibility, far more than you know. Your father placed it upon you and you accepted it without question. He guided you into areas that you would not have chosen on your own. I...I know of the pain you have felt. I know of the conflicts that you, your family, and your occupation have created inside you. All that you have done...become...was for a purpose, Jackie. Believe

me. Soon you will know.”

“What’s up, Tony?”

“I’m so sorry. I cannot say. I must go now. I’ve got to go back to Miami. You are right, Jackie. I am not so old. Just don’t tell my kids. Goodbye, Jack Trance. May good fortune and God’s will follow you.”

Trance watched as his father’s brother walked slowly away. He thought of how much more philosophical he had grown with age, and the patience Tony had always shown with him and his American compulsiveness.

Later that night, he unfurled the coded letter from his father and retired to the remnants of his father’s library. He located several of the defamed books and began decoding his father’s final words. As the letter unfolded, Trance found himself smiling, realizing that his father had undertaken to impart one final lesson to him—and to play one final game.

*My dearest son,*

*There is so much you do not know. But your road to knowledge will be long and dangerous.*

*Since you are reading this letter I must assume that two things have happened. The first is that I am now dead. Do not grieve for me. I have led a full and useful life. But whether I have died from natural causes or not, there will be people you must stop, perhaps even kill. It was not my fate to stop them, or kill them. That much was made clear to me. But I suspect it will be yours.*

*The second gives me grave cause for concern. For, if you are reading this letter, I considered this information too dangerous to give to you while I was alive. As of the time of this writing, it has been decades since I unraveled the secrets. Perhaps you were not ready and able to receive them—not that you were a source of disappointment to me. On the contrary, Jack, I have never been disappointed in you. Only once in your life did you incite my anger. You have done much during your short life. But you have not found perspective. Perhaps I allowed you to become too American, too self-focused. You must understand that in our Universe, as individuals, we are not important. Each of us makes a small difference, like one grain of sand will make upon a beach. The difference is there, but quite hard to measure. You have never been able to accept your own insignificance in this world, and allow yourself to surrender to the Cosmic Will.*

*Although each of us is insignificant in the greatness of the Universe, we can, and do play a major role in the small part we inhabit. Our mistake, my son, is that we believe we are in control of the moves we make, and the actions we take. That, my son, is up to the Creator.*

*I was tempted to feel concern at the pain this has caused you. But I also understand that this is all part of the Divine Order. So too, I believe, is this*

letter.

*I will give you the information in stages. I cannot take the risk of the whole falling into the wrong hands. If it did, life as we know it will be forever altered. It was not my place to let that happen. Perhaps it will be yours. Each stage will lead you to the next. You must surrender yourself to the Divine Will. Use your "I", and you will know what to do. Fight it, and I am afraid you will fail, and millions will die.*

*Remember our Friendship. Keep it as your anchor in the storm that will surround you.*

*Love, Dad.*

Trance let the letter fall through his fingers, pondering its possible meanings. They had played the game before, back when he had constructed the code while in grade school. It had been his father's idea, designed to give his son the experience he would need with ciphers. He had been good at the game, always decoding each message, leading on to the next like a scavenger hunt.

Now he drew a blank. He let his pen wander, repeating the key words of the letter, writing combinations of words.

Knowledge... long... dangerous... grave... information... disappointment... anger... perspective... self-centered... insignificance... Cosmic Will... Divine Order... information... stages ... Friendship... anchor... storm...

Was there another code within the letter? Where should he look next? He must look for what is out of place. Match the words and events.

Trance read the letter for the fifth time and still found no direction.

"If this was so goddamn important to him, then why the hell didn't he make it clear?" Trance threw the letter down in disgust. Anger was a familiar feeling with him these days, and he could feel it welling inside. He thought of the irony, of how his father had never expressed anger, while Trance seemed to live it constantly. Why did he fight himself?

"Anger," he said. Trance cocked his head and took the letter back into his hands. He began to read a passage of the letter aloud, so he could hear the words from the outside.

"Only once in your life did you incite my anger." Where had it been? Maine. It had been in Maine, their home on the coast. In Friendship. Friendship, Maine. Friendship...anchor. *That's it!* He had been helping his father set a new mooring for their boat in Friendship harbor. They were working together, underneath the boat in scuba gear. Jack had stalked off to snag two lobsters along the ocean bottom. He hadn't been gone for more than a minute when his father had emerged from behind him and torn the mask off of his face.

That had been the only time that he had seen anger in the eyes of his father. That must be his clue. The boat mooring in Friendship harbor.

Trance spent two days closing his parent's home off River Street in Williamstown. He wondered whether he should sell the place. It was a rambling old mansion, and it did have a certain comfort. But he felt no comfort now. In fact, there was something unsettling on the fringe of his senses. It nagged at him incessantly, although he could not pinpoint the stress. Perhaps he would figure it out later.

Trance made arrangements for the caretaker to look after the home. He convinced Professor Robert Lelander, a retired economics professor at Williams, and a long-time friend of his father's, to move into the house, rent-free, for as long as he wished. His father would have liked that. Lelander enthusiastically embraced the idea of using the home to host the disadvantaged students who were being sponsored by the Trance foundation to study at Williams.

It was an unusually hot August day and the sun had been glowering upon the Trance home all morning. There was no wind to stir up the oppressive humidity, and it clung to Trance's body until it began to wear into his patience. He could not yet leave for Maine, so he decided that a trip to the Dorset Quarry in Vermont was well in order. His father had never believed in air conditioning, and a swim in the cold spring water would do him good.

Trance grabbed his car keys from the kitchen counter and jumped into his classic Porsche 959. It was a white convertible with wire wheels, twin turbo charging, and custom black trim. His initials had been etched ever so subtly into the design, so that only he knew they were there. As he sat behind the wheel he felt a brief tinge of guilt for spending a quarter of a million dollars on a used car. But when he sat in the solid leather cockpit, turned the key and heard the throaty rumble of the engine, he remembered why he owned the car. He felt life spring into his muscles and a tinge of excitement flow through his blood. He was alive again. He headed north along Route 7, letting his mind drift back to his wife. Would there ever be another Janice? He felt tears struggling to break through his control. Why did he always want to cry? Why couldn't he let go? He gripped the wheel tightly and pressed on the accelerator. He rode along the country roads at a comfortable 85 miles per hour, pushing the car faster as he hit the corners, loving how the wheels clung to the road. In moments like these he could almost understand what his father had told him about feeling one with the universe. In this brief space in time he and his car became one. His hands became part of the wheel, and the car became part of the road. He pushed the car faster, and felt the familiar sense of danger, the thrill, the thought that any moment could be his last.

He glanced into his rear view mirror and saw another car a couple hundred yards behind him. Was he being followed? He'd soon find out.

After turning west on Route 30, Trance swerved his car into the parking lot of a souvenir store. He spun the car, curving it back out toward the road to watch as two men sped by him. It was a BMW 7 Series. Silver. Both men wore Bausch and Lomb Ray Ban *shooter* sunglasses, like the ones he wore himself. Perfect for driving, cutting the glare without reducing too much light. But Trance used them because of their purpose. The nose pads pushed the glasses higher than the standard aviator frames, so the frames didn't get in the way of a rifle. Were these men shooters, too?

The men kept their eyes stiffly forward as they passed, but Trance could feel their attention upon him. He had a sixth sense for that sort of thing, when he took the time to listen to it. He wondered if there were others, and why they were following him.

Trance set the alarm on his watch for ten minutes. He reached under his seat, unlocked a hidden compartment, and removed his father's old 32 caliber Colt automatic. It had been his graduation gift from college, his prized possession. He had carried it into danger dozens of times. He wrapped his hand around the grip, pulled back the safety and snapped it ready. Automatically he replaced the manual safety, even though there was a second one on the grip.

He thought of how this gun had always felt so natural in his hands. Others may carry Colt 38s or 45s, Rugers, Walther PPKs, or Berretta 9 millimeters for their power, but Trance had always felt more comfortable with his father's old Colt. He had modified the twist inside the barrel for extra bullet spin. It now took a higher-powered shell. But there was also a little magic to it, his father had said. Trance had seen that magic in action. The gun wasted no space. It fit perfectly in his hand, and comfortably into the small of his back, almost like a part of his body. He fingered the safety again, leaving the gun ready to fire.

Trance stopped to fill his tank with gas. When the regular tank was filled, he checked the spare he had built into the car. It was full. As he finished, his watch began to beep. He handed a wad of cash to the gas attendant, saying, "Keep the change," and hopped into his Porsche. He swung it back into the traffic, moving along at a leisurely pace, just under 40 miles per hour. He knew that any moment he would see the Ray Ban twins waiting for him along the side of the road. His eyes darted from side to side searching for the silver car. Finally he saw it, sitting at an angle in the parking lot of another gift shop. The men were hunkered down into the seats with the mirrors of the car angled to detect Trance's approach. Jack saw the movement of their glasses; they had seen him and reacted.

"Amateurs," he whispered.

Trance drove his car past the BMW at a slow speed. As he passed by, he hit his brakes, then gunned the car forward, turning the wheel sharply as the wheels

spun him around. In an instant he was staring directly back at his pursuers, their cars nose to nose. He smiled broadly, and saw panic spread across their faces. The driver jammed the car into reverse. Trance laughed. They'd never lose him. Their cars were a mismatch, and he could drive with the best. His mind flickered back to the one time that Janice had watched him take a third at Le Mans. He gritted his teeth and blinked.

He waited impatiently for the driver to stop the BMW and shift it back into forward.

"Hey, buddy," he yelled. "My mother drove better than you—"

Then he heard a muted crack from behind him and felt a jolt as a bullet hit his left rear tire. The tire spit in response, deflating in a blast of air. Trance knew that he was done for the day, despite his run-flat tires. He looked back and saw a second BMW spin away after the first.

"Damn" he said. There was a second car. "How the hell could I miss it?" These men were not amateurs. They were pros, and he'd been careless.

Trance slapped his hands on the wheel and chuckled. "At least they're not trying to kill me," he said. "But why are they after me?" The answer had to be in Maine.

## CHAPTER 3



The phone buzzed in the executive offices of Global Credit Bank in Boston.

“Lauren Haverford’s office. May I help you?”

“Ms. Haverford, please.”

“May I tell her who’s calling?”

“This is Jack Trance.”

“Oh, hello, Jack. Just a moment, please.”

Jack and Lauren had been high school sweethearts. In those young and simple days they had romantically thought of marriage, a house in the suburbs with a white picket fence, a two-car garage, and children playing in the yard. But it never happened. Lauren had gone on to Princeton and the University of Chicago while Trance pursued Annapolis, the Navy, then Harvard. Twenty years later they were still the best of friends. Lauren had chosen a career above marriage, and she had risen quickly in the banking world. She was now just one step away from the presidency of one of the country’s largest financial institutions. She also looked the part. She was slender and impeccably dressed. She could be ruthless in the boardroom when the game was on, but selfless and down to earth when someone needed a friend.

“Jackie. I’ve been trying to reach you. I just got back from China this morning. I am so sorry—”

“I’m okay, Lauren. Really. But I need you.”

“Really? I need you, too. Your place or mine?” Lauren could sense that Trance needed levity more than sympathy. This was a long-standing joke between them. Neither would chance ruining their friendship by trying to recapture the sexual innocence of their youth. Trance had not slept with another woman since his wife’s death. Lauren’s celibacy had endured twenty years. Yet both had a hunger for closeness, a need for intimacy and physical release. It was a hunger that had nearly drawn them into each other’s arms. Now they told jokes to remove the tension and make light of the needs that went unfulfilled. Perhaps he really needed her now, she hoped.

“I’d love to, Lauren. I’ll take a rain check on sex. I need you for something else.”

“Only if you’ll promise to turn my lights out later.”

Trance laughed for the first time in days, as he envisioned her using such language in the boardroom.

“Are they going to make you president of that financial colossus with a mouth like that? What in the name of God is this world coming to?”

“They never see me like this, Jackie. You know that. To them I’m Virgin Lauren. I can’t tell you how many of them have made it a quest to climb my little mountains, and failed. I’ve heard they call me the Terminator. Only you see me like this, Jackie. Only you...” The last two words trailed softly over the phone.

“You know what kind of work I do.”

“Adult toys, right?”

Trance laughed again. “I’m going to give you the chance to play with some new toys.”

“Shoot.”

Trance chuckled again. Only Lauren could make him laugh like this. He told her what he needed her to do. They didn’t talk about the death of his parents. They would do that in person.

Trance hopped into his car carrying a small blue gym bag. He set it on the passenger seat and fired up the Porsche. He drove leisurely, heading northeast toward Brattleboro, Vermont. He knew that somewhere, someone with a wireless device had alerted his pursuers. Soon he’d pick up a tail or two. How many ticks would there be? He wondered.

It was two o’clock on Wednesday afternoon, two days after his call to Lauren Haverford. When Trance reached Brattleboro, he glanced at his watch and then headed south on Route I 91 until he hit Route 2, the Mohawk Trail. He took it east toward Boston. He watched as two cars pretended not to follow him. They took turns in the lead, always keeping at least one or two cars between themselves and Trance.

Trance took the Copley Square exit off the Mass Pike and began to meander about the city. He drove with no apparent direction, keeping his eye on the mirror, memorizing license plates and the types of cars behind him each time he looked. At 4:40 he climbed along Beacon Hill. When he reached the top of the hill he swung past the Statehouse and then made his way toward the financial district. He continued to drive at his leisurely pace, circling around Post Office Square until he saw a red Mercedes and a blue van slip in behind him. Ten minutes later he pulled into the Aquarium garage off Atlantic Avenue. As



he took a ticket and began climbing the ramp he couldn't help but laugh, as he saw the woman in the Mercedes pull awkwardly to the ticket dispenser and clumsily reach in vain for the ticket just out of her reach. The van blocked the other entrance, leaving no way for Trance's pursuers to follow. They leaned on their horns, but to no avail. The woman got out of the car and began shaking her fist at the men in the car.

Trance swung around the corner to the second floor where he saw Lauren's blue Lincoln Continental parked exactly where he had requested. The trunk was raised and the car was running, with its driver leaning forward out of sight. He stopped his car where it was, leaving his motor running, grabbed his gym bag and climbed into the trunk of the Lincoln.

The Lincoln swung forward, headed down the ramp and became the third car in line for the exit. Meanwhile, an old friend jumped into the Porsche and began to spin it toward the top of the garage.

Fifteen minutes later Trance emerged from the trunk of the Lincoln, kissed Lauren gently, and left her standing in tears on the tree-lined Commonwealth Avenue.

Trance was now free from surveillance, for the moment at least. But he would have to move quickly. They would find him soon enough.

Trance drove the Lincoln north on Route I 93 to I 95, then followed the highway toward Maine. He took the Brunswick exit, passed by Bowdoin College, and followed Route 1 North through Wiscasset and into Waldoboro. From Waldoboro he headed east toward the coast. The drive brought back the comforting feeling of his childhood, when everything was light-hearted fun. He felt almost young again. He drove his car quickly over the sweeping bumps in the road that made his stomach reach for his throat.

When he reached the small village of Friendship, Trance parked the car half a mile from the family compound. He would enter the grounds on foot. He cut through the woods and approached the family home from the rear. In the darkness he could see the distinct outline of the old wood and stone farmhouse in the moonlight. He threaded his way through the thick pine forest, feeling glad that there were no rattlesnakes in Maine. So much safer than the jungles of Southeast Asia, where pit vipers, cobras and coral snakes grew like locusts. He carried a black rubber flashlight with a red lens placed over the face. This gave it a luminescent glow that could not be detected easily from a distance. He could see well enough, and would pass through the woods with less risk of detection.

Jack and his father had spent their lives in espionage, a business that inspired retribution. So the home was well protected. They had built an elaborate fence and alarm system around the outer perimeter of the grounds, and then twice

more in concentric circles as one drew closer to the house. Once inside the ten-foot fences, there were weight and heat sensors, as well as a crisscross of infrared beams aimed across the grounds.

The outside alarm system was kept off unless someone was in the house. Friendship had no formal police department, so there would be no response to a burglar. Trance had taken his own precautions to ward off intruders. Only an advanced professional could penetrate this home unharmed or undetected.

Trance satisfied himself that there was no outside surveillance of the immediate area. He moved closer toward the rear of the home and walked to the edge of the woods that surrounded the house. The closest trees stood at a distance of fifty yards on all sides, except in the back, which opened out to the broad expanse of the coast. As he approached he could discern the outline of the impressive home, and he could also hear the water of the harbor lapping gently behind him. He thought of how nice it would be in the morning to eat breakfast in the dining room, with its 270-degree view overlooking the ocean. Trance removed a large, flat stone. Underneath it was an airtight seal over a hidden switching system that lead underground to the home. He shoved a sensing device, shaped like a fat pen, into a membrane covering the hole to detect the trace gas he had injected inside the casing. It read positive. No one had tampered with the system, at least from the outside.

From his vantage point, Trance could now monitor various other sensing devices within the home. Through a series of steps he could discern the intrusion of any but the most highly skilled intruders. Even someone who knew his system would have a difficult time evading his elaborate series of fail-safe mechanisms. He tested them one after another. He tapped onto a notebook computer that was wired into the central computer inside the home and reviewed the data recorded during the past few weeks. When he had finished, he was satisfied that no one had attempted to invade his home. He couldn't be sure they weren't waiting just down the road for him to appear, but he had other precautions that would take care of that contingency.

Trance entered his home through one of the side doors and grabbed a Sam Adams beer from the refrigerator. He dropped his PDA into a sound docking system, selected a set of Jimmy Buffet tunes, then went through the house room-by-room until he was satisfied that he was alone. It was half past eleven, and he felt a comfortable weariness spread through his body. The alcohol hit and he began to relax. The tension began to dissipate slowly, now that he no longer needed it to keep on edge.

He walked over to a computer terminal and gave verbal commands to turn on the furnace, water pump, and the air compressor. Then he slid down the smooth wooden stairs that wound into the basement, feeling comforted by the thought

that in thirty minutes he could immerse himself in his Jacuzzi. Perhaps he would follow that with a hot shower rinse, and hopefully, a couple hours of sleep in his old feather bed.

Trance's pleasant reverie faded as the reality of the situation came back into focus. He pulled open the top to a long wooden case of roughly hewn oak. Inside he found his diving gear. A brief wave of sadness flowed through him as he fingered his father's diving pack. For a short moment he closed his eyes. Then he turned his head toward the heavens and let out a silent roar.

"I'm going to find the suckers," he whispered. Trance closed the top of the case, sat down upon it and wiped stray tears off his cheeks. He thought of how many times he had fired point-blank into the eyes of his enemy, feeling no remorse, no more pain than if they had been annoying mosquitoes, probably less. They had been *enemy*, and an enemy was something less than human, something worse than animal. It had also been his duty.

He thought of how he had been trained to mask his emotions, cloaking them in a prison of mental walls. Yet how many times did he now feel his emotions trying to brim over his eyelids? Too often. He wasn't very good at the game, was he?

Trance reopened the diving box and withdrew an air pack, a wet suit and a dry suit, and all of the paraphernalia he would need. He glanced briefly at his oxygen closed-circuit rebreather, but decided it wasn't needed. He checked the pressure in his traditional tanks and carried his pack to the air compressor that was already coughing and chugging in the corner of the basement. When he was finished, he began hauling the gear up the stairs and out the front door of the estate to the garage. The garage was a freestanding building. It would have made a good size home on its own. It had three wide doors in the front, with each port nearly wide enough to allow two cars through. Trance opened the middle door. Inside was a white Chevy Blazer. He drove it forward slightly and piled his scuba gear into the back. Moments later he was winding along the narrow gravel driveway that took him back to the main road. He followed it for a quarter mile, driving slowly with his lights off, hoping not to arouse any of his neighbors. The fewer the people that knew of his arrival, the better. When he reached the road, he took a sharp left, turned on his lights and followed the road down toward the docks.

Friendship was a small village, in a two-industry town of a few hardy souls. Some residents still headed out at four each morning to their lobster boats. Others began at dawn building Friendship sloops, the solid, elegant wooden sailboats that had served the fishermen so well before the coming of the Chevy inboard engine.

Trance drove cautiously down the steep hill that led to the harbor and looked

out at the dozens of lobster boats floating gently in the calm of the night. He thought of how hard, yet how easy, the lives of these robust fishermen must be. It was hard physical labor but easy on the mind, when the money was there. Unfortunately, these men were a dying breed, and were gradually being priced out of their homes and their lives.

Trance drove the Blazer out onto the public dock, clear to the end where there was a square wooden float measuring about ten yards to a side. Attached to the float was a clutter of small floating craft, the skiffs used by the fishermen to row their way out to larger boats moored in the harbor. Trance dumped his gear into his ten-foot skiff and began to row in relaxed strokes out to the family mooring. Each resident of the town was assigned their own special spot for their mooring, in a unique small-town caste system. The best spots were reserved for the oldest and most prominent families of the village. These spots were handed down from generation to generation, hoarded like football season tickets to the University of Michigan, Denver, or the Washington Redskins. The Trance's were newcomers to the town, only fifty years of residence. So, Trance had to row well away from the dock.

As he approached, he could see the outline of his classic J-36 sailboat rocking slightly, its bow pointed into the wind. A J-36 was large enough to be built for comfort. But any comfort comes as a sacrifice to speed. So, the inside of Trance's boat contained only the bare necessities for overnight sailing—two austere web bunks, GPS, a depth-finder, a small portable gas stove, and a tiny titanium sink. Where others may have added to the boat's weight with pillows or a bed, Trance had an on-board notebook computer with custom software that could give him up to a tenth of a knot edge in a stiff wind. The one small luxury that Trance had availed to himself was a narrow removable diving platform off the stern of the craft. It was upon this that he began to unload his gear.

Trance immersed himself in the darkness of the cold, bone-chilling waters. As he plunged back first into the night, he could feel the wetness seep through his wet suit, and his body shuddered against the cold.

In his right hand he held a black rubber flashlight that spread a milky whiteness in front of him. He could see mackerel darting in and about the beam of his light, and he thought of the sand sharks that dwelt along the harbor floor. He followed the thick, rusted chain down from the bow of his boat as it stretched into the murkiness of the mud-covered bottom of the harbor. As he drifted down to the thirty-foot depth he felt his heart beat with anticipation. What would he find? Would there be anything at all? What could there be that would have caused his father to be treated with such deference by his peers? What kind of information would cause someone to desecrate his father's home in its search? What could be so important that it could alter the course of world

events?

When Trance reached the two hundred pound concrete block used to secure their boats over the years, he felt his heart sink. He could see nothing attached to its base. There was nothing there. But there had to be. He felt the seeds of panic sprout as his fins began to stir up the ocean bottom, reducing the already murky visibility to only two or three feet. He forced himself to relax. What had his father said? Friendship in the storm? He tried to think. What had they gone there for ten years before? He remembered. Their mooring had shifted, from the boat pulling against the winds of a storm. That's why they had made the dive. They had chained another cement block to their mooring. It had to be underneath.

Trance clipped himself to the chain to give himself leverage. He began to tunnel into the mud to the second mooring buried deeper below. *Ah...there it is.* He began to feel around, searching for anything irregular through the thin rubber mitts covering his hands. Trance found a square metal box, with a chain attaching it to the mooring. He would need cutters to remove it.

Trance followed the chain back up to the boat. He pulled his mask off for a brief moment to look around, searching for anything out of the ordinary. Something seemed out of place. What was it? He had looked out into the harbor from this vantage point a hundred times, and he could feel that something was out of place. What was it? He moved his eyes from boat to boat, looking for one that wasn't where it was supposed to be, perhaps one that was new...no...each boat was familiar...but something was out of place...Then he knew what it was. Peter Murphy's 20-foot Sea Ray was never moored this close to his boat. How many times had he glanced toward it thinking how it might be fun to buy a pleasure powerboat like that? The goddamn thing was moving. The Sea Ray also towed a motorized skiff with a 20 horse Johnson, a boat that didn't belong to Peter Murphy. It must have been stolen from one of the docks. Both boats were drifting outward with the tide, directly toward his boat. They would make contact in no more than three minutes at the speed they were traveling.

"Shit," he said. "Just what I need." *Should I ignore them and get the hell out? Christ, I'd have to leave the box on the bottom. Should I challenge them directly? Good way to get shot. When will these observers become killers? Didn't dad say they'd have to be stopped? I should have taken the rebreather; now they will see my bubbles.*

There was only one thing he could do. He reached into the dinghy, opened his blue gym bag and removed several metal articles. He put them into a net strapped to his side. He then checked his compass, submerged himself again, and began heading toward the drifting boat.

He judged the distance to Murphy's boat to be no more than two hundred

yards. He was now faced with the decision of whether to wait for them to come to him, or to catch them out where they were. He'd prefer to swim toward them, surprising them if he could, but there was no vision under the water without his light. He was swimming blind. He cursed himself for not bringing his wristband GPS, and opting against the closed circuit rebreather. A compass and telltale air bubbles would have to do.

Trance found his way to the bottom, letting out air in his dive vest so that he rested comfortably on the floor of the harbor. He began a half-swim, half-crawl forward, counting the steps of his hands to give him some bearing on his distance.

He had to emerge behind them. Otherwise he'd be dead before the night was through. Every few moments he glanced upward, hoping he'd be able to make out the shape of the boat against the faintly luminescent sky. After he had traveled what he figured was close to a hundred and fifty yards, he could make out the shape of the two boats drifting above him. He swam upward to a depth of around ten feet, exhaled slowly and began swimming forward so when he emerged from below he would be hidden by the smaller, trailing boat.

When Trance's hooded head broke the plane of the water he was just two feet from the stern of the skiff. Pulling on the shaft of the motor, he lifted an eye above the side of the boat. He saw one man with an oar in the water, paddling quietly at the back of the Sea Ray. They were guiding it gradually forward toward his boat. There was one other man peering out from the bow.

*Do they know I'm diving? They must. They think I'm still down below. I don't have much time.*

Trance removed his gloves, then his pack, and fastened them to the propeller of the skiff's motor with a shock cord from the bag on his hip. He lifted the cowling on the Johnson and yanked the spark plug wire free. Then he pulled his way along the boat until he was within a few feet of the stern of the Sea Ray. He took several breaths and then dove forward, feeling his way along the side of the boat in front, until he had made his way close to its center. He reached his left arm upward along the curved side until he had it by the gunwale, leaving his right arm free to reach inside the netting at his side. He withdrew a weighted throwing knife, balanced perfectly to his own style of toss. As he brought it close to his face, he felt a brief pang of nausea, as he contemplated his next action. He would have to immobilize one of them; he couldn't risk them teaming against him. Another death? Would they ever stop? He remembered his father's assassination and his hesitation ceased. In one quick motion he pulled himself upward with his left arm and swung his right hand forward. The knife left his hand like a missile. The butt struck the base of the skull of the rowing man with a distinct *thunk*. The man crumpled unconsciously to the floor of the

boat. With the same upward thrust Trance pulled himself over the side until he stood in the center of the boat, all before the Bowman knew what was happening. He launched himself forward, catching the startled man with a swift kick to the face. The man staggered. That was all the advantage Trance needed. Before the man could react, Trance stripped him of his gun and pressed its barrel hard against his throat.

"I want to know what the hell is going on," said Trance, spitting the words through gritted teeth. The man choked, shaking his head violently against Trance's grip, clawing at him with his hands.

Trance let him go. The man turned, and this time Trance kicked him in the groin. The man buckled over and spewed vomit on the seats of the bow.

"My friend, Murph, won't appreciate having that in his boat," said Trance quietly. "You've got ten seconds to tell me who the hell you are."

"CIA."

"What?" said Trance. Not his own people?

"Miller sent us here to protect you."

"Oh, shit...What are you guys, trainees or something? Is he only sending out the puppy squad?" *How many questions should I ask him?* he thought. *What can I believe?* He followed his gut. "What are your op orders?"

"Our orders were to keep you under surveillance and to come to your aid if needed."

"Needed against whom?"

"I don't know, sir."

"How many more of you are there?"

"I...I don't know."

Trance's hand shot forward, ripping the man's arm and twisting it behind him. "I said how many more of you are there?"

"I said I don't know. For God's sake, I really don't know!"

Trance knew this was a judgment call. One slight pull of the arm and it would snap. Was the man telling the truth?

"Guess," he said.

"We're to radio in at any sign of trouble."

"How long have you been here?"

"Two days."

"If I leave?"

"We're to call in and follow you."

"What's your name, soldier?"

"Jeffrey Beaman, sir."

"Welcome to war, Jeffrey Beaman. I'm going to release your arm now. I believe you, so I won't break it. If you are a good boy I'm going to let you live.

Your first screw-up will be your last. Understood?"

"Yes...sir."

*Jesus H. Christ. The goddamn CIA. They have me attacking our own men. Oh, God. When will this stop?* He let go of Beaman's arm and said, "Okay, Jeff. Keep those arms above your head, will you?" Jeff raised his arms while Trance pulled his knife from the floor of the boat. He used it to cut a piece of rope from the tie line of Murphy's boat. He nodded toward the unconscious man.

"Gag him and tie him up. Damn lucky I didn't choose to kill him. He'll wake by morning." Trance nodded again toward the unconscious man. "I'm sorry about this. Didn't Miller tell you that my standing orders are to kill at the first sign of danger?"

Beaman looked at him blankly.

"That sonofabitch." Trance looked to the nearly dead man. "What's this soldier's name?"

"Atkins, sir."

"When this is over, you tell him he owes me one, ya hear?"

"Sir! Yes, sir!"

Trance looked at Atkins for several moments, saying nothing. Then he turned to Beaman and asked, "Why didn't Miller have you contact me?"

"Don't know, sir."

"You're a barrel of information."

"They didn't tell us much, sir."

"I bet he's got crew all over New England right now...shooting in the dark for where I'll show up. How are you making contact?"

"Telephone."

"Give it to me."

"Public telephone, sir."

"Public telephone?"

"All in all, we felt it would be best. Rather than risk being monitored on an open channel."

"What about a parallel tap?"

Beaman looked at Atkins's inert body. "The man you almost killed is a communications expert. Everything was worked out in advance."

"How long ago did you tell them that I had arrived?"

"We didn't, sir. By the time we detected you, you were on your way out here. Our primary directive was surveillance...and protection."

"When is your next scheduled contact?"

"O seven hundred, unless you move first."

"Do you know who I am, Jeff?"



“Of course...You’re sort of a legend...sir.”

“Remember this, Jeff. Legends don’t die easily. I’m going to see to that. Give me your hands.” Trance tied Beaman’s arms behind him with the rope—in a way that if he pulled at them, the knots would grow tighter. “Sorry about having to do this, but I’m sure you understand.”

“What’s next, sir? Are you going to kill me?”

Trance flashed a brief grin and pointed toward the small dinghy. “Into the skiff. We’re going back to my boat. I haven’t finished.”

“If I may ask, sir, what is it you’re doing?” asked Beaman. Trance answered by staring into his face. The less this man knew the better off he was.

Trance tossed Murphy’s anchor overboard, then guided Beaman into the motored skiff. He rowed it the short distance to his own sailboat. He stretched a handkerchief across Beaman’s mouth, blindfolded him, and tethered his arms to his boat. Satisfied that he would be no problem, he retrieved the metal box from the ocean floor.

Trance took Beaman and Atkins back to the entrance of his driveway in the Blazer. He carried Atkins and guided Beaman on foot through the woods. Trance repeated his elaborate security procedures. Satisfied again that no one had invaded the house, he led Beaman inside, sat him in the kitchen, then dropped Atkins to the floor.

“I’m going to remove your gag now. But I warn you, the first warning cry you make is the last time your tongue will work. Understand?” Beaman nodded calmly, but his eyes darted around bulging sockets underneath the blindfold.

As Trance removed the cloth he said, “Are you hungry, Jeff?”

Beaman said nothing.

“I’m going to heat up some rice, shrimp and tea. Want some?” Trance spoke like he were entertaining—his conversation light.

Beaman nodded.

Trance continued like he was speaking to a friend. “There were ways that my father and I were different. But there were a number in which we were the same. One of them was food. Americans eat too much fat, too much red meat. Don’t get me wrong. I mean, I like a good steak, and I love cheeseburgers...hot dogs at the ballpark. But all the fried food...the Atkins thing...can’t be all that healthy, can it?”

Trance walked toward the dining area of the spacious kitchen.

“You just make yourself as comfortable as you can for a spell. I have a few things to do before I remove your shades and bring the food. We’ll talk then.”

Trance turned his attention to the metal box. It looked like an oversized cookie tin and it was strapped with two small chains and welded shut. He cut the chains easily. As he held the box in his hands he could feel something heavy

inside, something that seemed to roll from side to side. Trance jimmied at the edges with a hunting knife. As the container split open it took only a second to realize that it had become filled with water in the years it was lying in the mud. He looked more closely at the tin box. There was a small pinhole in the bottom. The weight of the mooring must have pushed something through it.

Inside the box he found several large ordinary Tupperware containers. Inside each container he could see two plastic bags, one inside the other. Trance smiled. There had been ways in which his father was tediously meticulous, and there had been others where he seemed inordinately careless. Perhaps that's what came of letting the dice rule your actions. The contents of two containers appeared undamaged. The other was filled with seawater, as were the two bags inside it.

"Shit," he muttered.

Trance carefully lifted the innermost wet bag, looking through to the wad of paper inside it. Whatever it had been, it was ruined. He opened the bag and briefly considered drying the contents, hoping that some of the words may be legible inside the wad. But the thing was in shreds, except for one small corner. The only letters he could hope to discern were smeared lines that looked like the letters *i* and *l*, followed by the word *tank*.

Inside the next bag he found a stack of what looked to be financial documents. They were written in German, with an elaborate coat of arms imprinted upon the papers, which read *von Hoffenburg* across the top.

The third contained a tattered old book that crackled as he opened it. The book was written in some language he didn't recognize, perhaps some derivative of Latin, English, Greek and German. It was also laced with many strange looking symbols.

It appeared that the sea had destroyed his instructions. All he had were documents and a book. Had his father's plan been ruined by a pinprick?

Why were these documents too hot for his father to share? Could these old papers really shake the world? He wondered how. He shook his head ruefully and said, "Fate...Of all the things to have to fight, I have to fight fate."

Trance could hear the voice of his father saying, "I don't know whether it is good or bad that the instructions were lost. All I know is that they were lost...except for one word and two letters..."

*Could it possibly be that this isn't bad news?* thought Trance. At least he knew where to start looking, Austria, where his father had been murdered. Perhaps von Hoffenburg held the answers.

"Jeff," he said. "What words would you use before the word tank?"

"I'm sorry. What'd you say?"

"What single words would you use before the word tank?"

“You mean like gas tank?”

“Yeah.”

“Gas tank...scuba tank...fish tank...German tank...water tank...storage tank...oil tank—”

“Thanks. That’s enough for now.” Oil tank. It was worth a try.

The first yawn of dawn was stretching over the eastern sky when the front door to the estate clicked open. A pair of watchful eyes was followed by Trance’s weary frame. He had spent the past ninety minutes dismantling the twin two hundred gallon oil tanks in the basement. He had poked and prodded inside them and found nothing. Frustrated, he had siphoned the oil from one to the other. After a thorough search had revealed nothing more in the first tank, he had repeated the process with the second. Nothing again.

There was another set of oil tanks buried beneath the front of the home. These had been used in the first years after the estate had been built. But their use had been discontinued in later years when several neighbors had found their artesian wells fouled by leakage from their underground tanks. Many of the town’s water wells were drilled deep in the ground, with the base of the water pipes set into underground rock foundations. No one had thought that oil tanks so close to the surface would ultimately rust and leak, and that oil could seep downwards and settle upon the rock ledges at the base of a well.

The Trance’s well had never soiled. But after his retirement from the Army, John Trance had made many changes on the estate. He had built the pool and the tennis court. He had replaced the underground tanks, retiring them with an elaborate ceremony—passing from the old to the new. The ceremony had seemed odd at the time, but then Trance had never fully understood his father.

Had his father’s odd ceremony been designed as an event to be remembered by him? The mooring...they had put the new mooring in during that same week, he was sure. The anger. Was his anger contrived as well?

Trance took a shovel and dug through the two feet of rocky soil above the rusted metal frame that sheltered the old oil tanks. The steel crumbled as he ground the shovel in with his boot. Within minutes he was able to clear a space above the trap door that opened to the tanks.

Trance retrieved a crusted twelve-foot measuring stick from the basement, a long piece of tar-blackened pine that had been marked for measuring the oil level in their tanks. He carried it over his shoulder to the twin pipes sticking up through the casing, pipes used to fill each tank. He opened the cover clasp to one of the pipes and thrust the pole to the bottom. The pole sank nine feet, and when Trance removed it, he could see that there were still ten gallons of oil inside. Why would they have left oil in the tank? he wondered. He did the same

with the second tank. This time the pole would dip no more than five feet in. Something was blocking the way.

Trance took a flashlight and tried to peer through the small hole of the pipe. He saw nothing but blackness. He sat back on his haunches, rocking backwards and forwards as he pondered his next move. Should he take the time? He had already found what he had come for, or had he?

Trance gave a tentative tap with his shovel to the top of the tank. The tank had rusted heavily, and he figured that with a little effort he would be able to split it open. He stood up and walked to the garage, grabbing a fire extinguisher and a long-handled axe, sharpened to an edge thin enough for shaving. After clearing enough space to swing, he began to chop into the tank, ripping long tears in the softened steel until he had opened a hole a foot and a half wide. He shined his light again, and this time he could see that there was a thick sheet of oil-stained canvas covering something underneath. He reached down to remove the cloth. As he pulled it toward him, there was a brief, sharp reflection from the flashlight as the beam bounced off of something. Something with a rich golden color.

Trance pushed off the canvas with his pole and aimed the light back into the tank. He peered forward, not knowing what to make of what he saw. He glanced around him, checking for anyone who may be watching. Then he looked back into the hole, and stared. Passing from the old to the new, his father had said...*I wonder...* he thought. The tank was stacked with metal bars.

Trance took the axe and used it to peel back enough of the tank to allow his body to snake through. He tied his feet with a rope and attached it to a nearby water faucet, then lowered himself headfirst into the hole. He grabbed at one of the metal bars. It was far heavier than he had imagined, and it took considerable effort, in his awkward position, to pull himself and the bar back out of the hole. When he had done so, he sat back into the grass, staring at the twenty-pound bar of golden metal in his hand. He wiped it clean and bit into it. It gave against his teeth. Gold. Pure gold.

There were thirty-six bars in the tank. Seven hundred and twenty pounds, eleven thousand five hundred ounces, give or take a few. It was all worth millions. Just how many would depend upon the purity and the London gold fixings at the time of sale. He could smuggle it into India and get twice the price. But why take the risk? As he removed the final bar, he found a note inside a plastic bag attached to the bottom. It read, *Did you ever wonder why I didn't seem to age in my later years? It works, Jackie. I never used it for personal gain, as I was chosen only as the keeper. It is now your turn, as I always knew it would be. I left you this to help you stop them. Do not forget that he who lives by the sword, dies by the sword. Perhaps this challenge will help you under-*

*stand that there is so much we cannot know or control. We are like ants crossing the floor, not aware that we are part of a world far greater than what we perceive. Give yourself up to the Cosmic Will and you will know what it is you must do. Please give my regards to the Black Madonna, and to our friend in Austria.*

*Remember that I am with you, always.*

*Dad*

Trance glanced at his watch. 6:20. Forty minutes until Jeff must make his call to Miller. He'd have to move fast. He ran up the road, taking the chance that he was not being watched. He got into Lauren's Lincoln, which hadn't been moved. He drove it back down the driveway and through the gates to the estate, to where millions in gold lay openly on his front lawn. He loaded it into the trunk of the car and covered it with a blanket. He then went into the house, checked both prisoners, and then untied Beaman.

"C'mon. We're going to town to make your morning call." Beaman still wore the blindfold, and walked awkwardly with his hands tied behind his back.

"I'll untie you and let you see some light as soon as we're off the estate."

"What was all that noise before?"

"Beaman, the less you know the better off you are. I'm going to give you and your friend the chance to live. God knows, you don't deserve to die. You keep your questions to yourself and do what you are told. In another day you'll be just fine. Got that? Your partner should be okay. I'm sorry about him. Miller's a stupid shit—sending you out like that after me. He should know better."

"What should I say to Miller?"

"Tell him you haven't seen me." What Trance wanted to say was, "Tell him to lay off... Tell him I haven't trusted him since he sent my wife to die..."

Trance's thoughts caught in his throat. How could Miller have done that to his wife? His hands squeezed the wheel and his knuckles grew white.

As they drove, Trance's father's note twisted over and over in his head. The Black Madonna? What the hell was a Black Madonna? Our friend in Austria? Was von Hoffenburg a friend? Or was he the enemy? Who should he trust, and what should he do next? They made the call.

Later, Trance gave Beaman and Atkins a full meal. He let them use the bathroom. Then he left them sitting, tied to chairs in his living room in front of an impressive voice controlled home theater, with glasses of water with straws nearby. He wrote a short note and folded it into an envelope. Then he took a wireless phone and placed it before the men.

"I'll call Miller in six hours, so they'll come for you soon. In the event that something happens to me, I've also programmed this phone to activate in seven hours. Just say *dial* and then the number and you'll get through. Say *end call*

when you're done, so you don't ring up my phone bill. The home theater activates with the words, system on."

Behind Trance, the wide digital screen sprang to life, showing ESPN.

"There's a Red Sox game this afternoon on NESN," whispered Trance, so the TV wouldn't change. "Just say the channel name and it will change." Trance paused. "Sorry for the indignity of all of this, guys. If I had more time I would make this easier for you. If something happens to me and I can't call, and if the phone doesn't work, they will come when Miller gets this letter. I'll post it on my way out of town. So, rest easy. Make yourself at home once you're released. There's beer in the fridge and food in the cupboard. Just clean up after yourselves and lock the door when you leave."

Trance closed the door behind him, got into Lauren's Lincoln, and headed back toward Boston.

"Good morning. Lauren Haverford's office. May I help you?"

"Hi, Shirley. It's Jack. Is Lauren there?"

"Oh, hi, Jack. She had to go to Washington for a few days. May I leave her a message?"

"A message...no...no, thank you." Trance hung up the phone. Who could he call? He needed someone to go over the financial reports he had found, someone who could tell him what the hell they meant, someone he could trust. He also needed someone to explain the obscure little book. He needed more information, and he needed it fast. He needed it now. He dialed another number.

"Harris Investment Group. May I help you?"

"Bill Harris, Jr., please." Bill Harris would know. Trance had studied with Bill at Harvard Law. Bill was the scion to the sprawling Harris family fortune. The family had begun manufacturing cannons and muskets during the Revolutionary War, and had parlayed that business into an empire that stretched into banking, real estate, insurance, and investments. Trance and Harris had become close friends during their three years studying law, and he was the next logical choice for Trance to call for guidance on the von Hoffenburg papers.

"Hey, Jack. How goes the indecent exploitation of innocents in the adult toy business?" Harris was savvy enough to beware of others listening to their conversation.

Bill Harris was short and solid like a wrestler. When he moved it was with a gentle demeanor, but when he spoke it was in the same booming voice of his iconic father.

"Outstanding. How goes the pillaging of helpless victims in the world of finance?"

"Good...good. Still making a fortune. Just can't help it, Jack. It's in the

genes.”

“Bill, I need a favor.”

“Sure. Anything for one of America’s finest.”

“I need to see you. As soon as possible. Like now.”

“You in town?”

“I’m a block away.”

“Using a disposable, encrypted burner phone no doubt. Or are you over with that cute little vixen at Global Credit?” He chuckled. “C’mon by, ol’ buddy. I can juggle my schedule.”

Five minutes later the two men were meeting over coffee in the confines of Harris’s plush corner office, in the Harris Towers, overlooking Boston harbor.

“I need you to tell me what these figures mean, Bill.”

Trance passed the von Hoffenburg papers to his friend. Bill took them and ran his eyes down the first page. Trance watched him closely, noticing the slight raise of the eyebrows, then a frown as Harris turned to the second page. For ten minutes neither man spoke. Bill’s eyes never left the papers in front of him. Finally he said, “Holy shit, Jack. Where did you get these?”

“Does it matter?”

“Sure as hell does. I know that these documents must be over fifty years old...companies change...ownerships changes...but do you realize what we are looking at here?”

“Haven’t really looked at them, Bill. They just sort of fell into my possession.”

“Papers like these just don’t *fall* into someone’s possession, Jack. These documents link von Hoffenburg to the financing of Hitler during World War II. But, even more than that, do you have any idea what these companies are doing today?”

“Well, I thought that since you have been running your daddy’s investment firm, you might be able to give me a little help there, Billy.”

“You stole this stuff, didn’t you, Jack? This is some kind of CIA shit. Papers like these don’t exist. Do you understand that? Not if these are real. These documents link some of the world’s largest corporations, and a dozen of the world’s wealthiest families together in a crime so heinous...But Jesus, Jack...Do you *know* what some of these companies are doing today?”

“Look at this. This company reprocesses half of the spent nuclear fuel in Europe. This one makes missiles...this one, fighter jets. These three produce half the gold in the Southern Hemisphere, for Christ’s sake. Then there’s banking...finance...media...computers...software.”

“So, what does it all mean?”

“Can I make some copies of these? I’m going to have to do some checking

before I answer that question. These papers could probably blow the whole frigging financial world apart. That's what I think they mean...the anti-trust issues, the national security threat—”

“No copies, Bill. For your own sake. Take a few notes, but no copies.”

Bill began scribbling information. Thirty minutes later he was escorting Trance to the door.

“You sure you can't stay for lunch? You look like hell. A good meal—”

“No, Bill. Thanks. I've got someone else to see. When should I call you?”

“Call me first thing in the morning. I'll have something for you then.” Bill grabbed at Trance's shoulder as he turned to leave, and said, “Is everything okay, Jack? I get the feeling that you're into something over your head, and that's deep, way deep. Take it from a lawyer who's been trained to—”

“No, Henny Penny, the sky isn't falling. I'll talk to you in the morning.”

“Later, Jack.”

Trance drove a few blocks and checked into the Langham Hotel, leaving Lauren's car parked safely in the garage under Post Office Square. He was on his second day without sleep and he had no stomach for traffic congestion. He also didn't want to take the chance of an accident that might reveal seven hundred pounds of unexplained gold resting comfortably in the car's trunk. He made one phone call before heading to the hotel lobby.

He walked out onto Congress Street and hailed a taxi, then settled tiredly into the back seat, saying, “Harvard Square, please.” Then he closed his eyes to collect his thoughts. With fatigue he had grown careless. He didn't see the car pull out behind them, the car that followed them across the lazy Charles River and into Cambridge.

Trance had one more stop to make before he could slow down long enough to rest. Sir Godfrey Hind, professor of history at Harvard College. Formerly of Oxford, Hind's specialties were medieval European and Oriental history. Trance had met Hind by accident while studying at Harvard. It had been at one of the cocktail parties designed to mingle the students and normally reclusive faculty. Left alone, many of the big name professors would go for months immersed in research, without student contact whatsoever. This was one of Harvard's answers to the criticisms that its true faculty consisted of graduate students.

Hind had been fascinated to learn of Trance's education in Japan, what little of it Trance had been willing and able to share with him. Trance had given Hind a glimpse into a world that few Westerners would ever see, one that many would never believe could exist.

The taxi left Trance at The Square. He glanced up to read the Dewey, Cheetham & Howe lettering in a second-story office window, and wondered



what arcane and flippant topics they might be discussing now on Car Talk radio. There was still a half hour to kill and Trance felt that a nostalgic walk through the quads might do him good. He walked past the John Harvard statue and then the library on his roundabout way to Quincy Street and Robinson Hall. He didn't notice the two men following him at a discreet distance. As he opened the door to Hind's building, he missed the distant pairs of eyes that made notice of his entrance.

Hind was a stout, portly man in his middle seventies. His head was bald except for a few wisps of hair along the edges just above his ears. His eyebrows were his most prominent feature—huge, white bushes. They dominated his face, and they moved with animation as he spoke with his laconic British accent.

"Trance ol' boy. So nice of you to drop by. May I offer you some tea, or perhaps some cognac?"

"Tea would be fine, Professor."

"Ah...well...I'll have to make some up. Though I think I might have a touch of brandy within reach." Hind looked toward Trance expectantly.

"Tell you what, Professor. Pour us a couple of stiff ones, will you?"

"Gladly, my boy!" Hind's face spread into a wide grin, happy for the implied acceptance of his nipping before evening. "Nothing like a little lubrication for the mind. Now, what's this you tell me about some old book?" said Hind as he handed Trance a large snifter well primed with V.S.O.P. cognac.

"Here." Trance withdrew the thin, red leather-covered book from the blue gym bag and handed it to the curious professor. He then sat quietly as Hind opened it and began reading its contents.

"This looks like an alchemist's notebook, Jack. See all these symbols? This one stands for the moon, this one for the Sun...Mercury...Venus. From the looks of the Latin and the symbols, I'd say that this is from the eleventh, twelfth century. Although I'd guess that the binding wasn't done 'till the seventeenth, eighteenth century. See these marks here..."

"Excuse me for interrupting, Professor. Could this notebook represent the notes of someone turning something into gold?"

"I wouldn't say that at all, Jack. I said that this is an alchemist's notebook. They always wrote in code, although this one seems to be a bit more straightforward than most, if one understands the ancient languages, of course. Did you know that this is a hobby of mine?"

"I was hoping—"

"Oh, yes. I've studied all of the great alchemists," He took a sip of his drink. "Ripley, Philalethes, Aquinas, Bacon, Pope John XXII, DaVinci. I've read much of their writings, most of it gibberish. In fact, the word gibberish comes

from the great alchemist Geber. His writings were so difficult to follow that the word gibberish was created— “

“I’m sorry, professor, excuse me for asking again, but would you say that this book could possibly contain a method for the transformation of certain substances into gold?”

“Let me take a look.” Hind began thumbing through the pages. Now and then he scribbled a word or two on the note pad on his desk. He would alternately shake his head and say “Hmnm” or “I see...” As he continued through the notebook he began turning the pages faster. Neither man spoke for over an hour, until Hind said, “Yes, Jack. It implies here that the process described does indeed result in gold. Of course, most of them do. But this one appears to be an approach that is far different than other ones I have read...I’m sorry to say this, though, but the last few pages seem to be missing.”

Trance was lost in thought and did not hear the professor’s words.

“I said the last few pages are missing,” repeated Hind.

“Oh, how wonderful.” Trance hesitated. “But what I need to know is...could this thing be valid? I mean—”

“Jack. Come on now. You and I are intelligent men, educated men. There has never been any proof that this has been done. Rumors...legends, but no proof.”

“But you say it’s been a hobby of yours.”

“Yes, but the hobby of studying alchemy encompasses far more than the manufacture of gold, Jack. It’s a religion of sorts, a way of life, a way of thinking. The study of alchemy has influenced today’s life far more than you can imagine.”

“Oh, I know, professor. Remember, I am my father’s son. I know a bit about the theology of alchemy. But you do believe it may have been done, don’t you?” said Trance. *You’ve got to humor him, Jack.*

Hind sat back in his chair, causing his rather ample stomach to protrude outward. He then let it fall comfortably upon his tightened belt.

“Did I ever tell you that Carl Jung and I were good friends?”

“No, you didn’t. He shared your interest in alchemy?” said Trance.

“Carl believed that modern man has become too technologically oriented, too intellectual, and that many of the psychological problems his patient’s developed resulted from the western culture’s preoccupation with intellectual thought at the expense of emotional growth.”

“In Japan I was taught that the higher self is the emotional self, not the intellectual self. I was taught that the emotional self is much more in tune with the creative, universal force, and that the intellect tries to dominate the emotional side, thereby putting us in direct conflict with our true direction.”

“Exactly! Has this worked for you?”

“I’m afraid that I haven’t been very good at following what I was taught. I find it hard to subjugate my sense of self, what Jung might have called my ego, to something that to me resembles chance as much as some kind of *Cosmic Will*. I’m afraid that I have never been able to give up control. My father did. But I can’t.”

“Are you happy?”

“It has nothing to do with happiness.”

“I said, are you happy?”

“I...don’t...know.”

“Was your father happy?”

“That’s not a fair question. His life was different.”

“I said, was he happy?”

“Yes.”

“So, there you are. That’s all I can tell you today.” Hind drained his glass with one large gulp. “But if you wouldn’t mind, I’d like to study this for a few months.”

“What? No. I can’t let you do that.”

Hind fingered the book longingly. “There *are* a few things I’d like to check. I’ll copy some pages, and run a few calculations on the computer. Why don’t you call me in the morning?”

Trance nodded, and allowed the professor to copy several pages from the odd little book. As Hind turned to one of the book’s pages he frowned. “That’s strange.” He walked to his computer and started his Internet browser. After a few minutes he clapped his hands. “Aha!” He bellowed. “I knew it!”

Hind rotated the flat screen monitor so that Trance to view it.

“See that symbol?”

Trance nodded.

“That is a registered genome symbol.”

“What does that mean?” asked Trance.

“Let’s say that that I’m working on genetic research, working on stem cells, for example. If I start a new stem cell chain I would register it—with a symbol—a symbol like this.” Hind pointed to the notebook. He clapped his hands again. “This is interesting...very interesting.”

Hind stood up abruptly and reached out to shake Trance’s hand, smiling broadly. “This is extraordinary, son. This may be—” He looked to the copied pages. “Call me tomorrow. I have much to do.”

Trance took the notebook and put it back inside his gym bag. “Thank you, Professor. I’ll call you in the morning.”

Trance took a taxi back into the heart of Boston’s financial district. He got out on High Street near International Place. He needed to walk for a while as he

tried to comprehend the power of the information he now controlled. A formula, or at least most of a formula that would allow him to make gold? His father said that it worked. That must have been why he had spent so much time in Maine when he first retired from the service. Where were the missing pages? Or did they matter? Jesus, with a formula to make gold, he could debase the world's financial structure. He could easily wreak havoc with the money markets, and society, too. Entire cultures were based upon gold, and with an unlimited source of money, he could do almost anything.

Then there were the financial documents. What was it Bill had said? They could *rip the whole frigging financial world apart...*

If only it were that simple.

Trance meandered through Boston Common and into the Back Bay. He walked for hours. He always liked Boston, the blend between the old and the new. Skyscrapers of glinting glass casting shadows upon monuments to the past. The cobblestone streets, the narrow brick buildings standing side by side, the churches, and shops dating back to the Revolutionary War. As he bought a hot pretzel from one of the street vendors, Trance caught a sideways glance from a face that looked familiar. Where had he seen that face before? Friend or foe? It was the sunglasses that tipped him off. The Bosch and Lomb frames. It was one of the men from the BMW. Now where was the other, and how many other men were there? Were they just following? Or was he now a marked man? He had found the gold, the formula, and the financial documents. Is that what they were waiting for? Trance pondered what to do. Out of the blue he laughed, as he thought of what his father would have done. His father would have started flipping his coin. But Trance had no time to flip a coin. He had to think fast, and he had to act fast. Because each moment he waited could bring him that much closer to death.

## CHAPTER 4



A thick, white mist was spinning in and about the mountains as the final faint rays of sunlight stretched over the rippled horizon. The fog brought a sudden chill to the Austrian night. As the air and the mountains turned black, the Baron prepared to begin his meeting inside the castle.

Outside, the broad courtyard buzzed with the arriving helicopters—carrying many of the world’s most powerful men and women to rendezvous with their leader. Each of them bore the crest of von Hoffenburg on its side, a screaming Bald Eagle carrying the world in its talons. One by one they emerged, influential politicians, industrialists, revolutionaries, and soldiers from dozens of nations around the globe. They had nothing in common except blood, and one common purpose. These were all von Hoffenburgs by birth and spirit, though they were known by many other names. Together they planned to rule the world.

von Hoffenburg stood on his balcony, watching the scene below. This was truly the beginning of the end he had planned, so many centuries before. He closed his eyes and turned his weathered face toward the skies. How many hundreds of years had he sent his children out into the world to colonize and dominate nations? He had sent them to India, China, and Japan during the twelfth century. He had helped seed the Mongol Empire in the years it had swept through Persia. In the fourteen hundreds he had controlled the Holy Roman Empire through Maximilian I. His children had been early settlers of North and South America, taking new names that fit the land, but bringing riches with them from the Baron’s gold. They had helped shape these continents. Now, the Baron was preparing his most ambitious attempt at bringing it all under one rule, his own.

The world had grown smaller with the advent of global communications. Satellites could bounce his orders in seconds, where it had once taken him months, even years, to issue them by ship and caravan. He could bring about more destruction in minutes than the world had endured in its entire history.

Where it had taken him hundreds of years to create his first empire, his last would take only hours.

More than a millennium in the making, fifty years in the final planning, and over a trillion dollars invested, the time was drawing near. Now only two things remained to be done. First, he must recover his formula. It was his prize possession, and the world meant nothing to him without it. Now that John Trance was dead, it would be only a matter of days before he would possess it again. Without the Elixir he would die, and the Baron's quest would die with him.

There was no second copy of the formula. It was a possession too precious to duplicate. He'd kept it too heavily guarded to be stolen. Yet, stolen it was; but he would soon have it again.

With the formula back in his hands, only one more piece of the puzzle must fall into place. Then all could proceed. Just one more piece.

"Everyone has arrived, my Lord."

"The Chosen One?"

"He, too, is here."

"Good...good." The Baron moved to his library and warmed his leathery hands by a brightly burning fire set back against the far wall. Above the polished marble mantel hung portraits of the Khan, Maximilian, Napoleon, and Hitler. Soon a new face would be placed among them.

"Send him in," continued the Baron. He pressed his hands closer to the fire. There was nothing worse than a cold handshake, he mused.

As the sleek, finely dressed man entered the chamber, the Baron looked upon him with pride. How handsome he is, how confident his walk, how sincere his smile. The face, so much like his own, aristocratic, with the signs of breeding written all over its tanned features.

"My son," he said as the Chosen One approached him, smiling. "So nice of you to honor an old man with your presence..."

The visitor chuckled, "Of course, Father. So nice of you to invite me. May I ask the purpose of the invitation?"

"To announce your appointment."

"So, the decision has been made?" asked the visitor quietly.

"You have done well."

"But so have the others."

"Ah, but you are the best."

"Was Hitler better than Penwell? You chose an unstable unknown over a man with influence, and a political future."

"They were both of my loins, but Adolph had fire, my son, raw driving ambition. Much like yourself. The Germans were ready and able to do our work. Just like the leaders of your country are today."

“Will I become another Hitler?”

“No. Hitler was a failure. You will not fail. You cannot fail.” The Baron threw a thick log onto the fire. “You will direct the world’s policy. You will have the cooperation of your brothers. I already control the United Nations.”

The Baron pressed his hands one final time against the fire, turned, and led his visitor out of the room. They walked in silence through the drafty hallways. Along the walls stared dozens of faces, men who had altered the course of the world through the ages, all von Hoffenburgs. It was a gallery, a tribute to the endless quest of the Baron, a quest that, until now, had remained unfulfilled. But soon he would complete his dream. With this man by his side, and with the dozens of others, they would make it possible.

As the two men entered the great central chamber of the castle, a hush fell over the room. It was apparent. The decision had been made. The words spread in quiet whispers from man to woman to man. A wise choice...

“My children,” the Baron began. He addressed all of the family members as his children. Many present were indeed his own, but others were grandchildren, great grandchildren. Some traced their roots back more than forty generations.

“Every one of you here has passed severe tests of loyalty to reach this, the inner core of our family power. I congratulate you all. You will not be disappointed. Soon we will be standing upon the threshold of a new world government. A government run by you in the name of von Hoffenburg. The world’s three major powers will soon be destroyed through mutual nuclear annihilation. As you know, we have been planning this event for decades, and every small detail has been studied and put into place. All except for the triggering events, which shall commence in just a few short months. With the devastation of America, Russia and China, we will be left with the world’s greatest military arsenal. Combined with the political and economic influence that you represent, it will be but a small step to coalesce the few parts of the world we do not already control into our firm command. No one will challenge our solution for avoiding total global annihilation.”

Each of the people standing below the Baron felt his power pumping through them as he spoke. Each felt the tingle of excitement as he outlined the details of his plan. Their emotions rose and fell with the volume of his voice, and he played them like a concert musician, his talent honed through centuries of practice. He was Bach, Beethoven, and Mozart combined. His creative genius was not flawed by any clinging to convention. He was a man of vision, and his words reached out and moved them like no others had done before. He teased them with softness, and then swept their emotions upward with a flurry of words and hypnotic movements. He was Orpheus come to life.

“In the campaigns of Bonaparte and Hitler we were forced to stretch beyond the capacity of our resources. This time it will not happen. The world is different now, smaller. There will be no Waterloo, no Russian front. There will be no Russians fighting us at all!

“The road to power hasn’t changed. Our weapons may be different now, but the mind is not. Economic destruction, emotional disenchantment, religious differences...greed, hate, power, love...All still play their part.

“Each of you knows what it is that you must do. You have all been trained since birth, and the world will no longer deny you your true position in life! Each of you shall rule, with more power than you ever dreamed possible. I bid you now to go forth and await my call. Our time is near!”



## CHAPTER 5



“Hello,” whispered Trance as he walked along Commonwealth Avenue. He was being followed, and one pursuer was making no attempt at concealment. He followed Trance from a distance of thirty yards, never taking his eyes off his quarry.

*Why in hell would a tail allow himself to be so conspicuous?* wondered Trance. They must want him to know he was being followed. Was he being team tailed? How many more were in his wake?

These people were professionals. They were forcing his hand. He would need a team. That much was plain. Unless, unless there was only one of them. If there was just one, he could isolate and interrogate. If so, he would have to do it soon. He could *feel* the eyes of his tail upon him. Any moment those eyes could become the barrel of a rifle.

Trance looked for a public phone, stopping periodically to glance at the faces around him in the hope of spotting other pursuers. He couldn't run the risk of using a wireless, even one that was encrypted and routed through his own network. The chances were too great that they could listen in. He crossed over to Newbury Street and walked by the shop windows, glancing at the reflections to see who was around him. Too many people stood at the phones at the corner of Newbury and Dartmouth Streets. He crossed up Exeter Street and took a right onto Boylston. He'd use one in the mall.

Trance entered the Prudential Center Mall on Boylston Street and took the escalator up toward the shops. He checked the directory and located a phone bank. Moments later he lifted a receiver and dialed the number of an old friend, and former CIA operative. His friend was a financial advisor, offering insurance and investment services to the wealthy throughout the Boston area.

“Good afternoon, Capital Resources Group.”

“Roger Angleton, please.” Trance kept his eyes moving through the crowd.

“I'm sorry. But Mr. Angleton is out on an appointment at the—”

“I've got to talk to him. It's urgent. Can you contact him?”

“I could call him—”

“Please do so. Tell him Jack Trance needs him to call 617-555-0879 immediately. I’m at a pay phone. I’ll wait.” Trance hung up the phone. Two minutes later the phone rang.

“Jack?”

“Roger. I need your help.”

“Aw, shit, Jack. I’m in the middle of an appointment with an important client.” So much for friendship.

“Fee or commission?”

“What?”

“I said ‘Is it a fee case or a commission case?’”

“The latter.”

“So what’s the commission?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Five grand, maybe—”

“I’ll pay you twenty for two hours of your time. Then I’ll throw in a private dinner at the Algonquin Club for you and your client. Hell, include your spouses. I need you to reschedule your meeting...Please?”

Roger was the best person for the job. He was experienced, and they looked almost alike.

“Jack, you don’t need to pay—”

“Look, Roger. I don’t give a shit about the money. I need your help and I need it now. God knows I’ve saved your ass a number of times.”

Roger grew more attentive.

“Yes, Jack. You have. What d’ya need me to do?”

“Where are you?”

“Downtown.”

“Good. I want you to take a taxi to the front of the Hancock Building in exactly one hour. Only I want you to be hidden. Down in the seat, Roger.”

“Shit, Jack. Not—”

“Pay the driver a hundred. I’ll reimburse you. Tell him to look for a man wearing tan khaki pants and a blue shirt, carrying a newspaper in each hand. Have him stop, and I’ll get in.” Trance set the timer on his watch. He knew that Angleton was now doing the same, because he had trained him. “Mark the time.”

“Go,” said Roger. “Who’s following you?” he continued tentatively, wishing that he had said he couldn’t make the pickup. He was out of the spy business. He no longer got his jollies risking his life against phantom enemies.

“One man. Not dangerous, I think. But I need to make sure. Not to worry, Roger. You’re safe. Questions?”

“No.”

“Good...and Roger?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks.”

Roger laughed and replied, “You’re a shithead, Trance.”

With that problem out of the way, Trance could concentrate upon cornering the man on his trail. He’d have to hope that others didn’t rush to the man’s aid or put a bullet through his head. Trance drew a mental map of the city, thinking of the most likely place to confront his pursuer. Indoors? Outdoors? The street? The mall? The park? A deserted alley off of the street? Perhaps a bar...Then he knew.

There was a church less than two blocks away in Copley Square, right by the Hancock Tower. It was an old church, and big, with dark hallways. Trinity was a major tourist attraction. He knew. He had used it before. There were several potential exits on opposite sides of the church. A solo tail would run a greater risk of losing him by remaining outside, than by following him in. There was also a basement that stretched under the building, just above the hundreds of wooden pilings that provided support to the church in the soft sand and silt of Boston’s Back Bay. The cellar and its tunnels were often kept unlighted and were rarely used.

Trance climbed the steps to the church at a measured pace. He glanced at his watch; there were forty-nine minutes to go. He peered out peripherally at the people on the street. He knelt down to tie his shoe, finally locating Mr. Ray Ban attempting to look confused by the fountain, a tourist deciding which way he should turn.

*Over this way*, thought Trance as he turned toward the church. When Trance opened the door he stopped to allow his eyes to adjust to the dimness inside. A filtered light came through the impressive stained-glass windows along the walls. His eyes adjusted quickly. He paid to enter, then walked down the aisle toward the altar, which was adorned with several burning candles. There were a few sinners doing penance, and two small groups of tourists, but the church echoed in silence.

Trance planned to use his silhouette to draw the tail forward toward the cellar stairway. He would lead the man into the tunnels and take him there.

Trance waited. Three full minutes passed. Had they covered all his exits? Were they simply waiting for him to emerge? Or... the figure of Mr. Ray Ban emerged, now removing his glasses. Trance knelt at the far end of the church on one side of the altar. He watched through the corner of his eyes as his pursuer took a seat at the back of the church. It was time for move two. Much like chess. Perhaps more like the Japanese game of Go, which required art as well as skill. There was an art to what he was doing, an art to staying alive.

Trance made a sign of the cross and stood as if to leave. He stopped momentarily, knowing this would draw the eyes of his follower to him. Trance glanced toward the man, and he could see the round, wide eyes of fear etch the man's face in the hollow outline of the dim lights. Trance took the stairs down into the cellar, groping his way in the darkness. Would they be waiting for him in the tunnel? Was his trap now theirs?

Like his father, Trance had been born with a photographic memory. It had been five years since Trance had last used this tunnel, but even in the darkness he could recall it as if he were in daylight. Eight steps forward, two steps to the left, fourteen steps forward and he came to the stairs. He descended the nineteen stairs, scuffling slightly in his rubber-soled running shoes so Ray Ban could follow his sounds. He reached the bottom of the stairway and took three steps forward. Then he retraced his path and waited underneath the stairway for his pursuer.

The minutes passed like the slow drip of cold honey as Trance waited in silence. Were his pursuers in wireless contact? Was he trapped? Was the man getting his orders? Or was this a *rough tail*, designed to keep him under surveillance without worrying about the risk of exposure. The man would soon answer his questions. If he came. *Perhaps I should have taken him in the church?* he wondered. *No. Too much risk.* This was right. He could *feel* it.

*There he is.* Trance heard the man's feet coming cautiously down the stairs. This guy was an amateur, or he was very, very good. Trance counted the steps, fifteen, sixteen, nineteen...*Now!* Trance raced forward and shoved the man's face into the wall, feeling his teeth crack against the stone and his body go slack. Trance twisted the man's right arm behind his back, to the point where one light tug would break it.

"Who the hell are you?" he whispered. "Tell me why I shouldn't rip your frigging heart out." Anger was his best chance to elicit fear, thought Trance. An angry man was unpredictable. Angry men killed. He was more curious than angry.

The man grunted against the wall but gave no answer. Trance pressed his face within an inch of the man's eyes.

"Listen, asshole. You're going to start giving me answers or I'm going to begin breaking your bones, one at a time. I said who are you, and who do you work for?" No answer. *Oh shit, I hate doing this...* He pulled up on the arm. The man whimpered as it snapped at the elbow. The man bit into his free arm to stifle the pain, making several rows of teeth marks in his skin. He kept biting.

"Look," said Trance. "I don't like this any more than you. I know how this hurts. But I've got to have answers. Tell me who you are. Please." The man turned his face toward him and smiled. There was a look of raw hatred in his

eyes. A moment later he lay limp in Trance's arms.

Trance pressed him once more against the wall, fearing some sort of trick, knowing the man could respond with a swift blow that could cripple him in one brief moment. The man showed no sign of resistance. Trance felt his head sag and he felt for a pulse, fearing the worst. He was right. The man was dead. He sniffed Ray Ban's mouth and smelled the almond scent of cyanide. The pill had been sewn under the skin of the man's left forearm, and in the darkness Trance had not seen the man biting it out of his flesh.

"Of all the..." The man had been no amateur. He had been a fanatic, dedicated to some obscene cause. Why else would he have chosen death so quickly? The man couldn't have been CIA. What was he after? The formula? The financial papers? Perhaps both.

"He's dead, ain't he?" came a voice from several yards down the hall. Trance fell to the floor, rolling forward as he hit the ground. A second later he pressed the speaker's face against the wall.

"Who are you?" he asked. The smell answered his question.

"I...live...sleep here," he said. The man's breath confirmed his words. The air around his face had the odor of rotten fish. He was wrapped in a torn, heavy, hooded blue jacket with the words BOSTON GLOBE written on the chest.

Trance kept his hold of the man, thinking painfully of what he should do. Had the man seen him? Could he recognize him? Could he let him live? What should he do? He knew what he would have done years before. He wouldn't have thought twice, couldn't have. But things were different now. He was different now. Wasn't he?

"That man killed himself," he said. "He took a cyanide pill."

"Uh, huh. Anything you say," spoke the rotten mouth. "I didn't see nothin'."

"I should kill you," said Trance. The old man wheezed. "But I won't. You did nothing wrong. I suggest you get out of here. After I leave, of course."

"Y...yes."

Trance released him and quickly searched the dead man's body. He found what he expected to find, nothing. Except for one thing, a thin gold chain. On the end of it swung an old pendant—of a hammer and sickle.

Trance peeled a wad of cash from his wallet and gave it to the homeless man.

A moment later Trance was gone.

He still had eighteen minutes. He walked across Copley Square and crossed the street. He bought two papers from a street vendor, and then walked back toward the church. His eyes roved along the sidewalks and the streets, looking for anything out of the ordinary, anything that might help him spot his tails. They had to be there. He knew they were. It had been years since he had taught the art of surveillance. But he could still spot them a mile away, when he wasn't

preoccupied with other issues. *I'm acting like the amateur here*, he thought ruefully.

As Trance neared the church, he caught the glint of the sun on another pair of gold-framed sunglasses. He considered cornering the man in the park, but thought better of it. There would be too much disturbance, and the very real possibility of another death, this one in clear daylight. Better just to get away.

Trance walked leisurely along Boylston Street, and then meandered across the park toward the Hancock Tower. Soon a taxi swerved to his side and its door flew open. Trance jumped inside and gave a quick salute to Mr. Ray Ban as they sped away. Trance smiled as the man waved frantically for a taxi that didn't come. Trance directed the driver to the Massachusetts Turnpike, where they made several entrances and exits after they got beyond the Allston tolls. Trance memorized the types of cars and the license plate numbers around them at each stop. Finally, Trance was satisfied that they were not being followed, unless there were a dozen cars involved in the chase. At this point he would take that chance. He said to the driver, "The Langham," then turned to Roger and said, "Thanks. I'm glad I could count on you."

Roger whispered. "Shit, Sherlock. What are you going to ask me for now?"

Trance smiled and patted his friend on the shoulder. "It's good to see you, too. Just like old times, eh? Am I that easy to read?"

"Like a book. Don't forget, I know you. Christ, you trained me."

Trance winced, as he thought of the driver listening to their conversation. The less he knew the safer he would be.

"Just one more thing, Watson." Trance leaned over and whispered into Roger's ear.

When the cab reached Post Office Square, Trance had the driver pull down into the parking garage off Congress Street. He let Roger out at the bottom. Then he had the driver meander around the garage for over five minutes.

By now Roger would have found Lauren's car and be waiting for him. Trance told the driver to stop. He handed him three one hundred dollar bills and said, "Get this thing out of here, buddy. You were great. One of the best. You may not have guessed this, but you were just part of an anti-terrorism exercise. The less you say about it the better off we'll all be. Understand?" The man nodded. "Now I want you to take a leisurely drive along the Turnpike. For at least thirty minutes, out past Natick. Got that?"

The man nodded, smiling.

"Good."

As Trance closed the door the driver said, "Talley ho, Sherlock." Then began to drive away.

"I've got your cab number!" shouted Trance. Then he laughed.

Trance walked through the garage to the Lincoln, which was already running, with Roger at the wheel. He opened the driver's door, reached in and popped the trunk. He withdrew one of the gold bars and wrapped it with a towel from inside the trunk.

"Let's go," he said, as he slid in the back of the car. He lay down.

"What's that in the towel?" asked Roger, knowing that Trance may or may not choose to tell him.

"Your money," said Trance. "I'm afraid that it is a bit more than I promised. I can't make change, but I suppose you've earned it. Such short notice and all."

"What the hell are you doing? Carrying wads of bills in the trunk of this car? I want no part of this, Trance—"

"Not quite, Rog. It's gold. Twenty pound bars." Trance grew silent for a moment, watching Roger run the figures in his head. Twenty pounds was three hundred and twenty ounces. At current prices the bar was worth hundreds of thousand of dollars.

"That's a lot of money, Jack."

"Sorry. I don't have my checkbook. I'm going to be rather busy for the next few weeks. So let's not worry about it, huh?"

"You steal it?"

"Actually, Rog, that gold is legally and rightfully mine. I'm involved in something that is rather...complicated at the moment. The less you know about it, the better off you are. I suggest that you take a little vacation or something. I'll pay for it."

"What do you expect me to do with this?" He pointed toward the gold.

"Hell, Roger. I'd paint it green and use it as a doorstep."

"How about giving me another and I can use them as bookends?" Roger chuckled. "May I ask how many of these little babies you're carrying?"

"Enough," said Trance softly. *What the hell am I going to do with them? I've got to get them out of the country.*

Roger drove south on I 93 to Route 3, and headed toward Cape Cod. *Ah*, thought Trance, *what I'd give right now for a few quiet days on Nantucket.* Then he thought of Janice. She had liked the island. He had a home there now, thanks to his dead parents. *Sometimes life really sucks*, he thought.

As a teenager, Trance had learned to fly single engine planes. While at Annapolis he had become certified for twin engines, and finally for jets. In the Navy he had learned to fly helos. Flying always seemed to clear his mind. He supposed it was the freedom, or perhaps the relaxed concentration one needed in order to fly.

Trance knew most of the small airports along the southern New England

coast, and he knew many of the men that ran them. Now he needed to get to Washington D C. He knew just where to go.

“Take the next right,” he said to Roger as they edged toward Plymouth. Over the next few minutes Roger drove along several back streets until he stopped by a fence and a small building. Trance bounded out of the car and walked inside. If he could, he would fly from this small airport with the gold, while Roger returned to Boston with Lauren’s car.

“Hey, gorgeous,” he said to a plump middle-aged woman wearing thick, black feline glasses. She had a hefty double chin and it wobbled as she looked up from her desk. Peering through her myopia she made a double-take at Trance and screamed, “Jackie!”

“Hi, baby. Is Cubie around?”

“Sure. Up in the tower. But give us a kiss first.” The woman looked up at Trance with a coquettish grin and offered her cheek for him to kiss. Instead, Trance wrapped his arms around her and planted one squarely upon her lips.

“Martha. When I’m around you I just lose control,” he said laughing.

“I’ll tell you, Jackie. If I weren’t a happily married woman, I might be tempted to teach you a thing or two.”

To this Jack leaned close to her ear and whispered, “I’ll talk to Cubie about it. Perhaps I can get his permission.”

Martha roared and shook her head. “Men. All you think about is sex. Now, get out of here. I’ve got an airport to run.”

Cubie Drake had gone to Annapolis with Trance. They had spent hundreds of hours in the air together as Navy pilots. Drake got the Cubie handle because he was completely bald. His head looked like a cue ball, perfectly round, white and shiny. His face was also round. It looked like a moon with craters for eyes and a nose. His eyes had thin, blond eyebrows, and they emanated warmth and friendship to even the newest of strangers. When he saw Trance walk into the small control tower, he gave a shout and held up his arms.

“Well, it’s about time you showed your ugly mug around here. How the hell have you been, JT?”

“Fine, Cubie. You’re looking great. Martha is as sexy as ever.”

“You didn’t kiss her again, did you? Last time you did that it was all she could talk about for days...” Cubie suddenly grew serious. “What’s the deal?”

“You still have that souped up Apache of yours?”

“Runs like a tiger.”

“Mind if I borrow it for a few days?”

“No problem, JT...Sorry about the old man. Read about it in the paper. I tried calling.”

“Thanks, man. I’ve been a little busy.”



“Martha will quit talkin’ to me if you don’t stay for dinner.”

“I’m sorry, ol’ buddy. But I can’t stay tonight. Maybe in a couple of weeks.”

“Are you okay, Jack?” Drake knew that Trance had planes of his own. He also knew that Trance would never turn down Martha’s cooking unless something important was happening. But this was all he would ask.

“Fine, Cubie. Just a little tired. That’s all. You got that baby fueled and ready?”

“Give me fifteen minutes. I’ll have one of the boys pre-flight it for you.”

“You’re a sport. Thanks. I’ll go file a plan.” Trance started down the stairs.

“It’ll cost you a ride in your Sopwith, Trance.”

Trance turned to face his friend and smiled. “Tell you what...If I live through this, I’ll give you the damn thing.”

## CHAPTER 6



When Trance approached Virginia in the Apache it was dark. Flying IFR, with his instruments rather than by sight, Trance floated along the coast, enjoying the lights as they sparkled upon the water. As he neared Washington, he radioed ahead to the military attachment empowered to protect the city from acts of terrorism. He spoke with an old friend who reconfirmed his authorization to fly nearer the city.

Trance took several high passes of Washington, staying just outside the no fly zone, marveling at how Congress had been able to do one thing right. There were no skyscrapers dwarfing the reminders of our heritage. Our symbols were not diminutive in stature, hunkered below a series of towering structures, each taller than the next. Instead, they spread majestically against the sky, illuminated in all their glory, surrounded by a park. God, he loved this country.

Trance flew past the Washington Monument, spiking regally into the air. He always felt a surge of pride whenever he gazed upon that simple, monolithic structure. He saluted as he flew by the World War II Memorial toward the Lincoln Memorial, then gazed at the reflecting pool as it shimmered from above.

These sights always sobered Trance. He wondered how so many so-called leaders of this great nation could speak with conviction about freedom and equality while they did their best to undermine its greatness. To him they seemed like *holier than thou* politicians, flying in their Lear jets and G5s to tax-sheltered hideaways where they would screw their secretaries on Sunday afternoons and fleece the taxpayers on Monday.

They had made him part of it all. They had convinced him with their rhetoric, that the cause always justified the means. He had needed a cause. He had wanted to follow. He had craved for something to believe in, and they had provided it for him. Do this and you will promote freedom. Kill this man and you will save thousands. Politicians measured life on a scale, weighing everything. Nothing was sacred, not even life, only numbers and the polls... How did he

measure life?

Trance had a problem, a big problem. He held information so explosive that it could alter the course of world events. He hadn't asked for it. He didn't want it, and he didn't know what the hell he should do with it. Should he give it to the politicians? Some would seek ways to use it for their own benefit. They had done that too many times, and he had lost faith in their words. He couldn't trust many of them. But that wasn't the real problem, was it? There was something more dangerous going on. Handing over such information to the politicians would set them fighting against each other for media coverage, the next scandal, the next glorious *cause* to keep their names in the press, while whatever he was trying to stop would continue, unmolested. By then his hands would be tied. Should he give it to the CIA? To Miller? To the men who had killed his wife? There was no telling what they would do with the information. Perhaps they would take his formula and use it to make gold to fund covert operations throughout the world. No more begging Congress for money. No more diverting profits from arms sales. No more funneling opium from the golden triangle and cocaine out of South America. They'd have their own printing press. Then, what would they do with the financial secrets? Auction them off to the highest bidder? For what? Trance loved the CIA. It truly was America's frontline against foreign threats. God knows they need more funding, he thought. But, at what cost? And, ultimately, the Company answered to Washington.

Trance tugged at his hair with both hands, trying vainly to release the tension. He wondered if his views had been jaded by his own overly idealistic expectations. There were honest men in government. Hell, most of them were honest. The CIA? The CIA was built upon a foundation of honor—men and women routinely placing duty and country above all else. Life couldn't be nobler. But who could he trust? Power corrupts. Absolute power destroys.

Where could he turn? Killers were following him. It wouldn't be long before they found him again. Could he live his life on the run? He could destroy the information. But would they believe him? Impossible. He could already reproduce what part he had of the formula with his eyes closed. What then? Was he marked for death? Would they bargain? No. They wouldn't bargain. They had already proven they would die before revealing who they were. Who were they? Did they share the same ultimate goal? Did they want to see that the best thing came from the information? And what the hell *was* the best thing? Even he didn't know. He didn't know enough, and he would have to find out. He would have to go to Europe.

Trance circled the small Virginia airport, waiting for clearance.

"You're clear for landing..." he heard through his headphones. He banked

the plane and guided her to a soft touchdown on a newly paved sheet of tarmac. He paid cash for hangar space and called a taxi. He took it to the Presidential Limousine Service Company.

Trance had many identities, and many passports—with different names, faces, and countries of origin. The CIA had prepared two passports. They were the ones he used on government business. Robert Clark, American businessman, and Aristotle Nikonos, Greek shipping executive. He'd had other identities created for him in Paris. He was Jean Pierre Monseau, a flamboyant but reclusive film producer. He was also Claude D. Perot, a Dutch dealer in rare books. He spoke fluent Parisian and Deutschland French, and it was easy for him to assume an identity on a moment's notice. He was Arthur Applegate, a potato farmer in Maine, with a glitzy Park Avenue Coop. Trance's prized identity had cost him over two hundred thousand dollars to obtain. He was Swiss, and nobody could become Swiss. Trance's passport's numbers matched information contained in the Swiss computer banks. He had birth records housed in a Geneva hospital. Educational records. Fingerprints. Employment records. Bank accounts and credit cards that went back years. Jack Trance was the Swiss citizen Johann Tarrance.

Jean Pierre Monseau rented a Ferrari and left a cash deposit of ten thousand dollars as security. Using a custom credit card, Jean Pierre had booked himself a room at the Ritz-Carlton on Massachusetts Ave. in Washington. He walked into his room and went immediately to the sink. He splashed water on his face and gazed at his reflection in the mirror. There were black crescents under his eyes. Red streaks ran dark from the inside of his eyes, clear across the eyeballs.

Trance had avoided sleep for two full days and his body was crying for rest. He would have to meditate. During most of his childhood, meditation had been taught to him as a religion—something that could never be separated from self, philosophy, love, and hand-to-hand combat. Now, he simply needed rest.

Trance sat upon the bed. He was surprised at how easy it was to return to his quiet place. Back straight, breathing in through the nose and out with the mouth. Twenty minutes later he felt renewed. Then, suddenly, he was hungry. He realized that he had not eaten since breakfast. That could wait. He had a call to make. He picked up the phone and dialed the number of Jesse Tompkin. Tompkin was an old friend he hadn't seen in years, and a man Trance had commanded during missions in a dozen countries around the globe. Tompkin had played halfback for Stanford. He was big, quick and smart. Trance had recruited him into his squad, and for six years they had fought side by side behind friendly and enemy lines. Tompkin had no fear of losing his life. He was living his second anyway, one given to him by Trance. With his new life came the comfort of knowing that each extra day he lived was a bonus. He gave thanks

for every one of them, never worrying that he could lose it at any moment.

Tompkin was Trance's first recruit into T Force, and with the years of tutelage he had become nearly as good as the teacher. Tompkin now headed the covert organization.

"Jesse James," said Trance when Tompkin answered the phone. "It's JT."

"Where are you, for Christ sakes? And what the hell have you done? Two minutes ago I was alerted that you're dead meat. Not beyond salvage, but damn close. A million dollar bounty—unofficial, of course."

"And they didn't give you a chance at the money, Jesse?"

"Hell, I wouldn't know what to do with that kind of money." He sobered. "The orders came from the top, JT—"

"Are we sterile?"

"As of ten minutes ago, yes."

"And now?"

"I'm in a quiet room, but hold." Tompkin ran a quick scan of the line and said, "Far as I can tell, JT. But you know as well as I—"

"That's okay, Jesse. Will you help me?"

Without hesitation Tompkin replied, "Of course."

"They'll take your job and your life."

"Maybe."

"Thanks."

Ninety minutes later the two men were seated together in a topless bar on the outskirts of Georgetown, eating greasy hamburgers and drinking draft beer in a dimly lit corner.

Trance told Tompkin all he knew.

When Trance finished speaking, Tompkin said, "Jesus, JT...I don't know what to tell you. I knew they had a loose cover on your ass. But how many times over the years have they done that? You're always drifting off somewhere, and we never know when we might need you. I know nothing about those following you. I'm not on the inside. They'd never let me in on this. They know how far back we go. They even tried to tail me here, but I shook them at the Watergate. I did my best to make it look natural. But you know as well as I that they'll take me in when I surface."

"I need your help before then, old friend."

"Name it."

"I've got to get out of the country, to Zurich...and I've got to smuggle seven hundred pounds of gold with me."

"That's all?"

Trance smiled. "I don't need the money, really. But the gold itself might be significant. I just don't know yet."

“Anything else? Papers? Weapons?”

“I’ll need to get a bag through.”

“No problem. You’ll have to take a puddle jumper to Newark. I can get you out of there on Swiss Air tomorrow evening. They run for us sometimes. We’ll pack the gold in a Pentagon crate. I’ll be on the inside to remove the labels once it’s on the plane. I’ll take your bag through myself, and let you go through the grope and hope with nothing to hide. I’ll put your bag, with your weapons, in the compartment above your seat. Once on the plane, you’re home free.”

“They’ll have your head for this.”

“Perhaps. But then, we never know when our time is up, do we? Anyway, I know what I’m doing.”

Trance got an hour of abbreviated sleep. When his watch alarm began beeping he sat up in bed and made a call to his banker in Switzerland, to inform him that the holder of account number JTT211650jldl004 would be arriving from America on Swiss Air with a rather substantial deposit. Would he please be so kind as to arrange for someone to meet him at the airport? Customs could be so tedious, and they might wish to raise questions regarding a perfectly legal transfer of funds, the verification of which would be counter to the wishes of the U.S. government.

There were two more calls to be made before he left for Zurich. Trance needed to speak with Bill Harris and Professor Hind. Their answers might provide him with enough clues to know how he should handle his affairs in Europe.

“Mr. Harris, please.”

“I’m sorry. But Mr. Harris won’t be in the office today.”

“Thanks. I’ll call his wireless.”

“Mr. Harris won’t be answering it, sir.”

“Is he all right?”

“I’m...sorry...sir...Mr. Harris is dead.”

Trance felt the blood sink in his stomach. His cheeks flushed crimson and he closed his eyes tightly. This couldn’t be happening.

“What happened?”

“It was a bombing, sir. His car. We suspect they were terrorists—”

Trance hung up the phone. “This is my fault,” he muttered. He shook his head. “Trance, when are you going to learn to keep your friends out of your problems?”

Trance sat upon the edge of the bed, cradling his head in his hands, thinking of the senselessness of it all. Bill Harris dead. The heir to one of America’s great fortunes, a close friend, now dead because of him. Then he thought of the professor. He had seen Bill before the professor. If they had followed him

to Bill, then the professor... Quickly he dialed another number.

The phone rang for minutes with no one answering. He dialed Hind's home number and the result was the same. Hadn't the professor asked him to call at the office at nine? He tried one final number—the graduate department of history.

"History. May I help you?"

"Yes. My name is Trance. I'm an old friend of Professor Hind's. I was supposed to be calling him at his office this morning. Would you happen to know how I might be able to reach him?"

"I'm sorry. But professor Hind had a heart attack in his office last night."

"Is he alive?"

"No, Mr. Trance. He is dead. But Mr. Stevens will be taking his students."

Hind was dead, too. Was this coincidence? Retribution? How many more would they kill? Angleton? Lauren? *Oh my God, Lauren!* Trance dialed frantically.

"Global Credit Bank. Lauren Haverford's office. May I help you?"

"Has she returned to the office?"

"May I tell her who is calling? Is this Jack?"

"Hi, Doris." Trance waited for no more than five seconds to hear Lauren's voice, but the time seemed to drag like rush hour traffic.

"Hello, sweetheart," she said.

"You're okay. "

"Thanks. So are you."

"No. I mean you're safe."

"I only went to Washington, Jackie. Roger brought me my car this morning. Gee, I love your Porsche. Care to trade?"

"You haven't been driving it, have you?"

"No, Jack," she laughed. "It's not like you to be worried about a car—"

"Don't go near that car, Lauren. Please." He paused. "You won't be hearing from me for a while. You say Roger's all right?"

"Yes. Are you okay, Jack?"

"I don't know. Too many things are happening that I don't understand. Do me a favor. Would you take a vacation?"

"Now?"

"Yes."

"Not even if my life depended on it."

"I'll send you anywhere, just name it."

"I'm working, Jack."

"Never mind. Just a thought. I'll call you when I get back. You're—I'll miss you."

*And what the hell should I do now?* Two friends dead. How many more were going to die? Lauren was safe. He could feel it. Roger would be all right, too. But what would happen next? When they found him again would he be the next to die? Or would he kill them instead? He had to get to Europe. He called and confirmed his two first class seats for his flight.

At 9:15 PM., Trance was safely on his way to Zurich.

When the wheels of the plane left the ground, Trance exhaled deeply. He closed his eyes and allowed sleep to beckon. In several hours he would be back to full strength. He would need every bit of it for what he would have to do.

Trance was sleeping in the first class cabin when he was jerked awake by the rumbling of a meal cart behind him. He was stretched out in the seat, making it into as much of a bed as possible. There were two rows of three seats each in the first class section of the Airbus A330. There was only one other man in his row—a well-tailored, middle-aged executive with brown hair and a thin mustache.

Trance normally liked the Swiss Air food and today was no different. His scrambled eggs were light and fluffy, the bacon was crisp and the croissants appeared to be just out of the oven. Trance sipped a black coffee and sat back to relax in comfort. He perused several magazines, letting his eyes wander through them, not really reading but allowing his mind to clear before it limped back into the swirl surrounding him. The lights were turned low and Trance started watching an action spy movie, where the hero blows up half of New York City to save the other half. As the movie played, Trance drifted back into a calm, untroubled sleep.

Without warning the aircraft fell into chaos. The lights flashed on—a sudden, harsh change from the quiet darkness. As Trance awakened he could hear several men in the main cabin of the plane. They were shouting in a broken mix of French, English and German. A baby wailed and children began screaming for their mothers.

The crack of a pistol came from the cockpit in front of him. A moment later Trance saw his neighbor push the captain's dead body out the cockpit door. The door quickly closed and snapped shut.

A shot went off behind him in the main cabin. Several women screamed and the children cried louder. Trance assessed the situation quickly, but before he could move a man appeared above him, leveling a pistol twelve inches from his face. A second man stood two feet behind with an identical 9 mm Ruger P-85 in his hand. These men held killing pistols. They were no amateurs.

"You're going to be coming with us, Trance," said the man.

"I think you should land the plane first, don't you?"

"Shut up."



The second man frisked Trance for a weapon, while the first kept his pistol trained at Trance's head. Nothing was taken from him. Trance stared back into the man's face, studying it for strengths and weaknesses. It was amazing how much you could tell from a man's eyes and the way he carried himself, which direction he looked, even when he was in a position of dominance. This man wore no fear, only hatred. The same sort of fanatical hatred as he had seen in the eyes of the man in the church. Men without fear were dangerous.

Trance listened to the man's speech. It bore an accent he could not place. Perhaps middle Europe, he thought. He held the gaze of his accuser and listened to the yelling of two other men in the back of the cabin. Their accents were different, too, and each unlike the other. Who the hell were these men?

"May I ask where we're going?" Trance asked quietly. The man beside Trance reached back with his pistol, preparing to answer with a blow to Trance's temple. The man behind him grabbed his gun.

"We have orders not to harm him."

Where was that accent from? Chechnya, perhaps?

"I suggest that you rest now, Mr. Trance. The next few days will be very long ones for you, I suspect." The man with the gun chuckled and took the seat across the aisle from Trance, being sure to maintain enough distance between himself and his prisoner. The other man took a seat directly in front of his partner, grumbling as he sat.