

INCEPTION

Anonymous

This story takes place in the near future, a few years before The One. It tells the tale of the selection of Ian Rhames as the unwitting agent of the devil Dispater's Sovereign Plan.

Green fire burned along the horizon, over it, out of sight, casting a sinister hue into the sky. A glow that spread across the entirety of the heavens, added to by the infernal glare of a giant green sun.

Helakan was a malevolent land.

Hispartacrit ascended the final steps to his destination, the summit of a massive, iron pillar. Reaching it he stood, looking out across the smoking land. Broken crags, tortured rocks, twisting valleys stretched away below, out to the dark ridges of distant mountains, reaching into the dome of the abominable green sky.

Far off a battle could be heard, the clash of demons fighting some border war, the outcome of which was of no consequence to him. Smells drifted on the hot wind. Dry wind, bearing a stench he could not equate with any Earthly experience, yet so familiar to him now.

He brought his attention back into the realm of the pillar.

There at the top, a yard or so from him, rested a large, ornately carved bath. Or so it appeared. In truth the vessel bore a mystic liquid, portal to other places—other times, even, or so it was said. Window through which only the most powerful devil could see. He walked to it.

One of Lord Dispater's more favored messengers, Hispartacrit was no devil. By virtue of that association, however, he yet enjoyed the power of one. He peered into the mercury liquid, mesmerized by its reflective surface, regarding his own image as it peered back. Embattled features, piercing gaze, long, black

hair pulled tight into a queue that hung across one armored shoulder. Born long ago a man of Earth, where once he practiced the shadow arts, Hispartacrit had voluntarily entered service with the devil Dispater upon his own death and, because of this, retained his human form and charisma. As such he had knowledge of the myths, the religious invocations of this place, Helakan, known to Man in so many languages as Hell. Soldier turned sorcerer. Turned servant of darkness.

Days had passed since his dispatch to observe the progress of his Lord's collection, a turning point drawing close in Dispater's master Plan. One would need to be chosen soon, based on many factors, to carry forward the final phase of that glorious design. After three thousand years the cunning manipulations of the great Arch Duke were reaching their zenith, a point from which the next stage must be begun, the future created.

Hispartacrit concentrated, looking deeper into the portal.

* * *

The Spanish admiral strolled casually through a flower garden, overlooking cliffs that plunged into the ocean with breathtaking suddenness. With him were several others, also flag officers, including his host, an American captain and CO of the American elements attached to the military base. The figures were silent across the distance.

Far away from them Ian blinked, cross-hairs coming into view for a moment. He returned his focus to the group, close enough to touch, it seemed, through the eye of the rifle scope.

Their mouths moved, talking, laughing and enjoying the late afternoon air. The sun was an orange ball behind them as it headed for the horizon.

Ian adjusted his stance, centered on the Spanish admiral's head.

Crack! The rifle kicked against his shoulder.

A quick check back through the scope confirmed the hit. The admiral was down, the group reacting with the expected disbelief, turning their attention from the fallen man to the surrounding area, unable to place the sharp echo of

the shot.

Ian threw the rifle into the bushes.

Four hundred yards away, the figures were now difficult to see.

He turned and sprinted to a waiting motorcycle, parked behind him.

Jumping on he fired it, dropped it into first and was away, grass flying, then smoke as the rear tire boiled onto the pavement. With a controlled wheelie he snapped it through its first three gears and into the first corner out of the housing area. The tachometer fanned near the redline, speedometer lunging quickly past a hundred and fifty clicks, then below a hundred as he braked into the corner, then high into triple digits again as he charged down the next avenue.

ETA, the Basque party, was his employer for this hit. The admiral of the Base Naval de Rota had been his target. A man who had the unfortunate distinction of standing directly in the way of Basque objectives. This was no terrorist act, however, meant to draw attention to cause or purpose. No, that the ETA could have taken care of themselves. This was a removal, pure and simple, of someone who had, and by all indications would again, cause difficulty for Ian's employer. As such he, a professional, a disinterested party, had been enlisted for the task.

He raced onto the main avenue, leaning hard, left knee dragging the pavement. Metal scraped.

With the admiral out of the way, chief proponent of certain actions involving the northern territories of Spain, the agenda of the Basque could go forward with much greater ease.

He braked into the curve leading from housing. To his right lay the Puerto gate, through which he had entered that morning on a simple, civilian ID. Racing still, he turned onto the road off the base, knee plate of the riding suit taking another beating.

He looked ahead to the Spanish guards at the gate. One on each side, carrying only pistols.

A quick assessment told him that, other than his rapid approach, they weren't preparing for anything unusual. News of the shot would not have

reached them in such short time. The sound, if they heard it, would likely have been attributed to a backfire or firework.

He rolled the speed up. The guards were conscripted, edgy, not ingrained with the same rules of engagement as were the American troops, but he doubted they would shoot a simple speeder.

He broke two hundred, blurring by them and out the open gate, shifting third straight into fifth as he merged onto the exit road. A blitz down a sweeping lane to his left brought him parallel to the perimeter fence, skirting it to the north, racing toward Chipiona.

For many long moments time seemed to stand still, Ian working the controls of the motorcycle. Brake, throttle, shift, throttle, shift, brake. Then he was onto the main highway.

The big sport bike handled the uneven road well, tracking the long curve of the base with poise despite the pace. Ian moderated the throttle right at the edge of control, speed rising closer to three hundred. A check of the mirrors confirmed what he already knew: nothing followed. The only thing that could touch him would be roadblocks, yet, even those would be too slow. His plan was laid from here to the car to the city to the cab to the contact to the boat to the yacht to Gibraltar and on across to Morocco. One to the other, in rapid succession. In an hour he would be on the yacht. By that night on the way home.

With some effort he pulled the bike over and back, around a tractor rolling slowly along the shoulder. It might have been parked for all the speed difference between them.

He gave one good look around, careful to keep his helmet tucked behind the faring, out of the murderous wind. Wide open terrain on both sides. The base was smack in the middle of farm country, on the outskirts of several tightly packed Spanish towns, farms extending even onto the base, tended by locals who were given access. A military complex amid sprawling fields of crops, mostly sunflowers. It was, in fact, that relaxed atmosphere that had passed him through, an assassin determined to kill their top official. Tall, blonde—his appearance marked him easily as an American, when he chose that identity.

Today he had been a dependent, husband to one of the hundreds of American servicewomen stationed there.

Now that charade was over.

* *

Interesting, Hispartacrit thought. This one, this Ian Rhames, he had been watching more closely of late, feeling as if he might rise above the rest. The final decision would, of course, lie with his Lord Dispater, but it fell to Hispartacrit to offer up those most suited.

He smiled. This one was most suited indeed.

* *

Ian rode hard, focus on the road far ahead, asphalt scrolling beneath the motorcycle at an alarming rate.

Suddenly a giant shadow passed across him, sonic concussion striking simultaneously. Cross-wind buffeted him with tremendous force, nearly knocking him off the road. He snapped his head to the right, vision filled with the gray underbelly of an airplane, then its tail end, streaking away from him, curving at an angle out over the field of sunflowers. Immediately he identified it: a Harrier fighter jet. Markings attached it to the base, part of the Spanish Armada stationed there.

A chill gripped his spine.

Though Harriers regularly flew low and fast over the area, practicing their combat maneuvers with little regard for the locals or their safety, this one was definitely meant for him. As absurd as it seemed, in view of what he had done it had a cold logic to it. Why not? Nothing else could reach him, so why not send a jet after their admiral's killer. This decision had to have come down from the Spanish command. Ian could only imagine their outrage. Could only imagine the leeway given the pilot to bring him to justice.

He tracked the turn of the plane as well as he could, attention demanded by

the road and the speed at which he traveled. The jet hooked behind him, out of sight, less than twenty meters off the ground, cooking the air at eight to nine hundred kilometers an hour. All while he struggled to stay above two-fifty. He caught a glimpse of it in his mirrors, wings up as it turned in the far distance, back exposed, arc carrying it back on line with him, a half-dozen clicks to the rear.

Would it shoot? The possibility, however unlikely, caused a tightening in his guts the likes of which he hadn't experienced in a long, long time. There were absolutely no options available to him, out in the open as he was. Stop and run, keep riding, head into the fields; there was no way to escape his pursuer, no way to defeat it. He was helpless, the mouse pursued by the hawk, no hole in sight.

WHOOM! the jet blistered above him again, this time along his forward path. The buffeting was less intense than on the previous pass, but it nevertheless rocked him. He decided to slow for stability. After all, he wasn't going to outrun it. Speed was no longer his ally.

But what to do? Thoughts raced with rising hopelessness as the jet turned far out in front of him, rolled back in an S maneuver, then nosed straight up, shooting vertical, full breadth of its wings displayed. An obvious show of force that worked. Ian swallowed.

There were no side roads here, just the long, desolate stretch of two-lane highway on which he rode. To his left the perimeter fence, to his right a ditch and countless acres of sunflowers. Even if there were another road available it would be no improvement. Just another direction to travel in. Another direction to be chased in, shot, wrecked—whatever the pilot had in mind. Ian was completely at the mercy of the man in the plane ahead.

High above now it nosed back, down, spiraled, pulled up, crossed back across the road, straightened and was on line with him, coming head on. Aerobatics that were more flair than necessity. A car rounded the corner in the distance, in front of the plane, coming under its line of flight. As it passed directly above it the car drove off the road in a cloud of dirt.

Ian braced himself...

WHOOM! the plane blitzed him, lower this time, their combined speeds crushing the motorcycle downward. He felt the shocks compress under the pressure wave, tires shaking beneath the taxed suspension.

He very nearly went down.

Recovering, he concluded that, for the moment, the pilot's objective was to wreck him. He shook his head. Better than being fired on, at least. If he could hang on he might think of something.

The whole scenario was beyond any he might have imagined. Pursuit by a fighter plane was nowhere in his contingencies. He had imagined car chases, road blocks. Even aerial pursuit by helicopter, though no police helicopter existed near enough to the area. All possibilities, or so he thought, had been considered. All covered. Breakdown, even. Flats. An accomplice roamed the area, a phone call away, ready to extract him if needed.

But the Harrier was no helicopter. Ian's large caliber pistol, while a viable option against a smaller, unarmored, helicopter, would do little more against the jet than provoke an escalation of force.

He checked his mirrors, bracing himself for the next high speed pass.

And was surprised to see the plane, some distance behind him, approaching slowly.

It flew up on him now, ominous. Like a giant, airborne motorist, waiting to pass.

Closer...closer. Soon it filled his mirrors.

The Harrier, designed with VTOL, Vertical Take-Off and Landing, could fly at any speed, hover, move side to side, even backwards, all with good control. Ian tried to predict what tactic the pilot was preparing to employ.

Lower it descended. Ian kept steady, heart racing. Soon he could hear the roar of air, louder than that rushing around him, volumes of it being drawn into the gaping engine intake, feeding the massive Rolls Royce turbo-fan. The thunder of exhaust as it exploded from directional nozzles, thrust centering the plane above him. The whine of high-speed turbines.

The gray mass paced him, about to touch.

At that level Ian realized he himself could no longer be seen by the pilot,

high atop the fuselage, looking out from the canopy. He reached and adjusted a mirror, pointing it up to see above and behind, unable to lift his head at the same angle. If he slowed, the plane was low enough he wouldn't make it under. One goose of the throttle by the pilot and they would hit.

No doubt that was the plan. It was obvious he was aligning the plane for just such a purpose.

Ian looked at the nose of the plane in the mirror. Markings, chipped paint—details were uncomfortably clear. For a second he could read the name under the canopy: Colonel Martinez. He moved a little to the right, under the wing. Now he could see the large engine duct, blades of the intake fan spinning at an incredible rate.

An idea came to him.

Without further consideration he raised his left hand and stripped his helmet. Wind and noise became a furious howl around him. This would, he realized, be his only chance. He realized also that it might not be enough. It might not work.

No matter.

He looked over his shoulder, took aim...

And flung the carbon-fiber helmet into the jet's intake.

On target. He turned his head away.

BOOM! A new sound burst deep from the bowels of the Harrier. Loud enough to tell him the effect had been achieved.

He returned his attention to the road ahead, ducking behind the faring and rolling the throttle up. In the mirrors the plane dropped back, dark smoke escaping the engine exhaust and, though detail was hard to make out, Ian could see the fragmented compressor fan, now a gaping hole.

Moving slow already, and low, the pilot was able to bring up sufficient power at the bitter end to hit the road soft, keeping the plane together.

Up ahead a truck came into view in Ian's lane, traveling the same direction.

He raced around it, returning his gaze to the mirrors, watching as the plane skidded down the pavement, overtaking the truck. The Harrier seemed unusually large on the two lane highway, twisting, length of it hanging off both

sides. The driver of the truck no doubt had his attention on Ian, furious with the reckless biker. Oblivious to what approached from behind.

Ian backed off the throttle, turned his head to watch. The Harrier eclipsed the truck, taking it square under the wing. By then the skid had slowed it considerably, making the impact less than spectacular. It simply captured the truck beneath it, accelerated it, flipped and dragged it along. Knocking loose its contents, a hail of orange bottles scattering to the road.

Butane gas.

Ian watched as the pair slid along behind him, dropping further and further away, little orange balls bouncing around them.

Expecting now the inevitable.

Which wasn't long in coming. A flash of light burst the air, followed by a fireball erupting upward, then another...and another, gigantic. Followed by the clap and rumble of explosions.

Ian looked forward.

Another plane would be dispatched. Or more.

Time was his enemy now.

* * *

Hispartacrit grinned. Not only was his current subject a joy to observe, he was very nearly an inspiration. He raised his gaze from the portal, Ian continuing on with his frantic effort to lose himself in the vast, open terrain. To blend himself away, find a way to get his escape back on track, exit the country and disappear.

Yes. Ian Rhames could serve them well.

In a very lucid moment Hispartacrit made his decision. He would go to his master with this suggestion. Evidence confirmed it to be a worthy omen.

He looked around at the broken landscape, colossal in scope, yet a prison all the same. Immortality had done nothing short of chain him. Soon he, Dispater—all of Hell, would be free of it. With a sharp laugh of triumph he turned and began descending the stairs from the pillar. Below him on the

ground, far away, his dragon mount waited.

* *

Sirens had wailed for some time, at this or that point in the distance, distinctive American warbles, accompanied by the Spanish two tones: hi-low-hi-low. Blue and red emergency lights had found their way through the cover, blinking far away, more conspicuous as dusk settled into night. Now the sirens were silent. No doubt, though, lights still blinked, at the crash site, at road blocks around the perimeter.

Far from where Ian now walked.

Saturday had been chosen to carry out this operation, for reasons he thanked himself for considering. The base, the town, everyone would be busy. All would be out, for dinner, for drinks, for the movies, for work, even, going ahead with plans despite the day's assassination. That activity would assist him as he did the unexpected.

He looked at the checkerboard water tower a few kilometers away, marking the flight line, green and white searchlight rotating slowly atop it. Other lights shone on the base, the flight line casting the brightest glow into the night sky, an orange aurora to the north. The stretch of road along which Ian walked was dark.

It had taken him about an hour to carefully traverse the open areas of the base to reach that point, once he had decided to move again. For twice that length of time he had lain still in a remote part of the sunflower field just inside the base, after doubling back and making the motorcycle part of the collision of plane and truck. The flames had still been burning furiously when he leapt from the bike at speed, sending it crashing into the wrecked forms. There it had caught and exploded, small tank adding little to the fire, its placement in the wreckage not as convincing as he would have liked. Something that, by now, would have been figured out.

He had to assume those after him thought him alive, and would be looking. From there he had sprinted to the fence and clambered over, ripping his

leather riding suit badly on the concertina wire. The thick suit had protected him, however, and his clothes beneath, so that when he rose at last from cover hours later, stripped that outer shell, put on a jacket and shoes from his bag and a ball cap, he was transformed into any other of the sailors or Marines stationed there.

Under the moonless night, then, he had moved furtively through fields, across the gun range, through the woods of the Seabee camp and onto the main road which he now skirted. That much had been relatively easy. In another kilometer or so, according to his memory of the base, he would be near the officer's quarters. After that it was a short walk to the barracks for the enlisted sailors and Marines.

Dogs might have been used at the crash site. He wasn't sure what they would track, though his suit lay buried in the field, possibly enough for them to key on. He had tried not to leave any physical trace of his crossing on the wire or the fence, hoping that, once it was realized his body was not part of the wreckage, a search effort would be mounted outward, away from the base. It would be unexpected that he would try to gain access *to* the base. More so that he might be found right in the middle of it.

The fact of which had determined his decision. Doing the unexpected offered him the best odds.

A security truck rolled by doing the speed limit. Ian watched it. Routine patrol. Other vehicles passed in both directions, a stream of headlights going about their Saturday evening recreation. From their point of view it would not be unusual for a single man to be walking this open stretch of road, one of the hundreds there heading for a night of possibility. Ian put his hands in his coat pockets, tried and managed to blow a thin cloud of smoke in front of him. The Spring night was unusually cool.

He thought about his accomplice, his driver. Really just a hired assistant, a girl he had used before for similar insurance purposes. By now she would have departed, making her own way out of the country, her passage oh so much easier. Possibility of a smooth escape had been closed to him with the aggressive response of the Spaniards.

Yet, the rest of his plan was intact—more or less. A quick call on the cell phone to his contact in Chipiona had canceled that rendezvous. The message would go forward from there to the yacht anchored off shore, advising it to hold. Now all Ian had to do was get to it.

He passed the officer's quarters. Shortly after that the base theater. Walking, walking—impatient with the speed of his own two legs. People stood in line outside the theater to buy tickets, many arriving, many leaving. Now he was beginning to get into the congested areas. As he crossed the main road he looked to his left, at the Rota gate. Traffic crawled near the exit, vehicles being stopped briefly on their way out. The gate was about five hundred meters away, making it difficult to see details, but it seemed as if the guards were checking IDs. Ian watched a moment more as he kept walking. Their checks were cursory.

Now he crossed behind the enlisted barracks, nearing his destination. Minutes later he was walking down the drive to the base enlisted club.

A bus loaded with sailors drove by headed the same way, noisy, inside lights on. An American missile cruiser was in port, which meant an added compliment of bodies out to get drunk. Out to demand the attention of security. According to Ian's data their liberty was restricted to the base, which meant most of them would be there at the club.

Other single guys shared the walk with him, converging on this spot. Soon he was entering the crowd outside the club, heading through the front doors and into the main lobby.

He stood inside a moment, watching the volume of people moving back and forth, leaving, coming, traveling across the large lobby from one section to another, busy having fun.

First he would eat. The night would be long and, later, exhausting.

* *

Dispater stood at the edge of a towering cliff, looking out over a valley more vast than any of Earthly proportions. In his pensive regard he weighed many

things, thoughts drawn by images far off, expanded through time and space.

Earth. A place that had drawn his attention in one form or another for more than six thousand years, the last three thousand of which had been intensive. He inhaled. Between Earth and a collection of worlds the breadth of a galaxy away lay his objective. To unite the two, to do it from another dimension altogether, with no direct link possible...

He stood alone at the cliff edge, a black figure, his demonic head rising nine feet into the air. Dispater was a giant, an Arch Duke of Hell—bat wings, cloven hooves and all else that went with that image. Further back stood his concubine, Seriah, an Earth girl, further behind her a pair of iron warriors, animated metal, twice as massive as the devil himself. To his left, a respectful distance away, lay Hispartacrit, dutifully prostrate on the rocky ground. In front and below them all stretched a landscape that defied imagination. All at the mercy of that single being.

Dispater wielded tremendous power.

He inhaled. Where he stood was at the culmination of many paths, prepared to join into one, single, Way. An artery, as it were, designed to rush him to its end. There was left only the matter of the players in this final phase. Exactly what his loyal Hispartacrit had come to discuss.

Dispater looked to him.

“What bring you, messenger?”

Hispartacrit quivered at the bass rumble of his master’s voice. “My own, modest recommendations, Lord!” he offered, mustering enthusiasm to cover his fear. “My observation of those you selected has yielded one I believe to be our most likely agent. He rises above the rest, Lord.”

“You speak of Ian Rhames?”

“Yes, Lord!” Hispartacrit was not amazed at his master’s perception.

Dis reflected a moment. “I, too, am leaning to this conclusion,” he said.

Hispartacrit thrilled with this shared realization. To have his Lord support his own opinion meant much to his favor with him. Which meant much to his existence. He stole a glance up, excited—tempted by another desire.

The devil’s concubine, the sorceress Seriah. Her presence had distracted

Hispartacrit from the moment she came into sight on the cliff. Once a being of Earth herself, long before Hispartacrit's time, she, too, had been a practitioner of the shadow arts. Pharaoh's witch. Many things had she been before her descent into Hell. Hispartacrit swallowed. Seriah was the object of his greatest lust. He stared for a dangerous moment, watching her fire red hair blow in the breeze, careful of her empty, white eyes. One look from them and his fate could be terrifying.

Hispartacrit returned his gaze to the black rock inches from his face.

"Yes," Dispater said, seeming to have noted his messenger's furtive action. Hispartacrit never quite knew what Dispater perceived. And that, too, added to his fear of the devil. "I would expend some effort to observe this possibility myself, that I might judge his position in my Plan."

Hispartacrit waited, silent.

As Dispater looked out across the hellish landscape, focus far beyond it.

* * *

"Damn," Ian said, leaning forward on the bar, "that took a lot of balls." He had already slipped easily into his best, neutral American accent.

The guy to his left shook his head. Ian had chosen him after observing the crowd while he ate—two large burritos—identifying him as a likely candidate with whom to strike up conversation. He was with two other guys, all hanging out at the club, playing pool, talking about and looking at girls, getting loaded. One of them had already gone out to the car for cigars, meaning they had mobility. They would probably head off the base later.

"Never expected that one," the guy said. Ian watched the TV screen over the bar, showing coverage reports of the assassination, the Armed Forces Network broadcast not nearly as exciting as the treatment it would be given by the professional media. So far there had been no mention of the plane incident. Probably it was an embarrassment, being kept silent.

Ian turned his attention to the pool table, where he had already placed his quarters. He was up next. Three other tables formed a square, each active.

Across the room slot machines rang noisily, accompanied by the electric war of video games, conversation and the jukebox. In another room across the lobby a dance floor had been set up, music thumping from there. Smoke filled the room. Security roamed through occasionally, including shore patrol units from the ship. Ian wrapped himself in the anonymity of it, enjoying the beer he sipped.

“Shit!” one of the players at the table cursed as he sank the cue ball. Scratch on the Nine, game over. Ian smiled to himself, glad the other guy, the guy from “his” group had won. That meant a better opportunity to join them.

His guy walked around, smug in the victory, grabbed the chalk and ran it over the tip of his stick. Ian stepped over and accepted the stick from the loser.

“You break,” the other offered, rounding up the balls. He grabbed the rack.

“Cool,” Ian said and went to that end of the table. When they were racked he lined up and broke, driving in the Two.

“By the way,” he stood, “my name’s Tony.” He offered his hand and the other took it.

“Mike,” the guy said.

Ian crouched to line up the One ball. “I just came in on the CAT B Thursday,” he said. The Civilian Air Transport was how everybody got there, and how everyone left. It was the supply line of American personnel, connecting Naples in Italy, Sigonella in Sicily and Rota, there in Spain.

Ian snapped the One ball in.

“Where you gonna be working?” Mike asked.

“The Bull Ring,” Ian said. From listening he knew all three of them worked at air squadrons, which meant the radio building should be a safe unknown.

“That’s cool,” Mike said as Ian bent and missed the Three shot. “Crypto?”

“Yea,” Ian confirmed.

Mike got the attention of his friend at the bar. “Hey, Shoop,” he called, “Check out Mark!” He pointed to their third friend, who had been absent for a while. He, Mark, now returned to the pool room, a girl beside him. Shoop turned. Mark smiled, trying not to act triumphant in front of the girl. She ran a hand down his arm, drunk.

“Not bad,” Ian commented as Shoop and Mike both ribbed their friend. He reached for his beer and took a drink.

After a little more banter Mike returned his attention to the table, taking a shot on the Three and missing. “Damn!” he reacted. His cue was a personal one; he probably fancied himself a pool shark.

“Where’s a good place to go in town?” Ian asked, walking around to line up another shot.

“Oh, man, there’s a lot of cool shit in town,” Mike said. “We’re going out later. Probably to one of the clubs up this way, or maybe downtown. The whole city’s full of clubs and bars. Full of chicks, too. You won’t believe how hot these Spanish women are.”

“Spanish girls,” Shoop corrected, watching from his seat at the bar. “When they get old they decline. By the time they’re women they’re already ugly.”

“Yea,” Mike laughed. “You’ll see. It’s like a genetic thing. Every girl under twenty-five—I mean every one—is gorgeous. After that... It’s like, they transform. How can one turn into the other? How do they end up so ugly, when they’re all so sexy to start off?”

Ian shared their humor, taking the shot on the Three and making it. His prediction of the trio was bearing out. They were younger than he, inexperienced, especially in the area they sought so diligently – girls—and not so worldly as they imagined themselves to be. Both were average size. Mike had spiky black hair, Shoop wore glasses, his hair shaved nearly to the scalp. Neither projected much presence. Ian himself was tall, charismatic—capable of getting girls, just to judge by his looks, and he had an aura of confidence they were picking up on, despite the fact that they had just met him. Already he could see he was beginning to be perceived as the type of guy who could better their chances at having a good time.

To keep that feeling rolling he sank the remainder of the balls, ending by calling the Nine. Conversation along the way, combined with this display of pool savvy, situated him squarely in a position of high regard with Shoop and Mike. Questions, talk of the town, the sights and Ian’s ignorance of them, too, served to make his inclusion in what they did next a given.

“You guys want to take off?” he asked at an opportune moment, prepared to decline his next game.

They considered the idea. Shoop checked the time. Quarter to ten.

“That sounds cool,” Mike agreed. Shoop nodded, polishing off his beer. Mike went to confer with Mark, who had been off in a corner, drinking and trying to make out with the girl. While he did that Ian talked with Shoop, searching the room for possible likenesses. After a moment he spotted a blonde guy, about his height though not as heavy, who’s photo would probably look like him. Plus, the kid was wearing baggy jeans.

Good, Ian thought. It had been a long time since he’d practiced this particular skill.

Mike returned. “Let’s go,” he said. “Mark’s staying.”

Shoop nodded and slid off the stool. Both appeared silently jealous of their friend.

“She’s not really that good looking,” Ian responded to their mood as they walked out. He positioned himself so that he was following the two.

“She’s got little tits,” Shoop said as Ian brushed past the blonde guy, lifting his wallet. He slipped it into his own pocket.

“No kidding,” Ian agreed. “She’d need three rolls of Charmin just to be an A cup.” The kid hadn’t even noticed the contact, barely responding to Ian’s simple “excuse me”. Ian, Mike and Shoop headed into the lobby, through the crowd and out the front doors. Shore Patrol was there, in the parking lot, wrapping up a fight that had been cleared. Security rolled up, blue lights flashing. Mike and Shoop continued on to the car with Ian’s imperceptible urging, speeding along their urge to ogle the scene, watching, commenting. When they reached the car Shoop pulled a set of keys and went to the driver’s side. Ian looked it over.

It was very un-Spanish. An old Camaro, metallic blue with white racing stripes, it came complete with hood scoop and wide tires.

Ian climbed in the back seat. While they got in, talking and situating themselves, he pulled the stolen wallet and familiarized himself quickly with its contents. He moved the green military ID to the front, looking at the photo.

Perfect. It would pass for him.

When he had come on the base that morning he used a pink, dependent ID. Sitting on the motorcycle had lowered his apparent height, his helmet had covered all but his eyes. If the guard who passed him through had been asked to provide details of the assassin, which he probably had, they would be limited to those minimal facts. Black motorcycle, blue and black riding suit and helmet. Pink ID. Now, leaving under a green ID, in civilian clothes, in a grossly American car, it was unlikely he would be given a second thought.

Ian looked at the name on the ID card. Dustin McEwen. Not even close to Tony, the name he was using now, but the name on the card shouldn't be a factor. The routine at the gate would go: show ID; guard checks it; green ID, looks authentic; face looks similar; pass through. Shoop and Mike would never see the card up close. And Dustin, well, Ian would be long gone by the time he mentioned its absence to anyone that mattered.

"Yea!" Mike enthused as Shoop fired the engine. It lit with a throaty rumble. Ian had noted the hood markings as he got in, realizing now that the engine beneath was everything the markings claimed. A 427 was a rare find, a locomotive-strong power plant legendary to any enthusiast. Ian was no enthusiast, but by the very nature of what he did he knew a great deal about a great many things. He had to. He turned his attention to Shoop's hand as he put the car in gear, backing out. Five speed. Nice. If things came to another chase, this would be a good car for the task.

"Cool, man," he commented as they wheeled out of the parking lot and onto the road. He paid more attention, realizing the car was in better shape than he might have imagined. Despite the tacky paint and mag wheels, it was a very well maintained, practically restored automobile. In noticing that he also noticed a personality trait of Shoop's he had missed. Shoop was a gear-head.

"Sounds leaned on," Ian said.

"Yea," Shoop confirmed. "It's pretty tricked out. High compression pistons, valve porting, high latency cam, headers, dual eight hundred cfm carbs, advanced timing. You name it."

Ian nodded. "This thing has to kick ass here with all these little European

cars.”

“Oh yea,” Shoop said. In the passenger seat Mike had begun going through CDs.

“Ever time it in the quarter?” Ian asked.

Shoop shook his head. “Believe it or not, no. But I’ve never been beat on the street. Back in Ohio I used to race it all the time.”

They turned onto the main avenue toward the gate. Shoop drove cautiously, probably in view of his current state of inebriation, the Camaro loping along, sounding every bit as fast as he claimed.

“What gears you got in the rear?” Ian asked. Up ahead brake lights lined the way to the gate.

“Four-elevens, of course,” Shoop said. “A Ford nine inch. Traction’s my biggest problem. If I don’t get a good launch the tires won’t hook up again. Believe it or not, I’ve had it dyno’d at almost eight hundred horsepower.”

Ian whistled, genuinely impressed.

“Yea,” Shoop went on, slowing to a stop behind the last car in line. “That’s with pump gas and everything. Sometimes I’m amazed myself.”

“It’s fast,” Mike confirmed, looking over his shoulder at Ian. He had found a CD he liked and slipped it in, selecting a track.

“Check this out,” he turned up the volume.

Ian nodded his approval. Eye turned expectantly on the activity ahead.

* * *

Dispater brought his attention back from that far, distant place. Straightening, collecting his focus. For a moment only, then he was returned.

Hispartacrit waited, maintaining a position of supplication. He had not moved, nor stole a glance upward, though desire compelled him to. The image of Seriah teased his imagination.

“He does intrigue me,” Dispater said. He turned fully to Hispartacrit, who noted his movement and looked up, careful to maintain his attention upon the dark visage. “He has many strengths.”

“Indeed, Lord!” Hispartacrit lowered his eyes when he spoke. “Physical prowess is not his greatest, though it appeared so to my initial observation. After time, watching him through many trials, each self-inflicted, I have noted the confidence with which he carries each out. This Ian Rhames is a man of conviction, who has no greater belief than in himself.”

Dispater looked high above Hispartacrit, over him, into the sky beyond. “He has the intelligence?” he asked.

“Genius, Lord. Well rooted, with an understanding of the world that exceeds his contemporaries.”

“His subservience will cause problems,” Dispater noted.

“Might that not, too, be effective, Lord?”

“Perhaps,” Dispater said. Considering, at a depth of time and event Hispartacrit could not fathom. Dispater’s engineering of events was far, far beyond him. Hispartacrit could observe only their result.

Dispater spoke. “He must be kept from us,” he said. Hispartacrit wondered if the comment was directed at him, at Seriah or at anyone at all.

“You will see to his progress,” Dispater’s speech was now meant clearly for him. “He will be the one.” Hispartacrit thrilled at the acceptance of his choice. “I must turn my attention to the worlds across space,” Dis went on, “so that events there might be accelerated. There are many variables yet to unite.”

“I will see to our agent, Lord!” Hispartacrit rose and backed away slowly, head bowed.

And when a respectful distance had been attained, turned and ran for his dragon, eager to be off.

* *

“Hard Rock?” Mike asked, referring to that club in town.

Ian looked to Shoop for his answer, saving his own suggestion as to where they should go, playing the role of guest. For the moment he was satisfied to be so. They had just passed easily off the base with only a cursory inspection of the car and their IDs, which meant he was free. At least, in as much as he

was now on the other side of the base, far from where he had last been identified, incognito amongst a city full of others like him, able to move openly. And, he was near the water. When last he checked, in a bathroom stall at the base club, his small pocket-sized GPS had placed him at a location approximately ten kilometers from the yacht anchored offshore.

“Sounds cool,” Shoop agreed. Ian adjusted the GPS unit in his coat pocket. Once on the water he would check it again, then make his way out to sea.

“You guys ever hear of the Sangria Shack?” he asked.

“Oh yea,” Mike said, Shoop nodding. They rolled around the circle plaza at the entrance to the city, Camaro rumbling, discontent with the pace. People thronged the main avenue, other cars moving slowly down its length.

“Some girls were talking at orientation the other day,” Ian said. “I heard them mention it. Something about a bunch of them getting together there. I think there might be a party or something.”

Shoop and Mike regarded each other.

“We’ve got all night,” Mike said.

“You wanna check it out?” Ian asked.

“Yea,” Shoop agreed, “we can go there first.”

They moved slowly through the city, passing bar after bar, club after club. The city appeared to serve as a location for those places alone, to meet the demand of the military presence. It teemed with people, most of them younger than Ian, Spanish and American alike, all out to derive some energy from the night. Cars and mopeds dominated the streets, a few Harleys ripping the noisy din, some other, large motorcycles like the one Ian had ridden cruising by, people, people everywhere. Amid the commotion the Camaro still turned heads, Shoop and Mike relishing the attention.

Ian had scouted the city in advance, becoming familiar with its layout. He knew the Sangria Shack was a well known night spot, even among the multitude of places to choose from. It was also very near the water, and the port for the city’s tiny fishing fleet.

Soon they were close to it.

“I hate leaving this thing alone out here,” Shoop said, referring to the car as

he looked for a place to park. The Camaro, though mid-size by American standards, was a giant in the maze of ancient streets.

Ian realized the prize the car was to Shoop. Probably he would rather have been able to park it where he could watch it. Parking and watching it, in fact, was probably an activity Shoop enjoyed.

They were so far removed. Ian thought about the intangible distance between he and the two guys in the front seat. The degree of his training, his experience. How little he shared with them. Yet, as he thought of it, his feelings were not of contempt. No, to his personal interest he felt a measure of regret. Despite the thrill of his existence, what did it really mean to be who he was? Would it be better, in its own way, to be as oblivious as they were? A guy out on the town, looking to get lucky. A chance for an honest existence.

“Here we are,” Mike said, Shoop finding a spot large enough to accommodate the car. He shut it off and they got out. Ian stretched, looking up and down the somewhat quieter side street. Salt smell, the ocean, wafted on the breeze.

Mike and Shoop began walking, continuing whatever conversation had been going on in the car. Ian joined them, barely cognizant of the subject but doing a fine job of adding to it. Illustration, again, of how far beyond them he operated. It was, he believed, less of an excess of raw talent, which he no doubt had, but more an excess of what he considered to be the two prime movers of success: Confidence and Determination. Either one of them, Mike or Shoop, could accomplish ten times more than they did, had they only the confidence and determination to do so. Any one could.

Society operated at a band far below actual ability. Programming that ensured the status quo was maintained, that Ian and others like him would always rise well above it. Operators. Those who ran the world.

But his confidence, his determination, was employed in ways that chained him outside that very society. He could never be a part of the day to day world.

It mocked him.

“This is it,” Mike was saying as they walked into the Shack. It was a worn stone building, centuries old, a latticework of vines serving as ceiling, providing

a camouflaged view of the sky above. The light of a church bell tower could be seen through it, rising into the night sky.

“I’ll get the first round,” Ian offered. “Anything in particular?”

Shoop and Mike placed their order and went to find a table. Ian went to the bar. It was almost over.

And so they drank, Ian eating two burgers and fries to add calories to his earlier meal, a secondary effect being to dampen the effects of the alcohol.

Close to midnight, he excused himself to take a piss and left.

Outside he breathed in the cool salt air. A crowd gathered in the street, huddled in small groups, talking and drinking. He turned down the sidewalk, leaving them behind. Minutes later he stood at the edge of the sea wall, hands on one of the large stones that composed it, leaning over, looking down. A street behind him ran along it, below him by about ten meters ran another one, directly along the waterfront. Anchored there, beside it, bobbing by the dozens, were the small boats of the Rota fishing fleet. Each of them unique, owned and operated by a local who made his living catching fish to feed the city’s need.

Ian stepped over the edge and began climbing down the wall. After he had descended a meter or so a car rounded the curve below, traveling directly beneath him, heading toward town.

It was at times like this he was most acutely aware of the importance of good fortune. There were always moments that went beyond the ability to plan, where such intangibles became critical. Luck was not to be dismissed. So far, throughout his career, he had demonstrated an abundance of it.

As he continued scaling to the bottom he considered his many near-catastrophes. Over time, after observation of the results of this factor, he had begun to assign luck the nature of a skill, imagining it to be a quality to be refined, even practiced. Not something he could easily explain, he nevertheless had seen that it could be done. Luck had something to do with that all important prime mover, confidence, he once concluded, and, whether avoiding observation in the open as he now did, or evading an airplane as he had done earlier that day, confidence meant a positive outcome. To be lucky was a strength beyond measure. To be lucky was to have unwavering confidence on

a given course.

He reached the road below and stood. Sounds of the city were distant now, no activity at all along this section of waterfront. Off to his left curved the age-old shoreline, orange with the light of modern fixtures. To his right the port, extending away in a break wall to shield the beach from the erosion of relentless surf. High above on the sea wall and down from him a lighthouse reached into the air, surrounded by the ragged skyline of ancient stone buildings. Five centuries ago Columbus had paid a visit to this very port, on his way to the New World.

Ian checked the GPS unit. The yacht was still about ten kilometers from him, now on a different heading. Pocketing the unit, he walked across the road to the water.

Now that New World was the most powerful nation on Earth. Amazing, how things evolved.

He climbed down the boulders there, hooking a boat near the shore and pulling it to him. He got in. On the street above another car drove by, this one a Policia vehicle. By then he was deep in the shadows, below the level of the road. He watched as it continued out of sight. When it was gone, he pulled up the small anchor, put the oars in their locks and began rowing.

For a moment he considered calling the yacht, then decided against it. Those aboard were on a pleasure cruise, or so any thorough inspection would reveal, and would be in no hurry to depart the area. They would be waiting.

He wove his way among the other boats, rounded the retaining wall encircling the large basin in which they were anchored and headed out to sea.

Rowing, rowing, rowing.

His impatience had diminished. Slow, fast—he was used to operating at all paces, concerned mainly with result. And now, though he plodded slowly through the water, reduced to such basic movement, the result of his effort was escape.

Moments later he rounded the towering break wall, catching a stiff wind and rising waves as he moved out into the open ocean. The Atlantic. His efforts became more labored. Rowing the ten kilometers to the yacht, against

wave and wind, would be fatiguing, though nothing for which he wasn't physically prepared. Up above, on the break wall, he spotted a couple, embraced, looking out to sea. They might find his passage curious, were they to spot him. He pulled his cap on tighter and hunkered down, setting a rhythm he could maintain.

Countless strokes of the oars later and the break wall was diminishing, a dark mass against the light of the shore. Away on the right, many, many kilometers distant, points of light perched at the dividing line between the black of the ocean and the black of night. Freighters, gathering outside the port of Cadiz. He looked to his left, searching the horizon. A few such lights floated there as well. One of them would be the yacht.

He returned his attention to the receding city. What next? He had other operations under consideration, of course, other places to be, but where did it all lead?

Lack of ambition had never been a problem. Opportunity? That was more to the point. In all the world there was only so much opportunity, so many things one could aspire to. It was as if his ambition lacked only a goal.

But what else was there?

He looked up. Stars shone magnificently across the dark vault above him, band of the Milky Way arcing over it, horizon to horizon. By now he was well out to sea, in the midst of an incredible, wide open space. A feeling overcame him. The future seemed, suddenly, just as wide open.

As if, perhaps, there were opportunities unrealized. Something yet to be considered. It was a vague feeling, but one which energized him with possibility.

Rowing, rowing, waves beating the bow.

And for a moment he couldn't help feeling as if he might be part of some greater future.