

JOHN REBEL

AUTHOR OF "MEGA MERCIES"



THREE PAGODA PASS

AN ASIAN TECHNO THRILLER

"Unstoppable Reading"

Three Pagoda Pass

By John Rebell

An Asian Techno Thriller

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Dedication

To Lennon. You are the best part of me. You make it all worthwhile.

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What I got right was because of them. What I got wrong, is me spinning a story and not their fault. Thanks Dave and Michael, I couldn't have done it without you.

John Rebell

Three Pagoda Pass

An Asian Techno Thriller

Book One

The Bioreactor



Prologue

The General was convinced that children made the best killers, especially if trained from the proper age.

That age, according to the General, was between seven and ten. History, in fact, sided with the General on this, something which history rarely did. The legendary Spartans of Ancient Greece also started training their soldiers at the age of seven, and just as brutally. While the General had little knowledge of ancient history, he had great experience in the tactics of terror.

His monthly “drafting” of soldiers usually took place around three a.m. He would choose a village at random and set up surveillance. The trick was in knowing in advance where his future soldiers lived. His army was also based on gender equality. He did however, think that ten to twelve was a better age for girls...for personal reasons.

His soldiers would get to the village sometimes one week before the raid, set up a perimeter, and watch the daily routines, noting where the children lived, what parents were in attendance, and how likely the threat of resistance was. Once he had this information he was ready to act.

He had seen the Western “Rambo” movies where Asian warlords swept into villages, with floodlights blinding everyone, and with troops jumping out of trucks, firing their weapons at anyone and everyone. That was Hollywood. He thought it was very dramatic, but also very stupid.

He sent his fighters into the village in silence, directly to his target’s house. They would creep through the flimsy doors of the shanty, and

then the high-powered flashlights would come on. He knew perfectly well that waking up out of a sound sleep to blinding light was disorientating.

This way he could round up a maximum of soldiers with very little danger to himself or his troops. Of course, there were exceptions, like tonight.

In that case, it was permissible to have a little fun.

“Boot camp” was to begin immediately. First, the boys were separated from the girls and hog-tied on the ground. The girls would get his critical eye later. It was important to separate the boys from family and keep them together.

The General jumped down from the Jeep. He was thirty-seven, almost geriatric in this part of the world. He wore solid gold bracelets on each bicep. A US Army, Vietnam era sleeveless flak jacket hung on his muscular frame, as did the dozens of medals he had awarded himself.

He walked to the first family. The boy was the proper age.

“What is your name, little one?”

“Aung,” said the boy.

“What do you want to do when you grow up?”

“I’m going to be a teacher,” the boy said with pride.

He cut the duct tape handcuffs from the boy and handed him a gun.

“Why not be a soldier, like me?” said the General.

The boy was silent. Looking down at the gun.

“Shoot her,” he commanded Aung, pointing to the boy’s mother. The boy looked at him with complete incomprehension.

“It is very easy, little one. No more than killing a fly. You don’t need her anymore. You are one of us.”

The boy looked down at the gun, it smelled of gun oil, it felt heavy and greasy in his hand; he looked at his mother, and then looked at the General. Without hesitation, the boy turned the gun on the General, aimed and pulled the trigger. The hammer came down with a dry click.

The General burst out laughing. “Yes, little one, very good, you have the makings of a very fine soldier. Here, let me show you how this is done.”

This time the General used his own weapon. He placed it in the boy's hand, wrapping his own hand around it, placing the boy's finger on the trigger and in one quick, well-practiced, fluid motion, raised the gun and fired a shot directly into the boy's mother's face at close range.

The sound was huge. She went down like a heap of dirty laundry, the impact of the .45 caliber bullet blowing her sideways in a cloud of red mist. She came to rest face up, eyes open, face half gone, staring at her forever damaged son. "Uh, uh, uh ..." the terrified little boy was unable to grasp, or articulate what had just happened.

Dead-eyed child soldiers stood around him, and looked on with boredom.

"That, little one, is how easy it is done," said the General, with a hint of satisfaction. "You are now a soldier in my army."

Chapter 1

The refugee camp hospital at Three Pagoda Pass was a sorry affair.

The camp was located on the border between Thailand and Myanmar. It was over-crowded, built from bamboo, thatch, and banana leaves. It lacked water, basic sanitation, and had no medicine.

It also suffered from complete indifference on the part of just about everyone in the outside world. Even though Myanmar had laid claim to “The World’s Longest Running Civil War,” few people outside Asia had ever even heard of it. The camp held over 19,000 people.

Michael McAdams, a trauma specialist with Doctors Without Borders, with a stethoscope around his neck, walked around on the packed dirt floor of the refugee hospital in a filthy, blood-splattered smock. He walked among children doing triage. Flies rose, and then settled slowly as he passed. Nothing in medical school, nothing even in a big city ER, h the magnitude of this hospital’s problems. To call this hospital “primitive” was an understatement.

The three simple rules of triage repeated in an endless loop in his head:

The ones who are too far gone, you don’t waste time on.

The ones who’ll survive anyway, you don’t waste time on.

The ones stand a chance of making it with intervention, deserve five minutes.

He took the stethoscope out of his ears and stood up. The flies surrounding the child rose with him. He could smell the stench of sepsis in the open, running sores. He noted the mottled greenish color surrounding the wound. The flies settled back down like a black mist to

feed as he passed. *At least the flies are eating*, he thought. He shook his head slightly at the nurse. She nodded her head in understanding. *You can't save them all.*

Shit! He thought silently...*I can't save any of them today.*

The next child was not in the latter stages of malnutrition, nor did he have a traumatic injury. Dehydration, for sure, but no open wounds.

Hummm...BP slightly above normal, thought McAdams. *Heartbeat elevated, but steady. Maybe my luck is changing.* McAdams glanced up at the nurse.

"What do we have in the stores?" he asked quietly.

"UN supplied rice," she replied uncaringly, "I think...if the rats and the rains didn't get it."

"WHAT DO WE HAVE IN THE STORES?" the doctor repeated impatiently.

"Well, nothing..." the nurse shrugged her shoulders, and turned away indifferent to those surrounding her.

McAdams felt like Saint Jude, the Patron Saint of Lost Causes.

Chapter 2

Outside the refugee camp life was even worse.

While McAdams worked to save a child's life, My Lin, a child herself, worked to save her own. Twelve years old, dressed in rags and barefoot, picking through trash in a third world dump, her only occupation was survival.

She's been scavenging all day in the hot sun. She's become used to the smell of burning plastic, toxic waste and the constant droning of flies buzzing in the background. She picks carefully over the broken glass, as she was without shoes, knowing full well a small cut could have serious repercussions in the tropics. Infection could set in rapidly. She would be unable to walk within hours. With no water, and no basic sanitation or medical care available, a small cut could mean death.

There were other child scavengers at the sprawling hundred-acre garbage dump, as well. Hundreds of children, between the ages of seven to thirteen. Trash fires burned and plumes of black smoke choked the air with toxic gases day and night.

Some of them, like My Lin, worked in the dump barefoot and shirtless, combing through mounds of rubbish for tin cans, plastic bags and other recyclable goods. On a good day, she could make almost 50 cents.

My Lin lost both parents to the fighting four years ago. Eight year old Sambo Lon's divorced mother abandoned him. Kunthea Nim, ten, lost her father to a land mine a few months before her mother died in childbirth. All the children had to work to pay off the debts left by their parents.

Burmese health officials say the dump site was extremely treacherous. Two years ago, a Japanese study found dangerously high levels of dioxins in the soil and large amounts of heavy metals in the metabolism of children who worked in the dump. Dioxins, came from burning

chemicals, are known to cause cancer.

My Lin knew it is perilous work. Discarded batteries, pesticides, fluorescent light tubes, and medical waste caused the most serious health threats for young scavengers.

The land was soggy, and huge bulldozers rumbled through, dumping pile upon pile of garbage, seven days a week, twenty hours a day. My Lin and the other children got up as early as three a.m. to prepare for the first garbage trucks. They often worked well after seven in the evening, when it became too dark to forage.

On the hottest days of the year, temperatures climbed above one hundred and ten degrees. The air became nearly unbreathable.

My Lin watched children sifting through the smoldering trash heaps. Others raced after the garbage trucks that arrive with fresh loads of refuse.

My Lin spied a group of boys running after the trucks. They jumped into the jaws of garbage trucks to fish things out before the trucks even reached the dump site. The drivers paid no attention. More than once a child couldn't get out in time.

When a vehicle -- any vehicle -- crossed into the dump site, children flung their bags of tin cans in front of its wheels, hoping to crush their cans in order to increase the space inside their bag.

My Lin knew many of the children were born into impoverished Cambodian families that moved to the area from the countryside after the end of Pol Pot's murderous rule. Instead of finding urban fortunes, many of them settled in a slum that grew along the rim of the dried lake bed, a dump infested with flies that gravitated to the refuse and dregs of a nation. The slum now housed more than ten thousand adults and children.

Ratha, sat down beside her.

"Those boys are hitting me and pushing me into the garbage," she whined, showing My Lin her scraped up leg. She was another girl who still worked at the dump, trying to earn money to pay off her parents' debt.

She wore a stained white blouse and a pair of soiled long pants. Her sandals were too big, and her dirty hair, which fell down to her shoulders, was tucked under a dusty, purple knit hat that protected her eyes from the scorching sun. Stitched to her pants was a Winnie-the-Pooh

patch.

She carried a metal pick to help her poke through the garbage, along with a white burlap sack that she used to collect her recyclable goods. A condition known as Chloracne, caused by toxic chemicals, had given her a red, boiling, rash which crawled up her face and neck. Both children talked for a while, then My Lin moved away.

My Lin continued walking around the dump edges, turning over potential piles of trash.

My Lin found treasure; a piece of meat in the garbage. She looked around to see if anyone else was watching, then pounced on it. Feral, she scraped the maggots off with her fingers, eating it as fast as she could. There were indistinct shouts in the distance, as boys spied her eating and started throwing rocks. One landed close to her and she looked up, fear and determination in her eyes. A rock hits her back, causing blood to slowly trickle between her shoulder blades. As the boys got closer. She put the rancid offal in her shoulder bag and ran.

Chapter 3

“You have absolutely no idea what you’re doing, do you?” the CEO said, smugly, with a hint of contempt.

Fortunately for Cobalt, and unfortunately for the CEO, Cobalt knew exactly what he was doing. He had his private investigators compile an extensive dossier on the CEO, as well as others. For example, he knew the CEO ran a three hundred and fifty employee, Fortune 500 company, and that it was family owned, and operated.

He knew that the CEO was a “Type “A” business personality, and his management style was authoritarian. That his employees lived in fear of him, and his temper. No one dared to cross him. They called him “The Grim Reaper” behind his back.

Cobalt also knew the CEO was a militant health nut who jogged five miles every morning. He knew he was a rabid anti-smoker, gave a sizable donation to the American Cancer Society every year and considered second hand smoke “the biggest man made killer of this century.”

Which was why Cobalt took a certain delight when he looked at the CEO and calmly lit up a Marlboro.

“There is a strict no smoking policy in this boardroom, and building. Put that out right now,” said the CEO, standing up from his chair, glaring across the conference table at Cobalt.

“Then call security,” said Cobalt, quietly, meeting his eyes.

The Chief Executive dropped his eyes and picked up the phone.

“Mary? Get security up here. Have them escort Mr. Cobalt from the building.”

Cobalt didn’t bother to answer. Within minutes, two security guards hustled up from downstairs lobby and stood in the doorway looking from one man to the other. Neither moved.

The CEO glanced over his shoulder at them and said, “Please escort Mr. Cobalt out. He’s overstayed his welcome.”

Security stood rooted to the floor, not daring to breathe, understanding they were bit players in a drama they didn't understand and wanted nothing to do with.

Cobalt came to their rescue.

"Whether I know what I'm doing or not is irrelevant" Cobalt delivered this statement with equanimity, with no expression, to the stunned boardroom. "What is relevant is that, as of nine am New York Time, I own controlling shares in this company. That means, you are now my employee, and THAT means, you're fired."

The executive's face turned a deep shade of scarlet; he started to sputter, his voice rising. "You can't do that, this is a family owned, private company, I'll..."

"I can, and more importantly, I did. This company belongs to me now. Make this easy on yourself, because I'm not going away."

"My lawyers went over our agreement with a fine-toothed comb. They assured me..."

"Then my advice? Hire better lawyers the next time. Security? Please allow the CEO to clean out his office, then escort him out the building."

The CEO, the family patriarch, was used to getting his way in all things, and in over twenty-six years he had never been spoken to in such a manner. He looked ready to kill, or suffer a brain aneurysm. Cobalt watched with interest as the veins in the CEO's temples started visibly pulsating.

The CEO opened his mouth to say something, then thought better of it as each security officer put a restraining hand on his elbow. The CEO gathered up his papers and stalked out of the boardroom.

"I'll see you in hell for this, Cobalt," he said as he passed.

"You'll probably get there first." Cobalt said softly, after the slammed door finished reverberating around the conference room. Security had hustled out, trying to catch up with the angry CEO.

"OK, let's move on..."

Maximilian "Max" Cobalt was forty-four years old. He carried his six foot frame with ease. His hair was still jet black and his eyes were a cool ice blue. A self-proclaimed "Corporate Raider" by profession, he scouted out weak companies, whose management were making gross mistakes, came in on the pretext of injecting needed capital into the ailing companies, and then bribed weak family members into selling their

shares in order to take a controlling interest in the company.

Cobalt had no illusions about himself. In business, and life, he was a driven, cold-hearted bastard. He knew most people thought he was a certifiable prick and could have cared less. What never ceased to amaze him was that after twenty years in the business no one ever saw him or the end coming.

Cobalt looked for a specific type of company. He liked older, established family owned companies having between one hundred and fifty and three hundred and fifty employees. These companies were usually found in manufacturing, and lately, in the high-tech vertical. The companies were almost always headed up by nepotistic older management teams, who moved slowly, rarely took risks, and were slow to adapt to the changing circumstances of the marketplace.

Dinosaurs were also slow to adapt and we all know what happened to them.

Next, Cobalt turned his eyes on the CFO, the Chief Financial Officer. He was the son-in-law of the CEO. Cobalt had met the CEO's daughter before acquiring the company and thought the two deserved each other. She was the one who sold Cobalt the remaining controlling shares, selling her own family business down the river.

The CFO was a fussy little man, prematurely balding, with an air of preoccupation and rapidly blinking eyes. Bean Counters everywhere had a slightly superior air and way about them. As though they were privy to secrets no one else knew. Which, of course, they most likely were.

"Your fourth quarter estimates seem a little...optimistic." Cobalt let the statement hang in the air as a question.

"Actually, they aren't. You see, once past account receivables are tallied, we can confidently extrapolate..."

"You're history too," Cobalt said quietly. To his credit, the CFO simply nodded his head, gathered his papers and quietly left without another word.

The head of the table, as well as the right hand chair, was now vacant. Senior management was hemorrhaging.

The corporate blood bath continued.

Cobalt turned his attention to the left hand chair, the COO, Chief Operations Officer. He was the CEO's sister's husband. He was bombastic, with the stereotypical slicked back hair and the overbearing confidence of a door-to-door vacuum cleaner salesman pushing his way into people's homes.

Before Cobalt could even open his mouth, the COO launched into a well-rehearsed sound bite.

"Fourth quarter sales were MUCH better than anticipated, in fact, we..."

"You're toast," said Cobalt softly, cutting him off. The stunned executive just looked at him in disbelief.

"I think if you'd just give me a chance to explain, you'd see we're on a projected growth pattern that..."

"Go on, get out of here. My secretary has your severance package ready." Cobalt delivered this in the same soft, unemotional style.

With the entire top management gone, the air in the room was a little less stuffy. It was replaced by the smell of uncertainty and the stench of fear. Cobalt got up from the opposite end of the table from the now banished CEO, and walked slowly and confidently to the head of the polished oak table. He could feel eyes, awe, and hatred on his back.

Still standing, Cobalt looked at each senior VP in turn. Then he looked down distastefully at the cigarette in his hand and stubbed it out on the conference room table.

"In case you didn't get the memo, heads are rolling...who wants to be next?"

No one volunteered.

Chapter 4

“I’d like to introduce this year’s Hauptmann Award winner, Ms. Anya Chin,” said the Dean of Biological Sciences Dept., air-clapping silently as he finished the introduction. The sparse crowd followed suit and clapped politely, but unenthusiastically.

The lights dimmed, and murmurs from the crowd started to die down. Anya Chin, 26, an Asian Doctor of Biology in a white smock, mounted the stage. Her high heels tapped a tattoo beat across the hardwood. She was petite, raven haired, and had the flawless Asian skin that made women jealous. She was small breasted and weighed no more than ninety pounds. The single most beautiful thing about her was the fact that she herself was unaware of her own beauty.

The men in the front row of the auditorium, sitting at eye level to her ankles, admired her slender legs. Their lascivious eyes travelled up her legs to under her knee length skirt. The view from “the pit”, was almost worth the fact that the air conditioning in the auditorium was on the fritz and the temperature was rising. Most of the men now had a new reason to start sweating.

The auditorium seated about one hundred people. Only fifty or so were in attendance that afternoon, scattered about the room in twos and threes. Many of the students were here only because it was required. They had their legs up on the chairs in front of them, and were heads down texting their friends.

Anya Chin wasted no time. She started setting up her laptop computer, plugging in the A/V cables quickly and efficiently. She hit the enter key, and immediately a PowerPoint slide show presentation sprang to life behind her. She took the “clicker” and started walking about the stage.

“Right now, as I stand here, seventy children are dying of starvation. That’s one hundred thousand per day, forty two hundred per hour, and seventy per minute. In the time it took me to say that, three children died.”

Anya pressed the remote and showed a slide showing of the extreme malnutrition in Darfur

With another click, a slide showed children starving in a concentration camp type conditions in Rwanda appeared.

Anya clicked the remote again. A slide showing inner city starvation in LA and New York was next.

“That’s three hundred per month, three million six hundred per...”

“Excuse me? Doctor?” A bored, tired, voice piped up from the audience speaks up.

A prematurely balding man in his forties held his hand up, picked up a wireless microphone, which gratingly squealed in distaste. He had the disheveled look of an academic bureaucrat, with today’s soup stains on his tie. His shirt has given up the struggle to stay fresh. He was a life member of the “Academic Ignorati,” as Anya liked to refer to them. He pushed his glasses up his nose and continued...

“We’re aware of this. We know the problems. It’s the solution that brings us here today. The question is...Do you have a solution?”

The pretty Asian professor looked away, she was far too polite to confront his rudeness head-on, but had a faraway look in her dark, smoky eyes.

“As a matter of fact, I do, I...”

“Yes, yes, I’m sure you do,” interrupted the bureaucrat again.

“Would you mind however if you moved this along?” Even hostile looks from the audience at his appalling rudeness didn’t seem to faze him. “I have a meeting and I was hoping we could wrap this. up”

Anya looked down at him from the stage, no sign of irritation in her eyes, or any emotion at all registering on her facial features. She continued to click through her slide presentation.

“Consider this: Imagine for just a moment an organism that...

Can be used to end world hunger;

Can create nutritious health foods and has been eaten for centuries in Asia;

Can solve the “Peak Oil” energy crisis;

Can contain over 60% lipids (oil) which can be used in biofuels;

Can be used to produce biofuels, bioethanol, jet fuel, and bio gasoline;

Has the ability to grow incredibly fast, or slow;

Requires no cropland to grow, and displaces no food crops;

Has no growing season and can be cultivated year around;

Can be used to clean raw sewage into drinking water;

Can produce low cost medicines, pharmaceuticals and vaccines;

Can be used organic animal feed for the world's animals and livestock;

Can be used as organic fertilizer to grow organic vegetables;

Can be used to cure:

Diabetes

Cancer

Obesity

Reduce anxiety and sleep disorders

Anti-aging effects on skin, hair and organs

Improves mental function and enhances concentration

Improves immune system."

Anya looked up and realized that her audience was now captivated and had drifted from a disinterested state of skepticism to one of somewhat intrigued disbelief.

Microphone feedback squealed as the bureaucrat tapped it a second time. "Apart from science fiction, do you know where you can find such an organism?"

"I certainly do. In fact, it is almost impossible not to find. It grows abundantly all over the earth, in every climate, even on the polar caps, in your swimming pool and bird bath... It's called pond scum."

"You realize of course that is absolutely ridiculous," said the bureaucrat, "If this is some sort of joke, I'm not amused."

"I assure you, it's not a joke," said Anya calmly, with conviction.

"Do you have any sort of documentation to back up these ridiculous claims..."

"Of course, I do. It's..." Then Anya Chin stopped in mid sentence.

Realizing that fighting entrenched ignorance and rude hostility was a losing battle, she calmly walked off the stage not bothering to answer.

Chapter 5

“GERALD GARCIA HENDRIXXXX!!” His mother yelled down the cellar steps.

Christ, he hated it when his mother called him that. Geri looked up from his science project, rolled his eyes, decided not to answer, and went back to work.

It was bad enough that his last name was the same as a dead rock star, but to add insult to injury, his parents decided to name him after their idol. His mother and father met on a “Dead Head” tour, and he was the product of 3 days of sex, drugs and rock and roll. His father had dropped dead of a heart attack a year later. As though she could even remember The Old Geezer Reunion Tour. Talk about embarrassment.

To quote (one of)is his namesake(s), what a long, strange, trip it’s been.

OK, the moment of truth. He flipped a switch and the long, clear, glass cylinder burst into life, bubbling and gurgling.

Fuck me sideways!! he thought, *it works!!*

“Gerald Garcia Hendrix I’m not going to tell you again. Your dinner’s cold and if you don’t get up here this instant, I’m giving it to the dog!”

Go for it. To quote another questionable rock and roll dead-beat ‘you can’t always get what you want.’

The light green colored water bubbled silently. He added some nutrients, stood back, then added some more. There. Perfect. In three days he ought to have some concrete proof.

“For the last time, this is your last warning, young man. Come to dinner right now or I’ll...”

“Coming. Oh, Mom, did you say something?” he asked all inno-

cence and wide eyes.

Let's see Brittany McGuire and Bart Williams top this, he thought. As though she even knows I exist. If I win this prize it's a thousand bucks. With a thousand bucks I could... Visions of him in a top hat and tails as he whisks the blond Goddess Brittany McGuire off her feet...The DJ in his head sounded like Mick Jagger.

"Please allow me to introduce myself/I'm a man of wealth and taste..."

I really need to get these cheesy rock and roll lyrics out of my brain, he thought.

"So Mom, what are we having?"

"It's Tuesday night, you know we always have Tuna Surprise on Tuesday..."

Geri's mom's voice droned into a distant buzz in the back of his mind. Geri turned out the basement light and climbed the basement steps, like the condemned going to the guillotine. He hated Tuna Surprise.

What he didn't see was the infrared camera as it came on at the same time as the lights went off. The miniature camera, hidden in a broken radio, continued to film the progress on the strange cylinder glowing strangely green and red on the work bench.

Chapter 6

A line of five black limousines, front bumper flags flying for each respective nation, circled the block once on Wireless Road in Bangkok, then entered the side gate into the US Embassy. The cars held ambassadors representing the countries of Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Philippines, and Myanmar.

China was intentionally left out of this meeting as both an undisguised snub against the current ambassador as well as a protest against the military build-up and coming conflict over the Spratley Islands in the South China Sea for the oil and gas rights. This was perfectly fine with everyone present as there was no love lost between any of them and the Chinese.

Immaculate Honor Guard Marines stood at attention, swords drawn and held to the nose, as the dignitaries pulled into the circular, Greek columned portico. Not even sweat dared to mar the perfection of the Marines' protocol in the humid, tropical heat.

The US Ambassador to Thailand, Richard Jenkins ("Jenk" or "Jerk" depending on who you talked to) was on hand to greet each guest personally, and shake the sweaty hands of the visiting politicians.

Jenkins was an old hand in the Foreign Service, which was how he got this plum assignment with the past administration, a favor for his services in "outing" Valarie Plame, a CIA operative and a known "Big Mouth."

Jenkins had the impossibly white teeth of a celebrity, a full head of silver hair, and always knew exactly what to say no matter how uncomfortable the situation. While he was an inveterate back-stabber like the career diplomat he was, so far he had been wily enough to avoid falling on his own political sword.

"Mr. Nguyen, a pleasure to see you again. I was sorry to hear

about General Giap's recent passing," he said to the ambassador of Vietnam, thinking... *I hope the General rots in hell for all the embarrassment the man handed the Americans during the Vietnam War.*

"Thank you, thank you so much," replied the ambassador of Vietnam, "I know you were always special to the General. I'll pass your sincere wishes to his widow." At the same time thinking...*the only thing that would make the General happy is if he could reach from his grave and twist your testicles off and feed them to you for the 3 million of my countrymen you helped kill.*

Jenkins bared his unbearably white smile and reached out to shake the hand of his next guest, the ambassador of Cambodia.

"Mr. Pram...I fell in love with those candies Cambodia is so proficient at making the last time I was there." *In that shit-stained, backwater you call a country,* he didn't add.

"Ambassador Jenkins, an honor to see you again." *Here's to hoping you choke, and shit blood on the next one,* the Ambassador silently wished his counterpart with an insincere smile.

"Ah...Somporn, it's been way too long. I hope His Majesty is keeping you busy?" *Are you still supplying little girls to the Prince?* he thought inwardly with a huge outward smile.

"Mr. Ambassador, you always look so young. I wish I knew your secret. The demands of the kingdom are always pressing." *Of course, your secret of your Thai plastic surgeons is known to all as are Thai girls thirty-five years younger than you,* thought the Ambassador to Thailand.

And so it went. The US ambassador greeted each of his guests like visiting royalty, which, in some cases, they were. Expressing his intense and insincere love of whatever wonderful country he happened to be talking about.

Of course, he fooled no one.

His guests, equally diplomatic, and equally poisonous of thought, also outwardly expressed their deep respect and intense devotion for all things American, while inwardly expressing their equally intense distrust and in some cases, disgust, of all things American.

"So in conclusion," Jenk couldn't wait to wrap this up and get to

his current favorite whore on Soi Cowboy, off Sukhumwit Road., “I feel confident that the current troubles in Myanmar and the South China Sea can be easily solved when an international dedicated group of like-minded, and peace loving members join hands in a common cause. Furthermore, we are here today to...” Jenk’s monotone drone was already putting most members to sleep.

Ambassador to Vietnam: *Furthermore, we were here today so that you could lay the groundwork for the US stealing our naval base at Cam Ranh Bay back.*

Ambassador to Myanmar: *Furthermore, we were here today so that you could get a business foothold to rape the natural resources of my country.*

Ambassador to Thailand: *Furthermore, we were here today so you fuck more of my country’s girls and get your teeth whitened again.*

The meeting ended with a rousing toast to a wonderful host.

Chapter 7

Paul Savage was an ex Delta commando and corporate “fixer”, one of those Black Bag guys, made famous by G. Gordon Liddy of Water-gate fame. He was also one of the best in the business. But this job was taxing his expertise.

It was difficult to move inside a house, in the middle of the night, when all the motion detectors were connected to lights and burglar alarms. Yet that was exactly what Savage did.

Of course, night vision goggles and infrared helped in that respect. The occupants were all upstairs asleep. He was dressed in black, moving close to the walls, NV goggles firmly in place on his forehead, making him look like a hybrid human-insect. He moved surely, without haste or wasted movement towards the basement door.

Why did a normal house have all these motion detectors? He had a feeling that little fuck Geri Hendrix rigged it up. In which case, who knew what other surprises lay in wait that little shit had dreamed up.

At this point he knew he was in one of the few blind spots of the motion detectors so he knew he could move more freely. He tried opening the basement door slightly. The rusty hinges screeched.

He sprayed the hinges with WD-40 from his toolkit, then opened the basement door the minimum necessary, squeezed through, and went down the basement steps, distributing his weight evenly over the steps so as to not make a sound.

While the house was wired up the wazoo, the lab had no security at all. Go figure.

He approached Geri's work bench and looked at the camera hidden in the broken radio, checked its batteries and set up a wireless relay to beam the video signal to another relay outside the house.

Next, he went to the workbench, laid Geri's notes out and then he photographed every page and loose scrap of paper, making sure he left nothing out.

Then, he turned his attention to the bioreactor.

It was a cylinder of clear acrylic, roughly four foot tall, and twelve inches wide. It glowed in multi colors of red, blue, and white of the LED lights which were submerged inside the bioreactor. The culture itself had a dark greenish tint. Inside he could see floating clumps of dark green material being blown about the cylinder in a circular pattern by the air stones releasing oxygen and CO₂ into the tank.

Savage took more pictures documenting the growth in the bioreactor and left as silently as he came.

Chapter 8

In Social Studies class Geri Hendrix couldn't keep his eyes off Brittany McGuire sitting one row and two seats ahead of him.

He looked down at the computer screen, but in his mind's eye he was in the tropics with a Brittany in yellow string bikini, her bikini standing out on flawless tanned skin. Geri tapped on the computer keys, pushing his glasses up his nose, reading as he went-

"There are now few cases of outright starvation among poor children. Indeed, obesity is now more of a threat. This was not always the case. In 1968, a group of physicians issued -'Hunger in America,'- a landmark report documenting appalling levels of malnutrition among poor children.

"They wrote that-"Wherever we went and wherever we looked, whether it was the rural south, Appalachia, or an urban ghetto, we saw children in significant numbers who were hungry and sick, children for whom hunger was a daily fact of life and sickness in many forms, an inevitability." Their report to Congress exposed shocking levels of nutritional deficiencies in areas of the United States that were comparable to those in developing countries."

Brittany, fully aware of the effect she had on boys, had it all. Sixteen years old, blond, with all American cheerleader good looks, she knew she could have any boy she wanted...and most of the male teachers as well.

If Brittany had it all, Geri Garcia Hendrix had none of it.

At seventeen years old, Geri sported kinky, wiry red hair, geek glasses, and a pocket calculator. Even he admitted he looked like Carrot Top with a pocket protector. The Brittany McGuires of the world looked right past him. Not only did he not exist on the Planet of Brittany, he doubted if he could even be a minor moon orbiting it.

Brittany leaned back in her chair to giggle a moment with Bart Williams, this year's Quarterback. The movement stretched the fabric of her low cut T-shirt, delineating her perfect young breasts. Almost every man, boy, not to mention the jealous females, in the room stopped breathing for a few seconds.

She gave Bart a "*you're horrible*" look, giggled some more, and went back to her studies, ending the short peep show. Unfortunately, adolescent hard-ons remained. Geri decided, then and there, today was the day. Today, he would ask her out. Today he would defy the Gods. Today he would take a chance at heaven on earth.

Why not? He asked himself over and over.

No guts, no glory.

A faint heart never caught fair lass.

No pain, no gain, he told himself as he pumped himself up.

The rest of the class was spent composing the right words. He practiced killer one liners and witty repartee that would sweep her off her feet.

The bell rang and he gathered up his books quickly. He hurried over to Brittany's desk just as she was getting up. The moment of truth was here.

"Brittany, I was wondering if you, I mean, will you...."

"Ewwww" Brittany interrupted halfway through Geri's well planned, heartfelt, monologue, looking Geri up and down with disgust.

"Look, Bart, Pond Scum decided to speak. Go back to the other one celled organisms you call your friends and ask them out."

Brittany giggled at her own wit and took Bart's arm. Bart Williams gave him a withering "You're dead, asshole," look and they both dismissed him out of their lives without another glance.

Geri stood there, rooted to the floor, not daring to breathe. He could feel the blood rushing to his face to make his complexion an even brighter orange than it already was.

What just happened?

Pond scum? he thought, hoping there was a way to die on the spot. *She thinks I'm pond scum. Slimy, stinking, oozing, pond scum.*

Chapter 9

Bart Williams thought today would be an excellent day to beat the shit out of Geri Hendrix.

Not having forgotten the insult of being pushed aside just as he was making the final moves on Brittany McGuire, the only manly thing to do was to fuck up someone fifty pounds lighter and three inches shorter than he was. The fact that the competition was unequal only made it more fun.

He had it all planned out and even enlisted the help of Brittany. He told her the plan and she even rolled her eyes and gave him her patented “*you’re horrible*” look again as she giggled with delight.

Since today was Tuesday, it meant Geri would get out of gym class and walk this hallway. Brittany unbuttoned one button on her blouse and made sure her top showed plenty of cleavage.

The bell rang and class was dismissed. The hallway soon filled to flood tide, like a student river flowing down the main hallway with tributaries branching off into individual classrooms.

Geri Hendrix was one of the last minute stragglers as they knew he would be. Brittany reached down rubbing her ankle with a look of pain on her face.

“Geri? Could you help me?” She cocked her shoulders in such a way that looking down her blouse was unavoidable.

“Sure. What can I do...?” replied Geri, all too willing to help his Damsel in Distress, even if she did shit all over him the day before.

“Just help me outside. I think I twisted my ankle. I need to go home early.”

Geri helped her stand up and she slipped her arm around his waist. She leaned against him and Geri could feel her soft breast pressing warmly against his arm and immediately forgot about everything else.

As soon as the door closed and they turned a corner they ran into Bart Williams. Sadistic glee was spread all over his face.

“Hi asshole, remember me?” Since Geri’s hands were full of Brittany, he didn’t have time to react, and instead took the full force of the sucker punch on the side of his face.

Brittany nearly fell in a heap with Geri, but disengaged her arm in time to stagger out of the way. Bart used a sweeping kick, taking both of Geri’s legs out from underneath him and landing him flat on his back.

Brittany backed up to watch with a twisted smile and sickly fascination as the beating began.

Bart knelt and took his time. He lifted Geri up by the shirt front with one hand, and smacked him back down with the other. Geri never had a chance to retaliate, or cover his face from the blows.

Geri felt Bart’s class ring completely dislodge a tooth. At another punch, he felt his nose explode, and lay at an unnatural angle.

“Don’t ever, (punch) ever, (punch) EVER, push me aside again, Pond Scum, or this is going to seem like tickle time.”

Bart knew he had already won, but just to make sure, a kick straight to Geri’s testicles as he was down on the ground brought the point home.

Brittany had watched the whole scenario with sick fascination. She considered the bruised and bloody form at her feet, and then started to giggle.

Chapter 10

Anya Chin looked through the frosted glass of the hospital door at Geri Hendrix. Geri had been one of her students when she was substituting at the high school last year. They had formed an odd friendship and had kept in touch. She knew Geri had an exceptional flair for both mechanical engineering as well as biology.

She felt eyes, and saw Geri was staring at her. She pushed through the door into the hospital room. She saw his jaw was wired shut and he couldn't speak. She felt sort of stupid standing there with flowers. Just what every beat up high school geek needs.

"Don't talk, Geri," she said softly, not really knowing what to say. Geri made a motion in the air, as if he were writing. Anya didn't catch the meaning at first.

"What do you want?" She asked again, feeling stupid. *Good show, Anya, she thought to herself, the kid can't talk and is in horrible pain and you want him to repeat himself.*

Geri wrote in the air again, slower this time.

"You want to write?" Geri nodded his head.

Anya pulled a notepad and pen from her pocketbook. She put the notepad down on the bed next to him and handed him the pen, wrapping his fingers around it for him. Geri's eyes never left her as he wrote.

"You smell good," he wrote. "Give me a sponge bath?"

Christ. She was being hustled by the medical equivalent of the Mummy in a hospital room. Anya rolled her eyes. At least he had a

sense of humor.

“Very funny, Geri. But I don’t think that is the topic of conversation.” Anya said, smiling.

Geri shrugged his shoulders, as if to say, what are you going to do, beat me up?

“What happened? Who did this to you?”

Another shrug of the thin shoulders.

“Doesn’t matter.” He wrote. *I’ll deal with them in my own time*, thought Geri.

“It matters to me...Why did you have the nurse call me, Geri? Why didn’t she call your mom?”

Another shrug. “I can’t listen to her right now, he wrote.

“Then listen to me. You have to get well, before...”

Geri was writing again, this time with large exclamation marks.

“LISTEN!!! he wrote. “The PBR and the polyculture work. We did it...”

Even though it hurt Geri like hell to do so, they both looked at each other and smiled like fools.

Chapter 11

“Is all this cloak and dagger stuff necessary?” Savage said, feeling like a total ass dressed in plumber’s overalls, complete with a stainless steel lunch pail, and thermos.

“What makes you think I want anyone to see me with you? You honestly think I’m going to let you waltz into my office with a booked appointment?” Sharif replied.

Sharif was the CEO of Sanstone Pharmaceutical. His hair was receding and he had a snow white goatee. He had hired Savage to keep tabs on Geri Hendrix as well as keep him updated on his progress. *His English accent made him sound like a total wanker*, thought Savage.

Truthfully, Savage could care less what he thought. If he wanted to play spy games, for the money he was being paid, he’d play spy games.

They were sitting on a downtown park bench, the executive and workman, sharing a pleasant sunny day, watching female skin jiggle as it jogged on by.

Savage grunted noncommittally, and unscrewed the top of the thermos. He slid the papers of the report out of the flask and casually laid them on the bench between them. The executive’s newspaper covered them in an instant.

“So tell me what you found.”

“The kid’s got the place wired up like the fuckin Department of Defense. Motion detectors, tied to infrared lights, tied to sirens, silent alarms and booby traps. He’s a regular fuckin McGyver, that one.”

Savage took a bite out the sandwich he was holding. It was better than he thought, and took another bite, Geri Hendrix temporarily forgotten.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Tell me about the PBR," said Sharif, impatiently.

"What's there to tell?" said Savage, talking around a mouthful of meatball sandwich. "That's your area of expertise, not mine. I don't even know what I was looking at. It's a tall, green, multi-colored, bubbling piece of apparatus that stank like someone's uncleaned bird bath."

"Was it warm to the touch?"

"Yes, it was. It also looked like something was swimming around in it."

"OK. Was there any other equipment on the workbench?"

"Yeah, I took pictures of it. It's in the report. It looked like one of those hydraulic screw presses you see in machine shops...the kind you use for crushing oil filters? There were also bottles of what looked like green colored oil as well as an open peanut butter jar of green powder." Savage ticked these off from memory.

"Hummm...those are for oil extraction. The little fuck is further along than I thought. He had green oil, huh?" Sharif actually had a little awe in his voice.

"Yeah, another peanut butter jar of it...about a liter, I'd say."

"OK, here's what I want you to do." Sharif slipped into order giving mode. "I want you to go back and make a final sweep of the place. Gather any and all notes you find. Photograph everything. Get the oil and the green powder and anything else which points to how far along he is or any final conclusions..."

"It's your money, but is this really necessary? What's this kid got that is making you spend this kind of money? Wouldn't be easier to just buy the technology? Throw in a six pack of beer and a \$500 a night hooker and the kid will probably go to work for you. I mean, the kid is..."

"Believe it or not, this kid, either through shit blind luck, or sheer brilliance has created something even my researchers can't replicate. But, I'm not finished." cut in Sharif. "You need to do this quick, before he gets home from the hospital."

"He's in the hospital? Since when? What happened?"

"He started sniffing around the wrong pussy and got clobbered."

Not your problem. Just go back as soon as you can. After you have gathered everything together, wait for my word and then burn the place to the ground.”

Chapter 12

Cobalt didn't suffer from self-doubt.

He had no patience, or understanding of men that did. What he couldn't understand was the whiny, liberal attitude that the world was unfair, and mankind owed something to all the downtrodden.

Sure, life was tough. Had there ever been a time when it wasn't?

While he certainly sympathized with the Occupy Wall Street Protester's ideals, he knew altogether too well the deck was stacked against the ordinary person by the power elite.

He could also understand taking to the streets to protest the inequality.

He could understand bringing the fight to the very people who sucked so much fat off the already thin bones of the under class.

He could understand getting arrested for something you believed in with your whole heart.

He could understand nonviolent protest in the tradition of Gandhi and MLK, who he considered two of the greatest warriors of all time.

What he COULDN'T understand was giving up the fight because it got too cold, or because the police pushed a little too hard. They couldn't anticipate winter in the North East, for Christ's sake? Why start a peaceful revolution in the fall, if you think your feet are going to get cold in a few months? Why not start it in Southern California then?

What he couldn't understand, or relate to in the slightest, was piss-

poor planning on the part of the leaders. The troops did their jobs. The leaders sold out as soon as it was past their bedtime.

As usual.

He was a capitalist, and proud of it. There wasn't a socialist bone in his body. But Christ, man, if you're going to fight for what you believe in, then FIGHT for what you believe in.

Cobalt moved through the crowds in Zucotti Park. Contrary to the media depiction of events, he didn't see a lot of "dirty hippies." He saw a lot of middle class mommies, and beaten-down daddies, lower middle class blue collar workers, and scores of ordinary "down-sized" people.

Lots of college educated kids looking for the government to forgive their student loans. *Good luck with that one*, he thought. *Another government endorsed scam the middle class bought into hook, line, and sinker.*

A riot cop on a huge horse, brushed past him silently. Standing over six feet tall, Cobalt came up barely to the horse's shoulder. *What a magnificent animal*, he thought. *A warhorse, in the true sense of the word.* He respected the animal, but not the cop.

The cop sat atop an animal of power, both figuratively and literally. Cobalt knew very well that all power corrupted, and destroyed. It was the nature of power. To expect power to do otherwise was like expecting this horse to learn the Hoboken Shuffle. The cop was there to protect the power elite, not the people he was sworn to protect or those that paid his salary.

That power was far more destructive than these foot soldiers ever imagined. But then again, it was always was. Power always pulled the strings, always held all the high cards.

As Emma Goldman once said, "If voting changed anything, they'd make it illegal."

Cobalt worked his way to the "Gourmet Soup Kitchens." They lived up to their name. The air smelled of homemade, hearty, steaming, soups by the vat. Working chefs clad in white kitchen garb. One of the soup chefs was giving orders in a thick German accent which brought to mind the Seinfeld comedy episode the "Soup Nazi."

He quietly, and nonchalantly, put ten, \$100 bills in the donation

bucket.

Everyone was friendly. Either nodding their head as he passed or they said hello with a quiet “Hey, man.”

He wondered if they would feel differently if they knew he was on his way to a meeting with their ideological enemy.

Chapter 13

The General had raised kidnapping to a high art in this part of the world.

He found that first “inviting” his enemy’s family members to come stay with him had a positive effect on the outcome of any battle. He had also discovered that in many cases, multi-national companies kept “K&R” (Kidnapping and Ransom insurance) on their executives. This made kidnapping very lucrative as well. The trick was to always kidnap either influential or rich victims.

Every so often, however, he ran across someone, either family or insurance company, who refused to pay. In which case, one of the general’s favorite fun-time activities took place with his kidnap victims.

It involved telling the kidnap victim that help was on its way, and he just had to hold out hope for a little while longer and pay the price for that hope.

The pharmaceutical company executive’s name was Vince Cargil. He was from Bristol, Connecticut. He joined Sanstone Pharmaceuticals straight out of college and spent fifteen years working his way up through the company. He had a Masters in Engineering and turning biomass into chemical compounds was his specialty.

When he was offered a plum position, with great pay, in an exotic location, he jumped at the opportunity. His wife couldn’t take the extreme humidity and hardship of being an ex pat. She took the kids

and went back to the East Coast. He was thirty-seven years old and wouldn't live to see his next birthday.

Somchai was a dwarf. He was also the General's Chief Torturer and executioner.

Being handicapped or different in this part of the world wasn't an easy life. Since most Burmese were Buddhist, they believed he must have done something seriously wrong in his past life to be reincarnated as a dwarf. He had long grown used to being shunned, made fun of, and beaten for sport. He had learned to speak English in the tourist sections of Chang Mai.

"Hey, you! Joe! I come to tell you, your people are gonna pay the General. You just hold out a little while longer, then you go home."

"Somchai, please give me some food and water," pleaded Cargil.

"No, listen. If General catch me, he kill me. Very dangerous. Listen!"

"Food...water..."

"I hear General tell your people that they have to give money or he kill you. But they want "Proof of Life." They want to talk to you. General say no. So you have to choose. General say he take either hand or foot to send to them as proof. So you have to choose which hand or foot. Choose one you can live without...maybe left hand, uh?"

"What?" Cargil said, unbelieving. I have to choose between losing my hands or my feet? Is he crazy?

"Yes, but don't worry. General keep his word. Maybe you lose hand, but keep life. Choose quick!"

As if on cue, the General appeared.

"Ah, Cargil, there you are," as though Cargil had been flitting about the camp like a social butterfly, "I have talked to your people and they are very agreeable, you will live, go home soon. But I have to send them a little present first. You understand, yes? It is not me. But your people demand proof of life, so I must give it to them. I am a generous man, so I will let you choose. Would you like to send them a hand or a foot?"

Cargil was slipping in and out of consciousness from starvation and

dehydration, and was unable to comprehend.

“OK, if you insist,” said the General, “I will take your hand. The bones are easier to break there anyway.”

Vince Cargil was tied upright in a tent. The General untied one of his hands, and in a quick motion, used his machete to cut cleanly through the limb at the wrist.

“Ah, ah, AHHHHHHH...” Cargil let out a shriek as his hand, severed cleanly from his wrist, fell to the ground.

“Yes, don’t worry. I think they will be able to get the fingerprints off your hand. No need for you to worry, proof of life is assured,” said the General, with a big smile.

Somchai, the dwarf, handed the General another machete. This one had been getting red hot on the fire. The General used it to cauterize Cargil’s stump as the shrieking and gibberish continued until Cargil passed out.

The General picked up the bloody hand and looked at it critically, spat on it, and then threw it into the fire.

Chapter 14

Geri Hendrix had been thinking about a fitting revenge for both Brittany McGuire and Bart Williams, and tonight was the night.

But until the big moment, he had other things to concentrate on. The Science Fair was, of course, a big deal for geeks like Geri. He decided to play off his nickname of “Pond Scum” and had been carefully crafting his message for weeks. He had dug up a convention booth out of the junk in his basement to display his exhibition. He also had a PowerPoint slide show if anyone was interested.

Geri had healed from the beating and the bruises now were no longer visible. The scars from his broken jaw being wired shut were barely visible under the florescent lights of the gym as a pale yellow shadow.

It was incredible to Geri that no one had showed the slightest interest in algae. With so many possible uses, including green diesel, bio gasoline, and bio plastics. Algae held promise in treatments for obesity, diabetes, even cancer. The list was endless.

People only saw what they wanted to see. When looking at the ocean most people usually saw only surface reflections, on a blue-green sea and nothing else. They never bothered looking beneath the waves, understanding that there was a rich, varied, world beneath the surface.

His friends looked at him the same way. They saw only the surface. They saw the red hair, freckles, acne, and geek glasses. They couldn't see beyond that and didn't bother looking. He wasn't “cool” enough. His strengths were in creating things, not the ever popular world of high school sports.

The same was true of algae. People just saw green slime, without ever giving thought that this same green slime gave birth to all life as we know it, not to mention the oceans of oil under the surface. Algae were the oldest of all the earth's organisms. Without algae, life as we know it simply wouldn't exist.

Geri's thoughts on the origin of life was that life began as a single cell organism, i.e. Algae. It, in turn, gave birth to more complex organisms. Fish evolved, first vegetarians, feeding off the rich marine ecosystem of algae. Algae was planet Earth's first food.

Some fish species eventually came on land, driven out of the seas by a highly competitive environment. The land masses soon flourished with all kinds of plant life, which started out as algae, and then the animals that fed off the plant life. Soon, carnivores adapted to feeding off the animals, which fed off the plant life. After billions of years of evolution, man appeared, to feed off the carnivores and the plant life.

Lowly pond scum was directly responsible for all life which came after it. But it didn't stop there. In fact, that was only the beginning...

Anya Chin was strolling by the science exhibits as she did every year, keeping up with what students were doing as well as what they were interested in. She knew Geri would be there and walked over to him.

"So Geri, can you explain to me what this is?" asked Anya, stepping up to Geri's exhibit. She already knew, but she also knew Geri loved talking about algae.

"Sure," *Christ, she was beautiful*, thought Geri. Petite at four feet eleven inches, and maybe ninety pounds, she was an absolute stunning beauty. He went more for the All-American Blond Goddess type himself, but if he didn't, she would be the woman for him.

"It's really pretty easy," Geri began, "Algae are plants like any other. They need sunlight, water and food. As long as they have those three things, they complete its main function in life and reproduce.

What's awesome about algae is that they reproduce faster than all other terrestrial plants, one hundred to three hundred times faster, which causes explosive growth."

"I heard that output from algae could replace petroleum, is that true?" Anya asked.

"Well...yes and no. It has the *potential* to replace petroleum, since

it is where our petroleum reserves originated from. It could also go a long way to solving the “Peak Oil” dilemma. But remember, it took nature millions of years to create the reserves we’re now using. Currently we don’t have the technology to replicate that.”

“What are some of the other things, it could do?”

“It could solve world hunger,” said Geri, with complete seriousness.

“Oh, come on, Geri! Now you are pushing believability.”

“It’s true.” Geri said blushing, “I can prove it.”

“How?” Asked Anya, interested despite herself. She also saw her disbelief had wounded Geri. “Can you explain to me how this works?” She rushed ahead, trying to erase the hurt she saw in Geri’s eyes.

“Sure. What the bioreactor does is create the perfect growing environment for a specific strain of algae. Since algae reproduce much faster than land based plants, many species can double in hours, instead of months.”

“But how could that cure world hunger?”

“Algal products are known in some circles as a “Super Food.” It has incredibly high amounts of protein, carbohydrates, and oils. In short, everything necessary for humans to survive, and thrive. Because they reproduce so fast, with the right equipment and inputs, you could produce enough food to feed the hungry masses very quickly. This isn’t anything new. The Aztecs, Mayans, and Asian countries have known this for centuries.”

“OK, then. Give me an example of how this could work.”

“Easy. Disaster relief,” said Geri, quickly. “Anytime there is a natural or man-made disaster, bioreactor units like this one, but bigger, could be flown in and start producing food immediately. Not only that, but algae could also be used in waste water treatment, cleaning drinking water, organic fertilizer, even animal feed. Imagine what that could mean in a disaster zone where the primary problems are food, and clean water.”

Anya could imagine it. She had done volunteer work in Haiti after the earthquake. “Tell me more about this Super Food...”

Chapter 15

Alexander Sharif was also checking out the science exhibits, but for entirely different reasons.

He was interested in only one of them. After Savage's break-ins, he knew more about Geri's bioreactor than most. Sharif was CEO for Sanstone Pharmaceuticals. It was his job to see that none of the life changing patents his company created benefited anyone but Sanstone. It was also his job to steal any others which might benefit his company before any competitors got their hands on them.

Hence his interest in Geri Hendrix. Geri had come to his attention after one of his researchers had acquired a specialized strain of algae containing unusual percentages of Omega-3 oils from him. Sharif was interested in organ rejection compounds, and Omega-3 had shown promise in his earlier studies.

He casually edged in closer to the conversation between Anya Chin and Geri Hendrix.

"...I haven't even started talking about the medical uses of algae. The list of possible cures is endless," said Geri, warming up to his subject now.

"Such as...?" asked Anya

"How about Arthritis? One in ten Americans suffers from it. Obesity is another one. One in three Americans are afflicted. It has shown promise in memory improvement in Alzheimer's patients. There have been considerable studies showing cancer remission in mice..." Geri trailed off. He knew he was starting to sound like a nut case.

"Tell me, are you using just one strain of algae?" asked Sharif, for the first time interjecting himself into the conversation. His excite-

ment exaggerated his English accent.

Anya Chin cocked an eye over her shoulder to look at him, wondering where the English accent had come from. Geri also had an immediate feeling of wariness. Somehow, a question that loaded couldn't have just come out of the blue.

"I'm sorry, bad manners on my part. Emil Stratford," said Sharif, holding out his hand first to Geri, then to Anya. "I was just engrossed listening to you. Anyway, you were saying about the bioreactor...?"

"I'm using a polyculture, that is, I'm blending one or more compatible algae strains together to get a desired result. The bioreactor is simply a means to an end. It is the same in any field of agriculture. You first have to determine what 'triggers' enhance algae growth and in what amounts. From there it is a simple mechanical process to adjust those triggers at the right time, in the right amounts," said Geri, guardedly.

"Interesting. What algae strains are you using?"

"Ones that are compatible," said Geri, not wanting to part with details and not sure where this conversation was going.

Sharif, sensing reluctance on the part of the boy to share specifics, decided it was time to lay his cards on the table.

"I see. Have you thought about selling your design? I know a little about bioreactors and this looks like a good one. I'd be willing to set up a college fund for you in return for the details."

"No, I don't think so," said Geri, "there is still a lot of work to be done on it."

"Would you consider cash then? Say \$10,000?"

"No, thank you. I'm flattered, but no."

"OK, no problem. Well, it looks like a very interesting science project you have. I'll definitely vote for it, son." Sharif said as he moved away.

I'm not your son. Geri, wanted to say.

That guy gives me the creeps, thought Anya Chin.

Sharif walked away, stopping at one science project or another, talking with the students, and laughing. He flipped open his phone and speed dialed Savage.

"Do it," he said, and closed the phone.

Chapter 16

Myanmar was a country of contrasts.

Ancient and modern, religious and irrelevant, modern skyscrapers next to thousand year old temples, temples next to whorehouses, mansions surrounded by slums.

A red sunrise tinted the morning mist blood-red as it rose around Buddhist temples, which had chanting monks and gonging bells.

At six a.m. and six p.m. every day, all activity ceased, motorbikes and rickshaws stop in the streets, pedestrians stood still, as the ruling junta issued decrees from loudspeakers on every street.

Modern Myanmar was a cross between war-torn Vietnam of the 1960's and modern Bangkok. Child Soldiers roam the street with American made M-16's and Chinese AK-47's slung haphazardly over their shoulders, daring anyone to cross eyes with them. A soldier in Burma had the absolute right to kill anyone, for any reason. The civilians went about their business with their eyes down.

In downtown Yangon, everyday life was sandwiched between two competing forces...the Military and the Mafia. Everyday life was all about threading the needle between these two.

The Mafia controlled everyday vices like gambling, loan sharking, prostitution, and extortion. The Mafia, or military, was also one of the few employment opportunities available to young men. Sooner or later, everyone had to deal with one, or the other.

These forces were sometimes working together, and at other times in competition, or even at war with each other. While "Democracy"

was a word that is had been given lip service to in the capital recently, it certainly hadn't trickled down to the lives of everyday people.

Yangon, the capital city, was home to over 5.5 million people. The former British colonial capital has the highest number of colonial period buildings in Southeast Asia.

Downtown Yangon was still mainly made up of decaying colonial buildings. The former High Court, the former Secretariat buildings, the former St. Paul's English High School and the Strand Hotel were excellent examples of the bygone era.

Most downtown buildings from this era were four-story mixed-use (residential and commercial) buildings with 14-foot (4.3 meter) ceilings, allowing for the construction of mezzanines. Despite their less-than-perfect conditions, the buildings remained highly sought after and were the most expensive in the city's property market.

A latter day hallmark of Yangon was the eight-story apartment building. In Yangon parlance, a building with no elevators is called an apartment building and one with elevators is called a condominium. Condos which had to invest in a local power generator to ensure 24-hour electricity for the elevators were beyond the reach of most Yango-nites.

The ruling class, the military, the elite, and of course, the NGOs, all live and work in the prosperous suburbs north of downtown such as Bahan, Dagon, Kamayut and Mayangon.

Which was why Mike McAdams, the Chief Administrator for the refugee camp at Three Pagoda Pass was here in the capital, begging for food, medicine and supplies from the NGOs.

Chapter 17

The phony English accent never failed to amuse McAdams.

The sun never sets on the British Empire, tally-ho, and all that.

"Mike, Mike, old boy, do come in. Can I get you some Earl Grey tea? Honey and lemon? Hummm?"

"Bandages, antibiotics and quinine would be better," said McAdams hopefully.

"You Americans always want to get right to business. No appreciations for the fine art of conversation. If I can't offer you tea, then how about a scone?" asked Neilly, not about to give up his role as a proper English host that easily.

"It really is nice of you Neilly, to be so concerned with my appetite, especially since most of my patients haven't eaten in days, but I'm on a tight schedule."

Neilly's pinched in a classic upper class British sniff, usually reserved for the unwashed masses, and tried once again. "The scones were made right here in the kitchen and the strawberry jam is home-made too. I also have Columbian Supremo coffee for when the Yanks visit."

Neilly, or "Sir Nelly" as most called him, (of course he wasn't knighted and never would be) wanted most in the world to be perceived as a proper English gentleman. The fact that he was Asian, and had never been to England, didn't faze him in the slightest. No one was sure where the surname came from; most likely he was the bastard child of an English trader.

Dressed in top coat, hat, and tails from the last century, Neilly exuded an air of British colonialism of days long past. Unfortunately, no one had told him that those days, as well as his tailor, were at least 100 years past the “sell by” date.

“Sir Neilly,” Michael began, Adding “sir” to his surname always got Old Nelly going in the right direction. “I know you have pressing business with the Crown and all that, but I have sick children to attend to. Horribly depressing. I don’t want to bore you with the details.” McAdams started getting into his role, even adopting a slight phony accent himself.

“Yes, yes, quite a distressing business up on the border.” Neilly agreed, head bobbing up and down in sympathy. “As you know, we are here to help, old boy. So anything I can do, you just name it.”

“Well, we never received last month’s shipment of medical and food supplies. Or the month’s before that. In fact, we haven’t received anything for 6 months. I was hoping you could use your influence and perhaps uncork that bottleneck.”

“Quite. Quite” said Neilly. “It is a bit of a sticky-wicket that one, you see.”

“Well no, actually I don’t. Your organization, the Humanitarian Council, promised us those supplies. In fact, I have it in writing, signed by you as well as the DfID. Is it possible, your Lordship could tell us when to expect them?” said McAdams, laying it on thick now.

“Well, as you know, the Crown is having a horrible time back home prying any money out of the New Labour Party. They’ve got that dust up still going on in Afghanistan, and everything, draining the country’s treasury. Damn that Blair! Sickening the way he played the lap dog to Bush Jr. I know you understand, we...”

What Sir Nelly was trying to say, but couldn’t, was that he had spent the money, the entire year’s budget earmarked for the hospital, on a new Range Rover and boy hookers and no longer had any. McAdams listened to him drone on about the Queen’s business, or the lack thereof. What he understood clearly was that no supplies would be forthcoming.

As soon as was practical, McAdams excused himself and let himself out the colonial mansion, all the while Old Nelly was urging him to try the crumpets.

The mansion itself was clearly built in the heyday of the British Empire. Life-sized oil paintings of past inhabitants gazed down at McAdams, the eyes following him down the hall. Marble columns and solid oak wainscoting had the effect of echoing his footsteps like he was in a tomb, which in a manner of speaking, he was.

The tropical heat, smelling of diesel fuel and rotted garbage, blasted him as he stepped outside from the cool interior. At least four native servants, oblivious of the midday heat, were polishing the new Range Rover to a spit shine.

Chapter 18

While McAdams was fighting for NGO table scraps, My Lin was fighting for survival of a different kind.

She knew she had to be careful. Already her young breasts were beginning to show. If the other boys, or worse, the man she owed money to saw them, she knew she would be gang raped and forced into prostitution. She had to start every morning now by taping them down, then covering them up with as much heavy cloth as she could find. She wore a loose fitting top to conceal them even more.

Malnutrition also worked wonders making her appear younger. Although twelve, she looked nine years old at the most. Soon, she knew from the other girls, her bleeding would start, and then it was only a matter of time before the game was up.

The dump was already moving about at three thirty a.m. She went to a nearby fire and a kindly old man looked at her with sympathy and gave her lukewarm tea. He knew she didn't have any money for food, so he intentionally left some fruit on the table and turned his back, knowing she would snatch it up and run off.

My Lin took the offered food, saying thank you softly, picked up her stick, and moved away before he turned around. It was still too dark to scavenge, so she picked her way to the fence next to the hospital. Two rings of coiled razor wire with sharp edges separated the dump from the rest of the world. Razor wire was exactly that. Far more dangerous than barbed wire, razor wire was made of tempered steel wire with vi-

cious 'razors' clamped round it.

Some of the older boys tried to sneak through the wire to steal some food. But the penalty was harsh if caught. On one occasion the boys got trapped in the razor wire and could not move forward or back without cutting themselves to ribbons on the wire. A foreign doctor did his best to get to the boys before the soldiers came.

The soldiers arrived, looked on the scene with boredom, and sent the youngest soldier to get some rope. They practiced throwing the rope cowboy-style, as they had seen in Western movies, until they roped one of the boys. Then they tied the rope to the back of their truck and hauled the boy out of the razor wire tearing what little flesh he had off his thin bones. Amid great laughter, the game began again with the second boy.

The second boy, understanding what was in store for him if the soldiers succeeding in roping him, struggled furiously towards the Doctor. The doctor himself was caught in the razor wire now, his staff trying to pull him back towards the hospital, his coat, and pants sliced and bleeding as he tried to keep on cutting his way to the boy with a rusty set of wire cutters.

The General himself, usually too bored with death to even get out of the air conditioned truck, saw the doctor cutting himself up and decided to lend a hand. First he tried his hand with the lasso. Failing miserably, and losing face, he soon gave up on it and thought bribery might work instead. He promised the boy food and shelter if he returned. He promised him a place within his ranks, a gun, family and respect.

The General saw he was losing this battle of the hearts and minds to the determined doctor. So instead of taking the chance of losing any more face, he grabbed the AK-47 from one of his soldiers and calmly put three shots into the boy's chest. The General gave the body the middle finger salute, as he turned away, as he'd seen in American movies and started laughing.

My Lin could still hear the laughing ringing in her ears, and see the boy's body sagging against the wire in her mind's eye. It took a week for the birds and ants to pick the body clean.

In her reverie she wasn't paying attention as she should have been. She suddenly felt excruciating pain in her scalp as she was hauled

bodily off the ground by her hair.

“Hello, little one,” said the General, “You’re a bit too bony for me, but my men won’t mind.” The General spat in her face and flung her across the ground to the waiting men.

The last thing My Lin saw before the rifle butt hit her head was the look of pity on the face of the kindly tea seller’s who had offered her food that morning.

Chapter 19

Savage had some severe misgivings about this job.

One was the fact that it wasn't called for. Sure, steal the design, after all, that was the name of the game, but burn the house down? That was calling unnecessary attention to the act. Still, his was not to reason why...

Savage was dressed in black and even from two feet away, you couldn't see him. His face was completely covered so he couldn't be identified even if someone did. He had been watching the house for hours.

Close to nine thirty p.m. as expected, the lights were shut off downstairs from the automatic timer switch since the matriarch was still out playing Bingo as she always did this time of the week. Geri was at his science fair.

He had timed this excursion so no one would be home and he would have more freedom of movement with Hendrix still at the science fair and the mother gone playing board games.

Savage moved quickly and surely. This was his eighth trip into the house. He knew the layout and the routines of its occupants as well as he did those around his own home. Instead of dealing with the obstacle course of motion detectors in the upstairs, he slipped in a basement window at ground level.

Ironically, while Geri's obsession with security was in full bloom upstairs, it didn't extend to his own lab. Savage slipped into a basement window and avoided them all. Tonight there was no reason to go upstairs. It was to be a quick in and out.

The bioreactor was bubbling greenish on the workbench as expected as he shrugged off his knapsack. First things first. It wouldn't do any good to leave the remote camera hanging around for the arson inspectors to find, so he grabbed that, and the relay switches and stowed them away.

Savage thought back to any other evidence he might have inadvertently left behind, but couldn't think of any.

Next, he carefully laid Geri's notes out on the workbench and photographed them. After he finished, he carefully filed them away in his knapsack. He took his own containers out the sack and transferred the bio oil to them, leaving behind the originals in case anyone got curious, the same with the powder.

The tricky part was what to do about the bioreactor itself? If it was missing, that little shit was surely going to notice it and possibly mention it to the fire marshals causing them to take a more active approach to the investigation or suspect arson. No, that wouldn't do. This fire had to look like pure carelessness on the part of Geri leaving the unit unattended while he was at the science fair.

So for this part, Savage had bought an acrylic cylinder of the same height and diameter as the bioreactor. He transferred the green colored liquid to the new cylinder, and put the original in his knapsack. He took a final look around, looking for any notebooks, devices, or anything Sharif might be interested in. He found a couple of objects: he didn't have the slightest idea what they were, but figured Sharif might. Savage checked his night Timex, he was on time and on schedule. Good.

He silently muscled the backpack out the basement window, looking around carefully to make sure he wasn't being observed, and hustled his booty to his car parked a couple of blocks away. He stowed it in his trunk. He made the return trip equally carefully. He slipped back in through the basement window as silently as he had left.

Time for the pyrotechnics, he thought.

First, Savage studied the fuse box. Electrical fires were always good. Most people thought of electrical fires as an act of God anyway. It was just one of those inexplicable things which "just happened." Of course, the arson investigators would know better, but if he did his job right,

they would never be called in.

Once the fuse box was examined, he looked at the electrical outlet that the bioreactor was plugged into. With his Mag Lite stuffed in his mouth, Savage saw no joy. Geri had circuit breakers, CFI's, as well as a surge protector. Savage was starting to respect this kid's thoroughness and professionalism.

OK, so no joy with the bioreactor electrical setup...how about the work bench?

The work bench was equally tidy. However, one outlet was overloaded. He looked around and saw that Geri had even calculated the electrical load on the light socket. It was written down and tacked to the bench as a reminder. This little fuck was starting this piss him off now. Why couldn't he be a careless little asshole like all teenagers?

Fuck it. Like the fire marshals are going to believe a seventeen year old was this careful. Savage opened up the wall socket and pressed some ignition accelerant into the wires, just enough to get things going. He put some more accelerant on the wires leading back to the work-bench equipment. Added more to the work bench itself, then more accelerant on the vertical support next to it.

OK, now the tricky part. To look convincing, it had to look like the fire took the path of least resistance. This meant the fire started in the wall socket, traveled up the wires to the work bench, the work bench caught on fire, which in turn ignited the basement supports, causing the first floor to catch on fire from underneath. Once it had engulfed the floor, there would be no stopping it.

Professionals knew fire was a living thing that breathes and eats. You give it birth, feed it, nurture it, and then got the fuck out of its way, because that baby will also eat its parents as well if they weren't careful.

Hence, the next problem: what to use for a time delay.

After considering a lot of high-tech methods, Savage opted for the cigarette and matchbook trick, as seen in a thousand movies. There was a reason low tech worked for hundreds of years. A burning cigarette gives at least a ten minute head start before reaching the match book which ignites the accelerant in the wall socket, which in turn ignited the wires traveling up the work bench., which in turn, etc., etc., etc.

Savage lit his Pall Mall 100, careful not to put his lips to the filter, in case he left trace DNA, set it carefully in place, and made his way to the

basement window. He slipped out of the basement, carefully checked his surroundings, and made his way to the backyard, then the alley, unseen. He walked to his car, and checked his watch as he heard sirens in the distance and started a slow walk back following the engines as they turned onto the street up ahead.

He never noticed the video camera in the duct work that filmed everything. He was right; Geri hadn't put alarms down in the basement. Instead, he set up a video camera which switched on when the beam from the motion detector was interrupted. He hadn't done this in case of burglary, he done it to have a video backup of any work he did.

The crowd was gathering silently. To Savage, the spectators were more interesting than the fire itself. A few women had their hands over their mouths in silent horror wondering what they would do if it was their house. Men always stared at fire with a strange fascination. Savage liked seeing the reflection of the fire in the male onlooker's pupils, always giving them a slightly insane glare.

The Fire Department was making a half-hearted attempt at putting the fire out, but was, in reality, more focused on saving the other houses around it.

That is, until a woman, night gown ablaze and hair on fire came bursting out of the house screaming. A scream so high pitched and loud it sounded like an animal, stunning the firemen, and causing the crowd to step back in horror.

Geri's Hendrix's mother, Gertie Hendrix, on the last night of her life, had decided not to go to Bingo after all.

She ran, burning and screaming, straight at the stunned firefighters.

Chapter 20

Geri didn't know that his mother was already dead, pronounced DOA due to massive third. degree burns covering 87% of her body.

What he did know was that his moment of sweet revenge was almost at hand.

Brittany and Bart made a lovely couple. Their exhibit was about chemical reactions in beer making. Bart, as befitted a German beer meister, was dressed in lederhosen and looked like a complete fool. Brittany, of course, was the beer maiden, wearing a low cut German beer maiden outfit like it was Oktoberfest. Did they somehow mistake a science fair for a beer festival?

Since beating Geri to a pulp, both Bart and Brittany had left Geri alone. It was more like he ceased to exist to them after they finished.

Geri, ever watchful of the biologic kingdom, thought that it resembled the way a cat acted after it tired of playing with a mouse it caught. The cat usually dropped it, and went off without looking back, the prey completely forgotten.

Their science fair exhibit may have been about the chemistry of beer making, but their gastric tracts were beginning to suffer from a different reaction. Geri had thoughtfully laced their pizza, when no one was looking, with some chemicals of his own.

Stomach fluids are composed of many things, hydrochloric acid being the most common, designed to break foods down for easier diges-

tion. When hydrochloric acid mixes with simple enzymes of a particular sort, odd things begin to happen.

The first chemical reaction was an explosive release of gas, causing belching or flatulence. Brittany was clearly embarrassed by Bart's crudeness, not having any symptoms herself yet. Bart first tried humor as a way to deflect attention from himself. As the farts became louder and stronger, he was running out of sight gags.

Geri could hear rumbles from one end, and explosions from the other, coming from Bart's direction already. The smell, another side effect, was clearly toxic enough to make even the hardest of admirers want to back away.

Too late.

Bart's eyes flew open, not knowing what was happening to him, or why he couldn't get his farting under control. He was clearly distressed. Unfortunately, by then it was too late. A brown, oily, liquid discharge erupted on each side of his lederhosen and cascaded down the back of his legs.

Brittany looked at Bart with disgust, and immediately let out an ass toot that could be heard all the way across the gymnasium. Several onlookers later said that the blast was so strong it inflated the back of her dress momentarily. The onlookers stared with amazement and in horror at the back of Brittany's dress, as an oily dark brown stain was slowly spreading across it too.

A teacher stepped up to help Brittany as she completely lost control of her bowels and under an explosive velocity, ejected a river of Hershey's down her shapely legs. Bart, having a really bad day, was bent over at the waist trying to control his own rebellious bowels, and received most of it.

The smell and detritus of rotting stomach flatus and pizza was so putrid it caused him to lose his lunch, all over Brittany's brand new pumps. Brittany received this offering of friendship and returned it in kind all over the back of Bart's heaving neck and back. Several parents and class onlookers also puked in a chain reaction of reverse acid reflux.

Geri, deciding now was a good a time as any to make a getaway, asked Anya's help to dismantle the bioreactor and slipped quietly out the door of the gym, into the fresh cool air of spring. He quickly loaded his spare bioreactor into Anya's car. Life wasn't perfect, but sometimes it did have its moments.

Unfortunately, his sweet moment of revenge only lasted a moment, until they rounded the street corner going home to Geri's house. He could smell the odor of burnt lumber and something else indescribable from hundred feet away. An emergency vehicle was just pulling away.

Chapter 21

“Max...Long time, no pilfer or plunder,” said Alex Sharif, shaking Cobalt’s hand.

“That’s because you never invite me to your afternoon soirees, anymore” said Cobalt.

“Well, I am today. Max, I’d like you to meet some people.”

The financial district’s skyscrapers were some of the most distinctive and elegant in New York City. From the top floors of 101 Broadway, the sea of humanity below in Zucotti Park really *did* look like ants. The view, of course, was 360 degrees and spectacular, with water views on three sides and uptown Manhattan in all its glory on the fourth.

There were about twenty or so people talking in small groups, nursing drinks and noshing on snacks.

“First, I’d like to introduce Paul Shatner. Paul’s a banker with Credit Suisse.” Blond haired, blue-eyed, with that “Uber Volk” look so popular with last century Germans; Paul fixed Cobalt with an unblinking ice-blue stare. “A pleasure Mr. Cobalt,” he said with a faint Germanic accent.

“Mine as well,” replied Cobalt.

“This is the Lord Hamden of the Humanitarian Counsel, an NGO in Burma.” Max nodded hello.

“Here we have Sang Nhim, of the Democratic People Army of Myanmar. The General is here on a fact-finding mission for his country. Isn’t that right?” Sang Nhim nodded slowly, finding the fact of martinis quite refreshing.

“Here we have Dr. Alex Markey, Transplant Surgeon ...and Paul

Savage head of my security team,” Heads nodded in Cobalt’s direction.

“So do they call it “Burma” or “Myanmar” these days?”

“The official name is Myanmar, but most people on the ground still refer to it as Burma,” said Sang Nhim.

“Sort of like Ho Chi Minh City and Saigon?” interjected Cobalt helpfully.

“Exactly like Ho Chi Minh City and Saigon,” replied Savage, flatly. “Have you been to either?”

“Maybe. Why do I get the feeling I’m being sized up for a job and this is the interview?” asked Cobalt.

“Because you are,” Sharif answered without hesitation.

“I quit working for other people years ago, remember? I think you have me confused with one your employees, Alex.”

“Everyone works for someone else, Max. There are no free agents in the real world. You know that.”

“We have a delicate situation in Myanmar we think you can help with,” said Lord Hamden.

“We think you’d be perfect for it,” said Shatner, with a slight smile.

Cobalt had no doubt he was swimming with sharks, and in very deep water. He was at a disadvantage and he knew it. They had time to plan their attack, and he hadn’t. This was “interview by ambush.” This meant, either they wanted to pin some crime on him, or they wanted to screw him out of some money. His mind cast about for a life preserver to give himself time to think.

Instead of answering, he turned and took in the view from the hundred and first floor. The office, was more like a penthouse, and took up the entire floor.

Being so close to the tip of Manhattan Island, that he could see the Statue of Liberty in the foreground. She had long since given up any hope of “Liberty for All,” and instead appeared to be weeping in despair in the afternoon fog.

They weren’t the only people who knew how to play a game.

Cobalt turned back around and faced the men. Decision made. In for a penny, in for a pound....

“How can I help?” he asked.

"Entrepreneur Magazine called you 'The New Breed of twenty-first century entrepreneurship...'" Sharif let the statement sit like an invisible thought bubble in the air, looking at Cobalt to fill in the blanks.

"They must have been at a loss for words that day," replied Cobalt, deadpan, not sure where this was going.

"Probably not. I think they got it exactly right."

"How so?"

"Well, it is well known you're a risk taker in business, you're well-traveled, and South East Asia is also a place where you've done quite a bit of business. In addition, you seem to have an uncanny knack for sniffing out the 'next big thing,' a talent we'd all like to have."

"Wow! Flattery and all. Really, Alex, If you want to fuck me, wine me and dine me first," answered Cobalt, uncomfortable with the eyes on him, and everyone in on the secret but he. Not knowing the agenda was wearing thin, as was his temper.

"Just the opposite, I want to offer you a job."

"I thought we already covered that territory. Why don't we get to the part where you explain what the job is?"

"Certainly. I want you to go into Burma and rescue one of my employees who has gotten himself into a bit of a mess there."

"Why me? It sounds like a job for your security," said Cobalt, nodding his head in Savage's direction, "or some other professional. I simply look for holes in the marketplace and fill them. It's a bit out of my chosen field, wouldn't you say?"

"No, I wouldn't say."

Everyone was quiet. They were standing at the full length windows, with the Statue of Liberty framed between them. The two men remained silent, each watching the other, each studying the other for weakness, or an advantage. The spectators watched with interest.

The problem was, and everyone knew it, Cobalt was at a disadvantage. He couldn't see all the pieces on the board; let alone what positions they occupied.

All eyes were riveted on Cobalt and Sharif, going from one strong willed man to the equitable another. It was a contest and all were interested in the outcome.

Modern day gladiator games.

“Well, then, spit it out,” said Cobalt.

“I thought I already did,” replied Sharif. “I want you to go to Myanmar and extract my personnel.”

“How soon?”

“ASAP, of course.”

“Not possible,” dismissed Cobalt. “I’m currently involved in a delicate situation with my own business.”

“Of course it’s possible, and I’ll give you one million reasons why it’s possible. I’ll even give you five hundred thousand of them right now,” Sharif said as he handed Cobalt a check.

The game was on.

Chapter 22

My Lin regained consciousness in the back of the truck while getting gang raped by the General's soldiers.

The animal grunting above her had breath that smelled like garlic and rotting cheese. Long, thin ropes of saliva dripped onto her face as he rammed into her. Four other soldiers, waiting their turn, held her arms and legs, and egged him on.

Contrary to the long held, Western media belief, Western men very rarely went to Asia to get their jollies off on under-age girls.

The insatiable demand is fueled by Asian men. Western men weren't trusted, not to mention subject to blackmail, and are therefore never shown the true brothels. This has gone on since time immemorial in Asia. Sex with under aged girls would never be completely eradicated; it just went deeper under ground. Virginity was highly prized, and young girls can fetch top dollar from the Japanese and Arabs.

Not that My Lin cared as she was being "seasoned" in the parlance of the industry.

Once one soldier finished, another would take his place. The satiated soldier would then do duty holding one of her extremities. My Lin knew escape was futile, as was resistance. Even if she could get away, where would she go? It would just go harder on her when they found her.

The girls that were kidnapped were usually pressured into the business and a comprehensive strategy of re-education, in effect, brainwashing, is needed to make them into "willing" prostitutes. This tech-

nique was called “seasoning”.

Seasoning was attained differently based on the sex establishment, how a girl came to be there, and her own individual personality. Regardless, virtually all seasoning nonetheless, requires some kind of coercion.

Occasionally the girls were bodily compelled to sell sex and are tortured to help make them more amendable. They were raped continuously by countless men till their will to fight was destroyed.

In very old fashioned cultures, the rape of a girl almost always results in a complete erosion of self-esteem. Girls would frequently agree to a life of prostitution since they were trapped in a self-perpetuating system and way of life caused by the seasoning.

Often girls were required to sell sex due to the financial debt of their parents. After they had been sold to a brothel, the brothel operator would require that the girl repaid the monies owing by taking care of clients. She thereby got enmeshed in the very exploitative program of debt bondage that, in its most awful varieties, was indistinguishable from slavery.

Sometimes, they just purchased the child from the desperate mothers and fathers who didn't know where their next meal would come from. Once smuggled across an international border, their documents were usually taken away from them and they were persuaded they would be punished for illegal immigration.

Whether from California or Cambodia, people were transported to locations foreign to them in which they didn't recognize or know anyone. The girls had no clue which town they were really in, and if they got across international borders, in most cases they couldn't speak the regional language.

They were raped and beaten into submission, expected to withstand never-ending dispassionate use of their bodies and trained to fear law enforcement. They were often given booze and drugs to ensure that they were confused and pliant. In turn, they became dependent on the booze or drugs and therefore reliant on their traffickers for a constant supply.

They were told their family members and good friends would likely look upon them with shame if they were to go back, and it was far better if everybody believed they had ran away or were dead. In the event the trafficker was aware the girl has a younger sibling, they might threaten to go after the sister if the girl doesn't cooperate. Even worse,

they really might.

There have been instances overseas in which girls who had been sold to traffickers by their parents, bravely escaped, merely to be returned to bondage by the parents that dread retaliation for sheltering the trafficker's 'property'. In non-urban locations where chastity and virginity is especially cherished, the girl has small hope for a future inside of her own local community.

For example in several Asian brothels, selling virgins is an important revenue center. Young girls that were kidnapped or bought were controlled by severe abuse. Following being raped for prolonged durations, they were "sewn up" and re-sold as virgins again and again.

My Lin knew about the sex counter culture and that it cast out a net for all young girls. She knew that to survive she would need to keep her wits about her, and only act when the odds were in her favor. Above all else, she knew she must never give them a reason to doubt her submission and surrender. She would have to bear the brunt of anything they could throw at her, in silence. Otherwise they would drug her into complacency, or worse, addiction, and she would lose her will to live.

She drifted off into a pain-filled haze, only hearing the grunts of the soldier above her, and his companions egging him on as if from a great distance as she drifted into a reverie about her mother....

Chapter 23

Geri and Anya stood stunned watching with the rest of the onlookers. Geri watched the only home he had ever known go up in flames. Luckily for him, he was spared seeing his mother so horrifically injured; by the time he got there, she was already in a body bag.

He watched as the ambulance pulled away, in a blue daze, then he and Anya stepped forward.

“I live here,” he told the firemen.

“Son, I hate to be the one to tell you this, but we found someone. We weren’t able to save her.”

“What should I do?”

“Do you have anywhere you can stay? Relatives?”

“No. This was my home.”

“How about friends, then?”

“He can stay with me,” interjected Anya, who had been quiet to this point.

“How’d the fire start?” asked Geri, unconcerned about where to live.

“We don’t know yet, but we suspect an accelerant was used. It also looks like the fire started in the basement.”

“What do you mean?”

“We suspect arson, son. But you’ll need to talk to the investigators, and probably the police.”

Geri and Anya sat down on the curb, stunned. There was a smell of burnt charcoal everywhere. Blue and red strobes from the fire engines flicked and swirled across his hands. Neighbors he had known all his

life looked at him with horror and pity. Geri, for his part, couldn't think. He had a cheesy rock and roll lyric running around in his brain again and again. Jim Morrison singing "*Come on, baby, light my fire.*"

Arson? The thought was completely foreign to him. Why would someone torch his house? Who could have been in the house? It made no sense.

It was at that moment the reality of the fireman's words sank in. *Someone was in the house?* Geri jumped up.

"Where's my Mom? He wasn't talking about my Mom, right?"

"Geri..." Anya was speechless. What could she possibly say?

"No, no, no...There's been a mistake. My Mom was at bingo tonight. This is her bingo night."

"You're right, Geri. We don't know anything yet. We just gotta keep calm for now until we get answers."

Right then, as if on cue, a kindly neighbor stepped forward. "Geri, I am so sorry. We all loved your Mom."

Anya could almost feel the wounded animal howl that started in Geri's chest and came forth loud enough to overpower the police sirens.

Chapter 24

McAdams could see someone approaching the camp from a long distance away. The jeeps and half-tracks raised a rust-red dust cloud easily visible for miles. He decided it would be best to meet the guests out by the entrance, rather than allow whoever it was inside the camp compound.

Nielly, or “Old Nelly”, the basically useless NGO coordinator, hated leaving Yangon, and coming this far out into the wilderness. The smell especially bothered him. Luckily, his new Range Rover was up to the task and with the air conditioning on at full blast, it was just bearable.

The Range Rover’s bumper came to an abrupt halt inches from McAdams’s knees, raising clouds of dust and grit. Someone unknown to McAdams climbed out of the back seat of the Rover with Nielly and spit to clear his throat. He wore a safari hat and khaki shorts over white untanned legs.

“I say, McAdams, You’re looking well,” said Nielly.

“What brings you out this way, Sir Neilly?”

“To business then. I have a colleague I wanted you to meet. Is it possible to get out this blasted sun and perhaps get a drink? I say, the sun is over the yard arm after all.”

“Hello Doctor. My name is Paul Savage. How are you?” He said as a half-track, gears grinding in protest, came to a stop behind the jeep. Dull eyed child soldiers looked on with boredom, arms resting on their half slung AK-47’s.

“As well as can be expected.”

"We have a gift, Doctor."

"Oh?"

"Yes, I heard of your troubles getting supplies. I myself sympathize and would like to help do my part. It's the humane thing to do."

Savage made a twirling motion with his fingers. Kids no older than fourteen jumped from the back of the half-track trucks in pairs, then started lugging supplies over to the Doctor, and dumping them at his feet.

McAdams could clearly see the "USAID" stenciled on the bags of rice...which meant they probably belonged to him anyway.

"I have some medical supplies as well, if you're interested."

"Ah...a stranger bearing gifts. What do I have to give in return?"

"Something you can easily spare."

"Which is?"

"I'd like you to donate some subjects for clinical trials. You have many who are going to die anyway. We both know this. Their deaths are certainly a tragedy, a waste. But it doesn't have to be that way. In return, all your food and medical supply problems disappear."

"Subjects? They are patients to me. Clinical trials? What kind of clinical trials?"

"The kind that bring about sweeping changes. The kind that help the human race."

"OK, for the sake of discussion, let me see if I got this straight. I hand over some dying refugees to you, and all of a sudden all my food and medicine supply problems disappear. Is that it?"

"In a nutshell, yes," said Savage.

"What happens to the "subjects" after I hand them over to you?"

"We, my company, have life-saving drugs that will be used on them. We will try to save their lives."

"Why not try to save the ones who have a better chance of survival? Seems to me that would be a better alternative, don't you think?" said McAdams.

"Mine is not to reason why, Doctor," said Savage, "I'm an employee who does what he is told."

"Well, mine is to reason why. So far, I'm not liking the reasoning much."

The two men faced off against each other, neither saying anything,

out in the hot tropical sun. Kids kept piling supplies at the Doctor's feet. Every once in a while the stench of sepsis, or death wafted over both men, blown in from the camp. McAdams lifted his gaze to the palm trees, slightly stirred by a breeze felt only at height. He could see the grave detail burying the bodies from last night out beyond the fence.

"Doctor, really, this is an easy decision for you," said Savage. "Do you really want to continue to beg for scraps in the capital while countless children die? How many more people could you save if you didn't have to ration supplies?"

"It looks to me like those are my supplies to begin with. So, you'll let me have the supplies which should have gone to me anyway, in exchange for some lives?"

"You can bury them out beyond the wire and get nothing, the same as now, if you feel that is a better bargain."

"I see. I just need to misplace a few principles, not to mention medical ethics, is that it?"

"Doctor, this is the carrot. The stick is I tell the General you're being uncooperative and he'll come in and simply take anyone that's near. If you don't like my principles, wait until you work with his."

"Ah yes, now come the threats. I should have known," said McAdams.

As usual, fucked if I do, and fucked if I don't, thought McAdams.

"So, exactly how would this work?"

"Very simply," said Savage, "We realize that speed is of the utmost importance. We would require our patients to be within hours after death. We will erect a "hospice" if you will, near the gate. If a patient of yours fits our criteria, you simply have him or her moved to that location. We'll pick them up daily. That's all there is to it."

"And the supplies?"

"They will be delivered daily. Anything you need. We'll bring in the supplies, and take out the patients who are too far gone. In fact, if you want to rebuild this camp into a first class hospital, we can help. You'll find my employers are quite generous."

"I bet. Exactly who are your employers?"

"For now they wish to remain anonymous. I'm sure you understand. But let's just say they are humanitarians the same as you. They have money for research and finding cures that will help mankind,

and they don't mind spending it."

"What is this "research" you'll be doing?"

"That too, must remain confidential. But I can tell you we're testing organ rejection drugs."

Once again, both men looked at each other. Savage for his part didn't even seem to be sweating in the tropical heat. He looked cool and calm. His khakis were pressed and creased. McAdams was standing in a torn and bloody smock, as he has just finished an amputation without anesthetic; sweat soaked his surgical cap, and was running into his eyes. He knew he smelled of perspiration and death. Neilly, silent for a change, was fanning himself with his hat.

"Do we have a deal, Doctor?"

"I'll think about it," said McAdams.

Chapter 25

Somchai, the General's dwarf and Chief Torturer, slid up next to Vince Cargil. Cargil had survived the amputation of his hand, but was weak from blood loss and unrelenting pain. Somchai knew without a doubt he could keep him alive weeks longer if he had to.

"Hey Joe, how you doin'?"

Cargil said nothing. Too weak for pleasantries.

"OK, OK, I know it is bad. But don't give up. News is slow going through the jungle. But they gonna pay, they gonna pay. I heard radio broadcast myself. Yes, Joe, it is true."

Cargil lifted his eyes and stared at Somchai, hating the dwarf and wanting to kill him.

"Hey, Joe, you want water, huh? I can get you some water." Somchai brought a dirty "Sunny Maid" orange juice bottle to Cargil's lips, letting some drops slip between his lips.

"Not too much, OK, Joe? It will just make you sick, anyway."

Blood oozed from Cargil's crudely cauterized, unbandaged stump. Somchai could see the edges of bone gleaming whitely out of the bloody scab of burned flesh. Cargil had lost 50 pounds in the past 30 days. That sort of dramatic weight loss produced bags of loose flesh hung off his large frame.

"Hey Joe, look. I also have something for you to eat. You have meat today. It is rat meat, true, but still, it is good for you."

While the General's men ate well for a ragtag army, the same couldn't be said for his prisoners. Somchai knew, but didn't tell Cargil,

that the only food Cargil had had for the last week was old rice, and meat picked and cleaned from his own severed hand, and fed back to him. Somchai knew, in another week, Cargil would be begging for that as well.

Somchai applied some anti-infection gel, to the stump of Cargil's arm, making Cargil howl in pain. Somchai smiled to himself.

"Now, now, Joe. Listen. I have to put this on, OK? If I don't Jungle-Rot will set in and the General will have to take off more of your arm to stop infection. This is jungle remedy, OK?"

Somchai worked slowly. He wanted this "Round-Eye" in pain. Far too much pain had been inflicted on him throughout his life and this was payback and a pleasure inflicting it on someone else. In Asia, especially back water Asia, any handicap was held against you for life. You were automatically sentenced to a life as a secondary citizen, and there was no parole.

But the General changed that. He saw the Dwarf's cruel streak and knew it could be useful. The General saw it as an asset to be nurtured. For the first time in his life, Somchai had power over others. He enjoyed his role as the General's Chief Torturer. Everyone feared him.

"I'm sorry, Joe, OK? I'm as much prisoner as you."

It was strange, Somchai reflected, in some people, when others inflict pain on them, all they can think of was inflicting pain on others, whether they had anything to do with the original pain or not. With other people, the last thing in the world they wanted to do is watch others go through what they had. Somchai didn't see another human. He saw an object to vent his cruelty on. To inflict all the pain that had been inflicted on him.

"OK, Joe. That's over. But I asked the General and I got him to give you an IV, OK? So I'm going to put a needle in your arm. I will give you blood and some painkiller. Not much, but it will help."

Somchai worked slowly and clumsily. He roped off Cargil's other arm at the bicep, and got a vein to pop. He slapped it to get it come to the surface a little further. He missed the vein on purpose with the needle a few times and hung an IV bag of A Positive blood from a tent pole.

“OK, Joe. Good. That will help you stay alive. I put some antibiotics in your blood, so that will help too, OK?”

Cargil, in a pain haze, knew the dwarf wasn't trying to help him, but he was far from being able to express any expletives.

“OK, Joe. Now I want you to chew on this, OK? It is poppy stem. It doesn't taste good, but it will help with the pain.” Of course, it wasn't opium. In fact it would give him a heightened sense of awareness so that he would feel every twinge of what was to come.

Somchai watched as Cargil slowly chewed the root stem out of sheer hunger. His eyes, already dull, became duller, and more unfocused.

“OK, one last thing, Joe. The General says by nightfall you have to choose which leg you can do without. OK, OK, OK, I know this is hard. But the time limit is up, and the General has to keep his promise or your people will not respect him. So I will come back later, and you can tell me which leg you want to amputate, OK, Joe? Joe? You hear me...”

Cargil had already passed out from the pain.

Chapter 26

Cobalt felt a sickening drop in his stomach as the elevator fell one hundred and one stories straight down. That had to be one of the strangest meetings he had ever attended, he thought as he exited the building and walked back through Zucotti Park.

The ninety-nine percenters were even more in force as supper time rolled around for the homeless, yet he didn't see any of them this time. He was lost in thought. One million dollars to go to Myanmar to rescue some country bumpkin caught with his pants down?

It meant he would have to fly to Singapore and pick up his sailing yacht the "*Sea Bitch*," get some gear, and sail up the Gulf of Thailand to Bangkok. Not a hard sail, by any means, maybe six days, but it could be a dangerous one. Why had Sharif insisted on that? Surely, flying into BKK was a lot faster.

Cobalt had questions to answer. His analytical mind flicked through the possibilities. The most intriguing question was why him? Surely Sharif had men on his payroll more qualified, Savage, for instance. The boy looked ex-Delta or a commando of some sort. If he didn't have men on his payroll, then they could be found and hired a lot cheaper in Asia.

He mulled over the various questions; Why did Sharif want Cobalt for this job? Why Sharif insisted on Cobalt use his sailing yacht to reach Bangkok?

Other questions came to mind.

Why didn't Shaif just pay out the K&R insurance and be done with it? What business interests did Sharif have over in Burma? Also who were the other players at the meeting and what interest did they have? Who was Vince Cargil, and what was he doing in Burma?

Cobalt considered potential answers to the questions Sharif wasn't prepared to answer. The first question, i.e., why did he want him to conduct the mission was easy – he was expendable whereas others in his employ with the same skillset were not. Also, since there was no business relationship per se with Sharif, Cobalt would be an 'invisible' resource.

As for him using the *Sea Bitch*? Sharif must want to smuggle something into Thailand and it had already been placed on his yacht.

As to why the insurance company didn't payout the K&R insurance? That was unclear. But clearly they couldn't for one reason or another.

As for Sharif's business interests in the area? Sharif was Sanstone Pharmaceutical. He made his fortune in drugs. The area was the Golden Triangle after all. But Sharif was too smart to get involved in what was basically the CIA's territory. No, it had to be something else.

As for the other players in the meeting? Savage was muscle, obviously. Probably a bodyguard or fixer for Sharif. The Uber-German Paul Shatner was money. The Asian was the man on the ground in Burma feeding answers to Sharif. The million dollar question was...why a transplant surgeon? Was he also money? Or perhaps something to do with the business enterprise?

Lastly, who was Vince Cargil? That was going to require some research. But the answers to his other unanswered questions rested on the answer to that one.

The pieces on the board were coming into focus.

Chapter 27

Geri sat on the curb in front of his burnt childhood home, head in his hands, trying to comprehend that everything in his young life was gone. Anya could think of nothing else but to hold on to Geri until the guttural howls subsided. Gradually, the pain and anguish subsided into raw sobs of grief.

Geri looked up, tears streaking his face, “The cameras,” he said quietly.

“I don’t understand, Geri.”

“If it was arson, and it started in the basement, I have the whole thing on video.”

“Geri, what are you talking about?”

“I had motion detectors set up down in the basement to turn on video cameras so I could record my work.”

“Why would you want to record your work, Geri? That’s paranoid.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” said Geri, “The fact is, the motion detectors upstairs kept being tripped. I thought maybe it was the cat or something. So I was in the process of hooking up video cameras out of curiosity, just to see what it was. I had only enough money from my allowance to set up the ones downstairs though, in my lab.”

Geri was quiet as he kept on thinking. It was strange, now that he thought about it, adding it all up. First, the motion detectors detected movement, when no one was home, but they weren’t setting off the alarms.

Second, there had been just the feeling he was being watched. Nothing major, just a creepy vibe.

Third, there was that guy earlier tonight wanting to buy his bioreactor. He quietly told Anya what he was thinking.

“OK, let me get this straight,” said Anya, “You had motion detectors set all over your house as burglar alarms, is that right?”

"Yes, some neighbors had some break-ins, and I wanted to protect my Mom. I knew she'd never go along with it, so I just did it."

"Better to beg forgiveness than ask permission, is that it?"

"Huh? I don't know what you mean."

"Never mind. These motion detectors were being tripped, is that it?"

"Right. But the alarms weren't going off. I thought I fuc..., I mean screwed something up."

"So in order to find out what you screwed up, you installed video cameras. How am I doing so far?" asked Anya.

"Right, but only down in the basement, because I hadn't hooked them all up yet."

"So you think if it was arson, then you might have the arsonist on video, right?"

"Yes."

"Geri, either you're a genius, or the most paranoid seventeen year old I ever met."

"Want to find out? Let's go look at the video."

"How can we? Everything has been burned," said Anya.

"Not everything," said Geri, with a hint of a smile for the first time.

Geri got up from the curb. There was a quiet wave of murmurs from the onlookers, wondering if he would go nuts. Instead, he and Anya walked around to the back of what was left of the house.

"You can't go back there. It might be dangerous," said one of the firefighters.

"Bite me," said Geri under his breath, and kept walking.

He continued to the backyard, and walked to an old dog house. Out of the wrath of the fire, it stood there blackened with soot, but otherwise untouched. Geri reached inside, and grunted a few times, and came out with a wireless transmitter and a receiver. He smiled shyly, holding it up a small, blue disk to Anya.

"What's that?"

"A wireless receiver. See, the video cameras were wireless, they just beamed the video to this receiver. I had to do it that way so they could be small enough to be hidden. This receiver recorded it...if it hasn't been damaged, that is."

"Geri...where do you find this stuff?"

“Off the Internet. I bought a complete video wireless system, for \$199, sort of an upgraded nanny-cam, including nine cameras, but I only got one hooked up and working down in the basement. I was going to install the rest once I got the bugs out. But I never got a chance.”

“And this video taped anything going on down in the basement?”

“Well, not everything. Only what was in its field of view once the motion detector was tripped,” said Geri. “But hopefully it video taped anything in front of my work bench.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Oh no, I told you, I had a bad vibe...”

By now he had attracted the attention of the Fire Marshal who was walking towards them purposely. Geri hid the receiver behind him.

“Hey kid, you’ve been told. This area is off limits. What are you doing back here, anyway?” Hint of suspicion in his voice.

“I wanted to make sure my dog got out,” Geri lied.

“Did he make it out?” His tone changing instantly to pity.

“It doesn’t look like it.”

“Jesus, Kid. I’m really sorry for your loss. But you can’t be back here.”

“I know. Thank you for everything you’ve done. We’re leaving now.”

Both Geri and Anya cut through the fence in the backyard, into the alley, rather than go back out front and face the crowd. From there they made their way back to Anya’s car.

“OK, so now what?” Anya asked.

“We need to go somewhere where we can view the video.”

“What do we need to do that?”

“Any video camera will do that uses SD cards.”

“OK, check the back seat. I used mine tonight to video the science fair.”

Geri grabbed the camera out of the back seat, bringing it up front and opening the small disk door. He popped the disk in and closed it with a metallic snap. They both looked at each other, and pressed the power button. Geri fiddled with the view screen to get a better angle.

“Let’s just hope...” Geri’s voiced trailed off. Geri watched a minute, then tilted the screen towards Anya.

“So I’m paranoid, huh?”

Chapter 28

My Lin, facing the horrible trauma of being gang raped by the General's men, drifted into a semi-comatose state. Her mind left her body and she drifted back to more pleasant times. In her mental journey she was a little girl again, sitting at her mother's feet, watching intently as her mother explained what she was doing.

"Daughter, you are very lucky. This is good, because the world is hard."

"Yes, Mother."

Her mother was still young, only twenty-seven, but to My Lin she carried the wisdom of the world. She shared My Lin's coffee-colored skin, jet-black eyes, and curiosity about the world around her. They lived in the jungle, in a small village of KawKawreik, near the Thai border. A land steeped in superstition and fear, littered with land mines and dread.

"As you know, people call me 'Phoo Moo', a witch, and it is true," My Lin's mother began. "But I am not a dark witch, no, My Lin. I simply have knowledge passed to me by my mother, which was passed to her by her mother, to help people. When they are sick, they come to me and I help them get better. But they don't call me a doctor. No, they call me a witch, and shun me from fear."

My Lin, of course, had no idea what she was talking about, but knew better than to interrupt.

"Sometimes they come to me because they are sick with love. Is love not a sickness? Any strong emotion can change the course of the body, this is well known. Right now, I am making a love potion. I am going to teach you how to make one too. So pay attention!"

"Yes, Momma!" said My Lin.

"The first ingredient is menstrual blood. How do we get the menstrual blood? The woman who wants the potion must bring us her sanitary napkin...which I have here." She held a spotted napkin up for her daughter to see.

"Second, we must burn it then mix the ashes in the liquid from this plant." She held up a vial with milky-white liquid in the bottom.

"What will happen then, Momma?"

"I give this potion to the woman and she will mix it into the food of the person who she wants to love her. The man will eat the ashes, and from that moment on will have eyes only for the girl."

"Does it always work, Momma?"

"Of course, it works. But I will tell you the truth little one. It also depends on the strong belief of the woman who uses it. If her belief is strong, then the effect is stronger."

"How can that be, Momma?"

"I don't know child; I just know that it is."

"Will I be a witch one day?"

"That is up to you, daughter. You have the gift. I knew it at your birth. And I will teach you what I know, both light and dark arts. But you must promise me, never use the dark arts."

"What are 'dark arts,' Momma?"

"When you use your knowledge for evil, daughter."

"Oh no, Momma, I would never do that."

In her mind's journey, her mother smiled at her then, with a soft, sad, smile.

"I know you wouldn't, daughter. But the world is a cruel place, full of hard men." Her Mother's face and voice seemed to get further away. My Lin wanted to reach out and pull her back, No, not yet, Mother, don't leave now. Please, Mother, don't leave me...

My Lin's body came back just long enough for her to know that the truck had stopped. The soldiers were still laughing, making no attempt to cover her nakedness. The soldiers jumped down from the back of the truck, and each grabbed a leg and pulled her roughly out of the truck. She felt splinters dig into her back and her head strike the ground hard, causing bright lights to explode into her area of vision.

She was pulled roughly to her feet, blood running down her legs, and thrown into an animal pen with other naked children. Some were crying softly, others were curled up in fetal positions, sucking their

thumbs; still others had the blank stares of drug intoxication.

My Lin was in the auction house.

Chapter 29

Anya had never been to Cobalt's house. She knew where it was, sure, but you didn't show up at Max Cobalt's house uninvited. Now she stood with Geri Hendrix and a video disk, and they were going to ask for help.

Cobalt didn't like it when he had visitors at his house. He liked keeping his professional and private life separate. He preferred meeting people in his uptown apartment. Few people even knew he had a house. So when the doorbell rang, he knew it probably wasn't good news.

Cobalt opened the door, no expression on his face. If he was surprised at seeing his ex-girlfriend without prior arrangement, his face didn't show it. Instead, he looked at Geri, smelling of smoke, spiky red hair, coke bottle glasses, and held out his hand.

"I'm Max Cobalt. I know Anya, but who are you?"

"I'm Geri Hendrix, pleased to meet you."

"Anya, always a pleasure seeing you. Please come in."

Cobalt had no idea what was going on. But he liked the kid immediately. He had manners, which bespoke a good upbringing. Parents that cared about him. No hesitation in his manner, which meant he was confident. Confidence and manners were always a good sign in today's youth. Many of which had neither.

He knew Anya wouldn't be here unless she needed serious help. Cobalt may have been known as a dangerous enemy, but he was also a rock-solid friend in an emergency.

"Max, you were the only one I could think of," said Anya.

"Are you in trouble, Anya?"

“Yes...I mean, no... I don’t know...” she trailed off.

“Well, then, perhaps you should start at the beginning. I take it Geri here, is one of your students?”

So Anya started to fill Max in. Starting with the bioreactor, then the Science Fair, then the fire, finally the video. Cobalt, for his part, had been home, wrestling with his own problems. He knew he was going to be leaving the country soon for Burma, but for what, and why, he still hadn’t figured out. He didn’t like being Sharif’s pawn. So he used the time to think. But questions still remained. He forced his mind off his own problems, and concentrated on the one in front of him.

“Geri, I’m very sorry for your loss. I’d like to help. I guess it’s time we watched the video.”

Geri silently handed Cobalt the SD card, which Cobalt put into the slot on his DVR, then used the remote to switch to the proper channel, so he could watch it on the big screen of his home theater system. Geri looked at Anya approvingly and nodded his head. Cobalt had a first class home theater system and knew how to use it.

Cobalt watched silently as the video played through. He saw Paul Savage as he stole Geri’s notes and bioreactor, moving in and out of the field of view of the camera, then as he methodically and professionally torched the house. Both Anya and Geri watched Cobalt, but he showed no signs of emotion, nothing to indicate what he was thinking. In some sections he stopped, rewound, then played it back a second time. He stopped on a still of Savage’s face.

“I know him,” said Cobalt.

“You, you, know him? Geri asked incredulously.

“A friend of yours, Cobalt?” asked Anya, archly.

“Not exactly. His name is Paul Savage. As a matter of fact I met him for the first time yesterday. He’s a personal goon for Alex Sharif, who is a CEO for Sanstone Pharmaceuticals. Does his dirty work. But that’s not important. What is important is why a pharmaceutical company is interested in your...what-cha-call-it?”

“A photobioreactor, or a PBR. It can do lots of things.”

“Like what?”

“Like create biofuels, emergency food, medicines, treatments for diseases, many things. It depends on the strain of algae grown.”

“Whoa, big fella. This thing can do all that by growing algae, Al-

gae as in pond scum?" Cobalt asked, looking at Geri sideways.

Geri smiled for the first time. A bright, genuine smile, unpolluted with the desires of man, greed, or politics. "That's right. They call me Pond Scum."

"I think we better talk, and I think you need to tell me everything."

Chapter 30

Cobalt, for his part, vanished up inside his head and didn't say a word for a long time. Both Anya and Geri stood by silently. Abruptly, he said,

"I'm going to need time to look into this. Do you mind if I make a copy of the video?"

"No, go ahead."

"What should I do?"

"For now, just stay put, Geri. Do you need a place to stay?"

"I hadn't really thought about it until now."

"I have a guest room upstairs. You're welcome to it."

Cobalt, reading the situation correctly, and could see the look of gratitude on Anya's face. She couldn't really let a seventeen year old student stay at her place. In today's cynical day and age, it would raise too many questions. It wouldn't look right and could possibly put her job in jeopardy.

Cobalt walked Anya to the door, and helped her on with her coat.

"Thanks, Max. I didn't want to bring this to you, but I didn't know where else to turn.

Cobalt, smiled an easy smile. "What are friends for?"

"What are you going to do?"

"Have a very long chat with Mr. Hendrix."

"Geri kind of marches to the beat of his own drummer, know what I mean?"

"You don't say?" Cobalt said with wide eyed innocence. With that he pushed Anya Chin out the door. He had a lot of questions to ask Geri and time was growing short.

Cobalt walked back into the living room and sat down. Geri looked up from his laptop.

“Mr. Cobalt. I appreciate all you’re doing, but...”

“Call me Max.”

“OK, Mr. Cobalt. But it isn’t necessary.

“OK, that’s cool. You can leave anytime. You’re not a prisoner.”

“I can leave? Just like that?”

“Yes, of course. You’re a guest. Guests are allowed to leave anytime they want. You’re also an adult. If you weren’t before, then you certainly are now. However, before you go, you should understand something.”

“What’s that?” Geri asked, head cocked, pushing his glasses up his nose.

“These people play for keeps, Geri. What happened to your Mom was murder. Plain and simple. Accidental murder, perhaps, but murder all the same. If you get in their way, they’ll do the same to you.”

Paul Savage’s face was still frozen on the TV screen. Geri looked between Savage’s frozen look of concentration on the screen to Cobalt’s dead serious expression on his face.

“Mr. Cobalt, I’m just a kid. I don’t know what I’m doing. My Mom is gone. My home is now ashes. I don’t have any place to go. I want these people to pay, but I have no idea how.

“If I go to the cops, they’ll just see some geek with red hair, pimples, and wild ideas. They’ll get a good laugh before they cart me off to Child Protective Services.”

Cobalt was impressed. Geri had summed up pretty much exactly what would happen if he went to the police. Even with the solid proof of the video. While he would certainly be taken seriously, nothing would ultimately happen. Sharif was just too well connected.

“You want my advice?”

“Yes, sir, I do.”

“Forget about revenge. That’s a fool’s game.”

“So what should I do?”

“Beat them at their own game, of course. Tell me all about algae and this bioreactor,” said Cobalt.

Geri started to tell Cobalt how certain strains of algae had been used for centuries as food and medicine, and just lately as biofuels.

How the Aztecs and Mayans grew it outside Mexico City in mass quantities for consumption as the cure for many diseases of the time.

How it was just now being “discovered” for use in transportation fuels and Big Oil was racing to be the first to use it to replace imported oil.

“Some strains carry up to 75% oil. The Army wants it for mobile oil refineries on battlefields to shorten supply lines. The Navy wants it to so they can produce their own fuel at sea. The Air Force wants it to create jet fuel, the airlines are scrambling to produce it for the same reason, and...”

“What about pharmaceuticals? You said it could cure diseases?”

“Yes. Obesity for one. Diabetes for another. There have also been studies linking Chlorella to cancer remission.”

“You can prove this?”

“Well, yeah. But I don’t have to. The scientific research is there for anyone to find. It’s not a secret.”

“OK. Understood. So then, your bioreactor, what’s so special about it?”

“Well, nothing really. Except it can produce massive quantities of algae in a very short time. But the secret isn’t really in the bioreactor, per se. It’s in the polyculture.”

“OK, what’s that?”

“It’s mixing two or more algae strains together to get a better result, or stronger strain.”

“And this is what you did? Created a ‘super strain’ of algae?”

“Well, I guess so. I never really thought about it like that before.”

Cobalt sat back and thought about it for a while. Trying to fit it into everything he knew. Why would Savage do something as monumentally stupid as burning down Geri’s house and killing his mother? Why call attention to a black bag job?

OK, “Occam’s Razor” being that the the simplest answer is usually the most likely, dictated he didn’t know Geri’s mom was there. So that had to be a mistake, an unplanned event. But still, it didn’t make any sense.

“Tell me about the guy who wanted to buy the bioreactor. What was his name?”

“Stratford or something like that.” The name meant nothing to Cobalt.

"What did he look like?"

"A little older than you. Tall. Very nosy and too interested."

"Any marks, or tattoos?"

"No, nothing like that. He had a white goatee. Definitely a businessman of some kind. Spoke with an English accent. Sort of, like a high class Brit."

Confirmed. Sharif was also in the middle of this. He suspected Sharif when he stumbled into Savage. *Now the pieces are coming together* thought Cobalt. Geri had stumbled upon a method of making a pharmaceutical compound that Sharif wanted. *What did that have to do with Burma?*

"Look Geri, I have to be honest with you, OK? I'm getting ready to leave in a few days, going outside the country to Asia. The man who hired me to do a job for him is I think the same person who is responsible for burning your house down." Cobalt kept his eyes glued on Geri, hoping the kid understood what he was saying to him.

"I can find another place to stay, Mr. Cobalt, if that is your worry."

"No, Geri. That isn't it. You can stay here as long as you want. I'll leave you the key. What I'm trying to tell you is I don't know what is going on here. But like it or not, we're both in the middle of something not of our own making.

"In business terms we would call this a 'Conflict of Interest.' What that means is, maybe you shouldn't trust me. Or I wouldn't blame you a bit if you didn't."

"Can I trust you, Mr. Cobalt?" Geri asked, no hesitation, no guile, looking Cobalt straight in the eye.

"Max, Geri. Call me Max. I would like to think so, Geri. The truth is, sometimes even I don't know the answer to that question. There are quite a few people in the business world who would tell you that you can't."

"That didn't answer my question, Mr. Cobalt."

Cobalt smiled. Good boy. "You're right. It didn't. That is something you need to decide."

"Where are you going?"

"To Myanmar, or what they used to call Burma. You know where that is?"

Geri gave Cobalt a look that said *'Of course I know where the fuck it is'* instead he said, "It's in Southeast Asia, isn't it? I can go with you.

I've finished school, and..."

"Not possible," said Cobalt, quickly and definitely.

That's what you think, thought Geri. Instead he said,

"Whatever you say, Mr. Cobalt. Oh, and for the record, I will beat them at their own game."

Chapter 31

The next day, Cobalt left for Burma. Keeping his word, there was a key to the house left next to the coffee maker for Geri. Geri got up, showered, and went to meet Anya Chin for coffee. It didn't go well.

"Geri, I don't understand what you think you're going to accomplish by going to Burma."

"Mr. Cobalt said my only chance was to beat them at their own game."

"That's easy for Max to say. He knows the business; he knows the people and the language. Geri, listen to me, this isn't somewhere you want to go into empty-handed."

"So what do you suggest I do?"

"Let's take the video to the police and see what they say."

"The police won't help, Ms. Chin. All they are going to want to do is blame someone."

"Be that as it may, it's where you have to start."

So they did, after Geri made more than one copy of the video. He made one copy for Cobalt the night before and another one for Anya. He made a third copy for the police.

It went pretty much the way Cobalt said it would. After being ushered into the Fire Marshall's office, who brought in the lead arson investigator, then a homicide detective, they all sat around the table looking suspiciously at Geri and Anya.

The path of least resistance is always the police default setting. The homicide detective took over the questioning.

"Can you tell us again, how and why you were able to videotape this?"

"I told you I had a feeling something wasn't right..."

"A 'feeling', you say...?"

"Yes, a feeling. A vibe. Don't you ever get those?"

"Can't say that I do."

"Can't you just look at the video?" Anya asked.

"Now exactly who are you again, Miss...? What is your relationship to Mr. Hendrix?"

"I was his teacher, well, ex-teacher. I was with him when he discovered his house on fire."

"I see. What were you doing with him? Isn't it a little unusual, for a teacher to be out after dark with a male student...a minor?"

Anya blushed, resenting the implication. "No, I was giving him a ride home from the science fair."

"I see...So let's go over this again..."

After explaining, and re-explaining every possible unimportant event and detail, Geri was able to get them to look at the video. This led to another round of equally unimportant questions.

"So you say you recognized the person in this video?"

"Well no, I didn't. But I showed the video to Ms. Chin's friend, and he did."

"I see. And where is he?"

"He left the country this morning."

"I see. What's his name?"

"Max Cobalt."

"And this Max Cobalt recognized this person, is that correct?"

"Yes."

"How did he know him?"

"He said, he had met him the day before, I think."

"You think...?"

"Yes."

"Did it ever occur to you maybe this Cobalt and the guy in the video were in on it together?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I had never met Cobalt before last night."

"So then, we're back to square one. You're the only one with a mo-

tive...”

In the end, not only did they not believe Geri, but they were a whole lot closer to being convinced of Geri’s complicity in the fire, pinning the arson, and the homicide, on him.

Only the intervention of Anya calling a lawyer friend of hers stopped them from putting the cuffs on Geri then and there, until we “clear up a matter or two.” Luckily, the lawyer showed up in time.

“Is he under arrest?”

“Well, no. We’d just like to keep him for questioning.”

“So then, if he is not free to leave, he is under arrest. What’s the charge?”

“No charge. Just a person of interest.”

“So then, under the Patriot Act, you’re charging him as an enemy combatant, to hold without charge indefinitely?”

“Of course not, we just...”

“Then if there is no charge, and he’s not under arrest, we’ll be leaving. It’s been a real displeasure meeting you, gentlemen,” said the lawyer, pushing them both out of the interrogation room.

Geri and Anya went back to Cobalt’s house where Geri was staying. Cobalt’s home was a three thousand square foot home in the suburbs. Anya wandered around looking at things. She had only met him at his in-town apartment. This was a new peek into Cobalt’s life.

The house was a two story in a family neighborhood. Kids ran up and down the street, riding bikes, or playing on the front lawns of their houses. This side of Cobalt seemed mildly at odds with the person she knew. The neighborhood was upper class, with trimmed lawns, and neat homes.

The downstairs was done in inlaid hardwood floors. When you opened the front door it was really quite spectacular. Once you entered the foyer, the staircase went up to the second floor. To the right was a “sitting room,” which also had inlaid hardwood floors. She remembered Cobalt telling her he had installed it himself. To the left was a long hallway leading to the dining room.

Once in the dining room, the floor plan opened up to include living room, dining room, and kitchen. He had a gourmet kitchen, filled with every implement Cuisinart made, including a “Brew and Grind” coffee maker, sausage press, and bread machine. She’d heard tales that Cobalt

was also a gourmet cook, and this opulent display seemed to prove it.

The living room where they had sat last night had an antique Oriental rug in the middle, setting off the inlay in the floors, and a 60" inch TV with a home theater system mounted above the oak fireplace. The entire downstairs, floors and woodwork, were all done in light oak. Books and photographs were everywhere. Lining the walls, on shelves, and stuffed in every nook and cranny.

He also had a "Wall of Fame." Photographs of Cobalt in different places, mostly Asia, with people she didn't know, hung on the walls. Every single room, or space, had its own dedicated bookshelves. The kitchen was overloaded with cookbooks. By the back patio door, was a bookshelf of gardening books, as well as books on hydroponics and aquaponics. Books were stacked on the floor beside the sofa. These, she guessed, he was in the process of reading. If that was true, then he was reading several books at the same time. Everything was spotless.

Anya walked along the bookshelves, trailing her finger along the titles, until Geri interrupted her thoughts.

"Ms. Chin, I like you, OK? So please don't take this the wrong way. But I have to find out what this is about and Mr. Cobalt is about the only person who can help me."

"Geri, Max is on another continent. How can you even find him?"

"I don't know. I just know I have to try."

"Geri, this is a bad idea. You should wait for Max to come back. He'll know what to do and he'll help you. I know he will. I know Cobalt. He can do more with a phone call, then we'd be able to do in a month bumbling around on our own."

Geri, however, had made up his mind, but he didn't want to offend his friend, so he changed the subject.

"So tell me about Mr. Cobalt. How long have you known him?"

Anya, not wanting to get into too many details, was vague with her answers. "Quite a while. He helped me get through college."

"Why'd he do that?"

"It's just the kind of person he is, Geri. What you see is what you get. He's one of the most honest people I've ever met. He's also one of the most ruthless. But Geri? There's something you need to know... don't ever, and I mean ever, cross, or cheat Max Cobalt. He'll be your friend up to the end, but if you try and cheat him, all bets are off. He can be a dangerous man."

“Good. I think I need a dangerous man.”

Geri decided, then and there, he and Max Cobalt were going to be good friends. Even if Cobalt didn't know it yet.

Book Two



Bangkok

Chapter 32

The first splash from the deck mounted 57mm Bofors howitzer landed 100 yards astern.

Cobalt wouldn't have noticed it if the sound hadn't caught up to him seconds later jarring him out of his reverie of his last encounter with Anya Chin. God! What a woman! Why had they ever split up, anyway?

Cobalt lifted the binoculars and could only see a fragment, a dark sliver of something on the horizon. They were firing on him with no warning, which wasn't a good sign. Pirates infested these waters he well knew. He remembered stories from the "Boat People" he had heard years ago during the exodus from Vietnam. He had been a Third Mate on an oil tanker then and had picked some up; they were in such bad shape he thought they were all dead.

He could hear, and feel, the next round as it whistled over his head this time, shaking Cobalt out of his reverie about the Boat People. It splashed down hundred yards ahead of him on his present course.

Bracketing me, are they? He thought.

He wasn't amused. This meant, the next shell could very well land in his lap. He jumped to the wheel and spun the boat onto the other tack. The foresail was self-tacking, so he had no need to touch the sails. Now he was traveling at 90 degree to his earlier course. This would add crucial seconds as they had to readjust their aim.

His mind was racing...
 Who are they?
 What do they want?
 How do I escape?
 If I can't escape, how to do I fight them?

The third shell hit close enough to starboard to splash salt water on his face. He altered his tack again, this time going 180 degrees in the opposite direction. While he could do this all day long, it didn't change the fact that he wasn't outrunning his enemy. He could see the hull and topside of the vessel visible with his naked eyes.

Time to answer some questions...

Picking up his binoculars again, he studied his opponent. It looked like a fishing boat. Paint and rust streaked the sides, so no one was keeping the boat in tip top condition. Also, no visible fishing gear. Fishing boats didn't carry heavy weapons, nor fire on sailing yachts.

Question number one: Who are they? Certainly not a government warship, not a fisherman, so probably pirates.

Question number two: What do they want? Probably the boat, electronics, and any gear or money I have. Blond haired women were also a good prize, but I don't have any of those. Also, I could be a good prospect for a kidnapping and ransom, and if they can't have that, then I'm sure they'll settle for my life. At least his K&R insurance was paid up.

Question number three: How do I escape? Can I outrun them? Probably not. His diesel Cummins engine is a good work horse, but it wasn't made to outrun anyone.

Question number four: How do I fight them? The same way I've fought everyone else in this lifetime, by either outsmarting them, or outgunning them.

So there it is, then. Time to take the fight to them.

His mind made up, he became icily calm. The heavy deck gun had fallen silent. A bad omen.

Perhaps they'd decided against wasting ammunition.

Perhaps they figured he could tack a lot quicker than they could

figure new trajectories.

Perhaps they'd just got bored with the game.

Cobalt tacked again, hitting the starter as the boat turned, and the diesel engine roared to life. He set the auto-pilot. His sailing yacht's seventy-six foot Kevlar hull had cost him a fortune. But it would pay off on days like today. Made of the same material as bullet-proof vests, it was tough as nails, light as air, and could deflect small arm bullets.

The main boom was already pinned amidships, with the mainsail lowered into its 'lazy jack' gathering lines so as not to impede the boat's handling under power. He unclipped a cover on the outer end of the boom and pulled out a rocket-propelled grenade launcher.

This was a Soviet made RPG-7 he picked up in Singapore. It was about 40" inches overall, and weighed about 15.5 pounds. He also extracted 3 rocket propelled grenades in a compact tri-pod shaped cradle. Maximum range, with any accuracy, was about 300 yards for a moving target. But these puppies could blow through 12 inches of armor plating.

He walked back to the cockpit securing the RPG and grenades under the railing to keep them dry. The pirates were gaining ground. He wouldn't be able to outrun them. He walked below to the main cabin, opened a panel in the bulkhead and removed an M-16 with a grenade launcher, as well as two, 45 caliber handguns, and methodically loaded each, taping extra magazines end-to-end for easy reloading. He placed these around the cockpit and hid one by the mainmast.

He returned topside and picked up the binoculars again. He was rewarded by the sight of busy-bee workers loading a deck mounted .50 caliber machine gun. *Fuck me*, thought Cobalt. Kevlar, or no Kevlar, that sucker could slice and dice this boat to shreds, long before it came close enough to fire small arms.

Something Hollywood forgot to illustrate in the movies was that there wasn't much steel or concrete on a city block that a .50 caliber machine gun couldn't punch its way through. While the Kevlar hull would bounce small arm bullets, it wasn't made to stand up to one of those.

OK, I'm outgunned, he thought, what are my advantages? Right now, distance is my only advantage. And...

Cobalt returned below. This time going to the Master Stateroom, and opening the locked door to his private armory. He chose a Barrett Model 82 light .50 caliber rifle, semi-automatic with a Zeiss sniper scope. Designed to take out radar and gun emplacements. The army even consulted its lawyers about whether it was legal to use it as an anti-personnel armament. The Coast Guard used its successor to smash the engine blocks of high speed smuggling boats. The rifle was serious firepower.

He set the sniper rifle up on a tripod, opened the porthole. He loaded eleven, 290 grain, hollow point bullets into the magazine. From down here, he could also steer the boat, and he adjusted the course.

The tricky part, of course, was allowing for wind age and the constant motion of the boat. Both of which could screw up a shot fast. The problem with using any gun on a boat is that you don't have a stable platform to aim from.

The niceties that concern that snipers on land, such as how far the shell will drop and how much the wind will blow it off course on its journey to the target, are trivial compared with trying to keep a gun aimed when the boat is rolling and pitching through large angles.

Cobalt's solution, purchased through an arms dealer friend in Singapore, was a computer-controlled mount for the sniper rifle, and custom software. All he needed to do was press a button with his mouse to select the target on the computer screen between the cross hairs. After that, the computer would obtain the distance from a laser range finder, and drive powerful servos to keep the gun locked on to the target. Only when it lost the target, or when he wanted to select a new one, did he have to aim again.

Cobalt's first shot was off, and down, by 6 inches. Instead of landing the bullet in the machine gunner's forehead, it took his arm off at the shoulder.

OK, not bad, he thought.

He added the necessary adjustments to the computer program. The first gunner was quickly replaced by another gunner. He adjusted his aim, exhaled, and calmly clicked the mouse. It hit the second gunner squarely in the head, throwing him backward, leaving a red smear down the bulkhead. Cobalt saw an instant cloud of red mist through the scope before the wind snatched it away.

Two down. How many more to go?

It hadn't slowed the Captain of the pirate vessel down one iota, however. Using the powerful, military scope, he started tracking shadows in the wheelhouse. Sunlight reflecting off the windows in the wheelhouse made it almost impossible to see. He flicked a switch and the scope went to infrared. He could see the red and yellow heat signatures clearly behind the darkened glass.

He didn't know if the Captain had caught onto the fact he was being sniped at a distance or not. But there weren't any more takers at the .50 cal.

The boat was old, but it appeared the engine had been overhauled at the very least with a much faster version of the original. Its hull was steel however, not wood. This gave Cobalt another advantage he could utilize, if and when, the time came.

Boats of this variety usually had the wheel amidships in the wheelhouse. While he couldn't make any details, he could estimate where that was and see the heat signature of someone standing there. There was, of course, no guarantee the Captain would be steering the vessel. However, if he used this option, then any element of surprise was gone.

Hummm...what to do? Fuck it, he thought, and squeezed off a round.

Cobalt was gratified to see the boat veer wildly off course for a full minute or two, before it came back under control.

See what happens when you play tag? Thought Cobalt, *sometimes you're it*.

A movement off the port side caught his attention in the split second his eyes rose from the scope. A small Zodiac pushed off from the pirate mother ship, detached itself, and started racing like quick fire towards him.

Cobalt lasered the Zodiac, punched the numbers into the software. The problem was the distance was being closed by the Zodiac at a much faster rate. His shot would be inaccurate in the time it took the chamber another round.

No guts, no glory.

Cobalt put down one pirate standing in the bow, hanging onto a

rope, a-la George-Washington-crossing-the-Delaware, another round was chambered immediately, and then he took down another pirate steering the zodiac.

A quick thinking pirate pushed the dead steersman over the side, before the Zodiac could capsize, and took up his position. Cobalt aimed, fired, and missed. Lasered the target again, fired again, missing his intended target but catching an unlucky pirate who put his head up just in time to catch the bullet head-on with his teeth, blowing out the back of his head.

Life sucks...then you die.

Shit. Another Zodiac put off from the starboard side of the pirate vessel. The main ship was inching closer as well and he could see the crew getting ready to man the .50 caliber again.

Fucked if you do, and fucked if you don't uh? Thought Cobalt.

If he didn't take out the Zodiac closest they would be on top of him in minutes. If he didn't take out the .50 cal. It would shred his sorry ass from a distance. Cobalt blew the head off the machine gunner on the main deck.

The sharp tac, tac, tac, of an AK-47 could be heard as the first zodiac closed the distance and started firing. Time to change positions. Leaving the sniper rifle on the tripod, Cobalt walked to the main deck, keeping his head low, and out of sight.

No use giving his position away to the Zodiac. He could hear the low whine of the outboard motor and slap-whap, of the inflatable hull as it bounced from wave to wave. He knew he was only going to have one chance at this. They kept firing, the bullets chewing up the gunwale and deck house.

Fuckers.

Keeping his head down, he crawled under the railing. As soon as the Zodiac sounded close enough, Cobalt raised his head and fired the RPG point blank, at the Zodiac. He couldn't miss.

The grenade tipped rocket streaked out of the barrel straight into the Zodiac's wide eyed passengers. They got a glimpse of hell before it

blew the Zodiac and its contents completely out of the water. Moments later, body parts and bits of black neoprene rained down. A survivor flailed about on the surface.

Why is it most pirates never learned to swim? Cobalt drew his .45 and calmly shot him twice in the head from a distance of 50 feet. *Time spent at the shooting range certainly paid off today*, he thought.

The steersman of the second Zodiac wasn't going to fall for these tricks. He had the advantage of seeing the fate of his comrades and learning that his opponent was armed, and more than willing to fight. Deciding that discretion was the better part of valor, he made a wide arc and returned to the mother ship. His chances for a quick kill extinguished for the time being.

Meanwhile, the tropical sun was sinking fast. It would be dark in minutes. The pirates weren't about to give up. They had lost too many men. It was now a question of face. Besides, they believed darkness would give them the advantage.

Cobalt also knew the fight wasn't over; the worst was yet to come.

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