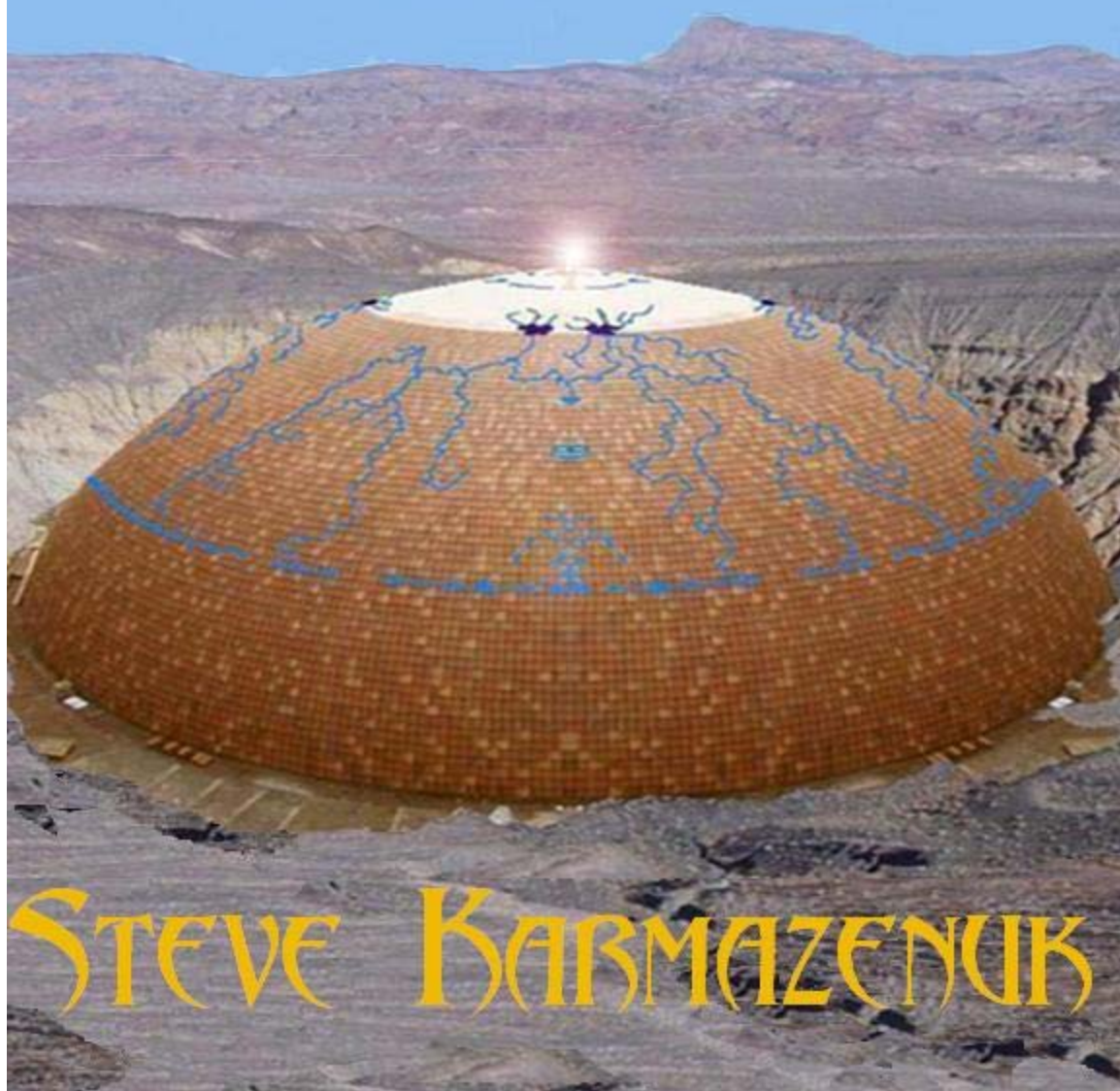


THE UNEARTHING



STEVE KARMAZENUK

THE UNEARTHING
Written By: Steve Karmazenuk
E-Book ISBN # 0-9739337-0-4
© 2000 Steve Karmazenuk

To Tom, for always knowing.

To Kevin, for always believing.

To Angel, for never doubting.

It has always been the way of tales and dreams. Time forgets itself. That is also the way of remembering. But when remembering or retelling, it is best to start at the beginning. And for all memories, all tales, and all dreams, there is but one beginning...

(PRELUDE) THE BEGINNING

In the beginning all was void and without form. There was no substance, no matter or energy. The elemental forces did not exist; neither did space or time. All that existed was nothing. Born of this irresolute paradox the Universe came into being and for the first time the eternal dark was broken by the Light.

The order of oblivion was shattered by the chaos of creation. Elemental forces of unstoppable violence roiled, pushing back the void to make room for the strange powers and energies that were screaming out from the core of creation to find their place in the new reality. The elemental powers, titans of weak and strong and strange attractors defined the first basic laws that governed creation. Their wrestling war against one another unleashed the energy that fuelled the continued growth of existence. Protomatter coalesced from burning plasma caught in fields of cold unmerciful gravity only to be rent asunder and scattered in an ever-widening sphere. The farther away from the violent chaos of creation these scattered elements fled the cooler they became. And as the matter and energy of the newborn universe began to cool a new order descended over all.

Vast nebulae formed from cooling gasses and strange, elemental particles. These nebulae grew so large and dense, so *fertile* with the stuff of creation that they began to collapse upon themselves. As matter condensed energy was released in violent reactions and chain reactions. New explosions dawned in a universe scarcely a billion years old. Globules of superhot matter and energy were scattered to the winds of spacetime, trailing dust in their wake. When these burning spheres finally came to rest rotating gracefully

on their own axes, the dust they had stolen began to settle into rings and disks around them. Slowly these disks of dust underwent their own transformations, forming dense pockets of matter and trapped energy all their own. Sometimes enough substance would collect into spheres of gas. Sometimes these spheres would collapse and ignite, becoming new, smaller stars. In other cases the matter would collect into loosely affiliated but nevertheless superdense clouds of gas. Just as often matter would collect into spheres dense enough to harden into planets or cold, random lumps of rock. Other stranger forms of matter and energy were often born but their placement would remain as much a mystery as their substance.

Not every world would bear the gift of life, but life still appeared and in many cases flourished in the otherwise barren universe. Not all worlds that held life held it long enough for sentience to emerge. And not all worlds that held sentient life would live long enough for that life to spread out beyond the cradle of its birth. And tragically the losses on these worlds went unnoticed by the universe at large. On many of these worlds civilizations rose and fell, succeeding and often failing on their own merits. Other times it was blind and uncaring cosmic chance that decided their fates.

But on every world where life did prosper, where sentience emerged, the desire to understand the origins of their world, their universe emerged as well. Many worlds approached these issues from a philosophical standpoint, looking to the sun, to spirits, to gods to ponder questions about the nature of the universe and why they were in it. Other worlds looked at creation analytically, using the methods of empirical knowledge to

determine how they came to be. Many worlds asked both how and why, trying to merge the twin opposites of science and religion into one. Invariably whether worlds of individuals or hive-like superorganisms, whether peaceful or warlike, whether superstitious or scientific, all sentient worlds turned their attention beyond their nesting spheres and out into the heavens. The ships created by these worlds were as wide in variety as the races that spawned them. Their means of propulsion were diverse, sometimes using systems of kinesis and power that the scientists of other worlds would maintain were impossible. But on every world the first ships and on many worlds whole flotillas of ships were explorers.

As explorers set out, first tentatively learning about their own star systems before heading out into the darkness of space, they discovered much of consequence about their own origins and the fragility of their worlds. Sometimes within their own systems they found other life. Often the explorers would discover themselves alone orbiting their parent stars. But when they left behind their homeworlds and birth stars, they set out with hope of finding others.

(1) THE DISCOVERY

A dust storm was blowing across the road as James Johnson piloted the camper down the long stretch of New Mexican highway. A sheet of dust rippled and danced, breaking like a wave against the asphalt. The storm was so bad that James had to switch on the enhancer in the camper's windshield. The enhancer created a computer-rendered simulation of the road and desert surrounding him. The wire frame image of the world outside his windshield compiled quickly, filling in with detail and colour that looked almost exactly like the real world.

"James where are we?" the Prof called from the back of the camper.

"Hang on I'll check." James called back.

There was a small monitor mounted in the middle of the driver's display panel, the stylized word

Galileo™

shimmering on the screen.

"Galileo," James said, "Where are we?"

Over the music playing through the camper's stereo system came the perfectly-simulated female voice of the Galileo system, "We are now approaching the city limits for Laguna."

"We're just crossing into Laguna Prof," James called back.

A moment later he added, "I thought we were already *in* Laguna."

"We are," The Prof called, "We crossed into the Laguna Band *District* an hour ago and now we're going into the town of Laguna, itself."

As if in confirmation of this the camper rolled past a large white sign, proclaiming

WELCOME TO THE TOWN OF LAGUNA
GOVERNMENT OF THE SOUTHWESTERN NATIVE PROTECTORATE
LAGUNA BAND DISTRICT

In the back of the camper, sitting in the horseshoe-shaped booth guarding a Formica table Professor Mark Echohawk sat working with his console. He wore a small but elaborate headset: an earphone in his left ear from which radiated a compact array: a microphone stretched out beside his mouth and a boom extended a small display screen over his left eye. The band that held the console to Echohawk's head cinched down over his long, graying hair. The headset was connected by a small, flexible cable bundle to the CPU Echohawk wore on his belt. The device itself weighed less than the headset and most of its size was taken up by the Digital Optic Slip reader on its front. A wireless remote keypad sat on the tabletop. Echohawk, an archaeologist attached to the World Aboriginal Anthropological Society and working out of UCLA, was studying images of an object unearthed in the desert near Laguna. The Chief of the Laguna Band, Paul Santino, had contacted the Society only days before requesting someone come. What the Lagunas had apparently unearthed was one side of a golden pyramid. Echohawk got wind of the discovery and immediately asked to be assigned to the project. His passion was the study of the ancient civilizations of the Americas and this discovery had captivated him.

“We’re almost there Prof!” James called from the camper’s cockpit. Echohawk stood up, retracting the monitor boom of his console and folding up the keypad. He headed forward and took the front passenger seat beside his assistant. The camper reached the turn-off to head into the town of Laguna. The side road was little more than hard-packed dirt. But as they crossed the decorative wall guarding the

approach to the town they left the desert behind them. The Town of Laguna was an oasis in the desert. Greenery and trees sprang up in large tracts of parkland surrounding the downtown core. The Southwestern Protectorate had developed extensive water reclamation systems and was bringing life back to the desert. The residential neighborhoods were densely packed communal green spaces the norm more often than not. As the camper swung through the streets some of the locals took notice.

Laguna was a closed community, a company town promoted and developed as one of the crown jewels in the Southwestern Native Protectorate. Unemployment was near zero, with the town's twenty-odd thousand residents working either on the farms or in the shops, or the town's backbone, the One Tree Hill software company. Following the Galileo system's concise directions James took the camper right to the parking lot of the Municipal Building where Echohawk would meet with Paul Santino.

"We're here," James said, parking and shutting down the camper. The Ballard cell engine cycled down, the whine of the system dropping to a hum and then silence. Echohawk climbed out.

"Great news," he said, "Even better, there's a Coke machine. I don't think I could stomach another cup of your coffee."

Echohawk fed his debit card into the soda machine as James slipped on his own console headset.

"Call Peter," He said into the microphone. A second later he was connected, "Peter? Yeah, we made it. How far behind us are you? Uh-huh...okay, well the Prof wants to get out to the site as quickly as possible so I'd

suggest linking to our Galileo and following us there. No, unless you want to stop and get some sodas I think you can bypass the town. No, the Prof's going in to meet with him now." As James spoke Mark Echohawk made his way into the air-conditioned interior of the Municipal Building.

The Municipal Building was only four storeys high but its lobby could have been that of a more auspicious building: elegantly decorated with local flora, pictures of area landmarks adorning the walls. Echohawk was about to announce himself to the receptionist when the man he'd come to see came down the hallway and introduced himself.

"Professor Echohawk? I'm Paul Santino." The Laguna Chief said, extending his hand.

"Mark Echohawk."

"Please to meet you; my office is this way." Santino led Echohawk down the hall. They were close in age though Echohawk was visibly older, his hair graying slowly through the ponytail hanging down his back. Santino, his hair dark and closely cropped, had the robust features characteristic of an outdoor life in the New Mexico badlands. Echohawk had over the years become an academe. This was the first fieldwork he'd done in a few years, though the weathered look of a seasoned field archeologist had not softened from his face. They reached the office. The ground floor corner suite looked out over a spacious park rich in greenery and with a flowing fountain. The blinds were open and the office was alive with rich sunlight. Santino sat behind his desk and pushed

a file across to Echohawk. The archaeologist picked it up and began flipping through the pictures inside.

“Tell me again how this was found.”

“A few local kids were tooling around the desert in gas-powered buggies,” Santino replied, “One of the buggies wrecked pretty bad and dug up the tip of the pyramid. When they started digging it up they thought it might be old cowboy loot dropped from a saddlebag. It didn’t take them long to realize it wasn’t. That’s when they came to town to get help. We managed to excavate almost three meters of the thing before we called your people.”

“That was a week ago,” Echohawk said, “Have you managed to unearth any more of the object?”

“We cleared off a second face of the pyramid to a total depth of four meters,” Santino replied, “The damn thing is huge. The size of the excavation’s making it harder to dig up and the soil is rocky around here so the dig is pretty tough.”

“The land around here’s remained unchanged for tens of thousands of years,” Echohawk said, “Under accepted theories about Native migration across the Continent that shouldn’t be possible. Then there’s the question of just *how* the object was buried. How far is it to the site?”

“It’s almost thirty clicks out of town,” said Santino, “Well past city limits, but still within the Laguna District.”

“Any other towns nearby?”

“Ghost towns now; most of the land around here was given up after the war. When White Sands was nuked the fallout blew right through this area.”

“It doesn’t seem to have affected things here.”

“Laguna’s the end product of the first twenty years of Southwestern Protectorate civil engineering,” Santino replied, “The town and the Band are old, going back to the Reservation era, but after the war this area was pretty badly beaten up. The town’s only looked like it does now for about ten years.” Echohawk nodded gravely. He remembered the battles that had been waged both in the political and personal arenas to establish the American First Nations Protectorates.

“How hot is the dust where the pyramid was found?”

“Remarkably it’s almost clean,” Santino said, “The radiation level is negligible.”

“Can we get out to the site? I’d like to see the object for myself.”

“We can leave right away if you like,” Santino said, rising.

Echohawk also got to his feet.

“We’ll follow you in my camper,” Echohawk said, “I want to get out to the site and start setting up a base camp right away.”

“I’ll get my car and meet you around front.” They headed for the door.

They traveled to the site on a dirt path stamped out in the earth by the recent activity surrounding the buried pyramid. This was outback; hilly desert stretching out for miles around them. The dig was visible as a glint on the horizon long before they reached it. Several cars were parked haphazardly around vaguely crescent-shaped pit, a canteen truck standing guard by the cars while a dump truck waited near the portable toilets as earth and stone was hauled from the arena by wheelbarrow. James pulled the

camper up to the other cars as Santino parked his own vehicle close by. Echohawk left the camper, approaching the Chief of the Laguna Band.

“Who’d you get for the dig?” Echohawk asked

“Locals,” Santino replied, “City works crews and highschoolers looking for summer work.”

Echohawk descended into the work pit. The excavation had uncovered two faces of the pyramid which shimmered in the late morning sun. The work pit was about ten meters wide at its base with a gradually sloping pathway to the surface. They’d moved a lot of earth; the problem with excavating a pyramid was that the further down one went, the larger the pit had to be so that there was enough room to work around the bottom of the pyramid and continue digging. Echohawk studied the dig so far: they had been primarily concerned with hauling away the earth and stone surrounding the pyramid’s two exposed sides. The bad news was anything in the earth of geological significance that had been thusfar removed was now lost. The locals had been eager to unearth the structure and in so doing had destroyed many potential clues to the pyramid’s origins. However there was still enough undisturbed land around the pyramid’s two unexposed sides for them to learn what they needed to know.

“I’m going to want to clear everyone out,” Echohawk said to Santino, “We have to proceed carefully and for now that means shutting down the dig.”

He turned to James, who was once more on the console link to Peter.

“James, when Peter gets here I want you guys to start taking core samples from around the site,” He said, “We need to establish the geological age of the pyramid. Also, get a grid set up on the unexposed sides; thirty square meters of half-meter squares. Then

until we've dug everything out to the same depth. We'll do Doppler seismography to get an approximation of the site after the geosurvey cores are taken."

James nodded and began relaying the information to Peter who was leading a small convoy of three cube vans of equipment and crew to the site. Echohawk started down into the work pit and approached the pyramid. Though only two sides were exposed and then only four meters of the structure it was already impressive, imposing. Its golden surface reflected the sunlight brilliantly. The pyramid was nearly perfectly smooth. There was hardly any sign of weathering on its surface; few scuffs or scratches and almost no dents or pockmarks. Given the tools the locals were using Echohawk had expected there to be some significant scoring on the pyramid's surface, but there was none. It was almost too smooth. He knelt beside the pyramid, running a hand over its surface.

"Excuse me professor," Santino said, "But I was wondering: you'd mentioned doing a geological survey of the land. May I ask why?"

Echohawk stood up, looking around the work pit. Shovels and pickaxes, yet no damage to the pyramid.

"A geological survey will allow us to establish, roughly, about how long the structure's been buried," Echohawk explained, "As time passes, the ground, surface dust and natural debris changes. Each new surface layer preserves the one underneath. Each layer of earth will be characteristic of a different geological era. Certain types of seed found mixed in the earth could be extinct in the present era or be the progenitor of a current plant. Soil metallurgy changes too, as time goes on. One layer of earth might have a relatively high amount of salt from when this was once an ocean floor. Another could

contain high quantities particleised iron or other materials indicative of a nearby meteor impact. The pyramid's position relative to the local geological history and how the earth around the pyramid settled will tell us how long it's been here and then hopefully help us figure out who put it here and more importantly, when."

As Echohawk and Santino finished speaking, Mark became aware that several pairs of eyes were focused on him; some faces suspicious, some hopeful, all expectant.

"Hello, ladies and gentlemen," Echohawk began, "I want to start off by thanking you one and all for the effort you've made so far in digging up the pyramid behind me." And Echohawk was very aware of the pyramid behind him. The Mayan and Incan civilizations had worshipped at pyramids and he easily imagined this object being used as the source of veneration. He wondered when there had last been an elder preaching as a crowd gathered around him to listen. Though he admitted, the smooth lines of this pyramid owed more to Egyptian styling than South American.

"My crew and I were sent here based on the pictures your band council sent to the World Aboriginal Anthropological Society. I can tell you that the discovery of this pyramid is an important one, not just from an archaeological point of view but also as a societal one for us and for all Aboriginal Peoples in the Americas. Because of the need to gather as much information as possible and because of the need to protect the structure, we will have to temporarily cease excavation."

Grumbles and disappointed moans greeted Echohawk's words. He raised his hands in a stopping motion, calling for silence.

"Folks, please...I said temporarily!" Echohawk called, "This is necessary, because we have to run certain tests in order to properly date the find, study the soil composition and

to determine the height of the structure itself. In order to do that, unfortunately, we have to stop digging for a while. I promise that as soon as we are ready to resume digging any and all of you who are still interested in working on the dig will be rehired. And when you are rehired you'll be working for the WAAS and being paid according to their very generous scale." This brought smiles and some applause. There were worse ways of kicking people off a dig site. As the work crew shouldered their shovels and pickaxes, climbing from the work pit, Echohawk returned his attention to the pyramid. He reached out to its golden surface, laying his hand on metal warmed by the desert sun. Except that the metal covering the surface of the pyramid was cool; it certainly was no hotter than air temperature, which on that fine summer morning was hovering around thirty-two degrees Celsius. Baking in the sun, the skin of the pyramid should have been much warmer. Echohawk slid his hand along the pyramid, feeling the smoothness of it. There were some scratches and pockmarks on it, but they felt weathered, smooth. He couldn't find any fresh scratches or gouges despite the equipment that had been used. The surface of the pyramid was mottled but that appeared to be a function of design. Echohawk stood and made his way from the pit. This was an unbelievable find and so far the information didn't make sense to him at all.



LINX TO: LAURA ECHOHAWK
FROM: MARK ECHOHAWK
SUBJECT: LAGUNA DIG

DEAR LAURA,

I GOT YOUR LAST LINX YESTERDAY. I'M GLAD YOU LIKE THE BOOK; FINDING A TOME ON ABSTRACT ART OF THE 1980s WAS DIFFICULT. I THINK YOU'RE ONE OF THE FEW PEOPLE ON EARTH WHO ACTUALLY LIKES WORK FROM THAT ERA. I HOPE THE BOOK HELPS YOU WITH YOUR CURRENT PROJECT. IT WAS ALSO GOOD TO HEAR THAT YOU AND YOUR ROOM MATE MANAGED TO WORK THINGS OUT; ALLISON'S A GREAT GIRL AND IT WOULD HAVE BEEN A SHAME IF YOUR FRIENDSHIP ENDED OVER SOMETHING AS TRIVIAL AS HOUSEWORK DIVISION.

I HAVE NEWS OF MY OWN: I HAVE RETURNED TO THE FIELD! IF YOU CAN BELIEVE IT, I FINALLY GOT A FIELD PROJECT INTERESTING ENOUGH TO PULL ME OUT OF THE CLASSROOM: EARLY LAST WEEK, SHORTLY AFTER I LIXED YOU MY LAST LETTER, THE WORLD ABORIGINAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL SOCIETY CONTACTED ME REGARDING A DISCOVERY MADE IN NEW MEXICO ON LAND BELONGING TO THE LAGUNA BAND. THE LAGUNAS DISCOVERED THE TIP OF A GOLDEN PYRAMID BURIED BENEATH THE DESERT.

THREE THINGS ABOUT THIS DISCOVERY HAVE PIQUED MY INTEREST WELL BEYOND MY USUAL TOMB RAIDER'S CURIOSITY: FIRST, IT WAS PREVIOUSLY ASSUMED THAT THE PYRAMID-BUILDING ABORIGINAL SOCIETIES HADN'T ESTABLISHED THEMSELVES ANY FURTHER NORTH THAN THE MEXICAN PENINSULA. SECOND, THE LAGUNA PYRAMID HAS MORE IN COMMON IN DESIGN WITH EGYPTIAN PYRAMIDS THAN IT DOES TO ITS SOUTH AMERICAN COUSINS: IT IS COVERED IN GOLD OR SOME SORT OF GOLD ALLOY AND HAS A POINTED PEAK AND SMOOTH SIDES, AS OPPOSED TO THE PLATEAUED SUMMIT AND STAGGERED SIDES OF MOST SOUTH AMERICAN PYRAMIDS. LASTLY, THAT THE LAGUNA PYRAMID IS BURIED IS SIGNIFICANT, BECAUSE THE LAND AROUND LAGUNA HAS BEEN UNCHANGED BY GEOLOGICAL EVENT FOR THOUSANDS UPON THOUSANDS OF YEARS. THIS MEANS THAT EITHER THE LAGUNA PYRAMID IS QUITE ANCIENT OR IT WAS METICULOUSLY AND DELIBERATELY BURIED. I HAVEN'T BEEN THIS EXCITED ABOUT A PROJECT SINCE DOCTOR AIZIZ AND I DISCOVERED THE QUIPU REPOSITORY, IN COLUMBIA.

I HOPE THIS LIX FINDS YOU WELL; I LOOK FORWARD TO HEARING FROM YOU SOON. LET ME KNOW HOW THINGS GO AUTHENTICATING THOSE WORKS YOU DISCOVERED IN THE UNIVERSITY'S WAREHOUSE. WE'LL GO OUT FOR COFFEE AS SOON AS I GET BACK TO LA.

ALL MY LOVE,

DAD



Peter Paulson arrived at the head of a convoy of cube vans and one flatbed trailer. They parked just inside an area marked off earlier by James using orange "CAUTION" tape and aluminum poles. A small army of assistants, graduate students and general help, began unloading crates of equipment and setting up tentlike portable shelters to be used as living quarters and a mobile lab building made from corrugated aluminum sheets and a titanium frame. By the middle of the afternoon Mark Echohawk's archaeological team had set up the entire base of operations and James and Peter had drilled out their first core samples.

“James!” Peter called, stepping inside the lab. “What have we got going?”

James turned his chair away from the workstation and shook Peter’s hand.

““Sup, Pete?” he asked, “What we’ve got going is the end-stage analysis of the core samples.”

James handed a sheaf of paper to Peter.

“This is interesting,” Peter said, reading the report. “It says here there’s a high concentration of iridium in the soil around the structure.”

“Only at a specific depth in the soil,” James answered, “It looks like a local meteoric impact.

“Yeah, but the patterning suggests the KT boundary,” Peter said.

“You noticed that too, huh?” James asked, “The Prof shit when he saw it. He wants me to drill new samples and re-run the geological survey.”

“I can see why.”

In geology, the KT boundary is a marker indicative of a time at the end of the Cretaceous Era when the Earth was subject to massive meteoric bombardment, including the so-called “Death Star” that wiped out the dinosaurs. The hallmark of the KT boundary was an uncommonly high concentration of iridium in the soil of the era; iridium being an element common in space, but exceedingly rare on earth.

“I don’t believe it’s the KT myself,” James said, “I think it’s just an anomalous iridium layer, probably from a local nearby meteoric impact.”

“That would make more sense to me,” Peter replied, “It’s something to keep an eye on. We’ll look for other signs of a nearby impact when we do seismography.”

“Yeah, the Prof wants to see you about that,” James told him, “He wants the cannons set up for a wide scan.”

“Why?”

“He wants to completely rule out the KT boundary’s significance to the dig.”



Peter made his way across their narrow, dusty compound to Mark Echohawk’s trailer. He was a couple of years older than James and was tall, dark haired and athletic. Coming from a poor neighbourhood, he’d exploited an athletic scholarship to get himself into the UCLA Anthropology department. It didn’t take his teachers long to realize this jock in particular was more interested than working in the field than playing on one. It wasn’t long after that Mark Echohawk, dean emeritus of UCLA’s newly-expanded archaeology department, took an interest in the young Peter Paulson.

Peter found Echohawk in the camper’s kitchenette brewing a pot of coffee. He favoured an old-fashioned percolator urn-style coffee maker over the more popular—and faster—drip-brew coffee makers. He was waiting patiently for the “Ready” light on the urn to turn red, a large glass mug in his hand.

“Hi Mark,” Peter said.

He was the only one of Echohawk’s students to call him, privately, by his first name.

“Hello Peter,” He said, reaching for the tap on the coffee urn the instant the light flashed red. “Want a cup?”

“Hell yeah,” Peter said, sliding into the horseshoe-shaped booth. If there was one thing the Prof did exceptionally well besides archaeology it was brew a pot of coffee.

Echohawk put milk, brown sugar and a bottle of cinnamon on the table. Peter began fixing his coffee as Echohawk sat down. Peter, almost twenty-five, watched the sixty-odd year old Echohawk fix his own coffee. Peter had studied under Echohawk for years now and had been fortunate enough to go into the field with him twice. This was their third expedition together and Peter, close to graduating and beginning his own career as an anthropologist, considered Echohawk both a friend and mentor.

“You read the geosurvey report?” Echohawk asked.

“Yeah,”

“What do you think?”

“I think we have to run some scans and dig.”

“Why?”

“The iridium layer,” Peter replied, “It could be anomalous, but I’ve seen enough spectrographs of the KT boundary to know when I’m looking at it. So either the structure was buried at the end of the Cretaceous or else it was built in a pit dug out that far down and then very meticulously buried.”

Echohawk nodded. He’d come to the same conclusion. Neither of them liked the implications.

“That’s why I want to start off with an extended Doppler seismology scan,” Echohawk said, “To see if it was buried deliberately or not. I also want to find out if the pyramid was part of some sort of temple complex. If they dug a pit to build the thing in, chances are it wasn’t a stand-alone structure. Chances are there’s other structures buried nearby and I want to see if we can’t locate them as well.”

“We should follow up with a hard dig,” Peter said, “Use Positron Emission Test scanners to see what’s between us and the structure and just strip out as much earth as possible. We may even want to consider getting an orbital deep radar scan of the surrounding desert.”

“One thing at a time,” Echohawk said, “Set up the Doppler cannons for as wide a scan field as possible. Then, we determine the next step.”



It took most of the rest of the afternoon to set up the Doppler seismology cannons for the scan. Doppler seismology scanning had been a beneficial addition to field archaeology years earlier. Using special cannons slug weights were fired into the ground. The seismic vibrations, Doppler waves, resulting from the blasts were picked up by echographic equipment similar in nature to ultrasound scanners and the resulting information was fed into computing systems that compiled three dimensional images of objects buried beneath layers and layers of earth. The use of multiple cannons fired simultaneously and networked in to a central computer would generate a detailed image of an object and anything surrounding it for kilometers. Doppler seismology had proven to be most beneficial in paleontology, helping discover entire dinosaur burial grounds. But Doppler seismology had also been used in archaeological digs in Egypt, Iraq and India. The greatest success of Doppler seismology to date had been the discovery of an entire lost city in China’s Gobi desert.

When James and Peter returned from setting up the cannons, the sun was well on its way towards setting. Three canteen trucks, one cooking hamburgers, fries and pizza,

one serving ice cream and one serving just about everything else, had established a beachhead on the edge of Echohawk's camp. James left to get their suppers while Peter reported in with Echohawk. The rest of the expedition were seated at picnic tables eating, or were working diligently in the lab building preparing for the Doppler scan and running final analyses on the soil samples taken earlier that day. Peter and James ate their fast-food suppers and then joined Professor Echohawk in the lab where the Prof sat with Paul Santino.

"Gentlemen," Echohawk said, "We're ready when you are."

James sat at one workstation, Peter at another.

"Tracking and recording are online," James said.

"Echography imaging systems on," Peter said, "We're compiling a scan of ambient seismic activity."

"An ambient scan will allow us to get an accurate image," Echohawk explained to Santino, "By sampling the seismic 'noise' made from foot and vehicle traffic and natural shifting in the ground, the scanner will then be able to filter out that background activity and focus entirely on the shockwaves set off by the cannons firing."

Santino nodded and continued to watch the display screens in front of James and Peter.

"We're ready Prof," James called.

"You may fire when ready," Echohawk said with amusement.

"Thirty second blast warning," Peter said, toggling a switch.

Two short blasts of a siren erupted in response, followed by a long wail which cycled higher and higher in pitch before dying out

"Cannons armed," James reported.

“Final countdown,” Peter said, reaching for an isolated console, “Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two and one. Fire!”

James unlocked a sealed button on the computer console and pressed it. There was a deep muffled rumbling noise and the slightest of tremors passed through the ground. A sound like distant thunder rolled through the compound and instantly every screen on the monitors before them flared to life, recording the progress of the shockwaves set off by the multiple cannons firing. A distinct image was forming on the main screen where the Doppler compilation was being done. It showed the pyramid as seen from above, resting atop a large circular dais. From there the image became strange, almost incomprehensible to Echohawk or his team: The dais was sitting on top of the crest of an arched dome, kilometers across. The dome was covered by an irregular network of pits and canyons and large constructs that looked like clusters of buildings. The dome itself was so huge that its periphery could not be seen on the scan image.

“What the hell was that?” Echohawk asked, rising.

“I don’t know,” Peter said, “I don’t understand what we’re looking at.”

“Show me three-D of the scan,” Echohawk said, “James, how far did we scan?”

“We set up the seismology to scan everything within a ten kilometer radius of the pyramid,” James said.

“Can we compile further out?” Echohawk asked, “Extrapolate based on what we have so far?”

“It won’t be well defined,” James said, “But there’s enough seismic activity for the Doppler imager to compile an image another ten K out, with about fifty to sixty per cent accuracy.”

“Do it,” Echohawk commanded.

“I have the three-D Prof!” Peter called.

Echohawk leaned over Peter’s workstation and stared in disbelief.

“The view is along the Y axis,” Peter said, “We’re looking at it from the horizontal now.” The pyramid appeared onscreen with scale measurements below the image. The Laguna Pyramid was almost twenty meters tall and nearly twenty-five meters wide at the base. Hardly a large pyramid by any standards, but it crested the ridge of a massive dome. At its summit the bowl of the dome was six kilometers wide and stretched down beyond the scope of the initial Doppler image. About two kilometers down along the surface of the dome was a ring of pyramids spaced evenly one every half-kilometer around.

“I’m recompiling all images now,” James called from his workstation, “You aren’t going to believe this.” The image onscreen shrank, to accommodate its full scope. The dome was not a complete sphere but part of a mountainous arch that curved down into a massive disk. They were looking at the upper half of a massive object onscreen. One whose presence they could not even begin to understand. Their compiled image was twenty kilometers in diameter. The object they were looking at was a circular disk with an arched dome on its surface. Said dome was seven kilometers high and at its widest was fifteen kilometers. Most incomprehensible was that the gargantuan object was right now buried beneath their feet.

“I think we need to call somebody,” Echohawk said, stunned.

(2) EXCAVATION

“I won’t believe it until we’ve had the entire Doppler seismography equipment checked out and another set of scans done,” Echohawk said during the next morning’s meeting.

“In fact I wouldn’t object to replacing the Doppler equipment altogether. Is it possible that something in the local geology is setting up some weird harmonic that’s messing with the equipment?”

“Not likely,” James said, “Prof, Peter looked at the Doppler equipment while I went over the geology last night: the equipment checks out fine and the only anomaly in the soil out here is that the area we’re in has significantly lower fallout levels than most of New Mexico. White Sands was a nuclear target during War Three and most of New Mexico has measurable fallout. There’s almost none in the area surrounding the Laguna Pyramid.”

“What about the iridium in the soil from around the Pyramid?” Peter asked.

“That’s the other problem with the dig,” Echohawk replied, “If the object was deliberately buried then the spread of iridium through the soil would not be consistent from one sample to the next. There is a very distinct spread to the iridium layer and from what we can see it’s right through the KT Boundary. So according to the current evidence not only was the object buried naturally, it was here well before the end of the Cretaceous.”

“That would mean the object was here more than sixty million years ago.”

“I know,” Echohawk said, dryly.

“But that would be impossible,” James said, “Unless there was an advanced civilization here on Earth sixty million years ago. No evidence has *ever* been found to even suggest that.”

“James until a few years ago there wasn’t any evidence to suggest there was life on one of Jupiter’s moons,” Peter said, “Then the Clarke probe brought back water samples from Europa that were rich in bacteria.”

“The point is we don’t know what it is we’re dealing with,” Echohawk said emphatically, “And the only way to find out is to dig. We’ll start a full excavation today. I’ve asked the Society to book us some time with the orbital labs so we can get a deep radar probe of the area and find out for sure if the object is really as big as the Doppler seismology says.”

“When do we expect the sweep?” Peter asked.

“In about a week and a half,” Echohawk replied, “The lab aboard the Concord 3 station is very busy right now and even as a priority booking the earliest we could get is then.”

“Well between now and then we have some earth and stone to start moving,” Peter said, “We should use Magnetic Resonance Imagers and Positron Emission Testers to make sure we can dig through quickly. Anything of significant interest between us and the Pyramid will show up on a scan.”

“I agree,” Echohawk said, “And this dig will be slow enough as it is. The real question is whether or not we go public with what we have so far; and if not, just how long we can expect to keep it a secret.”



A limited press release was issued by the WAAS. It said in part that a structure of unknown origin had been found on land belonging to the Laguna Band and that a team of researchers was currently undertaking its unearthing. Aside from a few details about the size and composition of the structure, little else was added. Some people were curious and came to see but no more so than would be expected on most digs. Only Santino, Echohawk and Echohawk's senior assistants knew the truth. And none of them were talking.

The dig was progressing well enough; the PET and MRI scanners allowed them to dig more quickly and less gingerly. They had excavated much of the Pyramid in a widening circle. Laser cutters on loan from the Society allowed them to clear away the heavy stone deposits, but the dig was nonetheless becoming more difficult because of the nature of the structure they were unearthing. During extensive excavations, it was often possible to "level" a dig laterally so the maximum width of a work pit could be maintained. But with a pyramid, the deeper one dug the wider one had to make their pit. The wider they had to make their work area the more soil they had to move from the surrounding land. Consequently the dig was starting to slow down. Where they had taken a week to reach their current depth, it would take them twice as long to expose the rest of the buried pyramid. And that was without considering what lay beneath that. If anything of significance presented itself in the soil between them and the base of the pyramid, they would have to excavate that object before continuing.

Echohawk's team first exposed all four sides of the Pyramid and from there dug

down another four meters. The Pyramid was now peeking out of a pit eight meters deep, itself nearly ten meters wide to a side at that level. Their workpit was a further twenty meters wide at current depth. Actual digging had stopped while James and Peter began another round of tests on the ground, using the PET and MRI scanners to ensure there was nothing archaeologically significant between them and the base of the Pyramid.

“How’s it looking?” Echohawk asked, as he approached his two assistants.

“If the Doppler seismology reading was right,” James said as he and Peter calibrated the MRI scanner, “We’re about nine, maybe ten meters from the base of the Pyramid. The ground is starting to become solid rock at this point, so we might consider precision blasting to widen the pit and bringing in more laser cutters to get past the rock deposits.”

“I’m not crazy about using explosives,” Peter advised Echohawk.

“Neither am I,” the elder archaeologist concurred, “But I’m inclined to agree with James. I’ll call the Society and have them send us an explosives engineer. We need to uncover the Pyramid, at least.”

“Yeah, but then what?” James asked, “Prof...this thing isn’t some Mayan ruin. The Pyramid is *metal*. And if it really is sitting on a structure twenty kilometers wide, what the hell is it and what do we do with it once we have access?”

Echohawk shrugged.

“We go inside and have a look around.” He said.



Nightfall brought the day’s work to a close, the pit a little wider a little deeper. The last of the work crew left the digsite behind and only James Peter and Echohawk remained, staring at the Pyramid under floodlights. James and Peter were sore, sweaty and filthy from

their day in the work pit. Echohawk had done his share, but had to balance his time in the work pit with his time coordinating the other tasks involved in the dig: analysis of recovered soil and stone, coordinating the expansion of the digsite, the logistics of hauling away the earth burying the pyramid and keeping the World Aboriginal Archaeological Society abreast of the ongoing efforts. Experts from around the globe were already beginning to weigh in on the artifact and its origins. Echohawk had to sift through their reports to find nuggets of use to the dig.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything like this,” Peter said, tiredly.

“Neither have I,” Echohawk replied, “Although I’ve had worse digs. Try cutting through stone like what we’re chopping up with jackhammers and weak explosives. We didn’t always have laser cutters and sonic pulverisers, you know.”

“I keep hearing that with Doppler seismology, MRI machines, PET scanners and deep probe radar that the days of digging are over,” Peter said, “And it’s all bullshit. We’ll never stop digging in the dirt to find things.”

“I hope you’re right,” Echohawk said with a smile.

They turned and began making their way from the site. Echohawk stopped and clasped his left ear as it suddenly started to vibrate. He’d been wearing a communications headset so long that day that he’d forgotten he still had it on. He toggled a small switch on the earpiece and began speaking.

“Mark Echohawk,” He said, “What? Really? That’s excellent. We’re on our way to the lab now. We’ll linx in directly from our main computer console. Thanks!” Echohawk ended the linx and began pacing from the work pit a little faster.

“What’s up?” Peter asked, jogging up beside his mentor.

“That was Professor Todds,” Echohawk said. “We got our operation time with Concord 3. The orbital scan of the area is going to begin in a few minutes.”



Early in the twenty-first century Space Station Unity, the International Space Agency’s crown jewel, went into operation. The costly venture helped open the door for other international efforts in space, including the Bova Manned Mars Mission, the Clarke series of robot probes to Jupiter and its moons and an international commercial venture by the Netter Consortium to build an orbital hotel. The privatization of civilian space ventures paved the way for cooperative international scientific missions. After long decades of use, Unity Station was retired. But the fledgling World Space Agency was already planning the second generation of International Space Stations. This time four stations were to be established around the globe. Later, two more would be added to the planned project. Six Concord stations were commissioned: five in geostationary orbit around the globe; Concord 1 hung in the sky over Europe; Concord 2 over Asia and Eastern Europe; Concord 3 over North America and Concord 4 and 5 over the North and south Poles, respectively. When Concord 6 was completed it would follow an orbital flight path between the Equator and the Antarctic Circle, covering the needs of the Southern Hemisphere. At the present time only three of the six stations were operational; the other three in various stages of construction. Concord 2, 3 and 5 were fully staffed, while work continued on Concorde 1, 4 and 6. The first five stations would have been up and running had a major electrical fire aboard Concord 1 and a near space collision aboard a fortunately empty Concord 4 not set back the schedule.

Like all of the operational Concord space stations, Concord 3 was staffed by members of the World Space Agency. Following regional preference guidelines, the cosmonauts aboard Concord 3 came primarily from the North American Union; American, Canadian, Mexican and Cuban cosmonauts handled all aspects of the day-to-day running of the station, including the constant research projects from both military and civilian interests. The station's command module was large but cramped; every available surface used as a workstation, including a spherical island moored to the inner bulkhead by a large support column through the center of the room. Two dozen officers occupied the module at any given time, everyone there running or monitoring part of the station's vital functions. The science system module was directly below the command module and looked much the same, though it was devoted to running the two arrays of scientific equipment at either end of the station; one array faced the earth, the other the stars. Between the command and science modules was the command office for Concord 3. The command office consisted of three separate suites: One for the station's chief clerk; one for the officer of the watch and one for the station commander. At this time, only one office was occupied: that of the station commander, Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Margaret Bloom.

Lt. Colonel Bloom's office boasted a large blister window of a transparent metallic alloy. The view from her office was across the breadth of the space station to the Earth orbiting beyond. In the three months she had been skyside at C-3 Bloom had grown used to the view and then become tired of it. She had three months more to go before returning to Earth and her true love: flying. At fifty-five, Bloom only had ten

years left before her flight status was permanently revoked. She had crystal blue eyes and short, blonde hair. She had strong Germanic features and her active lifestyle had kept the age from her features. She could pass for thirty and give women even younger a run for their money with men their own age. A former fighter jock and now an Air Force test pilot, she loathed the idea of giving up the stick. The hazardous nature of her work necessitated that every 18 months she take a six-month ground or non-flight assignment and each time she spent six months grounded it was to her six more months that she wasn't in the cockpit. The last thing she'd piloted had been the shuttle that had brought her up here. The next would be the shuttle home. The ten years she had left to fly seemed painfully short after almost four times as many years of flying behind her.

Bloom studied the watch report on the electronic notepad before her. All the standard statistics about what was just another day at the cracker factory. She signed off on it, planning to take a break from the monotony long enough to have a coffee and a cigarette. Not that there were any places aboard a space station that one could legally smoke. Bloom wondered how the tobacco companies were staying afloat. For a change of pace she put down the watch report and began going over the requests for access to the station's scientific equipment and arrays. Normally Bloom didn't pay much attention to the scientific research being done; if it was civilian it only concerned her if it was a potential threat to the station. If it was military Bloom was required to supervise. Most of the time the requests for authorization crossed her desk, she signed off on them and they were forgotten. However when the requisition from the World Aboriginal Anthropological Society crossed her desk Margaret Bloom became personally involved.

Bloom finished up on some unrelated paperwork and made her way from the office module into the command module. The communications hub dominated the lower hemisphere of the workstation island in the center of the module. She pushed and floated her way to the com operator's station.

"Colonel?" the communications officer asked, as Bloom drifted to his station.

"Lieutenant I need a direct linx to the communications spar for the ongoing deep scan in New Mexico."

The lieutenant worked his console's controls and a few seconds later the linx was established. Bloom slipped on a headset and oriented herself to face the two-way screen in the center of the operator's station.



In Laguna, Echohawk James and Peter took their seats around the main computer station in the lab. The computer was linked in to the World Grid and would shortly be receiving preliminary data from the deep scan being done aboard Concord 3. The actual full compilation of the data would be done on the station and then transmitted down to the Laguna site for full analysis. The data being transmitted to Laguna would be basic, but would be enough to form preliminary images of the object buried beneath them and confirm its size and age, if not its composition.

"We have an incoming linx from Concord 3," James reported, "It isn't the data dump, though. It's a communication linx...for you, Prof; from the station commander."

Peter and James both looked questioningly at Echohawk, who shrugged and arched an eyebrow. Echohawk slipped on a headset with a video boom and lowered the mini screen

over his eye. He toggled a switch on the side of the earpiece and nodded to James.

“Put it through to my spar,” He said, “I’m online.”

James focused a minicam onto Echohawk and then transferred the signal over. Instantly the viewer over Echohawk’s eye filled with the image of Lieutenant Colonel Margaret Bloom.

“Hello Meg,” Echohawk said, “What a pleasant surprise!”

Bloom smiled.

“Hello Mark,” She said, “How have you been?”

“I’m fine. How about you Meg? Finally get tired of test-piloting orbital relay fighters? I’m surprised to see you at a desk even if it is in orbit.”

“I’ve been good,” Bloom replied, “And no, I’m on a six-month ground-time rotation. They wanted me back at Engineering and Design but I was so fucking sick of E&D I took a command rotation on Concord 3.”

Bloom was happy to speak with Mark another again. It had been too long, she reflected, since she’d last seen him. But they both lived their own lives and they both knew it was best that way. But seeing his face onscreen Bloom knew she wanted to get together with him again soon.

“Have you heard from Laura?” Bloom asked to break the silence.

“Same time every week,” Echohawk replied, “She writes me a linx, tells me how she’s been doing and what’s going on in her life. I always write back and offer her advice when she asks; same as you.”

“And she never takes any advice,” Bloom said, wryly, “Same as you. She gets

that from your side of the family, you know.”

“I know. And I’m proud of it; same as you.”

“Mark I have to say I was surprised to find you back in the field,” She said, “I thought for sure you’d given it up for the classroom.”

“They made me an offer I couldn’t refuse, Meg,” Echohawk said, “Have you read up on the details of our request?”

“Honestly, I hadn’t. Usually the station’s clerk reads through the bulk of it and summarizes the requests in three sentences including one for the applicant’s name.” Echohawk smiled.

“Reread the application,” He said, “And you’ll understand why I’m out here. You’ll also see why we ordered the scan.”

“Mark...do you have any idea how busy it is up here? There’s a hundred projects just like yours going on each day; those are just the civilian operations. Then there’s the Government stuff and then the military. There are projects ongoing I’m not even supposed to know about. Then, I have to oversee the day-to-day operations of running this station. I don’t get a lot of time to read requests and reports.”

“I think you’ll want to read this one and not just for my sake.”

“Is it that big?”

“You just said a mouthful.”



History records that early in the twenty-first century international organizations decreed that Internet service was a public utility, much the same way that telephone or electrical services were. They renamed the Internet the World Grid and unknowingly

ushered in a new technological era. Television, telecommunications and the services of the Internet were gradually combined into one vast, single medium. Extremely high bandwidth was required to transmit the Grid's information to the world, so fibre optic trunk lines were established solely to provide Grid access. And the World Grid delivered everything: View-On-Demand television programming replaced broadcast TV's schedules; people began to watch what they wanted, when they wanted; long-distance calling became a thing of the past because of real-time voice chat; telephones gave way to streaming video communication and the host of services once provided by the Internet were still all available on the new World Grid.

The new media required new delivery systems and a small electronics firm working in Ottawa, Ontario provided the world with the next step in computer evolution: quantum optic computing, the computation of information using light instead of electricity and quantum processing. Previous computer systems relied on the electric processing of digital signals. Optic processing used light pulses instead of electrical impulses to transmit information. And where traditional computers transmitted bits of information as either ones or zeros to process information, quantum computation processed information by transmitting them as ones, zeros, or as virtually any probable combination of ones and zeros. Quantum-Optic computers, sometimes called Optical Probability Computers, worked so much faster so much more efficiently that the amount of information that could be transmitted processed and stored was exponentially greater than any previous computer system designed.

With the advent of quantum optic computing, Grid service providers replaced or absorbed cable companies, phone companies, Internet service providers and a host of other data-based industries. As currency was replaced by electronic credits to meet an international economy, even banks were absorbed into the new World Grid. The debit card became the new cash, with card-scanners built into most computer keyboards. Banks became largely virtual, with most people performing their financial transactions from their computer terminals. The World Grid was so all-pervasive that governments around the world formed supervisory committees to control as much of the technology as they could. And what couldn't be legislated was closely watched.

Most national Grid oversight committees simply ensured that no criminal activities were committed. There were some governments, however, who used theirs to spy on their own citizens; the United States of America among them. The House Grid Securities Commission had empowered the Homeland Security Agency to do just that. The work was outsourced to the Defense Intelligence Agency. The Laguna dig had been attracting attention ever since it started. But when the Doppler seismology tests revealed the possibility of a massive artificial construct buried beneath the New Mexico desert and that that object would have been there for millions of years, very keen interest was paid to the dig. When the Concord 3 space station began its survey of the area the DIA was already tapped into their systems through a back channel, recording everything. Already General Roy Harrod, head of the DIA, was aware of the ongoing operation and was supervising it closely under the direct orders of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Within an hour of the deep scan's beginning, the data being compiled by Concord 3 was already being compiled and extrapolated by the DIA's own supercomputers. And the results of that extrapolation were so shocking to General Harrod that immediately after he had read the report he contacted the Cee-Jay-Cee on a Grid channel that was only to be used in the most urgent situations. Harrod's desk was devoid of any furnishing other than three computer consoles connected to the same keypad. The information from Concord 3 was on the console to his right. On the middle console, he was linxing through to the Chairman, Joint Chiefs.

"General Harrod," The Chairman said, "What is it?"

"Sir, this is in regards to the Type Seven in New Mexico," Harrod replied.

"Go ahead."

"I'm linxing the information to you now, sir," Harrod said as he entered a sequence of keys on his keypad, "I would suggest deploying personnel to New Mexico and securing control of the site."

At his own workstation, the Chairman was reading over the report Harrod had just sent him.

"I concur, General. Use standard protocols and keep me fully informed. This is your operation, General Harrod."

"Yes, Mister Chairman."

In his office at the Pentagon, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff sighed heavily. The Chairman terminated the link and then removed his earpiece. He couldn't get the knack for hitting the buttons without seeing them. He tapped in the correct

sequence and replaced the earpiece. His console turned black except for a single red dot in the center of the screen.

“Yes?” a voice issued into the Chairman’s earpiece.

“Put them on call,” The Chairman said, “We may need to meet.” There was a long pause on the other end. An emergency meeting was rare.

“Understood.” The voice said, at last.

The signal was cut. The Chairman sat back in his chair.



Two hours after the downlink from Concord 3 began James was nearly done a preliminary compilation of the data.

“A lot of this is going to be conjectural,” He warned, “We’ll know the basic size and shape of the object but we won’t be able to tell its composition or any fine details.”

“That’s alright James,” Echohawk said, “Let’s see what you have.”

A large display screen had been set up to the left of the main console workstation. It unrolled much like an old projection screen and liquid crystal within compiled the image. They had set up the screen to accommodate the small audience of onlookers who had gathered, including the entire Laguna Band Council.

“We’re only going to be able to see from the top down,” James explained, “We can do a side view, but only of the upper half of the object. Whatever it looks like from below will remain a mystery, unfortunately.”

Those were the last words spoken by anyone for a very long time. Onscreen, the image of an arched dome appeared. The dome stretched out along its base into a long disk so that it seemed to be a tall, rounded mountain stretching out to a valley floor. At the top of

the massive dome was the elevated dais and atop that, looking very small when compared to the dome itself, was the Laguna Pyramid. A distance from the top a ring of three-quarter pyramids guarded the crest. According to the scale, there was one pyramid roughly every half-kilometer, twenty-eight in all. At the bottom of the disk, the object was thirty-two and three quarter kilometers across. It was circular and the blister-like top of the arched dome was almost seven and a half kilometers high.

“My God,” Santino said, “What the hell is it?”

“James, get me a linx to the WAAS,” Echohawk said, “I need to speak with Professor Todds immediately.”

James nodded and began working a second keypad.

“I don’t understand,” Peter said, “What are we looking at? A domed city? If so, who built it?”

“We don’t know that that’s what it is,” Echohawk cautioned.

“Well, what else could it be?” Peter demanded, “And how did such a civilization occur without any other evidence ever being found? How did they develop their industry without fossil fuels?”

“Alcohol-based fuel?” James suggested, “Maybe they used geothermal power?”

“James, my linx to Professor Todds please,” Echohawk reminded him, “Guys, let’s try and stay focused here. We don’t know what we’re dealing with right now and we can’t jump to any conclusions.”

“Prof? We have a problem,” James reported.

“What is it?”

“I have no Grid access,” James said, “I’ve even lost the feed from Concord 3.”

“How is that possible?”

“I don’t know!” James answered, “I can’t access the WAAS, Concord 3, I can’t send linxes and I can’t even get a VOD show.”

Echohawk crossed to where he’d put down his travel bag and pulled out his own console. He switched it on as he slipped his headset on. Lowering the microphone and display booms into place Echohawk placed his own Grid linx. All his display showed was a standard no-service message:

**ERROR 201.21: UNABLE TO ACCESS WORLD GRID AT THIS TIME.
PLEASE ENSURE THAT YOUR MODEM IS ONLINE AND THAT YOUR CONNECTION
SETTINGS ARE VALID. IF THE PROBLEM PERSISTS, PLEASE CONTACT YOUR
GRID SERVICE PROVIDER.**

“Shit!” Echohawk swore, “What the hell is going on?”

In response to his question the aluminum walls of the lab building began to rattle and hiss as they were pelted with sand, dust and small rocks. At the last Echohawk heard the distinctive staccato thunder of helicopter blades rumbling in all around them. He, James, Peter and Chief Santino rushed from the shelter into the night air. A storm of debris blew around them as four massive black helicopters landed in the compound. Several other military vehicles, including the British-made Ranger armored personnel transports were rolling up. The glare from the floodlights on the helicopter illuminated the compound with dusty beams of cruel, artificially white light. The storm began to die off as the helicopters’ propellers cycled down to a halt. The growling whine of the power cells in the land vehicles also faded, leaving only the migraine white of the floodlights that seemed to be everywhere. Echohawk squinted vainly, feeling pain behind his eyes. James and Peter produced sunglasses. Santino shielded his face by making a visor with his hand. They watched, stunned, as soldiers began running around in an organized,

concerted effort. The soldiers were rounding people up from the mess tents and the shelters, bringing them all over to the central location of the laboratory. Two soldiers stood before Echohawk as the rest of the camp's inhabitants and the dozen-odd curious onlookers that were almost always on site were herded together behind them.

“What the fuck is going on?” Echohawk bellowed with indignant rage.

The soldiers said nothing. Finally after everyone was brought together, one of the soldiers spoke into her headset.

“Area secure Colonel!”

She barked. A door in the helicopter nearest to Echohawk slid open. A man in combat fatigues, tall, gaunt with ice-blue eyes and graying hair shorn clean to his scalp walked slowly, deliberately from the cabin. As he reached the hard-packed earth of the desert floor he slipped a visored cap onto his head and walked with the same imperious, deliberate pace he had used to leave the helicopter over to where Echohawk stood. He had all the bearing of a senior officer and all the power and menace of a veteran soldier.

“Professor Mark Echohawk,” The Army officer said, “I am Colonel Isaac Jude, United States Army Rangers, Thirteenth Battalion.”

“How very wonderful for you,” Echohawk said.

Jude ignored the remark.

“By order of the head of the Defense Intelligence Agency, acting on the behalf of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of the United States, we are seizing control of this site and all equipment and records within. This area is now considered to be entirely the property of the Government of the United States. You and your people will be detained long enough to be debriefed on the artifact you've uncovered. Until further notice, all

access to the World Grid in this area, including the town of Laguna has been blacked out.”

“You have to right to do this!” Santino bellowed, “This land belongs to the Southwestern Aboriginal Protectorate, as per the terms of the North American Aboriginal Charter! You can’t do this!”

Jude turned his head to regard Santino with a cold, dispassionate gaze.

“Chief Santino,” He said, sounding stunned at Santino’s words, “We just did.” Jude shook his head at their dumbfounded expressions, unable to suppress a smile.



“Colonel Bloom?”

Bloom was at her desk, overlooking resource consumption reports on her console screen.

Bloom keyed open the intercom channel and replied.

“Go ahead.”

“Colonel you asked to be kept apprised of the deep scan of New Mexico,” The operator on the other end of the intercom explained, “There’s been a development, ma’am.”

“I’m listening.”

“The scan is still ongoing. However we are no longer able to relay telemetry to New Mexico.”

“Put a crew in the virtual chairs and deploy repair drones,” Bloom said, “It’s not rocket science Lieutenant.”

“The problem isn’t on our end Colonel,” The Lieutenant replied, “There’s no Grid service at the site.”

“I don’t understand.”

“The entire Laguna district of the Southwestern Protectorate, in other words most of northwestern New Mexico, is without access to the World Grid.”

“That’s impossible. There’s optic trunk lines buried right through the continental landmass and we monitor satellite traffic from up here. I haven’t gotten a report of any satellites being down.”

Bloom unstrapped herself from her chair, drifting away from her desk.

“I’m on my way.”

She pushed her way up to the airlock leading from her office and from there left, into the command module.

“Colonel on deck!” the duty officer called.

Bloom made her way to the command and control station that was monitoring the flow of communications to and from Concord 3.

“What is the situation?” Bloom asked, after returning the Lieutenant’s salute.

“Well Ma’am, as I said, it looks as though that Grid service to the area comprising the Laguna District and surrounding communities has been completely cut off. There’s no discernible activity, whatsoever.”

“That’s impossible,” Bloom reiterated, “Every single substation, communication central office, microwave and radio transmission relay tower...all of it would have had to have gone down, at once.”

“Lieutenant-Colonel Bloom,” the duty officer called, “You have an incoming linx from General Harrod of the DIA.”

Bloom turned to the young major, a look of disbelief on her face.

“You’re kidding me, right, Major?”

“No, Ma’am,” She replied.

“What in Hell is the head of the DIA doing, calling me?”

She moved back towards the hatch.

“I’ll take it in my office.”

Back in her office, Bloom unrolled the viewscreen from her console. A minicam built into the screen transmitted her image directly to General Harrod’s office.

“General Harrod,” Bloom said as the General’s image appeared onscreen, “What can I do for you, sir?”

“Good evening, Lieutenant-Colonel,” Harrod answered, “I’ll be brief. You can start by collecting all data that you have recorded about the New Mexico deep scan operation and packing it for transport back home.”

“General?”

“There’s a jump plane fuelled and ready for takeoff at Edwards,” Harrod continued, “In ninety minutes, the plane will be docking with Concord 3. I will be aboard and at that time I will take delivery of the optic slips.”

“With all due respect General, Concord 3 is an international space station and is not subject to American military control,” Bloom said, “If you intend on acquiring a copy of the data, you’ll either have to take it up with the World Space Agency, or with the World Aboriginal Anthropological Society; they’re the ones who commissioned the scan and so by international proprietary law it belongs to them.”

“Lieutenant-Colonel Bloom I’m not putting in a request. As your superior officer, I am *ordering* you to stand by and surrender those optic slips. You don’t have any choice in the matter. I am seizing them, as they directly relate to the national security of the United States.”

“You are neither my immediate superior nor in any position to order me to surrender those slips,” Bloom snapped, indignant rage filling her.

“You sure as hell don’t have the authority, General, to breach international law and violate World Council treaties! And begging your pardon, General, you damn well know all of this already!”

She kit the killswitch on her keypad and severed the communication. Seconds later, she was sending an emergency audiovisual link to World Space Agency headquarters. She was immediately put through to space station control in Hamburg, Germany.

“Colonel Bloom,” The control operator responding said, “This is Brenda Hensing. How can I help you?”

“We have a situation up here,” Bloom replied. “I have reason to believe that members of the United States Defense Intelligence Agency are going to try boarding the station within the next two hours.”

“What? I don’t understand. Why would they--”

The signal began degrading; Bloom couldn't make out what Hensing was saying.

"Say again, Hamburg," She called, "Say again, please."

Hensing's voice came back through the linx, faintly. "We're getting a lot of static on--" the image onscreen froze, depixelated and was replaced with a plain blue background.

The words

EXTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS RELAY FAILED

flashed across the screen. Bloom tried to reestablish the linx, but could not.

"Oh fuck," she hissed.

Throughout time the corrupt have risen to power. Throughout time they have manipulated the Truth in order to stay in power, even when at the cost of Life. The greatest weapon of the corrupt has always been ignorance. But Truth yearns to be free and it always finds a champion...

(3) INDOMITABLE TRUTH

He regarded them with ice-blue eyes over a hale, angular face. The corners of his mouth curved upwards into an oh-so slight, ever-present smile, this Colonel Jude. As their captor sat down Echohawk couldn't help the feeling that he was a supplicant before a king awaiting judgment. Jude consulted a notepad which he then tossed down onto the collapsible metal desk that had until recently served as Echohawk's command post within the lab building. Echohawk and Santino stood before Colonel Jude, two of Jude's men behind them.

"Do you have any idea," Jude began, "Just how often it is that I've been called in during my career to help save people from themselves?"

The tall soldier regarded them, the crow's feet in the corners of his eyes reaching outward as he squinted.

"You strike me as more of a hired killer, than a professional hero." Santino said, angrily.

Jude regarded him a long moment, perhaps wondering how Santino had gained such astute insight.

"I've been that too, when necessary," Jude said, "Right now, I'm the man who's keeping you from further digging on the object you've discovered out here."

"Do you have any idea what it *is* that we've discovered out here?" Echohawk demanded angrily.

"No, Professor Echohawk and neither do you. That's the problem." Jude leaned forward in his chair, as if trying to explain things to two errant schoolchildren.

“The fact is gentlemen, that the object could be anything. And until such time as a proper threat assessment can be made, it is in the interests of National Security to halt the dig.”

“What threat can an object that’s been buried for the last sixty-five million years possibly pose to national security?” Echohawk demanded.

“What threat did the Kreutz virus pose to humankind while it lay dormant in a cave in the Amazon for ten thousand years, until clear cutting exposed it to cattle farmers?” Jude countered. “Professor, my job here is simple: I’m shutting the dig down and I’m going to debrief you and everyone associated with this project on everything you know about the object. Once I’ve completed that, then my superior will decide what action is best taken.”

Of course, this wasn’t strictly true; his superior, namely General Harrod, had already decided what action was to be taken: Echohawk, Santino and the Laguna Pyramid archaeological dig team were to be debriefed and then silenced. The digsite would be closed, permanently and the world would get back to normal. Contingencies had already been discussed, ensuring that no one came out to the dig site for a very long time. This was New Mexico, after all. The Laguna Dig would unearth highly radioactive, contaminated soil from War Three. That contamination would of course force the United States government to cordon off the entire area for the next hundred years or more. A shame about the archaeologists, really, but there were risks to digging within the fallout zone of one of the dirtiest atomic bomb blasts of the war. Jude had no problems with his orders in this case. Everyone on-sight were to be considered red-shirts; expendable. It wasn’t the first time he’d been ordered by his government to kill and certainly not the

first time he and his troops had targeted civilians. Covert Operations were never pretty. However, they were almost always necessary. And if there was indeed a Type Seven buried beneath their feet at this moment, it was imperative that this area be secured.

“So, quite simply, Professor Echohawk, the quicker you are to cooperate with us, the quicker this will all be over.”



A hastily called meeting in the office module brought Lieutenant-Colonel Bloom together with most of her senior staff: Major Jack Benedict, her executive officer and the only one aboard with whom Bloom had served before; Captain Charles Boucher, Bloom’s head of station security; Captain Elizabeth Donnelly, the station’s operations chief and Major Louise Cohen, the Officer of the Watch.

“Current as of now we have a serious situation,” Bloom explained, “For some reason the deep scan we were commissioned to do of northwestern New Mexico has attracted some unwanted attention. The Defense Intelligence Agency has decided to black out all Grid communication access to the target area and to seize all material relating to the deep scan, including the originating systems, aboard this station. We’ve been ordered to turn over absolutely everything we have relating to the scans, including the science console core drives.”

“But they can’t do that,” Benedict replied, “This station is under international jurisdiction.”

“General Harrod seems to think he can do whatever he wants Exo.” Bloom looked around the table and stood.

“A jump plane left Edwards’ Air Force Base less than twenty minutes ago. ETA with the station is ninety-eight minutes. Before that plane gets here there are several things we have to do.”

She turned to Benedict first. The younger Black man leaned forward almost conspirationally to listen. He trusted Bloom implicitly; they’d both flown sorties together as combat pilots during the Australian Conflict a decade past. She’d been squadron leader then. When all but their two planes were destroyed during one firefight, it was her orders and deft manoeuvring that saw them both through.

“Major Benedict, you and Captain Boucher need to secure the station. Seal off all docking ports and the access ways between the docking hub and the rest of the station. That won’t stop them, but it will slow them down. Major Cohen, I need you to determine who among the crew we can trust and who we can’t. Everyone we can’t place above suspicion will have to be locked down in the habitat carousel. I suspect some of our fellow Americans might think we’re mutinying against the DIA and therefore the US government.”

Bloom turned to Donnelly, “Captain, you and I will go over the telemetry from the deep scan. We need to know what it is that’s down there, causing this mess. I want to know exactly why the DIA has decided to violate World Council treaty in order to seize this information. Maybe then we can figure out what to do with it.”

“Wouldn’t that put us in direct violation of orders?” Boucher, the senior staff’s lone Canadian officer asked.

“Whose orders?” Bloom asked. “We’re under the direct and exclusive authority of the World Space Agency up here.”

“General Harrod’s for one,” Cohen replied, “With all due respect Lieutenant-Colonel, he did issue specific orders.”

“I’m afraid they’re orders I can’t legally recognize,” said Bloom, “And all they can do is haul us before a hearing. We’d be exonerated.”

“And our careers would stall,” Donnelly protested, “I’d like to rise in rank and pay a little, before I retire. I’d also like to avoid a series of assignments to Godforsaken posts.”

“Like this one?” Bloom asked. “My career was stalled too, a few years back. I was court-martialed twice, acquitted twice and I was never supposed to make Major. I’m a Lieutenant-Colonel, now.” She tapped the clusters on her uniform for effect and then continued. “Your objections will be duly noted in my log. If you like, I can confine you to quarters for the duration. Following me on this one will be done strictly on a voluntary basis.”

“Count me in, Lieutenant-Colonel,” Major Benedict said.

“Me as well,” Cohen added.

“What have I got to lose? I work for the Canadian Armed Forces. We’re not violating orders that came from *my* government,” Boucher confirmed.

“I’m in,” Donnelly said, curtly, “Under protest, but, I’m in.”

Bloom nodded her head.

“Then it looks like we have a job to do,” she said.



The soldiers had done cursory interviews and separated the workers into two groups: Those who knew the full scope of the object they were unearthing and those who

did not. The people with little or no knowledge were all herded together, while anyone with any real knowledge was kept isolated and under guard. James and Peter had been quick to pick up on this and played dumb well enough to end up grouped in with those who were genuinely ignorant of the object buried beneath them. They stood together plotting their next move.

“What do you think?” Peter asked James as they tried not to seem too obvious about watching their military captors’ movements.

“I think that when we get out of this I’m going to go buy a pack of joints and smoke one after the other.”

“I hear you,” Peter said, “But that’s what I mean: how do we get out of this?”

“I’ve been trying to figure that out, myself. What do you think is *really* going on, here? I mean, did we accidentally dig up something the government buried down here, or what?”

“I don’t know,” Peter admitted, “But I don’t see how they did unless they tunneled out the whole desert before they built it.”

“Then why do they want so badly to keep this quiet?” James asked. “If it isn’t some supersecret government installation, then it’s just the ruins of a civilization that predates man. So what’s the big deal? As old as the planet is and as long as the dinosaurs roamed the Earth, it’s pretty egotistical of us to think that we’re the first intelligent civilization to grace the planet’s surface.”

“That’s just it James,” Peter said, “What if there’s a third option, one that is the exact reason the feds sent in the troops?”

“Oh for fuck’s sake please don’t say aliens.”

“It has to be considered James,” Peter said, “What if whatever’s been buried here in the desert for the last sixty-five million years *isn’t* of Earth origin at all?”

James looked around at the soldiers, noticing not for the first time how many of them had their rifles at the ready.

“Then I’d say we’re in a lot of trouble,” he said.



Using handholds built into the padded bulkheads of the space station’s narrow corridors, Bloom pulled her weightless self through the access way and into the science module. Weightless but with mass, her stomach and ears telling her she was in freefall, Bloom--like everyone else not currently in the 2/3 Earth-gravity environment of the habitat carousel had to be careful not to become disoriented or move too rapidly or swiftly. More than once in the time she’d been here Bloom had witnessed someone slamming headfirst into a bulkhead. In zero gravity nosebleeds could get very serious.

The science module was deserted except for the stocky redheaded woman working one of the console stations. Her hair was tied in a French braid to keep it from floating off and she was strapped into the workstation’s chair so as not to drift. She drank coffee from a bag with a valve-straw that floated near to hand. Bloom took a bag of coffee from the dispenser mounted by the main hatch before pulling herself over to where Captain Donnelly worked. Anyone entering the same hatch Bloom had used would first get the impression that the two women were glued to the ceiling.

“What’s telemetry showing?” Bloom asked.

“Lieutenant-Colonel You wouldn’t believe me if I showed you.”

“Show me,” Bloom said, stabilizing herself into an upright position relative to Donnelly.

On the viewscreen before them a three dimensional image began rendering. It showed the object under the New Mexico desert: a massive disk with a blistered dome arching up seven kilometers from the disk’s surface, where it ended in a ring of small pyramids guarding a single pyramid at the summit of the mountainous arch.

“Wait a minute,” Bloom said, “Is this right? This can’t be...the scale shows this thing to be almost thirty five kilometers in diameter!”

“I told you that you wouldn’t believe me,” Donnelly replied, “And there’s more, Ma’am. That was just the initial radar sweep. Further scans have determined the object to be of an unrecognized metallurgical composition which won’t allow us to do a scan of the interior.”

“Is the sweep still running?”

“Never stopped, Colonel Bloom.”

“We got cameras aimed down there? Regular video?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Show me the digsite. It should be right in the center of the scanning field.”

Donnelly worked the console and a few moments later a satellite view-from-above image of the Laguna Pyramid digsite appeared on the small viewer immediately to the right of that console’s main viewer.

“Zoom.” The image grew in size and detail. Now they were able to see shapes moving about, evidently people.

“Again,” Bloom said.

The people became visible to them. They were all armed and all wearing camouflage.

“Jesus Christ, the Army’s already taken complete control of the site,” Bloom hissed.

“Now what?”

“Now, we need a new plan,” Bloom said, “Contact Major Benedict and Captain Boucher. Have them meet us in my office the minute they’ve completed their work.”



“Let’s review,” Peter said, “What do we know?”

They were sitting in a corner of the laboratory on folding chairs provided to the detainees by the military. They were fenced in by simple retractable cordons but what was keeping them all in place were the heavily armed soldiers on the other side of the barrier. James and Peter had pulled their chairs away from the rest of the crowd and were drinking coffee also provided to them by the soldiers.

“Access to the World Grid has been shut down,” James said, “There’s no way to send any Grid-based communications out.”

“Right. And we know that the object underneath us is about thirty-odd kilometers wide and that it’s been here for sixty-five million years at least.”

“We know the government wants it.”

“More precisely we know they want to keep it secret.”

“And we know that they’re doing everything they can to appease us right now,” James added, “Giving us chairs, giving us coffee, donuts...I don’t know if you’ve ever been arrested or detained before, but usually when you’re dumped into holding, the guards don’t try and keep you happy.”

“No,” Peter said. “They just try to keep you *there*.”

“Pretty much.”

“So without Grid communication what can we do?” James sat silent for a long time, his brow furrowed and eyes downcast. Suddenly he straightened and looked at Peter.

“I just thought of something,” James said.

They watched members of the dig being escorted to Colonel Jude’s desk.

“Yeah?” Peter asked.

“The Army came in here in BVT 624 Ranger transports,” James said, “Those babies are equipped with full onboard console systems including independent Grid backbones. Even if the World Grid is being blacked out right now the console systems in those vehicles can get online. If we can get to one, *we* can get online.”

“Great,” Peter replied, “So all we have to do is figure out how to get past the barricade in here, past armed guards, out into their motor pool and into an Army vehicle and online using a computer that’s probably passcode-secured.”

“If I can get to my console I can get in that computer. I’ve got hackware that no one’s ever seen before.” James’s console unit was neatly stowed in its pouch on the desk of the lab’s main computer workstation.

“We still have to get out of here,” Peter said, “Which we won’t be doing any time soon.”

“Yeah,” James admitted, “That’s the fatal flaw in my otherwise brilliant plan.”

“I could probably boost the vehicle if we can get to it,” Peter said, “But the instant we try that shit, we’ll come under fire and pursuit.”

“Not a problem,” James replied, “I read about the 624 Ranger in Jane’s Review. They’re armor plated and can take an RPG round and keep going.”

Peter nodded, suddenly soberly terrified by what he and James were talking about. It was unreal: they were prisoners of the United States Army, plotting their escape, the theft of a vehicle and the expectation that they would be under fire while doing all this.

“This is really heavy,” he said.



Concord 3 hung in space over the Earth, a tiny white mote with silvery-black solar sails above a massive blue sphere. The station orbited over North America, staring forever down upon the eerie luminescence of the nighttime oceans bordering the continent and the brilliant web of diamonds that were its many cities. Toward the station flew with pointed precision and cold determination a white jump plane inscribed with the insignia of the Defense Intelligence Agency. The triangular, wingless wedge of metal shone from its own running lights as it made the approach. Capable of orbital insertion and return under their own power, jump planes had replaced the ageing space shuttle fleet early in the twenty-first century. Successive generations of jump planes helped lessen the expense of both air travel and space travel, making even lunar voyages accessible to the average citizen. But the plane approaching Concord 3 was hardly an innocuous tourist flight. General Roy Harrod was aboard and he brought with him an entire battalion of troops.

Armed with the news that Harrod’s plane was less than an hour away, Bloom once more stood before her senior staff.

“Donnelly and I have analyzed the telemetry from the New Mexico scan,” She explained to them, “There’s an object buried down there, composition unknown, origin unknown. Everything points to it having been there for the last sixty-five million years, maybe longer. The size and shape of the object as well as its composition seem indicative of it not being of Earth origin. The Defense Intelligence Agency has sent troops in to occupy the digsite. And as we already know General Harrod himself is coming here to seize all evidence of the scan on our end. This is what they’re trying to hide.”

Bloom hit a switch on her desk’s keypad and the wall to their left lit up with a three dimensional computer rendition of the object.

“Oh God,” Cohen said, her breath catching in her throat.

“My guess is it’s a ship,” Bloom said, “And my second guess is that the US government is trying to keep its existence a secret so they can keep everything they find for themselves. They’re violating both the North American Aboriginal Charter regarding the sovereignty of the Protectorate territories and the World Space Accords to make sure they have exclusive control of the information.”

“So what are we going to do about it?” Benedict asked.

Bloom smiled.

“We’re going to do just what the DIA doesn’t want us to do Exo,” Bloom said, “We’re going to broadcast the information out onto the World Grid. Any objections?” There were none.

“Fine. And thank you one and all. Captain Donnelly, I’ll need you to put a team together for an EVA. Because our Grid link has been cut we need to aim our

communications dish at another satellite. Then we have to hack in and send our signal. That's where you'll come in Captain Boucher. I understand your skills as a hacker are what landed you in military security to begin with."

Boucher nodded.

"All that's going to take some serious time Lieutenant Colonel," Benedict said.

"Correct Exo: time we'll buy for ourselves by shutting down docking control. If Harrod's boys have to dock with the station without our help, it'll take them at least another forty minutes. That gives us time to aim a dish, hack a satellite and transmit the information we have."

"Where are we transmitting to?" Donnelly asked.

"I think there's only one place *to* send the signal," Bloom replied, "Where the world gets its news: INN."



The jump plane neared the space station. Concord Three's appearance in the cockpit window had grown from a speck of light reflecting against the sky to an indistinct shape, finally to a series of three segmented columns joined together in tight parallel. The columns were bisected by massive solar sails, designed to collect most of Concord Three's power from the sun. At the upper end the three columns met together in one junction, joined to the gently rotating barrel-shaped habitat carousel. The carousel spun clockwise and generated an internal gravity approximating two-thirds that of Earth's. Above the carousel was the space observatory array consisting of radio, x-ray, optical and electromagnetic telescope equipment. At the earthside pole of the space station was a similar, though scaled-back array. Between the two arrays and just below the solar sails

was the docking hub. And it was towards this target that the jump plane's pilot was heading. Thrusters fired across the surface of the plane's skin in quick, controlled bursts, adjusting its speed and attitude. In space foils and rudders were useless with no air to displace. Earth hung just beyond the station to their left and as the pilots made another course correction the planet filled the horizon, seeming to roll toward them as they turned. Now they were perfectly aligned with the distant station, growing larger as they approached.

"Docking control, this is the *Trafalgar*. Come in please," The pilot said into his headset, "Concord Three docking control, this is jump plane *Trafalgar*. Do you copy, over?"

The pilot turned to his co-pilot.

"What's our ETA?"

"We are thirty-eight minutes from hard dock."

"*Trafalgar* to Concord Three docking control," The pilot said one last time, "We are currently forty minutes—that's four-zero minutes—from rendezvous. Come in, over."

There was no response when the pilot toggled the com switch to receive.



Donnelly's breath echoed loudly within the confines of her helmet. She felt the push of the space suit's built in jets as she thrust her way towards the upper array. Two of her assistants were behind her and watching via cameras from the command module Major Benedict kept her apprised of their progress. Donnelly watched another bead of nervous sweat pull away from her forehead and float up to the top of her helmet.

“Looking good Liz,” Benedict’s voice said over their radio link.

“Yeah, easy for you to say; you’re inside,” Donnelly replied.

She hated spacewalking. The cosmonaut thing wasn’t bad if you were in a space ship or doing time on the Lunar or Martian surface, but out in space with no dirt under you? That was too much for Donnelly.

“You’re almost there,” Benedict reassured her.

“Yeah,” Donnelly breathed, “Almost.”

Donnelly and Benedict had determined prior to her sortie that the station’s communication array was being hit by a microwave jamming field, most probably from a nearby military satellite. As the field was aimed at the base of the station and the array pointing toward Earth, the array at the top of the station should be free from such interference. All they had to do was aim one of the microwave scanning dishes at the top of the station down towards another satellite and they would be able to communicate with the world again. They knew the approximate location of another nearby satellite and were going to use handheld equipment to locate it and aim the dish. Benedict had already run wires from the science lab to the command module, effectively turning the radio astronomy dish into a communications array.

“The SETI people are going to be so pissed about this,” He muttered, gleefully.

“Hey,” Donnelly said through the open channel, “They’ll forgive you Major, when they hear about the Ship. We’re here. I’m going to start now. We’re going take the dish off its mounting bracket. Christ, the thing is huge...”



“What’s our status?” General Harrod asked, returning to the cockpit for the second time in ten minutes.

“We’re still trying to raise docking control,” The pilot said, “No go. We’re less than twenty minutes from the station, now, sir.”

“Can you dock this thing without their help?”

“I could, but I’d rather not.”

“You’re going to have to I’m afraid,” Harrod replied, “Believe me, son. I’d rather be dirtside as well.”

In truth there were few places that Harrod would not have chosen over space. He hated the constant feeling of falling, the nausea associated with having his stomach contents float around on their own and what *that* did to his acid reflux. Harrod had a long career in military intelligence; most of it as an analyst, sitting comfortably behind a desk. Space was for him the antithesis of comfort. True, he’d done his time in the field as an operative and served proudly. But given a choice between being undercover surrounded by people who would kill you—or worse—if they knew you were the enemy, often on the run, sometimes in shootouts or working a nine-to-seven and having three days off with the wife and kids, any man would pick the latter. Harrod wasn’t one to shirk his duty, but he wasn’t one to necessarily enjoy it, either.

“A manual docking procedure without the station’s help will take longer,” The pilot advised the General, “Probably on the order of forty-five minutes to an hour.”

“Be that as it may,” Harrod said, “Just get me and my troops aboard that station.”



There was a haze of smoke in Bloom's office. She'd manually—and illegally—disabled all the smoke detectors within the confines of the small room shortly after taking command of the station. The lights were off; the only illumination from the glowing red tip of her cigarette. She stared out the blister window behind her desk, allowing herself to float in the zero-gravity environment. Womb with a view. The view, of course, was Earth's nightside. Dawn was creeping up somewhere to the right. But a different set of lights was shining in front of the luminous nighttime of America. It was these lights that held Bloom's attention. The *Trafalgar*, an Avro Phoenix III orbital insertion jump plane configured for military use; modular payload convertible between cargo, hardware deployment, or troop capacity. The blinking running lights heralded the approach of General Harrod and his troops. The jump plane had grown from an indistinct reflective blur to a series of flashing lights to the point where Bloom could make out the plane's silhouette. They were minutes away from beginning manual docking procedures and not a damn thing Bloom could do about it except hope her people finished their work before Harrod's troops breached the bulkheads.

"Lieutenant-Colonel?" Benedict's voice came through the intercom.

She toggled a switch on her headset.

"Go ahead, Major."

"Ma'am, the microwave dish has been uncoupled from the array and we're currently trying to locate a satellite we can hack into."

"Good news Major. But the *Trafalgar* is minutes away from hard dock," Bloom advised him, "And we won't have control of the station for long after that happens."

"We'll be ready on time," Benedict assured her, "You have my word on it."

The confidence in Benedict's voice came through even in the tiny speaker in her ear. He'd changed a lot from the fighter jock she'd known during the Australia conflict. He'd been scared shitless back then. During the attack their entire squadron was taken out in one violent assault by suicide flyers and antiaircraft fire coming in from ground and orbit. The boy that Jack Benedict had been was gone, now. The man who took his place someone that Bloom would want watching her back any day.

"Roger that Exo," Bloom said, "Contact me when you're good to go."

"Will do, Ma'am."

"Banshee out," Bloom said, ending the comm with her pilot's callsign.



There was a sudden rumble and then the earth shook. Nothing violent and not for very long but there had been a definite quake. The people confined to the lab at the edge of the Laguna dig made a frightened noise, followed by nervous, excited conversation. The soldiers looked to their senior officers for orders, who in turn looked to Colonel Jude.

"What in Hell is going on?" Jude demanded, "What was that?"

"Earthquake Colonel," One soldier offered.

James and Peter saw their opportunity and pushed their way past colleagues to the front of the barricade.

"If you let us get to the main console, we can tell you exactly what's happening,"

James called, "We have Doppler seismology equipment set up all over the area. We can use it to get a Richter count and find the epicenter."

Jude eyed them suspiciously. Then he nodded to two of the guards, who escorted James and Peter over to the console. The two soldiers stood behind them as they got to work. Surreptitiously, James moved his console to his lap in order to access a keypad that it was blocking. They were bringing up the Doppler seismology systems, reviewing the mild quake that had just shaken the area.

“Well?” Jude asked from behind them.

“We’re at the epicenter of the quake,” Peter reported, “Looks like whatever it is we’re digging up did this.”

“How is that possible?”

Peter looked at him contemptuously.

“You tell us Colonel,” He said, “You’re the one who stopped us from digging.” Another quake hit, this one longer and more forceful. People screamed this time, as many of them staggered and fell. James and Peter regarded each other, both knowing what had to be done before this quake subsided.

“*EVERYBODY RUN!*” James bellowed, rising to his feet, knocking over his chair. He and Peter shoved past their guards and the Colonel who were already off-balance from the quaking ground. The wave of people broke, stampeding for the exits from the shelter. The soldiers at the site did their best to evacuate everyone in an orderly fashion, but the bedlam was out of control. The earthquake stopped by the time James and Peter cleared the building, but the people they had been held prisoner with were still panicked and scattering.

“Which way?” James asked.

Peter looked around and then pointed towards one of the 624 Rangers.

“There!” he said, dashing off.

James was at his heels and they could hear the sounds of more footsteps behind them. James didn’t turn around. He didn’t want to. A soldier was standing by the open door of one of the vehicles, speaking on a linx and consulting the console system in the dash. Jackpot. Peter slammed into the soldier from behind, knocking her into the door and pushing the stunned woman aside. He climbed in as James raced around to the passenger side door. They were locked in just as their pursuers caught up to them. The soldiers that had been guarding them were hammering on the vehicle as Peter tried to hotwire the starter, while James began connecting his console to the Ranger’s system using an elaborate octopus of cables. The transport was being quickly surrounded by troops—with guns drawn.

“Hurry up Pete,” James growled.

Floodlights hit the Ranger, turning night into day inside the cab. Colonel Jude was marching towards the human shield forming around the vehicle. He, too had his sidearm drawn. James had no doubts about their fate should they be hauled out of the vehicle. Troops were grabbing at the doors now, trying to get the transport open. The locks were shut but it wouldn’t be long until someone produced a master key or an electronic override. Peter was playing with wires and fuses under the dashboard while James began trying to slice into the console. Maybe he could send the information out, before it was too late; maybe he could—

“HOLY SHIT!” James exclaimed.

The Ranger bucked, its front end lifting into the air and slamming back down. Another earthquake had started; this one violent and showing no sign of slackening. The line of

troops surrounding them broke as soldiers fell or ran away. The engine of the Ranger whined to life. The three-tonne transport rocked on its suspension from the violence of the quake. The engine was humming now, a sharp arrhythmic sound as Peter climbed back up from under the dashboard. He was bleeding from his forehead but he said nothing as he put the Ranger into gear and tore out of the compound.

“Pete! Over there!” James shouted, pointing.

Echohawk and Santino were staggering away from the digsite. Peter swung the transport over to where his mentor and the Chief of the Laguna Band were, reaching around to open one of the two back doors on his side of the trucklike vehicle.

“Get in!” Peter ordered.

Someone had rallied behind them, realizing they were stealing a military transport. Shots were fired, ringing off the back of the camper. Echohawk and Santino scrambled aboard and the stolen Ranger took off.

“Where to?” Peter asked.

“Back towards Laguna,” Santino replied, “Let’s get the hell away from this place!”

“What’s going on?” Echohawk asked, “You were working the console before this went down.”

“It looks like the object beneath us is causing the quakes,” James replied, slipping on a headset and beginning the process of hacking into the Ranger’s Grid backbone, “I think it’s trying to unearth itself!”



Short siren blasts sounded from the intercom speakers throughout the station. General Harrod's ship had completed hard dock and his soldiers were now desperately trying to re-route power to bulkhead doors that had been sealed, their wiring and control circuits either torn out or just incinerated. Bloom stood by Major Benedict as the two of them hovered by the console where Boucher sat, overseeing Donnelly's progress. She and her team had aligned the microwave dish and were now trying to tune in to the satellite's control frequency. Boucher kept his hands ready at the console's keypad. Once they had access to the satellite he would begin the process of hacking in.

"How long?"

"I'll only need a couple of minutes," He replied, "Once we have the satellite linkup. We're hacking into K-Sat 213; Concord 3 actually launched that satellite a few years ago, so we have its startup protocols in-system. It's just a matter of making the satellite think we're restarting its command sequences without actually shutting it down."

"I don't know how much time we have," Bloom said, "I expect very little." Boucher nodded his head, his dark features growing more determined.

"I'll get it done, Lieutenant-Colonel," He said, "Don't worry about that."

"We're in!" Donnelly's voice called through their headsets.

Boucher lowered a monitor boom over his left eye and began a furious dance of fingers across the keypad in front of him. Bloom followed the action from her own monitor boom, but the large strings of code meant little to her. Her background was engineering, not code-crunching.

"Almost there..." She heard Boucher say after some minutes.

But his voice was not the only sound she heard. There was the shriek of a bulkhead being forced open, barks of orders and troops rushing to secure locations...they were close, very close.

“Almost got it...”

Bloom looked at Boucher as he said the words then hit the button to seal the command module’s hatches.

“I’m in!” Boucher said triumphantly, “I’m connecting to the INN Grid Spar now.”

They heard pounding on the main hatchway into the command module.

“Hurry it up Captain,” Bloom advised.

The pounding on the hatch became more determined and a moment later the door shuddered as they began forcing it open.

“Captain...”

“I’m beginning to downlink the data from the scan, now,” Boucher announced.

And then the power to the command module was cut. A moment later the bolts holding the hatch into the command module were cut through and the door was forced open.

“Freeze! Nobody move!” an aggressive, frightened soldier bellowed.

“You’re too late, Colonel Bloom,” General Harrod said, immediately after.

(4) THE UNEARTHING

When they had first arrived the land around them was lush with life. Animal, vegetable, even microbial life, in quantities far beyond anything previously recorded or predicted. What had begun as a simple catalogue became an epic task. It was a challenge they met eagerly, devoting themselves to the task of determining why a relatively small world would harbour such a wide variety of life. They had been diverted from their core mission to study this tiny world. The Ship and its crew gave no thought to this change of plan. Though the process of uncovering the secrets of life on this small blue world could well take ages, they themselves were ageless; their mission was already a thousand years old by the time they had been diverted. A thousand more, more or less, would mean little to them.

And so it was that the Ship came to be nestled in the earth of this far-distant world, fecund in its varieties of life. The Ship already held a catalogue of life from a thousand other worlds, but this one was unique. So varied was the plant and animal life that it would merit a special place in the archives. Explorers were sent to all the continents and all the environments on the world to study and collect tissue and fluid from each life form they encountered. The two hundred thousand strong crew devoted entirely to the task of the catalogue.



They believed, naively, that the enemies of their Purpose and the threats to Life had been left far behind when they had landed their massive Ship on this small world in a distant galaxy. This mistaken assumption would prove to be their downfall.

Sirens wailed throughout the Ship as the extensive catalogue within was secured. They had little time. No time to safely take the Ship away from the planet and no time to prepare the stasis systems for their habitation. Their inattention had condemned them to die. But the Ship could be saved, as could their catalogue. They had calculated the size and trajectory of the approaching asteroid. It was massive, deadly and was deployed to strike dangerously close to their position; it was only luck that had spared the Ship from being at ground zero of the projected impact site. They prepared the Ship, giving it instructions and a cargo so precious that it should survive the destruction of this world even if the Ship's crew could not. After the impact the Ship should sleep and heal. It should wait. When all was ready the Ship began powering down and alone in the last, its crew waited in the darkness for their deaths.



The asteroid slammed into the Earth with a force of immeasurable magnitudes. The shockwaves from the strike blasted out across the planet, leveling everything on the continent struck and raging out tidal waves the size of mountains to obliterate as much as they could on the others. The fireblast created by its impact shot up into space. A fury of molten sulfur stone and metal seared out, burning the land and burying the Ship in the scorching fires of Hell. There were probes still out across the world when the first shockwave hit. Those that survived the shearing hurricanes did not survive the firestorm.

They were pummeled by heaps of molten slag as large as they were; slammed into the earth, which itself roiled in revolt as it burned and broke open. And of the many forms of life on the once-fecund little world, few were left alive in the firestorm's wake.

Those who lived through the violence of the Cataclysm were almost all wiped out in the time of gentle famine that followed. Little vegetation was left and as the leaf eaters died so did most of their natural predators. Armageddon's Holocaust had visited the dinosaurs and most of the other forms of life left on the world. The dust of the Cataclysm spread, blocking out the sun and the stars in the last. Only the heartiest creatures lived through the thousand-year night, the hundred thousand-year winter. Those who were smart enough to adapt and cunning enough to evolve were the ones who survived, who prospered, after a fashion. And everything they witnessed, the destruction of their fertile paradise, the descending of the Long Dark and the Great Cold was engraved in them all, the first and most powerful racial memory. So powerful was the trauma that the memory of it was made part of their genetic code, passed down to their descendants, eventually becoming the unconscious birthplace of all nightmares in all creatures in all the world.

Throughout it all, during the dark times when individual animals first learned to eat their young to survive, during the great ice ages that reshaped the continents, during the aeons it took for those same glaciers to finally recede and the flood oceans that followed to rise and fill with life and then to recede and leave their mark on the resurfacing land for the millennia it took for life to return in force and prosperity to a

world all but obliterated by an incomprehensible violence and nightmarish devastation, the Ship lay buried, resting, healing and waiting.

Above, the Mammals flourished. The strange little world's fertility prevailed in the end and although vastly changed the climates and environments spread out across the globe had returned in vengeance. A small feral animal, designed for ruthlessness, cunning and adaptation emerged. Its lineage was an unbroken chain of evolution, leading back to primitive creatures who had survived the Cataclysm. Had the Cataclysm not occurred, they would have been hunted to extinction by the smaller carnivorous dinosaurs as tasty little morsels. With the dinosaurs gone the furry little mammals' fate had been forever changed and forever changed the fate of the world. Following the Cataclysm this creature's descendants spread out across the globe diversifying, multiplying, adapting to a hundred different environments. In one corner of the world it thrived well enough to begin evolving: creating language; then leaving the trees; learning to hunt, to use tools and then learning to walk upright. The most significant discoveries this primitive species could make after that were the mastery of fire and learning to farm. Their place on the planet was established. In less than a million years the world was theirs.

Below, the Ship rested healed and waited. It slept with its masters final instructions etched forever into memory: Heal and wait.

At last the Ship's wait was over.



The Ranger raced across the desert back towards Laguna. The ground shook violently now; so badly it was all Peter could do to keep control of the wide, heavy vehicle.

“How could it be unearthing itself?” Santino asked, desperately afraid. They were being pursued and this gargantuan object that had lain dormant beneath their feet for sixty-odd million years was suddenly waking up like some mythical giant.

“The earthquakes are centered right around the object,” James replied. “And looking over the record the quakes actually started with very mild tremors the moment the orbital deep probe scan began.”

“And what makes you think the object is causing the earthquake?” Echohawk demanded.

“Because the quake zone only extends as far as the outer edge of the object itself,” James replied.

“How’s it coming hacking into the Grid backbone, James?” Peter asked.

“Not good.”

“You’d better hurry up,” Echohawk advised, “We’re about to have some company!”

He looked out the back windshield at the receding digsite. One of the helicopters that had come in with the troops was rising into the air.



Colonel Isaac Jude picked himself up off the violently shaking ground and watched the Ranger tear out of camp with a mix of stunned surprise anger and the grim

admiration that a hunter has for skillful prey. People were scattering everywhere around him but he knew the four in the stolen Ranger were the most pressing. He used two fingers to press his headset tighter into his ear, quickening his pace towards the landing area as the aluminum shelter behind him began to collapse.

“Knight to Rooks One and Five,” he hollered to be heard against the din of quaking chaos around him, “Get ready for dust-off. Rooks Two, Three, Four and Six to the Rangers Three and Six; we have targets on the move.”

The affirmative callbacks came from his soldiers; members of Jude’s elite covert operations team referred to as Rooks. Jude staggered his way to the landing pad where his pilots were climbing aboard the massive black helicopter whose blades were already rotating for takeoff.

“Lock onto the transponder frequency for Ranger One,” Jude said, speaking his command into the microphone of his headset, “Our main objective is the safe capture of the information held by the people within. Secondary objective is their live capture. Repeat: their live capture is secondary to our mission. *Very* secondary.”



Lieutenant-Colonel Margaret Bloom reclined in her bunk, feeling the pull of the tumbler-generated gravity weighing her down towards the outer bulkhead of the habitat carousel, listening to the rumble of the large spinning module of the station. It was strange how after hours in zero gravity the relatively light two-thirds Earth-normal gravity of the carousel made her feel tired. She and Majors Benedict, Cohen and Captains Boucher and Donnelly were housed together, becoming the first people in the history of the Concord space station series to ever inhabit the brig. Little more than a set

of four bare-bones beds and a bathroom facility along the outer bulkhead nestled behind the waterworks and electrical supply housings of the habitat carousel, the brig was still built as a jail; one never expected to have been used. Bloom had had enough of sitting. She began pacing, walking up the long round floor of the brig. It was like walking up a constant incline; when she stopped Bloom was almost directly overhead from her subordinates. Gravity inside the spinning carousel was along the outer bulkhead and this created three hundred and sixty degrees of floor space. Interestingly, if one of them were to jump high enough they would break free of the gravity and hang suspended and weightless in the air as the rest of the room spun around them. From Bloom's angle, her personnel were over her head. Likewise, they were looking up at Bloom.

“Did you get the signal out, Exo?” Bloom asked Benedict, craning her neck to make eye contact.

“Not in its entirety,” he replied, “I’m sorry, Lieutenant-Colonel.”

“No worry,” She said, “Our next move is to figure out how to get out of here and stop Harrod from taking the data off-station.”

“Not likely, ma’am,” Donnelly said. “I’m sorry. But on three sides we’re along the outer bulkhead. The only inner wall is twice as thick as standard bulkheads and the door in and out is a hatch that only opens from their side.” Bloom paced again, completing her circuit around the floor.

“We can’t just sit here,” Bloom growled.

But in truth, she herself didn’t know what more to do. Harrod had won. She’d given him the opportunity to seize the station from her when she’d locked most of the station personnel up in the habitat. Any claim she had that Harrod had planned to violate World

Space Agency property or international treaty was gone. She and her command staff could be hauled away, court-martialed privately and locked away or otherwise disposed of, permanently. But there had to be something...*anything* that they could do.



The tremors were worsening. With the collapse of the shelter came a series of violent fissures in the ground. Two of Echohawk's assistants fell into one such rending of the earth to their abrupt and violent deaths. Other people were racing for vehicles or running away on foot. At the dig site was bedlam. But had anyone been able to see the quaking site from the air from even a few meters they would have seen the underlying order to the chaos. Not the whole area was quaking and collapsing. There remained a long, stable landmass extending from the edges of the object to the Pyramid whose unearthing had started the matter. Just before it reached the dig, the stable section of land stretched out in a ring encircling the Pyramid and everything around it for most of a kilometer. Beyond this land bridge the rest of the ground was cracking and shaking, while pinpoints of brilliant royal-blue light began shimmering through the fissures in the earth.



“We have target in check Knight!”

The call brought Jude forward to the cockpit. The windscreen of the cockpit was a giant display and not an actual window. Onscreen an enhanced image of the stolen Ranger appeared, lit up from the surrounding territory and locked in by several sets of crosshair targeting sights. Telemetry on the vehicle's speed, passengers, onboard electronic and photonic activity surrounded the bottom of the display. Jude ignored them. The

Ranger's movement was erratic as it was thrown around the unstable ground burying the Object, as it continued to attempt to unearth itself.

"Arm the ion gun," Jude said, "Disable their electricals."

Rook Five, the helicopter's gunner, nodded his head and began to work his panel. Rook One continued his deft piloting. The gun would fire a sweep of ionized energy at the target, instantly disabling any electrical or electronic equipment aboard by overloading it.

"Charging," Rook Five said.

A staccato pinging noise became one long whine.

"Fire!" Jude commanded.

An arc of electric white fury shot from the bottom of the helicopter. But instead of striking the Ranger dead center and crippling the massive truck-like vehicle, it only glanced impotently off the rear fender. The Ranger had been thrown from the force of the quaking ground. As the helicopter banked to pursue a sudden flare from the ground exploded, blinding them all temporarily as the viewscreen's RF system compensated for the affront.

"What the hell just happened?" Jude demanded as the helicopter suddenly veered away from the flare.

"I don't know!" Rook One called as he struggled to stabilize the helicopter.

As they regained control, the viewscreen returning to normal, Rook Five reported:

"Knight, it looks like some kind of energy wave shot from the ground; I think that the Object caused it."

"Are we alright?"

“Roger that,”

“Then resume pursuit!” Jude bellowed again.

This time however, the Colonel sat down in one of the cockpit’s jumper seats and strapped himself in.

“That was really fucking close, James,” Peter cried as they sped away from the scene, “They almost fried us; you’ve got to hurry it up!”

“It would help if you’d drive us out of this fucking quake zone,” James retorted angrily, “Every time we’re jostled, I miss a keystroke and have to start over.”

“I’m trying, I’m trying.”

In fact the distance they had given themselves from the Pyramid had lessened the violence of the quakes. But the ground was still shaking; the ground was still breaking open. Peter, James, Echohawk and Santino could only imagine how bad it was at the site.

“I’m in!” James said at long last

The violent shaking of the ground began subsiding.

“Okay, give me the OS; I can send this to anywhere on the Grid,” James said.

“Send it to INN,” Echohawk commanded, leaning forward, “Everything we have; don’t bother filtering it--just send everything!”

“Got it,”

As their attention diverted to James’s work none of them noticed the black helicopter as it closed on them from behind.



“Target in check,”

“Fire!”

Another bolt of searing white energy arched from the helicopter’s underbelly. This one hit the Ranger dead-on. Sparks danced across the vehicle’s surface as a black weld burn blossomed on its roof. Smoke billowed from under the Ranger’s hood and it rolled to a gradual stop. And it was truly motionless, for now they were well beyond the earthquake zone of the unearthing object. The helicopter circled around, coming in for a drop-down landing less than ten meters from the crippled armored troop transport.

“Checkmate,” Jude said.

The inside of the Ranger went completely dark. The console and Grid backbone that James had been using was photonic; the circuit-frying surge of energy from the ion cannon hadn’t harmed their processing equipment. However the electrical power supplies for the devices had been destroyed.

“Oh, fuck!” James exclaimed as the helicopter touched down in front of them.

“How much was sent?” Echohawk demanded, “How much information did you get out?”

“I don’t know,” James said, “I don’t know, Prof! Enough, I hope.”

The four men sat in silence, watching as two more Rangers pulled up: one behind them, one parked beside the helicopter. Troops debarked: seven in all. They were carrying heavy guns, all aimed at the Ranger. Echohawk and Santino saw the familiar figure of Colonel Isaac Jude debark from the helicopter: walking slowly, deliberately, coming to stand directly in front of the crippled stolen vehicle. In the silence imposed upon them by the death of their vehicle’s electric and electronic systems, they could hear the not-so-

distant thunder of the violent earthquakes caused by the Object's unearthing. It was a wonder they hadn't noticed it before. Watching Jude's troops advance toward them, each man in the Ranger went through their own silent introspection. Echohawk thought of his daughter Laura; of Meg, his ex-wife. He wondered if he'd get to see either of them again.

Santino's mind raced with indignant outrage. He'd come up against the American military before; during years of civil unrest among the Aboriginal Tribes of the Americas, as they fought and eventually won the right to establish the Protectorates. Twice Santino had been fired on and had even found himself locked in what would have proven to be a fight to the death with one soldier had friends not intervened. Paul Santino was a veteran of conflicts with the oppressive nature of the military and so his mind was flooded with both outrage at this latest injustice and a grim satisfaction that this should be the way his life ended: locked in combat with the American military. Like so many of his ancestors before him, it would be White soldiers that would take his life. He vowed he would not go peacefully.

Peter sat with his hands on the wheel, staring with dumb disbelief at the approaching killers. They couldn't possibly mean to kill them, he reasoned. Arrest them, yes. But not kill them. No.

James' eyes were wide, his ears open, his nose breathing deeply of the air. Every sound, every sight, every smell seemed that much more clear to him. These were his last

moments. He was terrified both of dying and that his last seconds of life might be spent groveling, afraid and so far away from those he loved. This wasn't fair. This wasn't how it was supposed to be.

“God...” he heard himself whine: A prayer; a lament; a useless last word.

Jude stopped, standing in front of the Ranger. He began speaking. Behind them, the rumbling stopped and the horizon lit up in a western dawn.



The axiom that those who do not learn from History's mistakes are doomed to repeat them is true. It is also true that those who learn from History's successes can repeat them as well.

When in the closing decades of the twentieth century a billionaire industrialist named Ted Turner created an entire cable network centered on the news he was for the most part considered a fool. But CNN's success led to a host of copycat all-news stations, some of which were still cropping up when the Photonic Revolution sounded Cable's death knell. Multichannel access and superfast computers combined with the power of the new World Grid, the successor to the Internet, led to view-on-demand television. The principle was simple: The user could program their consoles to watch whatever show they wanted, whenever they chose to do so.

As Ted Turner had seen the potential of cable so did Joel Dubois see the potential of the new World Grid and view-on-demand technology to fuse into one supermedium.

After hiring the best reporters he could and setting up a database of all the world's news services Dubois set about creating software that would allow the viewer to decide what news they watched, calling up related stories, background information, biographies and a host of other facts at the touch of a keystroke. He then created a Grid spar large enough to accommodate millions of channels of outgoing and incoming information. Critics said that INN would fail because it was too complicated and would overwhelm the viewer or the user with information overkill. Quite the opposite happened.

In the first month it was operational INN received a million subscriptions. That doubled before its second operational month ended. Over the years the Interactive News Network had been refined and was continually being upgraded to keep it at the leading edge. Like CNN before INN spawned a host of copycats, all of which lived in its shadow. But INN also generated subsidiaries, such as the Interactive Sports Network, the Interactive Entertainment Network and the Interactive Arts Network.

What led to INN's greatest success was its up-to-the-minute news format, which was derived from link up sites to its Grid spar where anyone with new information could send in contributions. To avoid useless news stories from cranks, frauds and lunatics, special context-recognition hardware was designed to prioritize information. Questionable data was put through a screening process that determined all the facts and data that was flagged as higher priority was put through an immediate review. The information was so well filtered that never once in its history did INN have to issue a retraction, despite times when it broke stories that were debunked by the rest of the

world's media until all the facts came out. INN had offices in every capital around the globe and could be accessed by anyone at anytime through the World Grid. Its head offices, however, remained in Dubois's hometown of Ottawa, Ontario where years before Dubois had made his first million by purchasing shares in an upstart photonics manufacturer.

Two hundred employees worked each eight-hour shift, scanning the end-results of their information filtering process for the latest news. The balance of INN's employees were computer, communications and broadcast technicians. There were no paid news anchors. Annanova, a British experiment in virtual newscasting had first inspired Dubois to found INN. Expanding on technology developed by the people behind annanova.com, INN had almost no on-air talent beyond a handful of field reporters. Few people outside INN realized that their favorite and often most trusted news anchors were nothing more than digital ghosts.

Stories uplinked to INN literally had to reach the top before being posted onto INN's news site or put out for broadcast. They came in through the basement where INN had several interlinked Grid access hubs and were filtered through the first tier of computers which separated the stories by keywords and again by category. The second tier of INN's sources looked for story corroboration by checking the uplinks against stories brought in through other news services and versus other corroborating uplinks. If the files were similar they were merged and sent on to another level. If the stories were conflicting both articles were flagged for research. When no corroboration existed the

stories were checked for general facts that could be confirmed. Enough corroboration transferred a story to a research system, where live operators made the final confirmation of the facts. The stories were then either dropped as false (most of the submissions), or sent on to an editor who would then decide which stories would receive highest priorities on postings or broadcasts.

The story out of New Mexico had been sent to Richard Mayhew's research station. While reading it over, he began to wonder how in the hell it had gotten so far up the editorial chain. He was about to dump the story when the list of corroborating links began loading and continued to load. First, substantiation came from Concord 3. Then from eyewitnesses and then from an observation satellite sliced into by some kids at Texas A&M. Mayhew checked the source of the broadcast and began looking at the chain of events that was related to the story. Then he linked to the satellite feed and dumped a copy of the story to an optic slip while printing up a quick summary of what he had just seen. Mayhew tore from the research operator's console bank and charged straight for the office of Ruth Tyler, INN's overnight Broadcast Editor.

"What is it?" Tyler asked, having been caught in the middle of an embarrassingly thorough armpit scratch.

Mayhew smiled; not at Ruth's awkwardness, but for the information he handed her.

"It's the story of the millennium. I mean that, Ruth. I really fucking mean it." Tyler put the slip into her reader and scanned the document onscreen. When the audio began, the voice of James Johnson squawked briefly through the room before Tyler could

slip on her earpiece. She listened and watched for a couple of moments. Then she turned her attention back to Mayhew.

“Can we verify its legitimacy?”

“It passed through all the filters,” Mayhew said, “It also coincides with that mysterious flare of light from New Mexico, the Grid being down in New Mexico and the sudden signal loss Houston reported from Concord 3. It’s way too elaborate to be a hoax. There hasn’t been enough time to dummy up something like this. We’re also already getting some sporadic uplinks that corroborate much of the data here.”

Tyler was silent a long moment, not weighing the story as Mayhew thought, but in fact pondering the implications of the information she had on her console at that moment. She sighed, feeling her breath shudder in her throat. Just based on what she had read she was in shock.

“Run it unedited on the next three continental news updates,” She said, calmly, “Edit it and run it on all globals after that. Then start cross-referencing the information into the interactive format.”

She looked at him a long moment, her deep blue eyes wide with a vehement fire.

“Richard? What the fuck are you still doing in my office? *GO!*”



Colonel Jude crossed his arms behind his back, standing with his legs akimbo. He stared down at the desert floor contemplatively one long moment before looking up at the Ranger.

“Gentlemen, let’s not make this any harder than we have to. Step out of the vehicle, please.”

Suddenly the sky behind the crippled Ranger lit up in blinding blue brilliance. Jude's first thought was *atomic blast* and his first instinct was to duck, shielding his eyes. If he could get back to the insulated interior of the helicopter he'd be safe from the x-ray blast and radiation wave and hopefully they were well beyond the shockwave and firestorm zones. But the light didn't turn from blue-white to red; it stayed blue and stayed fairly constant. There was no echoing thunder rolling in, no blast of wind. When Jude dared look again it was as though the Aurora Borealis had moved several thousand kilometers south and landed on the ground. There was a shimmering luminescence to the horizon and Jude had no doubt that this was coming from the Object, back at the digsite. He keyed a sequence in on the wristband console he wore, linking himself with his troops still at the digsite. If there still was a digsite.

"Knight to Rooks Seven through Twelve!" he called into his headset, "All pieces' status! Repeat: all pieces' status!"

The replies were faint, staticky and full of insane background noise:

"Rook Eight here,"

"Rook Nine,"

"Rook Eleven reporting in: Rook Twelve is down; she fell into a fissure that opened beneath her."

"What the hell is going on?" Jude demanded.

Rooks Seven and Ten still hadn't been accounted for.

"The Object has gone active," The voice of Rook Nine reported back, "We are now dealing with a Type Seven Omega!"

Jude's heart stopped. There were no contingencies for a Type Seven Omega. When the Type Seven classification had been established for the discovery of alien encounters or artifacts, there were different sub-classes assigned for each possible category: Alpha for recoverable or securable artifact, Beta for deniable contact and so on up until Seven-Omega: an encounter or artifact seen or experienced by a large group of people, unsecurable, unrecoverable and undeniable. Jude gestured to Rook Two, whose attention was trying to stay focused on the four civilians who were ignoring the soldiers now entirely to stare west at the shimmering blue lights on the horizon, itself.

"Rook Two, secure the prisoners in Ranger Two and let's proceed back to target zone,"

Jude looked around at his other troops.

"Come *on*," he shouted, snapping them back to reality, "Let's go; Rook One, Rook Five, *get the bird ready for dust-off!* Double time! Go!"

Jude walked up to Professor Echohawk.

"Now do you understand Professor?" he asked, "*This* is what I meant when I told you that you had no idea what you were dealing with. What the fuck is going to happen now?"

Echohawk only smiled.

"History," Was the last thing the old Indian archaeologist said to Jude before climbing into the Ranger.



The door to the brig opened and General Roy Harrod stood in the hatchway. One of his soldiers quick-stepped in bellowing at the prisoners.

“ATTENTION ON DECK! A FLAG OFFICER IS PRESENT, MAGGOTS!”

Cohen and Boucher actually saluted. Donnelly stood at attention. Benedict looked up from his relative position over everyone else’s heads. Bloom crossed her arms over her chest. Harrod stepped into the room.

“You and your subordinates have done well for yourselves, Lieutenant-Colonel,” He said.

Bloom regarded him with all the casual disinterest of a cat. Harrod continued speaking:

“You’ve managed to wrack up enough charges to keep you in prison for the rest of your lives,” He said, “Among the worst charges are that you’ve endangered certain ongoing missions vital to national security and that you hijacked the operation of an international space station.”

“Now *that’s* the pot calling the kettle black,” Benedict said. “Sir.”

Harrod stared at the young Black officer for one long, terrible moment. Benedict was a Major, Harrod a General. Certain things just weren’t said, weren’t done. Harrod finally chose to resume his tirade, turning his attention back on Bloom: “Fortunately for you, for even greater reasons of national security we need to keep these operations hidden. We’re going to help each other out, Lieutenant-Colonel. I’m going to let you go. You’re going to keep quiet about the fact that the DIA was trying to cover up the existence of the Ship and anything else you think you believe. Everybody wins. Our operations remain secret and you get to live a while longer. Do yourself a favor Colonel Bloom. Accept my offer. I could silence you otherwise but it would be much more complicated that way.”



They returned to the site; Rook Five in the helicopter navigating for the Rangers on the ground. The object, now so obviously a ship, was unearthed. A gargantuan luminous gold and black craft, the Ship shone under the brilliance of its own blue lights, laid out in vast trenches across its surface. As they approached it the Ship dominated the landscape around them. Flying over it, Jude remarked that it became the only ground-based point of reference. The violence of its unearthing over, the Ship had begun to sing. There was no other way to describe what it was doing, Jude reflected. All around them, echoing though the desert and across the great plain of the Ship itself a strange, haunting sound resonated. It was at once reminiscent of crystal and of whalesong. There seemed to be an almost identifiable progression to the slow, pulsing music, but it remained surrealistically out of reach. Jude sat inside the helicopter. His earpiece was turned up to maximum gain and still he had trouble hearing his surviving troops' reports over the Shipsong. And in truth, he had even more difficulty concentrating on them. Even his cold soldier's heart was moved by the never-before heard alien sounds resounding through the desert night outside. It was an appreciable moment of pure and perfect beauty; something Jude could not get used to, something he would never forget.

Forgotten by their captors by the sight of the massive Ship, Echohawk, Santino, James and Peter made their way to the edge of the drop-off, looking over the almost completely unburied Ship. It filled the horizon from end to end: a massive, luminous golden city. From the edge of the desert surrounding the Ship the drop to the leading edge of the alien artifact was easily several kilometers. The Ship had moved millions, perhaps *billions* of tonnes of earth to reveal itself. The question on Echohawk's mind

was what had happened to that earth? The land bridge, a three kilometer wide peninsula that the Ship had not destroyed in its unearthing, connected the outside world to the top of the dome of the Ship and the Pyramid whose accidental discovery had led to the revelation of this millions-year-old secret. The apparent cracks and rivulets across the Ship's surface were glowing blue from within. The Pyramid, now unearthed, sat atop a ringed dais which in turn occupied a great inverted bowl at the very top of the sharply curved dome of the upper surface of the Ship. Random-seeming lights dotted the surface of the Ship, lending more credence to the effect of seeing a city laid out before them. All around them on the peninsula were people, now numbering close to a thousand. Santino suspected that number would continue to swell. Throngs of people were all likewise milling around. A group of young people had driven up in a flatbed truck and were blasting music from a large stereo system. Oddly enough, the music they have elected to play was symphonic. The piece in question is an industrial technodelic version of Beethoven's Ninth. It echoed eerily into the canyon created by the Ship. Echohawk looked back over the crowd and back at the Pyramid below them.

“Gentlemen,” he said, raising his voice to be heard over the Shipsong, “From this point forward our world has been forever changed.” Santino nodded his head gravely. James turned around, taking a moment to rub his eyes and shake his head once in nervous reaction. Like trying to shake the last remnants of a flash of dream or déjà vu from his mind. It was then that he noticed someone watching a Grid broadcast on a console with a large roll-out screen. The console's owner had linked to INN and the report onscreen was about the Ship. James smiled. News as it happened.

“Good morning and welcome to the Interactive News Network. As of twelve-oh-seven this morning, life as we have known it is over. In the New Mexico desert at this hour, near the community of Laguna an object, almost certainly a ship, with an approximate measurement of thirty-two kilometers unearthed itself. The United States Armed Forces responded almost immediately, in an effort to secure the Ship and to try and keep a safe distance between it and the thousands of people that have already shown up at the Site. Video images obtained by INN from sources aboard the Concord 3 space station and at the archaeological digsite that originally discovered the Ship show the unbelievable sight of the unearthing...”