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Appx. 77,000 Words

E.L.F.

by James Brinkmeyer and Kimberly Giere

1. Artifacts

As in all great things, events began to move slowly, a word here, a significant coincidence there. Seemingly random happenings compounding to reveal, over time, a greater connectivity than anyone had ever imagined.

The air was hot as hell, as was to be expected for downtown Chicago in August. Random Waterson had some time to kill as the press conference he was in town to attend wasn't until later that evening. He decided to spend the remainder of the afternoon in one of his favorite neighborhoods, china town.

It has been said by some, that one should stay out of china town, perhaps they were wise.

The Sears tower reared ominous and stark against the skyline. The very air appearing to fluctuate and dance with the mid summer heat. Random drove past the Art Institute turning to admire the stone lions silently guarding the museum's entry way.

Winding down lake shore drive to the near south side and turning back west again into the city, Random turned as he noticed a curiously painted shop on the corner as he was passing on by. An image of a mermaid draped across an entire side of the building, geometric symbols with many curves and flourishes

covered most of the remaining surfaces.

Random, being the man he was, could not pass up such a mystery. So after circling the block and parking his car, he crossed the street heading toward the shop.

Once inside he discovered it was a sort of haitian voodoo boutique' / supply shop. The usual 'voodoo dolls' and skull's for the gullible along with a collection of liquid's and powders were displayed against one wall. There were machetes, swords, and other weapons of steel. Crows feet, and monkey hands, fabrics mostly of red and black, cluttered the tables. A magnificent group of hand made drums stood adjacent to the glass counter. Tied to the ceiling were ribbons, bones, and bottles filled with a variety of brightly colored substances which reflected in the many small mirrors hung about, filling the room with spectral rays of varied hues. A seedy looking black man with long dread locks sat behind the counter reading a book and smoking something in a clay pipe which smelled like it should be illegal.

After taking in the scene for a moment, letting his eyes adjust to the gloom, Random paused to pick up an interesting bone flute. It was ornately carved and polished to a fine sheen. Turning it over in his hand he saw a small glyph in the shape of a stylized earth with three mysterious characters imprinted upon it.

Carefully replacing it on the shelf, he noticed that it sat among a group similar arcane items, an ashtray made from what appeared to be a human hand and what appeared to be a human femur letter opener, each embossed with the same glyph. His curiosity peaked, Random asked the counterman where these strange pieces had originated.

"They are from the old world, Guine'e, blessed by the loa Gwana Bwa, protector of the forest." The man reluctantly replied in a thick jamaican accent with an appraising look up at Random through his ragged hair.

Try as he might Random could get no further information from the man. So after purchasing the strange letter opener he left the shop, intending to study it at a later date. There was something very myste-

rious about the small object, it just felt important.

Random spent the rest of his afternoon wandering about china town taking tea in small sidewalk cafes, regarding the jostling crowd and listening to the shrill cries of street vendors plying their wares. In spite all the activity, his mind kept straying back to the strange letter opener and the unusual glyph.

With a sigh of resignation at his apparent lack of mental concentration, he retrieved his car and returned to the Hyatt to get ready for the conference at the Field Museum.

Random, a slight man with sandy hair, had eyes that sparked with intent curiosity at the slightest provocation. His chosen occupation as a free lance writer suited him well. A sort of 'jack of all trades' Random wrote for the benefit of laymen and amateurs alike on such diverse subjects as astronomy, physics and computer science, but he enjoyed archeology and anthropology the most.

Tonight's conference was to include a lecture by Bill Raston, a leading anthropologist now working in central Africa and long time friend.

Random hoped tonight's speech would include the announcement of some new find or discovery to liven up the often dull iteration of some popular theory or bland interpretations of existing sites.

While leaving his suite, Random, almost without thought, retrieved the letter opener from his dresser in the hope that he might get some answers as to its make and origin from some of the attendees of tonight's conference.

He took a taxi over to the Field Museum even though it was only a middling distance. Chicago at night was no place to be walking about alone and he didn't care to trouble with retrieving his rental car. Arriving at 8:05 he walked through the main doors, on past the gigantic bones of a tyrannosaurs rex and up the main stairway into the lecture area.

A presentation was just getting over, complemented by a slide show of what appeared to be some ruins in the Hunan valley of China he had seen many times before. Random was eminently glad his timing

was on. He looked about the small lecture hall, noting the usual group of professors and undergraduates with a sprinkling of media people. Finally spotting Bill Raston speaking to an asian woman in the corner, Random got up and walked over.

“Good evening, Bill.” he smiled approaching the couple.

“Random! Well, I was wondering when you’d show up. Thought maybe you decided to enjoy some of that fine pacific sunshine instead.” Bill grinned, clapping him on the shoulder in welcome.

“Please, let me introduce Kim Li. She’s a colleague of mine out of Cambridge. Kim, this is Random Waterson. He’s here to tell the rest of the world what we’re up to, assuming of course anybody will publish him.” Bill laughed with a sidelong wink to Random.

“A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Waterson.” the demure asian woman said with a slight bow.

“Ah, Random please, Ms. Li and the pleasure is all mine.” Random remarked inclining his head in turn.

“Very well,” she nodded in return, “please call me Kim. Am I to understand from Bill you live out west then?”

Random refrained from cringing. The term ‘out west’ had always irritated him, as if he was some uncouth cowboy slugging down beer and indulging in bar fights. Swallowing his irrational ire, he said “Yes, I have a small beach house near a town called Tillamook, on the Oregon coast.”

“Oh, how lovely.”

Random wondered, not for the first time, why purportedly intelligent people engaged in such trivial conversation. Shrugging off his dampening mood he waited for a pause in the chatter. After inviting Bill to meet him at the Third Eye, an uptown bar, latter that evening, Random went in search of a seat for the next lecture.

Bill’s presentation on new techniques in using lasers for precise location in architectural digs turned

out to be the highlight of the evening much to Random's disappointment. Several lectures followed Bill's, and Random, after rousing himself from a second doze decided he had enough for an article for Scientific American and slipped quietly out of the hall. He caught a cab outside the museum and headed uptown to the Third Eye.

New town Chicago was a remodeled district full of interesting bars, jazz and blues clubs and the more ethnic of restaurants and shops.

It took some time for the cabby to find the Third Eye, as the traffic that evening was living up to its infamous reputation.

Random speculated at the now familiar premonitory feeling warming the pit of his stomach that generally indicated adventure of some sort on the horizon. He didn't think personal danger likely, but he'd learned to trust these instincts. In his past these subtle warnings had proven true time and time again.

"Well, perhaps Bill has some news he didn't let out at the conference," he thought changing his track of thought as he paid the cab driver and turned towards the bar.

Having left the conference early, the bar was nearly empty, he chose a table back in the corner and settled in to await Bill's arrival. The bar was decorated with large gothic mirrors and mystic looking paintings on the walls. The glass table tops had various types of Tarot cards embossed onto their surfaces and the bar itself sported two giant wooden griffins at either end. It had generally proven a quiet place and Random liked it for that even if the clientele was a bit odd.

After ordering a drink and spending some time in one of his favorite predilections, namely people watching, Bill and Ms. Li strolled in. Random grimaced as he saw the pair entering the bar. No new news would come out of Bill this evening with Ms. Li in tow. More drinks ordered, Random resigned himself to a late night catching up on one another's lives and more triviality. Wondering at the source of this strange mood of his Random tried to concentrate on the conversation.

Kim talked for a time about her latest project in Malaysia and they debated the current events unfolding in Iraq. Random suddenly remembered the letter opener and after retrieving it from his brief case showed it to Bill.

“Most unusual, Random. Where did you get it?” Bill asked turning it over in his hands.

“Voudoun shop bordering China Town this afternoon. It was with a group of similar items, all quite obviously made from human remains. Ever seen anything like it?”

“No, can’t say I have. Well, you know, the usual tooth necklaces and shrunken heads, but nothing this artistic. These” Bill said pointing to an area on the handle “look like machine tool marks. What do you make of this symbol Kim?” Bill asked handing it to her.

Kim gingerly took the proffered object and after examining it for a moment suggested that the characters in the glyph might be Sanskrit.

“Sanskrit is the most ancient language on earth.” she said. “Originating in the area which is now known as the gobi desert in central asia, but I’ve never seen anything this quite this gruesome associated with the cultures of that area.” Kim handed the opener back to Bill with an expression of distaste.

“Tell ya what, Random. I’ll take it back to Stanford with me and run some tests on it. We can at least determine its age by carbon dating and I’ll run it through the Linguistics Department and see if they can make anymore out of the letters.” Bill offered.

Random agreed to his plan and Bill slid the opener into his jacket pocket. They spent the rest of the evening small talking and nursing drinks. Random made arrangements to catch up with Bill the following week and after saying goodnight to Ms. Li, he took a taxi back to his hotel in the Loop.

It was 2:30 when he finally got to bed, his night was disturbed by recurring nightmares with a decidedly haitian theme. Random rose early the next morning, took the hotel shuttle to O’Hare airport and caught the 7:35 flight for the coast.

The flight west was uneventful, he spent most of the time catching up on his correspondence on a small lap top computer which had become indispensable to him in his profession. After about four hours the plane began to make it's descent. Banking low to align with the runway the plane flew down the center of the Columbia, the great river sparkling in the sun. Random smiled to himself, he loved his work but he loved being home in the northwest as well.

Disembarking the airliner at Portland International in northwestern Oregon, Random hurriedly left the main terminal and hailed a taxi. "Zulu Aviation, please." he told the cabby as he slid into the back seat.

"Yes sir! But you coulda taken the shuttle bus a lot cheaper 'en paying me five bucks to drive a half mile." the driver advised.

Random sighed contentedly and settled back into the seat.

"Seems I've been spending my life in cabs and planes lately." he thought to himself anxious already to get home and away from the pressing crowd and noise of the city. A few minutes later the cab pulled up in front of the small white building that administrated small aircraft.

"Here ya go, mac. Like I said, fare be five bucks." Random handed the man six and hauled his tired body out of the car.

Entering the office, he smiled to see a young girl her lithe form hunched over a computer terminal, punching at the keys as if the force of there strike alone would convince the machine to do what she wanted.

"Hi Marcie," he called "My plane ready or is that digital enemy of yours screwing up the departure schedules again?"

The girl started in surprise, then smiled as she rose to come to the counter.

"No sir, I mean yes sir, Mr. Waterson, your plane is ready just as you requested. Your never going to forgive me for making you miss your connection last month are you?" her grin belying the seeming formality of her manner, she slid the sign out board across the counter for his signature.

Random had long ago learned the he would never get Marcie to call him anything other than either ‘Mr. Waterson’ or ‘Sir’. It was a habit that at first seemed in contradiction to her smiling face and easy manner, but now he accepted it as unconquerable. He had tried to break her of it for many months after their first meeting because he couldn’t bring himself to ask a woman out for a date who insisted on calling him ‘Sir’. But then, he suddenly realized, maybe that’s why she does it.

Random grinned his reply, “Ah, I’m just teasing you girl.” He obediently signed on the indicated line and passed Marcie back the board.

“They got her parked in space seven with a full tank.” Marcie said indicating the west side of the building with a wave of her arm.

“Thanks. What’s the weather forecast for the coast today?”

“Clear and sunny. Wind from the northwest five to ten miles an hour. There was some fog this morning, but they report it’s burned off now. Visibility 20 miles. Will you be staying at the coast for a while? Should I reserve a hanger spot for you later in the week?”

“No thanks Marcie, I’ll be spending the weekend at home. I intend to enjoy some sun on the beach and catch up on my reading. Then I’ll be flying off to San Francisco the first thing Monday morning. I don’t expect to I’ll be back for a few weeks.

Marcie smiled, “Should be a wonderful weekend at the coast, nothing like Oregon in August, I’m heading off to Cannon Beach myself”.

Random stretched and sighed with relief. Tired as he was after flying in from Chicago he didn’t care to fight the fog and wind so prevalent on the Oregon coastline. Waving goodbye to Marcie picked up his brief case and slinging his carisak over his shoulder he headed toward the door. He hoped to get off the ground before Will, the over talkative hanger manager caught up with him. Turning right outside the office, Random spotted his blue and white cessna and was relieved that Will didn’t seem to be in the vicinity.

Hurriedly stowing his bags in the small luggage compartment, Random preformed his pre-flight and after pulling the blocks out from under the wheels, climbed into the pilot's seat. Ten minutes later he was airborne.

Banking low over the Columbia he turned the small cessna into the sun. He followed the river for some miles and then turned south west and gained altitude to clear the coastal range.

He thought again about the contradiction between his instincts and the rather innocuous events of the past few days. He looked forward to hearing of Bill's test results on that bizarre letter opener the following week.

After about thirty minutes of flight time he cleared the final foot hill and began his descent into the Tillamook valley. The Pacific was agleam in the afternoon sun as it peeked through the minor hills fronting the coastline with not a cloud in the sky. He sighed in contentment as he always did when returning home after a long time away.

Random has been fortunate enough to inherit a large sum of money several years ago and he had fulfilled his life long dream of purchasing a home on the coast. He didn't really need to work but he was one of those people who needed work to keep his mind going. Besides he truly loved science reporting. It gave him the opportunity to travel the world, put him on the forefront of new discoveries and filled his life with adventure and interesting people.

He brought the cessna down into the Tillamook airport and taxied to his parking slot. Climbing out and removing his luggage he walked the short distance to where his pathfinder was parked and smiled to himself again as he smelled a hint of the Ocean air he loved so well.

Turning onto highway 101 he drove north a short distance to a road which led west toward Oceanside and the cape. After passing through town he took the Cape Mears exit and skirted the bay for several miles until he made his turn back south into the foothills.

Winding down along the road he came at last to his driveway. He thumbed the remote control which activated the ornate gate and drove on in, the gate automatically closing behind him.

Random's home was perched atop a ridge on the north end of town overlooking the Oceanside beach area. He paused to admire the serene and panoramic view of the pacific, his eyes lingering on the arched rocks which jutted from the sea about two hundred yards out in the surf. These rocks sheltered a colony of about a hundred sea lions which could be heard at all hours. One of Random's favorite past times was observing them playing on the rocks and swimming in the water.

His property covered nearly five acres and included a small stable where he kept three horses. The house itself was of newer construction and stood nearly four floors high. The first floor itself was nothing more than structural supports dug into the hillside and stairways leading up to the main entrance. The remaining floors were skirted by strategically located decking and lot's of great arched window surfaces. The main deck on the third floor sported a large hot tub. The entire effect of the house reminded one of a tree house nestled as it was into the large pines and native shrubbery.

The town of Oceanside was a small community hidden away on a peninsula far from the usual throng of tourists, college kids and RV's which polluted other portions of the Oregon coast. The residents were an equal mixture of artists, and crafts people with a large contingent of weekenders coming in from Portland.

Random made his way up the flag stone walk leading to the stairway and made it to the landing just in time to bump headlong into his assistant/housekeeper coming out of the front door.

"Mr. Waterson I thought that would be you, I saw the gate light on the security console and thought I'd come down and say hello."

"Christine, please call me Random, after five years you would think you would get over this surname business. What is it with me anyway that inspires everyone in my life to call me Mister?" he growled jokingly

while moving inside. “How’s every thing around here?”

“Oh the usual Mr. er Random the horses have been fed and curried. Your mail is on your desk. I finished proofing that article for Astronomy Magazine and the house has been straightened up.”

“Thanks Chris, your being your usual efficient self. How’s Rick and the kids?”

Christine lived five miles down the road toward Cape Mears with her husband Rick and four kids. Rick worked for the city and Christine had been helping Random for some time now, about the house and with his business articles to make some extra money.

“Oh you know, some things never change. Frankly I thank the powers that be for this job just to get me out of the house and away from my kids from time to time.”

Explaining that she had to be going now as her youngest was due to be picked up from his piano lessons, Christine hurried down the stairs taking them two at a time.

After hanging his coat in the hall closet, Random walked up the few stairs to the main floor and into the living room. The house’s interior would seem, to the occasional guest, an odd mixture of high tech equipment and antique furniture. An eight inch folded reflector telescope was positioned in front of the french doors leading out to the main deck. Adjacent to the living room one could peak into the office/library area. A room with book shelves from floor to ceiling and several desks with computer terminals and audio/video equipment cluttered upon them.

Most of the decorations throughout his house reflected his main interests. Artifacts from Africa, some masks and spears adorned one wall. Another sported beautifully framed NASA JPL photographs of Saturn and Jupiter along with Nebula and Galaxy photographs from the Lick Observatory.

Moving up the stairway to the next level Random paused to scan his kitchen and dining room areas. Nothing new and different there, though the plants on the sun porch looked like they could use some tending to.

Random continued up to the fourth and final level. This floor contained two bedrooms in addition to the master bedroom. Random used one of these rooms for his hobby, painting. Locally well known for his landscapes, the room smelled of oil paints and damp canvas, but worked quite well as an artist's studio equipped as it was with massive sky lights. The other spare room was kept as a combination photographic dark room and guest room.

Random kicked open the door to the master bedroom and tossed his luggage onto the giant bed. He paused momentarily to look at a picture of his wife on the dresser in the corner stifling the memory of the boating accident. Three years and the loss still felt like yesterday sometimes.

Random went down again to the first level and mixed himself a drink. After locking the front door he returned to the second floor and gratefully sank into the prewarmed hot tub on the landing adjacent to the sun porch.

Later, exhausted he climbed the stairway to his bed room and keyed the television on. He didn't have any more energy than that required to watch some mind dulling program. He fell asleep just as Colombo was beginning to figure out who the real killer was. He slept soundly and long and remembered no dreams.

Early Sunday he took his favorite horse Nibbles out for a ride on the beach. A vice Random truly loved, there was nothing, to his mind, better than an early morning ride through the surf.

He spent the remainder of the day sorting through his mail, paying bills and starting a rough draft of the article for Scientific American. That evening he settled down with a good book, an interesting piece of escapist literature involving genetically altered humans taking on the forms of magical beings and creatures mixed with japanese flavored sci-tech. He fell asleep that night and dreamed of elves and griffins walking through the trees beside his house.

Monday morning found him in his cessna again, flying down the coast to San Francisco. The flight

was longish about five and a half hours and Random was grateful as he descended finally into the Palo Alto Airport.

He was to attend, that afternoon, a symposium at the nearby convention center on new advances in particle physics, a topic he enjoyed very much.

After acquiring a rental car, a most disgusting Ford Torus, he drove the short distance to a Best Western hotel near the convention center.

As soon as he had unpacked he called Bill Raston at his office in nearby Stanford. The entire trip down his mind had insisted on speculating on what Bill may have found out about the letter opener. It took some time to get through as the College switchboard seemed somewhat confused that particular day, but finally Bill's voice came through the receiver.

"Random, well met. How was your journey back west to cowboy land?" Bill seemed to be nearly dying of laughter on the other end.

"Oh fine, I had enough of the cowboy and indian stuff in Chicago, now I'm getting it out west too. I'm doing quite well, how are you Bill?"

"Ah well, OK a little jet lag and some sniffles is all. Hey, I put your letter opener through our Anthro lab with orders to pass it through the linguistics department after they were through, should have some results later today."

"Great, have to admit this one's got my mind going. How about meeting later tonight at the bar we used to go to out at the old aviation center, what was it called again?"

"Hanger 21, yea that sounds great, should be able to make it by about eight, we can share some steaks and some of that killer chili of theirs."

"Okay, eight it is, see you then." Random answered and hung up the phone.

Random pulled into the parking lot at the bar at 7:50 and walked toward the entrance. The night

was cooling off into the balmy weather northern California was so notable for. Bill was already inside and motioned Random over to a corner booth. Bill was looking a little troubled his usual casual air was missing, so Random inquired what the problem might be.

“It’s the results I got on that bone fragment of yours. Seems there human alright and if that’s not scary enough carbon dating indicates that there contemporary. That is,” handing the letter opener back to random with two fingers, “this is the bone of a recently deceased individual, recent being sometime in the last ten or so years. Can’t tell you any more than that, but linguistics confirms Kim’s guess that the letters on the emblem are Sanskrit. Translated they are the English equivalent of ‘E.L.F.’. The bone itself could be from anywhere and could be either male or female or any racial type. Rather spooky Random.”

“Thinking about it this afternoon rang a bell in the back of my mind.” Bill continued “Took me several hours to put it together, but you know how some countries trade in artifacts like this one made from animal bones. Monkey paw ashtrays, elephant foot cane stands, things like that. Now I’m not saying there is a parallel, but there was this article in last month’s Anthropology Review.” So saying he handed the clipped out article across the table to Random.

“Poachers being Poached”. The article was titled. Dated the previous month with the dateline of Nairobi, Kenya. The article went on to describe how all over the great game preserve in central Kenya discoveries had been made of the grisly remains of what had obviously been poachers.

There was nothing indicating how each had met their ends, even after autopsies at a local hospital had been performed. All had seemed to have been in good health. Invariably their heads feet and upper arms were missing.

All their booty had been destroyed and in some cases the victims had been skinned and their hides had been tied out on stands to dry. In every case an enigmatic warning had been left indicating that this had been the work of a local native god characterized as the ‘protector of the savanna’. A card had been found

on all the victims with the word poacher spelled out in several African dialects as well as french and english. All of these cards were also embossed with a curious symbol with the english letters E.L.F. underneath.

“Most peculiar.” Random remarked after finishing the article. “Knew this was going to develop into something. Come to think about it, the fellow at the store said something about the thing being blessed by some forest god. A little out of my usual line, but I’d sooner shoot my right foot than let this one go now.” he grinned taking a speculative sip from his drink.

“Can’t say I see any direct parallel between the article and the letter opener, except for the letters, but it looks like I’ll be visiting the Dark Continent in the very near future.”

“Watch yourself on this one Random, it’s got a real nasty feel to it.” Bill said taking a deep sip of his whiskey sour.

“Mind if I keep this article Bill? I’m going to start a file.” Random asked.

“No, of course not, that’s why I brought it along. Here’s the official paper work on the tests we ran as well.” Bill replied handing Random a small file across the table.

After that discussion they turned there conversation onto more pleasant matters. Finally bidding his thanks and saying goodbye to Bill outside the restaurant, Random drove slowly back to his hotel room. His sleep that night was troubled, but he would remember no dreams upon waking.

In the pre-dusk hush of the Kenyan savanna five muffled shots could be heard. Three camouflaged figures rise from the underbrush and move slowly down into the small arroyo. Five dark bodies lay on the ground in the final throws of a most potent, unknown and thoroughly untraceable neurotoxin. The figure in the lead turns.

“Did you get all that John?”

“Yea sure did, in living color.” The man trailing the others replies. He is equipped with what appears to be state of the art video equipment.

The middle figure shoulders a very wicked looking rifle and plucks a small dart out of the first victim’s throat. “Make sure you get all the darts and apply the healing salve. We don’t want anyone figuring this one out just yet.”

“I really hate this part.” The first figure remarks as he pulls an efficient looking hunting knife from his belt. “I understand, ‘As you do so shall be done unto you’, but I’ve got to bitch about it anyway.”

“Yes it’s wonderful to be an ELF in the wild. Camera ready?” says the second. Smiling, he pulls a selection of cards from his vest pocket.

2. A Strange Video Tape

At nine o'clock next Monday morning three bicycle messengers race through the streets of Manhattan, barely missing the various types of obstacles the city of New York throws up in their path. Mere minutes later find them individually at the editors desk of each the four main television networks. They hand a small package over to the receptionist and leave. The whole incident occupying only a beat in the hectic tempo of their lives.

As is usually the case in any large bureaucracy, each package went directly into the company mail destined for an in basket on someone's desk.

On the upper left hand corner of each package was an interesting symbol and nothing more.

* * * *

The night before, in the waters of Boston Harbor, a discerning eye could have just spotted the lights of a

large fishing boat several miles out at sea.

On board, a great deal of activity was taking place. Dark figures could be made out in the harsh glow of the trawler's operating lights. They were completely featureless, their heads appearing to be a dark matt mass and nothing more. The only distinguishing characteristic being a small crest over their hearts.

At mid-deck a man in ordinary street clothes and a wind breaker was setting up some video tape equipment. At the rear of the vessel are several nervous looking individuals in expensive looking suits and ties. They were tied, gagged and left standing in 55 gallon drums.

"You about ready to go Charlie?" One of the enigmatic dark figures inquired.

"Just a few more minutes, wouldn't want to screw this up, we only have one take you know."

* * * *

Wednesday morning found Random high over the Atlantic on his way to Kenya. Feeling a little foolish now the quest had begun. He wondered again if he was wasn't just indulging himself in another of his fantasies. He had left his plane at the Palo Alto Airport and then made his way to the nearby San Francisco Airport to board his international flight. After refueling in Orlando, the 747 had continued on it's way toward Kenya. Random was antsy as hell. He hated long flights and this one was proving to be the longest he could remember. After futzing around for awhile with his laptop he gave into the inevitable and lay back in his chair to think.

He wasn't really sure just what he was going to do once he arrived in Africa, Bill had given him the name of an acquaintance working a site in the area. Random figured he'd just start asking questions and see what happened. This technique had worked for him in the past and, of course he had no alternative.

"Besides," he thought, with a mental sigh "I never could say no to an adventure."

* * * *

It was three o'clock before John Walters, assistant news editor for NBC, got around to dealing with his daily mound of mail. As usual, he began by sorting through the always huge pile. He came across a brown wrapped package on the front the return address area bore only an interesting logo. Tearing it open revealed to John only a video tape with no accompanying documentation. The only identification at all was that peculiar symbol, like a stylized earth.

His interest ignited, John rambled down the hall to the screening rooms. Placing the tape in a VCR, he settled back with the remote control and lit a cigarette. As the tape began to role, he put his feet up on the desk and got comfortable. John was not prepared at all for what happened next.

The scene displayed on the monitor before him was of a figure, garbed totally in black, sitting behind a massive, ornate wooden desk. There was a computer terminal at the figures elbow and mounted on the wall behind the desk was the same symbol which was imprinted on the tape itself.

The man began to speak, his hands folded neatly on the desk in front of him...

"My name is unimportant, however what I am going to say is. I am the spokesperson for the Environmental Liberation Front. We are a worldwide, clandestine organization of over six hundred thousand members. We have agents and groups in every nation on the planet and have been organizing now for many years.

We have assembled, as we believe that the time has come for humanity to take responsibility for its actions. We intend to become the social organism to enforce that responsibility. We are, as of now, the

caretakers of this world.

ELF believes that the time has come to strike back in the name of the Earth. ELF operates on one simple rule; ‘As you do so shall be done unto you’.

“Quite obviously, human beings are incapable of administering the responsible preservation of this planet.” the dark figure continued. “You are indeed, slowly destroying your own habitat. Corrupt bureaucrats and government officials trade for their own profit on the future of our world. Greedy members of the private sector, have been destroying and polluting our world for decades.

For the love of money and the lust for power, these individuals have knowingly poisoned the land and sea. These actions have been ruled insane and the perpetrators have been judged guilty.

The time has come for retribution, to take the part of the Earth in the defense of life. The function of ELF is to provide fear aimed at these individuals so that they may know that their actions are observed and that these actions will be accounted for.

You may come to call us terrorists, and in fact, we are. We do not like or enjoy the actions and methods we must employ in our cause, however we believe there is no other way. Humans as a species have proven time and time again that they will not act in their own interest, but instead, through complacency or greed, allow atrocities to occur.

What you are about to see is gruesome and cruel. Documentation, where necessary, follows each of these segments, proving beyond a shadow of a doubt the environmental crimes and the guilt of the people involved.

Know that we are untouchable. We possess a highly integrated organization, and a technology beyond what you know. We have bases all over the planet and are integrated into all levels of society.

Either you are part of the solution or you are part of the problem.”

John was sitting forward in his chair, his cigarette, forgotten now, dropped ashes into his lap. As the tape began to fade into another scene, he hit the pause button and grabbed the telephone at his elbow.

“Dan, come down to screening room B as soon as you can. Don’t stop for anything.”

“John,” What must be ‘Dan’s’ voice began, somewhat annoyed at the interruption. “I’m right in the middle of something, can’t this wait awhile?”

“No Dan, trust me on this one. If this proves out we may have the scoop of the century sitting in our court”.

About five minutes later an older gentleman walked into the screening room.

“What you got, John?”

“Well, this tape,” John replied indicating the VCR machine, He could just barely contain himself. “arrived in my morning mail. It seems to be a communique’ from some outfit calling themselves the Environmental Liberation Front. If this is what I think it is Dan, it could be the greatest story since Watergate. Let me re-wind it for you.”

After reviewing the portion of the tape John had already seen, Dan was as wide mouthed as his co-worker.

The tape continued...

The scene cleared to show a group a black people stalking a guerilla in the wild. They surround the unknowing beast, one of the men stands up and shoots the animal square in the chest with a shotgun. The animal grasps at it’s chest as it tumbles to the ground as if in wonder at the pain. As the guerilla lays dying on the ground, the other members of the group begin to saw off its arms and feet.

Fade to black...

A beautiful tiger is sunning itself under a tree, happy in the warmth of the new day's sun. Suddenly a shot rings out. The cat springs into the air as if slapped. It falls back to the ground, the soft white fur of its underbelly now streaming red blood the animal feebly paws at the earth it's strength ebbing away.

The same group of people approach the great beast in its last throws of life. Two grab its front legs, two the back, stretching it to its full length. The third plunges his blade into the big cat's soft abdomen. Working the knife from hip to chest, the feline is systematically disemboweled and skinned. She is then decapitated. The remains are left where they lie for the scavengers.

Cross fade to...

A herd of elephants are seen moving their ponderous way through the undergrowth. Five full grown and two newborn. Into this peaceful scene creep again the same group of men. They stop, stealthily take aim with high powered rifles and slaughter the entire group. The elephants, unable to see their death coming, bellow at the sky and fall to the ground, the earth shaking with the weight of their impact.

The next scene shows the same individuals as they are bloodily removing the animals tusks and feet and then walking back into the savanna, leaving the carcasses again for the vultures.

Fade to black...

In what is obviously the poacher's base camp, many 'trophies' are in evidence. Elephant tusks stacked in rows and animal skins stretched out to dry on improvised racks. Another pile contains the hands and feet of various simians. Many other smaller, live animals are screeching in cages. The same group of people as were seen in the slaughter scenes, are now busily at work preparing their prizes.

Muffled shots ring out in the twilight, the mere puffs of silenced weapons. The poachers drop to the ground convulsing and gaging in their deaths. Two individuals in camo gear, with matt black faces arise from the under growth and approach. The first figure turns towards what must be a cameraman and speaks...

“For crimes against the environment these individuals have been judged.”

He and the second person remove hunting knives and wire saws from their belts and proceed to dismember and decapitate their human quarry. After this grisly business is complete, they free the living animals from their cages and light afire the entire camp. In the glow of these flames, one of the poacher killers comes to the center of the scene looking directly into the camera he says:

“As you do so shall be done onto you.”

Fade to black.....

The scene clears again to show a group of obviously ‘civilized’ western men standing bound and gagged in 55 gallon drums. They are positioned on the aft of a large boat. It is quite dark. A figure moves into the center of the screen. He is attired all in black, even the features of his face are obscured in darkness. On his breast resides the symbol which both John and Dan have now have come to know as the ELF logo. He speaks...

“For crimes against the EARTH” you could here the capitals, “These individuals have been judged.”

Fade in/out...

A meeting in a board room, somewhere. The same men previously seen standing in their barrels, are now seen sitting in a large conference room reviewing figures on printouts.

“You mean to tell me that were locked into this contract?” The man at the head of the table queries.

“Yes sir, moreover if we meet the terms of this contract our profit margin will be quite grim indeed.”

“Well then I want this stuff dumped, you understand me? I’m also personally going to shoot the person who set all this up.”

“Yes sir, shall I use the usual people?”

“I don’t care about the details, we’ve been efficiently ridding ourself’s of these chemicals for years

and I don't see any reason to change things now. Just get it done Carl."

"Can you take care of those federal task force people as usual?" The second man questions the third, sitting across from him.

He answers, "Of course. The standard sum will be required for their, um, 'non-observance'".

Fade in/out...

These same men are now seen being roughly and unceremoniously crammed into the drums by the black garbed figures. Their pleas for mercy become muffled as the drum lids are fastened into place. Screaming then, into the night, the men in the drums are pushed into the sea. A tight close up shows the drums sinking into the black waters.

The camera resolves back to the spokesperson...

"As you do so shall be done unto you."

Fade to black....

The tape returns after a moment, to the man behind the desk.

"Be aware we are among you. No longer will these actions be unobserved or go unpunished. We intend to reclaim the planet for the living. More communiques will follow as necessary. You have nothing to fear from us if you cherish your World. We are the caretakers of the Earth. Either you are part of the solution or you are part of the problem."

Fade to black.....

* * * *

Dan was white as a sheet and John wasn't looking much better.

"OK, I want this down in the control room pronto." Dan began, the excitement evident in his voice.

“Get with research, I want you running this one through yourself John. Confirm the missing executives; try the east coast cities first. See if you can confirm the poacher angle as well. Have Walter ready to go with a network special report. I want background material on the snuff segments. No one must know what’s going on John, until were ready to air, you understand?. Get on it and move! The other networks probably have these tape too. Keep me informed.”

“Yes sir!” Dan replied and tearing the tape out of the machine, he sprinted down the hallway.

In fact, the other networks had received the same tapes and were reacting in much the same manner as Dan and John. Things were getting hot in the news world of New York that afternoon.

* * * *

At that very moment, Random was arriving at an American hotel near the Nairobi airport. The sky just darkening toward twilight still illuminated the day as he checked in and wearily carried his bags up to his room. Turning on the air conditioner to battle the oppressive heat of mid Africa, Random tossed his bag onto the luggage rack and picked up the phone to call room services.

“Room Service.” a voice on the other end answers, in a very out of place english accent. “Would you like to place an order?”

Random wasn’t really too hungry, his plan for now being no more ambitious than to have a stiff drink and sleep for a minimum of eight hours.

“Yes please a long island iced tea and a green salad with blue cheese dressing, room 232.”

“Yes sir it will be about twenty minutes.”

Random sank down into the double bed sighing with relief, his tight muscles from the flight over

relaxing now into the beds softness. Tomorrow he intended to contact Bill's associate in the area and begin inquiries with the park service and local authorities. For now though, he was grateful the air conditioning had kicked in and the room was becoming a little cooler.

* * * *

In New York, Dan and John were talking in the 'War Room' adjacent to the studio main control room.

"We've been able to confirm the missing executives, Dan. Two worked for a division of T.G.D. Chemicals in the Boston area. The third is, ah," John paused, the color rushing to his face, "I mean, was, I guess, a free lance of some sort named Stan Walters. He has quite a record too. The poacher angle has also been confirmed. I found an article in the Nairobi paper from last month describing efforts by local authorities to discover the reason behind a series of apparent poacher killings. I have staff preparing segments covering each of these items and Walters warming up in studio three. We should be ready to break in with a special report in ten minutes."

"Good work, John. Let's start informing our affiliates across the country now. Also, contact our representatives overseas. I want to blanket the entire globe with this one."

* * * *

Random awoke with a start from his brief doze to a knock at the door.

"Room service, sir." a voice announced.

"Just a moment." replied Random, groggily rubbing the sleep from his eyes. Opening the door,

Random retrieved the small tray and tipped the waiter. After locking his door Random settled down at the small table by the window and took a long sip of the long island iced tea. He keyed on the television in the corner in hopes of finding a little diversion for his mind. One of those mind dulling talk shows was in progress. The topic seemed to be another case of abduction by space aliens. A black woman, obviously the hostess was speaking...

“That must have been quite traumatic, Arnold.”

“Traumatic, Mam?”

“Yes certainly, the experience where you were physically probed must have really shook you up.”

Suddenly the screen blanked and then again cleared to show the familiar NBC special report logo. It seemed out of place here in Nairobi. An aristocratic looking older gentleman began to speak...

“This morning at our network headquarters, here in New York City, the video tape you are about to see was delivered to one of our senior editors. We have been able to confirm much of the contents of this tape. Special reports will follow on our research efforts.

The tape appears to be a communique’ from a group calling itself the ‘Environmental Liberation Front’.”

Instantly wide awake Random’s ears perked up as he mentally drew the parallel between the name and the letters on the mysterious glyph.

“Much of what you are about to see is gruesome”, The announcer continued, “and we suggest that if small children are present, you remove them from the area for the duration of this tape.” After about fifteen seconds the tape began to roll....

Random watched with a growing sense of synchronicity as the screen cleared and the first words were spoken by the shadowy spokesperson. He glanced at the large symbol behind the desk, his mouth fell open in stark surprise. He dashed to his bag, spilling the forgotten drink in his haste to retrieve his artifact.

He looked back and forth at the symbol on the letter opener and the identical one on the screen in front of him and then back again to the small object now clutched tightly in his hand.

As the tape continued, Random grew more and more convinced that this group was somehow the source of the arcane items found in the Chicago Voudoun shop eight thousand miles away. His heart was racing with anticipation as the final segment ended with the words ‘Either your part of the solution or your part of the problem’. All Random could think of to say was “Damn....”

* * * *

Across the world in the underground headquarters of ELF, several people sit around a large wood table in a darkly lit conference room.

“Well,” remarks an elegantly dressed black man with a smile “the cat’s surely out of the bag now isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir.” a beautiful blond with hair down to her waist replies. “The news media sure gave us everything we wanted, didn’t they?”

“And more.” remarks the first steeping his fingers on the bridge of his nose. “Now we’ll see how the planet responds to our presence.”

Fade to black...

3. Beginnings

Several years ago, back in time before these events occurred. Almost eight years in all, things began to percolate...

Brand had met Ariel at work, momentous events are always small things, over looked in the pace of life. Brand was a systems designer for a major manufacturer of robotics and computerized systems on the west coast. Brand was very good at his work, he had always harbored, however, the belief that there were greater things to be accomplished in his life. He waited, patient in his way, for these things to reveal themselves.

Brand and Ariel were attracted to one another immediately, but both were somewhat leery about that fact. The last thing either of them wanted was to become involved in an office romance.

Brand was just a shade above six feet tall, well muscled and possessed a body a swimmer would envy. His long dark hair now a little thinning on top was held back in a pony tail. He had dark, penetrating eyes which were a good match to his rather intense personality.

Ariel was a very tall woman with a mane of curly auburn hair which fell nearly to her waist. Her sea green eyes seemed to sparkle with life. Ariel's body was that of a model, with long legs and an athletic tone.

Ariel had joined the firm as a software support person at the beginning of November. A week after her arrival, it was obvious to everyone else in the office that they were both the victims of love at first sight. The involved parties, however, needed a little time to admit that to themselves.

But as these things usually work out, they came to find themselves in one another's beds sooner than either expected.

By just past Christmas of that year, they were inseparable. Both had come to the realization, though by decidedly different routes, that spending their lives in the work a day world of nine to five, a place in the suburbs, and pension a sixty five, was just not what they wanted. In fact that life possessed the strong taste

of spirit death which neither could live with.

Brand had a lot of accumulated vacation time and Ariel was planning to quit in the fall and return to college to complete her data processing degree; through this stimulus a plan was hatched.

Brand was almost ten years older than Ariel and had traveled extensively all over the U.S. He had also not had a real vacation in five years. Ariel for her part had lived a somewhat more sheltered life. Essentially a country girl at heart, as opposed to Brand's New York upbringing. Ariel had spent her earlier years in small rural communities.

They set a target date for the last week in July and Brand made arrangements for a five week vacation. He planned to show Ariel the West. Everything from the Colorado Rockies to the New Mexico high desert. The couple happily planned an itinerary which included Utah's Bryce Canyon, the Sequoia National forest and finishing up in Crater Lake, Oregon via the California Redwoods.

Time passed slowly that Spring, but they spent a lot of time together, making the wait bearable. Finally the week of their departure arrived.

Packing up Brand's Rangerover was a joy. They had everything they could possibly need for an extended camping expedition. Camping/backpacking gear, climbing equipment, cameras, even a small telescope and inflatable raft were finally somehow crammed into the vehicle.

On Saturday morning, they pulled out of Brand's driveway and onto the road. Heading straight out highway 80, they made Rocky Mountain National Park in two days time. Having made arrangements to camp inside the park and spent the following week exploring the Colorado high country.

The park was not as Brand remembered it. He had lived for a time in a near-by community and had spent much of his free time exploring the area. Now There were RV's and people everywhere the couple had to work very hard indeed to find a place in which to be alone.

“This is really awful.” Brand remarked one afternoon as they walked down to a river bank. “Ten years ago, even in the summer months, this park wasn’t nearly as crowded as it is now.”

“Seems like all were doing is picking up after these nature ‘dilettante’ types.” agreed Ariel stooping to pick up yet another plastic cup from the high mountain tundra.

“Yea, it really pisses me off too. They’re destroying this world bit by bit, damn it. You know each day thousands of acres of the last remaining rain forests on earth are destroyed to make room for more people? And they dare to term it ‘progress’!” Brand ranted almost spitting the last word.

“I know Brand, but please, let’s not talk about this now. It really upsets me and it gets to you too. It’s one of the reasons I love you, dear, but let’s enjoy our vacation.” she said pecking him on the cheek.

“Yeah, your right. Let’s enjoy the day instead of listening to my bitching, but I swear someday I’m going to find a way to do something about it!” Brand said stopping to look Ariel in the eyes. “It’s just not enough just to shake your head and say ‘what a shame’, it really isn’t, that’s how all this comes to pass.” Brand finished, waving his arm at the thronging humanity.

They spent the next day climbing the highest peak in the park, ‘Longs’. Though they’d not had time to become acclimated to the high Colorado elevation, they finally made the last straight climb to the top.

“Well, is it all that I promised?” Brand gasped as he sagged down upon the granite of the 14,000 foot summit.

“Oh yes!” Ariel replied. “Is it true that you can see into six states from here?”

“I don’t know for sure, but that’s what I’ve been told.”

“If we keep up this pace for the next month, we’ll be in great shape to try one of those extended training expeditions we’ve been looking into.” Ariel said sitting down beside him.

“For sure! Brand gasped. “Though I’m not sure what my office would do if I called in from Patagonia or somewhere to request more time off.”

The view from the summit is extraordinary, the long arch of the back of the rockies extends to the horizon north and south. It seemed the top of the world in the harsh mid afternoon sun.

They spent the next hour on the summit and then began the long trek back down to the ranger station where they had left their Rangerover.

Too soon their week in the rockies was over, they reluctantly descended from the high mountain range, driving almost due south on highway 25 and then cutting over west near the bottom of the state.

That evening found them in a roadside hotel near the Mesa Verde indian ruins. It was quite a change from the previous week of camping, hot showers and a soft bed felt wonderful. The plan for tomorrow was to take some time and explore the area surrounding the indian ruins.

They spent the next day at the popular ruin site just inside the park. It was so packed with tourists that the feel of antiquity Brand had remembered was entirely missing. They had to elbow their way through crowds just to view the main ruins themselves. For a pair like Brand and Ariel who loved the peace and aloneness of the wilderness this was just too much. After about forty-five minutes of this abuse, they left and four-wheeled up a dirt road to the top of a nearby mesa.

Brand parked the rover and the couple walked over to the mesa's edge and sat down.

"Ariel, this is really beginning to get to me. Listen," Brand began, turning to face Ariel. "we have enough supplies to last us at least ten days. What do you think about the two of us spending some time in the back country? I remember someone telling me, some years ago that there is another ruin site somewhere around here that hardly anyone goes to."

"Oh I'd love that!" Ariel exclaimed. "You know me, I'd drop off the face of the world and go and live in a cave if given half a chance, well that is, if you would be there to."

“Ok, let’s take a look at those USGS maps we brought along.”

Ariel retrieved the map from the rangerover and after folding the map out on the ground, they both bent over to study it.

“Look, this must be the road we took up from the main park area.” Ariel observed pointing to a track veering west off of the park’s main north-south artery.

“Yeah, that looks right,” agreed Brand “and look over here. That must be the secondary ruins I was told about. Looks like another day in the Rover and then we’ll probably have to pack in from here.” Brand said indicating the point where the road ended abruptly at the foot of a mesa.

“Looks like it’ll be quite a trek too, judging from those elevation markings.” Ariel noted. “Let’s see that’s about a four thousand foot elevation gain in about twelve miles. That’ll be a bit tough, Brand.”

“Good, I need some real wilderness stuff after spending the last couple of days in tourist hell. Besides that most likely means we won’t bump into anyone. You up for it?”

“Absolutely my love, I’ve had it with civilization too.”

They camped that night on the mesa top. The stars were so bright it seemed that you could reach up and touch them. Occasionally a bright meteor would streak along the sky, leaving it’s fiery trail in the atmosphere. Coyotes could be heard in the distance from time to time howling in conversation with the rest of it’s pack. Brand checked the Browning nine millimeter automatic he always carried in the back country. Slipping on the safety, he put it in one of his hiking boots placed near the head of the sleeping bag. Better to be prepared, though he doubted there would be any trouble in the night.

“Now this is more like it.” Brand exclaimed with a contented sigh as he settled into the sleeping bag. “Out in the wild with not a soul around. You begin to loose all that manic city horse shit and remember what living’s all about, the inner core that is us.”

“Uh huh.” Ariel agreed “I’ve always thought a person needed to remove themselves from society

every once in awhile to let nature in and discover what their really all about. You know, kind of stop all the noise and listen.”

Soon the drifted off to sleep, the night alive around them.

They slept the soundest sleep either of them had experienced in months that night, waking refreshed and ready for the day ahead.

Ariel loved waking up in the morning when they were camping. Carefully slipping out of their sleeping bag, she moved over to the camp stove and made herself a cup of instant coffee. Letting Brand sleep awhile longer, she took her cup over to the edge of the mesa, sat down on a rock, and watched the day wake up before her. The nighttime cold still brushed the new day with a light breeze, but the desert sun warmed her skin.

Ariel, her hot coffee cupped between both hands, smiled as she saw some hawks leaving their cliff side nests to soar over the early morning desert in search of breakfast.

A half hour later, she made another cup of coffee for herself and another for Brand, setting it next to his head. If there was one thing that got Brand out of bed in the morning, it was the smell of hot coffee. Leaving it there to do its work, she started to prepare their breakfast.

Ten minutes later, the sizzling bacon added its aroma to the clean, cold, morning air, and finally drew Brand with a smile on his face to join Ariel at the cook stove. Wrapping his arms around her from behind and kissing her cheek, he felt a relaxing joy wash over him. Sniffing at the bacon appreciatively, he helped her make the eggs while the hawks hunted for their own breakfast overhead.

The road to the trail head leading to the ruins looked as if no one had been on it for years. From time to time they had to remove an obstacle blocking their progress, a tree limb or some sagebrush too dense to drive through. As the day wound on, each began to feel more and more at ease and invigorated

by the beautiful desert landscapes. Finally, they came to the end of the road. The road just disappeared at the foot of a wash leading up into the foot hills.

“It’s getting near dark. Let’s spend the night here and start the climb tomorrow.” Brand suggested as the sun dipped toward the horizon.

“Ok by me,” Ariel replied smiling, “I’m as happy as a jack rabbit just being out here with you.”

They spent the evening much as the last, snuggling together in their sleeping bags, watching the embers of the campfire and listening to the sounds of the night.

When they awoke the next morning, they took the time to bathe in a nearby creek. The water felt to Brand as if it were a second baptism, restoring his spirit and renewing his ties to the natural world. There was some change working in him, never had he been so attuned, almost, well awakened was a good term for what he was feeling.

After breakfast they put together the items they needed for a six or seven day back country trip. Locking up the rover and placing some of the nearby sage brush around it to hide it from unwanted eyes, they started their hike up the wash leading to the mesa.

The mid morning air was hot and dry and felt good on their bare shoulders. They rested periodically to ration their strength, but nevertheless made good time. By dusk Brand estimated they had come at least nine miles and should be no more than three miles from their goal.

They cooked a camp meal over the small propane burner Brand had in his pack, not wanting to disturb the desert environment with a campfire pit. They both were famished after the day’s exertions and fell to the meal with enthusiasm. Soon after, they fell asleep both dreaming dreams of indians living off the land that neither recalled upon awakening.

The next day was much easier as Brand’s estimate had proven true. By noon they had reached their destination; a group of ruins perched half way up a cliff. The site wasn’t in as good condition as the

ones back in the park proper, but the feel of antiquity Brand had missed was present and strong. As they'd hoped, there was not a soul in sight. Both felt blessed by the spirits as they set up their base camp at the foot of the cliff.

"Looks like we're going to have to climb up to the ruins." Brand observed.

Though both were experienced climbers, Ariel had more professional training in technical ascents and thus took the lead. Brand having been taught to climb by friends when he had lived in Albuquerque some years ago, was competent, but felt more comfortable with Ariel setting the chocks ahead of him.

They roped up and began the ascent. Following a defile in the cliff face, they belayed each other up the five hundred feet to the ledge of the ruins. Upon reaching the top, they hauled up the supplies they had been pulling up after them and looked around.

The horizon was unbroken as they gazed out over the cliff. To the south was another mesa and they could see the creek they had bathed in yesterday winding its way through the valley floor several miles away.

They spent the remainder of the day exploring the ruins, climbing about the ancient stone rooms cut out of the cliff face itself. At night fall, they prepared a meal and rolled out their sleeping bags to relax. A hawk could be seen lazily riding the thermal's as yet another beautiful desert sunset lit the sky.

Much later as the night fell and they were beginning to doze off, Brand heard a repetitive sound off to the left at the opposite end of the ruined village. At first he thought nothing of it, stones settling or the wind perhaps.

That was until the sound began to come nearer. Ariel was already asleep and so hastily putting on his boots and taking the nine millimeter in hand, he moved off to investigate.

"There's definitely something moving out there off to the left." Brand whispered uncomfortably to

himself, hoping it was a gofer or something and not a cougar. He chose a spot in the shadows at the side of a building and waited. Brand started in surprise as he saw a light moving toward him. There had been no one around all day and now someone was approaching in the near inaccessible ruins themselves. Brand could hear his heart beating in his chest as the light rounded the corner of a wall just in front of him.

“Stop right where you are, are you friend or foe?” queried Brand clicking on his own light.

The figure before him just about dropped his own light in surprise and a gruff voice exclaimed.

“Hold on, hold on! Damn let me get my bearings, who the... My name’s Carlton Jennings and I’ve been up here for a week exploring. Who do I have the pleasure of addressing?” The figure moved a step or two back into the darkness.

Brand gave the newcomer his name and after clicking back on the safety put the small automatic away behind his belt.

“My girl friend and I just got up here this afternoon. You sure just scared the hell out of me sir.” Brand had not yet moved any closer.

They were inspecting each other like alley cats from a distance of about five meters. The man Brand saw in his light was quite old judging from the deep crevasses in his face, but lean and well muscled. He wore expensive looking back country gear and had a day pack slung over his shoulder.

“Yeah? Well can’t say my pulse is normal either. I nearly fell off the cliff there, you know.” Carlton exclaimed in a friendly tone. “I live about forty miles south of here and have been coming up to these ruins off and on for the last fifteen years. I assure you, you won’t need that hog leg a saw you holding a moment ago. I’m as harmless as a chipmunk.”

Brand starting to calm down, moved over to the figure and stretched out his hand. “Sorry for the fright, thought you might be a cougar or something. I was half asleep when I heard you moving about in the ruins. How about I offer you a cup of coffee in way of an apology?”

“Yeah sure, I could use it. I was just coming back after finishing my own meal on the other side of the mesa. My gear is stowed in one of the rooms up that away.” Carlton replied pointing at the upper level of the ruins.

“That would explain why we didn’t notice it. What do you mean ‘the other side of the mesa’?” Brand asked after doing a mental double take.

“Oh, there’s a small trail skirting the cliff face leading around back and then down to the valley floor. It’s the way I always get up here. Did you two come up the cliff face itself?” Carlton asked incredulously.

“Yeah, Ariel and I, that’s my girl, have both done quite a bit of climbing. Speaking of Ariel, guess I should go and wake her before we scare her to death. huh.”

Brand and Carlton made their way back to the camp site. Carlton stood back a ways as Brand moved to wake Ariel.

“Ariel babe, wake up we’ve got company.”

“Huh what,” Ariel spoke as she struggled toward consciousness. “Visitors? How? I mean were five hundred feet up a cliff and it’s pitch dark, Brand.”

“Yeah, I know, babe, but seems there’s a trail from the other side of the mesa. Anyway,” Brand replied helping Ariel to sit up.

“May I introduce Carlton Jennings. Thought he was a cougar at first, turns out to be he’s a fellow explorer.”

Carlton moved forward into the flashlight’s range as Brand went to light the lantern.

“Pleased to meet you, Ariel. I hope you’ll forgive me for scaring the hell out of Brand back there.” Carlton smiled and extended his hand.

“I promised Carlton a cup of coffee babe. I’m going to get the camp stove.” Brand moved over to where they had left their gear and set up the small stove.

“What brings you folks out here to the middle of nowhere?” Carlton asked settling himself down on the cliff.

“Well, we got a little sick and tired of the usual National Park fare. You know, RV’s from hell, too many people, little yappie dog’s and misbehaving screaming children.” Ariel said with a grimace. “Oh my, I’m not at all awake yet, you don’t own an RV or a yappie dog do you, Carlton?”

“No Mam. and I know just what you mean. That’s the main reason you’ve run into me up here as well. I love the wilderness and it just rubs me ragged to be around folks who don’t appreciate it and believe the world’s their personal garbage can or something.”

“Brand I think were going to like this gentleman.” Ariel called over to Brand as he was returning from setting a pot of water in place on the stove.

They talked into the early morning hours. Both Brand and Ariel liked their new found friend very much. They shared a common reverence for the environment and nature. Carlton, for his part, thought these were the most refreshing young people he had met in some time.

Carlton was returning home the following morning as he had business to attend to. Brand and Ariel, were going to spend a few more days in the wild before returning to civilization.

Carlton invited them to drop by his ranch when they were through to spend a day or two relaxing and riding the range. Ariel and Brand happily accepted, both being charmed by their elder companion.

After talking long into the night, the group finally gave into the inevitable and fell asleep high above the desert floor, the full moon sailing it’s course overhead.

* * * *

Four days later found Brand and Ariel driving down Carlton’s long and dusty driveway.

“You really think his invitation was sincere? Ariel asked again with a worried frown. “We really don’t know the gentleman at all, he may just have been being politic in inviting us Brand.”

“Ariel, you worry to much, if we get there and you sense we’re not welcome just whisper in my ear and we’ll leave, Okay?”

“Okay, okay. I’ll quit nagging at ya. You’ve obviously got your mind made up anyway.”

Brand growled an affirmative as they reached the typically southwestern style house.

As they walked up the entrance way leading through an inclosed cactus garden the couple became aware of the real scale of Carlton’s home. The appearance, as one was driving up was of a sprawling single floor adobe dwelling so prevalent to this area. That floor however, was in fact the second as the ground floor was below eye level until you had walked into the walled garden. The walkway sloped downward to a large landing with a couple of steps leading down to the true entrance itself.

Ariel gave Brand one more sidelong look of resignation as he knocked upon the huge intricately carven double doors. Soon a middle aged indian woman with dark hair opened the door and looked at the two inquiringly.

“May I help you?” she asked with obvious doubts as to their character and intentions.

“Ah, yes.” said Brand “Is this Mr. Carlton Jennings’ place?”

“It is.” she replied eyebrows drawn together in obvious distrust.

“Is Carlton about?” he politely inquired trying to keep the irritation at being prejudged from his voice.

“Wait here, please.” she said closing the door.

“Hey if it’s at all weird were out of here OK.” Brand said in response to Ariel’s ‘I told you so look’. Presently, the door opened again Carlton’s lean frame and smiling face filling the entrance.

“Hey there, you two! Hoped you’d come by. Welcome to the Lazy J.”

The interior of the home was massive, high beamed ceilings with many landings and open area's. Carlton motioned then into what must be the living room.

"Please take a seat. You must be tired, finding this place can be quite an ordeal and driving on that old road back from the ruins is no picnic either."

"May I offer you any refreshments? We probably have almost anything you may want. Gabriel tries her best to spoil me and I've yet to request anything she doesn't have on hand."

"Well yes, I'd love a drink Carlton, some light red wine would be delightful. Ariel?"

"Yes please that sounds quite nice."

Carlton motioned to the housekeeper who had been standing in attendance in the shadows.

"Gabriel, these people are friends. Brand and Ariel, I met them up on the mesa last week."

"Pleased to meet you?" Gabriel replied with a smile and a slight bow of her head. Her air of distrust vanishing completely with Carlton's seal of approval.

"Well how was the remainder of your stay in our little hideaway?"

"Oh wonderful Carlton" Ariel replied, Brand noting the easing of her fears in her voice, smiled.

"Yes, we hiked around and explored quite a bit. Mostly though we spent our time soaking up the atmosphere and the sunshine."

They spent the remainder of the afternoon being shown around Carlton's hacienda. Their initial impressions had proven correct, his home was massive. The back end of the first floor was bermed into the desert floor itself keeping it cool even with all it's open areas. The house was immaculate, most probably the work of the house keeper as Carlton didn't seem the type to worry about a little dirt or clutter.

Each room was laid out as if by an interior designer with a lot southwestern art and tasteful furniture. One item Ariel especially loved was a stained glass representation of the earth about six feet in diameter on

the south wall of the second floor.

“That’s very beautiful Carlton.” remarked Ariel indicating the stained glass.

“Yes, my wife made that many years ago. She was an artist and as deeply in love with the wonders of the world as am I. She passed over six years ago.”

“Oh I’m very sorry to hear that.” Ariel answered “I would have loved to have met her.”

“And She would have loved to have met you too my dear.”

The reality of Carlton’s means really sunk in as he took them out to his stables for an afternoon ride. Sitting on a landing pad in the desert sun was a very new looking helicopter.

“Looks as if our friend is a little better than well off hey.” Brand whispered in Ariel’s ear in passing.

“Do you fly yourself Carlton?” Brand queried.

“Yeah, one of the benefits of having all this,” Carlton said sweeping his arm to take in the hacienda and the adjacent land, “is the ability to indulge ones fantasies. Tomorrow, you are staying the night aren’t you?” Carlton asked with a sidelong glance at Brand. “We’ll take her up and do a little exploring if you like.”

“Yes, ah well, Ariel if it’s alright with you I’d love to stay the evening.” Brand replied with a sheepish look to Ariel.

“Oh yes of course if Carlton’s willing to have us”.

Obviously Ariel was feeling much better about visiting the Lazy J.

The remainder of the afternoon was spent riding about the beautiful high desert, being escorted by the gregarious Carlton.

Toward nightfall, they returned to the stables and put up the horses. Walking back toward the house they could smell the intriguing aroma’s of something cooking. Carlton led them into a delightful dining room where Gabriel had already set out a feast of south western delicacies.

Chili relleno burritos enchiladas and a wonderful salad were provided along with a delicate wine and berry mixture.

“Carlton, that was the best meal I can remember in quite a while.” Brand sighed, loosening his belt a notch.

“Thank you sir.” Gabriel replied with a sly smile as she came from behind Brand's shoulder and began removing dishes. She seemed to have an almost psychic sense as to when she was needed.

Sipping their after dinner coffee Carlton expounded upon Gabriel's qualities.

“She's a Zuni Indian, native to the area. She lives here with me but was born nearby where many of her relatives still reside. Her brothers and sisters also help me from time to time taking care of this monstrosity.” Carlton waved his arm at his home. “She's been with me for over twenty years and I couldn't do without her.”

“She certainly is a darling, and she seems to materialize whenever she's needed like magick.” Ariel observed.

“Oh yes, I've wondered about my housekeepers abilities in that area. She often goes to answer the phone just before it rings, or fits me out with rain gear on a cloudless day that turns into a desert monsoon by night fall. A very special being is my Gabriel.”

As often happens after a great meal their talk turned to philosophy. It's much easier to expound on the spiritual and philosophical on a full belly.

“I've been thinking about your remarks on the cliff regarding the state of our world for some time now Carlton. I've come to the conclusion that much like us you've become quite disgusted with the apparent unconcerned attitudes of our fellow humans in relation to caring for the planet and the wild life.”

“I'd have to admit that this is one of my pet peeves Carlton, I can't tolerate people blindly destroying the world I was born to.”

“Oh yes,” replied Carlton “I’ve been involved with various environmental groups all my life, even before it became ‘fashionable’. Over the past years though, I’ve come to the conclusion that it’s all to little to late. No one organization seems to be able to deal with all the problems, they all seem to me to be ineffective at best. Perhaps human’s don’t deserve to live, or have a beautiful world to live in if their willing to destroy the home God has given them.”

“Yes, I agree,” spoke Ariel adjusting her body in her chair, “my sore spot is people who abuse animals. You know, poaching or the abominations they call ‘hunting resorts’. Where they provide endangered animals for some rich yuppie to shoot.”

“Yeah I hate that too,” Carlton replied “I’d trade a whole group of those types for one bengal tiger, but then I’ve become somewhat militant about all this in my old age. Yuppies?”

“Yes, it’s an appellate for ‘Young Urban Professionals’. We’ve come to term them GRUPpies for the ‘Grossly Replaceable Urban Populace’.” Ariel answered laughing.

“Well then... what can we three do about all this.” Brand was always the one to reduce things down to the personal level. “I keep coming back to the same thing when ever I think about all this. We, as those who do care and seem to have the vision to understand the problem, need to become pro-active. It’s not enough to just talk about it one needs to do something. Trouble is I’m not quite sure just what that is.”

“Not quite sure,” observed Carlton “Meaning that you do have some germ of an idea. Can I get Gabriel too bring us any drinks? She mixes a mean Marguerita and it’s sounds like this is going to turn into one of those wee hour in the morning talks.”

“Oh Brand were being rude Carlton is being a good host and letting us ramble on. Perhaps he’s tired and were keeping him from his bed.”

“Not on your life dear,” Carlton replied “there’s nothing I enjoy more than intelligent conversation. I don’t get to many visitors out here you know, this is delightful.”

“Well then I’d love one of Gabriel’s mean Margueritas.” Ariel responded with a smile.

“Me too please.” piped in Brand. Ariel noticed he had that distracted, speculative look on his face that he always got when deep in thought.

“So just what is your plan Brand?” Carlton asked sinking comfortably back into his chair.

“Well, This is a little ‘out there’ Carlton, but stay with me. I’ve come to term it in my head as ‘environmental terrorism’. Every time I see one of those stories about someone destroying the environment or about people killing endangered animals in protected areas for money I want to personally shoot them right between the eyes.

More over it seems to me that humans will never respond to reason. They’ve been told over and over that their destroying the environment, killing the planet off for the children and they keep on doing it anyway in the name of greed.

Now threat and fear on the other hand seems to always work. But then like you I seem to have become somewhat militant in my old age.”

“Very interesting,” Carlton remarked with an introspective smile on his face. “how would you go about doing it, employing these principals in the cause of the earth?”

“Well, it would have to start with a world wide secret organization to be effective. It would take a lot of organization but the members or agents of this hypothetical group would have to be insulated in some manner so that if individual members were taken they wouldn’t threaten the entire organization.”

“Seems like you’ve been thinking along these lines for some time Brand.” Carlton remarked with an intent smile.

“Oh yeah well, I’ve a tendency to worry an idea to death like a terrier.” Brand was getting on a roll now, Ariel had seen it before, she smiled to herself and settled deeper into her chair.

“Anyway, I’d set it up in a structure like the communist party used during the revolution, ‘cell

groups'. There would be an initial administrative core which would direct the activities of the whole. Recruitment would take place on a smaller level with each group knowing only the members of each individual chapter. Their leader would report to a higher member who would only deal with a few of these groups and so on. It's a very efficient structure as the old Russian regime found out."

"Interesting," Remarked Carlton, now leaning forward in his Chair a rapt expression on his face. "go on."

"Well, I haven't gotten much farther than that. Really don't think you'd need much more, the organization in a way after that would create itself. They would place spies in organizations and governments believed to be involved in anti environmental activities and then proceed to bring these activities to light as well as provide, um, shall we say 'negative reinforcement' for the perpetrators."

An idea was beginning to form in Carlton's mind, as if he had been waiting for these two people to show up and speak these words all his life.

"Oh there is one more thing, I think the whole organization should operate around one central core idea. That being 'As you do so shall be done onto you'."

4. Say What?...

Random broke into the room's bar as soon as the news report finished. Slumping into his bed and taking slugs of tequila straight out of the bottle, he contemplated his feelings.

Terrorism in any form left him feeling nauseous and enraged. It was no different this time.

"Except," he thought "this is the first terrorist group who's ideals, well more like aims, I actually believe in."

Random had given up on the human race and the planet's salvation long ago, vaguely rationalizing his apathy with quasi-christian theology regarding the destruction of the earth prior to the second coming or by the excuse of, 'I can't stop it all by myself, I am after all only one man' or perhaps, he had rationalized further that the human race was just another transient species on the face of the earth and like the dinosaurs their time would pass.

Bottom line, Random didn't have a lot of respect for his species. Well founded he believed due to how mankind treats itself as well as the natural world. The only truly immutable force in the human universe, from Randoms observations was greed, more... It had hardened his spirit.

In truth Random had never been the same since the meaningless death of his wife. Something had died inside him, leaving him alone and disenchanted with living. As an agnostic, he never could quite buy into revelation's angelic plagues and what not. Any God that allowed the destruction of beauty and peace, in his mind, was not a God to be worshiped, but instead a devil to be feared.

He had come to the point where he simply meant to enjoy what was left to him to the utmost and

mourn for the loss of what was passing day to day in his own way. Random had over the years become a very private person, strong in his personal beliefs and confident in himself.

“Now here’s somebody actually doing something about it all.

Somebody, utilizing fear and terror tactics, may actually have a chance, maybe our last, to save this faltering planet.” he said to himself and took another deep slug from the bottle.

“But Damn it, this is not the way! The means may never justify the end. Hacking up african poachers who know no other way of life, who have no other income, who have no understanding of the delicate balance of the life they upset by their killing is not right. It’s like hurting children when they cry; these people do not understand, hell or even comprehend, their great mistake. Is it proper to so judge the ignorant?”

These things very were close to Random’s spirit and caused him deep turmoil. His thoughts continued...

Nevertheless, those God damn suits knew what they were doing. They should be held responsible for their actions! But drowning in drums, slowly suffocating, as they sink to the bottom of the sea? Does any human being deserve that? Yes!... No! Ah hell, I don’t know...”

And so sleeplessly Random’s internal debate went on well into the early morning hours, until finally the tequila had it’s way and he fell into a restless sleep.

Eyes still red and irritated from too much liquor and too little sleep, Random walked weakly up the steps to the American Embassy in Nairobi.

After internally debating since waking and through a brief breakfast whether or not to inform the authorities of his find, Random had decided that in as much as no action was also an action, he should inform someone and so he had brought his macabre’ artifact with him.

Painfully he approached the reception area. Cursing his head and vowing the inevitable ‘never

again', he stepped before the receptionist.

"Madame, I have some information regarding last night's broadcast on that terrorist group that I'd like to talk to someone about."

"Sir, we are not an investigative agency per se. I'm not sure how I may help you"

"Well who is handling this thing? Who do I talk to, CIA, FBI?" Random inquired in an irritated tone. His stomach was doing flip flops and his head was banging like a drum.

Although a law abiding citizen, Random did not think highly of bureaucracies in general, and less of law enforcement bureaucracies in particular. He felt that the person bringing evidence against a criminal was invariably more harassed, harmed and endangered than the criminal in question; assuming, of course, any suspect was ever apprehended.

Not to his surprise, the receptionist showed no reaction to his impoliteness or obvious ire.

"Sir, although there is little we can do to assist you with your inquiry, I will see if one of our staff can direct you to the appropriate department." she replied in a bored voice looking down at her desk to consult what was obviously an in-house directory.

"Thank you." Random growled, his misgivings of involving himself in this matter rolling again through his mind.

The woman punched a button on her console and said into the phone "There's another gentleman here that says he has information on that E.L.F. announcement. Could you assist him in contacting the appropriate department?.....No sir, not in my realm of responsibility, sir.....yes, thank you, sir."

Turning once again to Random, she said "If you'll go up the stairs, Mr. Olson may be able to help you, his office is the third one on the right."

"Thank you." Random replied once again wondering if he shouldn't just make a dignified exit and forget the whole thing. But, Random thought with a start, 'another gentleman', that phrase had just regis-

tered. He was not the only one with information, Random would file this little tidbit away for future examination.

Nevertheless again despite his feelings, he found himself climbing the elegant staircase and knocking on the indicated door. A three piece suit, fiftyish, slightly balding, and looking rather bored opened the door and motioned for him to take one of the two seats facing his desk.

Returning to his own chair, the official leaned back and eyed Random.

“My name is Mr. Olson. I’m in charge of internal security matters for this embassy. What can I do for you, Sir.”

“I flew over from the States yesterday on an assignment. A week before I was in Chicago where I purchased this object.”

Random said passing over the letter opener, deliberately withholding his name.

Mr. Olson accepted it and after turning it over a couple times in his hands, returned it to Random.

“Yes?” he inquired languidly.

Random felt his stomach clench with frustration.

“Mr. Olson, did you notice that the emblem on the bottom is identical to the one shown in last night’s special news report?”

“Yes, I did. We have many peddlers in the area trafficking in such items, but in as much as there is no local law prohibiting selling human bones here in Kenya and we have no legal authority to investigate matters of this kind. I’m sorry, but I can’t see where I can be of any service to you. You might try the local authorities.” he replied.

“I see.” Random said in his most caustic of tones. Rising, he added “Thank you for your time.” Practically slamming the door on the way out, he heard the official’s unruffled reply as he walked down the hall; “Glad to have been of service, sir.”

As soon as Random left the office, the bureaucrat picked up his phone and dialed a three digit number.

“Sir. I just had a very interesting conversation....”

Random stomped angrily back to his hotel, his scowls and aggressive posture cleaving a path before him. When he reached his room, he tore off his coat and threw it over one of the chairs and sat himself down in the other, puffing with his exertions. His mind was seething over the officious brush off.

Random had a major problem with people who shirked responsibility or who lacked vision enough to deal with reality, as Random saw it. He considered the anger such people caused him to be a failing in his personality. Soon he calmed down and began to concentrate on the tasks at hand.

The next day, Random checked out of his hotel and headed for the bus depot. Bus was the only way to get to Eldoret, a small town near the game reserve. He planned on hiring a guide and a jeep to take him out to Bill Raston’s colleague, Walch, whose dig was some eighty miles east of there.

The crowds were thick as jam on the streets that morning, most on their way to the market square. Keeping a close eye on the carisak he had slung over his shoulder, Random decided to take a less traveled side street which should, he hoped, lead him to the depot.

Rounding a corner he ran straight into three men in dark suits and sun glasses.

“Excuse-moi, s’il vous plait.” he said moving past. Suddenly, his shoulder was jerked back, swinging him around. He just had time to see the fist coming at his chin, before everything went black.

Someone was moaning with pain in the harsh light and as Random soon realized with a shock, it was him, he pulled his head up to look around. He was in a small cement room with no doors or windows in his line of vision. There was an overhead lamp hung on a cord from the ceiling above his head which cast a sickly yellow light on the room. In front of him was a small metal desk and opposite that a chair, nothing

more.

Attempting to stand, Random found that his hands were handcuffed to the chair he was sitting in. His legs were likewise bound. He tensed as he heard a door open behind him.

Presently, a man wearing a dark suit similar to those of his abductors, as well as the ever present dark sunglasses, sat down at the desk before him.

“What is your connection with the E.L.F.?” the man asked in an unplaceable accent.

Startled out of his anger, Random said “I have no involvement with them, the ELF. I’m a journalist, here on assignment. I presented what I thought was possible evidence concerning them to the American Embassy yesterday morning. They weren’t apparently very interested.”

“And what would cause you to be interested in the reactions of America to a terrorist group if you were not involved with that group?”

His anger renewed, Random replied in an icy tone “I had purchased a letter opener in Chicago last week. Upon seeing the news broadcast, I realized that the two events may be related, so I attempted to report it to the embassy. Nothing more. Why are you holding me here? Why am I tied up like a criminal? Who the hell are you people anyway? I want the American Embassy notified immediately! I have committed no crime and you have no right to hold me here!”

“Mr. Waterson, believe me, we can do whatever we like with you. Now please answer my questions correctly. Why would you purchase such an unusual item if you were not already involved in the E.L.F. conspiracy?”

“I’m not involved with the ELF. or any other terrorist group. I abhor terrorism of any form, that’s why I reported it, you weasel!” he yelled letting his anger momentarily wash over his upsurging fears.

“You are not answering my question. Why did you buy this item if you are not involved?” the man

asked again in a calm voice, too calm Random thought.

“I bought it as a curiosity during a business trip in Chicago, damn it. I had no idea who or what it represented at the time.”

“A curiosity only then, Mr. Waterson? You have rather macabre’ tastes then I’d say. Perhaps you are a sadist? Most prevalent in this part of the world and with terrorists.”

“I am not a terrorist! I went to the Embassy to provide possible evidence about ELF.!” he said as his fear brought bile to his mouth making him want to retch.

“Who are you? What organization do you represent? What makes you think you can abduct an american citizen in broad daylight? Why are you doing this?”

“I will leave you alone for awhile now, Mr. Waterson. Until you decide to be more cooperative.” the dark man said and rising, left the room.

“Wait! What do you want? I am telling you the truth!” Random yelled as he heard the door close behind him, the bolt shooting home and the light going out.

Random first frantically attempted to loose himself from his bindings. Upon finding them to be quite secure, he tried to move himself and the chair towards the door. After nearly toppling the chair and himself along with it, he gave up any hopes of an immediate escape.

Taking repeated deep breaths to calm his swimming mind, he considered his situation. The questions of his interrogator indicated that these people were anti-ELF. That may be a ruse, however. They might be ELF terrorists trying to find out how much he knew about them, although he thought, somehow that didn’t seem to be their style.

“Now, who knew about me or why I had come to Kenya?” he asked himself.

Bill back in the states, Walch, and he had mentioned to a hotel waiter that he was here to investigate an artifact, no, unreasonable, he hadn’t told the man about the letter opener.

The receptionist and that Mr. Olson at the Embassy were the only ones who knew he had reported there. Unless there was someone else in the foyer when he spoke with the receptionist? Random cast his mind back trying to remember the details of that encounter. No, there had been no one else there that he could recall.

So, these people were either informed by Walch with whatever Bill told him, or they were connected with the embassy in some way.

The Walch angle didn't seem probable either. Bill and Random had always held close confidentiality when discussing their work. That was one of the reasons why they were still friends. Bill, from time to time would give him inside information on new sites or discoveries so Random could do background work prior to official announcements, thereby giving him a head start on the competition. But Random knew better than to betray that loyalty and Bill respected him for that and had always treated Random the same way. Nevertheless, there could have been an incidental slip.

No. These people were much more likely informed by someone at the embassy. Well then, these people were a U.S. department of some sort or there could always be, he surmised, a traitor at the embassy? Both seemed as equally possible to Random.

"Damn it." He still knew no more than before. "A man ought to know what he's going to die for." Random thought maudlinly.

Being unable to see his watch, Random had no idea how long he had sat in that chair nor the time of day. The dark man eventually returned. It had seemed like hours. Random's arms and butt ached from lack of movement.

Seating himself once again at the desk, the man began, "I ask again, Mr. Waterson. What involvement do you have with the E.L.F."

“Which U.S. department do you work for?” Random shot in the dark, blinking at the return of light to the room.

“You will answer my questions, Mr. Waterson.” he said and coming around the desk, slapped Random hard across the face. Sitting now on the edge of the desk in front of Random, he asked again, “What is your involvement?”

“You must be C.I.A.” Random replied. “The F.B.I. isn’t generally involved in foreign affairs.”

The dark man leaned forward and backhanded him on the other side of the face. Random gazed into the man’s sunglasses with what he hoped was an inquisitive look and stayed silent.

“The punishments for uncooperative behavior can get quite severe I assure you, Mr. Waterson.” the dark man said.

Random maintained his dark stare. His interrogator returned it for what seemed like minutes. Then with a sigh of resignation, the dark one said “Very well. We’ll see how you feel after you have humiliated yourself.” Rising, he left the room. This time the light was left on.

Random was acutely aware of his overfull bladder and wondered how much longer he could hold it. Then after mentally reviewing his somewhat sparse knowledge of terrorist tactics, pissed his pants. They could easily wait him out anyway. He thought.

With a start Random woke to the sound of the door opening and the smell of his own urine.

“Mr. Waterson, what is your involvement with the E.L.F.?” the man asked again, walking over to stand in front of Random.

“You’re a special operations branch of the C.I.A. right? Or is this just a routine interrogation matter? Standard behavior for those of your group.” Random asked.

The dark man sighed and then his knee connected with Random’s chin. Once again everything went dark...

* * * *

Random awoke with the sun in his eyes. He found himself propped up against a wall in what appeared to be one of the more squalid parts of the city.

Groaning at an ache deep in his muscles, he pulled himself to his feet. Not much to his surprise, his carisak didn't appear to be anywhere about and upon checking his pockets, he found his wallet gone also. His passport however, thank God, was still in place.

"Well, first things first I guess." he said to himself with a sigh and after brushing himself off, he started his search for an American Express office.

* * * *

"Will you look at that mess out there?" said John Weston, President of Kent State University. Joining the President at the window, the Provost for Student Affairs looked out upon the thronging demonstration. Students were carrying signs saying 'THE END IS NEAR! SPARE THE EARTH OR DIE!' and other slogans to that affect and singing out their dedication to their most recent cause.

"Who'd think the children of those so opposed to war in Vietnam would wind up here supporting a terrorist group." the Provost replied shaking his head.

"Well, what do you think we should do about it?"

"Nothing, Dr. Weston." the Provost replied. "Nothing at all."

The President regarded the Provost, his eyebrows raised in inquiry.

"Sir, we are not the only campus inflicted with this. All across the country, students from grade

school to graduate school are supporting the E.L.F. in what I must say, are uniformly peaceable, if somewhat irritating, public demonstrations.

I believe any attempt to subvert them would not only lead to violence, but would be likely to further fan the flames of revolution.”

“You consider this a revolution then?” the President asked incredulously.

“Yes, Sir. Furthermore, I think this time, they may succeed.”

* * * *

“You know I can’t allow this E.L.F to succeed in its mission.” the Prime Minister of Kenya replied to the U.S. Ambassador.

“Black market goods are unfortunately, a large portion of our country’s income base. As it is my people are starving. The discontinuation of funds from foreign countries in exchange for our natural resources such as ivory and pelts, would only further steep my country in poverty.”

“But, ...”

“But,” the Prime Minister interrupted “I could not stop such traffic even if I wanted to.”

“It appears that the E.L.F. may succeed at what you are unable, or perhaps unwilling to deal with, Prime Minister.” the Ambassador stated.

“Yes,” he whispered “and my people will starve by the tens of thousands.” The Prime Minister turned away, his eyes filling with tears.

“It appears that we will hunt no more.” he added sadly.

The Ambassador had no reply, no comfort to offer this leader of a country suffocating in its own

overabundant children.

* * * *

In the streets of Kingston and the mountain valleys of Haiti the Voudoun serviteur's rejoiced. The Loa danced and sang through their earthly brethren. The hougan let his people enjoy their victory, but knew it might be short lived. Age upon age they had seen the wheel turn and knowing the enemies great strength, did not trust this pause in the game.

* * * *

"This is preposterous!" the chairman of a worldwide tuna company exclaimed. "It cannot be allowed to continue!"

The senator squirmed uncomfortably in his chair.

"I know, Mr. Cartwright, but there appears to be a very strong grassroots movement out there supporting this group's ideals."

"Senator, contrary to popular belief, they are not paying for that lovely home of yours, We are." he said standing, hands flat on the desk and leaning over it toward the Senator.

"Now, you sit on the Appropriations Committee and I want you to make sure there are sufficient funds made available to stomp out this little terrorist group. I want and my counterparts require every american counter terrorist organization you have available on top of this now! I don't care how it's done, but these murders will stop!"

Mopping his brow with his handkerchief, the Senator said "Ah, yes sir." and watched the irate man

depart.

* * * *

Commander David Cutler paced in front of the group of highly trained covert operations personnel.

“Now, we surmise that the E.L.F. is established worldwide,” he said gesturing to the world map posted behind him “but we also know that they only contacted American news networks with their announcement.”

“For this reason, we are assuming for now that they are based in the U.S. Your assignments will be to infiltrate American based worldwide organizations that might be sympathetic to the E.L.F. These include everything from Audobon to Greenpeace to university sponsored wildlife research groups. Your individual assignments are in your folders. This operation commences immediately. Any questions?”

“Sir,” one of the men said, rising to his feet “are we the sole branch of this operation? Or are there operatives in the field?”

“Yes there are more special task forces stationed in areas we consider likely targets. Most of the targets however, have not been informed of our presence. These forces will operate independently of your group and have carte blanche with the aim of bringing in ELF hostages.” Cutler replied. “Any other questions?”

None being voiced, the commander continued.

“You should be aware that some of the larger corporations have hired outside forces whose aims are similar to our own. Things could get messy out there, so keep alert and try not to get shot by an unofficially.”

“We’re calling this operation TROLL for obviously reasons.”

He paused looking over his troops, meeting each man's eyes. Finding no signs of conflict of interest in any he said "Dismissed."

* * * *

"I can't say this on the air," the anchorman for NBC said. "I'll never be able to walk the streets again in safety."

"You can either do this broadcast or lose your job," the producer replied.

"All the other networks will be doing the same. We're all in corporate America, Ben. We've been told to slander the E.L.F. in any way we can, night after night. The tide must be changed against them and public opinion is the sea we all fish in. You know your job now do it!"

"You'll note we still have a republican in office in spite of our attempt to 'turn the tide' last year as you so eloquently put it," noted the anchorman. Scowling, the producer left the room.

* * * *

In the underground headquarters of ELF, an elegant black man and a blond amazon were having a conversation.

"Well, this is it, Diana. We're going to phase two tomorrow."

"Yes, the strike force is in place and ready off the coast. The covert people have been in Baghdad and in position for the last week. We're all ready to go, Sir."

"Diana, the Prime is due here tomorrow morning, to personally supervise the operation. God, I've been waiting for this for a long time! Alert the Paris House to be ready with back up personnel as required. I'm going to get some rest. Tomorrow is going to be a big day."

5. Establishment

Brand awoke first, but just lay where he was. It felt too good to feel the Southwestern sun on his face and the cool morning breeze washing across his body. Finally, he pried open his eyes and took a moment to stretch his sleep dulled muscles. The sun, he judged, was where it should be to be a little before nine o'clock in the morning.

Moving slowly so as not to wake Ariel, he disentangled

himself and threw on some clothes. He stretched again for awhile and reflected on how lucky he was to have such a beauty as Ariel in love with him. After a time, he went down stairs in search of coffee.

He found the kitchen with out too much trouble. No one was about but as his luck would have it, there was a pot of coffee on the range. Pouring himself a cup, he went in search of his host.

Brand walked through the living room wondering where everyone might be, ambling in the general direction where he remembered seeing a patio the night before. Sure enough, Carlton was sitting in the sun at a small table, the remains of his breakfast at his elbow.

“Good morning, Brand. Sleep well?” Carlton inquired, looking up from a paper.

“Oh, absolutely. Quite a change from a bumpy sleeping bag on the cliff side. Ariel is still sleeping, I thought i’d let her do a little catching up. I’m usually an early riser, but I seem to have slept in a little myself this morning.”

“Suits me, I wanted to talk to you alone about something, well after our discussion last night anyway.”

“Regarding what, Carlton?” Brand inquired, taking a seat on the other side of the table.

“Would you like some breakfast, Sir?” inquired the ever present Gabriel, appearing at Brand’s side.

“Well yes, Gabriel, thank you very much. That is if it isn’t too much trouble.”

“No trouble at all, sir.” Gabriel replied.

“Please call me Brand, Gabriel. Sir or Mister have always seemed to me, too formal for friends.”

Smiling Gabriel went to fetch some breakfast.

“You’ve really made a friend there you know, both you and Ariel. Our Gabriel doesn’t make friends with just anyone.”

“Yes, we both like her too, What did you want to talk to me about, Carlton?”

“Well, it’s about that organization you were outlining for us last night. I am, as you have probably already guessed, quite well off. Actually, that’s quite an understatement. The last time I checked I was worth a little over 167 million.”

“What’s that got to do with me, Carlton, or that hypothetical organization?” Brand, seeing where Carlton was leading, was beginning to feel uncomfortable. “I really don’t want to pry into your personal affairs, Carlton.”

“Oh, you’re not.” Carlton began, dismissing Brand’s objections with a wave of his hand. “I’m not much of a business man Brand. I hire people to take care of that stuff for me. Most of the money I have was the result of some very wise investing on the part of my father. And I don’t believe in secrets, either especially between friends. I’d like to think we are becoming friends.”

“Well, of course we are, Carlton. Both Ariel and I like you very much. We’re much like cats in that regard, either we’re going to like a person or not. And if we do, then it’s usually immediate.”

“Good, Well then, you see... I have an idea forming in my head, Brand. I remember you both remarking, when we were up on the mesa, about how the normal working world wasn’t satisfying you any more. I sure can’t see how it could for an obviously intelligent pair like you and Ariel. I think I may have a proposition for you that’ll suit you both quite well.”

“Carlton, hold on okay? I’m just marginally awake and I think I see where you may be going with all this. Let me get some food in me and come to full consciousness before we go on. OK?”

Gabriel, her timing perfect as usual, arrived with a laden plate, some juice and a pot of coffee. Brand fell to with feeling. Carlton gave him time to eat and settled into his chair to read his morning paper.

Brand, his breakfast finished, sat back in his chair and looked speculatively at Carlton over the rim of a cup of coffee.

“Okay, if I read you right, you’re proposing we do something along the lines we were discussing last

night. Am I correct?”

“Yep, I know it’s nuts Right? Could never work practically. You were just pipe dreaming, not really advocating a course of action. Believe me I’ve been up all night going over all the rhetoric and I come back to the same thing. You said it yourself ‘it’s not enough to just talk about it’, we have to do something.”

“You see there’s not much I can do in this world. I’m not an artist, or musician, nor a writer. I don’t really think I have an artistic bone in my body, that was my wife’s province. I’ve tried throughout my life to do what I can, usually in the form of donations to organizations or by volunteering my time. I, like yourself, am an engineer. My discipline is civil and I’ve spent a good portion of my life trying to help in third world countries and the inner city.”

“Though those efforts were worth while and all, they have left me somewhat dissatisfied. I have no family now that Janet is gone, Janet was my wife’s name, and I’d sure like to leave something behind me.”

“You know I was just, like you said, pipe dreaming last night, Carlton. I mean, I don’t have a clue if all of that is practical at all. Moreover, I’m not sure I would be the best choice to set up a group like that or if I, not to mention Ariel, would want to dedicate our lives in that fashion, not to mention the ethetical burden. Your throwing a lot of weighty material at me first thing in the morning you know.”

“Yeah, I know. All I’m proposing, at best, for now, is that if your interested at all, let’s do what we would do with a new product for one of my businesses, a feasibility study. But at the same time, I’d like you to know that I haven’t been so excited about an idea in years. It all gelled together for me late last night, Brand I believe we CAN make a difference. I think I’m in for the whole game, presupposing there is to be a game.”

“Carlton, another thing. You don’t really know us at all. We’re just two people you bumped into camping. Hell, we could be running a con for all you know.”

“Yeah, that’s true, however I trust my instincts and those of Gabriel as well. Also, quite honestly, if

we proceed from this point on, I will perform a thorough background investigation on you both. Remember, ‘trust in God but always tie up your camel’.” quoted Carlton.

Laughing Brand replied “Okay, well I’ll think on it some and talk it over with Ariel and get back to you.”

“That’s all I ask.”

“This is really out there Carlton. I mean I’ve never for a moment thought of actually pursuing all this. Well, like I said let me think on it.”

They turned their talk to other things. Carlton suggesting that they might take the copter up, explore the area, and perhaps have dinner in nearby Taos.

“Carlton, I just want you to know that both Ariel and I appreciate your hospitality very much.”

“Oh, think nothing of it, Brand. Really, I haven’t had such a good time in years.”

“Well, good morning you two.” Ariel called on her way to join them “I feel like a slug. How long have you been up and about?”

“Not to long, love. I have had time to have breakfast though, and if I don’t miss my guess, Gabriel’s about and would be happy to prepare you some as well.”

“Yes Brand.” Gabriel replied from across the patio. “May I get you something, Ariel?”

Brand was pleased to note her use of their first names.

“Oh yes please, Gabriel. That would be lovely, I’m famished.”

Later Carlton had to attend to some business matters and went up to his office to make some international calls. Brand and Ariel took the opportunity to enjoy some time by themselves and took a walk out into the foothills surrounding the Hacienda. The high desert was alive with life, lizards and birds and other denizens of the sand were everywhere. They hiked for awhile enjoying the day and then stopped to

rest on a convenient rock overlooking a beautiful small valley.

“Our host dropped a bomb on me at breakfast this morning. Seems he really dialed in on our talk last night.”

“You mean that bit about an environmental terrorist group? Surely he knows that you were just theorizing, doesn’t he?”

“Well yes, but I think He’s trying to get me to think about it all in more realistic terms. Carlton’s also incredibly rich, dear and he’s implying that he would back you and I in establishing this organization. I told him I’d think about it.”

“Are you, Brand?” Ariel asked with an unsure expression.

“Yeah, I sure am. At first I thought it was nonsense, but now that I’m waking up I’m not so sure.

“Oh, Brand this is science fiction, fantasy, nothing like that could work in real life.”

“Why not, look at the American revolution, or my example of Communism. Sure the desired end was different, but the systems used were much the same. It’s rumored that Freemasonry was responsible for the end of much of the monarchy systems in Europe and they were right out in the open. Note that many of our revolutionary fathers were Freemason’s, Washington, Franklin. I don’t know, babe. It’s got my mind going, that’s for sure.”

“Well Brand, I love you and where ever you go, I go, that is till you don’t want me any more. I am going to take a little convincing on this though. I mean, I just love the idea and I would like nothing more than seeing these types of people get what’s coming to them. You know me, I’ve got a bit of a mean streak when it comes to people who abuse animals and the environment.”

“Yes love I know, and I’m going to want you forever.” Brand put his arm around her and gave her a hug.

“Like me your unsure, this is a hell of a concept. It’s one thing to talk about something and quite

another to consider it as a reality in one's life. I do know you, Ariel and I suspect that in very short order, you'll be promoting this idea stronger than I and I'll have reverted to my usual 'Devil's advocate' role.

"Just how would you get it rolling, Brand?" inquired Ariel, obviously beginning to think about it in more practical terms."

"Well that Freemason parallel has got me thinking. Perhaps a pseudo religious organization. They have built in social and political autonomy and a little mystery is expected. You know the affinity I feel for Voudoun, maybe establish a society in each major city across the world as a front organization, maybe... Ah, but this all may be really nuts Ariel."

"OK, let's think about it, Brand, but we are on vacation and I do want to see all the rest of the places we've planned to go. We don't need to jump on this immediately, do we?"

"Okay, good. We'll tell Carlton that he's certainly got our attention and we're going to think it about during the rest of our trip."

They spent awhile longer soaking on their rock in the sunshine, each of their minds occupied with this new idea. About noon they walked back to Carlton's house.

"Hi, Carlton." Brand called seeing their host rounding a corner a book in his hand. "We've returned from our morning constitutional."

They met in the living room and sank into some of Carlton's overstuffed furniture.

"I've talked with Ariel about our conversation this morning and we're both willing to go as far as thinking over your proposition. We do wish, however, to continue our vacation. We thought we might let it gel in our heads for a couple of weeks while we're on the road."

"Excellent." replied Carlton with a grin "Frankly the more I think about all this, the more I like it."

"Seriously, Carlton?" Ariel asked a serious expression on her usually care free face. "I mean, I just starting to think about what Brand has told me of all this and my initial reaction was, science fiction.?"

“Mine too, I assure you Ariel, But as I thought about it more and more...” Carlton replied, spreading his hands wide to emphasize the contradiction.

“Well OK then, how about if we call you from the Redwoods and make arrangements to meet in, say, about two weeks. That should give us time to thoroughly digest all of this.” Brand suggested.

“Sounds perfect to me.” Carlton agreed, a sly smile on his face.

They spent the remainder of the day being flown about by Carlton and that evening, as promised, they had dinner in the charming town of Taos.

The following morning, Brand and Ariel said their good bye’s. Gabriel handed Ariel a small basket filled with all sorts of goodies for the road. After Hug’s all around they drove the ranger down Carlton’s long driveway, both lost in thought, on their way to Bryce Canyon and Zion National Parks.

* * * *

Brand and Ariel spent the next week enjoying the lush canyons and intricately wind carved stone spires of the two best parks in Utah. It was wonderful to be out in the wild again and soon the couple had not a care in the world. They would go hiking or climbing all day long and return to a meal and a good night’s sleep, the simple joys of a natural life. Though the spark of it seldom Carlton’s proposition was never far from their thoughts.

They went into California by way of Las Vegas. Brand and Ariel, being the people they were, couldn’t help but stop to over for a night and they got incredibly bombed in that capital city of over indulgence. They gambled some and entirely forgot about everything serious in their lives for a time. Jetting about the strip from casino to casino. It amused Brand’s bombed brain no end that one could pay for taxi’s with casino chips, like they were the local currency, which, I guess they are.

But one can only take so much of intellectual abandon and frivolity and so the following day found them, considerably hungover, driving through the desolate Mohavi desert on their way to the coast. It was not a pretty sight, they both felt like the living dead. Thank the powers that be for sun glasses, lest there wearers evaporate in the light of day.

Brand wanted to show Ariel the beautiful coastline around the Big Sur area. They drove all the way to Bakersfield that day taking a short cut which skirted the northern edge of Edwards Air Force Base. Making good time in the reliable rangerover the couple pulled into a motel just a few miles east of highway 5 an hour before dark. Both were most relieved indeed that this particular day was ending.

The next day they cut over to the coast on a California state highway and stopped by the Hearst castle 'San Simian'. Brand had been there once before when he was very young and it had left a lasting impression of elegance, decadence and indulgence of that period in American history in his mind.

Brand and Ariel spent that evening as well in a motel just below Monterey bay.

Things were starting to vaguely bother Brand. He remembered this area as a beautiful coastline free from the abomination of massively compacted people the southern portion of the state always had been.

The area had certainly changed. You could barely see the Ocean for the condo's and motel's. There were fast food places everywhere and driving was a nightmare of RV convoys and uncaring people hanging on their bumper. Gone was the serenity he remembered, replaced by a glut of pleasure seekers and the tacky establishments catering to their desires.

The countryside remained much the same until the pair were more than a hundred miles above San Francisco. San Francisco itself being a machine like maze of people and traffic. After San Raffle the country opened up again and their dismal moods began to pick up a bit.

They made the Humbolt red woods that afternoon and set up their camp site. The cathedral like trees created a peaceful and reverent atmosphere and they soon began to relax again.

“God that was awful this morning, how can people live like that?” Remarked Ariel as twilight was approaching.

They hadn’t spoken much that day as they were both still somewhat in shock at the massive amount of input generated by that sprawling urban hive.

“It must be that a portion of their spirit turns off I think.” Brand replied. “I can’t see it any other way. Living in that monstrosity would certainly kill my soul bit by bit.”

“It’s sure got me thinking of Carlton’s offer again, been thinking about it off and on all day. How about you?”

“Yes, I admit it has crossed my mind more than once in the past two days. One other thought has been popping up as well, which is; there are way to many people on this planet. It’s a form of pollution in it’s own right I think.”

“Yes,” Brand agreed. “were effectively reproducing ourselves into extinction. Why we as a species can’t see that is beyond me. When I see those over indulgent unintelligent types with six kids polluting the beaches and parks with their trash it makes me want to vomit. You know of course their progeny will follow in their foot steps until the planet is one huge garbage heap. Perhaps I’m being harsh but I swear Ariel some of our fellows do not care about anything which doesn’t pertain directly to their pleasure or well being.”

“Some one has to do something Brand and I guess it might as well be us.” Ariel replied a tone of resignation in her voice.

“Meaning that you’re thinking of us accepting Carlton’s offer?” In his own mind Brand had been becoming more and more converted over.

“Yes, we may never get such a chance again to do something worthwhile with our lives. I know you believe in destiny as well as I do and meeting Carlton can’t have been just mere chance.”

“Well OK then, how about if we call him tomorrow and tell him we’re interested. We’ll make arrangements to meet somewhere near Crater Lake and see if we can’t work all this out?” Brand suggested.

“OK, I really think we would kick ourselves the rest of our lives if we didn’t at least pursue this a little. In the mean time how about we go into the tent and see if I can remove your clothes with out using my hands?” Ariel asked with a sly grin.

Smiling Brand turned out the lantern.

* * * *

Diamond Lake is just to the north and a little bit west of Crater Lake. Carlton had rented a secluded lodge on the east shore. They were sitting on the deck over looking the lake, the air cooled by the mass of nearby water from the near hundred degrees of late August in southern Oregon.

“Well I presume you’ve been thinking quite a lot about our proposed project.” Carlton began.

“Hasn’t quite left my mind since we last saw you I think.” Brand answered. “We need to work out quite a lot of details if this is going to work though.”

“Such as?” queried Carlton.

“Well, the first thing being, were going to need a means of living. I would probably have left my company anyway sooner or later, probably would have gone into consulting or something. Thing is, there would have been some degree of security involved for Ariel and myself down the road. Not that there’s to much security in this world anyway but it’s something we need to consider.”

“Secondly, I’ve been thinking a great deal about the structure of our potential organization and I have some idea’s and requirements along those lines as well.”

“May I get anyone some refreshments before you begin?” Asked Gabriel.

Brand and Ariel hadn’t been too surprised at all to see Carlton’s housekeeper in Oregon. Carlton’s and Gabriel’s relationship was obviously much more than that of employee and employer.

“Yes Gabriel,” Carlton answered. “how about some drinks and some light snacks?”

Gabriel went up the stairs back into the lodge to comply.

“Let me answer your concerns by the numbers. I’ve been thinking about number one for some time now too. I’ve not too many years on this planet left, ten maybe twenty if I’m lucky. I’ve always intended to leave a major portion of my estate to Gabriel, though she isn’t, I think, aware of this and I would like to keep it that way for now. The reason I mention that is I think a good way to go would be to set up a front organization with Gabriel as the head.”

“Let’s call it an environmental research foundation for now. This foundation could employ the both of you as researchers thereby providing you with a legitimate income, health coverage, pension plans etc... It would also provide a good front for you both to be traveling the world, which I suspect we will be needing to do quite a bit. Further this foundation could be secretly funded by me thereby keeping my name and companies out of the spot light and away from prying establishment eyes. Would salaries of say, seventy five thousand for you Brand and fifty Thousand for you Ariel be sufficient?”

“More than, Carlton and I like the idea of a private research foundation a lot. It’s along the lines I was mentally pursuing as well.” Brand replied.

“Now for concern number two,” Brand began. “If we’re going to do this I will require some degree of freedom of action in establishing organizational systems and structures. Some initial seed capital will also need to be available, though I believe I may have come up with a way of providing some down the road. Your involvement should be somewhat insulated from the actual core, at least until we’re well established.”

“Yes, great minds do think alike,” Carlton smiled. “I would cover that one with a secret account in

Geneva or the Caimans you could draw from. Brand one of the first things that struck me about you is your gift for creative organization. I don't believe I've ever met any one who's mind jumps to a problem the way your's does and I have no hesitation at all with giving you a free hand in this area. Provided of course, for now, that you keep me informed."

"All of this sounds wonderful you two, but what's our first move to be?" Ariel asked as she pitched a small stone into the lake.

"Well," Brand began. "we need to recruit some additional core members, a military type, a good accountant, a media person and someone to front the religious organization I intend to use as our international cover."

"Secondly we need to do a lot of research in to the legal and social issues we're going to run into in setting all this up. Third we need to purchase and begin to create our headquarters."

"Ariel dear, there's no one better suited to research the involved issues than you. I would like to pursue the recruiting but no final decision will be made on any individual without a through background check and approval by all of us."

"And I would like to look into that last area." Gabriel remarked, returning with a tray heaped with drinks and snacks.

Smiling Brand said "Just who I had in mind. I would like our headquarters to be somewhere here in the North West and located on the coast for operational reasons, if everyone agrees?"

"Fine by me Brand." Carlton replied. Ariel and Gabriel both nodded assent. "I'm curious what's this 'religious front' you have in mind?"

"Voudoun, I've been interested in it for years and have done considerable research into it over time. Contrary to the western stereotype Voudoun is not involved with evil or black magic and all that Hollywood

nonsense, but instead is a living and environmentally conscious religion. Another nice aspect is that it is completely compatible with any other organized religion especially christianity.”

“Interesting,” Carlton mused sipping a tall chilled concoction of some sort, “tell me more.”

“The typical member looks at himself as a ‘Servant of the LOA’. That is the spirits. Interestingly enough this has nothing to do with their creation myth or the spiritual administration of the Cosmos. The Voudoun serviteur’ will confirm the existence of an over God who is not too overly concerned with the day to day activities of man.

It is through the LOA however that the member modifies and deals with the issues of their existence, their day to day lives. These LOA, spirits, are by and large and for the most part ascended human beings, admittedly in most cases, very old humans. The roots of the religion are African with an interesting merger of east American indian deities and practices. A major component of the worship of these spirits is that they regularly possess and speak through the initiates of the Hounfor, the meeting place and house of worship of Voudoun. Festinating stuff Carlton, I’ll send you a few books if your really interested.”

“Yes please, I’d like that Brand.” Carlton requested. “Well then, looks like were off and running. Is there anything more we need to do for now?”

“No, I don’t believe so, does anyone else have anything to discuss?” Brand asked.

No one made a reply. “So then, I declare the initial meeting of the ‘Environmental Liberation Front’ Closed.” Brand exclaimed rising and lifting his glass in a toast.

“The Environmental Liberation Front, ELF huh, You been keeping this one under your hat for awhile my dear?” Ariel asked, rising from her chair as the group clinked their glasses together.

“Yes my love, I wanted it to steep in my mind for awhile.”

“ELF, I like it Brand. To ELF then, may it prove to be all that we hope it to be.” Carlton exclaimed raising his glass again.

“Well, If were all done conspiring for the day I’m going swimming.” So saying Ariel stripped of her shirt and shorts and dove from the deck into the water. Brand, laughing was close behind.

6. On the way home

Random made Walch’s dig four days later. The monsoon season starting sooner than expected that year had made the primitive dirt roads almost impassable.

He was still shaken and incredibly angry at his last experience before leaving Nairobi. After he had regained his identification and credit cards through the ministrations of the local American Express office, he immediately went to his hotel and checked out. Figuring the hotel would be the first place anyone would look for him, it would be better to keep moving.

Random, however was not a man to be turned from his will so easily. In fact, the experience had the opposite effect on him. He had become more determined than ever to get to the source of this mystery. Actually Random was pissed, and like a terrier he would sooner die now than give up his grip on this little affair.

Upon his arrival in Eldoret he acquired back country gear. A backpack, a tent, some freeze dried food, and a local guide. A grizzled old native bent with age, the people at the hotel however had recommended him highly.

Random spent the next week canvassing every tribe within a fifty mile radius of the dig, finally he reached a consensus concerning his questions, which was, that the answers he sought were not to be found here.

Walch was of no help either. Involved as he was with his anthropological endeavors, he hadn't even been aware of the existence of the local poaching trade or the ELF communique'. Random had stopped by his operation the third day of his trip, the anthropologist had been hospitable but was obviously pre-occupied with his own problems. Random and his guide left the camp the following morning.

Tribe after tribe had responded the same way to the question; 'Why do you no-longer hunt the savanna?' From the obvious nomadic groups to the more stationary ones residing in colonized areas, all told him, through his guide, variations of the same story.

"The God of the Forest is hunting now, protecting his children." they said. "We fear his anger and hunt no more."

Random asked, again through the enigmatic guide, how long they thought the God would hunt the hunters and to that query received only shrugs. Apparently, these people truly believed that their ancient religious figure literally walked the earth, protecting his brethren, the animals, from the african tribal hunter.

Random asked what they would do now that they could no longer hunt.

“It is not important.” An elder of the tribe replied. “My father’s father spoke of a time when there was no food for the people. The gods take away, but they also nourish. We will worship the gods as always.” he said.

Replies were again uniformly the same, they would survive as their ancestors had...somehow.

After two weeks full of experiences akin to these, frustrated and tired, Random made his way back to Nairobi. The answers he was seeking he was now sure were not to be found in Kenya.

Random settled into the acrid smelling airline seat resigned to another eighteen hours at 33,000 feet. He contemplated changing his plans and getting off in London for a brief respite to rejuvenate his spirit with the ever flourishing english.

He wanted very much to go home and just rest from this search, but he knew himself and knew he’d find no peace there until he found some answers to his mystery.

Just before the planes departure, a slender, graceful woman of indeterminate age took the seat beside him and buckled in. After take off, the stewardess came around for drink orders and after placing his, Random broached conversation with the lovely lady seated beside him.

“Parlez-vous anglaise, madame?” he asked politely.

Random caught his breath as the woman’s striking coin colored eyes met his. “Mademoiselle. Et oui, Je parle l’anglaise.” she smiled brushing her silver hair from her shoulder to let it fall behind her back.

Her face struck Random as that of a queen. The strong jawline and cheekbones supporting a high

forehead from which her thick hair fell without a ripple, like a veil straight to her hips the color of molten glass, the ocean in the late afternoon sun.

Finding his tongue, Random said “My name is Random Waterson. It is a pleasure to meet you, mademoiselle.”

“I am Anna Belleau. Enchantement.” she replied in a velvet soft voice with a heavy french accent. “You are american?” she asked.

“Yes, I am. And you are french, n’est pas?” he asked mixing his french and english as so many english speaking french people did.

“Yes, I am on my way home to Nantes. I will be happy to see the ocean again. I have been too long away. Et vous? Do you return to America, monsieur?”

“Yes and I too will be glad to see the ocean. I live on America’s west coast, in Oregon.”

She favored him with another smile and sipped her wine. Random, finding himself atypically without words, thought he could fall in those huge luminescent eyes... Catching himself staring, he turned and reached for his drink, regretting now his choice of bourbon for he no longer wanted to sleep through this trip.

“I have travelled to America a few times.” she said turning toward him in the small seat. “It is busy and interesting, like Paris, but everything is so new...” pausing as if trying to find the right words, “Your people remind me of parisians,” she finally continued smiling “always hurrying around with nothing to do.”

“I also found Paris that way,” Random grinned. “Like New York with a foreign language.”

“All of America is not like that though.” he continued. “There are vast landscapes where few people live, save in small isolated towns. The land in some places seems immense. You could take a horse out into it and ride for days and days, and never see a soul.”

“I would like to see such places.” she said. “There are few left in europe; some, but they grow

smaller and smaller. That is one reason why I come to Africa sometimes. I love the great deserts and forests. The simplicity of the people, their passion for life itself.”

Her eyes having grown sad, sparkled once again with excitement as she described the tribal dances around huge bonfires in the night.

Random found himself engrossed with this charmingly beautiful woman speaking so enthusiastically about, of all things, African tribal religion. He found himself wanting to know more about this lady, her way of life, beliefs, likes and dislikes. Surprisingly, she seemed to want to tell him.

“About four years ago, I became a member of the A. V. A.” she said.

Startled, Random said “Voudoun? You are involved in Voudoun?”

Everyone by now knew about the A. V. A. it had become the new fashion in America due in part to that piece on sixty minutes. In five short years it had spread from little Haiti in Miami to the west coast of America to it’s now near world wide status.

Seeing the sudden change in his expression, she said “Yes, does that disturb you?”

“No, no. Well, it’s just that I never knew that voodoo was terribly accepted in France and,” he hesitated wondering how much he should reveal to this charming stranger of his recent adventures. She waited patiently for him to continue.

“Well, I’ve recently had my curiosity peeked by a certain, um..., artifact that appears, superficially, at least both gruesome and, well, possibly related in some way to voudoun.”

“Really, what? Perhaps I can answer some questions.”

Regarding her, Random sighed. The need to talk to someone about his confusion and pain over the past two weeks slowly overcoming his innate reserve.

“If I start at the beginning, you will become bored with me,” he said “which can be bothersome when trapped with someone on a plane for six hours or more.”

“Peut-etre. Try me.” she said with a smile. “I promise I’ll let you know if you become tiresome.”

Relenting to her graciousness and his own internal agitation, he told her his story starting in the voodoo supply shop. “and so here I am flying home, the beginnings of an answer, perhaps at hand and not at all sure what my personal feelings will become, in the end.”

After contemplating his words for a few moments she spoke.

“Africa has always been poor in material things, but rich in culture and spirit. Do not pity or mourn for them, believe it or not they are happy, at least the desert and jungle tribes are. Those of the cities can be somewhat different”

“They will starve.” he said “How can I not feel sorry for them.”

Anna dropped her eyes, staring at her hands, trying to find words to explain to this american materialist the superficiality of his own culture and the innate spirituality of the tribesmen.

“It is true,” she said “that those who have moved to the city and bought into the ways of avarice will suffer, for their health has become based on their physical well being.”

Placing her hand on his arm to catch his eyes, she continued “But the people whom you spoke to in the outback do not count their success by the number of their possessions. Their spirit is the largest portion of their existence.”

“They don’t care, Random.” she said, clenching his arm trying to make him understand. “To them, death is a part of life, an ascension, a new dimension. They want to live, yes. But they also want to die. Suffering holds no fear for them, it is not the same for them as what you see. They are who they are regardless of your perception of them.”

Random pulled his eyes away from her, a glimmering of understanding nearly within his grasp kept sliding just out of reach.

“If you believe there is more to life beyond this sphere, what becomes most important? The spirit

you nurture in your actions upon this earth or the possessions you acquire during your time here?” she asked.

Random signaled the stewardess for another drink and wondered if the road this lovely creature was trying to lead him down would leave him with everything he ever found precious, or simply penniless.

“I have disturbed you with my words more than I have comforted you.” she said after a moment. “I am sorry.”

Random glancing at her, noticed the graceful lines of her profile were drawn taut with self recrimination and he found that he did not like to see her sad.

Reaching over and touching her forearm, he said “It’s okay. You’ve just given me some more things to think about.” She looked into his eyes and gave him a tentative smile. He patted her arm.

“That’s better.” he said.

“I have told you about myself, will you not tell me then about you? Prior to the previous two weeks that is.”

Random once again struggling with his natural reluctance, responded scarcely.

“I am a free lance science writer. My wife died three years ago. I’m agnostic...I think.” he smiled.

“I am sorry about your wife.” she said. “But what does ‘agnostic’ mean en francais?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. It means that you’re not sure if you believe in the existence of a god or not. Not that you don’t, it’s just not that you do either.”

“That sounds american.” she said. “But believe me, monsieur, God does not cease to exist just because you don’t believe in him, nor does it mean that he does not effect your life.”

“Have you ever been possessed by the spirits? I understand that’s a common occurrence in Voudon.” he asked.

“Oh yes. I think it must be wonderful, although of course I do not remember the time I spend with

them. I feel fuller after the dance.”

“Fuller? In what way?” Random queried, his eyebrows arching together in concentration.

“Um, like there is more of me, or, like I am more aware of myself in relation to the universe. Tu comprend?”

“No, not really.”

“It is difficult to explain.” she said apparently not willing to make any further efforts to do so.

After a pause, she asked. “How do you feel about the natural world, the earth?” changing the subject.

“I love the world.” Random replied. “Nature, wildlife, and honor the sanctity of that life. That’s why I tried to bring evidence against the E.L.F. to the Embassy.”

“So you believe that human life is more important than animal and natural life.” she said making it a statement.

“No. I believe all life is valuable. I don’t believe that people or animals should be tortured and killed. To kill one in order to save the other is not an acceptable solution.”

“You believe there is another way?” she asked.

Random turned back to his drink, his mind confused once again by the paradox’s of his own musing’s. The crux of the matter again, his disgust of terrorism and his certain knowledge that there was indeed no other way to stop the destruction of his planet.

“I don’t know.” he finally said.

They flew on in silence then for more than an hour ordering their meals and pretending to watch the film. Finally, Anna spoke again.

“Are you staying over in London or catching a connecting flight straight home?”

“I had reservations straight through,” he replied “but I have been thinking of changing them and

spending a few days in London.”

“I am going to be in London this evening and then tomorrow I will be taking the train to the coast and the hovercraft across the channel.”

Random sensing the implied invitation, met her glance.

“Would you join me for dinner this evening?” he asked holding her gaze. She smiled her reply back to him, coquettishly lowering her eyes.

“Enchantment, monsieur.”

Random grinned his mood considerably lifted, he wished only that this plane was headed for Paris, that most romantic of cities, instead of London. Anna’s thoughts, unbeknownst to him, were falling along the same line.

Later that evening, dressed in hastily acquired black tails, a silk white shirt and a smart bow tie, Random helped her into a cab.

“I hope you like cabaret.” he said as the cab pulled up in front of the elegant old building in the Lichen District.

“Oui, J’adore ça.” she said smiling.

They ascended the ornate stairway and took a private booth in the center of the first balcony. Ordering a bottle of Don Perion and a cheese plate, they settled in for a long, romantic evening.

The wine, the food, the exotic entertainment, and the company did much to ease Random’s recent experiences to the back of his mind, abandoned for the moment in favor of genial leisure.

As the dance floor was thrown open to the audience after the show, Random enjoined his lovely companion for a dance. With wine flushed faces they whirled about the floor grinning into one another’s eyes. As the evening progressed and the dances became slower, they melded together as if meant to be one.

Anna her head against his shoulder, felt the Loa Erzulie's presence upon her. She sighed in contentment, raising her face to Random's. By mutual unspoken consent, they left the cabaret for more private quarters.

Upon entering her suite, Random was surprised at the spaciousness of Anna's accommodations, such services were rarely found in western europe. It was all one large room, with a huge fireplace on the left hand wall, a king size bed occupying the largest part of the room on the right, and a hot tub in the corner just past the fireplace, adjacent to a door assumedly leading to the bathroom. A large, standing wet bar filled the corner on the far side of the bed. Random smiling, taking in the scene decided that it was going to be a joyous evening of total decadence.

Anna crossed the room to the jacuzzi, and turned the tap, filling it with hot, steaming water. Random, taking the clue, went to the wet bar to investigate its provisions. His smile spread to a grin as he found the champagne in the small refrigerator, uncorked it and after locating two suitable glasses, set them on the side of the hot tub.

Anna lit four candles at each corner of the steaming, bubbling bath. Straightening, she turned and wrapped her arms around Random's neck, drawing his face to hers, their lips met, soft, warm, the heady rush of wine, adventure, and atmosphere overcoming them.

Random wrapped one strong arm around her waist, drawing her lean, straight body against his own. His other hand fell adroitly to her breast, feeling the warm, roundness of her flesh through the thin silk of her evening gown.

She ran her long fingers through his sandy hair, her tongue finding his, she tightened her embrace, one hand running down the hard length of his bicep.

She felt his excitement mount as he expertly unzipped the back of her gown and let it slip from her

shoulders to the floor. She then pulled back from his embrace to remove his tie. That undone she proceeded, now naked except for silk stockings, to unbutton his shirt, kissing each inch of bare skin exposed. Sinking to her knees, she heard him sigh as she unfastened his belt and proceeded to remove his slacks and drawers. Her hands firmly caressed his legs as she pushed his pants and underwear down and her moist tongue explored his groin.

Random felt himself harden and gasped, his fingers now entwined in her long silver hair, as she took him into her mouth. In all his experience with women, this he liked the best. The soft, warm, wetness of a woman's mouth around his manhood.

Random gasped and reaching down raised her to her feet, kissed her gently, and then guided her into the hot, steaming water of the jacuzzi.

They sank into the bubbly water, each a glow with the chemistry of passion.

Anna, her coin colored eyes misty, lowered herself on top of him, the water rising to the middle of her waist and Random's shoulder's as he lay on his back beneath her.

They both moaned with pleasure as he entered her. He reached a bubble covered hand to the back of her head, and drew her lips down towards his as he arched, pushing himself deeper into her.

She submitted to the pull of his hand behind her neck, leaning down to kiss him, then raising herself, sighing softly as he penetrated her deeply. They then started rocking in unison to that magick rhythm all lovers hear.

Random opening his eyes to see her sitting atop him, bubbles sliding from her shoulder, down over the outward curve of her breast and clinging to the inward curve of her waist where her rocking form met the water.

Faster now they moved, causing waves of water to splash over the edges of the tub onto the surrounding ceramic tile floor. He drew her down once more, urgently pressing his body into hers, his lips

to hers. They moved together, suspended in time, as their bodies built toward climax, water, bubbles, flesh, and the unintelligible language lovers share, binding them together as he finally came inside her. She kissed his neck, breathing heavily as he clenched her form tightly to him in the after shocks of their lovemaking.

Later, they leaned back, heads at either end of the tub, sipping champagne and enjoying the closeness they continued to share. Finally, skin pruned, they crawled out of the now limpid water, and after toweling one another dry, moved to the huge bed and to a drunken, sated, sleep.

The next morning, Random awoke to her warm form snuggled against his side, the smell of her perfume and their lovemaking still faintly in the air. He lay where he was for a moment, content in her embrace. As his mind slowly unfolded toward full consciousness, he felt the need to rise and gingerly disentangling himself from her, headed for the bath.

She joined him in the shower and they bathed one another, giggling like children. After toweling dry, Random went to retrieve his clothing strewn about the floor. Dressing, he watched Anna brushing out her long, wet, silver mane. She caught his eyes in the mirror and smiled her contentment at him.

Coming to her and resting his hands on her shoulders, he asked “Do you have to leave for the coast today?”

“No. I had thought to spend the day shopping at Harrod’s, but I am now hoping that you will drive me out to Bathe for the day.”

“Only if we can stop at Stonehenge.” he replied grinning.

Returning his smile, she said “You change and get the car and I’ll be ready by 8:00. We’ll have breakfast in Hampton or somewhere?”

“In an hour and a half then.” he said bending to kiss the top of her head.

They spent the day jaunting about every roadside town between London and Bathe. Arriving there finally at dusk, Anna suggested the Huntsman for dinner and Random found himself falling in love with this frenchwoman. "Tsk, tsk." he thought to himself, "A romantic liaison is sufficient." reprimanding his heart.

Driving back to London that night, Anna broached his tender subject again. Pulling a card out of her purse, she said "This is my address and number. I know that you are not ready yet to talk about the your recent problems, both circumstantially or spiritually, but hope when you are ready, you will communicate with me." the last statement ending on a questioning note.

Random, at the wheel, glanced at her, his feelings for her suddenly overriding his rationalizations. After a moment, he grinned saying "What am I going to do with you?"

"Je ne sais pas." she replied a worried frown marring her features.

"Shhh." he said putting his arm around her shoulders and pulling her as close as the gear shift would allow. "Perhaps my current story will bring me to europe again."

Helping her out of the car at her hotel, he noted the fullness of tears in her eyes and drew her close, but he could think of nothing to say to her that would be both comforting and also the truth. Drawing away, she looked into his eyes, and lightly caressing him from temple to jaw, she turned and walked into the hotel without another look back.

Random watched her go and wished his heart were not wrenching so.

Upon reaching her room, Anna calmed herself with a drink from the room's bar and picked up the phone.

"I'd to place an international call please....U.S.A. area code 503-367-2359."

"United Environmental Research Foundation." said a voice on the other end of the line.

"Secure to six operator."

"A moment." Replied the voice on the other end. After a moment another voice came on the line.

“Station six secure, release.”

“Agent P. Prime, please.”

* * * *

In a small run down tenement in east Los Angeles a group of teenagers sit around a small fire burning in a steel drum. They are all decked out in leather and jeans with a profusion of chains and steel spiked devices.

“Hey Johnny this is great bro, Yo, these bastards have been stinking up the hood for years with their smoke and chemicals.”

“Yeah well, let’s go an blow the shit out of them. That’ll get some attention” A large black boy answers. He is dressed in a silk fighting arts jacket and a baseball cap perched on his head at a rakish angle.

The group of kid’s move down the garbage littered hallway, down the stairs and into the street.

“This gang ain’t gonna take no mo from those biscuit headed ass ho’s.” The boy in the fighting arts jacket continues. “Ever since we seen that vid on that ELF, I got this idea blood. Blow the fuckers up an re-take the hood for the living.”

The leader, Johnny, is in the lead as the gang round’s a corner to face a large chemical plant spewing sulfurous smoke and stink into the air.

By the side of the building stands a lot with hundreds drums of used chemicals leaking there contents into the ground behind a chain-link and barbed wire fence.

Johnny reaches into his jacket and removes two grenades, he hands one to the leather clad youth at his side. Grinning at each other they pull the pins and toss the grenades into the storage yard.

The explosions occur as the gang is running back the way they had come, laughing and shooting out

street lights as they go.

Events very similar to this were beginning to occur all over the globe.

7. The Core

It had all worked out much as Brand had outlined three years ago at the lake in Oregon.

In Miami's Little Haiti He had found just the person he was looking for to head up the front organization. A native Haitian by the name of Titus Rigaud, who had been born to an upper class family and educated abroad. An elegant man, tall with an aristocratic bearing possessing the dress and mannerisms so typical of those schooled in Britain and France.

Titus had eventually come home to Port-Au-Prince where his family lived and had taken to Voudoun because as he himself said, 'the LOA would not leave me alone'. Titus's grandfather had been a powerful Hougan, which is a combination of priest, healer and councilor, in a village on the periphery of Haiti's capital city. Titus had 'inherited' his spirits. He spent many years under the guidance and supervision of the older man who had now become his spiritual 'Father'.

Titus's own parents had rejected the LOA and had become, as so many of the upper class Haitians had, westernized and lived now in the city.

He had practiced his craft for a time after his grandfather's death and subsequently 'taken up the asson' in the same small village where his grandfather had lived and worked for so many years.

Titus had also taken a degree in medicine and so he was in the unique position of being able to take care of his societe' with the best remedies of both worlds.

Titus had been very happy for many years, fulfilled by the feeling he was doing good in his work.

Until that dark time at the end of the Duvalier regime, when terror had stalked the land and Voudoun had been used to rule the people with fear.

Eventually, he had to flee the tiny island in fear of his life. He had crossed over to the United States and taken up residence in Miami.

Titus had been lucky enough to gain the status of a political refugee' and several years later had become a naturalized citizen.

Since that time, he had continued to practice medicine and his craft and had become known throughout the Haitian community as a most powerful and respected Hougan indeed.

Brand had to spend quite a lot of time locating Titus, the Haitian's being somewhat understandably closed mouthed when it comes to Voudoun. Eventually though, he had located his man and had then courted him by becoming a disciple. He had taken initiation and served for a time as an assistant, Hounsi, to Titus. To this day, Brand had been profoundly effected by the experience.

At first Brand had been merely playing a part, enticing his man, but soon he succumbed to the lure of the LOA. It took him by surprise but one day his initial interest and rapport was transformed into real belief.

He had missed Ariel awfully during this time and so as soon as her tasks allowed, she joined him in Florida where they kept a small bungalow on the beach. The times the spent together when all their work was done gazing off into the sea were especially peaceful and restorative for the both of them.

In time, Brand felt Titus could be approached about the E.L.F. project. Voudoun is tied very strongly to the land and sea, a deep reverence for both was inherent in each seviteur'. The only stumbling block Brand thought he might have, was in the tactics he intended to use in furthering the aims of the group.

Once approached, however, Titus was most enthusiastic and readily accepted the offer the couple made him. He was not appalled at all by the terror tactics they intended to use. In fact, he had always

judged individuals who greedily destroyed our world as evil magicians of the left hand who deserved death at the very best. It was a natural attitude for a Voudoun practitioner. Brand's fears had been for nothing.

He was adamant that the newly established Hounfors would be first and foremost dedicated to the service of the LOA. However, he believed that the goals of the group were consistent with the wishes and purposes of the spirits. All in all, the situation suited Brand and Ariel well. They had no intention of using a church as a purely front organization, especially now that they were becoming voudoun servituer's themselves.

They decided to start by setting up a blind fund to establish Hounfor's in other cities around the world. The first was to be a test in Seattle, Washington. Titus would, of course, personally train each Houngan and oversee the organization. His Miami operation was to be handed over to his main assistant, his Houngenikon, during his absence and who was also ready to 'take the asson'..

The individual members of each group might or might not become members of ELF itself, but in any case Titus was not to be involved in the actual recruiting. His role was always to be that of spiritual leader and councilor.

The idea being that given time, at least one member of a particular Societe' would report directly to ELF headquarters.

* * * *

The ELF headquarters were also under construction during this time, Gabriel having found the ideal spot along the Oregon coastline. Most of the construction was to be underground, below an elegant home site sitting on twenty six acres of secluded, forested land.

The major construction was being performed under the guise of a privately funded data processing

institute in order to blind their trail.

There was to be a tunnel leading from the property into the sea itself and many hidden chambers and entrances.

Much of the more mysterious construction was being undertaken by members of Gabriel's extended family imported for this purpose to further hide their presence and intent.

Gabriel was becoming quite the administrator and had become whole heartedly dedicated to the principles and beliefs of the group.

Carlton had been taken quite ill during the past year, a form of inoperable lymph node cancer was gradually wasting him away. Gabriel was constantly flying back to the south west to care for him.

Brand and Ariel too were spending a lot of time at Carlton's home attending him in his illness. They had come to love him very much.

With that single exception, things were shaping up very well indeed.

* * * *

Brand found 'the hangman' in San Francisco. Robert MacLange was his real name but everyone around little Korea knew him as the hangman.

Robert, Bob as he liked to be called by his friends had been a SEAL, that special division of the navy involved in counter insurgency and covert operations.

Brand had spent a lot of time hanging around in bars which vet's and mercenary types frequented. Getting to know the regulars and figuring out who was for real and who the players were. It was a very primal environment, a person had to be ready to back up their words at all times, these types never played around at anything.

Brand had never been much into the macho world, he could certainly hold his own in a fight but violence was not his way. Dealing with this kind of environment day after day in the search for his combat vet was beginning to take it's toll.

Bob had an attitude, he was constantly getting into fights. Normally a quite person found usually with his back to a wall back in the shadows nursing a scotch. He would sit for hours staring off into space until some loud mouth would finally provoke him, and well, shit happens.

What caught Brand's attention was the couple of times Bob had taken exception to a conversation involving someone getting down on 'those environmental bleeding hearts'.

Loggers or fisherman down on the environmentalists for costing them work, Bob would invariably have to butt in and stick up for the concept of saving the planet. Brand could tell that it was something near to his heart.

Bob couldn't ever leave it alone either, he wouldn't keep to himself and spare himself the trouble. One instance had involved a couple of fisherman complaining about dolphins getting fouled in their nets. Brand watched as Bob went from simmer to boil as the men talked about throwing dynamite into the sea to scare the fish into the nets. Bob stood up and told the men that he would rather have one dolphin than a brigade of their type which, of course led to blows. The whole thing was over in a couple of seconds leaving the men out on the floor. Typically Bob, the hangman...

Brand finally got to become one of his friends by remarking after one of these altercations that if Bob ever needed any help with 'those uncaring bastards' He was the man for the job. They shared stories and drinks the rest of the evening, overtime, slowly they became close friends.

Bob, taught Akido at a nearby school and spent a great portion of his spare time diving in the bay or back packing in the surrounding national forrest's. It was on one these outings that Brand approached him about ELF.

The night was cool and cloudy as it was near the end of September. They were camped at the top of a ridge overlooking the Pacific ocean about eighty miles above San Francisco.

“Bob, there’s a question I’ve been meaning to ask you. Namely, where does that strong feeling about caring for the earth come from. That is, well, before I got to know you I saw you quite a few times messing with people, well I’d call them air heads personally, several times for shooting their mouths off against environmentalists.”

“Yeah,” Bob drawled slowly, it was hard to get him to talk about himself. “guess I’m kinda hot headed about all that, it really came out in me when I was in Africa Brand, though I’ve always held the world and wildlife in reverence. My father was heavily involved with the Sierra Group when I was growing up, guess I got it from him originally.” Bob replied swigging down some more whiskey.

“In Africa, when I was there I saw the government destroying more land and animal habitats than I could believe, I was disgusted, everyday more and more, just to house the rich people, never the poor, the people who need their help. They obviously had no real plan and were killing animals off at an alarming rate. I just, I guess picked up an attitude then and it’s been with me ever since.”

“You really care then? I mean, well for me it’s like this I’d trade an indeterminate number of those types in a second to save a little piece of this planet. You feel that way too?”

“Absolutely,” Bob’s voice was betraying his feelings, taking on an aggressive tone and raising in volume. “I think I’m a little worse though, I don’t think most of those types deserve to live at all. They take and take and never give back, the world only has so much to give and then it’s all over Brand. Wish there was some way to correct that little problem?”

“What if there is Bob?” Brand asked quietly with a slight grin to himself.

“What do you mean?” Bob asked, turning his face toward Brand in the fire light. “What can either

you or I do to change all this? It's like a landslide picking up momentum all the time. How can either you or I stand up against the machine, the multi-nationals, governments, there's just no way." Bob ended with a dejected tone.

"What if there was an organization, highly motivated, secret, well funded and integrated world wide into society. What if this organization was dedicated to making the users pay, Bob. You think they might have a chance to change things." Brand's face was glowing with an almost mystic light in the fire.

Bob considered Brand's words for a moment and then spoke. "What would be their means Brand, how would they operate? Reveal their crimes to the media or maybe take a stand themselves and retaliate? Bob, was becoming quite interested.

"Perhaps a little of both Bob, fact is such an organization does exist. Thing is, well you know I've come to like you a lot personally but the main reason we've come to know each other is that I've been searching for someone like you to head up the action arm of this organization."

"Ah, come on, your bull shitting me right." Bob smiled, handing Brand the scotch bottle. "You told me you we're involved in research for an environmental group or something. Your just yanking my chain, pipe dreaming aren't you." Bob just couldn't quite make the leap to belief.

"No Bob, the environmental thing it's just a front. We've been forming this group for three years now. It's the real thing and I'm offering you the position."

"Well, Damn this is heavy, Bob said shaking his head. I'm not sure... well actually yeah I think I am, if this is all for real then I guess I'm your man. Not only that I know a lot of my buddies who would be more than ready to get in on this. Damn Brand!"

"Well we'll need to talk about all that. The operational structure of this group is critical to it's success. But I'm glad to hear your interested." Brand replied with a good feeling.

"Tell me how all this came about. How many members are there? How are you organized? Where

does your funding come from? Bob, was leaning forward his elbows on his knees.

“Well it all started some time ago when I was on vacation with my girlfriend.” Brand leaned back against a rock and got comfortable, it was going to be a very long night.

* * * *

The Seattle Hounfor was established and in operation in early January of the following year. The group had incorporated as a nonprofit religious institution and opened their doors. They were called The American Voudoun Association and were outwardly and in reality dedicated to the service of the LOA and to the quest for spiritual truth and peace.

To most people the A.V.A. seemed to be just another one of those New Age groups and were as such left alone. They attracted artists, musicians, writers and much of the underground society of Seattle along with a strong showing of professional people searching for something to believe in. Which of course we're just the type of people they wanted to attract.

Titus for a time was to lead the group, until someone could be trained as a replacement. He performed the rituals nightly just as he had always done all his life.

Brand or Ariel were not involved at all in recruiting for ELF but were present from time to time to gauge how the recruiting process might be better accomplished. They also were serving in role's as assistants, Canzo's, as they had passed to this degree in their initiations, to Titus.

Their first initial members of this outer circle of ELF we're brought in by a couple who had been recruited by Jason Bourne a local artist who had been with them for about two years and had been initially approached by Ariel.

From that point on the membership grew and was constructed as Brand had laid out in cell groups.

Each only knowing their individual captains and each other. To the majority of the members of the A.V.A. none of this was apparent and the Voudoun societe' was just what it appeared to be.

Brand was well pleased at how it was all going and by June the membership had grown to several hundred about fifty of which were also involved in ELF.

The A.V.A was established in a converted office building facing pugit sound in one of the older portions of Seattle. One entered through the administrative offices and then passed through to the actual Peristyle itself.

There was also a passage in the rear of the building into underground Seattle, a portion of the old city which had been built over with more modern buildings.

The Peristyle was a large room with chairs along the walls, symbols representing the Hounfor's patron LOA's, the Societe' and Titus's coat of arms adorned the walls.

The Poteau-Mitan, or center post, stood in the center of the room about which the members danced and which was representational of the cross-roads, the portal through the mirror, was bright with stripes and the colored splattering representational of the Societe'.

The cross-roads was the transition point, a place through which the spirits, les' invisables, could access the world of matter. Around the Poteau-Mitan was where the vevers, coats of arms, signatures of the LOA's being honored were created.

At the west end of this room is where most the action takes place. There were three doorways on this wall each contained a room sacred to a patron LOA and where their alter resided. Only the Houngan his assistants and high initiates might enter there.

The Patron LOA of this hounfer were Titus's own: Erzulie goddess of love and luxury represented as a mermaid. One of the Ougan's God of war and metals and Damballa Wedo god of the sky represented as a great serpent following the course of the sun in the sky. Damballa's mate Aiyda Wedo was also

honored and She was represented as the rainbow.

Of course Legba the opener of the way, Ghede master of the abyss and Carrefour the young man at the cross-roads were honored as well as nothing could be done without them.

The Hounfor was beautiful and the rituals performed there were filled with joy and singing in the night.

At first the actual possession of the serviteur's by the LOA, a most basic facet of Voudoun, was frightening to the American mentality, but in time as the number of converts grew and their knowledge of the 'Mysteries' increased it became almost common place.

Both Brand and Ariel helped ease this transition. Brand possessed a very strong Ogoun and Ariel an Erzulie and they had both become accustomed to being mounted by their LOA's. Their example and consulting helped many a member to come closer to the spirits.

Soon the Hounfor's reputation grew and Titus regrettably had to begin turning away people as there was no room.

The time had come to let the organization grow and so in October of that year the second Hounfor in Chicago was established.

* * * *

The main construction of their headquarters was completed in August of that same year. Brand was spending a lot of his time outfitting it.

They were constantly bringing in equipment late in the night to avoid unwanted questions. Computers and communications systems, photographic darkroom and imaging equipment were brought into the complex. An armory was established with state of the art weapons provided through some of Bob's more

questionable contacts.

Under water diving gear was acquired which they used to establish an under sea mooring post just off the coast at the end of the tunnel. There were rooms furnished to house more than fifty full time people, these were to be the people who would monitor world wide communications and direct the larger operations.

A complete video studio was also set up for the creation of their outward bound communiques. There were workshops for metal fabrication, wood working and electronics. Chemistry and biological laboratories were created and stocked.

The main conference room itself was created with one wall glassed and open to the sea with a remotely controlled shield resembling the rock surface in which it was imbedded. In a way it was a very immediate reminder of what their organization was all about

The computer lab was Brand's baby, being as it was so close to his chosen profession. They spirited away software from J.P.L. and M.I.T. and anywhere else they needed to. The end result was a world class system for climate and environmental modelling. With this system ELF scientists were able to perform studies and analysis of current global conditions and identify potential trouble areas.

By October they had twenty three people living and operating out of these quarters.

* * * *

In late December Carlton passed over. Brand and Ariel met Gabriel at his home in the south west. Both Bob and Titus were also in attendance at the funeral. Though they had not known Carlton as well as the others they had met him and had grown to care for him as well.

A combination Christian and Voudoun ceremony was performed by Titus. Everyone felt Carlton's

spirit and presence.

They would meet back here in one year and one day to perform another ritual to reclaim his spirit from the great Abyss. All in all it was a very moving and special service.

Carlton had left behind two video tapes, one being his will the other a private message to the group.

In his will he established a trust to keep the environmental foundation alive and another to support the on going efforts of the A. V. A both to be under the directorship of Brand.

They remainder of his capital he left to Gabriel with sums set aside for Brand and Ariel as well as Bob and Titus.

They all decided to retain the hacienda in memory of Carlton and as a retreat and base for the south western area.

They all met at twilight in the main living room to view Carlton's last message tape, after they were all settled Brand keyed the video recorder.

"Friends" The tape began, Carlton was seated in his chair behind the desk in his office. He looked haggard and tired, "if you are viewing this I must be gone. Do not grieve for me as I have had a full and wonderful life and all of you, Gabriel, Brand and Ariel, and you Bob and Titus have granted me great peace of mind and the knowledge that perhaps I did make a difference. It is late November and I feel the wings of my death brushing me already and so I thought I would prepare this last message."

"By now I am sure you have viewed the tape of my will with my attorneys and you are aware of how I have dealt with my worldly possessions. If there is any one other than the people I previously mentioned present would you please have them leave the room now."

As there was not the group let the tape continue.

"In my will I left great sums for the furtherance of the A. V. A as well as the environmental organization we have set up. Both are to be under the administration of you Brand."

“Gabrial I have left the remaining portion of this wealth to you with the understanding that you work to further the aims which brought us all together in the first place. We have talked much about all this and you know my wishes in this regard.”

“I have also left you Brand and Ariel, as well as both of you Titus and Bob trust funds sufficient to, I believe, see you through the remainder of your lives on this world independently and quite well off.”

“However there is something which I never told any of you. I had many more holdings than I ever let on. It was always somewhat embarrassing to me to possess so much money that I preferred to keep the greater majority of it a secret.”

“Brand these funds are for the purpose of furthering the ideals and aims of ELF. They are in an account in Geneva and are accessible to you only or in the event of your death Ariel and Gabrial may draw upon this account. You may find the number for this account on page three hundred and sixty seven of the copy of James Joyce’s Ulysses in my library. These funds total as of today three hundred and seventy six million dollars and change. May they be sufficient to create a new chance for this planet, use them well.”

“Please know that in my last days the knowledge that you were all working toward our common goals provided me with great peace of mind. I could not be happier at how things are all shaping up. The speed and creativity with which all this is coming about is proof to me that we are correct in our beliefs and purpose. I love you all.”

“In times to come you will have to do things which are distasteful and which will cause you much soul searching, know that as my death approaches I believe with all my heart in what we are doing. If I am ever to be held accountable for what we are doing I will hold my head high.

The world is worth much more the individual inhabitants therein. If we are to survive as a race we much change, this much is clear. Sometimes change takes on a violent face, if that is the way it must be then

so be it. I know you all, I know your hearts and they are good. Never doubt yourselves or our purpose and do what you must to end the madness.”

“I love you all and will always be with you in spirit.”

The tape ended...

8. Arabian Nights

The meeting was taking place in the main conference room at ELF headquarters, it was mid October. In attendance were Brand, Ariel, Gabriel and Bob.

Also present were: Diana a stunning blond nearly six feet tall who was in charge of their communication network. Franklin Roth an impeccably dressed black man who headed up the intelligence division of

ELF, he was ex-CIA and had been recruited by the hangman, they had worked together for a time in Africa.

Nelson Raith was there representing the science and technology section. He was second to ELF's resident genius William VonSchreader.

VonSchreader was the man who had made much of ELF's apparent magick possible. He had also developed the Hyper-Kinetic Neutrino principle which was a power source much beyond current non-ELF technology. VonSchreader almost never attended meetings.

James Branwaith was the final member present to make a quorum of the Environmental Liberation Front's High Counsel. James took care of all the financial matters involved in the day to day activities of a world wide social conspiracy, he reported directly to Brand, the Prime.

Titus, the final member of ELF's inner core was not available as he was at work on yet another Hounfor, this one established just last month in Amsterdam.

The meeting was being recorded for the ELF archives so that a complete record of their activities and judgments might be available for future generations.

"Very well, let us begin," Brand said rising from his chair at the head of the table. Behind him was visible the storm stirred surface of the Pacific ocean about sixty meters up through the glass wall.

"We all know the purpose of this meeting. We are to hear reports from all sections on their readiness to move into Phase Two of our Revelation project. This operation, as you are aware, is our most ambitious to date. Involving every facet of our organization."

"As we speak our submarine is moving into position in the Persian Gulf near the port city of Al Basrah."

The ELF submarine was another miracle of VonSchreader's. Powered by an engine which utilized the Hyper-Kinetic Neutrino principle, a 'cool' fusion, which left no heat signature, it was virtually undetect-

able to all the normal surveillance methods then in use by the major powers. Resulting in unlimited movement and complete secrecy for ELF in international waters.

Further it used hydrogen as it's fuel source and had no by-product thereby giving the sub an unlimited range and a clean energy source.

The sub had been constructed right there at their headquarters, off shore, piece by piece. The project had taken over two and a half years, and the sub had only been finished and at sea for the past six months. The submarine was completely automated and could be captained by one individual if necessary. It contained enough space to house sixty people with room to spare.

"On board," Brand continued. "is a squad of Bob's best people. Additional commando's have infiltrated the capital city and have made contact with our agents in place. With that I will turn this meeting over to our friend 'The Hangman.'"

Bob rising smiled at Brand and addressed the group.

"In six hours time my squad will be ashore just to the south of Al Basrah. They are to be met there by my infiltration people with land transportation, the team will then proceed on to their target."

"They should be in place in the capital city about seven hours from then. Our agent in the target's forces will provide entry to the complex one and one half hours later. That delay of an hour and a half is provided as a contingency for unforeseen events."

"The squad will then take their man and escape in a helicopter to be appropriated by other members of my infiltration group and our agent in the targets forces."

"Two hours from then they will be back aboard the sub and heading for international waters."

"Our agent in place will provide suitable cover stories and misdirection allowing our people to exit unchallenged. He as well as our other people will then travel to safety overland to Saudi Arabia."

"Any Questions?"

“Yes,” Diana asked. “as I have been working on this one closely with you I am aware that all field commanders report readiness. Everything seems to be on-line and all contingencies prepared for, however what if the unthinkable happens and our people are captured?”

“My people are all, as you are all aware, hand picked by me. They are all dedicated to our principles and are battle hardened professionals all. They are ready to die in service of their ideals.”

“Further each has been provided with a means of suicide and they, I assure you, will not hesitate to use it if required. I pray that it will never be necessary.”

“As do we all Bob,” Brand spoke up. “If there is no further discussion on this subject let us adjourn to our studio where our second communicate is, I believe, about to be broadcast.”

The group rose and moved through the double doors and on down the hall to the studio.

“Brand,” James inquired as they were walking down the hallway. “how are we protecting ourselves on this one? Won’t someone be able to trace our transmission back here?”

“No, were transmitting on a tight bounced microwave beam to one of our people in Portland. At a prearranged time he will tap into the network feed lines. After our broadcast is finished a separate signal will destroy the receiving equipment.” Brand assured his colleague.

As the group moved into the studio the broadcast was about to begin. Seated behind an ornate desk was, a now familiar figure, attired all in black. Behind him on the wall was a giant ELF logo. The man began to speak....

“I am the spokesperson for the Environmental Liberation Front. This, our second communicate’ is intended to illustrate our organizations power and the degree to which we have penetrated all levels of society world wide.”

“We believe that biological weaponry is an abomination. You have been creating these substances for years. As if you were children playing with a chemistry set, creating one horror after another. If even a

small quantity of the more viral of these agents were loosed into the atmosphere it would make nuclear devastation look desirable.”

“This day we take away your toy’s. As you hear this broadcast all of these materials world wide are being rendered harmless. No longer will such practices be tolerated. Any country or organization which deals or trades in biological will be dealt with harshly from this point on. These substances are as of now forbidden.”

“We will not reveal the means by which we have accomplished this operation. We leave it to your imaginations. Suffice it to say that we possess technologies and abilities well beyond what you have in the outer world.”

“Either you are part of the solution or you are part of the problem.”

The ‘On The Air’ light in the studio went out.

“Well that sure should ruffle some feathers.” Bob remarked to Brand as the group was returning to the conference room. “Just how did we pull that one off any way?”

“We’re actually using a little misdirection there,” Brand smiled at Bob. “for over the past year this operation has been in full swing, it’s taken a very great percentage of our total resources.”

“Our people in positions of authority with the armed forces and research centers all over the world little by little have been sterilizing or destroying these substances. A little toy of VonSchreader’s has allowed us to neutralize a great percentage of these substances in place with a radiation device. They are so viral that they are almost never checked upon, which of course, played right into our hands. We implied the magick act as a stratagem to increase our opponents fear of our abilities.”

“Well I knew we were proceeding along these lines but I never just never knew exactly how. Did we really get all of the stockpile Brand?”

“No definitely not, but we certainly got the majority of the damn stuff and we’ve made our point.

From now on we will deal very harshly indeed with any group maintaining or developing biological weapons.”

“Quite a statement Brand, I can’t wait to see how the world reacts to this one.” Bob said as he reclaimed his chair at the conference table.

“OK, that was fun,” Brand said with a grin. “but now back to the measures at hand. Diana is communications ready for operation Arabian Nights?”

“Yes sir, my people are monitoring all public and military communications in the target area. As well as the listening devices we have planted in their headquarters. We’re ready to go.”

“Nelson, please brief us on the special weapons which our people will be using.”

Nelson a small man with that unmistakable scholarly look to him rose to his feet.

“We are employing a new tactical dart gun. The active ingredient is a derivative of tetrodotoxin a neurotoxin found in the puffer fish. A suggestion provided to us by our missing religious colleague. Nothing new, a revival of and an enhancement of a little bit Mr. Flemming used in his From Russia With Love novel. It will render it’s victim’s into a coma instantaneously and will wear off after approximately twenty four hours. We should be able to harm no one at all during this operation”

“Additionally,” Nelson continued after shuffling the papers around in front of him. “we are using a new device which is also based upon Dr. VonSchreader’s Hyper-Kinetic Neutrino principle which will render the wearer virtually invisible to both visual and electronic detection. It can be thought of as a hologram which bends the surrounding light and other energy fields about the wearer as well as entirely insulating them from heat and low level electrical emission detection.”

“Very well, Excellent work as always Nelson. My compliments again to William.” Brand said as Nelson took his seat.

“If there is no other discussion I suggest we all go off line and meet back here in five hours to

monitor the operation.”

The meeting began to break up. James however lingered behind.

“Brand, if you have a moment I’d like to discuss something which has been troubling me for some time now.”

“Of course James,” Brand replied sitting on the edge of the monstrous conference table.

“What’s been bothering you?”

“Well, I’ve been thinking about it for some time. If that energy source we use, is, as I understand it to be a clean energy and it use’s common hydrogen as fuel why don’t we make it available to the world. I mean wouldn’t it go along way toward solving a lot of the very problems were dealing with?”

“James, as a relatively new member of our organization you aren’t aware of the long debate’s which went on over that very question. When VonSchreader first brought us his great discovery there were many of us that wanted to do that very thing. However, we would also be giving away our greatest strategic asset.”

“We came to believe that it would not solve all the problems that on the surface it would seem to. ELF is actually about education Bob, were really trying to change a global attitude.”

“We came at last to the opinion that the power would be abused as is so common with forces of this nature in our society. Further we believe it would be more beneficial in the long run if it were used to further our cause. When new generations are alive on this world and we have succeeded in our cause of reorienting their social attitudes we will reveal this great gift to humanity.”

“It’s a tough concept Bob, but please think about for awhile and then let’s talk again, OK? Brand stood and turned to gaze out the window to the sea.

“OK Brand, I think I see your point. But as you suggest let me digest it for awhile and then we’ll

talk some more.”

“Go get some rest James,” Brand suggested, grasping James shoulder. “tonight’s party is going to be a long one.”

* * * *

About ten miles off the shore of Al Basrah the ELF sub sat in readiness. Jason Alexander was sleeping, as were the rest of the ELF covert action squad. At 7:00 o’clock PM local time his wrist alarm went off. Jason arose and did some isometric exercises, dressed and then went to round up his men.

After they had eaten and gathered their gear they all met in the sub’s aft deck.

“Alright, let’s get going. I need weapon’s, equipment and communication checks now. We’ll be leaving the sub in thirty minutes.”

Jason’s men moved to accomplish his orders. Jason himself went to check in one last time with the sub commander, Alan Webster.

“Alan after we return with our prisoner we will put out to sea in the inflatable. This is when we will be at our most vulnerable, even more than our flight back. As you know it’s critical that you locate us as soon as possible.”

“Understood Jason, as soon as your at a suitable distance out to sea activate your infrared’s and have no fear we’ll locate you. Good Luck, were all with you in spirit.”

The sub moved in to a distance of two miles from shore and Jason’s team exited through the underwater access door. As soon as they hit the surface they inflated their landing boats. It took twenty minutes more to reach the shore line.

The squad buried the gear they would not be needing until they returned and settled against the sand

dunes to wait.

At the prearranged moment the recognition signal flashed about two hundred meters to their north.

“Number one, answer with the infrared’s.” Jason ordered.

Seconds later a man dressed in clothes common to the country approached the group.

“Arabian Nights?” Questioned the newcomer.

“Elves in the wild.” Answered Jason.

They quickly exchanged greetings and jogged the distance to where two innocuous looking trucks were parked. The team quickly scrambled aboard and secreted themselves behind the false walls. They didn’t want to use the new camouflage gear yet as it hadn’t been tested in the field and it was a long trip to their goal.

The trucks began to move. Jason and his men settled down for the seven hour trip to their destination. As he always did during such times Jason settled into his posture and began a meditation technique he had learned during his tour of duty in the Far East, contemplating movement in emptiness.

* * * *

Elf headquarters was awash with activity. Reports were beginning to filter in through their network. They used encrypted signals which rode standard trans-Atlantic telephone calls bounced off satellites. There was no way for them to be intercepted or even discerned from the hundreds of thousands of such calls being made at all times.

The High consul was monitoring the activity from the main conference room on a number of monitors set into the rear wall.

“So, the action squad is on their way to the target?” Brand asked.

Everyone's nerves were in high tension, a lot of coffee had already been consumed. There was more available as this was going to be a very long night.

"Yes Sir, The communication tech replied. "there is no unusual activity on our target's communication channels everything is quiet."

"The sub has moved off to a distance of ten miles and is standing by in deep water." The tech added.

"Have we received the go signal from our people in the Capital?"

"Yes Prime," Diana replied from her seat at the communication console. "we received the go ahead before the team left the coast."

"Very well," Brand replied, trying to mask the apprehension he felt. "keep us informed."

* * * *

The team reached their target at 3:30PM local. They quickly unloaded the trucks and took up position at a warehouse near the underground bunkers of their target. One half hour later they received the prearranged GO signal from their agent in the target's complex.

"OK group, this is it. Activate the cameo gear." Jason ordered.

The twelve men appeared suddenly to vanish. If one looked closely at the space which they had just occupied you would have observed faint outlines of figures, like heat waves in the desert.

Moving like glass shadows they made their way through the streets the quarter mile to the side entrance to the bunkers. Jason knocked three times lightly on the metal door.

Immediately the door opened. In the dim light of the hallway a man dressed in a captains uniform of the target's forces appeared.

“Arabian Nights?” The obviously frightened man queried the night in a very tentative tone, his eyes straining to see in the darkness.

“Elves in the wild.” The spectral figure of Jason replied, placing his hand on the mans arm to help the captain locate him.

“My God, I can’t even see you, even in the light.” The man remarked.

“Enough, what’s the situation?” Jason gruffly asked.

“Sorry, your right.” the man replied. “The situation is as predicted, the target is where you expect. I’m going to prepare the chopper. I’ll expect you in ten minutes time.”

Jason could hear him mumble ‘incredible’ as he moved off down the hallway escorted by a pair of ghostly figures.

The team continued their mission moving in a prearranged order so they wouldn’t stumble over each other. Down three flights of stairs and into the hallway. They had still met none of the targets forces. Very poor defenses Jason thought to himself. The doors appeared to open them selves as the team made it’s way through the complex. At the entrance to the third level Jason peaked through a crack in the door. There were three men obviously on guard duty seated at a desk before a set of double doors. Jason carefully closed to door. Using hand signals he ordered his men to action.

The door again opened and two ghostly figures moved into the hallway. Three small puffs could be heard and the men at the small desk instantly slumped face forward in sleep.

Quickly the remainder of the squad took up their positions and Jason with three others behind him kicked in the locked doorway. Inside they moved through the entrance area into the living room on to the dark bedroom behind. Another puff was heard and the team quickly bundled the limp figure of a man out of his bed and into a body bag which, when sealed vanished into the gloom.

They retraced their steps through the corridors and stairways but this time continued up an additional flight to the roof.

The Captain and some of the rest of the infiltration people were waiting for them in a large military helicopter at the center of the roof. There were a number of soldiers slumped about the landing area. As the rotors began to turn Jason's team dumped their quarry inside and scrambled in themselves.

They were air born and heading south twenty seconds later.

* * * *

"They've left the Capital with the target Sir." The communication tech reported.

"Good." Brand replied. "Now comes the most dangerous part."

"How long will it take them to reach the coast?" Ariel asked.

"About forty five minutes. That is if everything goes as planned and no alarm is raised. The trickiest part is flying the chopper through the city and surrounding area without being challenged. Our agent has provided clearance but at this point anything can happen."

"How soon will we know? This is really chopping up my nerves." Nelson asked fidgeting about in his chair.

"As soon as their aboard the sub a completion signal will be sent." Bob replied gently, he seemed the most at ease of the group . "We can all relax at that point.

* * * *

As soon as the chopper cleared the last buildings of the capital city it took up level flight about

twenty meters above the sand dunes to avoid detection by radar. The Captain breathed a sigh of relief the trickiest part was over. He pushed the throttle forward and headed directly south.

Fifty minutes later the chopper was hovering over the coast. Jason's men quickly repelled to the ground with their package. The chopper immediately flew off to the west, there the Captain would ditch the craft in the sea and meet up with the other members of the ELF infiltration group. They would then make their way overland to Saudi Arabia and freedom.

Quickly the squad recovered their boats and put out to sea. It took the same amount of time as when they were coming in to reach the two mile distance from shore, each moment seeming an eternity. As soon as they were in position Jason activated the infrared's and swept the horizon seaward. Almost before he had completed his first sweep the light was answered. Jason's group paddled toward it until they found the sea marker. After placing breathing gear on their sleeping target they deflated their craft and slipped silently into the sea.

Gaining access to the sub again the crew helped Jason's squad remove their gear and took charge of their prisoner.

As soon as everything was secured the sub moved out to sea. They had made it without a hitch. Everyone aboard breathed deeply and began to relax.

* * * *

"They've done it Sir!" The tech almost screamed. "There in the clear and moving into international waters. The target is secure."

Everyone cheered, everyone that is except Brand. He was troubled by what he knew was to come next. Sometimes the methods they used troubled Brand deeply.

“Congratulations Bob,” Brand finally said. “your squad really pulled this one through.”

“Thanks, but thanks as well should go to the technology group. Those invisibility projectors and the dart guns are a great help in operations such as this.”

Everyone was slumping into their chairs, the hours of tension having taken their toll.

* * * *

Later, well into the morning hours, Brand was alone in the main conference room. His sleep had been troubled and he had finally given up and come up here from their rooms leaving Ariel sleeping.

He had developed the habit of coming here when he needed to think, staring out the sea window for hours on end. The absolute darkness of the sea at night seemed to help him order his thoughts.

He stood in front of the now dark glass and began quietly to speak....

“Oh Father, forgive us for what we do. Forgive me for my vanity in believing that I know your will. I have faith in that you know all things, past, present and future. That you see into our secret hearts. Please Guide my hand.”

“Great spirits and powers I accept that we serve you and your purposes in this world. But I have become tired and discouraged. I begin to question myself and our motives, I begin to desire peace and solitude. To be divorced from these earthly endeavors, as if I had never been involved.”

“To go back to the time before all this began... before we had taken any lives. when I was just a man like any other. Or a new chance so that Ariel and I might have gone away, by ourselves and found a place for us to be, in peace and anonymity.”

“I grow tired of the responsibility, the constant moral warfare going on in my head. I ask you to take this cup from me, to release me... but as always not my will but yours be done....”

He stood there awhile in silence gazing out to sea.

“Lover?” Ariel’s voice spoke behind him. Turning he saw her in the doorway. “You are troubled and sleepless again? I awoke and turned to find you and you were gone. I thought I would find you here.”

“Yes dear.” Brand replied in a quite voice. “I have been troubled for some time now by my role in all of this. I suppose it’s really the events which are to occur tomorrow which are at the heart of my sleeplessness.”

He slumped into the chair at the head of the table. Ariel came and sat beside him on the table edge.

“I worry about what this is all doing to your life. We could have been normal, had a normal life in peace. But I have dragged you into this and I really don’t know at all what our future will be like.”

“Oh Brand, How like you. Look at all you have done. This organization is, I believe, the last chance for this world, for the survival of our kind. I know you believe this as well as I do. You always question everything darling, sometimes to much. I have great faith in you as do all the others.”

“I believe you are and old soul, my love, one of the shining ones, destined for great things. Don’t torture yourself like this, as you would say, you’re indulging in self pity and it’s counter productive.”

“Yes my love, you’re right as always. You are a great comfort to me, I could not do what I do without you at my side. It’s OK, you know I’ll snap out of it, these moods invade my soul from time to time. I think it’s part of my nature to constantly question myself and my motives.”

“Yes dear, it is.” Ariel replied, putting her arms around him.

“It’s involved very much in what makes you, what you are, and I love you.”

“You know what we both need?” She asked, straightening from their embrace. “Some time away, a vacation, something frivolous. We need to turn you off for awhile. How long has it been since we both were away by ourselves?”

“You know your right, it has been years.” Brand remarked a questioning expression on his face.

“I get so involved in things that I miss the obvious, especially when they pertain to myself, my well being. Your right, we need to go off line and get away somewhere. Now would be a good time too, things are well in hand and I could afford a few weeks to restore my spirit, our spirits. Where shall we go?”

“How about the continent?” Ariel suggested. “We’ve always talked about how we would both like to go back and spend some time in the Old World.”

“Yes, that would be wonderful. I’ll set things in order tomorrow, and you can make our travel arrangements.” Brand was starting to become enthused about this idea.

“Thank you my love, as you always do you’ve brightened my mood considerably.”

* * * *

On a small secured island off the west coast of Africa it was but a few hours after dawn and events already were in motion.

Men were setting up video tape equipment. Others were rolling large drums toward a small cement pool.

“We about ready?” A figure in the black garb of ELF asked. “We need to be aboard the sub and at sea by 9300 hours local.”

“Yes Sir, a few more minutes.”

A man was brought forward, his hands secured by two more of the dark figures.

“What is going on?” He exclaimed, he spoke in english in a thick arabic accent. “You can’t do this. Who are you people? You have kidnapped a monarch of a sovereign country. I demand that you release me immediately.”

Roughly he was lowered into the small pool into the arms of two other men waiting for him. His

arms and legs were chained to the bottom leaving him prone with barely enough slack to raise his head.

“What is all this about? Who are you?” He almost shrieked the words as he strained against his chains, his voice now showing his fear.

The dark figures gagged him, and then left him alone in the pool.

“God, I really hate this.” The man behind the camera exclaimed to the dark figure who seemed to be in charge. “I mean I know this man is a real rat and deserves much worse than what we are about to do but, well, I guess I’ve just got to much compassion for this work.

“Yes Philip, as do I.” The dark figure replied. “But I know you believe in our cause as much as I do. These are object lessons for the world. The evil must end.

“Yes Carl, I know,” The cameraman replied, his voice resigned. “I’m ready now. Lets get it done.”

The dark figure took up a position before the camera.

“Signal me when you’re ready.”

Philip focused his lens, pressed the trigger and waved his free arm.

“I am the spokesperson for the Environmental Liberation Front. Yesterday forces at our command captured the individual secured behind me at his compound for crimes against the environment.”

“He, for his own political advancement, destroyed miles of shoreline and killed thousands of marine animals. He has poisoned the atmosphere with millions of cubic feet of fluoro carbons and other chemicals. We are not concerned with what you do to each other in this world. Or for what other crimes the international community believes this man to be guilty of.”

“We will not tolerate willful destruction of our world. This man has been judged and found guilty.”

The camera focused in on three dark figures at the edge of the pool as they began to pour the contents of their drums into it. The substance had the appearance of oil.

The scene now slowly zoomed in close to show the fear lined face of Saddam Husien as the oil

began to cover his body. He struggled and tried to scream against the gag in his mouth his eyes wide in fear.

Soon the oil covered him completely and a few bubbles rose slowly to the surface. The camera drew back to the spokesperson who spoke slowly his eyes dark orbs in the black matt of his face.

“No one is safe from us. As you do so shall be done unto you. Either you part of the solution or your part of the problem.”

The light on the camera went dark.

9. Your Conscience

Random arrived home late, more tired that he thought he'd ever been before. In spite of his brief days of leisure in London, he felt weary both in body and soul. Finally climbing the stairs to his bedroom, he dropped his suitcase on the floor, stripped his clothes off and fell into bed.

He awoke some twelve hours later at the command of his over full bladder, took care of that

problem and drank a glass of water, he then rolled back into his blankets once more.

Three hours later he drifted once again to consciousness feeling like he might be able to muster up the energy to live again after all.

He lay there in bed for awhile letting the memories of the past weeks roll past his mind in no particular order, trying to make sense of his recent experiences. After an hour of watching his mind run around in circles, he sighed and drew himself out of bed.

“Write it out.” he said to himself. “Get it in order.”

Since grade school Random had taken on the habit of writing out anything he felt confused or tormented over. He found that if he treated anything which troubled him in his life like a research article, the placing of the events and his feelings on paper would solidify into a cause and effect relationship, something easier to deal with.

Random felt that anything that could be captured in writing, could be dealt with in life, it was merely a matter of identifying the action-reaction sequences, identifying his feelings and the reasons for them. This method not only cleared his mind and set it in order, but also revealed gaps of knowledge, inconsistencies, and promoted clear headed research on any of the areas in question. It was Random’s way of drawing reason out of irrationality.

He took a brief, invigorating shower and after making a pot of coffee, moved into his study and turned on his computer. He sat there for a while contemplating how he should begin to unravel this story and finally decided to start at the beginning... Chicago.

After two days hard work, Random had found some interesting details that he’d forgotten and also revisited some unanswered questions.

Two things now stood out in his mind. The letter opener had been bought in a Voudoun shop, Anna had supported the ELF in their conversations and she was a voudoun practitioner. On a possibly

unrelated line, the question remained as to who had kidnapped him that night in Nairobi?

Random decided to pursue the first issue, investigate the A.V.A. The phone ringing at his elbow broke him out of his reverie.

“Random! Where ya been, thought you’d fallen off the edge of the earth.” Bill Ralston’s voice on the line began.

“Hi Bill. No just putting some things in order. What’s up?”

“I was wondering if you were going to be attending Smith’s press announcement in Miami Thursday. Thought we could meet and you could fill me in on your trip to Kenya.”

“Announcement?” Random asked eyebrows raised in surprise.

“You didn’t hear? Apparently he found a new site in Egypt and the initial excavation implies that it’s quite large. He’s going to fill everyone in on his theories.”

“Seriously a new site in Egypt? Interesting, do they know which dynasty? Well yes bill,” Random answered, laughing at his own professional excitement. “I’d be happy to meet you there, sounds interesting, I can get my questions answered then. I need a break from what I’m working on anyway. Where is ‘there’ exactly?”

Bill laughed. “Miami Convention Center. Welcome back to the real world Random.”

Random grinned into the phone.

“Thanks Bill. See ya there.” He hung up the phone and dialed his travel agent to make the arrangements. Little Haiti, one of the hearts of Voudoun in America, Random remembered, was in Miami.

Random fell asleep that night reflecting on the A.V.A. and ELF. Everywhere anymore there were pro-ELF rallies. The environment had, through their efforts he supposed, become the ‘cause celebre’ the fashionable thing to do. Where ever these pro-elfers seemed to be the A.V.A. seemed to be right behind. He wondered sleepily if anybody else had drawn the same parallel.

He had seen a headline in one of those rag's one can buy in checkout lines last week that purported to have evidence that the ELF were extraterrestrials. What nonsense, everywhere you turned people were talking about ELF.

Certainly the renewed interest in the planet was a good thing. Everyone was getting on the bandwagon. Government officials denouncing their methods would, out of the other side of their mouth's praise the ideals and goals of the group.

Religious leaders too were not to be left out. They as a body supported the cause while damning the organization itself stating that violence was never a solution. Random was beginning to wonder if that were really true.

Public opinion was certainly on their side, Random was starting to see the ELF stylized earth symbol everywhere, on leather jackets and tee shirts, bumper stickers, everywhere.

He still didn't know, killing for the sake of life made intellectual sense sure, but he couldn't get passed his own emotions. Well, he reflected, that certainly wasn't stopping the rest of the world.

* * * *

Dressed for the warmth of Miami, even in October, in light cotton slacks and a short sleeve shirt, Random entered the massive domed building. Finding his way to the convention area, he stepped just inside the door and observed the crowd.

Not surprisingly, the place was packed. Random wondered if Smith had discovered another King Tut or something. Deciding he wasn't going to find Bill in this huge crowd, Random stepped outside to the reception counter and left a message for him. Returning inside once again and finding a seat near the door, he settled in his chair notebook and pen in hand.

The announcement itself was brief, given that Dr. Smith was the only speaker.

“The ruins are located in an isolated desert area previously unexplored by archaeologists.” he said indicating a point on the large map on the video screen behind him with a laser pointer. The screen switched to an areal view of the dig itself. The crowd gasped in surprise as the potential size of the ruins became apparent.”

“The city is mostly buried in sand, but appears to be quite extensive. As far as we have been able to determine thus far, there are no burial sites of any particular moment.”

“Nevertheless, it is hoped that additional data regarding the lifestyle of the ancient Egyptians may be brought to light in the process of the excavation and study of the site.”

As Dr. Smith’s presentation drew to a close and the question answer session began, Random got a copy of the press kit and slipped quietly out of the auditorium.

He tried one more time to locate Bill but was unsuccessful. He left a message at his hotel suggesting possible dinner arrangements and as he had some time left drove off in the direction of little haiti. He had some questions of his own to pursue.

Random parked his inconspicuous rental car in a public lot at the edge of the neighborhood. Slipping a small tape recorder in the pocket of his light cotton slacks, he started walking aimlessly through the streets, looking for voodoo supply shops or anything resembling a possible lead.

At 2:00 in the afternoon it started to rain. Taking refuge from the downpour under vendor canopies from time to time buying ice tea, Random worked his way deeper into little Haiti. By 3:30 he’d been in three supply shops carrying everything from powders to machetes, but no human artifacts. He was soaked from head to toe from walking in the drenching rain.

He stepped into the fourth shop that day and was greeted by a lovely negress wearing a filmy, many colored, toga sort of dress and a big smile.

“May I help you?”

Random paused on the question wondering if he should indeed ask if they carried human art work, then with his usual reserve decided against it.

“No thank you. Just browsing.”

“Well, let me know if I can answer any questions for you.” she replied and dipping her head politely, left him to roam about the shop.

This shop was far more extensive and well decorated than the others he’d been in that day or the one in Chicago. The shelves were painted rather than bare pressboard, it was newly carpeted, and obviously some forethought had gone into the decorating and display of wares.

Random moved toward the table left of the door where a substantial number of informational brochures, advertisements and newsletters were set out. Glancing over them, he noted that several were published by the A.V.A. He chose a couple and started perusing the rest of the store.

There were two bookshelves loaded with all types of literature on voodoo, everything from fiction to real life experiences to scientific documentaries. A good portion was in French which though it made sense didn’t help Random very much as he didn’t speak the language. Further along were photographs and paintings of ritual dances, ceremonies, and representations of the Loa in their christian guises. St. Patrick for instance represented Damballah Wedo and the Virgin Mary represented Erzulie. Random had found this out from a very good book on the subject written by an american woman film maker who had worked in Haiti in the forties and fifties.

Random had to admit to himself that this store appeared to be much better equipped and seemingly more reasonable to westernized conformities than the others he had visited. There were many racks of costumes and bolts of the traditional white or red and black cloth so favored by Voodoo. Also, shelves of powders, roots, and other unknown substances were displayed in artistic bottles and vials.

All in all, it seemed a pretty straight forward operation, until on the next table he found what he had been looking for. They were similar to the items he had seen in Chicago, but quite obviously were in fact works of art. Random couldn't tell for sure if it was the same artist, but the ornate style of the carvings was similar. Each was notably missing the ELF logo he had been expecting.

Taking the lead, Random smiled the shop woman over.

"Mam, this is very fine work. I was in Chicago recently and picked up a letter opener there of similar craftsmanship. I was wondering if this piece might be by the same artist?"

"It is possible," she replied. "There are very few people working in this particular, um media. The artist's name, I believe, is Ray Younger, he's from the Seattle Washington area."

Random felt an odd calm come over him in spite of his muscular tension.

"Oh? Does he have a gallery there? I may be up there, in Washington that is, sometime next month. I'd love to see more of his art."

"Well, I'm not sure to tell you the truth." The woman replied, with a speculative look on her face. "but I'll write his name down for you, so you can check should you find yourself up there." and she moved back to the counter to do so.

Random bent back over the display and selected a small flute similar to the one he'd seen in Chicago.

"I'd also like this piece, please." he said joining her at the cash register.

"That will be, ah, lets see, forty-nine dollars please." she said with her ever present smile. Drawing out his wallet, he asked "Are you, um, is this store, affiliated with the A.V.A.?"

"Oh, no. The A.V.A. is a religion, a non-profit organization or something. They can't sell anything through us, I think anyway. If your interest lies in the A.V.A. and you'll be in Seattle soon, I believe their national headquarters are there."

Random noted that she hadn't even flinched at his question and upon meeting her eyes casually, found no contradiction in them whatsoever. She handed him his change.

"There is some free literature up front about the A. V. A. though. Help yourself and thank you for stopping by today." she smiled to Random.

"Thank you." said Random and smiling in reply, he lifted his package and left the shop. Random returned to his hotel and placed a call to Bill, to see if he had gotten his message about dinner that evening at 7:00. He then scheduled a flight for Seattle the following morning, connecting through Denver, jotting down the flight numbers and times on his pocket schedule.

Sitting down at his portable computer, he drafted out his article on Dr. Smith's announcement. That done, he took a shower, dressed for dinner, and headed out for the restaurant.

Bill was already there when Random arrived at the elegant seafood restaurant. The black tailed waiter showed him to the appropriate table. Bill smiled as he saw Random drawing near.

"Random, well met."

Random grinned in reply taking the seat across from Bill at the round, white linen table near the window.

"Hi Bill, good to see ya. What's good to eat here?"

"All the fish is great, the crustations are decent." He replied filling Random's wine glass.

"So what's been happening with you. What ever became of our mysterious letter opener anyway and your trip to the dark continent?"

Eyeing Random as if to confirm his suspicion of his friend's high stress level, he settled back to let Random tell his story in his own way. Bill had known Random long enough to know that the only way to get any information out him was to stay quiet and listen.

Random glanced down through the menu and decided on the shark. Putting the menu aside, he

sipped his wine, cupping his hand about the elbow that held the glass, sitting casually back in the chair.

“What did you think of Dr. Smith’s announcement?” he asked.

“Pretty exciting, but I doubt it’s going to be much more than another large city ruin out in the middle of nowhere.” Bill replied.

“No possibilities of vaults or tombs were turned up under the surveying huh?” Random queried. “I didn’t stick around for the question and answer session this afternoon.”

“Nope, afraid not. Where have you been all afternoon then?” Bill asked in turn.

“Oh, I went down to little haiti this afternoon to do some research.” he answered somewhat evasively.

“Anything to do with that little curiosity you turned up in Chicago?” Bill asked.

“Yes, related. I’m routing through Seattle tomorrow on the way home to check out a lead.” Random replied.

Bill relaxed back in his chair, arms open resting on the chair waiting for Random to continue. After a few moments of silence, their waiter appeared.

“There is a call for you Mr. Waterson. An emergency apparently.” the waiter said.

Random rose setting down his wine glass and excused himself from the table. The waiter led him to a small alcove with a white phone on the wall and left him. Random picked up the receiver, curious as to who would call him with an emergency and how they could have possibly have found him here. He had a large number of acquaintances, but no family to speak of, most peculiar.

“This is Random Waterson.” he said tentatively.

“Random, this is Anna Belleau. I believe you are in great danger.” a soft heavily accented female voice said.

Random paused caught by surprise, not knowing for a moment how to respond.

“Excuse me, um... Anna? How did you find me here?” he asked.

“Random. I know it’s a bit difficult, but I haven’t time to explain it all, but there is a quasi military group after the ELF who believes you may be a member with information that may be helpful to them. Be very, very careful, Random.” Anna said, then the line went dead.

Random stood there for a moment listening to the dial tone and wondering just what exactly he should do with this information, the memories of that terrible day in Nairobi rolling through his mind. Then he remembered Bill and hanging up the phone walked back to the table, plans formulating slowly in his mind.

“Everything okay?” Bill asked, sipping on his wine.

“A bit of a problem with my secretary. I’m afraid I’ll have to take a rain check on dinner.” Random replied.

Bill sighed, resigned to his friends mysteriousness. “Random, if there’s anything you need, just say so, eh. I’m a little worried about you my friend. Please count on me if you need help.”

“Thanks Bill, I know this all seems a little strange. I’ll call you next week.” Random grinned and grasped Bill’s hand in a firm, reassuring handshake.

Random made his way out of the restaurant and asked the valet for a cab. He slid in the back seat, telling the cabby the name of his hotel.

Ten minutes later they pulled up to the front and Random paid the cabby, jumped out of the taxi and made purposefully for the elevator doors.

Glancing about the lobby, he saw nothing unusual. No black suits or people wearing sunglasses at night. The elevator was empty as the door opened and started the ascent to his 10th floor room.

He peered down the hallway both ways before exiting the elevator. It was empty, he was starting to feel like an idiot, all this James Bond stuff. Then he remembered

his interrogator in Nairobi and didn't quite feel so silly anymore. Pulling his key out of his pocket he turned left down the hall and approached his own room door.

Pressing his ear up against the door, he heard no sound within. Quietly inserting the key and opening the door he slid inside. He found the light switch on the wall.

All was still within the destroyed room. Furniture toppled, cushions and paintings slashed. His papers and portable computer gone. The bedding had been stripped from the mattress and the mattress itself pushed off the box springs and both effectively shredded with a knife.

Random hurriedly moved to the closet and recovering his clothing from about the floor, shoved them into his slashed suitcase. He then retrieved what was left of his things from the bathroom and started looking around for the bone flute he had purchased earlier.

Not finding it, he left the room, locking the key inside and headed for the elevator to the lobby. He walked out the front door and was met by the wet slap of wind from yet another rain storm.

He flagged a cab and opening the back door, tossed in his suit case and followed in after it.

"Airport. I'm in a hurry."

Random finally felt his heart stop pounding somewhere over Texas and two or three scotch and water's later. He wondered again at Anna's cryptic warning and at how she had found him at the restaurant. By another hour's time he had calmed down considerably.

Nevertheless, there was no sleep for him that night as the airliner sped him toward the nexus of his unanswered questions, Seattle.

10. Networking

By the time Brand and Ariel finally had their arrangements organized enough to be gone for awhile, it was the beginning of December. With a growing sense of excitement, Brand waited out the last few days. He had recently been troubled with nightmares, well not nightmares exactly, more like ‘night mysteries’, a sure sign that he needed to get away.

Ariel had made all the arrangements. They were going to fly commercial, as the jet they used for ELF business needed to be on call. Besides, Ariel had thought, it would be nicer to completely remove themselves from the organization for awhile. They would be incommunicado during most of the trip, away from most the conventional lines of communication. They could, of course, be found at their hotels. Ariel planned to keep that possibility at a minimum as Brand, she knew, needed to forget for awhile.

Finally, the day of their departure arrived. Brand and Ariel drove into Portland, as they stilled maintained a residence there and it was the most logical international airport to use.

As they settled into their chair's in first class, Brand was still worrying about taking the time off. As the plane lifted off on their first leg to Seattle, Ariel was working to change that.

* * * *

In the ever present darkness of underground Seattle, a group of flashlight beams cut into the shadows. As they draw nearer, voices may be made out against the drips, squeaks and moans of the haunted landscape before them. None of the features of this silent group are visible, except for the impression of loose clothing. There seems to be at least five people, though it's hard to tell in the darkness. The figure in the lead speaks...

"It's got to be right around here damn it, We're right on top of it according to the map."

"Yes, and now for the hard part." Another deeper voice answers. "The passage into the Hounfor would be on the upper floors. We need to search them all. OK gentleman, I need this whole area mapped out by dark."

The men move out to do his bidding. Climbing cautiously in the decade buildings...

* * * *

The flight over the pole was incredibly long. Brand after a meal and several glasses of champagne, finally fell asleep. His sleep was troubled again and he tossed and weakly struggled against the seat restraints...

A dark figure with mirror shades....laughing, misty. He doesn't approve. He does approve. An old bent man dressed in rags and scraps. A beat up top hat sits on his head, he leans on an old gnarled cane. The figure rests on his cane at the crossroads, the full moon behind him, he regards Brand.

"Approve, Don't approve". the figure rasps in a voice from the grave. Chattering birds, you are the one to choose, to make."

Brand's dream gaze shifts and through the mists he regards a mermaid trapped in a net and washed ashore. Behind her dance dolphins in the spray. Brand glides through the fog to her aid, the net disintegrates in his hands as he tugs at the loops and swirls to free her. Finally she slips back into the surf...

"Would you not have freed me? You are the one to choose."

Brand looks up to see a brownish wave washing down on him. He tries to dodge it's impact, but catches its full force in the face. It tastes like oil. Brand struggles to free himself...

When he awoke the cabin was darkened. Ariel is asleep beside him. Shaking his head, he remembers the words of the mermaid.

"This is getting to be a bit too much." Brand thinks to himself as he adjusts his clothing and resettles in his seat. "Am I really so disturbed by all of this that it invades my sub-conscious, my dreams?"

"Well, lets analyze it then. I believe in our cause, and I don't really give a shit for those people we've killed. Fact is I think they got better than what they deserved. The pressure of being in charge does get to me though, sending people out on dangerous missions, and the weight of the responsibility for our organization. Also one never does break out of the conditioning's of youth, 'Thou shall not kill' etc..."

"It's most probably a mixture of all these factors, the only remedy being, I guess, time away, time to reset."

"You are so wise, my lover." Brand said aloud as he bent over and kissed Ariel on the cheek. He

couldn't, somehow, shake the feeling that there had been quite a bit more to that dream though, it had a very real feeling quality to it.

Brand was wide awake now. He gazed at his watch, it was 4:00 in the morning. He sank deeper into his chair and let his mind wander.

For some reason he found himself thinking about VonSchreader. That mad genius, totally preoccupied with science, discovery, the search for his truths. For all that though, William was a kind and caring man.

Brand remembered that day almost four years ago when Carlton had called him.

"Brand, Carlton here."

Brand had noted in passing that Carlton had called in on the secure line, somewhat unusual.

"Good morning Carlton, What's got you up and going so early?" Brand replied. always happy to hear Carlton's voice.

"Something I think you should look into, that is, someone I think you should meet."

"Yes, and whom would that be Carlton?"

"Well, a little bit of introduction first. You remember all those conversations we've had about the need for people with solid science backgrounds in our organization? How we'll need to have a very good abilities in that area someday?"

"Yes Carlton, you know that is of great concern to me, what's up?" Brand was always a little impatient to get to the chase, a failing in himself as he judged.

"I have a man working for me, a real genius. He works for my research group at TauKing Systems. TauKing Systems is involved with government projects, mostly stars wars stuff. Anyway, this gentleman, William VonSchreader by name, is the most brilliant scientific mind I have ever come across. I have known him for years and believe he would be sympathetic with our cause."

“I would like you to fly out here for a weekend Brand, the object of which would be our recruiting of Mr. VonSchreader. How about it?”

“Yeah, I guess so Carlton, When?”

“This weekend if you can. I’ve requested William to spend the time here as well. Ostensively to go over some of our projects.”

The man Brand met when he entered Carlton’s living room that weekend was not at all what he had expected. William VonSchreader was a tall man, thin but with an athletic tone. Dark mussed hair framed his long face which was somewhat filled out by the shaggy beard which accompanied it.

“Well, you must be Brand, Carlton mentioned that you would be along this evening. Pleased to meet you, my name is William VonSchreader, Will to my friends.”

The accent was back east for sure, maybe Maine. His handshake was firm but short.

“Yes, William I’m Brand, pleased to meet you. Is our host about?”

“He’s out on the deck. You caught me on the way to the john. I’ll meet you there in a minute.”

Brand found Carlton and after greetings and hug’s Carlton asked. “You must have passed our friend on the way in, Any first impressions?”

“Not exactly type cast to be a scientific genius, but an affable enough person.”

“Good, I’d hoped you two would take to each other.

That evening over dinner their talk had turned, quite skillfully by Carlton, to the planet and the environment. Dinner that evening had been served by Gabriel’s replacement. Another local indian woman, probably a relation to Gabriel, Brand thought.

“Well, what exactly are the ramifications of loosing the ozone layer William?” Carlton asked.

“Global warming, Shifting of air and water currents, the movement of the agricultural areas of our world. Much death, famines, plagues. The world as we know it will be much changed indeed.”

“And am I correct in believing that there is no way to stop it now?” Brand asked in a tight voice, conversations like this always got him going.

“Oh certainly we could turn it around to some extent. Stop killing the rain forests, stop using products known to contain fluoro-carbons and other harmful aerosols, stop wasting gasoline so carbon monoxide levels may go down, among other things.” William replied in a dejected tone.

“But it sure seems our species is incapable of doing this, we must have our comforts and pleasures in spite of what it will cost our children or do to our world. The insanity of it really gets to me sometimes.”

“You ever thought of any other alternatives other than globally changing everyone’s behavior patterns? Something which I sure don’t see happening, at least without a little creative pushing and shoving.” Brand asked expertly setting his trap.

“Well, sure I’ve thought about it, a little, late a night, I wonder, perhaps a global effort of some kind to educate our world. Perhaps stronger methods...”

“Stronger methods, what do you mean William?” Carlton nearly jumped on that one.

“Well, it occurs to me a majority of the problem stems from people out to make a profit. What does the executive care if his company is poisoning the sea’s with pollution as long as the profit share is high. Or the general contractor who knowingly destroy’s the forests and is happy as long as his checks arrive on time. Maybe the behaviorists are right and only a little negative reenforcement will do the trick.”

“Such as taking away the executives profits or the contractors checks william?” Brand replied.

“Perhaps, I don’t know, to me, well I’m a little more militant than that. I think I’d shoot a few of them and make sure their colleagues knew why. Fear is a great teacher.” Brand said in a grim voice.

“Yes, my thoughts had gone as far as even that. I suppose that a few deaths in the name of species and planetary survival are acceptable. If it were up to me I’d take them out in a second, any member of a species other than man which acts against the groups survival is destroyed, a fact of nature, and I agree.”

Brand smiled inwardly, he knew he had his man. “What if it were up to you, really?”

“What do you mean, Brand?” VonSchreader eyes had that speculative look of a man who is just realizing he has been manipulated.

After swearing William to silence and moving into Carlton’s office. Brand and Carlton revealed their main purpose in the weekend’s activities.

William was, at first unbelieving, but Carlton assured him that all that they had revealed was true. It took hours longer to bring William to their way of thinking, but eventually their logic won the day.

“I gather what your proposing is that I go to work in your organization? I’m not sure that I’m quite ready for that yet. However your secrets are safe with me and if there is a service I can perform for you now please tell me. But for the rest of this I’ll need some time to meditate on it.”

William did meditate on it, for an entire two days. Brand got his call early in the morning over the secured number he had given him. Together they discussed the means they would use to bring the good Doctor aboard.

As William was unattached, it was agreed that they would fake his death. A simulated heart attack was arranged and through agents of theirs at the hospital near where William lived a death certificate was provided and with that Dr. William VonSchreader went underground.

He was probably the greatest asset ELF had in it’s battle to save the world. Brand reflected.

Since that day VonSchreader had worked tirelessly for their purposes. Never voicing any recriminations or regrets. His only wish was to be left alone as head of their science section and not to be involved in the administration of the organization. Unlike most scientific professionals he gave not a thought to credit or honors, the prize to VonSchreader had always been in the chase, the discovery.

Brand smiled to himself remembering VonSchreader and those days long passed. He genuinely liked the man and no one was more dedicated to their principals.

Ariel was still sleeping, her head now gently resting on Brand's shoulder.

Brand eased up the blind covering the window and was instantly blinded at the reflection of the sun off the snow of the north pole. Or he guessed it was the pole anyway.

He asked a stewardess in passing how long it was to Heathrow. She replied about two and a half more hours.

Ariel woke just as the stewardess was bringing their breakfast.

Customs was a joke coming into Britain, only a cursory glance at their luggage and a bored question from a bored man in a uniform regarding their purpose in England and they were on their way.

London traffic is amazing, frantic and hive like. There was a light snow blowing through the air but the chill went right into their bones.

Both Brand and Ariel were quite grateful to stretch out in a hot bath together in the oversize bathtub in their rooms at the Excalibur.

The Excalibur was ideally located near Harrod's and some of London's premier museums. Ariel claimed there was nothing more relaxing than slopping, Brand didn't argue, he knew better. Brand gently massaged her right breast with his toes through the soapy water. They sipped a dry champagne from cut crystal glasses. Brand began to feel that life was good again. It had been way too long since he'd had the time to enjoy Ariel's company and he intended to make up for it now.

The next day was spent in a flurry of shops and galleries. That afternoon, they took a tour of the Tower of London. It was an amazing experience for them both, touching walls dating back to 1010. Seeing chambers that were at times in England's history used as cells for traitors or royal prisoners, the captives carvings still clearly visible in the old stone walls. After four hours they still had not seen every

chamber on the grounds. Much to Brand's dismay, the line in front of the 'dungeon and torture chamber' was so long that they had decided to pass.

They did, however, tolerate the only somewhat long wait to see the Crown Jewels and other historic royal art pieces, jewelry, sovereign crowns, etc.

Exiting out under the Bridge, they made their way through the neighboring harbor district. Small yachts were ensconced in tiny marinas, not visible from the street. Finding the Beefeaters Pub nearby, they stopped in for a bite and a quick drink before returning to their rooms.

The night found them huddled in a booth at one of London's more fashionable restaurants.

"Well, tomorrow I'd like to stop by our London Hounfor, lover. I promised Titus we'd check in on things while we were here."

"Isn't it amazing how far we have come in this short time, Brand? Ariel remarked between bites of yorkshire pudding and roast beef. While they were in England they thought they would do the whole number.

"I mean if someone had told me I'd fall in love with a visionary, become a serviteur' of the LOA and be a member of a world wide secret organization eight years ago, I'd have thought they were nuts." Ariel laughed as she picked up her wine glass.

"Yeah," Brand replied with a chuckle. He was starting to unwind now. "I know what you mean. Especially voodoo, those experiences under Titus's tutelage in Miami have really changed me. Who would have thought a power freak like me would become used to and welcome possession by a Voodoo god."

"In those first days I was only pursuing it, Voodoo that is for Titus, you know, just to recruit him. Soon though I became enchanted by the spirits. The feel of it, well you came to know too. There has been no other experience in my life which has touched me as much on the spiritual plane."

"You should have seen yourself the first time Ogoun took you." Ariel began. "You remember we

were at Titus's Hounfor in little Haiti. You had been growing closer and closer to it for weeks, Titus knew. That night though it was if the spirit came just for you."

"You had been agitated all night. You had left the Peristyle several times only to be drawn back in again. Something was troubling you, I could tell."

"There was," Brand interjected. "I knew that this was it and warfare between my western trained mind and my spirit was going on like a blitzkrieg. I knew though that if I walked away then I would never know the real core of Voudoun. It was my time, it finally came for you too my dear."

"Finally you came back for good." Ariel took up her narrative. "They were just beginning the evocation of Ogoun and the drumming seemed to animate you. I have never seen you dance so."

"Soon it became obvious to us all that the spirit was upon you. You fought to throw off the possession, stamping your feet and shaking your head with a look of great fear on your face. I tried to come to you then but Titus stopped me saying it was alright and always was that way for westerners the first time."

"I was scarred though, finally a great calm washed over you. As if at a signal the members of Titus's Hounfor came to you and supported you and carried you around the Peristyle. I will never forget that night."

"Neither will I my love." Brand smiled, "That is what I remember. Now possession has become to me as natural as sleeping. Strange isn't it."

"Look how the A.V.A. has grown! Who would have thought our little front organization would grow to such extremes. I understand from Titus that it is truly now spread world wide and has become accepted, even fashionable in most western countries."

"Yes," Remarked Brand, his voice becoming reflective. "Don't you ever get the feeling that it's all just too much and if given a chance to step through a door into a more peaceful life you'd do it? I mean, I guess that was a little maudlin, huh? Like you could step away from the script for awhile, the movie. Hell of

a change of tact don't you think?"

"Well yeah," Ariel, answered smiling, she had become real used to these moods of Brands. "Sure we all do. It's as if events will always get out of hand and we need to stop the world somehow. But if you did find that doorway I'd hope you'd stop for me."

"Well of course lover, It's just that I never foresaw where I'd be today. What kind of person I've become."

"Not to worry my love, you're right here now with me and you're wonderful." She came closer to Brand and took his hand under the table.

The next day they spent exploring the Stonehenge site. The bus ride out wasn't too long and the information gleaned from their tour guide during the trip was presented humorously and thus, memorably. The site itself was not too touristy as Brand had feared, but a small tastefully done facility way out on the Salisbury plains.

Although walking amongst the stones themselves was now prohibited due to vandalism problems, it was possible to get quite close and view the monument clearly. They walked all the way around it, taking pictures and listening to their guide's musings and reiterations on speculations and theories regarding its purpose and construction.

Arriving back at the hotel, they took the underground to Westminster Abbey and tagged along with a tour just entering the church as they arrived.

Ariel was amazed at all the royalty buried there and the edifices built there in their memory. Bloody Mary, King Edward III and a host of others. Brand for his part, was caught by the number of writers, poets and artisans buried there. They were informed by their defacto guide that over 3,000 people were buried or remembered here.

They hurried back to the hotel, got their bags from the porter and took a cab to the train station as they were to take the North Sea crossing tonight in a shuttle ship.

The crossing itself was much more than either expected. They had decided on taking it, instead of a faster plane or hovercraft on the advice of Ariel's mother. The ships were huge, seven full decks. The amounts of people on board must have been in the thousands. Entertainment, gambling and restaurants were available.

Brand and Ariel spent the entire seven hours on the gambling decks. Both had minimal luck. Brand won about two hundred pounds playing twenty one and Ariel ended up losing about twenty on video poker and slots. They both enjoyed themselves immensely and wound up, after an interminable hour in customs, in Holland.

They arrived late that morning at their Amsterdam hotel much the worse for wear. Very tired and suffering from too much alcohol the night before, they went up to their rooms collapsed on the king sized bed and ordered eggs Benedict and coffee from room service.

* * * *

"I've seen the same van out there for three days now. Day and night it hasn't moved. I'm sure there's someone inside too." Billy Boldon told Titus.

"Well, don't worry, Billy, it's not as if we're doing anything illegal in here. Later I'll take a walk over and see who they are."

Titus walked back from the front window and up the stairs to his personal quarters. Picking up a telephone he dialed an 800 number.

"Continental Oil, how may I direct your call?" A voice requested.

“May I speak with Mr. Forrestson I have an appointment for 11:30.” Titus asked, the phone clicked and another voice came on the line.

“Please identify yourself and your location?”

“Titus Riguaud Seattle center.”

“A moment Sir.”

“Titus, good morning,” Bob’s voice came throughout the line. “Brand, as you know, is in Europe how’s things, good to hear your voice.”

“Bob, got something strange here. Been an occupied unmarked van outside our front door for three days now. The other night, I’m sure we were broken into. Nothings gone or even moved around but I’m sure just the same. Also the door, way in the back, into underground Seattle had left scrapes on the floor as if it had been opened. I’m sure it hasn’t by anyone hear. Getting a little spooky”.

“OK, don’t do anything.” Bob replied thinking that the word ‘spooky’ was a little incongruent in the mouth of a Voudoun priest. We’ll use our people. Just go about business normally. I’ll have my people in place by tomorrow morning.”

* * * *

That evening Brand and Ariel got themselves together and went out on the town. In Amsterdam, it is said ‘anything is available for a price’. It certainly seemed to be true. From the women advertising themselves in window fronts to the drug menu’s in bars. But Amsterdam was also a city of high art and culture.

The couple found themselves in a small jazz/blues club later that evening. A good acoustic blues player was currently on stage. They were both feeling quite content after a good meal and a bottle of wine.

“Ariel, do you ever wonder what exactly goes on in that B and C Dept. of ELF? I have, as you are aware, to be quite conscientious about security in this area. It’s just that you never ask about it.”

“Oh sure, you know me curious about everything. I just trust you though dear. What ever you do I know I would agree. But yes, about the blackmail and coercion department I admit I’m a little curious.”

“Well, it’s actually one of my favorites.” Brand’s smile could have been called mischievous. “So effective.”

“We have an enormous amount of people keeping tabs on government and large corporation officials. From time to time we may use some small bit of this information to sway a vote towards a bill aiding our cause.”

“Lovely dear,” Ariel replied lighting a cigarette, a newly acquired partial habit. “if it makes you happy to play with governments, then I love it.”

“Oh no, were not playing. For instance just last month we we’re instrumental in getting that last endangered species act passed. It’s like having our own lobby in washington. Like I said very effective.”

“I understand,” Ariel said trying to act more interested, they were both a little high. “Isn’t that where most of the communications traffic originates from which poor Diana has to deal with? I mean from our agents working in that sector.”

“Yes, Diana... she’s another mutant human in her own way.” Brand said out loud, even though he was just thinking it.

“What dear, Diana?

“Oh, I was just thinking how she’s another one of our super mutant’s, I was thinking about Vonschreader the other day.”

“That she is, Austrian nobility isn’t she?”

“Yes,” Brand answered pouring Ariel some more wine. “Though she’s third generation American. A star athlete, runner, I believe in her youth. Mind like an Edison or an Einstein, very blessed woman.”

“I remember when I first got to know her, back when I had time to take that French class.” Ariel mused. “When we were living in Portland. We hit it off right away. There was no one else near our age in the class. You remember those nights she would come over to study with me?”

“Sure do lover, but I tried to leave you two alone.”

“I got a little jealous at the way you looked her over.” Ariel said with a lifted eyebrow.

“But I’m sure no man could quite help it, she’s a rare beauty.”

“As are you my love.” Brand diplomatically replied, kissing her hand.

“That evening, you were away, when I started to probe to see if she might be interested in our little club, was very interesting. As always I started out by talking about all the nasty things we do to the world. Soon she was doing all the talking and ended up basically recruiting herself.”

“Yes, I remember coming home and having you introduce our newest member. It was nearly a year, wasn’t it, until she came to headquarters and knew we were inner core?”

“Yes, that seems right Brand.” Ariel said with a contemplative expression. “You know if you ever want our Diana, it’s OK with me. I’ve certainly seen her looking at you enough times to know she’s willing. I’m not a jealous person lover, you know that, and well, men are men. I don’t think I’ve ever said that to you before but it’s true.”

At which point Brand smiled, got up and paid the bill. He took Ariel home to their rooms and made love to her for several hours.

The morning found them on a marvelous boat trip down the rhine. Even this late in the year the trip was wonderful. Many castles and towns dotted both banks of the great river. They had purchased some

wine and cheese for the ride and sat in a booth in the mezzanine at the prow of the ship munching and exclaiming over the still lovely ancient castles as they paraded themselves along the gleaming river.

Floating first west into Germany and then turning south at Kublenz they traveled down the river. At Freilburg they left their boat and traveled overland to Munich, the whole trip occupying a long day.

Their reservations in Munich were at the Queens Hotel, again not the most expensive. They had thought that staying in three star hotels instead of the american four stars, would allow them to interact with a larger cross-section of european life.

The following day they arose early and after breakfast drove the short distance to the magick castle. That wonder built by mad King Ludwig and used as the pattern for the Disney tinkerbelle castle. They spent the day roaming the halls and gardens and in the late afternoon climbed a small mountain to see it from above in the sunset.

Arriving back at their rooms quite late, they ate a quite supper in the establishment's lovely restaurant and retired early.

The next day was spent mostly on a train bound for Geneva. The customs stop was cursory as the train passed into Switzerland. The country side was beautiful in it's early winter glory.

That evening at dinner, Brand and Ariel had checked in at the Ridpath hotel near downtown. Ariel asked about Franklin Roth's story. Franklin was a quite and unassuming man, somewhat new to the organization.

"Don't know much dear, except that I like him. Franklin was Bob's find."

"Yes I know, wasn't he ex-CIA or something?"

"Yes I believe so," Brand was much more intent on dinner, a wonderful sea food dish. "I think Bob had worked with him in that capacity when he was in Africa, Algeria I think."

"Law degree to if I remember right." Ariel commented.

“Yes, even took the bar in New York I seem to remember. Let’s see,” Brand said leaning back in his chair, with that expression of concentration everyone get’s when accessing the deeper memory areas. “American, fourth or fifth generation, educated in Mississippi, back when it was no fun being black in Mississippi. Took the bar in New York as I said. Then immediately recruited by the CIA. He became somewhat disenchanted after his experience in Africa and that’s all I know. Except that Bob says he’d trust him with his life.”

“Very nice man. I like him a lot. Brand we’ve got to spend more of our time, when we get back, in becoming friends with our colleagues.”

“ Yes love, we’re quite remiss in that area.” Brand agreed concentrating on some form off chocolate decadence a waiter had set before him.

* * * *

In a small back room of a much larger warehouse two blocks from the Seattle Hounfor seven men sat around a table. The scene was lit darkly by a single shaded bulb set in the high ceiling.

“The operation is set for tomorrow evening late, 2:00. We go in through the passage prepared in the underground, our entry is just down these stairs.” A well dressed athletic looking man said, gesturing toward the corner stairwell.

“This has clearance all the way to the top. It is also classified purple, inform no one else of these activities in your normal shop avenues and pursuits. But then you all no better than to speak about company business.”

“What were looking for is any information leading to the leaders of the Environmental Liberation Front. Everything, gentleman must be gathered in a very short time. Papers, journals, computer disks, everything. We also want at least one hostage, some of you will get that duty. After we’re finished we will

torch the place on our way out. Shoot any thing that moves. The powers that be want this one done cowboy, messy.”

“Any questions?” That man received only competent stairs.

“OK, John here has your individual instructions. Good evening.

The man rose and left the room.

* * * *

Geneva struck both Brand and Ariel as the cleanest and prettiest city they had yet been in. They had not had any time to sightsee after their late arrival yesterday. So after a quick breakfast in their rooms they decided to spend at least the morning hours street exploring.

Memorial park, their first stop, was beautiful in the light snow. The park sports a huge white stone wall upon which many of the great thinkers and figures from history are represented in alto relief sculpture. Brand and Ariel spent several hours leisurely walking along the garden paths.

They later took the time to see the famous banking street. They did not stop in to meet their E.L.F. account representative not wanting to be either observed or disturbed in relation to such business.

That evening found them at a charming small French restaurant. After dinner, they sought entertainment in the form of a nearby dance club. The band was good if a little loud. Brand and Ariel danced off and on and enjoyed the music until well past midnight.

The road trip to Marseille the following morning took several hours. The countryside was stunning and the temperature was warming up as well. After arrival, Brand and Ariel spent their time driving about the area going down into eventually both Monaco and Nice. Stopping at a whim at little shops or restau-

rants and generally being very frivolous.

That evening found them at yet another restaurant, both were planning an early evening in light of their travel plans the following day to Lisbon.

Lisbon was to be their last stop on the continent with St. Thomas their final destination before returning home. A quiet rest along the beaches for a few days to finally wind down.

Early that morning found them boarding their train, after returning their rental car. The train ride this time was somewhat long as they traversed a portion of southern France, the major girth of Spain and Portugal as well. They had decided to travel in a compartment this time and so they enjoyed coffee their meals and each others company along the way. Brand got to talking about the positive results which could be seen due to the efforts of ELF.

“Look at all the public support we’ve stirred up. I’m sure there’s no large metropolitan center left on the planet which doesn’t have regular environmental support meetings and pro-ELF rallies. Public opinion by and large is quite with us. Sure we get denounced a lot for our methods. How did that famous anchor put it? Something like, ‘doing what everyone else with a conscience wishes they had the guts to’.”

“Which leaves the Governments, Big business and all the worlds military after us big time.” Ariel replied with a grin.

“Yeah so, there is a down side.” Band said with an answering grin.

“But if there is one thing which assures me were doing the right thing is this massive support I’m speaking of Ariel.

Were seeing some real tangible results as well. Reduction in fluoro-carbons and other toxins in the atmosphere. A scaling back in large scale destruction of our rain forests. Not to mention a changed outlook as to our responsibility in these areas. It does make me feel good.”

Brand had wound down considerably since the beginning of their trip indeed.

“Yes dear, it makes me feel glad too.” Ariel answered. “Just think where all of this will go in future years love.”

And so they spent their time on the way to Lisbon. Upon arriving at their hotel Brand found a telegram waiting for them. It was from Gabriel and all it said was that their travel arrangements had been approved. A prearranged signal that things were not as they should be on the home front.

Brand called Gabriel and after warning her that they were not on a secure line exchanged some pleasantries. Hidden within the idle conversation were phrases which indicated that the organization had been infiltrated and all of ELF was on ready status.

Well it had been a wonderful vacation but it was sure over now.

11. Tuna Fishing

Bob was speaking at the head of the ELF conference table.

“As you know the Prime and Ariel are on vacation. This operation was engineered and set in motion before they left. I will be in command in Brand’s absence.”

“Do any of you know anything about commercial tuna fishing?”

Looking about the table first at Diana and Gabriel, and then in quick secession Franklin, Nelson, James and Jason Alexander just returned from his mission. He saw no takers for his question so he continued.

“For economical reasons, commercial tuna fishing uses what are called drift nets. They are incredibly huge, sometimes covering as much as a couple of square mile. Dolphin often swim above schools of tuna, this is one way the fishermen locate tuna schools for harvesting. Once a school of tuna has been located

these nets are deployed and then gradually closed and tightened capturing the fish. Invariably many dolphins are killed, drowned, remember they are mammals, in these nets. Thousands each year are killed. You may have heard about this before through one of the environmental organizations.”

“When the fishermen are tightening the nets they throw dynamite into the sea to scare the fish deeper into the nets, there entangling themselves. Many countries and organizations have been trying to stop the slaughter for years. The uncaring fish companies only see their profits vanishing and so do nothing. Well now it’s our turn.”

“Perhaps the worst offender in all of this is Japan. A major portion of their nations diet is tuna fish. They have refused for years to change their fishing methods.”

“We will,” Bob continued moving in front of the sea window. “tomorrow kidnap the C.E.O. and chief operations officer’s of both the largest American and Japanese fishing companies. We intend to show them, as well as the world, exactly what it’s like to be driven into a drift net with dynamite. Any questions?”

“Will they, as usual, be killed in the process?” Diana asked.

“Not this time,” Bob answered with a grin. “We’ve decided to soften our methods in this case. With the purpose of alleviating some of our criticism. If it were up to me I’d smoke the sons of a bitches,” Bob remarked with a deadly look. “But I see the logic behind the plan. We’re just going to scare the hell out of them on video and make it perfectly clear that if their crimes continue we will return”

“I’m sure that you will inform this committee of details as the operation advances?” Franklin asked from his seat at the end of the table.

“Yes, of course. Let’s move on to new business. I received an interesting call yesterday from Titus. Seems there is a suspicious unmarked van parked outside the Seattle Hounfor. Titus also believes they were broken into the other night. I have a team of my people in place now.”

“Have you been able to discover anything new since their arrival?” Diana asked, leaning forward

and placing her elbows on the table.

“Only that there is indeed a surveillance team in the van and that the Hounfor was in fact searched, very professionally. We are operating under the assumption that ELF has to some extent been infiltrated. We have had contingency plans in place for this eventuality for years and are employing them now.”

“We have gone to a world wide position of defence and readiness. My people in Seattle have instructions to locate the base of operations for this group, but under no circumstance to reveal their presence to our adversary. I will keep you all informed as events occur.”

“A second perhaps related item.” Bob continued. “A man by the name of Random Waterson, actually a neighbor of ours down the coast in Oceanside, has been nosing around after us. He’s a science reporter by trade and has somehow stumbled onto our sent.”

“He really knows nothing, he found one of those little artifacts we were distributing after our poaching operation and became, apparently quite interested in unearthing us.”

“He was detained and questioned quite roughly it seems, by members of an arm of the American CIA in Kenya. We had one of our people contact him as we didn’t want him believing we were at fault for his experience.”

“Our agent reports that he has somehow stumbled on or connection with the A.V.A and is even as we speak on his way to Seattle from Miami.”

“Do you think he is involved with our mysterious van?” Franklin asked.

“No, all our information indicates he is acting alone. We should know more by tomorrow.”

“The communique on the Saddam operation was aired this morning, as you are all aware. Again we used an inside person to disrupt the network schedule. World opinion seems to be jubilant, of course for all the wrong reasons.”

“Some of the news reports have gone into detail on his environmental crimes and have underlined

our real purpose in executing him as an environmental criminal. A lot of interest is being exhibited as well in our ability to snatch a figure as well guarded as Saddam right out of his compound. All in all we seem to have succeeded in our goal with this little object lesson.”

“In light of the events unfolding I have asked Gabriel,” Bob nodded his head in her direction. “To get in contact with Brand and Ariel in Europe and inform them of our status. I would expect their return in the next day or so.”

“Any questions or comments?” Bob asked walking over by his seat.

“Yes Bob,” Franklin spoke up. “any idea who might be running our friends in the van?”

“Not really Franklin, from their look I’d say american intelligence but you know as well as I that at this stage they could be anybody. Any more questions?”

No one spoke up so Bob continued.

“Nelson has a bit of a surprise for us now.” Bob took his seat as the mousey assistant to VonSchreader stood up. As he did so he placed a bulky item on the table. It had the look of a compact submachine gun. The barrel portion seemed thicker and more oval than it should be and the magazine, if that’s what it was, looked vaguely thicker.

“This gentlemen, is our latest assault weapon.” Obvious pride showed in both the eyes and voice of Nelson. “Weaponry has always been my hobby, I put this baby together in my spare time.” Nelson said picking up the gun from the table.

“It utilizes a system based around a small self contained battery made possible by the HK neutrino principle. The battery powers a very powerful compressor, the battery/air system combination is capable of firing 380 rounds a minute. As well as sustaining that fire for more than ten minutes. The battery itself may be replaced in the field. The shells are merely cast metal shapes such as these.”

Nelson paused to pass around a handful of the narrow brass cones. Merely a brass rod machined

on one end down to a point.

“These shells may be explosive, armor piercing or a modified sleep dart. The magazine is switch selectable to any of these cartridge types. The gun is almost completely without sound and flash.”

“Bob’s people have checked out the prototypes and found them to be excellent.”

“I’ll say” Jason mumbled in the corner

“All the troops we have currently in Seattle have been trained and outfitted with these new weapons” Looking over at Bob, Nelson nodded and took his seat.

“Thanks Nelson, quite a gun. Well folks that’s it. Anybody got anything else?”

As no one indicated any interest in taking the floor, Bob continued.

“Very well, we will continue our efforts up north as well as our tuna fishing operation. I suggest we meet again tomorrow at 0:700. Thank you.”

The group filtered out of the conference room. All except Franklin and Bob.

“This is looking a little bad Franklin, I’m sending Jason up tonight to Seattle. I’m planning on meeting him there tomorrow afternoon.” Bob began.

“Yes, I suspected that there was more going on than you reported on just now to the others.”

Franklin replied, sitting on the table edge and gazing out the window.

“We’ve got a mole, Franklin, there’s someone in the organization leaking information, and I don’t know who it is.

“I’m sure of one thing,” Franklin said “and that’s we will know very soon.”

“Maybe not soon enough.” Bob answered with a worried look up at his friend.

* * * *

In a darkly lit room somewhere in Washington D.C. sat Senator Reese Hills Chairman of the Congressional Covert Action Committee. Also present were Mr. Edward C. Baker, perhaps the richest man in America, Alfredo Franchesca representing the consul of north eastern 'families', and Piter Solkaravich KGB Director Eastern United States.

"Is our team in place?" Baker asked looking directly at Reese.

"Yes and the strike is set for the late hours of tomorrow evening, Pacific standard."

"We've got to get a handle on this ELF business." Piter remarked in an incongruent american east coast accent. "None of us can perform our normal activities in this climate. We are starting to loose both position and money in certain areas and my superiors are demanding action."

"As am I," added Mr. Baker sending dark vibes toward Senator Hills.

"Our activities are becoming severely hampered," Alfredo stated. "and you know we will not stand for that for long."

"Gentleman, Gentleman I assure you everything is in hand. Our agent is supplying us very good information and our raid tomorrow will, I trust, yield what we need. We're days away from identifying their headquarters as well as their top inner circle."

"This all better work out, Reese. That's all I'm going to say." Alfredo said ominously heading for the door, followed quickly by the other two gentleman.

A few moments later a figure moves into the room from the adjacent office.

"Yes, I heard it all." The man replied to the questioning look from the Senator. The mans face was obscured by the brim of his hat and a pair of extremely dark sunglasses both of which grew out of the upturned collar of a grey trench coat. A little campy and mysterious but fitting for an emissary of the Nine.

"You are aware of the nature of the reaction to displeasing the consul of the Nine, Senator Hills, are you not?" The dark main whispered lighting a cigarette.

“You have been privileged to even have been made aware of the existence of the consul of ages.”
He continued his sunglasses looking like twin windows into space. “We can not tolerate the interference in the worlds political and monetary arena’s of this organization and we are counting on you to neutralize it.”

“Yes Sir.” Replied Reese, somewhat ashen looking. “I will not fail.”

* * * *

A man leaving his office building in Seattle, as on any other day he takes the elevator down to the parking lot. As he walks toward his car a van stops along side of him and the door bangs open. Two dark figures leap out and force the man into the interior of the vehicle.

Driving slowly through town the van finally pulls into a warehouse area along the washington canal. Dark figures manoeuver the supine figure onto a small but powerful looking boat.

The van drives slowly back into town as the boat moves off into the night.

In Japan similar events occurred some six hours earlier. A man is leaving his estate at the northern edge of Osaka. As the limousine stops for a light at a secluded crossroads leading into town. A small van screeches to a stop along side the limousine and a group of figures emerge.

The first man shoots the driver in the neck with a dart. The second forces open the locked passenger door, the third climbs in and shoots the man there in the thigh with another dart.

Quickly the unconscious man is passed back into the van, the doors close and it speeds away.

In the news that evening were two seemingly related items reporting on the apparent kidnapping of the president and C.E.O of both the American Tuna company and the Japanese owned Kimoto Tuna company.

* * * *

Brand and Ariel arrived early the next morning, having taken the red eye into Miami and there transferring to the ELF jet for the flight to headquarters. They were both somewhat tired but Brand sought out Franklin as soon as he got underground.

“Okay, what exactly is going on. All the people on the jet could tell me was that we are in action alert, what’s going on Franklin?”

They had decided long ago to never trust communication lines in times of crises. Too many variables to control, the core had decided on face to face communications and code signals when in action alert.

“Seems we may have been infiltrated. Bob is on his way to Seattle even now. He felt it best to get up there instead of awaiting your arrival. He believes there will be a strike at the Hounfor this evening.”

“How has Bob come to believe that.” Brand asked taking a chair at the seat next to Franklin in the tactical communication room.

“There’s been a group covertly observing the Hounfor for the last three days. Bob’s people have discovered their base and have observed this group making preparations for an action of some sort. One only presumes...”

“Yes, of course.” Brand replied shaking his head. “I’ve always know that sooner or later something like this would happen, guess I’m not quite ready to deal with it mentally.”

“Where and who do you believe the agent to be.” Brand asked.

“We’re not even sure that there is an infiltrator actually. We’ll know a lot more after this evening. We are picking up indications of increased CIA activity in the Seattle area, but as of yet we don’t know for sure which agency or agencies are behind this.”

“Everything else in order, all other operations are proceeding uninhibited?”

“Yes Sir, both the tuna operation and the team working on the black bear poachers are on line. Also none of our other centers are showing any activity, which leads me to assume this is a small operation. Perhaps a cabal of agents with their own purposes. As I said, we’ll know more later. We’re in no real jeopardy at this time.”

“I wish I could be as assured of that as you seem to be Franklin.”

* * * *

Random’s jet had just set down at SEATAC airport. The ride into downtown Seattle would occupy another hour after he retrieved his baggage.

On his way to the baggage claim area Random passed by a bar with a crowd of people jammed in front. Curious as to the commotion Random asked an older gentleman at the periphery of the crowd what the excitement was all about.

“It’s the ELF group again.” The man’s breath reeked of bourbon as he began to speak. “They seem to have kidnapped Saddam Housein this time. At least that’s what the announcer who came on after their communique’ said.”

Random was unsure of his feelings, except for a sense of unreality and a strong feeling that things seemed to be accelerating.

“What did they say? Tell me about their tape?” Random inquired of the gentleman, perhaps a little harshly.

“Well, this is a re-broadcast, originally aired this morning it seems.” the man began.

“Basically, they said they were executing Saddam for crimes against the environment and then they drowned him in a pool of oil. Announcer said that one of the most amazing parts is how they got him out of

his compound, s'posed to be really heavily guarded. Well, I'm glad someone got that son of a bitch anyway."

"Yes," Random mumbled. "ah, Thank you."

Random went on his way to claim his bag's wondering if his bones would later be reclaimed for artistic purposes. He decided to check out this Ray Younger and the A.V.A. Hounfor as soon as was humanly possible.

* * * *

"OK, I want everyone here at 3:00 on the dot for final weapons and systems checks. A dark skinned man was saying to a group of about twelve other men.

"Peter you square on the layout?" The same man, apparently the leader asked.

"Yes of course, I've been studying it for days now." A large sandy haired man replied in a bored tone.

"I know, but for me, one more time." The leaders eyes could have pierced kevlar.

"Alright, one more time, corporate office's in the front part of the building. Well be entering at the rear near the south wall. As soon as we blow the entrance from the underground the electrical will also be cut. We move in with night vision gear and shoot any thing that moves. A team moves into the office area and begins cleaning things out."

"Meanwhile," The man paused for breath "My team goes up the stairs at the north front and clears out what we believe is their living quarters. We then move back through the building laying charges and make our escape through the underground, after blowing the building of course. Close enough?"

"Yes, Peter. You know how important this one is," After looking around for prying ears the man

added in a soft voice. “and for whom were really working.”

“Yes, Carl I know, but your aware of how many of these little parties I’ve attended. Don’t worry everything is under control.”

“I sure the hell hope so, I really do.” The man called Carl added.

* * * *

On a small island in the mid pacific a group of men are splashing in the water. They are in a small cove with very steep walls all about except for the small beach area and seaward, where a vessel of some type blocks the way. On the cliffs and the beach black figures seen to be are moving about.

“The gentleman whom you see behind me are guilty of crimes against the environment, against life.” A figure in black from head to toe begins while facing a camera perched on a ledge about half way up on one of the cliff faces. Small sharp noises, like explosions, may be heard in the background.

“For years they have killed thousands of dolphins in the process of doing their business.” The dark figure picks up his narrative. “Knowingly killing these sentient creatures in order to harvest schools of tuna. The international environmental community has been trying unsuccessfully for decades to get these people to use safer methods in their fishing. They have refused.”

“Today we will give them, and you, a feeling of what it is like for a dolphin, remember a mammal, an air breather, like you or I, to be trapped in a commercial drift net.”

The scene panned to show a group of about four men being driven by explosives thrown into the water in toward the beach area. As the are finally driven into the surf they seem to become entangled in something. Men could be seen fighting and tugging at something as time and time again they were buffeted back into the surf by the strong waves. Faces could be glimpsed in the foam gasping for breath, struggling

against drowning.

Suddenly just as the wild thrashing in the surf began to lessen, a group of black clad divers jump into the water from a small boat which had been just off camera.

The drowning individuals are helped onto the shore by the dive team. The camera zooms in showing the four men gasping for air but alive.

The camera resolves again to the dark narrator.

“A dolphin caught in a drift net drowns. They are air breathers just as you and I are. Oceanographers have established that the dolphin has at least as much brain matter as human beings, if not more. They freely admit they may have sentience a culture and society as rich as our own.”

“We will no longer tolerate the indiscriminate killing of these beings. This exercise was just a warning. We know you must fish to survive, and we would not deny you that. However clean up your methods. You have been warned.”

The men in dark began to break down equipment and get back on board the vessel moored at the edge of the cove. The four wet, coughing, executives stare bewildered at their retreating captors, slowly beginning to realize their freedom.

* * * *

On a roof overlooking 6th avenue in Seattle a man waits, occasionally looking through a powerful pair of binoculars. Another joins him.

“Any activity?” The newcomer asks.

“No same old thing. The van just sits there monitoring the going’s on in the Hounfor. The same people, nothing new. You just get into town?”

“Yes,” Bob replies, adjusting his weight to sit besides the first man. “I’m taking charge of this one personally. Has anyone been able to identify our adversaries base yet?”

“Yes, Jason thinks one of our team spotted it last night. One of the people in the van left about 10:00PM and went down 5th avenue to an old warehouse. We’re trying to get some electrical hardware in there right now.”

“Where can I find Jason?” Bob asked the man while getting to his feet.

“Should be over at the command post, corner of 4th and Mercer. Want me to raise him on the radio?”

“No, lets keep all our communications to a minimum for now, don’t worry I’ll find him.”

“OK, upstairs room 310, I’ll be there for the 6:00 briefing.”

“See you then.”

Bob climbed down the stair’s and started walking towards the command post. He went by way of the Hounfor walking leisurely right by the mysterious van in the process. Turning north on 6th avenue he walked the two blocks to the command post. In room 310 he found Jason and several of his men busy monitoring surveillance gear.

“Bob, glad your here.” Jason looked up from the small telescope as Bob was admitted to the room. “I think there going tonight.”

“What makes you think that? Have you been able to get a bug into the warehouse?” Bob asked, taking a seat at the small table.

“We’ve been able to identify a number of the people who have been coming into and out of the warehouse. Some are CIA extras, people they use from time to time but who are not directly attached to the Company. They have approximately twelve people in on this operation. You know as well as I they wouldn’t have all the players in place if they weren’t ready to go.”

“No we have not been successful in getting a bug in yet.” Jason continued turning to face Bob.

“Were using a line of sight sound amplifier right now. Haven’t got much of any help yet though.”

“How many operatives we have on hand Jason?”

“Nine trained men in the field plus you and I makes eleven.”

“Should do. Lets get everyone here for that 6:00. I’m going to want some of our people attending the ceremonies tonight and everyone else positioned to go from 7:00 on. You still believe the strike will come from the underground Seattle access?”

“Everything seems to point that way, Bob.”

“Guess we’re as ready as we’re going to get. Any more leads on who might be behind this?”

“No, but all the people we’ve identified are Shop. Got to be a CIA operation or some related cabal.”

“Just my thoughts exactly Jason. “Bob, smiled to himself, it was nice working with competent people. “Were going to want to capture at least one of these people tonight, Jason. I’m going to call into H.Q. and then catch a few hours sleep. Call me if anything changes.”

With that Bob went into the next room had a short conversation with Brand and fell asleep on the bed.

* * * *

Random had just checked into his room at the downtown Hilton. The very first thing he did after tossing his bags on the bed was to call Ray Younger, all he got for his efforts was his answering machine. Random decided against leaving a message.

“I’d rather meet this man face to face.” he thought as he paced in front of the window.

Random's mind was still in a whirlwind after the episode at the airport. "Saddam Husein," Random thought, "these folks have got to be well organized and funded to pull something of that caliber off. I still can't get behind the idea of this killing, sure all these people have deserved it in spades. But, well, Ah hell, I just don't know."

He placed a second call to the local A.V.A. chapter. He learned that there was to be a ceremony this evening to which he would be welcomed to attend as a spectator.

The Hounfor itself was in the 700 block of 6th avenue, corner of republican. Random knew just where that was, down by the docks.

Having some time to kill Random took a shower and went downstairs to get some dinner. At 6:00 he was back in his rooms again to try Mr. Younger's number. Still no answer.

Random left the hotel shortly there after to make his way the short distance to the A.V.A Hounfor. He had that nebulous apprehensive feeling again in the pit of his stomach, something would happen tonight.

* * * *

Brand was talking to Franklin in the conference room at ELF head quarters.

"We may have something new." Franklin began. "Seems one of our station commanders in the Seattle area has been in contact with a Senator Hills. Hills is in charge of that covert action watch dog committee in washington. Our people believe that the Senator is also a member of a clandestine group involving action on the behalf of big business, organized crime, foreign governments etc..."

"We further believe that this cabal has no direct connections to the current administration, that is their working alone for their own interests. Their operating outside of standard channels, of course, works into our hands."

"I see," Brand replied steeping his fingers on his chin. "how was this information obtained?"

“This station commander has been under observation for some time as he has a lot of connections with the spook community. It was just luck that one of our people caught him in the act of passing a message to one of Senator Hill’s aides. The commander is now in custody and has admitted everything. Our people in Washington are trying to determine who the remaining members of this group are.”

“Right, lets move on this one. As soon as we know who all the members of this group are I want plans on how to deal with them ready. I would prefer not to kill anybody to cover our trail Franklin. Killing in defense of the earth is one thing, killing to protect ourselves to my mind is quite a different matter. What’s the situation in Seattle?”

“Bob’s people are in place. Bob also believes, as does Titus, that a strike will occur tonight. He believes he has enough people in the area to handle any problem.”

“Very well, Keep me informed.” Brand was having a hard time making the mental transition from being on vacation to operating in command mode again. This crises could not have come at a worse time.

* * * *

Random arrived at the Hounfor at 7:15. He was met at the door by an achingly beautiful asian woman. One of those women who grabs a hold of your heart as soon as you see her. She asked if Random was a member of the A.V.A.

“No mam, Random stuttered, he felt like a school boy. “I’m here out of interest mostly. Called earlier and was told it was OK to just to come to observe.”

“Oh yes, of course. You won’t be allowed in the Peristyle itself during the ceremony but there’s a viewing area off to the right.” She indicated an area in the interior of the building with a wave of her arm. “We like to know who is visiting us and why. Would you like to fill out a small questionnaire for us?”

“Yes, I guess, I’d be happy to. Are you going to be busy all evening or could I presume on you to find me later and talk to me a little about what’s going on?” Random was finding it hard to concentrate on his business in this woman’s presence.

“No, I mean sure, I’ll be free later and I would love to talk with you about Voudoun. My names Maya, I’ll see you later inside.” She waved Random into the Hounfor with an arm and greeted a couple walking towards the door.

Inside Random wandered about the large assembly area in the back of the building. Groups of people were talking here and there and a table with refreshments had been set up in the corner. A couple of men were busy making arrangements at the front of the room.

Random went over to what was obviously the viewing area and took a seat. More people were pouring into the room and at 8:00 sharp a group of three drummers began a sedate beat.

Little by little people got up and danced. A large black man was shaking a small rattle and speaking in words Random couldn’t quite make out.

Soon a group of three people came out from the room at the front of what must be the ‘Peristyle’ The man in the center carried a saber, he was flanked on either side by a flag bearer. These flags were gaily colored with no discernable pattern Random could make out at all.

The party went around the room performing what was obviously some form of salute. First going to the large black man with the rattle and then to a variety of other people in the group and finally saluting a pole painted and adorned much as the flags had been and residing in the center of the dancing area and finally the group saluted the drums and the alter.

As the drumming grew more and more intense so did the dancing. An individual here and there would suddenly stop as if glued to the spot, tilt and sway about at preposterous angles and then begin dancing again wildly. Sometimes someone would come and dress these individuals in strange garments.

Maya who had come to take a seat beside Random explained that these people were being possessed by the Voudoun Gods. Random found this all very strange. He did note however, one could hardly miss it, the atmosphere of joy permeating the Hounfor. The expressions of peace on the faces of the dancers. Something missing in all Random's religious experiences, was this sense of *participation*. These people were actively experience their faith. Interacting with their Gods, it felt wonderful.

Random resolved to look further into the A. V. A. once he had finished his current business.

The evening wore on the activity never seemed to lesson. At one point one of the 'possessed' wearing an old top coat and mirrored sun glasses came and stood directly in front of Random swaying back and forth and chanting 'all is to be revealed, al seals unsealed, tonight, all tonight' over and over until breaking up in peals of laughter he returned to the dance.

Maya said this was the God Guede and he always was very cryptic and known to be something of a joker. Strange religion Random thought, their God's have personalities. A joker God like the american indian Coyote, how very interesting.

Around ten thirty the activity began to change, slow down, the drumming again taking on a more sedate tempo. Little by little people began to leave. By eleven thirty there were no more than fifty people left in the building.

Random was waiting for Maya to return. He was hoping she'd except his invitation for a drink so he might see if he could get any information regarding the ELF from her. As well, he had to admit to himself, her telephone number.

Maya was walking back towards him, she had been talking to the large black gentleman whom Brand had learned earlier was Titus the chief Houngan, a priest Maya had explained, and spiritual leader of the A. V. A.

Suddenly there was a massive explosion from the rear of the building. The lights went out and the

peaceful evening was turned into a pandemonium of screaming people, dust, strange red light beams and dark figures moving about in the glow from the candles now the only source of illumination.

12. Whiplash

Falling to the ground isn't a learned behavior, purely instinctual and the ground was where Random found himself. His mind still trying to catch up with events.

Looking up Random saw Maya, or rather Maya's legs and dove for them pulling the woman to the relative safety behind a small table in the corner.

Everything was dark and choking smoke filled the air. Random could see people in the streets gasping and choking through the glass windows at the front of the building. It was just beginning to dawn on Random's brain that he was in the middle of some kind of attack. Armed attack at that, the thought left him

dumbfounded for a second.

“What the holy hell is going on”. He screamed to no one in particular.

Dark figures could be seen through the rising smoke dashing about the room. They all carried something casting a narrow, red, light beam. Random had seen these things before on TV, and knew they were an aiming device of some sort.

Random was very sure he shouldn't move an inch just yet.

* * * *

When the explosion took out the back wall, Bob had already reacted. All those years of training pay off in situations like this. With almost a sixth sense, he dove for cover. Bob afterward, wasn't real sure if he had even heard the explosion.

Bob had decided to be one of the inside people as he hoped to be able to help the civilians who might become trapped during the raid and he was looking for somebody in particular as well.

Rolling up against the south wall he spoke into the microphone at his collar.

“That's it! Hit it all teams! Now!” He yelled, and was up and running. He positioned the low light goggles on his face as he ran, now freeing up a weapon under his arm.

He had seen that man the team had been briefed to watch out for over in the north east corner just before the lights went out. He headed in that direction.

All team members were to wear arm bands with the ELF logo visible in infrared. Bob shot a figure NOT showing one of these and continued on.

He glimpsed Kirk, his sandy haired friend from the roof, giving a martial arts lesson to some darkly clad men in the office section up front. He smiled, Kirk could well take care of himself.

The rest of the ELF team, almost together burst into the Hounfor. One set from the street entrance the other attacking from the hole blasted in the back wall.

A massive explosion suddenly tore through the night. Flames and a thick black smoke were visible through the front windows. Police sirens could now be heard in the distance along with screams, moans and the continuing muffled gunfire.

Turning from the new threat Bob glimpsed a huddled form under something against the back wall.

Reports were starting to come in over his ear mike.

“Team one secure, four adversary down.”

“Team three secure, three enemy down.”

Yes this was the man in the photograph, Orders were to take him without harm. Bob popped the man and the woman beside him each in the arm with a sleep dart.

All Random could see for his part was a blurry figure before him in the tumult, then a sharp sting, then nothing at all.

* * * *

They had hit the Hounfor at 11:45 exactly. Bob was ready for them. He had deployed two teams in addition to Kirk and himself inside the building. Their adversaries still had people in the van on the street and so team number one was to take them out immediately, then proceed into the Hounfor.

They had decided against canceling tonight’s activities as that would have tipped their hand. There would be a little added danger due to the civilians who would be in the Hounfor. Bob’s team would clear these people out first thing. The plan was to force black’s forces back into underground Seattle.

The second team had been hidden in underground Seattle all day. They were, after spotting their opponents to follow and take them from the rear after they attacked the hounfor.

It had all gone pretty much by the numbers.

Team two warned the rest of the force seconds before the explosion. Team one had quickly subdued the four men in the van.

A man had walked in front in a heavy raincoat and had turned and shot the two men in the front seat with a taser weapon right through the glass. At the same time two more ripped open the side door and shot the remaining two with sleep darts with the new ELF strike guns.

As the adversaries men poured into the Hounfor Kirk shot the lead two with sleep darts. One in the chest the other in the leg. The remaining men with black's team opened up with automatic weapons. As they were still coming through the blasted wall no one was endangered by their fire.

Kirk saw Titus moving at a figure in the dark. He caught him up and lifted him from the floor jerking his head to one side as he did. The figure fell limp at his feet. Bob gained a brand new type of respect for his friend that night.

The ELF team in the underground must have been firing on the group from behind, Kirk realized as chaos hit the invaders men.

He shot another man as team one came bursting back into the room. Now it was all moping up. Several of the attackers had made it into the office area. Quickly Kirk moved toward them taking one man in the chest with a kick as he rounded a filing cabinet. Another man behind him received a punch delivered from the floor onto the man's chin propelling him at least ten feet back into the room.

The first man was regaining his breath so Kirk kicked him again in the solar plexus. He then shot both men with sleep darts just as a precaution.

Looking around Kirk could only see ELF emblems moving around in the dark.

Some of the men set up lights and began to give first aid where required. Amazingly no one had been killed. There were two people with minor gunshot wounds and plenty of cuts from glass. After

assessing the damage the ELF teams began to filter away into the night. A man was being carried into the opening blasted into the underground by one of the team, others followed.

All the attackers men were to be removed. There was to be no evidence left for the civilian authorities to work with.

Bob was speaking into the microphone at his shoulders. "Got away, Bull Shit." He said his expression grim. "Were almost secure up here. We'll be clear in two minutes. Take your team and capture them now!"

* * * *

Seconds after the explosion chaos had ruled the street in front of the building. People came streaming out through the door gasping and choking. After team one had neutralized the van they had charged into the Hounfor. Two members remained outside to help anyone who might need assistance and to maintain the perimeter.

The must have missed someone in the van or one of the taser victims had recovered in record time because a short time later the van had blown. The people in the streets ran of into the night at this renewed threat. And the ELF people outside could only make out a single attacker sprinting down the block and turning north toward kinnear park.

One of the men on guard sprinted after the fleeing black agent. At the corner he kneeled and fired his weapon. He then took off down the block only to return moments later carrying the unconscious man over his shoulder.

One of their adversaries men must have had orders to blow the van if in threat of capture. The vehicle was still in flames as the two remaining ELF people took one more look down the now empty street and then turned and went inside.

Inside some sense of order was returning to the Hounfor. The lights had been restored and only a handful of people remained. Titus was in a corner near the back leaning over another person.

The two ELF men went over to him. Whispering in his ear the first asked if he was OK. Titus replied in the affirmative and told the man, again in a whisper, that the rest of the team had gone into the underground and that he could handle things here now.

The two remaining ELF men turned and ran into the underground taking the sleeping raider with them, just as at least a half dozen police cars screeched to a stop out front. Sirens screaming in the night they turned their spotlights on the building.

With their weapons drawn and in pairs the policemen came into the building. They quickly had the interior covered and came over to Titus.

“What the hell is going on here. We’ve got reports of gunfire and explosions. Are you in charge?” A tall policeman with a stern look on his face asked.

“I don’t know sir. We were having a ceremony as we always do when the lights went out and an explosion blew out the wall.”

Titus said indicating the back wall.

“After that everything was chaos. I really am not clear on events at all. There was another explosion outside, it seemed as well that there was a lot of fighting going on and then everyone cleared out. For the most part I was under that table.”

Titus pointed at an upturned table near the south wall.

“You have any idea who might be responsible for this? Any one who might have a grudge against you?” A second policeman asked.

“No Sir, I had many enemies in Haiti, but I can not believe that this is their work, I have been an American citizen for four years now and have left all that behind me. May I go and assist my people now?”

The first policeman waved him away and Titus again bent over the figure of a woman with a small flesh wound.

“I don’t get it.” Another policeman remarked, walking up to the first two. “Looks professional, nine millimeter automatic,” The man held up a shell casing to show the others. “but there’s no one here. A couple of charred bodies in that van out front and nothing more. Weird.”

“Man here says the attackers came and went through an access into the underground. Get some people and see what you can find out down there.” The first man ordered, the new comer moved to obey.

Turning to Titus the policeman got his name and told him he would have to come down to the station tomorrow to answer some questions. He then went to confer with his superiors, as a group of officers went carefully into the blasted opening.

* * * *

Nine of the adversaries forces had been accounted for, which left at least three at large. Bob’s people were working on the unconscious forms of their attackers and after removing all weaponry were taking them up through another entrance to the underground in the building where they had kept their command base. They were to leave them in kenear park in the shadows soaked with alcohol. They were then to go and search the warehouse the black team had used for any information and meet the remaining force at the pier at the end of west prospect street.

These members of black’s force knew nothing about what was going on. They were merely hired mercenaries and even if captured could not be a threat to ELF.

This left Bob with four of his people from team one and the entire team two somewhere ahead chasing the missing attackers. The leader would be in this group, Bob very much wanted to capture this one

alive.

They moved off through the ghostly landscape of the ruined buildings. It was as cold as the arctic down in the underground even through the battle fatigues they all wore. Behind them almost two 'blocks' back figures could be observed climbing cautiously down from the Hounfor's entrance. Bob surmised these must be the authorities and hurried his group along.

Ahead, about a quarter mile team two was gaining on their quarry. The three men were turning from time to time to fire their weapons but the ELF forces were hot on their heels.

At a ruined building on a corner the three men stopped to take a stand. The two forces exchanged fire for a few moments, until two ELF people flanked their adversaries and finally got a good shot bringing two down.

The third and final man sprinted from cover and ran off down the street. Jason gave orders to his men to identify and neutralize the two captured men and took off after the man who had escaped.

Rounding the corner Jason could see his man about half a block ahead. The man turned and fired in his direction but Jason kept coming. He was gaining on his man and in just a few more strides could venture a dive for his legs. The man must have felt his presence because he turned at that moment and took up a fighting stance.

Jason dropped into his stance and faced him. The man threw his now empty uzi at him following it with a side kick aimed at Jason's throat. Jason dodged the thrown weapon and blocked the side kick. The man now tried to jam the palm of his hand into Jason's nose. Jason blocked this blow as well and returned a punch to the solar plexus which connected, staggering the man.

Recovering his opponent launched a round house kick at Jason's head. Grabbing the man's ankle as it flew passed he jerked him forward to receive a blow square on his chin. The man went down rolling and came up again in his stance.

Moving in Jason blocked two attempted blows and seized his man's wrist. Turning it in toward the man's body he forced him to his knees. The man was still vainly struggling as Jason applied pressure to the femoral artery, three seconds later his man slumped into unconsciousness.

Quickly Jason searched his foe. This must be the commander Jason determined due to the type of equipment and gear the man had carried.

"JT two to leader." Jason spoke into his throat mike.

"JT two this is leader what's your situation?" He received back through the radio in his ear.

"All secure. I've captured the leader and am now proceeding to the extraction point. All remaining adversary forces are accounted for."

"Good, let's get the hell out of here. There's police all over this place. We leave the dock in ten minutes."

"Yes Sir." Jason replied, picking up his man's body and slinging him over his shoulder Jason made his way to street level.

Jason had to backtrack quite a distance to get to the stairway which led to the street. At one point he had to hide behind a decaying store front to let a group of police by.

Stealthily, Jason made his way to the street level. The light drizzle of earlier that evening had cleared, the streets reflected in random pools of water.

As he gained the surface he paused to activate VonSchreader's invisibility projector. The field covered Jason and most of his baggage, but an observer would have still seen the occasional ghostly sight of a disembodied leg or arm floating down the street.

After six blocks Jason turned at last onto the pier. He jogged now to the end of Prospect Street where a large cruiser was tied up. As soon as he approached two figures appeared directly in front of him. The must have deactivated their fields as he approached Jason thought, as the two men helped him lower his

captive into the boat.

“Let’s get underway.” Bob yelled forward as soon as he was aboard and the massive diesels pushed the craft away from the docks.

After the craft had made it’s way into the center of the bay. Bob came over to sit by Jason.

“Well we made it this time. No dead at all on our side, not even a wound. A few of the citizens got scrapped up a little but nothing serious. The only casualties at all were apparently three of our attackers who were killed in an explosion set off by their own people.”

Bob turned up his collar against the wind as the big boat got up to speed. A cold wind was blowing out of Canada across the sound.

“Good,” Jason commented after awhile, he was in the process of stripping off some of the heavier gear he carried. “Thought it was going to get away from us there for awhile. Who’s the extra man?”

Jason asked, pointing toward the limp form of Random.

“That’s the man we were briefed to look out for. Found him inside when the party started. Might as well get comfortable Jason, after we drop off our men at Port Townsend, we’ll be most of the rest of the night and then some getting back down to headquarters.”

With that Bob clapped Jason on the shoulder smiled and went below to report to Brand. The large cruiser moved like a shark through the dark waters surrounding the sleeping city.

* * * *

Brand was pacing up and down in front of the sea window. It had been almost forty five minutes since the group had heard anything from Seattle. With Brand were, Ariel, Franklin and Diana acting as the communication tech.

“Damn I hate waiting.” Brand said. “Can you get anything at all Diana?”

“Can’t call them now Sir, for all we know their in the midst of the battle.” Diana replied adjusting something on her console.

“I know,” Brand remarked. “that’s what’s got me so worked up. wish we knew what was going on.”

“Don’t trouble yourself so Brand,” The always cool Franklin spoke up. “Bob’s the best, the very best. These people won’t know what hit them.”

Just then Diana’s console began to buzz and lights began to wink on and off.

“Sir, Bob’s on the channel. He indicates that the operation is complete and that their on the way out.”

A visible coating of tension could be seen to lift from Brands body as he said “Let me talk with him please.”

Diana handed him a headset, after adjusting it Brand spoke into the microphone.

“Leader, any dead? What’s your situation?”

“No Sir, no casualties on our side at all, not even a scratch, no civilian dead either. Everything went well and we should be at your position by dawn.”

“Very well, good nights work. Do you have our package?”

“Yes Sir, all tied up and sleeping like a baby, oh, and we have that extra bonus package to.”

“Good, very good,” Brand was beginning to relax again. “then we will expect you in the early morning hours.”

“Yes Sir, Salamander out.”

The line went dead. Brand handed the headset back to Diana and sank into a chair.

“God, I’m glad that’s over, any word from Titus yet?”

“No Prime,” Diana replied. “he’s probably still involved with the police. Titus wouldn’t call in until he’s in a secure position.”

“Our cover story will work well there Sir.” Franklin commented. “We’ve supplied information to the Seattle authorities that our friends in black’s camp were drug dealers who were using underground Seattle as a means of getting their product into the city. A small amount of cocaine will be found in the warehouse they were using as a base.

“The police will write it off as another episode in the drug war. Titus will call as soon as he’s clear.”

“Yes, I know but I’ll feel a lot better when this is all behind us. Any more information from Washington on who’s behind this?”

“Yes Prime,” Franklin continued. “We’ve been able to identify a man associated with east coast crime, another man a Mr. Edward Baker, big bucks, as well as a KGB official as probable co-conspirators. Our people are now trying to determine if there is anyone else to account for in this group.”

“Something else though, it’s got a strange smell to it.” Franklin said, for once looking a little disturbed. “Like there’s something else were missing. Can’t put my finger on it but I’m sure there’s more to this than we’re seeing just now.”

“Yes I agree, we need to tie this one down as soon as possible Franklin. Lets get one of our interrogation teams set up in Washington, I want to close these people down like yesterday.”

“Yes Prime, that is already being done.”

* * * *

The trip down the coast had lasted all night despite the high powered engines of the Salamander. By early dawn they had reached the sea in front of the mansion hiding the ELF headquarters. The air was

clear and cold in the early morning gloom, though thunderheads were threatening on the horizon.

While still out at sea and with no running lights on, the sleeping bodies of both Random and the leader of the black forces were placed inside large body bags each equipped with breathing gear.

Four of the remaining ELF people also put on underwater equipment and with their two weighty packages as well as the remaining strike gear slipped silently into the water. They would bring their prisoners into the complex through the sea tunnel used for the submarine.

Bob and Jason took the cruiser back up the coast to a nearby marina where the boat was docked under Gabriel's name.

They then drove the four by four pickup the short distance back to the mansion the windshield wipers making the only noise.

By 7:30 Bob and Jason were underground in the main complex. The black group leader had been placed in the interrogation room. A small room with a steel cot bolted to the floor. One wall sported the standard one way mirror all such rooms posses. The captive had been striped to his underwear and chained to the cot.

Random was being attended to in another room. More civilized, it contained a large bed, nightstand and wash basin. Random had been administered the antidote to the sleep poison and was being allowed to rest. His door as a precaution was locked and he was under surveillance by way of a camera hidden behind an air intake duct in the ceiling.

Bob and Jason joined the group already gathered in the conference room. Ariel and Franklin sat against the back wall with Diana and Nelson on the opposite side. Brand sat at the head of the table, Bob and Jason took seats near the door.

"Gentlemen, welcome back. Excellent work in Seattle last night. We think we may have averted this little crises due to your efforts. To bring you up to date. Titus has reported that the police seem, at

least for now, to buy into our drug dealer story. At any rate Titus has been released and is now cleaning up the Hounfor. He will join us here tomorrow after everything has died down a little.”

“Further our people in Washington have, they believe, identified the authors of this little drama. we have an interrogation team on the way.”

“My thinking here is that we should, ah, impress upon these people the, um, futility of challenging us ever again. Any input on how we might do that?”

“Oh yes Sir,” Bob spoke up. “and I’d like to be in on it. With your permission Jason and I will take the jet to Washington today.”

“How will you deal with our little friends?” Brand asked.

“Oh kidnapping and terror as usual, they obviously don’t know enough to be dangerous. This was just an exploratory mission, a shot in the dark. The man who leaked the information is, I hope under captivity?”

“Yes, we have him here. He has revealed under scopalimine the names of his contacts. We are trying to determine what to do with him at this point.”

“Why execute him our course.” Bob replied in a matter of fact voice.

“No Bob, it’s not as easy as all that.” Brand replied with a shrug. “We can not set the precedent of killing just to protect ourselves. I’m not ready to accept that just yet. Any ideas on how we might deal with this is solicited. But for the time being were just going to hold him.”

“He threatens many more lives than he’s worth Brand.” Bob said, his eyes narrowed.

“Yes I understand.” Brand replied with a tired look in his eyes. “We will discuss this again.”

“Well, the main thing I want to know is if this goes any deeper than those people we’ve already identified.” Bob said “We wont know that until we get to Washington.”

“Before you leave, today, I need you to interrogate our prisoner. If he knows nothing more about

our organization, I intend to release him. We do need to know what he does know however.” Brand said rising.

“Please inform me of your results.”

“My pleasure Bob replied with a wicked grin.”

Sometimes Brand wondered if the hangman loved his work a little to much.

* * * *

OK, he should be coming around any time now, this combination of morphine and scopolamine is tricky but very good.” The medical tech. remarked to Bob.

“Well, I’ll take it now, you can join Jason in there.” Indicating the mirror on the wall behind him.

As the tech was leaving the man on the cot began to moan and move about. Suddenly his eyes came open and he tried to sit up, he could only raise his head a few inches due to his manacled hands. The man squinted against the harsh circle of light. Bob would appear as a shadow to him, sitting as he was outside of the light to the man’s right. With a sigh the man sank back unto the cot.

“What is your name?” Bob asked.

“Alfred Miller, ah, I feel strange, where am I?”

“I ask the questions. Who do you work for.”

“Work for, work? I am a car salesman. Who are you?”

“You are an agent, what agency do you work for.”

“No agency a man, I’m a salesman, where am I.”

“You are an agent not a salesman. What man?”

“The senator. Senator Hills. In Washington. I feel strange, I want to leave.”

“What do you know about ELF? The Environmental Liberation Front? Tell me?”

“You kill people, you kill people for garbaging up the planet.”

“Yes, we kill people. What do you know of our organization?”

“Only that the Senator’s group believes you use the voodoo folks as a front. Can I go home now?”

“Not just yet. Who are the members of the Senators group?”

“I don’t know for sure, some big business type and the mafia, don’t know the names, don’t know.

Want to sleep now.

And so it went for most of the day. Bob confirmed with the lab tech. who had been monitoring Mr. Miller’s readings and both agreed that the man had revealed all he knew. By nine that evening they were sure that the man knew nothing of any import and had decided to release him the following week in San Francisco.

This localized their problems, Washington and Senator Hill were the remaining pieces of this puzzle and they would be dealt with shortly.

* * * *

In Washington things were in an uproar in the Senators private offices. The same men were in attendance at this meeting except for the soviet.

“The men were found ***SLEEPING*** in a park with liquor on their breath! You had to bail them out of jail! Your commander has disappeared! Frankly Sir I’d call this a disaster. Worst of all we don’t know any more than we did. Maybe this voodoo stuff is a front for the ELF, maybe it isn’t. My people are going to be very displeased.” Mr. Baker the commercial giant was haranguing the Senator.

“Nor will mine be happy, I assure you.” The unusually quiet Italian agreed.

“Gentlemen, patience, all is not lost. This was just a feint. None of these men know anything about you. If anyone is in jeopardy it is myself.” Senator Hills said rising to stand before his window, the dome of the capital visible in the background. “We will mount another mission, perhaps this time we will kidnap some of these people. We will peruse our, ah, explorations.”

“Not this time Hills.” The mafia representative spoke in a venomous voice. “We will now take matters into our own hands. We are tired of your mismanagement of these affairs.”

“Mr. Franchesca, please, do not disturb the waters. I can and will get to the bottom of this problem, I assure you.”

“No I’m afraid that it’s much too late for assurances. I have been instructed to pull the families out of our little venture.”

“If that is the case, I am also afraid I will have to rethink our relationship.” Mr. Baker said, cleaning his glasses.

“Friends, this can not be. Give me forty eight more hours to resolve this. I’m sure we can clean this all up if you’ll allow me the time.”

“Very well Senator, forty eight hours. I’ll go that far, but no further. You had best succeed this time.” The Italian spoke darkly.

Hours later, the Senator was driving home to his apartment. Things were not going very well indeed. He didn’t know if he could pull this one off. The Senator intended to call in almost all of his personal favors as soon as he got home and could get on a safe line, but he wasn’t sure if even that would help.

The mysterious group calling themselves The Nine were also on the top of his thoughts as he turned down his street. Who was this group really? He had been working for them for years and it had been most lucrative, but he really knew nothing about them.

They claimed to be behind all major pivotal historical events for the last several hundred years,

hinting with an occult air that they were a millennium older. All bound up with this mystic nonsense his one and only contact kept throwing in his face. He was sure it was all bullshit, yet the scared him more than any of his other associates the mafia included.

As he pulled into his parking place he glanced into his rear view mirror and saw the dark figure in the back seat. He almost messed his pants.

“How? Have you been there the whole way?” Even as he spoke the words, the Senator thought of the inanity of the question.

“What do you want?” The Senator asked. The man in back hadn’t moved a muscle.

The man shot the Senator through the car seat in the kidneys. Not an immediately fatal wound, but deadly none the less. The Senator was flung forward from the force of the bullet and his head bounced off the steering wheel before settling back again against the cushion.

“You were warned regarding failure Senator. The Nine cannot tolerate such foolishness, we have been invisible for centuries and shall remain so. Your services are no longer required.”

With those words the man shot the Senator a second time in the back of the head. As the Senator’s body slumped down to lay across the front seat, the dark man stepped out of the rear door and began to slowly walk up the ramp to the higher levels.

* * * *

Titus arrived earlier than expected the following day. The hounfor had not been terribly damaged during the raid and none of the people present had been hurt badly at all. The authorities were initially somewhat reluctant to release Titus. They were eminently frustrated at having no leads to go on whatsoever and wanted to keep him on the line. After Titus’s lawyers pointed out that he was in fact the victim of this

crime and they had nothing to charge him with they grudgingly set him free.

Titus had left Seattle late in the night taken the ferry over to the peninsula. He had then driven down along hood canal finally slipping over to 101 at Olympia.

Even so, he had spent a little time at a roadside stop just to make sure he was alone before taking the old dirt road the remaining thirty miles to his destination. He rolled into the driveway on the wings of a storm.

He arrived underground at the headquarters a little before ten in the morning. Bob and Jason were getting ready for their flight to Washington, but Brand had called for a meeting before they were to leave.

Quickly Brand caught Titus up to date with the events of the evening and then asked how things had gone up north.

“Oh very well. No problem at all. I was very impressed with the team Bob.” Titus said easing his ageing body into one of the chairs. “The police were somewhat understandably ah, hesitant to release me but they had nothing to go on. I’m sure it will all be forgotten in a week or two. What news of the leaders of this group of devils? Were it not for your forces Bob, I’m sure they would have gladly killed us all.”

Brand explained their information concerning the mole and the Senators little group in Washington.

“What are our intentions for these people? Surely we will not allow them to continue to operate.” Titus inquired.

“Jason and I are on our way to Washington to deal with this little affair.”

“How do you intend to deal with them?”

“Kidnapping and scopolamine, always worked for me before.” Bob said with a grin. “What well do with them in the end depends entirely on what we find out. I’m all for terminating them but Brand would like for us to let them live if we can.” Bob replied, obviously disagreeing with Brand on the last point.

“As you say we will determine their fate after we question them.” Brand said looking at Bob. “If

we have to execute them to protect the organization we of course will.”

“Perhaps there is another way.” Titus said.

Outside, visible through the window the sea churned with the winds of the incoming storm.

“Please explain Titus.” Brand prompted.

“I was thinking about all this on my way down last night. Surely it has occurred to you that there will be other episodes like this one. I believe we need to develop tactics and methods to counter attacks and infiltrations.”

“I have been thinking along similar lines myself. We can not keep ourselves secure forever. We do need to develop strategies for these situations, What did you have in mind?” Brand asked.

“Your terror tactics and drugs are all well and good, Bob and I’m not proposing we get along without them. I, as our leader here,” Titus continued, motioning toward Brand. “would like to minimize the death we have to deal out. Perhaps we can let fear do our work for us. Perhaps we might have the Voudoun LOA come alive for these people.”

Brand, after a second began to smile. After another second Bob joined him.

“Oh I like it, I really do.” Bob remarked with a grin.

“Me too.” Brand agreed. “Well, I hate to send you off to Washington without a rest Titus but Bob and Jason are ready to go and I think they’ll require your expertise on this one. You OK for a plane ride?”

“Yes Prime, We all serve in our own way.” Titus said with a smile, spreading his hands and bowing his head.

* * * *

Washington D.C. is cold as hell in the winter. This particular day was not an exception. After

retrieving their baggage at the airport the trio took a rental car into the city.

As they were driving in through a blinding snow storm, they were startled to learn of the murder of Senator Hills the previous night on the local radio.

“Well this sure changes things, wasn’t he our first target.” Titus asked from the back seat.

“Yes, someone’s obviously trying to cover things up. Hope our remaining leads can shed some light on all this. Shit... This really complicates matters.” Bob said taking the next corner at a dizzying rate.

The next day they rented a small building on the outskirts of town and began to stalk their quarry.

They decided to go after all three at the same time, they didn’t think they had the time to deal with them all individually. The plan being to kidnap the remaining committee members and hold them prisoner in small rooms in their rented quarters.

They got Mr. Edward C. Baker coming home to his mansion in New Hampshire. They blew out the tires of his limousine on a quite country road. Left his driver and his bodyguards sleeping in the car and spirited the drugged commercial mogul away.

The soviet was another matter. Never without bodyguards in public and spending most of his time in the embassy didn’t make him an easy target.

They finally got their man when he paid a visit to his mistress, shooting the man unceremoniously in bed with a sleep dart and caring his naked body down the fire escape.

The startled woman hadn’t made a move and they left her sleeping peacefully in her bed.

The last man, the mafia boss, had proven to be the easiest of the bunch. Alfonso had a taste for gambling and frequented an illegal club most nights. Bob and Jason had simply waited for him to come out after a long nights gambling and had just taken him, clean and quiet.

Two days later found them with three drugged prisoners in their hideaway. They would start on their program the following morning.

* * * *

Random awoke with a grandmother of a headache. Looking about the room he came to conclusion that he didn't have a clue where he was. After forcing himself out of bed he walked the short distance to the single door, each step a torture. The door's locked status didn't help to improve Random's apprehensions. He returned to the bed and laid back down with a groan.

Soon a man in a white coat unlocked the door and came in.

"Feeling pretty poorly I'd imagine. Our sleep darts are very effective but the victim pays the price in the form of a massive headache upon waking." The man in the lab coat remarked.

"Yeah, I feel like a zombie. You got any aspirin? Who the hell are you anyway? Where am I?"

"Here this will fix you right up." The man produced a syringe and quickly stabbed Random's arm before he could complain. Almost instantly the pain began to lesson.

"As to the remainder of your questions I can tell you that you are being held, temporarily, by the forces of ELF and that someone will be with you shortly to answer any other questions you may have."

With that the man left the room. Random could hear the click of the lock moments later.

Sometime later, Random wasn't sure just how long as he had fallen back asleep another person entered the room. This time it was the most beautiful blond woman Random had ever seen.

"You should be feeling much better now." The woman said. "My name is Diana, I am to take you to a bathroom so you may get cleaned up and then take you to breakfast with the Prime. He's looking forward to meeting you. We may also have a little surprise for you later this afternoon."

"Ah, thank you, I could use a little cleaning up. The Prime? Who's that? Where am I?"

Diana laughed kindly. "I'm sure your a little confused right now. Let me assure you that your in no

danger. To answer your first question the Prime is our leader. We've been watching you for some time now Random. If you would come with me?" She motioned at the open door with her arm. Random began to climb out of the cot, Diana went to his side and offered her arm in assistance.

After a shower and a fresh change of clothes Random was feeling a lot more human but he was still unsure of his status. Was he a prisoner? Where was he? The ominous note that they had been watching him whirled around in his mind as he walked with Diana down a hallway and into a large conference room.

The first thing Random noticed was the large window filling up an entire wall with a view into the sea. Framed by this image a man sat at the head of the large table. The man rose as Random and Diana entered the room.

"Good morning, Mr. Waterson," Brand walked forward extending his hand. "I am your host, for now you may call me Prime. I assumed you would be hungry after your ordeal and took the liberty of having our cook prepare a little late breakfast for us."

"Ah, thank you, yes I'm famished, ah, Prime. May I ask where I am and what your intentions are toward me?"

Random dug into the fine breakfast of an omelette, juice, toast and bacon set before him. Brand took the time to answer Random's question before starting on his.

"Of course, Mr. Waterson. You are in our headquarters, I'm not going to tell you just where that is except that, as you must have surmised, we are within twenty-four hours travel time from Seattle."

"Our intentions are nothing more than an interview, dependant upon that interview is whether you will remain in contact with this organization. In any case you will be released unharmed where ever you wish. It may be that we will need to subject you again to our little sleeping chemicals, to protect our location as well as yourself should you choose to go your own way."

"Go my own way? I don't understand. Please call me Random, I've always been uncomfortable

with labels like Mister or Sir.”

“OK Random, I’m sorry I can’t give you my name just yet. By go your own way I mean if you should choose not to be a part of our organization after our talk.”

“Your organization, you mean the Environmental Liberation Front don’t you?”

“Yes Random, guilty as charged. We are the people whom you have been looking for. We’ve had our eye on you for some time now.”

“For just how long would that be, ah, Prime? Is Anna one of your people? I have suspected as much for some time now.” Random was experiencing a major case of unreality. The patterns the sea made in the window behind the Prime were casting strange lights on the table in front of him.

“We’ve been watching out for you since you troubles in Nairobi. We’re very concerned about innocent people getting involved in our, ah, enterprise. We have made some very potent enemies in our work. That party you got involved with last night was an attempt by a group to smash into our organization.”

“Yes, Anna is one of our people, She could get in a lot of trouble if that information got into the wrong hands, were trusting you on this one, Random.

“I expect you have quite a lot of unanswered questions for me, we have a bit of time available. Please feel free to ask me anything at all.”

“I, yes, I do have a lot of questions. Are you aware of how I got involved in the first place?” Random asked, munching on a piece of toast.

“Yes, the letter opener. I understand you were a little put off as to the nature of that, um, artifact.”

“Yes, you could say that. This has been going on for what, six months now? Well, anyway I’ve always had a problem with your methods. Your goals and intentions are quite admirable, I just can’t get behind the idea of terror tactics and killing.”

“I see, would it help to know that these very questions plague me day and night as well? No, probably not, Random let me give you a little history about our organization and my self and then we can speak about our deeper problems.”

Brand poured himself a cup of coffee and then slid the container toward Random, he sat back in his chair and began.

“Long ago I was a systems designer for an engineering firm....”

* * * *

In Washington Bob, Jason and Titus sat around a small table in the kitchen area of their quarters.

“Well Titus, how we going to go about this?” Bob asked as he poured himself another cup of coffee.

“Seems we have two items on the agenda. One determine who is behind all this and how much of a threat they are. Two make sure they never come after us again. As to the first, you are the experts there and I suspect you will be wanting to use drugs. As to the second how about if our captives were to meet the Baron Samedi?”

“The Baron huh, I thought you had something in mind like that. Let’s see I’m not as educated in all this as much as either Brand or Ariel but I am getting there. Isn’t the Baron the protector of the cross-roads and the cemetery, the opener of the way?”

“Yes Bob, he is typically depicted as an old man in tails and a beat up top hat leaning on a cane and he usually wears sun glasses. His manifestations can be somewhat unnerving to the uninitiated. I’m proposing that you allow me to do the interrogations in the guise of Baron Samedi.”

“Whoa, hold on there, you ever done anything like this before? There’s a lot more to it than just

asking questions.”

“No, I’ve never been involved in activities like this. OK, how about if one of you do it with my backing.”

“Yes that could work out, Lets get started. Jason, could you go out and get the things Titus will need for our little drama?”

“Sure Bob, Titus give me a list of what you need.”

Titus penciled a small list and handed it to Jason. While he was away Titus spent the time drilling Bob on the personality and behavior patterns of the Baron.

Bob was slowly becoming a Voudoun serviteur, he had gained interest in the craft through long conversations with both Brand and Ariel. He had yet to get to the point of full acceptance and had never been mounted by the LOA, so he had to learn his role the hard way.

Jason returned about two hours later with the items they needed. After Titus had outfitted Bob as the Baron he was a sight to behold. Tattered clothing, a beat up old suit coat with tails and top hat, his face made up to resemble a skull in certain light. Finally sunglasses and a gnarled old cane to top off his costume.

“Damn Bob, you look like the angle of hell himself.” Jason commented after Titus’s administrations.

“Feel like him too. Lets get this show on the road. I’ll take the business man first. Got that hypo for me?”

Jason handed the ghostly figure a small syringe filled with a clear fluid.

“I’ve checked out all the gear the interrogation team left for us, everything is up and running. Good luck.” Jason slapped Bob on the shoulder raising a cloud of dust.

As Bob entered the room containing Mr. Baker the man gasped and tried to sink below the mattress.

“Good day Mr. Baker.” Bob said in a voice that sounded like the rasp of a corpse. “I am hear to discover why you have dared to attack my people.” With that he bent over the shuddering form on the cot and sank the hypo into his arm.

Both Titus and Jason were monitoring events on the screen of a small television. They had placed cameras in all three rooms the previous night. As soon as the drug started to take hold Bob began.

“Why did you disturb my house. Why are you persecuting my people?”

“You house... I, ah, don’t know. Please I meant no harm, your scaring me...”

“Yes, and you should be frightened, I hold your spirit in my realm. Why did you attack our home in Seattle?”

“The Nine, The Nine.... I meant no harm... oh sweet jesus help me please help me.”

“The Nine? Ah,” Bob began to sway about drunkenly. *“I am the lord of the Abyss the master of the dead, you have offended me.”* Bob continued to sway, holding his head in his hands from time to time.

“What’s with Bob?” Jason asked. “He’s acting like he’s drunk. What’s going on Titus?”

“Ah..., I believe he’s being mounted by the LOA, by the Baron himself. I didn’t really foresee that this would happen.” Titus replied the intent look in his eyes didn’t quite mate with the slightly amused grin.

“What! your telling me Bob is being possessed? Titus this is nuts, I respect you and your religion and all that but this isn’t the time and the place. What the hell should we do?”

“Nothing, at least for now, let’s see how things proceed and then well decide on how to deal with it.”

“Damn Titus, this is getting out of hand.”

Just then a wail, like the voice of the banshee, echoed from within the small room.

* * * *

Brand had just gotten to the point in his narration where he was describing their first operation when the telephone at his side rang. Brand picked it up, typically a little annoyed at being disturbed.

“Yes, Prime here, I’m a little busy right now. Can’t this wait?”

“No Brand.” Ariel’s voice came through the line. “Gabrial’s just collapsed. We think she may have just had a stroke of some kind. Please come up here right now she’s asking for you.”

“Yes... I’ll be right there...”

13. The Warning

Bob's figure glowed in the stark shadows of the small room, literally glowed. His face turned toward the hidden television camera slowly as if getting used to new flesh.

"Do not disturb me Houngan. All is well, all is as it should be." the image of Baron Samedi spoke from the monitor screen in a voice no human could imitate, sounding like the rasping of a corpse to long from the grave.

Everything about the figure on the monitor was different from what had been mere seconds before. The posture, the tone of voice even the expression on the skull like face had changed. What stood before Titus and Jason now on the small monitor screen emitted a sense of regality, a potency and assurance, almost visible in the darkness. One thing was most certainly true, the being before them was not their friend the hangman.

"What are we going to do, Titus?" Jason asked, obviously somewhat shaken by the turn of events.

"Nothing at all, Jason, I believe the LOA has come to help us, Bob is in no danger." He answered staring intently into the screen.

Suddenly a harsh laugh resounded through the small house, the figure of the Baron whirled in toward the helpless captive whirling the tails of his coat like a cape. That laugh, hideous, long and drawn out exhibiting in its tone a true delight at the terror the spectral being knew it would invoke.

The poor man on the cot had wet himself in his fright. If he could have reached his wrists, he would

have chewed through them to be free of the nightmare now poised like a vulture before him.

The figure of the Baron turned his head down toward the captive, staring, turning his head one way and then another. The man tried to bury himself deeper yet into the thin material of the cot.

"What more do you know human? You can not resist me., TELL ME NOW!"

The capitalist stiffened and jerked as if being electrically shocked. Suddenly his body became stiff, seeming to levitate slightly against the tight bonds, the mans eyes rolling up into his skull. In a voice with absolutely no emotion the prisoner replied.

"There is a group, an invisible society which claims to order the destiny of humanity from the shadows. We have been working with them for years." he gasped, as if the words were being wrung out of his mind one by one, the captive having no choice or volition.

"They claim to all this pseudo occult nonsense, millennium old, in contact with 'powers', that kind of hocus pocus. I don't buy it. These types always have to get into scary stuff, it's all a lot of bull shit to me. They were very profitable though, very."

"*MORE!*" the Baron commanded, bands of some type of force were visible surrounding both the figure of Bob/Samedi, as well as the prisoner.

"There's not much more." The man began again in a completely toneless voice. "From time to time, we do things for this group. In return, they supply us with information and political power. Only the Senator and I know of the existence of these people, if you can call them that... The mobster and the Soviet know nothing of our alliance with The Nine. The believe we are an internal government cabal only."

"*Who is your contact?*" The figure of the Baron seemed to grow larger as the man on the cot continued.

"Never had direct contact, always through the senator. Hills said it was always the same. A man would 'appear', that's how he put it. Said he walked right through security systems and guards, just

showed up....”

The Baron Samedi grabbed the shrinking man by the shoulders and thrust his death's head features into his face.

“Now, know that I will be taking your memories of all of this away. You will have no further interest in ELF and you will forget all you know of The Nine. If ever you trouble these waters again, you will die within weeks from my curse. Your mind will not remember this conversation, but your body and spirit will. Sleep now till you are ordered to awaken.”

The man slumped in the Baron's hands his eyes closed now in sleep. The Baron released the body to fall back on the cot and strode regally from the room.

As the figure of the Baron came into the room where Titus and Jason sat, Titus rose from his chair and approached the ghostly form now leaning heavily on his cane. He bent down before him and kissed the ground at his feet.

“Lord, master how may we serve you?” Titus asked from a kneeling position. “What may we do to help the lord of the cemetery?”

“Merely stand aside now Houngan. You have served us and the spirits and we are well pleased with you. Know that we have now taken sides in the matters of men and that we will actively aid your cause. Lead me to the next two. I will remove their memories as I have taken this man's. When I am through, your friend will come back to you. Let us hasten.”

As Titus led the Baron to the next prisoner, Bob/Samedi's eyes fell upon Jason's for a moment. Jason would never forget the experience. It was as if the gates of the Abyss were visible behind the eyes of his friend and leader.

Soon the Baron was through with his business. The mafia man had almost quit breathing in his fear during his session. Jason had gone in afterward to make sure the man was still alive.

The Soviet on the other hand fought for some time against the ministrations of the dark specter. Finally succumbing to the Terror as had his two colleagues and as they did sinking back onto his cot in a deep sleep.

After coming back into the main rooms of the house, the form of Baron Samedi collapsed to the floor. Quickly Jason and Titus went to their friend's aid. Removing the makeup and outer portions of his costume, they put him on the couch to rest. His breathing and pulse were slowing down to a normal pace from an extremely accelerated rate.

"Well, that has got to be the most bizarre interrogation I have ever been involved in." Jason remarked as Titus and he took a moment to regain their composure. "What do we do now Titus?"

"Did we tape all that, amazing, no one will believe it. Do we have a tape?"

"Yes Titus, Hell here," Jason removed a cassette from the deck and handed it to Titus. "again I ask, what do we do know?"

"First things first." Titus said seeming to be recovered from his episode with the Baron. "While Bob is resting, perhaps we should get rid of our captives."

"Do you believe that they will not remember this, um, interview Titus?"

"Yes, I certainly do. I have seen the Baron to many times before to mistake him. As he says, so shall it be."

"Then let's get it done with. Help me to load them into the car. I'll drop them off in three different locations; naked, I think." Jason smiled. "That should help to reinforce their fears, eh?"

"Absolutely, Jason." Titus laughed his eyes agleam in the light from the console. "While your about that, I'll start packing up our gear and keep an eye on our sleeping friend."

"Titus, ah, after what I've seen um... when this is all over, and we have some time," Jason said tentatively, "Well, I'd like to talk over what I've seen here tonight with you."

“Yes, I imagine you would.” The Houngan smiled at his friend.

* * * *

By the time Brand got up to the mansion, Ariel and Diana had Gabriel on the couch. Her head was pillowed on Ariel’s lap and Diana knelt beside her, holding her hand. Brand too knelt down beside her and looked up at Ariel. Tears were streaming down her face as she said.

“Brand, she’s so sick, she collapsed early this morning. Diana found her on the living room floor.”

“What’s happened? Is it some form of attack? A stroke or heart problem?” Brand asked.

“She’s had a condition for some time now, Brand.” Ariel began, wiping the tears from her eyes.

“Cancer, inoperable, she’s known for quite awhile. She told me months ago and swore me to silence. She wanted someone to know... when the time came.”

“Is she alive now? Brand felt her neck gently for a pulse. What’s her condition? What should we do?” “

“She’s alive Brand. We’ve called for paramedics, they should arrive soon. It is important that we be the only ones here when they arrive.”

Gabriel moaned and her eyes fluttered open.

“Where..... Ah, I understand. Brand, Ariel, Diana.... I am glad you are here. There is something I must tell you. Brand, something you need to know. I did not think it would happen so soon. I..” Her voice broke down into a fit of coughing.

“Be quite Gabriel. Save your strength.” Brand said beginning to stroke her forehead. “There’s nothing that won’t wait until we’ve got you some help.”

“No, now.” Gabriel replied, trying to sit up in Ariel’s arms. “My people, they have been with us for many years, they work for and are organized for our cause.”

“What do you mean Gabriel?” Brand was beginning to believe that she was beginning to hallucinate.

“No... As we do, they have been ah, involved.” Gabriel gasped. “You must go see Manuel, he will explain. We have been assisting the ELF for years.”

“Gabriel, if I understand you, you are saying that your people, your tribe, are involved in activities to aid ours, the organization. Is this correct?” Brand asked the frail woman before him.

“Yes, it is important that you know this. Manuel will take over for me now. He knows what to do. The others will still be with us. It was thought better to serve invisibly, unknown. We would then have more opportunity to help.”

Gabriel fell into a coughing spasm, her hands clenching Ariel’s. After it had passed, she reached up to Brand, her now seemingly frail hand clutching at his shoulder.

“You see,” she went on “we love and revere our mother the Earth as much as you. It is part of our belief. Manuel is organizing the other Nations as well, soon we will all be with you. Now only Manuel knows, no other....”

Gabriel’s body seemed to relax all over and her head fell to Ariel’s breast. Diana took her pulse again.

“She’s in a bad way Brand. I don’t know if she can last much longer.”

Behind them a knock resounded at the door.

“Paramedics, is anybody in there?” A voice called out.

Diana hurried to the interior of the house to the hidden passage leading to the underground complex. As soon as she was clear Brand opened the door.

“Yes, please help her.” Brand motioned the two uniformed medics into the house. “We came back to find her laying on the floor. Were friends, we live down the coast a little. Ariel, my wife,” Brand said

indicating Ariel, still cradling Gabriel's head. "says she confided in her about a case of inoperable cancer."

"That correct mam?" One of the paramedics asked. They were both taking the now unconscious form of Gabriel from Ariel's arms and moving her to a position on the floor where they could work.

"Yes, but this seems to be a stroke of some sort. She could not move either her right arm or leg when I first found her."

"Thank you mam, please move out of the way a little so we can work."

Soon they had Gabriel stabilized and strapped into a stretcher. The two paramedics quickly moved her into their vehicle and began to make ready to drive to the local hospital. Brand inquired as to where they would be taking her and made arrangements for Ariel to accompany Gabriel.

As the rescue vehicle began to pull away, sirens wailing and lights blazing, Brand just stood there for a minute, not noticing the slight drizzle which fell on his face, just watching the lights until they vanished into the distant fog and early morning light.

* * * *

Brand walked back into the conference room where he had left Random about thirty minutes earlier.

"Sorry for the interruption, a problem."

Random could sense something was wrong from the tone of voice and the beleaguered expression on Brand's face.

"No problem, um, Prime," he said rising. "Would another time for our little talk be of a help. If so, I guess it would be OK. I mean I don't want to be left here hanging forever, but, well it looks as if something's come up."

“No.” Brand replied, trying to smile at Random. “Thanks for the offer, but there’s nothing more I can do just now. Please..”

Brand motioned Random back into his chair, taking one himself.

“Where were we in our discussion, let me see, Oh yes ELF history.”

“Well, not much more to tell really. After the poacher and ocean pollution operations we were in the world’s eye. We moved on to the strike in the mideast and then finally into our tuna fishing expedition.

“Tuna fishing, haven’t heard of that one yet?” Random asked, breaking into Brand’s narrative.

“Yes, I suppose you wouldn’t have, things are moving so fast that I’m forgetting the sequences.”

Brand sighed, events indeed were moving a little too fast. “The operation was in protest of commercial drift net fishing, killing dolphins. There’s a lot more to it, but let’s wait awhile for all that.” Brand answered, taking a sip of coffee.

“There are of course many things which I can not tell you of right now, Random. Such as how we are organized and what special capabilities we may possess, you are after all a reporter.”

“Yes, I can understand that.” Random began, he didn’t quite know how to say what was on his mind, despite himself he was beginning to like this man.

“It’s not so much your cause, hell everybody is for cleaning up the planet. It’s also not so much the people who have died in your um, demonstrations. They all most probably got better than they deserve.”

“I guess it’s... I admit I’ve been wrestling with this for many months now, the killing, the deaths. It’s a hard one Prime, on the one hand I realize these people deserved what they got and I agree that nothing teaches like fear. On the other, is the purely emotional prohibition against killing. Even right now I don’t know.”

“Random, I’ve been through this so many times now that I’ve lost count. Sleepless night after sleepless night, I’ve sat in front of this very window wrestling with the same demons.”

“What I finally settled for is this; the Bible says to ‘turn the other cheek’, and I do believe in this on a personal level. When I am personally threatened or my ‘things’ are, then yes, I would turn the other cheek. When someone I love is threatened or my very life is at risk, for I love myself too, I will not submit. I have come to believe that this is what the Bible injunction really means in this respect.”

“Now, by extension, I love my world. There are people on this planet knowingly killing it, literally in full knowledge, making the earth uninhabitable. We are the shepherds, the custodians of the world, Random. We have been given this fine home in which to live and it is our duty to keep it clean.”

“Yes, all well and good.” Random replied with a dissatisfied look in his eye. “I’ve thought that way as well, it’s very convincing but is it not also a mental compromise, killing is killing, the verse goes ‘thou shall not kill’.”

“One could go round and round forever that way Random, and I have. Someone must take responsibility for our global actions. Shall we through inaction or mentally crippling social conditioning go meekly into extinction?”

“As I said, a very difficult question. I don’t know.” Random sighed. “It’s just more ah, involvement, um, bad karma than I’m willing to take on. Perhaps a weakness on my part. I’ve always been something of a loner, Prime. I’ve long been disgusted with the state of the world, and by and large, by most of my own species that I’ve come across. I have kind of divorced myself from the world, society. Maybe, ultimately, you are the better person for having at least taken a stand, maybe...”

“It was the only choice I could make, Random. We all have to be true to our inner selves or we are nothing. I will take the consequences of my actions and pay my bill with God when I meet him, or Her.” Brand smiled as the last thought hit him.

“I guess that finally it turned out to be a question of my love for life and the earth balanced against my fears of being wrong, wrong that is, in my faith, in my own understanding of the intentions of life, God.”

“At some point, one has to take a stand Random, and I’ve always been a person who would throw himself completely into something once the die is finally cast. And so it is.”

“Yes sir, I understand, and I’m certainly not the one to judge you or what you and the others have done.” Random said, straitening in his chair. He looked Brand in the eyes.

“Perhaps it would be best if I didn’t join ELF directly. Think of me perhaps as an advisor, your conscience if you like.”

“Our conscience, hum..” Brand smiled. “I would like that Random. What I think your saying is that you aren’t ready to be directly involved in our activities but that perhaps you do believe in what we are trying to do, if not exactly the methods. You would be our conscience Random? Hum, well perhaps that’s just what we need. May I have your word that you will never betray us or reveal us to any other?”

“Yes Prime, I have no wish to do you or ELF any harm, I believe in your aims. I just want to be left out of all the killing.”

“Very well, then I would like you to call me by my true name, it’s Brand.” Just then the telephone rang again, Brand answered.

“Yes? Oh yes we’ve been expecting her arrival, yes please. Ariel? Yes, put her on.” Brand waited for Ariel to come on the line.

“Ah no babe, When?” Brand’s expression dropped, like a falling leaf, into grief.

“On the way in. Ah.. I’ll be there as soon as I can. Hold on lover.”

He hung up the phone. Took a second, sighed and then looked up at Random.

“I’m going to place my trust in you Random. Over the past months I feel I have gotten to know you through becoming aware of your activities. Now that I’ve met you my instincts say you are someone whom I can place my faith in.”

“I always trust my instincts, Random. So from this point on, you have complete clearance here with

us. I need someone, not involved, non-partisan to talk with, a confidant, can we try this for now and see if it works out?"

"Yes Prime, um Brand I think I would like that very much."

"Good, I've got to go, an emergency. But there's a little surprise which we have been saving."

As if his words were an introduction, right on cue Anna Belleau opened the door and walked in.

* * * *

Bob, Titus and Jason had just come aboard the little pocket jet for the trip back to the west. It was well into the evening hours, the flight wouldn't get them back home until the early morning hours. The ELF pilot came through the cabin performing his pre-flight and soon they were on the taxiway waiting to take off.

"Still don't feel that I was possessed Titus." Bob began tightening his seat belt for take off. "As far as I remember I walked into the first room and then the next thing I remember is waking up on the couch, that's all." Bob spread his hands as if dismissing the entire incident.

"Hey, you turned into the scariest son of a bitch I've ever come across Bob. When I looked into your eyes it wasn't you looking back I can guarantee you that. Didn't even look human." Jason remarked from across the small table between them.

"Bob, you were mounted by the Baron Samedi, no doubt. Even now you must feel inside the truth of my words. Don't you now feel much less reluctance at the thought of possession than you did even a few days before? It is a subtle thing Bob. The Baron has made you one of his own."

"Yes I do feel changed Titus. Not so sure I'm ready for it though, possession that is. Still feel kind of violated by it all some how. But your right I am less afraid at the idea of being taken over, of Voudon itself. I begin to understand Brand and Ariel when the talk of the joy mixed in with the fear in the presence

of the LOA.”

As those words were being spoken the jet began to gain speed roiling down the runway. The jets screamed and seconds latter they were off the ground.

“Well, after all we seem to have averted this little strike by our foes. This business of The Nine has gotten me worried a bit though.” Jason observed when they had reached cruising altitude.

“Yes, the Nine, seems I’ve heard about them before somewhere... It’ll come to me.” Titus said reaching for his coffee.

The door to the flight deck opened and their pilot walked into the room with a small cordless telephone in his hand.

“Bob, Prime for you, I’m afraid it’s not good news.” The captain handed the telephone to Bob turned and left the cabin.

“Yes, Prime what’s up?”

“Ah no.... When did it happen. Ah I’m sorry to hear that. What? Yes we’ll file new flight plans and meet you there tomorrow morning. My condolences and love to Ariel.” He keyed the phone off. For a moment he closed his eyes and kept silent.

“Gabriel has passed over, this morning. Diana found her on the living room floor. A massive stroke. We are to meet the others in New Mexico.”

“Titus bowed his head and began a quite litany of some sort, moving his fingers in strange signs.”

* * * *

On the opposite side of the globe in the core center of Mount Ararat in eastern Turkey a group of nine men sat around a circular table hewn out of the rock of the mountain itself.

“Never before have we been defeated. We have ruled in supreme secrecy for centuries, now all is in jeopardy. How has this come to pass?” One of the dark forms spoke, his voice had the timber of great age.

“The group, we can not find them... they are ghosts. Our pawns in the west failed and now we are left with not a clue to point the way.” Another answered, a trick of the flickering torch light made the face appear like a horned skull.

“We can not allow them to continue, they are upsetting balances and plans we have been cultivating for decades.” Yet a third voice interjected.

“What then do you recommend that we do? We are back where we started. Never before have we come so close to discovery, except, of course, for that operation in November of 63'. Another fiasco like that one and we can all forget about our centuries of secrecy as well as our global plans.”

“They are too well organized, the results of our little expedition should show you that. They KNEW we were coming. Even if the Voudoun churches are a front for them we will never break through to the core.” The first voice spoke again.

“Brothers.” A new voice, strong and deep began. “We will continue our efforts, we can do nothing else. It is not as much a crisis as you make out my dear Simon, they also do not know of us.”

“Our schemes and plots are not in danger from this group. As always one of our greatest strengths has been patience, let us use this patience again and wait for further developments.”

“We can, for now, do no more....”

* * * *

In New York hours before the jet which was to take Bob and company back home had even left

it's hanger another video tape was delivered to the offices of a major network. It had been addressed this time directly to John Walters, a fact which gave him pause as soon as he identified it's authors. How could they have known of him? The tape, as it had the last time bore only the curious earth glyph, nothing more.

Most of the news staff had gathered in the viewing room. As the lights went out the now familiar form in black resolved onto the screen...

"Citizens of the planet, I represent the Environmental Liberation Front. We are coming before you this time not with an example but with a message. No longer will we issue communiques regarding our actions, they have served there purposes."

The tape on the drift net operation had been delivered to a popular talk show host early last night and was, as of now, being replayed over all the major networks.

"You are now aware of our presence and our aims. We will not serve the baser desires of our society and supply gruesome entertainment for your pleasures."

"We are among you and will unswervingly continue in our purpose. No longer will wanton destruction of our world be tolerated. You are on notice, you must change. The attitude of consumerism will have to pass on, all life is change, evolution, the time has come to live in harmony with our world."

"We leave you no choice, it is done. We will continue to provide retribution for those who still would abuse our world. When an action ceases to be profitable it is abandoned, the violators of our world will find it very unprofitable to peruse their operations from now on."

"What the Environmental Liberation Front has been about from it's conception is education. We have endeavored to educate our world and the people who inhabit it and nothing teaches like fear and basic self interest. You must change, there is no alternative."

"Another issue, there are too many of you. Our mere numbers as a species are a form of pollution. The planet was not designed to support almost five billion inhabitants."

“We will soon call upon the nations of the world to adopt birth reduction programs. We will expect to see a graphic reduction in births especially in the third world countries during the next three decades. We will provide help for you in these areas. Again, you have no choice. You must comply.”

“As of today, any person, anyone at all, may come to us for aid or with a complaint. We have established a service, the ELF Courts. For the time being this will consist only of one address in Washington D.C. We plan, however over time on having a facility of this kind in every major city in the world.”

“The purpose of the ELF Courts is to provide a mechanism for control, a non-aligned, non-political forum to determine appropriate actions and guilt in regard to matters of the environment.”

“This shall now become the main contact point with our organization. Know that we are expecting interference with this our visible arm. It will not be tolerated. The people who will administer the courts are not affiliated with ELF in any way. They are a self governing and self determined organization with their only tie to us being a communication channel. Persecuting them will bring you nothing, they cannot betray us as they know nothing of our organization. We will judge harshly those who harm our people without good cause.”

“In the months past since we have come into your lives many changes have slowly been occurring. Thousands and thousands of people all across the planet are taking to the streets in support of endangered species and against pollution and polluters. In the background, attitudes are indeed slowly changing, pro-ELF rallies are now a global phenomenon, small non-aligned groups are performing services for the planet of their own accord.”

“For instance the raid on the oil tanker in the gulf of mexico last week was not our doing, even though the press decided to lay it at our doorstep.”

“Let me read to you an excerpt from a document found to be circulating in the San Francisco area last week:”

‘One World is enough. Stop destroying the planet. You can make a difference, come to the rally at Golden Gate park this evening, we will tell you how.’

“Our environment has become an abomination, help us to save our bay.”

“The time has come to take a stand. Stop using your cars, boycott tuna fish and non-biodegradable products. We have taken the fight into our own hands, we will strike back against the despoilers of our world.’

“This message is signed ‘The Bay Area Friends of the Planet’ and there are many more groups just like it all over the world. We have nothing to do with this organization or any of the others. They have formed on their own to work to save our world. Almost every community across the globe is experiencing the emergence of these groups.”

“The time has come to change our society from a dog eat dog, get what you can take mentality to, instead, a supportive and caring one.”

“We will not come before you again, unless you force us to. Believe that we are dedicated to changing our world and that we will do whatever is required of us to further those ends. The time has come to grow up and take responsibility for your place in this our home the Earth.”

“Either you are part of the solution or you are part of the problem.”

The screen began to fade to black.

* * * *

Random, I’m so pleased to see you again.” Anna came into the room and had her arms around him almost before he could stand up to return the embrace.

“I have been very worried about you ever since our last encounter. I’m very pleased to find you

well and unharmed.”

“Anna...” Random sputtered, he was more than a little surprised to find her here. “I’m very happy to see you again as well. How does it come to be that you are here?” Neither party had moved yet to break the embrace they found themselves in.

“When you were in little Haiti word was sent to me that you might be heading for trouble in Seattle. I alerted Prime and got him a picture of you so our people here could be watching out for you. As soon as I learned that you had been, um, recovered I flew out here.”

“I see you have met the Prime, what do you think?” Anna asked, untangling herself somewhat but still hanging onto Random’s hand.

“I like the man very much,” Random was unsure if Anna knew Brands true name and thought it prudent for now not to mention it.

“We also seem to have come to a point of agreement, a common ground.”

“Oh Random, I’m so happy to hear that. does that mean that your an ELF now?”

“No not quite, that is I’m not going to play an active role in the organization but instead act as a kind of advisor. At least initially, I’ve got a lot of things to work out in my head Anna. However I do believe in the aims of the organization and that Prime and I could become good friends.”

“Those things you need to work out I presume include our methods, the deaths?” Anna asked a look of sympathy in her eyes.

“Yes among other things, I’ve admitted to myself that I don’t have another solution to the problems facing ELF and have agreed to suspend judgement in light of that realization. Besides I like these people.” Random smiled at Anna.

“Random, this makes me very happy indeed.” She grabbed him up again and kissed him long and hard, it took the man’s breath away.

When they opened their eyes again after the prolonged kiss Brand had come back in.

“Excuse me,” Brand smiled sheepishly. “I didn’t mean to interrupt, I have to leave now for some time. A death in our family here, someone we all loved very much. Anna I believe you had occasion to meet our Gabriel didn’t you?”

“Oh Prime, Gabriel has passed on? Oh I’m so very sorry. Yes, I was privileged to meet her some time ago, I liked her very much.”

“We will be holding services for her in New Mexico tomorrow evening. I would be well pleased if the both of you would join us?”

“Certainly Prime, I would be honored,” Anna replied. “but I cannot speak for Random.”

“I too would be honored, I also intend to be quite serious about being the ELF conscience Prime. Which means, I guess, I’ll need to be around you folks a lot.” Smiling he gave Anna’s waist a hug.

“Good, then I will see you both next in the south west. Tell Diana of your needs, she will make all the necessary arrangements. Until tomorrow then.” So saying Brand waved and departed their company.

Anna and Random went down the hall to Random’s room. They had a lot of catching up to do.

* * * *

Brand had hurried into town to get to Ariel, she was awash in a sea of grief when he finally arrived. Gabriel had passed away on the way into the hospital. The emergency room physician said a vein in her head had given way and she had died almost immediately, there had been nothing anyone could have done. She had never again regained consciousness after she had collapsed that last time at the mansion.

Brand took care of all the minor details involved in a death. Contacting a local funeral home he had made arrangements for her to be picked up and then delivered to the airport tomorrow morning for trans-

portation to New Mexico.

Long ago, Brand had been made executor of Gabriel's estate, now Brand had the sad duty of informing Gabriel's family of her passing. He also contacted Gabriel's lawyer and informed him as well. The lawyer informed him in turn that the reading of the will would take place the following morning in his offices and that both he and Ariel were requested to be present.

As Brand was the executor he took Ariel back to the high mansion on the beach, it was their's now. Gabriel had told Brand that the mansion would be left to them in her will, which of course, was the only way to handle it as the ELF head quarters was hidden beneath the estate.

The wind from the sea was cold but the sky was clear and bright, Brand and Ariel sat hand in hand and gazed out to sea from the deck overlooking the small bay. After a time, the sun was well down, they returned to the catacombs below.

The mood below was sedate, everyone by now knew of Gabriel's passing. Diana, thoughtfully, had prepared a small diner in Brand and Ariel's quarters. After they had eaten Brand put Ariel into bed as she was emotionally exhausted, she could barely keep her eyes open. He spent a little time then alone in his favorite spot, in front of the sea window, remembering his friend and all the things which had come to pass, then he too retired saddened and soul tired to bed.

That night Brand had a dream.....

First the sky, only the sky... Then a horizon, a great serpent, or perhaps the rainbow, detached itself from it's circuit of the sun and came to lead Brand below.

Descending down through the coolness, the soft green blue, soon the serpent had led him to the courts. He wasn't sure how he knew these were 'the courts' but know he did. Great gardens were washed delicately in the soft light from above. A fortress or castle of some sort dominated the landscape.

Strangely beautiful creatures floated by as Brand sank even lower toward the fantastic structure.

Soon he was in a great hall, many forms could be made out in the glow from green fires at either end of the immense space. A shape drifted closer, the shape resolved itself into the great and majestic figure of a red man adorned in battle armor and a great golden helmet.

"I am Ogoun Badagris Lord of metals, Lord of fire and of conflict, I am your patron and have chosen to speak to you. Do not grieve for the passing of your friends, for they are with us even now. They are free of the pains to be found on the other side of the mirror and are content, grateful and at peace."

"You have given us much new power, we are much stronger now than in times before, for this we give you our thanks to our faithful serviteur."

The form of a laughing corpse drifted by, tattered clothing and top hat, the skull like features turned slowly towards Brand and then said...

"Little one, have no fear for we are with you now. Your aims are ours and we will stand by you and yours now in the world of men. Tell the one whom you call 'The Hangman' atop on the mirror's surface that the Baron sends his regards."

The form floated away into the shadows. Brand noticed then a dancing woman, all greens and blues with sparks of gold and silver shooting forth from her form. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, it almost hurt to lay ones eyes upon her. From time to time a trick of the light made her appear to have the tail of a great fish instead of legs. The figure floated close...

"You are not for me child of man," The woman reached out and stroked Brands chin, the touch sending electrical pulses throughout his body. *"my priestess already possesses your heart."*

Small seahorses and exotic fish swam in and out through the folds of her garments. *"I too am with you and yours, we are well pleased with you."* She bent forward and kissed his cheek and then floated

on returning to her slow hypnotic dance.

Ogoun continued...

“There are others like us whom are served by other men. These forces are now arrayed against you, they are mighty and terrible and are dedicated to the downfall of mankind. We will protect you now from them as we can and will wage battle on this side for your cause. The Earth is our mother as well and we revere her. We were all long ago once men like you.”

“Go back now and have faith, we are with you and will never desert you. Remember of this in waking only the peace we have granted you and this one thing...”

“Tell the Houngan that the spirits of the great city under the sea send their greetings and that the magicians of the old island are now with you.”

With those words Brand began to rise upward through the dancing green and blue light.....

The next morning Brand awoke feeling at peace and very rested. He couldn't explain his feeling this way but seemed to remember the tatters and wisps of a very strange dream. The only concrete fragment of this was, strangely, an arcane message for Titus. Well he would be seeing him soon and could tell him of the strange dream and see what he thought of it.

Brand filed this away and cleared the rest of the cobwebs from his mind, he had much to do this day.

Brand and Ariel were due at the lawyers office at ten that morning. They would, from there go directly to the airport for the trip to New Mexico.

There was nothing unexpected in the will Gabriel had prepared. As Brand had expected the mansion had been left to him and Ariel as well as the greater portion of her assets. The remainder being split between various relatives and friends. The lawyer also gave Brand two sealed letters, one to be read

after her service when her friends were gathered together, the other for her brother Manuel.

By noon they were in the air in their leased jet and headed southwest. On board with Brand and Ariel were Diana serving as pilot, Franklin, Random and Anna. The flight took a little over three hours and the group found themselves in the small airport outside of Santa Fe in the early afternoon hours.

The plane which had Titus, Jason and Bob on board had arrived earlier that day and they were now all out at Carlton's old place.

Brand rented a small van and drove the group along with Gabriel's body out to the hacienda. They arrived just as the sun was beginning to set over the foothills to the west of the estate.

Bob and Jason had been busy. To save the others this disagreeable chore they had prepared the grave sight next to Carlton's.

After taking some time to get settled the group of ELF people along with a large contingent of Gabriel's extended family and friends shared a dinner which had been prepared earlier in the day.

Brand finally met Manuel and passed on to him the letter the lawyer in Oregon had given into his care. Manuel was a very intelligent and likeable man, he had taken a degree in medicine years before and had returned to work with his people.

Manuel asked Brand to take a walk with him in the garden. The two found a secluded spot and took a seat under a full desert moon.

"Brand, Gabriel has spoken very highly of you. She told me that when she passed over I should speak with you. May I take a moment to read her last letter?"

"Of course Manuel." Brand replied.

Manuel took a little time reading through the letter in the sparse light from the porch.

"As I thought our sister loved you all very much. I am to reveal all to you."

"All of what Manuel? As Gabriel was dying she said some very strange things, about your people

and the Nations. Is this what your referring to?”

“Yes Brand, a little history first.” The elegant indian paused a moment to gather his thoughts. “We have cherished our mother the Earth for all our lives, millennium, it is ingrained into our spirit our culture. Before the white man came and destroyed the harmony of nature we lived at one with the Earth. It is very central to our religion and our holy men have kept the faith for all these years.

“When you and Carlton began this quest all those years ago Gabriel came before the consul of the wise. She told us of your hearts and that they were good. She told us also of your task and asked for our help. The consul agreed with one condition. The condition being that we not reveal our presence to you. It was thought safer to assist from the outside for a time.”

“From that time on we have been doing what we can to help in your efforts. We have dealt with game poachers in much the same manner as you have. We are also responsible for that train wreck last year which destroyed box cars full of hazardous chemicals. You probably remember the incident.

“Almost all the other tribes and their holy men are, as of now, organized behind you. Soon all the Nations will be gathered together.”

“The time has come for us to take an active role in the things to come. The consul of the wise agree, they have had visions and dreams and believe that the old days are returning. They speak of strange and powerful spirits unknown to them who work now to aid you in the world of men.”

“From this time on when ever you need our help, contact me and we will do what we can.”

“Ah, OK Manuel, this will take me a little time to digest. From the first you have been aware of our activities? Have been helping us? It takes a little getting used to.”

“Yes I understand,” The handsome indian remarked with a smile, brushing his long dark hair away from his face. “It is as I have said, all of us are ready to serve in the cause of saving the Earth, our Mother.”

They returned to the interior of the hacienda, most of the others had gone home already, and most

of the ELF people had retired to bed. Manuel took his leave saying he would see Brand tomorrow at the sunrise service for Gabriel.

Brand found Titus still up and sitting on the couch facing the fire, he took a seat besides him.

“Titus, how are you doing, I haven’t had a chance to speak with you before now. How did the Washington operation turn out? All I’ve had time to hear is that everything is under control.”

“Yes, well it is... There’s something happening Brand, can’t quite get a hold of it, but there is this, two things actually.

First when we finally had our captives and were beginning the questioning Bob was possessed by the Baron Samedi. It was the Baron in fact who conducted the rest of the interrogations. Very strange, Bob had never before been mounted and I have never before seen the LOA so concerned with the tasks of men.”

“Whoa, your telling me the Baron came and assisted in the interrogation. Titus I’m nowhere as knowledgeable as you in these affairs but isn’t this a little weird, even for us?”

“Oh yes, weird is a good word...” Titus replied, a speculative tone to his voice. “The spirits are getting stronger, I’ve been feeling it for a long time now. Something is occurring in their plane, some ‘event’. Legends from all over the world as well as Voudoun predict strange events at the close of this century, the millennium. Perhaps this is involved in some way, I’m not sure yet but something big is stirring, awakening out there.” Titus waved his hand to encompass the entire known and unknown universe.

“There’s more, I’ve been doing a little research in Carlton’s library. When we were questioning our captives one of them mentioned The Nine, and indicated they were the authors of our troubles and the secret masters of their little cabal. In one of Carlton’s books, a book on legends and myths, I came across a legend of nine men, one for each major land mass on the planet, immortal and depicted as having swayed the history of our species to their own ends for millennium. The legend stems from an ancient and virtually

unknown civilization in the gobi desert.”

“Now, I don’t know.... this is all getting a little out of my depth. I’m considering a trip to consult with some of my peers to investigate these matters. What do you think of all this?”

“What did Bob think of being possessed by the Baron,” Brand asked instead of answering the question. “must of shook him up some. I remember the first time Ogoun mounted me, I was terrified at first.”

“He remembers nothing, however I spoke with the spirit as he inhabited our friend and I assure you it was the Baron.”

“Something has happened to me as well.... a strange dream Titus, I can’t remember it all. The only really clear part is a message I was to deliver to you, it goes: ‘Tell the Houngan that the spirits of the great city under the sea send their greetings and that the magicians of the old island are now with you.’ what do you make of that. There was also a message for Bob, though it’s not very clear... The dream left quite an impression on me.”

Brand looked over at Titus and saw the look of disbelief on his face.

“The exact words were ‘the city under the sea’ and ‘the magicians of the old island’?” Titus’s face was very intent in the fire light.

“Why yes, to the best I can remember, why?” Brand’s interest had risen in response to the expression on Titus’s face.

“Nothing, that is nothing I can speak of. One needs to be a high initiate, a Houngan like myself before we speak of these things. Something is going on Brand, involving the LOA, involving us... very strange.”

“Titus, calm down old friend. We’ve just averted a major tragedy, we’re OK. Perhaps getting together like this, though under better circumstances, is something we should do from time to time from now

on.”

“Yes, Brand you are right, we have come here to honor our departed friend and I must think long and hard on this anyway. I’m off for bed it’s been a hard seventy two hours my friend, you could, I’m sure, use some sleep too.” Titus said and after clasping Brand’s shoulder he rambled across the living room and up the stairs.

Brand could have certainly used some sleep, he was exhausted. Ariel had already gone up ahead of him and the house was very quite and still. Instead Brand gazed into the fire remembering events now long passed...

It had been a year and a day since the service had been held for Carlton’s death. Now they had all gathered again to reclaim his spirit from the Abyss. They were all there, Ariel and Brand, Bob and Titus and Gabriel as well.

They had gone out to the grave site and prepared a small alter. They had then preformed a small Christian ceremony invoking the powers and saints and asking for their blessings on their work.

Titus had opened the Voudoun ceremony by saluting the four corners and blessing the ground, they had sung songs for the Marasa, the equals. Then to Papa Legba to open the way and Ghede as the keeper of the houses of the dead. Damballah Wedo’s aid was solicited representing the powers of the air and finally the Baron Samedi’s blessing was asked, as he was the lord of the dead. All of this accompanied by appropriate gifts of food and liquor for the LOA.

After that Titus had spoken in a tongue no one had understood and sang songs in creole. Acting as Hounsisi Brand himself had drawn the vevers about the tomb and had lit the ceremonial fires.

Ariel and Gabriel were taking the place of assistants, now with Brand in the center holding a machete at port arms, they walked about the tomb three times windershins carrying the flags of the societe’.

Titus had begun to sing again punctuated at times by the rattling of his asson. He asked, in between the songs, that the powers assist Carlton's soul to come to them. He spoke of the fine home prepared for him and how his friends and descendants were anxious to honor him.

Finally he had produced a small hollowed out gourd, containing about the same volume as a small carton of milk. He had placed it upon the alter and again begun to sing again in creole.

Quite suddenly they all could feel a presence, a change in the air or the light perhaps. Later Ariel told Brand that she had smelled the cologne Carlton had worn at that moment. Titus was lost in his song and making ritual gestures with the asson. Everyone felt Carlton's presence and the small gourd on the alter began to tip forward and back.

Soon Titus brought his song to a close, everything had returned again to normal. Titus spoke, his words breaking the spell which had settled on the group, "It is done". That was all, he covered the small gourd with a patch of linen and wrapped a string of beads about the top to seal it. They had then cleaned up about the tomb and returned to the hacienda.

That same small gourd, Carlton's spiritual home, now rested in the place of honor on the mantel of the fireplace before Brand.

Brand sighed and wondering at the deep mystery of it all went up the stairs to find Ariel and sleep.

* * * *

Early the next morning Brand arose early. After showering and dressing he went out to greet the morning. He had left Ariel asleep as she had been totally exhausted last night. As he left the house through the terraced garden in the back he noticed he was not the only early riser. Up on the ridge he could make out Bob and Jason and a few other figures. They were probably making things ready for the services.

"Well good morning Brand." Random's familiar voice called out behind him. Brand turned in the

direction of the voice, Random was coming across the deck to meet him.

“Good morning, Random. See you an early riser too.”

“Yes a habit I’ve never been able to break, which is OK as I enjoy the morning hours.” Random replied taking a seat at the small table nearby.

“I enjoy the early morning as well, the stillness and the freshness of the air are very relaxing.” Brand responded taking a seat himself.

“Brand, I saw the latest ELF communique’ on the TV yesterday morning. I believe you were away on some business. Why didn’t you tell me of it or about the ELF courts when we were talking the other day? I find both items very interesting”

“Didn’t have time, as things turned out. That day was a very um, difficult one for me. What did you think of the broadcast?”

“Very impressive, you’ve obviously had this all mapped out for some time. Are you really going to move away from your ah, object lessons?”

“Yes, for now, until that is, were shown that more are needed. It is my belief that no more will be required though. We seem to be turning the tide Random, changing the way the world thinks of and treats the environment and now with the option of anyone being able to go to our courts, well time will tell.”

“How exactly do you intend for these courts to operate?” Random asked gazing off toward the horizon.

“We anticipate that most the actions brought to our courts will involve small cases of abuse. For those we will investigate and probably for the most part turn over our findings to the popular media. For those instances involving large scale environmental crimes they will be reviewed by the inner consul of ELF. I’m hoping that, acting as our conscious,” Brand smiled over at Random. “you would be willing to sit on that consul.”

“Well, I think that would probably be fine but I’m the kind of person who never say’s yes right away, I’ll need some time to think it over.”

“Good morning you two.” A friendly voice called out. Brand turned to discover Anna coming their way.

“Beautiful morning, I’ve never spent any time in the south west. It’s wonderful, one always has the impression that the desert is a dead place, hot and arid but this is gorgeous.”

“Yes, the desert is beautiful,” Brand replied stretching. “it’s always been one of my favorite climates. Let’s see if we can’t go and find some breakfast.”

The service for Gabriel began at ten o’clock, the day had turned into that special kind of day only the high desert in winter can provide. Crystal clear and windless the very air smelled sweet and clean.

The grave site had been prepared earlier that morning by Bob, Jason and some members of Gabriel’s family. There was a small podium with an alter positioned before it. The area around Gabriel’s coffin had been decorated with vevors by Titus and a marvelous sand painting took the center place in the very front.

In addition to the ELF people there from the west about fifty people from the nearby village and the surrounding area were also present.

The service began with a small Christian service honoring the creator and asking for blessing’s for Gabriel. Brand then came forward to speak a few words.

“Friends, old and new,” He began after taking a moment to reflect. “we come here today to pay our respects to our departed friend. Gabriel was always a marvel to me, always ready to help a friend in need. Her almost telepathic powers of knowing when she was needed were amazing, she would appear as if materializing from thin air. Never once did I hear any word of complaint from my friend over all the long

years of our time together. She tirelessly worked to help her friends, those she loved. Gabriel was one of a kind and she will be surely missed by us all.”

“I can hear her now however and know that she would say to us to not grieve for her. She is with the spirit’s and those who have already departed. Nothing is ever destroyed, a law of physics, only transmuted. We believe in the spirit’s and in a higher purpose in life. Gabriel did as well, she is transformed now into this higher form, free of the weight and the pains of the body but with us still. Gabriel will be with us always, watching over us and filling our lives with her kindness and wisdom.”

“Do not grieve for her, she is free and content. Miss her in your own way but still she will always be nearby.”

Brand stepped down and returned to his place beside Ariel, she took his hand and dabbed at the tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Beautiful Brand, Gabriel would have been pleased.” Diana whispered in his ear.

Titus took over then and spoke a few words to the assembled people of Gabriel and her life. He then sang a few songs to the LOA and to Gabriel’s spirit, some Brand and Ariel were able to join him in.

While holding the asson in one hand Titus sprinkled rum and rose water over Gabriel’s coffin, he then tied a crucifix through the right front handle. Titus paused a moment in silent prayer and then began to speak in english of the peace to be found in the houses of the dead. His voice suddenly trailed off...

A great stillness had come over the land, everything seemed to pause even the clouds in the sky. A muttering was heard originating from some of the indian members of the assembled group then, silence again.

The light was beginning to play tricks with Brand’s vision, he was sure he saw fantastic ghostly, almost translucent, figures parading toward the group from the small arroyo to the north.

Titus had stopped in his tracks he was looking at the same point Brand was. Brand gazed about him and noticed that everyone was either looking in the same direction he and Titus were, or had fallen to the ground in a faint.

The man who had been introduced to Brand as the tribal holy man was singing a strange melody while shaking the south western analogue of Titus’s asson.

Soon the parade came to the point where individual forms could be made out. A great crystal serpent with it’s scales like a rainbow of translucent light, twined it’s way through the landscape.

A giant man with the head of a hawk strode behind, his eyes shining like the sun. Animals also by the score, the regal lion and black panther, the great bear and giant eagles, the heron and the stag. A woman holding a jug from which poured a clear stream with no ending. A great figure, a

warrior all in feathers and red from head to toe astride a great war horse holding a lance of white light.

A form Brand recognized, an old thin man sporting a top hat and cane ambled on down the wash toward the small hill. The figure smiled at Brand as it passed on by.

A griffin flew overhead with wings which spanned the group of people below. A woman arrayed in translucent silver with the moon and the stars in her hair reached out and brushed Brands cheek. It felt like the touch of his mother, love and assurance. Two golden children, but what children, their eyes shining with age and power made their way up the hill.

The ghostly display broke upon the assembled people, temporarily hypnotized by the strange exhibition before them, they stood rooted to their places as the specters walked through them, litterly through them on their way to the south.

Soon the figures had passed into the distance, all that could be heard was the soft quite chanting of the old indian.

Later that night Brand and Ariel were talking with Titus and Bob, sitting around a glass table in the moonlight of the back terrace, the stars reflecting brightly in the surface.

“What was that this afternoon Titus? Were we all the victims of some form of mass suggestion, hypnotism?” Bob asked, his face showing concern lines in the moonlight.

“No, it is my belief that the spirits were showing us their support, in a way thanking us. As I have said, they are very much more powerful today than they once were.”

“Some of the forms I saw were not LOA from my religion,” Titus continued. “from my beliefs, very strange indeed. I think, well believe, we are at some pivotal point in history my friend and a great change is upon us all.”

After the ghostly display had vanished that morning, the assembled people had, one at a time or in small groups, returned to the main house. There had seemed little more to be done, Gabriel had been well escorted on her journey. Some of the people who had fainted were assisted in regaining their feet and then helped down the hill. No one said anything, to do so would have been to break the spirit of the moment.

They had all experienced the ceremony a little bit differently. For the Indians the main forms they had seen were related directly to their society and beliefs, as those Brand had seen, for the most part, had made sense to him.

They had spent the remainder of the day talking in small groups and getting to know one another. Brand had made arrangements to spend some time with Manuel in two weeks to resolve the integration of the Nations into the ELF organization. Later, they had all walked off into the night, individually or in small groups to be alone.

After everyone had drifted away in the early evening, everyone that is except for a small group of ELF people, Brand had read Gabriel's second letter which had been entrusted to him by the lawyer in Oregon. As he had expected it was filled with personal messages for them all.

"Man, I need a break..." Bob lamented, leaning back in his chair. "This is all moving way to fast folks. First I'm possessed by the Baron Samedi and now your telling me were involved in something which to me closely resembles armageddon."

Titus chuckled. "Yes, I suppose this has all been a bit much for you, you've had to carry a lot of the weight of the LOA, sleep will restore your spirit. You'll feel much better tomorrow."

"What of this Nine business Brand?" Bob asked after a minute.

"I'm not real sure as yet Bob, but I intend to take precautions. Such as having you do a

complete investigation on them as well as a through internal security check out.”

“For the time being however, I believe we can all afford a little time to regenerate our spirits. Lord knows we all need a little time after the events of this last week. I intend to finish a vacation I remember being on recently.” He squeezed Ariel’s hand.

“Yes, we were just getting to the point where you were starting to relax and I seem to remember some reservations we had in St. Thomas.” Ariel said in a cheery voice.

She had snapped out of the mood Gabriel’s death had placed her in shortly after the experiences of the morning. Matter of fact Brand reflected, everyone had seem regenerated and renewed after the events which had taken place during the service.

“Yes my love, we all, I think need a little time off. Things are all well in hand now, the Seattle problem averted, our current enemies identified and neutralized and now that our new environmental courts are starting to operate, we can well afford a little play time.”

“Well I’m turning in, today really took it out of me, I’m going to sleep for a week.” Bob said, pushing back his chair and standing up.

Titus yawning, rose beside him and said. “I too am exhausted my friends, I’ll see you both in the morning.”

Bob and Titus went walking off together, through the french doors and back inside the hacienda. Ariel and Brand sat awhile longer, quietly amid the shadows and the stars, facing each other in the moonlight and holding hands.

After a time Brand said with a crooked smile. “Well, my love I am as unsure of our future right now as I ever have been before, but I am content. I know we are doing as we should and this wonderful mystery we call life continues. Who should ask for more?”

As Ariel looked up into Brands eyes as he spoke those words, she was just quick enough to see a meteor wink by in the sky behind his eyes.